

NEGOTIATING THE MIDDLE: INTERACTIONS OF CLASS, GENDER AND
CONSUMERISM AMONG THE MIDDLE CLASS
IN HO CHI MINH CITY, VIET NAM

by

Rylan G. Higgins

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As members of the Dissertation Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Rylan G. Higgins entitled *Negotiating the Middle: Interactions of Class, Gender and Consumerism Among the Middle Class in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam* and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

_____ Date: 12/04/08
Diane Austin

_____ Date: 12/04/08
Linda Green

_____ Date: 12/04/08
Elizabeth Kennedy

Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate College. I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

_____ Date: 12/04/08
Dissertation Director: Diane Austin

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SIGNED: Rylan G. Higgins

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ABSTRACT

This urban ethnography examines the everyday lives of young adults participating in middle-class culture in Ho Chi Minh City. My analysis illuminates the motivations and processes by which middle-class people create a social and moral *middleness*. *Middleness* refers both to the experiences of this group and to the cultural space wherein individuals perform their gender-specific, consumption-driven roles and negotiate identities as modern Vietnamese people. In attempting to understand precisely how social class functions and is experienced, my analysis focuses on how it relates to other processes of identity formation (i.e. gender and consumerism). Doing so also requires that I call attention to the uneven, unstable impacts of globalizing processes and the importance of performativity. By arguing that class is best understood as a socio-cultural process and by confronting the myth of global cultural homogenization, I reveal important insights about what it means to be middle-class in Ho Chi Minh City. Individual and group responses to the city's ever-changing consumer society show people carrying out their lives in social and cultural systems that are fundamentally unfinished.

CHAPTER ONE: A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE WORLD

While we talked at a coffee shop downtown, I asked Tri to give me his opinion of living in Ho Chi Minh City.¹ It was the fall of 2003; Tri was thirty-two years old, gainfully employed, not married; he appeared to be enjoying a life defined in part by financial stability, of modest comfort—neither rich, nor poor. He was literally the first person to agree to participate in my study, and he was eager to talk about a city (and a country) that he was both happy with and proud of. Tri answered with a smile full of enthusiasm, while glancing around at various retail shops, billboards and passing motor scooters:

Saigon is so comfortable. I'm very happy here. Now, we can buy anything. It's not like before, when you could not buy lots of things. My country opened, in 1986, for a relationship with the world. We have everything we need.

Responding to his enthusiasm, I told Tri that I also considered Ho Chi Minh City a great place to live, and then we went on to discuss those consumer goods and services about which Tri was most excited—he was particularly pleased that he could buy the latest styles of Western clothing and that there was an abundance of nice, newly-opened eateries and coffee shops.

During the nearly two years (October 2002 to September 2004) I studied and conducted research in Ho Chi Minh City², I found Tri's outlook common among people

¹ Ho Chi Minh City is the largest city in Viet Nam and was, before 1975, called Saigon, the name given to the city by the French. Throughout this dissertation, I use these two names interchangeably. I explain the political dimensions of the city's dual nomenclature further in the next chapter.

² This period is actually the second of several during which I have spent time living in Ho Chi Minh City. The first was a two-month stay in 2000. I also lived in the city nearly full-time from the fall 2005 to the fall of 2008.

who identified as middle-class.³ With very few exceptions, the middle-class people who participated in my research emphasized the increased availability and variety of consumer goods and services as the most meaningful sign that life in Viet Nam was good. Though the level of zeal with which people held these beliefs varied somewhat, participation in the world economy—primarily through consumption—was closely linked to everyone’s personal sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.

In his well-formed critique of the concept, Griffith (1993) observes that modernization theory⁴ relies heavily (i.e. foolishly) on the belief that there is something “called ‘progress’ that is slowly incorporating more and more of the world in its sweep, and that, given time, most of the backward nations will progress to our ‘level’” (238). Therefore, this Western-centric notion continues, changes to global power structures are not necessary. Rather, people in not-so-well-off places require only patience, because their turn for prosperity will eventually come. After decades of military struggle, political turmoil and economic crisis, as of 2003, when I began my research, it would have been difficult to convince middle-class people in Ho Chi Minh City, as anthropologists suggest

³ I use the hyphenated adjective *middle-class* liberally to describe people, beliefs, goods, and even events, whenever either Vietnamese people or I or both consider them part of the middle-class life in which they were participating. I reserve the compound noun *middle class* to refer to a socio-economic category. As I explain further in Chapter Three, the former (quasi-emic) term and the latter (etic) term do not always carry the same meaning.

⁴ Here, I refer to the modernization theory developed in the 1950s and 1960s by sociologists, political scientists and economists. It heavily influenced the foreign policy of the Johnson Administration primarily because of sociologist Walt Rostow and largely in response to perceived communist threats in Southeast Asia. Modernization theory is the near opposite of dependency theory (see Wallerstein 1976). The former emphasizes the positive contributions rich nations make to improve social and economic conditions in poor countries. The latter argues that it benefits rich countries for poverty in the periphery to persist, in part because this makes the extraction of wealth from poorer areas easier. During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries modernization’s views have resurfaced in neo-conservative calls for the spread of US style democracy and capitalism (see Gilman 2003).

(Griffith 1993, Liechty 2003), that modernization's promises are based more on myth than on the analysis of actual events. Indeed, for some, prosperity was knocking at Viet Nam's door.

As the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first, I was living in Ho Chi Minh City and conducting an ethnographic study among people whose time in the proverbial shine of prosperity was upon them: Viet Nam's urban middle class. In the chapters that follow, I describe and analyze the inner structures and meanings of the middle-class culture these people were in the process of defining, constructing and maintaining, as they participated in everyday lives and as their country continued to integrate into the global economy, or like Tri put it, as its "relationship with the world" continued to develop.

Following the intellectual footsteps of Liechty (2003), I argue that social class is best understood as a "socio-cultural project" and that class, gender and consumerism are interactive and mutually constitutive. In Ho Chi Minh City, this project was an everyday negotiation about what it meant to be a modern Vietnamese person. As such, it encompassed a wide range of beliefs and behaviors that allowed middle-class people to define a social and moral middleness. Despite only limited consensus regarding who was and who was not middle-class, this middleness was inclusive of all who could afford to perform "themselves in to cultural existence" (Liechty 2003: 265), and also profoundly exclusionary with regard to class others.

As the gap between rich and poor has widened in Viet Nam since the reforms of 1986 (Luong 2003), the middle class has continued to grow, prosper and define a lifestyle

that set itself apart from both poor people and Ho Chi Minh City's social and political elite.⁵ At the same time, thousands of miles away, the United States economy amassed its largest annual trade deficits ever amid calls for the Americanization of consumer cultures across the globe to remedy the situation⁶ (Schwenninger 2004). As if someone, somewhere had planned for it to be so, the consumer behavior of middle-class Vietnamese seemed to be falling in line. If they were paying attention, it is very likely that proponents of modernization theory were smiling even more proudly than Tri at the way this Americanization appeared to working itself out. Ho Chi Minh City's middle-class residents, for their part, were on their way to becoming the very sort of consumers and global citizens required for modernity's supposed extra-national transformation. Appearances of this nature, however, are rarely all they seem to be.

In Viet Nam, as the 21st Century got underway, the local machinations of these developments represent anything but cultural homogenization and undisputed progress. With globalizing processes and rapid economic growth underway in Ho Chi Minh City, I sought to uncover and understand those beliefs and practices culturally specific to the roles Vietnamese people were playing. In the next section of this chapter, I introduce

⁵ Here and throughout the following chapters, I use the terms *poor*, *rich* and *elite* primarily as ways to describe non-middle-class people. Poor does not necessarily mean destitute, though it could. When I am talking about truly disadvantaged people, this is clear from the context of the discussion. By rich or elite, I typically mean people who were considered rich or elite by middle-class standards. People in cars, for example, often carried this label, even though middle-class people knew nothing about their actual class standing or level of influence.

⁶ As a remedy for the US trade deficit, this position suggests increasing the number of middle-class citizens in parts of the world where exports of consumer goods exceed imports and encouraging them to (over)consume like the US middle class. Because decreasing consumption levels in the United States would significantly slow the world economy, according to this position, the Americanization of global consumerism is the only workable solution. This view gained increasing momentum during the writing of my dissertation, to the point where, in 2006, a popular Asian cable network featured "Retail Asia," a multi-part series describing how Asian middle-class consumers showed great promise in balancing global trade.

some of the distinctively Vietnamese elements of the global trend toward increased consumer capitalism and the development of middle-class culture. Throughout the chapters that follow, I continue with more of the same, while also attempting to interrogate the notion that what I was observing was simply “progress.” From the onset of my study it appeared to me as something both more complex and less straightforwardly positive.

An evening performance

The event took place in the summer of 2004 during the last few months of my fieldwork in Ho Chi Minh City. Around eight o'clock on a Friday evening, my friend, Hao, and I navigated weekend traffic as we chatted about her new job at a small business consultancy. We knew we had reached our destination when we saw the growing mass of pedestrians, motorcycles and taxis filling the road and sidewalk. Even from the street the excitement was palpable: the traffic jam and glittering lights combined with the thrill on people's faces and commotion in every direction.

After making it through the densest part of the traffic jam, I saw a parking area (gui xe) up ahead and on the left. It started to sprinkle as I waited for a parking receipt in a line of idling motor scooters, mostly with other men, as women and children waited on the sidewalk. Everyone seemed in a hurry, likely, I guessed, both because they hoped to avoid the imminent downpour and because they desired to get inside to where the real action was.

The expo center was surrounded by a three-meter concrete wall, like many large private and public places downtown. Hao and I followed others as they entered through a main gate where bottleneaking produced the densest assortment of people, some funneling in, others looking for the people with whom they came, and a few trying to scalp tickets. Everyone appeared so at home with the chaos that it did not seem to be chaotic at all.

Entering the compound revealed a citrus wonderland. Orange was the theme color for the new citrus shampoo being promoted, and various shades of it were employed in an elaborate, creative marketing scheme with the apparent goal of cementing the relationship between a color, a product and a way of life. Images of beautiful, long, flowing black hair were emblazoned upon most vertical surfaces; chairs were lined up in front of at least two well lit and brightly colored stages where video screens and real people extolled the virtues of healthy-looking hair; around the corner the free hair washes had just come to a stop; the ground was strewn with hundreds of empty orange bottles; young women clad in orange aprons walked around distributing free samples; guests (the consumers who had been invited here) walked around, joked with each other or chatted on mobile phones. A small but noticeable number of guests seemed to be transfixed, taking it all in. Based on the somewhat dazed look on their faces, I guessed that this was something new for them.

As we made our way to the show in the main building, we walked under a huge banner, welcoming us to “Shampoo World” (“The Gioi Dau Goi”). Indeed, this was the world of shampoo, a particular brand, of course, and the various companies that aligned

to create this universe were at work and in control. One of the young women participating in my research, Hanh, was a key player in these machinations. She had invited me to check out her handiwork, but I had no idea where to start looking for her. So, I called her. A bit frazzled and wearing a headset, but still her confident, well-dressed self, she met us at one of several doors leading into the lower level of the hall, gave us complimentary tickets and tried to escort us in. However, the six security guards at the door, with great intensity and nearly in unison, stopped us and informed us that these tickets would not get us onto the floor. Only slightly embarrassed, Hanh explained that we would have to sit in the balcony, where we would still see everything.

And there was much to see. The main building was a large arena-like event hall, where Hao and I had previously watched international boxing matches. As we found our seats and scanned the hall, it was still filling with people of all ages: families with children, young couples, groups of teenagers, some grandparents even. Video screens the size of billboards adorned the walls on either side of a brightly lit stage decorated in soft shades of orange. Music videos featuring young pop artists and advertisements for the new shampoo showed alternately. It was not easy to tell which was which. When there was any down time on the monitors, songs about the incontrovertible virtue of healthy hair played over loud speakers, as did announcements about how the show's featured shampoo could help prevent hair loss, a theme often portrayed in the ads on screen. Huge posters hung on nearly every available wall space. These posters, like those outside, featured images that communicated the evening's key message: a mix of notions about style, beauty and healthiness. Young Vietnamese women—whose overall style was

neither particularly traditional nor overly modern—were in close proximity to bottles of the new shampoo. They had perfect skin, slim figures, shiny white teeth, adorable smiles and long flowing dark black hair. These were clearly the wholesome of Viet Nam, fit, taken-care-of, and gorgeous.

The show started with a group of similar looking women performers in their late teens and early twenties. They strutted onto the stage in outfits that blended funky cowgirl with pop diva, pushing the proverbial envelope regarding showiness and sexiness. Knee-high black boots and brown cowboy hats complemented short, flared skirts and tiny, bare-midriff tops. Hips pumped and swung side-to-side and arms raised the roof as the women moved up and down the catwalk in choreographed configurations, each expressing a little sexualized individuality as they pivoted at the runway's end.

A group of four male singers entered from the right, trying to effect a gangster-rapper look (only somewhat successfully). It was clear that their presence was supposed to initially trump that of the dancing vixens. But the women did not tolerate this for long. Soon they started to taunt, then confront and finally mock-fight this posse of pseudo-rappers, all the while dancing and looking good. Eventually, the women released their harnessed hair from buns under hats, and swung their ebony locks as weapons. The men tried to duck and even to fight back, but there was little hope. They were no match for the women's powerful hair; having realized the futility of their position, they left the stage. The music came to an abrupt stop, as the women, with long, powerful hair now flowing in full view, struck a final triumphant pose.

Though they have caught on quickly and become thoroughly incorporated into middle-class life, marketing events like the one just described were, at the time of my study, a relatively recent addition to Ho Chi Minh City's consumer culture. These performances first arrived in the late 1990s, growing in popularity after 2000 in concert with the increased presence of multinational companies and their concomitants: high paying jobs, heightened consumerism, and industrial parks, to name only a few of the more positive contributions of increased foreign direct investment. Such events might never have arrived had the Vietnamese government not carried out political and economic reforms in 1986 and normalized relations with the United States in 1994. Nor might marketing events have been so *slow* to arrive had the communist party, in 1945, not initiated its campaign to ensure a liberated, united, communist Viet Nam that resulted, after 1975, in more than a decade of isolationism, strict authoritarian rule, and economic crisis.

Arriving when they did, marketing events like Shampoo World came to symbolize for me the intense energy that the Vietnamese middle-class socio-cultural project often required and projected. More concretely, one could say, the emergence of marketing events coincided with the return of promise for middle-class people, as urban economies recovered and then boomed following the late 1990s pan-Asian economic stagnation (Fforde 2003). As an emergent aspect of Vietnam's expanding consumer society, marketing events reflected, on the one hand, the liberating of middle-class women (and men, to a lesser extent) from responsibilities of the home, as affordable domestic servants made social outings in (corporate-controlled) public spaces of this type

ever more possible. On the other hand, these events tended to reflect the increasing commodification of everyday life—of women's bodies, of notions of beauty, of time spent with friends and family. While the 1990s brought a dramatic decrease in state control over many everyday activities in Vietnam, to me, marketing events embodied both new forms of freedom and expression resulting from country's "relationship with the world" and the corporate engineering of tastes and values.

When the people participating in my study talked about marketing events, however, these developments and contradictions rarely entered the dialogue, unless I introduced them. Marketing events were exciting and interesting, because most people did not attend them weekly or even every other week. These events nonetheless had, in less than five years, become a normal part of everyday life, in the sense that they had become interwoven into the fabric that made up that life. People's discussions of marketing events focused on all of the specifics and very little on how these events fit into the larger scheme of things. The humor in the advertisements was directed at middle-class sensibilities, and many of the images of female beauty fit well within middle-class preferences for a moral middle (not too sexy, but not too old-fashioned). That the female dancers were more scantily clad than most women audience members would dare be was explained in terms of the dancers' age or profession. These young women were dressed sexily enough to raise eyebrows, but not sexily enough to offend even the grandmothers in the crowd. Furthermore, the overwhelmingly thorough commercialization of the event made sense to middle-class people; after all it was sponsored by one company, designed after that company's corporate image, and put on for its valued customers.

Middle-class people appeared too engaged in their *socio-cultural project*—i.e. the everyday negotiating and constructing of a middle-class culture—to be regularly reflecting on these and the many other contradictions that defined life in Ho Chi Minh City. At first, I was somewhat surprised by this, but I came to realize that the requirements of everyday middle-class life made it unlikely that middle-class people would have the opportunity or the motivation to ask the kinds of questions that were occupying my imagination. The *project*, which was always a work-in-progress, reigned supreme as the primary order of the day, and participation in it, as I will detail in the following chapters, required nearly undivided attention.

Framework and Rationale: Studying Middle-Class Culture in Ho Chi Minh City

Liechty (2003) offers two important insights that go a long way in accounting for my interest in the anthropology of social class and that help explain my approach to the study of Ho Chi Minh City's middle class. He first argues that class remains “an exceedingly difficult concept to pin point” (Liechty 2003:11), emphasizing that even seminal theorists of modern capitalist society like Marx and Weber never fully theorized class in a systematic way. Echoing Ortner's (1991) similar claim, he also points out that the anthropological study of class is in its infancy, and that this is especially the case with regard to the study of middle-class groups. With the goal of addressing both of these conditions, Liechty (2003:12) observes:

An anthropology of middle-class cultural practice needs to unite a Weberian sensitivity to the powerful role of culture in social life with a

Marxian commitment to locate different forms of cultural practice in the context of unequal distributions of power and resources in society.

Envisioning such an approach requires understanding that Marx and Weber contributed differing concepts of class in part because they were theorizing capitalist societies within distinct historical and social contexts. It is not surprising, given the growing middle classes in Europe and the United States and the rapid development of consumer societies that marked the turn of the twentieth century, that much of Weber's work described the socio-cultural conditions of a (middle) group that did not fit into the class categories Marx posited based on differences in relations to the means of production. Nor is it surprising that Marx emphasized these differences so strongly while playing down the importance of culture in explaining the struggles between workers and capitalists in the middle of the 19th century.

As Liechty emphasizes, Marx and Weber provide complementary, not oppositional, frameworks, and my approach is motivated, in part, by the need to incorporate both theorists. Accordingly, I frame social class as a concept with two distinct but overlapping components: one that explains a system of hierarchy, and one that explains a system of cultural identity formation. As a system of hierarchy, social class operates to create, maintain and assert differentials in society regarding access to power and resources. It does so in part by generating and normalizing unequal access to and distribution of resources, so that observable differences in wealth and power seem "natural" to individuals involved. Of course, these power relations are anything but natural. They are products of historical circumstances within which certain groups and individuals act to gain advantages over others, creating power structures, such as

educational systems and exploitative labor markets that perpetuate inequality and create disadvantage.

For the purposes of my research, differential access to resources and power is best understood by identifying the types of capital—economic, social, and cultural—linked to and supporting middle-class life. As Bourdieu (1981:241) argues, “all capital is accumulated labor” which enables people “to appropriate social energy.” This labor includes everyday work both within and outside the workplace, and it takes place within a particular historical, socio-economic environment. The different forms of capital produced through this labor, furthermore, are interconnected, and both globalizing processes and local norms and expectations shape their production and accumulation.

Bringing to light these socio-economic foundations allows for a better understanding of the social and cultural dynamics at the center of my investigation. Put differently, viewing class as a system of hierarchy governing access to resources and power enables an enhanced view of class as a system of cultural identity. With this in mind, it is important for me to emphasize that a study of the latter is my primary aim in this dissertation. In providing a socio-cultural account of Ho Chi Minh City’s middle class, I rely foremost on three key concepts that I borrow from Liechty (2003): *middle-class culture*, *socio-cultural project*, and *middleness*.

As a system of cultural identity formation, I am arguing that social class operates in many of the same ways that other forms of cultural identity do. For this reason, I utilize the concept of *middle-class culture* as part of my primary framework. Sociologically speaking, to ask what makes someone a middle-class Vietnamese person

is similar in many ways to asking what makes someone Nuer, Tongan, or Hispanic.

Though not homogenous categories, all of these—and I included the Vietnamese middle class here—nonetheless involve socio-cultural beliefs, behaviors and institutions aimed at creating, maintaining and asserting group membership, so that an individual knows who he or she is, and so that others know this too. Thus the people in my study were both creating *middle-class culture* and living their lives according to norms and expectations produced by it.

The specific ways that middle-class people went about creating middle-class culture, furthermore, are best understood as participation in a *socio-cultural project*. The concept of a social *process* captures some of what it means to be middle-class, because culture and identity formation are always ongoing and incomplete undertakings.

However, the notion that these are *projects* adds important conceptual elements. As the term project implies, making middle-class culture required social and cultural work and resources. It could not be accomplished alone and it had to be negotiated, as economic situations were evolving and social norms were constantly being reevaluated.

Conceptualizing these undertakings collectively as a *socio-cultural project* highlights that these were not merely processes that happened, but social actions that middle-class people carried out.

Liechty's concept of *middleness* provides the final piece of the core framework for understanding the everyday lived experiences of Vietnamese middle-class people. Despite considerable variation in its many aspects, the socio-cultural work that went into making middle-class culture followed certain patterns. The notion of *middleness* captures

the nature of these patterns. The energy and efforts were anything but random. As I show, middle-class people strove to construct and maintain a middle ground, a social space of their own that located them between and in contradistinction to class others. This *middleness*, furthermore, was defined in both cultural and moral terms. Being in the middle meant not being either too traditional or too modern. It meant not embracing sensibilities that were either too local or too global. It meant that one was supposed to behave like she or he was neither rich nor poor. Moreover, this middle ground was rationalized as being the most appropriate social space, both culturally and morally. Beliefs and behaviors outside this middleness—i.e. those of class others—were not merely culturally distinct. They also represented moral compromise.

In addition to these three core concepts, other social science frameworks shape my study. E.P Thompson's (1978) historical perspective shows that the active participation of individuals in constructing their own class identities can be observed as far back as 200 years prior to my study. Lacy's (2007) research on Black middle-class identity in the United States, furthermore, demonstrates that such processes currently are not limited to Asian societies, but are likely taking place across the globe in their own distinct forms. Along these lines, I also seek to challenge, like previous scholarship (Appadurai 1995, Liechty 2003), the accuracy of notions such as cultural homogenization and the global village, which suggest that local cultural forms and institutions are easily overrun or transformed through globalization, usually by Western influence. My study, furthermore, is situated within an existing body of scholarship that demonstrates that "the

modernizing and globalizing of Asia have been systematically gendered processes” (Stivens 1998)

Especially with regard to the different roles men and women occupied, performance theory lent critical insights toward understanding middle-class culture. Following the intellectual footsteps of Goffman (1959) and Austin (1975) and more recently Butler (1993) and Bourdieu (1991), my analysis looks at the constant citing and reciting of social norms through individual performances and at the social relations wherein the conditions of performances were defined. Characterizing life as social performance, furthermore, has encouraged me to investigate the meaning not only in what people say and do, but in how these performances built and fed on larger narratives about modernity, success and freedom, all of which were important to the *socio-cultural project*.

In my analysis, I also tie performativity directly to consumption, arguing that consumer goods, like costumes and props in a play, were vehicles of cultural knowledge (Friedman 1991). Any good performance, whether on a stage or on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, relies on having the appropriate wardrobe and objects to help the actresses and actors send their messages home, so to speak. Douglas and Isherwood (1979) can be interpreted as supporting this position when they argue for approaches to studying consumption that focus on the social use of products after the time of purchase. The growing body of literature on political economy and social power in Southeast Asia shows that understanding people’s lives requires a close look at the intersections of gender, consumption, and various social hierarchies. Chua and Tan (1999) demonstrate,

for example, that prohibitively priced consumer goods delineate the features of social class structures. Ong (1995:5) argues that it is the ambivalent nature of gender meanings that allows these meanings to be impacted so heavily by “the regulatory schemes of consumer culture.”

Background and Methods

My interest in Viet Nam dates from 1998 when, during participation in a research project in southern Louisiana, I came to know Father Bui, a Vietnamese Catholic priest who was a community leader for a group of Vietnamese Americans living in the area. Father Bui told me stories about his previous life in Viet Nam, about fleeing the country to pursue religious freedom, and about his new life in the US—all of which encouraged my personal and academic interest in the Vietnamese language and in the lives of Vietnamese people. Significant influence also came from my language instructor, Sang, at the University of Arizona, who invited me to visit Viet Nam with him and his family, in the summer of 2000. This two-month visit provided my initial first-hand impressions of Viet Nam and Ho Chi Minh City and planted the seeds of curiosity that eventually led to me returning, in 2002, for a two-year stay.

During the first several months of my stay, I identified more as a student (studying Vietnamese) and a teacher (teaching English) than I did as an anthropologist and a researcher. Even so, living, working and studying in the city influenced how I would eventually come to conduct my ethnography. A dozen educators, for example, whom I befriended and with whom I worked encouraged me to do a study of the changes

Ho Chi Minh City was experiencing. Discussions about what changes most interested and concerned them led me to focus my work on the everyday lives of young middle-class people. My language tutors also played an important part in how I came to view doing urban ethnography in Viet Nam. They warned me, for example, that formal interviews and the use of a tape recorder would likely be more trouble than they were worth. I learned similar lessons from another North American-trained anthropologist conducting research in Ho Chi Minh City.

The understandings I gained while living and working in the city prior to the start of my project influenced specific elements of its design. During this period, significantly, people often talked about how Viet Nam was a “young” country. According to research conducted just prior to my study, 70 per cent of the Vietnamese population was under 30 years of age. People between 15 and 30, furthermore, made up approximately 30 per cent of the population (Youth Research Institute, 2003). By the time of my study, this latter group had begun to attract considerable attention from state and party officials, policy-makers, and a small number of researchers (Sakellariou and Patrinos 2000, Nguyen 2002). As King et al. (2008) point out, however, there has been little social science research aimed at providing socio-cultural understandings of young people in Viet Nam generally, and even less for young educated professionals. Born either during the last years of the war with the US or after it had ended, most had no first-hand memories of the war, yet nearly all had grown up in difficult times during the late 1970s and the 1980s. Convinced that young people constituted an age group of sociological interest, I chose to limit my study to people roughly between the ages of 18 and 30.

Though early in my study I spoke with people from a wide range of class backgrounds, I eventually chose to gather detailed ethnographic data only among people who identified as middle class. My rationale for doing so hinged in part on my recognition early on that data collection undertaken with the hopes of creating a socio-cultural account of the middle-class was going to be complicated, as I discuss below. Though understandings from what I would eventually come to think about as class others about middle-class people would have complemented my data, I knew that they would even further complicate an already challenging ethnographic project. To gain in depth knowledge of the perceptions that class others held, I would have had to immerse myself in the lives of these class others, and this would have detracted considerable time and energy from my data gathering among the middle class.

Learning that young people who identified as middle-class were engaged in economic activities of many types and in many sectors also influenced the design of my study. I initially wanted to incorporate the voices of people working in as many as industries, in both state and private sectors, as possible. My initial participants were in the private sector, however, and because I relied on snowball sampling, a large majority of all of my study participants ended up being employees for private domestic and international companies. Given that private and state sectors were both growing at around the same pace, and given that I did not observe any significant differences in the socio-cultural lives of the small number of state sector workers that did participate, I am confident that this bias toward the private sector does not undermine my research findings. The private sector participants in my study, furthermore, were involved in a

range of industries in Ho Chi Minh City. (I explain in Chapter Four the specific breakdown of the different industries in which study participants worked.)

In retrospect, it is difficult for me to list a figure that definitively represents the number of participants in my study. Especially early in my study, I circulated widely in Ho Chi Minh City, talking to nearly anyone who had the time. I conducted one or more in-depth interviews with approximately 50 people. What I consider my core group of participants, however, is smaller, totaling 28 individuals. This latter group includes individuals who meet two basic criteria: (1) I was able to spend considerable time with each of these people during everyday aspects of their lives; and (2) I participated in multiple conversations and conducted at least one in-depth interview with them wherein I recorded not only the richness of their socio-cultural lives, but also their socio-economic backgrounds, which included information about their families.

Among all of these participants it would be hard for me to identify key informants. Certain people's schedules allowed me to interact with them more frequently, yet some of my most interesting conversations were with individuals who were especially difficult to pin down, so to speak. My research journals contain several brief, yet poignant conversations with individuals with whom I interacted only once. Whereas other male ethnographers have reported difficulties when trying to talk with young Vietnamese women (Marr 1996), I found it easier and more ethnographically rewarding to talk with

women, even when it came to sensitive topics.⁷ Consequently, more women than men are represented in my study, by an approximate ratio of two to one.

To gather data among and about these young middle-class women and men, I relied primarily on traditional ethnographic methods: conversations/interviews and participant observation. Though in some ways these methods worked like I had come to understand they should in graduate courses and through other research experiences, in other ways they often did not. The actual implementation of them required that I rethink certain basic methodological concepts.

My conversations with people varied in style and manner. Some were casual chats over coffee, lunch or drinks; I typically would write up notes from memory in these cases. Other conversations were loosely structured and informal interviews, during which I took detailed notes. I met and spoke with most individuals participating in my research multiple times. Especially in the beginning stages of research, my approach was nondirective. I focused on topics that people were already discussing and introduced topics based on what I saw happening around me.

Generally, however, even semi-formal interviews were not especially effective. On a few occasions early in my research, I asked a couple of colleagues with whom I taught English to participate in interviews. In short, I felt they did not go well. People appeared to feel pressured in their role as interviewees, and seemed to produce answers that I perceived as reactionary, for lack of a better word. It was as if there was a correct

⁷ On approximately a half dozen occasions, young women participating in my study offered unsolicited comments about their sexual history. They told me that they had had premarital sex and about their desires to move out of the parents homes to acquire more sexual freedom.

answer to each question I asked, and that they were searching for it. It even felt like they wanted to give me the answer they thought I was looking for. Another anthropologist working in Viet Nam at the time had had similar results and suggested more casual settings and conversations at first. I took his advice, and this greatly improved my chances for more meaningful discussions with people.

Even so, as I began to focus discussions specifically on social class, I found that it was a conversation topic that some people had difficulty engaging with. For example, it was hard for people to articulate the boundaries between different class groups in Viet Nam. To deal with this, I organized discussion groups, during which I picked particular topics and introduced them into discussions. Even when sessions started slowly, they nearly always eventually took off, and the opportunity for participants to debate various issues with each other facilitated in-depth discussions about the class structure in Viet Nam. Also with the goal of addressing this challenge, I sometimes introduced individual profiles based on real people I knew and asked small groups about the class standing of someone fitting these descriptions. This strategy also helped to overcome the difficulties that people had when it came to talking directly about social class.

The location of my research was also initially a challenge. Few of the people participating in my study invited me to their homes. In fact, on several occasions, when I suggested to participants that I meet them at their home, they told me plainly that their homes were not “suitable.” When I asked for further explanation, I typically was given one of two answers. Some people felt like their homes were not nice enough to entertain, especially not for new acquaintances. Other people explained that they simply preferred

to socialize in cafes or coffee shops. There was little to do at home, they often reasoned. On most occasions when I did spend time at people's homes, I became the center of attention to such a degree that it was difficult to gauge what was happening because of me and what was normal life.

In part because of the situation concerning people's homes, doing research "on the street" became vital to my study. By on the street, I mean literally on the street, watching life as it happened and as it sped by on motor scooters. But on the street also means in coffee shops, shopping centers, restaurants, concert halls, classrooms, and a variety of other public and semi-public locations where I both talked with people about their lives and conducted participant observation. Data collection during the marketing event I described earlier in this chapter provides a useful anecdote for a discussion about the latter, participation observation.

I had been to marketing events prior to that evening, and, though I thought I would likely write something about it from memory after the fact, I could not have predicted that the evening's performance would be the first story I told in my dissertation. In fact, I did not plan to take notes during the event, because it was going to be more of a personal or social night out, and not a research opportunity, per se. So I did not bring the notepad I usually brought around the city with me. My attitude before going was that I had seen it all before.

It soon became clear, however, that I had not. The nature of marketing events is evolving in Ho Chi Minh City, and, as it turned out, that particular evening stood out as a major shift in that evolution toward more and more elaborate and expensive shows.

Suddenly, Shampoo World was reminding me more of the time I attended a concert for Ngo Nguc Ha, one of Viet Nam's most famous and beloved young pop singers, than of other marketing events. It was clearly something I would want to remember in detail. As I was sitting in the crowd, even before the show started, I recognized I was going to want some "scratch notes" (Agar 1996).

The solution was in my pocket. In Ho Chi Minh City, I would leave the house occasionally without notepad and pen, but I never left without my cellular phone. This was partly because I had become socially reliant on it. More important to this discussion, however, is the fact that, as an ethnographer in the city, I could not survive without it. Countless times people participating in my project would send me a text message with only a moment's notice, to invite me to attend some social event or just to get coffee, and these unplanned interfaces were some of the most generative of good data. Few of the young Vietnamese professionals I knew planned social outings more than a couple of hours in advance. When I tried to make plans more than day ahead of time, it felt almost unnatural, and people often would double book and have to cancel. So, I always had my phone with me, and I was always sending and receiving text messages as part of my research logistics, receiving a cancellation text for one meeting, only to quickly make another.

I also adopted this technology as an electronic notepad. At Shampoo World, while things were going on all around, I knew I would need about a dozen short phrases to jog my memory later as I wrote up the experience. Two and three word descriptors of the setting, the general feel and people's actions, were rolling around in my head, and I

started typing them into my phone. I then sent the message to myself. Later, when the show was under way, I did the same thing. “Black boots” and “hair as a weapon” were all I would need to remember certain details of the performance, but I would indeed need them. Sitting at my house the next morning, I opened the two messages I had sent myself and typed a couple of pages of detailed fieldnotes.

In general, this story relays the nature of doing participant observations in Ho Chi Minh City. The mood of the city alternated between frantic and lazy, and being an ethnographer in the city required that I constantly adjust to this mood. Because I was studying a socio-cultural project and because the participants in my study did not necessarily share a community, knowing when and where I was supposed to observe middle-class culture was at first difficult to determine. Eventually, I became comfortable with the reality that I was nearly constantly undertaking participant observation. I often recorded events and interactions on the spot via note pad, scraps of paper or text messaging; other times I committed things to memory and wrote about them later the same day. Participant observation was done with the individuals participating directly in my project and amongst strangers.

My research also included gathering information from a variety of media sources. I only intermittently watched Vietnamese television stations, and, when I did, language barriers made it difficult to garner data. Vietnamese and English newspapers, and magazines (in Vietnamese only), on the other hand provided considerably more. These media sources, all controlled to various degrees by a government ministry, provided examples of the public culture so important to life in Ho Chi Minh City.

In the following chapters, I use statistical data selectively. My decision to do so was based on observations like the following from Melanie Beresford (2003), a seasoned economist with extensive research experience in Vietnam:

Data on which to base an empirical examination of regional inequality have been, and remain, extremely scarce. Few statistics on province-level economies have been published that would permit an examination of changes over time (56).

During many conversations with sociologists from Ho Chi Minh City's University of Social Sciences and Humanities, it became clear to me that statistical data generated by the government's census teams about nearly any subject were both difficult to acquire and highly suspect with regard to their validity. International scholars who write about a wide range of topics in Viet Nam are nearly unanimous in pointing out that this has long been the case (DiGregorio et al. 2003, Hiebert 1996). Thus I chose not to incorporate the analysis of the state's census data into my primary findings. However, social scientists generally agree that various survey research conducted by local and international scholars in Viet Nam over the past 15 years are considerably more reliable. Accordingly, I rely on the findings of such projects to both provide background for my study and when discussing the broader implications of it.

Finally, with regard to methods, it is important that I briefly explain that I first dated and then married a Vietnamese woman, Vu Thi Thu Hao, while living in Viet Nam. I met Hao shortly after starting my research, and we were married just after I started analysis and write up. Though Hao is not featured as a research participant in any of the pages that follow, she nonetheless influenced my view of Vietnamese society generally, and my understanding of many of the issues that I explore in the chapters below. I am

certain that this dissertation, in ways that are nearly impossible for me to articulate, would have been a different undertaking without the influence that Hao and our relationship had on my experience as an ethnographer and a person living in Viet Nam. I can say, for certain, that my dissertation is the better for it.

Preview

As I have stated, my primary goal in this dissertation is to provide an ethnographic account of a socio-cultural project, of the everyday work that went into making middle-class culture in Ho Chi Minh City. This account illuminates the motivations and processes by which middle-class people created a cultural and moral middleness, or the cultural space wherein individuals performed their gender-specific, consumption-driven roles and negotiated identities as modern Vietnamese people. For the purpose of this study, social class is partly an analytical tool; more importantly, class and its interactions with gender and consumerism were the objects of study. In the chapters that follow my goal is threefold: (1) to describe the cultural context and recent history out of which the current middle-class culture has emerged; (2) to provide a detailed account of the practices and beliefs that comprise contemporary urban middle-class life; and (3) to use these ethnographic understandings to contribute to discussions about class, gender and consumerism.

Chapter Two lays out the historical and social context. This includes a brief history of Viet Nam, with an emphasis on key events of late 20th century, such as the

impacts of globalization and other recent socio-economic developments. Viet Nam's political and economic changes under reforms known locally as *Doi Moi* are addressed. Gender relations also are described, providing an introduction to how gender and other social hierarchies interact. Finally, I devote one section to understanding inequality in Viet Nam.

In Chapter Three, I examine the history of social and economic development in Viet Nam over the past approximately 50 years. My purpose in doing so is to explore the nature of Vietnamese approaches to development, past and present, and to see how these approaches resonate with commonly used concepts —socialism, post-socialism, and neoliberalism. It is clear that in 2003/2004 Viet Nam was a capitalist oriented society. Chapter Three explores how this came to be, by first asking to what degree this current form of social organization represents rupture from the past. This chapter concludes with a discussion regarding the extent to which it makes sense to describe the most recent approach to development in Viet Nam as neoliberal in nature.

In Chapter Four, I describe factors contributing to the social and economic foundations of middle-class culture. Though the primary goal in this dissertation, as I have already discussed, is to provide an ethnographic account of what makes the Vietnamese middle class a socio-cultural project, it is first important to understand what enabled people to participate in this project. With this purpose in mind, the first half of this chapter examines a brief history of class structure/mobility in Viet Nam and describes various social and economic conditions encountered by participants in my

study. The second half of the chapter provides more detailed profiles of six middle-class individuals

Relying on the concepts of middleness and social performance, Chapter Five begins the process of providing a social and cultural account of the middle-class. I begin with a discussion about local perceptions of social class with the goal of highlighting the rather haphazard grammar or cultural logic of social class in the minds of middle-class people. I then use the concept of middleness to explain how Vietnamese middle-class people worked to create a cultural and moral middle-ground between class/cultural others, the rich and the poor. Finally, I present a series of examples of the performative nature of middle-class culture. In this section, I emphasize that middle-class identity was articulated through both the constant acting out of cultural norms in public and the avoidance of performances associated with class others. In my discussion of middleness and social performance, furthermore, I emphasize that both are highly gendered processes. If, as I argue, there is much social work that goes into creating and maintaining middle-class identity, women shoulder a disproportionate share of this burden.

Chapter Six addresses work and education, relying on ethnographic data to depict how jobs and learning have become critical components of the performance of class, while also serving as more concrete avenues by which people hope and expect to achieve a certain salary and lifestyle. I emphasize that the making of middle-class subjects through educational and work-related institutions in Ho Chi Minh City entailed social reproduction through the endorsement of particular values and life-ways. Young professional Vietnamese men and women appropriated the values of modern capitalist

culture, including, for example, a naturalization of the relationship between hard work and material rewards for it. This happens through formal learning in school and daily practice on the job. On the surface the relationship is clear: to consume in a middle-class manner, sufficient income via an appropriate profession is required; to attain this professional role, a “good” education must first be gained. Underneath this surface, these same processes are also formative in the sense that they generate and transfer middle-class values—they set in motion the learning of the buying habits of modern consumers and create expectations about achieving certain kinds of success.

Chapter Seven analyzes the importance of consumer beliefs and practices to the middle-class culture, with particular attention to its role in defining middleness. I first provide a history of consumption over the past 50 years and an overview of the larger consumer society within which middle-class culture was situated. Then, by providing examples of consumer practices and beliefs, I then engage in a discussion about what it meant to be middle-class consumers at the time of my study, as opposed to consumers of other class backgrounds. I argue that class specific beliefs and practices were both the product of and contributed to the middleness that define middle-class culture. In the final section of this chapter, I demonstrate that it was within the arena of consumption that middle-class culture engaged most intensely with global flows. In this section, I also reveal that women were impacted more heavily than men by the global flow of consumer goods and the media images that accompanied them.

An important question for any ethnographer to ask concerns what the “present is producing” (Moore 1987:727). With an eye to the future, and while middle-class culture

in Ho Chi Minh City moves into that future, Chapter Eight serves primarily as an epilogue, but also provides the opportunity to further situate my work within relevant lines of scholarly inquiry. This chapter explains some of the ways in which middle-class people are making use of their growing power and influence, and it concludes with a look at the country's economic situation as of 2008, asking what this might mean for how middle-class people will position themselves in the future vis-à-vis class others.

CHAPTER TWO: ORIENTATIONS

In this chapter, my aim is to orient readers not already familiar with Viet Nam, by introducing the general historical, social and cultural context. Located in the southeastern corner of mainland Southeast Asia, Viet Nam spans approximately 1,000 miles from north to south, is less than fifty miles wide at its narrowest point, and has over 1,800 miles of coastline. Its shape catches the eye. Bordering Laos and China's southern Yunnan Province, the mountainous northern region of Viet Nam is bulbous compared to the long and thin center region of the country. The southern third flares as the Mekong River enters from Cambodia to the west, forming the low, fertile flood plains in and around Ho Chi Minh City.

Scholars note that Viet Nam's winding, elongated shape, itself the product of Vietnamese conquest of the Champa people and their land, has been an important factor in the country's tumultuous history (Karnow 1983, Taylor 1983). A country occupying only 127, 000 square miles, Viet Nam has nearly 2,800 miles of land borders, more than a quarter of which it shares with China, a hostile neighbor for most of Viet Nam's history. With their territory so spread out, emperors found it nearly impossible to control internal dissent and disorder during the country's centuries of dynastic rule. Furthermore, Viet Nam's long coastline made defense from European ocean-going military forces difficult. Largely because of both of these vulnerabilities, Europeans envisioned Viet Nam, which was a plentiful source of raw materials, as a strategically desirable colonial post in what was perceived to be a conquerable land. In the middle of the 19th century, using military

force and political underhandedness, France acted on this vision, colonizing Indochina (a region now comprised of Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam) and setting in motion a century of exploitation, oppression, and resistance. This eventually led, in the mid 20th century, to a war between colonizers and colonized (Karnow 1983, Nguyen 1993).

The war in Viet Nam that has received more attention from international media and scholars than any other aspect of Vietnamese history is one that most North Americans know as the “Vietnam War” and one that most Vietnamese people know as the “American War.” The “Vietnam War” was the first experienced “live” by television viewing audiences in the West; it has been the subject of countless news stories, academic journal articles, non-fiction books, novels, poems, documentary films, Hollywood features, and most recently, war-themed video games; while it was happening, it was protested in more than 100 countries world wide. However, the “Vietnam War” that American history textbooks date from 1965 to 1975, was only the final and most devastating stage in a political, military struggle for an independent Viet Nam with roots that date back to at least the 1920s, when nationalist organizations gained strength and challenged French colonial authority (Ball 1952). The struggle intensified in 1946 after Ho Chi Minh, quoting the United States’ Declaration of Independence, pronounced Viet Nam a sovereign nation, free of French colonial oppression. It ended in April of 1975, when communist Northern troops entered Saigon.

Consisting primarily of guerilla fighting between Vietnamese resistance forces, know as the Viet Minh, and the US-backed French military apparatus, the first decade of the war ended in France’s defeat in 1954 after a decisive Viet Minh victory at a remote

French outpost in the town of *Dien Binh Phu*. Peace was brokered at the Geneva conference, where the country's S-shaped territory was divided into northern and southern halves.⁸ Fighting resumed shortly after, taking on the characteristics of a civil war. The Northern government and military, who were loosely and at times tenuously aligned with both China and the USSR, and communist insurgents in the South formed one side. They were pitted against the Southern regime, which was receiving increasing financial, political and military support from the United States throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s as fighting and political tensions grew more intense. In this political and military struggle, the South was losing. Fearing a communist victory, in the final decade, the United States entered the war in support of the Southern regime and became one of the key participants, both politically and militarily. This final episode was by far the most devastating: a mix of guerrilla, counter-insurgency and conventional fighting produced millions of casualties, violent atrocities against civilians, and wholesale destruction and poisoning of much of the landscape (Karnow 1983).

The United States withdrew the majority of its troops by 1973, and, as the Northern troops moved farther south and closer to Saigon, in April 1975, the US ambassador order a full-scale evacuation of all US military and civilian personnel and approximately 200,000 Vietnamese—these were primarily people who had worked closely with the US government and their family members. The prevailing view among

⁸ At the time of my research, people in Ho Chi Minh City still strongly identify with being from the North or the South; people identify as strongly with their hometowns. For nearly all of the young adults I knew, these affiliations were based in social and cultural differences and, while political in the broadest sense of the term, they were less likely to be rooted in past North/South political oppositions. For example, a person would express her dislike for Northerners through a critique of the Northern style of food. Indeed, under the surface of this cultural critique were convictions that Northerners were somehow different, even slightly inferior, but the nature of this difference had little to do with current or past national politics.

both US and South Vietnamese leaders was that the arrival of troops from the North would bring untold violence and likely result in the execution of thousands who had collaborated with the US. This prediction was off significantly; the military takeover of Saigon was relatively peaceful. To be certain, for years, people who worked with the US did suffer at the hands of the new communist regime, through strict detention in “re-education camps” and because of institutionalized discrimination that affected even the children of supporters of the old Southern government. Even so, the country’s unification in 1976 brought urban centers like Saigon, which was renamed Ho Chi Minh City shortly after the takeover, relative calm. War again erupted later in the decade when a united Viet Nam invaded then communist Cambodia (see Chanda 1986), and during a short-lived but costly border war with China (see Gilks 1992, Lawson 1984). Additionally, the 1980s saw hundreds of thousands of people attempting to flee the country as a result of political and economic marginalization and persecution. Political unrest continued into the turn of the 21st century and is increasingly volatile in certain regions (McElwee 2005, Thayer 2002).

The ways that ordinary Vietnamese people express themselves regarding different episodes in the historical period between 1945 and 1975 vary according to whether people supported the communists or opposed them. September 02, 1945, for example, according to official language is Independence Day, or the day the Ho Chi Minh declared Viet Nam a sovereign nation. Some people who did not support the communists did not recognize the day as important, and refused to refer to it according to official language. People of this political disposition have even stronger opposition regarding April 30,

1975. According to official language the North liberated the South and reunited the country. Thus since the end of the war, April 30 has been called Liberation Day, and the presidential palace that was used by leaders of the southern regime has been renamed Reunification Palace. These were especially problematic terms for people who did not support the communists. Some people considered the Northern troops arrival an invasion, not liberation.

