The Fabric of Cultures

Fashion, identity, and globalization

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and Hazel Clark

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To our children, Anna Ward and Jacob Clark Dilnot

Chapter 6

Fashioning appropriate youth in 1990s Vietnam

Ann Marie Leshkowich

In February 1997 the cultural celebrations marking the Lunar New Year (*Tet*) in Ho Chi Minh City included a Spring Fashion Contest (*Hoi Thi Thoi Trang Ngay Xuan*) for youth. Held at the Youth Cultural House (*Nha Van Hoa Thanh Nien*) run by the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League, the event drew several hundred spectators, including friends and family of the contestants, representatives of the media, and curious onlookers, such as myself. The contest had been organized by members of the Youth League's Fashion Club. As the house lights dimmed, the evening's MC informed the crowd that the event was not a beauty contest. Instead, a panel of judges—the head of a popular clothing company, a fashion reporter, and a well-known Vietnamese designer and director of the state-run national design institute—would determine how well contestants had chosen clothing that was attractive and appropriate for their life circumstances.

Over the next several hours, thirty-two contestants, all students or workers in their late teens to mid-twenties and approximately two-thirds of them women, modeled outfits of their own selection or design in two categories: office or school attire (*trang phuc di lam hay di hoc*), and eveningwear (*trang phuc da hoi*). For the first section, most of the young women wore white *ao dai*, the long tunic and wide-legged pants that constitute Vietnam's national costume and are the required uniform for most female secondary students. The young men wore light dress shirts and dark pants or suits (Figure 6.1). For the eveningwear portion, many of the young women donned elaborate, but rather banal, evening gowns (Figure 6.2). The young men tended toward trendy, slightly grunge (*bui*) styles juxtaposing different patterns and colors.

As the audience awaited the results, the famous designer took the microphone. I expected her to congratulate the contestants or expound on the role of fashion as Vietnam strove for prosperity under the market-oriented policies known as *Doi moi* (Renovation) that had begun a decade earlier. Instead, she delivered a pointed rebuke:

> I thought that spring fashion and this contest were supposed to open up a new atmosphere and a new lifestyle. But there's a problem with the fashion that makes me feel hopeless. The outfits chosen by the female contestants aren't appropriate for their age, or for the lifestyle of Vietnamese people . . . It's strange . . . a young woman of sixteen who wears an evening outfit looks old . . . I'm wondering what kind of vehicle they'll use, to go where? [Turning to the female contestants] You young women have gotten old; you've become supermodels and lost your innocence.[1]

Figure 6.1 Contestants model clothing for school or work. (Photograph by Ann Marie Leshkowich.)

When the designer asked the audience whether they agreed that young people needed to represent the next generation by "comporting themselves appropriately" (*an mac mot cach phu hop*), the crowd responded with vigorous applause.

The assertion that clothing needed to be "appropriate" (*phu hop*) had surfaced quite often in my conversations with Ho Chi Minh City market sellers, boutique owners, designers, and consumers over the course of nearly two years of research on the sociocultural effects of economic transformations.[2] Excitement about how "open-door" (*mo cua*) policies had made new styles available, albeit primarily to well-heeled urbanites, was tempered by concern about whether appropriation of foreign fashions would erode a sense of Vietnamese-ness, particularly among impressionable young people.

Figure 6.2
An evening gown selection. (Photograph by Ann Marie Leshkowich.)

The designer echoed this prevalent concern, but she did so with a vehemence and in a setting that raise several questions. Why were the fashion choices of some contestants so upsetting? Why did audience members, most of them contestants' friends and family members, applaud her critique? Finally, given that the event took place under the auspices of the youth organization of the Vietnamese Communist Party and the designer represented a state-run company, how and why was the party or state involved in the fashion choices of youth? In short, why did young people's clothing matter (Tarlo 1996) to their elders and state officials during the late 1990s?

This chapter addresses these questions by examining the youth fashion contest as a diagnostic event (Moore 1987: 730) that dramatized official and popular concerns about the roles, behavior, and attitudes of urban Vietnamese youth. First, I examine the moral panic about youth created and expressed in reports by state-run media. While the overwrought tone of the moral panic

hardly matched the realities of most young people's lives and attitudes, I argue that this rhetoric nonetheless needs to be taken seriously as a means through which state organs such as the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League use media, expert knowledge, and cultural activities to interpellate (Althusser 1971) youth as particular kinds of citizen–subject–consumers.

