Van Nguyen-Marshall · Lisa B. Welch Drummond · Danièle Bélanger
Editors

The Reinvention of Distinction

Modernity and the Middle Class in Urban Vietnam

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Chapter 6
Finances, Family, Fashion, Fitness, and ... Freedom? The Changing Lives of Urban Middle-Class Vietnamese Women

Ann Marie Leshkowich

The expanding ranks of visibly prosperous middle classes in Vietnamese urban centers could be interpreted as a sign of increased freedom to construct identity through engagement with market processes of moneymaking, commodification, and conspicuous consumption. Both Nikolas Rose (1999) and Nguyễn-võ Thu-Hương (2008) caution, however, that market “freedoms” prove illusory and ironic. Rose points out that the exercise of choice in the projects of self-making demanded of the successful “free” market actor and citizen requires substantial expert guidance from cultural, social, and educational industries (1999, p. 65). For middle classes, status also brings anxiety about protecting and morally justifying material, cultural, and social privilege (Liechty, 2003). This is all the more the case when that privilege is emerging in a current or formerly socialist society in which wealth has in the past been punished, and strategies of moneymaking continue to be the object of moral and political ambivalence (Buyandelgeriyn, 2007; Hsu, 2007; Jellema, 2005; Leshkowich, 2006; Patico, 2005). Add into the mix the particular dilemmas that women face to present themselves and their families in modern, attractive ways, while avoiding displays that might seem decadent, crass, or inappropriate (Freeman, 2007; Gill, 1993; Jones, 2010; Nguyễn-võ Thu-Hương, 2008), and it quickly becomes apparent that the freedoms of prosperity and the marketplace pose considerable constraint.

Drawing on 15 years of ongoing ethnographic research in Ho Chi Minh City, this chapter explores dilemmas of freedom, constraint, anxiety, and morality in four areas that urban middle-class women describe as central to their contemporary lives: finances, family, fashion, and fitness. As I have explored elsewhere, each of these aspects of women’s lives presents its own particular constellation of dilemmas and opportunities with respect to changing gender roles, family relationships, moral issues pertaining to moneymaking, body image, and notions of modernity, civilization, and progress.1 My goal here is to consider what we learn by looking

1 Earlier publications have explored these domains separately: finances (Leshkowich, 2006), fashion (Leshkowich, 2003, 2009), family (Leshkowich, 2008a), and fitness (Leshkowich, 2008b).

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at these different areas of women’s lives together. The case studies and vignettes presented in this chapter generate a broader picture of the dilemmas that emerge from sites in which urban middle-class women appear to be experiencing freedoms of self-determination through their activities as consumers and income generators on behalf of themselves and their families.

The fact that many women quite consciously embrace what they identify as opportunities for autonomy and self-realization through new forms of production and consumption might signal a retreat of the state from involvement in private life. This chapter demonstrates, however, that market-oriented economic policies have provided significant opportunities for the Vietnamese government and communist party to interpellate women as consumer-citizens in new commercial arenas. They do so in part by reinterpreting issues of social status and economic inequality as questions of individual moral character. Citizens engage with these expectations in ways that also make them receptive to the expert guidance provided by state-affiliated individuals, companies, and organizations. Urban middle-class women’s fashion, fitness, and family practices thus quite literally embody the success of state developmentalist and civilizing agendas. This connection between the state and individual or familial market participation – a relationship that is political, economic, and, I argue, profoundly moral – thus complicates contentions that the expansion of markets and middle classes in Vietnam is evidence of the global spread of neoliberalism.

6.1 Rendering Middle Classness Moral

The middle class is notoriously difficult to define. Even if one adopts a Marxist definition of class as a structural relationship to the means of production, pinpointing exactly how much capital one needs in order to occupy the middle can be elusive. An even thornier problem comes from the so-called new middle class whose status depends not as much on ownership of material capital, as on their possession of human capital in the form of credentialed knowledge and expertise. Reckoned in terms of production, the middle class becomes so vast, amorphous, and internally diverse a group as to become theoretically untenable. It is also subject to significant internal tensions, as when middle-class professionals disdain the behavior of merchants as crude or disreputable. Weber eloquently underscored this point in his call to attend to social status, rather than merely class situation, even as class and status often are mutually reinforcing.

