

Growing up in Vietnam:
Mass Mobilization, Modernization, and Trends in Transition to Adulthood

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Over half of the Vietnamese population today was born after the American war¹. In 2000, the number of adolescents and young adults ages 10-24 reached 25 million – accounting for nearly one third of Vietnam’s total population (Population Reference Bureau 2003). Representing the collective demographic and economic future of Vietnam, these young people are often portrayed by the international media as indifferent to the memory of the American war and to their elders’ tales of hardship and dedication (for example, see Lamb 2002; Schiffrin 1999). Under the market-driven economy, young Vietnamese are growing up harboring very different aspirations and leading a lifestyle unknown to their parents who have lived through wartime and the socialist regime. Despite the much-heralded claims about contrasting pathways to adulthood between the past and present generations, there are currently very few empirical studies that provide a broad picture of intergenerational patterns of transition to adulthood (Mensch, Clark, and Dang Nguyen Anh 2003). This study seeks to use the life course approach to fill in this knowledge gap about young people in Vietnam.

Based on the analysis of the 1995-1998 Vietnam Longitudinal Survey², this study examines inter-cohort patterns in early life course transitions in northern Vietnam – comparing the wartime generations with the younger cohorts who entered adulthood in the 1980s and early 1990s, out of the shadow of war. The inter-cohort approach is particularly useful, given the country’s dramatic large-scale changes over the second half of the 20th century. Vietnam transformed itself from a French colony to a socialist state in 1954, went to war against the US from the 1960s to the mid-1970s, reunified its divided country in 1975, and most recently shifted from a collective to a market economy in the late 1980s. Several generations who were coming of age within this half century experienced dramatically different sociopolitical events and state policies.

How do the very different contexts of growing up associated with modernization affect the attainment of adulthood in Vietnam? To what extent did war and mass mobilization affect how the wartime generation navigated from childhood to adulthood? Did war disrupt affect pathways to adulthood of veterans and non-veterans in the same ways? Are the pathways to adulthood of young Vietnamese today different from their parents’ generation? As Vietnam becomes more modernized and increasingly integrated into the global economy, to what extent do these

¹ The standard Western reference to the war, which took place as a result of American intervention in Vietnam as the “Vietnam War,” reflects an American-centered perception. In this study, I will refer to the war as the “American war” (1965-1975) to be consistent with Vietnamese scholarship and also to distinguish this war from the French war (1945-1954) and other wars in the modern history of Vietnam.

² The Vietnam Longitudinal Survey (VLS) was carried out during 1995-1998 in the Red River Delta in the north of Vietnam. VLS is one of the first social surveys designed for documenting social changes in Vietnam, particularly changes related to families and economic activities, which have occurred since the market reform in the late 1980s. Since information on military and manpower are rarely published in Vietnam and are usually treated as top-secret intelligence (Ng 1974; Pike 1986), to my knowledge, the VLS is the only available dataset that contains detailed information on military service of Vietnamese men during the 20th century.

structural changes affect their pathways to adulthood? Do the experiences in adulthood attainment between men and women and among subgroups of the population? Can the case of Vietnam help inform theories of the determinants and consequences of changes in transition to adulthood for societies undergoing war and mass mobilization?

Demographers are inclined to think of the attainment of adulthood as a cluster of transitions beginning with the completion of school, entry into the labor force, and exit from the parental household followed by marriage and parenthood (Setterson, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005; Hogan and Astone 1986). Modernization is considered the underlying force influencing long-term trends in the transition to adulthood that differentiate successive cohorts (Shanahan 2000). Empirical evidence suggests that modernization causes three trends in timing and sequencing of the transition to adulthood. First, the life course becomes less determined by families and communities and at the same time, becomes more standardized by age stratification. Paradoxically, the passages to adulthood become increasingly diversified as a result of long-term social changes associated with modernization. Thirdly, the transition to adulthood has been prolonged considerably. Not only modernizing forces but discrete historical events such as war and mass mobilization also have profound affects on transition to adulthood, often leading to very different transition patterns among successive cohorts (Elder 1986; Modell and Haggarty 1991; Teachman 2004). War and mass mobilization can redirect the life course by delaying entry into marriage and family roles and providing young military recruits opportunities for educational and occupational advancement. It can also create a social moratorium or a postponement of the acquisition of adult roles and responsibilities (Elder 1986). These influences may leave lasting imprints on their later life course (Hogan 1980; Pavalko and Elder 1990).

