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On *Radicalism* and Ethnographic Research on Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Vietnam

I first read *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* from cover to cover shortly after I began graduate school in the early 1990s.¹ I had encountered earlier versions of some of the chapters in an undergraduate course on modern Vietnamese history that I had taken with Professor Tai, but it was not until I had the opportunity to savor the complete book while contemplating conducting my own fieldwork on gender and economic transformation that its scope and import captivated me. As an American of what had just then been termed Generation X, I came to the study of Vietnam with pressing questions forged by my earliest memories: heated political arguments between my parents; disturbing footage on the CBS Evening News that I could only quickly glimpse before my mother jumped up to change the channel (no remote control back then); the sense that the very word “Vietnam” meant something deeply significant and unsettling. I had since come to recognize these Vietnam questions as peculiarly American and had happily cast them off in favor of trying to learn about contemporary Vietnam. There, rapid market-oriented changes had rendered the late 1980s to early 1990s a time of both opportunity and uncertainty in which people were asking themselves questions about who they should be

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and how they should live their lives. *Radicalism* illuminated the complex genealogies behind these contemporary concerns about self and society. Its captivating prose drew me into the lifeworlds of a generation of Vietnamese radical intellectuals who in the 1920s and 1930s had fiercely debated Vietnam questions of their own.

Several things about *Radicalism* intrigued me. First, it focused on a moment in which Marxism-Leninism had not yet achieved the upper hand in anticolonial politics. A rich cast of characters—Phạm Quỳnh, Nguyễn An Ninh, Bùi Quang Chiêu, Nguyễn Ái Quốc—drew on diverse inspiration from Confucianism, anarchism, Marxism, etc. to imagine an independent Vietnamese future. Second, the iconoclastic mood of these radicals married the personal and the political, yet often did so through references to classic Vietnamese tropes of talent and fate, particularly as explored in the *Tale of Kiều*.² Finally, all of these engagements were profoundly gendered. Tai traced how radical imaginings of a desired future for Vietnam often centered on images of women and debates about their roles, with the authority of the patriarchal family at times serving as a rhetorical stand-in for French rule.

Of course, Vietnam was not the only place in which anticolonial politics played out through images of women. The so-called New Woman had sparked envy and moral panic throughout Asia for her education, apparent freedom from familial constraint, or her scandalous adoption of Western styles of dress and deportment.³ Tai's work stands out, however, for articulating so clearly why the New Woman mattered in Vietnam: "[S]ince disputes on culture and morality usually had a political subtext, the question of women operated as a discourse on freedom, in which differences between personal and national concerns blurred and merged together."⁴ In a context of colonial censorship, she continues, "gender acted as a coded language for debating a whole range of issues."⁵

As foreign anthropologists seized new opportunities in the 1990s to conduct extended ethnographic fieldwork in Vietnam, many of us noticed that the "woman question" once again seemed vital to understanding Vietnamese imaginings of futurity in a context of marketization and globalization. Newspaper columns and short works of fiction warned of newly comfortable families in which mothers had become so concerned with making money and shopping that they neglected the emotional needs of

husbands and children. Middle-aged women whom I met in a downtown health club told me that being fit would prevent their husbands from being lured by the attractive women riding around on motorbikes or working in the various *ôm* [hugging] establishments that their menfolk now frequented.⁶ Market traders, boutique owners, and fashion designers explained that the second part of the popular phrase *ăn ngon mặc đẹp* [eat deliciously, dress beautifully] permitted or even required women to style themselves to be attractive and distinctive, yet also appropriately Vietnamese.⁷ Meanwhile, actual gender roles seemed to be changing. The opportunity to engage in small- and medium-scale entrepreneurship seemed to benefit women, as Vietnamese women for generations, and particularly in postwar urban Hồ Chí Minh City, had plied wares to support families. Other women used recently acquired foreign language skills to take up positions as administrative assistants, bookkeepers, and office staff for private companies and joint ventures, often responding to newspaper ads in which qualifications included reference to age, gender, and, in some cases, physical appearance.

Written explicitly to explain the gender questions of an earlier era, *Radicalism* has provided an instructive model for feminist studies of Vietnam more generally. Tai's provocative theoretical framework probed the connection between the symbolic and material dimensions of gender, while her methodology illuminated these intersections through the details of personal experience. Over the past two decades, anthropologists and other social scientists eager to unpack contemporary gender questions have employed theoretical and methodological strategies similar to Tai's. Ethnographic monographs explore gender roles, ideologies, and subjectivities in daily life to chart the relationship between the shifting political economy of Đổi Mới, social relations, and culture.⁸ Pathbreaking edited volumes illuminate intersections between gender, culture, and political economy through consideration of kinship and household relations, class, consumption, media and public culture, work, and embodiment.⁹ A prominent theme in all of these works is how the expansion of a market economy has both played out in gendered ways and made images of women and femininity a vibrant domain for debating the social, cultural, and moral effects of these transformations.

