



RECONFIGURING VIETNAM

GLOBAL
ENCOUNTERS,
TRANSLOCAL
LIFEWORLDS

Minh T.N. Nguyen
Kirsten W. Endres
editors

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Reconfiguring Vietnam

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AND

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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>viii</i>
------------------------------	-------------

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>ix</i>
------------------------	-----------

INTRODUCTION

Deciphering Vietnamese Translocal Lifeworlds	1
--	---

MINH T. N. NGUYEN AND KIRSTEN W. ENDRES

Section I. Economic Activities

SECTION I INTRODUCTION

Informality, Precarity, and Desire: Frictions of the Contemporary Vietnamese Global Economy	29
---	----

ANN MARIE LESHKOWICH

1 Precarity and Opportunities: How Vietnamese E-traders Navigate between Imaginaries and Lived Reality in Germany	39
---	----

JESSICA STEINMAN

2 “Dream, Start More, Move Fast!”: Entrepreneurship, Sustainable Development, and Imagined Futures in Vietnam	59
---	----

ESTHER HORAT

3 Consumer Finance in Vietnam: The De/personalization of Credit and Debt Collection	79
---	----

NICOLAS LAINEZ, TRỊNH PHAN KHÁNH, AND BÙI THỊ THU ĐOÀI

4 Translocality, Labor Mobility, and Commodity Production in Northern Vietnamese Rural Livelihoods	101
--	-----

TUAN ANH NGUYEN AND MINH T.N. NGUYEN

Section II. Gender and Private Life

SECTION II INTRODUCTION

Private Lives on the Move: Transnational Migration, Marriage, and Work	121
--	-----

HELLE RYDSTROM

5 Cross-Border Marriages: Expectations and Translocal Lifeworlds of Vietnamese Brides in Wanwei (Guangxi, China)	131
--	-----

NGUYEN THI PHUONG CHAM

Contents, cont.

- 6 Sexuality, Masculinity, and Transnational Migration:
The Case of Male Vietnamese Returnees from Japan 149
AN HUY TRAN
- 7 More than “Left-Over Water”: Vietnamese Brides and the
Shifting Obligations of Transnational Families 169
PHUNG SU

Section III: Culture and Identity

SECTION III INTRODUCTION

- Hybridization and Heterodoxy: Vietnamese Culture and Identity
in the Global Cultural Flow 191
HOANG CAM
- 8 Digital Performances of Selves: Entrepreneurship and Social
Movements in Hip Hop 199
SANDRA KURFÜRST
- 9 The “West” as the Qualified International: Its Imaginaries at the
Urban Workplace in Vietnam 219
KIM ANH DANG
- 10 A Divided Sangha in the Global Field of Vietnamese
Buddhism 239
ALLISON TRUITT

Section IV: Class and Consumption

SECTION IV INTRODUCTION

- Almost Comfortable: Anxious Wealth and Uncertain Social
Distinction in the Market Socialist Economy 259
ERIK HARMS
- 11 Consumption and Global Connections in Vietnam:
New Middle Classes and Changing Everyday Practices under
Consumer Socialism 267
ARVE HANSEN
- 12 A Middle-Class Suitcase: Unpacking Domestic Tourism
in Vietnam 287
EMMANUELLE PEYVEL

13	Migration, Mobility, and Middle-Class Aspirations among Vietnamese Migrants in Moscow	311
	LAN ANH HOANG	
14	Afterword: Lifeworld Reconfiguration and Sociocultural Resilience	333
	HY V. LUONG	
	<i>Biographical Notes</i>	351

Illustrations

FIGURES

8.1	“Black Lives Matter—We Stand In Solidarity”	212
12.1	Combined growth of domestic and international tourism in Vietnam	287
12.2	Promotional campaign encouraging domestic tourism during the COVID-19 period	288
12.3	Bà Nà Hills, a paradigmatic middle-class tourist destination	293
12.4	Domestic tourists in Gành Đá Dĩa, Central Vietnam	295
14.1	Foreign Direct Investment Disbursement in Vietnam, in USD million, 1990–2022	334
14.2	Students at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hồ Chí Minh City	339
14.3	A male student honoree and Dr. Phan Thanh Hải	340
14.4	Heads of states and governments at the APEC summit in Hà Nội in 2006	341

MAPS

12.1	Main Vietnamese tourist sites	291
12.2	Provincial distribution of tourism revenue in Vietnam in 2019	301

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Minh T.N. Nguyen
and
Kirsten W. Endres



INTRODUCTION

Deciphering Vietnamese Translocal Lifeworlds

MINH T.N. NGUYEN AND KIRSTEN W. ENDRES

IN GERMANY, VIETNAMESE traders scour supermarkets and drugstores for beauty and nutrition items for sale via social media to middle-class customers in Vietnam. In Vietnam, young professionals participate in global forums for sustainable development entrepreneurship, aspiring to “innovate like a Swede.” Through online activism, music and dance artists take part in international hip hop competitions and support the Black Lives Matter movement. In doing so, they forge membership in global communities of practice, as do the followers and practitioners of Vietnamese Buddhism whose monasteries and pagodas scatter around the world. Vietnamese women and men cross borders to the north, east, and west to work, to get married, or to pursue higher education; many settle down in host societies, others return to their home country, thereby changing their lives and identities and those of the people around them. As a large number of rural people leave the countryside to work in factories, many rural households now raise animals and grow cash crops as contractors for global corporations. Global finance and global businesses are reaching deeper into social relations and into formerly subsistence-dominated economies for new frontiers of value extraction as people embrace their products and production methods with the hope of generating income and ensuring future protection. Conversely, Vietnamese businesses, employing Westerners and a discourse of Western efficiency, seek to generate an image of following international standards to compete in the global market. A consumer society has emerged in which people rework global products, signs, and images into their own schemes of significance while redefining what is authentically Vietnamese for everyday consumption, not least for tourism as a middle-class practice.

As the chapters in this volume show, Vietnam is a country in which global connections, deepening privatization, and neoliberal restructuring are drastically reconfiguring economic systems, cultural and social life, the self, and personhood. Following decades of high socialism, the country has remained under the rule of a communist party state that continues to exert monopoly political power over economy and society (London 2022; Masina 2006). Compared to the previous political restrictions on transnational mobility and international economic interactions, however, Vietnam has seen several decades of intensified engagement with the global world following the mid-1980s reforms (Luong 2003; Schwenkel and Leshkovich 2012). Despite sustained political control, multidirectional movements of people, ideas, practices, and institutions into and out of the country have created vast transnational networks and global fields of exchange. Since the 2000s, Vietnam has signed on to various free trade agreements and regional pacts, and Vietnamese labor and products are increasingly part of global systems of production and circulation (Rama 2022). As global production relocates to the country for its cheaper labor and natural resources, global finance quickly follows, with consumer finance, private insurance, and global investment funds now flourishing in Vietnam. Conversely, a greater number of Vietnamese leave the country to work the factories, construction sites, homes, care institutions, and commodity-trade facilities around the world, joining the global diasporas that had emerged from earlier waves of global migration/refugee movements (Schwenkel 2020; Su 2022; Tran 2021; Truitt 2021).

Today, many people lead mobile lives between their second and former home country, with homes and businesses at either end of their transnational sojourns; it is not uncommon for members of a family to live on several continents. Meanwhile, the digitalization of social and economic activities has been generating new possibilities for entrepreneurship, social relationships, and self-making, while creating new problems in private and communal life across locations rural and urban, within Vietnam and elsewhere. As the growing middle class looks to global consumption, higher education, and pop culture for validation of its distinction, working-class people search for opportunities beyond their home place and national borders, often driven by aspirations for the good life. These aspirations are shaped by contradictory notions of the good: as premised on private accumulation, consumption, and self-realization in the market, and as motivated by

communal belonging and ideas of public life (Nguyen, Wilcox, and Lin 2024). This tension in ordinary people's lives is closely related to the disjuncture in the governing approach of a party state seeking to legitimize its political rule via sustained economic growth and national competitiveness in the global economy (Wilcox, Rigg, and Nguyen 2021; see also Gainsborough 2010 and Schwenkel and Leshkovich 2012).

All these developments produce social and economic formations and structures of meanings that are difficult to pin down as characteristic of Vietnam as a country by and for itself. After all, similar processes of social transformations touch upon the lives of people in most global societies. This volume analyzes how they unfold in a socialist country now deeply implicated in global systems of labor, finance, and production. It contributes to the existing literature on Vietnam's socioeconomic transformations in the post-reform era (see, e.g., Barbieri and Bélanger 2009; London 2022; Luong 2003; Nguyen-Marshall, Drummond, and Belanger 2012; Taylor 2016) with in-depth analyses of the lives of Vietnamese in this global Vietnam. Produced by scholars based in Vietnam, Europe, North America, and Australia, the ethnographic studies in *Reconfiguring Vietnam* vividly explore how Vietnamese people today build their social, cultural, and economic lives out of the encounter between local and global forces, ideas, and actors and how, in doing so, they engender new spaces, processes, and dynamics.

People throughout the world and history often embrace societal changes by upholding constructions of traditions and cultures that provide them with a sense of continuity and help them face future contingencies (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). This also applies to Vietnamese people. In the country's long history, Vietnamese have not just put their "traditions on trial" at momentous turns (Marr 1981), but have also repeatedly invented and reinvented traditions for diverse political and economic goals (Endres 2000; Luong 2010; Malarney 2002; Taylor 2007; Leshkovich 2014), even in the most peripheral places (Ngô 2016; Roszko 2020; Rumsby 2023). The translocal lifeworlds we portray here are characterized by such dialogical interactions among the past, the present, and the future in the experiences and actions of ordinary people as they go about their lives and make sense of their encounters with the global world. The volume's title refers both to the reconfiguration of Vietnam through such encounters and the reconfiguring work that we do as scholars, that of deciphering how people strategically incorporate elements of the past and their vision of the future into their

present lives. Reconfiguring involves identifying both new dynamics of social life and the ways in which people seek to maintain continuity in their lives amid the change. Continuity does not simply happen—it requires continuous efforts,¹ and it can constitute a field of power struggles. As such, reconfiguration refers to an approach that is notably different from the revolutionary zeal witnessed in historical moments of the last century. During those moments, the objective was to remake the world by employing both physical and symbolic violence to dismantle the established social order, which was condemned wholesale as a barrier to human liberty and progress. In contrast, the current era of reconfiguring speaks of dramatic social changes brought about by global events and processes. It encompasses not only these external influences but also the changes that people consciously seek to enact, thereby respecting and building upon preceding configurations² (see also Luong's afterword in this volume).

Such reflexive engagement with the old and the new in the remaking of social and economic lives is observable in the practices of ordinary Vietnamese discussed in all chapters of the volume, despite their different topics. Following the introduction and ending with an afterword by Hy V. Luong, the book is structured into four sections: "Economic Activities," "Gender and Private Life," "Culture and Identity," and "Class and Consumption." Each section is introduced by an established Vietnam scholar who brings the chapters together under cross-cutting themes.

The chapters in the first section ("Economic Activities," introduced by Ann Marie Leshkovich) tackle processes that are currently recasting the economic lives of Vietnamese living in Vietnam and beyond, including the penetration of global finance (Nicolas Lainez, Trịnh Phan Khánh, and Bùi Thị Thu Đoài), ideas and practices of entrepreneurship around sustainable development (Esther Horat), the digitalization of economic activities as seen through the case of transnational virtual traders (Jessica Steinman), and the incorporation of commodity production for global businesses in rural livelihoods (Tuan Anh Nguyen and Minh T.N. Nguyen).

The second section ("Gender and Private Life," introduced by Helle Rydstrom) addresses the fact that the multidirectional mobility of Vietnamese-born people between different parts of the world today is not just an economic matter. It is shaped by and helps to reconfigure ideas and practices related to gender, sexuality, and, more generally, private life. This section discusses the personal and social implications of marriage migration

by Vietnamese women to China and other Asian countries (Nguyen Thi Phuong Cham, Phung N. Su) or the return migration of young men who had worked in Japan (An Huy Tran).

Following up on section II, the third section ("Culture and Identity," introduced by Hoang Cam), explores the ongoing process of identity construction. It examines the interweaving of what is imagined as traditional, for example in the case of transnational Buddhism (Allison Truitt), with what is envisioned as modern and cosmopolitan. This involves the adoption of global cultural forms such as hip hop dance (Sandra Kurfürst) and of international standards at the workplace (Kim Anh Dang).

The chapters in the fourth and last section ("Class and Consumption," introduced by Erik Harms) explore the class relations that unfold in people's engagement with the consumer society (Arve Hansen, Emmanuelle Peyvel) and their class aspirations (Lan Anh Hoang). They point to the circulation of ideas about and practices of middle-classness that take on both global and local means of distinction in ways that are laden with class anxieties and indicative of complex forms of social differentiation. In the remainder of this introduction, we will discuss the conceptual framing of the volume and explore some broader dynamics and processes that underpin the distinct but interrelated analyses presented in the chapters herein.

*"Translocality," "Encounter," and "Lifeworld":
Concepts for Studying Global Vietnam*

This volume uses an analytical framework that weaves together three concepts for the understanding of global Vietnam: namely, lifeworld, encounter, and translocality. Lifeworld is originally a phenomenological concept that refers to the direct experiences of the world in everyday life (Schutz and Luckmann 1989). It implies the coexistence of diverse perspectives, tensions, and contestations or contradictions, even in the logics and actions of the same person or groups. According to anthropologist Michael Jackson, lifeworld captures "a constellation of both ideas and passions, moral norms and ethical dilemmas, the tried and the true as well as the unprecedented, a field charged with vitality and animated by struggle" (2013:7). Encompassing both the particular and the general conditions of human life (Jackson 2013), the concept is useful for our purpose of portraying how Vietnamese today

grapple with existential issues of making a living, identity construction, and meaning making in a context where the abstract forces of global capitalism are entangled with the governing strategies of the authoritarian party-state.

The notion of encounter, meanwhile, takes its cue from the anthropological discussion of the colonial encounter. The colonial encounter, according to Talal Asad, is defined by relations in which “the West has sought both to subordinate and devalue other societies, and at the same time to find in them clues to its own humanity” (1979:104). In talking of the “global encounter,” thus, we recognize the traces of these colonial power relations, as also explicitly taken up by Kim Anh Dang’s chapter in this volume. However, we underscore the dialogical and multidirectional interactions of people born in and from Vietnam, a formerly colonized country, with the global world that date back to precolonial times but have intensified since the reform. Following Eric Wolf (1982 [1997]), we emphasize an understanding of global processes as embedded in ever-changing societies and cultures that constantly interact with the outside world to produce new social forms and dynamics since time immemorial. As a good example of Wolf’s thesis, Vietnam has had centuries of exposure to the global world, not least through the encounter with the major world religions and the global mobility of labor already occurring before and during the colonial period (Li 1998; Tappe and Nguyen 2019; Taylor 2007; Vu-Hill 2011). Empirical rule, colonialism, revolution, war, communism, and capitalism have made it “a true contact zone” from which Vietnamese derive cultural resources for representing the past in ways that carry “multiple interpretive possibilities” (Ho-Tai 2001:10). As Vietnamese today engage in global trade, global finance, transnational migration, and global consumption, they also remake the relations of power inherent in these global systems, as previous generations have done.

What we refer to as “translocal lifeworld” arises out of this dynamic and dialectical encounter. The last several decades have seen Vietnamese increasingly leading mobile lives between places and nations and being driven by ideas of the good life that draw on different value frameworks (Luong 2009; Hoang 2020; Nguyen 2018b; Nguyen, Wilcox, and Lin 2024). The lifeworlds that emerge therefrom take on a translocal character that defies the common characterization of an essentialized Vietnam as a nation or a stable conception of Vietnamese-ness. Our analysis of a global Vietnam starts with Vietnam as an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) yet recognizes that this imaginary has been many times expanded and reworked

through the experiences and practices of millions of people whose actions and mobilities simultaneously challenge and consolidate borders and boundaries (Leshkowich and Endres 2018; Su 2022). Our notion of translocality is therefore not necessarily limited to spatial mobility and migration as commonly understood. Instead, it refers broadly to how people and communities participate in multiple economic and social orders (Gershon 2019) that extend across locales, scales, and nations, and how, in that process, they carry out translation work and negotiate the boundaries between contradictory value frameworks and systems of meanings.

Global Encounters, Translocal Lifeworlds

Together, the individual chapters of this volume reflect the mutual constitution of morality and economy, the personal and the political, and the private and public in people's motivations and actions. In the following, we tease out the major moral, social, and political economic dynamics that have driven the reconfiguration of Vietnamese social and economic lives into the translocal lifeworlds in which Vietnamese today live.

New frontiers of value extraction and an unequal encounter

Within a few decades following the introduction of market reforms, ordinary Vietnamese are trading on the stock market, purchasing life insurance, signing up to mortgage contracts, becoming indebted to financial institutions, using the Internet as a venue of small trade and shopping, and conducting contract farming and working for global corporations. In ways that would have been unimaginable a few decades ago, hardly any facets of everyday life have remained untouched by the presence of global capitalist institutions, from banking and financial institutions, financial technologies, social media, and industrial zones to retail shopping complexes, agribusiness, and property development corporations. As Steinman (chapter 1), Horat (chapter 2), Lainez, Trinh, and Bui (chapter 3), and Tuan Anh Nguyen and Minh T.N. Nguyen (chapter 4) show, these global institutions do not function as impersonally, formally, and abstractly as often assumed or made to appear. Their analyses of ordinary people's economic activities suggest that these

institutions enter existing local networks, social relationships, and personal obligations and turn these into frontiers of value extraction, while at the same time using them for enforcing rules and consolidating power.

In a vivid account of consumer finance, Lainez, Trinh, and Bui (chapter 3) demonstrate how social relations are turned into collateral for “black credits” offered by legally sanctioned financial institutions such as FE Credit to cash-strapped borrowers with easy conditions and at exorbitant interest rates. These institutions create an image of impersonality for their products, free of the usual personal complications of indebtedness when providing the credit, only to turn repayment into a highly personalized business. Borrowers’ failure to repay the quickly multiplying sums would result in escalating verbal and virtual abuses, phone calls and threats to family members and employers, or public shaming on social media. This dirty work of enforcing the repayment is outsourced to thugs employed by a third party, thus absolving the lenders of any legal responsibility for their abuses. The depersonalization exhibited by financial institutions is thus a facade, masking the fact that their own existence very much depends on people’s mutual obligations and their sense of “having a face,” the potential loss of which puts enormous pressures on borrowers.

In Tuan Anh Nguyen and Minh T.N. Nguyen’s analysis (chapter 4), global agribusinesses assure farmers that contract animal farming is risk-free thanks to their guarantee of stable input provisions and output prices. Yet, as it turns out, freedom from risks, the biggest of which is animal diseases, is only made possible by the labor of ethnic minority people from the poorer northern mountains, who have to live in isolation within the farms during the maturation cycle of the animals to minimize contagion. Meanwhile, the low output prices the companies pay to contracted farmers and the high prices of the feed, veterinary products, and seedlings sold by the same companies work together to depress market prices and hike up the production costs of independent farms. Market and production risks thereby are shifted onto the contract farmers’ fellow villagers or relatives and onto the networks of migrant laborers from poorer regions who are made to give up their freedom to ensure minimization of these risks. In consumer finance and contract farming alike, it seems, the risks of production and circulation are absorbed by social relationships and local networks while feeding into existing social inequalities between regions and groups to the benefit of value extraction by global capital.

It has been established that global capital commonly feeds on value systems associated with domesticity, informality, and sociality, realms that are often constructed as insulated from the workings of formal capitalist institutions (Hann and Kalb 2020). In Vietnam's rapidly evolving digital economy, this reality is disguised by the now widespread neoliberal ethics of self-enterprise (Makovicky 2014). This ethics glorifies the savvy Internet entrepreneurs who are able to ride the waves of technological advances to achieve wealth and fame as autonomous players fully in control of their lives and time. Steinman's account (chapter 1) shows how e-traders between Germany and Vietnam deploy their migrant identities and social connections on either side of their transnational lives for selling online German consumer products that are desirable in Vietnam. In order to stay visible as e-traders, however, they have to activate the whole spectrum of their virtual sociality and self-presentation to generate impressions of credibility to maintain a customer base. The promise of autonomy seems undone by the extremely long hours of their days spent on constantly communicating with customers who expect immediate answers to their enquiries and the takeover of private and family life by the work that they do. Driven by entrepreneurial aspirations in an increasingly flexible cross-border labor market, the affective, informal, and emotional labor of these Vietnamese e-traders, likewise precarious as that of millions of others pursuing similar dreams in the digital economy (Srnicke and De Sutter 2017), becomes a foundation of the surplus value created for digital capitalism.

Self-entrepreneurship not only recasts precarity as desirable for people wanting to become their own masters, such as Steinman's e-traders. Horat's account of start-up initiatives among the young and urban middle class (chapter 2) indicates that self-entrepreneurship also gives the state a useful discursive instrument to frame responsibilities for tackling social and environmental problems as a matter of activating individual market potentials, as it does with the provision of most public goods and services (Nguyen 2018a, 2023). The young people Horat works with, in an effort to respond to climate change and environmental problems and to signal their alliance with global movements around sustainability, "communicate their mission in entrepreneurial terms and actions" (p. 71). Thereby, they translate ecological and environmental issues that require collective actions into those to be addressed by private initiatives such as making and selling products made from natural ingredients or permaculture. The privatization of common

concerns not only helps to absolve the state from responsibilities for these problems, many of which are as much a result of climate change as of government policies, but also turns a highly political matter into a moral issue (see also Derks and Nguyen 2020 for a similar dynamic in other Southeast Asian contexts). The depoliticization is also observed by Kurfürst (chapter 8) in her analysis of Vietnamese hip hop dancers' efforts to reach out to their global community of practices. Among others, these middle-class entrepreneur-dancers engage with issues of global justice from a safe distance via relevant hashtags to curate an image of global awareness as a central element of their enterprise of the self. Such "techniques of the self" are not dissimilar to those performed by Steinman's e-traders who demonstrate their cultural sophistication gained through cross-border migration in their online profiles to generate value for the products they sell.

In short, the Vietnamese encounter with the global world today is one in which people's economic lives are increasingly determined by the workings of global capitalist institutions and logics. Paradoxically, these very institutions and logics are enabled and embraced by the party state for its dual project of legitimation and socialist control as it continues to put forward a master narrative of a state-led march to well-being and progress (Harms 2016; Wilcox, Rigg, and Nguyen 2021). Yet, instead of living their lives in compliance with the homogenizing images configured by the market and the state, our authors suggest, Vietnamese people infuse these with their own meanings and practices as they strive for economic gains and social prestige from differential social positions. As much as global finance instrumentalizes social relations and networks for profit making, people also appropriate their products for maintaining existing relationships and ensuring familial care (Lainez, Trĩnh, and Bũi in this volume; Horat 2017; Nguyen 2021). Next, we further underscore how people domesticate global signs and symbols to articulate these, although their practices are often troubled by the anxiety of social mobility in a context where hegemonic cultural representations persist and class relations are consolidating.

The domestication of the global and the uncertainty of social mobility

The unequal global encounter previously described does not just occur through the movement of capital and labor into and out of the country, the

arrival of new production methods and infrastructures, or the ubiquity of new signs in what Anna Tsing terms “an economy of appearance” (2005; see also Leshkovich 2014). It is also underpinned by what Dang calls “imaginariness of the ideal global” in her thoughtful chapter on the transnational workplace of two private Vietnamese companies producing animated content for the global entertainment industry (chapter 9). Situating her ethnography in the postcolonial world order, Dang’s analysis of the practices and narratives around “international standards” in these companies, for example, the use of performance indicators, are underscored by the valuation of “the West” as the universal bastion of quality, innovation, and creative freedom. The West thereby turns into an adjective used for evaluation of individual performance and aptitude at the workplace vis-à-vis what are deemed as Vietnamese ways of thinking and working—passive, parochial, and hierarchical. These narratives and practices shape how Vietnamese and Western employees are symbolically ranked and recognized at the workplace and the differential material rewards they receive in return for doing similar tasks. The dynamics that Dang portrays of the transnational workplace similarly characterize the realm of consumption that several chapters address. As indicated by the perceptions of the German products sold by Steinman’s transnational e-traders (chapter 1), or the global brands of goods consumed by urban people in Hansen’s analysis (chapter 11), or even the replicas of colonial architecture for domestic tourism in Peyvel’s account (chapter 12), Western signs, symbols, and products are commonly perceived as bearing a powerful mark of quality and aesthetics.

This is, however, not the whole story. As Dang shows in chapter 9, the Vietnamese employees whose workplace is shaped by the Western system of knowledge and representation commonly challenge it by mocking the pretension of the so-called Western expertise and pointing out the system’s inaccuracies and injustices. Beneath their performance of international standards, for example, through the crafting of online appearance and company history or the employment of people with Western background, however, might be the Vietnamese companies’ conscious strategies for playing the rules of a game not of their own making in order to advance their competitiveness. In place of the former cash-strapped, shortage-ridden economy of the “subsidy time” (the period of high socialist central planning), the consumer society that Vietnam has become is now well familiarized with global brands and products one would find elsewhere in the world, many of

which are manufactured right in the country. But just digging a bit below the surface, as Hansen (chapter 11) suggests, we will find that the use of these products is embedded in people's continual efforts to sustain systems of meanings as they selectively take on certain aspects or combine them with what they see as traditional, creating adaptations that align with their specific needs and intentions. Examples abound: the value of an expensive car is only truly recognized when it has a lucky plate number; fast food is preferred by young people but as much because of the sociality it enables as because of its taste, which only appeals to people because local elements are incorporated; traditional dishes are adapted with new ingredients or ways of cooking and serving. Similarly, the architecture and locations of popular domestic tourist destinations such as Bà Nà Hills might be shaped by the enduring influence of colonial aesthetics. Yet, as Peyvel writes in chapter 12, "far from being prisoners of the French scheme, the Vietnamese have also developed their own practices and imaginations" (p. 304). Such practices range from avoiding sunbathing at the seaside to preserve the whiteness of skin, considered aesthetically and socially attractive, to combining tourism with pilgrimage, or going on a vacation organized by the workplace, a practice common during the subsidy time.

Global signs and signifiers, however well circulated, clearly only assume meanings in specific contexts once local people have reworked them into their own schemes of signification (Sen and Stevens 1998). In Vietnam, these schemes of signification are increasingly implicated in emerging class relations. The scholarship on the Vietnamese middle class (e.g., Leshkovich 2006; Nguyen-Marshall, Drummond, and Bélanger 2012; Truitt 2008; Earl 2014) has well established that it is an unstable, fluid, and internally differentiated social formation following four decades of socialist rule. It has also dispelled the die-hard assumption that a stabilizing middle class would eventually challenge the authoritarian one-party rule via greater civil participation. Shaped by long periods of colonialism, nationalism, and violent dislocation between changing social orders and differing notions of modernism, the Vietnamese middle class is also highly ambivalent and insecure about its historical positioning (Nguyen-Marshall, Drummond, and Bélanger 2012).

Yet, it cannot be denied that the Vietnamese middle class today arose from the state-led market reforms that legitimized private businesses and private accumulation following decades of high socialism (see also Zhang

2010 for a similar observation in China). It is as much affiliated with state-sponsored discourses of civility and progress as it is occupied with the imperative of global consumer culture, similar to China and other Asian contexts (Dai and Rofel 2018; Harms 2016; Sen and Stivens 1998). Contra the common assertion that official rhetoric avoids the term middle class because of its assumed potential for political action, there is plenty of media discussion and scholarly writing in Vietnamese around this notion.³ While the term *tầng lớp* (stratum) is used instead of *giai cấp* (classes), there seems to be much less effort in distinguishing the content of the two as before and the English term middle class easily translates into the Vietnamese term *tầng lớp trung lưu* in public discourses. In 2019, Nguyễn Xuân Phúc, the then prime minister of Vietnam, explicitly referred to World Bank reports about the larger number of Vietnamese joining the middle class when he said in a televised government meeting: “The ever-growing middle class is a welcome development” (“Tầng lớp trung lưu ngày càng nhiều là điều đáng mừng”).⁴ He went on to state that it was the outcome of the national cause of poverty reduction (*công cuộc giảm nghèo*)—in other words, an achievement of the party state—before concluding that the middle class will generate Vietnam’s prosperity, since, in his words, “a thinking person is equal to a crowd of working people.”⁵ The party state, it seems, has already preempted any of the said possibilities for politicizing the middle class by incorporating them into the embrace of state recognition of it as the backbone of national economic development and social stability. Even more so, it appears to have appropriated the notion of the middle class as a new form of exemplarity for its strategy of governing through “the will to improve” (Li 2007; Nguyen 2018a) that implicitly denies the private accumulation and dispossession occurring through market liberalization. This governing logic privileges people with the potentiality and desire to become part of the middle class with a “thinking” capacity that distinguishes them from those who are not willing or able to do so.

Following Bourdieu (1989), we share the emphasis of existing works on the Vietnamese middle class with consumption and lifestyle as central to the reproduction of class (Earl 2014; Nguyen-Marshall, Drummond, and Bélanger 2012). Yet, a proper understanding of class relations in Vietnam today requires close attention to how cultural mechanisms of class distinction are subjected to the same political economic forces that shape the economic activities and positioning of different groups of people (Kalb 2015).

Despite the heterogeneity and fragmentation of the middle class, there has always been consistency between its mode of production and mode of consumption. Historically, people's consumption practices tend to match their access to political and economic resources and their ability for private accumulation and property ownership (Dutton 2012; Sasges 2022). This connection becomes even stronger in global Vietnam as class identities increasingly map onto one's position in the global economy, fluency in global consumption as a fast-evolving social field (Peyvel, Hansen, this volume), and cultural belonging to global social movements or communities of practices (Kurfürst, Dang, Truitt, this volume).

Through the intertwining effects of these cultural and material dimensions, the middle class comes into being in its relationality with other social groups, similar to how E.P. Thompson conceived of class-making dynamics in England (1968). The Vietnamese middle class today stands in stark contrast to the peasants and the workers of the laboring class that provides labor for the farms, the factories, the middle-class homes, and the businesses of the expanding urban service sector (Nguyen and Locke 2014; Nguyen 2015). As laboring people struggle to meet the demands of everyday consumption of goods and services for household reproduction through selling their labor or incurring indebtedness (Tuan Anh Nguyen and Minh T.N. Nguyen, and Lainez, Trinh, and Bui, in this volume), the middle class distinguishes itself in the ability to secure both everyday consumption and items that produce well-being in the long term such as housing, schooling, education, and paid care. Further, as Peyvel's analysis of domestic tourism indicates, middle-class people not only have command over the income and time necessary for travel, but also have developed an expectation of leisure time. These would be difficult to imagine for the global factory workers trying to clock as many overtime hours as possible to make up for their low wages (Luong and Nguyen 2024), the female domestic workers confined to the urban middle-class home to address its care needs (Nguyen 2015), or the migrant ethnic minority laborers living in isolation on the commodified farms to ensure disease protection for animals in Tuan Anh Nguyen and Minh T.N. Nguyen's chapter. Peyvel's description of the changing landscape induced by the consumption of spectacular tourist infrastructure also reveals the privatization of public spaces for the consumption of a middle class increasingly on the search for exclusivity and privacy (e.g., Harms 2009; see also Zhang 2010 for similar dynamics in China). Middle-class consumption thus enables

capital accumulation by some at the cost of access to public goods by local populations and working people and in certain cases facilitates their dispossession. As Zhang (2010) also points out for China, the visibility of consumption by the middle class is strongly connected with the invisibility of production and wealth creation, which arguably has to be maintained for the sake of the party state's socialist claims. These intertwining dynamics of consumption and production indicate increasing social differentiation as a result of the entrenching inequalities induced by different groups and regions' encounter with global economic actors and systems.

As an ideal upheld by both the market and the state, meanwhile, the middle class has become an exemplary force that shapes the aspirations of working people who view membership in it as a life goal for themselves or for their children. The migration from rural to urban areas and from Vietnam to other countries today is often driven by this aspiration (Earl 2014; Hoang 2020). Despite significant social and familial costs, many are ready to spend years of their lives working away in precarious conditions of the transnational labor market or in unprotected sectors away from their homeplace and country in its pursuit, as the chapters by Nguyen Thi Phuong Cham, Su, Hoang, and Tran indicate. Hoang's transnational market traders view their precarious life and work in the cut-throat environment of the marketplace in Moscow, where their citizenship rights are uncertain, as necessary sacrifices for the future of their children, whom they have left behind with family in Vietnam (chapter 13). Many would spend huge amounts of money in bribes to secure their children state employment in the police forces or as teachers. As one of Hoang's interlocutors said, such an occupation "would guarantee a stable, respectable, and comfortable life" for her son. According to another, "money is not important" in this family project of having their children join the middle class via a profession they perceive as respectable and rising above their status of being market traders. Despite the possibility for moneymaking with the market trade, they see it as inferior to work that requires higher education. In recent years, however, low state salaries and taxing working conditions have been forcing thousands of state employees in many sectors to leave their jobs for the private sector for the sake of a living wage.⁶ Thus, whether Hoang's research participants' dream of a "stable, respectable, and comfortable life" for their children can be realized would largely depend on their ability to provide their offspring with the funds and properties they would need to compensate for

the insufficient remuneration of ordinary state employment. Hoang's case underscores both the salience of former ideas that connect respectability with public services and offices and the quick unraveling of economic and social structures that had given rise to these ideas. It also suggests a fraught relationship between spatial and social mobility in which the transformation of labor and money into class belonging is mediated by contradictory citizenship status and particular politics of value at different global locations of the translocal lifeworld.

Religion, national identity, and contestations of Vietnameseness

In the past three decades, Vietnam's integration into the global capitalist system went hand in hand with a fundamental transformation of the country's sociocultural and religious landscape, including discourses on the nation and on national cultural heritage (Endres 2011b; Luong 2007). Temples and shrines that had previously been neglected due to the government's restrictive policies were reclaimed by local communities as places of worship and ritual practice. Funds were raised for the renovation, restoration, or new construction of village communal houses, Buddhist pagodas, and family ancestral halls. Life-cycle rituals, such as weddings and funerals, and village ritual festivals were again celebrated with much grandeur (Endres 2000; Malarney 2002). Alongside this revivification, religious and ritual "folk" traditions were scrutinized for their embedded cultural values—such as, for example, patriotism, community spirit, and family cohesion—as part of the state's project of preserving and fostering a strong national cultural identity in the process of global integration. While this approach has come a long way from defining religion as a mystifying tool of power in the Marxian sense, official discourse now tends to essentialize certain aspects of Vietnamese belief as timeless cultural heritage imbued with national ideals. Recent scholarship has challenged this view by emphasizing that religion in present-day Vietnam constitutes a multifaceted arena of dynamic and creative interaction with the challenges of the contemporary globalized world (e.g., Endres 2011a).

As people become more mobile and more often exposed to alternative ways of being in the world through global media and the Internet, their need to articulate what it means to be Vietnamese takes on yet another dimension.

Since 1975, waves of Vietnamese have left the country as political and economic refugees to Western countries following the end of the war, as guest workers to the Soviet Bloc and its allies in Eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, and, more recently, as transnational migrants in search of employment and opportunities around the world. Diasporic groups with differing political affiliations originating from the North and the South are concentrated in particular places and countries—the United States, for example, is home to the largest number of first-wave refugees, while Eastern Europe and Germany host most of the former guest workers. The global Viet diaspora today continues to be shaped by Cold War divisions that divided the country before 1975 (Su 2022). Yet, in the face of diasporic exclusion and marginalization, the four to five million people of differing regional origins, class backgrounds, and religious orientations encountering each other beyond the national border are bound together by the same effort to articulate Vietnamese-ness in significant ways.

This complexity of community construction among Viet diasporas is captured by Truitt's analysis (chapter 10 herein) of the Buddhist communities with differing political identification that have emerged around the world alongside the varied migration trajectories of Vietnamese people. Shaped by the Mahayana or Pure Land traditions and underpinned by varying degrees of affiliation with the state-recognized Buddhist organization, the sanghas distributed around the world seem like separate "communities of practices" with contrasting beliefs and practices that cannot be reconciled. Yet, these communities of practice carry out similar strategies to establish Buddhist monasteries, sacred places that are "conceptually linked to Vietnam as an ancestral homeland but unreconciled with the territorial state of Vietnam" (p. 241). These communities are sustained both by people's pursuit of communal belonging and recognition and by the economic insecurity and precarity induced by the workings of global capitalism, which they seek to address through religious merit making, as do Vietnamese within the country (Schwenkel 2018). As Truitt writes, "people's participation in Buddhist communities whether in Vietnam or in diaspora is as much about navigating the forces of capitalism and globalization as it is about expressing Vietnamese-ness" (p. 249). The tension and discursive division between Vietnamese at home and abroad and between different diasporic groups thus do not map so easily onto the former North-South, East-West divisions as commonly believed—they are instead enmeshed in contested yet mutually

constitutive notions of Vietnamese-ness emerging in the coming together of varying trajectories of global mobility.

The notions of Vietnamese-ness today tend to weave together representations of the authentic and traditional, as in Truitt's example of Buddhism turned into a national cultural resource, and a sense of global belonging, as seen in the pledging of alliance with global discourses of racial justice and sustainability by Kurfürst's hip hop dancers and Horat's start-up entrepreneurs. This desire is often driven simultaneously by the goals of self-representation for the sake of private accumulation and putting a claim on the global world as citizens of a country that until recently was deemed its outcast. As much as it is shaped by the class relations we discussed earlier, people's participation in this "desiring project," to use Rofel's terms in characterizing China (2007), is equally shaped by gendered ideals of the self that are reproduced and reconfigured through the multidirectional mobility of men and women in search of better lives. The male migrants to Japan in Tran's chapter (number 6 herein) view their transnational migration as a rite of passage to mature manhood. Upon return, they perceive improvements in their social status and sexual desirability as a result of having gained not only economic resources but also a sense of having been out there in the world and coming back from a foreign country. Despite being socially and sexually marginalized in Japan, the men see their experiences in a modern industrial country, held as an Asian exemplar of economic success, as resources to realize their gendered roles of being the "pillars of the family" and contributing to national development, which they consider central to their masculinity and desirability. Similar to Hoang's migrant market traders' expectations of social mobility for their children at home, their experiences with exclusive citizenship regimes and structures of opportunities in the host societies make them turn to the homeland as the space for transforming the fruits of their migration into improved social positions. Yet, the exaltation in their improved status can be quite short-lived, as it is quickly met by the realities of changing parameters of middle-classness, obstacles in the labor market, or inflated expectations of wealth performance induced by the increasing number of returnees from more desirable destinations.

The changing ways in which gender and class work together to reconfigure gendered ideas of self as people are on the move also underscore the transnational marriage migration of low-income Vietnamese women to rural China (Nguyen Thi Phuong Cham, chapter 5 herein) and South Korea

(Su, chapter 7 herein). In contrast to the expectations placed on men to become independent economic actors competently acting as the “pillar of the family,” Vietnamese women are normally expected to marry up in order to bring face to their parents and provide financial support for them as an indication of their filial piety. As they marry into societies with seemingly even more pronounced gender hierarchies, the essentialized feminine qualities of Vietnamese women, for example, being caring, self-sacrificing, and docile, are often magnified to suit the patriarchal demands of their husbands’ families. This hyperfeminization is entrenched both by market intermediaries and by the women themselves, who have to rely on familiar gender roles as a cultural resource to negotiate the alienation of being strangers in hostile environments, as do the Vietnamese women in Wanwei that Nguyen T.P.C. discusses. As the women manage the gendered expectations on both ends of their translocal life, their strategy of gender subjection, aimed at acceptance and belonging for the sake of their private life, does not however foreclose the possibility of self-determination. Su’s research participants view their marriage migration to South Korea as a form of defiance against the patriarchal ways of the Vietnamese men they know, whom they do not spare words to criticize. In the meantime, some are ready to file a divorce and return to Vietnam to start anew as single women when they no longer see the merits of their transnational marriage. Even as they narrate their lives in the terms of female submission and sacrifices, Nguyen T.P.C.’s interlocutors in China’s periphery do carve out autonomous spaces of economic and social actions across the border that allow them some sense of dignity and achievement. In these cases, the transnational mobility and actions of these women challenge the patriarchal discourses that deem socially disadvantaged women who marry into working class or rural families abroad as outcasts in both home and host societies. Mobility thus inserts people into new gender hierarchies while carrying the potential to transform gender and to create possibilities for self-making in the translocal lifeworld that transcend familial obligations and roles.

Conclusion

The construction of Vietnamese identity today is simultaneously shaped by the emergence of an entrepreneurial self, an emphasis on individuality,

aspirations for global modernity, and a sustained need to belong to a moral community and to identify one's traditions and roots. These aspirations and personhoods are, however, steeped in ambivalence and uncertainty with growing class differentiation, greater encounter with the global world, and contradictory value frameworks. In people's efforts to establish social and economic life across borders and on the move, desires for love, care, and intimacy and aspirations for economic advancement and social mobility are mutually constituted. As people navigate the contradictory gendered expectations of their translocal lifeworlds, they assume more fluid and malleable identities and practices congruent with the transgression of boundaries through the crossing of national borders yet still underscoring enduring normative ideas and relations of gender, family, and nation.

Together, these contributions suggest that Vietnamese today are living in translocal lifeworlds characterized by ever more complex mobility trajectories, economic networks and systems, and communities of practice. Our authors describe the people and communities they work with as active participants in the global world, whose actions and mobilities catalyze changes to existing social systems and orders. While these actions and mobilities are constrained by dominant power structures, they also give rise to new social and economic spaces that allow people to make new claims, assert new identities, and imagine new futures. Yet, as Eric Wolf argues, "people do not always resist the constraints in which they find themselves, nor can they reinvent themselves freely in cultural constructions of their own choosing. Culture refashioning and culture change continually go forward under variable, but also highly determinate, circumstances" ([1982] 1997: xxiii). As Vietnamese people engage in global systems and processes, they also seek belonging to cultural, moral, and political communities that blend constructions of Vietnamese-ness with global forms. In their acts of navigating between lifeworlds, value frameworks, and social orders, people have helped to reconfigure Vietnam into the place of both global connectivity and friction that it is today. Their practices both de-essentialize the cultural superiority of the West (and the North) in certain ways and re-inscribe power relations in the global order in others.

Notes

- 1 This cogent point was made by Ann Marie Leshkovich in the workshop leading to this publication.
- 2 This excellent point was made by Erik Harms in his comments on the manuscript.
- 3 See, e.g., the review of existing literature in Trịnh Duy Luân 2020 (<https://vass.gov.vn/nghien-cuu-khoa-hoc-xa-hoi-va-nhan-van/nghien-cuu-ve-tang-lop-trung-luu-tu-kinh-nghiem-chau-a-den-thuc-tien-viet-nam-59>), an editorial on the news website Zing (<https://zingnews.vn/tang-lop-trung-luu-va-tuong-lai-thinh-vuong-cua-viet-nam-post1272409.html>), or an article covering comparative national data on the middle class on another news website (<https://vnexpress.net/them-23-2-trieu-nguoi-viet-gia-nhap-tang-lop-trung-luu-vao-2030-4351136.html>), all accessed on 8 November 2022.
- 4 See media coverage at <https://zingnews.vn/thu-tuong-tang-lop-trung-luu-viet-nam-ngay-cang-nhieu-la-dang-mung-post1034714.html> and <https://vietnamnet.vn/tang-lop-trung-luu-viet-nam-xap-xi-dan-so-mot-so-con-ho-chau-a-cong-lai-687409.html>.
- 5 “Một người lo bằng một kho người làm” is a Vietnamese proverb indicating the importance of the ability to organize and think ahead to ensure efficiency.
- 6 See, e.g., online state media coverage at <https://vtc.vn/luong-qua-thap-giao-vien-bo-nghe-di-buon-lam-cong-nhan-khu-cong-nghiep-ar711921.html> [Teachers quitting to work as traders and factory workers] and <https://www.qdnd.vn/y-te/cac-van-de/vi-sao-can-bo-nhan-vien-y-te-bo-viec-700144> [Why do employees in the health sector quit their jobs?]; or <https://laodong.vn/thoi-su/de-nghi-danh-gia-nguyen-nhan-gan-40000-cong-chuc-vien-chuc-nghi-viec-1107235.ldo> [Proposal to review the causes of 40,000 state employees leaving their jobs]. All accessed on 12 November 2022.

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Section I
Economic Activities

SECTION I INTRODUCTION

Informality, Precarity, and Desire: Frictions of the Contemporary Vietnamese Global Economy

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THE CHAPTERS IN THIS SECTION compellingly detail various forms of labor performed by Vietnamese individuals in the contemporary global economy: transporting goods transnationally and certifying their authenticity (Steinman), translating global concepts such as sustainability into specific proposals for entrepreneurial action (Horat), acquiring loans and capital (Lainez, Trinh, and Bui), and diversifying rural production and livelihood strategies through migration and consolidation of land holdings (Tuan Anh Nguyen and Minh T.N. Nguyen). These diverse forms of labor exemplify the informal economy as defined by Keith Hart fifty years ago: irregular and episodic self-employment, as opposed to the permanent recruitment on a “regular basis for fixed rewards” (1973:68) characteristic of the formal economy. In keeping with Hart’s now-classic formulation, economists and economic anthropologists in the mid-twentieth century tended to view the informal economy as a feature of “urban economies in the development process” (Hart 1973:89) that would ultimately be brought into the formal economy, particularly in the Global South. Decades of work in this area and the rise of the gig economy in the Global North have instead shown the opposite: not only is the informal economy thriving around the world, the flexibility it affords is integral to the formal organization of labor and extraction of wealth under capitalism (see, e.g., Han 2018).

In recent years, scholars have increasingly used the concept of precarity to indicate the global condition of widespread dependence on the informal

economy. Clara Han notes that, just as with informal economy, scholars have tended to depict precarity as aberrant, as what happens when formal economies and state-sponsored social safety nets do not work: “the predicament of those who live at the juncture of unstable contract labor and a loss of state provisioning” (2018:332). Just as the informal economy is integral to capitalism, however, so is precarity as the driving force propelling people to pursue diverse labor and capital strategies in order to get by. While the neoliberal retreat of the welfare state generated evident precarity throughout the Global North in the closing decades of the twentieth century, precarity itself has long been integral to capitalism.

Precarity may be ubiquitous, but, as Han also points out, its forms and individuals’ experiences of them are as diverse as the vulnerabilities that arise from complex configurations of global, transnational capitalist extraction and accumulation. As a result, precarity becomes an ethnographic question that these chapters can help us to answer: by placing particular experiences of different Vietnamese actors in the contemporary transnational informal economy into dialogue with one another, what contours of precarity do these chapters throw into sharp relief? What stands out to me most is how these chapters highlight forms of affective or emotional work, often involving self-exploitation and the assumption of significant risk, that the informal labor precariat performs, and how the performance of this seemingly immaterial work both fuels consumer desire and generates resources—labor, capital, and land—upon which formal markets depend. The chapters also illuminate patterns in which the forms of this affective labor depend crucially on questions of subjectivity, character, and identity: who seems “naturally” predisposed to perform what kinds of informal economic labor and how this labor lies at the nexus of constitutive frictions that transform values in the abstract sense of ideological goods into value in the material sense.

In a recent edited volume on Vietnamese traders, Kirsten Endres and I draw on Anna Tsing’s groundbreaking work on friction across differences as the driver of the global neoliberal economy to argue that friction can also be a productive metaphor for thinking about economic transformation and subjectivity within a supposedly shared cultural frame marked by uneven processes of “emplacement, mobility, and borderwork” (2018:14). We argue that these frictions are profoundly productive:

Friction creates danger and uncertainty, but it also transforms both trading activity and the subjectivities of traders and officials. ... [M]arkets

form and transform in uneven ways through the interplay between global processes and local trajectories of economic and social development that interact with changing—and not always consistent—regimes of state regulation at various levels of implementation. Rather than obstacles to market formation or its workings, the shifting dynamics of contestation and uncertainty—trading frictions—are the necessary ground on which new forms of political economy emerge. (Leshkovich and Endres 2018:15)

In formerly socialist economic contexts, one potent source of friction has been between a socialist moral vision of personal gain as antithetical to the social good and the capitalist vision of the pursuit of individual wealth as an engine driving national development. According to Lisa Rofel, similar tension in China has made the reconfiguration of desire central to its market-oriented economic transformation. She argues that socialist personhood has been replaced with a

model of human nature [that] has the desiring subject as its core: the individual who operates through sexual, material, and affective self-interest. ... “Desire” is a key cultural practice in which both the government and its citizens reconfigure their relationship to a postsocialist world. In official, intellectual, and popular discourses, this desiring subject is portrayed as a new human being who will help to usher in a new era in China. (Rofel 2007:3)

No natural creation, this desiring subject emerges through television and other forms of public culture that coach people in “the art of ‘longing’” (Rofel 2007:6).

The chapters in this section point to the crucial role of two kinds of desire in this productive friction: first, an ideological desire that figures entrepreneurship as an alluring space of freedom and self-making, even in the context of the precarity of the informal economy; and, second, a material consumer desire, compulsory in the global economy, that charts a course to the good life through particular products. As Rofel’s analysis implies, there can be significant friction between different ideologies and materialities of desire: What does it mean to desire appropriately? What forms of opportunity and precarity result when entrepreneurship is engaged informally versus formally? How can entrepreneurial and consumer desires be harnessed in forms of ethical citizenship that will contribute to national development?

Esther Horat’s chapter highlights the workshop as a significant public culture site for the pedagogical inculcation of entrepreneurial desire among

urban, middle-class youth in contemporary Vietnam. Often cosponsored by universities, foreign governments, and transnational companies, entrepreneurial “boot camp” workshops guide enthusiastic participants through each step of the business process. They explicitly focus on the relationship between values and value, as they take globally circulating articulations of the world’s most pressing problems and posit youthful social entrepreneurship as the source of the innovation needed to solve them. One workshop Horat attended focused on sustainability, a concept that, even when disaggregated by the United Nations Development Programme into seventeen “Sustainable Development Goals,” remained fuzzy and required significant translation work by the participating youths, whose success in this endeavor would be rated by a jury of potential investors. Along the way, values are created, such as Vietnamese young people as key to entrepreneurship, yet in need of assessment and training by experienced role models; in this particular case, Sweden was positioned as the inspirational instantiation of sustainability.

Horat insightfully argues that this example illustrates how the global economy has been reorganized around affective labor (Oksala 2016:284; Hardt and Negri 2004:96), with entrepreneurs looking to create pleasurable feelings in both their customers and themselves. The chapter also provides insights into the dynamics through which affective labor can be alienated so that the value it generates can be accumulated by others. In the incubation workshop, the risky labor of creativity, research, and development is outsourced to young contestants. Alongside the allure of having an idea fast tracked, the contestants gain the opportunity to cultivate an entrepreneurial ethos organized around the concept of sustainability that promises transformation of both self and world. But this may be a case in which, on balance, the youthful contestants lose more than they gain: “[E]ntrepreneurs invest thousands of hours of unpaid work during the initial stages of setting up a sustainability-aligned business that addresses the social issues about which they are passionate” (p. 73). Positioning Vietnamese youths as naturally creative sources of future solutions who require coaching essentializes their embodied affective labor as not yet sufficiently formed to garner economic value. This economic sleight of hand also serves government interests: Sweden’s in terms of its global branding as aspirational model of sustainability, but also Vietnam’s in that it renders sustainability a technical problem to be solved through individual entrepreneurship, rather than a political

problem resulting from policy decisions or the interests of capital—a point that Minh T.N. Nguyen and Kirsten W. Endres also note in their introduction to this volume.

Jessica Steinman's chapter focuses on entrepreneurial efforts to meet more conventional consumer desires: recent Vietnamese migrants to Germany between the ages of twenty and forty who utilize social media to sell luxury goods and health and beauty products, such as dietary supplements and skin care, to customers in Vietnam. One would expect this informal suitcase trade to have waned with the increasingly interconnected global economy, but digital media allows it to continue because it meets the needs of the lower middle classes in Vietnam for niche products. As with the youthful workshop participants in Horat's chapter, the traders' identities are central to the construction of appropriate entrepreneurial desire. In this case, the perception that e-traders do this on the side to assist social contacts in Vietnam helps to authenticate the goods and their services by distancing them from self-interested motives such as profit. Steinman carefully traces e-commerce workers' daily routines, including the hours they spend answering questions and their round-the-clock availability to customers. Facebook posts depict them living an aspirational middle-class "good life" in Germany, even though their e-trade in fact prevents them from achieving this lifestyle because they have little time or opportunity to learn German or participate in the formal economy—a textbook case of cruel optimism in which pursuing one's desires prevents one from thriving (Berlant 2011). Steinman vividly shows the technoprecarity that Vietnamese German migrant e-traders experience because of their extensive self-exploitation to cultivate and satisfy their customers. Their work as entrepreneurs threatens their health.

While their customers may immediately benefit, whose interests are ultimately served by Vietnamese German e-commerce workers' precarity? Steinman's chapter contributes to broader discussions of how social media platforms provide fertile ground for the alienation of labor precisely because posts seem like haphazard individual acts of commerce or egocentric self-branding, rather than part of a structured system to cultivate consumer desire and circulate goods in the global economy. In *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet*, Minh-Ha T. Pham (2015) focuses on fashion superbloggers, the vast majority of them Asian, who post highly staged, yet seemingly casual and effortless, photos of what they are wearing. Pham argues that the global

fashion industry has shifted so that a greater portion of marketing happens via these influencers, who perform unwaged or underwaged racialized and gendered fashion labor—in this case textual and code work to prepare posts, create links, and monitor traffic—that contributes to the accumulation of capital by the fashion industry because the bloggers drive demand for designer goods. Similar to racialized and gendered garment workers, superbloggers “occupy a common fraught position as a model minority labor supply believed to be oriented to hard work, yet racial assumptions about their natural facility for hard and difficult work put them in a position where they must bear the burden of demands (often discourteously made) for unreasonable amounts of work” (Pham 2015:32). The e-commerce workers profiled by Steinman seem similarly positioned as outsourced hustlers for low-end globalization that drive high-end globalization by fueling global desire for European products as technologically advanced or of high quality. Because the labor is racialized and perhaps also gendered—including by entrepreneurs’ own performances of cultural capital in depicting their e-commerce as merely a side gig motivated by a desire to help out fellow Vietnamese through social networks—the value it generates is easier to alienate because it seems less like material work and more like expressions of enduring cultural values and social relationships.

Nicolas Lainez, Trịnh Phan Khánh, and Bùi Thị Thu Đoài’s examination of loan repayment practices similarly explores how personalistic values can be mobilized to recoup material value, yet also not appear as such precisely because the practices seem to be about enduring cultural and social values. Although the Vietnamese government has called for the formalization of credit and lending, as opposed to informal practices based in social networks, financial companies (fincos) use personalistic networks as collateral to be weaponized in the form of social media shaming or physical threats when repayment is delinquent, often by outsourcing collection to the kinds of shady entities that fincos otherwise discredit. Consumer finance is dis-embedded and then re-embedded in informal economic social relations to limit the risk taken on by formal economic financial companies and banks.

Against a linear narrative of evolution from informal to formal systems of loans and credit, the chapter by Lainez, Trịnh, and Bùi shows the interdependence of the two systems in financial companies. Financialization draws from existing social structures and enduring cultural values such as

familism and personalistic networks, but hides this by outsourcing it to third parties, thus preserving the fiction of difference between formal and informal economies, rather than their obvious mutual dependence. Also obscured in this dynamic is that formal sector financialization may in fact promote familism because of its utility as collateral. These kinds of personalistic loan recovery practices are central to apparently depersonalized, supposedly regulated economies, suggesting that the formal becomes such by leveraging, yet denying, the informal, and in this way alienating the value that the informal produces.

Family ties are also central to the diversification of periurban rural livelihoods examined in the chapter by Tuan Anh Nguyen and Minh T.N. Nguyen. The authors argue that such households have become translocal in their dependence on “broader systems of commodity production, labor commodification, and finance that operate across the city and the countryside, engaging extrafamilial actors and processes.” Supported by the cash generated through children’s outmigration, the translocal rural household pursues subsistence agriculture, commodity farming, and employment of migrant labor to manage risk and accumulate wealth. Yet such practices also expose translocal rural households to the risk of debt and market volatility.

The authors argue that translocality has become a requirement of the contemporary economy and a defining feature of rural life in Vietnam because only by leaving rural areas are people able to invest in them. Translocal rural households can move toward economies of scale by acquiring land from families for whom migration has reduced their own available labor. Successful diversified income strategies involve the hiring of migrant laborers from other provinces and the renting of harvest machinery, with capital generated through loans or income from migrant family members’ activities in areas such as street vending. Although not emphasized in the chapter, these patterns of labor migration are highly gendered. This suggests that, as with the other livelihood strategies explored in this section’s chapters, rural translocality depends on the mobilization of subjectively meaningful values to foster patterns of accumulation and advance development policies.

The chapters in this section demonstrate that so-called formal markets rely upon informal labor and its associated values to assume risk, fuel and satisfy entrepreneurial and consumer desires, and generate material value. Informal labor is crucial to the global circulation of goods, capital, people, and concepts, yet it is also often unrecognized or under-recognized, precisely

because the formal sector denigrates the informal as backward or illicit and hence makes it easier to alienate its labor through being unpaid or underpaid. The variegated frictions of the contemporary global economy depend on forms of informality, precarity, and affectively generated entrepreneurial and consumer desire that are hierarchically naturalized—in the cases examined here, because they are performed through particular racialized, gendered, or classed Vietnamese bodies, cultural values, and social relationships in particular locations. The values that surround these patterns work to justify alienation of labor, particularly informal labor, and thereby enable more powerful entities to appropriate the value that labor generates. New social media technologies, accelerated processes of financialization, trendy concepts such as sustainability, and opportunities to diversify production strategies can make these labor formations seem novel. Yet the underlying story is the perennial structural one of capitalist expansion through the alienation of labor that mobilizes, yet misrecognizes values in order to generate value. It is a classic cautionary tale of capitalism's cruel optimism in which connections between values and value motivate individual action, yet are also implicated in processes of their own naturalization and mystification to foster regimes of differential accumulation.

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*Precarity and Opportunities:
How Vietnamese E-traders Navigate between
Imaginaries and Lived Reality in Germany*

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Introduction

IN RECENT YEARS, SOCIAL NETWORKING PLATFORMS (SNP) such as Facebook and Instagram have been a popular way for people to form communities, exchange information, and search for new opportunities, especially during migration. Increasingly, scholars have been paying attention to how these platforms affect migrants' trading practices (Chen 2013; Chen, Tan, and Tu 2015). Digital technology has reduced costs, allowed social capital as a marketing strategy, and reduced entry barriers for petty traders while increasing social interactivity between migrants and people in their social networks (Chen 2013). Moreover, researchers have shown increasing instances where migrants use Facebook to connect and trade (Blanchard 2013; Nancheva 2021). Despite increasing interest in digital trading, little research has explored the significant roles of digital trade in the migrant community, such as enhancing a feeling of home and community (Nancheva 2021) and maintaining family relationships (Blanchard 2013). For Vietnamese migrants in Germany, the increase of transnational communication through SNP, such as Facebook, has enabled them to build communities and engage in digital forms of small-scale trade. Using their digital social networks, Vietnamese e-traders established online businesses that reflected and shaped their Vietnamese migrant identity, based on their movement and social connection.

This chapter focuses on Berlin's Vietnamese e-traders who perform transnational petty trade between Germany and Vietnam. It draws on ethnographic data collected between July 2018 and January 2022. The data collection follows the non-digital-centric approach to the digital (Pink et al. 2015), in which the digital world is understood as a part of people's everyday world. This means the digital world constitutes only part of my fieldwork research. Since "participation in economic activities involves fantasies, desires, and other affective attachments, investments and entanglements" (Anderson et al. 2019:423), my ethnography engages with the yearnings, lived realities, and aspirations of my participants, which intertwine with various positionalities in contradictory and ambivalent ways as they participate in and embody the digital marketplace (Precarity Lab 2019:80). To understand how traders navigate between lived realities and imaginaries of the West, I befriended traders, participated in their digital worlds, visited their homes, accompanied them during deliveries, and analyzed publicly available digital texts on their profiles. The chapter explores how Vietnamese e-traders in Berlin capitalize on imaginaries of "the West" to conduct transnational trade and how these traders navigate the world between imaginaries and lived reality in their host land. Contrasting their ability to get Western products that are better and safer than the low-quality products in Vietnam, traders perpetuate ideas of Western modernity and orderliness in juxtaposition to Vietnam's backward lawlessness. Their promotion of such products reproduces the association of foreign products with upward mobility and prosperity. Nevertheless, even as they advertise a carefree lifestyle in the West, migrant traders themselves experience the de-liberating instability and precariousness of digital capitalism.

The Rise of Vietnamese E-traders

Today, there are 207,000 Vietnamese living in Germany, 130,000 of whom had their own migration experience (Statistisches Bundesamt n.d.). Vietnamese migration into Germany was heavily influenced by the Cold War and the Vietnam War (Steinman 2021). From the 1950s until 1989, thousands of Vietnamese from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and later the Socialist Republic of Vietnam entered the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as students and contract workers under a bilateral labor agreement

between the two COMECON states. At the same time, thousands of Vietnamese from the Republic of Vietnam also received training in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Following the end of the Vietnam War, the FRG also accepted some 38,000 Vietnamese refugees who fled Vietnam between 1975 and 1989. From 1989, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the statistics for Vietnamese in Germany were consolidated, yet tension continues between migrants from two distinct migration regimes (Bui 2003; Steinman 2021; Su 2022). This history heavily affects subsequent migrations into Germany, which can now be characterized by purpose, including family reunion, study and training, and employment.

In the GDR, Vietnamese migrants leveraged their mobilities to form extensive transnational trading and business networks across the Soviet Bloc and Asia (Hüwelmeier 2015, 2017; Schmiz 2011; Schwenkel 2014, 2022). From the 1950s until 1989, roughly 50,000 North Vietnamese studied in the GDR (Mausbach 2002; Weiss 2005). By 1989, it was estimated that some 60,000 Vietnamese workers were in the GDR (Weiss 2005). During this time, Vietnamese migrants had already developed practices of petty trading, making clothes in their dorm, or sending goods from Vietnam to Germany and vice versa (Hüwelmeier 2015, 2017; Schmiz 2011; Schwenkel 2022). In the 1990s, Vietnamese migrants in Germany turned to entrepreneurialism to mitigate the limited choices available to them in the local labor markets (Bösch and Su 2021; Steinman 2021). As Vietnam became part of the global economy, German companies started exporting goods to Vietnam. However, the large-scale import of German products to Vietnam did not stop the petty trade between Vietnam and Germany. Thanks to the explosion of social media, many Vietnamese migrants leverage their virtual social network membership, mobility, and identity to participate in petty trade to address small niches in the market.

There was a significant rise in the number of Facebook groups for Vietnamese in Germany between 2013 and 2017. These groups are explicitly set up for work support for Vietnamese migrants in Germany. There are approximately twenty of these groups, with members ranging from a few thousand to around 200,000. Members of the groups are Vietnamese who live in Germany and those who live in Vietnam or other countries. Despite their variety in membership and purpose, the most frequent posts in all groups I observed have been from members selling products and looking for customers in Vietnamese communities. These posts appear a few dozen

times a day in most groups, sometimes over a hundred times a day across several groups, though a few groups explicitly ban advertising. This trend of digital trading among Vietnamese migrants seems to coincide with the rise of e-commerce through SNP and peer-to-peer sale platforms in which goods, products, services, and funds are bought and sold all over the world through the Internet (Clarke, Thompson, and Birkin 2015; Elms, de Kervenael, and Hallsworth 2016; Ma, Chai, and Zhang 2018; Oncini et al. 2020). Undoubtedly, the e-traders on Facebook still rely on the network of ethnic shipping services that could bypass the tax authority to ship products between Germany and Vietnam and vice versa. The petty trading network formed during the 1980s and 1990s allowed Vietnamese e-traders to develop adaptive capacities to operate their trade in the interspatial boundaries between online and offline.

Imaginations of the West through Materiality

At the center of any trading practice are the products being traded. However, products are more than just things. Products carry with them different meanings. For the Vietnamese diaspora, products are not just commodities for trade; they also carry cultural and symbolic meanings. Products, whether they are food items, clothing, or household goods, serve as tangible connections between migrants and their homeland (Small 2019, 2021; Thai 2014). Moreover, these products play a crucial role in the economic well-being of migrants. E-trade, in its new form, is built on a long history of suitcase trading among Vietnamese migrants (Baláž and Williams 2007; Hüwelmeier 2015; Marouda 2020; Sword 1999). Central to the trade are products ranging from toothpaste to household appliances, aptly called hand-carried goods (*hàng xách tay*),¹ often bought from German stores to be resold in Vietnam.