Inspired by a seminal work on the early lives of American men by Hogan (1981), this study has two main objectives. The first objective is to describe the inter-cohort changes in timing of transition behaviors among subgroups of the population and to identify any inter-cohort variations within these subgroups. Differentials in adulthood attainment among gender and background characteristics such as military service experience, place of growing up and religious background will also be assessed. The second objective is to identify social structural conditions and historical events that produce these cohort changes. I hope to contribute to the construction of a life course theory of the determinants and consequences of changes in transition to adulthood for developing societies undergoing war and mass mobilization.

Using birth cohort as the unit of analysis, this study examines the cohort changes in timing and sequencing of early life course transitions including 1) school completion, 2) first marriage, and 3) parenthood (i.e., birth of the first child). I assess the inter-cohort patterns for each marker of transition to adulthood and examine the interrelations between timing of these markers. More specifically, I document central tendencies (median) of the timing of these transition markers and assess the variability of transition markers, including dispersion of the first and third quartiles of the timing of each marker, inter-quartile range, and ordering between transition markers. Differentials in transitions to adulthood between subgroups of the population will also be explored. Note that I incorporate median tests to examine whether the differences in the median ages of transition behaviors among subgroups are statistically significant. While the intercohort trends in transition to adulthood will be described and interpreted with reference to period events that may have differentially affected the cohorts depending on their age at timing of the events, I

plan to go beyond these *post hoc* interpretations by documenting the effects of social structural factors on cohort transition behaviors (Cooney and Hogan 1991; Hogan 1981). These factors include measures of modernity, economic development, demographic transition, and military mobilization.

Expected findings: Under rapid social structural changes over the last few decades, it is likely to observe the long-term trends in standardization, prolongation, and individualization in transition to adulthood in Vietnam.

- Compulsory education implemented by the socialist regime in the mid-1940s is expected to play an important role in standardizing the early life course of young Vietnamese men and women. I expect the recent cohorts of young men and women to experience increasingly similar timetables of adulthood attainment, particularly their school completion transition. Moreover, the Marriage and Family Law, which set a minimum legal age at marriage, are likely to standardize timing of marriage and indirectly regulate timing of parenthood among the cohorts who came of age after the law was implemented in 1960.
- In addition, studies point out that educational attainment is a key factor explaining the trends in extended pathways to adulthood. With the rapid expansion of educational opportunities in northern Vietnam, I expect that over time the cohorts of young Vietnamese would increasingly delay their adulthood attainment – particularly postponing their marriage and parenthood – perhaps well into their late 20s or early 30s. Note that these extended pathways to adulthood are expected to be temporarily stalled among the cohorts of men and women who experienced the stagnation in educational attainment in the 1980s.
- Further, with declining familial and parental control over young people particularly after Vietnam's market reform, the ordering of transition markers, which once used to proceed in lockstep, is expected to be lax among the recent birth cohorts. That is, the recent cohorts are more likely than their predecessors to experience non-normative sequencing of transition markers such as getting married prior to completing school.
- Since evidence suggests that the bombing campaigns in northern Vietnam during the American war did little to disrupt the socialist regime's educational expansion (London 2003), I expect the school completion transition among the cohorts educated during wartime (roughly those born between 1942 and 1957) to be only slightly affected. Further, during the time of war the socialist regime launched several campaigns to encourage young people to think about serving the country rather than being involved in romantic relationships (Van Dyke 1972). While there is no evidence proving how effective these campaigns are, I expect that economic hardship during wartime would influence the cohorts of young men and women to postpone their marriage and parenthood transitions. Moreover, since war usually creates a sense of chaos and uncertainties about life, the cohorts of young people growing up during wartime are likely to follow non-normative pathways to adulthood (such as getting married or becoming a parent before finishing school) than those growing up during peaceful periods.

