

Making Class and Gender: (Market) Socialist Enframing of Traders in Ho Chi Minh City

Ann Marie Leshkovich

ABSTRACT Over the past four decades, petty traders in Bến Thành market (Ho Chi Minh City) and Vietnamese officials have experienced and propelled rapid economic, political, and social transformations entailing reconfigurations of class and gender. Exploring the co-construction of class and gender through state and individual narratives and performances, I here make three contributions to anthropological scholarship on socialism and late, post-, and market socialism. First, I highlight the importance of associative gendered logics to government efforts to deploy new, morally compelling notions of class. Second, I demonstrate that socialist constructions of gender and class are not simply imposed on resistant subjects but also internalized as meaningful structures of sentiment, even among those otherwise ambivalent toward state authority. Third, I reveal that state socialist logics provide fertile ground for those enframed to exercise strategic essentialism (Spivak 1995) that affords symbolic or material advantage, even as it might also reproduce marginality. [*class, gender, socialism, Vietnam, petty traders*]

November 1996. On a hot afternoon in Bến Thành market, Dung fans herself while waiting for customers to approach her women's clothing stall. A stylish woman pauses to look at shirts. "This black one is from Hong Kong," Dung tells her. "How much?" asks the woman. "60,000 [đồng]." The customer looks annoyed. "35,000 is good," she snarls. Dung smiles sweetly, "50,000. It would be the first sale [of the afternoon], elder sister. I'll sell it very cheaply for the first sale. Buy to help me out." By invoking the belief, often derided by officials as superstitious, that a first sale sets the tone for the day, Dung subtly pressures her customer to buy. Pulling down a white shirt, Dung notes, "This one is higher quality, it would be perfect for you, elder sister. It's 110,000." The woman walks away. Dung turns to me. "I'm caught between two strategies," she sighs, continuing:

Say a reasonable price or inflate the price. If I say a reasonable price, I might be able to make the sale because the customers will trust me and not be scared. If the customer doesn't know prices, however, she'll bargain for half as much, and that may be too little. I'll lose the sale. But talking nonsense [*nói xạo*] can intimidate the customer, making her go away. A well-dressed customer may be told a higher price, but she might be savvy. She might know that the shirt from Hong Kong is really from [mainland] China. But, if you don't demand a lot [*nói thách*], you don't get a high price.²

Dung is one of more than 1,400 *tiểu thương*, or petty traders, who run stalls in Bến Thành, Ho Chi Minh City's

most famous marketplace. To most Vietnamese, Dung personifies the timeless market trader: a woman, for market traders are almost all women, who flatters, cajoles, and lies to make a sale and support her family. So thoroughly feminized is marketplace trade that a common collective reference to petty traders, *các chị em tiểu thương* (sister petty traders), combines the Sino-Vietnamese word for petty trade (*tiểu thương*) with a kinship term for older and younger sisters (*các chị em*). As is true throughout Southeast Asia, where women dominate petty trade, market femininity in Vietnam provokes contradictory reactions of denigration and respect (Atkinson and Errington 1990; Brenner 1998; Wilson 2004:181): denigration because buying cheap and selling dear entails deceit and self-interest; respect because, in earning money for their families, market traders demonstrate resourcefulness, self-sacrifice, and fiscal prudence that men are said to lack. Whether positive or negative, characterizations of *tiểu thương* appeal to a natural, essentialized femininity that ascribes contemporary forms and dilemmas of market trade to women's innate personalities.

In contrast to the *tiểu thương*'s timeless femininity, her class status and the broader political economy within which she conducts business have obviously been volatile. In the first postwar decade of "high socialism" (1975–86), Marxist social analysis branded traders as potential antirevolutionaries whose defects could be

remedied by joining socialist cooperatives. Following the 1986 introduction of market-oriented economic policies (*Đổi Mới*), entrepreneurial energy has become vibrantly apparent throughout Ho Chi Minh City. *Tiểu thương*, however, remain objects of ambivalence who, in contrast to modern entrepreneurs or businesspeople (*doanh nhân* or *thương gia*), are critiqued as backward, uneducated vestiges of tradition, unable to contribute to economic development. This backwardness has itself recently become a marketable commodity, as *Bến Thành* and other famous marketplaces lure customers hungry for a “culturally authentic” shopping experience. *Dung*, for example, now sells embroidered handbags to foreign tourists.

Over the 15-plus years that I have been conducting ethnographic research in *Bến Thành* market, traders have consciously narrated and interpreted their lives according to these two tropes: timeless gender and changing class.³ Although traders are indeed women who since 1975 have weathered rapid shifts in political economy, both tropes fail to capture the complex discursive and experiential contours of gender and class as well as the articulations between them.

Contrary to the first trope—timeless gender—femininity has, in fact, not been static, particularly in relation to economic activity. Scholarship on socialism and late, post-, or market socialism demonstrates that political and structural transformations had gendered goals and gendered effects.⁴ Socialist efforts to bring women into public industry (Engels 1972) and to transform household tasks into public ones promised gender equality but, instead, were undermined by several factors: women’s public work was valued less than that of men (Gal and Kligman 2000b; Ghodsee 2005; Hsu 2007:143–144; True 2003:28–30; Verdery 1996:64; Weiner 2007; Wieggersma 1991); women’s domestic labor provided a means to resist state intrusion into the private domain (True 2003; Verdery 1996; Weiner 2007); women’s nurturing roles lent themselves to informal economic activities, continuing associations between men as primary and women as supplemental workers (Gal and Kligman 2000b; Saldaña-Portillo 2003; Verdery 1996); and women’s success in the informal economy fueled accusations that socialism emasculated male providers and disrupted the “natural” gendered order (Gal and Kligman 2000a; Ghodsee 2005; Heyat 2002; Kaneff 2002; Kovacs and Varadi 2000; Rofel 2007; Szalai 2000; True 2003; Verdery 1996).