In Germany, suitcase trading continues to be a significant aspect of the Vietnamese migrant experience from the time of the GDR to the present day (Hüwelmeier 2017). Examining trading practices can illuminate the intricate ways in which materiality and its temporality shape imaginaries through migration. Particularly, the Vietnamese imaginaries of Germany have been influenced by the perception of German goods that found their way to Vietnam. Schwenkel (2022) argues that GDR things transported to Vietnam arrive with the promises of modernization and liberation from postwar

backwardness, tethered to a spatial imaginary of superior German technology in Vietnam. As explored by Dang (in this volume), imaginaries of the West as advanced and functioning are potent in Vietnam. Schwenkel finds that such imaginaries, in this case, of the GDR, often evoke the “themes of functioning modern things—technical infrastructure, food security, material plenitude, and urban mobility” in “a land ripe with consumer—and entrepreneurial—possibilities” (2022:488). It is, therefore, no surprise that today, Vietnamese, including many of my interlocutors, still prize German products. Here, the presence and consumption of foreign products increasingly bring the West closer while Westernizing the less developed countries (Sassen 1998:20).

Thanh is one of many Vietnamese Facebook-based e-traders in Germany.² In her mid-thirties, Thanh is a mother of two. She sells personal and healthcare products that she buys from major German drugstores such as DM and Rossmann to consumers in Vietnam. Thanh sells everyday products that are common in German households, yet her customers prefer *hàng xách tay*, as do many other Vietnamese shoppers, over imported goods. Consumers of *hàng xách tay* hold the strong belief that developed countries have stronger regulations for the domestic market to protect their citizens. Thus, they prefer *hàng xách tay*, bought directly from stores in Germany, over formally imported products from Germany. E-traders like Thanh can make money by selling large quantities of readily available products, which she ships in bulk to Vietnam, instead of waiting for customers to order them. Selling cheaper products also allows Thanh to reach a broader middle-class customer base in Vietnam. Like many other e-traders who offer *hàng xách tay*, Thanh leverages her mobility and identity as a Vietnamese in Germany as a marketing strategy to promise her customers in Vietnam access to “the highly regulated domestic German market.” In this context, the next section explores how mobility and identity become a marketing strategy for transnational e-traders like Thanh.

Mobility and Identity as a Marketing Strategy

Many Vietnamese e-traders experience some form of exclusion from the formal labor market in Germany due to language or educational barriers. Thanh celebrates her life as an e-trader because it allows her to work from

home. While the number of e-traders on Facebook is increasing due to its ease of access and low entry barriers, I witnessed many failed attempts at digital trading by Vietnamese migrants during my fieldwork. Not everyone can become a successful e-trader; only the lucky few can turn it into a money-making business. Linh, an e-trader in his mid-twenties, has relied on his Facebook friends, a network of five thousand people, for most of his career.³ Linh also uses a specific marketing strategy that deploys his mobility and identity as a Vietnamese consumer living in Germany.

Linh spends most of his day on Facebook, posting about his life and his products. His mobile phone constantly vibrates, indicating new messages, new comments, new likes, or new reactions. I was often amazed at Linh's ability to manage five thousand "friends" on Facebook, which also means that Linh must regularly delete "friends" who did not interact with him online and add new "friends" who are potential customers. The only way for Linh to have more than five thousand friends is to switch his profile to a page but that would also mean his profile is no longer personal. Linh prefers to use his personal Facebook to sell products because the likes and comments from his friends and family will increase his posts' popularity, ensuring that even his least interactive customers may see the posts due to Facebook's algorithm favoring the most interactive posts. Linh's career as an e-trader started on his first trip back to Vietnam during a semester break. His mother had asked him to help one of her friends buy Louis Vuitton products—two purses, a pair of shoes, and a scarf—worth over €4,000 (US\$4,732). Linh earned €300 (US\$354) for his trouble, about half the return ticket. Returning to Germany, Linh began to advertise his service. He earned a small commission buying luxury products for his mother's friends and their extended social networks. Linh targets people who can afford high-end products, and his mobility and identity that allow him to access his customer base come in handy. Specifically, his upper-middle-class background in Vietnam is crucial in securing his clients, many of whom are friends of his family.

Linh knows this too; in his own words, "You can only sell luxury products if you dress well and live a certain lifestyle." Linh's Facebook profile is carefully curated with images of him living a "good life" in Germany. He regularly posts pictures of himself at high-end shops in the KaDeWe in Berlin. He also frequents luxury outlet malls in Wertheim, Ingolstadt, Maasmechelen, and Roermond. Linh couples this with regular trips to Italy, Spain, and France. Pictures of Linh going out clubbing, eating, or being at

the airport appear frequently. In most of his posts, Linh cultivates a specific lifestyle, a fun, stylish, and well-traveled one, which is essential for winning his customers' trust in his ability to provide consultations on trends, prices, and substances of products.

Linh carefully curates his online image as do social media influencers, whose self-branding tactic allows their personas to become consumable brands (Duffy 2017; Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017). Nevertheless, while influencers promote products and services to an online following that wants to be like them (Duffy 2017), Linh is not an influencer. Linh poses as a "friend" of his customers. Linh makes only a few posts on his Facebook page public. Most of his content is private and can be seen only by his friends and friends of friends. This means that only people who become Linh's friends can access personal content and the occasional great deals he finds during his regular trips to luxury outlets where he shops for his customers. Highlighting his mobility, Linh often gushes about how being in Germany allows him to be close to many luxurious outlet malls and stores, thus giving him access to cheap but authentic products. His most popular items are perfumes and skincare products. With his connection to the upper middle class in urban Hà Nội, Linh emphasizes his products as a class symbol for his customers. Unlike Linh, Thanh concentrates on a middle-class customer base as she sells only cheap products from regular supermarkets or drug-stores, and thus Thanh earns only €2 to €10 (US\$2.36–11.83) for each product she sells and makes money by selling large quantities of readily available products. Like Linh, Thanh emphasizes her mobility and identity as a Vietnamese in Germany and a middle-class Vietnamese migrant. As does Linh, Thanh claims she is a regular user of the products she sells.

In this way, imported products provide symbolic meaning that can shape how consumers communicate their self-images and signal upward social mobility (Pham and Richards 2015). Studies in Vietnam found that foreign products are often associated with product quality, safety, hygiene benefits, and good customer service (Nguyen and Smith 2012; Nguyen and Tambyah 2011). Even cheap products from foreign brands such as those Thanh sells can still convey status and the wealth of the middle class. Thus, Thanh is not merely marketing products but also marketing both the aspirational middle-class lifestyle associated with the products themselves and a worldly lifestyle. As such, Thanh markets goods by inducing the social practices of imagining, longing, yearning, and desire.

Studying consumption practices in postsocialist China, Luisa Schein (1999) argued that some consumer products are a way of overcoming spatial constraints, acquiring “worldliness” or “imagined cosmopolitanism” to become “reservoirs of envy.” Yet, such an association of foreign goods with “worldliness” or “imagined cosmopolitanism” points to imaginaries of the West as desirable. In my research, imported products from South Korea, Taiwan, and even the United States are less preferred by Vietnamese consumers. Such preference could be driven by the fact that in Vietnam, Germany used to be at the top of a hierarchy of socialist modernity (Schwenkel 2022). Thanh and Linh’s identity as Vietnamese migrants in Germany and their mobility between Vietnam and Germany became a way to allow their customers in Vietnam access to Western products and, thereby, the desired Western lifestyle. Through marketing practices, e-traders carefully curated imaginaries of the West as modernized, safe, and ordered spaces in juxtaposition to the backward, unsafe, and chaotic Vietnam in order to sell products, as I will explore in the next section.

Commercializing Imaginaries of the West as a Marketing Strategy

“Do you want to stop by DM with me? I must buy a few more things,” Thanh asked me while I was accompanying her on a shopping trip in September 2021. We had made six different stops before DM. I was exhausted from the hours of shopping. Thanh had purchased products worth over €3,000 (US\$3,549), everything from shampoo to nutritional supplements to baby formulas. Today’s shopping trip resulted from Thanh’s hours of researching store prices, looking through coupons, and finding special deals among more than a dozen chains of drugstores in Berlin. When we arrived at DM, Thanh went into the section selling organic milk rice and risotto rice. “These are currently very popular in Vietnam,” Thanh said. She emptied the rice shelf, grabbed all the organic noodles, and proceeded to the supplement section. “Are you buying rice from Germany to send to Vietnam?” Astonished, I asked Thanh again to make sure I did not mishear. My astonishment stemmed from a simple logic: Vietnam, the third largest rice exporter in the world, is not in short supply of rice. Thanh excitedly told me that she had sold hundreds of these 500-gram bags of rice. At the price of €1.55 (US\$1.83) per 500-gram bag at the store, each bag can be sold in Vietnam for VND 220,000

(roughly US\$10) after shipping. At the same time, in Vietnam, the Vietnamese-grown ST25 rice, recognized as one of the best rice varieties in the world, is sold at VND 160,000 (US\$7.69) per 5-kilo bag.

The rice, which Thanh advertised as ideal for babies and children because of its nutritious nature, is safely cultivated according to “EU standards.” Vietnamese sellers, including Thanh, have claimed the rice to be more nutritious than Vietnamese rice while also having fewer carbohydrates, which makes children less fat. These claims are false, as the milk rice’s nutritional values are almost identical to the average rice in Vietnam. This is not the first time e-traders have made claims that could not be backed up, yet the “Western” brands still give customers some sense of confidence in the products. Thanh’s successful sale of everyday products captures the rising anxiety over the environmental and moral derogation in developing Vietnam embodied in the anxiety of fake and dirty foods there (Ehlert 2021; Ehlert and Faltmann 2019; Ha, Shakur, and Pham Do 2019). Thanh suggests that it is not just food; there are fake goods in all aspects of the Vietnamese market, from cosmetics and diet supplements, to electronics, household appliances, and alcohol. Thus, they can sell everything from household appliances like blenders and cooktops to small things like toothpaste and hand soap. The most popular products are usually diet supplements and personal care products. Consumers in Vietnam latch on to the hope that migrant traders like Thanh and Linh can provide them with peace of mind for a few items in their families’ everyday lives.

Counterfeit or fake products have been a problem in Vietnam for the last two decades (Vann 2005, 2006). Thanh sternly warns her customers about fake products’ pervasiveness, occasionally putting news stories about these fake products online. “Unlike a purse or a pair of sandals, things you put on your face, and in your body, sisters do not be fooled, who knows what is in it,” Thanh lamented in a post about the danger of fake products. Like Thanh, e-traders use their status as Vietnamese in Germany to guarantee to sell their customers “real and high-quality products” even if they are a little more expensive. They often emphasize the strict German regulations applied to products in the “domestic German market,” pointing out that they can deliver “domestic German products” to their customers. This distinction is crucial as it highlights that even when the products are made elsewhere, receiving a seal of approval from the “domestic German markets” means that the products are still high quality. Regularly reposting news of fake

product seizures in Vietnam and the prevalence of fake products there, Thanh and Linh highlight a lack of health safety standards in countries where “even reputable shops can sell fake products.”

On one occasion, Linh posted a story of a new customer who asked him why he sold the famous Crème de la Mer Moisturizing Cream 30 ml for over VND 4 million (US\$175) when it is sold for only VND 550,000 (US\$21.80) for a bottle of 60 ml at other shops. In the post, Linh ranted about the pervasiveness of fake products in Vietnam and the danger such products pose to the skin. Posting a live video of himself browsing and buying products at Sephora, a widely known cosmetic store across the globe, Linh showed the product’s price on the shelf. Captioning the video, Linh posted: “Usually, I never post bills here, but all customers say to check the Code in the last few days. Please, ladies, what is the software to check that Code? :) If you live in Germany, you can rest assured that you never buy fake goods, and no one dares to trade a life in this peaceful country to sell fake goods.” Once again highlighting the strict regulation in Germany while emphasizing his mobility, Linh contrasts the chaos of the Vietnamese market overrun by fake and mimic goods to the “peaceful” and regulated Germany. Vann (2006) argued that mimic goods offered at a reasonable price allows the middle class “to be conspicuous consumers at home while maintaining a semblance of comparableness with their counterparts in wealthier countries.” The presence of mimic and fake goods in the Vietnamese market indicates Vietnamese consumers’ preference for foreign products (Vann 2005). Nevertheless, the intensification of globalization, especially in logistics, has allowed the Vietnamese middle class to demand healthier, safer, higher quality products at a reasonable price, mainly imported products. Riding on the tail of the long-term relationship between Vietnamese consumers and German products, sellers like Thanh and Linh market themselves as reputable and trustworthy companions of middle-class consumers whose health and safety are often at risk because of low-quality and unsafe products in the unregulated market in Vietnam.

Nevertheless, *hàng xách tay*, with their “Western” origin, are not exempt from problems. When I asked Thanh whether the diet supplements she sells are subjected to rigorous regulations as she advertised, Thanh answered, “Of course, I bought these from reputable stores. This is Germany, not Vietnam. Companies would not sell things that are not safe.” However, like elsewhere, diet supplements are not highly regulated in Germany. The regulation only

requires that the food is safe and does not mislead consumers. Germany has been rocked by food scandals ranging from contaminated fruit to meat (Kupferschmidt 2011; Wisniewski and Buschulte 2019). According to statistics, less than 50 percent of registered food companies are inspected yearly. Of the 43 percent of companies inspected in 2015, more than 130,000 violations, most of which were related to hygiene, were found (Fietz et al. 2018). Meanwhile, Germany is among the top six countries hit hardest by trade in fake goods (OECD and EUIPO 2016). More than that, news of traders regularly selling fakes as *hàng xách tay* also makes the rounds online and on TV (Ban Thời sự 2021; Queenanie 2021; VietNamNet 2021a, 2021b).

Once again, Thanh and Linh perpetuate imaginaries of “the West” as a modernized, moral, and safe environment to foster such an aspirational lifestyle while portraying Vietnam as a backward, immoral, and unsafe place where one’s safety cannot be secured even for those with the means to do so. Thus, consuming Western products seems to be the only way for consumers to find peace of mind. Of course, when consumers associate foreign products with morality and safety, it points to a lack of trust in the government’s capability to regulate the market to protect consumers. More than conspicuous consumption, many consumers find *hàng xách tay* from reputable traders as their last resort. As news of fake goods is prevalent in Vietnam, it has become increasingly difficult to tell fake goods from real ones. This produces the anxiety of not knowing how to navigate between the immense numbers of choices provided by economic reforms to best care for one’s family and oneself.

The Imagined West and Precarity

Traders like Thanh and Linh continue, through their posts, to juxtapose the chaos in Vietnam with a vision of a safer and more peaceful existence in Germany, where the government is interested in strict regulations that protect people. Yet, unlike the glamorous images of their peaceful life in Germany, where they live the aspirational middle-class lifestyle, their cross-border trade has always been precarious. When Thanh became a mother, she stopped working as a nail technician because the long working hours did not allow her to spend time with her daughter. Also, the dangerous chemical use in the nail industry affected her health. To find something she could do

from home, Thanh and her sister, who lives in Vietnam, began the trading business. Thanh would send her sister German products to sell in Vietnam, while Thanh's sister would source Vietnamese treats for Thanh to sell in Germany. In the first month, Thanh made over €700 (US\$828) in profit. She had not thought she could easily make money working from home. It eventually became her job, a busy job. Thanh spends most of her day attached to her phone to answer customers' messages, manage her Facebook posts, and take orders from customers who want to buy products in Vietnam. Thanh's customers expect immediate answers to their messages, which can take all day. "Just answering customer questions and taking orders takes up a lot of my day, but I keep getting caught up in the sales," Thanh told me.

Linh and Thanh try to post in Germany around 2:00 to 5:00 PM. These times coincide with Vietnam's golden selling hours, between 8:00 and 11:00 PM there. Thanh was late to pick up her daughters from school several times due to postings, while Linh had to ensure his schedule was clear between 2:00 and 5:00 p.m. Linh is always available for his customers. "Hundreds of sellers, only one customer. The customers can close ten other orders in the 10 minutes that I am doing something else." Thanh insists that she is available for her customers at any time. "If you need anything, AT ANY TIME, please message me," Thanh tells her customers in a post. As commonly experienced by workers in the gig economy, digital trading is intensive and precarious (Bobkov and Herrmann 2019; Dolber et al. 2021; Morgan and Nelligan 2018). Linh spends hours every day researching prices from different shops to ensure that his prices are not too high compared to other sellers to be competitive. His work involves hours of boxing orders and shopping. Thanh also experiences long work hours and often wakes up at 5 or 6 AM to read messages from customers, answering questions and explaining away any complaints or grievances. As a result, Thanh is always tired. The working condition of an e-trader is not much different from the harsh reality of Vietnamese migrant traders in the Moscow markets that Hoang (in this volume) describes. Thanh and Linh insist they are free to choose their work hours, and profits reward their labor, but they sacrifice their health and social life for profit and imagined wealth. As self-entrepreneurs, these e-traders profit only when they make a sale, regardless of the hours spent shopping, posting, boxing, shipping, and advising customers.

E-traders' curation of a carefree lifestyle in the "imagined West" to sell products leads to the misrecognition and undervaluation of their labor.

Thanh and Linh both use the Vietnamese expression “use labor as profit” (*lấy công làm lãi*) to describe their current working conditions, which means barely making enough profit to cover their labor. Yet, these precarious working conditions also become a marketing strategy as they argue they do not do this for the money when the profit is this low. Rather, they do it because they care about their customers and friends. Nevertheless, Thanh still dreams of making over ten thousand Euros monthly with a steady stream of customers. This is a goal she said many have achieved. It seems that digital trading allows e-traders to dream of a better future despite the difficult conditions of their work in the present.

Embedded in the logic of self-development, freedom, and flexibility, digital trading masks the long and irregular working hours and can socially isolate e-traders. For Thanh and Linh, even vacations with friends and family become an opportunity to sell products. Peppered in with the images of the products are those of vacations abroad, which they advertise as an opportunity to find things on sale for their customers. Thanh’s husband once complained that they do not have family vacations but rather shopping trips abroad. E-traders, those who managed to find some success like Thanh and Linh, find themselves having no time for much else than work as they are constantly doing unpaid activities to make a sale. Blending their business and personal life in a single Facebook profile, this form of digital trading shows the breakdown of the boundaries between work and nonwork.

Selling on SNP like Facebook, where an algorithm determines which posts people see in which order every time they check their Facebook feed, creates another layer of work/nonwork for e-traders. This algorithm means that e-traders must regularly comment and like frequent customers’ posts to keep up with the interactions between the profiles, ensuring their posts will show up on customers’ feeds. Thus, interacting with customers’ personal lives becomes a requirement for the trade. E-traders are very aware of the fact that their work and ability to sell products are then also dictated by Facebook’s algorithm. In a Facebook group for Vietnamese E-traders, they show each other ways such as when to post, what to say, and how many times to post to mitigate the specific algorithm that can mark their posts as selling or spam instead of personal messages. Such intense algorithmic control also traps e-traders in the cycle of self-exploitation. Thanh and Linh become reliant on digital trade to make an income rather than finding other paths,

despite the long hours of digital trading and crafting an online persona. Having been in Germany for over six years, Thanh still has not gained permanent residency because she does not hold the required language certificate, which also keeps her from the formal German labor market. Yet, outside of the formal labor market, it is hard for her to find jobs because her kids' schooling schedule limits her hours. Meanwhile, Linh has no time to attend the free German course offered by his master's program, limiting his chance of securing a job after graduation. Thus, digital trading further alienates Thanh and Linh from the formal labor market, pulling them further away from the imaginaries of the "Western lifestyle" they portray to their customers.

Here, digital trade points to precariousness and uncertainty in the current time while perpetuating the idea that the developed "core" is better than the "rest." Thanh and Linh hope the trade can bring them some sense of security and prosperity despite downplaying the commercial aspects of their trade on their posts. Linh hopes to make enough money to cover his expenses in Germany, while Thanh dreams of having a house someday. Overexerting themselves on a historical trade of *hàng xách tay* from Germany to Vietnam, Thanh and Linh use their mobility and identity as Vietnamese migrants to market their products. Navigating between aspirations, imaginaries, and lived reality in their host land, e-traders find a way to make a living yet are excluded from the local labor market by well-crafted imaginaries of "the West" as they battle the precarious conditions of their trade and life in Germany.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, Thanh and Linh were still trading, expanding their product lines. Ironically, Thanh began to sell the Vietnamese rice ST25 at €48 (US\$57) for a 20-kilo bag, which is cheaper than the imported milk rice she sells in Vietnam. Thanh praises the quality of the rice, voted the best in the world in 2019. Straddling the perpetual imaginaries of East and West, Thanh and Linh found their niche in selling products. Excluded from the local labor market, many migrants enter e-trade to make a living. Although the ease of entry to the trade can offer some possibilities, digital petty trading is saturated with precarity. Unlike other forms of trading, the instantaneous

nature of digital petty trading adds to the precarity as traders overexert themselves to be available at any time for consumers.

In endeavoring to make a living, e-traders employ and perpetuate imaginaries of the West as modern, organized, and ethical in contrast to the backward, disorganized, and corrupt homeland. This chapter has shown that the emergence of the cross-border digital trade by Vietnamese migrants in Germany and its marketing is embedded in the historical and global imaginaries of the West in Vietnam, driven by colonial consciousness and global socialist orders. Yet, the emergence of such trade with specific consumers who have specific demands also shows the hold of older consciousness in the new middle class in Vietnam, as consumers demand safety, security, and well-being. While I have shown continuity and changes in the imaginaries of the West, it is not only the West that consumers are looking to for products. At the time of writing, thousands of Vietnamese migrants in Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Thailand, and China are also selling products with the promise of a “safer domestic market.” Like Linh and Thanh, these traders also leverage their mobility and identity as a marketing strategy. The impulse toward *hàng xách tay* points to a loss of trust in the domestic market in Vietnam, which makes it hard to predict the impact of the trade on the Vietnamese market. Buying foreign products is at once a status symbol and another way to find peace of mind in a precarious world. While promising consumers ease of mind, traders in Germany are also caught between the imagined West and their lived reality in the West, one filled with precariousness. Yet, while their trading activities are relatively new, traders’ marketing strategies rely on the continuity of the idea of the West, which is distant and inaccessible but also omnipresent and attractive. Such an idea continues to drive the imagination of Vietnamese people and the narrative of Western superiority in Vietnam, if only to mitigate anxiety in an ever-changing world.

Notes

1 *Hàng xách tay* are goods purchased by an individual directly from stores in Germany and then brought back to Vietnam via air, often bypassing import/export regulations.

2 All names in this chapter are anonymized.

- 3 While Linh never explicitly told me the number of his friends on Facebook, I know this number because Linh said he had reached the maximum number of friends allowed by Facebook, which was five thousand at the time of my fieldwork.

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2

“Dream, Start More, Move Fast!” Entrepreneurship, Sustainable Development, and Imagined Futures in Vietnam

ESTHER HORAT

“DREAM, START MORE, MOVE FAST!”—this was the takeaway message of one of the jury members at the “Bootcamp” to the participating students. The Bootcamp was a start-up workshop organized by an international university in Hồ Chí Minh City in November 2019. Themed around a space shuttle, the program included a captain, lieutenants, and astronauts. The captain, who led throughout the event, was later part of the jury; the lieutenants, who worked as instructors, were lecturers at the university hosting the workshop; and the astronauts were students at that university. For three days, the participating students were sent on a mission to explore new ground—metaphorically speaking—and to find solutions to the “toughest problems Vietnam is facing,” as the captain phrased it. As he was explaining the program during the welcome event I was attending, the students listened carefully and were visibly excited about what was awaiting them. Laptops open and fingers on keypads, they were sitting around tables in groups of four to five people they had formed prior to the event. The captain, after introducing himself and the lieutenants, explained the criteria according to which the start-up projects would be evaluated: (1) greatest social impact (beneficial and scalable); (2) most technologically advanced prototype; and (3) best presentation. The students could freely develop a project with which to tackle a social or environmental problem in Vietnam. The only requirement was that they had to explicitly link it to at least one of

the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This workshop was by no means the only workshop offered to young people in Vietnam. Rather, at the time this research was conducted, I observed a veritable “workshop culture.” As meeting at a coffee shop or in a mall was an integral part of the life of urban middle-class youths, so were yoga and meditation camps, permaculture courses, story-telling events, or, as in the earlier vignette, entrepreneurship workshops. Besides acquiring certain skills, another—and maybe even the main—reason to attend these events was that they provided a space where young people could discover themselves and ponder questions related to, for instance, “A Life Well Lived” or how to get “From Passion to Action,” as two event titles indicated.

In entrepreneurship workshops, participants could receive advice and support at the beginning of their entrepreneurial “journey.” While entrepreneurship workshops were often organized by universities jointly with international stakeholders such as embassies, there were also so-called incubators who carried out similar events. What these workshops all had in common was their focus on social and environmental matters and the declared goal of providing solutions to challenges that the world and specifically Vietnam were facing. Underlying these concerns was the paradigm of sustainable development, strongly promoted by the UNDP via the SDGs.

This chapter examines the flourishing of businesses driven by a social and/or environmental mission as part of a broader tendency toward entrepreneurship in Vietnam. A particular focus lies on urban, middle-class youth and young adults, and on their motivation to contribute to sustainable development via entrepreneurship. Thus, I will explore how the aspiration to become an entrepreneur and the global idea of sustainability mutually reinforce each other, and how economic and social life is being re-envisioned through the imagery of entrepreneurship. An important aspect of it is affect, for entrepreneurs as well as for the customers of their products and services. I therefore suggest looking at entrepreneurship from the perspective of affective labor, the “products” of which, according to Johanna Oksala (2016:284), “are relationships and emotional responses: ‘a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion’” (Hardt and Negri 2004:96). This relates to the (aspiring) entrepreneurs as their products are not only material ones, be they handmade soaps or organic fruits, but also intangible

products, which essentially are pleasurable feelings. How is the value that is created through entrepreneurship extracted and appropriated, and who benefits from it? Why is it enticing for young people to imagine themselves as entrepreneurs—what do they hope to attain? These are questions I will consider throughout this chapter.

In Vietnamese, sustainability is used in everyday language and is commonly translated as “*bền vững*,” which literally means “using steadily (*vững*) over a long time (*bền*).” Depending on the language of the entrepreneurship event, the English or the Vietnamese term was used interchangeably. Therefore, I assume that the same problem exists in both languages: On the one hand, “sustainability” is so overused and fuzzy that it has become an empty term. On the other hand, in order to know whether something really is sustainable or not, one would have to be a scientific expert who could calculate various interrelated factors. In this context, I observed that in many situations, sustainability was not defined, but instead a direct reference to the SDGs was made. Following De Wit, Pascht, and Haug (2018:5), who put forth that ideas do not travel passively or neutrally, but are a malleable resource that is made and remade as they are adopted and interpreted in certain ways, I argue that sustainability is a prime example for an idea that is taken up and given meaning in various ways. Relatedly, I further argue that the now dominant business approach to sustainability ultimately leads to the depolitization of sustainability. Looking closely at the missing or concealed translation process of what sustainability means (or, is made to mean) in concrete situations is essential. Translation is based on three elements: a translator, a message to be translated, and a medium (Callon 1990:143, cited in De Wit, Pascht, and Haug 2018:7). Translators are, for instance, the government, which breaks down the seventeen SDGs to more specific targets; workshop organizers and jury members; incubators and investors; researchers; and of course (aspiring) entrepreneurs themselves. As I will show in this chapter, even though all these actors have their part in the translation process, the main “translation work” is delegated to aspiring entrepreneurs, while jury members (among which are investors and businessmen, sometimes also businesswomen, and incubators) are in a position to empower certain ideas and projects and disempower others.

The idea of sustainable development is very much an invention of the UNDP from where the idea is disseminated through various global, regional, and national channels and is being negotiated along the way. While the SDGs

are present at different places and stages within the Vietnamese start-up ecosystem, they are most prominent in workshops geared toward university students and young people in general. In the following, I will first describe the emergence of the idea of sustainability and its successive institutionalization at universities in Vietnam through entrepreneurship programs. In the second part, I will examine young, aspiring entrepreneurs and their projects, hopes, and imaginations regarding the(ir) future and thereby shed light on the mechanisms of affective labor.

This chapter does not focus on the experiences of so-called local people in the sense of those directly targeted by globally orchestrated interventions, as other scholars have done (see, e.g., Homewood 2017). Instead, I will foreground the people that are tasked with linking global goals to local contexts as well as the events and circumstances where this happens. The chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2018, 2019, and 2022 in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City, including short stints of research in various places in the Vietnamese countryside. I mainly draw on conversations, observations, and notes taken during entrepreneurship workshops as well as reports that were jointly written by international organizations, government bodies, and Vietnamese researchers.

Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development in Vietnam

Concerns about sustainability are not as recent as we may think. According to the German cultural historian Ulrich Grober (2012, cited in Brightman and Lewis 2017:3), the eighteenth-century German term for sustainability—*nachhaltigkeit*—appeared for the first time in a treaty on forestry in the year 1712 in the context of increasing demand for wood fuels and the ensuing call for systematic reforestation. Further into the eighteenth century, and throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the relationship between humans and nature was characterized by a belief in the superiority of humans and a resulting subjugation of nature. The importance for the conservation of species, resources, and landscapes was recognized after World War II, and, since then, the institutionalization of sustainability has steadily increased (Brightman and Lewis 2017:4–5). Over the years, the idea of sustainable development—the compatibility of cultural, social, and ecological concerns with economic growth—has gained currency. This trend

continued after 2015 when the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was approved by UN member states.

As a UN member state, Vietnam has formalized its commitment through the “National Action Plan for Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” passed in 2017. The document includes a detailed table, in which the seventeen goals are split into 115 national targets and related to the responsible stakeholders at central and local levels. Among them are not only government ministries, but also the business community in the foreign and domestic private sector (The Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2017). Indeed, a combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches is suggested, including the involvement of a variety of social organizations and businesses (The Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2017:7). While profit-oriented corporations might contribute mainly through investments, social impact businesses are seen as key driving forces in addressing Vietnam’s development challenges (see Thang Truong et al. 2018:1). The term “social impact business” is used by the UNDP and other international and Vietnamese organizations to refer to “organisations that have both trading activities and a commitment to positively impacting society/environment as the two central tenets of their strategic operations,” the aim of which is “to sustainably solve social and environmental challenges” (Thang Truong et al. 2018:iv). Thus, it is social impact businesses—or SDG-aligned businesses as they are sometimes called—that I will take a closer look at in this chapter. Yet, before coming to that, it is important to briefly outline the broader context.

One way of looking at recent economic and social developments in Vietnam is through the lens of “socialization” (*xã hội hóa*). This process is particularly interesting as it captures the government’s ideas and practices regarding the country’s welfare and public goods provision. Minh T.N. Nguyen (2018) traces the term’s changing meaning from indicating the process of making something into a collective property during socialist times, to assigning responsibility for collective welfare to all the people in post-reform times. While the state keeps the role of providing care to its citizens, at least to some extent, the mechanisms of socialization are such that they also address individual responsibility and support the formation of ethical citizens (Nguyen 2018:632). This aligns with Schwenkel’s and Leshkowich’s (2012) earlier observation, according to which two governing logics—socialist and neoliberal—coexist in Vietnam. Similarly, Nguyen-Vo (2008) has argued that there are different governing tactics—one based on direct

repression, the other on self-control and self-improvement—for different segments of Vietnamese women. The paradoxical nature of neoliberalism is also apparent in the freedom of choice in the economic sphere versus the lack of freedom in political expression in late socialist Vietnam (Nguyen-Vo 2008). In that sense, entrepreneurship can be understood not only as an economic activity relatively unaffected by government intervention, but also as a space for imagining and creating the future, as I will show. At the same time, the entrepreneur is symptomatic of the mechanisms shaping the contemporary Vietnamese middle class, as he or she is experiencing economic freedom, but is being governed by self-discipline and a feeling of responsibility toward oneself and others.

Against this background, it should not come as a surprise that there has been a large surge of entrepreneurship in both discourse and practice over the years. While entrepreneurship in the model of the family business as a form of self-help and driving force of local economies was already promoted in the early days of post-reform Vietnam, the government's support for entrepreneurship in various new forms steadily increased. In recent years, entrepreneurship was seen as being driven by, and creating again, the innovative energy needed to solve major problems in Vietnam. Therefore, the government has launched National Program 844 to support the Initiative for Startup Ecosystems in Vietnam, which aims to create a favorable environment for start-ups in various sectors, especially finance, health, education, and retail (Ministry of Science and Technology of Vietnam 2018). It is in this climate, which propagates and rewards creativity, self-reliance, and responsibility, that social impact businesses also thrive, as I will show in the following.¹

The idea that businesses could—or perhaps should—balance their commercial model with a social mission increasingly gained popularity in the early 2010s and found legal recognition in 2014, when the social enterprise model was added to the Law on Enterprises. Shortly thereafter, with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the UNDP started to strongly support entrepreneurship-based initiatives in Vietnam, and as part of that also introduced its global program Youth Co:Lab. A further push to youth-centered entrepreneurship was the approval of Project 1665 by the government in 2017, whose aim it was to support student start-ups until 2025. Vietnam News reported in 2020 that the policy subsequently was implemented at all vocational training facilities in Vietnam. In development

agendas worldwide, the connection between youth and entrepreneurship has become central, so much so that youth has been described as "the untapped frontier of enterprising energy" (Dolan and Rajak 2016:514). The rhetoric accompanying this process often circles around "modernizing" and "upgrading" a perceived or real unproductive economy or economic sector (see Dolan and Rajak 2016:517). In the context of Vietnam, innovation and entrepreneurship should be taught at vocational schools so as to "have a high-quality workforce that could adapt to industrialisation, modernisation and the Industry 4.0 taking place on a global scale" (Vietnam News 2020). Thus, young people are considered potential entrepreneurs, and it is therefore seen as vital that they receive business training.

However, regarding the promotion of sustainability-aligned businesses, it is particularly higher education institutions that play a crucial role, most notably the National Economics University in Hà Nội. There, the first research, education, and incubation center for social impact, called Center for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship (CSIE), was established in 2017 (Dinh Cung Nguyen 2019:62). Besides conducting research with a team of students, the director of the center also offers a master's program to "train creative thinking, innovation and entrepreneurship for sustainable development in Vietnam." On top of that, the center provides training courses about innovation and social entrepreneurship for teachers. With this offer, the center seems to be perfectly in line with the government's education vision. Shortly after the foundation of the center, the Ministry of Education and Training signed a memorandum of understanding with the British Council in Vietnam to further embed social entrepreneurship at universities in Vietnam (Dinh Cung Nguyen 2019:63).² The role of universities thereby includes "teaching, research, incubation, awareness raising, policy advocacy and ecosystem building" (Dinh Cung Nguyen 2019:64).

Another university in line with the government's calls is Fulbright University Vietnam in Hồ Chí Minh City, which founded the Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation (CEI) in 2019. In an interview, the director of the center at that time, Spencer Ton, said that they are "on a mission to build the next generation of ethical and entrepreneurial leaders through skill-based learning and connecting [our] students to industry innovators" (Vietcetera 2021). Rather than being a research center, the CEI assumes the role of an incubator and seeks to establish partnerships with the private sector. Through their "Venture Fellows Program" (VFP), inspired by similar

programs in the United States and Singapore, the CEI tries to place their students in successful Vietnamese start-ups for internships, where they will meet “notable figures in Vietnam’s entrepreneurship community” and be equipped with “the toolkit to start their own entrepreneurial pathways and make a real difference in Vietnam” (Fulbright University Vietnam 2020). Interestingly, in 2021, the career development section at Fulbright University Vietnam created a fellowship program called Social Impact Fellows Program (SIFP). The two programs are structured similarly and last for several months, but what sets the SIFP apart is that it is geared at stimulating student’s interest in social and environmental issues and giving them the chance to do an internship at a company with a social mission. In addition to these internship programs, the CEI holds so-called boot camps, where interested students can participate in three-day entrepreneurship education programs. In the program, the students are guided through the complete process of setting up an enterprise, starting from problem identification, ideation, prototyping, validation, business model generation, and market sizing to finally demonstrating, or “pitching,” their start-up project to a jury. As part of their presentation, they are asked to state which SDG(s) they are tackling with their project. That these entrepreneurial projects are not necessarily only “school projects” but might have the potential to be realized is signaled through the purchasable option to be connected to mentors and investors after the program has ended.

Thus, the market-driven approach geared to workforce needs is paramount for the CEI. This marks a certain contrast to the research and teaching focus of the previously mentioned CSIE. However, what they have in common is their orientation toward and explicit mention of the SDGs. While these goals are present in the pitching process of the entrepreneurship workshop organized by the CEI, they are prominent also in the reports published by the CSIE. For instance, in the latest report by Thang Truong et al. (2019), Vietnam’s social and environmental challenges are listed in a table, including one column referring to the respective SDGs to show current gaps. Later in the report, the portrayed sustainability-aligned businesses are again related to the SDGs they are addressing, according to the authors.

Innovate Like a Swede

For the promotion of sustainability-aligned businesses among students, workshops and contests are regularly organized by international actors, such as embassies, with the support of the Vietnamese government. One example is the nationwide annual “Innovate Like a Swede” contest, which is organized by the Swedish Embassy in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Training and the Ministry of Science and Technology, as well as Swedish companies and Uppsala University, and whose aim it is “to inspire students in Vietnam to use innovation as a means to reach an SDG in a Vietnamese context” (Embassy of Sweden 2019). Thus, by invoking the SDGs as a key priority, the Swedish embassy appeals to Vietnamese students to propose entrepreneurial solutions for local problems that relate to the global challenges set by the UN in its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In the fall of 2019, the contest was launched at universities in Hồ Chí Minh City, Huế, and Hà Nội. Together with my research assistant, I attended the launch at the National Economics University in Hà Nội. The event was held in an auditorium with a row of windows in the back and a large, slightly elevated table in the front. Other than the Swedish flag and a banner with some information about the event, the room was not decorated in any special manner. As we took seats, students streamed into the room, chatting and laughing and finally sitting down in groups. At nine o’clock, the bell rang, and the embassy staff started with their presentation. It seemed important to first clarify the (unambiguous) event title “Innovate like a Swede” by raising the question of why Sweden was—or considered itself to be—relevant for the topic of innovation. The students learned that Swedish people were curious, spoke many languages, were open to other people’s ideas, were easy to approach since there were not many hierarchies in Swedish society, and, finally, that Sweden scored very high on the innovation index (Embassy of Sweden 2019). Thus, Sweden was presented as a role model for Vietnam, as a country that is so many things that Vietnam is not (yet). Consequently, the first prize of the contest was a trip to Sweden, where the winning team would visit the sponsoring companies’ headquarters as well as Uppsala University. Considering the purpose of the event, which was clearly stated on the flyer, this rhetoric of course made sense. The three-fold purpose was “1) to promote Swedish innovation capacity and Swedish companies as leaders in innovation, both in products and in production, as well as champions of

sustainable development, 2) to raise awareness about Sweden in general among young Vietnamese and attract them to consider studying in Sweden and working for Swedish companies, and 3) to raise awareness for the Sustainable Development Goals” (Embassy of Sweden 2019). Thus, on the one hand, the goal was to depict Swedish industry and education as attractive places for working and studying. On the other hand, by portraying itself as an innovation leader and a champion of sustainable development, Sweden aimed at using its position “to help others, to lead by example” (Embassy of Sweden 2019).

In the second part of the presentation, the Swedish representative of the embassy spoke about the importance of the SDGs and thereby also introduced the theme of that year’s contest, which was Sustainable Development Goal number 9: “Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.” While facts and figures were given to show why this goal was particularly relevant, there was no explication of what “sustainability” in this context meant. Rather, figuring this out was the students’ task: they had to pair up and develop a project that would solve a problem in Vietnam related to infrastructure, industrialization, and innovation. The projects would then be assessed against a set of previously stated criteria, including feasibility, applicability, and sustainability (in the sense of a long-term perspective), yet most important were the projects’ innovative and creative potentials and their effects on the SDGs.

The difficulty of this task became clear when listening to the students’ presentations, which were planned for the third part of the event. The projects could not be more diverse: a robot for picking up tennis balls, a machine that would make silk from lotus stems, a procedure to make organic plastic from seaweed, and an app to teach students how to present in a professional manner.³ While the sustainability aspect was not always clear to me, the projects were praised as good examples of how to tackle current problems and make an impact on the SDGs.

This contest is an example of how sustainability is translated and negotiated—not by talking about it, but by using a shortcut, the Sustainable Development Goals, that allows avoiding political and scientific discussions. In this way, possibly ambiguous understandings of sustainability are not discussed. Instead, the immensely complex translation work into straightforward messages and technical solutions is delegated to aspiring entrepreneurs. On another level, this example also shows how national and

international stakeholders collaborate under the umbrella term of sustainability, each with their own interests. While Swedish companies and the embassy use the opportunity to propagate their country as role model, the universities can strengthen their international ties and enhance their reputation, and the Vietnamese government can use these collaborative events for reporting its efforts regarding the SDGs to the United Nations. But what is the role of young aspiring and early-stage entrepreneurs, and what do they hope to gain by attending such events? How do they imagine the(ir) future? To answer these questions, I will examine an event organized by a famous social impact business incubator.

Generation “Enterprise”

Impact entrepreneurship is taught and promoted not only at universities, but also by so-called incubators, which aim to develop capabilities among aspiring and early stage entrepreneurs. One such Vietnamese organization is Leaf Grower, as I will call them. They regularly organize three-day entrepreneurship workshops in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City with the aim of equipping young people with effective skills to develop their own impact business ideas via Design Thinking methods. In the workshop I attended, there were ten women and six men, aged between eighteen and thirty-six years (with an average of twenty-five years). While the five youngest participants were still students, all the older participants, except one, had a university degree. Three participants already worked in a start-up (one of them being the founder and thus the boss of the two others), while the rest of the people said that they were either planning to set up a business and were developing an idea for it or were planning to do so in the future. The expectations of the workshop also related to the participants' backgrounds and can be grouped into specific objectives (learn more about Design Thinking, learn how to set up an enterprise, and understand more about social impact businesses), and a more general expectation to be confronted with something new, for instance to learn new things, acquire new skills and capacities, find new ideas, and connect with dynamic people. The more experienced and generally older the people, the more business-related knowledge they were hoping to get. The younger participants seemed to attend the workshop to find out more about what they wanted to do in their

life. Xuan, at her twenty years one of the youngest participants, was on a gap year and said that she was at the moment “developing herself.” Trang, her friend whom she had met in a critical thinking class, agreed and added that she thought that participating in social activities had a positive influence on determining her desires and would thereby create a positive effect on society. The third in this group of friends was Tam, who had already attended the previous workshop and recommended Xuan and Trang to come along this time. Bored with her studies because all that counted was learning by heart instead of thinking from different perspectives, Tam had the vision of opening a school for disabled children in the future.

These answers resonate with a conversation I had with one of the founders of Leaf Grower before joining the entrepreneurship workshop. Recounting the history of the social impact business model, she said that young people were particularly drawn to this model. Not too long ago, when she was a student herself, it was common that students would volunteer in their free time. For instance, they would visit an orphanage during the weekend and bake a cake with the children. Nowadays, students and fresh graduates were keen on making a more lasting impact on society and thus, instead of volunteering, they were considering establishing a social impact business, she said. The interest in entrepreneurship among young people was also confirmed by a survey conducted by the World Economic Forum, according to which 25.7% of young Vietnamese have entrepreneurial ambitions (Dat Nguyen 2019). How can we explain this strong interest in entrepreneurship? Why does a quarter of Vietnam’s youth want to work in a profession that less than two decades ago was very much looked down upon? Besides possible structural conditions, such as difficulties in entering the job market after graduation, there are two other reasons that may explain why entrepreneurship has become so popular among young, well-educated urbanites.

One reason could be the glamorizing, exciting rhetoric that is used by business incubators and event organizers alike, which very much tries to capture the attention of young people. At one entrepreneurship contest, the participants were welcomed with “Today we’re all winners!”; the day before another event, the registered participants received a text message saying “Be ready for a mind-blowing experience tomorrow!”; and in a keynote speech at the beginning of a contest, the speaker commented on Vietnam’s entrepreneurial history with the words: “From desert to paradise.” At contests and workshops, the organizers, some of which had returned to Vietnam after

gaining experience in the tech sector in Silicon Valley, often use the words "dream," "passion," and "action." This rhetoric resonates very much with students and fresh graduates, who, when asked about their ambitions in life and how they imagine their future, often said that they wanted to realize their dreams, to follow their passion, and to make the world a better place, just like Xuan, Trang, and Tam. At the same time, winning a trip to Europe or an internship in an international company was a very attractive prospect for many.

The second reason that might explain the recent popularity of entrepreneurship among young people, especially sustainability-aligned entrepreneurship, can be seen in youth culture and the ever stronger will to belong to a transnational community (see Kurfürst's chapter in this volume). Due to the spread of smartphones among young Vietnamese people in urban areas, they have access to international trends and news that are circulated on social media and can actively partake in global discourses on climate change and sustainable living. Thus, Greta Thunberg, the "Friday for Future" strikes in many Western European countries, zero waste efforts, and green living initiatives have become part of the life of a certain segment of young people in Vietnam, those who are connected with each other through Facebook groups on these topics. Yet, instead of organizing strikes, young Vietnamese people tend to communicate their mission in entrepreneurial terms and actions. This is reminiscent of Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo's (2008) argument, where, in the context of the country's move toward global neoliberal tendencies, economic freedom becomes available to certain segments of the population. At the same time, the Vietnamese government maintains the monopoly of political power, which is used to repress cultural and political developments that are not aligned with the government's agenda (Nguyen-Vo 2008:xxi). Along these lines, one could argue that young people might find a kind of freedom in the figure of the entrepreneur that they cannot find elsewhere.

Thus, taken together, entrepreneurship provides a space for young people to nurture their sense of belonging to a community of like-minded people, and to see themselves as effective agents in their attempt to contribute to solving urgent problems and as ethical citizens in their quest to support the people around them, in their hometowns, throughout the country, and even beyond. In all this, young entrepreneurs seek global encounters as they bridge the local and the global.

Affective Entrepreneurship

In entrepreneurship, and in particular impact entrepreneurship, affect plays an important role in various ways. While some entrepreneurs produce goods and therefore are involved in material labor, according to Hardt and Negri (2000), impact entrepreneurs also perform immaterial labor as they produce affect. Thus, it makes sense to look at entrepreneurship from the vantage point of affective labor because it directs attention to both the people who perform the labor and the mechanisms upon which it relies. Similar to situations of informal or domestic labor, those engaged in providing affective labor often find themselves positioned at the lower end of the power hierarchy. In the following, I will briefly introduce two businesses that take environmental sustainability to heart to illustrate where we can see the aspect of affect, and what it does.

The first business, established in 2018, is an enterprise that promotes a sustainable way of life through minimizing the use of single-use items by offering refill products as well as packaged products made of natural ingredients. In addition, the enterprise also organizes recycling and do-it-yourself workshops, tree-planting activities, clean-up days, and, on top of that, “green, zero-waste, sustainable wedding planning.” What they are trying to sell is not just an innovative product or service but also a lifestyle, an emotion: They promise that customers will feel happiness, love, and gratitude in their shop. By placing their products and services in the connection of the self to the Earth, they are implying that individual daily consumption habits have a crucial effect on the state of the world. To underline this message, they use the following quote by Mahatma Gandhi on their website: “You must be the change you want to see in the world.”

The second business was registered as a social enterprise in spring 2019. It is an enterprise that plants permaculture food forests on previously intensively used land. In addition to restoring depleted land, the business wants to help combat mental health issues and social isolation through the Shinrin Yoku method of “forest bathing.” When I met one of the three female founding members, a young woman in her twenties, she started the conversation with handing me a booklet of the Blue Swallow Honouring Gala. The event, which had been held a week earlier, honored business initiatives that promoted sustainable development. It was organized—like many other, similar events—by a joint committee of government bodies, a Vietnamese

incubator, and UNDP Vietnam. The social enterprise, apparently seen as a role model for sustainable development, attended the gala and won two prizes: one for sustainable tourism, and another for combatting climate change. By stating that "[our] forests will be healing spaces of peace and harmony," the company connects environmental sustainability to a positive inner state in a similar way as the enterprise mentioned previously. Interestingly, it also uses a quote by Gandhi on its website: "What we are doing to the forests of the world is but a mirror reflection of what we are doing to ourselves and to one another." Again, the emphasis is on the power of individual action and on the interconnectedness between humans and environment.

These two examples show how sustainability is being connected to an affective dimension. In the rhetoric of the two enterprises, products are not just products, but part of a comprehensive way of life, where nature and self are connected and in balance, and where everyone has the power—and responsibility—to act upon the self and its surrounding. Thus, "affect acts on the actions of both oneself and others" (Richard and Rudnycky 2009:68). The mechanisms of affect seem to boil down to creating value from feelings that make individuals act in certain ways: Customers are motivated to spend their money on products that make them happy, while entrepreneurs invest thousands of hours of unpaid work during the initial stages of setting up a sustainability-aligned business that addresses the social issues about which they are passionate. This work includes the translation work mentioned earlier, which revolves around translating the abstract idea of sustainability into concrete action. It also contains the work needed to set up a business, attract investors, and find skilled and committed people who can be employed at low cost once the enterprise starts operating. Whether or not the initially invested labor will capitalize later, the value created from that work is beneficial for the government in addressing social and environmental issues, or at least bringing them to the attention of a large audience while creating publicity for universities and adding to their reputation. Furthermore, if the enterprise proves viable and profitable, it generates tax revenues for the government. Ultimately, passionate entrepreneurs are essential to keep the ecosystem running, drawing in ever more people who invest their time to work for a cause and share in the idea of co-creating the future.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined entrepreneurship as a discourse and a practice promoted by governments, including the Vietnamese, and international organizations alike. As it traced the emergence and flourishing of sustainability-aligned businesses in the context of wider economic and societal changes in post-reform Vietnam, the chapter paid attention to how young aspiring entrepreneurs translate the global idea of sustainability into concrete understandings and actions in their social context. Not only circulated through official media channels but also on social media, young Vietnamese are confronted with the call for sustainable development from early on. Although the idea of sustainability has a long history, the UNDP's conceptualization of it in its seventeen goals has come to dominate current understandings of the term in Vietnam. This global idea of sustainability has entered the realm of entrepreneurship and has subsequently been translated and interpreted by aspiring entrepreneurs. Looking at impact entrepreneurship through the lens of affective labor has offered a way to examine the mechanisms upon which this form of entrepreneurship rests. On a more global level, one could argue that a similar logic inhabits contemporary capitalism with affect as a main driver of human action.

Even though impact entrepreneurship is only one part of the Vietnamese start up ecosystem, it is one to which the government is particularly sympathetic. This can be seen not only in the many partnerships government ministries forge with international stakeholders to promote this kind of entrepreneurship, but also in the passing of the Law on Social Entrepreneurship in 2014. Connected to peaceful states of being and a positive relation between the self and its surrounding, sustainability issues also receive much attention from a certain group of young Vietnamese in urban areas. Consequently, they are sold what they value most: doing good and at the same time feeling good about it. In addition, the prospect of building up a network of like-minded people, or even a trip to a foreign country or an internship in an international company, has become an attractive option. Compared to previous generations, Vietnamese youths nowadays are much more personally connected to people and themes beyond Vietnam and see their future and that of their country in a more transnational and globally entangled perspective. Finally, earning money through entrepreneurship is no longer looked down upon; it is even seen as a marker of success. In this

climate, a form of entrepreneurship that resonates with young people’s concerns can thrive. Yet, whether the “toughest problems Vietnam is facing” can be solved, or at least partly tackled, remains an open question.

Notes

- 1 While the government seems to be sympathetic to all forms of entrepreneurship, including social entrepreneurship, social enterprises do not receive special treatment. Although this is likely a major reason for explaining the very small number of officially registered social enterprises, it is at the same time consistent with how social entrepreneurs see themselves: as following an intrinsic motivation to do good, rather than doing good because there is something to be gained from it.
- 2 In a narrow sense, “social enterprise” is used for those enterprises registered under article 10 in the 2014 Law on Enterprises (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2014). Beyond that, the term is commonly used to denote any business with a social mission and is used interchangeably with “social impact business” or “sustainability-aligned business.” For a detailed discussion, see Horat (Forthcoming). In this chapter, I will mainly use “sustainability-aligned business,” because this term refers most directly to the SDGs.
- 3 The app, called Jovis Academy, has been realized in the meanwhile.

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*Consumer Finance in Vietnam:
The De/personalization of Credit and Debt
Collection*

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CONSUMER FINANCE IS BOOMING in Vietnam. Virtually nonexistent a decade ago, this market grew at an unprecedented rate over the past decade. Today, Vietnamese citizens are bombarded with microloan offers sent via SMS, email, and social media by financial companies (fincos), banks, peer-2-peer lenders, loan companies, and moneylenders. Obtaining consumer credit has become so convenient that a borrower needs only to make a phone call or click on a smartphone application to secure a microloan within minutes. This consumer finance boom reflects a pattern of financialization in the Global South. This concept refers to the emancipation of finance and its tightening grip over the economy and society. In Vietnam, financialization becomes visible through the growth of consumer finance (Nguyen et al. 2019) and private insurance of all kinds (Nguyen 2020), as well as a euphoric stock market boosted by a retail investor boom and an easy monetary policy (Lainez and Trính 2021). This chapter sheds light on the tensions and contradictions that financialization in general, and consumer finance in particular, generate in Vietnam.

These tensions and contradictions surface from an examination of the gap between political narratives about the benefits of consumer finance, on the one hand, and banking practices related to microlending and debt collection, on the other. State, financial, and financial technology (fintech)

players promote consumer finance as a magic tool to develop Vietnam, accelerate financial inclusion, formalize transactions, depersonalize credit, and eradicate an “archaic” yet persistent “black credit” (*tín dụng đen*) sector—the epitome of structured loan-sharking activities. Advocates argue that socially based lending practices including moneylending typify an exploitative, personalized, and unregulated subsistence economy that should be replaced with an optimized, depersonalized, and regulated market economy. Our study on microlending and collection practices challenges this argument, in particular, that consumer finance favors credit depersonalization. On the ground, fincos and banks depersonalize credit transactions and automate credit risk assessment. At the same time, however, they turn borrowers’ relatives, friends, and employers (hereinafter referred to as “personal relations”) into collateral, a practice they lambaste for being backward, illegitimate, and coercive when carried out by black credit gangs. By collateralizing personal relations, they limit credit risk and bad debt or non-performing loan ratios in the banking sector. But, they also reconfigure credit relations and reinforce the embeddedness of credit into social relations in an environment where socially based finance has been and continues to be vital to millions of Vietnamese. This finding challenges the pervasive separation between the economy and the society and highlights that debt and its dyad, credit, are social relations and processes that financialization reconfigures rather than eliminates.

Our argument enriches debates about financialization. This concept evokes the shift from industrial to financial capitalism. It appeared in the 1990s, was developed in the 2000s, and became popular in the 2010s after the 2008 global financial crash (Mader, Mertens, and van der Zwan 2020). Today, financialization expands in the Global South, resulting in significant heterogeneity where it exhibits specific and variegated patterns (Guérin, Morvant-Roux, and Villarreal 2014; James 2015). It has drawn the attention of economic anthropologists who approach it “not as a disembodied and narrowly economic process, but rather as a complex social dynamic manifesting in spheres ranging from intimate relations to national politics” (Mikuš 2021:1). By using ethnography and relational approaches and examining financialization’s inner workings and societal effects, anthropologists challenge popular views of finance as an economic, technical, and abstract process disconnected from society and social relations (Hann and Kalb 2020).

To boost financialization in developing regions, policymakers and financial and fintech players circulate legitimizing narratives about financial inclusion and poverty reduction. In the case of consumer finance, they emphasize its presumed ability to empower individuals, cultivate economic opportunity, and enhance inclusive growth. They also highlight its ability to depersonalize credit relations and render them more efficient, transparent, and fair. An example of depersonalization is credit risk assessment or the probability for the borrower to default on the debt. At the beginning of the twentieth century, US department stores proposed installment plans to increase profit. Retailers established personal relations with consumers and observed their demeanor, morality, and status to assess their character and risk (Marron 2007:106). With the emergence of credit cards and probabilistic credit scoring technologies between the 1950 and 1960s, lenders construed individuals as sets of attributes and established relations between these attributes and odds predictions about default. The assessment of risk through scoring technologies grew in the 1970s. In 1990, most US banks were using credit-scoring technology, widely perceived as “transparent, consistent, uniform, unbiased, less labor intensive and automatable” (Marron 2007:113). Today, credit markets use alternative data and machine learning analytics to score and reach the unbanked (Mader 2016; Aitken 2017).

Despite progress in risk assessment, credit remains embedded in social relations and mediated through agency, morality, and governmentality (Mikuš 2021). For example, credit markets tap into families’ and households’ capital to expand (Zaloom 2020; Han 2012). In Spain, prior to the burst of the real estate bubble in 2008, banks commodified social relations of precarious South American migrants who applied for risky mortgages by leveraging their income streams and turning their social networks into guarantors (Palomera 2014). In Greece, during the recent austerity period, courts blurred the individual and collective responsibility of defaulting borrowers. The courts compelled them “to exhaust all possible familial/household means to honor their obligations,” thus leading to the financialization of kinship (Kofti 2020:280). In the field of microfinance, lenders have commodified social networks and resources like trust by imposing social collateralization on female borrowers (Kar 2018; Guérin 2014). This scholarship challenges the dominant narrative of credit modernization with regard to credit depersonalization and institutionalization: modernity does not necessarily succeed in replacing “informal” and socially embedded credit

markets with “formal” credit markets driven by specialized financial institutions and technologies. The two coexist in symbiosis as extensively shown by historical (Lemercier and Zalc 2012) and contemporary works. In Vietnam, for instance, rural households combine socially based loans for consumption and bank loans for production and asset accumulation (Barslund and Tarp 2008). In Senegal, female borrowers take loans from microcredit providers to then re-lend them for profit in their community (Perry 2002) and, conversely, Cambodian borrowers take loans from money-lenders to repay microcredit loans (Ovesen and Trankell 2014). In South Africa, workers use state salaries and grants as collateral for taking informal loans whose payments are deducted from their salaries (James 2017). In brief, this chapter supports the symbiosis argument by revealing how consumer finance collateralizes social relations to reduce credit risk and expand in Vietnam.

We substantiate this argument with qualitative data collected in Vietnam in 2020 and 2021 amid COVID-19 restrictions. Most of the data, some five hundred pages, originate from semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in person and online via recorded phone calls and telecom software. The sample size amounts to forty-five informants, mainly from Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City. It contains seventeen bankers: four risk specialists, a senior banker, a branch manager, four loan appraisal officers and credit support staff, a former credit and debt manager, a marketing manager, a transactional manager, a former debt collector, and a consumer relations employee. These bankers work for public banks such as BIDV, Vietcombank, and Petrolimex, joint-stock banks such as PVCombank, Shinhan Bank, MB Bank, and Maritime Bank, and fincos such as FE Credit, Home Credit, MCredit, and Shinhan Finance. The sample also includes two senior officers from the State Bank of Vietnam (SBV) and the Credit Information Centre (CIC), the national credit bureau under SBV supervision. The sample also has twenty-six borrowers, including twelve individuals who obtained cash loans and bought vehicles and electronic devices on installment plans (*trả góp*) from fincos, mainly FE Credit. Our data is not representative of financial practices but provides a valuable glimpse into the sensitive underpinnings and inner workings of consumer finance in Vietnam.

Vietnam's Consumer Finance Market Goes Global

Before examining the depersonalization and personalization of credit, it is important to consider the economic background. Despite being under authoritarian rule by the Communist Party, Vietnam has achieved rapid growth since the launch of the Renovation (*Đổi mới*) reforms in 1986. Its economy has developed rapidly, with a US\$4,348 GDP per capita in 2023. The country fits into a broader pattern of postwar economic transformation marked by rapid privatization and industrialization, a dynamic export-oriented market, and a recent push for financial inclusion. It has also made rapid progress in the field of financial inclusion. While 70 percent (World Bank 2018:160) of ninety-eight million Vietnamese citizens had no bank account a few years ago, two thirds had at least one bank account in 2022, according to the State Bank (Thái Khang 2022). To boost financial inclusion even more, the government has approved the national inclusive finance strategy to include 80 percent of the population by 2025 (VNS 2020).

Vietnam is a testing ground for financialization. The banking sector has gone through a lengthy process of isolation and closeness to consolidation and liberalization. Although subordinated to government objectives during the socialist period (1975–1986), it has become an autonomous sector guided by global and regional market forces and competitive pressures since the Renovation reforms. The government's strategy has been to open the market to global capital while simultaneously strengthening its regulatory influence and power (Kovsted, Rand, and Tarp 2004). Foreign capital entered the Vietnamese banking sector when the State Bank allowed joint venture banks and wholly foreign-owned banks to operate alongside state-owned banks and joint-stock commercial banks in the 1990s.

Consumer finance is a growing market with untapped potential for profit. It is driven by sustained growth and the appetite of young and urban middle-classes as well as workers and rural families to take up loans to build and renovate houses, purchase motorbikes and cars, and acquire consumer goods. This market has grown steadily over the past decade to account for 20.5% of the total outstanding loans in the economy, 2.5 times more than in 2012 (VNS 2021). However, it accounts for only 8.7% of the total outstanding loans if mortgage lending is excluded, far behind Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, where consumer finance (excluding mortgage lending) accounts for 15 to 35 percent of the total outstanding balance. Hence consumer finance has room

for growth in Vietnam (Can 2021). The market is segmented and dominated by FE Credit. From the early 2010s, this company sought to liberalize credit and provide consumer loans to the unbanked. FE Credit was the first institution to democratize credit: two-wheeler loans, unsecured cash loans, installment plans for cell phones and appliances, credit cards, and digital loans. In 2020, it led the consumer finance market with a market share of 55 percent and a total outstanding loan value of VND 66 trillion (US\$2,718,005,400). Its rivals are other fincos such as Home Credit, HD Saison, Mcredit, and Shinhan Finance. Public and joint-stock banks are also entering the market. As opposed to fincos, they provide housing, car, credit card, and unsecured loans to low-risk customers with stable incomes. The market also includes peer-2-peer platforms such as Vaymuon, Tima, and HuyDong, a large number of big and small (un)authorized loan companies, and black credit gangs. They all offer microloans through simple procedures and easy-to-use apps.

Depersonalizing Consumer Finance

The rapid growth of consumer finance partly results from the depersonalization of credit relations. Until the advent of FE Credit, banks were reluctant to provide consumer microloans. As a result, lending was strongly based on social relations: people borrowed money from relatives, friends, employers, moneylenders, and rotative and saving credit associations. Nowadays, family loans remain hugely popular. A research participant, Minh, took a VND 800 million (US\$32,946) mortgage loan to VPBank to purchase an apartment in Hồ Chí Minh City.¹ The developer sponsored the borrowing procedure, which was fast and easy. To repay her mortgage before its maturity and save on interest, Minh borrowed 50 percent of the outstanding loan from her parents: “I had the help of my family, so I asked them to help with that loan. We arranged between ourselves afterward, and I repaid them. This loan was of helping nature, so there would be no fees added.” While family finance is practical and flexible, it comes with obligations to return the favor and balance emotions (*tình cảm*; Pannier 2018). The work of Nicolas Lainez and colleagues on credit in Hồ Chí Minh City’s sex trade also reveals that unbanked and financially excluded sex workers take loans from procurers and moneylenders who use knowledge extracted from their labor and personal relations to assess risk and ability to repay. To ensure repayment,

procurers take cuts from sexual transactions, whereas moneylenders use violence (Lainez, Trĩnh, and Bũi 2020). In short, personal relations have been and remain a crucial credit source for millions of Vietnamese who lack a bank account, material warranties, and trust in the banking system. However, socially based credit carries heavy obligations and is limited in scope.

