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2

The Ao Dai Goes Global: How International Influences and Female Entrepreneurs Have Shaped Vietnam's "National Costume"

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On 10 September 1995, the Miss International Pageant in Tokyo awarded the prize for "Best National Costume" to Miss Vietnam, Truong Quynh Mai. The Vietnam Airlines flight attendant wore a blue and white silk brocade *ao dai* (pronounced "ow-zai") consisting of three elements: (1) a long, close-fitting tunic with mandarin collar and high slits up the side seams, (2) loose pants, and (3) a donut-shaped coiled hat. The outfit is often referred to as Vietnam's traditional or national costume. Today, a formal ao dai like Miss Vietnam's is typically worn by brides, performers, and models, and on special occasions (Figure 2.1). Worn without the hat and fashioned from less sumptuous fabric, the ao dai is a common uniform for civil servants, tour guides, hotel and restaurant workers, and high school students.

Within Vietnam, Miss Vietnam's victory was heralded as more than simply a prize for a beautiful outfit. An article in Vietnam's fashion press described the ao dai as symbolizing Vietnam's "national soul" that had "once again been honored in front of thousands of international spectators" in Tokyo (*Thoi Trang Tre* October 1995: 43).[2] By affirming the ao dai as the embodiment of Vietnam's traditions and signifying the country's incorporation into the modern global community, Truong Quynh Mai's award represented a victory for her entire homeland.

Figure 2.1 A fashion show featuring a style of brocade ao dai similar to that worn by Miss Vietnam, Truong Quynh Mai. Photo by Ann Marie Leshkowich.

International recognition boosted the ao dai's domestic appeal. While Miss Vietnam was accepting her award in Tokyo, I was living in Ho Chi Minh City in order to study female traders in the cloth and clothing industry (Leshkowich 2000). Within days of Miss Vietnam's victory, many of the market stalls and tailor shops where I conducted my research had posted pictures and signs promising customers custom-made ao dai "just like Miss Vietnam's." While these signs testify to many entrepreneurs' speed in capitalizing on a potentially lucrative news event, the Miss Vietnam advertisements and increased interest in ao dai are in fact part of a larger effort by Vietnamese designers and sellers to market the garment as a domestic product that has earned the approval of foreign fashion experts, thus making it both traditional and stylish, or what Vietnamese tellingly call "*mo-den*," a term taken from the English word "modern."

This chapter focuses on three issues that are crucial to understanding the origins and significance of the "ao dai craze" during the mid- to late 1990s. First, I explore recent anthropological studies of consumption and globalization to highlight how so-called traditional costumes have emerged as powerful and fashionable, yet essentialized, markers of national and gender differences. The women who choose to wear such outfits often do so precisely because of global fashion discourses. The choice to don even a modern version of a "traditional costume" does, however, carry the very real danger of self-exoticizing. At the same time, women's positions as consumers of this fashion trend challenge other stereotypes that depict Third World women as participating in globalization only as oppressed laborers.

While global circumstances have prompted nations around the world to develop and promote a "traditional costume," understanding Vietnam's ao dai craze requires attention to a second question: why has this particular garment been selected to portray Vietnam on the international stage? The answer lies in the garment's history. Although the ao dai has become synonymous with traditional Vietnamese culture and feminine virtues, the garment in fact has a relatively brief history marked throughout by significant foreign influence – first Chinese, then French and American. I suggest that the ao dai can best be viewed as possessing a hybrid character. In today's environment of globalization that demands and structures standardized displays of cultural distinctiveness into a kind of homogenized heterogeneity, the ao dai's hybridity makes it particularly well suited to convey comprehensible and compelling messages about Vietnam's national character to both domestic and foreign audiences. In this capacity, it also serves as a vehicle for debating the positive and negative effects of globalization on Vietnamese cultural identities.

As important as the ao dai's history has been in shaping its role as the quintessential symbol of Vietnamese-ness, the garment is also a material object

designed, produced, and marketed by individuals. The third part of this chapter focuses on the roles of these individuals, most of them small-scale female shop owners and market stallholders, in producing and circulating ao dai. As the ao dai is created in homes and tiny tailor workshops across the country, each step in its production involves minute decisions about cut, pattern, fabric, and decoration.

Even on this mundane level, however, the supposedly "global" and "local" are intertwined. Conscious of their customers' desire to keep abreast of international fashion trends, the female entrepreneurs I studied regularly turn to their personal contacts overseas, primarily relatives, for information about the latest styles. Fashion catalogs, Vietnamese-language calendars produced in the United States, pattern books, and fashion magazines both inspire local producers to develop stylistic innovations and provide concrete evidence to convince wary consumers that the resulting items are truly "*mo-den*."

In charting the ao dai's "cultural biography" (Kopytoff 1986) as both a potent national symbol and a concrete object produced under specific material and cultural conditions, I seek to make three broader points about the cultural and economic effects of globalization. First, as a methodological tactic, I wish to draw attention to sites and processes of circulation as not just middle points bridging production and consumption, but as arenas for the mediation and transformation of style through specific marketplace encounters. The crafting and marketing of ao dai is a creative process involving communication and negotiation by multiple agents whose interaction shapes both productive processes and consumer desires. In contrast to more abstract discussions of global cultural flows (Hannerz 1996; Appadurai 1990, 1996), attention to marketplace encounters allows us to see how tastes are formulated, by whom, with what possibilities, and under what constraints.

Second, through an examination of the ao dai's distant and recent history, I suggest that contemporary global processes have placed a premium on identifying and ordering cultural diversity into a system of homogenized heterogeneity. As a result, the authentic, traditional, and local need to be viewed not as timeless, discrete properties characterizing people, things, or experiences, but as hybrid and discursive productions. While these dynamics are clearly compelling both foreign and domestic interest in Asian fashion today, the ao dai's history suggests that it has always been such a hybrid product. It may be that a garment's hybridity, far from violating its cultural distinctiveness, is exactly what makes it such a useful and comprehensible marker of ethnic or national identity in the contemporary global commodification of diversity.

Third, the creative energy of the female entrepreneurs I studied belies any attempt to depict Third World producers as simply the passive victims of forces of global capital. While scholars of gender and economic development have

rightly drawn attention to the ways in which global capital can marginalize certain groups, my research on the ao dai suggests globalization can create opportunities for certain types of small-scale female entrepreneurs to serve as active agents in the circulation of styles and information. By performing their traditional role as maintainers of kin relations within the relatively new circumstances of a global Vietnamese diaspora, the female entrepreneurs I met have privileged access to information about global consumer trends. Cosmopolitan in their orientation (Hannerz 1990, 1996), these savvy businesswomen serve as cultural brokers who use the knowledge they acquire through diasporic kin networks in order to craft and promote a garment whose appeal lies precisely in its synthesis of perceived national tradition and international modernity.

The Circulation of Fashion and Gender in Globalizing Marketplaces

My focus on the concrete circumstances shaping the ao dai craze in Vietnam during the mid- to late 1990s coincides with a broader shift in the anthropology of economic life away from a traditional concern with relations of production and exchange and toward a new focus on consumption.[3] This change in focus has led to several significant realizations. First, consumption is profoundly implicated in the self-conscious creation of gender, class, national, racial, and ethnic identities, not just in the developed "First World," but in the "Third World" as well. Second, groups and individuals tend creatively to reinterpret the items they consume, so that even the use of mass-produced products need not be a form of false consciousness perpetrated on unsuspecting consumers by hegemonic, neo-imperialist capitalist structures.[4] Third, anthropologists have come to recognize that gender biases led scholars in the past to valorize the "male" realm of production as the locus for creating individual and social worth, and also to denigrate the "female" realm of consumption as frivolous, superficial, or inauthentic.[5] A more fruitful approach would be to view consumption as a significant form of economic and cultural work (see, e.g., Jones, Chapter 6 of this volume).

Taken together, work in anthropology, postcolonial studies, and gender studies documents an important shift in the ideology of consumption. No longer viewed as the "radical leveler" (Marx 1977 [1867]) inexorably obliterating cultural distinctiveness or seducing women into accepting second-class status as keepers of the domestic realm, the commodity is now seen as a value-neutral tabula rasa, ready to be inscribed with meanings by its purchasers and users and then deployed by them to display those meanings.

As with any adoption of new areas of concern, however, the rush to consider consumption has created gaps and biases of a new kind. The tendency to celebrate consumption's potential to express and fulfill individual desires has led some to underemphasize the constraints – be they economic, religious, gendered, familial, racial, ethnic, or otherwise – that limit the exercise of consumer choice or that enable others to reinterpret the meaning of such choices in service of broader discourses. Focus on the act of consumption as an encounter between individuals and the goods that they select, acquire, and use also risks making goods seem the natural and functional concretization of consumer desires. But how does a particular array of goods come to be available for consumers to select? What persons and processes enable goods to be delivered to and desired by particular consumers?

On a philosophical level, while I agree that objects in theory do not possess intrinsic significance and instead acquire their meaning from people and the uses they make of those objects, the reality is that in a global flow of people, ideas, and objects, the vast majority of the things that we encounter in daily life are already saturated with meaning. As such, they carry rich semantic loads that have been assigned to them over the course of their history as objects. Meaning is not recreated anew each time a consumer confronts a commodity. Rather, meaning comes from somewhere, and each new interpretation exists in dialogue with its antecedents.