In 1976, the one-party communist state organized Viet Nam's economy, which was primarily agriculture-based, into a strict collectivist system. Along with a debilitating US trade embargo, the Communist Party's collectivist strategy has been blamed for plunging the country into deep and prolonged economic failure, culminating by 1988 in acute food shortages and appeals for international food aid (London 2003, Kolko 1997). Faced with the paramount challenges of rebuilding infrastructure, creating a new civil order, and carrying out massive political and economic transitions, all of which came ten years earlier than party leaders had expected and thus with little actual planning completed, to say the government failed is not to assess blame, but to point empirically to the disastrous impacts of a defeated yet powerful enemy, bad luck, poor timing, and misguided policy.

By the time of my research, however, the socio-economic landscape in Viet Nam had changed remarkably. Throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s, with the exception of a small ruling elite comprised of communist leaders and their families and close associates, most people, including nearly everyone who participated in my research, were poor. By 2002, the growth in the number of rich and middle-class people, those with at

least some disposable income, was noticeable to even a casual observer. Accompanying the increased numbers of people in these two groups was a growing gap between them and the poor. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Vietnamese government made a number of key decisions that explain much of this socio-economic change.

Two foreign policy decisions would have especially profound impact on the country's future. In 1989, Viet Nam completed its promised withdrawal from Cambodia, after ten years of military occupation. This led to the 1994 decision of the Clinton administration to lift the trade embargo. By 1995, Viet Nam and the United States had normalized diplomatic relations. Shortly after, the Vietnamese government chose to pursue an exhaustive bilateral trade agreement with the United States, and the promise of this possibility was heightened in 1997 by the formal visit to Ha Noi by then-US Secretary of State Madeline Albright. After nine months of negotiating, the US-Viet Nam Bilateral Trade Agreement was signed into effect in 2002. Within a decade, Viet Nam went from conducting no official trade with the United States to calling the United States its main trading partner.

Internal reforms were equally if not more important in shaping Vietnamese society and economy at the turn of the century. In 1986, the relatively small and insular party leadership in control of the Vietnamese government started along a path to official support for and authorization of: (1) the transition from a centrally controlled to a market-oriented economy, (2) a series of political and legal reforms, and (3) the opening of the country to foreign investment and international trade. These shifts in economic and

governmental philosophy, known collectively as *Doi Moi*, or renovation, brought sweeping changes, both positive and negative, to nearly all areas of the economy and to the vast majority of the populace. Gauging to what extent internal reforms were linked causally to Vietnam's foreign policy is a challenging undertaking, one that I take up with some depth in the next chapter.

Though sometimes discussed as a top-down reform *event* taking place in 1986, Vietnam's transition to a market economy was a ten-year process driven by local-level or grass-roots defiance of the pre-*Doi Moi* dictates of central planning (Fforde and deVylder 1996, London 2003). (Most of the participants in my study were not old enough to be active economic participants in these events. Their parents, however, were, buying and selling rice and other goods on black markets, for example. I discuss the impacts of the long-standing opposition to a centrally controlled economy in more detail in the Chapter Three.) *Doi Moi* clearly represented an important step in the official transformation of Viet Nam's controlled economy into a market-based economy, but given pre-*Doi Moi* deviation from the central plan and the untold strength of informal economic systems, *Doi Moi* has been characterized as creating policy that comported to existing economic practice (Luong 1998).

In the process of restructuring its economy and its political system, Viet Nam, like China—and unlike Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union—has not discarded socialism completely. The country's leaders have maintained claims to socialist governance (Chan et al. 1999). Reforms that were supposed to bring social mobility to workers in all social strata, however, have instead lead to deteriorating conditions for

laborers in some sectors, most notably in manufacturing. Since reform, many companies have increasingly neglected the rights of workers and prioritized the maximization of profits (Chan and Norlund 1999). At the same time, Chan and Norlund (1999) note that unions have obtained greater rights to operate without direct state control than their counterparts in neighboring China. Unions in Viet Nam, unlike in China, the authors argue, are not expected to collaborate with management, but can actually challenge managerial decisions regarding the rights of workers.

These internal and foreign policy decisions led to significant changes in how foreign governments, international organizations, and multinational companies viewed their relationships with Viet Nam (Schaumburg-Muller 2003). Loans from international lending institutions became available for the first time in decades; foreign governments and corporations were willing to invest in Viet Nam; multinational companies began in earnest to set up branches and production facilities; by 2000, unparalleled developments in marketing and advertising were shaping the physical and cultural landscape, especially in the two main metropolitan areas—Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City. Indeed, the initial motivations for my research in Viet Nam arose during conversations with young middle-class professionals whose jobs, many of which were with multinational companies, had all been created because of spectacular economic growth—an average of 7% between 1996 and 2004 (citation). Several individuals pressed upon me the need for someone to study the changes taking place in areas like Ho Chi Minh City.

It would be misleading to assert, however, that the average person taking part in my study thought about their own lives in relation to *Doi Moi* reforms. Though these

women and men, as I explain more in following chapters, were experiencing an early adulthood considerably different from their parents, they rarely framed these developments in the context of their government's decision to reform the country's economic policies. Instead, people tended to view the changes taking place as the result of Viet Nam interacting more with foreign companies and institutions. Most people I knew did not have high opinions of government institutions and officials, as I discuss more below, and thus it makes sense that few credited the government with having played an important role in reshaping economic and social life.

When I introduced economic reforms as a topic for discussion, in fact, many conversations proceeded like the following:

Rylan: So what about *Doi Moi*?

Hanh: What?

Rylan: What can you tell me about *Doi Moi*?

Hanh: What do you mean?

Rylan: *Doi Moi*, the reforms, what do you think about them?

Hanh: I don't understand what you mean.

Rylan: In 1986, *Doi Moi*...

Hanh: Oh, I see, opening the door...

It took several seconds for Hanh, the women who organized *Shampoo World*, to recognize that I was talking about the transition to a market economy and not just a phrase, one that for her did not resonate like "NAFTA" might to someone living in the United States, Canada or Mexico in the late 1990s. *Doi Moi* was history. Middle-class

people did not connect their lives with it in the sense that they regularly acknowledged that they had gained or lost anything because of it. They were living in a Viet Nam heavily shaped by the transition to a market economy, but they did not go around debating the merits of something called *Doi Moi*.

When the subject did arise, the direct translation of the phrase—renovation—was not how they conceptualized the effects of the reform. Vietnamese society had not been renovated so much as it had been exposed, opened to a world of goods and services previously unattainable. Thus, Hanh went on to talk about all the things available to her now that the Viet Nam’s “doors” were “open.” These were goods and services available to her as a consumer—a female, middle-class consumer—that previously had been unavailable. As I explain further in Chapter Seven, the primary connections that women and men associated with reform were consumer freedoms that *Doi Moi* brought about. Other scholars argue that such consumer freedoms can be viewed as representing political acts in that people resist Viet Nam’s communist system through capitalism and with consumption (Miller 1995, Thomas and Drummond 2003). Though I do not deny the usefulness of such analysis in general, as I discuss later, I do not feel it goes very far in explaining the significance of consumerism to the lives of middle-class people in Ho Chi Minh City.

Not everything in Viet Nam or in Ho Chi Minh City was changing so quickly. Though I made many of the decisions about the focus of my research while tracking discussions young women and men commonly had, I was also interested in what people were *not* regularly discussing. Certain aspects of Vietnamese society, while evolving, did

so relatively slowly and without attracting a lot of attention. In comparison to certain material, economic and social transformations brought on by the transition to a market economy, some aspects of life appeared to be on people's minds less frequently. In the three remaining sections of this chapter, I give attention to (1) government and politics, (2) gender relations, and (3) social inequality. All have been affected by the transition to a market economy, but the changes taking place within these categories have not accelerated as quickly, for example, as the increased availability and variety of commodities and services, and the consumer society they have brought with them.

Politics, Governance and Corruption

At the time of my research, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), founded by Ho Chi Minh in 1930, was the only political party in Viet Nam, and had been for nearly 30 years. Protest against the current regime by Vietnamese people living overseas notwithstanding (see Zabarkes-Friedman 2005), as I write this chapter, the dominant political position of the VCP, while weakening somewhat during the 1980s (see London 2003, Kolko 1997), does not appear to be in jeopardy. The VCP's power and authority, while shifting hands considerably within the party over that past decade (Thayer 2002, Womack 1997), have gone relatively unchallenged, in large part because the party and the government have directly prohibited or tampered with the establishment of social and political conditions within Viet Nam that might have made possible the development of a multiparty system. Overt dissent and even public support for political change have regularly resulted in imprisonment (Brown 1996, Thayer 2002), for example, and there is

at least some control over important resources necessary for a transition to a more participatory form of government, such as print media and the Internet (Nguyen and Thomas 2004). There is, however, at least some evidence that the media and public attention to specific issues both influence government decisions. Scholars report, for example, that community-driven efforts to force government agencies to better regulate industry and protect the environment have achieved some success (Logan 2003, O'Rourke 2004).

The VCP and the Vietnamese government are separate institutions, but the government is almost entirely dominated by the Party. By international standards, Viet Nam is not considered a democratic state (Lee 2002); in fact the country's regime is labeled "politically closed" and "authoritarian," controlling without free elections (Diamond 2002:25). There has been limited recent progress toward greater political pluralism. Take, for example, recent National Assembly elections. While the outcome of these elections in 2002 certainly could not have challenged VCP political dominance, they were nonetheless under less party control than were previous elections (Gainsborough 2005). Additionally, elections in Viet Nam do not involve the kind of violence commonly seen in other parts of Southeast Asia, a point that Gainsborough (2005) suggests indicates a difference in terms of how the public in Viet Nam perceives the significances of elections under the one-party system.

Despite what I will call its less-than-perfect international reputation, as my research was coming to a close, Viet Nam was receiving backing from the European Union and many non-European countries for joining the World Trade Organization. US

President George Bush was also tentatively scheduled to visit Viet Nam to attend the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. Internally, the National Assembly was becoming increasingly vibrant, taking on a more powerful role in orchestrating reform than at any time previously. Generally, leaders were trying to draw in more foreign direct investment, and part of their strategy for doing so was to enact measures designed to show commitments to fairness and transparency. During this period, the government passed new laws ensuring religious freedoms. Somewhat surprising to average Vietnamese people was the prime minister agreeing to a televised question and answer session, wherein deputy ministers subjected him to varying levels of scrutiny regarding current and future policy.

From conversations I had with young men and women in Ho Chi Minh City, there is little I can say definitively about the political spirit of the average middle-class person other than that it is highly variable. I knew a young advertising executive, who was fascinated with current politics, but mostly because he found them interesting, not because he was especially politically active. He told me that current political issues were hot topics among his friends. But he did not see his interest in politics as a political act. Rather, he prided himself in being politically savvy and being able to call on this savvy while socializing with friends and clients. I also knew dozens of students who knew next to nothing about current politics. Some of them told me that politics were of interest to the older generations, not theirs. One female student told me that keeping up with current government issues was really only for men. “Girls find politics *chan qua* [boring],” she said, mixing her English and Vietnamese for emphasis.

There were certainly a host of interesting political issues. At the time of my research the country was transforming rather quickly, and the government and the VCP were of course playing major parts in this. Most interesting to me, however, was how divided the leadership was regarding certain current and future developments. This was especially the case with the move toward a market economy. Within the leadership, there was considerable disagreement about the fact Viet Nam was becoming more and more reliant on international markets, and about the influences of capitalism on society. As I mentioned briefly in Chapter One, these “conservative” voices were becoming fewer in number and less powerful, but they had not given up on pushing for stronger government control in many economic sectors. At the same time, the communist leadership was much closer to a consensus when it came to their control of power. In short, nearly all high-ranking leaders agreed maintaining current levels of control over the political process was essential to their survival.

Within this context, some people’s politics confused me. The views of a sociologist that I knew well were the first to shake up my understanding of political dispositions in Viet Nam. She was born and raised in the south, and her parents, she said, were the kind of people who tried their hardest to stay out of pre-1975 politics. They were not strong proponents of the current regime, nor was she, which is not surprising given that her research put her in regular contact with various disadvantaged groups that she understood to be suffering from current policies. However, she did not think there was anything wrong with the one-party state. “With more than one party, things would be too difficult, and confusing, like before [1975],” she explained. Having not experienced

the pre-1975 political violence first-hand, she nonetheless reasoned: “Things are more stable now for people, with one party. Two parties could be dangerous.”

As I pointed out in Chapter One, it would be hard for me to identify “key informants.” Yet I knew nearly all of the core participants in my study well enough to broach political topics. For those between 18 and 30 years of age, many individuals fit one of four dispositions concerning the current political system and regime: (1) ambivalent (2), sheepish, (3) in support of the status quo, or (4) uninformed. This is not to say that these people were apolitical. Nearly everyone, for instance, had something to say about corruption. They were all affected by it, so they complained about it and sometimes expressed strong hopes that it would go away. However, these conversations, even when I pushed them in this direction, almost never resulted in a more general questioning of authority or the current one-party system with its tacit support for corruption. People one generation older had stronger political opinions about the need for change, which they shared somewhat clandestinely with me, but, not surprisingly, I did not know anyone willing to risk reprisals, which could include imprisonment, to voice these concerns publicly.

How much actual control the Vietnamese government has over the average citizen is something that remains somewhat unclear to me. Even so, conversations about government control over the lives of individuals revealed why political ambivalence and uncertainty were common. The politics of international travel both in and out of Viet Nam, for example, provide a good context for understanding why most of the participants in my study were not especially politically active.

As I describe more in Chapter Seven, many services and commodities were much more readily available to middle-class families at the time of my research than 10 years prior. Domestic and international tourism were among the most desired of newly available services. People were more financially able and freer to travel for pleasure. This new freedom was the result of decreased restriction previously imposed on average citizens by the Vietnamese government to travel abroad. In fact, between 2002 and 2004, the Vietnamese government was the least likely hurdle would-be tourists needed to clear. People planning trips to China and Singapore, two increasingly common tourist destinations, said something similar about these countries. Despite being governed by rather authoritarian regimes, both were easily accessible. Countries with democratic traditions, such as the United States, Canada and Australia, on the other hand, strictly controlled access to their territory. Indeed, most complaints I heard about the tribulations of international travel were from people trying to go the United States, oftentimes trying to visit relatives for the first time in 25 years.

That the United States rejects approximately 95% of tourist visa applications submitted to their Ho Chi Minh City consulate office was widely known.⁹ I knew several people who applied for and were denied tourist visas. Though none of them had unrealistic expectations about obtaining a visa, many nonetheless pointed to and even joked about the contradictions in the US Consulate's information video. The five-minute piece emphasizes that the United States, while maintaining "secure borders," nonetheless

⁹ While there are no publicly available statistics, this number was cited to me by two US consulate staff. It is widely believed by Vietnamese and United States citizen in Ho Chi Minh City, that to apply for a tourist visa was a waste of time, unless you happen to have connection or were able to meet the especially narrow definition of what it meant to have "personal ties" to Viet Nam.

has “open doors” that “welcome millions of legitimate visitors every year.” The video goes on to explain key immigration procedures, including the recently introduced scanning of applicants’ index fingers on the day of their interviews. Another important aspect of the process, the video points out, is providing convincing evidence of the applicant’s “personal ties to [her/his] home country.” What the video does not make clear is that the “personal ties” of “legitimate visitors” are primarily financial ties—for the most part, successful applicants must have businesses, homes, and bank accounts in their names before immigration officers will even consider their application. Though having the right connections, say through US citizens working for NGOs with ties to consulate staff, can also help, tourist visas are nearly unattainable for the vast majority of middle-class people. Among the participants in my study, less than half had bank accounts, and only a few owned either homes or businesses.

For foreigners wanting to visit Viet Nam, on the other hand, tourist visas are easy to obtain. Hai, a small business owner who successfully demonstrated his “personal ties” to Viet Nam and thus procured a US visa, joked that the Vietnamese government was “very democratic” about tourist visas, “they’ll give them to anyone.” Furthermore, as Hai pointed out, if a tourist decides to stay in Viet Nam beyond their one-month visa, even to work and remain in the country indefinitely, they simply apply for an extension. Though the bureaucratic procedure for doing so can be time-consuming, if an individual encounters a problem, there is almost nothing that a “middle man” cannot fix with a well-placed bribe. My personal experience along these lines involved paying 20 US dollars extra for my visa renewal every six months, which was necessary because I was supposed

to have a work permit to work in the country long term. As I describe later, the vast majority of middle-class people that I knew also participated in some form of bribery when dealing with their own government, but it was widely believed that there was little chance to bribe US immigration officials.

Anthropologists who study corruption try to understand it from the point of view of local participants, arguing that instances of corruption are social acts conceptualized and carried out in morally ambiguous contexts (Hasty 2005, Lomnitz 1988, Smart 1993). From the local perspective, “illegal” political and economic activities are often seen as inevitable, and to some extent useful, especially among the well to do (Lomnitz 1988, Luong 2003). Though the Vietnamese government is still under international pressure to improve its human rights record, the average middle-class person would much rather deal with her/his own government through a system of affordable bribes than interface with the less penetrable (Willis 1981) bureaucracies of the United States government, wherein direct experience and stories suggest that only the truly rich can participate. Given these contradictory codes about what it meant to interact with a “democratic” versus an “authoritarian” government—the US war in Iraq; the fact the George W. Bush lost the popular vote in 2000; and, to a lesser degree, the remnants of the US war in Viet Nam also factored into broad political narratives about democratic states—it is not surprising that the people I knew were not willing to risk government reprisals to support the transition to a more participatory form of government. After all, the average middle-class person was positioned well to “participate” in political processes and interact with the government through bribery and corruption.

Gender and Gender Relations

Gender and gender relations were in flux in Viet Nam at the time of my study, especially in large urban centers like Ho Chi Minh City. What it meant to be women and men was being redefined and what it meant for women and men to relate was changing. However, the new norms, expectations and power relations were taking shape within a context marked in no small part by elements of continuity. While many things appeared to be changing quite rapidly, others seemed to be doing so much more slowly or not at all. An important aspect of this continuity, which is evident in the findings from my study, is that life for women generally was more demanding and difficult, and came with less than equal rewards both materially and symbolically. While this had long been the case in Viet Nam, interestingly, it had not always been.

In a historical analysis wherein he compares the status of women in Viet Nam to that of women in other parts of Asia, Marr (1984) observes: Vietnamese women were never expected to immolate themselves alongside deceased husbands, as in India and Champa; they did not wear veils as in Islamic countries; they did not bind their feet as in China. In fact, he adds, archeological evidence from prehistory reveals that Vietnamese women were active members of the workforce, who likely enjoyed equality and power.

This was until, Marr points out:

...Chinese colonial administrators (111B.C-AD.939) and, especially, subsequent Vietnamese monarchs went to considerable lengths to convince women that they were by nature inferior, that their roles were rigidly circumscribed, that they should always follow and never lead (1984:191).

Echoing Marr's position that gender inequality, at least in part, was imposed on Vietnamese society from outside, Quale (1992) notes that Chinese imperial powers insisted on Confucian-dictated patriarchal family forms and patrilineal descent and these were initially met with considerable resistance from average Vietnamese people. The French colonial era only exacerbated what Chinese and Vietnamese dynasties set in motion (Stoler 1997).¹⁰ Vietnamese women argued that among a generally oppressed group—that is, all Vietnamese under French colonial rule—women were especially subjugated. Counter arguments of the time revealed the extent to which French colonial powers and Vietnamese collaborators were invested in what Marr calls the “conveniently exploitative aspects of Neo-Confucianism” (Marr 1984:191). By the 1920s, according to Marr, the “Women Question” had become a focal point around which many other social issues turned, and Vietnamese women “became conscious of themselves as a social group with particular interests, grievances, and demands” (1984:191). By 1945, Vietnamese women had come to collectively recognize and articulate common needs and wants.

What is perhaps most significant about the earliest period discussed so far, wherein greater gender equality was the norm in Viet Nam, is the attempt by at least some leaders within the Communist Party to draw on this history in re-imagining post-colonial society. Vietnamese women's empowerment expanded considerably during the 1945-to-1975 period, much of which has been explained as a result of the Communist Party's wartime efforts to facilitate gender equality (Goodkind 1995, Omar 2004).

¹⁰ For a discussion of how French colonialists and colonial government officials viewed Vietnamese women, see Stoler (1997).

Goodkind (1995) notes, for instance, that women in the North gained unparalleled autonomy and power throughout the war period because men migrated to strategically important areas of the country, because government policies promoted and taught gender equality, and because women played critical roles in battles against enemies, both directly and through a wide range of support programs. It is not clear what impact these war-era, Party-engineered gender relations had on women who did not support the Communist war effort. Even so, recent studies indicate the most pressing current task is to understand how post-war developments impacted the progress pro-Communist women made prior to 1975 (Goodkind 1995, Long et al. 2000, Omar 2004, Ungar 2000).

Omar (2004) argues that Vietnamese women have experienced a wholesale decline in status and power, attributing this largely to the lack of post-war public and governmental recognition of women's wartime struggles and sacrifices. Documenting the political implications of the change in women's social standing, Goodkind (1995) points to decreasing representation of women in the National Assembly—32 percent in 1971; 27 percent in 1976; 22 percent in 1981; 18 percent in both 1987 and 1992. According to Ungar (2000), the 1980s brought public campaigns to once again redefine women's roles, this time ushering in a series of developments that she claims eroded women's empowerment. In 1982, the government initiated a campaign for a return to what the communist leadership considered traditional family values and an emphasis on motherhood. The Women's Union, Ungar (2000) notes, once dedicated to promoting the empowerment of women, was instrumental in efforts to encourage women to resume domestic life for the sake of the country's on-going post-war reconstruction.

Furthermore, with men returning home from fighting, many women were forced to give up managerial positions they occupied during the war. For many women who remained in the workforce, opportunities were often limited to low-pay and low-prestige jobs. Soon after the war, gender inequality was also observed in educational attainment (Ungar 2000). Additionally, the Vietnamese government was negligent in enforcing a constitutional mandate to give women equal pay. Even more troubling was the lack of enforcement of laws to prevent female human trafficking and prostitution, both of which have increased annually since 1975 at alarming rates (Omar 2004).

While the studies reviewed so far in this section provide understandings of the evolution of gender and gender relations in Viet Nam up to the middle of the Twentieth Century, they provide limited insights because they do not consider the intersections between gender and other social hierarchies and forms of differentiation. Marr (1984) does briefly mention that class was an important factor in determining how women aligned politically during early anti-colonial resistance, and Stoler's (1997) investigation into inter-racial unions during the colonial era reveals race, class and gender interacting in the construction of a sexual morality. Missing from these studies generally, however, are the role that gender plays in reinforcing class differences and the understandings that class analysis lends to gender issues.

A small but growing body of literature based on contemporary studies is beginning to fill this gap, yet many still talk of a singular category of women. Omar (2004:55), for example, thus concludes:

Ensuring the strength of future generations of Vietnamese is the new role for women in post-war Vietnam, who are now symbolically positioned once again as biological producers and caregivers subservient to men.

It is true that much of what was gained during the war era in terms of gender equality has been eroded, but Omar's findings leave little room for what is ultimately necessary—a more complex analysis of women's roles and statuses.

In documenting the links between gender and development, Long et al. (2000) question whether gender by itself is a useful framework for analyzing the impacts of the social and economic changes that have accompanied the transition to a market economy, plotting a potentially fruitful path for research. They point out, for example, that compared to their urban counterparts, rural women on average have lower levels of educational attainment and marry earlier. Even so, in most of their major findings, they refer to women without adequately addressing age, class and geographic location as forms of difference among women. They point out, for example, that national mean age at marriage has fallen from 23.3 years as reported in the 1989 Census to 21 years, as of 1997.¹¹ My ethnographic data, on the other hand, reveal that *middle-class* women were getting married later in life, in many cases not until well into their thirties.

In short, issues concerning women's lives and empowerment in contemporary Viet Nam are not those of a singular category of people. Anecdotal evidence, for example, suggests that Viet Nam's transition to a market-oriented economy has created a variety of problems for low-wage women workers in the manufacturing sector. Bob

¹¹ As I mentioned briefly in chapter one, based on numerous discussions with sociology faculty and graduate students from Viet Nam, statistical data used for the National Census are highly suspect. No one I knew fully understood how the data were gathered or how statistics were generated. Long et al (2000) base this and many other major findings on Census data without acknowledging this widely held suspicion.

Herbert (1997), from the New York Times, reported an especially troubling story from Viet Nam in March of 1997:

Vietnamese all over the country were outraged that on International Women's Day, when most companies in Vietnam give women workers flowers and other gifts, 12 Vietnamese women were so abused they had to spend the day in the emergency room.

Herbert was reporting on an incident at a company contracted to make shoes for Nike. Managers ordered 56 women employed at the plant to run laps around the factory. March is humid and hot. The women were being punished for not wearing regulation work shoes. According to Herbert, a dozen women collapsed.

Discussing the impacts of *Doi Moi* on the commodification of labor and on female rural-to-urban migration, Ha and Ha (2001) detail a lack of government initiatives to deal with the movement of large numbers of women from rural areas to large metropolitan areas. This has left hundreds of thousands of women with no labor organization, no access to health care and no social insurance. Ha and Ha also explain that these urban conditions are worsened by the women's lack of family support from living so far from hometowns.

The women—and the men—participating in my study were aware of these problems, but did not regularly discuss them, and when they did, it was rarely within the context of social inequality or economic reforms. As I emphasize in reporting the results of my research, the women participating in my study identified and operated as a particular class of women, who usually shared more with the men in their lives and with women of a similar class backgrounds in other Asian and non-Asian countries than they did with poorer women in Viet Nam.

Middle-class women, for example, rarely empathized with class-other women when it came to topics involving sexuality and gender relations. Though attitudes toward prostitution were the most obvious in this regard, discussions about marriage to non-Vietnamese men were especially revealing with regard to how class and gender interact to create and enforce social difference. Most of the women participating in my study approved of dating and marrying foreign men. Some were actively looking to date foreign men; a few had sworn off dating Vietnamese men, because they preferred to date foreign men. The reasons for these attitudes varied somewhat, but many of the dispositions just described resulted from wanting something different from status-quo gender relations in Vietnam, where women were still expected to defer to the authority of the men in their lives. Other women said that they would not be comfortable dating foreign men, but that they saw nothing wrong with other Vietnamese women doing so. None of the women disapproved of dating foreigners, though a few thought that cross-culture marriages should be undertaken only after careful consideration of the potential difficulties. However, I came to realize that during conversations about relationships with foreigners there was an implicit assumption that we were talking about *Western* foreign men and *middle-class* Vietnamese women.

Other types of cross-cultural marriages had different implications. Specifically, Wang and Chang (2002) write about a phenomenon that has received considerable attention from the Vietnamese media. In certain regions of the country, primarily in rural areas of the Mekong Delta, there has been a rising trend for young Vietnamese women from low-income rural families to marry Taiwanese men. These marriages usually

involve intermediaries who broker what Wang and Chang describe as the commodification of international marriage. Brokers, who are more concerned with satisfying the demands of Taiwanese men than arranging a genuine relationship, present Taiwanese men with a number of potential brides from which to choose. These men typically pay between 7,000 and 10,000 US dollars, according to Wang and Chang (2002), a sum that is divided between the bride's family and the broker—highly in the broker's favor.

The women participating in my study told stories about how more traditional or conservative women, many of their mothers and/or the women in their hometown, for example, had judged them for dating or marrying Western men. I heard similar sentiments on the streets in Ho Chi Minh City, and there was little difference in how conservative women spoke about the wives of foreigners. Conservative Vietnamese women would say that the wives of both Western and Taiwanese men had “sold out,” so to speak, that they were chasing money and forsaking both true love and Vietnamese tradition in the process. Yet I found that middle-class women felt almost no connection with class-other women who were also judged for marrying foreign men. The middle-class women who participated in my study, to be certain, were not necessarily prone to judging women who would agree to marry Taiwanese men under the circumstances Wang and Chang describe. However, they had considerable difficulty understanding the motivations of such women. “How could they do that?” Hanh ask, “Don't they know they are not going to be happy?” My point here is not to emphasize similarities between these two types of cross-cultural marriages. Rather, I want to emphasize that clear lines of class

demarcation persisted despite what I saw as the potential for women from different class backgrounds to recognize similar concerns.

That middle-class women identify less and less with class-other women must be considered in relation to Viet Nam's transition to a market economy and how this transition has impacted women of different social class backgrounds. Vietnam's education and health systems, following patterns of slow growth in the early 1980s, entered a state of crisis toward the end of the decade as reforms shifted the cost associated with both from the government and onto citizens (Long et al. 2000). As Florence Babb (2001) demonstrates clearly, in countries experiencing market-oriented reforms, the negative impacts of such changes levy more hardship on women than men. Because child education and family health, across classes, are typically women's responsibilities in Viet Nam, it is a relatively safe bet that women bear more of the burden in Viet Nam also.

These changes provide the opportunity to understand class differences. Vietnamese women's ability to deal with these added burdens depends to a large extent on their socio-economic standing. At the time of my study, middle-class women and men in Ho Chi Minh City were being impacted by the transition to the market economy in both gender- and class-specific ways. Middle-class mothers were much better poised to handle growing concerns about their children's education and their family's medical needs than were, for example, their maids or nannies. While poorer families struggled to meet basic needs under the new burdens placed on families under reform, people in the

middle class had different worries, given that they were much better positioned to handle the extra burdens.

Within this context, gender relations for middle-class single women, married women and mothers were transforming, yet more traditional attitudes still play an important role as women and men negotiate the rules under which new gender relations take shape. Many young middle-class Vietnamese women were feeling a heightened sense of freedom that, while rooted in work and consumerism, clearly had developed into a larger set of personal freedoms. As Long et al. (2000) note, women in the post *Doi Moi* era were less likely to meet traditional expectations regarding gender relations, for example. They are less likely to meet filial obligations to in-laws and more likely to question their husbands' authority. Young women, especially, are increasingly challenging male authority. As Bélanger and Khuat (2002) argue, class is a key component in understanding whether and how women obtain the resources necessary to better exercise their agency and autonomy.

The primary contribution that my study makes to the discussions about gender in Viet Nam is that Babb's (2001) analysis of gender within the context of economic reform remains important even when considering women whose material lives have mostly improved because of such reforms. By their own accounts, this was the case for the middle-class women participating in my study. Despite the many positive developments these women cited, they also recognized and talked about how they were shouldering a disproportionate share of the material burden of making and maintaining middle-class society. I, too, observed this about gender roles but came to understand that women also

contributed more symbolic or socio-cultural work than men. A few women also pointed out that they were garnering a less than equal share of the returns for their efforts—less pay, less respect. Women’s responses to such gender-based inequality varied. Some women seemed to think this was mostly inevitable, while at the same time citing gradual change and anticipating more. Others occasionally confronted the imbalance in these gender relations during specific interactions with men in hopes of being agents of change. In the following chapters, I describe the everyday ways that women (and men) experienced these dynamics.

Poverty and Social Inequality

One of the most insightful people who helped me in trying to understand contemporary Viet Nam was Hoai An, an educator in her late 50s. Though her voice is not prominent in my analysis of middle-class culture, she regularly provided opinions and advice throughout my stay in Ho Chi Minh City. She was always quick to say whether or not I was “getting it right.” During one conversation:

Rylan: If I want to know about the social makeup, who are the important Vietnamese writers or scholars I should be reading?

Hoai An: Unfortunately most Vietnamese writers are too nervous to truly write about what is happening in Viet Nam. And they should be. Have you heard of Duong Thu Huong?

Rylan: She wrote *Novel Without a Name*. And her books are banned here [in Viet Nam], right?

Hoai An: Right. And she was sent to jail [for 9 months in 1991], and now she can't even travel abroad to accept awards she receives for her novels. They [the Vietnamese government] say that she is a dissident. And there are many more [whom have been labeled dissidents].

Rylan: Yeah, I see.

Hoai An: Have you read Kolko's *Vietnam: Anatomy of a Peace* or Templer's *Shadows and Wind*?

Rylan: I've read a couple chapters in the Kolko book.

Hoai An: If you want to really understand what's happening, what the government is doing, about how Vietnamese society is changing...if you want someone's honest opinion, if you want it from someone who knows what they are talking about, you should read these foreign writers. It is remarkable—they talk about the situation exactly like it is. They don't have to be afraid of house arrest or whatever.

Studying and writing about contemporary Viet Nam in the 1990s just as the country was getting back on its feet, so to speak, Kolko (1997) and Templer (1998) maintain similar positions. Both argue against the common view from the West blaming Viet Nam's failures on the government's recalcitrance with regard to abandoning their Stalinist model. The real problem, these authors argue, is that Viet Nam's leaders have ignored and forsaken the aspirations of ordinary Vietnamese people who desire a society founded on democratic and egalitarian principles. The findings from my research call into question the degree to which such principles were important to ordinary *middle-class*

Vietnamese people. In short, I saw little evidence that the government had abandoned the hopes of middle-class people regarding the kind of society the latter desired.

Along these lines, Duong Thu Huong, the author jailed for her criticism of the Communist Party, believes that it is not only the government that has given up on these principles, especially that of an egalitarian society. In an interview with Radio Free Asia (July 4, 2000), Duong had the following comments:

Interviewer: You often observed that your generation was armed to the teeth with ideals. What do you think of the current generation?

Duong: It's rather sad that today's generation would do anything to gain more "tickets"—that's what they call the US \$100 bills. They balk at nothing. They denounce the Party one day and cajole it the next for that same purpose...the most ethical ones could only think of learning foreign languages to work for foreign companies. Those are their highest ideals. As for the less ethical, the children of the high-ranking officials, they open their own companies to turn their parents' political power into real money and themselves into big and small bosses. Such phenomenon is common. The rest of the lowly people also try to send their children to school in hope of future jobs that can bring them a few "tickets." As a result, people of my generation are considered insane. Those of the current generation want to live only for the present. They eat, sleep, dance, and so on to seek physical comfort first and foremost. That has become the rule with very few exceptions in our society today.

To argue that the current generation's aspirations are merely the pursuit of "physical comfort first and foremost" is, in my opinion, to mischaracterize their motivations somewhat. The motives underlying materialism in Viet Nam are complex. Many young middle-class people have clearly adopted the belief that economic advancement is the key indicator of social progress and that consumer goods are one of the most telling reflections of this advancement. The pursuit of this particular kind of progress, furthermore, moves middle-class people away from the circumstances of their upbringing, and it forces them to make certain moral compromises. As I demonstrate in

the chapters that follow, however, these contradictions do not go entirely unrecognized by middle-class people themselves.

As my analysis shows, furthermore, for at least for some middle-class Vietnamese people, that the pursuit of material comforts is not simply an end in itself; it also is part of the larger social-culture project of being middle-class. As I discussed in Chapter One and further show in subsequent chapters, participation in this project also entailed defining the very nature of what it meant to be modern and Vietnamese. In many of the social performances of middle-class culture that I describe in Chapter Five, for instance, attempts by middle-class people to distance themselves socially and culturally from “the poor” were in part attempts to distance modern Viet Nam from its “peasant” past (and rural present). This civilizing discourse played an important role in how middle-class people envisioned themselves and class/cultural others, and how they conceived the progress of their country more broadly.

Significantly, Duong’s take on the morally questionable economic practices of the country’s political elite fit well within the framework of how middle-class people understand their position within Viet Nam’s social class structure. As I will expand on in the following chapters, according to middle-class cultural logic, both “the poor” and “the elite” often had more in common with each other than either did with the middle class. This was especially true when it came to questions of morality with regard to money—how it was earned and spent. Both groups of class/cultural others were considered suspect or even reprehensible when it came to these matters. “The poor”

would do anything for money; “the rich” acquired money dishonestly and spent it unwisely.

As I mentioned briefly in Chapter One, when middle-class people talked about “poor people” and “rich people,” they were primarily referencing or labeling individuals they considered to be class others, people whom they believed not to be middle-class. These labels, of course, reflected real aspects of Viet Nam’s class structure important to understand before I proceed, especially with regard to people discussed throughout the following chapters as rich or elite. When it came to privilege and influence, there was both a political and an economic elite, and there was considerable overlap and mixing of these two groups. Government policy makers and bureaucrats wielded considerable power, which they used and sold to a growing group of wealthy business owners. Wealthy business owners, in turn, were becoming more and more powerful politically as they formed alliances with state actors. Significantly, when middle-class people talked about “rich people,” they often did not distinguish between these two groups of elites.

Duong’s ideas about the current generation’s compliance with government market-focused initiatives also match well with my understanding of civil society in contemporary Viet Nam. Based on survey data, one recent study suggests that civil society is on the rise in Viet Nam (Dalton and Ong in press; n.d.). Their main conclusion, however, is that Vietnamese people are increasingly distancing themselves from their government, primarily by joining organizations with greater degrees of autonomy. The study does not provide evidence of increased collective action for the collective good.

While I have seen an increase of such actions among poorer (primarily rural) people, I saw nothing like it among those not struggling financially.

This is an especially important point on which to reflect when one considers inequality and poverty in Viet Nam at the time of my research. Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Sandie Robb (2005:5) provides among the most positive of outlooks regarding how, at the turn of the 21st century, the Vietnamese government was dealing with poverty:

While the major cities [in Viet Nam] have almost eradicated poverty, many rural areas, which rely largely on agricultural production, still have some way to go. But here too, the current administration is taking a number of measures to make poverty a thing of the past.

In fact, she continues:

Given the great strides the country has made in lowering poverty levels to date, Vietnam is a role model for other countries working towards achieving their Millennium Development Goal of making poverty history.

That Viet Nam, in many parts of the country, has reduced the number of people living in severe poverty is a point upon which there is wide agreement (Madrick 2003, Richardson 2004, Samans 2005, Thomas 2004, World Bank 2002). Robb's (2005) observations and optimism, however, are contradicted by other descriptions of and predictions about poverty in Viet Nam, which suggest that not enough has been done and that an improved situation is poised to regress (Kolko 1997; Lyall 2004). In either case, like many aspects of Vietnamese society, it is difficult from a review of the scholarly literature to fully understand what "poverty reduction" has meant for the poor.

What I can say is that, for the people participating in my study, helping the poor was neither a common concern, nor something commonly reflected upon by any one

individual. This is despite, as I later show, the close proximity of the lives of poor and middle-class people. It is important to point out, moreover, that the people in my study had grown up poor, as I discuss further in Chapter Four. Many of their parents spent two decades (or more, for people from northern Viet Nam) barely earning enough to support basic needs, and most people in my study could vividly remember being children during this difficult period.

Many middle-class people did know the story that poverty numbers tell. In 1998, 40 percent of the population was living on wages below the official poverty line (Le 2002:29). As an ethnographer in Ho Chi Minh City studying middle-class people, I was constantly curious about what life was like for the millions of people who struggle everyday to provide the basics. I also wondered about how middle-class people felt about the issue of poverty.

Consider the following observation I made while on the way to work in late spring of 2004:

A woman stopped on the side of the road, she dismounted from her bicycle, engaged the rusted kickstand, and quickly began to sift through a bamboo basket full of trash. She pulled out a rag, several pieces cardboard and a couple cans. She stuffed the cans and the rag into two large nylon sacks that hung almost to the ground from the back of her bike; she strapped the cardboard onto a small stack between the two sacks. Back on her bicycle, she pedaled half a block to the next basket. The rest of the city, on their way to work, was driving past on expensive motor scooters,

chatting to each other or into cell phones. For this gleaner, and many like her, though, the street is the work site. Hidden under a conical hat and behind a flowered mask, even her hands are covered with gloves, presumably to protect them while digging through the city's rubbish.

Ho Chi Minh City was full of these contradictory images: the daily grind of the anonymous have-nots nearly always juxtaposed to the daily grind of the haves.

Occasionally, the participants in my study thought about and discussed this latter category, the haves, as one group. It is important to recognize, however, that it was comprised of both middle-class people and rich or elite people. As I show in later chapters, middle-class people recognized many socio-cultural differences between themselves and the elite, as they did between themselves and the poor.

A week later, I recorded my observations about spending a full Saturday as a volunteer at a fundraiser for a school for disadvantaged children, where poor people, middle-class people and the rich all intermixed—to a limited degree, that is:

Today, at the 15-May soccer tournament, held at the An Phu Town and Country Club, I was struck most by the ropes. The Vietnamese staff had roped off certain areas, and hung signs announcing that these areas were “MEMBERS ONLY.” What a strange mixture of inclusion and exclusion! The school was invited to have its tournament here, and while the students are welcome to play in the field, they are not welcome in the pool, courtyard or restaurant. It's a ritual of inclusion, a limited one.

What struck me most about the situation was that no one else seemed to think there was anything wrong. Club members (the rich), 15-May students (poor people), and school volunteers and staff (middle-class people)—no one mentioned the ropes or hinted that they were problematic. It was these kinds of situations that first led me to question whether Kolko (1997) and Templer (1998) were asking the most important questions regarding average people's views on inequality and the state in Viet Nam.

Viet Nam has been praised for its recent gains toward reducing poverty (Luong 2003). Indeed, studies show that the number of poor people in Viet Nam has decreased. According to one study conducted by several non-government organizations, as recently as 1993, approximately 58 percent of the population lived in poverty; this number had been reduced to 37 percent in 1998, and 29 percent in 2002 (World Bank 2004). This same report claimed that Vietnam's achievements in reducing poverty have been "one of the greatest success stories in economic development"(World Bank 2002:12).

However, this same report also notes a steady tendency towards greater inequality (World Bank 2002). Anthropologist Philip Taylor (2004) also explains that social inequality in Viet Nam is increasing. According to his analysis:

Social inequality refers to differences between people in their material well being, their social position, cultural standing, or ability to influence others. It also refers to disparities in people's ability to ensure that they have a better future and that their children are secure, healthy, and have viable livelihoods. By most accounts such inequalities are growing and becoming more visible, in contemporary Vietnam (2).

Taylor (2004) also observes that Vietnamese scholars and policy makers have begun to attempt to measure inequality, understand its current causes, and direct policy intervention at improving on the situation, developments which Taylor finds striking in a

country in which the state has long portrayed social inequality as a legacy of the past imposed from the outside.

While at first it might seem contradictory to see such dramatic decreases in the poverty rate alongside growing inequality, these parallel developments are the result of what is essentially a singular strategic approach by the Vietnamese party/state to govern and maintain power. The leadership has aligned itself with both domestic and international capital and provided the means for a partnership wherein capital can invest and profit while the party leadership benefits either directly through joint-investment projects or indirectly through bribes and corruption. At the same time, unrest among rural and low-income urban residents could seriously hinder the effectiveness of the state/capital partnership. The state must be seen as providing assistance to those in need, and has taken various steps, including rural development and poverty reduction programs to ensure this image.

Taylor concludes his analysis of social inequality in Viet Nam, arguing that:

...current patterns of inequality along class, regional, gender and ethnic poles do not necessarily fatally undermine the state's ideology, in which socialism has been admixed with nationalism, and inflected with patriarchal, ethnic, and regionalist biases. When inequalities have threatened social cohesion or the party's control, the state's response has been swift (23).

As Taylor makes clear, the state is more interested in maintaining power than in dealing directly and comprehensively with social inequality. This has long been the case.

Especially since the reforms of the mid 1980s, state programs labeled "poverty reduction" have failed almost entirely to address the socio-economic relationships that, as Taylor puts it, "tie the losses of the poor to the gains of the rich" (2004:25).

Positioned between these two groups—the rich and the poor—the middle-class people in my study were not especially concerned about these relationships either. As the following chapters explain, attempting to understand why this was the case reveals that middle-class people seemed not to be closely aligned with the state, the elite or the poor. In fact, for many participants in my study, one of their most important ties was with international companies. Employed by these corporations, they served to help them invest capital and make profits in Viet Nam, processes that also clearly impacted the socio-economic relationships between class groups in Viet Nam. Situated in the middle of all of this, middle-class people were in association with people in all of these different groups to some degree and in patterns that are best described as opportunistic.

CHAPTER THREE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

This chapter presents an argument concerning social and economic development in Viet Nam over a period covering the 50 years leading up to my research. This was essentially the period of living memory for the participants in my study, in that their parents and grandparents had lived through it. During this period, major changes to Viet Nam's economic development and class structure took place, and in some cases changes happened rather suddenly. Perhaps the most significant transformation was that concerning how all but a few of the participants in my study experienced transitions from lives of poverty to lives of economic stability and material comfort.

There are two basic questions I explore. What kind of society was Viet Nam at the time of my study? How did it come to be that kind of society? My motivation results from reading about a society that by 2004 scholars had labeled "post-socialist" and from thinking about whether framing contemporary Vietnamese society this way benefits my understanding of the lives of participants in my study. As scholars reference a post-socialist era and post-socialist sensibilities (see Ngueyn and Thomas 2004), I am curious about whether there was a socialist era and socialist sensibilities that people in my study either discarded or transitioned out of.

As the following quote suggests, Viet Nam was, by 2004, well into a capitalist era where many people had capitalist sensibilities.

“He is my idol. He is excellent and successful,” 21-year-old student Do Yen told the BBC. “He is my idol. I hope that our country will have someone like him in the future.” (BBC 2006:1)

In late April of 2006, Bill Gates, as the BBC, *The New York Times*, *The Financial Times*, *The South China Morning Post*, and other major international media sources reported, was greeted in Viet Nam like a pop star. Students—many of them waved Vietnamese translations of Gates’ books over their heads—shoved each other, pushed against security barricades, climbed trees and hung from branches, just to get a glimpse of one of capitalism’s greatest modern icons. During his speech and a question-and-answer session, Gates received one protracted ovation after the other as he spoke of the promise he saw in young Vietnamese people to work in the ever-expanding niches of the global information economy: software outsourcing, call centers, back office processing and others. The allure of the globe’s foremost high-tech mogul was not limited to students. The country’s Prime Minister and President took time away from the Communist Party National Congress, the most important event on the government’s yearly calendar, to meet Gates on his first ever visit to Viet Nam.¹²

In the spring of 2006, when I read the news stories recounting Gates’ visit to Viet Nam, I was keenly interested in this development, but I was not at all surprised to hear that he had been received like a superstar by young and old alike—by both business people and communist cadres. The hoopla surrounding his visit harmonized perfectly with my own ethnographic observations. Between October of 2002 and December of

¹² It is worth mentioning briefly that the both the Prime Minister and President mentioned here were replaced in July of 2006 by two men reported by local media to be even more in line with the country’s drive toward market-oriented changes and capitalist-driven development.

2006, while teaching English in Ho Chi Minh City, I interacted with hundreds of Vietnamese university students.¹³ I could imagine nearly any of these students clamoring for a view of Bill Gates while exclaiming praise of his capitalist accomplishments.

Each course I taught enrolled 15 to 20 students and typically lasted two to three months. During my first year, I often taught three or four courses concurrently. Even so, I got to know many students in each class well. I was keenly interested in their lives. When I explained to students that my curiosity was partly the result of my primary role in Viet Nam as graduate student conducting social science research, they were eager to talk. Most students, in turn, were equally interested in my life in North America, and typical days involved sharing stories, both inside and outside of class. With groups of talkative middle-class students streaming in and out of classrooms, the aspirations of these students started to influence my understanding of what motivated middle-class Vietnamese young adults. On the first day of class, I inquired about students' plans for the future. Many students were studying English with hopes of attending university overseas (in United States, Australia, England, Singapore, or Canada, for example). Others hoped to study at one of the foreign owned and run universities in Ho Chi Minh City. Few indicated desires to continue their studies at Vietnamese institutions of higher education.¹⁴

Revealing an optimistic fascination with global capitalism, students' post-university aspirations were especially uniform. Inquiries about career plans drew a

¹³ Most courses I taught were comprised of a mix of high school students, university students and young to middle-aged working adults. Here, I am talking only about university students, who typically comprised a large majority in each class.

