

# The Reinvention of Distinction

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# The Reinvention of Distinction

Modernity and the Middle Class  
in Urban Vietnam

 Springer

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Who Are the Urban Middle Class in Vietnam?

Danièle Bélanger, Lisa B. Welch Drummond, and Van Nguyen-Marshall

In 1933, a young urbanite married and took his new bride to live in a simple thatched hut in a village near Hanoi's West Lake. This would not have been a remarkable event to be recorded by historians, except that the young man was Thạch Lam, a famous writer of the *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn* (the Self-Reliance Literary Group) (Hồ Sĩ Hiệp, 1996, p. 64). The *Tự Lực* writers were all educated, well-to-do urbanites who wrote about the modernizing and globalizing effects of colonialism on Vietnamese society. Thạch Lam's older brother Nhất Linh, after dabbling in medicine and fine arts, went to Paris to study science. Thạch Lam himself attended the prestigious Lycée Albert Sarraut and then became a journalist and writer. His choice of a thatched hut for his matrimonial abode was a deliberate act to demonstrate his love for simple and rural living—to show that even though he could speak fluent French, drink wine, and frequent trendy cafes, he also knew how to appreciate a supposedly traditional peasant life. Furthermore, his rustication was a demonstration of his artistic ability to transform simplicity and coarseness into comfort and elegance.

Fast-forwarding to Hanoi in the twenty-first century, similar scenes unfold: urban middle-class Vietnamese look to the countryside for refuge from the hectic city life. The new middle class of the *Đổi Mới* (commonly translated as 'economic renovation') period buys property in the temperate mid-lands to build their holiday homes (Chapter 9, this volume). Vietnamese artists, who make their wealth and fame from the international art market, also seek escape and inspiration in the villages. They build their village homes and fill their houses with antique art pieces (Chapter 7, this volume). While many do not choose a simple thatched hut à la Thạch Lam, but rather build extravagant stylish homes, they demonstrate the same nostalgia and romantic notions for rural living in the 2000s as Thạch Lam did in the 1930s.

These two montages from two different historical moments suggest that there is some continuity in the experiences and displays of middle classness from the French colonial to the contemporary period. Despite these similarities, however, with the devastating disruptions of two wars and radical socialist reconstruction in the North

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(the latter over a shorter period in the South), it is inevitable that sharp differences also exist in the practices of the middle classes through time and between regions. Through these changes, individuals and families have had to adjust, strategize, and adopt new lifestyles to reposition themselves in evolving social orders brought about by colonization, war, independence, communism, and a market economy. In each of these historical periods, individuals and families dealt with changing and sometimes radically different sets of institutions, social relations, power structures and social expectations. Survival, the maintenance or re-establishment of one's previous social position, as well as any aspiration for social mobility, have entailed the deployment of new strategies. These, in turn, have required the mobilization and conversion of former forms of valued and useful economic, social, cultural and political capital and, often, the creation of new capital of all forms. A focus on the urban middle class provides a unique vantage point into these decades of social history and social change experienced by Vietnamese society.

In this collection, we show how the study of the Vietnamese middle class is central to an understanding of Vietnamese urban social life. We start with the premise that the city is the primary arena for the demonstration of middle classness. It is in the city that the accoutrements of middle-class lifestyles can be obtained and shown off, where what is currently modern is displayed, a model to be learned and copied. There is no doubt that middle-class attributes are copied and exhibited by those able to do so in the countryside as well, but it is in the city that these attributes are debated and eventually adopted as markers of middle classness, as attesting to a familiarity with modernity and urbanity.

In addition to its focus on urban middle classes, this volume contests notions that the middle class is a novelty of *Đổi Mới* by stepping back in time and documenting middle-class life in colonial Vietnam and in South Vietnam during the US-Vietnam War. Contributors to this multidisciplinary collection trace the emergence of the middle class to the French colonial era, when Western and modern socio-cultural practices became important symbols of a new social class. The narrative continues into post-colonial South Vietnam and extends into the Socialist Republic of the *Đổi Mới* period, when middle classness had to be reformulated and reinvented. While there are significant differences in middle class formation and experiences through time, there are also striking parallels.

## 1.1 Narratives of Class in Vietnamese History

From the point of view of class and class mobility, Vietnam's modern period, marked by the onset of French colonial rule, was and is radically different from the (pre-colonial) feudal period when social mobility was possible only through specific and well-established means: the mandarin examinations or military service. In other words, to gain respect and prestige one needed to be educated in the classics and to succeed in the civil service examinations. Passing even the preliminary level of the regional exams would elevate the scholar and his family

to the literati class, which distinguished itself above the peasants and merchants (Woodside, 1988, pp. 172–177). Consequently, wealth alone did not equate to high social status. In addition, wealth accumulated through commercial activities was, in theory, scorned for not conforming to the Confucian values with which some of the precolonial dynasties publicly identified. In practice, however, wealth, if not a necessity, made it easier to devote one's life to scholarship. Moreover, despite official prejudice against merchants, this class was indispensable to the economic life of pre-colonial Vietnam. In any case, with or without a wealthy background, social mobility was intimately tied to the state and imperial appointments within the state bureaucracy.

After the French conquest of all Vietnam (c. 1883), and with colonial bureaucratization, resource extraction, and industrialization, a modern Vietnamese middle class emerged—though again one with strong ties to the state. According to Trần Thanh Hương, it was only in the 1920s that the bourgeoisie in Vietnam could be considered a class with its own class consciousness and distinct class interests (Trần Thanh Hương, 2008). After the First World War, intensification of French investment in Indochina created a capitalist economy which, in turn, nurtured a burgeoning native bourgeois class. Trần identifies two different groups of bourgeoisie: one which acted as contractors between the colonial state and foreign companies and one which comprised of small-scale entrepreneurs participating mainly in trade, light manufacturing, and processing. The bourgeois class therefore swelled alongside the several hundred manufacturing and trading enterprises in the 1920s.

In addition, during this same period, Governor-General Sarraut's 'association' policy opened up more educational and career opportunities for ambitious young Vietnamese. Consequently, the number of Western-educated and professionally-trained Vietnamese increased. Joining the newly-emerging entrepreneurs and business people were journalists, physicians, lawyers, clerks, teachers, and other white-collar professionals typically associated with the middle class. Members of this new commercial and professional class, whose wealth and social standing ranged from moderately well-off to rich, dominated urban centres such as Hanoi and Saigon, shaping the socio-cultural milieu to reflect their interests and tastes. To protect and promote their interests and views, this Westernized middle class organized friendly associations and charities and took advantage of the boom in print media to propagate their modern views (Marr, 1984; Jamieson, 1995; Phạm Xanh & Nguyễn Dịu Hương, 2008). Thạch Lam and the writers associated with the *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn*, mentioned above, were among those urbanites seeking to transform Vietnamese society in the 1930s.

The historical narrative of Vietnam's emerging middle class has not been so far an atypical story of class development in Asia or in other colonized societies. Work on South Asia, for instance, illustrates the impact of colonialism, modernity, and nationalism on middle-class identity in colonial India and how this middle class, in turn, shaped modern ideals and practices (Joshi, 2001; Banerjee, 2004; Joshi, 2010). What is interesting about the Vietnamese context is the middle class's interrupted and uneven development as the result of an interregnum of high socialist social organization (from 1954 to 1986 for North Vietnam and from 1975 to 1986

for South Vietnam). During this period, the middle class was actively punished and virtually eradicated. In its stead, a regime elite, so to speak, developed in which membership depended on good class background (i.e. peasant and/or revolutionary) and party membership or service. The middle class was targeted with a series of measures intended to curtail and then stop its activities. The socialist state implemented collectivization in agriculture and forestry while taking control of industries. Consequently, state collectives and cooperatives, rather than private enterprises, provided trading and distribution services. In this way the state restricted private trading and eventually tried to abolish it altogether. While the elimination of the commercial class was never fully achieved, it was nonetheless largely successful. Individuals and families identified as bourgeois had their goods and properties confiscated and or nationalized, and many were sent to re-education camps.

In the North, which experienced a significantly longer period of socialist construction, the state's Three Year Plan (1958–1960) stated the explicit goal of seeking 'to transform Hanoi from a "colonial consumption city into a producing city."' (as quoted by Turley, 1975, p. 377). In the 1960s, the middle class of the North received another blow, as the Second Indochina War brought US bombing and the evacuation of the cities. Starting in 1965, large-scale evacuations of Hanoi and other cities in the North were periodically carried out; in 1966 about one-third to one-half of Northern cities had been evacuated (Turley, 1975). Between the state policy of eliminating the capitalist class and the war's disruption of city life, the urban middle class in the North during the war years saw its numbers and activities sharply reduced.

The opposite was true for those in South Vietnam. The division of Vietnam following the Geneva Conference in 1954 led to the migration of approximately 810,000 people to South Vietnam (Hansen, 2008). Of this group of migrants, about one-third was Roman Catholic and about 90,000 were from the professional class (Hess, 1977). The new migrants, many of whom settled in Saigon and the surrounding areas, joined Saigon's middle class, already developed and active since the French colonial period. While the economic and social structure for the middle class predated 1954, the new political situation foisted on Vietnam meant new challenges and changes for social classes in South Vietnam. The war, American intervention, and the establishment of a new polity and political identity presented challenges as well as opportunities for the middle class.

The division of the country and the Second Indochina War thus resulted in the diverging trajectories of North and South Vietnamese societies from the mid-1950s onward until 1975. Research on social class during this period is striking in its almost complete absence in Vietnamese as well as in either English or French. For North Vietnam, the communist enterprise aimed to eradicate socio-economic inequalities, leaving behind a profound uneasiness with evidence of social cleavages. Vietnamese scholars and commentators have been unable, politically, to address such manifestations of inequality, although research on the communist experience in other countries has clearly shown the salience of inequalities linked

to political capital and the access to resources and power under communism. In the former East Germany, for instance, inequality arose not from income differentials, but from other factors, such as social connections, family ties, and individuals' age and gender (Merkel, 1999). In Vietnam, official recognition of social inequity is slowly surfacing. One of the most compelling and popular acts of acknowledgment was the 2006 Museum of Ethnology's highly popular exhibition on life during the *bao cấp* (subsidy) period in North Vietnam. On display were numerous items which pointed to the disparities and distinctions of everyday life under communism. One of the most telling items of the exhibition was a large display specifying the rations given to individuals according to their occupation and rank, with individuals of power benefiting from larger monthly rations of rice, meat, oil, and sugar than peasants and workers. The existence and practice of class distinction during the *bao cấp* period has been further corroborated over the recent years in published memoirs and novels, indicating that connection to the state and Party often could provide special privileges and status (Đường Thu Hường, 2002; Lê Văn, 2006).

For capitalist South Vietnam, the assumption is that class cleavages and inequality were prevalent—that the South Vietnamese government's inefficiency and corruption, in addition to the enormous flow of foreign aid into South Vietnam, exacerbated the disparity between classes. While this is the conventionally accepted representation of South Vietnamese society, little research has yet been conducted into the social history of this period, much less about the manifestation of classes in general and the middle class in particular. Just as the image of a classless North is probably untenable, so the image of a virulently competitive South may also prove inaccurate.

A decade after the end of the Second Indochina War, Vietnamese society and social classes experienced another major transformation. In 1986, after shortages and famines in the early 1980s indicated a failure of collectivized farming, the state introduced *Đổi Mới*, a new policy which moved Vietnam toward a market economy, allowing foreign-direct investment and private sector involvement in the economy. This led to the discontinuation of state pricing and rationing, the revival of small-scale trading, downsizing of the state sector (with massive layoffs), and the eventual flourishing of the private sector (comprising both domestic and foreign-owned firms) complete with a stock market. The description of the socio-economic system now in place is 'market socialism,' a term which is also used to describe the system in China.

Consequently, to talk about a middle class in contemporary Vietnam in this context of 'market socialism' is to talk about a group whose conditions of existence have been possible for less than 15–20 years. The contemporary Vietnamese middle class has consequently moved cautiously toward displaying and identifying class status. In the rapid and acute socio-economic transformations of the past 20 years Vietnamese society has witnessed a gradual change in valued symbolic capital, from association with the revolutionary and peasant class to association with the modern, entrepreneurial, and urbane. The cities, particularly Hanoi and Saigon, have once again become the setting for consumption and for the display and practice of middle classness.

## 1.2 Problematizing the Middle Class

The notion of ‘middle class’ is highly disputed in the social science literature. Disagreements over its usefulness have led some scholars working on societies outside Western Europe to reject the concept altogether. The main argument for refusing the relevance of this construct, found in the literature on Asian societies and on postsocialist societies, is the premise that ‘middle class’ as a concept is strongly anchored in the experiences of Western democracies. Indeed, the most influential theories of social classes and definitions of middle classes—often tied to specific typologies of occupations, types of state-citizen relations, and levels of economic capital—were formulated based on European or North American examples. For this reason, critical voices contend that the notion of ‘middle class’ cannot shed light on social transformations and class structures observed in societies with different legacies, such as colonialism and socialism (Geciene, 2005).

Questions regarding the applicability of this concept in non-Western contexts arise in particular from the literature on postsocialist societies, especially those of Eastern Europe. Researchers in this field express uneasiness with ‘importing’ this Western concept, for inevitably the middle class in transitional economies of Eastern Europe, in the throes of rapid social changes, will appear less developed in comparison to the advanced capitalist economies (Geciene, 2005, p. 82). While Vietnam is not a postsocialist society in political terms,<sup>1</sup> it shares with Eastern European socialist societies the experience of a communist class structure prior to the dismantlement of their centralized economies. Geciene’s cautionary note is, therefore, relevant to the case of Vietnam. However, the degree to which the communist class structure shapes the post-communist one is a matter of debate and different studies offer various and diverging conclusions (Evans & Mills, 1999; Mayer, Diewald, & Solga, 1999). Moreover, the rejection of the concept ‘middle class’ rests on the assumption that the socialist period completely and permanently eradicated all traces of any preceding social order and was itself a period free of class. The case of post-communist East Germany clearly shows the ‘hybridization of the new class formation because of the persistence of class groups created by the past [communist] political and economic order’ (Mayer et al., 1999, p. 187).

With respect to other Asian countries, the middle class has been the subject of a number of studies over the past decade (Cf Robison & Goodman, 1996; Pinches, 1999; Chua, 2000, 2003). Some focus on the origins and development of the Asian middle classes or ‘the new rich’.<sup>2</sup> Other studies examine the consumer power and lifestyle aspirations of the new rich, who are marked by their conspicuous consumption of luxury goods and fashion and their love for particular leisure activities, such as golf and karaoke. This literature has moved (with the globalization literature, with which it is closely connected) from an emphasis on understanding middle-class

<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Goodman (2008) comfortably refers to China as a postsocialist society.

<sup>2</sup> Goodman (2008), for example, in his study of managers in China prefers the term ‘new rich’ to ‘middle class’ for that context.

experiences as evidence of largely uncritical and unadulterated absorption of global flows of goods and styles to a consideration of the local inflections and adaptations of these 'global' lifestyles, particularly as influenced by so-called 'Asian Values,' commonly defined as Confucian, family-centric, and conservative. Studies of the middle class in Asia have also highlighted the role of gender practices as important to claiming middle-class identity. Purushotam (2002), for instance, argues that Singaporean women participate in a middle-class identity which requires that they both strive for a 'better life' and simultaneously accept their 'subordination' as part of their reproductive duty and social role in an Asian society.

There are, however, few studies which explicitly focus on or analyze the middle class in Vietnam. Among those few, several have been authored by contributors to this volume: Vann's research on middle-class consumer choices in Ho Chi Minh City (2003, 2006), Leshkovich's study of women entrepreneurs (2006, 2008), and Truitt's examination of motorbikes as a symbol of consumerism and class mobility (2008). Other studies on Vietnam's middle class include Gainsborough's research on the middle class's political challenges to the state (2002), Leaf's study of peri-urban development (2002), Heberer's comparative study of Chinese and Vietnamese entrepreneurs (2003), Jellema's work on the moral discourse on wealth in a northern village (2005), and King, Phuong An Nguyễn and Nguyễn Huu Minh on the identity and aspirations of middle-class youth (King, Phuong An Nguyễn, & Nguyễn Huu Minh, 2008; King, 2008). These studies have primarily focussed on lifestyle (e.g. Leshkovich, Vann, Truitt, Leaf, King et al., King), the middle class's potential to contribute to an emerging civil society (e.g. Gainsborough, King et al., King) and rationalization of class status (e.g. Jellema, Leshkovich). Only a few scholars confront the issue of whether or not to use the term 'middle class' or even 'class' to describe phenomena in contemporary Vietnam (Heberer, King).

While acknowledging the many problems associated with the term 'middle class', King opts to use it in his examination of middle-class youth in Vietnam (2008). King, however, conceives the middle class as subdivided with its boundaries 'fuzzy and fluid' (2008, p. 86). In contrast, Heberer (2003) rejects altogether the terminology of class which he says misrepresents the group in question in both of his contexts. In his comparative study of private entrepreneurs in China and Vietnam, he argues that 'class', whether in a purely Marxist or in a Weberian or even Bourdieusian sense, still implies more coherence than could describe the Vietnamese or Chinese cases. Heberer even rejects the use of the term 'middle strata'. In both contexts, he argues, these categories have to be modified—lower, middle, and upper middle class; old and new middle class—every time they are used, implying that they are on their own too broad to be useful. As well, he argues that both terms—class and strata—suggest some sense of political force as well as cohesion. This political force, or 'political mission', which has been touted as a factor in processes of 'democratization' in Asian societies (e.g. Korea), has also been shown to be far less coherent than assumed within the 'class' or 'strata' in the context under study. Consequently, inhabitants of 'middle classes' or 'middle strata' of many Asian societies are not always or uniformly found to be in opposition to or unsupportive of authoritarian regimes. Gainsborough (2002), on the other hand,

uses the notion of 'middle class' but also criticizes the theoretical assumption that in Vietnam, the rise of a middle class will inevitably lead to the rise of a civil society and, eventually, to a democratic (multi-party) political regime.

In the literature on the middle class in Asia, the point is often made that the presumed members of the middle class are politically ambiguous. That is, they are supporters both of democratization and of authoritarianism. Entrepreneurs and others in the middle class are often highly dependent upon government contacts, patronage, and protection. This phenomenon of state-dependency is certainly very clear in Vietnam, where nothing much can be accomplished without strong contacts in government. Many of the entrepreneurs who have been successful are, on closer inspection, highly dependent on the state. In fact, many 'private' companies owned by government ministries were spun off from state-owned enterprises (SOE) or were privatized SOEs sold to former managers. Heberer in his study of entrepreneurs, estimates that 40–50 per cent of entrepreneurs are former civil servants or party cadre. State contacts are crucial to the working of the private sector.

There is no question that in Vietnam the middle class is a politically sensitive topic. While a Communist Party should by definition espouse a negatively-charged position vis-à-vis a middle class, it is also clear that a regime overseeing a socio-economic structure described as 'market socialism' must in practice actively facilitate the development of privately-held wealth amassed through trade, entrepreneurship, and professional development. In other words, state policies actively encourage the emergence of individuals and household units which possess in varying degrees some or all of economic, social, cultural, and/or symbolic capital. Meanwhile, there are clear and obvious attempts being made by the state and through the media to make private sector ownership and entrepreneurship acceptable. Successful entrepreneurs are often held up as model citizens, extolled for their business acumen, their good management, and their role as creators of employment (Leshkovich, 2006).

In the Vietnamese media, which is strongly guided by the Communist Party, the uneasiness with the notion of middle class in government discourse is clearly apparent. Vietnamese media virtually never use the term 'middle class' to describe any contemporary phenomena. Occasionally there are references to a 'middle level' [tầng lớp trung lưu] used in a purely descriptive sense—that is, with no political connotation and most often in a way which somehow implies civil servants, i.e. those comprising the level mediating between the Party and the people. In contrast, the groups that do emerge as fairly coherent and identifiable are the poor and the elite. They are seen to have some common interests and needs. The poor are often discussed as a discrete group, and urban poverty as a specific issue, something to be fixed through development and modernization. There are also occasional references to an elite, described as 'wealthy' (the đại gia or the tỷ phú). Recently, as To Xuan Phuc points out in his contribution to this volume, media accounts have begun to be more critical of sources of wealth, especially when traceable back to the state and especially in cases of corruption. Consequently, there are public discussions of absolute poverty and of the extravagant consumption of the very rich, but not of the middle class.



Notwithstanding the silence in media accounts about a middle class, middle classness seems to have become very effectively normalized as simply ‘modern,’ and takes in a wide swathe of urban citizens, quite importantly those that the state views as desirable (as opposed to the poor, who are clearly undesirable). That the middle class lacks a formal descriptor or identifier may well be a useful lexicographical situation for the state, as it serves to undermine the middle class’ potential to articulate group interests or direct group action.

### 1.3 Conceptualizing the Middle Class

Despite the above criticisms that question the relevance of ‘middle class’ in Southeast Asian and postsocialist societies, contributors to this volume assert the conceptual significance of this term for the study of Vietnamese urban life. The authors in this book do not seek to adopt or develop a definition of the middle class based on objective criteria, such as income level or profession. Rather, the chapters approach ‘middle class’ in different ways through their examinations of different subgroups, while at the same time forming a coherent whole with their focus on lifestyle and elements of ‘distinction’ that people strive to incorporate in their life-worlds to emulate the wealthy and distinguish themselves from the urban working poor. Whether it means joining a charity organization, reading certain newspapers, eating certain foods, going to a fitness club, using bank machines, or moving to a new suburban apartment, urban residents of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City—in the colonial, post-colonial, or *Đổi Mới* period—have adjusted their lifestyles to build new valued forms of symbolic capital and establish their position in urban society.

This volume thus refers to ‘social classes’ as social groups sharing certain *lifestyles*, which, in turn, are related to certain types of *social relations* shaped by the symbolic power embedded in those lifestyles. In this view, classes are not defined a priori by fixed and objective attributes; they are not based on a materialistic conception of power and inequality but on the idea of ‘symbolic capital’. In this view, ‘middle class’ is a social group (including sub-groups) which adheres to a certain lifestyle (or set of lifestyles), or is encouraged to do so by market or state actors, in order to assert its social position in the respective class structures of colonial capitalism or socialist capitalism (post-1986).

Of the social theorists, Pierre Bourdieu offers us the most useful and insightful thinking tools to approach changes in urban middle-class lifestyles. The concept of class, as defined by Bourdieu, aims at overcoming the Marx-Weber debate over whether social classes are primarily defined by occupation in relation to the means of production (Marx) or defined by social status (Weber). Bourdieu claims that the primary operative means to approach and delineate classes is through the study of lifestyles. Bourdieu’s work thus rejects a finite typology of social classes (Crossley, 2008). Instead, his main concepts of ‘field’ and ‘habitus’ shed light on how ‘distinction’ operates to form class identity in relationship to other identities expressed in multilayered aspects of lifestyles. Bourdieu’s approach to social classes thus stands



as particularly useful for contributors of this volume because ‘his is a definition of class that incorporates within itself recognition that class is an essentially contested concept’ (Crossley, 2008, p. 98).

In Bourdieu’s approach to class, all individuals have a place, a position, in social space (‘espace social’) by virtue of their social, economic, and cultural capital, all of which combine to contribute to an individual’s possession of symbolic capital. Bourdieu showed how certain ‘positions’ can be associated with sets of ‘dispositions’, or sets of tastes expressed through certain lifestyles. The concept of *habitus* captures the socially situated set of dispositions individuals display through their lifestyle. *Habitus* entails the embodiment of certain practices and ways of being and living that are unconsciously performed because they are learned through early life experience and socialization (Maton, 2008). *Habitus* resides in a set of practices located within social fields (‘champs sociaux’). Fields are ‘social spaces’ where transactions, interactions, and events occur. Bourdieu’s own work has examined specific fields such as education, culture, housing, literature, science, and bureaucracy (Thomson, 2008, p. 68). This collection provides vivid examples of the dynamics of social fields and how they, in their own way, contribute in shaping social positions through lifestyles associated with middle classness.

Bourdieu’s claim that class belonging and one’s sense of place is not performed consciously is relevant to this collection in the sense that our emphasis is on how sense of group-ness and belonging largely emerges from daily life practices, as opposed to intentional and conscious political activities. Despite their proximity in lifeworlds, ‘individuals who are proximate in social space do not necessarily identify with one another or act collectively’ (Crossley, 2008, p. 92). In contrast to the importance given to early socialization in the acquisition of ‘habitus’ by Bourdieu, based on his analysis of French society, our collection emphasizes agency in *lifestyling* for the purpose of class mobility and belonging. The case of a society such as Vietnam, where the transition from a socialist to a market economy has entailed the dislocation of a class structure and the formation of a new one, offers a vantage point for the examination of agency in class mobility through *lifestyling* practices.

‘Hysteresis’, a less well-known Bourdieusian concept, offers a powerful entry into the understanding of how ‘positions’ and ‘dispositions’ have evolved in Vietnamese society and over life trajectories. Bourdieu defines hysteresis as a mismatch between *habitus* and field when social change occurs. One instance of this mismatch can occur when state policies redefine the type of symbolic capital that is valued, which redefines what gives power in the new social structure (Hardy, 2008, p. 143). When such reshuffling of fields occurs, a certain *habitus* can become a handicap rather than an advantage and individuals must deploy new strategies to accumulate capital in the new structure by adopting a new *habitus*. This result of a dislocation between field structures and *habitus* is hysteresis.

The case of Vietnam offers particularly rich instances for examining how changes in political and economic structures have redefined the value of symbolic capital and have therefore resulted in the experience of hysteresis for large segments of society. For instance, the land reform of the late 1950s in the North radically

condemned older forms of rural symbolic capital acquired through land ownership. The demise of older forms of symbolic capital and their substitution with new ones—being a good peasant and a good revolutionary—created a dramatic moment of hysteresis wherein individuals and families struggled to reposition themselves in society and acquire new dispositions. They were forced to endorse and embody a new habitus that would confer them a certain legitimacy in the new social order created by communism. In urban areas of North Vietnam, former connections to the colonial regime, which were often associated with a partially French-European habitus, became a symbol of connivance and collaboration with the oppressing colonial power. People belonging to this group experienced dramatic downward social mobility and their habitus not only lost its relevance and usefulness but was also harmful to the extent that family strategies were deployed to make up for such a ‘shameful past and origins’. Re-accumulating symbolic capital translated into becoming a good revolutionary family and learning the type of habitus valued under the new social structure.

Housing and urban landscape, for example, as considered by Drummond in [Chapter 5](#), offers a case in point of hysteresis in the *Đổi Mới* period. In that field alone, hysteresis has occurred repeatedly, with the result that numerous families have had to relocate (some several times) over the last two decades to adjust their lifestyle to rapidly evolving signs of distinction in the realm of housing. In the early 1990s when private ownership became accessible, aspiring to a middle-class lifestyle entailed moving out of one’s state-owned apartment and, if possible, living in a small private home in the centre of Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. In the early 2000s, when foreign construction companies from East Asia began selling the high-rise apartment complex concept to Vietnamese real estate developers (with the encouragement of the state), middle classness was no longer expressed by central urban living but rather by suburban apartment ownership. Subsequently, various tiers of apartment complexes appeared that created new layers of ‘distinction’ within the world of high-rise and apartment owners. The previously desired downtown living became a sign of lower social capital associated with noise, dirtiness, lack of class homogeneity, and lack of good taste. With the hasty expansion of the cities and the rapidly changing symbolic capital associated with neighbourhood and types of dwelling, a redefinition of public and private space has also unfolded. The redrawing of the confines of private space become part of the new habitus valued and considered desirable.

In sum, hysteresis is a useful concept for understanding how those in the Vietnamese middle class struggle to maintain themselves in relation to other groups through historical periods. The various contributions to this volume describe—implicitly if not explicitly—various instances of hysteresis whereby the colonial regime or the new market economy created a dislocation between habitus and new valued fields.

Chapters of this volume provide interesting examples of how the mismatch between habitus and new social structures brings about a mixture of excitement, pride and anxiety. Similar experiences have been observed for other post-communist societies. For example, Mayer, Diewald, and Solga noted this phenomenon in

their examination of the anxiety suffered by manual workers after the collapse of communist regimes in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic:

This class [manual workers] is most distressed [post 1989] because manual workers exhibit a high degree of skill and education mismatch; they, more so than other groups, have shifted to workplaces subjected to decentralization or other types of reorganization; they work under various stressful behavioral constraints; and the fear of underemployment. In contrast, some classes – managers, supervisors, and nonmanual workers – have benefited from changes in their work conditions and hence have a greater sense of well-being (Mayer et al., 1999, p. 187).

Our collection provides examples of the anxiety experienced by Vietnamese people trying to embrace new lifestyles. During the French colonial period, middle-class Vietnamese who exhibited their newly acquired taste for French food and drinks risked being ridiculed for aping the French. While women in the *Đổi Mới* period may appear to have more freedom as they engage in new leisure activities, such as fitness, they simultaneously feel pressured to consume and behave in ways that conform to the state's developmentalist agenda. Civil servants using an automated bank machine for the first time feel both empowered by the new technology and frustrated by its frequent failure. Urban families, whose recently acquired apartments are no longer considered desirable places to live, must consider moving as part of their experience of the constant pressure to follow the latest trend in housing.

An additional contribution of this collection lies in exploring how the experience of middle classness is gendered. Many of the chapters focus on women's experiences of middle-class status as distinct. In fact, state discourse appears to champion women as the heroes of modernization and the creation of a civilized society. Meanwhile, market actors target women as the symbols of middle-class values and lifestyles by imposing norms and ways of being. These insights resonate with findings for other societies. For example, in their analysis of the relevance of Bourdieu's concepts to India, Thapan and Lardinois highlight the following:

Class is essential to Bourdieu's understanding of gender inequality. He was also very conscious of the different modalities of control that shape such inequalities in varied ways. For example, in contemporary social settings, changing modes of domination through the media, the 'vendors of slimming aids' and other agents of the 'new petite bourgeoisie' impose new uses of the body and create a new bodily hexis (Thapan & Lardinois, 2007, p. 13).

Kalpagam (2000) uses Bourdieu's notions of 'doxa' (that which is taken-for-granted by society) and 'habitus' to explain the way in which women internalize their patriarchal oppression and subordinate status even as they attempt to overcome it through their individual acts of resistance. To quote Bourdieu himself, bodily practices imposed on women lead to the substitution of 'seduction for repression, public relations for policing, advertising for authority, the velvet glove for the iron fist, and thereby pursue the symbolic integration of the dominated classes by imposing needs rather than inculcating norms' (Bourdieu (1979), 1984, pp. 153–154). A number of the contributions included in this volume touch upon and explore the ways in which

the gendering of middle classness is produced by and through women's participation in building class status, acquiring appropriate habitus, and experimenting with new urban lifestyles.

In sum, in this collection, we follow Bourdieu's refusal to adopt a typology of social classes, agreeing with his contention that social classes cannot be strictly defined by objective criteria, particularly criteria that would claim to apply in a post-colonial and postsocialist society (though only in economic terms) such as Vietnam. Simultaneously, however, we endorse the usefulness of 'middle class', a category highly disputed in social science, across three historical periods of Vietnam's history. We would argue that the idea of 'middle class' used in a broad sense and detached from its loaded and Western-centred connotation can capture key urban social processes whereby new lifestyles are adopted by neither marginalized nor privileged segments of society who aspire to maintaining or improving their place in society. This process is best captured, we feel, through the documentation and discussion of key aspects of lifestyle practices. Common elements of lifestyle, in our vision of middle classness, are what circumscribe the group under discussion here.

## 1.4 Chapter Summaries

Contributing chapters in this volume illustrate, to varying extents and from different perspectives, moments in Vietnamese history when hysteresis compelled Vietnamese to reposition themselves vis-à-vis new symbolic capital, to find new ways to demonstrate and delineate their status and class. The volume begins with the colonial period in the early twentieth century, a period in which French colonialism disrupted not only the social and political order, but also the moral, philosophical, and cultural framework of Vietnamese society. Consequently, this period witnessed heightened anxiety as people experimented with and adopted a new habitus befitting the new reality.

The important role of advertising in the emergence of a consumer culture and the middle class during the French colonial period is discussed by George Dutton in [Chapter 2](#). Advertisements and their companion consumerism are indicative of the modernizing, globalizing, and urbanizing changes which gripped cities such as Hanoi and Saigon from the late 1910s to the mid-1930s. The rise of advertising and consumerism not only boosted local and global markets, forging links between Vietnam and the outside world, but also changed social relationships by encouraging individualism. For Vietnamese, however, the limitations and contradictions of colonialism rendered the pursuit of material wealth even more intense and thus the disproportionate display of class and status may have been even greater in Vietnam than in non-colonized societies.

The new advertising and consumer culture also manifested itself in new culinary practices. Erica Peters ([Chapter 3](#)) reveals how the emerging Vietnamese middle class of the colonial period had a propensity for displaying its status through new

preferences for Western and French foods. While drinking milk and champagne became cultural symbols of middle-class modernity and sophistication during the French colonial era, these practices were also vulnerable to ridicule as extravagant, brash, and inauthentic. The tension and anxiety associated with middle-class diversified tastes and consumer habits attest to the hysteresis of the modernizing and globalizing impacts of colonialism.

In the post-colonial period when the country was divided into two competing polities, Vietnamese society once again underwent a period of repositioning. Van Nguyen-Marshall ([Chapter 4](#)) offers an examination of this process in Saigon from the mid-1950s until 1975. Focusing on voluntary associations, Nguyen-Marshall explores how the middle class in Saigon reconfigured a new type of habitus, suitable to the newly constructed political entity of South Vietnam, the eruption of a civil war, and the heavy Americanization of Vietnamese politics and society. While consumerism was still an important element in class distinction, membership in social organizations, which could be professional, philanthropic, or mutual-aid associations, became important symbolic capital during this period of warfare. As they did during the French colonial period, the state and foreign influences played a role in South Vietnam in limiting and defining associational life and thus expressions of middle classness.

The second section of the book focuses on the transformations which have accompanied Vietnam's *Đổi Mới* period. In the new reality of 'market socialism,' Vietnamese society once again must confront and re-adjust to another set of symbolic capital. Lisa Drummond ([Chapter 5](#)) captures this process as it unfolds in the urban landscape of Hanoi. Drummond shows how middle-class aspirations and consumption practices are transforming Hanoi, reshaping the modes of dwelling, leisure, and transportation. Moreover, as practices such as favouring high-rise homes in the suburbs and department-store shopping become the markers for the newly (re)emerged middle class, attitudes toward and definitions of public and private spaces are also altered.

The gender dimension of the *Đổi Mới* hysteresis is explored by Ann Marie Leshkovich ([Chapter 6](#)). Focusing on four aspects of middle-class women's lives – finances, family, fashion, and fitness – Leshkovich examines the effects of the Vietnamese state's ideological reorientation in order to justify its new market-economy ethos. Breaking with the past condemnation of bourgeois consumption and production, the state now moralizes middle-class consumption as modern, civilized, and patriotic. Leshkovich suggests it is precisely because the middle class shares the same goals as the state—to normalize consumption and paper over inequity in access to production of wealth—that middle-class women appear to experience an increase in freedom.

One of *Đổi Mới*'s most notable consequences for Vietnamese society is the remarkably rapid and intense pace of globalization. This increased global connection, moving far beyond the Socialist Bloc of the previous era, allows more economic and cultural opportunities, including a larger market for Vietnamese art. In [Chapter 7](#), Nora Taylor examines the experiences of artists who have recently been propelled to a new, financially comfortable, middle classness. Taylor argues

that while under both the socialist and colonial periods, artists had always been part of the intellectual and cultural class, separate from the working class, the new economic standing of artists requires new modes of self-identification and distinction. Like other members of the urban middle class, these artists spend their new wealth on acquiring real estate, imported goods and vehicles. Anxiety over displaying their status as members of the intelligentsia, however, emerges as a desire to arm themselves with cultural artifacts and symbols in order to maintain their cultural distinction.

Readjusting to a market economy in contemporary Vietnam also means reforming and modernizing the banking sector. Allison Truitt ([Chapter 8](#)) focuses on the reforms in retail banking as a way to explore middle-class identity formation in Ho Chi Minh City. As new banking services and technologies have become important markers of a modern consumer society, they have also become entwined with middle-class identity and practices. According to Truitt, the state played a role in promoting the rapid transformation of retail banking, including automated salary payment and instant-banking machines. Consequently, the state also has a hand in shaping middle-class identities.

In [Chapter 9](#) To Xuan Phuc further reinforces the importance of conspicuous consumption as a marker for the new urban middle class. As if to underscore their urban identity, the new rich of Hanoi look to the countryside to build their holiday homes. As the middle class is reshaping the urban environment in their residential and leisure choices (Drummond, [Chapter 5](#)), they are similarly transforming the rural landscape with their holiday homes and lifestyles of rural recreation. To Xuan Phuc's chapter also confirms that consumption, even extravagant consumption, is becoming normalized and encouraged by the state.

Finally, in the last chapter Elizabeth Vann reflects upon the contributions to the volume. Drawing on her research on the middle class' consumer taste in foreign and domestic goods, Vann provides an analysis of the chapters and expands on some of the common themes. Taken together these chapters document how this loosely-defined social group has experienced class dislocation and redefinition through new activities, consumption patterns, and lifestyles from the French colonial era to the present. Underlying these varied repositions, reformulations, and redefinitions of social class is a palpable anxiety that accompanies the middle class' attempt to come to terms with rapid modernization and urbanization. These processes that we document for Vietnam resonate for other societies where similar experiences unfold in urban daily lives.

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**Part I**  
**Historical Perspectives**

## Chapter 2

# Advertising, Modernity, and Consumer Culture in Colonial Vietnam

George Dutton

The advent of the newspaper during the French colonial period marked a significant new era in Vietnamese urban society. These newspapers, along with a range of other publications, contributed to the emergence of what Shawn McHale has identified as a Vietnamese public sphere (McHale, 2004). While the new print media became a crucial marketplace of ideas, these same newspapers also emerged as a marketplace in a more literal sense. Newspapers introduced innovations of text, literary form, image, and language, but they also became an important commercial forum in which advertisements touted a wide range of products and services to Vietnamese urbanites. A survey of Vietnamese journals from the late 1910s to the mid-1930s reveals the powerful role that consumer advertising played in promoting modern European goods and the lifestyles that went with them. From clothing and cars to baby formula and bicycles, these advertisements were instrumental in creating an urban consumer culture of a type very different from that which had existed previously. As a noted Vietnamese novelist of the period commented, “This is the era of advertising.” (Luật, 1939, p. 39, cited in Zinoman, 2002, p. 14).

These advertisements reflected and accelerated the transition to the modern in Vietnamese society. In part this occurred through the technology of newspapers, which linked Vietnamese readers to one another and to a world beyond the boundaries of Vietnam. This transition was also reflected in the types of products being offered, many of them examples of new technologies, or items developed by scientific methods, or claiming to have been developed by such methods. Modernity, reflected in the myriad products offered for sale, was about many things. It was about personal appearance, reflected in innumerable cosmetics by Coty and Tokalon. It was about speed and convenience, represented by Fiat cars and Alcyon bicycles. It was about time itself, seen in Vulcain wristwatches, and grandfather clocks. It was about security, ensured by Phenix safes. It was about health and well-being, attested by endless advertisements for patent medicines and soothing tonics, as well as

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nutritious foods from Nestle and Ovomaltine. It was about physical fitness, promised by sporting goods and toys that helped make children strong. And it was about leisure time, offered by Beka phonograph records. Modernity, whatever its abstractions in rationality and scientific advances, was made manifest for the Vietnamese urbanite in the panoply of products and services advertised in newspapers of the day.

From a more sociological perspective, advertisements and consumer culture contributed to a new sense of individualism marked in part by the notion of the rational consumer. This individualist consumer culture was, quite clearly, only one manifestation of the predominantly urban shift toward individualism, and away from communal or familial forms of social structure. This shift was also revealed in changing attitudes toward love and marriage and toward obligations within traditional family structures. Younger urbanites were reimagining their lives in ways that gave precedent to their personal aspirations and desires, and that reduced their subordination to family interests. Each of these changes represented a departure from long-established arrangements, toward newly configured relationships.<sup>1</sup>

Paradoxically, while promoting individualism, the new consumer culture also had the potential to instill a sense of community and even national identity, as urban Vietnamese sought ways to connect with each other in new configurations. Benedict Anderson's articulation of the "imagined community" rests on the spread of a vernacular print media in which a shared body of information via a common language united people in a conceptual sense (Anderson, 1983). Jamieson has described the early decades of the twentieth century as a period in which people were engaged in "a process of collective reorientation," a process he sees being carried out and reflected in the literary output of this era (Jamieson, 1993, p. 103). I argue that these processes of creating an "imagined community" and of "collective reorientation" can also be seen in the ways in which advertisements shaped the emergence of a consumer culture, one grounded in shared interests, tastes, and purchase habits. Advertisers, seeking to maximize sales of their products or services, hope to create an entire community of purchasers. As readers of common newspapers, exposed to the same advertisements, Vietnamese urbanites were purchasing many of the same products. Consequently, they shared not merely the experience of reading the same print media, but also the more intimate commonality of owning the same product, or shopping at the same newly-established French-style department stores, whether the Grand Magasins Charner in Saigon or the Grand Magasins Réunis in Hanoi. These institutions were critical to the expansion of western-style products, and bourgeois customers would no doubt have met one another in these stores in contexts radically different from those once found in traditional marketing situations. Indeed, it

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<sup>1</sup> This is an oversimplification, as I do not wish to suggest that the 1920s or 1930s represented the triumph of individualism in Vietnamese society. While some literary figures, particularly within the Self-Strength Literary Movement, strongly advocated for individual self-determination, this met with more than a little resistance from those unready to accept what appeared to be a move toward social disintegration. For some literary insights into this debate, see Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: UC Press, 1993), especially pp. 111–175.

is clear that while Vietnamese urbanites explored some of the extremes of individualism, they continued to be drawn into collectivities, albeit ones configured in very different ways, as both Woodside and Tai have shown (Woodside, 1971; Tai, 1993).