In short, explorations of consumption risk truncating the political, historical, social, cultural, and symbolic trajectories that both people and goods must follow so that they may come together. How can we address these gaps? One fruitful approach is to focus on circulation. Through documenting the concrete details of retail encounters, we can explore how one's position in systems of production and access to sites of exchange serve to shape consumption preferences. We can also consider how the expression of these preferences then drives the production and exchange of goods, tastes, and identities.

An endless range of goods can be examined to shed light on these issues,[6] but I find clothing to be a particularly useful means for exploring the interconnection between meaning, taste, and agency in the context of globalization. As items that envelop wearers' bodies, clothing is the individually consumed commodity most available for public display. As a result, it is increasingly through fashion that cultural and other differences are being displayed, assessed, standardized, commodified, valorized, contested, and appropriated. These processes play a key role in propelling not just Vietnam's ao dai craze, but global fascination with Asian style and national costumes more generally. An exploration of the circulation of the ao dai thus draws our attention to two distinct, yet interdependent, contexts: the international circulation of information about national costumes and identity, and the Vietnamese locations

in which ao dai and information about them move between producers and consumers.

National Costumes and the Global Circulation of Difference

One of the most striking features of globalization is the frequency, speed, and ease with which people and things from different parts of the world come into contact with each other. Given that this contact has largely been prompted by capitalist forces originating from Europe and North America, most early observers of globalization found cause to be concerned that the encounter between different things and people would be a homogenizing one in which non-Western cultures would be transformed in the West's image. Something about this contact, however, led not to the erasure of difference, but to its validation. In today's global economy of mass-produced goods, the new and the unique have come to be prized as such, and possessing such items or knowledge about them marks one's status as a facile navigator of global cultural "scapes" (Appadurai 1990, 1996).

This development is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, an appreciative global audience for such things as African art, Chinese acupuncture, and Indonesian textiles leads to the continued use and production of those items or practices. On the other hand, what may seem a practical feature of globalization – the ability to encounter and appreciate difference – has in fact become an ideological technique for maintaining power. As with colonialism and Orientalism in past centuries, globalization has been a vehicle for serving up elements of the world so that these features can be assessed and appreciated by cognoscenti. The effect is what Jones and I (in our Introduction to this volume) refer to as "homogenized heterogeneity" or what Richard Wilk (1995) has called "structures of common difference": certain types of diversity are picked up and placed into categories so that they can be understood and controlled. We might think of this as a kind of patchwork quilt of cultural diversity. The color and pattern of each square may be individually or locally produced, but the way they are stitched together, the overall structure of the quilt, the commissioning and placement of each square, and even the very idea that a quilt should be constructed at all – these decisions are all controlled by globalization's powerful centers, typically located in North America and Western Europe.[7]

Homogenized heterogeneity is perhaps most evident in the idea of a "national costume." It has become standard practice at international events such as the Olympics, beauty contests, world's fairs, visits by foreign dignitaries, and even international policy meetings (see Ruhlen in Chapter 4 of this volume) for different groups to display their identities through the donning of traditional dress, usually by women.[8] Participation in the global community in fact seems

to require as a price of admission that each member develop and be prepared to display a costume that visually signals its history and distinctiveness so that it can be remembered and understood as it circulates through staged displays of global culture. Although the national costume's status as an unspoken requirement might seem oppressive, peoples distant from global power centers more often seem to interpret it as a chance to capture the attention and respect of a global audience, however stereotypically or fleetingly. To have one's cultural identity validated, even when one does not control and may be ambivalent about the process of display, can nonetheless be a desirable achievement.

While the presentation of a national costume on a global stage is an interesting site for exploring the commodification and circulation of cultural diversity, I am even more fascinated by the impact of such displays on the home audience. What happens when the traditional costume, now bearing the stamp of global approval, returns to its purportedly original context? How do the supposed owners of the traditional costume respond to it? Addressing these questions requires attention to another site for the circulation of difference: a domestic context in which national identity, images of traditional femininity, the lure of international power, and the simultaneous desire for "local" authenticity and modern cosmopolitanism mingle to shape perceptions of the so-called national costume. For the ao dai, these conditions have combined to make the national costume a trendy fashion, as processes of "self-exoticizing" (Kondo 1997, Tarlo 1996, Savigliano 1995) lead young, urban Vietnamese women and the media to see and newly appreciate the ao dai as outsiders might. It is in this way that people, particularly women, become globalized consumers of externally produced versions of the traditions that appear to be uniquely theirs.

Attention to the international and domestic circulation of national costumes thus challenges the image of tradition as localized, timeless, authentic, or uniquely the product of the group with which it is associated. We come to see that people wear or appreciate these outfits, not because they are performing some kind of essentialized identity, but because they have acquired global cultural criteria for discerning the value of specific visions of their own traditions. In addition, by showing women in places such as Vietnam participating in the globalized consumption of fashion, such a project challenges another cherished notion: that Third World women are involved in globalization exclusively as oppressed, localized producers.

Using Circulation to Challenge Producer/Consumer Binaries

One of the most popular ideologies of globalization is that it has fostered an increasingly stark dichotomy between First World citizens as consumers and Third World citizens as producers of the items consumed in the First World.

According to this account, the rise of consumption in the European and North American societies of the so-called First World (or what Wallerstein (1974) calls the "center") has been accomplished through the expansion of global systems of capitalist production that exploit workers in the Third World ("the periphery"). As feminist scholars have pointed out, this gap between First World consumer and Third World producer is often gendered, so that a contrast emerges between the housewife as the prototypical First World consumer and the Third World factory worker as a young woman with "nimble fingers, slow wit" (Ong 1987: 151) whose disempowered status as a woman makes her particularly vulnerable to exploitation in the workplace.[9]

With respect to clothing, this logic of globalization has become so prevalent that just about any consumer of clothing in the United States expects items bearing a "Made in X" (i.e., not "the USA") label to have been created by oppressed Third World women working under harsh conditions. It is for this reason that students of mine are often surprised by my pictures of a Ho Chi Minh City marketplace that show female vendors proudly displaying their stock of Levi's jeans, both genuine and fake. The conventional wisdom about the global circulation of Levi's does not include the possibility that Third World persons can be active agents of consumption, let alone a part of global culture partaking of and reinterpreting fashion knowledge generated in the First World.

The image of those same young Vietnamese women wearing ao dai sits more comfortably. Wearing ao dai "fits" Vietnamese women, for they are consuming the clothing that has rightfully been bequeathed to them through history. Such a conclusion is deceptive, for the ao dai's history and contemporary examples of its manufacture and use, as I describe below, demonstrate that the decision to wear an ao dai is just as influenced by global fashion trends as is the decision to buy Levi's.

Whether Third World women wear ao dai or Levi's, recognizing that they are not just producers of fashion but globally aware consumers whose choices fuel fashion trends does not necessarily simplify our interpretation of their actions. When they are doing so with respect to a supposedly traditional item of clothing, understanding their intentions and the effects of their actions becomes even more complicated. Consider a young female Vietnamese garment worker who uses part of her earnings to buy an ao dai to wear to a special event. Is she expressing her identity as a traditional Vietnamese woman, an identity that has remained largely unchanged, despite the transformations wrought by colonialism, war, socialism, and globalization? Or, is she responding to the international recognition of the ao dai as a beautiful Vietnamese national costume that has made "ethnic chic" trendy? Is the ao dai an expression of her personal taste? Or, is she buying one because she's been told (by elders, by peers, by the media) that she must have one because it is appropriate for a certain occasion?

Faced with such an act of consumption, I find myself asking why we should be forced to choose between these divergent interpretations. The consumption of fashion is not simply a system ordained by some invisible panel of experts, nor is it an unconstrained process of individual selection or identity construction. Answering these questions requires looking beyond the act of consumption to try to understand the forces and processes that enable that consumption. What is needed is attention to contexts in which production and consumption, global symbolic meanings, and local interpretations appear simultaneously and are mediated through the agency of individuals.

Circulation is one such arena. Through the circulation of clothing items in marketplaces, shopping malls, and curbside venues, consumers confront products, form and realize consumption preferences, and provide retailers with valuable cues about fashion trends. By documenting how small-scale traders and tailors in Ho Chi Minh City design and market Vietnam's national costume to their customers, I wish to demonstrate the utility of a focus on the circulation of fashion. Located between various sets of extremes – the local and the global, the traditional and the modern, production and consumption – the traders I studied serve as cross-cultural translators and fashion mediators. These processes of mediation depend in large part upon and are facilitated by exchanges of information, money, and fashion materials among traders, tailors, and their overseas kin. A major theme emerges from this account: contrary to images of petty traders as mere drones in the retail network,[10] the successful Ho Chi Minh City stallholders and boutique owners I met participate in global networks of circulation and have capitalized on them in order to fashion themselves as what Ulf Hannerz (1990) has described as savvy cosmopolitans: skillful cross-cultural translators of style positioned at the heart of the formation of consumer tastes. What is perhaps most surprising about this example is not just that female stallholders and their middle-class customers in Vietnam are embracing cosmopolitan orientations toward fashion, but that they are doing so with respect to a garment supposed to be the quintessential emblem of Vietnam's enduring cultural distinctiveness. While this is obviously a feature of contemporary globalization, the history of the ao dai reveals that the garment has long played this same role of helping Vietnamese both fit into and distinguish themselves from powerful foreign cultures.

