

HOW VIRGINITY ENHANCES MASCULINITY:  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN HANOI, VIETNAM

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Human Sexuality Studies  
San Francisco State University  
In partial fulfillment of  
The requirements for  
The degree

Master of Arts  
In  
Human Sexuality Studies

by

Cuong Manh La

San Francisco, California

May, 2005

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## CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *How Virginity Enhances Masculinity: An Exploratory Study in Hanoi, Vietnam* by Cuong Manh La, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree: Master of Arts in the Human Sexuality Studies at San Francisco State University.

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HOW VIRGINITY ENHANCES MASCULINITY:  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN HANOI, VIETNAM

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2005

This study examines the social and cultural relationship between masculinity and virginity in Hanoi, Vietnam. Taking a qualitative research approach, I conducted 20 in-depth interviews and four focus group discussions with male and female students (aged 19 to 24). This study reveals that female virginity is a key cultural concern among young educated men and women. Traditionally, virginity was measured not only by an intact hymen, but was also demonstrated by the dignity, faith, and love of a woman. The study suggests that there were two forms of male expectation regarding female virginity. The male group that highly valued virginity found it impossible to accept female partners who were not virgins. To protect their masculinity, these men ended their relationships when this fact was confessed to them. The second male group valued virginity a bit less and these men were more able to accept the fact that their partners' virginity was "lost" such that they could "forgive" (tha thứ) their female partners—but only if this loss resulted from a physical accident that damaged the hymen or through sexual coercion. Ultimately, this study found that marrying a virgin helps men enhance their social reputation and masculinity.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

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Chair, Thesis Committee

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Date

## PREFACE

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## **Introduction**

This study examines the social and cultural meanings of masculinity as seen through the lens of virginity in Hanoi, Vietnam. Traditionally, masculine status and prestige were based significantly upon marriage to a virgin; cultural change now indicates some degree of shifting emphasis in this cultural domain. However, as the data and narratives from field study reveal, virginity remains a highly prized and sensitive topic both for women and men – for whom masculinity is typically still defined critically by virtue of marriage to a virgin.

The following personal account partly explains my interest in conducting this study. My cousin, Van, was a young beautiful woman who was 25. She was born in a poor village in a northern province of Vietnam. Finishing high school in 1994, Van migrated to a small town in the same province and worked in a textile garment factory. She was a virgin. During that time, she fell in love with a co-worker, and she experienced her first intimate sexual encounter. The couple was happy together until they were split up by the man's mother who insisted on not allowing her son to marry a poor country woman. A few months later, through the introduction of her uncle, Van met Nam, her uncle's close friend. Two months later, they decided to marry. A week after their wedding, Van returned to her family with serious bruises all over her body. She was bitten and tortured by her husband on the wedding night -- until she confessed that she previously had engaged in sexual relations with her former boyfriend. Nam condemned her for not being a virgin. She "cheated" on him, he said, and "shamed his family."

This sad story is not the only one I have heard, and it urged me to ask: What does virginity mean to Vietnamese men? Why does virginity continue to be so important to

them? What would happen to women if they are not virgins? With this concern, I went back Vietnam in July 2004 and conducted this study for six months. This study is my master thesis in Human Sexuality Studies at San Francisco State University.

## **Background**

Vietnam is located in the Indochinese peninsula in Southeast Asia, with a population of about 82 million in an area of 330,000 square kilometers. Before Vietnam was identified as a country on the World Map, this region experienced a thousand years of ups and downs: Chinese occupation for over a thousand years, wars against invasions from outside, prosperity and decline of dynasties, and the colonization of the French. Vietnam was formally declared an independent nation in 1945 by former by two wars against the French and the United States (1945-1975), a socio-economic crisis (1976-1985) and the economic renovation, which started in 1986, causing radical economic and social changes.

The country's population is very young. Over a half of Vietnam's population is under 25 years old; 21% of the total population is between 15 and 24 (General Statistics Organization, 2000). The legal age for marriage is 20 for men and 18 for women. Young people living in rural areas tend to get married earlier than those in urban areas (Hong, 2003). A number of recent studies show that a proportion of young, unmarried people become involved in sexual activities. One in three single urban males (33.9%) aged 22-25 reported premarital sex activity, as compared with only 3.6% of their female counterparts. This pattern occurs again in the rural older males aged 22-25: rural males reported at 26.1% and females 3.2% (Ministry of Health, 2004). The abortion rate is extremely high among young women in general and among unmarried youth in



particular. About one-third of all pregnancy terminations each year are among young, unmarried women group (around 300,000 procedures) in early 1990s (Vietnam Youth Union, 1994). This indicates a serious problem of unwanted pregnancy and unprotected sexual intercourse among young Vietnamese.

This study was conducted in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam. The city is situated in the north of the country with three million people in an area of 920.07 sq kilometers. Hanoi is the political, economical, cultural, scientific center, and it is an important transport connecting point of the country. Hanoi has thousand years of cultural history. It is famous for its lakes, parks, the old-quarter, French-style villas, tree-lined boulevards, museums, coffee shops, and a cosmopolitan range of bars and restaurants. Home to nineteen state universities and colleges, it has been the biggest center of education in the north.

During the course of my field work, I visited six universities: Hanoi University of Technology, National Economics University, National University of Hanoi - School of Foreign Language, University of Foreign Trade, Hanoi University of Culture, and Open University. Each is located in a different area of the city. Five out of the six universities were established in late 1950s and early 1960s, and they are run by the government. The Open University was established recently, and it is a government-public university. Unlike in the United States, if Vietnamese students want to attend university after high school, they all have to pass the national test, which is held on the same day nation-wide. This exam is very competitive, and only the most talented students are selected. The rest of the competitors may choose colleges or vocational schools with lower requirements.

### **Meanings of virginity**

In Vietnamese, virginity is *Trinh tiet*. The word *Trinh tiet* is a combination of two words. *Trinh* means the hymen, the membrane that partially or completely covers the vaginal opening. *Tiet* carries more than one meaning, including pureness, chastity, and moral integrity. The word virginity in Vietnamese is commonly understood to contain two components: the biological part of a woman's body, and her moral attributes, which are socially constructed.

Looking at the history and culture of Vietnam, one can see the reciprocal relationship between masculinity, virginity and Confucianism. Patriarchy, social status and the power of men in Vietnam are based upon traditional Confucianism beliefs. *Truyen Kieu*, one of the most famous poems in Vietnam, written by the great poet Nguyen Du in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, retold the life of Kieu, a beautiful and talented woman, who suffered a hard life. To rescue her father, Vuong Ong, from imprisonment, Kieu decided to sell her body. Her life went through ups and downs as a prostitute, a concubine, and a widow. But eventually she was accepted by her lover without being judged for her lost virginity. In the conversation between Kieu and Kimtrung, her fiancé, Kieu shares:

*Virginity is priceless,  
I would not be ashamed if we had got married* (Nguyen Du, 1996: canto 3095)

*(Chữ trinh đáng giá nghìn vàng,  
Đuốc hoa chẳng thẹn với chàng mai xua)*

This poem suggests, in traditional belief, that being a virgin is an absolute requirement for a young woman as she enters married. Even today, this belief is still widely accepted among young women and their parents. A recent study about how Vietnamese youth learn about sexuality (Oanh, 2004) pointed that saving virginity until

marriage is the norm to be a good woman in Vietnam. For example, “saving woman’s life” is a common phrase that parents teach unmarried young daughters about saving their virginity. This indicates that virginity is seen as the most valuable asset of a young woman, and the issue of virginity is not only men’s concern, but also the concern of young women and their parents. “Wise in three years, stupid in one hour” is a common folk saying used for women who lost their virginity before marriage. It also demonstrates how easy it is for a woman to strive toward remaining a virgin, but have her resolve collapse at last minute (Oanh, 2004: 15-16).

