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# **Transnational Lives in Domestic Worlds: The Politics of Home in Contemporary Rural Vietnam**

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### Abbreviations

CCG: Commune Central Government

MARD: Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development

NRD: New Rural Development

NTP-NRD: National Target Program on New Rural Development

OCOP: One Commune One Product

PCF: People's Credit Fund

RDP: Rural Development Program

SoP: System of Provision

**Exchange rate (calculated based on November 1, 2023)**

1,000 VND (Vietnam Dong) = 0.03845 EUR

# INTRODUCTION

## I. Initial impression and justification for thematic research

One morning in October 2023, while carpooling to the Rivermoor commune<sup>1</sup> in North Central Vietnam where I was beginning my fieldwork, I encountered a tragic misunderstanding that would shape my understanding of the community. With no formal taxi service, locals relied on “home taxis,” informal carpools used for trips to the city, hospitals, or airports. During the ride, I mentioned with the shared riders my plan to visit Uncle Phan in North Mountain village, whom I had met during a previous fieldwork survey trip to hear more about his grandchildren’s summer in Korea. The driver told me that one of Phan’s grandchildren had recently drowned and that the family was in mourning. As I asked questions to ensure it was the same Uncle Phan - about the village, Phan’s children in Korea, the grandchildren - the driver calmly confirmed with “his boy, four or five years old”. My co-passengers chimed in with sympathy. Each person contributed pieces of information they had, about how uncle brought the child with him to visit a relative, how the child went to play alone outside, how wetlands can hold deathly traps hidden in plain sight, how the whole community spent days searching for him, how they found the body... By the time we reached the commune, I decided to follow the locals’ advice and waited one month before making a visit.

Fast forward to 30 days later, I was at the gate of uncle Phan’s. I found myself staring into a living room thick with incense smoke. The haze drifted around sheer white drapes and clung to a newly arranged altar. A photograph of a young child placed at the centre amplified the solemn atmosphere. I called out, "Uncle Phan, I'm here to visit". Shortly after, a man in his late 50s emerged from inside, looking surprised. I repeated, "Hi uncle! I'm looking for uncle Phan". His expression mirrored my confusion. "Here I am. Who are you?".

My stomach twisted with relief and grief. I explained, “I was looking for Uncle Phan from North Mountain village. I only met him once back in May, so all I really know is his name, his family, and the general area he lives in. I asked for directions, and people led me here. Though it was a misunderstanding, if it is alright, I would like to light an incense”. Phan was at ease, “I

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<sup>1</sup> All names of people and locations have been altered

understand now. I know him. A lot of people contacted him while we issued a public call to look for my missing kid because they thought it was his. Our [family] situations are too similar. But this is Middle Mountain village; I will show you the way to his house...”.

I paid my respects to the deceased. Tea was served. Phan's sorrowful voice filled the large, empty house as he reflected on how both slowly and rapidly the past tumultuous month had unfolded. His wife and grandchildren were staying with the other grandparents for some quiet time to process their grief. Phan remained at home to tend to the house and the family altar and anticipate visitors. He had resigned from his role as trưởng thôn (village headman). His son had just returned to Korea after completing the full 30 days of mourning. The child's mother could not travel to Vietnam. She was an undocumented worker in Korea, getting out of the country would mean no returning. Phan deeply sympathised with her situation but had to acknowledge, with a resigned “biết làm sao được” (“what can one do”), that the parents must continue to endure for the sake of their other child. The brief conversation seemed to exhaust Phan; he had likely repeated the same words countless times. Seeing his weariness, I excused myself, restated my condolences and bided Phan goodbye.

As I got on my way again to the North Mountain village, I kept feeling astounded by the commonality of 2 separate lives. My memory drifted back to the day I met Phan from North Mountain village. I was waiting for the local staff from the Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Xã (People's Committee/Commune's Central Government - CCG)<sup>2</sup> to accompany me to some households for an introductory visit. The staff member, a young woman who had just started her apprenticeship at the reception desk of the CCG, seemed reluctant to step outside into the scorching heat. Loudly and half-jokingly to a group of people waiting for their turn at the bureaucracy reception, she asked, “Anyone wants to answer interview questions about labour export? There's a research lady here...”. Trying to hide my own reluctance at being thrust into such an awkward situation, I was surprised when Phan (61 years old) stepped forward and said, “OK, and I want to ask something”. Phan wasted no time sharing details about his family: Phan worked in Korea for 10 years; he had three sons working abroad, and all of them are married with kids. Two of them were living in Korea

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<sup>2</sup> The official name of the place is the Commune People's Committee (Ủy ban Nhân dân Xã). However, since it also houses other local government offices such as the Commune Police (Công an Xã) and the People's Council (Hội đồng Nhân dân), I found it more appropriate to refer to it as the Commune Central Government.

with their partners. The family was handling paperwork for his grandchildren to travel to Korea for a summer holiday with their parents. Unsure about some of the required documents, he sought my advice, hoping I might have knowledge of the process. The conversation continued to be friendly and casual until Phan realised he had many tasks to complete that day. We exchanged some brief information, and I came back to insisting that the young woman fulfil the role of the local guide that I had been promised. As we moved on, she turned to me with a distinct lack of enthusiasm and said, “You don’t need to meet many households today, really. *Nhà nào cũng giống nhà nào* (Every family household is the same)”.

The Vietnamese word *nhà* carries a richness of meaning that resists a single translation, moving fluidly between material, social, and symbolic registers. At its most basic, *nhà* can mean a physical **house** - a dwelling or structure where people live. But, it often extends beyond the material to signify **home**, the emotional and affective site of belonging. Etymologically rooted in "house" or "home", it often refers to a **household or family**, which demonstrates how Vietnamese conceptualize *family as a house*, with roles and relationships mirrored in architectural metaphors - for example, men are often referred as the building pillars of a house (Vu, 2020). In everyday usage, *nhà* frequently emphasizes on people rather than place, such as for example “*nhà tôi có bốn người*” (“my family has four members”). It can also denote one’s **side of kinship**, as in *nhà bên ngoài* (the paternal family side) or *nhà bên nội* (the maternal family side). In an intimate way of addressing, *nhà* becomes a term of endearment between spouses, functioning like “dear” or “honey”. The word also carries institutional weight: *nhà nước* means “the state,” *nhà trường* refers to “the school”. In other contexts, *nhà* indexes **ancestry and continuity**, such as *nhà họ Nguyễn* (the Nguyen clan). This multilayered versatility makes *nhà* more than just house or home but is at once place, kin, identity, shelter, and institution.

As I grappled with how best to translate the word *nhà* that the staff had used, I began envisioning the many possible directions its meaning could take when people in Rivermoor spoke of house and home. Much like in the English language, ‘house’ is often the material, physical structure while ‘home’ can extend its notion and refer to the social and imaginary construct. House provides the stage on which home is imagined and performed, while home presses subjective meaning onto it. *Nhà*, therefore, neatly connotes simultaneously the physical manifestations, structures of feelings, and diverse discourses that influence, strengthen, or challenge their

manifestations. This struggle in translation became the foundation of my research, guiding me toward the idea of houses and homes as contested sites shaped by everyday practices of making and unmaking. In this small but dynamic coastal commune, where rapid change is felt in every corner, individuals push forward to improve their lives, families compete to build ever larger houses, and local leaders strive for recognition. Home is therefore shifting dramatically, following the dominant narratives that take hold in the community.

Thus, to understand Vietnam's social and cultural life, one might best begin with the notion of *nhà*, and how its flexible application reflects one's perception about home that forms society. In rural areas especially, home is the idiom through which people orient themselves to land, labour, and memory, and it is often the first reference point in understanding one's place in the world. In Vietnam's political discourse, the homeland is heavily entangled with the state's narratives of development and nation-building. In doing so, the state mobilizes home as a site where national identity and global competitiveness converge, in effect turning intimate practices of homemaking into matters of policy, economics, and geopolitics. Precisely because of this dual dimension of intimate and political, *homemaking* in the context of transnational migration becomes an overarching theme of analysis in my research project. *Homemaking* can be understood as the ongoing process through which both the material structure of the house and the affective, moral, and symbolic dimensions of home are produced, maintained, and transformed. It involves the tangible acts of building, renovating, and provisioning, as well as the intangible aspects of care, obligation, and memory that impart meaning to those physical forms. In this sense, homemaking bridges the visible architecture of the house with the invisible but equally powerful work of making a home. To make and remake a home is to negotiate not only kinship and memory but also market forces, state policies, and global influence. Seen this way, home is not a stable backdrop but a dynamic process. It is one that illuminates how people live through change, how they navigate overlapping scales of the local and the global, and how they remake themselves and their communities in relation to wider structures of power.

While the CCG staff's remark was simply out of disengagement in my work, it rang true to certain aspects of the living reality in Rivermoor. At first, it described the overlaps of many immigrant households' situations in terms of socio-economics and family setting. It underscored collective norms around scattered family composition, domestic space, and collective

organisations surrounding rural outmigration. Secondly, it may comment on the aesthetic standardisation driven by remittance-funded housing, where families replicated the imaginations of success and modernity. However, did this statement also address that underneath the surface of such imaginaries was a deeper structural similarity in terms of struggles and aspirations? Phan's situation demonstrates that building a prosperous life through migration often comes with risky and painful lessons. Nevertheless, such risks and missteps are woven into the very logic of migration, where the willingness to endure uncertainty is framed as a necessary step toward sustaining home. This willingness takes place not only because of personal idealism and global influence but also because of being pushed forward by the Vietnamese state's vision of home as a space of development, modernity, and moral nationalism. Ultimately, it made me question how rural communities negotiate individuality, inequality, and shifting traditions under the pressures of market socialism and transnational mobility, which have reshaped how people understand and make their homes.

Before delving into the social context of rural homes, several conceptual clarifications are necessary. First, borrowing from Boccagni's (2017) formulation, home can be understood as shorthand for homemaking: "the ordinary interactions through which individuals try to appropriate and make meaningful, personal and secure a variety of places - primary among them, the domestic ones and those of their family life. As a process, home is all but natural or predetermined" (p.9). Second, much like the Vietnamese notion of *nhà*, which simultaneously encompasses physical dwellings, kinship networks, moral orders, and territorial belonging, the meaning of home extends beyond specific bounded space. In the specific context of the transnational migrant community of Rivermoor, home operates across both micro and macro scales, ranging from the intimate sphere of individual imaginary to the broader landscapes of the nation and diaspora; each provokes emotional, social, and political significance that collectively shapes the lived experience of homemaking.

## **II. Objectives and research questions**

### *Research Objectives*

This research offers theorising homemaking in rural Vietnam as a critical lens for understanding the everyday negotiation of global capitalism, state power, and moral economy. By positioning the life-worlds of homemaking at the intersection of transnational migration, state-driven modernisation, and local moral traditions, this work contributes to anthropological debates on rural mobility and development, neoliberal morality, and the politics of aspiration (Carsten, 2018; Fong, 2011; Muehlebach, 2012; Wilcox *et al.*, 2023). Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Examine the quest for the "good life" in the context of tensions between socialist principles and neoliberal conditions in post-reform Vietnam.
2. Explore how intergenerational differences, as well as tensions between collectivist pasts and global aspirations, are mediated through everyday practices of homemaking and mobility.
3. Investigate how families imagine and construct futures and legacies that connect personal ambition, familial continuity, and national development narratives.
4. To illuminate the affective, moral, and material dimensions of homemaking as a process through which rural actors navigate tension and sustain social life amid continuous transformation.

The intervention of this research lies in reimagining home as a process of world-ordering rather than being confined to the localised space of the house but unfolding through practices of cultivation, migration, inheritance, and care that link households to wider political ecologies and temporal horizons. By foregrounding the elasticity of *nhà* - a notion that refuses the separation between house and home - the study advances a relational and processual understanding of homemaking as an adaptive practice through which rural actors live with, rather than respond to, change. Homemaking thus emerges as a subtle form of politics that neutralises and reconfigures state and market influences without overt resistance. Every day acts of building, maintaining, and inhabiting *nhà* become means of negotiating modernity, belonging, and futurity - those are modes of ordering life amid shifting material and moral conditions. In doing so, the research contributes to anthropological debates on materiality, affect, temporality, and value by positioning

homemaking as a critical site where people continuously remake the very grounds of living within transformation itself.

Researching rural areas is essential for several reasons. First, rural spaces are home to a significant proportion of the world's population, especially in the Global South, and therefore play a central role in global development discourses (Halfacree, 2006; Woods, 2007). Understanding how global processes shape rural livelihoods, landscapes, and identities is key to formulating equitable and sustainable development policies. Second, rural research illuminates the multi-scalar and relational nature of globalisation. Rather than viewing rural areas merely as “recipients” of global flows, contemporary scholarship highlights their agency in negotiating, resisting, and reconstituting global influences (Nguyen *et al.*, 2025). This perspective reveals the hybrid and negotiated character of rural transformation, where local actors, global networks, and non-human actors (such as plants, animals, and landscapes) co-produce new rural realities.

Moreover, rural research challenges the urban-centric bias of much of the globalisation literature (Hogan, 2004; Wilcox *et al.*, 2023; Rigg, 2025). Urbanisation and rural change are not discrete phenomena but are deeply intertwined through processes such as amenity migration, peri-urban expansion, and the “ruralisation of the urban”, where rural aesthetics and imaginaries are reproduced in suburban and exurban developments (Cloke, 2006; McCarthy, 2008). Understanding these processes is vital to grasping the full complexity of contemporary development.

In the context of Vietnam studies, it brings sharper focus on the ways in which homemaking in rural regions mediates tensions between socialist legacies and neoliberal reforms, offering a nuanced account of how global and national transformations are experienced, contested, and made meaningful at the margins.

Discussions of migration, commodity circulation, and ecological change in Vietnam frequently invoke “globalisation” and “global capitalism”, yet these terms risk becoming analytically misused if left undefined. While globalisation is sometimes understood as a long-standing feature of human history, its analytical significance in the contemporary world lies in the unprecedented speed and intensity of global interactions, considering how globalisation intensifies

along with colonialism, trans-border trading, and advancement in media and technologies. I shall use Manfred B. Steger's (2020) definition of globalisation as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring far away and vice versa. This definition highlights relations and interconnectedness rather than assuming globalisation as a homogeneous force that simply "happens" to every place (Ferguson, 2006).

The anthropological study of globalisation carefully emphasises flows of people, capital, media, ideas, and technologies that crisscross borders and reshape local experiences, such as for example Appadurai's (1996) five "scapes" of global interaction: ethnoscapescapes, technoscapes, ideoscapes, financescapes, mediascapes. Therefore, this approach avoids the pitfalls of treating globalisation as an explain-all-word for transformations. Instead, it foregrounds how specific kinds of movement and connectivity intersect with local conditions, histories, and power relations. Globalisation thus becomes a useful heuristic for understanding how and why influences traverse scales, without obscuring what is locally mediated or historically rooted. Thus, I follow anthropological argument that global connections take shape through specific encounters, frictions, and negotiations (Tsing, 2000; Ong & Collier, 2005).

To understand globalisation in a Vietnamese rural setting like Rivermoor, it is helpful to distinguish it analytically from related but distinct processes such as state policy, social and economic restructuring, and local mobility. *Globalisation* in this thesis refers to the cross-border movements and interdependencies that link Vietnamese communities to wider circuits of labour, capital, and consumption. Such process includes, but is not reducible to, transnational labour migration, digital communication technologies, international markets and consumption, and the circulation of development models. *Global capitalism*, by contrast, is used to describe the structural integration of national economies into market logics and global value chains, they manifest in trade agreements, foreign direct investment, and export-oriented agricultural or aquacultural production.

The concept of glocalisation was introduced as a hybrid process in which global influences are localised and reconfigured in specific contexts. Moreover, scholars have long emphasised that globalisation emerges through *situated interactions* such as mutual investments, labour policies, ecological changes, and household strategies (Ong, 1999; Appadurai, 1996). Global capitalist

processes do not uniformly penetrate rural Vietnam but rather interacting with socialist legacies, household-based production systems, and state governance structures. Scholars such as Harms (2011), Schwenkel (2020), and McElwee (2016) show that Vietnam's modernisation is always hybrid: market-oriented and globally connected, yet shaped by state planning and local moral economies. Thus, while Rivermoor's participation in cross-border labour circulation might appear to reflect "global" logics, these practices are always mediated by local conditions which is demonstrated throughout the empirical chapters. It underscores the selective nature of global encounters, as local agency mediates and adopts "new" things introduced through globalisation. Such decisions to accept new things, as well as to appropriate them the ways people see fit, reflect various aspects of society, culture, and identity. The empirical chapters will demonstrate such reflections through various discussion of work, lifestyle, and taste, etc.

This relational reading of globalisation also helps clarify the category of *rurality*. Rural does not simply mean "outside the city"; it signifies a set of embodied practices, livelihoods, landscapes, and social relations that are continually configured in relation to urban centres, state agendas, and transnational networks. I avoid reducing rural Vietnam to an unchanging "local" against a backdrop of globalisation. Rather, it is a dynamic field where historical memory, ecological constraints, and global flows co-produce one another. Yet, being *rural* and the related local practices are those processes that are both static and constantly shifting in terms of governmental unit, cultural identity, and socio-economic status. In Vietnam, "rural" goes beyond a demographic or geographic designation but a state category tied to development policy, agricultural production, land-use regimes, and state's normative ethnic categorisation (Turner *et al.*, 2015). Yet rurality is also an embodied and affective identity, often associated with moral purity, ecological closeness, and ancestral roots. Importantly, rurality is not the opposite of modernity. Scholars of Vietnamese rural transformation argue that rural spaces are increasingly characterised by hybrid economies, entrepreneurialism, and circulations of capital and knowledge (Rigg, 2001; Taylor, 2016). This complexity is visible in Rivermoor, where residents actively join the transnational labour migration schemes and selectively adopt urban consumption practices, even as they maintain close ties to their historical and ecological upbringing. Thus, in this thesis, rurality is treated as a relational and dynamic category, not a fixed backdrop against which globalisation unfolds.

Finally, to avoid attributing all transformations in Rivermoor to globalisation, this thesis clearly distinguishes between:

1. Processes that are transnational in origin (labour export; international trade).
2. Processes driven by state policy (OCOP; rural development plans; aquaculture regulation).
3. Processes shaped by local dynamics (kinship practices; intergenerational obligations; lifestyle and consumption).
4. Processes driven by ecological change (seasonal living; limited natural resources).

### *Research questions*

How do practices of homemaking in rural Vietnam mediate and reconfigure the social, moral, temporal, and material orders through which people live with migration and continual political, economic, and ecological change?

#### *Sub-questions:*

How do rural communities construct and maintain the meaning and materiality of home in the context of overseas migration?

How does this local construction of home compare or come into tension with the Vietnamese state's vision of home, belonging, and development and those of the overseas migrants? What does this reflect about the affective, material, and political dimensions of home in contemporary Vietnam?

### *Research Contributions*

By theorizing homemaking as a nexus of mobility and social ordering, this research advances anthropological debates on the politics of development and aspiration, as well as the productive analytical rigours of houses and homes as biographic parallel of lived experiences (Carsten, 2018; Boccagni, 2017; Pine, 2014), and offers a new framework for understanding how people at the margins in the Global South navigate uncertainty, reshape kinship relations, and pursue visions of the good life amid post-socialist transition and global capitalism (Ferguson, 1999; Fong, 2011).

- **Reframing homemaking:** It shifts the analytical focus from seeing rural housing as a passive responder and seeing rural trends of migration as an outcome of social change to understanding homemaking as an *active, contested, and future-oriented practice* that mediates between moral economies and market logic.
- **Bridging scales of analysis:** By connecting intimate household practices with broader political-economic transformations and expanding the analytical ecosystem of home, the research advances understanding of how far state policies, development discourses, and global capitalism can be internalised and negotiated at the domestic level.
- **Expanding theories of temporality and aspiration:** Building on Guyer's (2007, 2019) notion of punctuated temporal orientation and Povinelli's (2011) concept of endurance, the study offers insight into how rural families in Vietnam construct futures amid uncertainty, debt, and environmental change.
- **Contributing to Southeast Asian migration studies and to the under-research area of rural spaces and rural population:** It enriches the literature by foregrounding *homemaking* rather than *migration* as the analytical entry point, highlighting the moral, affective, and intergenerational dimensions often overlooked in economic or policy-driven analyses.
- **Empirical contribution:** Through rich ethnographic evidence from a fast-changing coastal commune, the study documents how ordinary households navigate the contradictions of aspiration, modernity, and belonging, hence revealing the complexities of post-socialist transformation in Vietnam.

### III. Structure of thesis

The thesis is organised into nine chapters. The first chapter serves as an introduction, outlining the contextual background, research objectives and research questions. The second chapter presents details of the background context of the research topic by analysing the socio-political struggles faced by the rural migrant community as well as reviewing the relevant academic literature. The third chapter presents the theoretical framework guiding the study. The fourth chapter details the

research methods and ethnographic approach employed. The following four chapters are dedicated to empirical analysis of the findings. The final chapter offers the study's conclusions.

The first chapter discusses why I chose to conduct research on home and rural development politics. It begins with the context-specific language of *nhà*, its significance in Vietnamese culture, and its evolution throughout the history of development in rural Vietnam. The second chapter goes further into the contextual background and analyses the lived struggles faced by rural migrant communities, as well as reviewing the relevant academic literature. It explains the conditions of homemaking and the sustaining struggles of rural communities in Vietnam, situating them within the country's broader historical and political trajectory. The chapter begins by examining the changing political and economic landscape following the *Đổi Mới* (reform) era and the subsequent economic liberalisation from the constraints of a centrally planned, socialist economic system that had dominated since the end of the Vietnam War. The reform has opened up opportunities and intensified the precarity of rural livelihoods. These transformations have pushed many to seek work beyond the village and outside Vietnam, while also reshaping domestic arrangements and intergenerational relations. The rapid changes in living conditions have created new forms of friction within families, as well as mounting pressure to work, provide, and sustain a meaningful sense of home - raising the question of what "home" might become in the future.

The third chapter presents the theoretical framework guiding the study while reviewing the available academic resources strictly regarding studies about home in transnational and rural communities, hence introducing the concept of the multiscale home, which illuminates the multiple, interconnected dimensions - domestic, economic, symbolic, and ecological - through which rural Vietnamese families construct and imagine home amid conditions of transition. This framework also identifies gaps in existing literature on home and family life in Vietnam, emphasising the need to move beyond household-centered analyses to consider broader spatial, temporal, and moral scales of homemaking.

The fourth chapter details the research methods and ethnographic approach employed, situating the study within contemporary debates on reflexivity, relationality, and fieldwork ethics in anthropology. The following four chapters are dedicated to the empirical analysis of the findings, each focusing on a distinct domain of rural life from labour and livelihood to gender and

generational relations to rituals, foodways and ecology - revealing how homemaking practices unfold within and across these intersecting realms. Finally, the concluding chapter synthesises the study's main arguments, reflecting on how rural Vietnamese communities navigate change and continuity through home and offering broader insights into the enduring significance of home as both a moral horizon and a material struggle in times of transformation.

## **RURAL COMMUNITIES' STRUGGLES OF HOMEMAKING**



*Figure 1: High-tech toilet*

I chose this image to open up the conversation about the visions of modernity in rural Vietnam. This image captures a domestic bathroom in Rivermoor, where a high-tech Japanese toilet sat in stark contrast to its surroundings. Despite being a modern appliance with a control panel for various bidet functions, seat warming, and other technological features, the toilet was not connected to either electricity or a water source that would allow those functions to operate. It announced its presence where the tiled walls met unfinished concrete, with signs of dampness, peeling surfaces, and exposed pipes. The ceiling was made of corrugated material, similar to the plastic bags used for storage, which demonstrated an improvisational approach. This type of toilet

seat is not commercially available in Vietnam; somebody had travelled from Japan to Rivermoor and carried a prototype along in their luggage with the thought that one day, it will sit well in a new and modern house.<sup>3</sup>

For an ethnographer, being in the presence of this technological and infrastructural mismatch prompts more questions about personal desires and longing of modernity and global connection. Apart from this instance, I often stumbled upon scenes in the villages where modern, foreign, and costly objects stood out amid the otherwise modest surroundings. I slowly began to see beyond such uneven displays the assertion of dignity, effort, and materialisation of aspirations. Just as the people of Rivermoor aspired to embody cosmopolitan modernity, their homes, as an extension of their social identity, had to reflect this ambition through scattered but telling changes. Amidst these changes, homemaking practices reveal the friction between mobile ideals and local conditions, as well as the disjuncture in larger narratives about migration, remittance economies, and the aspirational materialities of home.

*Labour migration post-reform and “đổi đời” (“life transformation”) in rural Vietnam*

As I trace the historical trajectory of labour migration and the shifting migration landscape up to the present in Rivermoor and its role in driving rapid local development, the struggles of homemaking in the community come into view.

Đói thì đầu gối phải bò,

Cái chân phải chạy, cái giò phải đi.

[When hungry, the knees must crawl,

The legs must run, the limbs must walk.]

(Vietnamese proverb)

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<sup>3</sup> In March 2025, my interlocutor told me that the vision had finally come true: that toilet seat was now in use, installed in a brand-new, spacious house with a modern bathroom.

Mr. Duong referenced that common proverb after listening to an explanation of the research project. With the assistance of the local authorities, I was introduced to him, and he offered me his son's single-story house as a place to stay for one year, because his son had long relocated and settled in another city. Already passed the 70-year-old mark, Duong lived alone and was working casually as a maintenance man for the CCG. His daughter has built a life in Japan, where she is married with two children. For Duong, migration was the key in securing the stable lives his children enjoy today. He recounted the history of the Rivermoor commune, a place once plagued by hunger and desperation, where people struggled even to own a pair of quần đùi (shorts/underwear). In times of hunger, survival meant taking action, shifting your body, moving around, venturing far from home in search of food (tha phương cầu thực). Not only from Duong, I often heard the phrase “phải đi” (“must go”) from people in the commune, insisting on the necessity of leaving and the crisis of staying put. Indeed, mobility for livelihood in rural Vietnam reveals the ways people manage within the rapidly changing social fabric, while particularly underscoring adaptation in response to both opportunity and adversity.

In Vietnam, labour migration bore witness to dynamic changes in social and economic life after the transition from a centrally planned to a market-orientated economy in the mid-1980s. The introduction of the reform (Đổi Mới) in 1986 dismantled collectivised ownership and opened the economy to foreign investment and altered labour patterns drastically. Industrialisation and economic liberalisation created new labour demands in cities, particularly in manufacturing and export industries, fuelling internal migration as people from rural areas moved to urban centres in search of better job opportunities. The government officially stated Vietnam's employment cooperation with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, aiming to provide jobs and promote skill trade. It was also the booming start of the economic sectors for overseas employment services. Both the number of Vietnamese outgoing workers and the range of receiving countries have been steadily increasing with the growing diversity and complexity of employment patterns; notably, there is a rapid increase in the number of Vietnamese workers pursuing work abroad through self-initiated or informal channels (Narcisco, 2017).

Rural-urban labour migration is a prominent trend in Vietnam; however, the migrant workers still face precarious and exploitative working conditions. While the reform has driven significant economic growth, urban areas benefit more, leaving rural areas still struggling to catch

up (Nguyen & Locke, 2014). The lack of accessible job information from various distribution channels poses a significant barrier for migrants seeking employment opportunities in the formal economic sector, further limiting their options and intensifying their reliance on informal networks. They typically take on jobs in manufacturing and service sectors that involve long hours, low pay, and limited job security (Siu & Unger, 2019). They are often excluded from social services like healthcare and education, particularly if they lack official residence status in urban areas due to the regulations of *hộ khẩu* (household registration system) (Le *et al.*, 2011). The household registration system functions as a mechanism of social control, effectively restricting migrants' access to public services and segregating the labour market (Le & Khuat, 2008; Le *et al.*, 2011; Nguyen, 2014). This system categorises residents' access to social welfare by their place of origin, placing migrants in a more vulnerable position within the labour market, where they face both economic exploitation and social marginalisation. Taking education provision for migrant children as an example, public schools prioritise students who are registered under the *hộ khẩu* in the area where the school is located; this means children living outside the registered area are given lower priority for admission to public schools. Additionally, public schools often have limited quotas for non-local children. In some cases, they may be required to pay higher tuition compared to children with local household registration. Another option is directed to private schools, which are substantially pricier. For such reasons, it is common that children are separated from parents who have to migrate for work and are taken care of by families at home. Similarly, the lack of formal social support often pushes migrant workers into informal networks to access housing, healthcare, and financial support.

Observing Vietnam's welfare reality, London (2013) describes Vietnam as a Market-Leninist political economy, characterised by welfare arrangements that commodify essential services and exacerbate polarising class structures. Jake Lin and Minh Nguyen (2021) examine a cycle of commodification in welfare studies, starting with the commodification of labour, which leads to the precariousness and suffering of migrant workers. This situation leads to decommodification through the provision of perfunctory social protection via universal welfare schemes. However, these inadequate welfare schemes condition the marketisation of welfare, thereby facilitating a process of recommodification that further binds vulnerable workers to their exploitative jobs while increasing their dependence on households for care and reproductive labour.

In sum, the design of Vietnam's welfare regime and labour market shapes the conditions where accumulating wealth becomes paramount for sustaining lives for people in rural regions because even basic survival needs are increasingly commodified.

My interlocutors have little faith in life-changing job opportunities within the national socialist-orientated market economy. Poverty in Vietnam is predominantly a rural issue, with the majority of the poor residing in rural areas; the common traits are low education qualification, larger family sizes, and limited access to essential resources such as land and basic social and physical infrastructures (Le *et al.*, 2011). The mass of migrant workers coming from Rivermoor Commune is a mix of skilled and unskilled, educated and undereducated, but they share the commonality of being underemployed and underpaid. Phan describes his eldest son, born in 1987, as having a passion for studying language and being among the best at school and the brightest and most hard-working men his age, but all of that would not amount to any true wealth when he stayed put in Vietnam and became an undervalued worker. Phan encouraged his three sons to pursue work opportunities abroad after high school. The two younger sons migrate overseas to work first through contract services with commercial brokers. The eldest, being the most academically gifted, devoted more time to learning Korean and preparing for exams, eventually securing employment in Korea through the Employment Permit System (EPS), which gave him a safer legal and structured pathway and “cost less money”. For the past decade, the family has enjoyed a comfortable living standard, largely thanks to the remittances sent from abroad. Phan believes that any investment, be it time, money, or effort, should be spent on earning foreign money. Phan reasons:

“At home, playing around, herding cows and buffaloes, you know... Meanwhile, children working [abroad], monthly sending home 1,000 dollars. Back then [in the 2010s at the sons’ departure], 1 USD was around 16 [thousand VND], one bill was 1.6 million dong. Once upon a time when I went [to work in Korea in the 1990s], one bill was 1.1 million. Food, water, and clothes, more than enough [for the whole family]”.

Foreign currencies essentially become the objects of desire for aspiring migrants (Chu, 2010), a sign of attractive qualities (Truitt, 2013), an “internal essence of the transnational family today” (Gregory, 2012, p.392). Given the state-endorsed emphasis on self-responsibility and the

increasing role of marketisation in welfare provision, money becomes not just essential but fundamental for life security. Remittances sent back by migrant workers have become a crucial source of protection for many Vietnamese families, also contributing significantly to rural development and economic growth. It is so powerful that remittances generate greater overall economic value than the country's major exports (Truitt, 2023). Money, or wealth accumulation, is still the main driver for the people in Rivermoor Commune to venture far and wide, where their labour could support them better than it could otherwise.

The commune has gained an incredible economic jump resulting from labour export starting as early as 1994. The community largely credits a visionary leader for the success. The Commune President at the time advocated and incentivised participation in the government's labour export programmes, recognising it as an immediate pathway out of poverty during the early days in the reform era. Rivermoor commune belonged to the district that was among others in rural Central Vietnam to be experimented with labour export programmes (khu vực thí điểm). It was due at Vietnam's reformation process that began experiments at the grassroots level, focusing on the rural economy, before gradually expanding to encompass the urban industrial state sector, ultimately serving as a model for other regions to follow (Tran, 2022). As a result, the pivotal economic transformation of the small rural town was conditioned by the convergence of timing, state agenda, visionary leadership, determined people, and a pressing need for đổi đời.

However, transnational labour migration comes with numerous trade-offs well understood by the rural aspiring migrants themselves. As migration regimes become more restrictive, their management becomes simultaneously more informalised, decentralised, and fragmented; in the case of Asia, migration organisation has become increasingly commercialised with the advent of state-regulated contract labour migration programmes, giving market actors a central role in labour migration systems (Lindquist *et al.*, 2012; Baas, 2020; Muranaka, 2022). This market-driven approach creates a co-constitutive governance of the states with the migration industry, integrates private recruitment agencies, brokers, and other intermediaries to operate within the regulatory frameworks established by governments (Rodriguez, 2010; Goh *et al.*, 2017). Brokers may be known for unreliable or unethical guidance and may put migrants into predatory migration situations that further exacerbate their precarity (Faist, 2014; Hoang, 2020a). Vietnamese migrants reportedly pay higher broker fees for the same migration routes compared to migrants from other

Southeast Asian countries (IOM & ILO, 2017). On top of that are typical upfront payments for visa processing, travel expenses, and language or skills training. The financial strain creates a cycle of dependency and vulnerability, as migrants may enter irregular work arrangements abroad to repay loans as fast as possible. Additionally, the risk of failed migration such as being unable to secure a renewed contract or facing early repatriation intensifies the financial risk.

Phan recounted his time working on fishing ships in Korea in 1997:

“I was a builder (thợ nề), but there were no jobs to do. In 1997, you have the skill but if the people in the villages built houses, we would help build it for free or only for a few bowls of rice for wages because nobody had the money for hiring people. Where would I have to go to build houses? Everybody in this area is poor. So you understand, there were no jobs for me. [...] We caught wind of foreign countries [recruitment] and people going to work in foreign countries, and we thought of wealth. Everybody liked that idea. One man at home rode a bicycle, seeing someone went to foreign countries and went back owning a red Honda Dream motorcycle... riding around, it was really like a dream for him, you know, owning a motorcycle. Because of that dream, I must go. There were many companies [recruitment agencies] to register for a contract. I paid 10 million dong<sup>4</sup> for a contract to work on a fishing vessel. My father loaned me 7 million dong, the rest was from my wife's family. I think that I only had 2 pairs of clothes, and we had to borrow from others. When going, I only thought that it would be super nice. But once I started working I couldn't follow. I slept 6 hours then I worked 16 hours. Everybody on the vessel took shifts - eat, sleep, work. Thằng tư bản (capitalist ones) work at different hours, unlike us”.

[...] “After 6 months the ship had some problems and broke down, so I was let go and had to return to Vietnam, still in debt. I went again in early 1998, and paid 25 million dong this time. The salary was about 1.7 million a month. I thought about the debt and the land that we needed to buy, for the house we are living in now. We needed 11 million dong for the land. [...] And wife and children at home, hunger and sufferings (đói khổ). So in March 1999, I escaped to work on land, on farms, for a nameless and faceless Korean boss - more

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<sup>4</sup> Approximately \$855

money and more work. On boats, I smoked a lot because it was cold, and they provided cigarettes for free. I quit smoking on land, it was tough... what if I wandered about and didn't know the language and got reported. I didn't have legal papers anymore; the situation was like a ton hanging on a strip of hair (ngàn cân treo sợi tóc). I only learned the alphabet and basic greetings before departing in 1997. I wasn't aware that I should learn language, neither was I told by them [recruiters]. On land, the other Vietnamese had language books, so I looked through them. During that time, many Vietnamese [workers] came to Korea. I learned with them as we lived together. I went outside, to the markets, listening to funny talkings (xì xà xì xô), and I started to understand more and more. [...] The Vietnamese communities were supportive kind and and protected each other. Therefore, there are many stories nowadays about people looking to reconnect with the friends they made abroad once upon a time”.

Phan was deported in 2007. It was a bittersweet moment. Phan admitted that he was earning exponentially well and wanted to work in Korea for as long as possible, though he found comfort in reuniting with his family. He was overwhelmed by the changes in Vietnam after 10 years apart, though he had a tinge of disappointment when comparing the changes to the far more advanced development he had witnessed in Korea. He took immense pride in the fruits of his labour, which grew the family's land and property, though he could not ignore how much his wife had changed during his absence, which him with him a sense of unfamiliarity. Regardless, he made it his priority to motivate all his sons to work abroad. Phan referred to himself as among many successful examples in Rivermoor commune about life transformation through labour migration, and he attributed this success mostly to the resilience of self and family unit. By the time he returned, *đổi đời* was more than about escaping poverty for the rural people but also an ideal of living in abundance (*sống dư dả*) that was worth the risks. Phan described his children's departures in the 2010s as like “riding the waves” (*cuỡi sóng*), easing into the flocks of people abroad (*theo đàn theo lũ*). There were more capitals, so as more options, services, information technologies, and bigger networks to migrate, all that was not accessible for him a decade prior.

