Fashion and Beauty in the Time of Asia

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Fashioning the Field in Vietnam

An Intersectional Tale of Clothing, Femininities, and the Pedagogy of Appropriateness

ANN MARIE LESHKOWICH

In Vietnam during the 1990s, the rapid expansion of a market economy led to dramatic social and cultural transformation, particularly in urban areas such as Ho Chi Minh City. The growing visibility of a conspicuously consuming middle class sparked vociferous debates about morality and national identity that often focused on claims about proper femininity. Public concern, sometimes rising to the level of moral panic, typically centered on younger women whose limited experience of revolutionary values made them seem vulnerable to the decadence of the marketplace. But the character and comportment of older women warranted scrutiny as well. Having experienced war and a decade of high socialist restructuring in Vietnam's southern region, women in midlife provided fertile ground for claims-making about the relationship between a national revolutionary past and a global market future.

These issues came into sharp relief during "Fashion for the Forties" (Thời Trang Tuổi 40), a state-sponsored show held in March 1997 that focused on styles for women in their forties. The event depicted an appropriate midlife Vietnamese femininity as mature, attractive, self-confident, and modest. More subtly, the show's vision of midlife called upon a generation of wives, mothers, and workers at the height of their productivity and family responsibilities to model for younger and older cohorts how Vietnamese might appropriately engage with an individualized, globalized, and sexualized marketplace in ways that would preserve their moral and cultural values. Fashion for the Forties also spoke back to racialized global fashion hierarchies by highlighting Vietnam as a source of stylistic creativity. As such, the show contributed to a budding

trend throughout the region in which Asian governments promoted development policies to move "up the value chain" by establishing Asian cities as hubs of design innovation in a knowledge economy, rather than simply reserves of inexpensive labor for producing others' designs in a manufacturing economy (Tu 2011, 12). Fashion for the Forties suggested that Vietnamese fashion was on the cusp of receiving international attention—a metaphor for Vietnam's development more broadly—and that what women wore and how they behaved were central to the attainment of this recognition.

By exploring the background context for, organization of, and public reaction to Fashion for the Forties, this chapter analyzes how fashion in Vietnam during the 1990s had become what Bourdieu (1977) terms a field: a system of social positions in which agents vie for various forms of capital. In this case, the competing forms of symbolic and economic capital associated with what Vietnamese officials call a "market economy with socialist orientation" (*kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa*)—market socialism for short—were being fashioned through the bodies and aspirations of women in midlife. This fashioning explicitly centered on a concept of the "appropriate" (*phù hợp*) in which Vietnamese women's bodies would display a form of proper femininity that would judiciously mediate between traditional cultural values and transnational modernity. Fashion shows, especially state-sponsored ones such as Fashion for the Forties, served as key training sites in this emerging pedagogy of the appropriate.

The Fashion for the Forties show was a field in a second sense of the term: a site in which I conducted ethnographic research. My interest in the show had developed from my primary fieldwork with cloth and clothing traders in Ho Chi Minh City's central marketplace (Leshkowich 2014). Eager to find out how market stallholders, most of them women, learned about style trends and determined which merchandise to sell, I frequently attended fashion shows and related events. Sometimes a market trader accompanied me, and we could discuss what styles were attractive or potentially lucrative. Other times, such as the Fashion for the Forties show, I went alone. I was part of the first generation of postwar, non-Vietnamese researchers to conduct intensive participant observation, and my endeavors occasionally generated suspicion or confusion. Far more often, however, interlocutors enthusiastically embraced the

opportunity to have me bear witness to individual experience. Days in the marketplace rushed by, as the briefest question or slightest show of interest in an episode caused stories to tumble forth. As Paul Rabinow (1977) has argued, such stories were not direct reports of what had happened, nor were they raw snapshots extracted from memory, but rather, intersubjectively crafted tales constructed through the give and take of conversation with the ethnographer. I came to see that my identity mattered greatly. To my interlocutors, mostly middle-aged women from southern Vietnam whose families had been on the losing side of the war, it was significant that the audience for their stories was a white American woman then in her late twenties: old enough to have memories of that time, but too young to be personally implicated in her own country's experiences. My status as "younger sister" to my informants lent their stories a didactic cast, yet my being a graduate student at a prestigious foreign university also imparted the authority that, through a dissertation and subsequent publications, I could carry their stories to a wider global audience. My interest served as a sign of validation: In suggesting that individuals' stories mattered, I prompted those stories to be told in new ways.

We have, then, two fields, each constructed through narrative: the field of a fashion show through which culture brokers made didactic claims about appropriate femininity to stake positions as arbiters of Vietnam's present and future, and the field site of a marketplace in which traders voiced their experiences to a graduate student in the hope that they might be related to a broader audience in the United States—a geopolitical power that many traders felt had abandoned their families two decades earlier, even as it had since offered a new home to many of their friends and relatives.[1] These fields operated on seemingly distinct scales: one national, significant, and public, the other located in one marketplace, mundane, and relatively private. To the extent that they intersected, it seemed largely unidirectional, with authoritative ideas about appropriate Vietnamese femininity providing a field in which traders attempted to position themselves through their daily activities.[2]

What I did not expect in conducting ethnographic fieldwork at the Fashion for the Forties show was that my own position as a (then) young, foreign woman and PhD candidate would itself also become part of the field in Bourdieu's sense. In an unexpected turn of events detailed

below, my presence at the event generated national press coverage. Much to my own discomfort, my act of fieldwork rather briefly played a role in bolstering a designer's and a reporter's claims to expertise about Vietnamese fashion and femininity—a field that I otherwise thought myself merely to be documenting. For a fleeting moment, my words and, even more important, my raced and gendered embodiment were deployed to validate state-sponsored construction of fashion through its pedagogy of appropriateness. Although particular to the novelty of foreign research about Vietnamese culture and society in the 1990s, this episode highlights the dialogic, intersectional, and embodied politics of knowledge production and circulation that shape the political economy of fashion—and research on it—in Vietnam and other globalizing contexts.