Hybrid Origins: How the Ao Dai Came to Represent Vietnam on the International Stage

Historian David Marr has described Vietnamese identity as forged in contrast to others, a sameness constructed to oppose difference. After years of research, he found that he was "repeatedly struck by the degree to which the Vietnamese have tended to define themselves in terms of their neighbors" (Marr 1971: 7). This practice has fueled struggles for independence and territorial expansion, but it has also led to a striking willingness to borrow from the cultures of both conquerors and conquered. The history of the ao dai places Vietnam's "national costume" squarely within this tradition of simultaneous adaptation and differentiation. What is today touted as the embodiment of a rich national culture and ancient ethnic traditions is in fact a bricolage constructed in response to powerful foreign influences. As such, charting the ao dai's distant and more recent history provides an instructive example of how global processes construct supposedly local cultures.

Chinese Confucianism and the Emergence of the Ao Dai

While the lines of the ao dai's long tunic and wide-legged pants seem so integral to Vietnamese dress, the outfit was unknown for most of Vietnam's history. In the centuries following the end of Chinese colonial rule in AD 939, most Vietnamese women wore an outfit consisting of a skirt (*vay*) and a halter top (*yem*).[11] Similar garments can be found among other ethnic groups in Vietnam, as well as in other Southeast Asian countries. Vietnamese scholar Doan Thi Tinh describes how women laboring in muddy rice paddies would raise the *vay* and tie the front and back hems together (1987: 65). The *yem* consisted of a diamond-shaped piece of fabric with two sets of ties securing it around the neck and back. By covering the chest, the stomach, and part of the back, the *yem* preserved some modesty but enabled women to bare their arms as they worked.

While the *yem* was suitable for working in the fields or at home, most women considered it too revealing for more public occasions. At such times, they would cover the *yem* with a long shirt known as the *ao tu than*, or four-paneled tunic. The *ao tu than* was worn open, with the flaps either falling loose in front or tied together about the waist. The neck of the tunic was either collarless or had a thin stand-up, mandarin-style collar. Women might also wear shorter versions of the *ao tu than* belted with fabrics in contrasting colors.

The purported immodesty of the *vay* and *yem* made them the target of numerous sartorial campaigns. During the fifteenth century, troops from China's Ming Dynasty occupied Vietnam for twenty years and pursued a brutal policy of assimilation. Condemning the *vay* as immoral and immodest, the Ming forced women to adopt Chinese-style pants and prohibited them from showing their feet (Nguyen Van Ky 1995: 237; Doan Thi Tinh 1987: 39). After recovering the country's independence in 1427, the victorious Le Dynasty embarked on its own program of Confucianization, which included promoting

more modest garments, but most women continued to wear the *vay* and *yem* (Nguyen Van Ky 1995: 237).

Four centuries later, the newly ascendant Nguyen Dynasty likewise pursued a series of orthodox Confucian reforms.[12] In 1826, Emperor Minh Mang banned the *vay*, which was derided as unseemly "'bottomless pants'" (Nguyen Van Ky 1995: 238). Compliance with these laws varied by class. Pants became most popular among women from the ruling mandarin classes, who donned the garment as a sign of their high status. Peasants, particularly in the North, continued to find the *vay* the more convenient garment for working in the fields and engaging in petty trade. By the time of French conquest later that century, most women in the North had resumed wearing the *vay* (Nguyen Van Ky 1995: 238).

During this period, a precursor to the modern ao dai became popular for daily wear in northern cities and for holidays and festivals in the countryside. The outfit consisted of a loose-fitting shirt with a stand-up collar and a diagonal closure that ran along the side from neck to armpit and down the ribs. Although resembling the *ao tu than*, this ao dai had prominent features, such as its closure and collar, that were directly inspired by Chinese garments, themselves adapted from Manchu fashions. These associations, plus the garment's inconvenience for manual labor, may explain its greater popularity among the upper classes. Most women wore the ao dai over a brightly colored *yem*, but for festivals during the colder winter months they would often layer three or more ao dai of different colors. The upper buttons would be left unfastened, thus revealing the different layers (Doan Thi Tinh 1987: 70).

French and American Influences

In the 1860s, French forces began an assault on Vietnam. They quickly established a colony in the south and by the 1880s had extended their control to the central and northern regions. The ensuing seventy years of colonial rule heightened preexisting cultural differences between the city and the countryside and led to the emergence of an urban, Westernized middle class.

Catering to the developing tastes of this new bourgeoisie, a series of French-educated designers remodeled the loose-fitting ao dai into a garment closely resembling the one worn today. The most famous of these designers was Hanoian Nguyen Cat Tuong, who was more commonly known as Le Mur, the French translation of his given name. In 1935, Le Mur released a new, "trendy" ao dai. Directly inspired by the cut of European shirts and skirts, this ao dai featured puffy sleeves, lacy collars, buttoned cuffs, and scalloped hems. The outfit appeared in bright or pastel colors, which younger women would pair with white pants, instead of the traditional black. Even more notable than the

decorative elements of this ao dai was the way Le Mur changed its fit. While the tunic still flowed open over the lower part of the body, the top fit much more closely to the figure, with darts at the chest and a nipped-in waist. This prompted many women to start wearing brassieres or corsets in place of the traditional *yem* (Doan Thi Tinh 1987: 77). Le Mur also tailored the pants in accordance with French fashion. Instead of being loose and belted, they were cut to fit more snugly through the waist and hips, gradually flaring down to the ankles. Le Mur publicized his design as well suited to "'show off the personal beauty of each person'" (Nguyen Van Ky 1995: 249). While peasants clung to the *yem*, *vay*, and *ao tu than*, and older urban women continued to prefer the looser ao dai, young women embraced these new ao dai and the European-inspired notions of the feminine form that inspired them. Just as the earlier loose-fitting ao dai had been associated with the Confucianized upper classes, the new ao dai served as a marker for an urban, educated elite which included comparatively liberated "new women" who came into frequent contact with Europeans.[13]

In 1954, the Geneva Accords ended French colonialism by dividing Vietnam into a communist North led by Ho Chi Minh and a democratic South under the presidency of Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem. The ao dai quickly fell into disfavor in the North, both because of its associations with the bourgeoisie and colonialism, and because the new leaders viewed it as impractical for workers constructing a socialist nation. Northern women did continue to wear the garment on special occasions and for important political functions, but in its looser, pre-Le Mur form.

Meanwhile, in the South, experimentation with the ao dai continued. Fueled by massive inputs of American aid, a consumer boom swept the capital city of Saigon. New body-conscious ao dai styles proliferated. Waists became even more cinched and sleeves tighter. Collars became higher, which emphasized the neck and restricted the wearer's movement, thus marking her as a member of the non-laboring classes. More radical experiments followed. The wife of Ngo Dinh Nhu, brother of the South Vietnamese president, popularized a type of ao dai with an elongated open neckline, but many reviled this design as immodest and aesthetically unappealing. Nevertheless, other ao dai styles with open necks, square necks, and shorter sleeves did become popular. Many women favored the "ao dai maxi," which featured a mandarin collar and was buttoned down the center, usually with Chinese-style fabric "frog" closures (Vai net 1995: 17). In the late 1960s, some Saigonese women began wearing miniskirts. Ao dai designers followed with their own "ao dai mini," a shorter version of the garment in which the tunic fell to the top of the knee. The slits in this ao dai were high enough to reveal skin from the waist to the ribs (Doan Thi Tinh 1987: 99). Around the same time, two Saigon tailors developed the

final innovation that distinguishes today's ao dai: raglan sleeves. Cut diagonally from the neck to the armpit, these sleeves eliminate wrinkling around the shoulder or underarm, enabling an even closer fit, which emphasizes the upper body.