Unfortunately, Phan's youngest son found himself in a predicament common among many contract migrant workers in Korea. After five years of employment, his contract was not renewed, leaving him with little savings after recovering the costs incurred through a commercial broker for

securing the job. He overstayed his visa and was subsequently deported. I met him briefly in February 2024 before his soon departure to Taiwan, once again using an intermediary to arrange the debt-financed migration. This is a common story of failed migration that leads migrants to “double down” on their debts and take on new risks in order to migrate again. Excessive migration expenses and associated problems in Southeast Asia, such as the rampant occurrence of irregularities, are largely linked to inefficient bureaucratic processes and widespread corruption within the state's labour export management systems (Petchamesree & Capald, 2023; Gerard & Bal, 2020; Lindquist et al., 2012; McKeown, 2012; Hoang, 2020a). Rural migrants repeatedly depend on informal networks and agree to follow brokers due to limited skill opportunities and government-imposed migration quotas, which lower-level authorities have often failed to improve. Intergovernmental labour migration programs have specific requirements in terms of specific skills, language proficiency, or educational qualifications, which not all rural populations are willing or equipped to follow. The proportion of skilled workers in the Vietnamese workforce remains low - this situation diminishes the competitiveness and affects the standing of Vietnamese workers abroad (Nguyen, 2023a). Conversely, the proportion of trained labourers in urban areas is three times higher than in rural regions (Nguyen, 2023b). This skills gap restricts their ability to compete for higher-paying or more secure jobs abroad, limiting their prospects to low-skill, precarious employment opportunities. Moreover, the development of welfare and immigration regimes in receiving countries may put foreign labourers into ethnic differentiation that affects their treatment in the workplace (Yoshida, 2021; Kim, 2021; Cho & Choi, 2017). Many workers encounter exploitative contracts, restrictive working conditions, and language barriers that hinder their ability to fully integrate into host societies. Additionally, low-wage labour Asia is predominantly structured around fixed-term temporary contracts, offering little to no opportunity for permanent residency or citizenship in the host countries (Piper, 2004). Overall, scholars argue that these problems are rooted in *structural vulnerability* (Ball & Piper, 2002), which is *structurally embedded* within social and economic systems (Belanger et al., 2011) and shaped by *neoliberal governmentality* (Hoang, 2017). They highlight how systemic management strategies position low-wage migrant workers in precarious and subordinate roles, often pushing them toward extreme measures in irregular migration. Until July 2023, Vietnam deployed over 712,607 workers abroad under contract. Among them, over 46,677 individuals breach their contracts (abscond) and reside

unlawfully in host countries, constituting approximately 6% of the total contracted overseas workforce.<sup>5</sup>

Market liberalisation since reform also influenced gender and household dynamics, as the increasing pressure on individuals to engage in market activities lead to the feminization of the workforce. Feminisation is particularly evident with the growth of export-oriented industries and the establishment of manufacturing factories. Employers often prefer young women, as they are considered patient, obedient, and physically suitable for manual labour and tasks requiring dexterity and high attention to detail (Caraway, 2007).<sup>6</sup> While global manufacturing effectively contributes to the gendered discourse of labour, migrant women's engagement in domestic work is as common as that of migrant men in construction and industrial jobs. Migrants' gender identity closely relates not only to the types of labour, but also to work-related social expectations and restrictions. For Vietnamese married women in rural areas, the decision to migrate is often conditioned by, or disrupted by, the interests of other household members, while single women, as prospective wives and mothers, need to justify concerns about safety and marriage to obtain household approval (Hoang, 2011). Collective planning of economic migration becomes necessary in family-oriented societies like Vietnam, where households bear the burden of social provisions. Researchers explore the intersections of migration, gender power dynamics, and adjustments to household disruptions in the translocal context in Vietnam. Some exemplary studies by Hoang & Yeoh (2011, 2015), Locke *et al.* (2012), Nguyen & Locke (2014), and Belanger & Tran (2011) have highlighted patterns among migrant families. These include profiles of migrant women who manage the dual responsibilities of sustaining their families economically and reproductive labour. Conversely, migrant men face traditional societal pressures that intensify or redefine their masculinity, which creates additional social challenges. Furthermore, the mobility status of women and men shapes the perceived "value" of their marriage. Beyond the gendered impacts of migration on household roles and relationships, researchers have also focused on the complex and fluid nature of care in the translocal family landscape. For example, studies from Haemmerli *et al.*

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<sup>5</sup> Source: Thanhnien News <https://thanhnien.vn/bao-dong-tang-lao-dong-bat-hop-phap-tai-han-quoc-185231130164256625.htm> [Translation of title: Alarming rise of unauthorised workers in Korea], accessed 30th February 2024.

<sup>6</sup> To read more about feminisation in agriculture in rural Vietnam: Bacud, E. S., Puskur, R., Duyen, T. N. L., Sander, B. O., & Luis, J. (2019). Rural out migration – feminisation – agricultural production nexus: Case of Vietnam. *Migration and Development*, 10(3), 442–466. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21632324.2019.1679962>

(2021), Hoang *et al.* (2012), Hoang *et al.* (2015), Lam and Yeoh (2019), Nguyen (2014), and Locke *et al.* (2012) reveal how family members contribute to adapting and managing care responsibilities, and children play significant roles in this process. While both male and female migrants must negotiate societal expectations, they generally uphold the traditional social roles from afar. In many cases, remittances from female migrants empower their positions in the families and communities, providing them with a greater say in financial and household decisions.

*On this account, the first struggle of homemaking in rural migrant communities lies in navigating the tension between socialist ideals of collective development and the neoliberal realities of market-driven life.* Vietnam's economic system is characterised by a pragmatic combination of socialist principles, such as state ownership and social welfare, with market mechanisms, including the encouragement of private enterprise, competition, and price liberalisation. However, post-reform Vietnam has increasingly adopted neoliberal policies such as market liberalisation, trade openness, "socialisation"<sup>7</sup> (Nguyen, 2018a), and deregulation (Gainsborough, 2010; Beresford, 2008). These reforms have also resulted in rising inequality, labour precarity, and environmental challenges, reflecting broader criticisms of neoliberal development (World Bank, 2023; London, 2018). While the Communist Party of Vietnam frames these changes as a transitional phase within a socialist trajectory, many scholars argue that the deepening influence of market logic and the proliferation of market-based governance signal a clear neoliberal reality, albeit one tempered by strong state control and political centralisation (Beresford, 2008; Gainsborough, 2010; London, 2018). The privatisation of land and resources and the influx of foreign investment empowered states, businesses, and military elites to sustain those with authority and capital; all the while, rising inequality, disruptive development, and a growing youth population may fuel future legitimacy crises (Hughes, 2020). Under the reform policy, rural livelihoods have been diversified through migration, wage labour, and nonfarm activities. Yet, the essence of village life has transformed, marked by a rise in uncertain migration,

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<sup>7</sup> Nguyen T.N.M (2018a) addresses the problematic term 'socialisation' (xã hội hóa) in Vietnam's policy, which historically referred to collective property ownership, but has shifted meaning to encompass privatisation and individual responsibility within a socialist framework, underlining the paradoxes and tensions arising from privatisation trends and the state's retreat from direct welfare provision. Nguyen argues that socialisation produces a moral subject who must balance self-responsibility with loyalty to society and governance by the state. Vietnam's socialisation processes promote moral values and community contributions, but they also lead to increased burdens on individuals, particularly those with fewer resources.

evolving gender dynamics, altered community interactions, and a growing expectation for individuals to take personal responsibility (Beresford, 2008; London, 2018). In market-socialist Vietnam, care institutions operate largely based on conditionality and commodification, which not only reflects shifting boundaries between the public and private but also exerts a governing logic that seeks to produce self-regulating subjects and communities responsible for their own well-being (Nguyen, 2015). Rural communities utilise multidirectional mobility to generate social and economic value, contesting prevailing perceptions of rural areas as static or uncivilised. Nevertheless, their pursuit of prosperity simultaneously reinforces state development agendas while ironically advancing national progress through forms of agency and initiative that emerge largely from within their communities (Nguyen *et al.*, 2025). Thus, the house must mobilise and embody state-led ideals of development and modernity, while the home is sustained through treacherous livelihood strategies and multiplied carer pressures. This tension renders homemaking an unstable achievement under ongoing negotiation of contradictory conditions between solidarity and competition, duty and aspiration, and discipline and desire.

*Taking risk for the future: the rural migrants' struggles for a good life*

*The second struggle of homemaking lies in the family and intergenerational dynamics that migration both enables and unsettles.* The flow of remittances, care, and power changes the way people in a household interact with each other, creating new hopes and disappointments for people of all ages and genders. Parents invest in their children as the imagined future of the home, while children often grow up negotiating absence, fragmented intimacies, and pressures to succeed as proof of the household's sacrifice. These exchanges of labour, love, and obligation reveal the complicated facets of homemaking that produce kinship bonds under conditions of uncertainty and uneven mobility. Building on this, I turn to the family and intergenerational dynamics that underpin these transformations, offering an overview of how aspirations for a "good life" articulate with everyday practices of homemaking and the moral economy of migration in rural Vietnam. What drives generations' persistent desires to leave? Why does "going" come to feel like a necessity rather than a choice? My host Duong had offered a straightforward answer: to have a better life. Yet such aspirations and anxieties are embedded in far more complex constructions of meaning, where moral expectations, intergenerational hopes, and material desires intersect. To unpack these entangled understandings, let us continue with the story of Phan and Ri.

At the end of my fieldwork in 2024, Phan and his wife, along with their daughter - Ri, born in 2007 - were the caregivers of three grandchildren, ages 5, 6, and 9.<sup>8</sup> Outside of school, Ri shared the childcare responsibilities, primarily watching over and spoon-feeding the 5- and 6-year-olds, which Phan considered essential for her personal development and something that she should familiarise herself with (“làm cho quen đi”).<sup>9</sup> Ri started school a year later than the usual school attending age, a decision Phan made after determining that the child was not yet developed enough to handle school and might struggle to perform well (which was also decided for his 6-year-old grandson). It had been for two years that, through an acquaintance, Phan secured a part-time waitressing job at a local restaurant for Ri during the months of her summer vacations and Tet holidays, again, out of belief that she should familiarise herself with working (“đi làm cho quen”). She could keep her salary. I once met Ri by chance at the restaurant in summer. "He always says he'd kick me out of the house if I'm lazy", she shared, shrugging her shoulders. She assured me that those were empty threats (đạo), but she was tired of hearing them. Meanwhile, Phan stated that Ri had it easy (“con này sướng”) as she grew up when the family's financial situation started to pick up and that facing difficulties working abroad would be the way for her to achieve real growth, just like her brothers did.

Phan and his wife, as part of a farming household, continued to work actively on their farmland; most of the produce was for their own consumption. Ri was not expected to participate in such activities, as farming was considered a trade belonging to the older generations, and the farmland was only used until being converted into non-agricultural land and estates for her brothers. It was also agreed by both parents that Ri would migrate and work outside of Vietnam after high school - something that she was looking forward to. The 17-year-old girl was shy and seemingly emotionally distanced from her family. Whenever possible, she preferred to play sports with friends and go home as late as she could. On the occasions that Ri started a conversation, she asked about where I had lived in the world and whether living there was affordable, from which she often reflected crudely about life in Rivermoor Commune. Ri typically wore boyish and plain clothing, though she had a preference for colourful Korean street style. Occasionally, her brothers would

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<sup>8</sup> I debated how to introduce Ri. Should not Ri, along with her 3 cousins, be described under the care of her parents? I resorted to putting Ri in the light of a carer, given how she is shaped in her environment to be one.

<sup>9</sup> Phan's wife chose to abstain from interviews and usually resided with her husband to support his statements. Thus, the weight of household decisions seem predominantly falls on Phan

send her fashionable items from abroad, though she always chose to dress in old clothes so as to avoid being seen as trying to be trendy (đua đòi). Ri shared her yearning for the days she could be without her scrutinising parents and her noisy cousins, make money, afford her own fashion, and see the world like her brothers. Ri was made to learn about earning money the harsh way from her own experience and from the stories of her family. She believed in the transformative power of money and migration over people's lives.

This case was not a common example of the teenager's life in rural Vietnam. However, first of all, it illustrates a methodical calculation of how an aspiring migrant should be “trained” and “prepared”. Phan's approach represents an intense aspect of fortifying the induction into labour migration within a household unit, in which his children's academic abilities and skill sets are evaluated and developed in ways deemed beneficial for their future prospects abroad. In addition to cultivating personal capabilities, resources such as finances, properties, and time are strategically planned and managed over their life course. Second of all, Ri as one aspiring migrant embodies the emergent struggles between different domains of desires for the good life, crossing genders, generations and socio-political discourses. Caught between patriarchal norms and pragmatic expectations, Ri was brought up to embody care and altruism - those qualities of a wifely female in Vietnamese Confucius traditions<sup>10</sup> - and self-reliance, resilience, and diligence. These latter qualities are said to be inherent within the people of Central Vietnam, as being shaped by a history of hardship, and now also serve to define the image of a driven migrant worker who is determined to transform her social conditions. Beyond moral education, Ri's future mobility is conditioned by and tied to her labour contribution and effort. These conditions played out in everyday life through strict household rules, moderation of hobbies and habits, and empty threats. This methodical conditioning emphasises a radical perspective on the future and its challenges, showing that if she is resilient enough to overcome them, the rewards will ultimately benefit her. For her, the rewards are freedom and financial autonomy. In contrast, her parents see a pathway to her personal growth and wealth accumulation. Over time, there is a shift in visions of migration aspirations: the old generations' (returnees) centre on overcoming poverty and securing a material

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<sup>10</sup> For study about gender moral education in Vietnam's rural area, read more from Rydström (2003).

foundation for their offspring, and the younger generations allow a certain degree of self-interest and private accumulation.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus (1977) suggests that the struggles of Ri's family and the challenging history of the commune continued to influence her upbringing. Her rural upbringing, her exposure to migration, and the aspirational narratives that circulate through her community formed her embodied dispositions. Her sense of what was possible, desirable, and necessary was linked to an imagined success that had the ability to transform both personal circumstances and the material environment left behind. As Ri's self-worth was linked to how well she performed the perceived qualities of a successful future migrant, the life choices given to her were drawn from a migrant habitus that is shaped by both local expectations and transnational imaginaries. The way she spoke, dressed, and invested her earnings was all informed by her upbringing and her exposure to wealthier, globally mobile surroundings. Ri's habitus was not fixed but constantly reshaped through her movement across social and geographic spaces. She hid the cosmopolitan aesthetics behind local sensibilities. In doing so, she embodied a form of aspirational subjectivity, where personal success is always measured against the broader landscape of migration, development, and transformation back home.

In this way, the homemaking project becomes a complex and contested process, as the pursuit of the desirable life is continually negotiated amid tensions between evolving individual aspirations, state imaginaries of development, and intergenerational moral expectations. A central tension emerges through the mediation of generational and ideological differences within rural households. Younger members increasingly frame migration as a route to personal advancement, modern lifestyles, and social mobility - those aspirations shaped by broader neoliberal discourses (Pham *et al.*, 2018). In contrast, older generations continue to interpret mobility through a moral and collective lens, emphasising filial duty, reciprocity, and the preservation of family values, rooted in legacies and kinship ethics. This intergenerational divergence generates friction, as youthful ambitions are evaluated against the moral frameworks of elders who experienced scarcity and ideological collectivism. These tensions are rarely expressed through overt confrontation; instead, they are negotiated through everyday practices of symbolic gestures and material exchanges. This dynamic underscores an intergenerational moral economy of migration, where

kinship ties and ideological legacies continue to shape local understandings of progress, virtue, and respectability.

A further dimension of this struggle lies in the *collective pursuit of a lasting and sustainable future* - a project through which families attempt to transform uncertainties into enduring forms of stability and material comfort, lineage continuity, and being part of the national narrative of progress. As families invest in durable homes, children's education, and community status, they confront the limits of endurance within unstable infrastructures and shifting moral economies. A strong future, therefore, is woven into the broader ideological project of development in post-reform rural Vietnam, rather than just binding together personal ambition and familial obligation.

### *Struggle of sustaining the future of home*

I arrived in Rivermoor when it had quickly availed itself of the post-reform surge in transnational labour migration and now finds itself at a crossroads, navigating the grid between rural transformation, capitalist vision of modernity, and generational tensions. In other words, Rivermoor Commune embodies the defining traits of rural Vietnam in the post-socialist era, where the interplay of capitalist economics with socialist institutions and rhetoric gives rise to complex and often contradictory aspirations between the individual and the collective, the local and the global, and the old and the new, where hope for the future emerges as a shared endeavour, envisioned both as a personal pursuit and a state-driven project (Wilcox *et al.*, 2023). The small commune by the coast of North Central Vietnam caught wind of the media as early as 2016, with different names and stories attached to it, about a place of the "good life" due to labour export. It is known in the neighbourhood regions as a place where foreign money flows alongside streams of people constantly moving to and from destinations around the world, yet burdened with negative consequences such as rising divorce rates, family separation, and issues of illegal migration. Nonetheless, their success appears evident through the proliferation of modern, upscale houses and a shift in lifestyle aspirations and purchasing power, coming from the economic benefits of remittances.

To my observation, and to my interlocutors' awareness, this picture of the "good life" misaligns with what is economically sustainable. It is in the paradox of perceived wealth: the general assumption of abundant resources adds to heightened financial expectations, inflated prices, and the perpetual need for bigger income to keep up with the rising life standards. My conversations with returned migrants unveiled another perspective on discordant generational dynamics, where personal, communal and familial values, cosmopolitan imaginaries, and actions go off sync. Furthermore, the aspiring migrants find themselves responsible for sustaining the "good life" while simultaneously being placed at the forefront of the state's agenda for rural transformation - they are in a race riddled with enchantment and disenchantment towards clashing futuristic dreams. The local programming of rural development also plays a subtle yet significant role in intensifying the pressure on rural subjects to migrate. Deeply rooted in the commune's developmental history, transnational labour migration was originally promoted to alleviate poverty. To this day, it has become a key economic sector crucial for rural development, one that receives sufficient institutional support and attention. Therefore, I highlight the complex lives of the subjects in Rivermoor Commune, who have recently reached a critical point in their desire for mobility, as they actively engage in transnational strategies and operations that often put them at risk and jeopardize their futures.

Rural Vietnam faces significant development challenges characterised by policy failures and structural constraints, though rural populations demonstrate resilience through alternative strategies. Taylor *et al.* (2007) identify the failures of official development schemes that utilise unsuitable progress criteria, whereas Nguyen & Vasa (2020) discover through empirical surveys conducted from 2011 to 2015 that rural development programmes inadequately address challenges specific to the region during implementation. Wilcox *et al.* (2023) elucidates the overarching background of uncertainty and anxiety in conjunction with emerging opportunities within the political landscape of development in late socialist Vietnam. Yet, Taylor *et al.* (2007) also present evidence from Mekong Delta instances indicating that rural populations utilise alternative sets of resources and strategies to attain an engaged, modern, and viable quality of life, implying adaptive capacity in the face of systemic obstacles.

This speaks to the quality Appadurai (2013) recognises as the capacity to aspire, or the navigational capacity, which is already grounded within constraining social structures and

opportunities, within which the poor must orient along limited pathways. Ri's parents saw a narrow path out of poverty, which demanded significant effort from her to navigate. Thus, each generation's calculable possibilities against their rural background shape the vision of the good life they deem worth pursuing. On a similar note, Nguyen *et al.* (2024) poses a critically relevant and humanistic question about the uneven distribution of individual capacity to aspire in the late-socialist political economy:

“What possibilities do people have to shape a life that they consider worth living? Such a question presupposes the active role of the aspiring subject as the agent of both change and continuity”. (Nguyen *et al.*, 2024, p. 5)

This becomes evident in the case of the tragic deaths of 39 Vietnamese migrants in Essex, the United Kingdom, in 2019 that shook the world. The victims had suffocated in a refrigerated lorry during a dangerous human trafficking operation. They were from the impoverished regions of central Vietnam and had reportedly paid large sums of money to be smuggled into the UK, where they hoped for life-changing jobs. The incident sparked global outrage and highlighted the dangers of illegal migration and human trafficking. It drew attention to the vulnerabilities of migrants, the exploitation they face, and the need for stronger international cooperation to combat trafficking networks. Vietnam and the UK both pledged to enhance measures to prevent similar tragedies, including better education for potential migrants and stricter enforcement against smuggling operations. While this tragedy serves as a compelling illustration of the human cost of illicit migration and the dangers posed by smuggling, what was ultimately left out of the debates was *how desperate the living conditions of these migrants were, which drove them to risk everything to change their situation.*

I often encountered the saying “chẳng biết làm gì ra tiền” (“do not know what to do for money”) when my interlocutors contemplated the career options without migrating abroad. Contrary to the socialist ideal of eliminating inequality, market socialism reintroduces and exacerbates the rural-urban disparity. The late General Secretary of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong described “the socialist-oriented market economy is a multi-sector commodity economy, operating according to the market mechanism under the management of the State, aiming for people’s wealth,

a strong country, and a fair, democratic, and civilised society” (2007).<sup>11</sup> In reality, studies have shown that rural areas are specifically designed and controlled by the state system to keep people in their location, finance the urban industries, and bear the cost of social reproduction, thus keeping the migrant labour cheap (Nguyen & Locke, 2014; Nguyen, 2014). Urban populations clearly benefit from better access to social services and security, while rural populations must turn to family or market-based solutions for protection. Following the conventional narrative, privatised and automated public institutions drive up the cost of their services, which increases pressure on household income as well as household reproductive responsibility. At the same time, Vietnam’s socialism and socialisation have also redefined self-responsibilities through a collectivist means of production, indicating that every citizen should strive to maintain their own well-being while participating in building the nation. Too often, when the Vietnamese media reports on tragic incidents involving people caught in dangerous migration routes, the story focuses on the migrants who have chosen the risk in the first place, while shifting the focal point away from their conditions at home and onto the *global* immoral and predatory migration networks. The harsh reality is that when the state’s “kept-minimum protection” fails to meet people’s care needs, people are forced to determine their ways to survive and secure their well-being. My interlocutors’ drive to “do something for money” reflects the broader survival logic imposed by Vietnam’s deepening consumer economy, in which migration and foreign remittances have become key strategies for securing household well-being. As said, Phan often described how one bill of foreign money can feed one family, while one person’s salary in a month in Vietnam can barely support them. Therefore, the driven working individuals in Vietnam have embodied the socio-political discourse by becoming independent, conscientious citizens who embrace responsibility for the well-being of themselves and their families.

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<sup>11</sup> Source: Nguyễn Phú Trọng. (2007, January 22). Kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa: Quan niệm và giải pháp phát triển [Socialist-oriented market economy: Concepts and development solutions]. Tạp chí Cộng sản (Communism Magazine). Retrieved from Tạp chí Cộng sản website ([tapchicongsan.org.vn](http://tapchicongsan.org.vn))

Đi làm việc mình thích thì lại không ra tiền  
Còn những việc muộn phiền lại nuôi ta hàng tháng  
😓😓  
Việc nhẹ lương cao tăng ca ko hết việc haha  
Các du học sinh Hàn Quốc nộp hồ sơ sang sớm mà  
kiếm nhiều cạ MAN :(:)))



*Figure 2: Working life in Korea*

(Photo shared on social media by an interlocutor. Translation of caption: *Do the work I like, then I make no money. But the work that stresses me out supports me every month. The work is light, and the salary is high, with overtime and endless work haha. Vietnamese students! Come to Korea and earn a lot of MAN :(:)))* [1 Man = 10,000 South Korean Won = 7 EUR].)

As I understand my interlocutors' perspectives, *migration is the good life*. Just like my interlocutor stated, it brings foreign money that feeds, supports, and sustains lives. But at the same time, *migration is the struggle*, along with risks and failures that it may entail. Managing risks also includes accepting the dangers of crossing borders in a refrigerated truck. I met Hoang, whose son was part of the group who traveled to the UK through the same smuggling network shortly before the tragedy. Hoang could only thank the ancestors for safeguarding her son's journey and blessing him with a steady job at a nail shop. She recounted the days spent waiting for her son's message that he had reached the destination. Each day, she checked the weather forecast and marked the map, tracking every border he was supposed to cross. A few years' prior, her daughter departed to work in Korea through a tourist visa. And before that, Hoang was also an undocumented worker

in an electronics factory in Malaysia for seven years. For each migration adventure, the element that could not be calculated was luck. Risk, however, was calculable. Hoang asked me how many times I had been in an airplane in the last year, whether I feared that an accident might occur midair, and if I ever thought that I was also risking my life every time I boarded a plane, legally or not. Then, Hoang neatly concluded her analogy that *risk governs all*.

The struggle for a strong and sustainable future, then, is not only about economic advancement but also about navigating uncertainty within an uneven system of care and opportunity. For many in Rivermoor, striving for a better future means taking risks that could just as easily undo the gains they hope to achieve. As people invest their labour and hopes across borders, they also negotiate what it means to build a “good life” amid instability and risk. Despite their aspirations of security and prosperity, their futures remain precariously tied to the very structures that promise liberation but perpetuate dependency.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the homemaking project in rural Vietnam unfolds through three intertwined struggles that reveal the tensions of a society in transition. The first concerns the *tension between lingering socialist ideals and dominant neoliberal realities*. While collectivist values once defined the moral economy of work, land, and care, the spread of market-orientated reforms has reconfigured home as a site of private accumulation and personal advancement. *Generational differences* in imagining value, success, and belonging give rise to the second struggle. The older generation, which was shaped by memories of hard times and a sense of community, often clashes with younger generations who want to be able to move around the world and live a consumerist lifestyle. These differences generate friction not only over choices of work and migration but also over the very meaning of a “good life”. The third struggle centres on the *uncertain project of building a shared and sustainable future*. As families invest in homemaking through migration, they attempt to craft a collective legacy that is simultaneously personal, familial, and national. The future, like the home itself, becomes a contested space where aspirations for security and progress are constantly remade in tension with precarity and loss. Together, these struggles expose homemaking as a deeply dynamic and contested project. It is one that materialises the

contradictory forces of aspiration, morality, and belonging at the heart of rural transformation in contemporary Vietnam.

## **MULTISCALAR HOME: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF HOMEMAKING**

This chapter outlines the theoretical foundations that inform my exploration of homemaking in rural Vietnam amidst transnational migration and rapid economic transition. In this research, I approach *homemaking* as a relational and multiscalar process unfolding across *four interconnected fields of negotiation: the individual, community, national, and global*. I identify these as active fields of negotiation shaped by overlapping forces of desire, governance, and circulation, where material, affective, and moral forces converge to shape how home is imagined, made, and contested. At the individual level, homemaking manifests through intimate acts of care, aspiration, and labour that anchor personal and familial belonging. Within the community, it is sustained through shared moral economies and local practices that define recognition and reciprocity. At the national scale, homemaking becomes entangled with state narratives of modernisation, citizenship, and development, while in the global sphere, it is conditioned by transnational migration, remittance economies, and circulating imaginaries of success and modernity.

Corresponding to my ethnography, I conceptualise rural homes as actively functioning in *four domains of practices - labour, future, roots, and ecological* - each revealing a different facet of how people inhabit and make sense of the world under transnational migration and the developmentalist logics of the Vietnamese state. The labour dimension captures the kind of prized work invested in sustaining domestic life; the future dimension situates home as a temporal and aspirational project; the symbolic dimension highlights home as a moral space of legacy and tradition; and the ecological dimension situates home within broader human and non-human entanglements. Together, these spheres of negotiation and dimensions of meaning offer a framework for understanding how rural Vietnamese negotiate belonging, aspiration, and care amid the shifting terrains of post-socialist transformation and global capitalism.

In short, *homemaking is produced through the multidimensional and intersecting negotiations at the individual, community, national, and global scales, across the domains of*

*labour, future, roots, and ecology. The dynamic interplay within and between these fields and domains gives rise to the lived experience and material reality of “home.”*

<b>Domains of Practice → / Fields of Negotiation ↓</b>	<b>Labour</b>	<b>Future</b>	<b>Roots</b>	<b>Ecological</b>
<b>Individual</b>	Personal aspirations, gendered labour identity, moral worth of work	Youth’s imagination, educational mobility, personal agency	Emotional belonging, filial responsibility	Everyday interactions with material surroundings
<b>Community</b>	Local labour hierarchies, moral economy of work	Shared visions of progress and continuity	Kinship networks, intergenerational expectations	Communal practices and transactional relationship environment and resources
<b>National</b>	State’s framing of productive citizens, rural development agenda	Policy visions of “future generations” and human capital	National narratives of tradition, heritage, and modernization	State-driven programs (e.g., OCOP, model residential areas)
<b>Global</b>	Transnational migration, remittances, capitalist labour demand	Global imaginaries of success, education abroad	Diasporic connections, remittance-based identity	Global ecological impacts, climate change discourse

### **I. Homemaking from social reproduction to state intervention and the Reconfiguration of Home**

Anthropology places houses and homes as the central point of social reproduction, as they offer the lens through which to understand how households are sustained, transformed, and imagined

across time and space. Social reproduction refers not only to the biological reproduction of labour but also to the everyday practices, care work, education, emotional labour, and symbolic investments that maintain and regenerate households, communities, and social life more broadly, also increasingly being exploited along with the rise of capitalism's global mobility (Katz, 2001; Federici, 2004; Ferguson & McNally, 2015). In a transnational context, throughout history, reproductive labour is undervalued within the household and devalued in the paid labour market while being further segregated based on gender-typed tasks and racial-ethnic hierarchy (Duffy, 2007). Moreover, feminist anthropologists have long argued that migration studies must foreground these reproductive dynamics, especially as they reveal how care work is unequally distributed along lines of gender, class, and geography (Parreñas, 2012; Constable, 2007).

Social reproduction in Vietnamese households is characterised by dynamic adaptations to economic transformation, with gender roles and household strategies fundamentally reshaping in response to market-driven changes. Prior to reform, scholarship on rural Vietnamese households emphasised the home as a site of social reproduction, which fundamentally set the practices essential for maintaining family and community life (Drummond & Thomas, 2003; Werner, 2009). Homemaking encompassed not only the material maintenance of the household (food preparation, childcare, eldercare, and agricultural labour), but also the moral education of traditional Confucian values and the reproduction of social norms, kinship ties, and cultural identities (Rydstrom, 2003). Home was conceived as a collective, intergenerational project, with women playing central roles in sustaining family and community well-being. These practices reinforced gendered divisions of labour, with women's unpaid or underrecognised work supporting the productive economy.

The reform marked a shift toward a market-oriented economy, leading to rapid economic growth, diversification of livelihoods, growing inequality, and increased rural-urban migration, fundamentally reconfiguring family production and consumption boundaries (Taylor, 2004; Bélanger & Barbieri, 2009). These changes disrupted traditional forms of homemaking and social reproduction as the liberalisation of markets encouraged young adults, especially women, to migrate to cities or industrial zones for work, fragmenting extended households and altering caregiving arrangements while pushing new, individualistic models promoted by globalisation (Huong, 2004; Resurreccion & Van Khanh, 2009). However, persistent intentionality and pragmatism in women's gender politics govern the discursive and everyday practices of endurance

and self-sacrifice in Vietnamese womanhood and sustain the need to re-establish one's gendered self while maintaining familial support (Knodel *et al.*, 2005; Hoang, 2016). In many ways, domestic labour remains crucial, with housework playing a significant role in family and community life and bringing significant economic value, despite ongoing gender negotiations along socialist ideology (Thu Hong *et al.*, 2014). These transformations reveal the adaptive capacity of Vietnamese households within a rapidly shifting economic landscape, yet this adaptability often comes at the cost of deepening inequalities and mounting pressures on those whose labour and contributions remain undervalued.

The Vietnamese government has been more involved in shaping daily life since the country started to reform and adopt market socialism. This is because of policies that focus on rural development, family planning, health, and housing. Some of the most important interventions are family planning (kế hoạch hóa gia đình) and population policy (bình ổn dân số), housing and infrastructure (xây dựng cơ sở hạ tầng), and women's empowerment initiatives (chính sách đặc thù cho vai trò phụ nữ). Government campaigns promoting smaller families, maternal health, population stability, and child nutrition and education primarily target rural households. Alongside state “investments” in rural infrastructure such as roads, sanitation, and housing programmes, various development initiatives extend the state’s all-encompassing influence into the intimate sphere of household organisation and reproductive choices. Even though state and NGO programmes have targeted rural women and children for microcredit, education, and political participation, these initiatives often reinforce the expectation that women will reconcile their productive and reproductive responsibilities. Jayne Werner (2009) illustrates that, even though Vietnam has a legal institution of public gender equality, post-socialist gender relations are still influenced by state policies and discourses, with unequal status for women based on kinship ties rather than economic contributions.

Consequently, the regulatory gaze of the state and the ideological framing of nation-building in the Vietnamese context inextricably link social reproduction and homemaking. The Vietnamese state often promotes the normative image of a happy family as the foundation for social stability, emphasizing the preservation of traditional family values as both a moral anchor and a social unit essential for the nation’s progress. Within this discourse, the family is also a foundation from which to propel the country toward industrialization, modernization, and

international integration.<sup>12</sup> These ambivalent conditions shape families and households into spaces that both facilitate and morally police aspirations for social mobility and modernity. Scholars have examined how the state employs techniques of governance that selectively celebrate aspects of neoliberal freedom while simultaneously asserting control over which forms of citizenship are deemed deserving of such freedoms. From the perspective of labour, Nguyen Minh's body of work clearly illustrates how Vietnamese neoliberal subjects are cultivated to voluntarily participate in their own exploitation so as to take on the responsibility of caring for both themselves and their families. (Nguyen, 2018a, 2018b; Nguyen & Endres, 2024; Nguyen, Vo, & Wei, 2024; Nguyen, Rydstrom, & Mao, 2024). Looking closely at government operations, Ann Marie Leshkovich (2014) shows how bureaucratic case files shape the Vietnamese understanding of selfhood, family, and state, as different mechanisms of form filling reflect transitions from socialist to neoliberal systems and reveal underlying continuities in the state's use of technical expertise and documentation to assess and mold individuals, albeit coercively, through a framework for self-representation. Approaching the topics of sexuality in Vietnam, Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong (2008) highlights the ironies of freedom-unfreedom governance in contemporary Vietnam. She shows how the state celebrates entrepreneurial and consumerist freedoms while simultaneously repressing "evil" desires brought about by certain social phenomena that emerge from global market liberalization, such as the commercialization of sexuality. The state justifies this repression by promoting "true" Vietnamese femininity and moral integrity, thereby effectively imposing the normative order and social discipline.

Nonetheless, while state intervention has reconfigured homes and continued to regulate their purposes, scholars note the persistence of local agency and negotiation. For the rural population, life is characterised by a delicate balance between precarity and resilience, where informality thrives as both a necessity and a mode of survival. In conditions of economic uncertainty, people are driven by desires and longings for a better life, often engaging in forms of self-exploitation sustained by what Berlant (2011) puts forth as *cruel optimism* - the attachment to dreams of upward mobility and security that may sustain hardship, in spite of the reality that liberal-capitalist

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<sup>12</sup> Government Portal of Vietnam. (2024). Gia đình hạnh phúc là nền tảng cho sự bình ổn xã hội [A happy family is the foundation for social stability]. Báo Điện tử Chính phủ. Retrieved from the Government Portal of Vietnam. <https://baochinhphu.vn/gia-dinh-hanh-phuc-la-nen-tang-cho-su-binh-on-xa-hoi-102240627195559919.htm>

societies are no longer reliable to provide people the opportunities for “the good life”. These practices continuously create new lifeworlds that emerge from the home environment, where traditional kinship networks and local cultural logics both adapt to and resist the pressures of global capitalism. While global systems often exploit these intimate social relations, they also become sources of resistance and continuity, enabling rural families to imagine, and at times materially facilitate, the possibility of return and the renewal of home.

## **II. Home as Multiscalar and Multidimensional Process**

Cultural theorists conceptualise home as a relational and affective practice that is constituted across multiple scales ranging from bodily and familial to national and transnational (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). This multiscalar perspective highlights how home is simultaneously material and imaginative: it is made and remade through emotional investments, spatial practices, built environments, and symbolic associations.