In the post- and market-socialist periods in Europe and Asia, anxieties about new economic and political regimes have coalesced around concerns about gender. This has led to such developments as reessentialization of femininity, particularly with respect to maternity and nurturing; remasculinization of politics; calls for women to prioritize family responsibilities over public work; preoccupation with the morality of women’s informal economic activities; and critiques of women’s consumption as excessive and selfish (Dunn 2004; Gal and Kligman 2000a; Ghodsee

2005; Makovicky 2009; Pashigian 2009; Rivkin-Fish 2005; Rofel 2007; True 2003; Verdery 1996). Who women are or should be, and why, has been questioned and revised, with significant social and material consequences.

The second trope—that class has rapidly transformed, specifically that the entrepreneurship frowned on under socialism has now been unleashed, and middle and wealthier classes have reemerged—also falls short because it ignores the significant discursive and material continuities that emerge from the life stories recounted below. Discursively, in Vietnam over the past 35 years, petty traders have been consistently defined by state officials, the public, and even themselves as insignificant, undesirable, or backward impediments to a modern socialist or market-socialist economy. Materially, petty traders have in fact generated significant resources that have directly or indirectly contributed to state developmentalist goals, whether socialist or market socialist.⁵ Contrary to descriptions of market reforms as dramatic rupture, recent work in anthropology highlights interesting and sometimes surprising continuities between socialism and post- or market socialism (Brotherton 2008; Kipnis 2008; Makovicky 2009; Matza 2009; Nonini 2008; Ong 2006; Verdery 1996; West and Raman 2009). A focus on class making among petty traders in Vietnam similarly reveals that even as class is reconfigured through outlawing and then sanctioning capital accumulation and private enterprise, such transformation mobilizes preexisting logics so that people come to see new ideas and behaviors as normal or appropriate. Ubiquitous gaps between state policy and daily experience further support the sense that state-centric visions of dramatic transformation look different from below.

The concealment of both gendered change and classed continuity raises several questions about socialism and market socialism: How do shifts in gendered ideas or practices come to be essentialized, and with what consequences? How is class made and remade in ways that are simultaneously new and rendered natural, self-evident, or compelling? How does class making relate to, and perhaps depend on, ideological and material articulation with other identities, such as gender, the naturalness of which can be more readily asserted? Most importantly, what can we learn about socialism and market socialism by examining class and gender together?

In this article, I explore these questions by considering how individuals and various levels of government in Ho Chi Minh City have comprehended and effected economic and sociocultural change by narrating, performing, and, most significantly, engendering class over the past four decades. I focus on constructions of petty traders or *tiểu thương* in *Bến Thành* market precisely because the “petty bourgeoisie” is economically, socially, and politically ambiguous in both socialist and capitalist schemes of classification and thus a particularly fertile site for illuminating the tensions surrounding class making.⁶ At the same time, because marketplace trade and traders are doxically gendered as feminine, they allow

us to consider how an obviously manufactured status such as class position is made legible and normalized through being linked to another status that appears more natural, self-evident, and essential.

This article makes three contributions to anthropological understandings of socialism. First, inspired by studies of the intersections among femininity, class, and governmentality in nonsocialist settings (Jones 2010; Ong 1999; Stoler 2002; Thomas 2009), I demonstrate the importance of associative gendered logics to state-socialist and market-socialist attempts to enframe and transform class, particularly the southern urban petty bourgeoisie. Following Timothy Mitchell (2002), I consider “enframing” a process of defining a problem or group of people in a way that asserts mastery through claims to objective expertise. As Tania Murray Li (2007:5) notes, enframing often depoliticizes issues by making them seem like technical problems that are amenable to technical intervention. I argue that, in postwar southern Vietnam, the enframing of petty traders’ class status through the deployment of gendered essentialism did to some extent defuse the politically contentious process of class restructuring.

Second, although research on actually existing socialism and late, post-, and market socialism has yielded rich insights on how the ideological construction of “femininity” and the political constitution of “woman” as an ontological category shape differential experiences of the world, scholars have tended to depict state-socialist gender discourses as inauthentic, politicized impositions on resistant populations. In consequence, less attention has been paid to how socialist and market-socialist regimes have also been profoundly engendering in ways that are simultaneously “class-ifying.” I address this gap by considering the processes through which both gender and class have become cathected (Connell 1990), or internalized as meaningful structures of sentiment, through daily practice in Vietnam. This, in turn, explains why the naturalization of gender persists in spite of both evident shifts in the discursive and practical outlines of femininity and individualized ambivalence toward particular state claims about gender.

Third, examination of traders’ narrative and performative constructions of class and gender in Bến Thành market reveals that state associative logics are not simply oppressive. They are also productive in that they provide fertile ground for those enframed in particular ways to both internalize and deploy strategic essentialism (Spivak 1995:214) that affords symbolic or material advantage, even as it might also reproduce marginality.

CO-CATHECTING CLASS AND GENDER UNDER SOCIALISM

As Carolyn Hsu (2007) argues in her study of petty entrepreneurs in China, class formation is as much a narrative, moral process as a structural, economic one. Class making requires considerable material and ideological work: making petty traders legible as part of the bourgeoisie, locating

them materially in terms of their ownership of particular means of production and, most importantly, imbuing these designations with moral characterizations to compellingly identify *tiêu thương* as desirable or not. These narrations are not simply top-down because “the myriad everyday actions of thinking people ultimately establish new forms of political economy” (Humphrey 2002:xvii). Typifying claims about how classed beings should fit into an imagined present and future help people to make sense of complex, uncertain landscapes.

In times of rapid and obvious social, political, and economic transformation such as has been occurring in the southern part of Vietnam since 1975, *class* becomes a term in contention, with high ideological and material stakes. During the first decades of the Soviet Union, class designations determined individual political, social, and economic fates (Rivkin-Fish 2009:82), a pattern repeated in China (Hsu 2007) and Vietnam. Because class is so evidently politicized and volatile, entities seeking to make class might attempt to naturalize and depoliticize it through association with other, seemingly self-evident categories, such as morality, ethnicity, or race: the poor are such because of defects in their behavior or work ethic; the socialist intelligentsia deserves its privilege because its members are more cultured than lowly working classes (Rivkin-Fish 2009:84); a particular ethnic group cannot be trusted and must be confined to economic or geographical enclaves.