The struggle between understanding virginity as a biological factor and as a moral attribute means that virginity carries a variety of meanings that make its exact meaning hard to define. For example, in *Truyen Kieu* (Nguyen Du, 1996: canto 3095), on the one hand virginity is defined “priceless” by Kieu, but, on the other hand, it is defined differently by her fiancé, *Kim Trong*, as the filial piety that the daughter sacrificed for her father.

*There are several ways to be a virgin,  
It can be changed in extraordinary circumstances.  
In crisis must one right rule apply?  
Like she chose to be the daughter with filial piety* (Nguyen Du, 1996: canto 3115)

*(Xưa nay trong đạo đàn bà,  
Chữ trinh kia cũng có ba bảy đường,  
Có khi biến có khi thường,  
Có quyền nào phải một đường chấp kinh .  
Nhu nàng lấy hiếu làm trinh)*

Being a virgin in order to be perceived as a morally “good” woman is a fundamental tenet of Confucianism. This ideology deeply influences Vietnamese culture. The four virtues of virgin women include domestic skills (Công), beauty (Dung), calm speech (Ngôn), and virtuous character (Hạnh). In the past, to recognize if a woman was a

virgin, the blood shed on a handkerchief after the sexual intercourse of the couple on the wedding night is used as the only proof. This traditional custom indicates that people define virginity by the hymen status.

Even today, traditional Confucian thought remains popular in Vietnam. According to the Military Assistance Command Vietnam Office of Information (1968), “Confucianism today retains a deep influence on Vietnamese people and its effects go far beyond religion, touching on behavior, the arts, and craft forms.” The traditional Confucian nature of gender roles between men and women propagated a segregated social system in which men retain a social role while women serve in a domestic role. Specifically, the three submissions (*tam tòng*), and the four virtues (*tứ đức*) in Confucianism relegate women to domestic affairs only. According to the three submissions, a woman owes obedience to her father before marriage, to her husband after marriage, and to her oldest son after her husband's death. In the four feminine virtues (*Công, Dung, Ngôn, Hạnh*), virginity is defined as a default notion that every young woman should maintain as the way to protect their social reputation.

Today, many people continue to misunderstand the relationship between virginity and femininity in Vietnam. To them, being a virgin is the overlap between the biological (the hymen) and the social (moral attributes). In tradition, which is heavily influenced by Confucianism, virginity is the most valuable asset of a young woman. However, the signal to recognize a virgin woman is based only on the hymen as a proof. In the old days, in the wedding night, the groom was given a white handkerchief, and he would show it to his parents the next morning with few blood-drops as the proof of his having a virgin bride. If there was no blood on the handkerchief, the woman would suffer many

disadvantages, and shame. She was regarded as bad luck, and became a shameful wife. In some families, at the ceremony on the second day of wedding, the new couple would visit the bride's family with a pig head as a gift. If the bride is not a virgin, the husband's family would give the pig head with a cut ear, which was a signal to shame the bride family that they had a bad daughter (Huong, 2003: 134). This also indicated that marrying a virgin woman is a man's desire and his family's as well. However, this belief exposed a misunderstanding of how virginity is lost when it is equated with the idea of taking blood-drops as the only proof of virginity. According to the World Health Organization (1995), "The hymen is sometimes torn or broken when a virgin woman or woman has her first penetrative intercourse/encirclement, but can also be done on inserting objects into the vagina such as tampons, and spontaneously upon strenuous exercises etc." This statement clearly explains a variety of ways which a woman's hymen may be lost. It also implies that the first penetrative intercourse is not the only way to measure a woman's virginity. This misconception may lead women to be victims of social judgment, family break-up, lost reputation, and so on.

### **Contemporary meanings of masculinity**

Traditionally, to be of high social status in Vietnam, men must be perceived of and behave as masculine. Because patriarchy created superior status for men, it affected the cultural beliefs and practices that informed their conduct, public and private. For instance, the meanings "good", "desirable", and "preferable" are embedded in masculinity, but not in femininity. To be considered a successful man in Vietnamese tradition, several critical perceptions and meanings of masculinity come into play. A man must achieve three big things: getting married and have as many sons as he can,

building his own house, and owning a buffalo – the main labor force for agricultural cultivation (Hong, 1996: 14:24).

Confucius considered women (except one's mother) subordinate to men. His teaching was only for men. This has had profound impact on society, resulting in a preference for sons that is still present today (Belanger 2002: 321:324). In many rural areas, the father and his sons are served with better meals in the family. They often have meals in the sitting room while their wife and daughters have meals in the kitchen with less nutritious food. Men who do not have a son will lose face or be ridiculed when they get together with other men. Sometimes they are not even allowed to sit and talk with their male peers who have sons in the same meal tray. Instead, they are seated with women and children as the way to ridicule their reputation. Having a son is not only to carry the family name, but also serves as proof that the family has many blessings. It enhances the social status of the wife. In some cases, if the wife cannot have a son for her husband, to gain the status, she has to marry a concubine for the husband to produce the son (Hong, 1996: 15).

According to folk wisdom, drinking and smoking are both symbols of masculinity. "Men without drinking are like the flag without the wind." This is a view that is often used to encourage men to gain masculinity or to shame men who can not drink. There are also a number of Vietnamese films using the image of women who smoke to refer to them as bad women, prostitutes, or gangsters.

In terms of sexuality, a Vietnamese folk saying goes: "A successful man has five to seven wives, a good-mannered woman should have just one husband." This indicates the power that men have over women in marriage. This norm resulted from polygamy in

the past. Before the Revolution in 1945, it was legal for men to marry as many wives as they wanted, given that Confucian teaching discourages sex outside marriage. In rural areas, sex outside marriage became more serious, particularly for women, when it was uncovered. Although men were criticized, they were able to return to a normal life (Hong, 1998: 25). Today, men often use the term “rice” (cơm) and “noodle” (phở) to draw a distinction between a wife and a lover, the women who engage in two separate forms of sexual relations: sex inside or outside marriage. “Cơm” – the main food Vietnamese eat everyday, refers to sexual intimacy with a wife; “Phở” – eaten only sometimes, and changeable, refers to sex outside marriage with a lover, which is believed to bring men pride, and maleness. Sex outside marriage among married heterosexual men is so frequent as to be the norm.

Homosexuality is not seen as masculine in Vietnamese culture. In the past, information about homosexuality was limited, indicating that homosexuality has largely been ignored by Vietnamese society (Hong, 1998: 46). There are many slang terms used to refer to a gay man in Vietnamese; these men are not seen as masculine. For example, ‘half male, half female’ (nửa đực nửa cái) or ‘half fuel, half oil’ (xăng pha nhớt) are two common slang terms. Recently, homosexuality has been addressed in mass media; however there exist many misconceptions and controversies about this issue. Today, homosexuality is still defined as a “mental disease” by public media, local authorities, and film producers. Many newspapers assert that the “gay disease” can be cured.

The image of masculinity in Vietnam is influenced and shaped by profoundly cultural and historical forces. One can see power exposed in many layers of cultural norms relating to sexuality, which define the privileges that men inherit, and the

disadvantages that women face. On the international level, it is proved that men occupy dominant positions in almost all societies. In various social institutions—family, law, social norms, religion—power operates to ensure that authority remains in the hands of men. As a result, women have been subjects to be repressed and controlled. In terms of sexuality:

“The traditional hold on power that men have had over the span of history has contributed to their greater sexual freedom while, at the same time, instituting deeply rooted gender based inequalities that have placed women in a disadvantageous position in the home, the workplace, in access to resources and negating key entitlements that confer power of decision and action" (Mundigo, 2000: 325).

To address this inequality, in 1994, the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo recommended that it is essential to assert the rights to self-determination in all matters concerning bodies and sexuality and to correct inequality between sexes (Correa, 1997: 107-116).

In short, this study gives the researcher an opportunity to learn how cultural norms shape gender roles, especially how men look at female virginity as a factor which enhances their masculinity.