Credit institutions took advantage of these limitations to develop a consumer finance market. FE Credit has set the course for depersonalizing and automating credit. Since 2010, it has created a vast sales network of 20,000 point-of-sale locations, formed many alliances with retailers nationwide, and compiled a database of 11 million customers. It is also the first credit institution to digitize credit by launching a lending app (\$NAP), a credit card management app (FE Mobile Card), and a super app that consolidates all its services (FE Credit Mobile). It has also invested extensively in risk management technology to reduce operational costs and human discretion in loan decisions. The digitalization of customers' personal, credit, and behavioral data processed through machine learning analytics has also improved credit risk assessment. To further cut paperwork and speed up loan approval, it has implemented digital identity verification procedures (Electronic Know-Your-Customer: eKYC). Other fincos such as Home Credit, Lotte Finance, and Mirae Asset follow its lead by tapping into new financial technologies including eKYC (Luong 2021). Banks follow in their footsteps by testing similar technologies to slowly, but surely, penetrate the vibrant consumer finance market. The race for a fast and easy credit experience is on in Vietnam.

To the surprise of policymakers and financial players, this race has triggered the proliferation, professionalization, digitalization, and visibility of shadowy lending operations referred to as "black credit." Many of these lenders originate from gangs of moneylenders and pawnshops that operated discreetly in neighborhoods, leveraging local knowledge to assess risk and recover outstanding loans. To fill a growing yet unmet demand for unsecured microloans, some of these lenders have expanded their operation to cover entire cities, provinces, and regions. Nowadays, they advertise their products online and through lending apps and posters glued onto city walls with enticing messages like "hello, there is money" and "borrow money quickly" (Lainez 2021). To take their business to the next level, they have overcome the limiting scope of personal and localized relations, which was their trademark.

Personalizing Controversial Debt Collection

While fincos and banks depersonalize credit relations and promote contractual and regulated transactions, they also use borrowers' personal relations as collateral against credit risk and bad debt. This process is visible in collection procedures, which remain loosely regulated. Debt collection is divided into stages. When a client misses the payment of a microloan, in-house collection departments from credit institutions send reminders. If the client ignores the messages, collectors contact borrowers' personal relations acting as referees to gather information about their motive for being late and incite repayment. At FE Credit, the Reminders Service contacts the borrower and the borrower's referees persistently, sometimes calling thirty times and sending dozens of text messages a day during the first thirty days after the payment due date. From the thirtieth to the sixtieth day, the Collection Service escalates harassment through persistent calls and messaging and home visits. After sixty days, the file is passed to the litigation service. Depending on the profit, FE Credit sues the borrower or commissions or sells the bad debt to a third party that may use violent means to retrieve it. Along these stages, collectors pressure the borrower and personal networks to incite payment. A typical gentle call or text message made or sent during the first ten days after the payment date says, "this person hasn't paid, we urge his relatives to remind him" or "this subject is indebted to us, we are requesting him to repay." Then, messages can quickly escalate and become rude, insulting, and threatening. Late payers and defaulters from the study explained how their relatives and friends had received insulting and threatening messages saying, "if you don't pay, I will come to your house to kill you," "we will cut off the heads, arms, legs of your children out in the streets," and "we will kill your child." They could not determine if these threats came from FE Credit or third-party collectors.

External collectors working for fincos carry out defamation campaigns on social media as well. Late payers may find manipulated photos of themselves wearing a prison uniform with messages such as "this is a debtor who refuses to pay up" circulating on their Facebook and Zalo pages. Đức took a VND 35 million (US\$1,441) cash loan from FE Credit to open a restaurant that went bankrupt because of COVID-19 lockdowns. After missing a payment for five days, FE Credit sent him messages accusing him of "fraudulent crimes and appropriation of property" and threats of "a

market-hammer nature, that if I read them out loud, it would be very unsettling to hear.” The most devastating action was the circulation of manipulated pictures of his sister on an ancestral altar and his wife dressed as a prostitute with a message saying “Đức’s wife has to sell sex to repay her husband’s debt” on his Facebook and Zalo pages. He explained:

Family is the most important thing. On my wife’s side of the family, and on mine, and other people, they’re like: “oh, this guy is this and that.” It affects me a lot. I’m not worried about my job. But in the family if there’s a rumor about you, and, well, Vietnamese people have always been like this, it’s not easy to get past this traditional character. Once they’ve tarnished you among your relatives and others, it’s really bad. When you appear on Facebook, it’s got a devastating effect as you’re almost like a wanted person. They put my wife’s photo up and said she’s a prostitute. And now, to explain to everyone why they did that to us takes a lot of time, and maybe they might even say: “it’s because of the husband that the wife is in this situation,” right? So, I’m still the one most affected by this problem, right?

These methods have devastating effects on borrowers’ personal relations, who can also be asked to repay the debt. Ngân, a woman working in a hospital, contracted TB and missed payment for a cash loan from FE Credit. After this finco harassed her son, she said, “they told me that if I was unable to pay, I needed to tell my family to do so on my behalf.” Her son agreed to repay two installments before he ran out of cash. External collectors can deal with this issue by proposing new lines of credit to late payers and their personal relations. Informants have reported being offered loans from FE Credit’s in-house and external collectors collaborating with small loan companies and pawnshops. These methods have caused public anxiety as evidenced in hundreds of news clips and YouTube videos on FE Credit’s controversial collection practice and the explosion of Facebook groups where disgruntled borrowers share their grievances and experience with fincos such as FE Credit.

Although banks are more cautious than fincos, some also harass late payers in order to collect outstanding loans. Petrolimex Group, a public bank that provides secured loans to low-risk clients, sends reminders five days before and after the payment date, investigates the client through phone and home visits up to ten days after the payment date, and from day eleven onward, requires the late-paying client to sign a commitment form. According to a senior officer from Petrolimex, at this stage, “If the client still can’t

come through, we will take more serious actions, such as going to the client's workplace or calling their family and relatives to remind them of the debt if the client refuses to cooperate." Our evidence and extensive material from news clips, YouTube videos, and social media show that credit institutions recover bad debt by turning borrowers' personal relations into collateral and using aggressive collection methods. Ironically, credit institutions and policymakers condemn these practices, especially credit personalization and coercion, when carried out by black credit gangs. What motivates credit institutions to act in this way?

Controversial Collection Supports Consumer Finance

Vietnamese credit institutions seek to enroll millions of unbanked citizens in the consumer finance market. However, they operate in an environment plagued by a substantial lack of customer knowledge, which limits their capacity to assess credit risk and reduce non-performing loans. The specter of bad debt looms on the horizon. It has raised grave concerns in Vietnam in the past decade. In 2008, after the global financial crisis, economic growth and consumption crashed, the economy experienced high inflation, and a property bubble burst, leaving high non-performing loan ratios in the financial system (Musil, Labbé, and Jacques 2019). Between 2011 and 2015, the State Bank restructured the financial system, stabilized credit institutions, and created the Vietnam Asset Management Company in 2013.² These efforts led to a significant drop in non-performing loan ratios: from 4.08% in 2012 to 2.4% in 2018 (Tran, Nguyen, and Tran 2020:324).

The economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic has revived concerns. Fitch-rated local banks reported a 45 percent surge in past-due loans in the first quarter of 2020 compared to the end of 2019 (FitchRatings 2020). The State Bank issued Circular 01/2020 in March 2020, requiring credit institutions to restructure repayment periods, waive and reduce interest and fees, and maintain bad debt classification to support borrowers affected by COVID-19. However, non-performing loan ratios continued in 2020. Data from seventeen listed commercial banks pointed to an increase of 30.7% compared to 2019's end, totaling a ratio of 1.8% (VietnamCredit 2020). Non-performing loan ratios are higher for fincos. FE Credit announced an increase from 6 to 6.6% from December 2019 to December 2020 (VIR 2021a).

In the first half of 2021, it jumped to 9.1% (VIR 2021c). These figures should be taken with a grain of salt, however. They are a bone of contention as different sources provide different figures. While the banking industry has consistently reported ratios below 3 percent, the National Financial Supervisory Commission stated FE Credit's ratio reached 9.5% by the end of 2017 (Huynh 2017). Several bankers from the study admitted that credit institutions "cook" their figures by selling bad debt to their child companies, especially during crisis times. To further support distressed borrowers, the State Bank issued Circular 03/2021 in March 2021, reinforcing the provisions of Circular 01/2020 and encouraging lenders to make provisions for potentially unrecoverable loans within three years (Vietnam+ 2021). It also amended this circular by issuing Circular 14/2021, requesting banks to prolong the repayment term for debtors by an extra six months (Vietnam News 2021). Overall, Circulars 01, 03, and 14 aim at keeping non-performing loan ratios below 3 percent and helping borrowers to weather the COVID-19 storm.

In this constraining environment, fincos and banks use any method available to reduce non-performing loan ratios. These methods include harassing borrowers' personal relations and, for fincos, hiring out or selling bad debt to controversial third parties that recover it aggressively. Policy-makers and financial players associate these practices with coercion and danger if carried out by black credit gangs. However, fincos and banks similarly recover bad debt by exploiting legal loopholes and weak enforcement. In the face of countless scandals and public anger about FE Credit's aggressive collection tactics,³ the SBV issued Circular 18/2019 in 2019. It provides that fincos can call debtors and send reminders only up to five times a day, and from 7 AM to 9 PM. In addition, collection activities must exclude any "organization or person who does not have debt repayment obligation" to the finco, meaning borrowers' personal relations. However, it is unclear who monitors enforcement. Our data show that fincos continue to harass borrowers and their personal relations as usual.

Another recent legislation, Investment Law 61/2020/QH14, bans debt collection services beginning 1 January 2021. Fincos can no longer commission or sell bad debt to third parties. However, collectors create other business models and conceal their activities to circumvent the law. They enter into debt-trading agreements with credit institutions, which do not involve "buying and selling bad debt" (Pham 2020). They are valuable to

fincos because they are not bound by banking regulations and, therefore, enjoy more leeway to recover bad debt. In other words, these collectors do the dirty work credit institutions cannot do. Since debt collection is crucial to limit non-performing loan ratios, it can be argued that using controversial collection methods and turning borrowers' personal relations into collateral supports consumer finance growth in Vietnam.

Controversial Collection Reconfigures Credit Relations

As we have seen, consumer finance interweaves bank loans with social debt and obligations. This process reinforces socially based finance and reconfigures social relations. A similar process has been documented in Greece, where the law compels borrowers to exhaust all possible means from co-residents and nuclear family members to extended networks of kin and close friends to repay outstanding loans. While legal pressure reinforces moral obligations and practices of solidarity and mutual support, it also challenges gender and seniority roles (Kofti 2020). In Vietnam, it is not the law but fincos and banks that pressure borrowers' personal relations to repay debt. Credit institutions apply contract law to define legal obligations, responsibilities, and binding rights with borrowers. While they cannot hold borrowers' personal relations legally accountable, they make them responsible by circumventing regulations and exploiting familistic obligations. Familism is an ideology that informs the socialist welfare regime in Vietnam, where the "bigger family" of the state supersedes the nuclear and extended family, although familial care is more important than state welfare due to the low quality service (Nguyen and Chen 2017). On the ground, fincos and banks assume that the family as a whole feels obliged to look after its members. Several bankers from our study supported this assumption. According to a loan officer from Shinhan Finance,

the way I see it, this practice is cultural. The Vietnamese family is usually pretty tight-knit, right? Vietnamese are affectionate, so if you cannot pay for the debt and your parents are harassed, you would feel really guilty, right? You would feel unfilial and at fault. Therefore, you would try to pay the debt as soon as possible so your loved ones wouldn't be harassed. It all comes down to culture and tradition.

This cultural argument has substantial implications as it entails that borrowers' personal relations must share the burden of outstanding loans.

Borrowers' relatives, friends, and employers have mixed feelings about this shared responsibility. Families might play the *fincos* and banks' games and let individual loans become family issues. They devise strategies to repay arrears under harassment, which reinforces socially based finance. However, harassment can also generate stress, conflict, anger, and guilt among friends and employers. Quynh, a senior executive from PetroVietnam, the state-owned trade and gas corporation, was harassed by FE Credit when one of his employees missed the payment of a VND 50 million (US\$2,059) cash loan he took without informing him. Quynh first received gentle calls asking him to interfere. Seeing that he ignored requests, collectors made calls and sent him text messages every few minutes all day long. Harassment ceased when he interfered. He called for more regulations on debt collection as "the act of incessant texting to terrorize an individual is illegal. It does not comply with the law, which leads to terrorism." The media widely report these practices. A recent piece from VietnamNet titled "Businesses 'Tortured' by Calls from Debt Collectors" describes how *fincos* harass deputy directors and division heads of big companies for their employees' outstanding loans. The director of a business in Đống Đa District in Hà Nội felt "tortured" when he received over one hundred calls in the previous two days about a debt that a departed worker had taken and defaulted on. The journalist argues that lenders should not harass "relatives of borrowers and ask to pay debts, because the relatives don't have the obligation of debt repayment" (Anh 2022). In this case, collection reconfigures labor relations between employers and employees by adding an extra layer of responsibility and obligation. Many of our informants expressed unease at being caught in unrelated collection procedures. This discomfort was more tolerable among relatives who intertwine money and obligations, financial flows, and moral economies daily (Small 2018).

Familistic and controversial collection methods also transform credit relations; in particular, they erode borrowers' moral obligation to repay debt and credit institutions' legitimacy to claim repayment. Tuấn, a delivery man from Hà Nội, took two cash loans from FE Credit: VND 36 million (US\$1,483) then VND 50 million (US\$2,059) to repay the first loan and cover urgent expenses. After fifteen months of steady repayment, he missed payments for the second loan due to income loss amid COVID-19

restrictions. FE Credit's in-house and external collectors harassed him: "For me, there's no problem with reminders, but it's different once collectors insult me and threaten to kill my child." They also harassed three of his relatives: "They insulted them, forced them to tell me to repay. It had a very negative impact on my workplace and my family." Eventually, Tuan evaded his debt. He admitted, "presently, I don't want to deal with it, nor do I need to. Since they feel no responsibility to their customers, I don't need to deal with it." This quote epitomizes a growing discontent about unfavorable lending conditions, penalties, and violent collection methods imposed by fincos on low-income borrowers. Much discontent is aimed at FE Credit.

Tuan's anger at FE Credit's threats against his son took a political turn. He joined Facebook groups where members shared advice on dealing with aggressive collection methods. He then created his own Facebook group:

The purpose of these groups is to respond to the terrorist nature of FE collection methods, their wrongdoings. People must find a way to respond. The purpose is not to default but to ease the downfall of people who have been forced into a dead-end by FE through peers in the same situation. Honestly, members in these groups hope for a different debt collection from FE and that they review their ways of working with clients. They don't wish for much.

Borrowers express this frustration through social media. There are hundreds of Facebook groups where disgruntled borrowers and their families pour out their grievances, provide mutual support, share tips on dealing with lenders and collectors, and even conspire to deceive and strike back against credit institutions and shadowy third-party collectors. Many of these groups focus on FE Credit and obscure lending apps operated by unlicensed loan companies and black credit gangs, known for being even more aggressive than fincos. These Facebook groups' members do not challenge financialization and consumer finance growth nor promote the emancipatory ideology that anti-debt movements spread in Europe (Ravelli 2021; Mikuš 2019) and North America (Stout 2015) in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. Instead, they reflect the need for a newly formed community of borrowers to assist one another in becoming familiar with new lending markets and their controversial practices. In short, the involvement of borrowers' personal relations in private credit transactions and controversial collection undermines public trust in consumer finance and obfuscates the

official narrative presenting it as the best antidote to black credit. Most importantly, it creates communities of borrowers who politicize credit and debt relations and challenge inequality and power relations with financial players and the state, thus reconfiguring and shaping credit relations.

Conclusion

At the conference “Consumer Finance: New Vitality after a 10-Year Journey” that was held at the Vietnam Investment Review headquarters in Hà Nội on 25 March 2021, the participating economists, bankers, and regulators reaffirmed the dominant narrative that “consumer lending has grown strongly in the last ten years, promoting economic growth (including consumption, production, and services), increasing access to credit, reducing the rate of black credit, and limiting cash payments” (VIR 2021b). A session was dedicated to the best “[s]olutions to promote consumer credit, contribute to improving people’s lives, and limit black credit.” Black credit epitomizes personalized, usurious, and coercive credit relations that are bound to be replaced by a depersonalized, regulated, and safe consumer finance market. This evolutionist narrative circulates extensively in media, banking, and development circles. It creates a dichotomy between “informal” and “formal” practices and provides a moral justification for consumer finance growth, a “new” and “modern” financial system bound to replace an “old-fashioned” and “inefficient” one based on social relations.

This chapter challenges this linear narrative, particularly the promise that consumer finance renders credit relations more rational, efficient, and fair through depersonalization and automation. As this chapter shows, this promise applies to credit sales and credit risk assessment but not to debt collection, which harnesses social obligations to manage credit risk, reduce non-performing loans, and generate value out of social relations. On the ground, fincos and banks turn borrowers’ relatives, friends, and employers into collateral for securing microloans, which is illegal but morally acceptable to bankers because of the popularity of cultural and familistic practices whereby familial and social circles share financial responsibility.

Our data highlight a substantial gap between narratives and practices, promises and facts regarding the actual capacity of consumer finance to depersonalize credit relations. We promote a critical approach to

development narratives grounded in empirical research. This approach does not limit itself to revealing the gap between policy discourses and practices or comparing financial systems labeled as “informal” or “formal” to highlight their differences and similarities or strengths and weaknesses. It aims at studying empirically how credit relations feed on each other and form new impersonal and automated credit instruments and how this weaving gives rise to new credit relations and practices to identify indicators of modernization, change, and depersonalization (Lemercier and Zalc 2012). In Vietnam, the depersonalization of consumer loan sales and automation of credit risk assessment goes hand in hand with the reinforcement of social collateralization. Both financial practices and social relations undergo a transformation, reconfiguration, and change. But does this change equate to modernization and improvement? Who benefits from such an improvement? Citizens, financial markets, or the state? To what extent? Is credit (de)personalization a good indicator of modernity and progress? Our study dismisses this argument.

A crucial aspect of our analytical approach is to regard credit as a social *and* economic relation rather than just an economic relation, a tenet of economic anthropology (Hann and Kalb 2020, Mikuš 2021). It is productive to ground the study of consumer finance and financialization more broadly in everyday life to clarify the role of social actors and their agency in shaping financial logic. Taking such an approach is critical to uncovering how financialization is contingent upon specific development trajectories and economic transformation processes. As this chapter shows, financialization in Vietnam is about the rupture, newness, and transformation of the financial sector, as much as it reflects partiality, incompleteness, and continuity of entrenched, embedded socioeconomic practices. Our study highlights that financialization is taking root in emerging countries because it resonates with political economies of integration into global finance and draws from existing social structures and practices that it reshapes to draw value from and thrive.

Notes

1 All names herein are pseudonyms.

2 This public company purchases non-performing loans to keep their ratio below

3 percent. In exchange, it provides banks with special recapitalization bonds from the State Bank, which they repurchase five years later.

3 See https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=fe+credit.

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4

Translocality, Labor Mobility, and Commodity Production in Northern Vietnamese Rural Livelihoods

TUAN ANH NGUYEN AND MINH T.N. NGUYEN

Introduction

FOLLOWING THE MID-1980s reform, Vietnam's countryside has been undergoing profound changes in economic, political, and cultural domains (Kleinen 1999; Mai and Nguyễn 2013; Tuan Anh Nguyen 2010, 2019, 2021). The dismantling of agricultural cooperatives and the return of the household economy were among the most important outcomes of rural restructuring (Kerkvliet 1995, 2005; Vu, Tran, and McGee 2000). Alongside urbanization and industrialization, new rural development programs and migration have significantly reshaped rural economic life and livelihoods systems (Tuan Anh Nguyen 2013; Nguyễn Văn Sửu 2018; Thompson, Rigg, and Gillen 2019). Central to this reconfiguration is the emergence of labor and livelihoods systems that transcend the rural-urban distinction through a process of translocal householding that has been similarly observed in comparable contexts such as China and India (Nguyen and Locke 2014; Shah and Lerche 2020). Based on fieldwork in two peri-urban districts of the Hà Nội metropolitan area, this chapter shows the increasing level of translocality in rural livelihoods that goes beyond the physical movements of people and intrahousehold negotiations that have been well documented. We underscore the ways in which rural livelihoods are more and more embroiled in broader systems of commodity production, labor commodification, and

finance that operate across the city and the countryside, engaging extrafamilial actors and processes. As farmers adjust and diversify their livelihoods to meet the demands of household reproduction in the new economy, rural livelihoods are more exposed to the risks that are inherent in these systems. Translocality in its varying forms, however, has become an enduring feature of rural livelihoods in a context where capitalist relations of production increasingly permeate rural economies at the same time that rural labor is made available as a commodity on the translocal and transnational labor markets.

Labor Mobility, Changing Rural Livelihoods, and Translocality

According to the 2019 Vietnam Population and Housing Census, Vietnam has 6.4 million people aged five years and over who are migrants, accounting for 7.3% of the total population and 8.6% of the national labor force. The majority of migrants are young—almost two thirds are between twenty and thirty-nine years old, more of them are female than male, and many migrate in search of employment (Tổng cục Thống kê và Quỹ Dân số Liên hợp quốc 2019). Since much of the migration originates from the countryside, the population movement, likely to be much greater than recorded in population censuses, has in the last several decades brought about deep social and political economic changes to rural areas. In particular, rurally based subsistence farming has given way to migrant livelihoods, bringing about new kinds of dependency and interconnections between rural and urban areas (Brauw 2009; Locke, Nguyen, and Nguyen 2012; Nguyen 2013; Nguyen, Gillen, and Rigg 2021; Pham and Hill 2008; Vu 2013; Vu and Agergaard 2012). Previous studies on migration and rural livelihoods show the declining significance of rurally based livelihood activities for household income, although migrant households continue to maintain these activities and agricultural land (Nguyen et al. 2012). These rural-urban interconnections in household livelihoods have gradually emerged along with the risks and vulnerabilities of the new economy that require rural households to embrace translocal livelihoods, although these generate further vulnerabilities and risks (Rigg, Nguyen, and Luong 2014). As Nguyen and Locke (2014) point out, the spatial and social transformations effected through rural-urban migration in Vietnam, like those in China, engage rural people in a process

of “translocal householding.” Similar to other contexts of rapid urbanization and economic restructuring (Jacka 2018; Oakes and Schein 2015), this process underscores how rural households strategize to reproduce themselves across rural and urban spaces in response to changing state policies and political economic conditions. This process often involves both cooperation and conflict, with household members navigating changing familial and gendered expectations when living their economic and family lives between places (Nguyen 2014). Furthermore, translocal householding leads to the reorganization of household labor and gendered work (Nguyen et al. 2020; Nguyen, Gillen, and Rigg 2021; Nguyen, Rigg, and Derks 2020), as well as new class formations that transcend regional boundaries. Building on this literature, this chapter explores the ways in which rural households operate across rural and urban spaces to ensure livelihoods in a context where commodity agricultural production and finance increasingly predominate. As we shall see, translocal livelihoods in Vietnam nowadays involve complex constellations of subsistence agriculture, commodity farming, and migrant labor as well as new arrangements of labor mobility and land use.

Field Sites and Fieldwork

The data for this chapter were collected from fieldwork in Hát Môn Commune, Hoài Đức District, and Lam Điền Commune, Chương Mỹ District, both part of the larger Hà Nội metropolitan area. Hát Môn is a rural commune about 30km from Hà Nội center with more than 2,000 households and a population of about 10,000. People in the commune practice a mixture of rice and crop farming, animal husbandry, and activities in the craft/cottage industry, with a large number of carpentry and mechanic workshops that generate five times as much income as that from farming, with the total value of handicrafts estimated at VNĐ 125 billion (about US\$5.2 million) in 2022.¹ Lam Điền is part of Chương Mỹ District, about 25km from Hà Nội center. It has 2,820 households and a population of about 12,000 people. The commune has about 70 poultry farms and 20 pig farms. There is a mix of farm and nonfarm employment, with 40 percent of the villagers working in farming and the rest in nonfarm jobs within or outside the village. Those who work away from the farm return home to work when needed (primarily at harvest). There are approximately one hundred people from the village

working overseas, mostly in domestic service and construction. The main source of income is nonagricultural production, and the rice fields are tended to primarily for household consumption. Most work on the field is mechanized (although transplanting is done by hand). People aged forty to fifty years old are most likely to work on the farm. Younger villagers often migrate for waged work elsewhere, while migrants from other areas come to the village to find work. As in Hát Môn, Lam Điền people derive their income from farming, livestock raising, and activities in cottage industries, although the latter seem more intensified and extensive here, with a nonagricultural output twice as large as that of Hát Môn (earning about VND 214 billion [US\$9.2 million] in the first six months of 2021).

Although local people had long been involved in livestock keeping for sale, the new rural development program has a role in the development of commodity livestock farming. According to official regulation, people in the commune had not been allowed to build livestock farms on land used for rice cultivation until 2011. Under the new countryside program, the People's Committee of Chương Mỹ District then approved the project proposed by Lam Điền Commune to change the land-use purposes of its 294 hectares of agricultural land from rice growing to perennial crops and livestock farming. This conversion allowed many households to convert rice fields into livestock farms.

The data for this chapter come from in-depth interviews and observations conducted in Lam Điền and Hát Môn communes from 2017 to 2018. Within the framework of this study, multiple field trips were carried out in Lam Điền and Hát Môn communes. The first author conducted a total of forty in-depth interviews on the maintenance of and changes in smallholder farming in the two localities. In addition, we also had face-to-face or telephone conversations with the people and officials of these two communes. Conversations with local people and officials for updated information on Lam Điền and Hát Môn communes were carried out until 2022.²

Translocality and Capitalist Commodity Production in Household Livelihoods

As of September 2022, Lam Điền Commune had 54 pig farms, 53 of which were under contract with global companies such as CP, Japfa, and Mavin.

CP, with whom many are under contract, is a major international corporation with its headquarters in Thailand; it specializes in animal feed production, food production and processing, and retail. The company has processing factories, retail facilities, and animal farms all over Vietnam (its farms tend to be located in remote and secluded areas so that the animals are protected from diseases, according to the company website³). It supplies seafood and meat products to its own supermarkets and retail chains and those of its partners in major Vietnamese cities. According to the contracts with these companies, households are obliged to invest in constructing the barns to raise livestock and to hire laborers to work on the farms. The companies provide breeders, feeders, and veterinarians to monitor the farm pigs. When the pigs are mature enough to be sold, the companies collect them and pay the farms VND 3,800–4,000 (about US\$0.16–1.70) per live kilogram. The first contracts between the companies and the households are usually for five years, and subsequent ones for three years. An average pig farm with about four to five hundred pigs requires an initial investment of about VND 2 billion (about US\$80,000). Lam Điền also had 120 chicken farms that raise broilers and egg chickens. An average chicken farm has 5,000 laying hens and 10,000 broilers, requiring about VND 1.2 billion initial investment (about US\$50,000). About 70 percent of households have breeding contracts with large corporations on similar conditions as the contracts for pig farming. The companies collect the chickens and eggs and pay the households at set prices (at VND 700—about US\$0.03—per egg). For years, meanwhile, many farmers in Lam Điền have raised livestock independently on a smaller scale, about 20 to 30 pigs or 200 to 300 chickens, for their own consumption or sale to small traders.

The establishment of livestock farms requires a relatively large area of land, and many farmers rent land from relatives, other villagers, or people in other villages who no longer need to use their agricultural land fully or partially. Those tend to be households with all or some members working in cities or industrial zones as migrant workers, such as that of Mr. Đức in Lam Điền Commune. His household has 5 *sào* of paddy field,⁴ which was allocated to his household of five, according to the number of household members. Mr. Đức and his wife have three children. Their two daughters are married and live in another commune of Chương Mỹ District. The couple live with their only son, the latter's wife, and his three children. Only growing rice until recently, this household has gone through several changes. First,

Mr. Đức's daughter-in-law went to work for a company in Hà Nội. His son had left to work as a butcher, and later returned to raise livestock when the family established a pig farm in 2016. The farm is built on the family's 5 *sào* of land, and since they want to continue to grow rice for home consumption, they rented 5 *sào* from another household in the commune, one whose adult members have migrated to work in the city and no longer work the fields. Mr. Đức's household produces two rice crops a year. For each harvest, they pay the other household 30 kg of rice per *sào*, leaving them with 1,680 kg of rice. According to Mr. Đức, migrant work in the factories increases the availability of farmland for rental by those who are willing to work the land:

Now, many workers in the commune migrate to work for companies, so many fields are abandoned and no one works them. I'm old, so I just work more. In many places, the fields are left uncultivated. It's true that I'm almost seventy years old this year, but I'm still healthy, so I keep working for the sake of my children. People work in companies for monthly incomes of five or six million [about US\$216 to US\$260] and you won't get that kind of income if you only grow rice.

This household's members, for the relatively small amount of rice they can harvest, had to spend a lot of money on production inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and hired labor for plowing and harvest. After deducting expenses, the income from rice cultivation was barely sufficient for everyday needs other than grains, and the pig farm as well as migrant wage work provided their needed cash income.

At the time of our fieldwork, the family kept 40 pigs. Unlike many other households in the village that conduct contract livestock farming for big companies, often using industrially produced feed, they sell their pigs, which they feed with leftover food from restaurants, to private traders. Mr. Đức's son has an agreement with three restaurants in central Hà Nội that allows him to take home their leftovers for a small fee. Every day, he rides his motorbike to Hà Nội to collect the leftovers from these restaurants and bring them back to feed the pigs. The cost of raising a pig from restaurant leftovers is only about VND 2,000 (about US\$0.09)/pig/day, which adds up to about VND 100 million (about US\$4,300) a year, including the cost of gasoline for the daily motorbike trip. Meanwhile, their yearly profit from selling pigs is about VND 200 million (about US\$8,600), that is, if they can sell the pigs at a good price (market prices for live pigs highly fluctuate). Their income from pig farming is much more significant than that from rice farming, which

suffices only to supply them with rice for household consumption. The diversification is not just a matter of increasing income, but also a necessary move to ensure household reproduction in a much more commodified context in which what used to be available through subsistence farming can now be obtained only with cash. As mentioned, even rice farming would now be hardly viable without cash to pay for essential inputs such as seeds or fertilizers, most of which are industrially produced by large corporations, often the same ones with whom the other villagers are under contract.

The household of Mr. Phi in Lam Điền Commune shows an even stronger connection between translocality and commodity production in local livelihoods. In the 1993 land reallocation, each person in his hamlet was given 528 square meters of agricultural land by the local government, a slight difference from the per capital area in Mr. Đức's village. With three members, his family was allocated more than 1,500 square meters of agricultural land, on plots that are separated from each other. The allocation of fields with which each household receives separate plots of land with different qualities was originally meant to ensure fair distribution among households. However, the varying locations and qualities of the household plots make agricultural production difficult, and the commune's land consolidation in 2012 allowed local households to exchange plots, enabling them to cultivate or build livestock farms more easily. But in order to have a large enough area of land for livestock farming, they have to rent or borrow land. Mr. Phi, for example, mobilized land from relatives for his farm:

In 2013, I decided to build a pig farm. My three older sisters did not work in the fields, so they left the fields to me to farm. Along with my household's allocated land, the sisters lent me their fields, so I have an area of 6,864 square meters since 2013 to build this farm. The sisters do not work in the fields because their family members have migrated to find off-farm work in the cities and industrial zones. Although I use the land of my sisters' households, the certificate of land use rights still belongs to them.

In 2017, Mr. Phi's farm kept 1,000 pigs. He had been raising pigs since 2013 on a five-year contract with CP. According to his contract with the company, the company provides Mr. Phi's family with breeders and feed, and it buys mature pigs at a fixed price of VND 1,600 (about US\$0.07) per live kilogram. Mr. Phi's family is responsible for building a pigsty and raising the pigs. For the work that needs doing on the farm, they have to hire migrant workers from other localities to work for them or with them. Mr. Phi's helpers were

from the mountainous province of Cao Bằng, one of the three poorest provinces in Vietnam:

I have to hire two laborers to work with me and my wife to raise pigs. If I and my wife don't do the work directly, I have to hire four workers. I hire people from other localities, not people in my village, to prevent epidemics for pigs. We had to hire people coming from far away so that they stay on the farm after work [unlike locally based workers, who would leave and return to the farm and are likely to bring pathogens with them]. Disease prevention for pigs is the top issue. I have been employing two persons from Cao Bằng Province for a while now. When we breeders want to find someone to hire, we would ask someone to introduce them. They get a monthly wage of 4 million đồng [about US\$187.6] per person.

While the chicken farms are often tended to by household labor or hired labor from the local area, pig farms employ people from ethnic minorities such as Nùng, Mường, and Dao from the poorer northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam such as Hòa Bình, Yên Bái, Hà Giang, and Cao Bằng. The in-migrants see recruitment information on Facebook pages such as that of the pig-raising association (Facebook Hội chăn nuôi lợn) and would go directly to the farms to apply for jobs. Those who go to work on farms can also get information from their fellow villagers who have worked on the farms before. On average, each pig farm needs two hired laborers. All of those employed by the 54 pig farms in Lam Điền, about 110 people, are ethnic-minority people from the northern mountainous provinces. During their employment on the farm, they will not go out of the farm gate for stretches of about six months (from the beginning to the end of a pig breeding cycle) in order to prevent diseases from outside infecting the pigs on the farm. They are provided with food, and they cook for themselves. They are also encouraged to butcher a few pigs from the farm's stock and freeze the meat for supplies. The farm often has a vegetable garden, and they can grow their own vegetables for daily consumption. Because of the long duration of the isolated farm stay during the six-month breeding cycle, the two laborers hired by the farm are usually a married couple. When the mature pigs are sold, the couple can return to their home for about two weeks before returning to the farm. In 2022, each laborer working in pig farms in Lam Điền was paid VND 6–7 million (about US\$250–291) per month, wages that are equivalent to the income of workers in industrial zones and higher than those earned by other agricultural laborers in Lam Điền. Compared to

the wages that they could earn in their home area, this level of income is much higher.

The data presented here indicate the ways in which rural households have come to be enfolded into capitalist commodity production and in that process become a node of mobility through which different sorts of migrant labor crisscross. Their entry into commodity farming seems closely connected to the commodification of rural labor (Lin and Nguyen 2021) that underscores the out-migration of villagers to urban and industrial centers. The labor migration frees up the agricultural land necessary for commodity livestock farming while the in-migration of people from the more peripheral rural regions of Vietnam provides the labor necessary for the same purpose.

Meanwhile, the construction of such a farm requires relatively large financial investments that both these households, as most other villagers, cannot readily afford. Mr. Đức's family had to take a bank loan of VND 100 million (about US\$4,800) out of the VND 300 million (US\$14,400) they had initially invested in building the farm. At the time of our interview, his household still had not paid off the bank loan. Mr. Phi, out of the 2 billion VND investment in his farm, took a bank loan of VND 800 million (about US\$38,400) and also had to borrow money from his brothers. At the time of our interview, his family was paying VND 15 million (about US\$649) in monthly interest on different kinds of debts. Most households that take up commodified farming have to borrow from banks. Contracted farming households do not seem to be subjected to a high level of risk, with the set kilogram prices and disease control services provided by the companies. The contracted prices are much lower than those fetched by independent farms such as that of Mr. Đức, but contracted households are not exposed to market price fluctuations as the latter are—in 2017, when the price of pork fell, the profit from selling a kilogram of pork was half of the investment per kilogram, and all small-scale pig farming households in Lam Điền suffered major losses. However, the price-setting for contracted farms lies in the hands of the powerful companies, and the low prices offered by the companies are often used as a reference point for wholesale market traders to bargain with independent farmers. Coupled with the increasing prices of inputs that are mostly produced by these companies, independent farms are often forced out of business and into indebtedness by the terms set by the companies with whom they do not enter into contract.⁵ The local saying “Pigs eat red books” (*Lợn ăn sổ đỏ*) refers to the situation in which households

have to mortgage land-use rights to borrow money to invest in livestock farms, and if they cannot pay back the loans, their land-use right certificates are confiscated by the bank. So the containment of risk that the agri-corporations sell to farmers as the most important advantage of working under contract for them depends on the transfer of the market fluctuations to the independent farms and the assumption of animal disease risks to the migrant laborers who give up their freedom for extended periods to stay at the farms.⁶ While contracted farming may contain the short-term risks of the household, their risk of future dependency in a relationship of highly unequal power relations with highly unfavorable terms for them seems significant.

The translocality in local livelihoods as such does not only entail rural-urban linkages in terms of labor, land, and production inputs, but also is expressed by the ways in which rural households are incorporated into financial systems and global commodity production. No longer confined to urban centers, these systems now extend across the city and the countryside, reaching into the remotest areas in search of opportunities for market expansion, outsourcing, and labor power. Rural households, as their livelihoods become more and more implicated in these systems, are taking on the risks of indebtedness and market fluctuation, even as their participation might allow some to accumulate wealth. However, not all villagers are able or willing to engage with commodity farming—many others continue to combine labor migration with subsistence farming.

The Interrelationship between Labor Mobility and Subsistence Agriculture

Households with members who migrate to the city to work tend to reduce the land area under cultivation, letting those who stay at home cultivate just enough to ensure food provision for the whole family and renting the rest of their land to those engaging in commodity farming. Ms. Hòp, forty-two years old, in Tân Triều Commune, Thanh Trì District, for example, works as a street vendor, selling mainly sweet potatoes, fruits, and cassava. Sometimes she is hired to wash dishes or cook for parties. These jobs bring her an income of about VNĐ 5–6 million (about US\$208–250) a month. In an arrangement similarly observed in many other parts of rural northern

Vietnam (Chau 2019; Vu and Agergaard 2012; Nguyen 2014), Ms. Hợp's husband is at home working the fields and attending to immediate family matters as she lives and works in Hà Nội. During planting or harvesting times, Ms. Hợp returns to join her husband in doing the necessary work in the fields. She said:

At first, [when] I went to [Hà Nội], the whole village went, each person doing a job. I followed my fellow villagers. Anyway, it's better to come here [better income] than stay in the countryside. ... Sometimes I also want to find another stable job or [work for] a company, but this job [street vending] is freer. [If I have a stable job or work for a company], when I have unexpected duties at home, I can't take a break. I still have to take care of the housework. A company would give me only one or two days off. So [I] have to do this job. This job is hard but not in terms of time, so [I] still [return to my commune] to harvest rice, plant rice. ... Except for rainy days, the other days I go [selling].

Although income from migrant work, such as street vending or factory work, is often much better than that from small-scale rice growing at home, families such as Ms. Hợp's do not give up the latter. This is indeed quite common in similar contexts of labor migration in which self-subsistence farming acts as a source of social security and protection for labor migrants, most of whom operate under conditions of precarity away from home (Rigg, Salamanca, and Thompson 2016). The latter's cash income in the meantime has become vital to household reproduction due to commodity market expansion into the countryside and the increasing privatization of public goods (Nguyen 2018). The combination is indeed a common strategy for translocal households to deal with the ever-higher costs of household reproduction and the risks faced by migrating members, who in turn ensure the cash income necessary for the former.

In our study area, this strategy of combining labor migration with subsistence farming has also called for adjustments in the production methods to suit the reduced availability of household labor. Mechanization of rice growing has now become commonplace partly due to this requirement of translocal livelihoods, as has been observed in another rural district in northern Vietnam where local people are active in the migrant waste trade (Nguyen 2017). A peasant in Lam Điền Commune, Chương Mỹ District, explains how mechanized farming is collectively organized in the village:

Cooperatives collect money from each household and pay the machine owner. Each family pays not directly to the machine owner, but to the cooperative. Agricultural cooperatives are now called New Cooperatives, representing farmers to avoid disputes over ploughing. For example, if a person has a contract to plow and harrow for 300 *mẫu* of the village, the cooperative will calculate on the basis of 10kg of rice per *sào*. The cooperative then collects money from households and pays the machine owners. For each 10 kilos of rice collected, the cooperative keeps 1 kilo, because the cooperative is responsible for making contracts, managing and supervising the plowing and harrowing; the owner of the machine gets 9 kilos.

The mechanization of agricultural production in Lam Điền Commune has taken place since 2014, not only for preparing the land for planting, but also for harvesting. The harvesting, however, is not collectively organized but takes place according to the individual needs of the households to facilitate transportation to individual families. A farmer in Lam Điền Commune, Chương Mỹ District said:

As for the harvest, the machine also does it all. Some people buy machines [for harvesting rice]. The price is about 150 to 200 million dong (about US\$6,300–8,300) per machine. ... The machine owners announce the rice harvest on the Internet [to let the households in the village know to hire the owners]. In this village, two people/households bought two machines. People from other localities also brought back dozens of machines (one machine per person/household) to harvest. [With] 300 *mẫu* [the cultivated area of Lương Xá Hamlet, Lam Điền Commune] to be harvested, within two or three days this area is all harvested. If it's sunny, it's fast.

Mechanization helps to free up the labor necessary for tasks that used to be performed manually and require much greater labor and time inputs. This makes it possible for the translocal household to maintain the combination of simultaneous livelihoods and reproductive activities across rural and urban locations (Nguyen 2014, 2017). That said, the costs of mechanization need to be made up for by the cash income of the migrant household members, as with the other inputs into rice farming. Indeed, subsistence farming and migrant livelihoods are mutually sustaining, in the same way that commodity farming depends on the multiple pathways of labor migration by different groups of rural people who are differentially located in the economic order of Vietnam today.

Conclusion

In contrast to the existing literature's focus on intrafamily relations and negotiation around the translocal household's division of labor and reproductive duties (Vu and Agargaard 2012; Nguyen 2014), we have paid greater attention to the economic linkages that the household has with external institutions and actors far beyond its village. Our analysis has underscored the multidimensional translocality of rural livelihoods in Vietnam today and the ways in which more diverse strategies for livelihoods have emerged in response to the changing conditions of household reproduction and production. The multidimensionality can be seen in the mutual dependence between labor migration and subsistence farming, between subsistence farming and commodity farming, between labor migration and commodity farming. It can be also seen in the mutual dependence between different livelihood strategies within the same village, for example by those who focus on commodity farming and those who do not, between those who practice contract commodity farming and independent livestock farmers. As well, it can be seen in the coexistence of labor migration out of the village and that from more peripheral regions into the village. These translocal linkages and actors beyond the household have come to shape the household economy and rural economic life in powerful ways.

Furthermore, we have demonstrated how the translocality in rural livelihoods nowadays is not only organically linked to the commodification of labor that underlies rural-urban migration (Lin and Nguyen 2021) but also increasingly engages broader systems of commodity production and finance (see the chapter herein by Lainez, Trinh, and Bui about financial expansion). As documented elsewhere in rural Vietnam (Nguyen 2020), these systems increasingly extend into the countryside in search of opportunities for expansion and outsourcing, often capitalizing on the very precarious mobilities of different groups of people migrating into and out of the village. Household participation in these systems, while allowing certain people the possibilities of entrepreneurship and accumulation, exposes the rural household, and those within its networks, to the risks of indebtedness and market fluctuations. Translocality is not merely a household choice; it constitutes an imperative of the new economy that rural households can ignore only at their peril. As translocality will endure, so will the high level of risk assumption in rural livelihoods in Vietnam.

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Notes

- 1 The conversion from VND to US\$ is based on the exchange rate at the time of the mentioned events.
- 2 Besides using data from the forty in-depth interviews in Lam Điền and Hát Môn communes, we also use data from fifty in-depth interviews conducted with immigrants residing in Tân Triều Commune, Thanh Trì District, Hà Nội. Tân Triều is a rural commune located almost in the inner city of Hà Nội. This commune has been urbanized to a very high degree and there are almost no agricultural activities left. All names of interviewees in this chapter are pseudonyms.
- 3 See <https://cpfoods.vn/pages/gioi-thieu-cong-ty-co-phan-chan-nuoi-cp-vietnam-cpv>.
- 4 In northern Vietnam, 1 *sào* is equivalent to 360 square meters; 10 *sào* are equivalent to 1 *mẫu*.
- 5 See, e.g., the following articles: <https://vietnamnet.vn/bi-kich-nong-dan-lam-thue-cho-dai-gia-chan-nuoi-122592.html> [The tragedy of peasants in contract with livestock big bosses], accessed on 14 October 2022, or <https://diendandoanhnghiep.vn/ban-nha-do-no-vi-nuoi-ga-lien-ket-222114.html> [Selling houses and becoming indebted because of contract chicken farming].
- 6 See, e.g., an article on CP’s website: <https://cpfoods.vn/blogs/hoat-dong/lien-ket-nuoi-heo-cong-nghe-cao-han-che-rui-ro-ve-gia-ca-va-dich-benh> [High-tech pig farming alliance reduces risks in terms of price and diseases].

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Section II
Gender and Private Life

SECTION II INTRODUCTION

Private Lives on the Move: Transnational Migration, Marriage, and Work

HELLE RYDSTROM

THIS SECTION ON GENDER AND PRIVATE LIFE explores the ways in which multidirectional cross-border migration affects the social life of Vietnamese migrants in their new country and even in Vietnam. In three insightful chapters, we meet Vietnamese women who have married men in China, South Korea, and Taiwan, and also Vietnamese men who have returned to their home country after having worked in Japan. Each of the chapters sheds light on the ways transnational migration is imbued with not only challenges, hardship, and crises, but also commitment, resilience, and potentialities. We learn about the ways in which Vietnamese migrants navigate several social terrains by adjusting to gender-specific expectations in their new country and family while also bridging to their natal family in Vietnam through emotional bonds, gift-giving, and financial support.

The chapters add new and important insights into the growing body of research on migration, marriage, and work in Asia and beyond. The authors contribute their research to scholarship on cross-border migration as related to the legal status and citizenship restrictions in respect to migrants (e.g., Tuen and Yeoh 2023); the significance of the migrants' family in their country of origin and the new home within a larger migration-development nexus (Chinsung, Keuntae, and Piper 2016); how the global economy facilitates flows in people for purposes such as getting married and finding a job (Thai 2008); the ways in which the racialization and marginalization of migrants in country of destination interact with overarching postcolonial powers (Ang, Ho, and Yeoh 2022); and the effect of gendered and racialized

discriminatory nation-state regulations that hamper migrant opportunities (Kneebone 2023).

Nguyen Thi Phuong Cham's chapter on "Cross-Border Marriages: Expectations and Translocal Lifeworlds of Vietnamese Brides in Wanwei (Guangxi, China)" draws on long-term data collected on the Vietnamese–Chinese border. Five Vietnamese women in Wanwei share their stories of living in poverty with lower-class local men. Phung N. Su's piece on "More than 'Leftover Water': Vietnamese Brides and the Shifting Obligations of Transnational Families" refers to fifty-eight interviews with Vietnamese women migrants married to men in South Korea and Taiwan who have managed to create a level of autonomy from their spouses by engaging in business activities. An Huy Tran's chapter on "Sexuality, Masculinity, and Transnational Migration: The Case of Male Vietnamese Returnees from Japan" builds on seventy life-story interviews with Vietnamese male migrants who had worked in Japan as technicians (i.e., technical intern trainees) before returning to Vietnam, where they find a new socioeconomic and even masculine status.

Situated in an ethnographic tradition, each chapter opens a window into the duple-contextual ways gender is crafted as the result of local perceptions, ideas, and actions at home and abroad. Intersecting with parameters such as class and sexuality, gender emerges as a malleable dimension of life that is dynamically changing and reconfiguring by incorporating local notions and practices bearing on masculinity, femininity, sexuality, age, ethnicity/race, and class (Collins 2019; Ong 2005; Rydstrom 2006).

In patrilineally organized societies with a Confucian heritage, as in the countries that are in the fore of the three chapters, hierarchies, powers, and privileges are intimately intertwined with masculinity. The ways in which not only masculinity but also femininity are rendered meaningful and associated with specific bodies frame the shaping of kin-related roles such as husband, wife, father, mother, son, and daughter as well as work-defined roles such as laborer, caregiver, and entrepreneur (Nguyen and Rydstrom 2022; Tuen and Yeoh 2021). Patriarchy and gendered intersections come together in each of the chapters to solidify a system that privileges men's superiority over women and thereby facilitates the conditions allowing for the exclusion of women and nonbinary sexualities (cf. Hearn 2015; Nguyen 2018).

Attempting to build a new life in China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, Vietnamese women and men develop strategies to navigate a social realm defined by ideas about appropriate ways of conducting oneself as a woman or man. Vietnamese women migrants carefully balance such gender-specific assumptions by merging a repertoire of values learned in Vietnam with gendered norms in the local communities in which they settle when going abroad. The chapters unfold the complex ways in which social spaces and places accrue gender-intersected meaning and, in doing so, demarcate boundaries to define “who belongs to a place and who may be excluded” (McDowell 1999:4). For Vietnamese women and men whose lives are framed by a history of transnational mobility, their vulnerability due to risks of marginalization, stigmatization, and inequality is evident (cf. Butler et al. 2016).

With a fine-tuned sense for how gendered power relations permeate their new household and society at large, Vietnamese migrant women perpetually attempt to adjust their behavior, anxious to avoid taking any missteps that might be deemed as indications of lack of respect for social conventions in their host country by an unsympathetic husband, mother-in-law, or neighbor. The Vietnamese social capacity *tình cảm* (sentiments/emotions/feelings), acquired through socialization, emerges as a helpful way for the migrant women to navigate gender-specific social asymmetries in their new country (Rydstrom 2003).

While working in Japan, Vietnamese men similarly adapt to country-specific sociocultural norms, though in ways that differ from the Vietnamese migrant women. As previous research on Japan conducted by Emma Cook (2016) has shown, masculinity and work are closely entwined, and low-income Vietnamese migrant male workers are rendered inferior as low-class masculinities. As returnees to Vietnam, however, they climb the social and gendered hierarchies because of the ways their economic, and even sexual, position has risen due to what is recognized as a stay in a socioeconomically prestigious country. The difficulties met by the men while working in Japan thus pay off after their return to Vietnam in terms of leading to an improved social status and living conditions. However, for the Vietnamese migrant women, who end up rooting in their new country, everyday hardship and crises do not seem to come to an end. Rather, daily life crises transmute into a new normalcy (Rydstrom 2022), a normalcy calling for the building of social resilience and the development of mitigation and coping strategies (Adger 2000).

Nguyen Thi Phuong Cham has been traveling to Wanwei since 1999, and the author's familiarity with the place shines through a text focused on the marginalization of Vietnamese women there. Because the Vietnamese migrant women have married men from poor households with little class status, the women are subjected to discrimination and treated like outsiders. Almost "included by exclusion" (Agamben 1998), the women feel that they are looked down upon in their local community and belittled by being referred to with the derogative term "bought bride" (cf. Le, Truong, and Khuat 2013). Tuen Yi Chiu and Brenda Yeoh (2023), for instance, have emphasized the significance of citizenship status in respect to migration and the human and social difficulties in which legal marginalization might result, as also elucidated in Nguyen's chapter. Here, the women neither have a marriage license nor a residence permit and, therefore, find themselves in a precarious situation due to the risk of being identified by authorities and deported. Keeping a low profile, they behave with great care to avoid provoking people in their community who may be inclined to report undocumented migrants to the authorities. To make matters worse, the Vietnamese women's marginalization is fortified because they do not master the Chinese language. This means that they are not only estranged from their husband and his family, but even from their own children, who do not master the Vietnamese language.

Vietnamese women married to men in Wanwei are stretched emotionally and mentally between a life with husband, children, and in-laws in China, on the one hand, and their own parents and siblings who live in Vietnam, on the other (cf. Chinsung, Keuntae, and Piper 2016). The women aspire to create a better life for themselves and their new family in Wanwei and wish to project such an impression onto relatives back home. Keen on proving to their Vietnamese family that they have been successful in building a life abroad, the women bring pricey gifts to kin in Vietnam, which they cannot afford, offer financial support to their relatives in Vietnam, put up a facade to appear cheerful, and downplay the challenges with which they struggle in daily life. Portraying oneself as a success by glossing over experiences of social exclusion and day-to-day crises of hardship is an efficient, but expensive solution for the women of little economic means.

Not unlike the Vietnamese women who have married men in Wanwei, the Vietnamese women who went to South Korea or Taiwan to get married encounter daily life challenges and precariousness, as highlighted in Phung N. Su's chapter. They encounter long working hours, feel alienated, experience

marginalization, struggle with language barriers, and suffer emotionally from lack of proximity to their Vietnamese female kin to rely upon in respect to childcare and the upbringing of their children. The women's new lives in South Korea and Taiwan are fraught with ambiguities concerning the extent to which they feel a sense of belonging to their country of origin and the new foreign community in which they have started their own family (cf. Yuval-Davis 2006). Such feelings should be seen in the light of discrimination tendencies against poor, gendered, and racialized migrants in their new country, as also discussed by Susan Kneebone (2023) in a study on marriage migration of Vietnamese women into South Korea.

Duple-contextual responsibilities, however, also generate creative strategies in response to gender-specific expectations in patrilineally organized societies with a Confucian heritage such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Committing not only to the family into which they have married, but also to their natal family, the Vietnamese migrant women attempt to redefine influential ideas about the ways in which filial piety is expected to be demonstrated by a dutiful wife and daughter (cf. Bélanger and Wang 2013). The women, Su shows, adroitly negotiate and reconcile obligations to husband and in-laws in their new country and parents and siblings in Vietnam. As "pious" (*hiếu thảo*) daughters, the women send remittances to their parents and siblings in Vietnam, who may be struggling to make ends meet, thereby supporting family members to improve their living conditions by helping them to repay loans, renovate homes, pursue education, and launch entrepreneurial ventures (cf. Tuen and Yeoh 2023). Marriage involving cross-border migration thus becomes a means for family-related poverty alleviation and development.

An Huy Tran's chapter illuminates the complexities with which multidirectional transnational migration is saturated. The journey involving migration from Vietnam to Japan as well as returning to Vietnam after working in Japan for a period symbolizes change and progress for the men, or rather a *rite de passage*. When moving to Japan, the Vietnamese men are inexperienced youngsters, who, however, upon returning to Vietnam give an impression of being capable, mature, and affluent "men of the world." While their economic and masculine position in Japan was inferior, their status in Vietnam is improved. As returnees, the men project an image of economic and personal success, which taps into assumptions in Vietnamese society about a correlation between a man's financial resources and the

quality and level of his masculinity. As income is thought to reflect upon a man's masculinity and by extension his sexuality, the wealthier a man is, the more masculine he is assumed to be (Hoang and Yeoh 2011; Horton and Rydstrom 2011).

Return migration thus provides an opportunity for the Vietnamese men to showcase upward social mobility and heightened sexuality. While heterosexual men tend to have experienced inferiority in the Japanese masculine hierarchical order, followed by an elevated social status when back in Vietnam, same-sex male returnees rather re-encounter a Vietnamese heterosexual matrix, which excludes same-sex and nonbinary sexualities. Thus, Vietnamese gay men returning after having worked in Japan do not enjoy an augmented masculine status after resettling in Vietnam despite economic resources in tandem with an increased recognition of LGBTQ people in Vietnamese society (Rydstrom, Nguyen, and Hoang 2023). Just like the Vietnamese women who migrate for marriage in China, South Korea, and Taiwan, Vietnamese migrant men who have worked in Japan avoid sharing with family and friends the difficulties and sense of exclusion they have experienced in Japan.

As part of larger development and reproduction tendencies (Le, Truong, and Khuat 2013), transnational mobility for work and/or marriage is imbued with hardship as well as risk-taking, precarity, crises, and resistance. This is also elucidated by Hung Cam Thai (2008) in a study on the efforts invested by Vietnamese men living in the American diaspora to attract women from Vietnam for the purpose of marriage and the uncertain conditions in which the women find themselves after moving to the United States. In-depth ethnographic studies like those of Nguyen, Su, and Tran generate critical knowledge about the multiple ways in which daily life crises are experienced and dealt with by migrating people (cf. Fassin 2022).

Rendered precarious and encountering a variety of crises, duplicated contextual lives are configured and reconfigured, for better or for worse, in China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam in correspondence with context-specific gendered intersections that frame “the hardship of ordinary life” (Rydstrom 2022). Each crisis is different in scale (Bergman-Rosamond et al. 2019), but it is common for the various crises encountered by those embarking upon a transnational migration journey that a crisis makes “outcomes unpredictable” (Habermas 1992:1). Beginning a new life in a foreign country is marked by insecurity, as described in the chapters, and

uncertainty produced by crises tends to traverse time, place, and space (cf. Mbembe and Roitman 1995). Facing difficulties, however, does not mean passive acceptance, as is also elucidated in the chapters. Rather, cross-country migrating and the building of a new life in the receiving country is an ongoing process of challenges and the mustering of social resilience to empower oneself and, in doing so, increase the control over one's own life (Kabeer 2005; Rampp et al. 2019).

Instead of complying with difficult circumstances, the Vietnamese women and men introduced in the chapters weather day-to-day hardship by inventing a variety of mitigating strategies. As Nguyen, Su, and Tran vividly show in their individual chapters, the Vietnamese migrants steer through daily life challenges in their new country, and even in Vietnam, by drawing on, and accumulating, various types of capital (Bourdieu 1992; Endres 2014). The Vietnamese transnational migrants endure adversity, but they also develop counter strategies by the aid of which they manage the painful aspects of living a life defined by gendered inequalities and socioeconomic marginalization in foreign lands. Capturing the powers and intricacies in cross-country migration, the chapters offer moving accounts of migrant devotedness to creating a new life and climbing the social ladder by staying resilient and coping with life even when harsh.

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*Cross-Border Marriages:
Expectations and Translocal Lifeworlds of
Vietnamese Brides in Wanwei
(Guangxi, China)*

NGUYEN THI PHUONG CHAM

SINCE THE *Đổi mới* REFORMS, cross-border marriages have been on the rise in Vietnam as a result of people's greater engagement in global mobilities. According to the Ministry of Public Security, since 2008 about thirteen thousand Vietnamese women have married foreigners, mainly from South Korea, Taiwan, the People's Republic of China, and the United States.¹ In this changing context, Wanwei, a coastal village located near the China–Vietnam border, has become a destination for Vietnamese brides to marry local Chinese men. By 2018, there were about fifty Vietnamese women with Chinese husbands living in the village. They had been born and grown up in farming families in Vietnam's northern and northeastern provinces such as Bắc Giang, Hà Nội, Hải Dương, Thái Bình, Nam Định, Hải Phòng, and Quảng Ninh. I visited Wanwei for the first time in 1999 and since then have returned many times. During those trips, I made acquaintance with these Vietnamese women. I call them *các chị* (elder sisters). In return, they consider me a member of their families, often using the kinship term *đi*² in our conversations, and they are willing to tell me their personal stories, many of which I have recorded over the years. These accounts depict their daily lives, economic conditions, work, family, and social relations in Wanwei as well as their relationships with their families in the homeland.

This chapter tells the stories of five among these women, who represent four trajectories of marriage into Wanwei: through the introduction of friends or relatives (sister Thanh); through migrant work as hired laborers in the village first before marrying (sister Tân and sister Hồng); through previous migration to multiple destinations before settling in the village (sister Hà); and through being trafficked into cross-border marriage (sister Lý). The five women's accounts indicate that Vietnamese women who are engaged in cross-border marriages (see also Su's chapter in this volume) are constrained by patriarchal expectations and structures on the two ends of their cross-border life. In their home country, it is the expectation that dutiful daughters will get married, and even marry up, in order to bring or save face for their parents. In their marital home in Wanwei, China, they are expected to be dutiful and submissive wives and mothers who are devoted to their husband's family as their own. Since they are cross-border migrants without legal status, they are also expected to act as well-behaved residents that make no trouble and keep a low profile. How, then, do these women live up to these expectations and manage to carve out their own social and economic spaces that allow for some level of self-determination and recognition?

Following the narratives of sisters Tân, Thanh, Hồng, Hà, and Lý, I argue that we might better apprehend how these women live their lives by deploying the unique set of coping mechanisms and strategies that Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) calls "patriarchal bargains." This notion refers to women's strategies to sustain their limited power or spaces of self-determination within the constraints of patriarchal structures without upsetting them, for example through cultivating emotional ties with their sons. As they fulfill obligations, cultural rules, and social expectations in their new families and communities, the women I met in Wanwei also create new social and economic spaces by using their Vietnamese identity to improve their social position and gain recognition. Their strategies may seem burdensome, yet they enable the women to balance between the social expectations and obligations of their new homes and their communities of origin (see also Su, this volume; Hoang 2011). Although they do not change the structures within which they operate, these patriarchal bargains enable them to gain a certain level of self-determination and recognition as well as a standard of living that would otherwise be denied to them.

On Being a Vietnamese Bride in Wanwei

Wanwei, together with the villages Shanxin and Wutou, is part of the Jingdao area that belongs to the town of Jiangping, Dongxing City, Guangxi Province, China. The area is home to a group of the Jing people (ethnic Vietnamese; *người Kinh* in the Vietnamese language), who originally belonged to the majority ethnic group in Vietnam but count as a minority ethnic group in China. As the largest coastal village among three villages constituting the Jingdao cluster, Wanwei has 1,002 households with 4,062 people. It has a natural area of 13.7 km², which is divided into three hamlets including Wanwei (mainly Jing people), Wandong, and Wanxi (mainly Zhuang and Han people). Over the sea, Wanwei connects to Trà Cổ (Móng Cái, Quảng Ninh Province, Vietnam), while along the land route, it is about 25 kilometers from the Dongxing–Móng Cái border gate.

Migrant women in Wanwei are Kinh, people who had been born and grown up in farming families in lowland Vietnamese provinces, where the gender order is shaped by patriarchal traditions that require women to be hardworking, docile, married early to a man in the same village, devoted to family, and remaining within the village. As a result of the post-reform industrialization and urbanization, coupled with labor migration and mobility in rural areas, women could leave their villages or take part in nonagricultural jobs. Many thus migrated for waged work and later married foreigners. All the five women discussed in this chapter had experiences with childhood poverty and lack of educational opportunities and became waged workers at young ages.

As grown women, all of them experienced difficulties in their personal relationships. Sister Hồng and sister Tân had not found a man to their liking and were eventually “past the marriageable age” as conventionally defined in rural areas; sister Hà had been married for several years before her husband left and never came back; sister Lý had had a boyfriend but got rejected by his family and had been raped once; and sister Thanh was scarred by witnessing the sufferings of other married women. The hardship faced by each woman was different; however, they shared the experience of having been perceived as too old for marriage and having “(unfavorable) circumstances” by their fellow villagers, which placed them under the pressure of public opinion in the village.³

Despite unfortunate family circumstances and unfruitful personal relationships, these women had not actively considered leaving their village;

“it was rather all driven by fate,” as sister Lý said. They had hardly gone out of the village, let alone abroad. To them, such names as Wanwei, Dongxing, or China had been unfamiliar; even the Vietnamese province of Móng Cái had been a strange place for them. As sister Tần was taken to China by an acquaintance to work as a hired laborer, she knew nothing about the neighboring country. What the women knew about their Chinese husbands was even more limited. They had known the men only through matchmakers or brokers, who provided brief, simple, and sometimes even incorrect information. Some of the women could not remember the full names of their future husbands. These women had nonlegal marriages, without celebration by any conventional ceremonies, which meant that they live in Wanwei without the household registration and marriage licenses that are legally required in China.

All the Vietnamese women in Wanwei, including the five sisters mentioned in this chapter, married Han, Zhuang, and other ethnic minority men instead of Jing men. As men of ethnic groups other than the dominant Han, their husbands had had difficulty finding Chinese wives; besides, they were poor and had unfavorable family backgrounds in a country where marriage prospects largely depend on money, education, and power. Some had lost either their mothers or fathers; others had lost their wives. Some were migrants and had wandered many places. Most of them were either hired or self-employed fishers. They had, as such, strenuous and precarious lives. If the gender imbalance prevalent in China for decades makes it difficult for Chinese men to find local wives, it is even more the case for rural men (Cai 2015). Thus, Dongxing men have been trying to marry Vietnamese women through brokers since the normalization of the relationship between Vietnam and China in 1991.

These Vietnamese women, in their home country, were subjected to the gendered stigma of being people “with circumstances,” “being past the marriageable age,” or “having to drift away to marry Chinese men.” Their social position in Wanwei, meanwhile, was equally inferior because they were married illegally to poor men, thereby being considered “bought brides” or “called wives.” However, they actively carved out autonomous spaces and created social connections, turning these into a long-term strategy to negotiate life in Wanwei with their Chinese husbands, as well as with their other family members and communities.

Fulfilling Gender Obligations in Marital Families

Accepting a simple and quiet marriage, the women had left their Vietnamese homes to start a new life in Wanwei with the families of their Chinese husbands about whom they had not known much or whom they had not met in person. They had to familiarize themselves with and adapt to new families, new jobs, a new lifestyle, and especially their new husbands.

