The People’s Committee was my first encounter with the northern Vietnamese rural commune of Thinh Tri and the highly vertical structure of the Vietnamese political system that framed my entire fieldwork. My research on children’s learning was intended to include daily interaction within both the family and the educational system. To obtain permission to conduct this research, my journey through the Vietnamese bureaucracy began in Hanoi with the Ministry of Education and Training (Bo Giao Duc Va Dao Tao). All my negotiations with the ministry regarding my research visa and (later) research permission were carried out in cooperation with the Institute of Educational Sciences (Vien Khoa Hoc Giao Duc), a research unit affiliated with the ministry.

A preliminary tourist visa had been issued so that I could enter Vietnam. For bureaucratic reasons, that visa could not be converted into a research visa—at least not at first. Therefore, the Institute of Educational Sciences suggested that when my tourist visa expired, I go to Laos, Thailand, or even back to Sweden to reapply for a research visa and at the same time research permission, following a more correct procedure by applying to the Ministry of Education and Training directly. However, thanks to tremendous support from a large number of people, I was finally able to get my tourist visa converted into a research visa. Then I could concentrate on obtaining research
permission. The ministry and the Institute of Educational Sciences are directly associated with the Educational Units (So Giao Duc Dao Tao) of the provinces, districts, and communes. First, all decisions regarding my fieldwork in Thinh Tri had to be cleared by the People’s Committees at these three levels. Second, any decision about my research had to pass through all affiliated Educational Units. Hence, in addition to the Ministry of Education and Training and the Institute of Educational Sciences, my application had to be accepted by six different political and administrative bodies.

When I began my fieldwork in 1994, it was both unusual and controversial for foreigners to obtain research permission to conduct fieldwork for any extended period within a rural setting. Even at this writing (2002), it remains difficult to do so. As a consequence, only very limited anthropological research has been carried out in Vietnam for about the last thirty-five years. The novelty of my own research meant that the bureaucratic problems were overwhelming. For example, at one level of the administrative system, I would be allowed to go to a northern Vietnamese rural commune, while this idea would be resolutely rejected in the next office to which I went. During the summer of 1994 (which was said to be the hottest and most humid for many years), the negotiations concerning my research permission went back and forth among the different bureaucratic levels in what I feared would be a never-ending process.

The bureaucratic procedures demanded almost all my attention, although I had originally planned to use this period for an intensive language course in Vietnamese in order to improve the basic skills I had already acquired in the language. I had to continuously procure an increasing number of “relevant documents” and attend innumerable meetings in different government offices. As months passed, it became obvious that I could not concentrate on language learning as I originally had planned. Therefore, I would need a coworker in the field. Assistance would be particularly crucial with regard to the transcription of audio- and videotapes that I planned to make of Vietnamese conversations. Moreover, because the Thinh Tri dialect differs slightly from the Hanoi dialect, which I had been taught in Sweden and which I had practiced through a language course in Hanoi that I finally managed to take, I also needed an interpreter to help me conduct in-depth interviews. A female northern Vietnamese friend introduced me to Tach, a young female who became my coworker. Since my friend and Tach are not connected to any administrative units or organizations, they are to be considered politically independent.
When all bureaucratic matters finally were cleared, Tach and I went to Thinh Tri with representatives from the Educational Unit from the province. When we arrived at Thinh Tri the People’s Committee invited us to lunch, and here we met Khai, my host mother.

In Thinh Tri, it became immediately clear that the Vietnamese political system operates according to a principle of support and surveillance (see Gammeltoft 1997:38–40; Humphrey 1977; Kerkvliet 1995:396–397). I was repeatedly and firmly requested by Khai to produce “plans” (ke hoach) for each day of the week detailing where I would be and at what time, whom I wanted to interview and about what, and so on. By virtue of such plans, Khai would be able to keep the People’s Committee of Thinh Tri informed about my movements in the commune. Furthermore, I was expected to regularly report (bao cao) orally to Khai to what extent I had managed to follow the plans. Although these procedures were explained to me as a way of protecting me from never exactly expressed dangers, I had a strong sense of being under surveillance until I was found trustworthy.

