

Le Việt Nam au féminin

Việt Nam: Women's Realities

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Feminine Disorder: State Campaigns against Street Traders in Socialist and Late Socialist Việt Nam

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In 1984, the socialist Vietnamese government moved to clear Hồ Chí Minh City's streets of black market trade. Within weeks, police had fined or imprisoned the predominantly female traders and confiscated their wares. Just over a decade later, the state again sought to eliminate itinerant peddlers, this time in the name of "ensuring traffic order and safety on roads and in urban centers" (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1995).

These incidents occurred at what seem vastly different historical moments. In the 1980s, a communist government based in the northern capital of Hà Nội sought to transform the South by redistributing privately owned property. Having initially focused on large-scale capitalist entrepreneurs, state officials in 1984 turned their attention to smaller scale traders, most of them women. State-run media outlets denounced black market street trade as a remnant of a decadent bourgeois past and announced a campaign to bring these traders into the realm of legitimate commerce, namely organized cooperatives under state or local party control. While the government explained its actions in economic terms, its reaction against traders clearly had political motives. By plying their wares along Hồ Chí Minh City's primary thoroughfares, petty traders selling black market goods both publicly flouted government efforts to transform them into proper socialist subjects and dramatized state failures to provide for citizens' material needs. After nine years of haphazard enforcement, local police had the government's blessing to round up independent street traders, confiscate their goods, and compel them to join cooperatives.

By 1995, the government had embraced market-oriented economic reforms known as *đổi mới*, or renovation. Private enterprise was flourishing. Commerce tumbled out of official marketplaces and onto city streets. Saigonese described the pervasive buzz of peddling activity with a popular saying: "Step outside your house, and there's a market (*bước ra khỏi nhà là chợ*)."¹ Once again, however, street traders had aroused the ire of the government. While no longer a pariah capitalist class, street traders in late socialist visions of modernity had come to represent a backward subsistence economy that thwarted state efforts to implant modernity through rational economic development. Charged by Government Decree 36 with the task of stopping private encroachment on public thoroughfares, police patrols rounded

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up traders. While most resurfaced within a few weeks, Decree 36 initiated a cat-and-mouse game that continues to the present.²

Despite the dramatic shift in Việt Nam's economic structure from state-planned socialism to market-oriented reforms that occurred in the decade between these two scenes, state officials have continued to launch highly visible media and police campaigns against street traders. Why? The stated rationale behind government policies in both periods was that street traders were retrograde remnants of an undesirable past – capitalist in 1984 and pre-modern in 1995. While these explanations are consistent with state socio-economic priorities during these two periods, this chapter considers the role gender plays in these classifications. By exploring the life histories of female street and market traders, I seek to illuminate how gender operates as a subtext at three stages of this story: (1) the central government's labeling of street trade as disruptive to national interests; (2) local officials' and urban citizens' acceptance of such characterizations as reasonable; and (3) traders' tactical responses in defense of their livelihoods.

By plying their wares in public spaces, traders expose themselves to the accusation that they are a spectacle of "feminine disorder," a visible manifestation of resistance to state attempts to categorize and organize citizens and their economic activities. This purported disorder is marked as feminine in two ways. First, the traders themselves are predominantly women. Second, cultural discourses in Việt Nam define trade as a feminine activity. My central argument is that the femininity of street trade eases the process of characterizing it as a form of disorder and hence an unseemly and undesirable pursuit. This certainly speaks to powerful discursive associations between "marginal" and "feminine." But it also points, somewhat ironically, to the centrality of femininity as a symbol of national identity and tradition, a significance which traders seem to recognize when they defend their economic activities as a particularly feminine responsibility. In vulnerable times of transition, such as Việt Nam witnessed in 1984 and 1995, the stakes in symbolic debates over appropriate femininity are heightened, thus prompting officials to try to ensure that real women visibly correspond to shifting state visions of urban order, whether associated with socialist central planning or late socialist economic development.

Feminine Disorder, National Imagery, and the Informal Economy

In using the term "feminine disorder" to characterize Vietnamese officials' denunciations of street trade, I seek to capture how what is claimed empirically to be a chaos caused by women may in fact be a discursive and symbolic move in which that which is defined as "female" at any given moment can be depicted as inherently more chaotic and threatening because of its femininity. My analysis reflects a concern for how discursive processes of gendering can hierarchically define spheres of experience as masculine and feminine (Rubin 1975) and thus naturalize the association between women, their activities, and disorder in ways that shape public policy and its implementation. I do not mean to suggest that mascu-

² As I write these words in October 2003, officials in Hà Nội are conducting a campaign to remove street traders from key areas of that city's historic and densely populated central districts. In addition to reducing traffic congestion, these efforts seem aimed at improving the city's appearance when it hosts the Southeast Asia Games in December 2003.

line and feminine are fixed, structural oppositions that persist unaltered through differences of time and location. Nor is "feminine" always or necessarily equated with disorder. Instead, I see these terms as part of a fluid symbolic and associative language in which the form of an opposition between "male" and "female" provides a ready framework whose content can be filled in according to specific circumstances. While masculine and feminine are often opposed to each other, the exact reasons for and significance of this opposition varies greatly. This often leads to direct contradictions, as in British Victorian-era claims that women are "naturally" keepers of domestic order and responsible for social reproduction, versus fears that women are plagued by unrestrained desires and hence a disorder that must be contained. Neither claim is ontologically more valid, but to the extent that they successfully seem to capture supposedly essential truths, they do so through association with a male/female gender binary that appears natural and absolute.

In situations in which power disproportionately resides with men and is defined as masculine, Toril Moi suggests that male/female oppositions can be mobilized to justify power by rendering the feminine disordered, and the disordered feminine:

From a phallogocentric point of view, women will then come to represent the necessary frontier between men and chaos; but because of their very marginality they will also always seem to recede into and merge with the chaos of the outside. Women seen as the limit of the symbolic order will in other words share in the disconcerting properties of all frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown [Moi 1985:166-7, quoted in Sears 1996:19].

In my reading, Moi's masculine/feminine opposition is not intended as a blueprint for universal gender absolutes. Such a structuralist interpretation would be reductive and deceptive. Rather, I find Moi's formulation useful in understanding how a state vision of order can in particular circumstances be discursively associated with gender and consequently naturalized as masculine in opposition to a feminine other. At other moments, the logic can shift, and "femininity" can suddenly, and equally plausibly, be mobilized as central to state order. Seen in this way, "the feminine" is a shifting and constructed location, rather than an essence. As Laurie Sears points out, the fact that this position might be defined as liminal to a masculine order explains why marginal women, particularly those women situated on the margins for additional reasons besides gender, can be so threatening to a state (1996:19).