The five women had different family backgrounds; yet, they all started their lives in Wanwei with more economic hardships than the majority of the other villagers. Three of them lived in cramped rented houses with simple furniture. Two others shared a very small house with people from all three generations of their in-laws. With this hard beginning, their early days in Wanwei were occupied with household chores, childbirth, and, once the children were born, childcare. Most of the women I met in Wanwei became pregnant within the first year of marriage.

After a while, when the housework was better organized and the children had grown up, the women had more time to work. Sisters Tân, Hồng, and Hà chose to work at the beach with their families. They took advantage of the time when the children were at school and the husbands were at work to go to the beach to dig clams, razor clams, or peanut worms.⁴ Sometimes, they also went to the beach to wait for their husbands to pull the nets back so that they could untangle them, sell seafood, and then clean up. Sister Thanh decided to become a tailor who fixed clothes and sister Lý took up fruit peddling to earn cash income. Through these jobs, they could easily form and enhance the connection with other family members, thereby stabilizing their domestic life.

The women had to get used to their in-law families with very limited language skills and understanding about their customs and routines. They did not have any relatives living nearby to learn from their behavioral experiences. All these things caused many difficulties in their initial integration with the new families. Sister Tân and sister Hồng felt lucky living with their fathers- and mothers-in-law, who were apparently easygoing. Sister Thanh lived with a younger sister-in-law who did not like her at first but gradually changed her attitude. Sister Hà lived with five stepchildren and a seriously ill mother-in-law. She said: "I took care of her for six years and a half. God, it was hard work!" Sister Lý lived with an in-law family who did not appreciate her; she said: "At first, they treated me purely as a

domestic worker. I knew my fate and my status, so I clenched my teeth to survive.”

The women were in charge of all housework and took care of their children while working to earn money to support the family. Yet, they always behaved carefully and handled the relationship with the in-laws by proactively observing the language, behavior, and habits of all family members, attempting to create connection and cohesion among family members to make their life more comfortable. Not only did they try to get familiar with, adapt to, and foster bonds with the in-laws, but they also tried to understand and adapt to their husbands. Since they neither shared a language and culture nor had had time to get to know each other before marriage, the women started their conjugal life with trying to learn about their husbands. All of the women told stories of feeling strange around the new husband during the early days of their marriage. Sister Tân said: “my first days living with my husband were very strange. I knew only a few Chinese words, so I could not understand what my husband said. We did not understand each other, but we did not know what we should do either.” In addition to this feeling of alienation, others also felt fear and sadness. As sister Lý said: “from the beginning, my husband only considered me something he had bought. I had to endure whatever he forced on me. I could not resist. When thinking of my husband coming back home, I felt very scared.” All of them said that over time they “did get used to it” or “everything gradually became familiar.” As sister Lý told me, “it took several years for me and my husband to become comfortable with each other.” Similarly, sister Hà said: “it took five to seven years for me and my husband to become comfortable and feel more in harmony.”

Although none explicitly mentioned how they achieved harmony with their husbands and felt more comfortable with their married life, my observations of them doing housework and extra jobs reveals that they paid great attention to the use of language, the local dialect and customs, learning and imitating cooking methods, and the working manners of other family members. Some even changed their own habits to adapt to their in-laws’ routines. These efforts did help to facilitate their connection with their husbands and the in-law families. I met sister Thanh in 2004 when she had been in Wanwei for just a year. She told me that it was difficult to eat the food her husband’s family usually consumed because, in her opinion, the dishes were always over-seasoned, too sweet, too spicy, and too greasy. However, when I met

her in 2005, she had already gotten used to the way local people dressed, spoke, and behaved so that she could fit in with her husband's family and be comfortable with her husband. In 2009, she was not at all different from a Chinese woman in terms of her speech, working habits, and cooking methods. When I visited her in 2015, she eagerly acted as my interpreter during my conversations with her husband.

The women also tried to form a better connection with their own children. When the children were learning to speak, the husbands and their families taught them Chinese, and when they went to school, they also used Chinese. The kids could learn faster than their mothers; therefore, the mother-child connection had to face certain barriers, which meant it was difficult for the women to keep track of the learning of their children (even though they wanted to do so). Teaching Vietnamese to their children as they wished was not successful. Despite not being able to teach their children Vietnamese, nor to give them advice on schooling, nor to have intimate conversations with them, the women sought to better connect with their children in different ways. As sister Hồng shared, they "took care of the children, from their meals to their sleep, from clothes to school supplies, from the use of language in daily life to their behavior in family and society." They also "tried to talk to the kids, although they might not understand all the said things." Sister Lý told me: "I try to learn more Chinese so that I will be able to talk with my children. I devote all to my children and I am certain that they understand." Their love and efforts to connect with their children give these women a sense of stability and fulfillment.

Moreover, their family members do acknowledge what they had done and tried to do to fit into the family. When I talked to sister Hồng's mother-in-law, she said: "many people here say that Vietnamese women are not good enough so they have to come here to find husbands. I don't know others, but my daughter-in-law is very good. She is hardworking and good at taking care of her children." The father-in-law of sister Tân also praised her, saying that "my daughter-in-law is hardworking and a good listener. She is also good at teaching her children. It is good that my son married her." The stepson of sister Hà told me: "at first I did not like her, now I love her sometimes and feel lucky to have her taking care of my father."

In starting a new life in a strange land outside of Vietnam, these women encountered many difficulties, including a language barrier, economic constraints, lifestyle differences, and prejudices by in-law families and

villagers. However, by taking concrete actions, being patient, accepting difficulties, and making efforts to improve relationships with family members, they gradually adapted to and integrated into their new lives, and even improved their position. From strange to familiar, they have gone through a long journey in which they have step-by-step gained a central place in the family by their constant efforts.

"Docile" and Responsive Vietnamese Women

One day in late 2021, I called sister Thanh, and she proudly said to me: "I have opened a shop. It was fortunate that many people have helped me. Now I feel somewhat secure." I congratulated her for she finally had her own tailor shop after many years of hard work. I asked about the "helpers" that she mentioned. Her younger sister in Vietnam and her close friend, who had also married a Chinese man in Wanwei, had supported her with the funds. A neighbor, who is a village official, helped Thanh with the business registration procedure. I understood that such support meant a lot to sister Thanh. To be supported by these people, she had made efforts over many years to create and maintain social relationships and to change her status from being a bought Vietnamese bride to a woman with a certain position and voice in the family and society in Wanwei.

Even though living in Wanwei, a village where many Jing people reside, the women at first received sympathy from neither Han nor Jing villagers. The Han in Wanwei considered them bought brides and were "not sure whether [they were] bad or good," whereas the Jing always held prejudice against them. As a Jing neighbor of sister Thanh commented, they thought these women "must be not good enough to find a husband in their homeland, so they have to come here." The women all faced unsympathetic and suspicious looks from others during their early days in Wanwei. "At first, they did not talk to me. When I met them on the street, I greeted them first and they just reluctantly said hi in return. If I did not greet them, they did not do so as well," sister Hà recalled. All these women were aware that villagers had unfriendly and unsympathetic attitudes toward them partly because they were still strangers. They were also affected by the stereotypes about Vietnamese women among the village community. As sister Thanh explained,

Vietnamese women living in Wanwei either with or without Chinese husbands are of different types. Many of them just get married like me while many others come to work as traders. Some get married but are involved in gambling or fighting each other. Some spoiled girls come here to work as prostitutes. There are many bad people, so local people do not have any sympathy toward them and dislike all Vietnamese women.

In response, the women proactively facilitated conversations with their neighbors. They helped them as much as possible while remaining very careful. Sister Hà shared that she actively treated her neighbors well so that they would treat her well in return:

I tried to treat them well. From time to time, I cooked sweet soup and porridge or made roasted peanuts, roasted beans and invited them to come over and eat with me. I helped them whenever they had some family events. I came even when they did not ask me. When my neighbors held wedding feasts, I came over to help them cook and lent them my cooking pots, dishes, or bowls. Thus, my next-door neighbors told me that “this Vietnamese lady is good and hard-working.”

Taking another way to socialize, sister Thanh tried not to bother her neighbors so that they would not hate her: “I was very careful and behaved thoughtfully. I never interfered in their business. Whatever they said, I just listened to it. I never dared to disturb them. If I did not have something, I tried to buy it instead of borrowing from my neighbors.” Sisters Tăn, Hồng, and Lý actively facilitated opportunities to communicate with their neighbors through sharing food and gifts after they came back from work or from their trips to Vietnam.

The Vietnamese women tried everything possible, from sharing daily meals and helping their neighbors at weddings, funerals, and emergency events to taking care of their neighbors’ children. They were willing to help or to ask their husbands to help on their behalf. Gradually, through the strategy of being kind and taking concrete actions and having careful behavior inside and outside the family, these women managed to create a friendly and close relationship with their neighbors. After a while, neighbors saw them differently and understood that these women were nice and hardworking people. Thus, they formed close relationships with the Vietnamese women, through which they were willing to share and help one another in daily life. In particular, the neighbors helped these women in learning a new language and shared the actual experiences of working at the

seashore. Information given by the neighbors was important for the women in many aspects of their lives: from shopping for groceries and trading activities to taking care of children and participating in common village affairs. Being aware of the significance of social connections, they remained continuously “invested” in and maintained such relationships in natural and practical ways.

For these women, in their hometowns in Vietnam, it was much easier to create and maintain neighborly relationships because traditionally “people within a village were also clan members,” and they already had a solid foundation established by earlier generations of the family. However, in Wanwei, they had to build everything from scratch with people who did not share the same language and culture and held prejudice against them. Thanks to their patience, hard work, and tolerance, they could eventually overcome the prejudice and gradually grew better relationships with their neighbors. Step by step, the women had managed to make their lives easier in their new land, in many cases turning the early suspicious and unfriendly neighbors into willing helpers.

While these women were active in building relationship with their neighbors, they tried to avoid the local government, often seeking to deal with them only indirectly. All Vietnamese women that I met in Wanwei told me that they were “most afraid of going to the committee office.” If there was an issue that needed to be approved or validated by the local government, they would ask their husbands or other family members to help them. They only visited the committee office when absolutely necessary, for instance, taking their children there for vaccination, or when they were asked directly by the government to participate in events specifically organized for women such as propaganda for birth control or disease prevention. Not having legal papers, they were afraid that they would not know what to do if asked about these things. Their Chinese was not good enough to communicate with local officials. Moreover, they sensed that local officials held a prejudice against Vietnamese women as “complicated members,” “having unresolvable problems,” or even “causing insecurity to the village.” Yet, they tried to act in ways that could generate sympathy from the officials or at least not make them feel bothered; they had their own ways to “please” the local authorities. Sister Lý, who sells fruits at the market, told me what she had done: “local government here sympathizes and gives us favorable conditions to live in the village. In my turn, I try not to make any mistakes, not to fight or argue

with others. My family and I obey all village regulations. When having to pay sanitization fees or make a contribution to constructing new roads, we do it right away and even pay more than the amount asked.” Sister Thanh and sister Hà used a similar method as sister Hà, saying: “We should pay attention to our behavior, not bothering them and actively participating in community labor sessions, not getting involved in any fights or quarrels. By living like that, local officials can sympathize with us.” Sister Hồng and sister Tân, who worked at the beach, tried to obey all regulations on closing and cleaning the beach.

The women try not to negatively affect the lives of other villagers, not to cause any security problems, nor to create a bad reputation for themselves within the community. As did the other villagers, local government officials gradually changed their view of these women. They eventually provided them with assistance and sometimes covered for them when checking up on household registration and resident records.

Creating New Spaces for Improvement and Recognition

Since Wanwei is a small village with a modest number of Vietnamese women living there (about fifty people), it is not surprising that most of them know each other. However, to form close relationships, they gather in small groups of four to six people based on living in the same neighborhood, working together at the beach, trading at the market, or coming from the same home village, district, or province in Vietnam. They told me that Vietnamese women here were very close to one another; as sister Hồng said, they were willing to help and treated each other like sisters. Sister Thanh said:

We sisters here have so much fun and can talk to each other all day. Some people like sister Tân stop by my place every day when taking her children to school. Sometimes, she gives me crabs or fish that she caught. Everyone is busy earning a living, so sometimes we meet and have fun together. Especially, sister Hồng sometimes calls us to come over to her place to eat chicken. Five or six of us talk to each other and support each other very often.

By sharing stories of common concerns, from family issues to village affairs, these women provided one another with encouragement and advice, which are crucial for their efforts to improve their lives and maintain peaceful

family and village relations. When one faced a difficult issue, others gathered together to “talk to her and make her know what should be done to settle the thing,” as explained by sister Hà. For those living far away from their families, such sharing is meaningful because, as expressed by sister Hồng, “I feel happy to have sisters to talk to, especially to confide in during moments of sadness, something that might not be possible with anyone else.”

They also helped each other in doing business. Sister Lý said: “[w]hile each of us lives under different conditions, we are all good people. When others need fruits, they come to my place. Since there is a Vietnamese tailor in the village, I’ve only had my clothes fixed at her shop. It is good to support one another to make a living here.” Sister Hà would look after the sisters’ children or do grocery shopping for them. Those who came earlier would teach people who came later, which they take on as a shared responsibility. The mutual support network that emerges thus also acts as an important infrastructure of arrival for newcomers.

Another important kind of support was providing mutual aid in case of family events such as weddings, funerals, illnesses or accidents, land purchase, or house construction. When sister Thanh opened her tailor shop, she received much help from a close friend in the same business. When sister Tân and sister Lý built their new houses, “all sisters gathered to help,” according to sister Lý. When one family organized weddings or funerals, others lent a helping hand. Besides, these women share important information on issues such as new regulations of the local government, schooling concerns, and traveling to Vietnam.

The sharing and mutual material, spiritual, and information support among the women over time formed a network of sisterhood that helped them to deal with the challenges of arrival and existence in an unfamiliar place far away from their former network of support. In a place where they are considered outsiders by community, government, and even their new family, this acts as a vital emotional and material resource with which they could gain some degree of security and belonging over time.

Maintaining Connection to the Homeland

Whether moving to Wanwei by a passive choice, through a deliberate decision, or by being trafficked, the women all wished to reconnect and take return

trips to the homeland once they were settled in Wanwei. However, the geographical distance, their legal status, and, more importantly, their worries over how to present themselves and their lives overseas upon return posed major difficulties. In their home place in Vietnam, they had to confront often complicated relationships with relatives and neighbors, many of whom would make comments about their “abnormal marriage” (*hôn nhân không bình thường*). Thus, they had to think carefully before reconnecting and returning to their hometowns.

The frequency of their contact with and visits to their family in Vietnam depended largely on their own conditions and circumstances. Sister Lý said that in the beginning she avoided contact because she wanted to deal with the uncertainties and challenges of being a newcomer by herself: “I missed my hometown and my family so much but I tried not to make any contact. I waited until my situation improved and I was more settled. It was difficult to keep my worries from my family, who would be concerned if they heard that I was not doing well.” As had sister Lý, the other women only resumed active communications with their families once their lives in Wanwei were stabilized, especially with the birth of their children. They also made sure that their in-laws were aware of their emotional connection to their own families and recognized the latter’s significance; as sister Tân said: “I want my husband and his family to know that I have my own family in Vietnam. By doing so, they would gradually know about my family and teach our children about them.” Maintaining contacts with their own families, however, is a challenge for them because they do not have the household registration and marriage licenses that are necessary for obtaining passports for passing through the border. The only way to do so is by “sneaking” into Vietnam by sea or across the river. All the women are used to cross-border traveling and they did not see it as a problem; instead, as sister Hồng said, “it is good enough that we have a way to go back to Vietnam.”

The visits to their native place are emotionally meaningful to them, but whether they can visit their hometown depends largely on the economic conditions and familial arrangements in Wanwei. Those with relatively good economic conditions and whose children are already grown up could return to Vietnam more often. Those with poorer families or with small kids and those who were burdened with housework had less opportunity to travel to Vietnam. For the women like sister Lý and sister Hà, who either were trafficked into the village or had wandered many places for years without

any contact with their parental family, the first homecoming visit was a major event for the family and for themselves. When sister Lý was trafficked to Wanwei, her family thought that she went looking for a job somewhere. Only one year later could she send a message to her parents to inform them that she was alive, and only six years after the day she disappeared did she have an opportunity to return to her hometown. Sister Hà had also been wandering from place to place, in her case since the age of fourteen. She had moved from her hometown to Hải Phòng and crossed the border to Hong Kong. Since then, she had lived in different places in China before arriving in Wanwei. It took her three years to be able to contact her family and return to her native village. The Vietnamese women's stories about the first homecoming after marrying Chinese men were always full of tears shed for themselves and their families.

When meeting family in Vietnam, the women seek to meet the expectations of their relatives and neighbors. In Vietnamese villages, people who leave the village to move to faraway places are often expected to be successful, and when they return they should present such success to their families and fellow villagers. The economic success of the migrant is a matter of familial pride (Ngô 2014; Nguyễn 2012; Phan 1998). Being born and growing up in the countryside where they had absorbed the village culture since very young, these women well understood this mentality and thereby made efforts to fulfill it. Thus, every time they return, they pay careful attention to matters of self-presentation and appearance.

Given their relatively low income, the expenses for each trip home are difficult to bear. Sister Lý told me:

Each time I return to my hometown, I have to spend quite a lot of money because, in fact, I cannot go home very often. Therefore, besides the money I give my parents, I have to prepare gifts for my younger siblings, my nieces, nephews, and other relatives. When I am back, I need to visit places and meet up with my friends. All that costs a lot of money. Every time I return to Wanwei, I have to work harder to earn money and save up for my next trip.

Although their families in Vietnam do not explicitly ask them for money, they often said, "as children who live so far away from our parents, we should give them some money to make them happy. We also should thank our siblings, nieces, and nephews for helping us take care of our parents in our absence." Before the trips home, these women all carefully tended to their

appearance as they wanted to present themselves with a “not-too-bad” image in front of their families and neighbors. Sister Lý told me: “I bought new clothes and had a new haircut so I would look tidy. I wanted everything well prepared so that my parents would not be ashamed of me.” Mentally, all of them put up a happy front when going home; they neither mentioned unhappy issues nor complained about their hardships. When their families enquired, some women would even present their lives in China in a better light than they actually were and tried to hide their hardship. They carefully considered what should and should not be told to their families. All wanted to talk about happy things, especially those related to their children.

The careful preparations for each homecoming trip are also meant to sustain the prestige of their parental families. The presentation of themselves as people having a good or at least a not-too-bad life is partly to secure their pride in front of other villagers, or to prevent neighbors from spreading maligning gossip. More importantly, they did these things for the sake of their families, who had been the target of the community’s attention because of their departure. Sister Lý told me about her first return home after her marriage:

My mother was overjoyed for about two or three days. After that, she asked me to buy gifts and visit my relatives and neighbors. She wanted to brag to everyone that her daughter had now settled down and could return home and that her daughter was neither missing nor had followed a man as people had always gossiped. I tried to dress decently, combed my hair tidy, and accompanied her to visit my relatives and neighbors. We smiled and laughed a lot when meeting other people and did not mention any of the hardships I had in Wanwei.

The lavishing of money and gifts on their return to their hometowns, which does not seem to match their frugal lives in Wanwei, thus is part of well-thought-out strategies to maintain connection to their own family and homeplace as spaces of value and meaning creation for their lives.

The presentation of a happy life overseas and the simultaneous glossing over of the precariousness and hardships that they experience as migrants has been observed in the migration literature (see, e.g., Thai 2008, 2014). These homecoming practices show that these cross-border migrants are driven by enduring expectations and desires for belonging and recognition.

Conclusion

The Vietnamese women of Wanwei, in their translocal situation between Vietnam and China, live their lives in constant negotiations with the difficulties and gendered expectations that are generated by the patriarchal structures and relations existing on both sides of the border. As poor rural women with limited education in Vietnam, they are marginalized by processes that work together with these structures to relegate them to the place of the unwanted and undesirable female, as women past the marriageable age or having unfortunate personal relationships. When starting their new life in China, they were confronted with the gendered demands of another patriarchal order, one that reluctantly accepts them to address its unmet household reproduction needs. In this trying situation, the women manage to carve out certain spaces of self-determination and self-worth by deploying various strategies and coping mechanisms.

Besides their efforts to fulfill their responsibilities as wives and mothers in response to gender demands in their new families, they also try to find ways to improve their social and economic status by claiming some space for their independent economic and social activities in the communities. Their narratives of successful and happy lives in the face of all their hardships, deprivation, and personal sorrows is, rather than self-deception, an act of self-determination with which they set the terms of their lives. This aligns with the stories they tell their husbands and children about the improved life of their relatives in Vietnam and their longing for a family reunion that leave out their worries about saving money and making arrangements for the trips home as well as their concern about how to fulfill the filial piety to their parents. These narratives are part of their strategy to negotiate the patriarchal expectations on both sides of the border.

The stories of migrant women in Wanwei mentioned here resonate with the findings of scholars on cross-border marriages worldwide (Su, this volume; Wang 2007; Hoang 2011). The migrant brides try to comply with the social and cultural norms in the new society in order to adapt, but concurrently they seek to assert their status and to have independence in decision-making. This patriarchal bargain thus allows them a certain level of self-determination and recognition within the confines of patriarchy at the same time as it reproduces the confines across the border (Kandiyoti 1988; Santos and Harrell 2017).

Notes

- 1 Phuong Anh, “Every Year, Vietnam Has about 18,000 Citizens Marrying Foreigners,” *Dân Sinh* newspaper [belonging to the Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs], 6 March 2020.
- 2 *Dì* is a kinship term used to refer to a mother’s younger sister or cousin. It is important to note that in Vietnamese culture, people tend to address other relatives from their children’s position. In my case, these women consider me their younger sister, but they do not call me *em* and instead call me *dì*, which is the way their children would address me.
- 3 In Vietnamese traditional village culture, women were most afraid of having “notoriety,” being “laughed at by outsiders,” and being criticized for “having bad behavior so that no one wants to marry them.” These fears would affect both the women personally and their families as well by making them feel ashamed to the extent that they “did not dare to look up” or “could not find any place to hide.” This put village women under heavy pressure.
- 4 The peanut worm lives under the sand; it is ivory in color and has an average length of 10 cm. Peanut worms are a specialty of this sea region with a high economic value, i.e., 1 kilo of dried peanut worms has a price of 200 to 300 yuan.

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6

Sexuality, Masculinity, and Transnational Migration: The Case of Male Vietnamese Returnees from Japan

AN HUY TRAN

IN THE PAST, RETURN MIGRATION used to be overlooked due to the dominant focus on emigration and immigration, the lack of quantifying data, and the complexities of how and when migrants return (Oxfeld and Long 2017). Alongside the transnational turn in migration studies in the past few decades, the phenomenon of return has started to receive more academic attention and has been rendered part of transnational migration, in which migrants' continuous engagements with communities back home help strategize their eventual return (Carling and Erdal 2014; Cassarino 2004). Despite more inclusive conceptual developments and richer empirical observations on return migration, some aspects of return have not received equal attention. In particular, most scholarship has been centering around the discourses of brain drain, brain gain, and brain circulation, as well as the different effects of migrants' remittances and return movements (Dustmann, Fadlon, and Weiss 2011). Whereas migrating to a new country can have different meanings for migrants' sexual and gender practices and identities (Ang 2019; Carrillo 2017; Hibbins 2005; Hoang and Yeoh 2015), how return migration affects such facets in migrants' lives is less often mentioned. Additionally, unlike the proliferation of research on female migrants' sexual and gender experiences in Asian contexts within the past three decades, studies on such facets in the

journeys of men who migrate within Asia are still lagging (Baas and Yang 2020; Fresnoza-Flot 2022).

This chapter contributes to the study of return migration by looking into the experiences of male Vietnamese migrants who return home from Japan and their reconfigured social, sexual, and gender statuses. Since the beginning of the 2010s, the number of Vietnamese migrants residing in Japan has been rapidly increasing as a result of the growing official short-term migration channels to Japan (Bélanger and Wang 2013), the active involvement of migration brokers (Liu-Farrer and Tran 2019), and the lower migration cost compared to migrating to Europe or the United States. From 2012 to 2020, the Vietnamese population grew more than eight times to become one of the most visible groups of foreigners in the country (Immigration Service Agency of Japan 2023). Close to 60 percent of this group are migrant men who mainly migrate as technical intern trainees,¹ student migrants who enroll at Japanese language schools, vocational colleges, or universities, and high-skill laborers who commonly work in Japanese IT or trading sectors. As of 2023, Vietnamese accounted for the second-biggest group of foreign residents, the largest population of foreign workers, and the third-biggest group of international students in Japan (Immigration Service Agency of Japan 2023; Ministry of Justice 2023). Given the significant number of Vietnamese migrants in Japan, it is important to look at the return experiences of these individuals as most of them are legally obliged to return after a few years or plan to return to Vietnam, depending on their visa category.

This chapter draws on life-history interviews with 52 male-identifying Vietnamese migrants in Japan and 18 returned migrants who used to live in Japan to explore their perceptions and reflections through the life course (Plummer 2001). Among these 70 migrant men, 23 self-identified as non-heterosexuals (bisexual or homosexual), while the rest (47) identified as heterosexuals. Their ages range from twenty to seventy-two years old (the average age of research participants in Japan was twenty-seven, and thirty-four in Vietnam). For those who permanently returned to Vietnam, their stays in Japan lasted from three to seventeen years, and the majority of them resided in Hà Nội (8) and Hồ Chí Minh City (8). Two returnees were living in the central area of Vietnam (Đắk Lắk and Đà Nẵng) at the time of the interview. In Japan, the geographical locations of the participants were also scattered, although a large number of them resided in large Japanese cities such as Tokyo and Osaka. Research participants' occupations vary from

students studying in Japanese language schools to postdoctoral researchers, from technical trainees working on construction sites or in butcher shops to high-skilled workers or company managers. In addition, ethnographic observations were conducted both offline and online in Japan and Vietnam to better understand how returnees' gender and sexual practices, subjectivities, and identities are performed and reconfigured during and after migration.

The chapter illustrates how male migrants experience an elevation of social, sexual, and gender statuses upon returning to Vietnam from Japan thanks to the positive meanings that transnational migration conveys. Specifically, migrating to Japan, being able to endure the hardship of migration, and accumulating different kinds of capital abroad symbolize a rite of passage leading to mature and capable manhood. Through migration to Japan, male migrants meet the Vietnamese gendered expectation of a "true man" and subsequently improve their social, masculine, and sexual statuses upon returning to Vietnam. The analysis is unfolded in three parts of the chapter. First, a systematic review of existing scholarly works on return migration is provided. Second, the chapter examines the social, sexual, and gender statuses of male Vietnamese migrants upon returning to Vietnam from Japan through engagement with a theoretical framework of return migration. It then discusses returnees' post-return transformation and subsequently the social meanings ascribed to return migration in a reconfiguring Vietnam.

The Constructed Meanings of Return Migration

While return migration has always been happening, it was only in the 1980s that research on this phenomenon started to flourish (Cassarino 2004). In one of the earliest extensive studies on return migration, Gmelch (1980:136) defined this pattern as "the movement of emigrants back to their homelands to resettle" and observed that most typologies of return migration had been categorized based on two variables: migrants' intended length of staying abroad and their reasons for return. In past decades, scholars have added other variables that significantly affect migrants' plans, time, and means of return migration such as the temporal dimension (short-term, long-term visits), the preparation processes (Carling, Mortensen, and Wu 2011), or the

consistent contacts with communities in the country of origin (Carling and Erdal 2014). In addition to these variables, the definition of return migration also changed. For example, Oxfeld and Long (2017:4) perceived return as ranging “from short visits to permanent repatriation, spatially from one’s original place of origin to a reconstructed homeland (a particular site in the home country where one has never actually lived), and legally from voluntary to coerced movements.” Resonating with such a definition, this chapter conceptualizes return migration as the voluntary and involuntary movement(s) of migrants from the migration destination to the origin country for either permanent settlement or short-term, temporary visits. Furthermore, it sees return migration not as the finale of the migration project but rather as a process involving complex interactions and transformations that take place over time and within transnational social spaces.

Alongside the attempts to adequately define return migration, theoretical frameworks for studying this mobility pattern also increased (Waldinger 2008). Many of these theories (see Cassarino 2004) see return as the end of the migration cycle resulting from failing to reap the expected benefits of migration (neoclassical economics), from having achieved the migration goals (the new economics of labor migration), or from the influences of social and institutional factors in the origin countries (structural approach). Contemplating return as a part of the continuous process of cross-border migration, the transnationalism approach and social network theory highlight the connections between migrants and individuals and communities at home, through which migrants constitute transnational identities, become aware of social situations at home, and constitute their interests and strategies for return (Carling and Erdal 2014; Cassarino 2004; Nowicka 2014). However, theoretical difficulties in studying return migration remain due to the lack of satisfactory theoretical approaches and frameworks, the assumption that migrants are flexible actors whose practices and identities change within fixed and unchanged states, societies, and institutions, and especially the overconcentration on a limited number of research topics (Batistella 2018; Chan and Tran 2011; Hagan and Wassink 2020).

In particular, the common themes in the studies of return migration can be summed up in three broad categories: the decision-making process of migrants regarding return or its possibility, the (re)integration and post-return experiences of returnees, and state policies and programs that manage return migration flows (Batistella 2018; Carling, Mortenson, and

Wu 2011; Hagan and Wassink 2020). These studies inquired into migrants' acquisition of capital abroad, how such capital is mobilized to either achieve economic and labor market mobility or contribute to the social and economic developments in the home countries, and how state policies, legal systems, and (trans)national institutions influence the processes of return and post-return (re)integration. Such focuses risk overlooking aspects such as the sexual or gender dimensions, which play an equally important role in contouring the experiences and meanings of return. Although some feminist studies have pointed to the structural changes in gender roles, ideologies, practices, and hierarchies induced by return migration (Christou 2006; Sakka, Dikaïou, and Kiosseoglou 1999; Hoang and Yeoh 2011; Parreñas 2010; Yeoh and Ramdas 2014), more could be done to link these changes to how return is perceived in the return society where social reconfigurations constantly occur. Moreover, the sexual aspect of return migration has rarely been addressed since studies have mostly focused on how sexualities drive outward migration and how migrants' sexualities are transformed or contested in the destination countries (Cantú, Naples, and Vidal-Ortiz 2009; Carrillo 2017; Gorman-Murray 2007; Hoang and Yeoh 2015; Luibhéid 2008). A focus on the gender and sexual aspects of return migration, thus, is needed to provide a fuller picture of migrants' post-return experiences. Such an inquiry is especially necessary among male returned migrants because less has been known about male returnees' sexual and gender identities in comparison to such aspects in females' return migration (Baas and Yang 2020).

Post-Return and the Transformation of Statuses

This chapter sees the return of migrant men from Japan to Vietnam as an event through which transformations at the personal level are made visible and concrete. It ventures from Hagan and Wassink's framework of return migration (2020), which considers four factors in the return process: (1) the accumulation of resources, (2) migrants' readiness for return, (3) institutional contexts in both sending and receiving states, and (4) the opportunities to mobilize resources in the return context. In addition, the chapter adds the dimension of transformation to the analysis to account for the reconfigurations in migrants' statuses and identities and the institutional changes

and social transformations that affect the trajectory and experiences of return. One of the first venture points from which to study post-return experiences is the extent to which migrants are willing and prepared to return (Cassarino 2004).

Motivation and the readiness for return

A high level of readiness for return is observed among the Vietnamese migrant men and former migrant men in this chapter. Although their desired length of stay in Japan varies, 63 of the 70 research participants have either planned or made the return trip. These men talk about the longing for “home” and the importance of family as the main elements that motivate their return. In particular, the lack of belonging in Japan is one of the typical reasons that drive the return motivation. This is a usual problem among foreign residents in Japan, where most foreigners are expected to stay only temporarily (Liu-Farrer 2020). At the same time, many longed for the relaxing living environment and vibrant social activities back in Vietnam, which stand in contrast to the more rigid, rule-obedient lifestyles in Japan.

Moreover, strong senses of familism and nationalism also encourage many men to return home. All of the research participants are first-generation and relatively young migrants for whom the presence of family members at home and the prospect of building and raising a family in Vietnam act as strong pull factors for return. Until now, the Confucianist value of familism that expects sons to take care of parents and to continue the family’s lineage remains relevant in modern Vietnam (Horton and Rydstrom 2011, 2019; Nguyen 2018; Rydstrom 2006, 2022), which the men featured in this chapter commonly used to justify their returns. Studies on masculinities in Vietnam have observed that a crucial masculine norm among Vietnamese men is the performance of the “family’s pillar” (*trụ cột gia đình*) role (ISDS 2020; Horton and Rydstrom 2011). A family’s pillar should provide a sufficient and good life to his wife and offspring, pay filial piety to his parents, and take care of other family members, sometimes even extended ones (ISDS 2020). Thus, the motivation to return to Vietnam among the Vietnamese migrant men in Japan is heavily shaped by this dominant masculine discourse.

Nationalism is another motivation that commonly prompts return. Unlike more established immigration countries, Japan does not allow dual citizenship

and, therefore, requires the renouncement of the former nationality when an individual naturalizes. Most participants saw such a situation as going against their devotion to the homeland. Moreover, several mentioned the wish to contribute to the development of the homeland as another reason to return. For example, Tung—a doctoral researcher in southern Japan—said that because he had “Vietnamese blood running in the veins,” he felt the need to return and use the resources that he had gathered in Japan to help Vietnam’s societal and economic developments. Such a narrative suggests a strong gendered guide in migrant men’s decision to return, namely, the masculine discourse of having a stake in the interest and building of the nation. Similarly, Phan, a former technical intern trainee, stated in his autobiography about his three-year migration journey in Japan that he refused to stay longer in Japan when his trainee contract ended. One reason for such a decision was the urge to contribute, as he wrote: “While there is no shared road for us [migrants] who return to the homeland, we meet at one common point—bringing good things from Japan back to our families, communities and contributing to our society” (Phan 2020:173). The “good things” that Phan mentioned here include both material resources such as economic capital and immaterial resources such as Japanese language skills, know-how, and potential networks and connections. Migration to Japan is, therefore, a process of accumulating necessary resources, and return takes place after migrants have successfully gathered these resources (Cassarino 2004). As a result, most men in this study only felt “ready” and willing to return to Vietnam after having accumulated sufficient financial, cultural, and social capital in Japan.

Post-return transformation of statuses

While looking at migrants’ resources and their willingness and readiness to return can provide insights into migrants’ post-return experiences, the validity of return migration becomes visible in their post-return transformation of socioeconomic status and interpersonal relationships (Castles 2010; Chan and Tran 2011; Christou 2006; Vertovec 2004). Taking such a transformation as one of the central analytical categories would, thus, allow the analysis of the social meaning(s) of transnational migration for migrants and their identities. The story of Phan, the aforementioned former technical

trainee who now resides in Hà Nội, is a good example. Born into a working-class family in central Vietnam, Phan moved to Hà Nội for his bachelor's degree before migrating to Hồ Chí Minh City to become a businessman. Phan's business did not go well, to the point that he had to look for financial support from his parents. Feeling disappointed, Phan wanted to go abroad as a laborer (*đi xuất khẩu lao động*) to "run away" from his failure. With the help of a migration agency, Phan migrated to Japan as a technical trainee intern in 2017 and worked for a construction company near Tokyo. Although Phan's job was harsh and labor intensive as he worked mostly outdoors, he kept a very positive mindset and turned his experiences into short stories that he then published on a social media account. After three years, Phan decided to return to Vietnam. At that time, Phan had accumulated enough money not only to pay back the loan that he had borrowed to migrate to Japan but also to have sufficient savings for "a new start at home (Vietnam)." Upon return, Phan worked as a managing director for a Japanese language agency that provides language courses for prospective migrants in Hà Nội. He also published an autobiography titled *I Went to Japan (Tôi đi Nhật)*, in which he wrote about his experiences of migrating to and working in Japan. The book's cover features a portrait of Phan originally taken at a construction site where he used to work in Japan. However, his working jacket and helmet were photoshopped to have typical pictures of Japan such as cherry blossoms and Mount Fuji. Next to the picture was a caption written in Japanese that translates into "I will try no matter how hard. The Japanese language is difficult yet interesting." To Phan's surprise, the book was well received among not only the Vietnamese migrant community in Japan but also people in Vietnam who are curious about the migrant life in Japan. It was even featured in a few local newspapers and on television stations in Vietnam.

Phan's book and experiences suggest the different kinds of transformation that return migration can have on a returnee's social status. On his book's cover, Phan's body transformed from the body of a construction worker in Japan into one of a successful role model migrant who overcame the challenges of migration. Phan was also aware of his transformation between the periods before, during, and after migration. Before going to Japan, Phan considered himself to be a failed businessman who "drained the family's money with unsuccessful businesses." Migrating to Japan was an escape for him as he looked for both a change in life and another way to earn money.

After his three-year stay in Japan, Phan was able to fulfill his former wish of becoming an entrepreneur by having an occupation as a managing director of a Japanese language agency in Vietnam. When Phan posted pictures of delivering a speech at the agency's grand opening on social media, many friends and acquaintances congratulated him and commented on how he looked like a successful businessman. In other words, Phan's social status was positively transformed and elevated upon his return from Japan. This elevation of status is made possible because of not only Phan's accumulated resources but also a favorable view toward returnees from abroad in Vietnamese society. This view stems from state-endorsed policies that encourage overseas Vietnamese to contribute to homeland development and give way to media glorification of this group (Chan and Tran 2011; Long 2017). In addition, there has been a common perception among local Vietnamese that associates diasporic Vietnamese people or people who come back from abroad (especially from developed countries) with wealth and modernity (Long 2017; Wang 2013). Such a perception also enables the conversion of returnees' financial and symbolic capital into social status in modern Vietnamese society, where pecuniary strength can easily promise higher social status (Thai 2008, 2014). All of these factors, thus, allow Phan to gain a positive social status through his image as a successful returnee.

The post-return transformation of social status also leads to reconfigurations in returnees' sexual status. Thai, in his 2008 work on transnational marriages, describes how low-income Vietnamese American men experience a drastic shift in their marriageability as they return from the United States to Vietnam. Although considered undesirable marriage partners for either white females or Vietnamese females in the United States, these men are seen as highly marriageable by local women in Vietnam due to their status as people coming back from abroad. Male returnees from Japan also noticed such an improvement in their sexual desirability. Being physically in Vietnam means they do not have to negotiate the possible linguistic and cultural barriers and, therefore, can have easier access to sexual encounters or relationships. More importantly, returned migrants' foreign credentials and experiences of living and working or studying abroad can help project the image of progressive and competent individuals, which can convey sexual attractiveness in the Vietnamese context. For instance, An, a thirty-two-year-old office worker in Tokyo, recalled: "When I went back to Vietnam, a lot of women would come to me. People in Vietnam have certain expectations

toward people coming back from abroad. ... And it was not difficult (for me) to find dates.” This situation differs greatly from the sexual experiences of many Vietnamese men in Japan, as several had difficulties cultivating intimate relationships with either Japanese locals or other Vietnamese migrants. Such a circumstance is the result of the Japanese hierarchy of sexual desirability that does not favor Asian foreigners (Baudinette 2016; Kudo 2009, 2016; Quero 2014) as well as the disproportion between the numbers of Vietnamese males and females in Japan.

Many nonheterosexual migrant men in this study also relayed similar occurrences during their short-term visits or after they had permanently returned. Many even found it easier to engage with their sexuality as sexual minorities in Vietnam than in Japan (Tran 2022). Tai, a gay-identifying interpreter in Hồ Chí Minh City who had lived in Japan for seventeen years, recalled how surprised he was when opening a gay online dating application when he returned to Vietnam: “I saw, wow, plenty of *thính* (bait) on the application when I opened it...[a]nd I received many flirtations.” He juxtaposed such an observation with his limited sexual experiences and hesitation to reveal his sexual identity in Japan, where acts and performances of heterosexuality are still expected in most social spaces (Dasgupta 2017; Kawasaka 2018). While being skeptical of such increased sexual desirability because he could not tell whether people were interested in him because of his characteristics and appearance or because of his label as a person coming back from abroad, Tai also enjoyed the new configurations in his sexual status and subsequently felt more liberated.

Male migrants’ gender status goes through a similar positive transformation upon their return to Vietnam. For many migrant men in this study, migration to Japan can be considered a rite of passage to mature manhood. Most of them migrated to Japan in their early twenties, and it was during their stay in Japan that these men gathered different kinds of resources such as language and cultural competencies, financial savings, and working experiences to construct their masculine identity. The Vietnamese version of hegemonic masculinity centers around four main domains: career, capability and personality, sexuality, and family duties (ISDS 2020; Khuat, Le, and Nguyen 2010; Nguyen 2018; Martin 2010, 2018; Rydstrom 2020). According to this discourse, a “true man” in modern Vietnamese society requires a successful career, a healthy body, and a wide social network. He also has to express decisive, confident, and strong mannerisms, dare to take

risks and be challenged, and does not show weakness, whether physical or mental. Furthermore, a “true man” would possess strong sexual ability and rich sexual experiences. Last but not least, he has to successfully realize the aforementioned gender role of the “family’s pillar.” As a result, migration to Japan is part of the process in which male Vietnamese migrants can transform from inexperienced young individuals into capable, independent, and grown-up “true men.”

For instance, Tung, the aforementioned doctoral researcher, shared that migrating to Japan had changed him as a man in a dramatic way. On top of studying, Tung also worked two part-time jobs to support his Vietnamese wife and his newborn son and send remittances to his parents at home. Although he did not share stories about such hardship with family members in Vietnam, Tung could sense that they had greater respect for his opinions because of not only his financial contribution to the household through remittances but also his pursuit of a doctoral degree abroad, which allow him to be seen as a capable and responsible man. Furthermore, there is a firm belief in Vietnam that a man’s financial status can mirror his level of masculinity (An, Waling, and Bourne 2022; Hoang 2014, 2015; Martin 2018; Nguyen 2018). The financial resources the migrants accumulate in Japan and remit to Vietnam, therefore, can be another catalyst for improved masculinity or upward mobility in their gender status. As a result, Tung felt “two hundred percent manlier” after his stay in Japan. Comparable accounts can also be found in the life histories of other male Vietnamese migrant men in Japan (regardless of their sexual identity), which indicate that their masculine identity in the return context can potentially be boosted by migration.

The Social Meanings of Return Migration in a Reconfiguring Vietnam

This chapter has shown that male migrants to Japan can have access to elevated social, sexual, and masculine statuses upon their return to Vietnam. Return migration, therefore, marks the event in which the men prove, show, and perform their accumulated resources to enjoy positive transformations in terms of social status, sexual desirability, and masculine identity. However, return migration can be a double-edged sword. One of the downsides is the social expectations on return that they have to negotiate. Thai (2014)

observes that the social anticipations of returnees' financial ability can significantly shape the social behaviors and relationships between returnees and local Vietnamese people. Because of the common assumption of returnees' high financial, cultural, and social resources, they are often subjected to the pressure of meeting these anticipations (see also the chapter by Nguyen Thi Phuong Cham in this volume for the same expectations toward female returnees from China despite their low class and social positions abroad). Phan, the former technical intern trainee, describes in his autobiography how newly returned migrants from Japan (including himself) often have to "buy new motorbikes, dress up nicely, or hold feasts to celebrate the reunion with friends after a long period abroad" to live up to the local expectations (2020:189). Other men also felt that they had to perform the status of the returnee by buying gifts for people at home, engaging in lavish consumption, or finding well-paid jobs. While the status as a returned migrant from Japan can facilitate interpersonal relationships, some felt that this status hindered sincere social interactions and intimate relationships. For example, Tai, the interpreter in Hồ Chí Minh City, said he did not know whether people were honestly interested in him or instead in his material resources and foreign background.

Studies have shown that migration can provide resources for returnees, especially female returnees, to confront and challenge traditional gender roles, norms, and expectations (Hoang and Yeoh 2011; Sakka, Dikaïou, and Kiosseoglou 1999; see also the chapters by Nguyen and Su in this volume). However, reconfigurations in gender perceptions, practices, and identities can be only temporary (Bell and Domecka 2018; Pande 2017). Similarly, this chapter argues that although Vietnamese migrant men's social, gender, and sexual statuses can be elevated upon their return, such a positive transformation might not be permanent. Rather, their improved social, gender, and sexual statuses can attrite after a period following the return. A key problem in debates about migration is the tendency to see migration as being distinct from broader social relationships and changes (Castles 2010). While returnees actively adjust their social behaviors, aspirations, and expectations to their social milieus, the social environment in which they operate is also constantly changing. Social contexts and realities in the return society, hence, should be taken into consideration when analyzing how the return trajectory unfolds (Batistella 2018). In the past three decades, the populations of middle-class and upper-middle-class in Vietnam have been increasing rapidly

because of the country's economic development (Hansen 2022; Nguyen-Marshall, Drummond, and Bélanger 2012). Consequently, returnees' accumulated economic resources from abroad might not deliver such impressive effects as in the past. In addition, as there has been a growing number of Vietnamese going abroad to work or study, the social meanings of return migration are also shifting. Tai, the interpreter in Hồ Chí Minh City who spent seventeen years in Japan, shared how he saw the label "returnee from Japan" had changed its meaning over time. When Tai visited home in the 2000s and early 2010s, he noticed that being a returnee from Japan drew more curiosity, admiration, and subsequently respect from local people in Vietnam. However, from the mid and late 2010s, he felt that the same label had not generated as much commendation as before due to the growing waves of Vietnamese migrants going to Japan. Coming back from Japan, therefore, "was not something too special." Tai thought that people coming back from Western countries might be held in higher regard, as migrating to these countries normally costs more than going to Japan. In short, the social meaning of being a returnee in Vietnam nowadays is locally specific and dependent on the globally constructed hierarchy of the host countries from which migrants return.

Despite elevated social, sexual, and masculine statuses, not all men are content after returning. Besides common discontent regarding air pollution, chaotic traffic, and the manners of people in Vietnam, bigger problems also emerge. Phan realized that it is not easy for returned migrants from Japan to find suitable jobs in Vietnam, especially those who were technical intern trainees, as they might not be able to compete with local Vietnamese or returnees from Western countries in the local job market. Consequently, they might not be able to live up to the social expectations of the successful and well-articulated returnee. Discontentment also came from the mismatch between the expectation and the reality of return. Returnees can encounter multiple differences not only between their post-migration selves and the communities back home but also between their expectations of return and the reality of return. For example, research on diasporic Vietnamese mentioned the uneasy feelings often faced by returnees, especially those who fled the country after 1975, due to the gap between the social and political expectations and realities (Long 2017; Oxfeld and Long 2017; Wang 2013). Since any social context is constantly reconfiguring, the returned migrants in this study also reported a gap between their imaginations of return and

the post-return realities. Dao—a gay IT engineer in his early thirties living in Hà Nội—initially returned partly because of recent developments in LGBTQ movements in Vietnam, which have reached several milestones in the past few years thanks to constant social advocacies, resulting in more open public attitudes toward sexual minorities (Horton and Rydstrom 2022). For nonheterosexual men who had emigrated to avoid homophobic and heterosexist sentiments in the past, such changes altered their perceptions of a sexually oppressive Vietnamese society (Tran 2022). As a result, Dao decided to return after more than four years of studying in Japan, hoping to have more freedom in terms of pursuing a gay lifestyle in Vietnam. However, Dao realized within one year of return that institutional barriers and homophobic sentiments still linger, hindering the gay lifestyle that he had expected. Dao longed to go back to Japan and thought of applying for a graduate program in Tokyo, where “nobody cares about other people.” Dao’s return is an unsatisfactory experience, in which the discrepancy between his expectation of his lifestyle upon return and the reality made him contemplate the possibility of migrating again.

Conclusion

The increasing diversification of contemporary migration patterns and trajectories has necessitated the conceptualization of how return migration unfolds. This chapter shows that the outlook of elevated social, gender, and sexual statuses upon return to Vietnam from Japan can be a lodestar that motivates Vietnamese migrant men to return. As such, it deviates from the framing of transnational migration as being merely economically oriented and responds to the call for more studies on Asian male migrants’ sexualities and masculinities (Baas and Yang 2020). Because migration to Japan is commonly seen as a rite of passage through which migrant men transform from inexperienced young men into capable and well-articulated matured men by overcoming the difficulties of migration and accumulating different kinds of capital, return migration is an occasion to showcase such transformation and to subsequently access upward mobility in terms of social, gender, and masculine status. Transnational migration thus is a pathway that allows men, especially those from the lower social classes, to negotiate their social

and gender positions in Vietnamese society over which patriarchy and materiality exercise considerable influence.

The chapter also calls for the adoption of a temporal perspective when studying return migration. It reveals how the meanings of return migration can alter over time and are shaped by multilevel factors within specific institutional, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts. Contextual changes in the returning society should be taken into account to dispense with the common assumption that migrants' identities and behaviors are fluid while states and societies are not (Chan and Tran 2011). As shown in the chapter, migrants' motivation, expectations, and experiences of return are largely conditioned by constant social reconfigurations and new developments in the home country, which also alter the meanings of return migration in Vietnam today. Moreover, with the growing culture of migration in Vietnam, the meanings of return are also determined by the countries from which migrants return. The social expectations toward the returnees have also been shifting, changing the kinds of pressure that returned migrants have to face and the discrepancies between the expectation and reality of return. Return migration in a reconfiguring Vietnam, therefore, needs to be not only examined through migrants' actual post-return social, economic, employment, sexual, and gender statuses but also analyzed in conjunction with the country's shifting social, economic, and political landscapes.

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Notes

- 1 Technical intern trainees are de-facto low-skilled laborers recruited to go to Japan under the scheme of the Technical Intern Training Program, which has been regarded as a side door for cheap labor importation. Foreign trainees who take part in this three-to-five-year program mostly work in industries that require hard manual labor such as agriculture, fisheries, or construction. In 2023, Vietnamese made up the largest group of technical trainees in Japan, with 185,563 registered individuals (Immigration Service Agency of Japan 2023).

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*More than “Leftover Water”:
Vietnamese Brides and the Shifting Obligations
of Transnational Families*

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SINCE THE 1990S, THE TOPIC of marriage and family in Asia has received widespread attention due to the increased formation of transnational families across the region. Much of the interest has centered on the cross-border movements of women from poorer countries, such as Vietnam, who marry low-income men in wealthier countries struggling with fertility decline, such as South Korea and Taiwan (Kim 2012; Wang and Chang 2002). With technological advancements, previous barriers to transnational connections have lessened as matchmaking sites proliferate with “viewing” tours that enable men to travel to Vietnam and meet single women. These tours, averaging between US\$10,000 and 13,000, allow matchmaking agencies to circumvent existing laws in Vietnam that prohibit matchmaking for profit¹ (Bélangier and Wang 2013; Jones and Shen 2003; Kawaguchi and Lee 2012). Through weeklong tours to Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC hereafter) or Hà Nội that include accommodation and transportation, wedding arrangements, and preparation of application materials for marriage registrations and visas, matchmaking agencies help expedite the legalization of marriages between Vietnamese citizens and foreign nationals.

As cross-border marriages involving Vietnamese grow, so does research on transnational families (Constable 2003; Hoang and Yeoh 2011; Kim 2018; Piper and Roces 2003). Existing scholarship finds that globalization and migration may reinsert women and men into categories of the female caretaker

and the male provider (Hartman 1979; Kim 2012). Others, however, contend that migrants do not readily absorb all aspects of normative gender roles (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Wang 2007). This chapter investigates how Vietnamese migrant women negotiate demands from their natal families in Vietnam and nuclear families in South Korea and Taiwan. Building on existing studies that recognize the entanglements of gendered expectations in transnational families, I elucidate how migrant women come to accept certain aspects of familial obligations and discard others. The women in the study, many of whom come from poor, rural backgrounds and have little education, similar to Nguyen's study respondents (chapter 5, this volume), illuminate how migration grants women more space to maneuver between accepting and rejecting the social demands placed on them as wives and mothers. Compared to the male Vietnamese migrants in Tran's study (chapter 6, this volume), who undergo varying degrees of loss and gain in status through their migration and return, I contend that women must exercise greater effort to deploy the knowledge and skills they have acquired from abroad to access new professional opportunities in Vietnam. This difference demonstrates how gender shapes individual experiences and reminds us of the divergence between men's and women's experiences of migration and return.

This chapter draws on fifty-eight interviews with migrant Vietnamese women, twelve interviews with their family members in Vietnam, and nineteen months of multisited ethnographic fieldwork between June 2014 and August 2018 in South Korea (Gyeonggi-do Province), Taiwan (Taichung), and Vietnam (HCMC and the Mekong Delta region). My fieldwork began in the Mekong Delta region in southern Vietnam, home to major communities that send women overseas as brides (General Statistics Office 2016), where I connected with family members who introduced me to migrant brides in South Korea and Taiwan. In South Korea, I conducted ethnography and interviews at two multicultural centers outside Seoul that catered to migrants. I also gained access to two sites that were popular with overseas Vietnamese near Taichung, Taiwan: a Buddhist temple and a Vietnamese restaurant. I transcribed, translated, and anonymized field notes and interviews in their entirety after each day of fieldwork. I paired ethnography and interviews with data from migration policies, reports on family, marriage, and economic development, and citizenship laws in South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam to provide a comprehensive picture of the legislative and economic terrain of migration.

Women's transnational lives can reveal the meanings and compromises they make as they simultaneously perform the roles of daughters and sisters to their natal families in their home countries and as mothers and wives to their nuclear families overseas. Like the Thinh Tri girls and boys in Rydstrom's study of morality and processes of socialization, the practices of the migrant women in this chapter exemplify how individuals "produce, reproduce, and transform the discourses that permeate and frame the world in which they are growing up" (2003:159). In what follows, I offer key snapshots into women's negotiation of differing obligations and duties. Similar to Steinman's account (chapter 1, this volume), migrants' social connections and responsibilities described here offer important glimpses into the ways that transnational lives are constituted and lived. Vietnamese women's experiences demonstrate how gender orders, conceived as fluid and contingent sets of power relations, are reproduced and contested by individuals as they cross different spatial terrains and navigate various life stages and roles.

Gender and the Transnational Family

Migrants navigate complex social networks and responsibilities as members of a transnational family (Parreñas 2001; Menjivar 1999). Migration can enable individuals to construct new gendered meanings around familial and social roles in relation to their new homes and communities of origin (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Piper and Roces 2003; Yeoh 2013). Yet migration does not necessarily reconfigure power relations (Parrado and Flippen 2005). Rather, it can re-insert migrants into gendered positions in the family (Hofmann and Buckley 2013; Kim 2012). In this way, migration initiates alternative formulations of power and responsibilities within the family, but the possibility to alter existing gender paradigms is limited.

Central to the discussion of transnational families is how individuals manage varying commitments to their natal families and homemaking duties, commitments that reveal existing gendered tensions and expectations individuals bear in different spaces and roles (Constable 2003; Kim 2018; Piper and Roces 2003). For example, the expectations for brides and daughters-in-law in one cultural setting might differ in another. There is the conventional assumption that women are victims within alternate systems of male dominance (Glodava and Onizuka 1994; Gothard 2001). Put simply,

women exchange one mode of patriarchy for another through marriage. This oversimplification ignores how women make choices and strategize within conditions that are not of their own making and the various roles they undertake throughout their lives. As Rydstrom (2003) reminds us, gender is a context whereby bodies are made meaningful and legible to the sociohistorical climate in which individuals exist. As bodies moving through different spaces, this understanding proves even more relevant when we consider how the physiological interacts with different social discourses and narratives in migrants' changing environment.

This chapter highlights how individuals strategize within and against taken-for-granted gendered expectations in their communities as they make use of the opportunities arising from increased interconnection and politico-economic interdependency in Asia. For Kandiyoti, to understand individual resistance within structural limitations is to recognize "messiness" because "resisting subjects may be both rational actors and unable to think beyond the 'naturalized' givens of their communities" (1998:150). With this in mind, I explore how migrant women, informed by the gendered demands of their local environment and culture, maneuver in response to familial obligations in their natal and nuclear families. I pair Kandiyoti's incisive look into individual strategies and conditions with Wolf's understanding of how "uterine families" emerge as a way for women to create their support networks. For Wolf, the uterine family is a response to the "traditional family organized in terms of a male ideology" (1973:41). Kandiyoti and Wolf together provide a guide to analyze how Vietnamese migrant women, as individuals in the roles of "daughters" and "wives," reproduce and contest gendered power and dominance as they traverse generational and cultural roles throughout their lifetime.

This chapter also builds on existing studies on the nuances of migrant women's postmigration strategies and experiences (Hoang 2011; Hoang and Yeoh 2011) and demonstrates how women utilize the idiom of the heteropatriarchal family to migrate and realize their breadwinning abilities overseas. Women's breadwinning goals are noteworthy given that 90 percent of the women in this study come from poor backgrounds, and 80 percent had initially participated in rural-to-urban migration in search of jobs. Unable to secure stable employment in the cities, they then returned to the countryside and pursued the bride market as an alternative. Although women may feel compelled to care for their natal families through

remittances as an expression of filial piety, they are less interested in perpetuating the submissive image advertised in the bride market. Such efforts to carve out separate spheres of existence and communities for themselves as economic independents in their new homes are resonant with Wolf's (1973) concept of the uterine family. As women reconcile familial obligations, they selectively choose to accept certain familial prescripts, such as filial piety, while rejecting others, such as the authority of their husbands. Their practices indicate the messiness that Kandiyoti identifies in resisting subjects who move through different national and cultural terrains.

The study of Vietnamese women's transnational lives can unearth existing tensions and ambiguities in gendered patterns of familial obligations. International marriage migration may offer poor, rural Vietnamese women a way to use prevailing cultural roles and expectations to circumvent migration laws that, on the one hand, limit the movement of people from poorer countries to wealthier countries and, on the other, encourage women's migration for social reproduction (Lan 2006; Parreñas 2001). The chapter is structured by three main points. First, women balance different natal and nuclear expectations, and carefully choose those that best accommodate their changing desires and roles. Second, women are still subjected to familial demands from which they may be unable to escape for different reasons. And lastly, even if marriage fails, women can return to Vietnam, where they can leverage the cultural and financial capital they have accrued overseas to be financially successful in their homeland. This harkens to the interaction between social and spatial mobility that we see in Hoang's work (chapter 13, this volume) whereby social recognition and belonging can be converted as migrants cross national borders. As I will show, women might value migration for their ability to distance themselves from the familial mandates and social obligations present in their homelands yet still long for the social network and community they leave behind (Gallo 2008; Mand 2008). By underscoring the tensions and messiness in transnational families, I illuminate how migrant women in the different environments participate in the simultaneous act of reproduction and rejection of the social practices within situated locations (Rydstrom 2003). Beyond migrants' conformity to or rejection of patriarchal and familial expectations, this chapter instead highlights how people on the move engage in a continuous and contested choreography of gendered struggles.

Balancing Expectations

It is not uncommon for media portrayals of migrant women and transnational family formation to stress tales of limitation and victimization. News articles with attention-grabbing titles—such as CNN’s “South Korean Authorities Encourage Men to Marry Foreign Women. But Their Brides Often Become Victims of Abuse” (from 2020) or NBC’s “Vietnamese Women Wed Foreigners to Aid Family” (2008)—perpetuate the narrative of marriage migrants as abused women or sacrificial lambs for their families.² Occasionally, women’s experiences reinforce this view. For example, Đào (thirty-four), one of three women I interviewed who had returned to Vietnam after her divorce, claimed that Vietnamese brides are easily replaced or refunded: “What’s the point of you staying [with your husband] if you can’t have kids and take care of his family? Some couples will have a three-year limit, and if the girl can’t produce a child, they’ll send her back and find another one.” The idea of women as returnable merchandise demonstrates the alliance between masculine domination and capitalism (Hartman 1979), one in which economic transactions are marked with “Satisfaction guaranteed!”. Beyond talk of how the market transforms individuals into goods for sale and presents women as disempowered victims of circumstances, however, there is an equally pressing story about adaptation, transgression, and compromise that depicts women’s lives as between different sets of national settings and cultural demands.

For the women in this study, their involvement in international marriage migration has afforded them relative independence and mobility, such as Mai (thirty-eight) and Thị (thirty-two), who had established themselves in Taiwan. Mai had met her husband during a viewing tour when she was only seventeen. She waited until she was of legal age to marry him. After emigrating, she took on the role of matchmaker for her younger sister, Thị. Despite her lack of formal education and work experience prior to her marriage, she had since opened a massage parlor in Taiwan and was hailed as a success story in her community. Thị did not have her own business; however, she worked steadily as a manicurist and hairstylist. The sisters often remitted money to their family while developing their separate careers outside the home in Taiwan. Mai’s and Thị’s experiences as migrants do not reflect the tales of horror and dread popularly consumed and repeated in media and through local gossip. Here, the demand for reproductive care that facilitates

the formation of transnational families has afforded the sisters the opportunity to acquire material and symbolic value through their ability to provide. In doing so, they have altered the power dynamics in their family and community of origin. This supports existing works that argue that migration enables individuals to construct new gendered meanings around family and social roles relative to their new homes and communities of origin (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Piper and Roces 2003; Yeoh 2013).

Although the women discussed their intentions to be good daughters, the family was not their primary reason for marriage. For many, the assumption that migrant women devote their entire lives to their families and are concerned only with sending funds home is misleading. Thanh (forty), who migrated to South Korea from Đồng Nai in 2003, expressed frustration with the prevalent narrative about migrant women and remittances in Korean society: "[W]ith Korean people, they think that Vietnamese women come here and send money back every month. I mean, that does happen, but that's only during the first year or so when you come over and you don't have kids. But after you have kids, you have to save. And I have to live as well and eat." For Thanh, it was not financially possible to remit monthly. Yet this storyline persists and portrays Vietnamese women's marriages to Korean and Taiwanese men as efforts to accumulate money for their natal families. Thanh also explained why this stereotype is deceptive:

It's like, if you think about it, with men who are rich and comfortable, they won't go to another country to marry, right? Right? If they could, they would marry Korean women. Why would they bother to go to Vietnam and marry? It's because their lifestyle is normal or below, so they can't marry and bring a wife home. That's why they go outside to bring a wife back.

Thanh's words reveal another critical point: men who marry women from Vietnam rarely come from economically secure backgrounds. The assumption that migrant women remit without hesitation ignores the financial reality many face as members of their husband's working class. Thanh's statement highlights the need to separate filial piety from self-sacrifice. Women's compliance with filial piety might be measured by their willingness to send money to their natal families. Still, that does not entail prioritizing their families above their own survival. Talk of filial piety must consider both the financial balance that Vietnamese women maintain between their family of origin's needs and their material reality.

My conversations with women further reveal the yearnings and desires that drive their decision to migrate. During a temple event in Taichung to celebrate the half-moon festival, a dozen Vietnamese migrant brides and a small handful of Vietnamese international students gathered to clean the temple and prepare dinner. I was tasked with helping Vân (thirty-six), originally from Đồng Tháp, make vegetarian spring rolls. Since Vân and I both have postbaccalaureate degrees and share similar interests in women's issues, Vân took a liking to me and openly recounted her life story. She explained that she brings her two daughters, ages eight and thirteen, to temple gatherings with other Vietnamese so they would have exposure to the Vietnamese language and culture. Although she wanted them to understand their Vietnamese heritage, Vân did not want her daughters to grow up in Vietnam.

I did [consider staying in Vietnam] but my family was so poor and I wanted to pay my parents back, you know, *trả ơn* [pay back debt] for taking care of me. But another part was also that I couldn't stay there and accept the way that my dad and brothers think about and treat women. I have two nieces and I kept telling them that there are more opportunities for them elsewhere. They don't need to get married and stay in Vietnam. I told them they could do what they wanted with their lives but that they should consider all the options.

Though Vân's initial decision to become a marriage migrant stemmed from the desire to care for her parents, below the layer of filial piety lies a critique of Vietnamese society and its lack of opportunities for poor, rural women with a low level of education. For Vân, it was through migration that she could move away from heteropatriarchal constraints and free herself from her male relatives' treatment of women. This is notable in Vân's suggestion that her nieces consider options outside marriage and family in Vietnam. Vân believed that as a foreigner in Taiwan, she has more freedom to reject Taiwanese familial constraints than Taiwanese women. Her sentiment reverberated with other women who remarked on their ability to escape from cultural expectations in their adopted countries. Their criticism was often directed toward the conditions that make women dependent on men for economic survival (Hartmann 1979; Rich 1980). Vân's comment challenges the image of filial piety as an uncompromising goal for migrant women. It lends texture to the portrait of limitations that Vietnamese women paint of their homeland and illustrates how women contest gendered

expectations in Vietnam through their new location as migrants in a foreign country.