Within material culture studies, the works from Daniel Miller (2008; 2001) have been instrumental in showing behind closed doors the constitutive relationships between homes and life construction and how objects and domestic arrangements are central to the well-being of social relationships. From another point of view into the spatial practice of home, more than being containers for social life, anthropologists such as Mary Douglas (1991) and Irene Cieraad (1999) have argued that home, as a localised idea, is a process of establishing a routine and creating order and meaning in life through classification and spatial demarcation. Such perspectives resonate with Vietnamese polythetic notions of home (*nhà*), which extend its scale and are intimately tied to structure, land and ancestry, community networks, kinship structures, and ritual continuity.

The practices of homemaking in rural Vietnam reveal sophisticated household strategies that manage global market pressures, resist state modernisation agendas, and uphold moral economic principles through diversified livelihoods. Through the concept of *đa gi năng* (maintaining multiple livelihood options), Chau Lam Minh’s (Chau, 2019; Lam, 2020) research illustrates how rural households in northern Vietnam strategically navigate the pressures of marketisation by adopting diversified livelihood practices that reflect a localised sense of agency and personal responsibility for family security and long-term welfare. Their strategies reveal not

an overt resistance to the state's push for agricultural specialisation but a pragmatic negotiation of market and policy uncertainties under the unpredictable state's interventions. Similarly, Vu Thi Hong Anh (2012) presents the emerging issues to Mekong Delta shrimp-farming households facing increased vulnerability as Vietnam integrates into the global market as a major agricultural exporter, which erodes traditional safety nets and shifts production risks onto families. Nguyen (2014) describes the spatial and social expansion of “translocal householding” to sustain care networks across rural and urban areas in response to broader processes of change.

The social consequences of international migration for rural communities have long been a subject of scholarly attention. An example is Peggy Levitt's book *The transnational villagers* (2001), which examines societal changes concerning race, class, and gender resulting from social remittances from Boston, Massachusetts, to the village of Miraflores in the Dominican Republic and the pursuit of sustaining migration between two destinations. In a setting of transnational villages in post-Mao China, which share striking socio-political similarities with rural Vietnamese communities, where immobility as much as mobility can be a source of anxiety and displacement for the rural subjects, Julie Y. Chu (2010) shows that “home” sites serve as an important counterpoint to the dominant focus on displacement and nostalgic detachment in contemporary diaspora studies. However, while the villagers in Chu's study seek to leave permanently and settle in the United States, the migrants in my research are drawn irresistibly back home. There is a particularly strong attachment to home that compels many migrants to find ways to keep tethered to home, give back, and eventually return, a dynamic extensively illustrated in Hung Cam Thai's body of research about gender, family life, and marriage in Vietnamese migrant communities (Thai, 2003, 2008, 2014).

Migration brings complex dimensions and scales of translocal family households, and anthropologists have developed robust frameworks to account for these dynamics, primarily focusing on transnationalism, gender perspectives, and social field analysis. Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) introduced the concept of *transnational social fields* to move beyond the container theory of society, allowing researchers to document how individuals and transnational families simultaneously preserve and transform cultural repertoires and identities, engage with one another both within and beyond local boundaries, and act in ways that align with or at times contradict their values as these evolve. Within these fields, care practices in transnational families are

fundamentally gendered, while *the absent presence* of migrants is often made material through remittances, video calls, gifts, and architectural projects - often motivated by imagined futures of return or inheritance (Parrenas, 2005). Revisiting the studies of transnational families in social research, Merla *et al.* (2020) and Merla *et al.* (2021) urge scholars to start engaging in immobilising regimes, probing how state immigration policies and dominant narratives about migrants create states of enforced temporariness and insecurity. These regimes shape transnational care networks by limiting short-term visits, long-term returns, and circular movements within families, often producing complex combinations of mobility, immobility, and entrapment.

Fewer sources discuss transnational ritual co-presence and the maintenance of symbolic continuity as strategies for bridging absence among dispersed family members. Aligning with Pierre Nora's (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire* to describe sites - both material and symbolic - where collective memory crystallises and is preserved, ritual spaces in rural Vietnam serve as key sites where family histories are remembered, enacted, and transmitted. Anthropological research reveals that Vietnamese homes are profound spaces of ritual significance and memory transmission, serving as critical sites for cultural preservation and intergenerational understanding. Since the reform, homes have become sites where pre-revolutionary and socialist values interact, giving rise to new forms of cultural and ritual expression (Kingsley Malarney, 2002). They also function as "cultural repositories", preserving ancestral heritage through spatial arrangements and practices of ancestor worship that sustain intergenerational ties and meaningfully accommodate immigrants' homemaking in displacement (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2016). Le Thu's autoethnography of Vietnamese diasporic families further show how domestic spaces mediate intergenerational historical trauma and memories and maintain transnational ritual connections that link migrants to their homelands (Le, 2025). Altogether, these research collectively shows that Vietnamese homes are profound sites of cultural negotiation, memory preservation, and ritual innovation that adapt to changing political, social, and geographical circumstances while maintaining essential connections to ancestral traditions and community identity. In many cases, commemorative practices serve to stabilise the home, not only as a place of dwelling but also as a moral and historical anchor. I fill in the gaps to explore how such symbolic homemaking is practised in the context of migration, as well as the possible new forms of care that may emerge when presence must be substituted with different kinds of proxies.

While being a less developed area in Vietnamese rural studies, ecological homemaking has gained prominence in anthropological theory, especially in the context of environmental change and late capitalism. Anna Tsing's (2015) ethnography of precarity and ecological interdependence shows how people form attachments and livelihoods in landscapes shaped by ruin and uncertainty. On the same account, Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) theorises the "economies of abandonment", which force some populations to endure the environmental and social afterlives of extraction and governance. These perspectives open space to contemplate the Vietnamese countryside not just as a backyard of tradition or development, but as a place where lives continue in the margins. For example, Pamela McElwee's (2016) work on Vietnamese environmental policy underscores the disjuncture between state-directed ecological zoning and local land practices, further complicating the relationship between state vision and ecological homemaking. In the Vietnamese rural context, examining the relationship between natural ecology and home is essential for comprehending how rural households innovatively integrate traditional ecological knowledge and moral responsibilities regarding land and water to preserve both home and community amid uncertainty and transformation.

### **III. Conclusion: Toward a Theory of Home**

Together, these theoretical strands provide a conceptual scaffolding for understanding home as a layered and contested project. Home is simultaneously a space of domestic labor, an investment in imagined futures, a symbolic anchor of identity, and an ecological practice of staying and caring. It is made and remade through the everyday efforts of those who remain behind, often in the shadow of transnational mobility and state-led modernisation. The growing literature on migration and rural transformation in Vietnam often treats the home as a site of nostalgic belonging and as a field of struggle, thereby positioning rural actors as responding to change rather than *living with it*. My research offers an alternative view: that rural actors inhabit social change and institutional subjugation as a constitutive condition of everyday life rather than a disruption to it.

Therefore, drawing on the conceptualisation of home as a process (Brun & Fabos, 2015; Carsten, 2018; Douglas, 1991; Dovey, 1985) and rooted in the Vietnamese notion of *nhà*, which conjoins the material and symbolic dimensions of house and home, this research explores homemaking as a way rural families mobilise a "*highly complex system of ordered relations with*

*place*” that situates them simultaneously in space, in time, and in society (Dovey, 1985, p. 39). In doing so, we can understand how homemaking unfolds beyond routine and structure but across dispersed scales of geographies and temporalities: from domestic to local landscapes to transnational circuits of migration, from inherited traditional grounds to speculative futures. As it follows how rural people build, rebuild, and reimagine *nhà*, the study reveals how they remain acutely attuned to their living environments and stabilise orientated homemaking practices throughout ongoing change - an art of recalibrating relations, materials, and moral orders as the world shifts around them.

By attending to the four domains of homemaking - domestic, future, symbolic/roots, and ecological - this thesis seeks to provide a more holistic and grounded account of how rural communities in Vietnam negotiate the meaning and making of home amidst ongoing migration and transformation. The homemaking framework provides an essential perspective for comprehending the intricacies of rural development and migration, especially in light of Vietnam's swift transformations since reform. Centering homemaking allows researchers to illuminate how development processes and migration are mediated and experienced within the home, capturing the nuanced ways in which gender, generation, and kinship both shape and are shaped by these changes.

Moreover, the homemaking framework is analytically powerful because it bridges multiple scales, connecting the intimate sphere of the household to national development agendas and global economic trends (Katz, 2001; Cole & Durham, 2007). It reveals how large-scale social and economic transformations are lived, negotiated, and sometimes contested in everyday life. Looking closely at the domestic labour, interconnected meanings, and negotiations of homemaking, scholars and policymakers can gain a more comprehensive and human-centred understanding of rural development and migration - one that appreciates both the challenges and the resilience of rural families as they navigate profound change beyond their localised houses.

# ETHNOGRAPHIC ENQUIRIES INTO VILLAGERS' EVERYDAY HOMEMAKING

## I. Situating the field: From theoretical framework to operational approach

I first went to Rivermoor Commune in May 2023 for three weeks of fieldwork survey and to arrange necessary administrative processes with the local authorities. I started the fieldwork period in Rivermoor Commune in October 2023 and wrapped up at the end of July 2024.

The rural Rivermoor Commune resides in the coastal region in North Central Vietnam in Ha Tinh Province. There are 3,402 households with over 12,154 people, of which 2,621 people are working abroad in more than 20 countries (Local Social Economic Report, June 2024); though, it is known that the reported statistic does not accurately reflect the amount of unreported self-initiated migration and seasonal migration, which could total the number of international workers to more than 3,000 people. Rivermoor Commune used to be in dragging poverty, exacerbated by limited economic opportunities during the American War. Duong was certain that I would not uncover any written history of a prosperous pre-war Rivermoor Commune. According to Duong and many local accounts, the community had previously thrived, actively engaging in trading seafood, dried goods, and fermented seafood products. However, much of their wealth and resources were devoted to supporting the liberation front during the war. Following unification and the establishment of a single government in Vietnam, trading and commerce effectively disappeared. The pinnacle of hardship came in 1989 with a series of cyclones that inflicted extensive damage on property and infrastructure. The historical records of Rivermoor Commune indicate that its tumultuous past has significantly influenced the characteristics of its people, who are known for their resilience, industriousness, and strong family orientation. In 2018, the commune was reclassified as *nông thôn mới* (New Rural), though it is more well-known by the name given by the media as *làng tỉ phú* (billionaire villages) due to its imposing and wealthy neighbourhoods. Since the early 1990s, labour export has emerged in the commune as the spearhead economy and the pivotal strategy for *thoát nghèo* (escaping poverty). Since July 2025, under the nationwide government restructuring, Rivermoor was no more. It was merged with two adjacent communes to create one large commune. *This alteration is part of the extensive reforms*

*initiated by the new government apparatus, demonstrating that Vietnam's governance landscape remains in flux, and rural communities will continue to experience significant socio-political transformations.*

The survey phase served as the foundation for my ethnographic study and set the tone for my relationships with the local authority and the people. The CCG assigned a deputy to assist with my requests. I received detailed guidance on how to present my academic objectives to higher government officials and how to tune my research proposal to ensure it aligned with the commune's priorities and avoided potential conflicts of interest. For instance, in my request form for conducting research, I should replace the implicative word “hệ quả” (“consequences”) with more neutral words such as “tác động” (“impacts”) or “tác dụng” (“effects”). Learning to avoid scrutiny and attention from the authorities was a valuable experience, as it deepened my understanding of the constant anxiety surrounding unwanted attention and the need to carefully mediate my actions to prevent potential repercussions for the local government and people and to protect my own academic freedom. Eventually, I obtained research authorisation through different levels of government.<sup>13</sup> The deputy also designated a staff member to introduce me to several households in different villages so as to familiarise myself with the community and collect general observations while establishing my presence. I was well-accompanied by the local government during my initial visit. By October, however, such involvement lessened; I knew then that I had successfully passed the “screening” back in May.

In May 2023, through the connection with a relative, I secured a temporary stay at Chinh’s house. Chinh was a well-known figure in the commune. She is a resilient and determined businesswoman with a sharp entrepreneurial spirit. In her words, simply telling others that I was staying with her would dispel any suspicions about me, because she was highly respected within the community. Chinh ran a seafood processing cooperative whose products were representative of the commune. Widowed at a young age, Chinh overcame significant hardships and built her business to its current level of success while also managing to raise her children and support their

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<sup>13</sup> I must obtain research authorisation from the People’s Committee at the district level and finish temporary residence registration before I could officially start conducting research in the commune. As of July 2025, the district level of administration was removed, redistributing its functions to provincial and commune authorities and altering how local governance operates.

lives abroad. Chinh's house was designed for the business: the front was set up as a small store, and the storage area was built in the back. As I reflected on my decision to stay with Chinh during this time, I realised that the situation was an ethnographer's dream. The store received a steady stream of local customers daily, giving me the opportunity to interact with people from different villages. These interactions allowed me to establish connections and helped me ease into the flows of conversation and learn the socialising etiquette in a rural community. Several relationships I formed during the survey period not only endured the time gap before I returned in October but also deepened and continued to grow throughout and beyond.



*Figure 3: Chinh's store, viewed from inside the house*

The research's qualitative ethnographic methodology combines performative ethnography, life histories/biographic narratives, oral history, and archival analysis to capture how migration and homemaking unfold across spatial, temporal, and institutional scales. Ethnography opens a window into the intimate rhythms of everyday life, allowing researchers to feel how people make meaning, dwell in uncertainty, and weave their worlds within the unseen threads of history and

society (Bernard, 2018; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This approach is particularly suitable for examining the nuanced impacts of migration on domestic life, gender roles, and household organisation. Participant observation was conducted throughout the fieldwork period, allowing immersion in daily life and engagement in household and community activities (Spradley, 1980), while the researcher strove for thick descriptions beyond superficial observations to describe not just actions but also their surrounding social contexts and layers of meaning (Geertz, 1973). This method facilitated the documentation of routines, resource management strategies, and shifting family dynamics, as recommended by DeWalt & DeWalt (2010). To trace the transnational reach of migration, I also followed household networks through telecommunication channels and digital ethnography (via social media and messaging platforms). This multi-sited perspective helped illuminate how homemaking practices are coordinated across distance and time and how these acts are represented in both local and transnational imaginaries. Detailed field notes were maintained throughout the research. I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with spouses and parents of migrants, youth, elderly residents, return migrants, and local leaders. The average length of an interview was one hour, with the shortest lasting 40 minutes and the longest lasting 2 hours. Interview guides often contain open questions focused on experience of migration, division of labour, coping mechanisms, gender roles, aspiration, future planning, and transformations in homemaking practices. The format allows participants to express their experiences in their own words while providing comparability across cases (Bernard, 2018).

Not long after I settled in the commune, I realised that transnational migration has percolated into daily life activities, from casual catch-up conversations about the well-being of the sons, daughters, husbands, wives, etc. working abroad to the morning rush by the shore to purchase as much seafood as possible to package and post to someone thousands of miles away. Thus, whenever I attended social gatherings or found myself in an engaging conversation or a moment I would like to remember, I asked participants for consent to record in the background. Over time, this resulted in 58 recordings capturing a wide range of everyday scenes, from casual and guided conversations and “pseudo” focus group discussions<sup>14</sup> to moments of market bargaining, children

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<sup>14</sup> “Pseudo” focus group discussion: Usually, when I interacted with people in a public setting, a certain topic in the conversation attracted more participants and diverse opinions, which turned into an unprompted group discussion. Focus group discussions foster community-level insights and help identify shared challenges and adaptive strategies (Morgan, 1997).

bickering, the sound of a tractor hauling boats ashore, or a great-grandmother's lullaby soothing a child to sleep. By doing so, I adopted a mode of *listening as a method* (Gallagher *et al.*, 2016; Pink, 2015) to engage with the soundscapes of everyday life in Rivermoor. These recordings are not only linguistic data but also *affective and spatial traces* that capture the textures of life as they reverberate through homes, shared spaces, and communal gatherings. By listening closely to tones, pauses, and ambient noise, I was able to attend to how people inhabit social worlds and negotiate their place within them. This method allowed me to understand homemaking and migration not only through words and actions but through the *sound of living itself*, such as the rhythms, frictions, and resonances that make up the everyday. This sensory collection shaped an *acoustic imagination* of the rural that felt distinctly different from the space I grew up in and am familiar with in Hanoi. Drawing on Feld's (1996) notion of *acoustemology*, or knowing through sound, I approached these recordings as a way of accessing how people make sense of their social worlds through listening and resonance. Similarly, LaBelle's (2019) work on *acoustic territories* inspired me to consider how sounds articulate power, intimacy, and aspiration within shared spaces.

Along with ethnographic engagement, I analysed commune reports, policy documents, and media coverage to situate local practices within broader national narratives of rural development and migration. Official documents from Rivermoor People's Committee and the commune's People's Credit Fund provided insight into how labour migration and home construction are framed in the official language of modernity and national progress. This also enabled me to trace how state rhetoric on "civilised living", "new rurality", and "model citizenship" interacts with the intimate realities of everyday life. Relevant local documents, including the printed edition of commune history, migration records, and court documents on local arrests of "illegal organisations for unauthorised international migration" ("tổ chức cho người đi nước ngoài trái phép") were reviewed to contextualise qualitative data and corroborate observed patterns (Bowen, 2009).

### *Analytical approach*

Thematic analysis enabled the identification of recurring patterns and meanings in participants' accounts. I organise the analysis around four interlocking domains because, together, they capture the material, social, temporal, and institutional forces that shape homemaking in a migrant countryside. Each domain foregrounds a different register of practice and meaning - labour,

generational horizons, rooted histories, and state-market interventions - while the analytic work is to show how they produce and reproduce one another in everyday life.

At first sight, transnational family situations are multiplied across the Rivermoor Commune and can feel almost interchangeable. As labour migration has become increasingly significant in rural Vietnam post-reform, too often here, children grow up without one or both parents and are cared for by grandparents (who are most likely retired migrants) or relatives, while people in their prime working age strive to migrate abroad and work for as long as possible. Due to the major benefits of remittances, many people in Rivermoor Commune desire an early working life abroad before returning for retirement. During my fieldwork, on the rare occasions when I met those in their 20s or 30s without employment, they would soon depart to another country. While the government regards labour migration as a solution for unemployment and skill exchange, migration from rural Central Vietnam is not only about seeking a better livelihood - it is about communal pride, about keeping pace with a rapidly changing world, striving to surpass neighbouring communities and reinforcing a deep-rooted identity of resilience and hard work. For the people of the Rivermoor commune, migration is their path to *đổi đời* - a literally complete life transformation, a way to build a life that continually improves with each generation. Through migration, they pursue a future that grows more ambitious with every step taken by those who came before them.

First, therefore, the **labour** domain of my analysis looks beyond the mechanism of mobility (who leaves, who earns, and who manages resources) to ask why migration is so highly valued and how that valuation is deliberately maintained. Here I move from description (how is migration taking place) into interpretation: how migration is narrated as respectable labour, how discourse, debts, and investments institutionalise it, and how social practices and moral economies reproduce the incentive to keep migrating. In a rural economy where state development and transnational migration redefine what counts as a spearhead economic sector, how are other forms of labour revalued, or quietly devalued, within everyday life? Rather than taking mobile flows as neutral facts, this domain interrogates the social investments that turn migration into an aspirational and self-sustaining mode of work. Hence, I will show that mobility emerges not only as a livelihood strategy but also as a central driver of social and economic capital, shaping how rural society envisions and secures its well-being through homemaking.

Throughout its history, Rivermoor Commune could not rely solely on farming and fisheries for livelihoods. In Vietnamese culture, farmers and fishermen are highly regarded and often praised not for their material wealth but for their hard work, resilience, deep connection to the land, and profound understanding of nature. Farming and fishery are also often characterised as difficult jobs but create rich historical and cultural values. It could be considered as part of the political discourse to prioritise urban and industrial development over rural and agricultural development. Many in Rivermoor continue with their old trades nowadays, often described as hobbies, for their own consumption, for health, or out of sentimentalism. For families whose livelihoods still depend entirely on fishing or farming, the struggles are not as severe as they were in the past, because their products are primarily sold locally to neighbors who now have the means to pay and can afford to pay a lot. This transformation marks the devaluation of manual, place-based labour within new social hierarchies of value: the same work that once sustained families is now reframed as optional, nostalgic, or even therapeutic.

Likewise, the younger generations are no longer anticipated to become farmers or fishermen, nor do they envision that as part of their life skills. This shift does not necessarily mean outright rejection of traditional livelihoods but reflects broader trends in labour migration, industrialisation, and the changing landscape of global and local economies. Therefore, the **future/generational** domain follows the uneven uptake of that migration ethic across generations. The mindset that prizes migration is not uniform: older generations may value sacrifice and collective uplift; younger people weigh different options between education, urban employment, and different forms of mobility. By tracing how children and young adults imagine and actively plan their futures, this domain reveals whether migration is being reproduced as a strategy, reconfigured as a choice among alternatives, or contested individually. It is here that intentions, aspirations, and plans for homemaking in the future become visible.

Observations about generational differences and contrasting experiences of time also opened up questions about tradition and history, probing what is preserved, what is transformed, and how the meanings of the past are reinterpreted through contemporary struggles of living and labour. The third analytical domain pertains to **rootedness and traditions**, which anchors these dynamics in place and memory. Homemaking does not emerge spontaneously; it is rooted in the legacies of land, kinship obligations, ritual practice, and previous forms of livelihood. Historical

trajectories, prior to the waves of mobility, shape how families understand risk, dignity, and resilience. This domain shows how generational change and ideological shifts transform inherited practices of homemaking even as certain attachments persist (to ancestors, to particular plots of land, to communal rituals).

Despite financial transformations and improved living standards mixed with a touch of cosmopolitanism, the residents of Rivermoor Commune retain a certain rural way of life. Mai Van Hai (2015) specifies the fundamental cultural and historical conditions that make traditional Vietnamese family characteristics permanent, embedded in attachments with nature and family practice strongly attached to communal villages and spiritual life. Nevertheless, Mai suggests that such characteristics would diversify through forces of civilised exchange throughout foreign invasions in Vietnamese history and global socio-economic exchange. The rural lifestyle in Rivermoor Commune aptly adapts to shifts in family demographics resulting from members migrating. On one hand, the traditional model of large families spanning three to four generations residing together, or close to each other, enables ongoing care for people staying behind, particularly the young and elderly. Also, familial lineage structure rooted in blood relations fosters extended family ties, emotional bonds and mutual support among relatives. On the other hand, traditional filial responsibilities and expectations to (literally) build a tall and large house and a big family to fill it (*an cư lạc nghiệp, nhà cao cửa rộng*) increase pressure on the younger generations to generate income sufficient to fulfil such obligations. While young people in Rivermoor Commune still follow the tendency of early marriage and early childbearing, another reason to establish families earlier in life is for reassurance before one or both parents go for work abroad. More cultural and traditional attributes will serve as illustrative points in the discussion about rootedness and heritage in the context of migration.

Changes in local customs are also mirrored in shifting 'global' lifestyles and consumption practices, which, from a broader perspective, reveal the pervasive influence of capitalist logics and state-endorsed narratives of change and modernity. Family meals first introduced me to the rural yet global lifestyle. I was surprised when a person I had just met invited me to their home for lunch for the first time. In big cities like Hanoi, such gestures of hospitality are rare, as it is not considered common or safe etiquette to invite a near-stranger into one's home for an intimate meal. However, I soon learnt that in Rivermoor, sharing a meal was one of the quickest ways to dissolve the initial

formality between strangers, to break the ice, and to soften invisible social boundaries. I also learnt that such an invitation in the countryside was always genuine. I stopped thinking twice about accepting such invitations. It became habitual to stay for several times a week at an interlocutor's house and even to take a nap after. These meals became windows into local foodways, which were varying and revealing of each household's rhythms, preferences, and subtle lifestyle changes over time. Sometimes, Phan invited me to join the family meals, which consistently featured local seafood, meat, homegrown vegetables, kimchi, and Korean chilli bean paste. Phan often described life in Rivermoor Commune with a single word: "quality" ("chất lượng") - referring to the food, the cafes and restaurants, and the available range of foreign products. Phan and his grandchildren loved ssamjang (a type of Korean chilli bean paste). They paired it with almost everything, mostly boiled pork, steamed fish, fresh herbs, and raw vegetables. It was a habit that Phan picked up from years of working in South Korea. Another instance from a household with family members living in the UK: I was often asked to pick a Strongbow cider flavour to pair with the food before we sat down to eat. These foreign additions were not a feature of every household or every meal, nor were they ever intended as a gesture of wealth display to guests. The essence of each meal remained humble and simple but was sometimes elevated by something new and foreign. These additions could not replace local flavours. Instead, they created a hybrid taste of home that was both rooted in Rivermoor's everyday life and of distant places. Through these meals, I came to see how the imported condiments and beverages sat comfortably alongside native homefoods in Rivermoor was not only a site of hospitality and relationship-building but also a microcosm of the village's entanglements with broader migratory and economic flows. This embodies a culinary landscape in which "home" tastes were constantly redefined by the movement of people, goods, and ideas across seas and borders.

The fourth domain of analysis centres on **food, consumption habits, and the community's enduring relationship with the sea** - a relationship that not only sustains daily life but also shapes moral and social imaginaries of well-being. This domain examines how everyday practices of eating, buying, and producing food reveal shifting values under the influence of state and institutional programmes, such as new rural development programmes and One Commune One Product (OCOP) initiatives. These interventions, while promoting modern standards of hygiene, branding, and market integration, also subtly redefine what counts as "good taste", "clean

living”, or “successful livelihood”. By tracing how people negotiate these changes - how they adapt, resist, or selectively appropriate them - I show how consumption becomes a key site where institutional visions of progress intersect with local ways of making and imagining home. Programmes such as OCOP, model residential schemes, credit funds, and local infrastructure investments do not simply bring development; they produce norms, aesthetic standards, and fiscal obligations that households must respond to. Simultaneously, changing consumer habits and expectations of comfort mediate how remittances are spent and what counts as successful homemaking. This domain connects policy, market signals, and everyday consumption.

In sum, these four domains are analytic lenses, not discrete silos. Labour narratives gain traction because historical attachments (roots) make home meaningful, generational imaginaries shape who will shoulder risk, and state-market interventions amplify certain forms of value while obscuring others. Practically, this framework lets me move between scales, from household conversations to state reports, from the kitchen cooking to credit-fund meetings, to show how homemaking is simultaneously an economic strategy, a moral project, a historical inheritance, and a response to institutional pressure.

In short: the labour domain asks *why* migration is maintained; the generational domain asks *who* will sustain it; the roots domain asks *from what* traditions and attachments it springs; and the state-market domain asks *by what mechanisms* it is shaped and regulated. Together they open up a full picture of how migration and homemaking co-constitute each other in the post-socialist countryside.

### *Methodological contribution*

This methodological design allows for an understanding of *homemaking as a dispersed and contested practice*, one that links local moral economies, transnational circulations of labour and capital, and the material aesthetics of development. By combining grounded ethnography with attention to state and market discourses, this approach situates household transformation within the broader post-socialist landscape of Vietnam, where the negotiation between collective ideals and capitalist logics continues to shape both the imagination and the substance of home.

## II. Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to capture a range of household types and migration experiences, complemented by snowball sampling to access less visible or marginalised groups (Noy, 2008). This approach is well-suited to qualitative research in small communities (Bryman, 2016). For this research, I employed a combination of broad engagement and focused inquiry. While I interacted with many residents across different settings and collected 58 episodes of recorded material, my structured interviews and close participant observations concentrated on 10 key informants (4 males, 6 females), with most of them distributed into 3 families. I chose to focus on the three families to gather a thick description of their life trajectories and events. They share certain similarities and differences in terms of members and demographic composition as well as economic backgrounds that are useful to compare and contrast for further analysis. These overlaps helped map the relational dynamics that cut across individual experiences and revealed the collective patterns of rural life and transformation in Rivermoor.

<b>Demographic composition</b>	<b>Family 1 (Han household)</b>	<b>Family 2 (Phan household)</b>	<b>Family 3 (Thu household)</b>
Generations	Parents and children (2 generations)	Grandparents, child, and grandchildren (3 generations)	Grandparents, child, and grandchildren (3 generations)
Children (4-9 years old)	1 child	3 children	1 child
Youth (16-17 years-old)	1 child	1 child	1 child
Migrant returnees	1 (parent)	1 (grandfather)	2 (grandparents)
Economic background / household main income	Fishing (no remittance)	Formerly farming (income comes from remittance)	Formerly fishing (income comes from remittance)

I must note that there were also occasional changes in these households' composition and modes of income generation throughout my fieldwork period. At times, migrant family members returned home temporarily before departing again, while in other cases, the flow of remittances was interrupted, forcing families to seek alternative means of livelihood. Such fluidity in household membership and income sources underscores the precarious foundations of rural home under the conditions of migration. The constant comings and goings of migrant members destabilise the household as a fixed unit of labour and care, while interruptions in remittance flows expose the fragility of livelihoods dependent on mobility. These uncertainties compel families to continuously renegotiate roles, redistribute labour, and reimagine what constitutes a "stable" home. Hence, I was able to witness the process of home that adapts and persists in spite of the fluctuating rhythms of migration, market demands, and redistributed obligations.

### **III. Positionality, reflexivity and ethics**

As an ethnographer working across social hierarchies and mobility regimes, I was often positioned ambiguously as an outsider slowly integrating into rural life and its moral expectations. Initially, my image was associated with the government during my first visit, but over time, it evolved into that of an independent researcher. My positionality shaped how people narrated their stories, as we could establish a certain mutual understanding about the struggles of migrant life, as well as life and living in Vietnamese society. I approached such narratives as productive sites of interpretations about power, aspiration, and moral value. All names of people and places used in this dissertation are pseudonyms, and identifying details have been altered to protect interlocutors' privacy. It is important to note that, during the discussions about legality and illegality, participants expressed no concerns. Those who are working or returned from working overseas are not hesitant to address themselves, in Vietnamese, as "đi lao động bất hợp pháp" ("irregular labour migrants") or "đi làm ngoài" ("working outside") - who migrated with the intention to break the laws by working in the destination countries and are fully aware of the risks and precariousness that may or may not occur. Research approval was obtained from the Local Committee. Informed consent was received from all participants, who were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and reminded of their right to withdraw at any time (AAA, 2012). Reflexivity was maintained throughout; the researcher regularly reflected on their positionality and potential influences on the

research process. For ethics concerning children, I will write more details in the chapter about children and the future.

My mobility story, marked by years of living abroad and returning, resonated with the aspirations and anxieties of those I met. This shared experience of departure and return created moments of recognition and empathy; yet, my urban and educational background also positioned me as an outsider, someone associated with privilege, difference, and the imaginaries of "modern life", which many rural interlocutors both desired and scrutinised.

Language also shaped my positionality and the practice of ethnography. The Central Vietnamese dialect spoken in Rivermoor was initially extremely difficult for me to follow, and no transcription programs could do the job. I struggled at first, relying on repeated listening and context clues to follow conversations. Over time, I gradually learnt the dialect, while my interlocutors adjusted their speech, speaking more slowly and using standard Vietnamese to ensure I could follow. This linguistic adjustment made me more aware of nuances in meaning, of pauses and emphasis, and of the relational work embedded in communication. For example, when interlocutors were overtaken by emotions or memories, they often reverted to their habitual speech patterns, slipping back into local words and expressions, and forgetting to slow down for me.

Being unmarried and without dependants afforded me the freedom to move and observe, but it also set me apart in a social world where womanhood is often equated with marriage and motherhood. My unmarried status (especially at my age) sometimes provoked curiosity, even pity and judgement, and occasionally became a conversational bridge for women to speak about their own relational struggles, silences, and desires. At other times, it reminded me of how gendered expectations structure belonging. As a city dweller, Rivermoor constantly unsettled certain habits and assumptions I carried about pace, comfort, and privacy. Just as I could join in any family meals at any time of day, a neighbour, friend, or acquaintance could drop by where I lived randomly, whether to share food, gossip, borrow appliances, etc. The slowness of life, the porousness of domestic boundaries, and the immediacy of communal relations revealed how deeply urban sensibilities shape what I take for granted as "normal". These dissonances also refracted my observations.

Acknowledging this positionality allows me to situate my interpretations not as neutral accounts but as situated encounters. My fieldwork in Rivermoor became a space of negotiation - of learning to listen differently, to inhabit rhythms not my own, and to see homemaking not as a static condition but as an ongoing act of balancing multiple, sometimes conflicting, worlds.

## VALUING WORK: MIGRATION AND THE MORAL ECONOMY OF LABOUR

### I. Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on Thu household - one of the families that I closely studied during my fieldwork. My time in Rivermoor allowed me to observe how families negotiated, coordinated, and resolved the many challenges that emerged along the course of migration. What became apparent were the intractable personal struggles to navigate the entanglement of moral ideals with the escalating practical demands from the community and the state. By centering on the family unit and listening to the multiple voices articulated through generational experience and perspective, I began to grasp the emotional and existential depth of what it means to *be* at home in Rivermoor while simultaneously *becoming* a transnational subject of the national development agenda.



Figure 4: National slogan of "building the nation"

In Vietnam, the slogan '*gây dựng đất nước quê hương giàu đẹp vững mạnh*' (building the homeland and the nation strong and rich) encapsulates how personal and collective futures are intertwined through labour. The private realm of home also holds a moral and political space produced through work: state discourses frame the household as a microcosm of the nation; if families thrive, the country thrives. This reasoning supports the neoliberal policy changes that promote the resilience of rural households to modernise agriculture, invest in education, and send family members abroad for work, with the promise that these efforts will enhance living standards and invigorate local economies (Hy, 2023). The social mobility of individual households, from new housing and children's school enrolment rates to the ability to escape subsistence living practices, is recast as evidence of Vietnam's collective progress. Nonetheless, ethnographic studies reveal the complicated hidden costs of gendered strains on family relationships, precarious work conditions, and uneven benefits across regions (Nguyen & Locke, 2014; Luong & Nguyen, 2023). While the state celebrates household development as the cornerstone of national strength, families experience it as a fragile balancing act between sacrifice and advancement, where the pursuit of mobile aspiration also becomes a contribution to the nation's imagined future. To approach homemaking, this chapter explores the multiple scales on which labour operates as a means of sustaining oneself, caring for family, and fulfilling responsibility to the country. By placing Vietnamese ethnographies of labour in conversation with theoretical perspectives on gender, politics, and precarity, I demonstrate how rural migrant households negotiate the division of labour and the meanings of homemaking within the shifting conditions of the post-socialist landscape.

### **Characterising the labour of homemaking**

In anthropology, work and labour are interconnected, with great attention to how each term reflects diverging socio-political contexts. Work encompasses various ways individuals engage with and respond meaningfully to societal and environmental concerns, while labour, or the division of labour "is a useful comparative frame to understand how different forms of work are allocated and valorised differently across sociocultural contexts" (Folz & Smith, 2024, p.2). Anthropologically, this chapter clarifies the various types of work in the homemaking effort that are rendered meaningful and valuable from a labour viewpoint. As the process of labour is highly sensitive to global societal processes and historical influences, the future of home and homemaking activities

will therefore also react to environmental changes, political and economic uncertainty, as well as conflicts and resource competition.

Cultural practices demonstrate that houses and homes are shaped equally by their infrastructural and architectural design and by the strategies of households influenced by societal conditions and cultural resources dedicated to its maintenance (Bourdieu, 1976; Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995; Cieraad, 1999). In the context of migration, homemaking is essential for preserving a sense of stability and security in the absence of household members, particularly regarding the redistribution of care labour, financial management, and the emotional effort required to maintain intimate connections. Various anthropological and sociological theoretical frameworks challenged traditional conceptualisations of homemaking in relation to labour. Brown (2020) demonstrates how domestic labour in western Kenya functions as both reproductive and economic strategy under conditions of extreme precarity, suggesting that care frameworks can be expanded to understand investments in domestic work beyond feminized care assumptions. Angosto-Ferrández (2022) argues that the labour theory of value can critically inform anthropological analyses of social issues, providing new grounds for understanding domestic work within broader economic frameworks. Ventura (2009) tests competing theoretical approaches to household labour division in Spanish families and finds that sociological perspectives better explain variation in domestic work patterns than economic models, with factors like labour status and traditional values significantly influencing distribution. Vogel (2000) reviews socialist feminist attempts to theorise domestic labour within Marxist political economy frameworks, noting theoretical paradigm differences that undermined early feminist discussions while arguing for continued attention to this unfinished analytical project.