Socialism and the Creation of a National Symbol

On 30 April 1975, Northern tanks and troops streamed into Saigon and captured the Republic of Viet Nam's capital, which they promptly renamed Ho Chi Minh City.[14] The victorious communist government decried most aspects of Southern urban culture as decadent, bourgeois, and un-Vietnamese. This included the newer ao dai styles. Everyday clothes became simple and utilitarian. Ao dai were worn only on special occasions, such as weddings, and the preferred form of the garment was the more modest, pre-French and pre-American one. Doan Thi Tinh's historical study of Vietnamese clothing, written in the late 1980s, clearly demonstrates the force of this condemnation of Southerners' sartorial decadence. When the author's discussion reaches 1975, what has heretofore been a straightforward and reliable description of stylistic changes suddenly becomes a polemical account of cultural purity and pollution. Only the classic form of the ao dai merits praise for surviving the cultural contamination perpetrated by the "American puppet" regime:

> We must recognize that in that tangled mass of bamboo shavings, in front of the sharp, ferocious tip of that massive, frenzied fashion invasion, the ao dai of Vietnam, although deformed in some ways, still survived as evidence of the protracted struggle, until April 30, 1975, the day the South was entirely liberated. (Doan Thi Tinh 1987: 102, my translation)

In addition to symbolizing the victorious regime's rejection of foreign decadence, a return to the traditional, supposedly unadulterated ao dai had the political advantage of emphasizing the cultural unity of the entire country. More than a century of separation by French colonialism and the Cold War had exacerbated preexisting differences in dress among the three regions of the country. In celebrating one particular style of ao dai as the common denominator uniting these regions, the government was also rhetorically asserting its own legitimacy as the ruler of the unified country. Doan Thi Tinh states this succinctly:

> The ao dai of Vietnamese women has become a symbol of Vietnam in the eyes of the world's people. Seeing a woman wearing an ao dai, foreign visitors know right away that this is a Vietnamese woman. The ao dai has contributed to demonstrating the unity of the three regions, North, Center, and South; it proves that there is only one unified country of Vietnam, unshakable. The ao dai is an achievement of a unique creativity, of the enduring struggle in which the good must defeat the bad, and a pure people must prevail against that which is foreign and unseemly. (107–8)

Despite such praise for the ao dai as a constituent element of Vietnamese identity, the garment retained its elitist connotations. With its bright colors and restrictions on the wearer's movement, the ao dai seemed an extravagance in a time of food shortages and redistribution of resources. In the decade following reunification, the ao dai was replaced in newspaper and magazine fashion spreads by styles reflecting an aesthetic of socialist androgyny that prized simplicity, labor, and frugality.

Economic Reform and the Ao Dai Craze

The heyday of socialism did not last long. By the mid-1980s, Vietnam's economy was in crisis. Geopolitically, Vietnam was dangerously isolated. The Vietnamese Communist Party responded by announcing a series of market-oriented reforms, known as *doi moi*, or renovation, that were intended to promote economic growth, increase exports, and attract foreign capital for business investment.

Progress under *doi moi* has been dramatic, particularly in terms of the population's rising standard of living. With increased incomes, especially in urban areas, Vietnamese by the mid-1990s were demanding more consumer goods. This led to an explosion of interest in fashion. Coming primarily from the United States, Paris, and Tokyo, these clothing styles – mostly for women – were hailed as fashionably modern (*mo-den*). Newspaper articles directed Vietnamese consumers to stores where they might find these clothes and described the resulting "fashion craze" as evidence that Vietnam had, after years of colonialism, war, and isolation, finally entered global markets.[15]

The proliferation of foreign fashion produced a predictable reaction in Vietnam: the self-conscious display for domestic and foreign audiences of clothing that was represented as uniquely Vietnamese. Combined with economic prosperity, it is this age-old need to differentiate that which is Vietnamese from that which is foreign that has fueled a recent resurgence of the ao dai. Interest in the garment has led to an ao dai craze that can be observed on a variety of levels, from working classes to elites.

The ao dai's revival can be dated to the First Miss Ao Dai contest, which was organized by the Ho Chi Minh City *Women's Newspaper* in 1989. In speaking with me about this competition, most observers described it as a signal that the drab days of scarcity and austerity had given way to relative prosperity and a concern with the aesthetics of daily life. In the words of one designer, "In the past, we lived by the proverb, 'enough to eat, warm clothes

to wear (*an no mac am*).' That was when the country was struggling, and having enough to survive was good enough. Today, we can live by the proverb, 'eat well, dress beautifully (*an ngon mac dep*).'" Tailors and stallholders echo this idea that increased material means alone can explain heightened interest in fashion in general and the ao dai in particular.

The Ao Dai on the World Stage

While growing wealth has certainly enabled Vietnamese consumers to increase their consumption of clothing and other consumer goods, the hyperbolic nationalistic rhetoric surrounding discussion of the ao dai suggests that this particular commodity carries a significant cultural load. The ao dai is a polyvalent symbol that both embodies Vietnamese identity and represents it to others. To the domestic Vietnamese audience, Miss Vietnam's award in Tokyo signaled that the ao dai has become part of the international language of fashion. This in turn has created two pressures, each of which presents drawbacks and opportunities.

The first pressure centers on the desire and injunction for cross-cultural communication. On the positive side, economic openness in the form of trade and foreign investment draws Vietnamese into systems of relationships that afford the opportunity to display Vietnamese culture to foreigners in a sort of free marketplace that places a premium on authenticity and distinctiveness. Miss Vietnam was one of forty-nine equal contestants – a metaphor for Vietnam being one of many countries whose traditions and history deserve outsiders' respect and appreciation.

The drawback is that something gets lost in the process of representation and translation. Communication of culture involves modification, and this can lead to static images in which the rich heritage being represented becomes flattened or caricaturish. The ao dai becomes a kind of free-floating symbol available to non-Vietnamese to be picked up and reinterpreted. This was already evident in the early 1990s, when the movie *Indochine* inspired an Asian-themed fashion trend known as Indo-chic. Taking the ao dai and the more common peasant outfit of brown or black pajamas as cues, design houses such as Chanel and Richard Tyler released their own variations. A *New York Times Magazine* fashion spread made the cycle complete by taking these clothes to Vietnam, where they were modeled by regular Vietnamese women. From the perspective of Vietnamese observers, the problem with such acts of translation and reinterpretation is that the clothing code associated with the garments' Vietnamese origins becomes garbled. A photograph taken in Ho Chi Minh City's colonial post office paired a lavish ao dai with a peasant conical hat – a combination that would be incongruous in daily Vietnamese life. The

mandarin collar and frog closures originally celebrated as the height of modesty by a conservative Confucian dynasty were now described for Western eyes as "like erotic flash points" (Shenon 1993).

With cross-cultural communication, therefore, comes a loss of control over the meaning of the items being displayed and the risk that their integrity will be compromised or degraded. While the ao dai's history suggests that such integrity is in fact chimerical, for there has never been a single, pure form of the garment, the outfit's current availability as one style among many on the international market raises the stakes involved in the myth of authenticity, even as it makes that myth harder to maintain.

The second pressure comes from the opportunity that allowing foreign goods into Vietnam affords for borrowing and adapting ideas, developing exciting new clothes, and marketing items that the public will view as raising its quality of life. One man who has taken advantage of the opportunities offered by Vietnam's open markets is an artist named Si Hoang, who by the mid-1990s had become one of Saigon's top ao dai designers. Si Hoang's ao dai designs first appeared at the Miss Ao Dai competition in 1989. Credited as the first designer to paint, rather than embroider, the ao dai, he has liberally borrowed from non-Vietnamese artistic movements. From the West, he has adopted features of abstract art, such as in a recent collection of ao dai inspired by Picasso and Matisse (Figure 2.2). Closer to home, Si Hoang has turned to the ethnic minority groups living in Vietnam's highlands. In 1996 he released a collection of painted velvet ao dai that employed motifs from these groups' weavings. When I spoke to him at the time, he was working on a show that would feature ao dai inspired by each of Vietnam's fifty-four ethnic groups.

Just as foreign embracing of the ao dai sparks a fear that outsiders will misinterpret the garment's meaning, experiments with foreign influences by designers such as Si Hoang lead to the parallel fear that Vietnamese themselves might forget which version of the ao dai is "authentic" and thus lose this cherished form. Si Hoang himself seems acutely sensitive to such concerns. He repeatedly emphasized in our conversation that his designs consist exclusively of decorative innovations, such as painting or buttons. He has not tampered with what he refers to as the traditional design of the ao dai: "I think that the ao dai we have had up to now, its design has already reached perfection. If I changed the way of tailoring or designing it, then it wouldn't be an ao dai anymore, but something like the cheongsam of China or a dress worn by Westerners." To Si Hoang, then, the ao dai's form is what makes it quintessentially Vietnamese.