For petty traders in Vietnam, gender has been a key axis of difference deployed to naturalize class. That class and gender should be associated under socialist and late-, post-, or market-socialist regimes is not surprising, given that many of these states espoused the Marxist proposition that class revolution would solve gender inequality. Official subordination of gender to class has prompted many feminist scholars to counter that actually existing socialism has been as profoundly gendered as it has been classed (Gal and Kligman 2000b; Ghodsee 2005; True 2003; Weiner 2007). Although an important corrective, calls for equal attention to gender may reproduce the idea that gender and class are discrete axes of difference that intersect only as they define and are experienced by individuals or communities, so that one can talk about professional women as both oppressed (gender) and oppressors (class) while working-class women are doubly marginalized (Crenshaw 1989; Davis 2008; Weiner 2007).

Analysis must go beyond highlighting intersections to attend to how class and gender constitute each other relationally and historically in their abstraction, materiality, and political, economic, social, and personal dimensions. Socialist claims about women certainly construct or deploy notions of femininity, and state policies enacted on behalf of women create a constituency of women with particular characteristics and interests (Connell 1990; Gal and Kligman 2000b; Verdery 1996). But such claims or policies also construct particular kinds of classed subjects and reflect class-specific assumptions about women’s natures and

experiences that in turn work to challenge or affirm prior notions of class precisely by indexing it to gender. As Susan Gal and Gail Kligman note, “Exclusionary politics are often articulated through ideas about gender. Such metaphorical use of gender stereotypes to talk about other matters strengthens the force of the stereotypes themselves” (2000a:16). By being gendered, the attributes of both class and gender come to be seen as objective, natural, and commonsensical in ways that effect political-economic transformation by making someone like Dung legible, including to herself. When such associative logics succeed, they obscure the circumstances of their construction (Gal and Kligman 2000b:117).

To summarize, I am arguing, first, that the dynamics through which class and gender constitute each other obscure this relationship by making class and gender seem natural. Second, although socialism transformed gender, particularly by turning women into workers, it was class that seemed most obviously subject to revolutionary reformulation. Gender emerged as the seemingly fundamental element of this couple. Scholars have convincingly shown that gender is not natural yet comes to be seen as such with implications for power relations.⁷ What requires further examination is precisely how such naturalization becomes meaningful and compelling in a particular context. R. W. Connell (1990:526) argues that engendering involves a structure of cathexis through which subjects internalize gendered sentiments as patterns of emotional attachments. Inspired by this idea, Katherine Verdery (1996:74–79) asks how gender under socialism cathected nationalism by masculinizing the nation, feminizing its borders, and eroticizing national sentiment. Tellingly, Verdery does not ask how gender itself might have been cathected through association with nationalism. Instead, gender seems the enduring emotional attachment ready to be manipulated to instantiate other sentiments.

Verdery’s discussion is but one example of a broader trend in the literature on gender and socialism: in spite of careful attention to state-socialist gender construction, scholars seem reluctant to depict official claims as having been internalized by gendered subjects. We are left with little sense of how individuals come to see themselves as gendered and are instead presented with sedimentary models of socialism layered on top of prior gendered traditions. Even when socialism is said to have fundamentally changed women’s roles or notions of masculinity, as in Kristen Ghodsee’s study of the Bulgarian tourism industry, it seems in retrospect merely a veneer: “While the gender roles of men and women did change significantly in Bulgaria during the forty-five-year experiment with communism, patriarchal traditions have made a comeback since the early 1990s” (Ghodsee 2005:39). This model of submerged tradition waiting to resurface curiously replicates the late-, post-, and market-socialist claims that socialism denied “natural” gender roles (Rofel 2007:7; True 2003:22). It also risks making socialism seem merely “an irrational disruption of the ‘normal’ pro-

gression of history toward capitalism” (Anagnost 1997:7). Although Verdery and others write against such teleology, their scant attention to how gender might be cathected under socialism in significant and enduring ways suggests that socialism has gendered effects but is not profoundly engendering.

This claim needs to be unpacked ethnographically by asking how governmentality and daily experience under socialism might have fundamentally shaped people’s self-conceptions of themselves as gendered beings, even as they might actively resist official claims about who men and women are or should be. Such an approach attends to human agency as shaped by factors or associations of which actors may not be cognizant. Sylvia Yanagisako, for example, emphasizes the importance of individual sentiment and subjective attachments in motivating family businesses in Italy:

The desire to open one’s own firm and, in doing so, to be one’s own boss does not arise out of a religiously based ethic of ceaseless striving for accumulation. Neither is it the expression of a ‘rational’ economic strategy dictated by Como entrepreneurs’ habitus. Rather, it is the activation of a gendered ethic of personhood and family in particular circumstances. [2002:143]

Even if directly intended by an external entity, this activation prompts associations and acts that can lead to unexpected outcomes. Alexei Yurchak notes that this performative dynamic

enabled people to engage in new, unanticipated meanings, aspects of everyday life, interests, and activities, which sprang up everywhere in late socialism and were not necessarily determined by the ideological constative meanings of authoritative discourse. [Yurchak 2006:27]

Both Yanagisako and Yurchak inspire me to consider how the business forms of *tiểu thương* in *Bến Thành* market have emerged through their simultaneous resistance to and internalization of forms of engendering and classifying associated with particular state configurations of political economy. It is not simply the case that gender is classed, or that class is gendered, or even that they are made together—although all of these are true. Rather, the discursive construction of ontological distinctions between these categories, particularly the tendency in Vietnam to see gender as natural, allows for essentializing claims about gender to define class and thus endeavor to naturalize it by downplaying its social and political constitution. This does not mean that gender is simply a ploy. Rather, the accepted naturalness of gendered behaviors and gendered divisions of labor provides a conceptual resource to ground claims that seem more clearly constructed and hence politically contentious. These dynamics emerge most clearly when we consider periods of extreme class volatility, such as during the postwar effort to reorganize petty trade in Ho Chi Minh City into socialist cooperatives and then, a decade later, during efforts to promote “a market economy with socialist orientation.”