Weber’s argument has inspired subsequent theorists to suggest that a vision of middle classness emerges more sharply when one shifts focus from production to consumption and from economics to culture. Middle classness coalesces, albeit still loosely and with plenty of room for slippage and contestation, as a lifestyle.

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2 For an insightful overview of Marxist and Weberian approaches to middle classness, see Liechty (2003).

3 Shorthand for the official terminology, “market economics with a socialist orientation” (kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa).

4 In her study of private housing communities in China, Li Zhang (2008) makes a similar point about the tendency to hide how wealth is produced while displaying it through conspicuous consumption.
One answer lies in the specific ways that market-oriented changes over the past two decades have recast the moral dilemmas of earning versus spending. Scholarship on late socialism in China suggests that class differentiation processes are as much moral and narrative — making sense of and justifying unequal wealth — as they are economic and political (Hsu, 2007; Zhang, 2008; Rofel, 2007). Precisely because market forms of moneymaking and reckoning status depart from previous socialist central planning models, their justification demands considerable ideological work. Hsu argues that this novelty makes market morality visible, contingent, and contestable (2007, p. 9). Put differently, the anxiety common to middle classes everywhere gets magnified when the accumulating classes are emerging within a new structural context in which political and popular support for their accumulation is neither naturalized nor commonsensical. This unease about wealth has been voiced in Vietnam since the 1990s in a variety of arenas, from headline-generating corruption scandals involving well-placed officials (Gainsborough, 2003; MacLean, 2012), to popular stereotypes of greedy traders blithely deceiving innocent customers about items’ prices, quality, or provenance (Leshkowich, 2006, 2008a).

In the face of skepticism about the possibility of earning money virtuously, proper conspicuous consumption becomes a strategy to render middle classness moral. I am coining the term “rendering moral” from work by Li (2007) and Rose (1999) that suggests contemporary forms of governmentality center on processes of “rendering technical.” Problems such as unequal access to wealth are depoliticized, first, by being defined as technical problems that can be solved through the application of expertise, and, second, through shaping the “conduct of conduct” so that individuals internalize the “habits, aspirations, and beliefs” associated with a “will to improve” (Li, 2007, p. 5).

My research with middle classes in Vietnam suggests that a similar depoliticization process is at work to justify emerging status by rendering privilege a sign of both state development goals and of individual moral worth that is made visible through properly refined forms of consumption. Rendering status moral resembles the attempts to moralize wealth that Kate Jellama (2005) documented in a Red River Delta village in which the newly comfortable strive to display merit (công) through donations to temples and events that foster reciprocal social relations. Although urban middle classes in Ho Chi Minh City often engage in similar religious and ceremonial activities connected to công, their attempts to render wealth moral extend beyond public charity or reciprocity to suggest that their more private acts of consumption are also evidence of their propriety. In a logic reminiscent of the ethos that Weber (1958) identified as propelling the emergence of capitalism in Western Europe, middle classes in Vietnam tend to claim that they have earned their prosperity because they have worked hard, acquired education, and have cultivated the sensibilities associated with being modern (hiền đỗ) and civilized (văn minh).

Class differentiation is rendered a moral index of the degrees to which individuals have become proper persons. This level of refinement, in turn, can best be discerned through appropriate forms of consumption, thus deflecting attention from the morally fraught question of how the means for consumption were acquired.

6.2 The Gendered Dilemmas of Market Freedom

The shift in attention from middle-class production to consumption is also profoundly gendered. In different parts of the world, consumption is closely associated with women in a vicious cycle that frequently serves to critique both women and consumption. In his classic study of America at the turn of the 20th century, Veblen (1994) argued that women had been forced to focus on the frivolous and demeaning task of consuming to display their families’ status, and that this role signified their subordination. Studies of the emergence of mass consumer culture in Western Europe and North America underscore this gendered ambivalence toward consumption. On the one hand, consumption became a socially and personally significant means to assert and acquire status. On the other hand, being economic, social, or political power that women might wield as consumers was consistently undercut by distaste for their unseemly expressions of desire, as in Victorian-era warnings that women in department stores might succumb to the allure of fashionable items or in contemporary condemnations of women as irresponsible shopaholics (De Grazia & Furlough, 1996; Fiske, 1991; Nava, 1996).

