

# FIGURES OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN MODERNITY

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**UNIVERSITY OF  
HAWAI'I PRESS**  
*Honolulu*

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 Printed in the United States of America

18 17 16 15 14 13 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Figures of Southeast Asian modernity / edited by Joshua Barker, Erik Harms, and Johan Lindquist.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8248-3646-7 (alk. paper)—ISBN 978-0-8248-3741-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Southeast Asia—Social conditions—21st century. 2. Southeast Asia—Social life and customs—21st century. 3. Southeast Asia—Biography. I. Barker, Joshua, editor of compilation. II. Harms, Erik, Ph. D., editor of compilation. III. Lindquist, Johan, editor of compilation. HN690.8.A8F54 2013 305.800959—dc23

2012029391

University of Hawai'i Press books are printed on acid-free paper and meet the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Council on Library Resources.

Designed by Julie Matsuo-Chun  
 Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc.

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power relations and play the role of bureaucrat. In the process, local tradition is deemed incompatible with foreign modernity. But foreign contacts need not undermine all forms of tradition, as in the case of Nina Hien's example of the Photo Retoucher, who is able to mobilize new technologies to recuperate auras that resonate with cultural sentiments. Even more explicitly, Lauren Meeker illustrates how the intersection between traditional culture and global modernity appears in the figure of the *nghệ nhân*, or Cultural Expert, whose state title indexes the global market for cultural forms portrayed as decidedly local. Finally, in Ivan Small's essay, the Vietnamese Transnational represents a figure conditioned by the historical circumstances of the second Indochina conflict, but who nonetheless resonates with long-standing notions that cultivating oneself as Vietnamese can actually come through the process of moving across spatial boundaries. Here the quintessentially Vietnamese concept of "coming home" (*về quê*) is intimately tied into the notion of going away.<sup>1</sup>

Anthropologists have discovered important ways in which the "modernization myth" has been "turned upside down, shaken, and shattered" in the face of unanticipated economic decline or other hardship.<sup>2</sup> This is partially but not wholly the case for Vietnam. While social scientists critique grand narratives, Vietnamese today have embraced modernity with clarion calls to "industrialize and modernize the nation" and with efforts to imbue everything imaginable—from ATM machines to New Urban Zones—with "civilization" (*văn minh*). Anthropologist Philip Taylor notes how Vietnamese notions of civilization reproduce a notion of modernity that consigns significant numbers of Vietnamese citizens to a spatial periphery and temporal past.<sup>3</sup> But the very notion of a linear march to the modern future is complicated by the fact that Vietnamese modernists have made these kinds of claims before, and they make them now after having turned modernity upside down, inside out, and spun it around. For example, the concept of "the new" in Vietnamese has appeared in so many iterations that it is itself, for lack of a better word, old. To cite the most obvious examples, the modernity of the 1920s and 1930s was called *tân thời* or "new times"; in 1946, the (in)famous campaigns to build socialist character in the north were framed around building a "new cultural life" or *đời sống mới*;<sup>4</sup> and the well-known renovation policies of 1986 are called *đổi mới* or "change to the new." In recuperating modernity in a postmodern age, Vietnamese have actually undermined the teleology of modernity not by renouncing it so much as reviving it. We have seen this brand-new, unprecedented situation before.

Writing of the journalist, novelist, and "king of reportage" Vũ Trọng Phụng (1912–1939), Peter Zinoman notes that his work can be understood as quintessentially modern for the way he sought to "mine Vietnamese tradition