It was especially clear that I was under surveillance and/or special protection when the matter of accommodations had to be resolved. First, Khai suggested that Tach and I, along with two male guards (who could watch my movements and guarantee my safety) live in the health care clinic where deliveries (among other things) are carried out. Neither Tach or I was enthusiastic about this idea since it would be, quite literally, a bloody place to live. As an alternative, Khai then reluctantly suggested that we could stay in her house because she was under pressure from the Thinh Tri People’s Committee to put us up. Even knowing Khai’s situation, we accepted the offer, and Tach and I lived in Khai’s house at the beginning of my fieldwork. However, both Tach and I felt that the arrangement would not work as a long-term solution. First of all, we occupied the main room of the house, which Khai and her family, of course, wanted to use. This meant that there was no place where Tach and I could store our equipment, work together with the material, engage in language sessions, have a rest, and so on. Second, I was under sharp surveillance by Khai, who followed me whenever I left her house. This meant that I could not help feeling imprisoned. Third, Khai insisted that she did not want to receive any kind of payment for the extra expenses we incurred: “It is my duty to help you in accordance with the wishes of the Thinh Tri People’s Committee,” she would repeat. However, this kind sentiment was contradicted by my sense that I (like all Westerners in Vietnam) was expected to pay a con-
siderable amount in dollars for this duty. All of these factors meant that it was not relaxing to live in Khai's house.

Unfortunately, there was not much that could be done. There was, for instance, no spare room in Khai's house in which Tach and I could live since Khai, Pha, and Thiep (her husband and son) used all the rooms. Moreover, when I suggested that we redo one of the stable rooms for Tach and me, Khai rejected the idea as impossible. For bureaucratic reasons it was out of the question to apply to build a house. Vietnam has special restrictions regarding foreigners' access to land, so I would need permissions from the communal, district, provincial, and central government levels (see UNDP 1993a:43). My experiences with the Vietnamese bureaucracy led me to believe that a house would perhaps (with luck) be ready when my fieldwork was completed. After much consideration, Tach and I therefore decided that we would stay in Khai's house three days a week. On the remaining days we would go to Hanoi late in the evening and return to Thinh Tri early the next morning (about seven o'clock). Everybody relaxed markedly when I came up with this solution, even though I did not consider it ideal. A positive and immediate result of this arrangement was that Khai's close surveillance of me became looser.

My impression of being under surveillance was actually confirmed much later when I was to leave the country with all my field data. The Ministry of Culture and Information (Bo Van Hoa Thong Tin) requested all of my materials in order to check them carefully. I also was asked to produce lists of the contents of all audio- and videotapes. Such requests are, needless to say, hard for a researcher to swallow, but I managed to solve the problem so that my data were not censored.

Throughout my fieldwork, I honestly informed Khai about my plans for each day. However, as time passed, no one in Thinh Tri seemed much concerned with my plans and reports, so I could move around as I wished. After a while, Khai’s family even enjoyed introducing me to new guests as “overseas kin” (viet kieu) who finally had returned home (this was vaguely possible because of my dark hair). In other words, I was slowly integrated into the local community and found to be trustworthy. The People’s Committee (and the local division of the Communist Party and the local police department) also relaxed in terms of my fieldwork. I was no longer requested to show up at any of these bureaus and report on what I was doing or how, when, and why. The Thinh Tri People’s Committee considered it sufficient that Khai was regularly informed about my daily activities.
and that she reported (orally and in writing) to the local authorities and at the district level. The district authorities, in turn, reported to the People’s Committees and Educational Units at the provincial level. The Institute of Educational Sciences in Hanoi was informed by the provincial authorities, and it reported to the Ministry of Education and Training. Furthermore, I also maintained regular contact with the institute, the People’s Committee in the province, and its affiliated Educational Unit.

The next bureaucratic problem I encountered was related to the selection of families for my study. Within a household, each adult has a certain position and social role, according to sex and age, in relation to the children. In order to comprehend how a child learns about a hierarchical, patrilineal social system in which seniority and sex are crucial points of orientation, I wanted to work with families that were comprised of more than two generations or with families that were extended in other ways (La Fontaine 1978; Schildkrout 1978). In order for me to observe the development in interactional practices between a child and other family members of different ages and sex, it was important that the children participating in my study be of different ages (Kulick 1992; La Fontaine 1986; Ochs 1986; Schieffelin 1990).

