

Working Out Culture: Gender, Body, And Commodification In A Ho Chi Minh City Health Club

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ABSTRACT: In 1993, the state-affiliated Labor Union Cultural House and a private investor opened Club Royale, a fitness center for women in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam. Club Royale quickly built a membership of urban middle-class women who wanted to improve their health and appearance, display their status, and reduce stress. Fifteen years later, the fitness trend continued, but Club Royale's membership had fallen significantly. Club Royale's changing fortunes provide a lens through which to examine how market-oriented reforms enabled the state to promote politicized ideals of urban middle-class femininity through the new venue of public-private commercial ventures. These developments also demonstrate that body images become significant under conditions of increasing commodification because, like the commodity images that are such a prominent feature of global capitalism, they encapsulate a tension between idealized meanings and concrete manifestations. Touting a scientific approach to health, Club Royale enabled women to negotiate conflicting images of femininity by materially reshaping their bodies. Although Club Royale's philosophy of exercise continues to be popular, its crumbling facility and increased competition mean that it no longer satisfies another aspiration of urban middle-class Vietnamese: to acquire and display status through conspicuous participation in global exercise trends.

In 1995, Jane Fonda was back in Viet Nam, although under different circumstances from the infamous 1972 tour that earned her the nickname "Hanoi Jane." The Jane Fonda spotted in Viet Nam during the 1990s was a virtual one: her internationally best-selling workout videos played continually on a television suspended above the cardio floor at Club Royale, a health and fitness center for women located in the heart of Ho Chi Minh City.¹ Although members tended merely to watch, rather than imitate, Fonda's movements, her video and the numerous posters of Cindy Crawford and Claudia Schiffer decorating the club's walls suggested a desire to connect Club Royale to the expertise of the international fitness and beauty industries.

Officially known as an "exercise and aesthetics club" (*cau lac bo the duc va tham my*), Club Royale had opened in December 1993. Like many new businesses established in the first decade of the market-oriented economic policies known as *Doi moi* (Renovation), Club Royale was a public-private partnership. The Labor Union Cultural House (*Nha Van hoa Lien doan Lao dong*), an organ of the Vietnamese Communist Party, provided the land and building, while the individual who managed the club provided capital for equipment and day-to-day operations. The club's numerous services included an exercise space with modern machines (see Figure 1), trained instructors, an on-site doctor, steam bath, massage, hairstyling, dance and flower arranging classes, and tourism excursions. On its promotional literature, the club touted its "airy exercise room - plentiful equipment - devoted instruction - friendly service."

Unlike the swankier health clubs located in the city's hotels, Club Royale attracted an almost exclusively Vietnamese membership. By the time I joined in 1995, the club had registered 4000 members. The director estimated that 500 of these worked out regularly. A written survey that I conducted revealed them to be highly educated and economically secure.² More than 90% had graduated from high school and approximately 40% had



Figure 1: The exercise floor at Club Royale, 1995.

college or university degrees. Although members reported a wide range of incomes, the average household earned about two million *dong* (\$180) per month, roughly twice the average for Ho Chi Minh City at that time.³ Most worked as white-collar professionals (civil servants, bookkeepers, teachers), in business, or in skilled trades (hair styling, tailoring). All had sufficient discretionary income to spend at least 100,000 *dong* (about \$9) for the club's entry-level package of twelve visits per month.⁴

Concern for the body and appearance was fueled by several factors. First, with economic openness came the opportunity to use products and partake of services that in the immediate postwar era had been branded decadent and bourgeois. Second, rising incomes fueled desires to display one's status as part of a growing cosmopolitan and internationally savvy middle class. Third, there was a sense that this new life had stress. Working out in a space separate from home or work afforded a respite.

This explains why the club offered services beyond exercise. It also explains why many of the women I observed seemed to take a lackadaisical approach to working out.⁵ The goal was to nurture the body by caring for it, not by straining it through overly vigorous movement.

Over the next fifteen years, the fitness trend in Ho Chi Minh City continued to gather momentum. Newspapers, magazines, and books provided detailed advice on nutrition and exercise to maintain a slim figure and prevent disease. The city's parks, which for years had attracted badminton players and elderly *tai chi* enthusiasts for morning exercises, now became popular for aerobics, stretching, power walking, and jogging. Numerous community centers run by ward and district governments advertised yoga classes.

With such widespread attention to exercise, it was puzzling to see that Club Royale's status had dramatically declined by 2008. With little improvement to its facility or purchasing of new equipment, the once upscale club now looked shabby (see Figure 2). Membership had declined by 60%, and its composition had changed to primarily civil servants and housewives with stable, but modest incomes. The club no longer offered non-exercise classes, tourism, or a physician. The types of upwardly mobile women who had joined Club Royale in the 1990s now flocked to state-of-the-art foreign owned clubs or exercised on their own at home and in parks. Long-term members who continued to patronize the club, as well as a smattering of new recruits, reported that they put up with the poor infrastructure because the club offered low prices, a convenient location, flexible workout schedules, and friendly personal training.

Club Royale's changing fortunes provide an interesting lens through which to explore two trends prevalent in urban Viet Nam since the 1990s: (1) the involvement of the state, the party, and local government in commercial ventures that have cultural implications, and (2) an explosion of interest in feminine appearance that includes consumption of fashion,



Figure 2: Club Royale, 2008.

cosmetics, fitness, and body treatments. Specifically, the club's early success invites us to consider why an organ of the party might be interested in running a women's health club, why such a venture initially proved attractive to economically comfortable women, and why, even though exercise has grown in popularity, the club has failed to retain members. Although state commerce and physical appearance may appear to be separate trends that happen to come together only because some government commercial ventures sold health and beauty products or services, an examination of Club Royale reveals them to be profoundly linked.

The first section of this article situates the Labor Union's involvement in Club Royale within a broader pattern of state rhetoric and mass mobilization campaigns that during the 1990s tried to manage the problems of economic change by providing models of disciplined middle-class women who

would appropriately use foreign commodities and follow modern scientific approaches to health and sexuality. Through public-private ventures such as Club Royale, state engagement of women in projects of self-making reached beyond formal, direct governance to encompass commerce.

Why was Club Royale successful in attracting members during the 1990s? The second section addresses this question by considering the issues of oppression and agency in the relationship between commodified images of women's bodies and women's individual projects of body work. Drawing on William Mazzarella's (2003) analysis of the "commodity image" in global consumer capitalism, I argue that the body has become such a vibrant site for articulating meanings precisely because it shares with the commodity form the ambivalent gap between its physical and ideological manifestations. Because we experience the body on an intimate, physical level, we each have a ready-made material basis from which we can negotiate meanings and engage in cultural production.