for a means to domesticate and make sense of the essentially unpredictable and accidental character of modern life."<sup>5</sup> Like Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel, and others who were writing in that intellectually fruitful yet politically fraught first half of the twentieth century, Vietnamese journalists such as Vũ Trọng Phụng anticipated the idea of exploring modernity through the depiction of figures. They were on different sides of the globe, but highly educated Vietnamese were reading the same Baudelaire as Benjamin, and Benjamin himself uses a Vietnamese visitor's impressions of Paris as an epigram. It is Nguyễn Trọng Hiệp's words that open Benjamin's meditation on the flaneur: "One goes for a stroll. The great ladies are out for a stroll."<sup>6</sup> As for Vũ Trọng Phụng, his works are filled with characters—Red-Haired Xuân, Mr. Civilization, Ms. Deputy Customs Officer—who are stylized in a way that "suggests a journalistic representation of a common sociological type as much as a fanciful work of literary imagination."<sup>7</sup> The king of reportage analyzed modernity in ways both modern and critical of modernity, embracing and indeed inventing modern literary conventions that challenge the assumptions of modernity itself.

Modernity is unprecedented once again. If many of the Vietnamese figures of modernity appear almost like a second coming, a return, they also appear, impossibly, as novelties—things that by definition exist only by virtue of having appeared for the first time. In this return of the novelty, we see the return of a particularly Vietnamese engagement with modern ways and traditions. It is not the figure itself so much as the experience the figure expresses that conveys the Vietnamese vision of modernity. Through the figures in these essays, Vietnamese modernity emerges not as a discrete moment in history but as a set of engagements with the extra-local and the Other, a set of engagements with new and transformative modes of production, new relations of mobility and communication, and new ways of presenting oneself as an active subject with a purpose in the world. These figures all have what Truong Huyen Chi, describing the H'Roi Girl from the Central Highlands, calls "a project in life."

### Petty Trader (*Tiểu thương*)

ANN MARIE LESHKOWICH

It is November 1996. On a hot afternoon, Dung fans herself while waiting for customers to approach her women's clothing stall in Bến Thành market. A stylish woman pauses to look at shirts. "This black one is from Hong Kong," Dung tells her. "How much?" "60,000 [đồng]."<sup>8</sup> The customer looks annoyed. "35,000 is good," she snarls. Dung smiles sweetly, "50,000. It would be the first sale [of the afternoon]. . . . Buy to help me out. It's the right price,

guaranteed.” By invoking the belief that the first sale sets the tone for those that follow, Dung subtly pressures her customer. Pulling down another shirt, Dung comments, “This one is higher quality . . . perfect for you. . . . It’s 110,000.” The woman walks away. Turning to me, Dung complains, “I’m caught between two strategies: Say a reasonable price or inflate the price.” State a reasonable price and customers might trust Dung, but they also might bargain down below her cost. “Talk nonsense” (*nói xạo*) and she might scare customers away. Dung sighs, “If you don’t demand a lot [*nói thách*], you don’t get a high price.”

Dung is one of more than fourteen hundred *tiểu thương*, or petty traders, who run stalls in Ho Chi Minh City’s most famous marketplace.<sup>9</sup> A *tiểu thương* would strike most Vietnamese as an inapt figure of modernity. Embodying timeless qualities of Vietnamese femininity—determination, resourcefulness, sweetness, and self-sacrifice—she plies her wares to support her family, yet her habits of buying cheap, selling dear, and talking nonsense provoke moral ambivalence.<sup>10</sup> Over the past thirty-five years, officials touting first centrally planned socialism (1975–1986) and then market socialism (1986–present) have branded *tiểu thương* backward, uneducated anachronisms to be replaced by modern retailers, with perhaps a few preserved as tourist attractions. Casting the *tiểu thương* as a figure of tradition against which modernity becomes legible, such claims deny the material significance of *tiểu thương* to actually existing socialism and market socialism.