The label “middle class” in the context of colonial Vietnam is difficult to quantify. We have little data about the specific consumers toward which these advertisements were directed. As such one cannot say with any certainty how these advertisements were being received or acted upon. At best, we can infer from some of the longer-running ad campaigns that they generated enough revenue to justify continued placement in newspapers. Furthermore, it is difficult to break down the category of “middle class” into more specific income levels, again because of a paucity of data, particularly as it relates to purchasing habits. Much of the advertisement was probably directed at members of the middle and upper middle classes, people with sufficient discretionary income to purchase newspapers and the kinds of goods that were being marketed to them. At the same time, it is highly likely that members of the lower middle class selectively acquired modern-style goods and attire as a reflection of their own aspirations.

Whatever its precise class nature, the community of modern consumers was overwhelmingly an urban population, a relatively new phenomenon in the Vietnamese context. Unlike China and Japan, for example, at the turn of the twentieth century Vietnam had little of an urban tradition. Pre-twentieth-century cities had generally been very small, and had served quite limited purposes. Imperial capitals, at Thăng Long (Hanoi) or Phú Xuân (Huế), had been centers of power, but with only modest populations and limited adjacent commercial sectors. Trading ports like Hội An or Phố Hiến, similarly had small resident populations acting more as conduits for goods than residential centers. The first larger-scale city was Saigon, whose considerable growth in the middle of the eighteenth century established it as a more densely populated, organized urban center. The emergence of established urban centers with steadily growing populations was very much a product of the colonial period, which saw the transformation of existing small-scale population centers into larger administrative centers supporting colonial governance or rapidly expanding commercial ventures. Despite this growth, only a few Vietnamese cities achieved the critical mass to support newspapers. By the early 1930s Saigon-Chợ Lớn had roughly 300,000 residents, Hải Phòng had 200,000, and Hanoi around 150,000 (Gastaldy, 1931, pp. 32, 34; Teston & Percheron, 1931, pp. 454, 537, 543). No other city had more than 100,000 residents in the colonial period. Moreover, these cities, while transformed by the French, were still mostly populated by Vietnamese. A 1940 census indicated the total French population of Indochina was only 34,000, out of a total of nearly 20 million. The largest concentration of these French citizens was in Saigon, and even it contained only 12,000 French residents as late as 1930 (Teston & Percheron, 1931, p. 10).

It was in these cities that we find the beginnings of a modern urban population, drawn by employment opportunities, access to power, and gradually the conveniences of urban life. As a critical mass of residents appeared, and as sufficient literacy emerged, either in French or in the romanized Vietnamese script, newspapers began to appear, and with them advertisements. Thus, the consuming

middle class was a distinctly urban phenomenon, restricted to those with access to newspapers published and circulated in larger cities, and among the small literate sector of the population. While some newspaper did circulate into the hinterlands of urban centers, and had their content transmitted orally to non-literate rural residents, these were not the consumers or participants in the consuming lifestyles featured in the pages of these journals.

## 2.1 Existing Scholarship

Given the prominence of Vietnamese print advertising, it is striking that this topic has so far remained unaddressed by western scholars, even as recent studies of this phenomenon in China, Japan, and Korea show the possibilities for such work. Even studies that give some attention to colonial-era journalism, such as David Marr's *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial* (1981) and Shawn McHale's more recent *Print and Power* (2004), do not take up the question, focusing on the articles found in these newspapers. Indeed, the only attention given to print advertisement as an important new discourse is Peter Zinoman's thoughtful but brief comments in the introduction to his co-translation of Vũ Trọng Phụng's *Số Đổ* [Dumb Luck] (Zinoman, 2002, pp. 13–14). Advertising was, as Zinoman notes, part of a new “supradiscourse” representing a significant shift in the deployment and perception of language.

While the advertisements from this period have not been studied, neither has much scholarly attention been directed at issues surrounding the emergence of the urban consumer culture that these ads both reflected and cultivated. In his 1981 examination of scholarly discourse on “tradition” and its implicit other, “modernity,” Marr does explore the nascent commercial and industrial sector that sprang up in the early decades of the twentieth century (Marr, 1981, pp. 122–127). He does so, however, chiefly from the perspective of scholars critical of this project. He gives no attention to the realm of advertisement and the consumer culture that it helped to engender. While these developments may not have drawn the attention of Vietnamese scholars and intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s, it seems very clear that this new version of consumption, spurred by advertisement, constituted a real challenge to “tradition” on numerous levels.

McHale's *Print and Power* does at least hint at elements of consumer culture through his examination of print media, but he is more interested in the emergence of a Vietnamese “public sphere,” one focused on ideological rather than material concerns. One element of this new public sphere is a realm he calls “print culture,” which in some respects is among the more readily visible manifestations of this sphere. I argue that simultaneous with the emergence of this print culture there appeared the beginnings of an urban “consumer culture,” which was another aspect of this new public sphere. This consumer culture was, to be sure, very closely linked to the print culture McHale describes, and to a considerable degree was a part of it. In fact, the growth of an urban consumer culture was a phenomenon closely tied to the emergent print media and to the advertisements that filled newspaper pages on a weekly basis.

## 2.2 Advertising and the Colonial World

The period from the 1910s to the 1930s marked the onset of the “modern” in many corners of the world, not only in Europe and the Americas, but also in many parts of Asia. Everywhere that the modern began to take hold it did so in circumstances shaped by existing social and cultural patterns, economic forces, and a variety of particular political constraints. Among the prominent political and economic forces shaping the transition to the modern in much of Asia was European colonialism, and the arrival of the modern and its impact in urban Asia was very much determined by the forces of colonialism. Recent scholarship has examined the interface between these two elements in Asia, and there has been considerable discussion of the forms of “colonial modernity” in East Asia (Barlow, 1997; Shin & Robinson, 1999). There has, so far, however, been little attention to the Vietnamese case within this “East Asian” context. And while the specificities of colonial domination are varied across countries, it is clear that many of the broad outlines of colonialism meant that “the modern” was experienced in often similar ways across Asia.

At a fundamental level, the modernity that emerged in colonized Asia was a circumscribed one, in which external political forces had a direct impact on the conditions in which the Vietnamese experienced the modern. In particular, colonialism constrained the emergence of a modern individual, precisely because it artificially limited his or her scope of speech and action, and further maintained a racial/national hierarchy that prevented Vietnamese from becoming too “modern.” If the French colon could be “modern,” then could the Vietnamese colonized be “modern” too? This question can be examined in the context of the realm of print advertising in particular. In the industrialized West, advertising was directed at more or less autonomous consumers acting as “modern” individuals. In colonized Vietnam, advertisements (at least in Vietnamese) were directed at people whose true autonomy was substantially restricted.

Alexander Woodside has argued that the pursuit of material objects by Vietnamese urbanites was undertaken in part because it was the only viable avenue for social advancement within colonial society, even if it was a poor substitute for genuine social mobility. The lack of more substantive opportunities meant that “this small urban middle class placed an exaggerated emphasis upon the material possessions it was able to acquire . . . perhaps as a way of salving its sense of subordination to French administrators.” Moreover, he adds, this group’s “materialism did not embrace any confident love of the new, as might be found in industrial societies” (Woodside, 1976, p. 92). In *Dumb Luck*, Vũ Trọng Phụng savagely lampooned 1930s urbanites for being trapped within the superficialities of consumerism. In his depiction of them, urban bourgeoisie equated French attire and speech with both modernity and civilization, even though their dialogue and behavior betrayed their utter failure to comprehend the cage in which they lived (Vũ Trọng Phụng, 2002).

However limited the modernity that arrived in Vietnam in the early twentieth-century, it still brought significant and observable changes, and constituted a distinct rupture, and a substantial dislocation for those confronted with a variety of new meaning systems. The sources of these new meaning systems were numerous,

but for urban residents among the most significant was arguably advertisement. As Slater has suggested, advertising was one of the most significant mechanisms providing “maps of modernity,” which guided people through the maze of new meanings in the increasingly dominant commercial world (Slater, 1997, pp. 86–87). Or, as Arvidsson puts it:

... Modern society depends on its ability to create a meaningful sense of community ... Life without any kind of myth is not worth living, and an entirely meaningless society will eventually collapse under its own anomic tendencies ... Consequently, the modernization process gives rise to a series of institutions in which the naked reality of a disenchanted life is re-presented as a coherent, ordered and meaningful totality, and where the amorality of brute facts is given a renewed ethical dimension. The disenchantment of modernization is accompanied by its reenchantment (Arvidsson, 2003, p. 6).

The Vietnamese colonial case was no exception. Advertisements in colonial newspapers were very much a mechanism for ascribing meaning to the new lives in which people found themselves. They served to recreate a sense of community within the emergent urban populations, even as this process also reinforced the modernist impulse toward individualism. At an abstract level, these “maps” suggested the new kinds of values that should be held by the modern person: a concern with personal appearance, a desire for physical strength and comforts, a preference for speed, efficiency, economy and convenience.

At a more concrete level, the maps of advertising guided the potential consumer along the path toward the purchase of a particular product. Many advertisements included not only information about a product’s many features, but also about its price, and even, most usefully, the location of stores where it might be purchased. Such information would have been extremely important, because the bewildering range of new products in many respects lay beyond the ken of potential purchasers. Many might have been familiar with traditional products, knew where to buy them, what to look for in terms of quality, and had a fairly good idea of how much they should cost. The same was not true of many of the new products flooding the marketplace. Advertisements that included detailed information about a product thus served, in a fashion, to empower consumers by giving them the knowledge that would enable them successfully to locate and purchase the product.

While newspaper advertising in itself had fundamental elements of the modern in it, the images and rhetoric used to sell products explicitly invoked the importance of the modern, and articulated a shift away from tradition. Advertising by its very nature dwells on the distinction between the past and the present or future, suggesting that previous products have been eclipsed by the latest and best replacements. In the context of colonial-era Vietnam, such distinctions revealed a much more profound rupture. This was a rupture between a tradition (presumed to be timeless) and a modernity that marked the beginnings of a new era. The rhetoric and imagery of advertising was very much part of the remythologicalization described by Arvidsson. Colonialism’s disruptions to Vietnamese society, compounded by growing urbanization, had substantially undermined “tradition” in its many forms, but had left a vacuum of meaning. Advertising helped to fill this vacuum, though it was not alone in doing so. The larger print culture played an important role as well,

and McHale's work underscores this point. Advertising's importance was linked to the emergence of an urban consumer culture, and if we accept the idea that consumer culture was a significant manifestation of the modern, then it was advertising that gave meaning to this manifestation.

### 2.3 Progress Has No Limits!<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, I examine the discursive and representational devices of advertising to explore the ways in which new meanings were being articulated in the products and services being offered to urbanized Vietnamese consumers. While the panoply of products being sold was dizzying in its range and novelty, my focus is on products related to the consumer and her or his body. This focus is suggested by colonial modernity's marked sociological shift from the collective to the individual. In Vietnam, as in many premodern societies, there had been a strong emphasis on the group, the family, the clan, or the village, as the basic social unit, which represented, as Woodside suggests, "the traditional family-centered, village-centered social psychology" (Woodside, 1971, p. 40). Families ideally acted as collectivities, which was reflected in their interactions with other such units, as well as in their contacts with the state. The arrival of modernity brought with it an erosion of this pattern, and Vietnamese urbanites in particular began to explore the possibilities of breaking out of the confines of these structures. Some did so for political reasons – such as the noted radical Nguyễn An Ninh (1900–1943) – and, as Hue-Tam Ho-Tai has shown, the 1920s and 1930s were periods in which Vietnamese urban youth explored individualism, which sometimes bordered on political anarchism, as a response to massive social and ideological changes (Tai, 1993, p. 72ff). Others were drawn to individualism by the prospects of personal or financial gain, which they perceived to be more readily achieved through individualistic endeavor (Marr, 2000, p. 780). As Marr notes, Vietnamese writers in the early 1930s were experimenting with use of the neutral, self-referential I [tôi], a clear mark of an individual existing outside of established sociocultural bonds, one free to act without reference to family or group linkages (Marr, 2000, pp. 786–787).

While scholars have explored the significance of the emergence of the individual as a major figure in the onset of Vietnamese modernity (Tai, 1993; Marr, 2000; Jamieson, 1993), they have largely focused on the literary, philosophical, or sociological roots of this impulse. Here I suggest that print advertising was another factor contributing to the push toward individualism, one which closely linked modernity with the individual and his or her needs, desires, and ailments. These advertisements primarily depicted people, both Asian and European, in various staged scenes enjoying the many benefits of newly available products, what Marchand has called "advertisements as social tableaux" (Marchand, 1986, pp. 165–166).

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<sup>2</sup> From an advertisement for Continental Tires in *La Tribune Indochinoise*, 7 October, 1931, p. 3.



Central to this shift toward individualism found in advertising was a focus on modernity itself in its talismanic form, namely the idea that to belong to this newly emerging society one had to partake of “modernity,” whatever that meant. While Vũ Trọng Phụng and other writers may have ridiculed members of the new Vietnamese bourgeoisie for mindlessly pursuing a superficial modernity, it is clear that for many taking on the accoutrements of “modern life” was an important part of the process of redefining themselves. Advertising both reflected and accelerated this process, and advertisements of this period frequently used the word “modern” itself, linking their services or products directly to this idea with its alluring, if still dimly understood, resonance. In doing so, such advertisements foreshadowed language with which we are all too familiar: “new,” “improved,” “the best,” and so forth.

Ubiquitous cosmetics ads in newspapers regularly used the term “modern” to attract attention and appeal to readers. “Beautiful and modern (tân thời) women all use Tokalon powders and soaps” (PH 6.15.1934, p. 14) boasted one ad, while another, for Velouty de Dixor face creams insisted that they were “of great value for all modern (tân thời) women and young ladies who wish to be young and wish to be pretty” (PH 3.17.1933, p. 12). While consumers might be “modern,” so were the products themselves, and many advertisements extolled their modernity in name or description. An advertisement for the “Salon de Coiffure Moderne,” promised the best styles and the cheapest prices, and featured a line drawing of a pleased Asian man getting a shave (Fig. 2.1). Another advertisement, this one for men’s shoes, asked the question: “For this year’s Tết (festival), what kind of shoes will gentlemen be wearing?” The answer was “Giày Kim-Thời,” literally, “Modern shoes” (PH 1.12.1934, p. 15). Another ad promised “Precision tailoring of the modern type” (PNTV 5.30.1929, p. 33). Even foods came to be described in this way, and a 1927 advertisement offered “modern breads” of the brand “New and Advantageous” (DPTB 1.5.1927, p. 6). Each of these advertisements appealed to consumers not by touting the particular virtues of their products, but simply by invoking the talismanic term “modern.” The complex and uncertain nature of this modernity is mirrored in the variety of terms and neologisms being used to express the concept. The French term “*moderne*” was commonly used in the Francophone colonial press, but many ads employed Vietnamese articulations of the term including *tân thời*, *hiện thời*, *kim thời*, reflecting the complex of Sino-Vietnamese and Vietnamese linguistic possibilities.

The direct use of the term “modern” was a common, and presumably effective, means of selling products to a newspaper readership. But more nuanced language and imagery also helped underscore this idea. This invocation of modernity is nowhere better captured than in the realm of cosmetics advertisements, which regularly highlighted their products’ modern characteristics without explicitly using the term. These advertisements boasted of the scientific processes by which cosmetics were created. They showed women deriving a range of benefits from their products. In particular, these ads suggested that a new era was at hand, one in which people were no longer at the mercy of time or fate. They also highlighted the individual and her own self-interest, marking them as a hallmark of consumer modernity. These cosmetics advertisements were very much “maps of modernity,” guiding a

# SALON DE COIFFURE MODERNE



**PHAM-MANH-KHA**

80 Rue du Colon — Hanoi 80

Là Hiệu cắt tóc sang hơn mọi nơi.  
dùng toàn thợ khéo. Giá tiền rất hạ

**Cắt tóc 0p.15, Cạo râu 0p.05,**  
**gội đầu 0p.05, uốn tóc 0p.30**

**Friction eau  
de Cologne 0p40**

**Cạo tháng :** 1 Tháng hai lần cắt tóc  
1 Tuần Lễ hai lần cạo râu. Giá 0p50

Fig. 2.1 Salon Coiffure Moderne. *Phong Hóa*, March 17, 1933, p. 12

generation of women toward very different ways of conceptualizing themselves and their priorities.

Modernity advanced hand in hand with scientific innovation, and advertisement of the 1920s and 1930s regularly emphasized the research that went into developing new and more effective products, particularly those for consumption or application to the body. Tokalon’s advertisements boasted of the fact that its products were developed by doctors and scientists working in laboratories. One such ad showed a European woman juxtaposed with a chemist working in a laboratory to develop this highly scientific facial powder. Another cosmetics advertisement, starring a European-featured woman, sold “Tho-Radia” creams and powders (Fig. 2.2). The text reads: “All women and young ladies who wish to have soft skin and younger-looking faces should use hygienic creams and powders from Tho-Radia.” It informed readers that these products featured Thorium and Radium in their formulae



**cac bà các cô**

Muốn cho da được mịn, mặt được thêm tươi,  
đều nên dùng kem, phấn vệ - sinh

# THO-RADIA

à base de THORIUM et de RADIUM      Formule du Docteur Alfred CURIE

<b>KEM</b>	1 lọ : 1\$ 85 1 ống : 1. 10	<b>PHẤN</b>	đủ các nữ : 1 hộp : 1\$ 40
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CHỈ BÁN TẠI

<p><b>CÁC HIỆU THUỐC TÂY</b></p> <p><b>HIỆU THUỐC</b> {</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>COUPARD à HAIPHONG</li> <li>MUS à SAIGON</li> <li>VEISSE à PNOM - PENH</li> <li>IMBERT à HUÉ</li> </ul>	<p style="font-size: 0.7em; margin: 0;">Cái phiếu này</p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: 0.7em; margin: 0;">(PHONG - HÓA)</p> <p style="font-size: 0.7em; margin: 0;">Mang lại những hiệu thuốc kể ở bên sẽ được biếu một hộp phấn <b>THO-RADIA</b></p>
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Fig. 2.2 Tho Radia, *Phong Hóa*, July 6, 1934, p. 14



text suggests this new model, in which people were empowered against the vagaries of fate. It observes that one's appearance "is not up to fate, but primarily depends upon you" (PH 11.8.1935, p. 14).

While the traditional woman might have bowed to fate and its inescapable consequences for her face, the modern woman knew that she could confound the fates. The power to change lay in her hands, or more specifically in the specially formulated beauty powder sold by Tokalon, which promised skin that would look ten years younger (Fig. 2.4). Another treatment claimed it could remove two decades from one's features; its advertisements showing the faces of two women, one deeply wrinkled, the other with remarkably smooth skin. While the wrinkled woman "looks

MUA MỘT LỌ KEM HAY MỘT HỘP PHẤN

# EM TRẺ LẠI MƯỜI TUỔI

CÁC CHỊ NẾU MUỐN SẼ CŨNG ĐƯỢC NHƯ EM



**MỘT CUỘC PHÁT-MINH RẤT LẠ - LÙNG VỀ SẮC ĐẸP CỦA MỘT BÁC-SĨ**

Sắc đẹp là điều kiện cốt yếu cho hạnh-phúc của người đàn-bà. Nhưng sắc đẹp ở đó. Xưa kia những người đàn-bà quá tuổi đánh chiju mất cái sắc thanh-xuân. Ngày nay khoa-học đã phát-minh ra được một chất có thể giúp cho người đàn-bà vẫn hồi cái sắc đẹp của mình một cách rất dễ. Chất ấy chứa ở trong thứ Crème Tokalon mới. Bên sức thứ Crème này lên da cho nó thấm vào trong thịt thì lập tức những vết rầu ở trên da như mụn, nốt ruồi đều mất sạch. Nước da lại trắng trẻo, mịn màng, như lúc tuổi còn non. Không những thế, dùng Crème Tokalon thì mình đã giữ được sắc đẹp, lại còn được thêm sức khỏe hó hiện ra ở trong cái nước da sáng-láng mơn-mỡn, trẻ trung

như da quả tiên-đào. Hơn nữa những người kém nhan-sắc mà dùng Crème Tokalon lại cũng đều ra đẹp một cách dị-thường. Vậy mỗi buổi chiều, trước khi đi ngủ các chị em nên dùng thứ Crème Tokalon, sắc hồng, thứ Crème ấy nó nuôi da và làm cho nước da trẻ lại trong khi ngủ. Còn mỗi buổi sáng thì dùng thứ Crème Tokalon, sắc trắng. Chất ấy nó làm cho nước da tươi-lần lại và dễ đánh phấn. Rồi lúc chị em soi gương sẽ thấy mình có một cái sắc đẹp lộng lẫy như ngọc, hồng hậu như tiên, cái sắc đẹp mà nếu không dùng Crème Tokalon thì không bao giờ có được. Hay dùng Crème Tokalon đi. Sẽ thấy hiệu quả tốt. Nếu không thì tiền mình mua sẽ hoàn lại cho mình

**LA CRÈME ET LA POUDRE TOKALON**  
 BÁN TẠI CÁC CỬA HÀNG LỚN Ở BẮC-KỲ VÀ TRUNG-KỲ  
 ĐẶT-LÝ ĐỘC-QUYỀN Ở BẮC-KỲ VÀ TRUNG-KỲ  
**Baron, Rochat et C<sup>ie</sup> - 45, B<sup>e</sup> Gambetta à Hanoi**

Fig. 2.4 Em Tre Lai. *Phong Hóa*, May 24, 1935: back cover

like she is over 50,” according to the ad, by applying the powder, one could banish the wrinkles and look younger than 30 (PH 11.15.1935, p. 14).

Indeed, just as appearance had become a major element of the new consumer culture, so too had patterns internal to the body, namely those related to health and general well-being. This was in part the result of a French obsession with health in the context of their newly created urban environments, in which tropical maladies, uneven sanitation infrastructure, and pests of all sorts were regarded as major concerns. In particular, the variety of medicines and tonics, both imported and domestically produced was remarkable. These purported to clear up a host of what can only be regarded as modern “illnesses” ranging from fatigue and intestinal discomfort to discolored urine. Although European medications were part of the advertising mix, there was a particularly prominent place for imported Chinese as well as locally-produced patent medicines. Such medications were a carryover from pre-colonial times, when itinerant peddlers sold such medicines from village to village.

These patent medicines, readily adaptable to the newly imagined diseases, were given new life in the context of the body-obsessed consumer culture that sprang up in colonial urban Vietnam. These medicines promised to cure numerous ailments or addictions, including those related to the use of both tobacco and opium. Among the most common remedies were ones claiming to treat various urological conditions, particularly venereal diseases. The obsession with venereal disease medicines reflected in ads from this period was mocked by Vũ Trọng Phụng in *Dumb Luck*. In it, the main character Red-Haired Xuân had once worked as an advertiser for venereal disease remedies sold by the enterprising Victor Ban, the self-proclaimed “King of Venereal Disease Treatment” (Vũ Trọng Phụng, 2002, p. 99). Commenting on the public’s obsession with bodily illnesses, Phụng described Victor Ban’s advertising, which highlighted the numerous afflictions besetting urban residents: “His cars canvassed every street, broadcasting incessantly over loudspeakers on the unchecked spread of nocturnal emissions, wet dreams, chilly semen, painful vaginal discharge, syphilis, and gonorrhea.” (Vũ Trọng Phụng, 2002, p. 99). A glance through the pages of *Phong Hóa* suggests the ubiquity of such advertisements; indeed, Phụng’s mocking of these advertisements most likely stemmed from his seeing them in the pages of this magazine and its contemporaries.

Other health-focused advertisements dealt with problems related to digestion, some of which were, themselves, products of the “modern” lifestyle and condition. Some were for local products, while others were for imported brands. A 1930s ad for Ovomaltine, which appeared in *La Tribune Indochinoise*, showed a colonial officer sitting down to a dinner, his gloomy face suggesting a general sense of unhappiness. The text reads: “When you are depressed, you lose your appetite. Do not hesitate to give a break to digestive organs exhausted from the colonial alimentary regime, which is unsuited to European habits” (Fig. 2.5). Another advertisement simply featured a picture of the tonic in question – “Hypertonic Mixture du Docteur Rudy” – and promised the reader that it would restore strength, vigor, and energy. It was “recommended particularly in all cases of nervous degeneration and loss of energy” (TI





*Quand, déprimé, vous manquez d'appétit*

N'hésitez pas à mettre au repos vos organes digestifs fatigués par le régime alimentaire colonial inapproprié aux habitudes européennes.

Quelques cuillerées d'Ovomaltine, dans du lait frais ou condensé, forment à tous les moments une agréable boisson qui, prise froide ou chaude, assure le bon équilibre des forces tout en ménageant le foie et l'estomac. L'Ovomaltine n'est pas un simple mélange de farines inertes mais, sous forme de paillettes solubles, la réunion des substances actives du malt d'orge, du lait, de l'œuf prélevées sur la matière fraîche et aromatisées, de cacao vanillé.

**OVOMALTINE**  
DONNE DES FORCES

FOLTZER et MOITESSIER  
22 et 26, Boulevard Charner - Saigon

Fig. 2.5 Ovomaltine. *Tribune Indochinoise*, April 18, 1930, p. 3

7.5.1930, p. 3). Yet other products simply offered nutrition and convenience. An ad for “Vittel” spring water featured a happy Asian man pouring a glass of “Vittel Grand Source,” alleged to promote both digestion and nutrition (DPTB 7.5.1928, p. 3). Another promised an early version of fast food: “Banania,” a multi-ingredient banana and chocolate-based nutrition drink for those too busy to eat or cook. The ad reads: “Are you in a rush this evening? Nothing is simpler or faster to prepare, than Banania, the gourmet fortifier” (TI 4.18.1930, np).

In addition to good digestion and younger-looking complexions, advertising came to emphasize physical fitness as a key attribute of the modern individual. While physical exertion and outdoor activity had been regarded in traditional Vietnamese society as the mark of a lower class individual, the peasant in his or her field, in the context of modernity physical activity became another marker of the new individual. Newspaper advertisements notably addressed parents' concerned with the health of their children. Nestlé milk advertisements promoted their effectiveness in assuring the "health and strength of young children." (PH 6.22 .1934, p. 15). Another advertisement promoted "Phoscao," a nutritional supplement for nursing mothers, promising better breast milk, which would make their children strong and give them healthy blood (PNTV 8.13.1931, p. 21). Some also advertised toys designed to encourage energetic activity. The Autofort was a four-wheeled wooden scooter which touted its ability to make children strong and give them healthy limbs. One of its advertisements read: "If you wish your child to be handsome and energetic, then give your child the Autofort toy, the type of toy currently popular among all European and American children (Fig. 2.6)." It depicted a healthy, well-fed young boy standing in front of the scooter, while in the background it showed a thin, squatting child in hazy outline. An arrow points to the thin child, while the words "or this" point to the strong boy (PH 5.3.1935, p. 8). Linking health and appearance with physical activity as well as invoking the toy's popularity among western children, the advertisement clearly makes an appeal to parents obsessed with both health and the modernity inherent in western-style toys.

Thus, the new Vietnamese urbanite was slowly coming into focus in the pages of newspapers of the colonial period. This new individual gave close attention to appearance, to health, and to physical strength. He or she was attired in western-style outfits and consumed European-style foods (see Chapter 3). There is no doubt that few, if any Vietnamese urbanites, could live up to the stereotyped image that could be compiled from advertising images, or that appeared in satirical depictions such as those in *Dumb Luck*, or the caricatures of *Phong Hóa*. And yet, urbanites were consuming some of these products and dressing in these styles, even if, perhaps, with



Fig. 2.6 Autofort. *Phong Hóa*, May 3, 1935, p. 8

some measure of uncertainty and hesitation. Life in the cities, shaped and defined by the new print culture and its advertising, was producing a new way of being Vietnamese.

## 2.4 Consumer Identity and New Communities

Not surprisingly, the new consumer modernity found in the cities of colonial Vietnam was closely linked to the West, and more explicitly to Europeans (and Americans). By extension it also made members of the Vietnamese urban middle class part of a larger (global) community of consumers. Many of the advertisements, particularly for cars, clothes, and cosmetics, depicted European-featured men and women, and occasionally western celebrities. Western movie stars, including Charlie Chaplin, who toured Vietnam in 1936, were certainly known by the Vietnamese colonial public, and advertisements featuring such people would have had the same appeal as similar advertisements in Europe or the United States. The pages of *Phong Hóa* regularly included an ad for Velouty de Dixor (Paris) facial cream that featured a smiling Barbara Kent, an American movie star of the period (PH 10.6.1932, p. 5). Another, for the same product, depicted Laura Wild, an English fashion model described as “a beauty queen of the most modern type” (PH 5.26.1933, p. 12). Yet other advertisements featured generic European faces, sometimes with the jarring juxtaposition of text in Vietnamese. One such advertisement for Tokalon featured a fashionably-coiffed young western woman and included what purported to be an extensive first-person comment (in Vietnamese) on fashion, men, and the virtues of the product.

Most of the prominent advertisements for western products found in both French and Vietnamese-language newspapers appear to have been barely or completely unaltered versions of advertisements that had first been published in European newspapers. Sometimes, as noted above, the text had been translated into Vietnamese, though in French language newspapers published in Vietnam this was not the case. Some ads even included English language text, which was explained in Vietnamese. These advertisements represented a globalization of consumption in which the same products were being made available for sale, via mechanisms which themselves were largely unaltered from one advertising market to another. As a consequence, French and Vietnamese consumers were seeing the same advertisements, increasingly going to the same kinds of department stores, and purchasing the same products. While those in France would have had little idea that they were sharing this experience with their colonial subjects, Vietnamese were no doubt acutely aware that they were partaking of what they understood as a specifically European/modern experience.

It seems clear that advertisers strongly pushed the notion of the universality of consumers, an idea reflected in a catchphrase of the advertising era “Markets are People, Not Places” (Ross, 2007, p. 63). The implication of this idea was that adaptation to new places was not required because modern consumers had a common interest in modern products. This notion was reflected in advertising copy that





Fig. 2.7 Tokalon four faces. *Phong Hóa*, June 15, 1934, p. 14

also sought to connect the consumer to a larger community of product purchasers. This too hints at another modern impulse in which connections between individuals are made across far-flung territories, whether an explicitly stated “world” or merely a general “everyone.” An ad for the soap “Savon Mondia” claimed that “Everyone around the world likes to use it, because of its pleasant fragrance . . .” (PH 9.22.1932, p. 4). Another, for Coty face powders, announced that “Everywhere, all fashionable women only use powders and perfumes of the brand . . . Coty” (PH 1.19.1934, p. 15). Tokalon cosmetics boasted that “All beautiful and modern women use Tokalon Powders and Soaps” (Fig. 2.7). The ad depicts four women using or benefiting from the use of these products, apparently representing a Vietnamese, a Japanese, a Chinese, and a European woman. The suggestion is that the “all” in the ad referred to women around the world (i.e. Asia and Europe), and not merely those in Vietnam (PH 6.15.1934, p. 14). Finally, another ad in *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* asked the question: “Is there anyone who doesn’t know? Is there anyone in Nam-kỳ who doesn’t know that Rhum Mana Spirits are of the highest quality?” (PNTV 5.16.1929, p. 7). These advertisements sought to appeal to consumers as members of newly forming communities of purchasers, and in doing so pointed directly at the new consumer culture being created in the colonial era.

## 2.5 Creating Communities: Consumption and the Formation of a National Identity

While advertising sought to create these communities of consumers in a kind of unbounded and frequently globalized way, the colonial period also saw the emergence of more delimited communities of purchasers. The reinvention of Vietnamese society precipitated by modernity also brought with it a reconfigured sense of community, one predicated not merely on political linkages, as most historical scholarship suggests, but also along commercial and consumptive lines. Thus, while advertising and the consumption that went with it created a new individualism, it simultaneously spawned a new kind of culture, one in which people were linked by

their consumption patterns, and in which decisions about consumption were shaped collectively. The creation of collective groups of consumers is, of course, implicit in the world of advertising, in which one is frequently urged to purchase products because others are doing so. One becomes part of a new collectivity defined by the purchase, ownership, and consumption of a particular product or service.

This collectivity was grounded not merely in consumption as an end in itself, but was also frequently undergirded by a deeper sense of ethnic/national solidarity. People were urged to purchase goods for the benefit of local/national producers as a challenge to what were represented as non-Vietnamese firms. Such campaigns were directed primarily not against French imports, but against those from China, and, more frequently, against products sold by local ethnic Chinese firms. In the colonial context, the commercial realm, and the sphere called “consumer culture” were ones presumably dominated by the European overlords. Their preponderance of power was both political and economic, creating conditions that heavily favored European products and the means of selling those products. And yet, in parts of Asia this near monopoly on commercial power was challenged in the early decades of the twentieth century. The Chinese case has been closely analyzed in Karl Gerth’s *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (2003). In it, he describes how the medium of consumer culture contributed to the emergence of conceptions of the Chinese nation among its people. In particular, a movement sprang up to urge Chinese to purchase “national” products rather than foreign imports. Thus, although urban Chinese, in particular, were bombarded with advertisements for modern consumer products, many of these advertisements emphasized the need to purchase Chinese-made products whenever available.

Gerth argues that in the realm of urban consumption, Chinese were able to assert an autonomous identity in the face of foreign challenges. Given the importance of consumption within the broad trajectory of modernization Gerth asserts that this campaign was important for helping create the Chinese nation and giving a role in this creation to its people:

Nationalism molded a burgeoning consumer culture by applying the categories of “national” and “foreign” to all commodities, creating, in effect, the notion of “treasonous” and “patriotic” products. This nationalized consumer culture became the site where the notions of “nationality” and of China as a “modern” nation-state were articulated, institutionalized, and practiced. The consumption of commodities defined by the concept of nationality not only helped create the very idea of “modern China” but also became a primary means by which people in China began to conceptualize themselves as citizens of a modern nation (Gerth, 2003, p. 3).

This clearly has echoes of Anderson’s print media-based argument about nationalisms based on imagined communities. Gerth’s argument indirectly links the two, as the Chinese print media was instrumental in pushing the purchase of “national” products in contradistinction to other products. But in a more general sense, he suggests that shared consumption substantially contributed to an emergent national identity.

The Vietnamese case was, of course, quite different from that of China. China found itself in this period under a form of “semi-colonialism” in which foreign powers had enclaves of authority and a considerable degree of informal influence over economic matters, but China retained its overall sovereignty. Vietnam was under full colonial control, allowing considerably less scope for assertions of national autonomy in the consumer realm. Perhaps even more importantly, very few Vietnamese firms produced goods that might be selected in the place of Chinese, French or other European imports. Vietnamese seeking to assert a national identity through their consumption patterns, would have found this extremely difficult in most instances.

There were, however, a few noteworthy manifestations of this nationalist impulse in consumer culture during the colonial period. The most prominent early example comes from the 1907–1908 Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục, the Tonkin Free School. The school’s textbook *A New Method to Study Civilization* included a chapter entitled “How to Develop Industry,” which emphasized the need for indigenous industrial development, noting that “there is nothing more detrimental to our economy than spending money in foreign countries” (Lâm, 2000, pp. 150–151). The “foreign countries” in question included most notably China, rather than France, as at this time many goods, both staples and luxuries, were still coming in from China. Thus, the school’s newspaper, the *Old Lantern Miscellany* [*Dăng Cỏ Tùng Báo*] observed, “How many possessions, how much blood and sweat does our country have that we can let it all fall into Chinese bowls, until before long there is no more to be had?” (Marr, 1971, p. 79). This promotion of domestic commerce was not merely rhetorical. The school’s leaders also made direct efforts, including modest financial subsidies, to encourage Vietnamese entrepreneurs to expand indigenous commercial development as a way to strengthen the nation. It was hoped that this commercial push would lead to the establishment of firms that could produce local goods to replace imports, most of them from China. The Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục effort was largely still-born. The financial constraints were virtually insurmountable, and those firms that were established were short-lived. The *Old Lantern Miscellany* ceased publication after only a few issues, chiefly for lack of a reading public sufficiently versed in the new romanized script (Duiker, 1976, p. 112). Finally, the closure of the school by French officials less than a year after its founding brought to a halt its ability to promote such ventures (Marr, 1971, pp. 179–181).

The effort to encourage consumption of domestic products then faded, but did not disappear, and periodic attempts were made to focus advertisements on ethnic consumption patterns. From 1919 into the early 1920s, newspapers, the Saigon-based *La Tribune Indigene* most notably, called for a boycott of ethnic Chinese products and businesses (Lessard, 2007, p. 172ff). The large ethnic Chinese population in Cochinchina, numbering more than a quarter million, held an economically prominent place in southern Vietnamese commerce, and was also closely linked to the French commercial sector. As such, it represented a prominent target for certain members of the Vietnamese middle class, in particular those involved in commerce and seeking to gain a greater market share for themselves in a constrained economic environment. *La Tribune Indigene* was the print organ of the Constitutionalist Party, which was made up of a small cohort of ethnic Vietnamese businessmen

and landowners, who had a vested interest in reducing ethnic Chinese commercial strength. As Micheline Lessard points out, however, this boycott campaign spread well beyond its origins in *La Tribune Indigene*, being picked up by other newspapers in Cochinchina, and then Tonkin, and reappeared off and on throughout the 1920s and even into the early 1930s (Lessard, 2007, p. 172).

One manifestation of this impulse appeared in advertisements in Vietnamese newspapers suggesting that consumers patronize Vietnamese merchants or purchase Vietnamese products. A 1928 ad in *Đông Pháp Thời Báo* shows a well-dressed Vietnamese man sitting at a table drinking alcohol, and is addressed to “my fellow countrymen.” The text describes the product’s virtues and its benefits for the consumer, and concludes by noting that such benefits did not merely accrue to the drinker, but because this product was sold by a Vietnamese firm, one could consume it “knowing that one was also helping to open up commerce for people of one’s home region. [bổn xứ]” (DPTB 1.17.1928, p. 3). A later ad informed readers of *Phong Hóa* that they “should use Vietnamese firecrackers, of the Tường-Ký, Hạnh-Phúc, and Khánh-Thọ brands,” seemingly a direct challenge to imported fireworks, probably from China (PH 12 January, 1934, p. 5). A 1931 advertisement for Fragrant River silks made the case against Chinese products even more bluntly, describing the clash between Chinese and Vietnamese silks as “economic warfare,” and depicting a mounted Vietnamese warrior detaining a Chinese man at the point of a spear (Marr, 1981, p. 124).

Such explicit calls to support Vietnamese merchants and Vietnamese commerce were, however, infrequent. More typical was a running ad on the pages of *Đông Pháp Thời Báo*, that simply ran “People of Nam Việt use Việt Nam soap” (“Người Nam Việt Dùng Savon Việt Nam”). This was not a call to purchase national products per se, though by using the name of the nation for the product there were clearly nationalist overtones. More subtly, the newspaper *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* periodically ran a small self-promotion with the text: “Phụ Nữ Tân Văn is the common newspaper of all the citizens (quốc dân) of Nam Việt, and all you brothers and sisters should read and support it.” In any case, the reality remained that too few domestically manufactured consumer products existed to allow Vietnamese to engage in the kind of large-scale assertion of national identity that was seen in China.

## 2.6 Conclusion

The 1920s and 1930s constituted a profoundly new period in the history of Vietnamese society. A handful of true urban centers had emerged in both Cochinchina and Tonkin, and with them had slowly appeared a Vietnamese middle class, one that stretched from the lower levels of civil service clerks to the upper ranks of successful entrepreneurs and property owners. Along with this emergent urbanism came the vibrant world of journalism, which in turn brought advertisements for a wide range of products and services being offered to a literate Vietnamese middle class. I have argued that these advertisements directly

contributed to a new sense of modernity within this population. The combination of language and imagery, as well as the products being offered all pointed to a substantial shift from the traditional to a something else, which was understood to be the “modern.” In particular, this modernity was exemplified by a strong emphasis on the significance of the individual in contradistinction to the long-standing emphasis on collectivities that marked earlier Vietnamese social history. At the same time, through consumer culture modernity also brought with it some important reconfigurations of social groupings, ones articulated by and through consumption patterns in urban settings. While scholars have long identified new solidarities emerging among Vietnamese urbanites in the first decades of the twentieth-century, I suggest here that such groups were defined not merely by political or ideological considerations, but also by commercial and consumptive ones, whose reach may ultimately have been equally significant.