Nation-building involves the marking and securing of borders, not just for geographical realms, but for symbolic ones as well. What makes the link between gender and nation so fascinating is that, despite their frequently being labelled as marginal citizens within the state – or perhaps precisely because of it – women can be depicted as central to the construction of a national imaginary. In Việt Nam, as in many other countries, women are invoked to represent the national essence, often conceived in terms of a pure tradition to be protected from external contamination.³ This can be seen in the mythical progenitrix *Âu*

³ The links between women and tradition in much of Asia can be traced to the colonial era. Many nationalist movements tried to balance assimilation and resistance by calling for both selective adoption of European modernity and self-strengthening through developing and promoting a vision of national, ethnic, or racial distinctiveness rooted in certain elements of tradition. The result was a gendered division of labor. Men adopted aspects of European cultures to assume posts in colonial commerce or bureaucracy. Meanwhile, men delegated to women the task of maintaining the domestic sphere as the core of traditional values, morality, and

Cơ and heroines such as the female warriors the Trưng Sisters and Lady Triệu, or the noble, but unlucky Kiều in Nguyễn Du's epic *The Tale of Kiều*. Such feminine figures compellingly illustrate a nationalist historical tale of fateful struggles for self-determination against powerful opposing forces. In postcolonial state narratives that often justify power in terms of the ability to foster development and modernity, femininity provides a convenient index for assessing progress. As Ashley Pettus (2003) has described, images of appropriately modern women who have not forgotten tradition can signal success. Conversely, women who can be labeled as backward in resisting needed change or wanton in abandoning decorum to embrace foreign influences can serve as convenient scapegoats distracting attention from shortcomings in state policies. For example, it has become quite common for cautionary tales about modernity and globalization in Việt Nam to be illustrated with examples of family breakdown or degeneracy brought on by a greedy housewife pursuing wealth and status at the expense of her domestic responsibilities.⁴

The result is that women are, as Norma Alarcón, Caren Kaplan, and Minoo Moallem have observed, "both of and not of the nation" (Alarcón et al. 1999: 13). Their crucial importance as symbols makes them central to national imaginings, but their supposed propensity for lapses from normative ideals – feminine disorder – means that they can just as easily threaten the national essence. Women are thus often depicted as a potentially dangerous internal Other who, along with the activities with which they are associated, must be scrutinized and made to conform to national goals.

Characterizations of women as threats to the national order can be exacerbated, as Laurie Sears points out, by structural factors other than gender that position certain women as more marginal than others (1996). Participation in the informal economy as a street trader is one such condition. Over the past decade, concerted campaigns to eliminate or curtail street trading have taken place in Moscow, Jakarta, Hong Kong, Auckland, Johannesburg, Manila, Bangkok, and New York. The goals of these various campaigns were strikingly uniform: combat tax evasion by promoting "legitimate" business, clear up traffic congestion, improve sanitation, and eliminate a lawlessness that was thought to lead to more serious crimes. As John Cross points out, a central modernist logic unites these claims: street trade represents an impoverished disorder that runs counter to visions of order and rationalized development (Cross 2000; see also De Soto 1989; G. Clark 1988, 1994; Geertz 1963). This logic has a long history, as evidenced by Haussmann's efforts in Paris during the 1850s and 60s (T.J. Clark 1985) and Le Corbusier's interwar goal of ordering society through carefully planned architecture (Cross 2000). With colonialism, this vision of modernity circulated from Europe to Africa and Asia, where the bourgeois goals of planned order and progress took hold among colonized elites (see, e.g., Burke 1996; Chakrabarty 1997; Chatterjee 1993; Stoler and Cooper 1997; Tai 1992; Taylor 2001). Scholars have noted that similar sensibilities inform postcolonial development projects aimed at developing industry, economies of scale, and modern urban spaces, even as they might explicitly tout their visions as unique, indigenous alternatives to Western modernity (Donham 1999; Ivy 1995; Ludden 1992; Ong 1999; Rofel 1999).

spirituality. The home and the women who supervised it thus had to be protected from contaminating foreign influences, lest the national essence be lost. (See, e.g., Chakrabarty 1997; Chatterjee 1993; Pettus 2003; Rafael 2000; Tai 1992; Tarrow 1996).

⁴ Examples of this include Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's "The General Retires" (1992 [1988]) and Nguyễn Quang Thân's "The Waltz of the Chamber Pot" (1997). Heng and Devan provide a similar account of Singaporean state construction of women's reproduction as pro- or anti-national, with the latter to blame for other national problems (1995).

In addition to condemning informal economic activities as such, modernist indictments of street trade impugn the character of the people engaging in it, typically poor, ethnic minority immigrants or migrants. Such people are either to be eliminated from urban centers or reformed to become more "civilized." In Jakarta in 1997, for example, a city welfare official denouncing the rural migrants who conducted street trade told the press, "People who dare to live in Jakarta must be taught certain things, such as obeying the rules" (*Jakarta Post* 1997). In 2003, Moscow's city government announced its intentions to step up a campaign to "civilize" the city's retail sector by eliminating more than twenty outdoor markets (Munro 2003). Around the same time, the mayor of Auckland criticized street traders for giving the city a "third-world appearance" (*Sunday Star Times* 2003). Similarly, when Mayor Rudolph Giuliani promoted his 1990s campaign to remove traders from New York City's streets as a "quality of life" issue for businesses and residents, he clearly seemed not to be considering the quality of life of the immigrant, minority, and poor vendors that one reporter described as a "United Nations" (Harpaz 1999). More than attempts at economic regulation, these campaigns are about the politics of urban human geography: who controls public space, who has the right to be seen occupying it, and what their appearance might symbolize about the city and the nation.