Determining the effects of the international trend of body work requires attending to the concrete circumstances through which particular commodified body images are produced and presented to consumers. The third section of this article draws on nearly a year of ethnographic participation observation in 1995 and follow-up research in 2007-2008 to examine the perspectives of the director and employees of Club Royale as they drew, in varying degrees, on both scientific and consumerist knowledge in constructing images of the feminine body to promote the club's services and to create personalized fitness goals for their clients. The fourth section briefly outlines consumers' largely positive initial responses to the club's scientific approach. In an increasingly stressful "economy of appearances" (Tsing 2005), Club Royale provided an attractive, seemingly apolitical commercial environment in which members could encounter mediated forms of expert knowledge

and temporarily resolve conflicting images of femininity by engaging in body work.

By 2008, the club's focus on scientific approaches to exercise and health remained unchanged. Popular concern about fitness suggests that such messages had been even more broadly accepted. Why, then, had the club's membership fallen so significantly? The final section of this article argues that the answer has to do with another aspect of the relationship between the material and the meaningful that underlies body work: status display through conspicuous participation in exercise.

Judicious Consumption and Scientific Health: State Cultural Production of Middle-Class Femininity in the 1990s

The prosperity visible in Ho Chi Minh City during the 1990s sparked tremendous anxiety about the moral, cultural, and social fate of the Vietnamese population in an increasingly "open door" (*mo cua*) era of global cultural and commodity flows. Images of women became lightning rods for debating the future of the nation, as the state sought to define, via claims about appropriate Vietnamese femininity, a contemporary Vietnamese culture that would judiciously blend the modern and the traditional, the foreign and the local (Drummond 2004; Gammeltoft 1999; Luong 2003; Nghiem 2004; Nguyen-Vo 2002; Pettus 2003; Rydstrom 2003; Werner 2005). Real women became targets of cultural education by mass mobilization organizations like the Women's Union and Labor Union, and through pamphlets, billboards, and educational programs against social evils (*te nan xa hoi*) such as drugs, prostitution, and AIDS.

Gendered concerns about modernity, globalization, and culture were refracted through a class and geographical lens that constructed different kinds of feminine subjects. For example, in replication of patterns observed throughout Asia and elsewhere (Mills 1999; Mohanty 1997; Ong 1987; D. Wolf 1992),

foreign investment prompted the celebration of hardworking, dutiful young rural women migrants whose unskilled but disciplined labor in an export processing zone would sustain their families and advance the nation's development (Nghiem 2004; Nguyen-Vo 2002; Rosenthal 2002; Tran 2004). That these same women might become prostitutes or engage in other forms of unacceptable behavior provided a cautionary tale and rationale for more coercive state intervention, such as imprisonment, that would turn wayward women into docile workers (Nguyen-Vo 2002).

If the working-class woman represented the body that was both necessary for and dangerous to development, then the middle-class urban housewife embodied its aspirations. An increasing proportion of state rhetoric shifted from "viewing women as productive workers to positioning them as desirable wives and caring mothers" (Nghiem 2004: 299). Most official discussions of femininity in the 1990s depicted women as domestic managers of their families' finances and emotions who needed to focus on maintaining stability in a time of rapid socioeconomic change. For example, the long-running "Happy Family" (*Gia dinh hanh phuc*) campaign offered billboard and pamphlet images of families that had achieved a measure of material comfort in the form of motorbikes, televisions, and rice cookers and had parents with time to supervise children's homework or enjoy recreational activities together (see, e.g., Drummond 2004; Gammeltoft 1999; Pettus 2003). Instructional programming and contests sponsored by the Women's Union, an organization that is part of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front, reinforced the idea that it was wives and mothers who created this domestic tableau (Pettus 2003: 90-102). The program also emphasized family planning because parents could better meet the material and psychological needs of fewer offspring. With birth control largely seen as a woman's responsibility, state constructions of femininity focused squarely on women's bodies and sexuality (Gammeltoft 1999). Although these campaigns

were national in scope, the ideal was clearly more attainable by urban middle classes of stable economic means, in stark contrast to earlier revolutionary propaganda that had held up working classes and rural peasants as the models to emulate.

Middle-class wifely bodies were further scrutinized through a growing number of publications purporting to provide scientific knowledge about conjugal relations. Nguyen-Vo (2002) argues that these manuals, most of them published by Fatherland Front organizations, presented information about sexual relations between men and women as biological, internationally accepted facts. Sex became yet another form of foreign expertise that the urbane middle-class woman needed to master and, quite literally, embody.

Similar valorization of international science can be seen in manuals about health and beauty. State actors in Viet Nam have long linked physical training to nationalism, from Vichy France's organization of young men into sports brigades during World War II (Raffin 2003: 313) to Ho Chi Minh and Ngo Dinh Diem's use of similar mobilization techniques. When young women joined the fighting in the 1960s and 1970s, they, too, had to develop bodily strength. Instead of increasing their attractiveness and fitness, the physical demands of combat and support robbed women of the youthful freshness and purity that revolutionary poets, rather ironically, celebrated as the enduring qualities of Vietnamese womanhood. Beauty and femininity were thus added to the list of things women sacrificed in serving the nation during war (see, e.g. Turner 1998: 130-3).⁶ What's more, paying excessive attention to one's appearance through use of cosmetics or fashion was bourgeois.

Starting in the 1990s, a burgeoning self-help literature popularized a different logic that linked women's beauty to deliberate effort. For example, one manual on family happiness published by the Literature and Arts Union of Ho Chi Minh City cautions married women not to become lax about their appearance by reminding them: "There's no such thing

as a woman who isn't pretty, just a woman who doesn't know how to make herself pretty" (Anh Tran 2007: 89). The same manual evokes the traditional Confucian Four Virtues (*tu duc*) for women and notes that one, *dung*, explicitly calls on women to maintain an attractive appearance through self-adornment, but in a manner appropriate to their economic and social circumstances. As I note below, members of Club Royale echoed this sense that an updated version of the traditional virtues would help them be attractive and successful in the "open door" era.