As I have pointed out, there are limitations to the conclusions that one can reach from the sources I have explored. In particular, without looking directly at the readers and surveying their reactions to these advertisements, it is difficult to measure the impact on potential consumers. There simply is not sufficient data to follow consumption patterns in colonial Indochina in a systematic fashion. At best one can surmise that the lengthy advertising campaigns for many products, some of which appeared for several years, suggest that they were working to promote consumer demand. Furthermore, I have bracketed out many variables that might have had some impact on the formation of the consumer sphere. Issues of education, politics, and location, for example, no doubt played a factor in shaping individuals’ participation in the realm of consumption.

What about situating the emergent consumer culture in the large colonial context? It is tempting to view advertising for consumer goods as part of a cynical plot by French colons to perpetuate or reinforce political passivity among Vietnamese, or to see in it further evidence of French colonial efforts to gain wealth at the expense of their colonial subjects. If religion was Marx’s “opiate of the masses,” might not the refrigerator or the phonograph have constituted the “opiate of the middle-class?” It is, alas, too much to suggest that newspaper advertisements represented a calculated move by the colonial powers to keep a pliant Vietnamese urban middle class content. Advertising certainly sold French-made products: perfumes, cars, machinery, and shoes, and the purchasers reading the newspapers in question were certainly Vietnamese. But these newspapers also advertised a wide range of domestically produced goods and also services. Vietnamese entrepreneurs used newspapers to hawk a remarkably variety of local products, from patent medicines and books to food and clothing. The range of services being offered was equally impressive: photographers, advertising agencies, beauty salons, transportation, schools, auto repair and parking garages, dentists, doctors, lawyers, printers, tailors. Moreover, many of the imported goods were sold by Vietnamese merchants in shops both large and small. In other words, while newspaper advertising may have served some elements within the French colon commercial sector, it also served as a powerful tool for enterprising Vietnamese merchants and commercial ventures across the spectrum.

This chapter has argued that the bold new world of newspaper advertising was crucial in introducing transformative elements into Vietnamese urban society. Advertising not only urged consumption, but also offered new ways to think about oneself and one's relationship to others. Advertisements underscored the new and "modern" times in which people were living, and sought to link products and services to this modernity. Advertising and the consumer culture it helped engender in the 1920s and 1930s was, of course, only one of various pressures helping to reshape urban colonial Vietnam, but heretofore it has largely been overlooked by scholars seeking to understand and explain how and why urban society in this period changed. While ideological discussions and overt political movements were clearly significant factors changing the structure and configuration of society in Vietnamese cities in first half of the twentieth century, one cannot ignore the role played by commercial and consumer enterprises most commonly seen in the realm of advertisement.

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## Chapter 3

# Cuisine and Social Status Among Urban Vietnamese, 1888–1926

Erica J. Peters

At the turn of the twentieth century, the poet Trần Tế Xương mocked Vietnamese who worked in the colonial administration: they had reached the high life, so now they could start their day drinking milk and end it with champagne (Dương Đình Khuê, 1966, p. 393). Upwardly mobile middle-class Vietnamese living in Indochina's colonial cities did indeed acquire a taste for new foods, and culinary innovation was a way for people to highlight their cultural sophistication and social status. Such conspicuous consumption and cultural borrowing, however, also aroused criticism from their contemporaries. One of the main markers of middle-class status thus proved unreliable: Vietnamese people ate new foods to demonstrate their rising position in society, but knew that those same practices could also make them look overly ambitious and socially insecure.

Indigenous people in many colonies around the world consumed imported foods as a way to claim middle-class status (Wilk, 1999, p. 249; Pilcher, 1998, p. 125; Rich, 2007, p. 87; Devasahayam, 2005, p. 4). India provides a telling exception: the educated middle class turned inward towards home-cooking, instead of outward to the world. In that British colony, middle-class *bhadralok* women cooked with moderation, distinguishing their families both from extravagant epicureans and from India's urban poor (Sengupta, 2010, pp. 90–92; Prasad, 2006, p. 259). In other colonies, however, European culinary imports and fine restaurants found an eager clientele within a new middle class composed of colonial bureaucrats, merchants, and urban professionals.

Historians of colonialism have thus noted indigenous interest in new culinary options from other regions and other continents. The social risks that accompany rapidly changing foodways, however, have remained unexamined. There were many class gradations in French Indochina's cities, as in other colonial cities around the world. Even within the middle classes it was not clear if Vietnamese officials outranked wealthy businessmen or vice versa. People were rarely confident of their social status: everyone had left the village, but many still had links back to

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the countryside, traveled back and forth, and might reasonably fear being labeled as peasants. Cuisine provided a realm of complex, shifting cultural expectations; Vietnamese people who served Chinese or French foods thereby made a claim to be at least in the urban middle class, if not in the upper middle class. But they also ran the risk of being seen as gluttonous parvenus, lacking in respect for the country's traditions. Asserting one's social status through food was a common if complicated part of colonial urban life.

### 3.1 Upper-Middle-Class Vietnamese: A Separate Path

The wealthiest of the rising new classes did feel secure enough to use food to make a splash on the social scene. In 1911, a very successful Saigon businessman named Lê Phát Thành brashly ignored Vietnamese wedding conventions when he married off his daughter. A French grocery emporium, La Maison Mottet, catered the extravagant post-wedding reception. European and Vietnamese wedding guests enjoyed *Œufs Niçoises*, *Côtelettes d'Agneau Maréchal*, and *Buisson de Rocher de Meringues Glacés*, but not a single Vietnamese dish. Later, the wedding guests sat down to an even more impressive dinner, again with no Vietnamese components. According to the society reporter for the Saigon newspaper *L'Opinion*, Lê Phát Thành had arranged a menu “which Brillat-Savarin himself would not have disdained” (27 January 1911). This wealthy Vietnamese excluded Vietnamese cuisine from the two wedding banquets he hosted, disregarding tradition and astonishing the French reporter. Lê Phát Thành took the opportunity of his daughter's prominent wedding to convey his cultural ambitions to a mixed audience of French and Vietnamese elites. He used French cuisine to stake his claim to power within the colonial hierarchy. At the same time, however, he went further than anyone expected, shocking the French with his commitment to their cuisine. The French preferred to mock *maladroit* Vietnamese efforts to emulate them (Doumer, 1905, pp. 51–52; Diguët, 1906, pp. 21–22). They would have preferred to “disdain” the wedding menus. Yet Lê Phát Thành demanded their respect.

Among this upper middle class, some even had the opportunity to go to France and experience French culture in its birthplace. A former interpreter for the administration, Bùi Thanh Vân, went to Paris twice, in 1910 and 1922. His interest in seeing all sides of France led him to go beyond the usual tourist itinerary: “I took up my fork in chic restaurants where I paid up to twenty-five francs for the meal (tip included), just as I sat down in squalid eateries which cost me three francs a meal” (Bùi Thanh Vân, *La France*, 1923a, p. 102). Even braver, he ventured off to visit a tannery, where he learned that the “disgusting remains” scraped from animal skins were treated with chemicals and then turned into jam “which we eat without recognizing the composition, listed under various designations” (p. 75). That provided a strong counterbalance to French pride in their world-renowned cuisine. Conversely, he also commented with amazement that the beef in Parisian butchers' shops had thick layers of flesh completely hiding the bones, unlike the meat hung up for sale in Vietnam: “In France, animals are fattened on purpose for eating. They do no work” (pp. 68–69).

No revolutionary, himself a naturalized French citizen, Vân wanted other Vietnamese to go see for themselves, so they too could learn how the French lived and ate in Paris. His middle-class perspective showed in his reiteration of prices: a piece of sole was two francs (p. 57), so were fried eggs (“they would only cost six sous back home”) (p. 58). A melon (“the size of a papaya”) was one franc fifty; he was intrigued to learn from the waiter that French customers ate it with salt and pepper (p. 58). He came back eager to encourage other Vietnamese to travel to France, reassuring his readers that a month-long trip to Paris could be done for only a thousand piasters—“What prosperous and level-headed Indochinese would not think to offer himself this fascinating tourism?” (p. 103). France had so much to teach, about the French, about their foods, their markets, their street vendors who yelled just as loud as the ones in Vietnam (p. 68). Bùi Thanh Vân was delighted to meet different kinds of French people, people who did not hide behind a screen of white prestige and who would share an ordinary meal with him.

### 3.2 Middle-Class Interest in New Products

Middle-class Vietnamese generally chose a less ostentatious path than either Lê Phát Thành or Bùi Thanh Vân. Flashy displays of French *haute cuisine* and trips to France were much rarer than people integrating a few new foods and beverages into their lives—expensive Vietnamese brands of *nước mắm* (fish sauce), peanut oil, pastries, and other local products; fine Chinese tea and candies; along with French wines, champagnes, liqueurs, and other drinks. By the 1880s, more and more social events began to feature imported beverages (Bouinain & Paulus, 1885, p. 285; Hocquard, 1999, p. 242). By 1895 Governor General de Lanessan described a “new class of mandarins,” who took eagerly to drinking champagne (p. 40). An observer commented that Vietnamese colonial bureaucrats now might offer a household guest absinthe and cognac in addition to French wines and champagne (Jourdain, 1910, p. 25). Wine and champagne began to mark a new standard of Vietnamese hospitality, at least for some. Michel Mỹ (Nguyễn Hữu Mỹ), an administrator from Saigon, visited Hanoi in the 1920s and ironically observed that he was welcomed at a Vietnamese event “with the traditional champagne” (p. 477).

Alcoholic drinks and other beverages played an early role in diversifying the culinary experience of professionals, bureaucrats, and others in the new urban middle classes. Unfortunately, reliable statistics are hard to track down (Bassino & Giacometti, 1997). Significant variation in French imports due to the phylloxera blight and to French troop movements made it hard to calculate the number of new Asian wine drinkers. When French bureaucrats tried to determine how much of the drop in rice alcohol sales was due to a Vietnamese switch to French wine, and how much was due to a rise in illegal moonshine, they found available statistics inadequate to answer that question (Kircher, 1913). Middle-class Vietnamese consumers also drank cheap knock-offs of Western forms of alcohol, so access to new tastes spread beyond those who were buying imported alcohol (Maron, 1911).

Newspaper ads help illustrate how these trends spread. European importers advertised in the major newspapers of Saigon, Haiphong and Hanoi by the 1880s,

promoting cigarettes, medications, bottled water, alcohol, and other products with high profit margins. Most of these newspapers (and advertisements) were in French, but they circulated among ambitious Vietnamese and Chinese—people who were interested in the papers’ social, business and political news and in practicing reading French. These Asian readers were also presumably interested in seeing what products the French liked. Perhaps they could use Cusenier Absinthe, Moët et Chandon champagne, Hommel Beer, or other advertised products to establish their credentials as affluent, forward-looking, and sophisticated. Laurence Monnais has discussed how the urban Vietnamese relied in part on French advertisements when they evaluated medicinal drinks, supplements, and other therapeutic products (2008, p. 120). Vietnamese interest in ingesting commercial products to stay healthy mirrored French concerns, although people’s home remedies no doubt varied significantly. The appeal of advertised products spread beyond the French to the Asian residents of Saigon, Cholon, Hanoi, Haiphong, and even smaller colonial cities.

Although most colonial newspapers were in French, ads for new products began appearing in a few Vietnamese-language papers as well. Elsewhere in this volume, George Dutton has discussed how these European advertisements helped Vietnamese consumers coalesce into a new urban middle class. From 1893 to 1895 *Gia Định Báo* (the Vietnamese-language newspaper of record) featured advertisements in Vietnamese, generally boilerplate adaptations of French-language ads, promoting French wines such as Bandol from Provence and Saint-Georges from Burgundy; Moët et Chandon champagne; Munich beer; and liqueurs such as absinthe, kirsch, curaçao, chartreuse, anisette, rum, *Ricqlès*, and four different kinds of cognac. This is not to say that the products urbanites drank were necessarily the ones advertised—consumers in search of prestige were not hard to dupe. *Le Cochinchinois* reported that a police raid on a Chinese wholesaler in Saigon found a drawer full of Moët et Chandon labels, ready to be pasted on off-brand champagne and presented to unsuspecting customers (10 January 1889, p. 3).

While ads in Vietnamese newspapers from the turn-of-the-century were simple adaptations of French ads, by 1910 Vietnamese-language newspapers featured some ads designed to target the Vietnamese. In his study of Zimbabwe, Timothy Burke discussed this shift from boilerplate ads to ones tailored to colonial readers (1996, pp. 150–158). Similarly, in Vietnam, advertisers began supplying ads written specifically for local Vietnamese readers. The Saigon newspaper *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn* (News of the Six Provinces) ran advertisements in Vietnamese for a French bakery in Saigon, offering “delicacies made in the Parisian manner”—meat pies, cakes made with sweet fruit liqueurs, and boxes of bonbons (3 November 1910). By 1920, the volume of marketing for European food products had increased dramatically in that newspaper, with advertisements for coffee, Olibet cookies, Nestlé brand milk, and even French diet pills, alongside ads for Chinese-run groceries selling canned goods and other new products.

Halfway through this evolution, in 1915, the French company *La Petite Fermière* began a major campaign in *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn* to encourage Vietnamese consumers to buy its condensed milk. Why milk? As we saw, around 1900 the poet Trần Tế Xương had presciently suggested that ambitious Vietnamese would start their day

drinking milk and end it with champagne. Champagne is an obvious symbol, with its resonances of excess and indulgence. But in colonial Indochina milk bore equal cultural weight, with resonances of whiteness and middle-class health.

The Vietnamese had not used milk, butter, or cheese in their diets before the colonial period, and consequently had never bred their cows for milk-giving abilities. This posed a problem for the French colonizers, but Tamil migrants to Cochinchina were comfortable with dairy products and found a solution. They began selling goat's milk, then imported cattle from southern India to be able to offer the French cow's milk instead. In the later nineteenth century, there were many Tamil-owned dairies in Saigon (26 of them appeared in the 1884 *Annuaire*), and Tamil milkmen delivered bottles of milk door to door in French neighborhoods (Lahille, 1919; Pairaudeau, 2009, p. 111).

In 1890 a French entrepreneur had noted that in Indochina, “[fresh] milk sells for at least 25 cents per liter, and as much as 40 cents. And what milk—half coconut powder, half water” (Fabre, 1890). Those prices seemed high compared to milk in the metropole, but they were much cheaper than the other option in the colony: buying milk shipped in from France. Stores in Saigon advertised not the freshness of their milk, but its origins: “pasteurized French milk, preserved naturally, absolutely pure and with no metallic taste” (*La Semaine Coloniale* 22 August, 1896, p. 3). A decade later, milk from France was still sold at a premium to fearful French families in the colony, with nostalgic labels such as “La Petite Fermière,” (*La France d’Asie*) or with reassuring references to its provenance: “Natural milk from Normandy, dried and powdered under the EXKI brand [. . .] is superior to natural milk from the cows of Cochinchina” (*L’Opinion* 18 May 1906). The words “Normandy” and “La Petite Fermière” seemed to promise a dependable product to the French.

To the Vietnamese newspaper readers, imported milk signified upward mobility. Seeing advertisements in the French press extolling the benefits of powdered or condensed milk for French children, some ambitious Vietnamese parents began to buy that milk for their own children (Kermorgant, 1907, p. 421). Milk was advertised in French newspapers as bearing health, protection against colonial diseases, and a link to French culture. But milk advertisements targeting the Vietnamese were somewhat different.

When the French brand *La Petite Fermière* began advertising in *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn* in 1915, its large-scale, quarter-page advertisements were not adaptations of generic publicity, but were designed specifically for the Vietnamese market. The first rendition of the ad, in January 1915, showed a Vietnamese person at the gate of a grand house, telling a dark-skinned person with milk in glass bottles to go away, because “your milk smells like hairy goat, and this house drinks only *La Petite Fermière* brand milk” (7 January, p. 8). Whether that wealthy urban household with a taste for imported milk was European, Chinese, or Vietnamese was left unclear in the ad. The Vietnamese servant's scorn for the Tamil milkman was evident, however, as was the contrast between the servant's light skin and the milkman's dark skin. It is ironic that the brand *La Petite Fermière*, with its nominal aura of nostalgia for the French countryside, aimed to convey urban sophistication to a Vietnamese audience.

Nevertheless, this ad acted as a transition, encouraging Vietnamese readers to think of *La Petite Fermière* as their brand (or at least the brand they should think of when shopping for their employers), while not yet proposing that they themselves would need canned milk.

The next month, a second version of the advertisement appeared (Fig. 3.1), again taking up a quarter of a page of the newspaper (25 February, p. 3). This version showed two Vietnamese women meeting on the street: one was laden with baskets and a bamboo pole, the other had a plump child. The first admired the baby's health and weight, and the mother replied that he drank *La Petite Fermière* milk every day. The implication is that the condensed milk is key to the child's future health and fortune, and that a child fed on *La Petite Fermière* milk will take good care of his mother in later years. Indeed, the mother already sports a neatly knotted headcovering, in contrast to the cloth draped negligently over the other woman's head. Clearly the mother has already internalized middle-class values of neatness, ambition, good health, and modern products. The ad suggests her son will imbibe those same bourgeois values along with his milk. A few months later, another ad in the campaign portrayed a Vietnamese-style fable, with a twist: the only way for the fabled hero to defeat the tiger was to drink *La Petite Fermière* milk (1 April, p. 3). The next month, the campaign showed Vietnamese children arguing over who should get to



— Cha chả! Con có sô sữa dũ hê!  
 — Là tại mỗi ngày tôi cho nộ uống sữa hiệu **LA PETITE FERMIERE.**

Fig. 3.1 *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn*, 25 February 1915, p. 3

finish the last of the *La Petite Fermière* brand milk (6 May, p. 3). The imported milk was apparently delicious, and it made you strong—strong enough to defeat tigers, or to undertake the even harder task of succeeding in the French colonial administration.

Urban Vietnamese eventually found other uses for canned milk, in desserts, creamy sauces, and in coffee. But the marketers for *La Petite Fermière* thought that their milk would find most acceptance in Vietnamese life as a drink for children. It was a reasonable assumption, for one constant during the colonial period was that Vietnamese parents often urged their children to surpass them in adapting to the French regime. The student Nguyễn Văn Nho wrote that his mother had forbidden him from eating fried chicken's feet when he was younger, because that holiday treat made one's hand shake, ruining one's Chinese calligraphy and hence one's educational potential (1920, p. 13). Later, his mother pushed him to start French school, which led to different culinary strictures. He could then eat fried chicken's feet, but could not chew betel nuts, because they supposedly reduced one's ability to pronounce French consonants (p. 33).

What is interesting about this shift is that by abandoning his study of the traditional writing system, the child was again able to savor the familiar crunch of fried chicken's feet. Parents allowed their children to enjoy traditional tastes, even while encouraging them to develop competence with European foods and silverware in order to fit into a French workplace (Bùi Thanh Vân, *L'Annamite*, 1923b, p. 31; Lefèvre, p. 30). Through their children and also through greater exposure to the French, the Vietnamese urban middle classes began gradually to explore European cuisine and to experiment with a more cosmopolitan culture. The Vietnamese middle class served French drinks at certain events to show their openness to new perspectives and tastes, and gave their children French milk as a first step towards giving them the power to enter the world of French administration. Ironically, French employers sometimes often viewed Vietnamese adoption of French practices as inappropriate imitation, not as an effort to find common ground and common references (D'Enjoy, 1898, p. 30).

French importers, on the other hand, delighted in the promise of an expanding new market for French products. In 1909 the Hanoi Chamber of Commerce looked enthusiastically at changing urban habits, and predicted that the Vietnamese—"copycats by nature"—will happily adopt "our style of life," including French food and wine (Guermeur, Guioneaud, & Ellies, 1909, p. 9). In their report, the Chamber members noted that the Vietnamese were also buying more from China: salted fish, Chinese noodles, dried and fresh fruits, candies and various teas. But they did not sound concerned about that competition. In 1924, the colonial government produced a statistical analysis of the native cost of living in Hanoi over the previous 12 years, reporting that educated, middle-class Vietnamese were eating more and more European foods, spending almost half of their income on food, and by the end of the First World War had doubled their expenditures on French wine (while reducing what they spent on rice liquor) (Leurence, 1924, pp. 7–8).

Advertisements for French food products in the Vietnamese press indicate that some Vietnamese had already taken up the items in question, thus encouraging



businesses to think of them as a possible market. The advertisements may then have persuaded other Vietnamese to try the new products. However the causation runs, the advertisements suggest that middle-class, urban Vietnamese were beginning to consume some French foods. Urban populations supplemented their Vietnamese diet with a variety of European and Chinese culinary products, along with Indian spices, using these new foods to suit their tastes and advance their interests.

### 3.3 Middle-Class Restaurant Culture

If the urban middle class wanted to move beyond particular imported products like cookies, tea, champagne or condensed milk and try more complex tastes, they also had a novel option—the midrange restaurant. Vietnam had had street snacks long before the nineteenth century, and upscale French and Chinese restaurants dated to the earliest years of colonialism. But not many Vietnamese had been able to explore those expensive and exclusive restaurants. By the early twentieth century, however, the scholar Phan Kế Bính observed that middle-class Vietnamese urbanites liked to take their friends and family out to Chinese and European restaurants for special occasions, or perhaps to a Vietnamese *chả cá* [fish patties] restaurant (1980 [orig. 1915], pp. 11, 17). In his view, one of the advantages of living in a city was being able to find out what everyone was doing, and to try the latest dishes, without having to pay for a banquet for the whole village. Instead, one just bought food and drinks for one's close companions; other restaurant diners had to fend for themselves (p. 177).

Michel Mỹ was one colonial bureaucrat who very much appreciated restaurant cuisine. Before he traveled to Hanoi in 1922, Mỹ enjoyed eating in Saigon's French cafés, and he had favorite Chinese restaurants in Cholon. Despite his sophistication, the food in Hanoi took him by surprise. Ordinary dishes tasted different (p. 43), the fish sauce was “indigestible” (p. 211), and dog meat was openly for sale. In contrast, back in Saigon, “if someone wants to indulge in a meal of dog, he hides as if he were doing something wrong. He invites only his closest friends, and holds the feast in the countryside, far from any populated center” (p. 128). Although people in the south might have a yen for dog meat, they viewed it as incompatible with middle-class urban culture. Mỹ also visited Hanoi's two finest Chinese restaurants, and declared himself unimpressed: “In no way did they compare to Cholon's grand restaurants. But we came out of nostalgia, to sample their bird's nests, shark fins, fish bladders. . .” (p. 159). The food may not have been up to Cholon's standards, but Mỹ and his southern friends seemed more at home in Hanoi's Chinese restaurants than in that city's Vietnamese restaurants.

Another day he sat drinking with his friends on the terrace of a French hotel, while European customers stared at them, nonplussed. One French officer was so taken aback that his more experienced friend had to explain to him that the interlopers must come from Saigon, where Vietnamese were more welcome in French establishments. Mỹ and his friends calmly played cards and drank iced aperitifs, letting the onlookers wonder about “our origin and our identity” (pp. 171–172). He felt able to experiment with the various cuisines available in Indochina, and

insinuated that uncovering his identity would be far beyond the skills of French *flâneurs*. He relaxed, sipped French drinks and played cards partly to demonstrate that he was more sophisticated than the Frenchmen who were shocked by such a sight, and partly to encourage Vietnamese residents of Hanoi to join him in the café. As he said, “In Cochinchina, we associate with French people, and they don’t eat us, by God!” (p. 112). Despite Mỹ’s bravado, one senses a certain social insecurity in his story: no matter how established and cosmopolitan he was, a few unrefined Frenchmen could have assaulted him that day at the café, with an impunity born of colonial racial hierarchies.

### 3.4 The First Modern Cookbook in Vietnamese

Phan Kế Bính’s acquaintances did not always go out to restaurants when they wanted to impress their guests; they might also serve them Chinese or French dishes at home (p. 176). But how did a host, or his cook, learn to make these dishes? There were Chinese cooks available to prepare Chinese cuisine, but no French people agreed to cook in Vietnamese households. A Chinese millionaire in Cholon, however, was reputed to be paying a talented French chef twelve thousand francs a year to prepare elaborate Chinese banquets of duck, chopped pigeon and ham, birds’ nest soup, slow-cooked sheep with bamboo shoots, fried rats, drunken shrimp, boiled crabs, and many other meat dishes and soups (Postel, 1887, p. 61.) Asians who wanted to cook French food could pick up skills washing dishes in a French café, serving French troops, or shadowing another cook. Cooks wanting to expand their repertoire beyond those skills could also turn to a cookbook put together in 1889 by an anonymous Vietnamese interpreter, the *Petite cuisine bourgeoise en annamite*—the first modern cookbook in Vietnamese. (“Annamite” was the French term for the Vietnamese people and their language.)

The author was not a traditional healer; unlike earlier *gia truyền* texts, his book was not a medical guide to the particular roots, greens and other foods that might help readers stay healthy. In his own words, he was not even a cook, just a professional interpreter who found French food appealing on many levels. He hoped to share his interest with his compatriots by translating “simple, easy, and inexpensive” recipes from French cookbooks, for the benefit of those of modest background. The reality was more complicated. While he surely translated the recipes for *pot au feu vrai*, *clafoutis*, and *sauce hollandaise*, it seems equally certain that he did not find recipes for boiled elephant trunk, fried palm-tree worms, *bánh cốm* (rice cake), bamboo shoots, or green papaya salad in a French cookbook. And yet, there they are, in the book. Another way in which this cookbook differed from one likely to be used in a bourgeois household in France, was in the number of recipes for *kari* (curry) which were included, such as *Kari créole*, *Kari parisien*, *Kari de crevettes* and *canard au kari*. Curries were certainly known in France at this time, but curry recipes were rare in the ordinary French cookbooks the author purported to be translating.

The audience for his book adds another complication. In the first edition (1889), the author included an introduction in Vietnamese, and wrote that the book was for those with “small pocketbooks,” those who were “not rich.” Presumably he had



in mind Vietnamese like himself—middle-class professionals, learning French, and wanting to give French dinners to show off their cultural competence. The names of the dishes were in French because that was how they were known in colonial society. The recipes and techniques were written in Vietnamese to help the prospective host explain to his cook how to make the dish, assuming the cook himself could not read the *quốc ngữ* writing system. The Vietnamese recipes also could presumably help a host with cooking skills to make these dishes himself or herself. What he was emphatically not doing, he said, was “teaching readers to cook rich people’s dishes, because rich people have already hired skilled people to cook for them.” So instead, simple, middle-class French dishes, for simple middle-class Vietnamese.

Cookbooks have long served middle-class families’ goal of displaying their literacy, leisure, and good taste (Goody, 1982, p. 152; Appadurai, 1988, p. 13; Sengupta, 2010, p. 93). But with this first Vietnamese cookbook, it was never that simple. Ambiguity about the class of the reader, and the class of the cook, pervaded the text of the *Petite cuisine bourgeoise en annamite*. At times, the author presented the cookbook as a manual for literate people who wanted to get jobs as cooks in European households: “People who want to cook Western-style will not ever get hired as long as they only prepare simple food with Annamese utensils.” Perhaps he imagined his readers a step or two down from the professional class. Or perhaps the financial opportunities of controlling a European family’s market budget were so great that they outweighed the prestige of a white-collar job, even for people with the educational resources to aim for non-menial work. It is hard to judge the class background of those relying on this cookbook, since social mobility increased in colonial cities, and especially since the cookbook itself may be evidence of readers’ ambitions to improve their lot in life, whether through serving the dishes to friends and colleagues, or by taking employment cooking for the Europeans and rising Asian elites.

In places, the author criticized his readers’ presumed culinary ignorance, warning them not to use duck eggs in omelettes (p. 246), or commenting that Vietnamese people use spices too liberally (p. 7). In other places, the author sounded as if he wished to collaborate with his readers, asking them to send in their notes on his recipes. When he suggested that they could cook hearts of palm the same way they cooked the flowers, for instance, he was eager for his readers to let him know if it worked out (p. 238). Many recipes also included a note instructing readers to season recipes to their own taste, without specifying whether that meant the cook’s taste or the employer’s taste, and how that should be determined given that so many of these dishes would be unfamiliar.

By the third edition (1914), the cookbook seemed to have found a French readership as well. This time, the author included a French preface setting out the book’s purpose:

Many of my countrymen did not know how to use the first edition. This book is made for cooks, but the detailed index is made for the masters. Many complain that they always eat the same thing: now masters can use the index to vary the daily menu as much as they like. They just tell the cook each evening what they want the next day, and if the cook is not familiar with a dish, this book will show him how to prepare it.

That paragraph aimed to reach out to a French audience, people complaining that their cooks' repertoire of "good enough" French dishes was too limited. And the 1914 edition included a section on indigenous medicine, written entirely in French. Perhaps that was for French people whose Vietnamese cooks might not be available when a health crisis struck, and who might want to learn local remedies such as papaya to treat uremia, or gin to treat cholera. Whoever was buying the cookbook, they bought enough from 1889 to 1914 for the publishers to print 2000 copies of the third edition. Apparently, the book found a receptive readership among middle-class urban households, as a generation of Asian cooks tried to master a new cuisine.

With dishes such as *Kari créole*, banana blossom *à la vinaigrette*, and young pineapple shoots *en sauce blanche*, the *Petite cuisine bourgeoise en annamite* provides tangible evidence of the formation of a new culinary pastiche in colonial Vietnam, at least at the level of recipes. Even a simple rice porridge (*cháo*) was dressed up by adding cow's milk, sugar, and bay leaves. The cookbook was also emphatically practical. The anonymous author was aware of what his readers were likely to find in their local markets, and discussed substitutions for European produce: "At various times one has to accept a flavor of Annam as a replacement for a Western flavor; thus I show that the leaves of the cajeput (*cây tràm*) can replace bay leaves." Similarly, he provided recipes for mango tart, papaya jam, roasted iguana, and squirrel stew, alongside time-honored Vietnamese favorites such as fried palm-tree worms and green papaya salad. If middle- and upper-middle-class Vietnamese signaled their cosmopolitanism to their colleagues and competitors by serving the best French champagne or paying for an exclusive Chinese banquet, they may also have relished the opportunity to see fine Vietnamese dishes displayed in a modern cookbook alongside French delicacies and innovative combinations of the culinary traditions.

### 3.5 Vietnamese Middle-Class Vulnerability

The *Petite cuisine bourgeoise en annamite* left open the question of who was likely to read the cookbook, and whether its readers hoped to cook for pleasure, for display, or for cash. Vietnamese people aspiring to middle-class status were increasingly living in a world of social ambiguity and dislocations. People who had thought of themselves as established and stable could suddenly find themselves in desperate need of work. In her memoir, *Métisse Blanche*, Kim Lefèvre wrote about her well-bred mother landing in such a situation in 1948. She gratefully took a job as cook at the Oceanography Institute of Nha Trang, despite her lack of culinary experience. She pretended to a competence she never felt, hoping that by adding potatoes and a lot of butter to a Vietnamese dish she could transform it into French food acceptable to the Institute's director (1989, pp. 139–140). Kim's family stumbled onto a solution which had appealed to many other Vietnamese since the onset of colonialism many decades earlier: cooking for the French. Household cooks gained access to a steady salary, to whatever they could skim from the market budget through judicious shopping, and to the opportunity to expand their culinary and cultural knowledge.

Within certain circles, Vietnamese people might feel middle-class, but should they travel outside those circles, by choice or by fate, they were quickly reminded of their inherent vulnerability. The story of a well-to-do Saigon businessman named Lê Bá Cũ provides an instructive example. Taken in by a French con man, Lesueur, he lent him money and persuaded his friends in Saigon to do the same. When Lesueur's scheme collapsed, Lê Bá Cũ had lost more money than any other victim, yet he found himself imprisoned as an accomplice:

How humiliating it was. . . to know myself innocent, a man of very high reputation, formerly admitted to the society of high officials and administrators and other esteemed personalities, both French and native. And now to be obliged to squat on the ground at meal times, eating nothing but raw rice and salted fish with the other prisoners; sleeping on dirty planks; seeing and hearing, night and day, terrible things. To make things even more unfair, the true guilty party, Lesueur, served out his sentence in a comfortable house next door to the prison, eating European-style (1917).

The French colonial prison system discriminated by race, but not by class, so that an upper- or middle-class Vietnamese experienced the same brutal prison regimen as a common criminal, while a European of any background was treated much better and fed tolerable food (Zinoman, 2001, pp. 91, 132–135). And for every Lê Bá Cũ who experienced it personally, a whole circle of acquaintances realized anew how vulnerable a middle-class Vietnamese person remained under colonialism.

To add to the sense of social insecurity, the Vietnamese middle classes also found themselves criticized for engaging in new culinary practices. Some French people viewed their experiments with European products negatively, ridiculing Vietnamese taste or worrying about the spread of alcoholism among the colonized. As Charles Gosselin wrote, “Unfortunately, it is not rare today in the major centers to see young Annamites [. . .] imitating our worst habits, and giving themselves over to the dangerous pleasures of preprandial drinks” (1904, p. 64). Vietnamese people also sometimes criticized middle-class adoptions of Western drinks and other new tastes. Besides Trần Tế Xương, other poets also penned stinging rebukes of people who feasted on foreign flavors while the vast majority barely had enough to eat. In 1926, Đặng Thái Thân wrote:

They gulp *jambon*, they gobble down *pâté*  
Your mouths just water—empty are your hands.  
You get some rice for lunch—for supper none (Huỳnh Sanh Thông, 1996).

And that same year, a 15-year-old radical phased his criticism in the form of advice to those among his countrymen who faced choices about their lives and their politics:

Do not crave delicious delicacies  
Now is the time for pickled vegetables, greens, and *tương* [thick soy sauce].  
Better than to depend on other people for wine and meat (Phạm Tất Đắc, 1926).

These verses mocked the eating and drinking of fine European products as a symbol of all that was wrong with ambitious, collaborating Vietnamese. Critics

attacked people for their social aspirations, disparaging colonial bureaucrats and other middle-class Vietnamese as gluttonous mercenaries who mindlessly betrayed Vietnamese traditions and their poorer compatriots.

In the 1930s, the criticism only intensified. In Thạch Lam's story "Hunger," a middle-class husband finds his principles undermined by his hunger for ill-gotten imported foods. After throwing out his wife for prostituting herself to buy him expensive French treats,

Sinh ate quickly, no time to chew or swallow. Holding tightly onto the meat, sticky with grease, without thinking about anything, he shoved it continually into his mouth (Nguyen-Marshall, 2008, p. 108).

In Vũ Trọng Phụng's (2006 [1934]) *The Industry of Marrying Europeans*, a tin of French butter repeatedly made an appearance to indicate the characters' improvidence and deviance from Vietnamese traditions. And in Nguyễn Công Hoan's 1938 story "Dead End," champagne was the drink of choice for the story's corrupt Vietnamese official (Ngô Vĩnh Long, 1991, p. 185). Vũ Trọng Phụng's characters were lower class, and Nguyễn Công Hoan's Representative Lai was a country official, but these stories were read by urban middle-class consumers. Seeing their imported tastes criticized as both vulgar and corrupt may have shaken their confidence. By engaging in conspicuous consumption the middle classes wanted to project an image of social success, not debasement, and yet the interpretation of their culinary choices was never completely up to them.

### 3.6 Conclusion

Food studies can thus provide an innovative approach to exploring old issues such as class formation. We can replace a teleological reading, which assumes that the middle class emerged naturally in the colonial cities, with a more nuanced interpretation, highlighting the tensions people faced in their efforts to seem middle class. Hosting a banquet or inviting others to a fine restaurant entailed significant financial costs, for a hoped-for reward in terms of establishing social credentials. The difference between food and other consumer goods is that people had to renew their food choices on a daily basis, at the café, on the street, and within the home. People constantly faced opportunities to express their aspirations, but they could never be sure they would seem as solidly established as they hoped.

Still, even though some observers read negative implications into people's culinary innovations, over a century of French rule the trend was clear. The growth of a Vietnamese middle class in the thriving colonial cities went hand in hand with an ever expanding market for imported foods and beverages. Despite the social criticism, more and more urban Vietnamese seized their opportunities to try new foods, be seen at new restaurants, and prepare new dishes at home.

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# Chapter 4

## The Associational Life of the Vietnamese Middle Class in Saigon (1950s–1970s)

Van Nguyen-Marshall

Throughout the Vietnam War (ca. 1960s–1975), Saigon was insulated from much of the fighting. Nonetheless, this city was deeply affected by the war. In this period Saigon experienced increased urbanization and modernization; the influx of war refugees and American military and civilian personnel brought dramatic changes to the capital city and its inhabitants, affecting all aspects of life. Connected to these transformations was the need for the articulation of a new socio-political identity, one that was based on the newly established Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). This endeavour was undertaken mainly by educated and moderately wealthy Vietnamese who founded and participated in voluntary associations. This chapter examines the role that these middle-class Vietnamese played in promoting voluntary organizations, including recreational clubs, charities, and war-relief associations. Voluntary activities played a critical role in enlarging the associational life of Saigon as well as in shaping the cultural and social identity of the South Vietnamese middle class. This chapter also explores the impact that the South Vietnamese government and American aid agencies had on voluntary associations and consequently, their influence on the South Vietnamese middle-class identity.

With regard to the political entity of South Vietnam, there are historians in the West who argue that the Republic of Vietnam was an artificial construct, an invention of the United States (Carter, 2008). While many would agree that without US financial aid South Vietnam would have collapsed, the fact remains that South Vietnam was created and did exist as a state for almost 20 years, albeit not a strong or effective one. People did rally to it; in addition to those supporters already in the South, approximately 810,000 people migrated south to join this newly created polity in 1954 (Hansen, 2008, p. 4). Moreover, for those living in South Vietnam who did not have links with or sympathies for the National Liberation Front (NLF) and/or the communists, the political construct of South Vietnam was very real to them, in both negative and positive terms. On the one hand, the coercive power of the South Vietnamese state was undeniably all too real for all those living in the

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southern half. On the other hand, with the unification of Vietnam becoming less a reality as the war intensified in the 1960s, South Vietnam was, by default, the only territorial and political basis on which non-revolutionary Vietnamese could anchor their imaginary community, to use Benedict Anderson's term (Anderson, 1983).

How the people of South Vietnam imagined their national community is an understudied topic. An even more neglected topic of research is the South Vietnamese middle class and its associational life. In contrast, the literature on the role of voluntary associations and middle-class formation in Euro-American history is rich and plentiful. While the emergence of the middle class in the West, usually dated from the seventeenth to nineteenth century, is far removed from the Vietnamese experience in terms of time, geography, and circumstances, there are some important insights and parallels to be gleaned from this historiography.

For historians of Euro-American history, the definition of the middle class has been a point of contention since this category usually includes people of diverse economic and social positions. While some historians tend to emphasize the economic aspect of class, others have focused more on the cultural and political characteristics of the middle class. Simon Gunn, for example, suggests that culture "was of central importance to notions of middle-class or bourgeois identity in nineteenth-century Europe. It represented an essential source of unity for propertied groups and a means of distinction from other social classes" (Gunn, 2000, p. 25). Likewise, David Ambaras (1998) maintains that the middle class cannot be defined by economic descriptors alone, without taking into consideration its relationship to other groups in society in a socio-cultural context. Leading historians of the middle class have generally used a number of criteria to define middle classness, including: the middle class's participation in the white-collar, commercial, or professional sectors, the relatively comfortable economic circumstances of this class, its relatively high educational achievements, and its self-conscious cultivation of taste for certain cultural and leisure activities (Sutherland, 1994; Morris, 1983; Gunn, 2000, 2004; Ambaras, 1998). These criteria are also useful for thinking about the middle class in South Vietnam.

Another important insight that emerges in the historiography on the middle class is the importance that urban voluntary associations played in constituting middle-class identity (Daunton, 1996). In his classic study of industrializing British cities, R. J. Morris argues that the emergence of voluntary associations helped to bolster and define the urbanized middle class. Morris shows that to deal with urban and industrial growth, the middle class founded various voluntary societies which in turn "enabled the middle classes to move towards the creation of a consciousness and cohesion amongst themselves and become a middle class" (Morris, 1983, p. 110). Morris further suggests that voluntary societies enabled the urban middle class to assert its cultural and moral authority in the towns and to take control of some aspects of urban governance, where the state had failed (Morris, 1983, p. 110).

Similarly, David Sutherland has convincingly argued that rapid urbanization and economic instability of nineteenth-century Halifax, a city on Canada's east coast, spurred the growth of voluntary associations which subsequently helped forge "the disparate 'middling' elements of the community into something which, in terms of



cohesion and consciousness, could be termed a ‘middle class’” (Sutherland, 1994, p. 237). Sutherland also suggests that the idealism behind many of the voluntary societies reveals the urban middle class’s desire to achieve modernity and to demonstrate to other urban centres their progressive and modern status (Sutherland, 1994, p. 240).