In Việt Nam, discourses about the marginality of the feminine and of petty trade combine so that both socio-economic status and cultural meanings reinforce petty traders' low status. As is true elsewhere in Southeast Asia, women have traditionally conducted what Vietnamese refer to as *tiểu thương*, or petty trade. The term evokes images of women selling items from market stalls, pushcarts, or baskets suspended from wooden shoulder poles. Such traders are usually thought to make barely enough to support a family. Nevertheless, even small trade incomes could give women economic power within their households. Their position was undercut, however, by the heavy semantic load of *tiểu thương*, which marks traders as liminal in both material and moral terms. In precolonial Việt Nam, social status stemmed from male activities, such as scholarship or participation in village political and social life. With Confucianism and socialism both entrenching widespread distrust of those who make their living by "buying cheap and selling dear," women took charge of these activities to protect men from sullying their reputations.⁵ The dominance of *tiểu thương* by women feminized the sector, thus enhancing perceptions of it as insignificant.⁶

Today, even as the government encourages private entrepreneurship, petty traders occupy a category distinct from those who "conduct business (*kinh doanh*)" or are "business people (*nhà thương nghiệp*)."⁷ The latter terms impute a sense of importance and permanence to a business enterprise. In contrast, *tiểu thương* are said to operate at a lower and more haphazard scale. *Tiểu thương* may have sizable investments in their businesses, but they are frequently perceived to be part of an informal economy whose participants lack both fiscal resources and personal commitment to their activities. This liminality can be both an asset and a liability. An asset, because the perceived "petty" scale of their activities and their low

⁵ Confucianism identifies and ranks four suitable occupations. They are, from highest to lowest: scholar (*sĩ*), peasant (*nông*), artisan (*công*), and trader (*thương*). Trade receives the lowest ranking because it does not produce anything and yet generates profit – a process which Confucianism glosses as self-interested and immoral.

⁶ These attitudes are also reflected in the dominance of trade by ethnic Chinese businessmen. With a mixture of pride, self-criticism, and ethnic hostility, Vietnamese tend to claim that Chinese traders rose to prominence in precolonial Việt Nam because ethnic Vietnamese simply didn't have the aptitude for business and preferred to work in the fields or devote themselves to scholarly pursuits.

turnover limits the extent to which *tiểu thương* can be perceived as cheating or exploiting their customers. A liability, because this same "pettiness" and supposed lack of means can be seized upon as evidence that *tiểu thương* lead a hand-to-mouth existence in which their focus on sheer survival has marginalized them from the fabric of society and rendered them prone to immoral, illegal, and disorderly behavior. *Tiểu thương* are either too small to be of any concern or so small that they elude the civilizing forces and structures of society.

To weave together the strands of this analysis, I am suggesting that street traders have been problematic, not so much for *what* they do, but for *who* they are and the gendered meanings surrounding them and their activities. In doing so, my argument confirms studies of female traders in other parts of the world which suggest that gender diminishes their status in both material and symbolic terms. Materially, female traders often lack economic or social resources to expand or advocate for their businesses. Symbolically, their visibility in public spaces can challenge notions of propriety and thus incite patriarchal desire to make them behave properly.⁷ The present study adds to these analyses by drawing attention to how this logic of gender reverberates through the higher levels of statecraft, through the centrality of women to the national imaginary. The cultural politics of gender as both a material and symbolic phenomenon predisposes those with greater access to state power to presume that street traders pose an unseemly, immoral, illegal, and undesirable feminine disorder that threatens the national order. These are high stakes under any circumstances, but it became even more important to curb feminine disorder in Việt Nam in 1984 and 1995 because of the tensions and uncertainties wrought by the transitions, respectively, to socialism and *đổi mới* late socialism.

The Men Took All the Goods: Socialism, Black Market Trade, and Cooperativization

In conducting research among Vietnamese traders in the 1990s, I sought to determine how the ambiguous cultural discourses surrounding gender and the informal economy shaped the possibilities for petty traders' activities in a context of rapid economic development. My project seemed squarely focused on the present, but I quickly learned that traders' experiences in the 1990s were inextricably entangled in the larger history of Sài Gòn and South Việt Nam. References to "before '75" and "after '75" dominated their accounts and rhetorically marked both a great historical rupture and a watershed in the women's lives. In its most literal sense, "1975" refers to the end of the Vietnam War: the "fall" or "liberation" of Sài Gòn on April 30, the reunification of the country under socialism, and the renaming of Sài Gòn as Hồ Chí Minh City. On a more abstract level, "1975" metonymically separates traders' past lives under the old regime (*chế độ cũ*) of capitalism, war, and a corrupt and occasionally ruthless American-backed regime from their and their families' later experiences of property redistribution, economic and social reorganization, and "re-education" of those who had worked with foreigners or served the losing side. It also signals the start of what traders describe as a period of fear and scarcity in which hundreds of thousands fled the country and those who remained behind mobilized all available social and familial resources to survive.

In retracing the events of "1975" through newspaper accounts, I found to my surprise that many of the transformations which traders associate with that date in fact occurred much more gradually. The disorder and uncertainty accompanying the change of regimes meant that determining who was an "enemy of the people" or a "puppet (*ngụy*)" serving the interests of the American invaders became a tortuous process of identifying the most obvious and egregious offenders first, then developing techniques to classify and punish the others. Transformation of the economic system took longer still. The campaign to replace private enterprise with state-run trade cooperatives did not occur in a single stroke in 1975, but unfolded in several stages over the ensuing decade. In the account which follows, I move back and forth between newspaper reports and traders' recollections in order to detail government efforts to bring private trade under state control, but also to demonstrate the ambivalence and anxiety resulting from gaps between official and personal perspectives on gendered economic activity and its meaning.

Immediately following "liberation," the government ordered a complete inventory and confiscation of property belonging to "puppets of the American government, bourgeois reactionaries, and dishonest traders" (Nguyễn Văn Linh 1985:150). The women I met who were market traders at this time recall it as one of great fear, with many larger merchants fleeing the country and abandoning their stalls. Many smaller retail merchants suddenly found themselves well-off, since their debts disappeared along with the large wholesalers. Another unexpected result of the state policies was the increased number of women engaged in petty trade. With male relatives imprisoned indefinitely in re-education camps, many Saigonese women turned to trade as a means to support their families. While the socialist state condemned Southern traders generally as "petits bourgeois" and confiscated the goods of the largest and most successful merchants, women were largely exempted from this indictment. Rather than being condemned for exploiting their working class customers, female merchants were viewed primarily as *women* who were by definition a perpetual underclass oppressed by patriarchy to be subordinate to men within their families and society. Women traders therefore were not punished, but were seen as victims of their own backwardness, lack of understanding, or error – a class in need of gradual education and paternalistic guidance. Official post-1975 interpretations of the relationship between gender, class, power, and economic activity thus increased women's participation in petty trade.

Focusing initially on industry and large enterprise, officials did not begin systematically to restructure Hồ Chí Minh City's marketplaces until 1978. Whereas earlier articles in the Party-controlled media had condemned "capitalists (*tư bản*)" or the "bourgeoisie (*tư sản*)," newspapers at this time broadened their indictments to include trade more generally (*buôn bán*). One article explains the logic behind the new attitudes:

Trade arises on the basis of profit. This profit comes from the gap between the price when an item is purchased and the price when it is sold. The more 'outstanding' the trader is in deception to lower the price of an item when purchased, and after that – also by deceitful means which lack nothing in their illicitness – the higher the selling price when the same item is sold, the greater the profit. In short, in order to be successful in trade, people have to find ways to dispossess both the producer and the consumer – the more the better... There's no way a trader can be an honest person [Thạch Trúc 1978:11].