A Successful Fashioning of Vietnamese Femininity

"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, 9). Phan Lương Cầm, the wife of then Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt, made these remarks to the press at the Fashion for the Forties show. Her comments succinctly captured both the headiness and peril of that particular moment in Vietnam. After a decade of steady growth resulting from market-oriented policies, Vietnam finally seemed ready to take its place in a global community of nations. Standards of living had risen dramatically, and a growing urban middle class embraced the spirit of a popular saying, "Eat deliciously, dress beautifully" (*ăn ngon mặc đẹp*). Ho Chi Minh City was in the throes of what newspapers and cultural critics dubbed a "fashion craze" (*cơn sốt thời trang*). Thousands of people flocked to runway shows, beauty and dress contests, and variety productions that highlighted recent collections by domestic and foreign designers. Many more turned to newspapers and magazines for expert advice about which styles were most chic, modern, and appropriate for different social situations and types of people. In the midst of such great optimism, commentators ranging from journalists to government officials to academics nonetheless expressed fears that in the rush to become part of the "modern world," Vietnam might lose a sense of the identity and independence that it had spent most of

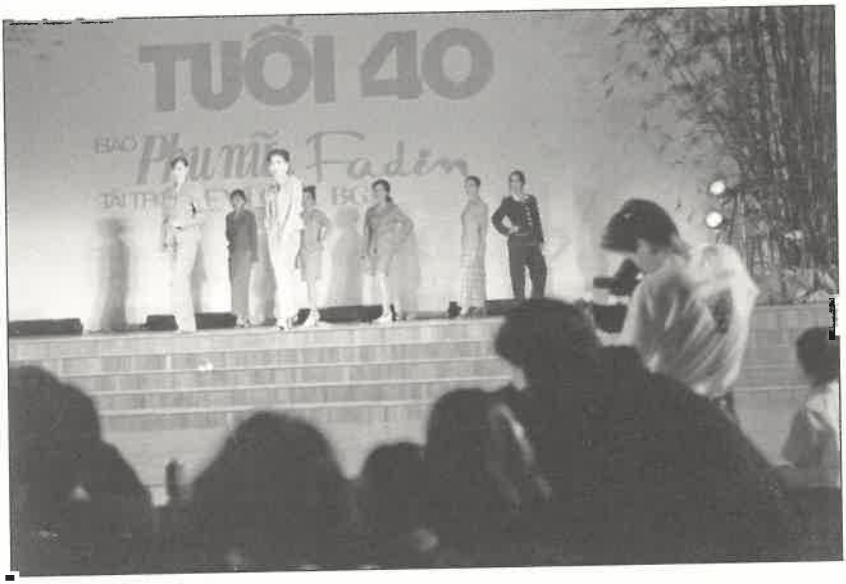

Figure 5.1. Amateur models in business attire at the Fashion for the Forties show (photo by Ann Marie Leshkowich).

the twentieth century fighting to achieve. Fashion shows became pedagogical venues to craft women whose appropriate embodied femininity would represent the future envisioned by state-affiliated cognoscenti.

By all accounts, Fashion for the Forties, featuring creations by Minh Hạnh, noted designer and director of the national Fashion Design Institute (FADIN), achieved its goal of "encouraging and orienting" middle-aged women at the peak of their careers to choose clothing "appropriate [*phù hợp*] for their age and work circumstances, lifestyles . . . fashions that are modern [*hiện đại*], worldly, yet rich in traditional color" (B.T. 1997). One journalist described the event, held on International Women's Day, as "One of the liveliest activities of this year's March 8th celebration" (Thúy Thúy 1997). Sponsored and highly publicized by the Ho Chi Minh City *Women's Newspaper* (*Báo Phụ Nữ*), the event had quickly sold out.

The models for this fashion show were amateurs: regular women from different walks of life selected and trained by Minh Hạnh especially for the evening. In the audience, smiling husbands and children clapped as their wives and mothers radiantly moved across the stage in business

Figure 5.2. Eveningwear at the Fashion for the Forties show (photo by Ann Marie Leshkowich).

attire, sportswear, and eveningwear (figures 5.1 and 5.2). In keeping with fashion show practices in Vietnam, the women also modeled *áo dài*, the outfit to which the prime minister's wife had explicitly referred. Often touted as Vietnam's traditional or national costume, the *áo dài* consists of a long tunic with mandarin collar, raglan sleeves, and high side slits worn over wide-legged pants. The models moved gracefully, but most betrayed a hint of embarrassment. That these otherwise self-confident and successful professional women appeared uncomfortable as they paraded across the catwalk seemed only to enhance the event's charm. As one reporter wrote, "But tonight, on the fashion stage, every power, every sharp-witted skill of everyday life disappeared, and they were simply gentle women, deep, and rather shy" (Thúy Thúy 1997).