David Ambaras proposes a comparable explanation for the emergence of a new urbanized middle class in Meiji Japan. According to Ambaras, in the late nineteenth century, a new middle class, made up of experts in fields such as social work, education, and medicine, “sought increasingly, and with increasing success, to shape the values and policies of the modern Japanese nation-state” (Ambaras, 1998, p. 1). Again, just as in the cases of British industrializing towns and urbanizing Halifax, rapid urbanization and industrialization in the late Meiji period created socio-economic problems to which the new Japanese middle class devoted time to solve. Involvement in these voluntary social-aid activities contributed to the construction of a middle-class identity: “By focusing their attention on the lower classes as ‘another society,’ members of the new middle class could construct an antithetical body of practices against which to establish their own ‘normality’ and ‘superiority’” (Ambaras, 1998, p. 9).

Turning to the situation of the South Vietnamese middle class in the 1950s–1970s, one finds a similar set of circumstances and development. The establishment of the Republic of Vietnam following the division of the country meant that Vietnamese living south of the seventeenth parallel had to deal with not only a new governing structure, but a new political entity to which they were supposed to owe loyalty. By the early 1960s the civil war and the ensuing US intervention wrought deep changes on South Vietnam. The middling sectors of South Vietnam, therefore, had to reformulate their identity and reposition themselves in order to cope with the new socio-political situation (Bourdieu, 1984). As with the historical experiences in the West and in Japan, voluntary associations in South Vietnam played an important role in the formation of middle classness. The socio-economic hardship caused by the war made voluntary associations, such as mutual-aid societies and social-relief organizations, a dire necessity. The leadership of these organizations included those of the elite, who tended to act as honorary presidents, but increasingly and more importantly included those of the commercial and professional class with social and cultural status. Moreover, paralleling the Western and Japanese cases, the demonstration of modernity, authority, and social cohesion were crucial elements of middle-class voluntary activities and in the articulation of middle-class identity in South Vietnam.

## 4.1 Social and Political Changes in Saigon

South Vietnam’s capital city was characterized by dynamism and diversity. Its long history as a commercial center and hub of intercultural interactions had produced a vibrant society and the most populous city in South Vietnam. In 1965, Saigon’s

population was approximately three million (Jamieson, 1995, p. 293). One aspect of Saigon's diversity was its ethnic make up. According to census data of 1970, one-quarter of Saigon's population was of Chinese ancestry (Saigon-Cholon Census, 1970, p. 3). The Chinese ethnic population played a critical role in influencing the history of Saigon and more generally of South Vietnam.

Not surprisingly the war brought a great deal of changes to Saigon. First there was an increase in population, much of which came from migration. One conservative estimate showed that from 1958 to 1967 the population of Saigon increased by 42 percent (Saigon-Cholon Census, 1970, p. 1). Another source states that the population of Saigon quadrupled in size from 1955 to 1969 (Jamieson, 1995, p. 292). The majority of the migration occurred in 1954 after the division of Vietnam, bringing approximately 810,000 people to South Vietnam (Hansen, 2008, p. 4). Of this number, an estimated 90,000 were from the professional and business class (Hess, 1977, p. 90). The migration of 1954, therefore, enlarged the middle class of South Vietnam significantly.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the war continued to produce a considerable number of refugees. In 1966 a US Congressional investigation estimated that there were about 1.6 million refugees in South Vietnam (Carter, 2008, p. 208). In 1970 the South Vietnamese government estimated that one-fifth of the population in South Vietnam had at one time or another been a refugee (Hess, 1977, p. 89). Many of those displaced by the fighting fled to Saigon and certainly their presence changed the social make up of the city. The mass migration to Saigon presented many infrastructural and socio-economic challenges. One of the hardest hit was District Eight. Already a chronically poor area, this district had to accommodate another 300,000 migrants in 1964–1965 alone. The lack of housing and sanitation made life precarious. Moreover, according to a Vietnamese House of Representatives deputy, District Eight was “the garbage dump for all of Saigon and it was not uncommon for people to build make-shift houses in between 8 and 10 foot high piles of refuse” (Goodman, 1973, p. 168). District Eight was one of many humanitarian crises which concerned Vietnamese voluntary associations.

Saigon not only witnessed the influx of refugees, but also American military and civilian personnel. From 1965 to 1973 millions of American soldiers were deployed to South Vietnam, in addition to the tens of thousands of US military advisors, foreign journalists, and foreign development workers who served there. While combat troops were stationed throughout South Vietnam, Saigon attracted many on leave and acted as a convenient home base for journalists and development workers. The American presence in South Vietnam was deeply disruptive in economic, social, and political terms. One-quarter of the total amount of aid the US provided worldwide was funneled into Vietnam and subsequently, approximately 80 percent of South Vietnam's budget came from US aid (Bradley, 2009, pp. 120–121). This enormous amount of US aid created a distorted and superficial economy that led to corruption and inflation. American military and civilian personnel living in Saigon and other urban areas also encouraged the growth of a lucrative service industry that included bars, brothels, and domestic services. These changes brought with them a whole set of social problems, some tainted with racism (Tran Nu-Anh, 2006).

Not surprisingly, the war transformed the workforce in Saigon substantially. As more men were recruited for the frontline, more women took paid work outside the home. From 1967 to 1969 the number of men entering the military increased by 52 percent (Saigon-Cholon Census, 1970, p. 7). By 1969 one in six men served in the Army of South Vietnam (Bradley, 2009, p. 119). The number of people serving in the armed forces in Saigon increased by 250 percent from 1957 to 1967 and the number of Saigoneses employed by the government in the civil service doubled in that time. For Saigon, the largest employer was the central government which provided 25 percent of all jobs in the city (Saigon-Cholon Census, 1970, p. 10). Second to the central government was the retail and wholesale sector, which provided about 20 percent of the work. These changes expanded the employment sectors conventionally associated with the middle class such as the civil service, the commissioned military service, and the commercial sector.

The 1960s–1970s saw an expansion of the transportation and communication infrastructure. Highways were built, connecting major cities and towns in South Vietnam. Between 1960 and 1970 the number of radios in South Vietnam increased by nearly 1800 percent; moreover, by 1970 television sets had become more widely available (Jamieson, 1995, p. 293). Alongside these rapid changes, there was also remarkable growth in literacy and education. By 1970 84 percent of the residents of Saigon, 10 years and older, were able to read (Saigon-Cholon Census, 1970, p. 12). The increase in literacy, which Neil Jamieson describes as spectacular, was related to the rise in the number of students attending schools in all of Vietnam; for South Vietnam, in particular, the number of students attending school quadrupled from 1955 to 1969 (Jamieson, 1995, p. 292).

This high rate of literacy helped to support a thriving print industry which had been growing since the 1920s (Marr, 1984, p. 164). In addition to magazines and journals, there were 27 daily newspapers in South Vietnam with a circulation of about 400,000 in 1968 (*Politics in South Vietnam*, 1968).<sup>1</sup> Newspapers, magazines, and literature published during the war exhibited a multiplicity of views and discussed a variety of issues including politics (Jamieson, 1995, pp. 290–294).

Some voluntary associations contributed to this flourishing print media by publishing their own journals and bulletins. For example, the Association for Writers and Artists of the Army (Hội văn-nghệ-sĩ quân-đội) published its own literary journal, *Khởi Hành* (Archival document 1). Similarly, the General Association for Confucius Studies (Tổng hội Khổng học) founded in 1957 in Saigon, published the journal, *Minh Tâm*, which promoted the revitalization of Confucianism as a relevant philosophy for national salvation. The Catholic Student Federation published *Thông Cảm* in the early 1960s and later on *Hiện Diện* in the 1970s. While these were Catholic journals, the editors and writers aspired to speak for youth and students in general. Their articles dealt with socio-political issues, with special attention to the role youth should play in the war and in the nation-building process. These and other publications of voluntary associations not only publicized and promoted

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<sup>1</sup> According to Neil Jamieson (1995, p. 291), circulation for Vietnamese language papers was much higher: 700,000.

the activities and ideas of their societies, but also created a sense of identity and cohesion among the middle class of South Vietnam.

## 4.2 Voluntary Associations

Considering the enormous disruption and violence the war brought to South Vietnam and particularly Saigon, there was great need for social relief. While the South Vietnamese government in conjunction with foreign governments and relief agencies provided humanitarian aid, Vietnamese themselves were also active in forming voluntary organizations to provide material, moral and spiritual support to each other and to victims of war.

In the 1950s–1970s a variety of voluntary associations were active in Saigon. These associations ranged from mutual-aid organizations to recreational, philanthropic, and religious associations. Some of these organizations had their origins in the French colonial period while others were established after 1954. The Benevolent Society for Vietnamese People, Students, and Orphans (*Hội phước thiện Việt Nam đồng bào học sinh và con cô*) was founded in 1930 (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, c.1975). Another organization, The Society for Nurturing Children (*Hội dục anh*), was created in 1931 by a group of elite women. By 1932 the Dục Anh society had established two charity daycare centres and was highly active in organizing fund-raising events for these daycare centres and for other causes (Nguyen-Marshall 2008, pp. 88–89). In addition, Buddhist and Christian groups were involved in charitable work during the French colonial period.

By 1956 mutual-aid organizations and friendly societies (i.e. those based on similar interests) were numerous. According to the South Vietnamese government, there were 148 mutual-aid and friendly societies operating in South Vietnam in 1956, of which 96 were based in Saigon (which also included the suburb of Cholon). At the same time, there were 94 religious organizations, 18 cultural societies, and 17 philanthropic organizations (Archival Document 2).

Mutual-aid societies have strong roots in Vietnamese history. Mutual-aid organizations predated French colonial conquest and continued to function throughout the colonial period. The vast majority of mutual-aid associations was based in the villages and reflected the needs of an agricultural society. For the most part, the mutual-aid societies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Vietnam ranged from labour-exchange organizations to ceremony-assistance and lending societies (Nguyen-Marshall, 2007). While rural mutual-aid societies continued to exist in the mid-twentieth century, as South Vietnam became more urbanized, mutual-aid societies also became an important aspect of life for city dwellers. In the late 1960s the government continued to receive applications to form new mutual-aid societies. In some ways, the mutual-aid societies that existed during the war years did not appear drastically different than those of the 1920s and 1930s. Significantly, the declared goals of these societies remained similar, namely to provide aid to members and to foster solidarity. However, there were also some marked differences that reflected the urban setting in which more Vietnamese were finding themselves.

Illustrative of the new associational needs that arose in the cities during the war was the proliferation of mutual-aid societies based on one's place of origin. Examples of this type of associations include the mutual-aid society for people from Quảng Trị province (located immediately south of the Demilitarized Zone), the society for the noteworthy people of Ninh Bình province in North Vietnam, and society for the retired officials from Vĩnh Long in South Vietnam. The mass Northern migration in 1954 also led to the founding of the friendly society for Northerners (Hội ái hữu Kinh Bắc) which aspired to develop and maintain solidarity among Northern Catholic migrants (Archival Document 3). While same-place associations were not a new form of organization, increased mobility and dislocation because of the war made these associations more important to people who found themselves resettling in large cities such as Saigon.

Mutual-aid societies based on kinship, particularly on the same family name, were another important type. For example, there was the mutual-aid association for the surname Vương from Thái Nguyên province and the association for the Trần family (Archival Documents 4 and 5). In their applications, many kinship societies stated that their main purposes were to foster mutual aid and to maintain solidarity through social and religious celebrations; some also aimed to build private cemeteries for their members.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, many of these associations were composed of Vietnamese of Chinese ancestry. Such was the case for the founding members of the mutual-aid associations of the surnames Hứa, Ngô, Tất, and Trần. Their ethnicity was noted by officials of the Ministry of the Interior, who vetted these applications. While the government did not reject their applications because of the founders' ethnicity, an official in the President's Office, Mai Quốc Đống, noted that these ethnic Chinese societies were attempts at recreating traditional overseas Chinese congregations. Over a decade earlier, in 1956, in an attempt to force assimilation on the ethnic Chinese population of South Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diệm's government disbanded the congregations which had mutual-aid and administrative functions and were based on place of origin in China. While Đống was aware that the ethnic Chinese were trying to re-establish these congregations, he also admitted that he had no valid reasons to refuse their applications (Archival Document 4).

South Vietnamese were also forming mutual-aid societies based on members' alma mater. As educational opportunities expanded in the mid-twentieth century, there were more graduates who sought to maintain connections with their classmates and teachers. A range of alumni associations existed based on one's school or specialization; for example, the graduates who majored in Japanese founded their own society. There were also alumni associations for graduates from the same native province. The alumni association for the Võ Bị National Military Academy was particularly strong with each graduating class organizing its own activities (Archival Document 4). The Võ Bị alumni association continued to be active into the 1970s with regular publications of its newsletter and organized social events

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<sup>2</sup> This was the case of the Hội tương tế họ Hứa.

such as banquets and reunions (Archival Document 6). In fact, some of these alma mater societies, such as the Võ Bị military academy, are still active overseas.

Not all mutual-aid societies received permission to operate, however. The graduates of Vạn Hạnh (Buddhist) University attempted to form a society in 1969, but the Ministry of the Interior put a hold on their application. The government believed that Vạn Hạnh University was associated with the Unified Buddhist Church (Giáo hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam thống nhất), a politically active coalition of Buddhist groups, formed in 1963 in order to protest the war (Archival Document 4). Based on this reasoning, officials with the Ministry of the Interior also refused the application of the parents association of the Bồ Đề private school of Đà Nẵng (Archival Document 3). As will be discussed later, the state had a significant role in influencing the type and form of voluntary associations that emerged.

Voluntary associations based on professions saw an increase in number, reflecting Saigon's growth in urbanization and modernization. For example, the society for the employees of the Saigon Electric Company and the Society for Public Health and Sanitation Specialists both received permission to establish in 1969 (Archival Documents 3 and 4). Also formed was the Business Administration Society, which had the stated goals of facilitating the exchange of ideas and the dissemination of modern administrative methodology. In addition, a number of associations for small businesses and merchants were founded (Hội tiêu thị tương tế and hội tập thiện) (Archival Document 3). While most of these professional societies appeared apolitical, some such as the Association of Newspaper Owners, found itself fighting the government's stringent censorship law. In April 1969 the Association was protesting the government's censorship of the newspaper *Tự Do* (Archival Document 1).

In addition to friendly and mutual-aid societies, there were many voluntary associations which were established mainly for benevolent purposes. Some were religious based while others were secular. These organizations often either focused on one particular social issue or provided aid to a wide range of cases. One such association was the Society to Help Poor Diligent Students (Hội giúp học trò nghèo hiếu học). One of the founding members was a professor and a politician from Gia Định while the other founder was a Buddhist monk. Another charitable society with a much broader goal was the One Dollar Helps the Poor Society (Một đồng giúp người nghèo khổ). Founded by a group of deputies from the House of Representatives, this society had a vague and ambitious mandate to help the poor and to help improve society in general (Archival Document 3).

The Society of Graduates of Lasan (missionary) School was also involved in rather large social projects. In 1971 this society was building a community centre in Saigon's District Five (Thủ Đức). The society's plan was to construct a five-story building with 45 rooms at an estimated cost of almost 610,000 US dollars.<sup>3</sup> The society intended to use this centre to provide medical attention, run a daycare, and host educational seminars, socials, and sports events (Archival Document 6). While

<sup>3</sup> The amount was expressed as 120 million Vietnamese Đồng; I used the exchange rate of 196.8 as provided by Dacy (1986), p. 181, Table 9.1.

the archival document does not mention the Society's source of funding, it is likely that the Society was receiving foreign aid for this project.

Another society with an ambitious agenda was the Friendly Society of Graduates of National Culture Studies of Huế (Hội ái hữu cựu học sinh, quốc học Huế). This society was established in 1969 and quickly established seven branch associations in other cities (Saigon, Đà Nẵng, Đà Lạt, Nha Trang, Qui Nhơn, Huế and Quảng Trị) and was in the process of establishing three more branches in Hội An, Tuy Hoà, and Phan Rang. In 1970 the society published two issues of its journal on national culture with plans to publish two more issues in 1971. The society was also involved in supporting underprivileged university students from the Central Region. The society wished to build a residence in Saigon in an attempt to provide more assistance to these poor students. The government provided \$US 1,000 to help support the society's activities; however, the government considered its plan to build a student residence overly ambitious (Archival Document 6).

### 4.3 The Vietnamese Middle Class, the State, and Nation-Building

From the above brief survey of a number of voluntary societies, what is striking, but not surprising, is that the leaders and founders of these societies were mostly of the educated and/or professional class. Not unlike the situations found in nineteenth-century European and North American cities, where the middle class played a leading role in voluntary associations (Morris, 1983; Sutherland, 1994), in Vietnam founding members for many associations were lawyers, doctors, professors, entrepreneurs, and officials. A survey of George McT. Kahin's unpublished "Biographies of prominent Vietnamese" shows that many highly placed Vietnamese tended to hold leading roles in voluntary associations (Kahin [n.d.]). Some examples from Kahin's biography include the Rector of the Pasteur Institute, Nguyễn Văn Ái, who was the national president of the Vietnam Catholic Action Organization, president of Pax Romana of Vietnam, and vice president of Salve (an organization which helped people with leprosy). The biography also included Physician Huỳnh Ngọc Anh, who was an elected member in the House of Representatives. His voluntary activities included leadership positions in various organizations, such as managing board member for the Vietnam Red Cross and vice president for the Vietnam Pharmacists Union. Businesswoman Trần Kim Thoa, who was also a deputy in the House of Representatives, was involved in numerous associations. She was a member of the Saigon Chamber of Commerce, the president of the Vĩnh Hòa Long Mutual-aid society, executive member of several parents associations, and also the comptroller of the Society for Nurturing Children (Hội dục anh). Another prominent figure was Saigon University Professor Lê Thành Trị, who was the secretary general of the Vietnam Council for Asian Studies, the president and founder of the Duy Linh Cultural Association, a member of the Pax Romana, and an executive member of the Vietnamese Association of University Staff. Another academic in the biography was Trần Văn Quế, an assistant professor of Vietnamese and Indian history at Saigon



University, who was also a member of the Biên Hòa Mutual Aid Association, the Association for the Development of the Body and Mind, and Chairman of the Committee for Propagation of Caodaist Doctrine. While Kahin's biography provides anecdotal information about a select group of people, the glimpse it affords confirms that professional and influential Vietnamese were actively involved in voluntary associations.

The people who played leading roles could be categorized as upper-middle to middle class; if not in economic terms, in educational and cultural terms they were between the upper elites of society and the working class. Interestingly, the term "middle class" (giai cấp trung gian or giai cấp tiểu tư sản) was not used in the documents that I examined. Those involved in these associations refer to themselves generally as Vietnamese people or when referring to those who were involved in charitable organizations as "benevolent people" (người hảo tâm). This term harks back to the old Confucian order when the elite literati class was obliged to care for those less fortunate. In pre-colonial Vietnam, and more specifically, in the nineteenth century, elite benevolent activities were considered not only as moral or ethical duties, but also as social and political obligations, which were reinforced by state discourses and practices. During the French colonial period, Western influence and models provided a boost to charitable and voluntary associations, which had become imbued with an aura of modernity. At least among the urban literate Vietnamese, voluntary associations and charity work came to be viewed as duties of modern citizenship in a modern nation-state (Nguyen-Marshall, 2008). In both the pre-colonial and colonial periods, economic and political disorder and the state's parsimony or lack of resources made private charity and voluntary organizations critical in providing some basic aid in times of need.

In the mid-twentieth century, in the midst of war, Vietnamese society was again in dire need of the social networks and welfare which voluntary societies could organize and provide. As with the French period, during the Vietnam War, Western influence endowed charity and voluntary activities with high status. In addition to US governmental aid agencies (such as USAID), many US and international NGOs were active in Vietnam during the war years. From 1954 and well into the 1960s, American NGOs played an important role in Vietnam. Delia Pergande argues that before 1961 American private voluntary organizations, such as CARE, were influential in shaping US policies toward Vietnam (Pergande, 2002). Many of these NGOs shared the US government's hostility toward communism and wanted to see South Vietnam survive as a non-communist country. Some NGOs therefore cooperated and collaborated with the US government and military and in return, the US government helped to facilitate and even fund the activities of these organizations. By 1970, there were over 50 foreign registered private aid organizations operating and maintaining a staff in South Vietnam (Vietnam Feature Service, 1970). The budgets of these organizations were substantial. In 1970 the total budgets of thirty-two organizations surveyed was approximately \$US 12.6 million with \$US 11.6 million budgeted for 1971 (American Council of Voluntary Agencies, 1971). In addition to this amount, there was the cost of material aid; in 1970 the material aid of only five organizations



totaled \$US 14.4 million.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, there were thirty-one organizations that were not located in Vietnam, but provided funding, material and support for other US and Vietnamese groups. In short, the amount of aid that was funneled into Vietnam via private voluntary organizations was extraordinarily large. Prominent foreign agencies in Vietnam included the Catholic Relief Services, the Asia Foundation, the Christian Children's Fund, UNICEF, and Caritas International (a Catholic aid organization). These organizations not only directed their own aid projects but also provided aid in cash or kind to various Vietnamese charitable organizations and groups.

Vietnamese charities could attract international aid if they were lucky and/or skilful. Not surprisingly those charities or associations whose leadership appeared Westernized and possessed Western-language skills were more likely to receive foreign funding. In comparing two Catholic orphanages, Lê Thị Sâm noted that the educated nuns of the St. Vincent Daughters of Charity Order (Bác ái Vinh Sơn) were more successful at getting external funding than the less educated sisters of the Lovers of the Holy Cross Order (Mến thánh giá) (Lê, 1970, pp. 20, 29–30). The enormous amount of foreign aid available to voluntary associations that pursued charitable and relief work and the lack of financial resources in Vietnam, meant that foreigners, particularly Americans, had a large role in shaping the forms and types of relief organizations. Those associations that attracted support and aid from international organizations and the South Vietnamese government were ones that exhibited many Western characteristics, were politically moderate if not conservative, and were composed of members of the middle to upper-class, people with education and time to contribute to these voluntary endeavours.

The South Vietnamese government also played a role in influencing the type of voluntary associations that was established. As indicated above, societies were required to apply for permission to form and operate. The government therefore determined whether or not a voluntary association was politically and socially acceptable. Applications were vetted by the Ministry of the Interior and police checks were conducted on founding members. In applications where the applicants were respected members of society, police checks were waived. For example, the mutual-aid society for people from Quảng Trị was spared a security check because the founding members were considered respectable people of good standing (Archival Document 3). In the government's assessment reports of these applications, the state's view regarding the *raison d'être* of voluntary societies becomes clear. The South Vietnamese government strongly encouraged the establishment of societies that they felt would contribute to South Vietnam's self-image as a modern, non-communist, and independent country. On the application of the association for university history and geography professors, a government official noted on the

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<sup>4</sup> This figure included food donation from the US government. The five organizations were: Catholic Relief Services, American National Red Cross, the Seventh-Day Adventist Welfare Service, World Relief Commission of the National Association of Evangelicals, and World Vision Relief Organization. (American Council of Voluntary Agencies, 1971, p. 3).

margin that more professional associations should be encouraged, since it was good for Vietnam's intellectual life, and also because in countries such as the US, there were many organizations of this sort (Archival Document 4). In other words, having professional voluntary associations would demonstrate Vietnam's progress toward development and modernity vis-à-vis the West.

It is also apparent that the state saw the importance of voluntary associations in its larger process of nation building. Evident in the archival documents is an assumption that associations were for Vietnamese nationals and that their social activities should somehow contribute to the common good of the nation state. This assumption was exhibited in the government's assessment of the mutual-aid societies of Vietnamese-Chinese merchants from Triều Châu and the society for those who originated from Mai-Huyện sub-prefecture of China. In assessing the applications of these two voluntary associations, Mai Quốc Đống found it difficult to allow a group of Vietnamese citizens to form an organization that explicitly associated itself with another country. Moreover, Đống contended that these organizations with their explicit identification with a foreign place of origin resembled too much the old overseas Chinese congregations (Archival Document 3). As I have mentioned earlier, the government had permitted Vietnamese-Chinese organizations to form, despite the officials' recognition that they were really a re-creation of ethnic Chinese congregations. However, these two latter organizations with their open association with China were not acceptable because they could not claim to be Vietnamese. Therefore, from the state's perspective, voluntary associations were valid only if they could demonstrate some value to society and nation. Moreover, the government's rejection of the applications of the Vạn Hạnh university alumni association and the Bồ Đề parents association (mentioned earlier), demonstrates that only those societies with similar political views and commitments as the South Vietnamese government would be allowed to participate in the public sphere. As Vạn Hạnh University and the Bồ Đề School were associated with the United Buddhist Church, which advocated peace and neutralism, their loyalty and therefore their value to nation-building was suspect, from the state's point of view.

While the South Vietnamese government was discriminatory about the type of voluntary associations that received permission to operate, government officials generally encouraged the activities of philanthropic organizations, particularly those that focused on helping orphans and refugees. It is not surprising that the government would welcome the support that philanthropic and relief organizations provided, for these activities augmented the state's own efforts. More importantly, however, is the political symbolism that these societies represented. The non-revolutionary, middle-class associations, particularly ones that carried out social work, provided legitimacy for the government's anti-communist stance and war policy.

The political symbolism of refugee relief was powerful. The best example was of course the 1954 migration, which was used to demonstrate the necessity of a non-communist South Vietnam's existence. Aid to refugees therefore received significant attention from the South Vietnamese government, the US, and voluntary groups. When the war intensified from the mid-1960s onward, the refugee

problem within South Vietnam increased. While many refugees had been forced to flee their villages because of South Vietnamese and US military activities, such as the creation of free-fire zones or counterinsurgency operations, displaced peasants were often portrayed as victims of communists. With foreign aid, South Vietnam's Ministry of Social Affairs built and maintained a number of refugee camps and orphanages. Encouraged by foreign aid and governmental support, voluntary associations, including youth and religious groups, frequently provided aid at various refugee camps. For example, in 1965 a number of youth groups helped build houses for refugee camps, construct roads and bridges, and provide medical examinations (Nguyễn Trần Quý, 1969, p. 13).

Another critical humanitarian issue which drew much attention from the South Vietnamese state was the growing population of orphaned children. Vietnamese voluntary associations had been highly involved in establishing and running orphanages and daycare centres during the French colonial period. In the 1950s, the South Vietnamese government became involved directly by building public orphanages. The first state orphanage was built in Thủ Đức, which gave priority to children of fallen soldiers (Archival Document 7). However, private charity daycare centres and orphanages still outnumbered state-run ones. By 1972 there were 135 privately-managed charity daycare centres that were officially recognized by the state and 16 public centres (Child Welfare Statistics 1972). These centres offered care to about 17,000 children of poor working-class families. The Ministry of Social Affairs subsidized the private daycare centres at about one US dollar (200 VND) a month for each child.

A similar state-private arrangement also existed with the operating of orphanages. Out of the 124 orphanages operating in 1972, 120 were private (Minh Đức, 1972, p. 20).<sup>5</sup> Private orphanages were established by both religious and secular charity groups such as the Women's Goodwill Society (Hội phụ nữ thiện chí), the Vietnamese Women's Association (Hội phụ nữ Việt Nam), and the Society to Protect Children (Hội bảo trợ nhi đồng) (Đào, 1973, p. 10). The state, however, provided subsidies and also set health and sanitation standards for these institutions.

To further support these endeavours, the state founded the National School of Social Work to provide professionally trained experts who would direct and administer charitable institutions and social programs. Vietnam's first school of social work was founded by Caritas International and the French Red Cross in 1947. The St. Vincent Daughters of Charity Order was given the task of managing and supervising this school, which trained only female social workers in its three-year program (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2002, p. 85, 2003, p. 27). Social work expanded in 1957 when Caritas graduates established the Vietnam Army School of Social Work. This new institution offered a two-year training program for social workers who

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<sup>5</sup> According to Đào Thị Kim Dung (1973), in 1973 there were 203 private and 3 public orphanages which cared for about 26,000 children in total. Of this number of orphanages, twelve were located in Saigon and all of them private. The state ran only three orphanages, those of Bảo Anh (Huế), Từ Tâm (Pleiku), and Thủ Đức (pp. 5 and 18).

would work for the military, providing family and child-welfare assistance. Shortly thereafter the Buddhist Youth School for Social Services was established to train rural development workers. In 1968 the Vietnamese Ministry of Social Affairs, with the support of the UNDP, UNICEF and other UN agencies, established the National School of Social Work. Meanwhile, social work was already introduced at some universities such as Đà Lạt University and Vạn Hạnh University (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2002, p. 86).

Graduates of the various social work schools were sent to set up community centres and to establish social programs to help the poor throughout Vietnam. In Saigon, social centres were built to offer literacy classes, training programs, and other programs to help youth in need (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2003). The social workers formed their own professional association to propagate and share new ideas about social development (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2003, p. 32). While there were some social workers who became highly critical of the conservative nature of social work, and a few eventually joined the revolutionaries, many social workers were committed to bringing about what they considered modernizing reforms to South Vietnam (Nguyễn Thị Oanh, 2003, p. 21).

Therefore, by the 1960s some of the social-relief activities were undertaken by Vietnamese who had been professionally trained as social workers. No longer was it acceptable to staff orphanages with ordinary women; the prevailing belief had become that professionally-trained social workers were needed. The professionalization of social and charity work elevated further the work that had been the occupation of voluntary societies. Moreover, the emergence of a new cohort of professionals who were experts at solving social problems reinforced the modern self-image of the middle-class participants and their organizations.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

The newly created professional class of social workers could be compared to the Meiji experts who, because of their education and knowledge, could claim moral authority over the working class and could endeavour to shape society. The social workers were not the only ones who were endeavoring to reform society. As this chapter has shown, there were many middle-class Vietnamese who, through their involvement in voluntary associations, tried to improve or effect changes. Like the aforementioned historical examples from Western countries during its industrializing and modernizing periods (Morris, 1983; Sutherland, 1994), the social and economic disruptions of the mid-twentieth century in Vietnam created compelling reasons for people to join voluntary associations of various forms. Some were self-help groups or friendly societies which provided support for their members. Other groups were founded for benevolent reasons—to provide assistance to others less fortunate or to those afflicted by the war. Participants in these voluntary associations were mainly middle-class Vietnamese with education and economic means. Their education and training as well as their connection to the state and to powerful foreign governments and agencies contributed to their authority and prestige.

While assessing the actual accomplishments or contributions of these voluntary associations is beyond the scope of this chapter, one can safely conclude that this emerging associational life had a deep impact on South Vietnamese society. The voluntary associations helped to constitute a middle class that emerged in the newly created political entity of South Vietnam. Participation in the voluntary associations helped to define and articulate a new South Vietnamese national identity, one which used the politically conservative, anti-communist middle class as the ideal.

The South Vietnamese government and the US played a critical role in influencing the forms and functions of these voluntary associations, by providing legitimacy, financial aid, and moral support to select organizations. The establishment of social work schools enhanced further the work with which voluntary societies had been engaged. Moreover, the creation of professional social workers helped to strengthen the middle class's ability to claim that they were improving the lives of the poor and labouring class through education and reforms. Consequently, the enhanced status of middle-class voluntary activities allowed the middle class a greater say in shaping society.

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**Part II**  
**Contemporary Perspectives**

# Chapter 5

## Middle Class Landscapes in a Transforming City: Hanoi in the 21st Century

Lisa B. Welch Drummond

### 5.1 Introduction

Hanoi at the end of 21st century's first decade presents an urban landscape that is often described primarily as “chaotic”. Chaos is certainly the impression left by the traffic—which almost all foreign visitors comment upon, as do most Hanoians, too—and the streetscapes which juxtapose buildings of different decades and centuries, architectural styles, functions, and states of repair, side-by-side. Chaotic also seems to describe the markets, the sidewalks, the jumble of advertising signage, and the noise of everyday life in the city.

This city, which in 2010 celebrated its millennial anniversary, seems, upon closer inspection, to sit uneasily between old and new. The weight of those thousand years—and particularly the last one hundred or so—certainly hangs heavy over the built environment and the social and political discourse on the city. But the new is also certainly making its mark, scoring deep inroads into the built environment and its historical character. Observation of satellite images of the city (e.g. from Google Maps) reveals not only the clear enduring outline of the citadel, home of the pre-colonial emperors, but the small irregular streets of the pre-colonial Thirty-Six Streets, and the grid-patterned boulevards of the European-built colonial quarters to the south. But following the dike road out past West Lake on these maps also reveals the landscape alterations of a much more recent past—the densely villa-infested shores of West Lake and the river bank, then, almost at the Thăng Long bridge, the high-rise towers and orderly townhouses of Ciputra, or Nam Thăng Long, the private gated community (“international city” according to its builder) with its massive gate (modelled on the Brandenburg Gate) onto the airport highway, and, cleverly, its road inwards from the gate in the shape of the Eiffel Tower. Following the map further to the south reveals the transformation of the area around the Daewoo Hotel and zoo, with its wide new roads and new government buildings, and even further

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south, the closely-constructed highrise apartment buildings of the new suburb/new town, Trung Hòa-Nhân Chính, and its new wide roads.

As a consequence of these juxtapositions of old and very new, the city is marked by a deep degree of uncertainty. This uncertainty is present in questions of preservation and heritage and planning: how to value the old, what to acknowledge as heritage, how to distinguish what warrants preservation, how to protect and preserve in a context of dense population and intense pressure on space, how to weigh competing claims and needs? This uncertainty is also present in the ways in which people live in this urban environment. When I started making notes for this chapter, I tried to think about how to describe contemporary urban lifestyles, based on my observations, reading of the media, and conversations in Hanoi. The descriptors which I ended up with were: precarious, experimental, testing, grasping, aspirational, uneasy, consumerist, uncomfortable.

Part of this sense of tentativeness around new urban lifestyles likely derives directly from the ambiguous relationship between a socialist government and an urban middle class (see Introduction for a more extended discussion of this issue). The tension inherent in such a co-existence is evident in the lack of any discussion of middle class—the virtual recoiling from use of the term—in Vietnamese academic literature. The notion of a presence of an urban middle class has been so successfully ignored through a very smooth normalization or naturalization of contemporary urban life itself as “middle class”, the middle class, in other words, as Vietnam’s “urban normal”. This has been ably accomplished through the popular media (cf Drummond 2003, 2004). Despite the silence around or invisibility of this term, I would argue that where we can see the presence of a middle class and those who aspire to it clearly is in their collective impact on the urban landscape.

## 5.2 Middle-Class Landscapes

Within the growing literature on the middle class or classes in Asia, a number of studies focus on the landscapes of the middle classes or new rich of Southeast Asia. These studies emphasize the impact of the new rich’s consumption practices (and the practices of those who aspire to the lifestyles of the new rich) on the physical fabric of cities such as Jakarta, Manila, Singapore, and Bangkok (Cf. Chua, 2000, 2003; Pinches, 1999; Robison & Goodman, 1996; Sen & Stivens, 1998). Consequently, these studies highlight the shopping malls and supermarkets which both cater to and create the demand for consumption of goods; the appearance of condominiums and gated communities and private cities; golf and other leisure facilities; the increasing use of private transportation, particularly cars; the prevalence of air-conditioned spaces; increasing vacation travel, particularly internationally; and the consumption of global, often regional, cultural goods with their images of middle-class lifestyles and their attendant appliances, fashions, and practices.

An important socio-physical manifestation of these consumption practices is retreat from the street and public space and its relegation to the lower and

“dangerous” social groups/classes, particularly Kusno’s (2000) study of Jakarta under Suharto who actively sought to develop and separate the middle class from the urban masses. The elite have always been separate and lived in a world more connected to the global; the sifting out of the middle class from the huge mass of “non-elite” is relatively new, except in those societies such as Vietnam where the middle class was a specific target of socialist mobilization.

### 5.3 Hanoi’s Middle Class Landscapes

In this chapter, I consider some of the specific physical manifestations of the middle class in Hanoi, some of the ways in which this group is *taking place* in contemporary Vietnam; in other words, the landscape that is visibly developing around a Vietnamese modernity. In this, I focus on a few key sites and phenomena, most of which are significantly interrelated—housing and suburbs, consumption, and leisure, in particular—and then consider more broadly the implications of those for the ways in which middle-class lifestyles are transforming the geography of public and private in Hanoi.

#### 5.3.1 *Housing and Suburbs*

Hanoi, since the mid-1990s, has experienced a significant building boom (with a short interruption over the Asian financial crisis in the late 90s). One of the most striking developments in Hanoi is the proliferation of highrises occurring at the same time as a rapid expansion of the suburbs. These are suburbs not in the Euro-Western “Garden City” style, but suburbs largely full of massive and tightly packed highrise and townhouse developments.

The first suburban, or now semi-suburban, areas to be developed were the areas close to the centre around West Lake—in the early 1990s the dike side of West Lake was a significant distance from the centre, particularly the areas where the flower villages and dog meat restaurants were located, past Tô Ngọc Vân (now a foreigner ghetto); a Party-owned resort of colonial villas was located there, at what was then a restful distance from the city. Quickly, however, once motorbikes were available and land sales were tolerated, land in the area was given over to the building of quite astonishingly monster home-type villas—enormous, imposing, often in grandiose styles covering virtually the entire plot of land and thus sitting cheek-by-jowl with their neighbours. Land here is now some of the most desirable and expensive in Hanoi, prized for the supposedly salubrious breezes off the lake.<sup>1</sup> Gia Lâm on the

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<sup>1</sup> It is less easy to accept the notion of West Lake’s salubriousness when recalling that the large leather tanning factory on the northwestern shore was reputed to be still actively dumping, well into the 1990s, what was said to be untreated effluent directly into the lake. Much is made, however, of the breezes which lakeside houses catch, and the lake itself has shrunk due to stealthy infilling

other side of the Red River also built up quickly; land lots were larger in this area and it was still an agricultural district in the early 90s. As it developed, it gave the impression of an area specializing in Rest Houses (*nhà nghỉ*), which are generally (perhaps exclusively) “short stay” hotels, particularly along the highly developed main road which is the first leg of the highway out to Hải Phòng.<sup>2</sup>

Suburbs are expanding rapidly to accommodate Hanoi’s expanding population. In part this is happening through state-approved and planned projects such as the Trung Hòa-Nhân Chính area with its massive high-rise residential towers and large expanses of townhouses spreading to the southwest of the city. This was formerly all agricultural land. And in part this is happening spontaneously, with individuals buying land (land-use rights) and constructing housing on former agricultural land (both with and without permission to convert farmland to housing).

The movement of urban elites including professionals out into previously “agricultural” areas, making them peri-urban, is argued by Michael Leaf (2002) to be “historically unprecedented” in Hanoi in the way this movement has created “mixing of social groups”. I would argue, however, that this mixing is not so much “unprecedented” as it is a new version of an historically established process—the pre-colonial market town, now the Old Quarter, is made up of guilds with strong ties to nearby artisanal villages with regular movement back and forth between the village and its guild street (see Papin, 1997); the colonial expansion of Hanoi brought many a contiguous village into the city; and the post-Independence influx of party members from the countryside into the city to take up positions in the government bureaucracy on the basis of their “good class backgrounds” led to a strong, and in many “old Hanoi” families still-resented, social mixing. And the recent expansion of the city to take in all of Hà Tây, and parts of Hòa Bình and Vĩnh Phú, is another such episode of such enforced social mixing. So it is perhaps a feature of Hanoi’s history that the city’s development has always involved moments of intense social mixing, in both directions.<sup>3</sup>

In the unplanned expansions—urbanites moving into “rural” areas—new landscapes are created incrementally, ad hoc mixings and transformations of rural and urban. In planned suburbanization, new landscapes are deliberately created and they often seem quite unpromising. These result in suburbs such as Trung Hòa -Nhân Chính with huge blocks of residential towers, wide boulevards to accommodate

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such that previously lakeside properties now find themselves considerably inland, access to those cooling breezes impeded by newly-built villas.

<sup>2</sup> It should perhaps be noted that short-stay hotels are now ubiquitous across the landscape of the city outside the very central core.

<sup>3</sup> The aspect I would see as unique or unprecedented in his case study, which is not noted by Leaf, is that this mixing was taking place on rural terrain rather than in the movement of people from the countryside to the city or the transformation of countryside into city. But that transformation has now also happened with the administrative expansion of the city (most administrative expansions likely follow de facto expansions—in this case, Hà Đông in Hà Tây was already functionally a suburb of Hanoi) and in the recreational property phenomenon and discussed by To Xuan Phuc (Chapter 9, this volume).

vehicle traffic, planned recreational areas which often fail to materialize, few daily amenities made available forcing residents to travel for groceries, meals out, and so on. These are often bleak streetscapes with few trees and little street life. While the secondary roads are now developing more active streetscapes, the main roads are multi-lane highways which discourage pedestrian traffic with a dearth of level crossings. Such street design serves to focus attention inwards on the home, encouraging intense investment in home décor, appliances, and other amenities of private life.