### **Virginity across cultures**

Masculinity varies widely across cultures. So too does the relationship between masculinity, virginity, and cultural power. Female virginity is also the concern of men in many parts of the world and at different periods of time, acquiring various meanings. Kimmel et al (1998: xx) writes: “Men are not born; they are made. And men make



themselves, actively constructing their masculinities within a social and historical context.” Because masculinity is socially constructed, it carries different meanings in different social contexts over time. Generally, masculinity refers to the traits, characteristics, roles and responsibilities of males (Dalisay et al, 2000: 16).

In terms of sexuality, masculinity defines a number of traits and characteristics. The recent research conducted by the Population Council, India (2004: 9) pointed out that men in Mumbai believe that good looks, a muscular body and penis size are crucial physical attributes of masculinity because those attributes help men attract women and enhance sexual prowess, which sexually satisfies women. In other words, sexual potency is an issue in masculinity.

Sexual potency is manifested in two qualities: sexual prowess and sexual performance. With sexual prowess, masculinity is equated with how frequent or how many sexual relations a man has. In many cultures, having more than one sex partner is considered a norm for men. In 1995, the World Health Organization conducted a study in 18 countries, and the results showed that in all those countries surveyed men had more sexual partners than women. This behaviour appears to be true of every culture.

Although masculinity indicates the power that men hold, it is very fragile. Kaufman (1987: 8) writes: “Although maleness and masculinity are highly valued, men are everywhere unsure of their own masculinity and maleness, whether consciously or not.” With sexual performance, what makes a man male is his penis and what he can do with it (Castro 1995: 52, 127-142), such as: the size of the penis, the time that a man can last during sexual intercourses, the aggressiveness dominating sexual intimacy, even the frequency of “impregnating their wives” in some cultures (Jurilla 1986: 19, 5-17).

Masculinity is not only based on physical traits, but also on personality characteristics, such as being brave, honest, and gentle with women (Javier 1980: 9). For example, when discussing the double standard between men and women in the history of sexuality in America in 1930s, D'Emilio and Freedman (1997: 184-186) illustrated in a number of examples that white young women had to keep their virginity untouched to preserve their chastity and purity before marriage. Men at that time tended to experience sex early but they did not accept the same of women. "They didn't love you but were just testing because they only plan to marry a virgin and wanted to see if you'd go all the way." That is the confidence of a sixteen year old about the man she slept with and who got her pregnant after seducing her (D'Emilio and Freedman 1997: 262).

In a recent study conducted in Northern Tanzania, Africa, Setel (1999: 110) writes: "For women, losing one's virginity was called *-vunja bikira*, 'to break the hymen,' but most women referred to the episode by saying that they were 'taught sex,' *nilifundishwa sexi*. Men referred to their entry into sexual life simply by saying that they 'started to sex' (*-anza kusexi* or *-anza kufanya mapenzi*) at a certain age." This understanding of virginity exposes the important meaning of the first sexual intercourse. It does seem to apply moral value to measure the quality of the woman. Interestingly, in the same way, men in Tanzania express their masculinity with other peers through having sexual conquests.

In Gujarat, India, the virginity of an unmarried woman is not only her concern, but the concern of her family as well. Her family's honor and reputation hinge upon her virginity. If she engaged in premarital sex with her boyfriend, she must do it in the strictest privacy and avoid conception; otherwise it will affect the woman's

marriagability (Verma et al, 2004: 228). The study in Mumbai, India showed that men do value virginity of the prospective wife (Verma et al, 2004: 341). Also, in the South of Asia, women found various ways to maintain virginity. For example, female youth in Indian-derived populations in Mauritius sometimes allowed their lovers to insert their penises partly into the vaginal canal, but not deep enough to break the hymen (Schensul et al., 1995). Practicing *gal kapanawa* (putting penis between two thighs) as a way to protect virginity among female youth in Sri Lanka is addressed in the article “Love, sex and peer activity in a sample of youth in Sri Lanka” written by Silva et al (1998: 34-52).

In Southeast Asia, Reid notes that female virginity was regarded as a major factor in marriage in several areas (Reid, 1988: 154). This finding is also confirmed in the study of Simon and Paxton (2004: 400) which expressed that beliefs about virginity before marriage are bounded by religious factors and social norms. This study also pointed out that although premarital sex is becoming accepted as a reality among young adults, choosing non-intercourse to avoid pregnancy and loss of female virginity is widely accepted among young people.

Going back to the question of my thesis, the limitation of the studies to which I referred is that virginity has not been addressed in those studies as a factor that enhances masculinity. Most of the documents looked at virginity as a default notion and reflected the attitudes about virginity amongst different groups of young people. Some other researches regarded the variety of ways to protect virginity among women.

In order to support my argument, I will present the results gained from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with students in Hanoi to examine the role that

female virginity plays both in protecting masculinity and in making masculinity more fragile.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Sixteen male and four female students, aged from 19 to 23, from six universities in Hanoi, Vietnam were recruited for in-depth interviews. Four focus group discussions with six to nine male students per group were conducted at four university dormitories in Hanoi.

### **Recruitment Procedure**

The first eight participants in in-depth interviews were recruited through personal introduction by the researcher's cousins. The following cases were recruited by the interviewed informants' recommendations using snow-ball method where participants recommend new participants. All the selected participants for the in-depth interviews must meet the criteria as single, preferred junior university students, and aged 19-23. In order to have a more diverse group of informants, I recruited students from four different groups: (1) students who were living in dormitories and majoring in technologies; (2) students who were living in dormitories and majoring in social sciences; (3) students who were living off-campus with parents in Hanoi and majoring in technologies; and (4) students who were living off-campus with parents in Hanoi and majoring in social sciences.

### **In-depth interviews**

The in-depth interviews took place in locations chosen by the participants. The interviewer would also suggest a location to meet for the occasion. The interviews were held at cafeterias, parks or the researcher's house. Each interview lasted approximately one and a half hours. For one participant, I had a follow-up interview to finish the

interview. During the in-depth interview, participants, who lived in dormitories, were requested to arrange a focus group with their room members in dormitories or members of other room that they can introduce. Typical questions asked of participants included: (1) Can you describe your ideal wife? (2) Is virginity a criterion of your future wife? (3) What does your wife's virginity mean to you? (4) How would you react if your potential wife were not a virgin?

### **Focus group discussions**

Focus group discussions were carried out in the dormitory. Dormitories in Vietnam house around ten participants per room (using bunk beds). For that reason, the focus group took place in the rooms where students were housed. Each focus group lasted one hour. Three interview participants also participated in the focus groups while the rest of the focus group participants had not been interviewed. Interviews were guided by some questions from the focus group. Typical questions included: (1) What does the virginity of your prospective wives mean to you? (2) How do you define a virgin woman? (3) Why is virginity important or not important to you?

### **Consent**

Before starting the interviews and focus group discussions, informants were told the purpose of the study. Consent forms were given to, and signed by all interviewees. During the focus group discussions, all participants verbally agreed not to share the information produced during the discussion. The researcher gave each participant a paper card to put a number on, and group participants used the given number instead of their real names during the discussion time.

## **Compensation**

All informants participated in in-depth interviews received 50,000 Vietnam dong (equal to 3 U.S. dollars) as compensation. For the focus group discussions, fruits, candies, and soft drinks were provided by the researcher as gifts for their participation.

## **Analysis**

All in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed by two professional transcriptionists. All names and contact information were removed for the transcriptions. The researcher read all transcripts and developed a thematic framework for coding and analysis. Coding was undertaken based on the context of the transcribed text. Using grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) when discussing a particular finding, the researcher aims to convey the degree of consensus, portray the predominant opinion (where there is one), and indicate the distribution of views on the topic. Verbatim quotes are used to illustrate particular points. Pseudonyms replace actual names to protect confidentiality.

## **The researcher's position**

In this study I was identified as a heterosexual, educated, married man. I found that my position, as a heterosexual man, gave me an advantage in building rapport with male informants. Being a married person, I was seen as an adult with experience in love and sexuality which made informants in general and males in particular feel more comfortable when addressing the topic of sexuality. Additionally, being a researcher who is studying sexuality allowed me to express my serious expectation from them to share information with me.