In addition to the personal pleasure many felt on seeing the women in their lives transformed into demure models for the night, audience and participants alike seemed to embrace Minh Hạnh's pedagogical project of showing women in their forties how to dress appropriately. One participant, a professional singer, said that the event taught her that women in their forties had value, and that they had to choose styles and colors

appropriate for themselves (Thúy Thúy 1997). Another woman, a housewife, gushed, "In the eyes of my husband, I'm so much more beautiful now than ever before. From now on, I will be more careful when I buy clothes" (ibid.). The journalist recounting their words echoed their sentiments: "Although they're in their forties, women are still as beautiful as twenty-year-olds and will be even more attractive if they know how to choose for themselves outfits that fit their individual figures, jobs, and positions" (ibid.).

The outfits themselves showcased new looks that were nonetheless viewed as appropriate for wear in the real world (Thúy Hà 1997). Observers positively compared the event's pragmatic approach to the frivolity of most fashion shows. A male journalist told the *Women's Newspaper*, "This is the most practical fashion show, from liberation [1975] until now. For so long, young people have paid attention to fashion shows primarily for . . . fun! But here, these ladies have a genuine need, a real benefit" (ibid.). Another man told a television reporter that his only criticism was that men, too, needed such an evening of instruction. The appearance of the prime minister's wife and her later remarks to the press gave the event the seal of official approval. Indeed, in commenting on the importance of women's appearance on the eve of Vietnam's global integration, First Lady Phan Lương Cầm also praised "the Women's Newspaper's initiative in organizing this event with the idea of directing fashion for women in their forties like this" (ibid.).

The Field of Modern Vietnamese Femininity

Fashion for the Forties ended with a spectacular finale. The designer Minh Hạnh received a standing ovation, further securing her position as an expert crafting contemporary Vietnamese femininity and individuality. Through her care and stewardship that night, she had projected her vision of how Vietnamese women of achievement and serious purpose could express their unique identities and inner beauty, particularly their shy grace, outward in ways that would be both appropriate and attractive. In doing so, she positioned herself as an arbiter of how women could indeed be fashioned as fitting symbols of Vietnam's careful integration with worldly modernity. But what exactly did Vietnamese in the 1990s envision modernity (*hiện đại*) to be? And why had "the behavior

and comportment" of women, especially the goal of "appropriateness," become so central to attaining it?

The concept of modernity is simultaneously self-evident and elusive. It is self-evident because people generally claim to know modernity when they see it and typically envision it as a kind of prosperous, technologically advanced global community through which people, things, and ideas circulate.[3] Modernity is nonetheless elusive because the precise nature of those circulating people, things, and ideas seems constantly to shift as technology, modes of doing business, and people's ideas change. What constitutes modernity and who embodies it must therefore continually be assessed, revised, and negotiated. These processes permit the emergence of "multiple," even "alternative" modernities, but they are also crosscut by hierarchies.[4] Certain groups or regions possess disproportionate authority to discern and differentiate which people are modern or traditional, which ideas are new and noteworthy, or which items of clothing are fashionable or passé; in short, which forms of modernity count as authentic, significant, and powerful. The result is that other groups may consistently find themselves approaching the finish line in the race to become modern, only to lag behind again as the parameters of modernity shift and the line moves into the distance.

It is this dynamic of an elusive modernity that seems within reach and yet always slips beyond the grasp, rather than modernity as some objective condition of being, that has shaped Vietnamese discussions over the past century and a half. The French colonial civilizing mission adeptly entrenched the worldview among Vietnamese intelligentsia that human history had been a steady march of progress based on struggle and competition (Tai 1992; P. Taylor 2001). Vietnamese came to desire the colonizers' science, technology, and commerce. Almost as soon as members of the Vietnamese intelligentsia adopted this vision of modernity, however, European conceptions of what constituted it shifted. This produced a dynamic, central to Bhabha's (1997) formulation of mimicry, in which Vietnam was perpetually "not quite" modern; in Philip Taylor's words, "Tradition is forever renewing itself, while 'modernity' is always just arriving in Vietnam" (2001, 9). But this dilemma offered a potential resolution: The racialized native Otherness that European rule both needed and derided could serve as the basis for crafting a uniquely

modern nationalist identity rooted in a tradition superior to more corrupt Western values (see, e.g., Chatterjee 1993; Chakrabarty 1997; Tarlo 1996). Preserving this inner core became an explicitly gendered project, a point to which I return below.

With the embrace of a market economy and talk of global integration in the 1990s, the anxieties and possibilities of Vietnamese modernity reemerged with particular force. Trying to replicate models from Singapore, South Korea, or Japan, which in turn had been adapted from Europe and North America, Vietnam's national development project could be described as a form of mimicry.[5] Here, again, the danger was that in developing a modern exterior, Vietnam might lose its unique core: sleek new skyscrapers, hotels, office spaces, and supermarkets without cultural distinctiveness. As in the colonial era, an expedient solution to the contemporary problem of mimicry was to celebrate an essentialized racial, ethnic, or cultural core that remained unique and valuable. The neo-Confucian "Asian Values" rhetoric popularized in the 1980s and 1990s by Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew held enormous appeal among the Vietnamese intellectuals and policymakers I encountered, for it offered a way to borrow from the West without reducing Vietnam to an inferior copy of a superior original. If Vietnamese could remember who they are by holding on to the distinctiveness bequeathed to them by tradition and defended through revolutionary struggle, they could determine what external borrowing and adaptation would be "appropriate" (*phù hợp*).