Second, I consider how the mode and object of such interpellation has shifted since the "Liberation" (*Giai phong*) of the south by northern-led communist forces in 1975. Formerly hailed as a vanguard to lead workers in radical socialist resistance to oppression and hierarchy, youth under *Doi moi* are exhorted by a Youth League turned media and marketing conglomerate to build the nation by becoming model middle-class consumers, cosmopolitan yet judicious in maintaining cultural traditions in the context of globalization. The rhetoric of moral panic constructs youth as vulnerable and insecure and hence justifies intervention into individual consumer choice as part of attempts to preserve state and party authority under the developmentalist agenda of *Doi moi*.

Finally, I consider the relationship between materiality and morality under both postwar socialism and contemporary *Doi moi* to show why fashion is an important site for interpellating and constructing this new model youth. Rather than a mode of creative, performative play, clothing tends to be viewed as an obvious signifier of one's moral and material status. These are linked, with moral virtue hinging on material position. Economic reforms have shifted this relationship from the straightforward association in which virtue was defined through the position of one's labor in relation to the means of production, to a more freewheeling and ambiguous regime of display through forms of consumption. Immature and vulnerable to alluring commercialized images, youth are thus said to require guidance in how to recognize and enact morally correct consumption. At the same time, the social problem of emerging class inequality under *Doi moi* becomes recast as one of individual morality.

My goal throughout this discussion is to interrogate the discourses surrounding the fashion contest in order to situate debates about youth and clothing within the broader dynamics of social, economic, and political change in Vietnam during the 1990s. This focus and the constraints of space mean that I must neglect other issues raised by the contest. These include (1) why it was the young women, rather than the young men, who failed to meet judges' expectations; and (2) the intentions and goals of contestants in putting together their outfits. With respect to the first issue, elsewhere I compare the contest to other fashion events in Ho Chi Minh City in order to consider dilemmas of gender and mimicry in the use of clothing to construct Vietnamese-ness under *Doi moi* (Leshkowich n.d.). Here I focus on the category of youth as including men and women, all of whom were expected to use clothing in ways that the judges and audience would find appropriate. As for the fascinating and significant issue of contestants' intentionality, I found

that their agency was effectively erased within the domain of the contest, as experts seized control over the signification of participants' outfits in a moralizing discourse that constructed youth as recipients, rather than creators, of fashion meanings. My task here is to understand why this happened, and what this reveals about shifting modes of governmentality vis-à-vis youth.

Moral panic

The late 1990s was a time of both optimism and anxiety for many in Ho Chi Minh City. *Doi moi* had resulted in economic prosperity and desire for personal accumulation, the latter recast as an act of patriotism: "*dan giau nuoc manh*" ("wealthy people, strong country"). An increasing number of city residents drove late-model motorbikes, wore designer fashions, and patronized upscale restaurants. Whereas an earlier generation had embraced ideals of struggle and independence with the slogan "*an no mac am*" ("eat enough, dress warmly"), *Doi moi* youth talked about "*an ngon mac dep*" ("eat deliciously, dress beautifully"). The anxiety stemmed from a concern that the consumption craze would become excessive. Were well-heeled urbanites becoming materialistic at the expense of concern for others, including their own family members? Was the desire to be fashionable becoming an obsession?

In media discussions of the allure and corruption of the "new," youth figured centrally. This focus stemmed in part from the demographic fact that by the mid-1990s more than half of the Vietnamese population had been born after the war ended in 1975. While an older generation knew firsthand the sacrifices necessary to secure independence or to move from dressing warmly to dressing beautifully, a younger generation accustomed to privilege might "lose its roots" (*mat goc*) (see, e.g., Drummond 2003: 158). Journalists and academics sketched harrowing portraits of bad youth: lazy, drug-addicted, sexually active, provocatively or sloppily dressed, prone to motorcycle racing, criminal, spendthrift, or irresponsible (Hang Chuc Nguyen 1995; Le Minh 1997: 76; Marr and Rosen 1998: 149–150). The government specifically targeted youth in media and educational campaigns designed to combat the "social evils" (*te nan xa hoi*) of prostitution, drug abuse, and AIDS (Nguyen Phuong An 2007: 288). In some accounts, the blame for this wayward generation fell upon the decadent influence of foreign culture, or what the minister of culture and information called "the flow of garbage from foreign degraded, reactionary culture which is strange to our tradition of humanities, and benevolence" (Nguyen Khoa Diem 1997: 56). Other accounts called upon parents and teachers to provide greater guidance to confused young people (see, e.g., Nguyen Thi Oanh 1995; Rydstrøm 2001: 398).