¹⁴ Given the limited availability and high cost of foreign options, however, I am sure that many students did go on to study within Vietnamese higher education programs.

narrow range of responses. By and large, students wanted to study and then work in information technology (IT), business and commerce, or marketing and advertising. I can remember several classes wherein the plans of not even one student fell outside of these three categories. Never did more than a handful of students say that they wanted to pursue something other than IT, business or marketing. A few students in most classes did express interest in being educators; some wanted to work in government or journalism; the odd student expressed intrigue in the idea of working for a non-governmental organization. These constituted a tiny minority, however. Furthermore, individuals who did express interest in these other fields, sometimes did so almost sheepishly. It was as if not pursuing a career in business full-throttle was somewhat of a social transgression.

Occasionally, someone admitting plans to pursue alternate career paths even resulted in heckling from a couple of the more obnoxious students in the career-plan majority. “He’s not interested in making money,” the heckling went after one student announced his intentions to work for a local newspaper, “He’s happy to be poor.” Other students laughed, and the journalism aspirant looked at me and rolled his eyes. “I get this a lot,” he said lightheartedly. In a discussion with this student after class, rather than defending his career choice on its own terms, he emphasized that he could make pretty good money as a journalist, because he could moonlight as a consultant for domestic and foreign companies. In Viet Nam, there is a long history of underpaid journalists augmenting their salaries by using press accreditations and contacts to secure work in

business promotion, advertising and consulting (Heng 2001, Marr 2003). This student knew of this trend and expected to benefit from it.

To be clear, interactions wherein students not interested foremost in making money or pursuing careers in business were heckled were not especially common, but when this did occur, it nonetheless underscored the grip capitalism had on the imagination of nearly an entire generation of students. Moreover, this was not limited to the students' generation. It was clear that many of their parents, too, expected them to pursue fields like IT or business that would bring large salaries. Students commented that their parents had explained that they were paying for expensive English courses based on the assumption that their children would use the language skills and credentials to make good money.¹⁵ In fact, the journalist aspirant had argued on multiple occasions with his parents about wanting to write for a local paper, which was against his parents' wishes. In these confrontations, his parents only relented after he explained how much money he could make on the side through business promotion.

Envisioning, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the creation of a modern, liberal capitalist South Vietnamese state, Wesley Fishel—along with other modernization proponents of the time—must have had this kind of pro-capitalist milieu in mind. One of the most influential US advisers in South Vietnam, Fishel (1961) argued that economic, political, and social changes were always integrated and interdependent, and thus to see so many young people inclined toward the culture of capitalism in Viet Nam surely

¹⁵ That few of the young adults that I knew actually worked in IT demonstrates how quickly things changing in Ho Chi Minh City. I knew a handful of people who had studied IT and were working in it, but it was still an emergent field at the time of my research. Yet students expected that there would be growth in this sector and were preparing for careers in it.

would please him. It might also surprise him. Emphasizing the retrograde nature of non-white, traditional societies and the superiority of Western progress, Fishel considered the Vietnamese a backward people motivated by self-interest, not principle; they were driven by emotion, not rationality (Latham 2006). Such a people, according to US analysts and policy makers, were not capable of self-government. Most important, these cultural deficiencies might have resulted in Vietnamese society rejecting capitalism. They needed guidance.

The extent to which this logic was embedded in US foreign policy in Viet Nam was revealed after the communists decisively defeated France at Dien Bien Phu. The subsequent Geneva Accords of 1954 partitioned Viet Nam into northern and southern halves and called for national elections to reunify the country in 1956.¹⁶ Concerned that Ho Chi Minh's prominence as an anti-colonial hero would enable him and the communists to prevail if such elections were to take place, the US rejected reunification and began its long nation-building program. From the start this was an attempt to create a viable, distinctly South Vietnamese state; a growing, market-oriented economy; and political legitimacy—all of which was aimed at redirecting the communist-led revolutionary energy into liberal, capitalist channels (Latham 2006). The Vietnamese, modernization theorists argued, required US intervention to stay on the path toward becoming a modern capitalist society. Left to their own decisions, post-colonial societies were likely to choose the wrong path and follow the wrong leaders, or so the logic of modernization went (Fishel 1961, Pye 1956, Rostow 1960).

¹⁶ This division was never intended to be a political boundary. For more on the history of how it came to be considered a political boundary, see (Neale 2001).

Their readiness to support this agenda required modernization proponents to ignore the implications of backing President Diem, the South Vietnamese leader during the late 1950s and early 1960s (see for example Fishel 1959). Despite his so-called liberal pro-capitalist leanings, Diem mounted a brutal campaign to suppress dissent against his regime. Equipped with US military aid, he created a powerful and ruthless secret police force that imprisoned, tortured and murdered communist sympathizers (Latham 2006: 30). As Gilman (2002) notes, modernization emphasized the ability of so-called advanced societies to bring purportedly backward societies up the universal socioeconomic ladder. The end justified nearly any means.

Rostow (1960), perhaps the best-known modernization analyst, explained that imperial powers necessarily brought about transformations of thought, knowledge, and institutions, all of which compelled colonial societies toward becoming modern. Communist recruits, Rostow (1960) argued, did not join the revolution because Marx, Lenin or even Ho Chi Minh motivated them. They were not inspired by the vision of a unified Vietnamese state or by President Diem's repressive tactics. They were, Rostow (1960) argued, alienated young men who desired foremost to be part of something larger, something modern, and they had mistakenly sought this in Vietnamese communism. The solution, in theory, was straightforward: the US needed to promote a model of the future that would replace the institutions of the communist-led insurgency with those of the capitalist state. When this transformation was complete, Vietnamese people would have a renewed sense of personal advancement as they made the transition to modernity (Gilman 2002).

Approximately 40 years after the intellectual staying power of these early modernization theorists peaked, Bill Gates was in Viet Nam promising a similar kind of personal advancement via global consumer capitalism. This time, no one, not even the leaders of the Vietnamese Communist Party, were truly on the defensive. An increasingly impotent group of leaders in Ha Noi was voicing concern about capitalism's vices, but fewer and fewer people were listening, and the country's policies, economy and population were increasingly capitalist in their orientation.

As Latham (2006) notes, however, the process of creating capitalist societies is now more market driven than it was in the 1960s, and less state-led. In Viet Nam, this time around, foreign policy and military campaigns have been mostly replaced with trade policy and foreign direct investment.¹⁷ Indeed, as I have stated previously, the recent reforms in Vietnam were primarily catalyzed by the Communist Party's perceived need to maintain power by tailoring policy to meet the demands of the public for a more market-oriented economy. The strategy is different, the channels through which capitalist slogans are spread are more diffuse, and the creation of a capitalist society proceeds with little hindrance. Significantly, the capitalist society being formed has not been forced upon Viet Nam from outside—at least not like it was when modernization theory was so directly influencing the US-backed regime in Southern Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. Having grown from within and been spurred by a host of both domestic and foreign influences, this modern capitalist society is Vietnam's. It is government approved, locally

¹⁷ Significantly, attempts to spread capitalism and so-called democracy by military force continue in other regions of the world.

driven, and based both on local and global expectations about what a modern capitalist society should be.

In short, I undertook my investigation of young middle-class professionals in urban Viet Nam well after the Communist Party, the Vietnamese government and the local populace had reinitiated the creation of a modern capitalist society. Vietnam's largest and most prosperous metropolitan center, Ho Chi Minh City, was materially, socially and symbolically at the center of it all. The country's economic goals were being orchestrated by policy, fed by capital investment, and enacted by citizens. Ho Chi Minh City and, to a lesser extent, Ha Noi, were the hub for all of this. Ho Chi Minh City was especially powerful in this regard, attracting investment from around the world and young people from all over Viet Nam. Some of these new arrivals were coming to take part in the lure of urban living; others considered urban living somewhat of a sacrifice. Nearly everyone talked about having come for the promise of material rewards. Long-term residents commented that in the late 1990s, the city was starting to look like it did in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the US was subsidizing an impressive consumer society. By 2002, this early period had been far surpassed.

Socialism, Capitalism and Inequality in Historical Perspective

Although popular support for the revolutionary forces in the South was relatively widespread, it was based less on communist ideology than on a simple desire for political and economic reforms and social justice. This fact had been reflected in the program of the Party's front organization, the National Liberation Front (NLF), which had been deliberately designed to appeal to Southern moderates in the struggle against the Saigon regime. Politically, the program of the NLF promised to ensure broad democratic

freedoms. In the economic sphere, it made no mention of communism and called simply for the confiscation of the property of the American imperialists and their puppets. (Duiker 1989:4)

When I first came to Viet Nam in the summer of 2000 (for two months), and still during my first months of living, teaching and studying in Ho Chi Minh City starting in 2002, I often reflected on how odd it was that a communist country was so driven by business, so marked by consumerism. I considered socialism and capitalism opposing global powers that had somehow formed a strange hybrid society in Vietnam. In fact, contemplation of this perceived contradiction influenced the direction my research eventually took. In retrospect, I was somewhat naïve in assuming that the ostensibly socialist ideology of the country's ruling group necessarily sat in opposition to capitalist forces.

In describing Viet Nam at the turn of the 21st Century, DiGregorio et al. (2003: 179) write about an “unevenly affluent, consumption-based, industrializing society.” To be certain, this is an apt description of the Vietnamese society that I came to know through my research. Even so, it is important to remember that no part of this description refers to conditions entirely new to Viet Nam. Class, commodities and industry have a long history of influencing the way Vietnamese society has been organized. Turn of the 21st century Viet Nam is unique only in the particular constellation these conditions take, and the intensity and variability with which this new mixture shapes life for the various segments of Vietnam's highly stratified citizenry.

During both the pre-colonial and colonial eras, a family's place in Vietnam's social hierarchy was determined largely by connections to land and by their relationship

to either imperial or colonial authority (Luong 2003b, Malarney 1998). In brief, some Vietnamese people benefited greatly from controlling large tracts of land and/or from political and economic alliances with Vietnamese emperors or French colonial authorities. Most others worked hard to earn meager livings, occupying a broad lower stratum within the social hierarchy.

Prior to French control of the economy, the vast majority of people were farmers. Trading, and, to a lesser extent, handicraft industries were strictly controlled by most Vietnamese emperors, who viewed traders from foreign—especially Western—countries as potential threats to their power. While some locals were given permission to trade with foreigners, serving as intermediaries, there is little evidence that a class of people specializing in foreign trade existed. This history suggests, however, that commodity trading with foreigners was, to at least some extent, an internally desired practice that needed to be suppressed. Based on the imperially promoted Confucian notion of proper social order valorizing working the land, however, there was cultural stigmatization of commerce, trading and entrepreneurship (Malarney 1998).

The social hierarchy of dynastic Viet Nam was rigid: scholars, officials and landlords occupied the highest ranks; farmers were below them; artisans and craft specialist were lower yet; traders occupied the lowest rank (Luong 1992). Trade was also considered an occupation for women and was not commonly undertaken by Vietnamese men during the pre-colonial period (Luong 1998). Though the vast majority of farmers were poor, rural families typically produced enough rice to meet basic needs—rice was then the primary commodity and a common form of currency. Furthermore, emperors and

landlords, under threat of peasantry revolts, upheld the institution of *village land*, which went a long way in ensuring the economic security of peasant families (Luong and Nguyen 1998, Neale 2001). According to this system, part of the land in each village was owned collectively by the village and rented to poorer families at reasonable prices. Though a head tax existed prior to French colonization, it was payable in rice, and emperors typically cancelled it during years when harvests were bad (Neale 2001). Throughout the pre-colonial period, there was a strong collective attitude. Rice farming was highly weather dependent and relied on complex irrigation systems, both of which led to extensive cooperation at the village level. Villages were largely autonomous, however, and this collectivity was only more broadly mobilized at times of war (Ashwill 2005)

Early on, the French colonial presence did not alter this system significantly. However, from the early 1900s on, the colonial authority committed to integrating Vietnam's economy into the world capitalist system, in the process transforming the nature of Viet Nam's social organization. A French-educated elite replaced the old mandarin class, as the right to vote required French schooling and high property qualifications. By the 1920s, a new elite class was well established, comprised of government employees, professionals, French-trained university students, educated landowners, and business people (SarDesai 1998). Furthermore, land was taken from villages and peasant families and given to French businessmen to operate plantations and mines. The colonial government raised agricultural taxes and doubled the head tax, while also mandating that the latter be paid in cash. Significantly, the colonial government also

increased the power of landlords, in an effort to garner landlord support for French colonial authority and bolster a social base for colonialism in the villages. This eventually meant that landlords would take a larger share of farmers' rice and sell it in cities, where these same landlords were then able to buy increasingly available industrial goods produced both domestically and in France. Farm families, meanwhile, because they were getting a smaller share of rice and paying much higher taxes, had to send sons to cities to earn wages, merely to meet basic needs (Neale 2001, Trullinger 1980).

Clearly, high levels of inequality marked Vietnam's pre-colonial and colonial society. That some of the values inherent in a capitalist society, such as private property and accumulation of wealth, were as common, if not more, as were those of a socialist society is also clear. Even prior to the twentieth century, capitalism did not necessarily contradict views regarding success and good fortune among common village families. As Hefner (1998) notes, the defining feature of modern capitalism is the systematic investment of wealth into productive processes that are intended to directly produce additional wealth, as opposed to producing immediate social ends. In contemporary, advanced capitalist societies, profiting and wealth generation have become both culturally and morally desirable, if not superior, activities (MacFarlane 19871). In the pre-colonial and colonial period, the average Vietnamese family, for both material and symbolic reasons, had important stakes in generating wealth. Malarney (1998) observes that neither pre-colonial nor colonial Vietnamese culture can be labeled anti-commercial, despite some periods wherein commerce was stigmatized. In fact, wealth creation for family advancement was common and acceptable throughout Vietnam's history, despite

the reality that many families were unable to achieve it. As Marr (2003) notes, there is also a long history in Viet Nam of families pinning their hopes for climbing the social ladder on sons' ability to qualify for and pass regional and national exams; while other families tried to marry their daughters into prestigious scholar families. Going back for centuries in Vietnam's dynastic history, there was at least some widely held social value placed on the prestige acquire via scholarly credentials and wealth accumulation, values quite conducive to the kind of private economic growth normally associated with modern advanced capitalism.

As the French began exerting greater control, these values transformed somewhat, but did not disappear. The new Vietnamese elite class was demanding equality, but not necessarily for all of Vietnam. Vietnamese professionals wanted their pay to be more in line with their French counterparts, regardless of what was happening at the village level. Vietnamese-born, French-educated government employees were sometimes as critical of the professional incompetence of French bureaucrats as they were the unjust policies they were charged with enforcing. Vietnamese businessmen, essentially calling for free-market capitalism, were concerned with changing colonial regulations that favored French companies and not necessarily ridding the country of those regulations altogether (SarDesai 1998). In general, a sizeable segment of the new elite class, from which nearly all organized anti-colonial resistance came, was as concerned with promoting a form of market capitalism more in their favor as they were with achieving democratic freedoms. They wanted a say in changing the rules of the system to their benefit, but many were not

calling for a complete overhaul of the system, something that might compromise their already privileged position in it.

More generally, the populace was opposed to white foreign control of the economy, which, according to Kerkvliet (2003), is how they perceived capitalism at the time. Yet Ho Chi Minh and other early nationalists were reluctant to project their communist ideological leanings, precisely because it was clear then that this same populace was no more in favor of a strong Vietnamese state taking control of the economy (Kerkvliet 2003, SarDesai 1998). In his historical analysis of Vietnamese print culture, MacHale (2004) argues convincingly that the influence of socialist values on public life was ambiguous and only ever sporadic.

The struggle against the French colonial authority transformed these dynamics, but never resulted in a society based on egalitarian principles or one that was anti-capitalist in its organization. A glimpse of this history, from 1945 to 1975, might suggest a long struggle to rid the country of capitalism, which is how only a few authors characterize this period (Morely and Nishihara 1997). This view, however, underplays elements of Vietnamese society prior to and during the anti-colonial struggle that indicate the continual presence of the culture of capitalism throughout the thirty-year war. In 1946, that Ho Chi Minh's original ten-point plan made no mention of national land reform or a centrally controlled economy is significant (SarDesai 1998). In short, the fight against capitalist societies (France and the United States), did little in the way of directly challenging the values of capitalism at the level of society, despite strong anti-capitalist government rhetoric.

Only a small number of people resisting the French were members of the Communist Party. The Communist Party aligned with other nationalist groups and formed what Turley (1980: 178) calls “a broad coalition of classes.” The party possessed considerable strength in mobilizing and motivating people toward the goal of building a socialist society, but it is clear that there was a limit to both its will and power in this regard. While many communists genuinely sought a socialist society, where social class played less of a role in people’s lives, they were, from the very beginning, and according to Ho Chi Minh’s directive, trying to build what Neale (2001:15) calls a “state capitalist economy,” wherein profit and industrial growth were keys to the country’s future. Vietnam’s northern leaders of the 1940s and 1950s felt they needed this type of economy—and the industry and tractable labor force that had accompanied it in China and Russia—in the struggle against *private* capitalist forces in Europe and North America. During the early years of developing such an economy, the intensity of discipline imposed on workers increased and as did the unfair nature of it. Demands on workers to accept unpaid overtime; the recruitment of surplus workers to drive down wages; the increased intensification of shift-work to meet production quotas—all marked the early years of socialist developed in the north (Post 1988). One of the primary motivations, for example, behind the state’s control over life-cycle rituals, such as weddings and funerals, was that these events were long in duration and took place during work hours, thus cutting into productivity (Malarney 2003). Furthermore, when socialist-oriented structural reforms were imposed, they caused serious problems within the

party's ranks, precisely because many branches of the party included large landholders (Turley 1980).

It is also important to remember that the founding members of the communist party, including Ho Chi Minh himself, by and large were educated and privileged, relative to the average Vietnamese person. They were the sons and daughters of government bureaucrats and landlords. Many despised the corruption and cruelty of their own class. They hoped to rid Viet Nam of the old order and replace it with a modern industrial society. However, they saw themselves not as the leaders of a democratic movement, but as members of an elite group in charge of Vietnam's move toward a future with a better life for average people. In this, there was zero tolerance for dissent (Neale 2001).

In the southern part of Vietnam, between 1945 and 1975, where there was greater inequality than in the north, the structure of class relations was somewhat different, but certainly not entirely distinct from the north. President Diem and the military dictators that succeeded him were also desperate to build a modern, industrial nation. Theirs, of course, was modeled after private capitalist states, such as the United States and Great Britain, but many of the effects were the same. Dissent was not tolerated, and there was an elite class of bureaucrats and landlords directly connected to an even smaller group of leaders than in the communist northern part of the country (Luong 2003b). As a consequence, especially from 1954 onward, the southern part of the country was deeply immersed in class struggle. This struggle, however, was largely between opposing groups promoting different models of *private* land ownership. Small private landowners were

struggling against large private landowners. No one fought for the socialist ideal of state-controlled or even communally controlled land. The southern government, aligned with landlords, was trying to regain control of land that had been redistributed during the previous decade as guerillas battled militarily and politically to acquire this land. Farm families with small land holdings fought to keep control of their land, which they thought should be privately owned (Kerkvliet 2003, SarDesai 1998).

As Luong (2003b) notes, the 1946-1975 war period, especially the last decade, saw a dramatic upsurge in the level of inequality, both in terms of urban/rural discrepancies and within both rural and urban populations. This was the case even in the northern part of the country, where the communists initially started their project to manufacture a socialist society alongside a state capitalist economy. However, it was in the cities in the south where inequality increased the most. Urban areas under firmer United States and Saigon control were considerably safer than rural areas and thus rural-to-urban migration increased dramatically (Thrift and Forbes 1986). Migrants often left land, many possessions and social networks behind, placing them at considerable disadvantage upon arriving in Saigon. As a result, Thrift and Forbes (1986) estimate, 1.5 million people were living in slums in Saigon by the end of the war. At the same time, elite and middle-class residents in Saigon benefited greatly from the inflow of foreign aid and the presence of foreign troops (Luong 2003b).

After the southern regime was dislodged in 1975, during the height of the Communist Party's controlled economy, and despite its genuine attempts to reduce inequality, the long-standing existence of a society characterized by inequality and free-

market desires combined with an insular, self-promoting leadership prevented socialism from ever establishing a stronghold on the people's imagination. This was especially the case in the south, in and around Ho Chi Minh City. Cooperatives never succeed in the south, and black (or free) markets, which existed for nearly all types of agricultural and non-agricultural goods, flourished throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. In a wide spectrum of economic decisions, large portions of the population passively and actively resisted the command economy (Kerkvliet 2003, Luong 2003a). Furthermore, especially after 1975, the government and the Communist Party were ruled by a small and self-perpetuating group of elite leaders who never willingly gave decision making power over to the party more generally, never mind to the public, and who quickly cultivated alliances and consolidated their power through the kinds of reciprocity and patronage systems commonly seen in capitalist societies (Kolko 1997).

It is difficult to describe with certainty the nature of class relations and the status of the culture of capitalism during the first decade and a half after the Communist Party took control of the entire country in April of 1975. There were direct attacks, by the government, on some of the intuitions of capitalism, especially the Chinese-Vietnamese dominated business sectors in Ho Chi Minh City. But these seemed to have been motivated more by the Party's increasingly hostile relations with China than by desires to rid the country of capitalist enterprises. By 1978, the government had initiated two large programs designed to reduce large entrepreneurial activity; these programs sent 30,000 powerful trading families to work in rural economic zones (Luong 2003b). Two participants in my study, as young children, were forced to leave their homes in Ho Chi

Minh City because of these programs, and remembered the resulting struggles well. According to families displaced by these policies, the government targeted trading families to punish them for having supported the Saigon regime and, perhaps, because they still feared this group.

Though it is impossible to know the precise motivation for these programs, it is safe to say that the goal in part was to penalize and destabilize a potentially powerful opposition group that happened to be capitalist-oriented, and not necessarily to rid the country of capitalist practices more generally. Indeed, during this same period the government had already loosened its control on various industries. In July and August of 1979 new regulations abolished checkpoints to curb private trade in the South and granted tax exemptions to cooperative farmers who brought uncultivated land into use (Duiker 1989). Some segments of the leadership had also started to openly blame the country's economic woes on a lack of capitalist incentives (SarDesai 1998).

Along with nearly all of the rest of the country, the middle class was hit hard in the 1980s, as unemployment peaked and the economy dropped to especially low levels. This suffering was primarily the product of widespread financial and social catastrophes that were largely beyond the Party's control and were clearly not the product of specific Party plans to create a classless society (SarDesai 1998). A state capitalist economy, centrally controlled, never truly took hold, especially in the south. By 1987, when the government essentially admitted defeat in the drive to initiate farming cooperatives, private rice traders were buying and selling nearly all of the rice produced in the Mekong

Delta. Only a small portion was being directed into the state's centrally controlled rice market (Fforde and de Vylder 1996).

Evidence that an elite class was benefiting from the suffering of a growing underclass comes in many forms, but one of the most telling involved the ten-year occupation of Cambodia throughout the 1980s. Unlike the previous wars against France and the United States, the war with Cambodia was initiated and directed entirely by an elite group of leaders, now living in comfortable Ha Noi villas once occupied by French colonial elites. The costs of the war were borne by a poor populace. While money poured into the war effort, average Vietnamese people went hungry. Furthermore, the Vietnamese soldiers in this brutal campaign, during which approximately 50,000 Vietnamese died, were the children of poor people conscripted primarily from the south. Significantly, other poor Vietnamese went with these soldiers in hopes of escaping poverty and finding work in occupied Cambodia. By the end of the occupation, the majority of prostitutes in Phnom Penh were Vietnamese women (Neale 2001).

Detailing that, by the early 1990s, intellectuals and policy-makers had nearly completely abandoned the socialist project, Greenfield argues that they did so at least in part because "a commitment to socialism denies access to the material rewards of alignment with...the interests of the state and capital" (1994:203). Even for leaders in Viet Nam who once had a strong commitment to socialism and the socialist project—something that was likely never common amongst the public—capitalism was the logic of choice well before the (inequitably distributed) material rewards of consumer capitalism arrived in full force. It is no surprise that at this point in time, and still at the

time of my research, there was almost no public debate about the merits of capitalism and socialism. In the 1990s, intellectuals were reprimanded for writing about whether real socialism was alive in Viet Nam (Greenfield 1994). During this same period, policies reduced the availability of free health care and education, the latter sending millions of children to work. Trade union leaders argued, furthermore, that the right for workers to conduct strikes was not supposed to conflict with interests of capital, especially foreign capital (Greenfield 1994).

In light of these post-1986 dynamics, Kolko (1997:162-163), while discussing the global opposition to US involvement in Viet Nam in the 1960s and 1970s, notes that no one involved in the anti-war movement then could have suspected that “two decades after [the war] ended that Viet Nam would adopt much of the culture and values that the United States tried unsuccessfully to impose during the war.” He continues, explaining that: “everyone is obliged to ask who really won the war, and to reflect profoundly on its true significance.” Kolko, despite his vast knowledge of Vietnam, seems not to recognize that neither the goals of Vietnam’s leaders nor the wishes of many of its citizens were ever entirely contrary to the culture and values of capitalism, to those of the United States. As Kolko knows well, and writes about articulately, the Vietnamese struggle was not against capitalism as an abstract concept or against the American way of life. It was a struggle for self-determination, against colonial control of their country. To suggest that Viet Nam might not have won the war borders on the absurd, and Kolko is likely not doing so. But he is suggesting that, in the end, capitalism won and communism lost. That probably is true, but, taken by itself, this position discounts important developments in

Vietnam's historic and late 20th century relationship with capitalism. Despite the influence of the global market and global institutions, and many poor internal decisions notwithstanding, the Vietnamese state and the Vietnamese people have indeed been making their own decisions and building their own capitalist society. They have not simply adopted the culture and values of a former enemy. To ask, within this process, whether either state leaders or the general public have *given up on* the goal of creating an egalitarian society in favor of global capitalism no longer seems to be a relevant questions, given that it is not clear whether either the state or the public ever desired or moved toward such a society.

Neoliberalism and Reform in Viet Nam

Thus far in this chapter, my goal has been to challenge the socialist/capitalist dichotomy that some others have used to describe changes in Viet Nam's approach to development (i.e. the common use of the term "post-socialist" in reference to late 20th/early 21st century Viet Nam). I have argued that Viet Nam, at the time of my research, was organized in large part in accordance with capitalist principles. Much in previous chapters, furthermore, reveals that most average people were embracing capitalist ways of life, and that only a few were challenging them. I also argue, however, that it is difficult to pinpoint an era of any length when Viet Nam was organized by socialist principles and wherein the majority of average people embraced socialist ways of life. It has been documented rather clearly, moreover, that in the 1970s and 1980s there was considerable dissent and resistance to policies of a socialist nature, country wide, but

especially in the south, such as state control of production and state control of consumer behavior. The previous section, furthermore, reveals that a significant element influencing these state-society relations has been the public's belief that government leaders have long been a cohort of corrupt political elites concerned more with wealth and their grip on power than with the well being of average people. Most recently, many of these leaders' close associations with both Viet Nam's business elite and foreign capital have only made matters worse in this regard.

All of this leads me to pose a final series of questions aimed at providing at least a partial answer as to what type of development has taken place in Viet Nam most recently. The most pressing question is to ask precisely how accurate is it to label the ideologies shaping changes that have taken place in Viet Nam over the past 20 years as neoliberal. A logical starting point to address this question is to ask whether the *motivations* behind the earliest reform efforts in the mid and late 1980s were influenced by neoliberalism. Was Viet Nam's transformation similar to those, for example, in Chile, Argentina, Poland or Russia, wherein U.S. economists and/or U.S. trained local economists schooled in neoliberal orthodoxy (primarily that of Milton Freedom and the Chicago School of Economics) played major roles in initiating and shaping reforms (Harvey 2005, Klein 2007)? By and large, Viet Nam's experience was distinct.

Early reforms throughout the second half of the 1980s in Viet Nam were driven primarily by internal factors and influences (Fforde and de Vylder 1996, Luong 2003a).¹⁸

¹⁸ In fact, it is possible to trace some of the earliest calls for reform back to 1972, when three scholars from the National Economics University in Ha Noi wrote a book entitled *Combining Plan with Market*. This was of course prior to the end of the war and unification and was suggesting market-oriented reforms to the control economy of North Vietnam (Beresford and Tran 2004).

They were certainly later influenced by global events, eventually and importantly by the fall of the Soviet Union, but the scope and pace of these early reforms was foremost the result of internal debates taking place between Party leaders. These debates, initially undertaken with little counsel from outside economic experts, were vicious in nature, creating two political factions within the leadership (reformers and conservatives) in near equal numbers who would battle over the nature and extent of reforms from the mid 1980s through the time of my research.

That these debates initially involved relatively little outside counsel likely was the product of both long-standing conventions on the part of the leadership to rarely seek such counsel, preferring to handle policy issues internally, and Viet Nam's relative isolation resulting from various international developments, the most important of which were its on-going military occupation of Cambodia and the U.S.-imposed trade embargo. Goodman (1995:93) points out that Viet Nam was "essentially a pariah state" and received diplomatic visits only from Eastern European and Cuban officials until 1994.

It is also worth noting that at this early point (the mid 1980s), the Party leadership had already been dealing with loudly voiced opinions and "fence breaking" activities from provincial leaders who, in practice, had already instituted economic reforms toward the market by the early 1980s (Beresford and Tran 2004). All of these activities and the formal implementation of market-oriented reforms (i.e. *Doi Moi*), moreover, took place when Viet Nam's foreign aid was coming almost exclusively from socialist countries, mostly in the form of food aid, and not from multinational organizations.

Another important question is why reforms in Viet Nam were initiated. Whereas in other countries it has been argued that (neoliberal) reforms were often carried out to restore class power (Harvey 2005), this does not seem to be the case in Viet Nam. Reforms initially were carried out because the leadership was in near full agreement that their previous model of so-called socialist development had failed almost entirely and the country was in dire economic and social condition. Differences of opinion, which as I have indicated were strong, were about how to repair the “traditional model,” not on whether it needed to be fixed. Party leaders, furthermore, were compelled in part by widespread dissent and resistance to the command economy. Many average people, in short, were demanding reform of some sort. They either voiced these demands openly, or, more commonly indirectly via what can be considered subversive economic practices such as smuggling and participation in informal or “black” markets, both of which were widespread.

Kerkvliet (2003) goes so far as to argue that farmers were instrumental in shaping national policy during the early years of reform in demanding control (i.e. private, non-state control) over land and production processes. Taylor (2007) believes that the state was also eventually responsive to foreign governments and multinational institutions, which of course offer aid almost always conditional on the adoption of market-based policies. However, for much of Viet Nam’s early reform period, it would be misleading to suggest that the government was forcing unpopular and outside-directed policies on an unwilling population in attempts to please multinational aid providers, as was often the

case in countries undergoing more orthodox neoliberal reforms (Klein 2007, Harvey 2005).

As Taylor (2007) observes, it did not take the IMF and World Bank long to enter the equation. In 1993, the United States agreed to cease its longstanding practice of voting against the clearing of past Vietnamese debts, and thus constraints on IMF and World Bank assistances were lifted (Goodman 1995). By 1995, these organizations were involved in debates within the Party, which had only intensified since their inception in the mid 1980s. It is clear at this relatively late stage in Viet Nam's reform process, that neoliberal ideals, nearly globally hegemonic during the Reagan-Thatcher era, were indeed influencing decisions in Viet Nam somewhat. These ideals came mostly indirectly at first, as Viet Nam originally based its reforms on Soviet and Chinese models (Kolko 1997).

As the developments described thus far indicate, Viet Nam's reforms also have lacked other fundamental elements accompanying neoliberal prescriptions elsewhere. The pace of reforms is especially significant. Nothing like Milton Friedman's "shock therapy" (Harvey 2005: 71) has ever been implemented in Viet Nam. Especially with early reforms (from 1986 through the late 1990s), the pace of was not only relatively slow compared to other nations transitioning to market economies, but these reforms were also quite haphazard, starting and stopping, accelerating briefly only to be reined in by powerful conservative forces within the Party's core leadership that were opposed to reforms both political and economic (Esterline 1987, Paine 1988). Regardless of whether leaders of this generation were pro- or anti-reform, in conversations I had with foreign

scholars with long histories working on policy issues in Viet Nam, these scholars emphasized it was very unlikely that the Party leadership would find neoliberal dogmas attractive or worthwhile. The idea that the state exists primarily to correct in the event of market failures is virtually antithetical to the leadership's insistence on a powerful and expansive state.¹⁹

Additionally, a small state sector and austerity are considered two major cornerstones of neoliberal prescriptions. Here also the Vietnamese government's attitude and development strategy tend to diverge, at least in part. Since reforms were initiated in the 1980s, the state share of GDP in Viet Nam has tended to remain high, and at times it has even increased. As Gainsborough (2007) points out, in 2003, state output in some provinces was as high as 80 percent, and only as low as 30 percent in others. Rather than being immobilized by globalizing forces, the Vietnamese state is "at the heart of the regulation and promotion of economic activity" (Gainsborough 2007:5). With regard to austerity and social spending, despite the introduction of user fees, public spending on education continued to increase throughout the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Spending on poverty reduction programs, furthermore, was actually initiated during Viet Nam's reform period (Vu 2004).

Finally, and perhaps most important to this discussion, the impacts of reforms carried out in Viet Nam in the name of its transition to a market economy, while anything but entirely positive, nonetheless contrast the generally negative impacts of neoliberal

¹⁹ Some of my understanding in this area comes from personal communication with two longtime scholars on Viet Nam's political economy, Adam Fforde and Martin Gainsborough, and with economic officers at the US Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City. In the latter case, these officers also regularly complained that Viet Nam's economy could be growing much faster if the government would only speed up its reform process.

reforms carried out in the same name elsewhere (see Babb 2001). These differences, moreover, lie within important aspects of people's lives, especially those of the middle-class. Subsidies remained an important part of people's lives, even if many were unaware that their government was still keeping the price of certain commodities "artificially" low. Fuel prices, for example, remained relatively low throughout the entire period of my study primarily because the government subsidized fuel. The fuel subsidy, furthermore, kept prices for other commodities and services, including basics such as food and transportation, relatively low. In 2003 at the start my research I could eat lunch at one of the middle-class establishments that I discuss later in Chapter Six, one that included rice, a vegetable dish, a meat dish, soup, fruit for desert and ice tea, for less than 1 US dollar. I could fill my motorcycle with enough gasoline to last approximately 2 weeks of driving for 2 dollars. Generally, until quite recently, Viet Nam was cited for impressive accomplishments in controlling inflation (Vo and Pham 2004).

Furthermore, the economic growth throughout the 1990s that resulted from both reforms and the lifting of the U.S trade embargo reduced the country's poverty rate significantly, from over 60 percent in 1990, down to approximately 29 percent in 2002 (World Bank 2003). During this period educational attainment also increased substantially (Vu 2004). Life expectancy, according to the annual survey conducted by the General Statistical Office of Viet Nam in 2002, increased to 71.3 years. According to a United Nations Human Development Report, the percentage of the population with access to clean water, garbage collection, electricity, and public media all increased

significantly throughout the 1990s and the period of my research. This same report cited declines in child and maternity mortality rates (United Nations 2003).

Since 1993, when the country received its first pledge from the World Bank, Viet Nam's more recent reforms have certainly taken shape partly within the context of negotiations with multinational aid organizations. As already discussed, both universal health care and universal education were the casualties of these negotiations. Even so, in the case of these two specific outcomes, average middle-class people did not consider themselves unfortunate.

As high school students, many of the people in my study were the recipients of a free education, one with which they were almost entirely unhappy. The same can be said about public hospitals. Care at these facilities was free, but it was not adequate according to middle-class people. That the government had provided and then revoked universal systems in each of these arenas was not something that middle-class people considered a negative development. Everyone I knew was much more interested in improving the quality of education and health care, and they were clearly willing to pay for it. I was regularly struck by how quickly and thoroughly middle-class people dismissed the loss of these two universal systems as virtually unimportant. A few people followed these developments more closely. These individuals did talk about these changes as sacrifices, but they did so within the context of having given up certain resources in the name of economic development, a trade off they said was justified by the country's economic growth and their own prosperity.

Social scientist and long-term researcher in Viet Nam Carlyle Thayer (2001) provides a revealing synopsis of how such developments transpired in the period leading up to the start of my research in 2003:

Since the Asian financial crisis of 1997-8, Vietnam has resisted calls by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and international donor community to step up the pace of its reform efforts. Vietnam has also rejected out of hand conditional financial inducements by the international financial institutions to underwrite the costs of reform efforts. Vietnam's party leaders have shown extreme reluctance to undertake any policy initiative that would upset political stability. This and a variety of other factors have led to reform immobilism. This was most evident in Vietnam's eleventh hour decision to pull back from completing a bilateral trade agreement (BTA) with the U.S in September 1999.

It took the VCP Politburo a further nine months to finally agree to the draft BTA negotiated the previous year. In November of 1999, the VCP Central committee's Eighth Plenum reviewed the draft text of the U.S.-Vietnam BTA in detail. These discussions revealed that those with vested interests in state-owned enterprises, including military-owned enterprises, were strongly opposed to opening up Vietnam's economy. Prime Minister Khai was given the unenviable task of obtaining consensus. As noted above, he was unsuccessful. In March of 2000, Vietnam sent a letter to the U.S. listing eight to 10 areas of the draft BTA that they felt were inequitable and should be renegotiated. In May, U.S Trade Representative, Charlene Barshefsky replied, outlining areas of the agreement that U.S would be willing to clarify. (Thayer 2001: 185-186).

Many of the so-called Asian Tigers (including Indonesia Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and South Korean) had been brought to their knees by the Asia financial crisis, wherein 1997 rumors of severe economic trouble in Thailand became self-fulfilling and spread quickly throughout much of Southeast Asia (Klien 2007). Precisely because Viet Nam's reforms had been piecemeal with regard to its integration into global markets, the country's economy weathered this financial storm better than most countries in the region. Importantly, in the processes Thayer (2001) reveals above, this regional episode was presented by conservative voices within the party as evidence that Viet Nam was

moving too quickly with economic liberalization, an argument that led to the stalling of reforms.

However, it is important to note that the restructuring of Asia that took place after the crisis resulted in what Klien (2007:263) calls “the looting of Asia.” The crisis set in motion a wave of privatization (outside of Viet Nam) and foreign multinationals swept in to takeover in major sectors such as energy and communications. Though Viet Nam was mostly an observer in this restructuring, as Southeast Asia reemerged after the crisis, Viet Nam would join the pack, so to speak, having never experienced anything like the level of public outrage over “the looting” that other countries in the region had. This very likely explains, in part, the period during the early 2000s, when the Vietnamese government proceeded to institute policies increasingly friendly to foreign capital. It also explains, in part, the attitude of many of my study participants, as they welcomed in and in many cases joined the ranks of foreign companies then entering Viet Nam in unprecedented numbers.

CHAPTER FOUR: SOCIO-ECONOMIC FOUNDATIONS OF THE MIDDLE-CLASS

In this chapter, I describe factors contributing to the social and economic underpinnings of middle-class culture. Though the primary goal in this dissertation, as I have already discussed, is to provide an ethnographic account of what makes the Vietnamese middle class a socio-cultural project, it is first important to understand what enabled people to participate in this project. With this purpose in mind, the first half of this chapter examines a brief history of class structure/mobility in Viet Nam and describes various social and economic conditions encountered by participants in my study. The second half of this chapter provides more detailed profiles of six middle-class individuals.

Historically, the middle-class in Viet Nam was relatively small. In fact, Ball (1952) argues that it was virtually non-existent even through the first half of the 20th century. As he explains:

The middle class has always been smaller and weaker in Indochina [Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia] than in most countries in eastern Asia. France discouraged the development of industries, and wholesale trade was in the hands of Chinese or Frenchmen. The French gave fewer opportunities to the Vietnamese to gain administrative experiences than any other colonial power. There was, therefore, no middle class, no class of administrators in the same strength as in countries like India and Indonesia (Ball 1952:27)

However, King et al. (2008) point out that an educated professional class emerged during the late colonial period, comprised of doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, interpreters, clerks, secretaries, technicians, schoolteachers, and journalists. Buttinger (1958) emphasizes that such people formed new social groups or classes that were unknown in

Viet Nam prior to the late 1800s. Similar observations have been made of Southeast Asia in general. Embong (2001), for example, argues that the emergence of the middle class in this part of the world is a relatively recent phenomenon that is likely only one generation old. The results of recent survey research by King et al. (2008) in part confirm that this has been the case in Viet Nam. Generally, scholars of more recently emergent privileged class groups in Southeast Asia agree that there are virtually no socio-cultural accounts of early and mid 20th century class groups with which to compare more recent developments (see Pinches 1999).

In Viet Nam, though social science research on privileged classes continued to lag during the second half of the 20th century, it appears that class mobility during this period followed various patterns and was influenced by both internal and outside forces. During the so-called socialist period (1954–1986), King et al. (2008) point out that young people with the correct political background and who passed university entrance exams with high marks were sent abroad to study and returned to take high-level positions in government. In many of these instances, having the correct political background required that one's parents and even grandparents were supposed to have been members of the proletariat, or working class, and not members of what the Communist Party considered the capitalist class. It was with this background and through international education that many people during this period achieved power and status.

In South Vietnam, prior to reunification (1975), United States intervention factored heavily starting in 1955, as US foreign policy began to shape the contours of class structure, specifically with regard to the middle-class. The most profound impact

came as the US government undertook a massive social engineering project that was aimed, in part, at creating a middle-class. The Commodity Import Program (CIP) began in earnest in 1955. The CIP was a trading plan ostensibly designed to introduce significant US capital into the South Vietnamese economy by importing commodities instead of simply injecting cash. The stated goal was to fuel the country's industrialization, growth and self-sufficiency, while at the same time keeping inflation low (Jacobs 2004). It was also intended to bolster a middle-class, which according to the then prevailing tenets of modernization theory, was to serve as the bulwark for democracy, and thus support for the US presence. The program lasted the entire period of US involvement, ending in 1975, with what scholars have reported as mixed results. Some middle-class actually suffered as corruption and black markets diverted a large percentage of goods the US imported, in turn producing the inflation they were supposed to prevent (SarDesai 1998).

The situation worsened for many among middle and upper classes in former South Vietnam when the communists gained military control in 1975 and complete administrative control in 1976. As I described above, the communists installed the command economy almost immediately, targeting the South's capitalist class specifically, by leveraging control over various forms of capital. Additionally, the new government sent hundreds of thousands of former military personnel and bureaucrats to reeducation camps (for periods from 3 months to 12 years), and replaced nearly all school administrators and teachers from the old regime with pro-communist individuals. The government also sent as many as 30,000 trading families to agricultural economic zones.

Within a few years of reunification, many families with enough money to arrange escape did so, including a large portion of the well-off Chinese merchants from Ho Chi Minh City (Luong 2003b).

Another major factor influencing the class structure was the currency reform instituted in September of 1975, even before full administrative reunification was carried out. Before 1975, there were two currencies, one for North Vietnam and one for South Vietnam. In September of 1975, the government ordered all organizations and individuals in the south to exchange their old currency (the Dong from the South Vietnam regime) at a rate of 500 to 1 for new currency issued by the National Bank of Vietnam (SarDesai 2005).

Two people in my study explained that their parents, who were relatively stable before this episode, occasionally still talked about how they were financially and emotionally devastated by these reforms. Thai's parents, for instances, though they both were able to earn modest incomes during the post-war period, said that they only fully rebounded from this after Thai landed his first job following his graduation from university in 1996. By rebounded, Thai explained further, he meant that his parents had not been able to achieve the middle-class lifestyle they had had before reunification until the late 1990s, when he as able to help them considerably with regular financial assistance.

Though it is not known precisely how many previously privileged families lost all or most of their wealth during this post-war, pre-reform era, it clear that some families were able to retain their wealth. As Luong (2003b) explains, inequality remained in the

southern part of the country throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s. One factor that explains this is remittances. The peak flow of refugees fleeing the country occurred between 1978 and 1980. As noted, those who fled were often people with enough wealth to afford the bribes and other payments necessary. Refugees typically were not the most economically disadvantaged. By the 1980s, these once-privileged refugees had established themselves in the West. Many, though certainly not all, acquired good paying jobs and were sending money to relatives who remained in Viet Nam (Luong 2003b).

As the issue of remittances indicates, family was interwoven with other important social processes, such as migration, the combination of which shaped economic possibilities and impacted social class in Viet Nam prior to reform in 1986. As Luong (2003b) points out, similar though distinct dynamics remained after reforms were instituted:

The success of some households [during the early post-reform era] as opposed to their neighbors appears to be due partly to a combination of drive and skills acquired through formal education as well as through previous work and family experience (104).

It is thus important to understand how and to what degree some of these processes impacted the economic possibilities for the people in my study.

All of the approximately 50 participants in my study were young adults. There ages ranged from 18 to 34: the majority were in their twenties; several were in their early thirties; and a handful were recent high school graduates. This age group was an especially potent social and economic force as the 21st century got underway in Viet Nam (Thomas and Drummond 2003). It was by far the largest age group in Viet Nam at the time, but this was not the only reason for their relative import vis-à-vis the themes of my

research. Significantly, along with their parents, they were the first to experience the profound social, political and economic changes that accelerated in the 1990s. With only one exception, all of the people who participated fully in my study had been quite poor as children and lived through difficult times in the 1980s and early 1990s. They were among a vanguard group, the first to experience the changes that came with the reforms of the late 1980s (*Doi Moi*). Without exception, according to their own appraisal, their lives at the time of my research were much better than they had been ten years prior.

Of the total number of people who participated in my study, I gathered information about family composition and history for 28 individuals, all of who were university graduates. The majority of these individuals (17 of 28, or approximately 60 per cent) had fathers who also were university graduates. Just under half (13 of 28, or approximately 46 per cent) had mothers who had earned university degrees. Survey research by King et al. (2008) based on urban residents of similar age and occupational background as the people in my study revealed even greater connections between intergenerational social stability and education, with 76 per cent and 65 per cent respectively. As these authors note, the social and economic making of the middle class in the post-reform era was marked by continuity in educational backgrounds between parents and children. My research showed, however, that there were a considerable number of exceptions to this pattern.

The nature of family relations and how those relations impacted individual economic decisions and situations was linked to other social processes as well. Decisions regarding migration, for instance, were often intertwined with both family and economic

concerns and had mixed economic impacts on individuals. Of these 28 people, 13 had migrated to Ho Chi Minh City and away from their families and hometowns, either to attend university or soon after graduating from university.