Who is moving into these new residential suburbs? Partly post-Đổi Mới migrants to the city who did not have access to government-distributed housing, partly nuclear family units taking this opportunity to establish a separate residence, partly Vietnamese making an investment in property which they then rent out to migrants, and to foreigners (when asking around recently—of friends, acquaintances, and taxi drivers—for the best Korean restaurant in Hanoi, I was told repeatedly that it must be out in Trung Hòa -Nhân Chính because there are so many Koreans living there now).

An important aspect of this move to suburban highrise and townhouse type accommodation is that it indicates a significant shift from the historical perception of street frontage as a valuable household resource. Apartments are increasingly attractive precisely because they are not located at street level, and thus obviate the need to deal with people on the street, the noise, smells, traffic, and garbage). It is also important to point out that apartment living is an established feature of post-Independence Hanoian life—the socialist state invested heavily in housing provision in the form of huge collective residential blocks (usually three to four storeys, no elevators)—and while initially desirable, in the immediate post-Đổi Mới era such housing was disdained for being off-street (and thus unamenable to commercial endeavours) and run-down. One such collective block (khu tập thể), Nguyễn Công Trứ, for example, had 14 three-storey blocks comprising 1000 flats housing 4000 people (Trinh Duy Luân, 2002, p. 93). Trinh Duy Luân, a Vietnamese sociologist, pointed out in a study of Hanoi's urban morphology (2002), that living in Nguyễn Công Trứ was a dream held by many when it was first built and was considered a real perk for a mid-level bureaucrat. Immediately after Independence, “new” housing was created by expropriating villas and houses belonging to middle class or elite families and repartitioning them to create multi-family dwellings, where each family might get one room and have to negotiate shared access to kitchen and toilet facilities. So the collective housing blocks, new-built, would have been more spacious, truly new, and also symbolic of one's status in the new regime.<sup>4</sup>

Within the urban core of Hanoi, a notable phenomenon occurring is widespread alteration to the housing stock, largely through occupant-renovations. This

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<sup>4</sup> More recently, however, it is clear that the state is much less involved in the provision of housing, current debates around the provision of low-cost urban housing notwithstanding, and that state involvement in housing provision dropped dramatically after Đổi Mới began. The majority of new housing construction is being developed by the private sector: Nguyen Quang and Kammiar, quoting Luân (2000), stated that between 1985 and 1995 approximately 70 per cent of new housing construction was produced by the private sector.

phenomenon was visible from the early 90s as residents, with greater access to building materials, began making often very substantial renovations to their accommodations—from the addition of a balcony on a second-story apartment in a house (the equivalent to adding a room), or installation of separate toilet facilities, or interior walls to create rooms within apartments, to wholesale and usually illegal demolition of houses in order to rebuild. These renovations were frequently of sub-standard construction and very often resulted in a less-than-aesthetically pleasing street frontage. Substantial damage to the historic streetscapes of the Old Quarter became a pressing municipal problem, mostly among foreigners and foreign agencies urging the city to preserve the Old Quarter. It remains an issue, with increasing local resonance as Hanoians begin to ask questions about what should be preserved, who should decide, how it should be done, and how historical heritage demands can be reconciled with present population and standard-of-living demands.

Another striking phenomenon is the construction and scale of new gated communities springing up around Hanoi. The largest so far is Ciputra, already noted above, but there are a number of others. The literature on gated communities globally, of course, sees them as facilitating or embodying a physical retreat from the city and wider society. In this sense we can understand them here as catering to and creating a sense of distance marking off the middle class from the rest of the city. In this sense as well these geographically-marked residential groups may, by virtue of their geographical integrity and coherence, serve to create a stronger sense of common group interests among a nascent middle class finding its way in a political system ideologically opposed to the middle class yet remarkably adaptive, receptive, and facilitative of its recent resurgence.

Gated communities also speak to global ideas about urban and suburban lifestyles, and Ciputra is an Indonesian-financed venture (one of several private cities this Indonesian developer has or is building in Asia, several of which feature the Brandenburg Gate entrance as his personal “motif”). As a development venture, Ciputra, officially named Nam Thăng Long (Thăng Long being the ancient name for Hanoi), may initially have been aimed at expatriate purchasers, but the extent of the eventual settlement clearly indicates that the majority of residents will be Vietnamese members of the elite or upper middle classes. Still, Ciputra is a smaller-scale private city than Phú Mỹ Hưng, the ambitious urban project in Ho Chi Minh City with plans for its own business district, commercial centres, amusement park, golf course, and schools.

Another aspect of housing, which might also be categorized under “consumption and leisure”, is the recent phenomenon of urbanites purchasing rural property, usually within a few hours’ drive of the city, as holiday homes or weekend cottages. While there is much investment in rural property both in the context of reinvestment in home villages (clan or family villages) and in the context of simple investment in productive agricultural land, either as non-resident agricultural landlords or for future development and profit (after the land has been approved for residential or industrial use). A series of articles in *Tiền Phong* newspaper reported on this “land-grab” phenomenon: (e.g. “Đua nhau ôm đất, lập dự án!”, *Tiền Phong*



*Online* 24 March 2009). Apart from these types of rural property investment, there is a growing trend, of which little has been written yet in Vietnam or elsewhere in Asia, of recreational property investment by urbanites, the aforementioned weekend cottages. Is this possibly a new sort of property ownership model in Southeast Asian societies? Among the Hanoi-based rural landowners whom I know personally, a few have bought land in their home villages or regions (or the *quê* [ancestral region] of their families), but many more have bought land on the basis of its convenience to Hanoi and its suitability as a weekend cottage. They are building small (or, often, not so small) houses, and using the land specifically as a recreational property (see [Chapter 9](#), this volume, for a much richer analysis of this phenomenon and its consequences for the affected rural areas).

One of the key developments of the last five or six years which has made this weekend property investment viable is the opening up of car ownership, specifically the availability of relatively cheap cars for private ownership. It is being able to own a car which makes it possible or worthwhile to buy not just a piece of property for investment but recreational purposes. While this is not a change in the physical morphology of Hanoi, it is a change in the social imaginary of urban living, the imagined boundaries of urban life, extending it outwards to envelope the rural as an aspect of urbanity—the possession of its own Other as a retreat from the city and the stresses of urban life.

### ***5.3.2 Consumption and Leisure***

This is an enormous and unwieldy category, but clearly, in a discussion of lifestyles, a particularly important and visible category. I consider leisure within consumption to highlight the fact that leisure is increasingly about consumption, a form of consumption, an activity which requires expenditure and in which the consuming is important, something one needs to be seen doing. That is, the practice of consumption is for the middle class a demonstration activity, as it is for those aspiring to the middle class.

Shopping sites are a key site of middle-class consumption and thus identity negotiation and formation. Shopping is a feature of the Hanoi landscape which has changed dramatically in less than twenty years; in fact, in less than a decade. In the early 90s, shopping was done at one of only a few types of retail outlets. There were state-owned and -operated department stores, fresh produce markets and non-food goods markets (both managed by the state); and household level street-front shops and street traders (private). By the mid-90s there were one or two supposed supermarkets which had a few imported goods, but were not stocked with any regularity and selection was extremely limited. These catered mainly to foreigners—Vietnamese urbanites could purchase some imported goods (alcohol, chocolate, Vache Qui Rit cheese) at market stalls such as those of the Hàng Da market. A marketing study on supermarkets and distribution networks in Vietnam stated that in 1995 there were two supermarkets in Hanoi; in 2004 there were 73

(Maruyama and Le Viet Trung, 2007, p. 25).<sup>5</sup> In that study, the authors' survey indicated supermarkets are not the primary places Hanoians shop for food, but are increasingly being incorporated into shopping habits as eating habits incorporate more packaged foods and imported foods.

Shopping malls have been rather slow to appear, in part because of the greater spatial demands they present and the scarcity of space. In the mid-90s, a key event occurred when the state-owned department store at Hoàn Kiếm Lake was torn down (it had originally been the fashionable French department store Godard's, see Logan, 2000). Eventually, after languishing during the Asian financial crisis, the site was rebuilt as an Asian-style mall-cum-department store, Trảng Tiền Plaza. This was the first shopping mall in Hanoi. There are others now, not on the scale of those in Asian cities such as Seoul or Singapore, and some smaller shopping centres. One thing these sites all have in common is security—they are not easily accessible for those who are not obviously appropriate consumers. So, as they are elsewhere, these are sites which filter the public into acceptable and unacceptable, pseudo-public spaces.

Meanwhile, high-end consumer goods are widely available across the city, as are all kinds of fashion goods, clothing, shoes, accessories, and specialty items such as wedding dresses. Asian fashion models are followed as much as European or North American (Fig. 5.1), and styles seen in Korean television dramas are particularly popular.<sup>6</sup> The emphasis in consumption is on trendiness and novelty, but not necessarily individuality. When something new appears, people want to try it and to be seen to try it. They want, in other words, to show themselves as people who know what proper consumption is. Thus these sites of consumption are particularly important to the display of lifestyle knowledge.

Elizabeth Vann (2006), in her study of the consumption of “mimic goods” in Ho Chi Minh City, argues that they are crucial to middle class consumption. Mimic goods, she explains, are goods which mimic brand-name goods, right down to the appearance of the brand name on the item in question. She argues they are distinct from “fake goods” because in practice buyers are able to distinguish them from the “authentic” brand-name goods. Middle-class consumers, who, she argues, generally invest time and effort on their consumption activities, are knowledgeable about prices and thus can judge whether the price of a good indicates its “authenticity”

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<sup>5</sup> The definition of supermarket here seems to include what might be understood more as convenience stores, but the point is still valid. In that study, the authors' survey indicated that over 60 per cent of shoppers surveyed shopped at supermarkets once to three times per month or less than once a month (in other words, occasionally) and 90 per cent used markets for fresh food shopping (Maruyama & Le Viet Trung, 2007, p. 37).

<sup>6</sup> Korea and Korean pop culture are frequently referenced in shop advertising (banners announcing that the goods on sale are from Korea, for example) and shop names, such as the *Coffee Prince Café* and *Full House Interior Design* (both spotted in 2009), are drawn from the titles of popular Korean dramas. The colloquial name for a bolero jacket in Vietnam is now a “Full-House” after the main female character's penchant for that style; *Full House* was remade as a Vietnamese drama in 2010 (I am grateful to Juliette Ségard for sharing her local knowledge on this point).



**Fig. 5.1** Yu Mi Korea Fashion on Hang Bong Street. Photograph by author

or its status as a “mimic good”, and often have the status of a regular and valued customer with the seller, who is then more likely to disclose in order to keep the customer. Mimic goods are usually produced by Vietnamese firms who lack the research and development capacity of the brand-name and usually foreign producers. The development of the capacity simply to produce a good quality mimic is an important step, Vann’s middle class shoppers argue, in the development of good quality national industries. “Fake goods”, on the other hand, do not attempt to mimic the quality of the original, only its superficial appearance, and are often not what they appear—they are fake throughout, in other words—they break easily, do not contain the ingredients they claim to contain, are made of other materials than those stated, etc. “Good” consumers then are careful not purchase goods which are sold too cheaply, or from sellers they do not know and trust, as they would then end up wasting money on “fakes” rather than “mimics”. Vann argues that mimic goods—be they electronics, appliances, clothing, footwear, or food—are produced specifically to cater to the middle class, allowing them to in turn mimic other Asian and western consumption behaviours and lifestyles, such as they see on television and read about in magazines. A recent study of advertising in Vietnam states that the under-25s are highly fashion and brand-conscious “dramatically influenced by foreign lifestyles and aspirations” (Le Thi Muoi and Jolibert, p. 9). Thus young Hanoi couples can sometimes be seen dressed in “couple t-shirts” as is the vogue in Korea and in Korean dramas.

The middle-class consumers Vann studied are concerned to purchase mimic goods both in terms of the value for money they offer—reasonable quality and

cheaper price—and because the purchase and ownership of those goods demonstrates the buyer's knowledgeable ability about what goods and what types of goods should appear in a middle-class lifestyle. Mimic goods thus cater to the aspirational consumption of middle-class urbanites, those who can not yet afford the real thing but know they ought to want and have it, and need to show they have it in order to assert their middle-class status.

Restaurants and cafés are another key site of consumption and leisure for the middle class. There are couple of trends which cater to and help to shape the middle class in this area. One is the development of upmarket cafés, the other is the development of standardized fastfood outlets (chains or pseudo-chains). Cafés such as Highlands Coffee, Trung Nguyen Coffee, and Hanoi's Paris Delis have proven to be enormously popular; the national Highlands chain has at least a dozen outlets in Hanoi alone. These and other such cafés provide spaces for consumption of leisure in surroundings such as those one sees on television in Japanese or Korean dramas, and self-consciously reference global trends and places with new types of drinks and evocative names. These cafés have also created spaces in which women can and do socialize in public. Where ten or twelve years ago there were few places for women to comfortably socialize—the draft beer joints, karaoke bars, and hotel bars being either perceptibly male spaces or too expensive—these new café spaces attract and accommodate women.

Both the cafés and the fastfood outlets such as Phở 24, Pepperonis, or BBQ Chicken, serve to tempt modern consumers away from streetfood, which is increasingly perceived and discussed as cheap, but dirty. The fastfood chains standardize food production and service and also cater to notions of hygiene. Such food outlets also speak to globalized ideas of middle-class lifestyles; consuming their products displays both knowledge of those “global” spaces and a considerable disposable income. At the same time as these types of food outlets appear, a parallel phenomenon is notable: a food landscape which speaks to a sense of nostalgia. Some of this nostalgia is “for the countryside”—visible in restaurants and cafés which are often named to evoke the rural—“The Thatched Roof Café”, or “The Homeland Restaurant”. But nostalgia is also already being extended to imaginings of a past-Hanoi, with restaurants such the “Quán Ăn Ngon” (Delicious Eating Place) where patrons order from a menu of street foods which are prepared at “stalls” situated around the perimeter of the restaurant; this set-up tames, sanitizes, and romanticizes streetfood as something already lost to the modern middle class and its aspirants. Although streetfood clearly proliferates and flourishes, the discourse around streetfood sees it as dirty, unhygienic, the food of last resort (quick and cheap), primarily serving low-income workers, migrants, those with no cooking facilities and little money.

While the emergence of new shopping and dining facilities creates new landscapes of retail spaces, often offering a stark counterimage of urban gloss and polish against the reality of the streets on which they are located, the consumption of technologies also produces new spaces. Computer games rooms and internet cafés, for example, proliferate in the city, and indicate not only the increasingly widespread

availability and popularity of this technology, but also the lack of alternate real-world recreation space. They also tend to be highly gendered spaces, as young boys generally have much more freedom and free time than young girls who often have domestic responsibilities. In another example, a recent study of the intersection of Vietnamese cultural notions of health, economies of medical services, and the availability of sonography (Gammeltoft, 2008) serves to explain the particular streetscapes of private ultrasound labs seen, for example, on Phủ Doãn Street near the Việt Đức hospital. Air conditioning is another technology with landscape implications, creating spaces of cool refuge from the city and the climate which contribute to the separation of the middle class from the rest of society. DVDs and satellite television may also contribute to the social withdrawal of those with the income to purchase, encouraging consumers to stay at home (with the aircon on), and providing access to global sources of culture which feed aspirations for modern lifestyles and cosmopolitanism.

Transportation is another technology which has seen rapid and drastic changes with the increased availability of motorized vehicles for private ownership. The changes in transportation in Hanoi over the last twenty years can be succinctly summarized as leaping from “bikes to motorbikes to cars in one generation”. This rapid shift in technology has expanded Hanoians’ range of mobility across the city and, as noted above, beyond the city. Commuting times have lengthened for many workers, and parking is a persistent problem, as are traffic jams and traffic noise. The shift to motorbikes and cars has changed the nature and experience of the urban street, making it difficult, dangerous, and for the elderly or disabled almost impossible to navigate. Thus while mobility has been expanded for some, it has been contracted for others, such as seniors whose mobility is hampered by the inability to independently cross streets against a flood of unheeding and unyielding motorbikes.

And finally, leisure sites which cater to middle-class lifestyle expectations and aspirations include spaces such as those internet cafés mentioned above, as well as bowling alleys, water parks, golf courses, air conditioned cinemas, discos, and other fee-based entertainment. The spaces of commercial sex workers should also be included in this category, the karaoke bars, massage parlours, and short-stay hotels which are prominent on the streetscapes of the outer city in particular. All of these recreational spaces also serve to draw their consumers away from the public spaces of the city into private spaces of consumption.

Notwithstanding the point made earlier about the importance of conformity; for a small sub-sector of the consuming middle class, maybe quite a small sector, claims to visible individuality are important. These claims are made manifest through such acts as buying and bringing stilt houses from the uplands into the city to be installed. A number of Hanoi artists have done this, installing the stilt houses either as studios or living quarters or both (see Nora Taylor’s chapter, this volume, for a discussion of artists and their practices of consumption). The wealthy building homes around West Lake have looked more to Europe for their exotic, adding turrets and other flourishes, some to demonstrate their own European experiences—such as the entrepreneur who worked in Germany then came back to Hanoi, opened a German

sausage enterprise, and built a house intended to resemble Les Invalides (Schutte, 2007)—and others who are emulating. Other claims to individuality may be made through dress; Ann Marie Leshkovich and Carla Jones have written about the role and exoticization of ethnic minority dress in fashion as a demonstration of global consumption knowledge (Leshkovich and Jones, 2003).

### 5.3.3 *Private and Public Space*

What has the presence of or aspiration to middle classness done to the practices of urban public and private space? The characteristics which I observed in an earlier paper (2000) based on observations throughout the 1990s led to my argument that public and private were in Hanoi functionally “inside-out” and “outside-in”; private activities routinely took place in public spaces and there was considerable “public” engagement in the organization and conduct of the “private” space of the household within the home. In contemporary Hanoi, I would now argue, there is far less mixing of “inside” and “outside” as the structures which forced or encouraged collective living are dismantled, and as rising standards of living and changing ideas about desirable lifestyles serve to emphasize investment in private space. Magazines devoted to interior design, as well as many other forms of consumption, are prominently ranged across newsstands in urban Vietnam. The space of the home is thus becoming more isolated and insular and the object of intense investment (i.e. the purchase of property to support the nuclearization of households, and the investment in making the home a more attractive space for leisure through décor and recreational appliances such as large-screen TVs, DVD players, stereos). That isolation may well have gender and age implications. While women continue to bear the primary responsibility for the home and domestic matters, still overwhelmingly women of working age work outside the home or in household-level enterprises, so are not as socially isolated as was the “classic” case in North American suburbs. But women (or men) who do stay home in the new tower block-dominated suburbs or gated communities might well find themselves isolated. Similarly, for older people whose mobility may already be challenged, the new suburbs, gated communities, and highrises may serve to leave them even more cut off from wider society and the small daily social interactions of the densely packed tube houses of the Old Quarter or the collective housing blocks of the *bao cấp* era. For domestic workers, also, isolated from wider society at the best of times while confined within the private spaces of the home/workplace, these new residential spaces may be even more socially isolating.

“Outside”, however, public spaces in contemporary Hanoi are the subject of concerted efforts to impose and enforce a “legitimate public” whose use of the city’s space is paramount. Thus, efforts to delegitimize and remove unsightly, unmodern users and uses continue and are periodically intensified. These efforts are not new, and reflect long-standing concerns with civility, propriety, and order. In the high socialist pre-Đổi Mới period, the attitudes towards urban public space and the



distinction between legitimate and undesirable users were little changed from those of the colonial era and remain little changed today (see Drummond, *Mad Dogs*, Unpublished manuscript). These efforts are also not unfamiliar from the experiences of other cities in Asia (and beyond, of course). In Jakarta, as noted above, the relationship between the middle class and urban public space was carefully managed by President Suharto in order to separate the middle class out from the mass of urban population, isolating and instilling in its members a fear of the city's streets as chaotic and dangerous (Kusno, 2000). Even without such deliberate planning, the development of urban middle classes in Asian cities has led to such retreats from the public spaces of the city, even while members of the middle class parade themselves and their expensive, modern, desirable modes of transport through those streets, as they commute or travel to the mall by private car, or as affluent youth conduct night-time motorbike parades through the central streets. These practices as well as the more mundane and simple choking of streets by an excess of vehicles and a disdain for traffic rules, effectively renders the street less accessible to the less affluent and less mobile.

## 5.4 Conclusion

The landscape of Hanoi attests to the changes in lifestyle practices which its residents are experiencing and implementing. Those with the means or the aspirations to lifestyles of middle-class consumption are availing themselves of new apartments, private cars, weekend cottages, supermarket shopping, and café socializing. They are taking up new technologies and using them according to Vietnamese ideas and cultural norms, trying out new identities and adopting lifestyle elements from the modern lifestyles they see modeled in other Asian cities on television. And in so doing, Hanoians are adapting, and adapting to, the contemporary urban landscape, buying condos and encouraging more investment in condo developments, meeting friends at trendy cafés and encouraging others to open new cafés, new restaurants, new types of leisure spaces.

Rather than insist on the existence of a defined middle class with fixed characteristics, it seems more useful in the fluid context of contemporary Hanoi to understand the middle class as negotiating social contexts, and built environments, which are inherited and structured, but also potentially malleable, adaptable, transformable. To see, in other words, the middle class as constantly in dialogue with norms and values, traditions, customs, social structures, and physical landscapes which shape ideas and behaviours and practices, and at the same time with models, ideas, images, cultural artefacts, landscapes which speak to competing or possibly complementary norms, values, possibilities. Mark Liechty argues in his study of middle class culture in Kathmandu, that middle class culture can be profitably understood as “practice, production, or performance. . . with all the anxieties that accompany an act of creation” (2002, p. 4). He argues that it is in the process of negotiation of a middle-class culture, what is and what is not appropriately middle class at each juncture, the constant testing of inclusion and exclusion of that class culture that the middle class is



constituted—it is not a product of that cultural experimentation, it is constituted in that process.

If we think about middle class as a process, as Liechty suggests, we can see the ways in which meanings are fluid—it is not clear what suburban life is or will be in Hanoi, it is being tested even at this moment, to see how it fits or can be made to fit or can be adapted to suit cultural norms and expectations, as well as expectations of what modern life is or should be. The middle class is itself still tentative, maybe nervous, politically uncertain, but it is having a material impact on the landscape of the city. As that impact takes physical form, it entrenches the middle class as a social force. As investment pours in, for example to shopping malls, luxury apartment complexes, so grows the pressure to ensure that there will be a steady flow of shoppers and apartment buyers. This is not of course an inevitable or fully irresistible force, but a force nonetheless which serves to give form and claim to an emerging middle class.

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## Chapter 6

# Finances, Family, Fashion, Fitness, and . . . Freedom? The Changing Lives of Urban Middle-Class Vietnamese Women

Ann Marie Leshkovich

The expanding ranks of visibly prosperous middle classes in Vietnamese urban centers could be interpreted as a sign of increased freedom to construct identity through engagement with market processes of moneymaking, commodification, and conspicuous consumption. Both Nikolas Rose (1999) and Nguyễn-võ Thu-Hường (2008) caution, however, that market “freedoms” prove illusory and ironic. Rose points out that the exercise of choice in the projects of self-making demanded of the successful “free” market actor and citizen requires substantial expert guidance from cultural, social, and educational industries (1999, p. 65). For middle classes, status also brings anxiety about protecting and morally justifying material, cultural, and social privilege (Liechty, 2003). This is all the more the case when that privilege is emerging in a current or formerly socialist society in which wealth has in the past been punished, and strategies of moneymaking continue to be the object of moral and political ambivalence (Buyandelgeriyn, 2007; Hsu, 2007; Jellema, 2005; Leshkovich, 2006; Patico, 2005). Add into the mix the particular dilemmas that women face to present themselves and their families in modern, attractive ways, while avoiding displays that might seem decadent, crass, or inappropriate (Freeman, 2007; Gill, 1993; Jones, 2010; Nguyễn-võ Thu-Hường, 2008), and it quickly becomes apparent that the freedoms of prosperity and the marketplace pose considerable constraint.

Drawing on 15 years of ongoing ethnographic research in Ho Chi Minh City, this chapter explores dilemmas of freedom, constraint, anxiety, and morality in four areas that urban middle-class women describe as central to their contemporary lives: finances, family, fashion, and fitness. As I have explored elsewhere, each of these aspects of women’s lives presents its own particular constellation of dilemmas and opportunities with respect to changing gender roles, family relationships, moral issues pertaining to moneymaking, body image, and notions of modernity, civilization, and progress.<sup>1</sup> My goal here is to consider what we learn by looking

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier publications have explored these domains separately: finances (Leshkovich, 2006), fashion (Leshkovich, 2003, 2009), family (Leshkovich, 2008a), and fitness (Leshkovich, 2008b).

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at these different areas of women's lives together. The case studies and vignettes presented in this chapter generate a broader picture of the dilemmas that emerge from sites in which urban middle-class women appear to be experiencing freedoms of self-determination through their activities as consumers and income generators on behalf of themselves and their families.

The fact that many women quite consciously embrace what they identify as opportunities for autonomy and self-realization through new forms of production and consumption might signal a retreat of the state from involvement in private life. This chapter demonstrates, however, that market-oriented economic policies have provided significant opportunities for the Vietnamese government and communist party to interpellate women as consumer-citizens in new commercial arenas. They do so in part by reinterpreting issues of social status and economic inequality as questions of individual moral character. Citizens engage with these expectations in ways that also make them receptive to the expert guidance provided by state-affiliated individuals, companies, and organizations. Urban middle-class women's fashion, fitness, and family practices thus quite literally embody the success of state developmentalist and civilizing agendas. This connection between the state and individual or familial market participation – a relationship that is political, economic, and, I argue, profoundly moral – thus complicates contentions that the expansion of markets and middle classes in Vietnam is evidence of the global spread of neoliberalism.

## 6.1 Rendering Middle Classness Moral

The middle class is notoriously difficult to define. Even if one adopts a Marxist definition of class as a structural relationship to the means of production, pinpointing exactly how much capital one needs in order to occupy the middle can be elusive. An even thornier problem comes from the so-called new middle class whose status depends not as much on ownership of material capital, as on their possession of human capital in the form of credentialed knowledge and expertise. Reckoned in terms of production, the middle class becomes so vast, amorphous, and internally diverse a group as to become theoretically untenable. It is also subject to significant internal tensions, as when middle-class professionals disdain the behavior of merchants as crude or disreputable. Weber eloquently underscored this point in his call to attend to social status, rather than merely class situation, even as class and status often are mutually reinforcing.<sup>2</sup>

Weber's argument has inspired subsequent theorists to suggest that a vision of middle classness emerges more sharply when one shifts focus from production to consumption and from economics to culture. Middle classness coalesces, albeit still loosely and with plenty of room for slippage and contestation, as a lifestyle.

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<sup>2</sup> For an insightful overview of Marxist and Weberian approaches to middle classness, see Liechty (2003).

By lifestyle, I mean the mix of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) that shapes the quotidian relationship between people and the things they own and use, as well as the value judgments and social relationships that propel these consumption practices and justify them as normal or appropriate. It is increasingly through consumption that middle classes show themselves as civilized and respectable. As “the primary currency of middle-class life” (Liechty, 2003, p. 31), commodities can provoke tremendous anxiety, with newer middle classes striving through their lifestyle practices to distinguish themselves as more refined than either decadent upper classes or crass lower classes.

In a socialist context such as Vietnam, the standard anxieties of middle classness are compounded by uncertainty about the overall stability and morality of stratification itself. Beginning in the late 1980s, Vietnam’s market-oriented principles, known as *Đổi Mới* (Renovation), have encouraged foreign investment and made it possible for citizens to pursue private entrepreneurship and enjoy mass consumption, particularly in urban areas. Even as many in Vietnam eagerly embrace opportunities to pursue affluence within what the government has dubbed “market socialism,”<sup>3</sup> those who have acquired some economic means fear that they may become victims of a socialist backlash against private property similar to that experienced by northerners in the mid-1950s and by southerners in the late 1970s. Other members of the emergent middle classes may feel materially secure, but sense a broader ambivalence to their prosperity that suggests that profit may be incompatible with virtue. In a state that celebrates the communist party as moral exemplar, it is significant that not until 2005–2006 were entrepreneurs allowed to be party members and vice-versa, although many party members had for years successfully circumvented these restrictions. Wealth and status in a market socialist context simultaneously signify prosperity and uneasiness.

The extent of these concerns struck me one afternoon in 2004 when the owner of a successful stall in Ho Chi Minh City’s central marketplace was describing his notion of what it means to be middle-class. He told me with a wry smile, “Don’t let officials see that you’re rich in production, but it’s fine, even encouraged, that you show them that you’re rich through consumption.”<sup>4</sup> Why is it acceptable to consume conspicuously, but necessary to earn circumspectly? Concerns about production may reflect the socialist emphasis on this as the underpinnings of class status, but post-1975 critiques of the southern bourgeoisie condemned their decadent consumption as also the outcome of exploitation: consumption status reflected production status. What now explains the possible disengagement of these two components of middle classness?

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<sup>3</sup> Shorthand for the official terminology, “market economics with a socialist orientation” (kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa).

<sup>4</sup> In her study of private housing communities in China, Li Zhang (2008) makes a similar point about the tendency to hide how wealth is produced while displaying it through conspicuous consumption.

One answer lies in the specific ways that market-oriented changes over the past two decades have recast the moral dilemmas of earning versus spending. Scholarship on late socialism in China suggests that class differentiation processes are as much moral and narrative – making sense of and justifying unequal wealth – as they are economic and political (Hsu, 2007; Zhang, 2008; Rofel, 2007). Precisely because market forms of moneymaking and reckoning status depart from previous socialist central planning models, their justification demands considerable ideological work. Hsu argues that this novelty makes market morality visible, contingent, and contestable (2007, p. 9). Put differently, the anxiety common to middle classes everywhere gets magnified when the accumulating classes are emerging within a new structural context in which political and popular support for their accumulation is neither naturalized nor commonsensical. This unease about wealth has been voiced in Vietnam since the 1990s in a variety of arenas, from headline-garnering corruption scandals involving well-placed officials (Gainsborough, 2003; MacLean, 2012), to popular stereotypes of greedy traders blithely deceiving innocent customers about items' prices, quality, or provenance (Leshkovich, 2006, 2008a).

In the face of skepticism about the possibility of earning money virtuously, proper conspicuous consumption becomes a strategy to render middle classness moral. I am coining the term “rendering moral” from work by Li (2007) and Rose (1999) that suggests contemporary forms of governmentality center on processes of “rendering technical.” Problems such as unequal access to wealth are depoliticized, first, by being defined as technical problems that can be solved through the application of expertise, and, second, through shaping the “conduct of conduct”<sup>5</sup> so that individuals internalize the “habits, aspirations, and beliefs” associated with a “will to improve” (Li, 2007, p. 5).

My research with middle classes in Vietnam suggests that a similar depoliticizing process is at work to justify emerging status by rendering privilege a sign of both state development goals and of individual moral worth that is made visible through properly refined forms of consumption. Rendering status moral resembles the attempts to remoralize wealth that Kate Jellema (2005) documented in a Red River Delta village in which the newly comfortable strive to display merit (*công*) through donations to temples and events that foster reciprocal social relations. Although urban middle classes in Ho Chi Minh City often engage in similar religious and ceremonial activities connected to *công*, their attempts to render wealth moral extend beyond public charity or reciprocity to suggest that their more private acts of consumption are also evidence of their propriety. In a logic reminiscent of the ethos that Weber (1958) identified as propelling the emergence of capitalism in Western Europe, middle classes in Vietnam tend to claim that they have earned their prosperity because they have worked hard, acquired education, and have cultivated the sensibilities associated with being modern (*hiện đại*) and civilized (*văn minh*).

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<sup>5</sup> Often attributed to Foucault, this precise phrase does not appear in English translations of his work, but it has become common shorthand for his sense of government as “the attempt to shape human conduct by calculated means” (Li, 2007, p. 5).

Class differentiation is rendered a moral index of the degrees to which individuals have become proper persons.<sup>6</sup> This level of refinement, in turn, can best be discerned through appropriate forms of consumption, thus deflecting attention from the morally fraught question of how the means for consumption were acquired.

## 6.2 The Gendered Dilemmas of Market Freedom

The shift in attention from middle-class production to consumption is also profoundly gendered. In different parts of the world, consumption is closely associated with women in a vicious cycle that frequently serves to critique both women and consumption. In his classic study of America at the turn of the 20th century, Veblen (1994) argued that women had been forced to focus on the frivolous and demeaning task of consuming to display their families' status, and that this role signified their subordination. Studies of the emergence of mass consumer culture in Western Europe and North America underscore this gendered ambivalence toward consumption. On the one hand, consumption became a socially and personally significant means to assert and acquire status. On the other hand, the economic, social, or political power that women might wield as consumers was consistently undercut by distaste for their unseemly expressions of desire, as in Victorian-era warnings that women in department stores might succumb to the allure of fashionable items or in contemporary condemnations of women as irresponsible shopaholics (De Grazia & Furlough, 1996; Fiske, 1991; Nava, 1996).

In different parts of Asia, the relationship between gender and consumption surrounding the emergence of urban middle classes had much to do with colonialism and debates about cultural or national identity. In the 1920s and 1930s, emerging nationalist leaders in many countries of the region condemned the so-called "New Woman" or "Modern Woman" for uncritically adopting European styles and mores. To nationalist elites, most of them men attired in versions of Western suits, the New Woman's hairstyle, dress, and comportment signified the loss of precisely that national or cultural essence around which they hoped to rally the movement for independence (Chakrabarty, 1992; Chatterjee, 1993; Jones & Leshkovich, 2003; Roces & Edwards, 2007; Tai, 1992; Tarlo, 1996; Taylor, 1997). Most scholars have interpreted these hyperbolic debates as largely symbolic discussions that indexed not so much women's roles, as broader anxieties about changing political, economic, or social conditions under colonialism. In her study of Burmese debates about women's "sheer blouses," however, Ikeya argues that linking women to "lowbrow materialism" had material underpinnings, as colonial policies of labor, education, and migration profoundly upset the structural relationship between Burmese men and women in ways that threatened men (Ikeya, 2008).

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<sup>6</sup> Rivkin-Fish offers a fascinating discussion of a similar "logic of mapping moral caliber onto class distinction" and its expression through consumption in postsocialist Russia (Rivkin-Fish, 2009, p. 80).



Turning to the more recent economic and social changes Vietnam has experienced, Ikeya's point alerts us to the ways in which symbolic debates about women and consumption may reflect deeper anxieties as women become central to the production of economic, social, and cultural capital on which middle classness rests. As middle classes display status through having the right kinds of homes, the right kinds of educations for their children, the right kinds of bodies and possessions, women increasingly become lightning rods for expressions of anxiety precisely because they are the crucial producers and markers of these materially significant appearances. This has led to a proliferation of cultural production educating women about how to perform consumption judiciously and appropriately. As Vietnamese state rhetoric shifted in the 1990s from focusing on women as public producers (and working class) to depicting them as private, but socially significant, caretakers for husbands and children (and middle class), the Women's Union and other official organs provided educational programming about how women might mitigate the negative moral effects of marketization by creating and protecting the "Happy Family" (Drummond, 2004; Nghiem Lien Huong, 2004, p. 299; Pettus, 2003).<sup>7</sup> The Happy Family (Gia đình hạnh phúc) was discernable through its items of consumption: a motorbike, television, rice cooker, and a house with spaces rationally allocated for eating, sleeping, and leisure activities. Just as women were supposed to become rational, scientific, and modern managers of consumption, so also was the expertise guiding them. Large sections of urban bookstores are devoted to women's self-help literature in the form of psychologically and medically vetted guidance about such diverse topics as family emotional relationships, child psychological development, diet, and sexual intimacy.<sup>8</sup> Newspaper advice columns caution women against letting their jobs or concern with finances hamper their ability to nurture their children or attend to their husbands. Other columns stress the importance of maintaining an attractive appearance for ongoing marital harmony. Then there are the cautionary tales about women whose excessive consumption represents a moral flaw or a departure from traditional, appropriate feminine norms and ultimately destroys their families.

The palpable anxiety in this proliferation of attention to middle-class women's consumption practices aptly illustrates Rose's point about the dilemmas that ensue

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<sup>7</sup> The Happy Family campaign is a continuation of longstanding socialist movements to promote national development through the transformation of attitudes and behaviors in the most basic units of society. The first iteration of these campaigns, begun in the 1940s by Hồ Chí Minh, focused on creating a New Way of Life based on the New Socialist Person who would be directly loyal to the party and collective, as opposed to the family (Drummond, 2004, pp. 162–163). Later versions shifted to promoting the Happy or Cultured Family, with emphasis by the 1980s turning toward issues of family planning. By the 1990s, the moral, cultural, and social dilemmas raised by the turn toward market socialism prompted decreased emphasis on family planning, political, or economic goals in favor of visions of the family as a harmonious affective unit. It is this ideal of the family as cozy nest that Women's Union programming promotes.

<sup>8</sup> Nguyễn-võ Thu-Hương (2008) notes the irony that, while middle-class women's sexuality is disciplined through the application of scientific expertise, the sexuality of working-class prostitutes is punished through incarceration.

when personal life becomes a matter of choice. Just as Ikeya found in her research on colonial Burma, however, I argue that the fact that these anxieties coalesce around women goes beyond symbolism to suggest the gender-specific effects of recent material transformations. To what extent are women gaining material or social advantage from their prominence in precisely the domains of private life that have come to be politically significant to state-sponsored visions of development, modernity, and civilization? To what new regimes of discipline might they be subject because of this advantage or the perceived possibility of it? In the following sections, I address these questions through brief accounts of how specific women occupying different locations within the broader category of “middle-class” confront the dilemmas of moneymaking, raising families, and presenting themselves attractively through dress and exercise.

### 6.3 Finances

In response to concerns about whether it was possible to be socially responsible and entrepreneurial, Ho Chi Minh City newspapers in the 1990s frequently profiled businesspeople who had managed to be successful without sacrificing a concern for others. Hiền was the subject of one such profile in a 1997 edition of a popular women’s newspaper.<sup>9</sup> Hiền and her husband owned three garment factories that together employed 800 workers (Fig. 6.1). Having left her civil service job, Hiền appeared to be a quintessential *Đổi Mới* success story. When I met this educated, articulate, and quietly determined woman several weeks after the article’s publication, however, I sensed that her pride in her accomplishments was tempered by a concern for how she was perceived in gendered and moral terms. Her success, she told me, was both the result of and evidence for her Buddhist piety.

In narrating her life story, Hiền repeatedly mentioned that being a woman involves sacrifice (*hy sinh*) as one subordinates one’s own needs and desires to those of others. *Hy sinh* typically refers to sacrificing for one’s family or, in nationalist revolutionary discourse, for the state. For Hiền, doing business also required *hy sinh*:

It’s very hard, ... every day I have to solve such problems that I have a bad headache. First, it’s because of the customers; they always demand that I do this, that, and the other thing. ... Then, there are the workers who demand that I do this, that, and the other thing for them. But, I’m in the middle, so I have to solve things so that both sides get what they want, and that means that I must sacrifice.

Noting that one must have good intentions and that heaven ultimately decides whether one succeeds, Hiền explained the role of virtue in doing business:

In business, a businessperson is someone who has many strategies to bring profit to himself [*sic*]. [B]ut these must be consistent with and live in accordance with your conscience, consistent with your heart [*tâm*]. Only then will you succeed. That’s my philosophy in life.

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<sup>9</sup> All names in the case studies are pseudonyms.

**Fig. 6.1** A worker sewing jackets at one of Hiền's production plants. Photograph by the author



Hiền's piety led her to demonstrate her virtue and accumulate merit through the sacrifice of occasional vegetarianism. While many Vietnamese Buddhists abstain from meat two days a month, Hiền did so for ten days. Being a woman, however, did force her to compromise for familial reasons:

... at night I have to eat with my children. Because I'm not able to be away from them, I'm gone every day, so at night if I don't share the same food tray with my children then the feelings between parents and children will push them out into society, I'll push my children away. If that happens, a young child is just like a thermometer, it's influenced by the weather. So I set aside dinnertime for my children, for my friends.

Hiền's story highlights key intersections between Vietnamese conceptions of gender, Buddhism, and fate. First, Buddhism has long appealed to Vietnamese women because, in contrast to patriarchal Confucianism, women were not prohibited from acquiring Buddhist textual knowledge and performing rituals. At the same time, women's duty to their families often forced them to neglect religious

study and contemplation and hence compromise piety, much like Hiền sacrifices her vegetarianism so that she can show concern for her children by sharing their food tray.<sup>10</sup>

Second, Hiền's narrative explores the complicated connections between virtue, talent, and fate. According to Vietnamese Buddhists, fate determines one's life course, but individuals must use their talents to cultivate virtue and realize optimal fate. Hiền follows a virtuous Buddhist path that she believes enables her to realize a destiny to be successful.

Third, in linking virtue and money making, Hiền explicitly challenges accusations that morality is incompatible with profit. For her, moneymaking is neither inherently evil nor amoral, and one can be both a successful entrepreneur and a good, virtuous woman. She is not a petit-bourgeois pariah, but a moral Buddhist who serves her workers and her customers by listening to the dictates of her conscience. In Hiền's view, her financial success is both the result of and primary evidence for her virtue, for good fortune only comes to those who work hard and live in a manner consistent with their hearts and their principles. At the same time, this claim of self-assured success and virtue betrays a great deal of anxiety about whether her success impugns her propriety as a woman and socialist citizen.