⁷ See, e.g., Babb (1988), Bass (2000), G. Clark (1988; 1994), Kapchan (1996), Kerner (1988), and Spiller-Roth (1988).

In the name of morality and a new way of life based on "authenticity," the author of this article calls on Hồ Chí Minh City youth and workers to join the campaign to "denounce and eradicate the old ways of doing business." Mobilizing appropriately trained and militant youth, the government dispatched them to marketplaces to catalogue and redistribute the goods of these immoral traders.

One trader I met was a young factory worker at the time. When her factory was confiscated, she was sent to a central market place as part of an inventory accounting team. After recording the contents of each trader's stall, the team asked for the stall's keys and gave the trader a receipt for the goods. Theoretically now employees of the state, the traders should have been able to continue selling what had formerly been their own inventory in exchange for a salary or share of the profits. Abuse was rampant, however. The trader mentioned above recalled one night in which most of the high value goods disappeared from the market. Given that most of the traders were women, her account depicts socialist redistribution as a gender conflict in which men appropriated women's property:

The bosses got a hold of some cars and simply took all the goods – gone, just like that. We were just supposed to count, the government wanted to know how much there was, but the men took away everything. So many people were afraid, they just abandoned their stalls, their goods. The bosses took them all, the traders lost everything. They opened state enterprises in the market, but the men had taken all the goods.

Apparently happy to be rid of reactionary elements, the market management allocated abandoned stalls to individuals from "revolutionary" families. Prior loyalty to the regime did not, however, ensure traders' ongoing compliance with its economic policies. Traders recall that hard times forced them to cooperate with market management cadres to channel profits from the sale of state-owned merchandise into private pockets.

Meanwhile, black market trade was thriving on the streets surrounding Hồ Chí Minh City's large marketplaces. Most of the merchants I met who now sell in such markets began their trading careers on the city's streets in the late '70s or early '80s. The experience of Trang,* now a highly successful wholesaler of imported cloth, is typical. Trang is a tall, thin, and dynamic woman who radiates energy, determination, and intelligence. Born in the North during Việt Nam's fight for independence from French rule, Trang moved South with her family in 1954 as part of a massive migration prompted by the country's division into a communist North and an American-backed capitalist South. Trang attended college in the South and worked as a reporter before 1975. Through her work, she met her husband, a director of a program for the US government. Immediately after liberation, her husband was sent to re-education camp; it would be nearly thirteen years before he returned. Shortly after his imprisonment, Trang learned that she was pregnant. She stayed with her family for a time, but by 1980, she needed to find a means of support. Her family loaned her some money that she used to purchase children's clothes and fabric sent to other Vietnamese by relatives living abroad.

Each day, Trang would sell her goods by spreading out a cloth or erecting a makeshift stall along the sidewalks. Such trade was illegal, and Trang frequently had to gather up her

pack, throw it over her shoulder, and flee district police – what traders call *bán chạy*, literally "to sell and run." Over time, police and city officials realized that they could not effectively combat black market trade. Economic circumstances were abysmal, and the official state-run markets could not supply even a basic level of merchandise. Traders reached tacit "understandings" with officials, and businesses like Trang's thrived.

Frustrated by the vibrancy of black market trade, the party leadership by 1982 had become split between orthodox ideologues who wanted to proceed with Stalinist-style industrialization in the South and reformers who advocated profit incentives to increase production of agricultural and consumer goods. Momentum seemed on the side of the conservatives, with the official party journal publishing reports lambasting party leaders and Hồ Chí Minh City authorities for their tolerance of private economic activities which had "harmful effects on the socialization process in South Vietnam" (Duiker 1995:150). By the end of 1983, the Central Committee had decided to proceed with socialist collectivization and called for the "immediate removal" of the local bourgeoisie from commercial activities" (Duiker 1995:150).

The cooperativization campaign explicitly targeted the more successful of Hồ Chí Minh City's remaining independent entrepreneurs, but street traders also found themselves profoundly affected by the state's measures. In official pronouncements about traders' status in light of these initiatives, the ambiguity of the term for petty trade, *tiểu thương*, becomes a central issue. For example, a lengthy article detailing the mobilization and its goals describes *tiểu thương*, on the one hand, as "workers who have skills in trade" (Cải tạo 1985: 3). On the other hand, they seem a marginal, disorderly, and dangerous element, for "if we don't re-organize them, they will become like thousands of tentacles for capitalists, for the black marketers and speculators, they will be accomplices to these brigands who will push prices higher and reap much profit" (ibi:3).

Such characterizations appear to have nothing to do with gender, but the strong feminine connotations of *tiểu thương* and notions of women's vulnerability provide a subtext that raises the specter of feminine disorder. Black market trade would likely have been condemned regardless of who conducted it, as its vitality had become a damning reminder of the state's inability to meet consumers' needs and reorganize southern society. That *tiểu thương* was commonly known as a women's occupation hinted at an even more profound disorder, for a state that cannot control women's activities must be impotent indeed. In this context, the tentacle analogy in the newspaper account quoted above is a particularly apt and persuasive rhetorical device. It vividly suggests that the street traders themselves are not the primary threat, and hence that the state is not so vulnerable as to be thwarted by mere women. Rather, it declares that traders' powerlessness renders them prey to the pernicious influence of "brigands." The glossing of successful black market entrepreneurs as unwitting dupes succeeds because the reader knows these traders to be women and because "woman as victim" is a common trope in Vietnamese discourses on gender. Evoking preexisting, culturally resonant notions of feminine weakness made it easier for officials to characterize women like Trang as prey to illegality in a socialist context. Reforming them meant forcibly removing them from the dangerous influences of the streets and placing them in an unquestionably legal and moral position as members of state-run cooperatives, much like colonial-era women were protected from contamination by being consigned to the culturally pure domestic sphere. Feminine disorder could thus be contained by reinscribing the women as proper socialist citizen-subjects.

* Trang is a pseudonym, as are all the names used in this chapter.