In Vietnam studies, although existing research on migrant households has thoroughly investigated their strategic organisation and how their lives unfold over time and space, my contribution focuses on delineating how the labour aspect of homemaking is reiterated in terms of meanings, values, and hierarchies, and how these conceptualisations underpin the daily practices through which households engage in migration. For a start, the state exerts strong influence outside the household, framing labour (*lao động*) as a patriotic duty. Socialist discourses have long celebrated the “working class” as the foundation of national development, and this theme continues in debates about overtime regulations and worker welfare in Vietnam’s market socialist economy

(Nguyen *et al.*, 2025). Household reproduction in terms of pregnancy, too, is narrated through a narrative of the national future: medical professionals and expectant mothers interpret reproductive labour as a contribution to the vitality of the Vietnamese population, which is haunted by histories of war and chemical exposure (Gammeltoft, 2013). Labour migration is promoted as both remittance-driven development and global integration, with lending programmes and preferential credit regulations aimed at disadvantaged populations, impoverished areas, young people without jobs, and landless agricultural workers (Vietnam Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, 2022; Thanh Hoa News, 2022). In Rivermoor, local development was celebrated as the outcome of collective effort from households to community leaders while at the same time accompanied by a formal “acknowledgement” of the lingering social problems that persisted within migrant households (such as rising divorce rates, prolonged family separation, etc.). Thus, individuals’ effort to maintain family wellbeing is simultaneously framed as service to the nation, binding domestic aspirations to collective imaginaries of modernisation, industrialisation, and global competitiveness. Distributed to individual level, the privileges of migration and state recognition in this dynamic also meant vulnerability to displacement and informality as rural communities strive to keep up with accelerating development agendas. Household social reproduction unfolds through complex and often conflicting gender and generational positionings, where the value and distribution of social recognition continually reshape social expectations of labour. For instance, in rural areas where teenagers are more likely to get paid work to help with household costs, showing that they are mature enough to take on adult responsibilities (Park *et al.*, 2021), their contributions to the home are expected to continue throughout their lives, particularly when they are legally and physically able to leave home. Likewise, ethnographies of migrant women workers demonstrate the accumulation of enduring investments and educational opportunities for their children, thereby transforming economic sacrifice into future-orientated care (Nguyen, 2014). However, certain occupations - particularly those of migrant domestic workers in major cities like Hanoi - are perceived as both dignified and demeaning. These workers navigate stigma and emotional burdens to establish fictive kinship ties with employers, which obscure the distinctions between commodified labour and interchangeable relational care (Nguyen, 2014a).

Why is it common that rural teenagers actively participate in household maintenance, and why is social reproductive labour dignified or demeaning depending on whether it is bought or

sold? To what extent are interpretations of labour shaped as calculated responses to the diverse mobility of people, resources, and things? How does homemaking transfer into or justify certain (re)valuations of labour? By situating labour at the centre of analysis, we see how *'gây dựng đất nước quê hương giàu đẹp vững mạnh'* is a nationalist slogan that imposes on the lived experience that binds personal futures to familial care and collective imaginaries of development. Within the home, people navigate competing expectations to secure fruitful livelihoods, to care for the young and the old, and to embody the state's image of productive citizenship. While labour sustains homes materially, crafts identities relationally, and is mobilised symbolically as a contribution to the nation, these practices also demonstrate divides: between those who stay and those who leave, between gendered expectations and lived realities, and between the promise of prosperity and the endurance of precarity. In this sense, home and labour are inseparable and entangled with the horizons of sacrifice, responsibility, and hope. Therefore, I look at the varied meanings, attitudes, and perspectives associated with different types of labour in the context of migration. Based on the ethnographic accounts in Rivermoor, diverse characterisations of labour reveal tensions regarding worth, morality, and belonging, revealing the ways migration intensifies some social processes while destabilising others and resulting in evolving social meanings attached to home and living. At these intersections, labour is then both a unifying narrative and a source of conflict that reveals the conditional and contested meanings of home.

### **Analysing labour: Methodological Approach**

Labour is best understood as a relational and affective practice that continually shapes the contours of home, kinship, and nation. Methodologically, this necessitates an expansive approach that moves beyond the analysis of wage labour to include reproductive labour, caregiving, and maintaining social ties. By embracing these diverse forms of labour, this analysis explores how households navigate the tension between material survival and moral belonging (Parreñas, 2015; Federici, 2012).

Labour is analysed across multiple scales. At the individual level, I examine how people construct selfhood, dignity, and aspiration through their engagement with the environment and in various forms of work. At the household scale, the focus is on how labour predestines the familial redistribution of roles and enables planning and investments across generations. At the national

level, I situate everyday labour practices within broader discourses that frame work as a patriotic obligation, a development strategy, or a marker of global competitiveness (Ong, 2006).

Both the material and affective dimensions are central to my analysis as well. I pair ethnographic attention to wages, remittances, housing, and commodities with an examination of the structural feelings, such as sacrifice, pride, shame, or frustration, that accompany labour, making visible both qualities of endurance and fear of uncertainty. Gendered and generational dynamics are foregrounded, revealing how labour reshapes expectations around masculinity, femininity, and filial responsibility (Constable, 2009). In doing so, labour is understood as both a structuring force and a contested site within family life.

Finally, I situate these ethnographic observations within a broader political-economic context. I consider how state interventions and advocacy for work, migration, and reproductive labour structure the rhetoric of responsibility to the nation while also showing how households interpret and sometimes contest these framings. To echo Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011), who introduce a nuanced understanding of labour agency and propose that it should be analysed relationally, involving various social actors and institutions such as global production networks, the state, communities, and labour market intermediaries. The authors assert that working strategies need to be contextualised within broader social relations, suggesting that agency is never entirely autonomous but rather constrained and variegated, thus revealing the interconnection of production and social reproduction, underscoring the persistence of kin-like, ritualistic, and gift-based relations in contexts where alienation or self-maximisation might otherwise be expected (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011). Such methods expose the contradictions inherent in labour perceptions, which can simultaneously produce experiences of exploitation, alienation, discipline, and monotony, as well as emotional bonds, meaning, fulfillment, and creative expression (Parreñas, 2015). Through this approach, labour becomes an analytical entry point for understanding how Vietnamese households navigate survival and mobility and how their homemaking practices are simultaneously embedded in local, translocal, and national projects.

## II. New rural Rivermoor: Model house, model home, model labour

My next-door neighbour, Tu (72 years old), lived a life that was “slightly below average” (as in her words, “hơi dưới trung bình”) with her stepdaughter. Their house stood out in sharp contrast to the new and more modern ones in the surroundings. Built in an old architectural style rarely seen even in rural areas today, it marked a life lived frugally and with limited resources. Tu and her stepdaughter’s income relied on support from the state and from family and relatives, while they earned sporadically by selling handmade conical hats (nón lá) and votive paper items.



*Figure 5: House built in the 1950s*

Tu often attributed her circumstances to misfortune. Her husband passed away too soon, leaving her with the responsibility of raising three children, including her disabled stepdaughter. The cruelest thing in life, she said, was her son’s repeated attempts to migrate abroad in search of a better livelihood - both times were unsuccessful: “He couldn’t even make it into the airplane”. Despite these hardships, her children eventually found steady jobs in the big cities and now provided moderate support for her and their stepsister.

Pointing to her house, Tu remarked that I could see which families had not benefited from the effects of migration. Her home had remained almost unchanged since the 1950s. The house carried a rustic charm, and, especially in the burning summer in the middle region, the traditional terracotta tiles and thick walls kept it cool and airy. Though, the roof leaked when it rained, the cold pierced through the walls in winter, and gaps in the structure allowed rats to sneak inside. Tu claimed to be embarrassed about her family's social standing, knowing the quiet stigma of neighbours who, when passing by her old house, often avoided looking at it. In Goffman's (1963) terms, the emblems of poverty become sites of stigma, the "spoiled identities" that trigger avoidance from the community and result in Tu's feeling of inadequacy to society's standard: "[...] shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual's perception of one of his attributes as being a defiling thing to possess" (p. 18).

Tu's family had long tried to persuade her to remodel the house, as the extended family could contribute to the renovation. Yet Tu kept responding "not yet" while offering no clear explanation. Occasionally when I spent my pastime at Tu's, commune leaders and local cadres on several occasions also visited her home both as routine well-being check-ins and as part of their effort to encourage her to move forward with the remodelling. In February 2024, Tu eventually agreed. The renovated house retained its original simple structure but was raised higher, reinforced for greater security, and rebuilt with more durable materials. A heatproof roof shadowed the front yard. Amenities were added: a washing machine, a water boiler for hot showers in the winter, and an air conditioner for the summer.



*Figure 6: Mid-construction*

One afternoon, I visited the new house. Pointing to the ceiling fan newly installed under the front yard's roof, I asked casually, "It's so hot today. Why don't you turn on the fan?". Tu chuckled: "We're used to enduring the heat. Also, I try to save on the electricity bill. I turned on the air conditioner at night a few times, and the bill went through the roof! I'm not rich. It's not like relatives repair our house and then give us more money for electricity".



*Figure 7: Renovated house*

Regardless of whether it is the attachment to the old house, fear of change, hesitance to spend the family's money, or a preference for continuity, the Tu household must reposition themselves within the inevitable momentum of development. Whether because of individual will or the socio-political atmosphere, the image of an old house became increasingly untenable against the background of community upgrades and state visions of rural progress. The local cadres<sup>15</sup> frequently recounted Rivermoor's history of rapid development, highlighting how it set the commune apart from neighbouring rural areas. They emphasised that progress was not only a distinctive feature but also a collective destiny, framing the community's trajectory as one of inevitable advancement and continuous improvement. Across Rivermoor, many households still lived in poverty, some under leaky roofs and fragile shelters. One of the commune's stated priorities was to safeguard the well-being of such families and to promote collective caretaking actions. Each year, one or a few households would be removed from the official poverty list and added to the statistics presented in the commune's social economic reports.

What emerges here is not just the story of one family's improved shelter; it also offers context for the political logic of rural development, which determines institutional and living propriety as important as their appearance. Rural revitalisation is seen as a benevolent and progressive shared project, yet it often acts like a two-edged knife by shifting the burden of development onto households who must shoulder the costs with their own money and networks of support. Likewise, public infrastructure projects such as concrete roads, public playgrounds, or village communal houses are funded not solely by the state but by collective household contributions. Each Rivermoor household was mobilised to contribute, and improvements in public or private space were honoured as shared achievements. Upon my arrival at Rivermoor, I observed that road remodeling had taken place in five out of the twelve villages. The village roads and alleys were expanded and surfaced with asphalt or concrete, transforming the previously uneven and damaged pathways. In the year that followed, two additional projects were completed, and the primary coastal route was also in the process of being constructed when I departed. For the repair of village roads, each household was required to contribute 3 million VND

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<sup>15</sup> "Local cadres" refers to officials of the CCG and "the unofficials" - the civil servants - who volunteer to facilitate the government's work within the commune, such as heads of villages (*trưởng thôn*), village women's committee (*hội phụ nữ*). To understand more about local government beyond urban settings in Vietnam, refer to Kerkvliet, B. J. T., & Marr, D. G. (Eds.). (2004). *Beyond Hanoi: Local Government in Vietnam*. ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute.

(approximately 115 EUR), with the exception of low-income and poverty-stricken households. The cost for the coastal road was 4 million VND (approximately 152 EUR). Public contributions also financed the construction of children's playgrounds, sports fields, and communal houses. These new infrastructure developments were partly the result of the *Nông thôn mới* (New Rural Development) program. The National Target Program on New Rural Development (NTP-NRD) became the centerpiece of Vietnam's rural transformation agenda after its introduction in 2010. At its core, the program sets out a series of standardised criteria for rural modernisation, covering infrastructure, environment, cultural life, and income levels. Communes that meet the NRD program's 19 assessment criteria and 49 targets are recognised as 'New Rural' communities, which implicitly separates them to those that are 'old' and 'behind' (Hoang, 2025). Within this framework, *khu dân cư kiểu mẫu* (model residential clusters) emerged as a highly visible initiative, designed to demonstrate what a "civilised" countryside should look like. These clusters emphasise paved roads, standardised housing, greenery, waste management, and organised community.

Research shows that while the NRD program's stated aim is to improve rural livelihoods and modernise living conditions, its implementation often shows more results in aesthetics and order rather than in economic development. Nguyen, Gillen & Rigg (2021) argue that the program has had little bearing on peasant livelihood strategies, mostly on peasant livelihood diversification strategies, which have been perpetuated without much attention to broader state-led initiatives aimed at "reforming" the countryside. Hoang Cam's (2024) detailed ethnography criticises that while some communities meet the NRD program's demands, the pressure to conform often leads to public shaming or coercive methods employed by local authorities to encourage compliance. The author points out that the successful implementation of the criteria has resulted in thousands of communes being recognised as New Rural, although the transformational process often leads to the dismissal of traditional customs and lifestyles. As I have noted, the Tu household lived among the symbols of progress, yet could not fully inhabit them. Families could mobilise resources for the *one-time cost* of renovation, but increased expenses incurred by such innovations remained a concern. Thus, rural development might manifest in material and infrastructural forms, but its full promise remains largely out of reach.

Development in Rivermoor created tangible improvements in material life, but it also redistributed the costs of progress onto families, reinforcing both the pride of inclusion and the

strain of obligation. The renovation represented meaningful progress in Tu's and her daughter's lives. At the same time, villagers often voiced frustrations about the financial expectations tied to public projects that they must subscribe to. For many, the collective contribution blurred the line between voluntary participation and obligatory compliance. Development was made both a direct provision and more about cultivating compliance through moral obligation, collective pride, and the social pressure of belonging.

### **People's Credit Fund and its fluctuating relevance**

Another blueprint that Rivermoor's political profile consistently highlighted was the *Quy Tín Dụng Nhân Dân* (People's Credit Fund - PCF). Underlined as a flagship model of local development, Rivermoor's PCF had received the Hero of Labor Medal three times in recognition of its contribution to the community. By the time of my fieldwork, the fund had already expanded its operations to cover three communes (to be the so-called Inter-Commune People's Credit Fund). Established under the cooperative model, the PCF was designed as a rural lending institution that mobilised state-backed capital for households that were otherwise excluded from commercial banks. In political discourse, the fund stood as an emblem of state–society synergy through which local residents could access resources for development while contributing to national advancement.

For the first generation of migrants in Rivermoor, the PCF played a formative role in the formation of the city's transnational labour force. Its operational model functioned as a collective mechanism for pooling resources, enabling households to finance migration costs, which successfully yielded a local economic upswing. Over time, however, the fund's relevance diminished within the local migration scene; none of the households I spoke to still considered it a viable option. People explained that as migration costs have increased dramatically over the years, the loans required for migration have risen so high that they necessitate mortgaging houses or land when borrowing from the PCF. Furthermore, unlike the earlier period, when many residents migrated through state-managed labour export programmes, most now work with private brokers and informal networks to arrange their overseas journeys. These pathways often involve irregular or illegal border crossings, allowing migrants to bypass the bureaucratic oversight of government schemes and, in doing so, minimise the state's role in their mobility trajectories. The PCF, they said, was only useful for those who wanted to establish a business or deposit savings with an

acceptable interest rate. Partly contradicting this statement, the director of the PCF in an interview openly acknowledged to me that the geographical, demographic, and other related conditions of the commune were not ideal for large business development but rather for short-term and small private businesses. However, the director underscored that Rivermoor lacked the necessary human resources to foster a thriving entrepreneurial community. This, in Scott and Chuyen's (2004) analysis on Vietnam's regional disparities, is also explained as low "entrepreneurial capacities" due to regional disadvantage that goes beyond non-economic determinants, such as natural resources, climate conditions, physical geography, and human geography (pp. 101-102). I was also informed by the director that, in practice, the fund operated mostly like a bank, investing capital outside the commune and generating interest for its clients rather than investing directly in it. On the other hand, the PCF sponsored annual cultural activities in Rivermoor, positioning itself not only as a financial institution but also as a visible contributor to community life.

While many celebrate the PCF as a cornerstone of modernisation, its slow disengagement from or disregard for remittance-dependent livelihoods highlights the limitations of state-centric development. By formalising credit as a sanctioned form of debt, the fund seeks to align household aspirations with national development goals. The same observation is shown in the studies in Indonesia: development programs often display the mismatch between problematisation and implementation and the divide between those who govern and those governed that reproduces systemic inequalities (Murray, 2007). The fund's history is intertwined with the financing of the first generation of Rivermoor migrants, but its current disjuncture reflects how villagers increasingly operate outside the institutional discourse of the exemplary type of labour migration. Hence, households in Rivermoor continue to depend on informal and kinship networks or overseas contacts for financing migration, with certain compliance with state programs often masking quiet disengagement with official schemes.

### **III. The cycle of labour mobility: making and maintaining home**

The commune introduced me to Thu, a 52-year-old, as one of my first interlocutors. Thu took up the volunteer position on the village's women's committee. The job kept her engaged with the village's communal activities concerning women's and children's welfare. She received a small monetary amount of monthly gratitude from the local authority for her contribution. I first met Thu

in May 2023 during my fieldwork survey period; at the time the household consisted of her husband, 16-year-old daughter Thanh, and her 4-year-old granddaughter. Thu's husband, Hao (53 years old), went to work on fishing boats in Korea in 2007; at the time she was pregnant with Thanh. He escaped to work onshore one year later. Thu decided to follow her husband in 2011, and she obtained a visa through a sham marriage with a Korean man, leaving their three kids in the care of relatives. Each entry set them back 500 USD (for him, following the government's recruitment)<sup>16</sup> and 16,000 USD (for her)<sup>17</sup>. They raised money by taking loans from family members, friends, and neighbours. Thu was deported five years later. Her husband returned in 2018 voluntarily, as he could not bear the loneliness. Thu gestured towards the ceiling: "Well, we got the house", referring to the most notable achievement of their labour. Thu and Hao claimed to be early retirees, while he sometimes went fishing leisurely for modest pocket money. Most of their earnings from Korea after debt settlement were invested in their daughter's job in the Czech Republic and their son's job in Korea. When I first met them, their son and daughter-in-law, Mi (28 years old), consistently sent them money from Korea, providing a comfortable living for the family.

When I returned in October 2023, Thu told me that her son had been involved in a traffic accident, arrested by the police, and was now being held in prison with no clear indication of when he might be released or what consequences he would face. Not wanting to darken our reunion with troubling news, Thu reassured me that prison in Korea was "not scary" and that the family stayed in regular contact with her son through handwritten letters. Every family member would compose a message and send it digitally to his wife, Mi, who would then put it on paper and forward it to him in prison. What weighed more heavily on the family, however, was the debt he still owed his parents. As Thu reminded me, the investment they had made for his migration remained unpaid. Since he had been working in Korea with an expired visa, he was banned from re-entering the country indefinitely. They did not know when he could return home, but one certainty remained: once free, he would need to migrate again to work and repay what was owed.

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<sup>16</sup> Approximately 365 EUR based on the average exchange rate in 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Approximately 11,520 EUR based on the average exchange rate in 2011.

In many families, migration started as an individual choice within a shared mission that counts on intergenerational responsibility. Like Phan, Thu and Hao were among the “parents” and “grandparents” generation that went abroad first in the family, working for years to establish savings and set up the initial capital needed for household stability or investment in land, housing, and education. The children who grew up during this foundation period then took their turn to migrate, ideally continuing the flow of remittances and, in effect, supporting their parents’ later-life security. Simultaneously, the family continuously established revised caregiving rhythms and responsibilities, adapting to the evolving socio-political landscape. While parents are abroad, grandparents often assume the primary role of raising grandchildren, ensuring that the household continues to function despite physical separation. Across generations, care and capital circulate transnationally, binding household members together in a moral economy of sacrifice, obligation, and reciprocity. Migration is, therefore, a cyclical project: the labour of one generation enables the mobility of the next.

Rather than a rupture in family life, migration becomes an extension of it as an ongoing collective project through which families negotiate survival, respectability, and the reproduction of mobile labour. In Thu and Hao's stories, migration intensified familial obligations that extended across time and space. Within the family, shared strategies discuss and sanction decisions about who migrated, for how long, and for what purpose. Migration also destabilises the conventional moral economy of kinship: children and spouses bore the costs of separation, but they also became co-participants in the labour of sustaining the household. Rather than undermining family unity, mobility made that unity portable by reproducing kin ties across distance while embedding them in broader circuits of labour, money, and aspiration.

As debt-financed migration emerges as a prevalent strategy among individuals seeking employment opportunities abroad in Rivermoor, there has been an establishment of money-lending activities run solely on trust and an egalitarian ethos. Clan structure in a small and close-knit community also maintains a sense of security through social bonds and support system, shared resources, and loyalty obligations. All of the informants I talked to confirm that taking loans from families and acquaintances is the go-to option to finance a migration journey (as outlined in the previous section). Acquiring funds through this method is expeditious, in contrast to the bureaucratic hurdles often associated with obtaining loans from traditional banking institutions.

Utilising labour exports to escape poverty has become deeply embedded within collective societal frameworks, thereby fostering a collaborative endeavour to facilitate opportunities for individuals to seek employment abroad and overcome economic hardship. This mutual understanding also kept the community close and closed off from outsiders (especially from predatory migration brokers or loaners).

Migration for work often begins with debt; repayment, however, is rarely understood in purely financial terms. The topic of debt occurred regularly; for many families in Rivermoor, the costs of sending a member abroad were not reducible to loans or recruitment fees but also entailed obligations to kin and community. Studies about debts prove that there are numerous ways transactions are flexible and extended into perpetual chains of demands for exchange, notably with Marcel Mauss' famous "model of exchange" (1990) that binds individuals and groups through spiritual and material ties, creating social solidarity rather than just an economic transaction. In Vietnam, scholars have shown how migration generates layered forms of indebtedness: children are expected to repay parents' sacrifices, wives and daughters-in-law remain accountable to their husband's kin, and migrants themselves become enmeshed in obligations to lenders, brokers, and the state (Hoang, 2022; Hoang, 2020a, 2015). In this case, broader practices of homemaking in Rivermoor became the typical exchange between families at home (debtors) and migrants (debtees). When I asked Thu to clarify further about her son's debt, she responded without giving a number. Instead, Thu explained that the money he had sent home over the years was not simply directed toward repayment of the initial migration investment but was also used to support his daughter and his sister and cover a range of household expenses that had accumulated. From Thu's perspective, what might appear as money repayment was inseparable from the moral and relational dimensions of supporting family. This resonates with anthropological perspectives that conceptualise debt as a social relationship rather than merely an economic exchange (Graeber, 2011; Peebles, 2010). Debt becomes a structuring force that organises how labour is valued and how home is materially and symbolically reproduced. It motivates and directs mobility, shaping where a person moves, under what conditions, and through which labour markets they become inserted. Debt also dictates the modality of exchange, determining whether money is circulated as repayment, as remittance, as contribution to household projects, or for all of such purposes.

Seen together, managing the cycle of labour mobility in Rivermoor requires the mobilisation of the same resources that are making and sustaining the conditions of life at home. Even though it is a familiar process, migration is a recursive one that requires constant inputs and adjustments to keep it going. Money is the most visible investment and product of migration, circulating back through remittances to fund household standard living and contributions to communal projects. These material flows make a home viable in the present while investing in its imagined future. At the same time, the organisation of social reproduction and the division of labour are neither fixed nor free of friction; as seen in Thu's experiences, disagreements over money management, caregiving, and responsibility shape how mobility is sustained. Last but not least important, migration is underpinned by moral economies of debt, obligation, and duty. Migrants often owe money to those who funded their departure, to children who must be provided for, and to spouses who shoulder responsibilities in their absence. These symbolic registers give migration its enduring force, so that it is not simply an economic motivation but also a moral and social project. Together, material, reproductive, and symbolic resources constitute the cycle of mobility. They explain why migration persists despite its difficulties: because home is not only a place to return to but also a project that must constantly be financed, organised, and morally justified.

#### **IV. Come home only to leave again: Whose labour? Labour for whom?**

Beginning with the story of a return migrant, this section highlights how labour is pragmatically defined and contested within the family while also being shaped by the scrutiny of both community and state. In doing so, it opens up a broader discussion of how hierarchies of labour are justified and naturalised through narratives of homemaking that position certain forms of work as more valuable, respectable, or necessary than others. These narratives, produced and reinforced by both community expectations and state agendas, frame certain forms of work as more valuable or respectable than others, embedding labour within broader moral and political projects for building and sustaining "home".

*Mi's story:*

Mi first left Rivermoor after high school to enroll in a work-and-study programme in Korea, joining many of her peers who pursued the same dream abroad. At the beginning, she tried to balance school with part-time jobs, determined to finish her degree. But as friends gradually dropped out to take up more lucrative, though often unauthorised work, Mi eventually succumbed to the peer pressure and abandoned her studies after two years. Over the next decade, she lived a modestly stable life: having a main job as a receptionist, sometimes taking odd jobs with good pay, forming a partnership with her childhood friend, and giving birth to her daughter, Chip, at the age of twenty-four.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this fragile stability. With jobs insecure and mobility restricted, Mi and her partner made the difficult decision to send Chip back to Vietnam, entrusting her care to the paternal grandparents, Thu and Hao. In 2023, the family's precarious relationship with Korea unraveled further. Mi's husband caused a traffic accident that led to his arrest and indefinite detention. Ten months later, Mi herself was detained by the local police and deported to Vietnam.

Returning to Rivermoor after ten years abroad, Mi found herself still young and faced the challenge of rebuilding her life. She had to search for work in a changed local economy, navigate reintegration into family life together with her in-laws, and reconnect with a daughter who had grown up largely in her absence. When I first met Mi, it was at a charged moment: she was scolding Chip for being insolent. Unexpectedly, Mi and I quickly grew comfortable with each other, and our conversations soon turned into an effortless companionship.

Once when I accompanied Mi and Chip at a playground, Mi lowered her voice and confided:

“I'm telling you thoughts I don't dare to share with anyone else. If I spoke openly, it would cause friction. Words travel like grapevines in this small community, whether you want them to or not. Since you are not from here, you can understand things (hiểu chuyện). My husband's family will never understand that I hadn't met my in-laws in person before I returned. We had no time to meet and bond, certainly impossible through the phone screen. For years, I tried to keep up my responsibilities

to my husband's family, those whom I don't know. Do you know she used to gamble, to the point that she disappeared for 24 hours? Do you know he has to eat out for breakfast almost every day? And then he goes for coffee? What money can sustain that ("Tiền mô chịu cho nổi")? My parents were already caring for two grandchildren. They could only visit Chip occasionally. I had to repeatedly tell myself the money I sent back was for the care of my daughter.

[...] You think it's easy to entrust my child to 'family'. I don't know their personality or how they behave, but I know all the conflicts my husband has with them. The day of the accident, he was fighting with his parents and went out drinking to loosen up. He rode his bicycle straight into busy traffic; a car avoided him and hit the utility pole. And now, after ten years away, I returned and found everything in this commune so different. My daughter... She has not been taught well. She is spoilt, underweight, and undisciplined. She was given whatever she wanted to eat... already she has rotten teeth! Everyone on my husband's side dislikes me because I am not diplomatic enough. That's why I take my daughter to live with my parents instead, though my husband's parents insist on keeping us with them, and I know it is only because of money. They never impose responsibilities on their daughter. Everything falls on the son, and so, it falls on me too".

Facing mounting financial pressures and dwindling savings, Mi began to consider her next move without her husband. Through the connections she had built during her years in Korea, her former boss introduced her to a position in Ho Chi Minh City. While the possibility seemed like a promising opportunity, Mi ultimately concluded that the salary would not provide the kind of stability and future she envisioned for her daughter. Relocating to the city would also require uprooting her daughter, incurring significant expenses for which the new salary cannot generously compensate, and placing her in circumstances where childcare might be compromised. For Mi, it was better to pursue another opportunity abroad, where wages in foreign currency could sustain her daughter's care in Rivermoor, than to accept a domestic job that might only reproduce new hardship in a new setting.

Mi ran her fingers over the necklace and bracelets she had brought back from Korea: “These are real gold”, she told me. “They are the only expensive things I bought for myself. The price of gold has gone up a lot now; it will be a good saving for myself”. Each time the conversation turned to finance, her voice grew weary. The monthly care money Mi transferred was meant for her daughter, but she often added more to support the grandparents. After her husband’s arrest, however, the weight of responsibility shifted squarely onto her. I once asked Thu if the family had a plan to manage; she disclosed that they came back to fishing, while at the same time the family must resort to withdrawing from their savings. If things become worse, they could withdraw early from private annuity insurance. Meanwhile, Mi was growing increasingly frustrated with the frequent demands for money. During holidays, she would travel with Chips to different cities - on one hand to avoid the in-laws, on the other hand to enjoy lost time with her daughter and to discover Vietnam all over again. This, however, deepened the tensions that already strained relations between the two sides of the family.

“I’m tired of running after money. I never thought this commune would change so much after 10 years. It looks good, but expensive. People also change because of money; they spend like there is no tomorrow, to show off, and to feel good. I understand people in their 60s and 70s wanting to retire, but my in-laws are in their 50s; they have to work! There is no shame in working, but they feel ashamed because we failed them and we can’t provide anymore”, Mi sighed...

...

A few months after I departed from Rivermoor, I received a message from Mi, informing me that she had made the decision to work as a nail technician in a European country. Mi was happy that her husband had returned and the family was whole again during the last months before her departure; however, she would have to miss her daughter’s birthday celebration.

### **Gendered disparities between “moneyed persons”**

Over the course of my stay in Rivermoor, gendered tensions surrounding domestic work were not always directly articulated but became clear through discussions about labour. While care work could often be substituted, delegated, or compensated through money, the critical point lay in the

labour that generated this flow of money in the first place. In other words, what mattered most was not simply who performed care, but also who sustained the household's economic foundation to ensure care performance. This reframing of domestic responsibility through the lens of labour and income revealed how gendered roles were negotiated less through living arrangements and more through the moral and material stakes of earning, providing, and remitting.

The first generation of Rivermoor migrants carried forward the expectations of a patrilineal family order. In those earlier years, men were usually the ones to take the risks to migrate and stay employed for as long as possible, while women remained at home to raise children and manage expenses. The opportunities introduced to them at the time were largely confined to manual labour - primarily fishing and heavy industrial work - roles considered more suitable for men. Most Rivermoor women who migrated in the 1990s and early 2000s found employment in factories, where their earnings were typically lower than those of men. In the case of Thu and Hao, she must also migrate due to her husband struggling to manage money. Hao himself admitted to being careless with spending and that he did not drink alcohol but had an addiction to cigarettes and coffee. Her decision to accompany him overseas was as much about safeguarding the household's future as it was about sharing the burden of provision.

The younger generation, however, grew up in a different landscape with more opportunities as well as pressures to work abroad regardless of gender. With this shift, new patterns of care and responsibility have emerged. Older parents and grandparents now take on the role of raising grandchildren, overseeing remittances, and managing household finances. An increasing number of children are being born outside of Vietnam and are "delivered back" to Rivermoor to be cared for by family. The boundaries of gendered labour within families have reconfigured due to this evolving migration pattern. While echoes of the old order remain, the emphasis today falls more on generational cooperation than on a strict division of male breadwinning and female homemaking.

This revolution produces and contests gendered divisions of labour in the home. Both men and women in Rivermoor now confront unique challenges in their household contributions and the recognition of their efforts. The men in Rivermoor still face the social expectation of being capable of migrating, earning, and providing remittances - all the while building and supporting a

traditional family with a wife and kid(s). Even in the case of stay-at-home husbands, as gender practices became contestable and flexible, the pressure to “perform” masculinity intensified, especially as they took up tasks that affirmed masculine responsibility but also exposed them to risks, debts, and the uncertainties of labour exploitation (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011). A 35-year-old stay-at-home father told me the importance of “doing something” (làm cái gì đó):

“As a man, you have to do something for the children to look at (cho con cháu nhìn vào). *Nobody expects a man to replace a mother’s work*; that’s for the grandparents. I used to try opening a beer and snacks establishment (hàng nhậu). I failed twice. I guess there is not enough drinking in this place (laugh). But nobody made fun of me [for failing]. Making little money is still acceptable. If money isn’t important, then you keep yourself occupied, or else you fall into alcohol, gambling, cheating, and so on”.

The stay-at-home husbands I spoke with often sought ways to generate income on their own, whether by running small informal businesses such as repairing motorcycles and electrical appliances or by setting up a modest grocery stall in front of the house. Quite a number of them eventually resorted to migrating regularly as visitors to their wives’ destination countries, entering on tourist visas and taking up seasonal work during their stay. The same strategy was employed by many women and men who can legitimately obtain a tourist visa and stay with their family abroad while making extra money. This form of work offered them not only the prospect of higher income but also a renewed sense of purpose, as it aligned their efforts with the transnational livelihood strategies of the households and allowed them to reclaim a more active role in the family’s economic narrative.

After all, women in Rivermoor still carry on traditional gender roles, yet increasingly shoulder the dual burden of migration and care. I often found the women more straightforward in relaying their emotional confessions about the sufferings and sorrows of domestic affairs. They also primarily noticed and observed signs of instability in kinship order. In the way Thao and Agergaard (2012) describe, migrant women often know how and assume the duty of “doing family” - quietly negotiating their roles within the patriarchy order while gaining power, pride, and respect. Nevertheless, they continue to be responsible for the moral and practical tasks of homemaking,

ensuring the well-being of all family members, regardless of whether they are employed or not. This tension reflects broader patterns in Vietnam, where migration, while enabling women's economic mobility, also exposes them to heightened scrutiny over their domestic and maternal roles. Mi was an example of how gendered kinship asymmetries endure across borders: women's labour sustains the household economically, yet their authority as wives, mothers, and daughters remains conditional, contested, and often diminished. Migration makes visible how gender shapes the burdens and meanings of labour in translocal households. Labour, whether through migration, care, or homemaking, becomes the medium through which family members assert responsibility, negotiate belonging, and confront the unequal demands placed upon them as men and women.

Thus, gendered clashes over the domestic domain were refracted through the moral economy of labour: who worked, how work was valued, and whose earnings carried the weight of family survival. Households in Rivermoor experienced care and labour as overlapping and substitutable, but never entirely equal, instead of treating them as separate domains. Money could stand in for care, but the gendered meanings of provision and responsibility were constantly renegotiated through this substitution.

## **V. Life without labour and the pride and shame of working**

Here, I present an alternative perspective on life in Rivermoor when remittances are absent, which my fieldwork has shown to be equally instructive. Periods of disruption exposed the fragility of household arrangements and made visible the otherwise hidden anxieties, frictions, and moral judgments that underpin transnational family life. In Rivermoor, where migration represents a moral recognition of labour, we observe how families recalibrate their understanding of work: identifying whose work is visible, whose work is undervalued, and how responsibility shifts when the ideal of the migrant breadwinner is absent.

One afternoon while I was at Thu's house, her neighbour Han (48 years old) walked into the front yard, excitedly announcing that her husband had made a great catch that day - 20 kilograms of large-sized squids, and offered to sell first to Thu at a reasonable price that Thu could even make a profit if she resold them. Han was a stay-at-home mother who had married into the commune after a divorce. Her now husband, a fisherman by trade, had once worked abroad for ten

years and saved enough for a house and a plot of land in the commune. However, much of his savings diminished significantly due to the divorce settlement with his first wife and children. It was only later that Han met him, moving into the commune with her daughter (Kim, 16 years old) from her previous marriage. Together, they had another daughter, now four years old.

Fishing was the main source of income for the household, with Han's ex-husband providing support for her daughter. Han's days revolved around the routines of her husband's fishing trips. She woke up in the early hours to prepare his food and supplies and often found it difficult to fall back asleep afterwards. Instead, she would begin breakfast for her two daughters and continue with her household chores. In the afternoons, when her husband returned with the day's catch, she carried the seafood to the market to sell. Their income was steady and also generous at rare times; on days when the catch was abundant, the earnings could cover the household's needs for an entire month.



*Figure 8: Working throughout the day and night*

When I asked Han to reflect on the family's life, she responded brightly with satisfaction. She described that they had “just enough” (vừa đủ) and were “kind of alright” (tạm ổn), and that

she had a reliable, hard-working husband and two well-behaved daughters, which was enough to make her feel secure. The local definitions of a “good life” were not always tethered to wealth accumulation, yet Han did not idealise how it played out in Rivermoor. Reflecting on its lowlights, she immediately pointed to the social dynamics of the village. She explained that people sometimes looked down upon her family. People could be arrogant, she said, treating them with a subtle but noticeable sense of pity – whether it was because she was an outsider with a reserved teenage daughter, or the family was made up of 2 broken marriages, or because they were not well-off: “Ở đây họ coi tiền hơn tình cảm. Mà hay khinh người” (Here they value money more than sentiment. And they tend to look down on people). [...] “People only need to talk about anything but their own bad things. It’s just gossip from those with too much time and money; I don’t care”. At the same time, she acknowledged moments of generosity: customers who bought their seafood sometimes paid extra or overlooked imperfections in the product. These oscillations between narratives of empathy pointed to the ways villagers justified and embodied life without labour: an abundance of idle time that easily slips into boredom and gossip while at times exposing one’s own vulnerabilities. Wealth accumulation through labour migration (and lack thereof) in rural Vietnam takes multiple forms, shaping not only household livelihoods but also reproducing existing gender hierarchies and deepening social class distinctions (Kawarazuka *et al.*, 2020). Labour is both a marker of hardship and of dignity, while freedom from it is associated with both comfort and moral decay. This paradox unsettles simple distinctions between success and failure, pride and shame. What lies in between is a fragile balance where dignity can be maintained without attracting either pity or envy.