## 6.4 Family

Hiền's story illustrates that part of the moral dilemma raised by money is that a focus on finances and property can promote individualism at the expense of the community, including the family. This is particularly ironic, given that a major effect of *Đổi Mới* has been to turn the family into a key economic unit. Ownership of land was transferred from rural cooperatives to individual families. In the cities, many people started small businesses, and they usually did this as families, pooling resources and tapping into flexible labor or small amounts of capital from relatives. This kind of productive family symbolized the positive potential of market-oriented reforms, but if business led to selfishness, then perhaps the values of the traditional family would be lost and family relationships would be weakened.

In newspapers and officials' rhetoric, the middle-class family ideal was made legible through a contrast with its evil twin: the depraved rich family that served as a cautionary tale of the dangers of prosperity. Some urban households were described in the media and academic essays as pathological hotbeds of selfishness, unseemly desires, and immorality. Bad middle-class parents focused excessively on possessions and status, and their unruly and disrespectful children became involved with sex, drugs, and crime (Duong Thoa, 1995, p. 37; Le Ngoc Van, 1994; Le Thi, 1994, p. 58). Foreign culture bore some of the blame for the decay of the traditional family,

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<sup>10</sup> Although Hiền did not explicitly use the word "tình cảm" or sentiment, her vision of feminine concern for the wellbeing of others is precisely what this popular term captures. Rydstrom (2003) argues that *tình cảm* is the primary virtue that girls are socialized to embody.

as in one official's call for Vietnamese to protect themselves from "the flow of garbage from foreign degraded, reactionary culture which is strange to our tradition of humanities, and benevolence" (Nguyen Khoa Diem, 1997, p. 56). But most of the fault lay with parents, particularly mothers. One academic cautioned that businesspeople's daily contact with "trading, hustling and even cheating activities" could not help but adversely affect their children. Another social scientist described female traders as uncaring and neglectful mothers:

Women apt for commercial activities virtually neglect the care, upbringing and education of their children, that is, do not fulfill the tasks of mothers. . . . [M]others having babies breast-feed them as quick as possible then leave them to the care of their husbands or grandparents to engage in commercial affairs, without bothering about what would happen to [the] small creatures. (To Duy Hop, 1997, pp. 17–18)

Such harrowing descriptions of maternal disregard bear little resemblance to the ways that the female traders with whom I have conducted research since the mid-1990s discuss their lives. As many have prospered and joined the ranks of the middle class, albeit with lower levels of material wealth than Hiên's family has acquired, they have responded to such indictments by portraying their businesses as allowing them to be better mothers who sacrifice on behalf of their children (Fig. 6.2). Their incomes provide educational opportunities for their children and allow the entire family to engage in the pleasurable leisure activities celebrated in the "happy family" campaign: watching television, trying new foods, traveling, or taking in the city sights (*đi chơi*) on a new motorbike.

Traders do worry that long days on the market floor might harm their family lives. Many said their husbands took over household roles by caring for children or running errands. One stallholder, Ngọc, praised her husband:

He reduces my load by shouldering the responsibility for the hard jobs in our family. For example, when I've been selling until late at night and come home tired . . . he deals with a lot. Many times at night my daughter has already gone to sleep but wakes up crying, she has wet the bed and her pants are soaked. I have to change them. But there are also many times when she cries and he takes care of everything, he doesn't even call me. If I hear, then



**Fig. 6.2** A daughter helps her widowed mother tend a clothing stall. Photograph by the author

I get up and the two of us do it together, only very rarely does he let me get up and take care of our child by myself. If not, he tells me to go to sleep and let him take care of it, that's so lovable.

Similar to Hiền, Ngọc defines morality as expressed through human connections. Money can foster one's ability to attend to those relationships, or, at the very least, it does not automatically make it impossible to meet one's affective familial obligations. Prosperity in business could also allow one to consume in ways that achieve precisely the modern form of happy family and companionate marriage that the state promoted. Suggesting that achieving middle classness entailed a reconfiguration of gender roles, some women quietly told me that their husbands had to respect their status as both the economic and emotional pillars of the family (*trụ cột trong gia đình*).

## 6.5 Fashion

Urban middle-class women's concerns about their family relationships were also related to a set of activities that they found necessary and personally pleasurable in the new economy: fashion and fitness. In the 1990s, urbanites began declaring that a slogan of the revolution, "enough food, warm clothes" (*ăn no mặc ấm*), had been replaced by a motto of prosperity, "delicious food, beautiful clothes" (*ăn ngon mặc đẹp*). Even those women who described their family's finances as just getting by told me that the opportunity to buy new fashion allowed them to express femininity in ways that were prohibited during the years of socialist austerity following the end of the war in 1975. During those "revolutionary" years, efforts to encourage equality and to promote a working class aesthetic limited available dress options to ones which women by the 1990s rejected as utilitarian, boring, and unfeminine. In contrast, the more colorful, body conscious, and diverse styles flooding *Đổi Mới* markets allowed urban women to display themselves to others (and to themselves) as attractive, cosmopolitan, and economically comfortable. Western-style clothing appealed for this reason, but so did Vietnam's so-called traditional dress, the *áo dài*, which allowed cosmopolitan women to style themselves as both traditional and fashionable (Leshkovich, 2003).

The fun that many saw in fashion provided pressures of its own. Some women confided that they had become fashion-crazed and worried about how much they needed to spend to keep up with trends. One market trader who designed many of the clothes for sale in her stall told me that the average "lifespan" of any given style was no more than a month. Middle classes' clothing, like their incomes, became disposable.

The greatest pressure that fashionable women have faced, however, is less concrete: the expectation that their appearance must simultaneously represent both Vietnamese tradition and international modernity. They therefore have to choose fashion judiciously and appropriately. As the wife of then-Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt told an audience at a fashion show in 1997, "As Vietnam becomes integrated



into ASEAN and the world, the behavior and comportment of women, especially the task of carefully preserving the *áo dài* of our ethnic group, is an issue of the utmost importance” (Thúy Hà, 1997, p. 9).

The high stakes surrounding dress were apparent in a fashion contest for young people that I attended in Ho Chi Minh City. The event was organized by the Hồ Chí Minh Communist Youth League and held at the Youth Cultural House. The contestants, all students and young professionals in their late teens and early twenties and about two-thirds of them women, chose outfits for school or work and for an evening out (Fig. 6.3). A panel of expert judges assessed whether their selections were attractive and appropriate (*phù hợp*).

While the final results were being tabulated, one of the judges – a nationally prominent designer and head of a state fashion company – took the microphone. Instead of the customary pleasantries praising the event and the competitors’ efforts, she lamented that the fashion she had seen that night made her despair. Turning toward the female contestants, she said:

The outfits chosen by the female contestants aren’t appropriate for their age, or for the lifestyle of Vietnamese people. . . You young women have gotten old; you’ve become supermodels and lost your innocence.

The designer asked whether the audience agreed that young people needed to represent the next generation by comporting themselves appropriately. Those in attendance, primarily parents and friends of the contestants, responded with enthusiastic applause.

Because the women had chosen so inappropriately, only one female contestant was awarded a prize that night. When I interviewed the designer the next day, she explained why she was so annoyed: “Because of waves of different cultural influences, the girls don’t know how to choose for themselves, they don’t know how to create a ‘character’ [she used the English word] for themselves.” Her job, and that of other experts, she told me, was to guide them so that they could be appropriately fashionable.



**Fig. 6.3** A fashion contest for youth sponsored by the Hồ Chí Minh Communist Youth League. Photograph by the author



The fashion contest was less a competition between the young participants and more a struggle between contestants and older generations of parents and cultural experts over exactly what the modern middle-class Vietnamese woman is supposed to be, and what this means for Vietnamese identity more generally. As a result, women's quotidian fashion choices received considerable scrutiny, and the pleasures of fashion carried considerable pressure to achieve the right look. The designer's lament voiced after the contest highlighted an additional difficulty and irony in this situation: young Vietnamese women must develop a "character" that is simultaneously individual and appropriately representative of the best qualities of Vietnamese-ness, yet the word the designer used to describe this identity was an English term. Even as women sought to resist contamination from excessive foreign influence by developing a particular kind of personhood, the form of individuality that emerged as the solution was somehow already foreign and hence inauthentic. The dangers of mimicry (Bhabha, 1997), and the sense of young Vietnamese middle-class women's greater vulnerability to them, seemed inescapable.

## 6.6 Fitness

For older women, concern with appearance also motivated their decision to exercise. Beginning in the 1990s, a number of fitness clubs opened in Ho Chi Minh City, many of them run by district governments or organizations associated with the communist party, often with private investment and management. Health clubs tend to be segregated by sex. Men go to weight lifting establishments, and women join women-only clubs that offer cardiovascular exercise, stretching, yoga, and light weight training (Fig. 6.4). Women exercise for several reasons. As well-heeled Vietnamese urbanites struggle with the downside of prosperity, such as pollution and diets high in animal fats and sugar, many worry about weight, cardiovascular health, and cancer. Exercise also provides leisure time to reduce stress and form friendships with other women. As opposed to participating in outdoor aerobics in city parks, which also has become increasingly popular, belonging to a club allows one to display status as a person who has money and time for such activities and sufficient knowledge of science to appreciate the health benefits of using a weight machine or a treadmill and seeking the expertise of a personal trainer. Finally, a physically fit woman can maintain an attractive physique.

In 1995 and again in 2007, I conducted research in Club Royale, a popular women's fitness center located near downtown. In the 1990s, it occupied the higher end of clubs catering to Vietnamese, but was neither as exclusive nor as expensive as hotel-based fitness centers that catered to foreigners and very wealthy Vietnamese. By 2007, a lack of renovation to the facilities and increased competition from higher-end chains had led to a decline in Club Royale's status. Nevertheless, it has continued to tout its focus on providing a scientifically sound, health enhancing exercise regimen. Both club management and personal trainers claim that their club allows women to improve their inner physical health, a corollary benefit of which is that they develop greater self-confidence and look good. Staff members



**Fig. 6.4** A women's health club in Ho Chi Minh City. Photograph by the author

unanimously proclaim, however, that health is their paramount concern. Members echoed this sentiment in the initial moments of our interviews, but most, particularly those with husbands and children (the vast majority of Club Royale's patrons), explained in some detail how exercise would allow them to maintain an attractive, youthful appearance that would keep their husbands interested. More than half of them said that the *Tứ Đức*, or four virtues that Confucianism prescribes for women, could be updated to serve as a model for contemporary women. One virtue in particular, *dung*, or appearance, could, they argued, be revised from its older associations with being clean and neat to include dressing in modern fashions and maintaining a lithe figure. Interestingly, the Women's Union, some academics, and the popular media have also touted reinterpretations of the four components of *Tứ Đức* as a way for women to merge modernity and tradition in culturally appropriate ways (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh, 2004; Pettus, 2003). These claims resonate with colonial-era quests to develop a form of modern woman who would adopt elements of foreign influence without compromising her traditional cultural essence.

Club Royale's personal trainers, many of them precisely the kinds of young, attractive women that, in a different context, might lead their clients to feel insecure about their husbands' fidelity, sympathized with the older women's dilemmas. Although they emphasized that inner beauty produced outer beauty, and hence the former was far more significant than the latter, many admitted that a woman's appearance had a pronounced effect on marital happiness. One trainer told me:

A husband of a fat woman – that always has an influence on the man and in this way it will have an influence on their happy relationship (*quan hệ hạnh phúc*). So a woman

very much needs to keep her health and her beauty to protect family happiness (bảo vệ hạnh phúc gia đình).

Echoing the state's Happy Family campaign, the trainer's statement suggests women to be the primary agents to ensure family happiness. In the era of market socialism, the idealized middle-class family is to be maintained by a self-confident, yet loving, financially responsible, modern, yet demure, and attractive woman, wife, and mother. As the prime minister's wife had suggested, women's behavior and commitment had indeed become an issue of "the utmost importance."

## 6.7 Rethinking Market Freedoms in Vietnam

These overviews of women's lives suggest that many urban middle-class women faced enormous pressure to behave in particular ways, especially in the arena of consumption that had seemed to offer so much possibility for pleasure and autonomy. Many reported that they felt enormous stress – and they used this English word to describe their condition. Even here, however, one might also discern the desire to portray one's self as having status, for being overburdened and overtired can also have globally trendy cachet. It is also important to place urban middle-class women's dilemmas in a broader context. The women that I came to know as they earned money, cared for families, sold or bought clothing, and worked out certainly find their circumstances to be vastly superior to those of poverty. They take pride and security in their level of material comfort and ability to express themselves and to portray their family's success through dressing in an increasingly diverse array of clothing, spending time at a health club, and working to build a stable family life.

To return to Nikolas Rose's concerns about freedom and governmentality, however, these vignettes suggest that what many middle-class urban Vietnamese women experience as an ability to exercise choice in shaping their own lives is in fact closely connected to constraint, much of it intertwined with ideals that have been prominently promoted by the government: slogans about how generating wealth can be a form of patriotism to build the country; propaganda campaigns and self-help books designed to help wives maintain proper morality and hence protect themselves from the negative impact that materialism and individualism can have on emotional and familial relationships; a fashion contest sponsored by the Communist Youth League in which a nationally known designer who works for a state-run company criticizes the young women's inappropriate fashion choices; a health club run by an organization affiliated with the communist party in which many women seek to reshape their bodies in the spirit of the Four Confucian Virtues being promoted by party-affiliated organizations. Through these diverse channels, government clearly has a role in shaping ideas and practices associated with the new middle-class femininity that is supposedly all about freedom of individual choice in the market.

It is tempting to think of "market socialism" in Vietnam as indicating a retreat of the state from its monopoly over economic activity and, by extension, from its shaping of Vietnamese citizens' daily lives. It is also a trend associated globally with

neoliberalism, as issues such as health and education that were handled publicly increasingly become the responsibility of private entities. However, recent anthropological scholarship, particularly that focused on late or postsocialist contexts, urges caution in assuming globally advancing logics of late capitalism or a grand rupture with earlier forms of governmentality (Kipnis, 2008; Matza, 2009; Ong, 2006; Nonini, 2008; Schwenkel & Leshkovich, 2012). In contrast to claims about socialism withering in the face of capitalism, this scholarship suggests that reworked and rearticulated aspects of market logics can become a project of the state that in fact reinforces its practical and ideological authority over social, political, and cultural processes – what Ong and Zhang (2008) dub “socialism from afar.”

As a description of governmentality in Vietnam, the model of socialism from afar may overstate the power of the center to determine the process of change, particularly when one considers the greater direct role that transnational actors might play in shaping Vietnam’s economy (Schwenkel & Leshkovich, 2012). It nevertheless is helpful in drawing our attention to the direct and indirect involvement of the Vietnamese state and party in precisely those domains of private life explored here. Over the past two decades, the Vietnamese state has not retreated from shaping citizens’ daily lives so much as changed the arenas and tactics through which it attempts to do so. Citizens no longer participate as widely in mass mobilization campaigns designed to spur revolutionary socialist activism. Urban middle-class women in particular find such activities distasteful signs of a revolution that they claim now belongs to the past. Many revel in the freedom to focus on making money, taking care of their families, and enjoying daily life. Yet precisely these pursuits are now closely intertwined with state activities. The Vietnamese state has become an influential commercial actor through joint ventures that produce consumer goods, media that define what fashions are attractive and appropriate, and leisure and fitness companies that provide recreational venues. Since the 1990s, the Vietnamese government has moved from organizing a vanguard of urban working classes to developing a skilled, savvy middle class of consumers whose fashion, fitness, and family choices embody the success of the state developmentalist and civilizing agenda.

Although the state directly shapes the economy through extensive involvement in production and marketing, its most profound influence over citizens’ daily lives lies in the domain of morality. Through propaganda, educational programming, media, and self-help literature, actors affiliated with the state and often speaking overtly on its behalf reinterpret issues of social status and economic transformation as questions of individual moral character. Prosperity comes to those who embody valorized forms of selfhood and continually assess the success of their efforts to measure up to standards of culture, civilization, and modernity. Such claims appeal to middle classes because they render growing inequality moral in ways that naturalize class differentiation and shield middle classes from accusations and their own nagging guilt that their status might have come at the expense of others. Having internalized such visions of morally correct personhood, middle classes become increasingly receptive to the expert guidance provided by state-affiliated individuals, companies, and organizations.

Middle-class women in Vietnam embody freedom – almost literally, given their focus on fashion and exercise. It is a freedom of tangible pleasure and status, and one that many quite actively choose, but it is also a freedom that has largely been made for them and that poses significant constraints. Although this freedom might seem quintessentially neoliberal, it also intersects in interesting ways with socialism, as middle-class women’s consumption activities contribute to building the nation. Just as the high moral stakes surrounding women’s behavior suggest that the ability to engage in the marketplace is not as liberating as it might originally appear, so, too, does the state’s ability to interpellate women as consumer-citizens suggest that market freedom is not the significant break with socialism that proponents of a neoliberal consumer revolution would have us believe.

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## Chapter 7

# Exhibiting Middle Classness: The Social Status of Artists in Hanoi

Nora A. Taylor

The extensive literature on the economics of the international art market, the world of art collecting and the holdings of private collectors has supplied the common idea that, in most societies, art is afforded only by the rich upper sectors of the population (Thompson, 2008). To buy art remains a privilege accessible only to those with money. And while much attention has been paid to the high price of art and the social class of those who pay for it, little has been written about the social class of artists themselves. The myth of the starving artist notwithstanding, studies that examine how and where artists position themselves socially are relatively rare. Art historians tend to focus on representations of class values in art or artistic commentary on class. T.J. Clark's study on French painters and the bourgeoisie in Paris discusses how art works reflected middle-class consumerism at the turn of the century (Clark, 1984). Another study of artists in 1980s New York illustrates how young artists commanding high prices for their work generated a younger class of art collectors (Marcus, 1994). Art became an attractive commodity for a hip, up-and-coming young middle-class society and no longer the purview of the old stodgy aristocracy. Both of these studies draw a correspondence between the rise of a new class of art consumers and the popularity of certain art works that appeal to the upwardly mobile, urban middle class. Both studies suggest a correlation can be made between changes in social stratification and art consumption or taste. Pierre Bourdieu's now classic study of taste and the French class structure also confirms the associations and assumptions made between what kind of art people like and the class with which they identify (Bourdieu, 1979). What these studies do not consider are the implications of a rise in a consumer class of artists. The young urbanites who purchase art are not the only signifiers of class transformation and its impact on the art world. The artists whose lives were transformed and whose social mobility may have improved tremendously thanks to the sale of their art works to collectors are curiously overlooked.

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The middle class being the subject of this volume, it makes sense to look into the kinds of goods that this Vietnamese urban middle class has been consuming, including the kind of art works that they may purchase. The situation with Vietnam, however, presents cause for a different kind of case study. Urban middle-class Hanoians may be moving into bigger houses as Lisa Drummond explains or going to fitness centers as Leshkovich discusses (Chapter 6, this volume), but they are not buying art. During the colonial period, a few isolated individuals did become patrons of the arts and amassed significant art collections but these were few and far between and no individual in the post-*Đổi Mới* period has distinguished himself or herself in that category. Art is still largely sponsored either by the state or by foreign art buyers or international cultural institutions. This is not to say that an art market in Vietnam does not exist. Quite the contrary, art galleries have been thriving and the sale of art works increased multifold since the onset of economic reforms and the lifting of the economic embargo in the mid-1990s. While most artists in Europe and America can only dream of selling one or two pieces a year, hundreds of Vietnamese artists have been able to live quite comfortably from the profits they have made in annual sales of dozens if not hundreds of works to tourists and international art buyers. Artists are not necessarily very wealthy and would rarely be counted among the new millionaires but they are considerably wealthier than the average worker. This is a dramatic shift from the period preceding *Đổi Mới* when artists were called art workers (nghệ sĩ) and formed collectives, exhibiting their works in the government sponsored art spaces for a small stipend that barely paid for art supplies.

This chapter will attempt to make sense not only of this shift in the social status of artists but also to account for the group of artists who can be considered middle-class as distinguished from an upper-class elite and a lower class of peasants and workers. While one could argue that artists are “naturally” part of a cultural elite, I would argue that they have emerged from a middle class of cultural workers under colonialism and socialism and created a middle class of artists, consumers of global artifacts and popular culture in the era of market economy. In other words, they have always been part of the middle class, albeit a different kind of middle class out of a different social environment. The essay will focus on selected individual artists who have acquired a middle-class status by collecting antiques, buying property, purchasing cars and patronizing cultural establishments in the post-*Đổi Mới* period. They have distinguished themselves from the previous generation of state workers and the nouveaux-riches business people in their tastes for art and culture. They are richer than the poor but not rich enough to support other artists. Vietnamese society is still lacking an elite class of individuals wealthy enough to pay for exhibitions, commission art works or make substantial donations to museums and cultural institutions. That work remains in the hands of international cultural centers such as the British Council, The Goethe Institute and the French Cultural Center known as L’Espace. These artists attend events at those institutions, as well as openings for their colleagues’ works and even manage alternative artist-run spaces themselves. They have earned enough capital to live comfortably and to become part of what can be called an audience for contemporary art. In this way, Vietnamese artists are both the patrons and clients of current art practices in Vietnam

and contribute to a middle classification of art that perhaps will never become elevated to an elite level.

If one considers that the shift in the social status of artists appeared after *Đổi Mới*, one may find it helpful to look at similar cases in post-socialist China and contemporary Cuba. In China, where artists long joined the National Association of Artists to be recognized as professional artists, change took place in 1989 after the events of Tiananmen Square. At that time, artists joined two opposing groups, those favoring reform and those who were recruited to denounce the others as “bourgeois liberationists” (Clark, 1992). The stigma was not on how much wealth the artists accumulated but rather, on their political inclinations. In Cuba, avant-garde artists have long received moral and political support from the government, if not funding. The dire economic situation in that country has made it necessary for artists to look outside of the country for patrons (Century, 1987). After the so-called Grey Years of the 1970s, when many artists were isolated by the government, new contemporary art movements began to emerge since the 1980s that merged avant-garde and nationalists tendencies. Havana has hosted a Biennale exhibition since 1989 that has invited artists from around the world to exhibit side by side with the most prominent and experimental artists of the island (Eligio, 1998). In Vietnam, the state does not support avant-garde artists. Unlike China and Cuba, there are no major international art exhibitions taking place in the country. But, like Chinese and Cuban artists, Vietnamese artists have learned that they cannot rely on conventional forms of patronage and that the state continues to interfere with their livelihood. While Cuban and Chinese artists have escaped domestic political regulations and found patrons abroad, Vietnamese artists’ road to freedom is paved along the systems of class. They find themselves having to behave less like artists and clients of the state and more like private consumer patrons, buying a middle-class lifestyle to escape the authoritative gaze of the state.

## 7.1 A History of Art Patronage in Vietnam

When the French artist Victor Tardieu founded the *École des Beaux-Arts d’Indochine* in 1925, his aim was to educate artisans and turn them into artists (André-Pallois, 1997; Taylor, 2007). He also had a clientele in mind for the student output. Colonial artifacts found easy customers among the French expatriates eager for souvenirs from their foreign travels, and those who did not travel became avid collectors of exotica, fascinated by anything *Indochinois*. Paintings by students of the new art school fulfilled this purpose; they would presumably sell easily as objects that are more sophisticated than mere craft, and yet less obscure than most of the art works found in Paris. They were considerably more “exotic” than works by contemporary French artists, and certainly more affordable. Indeed, these paintings filled a niche among the cosmopolitan French bourgeoisie who wanted to purchase art but were not enthralled by the 1930s abstractionists and found the Surrealists of the day too ambiguous to understand. French artists had also started coming to the colonies in search of subject matter, lured by the tropical climate and landscape.

Following the steps of Paul Gauguin who had earned a reputation as a painter of the Pacific islands, capturing the bright flowers and warm shades of skin color of the natives, many artists set off to the colonies in Asia and the Pacific to set up their easels. The work that Gauguin created in Tahiti earned his success as a painter, but for French art aficionados, work by Vietnamese artists would have been considered perhaps more “authentic.” Tardieu did not intend to go so far as to exploit the art students enrolled at his school, but considering the school was established under colonial policy, it is hard to imagine that the students at the art school were taken as seriously as French artists such as Gauguin. That these artists gained a reputation and have recently been recognized in art historical studies of the period and garnered sales at auction houses in Hong Kong and Singapore is unquestioned but their trajectory is beyond the scope of this essay.

Besides the patronage that graduates of the Indochina Art School received from French art buyers, a few notable local Vietnamese businessmen distinguished themselves by purchasing works by these artists. The most well-known of these is Bùi Đình Thảo otherwise known as Đức Minh, owner of the Grand Magasin on rue Paul Bert, today’s Tràng Tiền street by Hoàng Kiếm Lake. Part of the elite colonial bourgeoisie, Đức Minh had begun patronizing artists in the 1930s, buying the works of graduates of the art school and gradually amassing a substantial art collection by the time of independence from the French and the closing of the school in 1945. When the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was established in 1954, private property was abolished and Đức Minh entered into a negotiation with the Ministry of Culture. Recognizing the value of his collection, the cultural authorities agreed to let him maintain his collection if he agreed to loan some of it to the state for the purpose of traveling exhibitions in the name of socialist bloc friendship (Taylor, 2004). When he died in 1984, his family fought over some of the paintings and a number were sold. The remainder went to the Republic of Vietnam in the South and are now housed in a private museum founded by his son Bùi Quốc Chí. There is no official documentation on the Đức Minh Collection and no records of the works that were sold or acquired by the government. Recently, evidence has surfaced that many of the paintings in Đức Minh collection were copied and placed in the museum that was founded in 1963 by the Indochina Art School graduate, Nguyễn Đỗ Cung (Overland, 2009).

Other private collections developed during the period of economic hardship, hard-line socialism and war. Nguyễn Văn Lâm set up a clandestine coffee shop in of his home during the 1970s and 1980s that was frequented by many artists who did not hold state jobs. They would come and drink coffee, sketch, talk and offer their drawings scribbled on matchbook covers, pieces of cardboard or old newspapers. Often they exchanged these drawings for cups of coffee or Lâm would buy them from the artists. Lâm was a bookbinder by trade and earned a comfortable living for the time. After the onset of economic reforms, he was able to open a real coffee shop and continued to acquire paintings. By the mid-1990s, he had amassed a sizeable collection. Among the most noted of his possessions were paintings by the highly sought-after Bùi Xuân Phái. Unlike the museum, that rarely purchased works and exercised ideological prejudice in its acquisition practices, Lâm’s collection contains some of the most representative works of the period by the most acclaimed

artists of the time. Most of all, the collection contains originals whose authenticity is proven by the fact that most of the artists created them while they were sitting in his café.

Đỗ Thị Phương Quỳnh also managed to collect prized art works of the time but a little later. A French educated editor, journalist and translator, Quỳnh took an interest in artists in the late 1980s and early 1990s when she met a group of young graduates from the Hanoi University of Fine Arts through a friend. She quickly commissioned portraits of herself and installed a makeshift studio or salon in her house on Tuệ Tĩnh Street where artists would come by to sketch and talk. There were still no commercial art galleries at that time but these private salons were accumulating coinciding with the onset of *Đổi Mới*. She paid for the artists' works but they were not very pricey and artists mostly enjoyed the freedom to work in a non-governmental space and the stimulating intellectual environment. The home of Trần Dương Tường, also a translator, became another such setting. Artists often gave him gifts of drawings in exchange for the occasion to partake in the atmosphere of his home where writers, musicians and poets would congregate. Since there was not yet a true capitalist art market, artists simply sought these opportunities to make connections and show their work to like-minded spirits. A similar space, Salon Natasha, opened by Russian-born Natalia Kraevskaia and her artist husband Vũ Dân Tân, eventually became a commercial gallery in the early 1990s.

Before *Đổi Mới*, these salons and private art patrons offered the only exhibition alternatives to the state-sponsored art spaces and the only opportunities for sales. The National Arts Association, an organization founded in 1957 as an artists' union and a branch of the Fatherland front, subsidized materials, studios and exhibition space for member artists. It would be difficult to call this "patronage" in the sense that artists received little compensation for their work, but it did provide them with a social standing, an audience, official recognition and little hassle from censors if they complied with basic regulations. It provided them with a sense of community and a sense of belonging to the profession. Artists who did not join the Association would not receive the benefits of being able to travel abroad, teach, work for a cultural institution and exhibit in the national art exhibitions. For at least three decades, this was the only way that artists knew how to function as artists. Until the opening of the now hundreds of galleries in Hanoi, Hue and Ho Chi Minh City, artists could not show their work or be recognized as artists if they did not join the Association. Today, that has changed. Initially, membership was required for all artists wanting to exhibit and travel abroad, but today that condition has been lifted and there are very few advantages to joining. It is now seen as an outdated and outmoded organization but it is still the venue for many of the artists born in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.

## 7.2 The Social Class of Artists

Although the art world generally enjoys "rags to riches" stories, parables that would resonate accurately after the onset of economic reforms in Vietnam, the truth of the matter is that very few artists generally transgress class. Many artists became very

wealthy thanks to the sale of their works, but none genuinely rose from a poor peasant class to a bourgeois elite. From the colonial period through the Revolution and *Đổi Mới*, artists overwhelmingly belonged to the same social class: the educated, cultural elite. The Indochina School of Fine Arts was considered an institution of higher education that would have been accessible only to a small percentage of the population. Students at the school came from educated families. No farmer or rural peasant would have been able to afford to send their child to the school nor would they have had the wherewithal to consider it. This was perpetuated after independence. In spite of the government's effort to make education available to all, the choice of going to art school remained the privilege of the educated elite. This did not mean they were necessarily economically better off than their farmer or working class counterparts, but students choosing to attend art school were primarily children, sons or daughters, of artists, writers, poets or musicians.

During the period between independence and the onset of economic reforms in the 1980s known as the subsidy period (*bảo cấp*), artists united under a common sense of intellect and cultural education. The lack of a gallery system freed them from worrying about selling their works or having to forge relationships with dealers or buyers. Instead, artists bonded at the state-run art exhibition spaces or outside of the official circuits in cafes such as Lâm's or in their homes. These bonds were not created by these circumstances, rather it was understood that artists already belonged to the cultural elite and merely congregated naturally as members of a class that was neither the politburo nor the proletariat. Unable to sell their works, they were nonetheless interested in collecting objects, antiques or each other's work. These were acquired often through trade or clandestine dealings between themselves. Like their Chinese counterparts, Vietnamese intellectuals sought inspiration from the past, their interest in ancient civilizations matched their erudition as the ownership of antiques was testimony to their knowledge. Like a scholar's library, an artist's collection of ancient artifacts displayed his or her connoisseurship and often stimulated discussions among invited guests or visiting students. Furthermore, these objects would have been immediately recognized as emblems of status, displaying the artists' social standing as an intellectual, a middle-class cultured individual. If acquiring consumer goods are signifiers of a middle class in post-*Đổi Mới* Vietnam, during the subsidy period, antique ceramics, bronzes or other archaeological artifacts were markers of the educated middle class in socialist terms.

During my initial period of extended fieldwork in Vietnam in the 1990s, I visited many artists' studios and nearly always encountered artists' collections of ancient objects and heard stories of their acquisition. Most artists collected ceramics and traveled to ceramic-making villages and archaeological sites to acquire pots. I often attended discussions of these finds. It had appeared to me that certain artists found ceramics more intriguing than images of modern or contemporary art that they could encounter in magazines and newspapers from abroad. Collecting antiques was a practice shared by nearly every artist I met. And while it did give the impression that artists were more attached to their own cultural heritage than to learning about the international art world, the truth of the matter is that these forays into art collecting



earned them not only the respect of their peers but also contacts with outsiders. In the mid to late 1990s as the country opened up to the outside world, the number of tourists and foreign material coming into the country began to increase and artists started to make their own travels abroad. Their collecting practices gradually began to change. Many artists abandoned collecting ceramics and preferred to consume fashion or electronic gadgets from their trips to China or Europe. Those that did continue their acquisitions often did so anachronistically or out of defiance, against prevailing trends towards the contemporary and in seeking a desire to connect with the past or what they perceived as a more “traditional” Vietnamese culture.

That was certainly the case with one artist whom I will call Cường to respect his privacy. Cường, the son of a revolutionary period painter who had been a war widow, studied painting at the Hanoi University of Fine Arts and had married the daughter of a well-known Hanoi historian. Cường grew up modestly but since he married into an intellectual family, in the 1990s he had taken an interest in ceramics. By the mid-1990s, he was not only a collector but a dealer and self-taught scholar as well. His paintings consisted mostly of still-lives of his own ceramic collection to which he added antique furniture and ancient architecture. By 2000, Cường had also taught himself to use computer graphics and digital architectural drawing. In 2003, he was commissioned to design a hotel using ancient architectural designs for a resort on the island of Phú Quốc. He also built his own house on land he purchased in the province of Bắc Ninh, an area some 100 kilometers from Hanoi known for traditional carvings, folk music and ceramic making. His house resembled a country villa, a temple, a neo-traditional mansion complete with fishponds and jackfruit trees (Fig. 7.1).



**Fig. 7.1** An artist's house in Bắc Ninh, photograph by the author



What is intriguing about Cường is that his appearance in no way reveals these interests in traditional architecture. He always wears jeans, leather jackets and rides fancy German motorcycles. He only smokes imported cigarettes and loves pasta. Most of his friends are foreign and he somehow earns a living through his traditionalist ventures. For many of his clients, he embodies traditional values and yet, he is far from being a traditional person. He is not a farmer. He was educated in Hanoi and spends more time surfing the Internet than he does reciting poetry. He is by all measures a modern person. He has even nicknamed his son Jim and his marriage is very open. He barely sees his wife and hangs out in beer pubs with expatriate friends. Cường is an example of a new breed of Vietnamese middle-class art collectors. He is genuinely interested in ancient objects precisely because he is so removed from them, they are truly exotic for him and they embellish his lifestyle. They are testimony to his wealth, certainly, but also to his knowledge and most importantly to his taste. He has created an aesthetic that matches the displays in furniture stores and boutiques around the city. These shops showcase colonial memorabilia, Indochinoiseries and Vietnamese-ries to appeal to foreign tastes for the oriental and exotic. I am not sure, however, if Cường is trying to sell something to his foreign friends and therefore playing up his tastes for traditional wares or if he virtually became one of them and displayed his social status and consequently middle-class values by following the same tastes or acquiring the same tastes as them out of emulation for their status.

Taste is an elusive concept. Bourdieu (1979), in his study of some French households' preferences for opera, classical music or rock and roll, concluded that taste was intrinsically tied to social class. Cường's tastes for the oriental and exotic seems rather anachronistic and yet, it does follow a similar pattern. In the 1990s, social class was determined not technically by your financial holdings but by your connections to outsiders and precisely by your acquisition and preferences for imported goods. This was an idea that had emerged already prior to *Đổi Mới* during the subsidy period when black market goods from Eastern bloc countries were regarded as the privilege of the upper class elites, the party cadres. As Dương Thu Hương highlighted in her novel, *Paradise of the Blind*, it became extremely important for families to acquire Russian chocolate or Hungarian cheese if they wanted to impress their guests, especially for wedding banquets and funerals (Dương Thu Hương, 1988). At the exhibition on the subsidy period held at the Vietnamese Museum of Ethnography during most of 2006–2007 year, Russian clocks and bottles of vodka were integrated into a display of a cadre family's apartment to symbolize the importance of these possessions in defining class and status. In the 1990s, the young and fashionable were wearing imported clothes, riding foreign motorcycles and learning English. Indeed, the more "foreign" you looked the more you could transcend your social class and the less recognizable your background could be. Cường's modest upbringing certainly did not protrude as he sat in cafes discussing ceramics from the Ly dynasty and drank German beer.

Vietnam scholars have been interested in Vietnamese notions of themselves versus the world, the dichotomy of "ta" and "Tây" or what is "ours" and what is Western or foreign for some time (Malarney, 2002; Leshkovich, 2006; Drummond, 2004). Since the colonial period, there have been attempts to define what is uniquely

Vietnamese in contrast to the foreign or French and Chinese (Marr, 1981). But the influx of tourism at the end of the 20th century has also brought about new sets of models to reject and emulate, and the foreigner does not become a source of competition but rather a consumer of Vietnamese goods (Kennedy & Williams, 2001). Contact with the outside world of course also means the Vietnamese become consumers of foreign goods and this translates into a more equitable exchange of values and cultural goods. Cường's example illustrates the influence of ideas or more specifically, the idea of art, into the Vietnamese public sphere. Cường's taste for Vietnamese antiquities signals a different condition altogether. His interest in village culture signals a kind of primitivism that is directly related to the condition of modernity. Because he is an urban dweller, the rural scenery appears exotic and different. Desiring those goods aligns him with the ideas of the early European modernists who looked to Africa for "authentic" art to help propel them into modernity.

### 7.3 The Artist as a Middle-Class Male

Bình, an older artist – also not his real name to protect his identity – did not follow quite the same route as Cường. Bình, an abstract painter from the South born in 1949, had always wanted to go to Paris. During the war, his attempt to cross the Cambodian border ended with him in jail for nearly two years. His love of France and French art never dissipated. He managed finally to make a trip there in the 1990s and gazed directly into the paintings by his idol of French abstraction Pierre Soulages Nicholas de Stael. But, as a successful painter, with some income to spare, his first art purchases were not French paintings but rather Cambodian statues. One could speculate that he did this out of revenge for the time he spent in a border prison, but perhaps his admiration for Angkor period art may resemble Cường's love for Vietnamese ceramics (Fig. 7.2). In many ways, Bình's desire was to be French and hence, he took on France's love affair with Angkor Wat. His possession of Khmer statues is a display of his erudition and knowledge but also reveals him to be somewhat colonialist, a desire to gain power over the Cambodians in owning their heritage. While Vietnamese ceramics and Khmer statues certainly have an influence in Cường and Bình's works, being art collectors has given them a certain sense of superiority over some of their peers. Their acquisitions have enabled them to transcend the ordinary Vietnamese social world and allowed them to equal foreigners in their tastes and capital power. So, why aren't these artists buying contemporary art like many of the foreigners who come to Vietnam and visit galleries and artists' studios? Perhaps because contemporary artists are their peers and the last thing they want is to enrich the pockets of their rivals.

These artists consume a *mélange* of local and Western goods in the name of culture, erudition and social status. These goods include antiques as well as European fashions and Japanese motorbikes. They are not simply middle class by their trade. They are middle class by their tastes and their education. Artists have long belonged



**Fig. 7.2** An artist's collection of Khmer statues, photograph by the author

to the ranks of the intellectual elite. By going to art school and becoming artists, they are merely perpetuating their parents' upbringing and social status. They are not exchanging one class for another. One cannot speak of social mobility in the case of artists. There are, however, varying levels of wealth among them. Many artists earn more than others, some artists even earn next to nothing compared with those who routinely earn thousands of dollars for their work. Those who have earned considerably more than others have also been accused of selling out to the market or even betraying their middle-class status and joining the ranks of the *nouveaux-riches*, scorned for their love of capital. One such example is a lacquer painter from a relatively modest background who married the daughter of a flower cultivator. What began as a modest practice of making paintings on lacquer turned into very lucrative enterprise, employing a large staff of artisans churning out paintings like factory work earning the scorn of the art world. His newfound wealth and business approach to art did not win over his peers for he had transgressed the modest intellectual background of his contemporaries and moved into the world of the *nouveaux-riches* peasants. His example illustrates that, no matter how successful an artist is, he must remain within the boundaries of what is considerable acceptable for the middle class: modest earnings, but above all, modest ambitions.

Similarly, the artist Thành Chương, like Cường, the son of an educated cultural elite family, became rich suddenly in the late 1990s after selling hundreds of paintings to the Daewoo company to adorn the 1,000 rooms of their newly-built hotel. In 2003, he built himself a compound outside of the city with pavilions, temples and courtyards based on traditional architecture. He turned his property into a theme park, inviting the public to picnic there and visit free of charge.



Fig. 7.3 Thanh Chương restaurant, photograph by the author

(Today, however, he charges VND 70,000 per person or US 4.00 at the 2009 rate of exchange.) In 2009, he created a web site that describes it as “Thành Chương’s Viet Palace,” and built a restaurant on the premises (Fig. 7.3) ([www.thanhchuongartist.com.vn](http://www.thanhchuongartist.com.vn)). Shortly after it was built, it quickly earned the name “phủ” or “palace” with Chương as its lord ruling over his fiefdom. This nickname was not flattering and his reputation as an artist, like that of the previously-mentioned artist, suffered.