At first Khai and her female coworker Nhi had selected five families for me. Needless to say, these were considered to be model families and so had been appointed as participants in my study. In other words, the families had never been asked whether they wanted to participate. This was a problem. My plan was to interview about fifteen different extended or nuclear families, explain my study, and then select five families who agreed to participate and who fulfilled the criteria mentioned above. My desire to choose the families myself created tensions. The five families already selected by Khai and Nhi had been approved by the Thinh Tri People’s Committee, so it was difficult to change the selection. Supported by Tach, I began negotiations with Khai. Khai, in turn, negotiated with the Thinh Tri People’s Committee for permission to change the selection. After about one week of negotiations, the People’s Committee gave permission since the situation was considered to be under Khai’s control owing to her regular reporting to the committee about my study. After I had interviewed twelve families and Khai had interviewed a thirteenth, I asked five of them to participate. They all agreed to my recording the activities of their children with a tape recorder and a small video camera.

It was very important for Khai to check my plans and move-
ments, especially during the initial stage of the fieldwork (about one month). Therefore, she and Nhi followed me whenever I visited a family. Like many cadres, however, Khai and Nhi were always busy. This meant that whenever they followed me around in the commune, they were impatient and wanted to get on with other business. They said that if I wanted information about any family, it would be less time consuming to ask them instead of the families; they would know all the answers. Moreover, the tradition of Marxist quantitative sociology, which pervades northern Vietnamese social sciences, also seemed to influence Khai and Nhi’s opinion of anthropology; they frankly thought that the anthropological way of collecting data was a waste of time. It was obvious that while I wanted to stay from morning to night with the participating children and their families, Khai and Nhi preferred to do their usual jobs. As a consequence, all visits were remarkably speeded up.

The ways in which my fieldwork began did not correlate in any sense with what I thought anthropological fieldwork should be, and it became increasingly clear to all of us that the initial setup would not work for ten more months. It was thus a relief when Khai finally decided that it was too time consuming for her and Nhi to impatiently observe me in my observations.

Slowly a routine developed: I would record one of the five families on audio- and videotape while Tach would work in Khai’s house transcribing the tapes. I collected data in one family for eight to ten days, changed to the next family, and so on. After having stayed in all five families, I returned to the first family and repeated the cycle. This routine was interspersed with Tach’s and my careful review of all the tapes to confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions and avoid incorrect translations. Moreover, in this way we could ask a parent about a child’s utterances if they were incomprehensible to us on a tape.

Tach painstakingly transcribed more than sixty-four hours of interaction and interviews of girls, boys, and their adult kin: fifteen hours of videotapes and more than forty-nine hours of audiotapes. Included in the audiotapes are about twenty hours of interviews with girls, boys, their adult kin, representatives from Thinh Tri junior- and senior-level primary school, the People’s Committee, the Women’s Union, the health care clinic, the pagoda, and the agricultural cooperative. This methodology was inspired by anthropologists such as Don Kulick, Elinor Ochs, and Bambi Schieffelin. I employed it as a comprehensive way of capturing children’s learning as it takes place in daily social interaction. I obtained informa-

When I returned to Sweden, I produced a more than one-hundred-page-long index with all the themes occurring in my Vietnamese transcriptions. Indexing children’s talk was thus the first stage in the interpretation of my field data. (For practical reasons the index is not reproduced here.)

* * *

The study resulting from this fieldwork is about thirteen of my young friends, nine girls and four boys, from a northern Vietnamese commune. With overwhelming warmth and kindness, these children and their families invited me to participate in their lives and learn about Vietnamese culture. Although it is to them that I offer my greatest thanks, regretfully I shall not mention any names in order to protect their anonymity. Sadly, this also means that I cannot explicitly acknowledge all the people who very kindly supported my fieldwork in affiliation with the People’s Committee, the Educational Unit, the Women’s Union, the Religious Unit, the Health Care Unit, the Communist Party, and the Police Department of the commune.

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