In the midst of moral panic, clothing provided a convenient measure of youthful morality. An English-language newspaper published by the

Vietnamese News Agency proclaimed, "Many HCM [Ho Chi Minh] City youngsters are crazy about fashion." Their "extravagant" tastes were evident in their shopping habits: "Rather than shop at local markets, the city's newly rich buy stylish clothes and accessories at expensive fashion boutiques" (Cu Mai Cong 1996: 16). If the price of youthful fashion was not cause for alarm, the styles were. Social commentators attempted to decode the meanings of *bui*, an interpretation of grunge that involved T-shirts, unbuttoned plaid shirts, baggy jeans, or miniskirts, all donned with an attitude of ennui. *Bui* became the harbinger of what one journalist worried would be a soulless generation (Cu Mai Cong 1995). As part of a series of articles in the *Tuoi Tre* (Youth) newspaper produced by the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League, well-respected sociologist Nguyen Thi Oanh speculated that the grunge styles of youth "obsessed with fashion" signified a quest for identity by those lacking in self-esteem (Nguyen Thi Oanh 1995). Another scholar worried that grunge fashion, perhaps harmless as simply a style, would serve as a point of entry to a delinquent, disaffected subculture alienated from other youth and from elders (Nguyen Minh Hoa 1995: 7). The foreign press quickly picked up these generation-gap concerns with speculations that youth might be staging a quieter, gentler revolution through consumption (Mydans 2000) or more negative depictions of them as "young and insolent" (*The Economist* 1996: 38).

Such accounts of materialistic, disrespectful, rebellious, or ennui-ridden youth match anxieties voiced by elders around the world (see, e.g., Hebdige 1979; White 1993; Valentine et al. 1998; McRobbie 2000 [1991]; Mead 2001 [1928]; Cohen 2002 [1972]; Cole 2007). The tone of moral panic seems to have increased over the past several decades, as the growing availability of mass media targeting youth has intersected with broader anxiety about cultural and social reproduction in the wake of rapid socio-economic change (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Graeber 2002; Cole 2007; Durham 2007). In an environment of uncertainty, youth can serve as a convenient symbol of liminality on which to project anxiety (Maira and Soep 2005). As a result, youth studies scholars who might originally have been interested in the disruptive potential of spectacular, irreverent subcultures (Hebdige 1979; Willis 1981 [1977]) have more recently considered the gap between, on the one hand, hyperbolic images of moral panic, deviancy, and shocking styles, and, on the other hand, the more mundane, mainstream realities of young people who are not just active participants in and shapers of mass culture, but are also students, workers, family members, and citizens (White 1993; Thornton 1996; Valentine et al. 1998; McRobbie 2000 [1991]; Miles 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Maira 2002; Cole 2007; Cole and Durham 2007). Such scholarship argues that a generation gap is not an inevitable biological fact, but the result of a social process through which groups interact and come to see age as a determining factor of their differences (Cole and Durham 2007).

Consistent with this broader trend, scholars interested in Vietnamese youth over the past decade have tempered accounts of what Marr and Rosen call a "yawning generational gap" (1998: 145) with attention to the actual attitudes of young people. Surveys and qualitative interviews suggest that most young people in Vietnam tend to be rather traditional or conservative. They respect elders' authority over career and other life choices, hope to form families, want political and economic stability, and plan to take care of their parents as they age (see Marr and Rosen 1998; Nilan 1999; Mensch et al. 2003; Nguyen Phuong An 2006; King et al. 2008). When we look beyond the rhetoric of moral panic, youth reveal their most pressing concern to be neither fashion nor rebellion, but education and employment (Nguyen Phuong An 2002; Mensch et al. 2003). At the same time, young people increasingly link their identities to the use of fashion and consumption as tools for articulating issues of sociality and status (Nilan 1999, King et al. 2008). They may be a consumer generation, but materialism does not consume them.