In addition to buying stylish clothing or using cosmetics appropriately, a woman could improve her appearance through moderate diet and exercise. Newspaper columns regularly reported the results of the latest disease or nutrition studies done by universities in North America, Europe, or Asia. Diet manuals provided tips to reduce fat or caloric intake, to emphasize certain vitamin-rich foods, and to exercise. Much of this advice explicitly blended "Western" and "Eastern" approaches, as in one health manual's description of watermelon as both cooling, a quality associated with traditional Vietnamese medicine, and rich in Vitamin C and calcium (Vo and Nguyen 2006: 31). At other times, the advice was presented in a developmentalist idiom in which Vietnamese were exhorted to adopt diet or exercise practices that had previously become popular in Japan, the U.S., or Europe (see, e.g., To Minh Chau 2008).

No matter how strongly mass mobilization campaigns or expert knowledge emanating from government research institutes or newspapers might exhort the populace to behave in particular ways, *Doi moi* has required that the state retreat from regulation of consumption. According to Vann (2005: 483), "The state no longer presumes what people 'need,' nor does it identify itself as a provider of goods for its citizens." To be sure, the state does not directly control the circulation of goods as it did during the subsidy (*bao cap*) era of central planning. But the word "identify" in Vann's claim is significant. The state no

longer asserts *explicit* control over the flow of consumer goods, but central, provincial, city and local governments, as well as party-affiliated organizations, were in fact directly involved in commerce during the 1990s through their operation of numerous profit-seeking ventures.

If the typical neoliberal pattern is the delegation of responsibilities of governance to private entities, *Doi moi* Viet Nam presents the opposite: the transformation of the state into a commercial actor through the creation of domestic and foreign joint ventures.⁷ Although the process of equitization of government-run companies proceeded quite slowly in the 1990s (Gainsborough 2003; Rosenthal 2002), local governments and party organizations in fact responded quickly to economic reforms by establishing hybrid entrepreneurial endeavors. Gainsborough (2003: 16) cautions that the extensive commercialization of Vietnamese central and local governments in the 1990s makes the commonly used labels of “state” and “private” misleading, for “companies described as ‘private’ often have state institutions among their shareholders while state companies can in fact be found to be operating rather ‘privately.’” Many new and seemingly private local businesses, such as Club Royale, were in fact directly overseen or owned by local government or party entities. As Club Royale’s director put it: “From 1995 to 2000, a lot of new [health] clubs opened. Every single district opened a club.” Government entities provided land, buildings, and (to varying degrees) capital and managerial oversight for these enterprises.

State-affiliated commercial ventures became active in even more public elements of the fashion and beauty industry. For example, the popular magazine *Thoi Trang Tre* (New Fashion) was published by the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League in partnership with Ringier Switzerland. It featured local fashion spreads and an array of articles on beauty, fashion, and international celebrities translated from foreign publications. The Ho Chi Minh City Women’s Union newspaper, particularly

its Sunday magazine, combined reporting on economic issues with popular lifestyle features on diet, exercise, and beauty. They touted an approach to physical health and beauty based on international scientific research and reported the findings of the most recent studies. Meanwhile, advertising connected particular products to attractive visions of a modern femininity that did not exude excessive brashness. For example, a two-page advertising spread in *Thoi Trang Tre* urged women to be "self-confident and graceful" (*tu tin va duyen dang*) by buying a Suzuki Viva 110. The motorbike was distributed in Ho Chi Minh City by Savico, a city-owned trade conglomerate.

Through public-private formations, the state and its affiliated entities expanded into the arena of commerce their attempts to define an ideal urban middle-class woman who followed state and expert guidance by resisting the lure of material excess and developing scientific knowledge to become an appropriate Vietnamese wife, mother, consumer, and healthy sexual partner. Other types of women strove to emulate her slim physique and modern fashions. According to Nghiem Lien Huong, garment workers turned to extreme diets and physical stress to achieve figures similar to those of well-heeled urban gym members (Nghiem 2004: 311). Other workers might spend high percentages of their incomes on clothing or beauty products to approximate the images portrayed in glossy fashion magazines (Drummond 2004; Nghiem 2004: 309; Nguyen-Vo 2004). Their behavior suggests the significant influence of the state-sponsored fashion media. At the same time, actual women's consumption choices can involve resignification and critique of these norms, as well as conflicting feelings of pleasure, alienation, and objectification (Drummond 2004; Nghiem 2004; Nguyen-Vo 2004, 2006). Add to that the internal contradictions within the media between images such as the demure housewife and the gamine astride her motorbike, and there is ample evidence to support Mary Steedly's argument that the state as an actor producing culture is hardly monolithic (1999:

440-43), and its products are open to multiple interpretations. At Club Royale, part of this complexity reflects the circumstances of production and circulation through which commodified images of femininity are invested with meanings. These made the body an appealing and accessible means through which women might manage multiple projects of gender and class.

Commodity Image Meets Body Image

In associating a modern consumer society with particular visions of an attractive, urban middle-class wife and mother, the Vietnamese government was clearly responding to particular historical, political, economic, social, and cultural conditions. At the same time, it was replicating a broader global pattern of selling products by linking lifestyle aspirations to images of desirable femininity. William Mazzarella (2003) has noted that the globalization of advertising means that material objects are more central to issues of belonging and power than ever before, yet we increasingly encounter them, not as concrete items, but as described and photographed “commodity images.” In classic Marxian analysis, commodification requires that material use value be subordinated to abstract exchange value. This abstraction works only so long as it is ultimately re-embodied in the form of a concrete thing used by a person. According to Mazzarella (2003: 48-49), advertisements exploit this gap by generating images that link an articulated value claim with its viewers’ embodied memories of the commodity being depicted. The successful commodity image achieves a powerful but often tentative and temporary balancing act between the ideological and the material, as well as the public and the personal, through associating individual experiences and emotions with brand and product narratives.

What happens when, as is so often the case, the commodity image is also a body image, particularly a woman’s body

image? As Bordo (1993) has argued, we never “know or encounter the body (not only the bodies of others but our own bodies) directly or simply. Rather, it seems, the body that we experience and conceptualize is always *mediated* by constructs, associations, images of a cultural nature” (Bordo 1993: 35). If the commodity image represents a tenuous attempt to resolve the relationship between commodity as abstraction and commodity as thing, might commodified body images be similar sites for negotiation of gendered cultural meanings through concrete manipulation of the physical entity of the body?