Mi often drew comparisons between her in-laws and their neighbours or her parents. She noted that the neighbours owned a larger boat than the one that was meant for "hobby fishing" and that they were committed to earning a living through this trade; also, given the high seafood prices in Rivermoor, it could truly pay off (see the chapter about food and ecology). Mi explained that her parents had always earned well from cultivating on their vast farming land and selling homegrown vegetables so that they could safeguard their children's remitted savings. By contrast, she felt that her in-laws had become too comfortable being retirees dependent on remittances. When Mi eventually returned, Thu and Hoa resumed fishing to generate income. However, Mi

remarked that they came back to this old livelihood with a sense of reluctance and shame since they were suddenly yanked out of their comfort zone.

“Don’t judge me, but they don’t have my respect, which is priceless. I don’t think they care, though. What they care about is the fake respect of others, which means nothing, no real value”, Mi reflected.

In Rivermoor, I began to grasp a distinct understanding of labour and work, which emerged with nuances in the way families spoke about their social reproduction routines. There was a type of work that referred to tangible, structured activities producing income, such as fishing, farming, shopkeeping, and waitressing, which were visible, measurable, and immediately evaluated in terms of productivity. The other type falls under the spectrum of labour, which carries a moral and an affective dimension that encompasses sacrifice, endurance, and responsibility, often narrated in terms of what one does for family or the future. Migration, for instance, was not only described as work abroad but also as labour that carried moral weight since it required leaving home, enduring hardship, and securing remittances, which translated into care. This distinction helps explain why some forms of activity felt personally dignified or shameful. Fishing, though steady work, could be experienced as unenviable if it lacked a financial breakthrough, while migration - possibly precarious or undocumented - could be valued labour precisely because it embodied seemingly greater sacrifice and risks and was made visible through remittances. At the heart of such endeavours were respect, dignity, and worth - less about the act of working itself than about how labour was interpreted and acknowledged within families and communities.



*Figure 9: The beauty of work*

The internal pool of gossip had such power to translate personal stories into value interpretation, circulating as both entertainment and subtle social control (Gluckman, 1963; Harding, 1975; Farley, 2019; Bingley *et al.*, 2021). Women typically bear the brunt of this surveillance, whether through gossip or judgments. Han and Mi, though being in very different circumstances, both discover themselves positioned as objects of community scrutiny. Han navigated community hierarchies by asserting alternative values: stability, hard work, and resilience. Mi did not deflect scrutiny with indifference; instead, she actively contested its terms, rejecting the “fake respect” her in-laws sought and demanding recognition on her own moral grounds. Nonetheless, local scrutiny as a form of social regulation disciplines families into particular visions of success while also providing a space for people to critique, resist, or reframe the values imposed upon them.

How labour was valued also depended on the way their outcome circles back into the community. Mi and other return migrants frequently expressed their dissatisfaction about the spending habits in Rivermoor and the rising cost of daily expenditures, attributing this to the label

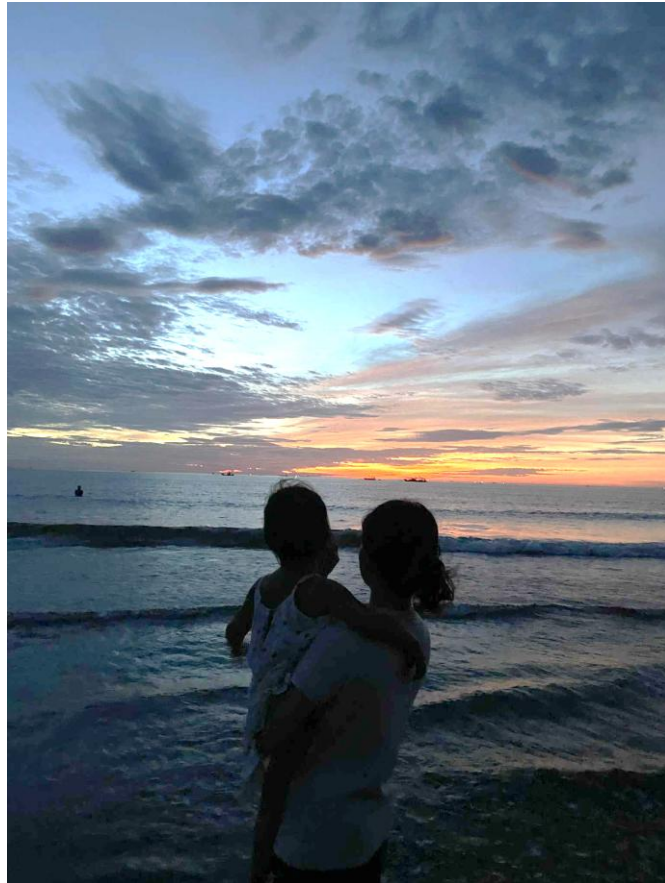
of “millionaire villages” that many Rivermoor residents were proud to uphold. In Rivermoor, I observed a different pattern of competition compared to the stories of a northern rural village described in Nguyen Thi Thanh Binh’s ethnography, where return migrants competed in charitable giving to secure status and influence (Binh, 2016). Here, migrant households competed through spending on behalf of absent family members by channeling remittances into community projects. Migrants abroad themselves often remain unaware of the full extent of these expenditures, entrusting their families at home to carry the mission of sustaining community expectations and advancing the collective project of ‘building the homeland’ in their absence. As a consequence, Rivermoor residents with heavy pockets readily paid for high-quality services or products. Occasionally, they compensated more as a means of philanthropy (to less well-off circumstances like the families of Tu or Hanh). In addition to daily living expenses, social capital development activities in rural villages, including weddings, funerals, festivals, and celebrations, require financial outlay as a means of cultivating connections. Luong Hy Van (2016) observes that increasing social capital undergoes different configurations depending on the models of the community's reality, with varying degrees of effectiveness in mobilisation. For a highly mobile population like in Rivermoor, social capital functions as investments in relational networks that reinforce belonging and reciprocity as migrants and their families strategically deploy resources to maintain a presence in both local and translocal spheres. Households relied on one another for migration assistance, navigating daily life through reciprocal networks while at the same time trying to avoid the risks of public scrutiny and gossip. For those overseas, maintaining these ties through financial inputs sustains their presence in the community and prepares the ground for an eventual return. In this sense, both the locally embedded and the transnationally mobile remain bound to the same circuits of obligation, though their strategies of participation and visibility differ.

Why is fishing not coded with the same prestige as remitting foreign earnings? For a start, it was about the social meaning attached to each: some economic sectors are framed as a regression from more prestigious forms of earning. Migration had promised upward mobility, remittances, and the moral recognition of sacrifice. Fishing, by contrast, symbolised endurance without progress and survival rather than aspiration. Secondly, migration holds a privileged place in the state’s rural development agenda. It is celebrated as evidence that rural households are no longer confined to subsistence but are actively participating in national modernisation and integration into

global labour markets. Fishing (aquaculture) and farming (agriculture) are framed as essential for national food production and commercial needs, yet they are also in need of state support, subsidies, and technological improvement. This contrast elevates migration as a marker of progress while rendering traditional livelihoods both indispensable and insufficient. Likewise, the contrast between hard work and leisure indulgence revealed a dissonance, much like the gap between one's social status and the kind of work one performed. Thu's engagement with the village women's committee was more a token of recognition rather than a job with a real wage. Nevertheless, this form of work carries prestige that allows her to participate in the machinery of local governance and to embody a sense of civic responsibility. Her pride stemmed from dedicating her free time to the state's rural development apparatus, rather than engaging in gossip, gambling, or babysitting. Ideally, most Rivermoor seniors hoped for early retirement while pursuing personal projects to keep themselves busy in a grand house full of children. However, realising this dream depends on whether other family members share the same ideal and are willing or obliged to support it.

This moment highlights the contestation of labour value among transnational households. Mi wanted to emphasise a moral hierarchy that transcends money or material contributions, where genuine respect is based on unity, intimacy, responsibility, and mutual recognition within the family. By contrast, her concerns with outward appearances or the kind of performative respect conferred by neighbours or relatives lacked substance in her eyes. Mi's critique also disrupted the gendered expectations imposed on married women, which are typically more intense in rural environments. Yet the very need to defend her perspective in secret ("don't judge me") came from awareness of the social pressures and judgements in Rivermoor, where community valuation impacted gendered mobility and class definition. This reality continues most prominently for the Vietnamese migrant wives, who gained more power within the family through migration but cannot challenge patriarchal ideals to maintain the family's harmony (Thao & Agergaard, 2012).

## *Mi's decision*



*Figure 10: Mother and daughter*

Pressure, limited prospects at home, and the value of labour itself shaped Mi's decision to migrate again. Her experience reflects what Hoang (2016) observes about Vietnamese migrant women in Taiwan: “[...] they reproduce their marginal city and subordination within both the Vietnamese kinship system and the capitalist economy [...]. This phenomenon underscores the historical and spatial embeddedness of gender as well as the symbiotic relationship between patriarchy and capitalism in female migration” (p. 906). Migration reaffirmed Mi’s commitment as both a mother and a household member, which could reconcile the gap between what was expected of her and what the local economy could realistically offer. Mi’s story shared commonalities with many others in Rivermoor. The very space that should anchor family life became financially unsustainable and socially demanding, pushing people to seek livelihoods elsewhere. Thus, home became paradoxical: it was the place people longed to sustain, but it was also what drove them

away. Migration was not an escape but a response to the very conditions of homemaking under pressure, where rising costs, shifting aspirations, and moral expectations converged to push labour outward.

## **VI. Conclusion**

In this chapter I started the story of homemaking in Rivermoor with the state's visions of development, rendered tangible through credit funds, collective savings schemes, and the NRD programs that promised to modernise the countryside. Yet these instruments of policy ultimately relied on the money and labour of villagers themselves. Far from being neutral mechanisms of development, they turned households into the very engines of rural transformation, responsible not only for sustaining their livelihoods but also for underwriting the state's projects of infrastructural and social renewal. Homemaking, therefore, was already political and tied to the neoliberal shift that redistributed resources and handed responsibility from state to household.

The most visible signs of this transformation were the new houses and public infrastructures that punctuated the rural landscape, along with exorbitant spending habits, conspicuous consumption, and a sharpened awareness of inequality. A social geography of comparison and stigma was created, where material prosperity became the measure of worth, and those unable to meet such standards were cast into shame.

Out of this environment emerged a hierarchy of labour value, a stratification that is deeply embedded in social perception, moral evaluation, and the politics of recognition. Crucially, the house and the practices of homemaking gave labour its meaning. The paradox was that while all labour sustained the home in some way, only certain types of labour were recognised as truly valuable. Work that did not visibly contribute to maintaining or expanding the household was often devalued. Informal trade or subsistence activities could sustain everyday needs, but they did not produce as much symbolic capital as a mansion, a thick envelope of wedding contributions, or a sizable public donation. Migration, by contrast, was elevated because its remittances could be concretized into the material and symbolic foundation of home. This hierarchy was unstable and fraught with contradictions. Unpaid or symbolic labour, such as the voluntary committee work undertaken by women like Thu, revealed the ways recognition could be accrued in non-monetary

forms. This hierarchy of labour value also exposed gendered fault lines. Migration reconfigured women's roles as both breadwinners abroad and caretakers through remittances, while men at home struggled to reconcile their diminished status with informal work or temporary migration. Social reproduction became a field of tension in which gender positions were renegotiated and contested through the way their labour input is evaluated, no matter how arbitrarily.

In the post-socialist countryside, then, homemaking was the very arena through which labour was assessed, classified, and hierarchised. Home was both the goal and the measure of labour, adding symbolic and material weight to the evaluation of different kinds of work. As the state sought to render development technical, households lived it as a moral and material struggle, constantly negotiating how their labour could be translated into home. Migration's ascendancy in this hierarchy underscores both the promises and the limits of this model of rural transformation, where the very foundation of home is tied to movement away from it.

The discussion thus opens up to a broader question of how labour is justified and stratified through narratives of homemaking, whether by the state, by communities, or within households themselves. This, in turn, raises the question of how future generations are imagined and positioned in these processes, a theme to which I now turn in the next chapter, where children emerge not only as dependents but as central figures in the ongoing project of making and remaking home.

## **INHERITING HOME, BECOMING FUTURES: YOUTH AND TRANSNATIONAL IMAGINARIES OF MIGRATION**

### **I. Introduction:**

This chapter explores the future through a temporal lens as it is imagined, anticipated, and embodied by children and youth. As outlined in the methodology, my youngest research participants included children of 17 years and below 5 years of age. I will discuss the flexibility of defining life stage in different contexts, especially from the viewpoint of children themselves. I focus on how their life trajectories take form within a mobile environment, considering how experience and expectation converge to influence their vision and plan for their life course. In

doing so, the chapter highlights youth as active agents in shaping the social reproduction of home and its futures.

*Trẻ em là tương lai của đất nước* (Children are the future of the nation) is a very common saying in Vietnam, often used in educational and government campaigns promoting children's welfare, education, and rights. This saying appears regularly in school slogans and banners as well as public speeches by leaders and educators to emphasize the importance of investing in youth, reinforcing the social responsibility to care for and nurture younger generations. This phrase reflects a Confucian-rooted value system that prioritises education, intergenerational responsibility, and national development through human capital. It aligns with both socialist ideals and more broadly humanist perspectives on childhood.

However, many Rivermoor children grow up in situations that do not fit into the ideal traditionalist scenarios: they absorb knowledge about routes, destinations, paperwork, remittances, and the financial and emotional costs of leaving home; family life is frequently disrupted by long separations, with care commonly provided by grandparents or a lone parent. As people develop as participants in cultural communities (Rogoff, 2003), children become active participants in the broader project of social reproduction during migration. They take on responsibilities that extend beyond their age - may it be care work within household work or for themselves, and maintaining transnational connections through their own devices. Moreover, they are engaged in crafting the moral narratives that sustain migration: they internalise and reproduce discourses of sacrifice, hard work, and future improvement that justify the absence of parents and frame it as an investment in collective well-being. Lan Anh Hoang and Brenda Yeoh (2015, 2012) describe gendered and generational shifts in household roles after migration using qualitative accounts and emphasise that children both adapt actively (notably in terms of attitudes and emotional registers) while experiencing constrained agency under these conditions (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015; 2012). In addition, insufficient state policy and limited social protection fail to address the trade-offs between economic benefits and the deficits in care, leaving children in migrant families without the timely support necessary for their well-being (Dinh, 2019).

Children's roles and their diverse experiences with migration are prominent topics of research. Their position within the scope of analysis itself has been 'moving' away from

conventional perceptions about children as dependents or non-persons lacking agency to active agents with autonomy, and unfolding their diverse endeavours and destabilising powers in migration, mobility and childhood (Bushin, 2009; Dobson, 2009; Gardner, 2012a; Ni Laoire et al., 2010; Orellana et al., 2001; Theodorou, 2011). Studies of transnational households have indicated that left-behind children exercise significant agency in shaping migration family decisions, experiences, and trajectories. Researchers are attentive to how different cultures treat children's well-being and upbringing inside and outside migratory journeys, as well as other areas regarding age, distance and length of migration, and many other aspects. For example, migration can influence migrant and non-migrant children's educational aspirations (Halpern-Manners, 2011; Kandel & Kao, 2001; Leo, 2022; Rao & Hossain, 2012) or schooling experience, such as social interactions, performance, progression or disruption (Chea & Wongboonsin, 2020; Chen et al., 2019; Liang & Chen, 2007), as well as choice of informal education linked to morals, gratitude and attitude (Li & Xiong, 2019; Rao & Hossain, 2012). Moreover, the children I met in Rivermoor also demonstrate determination and foresight in planning their life paths. Their future-making is informed by a keen awareness of their family's mobility history, economic conditions, and shifting opportunities, positioning them as central actors in the ongoing negotiation of transnational life.

As shown, scholars offer studies from numerous contexts demonstrating varying ways in which children react and negotiate their life worlds within the migration of others or themselves; however, they are also “not fully aware autonomous agents” with limited perceptions about space and action (Ansell, 2009, p. 199). Nicola Ansell (2009) observes that focusing on individualised agency limits scales, flows, or connections that construct policies and discourses that influence children's capacities. In my study, I specifically focus on children's agency in relation to mobility. While children's movements are often overlooked or dismissed as insignificant in both family and policy discourses, in practice they require considerable creativity, calculation, and foresight. Allen White *et al.* (2011) write on a similar note about children in migrant families, that they are “particularly disadvantaged through these processes [of control by state agencies and bureaucracies], not because they live more mobile lives than other migrants, but because their mobilities are frequently invisible in state-centred migration discourses” (p.1162). In Vietnam's context of hierarchical social ranking based on age, children and young adults are regarded as uncomplicated and naive; hence, their movements and frames of mind are often overlooked by

older family members. Nonetheless, far from being passive dependents, youth actively navigate their own mobilities in ways that demand careful negotiation of obligations, opportunities, and risks. Their independence is forged through the process of normalisation of absence, whereby the domestic setting plays a major role. Family-functioning mechanisms during temporary parental absence include communication patterns, parenting characteristics, negotiation of authority, and shifts in family roles, altogether suggesting the importance of relational rather than individual coping perspectives (Rodriguez & Margolin, 2015). For my young research participants, this agency is especially visible in their management and calculation of *time*: how they manage daily routines, balance responsibilities, and strategise future aspirations within the constraints of transnational family life.

### **Children's Agency Through Mobility and Time: Theoretical and methodological approach**

People often view children's activities within a household as secondary to the "real" work of family maintenance. If we shift our attention away from spectacular forms of mobility, such as transnational migration, and towards the small-scale logistics of daily life, a different picture emerges in which children are daily asserting their subjectivity to the collective project of sustaining family and village.

Children's mobilities must be understood temporally, considering generational relationships and biographical approaches that incorporate both space and time dimensions (Murray & Cortés-Morales, 2019). In *Children's Mobilities: Interdependent, Imagined, Relational* (2019), editors Murray and Cortés-Morales contend that this reorientation broadens our analytical perspective to encompass mediated mobilities (such as phone calls and messaging), imaginative travel (the anticipation of migration or reunification), and spatial navigation within local environments. As such, traditional concepts of "children's independent mobility" require rethinking to better incorporate children's agency and imagination rather than relying solely on parental or authoritative determinations of freedom (Murray, 2015). Ethnographic studies demonstrate that children develop sophisticated skills in negotiating multiple environmental, social, and technological rhythms during school journeys, gradually becoming more adept at shaping their mobilities through bodily routines and temporal negotiations (Kullman & Palludan, 2011). Dan Woodman and Carmen Leccardi's contribution to *Time and Space in Youth Studies*

encapsulates how youth's mobilities are not only about where but also when. They frame youth as inhabiting temporal landscapes defined by everyday rhythms across time zones. Embedded in cross-country routines are tacit skills that entail anticipation, buffering against uncertainty, and time-saving strategies that together form a youth's lived temporality (Woodman & Leccardi, 2019). Holloway, Holt, and Mills offer a nuanced lens for understanding children's agency as relational, spatially and temporally conditioned, and stratified across childhoods. They argue agency is often misrecognised when assessed by adult standards of autonomy or legal rights. Instead, children assert agency through everyday tactics. This approach invites us to see these tactics not as auxiliary or substitute roles but as *distinctively skilled and morally situated forms of action* (Holloway, Holt, & Mills, 2018).

Synthesising these theoretical threads reveals clear methodological implications: studying children's mobilities and agency requires methods that attend to the small, routine, mediated, and imagined. Standard household or adult-focused ethnography often misses the micro-practices and temporal calibrations by youngsters that sustain transnational family life.

As a result, for analysis, I unpack the different temporal layers of future planning in the context of migration among youths in rural Vietnam. Children and young adults in contemporary rural Rivermoor were coming of age during a period marked by the post-reform surge in transnational migration, substantial rural reconfiguration, and the persistent influence of a capitalist conception of modernity. These overlapping forces do not simply shape material conditions - they reorient how youth experience time and construct life trajectories and transitions into adulthood. Therefore, youth as a life stage is not only actively configured by young people but also a flexible and responsive temporal sensibility, calibrated in relation to the movements of people, unfolding life events, and shifting socio-material conditions.

First, I draw on Robertson et al. (2017), who conceptualise youth not as a fixed chronological age bracket but as "an in-between position in which people are moving towards and - as a space and time that is both liminal and transitional - rather than a fixed and chronological age range" (p. 615). This framing unsettles developmentalist models that imagine youth as a universal and sequential stage and instead highlights its relational and processual character. In rural Vietnam, *such an approach is particularly useful for understanding how young people*

*navigate migration, which influences their position within the family, economic mobility, and community that are not completely associated with age.* Second, this perspective draws attention to how young people mobilise *practices of timing*. As young people learn to insert themselves into broader temporalities of kinship, economy, and policy, timing becomes both a deeply personal and a profoundly social practice. Third, I looked closely into these practices of *temporal agency* - the ability to inhabit time as well as to shape, manipulate, and recalibrate its rhythms - especially in line with future mobile projects that are deferred based on existing context (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016). Rather than being passive subjects caught in the flow of structural change, rural youth in Vietnam show how agency can lie in synchronising or desynchronising with others, in accelerating or postponing decisions, and in crafting futures through small, calculated adjustments in the present. This recognition opens up a richer understanding of youth migration and the reproduction of mobile households.

Working with children in the context of transnational migration raises significant ethical concerns that require careful consideration. Children are often positioned as vulnerable subjects within research and policy discourse, a framing that risks silencing their voices by assuming a lack of competence or agency (James & Prout, 1997; Christensen & Prout, 2002). In Vietnam, where cultural hierarchies emphasise the authority of elders, I balanced my interactions among household members between respecting the head of household's permission and consent and recognising younger generations as capable social actors with valuable insights into family life, mobility, and care. Obtaining informed consent in research with children is rarely straightforward: it often involves both parental or guardian consent and the child's own assent, which may be shaped by family power relations. Children may feel obligated or reluctant to participate, and I must remain sensitive to such dynamics, ensuring that children understand they can decline or withdraw without repercussion.

Another challenge is confidentiality and protection from unintended consequences. In tightly knit rural communities, anonymity can be difficult to maintain, and disclosures about migration strategies or household conflicts could create tension within families or between neighbors. The ethical responsibility lies in protecting children from repercussions while still allowing their perspectives to be heard. This requires careful anonymisation and sometimes leaving out material that, though analytically rich, could expose participants to harm. At the same

time, I refrained from conducting interviews in formal settings and encouraged natural conversations and children's ways of communicating. I often followed along with my young participants to whichever activities they felt comfortable with me by their side, be it doing homework, playing board games, visiting neighbors, killing time at a cafe, or bike riding or strolling along the coast, etc. These methods treat children as co-researchers in knowledge production, honoring both their situated knowledge and ethical concerns over consent, surveillance, and exposure (Murray & Cortés-Morales, 2019; Holloway et al., 2018). An initial observation from these interactions reveals that the children often took the lead in scheduling and selecting locations or activities, purposefully avoiding the presence of their legal guardians (parents or grandparents). By foregrounding children's creativity and often-invisible mobilities in arranging time and activities, we see how youth in rural Vietnam are socialised into the skills and logics that sustain migration itself. Additionally, a stark difference in the way children communicated was the more frequent use of information and communication technologies, which created spaces for children to express their experiences in forms they were comfortable with. This perspective is especially valuable for capturing how they navigate social ties and mediate their own social circle.

Finally, ethical reflection must also account for the emotional labour of engaging with children's accounts of separation, longing, or conflict. Researchers must avoid reproducing narratives of victimhood while also not romanticising resilience. Instead, the goal is to hold space for the contradictions of children's agency, including their creativity and competence alongside their vulnerabilities (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015). I was fortunate not to encounter situations that were complicated or emotionally distressing in my work with children. However, I continue to be acutely aware of another type of dilemma: the moment of departure. Having built relationships and become woven, however briefly, into their lives, leaving at the end of fieldwork carried its own ethical weight. I also came to understand, in my own limited way, the feeling of separation that these children live with, echoing, though never equaling, the absences they experience within their own families. Taken together, these ethical and methodological considerations emphasise that children are not simply "objects of protection" nor "miniature adults", but also participants in social life whose perspectives are crucial for understanding the reproduction of home. Doing justice to their voices requires not only methodological innovation but also an ongoing reflexivity about the power relations that structure research encounters.

## **II. Growing up rural: Vietnam “socialism”, labour migration, and rural development**

Under the scorching summer sun, I hollered for Huong (16 years old) from the entrance of the modest one-story house where she lived with her mother. I was a regular customer at Huong’s “food shop” - a busy setup from the living room to the family kitchen. The house was always cluttered with gift wrapping materials, plastic food containers, and the constant bustle of activity. When I first arrived in Rivermoor Commune in May 2023, Huong - then just 15 - was already running a seasonal business making handmade gift boxes and flower bouquets. Over time, Huong expanded into food sales, sourcing snacks and ingredients from the city of Vinh (in Nghe An province). Her menu was eclectic and ever-changing, from staples like milk tea, pork jerky, and herbal chicken to whatever trendy treats were making the rounds on TikTok. Barely 155 cm tall, Huong radiated immense energy. Her days were packed with school, customers, deliveries, and sourcing trips. When she was not home or in class, she was zipping around on her e-bike between the commune and the city. Huong had plenty of plans with her savings. She talked about getting a nose job, opening a cafe with her friends. But the big dream was clear: make as much money as possible by the age of 20, then migrate overseas to make even more. Since when was Huong’s ambition already in motion? Is there a special motivation behind the 20-year mark? How do young people in Rivermoor envision their futures in the context of migration?

I learnt that Huong’s aspiration was not just driven by a desire for financial success but also by memories of hardship and sacrifice. Her father had passed away when she was just old enough to remember. Huong spoke of her mother’s quiet resilience and their gratitude for the neighbours and extended family who helped renovate their old house and gifted them a used washing machine.

Huong’s mother had had a regular hourly job as in-house help and also a shop assistant at a local business establishment with a salary of 3 million VND (€115.36) per month and no formal contract. Following the state classification, the family was considered a poor household. This designation allowed Huong and her brother to receive tuition exemptions throughout their schooling. Their mother was supported with 360,000 VND (€13.843)/month/child. The overall income was just enough to cover the family’s basic needs, leaving little to no room for savings.

Attending high school was also a challenge: there was no high school within the commune ; therefore, students must commute to either of the two high schools in the neighbouring areas, which are approximately 7 to 9 kilometres away. By the age of 15, many young people had learnt to ride motorbikes and often shared rides with each other. Huong made her first personal investment at 14 years old with her savings. She paid for half of a size-appropriate electric bike with her savings; the other half was financed by relatives. To minimise electricity costs at home, she would charge it at school whenever possible. Owning a personal vehicle marked the beginning of Huong's entrepreneurial path. As her mobility expanded, so did her business ambitions. She began experimenting with shipping trendy food in nearby cities to local peers eager to keep up with urban tastes. Her motorbike became both a means of transport and a tool for market exploration. Through mobility, she tapped into rural aspirations for modernity and trendy lifestyles.



*Figure 11: A teenager's gifts and food service*

In 2020, the family once again turned to the support of neighbors and kin, calling in loans to finance her brother's education in South Korea. Resisting the influence from many of his peers who dropped out to work informal jobs, Huong's brother was determined to finish his education.

He worked night shifts at a convenience store to finance himself, stretching what should have been a four-year degree into five.

Huong's migration plan was tethered to his timeline. She calculated: he would graduate in 2025, then hopefully obtain stable work and begin paying down the loans, which she estimated to take 3 years to form a favorable rhythm. Meanwhile, she aspired to become independent and alleviate her mother's burden. In this way, Huong's future was contingent upon the timing of others within the family unit.

### **Community power and socio-historical inheritance**

Huong's upbringing found its foundation in a supportive local landscape that intricately intertwines migration, debt, and self-transformation. Her personal project of future-making can be seen as a response to, and reproduction of, the commune's broader integration into transnational circuits of labour, aspiration, and capital.

Collectively mobilising resources through informal loans, kin support, and neighborhood solidarity has been a cornerstone of migration practices in rural areas. Stories of once-impooverished villages banding together to send their members abroad for work are common. As discussed in the previous chapter, this ethic also manifests in communal material acts and has shaped a growing socio-economic landscape that serves well the state's visions of development all the while pressing more self-responsibilities on individual life betterment. Mao *et al.* (2025) point out that the positive social outcomes rooted in local rural agency and resilience have little to do with post-socialist state development interventions, such as in Vietnam and China. The government's insufficient social welfare provision shifts responsibility back onto households; rural migrant families must sustain themselves within a system that actively constrains their mobility and devalues their labour (Nguyen, 2014). Moreover, the majority of so-called "new and model rural areas" are, in fact, built out of pockets of local people, often to fulfill state-imposed criteria, whether out of compliance, a force of duty, or belief in national narratives and promises (Hoang 2025). Likewise, as shown in the previous chapter, the local government often promoted the spirit of generosity and charitable giving as inherent virtues of the Vietnamese people, drawing on the

historical narrative of Rivermoor to cast the distribution of care duties as both an honour and a moral obligation.

Huong was embedded within a generational experience of resilience, self-reliance, and imperative survival needs for money. In many respects, Huong and her family must rely on their own social and economic capacities to overcome poverty. Indeed, Vietnam's market socialism fosters neoliberal subjectivities, where young people internalise entrepreneurial logic, self-responsibility, and risk management. Research has shown that pro-urban policies in Vietnam have reinforced structural inequalities between rural and urban populations, producing lower school enrollment rates and fewer trained workers in rural areas; these disparities shape not only household incomes and occupational trajectories but also the extent to which rural families depend on migration as a livelihood strategy (Le & Chung, 2020). In this context, rural communities that rely on remittances have created their own ways to care for each other (Hoang, 2014; Nguyen, 2014). This arrangement reflects how the state's uneven development strategies indirectly reproduce migration as a family project, with intergenerational care practices filling the gaps left by absent parents and limited institutional support.

Huong's family-centered vision highlights both the strength of intergenerational solidarity and the structural absence of institutional assistance in her life. When I asked how she balanced her business with education, Huong scoffed, as if the question itself missed the point. For her, schooling was not the central pathway to a better life. She looked instead to her older brother, whom she regarded as a model to follow. In her view, free public education did little to transform their prospects. Huong spoke candidly about the limits of the system that would cut her off once she turned 18. The possibility of pursuing higher education in another city was an expensive and risky venture. Even with a degree, she imagined herself returning to a life still marked by precarity, poverty, debts, and struggling to find stability. Against this backdrop, migration was more attractive as a direct route to income and responsibility than the slow and uncertain return of formal education.

Huong referred again to her brother, who had started a private insurance package for their mother two years ago, reasoning that not only she and her brother but also their mother would need to develop a way to take care of herself once she cannot work anymore. Vietnam's social welfare

system remains limited in scope and uneven in distribution, often providing little security for elderly parents who spent their working lives in agriculture or informal labor. Huong demonstrated her knowledge by actually sitting down and calculating the ‘fictional’ state pension for her mother with me. If her mother contributed to Vietnam’s voluntary social insurance based on a declared monthly income of 3 million VND, her maximum pension after 35 years of contributions would be 2.25 million VND per month (equal to 86.5 EUR; 75% of her insured income). This meant she cannot reach a 3 million VND pension unless she registers a higher contributory income, at least 4 million VND per month. Upon retirement, she would automatically receive a health insurance card free of charge, with the health insurance fund covering 95% of medical costs when using services within the designated healthcare network. This instance proves that state pensions are negligible, and health insurance coverage frequently falls short of actual medical costs. A study focusing on the “near-poor” population revealed that while health insurance reduces out-of-pocket payments by about 21%, a significant portion of healthcare expenses remain uncovered - particularly for outpatient services and treatment in private facilities (Duc Thanh *et al.*, 2021). This indicates that social insurance and social security’s benefits fall short of protecting financially vulnerable groups. From the way the earnings from migration were redirected to secure health, education, and well-being for family members; Huong and her brother even anticipated their mother’s aging and the likely medical expenses that would arise. At the same time, preference for private insurance demonstrates how households are compelled to insert themselves into market-based solutions, where care and security are privatised and conditioned on the ability to pay. The future of home rests not on the protection of the state, but on the children themselves, ironically echoing the very narratives promoted by the nation.

Huong’s perspective reveals her disappointment with the state’s thin social protection. In reality, the burden of care and survival falls squarely on families themselves. Social policies may acknowledge the children in special circumstances, but they rarely translate into meaningful support, whether in education, social protection, or emotional care. For Huong, this absence reinforces the primacy of family as the only reliable source of belonging and survival. The state does not “take care” of her, and so she must learn to take care of the family instead. This absence is not neutral. By outsourcing care to families and by promoting migration as a rural livelihood strategy, the state indirectly produces the conditions in which young people like Huong grow up

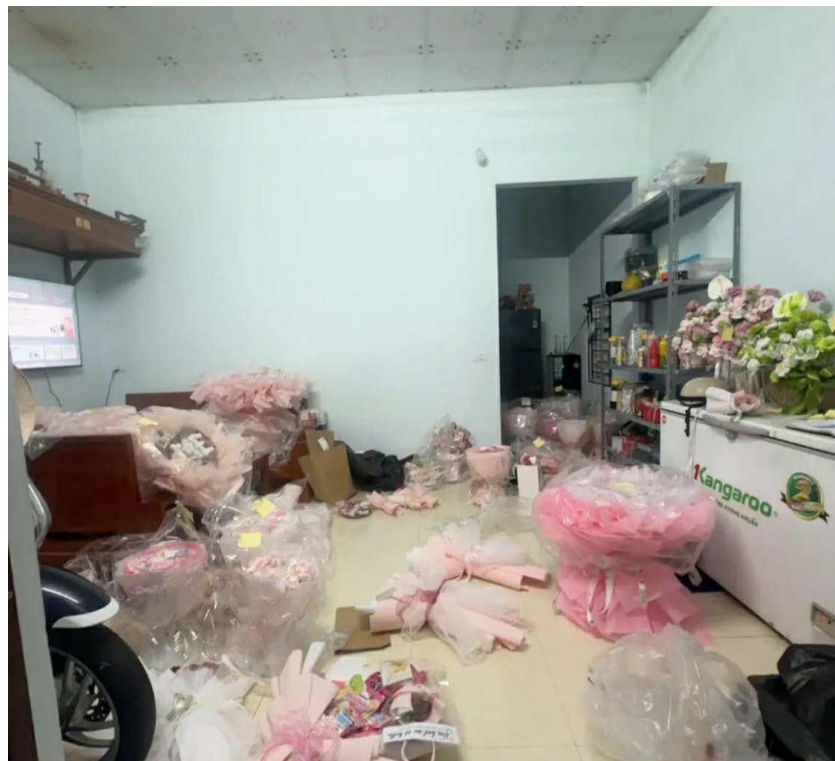
assuming responsibility prematurely. Her acts of generosity and responsibility are not simply expressions of personal maturity; they are symptomatic of a broader political economy in which the household, not the state, absorbs the costs of social reproduction. Huong's understanding of home, therefore, is both intimate and critical: it affirms the centrality of family care while exposing the state's failure to provide the very forms of protection it claims to uphold.

This precarity, while shaped by structural inequalities, is not devoid of hope or creativity. Anna Tsing's (2015) framing of precarity as both instability and potential resonates deeply in the rural Vietnamese context. The residue of post-socialist promise and national progress persists in tension with emerging neoliberal values of entrepreneurial success and individual striving. As younger generations learn to operate between these ideologies, they develop an attunement to the contingent conditions under which lives are imagined and made. It is not uncommon that rural teenagers take on responsibilities and display capacities often associated with adulthood, such as partaking in businesses, contributing to household well-being, planning future migration, and managing savings and investments. Thus, Huong does not simply "transition" into adulthood at a single, fixed point. She inhabits a liminal zone where markers of youth and adulthood coexist and were enacted in different contexts. Migration, while it may be a marker of adulthood, is now part of youth's strategic planning, often beginning early in their upbringing. These young individuals actively navigate economic pressures, family expectations, and social obligations, stretching or compressing life stages to align with shifting timelines. This supports the idea that youth is not a bounded life stage but a fluid and negotiated temporal experience.