That the moral panic about youth and their dress was more perceived than real does not mitigate the fact that these concerns seemed credible and pressing to officials, academics, journalists, and the broader public. If anything, the situation becomes even more puzzling: in the face of little concrete evidence, why did people view youth as a danger requiring immediate attention? Answering this question requires attending to the source of hyperbolic claims about youth and tracking their effects to determine whose interests the rhetoric served. David Oswell argues that moral panics reflect two impulses:

> The *othering* of young people is, we might argue, constituted within an ambivalence which leads both to the desire to expel these dangerous youths from the realms of decent society (to exclude them from the boundaries of citizenship) and also to the desire to protect them from further harm (to lead them out of the wilderness back into the fold).
> (Oswell 1998: 38, emphasis in original)

Oswell's statement implicitly connects both of these desires to issues of power and control over the social and political body. In Vietnam the sources of the panic discourse all had some connection to the state: the minister of culture, a youth newspaper published by the Communist Youth League, and researchers affiliated with state-run institutes. Depictions of the problem of youth were by no means uniform, and they certainly did not result from a central directive. But they do suggest official investment in particular modes of apprehending and correcting transgressions on the part of youth. The moral panic was thus a vehicle through which organs of the state interpellated youth as either good or bad citizens in the midst of rapid economic, social, and cultural change. Although the context of the 1990s moral panic may have been new, this mode of interpellation was consistent with a much longer history of party and state reliance on youth to advance the project of socialism.

Hailing youth under socialism and late socialism

Louis Althusser defines interpellation as an ideological process through which the state, via its agents, hails an individual. In responding, the individual becomes a subject identified according to the terms by which he or she was hailed and hence tacitly consents to the ideology that constructed the hailing (Althusser 1971: 174–175). While Althusser's model depicts power relations monolithically, it nonetheless can prove helpful in thinking about how processes of defining and constructing categories of persons said to be endowed with particular attributes might be a strategy of governmentality through which the state attempts to engage and manage its citizens.

Throughout its history, the Vietnamese Communist Party has interpellated youth as a cornerstone of its strategy of mass mobilization. According to Helle Rydstrøm, Vietnamese tend to think of youth as blank slates, or "like white pieces of paper" (*nhu mot to giay trang*) (Rydstrøm 2001: 394). As such, they need to be inscribed with moral values through education and socialization. Their "whiteness" makes them vulnerable to bad influences, but this can be offset by surrounding them with role models, such as their parents or exemplary peers, whom they can "imitate" (*bat chuoc*) (ibid.: 398).

These notions of socialization and imitation guided communist youth organizing and educational activities throughout the twentieth century. In 1925, Ho Chi Minh founded the Viet Nam Revolutionary Youth League (Viet Nam Thanh Nien Cach Menh Dong Chi Hoi) (Duiker 1972: 475). The League included a Communist Youth Group (Thanh Nien Cong San Doan) which organized and agitated from its exile base in Canton through its official journal, *Thanh Nien* (Youth) (ibid.: 481). Later renamed the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League, the group served as a vanguard for anti-French mobilization. Following the establishment of a communist-led government in the north in 1954, the league's political connections and educational training provided a means of upward mobility (Marr and Rosen 1998: 146). Youth also played a central role in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's fight against the American-supported southern regime. For example, the sacrifices and hardships endured by Thanh Nien Xung Phong (Volunteer Youth) in keeping the Ho Chi Minh Trail open have become legendary (Turner 1998; McElwee 2005; Phinney 2005; Werner 2006). When the victorious regime sought after 1975 to implement its policies of restructuring economic and social relations in the south, it was youth brigades who were mobilized to confiscate private property and proselytize about new policies (Leshkowich 2008: 21).