For some, the decision to stay with their husbands reflected a desire to remain in an arrangement that did not require further familial sacrifices. Vân said that she does not have much of a relationship with her husband outside their shared role as parents to their daughters. She spent most of her days focused on her own social network and work. Vân did not view married life as intimate or companionable, nor did she feel obligated to assume additional tasks beyond raising her children. Similarly, Linh (twenty-eight) proclaimed one afternoon after her Korean language class had ended, "I have a lot of relatives here as labor migrants so if I needed to escape, I could just call them and have a place to go. But I had set my mind to it. Whether I live or die, I was going to stay here." Others who were present nodded emphatically in agreement with Linh, like Kiều (thirty-seven) from Cần Thơ, who repeated Linh's point:

Exactly. Live or die, I was going to stay with my husband. And if my husband leaves me, I can live by myself, but I wasn't going to marry anyone else. ... If you marry a Vietnamese guy and your life is difficult and when something difficult happens, you'll be cursed at and yelled at. Can't have that. I had prepared myself mentally. I had resolved to go outside and marry a foreigner. I wasn't going to accept life in Vietnam. If it's exasperating [elsewhere], I would still accept [it]. I wasn't scared. I didn't think that I would come here and just live a good life doing nothing. I had planned on coming here and working. Put my sweat and tears into work. I had to work.

Kiều and Linh each demonstrate how women's marriage decisions were not based on attraction to Korean or Taiwanese men instead of Vietnamese men. Viewing Vietnam as a poorer country compared to Taiwan and South Korea, they had to weigh the pros and cons of migration. As they considered their options in Vietnam and overseas, they concluded that the ability to participate in an overseas labor market and pursue economic opportunities was worth leaving Vietnam to live as foreigners. Anchored in this quest for self-sufficiency is how women imagine the prospect of economic independence through marriage migration. Their efforts were not directed toward dismantling the marital establishment that facilitated their passage overseas. Rather, they maneuvered within openings to pursue their personal growth and dreams unrelated to their husbands. To be married in South Korea or Taiwan, for migrant women, was to have a shared parenting experience

without the immediate requests to perform the daughter-in-law or wife role to perfection. This distance from the conjugal demands on Vietnamese women in South Korea and Taiwan illustrates how women differentiate between marriages to foreign Asian men and marriages to Vietnamese men.

How women envision a life for themselves independent of close ties to the marital home *and* the natal home warrants further consideration. Thảo (thirty-one) from Bắc Giang needed little invitation to talk about her experiences. Thảo was in the throes of an impassioned critique of Vietnamese society when she stated that life for women in Vietnam is “*quá áp lực* [too much pressure]. ... Vietnamese society *không bao giờ bảo vệ phụ nữ* [never protects women]. Not that I hate men. But life in the family is the same. Why is it that we *trọng nam khinh nữ* [honor men and despise women]?³” Before she migrated to Daegu, South Korea, in 2014, Thảo had been married to a Vietnamese man from the north and had lived with him in HCMC. Thảo had harsh words to detail her marriage experience in Vietnam:

I feel that life for women or girls in the family are, in my village, it's as if when girls get married, and they marry someone from far away or even someone from close by, they're like leftover water that's been tossed out. ... A bride is like just a bride, not your own child. It's like an extra person. An extra thing. It's the same as if they bought an extra item. They buy us and bring us back and the parents tell us that we can only care for their family and we can't care for our own parents. That's what I see. Not good. Why? Our parents gave birth to us and took care of us until we're twenty-something, married us away, and when we marry, we only know how to live and care for our husband's family and it's as if the parents who gave birth to us *mất trắng* [lose everything]. To take a husband is to lose everything. ... After I came here, I could develop and have my own job. Although I don't earn a lot of money, I still have enough for me to spend on whatever I want. When I buy an outfit, or a pair of shoes that's expensive, or powder, those are things that *I* earned, and I can use.

By equating women to “leftover water” and brides as “an extra thing” in Vietnam, Thảo offered a lens into the context of her family history and community in the north. Thảo's statement does not reveal an appraisal of the demands of filial piety; instead, it demonstrates how she strategically employed one aspect of familial obligations and constraints to argue against another. In South Korea, she worked to excise the familial expectations in poor rural areas for brides in Vietnam, thereby emphasizing how class interacts with gender in shaping women's married life. Influenced by her

experience as a bride in Vietnam and South Korea, Thảo viewed her host country with more favorable eyes than her home country, as did most of the women I interviewed. This confirms studies documenting how migrant women transgress social conventions and gain personal freedom in addition to economic improvement (Oishi 2005). Therefore, as migrants straddling two cultural contexts and familial roles, women like Thảo have more space to strategize between and against different forms of obligations.

Women's pursuit of selfhood underlines how individuals strategize around gendered ideologies through migration. Respondents frequently listed their ability to work, self-sufficiency, and exploration of opportunities overseas as the advantages available through migration. Hạnh (forty-five), for example, had lived in Taiwan for more than twenty years. In 2018, she worked at a factory in Taichung and earned extra on the side as a marriage broker. Hạnh stated that she had married to help her family and portrayed her relationship with her husband as that of roommates rather than family. She explained that she is usually at work and rarely home to cook for her husband and children. After her two sons started high school, she immersed herself in her job and spent most of her time surrounded by the community of female migrants she had created. She seldomly passed on the opportunity to work overtime because she was addicted to working and exercising her ability to earn money. "[W]omen want to be independent from their families. They'll find work and live by themselves and have their own lives here. I don't think most women want to go back to Vietnam. If you look at the cost of living there, it's so high. But the salary's so low. You can just live by yourself here." Hạnh's determination to provide for her family in Vietnam shows how migrant women might work to preserve the pillars of Vietnamese filial obligations that call for revering the elders. Yet Hạnh was also disinterested in reproducing the expected role for married women in Taiwan, as evident in her lack of investment in her relationship with her husband. Her resolve to be a good daughter but not necessarily a good wife highlights how women, through migration, can tackle their objective of succeeding as a filial daughter rather than a homemaker wife.

Obeying Demands

The migrant women in this study, even as they balanced expectations and demands from their natal and conjugal families, were still subjected to some aspects of the gender order from which they could not entirely escape. For example, women's success in materializing the image of the "docile" daughter through the transnational bride market is best illustrated in the changes their remittances brought to their families' economic situation. Bà Bấy, an energetic woman in her seventies, was eager to chat about her daughter, Tuyết. Tuyết had been married for over eighteen years and lived in rural Taiwan. When she first emigrated, there were only a handful of Vietnamese people living there. As of 2014, there was a sizable community of Vietnamese women married to Taiwanese men. As we sat outside her house, which served as a local convenience store in Vinh Long, she reflected on her daughter's life:

My daughter's led a very good life. She's even meaner than [her husband], poor guy [*laughs*]. He'll work and when she needs something, he'll come rushing over to take care of her. Me too, he indulges me. I've been to Taiwan three times already. Every time my daughter is pregnant, he'll pay for my flight to Taiwan. ... To be honest, I didn't want her to move so far away. As a parent, you miss your child when she's not near. But she seems so happy over there. She has a life that we couldn't give her.

Bà Bấy's sentiment was widely shared by family members who believe that migrant women's life trajectories would have differed significantly had they stayed in Vietnam. Feelings of sadness and concern for their faraway daughters were often mixed with expressions of gratitude and relief for their economic contribution given that women's remittances have helped pull their families out of financial hardship, fund their siblings' educational and business ventures, and renovate their childhood homes. This is evident in Tân Lộc, known as the "Isle of Korean/Taiwanese Brides," where locals told me that eight out of the ten newer concrete-and-brick houses belong to families with a female relative married overseas. Through their economic provision, migrant women garnered recognition and status among their communities of origin (Yeoh 2013). But even as they acquired social recognition through their remittances, their contributions also help sustain the narrative of Vietnamese women as filial daughters.

As Vietnamese women crossed international waters to become brides, they had to take on different relational roles in their natal and in their nuclear

families, illustrating the continuing weight of domestic obligations. Women often used phrases such as “*hiếu thảo*” (pious) and “*trả ơn*” (repay debt) to suggest that migration is a strategy for family poverty alleviation (Palriwala and Uberoi 2008). Thọ (forty-three), the owner of a Vietnamese restaurant in Taichung, Taiwan, came from a life of dire economic straits due to the medical bills incurred by her father’s illness. Worried about the growing debt, Thọ entered the bride market to find work overseas to remit to Vietnam. Thọ’s friend, Nhi (twenty-six), also strategized through migration to access employment opportunities in Taiwan, in her case to pay for her mom’s cancer treatment. Thọ’s and Nhi’s efforts to help their family out of poverty and crisis were articulated as a gendered mandate for daughters. Their employment of “*hiếu thảo*” and “*trả ơn*” echoes the Confucian requisite for filial piety, which calls for women to prioritize their families above their own well-being. Yet it is difficult for migrant women to provide for their families because of the uneven access to labor opportunities in Vietnam since the *Đổi mới* reforms (Asian Development Bank 2020). The gender norms that structure women’s lives do so in a way that directs their effort and energy into the family but creates structural barriers for them to contribute successfully to the family’s financial health. However, as members leading transnational lives, they can help their families of origin. As respondents repeatedly stated, the “family economy relies on daughters,” whereby remittances were often provided for special occasions, such as the Lunar New Year and birthdays.

Women’s transnational lives offer a lens into the complexity of belonging and membership. Whether they are marriage migrants in China (chapter 5, this volume), male labor migrants in Japan (chapter 6, this volume), or Vietnamese brides in South Korea and Taiwan, life overseas is difficult and characterized by feelings of social exclusion. The women in my study worked long hours, raised children in a different culture and language to theirs without familial support, and remained social outsiders despite their citizenship. In Vân’s words, migrant women are “like trees without roots.” Although they made gains and achieved measures of independence, their status as foreigners carried cultural difficulties and social disadvantages. For example, Thanh, despite her Korean fluency, citizenship, and more than fifteen years living in South Korea, did not feel like a member of Korean society.

To be honest, I haven’t really gone out in society a lot. Because I’m a foreigner. And at the moment, I’m working at a language center that

supports and is for foreigners, so I'm really respected here. But if I go out in society and say, I go to another company and I don't have experience, so it's, it's really heavy here. Here, they still have this custom, "I am Korean." They won't accept other cultures. They still have this way of thinking, "Ah, mixed children!" In Vietnam, if it's a foreigner, they're very respectful, right? And happy. But here, it's not like that, it's like, if I came from the US or a European country, they'd treat me differently. With Vietnam, they look at Vietnam with eyes judging a lower economy. So they'll look down. And if you're from a country with a better economy, they'll look up. Respect more—two ways of looking.

Thanh's comment demonstrates how Vietnamese migrant brides might remain invested in the cultural tradition core to their upbringing despite their residency abroad (Palriwari and Uberoi 2008). Overseas, they are cultural foreigners and, as migrants, have to navigate familiar and foreign expectations of gender. Viewing herself as a foreigner, Thanh displayed a greater willingness to conform to Vietnam's demands for her to be a good daughter while distancing herself from South Korea's expectations of her to be a good bride. Thanh's simultaneous reproduction and rejection of gendered obligations in the family sheds light on women's shifting power positions over their life course as they move between the roles of daughter and wife.

Indeed, life overseas as a foreign bride can be a mixed bag. The difficulties that migrant women encounter highlight the contradictions inherent in women's roles (Wang 2007). Specifically, women must obey certain gendered dogmas for select reasons. Oanh, for instance, was living comfortably in Taiwan in 2018. Her husband worked all day to provide for their family and gave her money to remit to her mom in Vietnam. Although Oanh had financial stability, she did not have a life outside of marriage. She did not work because her husband was against her being employed. This disappointed Oanh, who wanted to pursue postsecondary education and have a career of her own. Before her marriage, she had been set to finish high school but had withdrawn before her graduation, on the orders of her father. Cô Bích, Oanh's mother, explained that Oanh's father was afraid that her decision to study business and economics in college would lead to her become *hư* (corrupt/disobedient). Cô Bích then asked rhetorically, "Why did she need to go to school when she was going to marry anyway?" Although Cô Bích openly disparaged her son-in-law for denying Oanh the opportunity for professional development, she did not criticize her husband, who had also dimmed Oanh's

hopes for it. Oanh’s story highlights how, under some circumstances, migrant women must accept life with continued limitations, as evident in her obedience to her father and her husband, both of whom were her family’s financial pillar.

Return Migration

Sometimes, the benefits of migration and life abroad are not enough to prevent women from returning to Vietnam. Even though bride market advertisements suggest that husbands can readily discard their wives if they are unsatisfied with their marriage, the women in this study were usually the ones who initiated the divorce. In 2014, Đào decided she could no longer live in Taiwan and moved back to Vietnam. By electing to return, Đào chose to live apart from her children. She explained that the children were accustomed to Taiwanese culture and would receive a better education in Taiwan. For Đào, it was easier to leave her children than to work on her marriage and submit to her husband’s whims. By dissolving the marriage and relinquishing custody over her children, Đào paid a high price to free herself from her husband’s demands. Even though she no longer lived in Taiwan, however, Đào could still reap the benefits from her marriage, as she stated matter-of-factly: “I have Taiwanese citizenship, so I can come and go.” Đào’s Taiwanese citizenship gave her physical mobility to explore new places and opportunities compared to the average Vietnamese. It also serves as proof of her cultural knowledge of Taiwan, one that would allow Đào to start her own business in Vietnam.

Low-income men in East Asian countries are not the only ones to benefit from the unequal geopolitical relations in Asia by marrying women from poorer countries (Constable 2005); Vietnamese women can also accumulate sociocultural assets to be leveraged professionally and socially in Vietnam. Yến returned to Vietnam in 2014 after her marriage of four years ended. She said that she and her husband were unhappy in their marriage. She also struggled to find meaning and independence for herself in South Korea. Unlike Đào, Yến and her husband did not have children. Without children to keep her in South Korea, she filed for divorce and moved to HCMC. Post-married life for Yến came with new opportunities and economic stability. Equipped with working experience in South Korea, Yến built a

professional career at a company in District 1 that caters to Korean clientele. Her new professional standing in Vietnam illustrates how some return migrants can convert their cultural knowledge of South Korea and Taiwan to secure new statuses and careers in their home country.

Conclusion

Women's encounters with gender orders across different locales and the need for reproduction, expectations of childcare, and filial piety do not cease once they create families that transcend national borders. However, this does not mean that migrants unwittingly absorb structures of obligations and constraints in Vietnam and overseas as individuals leading transnational lives. As demonstrated, women seek independence and the ability to provide in their new homes. Although providing remittances may be an important motivation among migrant women, it is not as commonly practiced as stereotypes about marriage migrants suggest. The need to survive in their new homes requires some exercise of restraint. As mothers and wives in South Korea and Taiwan, the women are vulnerable to select demands as homemakers at certain moments in their lives, such as rearing children or obeying male figures in their families. Although they may acquiesce to certain terms of gender, most of my respondents were determined to carve out identities of their own outside the family context. This is apparent in how some throw themselves into their work while others look to their community of female migrants to create a social support network. As such, migrant women may embark on conventionally gendered pathways created within a global environment that champions the image of the "wife" and "mother," yet their aspirations and goals transcend this heteropatriarchal reproduction of womanhood. And their experiences in marriage migration complicate the designation of women as exchangeable to reveal how women, through their strategies and experiences, are more than simply "leftover water."

Notes

- 1 In Vietnam, matchmaking for profit is considered illegal under the "Marriage and Family with Foreigners" stipulations because it is believed to violate the institution of marriage. To mitigate legal strictures in Vietnam, marriage

agencies will only assist single men who can legally wed and sponsor Vietnamese women to migrate to their countries.

2 See Hollingsworth, Seo, and Bae 2020; The Associated Press, “Vietnamese Women Wed Foreigners to Aid Family,” *NBC*, 10 August 2008.

3 This is a phrase commonly used in Vietnam to describe male domination.

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Section III
Culture and Identity

SECTION III INTRODUCTION

Hybridization and Heterodoxy: Vietnamese Culture and Identity in the Global Cultural Flow

HOANG CAM

THIS SECTION, “CULTURE AND IDENTITY,” examines how global encounters shape the Vietnamese construction of identity today and how contemporary Vietnamese identity in turn contributes to hybrid cultural formations, in which global signs and symbols mesh with conceptions of what Vietnamese-ness means in the contemporary context. Each of the chapters in the section offers rich analyses of cultural practices with which social actors create meanings for their experiences of living in the transnational lifeworld. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted at two transnational workplaces in urban Vietnam, Kim Anh Dang’s chapter, “The ‘West’ as the Qualified International,” provides a compelling account of how the “Western” (*Tây*) way of working and thinking are deployed and contested by different workplace actors. Based on Internet ethnography, Sandra Kurfürst’s chapter, “Digital Performances of Selves,” evokes the lifeworld of hip hop practitioners, who engage in transnational social movements as an expression of their belonging to the global community and a medium for their exercise of self-entrepreneurship. Finally, Alison Truitt’s chapter, “A Divided Sangha in the Global Field of Vietnamese Buddhism,” traces the emergence of Vietnamese Buddhist communities in the United States and Europe to show how it has generated a community of practice that is grounded in both enduring political divisions between diasporic groups with differing relationships to the homeland and the logics of global capitalism and its anxieties.

These chapters indicate how Vietnamese today live their lives by incorporating global elements into their lifestyles, workplaces, and religious practices, together with cultural conceptions that are firmly rooted in collective imageries of what constitutes Vietnam vis-à-vis the outside world. This dynamic of identity construction is also shaped by their position in the social world in which they live and by the value frameworks that orient their actions in that world (Keyes 1977).

In different ways, the analyses in this section speak to existing discussions of the “global situation” and “friction” by Anna Tsing (2000, 2004) and to what Arjun Appadurai (1996) calls the “Global Now.” According to Tsing, the increasing interconnection between regions and countries at various scales in terms of people, materials, and cultural flows causes heterogeneous ideas and value frameworks to encounter one another in ways that are uncertain and full of tension. In Appadurai’s *Global Now*, similarly, new forms of identity formation, desire, and social imaginings among individuals and groups have emerged in the five types of global cultural flows, namely, “ethnoscapes,” “mediascapes,” “technoscapes,” “financescapes,” and “ideoscapes” (see also Luong’s afterword herein). Unlike within the “old” global situation, forms of identity, desire, and social imagination in the *Global Now* are articulated beyond borders of the nation-state or territorial sovereignty, resulting in the disjuncture and difference of subjectivity.

The increasingly translocal lives of Vietnamese today are, likewise, often characterized by people’s greater insistence on what they see as traditional Vietnamese, for example Buddhism, as they are more exposed to global cultural forms and discursive practices. The simultaneous adoption of seemingly contrasting ideas and value frameworks, what Geertz (1957) terms “ethos,” thus helps people to make sense of and navigate the disjuncture, paradoxes, and differences that inhere in the “global situation” (Tsing 2000) and the “Global Now” (Appadurai 1996) and articulate their aspirations.

In this vein, the companies that Kim Anh Dang analyzes seek to cultivate an image of adopting a “Western style” (*phong cách Tây*) of working and mode of thinking at their workplaces in order to achieve a competitive edge in the global market for creative media content. Partly in response to state discourses and policies of marketization, socialist modernity, and global integration, and, partly for the sake of image making, they favor so-called Western standards and methods of working while constructing Vietnamese

ways as obstacles to efficiency, creativity, and improvement. These workplace practices, as Dang shows, are closely associated with the meanings of the term “the West,” which is discursively constructed and imagined historically and today as a social realm of progress, modernity, and civility. Those meanings attached to “the West,” as interpreted by both employers and employees of the two workplaces Dang studies, not only refer to global or international standards, but also to the qualities of being rational, scientific, and modern. In the struggle to make up for their perceived deficiencies and to attain desirable “Western” qualities, the employees seek to adopt these “advanced” qualities while, at the same time, selectively striving to get rid of their “rural” or “backward” styles of working, thinking, and living. Both the employees and managers endorse the value of the so-called Western style of management at their workplace—the international standards, however vague and arbitrary, give the managers a mechanism to fulfill their aspirations to become players in the global cultural industry and the employees a tool to cultivate modern personhood as global and self-enterprising professionals. Yet, like the managers who are fully aware of the necessity of cultivating an image along these lines for the sake of image making, some of the workers Dang interviews also point out the falsehood of Western knowledge’s claim to superiority at the workplace and the unfounded overvaluation of the so-called Western expertise.

In Kurfürst’s chapter on the emergence of a hip hop culture brought to Vietnam in the early 1990s, we see how young Vietnamese today, especially those in big cities, enthusiastically embrace this global cultural form both as a means of expression and as a tool of self-entrepreneurship. Kurfürst’s hip hop dancers (including break dance, rap, and other dance styles) simultaneously participate in social and political movements related to hip hop outside of Vietnam (such as the “Black Lives Matter” movement), attend hip hop events abroad, and produce hip hop commodities and artifacts for distribution across digital platforms. Unlike in Western contexts, where hip hop often represents a movement counter to the conventions of the mainstream society, Vietnamese hip hop dancers practice it to pursue their aspirations of becoming self-responsible citizens, modern subjects, and self-enterprising individuals. These goals are expected of them by the state (see also the editors’ introduction and Horat’s chapter in this volume, as well as Nguyen 2018, 2023), even as they imagine cosmopolitan identities and pursue hip hop business ventures within and beyond borders.

While individuals within Vietnam, such as the hip hop dancers, reach out to the global world to find global cultural elements for incorporation into their representation of self and their lifeworld, Truitt's chapter suggests that diasporic Vietnamese, conversely, reach back into what they see as Vietnam's traditional culture for dealing with the challenges of making a life in a new country. People of differing political orientations, who have left Vietnam by different paths, found in the varieties of Vietnamese Buddhism cultural resources to build "communities of practice" that, like those of the hip hop dancers, transcend locations and places. Buddhist practices such as charities or donations to temple construction and becoming a member of Vietnamese Buddhist communities, whether Pure Land Buddhism or Zen Buddhism, allow diasporic Vietnamese individuals to both position themselves as Vietnamese and demonstrate their moral capacity when establishing themselves in an unfamiliar cultural context. These communities of practice enable them to bridge the geographical distance with their ancestral homeland, materializing "Vietnam as an ancestral homeland not easily identified with the modern territorial state of Vietnam" (Truitt, this volume, p. 251) while helping them to make sense of and possibly reconcile conflicts left by the country's history of political division shaped by Cold War politics.

Meanwhile, the three chapters in this section also demonstrate that the construction of identity and the emergence of new cultural formations and practices in the translocal lifeworlds of Vietnam today, either in Vietnam or abroad, are full of challenges and contestations. These challenges and contestations arise from processes in which social division, marginalization, and cultural exclusion are established and reinforced in a manner pointed out by major theorists of globalization (Appadurai 1996; Bauman 2000). As vividly detailed in Kim Anh Dang's chapter, practicing Western styles of working and thinking at the workplace can be a way for employees to enhance their social mobility and position themselves materially and symbolically. Yet, this pursuit has also marginalized and devalued the knowledge and expertise of many Vietnamese, including those who have acquired Western training and education, in relation to foreigners, both in terms of professional valuation and in daily working relationships. The racially implicated social marginalization works at the psychological level, shaping identity construction through what Bourdieu (1977) calls "heterodoxy": namely, the tendency of contesting against the connotation of Western as superior while

seeking to achieve Western quality of subjectivity or personhood. Dang's subjects thus must assume quite conflictual positioning of the self in their efforts to assert themselves in the transnational workplace, which seems to project an illusion of being a meritocratic space in which those with the better working methods and ways of working are justly recognized and rewarded.

Similarly depicting a transnational field of contestations, Truitt's chapter indicates that the wish to have a unified faith and moral community among the Vietnamese diaspora through Buddhist practice cannot be easily fulfilled. The geopolitical divisions concerning Vietnam during and since the Indochina war and the social differences among diasporic Vietnamese communities today have caused overseas Vietnamese to pursue separate Buddhist practices and form their own communities. In order to resolve the contradictions and differences between immigrant and refugee communities, different groups have been vying to create new Buddhist sects and groups through purchasing lands to construct new temples to materialize the visibility of their version of Vietnamese Buddhism. Some Buddhist communities of Vietnamese immigrants try to connect with the state-recognized Vietnamese Buddhist Church in Vietnam while others turn their back on it, thereby resulting in widening divisions and growing differences. Even within the communities that engage with Zen Buddhism, a globally authoritative version of Buddhism that promulgates a cosmopolitan form of practice well received in Western countries, divisions and social exclusion cannot be easily overcome.

Dynamics of marginalization and exclusion likewise feature in Kurfürst's analysis of Vietnamese hip hop dancers, who operate at the edge of the global hip hop market with a core located in the United States. Apart from the challenges of getting recognized as equal members of the global scene, Vietnamese hip hop practitioners are confronted with immigration barriers as Vietnamese citizens with Vietnamese passports, along with financial constraints and family burdens. Their translocal experiences and practices of global engagement therefore are conditioned by material restrictions to their mobility that arise from their social location. That said, the availability of new social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram enables the dancers to produce performances and artifacts, including performances with their own bodies, thus maintaining global encounters despite these mobility barriers. These social networking platforms provide

effective means for them to connect with and participate in social movements with the global hip hop communities of practice, allowing them a sense of global citizenship. Their choice of taking part in competitions and performances within Southeast Asia instead of traveling to other regions is a way to preempt the visa and financial barriers that they would face when trying to enter richer countries. Their regional mobility and transnational community making thus complement their claim to being cosmopolitan citizens of the global world as Vietnamese. At the same time, they strengthen the division of a community of practice that is supposed to be borderless, deterritorialized, and free of friction.

Bubbling under the surface of the three chapters in this section is the articulation between new global cultural forms with local conditions and changing notions of what Vietnamese-ness is vis-à-vis the outside world. What they show is how Vietnamese today actively and selectively take on certain global signs, symbols, and practices and ground them in their lifeworld while recasting their cultural traditions for navigating the global world as they become more and more implicated in it. In so doing, they contribute to the formation of what K. Sivaramakrishnan and Arun Agrawal call “regional modernity”—a condition and situation that “break up the monopolistic, hegemonic and monolithic connotations of modernity that global invariably introduces and stabilizes” (2003:14). This encounter shapes the social lives of Vietnamese in general and the construction of Vietnamese identity in particular. Exposed to an assemblage of cultural sources and value frameworks, national and international, traditional and global, Vietnamese individuals and communities, either within or outside of the country, learn to situate themselves in a new social order. In constructing personhood and identity through cultural practices and economic activities underpinned by these contradictory values and desires, they are also actively reconfiguring the very culture of Vietnam.

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*Digital Performances of Selves:
Entrepreneurship and Social Movements
in Hip Hop*

SANDRA KURFÜRST

Global Encounters and Southern Positioning

Flows are integral to hip hop culture. First of all, rappers and dancers alike go with the flow. The flow is a form of embodied and sensory knowledge intimately linked to kinesthesia, and thence movement. As a result, the flow is a cross-cultural sensory experience of falling into another dimension and keeping on rhyming, dancing, and moving that is shared by actors of hip hop culture around the globe. Second, hip hop culture has been conceptualized as an idiom or cultural form that travels transnationally and is locally adopted and integrated into local practices and materials, facilitating global encounters and creating translocal lifeworlds (Alim 2006; Androutsopoulos 2003). The flow of ideas, people, commodities, and so on has been emphasized in studies of (popular) culture. The term flow denotes the increasing fluidity of boundaries between nations, cultures, and other forms of social organization (Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1992). While offering room to leave determined categories behind, and think beyond stable entities, the language of flows has simultaneously been criticized for not adequately addressing individual agency or the relevance of small-scale organizations (Rockefeller 2011). Flows suggest a smooth floating, and the exchange of artifacts, commodities, and people; however, the term obscures frictions that ultimately evolve in exchanges and processes of circulation

(Tsing 2011). Another critique points out that casting flows as something completely new and exceptional disregards a long history of global entanglements.

Much as the colonial encounter itself, the discussion of cultural flows runs along the center-periphery axis. The United States, where the four cultural practices of MCing, break(danc)ing, DJing, and graffiti writing first developed in the late 1970s, is seen as the point of origin and thence cultural center of hip hop. In the last decades, the United States has also become the economic hub of a global hip hop market with major hip hop labels, producers, and rap and dance crews having their base in major cities. The periphery of hip hop, then, is constituted by countries such as Vietnam and others in Southeast Asia. Although rap and dancing have been practiced in Vietnam since the 1990s, a market for hip hop commodities is still in the making. Jenny Mbaye refers to hip hop agents' positionality as a southern positioning, situated at "the margins of an assumed sociality and urbanity" (2014:398). This margin can be located at any given scale, a city, a community or social group (defined by ethnicity, class, gender, age, etc.), a nation, or globally with respect to the global hip hop market. Accordingly, practitioners of hip hop in Vietnam move "within unequal fields of globe-spanning power" (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013:187). This chapter conceptualizes flows as actors' bodily movement, physical travel, and the circulation of artifacts, visuals, and texts on social media platforms.

Hip hop actors in Vietnam, aware of their marginal positioning in the global hip hop market, combine their skills and knowledge, building up alliances beyond the geographic and linguistic confines of Vietnam. While the United States is a focal point of their orientation, they also move into alternative directions, for instance, within the Southeast Asian region or East Asia. Movement is, by definition, central to their practice of dancing. However, dancers in Vietnam are situated in regimes of mobility that simultaneously facilitate movement and constrain it. Oscillating between stasis and mobility, dancers achieve a cosmopolitan status by practicing street dance, a bodily practice conducted widely across the globe (Gaudette 2012). In this chapter, I aim to discuss, first, how Vietnamese practitioners of hip hop create global encounters in spite of their limited physical mobility, and, second, how they make and maintain a translocal lifeworld through the use of digital media.

Overall, I identify three fields of activity in which bodily and digital global encounters play out, and in which reconfigurations take place. The

first field that I refer to as “self-making” discusses dancers’ digital performances on diverse social media platforms. They curate self-representations, drawing on various media, such as photographs, videos, texts, and hashtags. Through these digital performances the artists mediate between what it means to be Vietnamese and what it means to be cosmopolitan or global. The second field then discusses dancers’ investment in self-entrepreneurship. In the late socialist economy, young people make deliberate choices to make a living from dancing. However, working as freelance dance teachers is exhausting and precarious. As soon as responsibilities multiply, some artists choose a different way of income generation, while maintaining dancing as their passion. Finally, the third field of networked social movements demonstrates their political engagement beyond the national borders of Vietnam—where political actions would be most likely sanctioned. Naturally, these three fields of reconfiguration are not mutually exclusive, but feed into one another. Moreover, such reconfigurations are appreciative of reconfigurations that preceded them, for example when Việt rapper Wowy collaborates with *cải lương* singer Bạch Tuyết, and woman rapper Suboi raps about Trạng Quỳnh, a legendary folk hero who satirized the feudal system of the Trịnh Lords (1545–1787). Methodologically, the chapter draws on hashtag ethnography, approaching the hashtag as a field, while following actors across multiple online and offline communities (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). In September and October 2015, and then again from September until November 2018, I conducted semistructured and narrative interviews with hip hop dancers and rappers from Hà Nội, Ninh Bình Province, and Hồ Chí Minh City. In addition, I conducted participant observation in dance studios and at dance battles.

The Hip Hop Community of Practice

In Vietnam, young people began to practice rap and break(danc)ing as well as other dance styles locally subsumed under the term hip hop in the 1990s, only a few years after the passing of the economic reform program *Đổi mới* in 1986. The country’s opening up paved the way for an almost unbounded flow of goods and people. Young Vietnamese, who had gotten in touch with breaking during their studies abroad, for example, in the United States, Germany, France, and Great Britain, introduced this practice to Vietnam.

Back in Vietnam they showed the break moves they had learned to their friends, sharing videos and tapes they had brought along with them. This form of learning is still valid today except that videos circulated through social media replaced analogue videos. Today, dancers and rappers might learn by watching YouTube tutorials and videos circulated on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, in addition to meeting face to face. Since the 2010s, both rap and dance have become more and more popular, not least due to national TV programs such as the dance competitions *So You Think You Can Dance?* and *Vũ Điệu Xanh*, and recently the rap shows *King of Rap* and *Việt Rap*.¹ While these are national, or even regional TV shows, Vietnam remains situated at the periphery of the global hip hop industry. That is why local practitioners of rap and dance reach out to peers around the globe, participating in global dance events, while recording and sharing videos and photos of their performances. In order to denote hip hop's global appeal, hip hop studies frequently invoke the idea of the Global Hip Hop Nation (Alim 2006). While the Global Hip Hop Nation imagines a community of peers geographically scattered around the globe, the term nation still insists on the existence of a fixed entity that popular cultural studies of flow seek to overcome. This chapter offers an alternative, by thinking of actors around the world investing in the same practices of MCing or dancing as a community of practice (for another discussion using the notion “community of practice,” see Truitt’s chapter in this volume). Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet define a community of practice as

an aggregate of people who come together around some enterprise. United by this common enterprise, people come to develop and share ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values—in short, practices—as a function of their joint engagement in activity. Simultaneously, social relations form around the activities and activities form around relationships. Particular kinds of knowledge, expertise, and forms of participation become part of individuals’ identities and places in the community. (1992:464)

Whereas Eckert and McConnell-Ginet use the concept of communities of practice in sociolinguistics to investigate gendered identities, the concept has been applied widely in social and cultural anthropology to analyze processes of situated learning. Through “legitimate peripheral participation,” novices learn a certain skill and are simultaneously integrated into a set of social relations, a particular community (Lave and Wenger 1991). In contrast to the common notion of community, a community of practice builds

around a certain practice and not a locality. That is why the concept is particularly appealing to the study of actors sharing the same practice, albeit being geographically distributed around the globe. Members of the hip hop community of practice share, exchange, and circulate music, dance moves, and artifacts across national borders, orchestrating translocal lifeworlds.

Connectivity beyond Borders

While most of the dancers I talked to confirmed that among other sources they had attained their dancing skills from watching YouTube videos, the most renowned dancers acknowledged that it was important to have a teacher, someone to follow and to guide them through the learning process. More concretely, situated learning in hip hop dance means regularly participating in dance classes or crew practice, both outdoors in public spaces and indoors in dance studios. Training together or participating in dance battles, dancers build up relationships and demonstrate their bodily skills to their peer group. Whereas most dancers would connect with fellow dancers in their city, such as Hà Nội or Hồ Chí Minh City, the most advanced dancers tend to travel within Vietnam to participate in battles as competitors or judges. Some travel beyond Vietnam, if their job and social obligations as husbands and wives, children and parents allow them to do so. While traveling is part of their desire for dancing, the dancers are also aware of the limitations to their mobility.

Hip hop practitioners' mobility needs to be considered in the context of unequal fields of power. These fields are diverse, and intersectional, containing class, gender, ethnicity, and economic capital. Moreover, all these different fields are tied to Vietnamese citizenship, particularly when it comes to practitioners' mobility across national boundaries. Vy, a woman popper from Hồ Chí Minh City, names visa restrictions as one reason why Vietnamese dancers tend to attend dance competitions within the Southeast Asian region. When traveling to destinations outside of the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) region, they would need to apply for visas, the acquisition of which depends on the availability of financial resources. For instance, if a foreign cultural institution like the Goethe Institute sponsors the stay abroad, it is easier for dancers to attain a visa to enter Germany than through proving their personal financial status. As a result, holding a Vietnamese passport

limits dancers' mobility to domestic travel or regional travel within Southeast Asia. By contrast, dancers from Germany, France, the United States, Japan, or Korea enjoy almost unlimited mobility based on the "cosmopolitan capital"—that their first world passport affords them" (Gaudette 2012:302).

Let me briefly illustrate the unequal limitations to mobility along citizenship by focusing on the Schengen visa-free zone. While France and Germany belong to the Schengen visa-free zone, US, Japanese, and Korean citizens do not require a visa to enter the Schengen zone. Vietnam and most other Southeast Asian countries are excluded from this visa-free zone. However, the ASEAN region implemented its own visa-free zone. The ASEAN Framework Agreement on Visa Exemption was signed in 2006 by all ten member states, and it promulgates visa-free entry for citizens of ASEAN member states for a period of fourteen days to other ASEAN countries with the possibility of extension. Except for Myanmar and Brunei, Vietnamese citizens are eligible for visa-free stays of thirty days in all seven other ASEAN member states (ASEAN 2022). During the period of this research, dancers traveled most often to Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, and sometimes Japan, to participate in and judge dance battles.

Vy refers to Vietnamese dancers' physical mobility to explain why many internationally renowned dancers in the United States, Europe, and East Asia would not know that there is a large hip hop community in Vietnam. In reaction, one strategy for Vietnamese dancers to get in touch with the global hip hop community of practice is to invite outstanding international dancers to Vietnam to give workshops and share their knowledge with Vietnamese dancers. For example, the Hà Nội-based hip hop dance crew New York Style invited Henry Link, an old-timer of hip hop and founding member of the internationally known Elite Force Crew from Brooklyn, to visit Hà Nội. The crew name New York Style already indicates their awareness of hip hop's origin in the United States. Another Hà Nội-based crew, the Low Ridaz, invited Jr. Boogaloo, a celebrated old school popper from California, to Hà Nội to teach a workshop. Vy herself attended a popping workshop led by DeyDey, the first woman world popping champion from France, in Hồ Chí Minh City, and she aims to invite more international woman dancers to Vietnam. Vietnamese hip hop practitioners aspire to show the world that hip hop in Vietnam is alive and flourishing.

Dancers connect to networks with their peers located in other parts of the world via social media. In contrast to "traditional" mass media, whose

main functions are to act as an “organ of speech for Party, state and social organizations” (Tran 2002:245) and to create the collective body of the nation, digital media offer a space for the formation of new (political) subjectivities (Tri Phuong 2017:825).

In January 2020, the number of Internet users in Vietnam was 68.17 million, with an increase of 10 percent in the period from 2019 until 2020 (Kemp 2020; Mai Duong 2017:374). Since many users in Vietnam access the Internet and particularly social media platforms via their mobile phones, the number of mobile phone contracts is another important factor indicating the rate of connectivity in Vietnam. In 2020, there were 142.73 mobile subscriptions registered for every 100 people in Vietnam (Statista 2021). On the one hand, the Vietnamese government is aware of the relevance of the Internet for the country’s economic development, aiming to connect remote areas to digital infrastructures. On the other hand, the government carefully watches online users’ activities. In the last decade, a vibrant online community has evolved around topics such as party pluralism, citizens’ rights, and the protection of the environment. However, the facilitation of the deliberation over the common good online has its limits, since freedom of expression is restricted. The Vietnamese government applies a “soft” blacking rule to social networking sites like Facebook to undermine undesired content such as critique of the Communist Party of Vietnam (Mai Duong 2017). Since 2007, access to Facebook has been blocked time and again for users from within Vietnam. Nonetheless, users have found ways to circumvent the blocking of websites, sharing such knowledge in online fora (Bui 2016). State media, by contrast, for example daily online newspapers, are restricted in their use of certain features of social networking sites. For instance, the authorities ordered a popular online daily newspaper to block the comment section on its Facebook site in order to prevent public debate among readers (personal conversation with an online journalist, July 2019). In spite of these technical limitations, people in Vietnam increasingly use digital media for a diverse range of activities; digital communications have become an integral part of Vietnamese citizens’ everyday lives (Mai Duong 2017). In particular, young people are familiar with the cultural protocols of switching and connecting networks (Castells 2009; Jenkins 2008), building up both digital and analogue relations beyond the geographic and linguistic confines of Vietnam. Accordingly, members of the hip hop community of practice based in Vietnam use digital media to reach out to other members, curating global encounters. In

the following, I will discuss the practices of self-making, self-entrepreneurship, and the participation in networked social movements through which Vietnamese hip hop practitioners tend to negotiate their southern positioning.

Self-Making

Henry Jenkins (2008) refers to the current state of the media as convergence culture, where old and new media collide. Moreover, media producers and media consumers are no longer thought of as separate entities, but as one. The capability to self-produce, change, and judge content is a crucial feature of digital media. On social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, dancers share, circulate, and “like” self-created or reproduced contents. As Brian Larkin (2013:241) reminds us, objects and contents can circulate only via material infrastructures that simultaneously shape and restrict the nature of the media they transfer. Instagram is an image-based application offering a range of postproduction tools, such as cutting devices and filters. In the past, these tools were accessible to users only if they purchased additional software, and users required at least some technical know-how to edit videos and photographs. Today, by contrast, users can conveniently edit images via some clicks on their smart phones. The taking, making, and editing of photos and videos then becomes a haptic experience.

Nina Hien (2012) shows that tactility and beautification in photography are highly intertwined. The Vietnamese term for retouching photographs (*tút*) actually implies their beautification (Hien 2012:479). She explores how beautification techniques in the form of digital postproduction offer actors control over their own lives and fates, as represented in the popular belief of “*sửa hình, sửa tướng*.”² Using mobile phone applications for digital retouching, dancers literally take their lives into their own hands. Through digital retouching techniques “everyday people establish and assert new subject positions through which they express their dreams, hopes, and desires, construct themselves as Vietnamese, and see into their own souls” (Hien 2012:477). Holding power over their visual representations, they create digital performances of selves, made of assemblages composed from visuals, texts, and metadata.

Hashtags are a form of metadata, self-produced by users, instead of being generated by a microblogging site. In social media, hashtags become part of

the linguistic structure of the post. They take over a cataloguing function, helping users to retrieve, categorize, and select information of interest to them. Hashtags function both intertextually and intermedially, since they link to other texts containing the same hashtags and can be used across different social networking platforms (Zappavigna 2015). That is how hashtags take over an important brokering function, linking texts, images, media, and user profiles across different infrastructures and geographic locations. Consequently, hashtags can be crucial in creating communities (of practice) among geographically dispersed users. Dancers in Vietnam make use of a variety of hashtags, including English and Vietnamese hashtags. Hashtags may consist of the denomination of a particular dance style, such as house dance, b-boying, popping, waacking, and the like, or a crew name, such as BNashor, BigToe, and NewYorkStyle. They may also reference dancers' aliases (e.g., #Maitinhvi, #Banrua, #Rufu), and sometimes refer to a particular group of dancers, as in #femalepopper. The choice of a hashtag is decisive in addressing a particular public. In this context, the usage of English hashtags, in particular, connects content produced by Vietnamese dancers with content produced outside of the linguistic borders of Vietnam. The communicative repertoire of the hip hop community of practice is hence defined by multilingualism. Samira Hassa (2010:57) identifies code-switching into English as hip hop's lingua franca. Overall, translanguaging becomes a defining feature of the hip hop community of practice. According to García and Wei, translanguaging, in comparison to code-switching, does not consider the language practices of (bilingual) individuals as two autonomous language systems, but as "one linguistic repertoire with features that have been societally constructed as belonging to two separate languages" (2017:2). Naturally, most of the dancers are not bilingual per se, but English terms and utterances are part of their linguistic repertoire as part of their dance practice. In this vein, translanguaging is simultaneously the basis and result of global encounters. Nonetheless, Vietnamese dancers tend to use Vietnamese hashtags too, to connect within their local community of practice.

Self-Entrepreneurship

As much as the dancers inhabit their images as their own, they also self-own their bodies. In *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel establishes self-ownership, the

ownership over one's personal body, as a necessary precondition for the ownership of things. According to Hegel, the expression of one's will over one's body is fundamental (Houlgate 2017:46). For dancers trying to make a living from dancing, their body is their most important asset. Sharing videos of their performances online, they not only self-represent but also own and privatize their bodily performances. Drawing on Hegel's notion of self-ownership, Aihwa Ong (2008) regards privatization as an ethical relationship to the self as well as to others, to things, and to one's fate. The ethical relationship to themselves became most obvious when dancers explained that their bodily performances, and thence their bodies, were inalienable. They claimed that it was of utmost importance to them to decide when and how their bodies would be presented to the public (e.g., on social media platforms), and when, how, and where their bodies became a commodity as determined by others.

In Vietnam, like elsewhere in the world, it is difficult to make a living from dancing. Furthermore, one's body is a highly fragile resource; it needs to stay healthy, well-trained, and at best young in order to yield a high performance. Dancing is hard work, and many dancers working as freelancers need to have various sponsors and dance studios in order to make a living. Sharing videos of their dance performances online is one way to promote their labor and acquire new jobs. However, a number of skilled women dancers participating in this research resisted the commodification of their bodies. Thanh Phương, who makes a career with a real estate company, does so by differentiating between dancing as an art form or hobby and dancing as a source of income generation. She said: "[E]verybody just looks at a dancer like a tool, like a worker. They tell me, we can dance one hour...I can pay you like this. But they don't know about dancing as an art, too. I need respect from them. That is why I never took any jobs that pay very cheaply or make me work like a worker, never" (interview with author, 24 October 2018). In her reflection on the status of dancers in Vietnam, Thanh Phương adopts the metaphor of the alienated worker, recalling the role of workers in the market socialist economy as a production input or commodity. Her emphasis on getting respect indicates the public perception of dance as a commodity. Dancers are considered providers of a particular service in an economic exchange relationship. Yet her demand for respect points to her sense of self-worth as an individual and an artist. Whereas Thanh Phương used to earn money from dancing and performing shows

with fellow dancers for big commercial brands, she always maintained control over the performances. She recalls how she refused to follow the client's instructions sometimes, instead pitching her own ideas to the client. Vy likewise rejects making a living from performing at weddings, for TV shows, or at pop concerts because she fears that clients' demands might prevent her from further improving and developing herself the way she wants (Kurfürst 2021). In the end, both women chose the job they had been educated for at university to earn an income and maintained dancing as their hobby. By clearly separating their work life from their dancing life, the women are able to follow their passion, free from customers' demands on them.

Other dancers, in turn, engage in vertical integration, capitalizing on their interconnections with processes of dance and music production (Mbaye 2014). For instance, Mai Tinh Vi, a renowned woman hip hop and house dancer as well as b-girl,³ extended her entrepreneurial activities from teaching dance classes and doing shows to designing street wear. As the owner of a street apparel label, she markets her products via Facebook and Instagram. Facebook offers customized sites where products can be displayed in an online catalogue and purchased online. Being a one-woman label, Mai sells most of her fashion online, while distributing a minor amount of her products via a street fashion store in Hà Nội (Kurfürst 2021). In order to promote her fashion, she uploads photos of herself, kin, and friends wearing the fashion items for sale. In this way, self-ownership of the body and entrepreneurship of the self, as well as its virtual representations, are highly intertwined, not unlike in the case of Steinman's transnational e-traders (see her chapter in this volume). The young people presented here make (life) choices on their own behalf, while constantly improving themselves. Self-entrepreneurship, self-responsibility, and self-improvement are aspired-for characteristics of late socialist moral subjects (Horat, this volume; Nguyen 2019; Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012). Through self-curation, artists position themselves as industrious and self-responsible citizens in Vietnamese society. In addition, they domesticate global discourses while displaying their orientation toward the world.

Networked Social Movements

The increase in digital connectivity has also sparked online activism in Vietnam. While the government so far lacks cost-intensive surveillance techniques such as China has, physical arrests of bloggers have proven to be an efficient means to counter criticism of the state in digital networks. Since the 2000s, the Vietnamese government has arrested several net activists and sentenced quite a number of them under Article 88 of Vietnam's Penal Code for "spreading propaganda against the Vietnamese state" (Bui 2016:106). Against this background, Vietnamese netizens need to carefully navigate online platforms. In this last section, I consider hip hop practitioners' potential to create global encounters by switching networks with social movements originating elsewhere in the world, like Black Lives Matter.

In May 2020, Black US citizen George Floyd was attacked by a white police officer who pressed his knee for nine minutes into George Floyd's neck, resulting in his death. The murder of George Floyd was yet another police assault against Black US citizens in the past years against which protests were staged by using the hashtag #blacklivesmatter, demanding an end to police violence against Blacks. Black Lives Matter was founded in 2012 after the violent death of Trayvon Martin. Since then, it has evolved into a networked social movement, with people organizing themselves transnationally against systemic racism. In summer 2020, networks switched as fans of diverse popular culture, such as K-pop and hip hop, showed support for Black Lives Matter.⁴ For instance, K-pop fans launched hashtag campaigns BlackARMYsequality, #BlackARMYsMatter, and #BlackOutBTS. The former two hashtags had already been in use since 2018 to address racism and inequality within ARMY, the fandom of BTS (Lee and Kao 2021). In response, BTS and its music company Big Hits Entertainment donated 1 million US dollars to support the Black Lives Matter movement.

Another political act involving members of diverse communities of practice joining forces is Blackout Tuesday. The initiative goes back to the music industry. After the murders of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery, and the killing of Breonna Taylor in 2020, two Black women executives of the record label Atlantic Records, well known for its production of Black music, called out #TheShowMustBePaused in order to interrupt business as usual and make visible and heard the long-standing racism and injustices that Black citizens face in public and private life.

Diverse media conglomerates such as MTV, Apple, and Nickelodeon participated in Blackout Tuesday on 2 June 2020. Individuals and groups around the world posted black screens on Instagram accompanied by the hashtags #blacklivesmatter, #BlackOutTuesday, and more.⁵ This cross-cultural articulation of transnational solidarity with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color facing institutionalized racism worldwide was also taken up by the hip hop community of practice in Vietnam. Several members posted a black screen on Instagram. By contrast, Suboi shared an artwork by Monyee Chau comprising a yin and yang symbol with a yellow tiger on a black ground and a black panther upside down on yellow ground on Instagram. The image contains the script “YELLOW PERIL SUPPORTS BLACK POWER,” including the hashtags #BLACKLIVESMATTER and #ASIANS4BLACKLIVES (see fig. 8.1). The overall frame of the image is composed of the yin and yang symbol, in Vietnamese *âm dương*. The frame of yin and yang symbolizes the relationship between “yellow peril” and black panther, signifying unity, a common front against institutionalized racism.

The author of the image, Monyee Chau, is a Chinese and Taiwanese artist based in Seattle, using the pronouns they and them. The image gathered more than fifty thousand likes on Instagram. The duplication and circulation were inherent in the artwork itself as they made it available for others to download to use it on posters and signs. However, the artwork was contested, since it centered around the Asian American community at a time that was about Black lives. Receiving response to the artwork, Chau entered into a dialogue with the respondents and finally altered the artwork and replaced the original phrase with Black Lives Matter. They also published an apology thanking Asian and Black people helping them to understand the slogan’s problematic implications (Weik 2020).

The term Yellow Peril originates in the 1800s and literally signifies the colonial encounter. At that time, Chinese laborers were brought to the United States in order to replace emancipated Black communities. Chinese workers earned less than their white counterparts, who considered them nonetheless a “peril” to their livelihoods. In 1882, the US government passed the first racially based law to restrict immigration, the Chinese Exclusion Act. In the 1960s, Asian American communities sought to reclaim the racist term and their histories. The phrase “Yellow Peril Supports Black Power” evolved in the 1960s as an expression of Asian Americans’ support for Black communities and of unity against oppressive forces.⁶ Chau initially sought to express

the grief people felt after George Floyd's death and to show support for Black Lives Matter as the slogan was previously used to show support for the Black Power Movement. But activists have pointed out that "today, Black Lives Matter is a different movement in a different era" (Weik 2020).

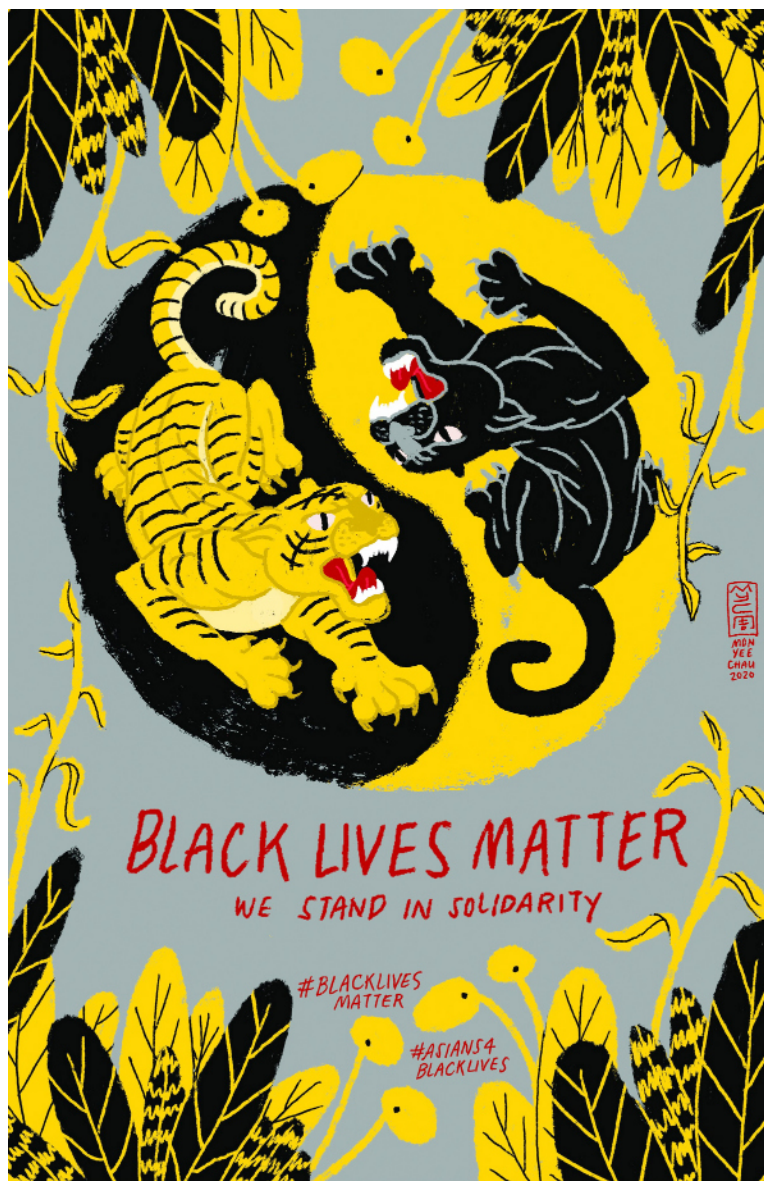


Figure 8.1: "Black Lives Matter—We Stand In Solidarity"

The term Yellow Peril is also claimed by Asian rappers to signify an intimate relationship among peers. Three young rappers from Hong Kong use it as their band name and track title (Lin 2009:174). In other words, a pejorative term that used to describe and address the “other” underwent a semantic inversion (Alim 2006). Accordingly, the appropriation of Yellow Peril, a term rooted in Western colonialism in the context of Othering, can, thus, be comprehended as a postcolonial act of signification and appropriation. As a result, the English term Yellow Peril becomes a linguistic marker of the translocal hip hop community of practice, uniting Asian rappers situated at the margins of the global hip hop industry.

By posting this image, Suboi reaches out to peers located across the Pacific. Her post on Instagram included a text on hip hop and its roots in Black culture, followed by the hashtags #georgefloyd #blacklivesmatter #justiceforgeorgefloyd. Such an imagined community, in which Black, Indigenous, and People of Color support one another, was also envisioned by Vietnamese American rapper Thai Viet G, one of the first MCs rapping in Vietnamese. Thai Viet G embodies translocal lifeworlds: he grew up in the United States and was raised by a Vietnamese mother. In 1997, he released the bilingual rap track “Vietnamese Gangs” together with Khanh Nhỏ, considered to be the first Viet rap track. In 2012, Thai Viet G also collaborated with Suboi. On Blackout Tuesday, Thai Viet G posted a clenched fist surrounded by sun rays, with stars in each corner against a brown background. Above the fist, capital letters read “VIETNAMESE FOR” and beneath the fist “BLACK LIVES.” The post reads “You know where I stand!” followed by the hashtags #blacklivesmatter and #unity.

The sharing of global icons in the form of black screens, artworks, and hashtags demonstrates Vietnamese hip hop practitioners’ awareness of global discourses. In their digital performances of selves, they continuously negotiate their being Vietnamese citizens and citizens of the world. An orientation toward the world containing intercultural contact, hybridity, and openness in regard to the other are important components of cosmopolitanism (Hannerz 1990; Gaudette 2012:306). With respect to China, Lisa Rofel (2007:112) defines cosmopolitanism as “a site for the production of knowledge about what it means to be human in this reconfigured world, knowledge that is being embraced, digested, reworked, contested, and resisted.” Such humanity can be articulated in solidarity with Black communities against racism. In addition, such support can be read as a form of political action

that would be immediately sanctioned if it were directed toward the Vietnamese nation-state. Giang Nguyen-Thu reminds us that “[f]or survival, professional, and ethical purposes, Vietnamese media practitioners precariously rely on years of trained sensibility to extemporize along and across the felt threshold of the sayable, which varies on topics, styles of presentation, political capital, and the overall public moods” (2022:7). Consequently, members of the community of practice have learned to navigate diverse layers of censorship, being able to “improvise and play ‘between the lines’” (Nguyen-Thu 2022:7). In this vein, the support of Black Lives Matter can also be interpreted as a deliberate political act that is not persecuted by the state because it addresses topics outside of Vietnam, but is nonetheless of relevance to humanity at large and the hip hop community of practice in particular.

*Orientations toward the World
in Unequal Fields of Globe-Spanning Power*

“The metamorphosis of media in Vietnam illustrates that national popular culture is neither a space of total encapsulation by the party-state nor a domain of autonomous resistance by the masses; rather, it is a constantly changing field of cultural relations” (Tri Phuong 2017:828).

Popular culture crisscrosses national boundaries and is frequently determined by the flow of capital (Huat 2015). In the global hip hop economy, Vietnam is located at the margins, but hip hop practitioners turn their marginality into an asset (Harms 2011) by producing hip hop commodities and artifacts, including their own bodily performances, and distributing them via digital networks. That is how they create opportunities for global encounters with hip hop artists in other locations of the world. Their lives are translocal as they move between diverse scales, participating in and physically travelling to local, national, and regional dance battles. However, their movement cannot be taken for granted. Dancers’ physical mobility depends on their economic resources, responsibilities toward family, kin, and community, and immigration regimes that may grant or deny access to Vietnamese citizens. Yet, the artists can be cosmopolitan without physical mobility. Instead of thinking of cosmopolitanism as a universal force, Rofel suggests decentering “representations of the ‘cosmopolitan’ and the ‘local’

by reversing their assumed hierarchies” (2007:114). Put differently, staying in Vietnam and building up communities of practice and markets within Vietnam and the Southeast Asian region does not make the hip hop artists less cosmopolitan. Rather, their various identities and desires are formed through attachments to places within their city, country, or region. Rofel considers desire, in the postsocialist context of China, as a “key cultural practice in which both the government and its citizens reconfigure their relationship to a postsocialist world” (2007:3).

In conclusion, through self-making, self-entrepreneurship, and engaging in networked social movements, Vietnamese members of the hip hop community of practice choreograph their multiple relationships with the world, their country, and their locality.

Notes

- 1 *Vũ Điệu Xanh*, broadcast on the channel VTV 6, targets both “old and young” people, presenting diverse dance styles, such as breaking, popping, waacking, hip hop, belly dance, and dance sports. *So You Think You Can Dance?* is broadcast on local and regional channels. In 2020, the two TV shows *King of Rap*, based in Hà Nội, and *Việt Rap*, based in Hồ Chí Minh City, attained massive public attention, pushing rap a bit further into the main stream. The shows featured rap icons such as Lil’Shady, LK, Dat Maniac, and Suboi.
- 2 Hien translates the idiom’s meaning as follows: “by altering an image, one may alter the fate of the depicted subject, which is connected to the art or science of physiognomy—reading the face (*nhân tướng học*)” (2012:475).
- 3 B-girls are women who perform break(danc)ing.
- 4 Both music genres have a transnational fan base. While hip hop is rooted in Black American culture, K-pop, a young music genre from South Korea, has a big fan base among the Black community in the United States. BTS, debuting in 2013, is one of K-pop’s most renowned bands internationally. The band’s fans organize themselves via social media in the umbrella organization ARMY (Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth). Over the past years ARMY has invested in a range of sociopolitical issues, such as refugee crises, racial discrimination, children’s rights, global warming, etc. (Lee and Kao 2021).
- 5 Soon after the posting of black screens marked by the hashtag #blacklivesmatter, voices arose kindly asking users to abstain from using the hashtag in combination with the black images, stating that the black screens hinder the hashtag’s cataloguing function to retrieve information on protests and civil actions.
- 6 “Yellow Peril supports Black Power” goes back to a black-and-white photo taken at a rally in Oakland, California, in 1969 in support of Huey Newton, co-founder

of the Black Panther party. The billboard displaying the photo is held by Japanese American activist Richard Aoki, the only Asian American holding a leadership position in the Black Panthers. However, he later turned out to be an FBI informant with the task to infiltrate the Black Panthers. Wun, of Asian American and Pacific Islanders Women Lead, said: “But there are limitations to symbolism. We need to consider the fact that today, there are a lot more Asian Americans who don’t identify as yellow, or East Asian, so the term ‘yellow peril’ isn’t inclusive” (Weik 2020).

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*The “West” as the Qualified International:
Its Imaginaries at the
Urban Workplace in Vietnam*

KIM ANH DANG

*Introduction: What Is the “Standard International” in the
“International Standard”?*

A FEW MONTHS AFTER my fieldwork ended in 2020, a manager at Animgogo (pseudonym), one of the two organizations that I spent my time with, asked me to check the English translation of their portfolio. A paragraph titled “What Makes Animgogo the Top Animation Production Studio in Vietnam” describes how Animgogo became the pioneer in the animation industry in Vietnam, which had previously been dominated by state-owned studios and was lagging behind the world’s standard. As the story goes, the founder returned to Vietnam after years of studying animation in the United States, was dissatisfied with the state of the industry, and decided to set up a studio that adheres to worldwide animation standards. Only, the story is not entirely accurate. The founder himself never went to the United States, though he did hire a US-educated creative director later on. There is no specific set of international standards to which they adhere, either. Nevertheless, this narrative around world-class practices, quality, and standards, coupled with the credentials of foreign-educated experts, highlights the image that was carefully crafted by the marketing team to attract local and international investment.

Animgogo is only one of the many enterprises in Vietnam that are taking part in this celebratory narrative of embracing an arbitrary ideal that the

rest of the world seems to be heading toward. The looming presence of world-class standards and quality, whether in the form of actual laws and regulation or just simply a tagline or buzzword, reflects Vietnam's many transformations under the forces of globalization and neoliberal ideals, and the pressure to integrate into the global economy. The diverse practices of measuring, classifying, comparing, and benchmarking against a certain "global" standard, however, does not simply reflect organizations' desire to upgrade their managerial and organizational practices and to appeal to foreign buyer requirements, as researchers such as Calza, Goedhuys, and Trifković (2019) have suggested. In actuality, the implementation of specific sets of international standards such as the ISO is still unregulated and voluntary, and the vast majority of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Vietnam do not adhere to them (Trifković 2020). Firms instead emphasize the abstract and principle-like concepts and philosophies of management knowledge from the so-called advanced countries rather than strict procedures, which allows them to experiment with different interpretations without compromising the symbolic capital that the tag "global standard and quality" can offer. As Roy and Ong (2011) have further pointed out, there is no singular or fixed standard of this desired globality. There are many forms of the "global" and the "international" at play, and not all of them are considered ideal, standard, or worth emulating. Even when workers viewed themselves as existing in a globalized world in which the management and organization of work no longer had a nationality, the practical reality was one of international fragmentation, with the value of other countries, particularly in the so-called developing world, being largely ignored (Boussebaa, Morgan, and Sturdy 2012).

In this context, this chapter aims to shed light on the application and aspiration around narratives of international standards, global quality, and world-class levels in management practices. It takes the political, cultural, and symbolic dimensions much more seriously than the managerialist and rationalist framework, as often assumed in the contemporary debates on the transferability of management practices in the Asian context. While it is not always possible to answer the question of what the exact international standard is that people and organizations in Vietnam follow, it is possible, and perhaps more interesting, to ask what practices are considered standard and what are the social and cultural imaginaries that constitute their desired globality.¹ Drawing on ethnographic observation, interviews, and

documents from two SMEs in Vietnam, this chapter aims to examine (1) how the idea of an international standard and global quality is understood and applied at the local sites of practice or, more specifically, who and what gets to represent this “standard international” and why; (2) how it is involved in the construction and management of subjectivities at the workplace; and (3) how international standard-aspired management practices and the shaping of subjectivities are interconnected with the Vietnamese state’s governance, in the context of the tension between Vietnam’s market socialist economy and the (arguably) neoliberal global economy.