Once, I asked Huong for a restaurant recommendation, and she immediately took the opportunity to take both her mother and me out for dinner. At the end of the meal, I stood up to take care of the bill, only to discover that Huong had already paid. She turned to her mother, all grinning, and said, "I won". The event was not the first time Huong demonstrated her generosity. She often offered discounts when I bought her food and always added a little extra as a gesture of goodwill and thoughtfulness. I was always amazed at her remarkable kindness and initiative; she was already rehearsing the behaviors of a responsible adult. Huong embraced an intense motivation to grow up, to be competent, and to take on responsibilities that she associated with adulthood, just as much as she desired to be taken seriously by those around her. I could see how Huong measured her progress not against her peers, but against the standards of responsibility she

observed in adults, particularly in a household structured around economic struggles, migration, and intergenerational care. Huong's actions are both a performance and a learning process: she practices decision-making, accountability, and social negotiation - those skills she views as essential to growing up. She inhabited an in-between space that was neither child nor fully adult, using this transitional period to experiment, learn, and stake a claim to competence that allowed her to contribute to family life and enact a vision of herself as a capable, responsible member of the household.

### **Calculating time: leaving and returning home**



*Figure 12: Business in the living room*

In the very space of home, Huong found a way to make a living and cultivate big dreams. This home-livelihood hybrid space, more than anything, visualised a material and social infrastructure of endurance, embodying both the promise of self-reliance and the precarity of informal labor under late socialism. Huong exhibited a form of temporal agency that is forged within and responsive to the socio-material contradictions of late socialism. Rural youths are not subjects-in-

waiting positioned in the interstices of global labour regimes. Rather, they are relational agents that calibrate decisions with kinship timelines, infrastructural shifts, and affective economies. To come of age in this setting is to live with time as something to be managed: to wait without drifting, to act without certainty, and to continually reorient oneself in a landscape where both mobility and immobility carry weight.

Young people in communities like Rivermoor became attuned to departure and return, as migration had often accompanied daily life since childhood. As youth engage with fragmented yet overlapping horizons of planning, waiting, and acting, futures are constantly assessed, reworked, and synchronised with the migration timelines of kin. The ability to chart one's life course through this complexity becomes a learnt and practiced form of agency. People frequently live within stretched moments of suspension where aspirations for the future may be deferred due to financial constraints, bureaucratic hurdles, familial obligations, or simply unluckiness. Yet this present is not static but thick with emotional labour, social comparisons, and strategic manoeuvring. Temporality and temporal experience thus become a social practice to manage affect, obligation, and uncertainty in tandem.

Finally, Huong temporal agency was marked by flexibility and resilience. She was acutely aware that her brother's degree was taking longer than expected, and her home business was constantly changing. Huong accepted that progress is not linear and that the future was contingent, conditional, and often shaped by forces beyond her control. Still, she continues to act with intention and hope. Her temporal horizon was beyond naive optimism and expanding through strategic waiting and adaptive planning. In this way, Huong lived what might be called a relational futurity - her aspirations unfolded through careful attunement to the uncertainties of her family's collective life course. What stood out in these moments with Huong was how little the state figured into her everyday responsibility and care. Huong never acknowledged formal youth support but rather claimed competence within her family and community. This absence underscores a broader pattern: while the state sets the structural conditions for migration through labour export schemes and rural development policies, the day-to-day reproduction of family life is sustained by all who must creatively fill the gaps left behind, including children.

### **III. Hardship first, happiness later: Living in the Korean village and life stage aspirations**

This section examines how rural youth in Rivermoor understand migration as part of their life course, framing it as a developmental milestone that they interpret and situate within their aspirations and imagination.

“You need money to be able to live in this commune,” Thanh (17 years old, daughter of Thu and Hao) remarked as she stirred her lemongrass iced tea. I often met with Thanh for informal interviews at various coffee shops scattered across the commune. Like many teenagers, Thanh enjoyed socialising at cafes (đi cà phê), but her limited allowance meant she could not do so frequently. She often compared herself to local peers who seemed to have more spending freedom. “You have no idea how spoiled the rich kids are here,” she told me. “Okay, spending money... but there’s also early pregnancy, dropping out, running away... And then? They finish high school and just go abroad to work...”. I waited, but Thanh let the words linger without elaboration. Thanh suggested a tacit logic: going abroad marked the end of misguided youth, a resetting of one’s trajectory into purposeful labour and self-discipline. Her telling fell into a common perception in the countryside that migration was also a kind of correction in which the excesses of adolescence were folded into a new narrative of productivity and responsibility.

The youngest of three siblings, Thanh had already made up her mind to go work abroad after high school, preferably in a European country. Her eldest sister had already settled in the Czech Republic, while her older brother had spent the last ten years working in Korea. Thu often remarked that her youngest daughter was fortunate to have been born much later than her siblings, to grow up in a household sustained by foreign money and foreign goods (like Phan compared to Ri). Yet Thanh herself spoke with a certain melancholy. She admitted that her deepest bond was not with her parents but with her older sister, who had cared for her through much of her childhood until the age of ten. After her siblings migrated, Thanh felt that her parents regarded her as an obligation made meaningful by the remittances from her siblings. Now, as she looked toward her own future, Thanh recognised that it would soon be her turn to shoulder this same pressure: to migrate, earn, and reproduce the financial flows that sustain the household. Upon entering high school, Thanh was placed in specialised class in literature. Her talent for writing and vivid imagination, however, did not extend to English. On several occasions, she asked me for English

learning materials, but each attempt to pursue them fizzled out, and she could not follow through. I asked her about motivations to migrate. She replied:

“I like to go to places. And I want to simply make a lot of money. Travel...”.

“Why did you choose Europe?” - I asked.

“I think society is more developed over there, and the work is actually less tough for the amount of money one can earn. I see my brother in Korea working so hard. My sister was doing average in Czech and now below average with a newborn, but she has a husband, and they both have papers [citizenship]. If I go to work, it’s just me taking care of myself, my money on myself. It’s tough for my brother because he is a man, unlike my sister... She rarely sent home any money, and my parents never complained about that”.

“Are you afraid of hardships?” - I followed.

“*Khổ trước, sướng sau (Hardships first, happiness later)*. I think simply... I work hard and try hard to settle, get married, and have children, and I will raise them until they are independent and I let them go into the world, and I return to my homeland to live. But, you still need money to live here. You know, this commune is called the Korean Village. People say this commune knows how to eat and play (ăn chơi). People come here to eat and to relax because this place is trendy (sành ăn). *Do you understand what I mean? People have to eat, and they like to eat*”.

*Eat and play: Rural cosmopolitanism and the social desires*

Ăn (eat) - a deceptively simple word, but it significantly speaks to a fundamental human need while evoking both suffering and pleasure and the pendulum between labour that sustains life and the aspiration to live well. The literature-talented high-school student Thanh weaved together enjoyment, survival, and moral evaluation in one word that, on one level, confirmed that eating was about enjoying life and about the material achievement that allows one to indulge and be socially recognised. At the same time, Thanh alluded to the labour and hardships that preceded this enjoyment. “Hardship first, happiness later” encapsulates a moral logic that toils are prerequisites for a life of comfort.

Huong and Thanh came of age amidst the shifting terrain of the local economy, where the pursuit of money had become a crucial condition for imagining a good life. In stark contrast to the way older generations recall their early life of poverty and hardship, children and teenagers in Rivermoor grow up in a different world that allowed relative comfort and small indulgences, made possible through remittances, improved infrastructure, and socio-political development intervention. However, the indulgence that the children experience is still accompanied by uncertainties regarding sustainable rural livelihoods. Rivermoor's children thus embody both the privileges and the tensions of a generation growing up in the wake of rural transformation. In the context of remittance communities, as rural areas began to experience uneven development, these changes translated into growing income differentiation. Huong engaged with this reality head-on by capitalising on local demand and trendy customers. Thanh acknowledged reality with a critical stance. Despite their different strategies and affective orientations, both of them shared a common aspiration: to become rich and mobile and free from local constraints and to secure futures on their own terms.

Her remark that “you need money to live here” and that her commune has become a “trendy” place to spend and retire (*ăn chơi, sành ăn*) also gestures toward a localised economy of aspiration. Lifetime achievements are shaped by both economic necessity and social desire; individuals must not only accumulate capital to reach their life goals but also participate in communal modern consumption and its rewards. Thanh's orientation to time merges long-term planning with critical social observation. She exemplifies a space of active anticipation where youth operate between the demands of the present and aspirations for a distant, more secure life stage. Thanh's reflections revealed no distinction between youth and adulthood but a strategic orientation toward *life stages of struggles and rewards*. Her perception of time is imbued with a sense of delayed gratification and a structured sequence of life events, beginning with labour migration and ending with a return home. Even for troubled youths, as per her remarks, life would eventually fall into a pattern shaped by discipline, the endurance of hard work, and the acceptance of whatever future followed. Her invocation of the Vietnamese saying *khổ trước sướng sau* (hardships first, happiness later) encapsulates a culturally rooted ethic of endurance, where present struggle is justified as a necessary stage in the pursuit of a secure and fulfilling future. Yet this vision of time also involves deferral and restraint. The present is thus framed as a space of intense productivity and self-

restraint, while the more expressive, self-realising version of herself is deferred to a later imagined time abroad. This also reveals how Huong experiences time as layered and uneven: full of hustle in the present, but with key parts of life - adulthood, beauty, autonomy - delayed for a future that is not fully hers yet.

### *Home and money*

Thanh's story also reflects how home is experienced by a younger generation with relative comfort, yet now also as a space conditioned by money and indulgence, as Thanh pointed out, in food, leisure, and retirement. Home, in this sense, must be continuously built through financial inflows, and its comfort is only enjoyable as long as these flows are maintained. Money not only sustains a home materially but also defines its affective quality: the difference between a childhood remembered with hardships and one experienced as indulgence is quite literally measured through financial means.

At the same time, home is infused with expectations shaped by migration. The comforts Thanh experienced were tied to the sacrifices of absent family members, and in turn, her presence in the household was bound up with implicit responsibilities to carry forward the family's trajectory. While she might not explicitly articulate these obligations, her position within a remittance-dependent household placed her at the intersection of present comforts and future duties. Home, then, emerges as both a site of care as well as one of reciprocity - as love and care are inseparable from the flows of money that sustain them. Thanh knows that it will soon be her turn to face the pressure of contributing financially, highlighting how children in migrant families inhabit the early space between dependency and responsibility. She is simultaneously a beneficiary of migration-generated wealth and a future agent in its reproduction.

Analytically, this underscores a broader point about the reproduction of home through intergenerational mobile labour. Children like Thanh are socialised into, and Ri (Phan's daughter) was "trained" into, the cycles and expectations of migration not just through instruction or enforcement, but through the lived experience of care and obligation. Emotional bonds, household hierarchies, and material dependencies converge to create a cycle in which the next generation is prepared to participate in the transnational economy, even as they negotiate their attachments,

aspirations, and sense of home. Both Thanh and Huong expressed their desire to grow old in their birthplace. Yet, they wanted to make a life in Rivermoor only after leaving it first. Migration was imagined as a necessary stage, not only to earn money but also to accumulate the experience, respect, and maturity that would allow them to eventually return and rebuild home on stronger terms. Rivermoor was not rejected, nor was it sufficient in its present form. It was a place worth coming back to, but only once transformed by the resources and capacities made possible by mobility.

### **Embodying mobility: unpredictable movements**

One Saturday, Kim (Han's daughter) was late to the interview that we had scheduled. Kim and several of her friends were caught up with an IELTS exam training course in Vinh city (IELTS exam - International English Language Testing System exam), as there was no such training center in Rivermoor. She would benefit greatly from an IELTS score of 6.0. Some universities, including the University of Vinh, accept IELTS certification in place for the English subject in the university entrance exam. Kim's plan was to enter the architecture major at the University of Vinh, though her father was encouraging her to study abroad. She was tempted by the prospect, though she fully understood that studying abroad, in her father's point of view, did not mean architecture. She clarified: "He has no money for me to just go and study what I want. It's some fake work-study program in Canada, like what people do around here. My mom and stepdad are more relaxed; they let me choose. I will know and decide what I want to do in about a year. For now, English helps with both migration and with university entrance exams".

Phan's first grandchild from his eldest son - Butter (9 years old) was also a fan of learning English. She quickly befriended me when she discovered that I, like her parents, had traveled in foreign places. Han also introduced her own international origins, being born in Korea and crossing borders before forming memories, though she admitted that it seemed ordinary. She rattled off a list of countries where her classmates had similarly been "sent back from" as toddlers and new-borns - Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Spain, England, New Zealand, and more. However, Butter knew that she and her brother were luckier than many others because they could visit their parents in Korea legitimately. She recounted the recent summer trip to Korea with her parents in 2023, describing a strong sense of connection to the country. In her words, "It's where I was born,

and my parents live there. I like it. I think I'd like to live there. [...] It smells really good [referring to air quality], and everything is high quality".<sup>18</sup> She expressed a wish to visit Korea again, maybe to live in it in the future, though she had not decided. Han occasionally invited classmates to my place, and their play sometimes turned into a competition over whose mother was more "baddie" (ghê góm), or, who was younger the last time their parents were in Vietnam - the winner being "I was minus one million years old the last time my parents were in Vietnam". The children, notably, spoke not so much from personal memory but from recollections passed down through family stories. Despite this, their sense of self already reflects the contours of transnational mobility imaginaries. As Salazar (2011) highlights, imaginaries are powerful because they shape mobility aspirations and embodied practices. For Butter and her peers in Rivermoor, growing up amid the persistent reality of departure was normalised and became woven into their worldview, inevitably shaping their upbringing and future patterns of movement.



*Figure 13: Children banter*

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<sup>18</sup> The way Butter used the word "quality" reminded me of the way Phan used the same word but to describe life in Rivermoor.

Like her father, Butter demonstrated a remarkable aptitude for languages. English, in particular, was her passion. She excelled at it at school and was motivated to improve further. Affectionately, she referred to me as “teacher”, and twice a week, she would bring her English homework to my place for extra study. When I asked why English was so important to her, Butter explained that it was her favorite subject. More significantly, she believed that English skill would enable her to travel to a greater variety of places, beyond Korea, where only Korean is spoken.

Butter’s narrative reveals not only individual talent but also a distinct orientation toward the future shaped by mobility and opportunity. In many migrant families who have benefitted from the previous migration experiences, language was added as a strategic resource for navigating uncertain futures and a way for young people to keep as many options as possible for higher education, employment, and migration. Not only did Phan's initial experience of migration (he did not know that language was important to survive in Korea) translate to strategic language education and a safer migration pathway for his son, but the third generation also embodied these experiences with a strong sense of place and mobile determination at a young age, positioning themselves for ever more opportunities that may arise in a globalised world. The pursuit of English reflects a “project of the self” (Giddens, 1991), where planning, aspiration, and self-development are closely tied to the ability to move and belong elsewhere.

At the family and community level, this focus on the future influences everyday decisions and routines - such as extra language lessons, the choice of schooling, and the cultivation of international connections. It also affects intergenerational dynamics: parents and grandparents may see their own sacrifices as investments in the next generation’s mobility, while children’s “choices” come from both the pressure and the possibility of realising these collective dreams (Gardner, 2012a; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). The unpredictable nature of migration policies, economic shifts, and global events also means that young people’s futures remain open-ended and contingent. Yet, it is precisely this uncertainty that makes English and other global skills so highly valued within migrant families - they are the tools to “keep doors open” and to maintain a sense of agency amid structural unpredictability (Appadurai, 2013).

In summary, the young generation in Rivermoor's commitment to English learning is emblematic of a broader mode of future-oriented planning that characterizes transnational youth.

Their stories highlight how language, aspiration, and the capacity to imagine and prepare for multiple possible futures are deeply intertwined in the everyday lives of migrant homes.

### *Unpredictable movements*

Anthropologically, the unpredictable movement of future generations in migrant families is embedded in these transnational imaginaries. Mobility here is not simply the crossing of borders but a process shaped by family narratives and aspirations (Appadurai, 1996; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Children's subjectivities develop at the intersection of personal experience and collective narrative, which is a process where mobility is imagined as both ordinary and aspirational. Sometimes, movements happen and are embodied before the individuals could register (being "sent back home" as babies, or crossing borders in their mother's womb). Thus, their lives illustrate how migration is not a linear journey from one place to another but a dynamic, ongoing fluctuation of belonging, identity, and imaginaries (Basch, Glick Schiller, & Szanton Blanc, 1994). The unpredictability of future generations' movements is less a sign of chaos and more an indication of the creative, resilient responses that migrant families develop in the face of shifting opportunities and constraints (Salazar, 2011; Appadurai, 1996; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

Meanwhile, the older generation, like Phan, becomes relatively immobile, assuming the role of caretakers for both the children and the home. Phan often described his daily routine with a sense of resigned contentment - mornings spent over breakfast and coffee, followed by chauffeuring his grandchildren to and from school, farming on the family land in between. Reflecting on his responsibilities, he said, "Three kids, two schools, each with their schedule; you just revolve around them until the day ends. There's not much left for yourself. But looking after grandchildren is the main job for old people". Grandparents lives are circumscribed by the responsibilities of sustaining the household and supporting the younger generation's mobility, often at the cost of their aspirations and freedoms (Gardner, 2012b). This generational dynamic highlights the uneven distribution of movement and stasis within migrant families, with mobility itself being a resource strategically allocated according to age, gender, and opportunity.

#### **IV. Conclusion:**

“Time is a relation between activities” (Evans-Pritchard, 1977, p. 119).

Migration is widely recognised by my subject of analysis as a marker of the next life stage that signifies a transition to meaningful labour and independence. However, this life stage is not necessarily associated with just adults or youth. It is at first a circulating condition of family life - this ongoing relational process cuts across age categories and milestones in the biography of an individual.

Home is revealed as a lived and continuously enacted project. Children inhabit a transitional position, negotiating the demands of the present while anticipating the roles they will assume in the future. They participate in homemaking both as contributors to the household and as actors embodying their own future. By actively modulating the timing of their involvement and decision, children enact a form of agency that is relational, embodied, and deeply intertwined with the reproduction of home.

In my analysis, I balance between emphasising the agency of children and paying attention to structures imposed by society or institutions. As a result, agency is both a quality inherent to the subject (as socially and culturally inherited throughout the community history) and emerges as something lived and embodied through practices and choices unfolding through intersubjective relations (as to navigate global influence and state intervention). Understanding agency in this way resists the tendency to measure children’s actions against adult-centric notions of independence or resistance. It highlights how young people carve out spaces of influence and decision-making within the constraints of migration economies and state neglect. Their agency adds a creative dimension in navigating transcending structures as they make the future actionable in the present through calculated, embodied, and relational practices.

For children in migrant families, this relational agency becomes visible in subtle but significant ways. It is enacted through practices of timing and decision and plan-making processes (when to study, when to work, or which responsibility to take up, how to coordinate with other household members). It surfaces in gestures of care, such as Huong’s efforts to contribute financially or to wait for her brother to settle abroad. Their practices may not appear as dramatic

acts of resistance or autonomy, yet they are crucial in the everyday reproduction of the home and, by extension, the reproduction of mobile labour.

These accounts reveal a notion of home that is neither static nor solely sentimental. In Rivermoor, home is revealed as a lived and continually negotiated project, sustained less by the state than by family histories of resilience, remittances, and the everyday practices of children and youth. The children described home in terms of the practical realities it has come to embody. At the same time, they articulate home as something of a lifetime, but one must leave it first. In this light, home cannot be reduced to a fixed place or a set of nostalgic attachments. It is simultaneously economic and affective, conditioned by financial flows, and sustained by intergenerational practices of care. Most importantly, home is reproduced through the agency of children and youth, who embody resilience not by resisting structures but by navigating them in ways that make the future actionable in the present. Home becomes something that must be continually constructed, maintained, and safeguarded within the migratory patterns that shape rural life in contemporary Vietnam. Children play a pivotal role in preserving and transforming this space, influencing both its current form and its future. They continuously nurture and re-imagine home through their sense of responsibility and care.

As youths grew up in Rivermoor's shifting terrain, the future seems both accelerated and postponed: accelerated because migration appears as a fast track to adulthood and success; postponed because structural precarity, debt, and familial obligations may interfere with their departure or progression. Together, these conditions produce a generation of young people who experience time as stretched, nonlinear, and conditional. Their life trajectories are marked by anticipation and recalibration, shaped by both the promises and contradictions of a world in transition. In this context, to grow up is not simply to move forward, but to learn how to wait, to pivot, and to act within a landscape where both mobility and immobility are structurally and affectively charged.

# HOMEMAKING THROUGH PRACTICES OF ROOTEDNESS

## I. Introduction

At the start of my fieldwork in 2023 in Rivermoor Commune in North Central Vietnam, the local authorities introduced me to Mr Duong, who offered me a single-storey house to reside in for one year. Duong was working leisurely as a maintenance man at the CCG. The house was titled to his son - Quang (50 years old), who had long relocated and settled in Hanoi. Duong's daughter was also absent, as she had already built a life in Japan where she was married with two children. Widowed with no children nearby, Duong found it exhausting to manage two houses, including his own, on top of his job. He considered himself fortunate to have found a tenant to share the burden, and I was grateful for the offer of a residence. He generously insisted on no rent, and that I would only pay the utilities bill to Quang. There was one imperative condition: for as long as I stay, I should take good care of the family altar in the living room, which entailed cleaning the altar and arranging offerings to the ancestors on the 1st (Mùng 1) and the 15th (Rằm) of every lunar month. Duong would always come by on these dates for incense lighting and burning votive items.

The house was passed down to Duong from his parents, as he was the oldest living male among seven siblings. Along with the inheritance came the responsibility of tending to the ancestors and afterlife of those who had passed. In 2012, the house underwent renovation when Quang, the next in line to inherit it, determined that he could gather enough resources to undertake the project. Duong joked that if I ever had to live in the old house, I would run away so fast that my shoes would fly off. He described how the house was once small and damp, with a low ceiling. The floor was too close to the ground. The front yard was simply tiles laid directly on the soil, making it easy for rodents to burrow tunnels underneath. Rats could run around inside the house and even climb onto the altar. Duong felt deeply guilty about the awful state of the house, and even more so for choosing to invest in his children's migration rather than renovating it. At one point, Duong believed that the ancestors had punished him by taking away his wife and his firstborn son. Quang's older brother's sudden passing set off a chain of events that led to Quang's failed migration to Japan. At the time of my fieldwork, seeing his children's stable life, Duong felt that the perceived transgression had been partly atoned for. In the future, Duong planned to sell his

house and land and divide the money into three parts - one for his retirement, one for his daughter, and the largest share for Quang. With the money, Quang promised to remodel the house once more and expand it into two or three stories and set aside a separate room on the higher floor for the altar. Why did Duong think that his negligence to the house and altar brought misfortunes to his family? Why was Quang willing to upgrade the house once more? What made renovating the space that held the family altar so significant to Duong and Quang? The answer inevitably begins with their rootedness in Rivermoor, bounded in family legacy, ancestral indebtedness, and genealogy. Ancestor houses, family altars, and lineage halls are active infrastructures of memory. In this sense, roots operate as a spatialised form of remembering - where family history is curated, displayed, and reaffirmed through both ritual acts and architectural interventions. Renovations, expansion, or restoration of ancestor houses all serve as spatial acts of commemoration, binding memory to material space.

I use the term *symbolic gentrification* to describe how ancestral houses, altars, and lineage halls are renewed and revalued through the flows of transnational migration. Like urban gentrification, this process involves aesthetic and material upgrading, but its stakes are moral and karmic rather than commercial. In the Rivermoor commune, newly reconstructed worship spaces do not simply mark prosperity but also signal the ongoing capacity of the family to sustain care across distance. These spaces are invested with transnational capital, but also with affective labour, transforming the moral geography of kinship. For example, when Duong's children invest in improving the family home, it symbolises more than a financial transaction; it signifies a ceremonial reaffirmation of duty. These actions transform the house into a location where mobility finds a physical grounding. Furthermore, the house also serves as a symbolic space of regeneration: old materials are replaced with modern ones, the rural landscape is reinterpreted through urban perspectives, and the ethical framework of kinship is adjusted to fit a transnational context. Nevertheless, unlike urban gentrification that displaces residents, symbolic gentrification depends on reinvestment in rootedness as a way of keeping individuals' presence in place even when physical bodies are absent.



*Figure 14: Incensing offering*

This chapter explores the significance of the material dimension in ancestor worship as a practice of rootedness, and how actors and agents are implicated in this dimension within specific place and time. The notion of *roots* offers a powerful entry point into analysing home, as it links the material and symbolic dimensions of belonging with histories of place and kinship. In the Vietnamese rural context, to have roots (*có gốc rễ*) is not only to trace one's ancestry but also to affirm moral and spatial attachments that anchor one's existence in history. I show how transnational migrants maintain their rootedness whilst abroad by investing remittance in building and renovating family ancestor houses. In so doing, migrants maintain their connections with their homeland, ensure their material contributions are preserved while also seeking redemption for their absence from the location. Ancestral worship spaces go by different names based on their scale and purposes for clan and lineage branches. For the purpose of analysis centering on the renovation of worship spaces, I will use 'ancestor houses' as a general term, referring to infrastructures specifically designed to house the spirits of the departed. These spaces serve as sites

for ritual and worshipping ancestral spirits and religious entities, reifying both spiritual devotion and material investment in the continuity of tradition.

### **Exploring roots, ancestor worship, and ancestor houses in Vietnam**

In Vietnam, the ideological value of “root” (cội nguồn) reflects the profound cultural tradition of remembering one’s origins, honouring ancestors, and maintaining connections with family and homeland. Its manifestation is ultimately observable in the practice of ancestor worship (tín ngưỡng thờ cúng tổ tiên) - a fundamental spiritual and social practice in Vietnamese society. Ancestor worship in Vietnam is both a tradition and a syncretism of overlapping religious beliefs (Salemink, 2008; Szymańska-Matusiewicz, 2013).<sup>19</sup> It is the custom of honouring deceased family members and/or those who committed venerable acts for the family, community or nation.

From an anthropological perspective, Vietnamese notions of roots are not only material but deeply embedded in kinship, memory, and ritual practice. At its core, “roots” function as a spatial expression of kinship relations, extending across time and space. It binds past, present, and future generations to a shared moral and physical landscape. Past generations’ ancestors are symbolically and physically anchored in places such as the village, the family temple, or burial grounds. Generations actively manage and materialise roots through ritual practices, financial contributions, and physical maintenance of ancestral spaces. For future generations, roots serve as both symbolic inheritance and moral expectation - a place of belonging, memory, and obligation. Yet, roots are not static; they are continuously reproduced and reshaped through rituals, economic mobility, and the physical renovation of ancestral sites. The collected work from editors Endres and Lauser (2012) shows that worship, spirit beliefs, and ritual offerings anchor families within spiritual landscapes, reaffirming social belonging through shared participation in ancestral care. In Connerton’s (1989) terms, bodily practices as traditional and ritual performances also reflect how grief, memory, and ritualised care maintain the moral and emotional connections to recollected knowledge of the past throughout ruptured life courses. Meanwhile, Carsten (2004) emphasises that kinship is lived and produced through place-making practices. Ancestor houses and worship

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<sup>19</sup> For an overview of the history of ancestor worship in Vietnam, refer to: Huan, T.V. (2019). The Tradition of Ancestor Worship in Vietnamese Families from the Beginning to the Present Day and Some Current Problems. *International Journal of Research in Sociology and Anthropology* 5 (4), 13-19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20431/2454-8677.0504002>

rituals, therefore, serve as symbolic and practical sites where spiritual, emotional, and economic investments converge to continuously remake the meaning of roots.

The ideal of ‘being rooted’ points to the perceived cohesion of the material and the ideational. My ethnographic research shows how people bring together the material - the material flows touting the changes in worship infrastructures and ritual practices - and the ideational - the emotions and desire for karmic merits and transcendental ambition intertwined with economic mobility. The cult of ancestors in Vietnam is deeply embedded within a complex dynamic and ever-changing ritual economy (Endres, 2015; Lam, 2019). As I observed during my fieldwork in Rivermoor, the cult of ancestors also closely aligned with the transnational and cosmopolitan life of rural descendants. Overseas migrants, internal migrants, and the left-behind have various ways to maintain their connection and access to their roots, with various means to fulfil the filial duty, such as through rituals, prayers, or money. Revamping ancestral houses is a highly regarded contribution that secures a respected position among generations and alleviates moral anxiety about losing connection to one’s roots. Within this development, infrastructural and material agencies actively alter the communal celebration of rootedness and compromise certain ritual domains.

As the Vietnamese saying goes, “Âm sao dương vậy” (However the yang world, so is the yin world), wealth signals economic success as well as an extension of spiritual credits. Showcasing the spiritual infrastructural investment and spatial organization can be seen as proof of prosperity and noble filial commitment. While the cult of ancestors has an element of display, this development is less visible in densely populated urban areas and larger cities, where ancestor worship is often confined to smaller, private settings or concentrated in public establishments. Towards this trend of the newly wealthy in rural areas, I pose the question: *How do renovated rites and built environment influence ancestor worship as a practice of rootedness and the redefinition of roots itself?*

I develop the concept of rootedness by bringing different scales and otherworldly realms into its analytical reach. Using an expanded concept of gentrification to accompany the study of ritual space, I identify the human and nonhuman agency implicated in upscale construction development and look into how both types of agency are subjected to the process of symbolic displacement and value exchange. As gentrification considers development restructuring grounded

within spatial and temporal particularities, it coincides with the basic connotation of rootedness - the connection to a particular time and place. Therefore, the chapter's ethnographic contribution also advances our understanding of religion and rural development in Vietnam during a period of economic transition.

### **Reconstructing the past in central Vietnam: an ethnography of renovation**

According to Duong and other local sources, the community had previously thrived, actively engaged in trading seafood and local produce. However, much of their wealth and resources were devoted to supporting the liberation front during the Vietnam-US war. Following unification and the establishment of the socialist government in Vietnam, trading and commerce effectively disappeared, and so did the wealth distinctions, emerging only a unified mass of peasants and workers within the agricultural cooperatives and the army. Starting as early as 1994, Rivermoor has experienced an incredible economic jump resulting from labour export. Their success appears evident through the proliferation of modern, upscale houses. Throughout my stay in Rivermoor, construction projects followed one after another, among which was the renovation of ancestor worship spaces.

Beyond the reason for material revaluation, these spiritual construction projects contribute to the social revaluation of clan culture that expands through the migrant bodies and the various things and non-things in circulation. The reform era marks the acceleration of both translocal and transnational dispersion of Vietnamese families as the country opened its economy and integrated into the global market. As rural populations flow to cities and foreign countries in search of financial opportunities, the Vietnamese families' spiritual life serves to tighten its individuals' identity and community cohesion. After a period of suppression due to war, colonial secularisation, and changing political discourse, along with ancestor worship and the construction and renovation of ancestor houses, resurged strongly as a way to affirm national and cultural identity and reconnect with family lineage (Taylor, 2007; Jellema, 2007a; Endres, 2011; Roszko, 2012).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Refer to Schwenkel (2018), Malarney (2002), Ho (2001) for studies of religion and politics in post-reform Vietnam that show how rituals and religious material related agencies serve both state commemoration of history and popular kin-related religious expression while preserving traditional system of morality.

Rituals and practices of ancestor worship rely heavily on infrastructure and the built environment. Today, nearly every Vietnamese household reserves at least one dedicated space for incense holders. The ancestor altar is typically placed in a central and elevated position within the home, which symbolises the presence of the higher spiritual authorities. Spaces organised for ritual and communal celebrations are also important. During grand ceremonies such as Tết (Lunar New Year), Giỗ (death anniversaries), and Thanh Minh (ancestral grave visiting festival), homes expand their ritual space by opening doors and setting up more tables for larger offerings and feasts. In rural areas where clans and larger lineage-based ancestor worship are more prominent, extensions of worshipping infrastructures can be found in communal houses (đình), ancestor houses or lineage halls (nhà thờ họ) or family temples (tờ đường). There are also family houses that combine two functions: both for family temple or lineage hall and for residence. Lineage work could go as far as to establish itself as a social organisation with wider influence and interaction with the public domain (Jellema, 2007b).

The transnational community in Rivermoor participated in the reproduction of boundary-making that it welded symbolic traditions compatible with overseas territories. Such phenomenon played out in the way the highly hierarchical clan system has granted more room for a hierarchy of capital. Material contributions to rituals and ancestral spaces can function both as a means of gaining social influence and as compensation for the absence of physical efforts. Indeed, ritual practices in Vietnam are tinctured with materialistic transactions (Salemink, 2008). As I will show, through material intervention, spiritual spaces and their physical and symbolic manifestations evolve as arenas for negotiation and contestation between generations, as well as between differently placed individuals. In exploring how symbolic power plays out in the spatial dimension of ancestor worship, I examine gentrification which resonates strongly with a form of place-making that reshapes hierarchies and social mixing. Amidst these shifting dynamics, the very definition of rootedness is continually redefined and renegotiated.

Classical gentrification in social research invokes discussions of inequality, class, and marginalisation resulting from financial disparity and various capital influxes within the local community (Glass, 1964; Smith, 1996; Freeman, 2006). Contemporary critical debates advocate for a more fluid and expanded application of gentrification that recognises the intersectional elements forming its multiplicity of forms and processes especially beyond the global North

(Spivak, 2007; Ghertner, 2015; Forrest, 2016; Lees *et al.*, 2016), and complements various local accumulative and transformative dynamics (Lees & Phillips, 2018). On this account, I adopt Shin *et al.*'s (2016) revised definition: gentrification “as a concept refers to the commodification of space accompanying land use changes in such a way that it produces indirect/direct/physical/symbolic displacement of existing users and owners by more affluent groups” (p.458). Spatial restructuring in Vietnam’s transitional economy in particular features uneven regional development stages resulting in heterogeneous spatial patterns and dramatic capitalist property manipulations (Hong & Kim, 2022). Strictly examining the effects of displacement and ownership, Yip and Tran (2016) question the relevance of gentrification in the urban landscape in Vietnam considering how faintly it plays out. Taken together, along with available urban-focus Vietnamese studies in gentrification, it is a useful premise to put emphasis on the rural populations whose out-migration experiences a particularly intense and dynamic form of displacement and competitive ownership in which geographical and economic shifts provoke struggles over identity, belonging, and resource claims. As remittances flow into Rivermoor and its ritual infrastructure, people use their available capital and an appropriate definition of rootedness to negotiate their positions in the familial hierarchy. I offer explanations for these shifts in their discourse over time and how the social construction of roots fundamentally accommodates these changes.

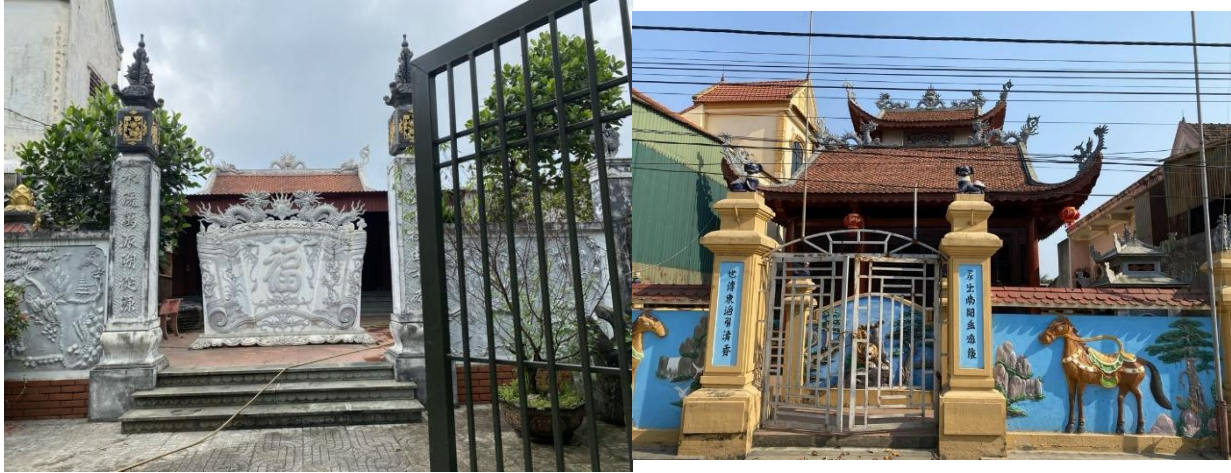
## **II. Money, labour and redefinition of ritual practices**

One morning, Nam (male interlocutor) gave me a tour of the clan’s ancestor house that he had volunteered to take care of. The whole property stood on an expansive plot of land, accommodating a worship house, a front yard, a storage area, a votive burning space, and a gathering area for feasts and banquets. The house itself was divided into three sections that were incorporated over the years: the entrance, the middle chamber, and the main temple. The entrance, also the oldest section, was originally housing the main altar when first built in 2003. It was a single-room structure with a traditional tiled roof. The walls bore layers of peeling paint in different colors from past renovations, alongside numerous photos documenting clan activities. In 2012, the middle and main rooms were added, turning the original structure into an entrance. At the entrance was now placed an altar for lost souls - those who had died young, remained nameless, or had no descendants to care for their spirits. The middle section served as a transitional space, offering a full view of the

main temple. On the two sides of this section were two dedicated arrangements for the God of Earth (Thổ Công) and the God of Wealth (Thần Tài). In the main room, the central altar was dedicated to the ancestors of the clan along with other superior spiritual beings. To its left stood the Mãnh Tổ (male - yang energy) altar, and to the right, the Cô Tổ (female - yin energy) altar. Mãnh Tổ and Cô Tổ refer to powerful ancestor spirits of those who passed away young and unmarried. While they should be honored alongside the ancestors, it is thought that, being young, they cannot relish the offerings meant for the elders. Thus, these spirits are honored on their altars at a lower level.