During the 1990s, the state and party had to reinvent themselves as their policies shifted from radical mobilization in service of centrally planned socialism to neoliberal embracing of market forces to promote national development. Once again, however, officials hailed youth as central to these goals. One party pronouncement declared:

> Whether the cause of *doi moi* will be successful or not, whether the country . . . will gain a deserving position in the world community or not, whether the Vietnamese revolution will firmly follow the path of socialism or not, it depends largely on the force of youth, and on the educating and training of young generations. The matter of youth is a matter of life and death for the nation, and one of the decisive factors for the success or failure of the revolution.
>
> (Vietnamese Communist Party 1993: 82, quoted in Nguyen Phuong An 2006: 330)

In a book establishing youth as a field for academic research, Dang Canh Khanh portrayed this sentiment as scientific fact: "Social research and sociological surveys [on the Vietnamese youth] in recent times have shown that the remarkable successes of the reform process have created a confident and energetic generation of youth who are looking forward to the future" (Dang Canh Khanh 1996: 24, quoted in Nguyen Phuong An 2002: 225). As an antidote to the wayward youth depicted in the moral panic, the party continued to use mass organizations such as the Young Pioneers to identify and reward virtuous role models (Rydstrøm 2001: 399).

Images of youth as central to revolutionary goals may have been an effective hailing technique to mobilize young people against French or American troops, but there was evidence that this rhetoric wore thin once the national mission shifted from independence to wealth and consumerism. Although Dang Canh Khanh asserted that more youth than ever wished to join the Youth League and Communist Party (Dang Canh Khanh 1996: 24, quoted in Nguyen Phuong An 2002: 225), most observers reported declining membership in the 1990s (see, e.g., Marr and Rosen 1998; Nilan 1999; Nguyen Phuong An 2006). The party's broader influence was also said to have decreased. For example, Nguyen Phuong An found that most young people in Hanoi, the seat of state and party power, were not aware of the various campaigns supposedly directed at them (Nguyen Phuong An 2006: 333). A reporter for *Time* magazine summed up the prevailing sense that the party had become irrelevant to the younger generation:

> It's a whole new world. Vietnam's younger generation has escaped from under the very eyes of the government, which didn't even see them going. The Party's authority no longer reaches across the generation gap, and a huge empty space has opened up in society for youngsters to prosper—or self-destruct.
>
> (McCarthy 2000)

The influence of traditional mass mobilization techniques may have been waning, but to conclude from this that the state or party was losing its ability to manage youth would be to neglect the ways in which *Doi moi* had

inaugurated a shift in its mode of interpellation. The state and party were not just the architects of market-oriented policies, they were key economic players. Throughout the 1990s the dominant form of enterprise was in state hands, either through direct ownership of factories or retail outlets, or through joint ventures between foreign companies and state entities such as the army (Gainsborough 2003). Add to this the state's continued direct management of a growing range of media, and it becomes clear that the government was the major producer and distributor of consumer goods, and also a generator of consumer desire for those products through advertisements and media coverage of key trends.

Consistent with this development, the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League during the 1990s became a major presence in the fashion industry. In collaboration with Ringier Switzerland, the league produced a popular fashion magazine, *Thoi Trang Tre* (New Fashion). The Youth League developed a joint venture to produce and market styles designed by a young Vietnamese American, while an additional league-run company provided advertising and marketing consultants. The league's more traditional publications, such as the newspaper *Tuoi Tre* (Youth), analyzed fashion and lifestyle trends. Finally, the league provided direct programming on elements of mass culture and popular trends, such as the Fashion Club that sponsored the New Year's fashion contest.

In urban areas, state lifestyle marketing constructed the ideal middle-class consumer as "civilized" (*van minh*) and "cultured" (*co van hoa*); conversant with cosmopolitan trends, yet judiciously maintaining select elements of traditional Vietnamese style and values. Women were the most obvious symbols in these campaigns, either as decorous housewives managing their families' emotions and finances, or as disordered subjects liable to behave crassly or wantonly (Pettus 2003; Drummond and Rydstrøm 2004; Leshkowich 2005). Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo finds these campaigns to deploy both disciplinary and coercive tactics: magazine features (in publications run by the Women's Union), courses on domestic arts (sponsored by the Women's Union), and manuals on conjugal happiness (from government-employed researchers) shaped middle-class women, while incarceration and reeducation tried to mold prostitutes and other undesirables into a docile working class (Nguyen-Vo 2002). Although programs targeting youth have not received as much attention from scholars, the Youth League followed similar strategies. Symbolically, the housewife and the prostitute find their youthful counterparts in the model student or worker and the delinquent engaged in social evils. Just as the Women's Union sought to guide women in developing taste and domestic management skills through instruction and media, the Youth League deployed a combination of pedagogy and reform through recreational programming, newspapers, magazines, and educational campaigns.