While Si Hoang asserts that the authenticity of the ao dai lies in its form, the history that I recounted above – one which is well-documented by Vietnamese and French historians – suggests that the ao dai's shape evolved in

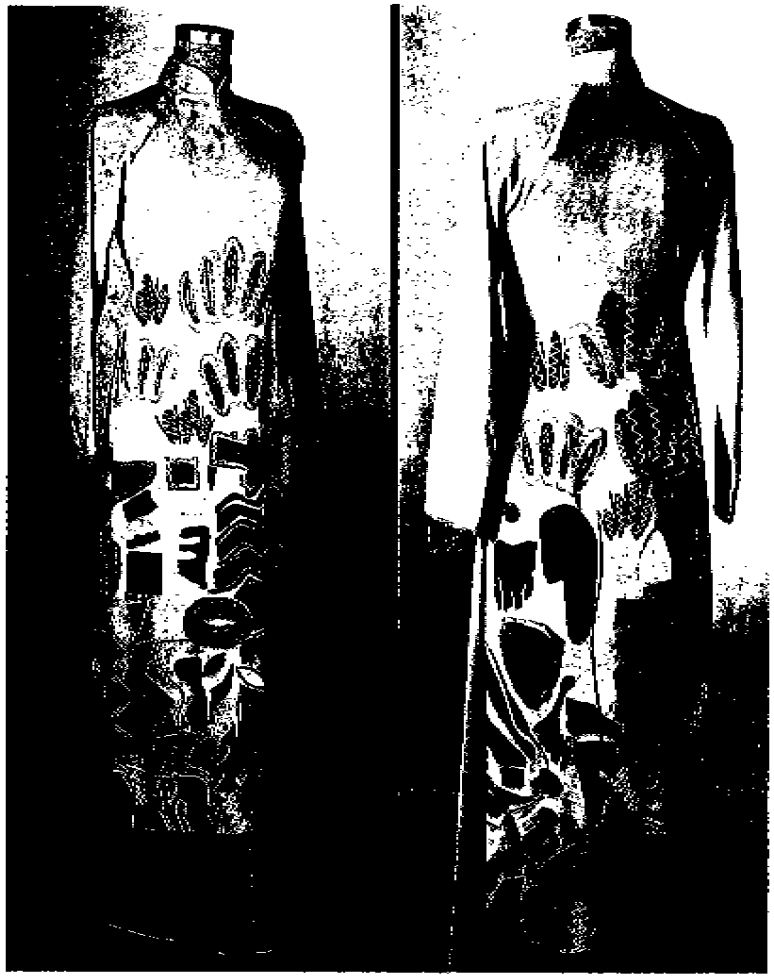

Figure 2.2 A Si Hoang ao dai showcases the designer's skills in adapting modern art styles. Photo by John L. Buckingham/College of the Holy Cross.

response to strong foreign influences. When I asked Si Hoang about this, he asserted that the ao dai is a uniquely Vietnamese and indigenous creation:

> In the past, Vietnamese women wore a type of ao dai which isn't like today's – the *ao tu than* – and after that it was improved slowly so it would be appropriate for an ever-developing lifestyle until it reached its present form. The Vietnamese ao dai isn't something which originated from China. No, it came from the *ao tu than*, the tunic with four panels which slowly became two.

The feature stories that followed Miss Vietnam's victory in Tokyo echo Si Hoang's adamant assertion that the ao dai is an indigenous garment that evolved in harmony with the material and cultural conditions of the Vietnamese people. One observer noted that when he looks at the S-shape of Vietnam on the map (see map 1b, p. xii), he "sees in it the graceful curve of the Vietnamese ao dai" (Thao Thi 1995: 11). One gets the image of the ao dai literally emerging of whole cloth from the soil of Vietnam.[16]

Others ascribe the Vietnamese-ness of the garment to its reflection of Vietnamese women's fundamental character. An article in a Saigon woman's newspaper recounts the history of the ao dai, noting that it has developed in response to significant outside influence. In the author's opinion, this evolution has allowed the garment to reach an ideal form that epitomizes the character of Vietnamese women:

> Something which must be noted about the ao dai of Vietnamese women is its "soul." It truly is appropriate only for those with the slight stature and slimness of Asian women. It demands that the wearer have a self-effacing bearing, cautious, moving deliberately, lightly. Because of that, it isn't without reason that there was a time when people forced female pupils from sixth to twelfth grade to wear the ao dai as a uniform. The goal was to train girls in a modest, cautious, and refined manner in their dress and their bearing, so that they can become young Vietnamese women of grace and politeness. (Vai ner 1995: 17, my translation)

In this way, the ao dai is not just a vehicle for expressing Vietnamese femininity, but a pedagogical tool for inculcating it.[17] The article concludes with the following assertion of the ao dai's symbolic importance today:

> Many researchers in fashion and ethnic studies within and outside our country say that the ao dai of Vietnamese women today has achieved a standard dreamed of: merging both traditional features and contemporary features, both reflecting the unique essence of our people, and answering the increasing aesthetic needs of this age. (ibid.: 17)

While these accounts unabashedly celebrate the ao dai as an embodiment of the traditional and the modern, they also hint at an underlying ambivalence about what truly constitutes each of these qualities. Both get oversimplified: the traditional is held to be uniquely Vietnamese, pure, simple, and unsullied, while the modern finds expression in the drive for more sumptuous lifestyles in which aesthetic desires eclipse material necessities. At the core of this contrast lies the conflict that David Marr claims has haunted Vietnam throughout history: how can Vietnamese incorporate the new and the foreign without losing that which is old and unique? The ao dai, itself the result of significant

foreign influence throughout its history, now becomes celebrated as the pinnacle of a Vietnamese tradition that must be carefully protected against undue outside influence, even as it simultaneously serves as a vehicle for encountering and mediating that influence by representing Vietnam in the global organization of cultural diversity.

In the rhetoric of contemporary cultural politics, the ao dai's protean identity as partly foreign and yet uniquely Vietnamese makes it a contingent and contested symbol susceptible to hyperbolic assertions of its "true" nature. Precisely because the meaning of the ao dai seems to originate from so many sources, it facilitates a discourse in which diverse people can participate. With its flowing lines and mandarin collar, it seems exotic to foreign fashion cognoscenti, but the French colonial influences on its cut and design mute this effect. Unlike other Vietnamese customs, such as teeth lacquering or betel-nut chewing, the ao dai is exotic enough to be enchanting, but not so Other as to be inaccessible or unpalatable.

The garment has a similar effect on domestic audiences. The ao dai is uniquely Vietnamese in that no other culture wears the costume on a regular basis, but part of its attraction lies in the fact that it is not an ordinary garment made banal by its prevalence in daily life. It occupies a middle ground between the foreign and the domestic that makes it well suited to represent Vietnamese resilience and the ingenuity required to incorporate outside ideas without losing one's identity. This hybrid character, rather than the ao dai's purported indigenousness, makes it the quintessential symbol of Vietnamese identity. That such a Vietnamese cultural icon is now celebrated by international audiences rather than demeaned as inferior, as was the case for other elements of Vietnamese society during the centuries of Chinese and French occupation, adds to its domestic appeal. The ao dai, like Vietnam, has arrived on the international stage.

The Making and Marketing of Ao Dai in Ho Chi Minh City

As a national symbol touted in cultural rhetoric, the ao dai provides a metaphor for debating the pros and cons of combining the local with the global and the traditional with the modern. The juxtaposition is not simply symbolic, but concrete, in that the ao dai's development to this point has entailed repeated borrowing and adapting of foreign design innovations and decorative details. The central players in this dramatic history have existed within the upper strata of society and culture: imperial courts, French colonial fashion houses, presidential palaces, contemporary design studios, and international beauty contests. Throughout the story, the ao dai as envisioned and worn by the upper, knowledge-producing classes seems to have an existence separate from that of the garment

occasionally donned by a peasant to welcome the New Year. Today, this gap appears to be narrowing. As economic reforms lead to growing incomes throughout the country, Vietnam is experiencing a rise in mass consumerism, and the ao dai has become a garment of interest to a greater variety of classes. With the expansion of the media, more information becomes available, enabling more people to express diverse tastes. This means that ao dai innovation does not just emanate from the couture design studio of someone like Si Hoang, but occurs in the more mundane settings of the thousands of home workshops and tailor studios that produce the vast majority of the ao dai purchased in Vietnam. On this level, the growing cosmopolitan orientation of both producers and consumers drives ongoing efforts to incorporate global influences into the ao dai. One of the most important sources of information about these influences comes from ao dai tailors' and sellers' kin living overseas.

To Market, To Market: How Traders Market and Consumers Select Ao Dai

The average Vietnamese consumer purchases an ao dai in one of two ways: either she goes to a tailor, chooses a fabric from her inventory, and has her sew it, or she goes to a market, picks out the fabric herself, and then takes it to a tailor (Figure 2.3). The former offers convenience, while the latter offers greater selection and cheaper prices. As part of my dissertation research, I spent a year observing daily life in both these settings. My research focused on Ben Thanh market, a large and famous structure located in the center of Ho Chi Minh City. Offering just about everything the average Saigon consumer might need, Ben Thanh contains over 150 stalls selling fabric and 350 specializing in clothing. Women own and run approximately 85 per cent of these stalls. On the higher end of the retail spectrum are Saigon's downtown tailor shops. Also largely run by women, these shops cater to both foreign tourists and wealthier locals. In both settings, I spoke at length with merchants about how they selected and marketed their goods. I also observed hundreds of transactions with customers in order to get a sense of what features they sought and the strategies sellers employed to clinch the purchase.

As Saigon consumers become more fashion-conscious, the sellers of cloth and clothing in Ben Thanh market make a concerted effort to persuade a customer that a given item is the newest, most "*mo-den*," and best suited for her particular coloring and figure. To do this, they often copy the designs of famous makers such as Si Hoang or use props such as catalogs and fashion magazines to convince the buyer of the popularity of a particular item. One day while I was speaking to a stall owner who specialized in ao dai fabrics, two customers, a mother and daughter, approached. They were looking for ao dai fabric for the daughter, a woman in her early thirties. The initial stages

Figure 2.3 A Ho Chi Minh City marketplace stall displays fabric panels, including ones used for making ao dai. Photo by Ann Marie Leshkowich.

of the transaction focused on what color and styles would be appropriate for the daughter's coloring, with green emerging as the consensus choice. The seller held up each of the panels being considered and wrapped them tightly around her chest in order to show the customers how the hand-painted design would look on the bosom and flowing toward the ground. She also showed the buyers "catalogs," which consisted of photo albums she had assembled herself from a variety of snapshots and Vietnamese fashion magazines. She mentioned that the panel in which the buyers seemed most interested was copied from a design by Si Hoang. Throughout the exchange, the potential customers maintained a rather cynical stance toward such claims, but they finally selected precisely the panel that the seller had identified as based on a *mo-den* Si Hoang design.