In different parts of Asia, the relationship between gender and consumption surrounding the emergence of urban middle classes had much to do with colonialism and debates about cultural or national identity. In the 1920s and 1930s, emerging nationalist leaders in many countries of the region condemned the so-called “New Woman” or “Modern Woman” for uncritically adopting European styles and mores. To nationalist elites, most of them men attired in versions of Western suits, the New Woman’s hairstyle, dress, and comportment signified the loss of precisely that national or cultural essence around which they hoped to rally the movement for independence (Chakrabarty, 1992; Chatterjee, 1993; Jones & Leshkowich, 2003; Roces & Edwards, 2007; Tai, 1992; Tarlo, 1996; Taylor, 1997). Most scholars have interpreted these hyperbolic debates as largely symbolic discussions that indexed not so much women’s roles, as broader anxieties about changing political, economic, or social conditions under colonialism. In her study of Burmese debates about women’s “sheer blouses,” however, Ikeya argues that linking women to “lowbrow materialism” had material underpinnings, as colonial policies of labor, education, and migration profoundly upset the structural relationship between Burmese men and women in ways that threatened men (Ikeya, 2008).

6 Rivkin-Fish offers a fascinating discussion of a similar “logic of mapping moral caliber onto class distinction” and its expression through consumption in postsocialist Russia (Rivkin-Fish, 2009, p. 80).
Turning to the more recent economic and social changes Vietnam has experienced, Ikeya’s point alerts us to the ways in which symbolic debates about women and consumption may reflect deeper anxieties as women become central to the production of economic, social, and cultural capital on which middle classness rests. As middle classes display status through having the right kinds of homes, the right kinds of educations for their children, the right kinds of bodies and possessions, women increasingly become lightning rods for expressions of anxiety precisely because they are the crucial producers and markers of these materially significant appearances. This has led to a proliferation of cultural production educating women about how to perform consumption judiciously and appropriately. As Vietnamese state rhetoric shifted in the 1990s from focusing on women as public producers (and working class) to depicting them as private, but socially significant, caretakers for husbands and children (and middle class), the Women’s Union and other official organs provided educational programming about how women might mitigate the negative moral effects of marketization by creating and protecting the “Happy Family” (Drummond, 2004; Nghiêm Lien Huong, 2004, p. 299; Pettus, 2003). The Happy Family (Gia đình hạnh phúc) was discernable through its items of consumption: a motorbike, television, rice cooker, and a house with spacesrationally allocated for eating, sleeping, and leisure activities. Just as women were supposed to become rational, scientific, and modern managers of consumption, so also was the expertise guiding them. Large sections of urban bookstores are devoted to women’s self-help literature in the form of psychologically and medically vetted guidance about such diverse topics as family emotional relationships, child psychological development, diet, and sexual intimacy. Newspaper advice columns caution women against letting their jobs or concerns with finances hamper their ability to nurture their children or attend to their husbands. Other columns stress the importance ofmaintaining an attractive appearance for ongoing marital harmony. Then there are the cautionary tales about women whose excessive consumption represents a moral flaw or a departure from traditional, appropriate feminine norms and ultimately destroys their families.

The palpable anxiety in this proliferation of attention to middle-class women’s consumption practices aptly illustrates Rose’s point about the dilemmas that ensue when personal life becomes a matter of choice. Just as Ikeya found in her research on colonial Burma, however, I argue that the fact that these anxieties coalesce around women goes beyond symbolism to suggest the gender-specific effects of recent material transformations. To what extent are women gaining material or social advantage from their prominence in precisely the domains of private life that have come to be politically significant to state-sponsored visions of development, modernity, and civilization? To what new regimes of discipline might they be subject because of this advantage or the perceived possibility of it? In the following sections, I address these questions through brief accounts of how specific women occupying different locations within the broader category of “middle-class” confront the dilemmas of moneymaking, raising families, and presenting themselves attractively through dress and exercise.