Rather than retreat from involvement in individuals' daily lives, the transformation of the party's mass mobilization organizations into diversified

production, retail, and marketing conglomerates suggests that the state shifted the arena in which it engaged youth. Revolutionary politics morphed into cosmopolitan style. In the process, commerce became an ideological tool. In her study of teenaged girls' readership of fashion and lifestyle magazines, Angela McRobbie describes media as part of a Gramscian private sphere of civil society in which "teenage girls are subjected to an explicit attempt to win consent to the dominant order—in terms of femininity, leisure, and consumption, i.e. at the level of culture" (2000 [1991]: 73). What McRobbie describes in England as an "*unspoken* consensus" (ibid.: 75, italics in original) between state ideologues and private publishing, becomes in Vietnam, because of the direct involvement of state entities in commerce, an explicit attempt to hail particular kinds of citizen-consumers whose activities affirm party leadership. According to Nguyen Bich Thuan and Mandy Thomas, "The state is developing a new relationship with consumers, testing the ground of possibility by simultaneously authorizing and disallowing. Working in tandem with mass culture, a new mass-oriented state has become the mark of the postsocialist era" (2004: 135). Fun, fashion, and taste become matters of politics and patriotism.

For their part, the young people I encountered, all of them self-identifying as upwardly mobile and responsible, seemed receptive to this guidance. Although many described party leaders as behind the times and eschewed direct membership in the Youth League, they welcomed expert advice. The imbrication of the Youth League, Women's Union, or other party organs into production, retail, and marketing meant that they provided the platform through which expertise was filtered to the general public. As a result, the values that most young people held in fact paralleled those emphasized by the party (see, e.g., Nguyen Phuong An 2006).

While urban youth may not have overtly accepted the guidance of the "party," they did respect the expertise deployed by that party. This became clear to me when a university student in her twenties who had accompanied me to the fashion contest assured me that the designer's critical rebuke was accurate, necessary, and appropriate. This young woman, who considered herself independent-minded and iconoclastic, patiently told me, "With status comes the responsibility to instruct those below you. The designer has to teach us how to understand fashion." In their desire to become models of middle-class decorum and responsibility, this woman and others like her were heeding the hail of a state apparatus.

Moralizing clothing

Clearly, the open-door policies of *Doi moi* had generated anxiety about cultural identity that coalesced into attempts to mold proper Vietnamese young people. Why, however, was clothing a key element of these efforts? What exactly was the understanding of fashion that contestants at the Youth Cultural House needed to acquire? The answer has to do with the ways in which outward appearance reflects inner goodness—a correspondence between materiality and morality that the Vietnamese Communist Party has reinforced since Liberation in 1975 as part of a broader effort to link national goals to individual subjectivity.

At the end of the war in 1975, the victorious regime attempted to restructure the southern part of the country by determining the economic status and political affiliations of individuals and families. Consistent with Marxist materialism, one's identity and character hinged on one's relation to the means of production. Workers and peasants were held up as moral exemplars; by not owning property, they had not been corrupted by oppressing or dispossessing someone else. The simple purity of the working classes or masses was represented in their dress: inexpensive, utilitarian styles without artifice.

In the logic of the revolutionary vanguard, a larger number of exemplary socialist worker-citizens could be created through imitation of the model peasant or proletariat. Officials thus explicitly rejected the transnational youth culture of the 1960s and 1970s by promoting an ethic of discipline in body and spirit common to socialist revolutionary movements throughout the world (see, e.g., Burgess 2002: 288). Donning socialist clothing styles would build a new citizen from the outside in—an inverted version of the "fake it 'til you make it" dictum. Because they were still deciding what they wanted to be, youth were particularly urged to make careful clothing choices. Just before the New Year in 1978, Ho Chi Minh City's *Tuoi Tre* (Youth) newspaper provided a full-page feature on proposed new outfits for various kinds of young people. The text emphasized the importance of clothing:

> Choosing for yourself an outfit/uniform (*dong phuc*) also means that you are choosing for yourself a career service, a position in order to implement your ideals, obligations, and dreams. Have you chosen a position for yourself yet? If you haven't, then you should ascertain it soon.
> (*Tuoi Tre* 1978: 17)

Accompanying the article were drawings of simple, modest, and functional styles for different professions and mass organizations, including office workers, laborers, and volunteer youth brigades (see Figures 6.3a and 6.3b).