## Findings

In this section, I am going to present the main findings of my research drawn upon my informants' narratives. Findings focused on four main topic sections, including: (1) the cultural meanings of the female virginity, (2) virginity and positive outcomes, (3) virginity and negative outcomes, (4) and ambiguity.

First of all, there existed different perceptions about female virginity and the cultural meanings of virginity. Obviously, the definition of female virginity overlaps between having an intact hymen and the moral attributes of a woman. The moral aspect of virginity played a crucial role in informant's perceptions; it relates to a variety of characteristics that men applied to define a virgin woman, such as: faithfulness, purity, self-control, respectfulness, and the 'default' heritage of being a 'good woman'. Men only value the virginity of the women who they consider as potential wives. For other relations (friendships or prostitution), virginity is not a concern.

Both male and female informants suggested that being a virgin is a must, which was well defined in the four virtues, of a traditional Vietnamese woman. Nevertheless, some of them expressed that virginity is less valued by young people today. This resulted from many reasons. One of the most common reasons is that premarital sex becomes a more accepted notion causing the decline of virginity value to some degree. The one who values virginity is judged as a selfish and narrow-minded person by this group of informants. Another point shown in this section is that virginity has been applied as a meaning only to women, not to men. That is why many informants of my study call the term 'male virginity' a 'weird' phrase. The last point in this section is that most informants suggested not having sexual relations before marriage to keep the hymen



untouched. However, there was one male informant who practiced cunnilingus as a way to maintain his partner's virginity.

Secondly, the positive outcomes of having sex with a virgin are male spiritual connection. All of male informants said they would be happy to marry a virgin wife. Some of men were unable to explain the reasons. Others expressed that sex with a virgin would satisfy their desires for conquest, which bring them pride and self-confidence. Additionally, to prove that a wife is a virgin will dispel male uncertainty about her virginity and reconfirm male ownership of a 'good woman'. Noticeably, for some business men, having sex with a virgin is believed to bring luck for their business development, according to on of my male informants.

Thirdly, men in both interviews and focus groups have two distinct attitudes and expectations towards female virginity. For the first group that highly values virginity, it is hard to accept a 'non-virgin' wife. This attitude has a negative impact on their relationships with non-virgin woman, which results in the decision to not marry such women. For these men, marrying a 'non-virgin' woman would harm their own, and their family's, social reputation. The other group that values virginity less accepts and "forgives" woman who lose their virginity. However, there are different degrees of their acceptance. If the woman lost her hymen because of an accident, being raped, and men all said they can understand and tolerate this. Some in this group can also "forgive" if a woman had sex with her ex-boyfriend, providing that she can persuade him that sex with her ex-boyfriend was a 'mistake' that happened in an unexpected situation. However, these men tend not to accept women who engaged in serious sexual relations with more than one partner. Women who have lost their hymens may face a hard time. They are

looked down on by peers, family, and community. This puts women at a disadvantage, preventing them from expanding relationships with outsiders, and limiting their opportunities for marriage.

Lastly, men, especially those who highly value their female partner's virginity, struggle with the uncertainty of defining virginity. Asking their partners directly if they are virgins is considered rude and insensitive. Some believe that having sex before marriage is the way to define virginity. However, for some others, premarital sex is not their own desire, so they cannot determine the virginity stage. Another discussion that makes them uncertain about their wife's virginity is the availability of surgical hymen reconstruction. Following is a thorough discussion of each of these topics.

### **Cultural values of virginity**

Female virginity is defined differently among different informants. In the literal sense, virginity is understood as the state of the hymen being untouched, and sexual abstinence. In the figurative sense, it refers to a numbers of moral attributes of the woman, such as: purity, faithfulness, dignity, the respect she gives to her husband, and her self-control. Some informants distinguished two aspects of virginity; some just referred to the biological meaning (the hymen untouched); some others looked at the figurative sense of virginity as interpreting the woman's moral value. Here is how my informants defined virginity as the combination of two aspects: the hymen, and moral values.

*The word virginity is combined by two single words: Trinh- the hymen is belonging to the physical body, and Tiet- is her dignity. (Male, 21, FGD1)*

*I look at virginity from two angles: biological and social ones. Biologically, virginity is the hymen that is not broken. From the social angle, it manifests the*

*innocence of a woman, the strict self-control in relation with peers, and the self-value of that woman. (Male, 19, from Thanhhoa, FGD2)*

Some other informants defined virginity as the unbroken status of the hymen. For example:

*To be honest, in my understanding, virginity is the hymen which is the very thin film in vagina that can easily be broken, that's all! (Female, 22, OU, Interview)*

There is one male student who defined virginity as the stage of never having sex as the following.

*The perception of virginity is different among persons; to me it is never having sex. (Male 22, from Nghean, FGD1)*

To explain the moral values of virginity, some informants used examples taken from cultural norms or a historical story.

*I think virginity is very important as it is the chastity of a woman which is formed in the four virtues of a Vietnamese woman. (Male, 21, from Hatinh, FGD1)*

The following narrative was mentioned by a male student in focus group number one that the moral value of virginity was not only applied for young women before marriage, but also for widows and women who did not marry.

*In the old days, women who passed the marriageable age, or widows but stayed lonely to raise their children, they were conferred a kind of honor title.  
(Male, 22, from Haiphong, FGD1)*

Using the image of *Kieu*, the main character of the most famous poem titled *Truyen Kieu*, written by *Nguyen Du* in 18<sup>th</sup> century, to emphasis the psychological perception of virginity rather than the hymen, *Duong*, a female, 22, from Hanoi, said:

*A woman has two kind of virgin, one is physical and one is spiritual. Why Kim Trong still accepted Thuy Kieu, who was put in many different brothels? Questioning you that, if he appreciated her hymen, she (the character) would die for thousand times. Of course Thuy Kieu didn't reunion with Kim Trong, but he*

*opened his arms, the family still accepted her and their love. This is the virgin of the soul!* (Female, 22, Open University, Interview)

Virginity is understood as the ability of self-control of a woman, which is believed to be an attribute of a good woman. The following was said by a male student, (21, from Quang Ninh province, NEU, interview). Interestingly, he mentioned that smoking and drinking among women, which is masculine, is not acceptable.

*Virginity means two things. First it is the woman, who knows how to protect her hymen. Second, it is her characteristic meaning that she's good woman, from a good family. A virgin woman is the one, who knows how to control herself, I mean she's a mature views on love. A bad woman, who indulges in pleasure like smokes and drinks, but maintains her hymen, her virginity is devalued.*

Being a virgin is important for both men and women because of a variety of social and cultural meanings that virginity carries. The most common meaning addressed in both interviews and focus group is that being a virgin manifests the woman's ability for sexual and social self-control, which guarantees faithfulness and makes a 'good woman'. Virginity is believed to be the most valuable asset of a woman, and once she loses it, she loses her "whole life."