For twenty-five years, Dung has navigated the symbolic and material contradictions of being *tiểu thương*. Born in the 1950s to a revolutionary family, Dung secured a secretarial job with a state-run company after liberation (1975). Over the next decade, the government sought to build socialism by redistributing large businesses, including those owned by ethnic Chinese. Gendered stereotypes of *tiểu thương* as subsistence workers protected them from being labeled “capitalist.” When officials finally announced in 1984 that Bến Thành market would become a cooperative, Dung contributed 20 *chỉ* (2.4 troy ounces) of gold to join. She quickly learned that alongside its official state commerce, Bến Thành was a center for black market trade. Scholars of socialism elsewhere argue that the informal economy, by delivering goods that centrally imposed scarcity denied consumers, simultaneously undermined and prolonged actually existing socialism.<sup>11</sup> While other citizens might recall the late 1980s “subsidy period” as a time of long lines and deprivation,<sup>12</sup> Dung claimed that Bến Thành’s *tiểu thương* and the cadres with whom they shared their profits “lived very well.”

*Đổi mới* officially began in 1986, but it again took time for the new measures to affect *tiểu thương*. Then, one day in 1989, officials simply declared

that the stalls now belonged to individual traders. Profits were high at first. Dung, her mother, and her sisters soon acquired four stalls, making them one of Bến Thành’s “big families” (*đại gia đình*), a term that can also mean both extended family and great or illustrious family. By the late 1990s, however, the allure of entrepreneurship led to increased competition and lower profit margins. Capital markets favored the politically connected, leaving the supposedly lowly, untrustworthy *tiểu thương* with no option besides usurious “hot loans.” Newspapers reported on plans to redevelop Bến Thành as an international trade center. Meanwhile, anxiety about growing inequality fueled scapegoating of *tiểu thương* as unscrupulous cheats antithetical to a modern economy. Banners strung from the market’s rafters exhorted *tiểu thương* to conduct business in a “civilized” manner worthy of the city bearing Hồ Chí Minh’s name. The implication was clear: Left to their own devices, traders were liable to behave otherwise.

In lengthy conversations with me during the late 1990s, Dung contested these stereotypes. Although she did not garner the riches that the public imagined, neither was her business an unscrupulous, petty, and backward affair. She fueled the development of “market socialism” by shaping fashion trends, employing struggling relatives, creatively juggling her cash flow, and investing profits in her husband’s tourism business. At the same time, Dung’s success rested on “strategic essentialism.”<sup>13</sup> By sweetly bargaining with a customer, lying that a shirt produced in Vietnam was made in Hong Kong, or deferring taxes by appealing to the collector’s sympathies, Dung garnered temporary material advantage through conforming to the traditional *tiểu thương* stereotypes that otherwise vexed and marginalized her.

More recently, Dung has benefited from increasing political and social acceptance of private entrepreneurs. The 1997 financial crisis halted Bến Thành’s ambitious redevelopment plans. Foreign tourism has grown, and journalists have begun to praise the acumen of “marketplace” businesspeople (*doanh nhân “chợ”*) whose attractive, multilingual salesclerks charm foreigners into buying T-shirts and pottery at prices above those in “modern” department stores.<sup>14</sup> By 2008, Dung had acquired stalls near the market’s entrance and in the newly opened night market outside. She now caters to tourists with designer knockoffs and embroidered handbags.<sup>15</sup> Almost sixty, Dung increasingly delegates selling to young employees who chat up customers in English, French, Japanese, and Korean. The gold and jade jewelry adorning her fingers, wrists, neck, and ears testifies to her prosperity. Her English-speaking daughter sometimes helps with the stalls, but Dung is saving money to send her to business school abroad. Although Dung tells me that marketplace trade no longer poses “problems like in the past,” she is adamant that her daughter

never become a *tiểu thương*. Once again, achieving modern prosperity requires the *tiểu thương*'s profits but consigns her symbolically to the past.

## Prostitute (*Gái*)

CHRISTOPHE ROBERT

On an early evening in June 2008, I ride my motorbike down dusty streets near Peace Park, a few paces from An Đông Market in western Saigon. I am reacquainting myself with the neighborhood after a long absence. I realize I gave off the wrong signal by looking left and right while slowly riding down the boulevard. A woman suddenly appears in my field of vision. She rides alongside me and whispers a tentative "You, hello." I ignore her and keep riding, watching her from the corner of my eye. We remain silent. At the traffic light, she idles next to me for a short while and then moves on to the next potential client.