ENGENDERING CLASS-IFICATION UNDER SOCIALISM

In the decade following the end of the war in 1975, the Vietnamese government attempted to restructure the southern economy along socialist lines.⁸ This material process of cataloguing and redistributing resources, as well as reorganizing production and distribution, was also a political, imaginative, and moral project to transform people's perceptions and behaviors. The government followed the Marxist notion that the petty bourgeoisie would ultimately disappear in the struggle between capital and workers, rising or falling to one side or the other. Meanwhile, the government tacitly recognized the need for an informal economy to provide goods, jobs, and services that the state sector could not. Such a role was common in other socialist societies, including in northern Vietnam following independence in 1954 (Abrami 2002; Dunn 2005; Heyat 2002; Pettus 2003; Szelenyi 1988). Nevertheless, by enframing the petty bourgeoisie as endangered and marginal, the postwar Vietnamese government worked to disavow these pragmatic concessions and to justify policies discriminating against this group.

Official ambivalence about the petty bourgeoisie dovetailed with, and hence acquired legitimacy from, long-standing Vietnamese suspicion of trade.⁹ Confucian moral codes disdained trade as the lowest acceptable occupation. Petty traders were assumed to be selfish, dishonest cheats resistant to the civilizing norms of morality and social order (Leshkovich 2005). It was therefore not simply Marxism that prompted one postwar southern journalist to declare, "There's no way a trader can be an honest person" (Thạch Trú 1978:11).

Although resonating with tradition, such indictments departed from the official policies toward petty traders deployed in the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam following the end of French colonialism in 1954. The flight of many larger-business owners southward to the Republic of Vietnam resulted in a net decrease in the scale of northern private enterprises, nearly half of which were run by women (Pettus 2003:32). According to Regina Abrami, these "petty traders were automatically classified as 'patriotic labourers'" (2002:96). President Hồ Chí Minh even saw the marketplace as an arena for inculcating revolutionary values (Bayly 2009:133). Calls in the early 1970s to shrink Hanoi's burgeoning unofficial trade sector characterized these businesses as exceeding subsistence requirements and disrupting attempts to organize productive and retail labor more equitably (Abrami 2002:97). These accounts suggest that scale, not gender, shaped the classification of petty traders.

Harsher criticism of traders' morality in the postwar south highlights how civil war and the larger scale of the southern urban commercial sector cast doubt on traders' "patriotism" and pettiness. Nevertheless, the utility of this sector influenced the scope and pace of state policies. Officials initially classified most petty traders as subsistence workers and instead targeted large owners, "speculators," and offi-

cials from the old regime (Nguyễn Văn Linh 1985:150). In 1978–79, a second campaign socialized all but the smallest family-run firms.¹⁰ The petty-trade exemption ended in 1984, however, when Ho Chi Minh City's government dispatched revolutionary youth brigades to cooperativize markets and transform Bến Thành's petty bourgeoisie into shareholders supervised by district governments.

In conversations with me during the 1990s, traders recalled socialist economic classification as primarily a process of political assessment. They were repeatedly "invited" to the local police station, party office, or school to complete personal biographical statements (*lý lịch*) specifying property, employment status, and political activities since 1945 for themselves, siblings, parents, and other relatives. These statements, as political as they were economic, formed the basis for official designation of "class" status. Discrepancies resulted in reclassification, property confiscation, reeducation, forced migration to barren "New Economic Zones," or reduced access to goods and services.

Although not as obvious as political characterizations, gender played no less a significant role in the classification of southern businesses throughout this decade. Officials were strongly influenced by Frederick Engels's (1972) analysis of women as a perpetual underclass whose productive and reproductive labor was controlled by men (Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1978; Pettus 2003). Because women's public work would liberate them from patriarchy, it was less likely to be classified as antirevolutionary, even if it did facilitate bourgeois accumulation. Traders told me that women in families classified as bourgeois, land owning, or wealthy therefore typically received less direct or severe punishment than their menfolk. Instead of being reeducated, women attended local training classes to learn to assume productive roles in a socialist society (see also Pettus 2003:9).

Officials also tended to view women's wage-earning activities as more likely to be necessary for a family's subsistence. For example, the cadre stationed in the central marketplace to represent the Women's Union, a mass-mobilization organization associated with the Vietnamese Communist Party, told me that although the Republic of Vietnam had been capitalist, not all markets and traders were capitalist. Women's market stalls were typically hand-to-mouth enterprises at the lower end of the scale. The cadre reported that the women themselves were uneducated and possessed a "lower level of understanding." This conflation of gender with an enterprise's scale meant that, other factors being equal, male-owned businesses were more likely to suffer confiscation and punishment.¹¹ Officials even encouraged women to take over businesses that had been seized from pariah entrepreneurs.

The connections between trade and gender under high socialism can be seen in the experience of Hà, who related her life story to me in 1996 during an interview in the apartment that she shared with her grown children. Born during the First Indochina War (1946–54) into a well-educated family

in central Vietnam, Hà married her high school teacher when she was 16. In 1975, as North Vietnamese troops pushed southward, Hà, her husband, and their four children fled to Saigon. After Saigon fell on April 30, Hà's husband was imprisoned in a reeducation camp. With no means of support, Hà started selling gasoline on the city's streets. Hà did well despite her lack of prior trading experience and gradually expanded her business to foodstuffs and black-market medicine. After being released from the camp in 1983, Hà's husband used her savings to finance an attempt to flee the country. Hà never heard from him again and presumes his boat to have disappeared at sea. Over the next several years, Hà continued selling medicine and slowly rebuilt her savings. When local officials reopened Bến Thành market to private trade in 1989, Hà sold her medicine counter and purchased a clothing stall. She later acquired a second stall for her son, who helps support Hà's extended family of nine.