*The West as the Desired Global:
The Cases of LEAP Global and Animogogo*

One day during my fieldwork, I was intrigued by a worker’s sarcastic tone about the hiring of what she referred to as a *mẫu Tây* (Western model)² in their English-language edutainment programs. Upon my inquiry, she explained: “Only when they hire someone from the Philippines, then I’ll believe that they want to diversify. Otherwise, they will just serve the *sính ngoại* [favoring foreigner] mentality of a small group of clients.” The remark reveals an implicit understanding at both organizations in this study that there is a kind of “foreign” (in this case, the Western kind) that clients favor. This desire for a certain skin color and race in companies’ attempt to be and look “international” is not a particular case of the two organizations in this study, or Vietnam in general. As observed elsewhere in Asia, concepts and images under the tag of “international,” especially where and when an authoritative, reliable statement is needed, have been aggressively portrayed via the West, or the idea of the West. While it is out of this chapter’s scope to provide a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of the portrayal of the “West,”³ I aim to contribute to a more complex and nuanced understanding of its presence in Vietnam, an interaction that has been described as interdependent (Phan 2016) and cofigured (Wilcox 2010). As Wilcox (2010) argued, “Vietnam,” “Asia,” or the “West” are not given categories of analysis that were produced *ex nihilo*, but defined through the interactions of the subjects that are deemed Vietnamese, Asian, and Western. Thus, the West has never been a fixed entity, or simply a source of dominance and hegemonic force, but rather it has always existed as a source of ideas, inspiration, and imagination.

As Asia and its people experienced multiple relations with the West, Western imaginaries have also been constantly reworked and reconfigured. Throughout Vietnam's anti-colonial struggle, the West has been imagined as a force of nature,⁴ civilization, and progress, an idealized representation of a social Darwinist inevitability (Bradley 2003). And yet, it has also been portrayed by the Communist Party during the 1960s as a source of social evils, whereby Vietnam and the party were envisioned as a "non-West" space, positioned as guarantors of authentic Vietnamese "tradition" (Wilcox 2000).

Since the series of market reforms, movement toward globalization and internationalization provides an even more fertile ground for people to participate in and actively cogenerate ideas and imaginaries about the West. Even if its status as financial superpower declines (Hoang 2015), it continues to stand in for quality and safety in the time of rising anxiety over environmental and moral degradation (Steinman, this volume) and upward class movement in a time when the Vietnamese government is criticized for discouraging inventive and hard work (Small 2019).

In this context, I would like to take as my starting point the narratives and practices around "international standard," "world class," and "world level" at the workplace, practices that, according to workers, help them and their workplace to "catch up with the world" and achieve a world-class aesthetics and desired globality. Their presence in Vietnam's engagement with the "international" is a fruitful point to start precisely because of the lack of laws and regulation when it comes to this standard, level, and quality. Instead, the practices and narratives' reliance on the social and cultural imaginaries of the West as the international standard prompts us to ask: What are the imaginaries of the West and how do they get to represent the standard in the "international standard," or the quality in the "global quality"? As I will demonstrate, even against the backdrop of the grander and seemingly more inclusive narrative of the "international" and the "global," the "West" does not simply recede or become irrelevant, but rather transmutes in its meaning, representation, and symbolic power. At the same time, people are not passive recipients of hegemonic Western ideas and values. Rather, these spaces of encounter are constantly negotiated as people are pushed and pulled by their own interests, agendas, and aspirations.

At both organizations in this study, being international is expressed through a desire for affiliation with the West, or more specifically the imaginaries of the West, whether real, distorted, or symbolic. The very same

word “West” can mean different things to different people, and does not necessarily refer to the geographical and/or political boundary of what is considered the Western world. As a result, the word “West/Western” is often used interchangeably with “abroad,” “foreign,” or even “global” whenever the image of a desirable “global” or universal quality is evoked.

At Animago, a privately owned animation studio, it is not by chance that their tagline “Crafting your stories with international standards and expertise” is associated with their affiliation with the “West” in their portfolio, be it in the form of their US-educated creative directors, French consultants, Australia-educated manager, or their affiliation with popular US and European animation studios. For LEAP Global, a foreign-funded digital entertainment company, the internationally recognized standard of working relies heavily on the presence of their international talent. Despite their most important market being Southeast Asia, these expatriate managers’ expertise and authority about the “international way of working” are often reinforced and justified by either their Western origin or their affiliation with the West, either in the form of education or work experience. In an induction session, a Vietnamese manager praised how far LEAP had come in its global ambition, citing the diversity of its expat manager staff, coming from the United States and France. She then mentioned a non-Western expat manager, who is “Indian, but at least she used to study in the US.” Stressing the word “at least,” she went on to mention their consultants from Netflix to impress the newcomers with their Western affiliation.

As aforementioned, the affiliation with the “West” here is not only confined geographically but also extends to include symbolic representations. At Animago, even the simple act of choosing a business email address to be a “Western-sounding” one becomes an important way to show investors and clients that they possess this desirable cosmopolitan quality. This symbolic capital of practices under the tag of the international standard can also be seen in advertisement and recruitment materials such as “Vietnamese company with international standard,” or “Vietnamese culture, international standard”; these often go together with images of “Western” experts or “Western” brands. This performativity does not go unnoticed by workers, as commented by a young employee with a hint of sarcasm: “Clearly an outsider looking in will find that professional. But that is just about the façade. Clearly you can see that our company is called LEAP Global. Our company has foreigners.” As the ideal West is imagined as the pathway to achieve a

world-class status, conversely practices that ensure achieving an “international quality and standard” are often described and justified as *kiểu Tây*, a “Western” style, which is described generally and vaguely as a desirable, modern, advanced way of thinking, working, and managing. The vagueness and symbolic nature of the term West is not new, neither is it a surprising finding when it comes to Vietnam. In Vietnamese, “West” (*phương Tây*) and “Western” (*Tây*) are often used interchangeably with “abroad” or “foreign,” with researchers tracing back the use of the word to the French colonial time (Gillen 2008). Shifts in the Vietnamese economy over the course of the war and postwar years along with the increasing flow of transnational mobilities have further contributed to the spatial reorientation along with the symbolic representation of the “West”: a place of economic advancement, opportunities, and promises for better future. As Schwenkel’s (2015) study of Cold War socialist mobilities in Vietnam has pointed out, travelling to what the Vietnamese identified as the “West” (*đi Tây*) was after all capitalism’s “East” at the time. This socialist dreamworld that promised Vietnamese men and women their escape from war and poverty remained a symbolic “West.” Similarly, in recent years, the flow of migrant workers expanded to what was often considered the “East,” such as Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This migration would still be referred to by workers and manpower agencies as “going West,” evoking the desire of hope for a better life in a destination that they consider to be more advanced economically. In this context, this use of the term West should not be seen simply as a linguistic error due to the person’s lack of geographical understanding (or perhaps lack of interest) or just a discursive relic from Vietnam’s colonial past. But rather, the idea of the West has become a system of representation that people use to make sense of their place in the modern global order. In fact, this generality of the “West,” especially in the perceptions and interpretation of the desired “global,” is exactly the point because it reflects the extent of unconscious colonial identification in the popular imagination. To borrow Hall’s (1992) theorization, the West becomes a structure of knowledge, a system of representation that connects with other concepts, in this case the advanced/developed/modern/scientific versus the developing/feudal/rural/hierarchical. This system of representation then becomes a frame of reference, deciding the benchmark and the standard for comparison. The global here, through the narratives and practices of the international standard and world-class quality, is reconfigured through the imaginaries of the “West,”

creating new spatialities where certain spaces (such as the Euro-Anglo-America) and subjects become visible, while the rest of the world is obscured.

Considering not only Vietnam’s colonial past but its trajectory under neocolonial globalization,⁵ the identification of the “standard international” with the West reveals how through discursive articulation, neocolonial systems of representation and modes of living continue to infiltrate the space of the national popular imagination. Putting the “West” at the center of inquiry, the next section offers an analysis of the visibility of the West as the desired global. As the “global” is imagined, performed, and practiced over different locations, its material and discursive forms in turn transfigure images, desires, and identities.

Climbing the Global Ladder with Western Quality

As aforementioned, the use of the word *Tây* (Western) by Vietnamese workers at both Animogo and LEAP Global goes beyond a specific geographical region. Often used as an adjective, it is also associated with the discourse of *chất lượng* (quality) or *xịn* (having quality). In one interview, a participant who obtained her degree from what she described as a “Western” university, explained why she had rejected another job offer as a manager at an outsourced shoe factory on the city’s periurban periphery. The following excerpt from my interview with her illustrates how this Western quality is imagined, through association with certain images and disassociation with others:

At that time, I just graduated, I thought I was at this level, I should work in an environment which is *qualitied international*, wear nice clothes in a nice building in District 1,⁶ or at least the center of District 3. But it [that workplace] was very close to the rural area, so I refused. I studied in a Western university, why would I work in the rural area? I didn’t like it at all. My mum said, you should take it, this is also an international environment, because there are also foreigners there, they also speak English. But I said no.

As this excerpt shows, the international level that Vietnamese workers aspire to is not simply a place where there are foreigners who speak English, but a “*qualitied*,” cosmopolitan Western kind. Similarly, many workers at both LEAP and Animogo are very aware that not everything “international” is associated with the social prestige and “quality” to which they aspire. Desire for

upward social mobility is further expressed through the extent that the workers can affiliate with this Western quality, with some spaces considered having more Western quality than others.

It is perhaps not surprising that this deeply entrenched occidental/oriental binary continues to polarize the divide between the “West” and the “Other,” and redefine the “Other” in terms of the superior and developed West (Said 2016). Yet, the reimagination of the West in terms of quality means the “West” is no longer fixed as a geographical and temporal entity, but has become a universal psychological category. As Nandy has warned: “the West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds” (1983:vii). In the urban workplace, this Western quality extends to describe a desired way of thinking and attitude (what a lot of participants refer to when using the English word *mindset*), an inner quality that Vietnamese workers can learn to possess, without even having to ever visit the West.

While workers offered various accounts and interpretations of what this Western *mindset* is, its presence continues to exist in a system of binary opposition, going hand in hand with the problematized Vietnamese and, at times, Asian characteristics. As workers praised what they identified as the Western spirit of openness, entrepreneurialism, self-discipline, and self-management, they also saw it as the solution that helped them slough off the conservative, passive, and submissive Vietnamese-ness. Many young workers at LEAP and Animogo chose to work in a foreign company with the hope of being exposed to this new way of thinking, as illustrated by the following excerpt from an interview with a manager from LEAP Global, who made a point to recruit people with a Western *mindset*: “In the Western world, we tend to like focus more on what you think is important as well. So they actually need to find the solution themselves. Here [in Vietnam], the solution is provided by the teacher, the boss, the parents—and that’s how it should be. This is not the kind of people I would recruit absolutely.” There is no reason to claim characteristics such as “taking initiative” and “being proactive” as belonging exclusively to the West, and workers have also referred to these desirable characteristics in various occasions without referring to the West. Nevertheless, their association with the West was often brought up to emphasize these characteristics’ universality in an increasingly globalized world, where heading West is considered a natural order of progress and development. Presenting the Western proactive attitude as the

solution to be able to work in a transnational, multicultural environment, another manager at LEAP explained:

In Europe or the US, people are very friendly and they can just say “hi.” Even when they don’t know each other, they are still very open during an interaction. But we Vietnamese are pretty reserved, pretty traditional. That’s a cultural issue, the standoffish Asian characteristics. That’s a hindrance for our employees, even though the senior expat managers always expect them to be more proactive.

The reimagination of the desired global in terms of a Western quality here is not only discursive but also technical. Through practices to upgrade the organizations, to train and manage workers to reach this desired global level, this Western quality is produced as an inevitably universal, modern, scientific, logical way and becomes the solution for the Vietnamese rural, feudal, and obsolete way. At Animogo, using a management program to track and manage workers’ performance is considered one of the main strategies to upgrade the organization to the global level through promoting a more scientific and logical way of working; most importantly, it is to remove the old, *nhà quê* (rural) way of working. This concern is also translated to how they use English and redesign their office as well as their portfolio and website. When one of the managers asked me to help him come up with a business email address, he remarked that the current name, even in English, sounded too “rural” and lacked the sophistication needed to impress foreign investors.

In Vietnam, the term *nhà quê* has long been used to refer to anyone or anything that lacks sophistication, cosmopolitan, taste, or class. However, its ideological associations go beyond the spatial, cultural, and moral distinctions between the city and the country (Tu 2019). Dating back to the colonial time when indigenous people were referred to as *nhà quê* with contempt by colonialists (Ky 2002:58), these days the term is laden with other connotations, from “outdated” and “backward” to “ignorant” and “uneducated.” These symbolic categories between the obsolete/ignorant and advanced/educated continue to lend themselves to Vietnamese workers’ imagination of their place in the global hierarchy.

At both organizations, another way to upgrade the organizations’ backward way of working is to uphold the supposedly Western ideal of meritocracy through methods of quantifying performance and performance-based payment.⁷ Citing the feudal and hierarchical characteristic of

Vietnamese society as conservative and problematic, many workers at both organizations chose to work specifically at an organization with foreign elements. Meritocracy in this context is translated into the assessment and management of workers' performance under the notion of "key performance indicator" (KPI), which quantifies not only their achievement but also their attitude against the organization's objective and core value in percentages.

Despite this promise of Western objectivity, the KPI system is not as meritocratic as it claims to be, but is instead performative and disciplinary. In casual conversations during my fieldwork, workers often complained how other members in the team were "obsessed" with having to manipulate their KPI numbers to look good enough, despite knowing that the target number, which was mostly decided by the CEO and senior managers, was completely unachievable. Furthermore, the universalization of attitudes such as "stepping out of your comfort zone" and "taking initiative" by assigning them as part of a more advanced Western mindset is often used to dismiss workers' dissatisfaction and shift the responsibility to the individual during times of precarity. When one of the businesses at LEAP was restructured, which forced a number of workers to resign, the situation was framed by senior managers as the workers' lack of "willingness to grow" and therefore a missed opportunity to apply "passion to adapt."

Desire, Resentment, and the Specter of Orientalism

As shown, the imaginary West has performed different functions. It has become a way of being and doing, a representation of modernity and advancement, a system of reference, a point of measurement for comparison, and also a goal to meet. But as Dirlik (1997) argued, the "West" has also become the object of both desire and resentment among third world nationalism, whose geographical and psychic spaces it has occupied. In the case of Vietnam, this "fatal distraction," to borrow Dirlik's conceptualization, has no doubt transformed over time. While the nationalist anti-foreign discourse at the beginning of the market reform is no longer prevailing, its social and cultural legacy carries on in the everyday life language of Vietnamese people.

Even when the "West" is desired as a quality, it still carries a negative connotation especially when used to refer to a person. The slightly

demeaning tone of the word *người Tây* (Westerner) has been detected by scholars outside of Vietnam such as Gillen (2008), who tracked the etymology of the expression to its usage to describe French colonizers. While the modern workplace under globalization has no doubt adopted a more politically correct language to address foreign colleagues and partners, workers still sometimes used the word “Westerner,” often to express the anger and frustration toward the racism and discrimination between Vietnamese and foreign expats.

While expat managers often introduce new structures, knowledge, and resources into the work process, these elements often varied depending on the individual’s personal education and work experience, rather than on the aforementioned generalized superior Western mindset. Nevertheless, even expat managers themselves often assumed that their ways of working were just the universal, smarter way of doing things or, in the words of an expat manager at LEAP Global, “geographically agnostic ways of working if you get a smart team of people.” Here, both expat managers and Vietnamese workers’ discourse of the “Western universal skeleton,” where Vietnamese culture is simply an added-on flavor, displays how the “West” remains the inevitable and universal and the “East” the exotic and cultural—the very depiction that Edward Said’s (2016) “Orientalism” has sought to identify and deconstruct.

It is not uncommon, however, for Vietnamese workers to challenge this assumption. In one instance, a manager at Animongo got into an argument with their business partner, who insisted on choosing the strategy that their French consultant had suggested. After yet another tense negotiation, he told me: “They often say along the line of ‘he’s from abroad so his mindset about everything is better than Vietnamese’ to protect their opinion. I can accept that they want to protect their opinion if they give me their own reason. But the reason that the French consultant has superior mindset just because he’s French doesn’t make sense to me.” Yet, it is also this very hierarchy of power that pushed both LEAP and Animongo to affiliate with foreign and foreign-educated experts to add the image of internationally recognized expertise and quality to their claims, even when such expertise is not necessary or relevant.

This game to accumulate and exercise symbolic power associated with the West means that the resentment toward the “superior Westerner” continues to go together with the desire to identify with and to be “them,” to

echo Fanon's psychoanalysis of coloniality (2008). The Western mindset becomes the new "white mask," a tool of mobility through which many Vietnamese workers aspire to move across the global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority. While this ranking has been politically, economically, and culturally produced and reproduced during the centuries by the modern/colonial world system; by detaching West-ness from the Westerner as such, Vietnamese workers can strip the default superiority off the Westerner, and by possessing that Western quality, they hope to be on the "same level" when protest against racism at the workplace is not possible. This desire is expressed by a worker at LEAP Global:

When you are Asian, and the others are Westerners, you are treated very different from them. Even when your thinking inside is Western style. But when they see that you are Asian, they don't care. And the others must have something special because they are European. That is a wrong preconception that I think has to be changed. The Westerners are also human just like you. There is no reason for them to be superior.

The previous sentiment, at first glance, seems to echo what Hoang (2015) observed to be a global pushback against Western superiority. Yet, this contestation is also enabled by the reimaginary of the West as a quality that can be internalized. Thus, as Phan (2016) argued, transnational spaces in Asia continue to act as a transforming and dynamic transit point—a layover that facilitates entry into a wanted destination: the West and/or the idea of the West. Even when this imaginary opens up spaces for workers to revalue their sense of their labor's worth, the underlying logics of progress and advancement also allow the colonialist and neocolonialist hierarchy to continue while its claim of universality conceals new forms of inequality. Just as middle-class Vietnamese workers in urban spaces climb up the hierarchy with their newly cultivated Western quality, others are deemed to be of lower quality, and therefore inferior on the global ladder. In a follow-up conversation about the notion of *bọn Tây thượng đẳng* (the superior Westerner), a senior manager at Animgogo stated: "It's only normal [that they are superior]. It's just like when we look at other ethnic groups, or Cambodia. Or even when rich people look at poor people." This subconscious tendency to project groups of the "Other" in a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority—the specter of Orientalism—is unfortunately not uncommon among workers with whom I have spoken, and especially among those who previously worked with people who they considered *ít học* (not as educated).

Ideals often associated with the West such as transparency, negotiation, fairness, and the democratic practice of listening to everyone’s voice are then often reserved only for the educated middle-class professionals who are assumed to possess the superior intellectual and moral capacity. As a result, the very workers who admire the reasonable, democratic “Western” way of working can be the same ones who deem others not educated enough to reason with.

In contemporary Vietnam, where the party-state considers the notion of *dân trí* (intellectual level of the people) to be correlated with human development, low *dân trí* is often deemed both the cause and effect of poverty, disorder, and underdevelopment (Nguyen 2018). In this sense, “the uneducated” and “the working class,” who are deemed to have low *dân trí*, are often considered greedy, impulsive, and incapable of understanding law and reason, thus exempted from any benefit that the supposedly liberal Western ideals offer. In this context, the Western quality discourse takes on a similar function as the rhetoric of morality in Vietnam, which, as Schwenkel and Leshkovich (2012) argued, naturalizes middle-classness as somehow reflecting desirable qualities (in this case, reasonable, lawful, and civil) rather than a privileged position in an environment of increasing structural inequalities.

Western Quality and Patriotic Professionalism

What Tania Li (2007) has referred to as the will to improve also extends from the self at work to the state’s nation-building project. Through accumulating Western quality, it links the managing and shaping of subjectivities at the workplace to state governance. It is precisely by turning the “West” into an adjective, a quality, that it can be learned and achieved, and thereby incorporated into the national development project. In fact, at both Animogo and LEAP Global, the tag “Made in Vietnam, global quality” is used as a strategy to attract idealistic talents who are passionate about taking Vietnam to the global arena despite the potential risks and hardship of being a pioneer. In an interview, a younger worker explained the reason why she decided to take a job at Animogo: “When the interviewer shared with me Animogo’s dream to be a part of the world’s modern animation industry and the plan to develop Vietnam’s animation industry, I loved it because it’s

exactly what I want, leaving behind my marks as a Vietnamese.” The desire to be globally competitive, yet remaining distinctively Vietnamese, echoes the Vietnamese state’s policies of global integration in the past few years. Integrating the “West” into nationalist discourse is of course not a new phenomenon.⁸ What makes the presence of the West notable in this case, however, is that the West is no longer just a method or a source of knowledge, but has extended to become an essence, a spirit, a way of thinking and being in the world, thus transmuting from an external foreign threat to a mode of thinking that can be reconfigured and combined with the state’s economic and political interest. Universalized and depoliticized, the Western quality is combined with a nationalist identity to develop a form of post-reform personhood that improves the nation via fostering new (apolitical) technologies and knowledge in the economic sphere. This sense of apolitical professional nationalism is observed at both Animago and LEAP Global, especially among foreign-educated managers who had returned to Vietnam, and younger workers who harbor the dream of going abroad. For a US-educated manager at Animago, his decision to return to Vietnam was to improve what he considered the hierarchical nature of the Vietnamese culture. Insisting on promoting democracy at Animago, he explained:

It’s because I see a lot of problems with the way of working in Vietnam that I want to bring my way of thinking back, even just a bit. So that everyone can follow this way, which is fair and respectful for everyone, and not “because I said so.” Maybe my thinking is too idealistic in Vietnamese society. But I think Vietnam needs someone to do that.

Similarly, another younger worker at LEAP shared her dream of going abroad, but eventually returning to Vietnam to work: “Maybe it’s a little bit ideal. But I want to do something for Vietnam rather than a foreign country. So I will study, and maybe work a little bit there to train my skills and knowledge, to have a completely different mindset [before returning to Vietnam].” This form of personhood has also been observed in market socialist China, described by Hoffman (2010) as patriotic professionalism. In Vietnam, far from the view of the post-reform democratized workers, the state did not simply retreat, but merely shifted its governing approach to one where modernization goals are combined with social stability, self-reliance with a sense of nationalism. At urban workplaces, where middle-class professional subjectivities are fashioned as self-improving agents, the

depoliticized and universalized Western mindset becomes a governing technology that problematizes the Vietnamese way of working to align with the state’s socialist modernity project, yet never extend it to the state’s political trajectory.

Conclusion

The main aim of this chapter has been to explore the practices and aspiration around narratives of the international standard, global quality, and world-class level at transnational workplaces and the way in which such practices transform the subjects that they seek to govern. Providing a critique to the grand narrative of global standards and quality as simply a set of universal and rational principles, my analysis reveals how imaginaries of the ideal global divide into imaginaries of the global “core” (the standard, qualified) and the “peripheral” (those who are geographically international, but are not considered standard), thereby forming spaces and subjects of inclusion and exclusion, and consequently a hierarchy of who is worthy to govern at the local and global spaces.

First, my findings side with research in the field of internationalization in Vietnam that found global aspiration to be attached to idea of “the West,” a mythical rather than real standard that relies on a selective image of the “West” that is further reinforced through a neocolonial comparative gaze (Phan and Doan 2020). Yet, the rearticulation of the West as an adjective allows it to transmute from an external location into a quality and a mode of thinking that can be produced and consumed through training and management practices at the workplace, transferred from the foreign, to be learned by the local. Both the “rise of Asia” and the rise of its imaginary as a global space did not diminish desire for the West within Asia, but rather have created new meanings and imaginaries of the West and what they signify. There is thus an obvious need to engage with the complex and revised meanings of both the “West” and “Asia.”

Second, my results provide insights into how neoliberal and socialist forms of governance in Vietnam can coexist. Precisely by turning the “West” into an adjective, it can also be depoliticized and incorporated into the national development project. Through the developmentalist narrative of science and progress that underlies much of Vietnam’s socialist modernity

project, Western quality is combined with a nationalist identity to develop a type of post-reform personhood that is a self-improving entrepreneur for the sake of improving the nation. At the same time, this form of improvement is limited to the self, in the economic sphere and the workplace where new (apolitical) technologies and knowledge can be fostered.

Finally, my analysis also echoes the postcolonial concern of the intensification of inequalities through global competition in Asia (Chatterjee and Barber 2021). While ideas and practices around a global standard and quality open up spaces to reinvent the self and to contest against existing forms of racism and classism in Vietnam, this new tool of mobility also acts as the new “white mask” to reproduce and conceal the imperialist hierarchy of superiority and inferiority. In Vietnam, even when discourses around internationalization go hand-in-hand with “the rise of Asia” and a sense of nationalist pride, the effort to position itself in the global ladder by either heading toward or competing with the “West” still relies on the “specter of comparison” (Anderson 1998), one that continues to split the world into the binary of West-East, advanced-backward, universal-cultural, superior-inferior.

Notes

- 1 For example, Horat (this volume) explores the way in which engaging with the global ideal of sustainability provides Vietnamese youth a space to connect with people and themes beyond Vietnam and envision their future in a more globally entangled way. Yet, confined to what the Vietnamese government deems politically appropriate and acceptable, these imaginaries are often translated into entrepreneurial terms and actions, allowing young people a kind of freedom they cannot find elsewhere.
- 2 While *mẫu Tây* could refer to all foreign models, it is more often used to distinguish a group of models with typical “White” features who are thereby distinguished from other groups such as Vietnamese models (*mẫu Ta*), Asian models (*mẫu Á*), and models of color (*mẫu da màu*).
- 3 Wilcox (2010), for example, provides an expansive chronological and topical collection of essays on the presence of the West in the Vietnamese past and present.
- 4 This image of the West is described by the reformers as “European wind, American rain” (Bradley 2003). Similarly, Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân (1988) described the arrival of the West as a strong gust of wind: “The whole old

foundation was shaken. Encounter with the West was the greatest transformation in Vietnam history for centuries.”

- 5 Here I follow the argument by Tomlinson (1996), who linked globalization to the continuous project of imperialism.
- 6 District 1 is the central urban district of Hồ Chí Minh City, which contains most of the city’s administrative offices, consulates, and large buildings, and has the city’s highest living standards.
- 7 It is important to note here that meritocracy in itself is not a stranger to Vietnamese history, with the feudal system exercising the practice of examination for the hiring of their mandarins. Ironically, it was the arrival of Western colonialism that ended this system of meritocracy. In 1919, the French abolished the mandarin’s competitive civil service examinations without replacing them with an equally meritocratic new recruitment system (Woodside 2006).
- 8 Integrating the “West” into nationalist discourse is of course not a new phenomenon. The history of imperialism and the various ways to respond to Western forces have produced movements such as *zhōngtǐ xīyòng* (Chinese essence, Western practicality), in the late Qing dynasty in China (Luo 2017), and *Wakon-yōsai* (Japanese spirit, Western learning), in late nineteenth-century Japan (Sakamoto 2008).

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*A Divided Sangha in the Global Field of
Vietnamese Buddhism*

ALLISON TRUITT

IN 2005, THE ACCLAIMED ZEN MASTER Thích Nhất Hạnh returned to Vietnam after nearly forty years. Exiled from the Republic of Vietnam in 1966 for his anti-war activism, the venerable monk would later achieve international acclaim for his Buddhist teachings and establish his Order of Interbeing as a global community of practice with monasteries in France, the United States, and Thailand. During his three-month teaching tour, thousands of people attended his ceremonies, lectures, and retreats. Thích Nhất Hạnh's visit to Vietnam can be understood as a reconfiguring of spiritual authority—both in the popularity of a once-exiled Buddhist leader and the resurgence of Buddhism as a viable and even desirable form of selfhood that had been shunned during the socialist period. By extending an official invitation to Thích Nhất Hạnh, the Vietnamese government signaled its recognition of these reconfigurations.

During a second visit to Vietnam in 2007, the revered monk issued a call for religious reforms and carried out a repentance ceremony to heal the wounds of war and division. In a gesture of reconciliation, the abbot of Bát Nhã Monastery invited Thích Nhất Hạnh to open a Buddhist center to teach his style of meditation. Tensions over spiritual and political authority were not easily swept aside, however. Thích Nhất Hạnh stood accused of conducting himself as a senior monk representing Buddhism to Vietnamese society, thus violating the regulations of the official Buddhist organization. The abbot withdrew his support, and hundreds of male and female practitioners were forced to relocate to pagodas under government control

or return to their home villages. Some eventually found refuge in practice centers outside Vietnam. This scattering of monastics underscores how the Buddhist sangha, far from a harmonious community, bears the legacy of tensions over religious freedom and the role of the state to govern religion.

Reconfiguring the meanings of the past and aspirations for the future with regard to spiritual authority is not confined to the political landscape in Vietnam. This process is evident as well in contemporary diasporic Vietnamese communities across the world. As Nguyen and Endres note in the introduction of this volume, the “multidirectional movements of people, ideas, practices, and institutions into and out of the country have created vast transnational networks and global fields of exchange” (p. 2). In 1992, the term “Global Asia” signaled the waning geopolitical paradigm of the Cold War. At that time, Vietnam was undergoing economic reforms that ushered in new ways of fashioning the self that appeared, at least initially, to mark a new opening toward religious freedom and spirituality. Today, scholars pluralize the term to “Global Asias,” in recognition that these processes did not flatten differences but engendered both new dynamics of social life and efforts to maintain continuity in the face of change.

Scholars of Vietnam today reckon with how the contentious politics of the Cold War are not relegated to the past but instead exert effects on current religious communities of practice. In this chapter, I examine how this divide between spiritual and political authority is addressed in the growing body of literature on Vietnamese Buddhist communities in Europe and North America. Whereas Buddhist communities in these countries have been formed by multidirectional pathways of migration, the scholarship points to commonalities, particularly, how debates over spiritual authority are less about doctrinal or theological differences and more about the politics of Vietnamese Buddhist organizations. These politics become localized as lay Buddhist groups materialize their versions of Buddhism on landscapes by purchasing land and establishing pagodas. In so doing, Vietnamese Buddhists fashion new spaces and processes even as they seek to replicate cultural systems of meaning with reference to an ancestral homeland. These dynamics contribute to the “structural incoherence” of Vietnamese Buddhism, incoherent because of the multiple and contradictory ways in which Vietnam as a referent is imagined within the conceptual realm more so than on actual terrain (Chen 2021:40).

To make this argument, I first show how Buddhism in Vietnam, especially in the twentieth-century history, was forged out of encounters. During the

colonial period, European preoccupations with defining religion led Buddhist leaders to propose a nationwide association. Yet with the division of Vietnam, these efforts to relate spiritual authority to nation-building became more contentious. I then turn to the growing literature on diasporic Buddhist communities to trace how the politics around Vietnam's geopolitical division has often splintered communities of practice, leading not to their consolidation but their proliferation. Out of these tensions over spiritual and political authority, Buddhist communities in Vietnam and in diaspora enact a spiritual geography of the homeland that is global in scope and exceeds its geographic referent yet is materialized on the local landscape in the construction of pagodas. I conclude by describing one example of this reconfiguration of spiritual authority within a monastery located in the US Gulf South as an illustration of how the translocal field of Buddhism operates on a conceptual plane.

The Dream of a Unified Vietnamese Sangha

While Buddhist communities are found across vast regions of the world, the relationship of these communities to the state varies considerably. In Europe and North America, Buddhism is a minority religion. Teachings in the Mahayana tradition offer resources for people to reimagine a collective consciousness, often around discourses of liberation that stand at odds with more dominant understandings of personhood that emphasize individual autonomy. In the early twentieth century, these discourses of liberation in Asia were associated with nationalism, a designation rooted in European colonial encounters and explicitly cultivated by anti-colonial movements. Today, the role of religion in political life is conceptualized differently in Europe and North America than in Vietnam, even as these communities of practice engage in similar strategies of self-making, visible in large-scale construction projects. These communities constitute a spatially dispersed network of sacred places conceptually linked to Vietnam as an ancestral homeland but unreconciled with the territorial state of Vietnam.

Buddhism thus offers a model for understanding how people make meaning out of encounters between local and global forces. Its status as a world religion was initially proposed by European philologists in the nineteenth century who deployed a category defined by European historical

and social foundations of Christianity. This project of making Buddhism commensurate with Christianity allowed scholars to contrast what they regarded as the original, true Buddhism with its later, “corrupt” versions (Masuzawa 2005:129). Popular spiritual practices in Vietnam were described by scholars as distortions of Buddhism—pagodas were criticized for their income-producing activities, monks were seen as indifferent toward the challenges of colonial rule, and rituals such as burning spirit money were dismissed as superstitious (DeVido 2009:424). The depiction of Buddhism as insufficiently modern galvanized monastic leaders to reform Buddhist education and the monastic sangha, often in nationalist terms, thereby ensuring their legibility and viability under colonial regimes. These influences were also transnational, a point stressed by historian Elise DeVido (2009:425) in her study on the influence of Taixu, a Buddhist activist credited with reforming Chinese Buddhism in the early twentieth century by laying a foundation for cultivating the individual and building the nation. By the late 1930s, Buddhist leaders called for creating a nationwide association, which would not be realized until 1951 with the founding of the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association (Tổng Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam). As these movements grew in prominence, they also shaped a discourse in which Buddhist consciousness was about world peace (Ngo 2015). Soon, however, the struggle for national liberation would dominate.

After 1945, debates over how institutionalized religion would contribute to liberation were redirected toward communism. Ultimately, these debates had different consequences for Catholic and Buddhist leaders. After 1954, entire Catholic parishes relocated to the south, bolstering support for the new regime. While Catholic leaders rejected the atheism of communism, Buddhist groups did not establish a firm position in the struggle while leaders focused instead on uniting the three regional Buddhism associations (Phi-Vân Nguyen 2018:746). Their efforts to establish a nationwide monastic sangha abruptly ended with the territorial division of Vietnam. In northern Vietnam, the Buddhist association supported the Việt Minh and expressed support for territorial unity and independence through prayer, thus underscoring how cultivating the self was compatible with cultivating the nation. As Buddhism was brought under state control, popular religious practices were blamed for diverting resources from the development of the nation (Luong 1992; Taylor 2007), and institutions like pagodas were converted to secular activities such as nurseries and schools.

By contrast, the Republic of Vietnam sought to create a secular state by not endorsing religion, even while it promoted spirituality as a fundamental value to differentiate its policies from the communist regime. The Constitution in 1956 supported spirituality, but the newly formed state did not enact an official government policy regarding organized institutions. Religion was instead promoted as a personal quality, and the state proposed that it could accommodate diversity without regulating it, a model consistent with religious freedom promoted by the United States. Increasingly, however, Buddhist movements were seen as a threat to the stability of the newly formed state. President Ngô Đình Diệm sought to repress two Buddhist movements, Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo, fearing that they would create a state within a state (Nguyen, P.V. 2018:750). Ultimately, the official strategy of declaring religious consciousness a form of noncommunist nationalism challenged the Republic (Nguyen, P.V. 2018:742). The state's position of acknowledging spirituality without regulating its institutions began to unravel as Buddhist leaders demanded the same political rights as the Catholic Church (Nguyen, P.V. 2018:763). This conflict peaked in 1963 when a group of monastic leaders demanded rights already granted to the Catholic Church—the right to fly a flag (in this case, the Buddhist flag) during celebrations, the right to be recognized as a religion, and the right for religious freedom. The Republic of Vietnam's refusal to guarantee these rights precipitated the Buddhist crisis, culminating in a leading monk immolating himself in Saigon to protest the Ngô Đình Diệm government. In response to this event, Buddhist leaders established the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV, Giáo hội Phật giáo Việt Nam Thống nhất) as an umbrella organization to bring together the theologically diverse schools of Buddhism and promote a coordinated response to the war. It was in this context that Thích Nhất Hạnh established a new monastic order, the Order of Interbeing, to promote a form of socially engaged Buddhism. He was later exiled.

After the collapse of Saigon in 1975, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam sought to bring all religious and secular associations in the south under state control. The government established the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), or Giáo hội Phật giáo Việt Nam, to represent pagodas and schools under the auspices of the government. Several leaders of the Republic of Vietnam-based UBCV refused to join the state-sanctioned organization, which led the state to declare the organization illegal. Buddhist monks, who had once protested the war, now turned to protesting violations of religious freedom.

The extent of state-based control over spiritual life in Vietnam has never been predictable, as debates among state officials, citizens, and spiritual leaders over the material culture of pagodas demonstrate (Roszko 2018). For example, after 1975, local police relocated a statue of Bodhisattva Quan Âm from the grounds of a temple to another location. Local fisherpeople saw the statue as a suitable replacement for a spiritual void left by the departed spirit of a local deity. Thirty years later, the head monk regarded the statue as out of place in its secular location and sought to move it back to the pagoda (Roszko 2018:187). The story of the statue demonstrates how the categories of state and religion are not fixed but shift over time as debates over the proper location of the statue make clear.

Today in Vietnam, tensions over spiritual and political authority persist. While the Vietnamese state has since relaxed its anti-superstition policies (Endres 2011), the official discourse of Buddhism dismisses practices such as shrines or temples dedicated to the Mother Goddess. For many practitioners, this figure is understood as a more relatable and practical side of Buddha (Soucy 2012). In the Mekong Delta, goddess figures are seen as variations of the Bodhisattva Quán Thế Âm, and along coastal communities the figure of the Bodhisattva merges with the Chinese Goddess of the Sea (Thiên Hậu), reflecting how female figures are archetypes credited with spiritual power to rescue people from harm (Nguyen, N.T. 2018:229). While practitioners in northern Vietnam look to the south as a more authoritative version of Buddhism, in the Mekong Delta Vietnamese political authorities have not wholly eliminated Khmer cultural institutions and Caodaism (Hoskins 2015). Even some urban middle-class residents regard Khmer forms of Theravada Buddhism as more authentic than Mahayana Buddhism (Taylor 2014), which they see as steeped in superstitions, thus appropriating state-based discourses in novel ways.

Here then we arrive at a dilemma regarding how religious self-making unmask the presentation of Vietnam “as a country by and for itself,” as this volume shows. Actors draw on both elements of the past and visions for the future as they reconfigure present forms of spiritual authority. Colonial discourses that once designated some practices as “Buddhist” and others as “superstitious” persist in the split between official and popular Buddhist practices (Soucy 2012), while Cold War alignments are reanimated in how different communities align themselves with state-based Buddhist organizations (Maldonado-Torres 2007). The politics of affiliation remain a

contentious element within communities of practice, ensuring that a unified Vietnamese sangha is still a dream.

Buddhism and the Politics of Remembering

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, more than three million people fled Vietnam, and among those were Buddhist monks. Alongside other refugees, they found temporary refuge in locations of first asylum—Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Hong Kong—where they ministered to people in camps and incorporated their experiences of suffering into their teachings of the Dharma, forging a distinctive discourse of suffering in response to the violence of war and displacement. Among these were leading Buddhist figures in Australia and the United States, including Venerable Thích Phước Tấn and Venerable Thích Giác Nhiên, who guided their followers on spiritual pilgrimages not to Vietnam but to the sites of refugee camps in Southeast Asia where they performed liberation ceremonies to release the souls of those who had died in the camps (Tran 2012). These rituals of remembrance were also aimed at instructing younger generations of Vietnamese about the history of these refugee passages, thereby ensuring their afterlife. Nearly five decades after 1975, the ritual activities and everyday practices of Vietnamese diasporic communities commemorate refugee passages, and, by so doing, they remind practitioners of the division between their communities and the geopolitical state of Vietnam.

Scholars working across different continents, including Oceania, North America, and Europe, show how Buddhist communities position themselves with regard to this fraught history as well connect their communities to others around the world, often through social media and tours, as Sandra Kurfürst describes is the case for Vietnamese hip hop dancers (this volume). Some of the work in creating continuity with the past reinscribes the geopolitical divisions of the Cold War. In my own fieldwork, lay Buddhists told me how they would seek out senior monks who arrived in the United States as refugees themselves to vet younger monks, ensuring how the politics of recognition were entwined with institutional affiliation. One reading of this vetting process would be to presume that these communities were not yet liberated from the politics of the past. However, this view depoliticizes identity construction, especially as it relates to refugee subjectivity. The

vetting process itself can be seen as a strategy to manage the increasingly complex and multidirectional movements of people within global fields of exchange (see the introduction by Nguyen and Endres).

The emphasis on reconfiguration as a framework for deciphering transformations in spiritual authority allows us to understand the effects of mobility when it is no longer unidirectional. Before the transnational turn in Asian studies (see, e.g., Hu-DeHart 2000), scholarship on refugees often focused on the problem of assimilation to the neglect of the creativity and agency people exhibited in navigating everyday life, especially in those countries that were predominantly white and Christian. Although Buddhism in these societies was viewed with suspicion (Ong 2003), these faith-based communities offered more than a place of collective worship. They also offered an escape from their host societies, or “racial safety zones,” especially in societies where the voices and experiences of Vietnamese are otherwise silenced (Aguilar-San Juan 2009). In the United States, Vietnamese Buddhist communities would hoist the Heritage and Freedom Flag, a symbol of the former Republic of Vietnam, as a sign of political identification that distinguished those communities from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and allied them with the United States while honoring a history that refugees were all too often expected to forget. In this regard, the Heritage and Freedom Flag is a translocal response that is just as much about reconfiguring Vietnameseness in response to racial formations in the United States as it is a rejection of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

In other ways, Buddhist communities are not bound to institutional structures. Vietnamese Catholic congregations in California, despite their numbers, were not recognized as distinct parishes based on nationality (Ninh 2014), which restricted their autonomy over raising funds. Buddhist congregations, however, were able to establish associations without such institutional oversight. This autonomy allowed splintered groups to establish new associations and even to build new pagodas. These ruptures ultimately broadened support of the monastic sangha, a dynamic especially strong among Cambodian Buddhists who saw the sangha destroyed under the Khmer Rouge (Mortland 2017). Large monasteries in Texas and California recruited monks from Vietnam who were, in turn, expected to demonstrate their adherence to refugee politics by flying the Heritage and Freedom Flag, attending political rallies, or ritually liberating the souls of those people who died while fleeing to freedom.

The scholarship of Buddhist communities in Europe offers a more complicated story, in part because of the different histories of migration, especially of contract laborers, and the relatively smaller numbers of refugees. In Switzerland, Vietnamese refugees initially practiced alone or attended seminars by Europeans (Weigelt 2016). Only with the arrival of a female monk in 1980 and a male monk who arrived as a refugee in 1985 did people have spiritual support from leaders who understood their experiences of displacement. The lay Buddhists sought funding from the Swiss state to establish an association, and they eventually purchased a house near Bern that would serve as collective space of worship. Today the pagoda is affiliated with the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam in Europe headquartered in Paris, underscoring the continued importance of that organization beyond the territorial state of Vietnam.

Not all Vietnamese residents in Europe arrived as refugees. Many were sent as contract workers to Eastern bloc countries as part of bilateral agreements. Unlike refugees who faced demands to assimilate, these workers lived in close conditions with other Vietnamese workers with little opportunity to mingle with locals. Many chose to remain after 1989 when the wall dividing East and West Germany fell but found themselves as asylum seekers (Su 2022). Vietnamese refugees in Berlin initially welcomed these workers and saw in Buddhism a “reconciliatory force” between the past and the future, the Northern and Southern Vietnamese (Ngo and Mai 2021:111). But the divisions in how they constructed Vietnam as a homeland were magnified, signaling an “enigma of arrival, that one never fully arrives and many of the troubles that make one move to another country keep following the migrant ... both in a religious and a political sense” (Ngo and Mai 2021:105). Even dialect differences that marked regional identities were seen as proxies for political affiliation (Lam 2006). Eventually, the political differences within these communities were resolved by establishing two different temples, each serving a different population. The first pagoda, founded by boat refugees, maintained an affiliation with the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, an organization banned by the Vietnamese government. The second temple was established by former contract workers. These two pagodas symbolized how these Buddhist communities of practice could not overcome the geopolitics of a divided Vietnam. Instead, these divisions were materialized by built structures, each serving a separate community that fashioned itself as Vietnamese.

In Poland, where migrants arrived as contract workers, the political authority of the Vietnamese state clashed with Buddhist practitioners who asserted their authority through their financial clout. Without the institutional support of the Catholic Church, the second group of Vietnamese Buddhists relied on their financial capital to purchase land on the outskirts of the city, build a pagoda, and recruit a resident monk (Szymanska-Matusiewicz and Bossak-Herbst 2019:423). This group was seen as a competitor to a temple established by the state-recognized Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha. As in Berlin, these communities reconfigured Buddhism in relation to an imagined homeland where those geopolitical divisions still pertained.

The splits among these Buddhist communities of practice offer an instructive lesson in identity construction among the Vietnamese diaspora. For both Vietnamese refugees and migrants, making homes in new lands involved refashioning self and community, a process expressed through belonging in moral communities. These communities align themselves with Buddhist organizations that, while global in scope, fortify these divisions. Monks who arrived as refugees are not affiliated with the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha, the umbrella organization of Vietnamese Buddhists in Vietnam, while monks who are affiliated with this organization are sometimes met with suspicion by lay Buddhists. At the same time, actors are not entirely bound by these organizations, as we could see in the intense interest in Zen master Thích Nhất Hạnh's return to Vietnam. Reconfiguring spiritual and political authority within these Buddhist communities is about reckoning not just with the weight of the past but also with the force of global capital.

Buddhism in an Age of Capitalism

The resurgence of spirituality in Vietnam is often credited to the economic liberalization policies implemented under the banner of the *Đổi mới* reforms in 1986. As incomes rose and the government relaxed its oversight over religious life, households channeled more income toward ritual activities such as sponsoring pagodas, constructing ancestral shrines, and taking part in pilgrimages. These ritual expenditures were not merely an outcome of rising incomes but a response to rising economic insecurities. Thus the return of religious enchantment is not simply an expression of people's

wealth but rather their desires for monetary gain and material well-being under precarious conditions (Schwenkel 2018). Diasporic populations face the vagaries of capitalism as well, suggesting that if geopolitics divides these communities, then global capitalism exerts a common pressure. Seen in this light, people's participation in Buddhist communities, whether in Vietnam or in diaspora, is as much about navigating the forces of capitalism and globalization as it is about expressing Vietnamese-ness.

Buddhism does not stand apart from capitalism but finds its expression through it. Likewise, religious policy is a significant issue for contemporary states, whether those states are nominally communist regimes like Vietnam or outwardly capitalist such as the United States. In an analysis of temple building in the northern Vietnam city of Vinh, Christina Schwenkel (2018) argues for "religious reassemblage" to describe how state forms of commemoration are supplemented by popular religious expressions, a point also made by Heonik Kwon (2008). She focuses on two temples—one built by local authorities and the other by contributions from lay practitioners. On the one hand, official forms of heroic commemoration emphasize secular memory and the demand for people to remember (*nhớ*), but on the other the expressions of popular or "superstitious" belief emphasize a form of divine worship (*thờ*) (Schwenkel 2018:528). Scholars have recognized a similar dynamic among the religious practices of migrants, particularly because such spaces of popular belief offer a means of sacralizing community that the broader forms of state commemoration foreclose. Whether in Vietnam or elsewhere, these communities are involved in meaning making in contexts where "the abstract forces of global capitalism are entangled with the governing strategies of the authoritarian party-state" (Nguyen and Endres, this volume, p. 6).

Building temples lays the groundwork for materializing meaning while also projecting these meanings into the future. Lay Buddhists express moral personhood by making donations to support monks and to fund pagoda-building projects as well as to ensure familial care. Discursively cast as merit-making activities that are channeled through the body of the sangha and returned as a supernatural return-gift, these donations materialize Buddhism on the landscape. The proliferation of these pagodas also embodies local meanings, for example how in a particular city, whether Berlin (Ngo and Mai 2021) or New Orleans (Truitt 2021), these temples mark schisms in communities of practice such as the politics of affiliation that inhibit the

consolidation of a unified Vietnamese sangha. In Warsaw, the temples provided a spatial resolution to different communities of practice, one built by a wealthy businessman and one affiliated with the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha, the only organization recognized by the Social Republic of Vietnam. These pagodas are never simply local organizations but part of a networked effect that connects Vietnamese actors in unevenly distributed ways. In New Orleans, the question of managing financial transactions, while cast in moral terms, likewise engendered questions over the proper administration of these institutions, leading participants to ask whether decisions should be vested in the spiritual authority of monks or in the financial capital of lay Buddhists (Truitt 2021).

Distanciated networks connect Vietnam and diasporic populations through the circulation of discourses or different ways of thinking, practicing, and representing Buddhism as “a set of practices and traditions that emerge as a result of local circumstances within global cultural networks” (Mitchell 2016:6) and do not always originate in Asia. These global cultural networks operate in ways that create hierarchies among variations of Buddhism. For example, Zen Buddhism has experienced what anthropologist Alexander Soucy calls a form of “conquest” (2022). Today, most practitioners understand Zen through its associations with the teachings of two Vietnamese monks—Thích Nhất Hạnh, who spent the final years of his life in Huế until he departed this world in 2022, and Thích Thanh Từ, who resided at the time of this writing at the Trúc Lâm Monastery in Đà Lạt, Vietnam. Many Vietnamese Buddhist practitioners learned about Thích Thanh Từ’s teachings not from meditation retreats or books but through recordings of his talks on cassette, earning him the nickname of “cassette monk,” and underscoring the importance of media in constructing new identities be they Buddhist or hip hop (see Kurfürst, this volume). For Soucy, the conquest of Zen instilled a cosmopolitan form of practice that sidelined practices associated with Pure Land Buddhism that are accessible to a broader constituency of lay Buddhists. But Zen Buddhism does not wholly characterize the practices of Vietnamese practitioners, many of whom still seek liberation from the violence of war, displacement, and the loss of their homeland.

The interest in pagoda-building and the global popularity of Zen as an authoritative version of Buddhism both underscore that Buddhist communities are translocal formations, unbound by territorial borders and reconfigured through disparate yet connected networks to ensure conditions

for familial well-being. Zen as a global discourse offers a cosmopolitan version of Buddhism, but Vietnamese communities also draw on other ritual forms that address the violence of war and fulfill moral obligations by caring for the dead. People entrust monks to maintain altars and carry out ritual ceremonies that release the spirits of those who have died, as we saw in the return of two monks, not to Vietnam but to the nearby islands where Vietnamese refugees were once housed (Tran 2012). Monks serve as caretakers of ancestral spirits and ghosts, liberating the dead by invoking specific locales during the ceremony. This emphasis on locality is accompanied by a model of personhood premised on the intergenerational family, not the autonomous self. At the same time, these practices lay the foundation for collective liberation, thus mapping a conceptual, cosmological realm in which the spirits of ancestors are invoked irrespective of any particular geopolitical location.

Buddhism provides a vocabulary and affective relationship that materializes Vietnam as an ancestral homeland not easily identified with the modern territorial state of Vietnam. This is not to claim that Buddhist practitioners residing outside Vietnam never return or that practitioners in Vietnam never leave. Monks bring their disciples to Vietnam to purchase a statue of Bodhisattva Quán Thế Âm or witness the smelting of a bronze bell to be installed in a newly built pagoda. The sangha may be divided but the Dharma is not. These communities are self-consciously Vietnamese, and they are global in scope, reflecting the continued geopolitics of a Vietnam divided from its diasporic populations with future aspirations of collective liberation.

Geography is an unstable referent. Spiritual authority is being reconfigured in ways that challenge the divisions between communities of practice in Vietnam and in the diaspora, including in the administration of US-based temples. In my own fieldwork (Truitt 2021), monks who owned property often insisted that the property belonged to Buddha. While this gesture may be seen as one of humility, it overlooks the role of the state in issuing land titles and legal documents and neglects the role of lay Buddhists whose financial support remains crucial to the viability of these institutions. In one monastery, after local Buddhists withdrew their support, spiritual authority was transferred to a monk based not in the United States but in Vietnam. The 80-acre property had been purchased by an extended family who arrived in the United States as refugees. They sought the support of a senior monk

in California and eventually donated the land to his organization. Over time, however, conflicts over how to manage the monastery emerged, and the family withdrew most of its financial support and practitioners in the vicinity stopped attending the pagoda, even on the eve of the lunar new year. For several years, two large stone statues, both purchased in Vietnam and transported across the Pacific Ocean, remained on their sides for want of funds for the installation. To appease these supporters, the senior monk entrusted with administering the monastery announced he would transfer ownership of the property to another monk, who was the abbot of a monastery in central Vietnam. The transfer was symbolic. Neither monk resided in the monastery; that role belonged to a third monk who had been ordained by the Vietnam-based monk and migrated to the United States under sponsorship of the California-based monk. He promised those who gathered to witness the transfer of the property that one of his first projects would be to install the statue of the Bodhisattva Quán Thế Âm overlooking a small pond on the grounds of the monastery.

The two senior monks knew each other well. They referred to each other as brothers in the Dharma as both had been ordained by the same master in central Vietnam. While administration of the monastery was symbolically transferred from one monk to another, it would remain within a monastic lineage that now stretched across the Pacific, connecting Vietnam and the United States. The handing over of the monastery as a legal property and its administration initially appeared to be straightforward, but the process of transferral, even within a lineage, required formal deeds attesting to ownership. These documents alone were not enough to confer legitimacy upon the transfer and ensure the spiritual well-being of the monastery. During the ceremony, lay Buddhists and monks who resided in the region attended as witnesses to ensure the symbolic legitimacy of the transfer and the well-being of the community it represented. The solemn ceremony was followed by a lively lunch with entertainment provided by a group of singers from California who had flown in to offer their support for the new resident monk.

A monastery in Alabama has its origins in the labor of refugees who pooled their financial resources and sought spiritual guidance from monks based in California. Ultimately, the spiritual authority to administer the monastery was transferred to a monk based in Vietnam who regularly visits twice a year, and it is managed by one of his disciples. As this example shows,

the expansion of Vietnamese Buddhism involves global historical forces and transpacific crossings. Yet this case also raises the question of how spiritual authority is recognized and regulated in the face of other sources of power, namely, the financial power of lay benefactors. Here we see how spiritual authority is continually being reworked and reconfigured within communities of practice as they endeavor to find sustainable and meaningful expressions of belonging.

Conclusion

Historian Christine Yano, in her recent call for studies that address Global Asias, proposes that doing so “does not turn us away from Asia, but recognizes shifting, complex Asias globally, especially in diasporic settings” (2021:859). She also proposes that in order to recognize these shifts and complexities, scholars must transgress the long-standing disciplinary divide between area studies and diasporic studies, not because the divide is no longer relevant but because these multiple Asias—whether families, political ideals, capitalist formations, or Buddhist communities—are situated in conceptual realms, not on geographic terrain.

Buddhism is an ideal discourse for tracing these shifts and complexities, as its power is drawn from beyond the nation-state—through colonial encounters, national liberation movements, and diasporic populations. What comes into view in the literature on Vietnamese diasporic communities is how the geopolitical divisions of the Cold War (Kwon 2010) are also reconfigured. The referents are no longer situated on the terrain of “north” and “south.” Nor can the referents easily be situated in terms of homeland and host society. Reconfiguration provides a framework for scholars to escape the opposition of area studies and diasporic studies and instead examine how the geopolitical and social tensions that rocked Vietnam in the twentieth century continue to reverberate into the twenty-first century. Enacted through refugees, migrants, and contract workers, these communities remind us that Buddhism is still a practice for these communities to seek collective liberation.

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Section IV
Class and Consumption

SECTION IV INTRODUCTION

Almost Comfortable: Anxious Wealth and Uncertain Social Distinction in the Market Socialist Economy

ERIK HARMS

“The Indonesian middle class is not merely wealthier than the underclass; it is almost comfortable with its wealth; it does not feel it will be devoured by it.”

James T. Siegel, “Early Thoughts on the Violence of
May 13 and 14, 1998, in Jakarta”

IN THE 1990S, AND THEN ESPECIALLY in the new millennium, people exhibiting social characteristics that scholars tend to identify with middle-classness were increasingly visible across in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the words to describe such people always seemed inadequate. In a chapter on the class dynamics of domestic tourism in the current section of the book, Emmanuelle Peyvel evokes this dilemma by paraphrasing Ann Marie Leshkovich’s ethnographic work on female market traders in Hồ Chí Minh City’s Bến Thành Market. “In the 1990s,” Leshkovich astutely observed, “middle classes in Hồ Chí Minh City seemed everywhere and nowhere” (2014:175). In that work, Leshkovich emphasized a distinction between how people enacted their lives in classed ways and what they had to say about it. Class is not just everywhere and nowhere, but more precisely it is everywhere being enacted but almost never enunciated.¹

In order to address this seeming paradox, it became increasingly common for Vietnam studies scholars to move away from Marxist or Weberian understandings that sought to name “classes” as component labels within a system of hierarchical ranking. Instead, scholars turned to ideas of “class

habitus” derived from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. As the editors of one important volume interpreted it, such a move encouraged scholars to focus less on labels and more on consumption *practices* (Nguyen-Marshall, Drummond, and Bélanger 2012). The influence of this approach is clearly present in the contributions to this section of the book.

For example, Arve Hansen describes people in Hà Nội as increasingly sophisticated diners, beer drinkers, and automobile drivers who have wholly embraced global consumerism despite the persistence of conservative moralizing by party ideologues.² Hansen follows this consumption approach to understanding class, but adds a focus on how globally variegated forces of capitalism and global markets transform the landscape within which consumption plays out. His chapter clearly shows how new consumption habits signal a new kind of class identification emerging in Vietnam, but he also stresses that understanding that newness requires situating consumption habits within historical changes in political economy and global interconnections.

Likewise, Emmanuelle Peyvel’s analysis of domestic tourism in Vietnam shows how class differentiation depends less on income than on modes of taste and distinction. Of course, one needs a certain minimum income to be able to engage in leisure travel, but it is the style of travel one engages in that says the most about one’s sense of self. Identities play out on a domestic tourist circuit but also engage with global influences. The question of identity thus hinges not merely on how much money one spends on a vacation or what one calls oneself but on the kinds of experiences one seeks out and chooses to spend one’s money on.

Similarly, as Lan Anh Hoang so vividly shows through her excerpts of interviews conducted with Vietnamese market traders in Moscow, the key concern they have for their children transcends pure monetary calculations. The traders are doing quite well financially, but they clearly worry about securing “respectable” work for their children back in Vietnam, often in professions that will not prove financially lucrative in the long run, like teaching. The traders seem to see themselves as having earned money, but not of having earned *distinction*. As a result, they invest quite large sums of money to secure more reputable kinds of jobs for their children, in ways that clearly do not deliver a good return on investment, at least financially speaking. The return on investment they seek is related to status, not financial position.

All of these examples clearly demonstrate the importance of focusing on consumption patterns and status distinctions. There is a question that follows from all of this, however, the answer to which I suspect most Vietnam studies scholars implicitly assume but rarely ever explicitly express. Why is it so difficult to talk directly about class in the Vietnamese context, even if consumption habits clearly indicate emerging class identities? To begin a conversation around this question, I would like to suggest that the problem with class analysis in Vietnam is not whether one sides with Marx, Weber, or Bourdieu. It is not even about whether one defines class based on consumption or production, or even if one engages in facile attempts to rank people by income levels and divide them into thirds named “upper,” “middle,” and “lower.” The reason people do not enunciate the words for class is because the idea of class is associated with a painful history, and in Vietnam the act of pointing fingers at people and placing them into class categories has had a rather nasty set of associations with violence and morality policing, from colonial taxation to violent socialist land reform, and on into late-socialist practices of shaming.

Before readers turn to the chapters in this section of the book, then, it is useful to pause and remember how fraught the postwar period in Vietnam was, and how the re-emergence of class distinctions during that time was so often accompanied by anxiety and discomfort. One valuable source for understanding such anxieties during the so-called subsidy period (*thời bao cấp*) is Dương Thu Hương’s novel *Paradise of the Blind*, which became famous for describing the complex tensions, power plays, and interpersonal and familial betrayals that emerged during a period when commodities themselves were still seen as dangerous symbols radically infused with anxious associations connected to either supporting or betraying a revolution. Throughout *Paradise*, acts of commodity consumption almost always seemed to demand that people make terrible choices: either betray the revolution or betray family, friends, kin, or lovers. During that period, consuming even basic foods, acquiring household goods, and trying to make a little money was almost always depicted as a fraught, morally complex enterprise.

Paradise of the Blind was first published in Vietnamese in 1988. It appeared in French in 1991, and then in English in 1993. The novel’s narrator is a woman named Hằng who is living in Russia as an export worker at a textile factory. She narrates the novel as a series of memories she has about

subsidy-era Vietnam while traveling by train to visit her uncle Chính, a communist party official with a plum posting in Moscow who has fallen ill. In one set of memories, Hằng recounts a scene when Uncle Chính derided and criticized her mother, who was his older sister. The fraught exchange she describes transpired after her mother had hosted Uncle Chính at her home. At first, Hằng's mother beamed with pride as she introduced her important brother to neighbors, and she even laid out all her best wares and food for the occasion. After the neighbors left, however, the conversation grew tense when Hằng's mother asked Uncle Chính why he had stopped participating in ceremonies to honor their parents. Chính switched the tone dramatically, and soon started scolding Hằng's mother for her work as a petty trader (*tiểu thương*). The mother, in turn, struggled to defend herself, leading to further scolding:

“Stop,” Uncle Chính cut her off. “You don’t need to rail on any longer. Small traders [*tiểu thương*] like you *are* bourgeoisie [*bộ phận giai cấp tư sản*]. But our country will achieve socialism directly, without passing through the stage of capitalism. The bourgeoisie [*tư bản*] is the enemy of the revolution, and we will smash that class [*giai cấp ấy*], yank it out at the root.”

I heard my mother sigh. “Chính, Brother, forgive me,” she said wearily. “I never did get much of an education, so I don’t reason very well. But you will, at least, allow me to provide food and education for my own daughter.”³

A few moments later, the conversation crescendos powerfully as Chính reveals where his priorities stand when he is forced to align his ideological obligations to official positions about class dynamics and Vietnamese notions of family. Readers might expect that a younger brother would express respect for an older sister; instead, he chooses to shame her. Again, the language of class Chính uses when berating his older sister is very prominent: “I work doing Party propaganda work and ideological education for people from all levels in society [*các tầng lớp nhân dân trong xã hội*]. I cannot have an older sister who is a trader [*con buôn*].”⁴ The sentiment in this passage is radically different from the descriptions of consumption in the chapters by Hansen, Peyvel, and Hoang. But there are some unsettling continuities as well. On the one hand, when juxtaposed against this excerpt from a novel set in the period of high socialism, Hansen’s and Peyvel’s chapters both show especially starkly how much times have changed in Vietnam. People simply do not talk like this very often (if at all) anymore. On the other hand, reading it

alongside Lan Anh Hoang's study of traders in Moscow also suggests some ways in which lingering traces of class anxiety still recall that earlier period. As Hoang's chapter clearly shows, the traders in Moscow remain haunted by the stigma of being called *con buôn*. They remember a time when engaging in "buying and selling" (*buôn bán*) was equated with moral failure, that is, with selling out. As a result, they do everything they can to save their children from such stigma.

Literary representations of the postwar period are important because authors also tend to be social critics, and their writings work hard to invert the logic of moral failure, showing how it was in fact ideologues like Chính who were selling out—in this case selling out their families to a utopian charade. Novels provide nuanced expression of the way people's relations to commodities and family and other affiliations are always embedded within moral struggles. Commodity consumption was, and obviously still is, about so much more than simply consuming things. It is connected to becoming social persons. While it may be tempting to think that such associations are a thing of the past, or that no one really remembers them anymore, a much more recent literary representation of almost the same exact scenario suggests that it is not something people have forgotten.