Of these 13 individuals, 7 were from Ha Noi. Of these 7, 5 people cited economic factors as the predominant influence over their decisions. They believed Ho Chi Minh City held more and better job prospects. For the 2 other Ha Noi-to-Ho Chi Minh City migrants this was not the case. These 2 individuals, who were both women, made the choice primarily to justify moving out of their parents' homes. Each had graduated from university and was working a good paying job at a company in Ha Noi. During this phase of their lives, they both decided they needed more personal freedom from their parents, primarily when it came to dating men. They believed that it would have been much more challenging to justify to their parents their actual desires, each explained, than it would to simply explain they were relocating for a better job or more pay. While they told their parents their motivation was economic, the real issue had more to do with sexual freedom. As single women working and living alone in Ho Chi Minh City, they had actually made financial sacrifices to gain personal freedoms. Though this decision ultimately entailed thriftier lifestyles than if they had remained living with their parents, it was, in both of their opinions, worth the sacrifice.

Of the other 6 people whose hometown was not Ho Chi Minh City, 2 were from smaller cities in the central region (Da Nang and Hue) and 4 were from what Vietnamese people often refer to as rural areas, though small-town is a more accurate way to refer to their background. The primary motivation for these 6 people was financial. They all

explained to me that their chances for finding employment in fields that interested them were greater in Ho Chi Minh City than, for example, in Benh Tre, a small town in the Mekong Delta, which one such person called home. In somewhat of a contrast to the 2 women from Ha Noi, the relocation of these 6 individuals was conceived, in financial terms, to be wholly positive. They were paying more for basic living expenses in Ho Chi Minh City, but they were earning more than they could have in their hometowns.

In fact, for all 13 people who had migrated to Ho Chi Minh City, only one person was not emphatic about having made the decision to migrate. The individual who was not was originally from Ha Noi and believed that he would have been better off staying with his job in Ha Noi. Even so, he preferred life in Ho Chi Minh City over that in Ha Noi and enjoyed the freedom of living away from his parents.

According to most individuals moving to Ho Chi Minh City from smaller cities and towns, their parents were not entirely happy or comfortable with the idea that their children were living in such a large city. Even so, no one reported that doing so had actually caused major problems with their parents. Several people had extended kin living in the city already, and this often eased transitions and concerns about the city among parents. (As Hanh's story later in this chapter reveals, however, these arrangements were not always trouble-free.) Whether people had extended kin in the city or not, parents were generally quite keen to have children earning the salaries available in Ho Chi Minh City. Some parents, and even a few of the individuals participating in my study, felt like it was a sacrifice for various reasons (e.g. pollution, higher crime rates), but a good economic strategy nonetheless.

Migrants were by no means the only people living out of their parents' homes. Of the 15 people participating in my study who were born and grew up in Ho Chi Minh City, only 5 still lived at home. Decisions to live at home also varied. Thuy, a factory manager whose profile is presented later in this chapter, represents someone who felt at least somewhat trapped by gender norms in this regard. Though it was not the most important issue in her life at the time, at 27, she had given much thought to moving out. She had not, however, even broached this topic with her father, whom she feared would have been thoroughly angered by her even mentioning desires to move out before getting married. Thuy sometimes felt like pushing the issue, but she also admitted that it was great to be able to save money. She explained that her hopes were that, when she did get married, she would have saved enough money to buy land and build a home, and thus not have to worry about the prospect of moving in with her future husband's parents.

During discussions with the other 4 people still living with their parents (1 woman and 3 men), economic factors seemed to be the primary motivation, though it was not easy to know this with certainty. They all explained that they lived at home in order to save money. However, I did not talk with these individuals as often or as in-depth about this issue as I had with Thuy. During some discussions, I wondered whether the woman and one of the men were being entirely forthright in this regard. Even so, it seemed clear that some young middle-class people were living at home until marriage, not solely because they felt compelled to do so by their parents, but also because they wanted to enhance future economic prospects. According to research that deals specifically with

pre-marital cohabitations by Nguyen (2007), this practice was increasingly common at the turn of the 21st century and motivated by a number of concerns.

There were 4 unmarried people living on their own even though their parents lived in Ho Chi Minh, 2 women and 2 men. Not surprisingly given the gender norms in Viet Nam, it had been more problematic for the 2 women to move out than it had been for the 2 men. One of the women in particular was still dealing with the problems this had caused at the time of my research, even though she had been living on her own for almost 2 years. The 2 men and the other women, on the other hand, found their parents more accepting of their decision than they had expected. Their parents had discouraged them from moving out, but their rationale for this was mostly that doing so was a waste of money, given that they could live at home for free.

The remaining group of 6 Ho Chi Min City-born people was comprised of 3 married couples all living on their own. One of these couples owned their own home, and 2 couples were renting apartments. None were currently living with the husband's parents, though 2 couples had done so for the first year or so of their marriages. When the women in these couples explained their choices to move out, answers were similar. They both seemed to factor economic and personal freedom equally. They indicated that they did not move in with their husbands' family because they felt obligated, but because they wanted to save money. They moved out, not because there were major problems, but because they wanted the freedom and comfort that came with having their own home.

Regardless of whether they were married or single, living with their parents or on their own, these 28 people spent as many as 60 hours per week, and no less than 44, at

work. Regarding employment by sector, this group was divided according to the following breakdown: 6 people were factory managers (all foreign companies: 2 textile; 2 footwear; 1 garment); 6 worked in marketing and advertising (2 domestic companies; 2 foreign); 5 people worked as office assistants for foreign companies operating in Viet Nam (in finance, oil production, accounting and law); 3 were university teachers (i.e. state employees); 4 were English teachers (private and state schools); 2 worked in mid-level positions for import companies (both domestic: steel; lumber); 1 person was a bank supervisor (foreign); and 1 worked for a human resources firm (local). While their work environments certainly varied, most people worked closely with mostly other Vietnamese people. For individuals working for foreign firms, most employees were Vietnamese, with one or two foreign top managers.

Generally, the people in my study got their first jobs soon after graduating from university. For the people who were in their mid 20s at the time of my study, and who thus graduated in the late 1990s, there were a growing number of service or retail jobs in both Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City and these served as stepping stones for several people. One woman from Ha Noi for example, got her first “real job” as she referred to it, after working at as sales representative on the floor of new locally-owned furniture store. This job itself had been rather easy to get. The owner did not require previous experience, because he provided on the job training and paid employees based on commission. When a (Vietnamese) manager of a large foreign-owned factory stopped in to buy new furniture, she worked with him for more than an hour picking out several items. At the

end of that hour, she had one of her largest commissions for the month and an offer for her first office job, which she accepted eagerly.

Several other people conveyed somewhat similar stories about how jobs in sales had either prepared them to find other work, or through such encounters, led directly to employment in various sectors. Other people obtained their first so-called real jobs directly out of university. In some cases, companies were actually recruiting at universities. Thuy, the factory manager profiled in the next chapter is a good example of this. Chi, on the other hand, who got her first job in marketing soon after graduating, admits that she was lucky that her father had connections in Ho Chi Minh City. He was able to use these connections to arrange a position for Chi. Dat's first job provides a different example from the advertising and marketing sector. His family had no such connections, and in fact was at considerable disadvantage politically speaking. His ability for language acquisition and his hard work studying English, however, made him an attractive candidate in the marketing sector, where, in the mid-to-late 1990s, more and more foreign firms were entering Viet Nam. Companies such as Proctor & Gamble and Unilever were interviewing aggressively during this period, good English skills were their main concern, given that virtually no one in Viet Nam had marketing experience at the time.

As middle-class employees in primarily non-state domestic and international companies,²⁰ participants in my study were benefiting from a pattern of increasing wages for people with university degrees and various skills, including fluency in English and

²⁰ There were plenty of state-companies that provided incomes high enough to support middle-class lifestyles.

computer literacy²¹. These individuals earned salaries within a somewhat broad range. University professors with total monthly incomes as low as \$100 US per month represented the lower end of this range, while factory managers and people working in marketing earned \$600 per month, occupying the upper end of the scale. Earnings were part of what constituted a person's class status, but I did not regularly hear people boast about their salaries, or even discuss them in detail. The lifestyles afforded by middle-class earnings also varied, but as long as an individual had some disposable income at the end of each month, they could participate in middle-class cultural practices. Middle-class identity was thus tied to income, but this link was relatively unstable, given that both the material and the symbolic were involved in maintaining middle-class culture. A minimum income was thus necessary, but far from sufficient in this regard. I demonstrate this point in the following chapters.

The cost of some basic necessities also varied for people in my study, sometimes markedly so. Housing cost some people as little as 33 USD per month. People spending this little on rent, however, were not living in especially comfortable conditions. They typically either rented a room in a family's home or a small apartment with few amenities. Mid-level housing ran two or three times higher, and this price range was the most common for single people living on their own. At the time of my study, there were plenty of small, but comfortable apartments for between 60 USD and 100 USD per

²¹ Though statistical data are not available that would demonstrate that middle-class wages were on the rise, I based this statement on the fact that nearly all participants in my study and many other middle-class people I knew in Ho Chi Minh City were regularly receiving wage increases either through raises or by moving to higher paying jobs. Those few who did not experience such increases stayed at the same level. No one I new saw a decrease in their earnings.

month. Renting a home for married couples was only slightly more expensive in districts just outside the downtown core.

Food, as I have already mentioned, was also reasonable. People could eat three decent meals for around 2 or 3 USD per day. A hearty, and tasty, bowl of *pho*, which was typically eaten in the morning, cost as little as 0.33 USD. A good cup of coffee could be purchased on the street for 0.20 USD. At the same time, there were a growing number of high-end restaurants selling similar items at two, three, and even four times these prices.

Personal debt was relatively low in Viet Nam at the time of my study, especially for the middle-class. In 2004, few people in Ho Chi Minh City had credit cards or bank loans. None of the 28 people discussed here had either. Even so, everyone in my study did have to deal with what Vietnamese people refer to as “moral debt” (*tra hieu*) meaning they were expected to finance their parents’ retirement, to “repay” their parents for having raised them. (This debt was not entirely conceived of in monetary terms. Helping your parents, by cooking meals for them, for example, was also considered part of repaying the debt children owed their parents.) The amount that individuals paid each month to their parents, like their salaries, was not something most people were often comfortable discussing. I came to understand that the amount varied according to several factors including: whether one’s parents lived in rural or urban areas; how many working age siblings one had to help with this expense; whether one’s parents had retired from government jobs, which came with small pensions; and finally how much people were able to pay depending on their salary and other expenses.

As the issue of moral debt introduces, another important factor with regard to the intersection of family and economy was family size and composition. The number of siblings and whether these siblings were older or younger than the participants in my study were important factors. For example, if someone had a younger sibling, then they either wanted to or felt family pressure to help. This usually took the form of the older sibling providing financial support for the younger sibling who were attending university. The benefit was that the younger sibling did not have to work a part time job, and thus could either simply work harder on their general studies or invest their time in extra English lessons, which was common, despite the added expense, which the older sibling also often covered. (A few months of such lessons could equal and even far exceed the cost of university for one semester.) Many of the hotel and restaurant staff that I talked to in Ho Chi Minh City were university students, who talked about how difficult it was to balance work and school. Some of the youngest participants in my study had in fact been at the receiving end of sibling assistance, and thus had been able to avoid this challenge.

Generally, jobs in certain sectors for people either during school or just graduating were plentiful. It was not unheard of to come across counterpoints in this regard, but it was rare. The economic situation in Viet Nam leading up to and during the time of my research had been favoring the middle-class. The academic journal *Asian Survey* provided yearly updates on Viet Nam that captured this prosperity. For the year 2002, Abrami (2003) explains:

...with expected 6% annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, Vietnam remains, after China, the second-fastest growing economy in Asia. Industrial growth was particularly impressive, increasing 14% in the first five months of 2002. Much of this increase came out of the non-state

sector (19%) and the foreign-invested sector (42.8%). Still, we can expect the state-owned sector to assume the largest share of industrial GDP for some time (Abrami 2003:92).

For many middle-class people this meant stable employment and regular salary increases in both state and non-state sectors. It explains in part why jobs were not difficult to find for people with university degrees. People with strong foreign language skills, especially English, were at a particular advantage given the rising foreign investment.

While some farmers were not faring well at all in 2002, urban residents appeared poised to benefit in 2003 from even stronger growth and more foreign direct investment. Adam Fforde (2004), an economist who researches economic development in Viet Nam, describes the economic landscape that year:

In 2003, the Vietnamese economy reported an outstanding performance, with some clouds on the horizon. Gross domestic product (GDP) is thought to have grown by around 7-7.5%, made up of rapid growth in industrial output, 15%; in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, near 5% (a very rapid gain for this sector); and services, 7%. On the demand side, exports grew very fast, by nearly 17%. Prices were broadly stable, and as state revenues grew well (reportedly around 11.2%) and faster than state spending, the fiscal deficit was estimated at not more than 5% of GDP, which was quite containable given the high levels of overseas development assistance and local savings. However, with continued rapid imports—a sign of the effects of excessive import substitution and protection of domestic state industry—the balance of payments deficit exploded, with the trade deficit in 2003 thought to be around \$4.5 billion (11.4% of GDP), up from \$1.2 billion in 2001 and \$3 billion in 2002. The government reported job creation at 1.5 million in the year, leading to slight falls in reported unemployment rates (Fforde 2004:122).

Fforde (2004) offers a further breakdown of these numbers, showing that growth was not only strong, but widespread in many of the sectors important to the people participating in my study:

In terms of industrial production, the now rapidly emerging private sector was posting growth of around 19%, the state sector 18%, and the foreign direct investment (FDI)-invested sector 22%, on a year-on-year basis by November (Fforde 2004: 123).

The year during which the last several months of my research took place, 2004, saw a continuation of the same trends seen in 2002 and 2003. Carlyle Thayer, who is also a well know scholar of Vietnamese studies, described Viet Nam's economic situation in the following manner:

Vietnam is in an enviable position. Vietnam's economy is on roll with all major indicators trending upward in 2004: Gross Domestic Product grew by 7.6%; foreign investment reached U.S. \$4 billion, the highest foreign investment commitments since the 1997 Asian financial crisis; and exports rose to U.S. \$25.8 billion, a sever-year high. Late last year the international donor community, in recognition of Vietnam's efforts in lowering the incidence of poverty from 12% to 9% in 2004, gave Vietnam a vote of confidence by pledging U.S \$3.44 billion in assistance for economic development and poverty reduction. This is a marked rise from U.S. \$2.5 billion in 2003. Vietnam's economic performance is all the more remarkable because Vietnam was affected by rising commodity prices (especially oil), drought, a renewed epidemic of avian (bird) flu and legal action by the United States that limited textile export quotas and increased tariffs on shrimp exports (Thayer 2005).

In addition to the growth rates cited above, there were other clear signs that Ho Chi Minh City's consumer society and overall economy were experiencing rapid expansion throughout the 1990s. DiGregorio et al (2003) report that since the early 1990s, Viet Nam had witnessed the growth of an "unevenly affluent, consumption-oriented, industrializing society" (179). One of the authors' more telling signs of this was one of the landfills into which the waste of residents of Ho Chi Minh City ended up. In 1989, Dong Thanh landfill received only 100 tons of waste per day. By 1998, it was receiving nearly 4000 tons of waste per day (DiGregorio 2003).

Even though they are widely accepted as indices of a robust economy, GDP and consumer spending certainly are not adequate or oftentimes accurate indicators of the overall happiness or wellbeing of a society. For this reason, the following profiles are meant to provide a glimpse of the social and economic conditions experienced by middle-class people in Ho Chi Minh City.

Born and raised in Ho Chi Minh City, when I met Thuy, she was twenty-seven, living with her parents, her older brother, one cousin, and one grandparent, in a medium sized home with four floors and a rooftop used for laundry and other domestic household tasks. Generally, her family had fared rather well even through the difficult post-war period. Her father was a college graduate who worked as a low-level bureaucrat for the government of South Vietnam prior to 1975. The new government removed him from his position; he was underemployed thereafter running a bicycle repair shop out of the family home. Thuy's mother had run a noodle shop prior to 1975, and was able to keep doing so after 1975, though with considerable difficulty when it came to dealing with the police. Though life was often struggle, by the late 1980s, the family was doing better than many in Ho Chi Minh City. By the 1990s, Thuy's parents had saved enough and were able to pay for university education for both her and her brother and were adamant that both attend.

Thuy typically woke an hour before needing to be at work, showering, and eating a breakfast prepared either by her cousin or her mother. At or around 7 o'clock she

would head out the door and ride her early 90s model Honda Dream²² to work, a trip that usually took 20 to 30 minutes, depending on traffic. The family home was located in Tan Binh District, one of the outlying districts of the city. Tan Binh is packed with homes, yet many of its streets are considerably wider than those in more central districts. Much of the land not occupied by homes is comprised of factories, industrial zones, and Tan Son Nhat Airport, Ho Chi Minh City's international airport. Morning traffic is never good, but some days are much worse than others. Thuy felt lucky that she lived relatively close to the foreign-owned textile factory where she worked, yet she still complained that getting to work was her least favorite part of each typically stress-filled workday.

Recently promoted to the highest-level domestic manager at the factory, Thuy was responsible for overseeing nearly all aspects of production. "Well paid and over worked," is how she described herself when I first asked about her job. Her two bosses were both Americans, one of whom she saw for a month at a time two or three times a year, the other she saw every day. After a long, often hectic morning, lunch was usually eaten at the factory canteen or delivered by one of the closest noodle stands. The factory was situated so that going out for lunch was possible, but somewhat inconvenient. Lunch outings were typically saved for special occasions—birthdays or when the big boss (the European owner) was in town, for example. After lunch, it was not uncommon for Thuy to work six or seven additional hours. Some days, she worked well into the night, getting home at 9 or 10 PM. In exchange for her commitment, she earned enough money to support her entire family. She did not need to, however, because her father and brother

²² The Honda Dream has long been a staple form of transportation for middle-class people in Vietnam. It is a durable, well-built, medium priced motorbike, typically costing between 1000 and 2000 USD.

also worked fulltime. Thuy's basic expenses were low. She paid no rent because the family house had been purchased with gold several years previously; she ate the majority of her meals at home; she made few large purchases, preferring, for example, not to replace her early 1990s model motorcycle for a fancier, more expensive model despite having plenty of money to do so. Thuy put the bulk of her monthly salary, which was nearly \$600 per month, into a savings account she had opened at Vietcom Bank only a few months before I met her. She initially had been quite nervous about trusting a state-owned bank with her money. A close friend, however, who had had an account for several months, persuaded her that it was the best place for her savings.

Thuy was expected to do little domestic work, though she sometimes contributed when it came to cooking or cleaning up after dinner. She told me that everyone in her family agreed that she spent too much time at the factory to be expected to come home and work more. Her long hours at the factory also made it difficult for Thuy to socialize, to go out, even on the weekends. She confided in me a few months after we met that her greatest concern was to turn thirty and not have a boyfriend. She was too shy to date while in university, and now that she had overcome that shyness, largely because of her responsibilities at work, she had little time or energy for going to coffee shops or other forms of socializing that might regularly put her in contact with single men her age. Even so, Thuy had recently made it a point to spend two or three days a month shopping and going out in one of the city's central districts. Like a handful of other women in my study, Thuy's concern regarding fashion and her image transformed considerably in the first year I knew her. She told me on more than one occasion that perhaps paying more

attention to fashion might help her when it came to more fully participating in dating. As a result she was shopping for clothes more regularly and attempting to wear the latest fashions more often.

A 32-year old university professor who grew up in Da Nang,²³ Dong (and his family) had experienced more hardship than Thuy. His father was a soldier for the South Vietnamese Army and was killed shortly after Dong was born. Dong, who was an only child, was uncertain what his mother had done prior to 1975, but he remembered that she sold goods on the black market while he was growing up, which meant that the family's income varied widely from month to month. Dong recalled that as a young teenager he sometimes felt lucky because they could buy meat and good rice. Other times it was any rice his mother could acquire and vegetables only. Dong's uncle from his mother's side of the family, having served in a somewhat high position in The National Liberation Front army, was in a position to assist the family, which he did. Dong was graduating from high school during the period when the Vietnamese government was starting to shift more of the costs of education onto families. Dong guessed, though did not know for sure, that his uncle had paid for the portion of his college education that his family was expected to cover.

Like Thuy, Dong had trouble when it came to meeting members of the opposite sex, though his originated mostly from having too little money, not too little time. In fact, boredom was nearly as big of a concern for him as finding the right woman with whom to

²³ Da Nang is Viet Nam's third largest city and is located in the center of the country and quite far from Ho Chi Minh City.

start a family. Dong lived by himself, on a junior university professor's salary, which meant that his rent, though reasonable by local standards, was a disproportionate monthly expense for him, nearly 50% of his official monthly salary, which was approximately 60 USD per month.²⁴ He was not married and most of his extended family lived in Da Nang at the time of my research. He had a distant cousin in Ho Chi Minh City, but did not see him often.

His position at the university provided him both status and social networks, which, if effectively employed, could have earned Dong extra money, but he had yet to employ either for this purpose. He was studying English five days a week in a government-sponsored intensive language program designed to send local faculty overseas for further study, and he was hoping this opportunity would improve his socio-economic standing. (The last I heard, he had not successfully passed the required English placement exams.) Dong was smart, convivial, and pleasant to be around. Compared to other men that I met during my time in Ho Chi Minh City, fostering a friendship with Dong was easier than it was in most of cases. Even so, he lamented how difficult it was to meet women his age, because he could not afford to socialize as often as other people he knew. Many of the friends he made while attending university in Ho Chi Minh City had pursued jobs in business and were making sizeable incomes. He complained that he spent the little disposable income that he had on clothing appropriate for a university professor, and going out for coffee with friends at inexpensive cafés. His professor

²⁴ University professors also received extra payment each month that was similar to a bonus. Dong and I discussed this form of income a couple times, but I never came to fully understand how it worked. Bonuses typically increased monthly salaries by 25% or more.

position was paying off some, so to speak. Three senior faculty members in his department, who, having used university-based status and networks to earn extra money, were better off than he was financially, occasionally invited him to dinner or to drink beer with the expectation that one of them would cover for Dong.

A typical day for Dong involved teaching one or two courses in the morning at the university and spending all afternoon at the language center where he studied. After more than four months of studying with the same group—a dozen professors from various universities in Ho Chi Minh City—he had become good friends with three men in the group. I joined Dong and these men on a few occasions, eating dinner and drinking beer. Everyone else in the group was married and spent much time during these outings complaining about their wives, commonly making disparaging and sexist remarks about them. During these conversations, Dong more than once reminded the other men (and me) that there were benefits to being married. He was alluding to the fact that a considerable amount of his week was devoted to domestic chores. Unlike several of the people in my study, Dong could afford none of the following: a maid, a washing machine, or eating out regularly. Consequently, he cooked many of his own meals, cleaned his small home, and did his laundry by hand. In addition to not having the resources to socialize in ways conducive to dating, Dong also complained that he did not have adequate economic stability to “fall in love,” to ask someone to marry him. Though otherwise ready to do so, he felt like he was not yet financially stable enough to start a family.

Hanh, the organizer of Shampoo World, was the oldest of three siblings of family in Hue.²⁵ Her mother and father were both university educated; her mother worked in the private sector, and her father worked for a state-owned bank. Hanh had talked with her parents little about the pre-war and early post-war period. She was too young to remember much first-hand prior to the reforms of the mid-1980s. She described the experience of her family as average: the 1980s were tough, but because the family's political profile was relatively neutral and because her parents were both college educated, they were able to maintain stable employment throughout even the toughest times. Hanh's youngest brother was in high school. Her other brother was in university in Hue, and she helped support his education

Hanh was single, but, unlike Thuy and Dong, this was not a significant concern of hers. She was one of the youngest women who participated in my study, and she was in no hurry to get married. At 23, she had finished university approximately two years before I met her, and was hired immediately to work in the marketing department for a large multi-national consumer products company that had recruited her at an on-campus job fair. Six months later she was offered a job at a locally owned marketing company that specialized in events management. She accepted and was soon making approximately \$400 per month, enough money to move out of her aunt's home, which was something she had been eager to do. Hanh had moved to Ho Chi Minh City from Hue to attend university, and had lived with her aunt during school and for a short time after. Her life had changed considerably in the two years preceding our first discussion,

²⁵ Hue is a medium sized city in central Vietnam, known for its previous position as Vietnam's Nguyen Dynasty capital.

primarily because she was making more money and working more hours than she had ever expected. She found living with her aunt during this time in her life somewhat stifling, because she had started to stay out late, occasionally having one or two alcoholic drinks while she was out. Her aunt approved of neither of these behaviors, often reporting them back to Hanh's parents. Hanh felt the need to move out, despite disapproval from her parents and older siblings back in Hue.

Moving out also relieved some of the tensions between Hanh and her aunt with regard to Hanh's demanding work schedule. Though not especially common, calls in the middle of the night from anxious clients were not unusual either. Hanh was good with people, according to her bosses, and was in charge of several projects that needed constant attention and much patience when it came to working with clients. Clients were the CEOs or marketing directors for medium to large domestic and multi-national companies. She had one client, for example, who, over a six-month marketing campaign designed to boost the company's domestic sales, regularly called her at two or three in the morning. Hanh told me that back when she was offered her current position she had been told to buy whatever mobile phone she wanted, bill it to the company, and never turn it off.

Even so, Hanh's social life was active. In part, this was because the marketing events she designed, planned and carried out were becoming the latest hip social events for the city's growing middle class. It was not uncommon for someone to ask her out on dates at these events, but Hanh was somewhat hesitant to mix her personal and professional life, and only agreed to go on dates with men who she had gotten to know at

least a little via multiple events. She had dated a few men whom she described as nice, but was not in a serious relationship at any point during the span of my research. In short, Hanh's schedule was nearly always very busy. She was, on a long list of people in this regard, among the most difficult of people to pin down for a meeting. Marketing events were scheduled during the day, at night and on weekends, and she typically had to plan her days according to the needs and desires of clients. Consequently, her schedule was not only busy, but also erratic. She ate something nearly every time we met, claiming that she had not had time to eat that day, and we usually met late in the afternoon. Still, because her salary afforded such conveniences, a washing machine and the rising number food delivery services helped to make living on her own less taxing. Despite living what she considered a "modern" life, Hanh said that she was more traditional than many of her friends and colleagues. In citing one example, of this, she said that she wanted to marry a Vietnamese man, not a foreigner, even though she knew many foreigner men who were "nice guys."

Tra was 25 and living by herself in a small apartment when I met her. She was from Ha Noi, and was the youngest child of parents who went into retirement during the period of my research. They had both worked for state companies and were living off of small state pensions. Tra was somewhat uncomfortable talking about her family, primarily because her older brother and her parents had had a falling out of some sort. She had not heard from him in several years. Tra's sister was married, and she and her husband had stable middle-class jobs. Tra and her sister had just started to send money

to her parents and to her grandmother as part of their “moral debt” in amounts that certainly factored into their financial decisions making, but which Tra said she could afford nonetheless. Given that her parents were drawing pensions, Tra explained that the money she sent them did not always go toward covering basics. She explained, for example, that they used one payment she sent to purchase a DVD player.

Tra differed from Hanh in at least three important ways. Firstly, her salary was considerably lower than Hanh’s. She worked for a human resources company in a mid-level position, earning approximately \$200 per month. Though she could afford to shop and go out more than Dong, she struggled to make ends meet some months, and she was not able to save any of her salary. Secondly, she did not consider herself a traditional woman. In fact, she talked a lot about the fact that she was unique amongst her peers regarding a host of social issues. She wore short skirts, tight blouses, and makeup; her thong underwear could sometimes be seen sticking out of her low-rise jeans; she had a tattoo on her lower back; she colored her hair with highlights; and she was very candid about her sexuality. Thirdly, as she explained it to me, Tra had essentially sworn off dating Vietnamese men. Having dated four foreigners in the 2 years before I met her, and no Vietnamese men, she was in a serious relationship with a French man during the year we were in regular contact. She was not certain whether she would marry the man she was dating, but she felt that she could never “go back to dating a Vietnamese guy.” Vietnamese men, according to Tra, would expect her to be a virgin before they married her, and they would expect her to quit her job to be a full-time wife and mother. Foreigner men, she pointed out, were more “flexible” when it came to these issues. She

was adamant, however, in her opinion that both Vietnamese and foreigners could be “bad guys.”

Though she talked confidently about her preference for foreign men and comfort with pre-marital sex, Tra nonetheless seemed conflicted about what other people thought about her lifestyle. She went out often, frequenting places that she could not have afforded on her own. Most of the time the foreign men she was dating paid for her, and many of her friends and co-workers knew this. Her family, on the other hand, who did not live in Ho Chi Minh City, knew nothing of these activities. She had made it a point not to tell them about dating foreign men, and she never dressed in the revealing clothing she commonly wore in Ho Chi Minh City when visiting her family. When shopping in the market, furthermore, it was not uncommon for shop owners to refer to her as “con ga”(chicken), implying that she was a prostitute. She said that this did not bother her. However, she was concerned that some of her friends and coworkers regarded the practice of letting foreign men spend so much money on her as inappropriate. Even so, Tra was also friends with several foreign women living and working in Ho Chi Minh City at the time, and they encouraged her to live the way she wanted and not to be bothered by people casting insults. It seemed to me that Tra was having trouble truly embracing such advice.

Tra shared with Hanh and with Thuy an especially busy work schedule and stressful professional life. The company that she worked for was owned by a Vietnamese American who expected a lot from his workers—too much according Tra. She was scheduled to work 8 hours a day, 6 days a week. She rarely worked on Sundays, but often

worked 9 or 10 hours on days she was in the office. The long hours were only part of the problem. The owner was also very demanding when it came to even the smallest detail, and his priorities often did not match those of his Vietnamese employees. There were constant frustrations. In short, Tra said that she did not like her job and was eager to find another. Over the year that I knew her, however, her nearly constant pursuit of new employment had not been successful. In contrast, according to her own appraisal, she had a terrific personal life. Her evenings were filled with dinners at nice restaurants and many evenings were spent at local cafés and bars, listening to music and talking to people from all over the world. She was planning a trip to Europe with her current boyfriend the last time I spoke with her, but she was worried that the requisite visas would be difficult if not impossible to obtain given her relatively low income and lack of property ownership.

Tram (wife) and Duy (husband) were English teachers at the language center where I taught part-time during my time in Ho Chi Minh City. Having met each other in 1994, during their second year in university, they had been married for five years when I asked them to participate in my study. At 32 and 31 respectively, Tram and Duy had one daughter and lived in a house they were renting, having opted not to follow the still relatively common tradition wherein newly married couples live with the husband's parents until they can afford to purchase a home of their own. "You know about the husband's mother, don't you?" Tram had joked when I asked them about this choice, alluding to the oft remarked upon tensions that tend to characterize the wife/mother-in-

law relationships in Viet Nam (see Tuan 2006). They admitted that this decision clearly had impacted their financial circumstance, but that they both agreed it was for the better, citing Tram's atypically problem-free relationship with Duy's mother as ample justification.

As a couple, they did well financially. Though their hourly wage was considerably lower than the foreigners, like myself, who taught at the school, their combined monthly income allowed them and their 4-year old daughter a comfortable life. Major decisions about money centered on their daughter's education. Though both also admitted they had small fights about their individual spending habits (his spending on beer; her spending on clothes), these disagreements were rarely anything serious. Rather, they shared in financial woes that resulted from the money they spent on their daughter's schooling. Even though their daughter was only in preschool, Tram and Duy regularly debated whether the money they were currently paying for fees was too much, and whether it was money well spent or not. With kindergarten approaching on the horizon, planning for it was also a stressful enterprise wherein money was the primary concern.

The couple considered themselves fortunate to each be teaching at the same two schools (the school where I taught and another language center). The flexible hours and the option to prepare lessons at home allowed them to spend considerable time with their daughter. They had a maid who came twice a week, which helped Tram by relieving her of much of the domestic work. Duy admitted that he was somewhat traditional and felt that this kind of work was not the husband's responsibility. Rather than help out with

these tasks, he agreed that the family should hire a part-time maid, given that Tram was working full-time. During one conversation they explained that the \$15 per month they spent on a maid seemed like a lot of money at first, but that it had become an acceptable monthly expense for a service they considered necessary.

When the couple was not working, their free time was divided between visits to each of their parents' homes in Ho Chi Minh City, and various forms of entertainment. They had purchased cable television, and enjoyed watching foreign programming, and they took their daughter out often to various locations downtown. Their daughter enjoyed getting out of the house and was completely entertained at shopping centers, which were the most frequent locations for family outings. Tram, while constantly trying to curb her spending, nonetheless reveled the chance to "window shop." (This term referenced the act of entering a shopping center to look at consumer products with no intension of buying anything.) Duy, for his part, as he somewhat hesitantly admitted, was beginning to enjoy trips to shopping centers also. He was impressed with how quickly mobile phone technology was advancing, and was always on the lookout for models that went on sale. All three family members enjoyed the increasingly common marketing events that were often underway at shopping centers on weekends.

My initial and most subsequent conversations with these six people took place at coffee shops near the center of the city. As I have already mentioned, coffee shops quickly became an important ethnographic site, and, because there were so many options, deciding on a particular shop was often a complicated and drawn-out process. New coffee

shops were opening every other day, or so it seemed, and people typically had a rotating list of favorites, containing a half-dozen or more locations. In addition to coffee drinks, most places also served a wide variety of other beverages and at least some food. By the second month of my study, I had become well acquainted with the coffee shop landscape in the city's central districts.

Coffee shops were so numerous that people visiting me from North America always asked how so many coffee shops could survive. Despite my familiarity with them, I never had a satisfying answer. My attempts to explain often drew on a conversation I had had with Hai, who was one of the first people to sign on to my project (though not discussed in the above section), wherein he quoted the Hollywood film *Field of Dreams*. In the film, in reference to constructing a baseball diamond in an Iowa cornfield, an ethereal voice tells Kevin Costner's character: "Build it and they will come." My Vietnamese acquaintance, both a coffee shop aficionado and a Kevin Costner fan, said that this seemed to hold true in Ho Chi Minh City. Set the foundation, raise the walls, decorate, mount televisions to the walls—and they will come. Unfortunately, my friend continued, for coffee-shop entrepreneurs the city over, they (the costumers) were inclined to leave as quickly as they came, for the next newest hot spot. Owners were likely to lose out to the very forces that initially delivered crowds of coffee shop goers—a consumer group especially prone to looking for something only slightly more trendy.

Overseas visitors also asked me about who *they* were. Who would come? Who comprised this group of consumers constantly searching for and acting out these culturally shaped forms of consumerism? It was in this context that I realized there was

no easy way to quickly and fully describe the people participating in my study. The term *middle class* often sufficed in answering visitors, but, for me, it needed to be refined if it was going to meaningfully describe the people participating in my study. To be certain, groups not fitting the middle-class label were frequenting the same coffee shops, namely the political elite, the socio-economic elite, and expatriates from other Asian and many non-Asian countries. It was clear to me that people in my study were distinct from these groups, but in ways that were sometimes difficult to define, especially because their daily activities overlapped considerably with class/cultural others.

The people in my study were not members of a single community, group, or network. Not everyone knew each other; very few knew each other well; several individuals did not know any of the other participants in my study. They lived scattered throughout Ho Chi Minh City, though the vast majority lived in one of three central districts. Only one couple owned their own home, everyone else was either still living with their parents or renting an apartment. Only a handful of people worked together. None were neighbors, and many were not born in Ho Chi Minh City, though nearly all had lived there for at least 5 years. Women outnumbered men by a ratio of two to one.²⁶ Only one person openly identified as gay. Though a handful of my acquaintances in Ho Chi Minh City identified as Christian, none of the people participating in my study did. Nor did most consider themselves active or devout Buddhists. Nearly everyone, however, respected Buddhism generally, and participated in Buddhists rituals on important

²⁶ Though I made no conscious effort to focus my study on women, I found that there were more women willing to participate in discussions of interest to my study. Attempts to initiate discussions about social life in Ho Chi Minh City failed more often with men than with women.

religious and non-religious days. Nearly everyone also participated, to varying degrees, in rituals associated with ancestral worship.

These men and women were not completely internally homogenous with regard to beliefs and practices in many social arenas. Some people, for example, were more progressive than others with regard to gender relations/roles, sexual agency and sexuality. A few unmarried men told me they would be happy to share domestic chores with their future wives, though none of the married men I knew considered gender equality in this arena an important part of their households. Many of the women strongly disagreed with the double standard common in Viet Nam regarding whether men and women should be sexually active before marriage (i.e. women, but not men, were expected to maintain their virginity until married). Some of these women acted on this and were having premarital sex. Others voicing strong opinions about this freedom were hesitant to act on these beliefs. Only a few intended to “save themselves” until marriage. When it came to sexual agency and fashion, there was also variation in women’s beliefs and practices regarding appropriate manners of dress.

As I mentioned in Chapter Two, political dispositions among the people participating in my study varied. However, most did not actively participate in political processes. People explained, for example, that they did not take voting in National Assembly elections seriously. Candidates had to be approved by the VCP, after all. And according to people who followed politics, though it was ostensibly Vietnam’s legislative body, the National Assembly merely rubber-stamped policy handed down from the VCP. Only one of the people in my study participated in volunteer or civic-oriented activities.

People's family political backgrounds also varied widely, though the majority of people did not have extensive ties to political higher-ups or elites. In fact, of the two people who did, there was no reason to believe that these connections had or were directly benefiting them at the time of my study. Nghia, for instance, was a woman in her early thirties who worked for an international bank. Her father and uncle had been important low-level cadre during the 40s and 50s, and family was therefore had strong social networks within the party-state. However, her father—who was under investigation for suspicious business practices—and her uncle had lived their entire lives in Ha Noi and had been out of politics for more than a decade. Nghia moved to Ho Chi Minh City after graduating from university, and when she landed a job with an international financial institution, they played virtually no role. Nghia in fact, laughed when I asked her about this. “My father and uncle live in the past, they do not know people in banking,” she explained.

A second person, Sen also had connections: his father was the ward chief in one of the city's largest and more central districts, meaning that he knew a lot of people well in many business sectors and government ministries. However, Sen was completely uninspired by the idea of being a communist party member and was uninterested in pursuing fields wherein his father could have easily expedited a career. Keen instead on marketing, Sen sought help from friends and friends of friends in pursuit of the right connections. As my research phase came to a close, Sen had looked for more than a year for a job in marketing with no success, and was working odd jobs and still relying on his

parents for a portion of his monthly income. This state of affairs had become a significant concern for him.

Some individuals were more politically savvy than others. Though no one was regularly and openly critical of the government or the Communist Party, there was a range of attitudes about state-society relations. Even so, when compared to class-cultural others, there was a surprising level of consensus regarding many important social questions of the day. For example, nearly everyone agreed that Viet Nam was headed in a positive direction with regard to economic and social transformations. Similarly, few seemed to consider it important to ask questions about the fact that Vietnamese society was becoming increasingly class-based and that the wealth gap was growing. This is in contrast to the growing discontent among poorer families that is described by other scholars (Luong 2003b) and that I saw in Ho Chi Minh City in the form of organized demonstrations, often concerning disputes between rural residents and the state over land ownership.

As this chapter reveals, people in Ho Chi Minh City who identified as middle-class were not an especially homogenous group. These individuals, according to my analysis, were nonetheless active participants in Viet Nam's middle-class culture. I present the assorted details of each person's background and the varied features of their daily lives to emphasize that people in different social and economic situations took part in my study. They were all nonetheless middle-class by nature of their eagerness to identify as middle-class, contributing substantial time and energy toward the middle-class socio-culture project. This project, as I have noted previously, entailed socio-cultural

work toward creating and maintaining middle-class culture and identity, an everyday undertaking that I document in subsequent sections and chapters. In the chapters that follow, I take up the task of describing in detail the character and features of middle-class culture.

CHAPTER FIVE: MIDDLE-CLASS CULTURE:
 “MIDDLENESS” AND PERFORMATIVITY

Amidst Ho Chi Minh City’s growing and evolving consumer society, my research focused on middle-class practices and beliefs, the basic components of what Liechty (2003) astutely refers to as *middle-class culture*. In employing this concept in the context of turn of the 21st century urban Viet Nam, it is important to recognize that shared global processes (e.g. the Internet, global finance, Hollywood, labor migration, KFC) have not resulted in shared cultural lives. By many accounts, cultural heterogeneity and economic disparity both persist. Therefore, though I would argue that the concept *middle-class culture* holds much potential for explaining the “middle stratum” in various locales, individual middle-class cultures (emphasis on plural) display considerable regional and local distinction when portrayed through ethnography—in India (Dickey 2000), Indonesia (Sen 1998), Malaysia (Stivens 1998), Nepal (Liechty 2003) South Korea (Myung-Hye 1992), and the United States (Lacy 2007).

The primary purpose of this chapter is to described the character of Ho Chi Minh City’s middle-class culture, some elements of which are unique to Viet Nam, others not. I begin with a discussion about local perceptions of social class with the goal of highlighting the rather haphazard grammar or cultural logic of social class in the minds of middle-class people. I then use the concept of middleness to explain how Vietnamese middle-class people worked to create a cultural and moral middle-ground between

class/cultural others, the rich and the poor. Finally, I present a series of examples that reveal the performative nature of middle-class culture. In this section, I emphasize that middle-class identity was articulated through both the constant acting out of cultural norms in public and the avoidance of performances associated with class others. In my discussion of middleness and social performance, furthermore, I emphasize that both were highly gendered processes. If, as I argue, there was much social work that went into creating and maintaining middle-class identity, women shouldered a disproportionate share of this burden.

Local Perceptions of Social Class

Dickey's (2000) work highlights the importance of understanding indigenous concepts of class, revealing that how an Indian person talks about class depends on the class of the person talking. People in India divide society based on either a two- or a three-part model of class structure. The two-part model divides society into the poor and the rich; the three-part model into the lower, middle and upper classes. Poor people in India rely almost entirely on the two-part model, while those who are better off tend to employ the three-part model, especially when talking about themselves, feeling the need to distinguish between at least two kinds of people who are better off than the poor. In light of this complexity, in her analysis of class practices in India, Dickey relies on the divisions that local people used.

I do the same in my analysis, having observed something similar though less precise than the patterns described by Dickey when it came to indigenous concepts of

class in Vietnam. Because people who were poor did not fully participate in my study, I am not in a position to speak with precision about how poor people think and talk about class concepts in Ho Chi Minh City. Yet from casual conversations and observations, poor people seemed to place little importance in dividing people better off than they were into two groups (the middle and upper classes). Doing so, however, was a primary characteristic of how middle-class people divided Vietnamese society along class lines.

During initial conversations, I learned that middle-class individuals recognized three primary class groups: *tang lop ha luu* (lower class), *tang lop trung luu* (middle class) and *tang lop cha gia* (upper class). Generally speaking, these were somewhat formal phrases that distinguished between three categories of people: *nguai ngheo* (poor people) *nguai binh thuong* (average people) and *nguai giao* (rich people). During discussions in Vietnamese, people were more likely to use the latter three terms to divide society. So, it was more common for a middle-class person to refer to someone below them in the social hierarchy as *ngheo* or poor, than it was to refer to them as *tang lop ha luu* or lower class. As a local sociologist and a few of the people in my study explained it to me, Vietnamese phrases for specific social classes are considered formal, even academic. When talking about different social classes in English, there was the same preference for poor and rich. In both languages, therefore, it was the norm to hear people refer to class others as either “the poor” or “the rich.” Significantly, middle-class people use the term “middle-class” nearly always to refer to their own class group when speaking English.

When I asked people about this, they said that “average people” did not really translate from Vietnamese as effectively as “poor people” or “rich people.” One informant went further, explaining that “middle-class” was a concept “that people everywhere recognize,” indicating that Vietnamese middle-class people had at least some stake in the notion that they were part of a globally recognized “class” of people. Interestingly, the *idea* of being an average or ordinary person, on the other hand, was an important, though somewhat contradictory, facet of middle-class identity that I address later. The main point for now is that middle-class people recognized three strata in the social hierarchy, preferring more informal labels for class others, and “middle class” as opposed to the less formal “average” for themselves, and that this was at least partly explained by the cosmopolitan weight associated with “middle class” as a global concept.

A set of basic normative beliefs about the members of class groups accompanied this classificatory system and its semantic peculiarities. Bourdieu argues that:

...a class or a class fraction is defined not only by its position in the relations of production...[but also] by a whole set of subsidiary characteristics which may function, in the form of tacit requirements, as real principles of selection or exclusion without ever being formally stated (1981: 108).

Membership in Ho Chi Minh City’s middle class most definitely involved “tacit requirements” that were indeed only rarely formally stated. While not even commonly using the term *middle-class* in articulating identity in everyday life—i.e. outside of conversations with me—it was clear that people had strong beliefs about what it meant to be middle-class. There were principles of selection, but it was generally easier for people to discuss principles of exclusion. Inclusion was subject to a set of rules that were

constantly negotiated and put into practice, but these often seemed to make sense only in opposition to class/cultural others. When asked about social class in Ho Chi Minh City, middle-class people had much to say about these principles, though as Bourdieu notes, they were rarely “formally stated.”

The first in-depth conversation I had about class took place at the textile factory where Thuy worked as a manager. A textile production facility located in an enormous industrial park, this site was indicative of the positive side of what Beresford (2003) describes as uneven development in Vietnam. Especially for management, the factory was prosperity. Six of these managers and I sat around a large office filled with computers, comfortable office chairs, desks with family photos and a cooler for Coca-Cola and other soft drinks. Despite the level of comfort, I recognized it as the kind of space many Westerners would consider less than suitable for a team of managers. It was 6 PM and the workday had just ended for some, while a couple managers would need to get back to work after our meeting. We talked at length about a variety of topics, all of which had something to do with the notion of social class. The key points from that conversation, which I describe below, echoed throughout the following months as I started to understand the complexity, import, and vagueness that the concept of social class carries in local cultural logic.

The first thing on which everyone could agree that evening was that to meaningfully talk about social class in Viet Nam required “two conversations: one about social class in the city, and one about social class in the countryside,” as Phuc, one of the more senior managers, put it. This is an important point to highlight. Though the

countryside, which is the English term most Vietnamese people I knew used to reference areas outside of major cities, is experiencing some of the same major socio-economic changes as large cities, the ideas about class we discussed were meant to apply only to large urban centers. On this, everyone agreed. Beyond this point, however, it was a struggle at first for the group to reach consensus on several basic concepts regarding social class, in general, and, more specifically, regarding what it meant to be middle class in Ho Chi Minh City.

Mai—she and Thuy were the two women in the group—initially insisted that there were only two social classes in Ho Chi Minh City, essentially the *haves* and the *have-nots*. Hearing this, three of the other managers quickly spoke up, saying that there was most definitely also a middle-class. They knew this to be that case, they argued, because they were “living proof of it,” as Nhuan phrased it. They were members of the middle-class, thus it had to exist. Everyone nodded in agreement. As the conversation continued, it was clear that everyone strongly associated himself or herself with the middle class, even Mai, who, shortly after her initial comment admitted that she had not been thinking clearly, that she had initially placed herself in the *haves* and had forgotten that this was really two groups. For me, this suggested that conversations that directly dealt with social class issues were not especially common among middle-class people. Indeed, subsequent conversations with a wide range of middle-class people confirmed this.