With fashion being key to the material and ideological crafting of Vietnamese modernity, the term "appropriate" surfaced often in my conversations with Ho Chi Minh City market sellers, boutique owners, designers, and consumers. Widespread excitement about the new fashions made available by economic reforms—the fashion craze mentioned above—was tempered by assertions that international styles had to be carefully mediated so that consumers would learn how to select styles appropriate for their personal attributes, cultural setting, and socioeconomic position. The required modifications involved notions of modesty, but my interlocutors also repeatedly noted that changes to cut and color were necessary to make European and North American fashions suitable for Vietnamese women's racialized bodies. Accustomed to seeing fashion as a realm of personal expression, I was surprised by the

hunger of many fashion retailers and customers for expert guidance. Minh Hạnh catered to and further entrenched this desire with pedagogically motivated collections, shows, and media statements, Fashion for the Forties being just one example.

These conversations provide glimpses into how, in Vietnam as in many other countries, debates about cultural appropriateness often hinge on claims about gender. Some observers hold colonial regimes responsible for creating a gendered distinction between Western modernity and local tradition so that men, particularly those in the burgeoning ranks of the middle class, enjoyed greater latitude to pursue modernity through Western education, employment, and dress, while women, as keepers of domestic order and socializers of children, bore greater responsibility for maintaining an appearance, behavior, and morality consistent with prevailing views of tradition.[6] Women's savvy appreciation of tradition could admit some aspects of modernity, such as domestic science (Hancock 1999), so long as they also recognized its flaws—materialism, lack of spirituality, moral decay, domestic discord, etc. Elite nationalist men expected women to wear "traditional" clothes, although some of these outfits were "reformed" in dialogue with European clothing aesthetics.[7] This dynamic gave birth to the Vietnamese *áo dài* (Leshkowich 2003). Women who directly adopted Western dress, cosmetics, or styles of comportment were condemned as gross or shocking "new women" akin to hussies (Chakrabarty 1997; Tai 1992, 96). While most scholars see these debates as largely symbolic, Ikeya argues in her study of Burmese nationalist condemnation of women's "sheer blouses" that critiques of women's inappropriate mimicry reflected the actual material transformations wrought by colonial labor, education, and migration policies that had appeared to lower the status of Burmese men and to raise that of women (Ikeya 2008).

Market economic growth reignited both this gender symbolism and concerns about how changing relations of production and consumption might differentially affect men's and women's status. Initial waves of foreign investment and rising domestic affluence generated feminized jobs in light industry, retail, and administrative support (Earl 2014), while perceptions of lessened commitment to the state sector threatened male jobs in the bureaucracy or military. Defining

who Vietnamese women were or should be thus became key to securing Vietnam's national identity. This is why the prime minister's wife identified women's behavior and appearance, particularly continued wearing of the *áo dài*, as crucially important during Vietnam's global integration.[8] At the same time, women were depicted in cautionary tales in the media and popular fiction as liminal and untrustworthy. They therefore needed to be scrutinized and held accountable to strict standards for appropriate behavior.

The field of opinion about Vietnamese modernity thus involved disciplining women's expressions of identity with dimensions that were both material—the limitation or monitoring of women's access to foreign cultural elements—and ideological—the assertion that femininity rested on the passive expression of a preexisting core, rather than any conscious process of imitation or performance. These came together in the fashion show, with Minh Hạnh pedagogically enacting her ideological claims to expertise about appropriate Vietnamese femininity through the concrete contours of the clothes that she had crafted. Like the creators of the *áo dài* decades earlier, she was asserting her role as gatekeeper who could borrow cultural features from powerful outsiders such as China, France, or the United States—a role also asserted by other intellectuals, political leaders, revolutionary veterans, and credentialed experts eager to shape Vietnam's future.[9]

The 40 or so women in the fashion show, in turn, enacted an appropriately modern and status-enhancing Vietnamese femininity, in three distinct ways. First, the styles they wore and their movements during the event epitomized respectability, modesty, and simple elegance. Second, the circumstances that brought them to the stage—their willing submission to Minh Hạnh's expertise in fashioning them—reinforced social expectations that women's encounters with modernity needed to be superintended and assessed by someone else, in this case a high-status, state-employed designer. Third, the women's positions as wives and mothers and the fact that they were old enough to remember the struggles of what the Vietnamese government refers to as the American War allowed them to occupy stable, respectable subject positions. While their gender made them liminal subjects in need of surveillance, these were women of accomplishment and substance who had internalized the standards of appropriate Vietnamese femininity, who

understood the stakes involved in maintaining them, and who had made an investment in conforming to them as part of their movement toward the middle class.

When Fieldwork(er) Becomes Field

The discussion thus far has focused on how Fashion for the Forties revealed the centrality of dress to a gendered pedagogy of appropriateness: an ideological and material assertion of authority to shape Vietnam's future by determining how Vietnamese women should act and appear. I would soon learn, however, that I was no mere observer of this Bourdieu-esque "field." Indeed, the very fact that I, as a foreign researcher, showed an interest in Vietnamese fashion at all quickly became deployed as a didactic lesson about the desirability of the path that Minh Hạnh was forging.