The linkage of commodities and wealth with moral quandaries, it turns out, is also one of the major subthemes running through Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai's recent novel, *The Mountains Sing*, which charts a fictional, yet historically realistic story of a family's experiences through several generations of Vietnamese history. In the novel, which was published in 2020, the memories of almost every era are saturated with existential dilemmas that emerge when wealth gets infused with intense moralization, which in turn entangles it with haunting violence. In different episodes, the novel describes these dilemmas in ways that seem to keep returning over and over. First there were the evils of French colonial tax collectors (with Vietnamese collaborators who have not-so-subtle names like "Wicked Ghost"). Then there was the violence of anticolonial land reforms—populated by cruel zealots like "Butcher Woman," who had "a large protruding forehead and teeth that looked like those of a rabbit" and "a reputation for cheating people," and who in an especially traumatic episode accused the narrator of being "the rich bitch. The wicked landowner!" (Nguyễn 2020:139). For a period, after the violence of the campaigns against landowners, it seemed as though class anxieties were temporarily overshadowed by the immediate violence of

military conflict, but then anxieties about the morality of money and commodity consumption return in full force in the novel's depictions of the period after 1975. In the postwar period, the main device for conveying the fraught position of money and wealth is another "uncle" figure named Sánh, who, much like Uncle Chính in *Paradise*, has a hard time balancing his devotion to the party with his own filial duties as a good Vietnamese son. The narrator recounts a scene in which her uncle Sánh's devotion to utopian socialist ideologies of a commodity-free classless society leads him to erupt into harsh words that debase his own mother (who is the narrator's grandmother):

[Sánh says]: "What a stupid, stupid thing you did." I sat frozen next to Grandma as Uncle Sánh paced back and forth in our living room, berating her. His boots squeaked under his heavy footsteps. He raised his feet, sending the pigs scurrying away. "I can't believe you quit teaching to become a trader."

"Calm down, Son. I'm not doing anything bad." Grandma poured a cup of tea for my uncle.

"Nothing bad?" Uncle Sánh walked to Grandma. He put his mouth against her ear. "I've become a Party member. My mother can't be a *con buôn*." (Nguyễn 2020:105)

The scene in this story, published thirty-two years after *Paradise of the Blind*, but describing episodes from the same postwar period, is so similar to scenes in the earlier novel that it speaks to a trend (we might also call it the trope of "the bad uncle berating the pure-hearted *con buôn*"), and clearly suggests how intense the anxieties about money and class were in the postwar period. A host of examples could be culled from ethnographic and historical work on or about that period: one especially poignant example was the exhibit on the subsidy period held in 2006 at the Vietnamese Museum of Ethnology, prompting extensive discussions and memories about the deprivations experienced during the period of high socialism between 1975 and 1986 (MacLean 2008).

It is necessary to remember these kinds of experiences because they highlight the degree to which access to commodities and wealth during the subsidy period had come to be associated both with the power to manipulate and control others and also with a pervasive sense of shame (and counter shame). Access to commodities—the stuff of consumption that now so

effortlessly allows people to comfortably express themselves—was at one point a material expression of either power or shame, and sometimes both. People in power could shame others for their consumption patterns, and critics of people in power could shame them for their cruelty and hypocrisy. With all this symbolism and shame that was until recently attached to consumer goods and social class, it has understandably been no easy matter for Vietnamese to simply become comfortable with their own wealth. In other words, there was a time, not so long ago, when it was reasonable for people to think that they, and perhaps even their entire society, might become devoured by wealth.

The remarkable thing about the chapters that follow is how different the situation now seems. They show that there is indeed a critical class of people in Vietnam that now appears, as Siegel remarked about members of the Indonesian middle class, “almost comfortable with its wealth; it does not feel it will be devoured by it” (1998:82). Should we call this the “middle class”? Most scholars will choose to do so, and I promise not to mind if scholars use the term for the purposes of citations and comparisons. However, given how fraught and anxiety-producing the language of class has been, and given its violent history, I am not so sure that assigning a name is the right move. An entirely different way to think of the folks described in the following chapters is as members of a generation that is “almost comfortable.”

Notes

- 1 “Everywhere, because Honda motorbikes, recently renovated homes, upscale cafés, and imported fashion testified to an urban middle class on the rise. ... [N]owhere, in that people tended not to identify as middle class (giải cấp/tầng lớp trung lưu). Instead, they talked about being modern (hiện đại), having enough to live (có đủ sống), being civilized (văn minh), having culture (có văn hóa), or being appropriate (phù hợp)” (Leshkovich 2014:175).
- 2 It is worth noting, however, that it is not only “conservative party members” who worry about hyper-consumption. Regarding Hansen’s examples of beer and automobiles, there are of course many everyday people who worry about the risks incurred when consumers do their automobile driving immediately after their beer drinking.
- 3 In order to highlight the “class language” being used, I have reinserted some of the original words from the Vietnamese edition of the text into the standard English language translation of the book. For the two versions of this passage,

see Dương Thu Hương (1988:46–47) and Duong Thu Huong, trans. Phan Huy Duong and Nina McPherson (2002:51).

- 4 The original Vietnamese reads: “Tôi làm công tác tuyên huấn, giáo dục tư tưởng Đảng cho các tầng lớp nhân dân trong xã hội. Tôi không thể có một người chị là con buôn” (Dương 1988:47). The English translation by Phan Huy Duong and Nina McPherson reads: “I am a cadre responsible for educating the masses. I cannot have a lousy street vendor for a sister” (Duong 2002:51).

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*Consumption and
Global Connections in Vietnam:
New Middle Classes and Changing Everyday
Practices under Consumer Socialism*

ARVE HANSEN

ASIDE FROM THE HAMMERS AND SICKLES in street decorations and official posters, or perhaps some of the uniformed guards and the many portraits of Hồ Chí Minh, there is not much “socialist” about the streetscapes of Vietnamese cities today. These streetscapes remain distinctly Vietnamese, with their millions of motorbikes, the many narrow alleyways, and the lively sidewalk cultures and street kitchens. But they are infused with items and symbols from Eastern, Western, and global capitalist consumer cultures, such as T-shirts with images of pop stars, restaurants and supermarkets offering food from all over the world, fast food chains, and an increasing number of expensive cars. The people in the streets are more or less all equipped with smart phones, on which they have access to news, entertainment, and social media accounts.¹ In short, global connections are everywhere you turn in contemporary Vietnam (see also Nguyen and Endres, this volume).

Global connections affect people in Vietnam in highly uneven ways. Significant segments of society are toiling in either (or often both) the export-oriented parts of the large agricultural sector or in labor-intensive industries as part of global production networks (see Nguyen and Nguyen, this volume), while others lead increasingly cosmopolitan lifestyles. Everyone in contemporary Vietnam is somehow connected to foreign consumer

cultures, but the middle classes are generally known to be in the driver's seat of consumption booms and cultural globalization (see Hansen and Wethal 2023 for discussion). Fueled by rising incomes and—more recently—soaring household debt (Nguyen et al. 2018), parts of the urban middle classes in Vietnam have adopted consumption patterns that are globally associated with middle-class status, including clothing styles, private motorized mobility, dinners at restaurants, and holiday travels (Peyvel, this volume), and living arrangements that involve smaller households in increasingly air-conditioned environments (Hansen 2022a). Vietnam's middle classes also live in larger and more solid houses, often equipped with modern appliances, and spend much more on items beyond food than the rest of society (World Bank 2018).

Scholars have previously analyzed the rapid expansion of the Vietnamese urban middle classes, as well as the dramatic changes in consumption patterns, lifestyles, and everyday practices brought about by the *Đổi mới* reforms (Bélanger, Drummond, and Nguyen-Marshall 2012; Earl 2014; Hansen 2020, 2022a). The literature has also unveiled the underbelly of the consumer revolution, such as the inequalities embedded in the state-led urban transformations toward “rich, civilized, and beautiful cities” (Endres 2019; Harms 2016) and the “socialist servants” that make middle-class lifestyles possible (Nguyen 2015). But few studies have looked deeply into how global connections and global encounters shape middle-class consumption patterns (although see contributions in Nguyen-Marshall, Drummond, and Bélanger 2012; Drummond and Thomas 2003). And even when studied, scant attention has been given to the political economy of consumption (see Hansen 2022a). The starting point of this chapter is that understanding middle-class consumption in contemporary Vietnam requires studying global encounters both in everyday practices and in the political-economic changes in which these practices take place.

From the political economy of capitalist transformation through the everyday geographies of consumption to the mundane performances of middle-class urbanites, this chapter explores the aspirations, expectations, and contradictions embedded in Vietnam's “consumer socialism” after *Đổi mới* (Hansen 2022a, more on which later). Through studying practices of eating, drinking, and driving, I focus on both the pleasurable changes and the tensions and anxiety that are part of being middle class in the socialist market economy. I approach the topic from the practice-theoretical understanding of consumption patterns as embedded in a wide range of

social and material arrangements and interactions and of consumption taking place as “moments” in practices (Warde 2017). In order to grasp the effect of broader political-economic changes, however, I combine practice theory with what I, inspired by the variegated capitalism approach (Peck and Theodore 2007), label variegated transformations. In short, this involves a focus on how capitalist development leads to different, yet similar, versions of consumer society, multi-scalarly shaped by encounters between global flows of money, things, and ideas, and local cultural and institutional arrangements (Hansen 2022a). The chapter draws on observations, conversations, interviews, and lived experience over a period of ten years, mainly in Hội An and Hà Nội, but also in Đà Nẵng and Hồ Chí Minh City.

Global Connections and the Construction of Consumer Socialism

Various forms of uneven global connections have accompanied Vietnam's history, for example through different Chinese empires, French colonialism, US imperial aggression, and a range of interconnections with international socialism (e.g., Schwenkel 2020). With *Đổi mới*, such connections have taken new and transformative forms. These are largely intended developments, as the communist regime has had a strong focus on strengthening diplomatic relations and integrating into global production networks. This political and economic integration has involved deep global interconnections that cut across the entire Vietnamese society, although in highly unequal ways. As part of the societal transformations brought about by *Đổi mới*, the ownership of a wide range of consumer goods has gradually but rapidly been normalized. Most of these goods have somehow depended on foreign connections, whether through production networks or through global sociocultural processes that define what a “modern” society looks like (e.g., Shove 2003). In the process, Vietnam has gone through dramatic consumer transformations. Beyond global connections, these transformations have also required a certain ideological shift toward embracing private consumption, simultaneously producing and responding to consumption desires in the population. It has also involved what can be seen as a new acceptance of middle-class lifestyles, although never using that word, as an ideal for the modern and “civilized” socialist consumer-citizen on which the economy is now dependent. Representing a dramatic break with the planned economy and past

socialist ideals, the (somewhat reluctant) development of a consumer society has been a defining part of Vietnam's capitalist transformations. I dub the somewhat uneasy merging of capitalist consumer culture and socialist ideology, and in the process the partial rewriting of both, consumer socialism (Hansen 2020, 2022a). In the following, I will study global encounters through three mundane activities that all depend on different forms of consumption and that all are part of defining consumer socialism: eating, drinking, and moving around.

Eating

During fieldwork in 2017, I had a long conversation with Vân in her tube house in central Hà Nội. She was in her sixties, a retired dentist, and passionate about food. She talked about all the changes in food practices that she had seen since, as she put it, “the war until now.” Unsurprisingly, *Đổi mới* was presented as a great turning point. She approached the changing foodscapes with curiosity, but worried about some of the consequences of these changes. In particular, she worried that Vietnamese food traditions were under threat. As she put it:

We adopted a lot of food culture from foreign countries. Before, we ate very traditional Vietnamese. Pure Vietnamese. There was nothing foreign about our food before. But now, young people, the young generation, think it's not suitable anymore. Now the trend is new food, we have so many different things. And living, the speed of living, everything is faster. Now we like simpler food, before it was more complicated. Because Vietnamese food in the past was very different. It took time to prepare it. People put a lot of effort into it. But now, in my opinion, everything is so fast. Everything looks good but it's actually prepared in a very fast way. Before, people put effort and time in it, and it was so much better. (Interview, Hà Nội, March 2017, translated from Vietnamese)

The reflections of Vân well capture common sentiments in contemporary Vietnam. First of all, like many others, she experienced the rapid changes as both fascinating and worrying. These reflect deep food-cultural concerns, which in turn also often connect to concerns about health and food safety (see contributions in Ehlert and Faltmann 2019). Furthermore, her labeling of traditional food as “purely Vietnamese” is interesting, and also reflects

broader sentiments toward purity and safety in Vietnam today (see Hansen 2022b). These can at least partly be seen as a result of nostalgia and are, of course, not entirely accurate. Vietnam's culinary traditions, as indeed culinary traditions anywhere, carry in them histories of cultural and material encounters and interconnections. Peters (2010) has shown how *phở* emerged through Chinese cooks using French leftovers in colonial Vietnam. The *bánh mì* is another success story of hybridization, now going full circle by becoming highly popular in Europe.

In today's Vietnamese cities, eating globally is certainly no problem, at least not if you have money to spend. The presence of foreign food often requires the movement of ingredients. A fascinating example of this is Hội An, a small town in central Vietnam that developed into a major tourism hub after being granted UNESCO world heritage status. Local businesses there have gone through a significant learning process in order to make food that the "Western" tourists want, which is a combination of "acceptable" Vietnamese dishes and comfort food they are used to from home. But until recently they also had to go through significant struggles to get the ingredients needed for preparing, for example, Italian food or steaks to the small town, often depending on personal contacts in larger cities. In turn, however, this demand created thriving businesses specializing in foreign ingredients (Hansen, Pitkänen, and Nguyen 2023). In urban Vietnam more generally, the tourism and expat circles represent the most obviously globalized forms of consumption. But gradually, a wide range of eateries catering to the Vietnamese middle classes have been established. These include both foreign enterprises, where among the most successful have been KFC and its fried chicken, and Vietnamese enterprises such as Golden Gate. The latter considers itself a pioneer in developing chain restaurants in the country, and according to their websites now own more than twenty brands and four hundred restaurants in forty provinces, most of them specializing in Southeast and East Asian food. An interesting trend is the popularity of places capitalizing on romanticizing the days of the planned economy and rationing, such as the hugely popular Cộng Cà Phê coffee chain. This capitalist enterprise full of socialist symbolism catches some of the essence of consumer socialism. In the early days of the chain, the menu was even scribbled on old copies of Lenin books.

Another obvious way that food in Vietnam is globalized is through the ongoing supermarketization of food retail (Wertheim-Heck, Raneri, and

Oosterveer 2019). What supermarkets and many chain restaurants have in common is that they depend on different sets of connections, different systems of provision (Fine 2002), than street kitchens and wet markets (see also Nguyen and Wei 2023). While the latter would usually source their goods from wholesale night markets or middlemen on motorbikes, the former, due to both economies of scale and strict principles of standardization, tend to involve commodity chains depending on global connections and often contingent on “cold chains” (Rinkinen, Shove, and Smits 2019). A pertinent example is the frozen chicken that Vietnam imports from places such as the massive poultry industries of the United States and Brazil, and which after traveling around half the world ends up being cheaper than the chicken raised next door (see Hansen 2021).

As is obvious from the interview with Vân at the start of this section, the Vietnamese middle classes only partly embrace the onslaught of foreign foods available. For those who remember times of extreme hardship, the changes that development has brought with them are obviously positive in a wide range of ways. Younger generations grow up with a very different access to food than their parents and grandparents. But there are also many anxieties associated with the changing food scene. The new foodscapes bring along a host of alternatives, but also significant uncertainties concerning safety and healthiness. Food safety has become one of the most common consumer concerns in contemporary Vietnam (see Ehlert and Faltmann 2019; Steinman, this volume), and many develop a range of strategies in navigating and negotiating the rapid changes—such as touching and smelling produce or using trusted food vendors in markets in attempts to avoid contaminated food or using specific foreign supermarket chains. Children’s diets represent a particularly important field of negotiations, whether concerning the safety of street food or the healthiness of foreign fast food or ultraprocessed products such as the extremely popular instant noodles (Hansen 2022b).

As I have argued elsewhere, the effect of foreign food on local culinary cultures tends to be exaggerated in both popular and academic accounts of globalization, and the food practices of the new middle classes remain recognizably Vietnamese (see Hansen 2021). The global orientation of the food practices of Vietnam’s middle classes could rather crudely be considered along an axis, where those who adhere almost only to Vietnamese “traditional food” occupy one end and those married to foreigners or

frequenting expat circles occupying the other. Most are, however, somewhere in between. In general, culinary influences from around the world have over time seeped into food practices, gradually normalizing the consumption of bread, instant noodles, and pizza, to name a few. Today you can find *bánh mì döner kebab* and street kitchens specializing in Thai food or Japanese *okonomiyaki*. Tacos, sushi, spaghetti, and hamburgers have become common. Pizza is served in a wide variety of establishments, ranging from “authentic” Italian restaurants to restaurant chains focusing on their own hybrids, such as the wide variety of seafood pizzas offered by some local businesses. The extent to which the new middle classes eat at these places depends on their class positions and the circles they frequent. Many of those who have studied abroad or hang out in expat circles may incorporate “authentic” foreign food into their eating practices, at the same time allowing them to display their cosmopolitan know-how. Others would see no problem in eating a goose meat or shrimp, ham, peach, and Thousand Island sauce pizza at The Pizza Company. These tastes are socially constructed, forged through global encounters and local class dynamics. Importantly, however, it is rare among the middle classes in contemporary Vietnam to eat foreign food more than occasionally, although today’s younger generation may end up normalizing this considerably. If the globalizing alcohol industry has it their way, they will eventually do the same with beer.

Drinking

During fieldwork in 2017, I met with an upper-middle-class family in their beautiful, old house in Hà Nội’s French quarter. Like many others living in the area, they were clearly well off. They also obviously had enough cultural capital, including “socialist capital”—that is, deep knowledge of and connections in the communist regime—to be modest in the art of social distinction. I soon discovered that the family had historically held an important position in the Communist Party, but to my knowledge none of them were actively involved at the time. The mother in the family came across as a quite progressive woman in many ways. She told the story of how she was among the first women in Hà Nội to own a motorbike. And, she added, she could hold a drink, clearly challenging dominant stereotypes about proper female behavior. She claimed she would often beat her male friends in drinking

competitions when she was young. Now, she went easy on the alcohol. Her husband, a seemingly highly successful businessman, joined the conversation. He referred to himself as a “professional drinker”—he drank for a living. Referring to the importance of alcohol in making contacts and signing contracts in Vietnam, he said he would always take important connections out to drink, not to eat. This echoes a man I talked to in central Vietnam in the early 2010s. He ran a successful enterprise in the Vietnamese tourism industry and said that a common mistake in dealing with local officials was to only give “the envelope” (read: bribe), when taking them out drinking was the most important part of the deal (see also Osburg 2013). Returning to the Hà Nội businessman, he proceeded to summarize what different kinds of people would prefer to drink: “Young people like beer. [Party] Officials are moving into wine. People my age love spirits. Police or people in the army love spirits.” He added:

And the last four to five years the cigar has been here. And lots of officials they love cigar. And then when you smoke cigar you have to drink whisky. It's like a balance. Or sometimes with wine. Because we operate within a hierarchy, we always have to watch what the higher person is eating or drinking. If the head of the ministry eats or drinks something, the others will drink it. You don't have a choice! (Interview, Hà Nội, March 2017, translated from Vietnamese)

The point of this story is both the importance played by alcohol in contemporary Vietnam and the strong social expectations associated with drinking. While these practices are old, the materials or ingredients with which they are performed change. And, they change through global connections.

Vietnam's “drinkscape” (see Wilkinson 2015) are probably as diverse as its foodscapes. A wide range of beverages form part of normal drinking practices, including smoothies, bubble tea, soft drinks, and energy drinks. But the most important roles are perhaps held by coffee, tea, and beer, where the latter has gone through a significant boom. Vietnam has in recent decades been home to one of the fastest growing beer markets in the world and now has among the highest annual per capita beer consumption rates in Southeast Asia (Knutsen et al. 2023). Drinking alcohol has a long history in Vietnam (see Lincoln 2016), and home-distilled rice alcohol especially has long traditions all over the country (see Bonnin 2015). These survived despite the French imperial administration's attempts to curb home brewing

and establish a monopoly of factory-produced alcohol, something that faced severe opposition (for history, see Peters 2012; Sasges 2010, 2012, 2017). Alongside *Đổi mới* and the development of a globally connected consumer society, homemade spirits have however faced new forms of challenges. For example, factory-produced liquor is common and wine made from grapes—mainly imported but also produced in Đà Lạt—has steadily grown in popularity. But, it is beer that has seen the most dramatic growth. While beer has been common, at least in urban Vietnam, since the French established the first breweries there in the nineteenth century, it has not traditionally been a particularly popular drink among Vietnamese consumers. The first breweries mainly served the French, and it seems beer did not really start gaining popularity until the 1960s, partly due to the phenomenon of *bia hơi*, as discussed later (Le 2015). The consumption of industrially produced beer took off after *Đổi mới* and saw a further boom in the 2000s and 2010s. The footprint of colonialism is still obvious in Vietnam's beer market, in the very word *bia* and beer brands such as *Larue*. But after independence and reunification, breweries all across the country were nationalized. Two large state-owned companies emerged, Hanoi Beer Alcohol and Beverage Joint Stock Corporation (Habeco) and Saigon Alcohol Beer and Beverage Joint Stock Corporation (Sabeco). These corporations and their trademark beers, mainly Bia Hà Nội and variations of Bia Saigon, have come to represent Vietnamese beer, with the latter having the largest, and increasing, shares of the market.

Beer has become a defining part of Vietnam's consumer society. While the professional drinker cited previously loved spirits, he identified as a beer person. He did however not drink just any kind: he preferred Belgian beer, available in Vietnam but at a very high price. This is the same man who once took me for the most expensive coffee I have ever had in Vietnam, an espresso at a five-star hotel at the cost of a full family meal at a local restaurant. Through Belgian beer and expensive, foreign coffee, this man is able to display both wealth and cosmopolitan competence. He needs both in navigating the socialist market economy. The global beer industry also has to be clever to navigate this system. The industry has really opened its eyes to Vietnam, representing one of the fastest growing beer markets in the world. The powerful beer conglomerates Heineken, Carlsberg, and InBev are all present (Knutson et al. 2023), as is ThaiBev, belonging to the “crazy rich” Charoen Sirivadhanabhakdi (see Hewison 2021). In different ways,

these companies are buying up the state-owned companies that have dominated the beer industry so far, although the process is at times complicated (Knutsen and Do 2020; Knutsen et al. 2023). But no matter who controls the industry, beer in Vietnam depends on global connections. While there is rice in some brews, the beer industry uses large amounts of malts and hops, none of which are readily available in Vietnam.

A central part of the democratization of beer consumption in Vietnam was *bia hơi*. Directly translated as “fresh beer,” *bia hơi* is usually light on alcohol, and is particularly popular in the northern parts of the country. Served directly from the keg, it first emerged as a cheaper alternative to the glass bottles that in periods could be hard to come by. *Bia hơi* remains important, but today the competition in the Vietnamese beer market is fierce. While older rather than younger parts of the Vietnamese population tend to be the heaviest drinkers, the urban middle classes, along with tourists and expatriates, play a central role in the diversification of demand. Alongside a rapid growth in different forms of drinking establishments, from local drinking joints to high-end bars, the market for all types of beer has expanded significantly. At the lower end, industrial breweries have replaced home brewers as suppliers of *bia hơi* (despite what both tourists and tourist books seem to believe), while the market for more expensive types of beer has simultaneously grown rapidly.

Craft brewers have established themselves in cities in Vietnam, and sales of craft beer have grown very rapidly in recent years. While expatriates have dominated both the production and drinking of craft beer in Vietnam, its expansion has also reached the upper and upper-middle classes. With at least two to three times the price of a “regular” beer, and easily ten to fifteen times the price of *bia hơi*, this is clearly high-end beer drinking. Although microbreweries have long existed in the country, these have previously focused on Czech- and German-style lagers (beervn.com 2015). While these are still highly popular among segments of Vietnamese beer drinkers, the new microbreweries are embracing the international craft beer trend centered on varieties of US-style pale ale and IPA. Since this trend started in 2014, and particularly since the three expats from the United States who started Pasteur Street Brewing Company established their brewpubs in 2015 (beervn.com 2015), the sector has expanded at a rapid pace. A large number of microbreweries have joined the market, with Heart of Darkness, based in Hồ Chí Minh City, and Hà Nội-based FurBrew, the former with an American founder

and CEO, the latter with a Danish brewer and co-owner, as examples of successful actors. In recent years, all three breweries have expanded their reach to many parts of the country but are also facing increased competition from new microbreweries and from global craft brew brands. For example, Golden Gate, mentioned previously, has opened a range of bars and restaurants specializing in imported US craft brews.

Driving

While moving around is certainly nothing new, the capitalist transformation has changed how and how far people move. First, new jobs, new living arrangements—in cities increasingly away from the workers' quarters of the planned economy—increased the need for transport. Furthermore, more money to spend and more leisure to spend it on, combined with a dramatic increase in available means of transportation, have radically changed everyday mobilities in Vietnam. The French may have introduced the early buds of moto-mobility, but it was long the bicycle that dominated traffic in Vietnam's cities. Indeed, while the car has played a central role in the history of communism in Europe, perhaps even in its fall (Siegelbaum 2008, 2011), the bicycle dominated Asian communism. Vietnam had a significant bicycle industry, and David Koh (2006) found that in 1981, Hà Nội was home to six hundred thousand bicycles. Ask anyone who visited or lived in Hà Nội as late as the early 1990s, and they are likely to describe a tranquil and quiet city where everyone either walked or rode bicycles to get around town. Many of these bicycles were produced domestically. That was not the case for the early motorcycles, which came from different European countries. The Babetta and the Minsk are still famous, but seen as old fashioned and polluting; there was eventually no room for them, at least not in the cities. Rather, motorbikes from Japan and Taiwan, in other word capitalist motorbikes, took over. In Vietnam, the dominance of primarily Honda, but also Suzuki and Yamaha from Japan, together with SYM from Taiwan, has been close to total. While these in many ways have represented symbols of the new openness and of trade liberalization (Truitt 2008; Nguyen 2020), they also represented trade protectionism. The communist regime protected its borders but gave Japanese and Taiwanese producers close to a monopoly. This monopoly was soon challenged by Chinese copies, and the so-called

China shock in the business was an important turning point in the development of a Vietnamese motorcycle industry (see Fujita 2013). Through both protectionist governance and technological innovation, Japanese and Taiwanese brands regained their dominance (Hansen 2016). In recent years competition has tightened, including from the Italian Piaggio, while the newly established Vietnamese producer VinFast is positioning itself as an important actor in the growing e-scooter market.

Today there are more than seventy million registered motorbikes (Vietnamnet 2023), with more than one motorbike per person in large cities (Hansen 2022a). I have elsewhere written extensively about the development of Vietnam's motorbike society and what I call the "system of moto-mobility" (Hansen 2022a). In this system, more or less everyone moves around on two wheels. There are surely ways of standing out, and the middle classes are found on everything from the most affordable Hondas through old-school and trendy Vespas to expensive Piaggios and new e-bike models, but the motorbike is first and foremost a convenient form of transportation. In recent years, the middle classes have also re-embraced the bicycle, although mainly as a means of exercise. And the well-off often ride bicycles that cost much more than the average motorbike. Increasingly, however, the middle classes are also found inside cars.

During my fieldwork on mobilities in Hà Nội in 2013, I met Đức, a man in his early seventies and a relatively high-ranking public official. Like so many other car owners at the time, he was eager to talk about cars. He told me he had two cars, one for business that he shared with his son, and one for his daughter. "I bought my daughter a car because my daughter has to pick up her children. And it only cost some million dong, 500 million, a Kia Morning." Himself, he owned a Mercedes Benz C200 that he told me had cost VND 1.5 billion (interview, Hà Nội, April 2013). This short passage from Đức effectively places him very high on the middle-class spectrum, if not in the upper classes. It also summarizes well the position of many of the car owners I have interviewed. The car plays an essential role in middle- and upper-class Vietnam both through the safety it offers and through the politics of distinction. In fact, the car stands out as one of the ultimate symbols of Vietnam's new consumer society in this regard, given that it is often seen as a necessary part of proving success in the market economy, and as an important part of the new expectations of convenience and cleanliness associated with being (upper) middle class today. Some even told me quite

bluntly that they had bought a car because they felt it was expected of them due to their social standing. Most would however use their motorbikes more regularly than their cars, since the former was seen as much more convenient for moving around. The car is also an expectation in national development terms, and many would consider cars a necessary part of the modern and developed society. Needless to say, the government shares this vision.

The car and the “system of automobility” (Urry 2004) are among the most predictable changes in consumption patterns to follow development and increasing affluence (Hansen and Nielsen 2017). But again, these transformations are variegated, something for which Vietnam’s motorbike society is clear evidence. The “socialist car” (Siegelbaum 2011) never really made it to Vietnam, but the capitalist car certainly did. Today the streets of Vietnamese cities are full of American, German, Japanese, and Korean cars, although many of them are produced in Southeast Asia, some also in Vietnam. Vietnam has long tried to develop a car industry but remains mainly an assembly point (Hansen 2016; Small 2018). Vinfast could change that, but also Vietnam’s first national manufacturer ultimately depends on imported technology and imported parts. Just like consumer socialism in general, the car industry developed by this extremely powerful conglomerate is both distinctly Vietnamese and forged through global connections.

Concluding Discussion:

Everyday Practices and Variegated Consumer Transformations

As this chapter has shown, the changes in consumption since *Đổi mới* have taken shape through the encounters among Vietnam’s development strategies, global production networks, urban transformations, and everyday practices. Most basically, the consumption boom has depended on the combination of a radical increase in the availability of consumer goods and rising affluence, which in turn is an outcome of Vietnam’s overall development success. For example, in the past, motorbikes represented a significant investment, and were financially out of reach for most Vietnamese until the turn of the millennium. In this sense, the motorbike society is a material manifestation of Vietnam’s success in “delivering development” to large parts of the population, although for many a motorbike is still very expensive. Now that Vietnamese consumers have started to buy cars, this in turn shows

that Vietnam has grown increasingly prosperous, although also increasingly unequal. But market reforms have involved more than strictly economic measures. No matter the communist regime's insistence on the market economy merely representing an economic tool for delivering socialism, Vietnam has gone through a capitalist transformation (Hansen 2022a). Although there has been no political transformation in Vietnam, the sociopolitical changes in terms of relative economic freedoms and the official position toward commodities have been radical (see Vann 2012). With reforms, widespread ownership of goods beyond strict necessities had to be accepted by the communist regime, and in time even the consumption of luxury goods appears to be considered beneficial for the road to socialism in Vietnam. The rapid increase in car ownership, and especially the many luxurious cars in the streets, would be impossible without these changes.

The examples presented in this chapter show the material, social, and political embeddedness of consumption. They have also shown the importance of temporal and spatial contexts for understanding changes in consumption. Trying to explain, for example, car, food, or beer consumption in Vietnam as an expression of "Westernization" would be unhelpful. Goods surely cross borders physically and so do at least parts of the sociocultural meanings attached to them. But this generalizing concept obscures more than it unveils. Rather, changes in consumption are contextually dependent, and consumption transformations tend to involve as much continuity as change (see Hansen 2022a). The motorbike society developed in the footprints of the bicycle society. In other words, the system of moto-mobility developed through introducing foreign technologies into existing local practices. The car represents more of a break with existing mobility practices, but also cars are adapted to local contexts, whether through the materials used in assembly, the "lucky license plates" for those who have the political and economic capital to acquire them (see Hansen 2022a), or the amulets hanging from the rearview mirror. Relatedly, most Vietnamese consumers eat mostly Vietnamese food, and drink mostly Vietnamese drinks. Both food and drink have developed through connections with other countries, but they remain recognizably Vietnamese. "Modifications" to the original products, such as coffee served with condensed milk and ice, form one part of this picture. In the beer industry, the monopolizing tendencies in the global industry wipe out some of the local-global differences. Yet many remain, since the globally leading firms long ago realized that they were unable to

attract enough consumers to their global brands. Instead, they had to own local breweries in order to capture large market shares (see Knutsen et al. 2023). So the local brands survive, and the mushrooming of small craft breweries adds further complexity to the sector. Even many of the local drinking practices survive, although rice wine may need to be reinvented to reach a new generation of urban consumers.²

Consumer socialism is an example of the variegated consumer transformations brought about by the encounter between local cultural and institutional contexts and the relatively homogenizing power of global capitalism. Vietnam's socialist market economy is an excellent example of what Peck and Theodore (2007) conceptualize as variegated capitalism. It is capitalism, but it looks different from capitalism anywhere else, to some extent with the exception of China and Laos (see Bekkevold, Hansen, and Nordhaug 2020). Nevertheless, as Peck and Theodore argue, the defining traits of capitalism, including the growth imperative and the search for profits, always remain the same. There are not many different capitalisms out there, but one social and economic system that takes uneven and variegated forms (see also Peck and Zhang 2013; Zhang and Peck 2014; Kenney-Lazar and Mark 2021). This is helpful for making sense of Vietnam's consumer society. It is similar to yet different from consumer society in any other country. These dynamic similarities and differences involve both continuity and change, as this chapter has attempted to show, and are forged in the encounter between local practices and global connections.

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Notes

- 1 Indeed, according to Statista (2021) data, Vietnam is among the countries with the most Internet users in the Asia Pacific Region. Vietnamese authorities do

censor the Internet, for example BBC's Vietnamese accounts, but most young people would know how to get around the blocking should they so desire.

- 2 This process has already started, but so far it represents a very small part of the market.

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12

A Middle-Class Suitcase: Unpacking Domestic Tourism in Vietnam

EMMANUELLE PEYVEL

TOURISM HAS STEADILY INCREASED in Vietnam since the *Đổi mới* reforms (figure 12.1). In 2019, the country registered 85 million domestic tourist trips as compared to 18 million international tourist arrivals, a 4.7-fold difference. The revenue generated totaled US\$32.8 billion, of which 14.5 billion came from domestic tourism (Bộ Văn hóa Thể thao và Du lịch 2020). Between 2015 and 2019, domestic tourism flows increased by a factor of 1.5 (from 57 to 85 million), and its revenues by a factor of 2.1. All these figures show that domestic tourism is a major pillar of Vietnamese tourism growth.

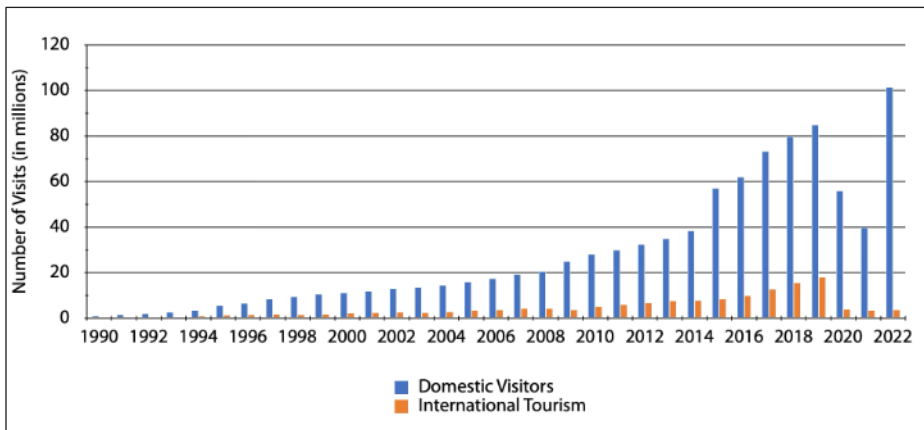


Figure 12.1: Combined growth of domestic and international tourism in Vietnam (number of visits). (Source: <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn>)

The collapse of international tourism in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak has boosted the recognition of domestic tourism, which had previously been overlooked, even by academics (Peyvel 2016; Bui and Jolliffe 2011). It was officially encouraged by the Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism's "Người Việt Nam đi du lịch Việt Nam" program (figure 12.2) that began in May 2020 (Nga 2020) and that helps sector professionals promote their offers. Although domestic tourism has not fully compensated the losses of international tourism, it has acted as a significant shock absorber in the face of the crisis.



Figure 12.2: Promotional campaign encouraging domestic tourism during the COVID-19 period. (Source: Minh Châu 2021)

The Vietnamese situation is not unusual: with a few rare exceptions in the world, domestic tourism is always higher than international tourism (WTO 2020). In addition to the standard economic indicators, domestic tourism is an excellent way of measuring how wealth is distributed, thus enhancing our understanding of social stratification and inequality. Moreover, its development is often seen as a marker of social progress. Indeed, it is correlated with the industrialization and tertiarization of the economy and the introduction of paid holidays and labor legislation, in accordance with Article 24 of the Declaration of Human Rights.

Although the impressive figures over the past thirty years demonstrate the growth of domestic tourism in Vietnam, the phrase “everybody is a

tourist” is misleading: not everyone can be a tourist, and not all provinces take advantage of tourism. This chapter identifies the populations and territories that benefit from domestic tourism (or not) in an attempt to avoid artificially simplifying and essentializing a statistical category. In doing so, it argues for acknowledging the diversity of tourist resources and practices as central to a complex understanding of the Vietnamese middle class today.

Understanding the Vietnamese Middle Class through Tourism Practices and Locations

The definition of the middle class is the subject of an abundant, contradictory literature. Recognizing and defining it is a challenge for several closely related reasons. Politically, the middle classes do not really have an official existence in Vietnam. The descriptive term *tầng lớp trung lưu* (middle class) used in official discourse serves to bolster class unconsciousness among a significant part of the population, to the benefit of the regime’s stability.

These apparent paradoxes explain why today the Vietnamese middle classes are everywhere and nowhere at the same time, as Ann Marie Leshkovich explains:

Everywhere, because Honda motorbikes, recently renovated homes, upscale cafés, and imported fashion testified to an urban middle-class on the rise, a perception echoed in media and government-sponsored visions of the cultured family whose cosy emotional relations were enabled by material conveniences and leisure activities. ... At the same time, the middle class seemed nowhere, in that people tended not to identify as middle class (*giai cấp/tầng lớp trung lưu*). Instead, they talked about being modern (*hiện đại*), having enough to live (*có đủ sống*), being civilized (*văn minh*), having culture (*có văn hóa*), or being appropriate (*phù hợp*). (Leshkovich 2014:175)

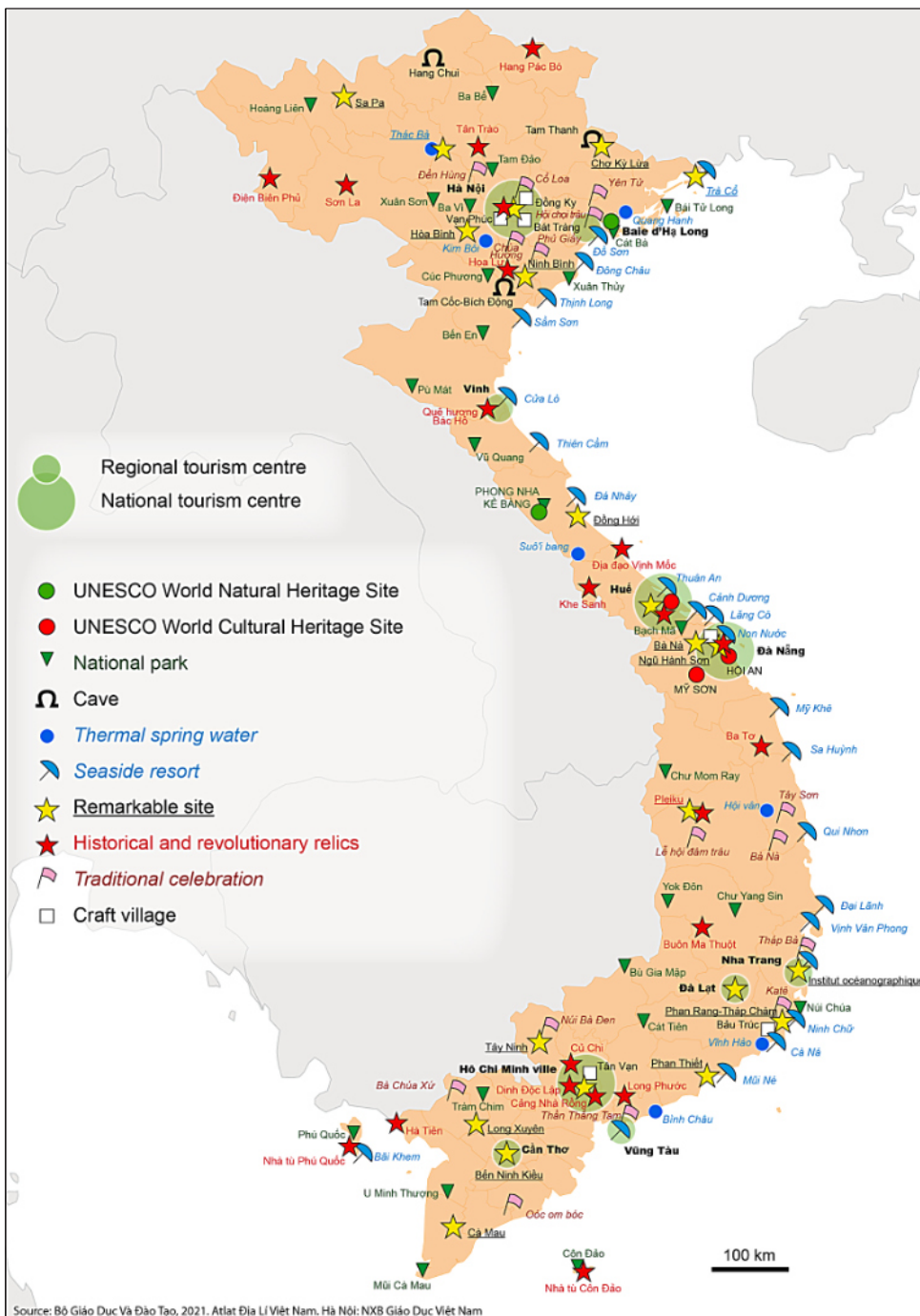
Since *Đổi mới*, social membership has been based less on production than on consumption, but the latter can be observed through practices that are more or less concealed, as they can be looked upon with suspicion (see Harms, this volume, and Hansen, this volume, on the tensions and anxiety that are part of being middle class in the socialist market economy).

Thus, the Vietnamese middle classes reside in both visibility and invisibility. While that makes them difficult to define, their multiple spatial footprints make the analysis of their practices and spaces even more

rewarding. Through landscape analysis, Lisa Drummond (2012) shows the many layers of public, consumption, and circulation spaces in Hà Nội. Yet, if the city is the most favored place to study the middle classes due to the social inequalities generated by the accumulation of wealth in these paradigmatic places of capital, social stratifications cannot be restricted to the city. They are at work in all spaces occupied by the consumer society (see also Hansen, this volume). Therefore, the study of tourist locations extends the study of Vietnamese middle classes by following their practices and movements in places beyond their daily lives. Such an approach helps us to understand the ways in which they claim their social position in changing Vietnam.

As map 12.1 indicates, the places where the Vietnamese middle classes practice tourism are telling of their relationship to the body, time, space, and wealth. It shows how they project onto these places the values that they seek to claim as distinctive, such as being modern (*hiện đại*) and civilized (*văn minh*). Yet, turning rural, mountain, and coastal productive places into recreational ones has major consequences on the land, the landscape, and their economic functions. Land speculation, densification, and planning are a direct consequence of the production of recreational and contemplative places. Within these places, the unequal concentration of wealth reshapes the gradients between private and public, clean and dirty, male and female spaces due to the progressive urbanization and integration into consumer society, as demonstrated by To (2012).

The transformation of the coastline between Đà Nẵng and Hội An is representative of these sociospatial changes. The 30 kilometers of coastline are now seamlessly occupied by resorts, large complexes of hotels and villas with swimming pools, spas, restaurants, cafes, and golf courses. They have sprung up over the last twenty years under umbrella Vietnamese corporations (e.g., Vinpearl, Naman Retreat) and foreign ones (e.g., Sheraton, Hyatt, Accor, Furama). They operate in a self-contained way and are closed off from the outside by high walls, heavy gates, security guards, and video surveillance. The result is an almost total privatization of the coastline that heavily restricts the access of local populations to the beaches. This impedes the prior functions of the beach as a source of freshness that is increasingly necessary in the face of global warming, as a place for social and recreational activities (e.g., *tập thể dục* gymnastics, relaxing, and socializing) for neighboring communities, and a resource providing supplementary food and



Map 12.1: Main Vietnamese tourist sites.

nutrition, for example, through fishing or harvesting coconut groves. These resorts are not just isolated ramifications of international tourism, they are part of the global encounter and domestication of the tropical island iconic landscape for which three key elements are combined: white sand, coconut palms, and a turquoise sea (Löfgren 1999). The construction of these resorts has established a new relationship with the place through the introduction of new standards of hygiene: swimming pools are considered cleaner and less dangerous than the sea, garbage cans encourage waste collection, and each resort has dedicated personnel for maintenance and cleaning tasks. Meanwhile, the heavy construction accelerates coastal erosion as the ripraps no longer allow natural sand dynamics despite regular sand supplies.¹ Gardens and golf courses, watered with fresh water, complete the ecological nightmare. These tourist areas, as they develop, gain in centrality on a national and regional scale as spaces of investment and wealth concentration. They become more accessible by road and air travel with the development of transport infrastructures such as highways and airports that connect them with major cities. The rise of low-cost airlines such as Vietjet Air and Bamboo Airways, alongside Vietnam Airlines, has enabled the democratization of air transport and improved access to formerly remote mountainous regions such as Điện Biên Phủ and Buôn Ma Thuột. At the same time, they lead to the marginalization of local populations, as privatization, hygiene standards, and the use of comfort technologies (such as air conditioning or the Internet) justify withdrawal to the private sphere. Consequently, the seaside or highland resorts are purposely built to generate contrast with their surrounding social and spatial environments, in order to feed into the middle classes' distinction project.

This process is well illustrated by figure 12.3, a photograph taken in the former colonial hill station of Bà Nà (Central Vietnam), which Sun Group corporation, one of Vietnam's largest real estate developers, rebranded as Bà Nà Hills in 2013. The pastiche buildings reminiscent of France and the dedicated transport infrastructure with six cable cars are hardly integrated into the natural environment of the highlands. Instead, a logic of enclosure and domination in relation to the surroundings prevails. The resort is indeed a tourist bubble that offers visitors everything they need in terms of accommodation, food, and entertainment in a scheme of effortless consumption. In addition, standing at nearly 1,500 meters above sea level, the multiple viewpoints and panoramas, including the new Golden Bridge (Cầu Vàng),



Figure 12.3: Bà Nà Hills, a paradigmatic middle-class tourist destination. (Photo by the author, 2016)

are designed to look down on the natural space, while paradoxically defacing it. As a heterotopia, namely a localized utopia, requiring rigid norms of operation (Foucault 1984), the place deliberately maintains a disconnection from its immediate environment, functioning as an island in it. This results in a strong control of both employees and tourists, who are monitored everywhere and at all times.

Blurring the Lines: Tourists On-site and Online

The processes of individuation at play in these tourist sites is also worth considering. The practice of photography, a middle art par excellence (Bourdieu 1995), is striking in its capacity to enhance the bodies of these classes in a new way. By subjects adopting flattering poses in renowned places, staging themselves in uncommon and therefore distinctive activities,

displaying their bodies on the beach or during sports activities, they feed a new self-consciousness. These practices have clearly been democratized with smartphones and the selfies they allow. Before, owning a camera was more socially distinguishing. Alternatively, professional photographers were, and are still, appreciated by large groups, although their number has considerably decreased. In any case, the new self-consciousness is one occupied with being happy, whether alone or with family, friends, or as a couple. Bà Nà Hills, in particular, has become a romantic destination for young couples to spend their honeymoon, a relatively recent practice in the country that has much to do with new notions of happiness and the good life.

This new self-consciousness supported by photography is very often mediated through social networks. These virtual networks can also be considered as new spaces for the Vietnamese middle and upper classes to produce material and social effects via the sociability and visibility of this social and economic capital. The practice of photography itself is based on the consumption of expensive objects, smartphones, and dedicated cameras, which also partakes in a distinctive material culture.

Finally, the use of photography in a tourist context supports another relationship to time in its capacity to isolate unique moments whose exceptional character reinforces their distinctiveness. It is a question of keeping a trace. More than the landscape or the monument visited, it is the act of posing in front of it as a testimony of the subject's visit that counts (see figure 12.4). These photographic practices feed a sense of nostalgia, particularly about their native land and childhood, which is counterpart of the modernity on which these populations put their claim, reflecting a singular relationship that individuals now have with the passing of time. The recent use of the *bao cấp* (subsidy) period for tourism and leisure purposes exemplifies this (Peyvel 2021a). Some bars, cafés, restaurants, and gift or decoration shops now use socialist aesthetics such as propaganda slogans or objects from (or copying) this period in order to thematize commercial venues.

Free Time and Self-Concern in the Context of Social Change

Domestic tourism contributes more broadly to a revolution of the individual in Vietnam, by legitimizing self-concern, the development of a private life, and the preservation of intimacy, all of which complicate the social and



Figure 12.4: Domestic tourists in Gành Đá Đĩa, Central Vietnam. (Photo by the author, 2021)

spatial relationships between public and private (Barbieri and Bélanger 2009). This is striking in a country marked by both Confucianism and socialism, systems in which modesty, a sense of hierarchy, and obedience remain important values.

Furthermore, the development of domestic tourism is deeply linked to social and economic changes, of which it is as much a witness. For the past 30 years, Vietnam has been experiencing strong economic growth, averaging nearly 7 percent, resulting in a general increase in living standards. According to the World Bank, the poverty rate was 6.7 percent in 2018 in Vietnam, and the GDP/capita was US\$3,461, placing the country in the middle-income category. However, city dwellers remain privileged in the distribution of this wealth. Hồ Chí Minh City accounts for nearly one fourth of the national GDP, and Hà Nội 12 percent. This unequal distribution of wealth is linked to rapid urbanization. At 20.1 percent in 1989, the urbanization rate has now reached 36.8 percent with an annual urban growth estimated at 3 percent

(Business France 2020a). Unquestionably, middle-class and affluent city dwellers are the breeding ground for domestic tourism, even if they do not account for all of it.

These city dwellers, increasingly rich and numerous, are often employed in the industrial and service sectors. Agriculture accounted for only 15 percent of GDP in 2020, while industry represented 34 percent. According to the World Bank, the rate of wage employment has risen from 19 percent in 1997 to 45.7 percent in 2019, and it is within the skilled labor force that this rate is growing fastest. Wage employment introduces lasting changes in time management. When a population lives mainly in rural areas of an agricultural economy, the rhythm of work depends essentially on that of the harvest, allowing little time off. Even if there are times when people do not work, they most often coincide with forced idleness during the off season. They are therefore not really chosen, and more difficult to structure as free time. In addition, this interruption of work is often used to temporarily engage in another income-generating activity, such as a craft industry, or to get a job in the city. In urban areas, on the contrary, an employee in the industrial or service sector lives according to a much more structured separation of work and free time. The simple fact of having a weekly or monthly contract, rather than a daily one, guarantees the consistency not only of income but also of time use. This helps structuring and financing free time, and therefore organizing tourism projects.

In Vietnam, free time is governed by the Labour Code, adopted by the Assembly of the Ninth Legislature on 23 June 1994. Today, the legal working hours are eight hours a day and 48 hours a week (Chapter 7, Article 68), which can be reduced for very arduous jobs. According to Article 72, the employee is entitled to one day off per week, or four days per month if weekly rest is impossible, and he or she earns an extra day off every five years (Article 75). In addition to this, there are ten public holidays (*ngày nghỉ lễ*).

In total, Vietnamese people enjoy an average of twenty to twenty-five days off per year, although a large part of the economy is still informal, and therefore more difficult to track. As a result, some Vietnamese may have fewer vacations than expected, while others are more fortunate. Some foreign companies and administrations may grant extra days, notably to comply with vacations of their expatriate staff. However, these exceptions benefit managers working at headquarters often located in Hà Nội and Hồ

Chí Minh City, rather than workers employed in peri-urban and rural factories, further reinforcing social and spatial discrimination.

However, the increased number of people working in cities and in the secondary and tertiary sectors creates a favorable time for the development of tourism. Weekends gradually become more structured and are increasingly reserved for rest and recreation, even as people continue working. It is important to highlight this situation as it complicates the traditional definition of the middle class by its income. While it is true that the middle class typically has higher incomes, it also has more and more free time, flexibility, and resources to enjoy leisure activities.

The changing consumer practices are also driven by the country's youth. According to the last population census, half of the population is below thirty years of age. Socialism has brought a high level of education and care to the masses, making it easier for them to join the consumer and communication society. Indeed, school is understood as a place not only of formal learning and diplomas but also of preparation for globalization and mobility: students learn foreign languages, study geography, and go on school trips. According to the World Bank, more than 70 percent of the population is connected to the Internet today, while the rate of cell phone equipment is 142.7, which means that there are 1.5 subscriptions per person. The development of these technologies actively contributes to the development e-tourism, and specific platforms such as Luxstay, the Vietnamese equivalent of Airbnb.

All these social changes suggest a nonproblematic relationship with mobility. In 1993, 81 percent of the Hà Nội population and 65 percent of the Hồ Chí Minh City population owned a bicycle (Godart and Cusset 1996); in 2020, there were between 45 million (according to the Ministry of Transport) and 58 million (according to the Department of Road Safety) motorcycles in the country. Eighty percent of urban trips in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City are made with this type of vehicle, while the rate of car ownership continues to grow (Hansen 2016). This has led to a spectacular increase in mobility, particularly for tourism and leisure purposes, closely combining mobility and well-being (Nguyen 2020; Truitt 2008).

Social and Spatial Inequalities of Domestic Tourism

While the country as a whole is richer, not all Vietnamese are: *Đổi mới* has increased wealth and inequality at the same time (Harms 2016; King 2008). According to Oxfam,² there are currently 13 million poor people in the country. Among them, ethnic minority groups are overrepresented: although constituting only 14 percent of the total population, they make up half of the population of “most impoverished people.” In contrast, the country now has 12,327 millionaires and 142 ultrarich people, defined as those possessing at least US\$30 million (Business France 2020b). Tourism has followed the same trend and remains socially discriminatory.

According to the General Statistics Office surveys of foreign and domestic visitor spending in 2003, 2005, 2009, and 2013 (Tổng cục Du lịch Việt nam 2003, 2005, 2009 and 2013), which regrettably have stopped, the inequalities become visible through nine variables relating to gender, age, occupation, expenditure, means of transport, accommodation, reasons for visiting, length of stay, and management (use or not of a travel agency). These statistics are now about ten years old, which is why I will present a summary of them here, to identify structural characteristics, supplemented by more recent specific statistics when they exist, notably in the Statistical Yearbooks³ that contains data on the average length of stay. In 2013, it was 3.7 days. In 2019, it was still less than 4 days (3.57 in the case of visiting friends and family, 3.96 days when using a commercial establishment). This shows that short stays dominate, and while vacations are gradually normalized, long vacations are neither common, nor widely socially accepted. In terms of spending, in 2019, it averaged VND 1,122,800/day for domestic tourists (around US\$45), compared to US\$96/day for foreigners. Unsurprisingly, guests in the most expensive accommodations spend the most: VND 1,845,100 (around US\$75) for a five-star hotel customer in 2019, compared to VND 1,020,200 (around US\$40) for a guest house customer. However, according to the 2013 surveys, it is the most modest accommodations that are the most frequented: the share of hotels with none through 2 stars concentrated more than 55 percent of domestic visitors, while 4- and 5-star hotels gathered only 10 percent.

Beyond this general profile, three variables further characterize domestic tourism: age, gender, and occupation. Most domestic tourists are young: twenty-five- to forty-four-year-olds represented 65 percent of the sample in

2013. The ratio of men to women appears clearly unbalanced, since 60.3 percent of men were surveyed against 39.7 percent of women in 2013, which suggests a gendered access to tourist mobility, the equality of which is only slightly progressing (in 2003, this ratio was respectively 67.4 percent against 32.6 percent). The generational and domination effects combine here, explaining why most Vietnamese tourists are in fact young men. Professional occupation is also discriminating. Farmers are indeed the numerically least important category in the sample (less than 3 percent in 2013), which is explained in part by their low income, but not only: it is more difficult to autonomously spend free time in this profession. Between the 2003 and 2013 surveys, farmers are the only ones who are less likely to go on vacation, an indication of the difficulties faced by the rural population. On the contrary, all the other socio-professional categories, as well as retirees, have seen their departure rate increase in ten years, with blue-collar workers recording the strongest growth, going from 2.2 percent to 11 percent of the sample, which suggests, beyond the massification of flows, a certain democratization of the tourist activity. However, this must be nuanced according to income. On the one hand, income determines the length of the stay: while 30 percent of civil servants and 16.3 percent of entrepreneurs spend more than 15 days away, only 8.1 percent of workers, 6.1 percent of retirees, and 0.4 percent of farmers could afford it in 2013. On the other hand, income determines the expenses incurred during the stay: entrepreneurs are the ones who spend the most (more than VND 5 million/day), twice as much as farmers, the socio-professional category that spends the least (VND 2.5 million/day) in 2013. The gap had been the same ten years earlier. This means that while living standards are rising for all, this does not significantly reduce the gaps between social classes in tourism practices.

Finally, income, while indispensable to the realization of a tourism project, is combined with other discriminating variables: that of being able to free up time, which puts farmers at a disadvantage; and the social acceptance of mobility, which favors men. However, it is impossible to go further in the intersectional study of these relations of domination because certain variables are missing, such as the geographic origin and ethnic categorization of the respondents, which would have been useful in approaching the rural-urban and ethnic inequalities. By observations alone, Kinh city dwellers are indeed the majority going to tourist sites, reinforcing the ethnic and gender domination effects.

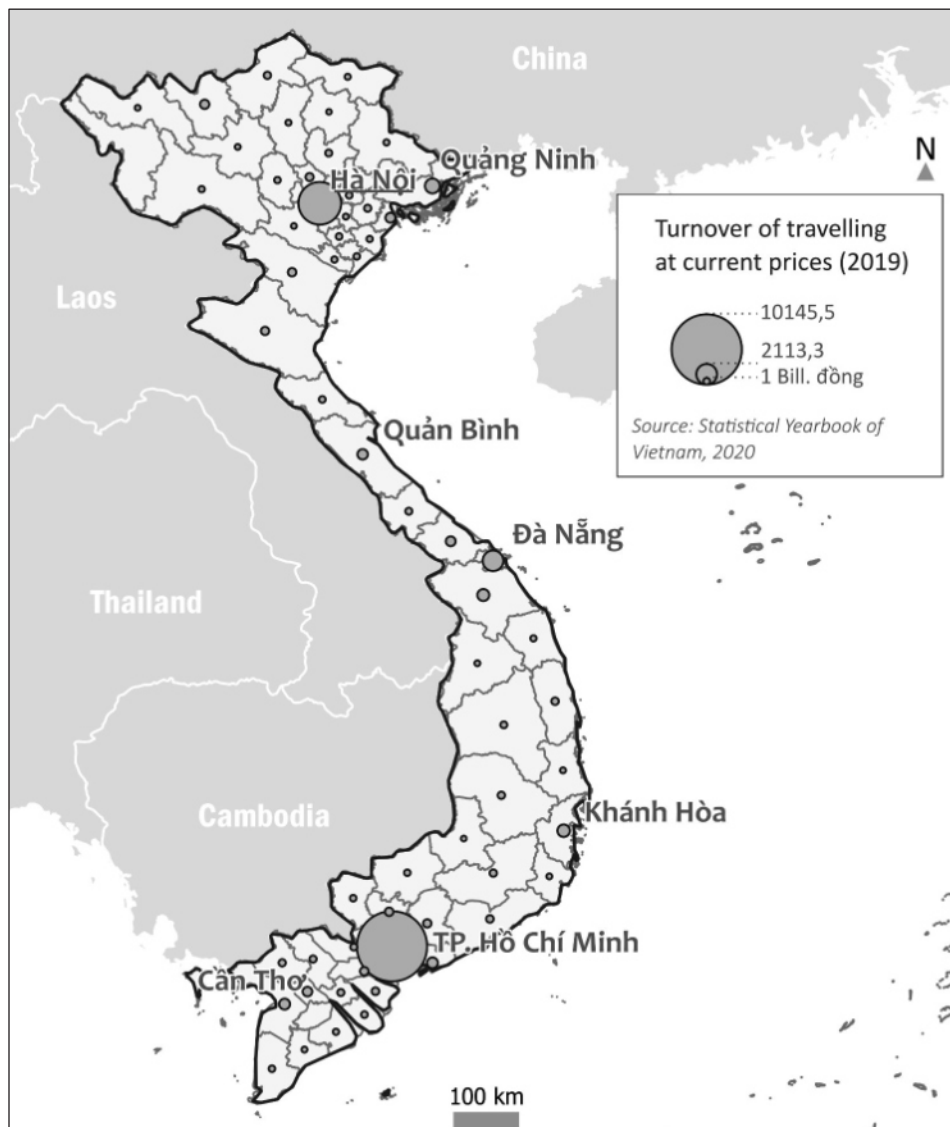
Not only is tourism socially discriminatory, but its practice generates integration or exclusion, leading to further axes of inequalities. This unequal distribution can be analyzed at two levels: the national level, to differentiate between privileged and disadvantaged regions, and the local level, where cities appear as centers of tourist. Map 12.2 shows that tourism in Vietnam is ultimately concentrated in two quite distinct regions: the north, polarized by Hà Nội, and the south, around Hồ Chí Minh City. While the eleven provinces of the Red River Delta alone account for more than 25 percent of revenues, Hồ Chí Minh City and Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu gather 60 percent. Beyond the influence of Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City, Central Vietnam collects only 6.3 percent of revenues, shared among Huế, Đà Nẵng, and Hội An.

This north/south dichotomy is combined with an east/west one: tourist activity is more concentrated on the eastern coast than in the western mountainous region. The five provinces of the Central Highlands account for only 0.3 percent of the country's tourism revenue. This dichotomy refers more broadly to an unequal development of the country, between a much richer Kinh territory in the plains and rice-growing deltas, conceived as the center of the country, and the mountainous territories, often relegated to a peripheral status. In the north, however, tourism is increasingly gaining traction with itineraries linking villages marketed as "ethnic": Hòa Bình, Mai Châu, Sơn La, Điện Biên Phủ, Lai Châu, Sa Pa, Hà Giang, Ba Bể, Cao Bằng, Bắc Kạn, and Lạng Sơn. In the Central Highlands, conflicts between Kinh and local ethnic groups are still recent, so tourism development in these provinces remains limited around the three main cities of Kon Tum, Pleiku, and Buôn Ma Thuột. In the east, 70 percent of the revenue generated from tourism is concentrated on the coastline, where 54.5 percent of Vietnamese tourists travel (Business France 2020b).

Furthermore, larger cities, especially Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City, are the focal points of this tourism system. They play a triple function: as destinations, as a transit point to other regions, and as emitting hubs, with their residents supplying the largest number of domestic tourists in the country. Above all, it is there that the command structures of the activity are concentrated, not only public (the country's largest agency, Saigontourist, has its headquarters in Hồ Chí Minh City), but also private actors.

Tell Me Where You Travel, I'll Tell You Who You Are

While statistical surveys outline the main characteristics of domestic tourism in Vietnam, qualitative field surveys finely differentiate middle class practices according to the forms of capital employed (Bourdieu 1979). Indeed,



Map 12.2: Provincial distribution of tourism revenue in Vietnam in 2019.

the practices, places, and imaginaries of domestic tourism are not uniform, and some can be conflicting, as they are claimed by social groups aiming to achieve distinction and belonging at the same time.

Bà Nà Hills is a good example of these class dynamics. The destination is an iconic landmark of Vietnamese mass tourism. Designed almost exclusively for a domestic clientele, this place represents a “middle-class landscape” (Drummond 2012). Indeed, Bà Nà Hills is a clear spatial manifestation of global consumption, materializing the good life as idealized by the current Vietnamese middle class (Earl 2014). Evidence that this place has a strong social identity is that it has been criticized specifically by a social class having a strong cultural capital. Professors, architects, artists, and journalists have exposed the destruction of the natural environment and mocked a monumental faux pas on social networks, as a forty-two-year-old project manager for an International Cooperation in Hà Nội posted on Facebook in 2023 with photos of the construction site:

Now Sun has demolished the entire mountain peak at an altitude of 1,500 in Bà Nà's sacred mountain conservation area, destroying nature to create a complex of super-class, fake European concrete fortresses that speak in today's language. Looking at the images of brutal butchering of a nature reserve like this, you must see that going to Bà Nà Hills is aiding in crime. (Translation by author.)