In Viet Nam during the 1990s, social and cultural commentators, officials, and academics saw danger rather than possibility in processes of commodification that entrapped women in time- and money-wasting efforts to maintain idealized versions of appearance in order to compete professionally and romantically. For example, in casual conversations with me in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, several Vietnamese women’s studies professors worried that Vietnamese women would succumb to the allure of unattainable body and beauty ideals. Both Fahey and Luong have suggested that commodification through sexualized images of women (women selling products) has led to a rise in urban prostitution: women as products (Fahey 1998: 230; Luong 2003: 11-12).

Such concerns would find ample support in an international feminist scholarly literature that has critiqued advertising and mass media images of women’s bodies as tools of subjection reducing women to a body-thing or demanding time-consuming, emotionally draining, and often self-destructive preoccupation with the specific contours of one’s body (see, e.g., Bartky 1990; Brownmiller 1984; Chapkis 1986; Willis 1991). Susan Willis (1991: 69) describes the problem of body image as precisely one of commodification: the machine-based gym workout may be “the most highly evolved commodity form yet to appear in late twentieth-century consumer capitalism,” because it “isolates the individual for the optimal expenditure of selectively fo-

cused effort aimed at the production of the quintessential body object." In non-Western contexts, these developments are often interpreted as the infiltration of foreign bodily ideals, a claim that also appeals to nationalist politicians eager to combat the cultural influences of globalization (Becker 1995; Brownell 1995; Hooper 1998; Kim 2003; Miller 2006; PuruShotam 1998; Ruhlen 2003). Such dynamics have been critiqued as delivering women the false promise of liberation through forms of self-improvement that in fact enmesh them in standardized, commodified economies of appearance (Douglas 1994; N. Wolf 1992).

Fear of oppression by unattainable ideals was not, however, the only reaction to the growth of a health and beauty industry in Viet Nam. Many women with whom I spoke in Ho Chi Minh City heralded the development as allowing Vietnamese women to display their femininity and recently acquired higher standards of living. There is scholarship to support this view as well. Recent ethnographic work suggests that exercising to embody a desired appearance or project an aura of disciplined mastery can be a source of empowerment and concrete benefit, as well as a strategy to negotiate the conflicting ideological and material demands of modernity and globalization (Alter 1992; Bolin and Granskog 2003; Dworkin 2003; Gimlin 2002; Markula 2003; Miller 2006; Spielvogel 2003). Arguing against a static binary between domestic and foreign or traditional and modern bodily ideals, these scholars call our attention to how body work may enable self-aware subjects to negotiate meanings they themselves associate with these different influences. At the same time, consumers' agency in performing body work, although perhaps personally quite significant, can be quickly recaptured through the more powerful agency of corporations (see, e.g., Markula 2003; Miller 2006).

Such claims depict consumer agency and corporate agency as embroiled in a contest from which the corporate side will always emerge the decisive victor. Exploring the connection between commodity image and body image can provide an

important corrective. Just as the commodity image rests on a powerful yet tentative and temporary bridging of the gap between idealized meanings and material practices, so also might body images circulating in commodity forms (what might be called the commodity body image) be simultaneously influential yet vulnerable. Unpacking the power imputed to commodity body images and the commercial agents behind them requires us to attend ethnographically to the circumstances of image production: Who is turning body into image and commodity? For what reasons? Through what agentive processes? In short, this calls for us to consider how Club Royale, its director, and employees have produced and marketed images of the desirable female body at particular moments in order to attract members.

Running Club Royale: Health, Scientific Expertise, and Beautiful Role Models

In the 1990s, Club Royale's management and employees marketed the center as a vehicle for improving women's health through a scientifically developed and medically supervised system of exercise consistent with the state's broader celebration of expert knowledge. As a commercial entity, however, Club Royale could also portray itself as a service responding to women's pre-existing consumer demands and hence had greater latitude to embrace those marketplace realities that government rhetoric dismissed as crass and undesirable.

"I love Vietnamese women," the director of Club Royale announced during our initial interview in 1995. "That's why I want to help them have knowledge about themselves so they can be healthier and stronger." In his earlier career as a film and television producer, the director had read a magazine article about an actress who needed to reduce her stomach and enhance her rear and chest in preparation for an upcoming

film role. After three months working with a personal trainer in New York, she had entirely reshaped her body. "From that small item of news," he recalled in 2008, "I thought, 'Why don't I open a club like that in order to help women?'" He embarked on a period of study about exercise and nutrition that included reading books and articles from around the world and viewing exercise tapes from Asia and North America. He saw an opportunity to develop the knowledge about athletics then available to women in Viet Nam with specific, scientific information about body shaping through a targeted exercise program. Taking the capital he had saved from his entertainment work, he formed the partnership with the Labor Union Cultural House.

The director envisioned the club as providing women scientific perspectives on physical health and self-care that would build their self-confidence, a claim consistent with both recent state campaigns to disseminate international scientific knowledge and earlier socialist rhetoric of mass mobilization through self-improvement. Interestingly, this rhetorical packaging disavows any role the club might have in creating new standards of beauty in a commodified context. Club Royale does not tell women what they should look like, but merely provides them with the knowledge to motivate them to realize the potential for health that will foster the self-confidence lying dormant within them. Although the director also emphasized that he has responded to members' needs for a pleasurable social environment, his primary focus in our discussions was on the personal benefits that individual women can achieve through enhanced physical wellbeing and self-confidence. He views scientific, medical rationality as a personal service, rather than an aesthetic or cultural concern.

The scientific nature of the exercise program receives clear emphasis throughout the club. Upon registering in the 1990s, a member's first visit included a consultation with the on-site physician. She recorded statistics such as heart rate, blood

pressure, height, weight, and measurements of the chest, waist, and hips. She inquired about pre-existing conditions and discussed the client's goals. These included losing or, for about one-quarter of the members, gaining weight to achieve better health. She would then meet with the exercise trainers to let them know, as she described for me, "what exercises are appropriate for the member's health, consistent with her needs." This was important because "each person is different, each has a different constitution (*the tang*)."

At the same time, the doctor might also classify a new member with others of similar health profiles or with similar body goals so that instructors could tailor specific group classes.

The measurements taken, plus the fact that it was a physician rather than a trainer taking them, made it easy to portray the intervention as one oriented toward health, and health alone. Although the doctor and members talked about wanting to achieve beauty, an exercise regimen was couched as a medical, not aesthetic issue. As the doctor told me: "Beauty is about health. If you have health, then you have a beautiful face." In her research in Japanese aerobics clubs, Laura Spielvogel found a similar emphasis on health (2003). This seems largely a status-enhancing claim: while anyone can have an opinion on what constitutes an attractive body, medical expertise is the preserve of a select few. The medical focus also elevates the club endeavor from a selfish or vain project of appearance to a scientifically validated effort to secure optimal health, something which members would be less able to achieve independently.