It is interesting to note that these artists are predominantly male. Gender biases in the art world have been the subject of previous research (Taylor, 1996, 2004, 2007) but it is important to raise the issue again here. All the artists mentioned in this essay are men and are married, several have mistresses; their wives and girlfriends partake in their social roles. Some have married women of similar class backgrounds and others have used their marriage to transcend their class of origin. The “Lord” mentioned earlier has married twice and his second wife is a well-known film actress. These social advantages brought about by marriage go both ways. The women, too, benefit from their marriages to artists. Rarer are those women artists who have gained social class prominence independently of their marriage. Single women artists, in other words, rarely have a chance to be economically and socially successful on their own prior to marriage for marriage is a way of establishing class. Wealthy women in Vietnam are usually business women. Some women artists are divorced and their financial success contributed to the downfall of their marriage, for their husbands do not like to compete with them.

These artists share similarities with two notable artists in Thailand, Thawan Duchanee and Chalermchai Kositpipat. Both have built monuments on their personal estates out of the profits made from the sales of their art work. Thawan built a house that looks like a temple in his hometown of Chiang Rai. He painted

the structure black and adorned it with buffalo horns and neo-traditional symbols. Chalermchai built his own “temple” in Chiang Mai. In contrast to Thawan’s, the structure is an ornate bleached-white building that resembles a traditional temple from afar but is decorated with elements that would never appear on a conventional temple such as severed arms projecting upwards like sprouting branches and overgrown foliage. While both artists claim to be making merit in building these structures, making offerings to the Buddha, the buildings have been interpreted as blatant examples of the overblown ego of the artist, self-aggrandizing strategies on the part of the artists (Gamache, 2008). This can be said too of the “Lord’s” estate and its museum-like qualities.

In addition to those artists who earn a living, large or small, from their art, there are those artists who have profited from the transformations in the art world in other ways besides money. One artist whom I will call *Đàn*, for example, makes little money and lives modestly with his parents, wife and children in a government-deeded house. But he is an influential figure in the art world, organizing community programs for artists, workshops on contemporary art and projects that promote avant-garde art practices. His parents were cultural workers during the subsidy period. His mother was a stage actress and his father a cameraman for the national television service. He grew up playing music and drawing. His sister is a professional pianist. No matter how poor they were, art and culture came first in their household. Because he did not come from a peasant or working class background, he learned to value art and did not find it necessary to sell out to the commercial art business. Like *Cường* and *Bình*, he prefers to maintain a bourgeois lifestyle that remains within the boundaries of “good taste.” He will not compromise his artistic values for the sake of capitalism and yet, he is firmly entrenched in middle-class values. These values are not attached to money, but to cultural capital.

Rather than acquiring middle-class status, artists have always in some sense been middle-class. They have always belonged to the intellectual class with modest capital earnings but in recent years, they have been able to show off their status and their gains through real estate purchases and mingling with the international jet-set. What has changed is the class structure itself and artists, like others, have had to adapt to it (see [Chapter 1](#), this volume). While they long belonged to the intellectual elite, they did not earn money from their art until well into the post-*Đổi Mới* period. Once they started to sell their works, they could perpetuate their intellectual class status and use their earnings toward bourgeois purchases such as real estate, antiques, books and leisure time. They could distinguish themselves from their nouveaux-riches peasants who would spend their money on karaoke bars, television sets, and lottery tickets. In this way, artists may not conform to the *Đổi Mới* narrative of transition from socialism to capitalism, and neither do art collectors. Artists have always been somewhat marginal to mainstream society and national values, but they have consistently contributed to the consumption of culture. They feed a desire for visual representation of the country, they are the main ambassadors for Vietnamese art and culture abroad, they collect antiques and support each other’s work and they have created a visible class of thinkers and intellectuals that is unrivaled in the academic community. Their marginality is relative. They may not contribute to the capital

growth of the country, but they are key players in the movement toward a civil society. Artists who are not attached to earning money from their art are very involved in promoting freedom of expression and middle-class values of individuality and independence of spirit and creativity.

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## Chapter 8

# Banking on the Middle Class in Ho Chi Minh City

Allison Truitt

By 2007, automated teller machines (ATMs) had sprung up all over Ho Chi Minh City. The rapid expansion was notable given that as late as 1999, only a few machines were in working order.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the first machines were almost exclusively owned by foreign banks and connected their users to vast global digital networks. Vietnamese citizens were prohibited from opening accounts at these banks. Yet even though the machines were all but off-limits, residents were still aware of their power and promise. “You just put in a card and cash comes out,” one man explained to me, expressing wonder at the magic of making money appear so easily.

The ATM promised more than a self-service technology for accessing cash. It also linked Vietnamese consumers to a powerful social imaginary of modernity organized around the values of convenience, mobility, and technology. Journalists touted the cards as symbols of “civilization and modernity” in which purchasing power was condensed into a discrete card (Tuổi Trẻ, 2008a). Newspapers featured tutorials on proper etiquette when using the machines (Tuổi Trẻ, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a). ATMs were more than a self-service device; they were a source of modern self-expression (Giddens, 1991).

In this chapter, I analyze how banking technologies and government policies have produced the new middle class in Vietnam. I show how the expansion of the ATM network was driven not entirely by consumer demand. It was also “engineered” by the Vietnamese state (Tomba, 2004), specifically a government decree that required all state employees to receive their salaries through the domestic banking system. Employees would have a round-the-clock means of accessing their salaries through these machines. Significantly, this decree was not intended to widen access to financial services but rather to reduce cash transactions and bolster the domestic credit

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<sup>1</sup> The first bankcards were introduced by Vietcombank in 1996, but they were limited in scope (Tuổi Trẻ, 2007c).

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market.<sup>2</sup> By the beginning of 2008, ATMs, once associated with the values of convenience and security, were dogged by complaints of technological failures and cash shortages. The rapid expansion of the ATM network in Ho Chi Minh City and its subsequent failure, I argue, provides a screen for the vexed relations of the urban middle class and state-sponsored economic liberalization in Vietnam's south. By enrolling ordinary citizens as bank consumers, the Vietnamese government exposed how the new urban middle class was not yet linked to the global economy but still mired within the domestic monetary context.

## 8.1 Formations of the Middle Class

Much analytical attention has been given to the urban middle class in Asia as a consumer class (Chua, 2000; Lett, 1998; Li, 2006). In India, for example, the “new middle class” has been constructed as an advocate for globalization (Fernandes, 2006, p. xviii). Outside of Asia, however, scholars have depicted the fragility of purchasing power as a source of identity. In Brazil and Russia, class formation is consequently unsettled by constantly shifting social imaginaries (O’Dougherty, 2002; Patico, 2008). Despite the importance of consumption as an analytical paradigm, little attention has been paid to banking and financial services as a site of class formation. One reason for this oversight is the common assumption that all money is fungible, especially within a national context (Guyer, 2008, p. 3). Scholars of modernity (Giddens, 1991) emphasize how expanding money economies reduce the obligations associated with traditional bonds of kinship or community but neglect how access to banking and financial services is unevenly distributed. Consequently, many analyses conflate money, cash and capital without reckoning how new forms of debt and instruments of credit are reshaping notions of sociality (for a review of anthropological analyses of credit and debt see Peeble, 2010). How then are banking and financial services, arguably integral to modernity, producing new forms of class?

In both Vietnam and China, state-sponsored economic liberalization policies and social imaginaries based on global consumption patterns have converged in the formation of a new urban middle class. In China, policies to stimulate economic growth have depended on the rehabilitation of the well-off (Anagnost, 2008), while this rehabilitation has, in turn, privileged models of social well-being based on an urban middle class. The banking industry is thus an important site for investigating the interaction between state-led development and class formation. Consider, for example, how state-subsidized housing in “Hopetown,” a suburb of Beijing, contributed

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<sup>2</sup> In 2006, the Vietnamese Prime Minister signed a decision to approve the “scheme on non-cash payment in Vietnam in the 2006–2010 period (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2006).” The decision encouraged the development of networks that would accept non-cash payment instruments such as debit or smart cards. It also called for formulating a policy for paying salaries via non-cash pay instruments.

to producing the new middle class. In the early 1990s, people were initially reluctant to purchase their already-subsidized housing. Within a few years, these same subsidies combined with a speculative real estate market to turn access to low interest loans into a wealth multiplier (Tomba, 2004, p. 4).

In Ho Chi Minh City, status is often mediated by foreign goods that invoke global life-styles and consumption habits. Holding an ATM card initially signaled membership in the global economy as the machines in the 1990s were connected to foreign-owned banks. Later, retail banks in Ho Chi Minh City drew on the appeal of foreignness for customers seeking new opportunities for spending and saving, while the Vietnamese government promoted non-cash payment systems as part of its efforts to govern the economy. As I demonstrate in this chapter, these state-sponsored policies did not liberate consumers from a cash-based economy but instead increased the risks and vulnerabilities of ordinary citizens. It is thus important to distinguish the domestic deregulation of financial markets from broader generalizations about the internationalization or globalization of financial services (Claessens & Glaessner, 1998). For this reason I focus on enrollment in domestic banks as a marker of middle-class identity in Ho Chi Minh City.

## 8.2 Banking and the Revolution

Since the late 1990s Vietnam has been ranked among the fastest growing economies in Asia. Economists and bankers refer to Vietnam as one of Asia's most "under-banked economies," because of the limited availability of mainstream banking services. Such availability is often deployed as a measure of economic development.<sup>3</sup> Banking systems, like economic development, are understood within evolutionary paradigms (see Chick, 1993) that rarely take into account specific national histories or political contexts. In Ho Chi Minh City, also known as Saigon, such paradigms can be misleading. The problem of "under-banking" has been complicated not only by the lack of access to banking services, but also by popular mistrust of the predominantly state-owned banking sector. Restoring people's confidence in the banking sector has thus been an important, but elusive, component in reforming the Vietnamese economy.

The urban middle class in Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City has long been constituted through a complicated relationship to foreign capital, global markets, and state techniques for governing the economy. In the 1960s, Saigon, the capital of the Republic of Vietnam, was buoyed by U.S. economic policies designed to foster an urban middle class. Almost 30 different banks, including the Bank of America and Chase Manhattan, had branches in the city. Government officials, military officers, and other professionals that comprised the urban middle class of Saigon were consumers of bank services. The imprint of this history can still be seen today. A banker with

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<sup>3</sup> While formal financial sectors serve a majority of the population in developed countries, the World Bank estimates that only 20% of the population in most developing countries is served.

the Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation advised me to look closely at State Bank of Vietnam building located near the Saigon River. On the front gates, he said, were the bank's initials. There the British note-issuing bank had been headquartered for more than 100 years from 1870 to 1975.<sup>4</sup> The bank's return to Ho Chi Minh City in 1995 heralded the country's re-integration into the global capitalist economy. For some residents, its return served as a reminder of twenty-year absence of a viable banking sector.

The foreign banking community anticipated the collapse of the Saigon-led regime in 1975. By late April of that year, the representatives of all three American banks had fled the country with their dollar deposits and photocopies of the bank's ledgers on a chartered Pan-Am 707, leaving only local currency in the bank vaults.<sup>5</sup> After April 30th, residents in the city could no longer access their deposits. Rumors spread throughout the city that the currency issued by the Saigon-led regime would soon be worthless. In September 1975, the new regime withdrew the physical stock of currency and replaced it with a "transitional currency" that circulated in southern Vietnam. People were required to convert a fixed amount of the old currency for the new transitional currency. While the new government allowed banks to re-open in November, the majority did not have enough in reserves to return deposits to their account-holders (Nguyễn, 1998).

Even thirty years later, people still recalled the banking services they had used before 1975. They described how they had suffered as "banked citizens," having lost their wealth in bank safety-deposit boxes or savings accounts, unlike the "unbanked," who wore their personal wealth in the form of gold jewelry. Such stories of the disappearance of banked wealth versus the display of embodied wealth emphasized how people's experiences in post-war Vietnam were shaped, in part, by their inclusion within capitalist financial systems.

After 1975, people in Ho Chi Minh City had to rely on cash transactions, a rupture in the conventional evolution of money from paper currency to digital transactions. Confidence in the newly issued currency was hindered by the post-war disunification of money. Rather than unifying prices under its sign, the Vietnamese dong was fractured by the government's two-price policy. In the state-sector, prices were low, but goods were scarce, while in "free markets," prices were higher but goods were available. This disunification affected not only ordinary Vietnamese citizens, but also state-owned enterprises. Work units were forced to purchase goods in the "free markets" in order to provide workers with subsidized goods. In 1983, the government attempted to fix this untenable fiscal policy by monetizing wages. The State Bank then withdrew the entire inventory of physical currency and issued a new series of notes, which sparked higher prices as people scrambled to exchange their rapidly devaluing currency into goods that would hold value. The resulting

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<sup>4</sup> HSBC first established a representative office in Ho Chi Minh City in 1992 and then one in Hanoi six months later. It opened its first branch office in 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Time, Executive Flight, April 21, 1975.

hyper-inflation has been widely attributed to as one factor that prompted the Sixth Party Congress to initiate economic reforms in 1986.

### 8.3 Reforming the Banking Sector

One goal associated with *Đổi Mới* (“Renovation”) was to stabilize the value of the Vietnamese dong. In 1988, the State Bank of Vietnam was granted powers to stabilize the currency and promote economic development (Kouvsted, Rand, & Tarp, 2005, p. 12). The following year, the Vietnamese government devalued the Vietnamese dong and removed price subsidies to curb inflation. A National Law on Banks allowed the establishment of private commercial banks and branch offices of foreign banks. Since then, the Vietnamese state has taken steps towards liberalizing the domestic financial sector, but it has also imposed barriers to the full internationalization of financial services, limiting the activities of foreign banks (Kouvsted et al., 2005). The political project of enrolling citizens in *domestic* banks has been part of a post-reform strategy for governing the Vietnamese economy.

In spite of the veneer of reform, residents in Ho Chi Minh City remained skeptical of the largely state-owned banking sector. Their wariness was rooted not only in post-war experiences, but also the early state-led attempts to revive the domestic credit market. Credit cooperatives in 1990 offered high rates of interest on deposits, up to 15% per month (Fforde & De Vylder, 1996; Kouvsted et al., 2005). The State Bank’s reduction of subsidies eventually triggered a run on deposits throughout the country, thus reinforcing people’s lack of faith and confidence in the formal financial sector (Kouvsted et al., 2005, p. 16).

Many citizens relied instead on financial institutions outside governmental control. These institutions constituted the “second” or informal economy and included intra-household transfers, *hụi* or rotating credit associations, pawn shops, and “hot loans.” These arrangements generated credit around reputation. For example, rotating credit associations depended on the internal coordination of a group of people, most often women, and the reputation of the organizer. People also channeled savings to purchase US dollars and gold bars, as an alternative store of value to the state-issued Vietnamese dong.<sup>6</sup> The Vietnamese government’s tacit acceptance of the U.S. dollar as a quasi-legal currency within the domestic economy helped to stabilize monetary policy by bringing domestic savings into state-owned banks. By 1991, almost 40% of all bank deposits were denominated in dollars, leading the World Bank and the International Monetary fund (Dodsworth et al., 1996) to classify Vietnam as an “informally dollarized economy.”

In the mid-1990s, joint-stock banks offered Vietnamese citizens an alternative to state-owned banks. These banks promoted new forms of consumers and

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<sup>6</sup> Three factors made it easier for Vietnamese citizens to hold US dollars. First, domestic banks offered time deposits denominated in foreign currency; second, the rouble-based trade was replaced by trade and investment in US dollars; and third, the US dollar was a hedge against future devaluations of the dong (Kouvsted et al., 2005, p. 23).

retail-oriented banking for Vietnamese citizens. One of the most popular banks was the Asian Commercial Bank widely known by its acronym, ACB. Despite its English name, the bank was not a foreign-owned bank, but a joint-stock bank. ACB heavily promoted its own bank cards in association with a chain of supermarkets. Many of its advertisements featured references to the global consumer economy in which shopping was not a daily errand, but a source of pleasure and an expression of selfhood. ATM and debit cards appealed to the desires of Vietnamese citizens for membership within a globalized economy. Few people, however, qualified for international credit cards that were linked to global payment systems.

In spite of the expansion of retail banking, people still had few options for *spending* money other than as cash. Consumers could store their money in the bank and access their deposits via ATMs, but they were still limited in how they could spend money. Most people relied on cash payments that depended on face-to-face transactions, a method that was practical but also time-consuming and limited the creation of a domestic credit market.

By the late 1990s, policy-makers and economists regarded the cash economy as an impediment to economic growth. Because cash issued by the State Bank of Vietnam circulated outside the formal banking system, it could not be reconstituted as credit-money through the creation of new forms of debt. Moreover, the predominance of cash transactions reinforced Vietnam's status as a less-developed nation, easily corrupted by the unregulated circulation of money in the country's expanding economy. Even the rapid growth of the money supply through the influx of US dollars and other foreign currencies signaled a loss of political sovereignty. Cash—now constructed as loose, unregulated, and traceless—became a target for regulation in the anti-corruption drive.

Vietnamese consumers were not the only ones who expressed frustration with the limited availability of financial services. International lenders like the IMF and the World Bank expected the Vietnamese government to ensure monetary transactions were ordered and legible, although bankers themselves were hardly not immune from accusations of corruption (Gainsborough, 2003a). In response, the Vietnamese government pledged to increase non-cash transactions and promote new payment systems. An interbank payment system funded by the World Bank was intended to integrate economic exchanges across wider distances and over time, thereby facilitating economic transactions. What was still needed, however, were bank customers. The enrollment of citizens into banked customers was thus part of wider state-sponsored project for governing the economy.

## 8.4 Banking on the Middle Class

In 2007 the Prime Minister issued instructions for implementing non-cash payment systems. Salaries of state employees as well as other beneficiaries paid directly from the state budget would be deposited into personal bank accounts.<sup>7</sup> The decree was

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<sup>7</sup> Directive No. 20/2007/CT-TTg dated August 24 on paying salary via bank accounts to those who are paid from the state budget (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2007).

a key event in enrolling “unbanked” citizens as “banked” customers, which in turn was part of a broader governing strategy to ensure that state transactions were legible, traceable, and legitimate. Initially limited to the two largest cities of Vietnam, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the decree projected that by 2008, all state employees who lived in areas with banking services would be enrolled in the new network of payments. By 2010, the goal was to open 20 million personal bank accounts and reduce cash payments to 18% (Tuổi Trẻ, 2007a). Enrolling citizens in domestic banks was not based on financial inclusion, but rather a policy initiative to reduce cash transactions and create a system for orderly and legible economic exchanges.

Initially, the state decree appeared to converge with the aspirations of the urban middle class in Ho Chi Minh City. The ATM had already been elevated to a symbol of modernity by various agents including joint-stock banks, the mass media, foreign companies, and even the World Bank. Part of the allure of the ATM was its link to foreign banks. The first international ATM was installed by the Hong Kong Banking Corporation in Ho Chi Minh City in 1996 to provide services to foreign investors and cultivate a transnational capitalist class.<sup>8</sup> Even as late as 2001, the only functional ATMs in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam, belonged to foreign-owned banks. Through the 1990s, most ATM-card holders were foreigners or Vietnamese citizens employed by foreign companies. The machines were even designed to dispense both US dollars and the Vietnamese currency until the State Bank required that all ATMs dispense the national currency.<sup>9</sup>

This social history diverges from representations of ATMs in the United States where the machines are regarded as little more than cash dispensers. First introduced in 1967, ATMs were described as “holes in the wall.” Physically attached to bank branches, the machines were designed to eliminate labor costs associated with tellers. The emphasis was not on connectivity, but rather on reducing the operational costs around handling money by promoting self-service. Today ATMs remain one of the primary means for people to access cash, and the U.S. banking industry still views ATMs as “strictly about cash on the run” (Bielski, 2007).

In Asia, by contrast, ATMs are part of an imaginary of global mobility and connectivity. ATMs as well as cell phones constitute what Qui and Thompson (2007) call “mobile modernities,” based on a new configuration of social, technological, and cultural realities. Encoded with advanced functions (i.e., remittance services and bill payment), ATMs and cell phones allow users to bypass older payment systems like check writing and making deposits in traditional banks. In Japan, the popularity of smartcard technology to facilitate digital money has been linked to the cultural value of *tokushita* (Mainwaring, March, & Maurer, 2008), whereas in India

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<sup>8</sup> Vietcombank had installed two ATMs in Ho Chi Minh City in 1994, but the machines could only be used by customers of that bank. Moreover, people I interviewed in 2003 recalled that the machines were chronically out of order or out of cash.

<sup>9</sup> Machines were limited to dispensing a maximum of 40 notes per transaction. At that time, the largest note in circulation was the 50,000-dong note (approximately US\$ 3.50). In 2003, the State Bank of Vietnam issued higher denominated notes, including the 100,000-dong note and later the 500,000-dong note and then the 200,000-dong note.





**Fig. 8.1** Setting up the ATM network. Photograph by the author

the expansion of mobile networks for remitting money has benefited established micro- and small enterprises (Donner & Escobari, 2010).

When I returned to Ho Chi Minh City in 2007, I was surprised by the sheer number of ATMs around the city. By July of that year, more than 3,800 machines were said to be in operation, while over 6.5 million ATM cards had been issued by 27 commercial banks (Fig. 8.1). The vast majority of customers used debit cards, almost 92.5% (Tuổi Trẻ, 2007d), even though the machines were advertised in promotional literature and the mass media as a convenient portal to a global consumer economy. The expansion of ATM networks generated new habits of storing money. People no longer stored money in their own homes but entrusted their personal wealth to banks. Several people showed me not one but multiple ATM cards. One man explained that he used one ATM card for accessing his salary and another card for receiving money sent from family members living outside Vietnam. A woman in her 30s employed by a municipal agency complained that she could not yet receive her salary as a banked deposit, unlike her sister who received her regular salary through the bank as an employee of a foreign company. Did then the ATM deliver on its promise to deliver cash to the middle class, offering them new ways of storing and handling money?

The expansion of ATMs was a response to a governing strategy to create a banked payment system premised on the order of advanced capitalist societies. Advanced capitalist societies were an idealized model against which the pathologies of Vietnam as a “less developed” nation could be measured. And while the machines themselves were signifiers of global connectivity the machines operated



within a specific economic culture. The ATMs seemed to embody the promise of cash availability 24 hours a day, but by 2007, people had begun to voice concerns. Most of the ATMs were clustered in urban centers, particularly around major supermarkets, department stores, and outside bank branches. Within only a few weeks of implementing the governmental decree, the ATM was transformed from a promise of readily accessible cash to a technological failure.

## 8.5 Sorry, Out of Cash

In the months leading up to 2008, ATMs were promoted as a quick, secure, and convenient way to access cash. Machines were set up in supermarkets and outside banks around Ho Chi Minh City. Within weeks, the heavily promoted ATM was no longer lauded as a machine of convenience; it was instead ridiculed as an obstacle to people receiving their wages. The ATM, which had once appealed to the desires of global economic integration, now left people standing in front of screen that read “out of cash.”

The almost overnight expansion of users contributed to a breakdown of ATMs across Ho Chi Minh City. Banking officials were interviewed by journalists to explain the myriad of problems with accessing cash. One official blamed the shortage of cash on the city’s traffic problem. Another attributed it on the demand for cash at the lunar New Year. Still others pointed out that the number of machines was still low for the number of cards that had been issued, even by regional standards.

By failing to deliver cash, ATMs resurrected complaints that resonated with the by-gone subsidized period: people waited in long lines only to find the machines empty. Newspapers that had promoted the ATM as a site for producing the values of capitalism shifted to recounting people’s frustrations as users. People waited in long lines to try to access their funds from a machine that was either broken down or out of cash. The meaning of “ATM” was transformed into a new moniker, à, *thấy mệt*, or “so damn tired.”

The expansion of the retail banking sector had been achieved, not by a popular movement or consumer choice, but rather by state decree.<sup>10</sup> People who lined up to withdraw cash from the ATM in the first months of 2008 did not do so as willing consumers. Most people were accustomed to receiving their salaries as a lump sum. Yet when thousands of people tried to access their entire monthly salary as soon as it was available, they placed a heavy load on the ATM networks. Some government officials chided the popular habit, but others pointed out that the increased demand also reflected the spending patterns that preceded Tet, the lunar New Year celebration (Tuổi Trễ, 2008b).

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<sup>10</sup> The movement to use ATMs in Ho Chi Minh City resembled what Ellen Hertz (1998) called the “top-down model” of campaigns in China. In her ethnography of the Shanghai stock market in Shanghai, Hertz argues that these campaigns are often referred to as “waves,” in order to generate the appearance of popular acceptance. This model can be applied to the Vietnamese government’s decree to enroll civil servants and pensioners into the domestic banking sector.

Customers, however, complained that the problem were restrictions placed by banks themselves. Some people could not withdraw their entire salary because banks required customers to maintain a minimum amount in their account. In other cases, the ATM would dispense bills in fixed denominations, which meant that many users were not able to withdraw their entire salary. Moreover, the competition among banks had spawned several networks, rather than a single integrated network. Users were restricted to machines affiliated with their particular bank. In a few cases, people had to withdraw money from the ATM outside the very branch where they had opened their account.<sup>11</sup> Others argued because ATMs were clustered in the central districts of the city, people who lived in the outer districts had to travel to the inner district to withdraw their salaries, often using their leisure time to search for a machine stocked with cash.

The sheer demand for cash from these machines culminated in another failure—the ATM out of cash. The phrase, *hết tiền* (“out of money”), is often used by people in Vietnam to explain why they were unable to carry out an obligation or a duty. The phrase is used as a socially significant explanation, yet in the confusion of “my money,” and the “machine’s money,” people regarded the failure of banks to keep the machines supplied with cash as a moral, not a technological, failure.

The ATM did not instill confidence in the banking system. People who received cash from the machine still fretted that the bills might be counterfeit, despite efforts by State Bank of Vietnam to reassure the population by producing a more reliable currency made of polymer. Polymer notes were promoted as more difficult to copy than the previously-issued cotton notes and almost indestructible. They did not tear easily, even given the popular practice of folding one note in half to mark a bundle of ten notes. In Ho Chi Minh City, many banks stocked the ATMs with 200,000-dong notes. People who withdrew their salary from the machines found that while the high denominated notes signaled their participation in the banking system, they also frustrated vendors who were hard-pressed to make change for everyday purchases. The ATM network, rather than reduce cash transactions, instead highlighted the increasing income disparities among residents in the city.

What do these stories of breakdown and technological failure tell us about the middle class in urban Vietnam? The ATM as a site for producing value failed for reasons that illuminate the tensions between state-sponsored economic policies and the aspirations for global connectivity among the new urban middle class in Ho Chi Minh City. While ATMs were initially associated with the global capitalist economy, the state-sponsored campaign to enroll people as bank customers exposed how the machine had not yet liberated people from a largely cash economy. Hence, the public discourse around the machines invoked images from subsidized period—long lines and shortages.

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<sup>11</sup> The State Bank of Vietnam announced plans to build a central bank card switch center by 2009, but most people attributed the highly competitive environment in consumer banking to be a factor in the fragmented network of ATMs.

Still, the machines were instrumental in another important shift. The risk of the transaction was displaced from the employer (e.g., the state) to the consumer. Newspapers reported stories of people who lost their ATM cards or discovered their bank accounts had been wiped out. One of the first widely reported stories of loss was the employee of a security company. Her wallet was stolen along with her ATM card. The bank's investigation ultimately determined that she was responsible for the loss because her pin number was the same as her birthday, which was available on the personal identification card she carried with her ATM card. Other stories reported the frustration of users who tried to access cash but were informed that the machine was not in working order, only to learn later that the amount had been debited from their account (Tuổi Trẻ, 2007b).

The ATM promised readily accessible cash, but it failed to deliver (Tuổi Trẻ, 2008c). Introduced within the social imaginary of global capitalism, the domestication of ATMs contributed to the very breakdown of the network. Because of such failures, ATMs made the new middle class visible in unexpected ways. When the State Bank approved a decree to allow banks to charge their customers fees for withdrawing money, the public outrage was so strong, that the State Bank revoked the order. The State Bank also was forced to rescind the requirement that pensioners use ATMs (Tuổi Trẻ, 2008d).

## 8.6 Conclusion

Banking the unbanked has been promoted by the World Bank and non-government organizations as an important goal in expanding financial services. This goal, however, fails to take into account how the distribution of financial and banking services contributes to inequalities (Sassen, 1998, p. 162). In Vietnam, and in Ho Chi Minh City, the large “unbanked population” is not merely a problem of limited access to financial services. It is also a problem of restoring confidence in the domestic banking sector. The problem of confidence—both in the national currency and in the domestic banking and financial sectors—has been a constant, if overlooked, impediment to economic liberalization in Vietnam. While government policies to modernize the state's payment systems may be aligned with global practices, these policies have often neglected people's strategies of storing, spending, and saving money.

In Ho Chi Minh City, the restoration of confidence in the domestic banking sector has been predicated on creating domestic alternatives to foreign banks. Joint-stock banks have successfully solicited the domestic savings of citizens, in part by offering customers access to symbols of wealth and status, including motorbikes, cars, and even mortgages (Truitt, 2008). By drawing customers into these institutionalized networks banks have been part of a broader social imaginary reshaping consumption habits and projecting images of middle-class lifestyles.

ATMs continue to play a critical part in converting the unbanked Vietnamese middle class into banked consumers precisely because the machines operate at the interface of two disparate payment systems—the cash economy and the banked

economy. Yet the almost overnight enrollment of thousands of people in 2008 created a breakdown signaled by the familiar screen, “out of money.” The failure of ATMs to deliver cash reminded people that they were still situated in a domestic monetary context where cash and confidence was in short supply. While the expansion of ATMs was part of a broader renovation of the social infrastructure of money in Vietnam, this expansion was not yet been accommodated within Vietnam’s consumer economy. ATMs in Ho Chi Minh City reflected the frustrations of the city’s new middle class who were left standing in front of machines that displayed the message, “out of money.”

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## Chapter 9

# When the *Đại Gia* (Urban Rich) Go to the Countryside: Impacts of the Urban-Fuelled Rural Land Market in the Uplands

To Xuan Phuc

### 9.1 Introduction

About 10–15 years ago, the upland areas in Sóc Sơn, Ba Vì, or Lương Sơn, about 50–60 kilometre (km) from Hanoi were predominantly characterized by simple houses with rudimentary facilities inhabited by local people, many of whom were of the Mường and Dao minorities. The situation has changed substantially in recent years. For example, in Minh Phú commune of Sóc Sơn district, luxury villas with expensive amenities such as swimming pools and satellite receivers emerge visibly on hills of ever-green forests, often overlooking rice fields in the valley or beautiful lakes. These villas are protected by concrete walls and heavy gates. The villas do not belong to the villagers, but to people from Hanoi who still work in the city but construct “weekend” villas in the area. In the commune, in less notable locations, lie much smaller houses, often newly-constructed, belonging to the villagers. On a week day, the village road is occupied by motorbikes and a few bicycles. On weekends the village becomes busy with well-dressed people arriving from the city in their shiny Toyota or Nissan cars.

This chapter is about the presence of a particular group of urban rich people who arrive in the “scenic” uplands near the city and construct weekend homes. To the average Vietnamese, these are the *đại gia*. Literally, the term *đại gia* refers those who are wealthy and possess multiple and large properties and abundant consumer goods (người lắm tiền nhiều của), but in everyday and media discourse, the term is used more widely and commonly to talk about those with disposable income and some property, particularly recreational property. To construct their villas, the *đại gia* often buy a large area of land, usually from 0.5 to 2 ha. The presence of the *đại gia* is not peculiar to the upland areas in the north; they are to be found in other “scenic” rural areas near big cities across the country.

In this chapter, I argue that the *đại gia* is a particular group within the greatly expanded middle class emerging after the introduction of the “open door” policy

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(chính sách *Đổi Mới*) in the 1980s. People belonging to the *đại gia* group are different from other people not in terms of the material goods they acquired, especially the fancy expensive villas in the uplands, but in their realisation of the recreational value offered by beautiful landscapes that most Vietnamese cannot possess. Over time, the rural uplands have become an arena for the *đại gia* to articulate and express their distinctiveness within the middle class, while reinforcing their middle-class status. In the rural areas, the arrival of the *đại gia* has substantially changed social relations and local livelihoods in ways which are often characterized by confusion and contradictions.

The fieldwork on which this chapter is based was conducted in different locations near Hanoi over several years. In 2003–2004, I spent three months in Ba Vì commune in Ba Vì district of former Hà Tây province (now Hanoi) to do field work for my PhD research. The land rush driven by the *đại gia* emerged in Sỗ village of Ba Vì commune, as in other communes in the district, at the end of 2004 and in 2005. Between 2005 and 2009 I also made various trips to other villages and areas belonging to Ba Vì district of Hà Tây province, such as Lương Sơn district of Hòa Bình province, and Sóc Sơn district of Hanoi. In the field, I interviewed a number of villagers who had sold their land to urbanites and also some who had not; I also interviewed some *đại gia* who had bought land from the villagers. I talked to land brokers and local officials at village, commune, and district level about their roles and perceptions of the land market. I used observation method to examine physical changes in the village triggered by the land market. Lastly, I used data collected from newspapers and followed media debates over this emerging phenomenon.

## 9.2 *Đổi Mới* and Middle Class in Vietnam

Prior to *Đổi Mới* Vietnam had been characterized as a country with chronic poverty (having a poverty rate of more than 70 percent), information distortion, chronic shortages of basic goods, economic growth stagnation, high inflation rate, and low per capita income (\$US170) (National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities, 2001). The centrally-planned economy, with large-scale production intended to be the driver of the economy, did not work, causing development stagnation. In response to the problem, the government decided to shift from a centrally-planned economy to a market-oriented economy at the end of the 1980s, the so-called *Đổi Mới* policy. Some key aspects of the shift included the abolition of large-scale production particularly agricultural cooperative, loosened state control over trade relations, and permissions for private actors to engage in economic development. The introduction of *Đổi Mới* has made the country's economy take off: the economy grew at 7.5 percent annually during the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s and the poverty rate declined from 58 percent in 1992–1993 to 37 percent in 1997–1998 (Hy Van Luong, 2003), down to 19.5 percent in 2008 (World Bank, 2008).

The market-driven economic changes have produced an urban middle class in Vietnam (Reuters, 2006). Within the country, academic writing on class has



been scant, probably because the government has been using the idea of social egalitarianism (*xã hội công bằng*) as one of the key principles for gaining legitimacy from the public. Thus writing on different classes and class formations in the country would be sensitive. Outside the academy, the term class (*tầng lớp*) or middle class (*tầng lớp trung lưu*) is used in a loose way, usually referring to a wide spectrum of primarily urban residents. Following Reuters (*ibid.*), the middle class is made up of those “who eat at expensive restaurants, own expensive cars, and buy vanity items”. Defining middle class as those who spend 5–7 million Vietnam Đồng (VND) per month (\$US 270–370), the Taylor Nielson Sofres Company’s (TNS) survey on expenditures in Vietnam showed that the middle class in Vietnam expanded to 55 percent in 2006 from 30 percent in 1999.<sup>1</sup> The “middle class” which Reuters and TNS refer to is basically a wide spectrum of urban people with a good source of income who can afford luxury consumer goods. The term, however, does not tell anything about other aspects such as background or taste. Trinh Duy Luan (1993) and Bresnan (1997) (in King, Nguyen An Phuong, & Nguyen Huu Minh, 2008) have argued that the new urban rich are members of three advantaged groupings: people in the positions of administrative power; people who control economic capital; and people with education, experience, and employable skills. In Vietnam, then, the *đại gia* is a particular group of people belonging to a wide spectrum of urbanites with good incomes. The *đại gia* are different in terms of their backgrounds, their social standings, and their consumption and taste.

### 9.3 Arrival of the *Đại Gia* in the Uplands and Their Impact on Land Tenure

In recent years, the landscapes of places such as Minh Phú village in Minh Hiên commune in the upland areas of Sóc Sơn district, about 30 km from Hanoi, have begun to include big villas and houses on stilts (*nhà sàn*) worth billions of VND, located often side-by-side in the most visible and beautiful areas. These houses are usually heavily protected by concrete walls with iron gates, clearly separating them from the rest of the village. Inside the walls, a spacious two to three storey villa or a big wooden house on stilts can be found, typically surrounded by fruit trees, grass, and vegetable gardens. Each of these houses is usually equipped with a satellite receiver that brings in foreign-language channels such as HBO, Star Movies, ESPN sports channel, and world news on BBC or CNN. In front of the house one can generally find a small artificial pond with beautiful lotus flowers, sitting next to a swimming pool. Such a house is usually situated with its back to a pine-covered hill, overlooking either a beautiful natural lake, where in the summer village kids swim in the green water, or rice fields that turn golden during harvest time. All of these paint a pleasant picture of a bucolic yet comfortable countryside characterized by tranquility, cleanliness, privacy, and relaxation.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.massogroup.com/cms/content/view/2743/313/lang,en/>. Accessed 15 December 2009.

Although located in the village, these houses do not belong to villagers, but to the *đại gia*, most of whom are from Hanoi. The *Đại gia* construct these houses for weekend getaways; they maintain their main home and work in Hanoi. The house in the village is usually called either a second home (ngôi nhà thứ hai), second-living space (không gian sống thứ hai), or weekend home (nhà nghỉ cuối tuần). The weekend houses of the *đại gia* can be found in different upland areas near the city such as Sóc Sơn district of Hanoi, Mê Linh and Vĩnh Yên districts in Vĩnh Phúc province, Lương Sơn and Kim Bôi district in Hòa Bình province, or Xuân Mai, Ba Vì, Chương Mỹ districts of Hà Tây province.<sup>2</sup> Figures 9.1, 9.2, 9.3, and 9.4 show some houses in different locations.

The arrival of the *đại gia* has substantially changed control over the land in the villages. Plots of land in good (aesthetically pleasing) locations have changed hands quickly from the villagers to the *đại gia*. High demand for land to build weekend homes has accelerated land prices over a short period of time, producing a land rush (sốt đất) in the upland areas near the city. In 2002, one *sào* (360 m<sup>2</sup>) of forestland in Minh Phú commune of Sóc Sơn district sold for about 90 million VND (around \$US 5,600); in 2003, the price had doubled; and had more than doubled by 2005. A woman from the Ministry of Education and Training in Hanoi bought one ha of



**Fig. 9.1** A plot of land ready for construction of a villa

*Source:* Photo taken by author in April 2009 in Yên Bài commune of Ba Vì district, Hà Tây province

<sup>2</sup> Since August 2008, Mê Linh district, four communes of Lương Sơn district, and the entire area of Hà Tây province have become part of Hanoi as a result of the geographical expansion of the capital.



**Fig. 9.2** A heavy gate and wall of a villa

*Source:* Photo taken by author in April 2009 in Minh Phú commune in Sóc Sơn district, Hanoi



**Fig. 9.3** A villa surrounded by fruit trees and pine trees

*Source:* Photo taken by author in April 2009 in Minh Phú commune of Sóc Sơn district



**Fig. 9.4** A villa under construction

*Source:* Photo taken by author in December 2007 in Ba Vì commune of Ba Vì district, Hà Tây province

land in Minh Phú commune at 300 million VND (\$US 18,500) in 2002, and in 2004 she was offered \$US 75,000 for the land. Land in the most attractive and convenient locations (close to the lake or to the main road) fetches much higher prices than land in less beautiful and less convenient locations. This high market value of the land is driving villagers to sell their land even without permission from the government.<sup>3</sup> In some areas, this land rush has substantially changed physical landscapes, with forests being chopped down and vegetable plots broken into smaller pieces and then sold to the *dại gia* (Vnexpress, 2006). In some areas, large areas of land in protected forest areas assigned to households specifically for forest protection purposes have been illegally sold to *dại gia*.<sup>4</sup> These practices have not gone without media attention. These kinds of illegal transactions in Sóc Sơn district, for

<sup>3</sup> The 1993 Land Law states that land belongs to the state and the state allocates use rights of the land to individuals. Any land transaction has to be approved by the government otherwise it is considered illegal.

<sup>4</sup> The 1991 Forest Protection and Development Law classifies production, protection, and special-use forests. The latter two are designated for protection of watershed, soil, environment, and nature conservation, and protection of ecosystem. The government may contract the land in protection and special-use forest to individual households, not for production purposes (e.g. food crop production) but for forest protection. The Law stipulates that alienation of the land in protection and special-use forest is not allowed. Land transactions occurring in the absence of the government's permission are illegal, with the parties involved in such a transaction subject to fines and/or imprisonment depending on the impact of the transaction on ecosystems.



example, were the subject of journalistic investigation in 2006. There, 650 villas were constructed on the land not legally allowed for housing, which was exposed in the press (Vnexpress, 2006). The government rapidly responded to public pressure, requesting the General Inspectorate and the Ministry of Public Security to conduct careful investigations. Eventually, nine officials from the commune and district were accused of abusing their power to allow illegal transactions and were sentenced to jail. The investigation team also found that most of the owners of the villa were government officials from Hanoi (Vnexpress, 2006).

On the ground, the links between the *đại gia* and the state is clearly shown. A villager of Ninh Môn village of Hiền Linh commune in Sóc Sơn gave me a tour along the village road showing me the house of the *đại gia*. His commentary clearly reflected these links:

This villa belongs to Ông Hùng. . . a journalist in Cầu Giấy [Hanoi]. . . his work requires lots of travel from the north to the south of the country. He only visits this house once a week, or twice a month. . . He has a daughter working at a bank and a son studying in Australia. . . The next two villas belong to friends of his working in the same organization. They often come to the village together. . . That big yellow villa facing the lake belongs to Ông Long at the Department of Energy in Hanoi. . . the one behind it belongs to his brother. . .