- I expect the experience of transitions to adulthood between veterans and non-veterans to be significantly different. Because of their military service, veterans are likely to experience delays in adulthood attainment. I expect the differentials between veterans and non-veterans to be greatest during the American war. By law, Vietnamese men who were inducted were expected to serve for a period of two years. However, during wartime, the duration of military service were usually extended indefinitely (Pike 1986). My exploratory analysis shows that over half of veterans during the American war served in the military for more than 5 years. While the disruptive effects of military service on the school completion transition may be limited because of the overall low level of educational attainment among the northern Vietnamese population, I expect military service to be especially disruptive to the marriage and parenthood transitions. Because of particularly long duration of service, the cohorts of veterans who served during the American war tend to delay their marriage and fatherhood (and therefore, their adulthood attainment) to a greater length than their civilian counterparts.

Results from the exploratory analysis are attached.

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Figure 1. Percentage (3-Year Moving Average) Ever Served in the Military in Each Birth Cohort:
Men Born 1930-1975 in the Red River Delta, Vietnam (N=1,851)

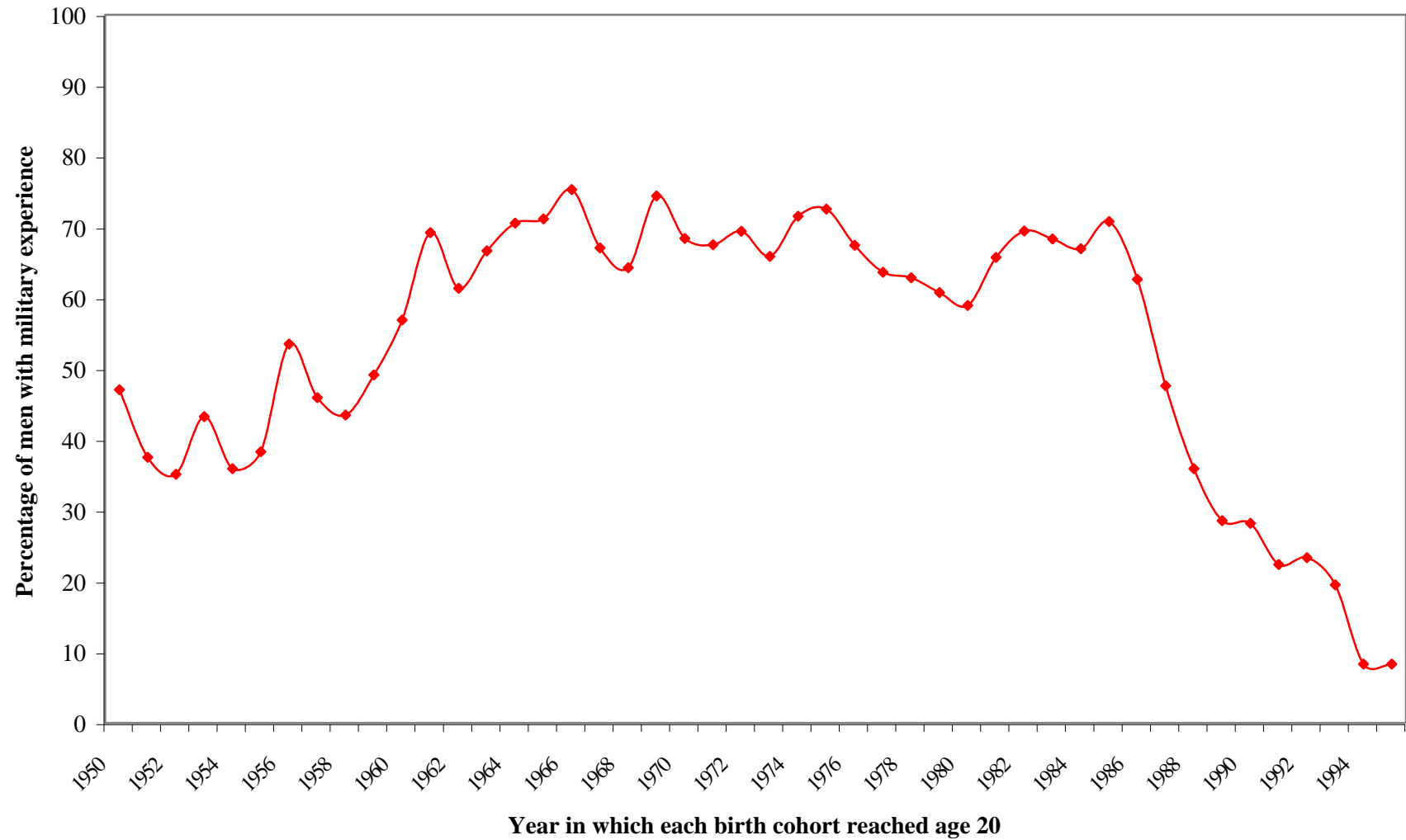


Table 1. Cohort Trends in Timing of Induction and Duration of Military Service by Birth Cohort, the Red River Delta Men Born 1930-1975 (N=1,851).

	Year in which each birth cohort of men reached age 20:			
	< 1960	1960-1975	1976-1986	1987-1995
	Pre-mobilization generation	American war generation	Reunification generation	Renovation generation
	N=199	N=600	N=688	N=364
% Age at induction				
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
Never served	57	32	34	73
Inducted, ages 19 or younger	9	35	40	22
Inducted, ages 20-24	13	27	25	6
Inducted, ages 25 and older	22	6	1	0
% Duration of service				
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