Club Royale's personal trainers and exercise instructors echoed this theme of expertise in helping members to improve their health, appearance, and social relations. The trainers, all women in their 20s, possessed credentials in exercise physiology and physical education; most had degrees from the College of Sports and Physical Education. While one might expect them to focus on the minute details of physical training, they

asserted in all of our conversations in 1995 that the goal of exercise was simply to be strong and healthy (*khoe manh*), the content of which was presumably self-evident. Of far greater interest seemed to be how a beautiful appearance (*ngoai hinh dep*) related to these goals. Without exception, beauty was described as the outward projection of inner goodness. One trainer told me: "According to me, beauty isn't important with respect to your outer appearance at all, but it's about your heart, your inner heart, not your beautiful outer appearance. But the qualities that increase beauty are sweetness (*diu dang*), loyalty (*chung thuy*), responsibility (*dam dang*)."⁸ Another asserted: "Outward appearance will change a lot over time, but with a very beautiful spirit then it won't change over time."

Their comments about inner beauty propelling outward beauty echoed popular discourses about character and appearance in Viet Nam, ideas succinctly captured by a phrase often quoted to me by club trainers and patrons: "*Cai net danh chet cai dep*" (character beats beauty).⁸ These assertions about beauty gathered momentum throughout the 1990s and early 2000s as a kind of culturally specific answer to concerns about the increased attention on women's appearance accompanying economic globalization. One trainer told me in 2008 that her ideas about health, character, and beauty had been inspired by her studies of Buddhism. An article on beauty in the Vietnamese magazine *Buddhist Culture* made this logic explicit: "Beauty isn't just in the body, it's in the spirit, and beauty of the spirit is more secure, deeper, and more foundational, so beauty of the spirit is the basis for preserving physical beauty on the outside" (Nguyen The Dang 2007: 38).

Although often cast in the idiom of inside (*ben trong*) versus outside (*be ngoai*) in which inside takes priority, these ideas can be used to mean either that inner character shapes the exterior or that, if inner character and outer appearance are not of comparable quality, inner is more important. While the trainers' descriptions seemed similar to those of the doctor,

they did not attribute the inner quality propelling beauty to physical health alone or even primarily. Instead, "inner" meant aspects of personality and character, including responsibility and loyalty, that could prompt a dedication to self-improvement that would create a fit body. Their statements implied a variation of the production metaphor discussed above in which strength of character would create a work ethic that would allow an individual to produce a better body. Although trainers saw this endeavor as providing satisfaction, most of the rewards came from how others would respond to a fit and attractive physique.

For social and economic reasons, trainers argued, beauty had become a necessity, and manipulating the body became a means to achieve advantage. This realization led some of them to assert a hardheaded realism about the power of beauty that strayed from the logic of inner producing outer that they otherwise espoused. One trainer told me: "Someone who has a pretty outside appearance (*hinh thuc be ngoai dep*), such people will easily have more success in a profession, in a job. It will be easier for them to communicate, so, naturally, beautiful women are very self-confident." As opposed to the director's claim that self-confidence comes from health, this view suggests that it develops from the success, or expectation of such success, that one experiences when others respond positively to an attractive appearance. Another trainer noted that economic development raised expectations about beauty, and this competition in turn would fuel desire for higher economic standards:

Every day the need to be beautiful increases and requires lots of interest. It's not just women in the city, but women in the countryside also pay a lot of attention, like the women who work in the fields, they also pay attention to their clothing to go to work. This ever-increasing need to be beautiful is because the family and individual economy in society is ever rising, so it pushes the economy higher. Then the need to be beautiful increases.

In such an environment, the consequences of not being attractive, no matter how exemplary one's character, could be dire. When I asked how much beauty in fact matters, an instructor responded: "Fifty percent is influenced. If you have an exercise student who has a lot of education, but has a face with many pimples, she's going to face difficulty when seeking a job and when working." Several trainers told me that women are the "flowers of the office" (*bong hoa van phong*). Although the flowers need what one instructor described as "many angles, it's not just pretty on the outside, she needs many other things," appearance is a key criterion on which a woman's professional value is assessed.

The importance of appearance was also evident in instructors' discussion of personal relations. Although most of the instructors were single, they quite keenly perceived older women's concerns about their husbands' fidelity. Indeed, this was the dominant theme of my discussions with Club Royale's members, a point to which I return briefly below. One instructor described Viet Nam, particularly urban areas such as Ho Chi Minh City, as a visual spectacle of attractive, urbane young women on motorbikes who could lure husbands into extra-marital pleasures. These concerns were particularly acute for middle- and upper-class women, as business dealings frequently involved cementing agreements over a meal or drinks at bars, cafes, and karaoke parlors that also offered "om" (hugging), i.e., the companionship of women. One of the club's bookkeepers utilized the rhetoric of "Happy Family" (*Gia dinh hanh phuc*) from state propaganda campaigns to highlight the importance of a woman's appearance to marital fidelity:

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 he hanh phuc*). So a woman very much needs to keep her health and her beauty to protect family happiness (*bao ve hanh phuc gia dinh*).

Instructors echoed this sense that maintaining an attractive appearance would help to keep a family together by preserving a husband's interest, a claim that, as mentioned above, was being popularized in the government-sponsored self-help literature.

In providing the expertise through which their older clients could shape their bodies to be as attractive as possible, instructors turned to their advantage the potential complication that they were precisely the kinds of alluring young women that so concerned older married women. Instead of being rivals, instructors tried to use their own bodies to display the benefits of exercise and diet regimens. One of Club Royale's instructors had been Viet Nam's top gymnast. In 1997, a local magazine featured her on its cover and explained that she was now using her expertise to train others to be fit at Club Royale. Not surprisingly, multiple enlarged copies of the article soon appeared on the club's walls.

Another trainer felt that she needed to be a physical role model, a status that she found both invigorating and exacting:

In the eyes of the students, I'm a pretty woman. I have to have an attractive figure in order to teach different people. In front of the students, I try to perfect myself, to exercise to become a model for the students to try to study. For example, fat people have to try to exercise to become thin. We need to try to exercise in whatever way in a style to be a role model, even though not everything is perfect.