One of the most obvious examples of linkages between the *đại gia* and the state is found in Ba Trại commune of Ba Vì district, formerly Hà Tây province. On a 2-ha-plot of forestland sits a huge heavily-guarded villa equipped with fancy amenities. This villa belongs to a top-ranking government official. During my various trips to Ba Vì district, my key informant, a land broker, told me many stories about how he helped a number of government officials from, for example, the Ministry of Industry and Trade, the Vietnam Aviation Association, and the General Department of Customs buy land in the district. My fieldwork in Ba Vì commune revealed a similar and enduring pattern (To Xuan Phuc, 2007, n.d.). In general, it appears that most if not all *đại gia* have some direct connection with the state.

It is not clear if the *đại gia* engaging in illegal practices, particularly in Sóc Sơn district (noted above), were prosecuted, and the names of those *đại gia* were not revealed to public. It may be that this lack of public disclosure around the persecution of these illegal practices stems directly from these links between the *đại gia* and the government. This may, in other words, have been seen as a sensitive issue with the potential to threaten the legitimacy of the state. Across the country, the gap between the rich and the poor has been widening since *Đổi Mới* (Hy Van Luong, 2003; National Centre for Social Science and Humanities, 2001). The ways in which people become rich and the sources of wealth among the well-off is a long-standing matter of interest and preoccupation to the average Vietnamese. Given the widespread corruption to which Vietnam is prone – it was ranked 111th out of 163 countries on the corruption perception index in 2006 (Vietnamnet Bridge, 2007) – the linkage between the *đại gia* and the government confirms the belief of many that the wealth of the *đại gia* actually comes from the state. This belief has been strengthened by high profile corruption cases such as those of Project Management Unit 18 and East-West Avenue belonging to the Ministry of Transportation, among others,

in which a large number of officials had been charged and convicted of corrupt practices.<sup>5</sup>

#### 9.4 What's Motivating the *Đai Gia* to Go to the Uplands?

The *đai gia* only buy land in areas with beautiful landscapes constituted from mountain ranges or natural lakes and streams, convenient for travel, and with cool weather year round (Diendan online, 2009b). They also tend to prefer places near touristic areas (ibid.). As one newspaper account put it, constructing a rural villa and spending weekends in the countryside helps “to harmonize the modern life of successful people; to maximize their spiritual values, to make use of living and relaxing space which is close to nature but still fully equipped with modern facilities meeting [four or five star] standards” (ngoisao.net, 2007). This second home is the place for the *đai gia* to relax on weekends in an open, green space far from the crowded city (VNNeconomy, 22 June 2007). It is also a place for them to “satisfy their desire of individualism” (Diendan online, 2009a). Furthermore, the construction of an expensive villa or a house on stilts equipped with luxury amenities is a way for the *đai gia* to “implicitly show their class and civilized way of life” (Diendan online, 2009b). The beautiful house, equipped with luxury amenities and surrounded by natural beauty and rustic images, helps produce good quality of life for *đai gia* and at the same time, enhances and reinforces their distinction and identity.

These material and cultural goods acquired by the *đai gia* reflect their social standing in Vietnamese society. By consuming the goods associated with cultural values, the *đai gia* are seeking to distinguish themselves from others in society. The *đai gia*'s presence in the uplands has revalorized these areas, turning the uplands from a place of production to an area of recreation, with agricultural and forestry land in the village converted to residential property.

The motivation of *đai gia* taking up a space in the uplands can be attributed to the urban-rural dichotomy conventionally perceived in Vietnamese culture and practice. Drummond and Thomas (2003) argued that urban culture where the *đai gia* usually live expresses a profound and heavily romanticized vision of rural life and “the village” around which it is centered. Following their argument, the romanticised views represent the city as the site of materialism, superficiality, spiritual alienation, and corruption. By contrast, the rural area is the “repository” of traditional values and national identity; life in the village is seen as more peaceful and rural relationships are understood as based on emotion rather than money. The “bad, polluted urban” versus the “good, clean rural” perception may serve as a basis for push and pull factors bringing the *đai gia* to the uplands.

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<sup>5</sup> These million USD high profile corruption cases have been well featured in the country in recent years. There are a large number of government officials committed to corruptive practices from infrastructure projects and have been sent to jail.

Though present in the uplands, the *đại gia* are not necessarily, and not usually, part of village social life. In other words, the *đại gia* do not consider themselves members of the village. In Ba Vì commune, some *đại gia* refused to make cash contributions to upgrade the village road, despite the fact that all the other resident villagers, including many poor households, participated voluntarily in the upgrading fund-raising. One villager referred to these *đại gia* as “very rich but very mean.” My interviews with some *đại gia* who bought land in Ba Vì revealed that they held a strong bias against the villagers. They often used words with negative connotations when talking about their village neighbours, such as *bẩn* (dirty), *mất vệ sinh* (unhygienic), and *lạc hậu* (backward). Some stated that they were scared of living beside villagers who are ethnic minorities. When the *đại gia* travel to uplands, they often bring with them all necessary goods needed for their stay in the village. “They [*đại gia*] never buy anything from here,” said a villager who had a small shop located near a big house of a *đại gia*. This clearly reflects the distinction between different classes and groups in the village. On the one hand, it is the *đại gia*, possessing both material and symbolic values, who try to disassociate themselves from other villagers. On the other hand, the villagers see themselves as having different values and identities from the *đại gia*. Such sharply distinguished self-perception on both sides promises difficulties ahead for the two groups living in the same village.

## 9.5 *Đại Gia* and the Production of Real Estate Companies

High market demand for land in the uplands suitable for weekend homes has motivated a number of real estate companies in Hanoi to go to the uplands and try to grab the plots in good locations. This has triggered substantial impact on the socioeconomic and physical situation of the village. To meet the demand for *đại gia* weekend homes, these companies buy large tracts of land from several adjacent households and then construct infrastructure such as boundaries, roads, water supply and electricity, and they also plant trees and grass. The company then divides the land into small pieces about 1,000–6,000 m<sup>2</sup> each and sells to buyers, at a price of about USD 10–24/m<sup>2</sup>. (Figure 9.1 shows a plot of land ready to be sold to a *đại gia*). The INT Joint-Stock Company in Hanoi, for example, has various weekend-home projects in different districts of Hòa Bình and the former Hà Tây province (ibid.). Another company, Archi Joint Stock Company, has already completed a project in Yên Bái commune of Ba Vì district and sold twelve villas to various *đại gia*.<sup>6</sup> The large profits derived from the project encouraged the company to construct another twenty-one larger villas in the area (ibid.) This company has a number of weekend home projects under construction in Ba Vì and Chương Mỹ districts of the former Hà Tây province, and in Lương Sơn and Kỳ Sơn districts of Hòa Bình province.

<sup>6</sup> Batdongsan.com.vn, 25 August 2009.



The emerging demand on land for weekend homes in the uplands has triggered land grabbing by real estate companies and has had negative impacts on local population. In general, the land grabbing has squeezed local livelihoods; most of the benefits generated from the land market are accrued to the companies. Agricultural land belonging to the villagers of Tiên Xuân commune in Lương Sơn district was expropriated by the government and given to Xuân Cầu Limited Company for a project to construct of weekend homes (vitiinfor.com.vn, 10 June 2008). Villagers were dispossessed of their paddy land, and thus their agricultural income, and compensated at a rate of around 27,000 VND/m<sup>2</sup>. After building some infrastructure such as roads and trees, the company sold the land for 185,000–450,000 VND/m<sup>2</sup>. The villagers' vocal discontent with the way their land was taken away from them and the low compensation they received for land which has brought huge profits to the developers, has produced tensions both between the villagers and local authorities, and between the villagers and the company (ibid.)

## 9.6 Challenging the Conventions

The arrival of the *dại gia* in the uplands has challenged a number of conventional views about the uplands, the country's development process, and the state. Many Vietnamese still hold the notion that the uplands are inhabited by "backward" people, who are plagued by superstitions and resistant to change (Rambo, 2005; Jamieson, Le Trong Cuc, & Rambo, 1998). The low economic development level in the uplands as compared to the lowland has led some Vietnamese scholars to believe that the uplands are experiencing a development crisis, with the upland minorities in a downward spiral (Jamieson et al., 1998; Rambo, 2005). In this view, the uplands peoples are portrayed as a homogenous group of poor and "backward" ethnic minorities, or those from the working class. However, the presence of the *dại gia* in the uplands means this view can no longer hold. The uplands should be seen as a composition of different social and economic classes.

The arrival of the *dại gia* in the uplands highlights the huge gap between the two groups: villagers and "weekenders." Poor villagers struggling to make a living now observe rich urbanites arriving in their villages, constructing huge villas and consuming luxury goods, right on the doorstep, as it were, of their less-well off local neighbours: "They live like kings," some villagers remark. The question of where the *dại gia* get their money has been a preoccupation not only of the villagers but also of the wider Vietnamese public. The strong links between the *dại gia* and the state produce a strong belief that the *dại gia* derive their wealth from the state, but not through their official salaries, which could never support the construction of weekend villas and luxury goods. This can have the potential to challenge the legitimacy of the state. The Vietnamese state has long emphasized egalitarianism as the foundation of its legitimacy with the masses, according to its famous principle, "the state is of the people, through the people, and for the people" (nhà nước của dân, do dân, vì dân). However, the socioeconomic difference and distance between

*đai gia* and the villagers on display in the uplands clearly show that the state as represented in the *đai gia* is of a distinctly different class and lifestyle from the villagers, contesting the idea of the state is of the people, to the people and for the people. The state is not, as it is on display in scenic upland villages, for “the people” but for a select few including the *đai gia*. The legitimacy of the state is even more acutely challenged in particular instances such as the expropriation of agricultural land from villagers at low rates, which is then profitably converted into weekend residential properties for wealthy urbanites.

## 9.7 Conclusion

This chapter has described the process whereby wealthy urbanites, often referred to colloquially as the *đai gia* arrive in the aesthetically pleasing landscapes of the uplands near Hanoi to construct weekend getaways. The chapter does not argue that the process is peculiar to Vietnam; a similar process has been observed, for example, in Thailand. Studying rural-urban linkages in Southeast Asia countries, Rigg (2001, p. xiv) observes a “critical transformation has taken place in the rural area which strongly influences social, spatial, and economic interactions between rural and urban areas and people”. With the arrival of the urbanites in the countryside, the new rural space now is characterized by multiplicity and competition between people and divergent interests. Rural society has diverged, with rural space becoming an objective of competition between producers and consumers; moreover, the use of rural space has been divided among recreational, residential and conservational purposes. Rigg (2005, p. 42) notes, “In the rural area, the consumerist and modernist culture emerges, produced educated, experience of urban life, and consumerist messages conveyed by mass media. These become pressure for rural population to change their consumption preferences and to be modern”.

The arrival of the wealthy urbanites to the rural areas in Vietnam, as I have argued here, has great impacts on social relations and local livelihoods. The motivations of this group of urbanites in going to the uplands reveal that they are much more than “people with a lot of money and abundant properties.” Across Vietnam there are many people who have wealth but do not invest in recreational property in the countryside. The *đai gia* are different not only in terms of the material goods they acquire and display, particularly the expensive villas equipped with luxury amenities, but also in their taste for a certain type of aesthetic landscape to be found in the uplands. In other words, the *đai gia* are a subgroup of people belonging to the middle class characterized by wealth, taste, and, importantly for their disruptive potential, and their links to the state.

With the arrival of the *đai gia* in the uplands, these areas can no longer be considered simply the domain of “backward” and desperately poor ethnic minorities. These are now also “home”, at least part-time, to a particular group of wealthy urbanites who are entirely different from the villagers in terms of their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The appearance of the *đai gia* in the uplands throws two lifestyles

into sharp relief over a geographically-compact terrain. On the one hand are the *đại gia* who “live like kings” and disassociate themselves from the villagers. The uplands are consumed by the *đại gia*, but for the physical landscape only; the local villagers are not considered important figures in the urbanites’ rural idyll. On the other hand are those “inconvenient” villagers who struggle to earn a living; they are often left worse off through the land market which makes their land available as recreational property, and who gain few or no economic opportunities through the presence of *đại gia* in their midst. This obvious gap visibly contests the state’s principle of egalitarianism, highlighting to some degree the state’s failure to be of the people, through the people, and for the people.

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# Chapter 10

## Afterword: Consumption and Middle-Class Subjectivity in Vietnam

Elizabeth F. Vann

How, then, are we to understand Vietnam's middle class, past and present? As these authors have shown, we would do well to avoid approaches which define a universal "middle class" in terms of income, or political liberalism, since these have arguably hindered efforts by scholars to make sense of the specificity and complexity of their subjects' lives. In their introduction to this volume, Bélanger, Drummond, and Nguyen-Marshall encourage us, instead, to understand "middle class" not as a clearly-defined category or set of criteria, but as a far more unstable situation, not unlike what Li Zhang, in her research on the middle class in China has called a "process of 'happening'" (2008, p. 24). Further, they encourage us to see middle classness as marked, among other things, by practices of consumption, and efforts to acquire, or at least associate oneself with, particular "lifestyles." In so doing, they draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984), who argued that class status is formed and maintained through a complex and changing matrix of knowledge and practices, in which mastery of particular aesthetics are as fundamental as access to material wealth. Drawing on the insights of Bourdieu and others, I explore some ways in which this collection of essays might further our understanding of the relationship between consumption, social distinction, and modernity as well as that between consumption, production, the market, and the state. Finally, I consider some of the middle class practices described in this volume in light of recent scholarly discussions about socialism, liberalism and neoliberalism, governmentality, and the public sphere.

### 10.1 Consumption, Modernity, and the Middle Class

As the contributions to this volume make clear, consumer goods and consumption practices have long been central to the articulation of Vietnamese middle-class lifestyles and subjectivities. That class distinctions are formed and articulated

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through consumer goods and consumption practices was fundamental to the work of Bourdieu (1977, 1984) and others (e.g., Hebdige, 1988; Sahlins, 1976; Veblen, 1899/1998) who aimed to show that consumption was not merely the end result of capitalist production, but itself the site and source of extensive social and cultural production and reproduction. This body of work informed scholarship that approaches consumption as essential to the articulation of modern selves and socio-cultural worlds (e.g., Burke, 1996; Friedman, 1995; Comaroff, 1996; Miller, 1995, 1998; Weiss, 1996). Although much of this latter body of work has not been primarily or even explicitly concerned with class difference, it has fed back into discussions of class, such that the appearance of the term “middle class” is often eclipsed by more consumer-centric ones, such as “consumer class,” “consumer society,” and “consumer culture” (e.g., Chua, 2003; Davis, 2000; McKendrick, Brewer, & Plumb, 1983; Patico, 2008; Slater, 1997). Mark Liechty, in his study of consumer-oriented middle-class culture in urban Nepal, makes an argument for why we ought to study the middle class in terms of consumption:

[T]o the extent that middle-class people share a common orientation to capitalist productive processes as consumers of commodities, and to the extent that consumption (with all the social fashioning and practice that the term implies) becomes their primary mode of cultural production, middle-class practice is inescapably consumer practice. Because of their ability to both include and exclude class others, and to both display and conceal class privilege, commodities (and their attendant practices) are the primary currency of middle-class life. (2003, p. 31)

For Liechty, it is not only practices of consumption, but also the place of consumer objects in people’s lives that justify this consumption-oriented approach to middle class. Bourdieu’s work offers important insights here, as well. Rather than conceiving objects as passive and raw materials for the production of human social meaning, Bourdieu recognized that objects play active roles in socializing humans. This idea is essential to his notion of *habitus*: it is through people’s everyday experience of their surroundings—their possessions, their homes, their neighborhoods, and schools—that they come to acquire certain dispositions about themselves and their relations to other people, institutions, and things (Bourdieu, 1977).

In Vietnam’s modern history, however, registers of distinction and taste have been anything but stable. Rapidly unfolding contexts of colonialism, war, socialism, and market reform have made for exceedingly fragile and often fleeting experiences out of which something that might be identified as a “Vietnamese middle-class lifestyle” might be formed. As Bélanger, Drummond, and Nguyen-Marshall discuss, Bourdieu used the term *hysteresis* to describe those situations in which the usually close relationship between *habitus* and *field* is disrupted, typically by abrupt and dramatic changes in field structures. Even in the context of modern French society, though, Bourdieu’s *habitus* was never a static state, as it necessarily responded to and introduced change in what he termed the *field* (and vice versa), such that each was constantly shifting in relation to the other (1977). Nonetheless, Bourdieu held that such changes were usually subtle and gradual, with the effect that, at most times, actors would experience *habitus* and *field* as mutually supportive (1984).

Situations of *hysteresis*, then, require that we consider not only how actors maintain their social, cultural, and economic capital, but how those actors perceive and respond to disruptions in which prior forms of capital are stripped of their social weight. Bourdieu conceptualized *hysteresis* largely in temporal terms, such that the disruption was due to rapid changes in *field* structures but not in *habitus*, with *habitus* “lagging behind” emergent *field* structures (Hardy, 2008, p. 133). It is worth noting, as well, that Bourdieu did not think that all actors would respond equally, or equally well, to such situations of rapid and extensive *field*/*habitus* disruption. Rather, he posited that those actors with higher social, cultural, and economic capital would be most likely to recognize and take advantage of the attendant gaps (Bourdieu, 1984).

Not all moments of *hysteresis* turn out to be opportunities for further social distinction, though. Sometimes social *fields* are turned upside down such that previous forms of social, cultural, and even economic capital lose their value (Bourdieu, 1984). This way of thinking about class distinction and social change is particularly useful when considering Vietnam. For, while there are striking similarities in the descriptions of contemporary and historical Vietnamese middle classes in this volume, we surely cannot explain those similarities in terms of simple historical continuity. As scholars of Vietnamese history have shown, Vietnam’s transition to socialism was intended and experienced as a radical break with the past, in which ideologies, institutions, practices, persons, and things associated, variously, with “traditional” Vietnamese culture, colonialism, capitalism, bourgeois society, and other ways of organizing life that were deemed backwards or foreign were to be abandoned in the pursuit of a new Vietnamese socialist modernity (Marr, 1981; Tai, 1992; Taylor, 2001).

The people whom Dutton, Peters, and Nguyen-Marshall describe in their essays as comprising a Vietnamese middle class in the first half of the twentieth century, were, by 1975, and decades earlier in the urban North, targets of precisely these forms of state criticism and reform. The accumulated wealth, foreign goods, and French-inspired tastes that enabled these individuals and groups to aspire to, and sometimes achieve, levels of social distinction and membership in particular versions of “modern society,” were the very things that made them subject to criticism, punishment, and death at the hands of the new socialist state. This is, of course, not news. The point I’m after here is that Vietnam’s turn to socialism amounted to what Bourdieu (1984) would consider a different sort of break in the social fabric than those that came immediately before and after. While colonialism, socialism, and market reform have all, in various ways, been projects of and about modernity in Vietnam (Brook & Luong, 1997; Gran, 1975; Leshkovich, 2006; Lockhart, 1996; Marr, 1981, 2003; McHale, 2004; Tai, 1992; Taylor, 2001, 2005; Thomas & Drummond, 2003; Turley & Seldon, 1993) and elsewhere (e.g., Burke, 1996; Comaroff, 1996; Davis, 2000; Liechty, 2003; Weinbaum et al., 2008), in Vietnam, it has only been in the periods following the first and last rupture that individualized and individualistic consumption have served broadly as legitimate means for pursuing it. Viewed through Bourdieu’s analytic of *hysteresis*, what becomes clear is that socialism upturned the social order in ways that left many, if not most,



of those with impressive amounts of social, cultural, and economic capital—the very people we are inclined to call “middle class”—(at least those who remained in Vietnam under the communist regime) in situations of profound disadvantage. By contrast, the historical moments of French colonial rule and *Đổi Mới* appear to have been more amenable to the kind of exploration, experimentation, and pursuit of personal status and gain that Bourdieu had in mind when he spoke of differential opportunities made available by situations of *hysteresis*.

It is important to note that these situations of social rupture have not been the concern of scholars alone. Like Bourdieu, many Vietnamese—past and present—have been concerned with the “fit” between, on the one hand, people’s dispositions and practices, and, on the other, larger social, cultural, and political contexts. This was certainly true during the colonial period, when many urban Vietnamese struggled with their position in and to what they considered to be the modern world (McHale, 2004; Tai, 1992). But, as the contemporary-focused chapters by Drummond, Leshkovich, Taylor, Truitt, and Phuc show, questions about the modernity of Vietnam and its citizens have also been matters of individual, class, and even state interest in the era of market reform.

In the chapters by Dutton and Peters, we see that early-twentieth century proliferation of advertising and consumer goods and services in the urban centers of colonial Indochina informed broader efforts by indigenous residents and colonial subjects to locate themselves and Vietnam in relation to modernity. What these chapters show nicely is that these new practices of consumption were sometimes fruitful but often risky tactics for indigenous Vietnamese to acquire new social statuses within French colonial Indochina. Dutton’s chapter shows how the development of new forms of media introduced an urban Vietnamese population to a broad range of novel consumer goods as well as information about who ought to consume them and why. Like this volume’s editors, Dutton sees this as a moment of social rupture, in which previous ways of organizing and understanding social life had lost relevance in the context of dramatic social change. He argues that the discontinuity that urban Vietnamese experienced was between tradition and modernity, a dichotomy that was linked in important and complicated ways to colonialism, Vietnamese nationalism, and global cosmopolitanism. Further, he posits that advertisements and the commercial spaces and objects of consumption they featured helped the urban readers of newspapers navigate the dissolution of a previous way of life and the formation of a new one. Indeed, and following Dutton’s argument, we might say that these new products and their advertisements did significant social work, inasmuch as they both signaled the rupture between tradition and modernity, and provided what Slater (1997) has called “maps of modernity,” enabling middle-class consumers to successfully transverse that gap.

Many of these ads—and especially those for clothing, cosmetics, medicines, and tonic—not only promised that their products were modern, they also insisted that their consumption could transform their consumers into modern individuals. Women’s bodies were given special attention in these ads, many of which assured readers that a certain cosmetic would make them not only beautiful, but also young

and modern (see also Drummond, 2004; Rofel, 1999). As Leshkovich's contribution to this volume and the work of the Modern Girl Around the World research group (see Weinbaum et al., 2008) make clear, this powerful and enduring association between gender, advertising, consumption, and modernity is limited neither to the colonial period nor to Vietnam.

The content of this emergent, urban Vietnamese middle-class *habitus* was complex, and sometimes contradictory, as it was oriented variously toward and away from the nation. As Dutton notes, advertisements, and especially those for foreign, luxury goods, served to promote individualism, since they encouraged their audiences to consume in terms of personal desires, and with the promise that goods could transform their consumers into distinct selves. At the same time, however, the mass consumption of these advertisements and their messages contributed to the formation of shared social dispositions. While some advertisements drew associative links between modernity and either a decidedly Euro-American version of foreignness or an often similarly Western-led universalism and cosmopolitanism, others encouraged consumers to buy Vietnamese goods by appealing to developing nationalist sentiments. As I have argued elsewhere (Vann, 2005), related dichotomies of global and national, and domestic and foreign goods have also informed consumption practices in reform-era Vietnam and in other contexts of post- and market-socialism. But while colonial-era calls to "Buy Vietnamese" were made against a largely non-existent domestic system of manufacture, those following market reform have often insisted upon the superiority of foreign goods against those of an ever-growing domestic base of foreign-led manufacture for export.

Peters' chapter on cuisine also engages the complicated discourses of tradition and modernity, Vietnamese and foreign, that informed urban middle-class social life in colonial Indochina. As she explains, consuming and learning to prepare foods that were considered "French" held potential to mark individuals as modern and cosmopolitan. But Vietnamese who patronized French restaurants or chose to serve "Western" food at wedding banquets and other events of public display ran the risk of being criticized by French colonists and others as being either too unsophisticated to consume such foods properly, or so passive and unthinking as to merely ape French culture. Either way, Vietnamese consumers of French and other foreign foods were, in their efforts to mark themselves as modern and cosmopolitan, in danger of being classed as decidedly neither.

Nguyen-Marshall's chapter shows how urban Vietnamese attempted to create more modern selves and a more modern Vietnam not only through consumption, but also through participation in particular kinds of organizations and activities. Rather than relying on the consumption and display of material goods (although these same people may have done exactly that in other aspects of their lives), these middle-class residents of Saigon aimed to make not only themselves, but also their fellow citizens into modern, national subjects through what Nguyen-Marshall points out were often Western-inspired techniques for dealing with such social problems as war orphans, children's education, and poverty. Membership in these groups served, much like the consumption practices described by Dutton and Peters, to identify participants as modern individuals, in this case, working to create modern solutions to

contemporary social problems. However, by bringing people together under organizational umbrellas, these associations encouraged their members to see themselves as part of a community of like-minded and like-acting citizens. Like the chapters by Dutton and Peters, Nguyen-Marshall's contribution enriches our understanding of the ways in which particular social contexts and practices—shopping and displaying consumer goods, eating and cooking new cuisines, providing new and needed social services—served as venues for both highlighting and disavowing potential tensions between the pursuit of modern life in Vietnam and of the formation of modern Vietnamese subjects as regional, national, foreign, or global endeavors (see also Taylor, 2001).

Other chapters in this volume suggest ways in which the dilemmas of modernity faced by Vietnam's contemporary middle class are both like and unlike those of their colonial era counterparts. Drummond describes the ways in which the construction of suburban housing, including high-rise apartment buildings and private, gated communities—one with a road in the shape of the Eiffel Tower—along with enclosed, air-conditioned supermarkets, shopping malls, and fast food chains, are transforming the landscape and urbanity of Hanoi. Drummond shows how these new types of spaces and associated patterns of consumption—especially car ownership—have made it newly possible for a “non-elite” middle class to circulate in a world that is largely set apart from street life and public space (see also Harms, 2009). Like the female clients of Ho Chi Minh City's (HCMC) health clubs described by Leskovich, these consumption practices and new ways of inhabiting the city are aspirationally modern (see also Vann, 2006). Middle-class consumers express desires for the things and spaces they consume to be hygienic and safe, or, in the case of the ATM users described by Truitt, secure and convenient, but that will also distinguish them as fashionable and cosmopolitan.

Among the distinguishing characteristics of this modern, cosmopolitan, urban subjectivity is the ability to appreciate, in decidedly nostalgic terms, the temporal and geographic space of “the Vietnamese countryside” (see also Dang & Pham, 2003; Thomas & Drummond, 2003). Phuc's chapter about wealthy urbanites who build “weekend” houses in the rural areas surrounding Hanoi attends directly to this middle-class desire to know and possess a romanticized Vietnamese rural life. Built largely as escapes from the hectic day-to-day of Hanoi, these new houses enable wealthy urbanites to get even further away from public street life than they might through an elevator ride in a high-rise apartment building, or by passing through the security gate of a private residential “community” (see also Lowe, 2003). The owners of these houses say that they build them in order to get away from the city and closer to nature, but as Phuc shows, building and occupying houses in the countryside certainly does not transform these *đại gia* into rural folk. Rather, their rural and usually poor neighbors serve as “primitive” foils to the modernity of these new, expensive houses and their urban occupants, whose presence has created new fissures of class distinction in the countryside.

Like Phuc's *đại gia*, many of the artists in Taylor's chapter have attempted to position themselves as modern and cosmopolitan by consuming what they and others take to be traditionally Vietnamese. As Taylor shows, some Vietnamese artists

have, in the wake of *Đổi Mới*, criticized or avoided popular trends of consuming electronics, clothing, and other goods typically valued as modern. Others, however, display their appreciation and possession of “traditional” Vietnamese antiques, artifacts, and architectural styles alongside tastes for things like European clothes, Japanese motorbikes, and expatriate friends, whose cultural associations are decidedly global and/or Western. Like the rural weekend homes of Hanoi’s middle class, ownership and knowledge of things “traditionally” Vietnamese serve as markers not of the traditionalism of these middle-class Vietnamese artists, or even necessarily of their Vietnamese-ness, but of their rightful membership in a cosmopolitan modernity.

## 10.2 Consumption, Production, Market, and State

As I have suggested, approaching the middle class through consumption is of special relevance in relation to Vietnam’s socialist history. A key aspect of turning North and South Vietnam into a unified, socialist nation was the eradication of what communist leaders took to be rampant and immoral consumerism (Marr, 1981; Taylor, 2001). For Vietnam’s early communist leaders, the problem with consumerism, and especially its conspicuous forms, was essentially a Marxist one, namely that it represented the pursuit of false wants and needs; people wanted more and more, and ever newer models of goods not for their practical utility, but for their value as status objects. Indeed, it was precisely the ability of goods and consumption practices to articulate social difference (Bourdieu, 1984) that, from the perspective of Vietnam’s early communist leaders, made them socially and morally dangerous (see Taylor, 2001 for excellent examples of this sentiment). Fundamental to the work of the new socialist state, then, was the transformation of Vietnam from a locus of consumption to one of production, and of Vietnamese citizens from consumers into workers. Bélanger, Drummond, and Nguyen-Marshall recognize this state emphasis on production over consumption in their Introduction, noting that the aim of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam’s first Three Year Plan was to “transform Hanoi from a ‘colonial consumption city into a producing city’ (quoted in Turley, 1975, p. 377)” (p. 4). It is important to note that the work of the socialist state here is framed not only in terms of a shift from consumption to production, but involves as well an equation of consumption with imperialism, making production a necessary component of Vietnamese nation-building and its independence from a colonial past. For socialist states, production—understood and pursued in such terms as industrialization, manufacturing output, and unit productivity—served as a barometer of national and socialist progress. Citizens were evaluated and encouraged to think of themselves in similar terms, such that their productive contributions and social worth were framed in terms of labor. Ideologically, and despite the fact that many Vietnamese had to work hard to secure basic household necessities for their families during much of the 1970s and 1980s, the state did not recognize consumption as a legitimately productive activity.

If, during the period of high socialism, the Vietnamese state valorized workers and production and approved officially of consumption only in terms of “needs,” the lines between production and consumption, and between socially moral and immoral behavior, are surely less clear in the market reform period. Scholars of postsocialism have argued that the dissolution of socialism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has entailed efforts to transform the worker-citizens of these former socialist countries into neoliberal consumer-citizens (Verdery, 1996). Such efforts essentially reverse the relations between states and citizens that socialist regimes aimed to establish in the first place. Often, the transformation of citizens from workers to consumers is framed in terms of the state’s retreat in the face of market and political liberalization (e.g., Dunn, 2004). The chapters by Leshkovich, Truitt, and Phuc, however, reveal more complicated relations between state and citizens in reform-era Vietnam, and suggest ways in which Vietnam’s middle class has been both subject to, and partially formed though, changing classifications and valuations of persons in relation to consumption and production.

Rather than documenting the withdrawal of the Vietnamese state in the context of market reform, these chapters show how the state has become an important actor in Vietnam’s market economy. As Phuc explains, many of the wealthy, urban residents of Hanoi who have built large, luxury “weekend” homes in the upland regions surrounding Hanoi are government officials and others with close links to the Vietnamese state. Phuc’s example points to ways in which dichotomies of state and market and public and private are being refigured in the context of market reform in Vietnam. Bourdieu’s notion of *hysteresis* is of value here, since it helps to rectify the apparent contradiction of socialist state officials acting as market entrepreneurs. Recall that Bourdieu argued that *hysteresis* was a moment of social disorientation, but could also be an opportunity for those with existing social and cultural capital to improve their status by exploiting the gap between *habitus* and *field*. In the situation described by Phuc, those with close links to the state may be at special advantage in the private purchase of rural land, especially since the legality of some of these purchases has come into question. As Phuc notes, the government ties of many *dại gia* have raised questions for rural villagers and others about the legitimacy of a socialist state that claims to be working toward egalitarianism. But as this and other chapters make clear, in the ever-changing context of market reform, the relationship between state, market, and the middle class in Vietnam has entailed new strategies—from national policies to potentially corrupt, individual gain—of state involvement in the market.

The response by a market seller to Leshkovich’s inquiry about what it means to be middle class, in which she argued that it was safe, vis-à-vis state officials, to consume conspicuously, but not to produce conspicuously suggests just how much the Vietnamese state’s position on consumption has changed in recent years. Leshkovich argues that while market-based production and wealth accumulation appear as direct contradictions to earlier state socialist forms of centralized planning, consumption is at present more easily “rendered moral” by the state. This is an interesting claim, since it diverges, in important ways, from earlier state socialist claims that conspicuous consumption threatened the moral fiber of Vietnamese

society (Marr, 1981; Taylor, 2001). For Vietnam's early socialist leaders, conspicuous consumption was not only immoral but, inasmuch as it was associated with capitalism and imperialism, a political act against state and social interests. The ability of contemporary Vietnamese, and women in particular, to engage in conspicuous forms of moneymaking and consumption without fear of legal punishment might appear, at first glance, as a shift away from centralized state control and toward more neoliberal forms of social governance. But as Leshkovich explains, the Vietnamese state remains invested in the moral subjectivities of its citizens, even, and perhaps especially, as they are articulated through various productive and consumptive practices.

Since market-oriented activities remain morally ambiguous in Vietnam, those who participate in them feel under special pressure to prove that their entrepreneurial and consumptive activities are morally just. However, the onus to align certain activities with certain moral dispositions has been shifted from the state to individuals in ways that are experienced as especially demanding by middle-class women in Vietnam. There is great pressure, then, for these women to become consumer-citizens (Rose, 1999; see also Vann, 2005). But as Leshkovich argues, this consumer-citizenry is forming not amidst the retreat of the socialist state in the face of market liberalization, but through state efforts to encourage Vietnamese citizens to remake themselves in ways that promote state and market ideals. Following Elyachar (2005), we might see this as a situation in which the state is attempting to act *through* the market.

Truitt's paper on the widespread introduction of ATMs in HCMC is also attentive to the ways in which the Vietnamese state is deeply invested in goods and activities that are generally viewed as tools of market liberalization. ATMs were appealing as material forms of modernity that would mark Vietnamese cardholders as modern and cosmopolitan, give them access to foreign currency, and make them subject to international banking regulations and institutions, rather than those of the Vietnamese State Bank. Long-term mistrust of state banking had resulted in a largely cash-based economy in Vietnam, which became, in the context of market liberalization, a concern for the Vietnamese state, since it signaled to outside parties that the country's financial sector was undeveloped and susceptible to corruption. Truitt argues that making ATM machines and cards available to Vietnamese citizens was an act of state "engineering" that aimed to make Vietnam's financial sector more regulated and transparent. While these are goals that we have come to associate closely with neoliberalism, Truitt shows how they are also those of the Vietnamese socialist state. Further, she shows that, despite popular views of ATMs as modern, liberating tools of the global economy, their customers in HCMC and elsewhere have experienced them as further restrictions—at the hands of the state—on their individual freedoms, as well as on their ability to interact with people, institutions, and goods beyond Vietnam's national borders. As Truitt notes, most of Vietnam's ATMs allow Vietnamese customers to access only their state salaries, only in Vietnamese dong, and only from properly affiliated machines, and even then, visitors find that they are often out of cash.

Truitt's research findings echo some of my own, in that they suggest that middle-class residents of HCMC have found that apparent opportunities to participate in the global economy sometimes turn out to be situations in which people's options are further limited to the domestic sphere. In my research on middle-class consumers in HCMC (Vann, n.d.), I found that shoppers' interest in the sites and circumstances of production were central to their evaluation of consumer goods. Shoppers experienced the early years of market reform in Vietnam as ones in which the goods of the global economy they desired—famous, foreign-branded goods—once again filled market stalls and store shelves. But as Vietnam became an important production site for consumer goods—a development that contributed in important ways to the growth of a Vietnamese middle class—shoppers lamented what they saw as an increasingly domestic economy, in which Vietnam was the site of production and consumption of many foreign-branded goods. The effect was that many consumers experienced corporate branding and production outsourcing—commonly understood as globalizing processes—as creating a kind of closed circuit in which they were being cut off from the sorts of connections—of information, fashion, ownership, and display—made possible by goods available elsewhere. While the consumers with whom I worked attributed their inability to obtain certain goods primarily to powerful global actors such as foreign governments, multinational corporations, and international agencies, the ATM users described by Truitt feel restricted by the Vietnamese state. In both situations, however, apparently liberalizing activities and processes—in which citizens are allowed and even encouraged by the state and others to consume—are experienced by Vietnamese citizens as frustrating limitations on personal choices and on their ability to interact outside of state and national boundaries.

### 10.3 Conclusion

The chapters in this volume make strong historical and ethnographic cases for approaching the study of middle classness in Vietnam through consumption, conceptualized broadly as “lifestyle practices.” By way of conclusion, however, I would encourage us to recognize just how fragile, difficult, complicated, contradictory, and even political, consumption can be. Throughout this volume, we see that insecurities and anxieties have accompanied Vietnamese middle-class consumption practices, past and present. Indeed, what this historical breadth makes clear is that, while the indigenous Vietnamese middle class has sometimes been the object of normalization efforts, it has never been “normal.” For this reason, the construction of middle-class lifestyles through consumption has always been an uncertain enterprise.

In their introduction, Bélanger, Drummond, and Nguyen-Marshall caution us that the presence of a Vietnamese middle class does not necessarily imply the development of civil society (cf. [Chapter 7](#), this volume), noting that those identified as middle class in Asia have not always been critical of their authoritarian states, and only sometimes support democratization efforts. And yet, while the middle



class in Vietnam may be “politically ambiguous” (Chapter 1, this volume) what we find throughout this volume is that Vietnamese consumption practices are often quite political, although not in the Marxist sense that the authors rightly aim to avoid. Rather than serving as a platform for collective political action, consumption practices, and especially those in the market reform era, seem to be involving the Vietnamese middle class in politically-complex webs of state, society, and market, that are perhaps better understood in terms Foucault’s notion of governmentality.

Shawn McHale’s (2004) work on print media in early twentieth-century Vietnam provides important historical depth for evaluating the political nature of the Vietnamese middle class. McHale argues that, between 1920 and 1945, a Vietnamese public sphere—informed largely by a Western-influenced, enlightenment discourse—developed through print media and its audiences. This public sphere, McHale argues, was meant to be socially-transformative, inasmuch as it aimed to create a modern, Vietnamese society, but it was not a democratic movement that targeted directly the political or cultural authority of French colonialism. As McHale shows, the Vietnamese public sphere operated within, rather than against, a system of censorship and other forms of colonial restriction. The result, says McHale, was a situation of “political dominance without sociocultural hegemony” (2004, p. 9). Similarly, and as the Chapters 2, 3, and 4 (this volume) make clear, much of the work of self-fashioning modern, Vietnamese selves was conducted through consumption and related activities that were, at least in limited ways, encouraged by French colonial and American occupational authorities precisely because they were seen as producing certain and preferred kinds of subjects, whose goals and interests would be aligned with their own.

Turning to the market reform era, we might ask who and what is implicated and invested in a contemporary Vietnamese middle class. While the contributors to this volume seek to articulate a middle class in Vietnam, its absence in Vietnamese state and public discourse is conspicuous. Like the term “privatization” in China, which Ong and Zhang describe as “political dynamite” (2008, p. 2), the Vietnamese state has steadfastly avoided using the term “middle class.” The effect, as Drummond (Chapter 5, this volume) notes, is that “it is extremely difficult to ‘see’ the middle class in Vietnam.” At the same time, however, the Vietnamese state not only tolerates consumption, it often champions it as an important social, moral, and even patriotic act (see also Hoffman, 2008). Rather than linking consumption and middle classness, though, as this volume’s authors do, state officials and others describe certain consumption practices and their practitioners as “modern,” or alternatively, as “urban,” or “normal.” If Vietnam’s early communist leaders equated and politicized consumption and middle-class lifestyles as a way of condemning both and validating a new socialist state and society, this intentional decoupling of consumption from middle classness is equally political, since it aims to preserve the authority of the socialist state by depoliticizing and normalizing consumption and consumers. In this framework, “modern” citizens are both economically successful and aligned with official state socialist values. These “modern” Vietnamese citizens are thus encouraged to self-fashion freely, through consumption and other activities, within the parameters established by the state.

Of the interplay of socialism and privatization in China, Aihwa Ong and Li Zhang write: “Increasingly individuals are obliged to exercise diligence, cunning, talents, and social skills to navigate ever-shifting networks of goods, relationships, knowledge and institutions in the competition for wealth and personal advantage” (2008, p. 8). This sort of work is not unlike what Bourdieu (1977, 1984) described as comprising *habitus* and the production of social distinction. But while Bourdieu was attentive to the ways in which the interaction between people and their surroundings produced certain dispositions and class differences, Ong and Zhang are, following Foucault, most concerned with “modernity as an ethic of ‘how one should live’” (Ong & Zhang, 2008, p. 16). But of course, and as this volume makes clear, the middle class in Vietnam have always been involved in the practices and ethics of modern selves.

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