6.3 Finances

In response to concerns about whether it was possible to be socially responsible and entrepreneurial, Ho Chi Minh City newspapers in the 1990s frequently profiled businesspeople who had managed to be successful without sacrificing a concern for others. Hiền was the subject of one such profile in a 1997 edition of a popular women’s newspaper. Hiền and her husband owned three garment factories that together employed 800 workers (Fig. 6.1). Having left her civil service job, Hiền appeared to be a quintessential Đảm Môt success story. When I met this educated, articulate, and quietly determined woman several weeks after the article’s publication, however, I sensed that her pride in her accomplishments was tempered by a concern for how she was perceived in gendered and moral terms. Her success, she told me, was both the result of and evidence for her Buddhist piety.

In narrating her life story, Hiền repeatedly mentioned that being a woman involves sacrifice (hy sinh) as one subordinates one’s own needs and desires to those of others. Hy sinh typically refers to sacrificing for one’s family or, in nationalist revolutionary discourse, for the state. For Hiền, doing business also required hy sinh:

- It’s very hard…every day I have to solve such problems that I have a bad headache. First, it’s because of the customers; they always demand that I do this, that, and the other thing…
- Then, there are the workers who demand that I do this, that, and the other thing for them.
- But, I’m in the middle, so I have to solve things so that both sides get what they want, and that means that I must sacrifice.

Noting that one must have good intentions and that heaven ultimately decides whether one succeeds, Hiền explained the role of virtue in doing business:

In business, a businessperson is someone who has many strategies to bring profit to himself [sic]. [Bui] must be consistent with and live in accordance with your conscience, consistent with your heart [tên]. Only then will you succeed. That’s my philosophy in life.

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7 The Happy Family campaign is a continuation of longstanding socialist movements to promote national development through the transformation of attitudes and behaviors in the most basic units of society. The first iteration of these campaigns, begun in the 1940s by Hồ Chí Minh, focused on creating a New Way of Life based on the New Socialist Person who would be directly loyal to the party and collective, as opposed to the family (Drummond, 2004, pp. 162–163). Later versions shifted to promoting the Happy or Cultured Family, with emphasis by the 1980s turning toward issues of family planning. By the 1990s, the moral, cultural, and social dilemmas raised by the turn toward market socialism prompted decreased emphasis on family planning, political, or economic goals in favor of visions of the family as a harmonious affective unit. It is this ideal of the family as a cozy nest that Women’s Union programming promotes.

8 Nguyễn văn Thu-Hưng (2008) notes the irony that, while middle-class women’s sexuality is disciplined through the application of scientific expertise, the sexuality of working-class prostitutes is punished through incarceration.

9 All names in the case studies are pseudonyms.
Hiền’s piety led her to demonstrate her virtue and accumulate merit through the sacrifice of occasional vegetarianism. While many Vietnamese Buddhists abstain from meat two days a month, Hiền did so for ten days. Being a woman, however, did force her to compromise for familial reasons:

...at night I have to eat with my children. Because I’m not able to be away from them. I’m gone every day, so at night if I don’t share the same food tray with my children then the feelings between parents and children will push them out into society. I’ll push my children away. If that happens, a young child is just like a thermometer, it’s influenced by the weather. So I set aside dinntime for my children, for my friends.

Hiền’s story highlights key intersections between Vietnamese conceptions of gender, Buddhism, and fate. First, Buddhism has long appealed to Vietnamese women because, in contrast to patriarchal Confucianism, women were not prohibited from acquiring Buddhist textual knowledge and performing rituals. At the same time, women’s duty to their families often forced them to neglect religious study and contemplation and hence compromise piety, much like Hiền sacrifices her vegetarianism so that she can show concern for her children by sharing their food tray.10

Second, Hiền’s narrative explores the complicated connections between virtue, talent, and fate. According to Vietnamese Buddhists, fate determines one’s life course, but individuals must use their talents to cultivate virtue and realize optimal fate. Hiền follows a virtuous Buddhist path that she believes enables her to realize a destiny to be successful.

Third, in linking virtue and money making, Hiền explicitly challenges accusations that morality is incompatible with profit. For her, moneymaking is neither inherently evil nor amoral, and one can be both a successful entrepreneur and a good, virtuous woman. She is not a petit-bourgeois parish, but a moral Buddhist who serves her workers and her customers by listening to the dictates of her conscience. In Hiền’s view, her financial success is both the result of and primary evidence for her virtue, for good fortune only comes to those who work hard and live in a manner consistent with their hearts and their principles. At the same time, this claim of self-assured success and virtue betrays a great deal of anxiety about whether her success impugns her propriety as a woman and socialist citizen.