Hà's choice to pursue a lucrative but politically risky occupation illuminates a performative dimension to post-war state enframing, similar to what Yurchak (2006) describes for Russia. *Tiểu thương* were feminized not because of some spontaneous, natural condition inherent in Vietnamese women or culture but, rather, because state schemes of revolutionary class-ification enframed particular petty bourgeoisie in gendered ways. Shielded from being viewed strictly in terms of socioeconomic class struggle, female traders paid lower prices for "class crimes." For those with revolutionary credentials, this gendered logic offset the risk that association with an unsavory occupation might pose to their political capital. For Hà and other "antirevolutionaries," it meant that an occupation of last resort posed fewer risks to them than it might have to their husbands, who remained unemployed or fled the country. Socialism encouraged the emergence of a particular kind of petty bourgeoisie and created the conditions through which this group was largely female and their activities feminized.

Although women traders blamed the state for forcing them to trade to support their families, they ultimately performed and affirmed the idea of trade as feminine, precisely because it prevented them from being viewed in negative class terms as "petty bourgeoisie." As a result, class and gender became mutually cathected. Women internalized a sense of being naturally suited to trade. A sector of the economy—southern urban retail marketplaces—that had during the war period been dominated by larger-scale entrepreneurs came to be the domain of women operating on a smaller scale, and this transformation paradoxically seemed both dramatic and natural. Drawing on associations that people generally found credible, state enframing created the political, economic, and social factors that made trade attractive to women, thus reinforcing the perception of this sphere as suitable for women and of women as naturally adept at it.

PETTY TRADE VERSUS DOING BUSINESS: ESSENTIALIZING FEMININE BACKWARDNESS UNDER MARKET SOCIALISM

The market-oriented economic policies (*Đổi Mới*) that began in the 1980s seemed to encourage private enterprise, but their initial effect was to create incentives for government and party organs to form joint ventures with foreign investors. The government remained suspicious of private entrepreneurs and waited until 2000 to pass a private enterprise law and until 2005–06 to admit private entrepreneurs into the party.

Similar socioeconomic transformations in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and China have promoted prosperity but also anxiety about the "visceral experience of class stratification and social exclusion" (Ries 2009:187). Class becomes a moral question, as in claims that workers were spoiled by socialism and thus lack the flexibility or initiative to adapt to capitalist demands (Dunn 2004:80; Weiner 2007:20–21). According to Elizabeth Dunn, "the disparate value of different people's labor comes to be seen as a natural emanation of the kinds of people they are rather than as the artifact of a socially constructed division of labor or as the product of a class system" (2004:80–81). In China, for example, anxiety about the morality of wealth has led to a distinction between the quality entrepreneur and the lowly *getihu*, or petty trader (Hsu 2007:123–124). So widely accepted is this distinction that a scholar from Harbin asserted that *getihu* are "not real businesspeople. They're just small—they're just peddlers" (Hsu 2007:131). In this view, petty traders lack intellectual quality (*suzhi*; Hsu 2007:132; see also Rofel 2007:35–36).

In Vietnam in the 1990s, ambivalence about market socialism fueled similar distinctions of scale. The businessperson or entrepreneur with official connections earned praise for contributing to the nation, even amid accusations of corruption (Gainsborough 2003). Smaller-scale traders were dismissed as incapable of driving prosperity. Vietnamese economists and sociologists told me that stallholders are not entrepreneurs, they're "just petty traders" (*chỉ tiểu thương thôi*). At the same time, because getting rich in Vietnam in the 1990s was never celebrated as glorious as it was in China, the officials I interviewed avoided discussing privileged classes lest they expose contradictions between socialism and the market.¹² Instead, anxieties about class led to enframing petty traders once again through the idiom of gender.

State-sponsored development policy during the 1990s explicitly contrasted *tiểu thương*'s traditional methods of doing business with the modern, larger-scale entrepreneurship needed for market socialism. Traders were primarily enframed as objects of welfare. For example, in June 1997, shortly before economic crisis hit Southeast Asia, I met with a chief architect for Ho Chi Minh City. He had been reviewing proposals from international firms to redevelop Bến Thành into a multistoried trade center that would attract

tourists and showcase Vietnam's modernization. The architect assured me that officials were mindful of traders' proper place: "Tiểu thương fit the country's conditions right now and will continue to do so for ten to twenty years. . . . 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." He concluded: "My talking like this doesn't mean we aren't going to go down the road of industrialization, modernity, and civilization. Certainly we have to do that" (conversation with author, June 7, 1997). To him, female *tiểu thương* clearly represented an undesirable tradition that economic growth would replace with modern industry.

Less sympathetic views echoed Chinese accounts of the lowly *getihu's* inferior moral character. Gender facilitated these characterizations. Market-oriented policies aroused concern about values and women's domestic roles as insulating families from the dangers of a market economy. State campaigns promoting the "Cultured Family" (*Gia đình văn hóa*) provided pamphlets, billboards, courses, and recreational programming teaching middle-class women to nurture the physical, emotional, and intellectual well-being of their husbands and children (Drummond 2004; Pettus 2003). "Cultured Families" received certificates, and neighborhood officials worked to meet quotas for residents so designated.

Female traders, in contrast, were depicted in academic publications, newspaper articles, and fiction as being so obsessed with money that they could not be the moral pillars of a family. Writing in a Vietnamese social-science journal, Le Minh explains:

Small traders daily have access to market generation ruled by money. They should be given opportunities to raise their level of knowledge and enjoy the benefit of culture and art so that they can by themselves get rid of the influence of the reverse side of the market economy and keep from muddling the social environment and their own family. [Le Minh 1997:78]

Another social scientist penned a harrowing picture of traders who "do not fulfill the tasks of mothers" (To Duy Hop 1997:17). Eager to get to the market each day, they hastily nurse their babies, hand them over to another caretaker, and neglect to think about them for the rest of the day (To Duy Hop 1997:18). In calling for study of why such women had children at all, the author suggests their feminine financial and biological fertility to be unrestrained by moral propriety. Finally, newspaper articles and short stories chronicled broken families in which husbands neglected by market-focused wives sought solace elsewhere.