I had first met Minh Hạnh in February 1997, when she judged a youth fashion contest. During that event, she had taken the young women contestants to task for an excessive form of mimicry that strove too hard to embody a vision of Western high fashion that she deemed inappropriate for their age and daily activities (Leshkowich 2009). Surprised by her diatribe, I requested an interview. During our lengthy conversation the next day, Minh Hạnh articulated her desire to create a unique Vietnamese style that would serve as a foundation for the country's fashion industry. Such an endeavor required structure and hierarchical expertise to guide Vietnam away from its current global market position as merely a source of cheap labor to manufacture foreign designs. It also required actively inculcating an appreciation for local and traditional styles, such as silk jacquard (*tơ tằm*) or the woven textiles (*thổ cẩm*) associated with different ethnic minority groups. She continued by ascribing fashion faux pas committed by newly affluent Vietnamese women to a lack of discerning knowledge needed to cultivate compelling personal style. Nearly forty at the time, Minh Hạnh described how her "adventurous" next step would be to lead a fashion "revolution" for women whose survival of the war and postwar periods and current pursuit of success had perhaps come at the cost of their beauty and, consequently, family happiness.[10] She promised to get me a ticket to her upcoming show, which I received shortly before the event.

Figure 5.3. The author, wearing a suit designed by Minh Hạnh, being interviewed at Fashion for the Forties for the Vietnamese television show, "Fashion and Life."

In the intervening month between our interview and the show, buzz in the press began to build, thanks in part to sponsorship of the event by the *Women's Newspaper* (*Báo Phụ Nữ*). Meanwhile, on a trip to Hanoi at the end of February, I had occasion to meet Vũ Thanh Hường, a reporter for the television show, "Fashion and Life" (Thời Trang và Cuộc Sống), that had just begun airing as part of the popular lifestyle offerings on Vietnam Television 3 (VTV3). Thanh Hường told me that she would be covering Fashion for the Forties and suggested that she might interview me there. I agreed.

On the night of the show, I arrived at the packed theater wearing an ensemble that I hoped would be attractive, yet businesslike: a maroon cotton pantsuit made-to-order from Minh Hạnh's own FADIN line (figure 5.3). Conspicuous for my foreignness, I was easily located by Thanh Hường for an on-camera interview focusing on my impressions of the event and of Vietnamese women's dress more generally. Thanh Hường then told me that she wanted to do a feature segment on my research based on a longer interview and some footage of me working in my apartment. We arranged to meet at my rented room two days later. I dressed for that occasion more casually, with plain black pants paired with a t-shirt and what I recall as another of Minh Hạnh's designs, a striped, fitted vest made from ethnic minority textiles (figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4. The fieldworker typing up notes in her apartment: "Traveling from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City, this future PhD already clearly understands our country's customs and culture."

The episode featuring Fashion for the Forties and my interview aired on national television later that month. Thanh Hường opens the show by declaring that every woman wants to be beautiful, but that fashion is skewed toward the young. A marketplace filled with jeans and short skirts has little to offer women in their forties that is attractive and appropriate for their family and life circumstances. Amidst footage of the career, special occasion, and casual wear segments from Minh Hạnh's show, Thanh Hường's voice-overs echo other press coverage about the event: the difficulty that women in this age range have choosing appropriate clothing and the notable fact that the models were regular women who wished to dress in ways that would reflect and advance the country's modern development. Snippets of interviews with audience members praise the event for showing women what to wear and include the suggestion mentioned above about the need for a similar program for men. The program then turns to a segment from CNN Style featuring Trish McEvoy makeup with dubbed Vietnamese translation. Fashion coverage in Vietnam frequently included this kind of interlude that served to introduce the audience to international trends and compensated for the lack of domestic footage.

After coverage of the dress rehearsal for Fashion in the Forties, the show turns to my interview, all of it in Vietnamese. Thanh Hường introduces me as an American graduate student conducting research about

fashion in Vietnam. When asked why I chose to conduct this research in Vietnam, I answer by noting the importance for Americans of learning about Vietnam not just as a war, but as a country and people with "a rich civilization and history." Explaining that I have conducted research "from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City," Thanh Hường asks what had by then become a familiar question, "What do you think about the way that Vietnamese women in general dress?" Deciding to err on the side of diplomacy rather than analytical depth, I earnestly declare that Vietnamese women dress in a manner that is very polite, very beautiful, and very fashionable. I note that this may be a new trend, perhaps something that has become possible only in the past five years or even more recently.

From here, the scene shifts to footage of the fieldworker at home—a contemporary video equivalent to the "researcher in a tent" photos in classic ethnographies that imparted the authority of having been there. After an establishment shot of my desk, armoire, and modest cooking area, the camera zooms in to show me typing notes on my computer, my spiral notebook propped up at my side. In accordance with my wishes, the camera angle and movement make it impossible to decipher my notes, but it is evident that they are written in Vietnamese. The camera then closes in on the Vietnamese dictionaries piled on my desk and newspaper clippings adorning my walls. Thanh Hường's voice-over describes my research:

> It's not just me, but also the traders at Bến Thành market who are very surprised when they meet this young American woman with her fairly fluent Vietnamese conducting research about Vietnamese fashion. Yes, foreigners like Ann Marie who are researching Vietnamese fashion don't just look at fashion, but also consider culture, because fashion is one part of our ethnic culture. [Camera shows me holding a picture that I've taken in Bến Thành market.] Traveling from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City, this future PhD already clearly understands our country's customs and culture.

The scene concludes with a shot of me underlining and annotating my notebook, as Thanh Hường declares, "Ann Marie in particular, plus a lot of other foreign entities, are turning toward the Vietnamese fashion market to understand more about a particular perspective, a culture

collected together." The camera zooms in on a framed snapshot of my husband and me that, as our attire clearly suggests, was taken at our wedding.