The gate and front yard were the most recent additions to the property, showing a shift toward modern materials and more intricate craftsmanship. The gate itself was a sliding structure, crafted from stone and stainless steel, giving it a sturdy and refined appearance. On either side were two towering pillars, adding a sense of grandeur and permanence to the entrance. Behind the gate stood a stone screen (bình phong) - a traditional element in feng shui architecture that functions as a shield to protect sacred spaces from negative energy. In contrast to older family temples featuring stone screens made of cement and brick, recent structures showcased high-quality stone and more intricate craftsmanship. Religious commodification in Vietnam is shaped by mutually reinforcing rationalised production and consumer growing demand for sophisticated religious market (Kendall *et al.*, 2014). Nam shared that the construction businesses offer services for the construction and renovation of ancestral houses, ranging from basic altars to elaborate temples, complete with feng shui consultations and ornamentation tailored based on request.





*Figure 15: Images of 'old' and 'new' house styles*

Other than the lavish design as a clear indicator of the clan's good fortune, increased worshipping capacity spread along the expanded space over the years. Six altars for different symbolic categories, gate, stone screen, incense burners all actively consolidated filiality as a visible pointer to the valuation of families, people, and their relationship with the benevolent. Dedicating an area for ghosts and lost souls carries philanthropic connotations, which might be motivated by awareness of suffering, or fear of the restless' menacing influence, or protection for future prosperity (Marouda, 2018). In addition to signifying the families' ability to engage in charitable acts for the ritual society, honouring more spirits is believed to bring greater merit for the worshippers. Scaling up worship sites both materially and symbolically resonated with the magnifying significance of ancestral supremacy, all the while reinforcing a sense of permanence through its physical stature. The aesthetics of these places - whether through the grandeur of halls, the use of high-quality materials, or symbolic ornamentation - visually and physically enact rootedness. The villagers' aspirations to elevate their own status in relation with the ancestors have reshaped the symbolic geography of veneration, expanding the potential for spiritual merit and good karma. As we follow Nam's story, this process of constructing and expanding roots is not confined to Rivermoor alone but extends beyond its geographical boundaries.

### **Roots as generational negotiation**

At the entrance hall, I noticed a written announcement pinned to the wall. The announcement, dated in 2021, was about the revision of worship contributions. From then on, descendants should only bring incense and votive items as offerings on the 1st and 15th of each month - foods and

drinks were no longer necessary. Additionally, it mandated that at the end of each year, every family should contribute at least one million dong per household toward the renovation of the ancestral house. Nam explained that it was a problem of quantity. He used to redistribute offerings to neighbors and family members after every incense ceremony. However, passed over food seemed to be less appreciated even when it was *lộc* (reclaimed offerings that become blessed objects). People had more than enough and had already prepared offerings for their own in-house altars. An informed choice to avoid food waste was to opt for items that lasted longer and did not require immediate consumption. Nevertheless, these eventually piled up. With six altars to maintain, the sheer volume of food became a logistical burden for Nam. The practical solution was shifting contributions to money instead.

‘How did you explain to the ancestors that there will be no food and drinks every two weeks?’, I asked.

“It was not exactly no food and drinks. I prepare them, but with sensible minimalism. For example, I only prepare small fruits and plain water, those that my family and I will eat. How do we explain? We light incense. We bring our hands together. We close our eyes and speak from the heart. It’s the new era. Food is not a daily concern; it’s too trivial now. The house, however, still looks like patchwork. And to be honest, the older generations have some good years left before their bones fall to bits. The young will be away for a long time. They won’t know what to do. I think we can start within the next two years”.

When discussing the youth, Nam specifically referred to his youngest child, who embraced Christianity while living in Korea.<sup>21</sup> His remark carried a concern about continuity, faith, and the place of ancestral worship in a rapidly changing world. While financial contributions from overseas sustained traditions, the spiritual ties that bound generations together were becoming more fluid due to new beliefs and cultural influences.

Nam was also in charge of accounting for renovation projects. I asked whether the responsibility was determined through hierarchy. ‘No. I am not even in the most senior branch. I

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<sup>21</sup> Nam’s son reasoned that Christianity generally discourages active relationship and communication with spirits, emphasising prayer to God rather than interaction with the dead.

live just a few houses away, and I am a builder by profession, so I know how to manage [construction and maintenance]. I contributed my labour instead of money, to build the house. Some contribute labour (người góp công), some make material contributions (người góp của).’ When I complimented the impressive structure, Nam responded simply, ‘This commune is blessed with labour export. For our families, this place is too big, it takes a lot of money to repair.’ Nam had three children working in Taiwan and Korea who sent money home periodically. While tending to the ancestor house might not be their primary concern, they entrusted Nam’s decision on ritual expenditure on their behalf. Nam was clear about how contributions were acknowledged: ‘Their money is their money and their credit,’ ‘I also benefit from their credit, but the gods know the ones without a heart for filial duty.’ Undoubtedly, clan members and neighbours respected him for his meticulous care work and his children’s piety. His idea to adopt a new offering routine was also replicated by others.

Food and the act of food preparation play a crucial role in the way Vietnamese maintain connection with the intangible world (Avieli, 2007; Hüwelmeier, 2021). Nam’s minimised standard of offerings marked the crossing into a larger spectrum of revised ritual practices, considering the rising economic status of transnational families with excessive provisions. While it is mostly normative for urban dwellers to reserve moderate space and spending for worshipping activities, such as I have observed in my home city of Hanoi, it shares little resemblance with the symbolic reassessment in Rivermoor. Nam among other villagers, resented the problem of surplus with a sense of flatulency. While ancestor worship was still at the heart of the commune’s tradition, their practice gradually scratched out the impoverished ontological farmers and fishermen. Placing excessive emphasis on food reflects a lingering fear of poverty and hunger - a mindset that the up-and-coming Rivermoor wanted to shake off. Abundant food offerings once symbolised reverence and gratitude, ensuring that both the living and the dead would never experience deprivation. *Lộc* carries significant symbolic and social functions in the way they represent caring qualities of the handlers and generate a sense of debts and reciprocal attention for the receivers (Saucy, 2006). As blessed objects and as agents of powerful invisible forces that bring good luck to the people crossing their circulation, lộc are vital because of their substance. Nonetheless, there is a shift in this regard. The lowered appreciation for lộc reduces the act and the efficacy of offering to its performative quality. Material generosity remains important, but its form is reshaped by changing

social and economic realities. More to the trivialisation of food, the image of a well-off, transnational subject was swiftly embodied by the people and imagined for a reordering of social status.

While food was shifting within the hierarchy of value, money also held sway over ritual revaluation and power dynamics. Money upholds eternal value through life and death. It has the defining ability towards the scale and grandeur of worship and communal participation. Its versatile application is imagined differently across various social spaces of devotion. Money for the dead and burning votive items are part of a custom that survived historical and political trials of the state's changing discourses about religions (Kwon, 2007; Blake, 2011), as well as Nam's modern-day 'streamlining' of monthly offerings for the ancestors. In this case, another key distinction emerged between money and labour. While the newly found wealth was mostly attributed to the young people, the older generation maintained control over narratives and ritual authority. For instance, Nam's children would not know what to do without the skill and wisdom of traditional knowledge and feng shui calculations in religious construction and related activities. As financial contributions became a marker of status, history and tradition remained the intangible assets of those at home. Yet, they actively accommodate these dynamic shifts through restructuring of ceremonial responsibilities and negotiation with the divine channelled through various agents of belief. This balance between material and symbolic power ultimately created a system where both old and new generations found ways to benefit from honouring the past while making space for an increasingly globalised future.

Gentrification of symbolic space also took place gradually, where spiritual landscapes are reshaped and layered with new markers of economic power. First, commodified services for religious construction standardises spiritual space into purchasable forms that are accessible for the future returnees. Pious subjects found themselves displaced between the shifting hierarchy of value and traveling materiality, as their religious and social standing were further tested when monetary contributions increasingly rival, and at times surpass other intangible values. The traditional patrilineal clan hierarchy, based on seniority and genealogical position, was challenged by the shifts in family composition, migration, and economic diversification. As the young and cash-rich generation of migrants take claim of their positions in the sacred space, the old generation mediate their religious positions by drawing on their capital of heritage and steadfast commitment

to cultural traditions. Therefore, I propose that people can move in and out of the state of displacement as they continually negotiate their place amidst the transcendental ritual economic interactions. Second, gentrification of worship spaces can be seen as a positive process in rejuvenating the 'poor' spiritual landscape thus invigorating ancestor power to facilitate growth and quality of life. New and upgraded spaces also reconnect the dead who were once suffering to their now cosmopolitan and transnational families. However, the "gentrified" ancestor houses become distanced from its function as a repository of intimate kinship memory, instead become a signal of the family's upward mobility, often funded by remittances from overseas migrants. In this process, the past is gradually pushed further behind to make room for the reimagined global citizens of the modern world. Certain ritual practices and elements also slowly make their exit as they lose status on the hierarchy of value. Newfound wealth became the anchor for justifying collective needs and priorities, as well as decisions about community obligations.

### **III. Wealth distributions across spaces: Roots as affective and existential anchor**

Through a phone call, Quang reminded me carefully about the upcoming death anniversary of his mother in the third lunar month, and the ceremony was to take place at the property. Quang hoped that I would assist even when Duong did not ask for any favour. The anniversary observance began on the evening before and continued until the afternoon of the actual death day. Duong's position as the oldest living male conveyed the importance of this event. Close family members and friends would visit first in the evening before, offering their respects in a more intimate setting. The space opened a wider circle of condolences to all guests and extended relatives the next day. Although Duong assured me that I should just enjoy the occasion, it is customary in Vietnam to never attend such an event empty-handed.

The commemoration started by 8 o'clock in the evening before the anniversary; relatives began arriving for incense lighting. The house filled with conversations and laughter as brothers, sisters, and grandchildren gathered on the *phần* (wooden platform), sharing cups of tea, reminiscing about old memories. I received compliments that the ancestors must be pleased with my presence, because if I had not been welcomed by the spirits, I would have been plagued by bad dreams and ill fortune.

Early the next morning, Duong's youngest sister-in-law was the first to arrive and was in charge of cooking extras to elaborate the ancestral offering. Unlike in the past when families would prepare the entire meal themselves, it has become common to rely on catering services. This time, Duong ordered food for five mâm (tables), expecting to serve around 50 people. The catering cost was covered by Quang and his sister, who could not attend the event in person but supported it financially. Part of the expense would be recouped through money envelopes brought by guests, which served both as lễ (courtesy gifts) and contributions to the event.

Each table featured an impressive spread, including a small hotpot with side items, sticky rice, simple vegetables, and generous plates of seafood, chicken, veal, and fresh fruits. A separate mâm was arranged on the altar and served first to the ancestors, and later would be taken down and enjoyed along with the feast. Banquets are a site of performance and divine recognition in Vietnam (Avieli, 2007). It is believed that ancestors find joy in witnessing the communal moments of their descendants sharing meals and actively socialising in honoring their spirits. By 11am, guests began to arrive, the crowd mostly composed of the elderly around Duong's age, along with a handful of teenagers and children, and a dozen men and women under forty. Envelopes were passed around, each labeled with the names of contributors and those who had given on their behalf. My offering stood among many foreign goods. Some guests took the time to explain their origins and instruction languages, some pointed out that the items had just arrived from abroad shortly before.

This scene offered a clearer glimpse into the awkward portrayal of class consumerism and new wealth. As Saleminck (2008) describes the consumption of ritual performance and spectacle, “the commercialization of relations and commodification of objects in late capitalism is mirrored in the spirit world” (p. 167). Rural residents became the local embodiment of the family's transnational success, bearing the responsibility to uphold both the economic image and the moral reputation of the household. Those who served as proxies for the absent also represented social legitimacy in the eyes of the community and the ancestors. This contradiction between the desire for global economic mobility and the devotion to hometown symbolic space illustrates how class formation in rural Vietnam is both a process of displacement and reconnection.

Duong gave thanks in front of the altar for the blessed foods. He thanked the ancestors for watching over his children and for blessing him with many grandchildren as well as good health

and stability. Every time in his prayers, he asked forgiveness for his children who could not be present in front of the altar and for any wrongdoings he might unknowingly commit. Duong wished for the continuation of this peaceful and steady life of the family so that they can look forward to the renovation of the house shortly in the future. The feast commenced after the burning of votive items. Children sat with women while men gathered together over beer and local rice wine.

After a few hours of indulgence, the guests left one by one. The catering team cleared the tables, and the sisters helped wash up the remaining dishes. Once the house was quiet again, Duong sat down to count the money from the envelopes while briefly updating Quang over the phone about how the day had gone. The amount itself did not matter, as it would go toward the next gathering. From the stack of offerings, he picked out a tin of Australian milk powder to keep and gifted the rest to me. Looking at the collection, I thought about people in the neighbourhood who might like something.



*Figure 16: Banquets for commemoration*

Through prayers and offerings, the villagers frequently sought divine influence to ensure safety, prosperity, and fertility in the living world. Duong's belief in karmic regulation shaped his

sense of duty toward his ancestors. He saw the loss of family members as part of an intricate system of debts and repayments, whereby neglecting the dead's resting place could result in lifelong consequences – be it bad dreams, ill fate, or even death. Unlike those who were more flexible in their relationships with their ancestors, Duong regularly confessed in his prayers to acknowledge and assume his family's moral debt. Chu (2010) describes *cosmic debts* to ancestors as extending over a lifetime and through different lives that were lived. Chu asserts that cosmic debts are collective, requiring living individuals to shoulder the obligations of the deceased, their relatives, and their ancestors. Debt and its anxiety-inducing influence united kin relations across vast distances, which in a transcendent manner also drew me into the situation. Duong's appreciation for my assistance stemmed from an underlying fear that his efforts might be insufficient. This anxiety also played out in his insistence on the children's moral obligations, as their physical absence from important events was deemed a form of neglect, hence requiring compensatory action beyond money giving - that was, a concretised effort of elevating the communal infrastructure.

Claiming debt for oneself and on behalf of families, while seemingly drastic, embodies existential uncertainty about the liberating capacities of material wealth. It underscores a deeper cultural belief that prosperity is not solely an individual achievement but a continuation of familial succession. In this way, wealth distribution is about maintaining harmony with one's lineage, honouring roots, and ensuring the family's collective moral and social standing. It reveals the persistent anxiety that wealth, without proper acknowledgement of ancestral assignment, may be hollow or even self-defeating. Within this cycle of ritual exchange, gain and loss remain in constant flux. Just as the money collected during the death celebration would be spent on the next event, part of Quang's inheritance will return to the ancestor house and also to Duong after his passing. In this light, Duong's perspective of the complex equilibrium that underlies the cosmic experiences was shaped by an understanding that fortunes and resources are not owned but continuously circulated among the living and the dead, between past sacrifices and future obligations. This fluid movement of material and symbolic wealth ensures the continuity of spiritual ties, reinforcing the idea that no gain exists without eventual return to its roots.

Migrants often grapple with the moral anxiety of *mất gốc* (losing roots) - a form of public scrutiny directed at those who are perceived to have abandoned their national identity or

disregarded their origins in pragmatic pursuits. *Mất gốc* is not just a geographical disconnection; it is also a loss of respect for one's homeland, its memories, histories, and cultural values. At its ideational level, roots serve as an affective and existential anchor, providing ontological security in the face of rapid mobility, social change, and mortality itself. Their function is as a spiritual safety net that ensures protection rather than retribution and offers descendants a sense of continuity that links fragmented, mobile lives to a stable and enduring origin. Roots also act as a moral compass, guiding behaviour through the celestial gaze of ancestors whose approval or displeasure shapes the living's fortunes. This emotional investment in roots - and the anxiety over displacement - drives ongoing practices of commemoration, renovation, and ritual performance so as to keep roots alive both as a material space and a symbolic system.

#### **IV. Conclusion: The constellations of rootedness**

As I have examined two examples of ancestor worship in rural Vietnam, the moderation in ritual practices and rejuvenation of ritual spaces not only adapted to the changing landscape of Vietnam's religious political discourse and market socialism but also adjusted to the material transformation in response to the modern and cosmopolitan imaginaries. The disjunctures among mobile subjects and religious entities highlight the changing and, at times, contradictory claims to the rootedness of a dispersed community in its transitional period.

Roots operate within a moral economy, where kinship and belonging are conditioned upon acts of filial performance and care. Contributions to family temples, participation in death anniversaries, and regular offerings to ancestors are forms of symbolic currency that secure one's moral standing within the kin group. Roots thus establish a system of reciprocal exchange between the living and the dead, and among kin themselves - where financial wealth, spiritual devotion, and physical labour circulate to produce social recognition and blessings. Through these exchanges, economic wealth is converted into spiritual legitimacy. For migrant descendants, physical absence can be offset by financial contributions - but only when these contributions are symbolically acknowledged within the shared moral framework of root-based obligations.

In the context of transnational migration, roots are not territorially fixed but stretch across translocal and transnational networks. Migrant descendants remain attached to ancestral homes through multiple forms of engagement: remittances directed toward temple renovations,

participation in rituals via digital connections, and symbolic returns during major life events such as weddings, funerals, and celebrations. These practices demonstrate how root-making is not disrupted by mobility, but rather transformed as ancestral spaces become the focal points for negotiating diasporic belonging. Senior, resident family members claim authority over the interpretation of tradition, controlling both ritual procedures and the spatial arrangement of ancestral sites. Meanwhile, younger, more mobile generations engage with roots through alternative forms of care - monetary remittances, symbolic gestures, and occasional ritual participation. This negotiation reflects shifting moral hierarchies, raising questions about whether financial contributions outweigh physical presence. It also sparks tensions over who defines proper rootedness. Ultimately, roots become a contested and intermediate terrain where moral and symbolic belonging as well as cultural authority are continuously redefined.

### *Roots as home*

Taken together, rootedness is more than a physical location or historical lineage - it is a living cultural, moral, economic, and spatial project constantly reworked across generations. It serves as a spatial metaphor for kinship and belonging, a moral framework governing intergenerational obligations, a site of ritual and spatial production, and a trans-border network linking mobile descendants to ancestral homes. As both a symbolic anchor and a contested site of power, memory, and wealth, roots reflect the ways families navigate modernity, migration, and the uneven flows of global capital, all while negotiating their place within a lineage grounded in both land and spirit.

In addition to contributing to the discussion of roots and rootedness in the context of rural transformation resulting in changing cultural and traditional dynamics, this chapter also engages in the contemporary notion of gentrification to explore manifestations of rooted practices in various physical and symbolic domains. Csordas (2009) uses the term ‘transnational transcendence’ to “point to the existence of modalities of religious intersubjectivity that transcend cultural borders and boundaries while forging new ones” (p. 266). My intervention lies in the analysis of how ancestor worship as practice of rootedness also functions as a system and an infrastructure that influence *how home is felt and enforced*. As I have shown, the cult of ancestors as a modality of religious intersubjectivity travels well. However, its traversability and transposability are largely owing to its strong attachment to the idioms of rootedness. Practices of rootedness can be enacted beyond geographical space and implicated through different material and immaterial means. This

declaration can be seen through subtle contrasts contouring its dynamics: here and there, departure and staying put, debt and return, and past and future.

Amid uncertainty and anxiety about securing a stable future, villagers eagerly anticipate the moment they can ‘report’ to their forefathers about their newfound affluence. The ancestor house also poses as a place where rural people learn to mediate the ebb and flow of resources. Within its walls, they practice the art of balancing tradition with modern aspirations, intuitively charting a way forward in a world increasingly shaped by transnational mobility and economic circulation. Before my departure from Rivermoor, I offered three sticks of incense to the altar, watching the delicate tendrils of smoke curling upward, carrying my silent prayers to the ancestors. In that fleeting moment, I sought their blessing for Duong, hoping that he might find peace in his very home.

## **STATE, SEA, AND SUSTENANCE: THE FLAVOURS OF HOME**

### **I. Introduction: Food and foodways as Ecological and Social Connectors**

In this chapter, I explore the ecological aspect of homemaking through the lens of foods and foodways. The central question is: *How do food and foodways reveal changing ecological relationships and notions of home and homemaking in Rivermoor?*. The historical element of the sea, or maritime perspectives, is often neglected in research on Vietnamese cultural studies (Wheeler, 2006), leading to uneven attention to the coastal history of diverse economic and cultural exchanges compared to the dominant narratives focused on agriculture and rice cultivation (Pham, 2013). Timothy Gorman (2018) explains the rice monoculture that emerged in Vietnam’s political context, as rice was regarded as the staple grain for ensuring food security and aligned with the state’s political agenda of self-sufficiency. Conversely, fishing is regarded as an unstable occupation, contributing less dietary significance, as much as it continues to be framed as a sector in need of development support. Thus, the absence of maritime perspectives as well as the food practices related to coastal communities also presents a limitation in the current research coverage of Vietnamese ecohistorical narratives and national rhetoric about nature and, to a broader extent, stows away the multi-faceted experiences of coastal communities. I build on another precise

question to further explore the main research inquiry: *How has Rivermoor's relationship with the sea evolved in response to shifting socio-political, economic, and ecological conditions?*

Ta hát bài ca gọi cá vào,  
Gõ thuyền đã có nhịp trăng cao.  
Biển cho ta cá như lòng mẹ  
Nuôi lớn đời ta tự buổi nào.

*[We sing the song that calls the fish to shore,  
The boat's oar beats in rhythm with the high moon.  
The sea gives us fish like a mother's womb,  
Nurturing our lives since time unknown.]*

Those beautiful lines are from the Vietnamese poem *Đoàn thuyền đánh cá* (Translation: The Fishing Boat Fleet) by the poet Huy Cận, written in 1958 during his time in Hòn Gai, Quảng Ninh. The excerpt comes from the section depicting the fishermen's nighttime labor and a deeply moving connection between humans and the sea as a nurturing mother.

During my time in Rivermoor, I often recalled the literature about the sea I had studied in school and reflected more deeply on the ecological significance of home for the Vietnamese people. Vietnamese take great pride in their country's unique combination of land anchoring and open sea facing. Beyond geography, natural landscapes are embedded in a national narrative in which land and water together formed the lifeblood of the country with their productive capacity. Children were taught at an early age about the value of a single grain of rice, made from the labour of farmers whose lives are spent taking care of the rice fields against the battles of wits with unpredictable weather; the fragrance of tea leaves stretching across vast green hills; and the briny scent of salt borne on the hot wind along Vietnam's long coastline. Growing up in the flat land of Hanoi, I naturally feel more bonded to and informed about the open land and the Red River dotted with cornfields running through it. It is important to know how deeply one's birthplace shapes both the emotional and rational dimensions of home. This recognition gives soul to the narratives

I had learned in school and in life, as it reveals the uneven ways people actually inhabit and relate to Vietnam's diverse landscapes.



*Figure 17: Small fishing boat*

### **The sea and natural resources in Vietnamese culture and national rhetoric**

When I first arrived in Rivermoor, I had not yet grasped what it truly meant to have the sea as a constant companion just thirty steps from the house, like a living horizon expanded from the backyard. I enjoyed it as a tourist: a space for leisure, for swimming, strolling along the shore, and the small joy of catching tiny crustaceans and watching them scuttle inside glass jars. I vividly remember my first experience of a post sea storm. As the waves receded, families and children rushed to the shoreline with buckets and rakes. I followed them as they taught me to read the faint dents in the smooth sand that were the breathing holes of the clams underneath, then scooped up

clams of different varieties - my dinner. In a different mood of the sea during scorching summer noon, hammocks strung in the shade swayed gently to the rhythm of the breeze, lulling me to sleep without the need of electricity. At night, a stark black ocean melted into the sky, broken only by the flickering lights of fishing boats bobbing in the distance. We sat by the shore in low-key conversations, connected by random stories that drifted endlessly like waves. Over time, I came to understand why she was called “Mother Sea”: she soothed, sustained, and sang to those who stayed close. Her presence is both elemental and intimate. The sea was a home, kin, and a quiet witness to our unfolding of life.



*Figure 18: Clam picking after a storm*

Ideas of belonging, identity, livelihood, and memory are deeply shaped by ecological, economic, and symbolic relationships with place. A natural environment can prompt distinct feelings of comfort, familiarity, and security, as well as the oppositions of such feelings (Ingold, 2000; Hinds & Sparks, 2011; Ruzol & Pulhin, 2021). In coastal communities like Rivermoor, the sea was a living environment that structured social worlds and defined what it means to be at home. In an era of migration and globalisation, the sea becomes an imagined connector. It links coastal villages to diasporic kin and to imaginaries of a better life across the water. In this sense, the sea mediates between home and away, the present and the future. The ecological environment is both

a material and metaphorical terrain through which home is made, contested, and carried across time and space. Attending the sea allows us to uncover how ecological realities, economic shifts, and affective relations all shape the making of home in nuanced, often contradictory ways.

Anthropological literature has shown that the natural environment is never neutral but rather deeply embedded in state discourses, development agendas, and everyday life (Escobar, 1999; Li, 2007). Likewise, nature is a central figure in the symbolic, material, and political construction of the Vietnamese nation. In school curricula, state media, and cultural events, nature is portrayed as both nurturing and resilient, which echoes the qualities attributed to the Vietnamese people themselves. The volume edited by Ursula Heise and Chi Pham (2024) brings together essays that explore the tensions and convergences between nationalist nation-building projects and Vietnam's economic integration into global markets over the past half-century, particularly in relation to environmental thought. The contributors examine how diverse environmental elements in Vietnam are represented in a range of texts from literary fiction to contemporary news media; though, yet again, the marine aspects are left unmentioned.

The sea in particular plays a dual role. On one hand, it presents a natural aspect associated with fishing folks, coastal cuisine, tourism, the export economic sector, and maritime heritage. On the other, it is a strategic geopolitical border zone that signifies territorial integrity and national defense, especially in the context of the South China Sea disputes. In the book *Fishers, Monks and Cadres: Navigating State, Religion and the South China Sea in Central Vietnam* (2021), author Edyta Rozko brings readers' attention to the different fishing communities of little-studied central Vietnam and compares and contrasts how fishers from the shoreline and on islands navigate the modern nation-state's vision of national culture and development. As Rozko analyses, the fishing communities are often placed within the marginal and peripheral description of socio-economic progress until they become the heroes "who bear the brunt of the defense of the nation's sovereignty" (p. 199) in the wake of the South China Sea disputes. Rozko also underlines the unsettled and disconnected relations with the state that characterized the varied situation of one fishing community to the other. While this section does not focus exclusively on Rivermoor's fishing community, it addresses the still-defining threads of the fishing trade in society and the forces that have driven change to it. I examine the roles of various social actors: fishers, migrants,

traders, local leaders, etc. who, alongside or seemingly alongside the state and the sea, each contribute in their own way to shaping development at home.

### **Home, foodways and taste: the link between home and away**

Historically, the sea played a part in shaping nearly every aspect of life in the community, from subsistence practices and daily meals to spatial arrangements and seasonal rhythms. Despite the increasing involvement of coastal landscapes in leisure, tourism, and commercial development, seafood continues to serve as a vital source of continuity. For many, growing up in Rivermoor meant eating fresh, locally caught seafood, which is an embodied connection to a place that becomes difficult to replicate during migration. With technological advancement and globalised logistics, food now travels with people across vast distances, carrying with it not just flavour but memories, attachments, and ideas of home. Still, are these “travelling” foods still carrying the same values that nourished generations of Rivermoor children? Since food serves as a marker of home, how does it also reveal the transformations taking place within home itself?

Natural environments actively structure how food is cultivated, foraged, processed, and consumed. In the Red River and Mekong Deltas, for instance, rice cultivation is both a cultural and ecological system, shaped by intricate water management and intergenerational labour. Similarly, coastal communities like those in Central and Southern Vietnam engage in small-scale, near-shore fishing and production of dried and fermented products, taking advantage of the predominantly hot and dry climate. Additionally, the material embeddedness of food in broader ecological systems where practices such as seasonal foraging, home gardening, and preservation (drying, fermenting) not only reflect subsistence strategies but also express a moral economy of sufficiency and environmental attunement.

Following Đổi Mới, Vietnam’s transition to a market-orientated economy triggered significant changes in everyday life, especially in the realm of food consumption. The liberalisation of the economy created new opportunities for entrepreneurship, including the commodification and commercialisation of food production and distribution. Not only were food systems revived and transformed - such as for example banquets and feasts on special occasions that once faced government restrictions (Luong, 1992) - but the pleasure and leisure dimension of

eating practice also expanded along with the increasing freedom of consumption (Luong, 2010; Thomas, 2004). As a result, Vietnam experienced a food transition that changed local food and dietary systems that include higher nutrition values but also introduce more diet-related diseases (Ehlert, 2019). Along with increasing options of consumption is growing class differentiation as well as novel perceptions about health, diet, and gendered body performance (Ehlert, 2021). Likewise, concerns about health, safety, and sustainability also intensify as Vietnamese open up their culinary horizon to the world. The contributions from the edited volume by Ehlert and Faltmann (2019) trace Vietnamese food culture from the colonial period to its integration into global markets through the lens of anxiety and trust, while also illuminating the evolving dynamics among consumers and producers - the shift in viewing foods beyond necessity to choice of investment, quality, and standards mirrors the more defined emergence of class and modern identity.

While these trends are most visible in urban areas, they are also affecting rural communities, where fast-changing consumption habits intersect with enduring seasonal foodways and subsistence practices. Notably, amidst growing anxieties over chemophobia and ‘fake’ and unclear-origin foods in a globalising Vietnam, rural areas have come to be seen as the trusted producers of organic, homegrown, chemical-free food (Figuié *et al.*, 2019; Kurfürst, 2019). Rural areas are associated with easy access to fresh foods due to their close contact with nature; at the same time, such closeness to nature is also linked to slow development and backwardness. Therefore, rural produce brings a deeper sentimental weight for consumers because it is often imagined as the “true” food of home and hometown that carries nostalgia, authenticity, and rootedness in the past. Such foods are perceived as untouched by the corruptive agents of modernisation, industrial trends, and global market logic (while in fact, as the previous chapter has proved, food trends and new tastes were in constant demand from young people and also from the newly rich in rural areas). As the chapter ethnography reveals, the same imagination toward foods of the rural home was also embedded in the national narratives surrounding Rivermoor’s seafood produce, where local products were framed and advertised as embodiments of authenticity, heritage, and a moral connection to place.



*Figure 19: Home-grown vegetables as prized items*

For transnational communities, food plays an important role in asserting group identity as well as maintaining one's sense of belonging, while foodways are a medium for balancing local belonging with global engagement (Chapman & Beagan, 2013; Fischler, 1988; William-Forsen, 2014). Moreover, scholars have observed that food and food practices function as social and cultural dialogues that not only reflect broader shifts in translocal political economy and cultural practice but also play an active role in producing and mediating relationships between individuals and their communities or between migrants and their homelands (Schuster, 2021; Abranches, 2022). Mandy Thomas (2004) uses the example of the Vietnamese diaspora in Australia to show that food and eating habits have become important signs of social change, both in Vietnam and among the Vietnamese diaspora. The adoption of new ways of eating, cooking, producing, and accessing food in both sending communities and new destinations involves Travellers, those who

stay behind, and locals alike, all of whom participate in the cultural production and consumption of food, form their habits and practices critical to shaping identity (Schuster, 2021). Throughout the rare occasions when I could visit home from abroad, I have learnt to bring back home the foods from abroad that are suitable for each family member's preferences. For instance, I brought hazelnut chocolates from Italy for my sister, salami for my father as beer snacks, and for my mother a variety of dried mushrooms. And without fail, on the first day of my return, the familiar scent of homemade phở would greet me from our small kitchen. The circulation of food between home and abroad thus expresses multiple layers of personal and collective values: food products from the homeland bring authenticity and care, while packages sent from abroad are the reciprocal of love while signifying transnationalism and multicultural appreciation.

Thus, food serves as a platform for various temporalities and value systems that exist between the state's national branding efforts and local practices of care and subsistence. Research on food and eating has become an important subfield within anthropology, providing invaluable perspectives on theoretical and methodological debates. Studies of food have shed light on wider social processes, including the creation of political-economic and symbolic value, as well as the formation of social relations (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). By situating food at the intersection of ecology, economy, and emotion, this study draws on material culture (Kopytoff 1986), migration (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004), and systems of provision, as well as Vietnam-focused scholarship, to trace the evolving significance of food in constructing "home" across multiple domains. Whether shared at local tables, traded in international markets, or shipped across continents, food emerges as a vital medium through which Vietnamese communities anchor themselves, navigate change and futures.

### **Foods, foodways, systems of provision: what to look at?**

For units of analysis, I start with the definitions of food and foodways, using the concept of system of provision as the main thread for analysis.

Food is the material substance: the edible items that sustain life. I simply documented *what people eat*, that is, the daily staples, meals, and culinary routines that sustain bodily life for Rivermoor people. Food availability was shaped by seasonal patterns, systems of provision,

household labour, and broader political-economic structures. Examining what is eaten offers an understanding of subsistence strategies, nutritional shifts, and the immediate ways in which global and local markets intersect in household reproduction (Mintz, 1985; Ehlert & Faltmann, 2019). What is eaten also marks social boundaries: who eats what, and who can afford “safe” and “fresh” or imported goods. These distinctions are critical for understanding how class, gender, and rural–urban differences materialise at the table (Bourdieu, 1987; Warde, 2016). To expand from this, *what people would like to eat* captures the aspirational, symbolic, and affective dimension of foodways. Desires for fresh produce, elaborate dishes, or foreign cuisines index moral values, social ambitions, and anxieties about modernity and authenticity. They are part of the lived experience of food: people think, talk, and desire the dishes they miss, the foods they reject, and the meals they long for - these desires reveal orientations toward belonging and imagined futures (Ray, 2004; Wilk, 2006). Attending to what people would like to eat thus illuminates the tensions between aspiration and constraint, between the ideal of “true food” and the compromises of everyday provisioning.

Foodways is a broader and more analytical concept. It refers to the cultural, social, and economic practices surrounding the production, distribution, preparation, and consumption of food. This includes recipes, cooking methods, commensality (eating together), taboos, rituals, and the meanings attached to specific foods. The term emerged in mid-20th-century anthropology and folkloristics (Anderson, 2005; Long, 2015), and it emphasises that eating is part of a patterned system of values, identities, and power relations. Foodways thus encompass not only what people eat but also how, with whom, when, where, and why. From a philosophical perspective, Lisa Heldke (1992) posits that foodmaking is a thoughtful practice that builds self-other interconnection, engages emotional body knowledge, and maintains community membership. Likewise, as Sidney Mintz (1985) argues in his classic work *Sweetness and Power*, food and foodways link biology and culture, consumption and production, the intimate sphere of the household; and the vast systems of global trade. Taken together, situating food and foodways at the intersection of material provision and symbolic imagination makes visible how food anchors home in the present while simultaneously projecting it into remembered pasts and imagined futures. Drawing on Igor Kopytoff’s (1986) concept of the social biography of things, we can trace how different foods acquire, lose, or shift in value as they move through local networks. A basket of fresh clams straight

from the sea, for example, may be a humble daily staple in one household but a prized gift in another, depending on who harvested it, the context of its presentation, and the relational ties involved.