A colleague working elsewhere in Asia asked me recently why so much scholarship on contemporary Vietnam focuses on gender. Jayne

Werner found a decade ago that of the PhD dissertations and master's theses on Vietnam produced between 1995 and 2003 and available from University Microfilms, more than half were about gender.¹⁰ My own analysis of qualitative social science dissertations on contemporary Vietnam completed between 2004 and 2016 shows that nearly one-third focus on gender or sexuality. Add to that the published monographs and edited volumes cited above, plus numerous journal articles and book chapters, and it is clear that the question "Why indeed has so much been written about gender in Vietnam?" warrants attention.

One answer is that, much as the political context of colonialism raised questions of culture and personhood, contemporary economic change has reconfigured gender relations and hence challenged men and women to redefine what it means to be a man or a woman and what proper masculinity and femininity should be through engaging in forms of work that were profoundly gendered. With the household declared to be the primary unit of agricultural production, rural families confront gendered issues of land rights, inheritance, divisions of labor, and resource allocation to meet production and reproduction needs.¹¹ Given the association between women and the *chợ* [marketplace], women in both rural and urban areas were often better positioned than men to sell produce and wares in the burgeoning small and medium enterprise sector of the 1990s. This became my own research topic,¹² but it also figures prominently in research by Ashley Pettus and Philip Taylor.¹³ Meanwhile, young Vietnamese women, like their counterparts throughout the region, were being marketed to global capital as a desirable and controllable industrial workforce, so that women's movement to new manufacturing zones became a key pattern of Đổi Mới mobility.¹⁴ Foreign investment created opportunities for women in "pink-collar" administrative support positions.¹⁵ The control of capital, however, remained largely in the hands of men, who often bolstered their position through performing dominant masculinity vis-à-vis women in the hooking economy, as documented by Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương and Kimberly Kay Hoang.¹⁶

These changes also involved growing consumerism. The clothes women wore, the products they used, and how they managed consumption by their family members became key ways in which people imagined, enacted, and



FIGURE 1: Billboard outside Tân Sơn Nhất Airport, 1995 (photo by Hue-Tam Ho Tai).

debated a modern, civilized, and cultured Vietnam.¹⁷ Although women continued to be valued as workers in the public sphere, state and media focus on family quality increasingly emphasized feminine domestic responsibilities, from the material tasks of managing budgets and maintaining the physical environment of the home, to the emotional labor of nurturing children and providing a warm nest to shelter family members from the moral dangers of a competitive market economy.¹⁸ Class formation became visible in gendered ways through middle-class women's employment of rural, working-class domestic helpers, with the latter forced to be good mothers and wives by providing for their own families economically at the expense of being physically present to care for them.¹⁹

Women also had to maintain Vietnamese tradition, perhaps most iconically through wearing *áo dài*. A mid-1990s billboard featured a smiling woman in *áo dài* and *nón lá* who welcomed arriving travelers at Tân Sơn Nhất airport to the "World of VISA," preserved in a photo that Professor Tai shared with me when I was her graduate student in the late 1990s (figure 1).



FIGURE 2: Usurious loans as a battle between the sexes.²⁰

As the wife of prime minister Võ Văn Kiệt declared at a fashion show that I attended 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.”²¹ Not surprisingly, the fact that the *áo dài* inspired designers such as Ralph Lauren or the legendary houses of St. Laurent and Chanel meant that this was a tradition that carried the seal of modern global approval.

Women also came to symbolize the market economy’s excitation of dangerous lust for material luxury or sexual pleasure, with the figure of the prostitute as part of “social evils” [*tệ nạn xã hội*] neatly encapsulating both of these dangers.²² The ravenous woman entrepreneur provided another cautionary character, as in a mid-1990s cartoon from *Tuổi Trẻ* showing a male borrower struggling beneath a mountain of high-interest debt. On top sits an angry female moneylender, her wagging finger and fearsome expression castigating the borrower below (figure 2). Such depictions glossed market

morality as a matter of sex or a battle between the sexes, with the immoral woman serving as a convenient scapegoat. Debates about the gendered morality of money in the mundane world had their echoes in the spiritual realm. Increasingly popular female spirits reinforced the notion of financial acumen as feminine and of femininity as central to indigenous Vietnamese traditions, but they also could represent amoral greed or backward superstition that needed to be transcended in favor of globalized, urbanized modernity.²³

As in the 1920s and 1930s, there has been much to think about over the past several decades in Vietnam through images of women, and with actual women, in terms of how they lead their lives, that in turn has become central to how people make sense of their rapidly changing social and economic contexts. For some scholars, myself included, Tai's work on an earlier era directly alerted us to these historical resonances, spurring us to consider longer term dynamics and enduring ideological patterns in order to develop a more nuanced perspective on exactly what in *Đổi Mới* might in fact be *mới* [new]. I doubt whether so many of us in anthropology, sociology, cultural geography, and related fields would have been as alert to attending to gender in this way had it not been for Tai's historical scholarship pointing us in the right direction. For others, the influence may have been indirect, but that does not necessarily mean less consequential. As Sara Ahmed writes in *Living a Feminist Life*, "If we can create our paths by not following, we still need others before us."²⁴ Tai's scholarship reflected and then became part of a broader feminist genealogy that continues to inspire historical and cultural studies of Vietnam.