When Hồ Chí Minh City police heeded the state's call by confiscating street traders' goods and "inviting" them to become shareholders (*cổ động viên*) in marketplace cooperatives, traders such as Trang proved as adept as the central government in using gender associations to advance a particular interpretation of their activities. Casting themselves in the role of feminine victim, the new cooperative members proclaimed their suffering as they struggled, often without a husband present, to support their families. Just as the state's critique of black market trade for being illegal was factually accurate, so too were the women's accounts of their position, for many were like Trang, single mothers seeing their only source of livelihood threatened. But gender once again worked to lend these descriptions a greater aura of truth. They aroused the sympathy of the public and, more importantly, of male marketplace officials, whose low salaries placed them in similar predicaments. In exchange for a cut of the profits, market cadres looked the other way while Trang and other cooperative members strapped bolts of black market cloth and garments underneath their clothes and smuggled them into the market each morning. These goods would then be sold as if they were officially sanctioned merchandise, with the profit going directly to the trader. One trader to whom I spoke estimated that for every meter of official cloth, she sold at least ten illegal ones. When government inspectors arrived at the marketplaces, much of this illegal merchandise would again be concealed beneath the traders' clothes. The unseemliness of strip searching women, coupled with the women's convincing self-presentation as *tiểu thương* who were members of the working class struggling to make ends meet, enabled many to evade detection. Traders told me that men were typically not as successful in concealing their activities because they were automatically assumed to be "doing business (*kinh doanh*)."

While the cooperativization campaign succeeded in corralling black marketers within the physical space of state-run markets, it did little to address entrenched inefficiencies in the state-run production and distribution infrastructure. Allowing traders to return to their black market ways represented an accommodation to the bleak realities of the mid-'80s command economy which had the added bonus of enabling local officials to benefit from the "fees" they received to ignore the illegality of traders' activities. For its part, the central government's coffers received a greater share of these traders' profits than before. Tacitly permitting black market trade to continue preserved the economy from collapse and, because the trade's new location within the state market sector concealed it within the mantle of legitimate commerce, the central government could maintain the fiction of a successful, rational, and socialized economy.

One can reasonably conclude from the outcome of the cooperativization campaign that the problem with street traders was not so much what they did, but where they did it and who they were. The presence of the black market on the streets of Hồ Chí Minh City tangibly symbolized the state's inability to curb past capitalist practices. That it was women who engaged in this trade made the failure all the more striking. The official response during the heyday of socialism was to assert authority over economic activities by literally and symbolically containing feminine disorder. A decade later, the continued salience of this opposition between feminine trade and chaos, on the one hand, and male politics and order, on the other hand, would provide justification for the removal of street vendors as part of the transition to market-oriented late socialism.

Restoring Order in Transportation: Street Traders under Late Socialism

The cooperativization campaign proved short-lived. In 1986, in response to economic stagnation and geopolitical isolation, the Vietnamese Communist Party announced a series of market-oriented reforms, known as *đổi mới*, or renovation. Enacted gradually over the next few years, *đổi mới*'s growth-oriented policies have included decollectivizing agriculture, privatizing select state-run enterprises, encouraging foreign investment through joint ventures, and returning many cooperativized Southern businesses to those who had owned them before 1975. While the onset of a regional economic crisis in 1997 temporarily slowed what has otherwise been rapid growth, Việt Nam's gains over the past fifteen to twenty years have been substantial, particularly in raised standards of living.

With its socialist political organization overseeing an economy that blends state and private entrepreneurship, Việt Nam has entered a period of "late socialism" similar in its socioeconomic complexity to what Zhang (2001) has described for China. Late socialism is intended to contrast with post-socialism, the term used to describe Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, in that it signals a continuous movement toward a different and perhaps declining stage of socialism, rather than a definitive break with a past political and economic formation.⁹ As Zhang vividly demonstrates, China's move toward marketization may not involve a retreat of the state from daily life so much as a shifting in the terms of the relationship through which the government enmeshes citizen-subjects in relations of power (see also Wank 2000). But continuity does not mean stability. In Việt Nam, the most obvious constant between socialism and late socialism – the continued control of the government by the communist party – may also pose the most profound tensions. How can the very same regime that has legitimized its power through revolution, claim to represent the people, and the promotion of a classless society retreat from this agenda in a way that does not compromise its authority? Cognizant of the skepticism that greets party declarations that *đổi mới* is consistent with Marxism-Leninism, officials seem eager to display their authority more concretely, through interventions in daily life. Their logic seems to be that by successfully molding citizens' behavior to be consistent with state-sponsored priorities, the legitimacy of those priorities can be demonstrated and the state's mandate to enact them can be reinforced. It is in this context that female street traders have once again been targeted as an unmodern disorder that needs to be contained.

An episode from my research in Hồ Chí Minh City's central market demonstrates local officials' growing hostility toward street traders. At around 3 p.m. on one hot and humid afternoon in March 1997, a power outage prompted me to leave the market early. As I stepped outside, I heard some commotion down the block. Turning to find out what was going on, I saw the dozens of street traders near me hurriedly throw their wares, mostly fruit and clothes, into their baskets, clutch them to their chests, and run panic-stricken for the nearest alleyway. In what seemed a split second, a busy market street lined with peddlers became deserted.

⁹ Even in those societies described as post-socialist, however, anthropologists have critiqued the concept of rupture as misleading. The ongoing, complex legacies of each country's distinctive socialist past render futures uncertain, and directions of transformation across countries have by no means been uniform (Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Humphrey 1999; Verdery 1996).

A moment later, the yellow jeep belonging to the ward police appeared around the corner. Two officers jumped out and seized the basket of a hapless trader who had not managed to run away in time. Her goods were confiscated, and she likely had to spend the better part of the next day paying a whole series of "fines" to the local police in order to get them back. It was a pretty typical scene for that time of day, the late afternoon being what traders refer to as the "hours of the police (*giờ công an*)."¹⁰ At least these street traders were luckier than the greeting card sellers around the central post office. Their wooden display racks were routinely smashed by angry police in a public and violent display of the dangers of defying local authority.

The police actions were part of a larger government initiative, known as Central Government Decree 36 (Nghị Định 36/Chính Phủ), designed to ensure traffic order and safety on roads and in urban centers. In addition to greater enforcement of vehicle licensing and traffic laws, the decree includes provisions prohibiting most street trade. According to Article 62, Section 1:

Streets and pavements can be used only for traffic. The People's Committees of the provinces and cities directly under the Central Government shall stipulate in detail the use of the inner part of pavements on a number of special roads and streets for the sale of commodities... Any encroachment on the road beds, the road sides and pavements for marketing, show and sale of commodities, and for display of advertisements and storage materials is banned [Socialist 1995].