6.4 Family

Hiền’s story illustrates that part of the moral dilemma raised by money is that a focus on finances and property can promote individualism at the expense of the community, including the family. This is particularly ironic, given that a major effect of Đổi Mới has been to turn the family into a key economic unit. Ownership of land was transferred from rural cooperatives to individual families. In the cities, many people started small businesses, and they usually did this as families, pooling resources and tapping into flexible labor or small amounts of capital from relatives. This kind of productive family symbolized the positive potential of market-oriented reforms, but if business led to selfishness, then perhaps the values of the traditional family would be lost and family relationships would be weakened.

In newspapers and officials’ rhetoric, the middle-class family ideal was made legible through a contrast with its evil twin: the depraved rich family that served as a cautionary tale of the dangers of prosperity. Some urban households were described in the media and academic essays as pathological hotbeds of selfishness, unseemly desires, and immorality. Bad middle-class parents focused excessively on possessions and status, and their unruly and disrespectful children became involved with sex, drugs, and crime (Duong Thoa, 1995, p. 37; Le Ngoc Van, 1994; Le Thi, 1994, p. 58). Foreign culture bore some of the blame for the decay of the traditional family,

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10 Although Hiền did not explicitly use the word “thịnh ân” or sentiment, her vision of feminine concern for the wellbeing of others is precisely what this popular term captures. Rydström (2003) argues that thịnh ân is the primary virtue that girls are socialized to embody.
as in one official's call for Vietnamese to protect themselves from "the flow of garbage from foreign-degraded, reactionary culture which is strange to our tradition of humanities, and benevolence" (Nguyen Khoa Diem, 1997, p. 56). But most of the fault lay with parents, particularly mothers. One academic cautioned that businesspeople's daily contact with "trading, hustling and even cheating activities" could not help but adversely affect their children. Another social scientist described female traders as uncaring and neglectful mothers:

> Women apt for commercial activities virtually neglect the care, upbringing and education of their children, that is, do not fulfill the tasks of mothers. ... Mothers having babies breastfeed them as quick as possible then leave them to the care of their husbands or grandparents to engage in commercial affairs, without bothering about what would happen to [the] small creatures. (Duy Hop, 1997, pp. 17-18)

Such harrowing descriptions of maternal disregard bear little resemblance to the ways that the female traders with whom I have conducted research since the mid-1990s discuss their lives. As many have prospered and joined the ranks of the middle class, albeit with lower levels of material wealth than Hiền's family has acquired, they have responded to such indictments by portraying their businesses as allowing them to be better mothers who sacrifice on behalf of their children (Fig. 6.2). Their incomes provide educational opportunities for their children and allow the entire family to engage in the pleasurable leisure activities celebrated in the "happy family" campaign: watching television, trying new foods, traveling, or taking in the city sights (đi chơi) on a new motorbike.

Traders do worry that long days on the market floor might harm their family lives. Many said their husbands took over household roles by caring for children or running errands. One stallholder, Ngọc, praised her husband:

> He reduces my load by shoulder[ing] the responsibility for the hard jobs in our family. For example, when I've been selling until late at night and come home tired ... he deals with a lot. Many times, at night my daughter has already gone to sleep but wakes up crying, she has wet the bed and her pants are soaked. I have to change them. But there are also many times when she cries and he takes care of everything, he doesn't even call me. If I hear, then

![Fig. 6.2 A daughter helps her widowed mother tend a clothing stall. Photograph by the author](image)

> I get up and the two of us do it together, only very rarely does he let me get up and take care of our child by myself. If not, he tells me to go to sleep and let him take care of it, that's so lovely.

Similar to Hiền, Ngọc defines morality as expressed through human connections. Money can foster one's ability to attend to those relationships, or, at the very least, it does not automatically make it impossible to meet one's affectionate familial obligations. Prosperity in business could also allow one to consume in ways that achieve precisely the modern form of happy family and companionate marriage that the state promoted. Suggesting that achieving middle classness entailed a reconfiguration of gender roles, some women quietly told me that their husbands had to respect their status as both the economic and emotional pillars of the family (trụ cốt trong gia đình).