Like most other sellers in Ben Thanh market, this stallholder had carefully selected the panels displayed in her stall in accordance with her reading of local consumer tastes. She then marketed her designs as cheaper versions of these prestigious *mo-den* items. As the shopping encounter described above illustrates, however, the trader was not simply supplying items to meet pre-formulated consumer demands. Rather, she was an active shaper of ideas about what constitutes the *mo-den* and fashionable. Like most customers I met, the mother-daughter pair in this transaction came to the stall with vague preferences as

to ao dai color and design. They actively solicited the trader's advice about how to concretize these desires, although they carefully cloaked their need for information in an air of indifference that would strengthen their bargaining position as the transaction moved toward a conclusion. Despite their skepticism, the consumers seemed swayed by the trader's performative display of fashion knowledge, particularly her familiarity with Si Hoang's designs and ability to produce evidence in the form of homemade catalogs to substantiate her claims. This marketplace encounter thus entailed a transformative process of negotiation and exchange in which a certain knowledge about the desirability of a Si Hoang design was produced. Two consumers who may previously have had only vague ideas about Si Hoang and his designs left the stall obviously pleased with their decision to partake of this fashion trend, while the trader subsequently decided to devote even more of her stall to knock-offs of designer creations.

In addition to copying famous local designers, many Ben Thanh market traders pay close attention to the tastes of overseas Vietnamese who comprise a significant portion of their customer base. In the year 2000, over 300,000 overseas Vietnamese visited Vietnam (*The Saigon Times Daily*, 10 January 2001). Most of these visitors stayed in the South, as this region had previously been their home and many of their relatives remain there today. As Saigon's most famous market, Ben Thanh is a popular stop for visitors, and most make sure to buy ao dai fabric for themselves, their relatives, and their friends abroad. At the end of December 1996, one fabric seller told me that the vast majority of her customers during the past few weeks had been returning Vietnamese. Climatic and cultural differences between Vietnam and the temperate regions where most overseas Vietnamese now live have prompted ao dai fabric sellers in Ben Thanh to stock a greater array of fabrics, particularly heavier ones such as velvet and thick brocade. They also offer more daring styles, such as flocked velvet, in which bits of pulverized material create a pattern against a sheer, see-through background. Designs have likewise become bolder, with velvet panels decorated with lavishly sequined dragons or phoenixes becoming increasingly popular. Finally, because many overseas Vietnamese prefer ao dai with the tunic and pants sewn from matching fabric rather than the customary white or black, many stalls now stock a wide array of undecorated ao dai fabric.

Overseas Vietnamese also have a direct influence on Saigon tailors' ao dai designs. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the ao dai had fallen out of favor in Vietnam, overseas Vietnamese in the United States continued to experiment with style innovations. A student of mine who grew up near Little Saigon in southern California recalls the 1980s as a time when Vietnamese-Americans wanted to make the ao dai look more "Western." Fashion shows

featured puffy sleeves and sweetheart necklines, or even more daring variations, such as sleeveless and one-sleeved tunics. While most Vietnamese returning to have ao dai made in Vietnam request the more "authentic" traditional form, some do voice a preference for a different neckline, a certain cut, or a particular length. The resulting styles transform the ao dai into something closer to an evening gown, as befits the special occasions for which most overseas Vietnamese will wear the garment. The tailors with whom I spoke in downtown Ho Chi Minh City told me that while some of these designs might not be appropriate for domestic tastes, others could be adapted. Some described overseas Vietnamese ao dai as more luxurious (*sang trong*) – a fitting symbol of Vietnam's prosperity and the aspirations of many middle-class Vietnamese to the kind of lifestyles they imagine their kinfolk enjoying abroad.

Circulating Fashion Knowledge within the Diaspora

While overseas Vietnamese customers play a role in traders' and tailors' selection of ao dai merchandise, the overseas Vietnamese population with whom these businesswomen have the most frequent and prolonged contact are their relatives. By the late 1990s, remittance flows between the nearly three million Vietnamese émigrés and their kin in Vietnam were widely estimated to exceed one billion US dollars annually. More than 80 per cent of this money was sent directly to individuals, rather than being invested in official development projects. While much of this money is used to cover day-to-day living expenses or one-time expenditures, such as a new television or motorbike, many of the tailors and traders I know use remittances as investment capital for their businesses. Perhaps even more significantly, the packages relatives mail back to Vietnam contain more than money. In addition to letters, Vietnamese resettled abroad regularly send foreign videos, CDs, fashion catalogs, magazines, and snapshots of daily life or special occasions in their adopted countries. For small-scale fashion entrepreneurs, these materials provide a valuable source of information about international clothing styles and trends, and they waste no time in capitalizing on this knowledge. Tuyet, Mai, and Tien provide three typical examples of the ways in which capital and information from overseas Vietnamese can facilitate the development of small businesses.[18]

On one of my first shopping excursions when I arrived in Saigon in 1994, I visited nearly every store located on the main strip of tailor shops along Dong Khoi Street. After seeing about a dozen nearly identical displays of merchandise, I entered a large boutique featuring more colorful and innovative styles. Fashioned from the same materials – raw silk, brocade, and light silk – as the clothes in neighboring shops, the items in this store blended Western clothing forms and colors with Vietnamese accents. Thinking that this store featured the most chic and up-to-date styles, I asked the owner, Tuyet, about the origins of the designs; she replied that they were all her own creations. A woman in her late thirties, Tuyet had worked as a secretary for a state firm until about five years before. Noticing the rapid increase in tourists and explosion of domestic consumerism, she opened her tailoring and clothing store with capital pooled from immediate and extended family living both within and outside Vietnam. Tuyet's sister, who lives in Seattle, has encouraged her to expand her business and regularly sends her newspaper columns and magazine spreads about fashion trends. Tuyet prides herself on providing superior-quality silks and designing styles that appeal equally to Vietnamese and foreigners for wear in business and professional settings. While she also offers standard tourist articles, she sees her future success as lying in cross-cultural styles that transcend kitsch. Right before my return to the United States, she told me that her sister had offered to help her open a boutique in Seattle.

Mai and Tuan are a married couple in their forties who own a large clothing stall in Ben Thanh market that specializes in a variety of women's clothes, including dresses, suits, tops, and leggings. Mai designs all of the clothes herself. Her three younger sisters help with the sewing and patterns. Mai has been selling clothing for over twenty years. A college student when the North Vietnamese army captured Saigon in 1975, Mai was forced to leave school when her father, a colonel in the South Vietnamese army, was sent to a re-education camp and her mother was forcibly relocated to the Mekong Delta.[19] To support her siblings, she started selling clothing on the black market. At that time, most of Mai's goods were smuggled items sent into the country by Vietnamese who had escaped abroad. Mai slowly developed her business and acquired a stall in Ben Thanh market in the mid-1980s. After several unsuccessful attempts to flee Vietnam, Tuan eventually joined Mai full-time in running the stall. Their business has grown steadily since the advent of economic reforms in 1989.

Both Mai and Tuan pay close attention to new styles, particularly to catalogs that friends and relatives in the United States send them. Mai often adapts drawings from Vogue, Butterick, or Simplicity catalogs, which she then promotes to her customers as "sewn from a catalog just sent from America." With an average turnaround time of less than a week, Mai can quickly translate the newest foreign styles into items that she knows will appeal to her loyal customer base of small shop owners and other traders. Tuan's sister lives in North Carolina and occasionally sends them some money, but the amounts are small and typically intended to help support Tuan's elderly parents. Nevertheless, Mai and Tuan dream of expanding their business, and their overseas relatives and friends form a key part of the plan. Tuan explains:

> I would like to open a factory, but I don't have the facility yet. In the future, I think that the piece of land Mai and I have bought could serve as the production plant. We'll buy machines and then have some other workers work from their homes. We could have about thirty people working for us, that would be good. Most of our customers would be domestic, but we also have so many friends and relatives [overseas] who can help us with the American market. They know fashion, they know what styles are popular there with the *Viet Kieu* [overseas Vietnamese], who like goods produced in their homeland.[20] They'd help us be able to sell and develop, and we would also make clothes cheaply following catalogs. The clothing would be popular and the price would be right, not too expensive.

Like Mai and Tuan, Tien, who owns a stall in one of Ho Chi Minh City's wholesale markets, sees his overseas relatives as a key resource helping him to expand the women's clothing and pajama business that he owns with his wife. Tien's mother-in-law has lived in the United States for ten years and recently sent the family a computer, complete with graphics programs to help Tien design clothing. She regularly mails Tien fashion catalogs such as McCall's, which he credits as the primary source of inspiration for his designs. Although a computer and occasional catalogs may seem like a relatively small contribution to Tien's business, Tien describes these kinds of exchanges as essential to maintaining his competitive edge: "In this way, *Viet Kieu* send back some of their gray matter [i.e., their knowledge and skills] to help us out in Vietnam."