Never served	57	32	34	73
Served 3 years or less	18	15	33	25
Served 4-6 years	11	21	24	2
Served 7 years or more	15	33	9	0

Source: Vietnam Longitudinal Survey, 1995.

Table 2. Descriptive Analysis: Trends in socioeconomic changes (modernization and development factors)

	Cohorts (Percent)				Total
	< 1960	1960-1975	1976-1986	1987-1995	
	Pre-mobilization	American war	Reunification	Renovation	
Male					
Total	100	100	100	100	100
R's Place growing up					
Urban	7	7	9	11	9
Rural	94	93	91	89	91
Father's work when R grew up [§]					
Family Farm	69	28	8	17	23
Agricultural Cooperatives	6	42	56	50	45
Non-agricultural, Private	12	11	5	3	7
Non-agricultural, Public	8	13	28	27	21
R's Education attainment at age 18					
Primary schooling or less	58	21	8	5	17
Lower secondary	33	56	67	66	59
Upper secondary or higher	9	23	25	29	23
<i>N</i>	(199)	(600)	(688)	(364)	(1851)
Female					
Total	100	100	100	100	100
R's Place growing up					
Urban	7	8	12	12	10
Rural	93	92	88	88	90
Father's work when R grew up [§]					
Family Farm	71	31	8	12	22
Agricultural Cooperatives	3	39	54	46	42
Non-agricultural, Private	14	7	4	5	6
Non-agricultural, Public	5	16	31	34	25
R's Education attainment at age 18					
Primary schooling or less	90	39	11	6	26
Lower secondary	9	52	67	68	57
Upper secondary or higher	1	9	22	26	17
<i>N</i>	(219)	(591)	(762)	(515)	(2087)

Source: Vietnam Longitudinal Survey 1995

[§] Cases with missing values (DK) are included in the analysis but results are not reported

Table 3. Level of school attained by 5-year birth cohorts of Vietnamese males born 1930-1975

Birth cohort	Number	Percentage with this level of schooling or higher				
		Level of schooling				
		0	1-5	6-9	10-12	12+
		No education	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary	Tertiary
1930-1934	90	100.0	88.9	47.8	12.2	6.7
1935-1939	109	100.0	100.0	64.2	17.4	12.8
1940-1944	125	100.0	96.8	70.4	25.6	15.6
1945-1949	175	100.0	98.9	80.0	28.6	15.4
1950-1954	255	100.0	98.4	90.6	28.6	14.9
1955-1959	303	100.0	99.3	92.1	29.4	13.9
1960-1964	317	100.0	99.1	94.6	25.6	7.3
1965-1969	237	100.0	99.2	94.1	26.6	7.6
1970-1975	240	100.0	99.2	94.6	30.0	6.3