6.5 Fashion

Urban middle-class women's concerns about their family relationships were also related to a set of activities that they found necessary and personally pleasurable in the new economy: fashion and fitness. In the 1990s, urbanites began declaring that a slogan of the revolution, "enough food, warm clothes" (ăn no mặc ấm), had been replaced by a motto of prosperity, "delicious food, beautiful clothes" (ăn ngon mặc đẹp). Even those women who described their family's finances as just getting by told me that the opportunity to buy new fashion allowed them to express femininity in ways that were prohibited during the years of socialist austerity following the end of the war in 1975. During those "revolutionary" years, efforts to encourage equality and to promote a working class aesthetic limited available dress options to ones which women by the 1990s rejected as utilitarian, boring, and unfeminine. In contrast, the more colorful, body conscious, and diverse styles flooding Đô MôMARKETS allowed urban women to display themselves to others (and to themselves) as attractive, cosmopolitan, and economically comfortable. Western-style clothing appealed for this reason, but so did Vietnam's so-called traditional dress, the áo dài, which allowed cosmopolitan women to style themselves as both traditional and fashionable (Leshkovich, 2003).

The fun that many saw in fashion provided pressures of its own. Some women confided that they had become fashion-crazed and worried about how much they needed to spend to keep up with trends. One market trader who designed many of the clothes for sale in her stall told me that the average "lifespan" of any given style was no more than a month. Middle classes' clothing, like their incomes, became disposable.

The greatest pressure that fashionable women have faced, however, is less concrete: the expectation that their appearances must simultaneously represent both Vietnamese tradition and international modernity. They therefore have to choose fashion judiciously and appropriately. As the wife of then-Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt told an audience at a fashion show in 1997, "As Vietnam becomes integrated..."
into ASEAN and the world, the behavior and comportment of women, especially the task of carefully preserving the do dài of our ethnic group, is an issue of the utmost importance" (Thùy Hâ, 1997, p. 9).

The high stakes surrounding dress were apparent in a fashion contest for young people that I attended in Ho Chi Minh City. The event was organized by the Hô Chí Minh Communist Youth League and held at the Youth Cultural House. The contestants, all students and young professionals in their late teens and early twenties and about two-thirds of them women, chose outfits for school or work and for an evening out (Fig. 6.3). A panel of expert judges assessed whether their selections were attractive and appropriate (phô ưng). While the final results were being tabulated, one of the judges – a nationally prominent designer and head of a state fashion company – took the microphone. Instead of the customary pleasantries praising the event and the competitors’ efforts, she lamented that the fashion she had seen that night made her despair. Turning toward the female contestants, she said:

The outfits chosen by the female contestants aren’t appropriate for their age, or for the lifestyle of Vietnamese people... You young women have gotten old; you’ve become supermodels and lost your innocence.

The designer asked whether the audience agreed that young people needed to represent the next generation by comporting themselves appropriately. Those in attendance, primarily parents and friends of the contestants, responded with enthusiastic applause.

Because the women had chosen so inappropriately, only one female contestant was awarded a prize that night. When I interviewed the designer the next day, she explained why she was so annoyed: “Because of waves of different cultural influences, the girls don’t know how to choose for themselves, they don’t know how to create a ‘character’ [she used the English word] for themselves.” Her job, and that of other experts, she told me, was to guide them so that they could be appropriately fashionable.

Fig. 6.3 A fashion contest for youth sponsored by the Hô Chí Minh Communist Youth League. Photograph by the author.