Once Mai had agreed not only that there was a middle class, but that she was a member of it, I asked the group how they knew they were middle-class. People sat silent

for several moments, looking back and forth at each other and laughing a bit, the most common reaction among many Vietnamese people to uncomfortable situations. Sensing that this might be a dead-end question, I asked them to talk about other class groups. “The upper-class,” Thuy asserted, “is defined by their ability to own. They own factories, restaurants and homes.” Everyone, while still silent, nodded in less than enthusiastic agreement. “That’s what it means to be upper-class, which is different from us,” Thuy finished. Given that Marxism, Leninism and the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh still comprise a sizable portion of secondary and tertiary curricula, I was not necessarily surprised to here Thuy speak in these terms. Even so, given how many people I had heard dismiss these teachings as irrelevant in Viet Nam at the time of my study, I wondered whether Thuy was actually thinking of class relations in Marxian terms.

Listening to what Thuy was saying, I immediately thought of a family I knew who owned both a home and a business. Though it is difficult to accurately gauge how much money they earned each month, I knew the family’s lifestyle well enough to recognize that they had more financial concerns than many middle-class families I knew. Yet, they owned a small factory, one that produced large portable batteries used in households in parts of Viet Nam lacking electricity services. I had visited the facility: it was a partially dilapidated building without walls on two sides wherein a crude production process was constantly underway and where the workers by in large looked dirty and unhappy. The father, I know from many conversations with him, was trying desperately to save to send his only son overseas to go to university, but he was having trouble coming up with the required amount, despite considerable remittances from

overseas relatives. In short, in my opinion, this factory owner, while not poor, was clearly not rich either.

Even so, this family's situation did not really contradict what Thuy was saying. When I brought up the family and their dilapidated factory, she corrected herself: "Of course, there are many places like that. I'm not talking about people like that. I mean the big, expensive factories. They are more modern, and not making batteries to sell here in Viet Nam for cheap. When I said factories, I mean places like this." She motioned toward the production lines on the factory floor we overlooked, where a couple hundred workers were busy operating textile machinery. Thuy's reappraisal highlights a common theme that emerged in my conversations with Vietnamese people about class. On the surface, class categories appeared relatively stable and distinctions between them were clear. Just below the surface, contradictions flourished, as ideas people expressed when initially responding to a question about social class were often challenged—transforming as the conversation continued. These conversations thus began to reveal the cultural logic behind how Vietnamese people, those who identify as middle-class anyway, thought about social class.

After Thuy's response to my comment about the family with the battery factory, the group conversation splintered into multiple discussions between pairs. Then Phuc spoke up, commenting that, "The rich play sports that they are not good at. They play different sports, such as tennis and golf, even though they have not learned to play them." No one seemed keen to follow this thread, which I return to later in this section, but Phuc's point nonetheless brought back the group dynamic of the discussion. People went

on to list characteristics that clearly marked members of the upper class. According to Quan, they have cable television, drive expensive motorcycles, specifically the Honda @²⁷ and own cars. Phuc agreed, saying that it was “easy to recognize the upper class people because of their expensive bikes. You know the @ symbol.” Thuy added that the rich “eat at expensive restaurants and can travel out of the country or stay at deluxe resorts here in Viet Nam.” A picture was emerging, and it was revealing that according to the cultural logic held by these six factory managers, class was tied closely to the goods and services that people bought. Rich people bought certain things and this is how one could spot a rich person. Presumably, this was also the case for middle-class people: you could identify them by what they bought. Or could you?

I interjected this idea, asking whether it was true that you could clearly identify somebody in the middle-class by looking at what they bought. Ultimately the answer was both yes and no, indicating that the perception of class categories depended on a host of variables. Over the next several minutes there seemed to be a dispute about what it meant to be middle-class. Yet there was never a point where two people were arguing with each other. Rather, it was as if the group was working their way through a puzzle or a riddle trying to figure out their own cultural lives. Phuc and Nhuan claimed that the middle class was growing, because there was a lot of opportunity at the time in Viet Nam. Factories similar to theirs, with foreign owners and foreign top management, were becoming increasingly common, they said, and the result was a lot of new positions in

²⁷ The Honda @ is an upper-end model of Honda. Its sleek, yet powerful looking design makes it stand out in Ho Chi Minh City, and everyone knows the @ symbol. It is associated with wealth, and in many cases excess. I deal with this more in Chapter Five.

middle management for locals, especially for those with a good education, previous experience and at least some English skills. Thuy pointed out that in the United States the middle class was getting poorer and shrinking. No one, however, seemed to want to follow up on my idea that a person's class was linked closely to what they bought.

Quan pointed out that although he was middle class, his parents were lower class, because they had never earned a middle-class income. Nhuan strongly disagreed: "But, Quan, your father is a teacher, so, it's not the same. He does not make a lot of money...he cannot buy a new motorcycle or go out to dinner...but he is still middle-class." Everyone agreed that teachers were considered middle class by nature of their status even though their income was low, similar to what poor people made in fact. Phuc then added that street cleaners commonly made \$150 US per month, which at the time would have been a stable middle-class income for an individual. According to Phuc, however, when it came to class standing, street cleaners were more similar to the "workers" in the factory, to the people working on the factory floor who earned approximately \$50 per month—or a typical salary for a teacher. Despite their relatively high salary, street cleaners shared more socially and culturally with factory workers than with management. Phuc did not consider either factory workers or street cleaners to be in the same class as him. Teachers, like Quan's parents, according to Phuc, were middle class despite their low monthly salary, "Phuc is right" Thuy added. "I think some people who sell noodles on the street, the popular ones downtown, they make that much too, but they are not middle-class." Everyone again nodded in agreement.

I then asked the group if they could recognize someone in any of these three occupations—street cleaner, factory worker, street noodle vendor—outside of their work roles, at a coffee shop, for example. Could they recognize non-middle-class people on the street based on outward appearance?

“The workers at this factory do not go to the same places we do, they cannot afford to,” Quan replied.

“Some do,” Phuc pointed out, “Sometimes even when they cannot afford it they go. They spend the money they are supposed to spend on school [for their children] on coffee they cannot afford.”

Thuy: “It is the same with expensive motorcycles. My neighbor sacrificed everything for his new bike, and he makes a lot less than I do.”

Phuc: “You can sometimes tell when you see these people at expensive restaurants. You can tell they are out of place. In Vietnamese we say *nha que*. It means they are from the countryside, not...suitable.”

Rylan: “How do you know? What is it about them?”

Thuy: “It is difficult to explain. There is just something different about them”

The notion “something different” is key to understanding how middle-class people perceive class/culture others on either side of them. It closely parallels Bourdieu’s *distinction*, in that middle-class people’s own identity and their understanding of class categories are both caught up in processes of recognizing and asserting class-based cultural differences. This early conversation was my introduction to this dynamic of social class in Ho Chi Minh City. At his point in the conversation, it felt like we had

made progress toward uncovering the cultural logic by which middle-class people understood social class. Class was not strictly linked to a person's ability to own (the means of production), and it was not determined entirely by income. There was something about the consumption of goods that was important in determining at least some people's class standing. Most importantly no single determinant could fully explain how middle-class people recognized class/cultural others.

Curious whether I was making proper sense of what the group was communicating, I tried to summarize what they had told me and pressed them for a more concrete definition of the middle-class. Phuc, who had become somewhat a self-proclaimed spokesperson for the group, attempted to fulfill my request: "The middle class, you can define it by the things people do, the things they do, like public sports and normal entertainment. They play football [soccer], table tennis, or badminton and they only have free TV. Some own their homes, some live with parents. This of course depends on whether someone is married. The middle class gets paid vacation, or at least we do. We get twelve days per year. All these things are what make us middle-class."

I asked Phuc and the others how this was different from the lower class. Prodding a little as the devils advocate, I explained that I had seen people who likely made much less than the members of their management team playing the same sports they did and watching free "normal" television. They responded first: "The lower class seems to do a lot of the same things that the middle class does. But they can be defined mostly by income and lack of ownership of homes, and the type of work they do." Phuc took over from where They had left off and turned the conversation back to the rich. He talked for a

minute or so about how the upper class or rich eat in “deluxe” restaurants, and buy expensive bottles of “wine,” by which he meant hard liquor, such as scotch whiskey and cognac.²⁸ But he was not so sure that everyone doing this was rich: “If you look around town at night, on Sunday night, you see lots of people [eating at expensive restaurants], only most of these people are not rich. Some of those people make only 50,000 *Dong* (approximately three US dollars) a day and will spend half of it on eating out or drinking, or even all of it. I mean that’s what some people will do. They waste their money. And this is a new development and it involves a lot of drinking [alcohol].”

For nearly an hour, the group talked about the contours of class structure in Vietnam. The principles of this structure had not been stated explicitly, nor had an especially stable definition of the middle class been established. The discussion nonetheless relieved the complex beliefs that middle-class people share about class. Class, not surprisingly, was about income, in that the group agreed it was important to be financially stable, and that generally this meant that someone needed to make at least \$100 per month, yet there were exception to this. Thus, status was also important, in that teachers were considered middle-class despite their income, which was considerably lower than any of the factory managers, perhaps more in line with that of workers on the factory floor. Being middle-class was also linked to the purchase and ownerships of

²⁸ A growing number of restaurants and bars were selling expensive hard liquors by the bottle, so that “VIP” customers had personalized bottles from which they drank on visits. This was becoming an increasing common practice among people who could afford anywhere from \$50 to \$100 US per bottle. At the time of writing, significantly, Viet Nam had earned its spot among the top ten global consumers of Chivas Scotch Whiskey, something I learned from the company’s master blender, who was visiting Viet Nam to honor this achievement.

goods and paying for certain services, in that, a Weber points out, a person's relationship to the market at least partly determines their positioning within the class structure.

Phuc's comment about rich people playing tennis, however, revealed an especially important socio-cultural dynamic with regard to social class in Ho Chi Minh City. If the sport or leisure activity an individual chose was such an obvious indicator of someone's class standing, as Phuc had claimed, what did this say about the nature of class-based identity in Ho Chi Minh City as understood by average middle-class people? The sports one chose to play or the way one chose to dress were significant in part because they reflected individual tastes and desires. As I would learn over the course of my research, however, for Phuc and other middle-class people, there was a story much larger than any one choice or any specific hobby, or the particular tastes of any one person. Being middle-class was a collective effort toward defining, creating and maintaining a cultural and moral middle ground, a space both physical and cultural that middle class women and men could claim as their own. In addition to providing an a reasonability priced form of entertainment, in this light, playing the appropriate sport signaled "appropriateness"; conversely, costly sports that people "were not good at" gave the "wrong" signal.

Collectively, individual beliefs, actions and signals comprised the social work that went into maintaining middle-class culture. Two key features of these social processes are addressed in the next two sections. I first point out how important Liechty's notion of middleness was as middle-class people negotiated what it meant to be modern

Vietnamese people. I then highlight the importance of performativity in how middleness and middle-class identity were achieved.

Delineating Middleness in Time and Space

Globalizing processes were underway in Ho Chi Minh City well before I arrived. In fact, as I noted in Chapter Two, the primary way that many individuals conceptualized the effects of the political and economic reforms of the mid 1980s (*Doi Moi*) was that they had opened Viet Nam's doors to the world, so to speak, nearly two decades prior to my research. Likewise, scholars increasingly portray Viet Nam at the time of my study as a more open society, wherein many Vietnamese people had widened access to information and travel (Nguyen 2007, Nguyen and Thomas 2004, Thomas and Drummond 2003, Vann 2006). For the middle class, this relatively new openness meant that people were learning about and in some cases directly experiencing non-Vietnamese ways of life—often for the first time—and finding it irresistible to compare themselves to global others. Middle-class individuals, therefore, were using both local and global criteria in the assessment of what it meant to be middle-class and, as importantly, what it meant for someone else *not* to be.

The global other that most frequently brought these forces into play was the Western backpacker (*tay ba lo*). Backpackers were coming to Viet Nam to vacation from all over North America and Europe. Especially during the summer, they could be seen regularly throughout many of the city's districts. In District One, the city center, one was hard pressed to go very long at all without seeing this type of foreign traveler. They were

typically young budget travelers, staying in the least expensive hotels and eating at reasonably priced restaurants catering to their specific tastes and budgets. However, many also traveled throughout the country, ate occasional meals at more expensive restaurants, and spent at least some time shopping at stores that middle-class people could rarely if ever afford. As foreign elements in Ho Chi Minh City, these somewhat contradictory behaviors interacted with local middle-class assumptions about social class.

Their appearance was even more confusing. Backpackers wore shorts to dinner, even to relatively nice restaurants, something nearly all middle-class Vietnamese people avoided. Many backpackers were clad in worn-out shirts, ripped pants or oversized, wrinkled skirts. Others wore dirty baseball caps, some of which were on backwards. Men could even be seen occasionally on downtown streets without shirts, which by local standards signaled poverty. Many women backpackers wore short shorts and skirts, which, at the time, were seen much more commonly on Vietnamese prostitutes standing outside brothels than on ordinary middle-class women. In short, according to middle-class people, the backpacker aesthetic challenged the sensibilities of local middle-class people. They did not look middle-class.

Middle-class people asked me about the appearance of backpackers, wondering if they were actually poor. After all, how could people unable to afford decent clothing travel half way around the world? Most people understood or came to understand rather quickly that they were experiencing different cultural norms regarding the relationship between appearance or fashion and social class or status. I explained that in the United States a lot of middle-class people, mostly young adults, dressed quite differently than

middle-class Vietnamese people. In the US, I continued, college students often came to class in shorts, in torn jeans, and in sexually revealing clothing. For the most part, these contradictions were not especially disruptive.

Most of the people with whom I had such discussions were in the process of getting to know non-Vietnamese social norms. While initially shocked at times, they were not surprised as much as they were confused. It was often hard for them to reconcile Western norms with those in Viet Nam. Ultimately, local expectations regarding class tended to supercede foreigner norms, in that Vietnamese people thought that foreigners should be more careful with regard to their appearance and behaviors, given that in Viet Nam they signified poverty. “I would never dress like that if I traveled to another country,” one young woman exclaimed. “People would think that all Vietnamese people are poor.” Another woman asked why these foreigners did not care about their appearance. She wanted to know whether foreigners worried about the possibility that Vietnamese people might consider them poor. Going further she added, “My mother thinks women in those short skirts look like prostitutes. Do they think about that?”

Other globalizing forces were also impacting the relationship between image and social class. A growing number of middle-class people were traveling overseas, to North America specifically, and their experiences abroad added another dimension to global/local interactions as Viet Nam became a more open society. Nghia—the woman in banking whose father was under investigation—traveled to the United States for a wedding and to vacation during the period of my study. When she returned, she was quite eager to meet with me to tell stories about her trip. In short, the trip had been the vacation

of a lifetime. She had saved for many months in anticipation of the wedding, which was for a Vietnamese woman living in the US with whom Nghia had grown up. She was thrilled to have attended a wedding in a foreign country. It was a first for her.

Nghia was also surprised, however, and a little irritated, though not necessarily offended, by behaviors and assumptions of two American guests at the wedding. On two separate occasions at the wedding reception, these two women had expressed surprise that Nghia was dressed so well. They were somewhat discrete and not necessary rude in doing so, according to Nghia's account, but they essentially explained to Nghia that they had assumed most people in Viet Nam were poor. Relying on this assumption, they did not expect that a young Vietnamese woman would have the fashion sense the Nghia was displaying. Nghia showed me pictures during our discussion and explained that she had worn a fashionable, semi-formal dress of the latest style. "They [people living in the US] think that all Vietnamese people are poor. They think we do not have the latest fashions here," Nghia explained, laughing at little at how ridiculous she found their lack of knowledge of contemporary Vietnam. "One of the women asked me if I bought my dress in America. She was very surprised, because I had it made here [in Vietnam]", she continued.

Discussions with people about these interactions and others like them revealed important dynamics of how middle-class people experienced social difference related to social class. They demonstrated that much was at stake and that defining what it meant to be a modern Vietnamese person was partly accomplished within the context of a globalizing world, wherein certain nations were considered "inferior" to others. On the

one hand, foreigners who were *not* poor were dressed—by local standards—like poor people. This seemed only to confirm the importance of appearance. It also suggested that Vietnamese middle-class social norms were more appropriate, at least in Vietnam, than Western norms. On the other hand, Nghia's visit to North America confirmed the importance of appearance in presenting self—one's Vietnamese self, that is—to non-Vietnamese global others. Both situations also revealed, to Vietnamese people and to me, the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in identity formation and in globalizing processes, such as international travel. Foreigners had expectations of Vietnam, and Vietnamese people had expectations of foreigners; neither seemed stable, however, at the level of everyday experience. Appearance was important, and related to social class, both in Viet Nam and in America, yet social norms about how to negotiate this terrain globally were imprecise. If Vietnamese people could mistake non-poor Westerners as poor based on appearance, then the reverse was also possible.

Partly influenced by cultural norms and processes originating outside of Viet Nam, the primary work toward the delineation of middleness was accomplished in various local social arenas. In this way, perceptions of global others were notable because they interacted with middle-class impressions of class others in Viet Nam. I both observed and heard about interactions especially important in this regard. On one occasion, for instance, while I was teaching a group of young adults, the class was practicing conversational English in small groups by discussing current events. One group was talking about traffic safety in Ho Chi Minh City, and one person pointed out that some motorists were not obeying traffic lights. (This a common grievance among

Western foreigners living in Viet Nam.) A second person recounted how he had recently witnessed a motorist cause a minor accident by driving through a red light without even looking for on-coming traffic. Most faces expressed disapproval of this action. The next comment, however, went too far. It came from a woman that everyone knew was married to a Western foreigner because of previous stories she had told. After hearing about the accident, she grumbled: "That is so Vietnamese." The look on her face displayed moderate disgust, and she waved her hand in dismissal.

This comment halted the conversation; I moved on to listen to a different group. After class, however, one of the women from the group approached me. Her name was Manh, and after a brief after-class conversation, I asked her if she would participate in my study. Though I did not get to know her well, she agreed. That day, she explained that the woman who had made the "so Vietnamese" comment had spoken inappropriately. "How can she say that? She is Vietnamese," Manh stated with a slight grimace on her face. She and I met for coffee a few days later, and I reintroduced the topic. Manh again complained about the "so Vietnamese" comment, and went on to say that this woman probably thought that way because of her husband. Manh stopped in the middle of her complaining, to apologize to me. She wanted to clarify that not all foreigners were the same in this regard, but that some lumped all Vietnamese people together and considered them backward. "And some *Vietnamese* people think that," she emphasized. "I see it at the market. A [Vietnamese] woman with her foreigner husband. She thinks she is better than other [Vietnamese] people. She thinks that she is not Vietnamese. But she is Vietnamese. Maybe she was poor before she married a foreigner. Maybe she only worked

in a bar. And there are rich [Vietnamese] people who say things like this. I see them in the market acting the same.” Comments of this nature indicated to me that, according to middle-class people, some “rich” people exhibited faults as reprehensible as those of “poor” people. Running traffic lights and referring to such actions as “so Vietnamese” were equally reprehensible.

Perceptions like Manh’s fit into middle-class belief systems regarding how distinctions such as *global* related to class identity. Generally, as middle-class people went about defining middleness, the socio-cultural space that they claimed to be the most appropriate for being a modern Vietnamese person, they were negotiating between various poles. Without necessarily expressing themselves in these terms, it was nonetheless clear that certain attitudes were seen as too global. Forgetting that one was Vietnamese, as Manh made clear, was a realistic and unfortunate possibility of living in a Viet Nam that was experiencing globalizing processes. Nearly everyone I knew had at least one story about an incident when a “rich person” had betrayed the Vietnamese component of their identity, so to speak, by voicing a complaint about inappropriate individual behaviors in terms that used the concept of being Vietnamese as a pejorative.

The nearly infamous lack of recognizing queues or public lines in Viet Nam was the most common behavior to trigger this kind of response. Vietnamese people from a wide range of class backgrounds frequently cut in line, or disregarded lines entirely. At the post office or while waiting to check in at the airport, it was common for someone to walk directly to the front of the line instead of to the back. Some Vietnamese individuals (and many foreigners) talked about these as transgressions, labeling them “so

Vietnamese,” and this labeling bothered many middle-class people I knew as much as cutting in line bothered them, if not more. Often the person making these comments was a Vietnamese person whose spouse was a foreigner. Middle-class people often rationalized that such attitudes resulted from exposure to foreign, somewhat elite lifestyles and beliefs.

There were also complaints by middle-class people when Vietnamese Americans living in or visiting Viet Nam used the concept of being Vietnamese as an indication of backwardness. Vietnamese Americans commonly labeled various annoying or inconvenient experiences as things that happened “only in Vietnam.” Middle-class people cited examples of this behavior; common occurrences involved Vietnamese Americans complaining about the country’s infrastructural inadequacies or perceived poor service received at cafes, restaurants and hotels. Power outages, for example, are still common in Ho Chi Minh City, and, throughout the country, the customer is not always right. Middle-class people also recognized these as problems, but they conceptualized them differently. At a restaurant, for example, if a server seemed “backward”, this was explained in terms of that person’s class background, not their race/nationality. Generally, comments by “elite” Vietnamese, foreigners, and Vietnamese Americans that implied there was something inherently Vietnamese (and backward) about less-than-desirable experiences in Viet Nam offended the sensibilities of many middle-class people concerning what it meant to be a modern Vietnamese person.

If, as I argue, there was a risk that a person’s behavior and attitude could be too global, even more caution was in order with regard to the possibility of being too local. A

single Vietnamese term, *nha que*, which encapsulates a broad set of related meanings, was often employed to critique something or someone that was not worldly enough. *Nha que* translates literally to *country people*, and has a long history in Viet Nam. Though little has been written about this term, it has been evoked in a handful of scholarly publications. In his analysis of the relationship between class formation and language, Luong (1998:246) briefly mentions the use of the term in the late colonial period, translating it to “peasant.” In referring to inter-war era political circumstances, Hammer (1957:223) expands it to: the “simple peasant...who had never left his rice field.” Most recently, Dang (1998) points out that sayings such as, “Giau **nha que** khong bang ngoi le thanh pho” (It is better to be poor in the city than rich in the **countryside**), reference the perceived advantage of the urban over the rural in Vietnam.

To grasp the essence of the phrase *nha que* and to understand how its use relates to my analysis of middle-class culture requires nearly conflating distinctions based on place and those based on time. Middle-class people regularly fused the meanings associated with each of these two modes when signifying social class difference. Distinguishing between global and local was often akin to deciding whether something was modern and traditional. This was significant in that there are longstanding debates in Viet Nam’s recent history (colonial period to present) about the modern/traditional distinction (see Taylor 2001). Thus, when middle-class people used *nha que* to describe that which was too local/traditional, they effectively were engaging in a dialogue that was more than a century old and often contentious. They did so in multiple contexts and with a variety of intended meanings, but the underlying assumptions about social class and

modernity were relatively constant. Middle-class people used *nha que* regularly to describe the social behaviors and culture knowledge, or lack thereof, that marked the “backward” lifestyles of class others.

Nha que was sometimes clearly pejorative, but when using it to describe class others, middle-class people only did so behind their back, so to speak. Middle-class people almost never said it directly to class others as an insult. Rather they used it to describe class others to fellow middle-class people. When interacting in public, they would wait until they were out of earshot of class others before describing them, their clothes, or their attitudes as *nha que*. People used it when speaking both Vietnamese and English, often inserting it rather seamlessly into English sentences. *Nha que* most commonly described a lack of cultural knowledge, or behaviors that resulted from it. People used it when telling stories about past encounters with individuals or situations that were deemed too local/traditional. I heard it refer to taxi cab drivers, for example, if they did not know the city streets well. Several individuals used to describe service staff at hotels and restaurants when these staff got orders wrong or did not know the price of something. Middle-class people also used *nha que* to describe many of the same things that “elites” and foreigners described as “so Vietnamese.” Someone cutting in line was *nha que* because he or she did not recognize what was perceived as global standard for queuing.

It is important to note that *nha que* was not directed solely at people considered lower-class. The rich and foreigners could also act in ways deserving of *nha que* signification. Rich Vietnamese people who had lots of money but little fashion sense,

according to middle-class norms, were especially likely targets. As I discuss further in Chapter Seven, these individuals simply bought the latest trends and put outfits together without adequate attention to fashion, and this was evident in how their appearance. My own fashion choices provide another example. I came to Viet Nam wearing cowboy style shirts that I had purchased second-hand, which were deemed by more than one friend as *nha que*. (Toward the end of my stay, cowboy chic would take off in Viet Nam, but it was not popular during most of my time there.) When directed at me, however, people used *nha que* in my presence, revealing that its meaning and usage varied from one context to the next. People were not so much trying to insult me as give me a hard time, or perhaps advise me in a friendly manner to dress more stylishly.

This was nearly the same manner in which middle-class people used *nha que* when talking about each other and to each other. The phrase was used more jokingly when directed at another middle-class person. The following encounter demonstrates this point. I was having coffee with Tra (the most “modern” of the women portrayed earlier) and her friend Nhu, who also identified as middle-class. Nhu received a call on her cell phone. As Nhu answered the phone, Tra pointed out that Nhu had purchased it two days earlier and was excited about her new “tech gadget.” Nhu answered with a quick greeting, listened to the caller for less than a minute, and then ended the call after simply saying, “Yes, wait a minute.” A co-worker had called Nhu in need of a phone number for a client. This provided the makings for unexpected ethnographic encounter.

After Nhu hung up, she fiddled with her new phone, while explaining to Tra and me the nature of the call and apologizing for the interruption. Tra and I both noticed that

she was copying the number from her phone to a napkin by hand and had started punching it into a text message that she presumably was going to send to her colleague. I asked Nhu why she did not instead send a “business card.” (A business card was the technological equivalent of a text message containing a phone number. It was a specific feature of many new phones wherein one did not have to write the number down and then enter it manually. This function could be quickly employed to send a name and number in only a few seconds.) Nhu stopped typing into her phone to ask me what I was talking about. “You do not know how to send business cards?” Tra questioned. “I’ll show you.” As she took the phone from Nhu and executed the sending of a business card, she joked to Nhu, “Nha que qua!” Then she looked at me and repeated her good-natured gibe, half in English have in Vietnamese. “Very *nha que*, isn’t she.”

Tra was not trying to be hurtful or mean, but nor was she entirely kidding. In this and similar situations, rather, one middle-class person was sort of prodding another for her to get in line, so to speak. After Tra made the *nha que* comment, Nhu smiled, laughed a bit, and smacked Tra relatively lightly on the arm, communicating that Tra had embarrassed her a little, and perhaps it was significant that she had done so in front of a foreigner—me, that is. Then Nhu decided she needed to test out her newly acquired knowledge, so she asked for my phone number and attempted to send me a business card, one containing the name and phone number of someone I did not know, without assistance from Tra. She succeeded.

This good-natured incident was not something that any of us took too seriously, but it had nonetheless been a somewhat weighty moment wherein a piece of cultural

knowledge was passed along. In a small, but significant way, this bit of cultural knowledge contributed to the definition of what it meant to be modern Vietnamese middle-class person. The interaction thus helped to remedy what could be conceived as a deficiency in this regard. No single such moment or exchange was by itself especially formative, yet collectively these relatively common occurrences played a vital role. It was important to know the latest hip musicians (local or foreign), or that a famous foreigner was coming to Ho Chi Minh City (e.g. US President Bush, or most recently Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie), or whether the newest consumer electronics were available in Viet Nam, or which country was doing well in World Cup Football [soccer]. Not keeping up with global flows, while certainly excusable, was not something that went unnoticed, and friends would keep each other in line by highlighting various moments wherein someone's behavior exhibited *nha que* qualities. There indeed was a danger of being too local or traditional and friends helped each avoid this.

In summary, delineating middleness and attempting to define what it meant to be modern Vietnamese people required a balancing act. Being privy to global flows was culturally valued, but so was showing a healthy appreciation for the local. As the above stories and observation suggest, considerable time and energy went into this aspect of creating and maintaining middle-class culture. Some of the social work that went into this "project," however, was revealed to me less in people's attitudes and knowledge and more in appearances and actions. As the next section details, middle-class people

regularly performed or acted out their class-based identity during everyday life activities, oftentimes in what I call public spaces.²⁹

Performativity and Middle-class Culture

Dong, the struggling university professor discussed earlier, gave perhaps the most candid response when I asked if I could stop by his house. At one time or another, I asked many of the people participating in my study the same question. During my research in North America on a separate project, people's homes were primary sites for my ethnographic inquiry, and I had initially—naïvely—expected something similar in Vietnam. My presumption stemmed from all I had heard about how important family and household were to Vietnamese people. As I mentioned in Chapter One, however, I visited few homes during my research. Nearly always, people either suggested we meet at a coffee shop with no explanation as to why, or they gave somewhat vague excuses about how meeting at their home was inappropriate. Dong, however, was unusually frank: “My house is small and not nice. It is not clean. I have not done housework lately. We should not meet there. Can we meet outside [at a café or coffee shop]?”

I agreed to his suggestion, having not been surprised or insulted by his response at all. At this point, I was still somewhat persistent in my attempts to see where people lived, but I had already come to understand that the likelihood of doing so was low. Furthermore, my expectations in this regard were becoming intertwined with a broader

²⁹ Whether spaces like coffee shops and shopping centers are public or private depends in part on how one defines these terms. I consider them public in that they are not private homes. I also recognized that, as Earl (2004) points out, these spaces have also moved certain elements of street culture from outside to inside, making them less accessible and more exclusive, a point I revisit.

set of understandings about the nature of middle-class culture. The notion that middle-class culture was comprised partly of highly performative processes had become clear, and I had started to incorporate this notion into my research and analysis.

It turned out that I was by no means the only person that Dong did not invite to his home. He explained to me that he almost never invited people to his house, because he was embarrassed by how “small and uncomfortable” it was. It was not a place to entertain guests. As I got to know people better, I learned that some felt the same way as Dong that their homes were somehow lacking aesthetically and with regard to comfort level. A few of these people admitted that his was in part because I was not a close friend; someone also suggested that it had something to do with the fact that I was a foreigner. Other people explained that coffee shops, generally speaking, were better places to socialize. It was not so much that their homes were inadequate. Rather, with so many options, there was no need to sit around the house. Why not go out? Though the precise rationale from person to person varied, the answer was nearly always that same: more often than not, going out was preferable to me coming by people’s homes.

Performance theory helped me make sense of this pattern. Whether in an actual theater or in the social realm of everyday life (Goffman 1956), performances require basic elements, including audience and stage, or setting, as Goffman prefers. Homes, in Vietnam, were not especially well suited when it came to providing the kind of setting necessary for performing middle-class culture. Some, like Dong’s, simply gave off the wrong image in that they looked and felt like low-income homes. They were not suitable for a middle-class person, at least not according to some people’s view. There were other

features, however, shared even by many nicer houses that made people's homes a less appropriate setting for the performance of middle-class culture than a coffee shop or mall.

Despite Ho Chi Minh City's dense population, individual homes were relatively private. Because most homes were packed tightly into city blocks, typically the only windows were at the front of the house, and, especially on the ground floor, these were nearly always separated from the street by large metal doors, metal screens or barred gates. A variety of other spaces, both public in that they attracted large crowds and private in that they were not accessible to many lower-class people, were increasingly common in Viet Nam and becoming sites of scholarly inquiry in and of themselves (Earl 2004, Vann 2006). A coffee shop, for instance, provided a highly visible and aesthetically pleasing setting, drawing large crowds. The entrance fee—a coffee drink for approximately \$1 US—was reasonable for most middle-class people. Many people clearly preferred such settings to their homes for telling those unfamiliar with contemporary Viet Nam (i.e. me) about its most important features. I eventually came to agree, at least in part, that coffee shops worked well in this capacity. If someone wanted to point to the changes taking place in Viet Nam, in popular fashion for example, it made sense to do so where those changes were abundant and obvious. Coffee shops were full of people wearing the latest fashions, cable television stations such as MTV Asia filled the airwaves, and people were consuming imported drinks and a vast array of local favorites only recently available in Viet Nam.

The location for the vast majority of conversations I had with people, therefore, fit into a larger framework for understanding middle-class culture. This framework took into

account the notion that social life can be understood in part as performance, emphasizing that the setting, the dialogue, the props and even the choreography were all important in understanding how middle-class people “acted their way into cultural existence” (Liechty 2003:25). Thus relying on Goffman (1956) and other performance theorists following in his footsteps, the notion of a social performance helped explained that fact that certain daily activities were important because of the messages or signals they gave off. In this section, I highlight several specific performances that I saw regularly in Ho Chi Minh City, many of which I also discussed with middle-class people. I do not discuss props and costume (i.e. consumer goods) in this chapter, because these are treated with more depth in Chapter Seven. Here I talk briefly about performance and speech acts and at length about the relevance of social performances in the daily lives of middle-class people.

I arrived at my decision to include performativity as part of my framework for understanding middle-class culture through a series of punctuated realizations. An evening of socializing early in my study was the first of these. Trang, a woman who had recently agreed to participate in my study, invited me to drink beer with a young couple with whom she was good friends. Soon after we ordered, the other woman asked Trang to tell her husband a humorous story about a mutual friend. This was at a point where my relatively low level of fluency only allowed me to understand approximately twenty-five percent of spoken exchanges. A few minutes into the conversation, the details of which I never fully understood, I switched from listening closely in an attempt to glean as much as possible from verbal exchanges to intently watching what struck me as a particularly animated conversation. Trang was speaking quickly and the couple was listening. The

other woman, however, was an active listener and regularly interjected her own thoughts into the story, because she and Trang had both experienced the events being depicted. Initially asking Trang to tell the story, perhaps because she felt Trang was a better storyteller, the other woman nonetheless played an important supporting role in its telling.

Watching her posturing and style of delivery, both of which changed considerably once she started telling the story, I imagined how Trang would not have been out of place on an actual stage delivering standup comedy. Early in the story, a character was laughing, so Trang mimicked a laugh—“he, he, he”—and the others laughed along. Then, when someone in the story got angry, the expression on Trang’s face turned sour. Several sentences were delivered with this grimace, and when she was finished with this segment of the story, Trang gave a quick laugh, one that punctuated the end of the angry segment of the performance and segued into another. Trang and the other woman, on a handful of occasions, disagreed about the specifics of the story. They pointed at each other, again with scowls on faces, and even not so lightly smacked each other on the upper arm when discharging complaints and retorts. Throughout the story, Trang’s hands almost never stopped, and she repositioned herself in her chair several times, once so that her back nearly faced her listeners, while she turned her head and appeared to quote the main character in the story, though I cannot be sure. Her gestures appeared to reflect actions, directions of movement, and emotion. I often was unable to understand the intent of gesturing, given my linguistic limits.

After this conversation, I regularly noticed similar features in many others. This degree of performativity was not limited to times when people were telling stories. Simple discussions also involved performance. Facial expressions and gestures that signaled anger and joy were especially common. Individuals commonly hit each other, usually on the arm and clearly with no intent to cause harm, during conversations to express anger, disapproval, or embarrassment, especially among people who knew each other well. Yet I occasionally saw people smack virtual strangers. In one case, for example, a woman buying fruit from a bicycle vendor smacked the vendor on the arm when the vendor started the bidding at an unreasonably high price. The buyer smacked the vendor again, when the vendor tried to push the buyer to buy more fruit than she wanted. The vendor smiled the entire time, and neither woman ever raised their voice more than a little. It seemed that both woman considered this an acceptable way to haggle, if not especially common.

My language abilities would not have allowed me to undertake an analysis of such conversations; nor am I sure whether doing so would have been especially useful in understanding middle-class culture. Though performance theorists such as Austin (1975), Butler (1993) and Bourdieu (1991), emphasize the links between speech acts and the constant citing and reciting of social norms through individual performances, I was not inclined or able to do so. Rather the highly performative nature of many simple speech acts, which was itself certainly not class specific, highlighted the importance of image and signaling in the everyday life of most Vietnamese people I knew. I thus set out to learn whether the nature of social performances was class specific. I discovered, indeed,

that at least when it came to middle-class people, social performance was significantly shaped by class/cultural norms, while simultaneously shaping those norms by citing and reciting them.

In describing and analyzing middle-class culture, a host of public acts on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City are important because of the messages they gave off. Furthermore, the audience's ability to understand the message was highly dependent on the social context of the act. Relieving one's bladder in public provides one example. At first, I thought the message was clear and straightforward: urinating in public, a rather common occurrence, was an act of "pollution" (Douglas 1970), symbolizing poverty. Poor or homeless people, the city's underclass—these were the individuals I regularly noticed urinating in public. Then late one night and on a side street, I saw a man park and hop off of a relatively expensive Yamaha motorcycle. A woman had been riding with him, and she remained standing near the bike looking slightly anxious, while the man scurried over to the adjacent wall, unzipped his pants and proceeded to urinate. While slowing as I passed, and trying not to pay too much attention, I noticed the couple did not look like the people I typically saw urinating more conspicuously during the day. Their dress and motorcycle signified middle-class identity to me.

If a middle-class man was in desperate need of a place to relieve himself, he could be forgiven for urinating in public, but this was acceptable only at night and only in places where he was unlikely to be seen. Tram, the wife of the couple who taught English, squirmed a little in her chair and expressed her disbelief concerning our conversation topic, but then added: "Late at night and somewhere people will not see him

[urinating] is okay.” She did not like these late nights stops, but the couple lived several miles from restaurants and cafes they frequented, so, she, like other wives and girlfriends that I saw on the side of the road, would wait on her motorcycle as Duy shuffled up to a concrete wall and discretely relieved himself. Urinating in public was not polluting in and of itself; being *seen* urinating in public was the act of pollution. When asking people about these contradictions, no one entirely missed the link between middle-class and lower-class needs in this regard. There were virtually no public bathrooms in Ho Chi Minh City, and this was somewhat commonly reflected upon as a citywide problem. While this could have unified people across class lines, it did not have this effect. Middle-class people were normally able to avoid public urination, because they had restrooms in offices and cafes, during the day especially. And they were careful in those instances when it was necessary not to be seen.

Having seen lots of poor people urinate much more openly in public, I recognized that Goffman’s sense of social performance was somewhat incomplete when it came to thinking about middle-class culture in Ho Chi Minh City. In the same way people performing in actual theatrical performances go out of their way to conceal, performers of middle-class culture tend to hide certain acts. Perhaps the most obvious example of the former would be Shakespearian actors concealing their maleness, so to speak, when acting the part of a woman. But one certainly does not have to go back nearly so far to see examples of this. Today’s fascination with and portrayals of the making of Hollywood films has actors admitting that certain filming sequences bothered them or frightened them and that they had to go to great lengths to conceal these emotions for the

camera. In these scenes, concealing is as much the key to a successful performance as anything. On the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, the same is true for many aspects of the performance of middle-class culture.

A second example concerns eating habits. During my research, it was rare that I saw empty bowls when eating certain dishes with middle-class individuals. The first time I recognized this, somewhat ironically, was in my own behavior, which had, hitherto unbeknownst to me, started in at least one way to mimic the middle-class people with whom I was spending time. Well into my research, I was eating *pho* (beef noodle soup) at a new chain restaurant with people visiting from North America. The three of us had each ordered a bowl of *pho*, which is eaten individually, as opposed to family style. Everyone prepared theirs according to individual preferences, adding various sauces and herbs made available on a small platter. Then we ate, while chatting. Approximately 10 minutes later, I stopped, as I had come accustomed to doing, well before my bowl was completely empty. Most of the noodles and all of the meat were gone, but I left some broth, and, significantly, I did not “forage” for every last bit of noodle, something I would normally do, when, for example, eating spaghetti in an Italian restaurant in North America. I placed my chopsticks across my bowl, set my spoon on the table, and observed my friends. The sight—each had a spoon in one hand, was tilting the bowl with the other, and was savoring the bowl of *pho* in its entirety—stuck me as peculiar. In public, the people I had been eating *pho* with for more than a year would never engage with a bowl in this somewhat aggressive manner. They would eat the vast majority of the bowl’s contents, while leaving a good portion of broth and a scattering of noodles.

After this encounter, I continued regularly to observe middle-class people consume bowls of soup of a various types (*pho*, *bun*, *huu tieu*) paying attention to the restraint they displayed. One day, several weeks later, I saw the behavior that middle-class people were trying to avoid or conceal by eating their *pho* with self-control or moderation. I was at a street side noodle stall, sitting on a plastic chair, eating a bowl of *pho*. As I was doing so, the man sitting right in front of me—he was dressed in slacks and a polo shirt—finished eating, and called for and quickly paid his bill. He then got up from the table and drove off on a Hondo Wave. As soon as he did, a second man came over to the same table, which had not yet been cleared of the first man's nearly empty bowl. This second man was clearly poor. In fact, his ragged clothing, especially dark complexion and the dirt on his hands and feet all indicated to me that he was likely homeless. He bent over, and, in a fashion not dissimilar to how my North American friends had eaten their *pho*, he scooped every last morsel of leftover food into his mouth. Ignoring calls from the shop owner to leave, he waited until he emptied the bowl and then left quickly without looking at anyone. That middle-class people avoided this behavior struck me as an instance of the restraint said to characterize higher social strata, which has been reported in Viet Nam by Avieli (2007) and outlined in detail by Bourdieu (1981).

Middle-class people's restraint was especially common when it came to squatting in public. Generally speaking, squatting is so common throughout Viet Nam that travel writers mentioned it (see Muller 1998), and visitors comment on its novelty regularly. Squatting is what it sounds like. People of all ages and genders bend at the knees and lower their rump toward the ground, without it ever touching the ground. Feet generally

stay flat on the ground and arms often extend forward to help with balance. People typically assume this position when waiting (for a bus, for example), when socializing on the street, or when they are working on something close to the ground (cleaning vegetables, for example). I saw people squatting somewhere for some reason everyday, and I was often impressed with how people could assume this squatting position and hold it effortlessly for several minutes looking comfortable the entire time. I personally could not squat like this at all, never mind comfortably.

I first recognized the link between performance, social class and squatting while sitting on my motorcycle waiting for a red light to turn green at an intersection downtown. I looked across the intersection and saw a woman that I assumed was middle-class—she drove a relatively expensive motorcycle and wore a pants suit typical of an office worker. She was *standing*, covered head-to-toe to avoid sun exposure; the two men that worked on her flat tire were *squatted*, talking and fiddling with tools and bike parts. I pulled up onto the sidewalk and watched this scene for several minutes. The woman stood for more than 10 minutes, shifting her weight and shuffling around some and occasionally saying something to the men working on her tire. For their part, the men went about their work maintaining their squatted positions the entire time, even as they moved around the back end of the bike. Ten meters a way, there was a second woman. I guessed she was the approximate same age as the first woman, but not of the same social class. She wore the pajama-like outfit and conical hat associated with lower class or rural women. This second woman was *squatted* next to a large tin basin full of soapy water. She scrubbed at various utensils and cups for the duration of my observation. Just around

the corner, but in the same visual field as the people just mentioned, two taxi drivers also *squatted* on the sidewalk, presumably waiting for a call on their radios or for potential customers to exit from nearby businesses. Just across the street from the taxi drivers two men wearing dress slacks and shirts *stood* in front of an office building, waiting and talking.

Observing this scene prompted me to pay more attention to who was squatting, and a clear pattern quickly emerged. In short, poor people regularly squatted and middle-class people and the rich did not, not publicly anyway. As with urinating, middle-class people did not avoid squatting altogether, but they rarely could be seen squatting, unlike the taxi drivers or vendors who shared many of the same physical spaces with middle-class people and who could be seen squatting while working, eating and resting throughout the central districts. For example, either early in the morning or during the lunchtime break, taxi drivers around the city squatted in circles talking or playing Chinese chess. Office workers, on the other hand, while they also gathered outside at these same times on the same downtown sidewalks, stood in a circle when they did so, talking on cell phones or to each other. When I asked about this, most responses were remarkably similar: squatting was considered “not polite” or inappropriate, for middle-class people; it was “normal,” or appropriate for taxi drivers or street vendors.

A conversation I had with a small group of university students at a coffee shop was typical of how people thought about squatting. I had initiated the discussion by explaining that I rarely saw the people participating in my study squat in public, but that I had seen people do so on the relatively few occasions I visited their homes. A young man

named Lam seemed to understand that I was trying to ask about who squatted and who did not. He was the first to speak, followed by two young women, Nguyen and Dung.

Lam: People without an education squat.

Nguyen: No, you can't say that. Let me tell him. Nowadays people in the market do not need to [squat] because they have chairs and tables. But before, people used to, especially sellers. Before you could see people in the market, especially sellers—they would be squatting while they worked, selling things to customers or arranging. But things are different now. Things are more modern, and people do not need to squat.

Lam: But people still squat now.

Dung: Yeah, lots of people still squat.

Rylan: So who squats? For example, if you go out at night and take a taxi, do you squat while you're waiting for the taxi.

Nguyen: No, of course not. Nobody would.

Dung: No, not like that, not in public. Not people who can afford to take a taxi.

Rylan: Why not?

Dung: Because squatting in public like that is impolite. Look at it, it is not beautiful to do it like that, it's not appropriate.

Lam: She is right. It looks bad to do it like that in the street.

Nguyen: It's true, she is right. It's not polite. That is what I was trying to say. We are more modern now.

Lam: But not everyone is. Many people still squat. It is normal for sellers in the market, or *xe om* drivers [motorcycle taxi drivers]. I see that all the time. But we do not [squat], because it looks bad.

Rylan: Looks bad, what do you mean?

Dung: I don't know, it does not look nice, it looks...it's not polite, not appropriate. It is okay to do it at home, but not in the street, not if you are waiting for a taxi. [Everyone laughed.]

Lam: Right, so that's why we don't do it like that.

Lam's initial comment was typical of explanations I heard when discussing various practices and beliefs that were rationalized in class-specific terms. That is, sometimes people were surprisingly blunt in their descriptions of these cultural differences, explaining that certain behaviors were simply the product of someone's lower-class standing. In Lam's case, this was explained in terms of their educational inadequacies, which is an issue I discuss further in the next chapter. Equally common, during group discussions, was a response like Nguyen's, which implied that such frankness was itself not appropriate middle-class behavior. Being so direct, perhaps especially in front of an outsider, seemed to conflict with the restraint middle-class people were expected to exercise in social performances. It was also common, as I described earlier in this chapter, for people to "get it wrong" early on in conversations, later either correcting themselves or being corrected by others. In the end, Lam's bold comment and Nguyen's misspeaking were both eventually reconciled as people came to agree about the social performance of squatting. It remained common; lower-class people who still squatted

should not necessarily be openly judged for their behavior; middle-class people should avoid it because they might be judged for doing so in public.

What were essentially biological needs—to urinate, eat, and rest—required social performances to conceal or camouflage activities that middle-class people either were not supposed to conduct in public settings or were supposed to conduct in particular ways. Though there were minor differences in how men and women put on these performances, these three examples are actually notable in that gender did not seem to be a significant factor. Even when it came to urinating in public, some middle-class women admitted that they and other women they knew would do so, if absolutely necessary, perhaps on a long car ride while on vacation. But they would go to great lengths to avoid being seen, of course, even by strangers. However, there were common performances wherein gender played an important role. As the next examples demonstrate, if social performances were an important part of the social work required to articulate and maintain middle-class identities, as I am arguing, then women carried a disproportional share of these burdens.