A third instructor described the pressure even more vividly: "We [the instructors] have to focus on everything so that we can correct the places where I may still fall short. We have to exercise every day... one can't not exercise, only if I exercise can others follow me."

Another way in which instructors tried to support their clients was by providing a combination of psychological

counseling and interpretation of exercise techniques that could personalize their relationship. One instructor described herself as almost a therapist:

A person who is fat and continues to think about working out only for health will lack confidence. I hope that my students need the care of the instructor and explain things so that they understand clearly so that they can exercise better. And when the instructors share their feelings with the students who have things that aren't happy, then the student will pay attention, patiently try to exercise, have time to relax, rest, and have a moderate diet, then they'll have better results.

Another described her counseling more in terms of interpreting fitness knowledge, particularly when it came to adapting and revising foreign exercise techniques. She told me: "There are some exercise programs that are hard to carry out, the rhythm's too fast. The students usually find it too hard to do." For this reason, instructors preferred Jane Fonda's stretching videos to her more intense aerobic ones. By sympathizing with their clients, instructors hoped that they could do a better job of helping them to realize their fitness goals, but I also perceived that such interactions defused potential tensions as instructors and members alike tried to manage the increasingly competitive demands of feminine appearance.

Finally, instructors emphasized the club as a nurturing social environment. Although the director had explained the club's services as designed to meet individual needs, the instructors agreed that he had worked hard to create "... a social environment that would be good for the members and employees. For example, going on trips to have closeness. Maybe members don't have family circumstances to do that, so the club organizes it for them." Club Royale also hosted holiday parties for members and their children. As one of the trainers explained the club's mission: "The boss doesn't want us only to

provide exercise, but [to think about] how we can organize an exercise environment that will turn into socializing." Another trainer contrasted my tendency to work out alone with what she characterized as a Vietnamese approach: "Here, if you work out, you have to have a friend. If you don't, it's very sad. Friends will give you motivation to work out."

Through promotional literature, health assessment procedures, arrangement of the workout space, classes, ancillary services, and particularly through interpersonal interactions, Club Royale's management and staff provided members with a variety of logics linking health, femininity, and exercise. While the commodity body image being "sold" at any given moment was generally presumed to be slender and attractive, the significances attached to this "ideal" varied tremendously. Whereas the director emphasized a nurturing environment where his solicitude could empower each woman to treat herself well and hence realize her potential for health, the doctor used medical expertise to promote a beauty-endowing healthfulness. Meanwhile, instructors seemed much more instrumental in their sense of the benefits that an attractive physique could generate in a cosmopolitan context of increasing commodification.

It is significant that at no time did this discussion of bodies and beauty outline rules for what a body should be. Unlike American clubs that emphasize "objective" measures such as Body Mass Index, weight, or percentage of body fat, Club Royale promoted a vaguer sense of bodily aspirations as dependent on the specific health needs and lifestyles of individual members. If bodies differed and goals were truly person-specific, members were more likely to perceive success in small achievements. This may very well have been a prudent marketing ploy to keep membership rolls filled by lowering expectations, but it also allowed the club to portray itself as an expert source of health advice and management techniques, rather than an active shaper of bodily ideals. This clearly paralleled official government programs focused on supplying

scientific knowledge to manage marketplace pressures. At the same time, instructors' bodies, demeanors, and interactions with clients provided confirmation that external appearance was a vitally important criterion against which women were measured. Rather than reject this as the corrupting influence of the market, as officials might, the commercial character of the club provided an environment in which trainers could empower clients to manage these concerns. This dose of realism might reassure members that their concerns about their figures were not superficial, but it also risked drawing them into a competitive situation that could undercut the official emphasis on health, nurturing, and support.

Renovating Traditional Femininity through Exercise: Members' Perspectives

How did club members perceive the various commodity body image messages about health, physique, and femininity that Club Royale generated? While space constraints do not permit a detailed exploration of this question, a few general points that emerged from individual interviews in 1995 deserve mention.⁹ Like Club Royale's instructors, members defined beauty as both internal and external. They also generally shared instructors' sense of the socioeconomic importance of being attractive. Competition was a concern, but many saw exercise as an empowering technique in a program of self-perfection (*tu luyen hoan thien minh*). Working out was also a form of recreation (*giai tri*), a luxury (*su xa xi*), and their own time to take care of themselves (*thoi gian rieng danh cho minh tu cham soc*). While economic transformation entailed pressures and complications (*su phuc tap*), it also brought opportunities for recreation and self-care that had not been possible ten years before. Unlike during the high socialist period right after the war, middle-aged women in particular voiced appreciation

for the opportunity to feel very feminine (*co nhieu nu tinh*) that fashion, cosmetics, and Club Royale afforded.

There was, however, a clear danger to the emphasis on appearance and particular visions of femininity. Just as the instructors had perceived, every one of the 23 members with whom I conducted in-depth interviews said that she needed to work out and be attractive in order to be successful in romance or marriage. Being fit and slender would help unmarried women to get a husband and married women to keep one. While many women blamed men's infidelities on the allure of the city, some also critiqued women who did not look after their husbands. Caring for a husband (*cham soc chong*) included attending to one's own appearance so as to maintain his sexual interest. Working out was a key strategy for accomplishing this.

Many members emphasized a need to forge a modern definition of Vietnamese femininity that would build upon and reinterpret elements of tradition. More than half the women I interviewed mentioned that their sense of the ideal beautiful woman involved adhering to the four virtues (*tu duc*) associated with Confucianism. When asked to clarify, each woman explained that the four virtues she had in mind were updated. *Cong* (work) expanded from its traditional meaning of being skilled in housewifery to include managing the finances and doing work outside the home to support the family. *Dung* (appearance) meant looking neat and clean, but they updated the term to include dressing fashionably and maintaining an attractive figure, clearly germane to their membership in Club Royale. *Ngon* (speech) required speaking politely in a way befitting one's level of educational and cultural attainment.¹⁰ *Hanh* (well-behaved) had in the past forced women to accept an inferior position in society, but now it meant that they would behave in a way that would show respect for others.