6.6 Fitness

For older women, concern with appearance also motivated their decision to exercise. Beginning in the 1990s, a number of fitness clubs opened in Ho Chi Minh City, many of them run by district governments or organizations associated with the communist party, often with private investment and management. Health clubs tend to be segregated by sex. Men go to weight lifting establishments, and women join women-only clubs that offer cardiovascular exercise, stretching, yoga, and light weight training (Fig. 6.4). Women exercise for several reasons. As well-heeled Vietnamese urbanites struggle with the downside of prosperity, such as pollution and diets high in animal fats and sugar, many worry about weight, cardiovascular health, and cancer. Exercise also provides leisure time to reduce stress and form friendships with other women. As opposed to participating in outdoor aerobics in city parks, which also has become increasiagly popular, belonging to a club allows one to display status as a person who has money and time for such activities and sufficient knowledge of science to appreciate the health benefits of using a weight machine or a treadmill and seeking the expertise of a personal trainer. Finally, a physically fit woman can maintain an attractive physique.

In 1993 and again in 2007, I conducted research in Club Royale, a popular women’s fitness center located near downtown. In the 1990s, it occupied the higher end of clubs catering to Vietnamese, but was neither as exclusive nor as expensive as hotel-based fitness centers that catered to foreigners and very wealthy Vietnamese. By 2007, a lack of renovation to the facilities and increased competition from higher-end chains had led to a decline in Club Royale’s status. Nevertheless, it has continued to tout its focus on providing a scientifically sound, health enhancing exercise regimen. Both club management and personal trainers claim that their club allows women to improve their inner physical health, a corollary benefit of which is that they develop greater self-confidence and look good. Staff members
unanimously proclaim, however, that health is their paramount concern. Members echoed this sentiment in the initial moments of our interviews, but most, particularly those with husbands and children (the vast majority of Club Royale’s patrons), explained in some detail how exercise would allow them to maintain an attractive, youthful appearance that would keep their husbands interested. More than half of them said that the Tư Đức, or four virtues that Confucianism prescribes for women, could be updated to serve as a model for contemporary women. One virtue in particular, dung, or appearance, could, they argued, be revised from its older associations with being clean and neat to include dressing in modern fashions and maintaining a lithe figure. Interestingly, the Women’s Union, some academics, and the popular media have also touted reinterpretations of the four components of Tư Đức as a way for women to merge modernity and tradition in culturally appropriate ways (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh, 2004; Petts, 2003). These claims resonate with colonial-era quests to develop a form of modern woman who would adopt elements of foreign influence without compromising her traditional cultural essence.

Club Royale’s personal trainers, many of them precisely the kinds of young, attractive women that, in a different context, might lead their clients to feel insecure about their husbands’ fidelity, sympathized with the older women’s dilemmas. Although they emphasized that inner beauty produced outer beauty, and hence the former was far more significant than the latter, many admitted that a woman’s appearance had a pronounced effect on marital happiness. One trainer told me:

A husband of a fat woman—that always has an influence on the man and in this way it will have an influence on their happy relationship (quan hệ hạnh phúc). So a woman very much needs to keep her health and her beauty to protect family happiness (bảo vệ hạnh phúc gia đình).

Echoing the state’s Happy Family campaign, the trainer’s statement suggests women to be the primary agents to ensure family happiness. In the era of market socialism, the idealized middle-class family is to be maintained by a self-confident, yet loving, financially responsible, modern, yet demure, and attractive woman, wife, and mother. As the prime minister’s wife had suggested, women’s behavior and comportment had indeed become an issue of “the utmost importance.”

6.7 Rethinking Market Freedoms in Vietnam

These overviews of women’s lives suggest that many urban middle-class women faced enormous pressure to behave in particular ways, especially in the arena of consumption that had seemed to offer so much possibility for pleasure and autonomy. Many reported that they felt enormous stress—and they used this English word to describe their condition. Even here, however, one might also discern the desire to portray one’s self as having status, for being overburdened and overtired can also have globally trendy cachet. It is also important to place urban middle-class women’s dilemmas in a broader context. The women that I came to know as they earned money, cared for families, sold or bought clothing, and worked out certainly find their circumstances to be vastly superior to those of poverty. They take pride and security in their level of material comfort and ability to express themselves and to portray their family’s success through dressing in an increasingly diverse array of clothing, spending time at a health club, and working to build a stable family life.