Returning to the interview at the fashion show, Thanh Hường asks me to compare how women in the United States and Vietnam dress. Ever ready with bland generalizations, I note the tendency to dress for comfort in the United States, in spite of comparative wealth and fashion options, versus the focus on dressing elegantly and decorously in the relatively new Vietnamese fashion scene. I predict that "convergence between these two tendencies will make both sides more beautiful." Gathering momentum, I invoke Vietnam's national costume: "In the past in Vietnam, there was the *áo dài* that served as a symbol for the entire Vietnamese nation. And when women wore the *áo dài*, they made an unforgettable impression." As edited for broadcast, this part of the interview serves as a voice-over for a quick scene from the *áo dài* portion of Minh Hạnh's show. Lest my statement imply that embracing Western-style clothing might make a less favorable impact, the camera returns to me as I conclude, "As Vietnamese women today pay so much attention to fashion and have such a decorous, beautiful way of dressing, they will direct the development of Vietnamese fashion so that it can be more beautiful every day."

I found the whole exercise—then and now—cringe-worthy. My goal was to repay a reporter for the access and information that she had provided in a manner that would sacrifice neither my dignity nor research prospects. So nervous was I about the possibility of causing offense that I pandered to my audience by praising Vietnamese women, Vietnamese culture, and Vietnamese fashion in a manner that no doubt seemed well-intentioned, but perhaps gave the audience cause to question my credentials as a "future PhD." As my always-frank landlady put it when we watched the segment, "You look better on tv, but you sound better in person."

Reflections on Fashion Fieldwork in Vietnam

Happy to have my three minutes of fame on Vietnamese television behind me, I completed my dissertation fieldwork on clothing and market traders. I began to present my research on Vietnamese fashion,

including an unpublished paper on Fashion for the Forties that featured much the same analysis as I offer above, but omitted my moment in the media spotlight. Other, published pieces explored the high stakes surrounding women's appearance and behavior to argue that these illuminated how market socialism was ideologically and materially constructed in class- and gender-specific ways (Leshkowich 2003, 2008, 2009, 2012). I commented on the overblown rhetoric surrounding women's dress choices within Vietnam and the ways that international celebration of the *áo dài* or of Indo-chic—moments with rhetoric that I and a co-author critiqued as Orientalist and self-Orientalizing (Leshkowich and Jones 2003)—were met with acclaim by the Vietnamese designers and merchants I knew. The cultural and economic dimensions of these moves were fraught. On the one hand, identifying particular styles as quintessentially Vietnamese, and hence unique for that fact, could provide a point of entry for Vietnamese designers and entrepreneurs into global fashion or local tourist markets. On the other hand, this label risked reproducing Orientalist stereotypes of Vietnamese fashion as somehow essentially Vietnamese and hence consigning its styles to ethnic chic or other "exotic" niche markets. Designers might sell clothes, but they would consequently become known not as individual auteurs and innovators, but as repositories of cultural heritage or, perhaps slightly better, as skilled translators and intermediaries between the local and global, the traditional and modern. Stereotypical or not, such praise at least signaled to the clothing entrepreneurs that I met in the 1990s that Vietnam might capture a spot on the international runway.

Similar dilemmas have plagued designers elsewhere in Asia and diasporically. Dorinne Kondo (1997) offers an astute analysis of the opportunities and pitfalls of the fraught intersections between race, ethnicity, and global fashion. When Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto gained international prominence in the 1980s, the international fashion press took to touting their emergence as a "Japanese invasion." As Kondo points out, this drew attention to their lines, but the racialized and martialized metaphor raised the specter of a contemporary "Yellow Peril." It also lumped three designers' diverse style innovations into a single category, as if intricate pleating techniques (Miyake) or avant-garde deconstructionism (Kawakubo) were

expressions of an immutable Japanese essence (Kondo 1997; see also Tu 2011). Lise Skov has chronicled how Hong Kong designers viewed self-exoticization as a way to gain a "competitive edge" in global markets, but "doing something Chinese" risked confining them to the marginalized ranks of ethnic chic—an especially ironic outcome because such traditional motifs were alien to the designers' own modernist fashion sensibilities (Skov 2003, 215–216). Chinese, Indian, and Asian American designers have likewise navigated the pitfalls and opportunities of, to borrow Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu's phrase, "how Asianness has become a resource in this creative economy" (Tu 2011, 5; see also Lindgren 2015; Radclyffe-Thomas and Radclyffe-Thomas 2015; Tarlo 1996; Zhao 2013). As Minh-Ha T. Pham observes, however, "wearing one's ethnicity on one's sleeve" plays into essentialist, racialized logics that marginalize Asians as other and consequently devalue their fashion labor, ideologically and materially (Pham 2015).

Although I still cringe when I view the footage of my appearance on "Fashion and Life," the passage of two decades affords critical distance to consider how my verbal and visual performance might have been implicated in these dynamics. Watching the clip now, I see that what mattered was not that I praised Vietnamese fashion (although that certainly was preferable to insulting it), but the very fact that I had decided to study it and could speak about it in Vietnamese. As Thanh Hường's voice-over suggests, that a foreigner saw Vietnamese dress as a window on a rich culture amounted to a seal of approval that both Vietnamese fashion and culture had value. Through my own implication in global hierarchies of race, nation, and class, my interview marked Vietnamese fashion as worthy of notice and suggested that the television reporter, Minh Hạnh, and even Vietnam's First Lady were right in seeing this as an issue of the "utmost importance" to be approached with far more care and intentionality than my own blithely uttered platitudes.