Beyond its direct attention to shifting gender roles, Tai's analysis in *Radicalism* offers what I see as an even more provocative lesson for scholars eager to make sense of contemporary Vietnam. In colonial-era debates about women's education, gender became a coded language for discussing anticolonialism and visions of independence that could not be voiced directly. In recent decades, gender has similarly functioned as a safe terrain through which people indirectly reference something that is much more politically sensitive: class. Specifically, gender has become a means to consider what growing inequality and extremes of wealth and poverty might mean. But gender is also functioning in some ways to normalize or naturalize those changes. Let me explain.

The explosion of conspicuous consumption in Vietnam—motorbikes and cars, recently built or renovated homes, upscale cafés, imported fashion—testify to an urban middle class and elite on the rise.²⁵ Yet, it took more than two decades until people started comfortably using terms such as *tầng lớp/giai cấp trung lưu* [middle class] to describe themselves.²⁶ *Giàu có* [wealthy] was something that described somebody else, hardly ever oneself. Scholars have noted a similar tendency not to refer to class in the United States, where class often slides into characterizations about race, ethnicity, or region. In Vietnam, where Marxism in fact offers a precise language for class as relationship to the means of production, the reluctance to use class language to describe what clearly seemed to be class developments was puzzling. Perhaps that was precisely the point: Marxist class language did not capture the complex configurations of consumption and production through which new classes were asserting themselves. To assert class status in Marxist terms might prompt Marxist class reprisals—a palpable concern among the newly prosperous during the first two decades of *Đổi Mới*.

Instead, people tended to describe themselves as aspiring to be modern [*hiện đại*], having enough to live [*có đủ sống*], being civilized [*văn minh*], having culture [*có văn hóa*], or being appropriate [*phù hợp*].²⁷ Women became ways to visualize what this looked like and to make claims about the morality of both the newly prosperous and the increasingly dispossessed that somehow made these seem more like matters of personal choice and hence not structural critiques of either the well-off or the government whose policies had produced inequality. That in turn naturalized class privilege as matters of proper femininity or masculinity, not just as a rhetorical sleight of hand, but in terms of how people actually experienced class status as meaningful structures of sentiment and being in the world. The women traders whom I know in Bến Thành market or the wealthy businessmen that Kimberly Kay Hoang studied are not just experiencing class through gender. They are experiencing class as gender. Tai's line of analysis in *Radicalism* prefigured that of a generation of scholars of contemporary Vietnam who explore not just shifting *articulations of* class and gender, but the shifting *articulation between* them in an intersectional sense.

In recent years, attention to sexuality within Vietnam has pushed this line of inquiry further. Those of us who came to the study of gender through

third wave feminist critical theory had to grapple with the fact that, even as gender ideas and roles in Vietnam seemed so much in flux, they remained fixed in an essentialist, heteronormative binary between male and female. In recent years, however, Vietnam has seen a growing, visible LGBTQ movement. While activists may assert that gender or sexual identity is rooted in one's nature—one is born this way—they also demonstrate that there are a variety of gendered and sexual ways of being. It has been fascinating to see a growing body of scholarship focusing on queer identities and politics as *Gender Trouble* in Judith Butler's sense: trouble about gender that troubles gender.²⁸ For example, in a provocative review essay of three recent books on sexuality in Vietnam, Natalie Newton argues that Vietnamese NGO work has shifted from a focus on health to "explicitly politicized frameworks of sexuality" that call for "'sexual literacy' around all forms of sexual behavior and lesbian rights."²⁹ In Newton's analysis, these educational efforts harness perspectives from transnational neoliberal rights movements and scientific expertise to counter state regulation of sexuality. Elsewhere, Newton explores how the Vietnamese *les* [lesbian] community in Sài Gòn constitutes itself in part through dynamics of strategic invisibility in public space.³⁰ Huong Thu Nguyen explores performances of non-normative masculinities in the Central Highlands as part of that region's complex interethnic relations.³¹ Whether they are explicitly continuing along the analytical path blazed by Professor Tai or pursuing their own projects of not following that, as Ahmed so sagely reminds us, are nonetheless made possible by those who came before, a new generation of scholars now challenges us to consider whether contemporary gender trouble in the name of individual or group rights in Vietnam might be a way to make trouble of some different sort, trouble that cannot as easily be voiced or enacted.

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collection, *Traders in Motion: Identities and Contestations in the Vietnamese Marketplace*.

Notes

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4. Tai, *Radicalism*, 89.
5. Ibid., 90.
6. Ann Marie Leshkowich, “Working Out Culture: Gender, Body, and Commodification in a Ho Chi Minh City Health Club,” *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 37, no. 1 (2008): 49–87.
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 12. Leshkovich, *Essential Trade*.
 13. Pettus, *Between Sacrifice*; Philip Taylor, *Goddess on the Rise: Pilgrimage and Popular Religion in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
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