*Remaining a virgin manifests the lifestyle of a woman – a good, energetic lifestyle which helps her overcome daily life lures. Admittedly, love is to give, but it is in control. If a woman can not control herself from the lure, she will lose her woman-life. For instance, in your married life, if you live far from your wife, like in the army for years, if the wife can not control herself, cannot keep her faith with her husband, sleeping with others can be foreseen definitely. Once the wife loses it (faithfulness), the same mistake can happen again. That makes the husband upset.*

(Male, from Haiphong, FGD3)

Thuy is a female student, 20 years old, from a small town in the north-east province. Born in a family whose parents are teachers, she was taught to appreciate the cultural value of virginity. For her, being a virgin is the most important thing for a young woman, regardless of time or age. She said:

*Admittedly, men today may have a generous view, but they still value the virginity of their lover. In the eyes of a man, being a virgin means serious love, and respect that the woman presents him. It also reflects the dignity and the personality of the woman.*

(Female, 20, interview)

**In the old days, people valued virginity more** Since the mid-1980s, the government of Vietnam carried out the renovation policy, which brought significant changes in many spheres of society: economy, culture, and society. Many social norms have been challenged with new concepts from outside. In terms of sexuality, a number of recent studies show that premarital sex, which was unacceptable in the past, has become more accepted by young people today. In this study, many informants told me that the way they look at virginity is less important than it used to be. Here is what a young male student said:

*In the past, virginity was very holy. If a man sees a woman body when she is bathing, that can be called virginity lost. But now people would call virginity lost when the sexual intercourse happens (có quan hê).*

(Male, 21, from Hanam, UFL Interview)

A few informants believe that valuing the virginity of their prospective wife is not proper at present. He said:

*In the old days, a woman must be a virgin before being married to be accepted by the husband's side. Loosing virginity meant that she was a bad woman. Times have changed, we also change in perception. I would call someone who values virginity now a selfish guy.* (Male, 23, University of Geology, Interview)

However, some others disagreed with the above statement. For them, even though there have been changes in attitudes toward virginity among young people, it does not mean virginity loses its value. This is what a male student in the focus group 2 said:

*According to the old conception, virginity was something the most precious of a woman, it meant everything. Nowadays, it's not everything but other aspects still cannot make a shadow on it. For someone who has a backward thinking like me*

*under the influence of my family, my living circumstances, traditional thinking, if virginity hasn't kept totally 10 parts of its value, it is still an 8 in my views.*

(Male, 2 year student, FGD2)

During my interviews, I attempted to find the connection and similarity among the men who highly valued virginity and those men who valued it less, by looking at their family style, the sub-culture of the settings where they were raised, lived, and the sexual experiences that they have had. However, I did not find commonalities. This reflected the ties of cultural values among informants from different cultural background and settings. I am going to give two specific examples to illustrate this point. Kim and Doan were both male informants of my interviews. Kim was born and raised in the Thai ethnic minority family in the Central Vietnam, which is a very poor and remote area. In Kim's village, every adult man will marry a virgin. If the woman is not a virgin, there will be very limited chances for her to be in love with a young boy. Even though Kim has never been in love with a woman, he strongly believed that his future wife must be a virgin. It would be unacceptable for him to have a non-virgin wife. He said,

*Marrying a virgin will meet my expectations, which means she is the one who loves me only, who is faithful, and gives 'her body' to me. Being a virgin wife also makes me love and respects her, which would encourage me to build my own family happiness. (Male, 23, from Nghean, Thai minority, interview)*

Unlike Kim, Doan was born in a well-off family in the city of Hanoi. The relationship between family members in his family is very open and friendly. After high school, Doan was sent to New Zealand to study English for a year, where he learned a lot from Western culture. Doan used to love and practice sex with a few young women. They were all virgins before getting to know each other. Doan highly values the virginity of his prospective wife even he acknowledges that the double standard is unfair for women. He said:

*Sometimes I cannot understand why I want a virgin wife; it means I don't want my wife sleeping with any guys before me. I think I am selfish, I mean even though I would have sex with someone else, I still require my wife a virgin. I think the Asian characteristic is still flowing in my blood.*

(Male, 23, from Hanoi, interview)

**Virginity is an unfair, selfish, and unacceptable value** Despite the fact that many informants expressed the importance of female virginity, there existed controversial, debatable arguments about whether men should value virginity in modern society. Both the interviews and the focus group discussions conducted with men showed that there were different levels of concern among men about virginity. Interviews with female students also showed that two out of four supported the arguments, while the rest disagreed.

*They (men) are definitely selfish. When they value virginity, it means they have a goal in their mind, and they don't care about love. When a man is in love with a woman, who lost her virginity, he should understand for what reason the woman lost it; does it mean she is a bad woman? I think the reason that they value virginity is resulted from patriarchal time, from the Vietnamese customs.*

(Female, 23, from Quangninh, interview)

**How far does virginity extend in men's relationships with women?** Most of the answers I got from FGDs, and in-depth interviews pointed that men only care about the virginity of the women who they seriously thought about marrying. In other words, they tended not to value the virginity of the women used for 'having fun', for friendship, or for prostitution.

*Only when a man considers love with a woman seriously and intends to marry her, he will care about her virginity. If a man loves a woman just for having fun, he doesn't care about that.* (Female, 22, from Hanoi, interview)

*I know that prostitutes are not virgins, having sex with them is just to meet my sexual desire; I know there is no love there, so why should I care about her virginity?* (Male, 23, from Hanoi, interview)

**Is oral sex a good way for a woman to retain virginity?** Oral sex (fellatio and cunnilingus) was not an unfamiliar term for the male students that I interviewed. During my visits to a number of university dormitories, it was very common for students to have a personal computer in their room, especially the ones who major in technology. Besides using the computer for the purpose of study, it was pointed out that informants used their computers to watch pornographic films. Most male students said they used to watch pornographic films in their dormitory, and that they understood how oral sex worked. All informants from Hanoi were familiar with the term oral sex, which was learned from pornographic films. However, their attitudes toward oral sex as a way to maintain a woman's virginity were very different. Most informants living in dormitories were from rural areas and other towns outside Hanoi. This group strongly opposed oral sex. Many of them said it was dirty and disgusting to practice fellatio. This is what a male informant in focus group 1 said:

*I extremely oppose this action! First, think about the mouth, um, um, to me it is a beautiful thing. Admittedly, there are many bacteria in the palate, but it is used to produce nice words, so why can it be used to do such a dirty thing. Second, it is quite different from our habits and customs, our morals. To me it is incestuous, and never can I accept it. That way is useless as it's also unacceptable for the woman who does it. (Male, 19, from Hungyen, FGD2)*

One male informant shared that to maintain his prospective wife's virginity, he would rather have sex with other women than practice oral sex with her. He said:

*If doing it (oral sex) just to satisfy the sexual demand is not advisable, you can satisfy it in different ways with other women. God gives human being different organs for their own purposes, please use them with their given purposes.*  
(Male, 20, from Tuyen Quang, FGD2)

But for most informants from Hanoi, oral sex was not that bad. The term fellatio is very often called “thổi kèn”, in English this means playing saxophone. One male



student from Hanoi told me that having fellatio was the most wonderful sexual activity.

He said:

*I think playing fellatio is the most wonderful sexual activity because the mouth brings the most satisfaction. I know that kissing on lips, ears, or shoulders are also wonderful, but kissing on the most important part – my penis - must be the most wonderful. (Male, 23, from Hanoi, UOT, interview)*

One male student regretted that he was not able to have fellatio with a prostitute when he had sex with her. He said:

*I realized that I will get bored if there is only one position of having sex. I want to do different things, such as sitting, or standing positions. Last time, I really wanted her to 'play saxophone' on me, but she didn't. (Male, 22, from Hanoi, UOT, interview)*

There is one male informant from Hanoi who uses cunnilingus as an alternative sexual practice with his female partner to maintain her virginity. He explained that his girlfriend agreed to let him have sexual intercourse with her, but he did not want to do that. If they had sex, and were not able to marry for some reason, in the future she may meet a “conservative” guy who highly values virginity, and she would be in trouble.