In accordance with this decree, the government declared that a nation-wide campaign to "restore order and safety in transportation" would begin on August 1, 1995. Dramatic changes marked the first few weeks of police and state enforcement efforts. Large banners in Việt Nam's national colors of red and yellow spanned major thoroughfares and reminded motorists to observe traffic laws. If the banners were insufficient, the traffic cops liberally stationed at every major intersection and rotary ensured that all offenders either received a stiff fine or witnessed the confiscation of their motorbikes. As for the sidewalks, the number of petty traders dropped precipitously within a few weeks.

Ostensibly intended primarily to enforce traffic safety, the campaign was linked in newspaper editorials and commentary with the state's broader urban planning priorities. According to then Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt, the campaign would result in "clear pavements, safe roads, and cleaner cities" in accordance with the state's urbanization plans (Prime 1995:1). While Kiệt expressed sympathy for those unfortunates whom the new regulations displaced, he implied that such would be the price for realizing modernity. One newspaper article lamented the condition of city streets, with sellers producing heaps of garbage and their myriad activities exuding an aura of chaos and suggested that such a state would give foreign visitors a negative impression (Bá Ngọc 1996:3). Most reports on the campaign in the party-controlled media lauded it as a critical step in creating the "image of a civilized city" (see, e.g., Trật tự 1995:5).

¹⁰ The Vietnamese zodiac consists of a twelve-year cycle, with each year bearing the name of a different animal. These twelve animals also correspond to two-hour increments throughout the day. The monkey, a sign associated with cleverness in business, controls the late afternoon hours when police patrols harass street traders. Traders play on this astrological association when they dub this period of the day, "the hours of the police."

Street traders were not the only group targeted by Decree 36 and similar measures that were announced in subsequent years. Street children who sell such things as postcards and cigarettes, rural migrants who have built shanties near canals and parks, and homeless men living in doorways have all been subjected to police harassment, fines, and incarceration. Like female peddlers, they have all been labeled signs of backwardness and poverty that should not be present in a modern, civilized, and developed economy. What distinguishes these groups from female peddlers, however, is that most are homeless due to lack of parents, poverty, migration, or disability. They are a "floating population" (Zhang 2001) whose pressing needs for social services are compounded by their not being embedded within the residential fabric of urban society. They are easily recognized as symbols of disorder and thus scapegoated as nuisances.

Female traders, in striking contrast, are typically not homeless, and the activities they pursue on the city streets provide a concrete service. Commuters returning from work on their motorbikes find it convenient to buy goods from a streetside vendor, thus saving themselves the time, trouble, and expense of parking their bikes to venture into a marketplace. Tourists typically see vendors of things such as soup (*phở*), souvenirs, and T-Shirts as signs of a vital and colorful urban street culture that adds to their experience of Việt Nam's supposed charms.¹¹ Finally, as traders themselves are quick to point out, their activities are economically necessary, not just to themselves and their families, but to the urban economy. Economic studies confirm their claims. According to U.N. statistics, the informal economic sector created 2.3 million new jobs from 1985-1994 and contributed 33.85% of the GDP for 1995. One journalist estimated that if smuggling activities could be counted, the GDP contribution would rise to at least 50% (Lưu Hào 1996:18).

Women's street trade is clearly not as undesirable as the other signs of disorder targeted by Decree 36. How, then, have they come to be included in the category of people and activities to be forcibly removed from city streets? Why did this categorization seem natural or appropriate to most other urban residents, including those who frequented such vendors? As was the case in 1984, state discourses condemning street trade rest on implicit, but culturally resonant associations between gender, *tiểu thương*, premodernity, and disorder which make it easy to portray traders as obstacles to a modern, rational, and ordered economy.

Discussions of urbanization in Việt Nam are liberally sprinkled with references to order and civilization that conjure a specific vision of modernity.¹² In my conversations with officials and educators about *đổi mới*, the most commonly invoked model for Việt Nam's economic development was not China – a country whose late socialist circumstances parallel Việt Nam's – but Singapore.¹³ To hear Vietnamese officials describe it, Singapore presents a gleaming paragon of modernist virtue. Thanks to the rational planning of its uncontested ruling party,

¹¹ Such attitudes were apparent during a Vietnam Studies Group e-mail discussion of the 2003 campaign to clear Hà Nội streets. Some of the foreign scholars who contributed to the debate suggested that street trade gives Hà Nội and, to a lesser extent, Hồ Chí Minh City a distinctive urban character that, rather than repel tourists, attracts them. Others countered that this attitude itself was problematic, in that it reflects a foreign desire for Việt Nam to represent a charming, exotic Other.

¹² Philip Taylor compellingly shows that "modernity" has occupied a privileged position in Vietnamese discussions of the future, not just over the past decade, but since the French colonial era (Taylor 2001).

¹³ Politics may play a role in the failure to cite China as a model for Việt Nam. Given the more than two thousand years of animosity between the two countries, it would be understandable for Vietnamese not to acknowledge the obvious parallels between their own *đổi mới* and China's "socialism with Chinese characteristics." The enthusiasm with which officials praise Singapore suggests to me, however, that they view the city-state as not simply a convenient substitute for China, but a laudable model in its own right.

the city-state's well-defined spaces both create and mirror a regime of perfect order in social, cultural, and economic life. Rather than running helter-skelter along the streets, hawkers are grouped in spaces set aside specifically for this purpose. These descriptions oppose modernity to tradition and emphasize that haphazard petty trade should have no place in a rational bureaucratic industrial order. Turning to Singapore to get a sense of how developed cities look and feel, central and local officials seem to have decided that the disappearance of petty trade indicates that a certain level of development has been reached and that it can accelerate the process by actively working to ensure that petty trade disappears as soon as possible. It is probably not a coincidence that Decree 36 was enacted a few months before the Eighth Party Congress, a prime opportunity for the party to display to itself, Vietnamese in general, and the world how shining and successful its implementation of development plans had been.

Contrasts between order and disorder or tradition and modernity so thoroughly shape visions of economic development within Việt Nam that even those Hồ Chí Minh City officials who support more tolerant policies toward petty traders view this group as an anachronism in Việt Nam's modernist future. For example, one of Hồ Chí Minh City's government architects told me that his salary cannot cover his family's expenses, so his wife works as a vendor in front of their house. His survival depends on petty trade, yet he views it primarily as a traditional means of welfare:

After this, petty traders will become integrated into modern life, but before that, if we don't have petty trade, the majority of women will not have jobs. Petty trade thus is beneficial to society right now. But, I have to emphasize that my saying this doesn't mean that we shouldn't follow the path of industrialization, modernity, and civilization. Certainly we have to do that.