To return to Nikolas Rose’s concerns about freedom and governmentality, however, these vignettes suggest that what many middle-class urban Vietnamese women experience as an ability to exercise choice in shaping their own lives is in fact closely connected to constraint, much of it intertwined with ideals that have been prominently promoted by the government: slogans about how generating wealth can be a form of patriotism to build the country; propaganda campaigns and self-help books designed to help wives maintain proper morality and hence protect themselves from the negative impact that materialism and individualism can have on emotional and familial relationships; a fashion contest sponsored by the Communist Youth League in which a nationally known designer who works for a state-run company criticizes the young women’s inappropriate fashion choices; a health club run by an organization affiliated with the communist party in which many women seek to reshape their bodies in the spirit of the Four Confucian Virtues being promoted by party-affiliated organizations. Through these diverse channels, government clearly has a role in shaping ideas and practices associated with the new middle-class femininity that is supposedly all about freedom of individual choice in the market.

It is tempting to think of “market socialism” in Vietnam as indicating a retreat of the state from its monopoly over economic activity and, by extension, from its shaping of Vietnamese citizens’ daily lives. It is also a trend associated globally with
neoliberalism, as issues such as health and education that were handled publicly increasingly become the responsibility of private entities. However, recent anthropological scholarship, particularly that focused on late or postcolonial contexts, urges caution in assuming globally advancing logics of late capitalism or a grand rupture with earlier forms of governmentality (Kipnis, 2008; Matza, 2009; Ong, 2006; Nonini, 2008; Schwenkel & Leshkowich, 2012). In contrast to claims about socialism withering in the face of capitalism, this scholarship suggests that reworked and rearticulated aspects of market logics can become a project of the state that in fact reinforces its practical and ideological authority over social, political, and cultural processes—what Ong and Zhang (2008) dub "socialism from afar."

As a description of governmentality in Vietnam, the model of socialism from afar may overstate the power of the center to determine the process of change, particularly when one considers the greater direct role that transnational actors might play in shaping Vietnam’s economy (Schwenkel & Leshkowich, 2012). It nevertheless is helpful in drawing our attention to the direct and indirect involvement of the Vietnamese state and party in precisely those domains of private life explored here. Over the past two decades, the Vietnamese state has not retreated from shaping citizens’ daily lives so much as changed the arenas and tactics through which it attempts to do so. Citizens no longer participate as widely in mass mobilization campaigns designed to spur revolutionary socialist activism. Urban middle-class women in particular find such activities distasteful signs of a revolution that they claim now belongs to the past. Many revel in the freedom to focus on making money, taking care of their families, and enjoying daily life. Yet precisely these pursuits are now closely intertwined with state activities. The Vietnamese state has become an influential commercial actor through joint ventures that produce consumer goods, media that define what fashions are attractive and appropriate, and leisure and fitness companies that provide recreational venues. Since the 1990s, the Vietnamese government has moved from organizing a vanguard of urban working classes to developing a skilled, savvy middle class of consumers whose fashion, fitness, and family choices embody the success of the state developmentalist and civilizing agenda.

Although the state directly shapes the economy through extensive involvement in production and marketing, its most profound influence over citizens’ daily lives lies in the domain of morality. Through propaganda, educational programming, media, and self-help literature, actors affiliated with the state and often speaking overtly on its behalf reinterpret issues of social status and economic transformation as questions of individual moral character. Prosperity comes to those who embody valorized forms of selfhood and continually assess the success of their efforts to measure up to standards of culture, civilization, and modernity. Such claims appeal to middle classes because they render growing inequality moral in ways that naturalize class differentiation and shield middle classes from accusations and their own nagging guilt that their status might have come at the expense of others. Having internalized such visions of morally correct personhood, middle classes become increasingly receptive to the expert guidance provided by state-affiliated individuals, companies, and organizations.

Middle-class women in Vietnam embody freedom—almost literally, given their focus on fashion and exercise. It is a freedom of tangible pleasure and status, and one that many quite actively choose, but it is also a freedom that has largely been made for them and that poses significant constraints. Although this freedom might seem quintessentially neoliberal, it also intersects in interesting ways with socialism, as middle-class women’s consumption activities contribute to building the nation. Just as the high moral stakes surrounding women’s behavior suggest that the ability to engage in the marketplace is not as liberating as it might originally appear, so, too, does the state’s ability to interpellate women as consumer-citizens suggest that market freedom is not the significant break with socialism that proponents of a neoliberal consumer revolution would have us believe.

References