By the 1990s the content of fashion styles had clearly changed. In fact, a key part of the allure of the fashion craze was the opportunity, particularly for women, to experiment with more elaborate styles that departed from the austere, androgynous look of the postwar decade. At the same time, the fashion contest suggests that clothing continued to be viewed as a straightforward projection of identity that reflected the close association between socioeconomic status and individual morality.

Figure 6.3a Attire for vocational students (*Tuoi Tre* (Youth) 1978: 17).

The day after the fashion contest, I interviewed the designer who had been so disturbed by the young participants' outfits. She told me that she was worried that young Vietnamese were becoming dangerously obsessed with foreign fashion. In her view, fashion is both a product of economic status and a means to express personal and cultural identity. This explained her comment that the contestants were wearing clothing that was not appropriate for the lifestyles of Ho Chi Minh City residents. How, she wondered, can you maneuver a motorbike through city traffic in a white gown with an elaborate train? The choices were not just impractical, she told me, they were immoral. The goal of fashion was to help Vietnamese forge a unique sense of style that was individual, yet part of a broader national identity. As with other Youth League programming, the contest organizers intended the event to promote exemplary youth who could serve as fash-

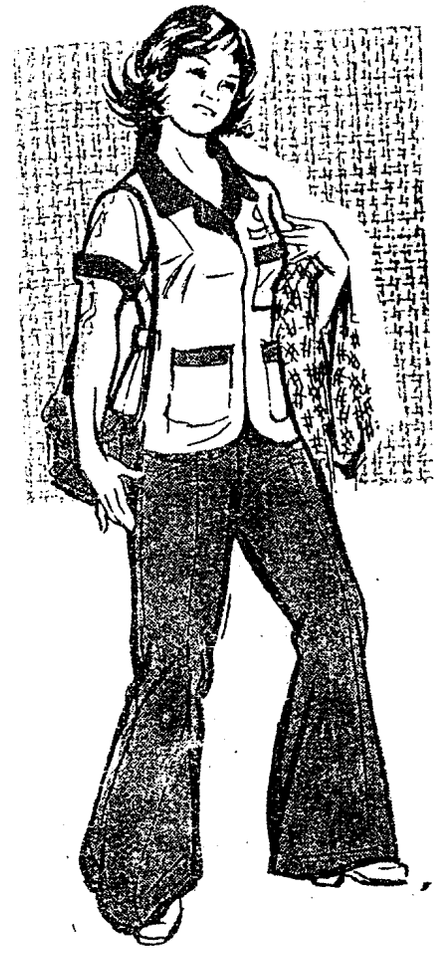

Figure 6.3b Attire for Youth Union office workers and administrators (*Tuoi Tre* (Youth) 1978: 17).

ion role models. Instead, the designer had witnessed confusion: "Because of waves of different cultural influences, the girls don't know how to choose for themselves, they don't know how to create a 'character' [she used the English word] for themselves." Her mission was to chart Vietnam's fashion course by guiding people in acquiring powers of discernment and critiquing missteps. Without expert guidance, Vietnam might become what she decried as the "second Hong Kong." She explained, "Although Hong Kong clothes are pretty and cheap, I think that they're only copies cribbed from the other nations around the world. They don't have their own style."

That the designer used the English word "character" to describe the distinct Vietnamese identity that she believed the young fashion contestants lacked poses an irony reminiscent of the dangers of mimicry identified by Homi Bhabha (1997). Yet the term also permits an instructive double

meaning: character can be both a persona projected outward, as in a play, and one's own inner moral worth. In the designer's view—one consistent with broader opinion in Vietnam, including among party officials—these should be consistent: surface should reflect substance. The fashion choices in the contest were problematic not just because they were uninspired or unattractive, but because the sartorial confusion betrayed a vulnerability to external influences stemming from an uncertain inner character. Sociologist Nguyen Thi Oanh made this logic explicit in her assessment of the *bui* (grunge) trend: "Excessively following fashion is in fact an inclination to look for one's identity, to look for a foothold in the midst of insecurity" (1995: 6). Although such confusion was an understandable part of maturation, it was not acceptable at an event explicitly designed to provide exemplars for young people to follow.