I find this statement typical for its rhetorical slippage between petty traders and women. The speaker seems to be suggesting that women naturally face more difficulty in integrating into a modern economy, making gainful employment difficult. Their femininity seems linked to a kind of intractable backwardness, so they need stopgap welfare measures such as the informal sector as they wait to be eased into the modern era. The architect's characterization is compelling because it draws on centuries of discursive construction of women as an Other resistant to official structures, be they Confucian, socialist, or modernist. So prevalent are these associations that I found residents of Hồ Chí Minh City generally accepting of the logic of Decree 36. Even as they were personally inconvenienced by the lack of curbside shopping, most seemed to agree that vendors were a sign of backwardness and that it made sense for the state to do something about it.

The rhetorical force of associations between women and a premodern economic sector or mentality conveniently distracts attention from ironies of Việt Nam's *đổi mới* development that might otherwise cause official embarrassment. Late socialist transformations have produced such high un- or under-employment that many people have left jobs in the supposedly modern sector or supplemented meager paychecks by pursuing more lucrative opportunities as traders.¹⁴ Men constituted many of these newly unemployed or under-employed workers, and, because of the longstanding notion that trade was women's work, it fell to their wives

to try to make ends meet by plying wares. Rather than a sign of backwardness, the thriving informal economy might be read as a particularly modern institution, both for its entrepreneurial energy and for its ability to absorb those whom *đổi mới* might be leaving behind.¹⁵ Like Trang a decade earlier, the people pushed into street trade in the 1990s tend to belong to those classes that have been made most vulnerable by shifts in state policy. As many as 70% are migrants from rural areas who came to the city seeking employment (Thanh Thúy 1995:3, see also Quỳnh 1997). Lacking capital and merchandise, they cannot afford the high fees and taxes of a stall in a legal marketplace.

Unlike the black marketers of 1984, however, most of today's street traders are not the "enemies of the people," but part of the mass of struggling working classes whom communist leaders claim to represent and protect. The public and occasionally violent implementation of Decree 36 visibly dramatizes what officials may wish to remain hidden: their subordination of social welfare goals to the supposed exigencies of economic development. Even as the vilification of petty trade and traders might seem reasonable or understandable to many Hồ Chí Minh City residents, it also alludes to a potentially destabilizing contradiction between the political and economic agendas of late socialism.

Far from being an inherent or essential gender characteristic, female petty traders' putative backwardness may have been foisted on them by *đổi mới* policies. For this reason, petty traders defend themselves against official and police attacks – attacks justified by the implication that women pose a premodern disorder – by mobilizing exactly these same gendered associations, only this time to link women's backwardness to a vulnerability that should arouse sympathy. Street traders frequently point out that they lack sufficient other means to fulfill their female duty of supporting a family. My research assistant spoke to a woman in her forties who sold T-shirts to tourists on a main thoroughfare in downtown Sài Gòn during the afternoons and evenings.¹⁶ Every evening, as the tourist traffic ebbed during dinner hours, Huyền interrupted her selling for a couple of hours to clean and do laundry for a Japanese company across the street. The job paid her \$75 per month; with the income from selling, she usually had just enough to support her family of four. Huyền's selling space consisted of a patch of sidewalk in front of a jewelry store. When the shop closed for the evening, she spread her goods onto their steps to make a more eye-catching display. Unlike other traders, Huyền did not pay the store a monthly sum to "rent" this space; she claimed the owners had taken pity on her and allowed her to sell in front as a form of charity. Huyền had to routinely avoid the police, something which she claimed could be easily done by observing their schedule. If the store were open when the police or the rains came, Huyền could stash her goods inside. If the police came by in the evenings – an unusual practice – Huyền simply picked up her goods and ran away. When asked how many hours a day she worked, Huyền laughed, "Whatever hours the police rest, those are the hours I sell."

¹⁵ John Cross notes that this circumstance is typical of modernist projects of development around the world. He argues that such programs have in fact spurred the expansion of street vending as a low capital alternative to conducting business in the increasingly capital intensive and unemployment-ridden formal sector. In support of his argument, he cites the recent trend among development experts and NGOs to promote low cost loans and microcredit programs as a way of harnessing the entrepreneurial energy of the informal sector and reducing un- or under-employment, thus spurring economic growth (2000: 42-3).

¹⁶ Throughout my fieldwork, I benefited from the assistance of Trần Thị Kim Liên, then an undergraduate student in Hồ Chí Minh City University's Faculty of Oriental Studies. Liên conducted most of the interviews with street traders, since the sight of a foreigner talking to them at length would attract the notice of the police – something which all but the boldest did not wish to do.

¹⁴ At the time of my research in the mid- to late-1990s, civil servants' salaries typically ranged from \$50 to \$70 per month.

Unlike Trang, 1990s street traders like Huyền tended not to be members of the reviled classes of pre-1975 elites. Instead, they came from the very working classes in whose name the state declared its policies. Huyền attended school until the fifth grade, at which point she went to work to help support her family. After liberation, local communist party operatives identified Huyền as a quick learner and selected her for service in the Volunteer Youth Corps. Steeped in revolutionary fervor, the groups were mobilized to reinforce troops on the front with Cambodia or to handle the inventory and confiscation of merchandise in urban marketplaces. Like many other street traders, Huyền found it ironic that the same state whose socialist policies she implemented so faithfully as a youth not only could not find her a better means of livelihood, but had branded her an obstacle to the realization of its modernization agenda.

Most street sellers in downtown Sài Gòn live in district 4, a crowded and dingy neighborhood notorious for its poverty and its roughness. So negative is the neighborhood's reputation that "district 4 (*quận 4*)" has become a popular colloquialism to criticize someone for behaving uncouthly, coarsely, or impolitely. When asked why so many street traders come from district 4, one seller responded, "Because we're the poorest." A neighboring trader interrupted the conversation to relate the following anecdote:

One time, when I was taken into the police, I was sitting there begging the men [to lower the fine because I'm poor and from district 4], and they took out the register [of offenders who had been fined for illegal selling] for me to see, then said, 'You see, fruit, it's district 4, guava, it's district 4, lemonade, district 4, pickpockets, district 4, stealing, district 4, prostitution, district 4. It's all district 4, so what are you complaining about?' I told them, 'All those times, taking care of all these men [supporting police officers by paying 'fines'], that's also district 4.'