While Tuyet, Mai, and Tien sell mostly Western-style clothing, information and goods received from overseas Vietnamese can also help traders reinvent supposedly traditional merchandise. The Ben Thanh ao dai trader described above freely admitted to copying a Si Hoang design; indeed the resemblance of her and other traders' items to Si Hoang creations makes them considerably more attractive to their customers and likely results in higher profits. I have also documented trends in ao dai styles and fabrics that I believe originated with overseas Vietnamese customers' preferences. Occasionally, I would hear a Ben Thanh trader tell a domestic customer that a type of fabric she seemed interested in was "very *mo-den*. The *Viet Kieu* who come back to visit home buy this type of fabric a lot." Downtown tailor shops stock many types of ao dai panels, and I have also heard boutique owners tell prospective customers that an overseas Vietnamese had just bought a large quantity of a certain style. The implication is that the style is somehow trendier or more fashionable because a Vietnamese living overseas, who presumably has more cosmopolitan tastes, selected it.

Unlike Mai's touting of her fashions as inspired by American catalogs, traders' statements about the ao dai's appeal to overseas Vietnamese stop short of suggesting that the ao dai designs themselves have anything but a local origin. One explanation may be that their statements are accurate; the ao dai is simply a homegrown product that is little affected by input from outside sources. My research, however, suggests a different interpretation. Given the variety and importance of traders' contacts with overseas Vietnamese in other aspects of their fashion businesses, it would be naive to assume that these relations have no bearing on their ao dai designs. Indeed, occasional offhand comments and my observations in the marketplace suggest that these interactions do have an impact on the ao dai. Unlike other articles of clothing, such as dresses, skirts, pants, and suits, however, the ao dai is a symbolically charged item whose appeal rests largely on its associations with Vietnam's national history and character. Just as Si Hoang downplays Chinese, French, or American fashion sensibilities in asserting that the ao dai evolved directly from the Vietnamese *ao tu than*, small-scale ao dai sellers are reluctant to admit that they have been influenced by overseas Vietnamese tastes or by ao dai-inspired styles from the foreign designers who have promoted Indo-chic. So much of the ao dai's cultural currency stems from its aura of supposed indigenous authenticity that too much discussion of the impact of foreign ideas, or even overseas Vietnamese tastes, might contaminate the article and threaten tailors' and stallholders' positions as its purveyors.

In representing an ao dai style as popular among overseas Vietnamese or in using information about the ao dai supplied by emigrated relatives to rework their own versions of the original item, traders must walk a fine line between concealing this interaction and reaping the benefits that such foreign prestige imparts to their products. When a panel of judges in Tokyo proclaims the ao dai to be the best national costume, they put an international seal of approval on the garment. This acclaim can be freely celebrated within Vietnam for it does not call into question the garment's sacred status as a marker of authentic Vietnamese identity. Similarly, Si Hoang can use cubist images or ethnic weaving motifs to decorate his ao dai, so long as he is careful to point out that he preserves and respects the garment's time-honored form. When, however, foreigners or quasi-foreign Vietnamese participate even marginally in transforming the ao dai sold to domestic consumers, they challenge perceptions of the garment's authenticity. The traders and tailors I know must balance the attraction of disclosing the sources of their stylistic innovation with this need to preserve the ao dai's sacred orthodoxy.

Conclusion: Cosmopolitan Women, Traditional Fashions

In this chapter, I have documented the historical emergence of the ao dai as an ambivalent but potent symbol of Vietnamese identity. Its hybridity makes it particularly appealing to contemporary domestic consumers, who see in the

garment the opportunity both to assert national tradition and to embrace an international vision of cosmopolitan chic. They are supported in this project by ao dai producers and sellers, who use a combination of overt displays of local taste and covert acquisition of international knowledge from diasporic kin to fashion themselves and their goods as authoritative representatives of style.

By focusing on how small-scale traders and tailors design and market ao dai styles to their customers, I seek to address a gap in knowledge about the circulation of fashion. Located at a nexus between the global and the local, as well as between production and consumption, the traders I studied serve as cross-cultural mediators. As the above examples from my fieldwork suggest, traders' and tailors' abilities to act as mediators are significantly enhanced through ongoing relations with overseas kin and their gifts of money, information, and clothing. Advertising these channels of communication during marketplace encounters with consumers adds to the ao dai's appeal, even as traders try to conceal them out of a need to protect their own access to information and to preserve the aura of authenticity surrounding their product.

Their willingness to explore new style trends gives businesspeople such as Tien, Mai, and Tuyet what Ulf Hannerz (1990) has termed a cosmopolitan outlook. In a world marked by an "organization of diversity," Hannerz claims that cosmopolitans possess the following traits:

> a stance toward diversity itself, toward the co-existence of cultures in the individual experience . . . At the same time, however, cosmopolitanism can be a matter of competence, and competence of both a generalized and a more specialized kind. There is an aspect of a state of readiness, a personal ability to make one's way into other cultures through listening, looking, intuiting, and reflecting. And there is cultural competence in the stricter sense of the terms, a built-up skill in maneuvering more or less expertly with a particular system of meanings and meaningful forms. (1990: 239)

What is most useful about Hannerz's definition is that it combines an orientation, an interest in the novel and unique, with practicality, namely the ability to understand and interpret diversity.

It is precisely this cosmopolitan outlook that traders like the ones I studied are frequently assumed to lack because gender and the small scope of their enterprises are presumed to give them a local orientation.[21] At first glance, the traders and boutique owners I met seem to support such an expectation. Retail trade in general, and marketplace selling in particular, have long been gendered as feminine in Vietnam – a designation that both reflects and reproduces the lower status and presumed insignificance of traders and their activities

(Leshkowich 2000).[22] Employing no more than one or two dozen workers who produce garments at home, the "entrepreneurs" I studied work on a scale so tiny as to seem undeserving of this label. Producing new garments in batches of ten or twenty, they seem risk-averse and focused on day-to-day survival, rather than on long-term growth. Given the small size of their operations, they understandably rely on cheap and informal sources of information sent to them by kin, rather than more scientific marketing studies. As useful as such strategies may be, the specific economic and political circumstances of development in Vietnam suggest that they are tools of last resort used by those who lack more formal and more profitable means to expand their businesses. Even in an environment of economic reform, the state retains total political control and a firm grip on economic "liberalization." Complex foreign investment laws designed to protect unprofitable state-run firms, minimal steps toward privatization, incoherent and contradictory property laws, and ambiguous lines of authority over business regulation combine to create an uncertain economic environment. This setup favors those with formal or informal connections to the party: high-level bureaucrats, operators of state-run industries, their relatives, and private businesspeople with the connections or capital to pay hefty "fees" – a euphemism for bribes. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of these people are male.

Although such characterizations contain an element of truth, my account of traders' businesses and the items that circulate through their stalls demonstrates that their businesses are far more complicated and global in their scope. Mai, Tuyet, Tien, and others are sources of tremendous creativity and resourcefulness, and it is traders like them who continue to cater to the needs of most consumers in Vietnam. Their means of doing business are also relatively sophisticated, in that they rely on frequent information sent to them from abroad. Rather than leaving them behind, economic and cultural globalization has led to a democratization of knowledge and the opening up of opportunities for certain types of entrepreneurs – many of them female – to capitalize on this knowledge.[23]

While the term "democratization" suggests that access to international networks is no longer confined to Vietnam's elites, it would be misleading to assume that it has become universal. The mostly female entrepreneurs whom I studied tend to come from families like Mai's, which had been part of an urban middle class displaced by the communist victory in 1975. Tormented by or disenchanted with the new regime, many of these women's relatives fled the country. More than twenty years later, the displacement that led to their marginalization within a socialist society and scattered their families around the globe had been transformed into a valuable economic and cultural resource. The relatively new situation of a vast Vietnamese diaspora in which women

serve as the primary conduits for ongoing communication presents substantial business opportunities. This interaction has clearly facilitated small-scale entrepreneurs' production and marketing of foreign-style commodities, but it has also had a profound effect on the revival of the ao dai. While other aspects of "traditional culture" are being resurrected or revived, no other Vietnamese outfit is experiencing the same exuberant resurgence as the ao dai.[24] It cannot merely be a coincidence that this item has also received significant international attention, a fact that traders learn about through newspapers, magazines, and their diasporic contacts.