*They do not make love, but they do oral sex or all kind of such things from up and down the bottom, then you tell me whether they are still virgin or not? (Female, 22, from Hanoi, interview)*

**Should men be virgins?** There existed double standards between men and women's virginity. Male virginity is widely perceived as “weird” by most participants. Many men said that men do not need to be virgins for a number reason. First, there is no discourse saying that men need to be virgins. Second, there is no sign to tell if a man is a virgin. Third, men are supposed to be sexually active, to be “sexual teachers” for their wives when they enter marriage. There were two students who agreed with the statement that men should be virgins, and that there existed double standards between men and women

regarding virginity. However, they agreed with others that virginity is something that is deeply rooted in Vietnamese culture, and it is hard to change the public opinion. Here is what my informants said:

*The un-equality is rooted from our long history. In the past and present, I only heard that a woman should be a virgin. I never heard anyone talking about male virginity. What I know is just that men should be well educated and successful in their career.* (Male, 22, from Hanoi, interview)

*In our culture, many older people think that men can have multiple wives that are why men do not need to be virgins. Male virginity does not indicate his moral value or stature. No one judges a man if he sleeps around with many women; if there is a case, the judgment is very little. If that happens to a woman, she will be condemned as a bad woman.* (Male, 22, FTU, FGD3)

Though male virginity does not exist in the culture, some informants were dissatisfied with the double standard regarding virginity because it creates inequality between men and women. Here is what a man in FGD3 said:

*I am discontent with the idea that men should not be virgin. For example, before marriage, the husband has sex with many women, but he hides those relations with his wife. But when he finds out that his wife is not a virgin, he tortured her. In my opinion, that is the injustice between men and women.*

(Male, 19, FTU, FGD3)

Kim, the Thai minority man, who highly values virginity, told me that men do not need to be virgins because:

*I think men do not need to maintain virginity. A man can have sex any time he wants providing that he does not do bad things. He does not lose anything when having sex. Losing a little semen is nothing. Meanwhile, losing virginity, a woman may face serious consequences.*

(Male, 23, from Nghean, Thai minority, interview)

Both Kim and Doan, the ones I mentioned earlier, who highly value virginity, also confirmed that male virginity is not necessary. To them, denying having sex with a “willing” woman will be ridiculed. Here is what they said:

*Men often say that if you don't have sex with her, you are a fool. If you are not the one who sleeps with her, there will be another guy who does, and then he will laugh at you as a duped guy. (Male, 23, from Nghean, interview)*

*When a man loves a woman, it's stupid if the man does not ask her for sex. I may question if something were wrong with him. (Male, 23, from Hanoi, interview)*

The findings brought up in this section reflect the various points of views that informants shared about the biological and cultural meanings of female virginity. In the next section, findings focus on the positive outcomes of marrying a virgin bride.

### **Virginity and positive outcomes**

In most of my interviews and focus groups with men, after building rapport, I asked the informant to describe his ideal wife to see if virginity was one of the attributes of his dream wife. Surprisingly, virginity was not really touched on during the discussion or during interviews. Most male informants expected to marry a traditional woman. They admired faithfulness, gentleness, and respect as characteristics of their dream wives. The topic of virginity was brought up only when I provoked them by asking the following question: When you describe attributes of your prospective wives, it seemed to me that your wives' virginity is not important to you any longer? Men responded to the question with different attitudes: some expressed that they highly value the virginity of their prospective wives, while some do not. However, none expressed that they hate or dislike virginity. In contrast, all men agreed that having a virgin wife made them feel happy. A man from Thanh Hoa province said in his interview that he does not care about his future wife's virginity, but it is still important. Another male informant said in the FGD2 that:

*The idea that virginity is not important is the trend of the Western world. In my opinion, in the Orient, that trend has also started. However, in the university environment like this, marrying a virgin is a matter of course. But from my*

*observations, I have found no man who doesn't want a virgin wife. I'm aware of that trend, but still no one accept it. I think if you do a survey on male students in this University about their opinion of this issue, I am sure that nearly no or only few guys can accept a non-virgin wife. (Male, 19, from Hanam, FGD2)*

Not only did men express their happiness with marrying virgins but they also expressed their joy when having sex with virgins.

**'De-flowering' – the sexual conquest** Sexual conquest brings men the feeling of ownership over a woman's body. To explain, one male informant used the image of 'eating a new cake' to express his view:

*I think, first because men demand sex too much, they don't want just to 'eat' (means have sex) one thing, but many. Second, deep inside men's heart, they are still selfish and influenced by the Oriental tradition. So when they demand something, they want to own it forever. It must be new, and of course fresher than the one taken by others. Do you like to eat a fresh, new cake or you want the one which is already eaten by someone else? (Male, 23, from Hanoi, interview)*

When a man reveals that his woman is a virgin, it reconfirms his belief that she is a good and satisfying woman. One male student said:

*When I was with my girlfriend, I touched her body but never had we had sex. Once I touched down there, she removed my hand. I did not feel angry, but excited, because I believe that she is still a virgin; and she is a good woman. (Male, 22, UOT, from Hanoi, interview)*

I asked my informants: "If the first sex may hurt the woman, how come the hurt brings you satisfaction?" Most informants responded that no matter how difficult it may be for the couple in the first sexual intercourse, they felt happy about it because it met their desire for conquest, clarified their doubts of unfaithfulness, and confirmed and enhanced their maleness. One informant said:

*Having sex with a virgin brings us a wonderful feeling, even the first time we may have some 'problems'. That's what my mind, my soul feels. The hurt is only physical, but I will feel secured, I will never have to mind of it, more than wonderful. (Male, 23, from NgheAn, FGD1)*

In the case below, Manh, a 23 year-old male student, shared with me that his woman friend initiated sex first, and this made him doubt her virginity. However, when he saw blood, his opinion was totally changed. He said:

*At the beginning, I had thought she is not a virgin because she initiated sex. Later, I saw blood on the bed sheet; I realized that hers is still untouched; I felt sorry as I made a wrong assumption about her. Indeed, I was very happy at the moment. I can guarantee you that all men feel the same way I did.*

(TMH, 23, Interview, Off Campus)

The first sexual intercourse may hurt, but it is a temporary feeling. One man said:

*If you have sex with a virgin woman, you will be very happy. The issue of hurt is not a big deal because the first step is the hardest!* (Group burst out laughing)

(Male, 19, from Hungyen, FGD2)

Minh, a 23 year-old male from Hanoi, experienced his first sexual intercourse with his woman friend when he was in high school. He confessed that he was not satisfied with his first sexual experience because he was too young to acknowledge ‘the beauty’ brought by ‘de-flowering’ a virgin. He feels regretful, and he wants to buy female virginity when possible:

*I really want to have the feeling that de-flowering virginity brings. I think when I get rich I can buy it definitely. One time is enough just to satisfy my own desire.*

(NMQ, 23, From Hanoi, interview)

Purchase of virginity through commercial sex is seriously problematic, and results from the belief that deflowering teenage women (under 18 years old) brings men luck in business. Recently, a leader of the Vietnam Football Federation was caught having sex with a virgin woman who was under the age of 18. In my interviews, I asked if any of my informants believed in this practice. One male informant shared with me:

*The idea that deflowering a virgin woman brings good lucks to men exists in the business world, especially having sex with the virgin under 18, which means she is not old enough for sexual activity legally. It happens before or after a huge*

*business affair. I think the belief came from Chinese culture as they dominated our country for a long history.* (Male, 22, from Hanoi, interview)

One female informant acknowledged that there was a double standard between men and women in terms of virginity, but she felt that the contradiction was reasonable.

I asked: “Do you think that it is unacceptable when men tend to have sexual relations before marriage, but they want to marry a virgin wife?”

*Contradictions occur all the time in our society. When you find a solution for a contradiction, another one occurs. I agree with your statement, no doubt! but that is understandable. We are human beings; we can not get out of the cultural boundary regulated by a long history. That is a contradiction as many other ‘natural’ contradictions.* (Female, 20, from Quangninh, FLU, interview)

### **Virginity and negative outcomes**

What happens if a woman is not a virgin? How do men react to this situation? Informants had different reactions when asked how they would respond if their future wife were not a virgin. Responses are temporarily divided into two groups (objecting and tolerating). These responses are related to respondents’ attitudes on the virginity of their wives (highly valued vs. of lower value). The group that highly valued virginity found it hard to accept a ‘non-virgin’ wife. Such a situation would result in the end of their relationship. Meanwhile, the group that valued virginity less expressed their tolerance of the situation and said that they would accept the woman. Moreover, the specific circumstances causing hymen loss would be taken into account, which could affect the couple’s relationship. The following are narratives shared by male informants, and divided by point of views.