The trader's story suggests another motivation for Decree 36, one which state pronouncements have proven unable to conceal: local police officers depend upon the persistence of illegal street trade in order to supplement their meager salaries. While *đổi mới* has relaxed restrictions on free enterprise, much of the bureaucracy created during the command economy continues to exist. The salaries of local functionaries have barely risen, and this motivates many to exploit other sources of revenue arising from their positions. These individuals' affiliations with the party and government tend to fuel a lingering suspicion toward private enterprise, *đổi mới* notwithstanding. Even the poorest street trader can seem a petite bourgeoisie who earns her living by hoodwinking her working class customers. Low-level civil servants thus look for bribes or ways to collect new "fees." One trader showed me an official citation for violation of Decree 36. The paper indicated that a fine of 50,000 *đồng*, or just under \$4, had been collected, but the trader claimed that her goods had been returned only after she paid a fine four times the stated amount, and not just to one official, but to several. For a trader with a monthly income averaging one hundred dollars, a single run-in with the police can be a devastating blow.

As I concluded my fieldwork in 1997, the campaign to restore order in transportation continued, but with haphazard enforcement. Many districts had reached agreements to grant the larger and more established street trading operations official permission to continue in exchange for payment of certain local "fees" (Tân định 1995). Traders like Huyền, whose

arrangement with the jewelry store allowed her to sell from a fixed location, had acquired enough experience with police patrols to know their daily schedules. Others had established networks with other traders to spread the word of an impending raid. This means that the street traders most likely to be caught and assessed a fine were those of the most limited means: elderly women who cannot run quickly, those in dire poverty who cannot afford to secure a semi-permanent sidewalk post by paying a fee to a store, and the newer arrivals from the countryside who have invested all of their savings in the contents of their baskets and have not yet learned the ropes. Officially portrayed as a step in ongoing efforts to enact the state's vision of modernity on urban streets, the campaign launched by Decree 36 had become a welfare program for local police funded by the poorest members of a dispossessed class whose interests the state might otherwise claim to represent. While numerous press accounts alluded to the entrenched problems of the poor or corruption among rogue petty officials, they stopped short of acknowledging that by placing these two "problems" in direct confrontation over the implementation of Decree 36, central officials had effectively diverted attention from their own shortcomings in providing for both groups and from the possibility that their gleaming vision of a modernist future might not bring prosperity for all.

Conclusion: Hailing the Disorderly Feminine Subject

In this chapter, I have juxtaposed newspaper accounts and traders' experiences in order to highlight gaps between the avowed purposes and actual implementation of two distinct campaigns aimed at eliminating petty trade from the streets of Hồ Chí Minh City. In each instance, I have suggested that petty trade's gendered associations have enabled officials to condemn the activity and those who engage in it as an unsightly disorder that undermines the implementation of rational economic policy, both socialist and late socialist. Years 1984 and 1995 mark decisive moments in the Vietnamese state's ongoing process of directing social and economic transformation. In both cases, street traders came to represent a problematic survival of the past in the present, an image imbued with the aura of truth because of longstanding cultural associations between women, tradition, and disorder.

In the 1980s, a thriving black market trade provided a tangible, highly visible reminder of a past, capitalist way of doing things that dramatically highlighted the shortcomings of the state's socialist present. The plentiful goods being trafficked on the city's streets offered a mute but powerful indictment of the bleak, empty shelves in state-run markets. As disaffected remnants of Sài Gòn's bourgeoisie, the traders themselves idealized the time "before '75," and this tendency did little to conceal the threat that they might use their accumulating capital to recreate this past and thus thwart state implementation of socialism. A decade later, traders served as a reminder that economic development would not soon eradicate a past plagued by poverty. The rows of old women patiently sitting behind their worn baskets provide a jarring contrast to a backdrop of glistening, air-conditioned boutiques. They serve as a public taunt that the state which professes to support the dispossessed has seemingly cast them aside in the pursuit of modernity. In both cases, removing petty traders from the streets seems intended to symbolize the government's power to leave the past behind and to clear the way for the future as it would envision and implement it.

In seeking to enact its vision of a modern economy and rationalized urban space, the Vietnamese government exhibits a desire characteristic of all types of states, for a primary purpose of politics is to acquire power to implement a desired future. What makes Việt Nam's situation noteworthy, however, is that the destabilizing uncertainties of transition from capitalism to socialism and from socialism to late socialism simultaneously undermine officials' ability to realize their aspirations and yet compel them to try to show that they possess the power to do so. Since achieving victory in the South in 1975, the Communist Party has based its legitimacy on its claims to represent the people, by which it means the working classes, and invokes their name to justify its policies. To demonstrate that it does indeed possess their mandate, the state apparatus attempts to mobilize the people in tightly organized campaigns intended both to display and entrench its authority. Each day, Vietnamese confront a profusion of banners, billboards, pronouncements, and advertisements exhorting them to do something or think something for the good of the country. As Hjörleifur Jonsson and Nora Taylor have observed, women frequently serve as a convenient symbol in propaganda posters for this properly disciplined socialist subject (2003). Together, these campaigns constitute the more visible aspect of the complex of ideological state apparatuses that, to use Althusser's (1971) famous term, hail and attempt to incorporate Vietnamese as subjects of the state. Should these subjects ignore the hails by refusing to behave appropriately, the state's claim to rule in their name becomes vulnerable. Since femininity is symbolically mobilized to portray a Vietnamese national essence, it makes sense that real women would face particular scrutiny, and the threat posed by their supposed deviance from idealized expectations – a deviance to which women are thought particularly prone – would be exaggerated. Feeling threatened, the government redoubles its efforts to order its disorderly feminine subjects.

In the years following the announcement of *đổi mới*, the state has reduced the number and frequency of its hailings in the economic sphere in accordance with a transition from a command economy to one increasingly subject to decentralized market forces. Its political authority, however, continues to rest on a socialist mandate, and this raises the stakes in whatever hailing encounters remain. By selling illegally on the street, petty traders appear to be refusing state interpellation as subjects within its marketplaces. The fact that their identity as women can position them as inherently marginal to the social order makes officials even quicker to condemn their economic activities as transgressive. Hence, these women need to be regularly and decisively punished, with others looking on and learning the lesson as well. If officials do not act to repress them in the name of order, then street traders tangibly represent the truly disruptive possibility of a future in which the state hail can be ignored. In material terms, poor women selling used clothes or gnarled potatoes hardly pose a threat to state order, beyond the occasional traffic jam. Many avoid taxes, but this could be dealt with directly through licensing procedures. Rather, the disorder street traders pose is more symbolic than real, and more temporal than spatial. Female street traders remind the state and its subjects that the shortcomings of *đổi mới* policies have given many citizens little option but to set up curbside stands, while underpaid local officials must survive on graft. Street traders thus expose the central contradictions of a socialist state based on equity pursuing capitalist policies that dispossess some of its most vulnerable citizens. Feminine disorder highlights the possibility that the future might be other than the modern paradise state policies describe. The stakes involved in controlling petty trade, it turns out, are not petty at all.

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