Gender-specific performances also mostly had to do with the body. Toothpicks, appearing on nearly every table at restaurants in Viet Nam, provide one illustration. Nearly everyone I knew used them after most meals. Significantly, men were likely to do so with little apparent regard for the image their actions presented to the person sitting opposite them. Often with their mouth open wide, middle-class men worked on their teeth without discretion for a minute or so, while sometimes still actively talking to people around them. During the most vivid encounters with male toothpick use that I experienced, men would even suck the food they had dislodged from their teeth off the

toothpick producing an audio/visual display that, as a Westerner, initially took some getting use to. In short, men did not seem concerned about the message that their personal toothpick use gave off. Furthermore, if the audience was Vietnamese society at large, then there seemed no need to be concerned.

Middle-class women, on the other hand, rarely if ever used toothpicks this way. Instead, they were careful to open their mouth only enough to insert a toothpick, and they almost always covered their mouth with one hand while maneuvering the toothpick with the other, allowing the person on the other side of the table to see little. I asked both women and men about this difference, which they too recognized, and most responses were both uniform and brief. In line with other gender-based double standards in Viet Nam, men simply were not expected to maintain “purity” or beauty in these setting. Women were. Though gender relations were experiencing some positive changes, scholars reported profound tensions over protecting the image and chastity of women within a context where it was widely-know that men were increasingly buying sex from women prostitutes (Gammeltoft 2003, Nguyen 2007). My discussions with both sexes revealed a variety of double standards along these lines. Thus, continuing a long history wherein women were expected to conform to higher moral standards when it came to nearly all matters of the body, there was more at stake during postprandial toothpick activity for women than there was for men.

Lower-income women, meanwhile, tended to use toothpicks more like the men in my study, indicating that class and gendered had become intimately intertwined when it came to certain performances. Nose picking, for lack of a less crude term, provides

another example. Like toothpick use, nose picking was also very common in Viet Nam. Indeed, many Western foreigners I knew and even some I met only casually commended on how often they encountered this behavior. It was especially common among men, of all class backgrounds, but also among many lower-income women, according to my personal observations. I regularly saw people in both of these categories picking their nose with impunity, so to speak. On more than one occasion early in my study, I was interviewing a man and became quite distracted by how aggressively, openly, and for how long he would undertake this activity without concern about being seen. For men, this was clearly normal behavior, and I soon became accustomed to it. Most middle-class women, on the other hand, were careful not to pick their nose in public. They even occasionally talked negatively about women who did. I was struck by how rarely I saw women act like middle-class men when it came to this particular behavior.

On at least two occasions, however, while I was having coffee with two middle-class women, one of them was caught indulging, so to speaking, by the other. In both cases, the non-offender quickly and subtly intervened with a gentle tug at the offender's arm without verbally calling attention to her faux pas. The most dramatic ethnographic encounter along these lines happened at a group dinner celebrating the birthday of a study participant. I was sitting at the end of the table, across from one woman, and next to a second woman at the head of the table. At one point, the woman at the head of the table, after apparently noticing something in the nostril of the woman sitting across from me, reached over to remove it with her own finger. She was adept and successful in doing so. I was more than a little surprised by this, but also somewhat impressed with the nature of

the woman's altruism. The woman sitting across from me, however, was not. She quickly became mildly upset and then embarrassed about what had just happened. A few minutes of awkwardness ensued, and then the mood pretty much returned to normal. These last three examples suggested that middle-class women were executing at least some restraint in achieving the "purity" or elegance expected of someone their class and gender.

For many middle-class women, riding a motorcycle also involved a social performance of elegance signifying gender- and class-based distinction. Whereas the two performances just described required only momentary restraint, riding a motorcycle involved a more sustained performance, one lasting the entire length of a ride. Yet the posture that middle-class women held while riding appeared to come almost effortlessly. Despite the distinct deportment involved, the position middle-class women maintained on motorcycles seemed almost "natural." Perhaps this had something to do with frequency.

The streets of Ho Chi Minh City were heavily congested and the vast majority of the traffic was motorcycle traffic. Everyone in my study, like nearly all middle-class people, spent many hours per week riding a motorcycle. In fact, time spent on a motorcycle comprised one of the largest portions of public life for middle-class people. Everyday, commuting to and from work meant spending an hour or more on a motorcycle, and weekly socializing added significantly to this total. It is not surprising then there was something significant about the manner in which middle-class women rode motorcycles. If the self that middle-class women presented to others was important, and I am arguing that it was, why would this have been any different while atop one's motorcycle, where the self was commonly highly visible?

The way many lower-income women rode the motorcycles differed considerably from the way middle-class women did. When I suggested this to the middle-class women in my study they typically agreed, labeling women who rode their bikes a certain way *cong nhan* (worker) or *nguoi ngeo* (poor), by which they would have meant that she was not middle-class. Importantly, this did not imply that these class other women were poverty stricken or destitute. Rather it implied simply that they were not participating in the same lifestyle as middle-class people. They were not participating in middle-class culture.

Why did the middle-class people in my study think these things? In part, it is because of what lower-income women wore, and because of their motorcycles, neither of which matched very closely with a middle-class aesthetic surrounding consumer goods, which I describe in more detail in Chapter Seven. *How* class others rode their motorcycles was equally important. Image a woman straddling her motorcycle, with both legs around the side. Her knees are spread rather wide, her arms are bowed with the elbows out somewhat, and she appears to grip the handlebars firmly. In short, she looks to be handling her bike with a certain pragmatic fortitude, worrying about the basket she might be carrying between her legs and the traffic around her more than she is about how she looks. It is entirely possible that she is presenting a self to those around her, but if she is, she is presenting an altogether different self than that presented by middle-class women when they ride their motorcycles.

Image a second woman. She is dressed differently than the first women, and her motorcycle is a slightly more expensive and newer model. As importantly, her riding

style is quite distinct from the first woman. She is not straddling her motorcycle so much as she is perched somewhat gracefully atop it. Her knees nearly touch in the space between the handlebars and the seat, rather than jutting out from her bike. Her elbows are also drawn in, so her arms sort of curve in toward her body, extending to the handle bars, where her hands, of course, grip the handle bar, but not before her wrists bend quite noticeably, suggesting a somewhat delicate embrace of her bike. Significantly, the wrists of the man on the motorcycle behind her are straight, suggesting that he has a firmer, perhaps more masculine grip on the controls of his bike.

Negotiating the Middle

In this chapter, I have set out to demonstrate that middle-class people thought and acted in ways that distanced themselves from class/cultural others. My purposed in the last section of this chapter is to re-emphasize why this was an important part of middle-class culture. In any society, being poor is undesirable for reasons that require little explanation. Furthermore, as I have noted, most of the people in my study had once been poor. They knew firsthand what a life of poverty entailed, and everyday experience at the time of my study further reminded people of these details. It was their proximity in time and place to less fortunate class others that seemed to reinforce the need to “buttress borders,” as Dickey (2000) phrases it.

Interestingly, a jingle commonly heard and nearly ubiquitous throughout Ho Chi Minh City was significant in this regard. The jingle was an advertisement for ice cream. Vendors toted colorful coolers full of ice cream on small carts emblazoned with images

of the treats inside. While doing so, nearly all vendors played the same tune.

Significantly, potential customers heard only musical notes; there were no lyrics to the version of this jiggle that vendors played. People explained to me, however, that words had been “written” for the jingle, seemingly by the public at large. No one knew where the lyrics originated. A few newspaper articles, in fact, had even addressed this mystery.

When people heard the jingle they often sang along with the following lyrics:

(You) have no money,

(You) have no money,

(You) have no money,

So (you) don't have ice cream

The pronoun is my insertion, because in Vietnamese, the song had no subject. It was left up to the singer and/or listener to imagine who did not have enough money to buy ice cream. In my experience, people teaching me the words primarily sang it jokingly. When I told one person that it seemed a bit odd, he explained that it was not something to take seriously. He continued while laughing, “It is for people to remember that they were poor. But now they are not. Now they can afford ice cream.”

That Ho Chi Minh City was not especially segregated geographically with regard to social class meant that middle-class people were regularly confronted with images of poverty. Throughout the city, virtual shantytowns often were located a block or less from high-rise apartment buildings where mostly middle-class people lived (see figure [number]). Also throughout the city, poor-looking children sold flowers and gum on the streets; blind people walked around helped by a friend or relative singing into a portable

amplifier trying to earn tips; middle-class individuals were approached by people begging for money; disabled people positioned themselves in conspicuous locations in hopes of receiving random charity from people passing by; shoe-shine boys regularly approached and often pestered middle-class people for the chance to earn 33cents; occasionally an especially desperate person could be seen in hysterics, aggressively pleading for money. The signs of poverty were quite literally everywhere all the time.

Many of the people who participated in my study would occasionally give to people they perceived as truly in need. Yet poor people asking for assistance were so common in certain areas that some middle-class people explained that it often was overwhelming. In my own experience, if I gave money to one person, often several others would rush over also hoping to receive a donation. Middle-class people also complained that it was hard to know whether everyone asking for charity in these ways was truly poor. Stories circulated that some people performed as though they were poor or even disabled simply to make money. The most dramatic of these stories involved mothers drugging the infants to make them look ill in attempts to solicit sympathy when begging. Combined these scenarios reinforced both “common sense” and personal memory about the unscrupulous nature of poverty. Though no one individual was necessarily to be judged for it, according to middle-class logic, poor people would do anything for money.

Proximity to better off class others was an equally potent factor. Expensive cars, for example, were increasingly common in Ho Chi Minh City, and middle-class people complained that the increased volume of automobile traffic was a major source of the worsening traffic situation. Newspaper accounts reported that rich people were buying

luxury vehicles, and that the government was doing the same, making such cars available to communist party officials, who, in turn, were cited as abusing this privilege for personal benefit (Thanh Nien 2004b). In fact, high-end products and services of all kinds were becoming more and more common throughout Viet Nam (Thanh Nien 2004a, 2005). It was during my research that VIP lounges were added to Ho Chi Minh City's domestic airport terminal, for example. During this period there was also a dramatic increase in the number of high-end restaurants serving both domestic and foreign cuisine for as much as \$20 US per plate. Middle-class people pointed out how absurd it was that the frequency of conspicuous consumer practices was increasing so quickly. Thuy, the factory manager, explained her criticism of these developments in particularly direct terms: "They [rich people] spend like crazy, without thinking about how they spend their money. It is out of control. It is not good."

Most important, however, were reminders that being rich could come with certain moral compromises or pitfalls. There was an inseparable link between luxury and corruption that was discussed in public and reported in the media. Viet Nam's expanding and evolving media institutions, with the increasing freedoms they were given by the government, were critical in spreading the message that political and economic elites were a bad lot (Thanh Nien 2004b, 2004c, 2004d, 2004e, 2004f, 2004g). The middle-class viewed these elites as regularly participating in illegal activities that impacted the welfare of average people. These views, furthermore, were founded in well-documented cases wherein specific individuals were named. For examples, newspapers reported that

one high-ranking official extorted \$1.5 million US worth of highway funds, gambling it away on sports betting (Luong 2006).

In fact, one of the highest profile instances of corruption in Viet Nam's history took place during my research. Nam Cam, a mob boss who had been arrested in 2001 and who subsequently had become infamous nation-wide, was tried, convicted and executed for murder. Along with charges against Nam Cam himself, several government officials were also tried for accepting bribes from Nam Cam (Thanh Nien 2004c). People from all walks of life watched these highly publicized and televised trials. Over the following weeks, corruption was an especially common and lively topic when I met with people. As Marr (2003) explains, the media had been transforming for several years prior to my research, and it was now providing official voice to years and years of complaints from the public about how government officials and rich business people were in illicit collusion for material gains, often enormous, and at the public's expense.

It was in this context and for these reasons that middle-class people strongly identified as neither rich nor poor. With ample proof from both personal experience and mass cultural institutions, furthermore, they viewed their role in Viet Nam's evolving society as the most suitable for ensuring a good future for Vietnamese society. They were convinced of this because they believed the social space they occupied was the most cultural and morally appropriate. In a society defined both by rapid change in certain arenas and by cultural continuity in others, middle-class people tried to maintain a balance, as I have described, that they knew to be necessary for all of this to work. From afar, the notion of being in the middle, of being neither poor nor rich, seemed almost to

follow naturally from the history and the present that middle-class people experienced. At closer look, however, there was much hard work that went into forming and claiming a particular class identity, as scholars have demonstrated elsewhere (Lacy 2007, Liechty 2003). These efforts, furthermore, were marked by ambiguity and contradiction. In the next two chapters—Chapter Four on education and work, and Chapter Five on consumption—I further describe the complexities and difficulties of making middle-class culture.

CHAPTER SIX: WANTING TO BE BETTER:
EDUCATION, WORK AND APPROPRIATENESS

All the time, people tell me to keep looking down to see how many people are not at my level. My friends are so competitive. There's this competition among my classmates. It's about people wanting to be better, about always wanting to be better. There are steps. First you must get a good education—and this involves competition—and then you get your first job. Then the competition is about other things—the type of job, promotions, salary, finding a better job. It never stops. (Dat, marketing/public relations)

Education and work are important and interlinked components of the process of “making middle-class culture” (Liechty 2003) that warrant individual consideration. In this chapter, I examine each, giving attention to the cultural, gendered and moral complexities of learning and laboring, some combination of which have been observed by social scientists in a wide variety of other ethnographic settings (Bourdieu 1981, Nonini 1999, Sivaramakrishnan 1998, Wells 1996, Willis 1981). Though specific theoretical contributions among these scholars vary, all demonstrate that formal education and work play important roles in the social reproduction of class hierarchies. Along these lines, I argue that education and work are materially and symbolically powerful forces that shape middle-class notions of success and appropriateness, producing both inter-class competition and intra-class distinction. Building on the notion that middle-class culture was a highly gendered process that I discussed in the previous chapters, the final section of this chapter explains that women, in addition to the extra

symbolic worked expected of them, contributed more materially and experienced more everyday frustrations in what were often gendered work environments.

In Ho Chi Minh City, like in all capitalist societies, education and work are important, partly because they provide pathways to and generate the economic capital for a middle-class lifestyle requiring a regular flow of disposable income. However, understanding financial rewards is only the beginning. Education and work are also critical cultural processes in and of themselves wherein the logic of middle-class culture is further defined and acted out. Young middle-class professionals *learn* to acquire the credentials, knowledge and skills they will need or think they will need to then *work* in certain positions in various economic sectors (e.g. factory management, education, marketing), where they can earn monthly salaries that allow them, in some cases easily and in some cases with considerable struggle, to participate in Ho Chi Minh City's consumer culture. Equally important, however, are the roles that learning and working play in defining what it means to be middle-class. Middle-class logic calls for a near life-long commitment to improving one's self through formal and informal learning and a work ethic where consumer goods are, among other things, rewards for working hard. But in these pursuits there are both appropriate and inappropriate paths, and it is important for middle-class people to stay on the former.

To understand how they played out in discussions with middle-class people, it is important to recognize that the material and symbolic values attached to work and education did not always work together. In the realm of material values, increased access to education and high-paying jobs were, not surprisingly, nearly always interpreted as

positive. Even when high-paying jobs meant higher levels of stress, the benefits outweighed the costs. This was not, however, always the case for the symbolic values attached to education and work. For middle-class men and women in Ho Chi Minh City, these two values sometimes contradicted each other, and when they did it, this usually revealed middle-class people distancing themselves from social/political elites, for the reasons similar to those discussed in Chapter Five.

The possible contradictions between material and symbolic values date back to the French colonial era. Then—and to a lesser extent during the period of my study—some Vietnamese people viewed a degree from a foreign university with a sense of contradiction. On the one hand, the value of a “modern” French education nearly spoke for itself. On the other hand, that this option was nearly only available to the country’s elite, and that some of those returning often did not seem to have gained much from it, suggested that a foreign education was just another status symbol and nothing more. At the time of my research, despite the fact that many middle-class people were keen on getting a foreign education, there also existed a common belief that the sons and daughters of elite and rich families were the most able but least deserving of opportunities such as an overseas education.

In fact, after talking at length with people about social class in Viet Nam, I began to wonder whether a person who identified as middle-class could have “too much” material success. That is, could the negative symbolic value of earning more than what is appropriate for middle-class people outweigh the material value? Ultimately, the answer is no, yet arriving at this conclusion proved interesting.

In Chapter Five I established that in Ho Chi Minh City determining a person's class standing was difficult to do based solely on her or his salary. Even so, there were both upper and lower limits to the income range upon which most middle-class people agreed. These limits were primarily hypothetical, in the sense that people did not go around accusing other people of making too much or too little money to be considered middle-class. For the most part, these limits came up when I was asking people about social class directly and were often only relevant in the context of those conversations. However, I eventually came to have conversations wherein I took the basic life story of an individual participating in my study and presented it as a hypothetical case to people, usually in small groups. These discussions further revealed how middle-class people reconciled the potential conflict between material and symbolic values attached to income.

These discussions showed that people earning salaries at the upper extreme of the middle-class income range were in potential jeopardy of tarnishing their middle-class cultural identity. Outside of these hypothetical discussions, however, I knew individuals who, according to middle-class narratives about appropriate financial capital, earned "too much." These individuals were presented with a unique challenges regarding the maintenance of their middle-class cultural identity. It was not that these high-income earners felt pressure from other middle-class people. Rather, they were aware themselves that they were pushing the limits of an acceptable middle-class salary. Someone earning \$1000 US per month, for example, was at risk of being labeled elite—by themselves, that is—because their levels of financial capital did not fit within the widely agreed upon

middle-class cultural notions of “appropriateness” (Liechty 2003) that distinguish the middle class from the upper class. Significantly, people’s cultural capital played an important role in helping balance out these potentially tumultuous developments.

Consider the life history of Nghia, the woman who worked for an international bank in Ho Chi Minh City. Nghia graduated from university with a degree in English. In her case, studying and working hard led to a near linear path of progress. Sound verbal and written English language skills transferred directly—and immediately after graduation—to a job for a foreign company. Within a few years, she had received several incremental salary increases, and by the time I met her, her salary would have been considered by many middle-class people as bordering on that of a “rich” person. Toward the end of my study, Nghia invested in a small business, and not just any business, but a somewhat upscale establishment serving Western food at prices many Vietnamese people could not afford. In doing so, she took on a marker with even stronger potential to distinguish her from middle class people. I often used a hypothetical life history similar to hers in these discussions. According to middle-class narratives about success, her story is simultaneously the ideal scenario for how education and work provide paths to and produce middle-class culture, and evidence of how too much and/or the wrong kind of financial capital can communicate socially corrosive cultural meaning. To understand what these reactions to such a life history meant, I had to consider them within a larger context.

Among the primary participants in my study—again, they all identified as middle class—Nghia and five other young professionals occupied unique positions within Ho

Chi Minh City's class hierarchy. As I previously mentioned, it was easier for people to agree about who was not middle class; people's decisions concerning whom to exclude came more quickly than those about whom to include. At the time of my research Nghia and these five other middle-class people with higher than average incomes were pushing the boundaries of middle-class membership, but not in the sense that they were pushing on something that was going to crack or fracture. The pressure they were applying was more likely to stretch the boundaries of middle-class cultural membership. During the three years following my research, I observed the impacts of this pressure. As salaries in many economic sectors in the city were increasing, the range of appropriate incomes was changing. To be certain, it was not that people had collectively decided to change these boundaries. Rather, middle-class people earning high incomes demonstrated that they were still middle-class, despite their somewhat inappropriate financial capital. They did so by continuing to act middle class.

I presented hypothetical stories similar to Nghia's to people who made salaries solidly in the middle of the middle-class range of salaries (anywhere from \$200 to \$400 US per month). I did this to gain a better understanding of the narratives about class identity. As I have already mentioned, when talking about how someone like Nghia proceeded from high school, to university, acquiring strong English skills, and then obtaining employment for a foreign company, everyone agreed that she represented nearly the ideal middle-class path to success. However, when I mentioned that she had received several raises, was earning in the neighborhood of \$1000 a month, and was now the owner of a downtown business, people balked. They were no longer so convinced that

such a life style was firmly middle-class. People pointed out that \$1000 was a lot of money, especially for a single person. A few men mentioned that it was a lot for a woman to make. Many discussants also noted that owning a business, especially downtown, seemed more like the kind of economic behavior rich people undertook. Yet no one was willing to label this kind of scenario as clearly that of an elite or rich person. “I guess it depends on how she spends her money,” one young woman said. “She still works in an office, right,” commented another, “so she is still middle-class.” The former comment, which hints to the fact that there is a middle-class way to consume, is something that I take up in detail in next in Chapter Seven. The latter comment, however, is an ideal jumping off point for this chapter, wherein I explain how important both work and education were in establishing and maintaining middle-class identity.

Social life paralleled the hypothetical discussions I initiated. Despite rather significant changes in the source and level of her financial capital, Nghia remained strongly affiliated with her middle-class cultural peers, and though her social role changed, to that of a business owner, and had created some tension for Nghia, she was able to mitigate this tension through class-culture practices. Elsewhere, anthropologists have documented strong links between class and access to the means of production, arguing the latter largely determines that former (Collier 1986, Gilmore 1980). Nghia, however, did not perform like the owner of the means of production after she became part owner of a business. In my interactions with her even at the business site itself, it was more like a hobby than something capable of redefining her position within Ho Chi Minh City’s social organization. Her daily participation in middle-class culture continued. To

be certain, her change in status to a business owner was not insignificant, but her continued participation in class-cultural practices was much more central to the everyday expression of her identity. The analysis of what I label as “gossip” in the following paragraphs demonstrates one of the ways this worked.

For middle-class people in Ho Chi Minh City, there is much at stake in having the right job and a proper educational credentials. A clear picture of the relationship of between education and work, on the one hand, and class identity and consumerism, on the other, emerged during several similar conversations I had with people while out at restaurants, cafes and coffee shops. I had come to know well the styles that the people participating in my studying considered “appropriate” and “fashionable” for a person who identified as a modern middle-class resident. While on social outings with people, consequently, I became skilled at recognizing individuals who came close to fitting this style, but not close enough. What I am saying is that, from my perspective, individuals that I identified as someone who middle-class people would potentially label class others had not missed the mark by much, which is significant. As Bourdieu (1981) argues, social difference is exerted most frequently and with the most resolve against those who are closest. The presence of possible class others at establishments frequented by middle-class people like Nghia revealed, at first unexpectedly, the symbolic importance of education and work.

The first instance of this took place early during my second year in Ho Chi Minh City at a restaurant popular among middle-class Vietnamese, Viet Kieu³⁰ and tourists. I was sitting near the door with Nghia and her friend, Binh, eating and talking. A couple pulled up on an expensive Honda motor scooter, entered the restaurant and took the table across from us. Within a few minutes, Nghia and Binh started speaking to each other in hushed voices. Intrigued, I asked if they would mind including me in the conversation. They kept their voices low and leaned across the table. They explained that they were talking about the couple that had just come in. As they explained the details of what they had been saying, I asked questions and, with their approval, started taking notes about our conversation:

Nghia: We were talking about that couple [motioning with her head subtly].

Rylan: You know them?

Nghia: No. But we sort of know about them, you know?

Rylan: I'm not sure I understand?

Nghia: No, we don't really *know* about them, but we can *tell* about them?

Rylan: Tell what about them?

Binh: In Vietnamese, we say that they have no letters on their face.

Rylan: Okay, what does that mean?

Binh: It means that they don't have an education.

³⁰ Viet Kieu is a Vietnamese word for Vietnamese people living overseas, and is typically reserved for individuals who were born overseas or who have spent a good portion of their life in another country. Depending on the user, the term can carry derogatory connotations.

Nghia: That they *probably* don't is what we mean.

Rylan: Okay.

Nghia: It's the way they dress, trying so hard to look fashionable, but it is not very stylish, you know, and look at all of her makeup. It's too much. But they have the expensive Honda.

Rylan: Probably at least five thousand [US dollars], right?

Binh: Probably more.

Rylan: So...

Nghia: They are probably the kind of people who do not work in an office like us, or even work at all. They probably got their money from overseas or something. And they don't have an education...

Rylan: And you can tell all that just from looking at them? How?

Binh: From the way they dress, and the expensive bike, and...

Rylan: From what they are wearing you know they have no education?

Nghia: Not only what they wear, but the way they look too. It's hard to explain, you know.

By this point, I did know, at least in part. After more than a year of spending time with middle-class people, I had started to understand the various terms by which middle-class culture was defined in Ho Chi Minh City. Binh and Nghia were at almost polar ends of the spectrum concerning income levels for middle-class men and women, which, again, ranged from about 150 USD to 1,000 USD per month. It is entirely possible that the couple they were talking about, by whatever means they did earn a living, had only

slightly more money at their disposal than Nghia. Yet, Nghia and Binh quickly and easily established this couple as class others based on suppositions about the couple's education and work, which were suppositions formulated on the basis of physical appearance.

Though Nghia was likely more the couple's financial equal, she identified much more strongly with Binh, and this was because Nghia and Binh shared the experiences of a university degree and hard work in downtown offices, and a firm sense of what "look" communicated middle-class culture membership. The couple, Nghia and Binh guessed, because of their style, lacked both an adequate education and a proper work background.

James Scott (1985) reveals that peasants in Malaysia used gossip to disparage the reputations of wealthy farmers. According to Scott's analysis, gossip was successful because of its everydayness and its capacity to draw on inter-class traditions about obligations of the rich, which were not being fulfilled, and because gossip could be individually implemented. When middle-class men and women in Ho Chi Minh City gossip about strangers, something similar, yet distinct is happening. Here too, the gossip is everyday, individual, and it is based in inter-class traditions, at least to the extent that both middle-class and poor people believe that the rich do not earn their lot in life. However, the intended effect of the gossip in Ho Chi Minh City is not about chipping away at the character of any one rich person, as was the case with Scott's description of Malaysian peasant resistance through gossip. Rather, middle-class Vietnamese used gossip as an intra-class mechanism to continually situate themselves in the best cultural and moral space—in the middle.

The ideas that Nghia and Binh were discussing were part of the larger narrative or story that Vietnamese middle-class people tell each other about what it means to be middle-class, and, as importantly, what it means *not* to be. They were, like all the people who participated in my study, defending the boundaries of middle-class culture, while nearly simultaneously constructing those boundaries. I overheard and participated in—as a listener, that is—several similar discussions, often among people I knew well enough to realize there was nothing malicious about what people were saying. Two of the essential modes by which middle-class people located themselves relative to others in their social, class-based world are work and education. Gossip was the everyday way of expressing these differences. The dress and look of this couple was distinct from that of Nghia and Binh, but their gossip was concerned with more than just the couple’s look. For Nghia and Binh this different outward appearance represented other inner differences. The couple was likely deficient, culturally speaking, in at least two ways: they lacked college degrees and they did not work appropriate jobs, in an office for a good company. Nghia and Binh gossiped about this, not with the intension of harming others, but to remind each other who they were and who they were not. In the next section, I describe the significance of being an educated middle-class person.

Formal Learning and “Middleness”

Prior to 1975, according to one study, education in Viet Nam had been slowly, but steadily improving for at least a decade, suggesting that, even at the height of the war, when US bombers were regularly destroying schools in the North, enrollments and

staffing actually increased (London 2003). With the new government announcing enthusiastic commitments to education, the post-war period between 1975 and 1980 also saw increases in the quantitative measures of education, including student enrollment and number of teachers. However, during the 1980s, government commitments to and policies for the improvement of education deteriorated (London 2003).

At the turn of the 21st century, educators and policy makers fretted almost as much about “moral education” as they did about resources for skills-oriented curriculum (Dung 2005:451). In primary schools there was much attention to character and personality building. In secondary schools, the focus was on citizenship education, which emphasized the development of a socialist citizen, in both the political and the economic sense. In higher education, socialist ideals and principles were as important as intellectual ability; courses on Marxist theories and Ho Chi Minh’s thoughts were compulsory and were supposed to comprise more than 10% of both undergraduate and postgraduate study time (Dung 2005). From the perspective of the young middle-class people with whom I spoke, including some university students, these efforts of the behalf of educators were almost entirely in vain, backfiring, so to speak, and leaving middle-class students and parents entirely dissatisfied with state efforts to educate and prepare young people for life and work in Ho Chi Minh City’s capitalist society. Attempts at “moral education,” which Dung (2005) likens to political education, rather than producing a socialist citizenry, helped catalyze the commodification of education.

Examining how the material and symbolic values of education and educational credentials relates to middle-class culture, I will focus primarily on access to education,

as opposed to education itself. Local perceptions of a “good” education and the price people are willing to pay are key in this discussion. While long-standing Confucian respect of education remains an important part of how most Vietnamese people view education, the commodification of education and educational credentials and the role of corruption in this process were important developments to understand regarding the material and symbolic value of education.

Before proceeding with this section, I want to briefly discuss the relationship between Confucianism and education. Generally speaking, there has been much questioning of the relevancy of Confucian principles to the everyday lives of Vietnamese people (Bradley 2004). However, middle-class people’s attitudes toward education were not necessarily formulated in opposition to Confucianism. Though teachers to whom I spoke did report some instances to the contrary, as an educator, I was constantly aware, for example, just how strongly the Confucian value of not questioning authority (the teacher) was. Several students admitted to me that, more than once, they had not corrected a teacher when that teacher had written something wrong on the board, because it was considered disrespectful to do so. They would even write this piece of misinformation in their notebooks, because it might show up on a test. As I explain in this section, education had become a commodity, one that was literally bought and sold, but, here I am not attempting to argue that Confucian principles had been discarded in the process. “Teacher Day” is a significant holiday in Viet Nam, and its importance likely stems from both communist and Confucian sanctioned respect of education. It is not my intent here to argue that these old beliefs have entirely faded.

To get a better sense of people's attitudes toward education and to see how these attitudes contributed to the making of middle-class culture, I steered many conversations toward Viet Nam's educational systems, which was, interestingly, one of the least likely conversation topics to arise without my prompting. Though it was a topic commonly reported in the media, many people seemed disinterested in problems with education and attempts to reform. Perhaps this resulted from people reading so much about it in the news while seeing few meaningful changes. Even so, I thought it was worthwhile to ask university students and young professionals about their high school and university years. I also asked young parents about what it meant to plan for and handle their children's education. When I sat down and talked with people individually, it became clear that attitudes about education were informed by a complex set of old and new values.

Hai was in his mid twenties and was a sales representative of a steel importing company. While talking to him about his education, it was clear that he was proud of his opportunities to acquire a "modern" education at the expensive English language school where I taught. He was also quite disappointed with the university education he had received in Ho Chi Minh City, and, yet, he was opportunistic in his embrace of educational levels as markers of middle-class status. The following conversation, which took place at one of Hai's favorite coffee shops, reveals the complex nature of his thoughts about education and credentials:

Rylan: Was it a good education [a degree in foreign trade at the University of Economic in Ho Chi Minh City]?

Hai: No, it is not a good education. Just a means to the future. Students in Viet Nam can't get a lot of good knowledge. Too much theory, not enough practice. When you finish you have to start learning all over again.

Rylan: Then how is it a means to the future?

Hai: Without a degree you can't get a good job in Ho Chi Minh City. Even with a degree, it is hard; without a degree, it is impossible. But, the degree is not good; it's just what they want.

Rylan: Who?

Hai: The people who will hire you for a good job, a foreign company or a good local company. It doesn't make sense.

Rylan: What do you mean? What doesn't make sense?

Hai: That they expect you to have a degree, but that the education is no good. They also know it is not good. It is not only the students who know. My boss got his education here, too, so he knows. But you have to have the degree.

A few moments later in the same conversation:

Rylan: Was the job with the steel company your first job out of university?

Hai: No. My first job was in advertising. I did promotion for watches in nightclubs. I only worked that job for a couple months.

Rylan: Why?

Hai: I didn't like it. It was not interesting. I worked late hours, until the club closed, which was late. But the most important thing is that it did not

match my education. I had a degree in foreign trade! What was I doing promoting watches in a nightclub? It did not match my training. I had no job for a month, but then the company called me to come to work for them.

Rylan: So did your degree help you when you started working?

Hai: Almost nothing—it did not give me much at all. I mean skills or knowledge. Like I said, I had to learn all over once I started.

Rylan: So could people without out a degree join a foreign trade company and do what you did, by learning on the job?

Hai: They could, but I deserve the job because I did the education. And I learned English, and everything. They would not have all that, they won't have done all the education to get to where I am. That's just how it works, you know.

As I mentioned previously in Chapter Two, no one with whom I discussed education in Viet Nam had much, if anything, positive to say about Viet Nam's formal learning systems. Yet, as Hai makes clear, the long-standing respect for education remains important, as does the need for educational credentials in getting good, high paying jobs. The contradictory nature of this dynamic is not surprising. As far back as the pre-colonial era, intellectuals were elites, and families wanted to marry their daughters to scholars. Even then, however, education was not necessarily highly valued for its demonstrable practical worth, but because respect for educational credentials was socially sanctioned by Confucianism (Marr 2003). Through a hundred years of colonial rule and

three decades of war, the rationale behind respect for educated people had been evolving and was continuing to evolve.

Hai's remarks—and this is something I commonly recognized among people who did not start out in their field immediately after graduation—reveal that he internalized the value of the degree or the credentials while nearly simultaneously regretting the worthlessness of the education. Though people commonly admitted the education they received prepared them little if at all for the field they were entering, they still felt like they deserved a job in that field. In Hai's case, this was foreign trade. Hai questioned the logic by which employers could expect him to have a useless university degree, yet he did not question the logic by which university graduates could expect to have jobs appropriate to their (often impractical) degrees.

At the same time, another contradiction also existed. Many middle-class people, when they talked about class others, referred to their lack of education and often associated this lack with certain inappropriate behaviors. The emotional outbursts that middle-class people observed among the poor are a good example of this. Middle-class people generally avoided outward displays of anger in public, but this was not true of poor people, and middle-class people explained this behavior in poor people as the result of not being educated. Though the precise reasons for this difference in behavior likely are more complex, middle-class people explained the behavioral difference in terms of differences in educational levels. This suggested to me that they held at least some regard for the actual education they were getting and not just the degrees or credentials they were obtaining.

As they do in other capitalist societies, expectations about education and credentials form an important part of middle-class culture for all actors—for teachers, parents and students. In Viet Nam, they start to play a noticeable role even at the kindergarten level. A conversation with a Tram (wife) and Duy (husband), the married couple introduced in Chapter Five, reveals how this system works and typical middle-class attitudes about the system. I had known this couple for approximately a year and had engaged in several conversations with one or both, when we finally found time for dinner and an interview at a restaurant downtown. After the meal we sat for a couple hours talking about their concerns and expectations as young middle-class professional parents:

Rylan: What do you think are the most important things that you can do for you son?

Tram (wife): Provide a good education.

Duy (husband): Yes, education.

Rylan: What do you mean?

Tram: To provide him with the best education that we can afford.

Duy: Overseas would be great, to send him to America or Australia. But that is probably too expensive for us.

Tram: Education in Viet Nam is not good.

Rylan: I hear a lot of people say the same thing. What are the major problems?

Duy: The curriculum. There is no independence. Teachers do not encourage students to be independent, to think independently, I mean. There is too much, they try to make them learn too much, and there is too much theory and not enough practical.

Tram: Yes. And they focus too much on getting them to pass tests, and that's not good education. There is pressure on the students and pressure on the teachers. Every year they report that the graduation rate is 99%, but it's not real.

Duy: Yes. And most students who graduate fail the entrance exam to university. It's all about learning things by heart and then that's all they know.

Rylan: I see.

Duy: But for now we just have to make sure he gets the best treatment in Kindergarten, and, of course, that means making *special payments*. Have you heard about these?

Rylan: Sort of like bribes, right?

Tram: Yes, because Kindergarten teachers cannot survive on their salary. At some schools, they only make around 500,000 [Vietnamese Dong or 33 US Dollars] per month, so they take these extra payments from parents.

Duy: We pay about 100,000 per month to make sure that she gives our son enough attention. She has 40 students, and she can't give all of them good treatment, so you have to pay extra.

Rylan: Or what?

Tram: Who knows? We don't really know if the teacher gives him more attention all the time, but without the payments, we know she would not worry about it at all.

These “special payments” are notorious in Ho Chi Minh City. Everyone I knew was well aware that teachers earned many times their official salaries from unofficial payments made by parents. While few people objected to this practice, generally, many did doubt the effectiveness of some special payments, especially those they paid to primary school teachers. Parents admitted there was no way to really tell whether special payments actually influenced the situation in their child's kindergarten class. The actual benefits of such payments were, for the most part, beyond the scope of my study. To fully understand the impact of these special payments would require systematic investigation of how the school performance of students whose parents made special payments compared to that of students whose parents did not. I am concerned here, however, only with the parents' perceived need to make the special payments regardless of their benefits, and with how such payments to kindergarten teachers fit into the larger system of educational corruption, a system that is one of the key components contributing to the reproduction of both social inequality and middle-class culture.

There were at least some direct practical benefits to the extra money middle-class parents paid to have students of all ages placed in the best schools in the city. Officially, school enrolment was determined by school districts. If a person's home was in that district, he or she was supposed to go to school there. Some schools in Ho Chi Minh City

are better than others, and it was therefore common for people with the money to do so to buy their child's way into a good school with special payments to school administrators. There were also special payments made to high school educators. These payments were for tutoring sessions that were widely believed to improve student scores on college entrance exams. During group discussions I had with university students, there was nearly unanimous agreement that after-school tutoring was the primary reason why many students who did achieve high marks on university entrance exams were able to do so.³¹

Middle-class university students complained vigorously about their high school experience—about what they learned, about how much they were expected to learn, about how they were taught. In short, high school education for most of the people I knew was comprised of the tiring memorization of facts most students considered either boring or irrelevant. There was too much material to cover; this material was for the most part too abstract, not practical enough; students were strongly discouraged from breaking from the Confucian model where students are foremost passive receivers of information. Furthermore, the complaint was common that this type of learning did not prepare students adequately for university entrance examines. The solution, for middle- and upper-class people living in Ho Chi Minh City, has been the development of an exhaustive program of unofficial after-school learning. Parents pay their children's teachers to tutor their children—in many subjects, usually in groups. Conspicuously missing from these groups, often, are students from poor families, who cannot afford to

³¹ These exams have an interesting history that I will not expand upon here. In short, university entrance once required a higher test score for high school students with poor “revolution histories”—i.e. if their parents or other families did not support the North or the Viet Cong, it was substantially more difficult to enter university. In the early 1990s, this formal policy was officially abandoned.

pay the extra money required for these tutorial sessions. As I have mentioned, poor families struggled already with added financial burdens resulting from reforms that have shifted educational costs onto families. Paying even more for after school tutoring was out of the question for many of the city's residents.

Significantly, people talked differently about unofficial payments to high school teachers than they did about those made to kindergarten teachers. One of the key reasons for this was that middle-class people could more easily speculate about the results of making special payments to high school teachers. When I asked people more about this situation, a pattern emerged. High school students spent several hours each week during official school time sitting in front of, for instance, their math teacher. During this official school time, teachers lectured and wrote on the board. The teacher, as it was explained to me, then turned to students and expected them to recite things they were supposed to have memorized, without checking whether students actually learned anything. There were of course exceptions to this, but the vast majority of middle-class people I knew said this was by far the most common way high school classroom sessions proceeded.

By the end of any given school week, students would have learned very little, they told me, had they not also gone over to their teacher's house multiple times per week for relatively expensive after-school tutoring, where students were taught in somewhat smaller numbers—because few poor students could afford the sessions—and thus could engage more in material and even ask questions. There was a range with regard to how much teachers charged; the price was at least somewhat tied to how well individual

teachers taught during these tutorial sessions. But even the lowest price was enough to double or triple a teacher's official monthly salary.

When people talked about paying high school tutors, they expressed fewer reservations about doing so than they did when talking about making special payments to kindergarten teachers. I found that this was primarily because parents and students, in line with broader middle-class consumer values, were more comfortable paying for something when they could evaluate the worth of the product. Parents and students reasoned that the possibility of doing well on university entrance exams was worth the cost of regular tutorial sessions.

These payments are symptoms of Viet Nam's under-financed education system. Even at the primary school level, furthermore, they are important because of what they say about middle-class culture. On the one hand, the special payments paid to kindergarten teachers are another example of the performative nature of middle-class culture. Special payments are part of the performance of being middle-class parents. "We have to pay them," Thuy explained to me, "It wouldn't be right not to. At least we know we tried." Revealed in these comments is the notion that middle-class parents are expected to make special payments because they can. Not to pay, by comparison, would imply that parents were not capable of making special payments to kindergarten teachers. Worse yet, it might suggest that they were not willing to spend money on something as important as their child's education. It is a performance in the sense that the act of making the special payments, which is something people talk about openly with fellow middle-class parents, is as important if not more important than the effect of the special payments, which are

difficult to determine. “We can see people all over Saigon who can’t afford to make special payments,” Thuy continued, “Their children will not have the same opportunities that our son will.”

Significantly, special payments reveal middle-class ideologies about appropriateness or middleness in action. That people avoided the words “bribe” and “corruption” in these discussions was not a coincidence. For the middle-class people participating in my study, these payments were necessary and appropriate. Though technically a form of corruption, middle-class people viewed the making of special payments as inline with the values that juxtaposed middle-class ways of life against Ho Chi Minh City’s class others—the rich and the poor. The previous paragraph explains how this works with regard to middle-class people’s relations to the poor. Middle-class people make special payments to kindergarten teachers and high school teachers not only because they *can*, but also because they *should*. Without actually expressing judgment about poor people who cannot afford to pay these special payments, middle-class people nonetheless draw on moral and cultural understandings of what good parenting is. For them one part of good parenting is participation in educational corruption.

At the same time, middle-class participation in making special payments was thought about in entirely different terms than the special payments made by class others—namely the rich or the elite. And this was necessary to further set them apart from Viet Nam’s elite, who, according to middle-class narratives about class hierarchies, often came to be wealthy via morally questionable ways. As I explained in Chapter Five, one of the questionable ways by which the rich get rich, according to middle-class logic,

is through participation in corruption. The special payments middle-class people made to educators, on the other hand, were a form of “informal exchange” (Lomnitz 1988) necessary—though not sufficient—for their children’s future. In the classic Geertzian (1973) sense, these were some of the stories that middle-class people told themselves about themselves, and I understood why.

Middle-Class Expectations about Work, Rewards and Success

In the 1994 Labor Code of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, work is officially defined broadly as “all income-generating activities [that] are not banned by law” (quoted in Nguyen 2003:226-227). Prior to the economic reforms brought on by *Doi Moi*, as Nguyen (2002) explains, the state’s definition of work was tied nearly inseparably to the concept of *bien che*, which in common usage refers to employment by the state. Between 1975 and 1986, in Viet Nam’s centrally planned economy, subsidies (*bao cap*) were provided by the state to most industries to make up for any losses. *Bao cap* thus enabled the provision of jobs for nearly all people of working age and created a work environment wherein employers were essentially free from worries about worker competency and productivity. Firing was rare. Once obtained, employment in a certain position was generally perceived as life-long. In this arrangement, freedom of employment choice was strictly limited, and employment often required little professional competence (Nguyen 2002).

During the first years after *Doi Moi*, the culture of work created under the controlled economy was difficult to change. Management and worker attitudes stood in

opposition to market capitalism's "competitiveness." This was something that persisted across most industries and could not have changed over night (Nguyen 2002). By the time of my research, however, at least in sectors occupied by the middle-class people in my study, these attitudes had almost entirely disappeared, over a relatively short time period. As I spoke with middle-class people in foreign trade, marketing, education, and factory management, there was little evidence of pre-*Doi Moi* attitudes about work. For nearly everyone participating in my research, the idea that the state or anyone else would subsidize the financial impacts of poor performance was entirely absent.

In advanced capitalist societies, it has been established that labor has long been and continues to be a commodity (Griffith 1987, Mintz 1960, Wolf 1982). Not surprisingly, Viet Nam's transition to a market-based economy resulted in the formation of a labor market. By the mid 1990s, labor was being bought and sold as a commodity (Norlund 1993). As Boothroyd and Pham Xuan Nam (2000) have shown, instead of subsidizing the creation of jobs, the focus of the state, since 1986, has been to gradually institute reforms designed to ensure freedom for individuals to engage in production and businesses across all economic sectors. At the same time, young people have been given the encouragement and support to create jobs for themselves and for others (Boothroyd and Pham Xuan Nam 2000). From the perspective of the working population, employment is no longer seen as a right that the state is expected to uphold. Correspondingly, young Vietnamese middle-class adults have come to realize that they are expected to strive to achieve positions and exhibit competency if they want to keep jobs in a competitive market.

These developments were especially noticeable in Ho Chi Minh City while I was conducting research there. As a consequence, a relatively new cultural model for understanding what work meant had emerged. The Vietnamese government's reorientation resulted in profound and observable changes in how people viewed work and interpreted its role in society. For middle-class people, work was no longer only about survival, which it had been throughout most of the 1970s and 1980s, nor was it exclusively a state sanctioned activity requiring at least some allegiance to the state's political agenda. By the turn of the 21st Century, rather, hard work and competency were expected, evaluated and rewarded within a capitalist system in ways that represented, at least in part, a departure from the way labor was organized during the 1970s and 1980s. As I explain more later in this section, it is important to remember that most of the people in my study were children during this early period, and many had memories of what work meant for their parents during it.

Compounding these internal reconfigurations, and coinciding with them, were important external factors. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, in 1994, United States president Bill Clinton officially lifted a trade embargo, which, though technically unilateral, had prevented Viet Nam's full participation in the global market since it was instituted in 1975. This, along with the increasingly powerful effects of Viet Nam's *Doi Moi* reform policies initiated in 1986, began to impact economic and social life in Ho Chi Minh City profoundly. By the year 2000, my first visit to the city, these changes were already highly visible, primarily in the fashion and consumer goods displayed and available on the streets and in shopping centers and by the large number of Western

tourists throughout the city. In causal conversation I had, city residents talked about how much potential there now was in Viet Nam.

During this short visit in 2000, however, the transformations taking place in the way labor was organized in Ho Chi Minh City were not especially clear to me. In retrospect, however, the beginning of the 21st Century marked a central development in the lives of middle-class people. Economic growth and increases in capital investment were reaching new all-time highs every successive year. Foreign companies were arriving in large numbers, setting up their operations, and propelling Ho Min Minh City, if not the entire country, faster and more thoroughly than ever into a “world capitalist economy” (Harvey 1996: 403). For the purposed of this section, the most relevant micro development stemming from these macro changes involves jobs. As I walked around Ho Chi Minh City in the summer of 2000, many of the people participating in my study—people that I had yet to meet—were finishing university, starting jobs, changing jobs or getting promotions or salary increases, as foreign companies arrived and as local companies emerged, expanded and changed to meet the evolving needs of the growing capitalist system.

One aspect of this transformation critical to understanding the construction and articulation of middle-class cultural values was the relationship between work and rewards. By the time of my study, young middle-class people had come to perceive this relationship in terms common in capitalist societies: they, as workers in capitalist enterprises, would be expected to work hard; in return, they expected class-specific material rewards, primarily in the form of consumer goods and services. While there was

considerable variation in levels of income within the middle-class, the impact of this variation with regard to identity was mitigated partly by the fact that some rewards were specific to middle-class professionals regardless of income variation.