Source: Vietnam Longitudinal Survey 1995

Table 5.1b. Level of school attained by 5-year birth cohorts of Vietnamese females born 1930-1975

Birth cohort	Number	Percentage with this level of schooling or higher				
		Level of schooling				
		0	1-5	6-9	10-12	12+
		No education	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary	Tertiary
1930-1934	95	100.0	65.3	7.4	0.0	0.0
1935-1939	124	100.0	78.2	15.3	2.4	0.8
1940-1944	134	100.0	92.5	36.6	6.7	4.5
1945-1949	169	100.0	97.6	64.5	16.0	10.6
1950-1954	233	100.0	99.1	79.0	13.3	7.7
1955-1959	353	100.0	100.0	87.0	18.4	8.4
1960-1964	346	100.0	100.0	92.5	25.4	10.1
1965-1969	288	100.0	100.0	93.8	24.0	4.9
1970-1975	345	100.0	99.4	93.0	26.7	8.1

Source: Vietnam Longitudinal Survey 1995

Figure 2a. Inter-cohort Trends in median ages (3-year moving average) at school completion, first marriage, and first birth for single-year birth cohorts of Vietnamese males born 1930-1975

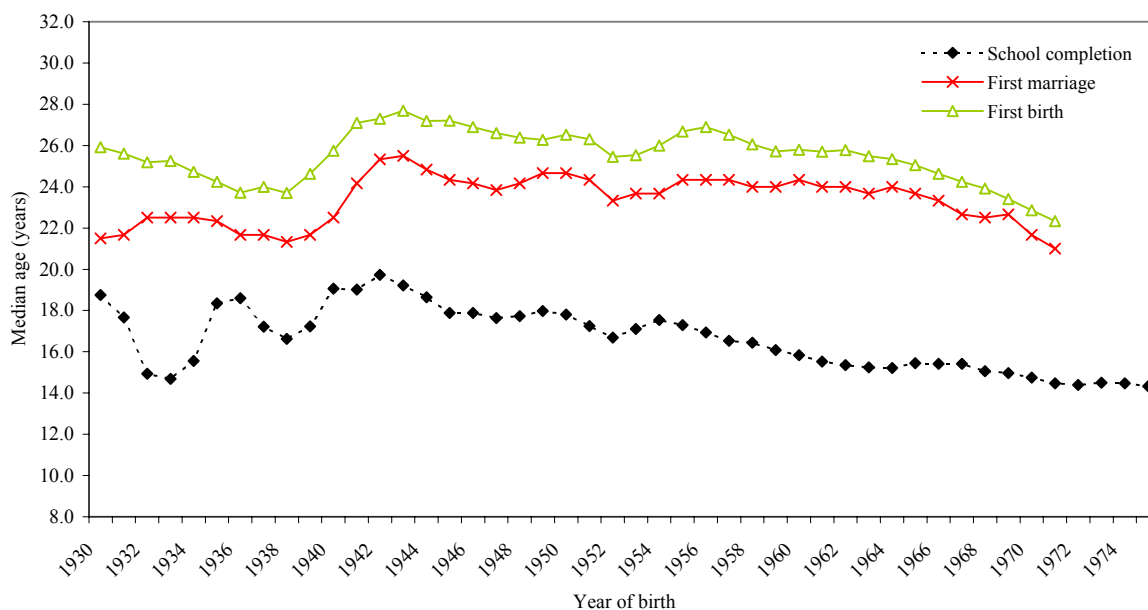


Figure 2b. Inter-cohort trends in median ages (3-year moving average) at school completion, first marriage, and first birth for single-year birth cohorts of Vietnamese females born 1930-1975