**I would never accept a ‘non-virgin’ wife** For those who would not accept a ‘non-virgin’ wife, ending the relationship is the solution. Each man had his own reasons to do

so. In the following case, the male informant said that virginity was his primary concern regardless of any justifications. He said:

*I highly value my wife's virginity, and I would definitely run away from the woman if she is not a virgin. Forgiveness will never happen in my love. Her virginity must be my first priority. She must be honest; otherwise she will take all consequences and responsibilities when I find out. (Male, 23, from Hung Yen, FGD1)*

Kim, the male informant whom I mentioned in the last section, provided his reason that:

*I can tell you straight away that her lost virginity would affect my family honor and my own reputation. I would never accept her if she had volunteered to lose it. (Male 23, from Nghean, Thai ethnicity, interview)*

Men will lose their social reputations because of rumors and ridicule from outsiders, family relatives, peers or neighbors. This ridicule will affect the relationship between the husband and his wife. This is what two informants said:

*There will be rumors or public opinions going on with the man whose wife is not a virgin. He will be upset. If someone says it in front of him, he will feel insulted because of getting married with her – a virgin-less wife. (Male, 19, from Hanam, interview)*

*The relation between husband and wife would suffered from the opinions of outsiders. For example, under the influence of the outsiders, when the husband hears something bad about his wife from outsiders, if they do not have a strong relationship, it would be very easy to make the family broken. (Male, 23, FGD2)*

Men believed that the hymen was the most valuable asset of a woman; once it was lost, it would decrease men's ability for sexual conquest and place their masculinity in a vulnerable state. This male informant said in the interview that:

*Being the first man to enter her life brings me the pride because I am the first man who conquers her love, and I am the one who she loves the most, that is why she gave me her body. That is the reason why it makes a man vulnerable as he is the late comer so he is not able to inherit her virginity, the most valuable thing of a woman. What he has now is not new, intact. (Male, 21, from Hanam, interview)*

For some others, splitting up was the smartest solution to avoid unnecessary conflicts which may happen in married life if the hymen is lost.

*I would really to forgive her, but I am afraid that I would get angry, I would insult her, and then it would cause us to split up. If we have children at the moment, our split up will trouble them, which I don't expect. Saying good bye sooner is better to avoid the later consequences.* (Male, 22, from Hanoi, interview)

**The cost of the lost hymen** A woman's previous sexual experience places her in a disadvantaged position. First, she suffers ridicule from family, neighbors, and peers. Rumors negatively affect her social reputation and narrow her chances to begin new relationships. Other men may be afraid of losing their reputations; when a man loves a non-virgin woman, he is called a "left-over." If a woman is in love with a man who values virginity, ending the relationship is the worst thing that can happen to her. Otherwise, dealing with rumors will challenge her ability to begin new relationships, and will haunt the men who love her. During the interviews, informants brought me many stories that they knew or witnessed about the consequences of men leaving girlfriends because of previous sexual experience. Here are reactions from my informants and a story told by Duong, a female student.

Breaking up is the most common consequence resulting from the feeling of being the "left-over" man. This man said:

*In my opinion, when the woman lost her virginity, people will look at me as the leftover guy. How can I stop thinking about the passionate moment she had sex with other guys. Guarantee that no man can stand that scene. I would definitely end the relation.* (Male, 23, from Hanam, interview)

*In my own opinion, I would never accept that fact. I think, for the man who values his wife's virginity, the wedding might be postponed. Because the society in Vietnam is still very conservative with 80% of population living in rural areas. The wedding may be cancelled when the bad news comes no matter if it's true or not.* (Male, 19, from Hanam, FGD2)



Duong, the female from Hanoi, told me a story of her close friend, whose name is Mai. Mai lost her hymen due to an accident when she was in middle school and riding a bicycle. Later, when she felt in love and had sexual relations with her boyfriend, he realized that she had no longer had a hymen, but he did not accept her explanation. Here is what Duong told me:

*She and her boyfriend then left each other because that boy refused a woman without a hymen. I told her not to worry over that kind of boy, though she was very sorrowful, but a man, didn't even believe in his lover, of course he would never believe in her explanation, even the issue is very sensitive, she for sure didn't want to lose her hymen before with him. (Female, 22, from Hanoi, interview)*

**I will 'forgive' her if...** In this study, there were two ways that men related to female virginity: some men highly valued virginity, while others valued virginity less. The first group would never forgive their wives for losing their virginity before marriage. As mentioned earlier, these men would choose to end their relationships based on their wives' virginity. The others use the word "forgive" (tha thú) if their wives had an accident which caused them to break the hymen. Through the act of forgiving, men noticeably enhance their masculinity. However, if their wives lost their virginity in a pleasurable encounter with another man before marriage, even men in this group will not forgive. One of my informants stated:

*If she lost her hymen because of a gullible mistake, and then she repented, then I could forgive. (Male, 23, from Hanam, interview)*

This man said he could "forgive" a woman if she provided a persuasive reason for her damaged hymen; however, her sexual experience must be kept secret to ensure that his maleness is not threatened. Another man said:

*If the reason she gave me was persuasive and kept in private, then I could tolerate it, and I would accept her. (Male, 23, from Hanoi, interview)*

Some others said they would accept a broken hymen if this damage were due to an accident or rape. But if the woman enjoyed sexual activity with her ex-boyfriend, this would be unacceptable. This man labeled himself as someone who did not much value virginity, however, accepting a non-virgin wife would be difficult for him. He said:

*If my wife lost her virginity, it would be a bitter truth. It reflects her loose lifestyle, which is not acceptable in Asian culture. We appreciate women's virginity for a long history. It would not be so important if my wife lost her virginity, but for what reason causes her hymen lost? I would not accept if that is her nature as an easy woman.* (Male, 20, from Tuyen Quang, FGD2)

This man likens female sexual experience to a personal stain. He said:

*Her lost hymen would definitely affect the marriage life. For example, when we (husband and wife) have a quarrel, to some people including me, virginity may be brought up. Because we are Asian, we respect our tradition, so that sexual experience is a stain.* (Male, 23, from Nam Dinh, FGD2)

However, there was one man who was discontented with the attitudes of his peers in the focus group. He said:

*If we meet a woman, who lost her virginity, oh no, I mean lost her hymen, not her dignity, then none of us opens arms to receive her; So I am asking you, what will her fate be ?* (Male, 21, FGD1)

Another man was unconcerned about a woman's sexual experience as long as they loved each other. He said:

*I know I am in the minority that does not value virginity. If I marry a non-virgin wife, I can 'forgive' her. The society now is westernized so much that virginity is not an important issue. Although I was born in a good family, I have open views. Some one may say I am an easy guy to accept such that thing, but with the one whom I understand the most, and who understands me the most, it is not a big deal.* (Male, 19, from Ninh Binh, FGD2)

## **Ambiguity**

**How do men know if a woman is virgin without asking her?** Although there were many discussions about female virginity with hundreds of different ideas represented,

men in the interviews and focus groups were very unsure about how to know a woman is virgin. Most informants agreed that asking a woman if she is a virgin is insulting to her.

One male informant said:

*Suppose I ask her if she is a virgin, she may think that: “this man thinks that I am not a virgin or he doesn’t trust me”. That will insult her. So I think I shouldn’t ask that kind of question. (Male, 21, from Hanam, interview)*

Of course, some men suggested that blood after sex was proof of virginity, but this strategy very much depended on the relationship. If sexual relations were impossible, this suggestion did not help. Besides, the informants also knew that there were many reasons that no blood would be produced during the first sexual intercourse.