Lunch during one of the six weekly workdays in Ho Chi Minh City demonstrates this point well. Nearly the entire city started lunch somewhere between 11:00 AM and 12:00 noon. Even the timing of when a person took lunch, however, highlighted the divide in the city's population into various socio-economic and cultural groups, distinguished, in this case by disparate behaviors. The poor and working class were likely to rise early and eat lunch by 11 AM, whereas the middle-class people I knew rarely started work before 8 AM and almost always took their lunch break at noon.

More telling was *where* middle-class employees went for lunch. Significantly, they had their own physical noontime spaces that were literally labeled theirs, and which were culturally distinct from the noontime spaces of class others. Two common signs advertising the locations of eateries in Ho Chi Minh City contained the following phrases: *An Com Binh Dan* and *An Com Van Phong*. Translated word for word the first sign reads "food average," the second "food office." What they communicated to a city resident in search of a noontime meal was *lunch for average people* and *lunch for people who work in offices*, respectively. Caught up in these labels and in how people thought of these spaces were a series of distinctions.

Locations advertising *An Com Binh Dan* (average) were average places, for average people, with average prices, and average food. Anyone could and did eat at these places; they were not necessarily designed with a particular aesthetic or customer in

mind. These were some of the least expensive places in the city to eat, and as such, they were spaces that had a particular look to them. Chairs were typically plastic. Often they were stools low to the ground. The walls, tables and floor were not especially dirty, but nor were they especially clean. The chopsticks, spoons and bowls might not match. These places also had a distinct feel. The staff was often somewhat surly, shouting drink orders to each other from across the room. Customers often had to fend for themselves when it came to getting a seat and/or the staff's attention. The food was often good quality, but the atmosphere was not well suited for relaxing or talking about important business deals.

Office lunch restaurants, on the other hand, appeared to be designed with these things in mind, even specifically for middle-class office workers. Their look and feel reflected this. The aesthetic was achieved through attention given to how tables, chairs and even the chopsticks looked. Chairs were typically metal or wood, and stools, especially those plastic and low to the ground, were rare. Everything tended to match. There were obvious decorative efforts and themes, and "office lunch" places showed signs of having been cleaned more often and more thoroughly. Music played quietly over loud speakers and televisions without sound were scattered along the walls, featuring local and international programs. The food was not always better and the prices not considerably lower than "average" places, though these could also be significant factors. More important, however, was that these spaces had a more professional, middle-class feel to them. Middle-class people, when talking to me about "office lunch" places, revealed that the features of these spaces just described and their feel were important. On days when they wanted to eat with a client over lunch, take a co-worker for a birthday

lunch, or simply relax during lunch after an especially stressful morning, they would spend the extra money to enjoy these environments.

The difference in price between these two types of places deserves further comment. Middle-class people would pay anywhere between 80 and 90 cents US for an “office” lunch, compared to 50 to 60 cents at “average” locations. (Lunch at both types of eateries typically involved a choice of set lunches, which included a meat dish, vegetable dish, rice and iced tea.) The difference in price is not insignificant, given that many people in the city were earning only 3 dollars a day. However, the more important difference was between either of these choices for lunch and the places where rich Vietnamese and foreigners frequently ate. A person could spend as much as 10 dollars for lunch in Ho Chi Minh City at that time. In summary, “office” lunches were priced inclusively, in the sense that they were reasonable when compared to lunch options for the rich, and they were designed exclusively, with an aesthetic or atmosphere that was distinctly middle-class.

Inside locations labeled for office workers, not surprisingly, you would find only office workers, with few exceptions—men in pressed shirts, dark slacks and shined shoes; women in skirt suits or slacks and a nice shirt. These men and women likely would have pulled up on medium priced motor scooters and might have talked about the latest fashions and best foreign DVD titles currently available. Their dress and the way they handled themselves, are not *that* different from people down the same street in an *An Com Binh Dan* eatery, but different enough. In establishments labeled for average workers there was a mix of people, with regard to class background or standing. Within

that mix, there probably were more men than women, for example, and these men were likely to be wearing construction uniforms and carrying hard hats, or wearing the bright orange coveralls of municipal trash collectors. Officer workers might very well be the minority in such places.

Lunchtime eateries were imbued with symbolic meaning. They were cultural spaces tied closely to work identity and defined by social norms that directed people to spaces that were class and culturally appropriate. Though I spoke with few “average” workers about this situation, middle-class professionals felt this segregation was normal and expected. Generally, the rationale behind these expectations for middle-class people was that they deserved something a little better, a little fancier—yet not something too fancy or too expensive. *An Com Van Phong* restaurants, as signs outside clearly mark, represented the class-specific rewards that middle-class people had earned. That middle-class people deserved something a little better, furthermore, derived from their beliefs that their occupational roles were themselves, for lack of less smug sounding word, superior.

As Firth (1967), Sivaramakrishnan (1998), and Wallman (1979) all argue, work must be understood as producing both the material and the symbolic: material production and social transaction are equally important components of work. For these authors, the relationship between work and livelihood is as much about establishing and maintaining identity and status as it is about material rewards. This approach is key to understanding how young middle-class people in Ho Chi Minh City thought about their jobs in relation to their middle-class identities. The fact that work is so closely tied to identity, generally

speaking, combined with the profound changes in how work itself was perceived in Viet Nam, specifically, provides a rich context for understanding how symbolic values associated with work were interacting with middle-class culture in Ho Chi Minh City.

With this in mind, I begin a discussion intended to reveal in what ways work in Viet Nam was valued beyond the rewards obtained from it. The expectation that one would work hard at a “legitimate” occupation within a capitalist system was internalized, creating social value in work of a certain type in-and-of-itself. As I previously mentioned, I was quite surprised during my research to learn just how widely valued the unbridled pursuit of success in business was. I was also surprised that, among middle-class people, the definition of success was rather narrow, especially as it related to success in one’s career. Success meant working in an office, preferably for a company that was competing well in one of Viet Nam’s many sectors experiencing rapid growth. Certain sectors were especially praiseworthy—such as advertising, marketing, public relations, import/export, design—but any “player” in the market, as one study participant explained, was as good as another as long as the company was earning well and/or doing something new and exciting. As I described in the Chapter Three, when Bill Gates came to Viet Nam in 2006, he was received like a hero, perhaps a superhero, by a wide demographic.

The point is that simply earning money was not enough. How you earned your money was nearly as important with regard to middle-class identity formation as how much you made. Earlier in this chapter, when Nghia and Binh were gossiping, they relied on this construction, claiming that they could tell—guess, really—that the couple was not employed in an office just by looking at them. While this says something about the

presentation of self made by this couple, it also says a lot about the terms by which Nghia and Binh made sense of these class others. Nghia and Binh determined that this man and women were class others based solely on their appearance. But the formulation of who this couple was did not stop there. Nghia and Binh went further, conceptualizing these class others as suspect, so to speak, in large part because Nghia and Binh considered the couples (imagined) occupational roles as inappropriate. According to Nghia and Binh, they had likely either earned their money somewhat illegitimately or it had been given to them via overseas remittances. Either way they did not work in an office for a reputable company, at least not according to Chua and Binh's on-the-spot valuation of their image and corresponding character.

The women and men who participated in my study were salaried professionals. As Weber and scholars since have argued, the symbolic value or symbolic capital that an individual earns in society is often closely related to the type of work someone does. In the round group discussion among factory managers that I described in Chapter Five, it became clear that the status of person with a low salary was augmented by the fact, for example, that he or she was a teacher. Certain jobs are given respect. At the same time, certain jobs come with lower status. In Viet Nam, like in all capitalist societies, there was hierarchy of occupations. While not commonly talking about this hierarchy explicitly, middle-class people played a part in maintaining it. As they did, middle-class notions of what it meant to be a modern Vietnamese person factored heavily.

The newly emergent work culture in Ho Chi Minh City stood in stark contrast to the opportunities available for the first 15 years after 1975. More specifically, as

previously mentioned, participants in my study had parents who maintained their family's livelihood during this time, and many did so by relying on the informal sector, on "black markets." A conversation with Dat, whom I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, provides a typical story and common attitudes toward the informal sector:

Rylan: Do you remember what it was like in the 80s?

Dat: There were lots of bicycles, lots of cyclos. There were a lot of free traders, people who did not claim their profits to the police. It was not allowed, but many people did it. My mother was one.

Rylan: What was she doing, selling?

Dat: She had to buy things here in Saigon and sell them in the North, which was not allowed until 1986 when Viet Nam changed to the market economy.

Rylan: What sort of things?

Dat: Lots of stuff, clothes, coffee, tea, vegetables, whatever she could find. She would spend 3 or 4 days shopping in Saigon, and then she would travel to Da Lat or Ha Noi, by train. She would even buy and sell coal. A lot of times, to avoid getting caught, she would throw goods off the train before it arrived at the station. Sometimes she would also jump from the train, herself. I remember seeing this once when I was young.

Rylan: Do you remember when she started making a living that way.

Dat: She started right after our family moved to Saigon in 1975, and she did it for more than a decade, until I was about 15 or 16.

Rylan: When she stopped, why did she stop?

Dat: At that time, somewhere in the mid 1980s, around the time of Doi Moi, the goods that she was buying and then reselling, had become available in more places than just Saigon and at the same price she was buying them. There was a free flow, a free market.

Rylan: Does your mom talk about this part of her life?

Dat: Not much. I think about it a lot. I look around today, and I see people still doing it. The street vendors and the *xe om* drivers. They are working outside...I mean what are they doing? And my mom had to do that. I feel bad for her. It was really hard on her. The government took away her right to work, so she had to go into the black market. It was embarrassing for her, I know. She had a good job before 1975.

Dat was genuinely concerned for his mother, who surely did have to work hard to earn a living trading on the “black market” during the period of the controlled or subsidized economy. Even so, the way he expressed this concern revealed to me that he had internalized the logic that only certain types of work counted. It was almost as if being a trader in the “black market” was not work, but something else, something about which to be embarrassed.

Phat, who taught English at a private language school and at a local high school, also spoke about his parents having to work in the “black market” during the decade following reunification in 1975. His views were very similar to Dat’s. He had more to say, though, about how this related to the present. According to Phat:

People working in the street [in the informal economy] today are just like that [like people in the black market in the 1980s]. They are stuck in the past. My parents had to do that for many years. They had to work in the black market and pay the police [bribes] and everything. People still do that today. They are working all day, and they are working just to survive. It is exactly like my parents. They are stuck in the past.

From what I could tell sitting across from him, Phat was not necessarily angry or sad about his parents' past; nor was he judging people who were currently working in the informal economy. He was speaking rather matter-of-factly about people whose occupational roles differed from his. Significantly, all of these people were living in the past, just trying to survive, according to Phat's conception of this type of work.

During this same conversation, however, Phat also revealed the tension seemingly inherent in "modern" living and working. We had met for the first time at a birthday party for a mutual friend. I had never, to be honest, been entirely comfortable socializing with this group, which was comprised primarily of men, most of whom earned incomes and participated in the kind of luxurious behaviors that might be considered elite. Phat stood out among the other men because he seemed not quite to fit in. During our conversation I asked him what he thought about the birthday party:

Phat: I'm a teacher, I can't afford those kinds of dinners all the time, like them. And I don't really need to spend that kind of money. I'm a teacher. My lifestyle is middle-class, not like Tho [our mutual friend].

Rylan: Yeah, they spend a lot of money at those places.

Phat: Actually Tho often pays for me. It is not my style. And I work so much. I often work seven days a week. I do not even get the chance to visit my family [who do not live in Ho Chi Minh City].

Rylan: Does it bother you that you have to work so much?

Phat: It bothers me sometimes. When I was a student I had more free time, but I did not have the money I have now to buy the things I want.

Rylan: Were you able to visit you parents more then?

Phat: Not really. I came to Saigon because it is difficult to find a job in my hometown. And back home a person has to have connections, but in Saigon it is possible to get a good job without connections. And it is much easier to get a second job here to earn extra money. And it's easier to get promotions and to grow as a person by having to learn more and try harder. Here, a person has to compete with so many others, and this is good because it means that you enhance yourself. In Saigon, if you try hard, you can make a lot of money, and buy the things you like.

Rylan: But do you think it is worth having to work so much?

Phat: I have not been doing it that long. Honestly, I don't know. I sometimes think that it is not [worth it]. Why work so hard just to get a vacation and nice clothes. Why not just relax more and wear last year's fashion (he laughs).

Toward the end of my study I started to pick up on an interesting trend regarding how people thought about stress in the workplace. Though I am not able to discuss it at length or with much expertise, it is nonetheless worth mentioning here. Some people were actually emphasizing the stressfulness of their job in attempts to demonstrate how important their jobs were. Their stress was a badge on their sleeve, so to speak, in an

increasingly corporate society were the unbridled pursuit of success was gaining considerable currency. Again, I did not pick up on this pattern soon enough to include it in discussions I had with many of the people in my study, but through conversation with some study participants and with other middle-class people, I noticed that, under this new system of meaning with regard to work, stress could have positive symbolic value as an indicator that a person was making advances in her or his career. A person, the logic seemed to go, must certainly be making strides toward success if she or he was that stressed about their job.

To be certain this was not the only reaction to the new expectations about work within Viet Nam's capitalist system. Phat was certainly not alone in expressing conflicts and concerns about what working so much meant. Yet few people appeared ready to take steps to change their roles within this system, as changes to their lifestyles would certainly also have to be made. In the next section, I explain that women were more frequently and strongly impacted by the tensions that arose in this context.

Gendered, Work, and Family

“In Vietnam, like in other countries in the region and the world, household chores are considered women's work; in reality, this conception exists everywhere” (Le 2002: 152).

At the time of my research, gender roles in Viet Nam were changing slowly, more slowly than many women would have preferred, that is, especially with regard to work roles, broadly defined. In line with Le's observations specifically, both women and men

participating in my study talked about and in some cases defended social norms by which women were expected to do most or all domestic work. Even in cases where families had domestic servants, these servants were always women. The few exceptions to these norms proved the rule, so to speak. The small handful of men who expressed views to the contrary highlighted the uncommon nature of their beliefs. Hong, who worked in marketing, for example, remarked: “I am not like other men my age [30 years old]. My friends expect their wives to take care of the children and the home. I feel like we should share [these responsibilities].” Though one goal in the final section of this chapter is to explain how gender inequality regarding domestic work was perceived by and impacted middle-class women, I also want to extend Le’s observations to spheres beyond the home, because doing so reveals a significant difference between middle-class women and class others in this arena.

In Ho Chi Minh City, gender was a key factor in explaining how work in many sectors was organized. Observations throughout the city showed a rather segregated occupational landscape when gender was taken into account. This was especially the case in the informal sector. The vast majority of food and drink stall operators were women, for example.³² Itinerant fruit and vegetable vendors were almost always women. In fact, the sight, portrayed often in guidebooks, postcards, and photography books, of a *woman* dressed in the “traditional” pajama-like outfit and conical hat balancing two heavy baskets of fruit on either end of a pole across her shoulder was so “natural” that people typically chuckled when I suggest inserting a man into this image. “It is just women’s

³² For a detailed gender analysis of streets vendors in Viet Nam, see Tantiwiranond (n.d.).

work,” replied one female study participant when I asked why it was that men did not sell fruit in this manner. There was some mixing of occupational roles with regard to drink and food vendors (not itinerant, but based in semi-permanent to permanent stalls). Even so, typical gender-based patterns nonetheless persisted. Whole families, for example, ran some street side food stalls, and the men in these families played important roles. Here, too, however, gender norms factored heavily. Often in family run stalls, men collected the money, while women did most of the rest of the work: the cooking, tending to customers and the cleaning.

While collaborating with a local sociologist on a secondary project, I interviewed and spent time getting to know sales clerks in a downtown shopping center.³³ Of the approximately 20 clerks we talked to, all but one were women. An important and recurrent theme in discussions with these women had to do with their opinions about being working women in Vietnamese society. Clerks indicated that they were well suited for their jobs, but also felt that their working conditions could be better. They complained about treatment from the mostly male management as overbearing, and thought that their pay was too low given the demands on their time. (They earned around \$60 US per month, worked 8 to 10 hours per day, and had only 3 or 4 days off per month.) Even so, though some of these women were hoping to eventually find better jobs, many were not, describing that they were content with this line of work. Many explained that it provided enough income to shop for the latest fashions and beauty products, while others noted that it provided sufficient income for some other purpose in their lives. These priorities

³³ It is important to point out that the middle-class participants in my study did not view these sales clerks as part of the middle class.

appeared to be determined by a host of factors including age, marital status, and plans for the future that I do not address here.

Like it has been reported in the highly gendered light manufacturing sectors in Viet Nam (Nghiem 2004, Tran 2002) and other parts of Asia (Ong 1987), people rationalized that certain jobs, while not exclusively for women, were well suited for women, and that this explained why so many women worked in these sectors. Whereas Ong (1987) reports that people believed that women's nimble fingers were well matched for factory work in Malaysia, in Ho Chi Minh City's downtown core, women's patience and their "soft" disposition were said to match well with occupations such as store clerk, where beauty, politeness and even coyness were important. These troubling stereotypes, and others, seemed to go a long way in explaining popular beliefs regarding "women's work."

On the other hand, nearly all *xe om* drivers (motorcycle taxi drivers), cyclo drivers and people involved in motorcycle repair were men. In fact, during my time living and researching in the city, I never saw a female *xe om* or cyclo driver nor a repairwoman. Nor did I ever see an itinerant fruit and vegetable vendor who was a man. Taxi drivers, on the other hand, provide another example wherein exceptions proved the rule. I spent considerable time in taxis with middle-class people. On the handful of such occasions when the driver was a woman, people offered unsolicited comments about how surprising and odd it was to see a woman in this role. Many also pointed out that they never used to see *any* women taxi drivers as recently as 2 or 3 years previously. At the time of my

study, it was only slightly more common, indicating that gender roles were neither static nor rapidly changing.

Significantly, however, it is important to point out that most of these highly gendered occupational roles involved low-paying, low-prestige jobs, many of which were in the informal economy. That occupational roles in sectors more common to the middle-class women and men participating in my study were much less gender segregated was further indication to middle-class people that their lives were distinct from the lives of class others. This distinction was expressed primarily in two ways. Many middle-class women talked directly to the point that their mothers had not had the same opportunities that they did, that their mothers had faced considerably worse gender inequality when it came to the career options they had in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. “I am lucky,” Hanh (Shampoo World) explained, “My mother never had the chance to work in a job like this.” Middle-class women also talked about having similar advantages over class others, implying that non-middle-class women were somehow trapped, not only into low-paying jobs, but also into sectors where they had fewer choices. “They are trapped in the past,” is how Hanh put it. This was partly the result of Viet Nam’s continuing problems with gender inequality, which middle-class women believed they had successfully overcome, if only in part.

If the companies with which I became familiar were indicative of various sectors, such as factory management, law, medicine, education, marketing, advertising, public relations, human resources, finance, and others, then these kinds of work were significantly less segregated by gender. In many cases, there were equal numbers of

women and men in offices associated with these sectors. In some cases, such as marketing and advertising, there were actually more women.

When discussing these issues with two women sociologists in Ha Noi one afternoon, they added another dimension to this discussion, however. They said that, of course, it was the norm in Viet Nam for women to be placed in certain occupational roles. They cited and strongly criticized the logic, for example, that argued women were naturally inclined for jobs in the garment and footwear sectors. Furthermore, these sociologists noted that more broadly it was commonplace for women in Viet Nam to hold less powerful positions, to earn lower pay than men in similar jobs, and to receive unfair, Chauvinistic treatment in the workplace. This was the case, the more senior woman faculty member noted, in academia too. She expressed frustration about having personally fought for equal pay and greater respect, a struggle she had been waging for two decades, seeing not enough change.

The lives of the middle-class women participating in my study tended to diverge from the patterns discussed thus far in this section, however. Issues such as equal pay and fair treatment in the workplace were not central when middle-class women talked about being female employees in their companies. In fact, with regard to gender roles and gender equality, middle-class women shared few concerns with class others such as vendors, clerks and factory workers. Furthermore, they generally voiced few complaints about how being women affected daily experiences in their positions or their opportunities for equal pay and advancement. Sexual harassment, disrespect for women,

and other forms of gender-based mistreatment from male co-workers were infrequent, according to nearly all the women I talked to at length about these issues.

Middle-class work environments were by no means devoid of gender biases, however. The more I spoke with women, the more I came to learn that they confronted their own class-specific problems when it came to being women in the workplace. Smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol, for example, were practices that overlapped considerably with the workplace. And both were highly gendered practices. While a growing number of women in Viet Nam were smoking and drinking alcohol, many times more men than women participated in both. Furthermore, the office and other work environments, such as cafes and restaurant where one might meet or take a client, were common sights for both.³⁴

A frequent complaint from middle-class women was that their male co-workers did not always respect concerns of women with regard to smoking, especially those of pregnant women. There were pregnant women in the many offices where people participating in my study worked. Men often disregarded the fact that their smoking presented a real danger, and in some cases women regularly had to remind them not to smoke in offices, at least not around non-smokers and pregnant women. According to one study participant, it was not that men were entirely stubborn or purposefully disrespectful. Rather, they were inconsiderate, occasionally even acting put out when

³⁴ Men also frequently negotiated business deals at Karaoke Clubs, “Monkey” Bars and other locations throughout the city where prostitution was common. I was invited more than once to join Vietnamese men in these activities, but declined. While I heard much talk about men’s behavior in this regard, I am nonetheless unable to speak with confidence to these issues. It suffices to say that this was a “business practice” in which few if any women participated and which often involved considerable smoking and drinking.

moving to the hallway, for instance, to smoke. Another women felt strongly that smoking in her office should be prohibited and was lobbying her male boss, who was a smoker himself, for this change. She laughed when she predicted it was going to be a real struggle.

Men to whom I put the question of smoke-free workplaces responded with a range of attitudes. Some were clearly in favor of a smoking ban in their offices, and nearly all agreed that it was not right to smoke around pregnant women. Many also explained that it should be more of a negotiation. Phuc (textile factory manager) explained what he meant by this. Women needed to adapt to men's work environment; they needed to realize that smoking was something men did to relax, that is was a necessary part of men's stressful workdays. Most importantly, there were few men who appeared ready to defend female co-workers if it meant confronting male co-workers who were less understanding when it came to smoking in the office.

There were similar issues regarding the drinking of alcohol. Many business meetings in Viet Nam involved the consumption of alcohol, and sometimes this placed women in difficult positions. Again, while norms regarding women and alcohol were certainly in flux, it was still much less acceptable for women to drink than it was for men. Many middle-class women agreed with this social norm, saying that it was unhealthy for women to drink alcohol and coffee, and this was especially the case for pregnant women. Thus, that these activities were so common in work environments was troubling, according to these women. They felt like they were participating in a work world with

rules and expectations that were male-centered or directed, and that sometimes this resulted in conflicts that were difficult to resolve.

For instance, during more than one meeting that Thuy (textile factory manager) facilitated between Vietnamese businessmen and her American bosses, the Vietnamese businessmen would order a bottle of alcohol and invite all the men in the group to drink. They then proceeded, without asking her, to order a non-alcoholic drink for Thuy, explaining to her American bosses that Vietnamese women were not *able* to drink alcohol. Though Thuy rarely wanted to drink alcohol in these settings, she did occasionally drink in non-work environments, and she resented both Vietnamese men being overbearing and their chauvinistic attitudes. She wanted to make such decisions on her own and explain, if needed, her choice in her own terms. In fact, in such situations, Thuy sometimes took advantage of the lack of English skills still common among many Vietnamese businessmen to subvert the expression of gender bias. If she was translating for the two sides during a meeting, she would edit out comments she considered gender-biased and present her own version of her decision not to drink, or simply leave this out entirely. One of the key insights from this story is that it is hard to imagine a similar scenario, which Thuy encountered not infrequently, affecting a fruit vendor or sales clerk.

A set of issues related to yet distinct from those experienced by class other women tended to dominate conversations I had with middle-class women when I asked about gender and work. Whereas women working in garment factories and as sales clerks were said to be “naturally” good at performing the tasks expected of them, in some cases to the point that many internalized these socially constructed valuations (Nghiem 2004,

Tan 2002, Ong 1987), middle-class women commented that they were both advantaged and disadvantaged relative to their males coworkers, by virtue of being women. They were, as women, both well suited and ill suited for their occupational roles. This was clearly related to the issues just discussed regarding a male-centered work environment. However, this is only part of the picture.

As the previous two sections demonstrated, there were tremendous pressures for both middle-class women and men to “be better.” This took the form of near constant efforts to improve peoples’ English, advance their education and vocational skills, and to obtain salary increases and promotions in their careers. These middle-class pursuits, of course, often had to be negotiated alongside the demands associated with marriage and parenthood. Significantly, it was common for women to shoulder the bulk of the added burdens this placed on couples. This was an issue even for single women, as most anticipated facing these expectations when they got married. Few women predicted that this type of gender inequality would change soon, and many were expecting to leads lives pulling “double-duty” as a local magazine article labeled the challenges faced by working middle-class mothers.

During a period of my study when I was focusing closely on these issues, I emailed several women hoping to prepare them for questions specifically about gender and work. Prior to this point, I had had limited success in facilitating discussions of this nature. During typical conversations at coffee shops, women rarely went into much detail regarding any of the issues discussed thus far in this section. My intent in sending the email was to allow them time to think over questions I planned to ask. In the message, I

asked broadly whether they encountered problems at work that they felt resulted from being women. Three women answered in their email responses, and I was struck by how similar their comments were. Reproduced below, they begin to reveal how middle-class women thought about work and gender.

First, a brief introduction for each woman: Truc, who was not introduced in previous chapters, was in her early twenties and had recently quit a well-paying job in public relations to take a position at one of Ho Chi Mint City's leading newspapers. Chi, who was discussed briefly in Chapter Four, was working in marketing and public relations for a locally owned company and was in her late twenties. She was one of the highest paid people participating in my study. The third response is from Hanh the organizer of Shampoo World. All were single, neither married nor in relationships they expected to lead to marriage.

Their responses:

Dear Rylan,

Please find my answer below:

Yes, I sometimes have. And the difficulties seem to be internal rather than external. I mean it's not the matter of others' attitudes and behaviors toward me as a woman, but it's the particular character of woman itself. For example, each reporter in the World news department (where I am working) has to take turn to stay until midnight to keep the news updated. If I were a man, it's ok. But as a woman, I have a lot to worry about, like personal safety and health, etc. Things will get even more difficult when I

get married and pregnant because I'll have to try my best to balance between my job and family, and it may interfere my efforts and contributions to the work.

I hope it will help. If you have further request, please feel free to ask.

Cheers

Truc

Dear Rylan,

I am sorry I respond you quite late.

So here below are some of my POVs:

I don't think I have any difficulties (maybe because I am single woman :))

At workplace, we respect each other, and our male colleagues also respect women, so that is great to be inspired to work (since I first started my career)

The only difficulty I may find is that the pressure of the job's nature; as a woman, we are very emotional, sometime, I got too emotional, which lead to some silly behaviours or reactions to my colleagues, my boss or my client, which I don't think good enough

And I don't know if my future husband may allow me to work as much as I do now :)) hihi

If you still have questions, just email me ..iam ready to answer,

All the best,

Chi

Hi Rylan,

Sorry for being this late of answer.

My only excuse is i just came back from a one-training course in BKK - Thailand I just so busy to sort things out here :))

And here are my answers:

Sometimes, I think being a woman working in advertising is God's gift.

Sometimes, I found it quite good using this weapon. Client just can not resist a patient woman who keep telling them on the good points of her advertising launching plan and convince them on its result. Also, thanks to my sex, i am quite good in details so i make sure nothing even a very small one is out of track.

The same to my colleagues, I can hangout very good with one having same sex, sharing chit/chat while utilize the weapon with the males. They just can not say no with a request from a female, though the same job may be declined if it comes from a male ...

Surely, getting married will effect my job, let think about how can i manage my own family with shooting trips in BKK or Malaysia every 3

months? and normally, each trip last about 10 days/trip? Sometimes, have to work late in the evening to finish a launching campaign or pitching new client. Let just think about my child, staying at home and waiting for his mom to come back from work?? It will be very hard for all the woman and her beloved ...That case, everything need to be compromised whether it is i have to shuttledown my career or asking my beloved to be shared. At that moment, i am not yet think about having a family and give-up my career. May be latter:))

Cheers

Hanh

P:s/ The China trip is very good. I enjoyed the signseeing and also the food there.

Though Hanh commented that she was not thinking about having a family, it is clear from the rest of her email that she was. She explained later to me that she had yet to start *planning* for a family. In Viet Nam, one of the first questions asked to you after meeting someone for the first time is whether you have a spouse and/or a family. In fact, the idea of not having a family, I learned, was nearly antithetical to being a member of contemporary Vietnamese society, and the strength of this norm was reflected not only in how quickly it came up in conversation, but also in *how* people discussed family. During my first few months in Viet Nam, conversations I had with people when meeting them for the first time started more or less like the following:

Stranger: Hello.

Me: Hello.

Stranger: Are you well?

Me: I am. Thank you. And you?

Stranger: Me too. Thank you.

(brief pause/silence)

Stranger: Where are you from?

Me: Canada.

(brief discussion of whether I was from Toronto or Vancouver, the two best known Canadian cities in Viet Nam)

Stranger: Do you have a family yet?

Me: No.

Them: You mean not yet, right?

Me: Yes, not yet.

After several initial failures at negotiating local norms and their linguistic peculiarities, I finally learned the appropriate way to respond when asked about family. It was essentially a social transgression, a minor one, for someone to answer “no” when asked about family status. This was because there were only two appropriate answers. The respondent either had a family already, in which case the answer “yes” was appropriate. Or the respondent was at pre-family stage in life, but expecting to someday to enter the family stage, in which case the answer “not yet” was appropriate. Answering “no” raised the possibility that one was not *ever* planning to marry and have children.

While many young people were redefining what it meant to be women and men and to relate to each as such, in turn of the 21st Century Viet Nam, most people were not redefining the social norm that stipulated that having a family was an integral part of being a member of Vietnamese society. As sociologists Belanger and Khuat (2002) explain:

In Viet Nam, as in many Asian countries, marriage and motherhood are strong social norms, and legitimate alternatives to married life are almost nonexistent. The question that arises regarding women past a certain age is not 'why are these women single?' but rather, 'Why are these women not married yet' (89).

These norms presented challenges for women. According to both men and women, women in their late twenties and early thirties were approaching the point of being un-marriable, of being too old to find a husband and have children. If one had not made significant progress in working toward having a family by the age of 30, it might be too late, according to many. As I explained in Chapter Four, Thuy was especially worried about this, but she was by no means alone. In this context, it is not surprising that a future with husbands and children was, without exception, the one all single women in my study were envisioning, and that this was a future wherein there would be a need to balance work and family.

Without fully articulating class-based dynamics, other scholars also report the tensions in Viet Nam between the increased demand for women's work outside the home and women's greater household responsibilities (Long et al. 2000). With the understanding that this concern often was more important to middle-class women than gender politics within the workplace, I rethought my approach to conducting research. I

begin discussions with single women with reference to their futures. Most were eager to start families; many, as the emails from Truc, Chi and Hanh reveal, were concerned about how having children would impact the career path; and several women showed some regret that they had prioritized the careers so heavily that they now feared it would be difficult if not impossible to start a family, given that they were not in serious relationships.

For women in this latter category, going out with friends who were married or who had serious boyfriends tended to highlight their singleness. Thuy (textile factory manager) described this as somewhat of a vicious cycle. As I noted in Chapter Four, she had started to make an effort to go out more, yet when she did, it was often with married people or couples who had been dating for some time. And this could be frustrating:

“[Oftentimes] I am the only single woman. Many of my friends from university are already married. People have families. People are dating. They have boyfriends, and they will get married soon. I am the only single woman. It is uncomfortable when they try to find a boyfriend or a husband for me. They are being nice. But sometimes people even joke about it. I laugh too. I know they are not being mean. But it makes me uncomfortable sometimes.”

That she was the only single woman on many occasions sometimes made her anxious about participating in these social outings. Yet, as she pointed out it, “I am not going to meet my future husband at home.”

For the married women who participated in my study, expectations that they would carry a disproportionate amount of the burden resulting from having to work and raise a family was of course already affecting their lives. To be clear, all of the married women in my study also had at least one child. This, I learned, was in line with another

widely held social norm about family. Couples were compelled to have children within the first year of marriage. When I asked newly married couples that I knew in the city when they were having children, answers varied little. People explained to me that it was expected that married couples would have children soon after getting married.³⁵

Concerns for the women in my study revolved primarily around intersections where the values of capitalism and family collided. As previously mentioned, as the Vietnamese state has shifted most of the costs of both education and health onto families, women of many class backgrounds had to balance the demands family and earning a livelihood placed on them. I am arguing here that middle-class women did so in ways that were class specific to a significant degree.

Children and the households had to be taken care of. Men often played only minor roles in these efforts, meaning that these responsibilities were left to women. This produced actual physical demands. Married women, according to both husbands and wives, handle the majority of tasks associated with: purchasing and preparing food; taking care of infants; the logistics of making sure that school age children were prepared and at school on time; cleaning the house; shopping for households goods (e.g. laundry detergent). Husbands tended to help with playing with children, assisting with their studies, carrying children when out in public, and completing or arranging to have completed various repairs to homes.

I heard about the gendered division of domestic labor individually from women and men, and also when talking to couples. Talks with couples were often more dynamic.

³⁵ Social norms about marriage, family and children were especially stable in Ho Chi Minh City at the time of my study, so much so that I am considering studying them specifically in the future.

Husbands typically admitted they did less household work. Couples rarely argued about these points. Some men tried to imply they had more challenging occupations, which did not sit well with their wives. More often than not it was body language or a gesture that indicated when a husband was not being entirely honest.

Additionally, some aspects of these gender roles were revealed when couples invited me out to socialize. Several weeks after I met Cuong, for instance, he invited me to drink coffee and go shopping with him, his wife and his 3-year old son. There were many interesting aspects to our interactions that afternoon. Relevant to the current discussion were the distinct roles that Cuong and his wife occupied with regard to their son.

Cuong was understandably keen on me meeting his son, and during these moments, he was an attentive father, introducing us and trying to convince his son to speak to me in English. Though his son never did muster the courage, it was nonetheless an endearing few minutes of interacting between the three of us. Cuong's wife, on the hand, was mostly a bystander during this introduction, so much so that Cuong actually never did introduce his wife to me. I eventually initiated an exchange of names with her—her name was Hien—and then we sat at a table and ordered drinks. Cuong, Hien and I started talking about their son, as I had asked whether he was currently studying English. Cuong dominated the couple's side of the conversation for the first 15 minutes or so, explaining the particulars of his son's English language education and more. Hien sat without much of chance to add to her husband's explanation. As Cuong was talking, his son got up from the table to explore the café. We were in a courtyard of the café that

allowed him to do walk around, grabbing plant leaves and shuffling through a rack of magazines.

Hien was mid sentence—it had been her first opportunity to participate in our conversation—when Cuong noticed that their son was about to get into some mischief as he nearer the fountain in the middle of the café. Cuong interrupted his Hien before she completed her thought, and indicated that she needed to tend to their son, which she did. Hien spent the rest of our stay at the coffee shop looking after their son while Cuong and I talked and drank our drinks. Hien never really came back to the table. The drink she had ordered was sat on the table nearly full as we paid the bill and headed to a nearby shopping center, where a similar partner regarding the couple's roles persisted for nearly two hours. Hien seemed to be there to facilitate Cuong's outing, taking care of their son when Cuong was otherwise occupied, and getting a break only when Cuong had something fun he wanted to do with his son.

After this outing, I started to pay closer attention to these dynamics among the couples I knew and those I observed from afar during the many hours I spent in coffee shops. There were of course exceptions, but it was often the case that husbands played an important role in interactions when couples would meet other couples, exchange greetings, and catch up. They were often the key presenters of children, pointing out a new pair shows or explaining a recent accomplishment. Once these more performative aspects were finished, it was often the case that the caring for and disciplining of children was left to mothers. In short, both in homes and in more public settings, women had longer lists of responsibilities and many of these responsibilities were both more time

consuming than their husbands and less interesting. Again, while there were exceptions, these were not especially common, and the roles were never reversed.

Phuong was married and had a 7-year old daughter. Though I met her rather late in the course of my research, her willingness and openness when it came to discussing her life and her story itself compelled me to consider her life often. In these discussions she talked often about being a mother, a wife and a worker. After several informal discussions of various lengths, she invited me to visit her at her office, which was something that happened rather rarely during my study.

Phuong worked for a manufacturing company located in an industrial park approximately 45 minutes from downtown Ho Chi Minh City. On my drive out that day through the throngs of motor scooters and the screaming horns, I was reminded that Phuong made this trip five evenings a week to study English at a language center located downtown. And this was always after a full workday. At her workplace, her especially roomy office and her large wooden desk impressed me. She invited me to drink tea in the small lounge area, also within her office. After several cups of tea and more than an hour of talking, I got up to use her private restroom and was struck by the number of toiletries: a toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, shampoo, large and small towels, multiple types of perfume, lipstick, and several other makeup items. As I made my way back to my seat, I joked with her about what I had seen:

Rylan: It almost looks like you live here.

Phuong: It often feels that way.

Rylan: I bet.

Phuong: I spend more time here than I do at home some weeks.

Rylan: And don't you get sick of the drive into town each day for class?

Phuong: I do, but you know it's not the drive that is bad. I don't like that it takes some much time. It is time I could spend with my daughter.

Rylan: It must be hard. Have you thought about trying something different?

Phuong: What do you mean?

Rylan: I don't know—like changing something so that you are not so busy at work.

Phuong: There are no options. I could quit. I mean I could not go back down to my old position.

Rylan: Why is that?

Phuong: The money is part of it, but it is also the position. Around here, nowadays people look down on it. If you step down from a position, it's like you failed. It is like you could not handle it. I would have to quit or just keep going.

Rylan: And you're going to keep going...

Phuong: For now.

As Viet Nam experienced significant changes to how society was organized with regard to family, many young couples found themselves in difficult situations concerning daycare for their children. Many couples were living long distances from their parents and other relatives, and thus could not rely on them for help with taking care of their

children while they were at work. An editorial-like newspaper story highlighted many of the obstacles in these negotiations. The author recounted her own experience with going back to work after four months of maternity leave—a state sanctioned reduction from six months resulted in maternity leaves that many mothers felt was far too short. She also described problems that several acquaintances had finding appropriate care. What is most striking is the complete lack of husbands in the story. The implicit message from the article was that childcare was a problem for working mothers, much more than it was for working fathers (Hoang, 2006).

As social scientists have observed in other emergent middle-classes in Asia (Ong 1995), gender played a role in these conflicts. The young women who participated in my study, in particular, felt that they were presented with challenges that men were not in negotiating the constantly shift paths to middle-class success. However, unlike the research on how gender influences the intersections of local production labor and international capital, middle-class women in Ho Chi Minh City find that it is not their bosses or male coworkers, but the expectations of middle-class culture and those of “traditional” gender and family ideologies that put demands on their lives.

CHAPTER SEVEN: MIDDLE-CLASS CONSUMERISM AND MIDDLENESS

As the two previous chapters begin to reveal, consumer practices played an important role in middle-class culture. In this chapter, I focus specifically on how consumerism and consumer goods factored into identity formation processes for middle-class people. I show that possessing the appropriate cultural knowledge about consumer goods themselves, but also about what to buy, where to buy it and how much to pay was expected of middle-class people by their same-class peers. To engage in consumer practices without paying at least some attention to middle-class specific rules about consumption was to spend one's money unwisely.

This chapter begins with two excerpts from my fieldnotes (from the spring of 2004) and a discussion of the implications of the events I describe. During my research, I was constantly reminded of the extent to which Ho Chi Minh City had become a consumer-based society. The situations described in the two passages below are reflective of how this aspect of Vietnamese society was occasionally troubling, from my perspective and from that of the people taking part in my study.

Following this opening section, I provide a history of consumption over the past 50 years and an overview of the consumer society within which middle-class culture was situated. Then, by providing examples of consumer practices and beliefs, I engage in a discussion about what it meant to be middle-class consumers at the time of my study, as opposed to consumers of other class backgrounds. I argue that class specific beliefs and practices were both the product of and contributed to the middle-classness that defined middle-

class culture. In the final section, I demonstrate that it was within the area of consumption that middle-class culture engaged most intensely with global flows. In this section, I also reveal that women were impacted more heavily than men by the global flow of consumer goods and the media images that accompanied them.

A woman sits on a piece of cardboard at the side of the street near one of Ho Chi Minh City's busiest and most congested downtown intersections. She wears the pajamas and conical hat many city people associate with a rural or low-income lifestyle. There is a black plastic bag next to her, and the piece of cardboard on which she sits stretches out in front of her for approximately two feet. She sits with one leg forward and one tucked underneath her and alternates between sitting up straight and leaning far forward. She seems not to be paying attention to anything but two plastic wind-up toys in front of her: small gorilla-like robots that do somersaults. Over and over again, she winds up one toy and releases it. While it flips across the cardboard, she winds and releases the second toy. Before the first reaches the end of the cardboard mat, she snatches it up, rewinds it, and off it goes again. I am waiting for the traffic light to turn—for about 30 seconds—and each toy makes three or four trips across the cardboard. The highly repetitive process goes on and on, as thousands of motorists drive past. The plastic bag next to her is full of these toys, and her continually displaying their action to those motorists who look her way is her sole form of advertisement, as she hopes to sell enough to make it worth the effort.

The next day, I am at the same intersection early in the morning, and the same woman has just arrived and is setting out her wares and taking her place along side them. Two teenage couples on nice motorbikes and wearing designer clothes are staring at the lady. One of the young men leans over and says something to the woman selling toys, which I do not catch. The others laugh at what he has said. The woman, having looked up when the young man spoke, turns her attention back to the day's work, ignoring what was likely an insult or a joke at her expense. I decide to circle the block. I am curious about so many things, but decide only to purchase one toy and to ask her a question or two. She charges me 10,000 Vietnamese Dong (or 66 cents US) for one of the wind-up toys and tells me that, on good days, she can sell as many as 8 or 10 toys. Keeping in mind that I am a foreigner who did not haggle about the price, I probably paid 20 or 30 percent more than her average customer would. I quickly estimate that on her most successful days she earns somewhere between 1 and 2 US dollars profit, enough to feed herself for the day, but not much more, given the perpetually rising cost of food, goods and housing in Ho Chi Minh City's constantly evolving consumer society.

Today, Hanh [the organizer of "Shampoo World" from Chapter One] told me about having to help out a friend and coworker. Hanh explained to me that this friend had, for as long as she had known him [about two years], had trouble managing his money. He and his close friend were always going out and spending lots of money on expensive clothes and eating at expensive cafés. He spent way beyond his means,

according to Hanh, and, despite a sizeable salary—one that would put him at the upper end of the middle-class wealth scale—he was broke and in need of money to pay his rent.

People have told me about these kinds of situations before. During conversations about social class, people have pointed out that some middle-class people spent beyond their means. Stories about people not in the middle-class spending beyond their means in attempts to look like they were middle-class were also common. Interestingly, middle-class over-spenders were typically either friends or relatives of the people telling the story. Anecdotes about over-spenders from lower socio-economic levels were typically about strangers or even second-hand. The latter type sometimes came across like an urban legend. Additionally, stories of middle-class over-spending rarely included a sense of right or wrong. Whereas there was often, though not always, at least some judgment passed on lower class over-spenders. Lower-class over-spenders, I was told, were sacrificing their children's education just to drink coffee at fancy cafes. Middle-class over-spenders, on the other hand, were not conforming to proper middle-class expectations about wealth and spending, which was a transgression more easily forgiven.

This was the first time, however, that I had talked to someone who had had to bail a friend out of trouble for his overspending. Most other stories had been about misplaced priorities, i.e. spending too much on frivolous items and not enough on important items, like education or assisting parents with their retirement. Nothing of immediate significances was in jeopardy in these other stories. In this case, however, Hanh's friend was actually in danger of being kicked out of his apartment. He had no savings, and, according to Hanh, certainly could not go to his parents for the money or ask to move

back in with them, unless he lied about why he was doing so. Like nearly all young adults I knew, he was supposed to be helping support his parents' retirement, not getting support from them. Indeed this was the first time that such important matters were at stake, and the culprit, Hanh noted, was "his shopping." She continued, "It's a bad habit. It makes him spend like a crazy person, sometimes."

Consumerism in Ho Chi Minh City sometimes felt more like an ailment to me than a lifestyle. At times, there was something saddening about it: a woman sitting for hour after hour, day after day, attempting to earn nickel-and-dime profits by selling low-quality wind-up toys to people who spent as much on morning coffee as she was likely to make all day; or a well-paid marketing professional needing to be saved from financial woes resulting from persistent overspending and not being able to turn to his family for help because of the further shame it would likely induce. I was not alone in recognizing both of these situations as dilemmas. The middle-class people participating in my study also felt like such situations were unfortunate.

When I asked middle-class people about street-side toy sellers, they too tried to do the math, so to speak. They figured that there was no way the woman made enough money to do anything but barely survive, on good days. Several individuals also suggested that she would be much better off trying to get a job, such as working as a domestic servant, a job that could earn her 30 to 40 US dollars a month, or more. Domestic servant jobs, people continued, also often come with room and board, and thus the meager monthly pay is nearly all profit. When I suggested it was likely hard to get

domestic servant jobs for many low-income people, and that these jobs came with their own less-than-pleasant qualities, people generally agreed. When I asked people why they thought street-side toy sellers did what they did, despite the paltry earnings, no one had an answer. In several conversations, I proceeded to push the issue further. I asked individuals what they thought about these different kinds of jobs, regardless of which paid more. Was it better to sit on the street inhaling exhaust,³⁶ enduring the heat and the occasional insult, or was it better to be at the constant beck and call of a middle-class family, living under their roof and their rules? This presented an especially difficult comparison. Middle-class people, including several who participated in my study, had maids to clean their homes and nannies to take care of their children. Everyone in my study regularly made purchases from street vendors. But it was clear that few people previously had given much thought to what it was like to occupy these roles, or how an individual could pull herself out of the low socio-economic position that went with them. Middle-class people were consuming services and goods with increasingly regularity and intensity, but they had trouble imagining life on the other side of these interactions.

Because nearly everyone in my study consumed so regularly, their suggested solutions to overspending came more easily and were more straightforward. The ways to deal with it were more easily grasped—though not necessarily more easily executed, I observed. Individuals, like Hanh’s friend, simply needed to stop overspending. They needed to start spending appropriately, people emphasized. It was a matter of discipline

³⁶ According to research reported in local and international media, Ho Chi Minh City has some of the worst air pollution in Southeast Asia. Alarming levels of benzene and sulfur dioxide primarily result from the especially low quality gasoline that fuel purchasers import into the country.

not strategy, and there were plenty of normative values and examples announcing the imperative for getting on the right track, and the implications of not doing so. Through 2003 and 2004, for example, the first feature films produced by a non-state company in Viet Nam since 1975 appeared. They bore titles such as *Bar Girls* and *Long Legged Girls*. While much flashier than films designed by state-run production companies, these movies also strongly emphasized the perils of excess when average young people overly indulged in various consumer practices. Additionally, by 2004 there were media reports about young people spending too much and winding up in trouble as a consequence (see for example Duong and Xuan 2004, Hoang 2004, Hong 2004). As I have already mentioned, for the time being, however, Hanh's friend could easily be excused for his behavior. He simply needed to come to terms with the inappropriateness of living in excess, which was an inappropriateness determined through class-cultural processes. "He knows it's wrong, especially because it has happened before. He just needs to stop," Hanh reasoned. Interestingly, Hanh lent her friend the money he needed without telling *him* any of this—and without placing expectations on his future consumer behavior.