How did the lives of female traders and their families compare to these characterizations? They reveal that trading both involved entrepreneurial expertise and allowed women to fulfill family responsibilities. At the same time, traders generally held the belief that their work rested on natural feminine traits. For example, the married proprietors of a moderately sized children's clothing stall earned just

enough to support a family including two children and the wife's mother. Both husband and wife tended the stall full-time, yet in repeated conversations separately and together, they described the business as belonging to the wife, Ngọc. Khánh, the husband, "just helped out" (*chỉ phụ thôi*). Ngọc complained that, like many men, Khánh "doesn't have a head for business." He forgot prices, sold items below cost, and could not "sing out to catch the fish" by sweet-talking customers. As Ngọc put it: "He doesn't sell as well as me. Naturally, it's because he's a man" (conversation with author, March 22, 1997). Spending many weeks at their stall, I had ample opportunity to observe Khánh's befuddlement, but I couldn't help but wonder whether his was a studied incompetence to recoup a tarnished masculinity. One afternoon after Ngọc had left to pick up their daughter from school, Khánh described working in the market as "being confined in this cage" (conversation with author, March 24, 1997).

This couple's claims and behaviors echoed prevalent tropes about gender and marketplace trade. In the increasingly cutthroat environment of market socialism, women were said to hold an entrepreneurial advantage over men, part of which stemmed from officials' ongoing leniency toward female entrepreneurs. More significant, however, was what both male and female traders described as women's innate patience (*kiên nhẫn*), sweetness (*dịu dàng*), and skillfulness (*khéo léo*). Merchants contended that selling involved flattery and, occasionally, "talking nonsense" (*nói xạo*). Just like Dung in the opening vignette, traders consistently displayed verbal dexterity to assure customers, most of them also women, in sweet but authoritative and persuasive tones of the quality, fair price, or uniqueness of an item. Stallholders would also adroitly manipulate the kin terms used as personal pronouns in Vietnamese so as to lower their status and elevate that of their customers: for example, an older trader would refer to a young browser as "elder sister"; a younger trader would urge an older customer to help out her "child" by buying a shirt. Such appeals used widely held assumptions about market traders' marginality to turn a purchase into a form of charity.

Deflating status and talking nonsense made trading an unpalatable profession for men, as masculinity tends to rest on maintaining prestige (*uy tín*). Those men who did work in Bến Thành—15 percent of all traders and, like Khánh, typically stallholders' husbands—displayed stereotypical ineptitude and bitterly asserted that circumstances forced them into such an unsuitable profession.¹³ Another woman complained that her husband spent most of his time in the market playing cards or hatching harebrained financial schemes, the most notorious being his "investment" in a costly antique cannon that he failed to resell.

With respect to their families, Bến Thành stallholders described trading as a form of maternal self-sacrifice (*hy sinh*) for their children—sacrifice being a component of femininity celebrated in the state's "Cultured Family" campaign. Traders' incomes enhanced family relationships

by financing education and recreation: television, restaurants, travel, or simply driving around on a new motorbike. Traders worried that long days on the market floor might harm their family lives, yet many said that their husbands assumed household tasks. Ngọc, for example, praised Khánh for attending to both her ailing mother and their young children, often getting up in the middle of the night and allowing Ngọc to sleep. Ngọc and Khánh exemplified the companionate marriage valorized by the state as key to modern “Cultured Families,” yet I knew of only one trader’s family that had been so certified. Traders’ exclusion reflected both their disdain for state policies and officials’ tendency to assume that traders could not represent this ideal.

Not all traders’ families were harmonious. Many women lamented their husbands’ infidelity or minimal contribution to household finances. They worried about their children’s behavior and complained about distant kin demanding to share in their prosperity. Overall, however, their experiences belie a facile connection between increasing wealth and declining family feeling. For many, trade was the only way that they could provide the material comfort that they and the state said was a necessary precondition for family happiness.

In their daily struggles to turn a profit in the contentious cultural and economic landscape of 1990s market socialism, cloth and clothing stallholders exemplified popular truths about trade’s traditional and innately feminine character. The power of these conceptions undoubtedly shaped behavior and justified claims such as Ngọc’s assessment of Khánh’s masculine entrepreneurial shortcomings. These behaviors and ideas persisted, however, not simply as crystallizations of timeless or inevitable cultural modes of production but also because traders viewed them as useful and reasonable responses to the dilemmas of early market socialism: volatile prices, uneven quality and supply, fickle consumers, political uncertainty, and a lack of formal access to capital. By pursuing entrepreneurial strategies of gendered self-presentation that were both practically necessary and culturally intelligible, traders could expand their businesses and enjoy comfortable, middle-class lifestyles. At the same time, such strategic essentialism reinforced official enframement of trade as inherently traditional, feminine, and hence peripheral to the development of a modern, industrialized economy.

FEMININITY AS MARKETABLE SKILL IN THE 2000s

Over the past decade, initial anxieties about stratification and instability have given way to greater confidence in the private sector. No milestones clearly demarcate earlier and later market socialism. Rather, the passage of time has simply convinced people that *Đổi Mới* will endure. Women’s businesses are still attributed to timeless features of femininity, while men’s entrepreneurship relies on personal networks, the “hooking economy” (Nguyễn-võ 2008), and equally naturalized notions of virility. There is, however, a growing

sense that doing business entails modern expertise that can be acquired through education and credentials. Bookstores lined with the *Harvard Business Essentials* series and other manuals promote entrepreneurial self-help.

Although these trends reflect a growing emphasis on private entrepreneurial initiative, they also reinforce prevailing state policies that link national economic growth to raising population quality (*chất lượng*), often defined in individualized terms of knowledge, initiative, and self-improvement.¹⁴ Similar to *suzhi* (quality) discourse in China, concern with *chất lượng* stems from recent calls for scientific birth planning, but it also resonates with Confucian notions of self-cultivation (Anagnost 2004; Fong 2004; Greenhalgh 2003; Hsu 2007; Kipnis 2006; Marr 2000). Consequently, entrepreneurs’ *chất lượng* is simultaneously economic and moral. For example, “Entrepreneurs Day,” established in 2004, celebrates businesspeople’s *tâm tài* (heart and talent) in creating jobs, marketing quality products, and organizing charitable works.

