

## CLANS AND POPULATION

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### 1. Family annals of clans

If you look at the annals of any clan, you will see the figure of a family tree having many branches. The larger the clan, the larger the family tree is going to be.

Most ethnic minority groups in Vietnam's mountainous regions follow a patriarchal system in social, familial and bloodline relationships. The inheritance of property and other cultural functions are male-oriented. The father's family name is used for his children and the evolution of a clan depends on the number of sons he has. This explains why males in these societies want to have as many sons as possible – to develop their clan and live in posterity.

The woman acts as an important link in the chain of population reproduction. However, they are regarded only as a "horizontal link" which contributes to the "vertical link" in the development of a clan. If they are unable to give birth to sons and assist in "vertical" growth, then a branch in the clan tree will be suspended or broken.

The case below highlights the branches of the Duong's clan in La Khe village, Ha Dong township, Ha Tay province. This family tree has spread across 13 generations and although it is small in population, the tree has few broken branches. In the second, third, sixth, seventh, eighth, tenth and eleventh generations, different bloodlines have petered out void of prosperity.

For a man and his wife of Viet or ethnic minority in North Vietnam, having no prosperity in their bloodline is a terrible misfortune. When a man failed to have a son, his family would not have a succeeding descendant and his branch of the family would become severed. If the clan patriarch had no sons, the rights to inherit the patriarchal line would be switched over to the branch of the next rank. The property of the clan, such as the ancestor's shrine and land, would be transferred to other persons in the clan,

according to the clan regulations on inheritance. This would often lead to disputes and legal proceedings, adding to the man's sense of failure. He would feel guilty for not fulfilling his obligation as the patriarch of the clan and not contributing to his branch, line and race.

One way to avoid this situation is to have more children. This also caters for the possibility that some children may die young. These considerations lead to the introduction of polygamy in feudal times and more recently, to laws on marriage and the family of contemporary society. Women who had not given birth to a son had to grant their husband's request for more wives until a son was born.

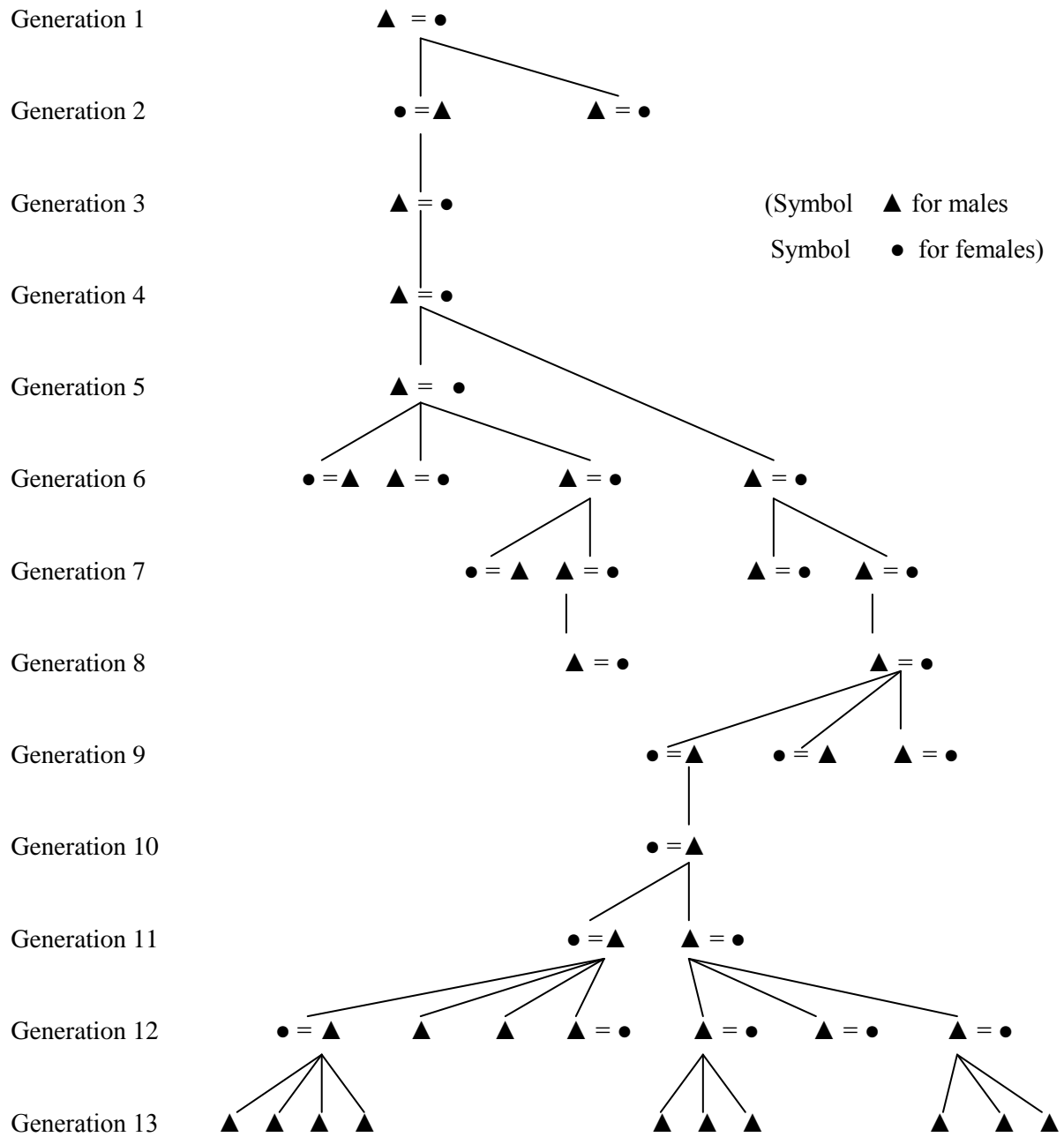
The 'indispensable' role of the man in the family stems from old patriarchal societies. The division of labor placed men at a much higher level of society than the women. The man often ran family affairs was responsible for production and livelihood in the family. He makes decisions and handles all important matters in the family such as worshipping ancestors and representing the family in social activities both inside and outside their clan. Some ethnic minority groups in North Vietnam, such as the Thai or Tay, observe a custom where the owner of the house is the sole representative of his ancestors<sup>1</sup>. He is the pillar for establishing the family, performing all rituals within his clan, and establishing links with other villagers<sup>2</sup>.