The women I interviewed cited an updated or renovated *tu duc* as a perfect model for women. Although these four virtues, particularly *dung* (appearance), complemented many of the

perspectives offered by Club Royale's staff, no employee had framed the discussion of beauty in such a way, even though the Women's Union and some academics had begun speaking about the need to preserve and revitalize *tu duc* as part of an ethnocultural heritage that would help Vietnamese withstand the potentially homogenizing influences of globalization (see also Pettus 2003). This suggests that official pronouncements did influence women's analyses of their socioeconomic context. It is significant, however, that this segment of upwardly mobile, cosmopolitan women responded, not by joining Women's Union programs or other official cultural offerings, but by becoming dues-paying members of a profit-making venture. Club Royale allowed women to manage contradictory images of femininity in a voluntary manner that affirmed their privileged status in the very market that made them anxious. At the same time, the club's commercial character allowed an organ of the state to supply indirectly a program of body work consistent with official valorization of science and rational management.

The Ideological and the Material Revisited: Club Royale's Decline

From 1995-2008, Ho Chi Minh City's fitness industry grew and diversified. Although many district-run venues closed or limited their offerings, others expanded to include more equipment and a greater variety of classes such as yoga. Hotels continued to offer fitness memberships in a luxurious setting, and, with incomes rising, more local residents decided to join. International fitness chains also opened branches in gleaming mall developments. Membership prices can run \$1000 per year or higher. These clubs have a youthful techno vibe, with rows of the newest equipment, personal video monitors, the driving rhythms of global pop music, and luxurious amenities. Many of the newer clubs cater to both men and women. Finally,

newspapers and magazines have increased their attention to health. Columns on nutrition suggest the previous decade to have suffered the excesses of recently acquired prosperity, with too much intake of meat, fats, and sweets. Rising concern about the health consequences of being overweight, the risks of cancer, and chemical contamination of foods have led many urbanites to alter their diets. Authors increasingly urge Vietnamese to rediscover moderation and balance by blending Buddhism and Confucianism with Western self-help psychology (see, e.g., Nguyen Tho Sinh 2007).

These developments suggest the success of a message about the benefits of working out that Club Royale's director claims to have pioneered. Yet the club in 2008 appeared to have been left behind by the fitness industry's growth. The facility looked unchanged, with a new coat of paint and minor adjustments to the layout doing little to conceal that the equipment was now fifteen years old, the lighting poor, the roof leaking, and the building without air conditioning. By the director's admission, membership had declined by 60%. Profits had fallen. The club no longer provided an onsite physician, but instead asked instructors to perform basic health assessment and monitoring. Membership fees had been raised by 50%, an amount that kept pace with inflation and left little surplus to invest in the facility. The Labor Union Cultural House had renamed itself the Cultural Palace (*Cung Van Hoa*), but it seemed disinclined to finance capital improvements for Club Royale. As one of the club's managers told me, "We can't charge higher fees unless we upgrade the facility, and we can't upgrade the facility unless we have more money from higher fees."

Time has also had little effect on Club Royale's philosophy. If anything, the focus on science, health, and pedagogy has been honed. The director told me that the reason his club had stayed opened when other public-private clubs in the city had closed was because: "We are specialized. For example, when a student (*hoc vien*) comes to the club, certainly they are inter-

ested in athletics and health. That's why they come. We have specialized understanding about their desires, and we talk with them so they'll know how to figure things out." That the club possessed expert knowledge was further underscored by how clients were described. In the 1990s, the director and employees had used the terms "members" (*thanh vien*) and "trainers" (*huan luyen vien*) interchangeably with "students" (*hoc vien*) and "instructors" (*giao vien*). In 2008, only the words "students" and "instructors" were used.

The instructors' authority rested even more clearly on their knowledge of scientific approaches to health. Whereas instructors in the 1990s had acknowledged the importance of a beautiful appearance as a powerful motivation for exercise, instructors and staff in 2008 asserted that health was paramount. For example, one trainer said she chose her profession because she recognized that: "When a body is healthy and strong, then a joyful spirit will impart a naturally beautiful appearance.... I always tell my students that health will make you beautiful." One of the club's administrative staff said that the increasing incidence of cancer and other diseases has led Vietnamese women to recognize the importance of health, in terms of having strength and endurance. "They say that when they have health, they'll have beauty," she asserted. A young college student who had joined the club at the suggestion of her boyfriend's mother echoed this philosophy: "Only if you have health can you make yourself beautiful." She then continued by expressing that she and other members completely agreed with the club's claim that health promoted self-confidence and beauty: "I think that a beautiful woman has to have self-confidence, social knowledge, and knowledge of her field so that she can know how to interact with a neat, clean appearance that will give others a positive first impression."

As in the past, the club's employees linked the need for exercise to Viet Nam's developing economy and the need to reduce stress. One instructor declared: "Don't you know, every

day a society develops and with it so do the needs of a person to develop along with it. When we have enough to eat and wear, then we need to worry about health and beauty." She also emphasized that these advances bring hectic schedules. One of the first things she tells her students is that they need to set aside just one hour a day for exercise. "Work, family, children," she told me, "make people extremely stressed, but if you know to solve it by coming to exercise, after you finish your workout you'll have reduced your stress a lot, you'll breathe a sigh of relief." In her own approach to work, she tried to model for her students how discipline and rational time allocation can help to maintain health and balance. At the same time, she sought to take care of her students so that they could appreciate the value of nurturing themselves. Finally, the club's director and employees told me that this ethos of service was better provided in a single sex environment. "My place was opened for women," an instructor explained. "It's more relaxing for women to work out with each other, according to the custom of the East." She then noted that co-ed clubs were "following the newest ways of Westernization" by allowing men and women to mingle, which might be fine for some, but it was still important to provide a space reserved for women.

With Club Royale's message about health gaining clarity and widespread acceptance between 1995 and 2008, why were fewer women working out there? The director offered several explanations. The economic crisis that hit Asia in 1997 dealt a particularly strong blow to the private entrepreneurs who had joined the club. Many of them let their memberships lapse. By highlighting the dangers of an unregulated market economy, the crisis increased the status of civil servants as rational managers of growth and investment. This group became the club's core membership precisely because they appreciated its straightforward approach to health and exercise. At the same time, they were now able to acquire knowledge about health on their own and had steady access to medical care, so many

exercised independently or in open air classes in parks. Those who stayed or joined wanted no-frills exercise focused on essential information and personalized instruction. Although the director and manager both asserted that Club Royale excelled in this regard, they acknowledged the impact of increased competition from a greater variety of venues and workout regimens.