Their uncertainty was clearly seen. This informant said:

*If I can not see the blood during the sexual intercourse with her, the most important thing I expect is her honesty to tell me the truth.*  
(Male, 22, from Hanoi, interview)

However, some other male students were concerned about the reliability of the “truth” that the woman may tell. This man said:

*How can we assess the ‘truth’? For example, she may say that her hymen lost is because of an accident, but how can you know that information is accurate? Besides, the process to assess the information is very difficult, especially in a very sensitive moment like that. (Male, 21, from Hatinh, FGD1)*

**Hymen reconstruction** Duong, the female informant that I mentioned in the preceding section, shared a story with me. She took her friend to a clinic to have her hymen reconstructed. Her friend had previously engaged in sexual relations with a number of guys, but was now preparing to get married to a successful guy introduced to her by her parents. To protect against the risks associated with her future husband discovering her broken hymen, she decided to have her hymen reconstructed with 2 million dong (about 130 US dollars). I asked my male informants: “How could you know that your future

wife is virgin if she has her hymen reconstructed?” Most of the informants found it hard to answer this question, and some were really worried that this may happen to them.

Here is what they said:

*I think I would give up, because I have no experience in this matter.*

(Male, from Hanam, FG3)

*It is very difficult! I really don't know how to know. To me, I don't highly value virginity, but to many others, they would never be sure if their wives were virgins or not. It is never easy because I never experienced it before, so how can I know that she is a virgin?* (Male, 24, from Thaibinh, FGD4)

One man did not believe that the hymen could be reconstructed. He said:

*I don't think they can stitch up a broken hymen (vá trinh). The hymen belongs to nature, and a people-made hymen is impossible.*

(Male, 23, from Hung Yen, FGD1)

Another man, 19, from Hanam, FGD2, responded angrily. (Remember that he is the one who never accept to marry a woman who is not a virgin.) He said: *“It is never acceptable. That is a sham exactly!”*

Kim, the ethnic informant, used the phrase *“murder will out; truth will conquer”* to express his view that he would find out the truth one day. This is not sound reasoning. I closed my discussion with a question to Kim, delivered in jest. I asked him how he would react if he were to find out when he was 70 years old that his wife had been sexually experienced when they were married. Kim, male, 23, from Nghean (interview), said: *“It would be the worst mistake of my life!”*

In the preceding pages, I have reviewed the cultural evidence on virginity and masculinity shared by informants in my sample. In section one, “cultural values of virginity,” I have found a number of different perceptions and definitions of female virginity which help protect and enhance the social reputations of men. Compared to

older generations, the value placed on female virginity was found to be less important. However, virginity is still a debatable topic. To some informants, valuing women's virginity is selfish, unfair, or even unacceptable in modern society. This section also showed that men only value the virginity of women who they seriously consider marrying. Most informants agreed that women who perform oral sex (fellatio and cunnilingus) do not retain their virginity. Men in both focus groups and interviews suggested that men do not need to be virgins. In section two, "virginity and the positive outcomes," I found that most male informants expected to marry a virgin woman. Having sex with a virgin bride was described as a "wonderful dream," regardless of the pain which resulted from first sexual intercourse. This is because "deflowering" provides men with complete ownership over their brides' bodies. In section three, "virginity and the negative outcomes," I found that there were two different groups of attitudes towards female virginity. The first group, who highly valued virginity, would never accept if their future wives lost their virginities. This would lead them to end their relationships. As a result, these women lost their boyfriends, suffered ridicule from family, neighbors, and peers, earned bad reputations, and lost the opportunity to start new relationships with other men. The second group valued virginity less, and would accept their wives if they have had an accident, rape, or mistake which caused them to break their hymens. However, they would not accept their future wives' decisions to engage in pleasurable sexual encounters with other men before marriage. In section four, I showed that men expressed anxiety and concern about how to assess their future wives' virginity: accidents could damage a virgin woman's hymen, and a woman who is not a virgin could undergo

hymen reconstruction. In other words, a woman's virginity was not always easy to assess.

### **Discussion**

Under Confucianism, virginity was defined as a requirement to be a “good” woman, along with domestic skills (Công), beauty (Dung), calm speech (Ngôn), and virtuous character (Hạnh). Being a virgin means many things to men, and these meanings condition their feelings of masculinity. Informants in my study described the qualities of virgin women; these women were self-controlled, faithful, respectful, educated, and came from good families. These qualities are crucial to men who enter loving relationships and choose life-partners. Virginity becomes a tool that men use to assess whether their future wives' are “good” women, and is believed to guarantee a good prospective wife. This belief also reflected that, in a patriarchal society like Vietnam, men exert power over women to control their bodies, appearance, and behavior as a way to gain their social prestige and masculinity.

Having a virgin wife is an expectation of most heterosexual men. Female virginity ensures that men own good wives; this not only helps men keep their social prestige, but also bolsters their sense of masculinity. For example, men in this study felt happy when they married virgins; having sex with a virgin fulfills men's desire for conquest. Despite the pain experienced during the couple's first sexual intercourse, men in the study confirmed their desire to deflower virgins because this would bring them masculinity, female ownership, pride, and even luck. In section 3c, we see the power that masculinity holds over women when men allow themselves to “forgive” a bride who lost her virginity because of an accident. Men have the right to control and make judgments

about women's bodies; meanwhile (and ironically), men are not concerned about retaining their own virginity. In fact, respondents found "male virginity" to be a "weird" term.

On the one hand, female virginity helps men protect and build a sense of masculinity, but on the other hand, it is also a factor which demonstrates masculinity's fragility. The value placed on female virginity is rooted in long-standing Vietnamese cultural traditions. It is expected that all women should be virgins until marriage, so it is difficult for a man to accept a future wife who is not a virgin. This strong cultural belief is detrimental to women who lose their virginity before marriage. Additionally, the man who marries a 'non-virgin' wife must face the fact that his masculinity will be negatively affected. Internally, he struggles with feeling like the "left-over" guy who is not able to own a virgin wife, a 'good' woman. He loses the ability to own and conquer a woman, weakening his masculine self-image. This man has to face pressure from his family, who tell him that marrying a non-virgin wife will shame the family and damage the family's reputation. Moreover, rumors about his wife's lost virginity will circulate in his neighborhood and among his peers, putting him in a difficult situation.

The ambiguity in assessing female virginity also demonstrates masculinity's fragility. Men in this study had different ways to identify the virginity of their partners. In men's perception, a virgin woman must have both an undamaged hymen and strong moral values. The overlapping of traits in this definition made assessing a woman's virginity ambiguous. Moral values are difficult to measure, and assessing the hymen's state is not always simple, either. Most informants were aware that there were many experiences which could cause the hymen to break besides intercourse, such as an

accident or injury, horseback riding, bicycling, high jumping, or gymnastics. These alternate explanations for a damaged hymen provided men with some room to “forgive” their future wives. In addition, the fact that hymens can be surgically re-constructed challenged men’s definitions of virginity. Most men in this study were unable to recognize a reconstructed hymen. Some expressed their worries about this issue, as reconstruction challenged their beliefs about female virginity. How men ensure their future wives’ virginity is a difficult question. Ultimately, men’s beliefs regarding female virginity are not sustainable; they are revealed as vulnerable and fragile.

The value placed on virginity reveals the gender inequality between men and women. If a woman’s hymen is lost, she is at a great disadvantage. First, virginity is traditionally believed to be the most valuable asset that a woman possesses. Consequently, a woman’s social prestige may be seriously affected by her damaged hymen. Second, the negative rumors which circulate when a woman’s hymen is lost may narrow her possibilities of being accepted by other men. Men’s concern with female virginity may lead to the end of the relationship; at the least, a broken hymen will negatively impact the relationship. Ironically, while virginity is required of women, it is not required of men. In fact, men shared that “male virginity” was a “weird” term. In short, many men believe that conquering a virgin will enhance their masculinity.

Valuing only women’s virginity reflects the gender inequality that exists between men and women in Vietnam’s traditional patriarchal culture. As a result, women are placed in disadvantaged and risky positions when they are not able to prove their virginity. This demonstrates the power and privilege that men hold and exert over women: they are able to control women's bodies, behaviors and social prestige. This



discussion suggests that in Vietnam, men need to change their perceptions and attitudes toward female virginity as the way to enhance their masculinity.

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