The mobile sex workers who cruise nightly down this dusty boulevard are older and homelier than the prostitutes who crowd Vietnamese newspapers and television shows. Their clothes are outdated. Like their scooters—older models from the mid-1990s—they seem stuck in an earlier stage of the new Vietnamese market economy. Their activities mirror the small trades of street sellers in the neighborhood. They charge low prices and service their clients in parks or cheap hourly rooms.

Prostitutes are common in Vietnamese cities today. In bars and cafés, nightclubs, karaoke lounges, massage parlors, street corners, and parks, their presence is discreet and yet insistent, alternatively invisible and visible. The practices of mobile prostitutes such as the one who hailed me are far removed from the lurid clichés and mass-mediated representations of prostitution. Foreigners do not patronize these women, although in official discourses in the 1990s prostitution was consistently associated with foreign tourists and the decadence fostered on Vietnamese youth by new criminal groups and consumer society alike.

In *The Philosophy of Money*, Georg Simmel makes an apparently startling claim. For him, "We experience in the nature of money itself something of the essence of prostitution."<sup>16</sup> Commodified sexual relations—"sex work," bought and sold as labor or service—can be understood as extreme manifestations of impersonal financial transactions in capitalist economies. This insight into exchange and commodified personal relations helps us better understand images and representations of prostitution in Vietnam.

At three key moments in recent Vietnamese history—1990s, 1960s, 1930s—the figure of the prostitute became prominent in the public sphere.

Each time, the relevance of debates on prostitution stemmed less from what they actually said about sex work than from the political and social commentaries they triggered about rapid economic and social change. The proliferation of mass-mediated discourses about prostitution in Vietnam since the 1990s is not a new phenomenon. It echoes political struggles against American intervention in South Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. For Hanoi leaders and progressive intellectuals in Saigon, the prostitute was then a figure of abjection and national humiliation, both metaphor and metonymy for the violence of American neocolonialism and capitalist exploitation. These representations built upon analyses of writers such as Vũ Trọng Phụng, who in the 1930s castigated French colonizers for abusing Vietnamese "concubines." In all three cases—1990s, 1960s, 1930s—male anxieties surrounding foreign presence, threats of cultural disintegration, and contamination of the national body are paramount. Male fears of social and cultural disintegration are cast in moral terms: Political threats are represented as sexual threats undermining patriarchal authority.<sup>17</sup>

In these representations, the prostitute has consistently been a figure of rootless mobility. Urban Vietnamese today imagine young prostitutes as rural, uneducated, greedy, and connected with "black society" networks, a murky criminal underworld of pimps, drug dealers, heroin addicts, gamblers, swindlers, and corrupt cops. These networks are imagined to exist alongside legitimate businesses, but in ways that are not fully knowable.

Like the criminal networks with which they are associated in popular imagination, prostitutes derive much of their power to fascinate from their ability to appear and disappear at will, while being very real in their local presence and influence. The association of prostitution with AIDS in the 1990s increased the hysterical mystery surrounding this montage of symptoms and anxieties. AIDS was associated with foreignness; urban legends flourished about its origins, etiology, and spread. This reinforced popular notions that contamination from the realm of "social evils" happens by simple contact with criminal social types.<sup>18</sup> A moral narrative of reprehensible decadence emerged quickly and durably in the 1990s. It fit well the agendas of both anxious parents and manipulative government officials and censors.

Debates about prostitution in Vietnam since the 1990s stem from widespread anxieties in the wake of market-oriented economic reforms and the rapid reemergence of a consumer society. What is striking about these debates is how little they really are about prostitution. Instead, as Simmel suggested in a different context, they enable Vietnamese to debate shifting political and ideological landscapes on a broader tapestry of social relations, including the visible presence of commodified women functioning symbolically as commodified images.<sup>19</sup>