That I was featured in the national broadcast of Minh Hạnh's self-described "adventurous" and "revolutionary" fashion show also suggests that my presence served as a seal of approval of the soundness and necessity of her endeavor in particular. My expertise—the fact of which I never asserted and which my trite, bumbling comments most likely called into doubt—played into Orientalist dynamics in which a Westerner authoritatively defines that which is valuable about Asian cultural

heritage. Only here, it was a Vietnamese reporter and a Vietnamese designer positioning me as a foreign expert in order to shore up the importance of their own projects of cultural production: Fashion matters because this American graduate student says it does. Minh Hạnh's direction is sound because this future PhD is paying attention. What's more, our visions coincide: Modernize through adopting and adapting Western clothing but be sure to preserve that distinctive Vietnamese beauty embodied by the *áo dài*.

My authority as a foreign researcher thus mattered a great deal to the success of this project, at least for that moment. Once I decided to participate and to say nothing that might offend, however, the agency to assert and delineate my authority shifted to the reporter and her crew. As a result, a large part of my authority as "expert" rested on how Thanh Hường chose to portray my own femininity visually. I was certainly complicit in this, as I deliberately chose to wear clothing designed by Minh Hạnh as a gesture of appreciation for her talents and because it was the most businesslike outfit in my otherwise lackluster graduate student wardrobe. At the same time, my portrayal on the television segment exceeded my own intentionality. While the audience would likely not have realized who had designed my outfit, the similarity between my own clothes and those on the runway, made evident through interspersing shots of the interview with those of the models on stage, certainly could have conveyed the message that Minh Hạnh's vision of the Vietnamese woman converged with global tastes. Similarly, my "at-home" outfit of "ethnic" vest over plain shirt and pants mirrored what the reporter herself had worn at the fashion show. I had not been aware of this fact then, but in retrospect it again suggests comparable tastes, as foreign authority and local experts encountered each other on a common playing field of style. Finally, the shot of me and my husband in our wedding finery established me as having achieved the pinnacle of heteronormative femininity and fashion: the bride with her updo in a white gown, tuxedo-clad groom at her side.

To the extent that I had allowed myself to be portrayed as a foreign expert, I had assumed that my authority would lie in my ideas and analysis. That is why I had been disappointed by my failure to be more articulate and was happy to put the episode behind me. Two decades on, as I review the grainy VHS tape and reflect on the debates then

taking place about the national and global position of both Vietnamese women and fashion, I realize that while my academic credentials and the content of my speech mattered, my embodied, clothed, and gendered form was perhaps even more important. It was my appearance, both in real time and in the past as a bride, and my ability to speak and comport myself in a way that might seem both foreign and familiar, that the reporter highlighted. This lent me an aura of authority and of comprehensibility as mediator between the local and the global that Thanh Hường could then invoke to bolster her own claims about the significance of the Vietnamese fashion scene of which she was a part. In my graduate student, in-the-moment myopic despair that my landlady was right that I had not sounded as good as I normally did, I missed what upon more distanced reflection would occur to me to have perhaps been the point of the exercise: in fashioning me to look better than I did in real life, the segment presented me as part of an idealized vision of fashion and femininity that underscored the need to attend to both in precisely the manner that Thanh Hường and Minh Hạnh had identified. My racialized, embodied femininity represented a "global modernity" that buttressed their approach to fashion as a gendered pedagogy of appropriateness.

Postscript: Resisting the Field

To be sure, there was something particular about Vietnam in the 1990s that shaped this episode. Anxiety about the market economy and fears that global integration would mean cultural homogenization lent urgency to declarations of Vietnamese distinctiveness. The novelty of foreign, especially American, researchers was taken as a sign that Vietnam mattered, even as our presence aroused suspicion about our motives. The result was that the fieldworker was often asked to opine about the subjects of his or her study, with select quotes enlisted in service of particular agendas, thus feeding back into those very same cultural dynamics. Given my own personal, political investment in postmodern critiques of anthropology's implication in Orientalist and colonialist knowledge production, I recognized that my anticipated publications in English-language academic venues would always need to be answerable to a legacy of speaking for "the natives." It therefore seemed

only fitting to have the tables turned so that my less than eloquent words might shore up Vietnamese projects of self-representation. Who, indeed, was the expert here?

Intersectionality, however, complicates this already fraught and politicized field of cultural production. Two dimensions of this strike me as particularly worth underscoring. First, the segment highlights how the relationship between race, class, and gender shaped how I appeared and what claims about my significance might be made. While it might seem apt comeuppance for the words of a white American expert to be turned to different purposes in different venues—all the more so given the history of US involvement in Vietnam—the fact that the clothed, hetero, cisgendered femininity of this particular "expert" was central to the representation would seem to reproduce a crude, tenacious sexism that reduces women to their embodied appearance. As a woman, should I really be surprised that my words, even if far from spellbinding, might matter less than what I looked like?

Second, "the natives" whose voices anthropologists have rightly been critiqued for usurping are not a singular, univocal entity. The politics of who gets to speak about and for whom are no less fraught in Vietnam than they are transnationally. With the 1990s expansion of a market economy intensifying class, regional, and ethnic differences in Vietnam, and these differences often mapping in complex ways onto issues of gender, the use of my words to make disciplining claims about the significance of women's "appropriate" appearance worked to bolster the cultural and hence economic capital of particular experts. State functionaries who have inherited a revolutionary socialist tradition are not often viewed as fashion tastemakers. Deploying me as one of many mediators between the globally fashionable and the locally meaningful aided the state's broader pivot from engineer of socialist economic planning to promoter of cultural capitalism and consumer citizenship that would foster market economic growth. It also worked to make fashion seem a matter of individual taste and discernment, rather than a reflection of an individual's socioeconomic position. This naturalizing sleight of hand worked directly counter to my own intellectual project by obscuring the fact that the field of 1990s Vietnam, in Bourdieu's sense, was shaped by, and contributed to, the increasing inequality generated through a market economy.