These developments would seem consistent with the supposed global neoliberal turn that has recently attracted much anthropological attention.¹⁵ As scholarship on market socialism in China cautions, however, the relationship between capitalist economics, socialist governmentality, class formations, and moral subjectivities is as marked by continuity with the past as by transformation (Kipnis 2008; Nonini 2008; Ong 2006). Similar to the “socialism from afar” that Aihwa Ong and Li Zhang (2008) observe in China, the Vietnamese state now applauds as modern (*hiện đại*), civilized (*văn minh*), and central to national development those forms of entrepreneurship that had been banned a couple of decades before—so long as businesspeople evince a “heart” committed to supporting the masses.

Not surprisingly, the reconfiguration of entrepreneurial morality has fueled renewed calls to upgrade “traditional” markets such as Bến Thành. In Hanoi, the famous Hàng Da market reopened in 2010 as a five-story commercial center with upscale retail shops above and a gleaming new marketplace below. One commentator praises the new market for “creating a commercial way of life and civilized and modern services” that will help to rationalize Hanoi’s market infrastructure (Duy Khánh 2010). Fittingly, the market opened during Hanoi’s 1,000th anniversary—an event that also celebrated the embrace of modernity and maintenance of tradition. Newspapers report plans to expand this model to other urban markets.

As the plans outlined by the city architect in the previous section suggest, Bến Thành market in the 1990s had appeared headed for a modernizing fate similar to Hàng Da’s. Bến Thành, however, has since received a reprieve, at least temporarily, thanks to its growing popularity as a tourist destination. In an unexpected twist, planners reevaluated Bến Thành’s traditional features as tools that could serve modern entrepreneurial strategy. Part of Bến Thành’s positive characterization stemmed from a spike in urban

property values. By 2006, one square meter in Bến Thành was valued at approximately \$175,000, displacing Tokyo's Ginza district as the most expensive space in the world (Aglionby 2006; Vũ Bình and Hoài Trang 2006). After citing this surprising news, one journalist incredulously described the "'marketplace' businessperson" (*doanh nhân "chợ"*), well schooled in the "technology" (*công nghệ*) of marketing (Vũ Bình and Hoài Trang 2006). Sellers, many of them young, attractive female college graduates conversant in three or four languages, sweetly flirted with customers. Stall owners cultivated skills through training, staff meetings, and several months of probationary employment for sellers who received monthly salaries of between three- and five-million *đồng* (around \$200–\$300). Sales generally garnered profits two to three times that of "modern" supermarkets and department stores. Unlike a department store, the market offered a bargaining experience that foreigners found culturally pleasurable. Recent redevelopment proposals, for now at least, have consequently abandoned the idea of a multi-storied international trade center in favor of preserving this important "market community" (*quần thể chợ*). One architect called for preservation to go beyond Bến Thành's façade, opining that "loving a girl is not just about loving her face and body, but her spirit and character" (Hoài Trang 2005).

Recast as modern business strategy, tradition nonetheless continues to inspire gender essentialism in these accounts. An architect feminizes Bến Thành as an object of masculine aesthetic and romantic appreciation. A journalist marvels at young, attractive, educated salesclerks who flirtatiously and profitably purvey Vietnamese culture to delighted foreigners. Although female sellers have clearly cultivated these skills, the exemplary "'marketplace' businessperson"—praised for deploying modern, rational entrepreneurial expertise in the newspaper article quoted above—is a man. Women, it seems, simply and naturally embody the qualities of Vietnamese femininity.

Dung and Ngọc had different reactions to these developments. Dung, whose six stalls specialize in handbags for foreign tourists, exuded optimism as she fidgeted with one of her many jade rings: "The market is now a historical landmark (*di tích lịch sử*), a symbol (*biểu tượng*) of the city. . . . Traders are doing well. There aren't problems like in the past" (conversation with author, December 31, 2007). Speaking to me after dinner at her newly constructed suburban house, Ngọc, however, expressed concern:

We don't want to put any more money into our stall . . . I don't know for sure what's going to happen . . . Where are they going to put us [if reconstruction occurs]? . . . More than a thousand traders, not to mention their families . . . it will be an incredible hardship. [conversation with author, January 18, 2008]

The two women's differing opinions partly reflect different positions in the broader market. Well-coiffed and bejeweled, Dung has successfully fashioned herself as a trader who can attract foreigners. However, Ngọc feels uneasy that her livelihood might depend on serving up market transactions

as cultural encounters with an alluring Vietnamese femininity. As popular perception of the market's essentialized femininity has shifted from the traditional, poor, uneducated stallholders of the 1990s to today's sophisticated, multilingual, attractive sales clerks, traders have become divided according to which model best fits them.

CONCLUSION

Women's management of market stalls may not seem surprising, given this practice's long-standing history in Vietnam, its correspondence to broader Southeast Asian associations between women and trade, and the "pervasive and often feminized phenomenon of small-scale marketization" throughout late-, post-, and market-socialist contexts (Gal and Kligman 2000a:3). In this account, however, I have suggested that there is more going on in Bến Thành market than the simple reproduction of tradition. Ascribing stallholders' behavior to Vietnamese cultural inheritances elides the complex gender- and class-making dynamics through which people choose to behave in certain ways, even when conforming to dominant cultural expectations about what is "normal" or "natural."

Central to traders' performances of gender identity have been postwar state policies of Marxist and later market-oriented development, both of which have enframed certain levels of the southern petty bourgeoisie as inherently feminine. This framing has marginalized traders yet also created material and symbolic opportunities. Ngọc, Khánh, Hà, Dung, and other *tiểu thương* in Bến Thành market have generally come to accept the logic that women possess temperaments suited for trade while men do not. *Tiểu thương* readily and vehemently identify pertinent characteristics in themselves and others. Such essentialism is complicated, however, by traders' descriptions of their relationship to these "natural facts" over time. "Sister petty traders" performed and narrated culturally intelligible gendered behaviors and patterns of ownership because such strategies were activated by particular exigencies (Yanagisako 2002). Embodying gender in expected ways in turn fostered the internalization of associations between femininity and petty trade.