To draw together the threads of this analysis, the fashion contest revealed that despite massive shifts in political goals and styles of dress, the party continued to attempt to ground moral personhood in materialism. The pure peasant or proletarian may have been replaced by the civilized middle-class urbanite, but clothing remained a key signifier of one's virtue. Dress has often been interpreted as what Terence Turner (1980) termed the "social skin," but this characterization tends to emphasize fluidity: the performative potential to change identity or status by donning a different look (see, e.g., Hansen 2000: 4–5). As economic reforms accelerated processes of class differentiation in urban areas, it was precisely this kind of fluidity that worried state leadership. While many Vietnamese sought to dress aspirationally and fashion magazines in the 1990s advised them about how to do so, there was nonetheless tremendous anxiety about a shift similar to that noted by Richard Sennett in his account of the aftermath of the French Revolution: presentation in a system of fixed statuses had given way to representation in an environment of new socioeconomic differentiations (Sennett (1992 [1977]: 39–42, quoted in Hansen 2000: 4).

Under *Doi moi*, the shift in the locus of meaning from position in production to status through consumption threatened to disrupt the equation between class status, morality, and outward appearance. Whereas an individual's position in production was obviously social, in that it depended on a broader economic system subject to government oversight, consumption could be an individualistic, anarchic affair. Individuals and media outlets affiliated with the state tended to respond to this dilemma by reinterpreting individual style choices as anchored in a broader social morality and cultural identity, through such concepts as "appropriate" (*phu hop*), "modern" (*hien dai*), and "civilized" (*van minh*). In her analysis of Vietnamese television shows during the 1990s, Pam Nilan notes a tendency to treat "social issues as *moral* issues in the private lives of the characters" (Nilan 1999: 366, italics in original). Nilan implies this conflation to be a smokescreen: an attempt to absolve the state of responsibility for the problems of rapid socioeconomic change by shifting blame to individuals. The youth fashion contest suggests a different interpretation: defining social issues as problems of individual moral character might allow the various apparatuses of the state to interpellate citizens on the new terrain of the market. Through deploying a moral discourse of appropriateness and engaging in pedagogical efforts to establish its parameters through the fashion media, design and retail businesses, and recreational activities, the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League defined the individual problem of what to wear as a public moral concern that required the guidance of experts, many of whom were conveniently in its employ.

Conclusion

The Spring Fashion Contest illuminated a controversy about what clothing would be appropriate for Vietnamese teenagers and twenty-somethings that was part of a reconfiguration of state–youth relationships in the wake of economic changes from centrally planned socialism to a market-oriented economy. In contrast to representations of youth as rejecting the party, and the state as retreating from control over daily life, this chapter has highlighted how an activist state fomented such controversy as part of a shift in the modes through which it organized citizens (see also Zhang 2001; Gainsborough 2002; King et al. 2008). In the 1990s, the Vietnamese Communist Party moved from organizing a vanguard of urban working-class and revolutionary youth to developing a skilled, savvy middle class of consumers whose fashion choices would embody the success of the state developmentalist and civilizing agenda. It attempted to do so in part by reinterpreting issues of social status and economic transformation as questions of individual moral character in ways that would make citizens receptive to expert guidance. Clothing became central to these efforts because it was widely presumed to be an outward projection of inner character. Youth, for reasons related to their symbolic association with the future, their active participation in broader circuits of popular culture, and their receptiveness to moral inscription, became objects of state attempts to hail and fashion them as appropriate Vietnamese consumers by drawing them into a nexus of discourse and instruction overseen by an increasingly entrepreneurial Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League. Vietnamese youth in the 1990s may have increasingly eschewed party membership, but the applause that greeted the designer's critique of the participants at the Spring Fashion Contest suggests that they, their parents, and the broader public willingly answered the hail of consumerism issued by a party that had reinvented itself as a savvy arbiter of style.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Vietnamese are my own.
2. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Ho Chi Minh City for twenty-one months between 1995 and 1997, with follow-up visits in 2003–2004 and 2007–2008. My research focused on cloth and clothing sellers in the city's central marketplace and consisted of daily participant observation and extended life-history interviews. To get a broader sense of how changing fashion tastes affected stallholders' businesses, I conducted research on the fashion industry which included interviews with prominent designers and boutique owners, attendance at fashion shows and beauty contests, and analysis of fashion publications. All research was conducted in Vietnamese.

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