In asserting that Club Royale's attraction has always centered on its personalized, scientific approach to fitness, the director and employees refused to acknowledge that what may have made this message attractive to clients in the 1990s was that it was delivered in an environment that permitted a conspicuous display of wealth and leisure. This silence about symbolic capital does not mean that such concerns are unimportant. Rather, it reflects an ambivalence toward emerging class distinctions that has been prevalent under *Doi moi* (Leshkovich 2006), combined with a broader tendency of emergent middle classes to justify their newly achieved status as the result of moral virtue (Liechty 2002). In doing so, middle classes often remove themselves physically from the masses by developing special-purpose indoor leisure venues (Earl 2004). Although by no means elegant, Club Royale in the 1990s had been just such a venue. Its atmosphere of tasteful exclusivity allowed members to be seen as possessing sufficient time and money to work out, a newly available form of pleasurable consumption that would enhance their family relationships and professional prospects. At the same time, Club Royale's explicit focus on scientific approaches to physical health allowed members to claim to others that their body work, and the time and money it required, was motivated by concerns more elevated than simply outward appearance, display of socioeconomic status, or a desire to separate themselves from lower classes.

As Ho Chi Minh City's fitness industry has expanded and diversified over the past decade, the goals of health, beauty, and status display that had once coalesced in Club Royale's "com-

modity image" have splintered into a hierarchy of workout options. Club membership has narrowed to those who are committed to its philosophy and, given the availability of classes in nearby parks, those women who require more intensive supervision of their exercise programs. Although its ideology remains influential, declining facilities mean that Club Royale can no longer convey its authoritative knowledge about how to produce an attractive body in an environment that members might also find materially pleasurable and useful for their own middle-class projects of conspicuous consumption.

Conclusion

The words and actions of Club Royale's management, employees, and members clearly demonstrate the centrality of body image to negotiations of gender and culture under conditions of increasing commodification. This article has shown that body image assumes this role because it shares with the commodity images that are such a prominent feature of global capitalism a tension between idealized meanings and concrete materiality or experience. Because this tension generates complexity, fluidity, and impermanence, we need to consider the precise circumstances of body image production and reception in order to make sense of the meanings and consequences of these images.

Club Royale, as a company closely affiliated with a party organization, has since the 1990s been commercially invested in deploying persuasive arguments about the benefits of exercise that call forth the image of a slender, attractive, modern, middle-class, urban woman. The guises in which these images appeared, however, were quite diverse. Jane Fonda, the former national gymnast leading her class, and the dialogic formation of specific individual exercise goals between doctor, instructor, and client were moments in which Club Royale made ideal-

ized assertions. In doing so, however, Club Royale also opened up spaces for cultural production in which consumers could consider, adapt, or reject commercially generated statements. Members could associate the ideal body with inner health. Or they could embrace the pragmatic philosophy that body work is a material strategy to gain advantage or keep a husband faithful in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Or they could talk about gleaming exercise machines as a way to craft a body that fused traditional and modern, local and global femininities.

Club Royale's varied and contestable cultural productions succeeded for a time as marketing strategies precisely because they permitted multiple forms of consumer engagement that drew in a variety of dues-paying members. At the same time, the club reproduced official discourses that bifurcated international influence into beneficial scientific knowledge and the more corrosive values of marketplace competition and materialism. In Viet Nam during the 1990s, the involvement of organs of the state, local government, and the party in commercial endeavors suggests that the commodity form provided a novel venue for circulating politically significant images of Vietnamese femininity and culture that reached audiences who otherwise might eschew participation in government mass mobilization programs. The marketplace became an important arena for state articulation of citizen subjectivities.

As William Mazzarella has argued, commodity images succeed when they effectively associate personal and cultural meanings with a particular material item. When the item being portrayed is a woman's body, it can prove alienating, as feminist theorists have warned, but it can also provide women with a concrete tool (their own bodies) through which they can engage in broader processes of signification that have social, cultural, and economic benefits. Because commodity images also work through status associations, engaging in body work in particular kinds of environments can allow one to craft one-

self and be seen by others as belonging to a certain class. Part of the appeal of Club Royale was that it provided a materially privileged form of consumption that cloaked its class associations in the mantle of objective, scientific knowledge that would help Viet Nam to advance.

The fate of Club Royale over the past fifteen years substantiates Mazzarella's caution that the commodity image's project of ideological and material bricolage is unstable and fleeting. The trends that gave birth to Club Royale and that the club itself fostered have continued, or even accelerated. Club Royale has responded by honing the vision of health, beauty, and science that its director credits for its initial success. By redefining "members" as "students," however, this strategy narrows the scope of the body work that the club legitimates. Although Club Royale's approach to exercise continues to hold appeal, it no longer delivers its ideology in an environment that satisfies the material aspirations of its target demographic by engaging them in dialogic, open-ended projects of creating meaning through reshaping their bodies.

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NOTES

- 1 The name of the club has been changed.
- 2 The three-page survey was distributed via a box near the front desk. Seventy-eight members (approximately 15% of the active membership of the club) responded.
- 3 Self-reported monthly incomes per individual ranged from 100,000 to 30,000,000 *dong* (\$8-\$2700). The lowest incomes were those of students still living with their parents. The highest were those of

- entrepreneurs who owned stores, restaurants, or, in one case, an ice skating rink. Reluctance to detail supplemental sources of income and a general desire to downplay wealth lead me to believe that incomes were generally underreported.
- 4 Students and workers received a 20% discount due to the club's connection to the Labor Cultural House.
 - 5 See Spielvogel (2003) for similar observations about Japan.
 - 6 Peasant and working women today make similar claims about the health and aesthetic toll of manual labor (Gammeltoft 1999: 107; Nghiem 2004: 311).
 - 7 The more conventional patterns of neoliberalism are nonetheless also occurring in Viet Nam. For example, Nguyen-Vo observes that doctors, nurses, health writers, and social workers implement foreign expert knowledge in state-sponsored public health campaigns that are increasingly managed by private entities, such as fee-based hospitals (Nguyen-Vo 2002: 132-137).
 - 8 Stephanie Fahey encountered similar claims about the relationship between inner and outer beauty (1998: 29).
 - 9 I conducted semi-structured life history interviews with twenty-three of Club Royale's members. The interviews were taped. Although interviewees differed in age, status, and opinions about recent transformations, I focus here on general themes that emerged in most of the conversations.
 - 10 This use of the term culture (*van hoa*) has judgmental connotations and indicates facility with highly valued forms of knowledge and decorum. People behaving rudely or in a manner bespeaking ignorance are often criticized for lacking culture (*thieu van hoa*).

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