Since 1975, most traders I know have appreciated being hailed by state planners as women, for this allowed them to be classed separately from the more masculinized petty bourgeoisie. Gendered classification also allowed them to deploy strategic essentialism that deflected socialist and early market-socialist suspicion of private entrepreneurs, even as it ensnared them in what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1995:214) identifies as the "constitutive paradox" of all essentialism by reinforcing its apparent naturalness. The combination of gendered classification and strategic essentialism consigned female traders to a backward sphere and raised gendered dilemmas for men who did business as *tiểu thương*. With more recent depictions of femininity as a conscious marketing strategy to charm foreigners, traders are divided according to how well they deploy feminine

wives, assuming they wish to do so. No longer conveniently conflated with class subjectivity, a particular entrepreneurial femininity can move a stallholder from the ranks of petty bourgeois *tiểu thương* into modern middle-class *doanh nhân*. Meanwhile, the entrenching of market socialism has encouraged processes of rationalization and stall consolidation. This presents the irony that market socialism might accomplish what high-socialist central planning could not: the transformation of Bến Thành's female workforce from petty bourgeois owners of capital into wage laborers in the service sector.

Attending to the narrative and performative co-construction of class and gender in a city that has seen particularly stark and rapid political-economic transformations reveals that, at moments in which class is obviously contentious, state attempts to make class legible can associate it with other more naturalized categories—in this case, gender. The naturalization of class claims about petty bourgeois market traders through appeals to gender essentialism has worked to defuse a potentially problematic class status by rendering it immoral or traditional in ways that gender makes self-evident.

What this account also highlights is that postwar state enframing has shaped material contexts and structures of sentiment to profoundly influence how subjects identified as female or *tiểu thương* perceive the world, even as they might overtly resist or challenge aspects of these depictions. Although scholarship on actually existing socialism and late, post-, and market socialism has effectively considered how class structures and sentiments have been created through dialogues between states and individuals, gender tends to emerge in these accounts either as an ideological construction associated with a tradition mobilized to challenge state policies or as a self-evident category that shapes the differential effects of those policies. Less attention has been paid to how socialist and market-socialist regimes have also been profoundly engendering. Although gender in Vietnam appears to be the result of natural factors that shape feminine predispositions and socioeconomic roles, and although class seems obviously constructed through political economic conditions, Bến Thành traders' enactment of gender and their statements about masculinity and femininity suggest that socialist and market-socialist regimes have effectively nurtured precisely those qualities that officials and *tiểu thương* alike treat as if they were innate.

Ann Marie Leshkovich *Department of Sociology and Anthropology, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA 01610; aleshkow@holycross.edu; <http://college.holycross.edu/faculty/aleshchow/homepage.html>*

NOTES

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1. Around \$5 at the time.
2. The term *nói xạo* implies that the person talking nonsense is deceitful. *Nói thách* is a less insulting term.
3. I conducted fieldwork in Bến Thành market for two years, in several stages (1995–97, 2003–04, and 2007–08). After interviewing 345 of Bến Thành's more than 500 cloth-and-clothing sellers (85 percent of them women), I conducted participant-observation with 50 traders. Twenty traders participated in extensive life history interviews.
4. The terms *late*, *post-*, and *market socialism* all refer to the growing prominence of market dynamics within current or former socialist political economic systems. *Post-* characterizes those states, primarily Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, in which socialism “collapsed,” although scholars now question the decisiveness of this “rupture” (Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Dunn 2004; Verdery 1996; West and Raman 2009). *Late* describes those states that remain committed to socialism, including China, Vietnam, and Cuba, and those European countries that incorporated market elements in the 1970s and 1980s (Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Hann 2009; Hernández-Reguant 2004; Leshkovich 2006, 2008b; Zhang 2002). Because *late* can also imply evolutionary progression, scholars of China and Vietnam increasingly use the phrase *market socialism* to designate communist party leadership, ongoing official commitment to socialism, and a market economy with significant state planning (see, e.g., Bray 2005; Hoffman 2008; Hsu 2007; Schwenkel 2009). The Vietnamese government calls this formation a “market economy with socialist orientation” [*kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa*].
5. Under socialism and capitalism, the informal economy provides a reserve labor pool, supplemental income, and alternative channels of production and distribution (see, e.g., Brotherton 2008; Dunn 2005; Heyat 2002; Scott 1998; Smart and Smart 2005; Szelenyi 1988; West and Raman 2009).
6. A variant of the French *petite bourgeoisie*, the petty bourgeoisie includes independent small-business owners with limited capital who labor alongside their employees. In both English and Vietnamese, the term also carries the negative connotation of *pettiness*.
7. For discussion of how gender comes to be naturalized, see Ginsburg and Tsing 1990, McKinnon and Silverman 2005, Weston 1990, and Yanagisako and Delaney 1995.

8. Duiker (1995:111–115) discusses debates about the pace of socialization in southern Vietnam.
9. The immorality and disorderliness of private trade predated socialism in many countries, with Russia a notable exception (Hsu 2007; Humphrey 2002:59; Humphrey and Mandel 2002:1; Kaneff 2002:35–41; Watts 2002:64).
10. Ethnic Chinese businesses were particularly targeted, suggesting intriguing links between ethnicity and class that fall beyond the scope of this article.
11. Abrami (2002) notes that, in northern Vietnam, associations between petty trade and rurality similarly conceal the scope of an enterprise within naturalizing rhetoric about subsistence.
12. A key slogan of market socialism is “rich people, strong country” (*dân giàu nước mạnh*).
13. Tran Ngoc Angie (2004) describes how men recoup masculinity in the similarly feminized garment industry.
14. For example, the 2001–10 population strategy calls for improved population quality “to meet the requirements of industrialization and modernization, making a contribution into the rapid and sustainable development of the country” (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2006).
15. See, for example, Richland 2009.

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