Maintaining the race is considered a sacred task for each man, hence the more children he has, the more happiness he is perceived to enjoy. Children are regarded as the wealth of a family; they will fulfill the obligations of ancestor worship, treasuring traditions and running clan and village affairs. In their systems of land allotment, the more workers in a family, the more land they were allocated.

<sup>(1)</sup>. Now Van Khe village, Ha Dong township

<sup>(2)</sup>. This term is used to show the family groups of the person's brothers

**Branches of the Duong's Clan ( La Khe Village, Ha Dong Township, Ha Tay Province)**



Meanwhile, the woman, despite her major role in crop production, animal breeding, trading and other household chores, is always dependent on the man. Although women contribute to the maintenance and evolution of the family tree, they are not entitled to inherit property. In several ethnic groups, widows are not even entitled to property left behind by their late husbands. If a man has no sons, when he dies, his brothers will own all his land, not his wife<sup>3</sup>. Women prepare offerings and other necessities for worshipping rituals, but they are not allowed to handle such events. When the husband is away, his uncles are invited to replace him in worship rituals.<sup>4</sup>

There is no way for women to overcome the barrier of gender hierarchy stipulated by social institutions, families and clans under the patriarchal system. This system recognizes the established role of men, however few they may be, while ignoring women's existence or social status. So even if a family has ten daughters and no sons, that family branch is considered suspended or severed.

The practice of patriarchy may have given rise to the customary law of recognizing "sons-in-law". In some ethnic minority groups in the Northern mountains, sons-in-laws often stay with their wives' families and have their name changed to the wives' family name. Such customs and practice may affect family planning because every family wants to have a son for maintaining the traditions of the clan.

## 2. Insurance for the elderly

In modern industrial societies where peoples' living standards have been raised and stabilized, insurance, especially for the elderly has become an important issue. In Vietnam, social security insurance is limited to pensions for employees of the state. However, for a large

proportion of the population including farmers, non-state craftsmen, and small traders, social security insurance has not been taken into full account. Each farmer beyond retirement age is entitled to buy or receive 30 to 70 kilograms of rice.

People normally rely on individual insurance coming from their own family or social cell. Children rely on their parents when they are young and when the parents get older, the children will support them. This insurance still emphasizes the role and position of males. The patriarchal system has resulted in a tradition where only men are entitled to inherit property. Under this principle, the eldest son, in addition to his share of property, will also inherit his race and the family home. In return, he is responsible for taking care of the parents, and arranging the funeral and follow-up worship rituals after they die. This explains why parents often choose to stay with the eldest son and his family. Rarely will old people live on their own, or with their daughters, except when the daughters are unmarried or divorced. In this case, the parents, and the daughters may live together with the eldest son's family.

Daughters are not entitled to take care of their parents and they have no rights, but they are left to do all the work on behalf of their husbands in caring for his parents. When they are married, women become members of their husband's family and are treated as daughters. Actual daughters, on the other hand, are regarded as other people's daughters. In patriarchal societies, woman – real daughters or daughters in laws – are not regarded as independent individuals, however significant their role in the family may be.

At present, the tradition of inheritance by men remains fairly popular among the majority Viet population and in several ethnic minority groups in the Northern mountains. People always want to have sons, or at least one son to maintain the family traditions and to provide for them when they grow old. This traditional practice has in no small way affected Vietnam's population patterns.

<sup>(3)</sup>. *Cac dan toc it nguoi o Vietnam (Cac tinh phia Bac)(Ethnic Minority groups in Vietnam-Northern provinces)*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi 1978; pp. 158-159

<sup>(4)</sup>. *Nhan dien gia dinh Vietnam hien nay (Identifying present day Vietnamese families)*, Hanoi 1991, pp.86