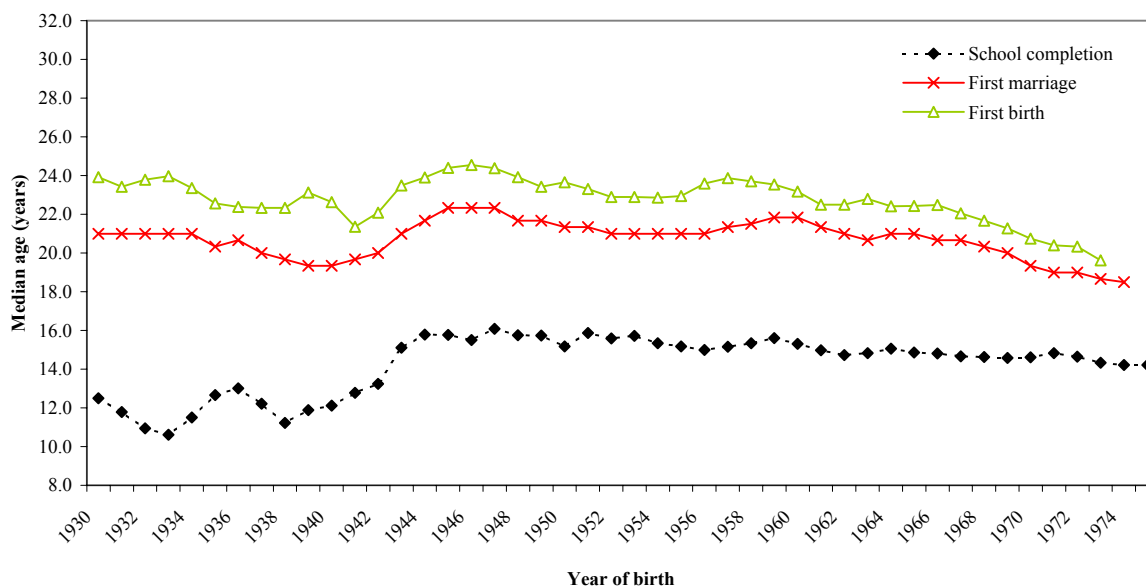


Figure 3a. Median ages (3-year moving average) at school completion, first marriage, and first birth for single-year birth cohorts of Vietnamese males, born 1930-1975, veterans

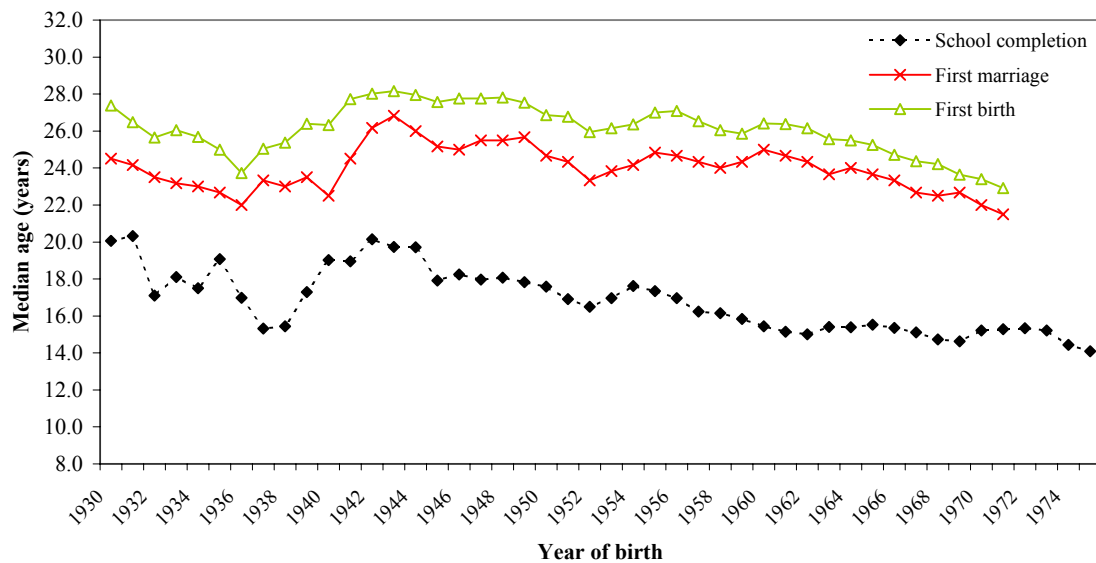


Figure 3b. Median ages (3-year moving average) at school completion, first marriage, and first birth for single-year birth cohorts of Vietnamese males, born 1930-1975, non-veterans