Twenty years later, the prospects and challenges of global economic integration are no longer novel in Vietnam. Yet foreign fieldworkers continue to be called upon to lend legitimacy to particular interests in the field of cultural production. In my current research on social work, I chronicle a situation akin to fashion in the 1990s, only now those eager to adapt foreign knowledge are Vietnamese social workers seeking to advance particular material and ideological visions of Vietnam's future and to consolidate their own status as experts employing scientific methods to assess and address "social problems." Once again, my interest is interpreted as a sign of approval, my attention to their efforts a resource to validate their projects.

In November 2011, I made a whirlwind trip in the middle of the semester to attend World Social Work Day, an event hosted that year by the department that sponsors my fieldwork. One faculty member repeatedly pressed me to be interviewed by Ho Chi Minh City television. "You have to talk to the reporter," he insisted. "You're a foreign professor who has studied about social work in Vietnam, and you speak Vietnamese." Claiming jetlag and the onset of a nasty cold, both of which were true, I politely but adamantly resisted his multiple requests. Anthropological knowledge production is dialogic and ideally entails reciprocity, but prior experience made me wary of how, projected through a television screen, my appearance and comportment might convey messages about race, gender, and status that could lend authority to my casual statements beyond what I might intend and in ways that could easily be enlisted in service of other agendas. Fieldwork as an intersubjective, embodied process of knowing becomes fodder for the field, the terrain in which social, cultural, and economic capital are asserted and contested. Having learned firsthand that all knowledge is situated, that all scholarship is inherently political, and that observer and observed inevitably shape each other and readily switch places, I realize that fieldwork and fieldworker cannot be separated from field. But in the ongoing, high-stakes environment of claims-making about Vietnamese culture, I've decided, for now at least, that this relationship need not be televised.

NOTES

1 Traders had ambivalent visions of the United States. Many expressed admiration for its professed values of democracy or entrepreneurial freedom, yet were critical

of aspects of US military intervention in Vietnam and blamed the Ford administration for not rescuing the Republic of Vietnam ("South Vietnam") in April 1975. Meanwhile, from relatives and friends who had immigrated to the United States, traders had a sense that the economic prosperity that many enjoyed (although their visions here often seemed inflated) carried the price of racial discrimination, lack of time for anything but work, and weakened family and community relationships.

2 The gendered subjectivities that traders constructed through their daily performances in the marketplace did play a crucial role in shaping market socialism, but this point was not readily apparent to traders or other observers in the 1990s (Leshkowich 2014).

3 Narratives of modernity have usually mythically and Eurocentrically attributed its origins to seventeenth-century Europe, from which it spread around the globe over the course of the ensuing centuries (see, e.g., Giddens 1990). Scholarship on colonialism over the last two decades provocatively reverses this causal relationship by suggesting that the dynamics of colonial rule enabled the emergence of modernity in Europe (Barlow 1997; Burton 1999b; Stoler 2002).

4 Brenner 1998; Ferguson 1999; Gaonkar 2001; Knauft 2002; Ong and Nonini 1997; Piot 1999; Rofel 1999; Walley 2003.

5 China might seem to provide an even more immediate model of grafting market economics onto a socialist political system, but the lengthy history of animosity between the two countries has made Vietnamese policymakers reluctant to acknowledge this resemblance.

6 Burton 1999a; Chakrabarty 1997; Chatterjee 1993; Clancy-Smith and Gouda 1998; Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis 1987; Gouda 1999; Marr 1981; Stoler 1989; Tai 1992; Tarlo 1996; Taussig 1993: 177–185; Tiwon 1996; Wieringa 1988; Yuval-Davis 1997: 23. In this way, the native woman could also serve as a mute rebuke to the European woman, whose presence in the colonies was supposed to symbolize the nurturing, maternal purity of European colonization, but who in her actual behavior was prone to inappropriate commingling with the natives or ignorant and unseemly expressions of racism (see, e.g., Stoler 1989; Edwards 1998).

7 Chakrabarty 1997; Chatterjee 1993; Niessen 2003; Ruhlen 2003; Tarlo 1996; Taussig 1993; J. Taylor 1997; Wilson 1985.

8 Durham similarly notes that throughout southern Africa at this time, women were pressured to wear traditional dress in such settings as political meetings so that they could literally embody national identity (Durham 1999, 395).

9 As a woman then approaching 40 and daughter of a former captain in the South Vietnamese army who spent nine years in a re-education camp, Minh Hạnh might not seem part of a revolutionary elite. As a designer heading a state-run company whose status depended on popular acceptance of her fashion knowledge, however, she was deeply invested in maintaining a hierarchy based on expertise. She was thus aligned with other political, cultural, and economic leaders in attempting to steward Vietnamese women's engagements with modernity.

10 Here, Minh Hạnh references the widely held anxiety, one reinforced by the beauty and fitness industries, that the husbands of successful middle-aged women would have affairs with younger, presumably more attractive women (see Leshkowich 2008; Nguyen 2015).

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