Rather than a place for the middle class as a fixed and bounded category, Bà Nà Hills is therefore the place of a certain middle class, from which other social groups seek to distinguish themselves. Attendance surveys conducted on-site show that the most represented professions correspond to middle classes possessing a certain amount of economic capital, but relatively low cultural capital, such as retailers, managers of small and medium-sized businesses in transport or import-export, or office workers. On the contrary, professions requiring a high level of cultural capital, what R. Florida called the “creative classes” (2002), are not prevalent. This socially demarcated attendance helps us to understand why this leisure park, the largest and most frequented in the country, the flagship of Sun Group (the third largest group in the sector after Vin Group and FLC), is at the same time the most reviled, especially in the press and on social networks.

These middle-class conflicts reveal that tourism, and by extension leisure, can be used to acquire skills and knowledge that can serve as an economic, social, cultural, and symbolic tool kit within the educational, professional,

and even matrimonial markets. Tourism does not only allow encounters; it is a means of acquiring and capitalizing on skills and knowledge: holiday camps that are blossoming in the urban economies of Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City today are a case in point. It would be restrictive to understand them only as entertainment or child care. Rather, they allow middle class and wealthy children to practice music, painting, chess, physical activities, computer coding, or a foreign language, especially English or Chinese. These activities are marketed as means to reinforce multilingualism, muster a sense of teamwork, foster a taste for competition, and promote logic, rigor, and creativity, not to mention self-confidence. These are all skills and attitudes that are not strictly part of the academic learning process, but which nonetheless have a discriminating effect on academic and professional careers. They fuel this “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005), where cosmopolitanism, initiative, dynamism, and mobility are central values. This investment is a characteristic not only of upper classes with a certain international capital (Wagner and Réau 2015), but also of middle classes with an “international goodwill” (Nogueira and Aguiar 2008), seeking to integrate as best they can into globalization. In this sense, tourism can condition other social and spatial mobilities. Despite its frivolous appearance, tourism may be purposeful: it can be made profitable, build up reputation, and lead to the formation of wealth.

The unequal access to tourism, both socially and spatially, is also the result of a progressive withdrawal of the party-state from the tourism sector in favor of the private sector (Gillen 2016). It has maintained majority control of the most profitable companies such as the national airline Vietnam Airlines while progressively parting with smaller infrastructures such as state-owned accommodation. In 2004, for the first time, the private sector surpassed the state one in tourism (Tổng cục thống kê 2007:165–166). Ten years later, 26.7 percent of the revenue generated by tourism still went to the state, while 63.1 percent went to the private sector and 10.1 percent to companies with foreign participation (Tổng cục thống kê 2010:536–537). In 2019, these figures were respectively 12.6 percent, 75.6 percent, and 11.3 percent (Tổng cục thống kê 2020:652).

Global Encounters of Domestic Tourism

The World Tourism Organization (WTO) officially defines a domestic tourist as a visitor traveling within the tourist's country of residence, and the category of domestic tourism therefore includes people who live in the country they are visiting. However, establishing a statistical group based on the country of residence may result in an artificial separation from international tourists, with the risk of overestimating the common features within each category and setting them up as particularism, without providing the means to envisage heuristic bridges between Vietnamese and foreigners in the places, practices, and imaginaries that they may share. The danger would then be to fall into essentialism, by assigning specificities to each nationality, instead of focusing on the circulations, hybridizations, and reappropriations that they entail in a globalized context.

Current domestic tourism practices involve multiple circulations, both in time and on various spatial scales. Some are ancient legacies, such as *du xuân*, the practice of going to the mountains at the time of the lunar new year to admire the blossoming fruit trees, a practice common to other countries in the region, such as Japan (*hanami*) and Korea (*beotkkot kugyeong*). The French colonization marked the moment when the spatial model of the resort appeared, by the sea (the seaside resort of Cap St. Jacques, which later became Vũng Tàu, but also Nhà Trang, Đồ Sơn, and Sầm Sơn) or in the mountains (the hill stations of Đà Lạt, Bà Nà, Tam Đảo, and Sa Pa), promoting new practices and landscape aesthetics from Europe. These were sometimes appropriated by the Vietnamese from that time, sometimes valued (Goscha 1996; Nguyen 1995), sometimes mocked (Durand 2011; Vũ 1936). Today, the attendance of these resorts is essentially domestic and consists of fundamentally hybrid practices. Far from being prisoners of the French scheme, the Vietnamese have also developed their own practices and imaginations, such as going to the seaside without sunbathing, since white skin is still considered aesthetically and socially attractive. The current syncretism of mountain travel, between tourism and pilgrimage, is also interesting to highlight (Peyvel 2021b). It is fully in line with the three Ps of tourism in the region, identified long ago (Graburn 1983): pray, play, and pay.

The socialist era was an important stage in the conception of domestic tourism, which was then designed to serve national construction (Gorsuch

and Koenker 2006). No longer a market sector, tourism was considered a reward, captured by the apparatchiks but also granted to peasants or workers considered deserving, with the aim of building a new person (*người mới*). Today, there are still trips offered by mass organizations and trade unions to their members. It would be interesting to study them further, because although their members are getting older, these organizations continue to play a role in democratizing tourism, especially in rural areas. Their actions show how transnational neoliberalism and state socialism have intersected (Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012).

Since *Đổi mới*, Vietnamese tourism has continued to grow. It is therefore important not to completely separate inbound and outbound tourism. In addition to domestic tourism, most Vietnamese tourists travel within the region, primarily to China and then to ASEAN. In 2009, there were 1.4 million Vietnamese trips to ASEAN, ten years later there were 4.1 million, mainly to Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.⁴ These circulations allow for a better understanding of practices such as gambling and casino tourism, which are officially forbidden to the Vietnamese in their own country, but which are nevertheless very popular.

Finally, between inside and outside, at the crossroads of the foreign and the familiar, the Vietnamese abroad occupy a special place on the tourist spectrum in present Vietnam, which is poorly represented by official statistics. They straddle the line between domestic and foreign tourists. However, this status is not only an administrative issue, but also a matter of personal membership: some claim it and ask for dual nationality, while others reject it. Moreover, traveling to the native country fulfills several functions, which are often difficult to summarize solely on the grounds of “tourism.” For example, the business deals concluded on such occasions may also motivate the visit. Finally, the matter remains political. Between 1975 and 1986, it was unimaginable for those living in countries designated as capitalist enemies to come to Vietnam for tourism. If such tourism practices can be deployed today, it is because the Vietnamese authorities have now opened up their borders and are encouraging these populations to invest locally. The tourism dimension of these trips is in fact twofold: not only do Vietnamese emigrants and their descendants go to Vietnam for tourism, but they can also organize trips with their families back home, which is particularly conducive to sharing views, discovering new places, and renewing certain practices.

This brief overview does not claim to cover the entire history of tourism in Vietnam, but it does demonstrate that domestic tourism cannot be reduced to a simple phenomenon of diffusion from Europe. The issue here is to distinguish between Westernization and globalization, and not to confuse an object with the multiple uses that can be made of it. Vietnamese tourists today are not receivers of a tourism globalization that will affect them sooner or later, but rather producers, transmitters, users, and manufacturers of tourism discourses, practices, and standards. Moreover, restricting this vitality to a mere Westernization can revive racist clichés forged from the colonial era. This is not unique to Vietnam: it could be generalized to many former European colonies, such as Morocco (Berriane 1993).

Conclusion

All these arguments show how domestic tourism can be used to examine the Vietnamese middle classes. These mobilities constitute an excellent means of concretely approaching the uses of the newly produced wealth since *Đổi mới*, its distribution, and the meaning assigned to it. Furthermore, leisure offers an original perspective on the construction of identities and the rise of the individual in society. Urban, recreational, and social mobility are finely interwoven: the Vietnamese rely in part on the recreational sphere to showcase their social success and build their urban identity. However, it is fundamental to avoid making it an essentialized category: beyond the figures that show a constant growth over thirty consecutive years, not all Vietnamese are tourists, and, among them, not all engage in it in the same way: social, spatial, ethnic, and gender inequalities continue to be strong and require careful analysis.

Nevertheless, unpacking Vietnamese domestic tourism should not lead to a total deconstruction of this category of mobility. Indeed, even though it is imperfect, it has two major benefits. First, it recognizes the existence of these tourists. To name them is to make them exist alongside international tourism, which has long captured most of the attention. Although international tourism generates foreign currency and contributes to the balance of trade, it represents a smaller volume compared to domestic tourism, and is more volatile and sensitive to crises, as evidenced by the recent Covid crisis. Moreover, it is not the category itself that is the problem, but the use that

can be made of it, for example to serve an essentialist or nationalist discourse. In contrast, there is considerable reward to approach it in a dynamic and transformative way in a globalized context.

Notes

- 1 This issue is regularly covered in the Vietnamese press, e.g., Hoang Anh, “Enduring Battle to Save Beaches from Erosion,” *Vietnam Investment Review*, 6 May 2021, <https://vir.com.vn/enduring-battle-to-save-beaches-from-erosion-84062.html>.
- 2 See <https://www.oxfam.org/en/what-we-do/countries/vietnam>.
- 3 Niên giám Thống kê quốc gia, General Statistics Office yearly publication: <https://www.gso.gov.vn/en/?s=statistical+yearbook&lang=en>.
- 4 See <https://data.aseanstats.org/dashboard/tourism>.

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*Migration, Mobility, and
Middle-Class Aspirations among
Vietnamese Migrants in Moscow*

LAN ANH HOANG

Migration and Middle-Classness—Paradoxes and Contestations

ACROSS THE DEVELOPING WORLD, migration is considered to be a strategy for upward mobility by both working class laborers (Bonatti and Muniandy 2020; Hoang 2020c; Hoang and Yeoh 2015b) and the middle classes (El-Mallakh and Wahba 2021; Rutten and Verstappen 2014). The supposedly superior income opportunities offered by places of destination potentially enable cash-strapped rural families to join the ranks of the middle classes through the accumulation of either or both economic and human capital. Middle-class migrants, on the contrary, seek highly regarded education and professional development opportunities overseas, which are expected to facilitate their future occupational mobility and, in so doing, consolidate their middle-class status in the face of increasing uncertainties.

Middle-classness is, however, a highly contested concept the meanings of which are historically and culturally constructed (Bélanger, Drummond, and Nguyen-Marshall 2012). Absolute income is commonly used in economics as a defining criterion for the middle classes. While it helps us capture the scale of the middle classes and their changes over time, income can be misleading given the significant disparities in the cost of living between urban and rural areas and across countries. More importantly, official statistics on income are not always reliable in the Global South, where

corruption and tax evasion are endemic (Rosser Jr., Rosser, and Ahmed 2000). For example, the 2006 Vietnam Enterprise Census shows that only 46.4% of the surveyed enterprises are registered with social security, and wages reported to social security represent just 32.5% of the wages actually paid (Castel and To 2012).

Recent qualitative research on the middle classes draws extensively from Bourdieu's (1984) and Veblen's (1973) thinking about taste, consumption, and social class. According to Veblen, conspicuous consumption as a social performance is key to the transformation of wealth into status, and members of each social class have their own ideals of consumption behavior (which align with those of the class above them). The relationship between consumption and social class is refined by Bourdieu, who introduced the concept of cultural capital, or values and tastes, the expression of which in consumption is what distinguishes one class from another. As such, consumption is regarded as a vehicle through which people identify with a particular class, and the way people consume reflects and reinforces their cultural and economic capital. Through consumption choices, the middle classes show themselves as modern, sophisticated, civilized, and respectable (Leshkowich 2012; Hansen, this volume; Peyvel, this volume).

The relationship between consumption and class identity becomes complex in the context of migration, where class boundaries are rendered fuzzy by the (often conflicting) shifts in migrants' pecuniary strength and social status vis-à-vis non-migrants at the origin or destination (see, e.g., Rao 2014; Scott 2006). In Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer's (2008) study on Indian hospitality workers in London, highly educated middle-class Indian men are employed to perform tasks that are not congruent with their middle-class status back home, which, however, enables them to engage in consumption practices associated with the middle class in both India and the United Kingdom. In another situation, poor, working-class Vietnamese American men (a.k.a. *Việt kiều Mỹ*) in Hung Cam Thai's (2014) research spend money lavishly at frivolous places on their visits to the homeland because of the assumption that *Việt kiều Mỹ* are all wealthy and successful.

People's consumption choices are shaped by both their unique social trajectories and the broader socioeconomic context in which they are embedded. While cross-class mobility might be unattainable for first-generation migrants due to their lack of cultural capital, they are able to channel the wealth gained from migration into the education of their

children who then succeed in securing middle-class jobs and adopt middle-class lifestyles for themselves (see also Trigg 2001). Compared to Europe, where well-established social hierarchies have survived centuries of social upheavals, cross-class mobility is more achievable in contemporary Vietnamese society, where class boundaries are both fuzzy and fluid. The rigid pre-revolution hierarchy was wiped out by the brutal 1954–1956 land reforms that resulted in the execution of as many as fifty thousand landlords (as estimated by Llewellyn, Southey, and Thompson 2019), redistribution of land to landless peasants, and agricultural collectivization across northern Vietnam. It was not until the *Đổi mới* economic reforms were introduced in the late 1980s that a new class structure began to appear.¹ While cultural and economic capital remains important for what it means to be middle class, decades of socialism have left an imprint on the ways middle-classness is understood in today's Vietnam. Like what Chen and Qin (2014) observe in post-reform China, the occupation, education, income, consumption, and status of Vietnamese middle classes do not always align. This calls for an alternative framework for making sense of middle-classness in the shadow of both socialism and capitalist globalization.

In what Castles and Miller (2009) refer to as the “Age of Migration,” migration and metropolises play pivotal roles in the production and reproduction of middle classes (Barwick and Le Galès 2020:3). Catherine Earl's (2014) ethnographic research in Hồ Chí Minh City shows that rural-urban migration, higher education, and professional employment are central to rural folks' class ascension. Migration becomes a particularly important enabler of class mobility when we look transnationally. Transnational migration reflects and reinforces existing inequalities and power hierarchies (Hoang 2020a, 2020c; Rao 2014; Tran, this volume) but the relatively significant financial rewards gained from it have the potential to shift class boundaries and restructure social hierarchies.

In this chapter, I draw on ethnographic research conducted in Moscow between 2013 and 2016 to explore what it means to be middle class in the context of transnational migration. Data were collected through extensive participant observations, thirty-one in-depth interviews, and twenty-six life histories with Vietnamese migrants from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. I was based mainly at Sadovod market (*Садовод рынок*),² which was about 30 kilometres south-east of Moscow's city centre and one of the three Moscow markets with a large concentration of Vietnamese traders. In

addition, I made regular visits to Yuzhnyie Vorota³ market, Liublino⁴ market, legal and illegal garment factories in and outside the Moscow metropolitan region, migrant traders' hostels and private homes, and several local schools that Vietnamese children were attending. Most of my interlocutors were irregular migrants⁵ (92 percent), which is representative of the Vietnamese population in Russia.

As I have discussed elsewhere, Vietnamese migration to post-Soviet Russia is rarely intended to be an "escape" as we tend to see in northbound flows but often forms part of the family's strategy for mobility back in the homeland (Hoang 2020c). In my analysis, I emphasize migrants' subjectivities and the social constructedness of middle-classness. The contested and fluid nature of the middle classes demands an intersectional lens as well as attention to the temporality and spatiality of the case study (see also Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer 2008; Bélanger, Drummond, and Nguyen-Marshall 2012). Perspectives from positions of marginality are instructive for our understanding of cross-class mobility as well as subaltern migrants' strong attachment to the homeland that is observed across contexts (see, e.g., Farrugia 2020; Thai 2014; Tran, this volume).

Migration, Education, and Cross-Class Mobility

I sent for her so she could study [better]. Studying is the only choice if we don't want her to end up at the market. ... It is the wish of every parent that their children are well educated. Nothing can beat education. It is much harder to make money by using your muscles, harder than using your brains. ... Well, maybe it is not easier with your brains but educated people are worlds apart from market folks. It feels so different to talk with an educated person like you; different mannerism and comportment. That is why we wish things would be different for our children. You can see how hard it is to earn a living at the market. We wish our children would have a better life, not doing manual labor like us.

This is how Hoài—a thirty-three-year-old mother of two—explained why she decided to send for her eldest daughter (soon to turn fourteen) from Vietnam and to enroll her in a local school in Moscow. Hoài and her husband had first migrated to Russia eleven years earlier, leaving their then three-year-old eldest daughter behind with the girl's paternal grandparents. Two years later, their second daughter was born in Moscow and sent to her

maternal grandmother in Vietnam when she was eight months old. The children continued to live in separate households until her eldest daughter reached puberty, which prompted Hoài to send for her as a precautionary measure against the “vices” to which unsupervised teenage girls were vulnerable. Her nine-year-old daughter was, however, left behind in Vietnam because Hoài was uncertain how much longer she would remain in Russia—a predicament commonly observed among Vietnamese parents in my study (Hoang 2021, 2023).

Hoài’s aspirations for her daughters’ education and social mobility as well as the care arrangements she had made for them over the years illustrate the anxiety, contradictions, and dilemmas facing Vietnamese migrants in Russia. Arriving in Russia after the fall of communism, they braved rising xenophobic sentiments while enduring successive crises in market trade within a volatile economy. Often connected to networks of pioneer migrants who were sent by the Vietnamese government to the Soviet Union for work or education during the Cold War, “new migrants” are mostly low-skilled men and women from rural areas of northern and central Vietnam who have suffered from chronic under- and unemployment since the introduction of *Đổi mới* reforms. Typically, they travel to Russia with a student or tourist visa and overstay it. Because Vietnamese migration to post-Soviet Russia is largely undocumented, there are no reliable statistics, and estimates vary widely. In 2007, the Vietnamese government estimated that there were between 80,000 and 100,000 Vietnamese nationals in Russia,⁶ but Nožina (2010:229) suggests that figure could be 150,000.

In the face of rapid demographic decline,⁷ Russia turns a blind eye to irregular migrants, who provide much needed cheap labor and services. However, concerns about terrorism, crime, and migrants’ cultural and racial inferiority have led the postcommunist state to adopt exclusionary permanent residency and citizenship laws and impose tight restrictions on migrants’ participation in the formal labor market, especially for those coming from outside the former Soviet Union (see Hoang 2020c for a detailed discussion of Russia’s migration regime). Unable to access formal employment opportunities, most Vietnamese migrants have no option other than to trade at wholesale markets, which operate on extremely exploitative terms in exchange for protection from opportunistic crime and police extortion. As part of Russia’s vast shadow economy (see Schneider, Buehn, and Montenegro 2010), wholesale markets are governed by rules akin to

those of mafia. This allows irregular migrants to enter market trade easily but at the same time renders them highly vulnerable to political whims at both local and federal levels. As has happened in the past, markets can be closed down anytime without warning or compensation for traders, driving them to bankruptcy overnight.

In such a volatile and uncertain environment, migrants literally live “out of a suitcase,” avoiding putting down roots so that an unwanted and unforeseen departure would cause minimum financial damage. Children are, therefore, often left behind with the extended family or sent to Vietnam after birth so that their educational stability can be ensured. Many parents like Hoài, as their sojourn in Russia prolongs, are forced to alter their childcare arrangements when children grow up and the risks of unsupervised adolescence begin to surface. Migration is often justified by Vietnamese parents as something done in the best interest of their children (Hoang 2023; Hoang and Yeoh 2012), and migrant families tend to invest a large portion of remittances in education (Hoang and Yeoh 2015a). Children’s education failures, as a result, would not only invalidate migrant parents’ hardships and sacrifices but also reflect poorly on their parenthood—a primary identity for both men and women (Hoang 2016; Hoang and Yeoh 2011) in a culture where the family is considered to be the “bedrock of society” (Werner 2004).

Most importantly, as Hoài makes plain in her narrative, education offers working-class families a route to upward mobility that, based on her remarks on my education and mannerism, meant an avenue to the middle classes. The importance of education for class ascension has its origin in the mandarin examinations in feudal times that enabled people of the “subject” class to move to the “ruling” class (Nguyen 1974:26). This was reinforced throughout the French colonial era and the socialist period, when university students with the best examination results were sent to universities in European countries and, upon their return, assigned to important positions in the government. In post-reform Vietnam, education remains the most important strategy for working-class people to get ahead and achieve social status and prestige (Earl 2014; King, Nguyen, and Nguyen 2008). Together, higher education and professional employment are defining features of what is construed as middle-classness in Vietnam (Earl 2014; Gainsborough 2002; King, Nguyen, and Nguyen 2008; Nguyen 2017). Without connections to the political elites or financial means to bribe their ways into prestigious (and financially rewarding) positions in the public sector, education offers

working-class children the most viable route to upward social mobility. The prominent role of education in class mobility explains the humble rural origins of the increasing numbers of first-generation urban migrants who join the ranks of Vietnam's "new middle classes" every year (see also Earl 2014).

What Does It Mean to Be Middle Class?

Despite Hoài's high hopes for her daughter's education and future, I later learned from my interlocutors that moving children to Russia when they are only a few years away from finishing high school in Vietnam is more likely to be a "rescue," or a "last resort," than a "strategy" for future mobility. Teenagers often struggle to fit in, not only due to their low proficiency in Russian language but also because they had already had behavior and schooling problems in Vietnam that prompted their relocation to Russia. As I discuss elsewhere, the relocated children often ended up dropping out of school after several failed attempts to move up a grade (Hoang 2020c). Since migrant parents do not plan to settle down permanently in Russia, and Russia-educated Vietnamese children struggle to secure professional employment in the country after university graduation, those who pursue class mobility often leave their children behind with the extended family in Vietnam and invest heavily in the youngsters' education and professional career, usually at the expense of the parent-child emotional bond. This is illustrated by fifty-year-old Bàng's story:

We left them in Vietnam so they would have a stable life, earning salaries from a stable job, and not having to *bon chen* [scramble for money] at the market. Perhaps we have grown weary of this kind of life. We have worked hard so they don't have to worry about their future. All they need to do is to earn enough money for their daily upkeep. My sister is a school principal so it did not cost us much to get a teaching job for our eldest daughter...we just spent about VND 100 million dongs on luxury gifts for some big shots in the Provincial Department of Education and Training.⁸ We bought them bottles of whiskey and leather jackets...around USD 1,000 per person. ... It would have cost us several hundred million dongs [if my sister had not been the principal].

Bàng's daughter had just graduated from a local teachers' training college and, much to his delight, landed a sought-after teaching job at a primary

school in his home province of Hưng Yên, thanks to family connections and his generous bribes. Bằng and his wife, forty-eight-year-old Vy, first migrated to the Soviet Union as contract workers in 1983 and worked in factories in the Ukrainian city of Donesk until their contracts finished in 1988. Unable to find a decent job in Vietnam when they returned home, Bằng made his way back to Russia in 1992 and inevitably joined thousands of his compatriots trading at a makeshift market at Locomotiv stadium. He lived through successive upheavals in market trade including the closure of commercial *ôps* (obshchezhitie общежитие, student hostels)⁹ and Cherkizovsky market (*Chợ vòm*) in the 2000s, and he finally moved to Sadovod in 2010. Throughout the first tumultuous decade of post-Soviet Russia, during which Bằng saw his financial worth rise rapidly at some points only to lose everything when the next crisis hit, Vy stayed behind in Vietnam to raise their two daughters. She did not join him until 2000, and since then had been making months-long visits to Vietnam every year to make sure that their daughters did not go astray or feel abandoned by their migrant parents. The trips were a substantial financial investment on their part, not to mention the private tuition expenses they paid for with the hope that it would enable the girls to go on to obtain higher education qualifications and secure well-respected, stable, salaried jobs.

However, I was surprised to hear that Bằng's eldest daughter was earning a paltry monthly salary of VND 2 million (USD 90), which was an exceptionally low return on investment and barely enough to cover her living expenses. According to the 2012 Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey, the monthly income per capita in the Red River Delta was VND 2.337 million, and the monthly total consumption expenditure per capita in the same region was VND 1.889 million (GSO 2012). The girl's income was only a fraction of what her parents were earning at Sadovod and, given the substantial investment they had made in her education and career, it did not seem to be a worthwhile outcome. When I remarked that his daughter would have been able to earn at least twenty times more if she had followed in her parents' footsteps, Bằng declared at once: "money is not important!" What mattered most to him and his wife were education, social status, and a stable life for their daughter.

As it turned out, Bằng's strategy was the rule, not an exception, among the Vietnamese migrants I met in Moscow. A single mother of two and a successful trader at Liublino, forty-four-year-old Lê, told me that she had

paid a bribe of VND 300 million (nearly USD 14,000 as of November 2016) to have her eldest son enlisted in the police national service (instead of the military national service, which was supposed to be a mandatory and free system), hoping that it would provide him with a pathway to become a career policeman. Apparently, his poor academic performance had prevented him from taking a more direct route by enrolling in a police training college after high school. Once the young man completed three years of national service duty, Lê would have to pay another bribe of similar or higher value to have him transferred to a police training college, which, she declared with much excitement and confidence, would guarantee a stable, respectable, and comfortable life for him. Again, when I expressed doubts about the financial returns on such a big investment (especially if compared with what he might earn if he joined her at Liublino), Lê immediately shrugged them off, pointing out that financial rewards were not her principal concern when laying out such a thorough road map for her son's future.

The contrast between migrant parents' financial success at Moscow markets and what they hope for their children in Vietnam is intriguing. Without exception, children's higher education and professional employment, preferably in the public sector, are considered by the migrants in my study to be the ultimate measure of parenting success. A permanent position in the public sector is highly competitive, requiring either powerful connections or a substantial financial investment, and usually both. Migration enables parents to win such highly coveted prizes for their children that are otherwise beyond their reach. For them, a university degree and a (permanent) white-collar job are the markers of the middle class, which would give them and their family the prestige and respectability in which market trade is deemed to be lacking. Respectability is fundamental to the emergence of the concept of class, acting as both a marker of class and a benchmark against which to judge others and to be judged (Skeggs 1997:3). To be respectable is to be moral. In Vietnam, the rhetoric of morality somehow naturalizes middle-classness as embodying most proper, acceptable, and appropriate qualities (Schwenkel and Leshkovich 2012:397).

In both Vietnamese culture and socialist discourse, however, market trade is anything but moral or respectable. Trade was considered the lowest acceptable occupation in the feudal times when social hierarchy was based on the Four Occupations, which consisted of, in descending order, *sĩ* (literati), *nông* (farmers), *công* (artisans), and *thương* (merchants/traders). The

lowliness of trade in the Confucian society has its parallel in Marxist-Leninist thinking about value whereby only “production” constitutes real economic activity deserving of reward (Watts 2002:66). During socialism, making profits from private trade activities was portrayed as immoral, even illegal in many circumstances, as it involved individualistic motives and the pursuit of money, which were associated with the morally corrupt and profit-driven West and went against communist ideologies (Humphrey and Mandel 2002; Ironside 2014). Petty traders were assumed to be dishonest and greedy by default and thus despised (Endres 2013; Schwenkel 2014; Truitt 2013). The derogatory term *con buôn*¹⁰ used to refer to traders is a classed and cultural construct, the moral undertones of which continue to trap them on the lower rungs of the social ladder in postsocialist Vietnam despite the relatively solid financial standing of many (see also Horat 2017; Leshkovich 2006).

Migrant traders’ aspirations to and imaginings of the middle class express their unease about the growing incongruity between their newfound wealth and the low status accorded to market trade in the Vietnamese culture. Troubled by the derogatory connotations of the label *con buôn*, Chi, a twenty-eight-year-old Sadovod trader, was adamant that her two children would have middle-class professional jobs when they grew up because “traders are called *con buôn*, not *cô buôn* [Ms. Trader] or *chị buôn* [lady trader].” As their wealth has come at the expense of personal freedoms, social acceptance, security, and dignity within Russian society, traders became more keenly aware of their status as a subclass in Vietnamese society. Research shows that the middle class in each historical period has its own distinct benchmarks and parameters (Bélanger, Drummond, and Nguyen-Marshall 2012; Earl 2014). In the same historical period, the meanings and values of the middle class are also subjected to what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) refer to as the “position in the field” of the person in question. For my research participants, their idea of the middle-class life simply revolves around a white-collar job with stress-free, laid-back daily routines, as illustrated by a twenty-nine-year-old Sadovod trader named Khanh:

You have holidays, annual leave. ... We toil at the market day in, day out (*bán lúng cho đất, bán mặt cho giờ*). ... Your life is one of civility. You work at the school during the day and go home to sleep at night. You have breaks and holidays. We can never catch a break...always worried whether our wares will sell and, if not, what we should switch to. Market trade is a tough job, don’t you think? It’s only petty trade, nothing more.

An economics graduate from a Belorussian university, Khanh ended up at Sadovod market after failing to land a professional job that would pay a living wage in Vietnam. Although his Italian fashion store was doing exceptionally well, Khanh was not happy about his job and the low status associated with it. He kept comparing himself with me, emphasizing the “*văn minh*” (civility) of my job as opposed to his “*buôn vặt*” (petty trader) job. Without any prior professional employment experience, migrants’ perception of a white-collar job is essentially based on their secondhand knowledge of state employment just before and after *Đổi mới*—a job for life that pays little but affords a dignified lifestyle. Their accounts highlight the social constructedness and situatedness of middle-class aspirations and class-making practices. Khanh is an exception. Vietnamese migrants in Russia are predominantly non-tertiary-educated men and women from poor, rural backgrounds, and many parents in my study had left Vietnam in the early years of *Đổi mới* when salaried, permanent employment in the public sector was their ultimate yet far-fetched dream. While state employees tend to be poorly remunerated in official terms, the social and symbolic capital that is associated with their positions is convertible to economic resources and opportunities. Even in situations where the extra economic rewards do not materialize, the prestige, stability, and security promised by such jobs still have a strong appeal to many people in the face of a volatile capitalist economy. This corroborates anthropologists’ observation that the “socialist past” remains deeply entrenched in cultural logics, social values, and people’s visions of the world in post-*Đổi mới* Vietnam (Earl 2014; Schwenkel and Leshkovich 2012).

(Im)mobility and Middle-Class Aspirations

Nhung: If she [daughter] fails to go further in her studies,
she can get a husband. (laughing)

Researcher: Bring her to Russia!

Nhung: No! I have suffered enough. Why would I bring her
here so she’d suffer too?

It is often assumed that migration from the Global South to the Global North is invariably deemed desirable at places of origin and, therefore, people do not migrate only because they are unable to do so (primarily due to the lack

of financial resources). Our times, Carling (2002) argues, ought to be characterized as an “Age of involuntary immobility,” rather than an “Age of Migration” (Castles and Miller 2009). The conversation I had with fifty-year-old Sadovod trader Nhung earlier illustrates that (im)mobility aspirations in the Global South are more complex. While migration is generally associated with upward social mobility in Vietnam, the unprecedented economic opportunities brought about by economic reforms and globalization have radically altered the migration cost-benefit equation for many. Migration to developed countries is still considered desirable across social classes, but the significant economic and cultural capital required to make it happen excludes millions of poor rural migrants from northbound corridors.

Migration to Russia is often described by my interlocutors as “the only choice,” “a sacrifice,” something done “for survival,” “for money,” or “for my children’s future” and not expressing their desire for a better life away from home as we tend to see in other contexts (see, e.g., Carling 2002; Langevang and Gough 2009; Margold 2004; Salazar 2010). In most situations, parents migrate so their children do not have to do so. As illustrated next by a narrative from fifty-year-old Sadovod trader Bân, migrants’ children do not migrate not because they are unable to do so but because they can afford to stay put:

It must be different for my children’s generation. It can’t be the same as ours. We started out empty-handed, without a place to call home. But my children won’t be in the same situation. We have bought them a home. They already have a home so they won’t need much (money). We have worked hard so they will have a (secure) future. They will only need to earn a salary of 7–8 million dongs [USD 220–320] per month and can take a break from work and spend time with the family at the weekend. That will be their lifestyle. They can’t be like us. We work day in day out and never take a break.

Bân’s thoughts were echoed by many other parents in my study. For them, children’s spatial immobility per se is an indication of their parenting success and the family’s upward social mobility, while migration is associated with hardships and, as described by Nhung in the previous conversation, sufferings. When I asked thirty-nine-year-old Sadovod trader Huy why some people like Nhung had sent for their children, but he insisted that his children stay in Vietnam, he explained:

[Other people have sent for their children] because the young ones can't study. They have been too busy making money and not spending time to supervise their children. It's all because of the moneybag. The moneybag is not full yet and they have to keep working. I will give my daughter a fishing rod (and not a fish). She is still in day care but one of us will have to return to Vietnam as soon as she starts primary school. Well, unless someone in the (extended) family could supervise her on our behalf, one of us will have to go home to make sure she has the guidance she needs and pay for her extra tuition, so she won't be held back.

Here, migration is still seen as a strategy for upward social mobility, but not for migrants themselves. Migrant parents' aspirations for their children's future in the homeland are informed by both their pre-migration social positionings in Vietnam and place-based experiences in Russia. The emphasis on stability, security, and immobility in what migrants envision for their children is shaped by their lived experiences of insecurity, precarity, and uncertainty on the margin of Russian society. Their accounts lend support to Mary Douglas's view that we should see ordinary people as operating through cultural designs of anticipation and risk reduction (Douglas 1982; Douglas and Wildavsky 1983). The lens of migration and (im)mobility underscores the fact that "culture" is not definite or bounded, but in a constant state of flux. Vietnamese migrants in Russia inhabit a unique transnational social field where the normalization of risk and uncertainty in everyday life fashions distinctive ways of being, living, and aspiring. Diaspora is, indeed, a category of practice in the first instance (Brubaker 2005).

Placing Vietnamese migrants' middle-class aspirations within the broader political economy of transnational migration to post-Soviet Russia illuminates the seemingly counterintuitive strategies of those who have had to leave their homeland to seek social mobility opportunities elsewhere. In the extant migration scholarship, global mobility is broadly considered to be integral to middle class futures, be it through work, education, travel, or encounters with foreign cultures (El-Mallakh and Wahba 2021; Maxwell and Yemini 2019; Rutten and Verstappen 2014). It is indeed the desire of many parents in my study to send their children to a wealthy Anglophone country for higher education as a stepping stone to the middle classes or even permanent emigration to the West. However, this is only achievable in rare cases not only due to the substantial financial investment but also because very few children left behind in Vietnam are able to meet the competitive admission

requirements set by Western universities given the lack of parental guidance throughout their childhood and the low educational capital in the family.

The case of Vietnamese migrants in Russia shows important shifts in the meanings and values associated with both transnational migration and the middle class as mobility becomes an important stratifying force globally and nationally. In the so-called (im)mobility regime, migration securitization has produced new systems of closure premised on a principle of perceived “dangerous personhoods” (Shamir 2005:199). People seeking to cross national borders to enter another country are sorted into “good” and “bad” migrants so that tools of containment, surveillance, and control could be deployed to protect “host” populations from the risks and dangers brought by the latter. Based on their personal attributes alone, migration could expand one’s freedoms or restrict them, and immobility could be seen as a sign of failure or success.

Some scholars claim that in a globalized and cosmopolitanized world, the notions of “home” and “belonging” have become deterritorialized (Arp Fallov, Jørgensen, and Knudsen 2013; Bauman 1998; Beck 2012), but this view is based on transnational studies of elite migrants for whom “home” and “belonging” are largely matters of personal choice. Migrants are “embodied bearers of culture, ethnicity, class or gender” (Yeoh and Willis 2005). Transnational migrants on the bottom rung of the social ladder, research shows, tend to have lower motility than nonmigrants. In the face of immotility and precarity, maintaining multilocal livelihoods becomes a crucial risk management strategy for many (Cohen and Gössling 2015; Rogaly and Thieme 2012). Yet, “stretched lifeworlds” as a result of this strategy (Samuels 2001:1) further strain migrants’ precarious existence, leading them to pursue stasis (Parsons 2017:187). In the “Age of Migration” (Castles and Miller 2009), the nation-state retains its power in foreclosing the possibility for subaltern migrants to assert new memberships and belongings. Vietnamese migrants in my study have moved but never actually left their homeland. Unable to call Russia home, they continue to think, act, and plan for their future in reference to Vietnam. Their aspirations for children’s class ascension in Vietnamese society express the meanings they ascribe to migration as well as the deepening mobility inequalities along the lines of class, race, and nationality, among others.

Conclusion

Middle classes are more a social group than an economic class, and understandings about group membership are historically, temporally, and spatially situated (see also Barwick and Le Galès 2020:4). My research in Moscow highlights the significance of both transnationality and place in constituting social relations, subjectivities, and future-making practices. The barriers and frictions that subaltern migrants encounter in what is often imagined as a borderless world only reinforce their classed attachments to the homeland (Conradson and Latham 2005; Farrugia 2020). Migrants' lived experiences of social exclusion and precarity away from home lead them to valorize immobility, mundane living, and modest financial ambitions, none of which can be used to characterize the middle class in its conventional sense. Studies on Asian middle classes, for example, highlight their conspicuous consumption of luxury goods and their love for particular leisure activities, such as golf and karaoke, as markers of their middle-class status (Bélanger, Drummond, and Nguyen-Marshall 2012:6). None of these featured in my research participants' class mobility aspirations.

Vietnamese parents' aspirations for their children's future show the continuity of socialist values in social imaginaries and future making practices. *Đổi mới* reforms and transnational migration have brought about radical changes to subjectivities, social relations, and power dynamics within Vietnamese society but not completely altered people's conceptions of a "proper" and "respectable" life (see also Hoang 2020b; Schwenkel and Leshkovich 2012). The unprecedented mobility and wealth enable migrant trader families to experience material comfort and economic security for the first time but at the same time make them more keenly aware of their awkward position on the lower rungs of Vietnamese social hierarchy.

Notes

- 1 *Đổi mới* allowed for private ownership, dismantled collective farming, and moved Vietnam from the command-subsidized economy to a "market economy with socialist orientation."
- 2 Sadovod market (*Sadovod rynek Садовод рынок*) is commonly referred to as Birds' market (*Chợ Chim*) by Vietnamese migrants due to its adjacency to a market selling birds (*Ptychiy rynek Птичий рынок*).

- 3 Yuzhnyie Vorota (*Южные ворота*, Southern Gates) is also known as Km 19 market, a name deriving from its geographical location at kilometer 19 on МКАД (the Moscow Automobile Ring Road, *Московская Кольцевая Автомобильная Дорога*).
- 4 The official name of Liublino (*Люблино*) market is Moscow Trade Complex (Torgovo-yarmarochnyy Kompleks Moskva *Торгово-ярмарочный комплекс Москва*). It is commonly referred to as Liublino market (or *Chợ liu*, by Vietnamese migrants) due to its proximity to the Liublino metro station.
- 5 Irregular migrants are foreigners who stay in the destination country beyond their permitted period of entry and residence and/or work in the destination country when not permitted to do so.
- 6 Sài Gòn Giải Phóng, 17 January 2007, <http://www.sggp.org.vn/chinhtri/2007/1/81930/>, accessed 12 January 2015.
- 7 The Russian population is declining fast, by an estimated 700–750,000 people each year. The United Nations Population Division forecasts that the Russian population will drop to 101 million people by 2100. The Russian population as of 2015 was 142,098,000. See UN DESA, Population Division, Population Estimates and Projections Section, <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/unpp/p2kodata.asp>, accessed 16 March 2015.
- 8 VND 100 million dong was about USD 4,545 by the mid-2014 exchange rate.
- 9 Between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, Vietnamese entrepreneurs leased residential buildings and student dormitories and rented out studio flats in these structures to Vietnamese migrants who used them for both living and trading. As of late 2001, the heyday of the Vietnamese “apartment trade,” an estimated sixteen commercial-cum-residential *dôms* and *ôps* were in operation across Moscow. Most of them were under the control of one of two Vietnamese companies, Sông Hồng (Red River) and Bến Thành. All the commercial *dôms* and *ôps* were closed down by the Moscow government by 2007.
- 10 In Vietnamese language, *con* is a pronoun or prefix used by superiors to address the inferior. As a prefix, *con* is often added to words referring to what are commonly regarded as disreputable, degrading, and lowly occupations.

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*Afterword:
Lifeworld Reconfiguration
and Sociocultural Resilience*

HY V. LUONG

Globalization and Translocal Connections

IN 1990, VIETNAM BEGAN THE PROCESS of reintegration into the capitalist world economy in the context of accelerating globalization. Globalization has long been a part of the landscape of present-day Vietnam, with Buddhism and Hinduism influencing, respectively, ethnic Vietnamese and Cham more than a millennium ago, and Christianity on the former since the sixteenth century and on a number of ethnic minorities in the past century (e.g., Coedes 1966; Nguyễn Lang 2010; Trương 2008; Ngo 2016). Before the nineteenth century, Vietnam had exported rice and forest products to China, and ceramics and silk to a number of countries (Li 1998; Nguyen Thanh-Nha 1970). Global encounters increased under French colonialism. And globalization has accelerated in the past few decades with modern transportation and information technologies.

If we adopt Arjun Appadurai's analytical categories (1996), in the closely intertwined *financescape* (money/capital) and *ethnoscape* (people), the annual disbursement in foreign direct investment (FDI) in Vietnam increased from zero in 1990 to US\$22.4 billion in 2022 (see figure 14.1). Initially concentrated in labor-intensive manufacturing in order to take advantage of the low labor cost in Vietnam, FDI has branched out to high-tech industries in the past decade and a half. It has strongly stimulated

rural-to-urban migration within the country. FDI has also contributed to the growth of expatriate communities in Vietnam, of which the number of South Koreans alone was reported at 178,122 in 2023.¹ Although initially concentrated in Hồ Chí Minh City, Hà Nội, and surrounding provinces, industrial FDI has spread to smaller provinces in order to facilitate labor recruitment (Luong 2018a). FDI has also reached deep into a number of agricultural communities through contracted animal husbandry, as discussed in the chapter by Tuan Anh Nguyen and Minh T.N. Nguyen in this volume. FDI has made a significant contribution to the increase in Vietnamese export, from US\$2.19 billion in 1990 to US\$371.9 billion in 2022 (Vietnam GSO 1991:105 and 2022b:29).

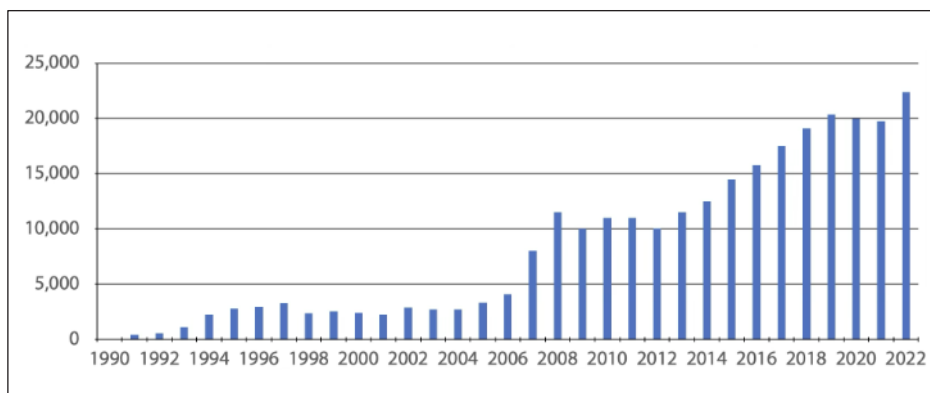


Figure 14.1. Foreign Direct Investment Disbursement in Vietnam, in USD million, 1990–2022. (Source: Vietnam GSO 2022a:275 and 2022b:26)

As a part of the financescape and ethnoscape, the annual remittances from Vietnamese workers overseas and the Vietnamese diaspora were estimated to increase from US\$1.2 billion in 1999 to US\$17.2 billion in 2020.² The number of international tourists also increased from 1.35 million in 1995 to 18 million in 2019, before a precipitous decline in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.³ Their spending was estimated to reach US\$11.83 billion in 2019.⁴ As a result, GDP per capita in Vietnam increased from US\$96.70 (1,184 in purchasing power parity [PPP]) in 1990 to US\$4,110 (12,646 in PPP) in 2022 (Vietnam GSO 2022b:3).⁵

In Vietnam's ethnoscape, Vietnamese in Vietnam have had increasing interaction not only with international visitors, expatriates, migrant workers returning from other countries, and members of the Vietnamese diaspora visiting their homeland, but also with other ethnic groups within the country in work contexts (see Tuan Anh Nguyen and Minh T.N. Nguyen, this volume) and through domestic tourism. Their wide access to smartphones and cyberspace has also facilitated this interaction. As mentioned by Kurfürst (this volume), in 2020 there were 68.17 million Internet users in Vietnam (population 97 million), and 142.73 mobile phone subscriptions for every 100 persons in the country. Although the Vietnamese government has created firewalls to restrict access to cyberspace, it has allowed social media such as Facebook. There are almost 70 million Facebook accounts set up in Vietnam. As a result, Vietnamese in Vietnam and elsewhere have frequently had global encounters in cyberspace. Not only Vietnam's financescape and ethnoscape, but also its technoscape (technology, both mechanical and informational), mediascape (media discourse and images), and ideoscape (images, often political, and ideologies) have undergone a fundamental transformation in the past three decades.

Reconfiguration of Vietnamese Lifeworlds and Sociocultural Resilience

Many chapters in this volume emphasize the inequality in global encounters: migrants from Vietnam at the total mercy of Russian authorities (Hoang's chapter), Vietnamese hip hop dancers at the periphery of the global hip hop system (Kurfürst's chapter), or an ideoscape with imaginaries built upon the binary opposition between the "backward" and "developing" Vietnam and the "advanced" and "developed" West (Dang's and Steinman's chapters). These imaginaries of Western superiority constitute a vital part of Western ideological hegemony, and play an important role in facilitating the adoption of Western practices by a number of Vietnamese. With rich empirical data, all chapters in this volume highlight the effect of global encounters on Vietnamese lifeworlds, both material and nonmaterial, and among international migrants of Vietnamese origin as well as people living in Vietnam.

In the context of a tenfold increase in the per capita PPP over three decades, it is not surprising that the living conditions of most people in

Vietnam have significantly improved. In the late 1980s, in public space, the vehicles on the streets of Hà Nội were mostly bicycles, with occasional three-wheel pedicabs, motorcycles, government cars, and trucks. Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC) had more motorcycles (Hondas from before 1975) and some old taxis (vehicles from the French colonial era or the period of US involvement) serving international visitors. But on the boulevard from the HCMC city hall to the Saigon River, in those days, teenagers could be observed to practice their soccer kicks at 6:30 AM due to the light traffic. Telephones were available only at government offices, enterprises, or in the houses of very high-ranking officials. Nowadays, during daytime, streets in both cities are congested with motorcycles and four-wheel vehicles. During rush hours, in order to get out of big traffic jams, many motorcyclists even ride their motorcycles on sidewalks for a short distance. More and more members of the upper middle class in Vietnam own cars. Beyond private means of transportation, Peyvel and Hansen (this volume) have also provided us with an aggregate view of the changes in recreational travel, eating, and drinking in contemporary Vietnam. Kurfürst has touched on the changes in communication technology. Cell phones, including smartphones, are widely available, even among people working in rice fields. Material living conditions have vastly improved for an overwhelming majority of Vietnamese since the late 1980s.

Beyond material lifeworlds, some authors in this volume have also examined the inculcation of entrepreneurial spirit among Vietnamese youth (Horat, chapter 2), the emergence of trade through the cyberspace (Steinman, chapter 1), the push for Western standards in workplaces (Dang, chapter 9), the emergence of new arts such as hip hop (Kurfürst, chapter 8), a greater openness toward nonbinary gender identities and alternative sexualities (Tran, chapter 6), and the emergence of new communities based on novel practices. On the basis of my research, I can add changes in life-cycle events and other rituals. Among life-cycle events, birthday celebrations, quite rare half a century ago, have become commonplace in cities and have spread to rural youth. At urban weddings, following the Western practice of the newlyweds and their parents marching down the aisle of a church, it is common for the bride to walk down the aisle of the wedding reception hall with her father or with the groom, followed by the parents of the other newlywed (Luong 2016b). Beyond life-cycle ceremonies, many young non-Christian Vietnamese have joined in Christmas celebrations in urban

streets and downtown areas, and many others, regardless of religion, have organized Halloween parties or Valentine's Day dates with gifts to women. In general, novel practices tend to emerge first among urban residents and Vietnamese migrants overseas partly due to their greater global exposure, and partly due to their widened and looser social networks that create more space for individual agency away from the gazes, or under fewer gazes, of people in their close-knit networks.

However, I would like to suggest first that people in Vietnam and in Vietnamese migration flows respond to global encounters and rising disposable income by adopting not only foreign practices but also traditionalist patterns. Second, even when they adopt foreign practices, the results are often hybridities imbued with traditional values and meanings in a process of glocalization. Third, social relations and social networks figure prominently in the lifeworlds of both Vietnamese migrants overseas and the people in Vietnam, even among entrepreneurs seeking to maximize wealth accumulation.

In global encounters, a number of Vietnamese have adopted traditionalist responses like *cổ trang* (old dress) or *áo dài* (traditional long dress) for men (see figure 14.2, taken at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hồ Chí Minh City). In Huế, authorities in the provincial department of Culture, Sports, and Tourism have even institutionalized the wearing of *áo dài* among male civil servants at the flag ceremony on the first Monday of every month. In the same year, at a ceremony honoring 367 high school students, *áo dài* was worn by the chairman of Thừa Thiên-Huế People's Committee and other officials, as well as by male and female honorees at the instruction of the provincial Department of Education (figure 14.3).⁶

Historically, at the height of socialist construction and as late as the 1980s, among ethnic Vietnamese in rural northern Vietnam and in the urban working class, even at traditional ancestral altar ceremonies (*lễ gia tiên*) during weddings, few grooms and brides wore *áo dài*, because under state influence *áo dài* was associated with a feudal tradition under attack.⁷ It was only in a small number of Hà Nội families, those with *tiểu tư sản* (petit bourgeois) and *tư sản* (bourgeois) backgrounds, that brides wore *áo dài* at weddings in the 1970s and 1980s.⁸ From the 1950s to the late 1980s, even female flight attendants of the Hà Nội-based Vietnam Airlines wore shirts and pants, not *áo dài*. In the 1990s, more brides began wearing *áo dài* as well as Western bridal dresses, while grooms might add Western jackets or suits

to their Western shirts and pants. During this period, I observed men wearing *áo dài* only at communal house rituals, at Cao Đài and some other religious ceremonies,⁹ and in *quan họ* traditional singing in the northern province of Bắc Ninh. In contrast, in the Vietnamese diaspora, at ancestral altar ceremonies, many grooms wear *áo dài* to highlight their ethnic identity in the multiethnic context of Western societies. In Vietnam, following the practice of distinctive national/local attire for a picture of state and government leaders at the annual APEC summit, the Vietnamese government had all the heads of APEC states and governments at the summit in Hà Nội in 2006 wear Vietnamese *áo dài* for a group picture (figure 14.4). (However, for reasons unknown to me, this was not continued at the APEC summit in 2017 in Đà Nẵng.) When interacting with people from other cultures, a number of Vietnamese have also been asked whether ethnic Vietnamese males have costumes along the line of *áo dài* for Vietnamese women. Thus, it has been in global encounters that the practice of men wearing *áo dài* outside public sacred space and arts performances was reinvented.¹⁰

A traditionalist development on a much larger scale is the restoration, renovation, and construction of sacred space such as patrilineage halls among ethnic Vietnamese in northern and central coastal Vietnam, and of ancestral tombs, pagodas, temples, shrines, communal houses, and churches throughout the country (see Luong 2007 and 2017). The well-off and many members of the growing Vietnamese middle class have made significant financial contributions to this traditionalist development for a variety of reasons (e.g., praying to supernatural forces for assistance and offering financial donations out of gratitude in case of success; need to affirm village identities; competition among lineages and villages, etc.; see also Truitt's chapter in this volume). Among domestic tours are popular pilgrimages to the Lady of the Realm Temple (Bà chúa xứ) in Châu Đốc near the Vietnam-Cambodia border (Taylor 2004), to numerous pagodas in Đồng Nai and Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu provinces in southern Vietnam, or to the Hương pagoda near Hà Nội. Even in numerous modern-looking business establishments, such as upscale restaurants in Hồ Chí Minh City, one can often see altars to the money god (*thần tài*). Traditionalist responses and developments thus may emerge from the assertions of cultural, ethnic, and local identities in global and translocal encounters. They may also reflect attempts to cope with uncertainty in the living environments either through assertions of values



Figure 14.2: Students at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Vietnam, in Hồ Chí Minh City, at a club-organized old-dress festival in March 2022, with male students in blue dresses. (Photograph by author)



Figure 14.3: A male student honoree and Dr. Phan Thanh Hải, director of the Thừa Thiên-Huế Department of Culture and Sports, at the annual student-honoring ceremony in Huế. (Photograph reproduction authorized by Dr. Phan Thanh Hải)

as at wedding ceremonies (see later) or through appeals to supernatural forces (ancestors, gods, etc.), as well as financial and nonfinancial acts of gratitude to the perceived positive responses to these appeals.¹¹

Even the apparent adoption of Western practices is often imbued with traditionalist values and meanings. In Vietnam, unlike in Canada or the United States, at Valentine's Day, males have to shoulder virtually all expenses, with gifts flowing from men to women. On Christmas Eve, non-Christian Vietnamese join in the Christmas celebration, neither in public sacred spaces (churches) nor in private secular settings (homes) as among Christians in the West, but in public secular space (city streets and parks) since they see this event as a festival (*hội*), and Vietnamese festivals take place in public secular settings. And at urban wedding receptions, once the newlyweds and their parents have marched to the stage, the former present wine to the latter as a symbol of filial piety, and parents give advice to the newlyweds, especially to the bride, emphasizing harmony and respect as important traditional



Figure 14.4: Heads of states and governments at the APEC summit in Hà Nội in 2006. (Photograph reproduction authorized by Alamy)

values (Luong 2016b). In introducing section 3 of this volume, Hoang Cam has emphasized the tension and contradiction between global forms and local meanings. However, in the process of glocalization, in many cases, Vietnamese seem to have smoothed over this potential tension or even do not see any tension at all.

Beyond rituals, many Vietnamese's visions of lifeworlds include not only new consumption patterns but also long-standing ideologies in the local landscape. Lan Anh Hoang's interviewees, northern Vietnamese traders in Russia, want their children not only to have material comfort but also postsecondary education and white-collar jobs in Vietnam, even when some positions (e.g., in the teaching profession) have low salaries (chapter 13, this volume). Hoang points out that her interviewees' aspirations for their children reflect the low regard for trade in Confucianism as well as the strong suspicion of wealth from private commerce during the command economy era (see also Truong 2001). As Erik Harms has suggested in his introduction to section 4 of this volume, "[w]ith all this symbolism and shame that was until recently attached to consumer goods and social class, it has understandably been no easy matter for Vietnamese to simply become comfortable with their own wealth" (p. 265). It remains a question for further research whether people from the southern third of Vietnam have the same vision of lifeworlds as their northern counterparts, given the weaker influence of Confucianism and the much shorter period of the command economy in this part of Vietnam.

Finally, for Vietnamese from all walks of life, kinship, social relations, and social networks constitute a fundamental aspect of their lives, no matter whether it is eating, drinking, recreational travel, or entrepreneurial activities. The e-traders in Germany studied by Jessica Steinman, for example, relied heavily on their and their family members' social networks formed and sustained in cyberspace for their trading. Debt collectors in Lainez, Trĩnh, and Bũi's study also relied extensively on their knowledge of debtor's family and social relations to put pressure on debtors and to collect debts. The Vietnam Bank for Social Policies gives out student loans to students' families and not to individual students. This means that students' parents have to share the responsibility for loan payments. The Vietnamese migrants in Russia studied by Hoang relied heavily on strong social ties, particularly extended family ties, for the raising of their children in Vietnam. All these examples show how important social and family relations are in Vietnamese sociocultural life, including in the international migration process.

The role of kinship and social networks in Vietnamese migration and in sustaining occupational niches in destination areas has been well documented. The overwhelming majority of Vietnamese migrants to Russia and Eastern Europe come from the northern half of Vietnam, because most Vietnamese workers in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the 1980s had come from this part of the country. Similarly, the overwhelming majority of marriage migrants to Taiwan and South Korea come from the southern third of Vietnam because of the long-standing preference for community exogamy in marriage there (Hickey 1962:100; Luong 2018b:301), making people more open to marriages with people far away, and because migrants follow one another on the basis of their social networks. This has led to islets and communities in the Mekong Delta of southern Vietnam with heavy concentrations of daughters marrying Taiwanese or South Koreans. For example, by 2012, the islet of Tân Lộc in Cần Thơ City reportedly had about one thousand women married to Taiwanese or South Korean men.¹²

Domestic migrants in Vietnam, especially from the north and the center, have similarly relied on their social networks in their destination and occupational choices. Migrants from lower Nam Định Province in the northern Red River Delta have followed one another into the household junk trade, and have dominated this trade in northern Vietnamese cities and beyond (DiGregorio 1994; Nguyen 2014). Villagers from Lịch Động Village in the northern province of Thái Bình have come to dominate the nationwide trade in sunglasses, opening numerous shops throughout the country (Anh Thu 2005; Hà Thông 2007; Nguyễn Tuấn 2014). A Lịch Động official estimated that more than half of the residents of the village had left to engage in the sunglass trade all over Vietnam (Trọng Phú 2005). Similarly, migrants from Tịnh Bình Commune in the central coastal province of Quảng Ngãi have dominated the itinerant vending of keychains, sunglasses, and other small items in the southern half of Vietnam (Luong 2018c). Migrants from the coastal district of Đức Phổ in Quảng Ngãi Province, and particularly from the commune of Phổ Cường, have also carved out for themselves the niche of selling noodle soup (*bán mì gõ*) through home delivery in Hồ Chí Minh City (Dương Minh Anh 2006).

The salience of kinship and social connections or social capital in Vietnam is summed up in a contemporary Vietnamese saying regarding different factors of importance in the Vietnamese labor market: “*nhất hậu duệ, nhì quan hệ, ba tiền tệ, bốn trí tuệ*” (of first importance is descent; second are

social relations; third is money; and fourth is the intellect). Such a saying may oversimplify reality, but it is a fact that ethnic Vietnamese from all walks of life think first and foremost of social connections in their search for the solutions to various problems in their daily lives: from the purchase of a motorcycle and many other consumer durables, to medical treatment for a family member, to securing a job or a loan, or to searching for a domestic or international migration path. It is due to the importance of social relations and networks in Vietnamese lifeworlds that ethnic Vietnamese, including international migrant entrepreneurs, have invested considerable resources in social relations, through taking turns paying for drinking among men, and through reciprocal invitations to the death anniversaries of one another's close relatives or to one's own wedding or those of one's family members. Partly due to the cultivation and reinforcement of social capital, the number of wedding guests even in rural communities had almost or more than doubled between the periods 1976–1985 and 2006–2012 (Luong 2016a). Ethnic Vietnamese often couch their kinship and social relations in the idioms of *tình cảm* (sentiment) and *ơn nghĩa* (obligation and gratitude; see Rydstrom, this volume, and Shohet 2021). In general, we should not underestimate the degree to which eating, drinking, and recreational travel in Vietnam are socially embedded, and it is very rare for a Vietnamese person to travel alone as a tourist.

The common reliance of Vietnamese on kinship and social networks notwithstanding, there are also important regional sociocultural variations in Vietnam that shed light on Vietnamese migrants' behavior. Among the female marriage migrants discussed by Phung N. Su and Nguyen Thi Phuong Cham, remittances to parents in home communities figure prominently among Su's informants, while this issue does not loom large among Nguyen's interviewees. It is not a coincidence that the former came mainly from southern Vietnam, while the latter came from the north with a strong system of male-oriented kinship. This long-standing male-oriented kinship system has been reinforced by the revitalization of patrilineages among ethnic Vietnamese in northern and central coastal Vietnam, and by the widespread construction of patrilineage halls in many communities in the latter region. For example, in the commune of Tịnh Bình (population around eleven thousand) in the central coastal province of Quảng Ngãi, where I have conducted research, by the mid-2010s villagers had (re-)built about forty ancestral halls (*nhà thờ họ*) for patrilineages and lineage

branches, despite the annual per capita income of only about US\$800 at the time. In a male-oriented kinship system, sons assume a prominent role in taking care of parents both in life and after death. In contrast, in the southern third of Vietnam, patrilineages and patrilineage halls are quite rare, and daughters generally feel a stronger obligation than their northern counterparts to contribute to the financial support of parents and possibly also to parental worship (Luong and Phan 2023:34).

In the introduction to this volume, Nguyen and Endres suggest that “these [global] institutions enter existing local networks, social relationships, and personal obligations and turn these into frontiers of value extraction” (p. 8) and that “people’s economic lives are increasingly determined by the workings of global capitalist institutions and logics” (p. 10). In the introduction to section 1, Leshkovich also argues more generally that in Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora, the global capitalist economy takes advantage of the informal sector and the latter’s relational logic. I would like to suggest that local actors’ attachment to families and strong reliance on social networks can also pose problems for the operation of global capitalism in Vietnam. For example, many male migrants from Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, and Hà Tĩnh in the northern central coast to the southeastern province of Bình Dương have reportedly mobilized well their social networks to confront foreign and domestic employers as well as boarding house owners. Many of these employers and boarding house owners have consequently refused to hire or to rent to male natives of these three provinces (Cù 2015). On a much larger scale is the return of many migrants to their native villages and provinces for family reasons as well as due to the rapidly rising costs of living in destination areas. This has led to a shortage of industrial labor in Hồ Chí Minh City and surrounding provinces. Many companies have to open satellite factories in more distant provinces in order to recruit labor more easily, despite higher logistical and operational costs (Luong 2018a). In general, I suggest that the relation between global capitalism and the local sociocultural landscape involves a power-laden dialogic process (see also Luong 2023).

Conclusion

As Vietnam has been reintegrated into the capitalist world system in the past three decades in the context of accelerating globalization, global and translocal encounters as well as the significant increase in disposable income for most Vietnamese have powerfully shaped their material lifeworlds. They have also led to many changes in nonmaterial aspects of their lives. The chapters in this volume illuminate many aspects of this transformation process. However, many Vietnamese have also adopted traditionalist responses in global and translocal encounters. Their new practices are also often imbued with local values and meanings, which has led to a process of glocalization. Vietnamese from all walks of life have continued relying extensively on their social relations and social networks, and invested heavily in the cultivation of social ties. I suggest that the local sociocultural fabric has also shaped Vietnamese responses to translocal and global encounters in a process of glocalization.¹³

Notes

- 1 See https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/nation/m_4902/view.do?seq=38.
- 2 See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT?locations=VN&view=chart>.
- 3 See <https://www.unwto.org/tourism-statistics/key-tourism-statistics>.
- 4 See <https://www.unwto.org/tourism-statistics/key-tourism-statistics>.
- 5 See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=VN>.
- 6 See <https://vnexpress.net/nam-sinh-mac-ao-dai-du-le-tuyen-duong-o-quoc-tu-giam-4202262.html>.
- 7 In 1947, Hồ Chí Minh suggested Viet Minh cadres mobilize people to replace *áo dài* with shirts in order to save cloth and to live a modern life (Hồ 2007:14).
- 8 A Hà Nội social scientist wore *áo dài* at her wedding in the late 1970s due to the insistence of her mother who had a *tiểu tư sản* background. She reported that the groom's father, a cadre from another northern province, refused to be in a picture with her at the wedding until she changed from an *áo dài* to a shirt.
- 9 Cao Đài is a syncretic religion that emerged in southern Vietnam in the 1920s.
- 10 At some weddings in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City in the past decade, grooms have worn *áo dài* in domestic rituals and then switched to Western suits in public receptions and ceremonies at the banquet hall. This practice thus slowly spreads from people of Vietnamese descent in the West to Vietnam. See, for example,

the wedding pictures of the well-known soccer player Đoàn Văn Hậu (<https://vnexpress.net/le-an-hoi-truyen-thong-cua-doan-hai-my-doan-van-hau-4675755.html>).

- 11 At the approach of major examinations, even many science students may feel insecure and choose to pray to ancestors and other supernatural forces, and, if in Hà Nội, surreptitiously touch the heads of stone turtles at the Temple of Literature for good luck. Their behavior is similar to the prayers and magical acts of Vietnamese traders in face of market uncertainties, or of Trobriand fishermen facing uncertainties of risk and outcome in offshore fishing (Malinowski 1954; Lê Hồng Lý 2007).
- 12 See <https://vnexpress.net/thon-nu-mong-lay-chong-han-de-duoc-di-may-bay-2307294.html>.
- 13 See Watson 1997 and Weller 2006 for glocalization in other East Asian societies.

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