In spite of impassioned cultural rhetoric touting the ao dai's indigenous authenticity, attention to the circulation of the ao dai domestically and globally in both the past and the present reveals that its enduring popularity stems from its multi-national, hybrid origins that make it a garment amenable to interpretation by both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese in standardized displays of cultural distinctiveness, or homogenized heterogeneity. Whereas earlier versions of the ao dai were crafted by cross-cultural elites, such as a Confucianized emperor or a French-educated artist, today's ao dai is being shaped by thousands of independent tailors, mostly women, who draw on a varied cross-cultural array of resources. Through its history of incorporating foreign influences in uniquely Vietnamese ways, the ao dai is not just a fitting symbol of Vietnam's past, but of a globalized present in which innovative women engage in transnational, multi-faceted personal relations and transform them into productive, profitable resources.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the following people for their comments on this chapter and the 1999 Association for Asian Studies conference paper on which it is based: Carla Jones, Sandra Niessen, Mary Steedly, Hue-Tam Ho Tai, Jennifer Cole, Penny van Esterik, Stephen O'Harrow, Sara Friedman, Sandra Teresa Hyde, Christine Walley, Noah Berger, series editor Joanne Eicher, and one anonymous reviewer. John L. Buckingham, Kurt Hultgren, and Joel Villa of College of the Holy Cross graciously helped prepare the photos. My research in Vietnam was sponsored by the College of Social Sciences and Humanities of the National University of Ho Chi Minh City and benefited from the help and advice of Vo Van Sen, Ngo Van Le, Bui Khanh The, Tran Thi Kim Lien, and the stallholders of Ben Thanh market. Fieldwork was funded by the Joint Committee on Southeast Asia of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies with funds provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Henry Luce Foundation; a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship from the United States Department of Education; a Merit Fellowship from Harvard University; and an International Predissertation Fellowship from the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies with funds provided by the Ford Foundation.

2. My use of the term "fashion" requires explanation. As Sandra Niessen points out (in the Afterword to this volume), the term is hardly straightforward. Through its association with a systematized cycle of innovation over time, "fashion" has typically not been seen to include non-Western societies. As we look at clothing styles and uses around the world, however, it becomes increasingly apparent that exactly this kind of fashion does indeed exist outside the West. It is for this reason that I use the term fashion in this chapter. The Vietnamese language also suggests that Vietnamese clothing tastes and practices constitute fashion in this sense, for the word for fashion is *thoi trang*, a compound composed of *thoi*, or time, and *trang*, dress or decoration.

3. Mary Douglas (Douglas and Isherwood 1978) and Pierre Bourdieu (1984) were some of the earliest contemporary anthropologists to call for anthropological study of consumption. Other noteworthy studies include Abu-Lughod (1990), Breckenridge (1995), Burke (1996), Comaroff (1990), de Certeau (1984), de Certeau et al. (1998), Freeman (2000), Friedman (1994), Howes (1996), Mackay (1997), McCracken (1988), Miller (1987 and 1995a), Parry and Bloch (1989), Rutz and Orlove (1989), Tobin (1992), and Weismantel (1989).

4. The idea that regimes of commodity capitalism challenge indigenous and supposedly more authentic cultural and social systems has long roots in anthropology, dating from Malinowski (1961 [1922]) and Mauss's (1990 [1925]) use of anthropological evidence to attack the concept of *homo economicus*. While such oppositions certainly can exist (see, e.g., Taussig 1980), they cannot be assumed a priori. For a detailed history and critique of this good/bad opposition between authentic culture and inauthentic consumption, see Miller (1995b).

5. Several scholars have noted that this gender bias, as well as the male/female and production/consumption dichotomies upon which it rests, stems from the late eighteenth- to early twentieth-century emergence of manufacturing in Europe and North America. During that time, a rising middle class began to view the world as separated into the public sphere of male work and the private sphere of female housekeeping (see, e.g., Davidoff and Hall 1987 and Nava 1997). When women did enter the public sector to shop, their activities were critiqued as illicit and self-indulgent, a chastening rhetoric which Susan Bordo (2000) argues continues to this day.

6. Examples of commodities studied by anthropologists, mostly from the perspective of consumption rather than circulation, include Coca-Cola (Miller 1997), bread (Weismantel 1989), motor scooters (Hebdige 1988), soap (Burke 1996), soap operas (Abu-Lughod 1995, Das 1995, Miller 1992), home decoration (Gullestad 1992), personal stereos (du Gay et al. 1997), beauty contests (Wilk 1995), and sugar (Mintz 1985).

7. Richard Wilk likewise sees a link between displaying or understanding diversity and asserting power: "The *dimensions* across which they [different cultures] vary are becoming more limited, and therefore more mutually intelligible. In this way the societies competing for global economic and cultural dominance build their hegemony not through direct imposition, but by presenting universal categories and standards by which all cultural differences can be defined" (1995: 118). Wilk includes in these

categories things like feminine beauty, the focus of his study, but also economic indicators such as standards of living and GNP (131, n.8).

8. While the reasons for this mobilization of women to display national essences and traditions can vary according to context and historical circumstances, I suspect that a primary reason for the prevalence of the woman/nation association is colonialism and, in Asia, Orientalism. As Emma Tarlo describes for India (1996), Indian men tended to adopt variations on British suits as part of a mimicry strategy that, among other things, might help them access educational and employment opportunities. Women tended to continue to wear traditional forms of dress because to do otherwise would too clearly challenge notions of modesty and decorum. Women's dress thus came to be seen as a potent encapsulation of Indian identity, both for Indians seeking to ensure the preservation of national culture and for colonial authorities seeking to justify their rule as a mission to rescue Indian women from exploitation by traditional patriarchal culture.

9. This point is taken directly from Mies (1986). For discussions of the negative impact of globalization, economic development, and capitalism on women, see also Boserup (1970), Benería and Sen (1981), Benería and Feldman (1992), Bourque and Warren (1991), Guyer and Peters (1987), Lim (1983), Mohanty (1997), Nash and Fernandez-Kelly (1983), Ong (1987), Salaff (1995), and Wolf (1992).

10. The Vietnamese refer to small-scale market and street traders as *tieu thuong*. This term literally means small trader, with the word "*tieu*" having the same connotations as the English "petty": small, insignificant, or trivial.

11. According to Nguyen Van Ky, the skirt appeared in two variations: a closed garment made from a long piece of fabric sewn in a sheath stopping at the belt, and an open version that was shorter and not sewn (Nguyen Van Ky 1995: 237).

12. Woodside (1988) provides an excellent discussion of the Nguyen Dynasty's Confucian policies.

13. As Tai (1992) points out, these so-called new women were problematic figures, precisely because their Westernized manners and purported ease in public places and among foreigners, including men, challenged traditional notions of the modest and demure woman. Hence, when Le Mur's ao dai first appeared, it seemed quite shocking.

14. While Saigon today is officially known as Ho Chi Minh City, the older name is commonly used to refer to the central downtown area. I follow local convention in using the terms interchangeably.

15. While these accounts suggest an uncritical passion for things foreign, my discussions with young cosmopolitan women reveal greater ambivalence and selectivity in adopting "new" fashion. Undeniably enthusiastic about being able to exercise greater choice in clothing, every woman I interviewed nonetheless expressed concern about selecting "appropriate" styles. This term encompasses a host of criteria – lighter pastel colors, looser fit, more frills, and greater coverage of legs, midriffs, and arms – that, to Vietnamese women, serve to distinguish them from the more audacious foreign consumers who drive international fashion trends.

16. Looking at ao dai worn in Vietnamese beauty pageants in the United States, Nhi T. Lieu notes a similar tendency to claim, despite evidence to the contrary, that the ao dai is a pure and untainted Vietnamese product (2000: 128).

17. The pedagogical utility of the ao dai is reflected in the fact that it has once again become a common uniform for high school girls. By restricting their movement, the garment literally crafts them as gentle and modest females.

18. With the exception of the well-known designer Si Hoang, all names provided are pseudonyms, and identifying details have been changed to protect anonymity.

19. Mai's experiences parallel those of many other traders at the end of what Americans refer to as the Vietnam War and Vietnamese tend to call the American War. Like many middle-class Saigonese, Mai's parents supported the Republic of Viet Nam, the United States-backed regime of South Vietnam, as opposed to the communist government of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam, based in the Northern capital of Hanoi and supported by guerrilla movements throughout South Vietnam. After the Northern victory, Southerners who had supported the Republic of Viet Nam or the United States were punished through imprisonment in reeducation camps or internal exile to remote rural provinces.

20. Although widely used by Vietnamese living inside and outside Vietnam, the term *Viet Kieu* can be pejorative, in that it can be used to mark Vietnamese as lesser citizens of their adopted countries and because *Viet Kieu* are often seen by other Vietnamese as having acquired certain negative personality traits and aggressive behaviors. While I retain this term when it appears in direct quotes, I prefer in my own discussions to use the neutral phrase "overseas Vietnamese."

21. Hannerz himself seems to make these assumptions, as evidenced by his unsubstantiated claim that Nigerian women smuggling goods between Lagos and London possess an unaltered "local" worldview (1996: 103).

22. So prevalent is this idea of trade as a female activity that male stallholders such as Tien must endure his female colleagues' continual teasing about his masculinity. Male traders often respond by assuming a stance of alienation from their work, typically by describing a hobby or alternative occupation as their true vocation (see Leshkowich 2000).

23. For similar discussions of how globalization and the spread of mass consumerism have created opportunities for diasporic female South Asian entrepreneurs, see Bhachu (Chapter 4 of this volume and 1997) and Khan (1992).

24. The revival of tradition has been most marked in the area of religious practices. See, for example, Malarney (1996), Kleinen (1999) and Luong (1992).

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