Not only the things, but the systems within which they circulate are relevant in identifying the nodes of transformation that reflect broader implications of cultural and social expectations of home. The systems of provision (SoP) framework was elaborated as part of a critique of mainstream economics, which reduces commodities to interchangeable units governed by abstract laws of supply and demand (Fine & Leopold, 1993; Fine, 2002; Bayliss & Fine, 2020). A “system of provision is the inclusive chain of activity that attaches consumption to the production that makes it possible” (Fine, 2002, p.79). SoP posits that each commodity must be analysed through its historically specific system of provision, encompassing production, regulation, circulation, and consumption. Food, like energy or housing, cannot be abstracted into a generic commodity but must be understood as embedded in institutional structures, cultural logics, and political economies (Fine & Leopold, 1993; Lawrence & Dixon, 2015). This perspective aligns with anthropological approaches to materiality and provisioning (Watson & Caldwell, 2004; Wilk, 2006), yet it differs by insisting on the inseparability of production and consumption. Thus, it enables the link between food choices, practices, meanings as well as consumer preference and systemic arrangements involving governance, markets, labor, and infrastructures.

One of the key methodological contributions of SoP to this study is that it allows “home” to be re-theorised as part of a *political-economic system*. Conventionally, home is approached in anthropology as an affective, symbolic, or material domain (Carsten, 2004; Mallett, 2004). As explained before, food has long been studied as a vehicle of belonging and nostalgia in migrant contexts, yet these approaches often emphasize home as a cultural-symbolic construction detached from systemic infrastructures. The SoP framework extends this by demonstrating how the foods of home are systemically produced, circulated, and made available, all the while mediated by policies, supply chains, and global trade. This move is methodologically significant: it prevents home from being treated solely as a metaphor or memory and grounds it in the materialities and politics of provisioning. For example, under the analysis of SoP, Turner *et al.* (2022) follow the story of cinnamon cultivation among ethnic minority farmers in Northern Vietnam. They show how farmers are embedded in very different realities compared to retailers who influence how their

work and homeland are described in contrasting ways. While farmers navigate changing farming practices, climate shifts, and political decisions in their frontier and borderland regions, their cinnamon is often marketed with polished images and stories that do not match everyday life. Thus, foregrounding how systems of provision organise what counts as “food of home”. We can go further than its bounded domestic space and analyse home as a relational effect of political economy, ecological systems, and cultural practices. I examine how food mediates relations between four categories: state, market, the sea, and household. As Bayliss and Fine (2020) argue, provision systems are embedded in particular institutional logics - state policy, corporate strategy, local markets - and these condition what is possible within the household. By employing SoP, the study reveals how the stability or instability of “home food” is tied to systemic processes, making home a relational rather than self-contained category.

## **II. A commodity chain: From Daily Catch to Global Circuit**

In April 2025, Chinh's social media posts drew hundreds of enthusiastic reactions. She had just announced that her seafood cooperative would be hosting a trade promotion seminar with overseas enterprises. The compliments poured in as people praised her leadership, admired her success, and shared a sense of local pride. In Rivermoor, Chinh had long stood out as the face of women's entrepreneurship. Her seafood products not only entered the national OCOP (One Commune One Product) programme and its related affairs, such as competitions or grand showcases, but also came to symbolise the identity of the commune itself. From her modest home-based shop in Rivermoor, I began tracing the movements of her seafood from local shore to international markets. Their trajectories reflected broader transformations in the meanings and production of ‘home’.

Launched in 2018 by the Vietnamese government, the OCOP initiative is a rural development strategy modelled on Japan's successful OVOP (One Village One Product) scheme.<sup>22</sup> The OCOP program in Vietnam is managed under the National Target Program on New Rural Development (NTP-NRD), which is overseen by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD). At the central level, MARD provides policy direction, evaluation criteria, and coordination across

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<sup>22</sup> For more information, refer to FAO reports at: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (n.d.). One Country One Priority Product (OCOP): Asia and the Pacific. <https://www.fao.org/one-country-one-priority-product/asia-pacific/en>

ministries. At the local level, provincial People's Committees are responsible for implementing OCOP, including selecting products, organising evaluations, and supporting enterprises, cooperatives, and households in developing their certified products. Communes select a signature product and undergo certification through a star-rating system ranging from 1 to 5 stars, based on criteria such as quality, safety, cultural significance, and market potential. Once certified, producers receive guidance on production improvements, packaging, branding, and storytelling. Fairs, exhibitions, and trade promotions connect them with markets both domestically and internationally.

The OCOP program has been promoted by the Vietnamese state as a key policy instrument for the development of new rural areas and is framed as a pathway to modernising agriculture, enhancing rural livelihoods, and promoting national identity. Positioned within the wider industrialisation and modernisation agenda, OCOP prioritised agriculture, rural communities, and farmers as strategic pillars. These pillars are regarded as important not only in preserving cultural heritage but also in protecting the ecological environment, maintaining political stability, and securing national identity (VOV, 2024). This discourse reinforces the view that rural spaces and subjects are essential to the nation-building project, simultaneously as productive units, cultural stewards, and environmental custodians.

#### *A successful OCOP journey born in Rivermoor*

After more than three decades working as a dried seafood trader, Chinh made a decisive shift in 2020 by joining the national OCOP programme. She reorganised her business as the Seafood Processing and Trading Cooperative and expanded the operation to include 11 members. At the time of my fieldwork, the cooperative had three purchasing and processing facilities, all located in Rivermoor. Her home-based store in Rivermoor was what she called the 'headquarter'. Her OCOP products were also on the shelves of various flagship stores located in different cities. Chinh's Seafood Processing and Trading Cooperative offered a range of dried seafood products, among which two have received a 3-star OCOP rating, while her most celebrated product - dried shrimps - was awarded 4 stars. In several interviews with state media, Chinh often emphasised her deep roots in Rivermoor's fishing heritage and their traditional occupation for generations, including the craft of dried seafood. Her cooperative went beyond Rivermoor and sourced seafood

exclusively from the waters of the home province, purchasing only same-day catches to guarantee freshness. In the case of dried shrimp, the process began with buying fresh tôm sặt (a type of mid-sized shrimps living in deep ocean waters, known for their rich sweet flavor and high nutritional value and cannot be artificially farmed like many other types of shrimp), which were immediately brought to the factory for pre-processing. Workers carefully removed the intestines from the back, washed the shrimp, and boiled them at 100°C for 5-7 minutes. The shrimp were then peeled, deheaded, washed again, and placed in a dryer for five hours.

Chinh explained that on average, 10 kilograms of fresh shrimp yield just 1 kilogram of dried product. The cooperative followed a closed, carefully controlled process, using advanced machinery to produce shrimp with a vibrant red hue, tender texture, and naturally sweet flavor - qualities that made them a customer favorite. With a selling price averaging 1 million VND per kilogram (approximately 38.4 EUR), dried shrimp had become not only the cooperative's signature product but also its primary source of revenue.

The products from Chinh's seafood cooperative had become emblematic in the eyes of the local authorities, as it was frequently spotlighted in official communications, trade exhibitions, and policy showcases. First, they reinforced the reputation of the commune's traditional Vietnamese artisanal trade, aligning with the state's vision of preserving cultural heritage while modernizing rural economies. By recognising these goods as both authentic and commercially viable, the cooperative served as a flagship for the commune's development strategy, positioning the locality as an emerging site of entrepreneurial activity and economic potential. Second, Chinh's enterprise neatly aligned with gender-focused policy objectives. As a woman entrepreneur leading a successful cooperative, she was held up as the star of rural women's empowerment. Her visibility as a model of progressive, self-sufficient feminism within the rural economy supported broader gender equity agendas promoted through state and donor-funded programs.

Chinh described the OCOP program as bringing not only recognition but also concrete benefits: members received training on food safety and hygiene standards, guidance on building compelling brand narratives, and support in improving packaging design to meet professional market expectations. These changes had enabled the cooperative's products to reach distributors across Vietnam. Beyond the domestic market, they also became prized goods that locals bring

abroad as small tokens of home carried across oceans. In terms of tangible economic impact. Chinh estimated that revenue doubled since the products received their star ratings. At peak processing times, the cooperative hired 15-20 seasonal workers, which showed not just increased demand but also a shift in how local marine resources and artisanal processing were tied into wider commercial networks.

### **Home-based Co-op: a microcosm of changing provision infrastructure**

While the rhetoric of the OCOP program emphasises integration, empowerment, and sustainability, Chinh's cooperative flourished within a complex reality. While Chinh herself was from the commune, and the cooperative carried the name and symbolic weight of Rivermoor, the labour and the materials that sustained the business were often sourced from neighboring areas. While there was nothing unfounded in that not all the inputs into the cooperative came from the commune itself and, in fact, it meaningfully represented inter-communal collaboration and was tied to cultural traditions that spanned multiple areas in Central Vietnam, the values and changing social biographies of Rivermoor's seafood were dynamic and embedded in networks of value and identity that shift across social contexts and geographic scales. Their meanings changed as they traveled between the domestic kitchens of Rivermoor, international airports, and the living spaces of Vietnamese families abroad.

When asked about the major challenges in developing her business, Chinh first shared about the difficulties of labour input. Chinh preferred hiring women from the commune to work in her processing facility, especially those facing economic hardship. But she admitted that it was difficult to find workers from Rivermoor. Her offered wages were not attractive enough compared to the locals' expectations: "This commune is rich; everybody is on the rise. Work for me; how can you be rich? And I seem to have a lot of money, but I don't. I have a steady income from a normal business; that's what it is, fundamentally". Young men and women often opted to migrate for higher income, while many older residents, especially returned migrants or those with passive income from remittances, preferred early retirement and had little interest in the time-bound demands of formal work. The result was a hollowing out of the local labour pool, even as the valuable products of the sea and the local entrepreneurial pride that Chinh carried continued to circulate widely.

During my fieldwork, Chinh's home-based store was staffed by three people: her son, her daughter-in-law, and Thoa - a Rivermoor woman in her early forties who had worked there for nearly ten years. Thoa admitted that her salary was slightly below average by any standard, considering that she worked more than 6 days per week and without any other benefits. However, she emphasised that the work was light - sorting dried seafood, serving customers, packaging goods, and keeping inventory with Chinh. For her, it was ideal: she was a single mother without a completed public education, and this work allowed her to remain close to home and care for her children.

One afternoon, during a lull between customers, Thoa shared that her job in the shop or in the processing facilities was only suitable for someone in her situation, not for younger people. As she spoke, she gestured toward Chinh's son (28 years old), who was playing computer games in the corner, and his wife (30 years old), who was sitting beside him, crocheting absentmindedly. I understood what Thoa was trying to convey: they were restless and bored, their bodies in the shop but their minds elsewhere.



*Figure 20: Chinh's store, viewed from the entrance*

The young couple had returned to Rivermoor from Korea just shortly before my fieldwork. They met while enrolled in the same work–study programme abroad. He had been spending more money than he earned until Chinh demanded his return to learn the trade and one day take over her business. His girlfriend had come under mounting pressure to marry, and eventually, she followed him to Rivermoor. Later, she confided to me that they still missed Korea and would have preferred to stay longer if the choice had been theirs.

Their story implies a broader pattern at Rivermoor: migration aspirations persist beyond perceived stability, especially among younger adults who have learnt about what is possible elsewhere. The economic structure of Rivermoor was narrowly tied to small-scale business and petty trade and offered few concrete chances for upward mobility. While development programmes such as OCOP have integrated the commune into regional and even global commodity chains, this integration has not translated into diverse or rewarding local jobs for young people. Instead, working locally felt like a step backward compared to elsewhere where wages were higher and horizons wider. In other words, being physically grounded at home was deemed a type of immobility that ultimately inhibited aspirations and prospects.

Moreover, the dynamics in Chinh's small shop illustrate how home, labour, and aspiration are reconfigured through the state's branding of local produce. By positioning rural products as carriers of authenticity and cultural identity, OCOP folds household labour into a national system of provision where the value of work is both economic and symbolic (as working toward the pride of a national brand). For many small producers, especially women, this transition provides both recognition and pressure. Chinh hoped that her son could carry on with the trade and continue to grow the business that was carrying the pride of the community. In this way, aspiration is not simply about economic gain; it is about proving that one's work and one's home can be legible, respectable, and competitive in the eyes of the state and the market. At the same time, OCOP reveals how food is socially organised across institutions, households, and markets. Branding links the materiality of labour and land with the immaterial promises of development and belonging. Both authenticity and global desires for safe, organic, and nostalgic foods originate from home. Local producers who enter into the programme also enact the state's vision for the rural area, which is stable, productive, and market-ready. In contrast, the reality is that mass migration from

economically disadvantaged homes continues, with persistent poverty and a lack of opportunities for prosperity.

The gendered framing of Chinh's work also fits into broader state narratives about *women's roles in modernisation*, echoing what Werner (2009) identifies as the state's strategic deployment of women's labour and virtue in rural development campaigns. While women like Chinh are celebrated as entrepreneurial agents, this recognition often masks the uneven distribution of opportunity and labour behind such achievements. The celebration of women's empowerment can obscure the precariousities of the informal labour force on which such enterprises rely - many of whom remain invisible in state and donor reporting.

### **Rural delicacies in cloth sacks**

OCOP programs often operate within a top-down framework that prioritises market viability and branding. The emphasis on turning local products into commodities that contribute to the *thương hiệu quốc gia* (national brand) reflects a form of developmental nationalism in which rural spaces are mobilised to serve state narratives of progress and prestige. In this sense, local producers are not only encouraged to innovate but also to conform to external standards of quality, packaging, and presentation that align with market and policy logics often at odds with traditional production rhythms.

For instance, whether local residents or travelers passing through, Chinh's home-based store in Rivermoor could take advantage of prices significantly lower than those found in the flagship shops in the city. Transactions were informal and efficient: customers would simply name the types and quantities of seafood or dried goods they needed, and the staff would measure out the requested amounts directly from large plastic or cloth sacks into ordinary plastic bags. As I had copied from other customers, occasionally, I would make a personal request for both freshly frozen and dried seafood items before I visited my family in Hanoi, and Chinh would take care of my request at a reasonable price. While the store's shelves displayed attractively packaged products, these were not typically for sale to the local community. Their presence functioned more as visual proof of legitimacy, branding, and compliance with modern standards of hygiene and traceability. For Rivermoor's residents, the priority was affordability and familiarity. People trusted each other

because of their personal relationships, sensory knowledge, and long-standing reputations. The coexistence of two economies, one rooted in local sociality and everyday practice, and the other catering to the demands of formal commerce, bureaucracy, and global markets, is reflected in this dual system of presentation and distribution. It also highlights how rural sellers like Chinh skillfully navigate between these realms, using the appearance of formalisation to access state and international support while maintaining embedded ties with her community.



*Figure 21: Pick and buy*

As demand increased for food items that could pass through airport customs abroad, Chinh adapted to meet these logistical needs. Her store gave out packaging materials such as vacuum-seal bags and printed labels for free and sometimes at a small cost for large amounts or expensive containers. Many customers joked about doing free marketing, as Chinh's OCOP labels had been traveling all around the world directly from Rivermoor through parcels, suitcases, and *hàng xách tay chính chủ* (authentic carry-ons), without any complicated international business contracts.

The OCOP-certified brand became a passport for food to circulate across borders in ways that blur legality. Once products carry the OCOP seal, they are understood as “safe”, “authentic”, and “representative” of Vietnam. This reputation makes them standard and recognised in the eyes

of examiners. In this way, OCOP brands become a mechanism through which food “sneaks” across borders under the cover of legitimacy. It reveals how the state’s strategy of branding local produce by chance intersects with and is appropriated by informal economies. They facilitate the formalisation and regulate “home food” through OCOP packaging for people to circumvent customs and expand the reach of their local tokens. Critically, the circulation of OCOP foods across borders exposes the paradox of state-led authenticity. By codifying “home” into a brand, the state inadvertently equips food with the symbolic and bureaucratic legitimacy to bypass certain forms of control, effectively enabling the leakage of its own regulated commodities into unregulated spaces. What begins as a strategy to root people and products more firmly in the nation thus becomes a pathway for mobility, destabilising the very economic, cultural, and territorial borders that OCOP was meant to reinforce.

The struggle over authenticity, nationalism, and what DeSoucey (2010) terms “gastronationalism” often unfolds through food, as national pride and identity directly influence how food is produced and marketed. Local businesses, no matter how small-scale, are embedded in global mobility patterns while responding not only to taste and tradition but also to the bureaucratic and aesthetic requirements of transnational circulation. This disconnection between the symbolic representation of “local success” and the spatial displacement of actual production reveals a pattern increasingly common in state-led rural development narratives where visibility, rather than embeddedness, becomes the primary metric of value.

This has consequences for how we think about home, labour, and aspiration within the system of provision. First, “home” is mobilised across scales: what is produced in a rural household is reframed as part of the nation and then transported to diasporic kitchens abroad. Second, in official markets, the labour invested in branding and compliance with market standards finds its value also in grey circuits of exchange, where trust in the label stands in for regulatory enforcement. Third, while local products carry certain national development ideals, these meanings are embraced differently within their provision circle. For example, migrants mobilise home foods as portable pieces of home, circulating them across borders in ways that exceed state agendas. Local consumers embrace them as trustworthy in an age of food anxieties, though often with ambivalence about price and packaging, while producers must follow strict compliance in order to gain recognition and reputation. In Anna Tsing’s (2005) terms, these encounters are sites of friction:

the national project rubs against the everyday uses of food, producing new meanings that are neither fully aligned with nor entirely resistant to the state. The OCOP brand thus becomes a contested medium through which home, labour, and aspiration are imagined, negotiated, and lived.

### **III. Taste, Class, and the Value of Freshness**

“It would be wonderful if clothing or shoe factories hired people in their 50s and 60s,” Lan remarked with a laugh. “This commune has plenty of oldies with too much time on their hands. They just play cards all day and gamble the money away”. Lan was a regular customer at Chinh's store. She was in her mid-50s - a declared retiree, sharp-witted, and full of energy. Along with her husband, she had taken up a private insurance sales job, which she described as something to keep her mobile like a swinging “pendulum” (túc tắc) between the commune and the company office in the district.<sup>23</sup> The couple took the job lightly, aiming to sell one insurance contract per month as a personal KPI. They were living a lavish life with a daughter-in-law and 9-year-old granddaughter. Family members in the UK and Canada largely supported the family care and financial stability.

Lan regularly sent packages of fresh and dried seafood abroad; the selections were tailored based on seasonal availability. She stated proudly that the family had secured several trusted sellers to bring them fresh seafood anytime with just a phone call; the key was to be generous with money. Not only Lan, but also commune residents frequently dropped by Chinh's to vacuum-seal and pack food, seek help with labelling, or ask for advice on how to ensure the goods passed through customs overseas. The store, modest in size but rich in social life, functioned as a material and affective bridge between Rivermoor and its overseas extensions. Residents like Lan actively participated in reproducing homes across borders, maintaining kin ties, and asserting the ongoing relevance of local foodways in transnational circuits.

The food delivery process was a carefully choreographed practice with smooth coordination among many people. In Rivermoor, families waited for fishing boats to dock at various hours during the day as they tried to be the first buyers. They hand-picked seafood with care so as to select only the freshest and most visually intact pieces. Often, people with connections

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<sup>23</sup> Refer to Nguyen Minh's (2023) research about the rise of life insurance sale agents in rural Central Vietnam to further understand the elusive spirit of entrepreneurial self within market socialism.

did not have to go through too much trouble; only a phone call could be sufficient to secure the products. Foods were then cleaned, portioned, and put in packages and immediately frozen deeply to preserve both flavour and appearance. The act of sending food abroad reflects a deep commitment to maintaining transnational kinship, as well as a shared understanding that taste must travel well to carry home with it. Through these careful rituals, food becomes a vessel of memory, care, classed performance, and an enduring symbol of connection.

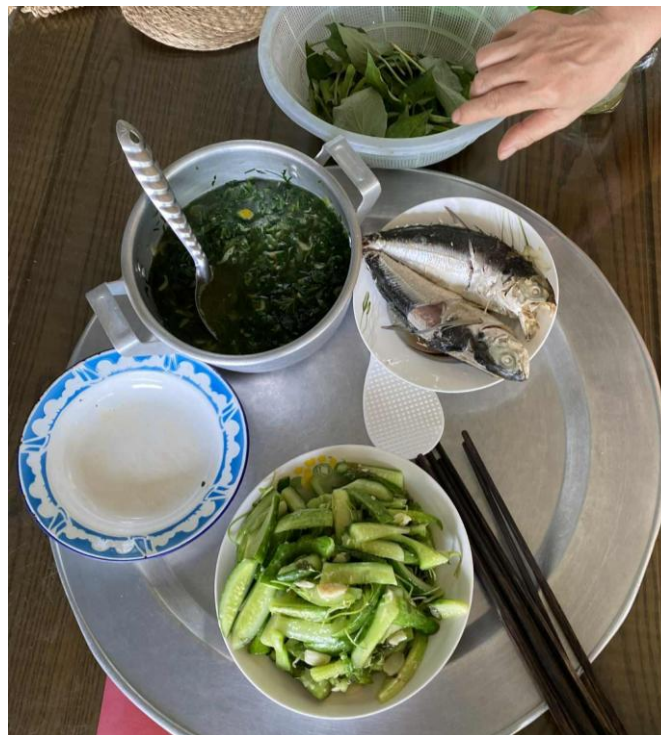


*Figure 22: Business hard and fast on shore*

In Rivermoor, the daily seafood catch flowed through certain directions: primarily, it fed the family table for everyday meals; it was sourced to local restaurants, who competed for the freshest and best-tasting; or it was set aside for deep freezing or sent directly abroad to family or acquaintances. This system struggled to meet local demand. The limited stretch of shoreline under the commune's jurisdiction was intended primarily for local, small-scale use rather than commercial fishing. Most of the local residents' boats were small, suited only for near-shore fishing; only a few ventured farther out. Locals often complained that, ironically, seafood prices were absurdly high for a place perched beside the sea.

As the day progressed in Rivermoor's wet market, the selling price of the catch gradually declined. This daily cycle reveals how class distinctions play out through taste and perceived quality and value. What was sold at a premium in the early morning lost value by afternoon as the freshness diminished. By the end of the business day, the remaining stock typically consisted of smaller or less desirable species - those deemed too small, too plain, or simply unfamiliar. These were sold at significantly lower prices, and it was usually budget-conscious buyers who chose to purchase them.

Despite hailing from an inland city, the quality and freshness of seafood in coastal communities captivated me. I still recall my initial experience with freshly caught fish, just taken from the boat and still alive. Fishes were gutted and cleaned quickly, rinsed twice, and dropped straight into boiling water along with a pinch of sea salt. Served with a steaming bowl of rice, they needed no elaborate spices. Just a dab of fish sauce, a squeeze of lime, and a tiny flicker of chili accentuated their deep umami and briny sweetness. Boiled fish - what I once found plain and tasteless - became something of an obsession. I ate a rotating variety of the fresh catch every few days and eventually began to crave their presence whenever I left Rivermoor.



*Figure 23: Boiled fish*

What began as a local routine became a marker of attachment - a sensory memory of home that lingered long after the meal was done. Homeland food not only plays a crucial role in sustaining a sense of being at home (Bailey, 2017; Sutton, 2001; Lu & Fine, 1995), but also renders belonging into something materially and sensorially consumable as an act of deterritorialisation and reconfiguring displacement (Appadurai, 1996; Heldke, 2003). Following Hoang Lan Anh's evocative account of a refrigerator in Moscow filled with Mekong Delta foods just as greatly as Vietnamese migrants longing for home (Hoang, 2020b), we witness how food becomes a medium through which home is mobilised, reassembled, and maintained across distance.



*Figure 24: Frozen or dried, packed and ready to ship overseas*

Lan reflected on how Rivermoor's relationship to consumption had drastically transformed alongside its growing prosperity. "Back when Rivermoor was still poor," she said, "we got the leftovers and low-quality goods (của rẻ, của ôi). In those days, this commune was at the receiving end of the market priority for traders". Today, Rivermoor's consumers could rightfully demand the best. "The top-quality goods, the most expensive, are spared here. They [sellers] bring goods here first, they know where the places with wide pockets are", she added. Indeed, the market turned

to where the consumption power is strong. This transformation reflected the common patterns of rural class restructuring in Vietnam as consumption became a way to enact class distinction. From my observations, in Rivermoor, food and eating practices were central to how people express value. Consumers paid close attention to what they ate and to the quality of food products and actively sought for trustworthy food providers. In contrast, fashion or brands carried little significance. Housing, however, much like food, was regarded as important both as a material necessity and as a marker of security and stability. Class shapes not only access to seafood but also its social meanings. Where people were once making do with 'Low-quality goods' turned into the place of curatorial process: who gets to eat, buy, prepare, and send the best seafood was equated with access to money, social capital, and transnational networks.

The value of seafood in Rivermoor was not only determined by quantity but also by the more elusive qualities of *taste and perceived quality*, both of which are social and subjective. There was a premium on freshness, aesthetic appeal, and species that conferred privilege. By contrast, those with fewer resources had different thresholds of acceptability and creativity in food use. Here, taste becomes a social distinction, echoing Bourdieu's (1987) insights into how class shapes consumption preferences and legitimises certain forms of aesthetic judgement. Moreover, home food's value increased as it moved outward to be consumed elsewhere, whether in different regions or countries. The acquired new forms of worth, or to borrow from Appadurai (1986) - the new social life of commodities, accumulate as their meanings travel and exchange across different contexts. Rivermoor seafood had been reimagined as a speciality, a gift, or a marker of authenticity tied to home. In this sense, the local ecology of daily subsistence was reframed as a carrier of identity and aspiration for distant consumers. Money not only dictates access to particular foods but also influences the buying habits (to shop early as opposed to waiting until the end of the day). These local economic transactions transpire the local hierarchies, aspirations, and forms of care.

Through varied notions of quality and taste, foods sent straight from Rivermoor became the prized items, sometimes even overhyped as purer, tastier, and more authentic than anywhere else. This perception represents the enduring uniqueness of home and the abstract captivity of authenticity. Receiving these products affirms the idea that no matter how globalised or mobile people become, the taste of home is irreplaceable. Authenticity, in this sense, is less a fixed property of the food and more a social construction sustained through memory, affect, and

embodied taste. Authenticity is not simply inherent in food but crafted through narratives and practices (Crossland-Marr & Krause, 2023). These claims to authenticity also function as a moral category that materialises irreplaceability, as a reminder that while money may sustain livelihoods, only homegrown food can nourish belonging.

However, when the food of home acquires a price, it transforms the meaning of home itself. For migrants, the care packages they receive from Rivermoor are also commodities with a market value, as they are expensive and scarce goods. Receiving such food creates both pride (family provides valuable things) and pressure (family invests in me with costly gifts). Home is thus refracted through monetary worth, with care turned into an exchange with calculable value. On the other hand, the shift is equally significant for people who stay behind. They were experiencing day by day the increasing living costs in the commune (*for a place perched beside the sea, seafood prices were absurdly high*). This development shifted the grammar of home from being unconditionally given (this is where I belong) to something that required competition, maintenance, and investment (home is most enjoyable when we can afford its foods). In this way, the system of provision not only distributes food but also reorganises attachments at home. Foodways and food practices make home aspirational and prestigious, but they are also fragile, conditional, and always under negotiation. In short, home is treasured, but also contingent on the ability to maintain its value in broader markets and in the eyes of others.

#### **IV. Conclusion: Changing Ecological Relationships with Home and food**

This chapter has traced the ways in which food mediates the relationship between home, livelihood, and belonging in Rivermoor. By following the practices of eating, preparing, circulating, and valuing food, I have argued that home is also a system of provision in which politics, labour, and aspiration are deeply intertwined. Food operates as both consumption and narrative that anchors people to place while simultaneously opening up spaces of exchange, migration, and cross-border movement.

Programmes like OCOP show how the state inscribes local foods with the language of national development and global competitiveness. Even so, the meanings attached to these foods exceed state narratives. For producers, they embody laborious labour and uncertain futures; for

migrants, they are gifts of care and reminders of home; for consumers, they carry the promise of authenticity, purity, and value. What the state brands as “local speciality” becomes, in lived practice, a terrain of friction (Tsing, 2005), where divergent aspirations and unequal power converge.

The chapter has also demonstrated that food carries a price beyond its market value. When Rivermoor seafood circulates beyond the commune and across borders, it gains a surplus of meaning. It becomes evidence of quality, identity, and prestige. For migrants, food from home is a reminder of their irreplaceable origins and the conditionality of home, which requires remittances and reciprocity. For those who stay, the rising value of local produce creates both pride and pressure, recasting home as a site whose worth is constantly measured and negotiated. Consumption and demand push away affordability, widening the class gap. In this sense, food remittances and food branding reveal that home is not simply given but is continually made and remade through practices of valuation.

Ultimately, this chapter shows that food, in its multiple registers, makes visible the shifting ecological and economic relationship with home. It illuminates how care and aspiration travel alongside commodities, how authenticity and nostalgia are mobilised in everyday life, and how national and global discourses become entangled with intimate practices of eating and exchange. Home emerges here not as a stable ground but as a priced, conditional, and contested field - one that is lived through the taste of seafood, the anxieties of reciprocity, the branding of rural authenticity, and the longing of those near and far.

Nevertheless, in focusing on the home and the land, the chapter has so far only touched lightly on another presence: the sea. An economy of extraction and consumption, along with state-led development projects, has transformed the sea, once central to livelihoods and imagination. To return to the sea is to recognise another aspect of Rivermoor’s foodscape - one that speaks to loss and renewal, to the ebb and flow of connection between humans and their more-than-human environments. As explored in the previous chapter, the drive for alternative incomes and modern aspirations has loosened the vital co-dependent relationship between villagers and their ecological surroundings. The changing relationship with the sea thus completes the picture of Rivermoor’s as a living terrain: the notion of home in contemporary Vietnamese society encapsulates the diversity

of problems and tensions emerging from rapid social transformation - state intervention and globalisation infiltrate everyday life, reshaping the very relationships, values, and aspirations that once grounded Vietnamese notions of belonging and kinship.

## **CONCLUSION: HOMEMAKING BEYOND THE HOUSE - NEGOTIATING VALUE, MORALITY, AND CHANGE IN RURAL VIETNAM**

“... national development looks the way it does, in no small part, because of rural people and processes”.  
(Rigg, 2024, p.165)

Rural research is vital for documenting and contesting the new forms of social differentiation, exclusion, and environmental change that globalisation produces. Rural studies provide critical insight into the winners and losers of global change, examining phenomena such as the rise of gated communities and luxury rural retreats, as well as the displacement of smallholders by transnational agribusiness (Álvarez-Rivadulla, 2007; Woods, 2007). This research has examined how practices of homemaking in rural Vietnam mediate and reconfigure the social, moral, and material orders through which people live with migration and continual political, economic, and ecological change. Drawing on ethnographic research in a coastal commune in Central Vietnam, I have shown that home is not a static place or a sentimental ideal, but an active process of negotiation that binds together labour, future, roots, and ecology across scales from individual aspiration to global circulation. Homemaking is a mode of living within contradiction: between socialist ideals of collective well-being and neoliberal imperatives of self-making; between state visions of development and the affective labour of ordinary families; and between permanence and mobility, belonging and aspiration.

While the state’s developmental visions and “model” implementation programs serve as powerful forces driving social and economic transformation, my research shows that rural communities have remained somewhat changed and unchanged. Substantial changes happened in patterns of economic activity, consumption, and lifestyle. What has not changed is the community resilience as an inherited capacity to adapt to and endure external pressures. For better or worse, rural Vietnam stands as both the frontline and the testing ground of national projects of future-making by supplying labour to the global economy, experimenting with reform-induced

transformations, safeguarding traditions, and living in closest proximity to - and most vulnerable awareness of - environmental change.

The village continues to serve as a vital unit of political maneuvering within what the state promotes as “grassroots democracy” (dân chủ cơ sở). While the central government establishes overarching policies, the implementation and negotiation of these directives often unfold at the village level, where local leaders and residents adapt, reinterpret, or even overlook regulations to suit local realities (Kerkvliet & Marr, 2004). This flexibility arises partly from the limited administration and resources available to lower-level government units, which leaves ample space for informal practices and locally derived solutions. As a result, village social organisation maintains a distinctive degree of informality and autonomy, even amid constant political and economic transformations. This condition allows rural communities to navigate shifting state agendas and external pressures while sustaining their moral and practical order of governance.

Across the four domains of analysis, homemaking appears as a field of tension where competing logics of value unfold. The labour domain reveals that migration remains the most prestigious and desired form of work, not only because of its economic returns but because it aligns with moral and aesthetic imaginaries of modern life. As remittances materialise in new houses, consumer goods, and infrastructures, they reconfigure local hierarchies of worth, positioning mobility as a sign of both filial devotion and individual success. Yet, as families navigate unstable remittance flows and shifting gendered roles, the moral weight of homemaking intensifies - women abroad are celebrated as breadwinners but also disciplined as mothers, while men who stay behind must rearticulate their sense of purpose and masculinity within domestic space.

In the domain of the future, migration has profoundly reconfigured how young people in rural Vietnam imagine and organise their lives. First, the life stage is not defined by age but by a mobility-based temporality, where migration marks the period of growth, freedom, and hard-work towards the next part of life, where families are built, wealth is accumulated, and work is lessened. Second, planning one’s future extends beyond individual effort to become a negotiated process influenced and occasionally disrupted by the expectations and interventions of older generations, whose own experiences with mobility continue to shape the aspirations of young people. This intergenerational interplay produces both guidance and tension, as youth navigate between inherited dreams and uncertain realities. Third, the meaning of home itself has been unsettled: it is

no longer simply a fixed place of belonging but a project to be realised through departure. To “make” a home now often requires leaving it, hence revealing the paradox at the heart of contemporary rural life, where mobility is both a strategy of survival and an expression of care for the very place that one must temporarily abandon.

In the roots domain, the ritual and religious landscape of Rivermoor emerges as a terrain where the moral histories of labour are remembered and reworked. As families invest remittance wealth into rebuilding ancestral houses or sponsoring rituals, they transform traditional practices into markers of modern virtue with an attempt to ‘lift’ the family history of poverty and struggle to a modern and thriving one. However, these acts also reveal the fragility of local cohesion: new class divides and spatial inequalities unsettle older forms of collective belonging, and the constant anxiety of moral debts and unfulfilled duties is caused by absence. Moreover, ancestral worship - encouraged by the state as part of its broader project of commemorating national history, war, and sacrifice, brings families' spiritual lineage closer to official narratives of patriotism and continuity. Yet, home, as a site of symbolic roots, becomes the meeting ground of contradictory forces between the transnational desires of those who have left, the everyday struggles of those who remain, and the state’s ongoing effort to sustain its rhetoric of filial loyalty and collective endurance.

Finally, the ecological domain - seen through everyday practices of food, consumption, and relationship with the sea - shows how homemaking is entangled with broader economic and institutional programmes. State-driven initiatives such as the OCOP programme and new consumerist habits reshape local notions of “quality”, safety, and sustainability. Food and domestic consumption become sites where people enact moral personhood and national identity, often reproducing the state’s developmental narratives while also improvising within them. Home and the sea become expensive through food acquisition; therefore, it requires one’s hard work to be able to afford the taste of home.

It is here that the insights of Christina Schwenkel and Ann Marie Leshkowich (2012) are particularly illuminating. They argue that in Vietnam, neoliberalism does not replace socialism but becomes articulated through it - a process in which moral, aesthetic, and scientific forms of state governance are reconstituted under the logic of “quality” and self-responsibility. In Rivermoor, these intertwined logics are palpable in the ways families aspire to be “modern”, “civilised”, and

“happy”, echoing the state’s slogan that “a happy family is the foundation for social stability”. Even the smallest interventions by the state - credit schemes, quality labels, televised models of ideal homes - filter into intimate life, shaping how people build, consume, and imagine what a “good home” should be. Yet, as Schwenkel and Leshkovich remind us, neoliberalism in Vietnam is not a uniform or totalising force: it is refracted through local moral economies, socialist continuities, and transnational influences. In Rivermoor, people’s efforts to improve their homes or secure remittances reveal a moral economy of quality, where aspiration is both a measure of virtue and a burden of self-management.

Thus, homemaking in post-socialist Vietnam cannot be understood merely as a domestic or economic pursuit. It is a moral and political practice through which people engage with shifting forms of governance, expertise, and global connectivity. The house becomes a site where state projects of modernisation, global capitalist aesthetics, and local moralities of care converge and sometimes clash. In their everyday dealings with labour, consumption, and kinship, rural families actively remake the state’s developmental vision and expose the entanglement of domestic life with political power.

This study enhances anthropological discourse on post-socialism, neoliberalism, and moral economies by situating them within the lived experiences of rural Vietnam. It demonstrates that rather than signaling the retreat of the socialist state or the triumph of market rationality, neoliberal reforms in Vietnam unfold through intimate governance in the moral regulation of family life as well as personal consumption and aspiration. In Rivermoor, homemaking is both a response to and a reproduction of these dynamics - a practice that sustains life amid uncertainty, while continually redefining what it means to live well, live together, and live modernly.

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