While I viewed these two situations—the toy seller and the over spender—to be the inevitable consequences of a society so heavily influenced by consumer culture, middle-class people by-and-large viewed them differently. For them, these situations were seen as problematic through the lens of middle-class culture, and did not reflect problems with a consumer society in general. Virtually no one suggested that Vietnamese society should be less defined by consumer culture. Rather, these were individual dilemmas. In the case of the toy seller, her life as a street hawker, while viewed with

some empathy, was perceived as nearly outside of the consumer-driven world of middle-class people, not as a product of it. In the case of the over spender, he was simply having trouble negotiating Ho Chi Minh City's consumer society successfully. He had performed well as a middle-class citizen in many regards: he had a good education, a good job, and lots of middle-class friends and colleagues. He had failed, however, when it came to avoiding one of the pitfalls—spending beyond one's means. Perceptions of these stories varied moderately from individual to individual, but generally, conversations about them lead me to two conclusions: (1) there was a general disconnect between the condition of the city's less fortunate and the influence of Ho Chi Minh City's consumer society, despite the close links; and (2) that overspending was, firstly, an individual problem not a societal one, and, secondly, it represented behaviors that contradicted the moral and cultural beliefs of middle-class culture. Both of these conclusions, in turn, were elements of a larger narrative that elevated appropriate consumer behaviors as a one of the most fundamental ways of being middle class.

They key to understanding the significance of appropriate consumer behavior to the larger middle-class culture lies in Liechyt's (2003) notion of *middleness*. As I have argued in previous chapters, middle-class people were engaged in a *socio-cultural project* aimed at creating a way of life considered both morally and culturally superior to other ways of life. In the arena of consumerism, the two situations I described above represent two of the poles between which middle-class people sought to define their own class-cultural position. This is an especially important arena in the construction of middle-class culture. As this chapter shows, this construction required the constant negotiation

between such poles. In the process, middle-class people defined appropriate beliefs and behaviors within Ho Chi Minh City's consumer society, that were both surprisingly widespread and regularly evolving. Central to understanding Vietnamese middle-class culture and identity is recognizing just how much time and energy is spent thinking about and acting according to a body of cultural knowledge about goods and shopping.

Though these consumer-oriented processes of generating middle-class culture are relatively recent developments, they have emerged out of a long history of consumerism in Viet Nam and, as I have mentioned, they are situated in a consumer society that spans across many other groups in Ho Chi Minh City. In the following section, I trace the recent history of consumer patterns and survey Vietnam's wider consumer society at the time of my research.

The Historic and Cultural Context of Consumerism in Ho Chi Minh City

In its most basic formulation, *consumerism*, or the act of people consuming goods for reasons beyond meeting basic needs, is anything but a recent global phenomenon. It has received considerable attention from social scientists for nearly a century (Veblen 1934; Kroeber and Richardson 1940). In the context of twentieth century Vietnam, interestingly, consumerism never has been entirely at odds with socialist ideology. Communist Party Secretary Le Duan, one of Vietnam's most revered communist hardliners, made this clear in his 1976 speech on the day of Tet (Vietnamese New Year). In one of the Party's many attempts to assuage the concerns of average people during an

especially tumultuous and difficult period in Vietnamese history, that year, just eight months after the defeat of private capitalist forces, Le Duan publicly promised each war-torn family a radio, a refrigerator, and a television within ten years. The Secretary seemed to pledge that in the reunited Viet Nam there would be the chance to combine the industrial development of the north—which mostly had been destroyed by the war and would need to be rebuilt—with the consumerist society of the south—which had been subsidized almost entirely by the United States (Marr and White 1988). Significantly, rather than seeing socialism and consumerism as opposing social forces, Duan wed them: in Vietnam's egalitarian society, according to his rhetoric, all families were supposed have the equal access to consumer goods, the purpose of many of which went beyond meeting basic needs.

In practice, however, under the controlled economy from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s, the VCP was never able to deliver on Duan's promise. To be fair, there is no way to tell whether even Duan ever believed in either the likelihood or merit of his promise. Yet it is likely that he and the communist party more generally considered it the answer everyone was looking for. The questions being: with thirty years of struggle and sacrifice, now what?

Housing, food and most consumer goods were in short supply for much of the war and post-war period. In Ha Noi, during the peak of US bombing in the late 1960s, because economic activity and markets were under the control of a state that officially promoted equality, consumption had a limited role in shaping societal differences. Most families lived in small apartments with only one or two rooms. Furthermore, both food

and consumer goods were rationed by the state via work groups. Even so, within this tightly control system, some differences did exist. Higher-ranking bureaucrats received privileges within the ration system, and some families benefited from remittances from relatives working overseas. High-ranking cadres were provided with larger apartments and received more food and more commodities. Motor scooters and televisions, the only conspicuous signs of wealth and privilege, however, were few and available only to a very small number of families. As compared to the intense congestion of motorbikes on all major urban streets since the late 1990s, as recently as 1988, an anthropologist visiting Ha Noi reported seeing mostly bicycles (Luong 2003b). Among many changes experienced by Vietnamese people in the past two decades, patterns concerning the consumption of goods and services have gone through some of the most profound transformations.

Not surprisingly, accounts of life in the north during this period point to a population, who, while regularly willing to sacrifice for the war effort, were nonetheless dissatisfied with the material sacrifice this entailed. People were generally unhappy with the lack of goods, and understandably so:

During the decade of the Second Indochina War (1964 –1975), consumerism in North Vietnam declined to among the lowest levels in the world; the diplomatic staff in Hanoi reported mostly empty shelves in the capital's stores. Thus a whole generation of North Vietnamese, political and military leaders included, learned to live on bare necessities. No wonder that when the North Vietnamese troops and cadres marched into Saigon in April of 1975, they went on a mad spree, wildly buying up—or more often looting—US-made consumer goods (SarDesai 2005:75).

SarDesai's (2005) primary observation here is that the sheer lack of goods left northerners wanting more. I heard stories from people who grew up in the north during the war confirming this. These accounts revealed: how a pencil and paper for school more often than not were difficult to acquire; meat was a luxury; new clothing was rarely available; necessary medicines were often times simply not available. Thus prior to 1975, material dissatisfaction was foremost a product of the constraints that war and significant international isolation placed on the economy, more than it was the product of socialist policy regarding production and consumption.

Before 1975, the impacts of the war on consumption in the south was nearly the opposite of those in the north. While many northerners went without, there was a vibrant consumer society in Ho Chi Minh City for at least a decade prior to reunification, primarily because of the presence and influence of the United States government and military. An extensive assortment of imported consumer goods—fancy automobiles, stereos, and electrical appliances—was subsidized by the United States. At the same time, the large amounts of external funds pumped into the economy resulted in galloping inflation, impoverishing many people in the middle class. Smugglers likely prospered the most, as did black marketers, building contractors, middle-men, pimps and prostitutes (SarDesai 2005:124-125). Of course, much of this came to a halt after reunification in 1975, as the government implemented its socialist policies on the south—though, as in the north, black markets persisted.

From 1976 through 1986 (the post-war, pre-reform era), the period during which Duan and other communist leaders were promising bright economic futures, “legal”

consumption throughout the entire country operated according to the principles and infrastructure of a centrally control, subsidized economy. There was virtually no “free-market” or open commercial activity. There were expensive black markets for many goods and there were state-managed outlets, which distributed goods produced by state-controlled cooperatives and industries using a cumbersome and often corrupt voucher system. Exacerbating internal limitations on consumption, the embargo by the United States—not lifted until 1994—prevented food aid and medicine, along with many consumer goods, from reaching Vietnam’s struggling ports. Even people with money often had trouble finding basic consumer goods to purchase. And of course the vast majority of the population was very poor throughout the subsidy period.

That the socialist distribution of consumer goods was anything but favorable seems to have been a widely held belief. On display at the Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi in 2006 and 2007 was an exhibit of surprising openness—by Vietnamese standards of recording and representing history—about life under the subsidy economy. In considerable detail, it shows both the structure of that system and local reactions to it, nearly all of which are negative. Excerpts from interviews transcribed on placards or played on video and audio tape recordings reveal that average people considered the attempt at a subsidized economy an enormous mistake, not only in its execution, but in its conception. Given that all museum content must still pass the close scrutiny of the VCP, these voices also can be read as an official stance on this period. In short, the jury is in, and the verdict is that the non-market based economy was not only a failure, but also a

poor idea to begin with. Much of the rationale behind this assessment, according to the exhibit, rests in the belief that there were too few consumer goods of too little variety.

In Viet Nam, the production and consumption of goods over the past fifty years have been dynamic and evolving processes, ones in which the government regularly has played important roles (Malarney 2003, Marr 2003). Though it is beyond the scope of my study to provide a detailed historical analysis of these processes, it is important to understand the basic nature of them. Foremost, it is essential to recognize that ideology, policy and practice regarding consumption in post-WWII Viet Nam were never fully in unison. Furthermore, the degree to which they were in unison varied over time and, prior to 1975, according to whether one is describing the northern or southern part of the country. In the North, in the mid-1950s and throughout the country after 1975, the Communist Party and the Vietnamese government exerted considerable control over both consumption and production (until the late 1980s). Official rhetoric, which was of course shaped by socialist principles, stressed the need for a society that was (1) egalitarian in its distribution of resources and (2) thrifty with regard to these resources. However, even government policy did not conform fully to these socialist ideals, given that, as previously noted, policy stipulated that political elites were entitled to more. Moreover, in practice, the distribution of goods never fully conformed to policy, as power and influence regularly resulted in less than equitable distribution. Although thriftiness certainly defined the consumption levels of this period, this resulted from material limits more than it did from socialist policy put to practice. Even so, during the period of the

centrally controlled and subsidized economy, there was considerable government control of how goods and services circulated, as we have seen.

Though this control was only officially relaxed after 1986 (country wide), the state was never fully successful in orchestrating production or restricting consumption according to the government's socialist directives. As I have mentioned previously, black markets for nearly every type of agricultural and nonagricultural good existed and even flourished throughout the era of Vietnam's centrally planned economy. In short, production and consumption practices never reflected the directives of the state, yet the changing nature of these directives have influenced the production, distribution, and thus the meaning of material culture.

Many people opposed and resisted government control over the distribution of goods during this subsidy period. Luong (2003b) reports a telling example. Throughout the 1980s, although rice produced anywhere in Viet Nam was supposed be sold to the state-run market, only a small percentage of the rice produce in the Mekong Delta, the countries major rice-producing region, actually was. Approximately 80% of rice in the Mekong Delta was being bought and sold through open, informal (i.e. illegal) markets. Malarney (2003) points out that as early as the 1980s, consumption associated with life-cycle ceremonies (such as weddings and funerals) already showed that many average people were resisting official spending restrictions. By the late 1980s, feast size for weddings, funerals and death anniversaries was increasing as the state loosened its control on life-cycle rituals and consumption more generally.

Economic reforms, according to official rhetoric, were said to allow for non-state markets, reducing government control on production and consumption. A more accurate way to describe this change would be to say that policy conformed to practice, giving state sanctioned legitimacy to markets and practices long in existence. Desires to sell outside the state system on free-markets were forced underground countrywide after 1976. As I previously noted, however, this control was relatively short-lived. The first signs that the communist leadership was re-evaluating their policies on consumption came in the summer of 1979 when a series of new regulations abolished checkpoints that had been established to curb private trade in the South. Eventually, the 1986 reforms made private trade fully legitimate.

There are virtually no comprehensive ethnographic accounts of Vietnam's post-war, pre-reform (1975 to 1986) informal economy, and it is therefore difficult to compare local understandings of this 10-year period with attitudes toward consumption revealed in my study. However, burgeoning social science literature on Vietnamese society during the post-reform era (post-1986), sheds some light on consumerism during the past 20 years. (Though I do not discuss it in detail, it is important to point out that consumption at the time of my study was still being carried out in both formal and informal sectors.) Studies have begun to reveal the evolving nature of production and consumption practices, the role these practices play in shaping society, and the relationship between practices and government policy. Specific topics are scattered across the spectrum of social arenas; most studies fail to adequately address the relationship between class and

consumption; only a few authors sufficiently treat the reality that consumerism is a highly gendered process in Vietnam.

At the time of my research, a casual observer might have guessed that, having waited too long for the communists to make good on Duan's promise, Vietnamese people were making up for lost time. Even in the poorest areas of the country, television antennas reached for the sky from nearly every home. According to the 1992/1993 Living Standards Survey³⁷, among a larger and larger portion of the population increased spending on consumer goods was increasing common throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, and media reports combined with my ethnographic observations confirm that this trend continued unabated through 2003/2004. Notions of what constituted "necessary" household items were changing. Small refrigerators somewhere along the way became a staple for most households, which, in turn, provided at least the potential to change food-buying practices. By the time larger numbers of families could afford electronics, some of the goods Duan had promised, such as radios, were nearly obsolete in Vietnam. They had been replaced by more advanced media technologies, such as household Karaoke machines, DVD players, CD players, cellular phones and, most recently, satellite dishes and I-pods, all of which were increasingly common across much of the socio-economic spectrum (Thomas and Drummond 2003). To drive anywhere during the evening in

³⁷ This comprehensive household survey was conducted through a coordinated effort by the State Planning Committee, the General Statistical Office, the United Nations Development Program, the World Bank, and the Swedish International Development Authority. It was initiated on the basis of a widely recognized lack of national household-level data. The sample size consisted of 4,800 households. The stated objective was: "To ensure complete, objective, and systematic collection of data reflecting the actual material and cultural living standards from those households which were selected for the survey sample and to provide necessary information to meet the needs for analysis of socio-economic policies."

Vietnam, in fact, was to pass by house after house and business after business either illuminated with the bluish glow of televisions or projecting amplified Vietnamese and foreign music. During the final stages of writing this chapter, in the summer of 2007, a survey by AC Nielsen provide a finding that took many people in Viet Nam by surprise. According to the survey, when it came to spending on new technologies after meeting basic living requirements, Viet Nam was ranked number one in the world, beating out Russia and Brazil for the top spot.

In Ho Chi Minh City specifically, the cityscape was profoundly influenced by consumerist practices, corporate imagery and displays of wealth. Drives down typical city streets during the early phases of my research resulted in extreme sensory overload. To what was I supposed to pay attention? Eight-story ice cream parlors; fleets of cars with sides painted with special offers from a local restaurant; teams of young adults in brand-specific uniforms distributing samples and product information on street corner after street corner; marketing event after marketing event; coffee shop after coffee shop; traditional rituals, such as the dragon dance, being performed by teams in outfits marked by brand logos; the billboards and neon signs that seemed to cover most available flat surfaces; scantily clad young women on motor scooters emblazoned with corporate imagery; the inside of taxis crammed with racks of pamphlets and covered with stickers announcing new consumer brands. Nearly everywhere, but especially in a handful of central districts, the city's cultural space was dominated by consumerism.

Consumerism also appeared to be affecting how people organized themselves relative to various institutions. The following is a partial list of consumer oriented

organizations and interested groups that have been formed over the past ten years in Vietnam: Vietnam Standard and Consumers Association, Association of Testing Laboratories, the Association of Mineral Water Quality, the Center for Study and Consultation on Consumerism, the Club of Women Consumers, the Anti-Fake Goods Club, the Quality Club, the Club of Newsmen for the Protection of Consumers. As Luong (2003) makes clear, the growth of non-government organizations is still rather slow in Vietnam, especially when compared to the many large and powerful state-operated organizations, such as the Women's Union or the Workers Union. Most interest groups are still closely tied to the state. Yet this is clearly not the case when it comes to organizations charged with protecting consumer interests, given that most of the above organizations are not directly linked to the state. James (2002), in *Marketing News*, estimates that there are 15 to 20 million Vietnamese people on the verge of entering the middle class, with a disposable income of \$1000 a year. She adds that 99 percent of urban households own motorbikes and 92 percent own color televisions, according to NFO World Group, Inc., a company that conducts consumer research. All of this points to the reality that consumer interests are widespread and are becoming among the most important concerns in Vietnam.

Just before the Doi Moi reforms of 1986, as Luong (2003b) notes, government officials were still confiscating homes that were considered ostentatious at the time, citing the accumulation of illegal wealth as the reason for doing so. By the mid 1990s, such regulatory practices were extremely rare; individuals and families were regularly displaying conspicuous private wealth through consumer practices. Throughout the

country, but more so in urban centers, large private residences and private mini-hotels were increasingly common, as were four-star tourist resorts. Privately owned automobiles also emerged as a form of conspicuous consumption in the 1990s. In Ho Chi Minh City, these changes came even earlier. By the late 1980s, private wealth was already on display, primarily in the form of private villas built behind high walls. By the late 1990s, a small number of what Luong (2003b) calls elite residents also had acquired enough private wealth to send their sons and daughters for overseas education.

Changing patterns of food consumption are being studied, revealing current trends and indicating that food consumption in Viet Nam is poised to undergo major changes. Citing the increased prevalence of what they call “modern food marketing outlets” in Ho Chi Minh City, which have benefited from strong backing by local authorities, Cadilhon et al. (2006:32) suggest that a transition from “traditional vegetable supply chains” is in progress and includes growing numbers of people from various income levels. Their study, which involved interviewing suppliers, compliments the work of Dien et al. (2004), who demonstrate that socio-economic/demographic factors impacted food consumption patterns for buyers throughout the 1990s. That the patterns these nutritional scientists reveal include an increase in eating outside the home and an increase in the consumption of sweets and bottled drinks is relevant to my study. Based only on survey data, however, their conclusions only scratch the surface of the relationship between class and consumption. Additionally, the authors rely on oversimplified demographic categories (the poor and the not poor) further reducing the usefulness of their study to my own.

While analyzing the contradictions Vietnamese people, especially young women, have encountered during the era of increased economic development, local sociologist Le (2002:29) emphasizes that:

Over-consumption, which limits the reproductive capacity, has created unnatural privation in life. In the social field, it will lead to such social evils as corruption, waste, debauchery, prostitution, drug-addiction, crime, etc. What causes our anxiety now is that over-consumption is increasing among the youths, spoiling a number of young girls. Consequently, research should focus on youth and teenagers, especially young girls (their rights and values), so that they can adopt a healthy mode of life and prevent irresponsible decisions in life.

She continues:

However, the development of material life has entailed the degradation of social morality. This is the great challenge to the Vietnamese culture. Pragmatic mode of life, the tendency to attach too much importance to the material aspect of life, rivalry and violence, ignoring friendly relations, making light of ethics have come into view in our society. They are undermining part of the fine ethical tradition of the Vietnamese people, particularly of Vietnamese women. Therefore, the main orientation is to search for ways to a new dialogue on traditional culture, which would create a resistance force with our national culture to all what is amoral, inhuman, violates traditional ethics, what tramples on the women's dignity and interest (Le 2002: 30).

In the spring of 2007, local newspapers reported that the owner of a karaoke business in Ho Chi Minh City planted a homemade bomb at the club of one of his competitors, allegedly because of business rivalry. The bomb exploded and the owner of the second club lost both of her legs. Shocking stories of this nature could be interpreted as confirming Le's (2002) concern that "the development of material life" has resulted in "the degradation of social morality." Such stories, however, are very rare. Though social morality is transforming in Vietnam, Le mischaracterizes the nature of Vietnam's

consumer society somewhat, overstating the negative consequences, while looking only at the surface of this emergent phenomenon.

In recent studies, Van (2006) and Nguyen and Thomas (2004) begin to reveal a more complex understanding of consumerism in Vietnam, providing what I feel is a more accurate assessment of the relationships between consumerism and other aspects of Vietnamese society. Through detailed ethnographic accounts both studies demonstrate that consumerism in urban Viet Nam is of growing import in understanding and describing how people identify as Vietnamese. While the approach by Nguyen and Thomas (2004) glosses over the complexity in how Vietnamese perceive class and status—e.g. these authors' use of the term “elite” is vague and at times misleading—they do show that Vietnam's urban consumer culture has enormous power in creating social difference. Van (2006), on the other hand, lays out in great detail how shoppers in Ho Chi Minh City rely on Vietnamese concepts, as opposed to international concepts, with regard to the character and quality of consumer goods. In doing so, she reveals just how much thought and energy goes into being a consumer, and that there is much at stake in the many buying decisions people make. I return to the issues Van (2006) discusses at the conclusion of this chapter.

My views on consumerism in Ho Chi Minh City, while not necessarily contradicting any of the existing literature on consumer practices in Vietnam, have had to draw their theoretical underpinnings from a broader scholarship. Significantly, in framing Vietnamese middle-class consumption, I focus more on the notion that “social lives have things” (Friedman 1991:161) and less on the “social life of things” (Appadurai 1986).

Within the context of my study, this distinction emphasizes an important point: things (i.e. commodities and services bought and sold in Ho Chi Minh City) take on their social meaning precisely because of their role in identity formation processes. Like Friedman's (1991), my approach is concerned more with how objects (and services) come to carry meaning and less with those objects themselves.

The usefulness of this approach was apparent during even my earliest of conversations with people, which, as I have mentioned, were initially concerned primarily with local perceptions of social class. When I asked people about different social classes, references to consumer goods and services were the primary strategy by which people articulated social class differences. Yet my point—and Friedman's—is that the goods are not so much endowed with meaning as they are the vehicles of meaning, primarily because they function well in this capacity, and this is not because there is necessarily or always something especially meaningful about consumer goods generally, or any specific product.

Rather than undertaking a study of Ho Chi Minh City's modern material culture, I spent considerable time trying to pinpoint middle-class strategies for asserting selfhood and identity through consumer goods. Among all of the consumerist pandemonium, delineating class-specific consumer behaviors and environments was often difficult. This was especially the case during the early phases of my research, but it was never easy to draw the lines between poor, middle-class and rich people. As Liechty (2003:64) notes, “[t]he more closely one looks at a class group, the more its boundaries dissolve and its supposedly distinguishing features blur into a haze of contrasting and conflicting detail.”

In many ways, the middle-class people in my study were often taking part in the same consumer society as the people on both ends of the socio-economic continuum—the poor and the rich. Even so, it eventually became clear to me that middle-class participation was something quite distinct from both of these other groups, not because the goods they bought and used were that different, but because strategies for constructing selfhood and identity were. Furthermore, as I hope to demonstrate in this chapter, their participation in Ho Chi Minh City's consumer society was culturally constructed. Furthermore, understanding the details of this participation and what it means to individuals lends important insights regarding identity formation for average middle-class people.

Returning briefly to my discussion of lunchtime eateries in Ho Chi Minh City from Chapter Six, which distinguished between establishments labeled *an com van phong* (office lunch) and *an com binh dan* (average lunch), will help to introduce the next section. Office-lunch locations were places middle-class people claimed as theirs, whereas average-lunch locations were not. In practice, middle-class people could be seen eating at both, but, especially at lunch, they regularly ate an office-lunch, while this was virtually unheard of for low-income people (e.g. street cleaners, construction workers). At the same time, middle-class people did not regularly eat lunch at one of the many expensive establishments serving both local and foreign dishes, that expatriates and rich Vietnamese people frequented. However, this was one of the very few actual physical spaces that Vietnamese middle-class people could claim as their own cultural space. And even office-lunch locations were somewhat up for grabs, given that poorer people could occasionally afford them and given that rich people were often drawn to those with

especially tasty dishes. Beyond office-lunch restaurants, other spaces—physical and cultural—in Ho Chi Minh City were defined by even more unstable borders. As the next section reveals, this was both an asset and a liability as middle-class people participated in the social-cultural project of producing, maintaining and acting out middle-class cultural identity.

Shopping, Window-shopping, and “Appropriate” Consumer Goods

Like it does in most consumer societies, shopping takes many forms in Ho Chi Minh City. One level of complexity to flesh out in an attempt to understanding the socio-cultural import of shopping concerns the different types of shopping outlets. There are 5 basic types of outlets: (1) street vendors or hawkers (*ban hang rong*), (2) small indoor shops that line nearly all major and many minor city streets (*cua hang*), (3) covered, open-air markets (*cho*), (4) super markets (*sieu thi*), and (5) shopping centers (*trung tam mua sam*). Within all of these categories, however, there is much variation, some of which I address as necessary later in this section.

For now, a few comments suffice. Streets vendors sell many different goods and services often times with makeshift kiosk or shops, but also by even simpler means. Open-air markets vary widely in both size and prestige: some have received international media attention; others are known primarily by people who live near them. Though one can purchase food at them, what Vietnamese people call supermarkets (*sieu thi*) are not grocery stores, strictly speaking. Rather they are better described as relatively large variety stores—small-scale versions of Wal-Mart—and are rather uniform from one

company's version to another's. (The Vietnamese version of the North-American grocery store has not arrived in Vietnam, and these stores, especially for expatriates, serve a similar, though limited purpose.) Shopping centers also vary widely. Some resemble open-air markets, while others are entirely enclosed, and resemble North American malls somewhat.³⁸ Large, enclosed, air-conditioned, and regularly re-modeled, a handful of shopping centers downtown represent the most elite shopping outlets in the city.³⁹

Discussions about the merits and drawbacks of these various shopping outlets were something I came to expect from nearly all of the women taking part in my research. It became clear eventually, however, that shopping was anything but the domain of women exclusively. Phat, the high school teacher in his mid 20s who talked in the previous chapter about work, was a shopper. He and I talked at length about shopping on several occasions. During one of our early conversations, when I asked him what he did when he was not working, he somewhat awkwardly explained that he spent much of his free time at shopping centers. Several weeks later, I brought up this previous conversation, and jokingly asked him whether he had been a little embarrassed to admit that he shopped a lot. He indicated that he had been. He explained that it was still not that common for a man his age to admit to enjoying shopping, even though a lot of men he knew did shop often. "For the younger generation, you know Generation X, *the he X*, it's more acceptable," he reasoned, "but a lot of men my age still think it is not a very

³⁸ The comparison between such shopping centers and North American malls should be tempered. These shopping centers, like malls, are owned by large corporations, and rent space to retailers. However, until most malls in North America, they are structured more like department stores, with few if any, enclosed spaces. Each floor is usually one vast room with dozens of kiosks.

³⁹ The North American equivalent of the convenience store was introduced in Viet Nam (during the writing of this section in 2006). Though neither common nor widely used, they were nonetheless a new option for people with the potential to transform the complexity of shopping practice.

man[ly] thing to do.” Phat also explained that he felt like it was something that a foreigner perhaps would not understand. “Vietnamese shopping is probably different than in America. You should go with me sometime. I’ll show you.”

The next time we got together, we met downtown at the Trung Nguyen coffee shop across the street from Diamond Plaza shopping center. Phat wanted to take me “window shopping,” and had invited me to coffee before hand. We sat quietly at a one of the tables closest to the street that separated us from Diamond Plaza. It was a Sunday afternoon, the busiest day for shopping in Ho Chi Minh City, and for a few minutes after our coffee arrived we both just sat there sipping our drinks and staring across the street.⁴⁰ I was momentarily fixated on the hoards of people parking, entering and exiting the shopping center, chatting to each other outside, waiting for cabs and drivers. It was scene remarkable in its familiarity, a spectacle of consumerism increasingly common throughout the city, the kind that had come to almost entirely dominate the cityscape downtown. I glanced over at Phat, who was also staring at the scene of shoppers. I thought to myself, *I wonder what he’s thinking about*, and was about to ask him when he suddenly spoke up:

Phat: I like shopping. I go a lot with my best friend, to supermarkets and department stores. But we usually only go window-shopping, we buy very little, spend little money. We spend a lot of time. A lot of people are like that.

⁴⁰ After the first couple months of research, I adopted a strategy wherein I let so-called “awkward” or “uncomfortable” silences play themselves out. The conversation summarized here was a key moment in this decision. It was one of the first times that I fully recognized how not asking questions could work well in getting information, especially in certain settings.

Rylan: What do you mean when you say window-shopping?

Phat: You go to a supermarket. There are a lot of things to see, things that you have never seen before, new products. When I was a student, there was a supermarket near the dorm, near Dong Sen Park. It was close to the dorm and it had air conditioning, so we would go there and look at everything, look at the clothes, and it was really nice.

Rylan: Really nice how?

Phat: You can choose. You don't have to buy, but you can enjoy. They have everything, but we usually go to see the clothes.

Rylan: Did you do this sort of thing before you started university?

Phat: No, because I lived in the countryside. There are no supermarkets, only the markets, which have no air conditioning, and we didn't go there often.

Rylan: Do you still go window-shopping a lot?

Phat: Not as much as I used to. I go window-shopping less, but shopping more. Now, I go to get what I need—shampoo or something, or when I need a new shirt.

Phat called for the bill and insisted on paying, because he had invited me (*moi*).⁴¹

We crossed the street and joined the amalgam of people coming and going: those leaving with bags full of goods, the larger number leaving empty handed, those entering, those

⁴¹ *Moi* is a verb that can be used to show that someone is inviting you to eat or have coffee and the intension is that the inviter will pay for the invitee. It is common, for example, for people to invite (*moi*) a group out for dinner on the inviter's birthday. The inviter pays the entire bill.

who seemed simply to be hanging out within or just outside the huge shopping center. Nearly everyone was dressed in some version of the latest fashions. Low-rise jeans were the most common pants for women; slinky colorful tops also were abundant; men wore pressed dress shirts or hip t-shirts; young children often wore outfits very similar to their adult counterparts; six-year old girls wore high heels; boys the same age were in fashionable faded jeans and ball caps.

Not everyone seemed so concerned about fashion, however. Like most shopping centers in the city, scenes of social inequality marked the area surrounding Diamond Plaza. Young girls, either in school uniforms or somewhat ragged street clothes, tried to sell flowers to shoppers streaming in and out of the building. Children and adults also carried small baskets full of chewing gum, candy, lighters and a variety of other inexpensive trinkets, attempting to persuade passersby to purchase these goods. There were a dozen or more security guards in blue soldierly uniforms flanking the perimeter of the building. One of their key roles, here and throughout the city, was to keep the street hawkers at bay. Because the vast majority of people arrived to Diamond Plaza by motorbike, parking attendants were also a common sight. These attendants, typically men, were easily recognizable as distinct from shoppers: they wore cheap plastics sandals, unfashionable pants and scruffy shirts. They also acted differently.

Motorbike attendants alternated between waiting for new shoppers to arrive—their lazily lying atop a customer's expensive Honda somewhat mocking the frenzied consumer space—and aggressively trying to coax new arrivals to park in their stall. The importance of these attendants' role was widely recognized by shoppers: they

ensured the protection of shoppers' motorbikes and allowed for peace-of-mind, enabling people to socialize and make sound shopping decisions once inside. For all middle-class people, motorbikes were one of their most valuable possessions; for those who did not own homes, it was very likely their most valuable. Like cars in North America, motorbikes were treasured. Yet motorbikes are considerably easier to steal than automobiles, and I receive many warnings to this point about the bike I rented and drove during my time in Ho Chi Minh City. In conversations, middle-class people emphasized that a person could not simply leave their motorbike parked outside of a building, not even for a few seconds. Doing so was too risky. Someone would likely steal a motorbike left unattended.⁴²

In general, all of these non-shoppers stood in sharp contrast to the shoppers, and this visual contrast was heightened by a less tangible but observable disconnect between the two groups. Shoppers often seemed not to even acknowledge non-shoppers, while non-shoppers tended almost to mock shoppers on occasion. The more I hung out at these locations the more I felt like non-shoppers and shoppers had very little in common despite the many socio-economic links. Both depended on each other greatly: non-shoppers depended on shoppers for their livelihood, while shoppers depended on non-shoppers for piece of mind, because the latter was needed for the experience of shopping to occur. Though I would not describe either group's attitude toward the other as opening condescending, I could not imagine friendships between shoppers and non-shoppers.

⁴² I was not able to obtain official crime statistics, but did hear a handful of stories about people's motorbikes being stolen. Though I am not in a position to confirm or contradict the general fears that middle-class people had, I also feel it is not especially important to do so. That people had these fears spoke to their perception of risk, which was socially generated, through stories people told, the media, and first-hand experience.

Indeed, none of the people participating in my study ever talked about or even mentioned friends who were cab drivers, security guards or parking attendants.

Phat looked over at me as we entered on the ground floor and said we were going up to the second floor. The first floor, he explained, was reserved for the most expensive (primarily imported) products, including: a dozen cosmetic lines; several expensive handbag, shoe and clothing labels; high-end watches and sunglasses. Phat explained quickly that he was more interested in checking out the clothing on the second floor, which was still expensive, but more reasonable. I could not help thinking during these first few moments about how the arrangement of objects and people within this physical space underscored a tension that seemed to go unnoticed by Phat. People and consumer goods representing three socio-economic groups—the poor, the middle-class and the rich—all in close proximity, yet somehow thoroughly separated by a mixture of material and symbolic boundaries.

On the second floor, we walked around, not saying much; Phat squeezed between and weaved around fellow shoppers and scooted past kiosks quickly to get us to a section comprised of three or four different lines of men's clothing. Phat was wearing a neatly pressed, white, Viet Tien shirt. Viet Tien are locally made high-quality shirts. I had seen Viet Tien or An Phuoc—the other local, high-quality brand—on nearly all of the Vietnamese men I knew at one point or another. Phat wore them exclusively, for work and for meeting with me anyway. As he glanced around at the racks of shirts and pants, I asked him whether he had purchased the shirt that he was wearing at Diamond Plaza. “Are you crazy?” he blurted. “Shirts here are too expensive. Diamond Plaza is only for

looking at the fashion trends.” We continued walking around for several minutes, and it became clear that Phat was not entirely comfortable in his role as the leader of our Vietnamese shopping outing. He was at a loss regarding what else to say and show me.

After twenty or thirty minutes, I suggested we go back across the street for another coffee and he quickly agreed, noticeably glad to be relieved of his duties as my guide. Once we had found a table and order more drinks, I asked Phat where he shopped for his clothes. He explained in detail, which eventually led to a discussion highlighting the links between social class and consumer behavior:

Rylan: Where do you buy your clothes?

Phat: I go to either Co-op Mart or to Saigon Supermarket. People like the supermarket because even though it is a little more expensive, they believe in the quality of the goods. The shops outside, they will tell you a price, and then you have to bargain [haggle] with them. But not at the supermarket. There you no the quality of the products because of the price. The price is a little higher, but it is acceptable, and the outside price—with the outside price, you don’t know if it is the real price.

Rylan: So, who goes shopping at outside stores?

Phat: It depends on the money you have. Some students, when I was as student, some students in the dorm would buy expensive clothes, ones in the supermarket, but some students would have to bargain on the street. And some would even buy second hand. Students who had a lot of money bought the expensive clothes. I like buying at the supermarket because of

the quality of the shirts and trousers. In the market, clothes are just in a pile, you never know about them. So, you know, some students were rich at school, others had jobs, so they could also enjoy life, by buying clothes and food and other things, you know.

Rylan: When you say rich, who is rich?

Phat: That's a good question. Maybe...because the way they dress, they are happier, the way they spend.

Rylan: Dress how? What do you mean?

Phat: In the dorm, there were, I think, a thousands students, some wear old clothes, and they don't changed very often. I mean they wear the same clothes for more than a day. Maybe they only had 2 or 3 shirts. They didn't have a lot of clothes. Others had lots of clothes, lots of expensive clothes. What I mean is that one rich person's shirt could cost the same as 10 poor shirts. One rich shirt could be \$20 or \$30. Like Mr. Tho [a mutual friend], you know Tho, his clothes are really expensive—one shirt could be \$100—and their motorcycles, and their hand phones, they always have to have the new one, the most fashionable. They get the really expensive one [phone], you know, the ones that cost 10 million [dong, or 650 USD] and they always have to have the new model, always changing. But for me, I mean when I was a student we did not even go to Trung Nguyen Coffee, because it was too expensive. We would go to lunch at the Binh Dan [average person] places, you know, the ones with the lower price, the

price that was acceptable for most people. It like that with fashion now too. I don't buy really expensive brands, but I buy what I need, to have enough nice clothes...for work, for going out with friends.

From my conversations with Phat and other shoppers, and from accompanying people during both actual shopping and window-shopping outings, it became clear that middle-class people in Ho Chi Minh City had a lot to think about when they went shopping. Though I do not explore it in detail here, firstly, Phat had his masculinity to think about. During and in the two years since my research, the implications of consumer culture on the shaping of masculinity have been changing perhaps more quickly than any other aspect of Ho Chi Minh City's consumer culture. I came to know several young men who were even more emphatic in their like for shopping and the readiness to participate in Ho Chi Minh City's consumer society, and many of them at one point or another had talked to me about what it meant to me a male shopper. I hope to explore this development more in later research.

Men and women shoppers alike also had to make important decisions about how to balance, on the one hand, the need to maintain a fashionable image and the desire to buy new things with, on the other hand, both the material and symbolic constraints that middle-class life entailed. As Vann (2006:191) notes:

...[middle-class people] had limited disposable income, which they tried to spend wisely; their consumer decision making was a careful balance between cost and quality, style and durability. In an effort to be *mo-den* (fashionable), HCMC's middle class aims to follow regional and international trends in products like clothing, cosmetics, home decor, and motorbikes. But owning and displaying goods that are *mo-den* carries more significance for HCMC's middle class than simply enabling them to be 'in fashion'; it allows them to see themselves as consumers of the types

of goods that are popular in wealthier countries and, therefore, as worthy participants in a global economy.

Though the primary findings of her research deal with local understanding of “authentic” as it pertains to consumer goods, above, Vann begins to address what shopping meant to middle-class people. Outside the scope of her research but at the heart of mine is how the balance she describes plays into people’s larger lives. Beyond allowing themselves to see themselves as certain kinds of *consumers*, walking this line allows middle-class people to see themselves as certain kinds of *people*, fundamentally distinct, both culturally and morally, from class-cultural others. This distinction is expressed through consumer practices, but it derives from a need to form an identity, to be cultural beings.

The stated goal in Miller’s *Home Possessions* (2001) is to illuminate and explain the “personal and intimate” relationship between people and the consumer goods they buy. Though this approach is distinct from Appaduri’s (1986) concern with the “social life of things,” it still does not fully capture or accurately frame the role of consumer goods as it pertains to middle-class culture in Ho Chi Minh City. While also interested in how people related to objects, my analysis diverges from Miller’s goal, focusing instead on the beliefs and practices of a consumer society and understanding how these interact with other processes of identity formation—namely class and gender. Following a rather consistent thread in how anthropologists analyze consumerism, one that runs from Mary Douglas’ early collaboration with economist Baron Isherwood (Douglas and Isherwood 1979) through the twenty-first century (Dickey 2000, Liechty 2003), my research reveals that consumerist practices in Ho Chi Minh City reflect the need to

“buttress” borders (Dickey 2000) and prevent the “mixing of categories ” (Douglas 1966). Consumer goods, it has long been argued (Veblen 1934, Bourdieu 1981), play an important role in maintaining exclusivity, a process important to identity formation in that it makes clear to one’s self and others who one is and is *not*.

In Viet Nam, class-cultural borders were protected, in part by direct defense (i.e. by the growing security industry). Equally important and sometimes more effective border protection, however, could be found in the constant shifting of the borders, to make the journey from one cultural space to another a continual effort. Make it one week, and then just try to keep up the next. As “a nonverbal medium for the human creative faculty” (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:62), the consumer good itself is important in border protection, and, at times, so are the relationships that people have with consumer goods. However, among Ho Chi Minh City’s middle class, neither the goods themselves nor these relationships were as important as the perception of goods and the culture strategies that defined people’s reliance on products as vehicles of meaning. In fact, as the conversation below reveals, there often was at least a partial disconnection between the product and people who purchased and used it. Put differently, it is clear that a product can have an important role in society without people really knowing much about the product or having an strong affinity for it.

During my stay in Viet Nam between 2002 and 2004, Omo and Viso were two laundry detergents common throughout much of Southeast Asia. More than I would have ever predicted before starting my research, I spoke to middle-class people a lot about these two products. An afternoon discussion at a coffee shop with a group of eight people

I had met while teaching them English was one of the most revealing. They ranged in age from 18 to 30 and they all identified as all middle-class. The conversation was quite dynamic. We had a large room in the coffee shop mostly to ourselves, and one of the men in the group asked the manager to turn down the music early on in the conversation. According to my notes, everyone participated, sometimes putting much thought into a comment, and others times excitedly interjecting a comment without thinking.

One methodological point is required before continuing. By the end of the conversation, I wished that I had video taped it. This is primarily because, many of the comments, were followed by laughter. Vietnamese people regularly laugh when they are uncomfortable, and it can often be mistaken for a sign of finding something funny. If my knowledge of this characteristic and my memory serve me well, much of the laughter indicated below is of the type that coincides with mild levels of feeling uncomfortable.

Watching local television in the days prior to our meeting, I had seen commercials promoting Viso and Omo. I mentioned the commercials shortly after everyone settled into his or her chair, admittedly hoping to catalyze a conversation of ethnographic interest. None of the middle-class people that I knew in Ho Chi Minh City used Viso—none. I wanted to know why. According to the group, Viso was a locally made product. Omo, they explained, had a foreign trademark and was imported. When I told the group I wanted to talk about Omo, individuals either laughed a little or looked at me somewhat puzzled. Within a few moments someone asked why (on earth, her facial expression added) I wanted to talk about Omo. I told the group that I did not know anyone that used Viso, and that I wanted to know why it was everyone used Omo. Why

was Omo so popular with my friends, acquaintances, and the people participating in my study?

Still rather confused by my desire to know about Omo's merits, several individuals nonetheless initially offered short, straightforward responses praising the detergent:

"Omo is better."

"Omo works better."

"Omo is a better product than Viso."

To confirm my assumption that everyone in the group likely used Omo, I asked about this. They all said that they used Omo. I then asked what they meant by better.

"It cleans better."

"It gets out dirt better."

"Your clothes smell better."

"Omo makes more suds"

"Really," I replied. "So you've compared Omo to Viso?"

There was silence for a few seconds. People looked around the room. Some people smiled. Some giggled.

One brave response: "No."

Help from someone else: "But the commercials say so."

Nearly everyone laughed.

A third voice: "It gets out 99% of dirt."

Some people giggle more; others looked rather serious, communicating that they had meant what they said about the higher quality of Omo.

I must have looked a little baffled after these first exchanges. Everyone started to laugh, and so I asked whether they believed the commercials or not. The conversation then got more intense and the pace of exchanges increased. Everyone was in agreement that Omo was superior. There was no dissent whatsoever. However, the rationale for why this was the case was not easy to pin point. Nearly everyone admitted that they did not necessarily believe the television commercials. One of the older women in the group said that she liked the commercials for Omo better than those for Viso. She said that they could see herself in commercials for Omo more easily than those for Viso, and then laughed at her own comment.

“It’s an imported product, made with by better...” one woman started, apparently unable to remember the details of the commercial.

“The way it is made is more advanced, the technology,” echoed someone else.

“Omo is better than Viso, especially for people who have washing machines,” someone chimed in.

“That’s right—[Omo] makes better suds. Viso is better for people who wash by hand.”

“So everyone here uses a washing machine?” I asked.

One of the college-age man admitted: “My mother does my laundry. She uses a machine and she uses Omo. *She* says it makes more suds.” He laughed as he turned to the young woman next to him following his comment.

“How many people do their own laundry?” I asked.

One woman—this was same woman who said that she could see herself in Omo commercials—raised her hand. Significantly, she was the *only* person to raise her hand. The room fell silent again. I asked if I understood things correctly—that nobody else actually did laundry, actually used Omo. Everyone, some rather sheepishly, others laughingly, confirmed that they rarely or never did their own laundry. More than half of the group could not even remember having ever purchased Omo, because they did do this kind of shopping. The young man who early had admitted that his mother did is laundry tried to compensate by saying that he really liked the way his clothes smelled because of Omo.

A bit confused over whether to pursue what seemed like an intriguing contradiction, I returned to an early phase of the conversation. I said that I still was not convinced there was that much difference, jokingly giving the group a hard time about not having provided enough “evidence” that Omo was a superior product. Suddenly, one of the older men in the group, who overall had been the least talkative, exclaimed, out of frustration: “Viso is for poor people.” For the third time in the conversation, there was utter silence, but this time it was an awkward silence, not followed by any giggling. A few heads nodded hesitantly in reserved agreement. Some people looked not sure whether they should voice agreement or disagreement. “You can’t say that,” one woman interjected. The way she spoke indicated to me that she was not passing judgment on the validity of his comment, but rather was merely indicating that voicing that kind of

rationale was inappropriate in this setting. *Remember, he's writing this down*—she seemed to imply.

Interestingly, the matter finally was resolved. Looks on most faces indicated they could live with this as a closing statement. The conversation was over. I did not know what to ask next, and no one seemed to be disagreeing. There had been a host of detailed and fragmented arguments thrown around about why Omo and why not Viso, but in the end, the answer was simple. The people in the room were all middle-class and they had been talking about something they may never have been asked about before: the reasons, or perhaps the reason, for choosing one laundry detergent over another. The conversation leading up to this crescendo now seemed like a long string of diversions; people had been genuinely frustrated by having to rationalize their choice of laundry detergent. People did not know very much about Omo, other than it left their clothes smelling good, and certainly Omo was not the only laundry detergent capable of this. That people had never worn clothes washed in Viso was not really the issue here.

As I demonstrate later in this section, probably the only thing that might have change the middle-class perception of Omo and Viso would have been an increase in the price of Omo. For the time being, it was only slightly more expensive than Viso. It was, however, according to commercials that seemed to speak directly to middle-class sensibilities, a better product, and this was partly based on the notion that it was a foreign product made with modern technology. It was an appropriate choice for middle class, because it represented an important balance of high-quality and reasonable price. It distinguished the middle-class consumer from poor people, for whom the difference in

price was significant, and yet it did not represent luxurious or wasteful spending. In the end, Omo was the right choice, and Viso was the wrong choice, because middle-class cultural logic established the former was for middle-class people, and the latter was “for poor people.”

According to middle-class people, many products and services signified poverty. Riding a bicycle, as opposed to a motorbike, was perhaps the most commonly cited sign that a person was poor, as Trai (quoted below) notes. Taking the bus was also a sign of poverty. The logic being that people who used these modes of transportation could not afford a motorbike. Footwear provides another example. Throughout Vietnam, one type of plastic sandal is very common. They are thick soled, covering much of the foot and are cream colored, almost resembling flesh. The few middle-class people I knew who owned this type of sandal were careful not to wear these outside the home. Others avoided them altogether, purchasing only slightly more expensive plastic sandals, often blue in color, to wear around the house. Even these sandals were not worn out in public. People feared they would communicate the wrong message: that the person wearing them was poor.

Locally made soft drinks also fell into the category of goods people associated with poverty. Even though middle-class people bought and consumed these drinks, they often did so cautiously in public. At a wedding during the last few months of my study, a locally made, low-end cola was served. As a server opened and poured for them, one couple at my table expressed disapproval. The woman explained that she expected the bride and groom to offer a “better” soft drink, and the man agreed. I asked them why. The answer was typical. When I explored the reasons why various products and services were

considered signs of poverty, the results were often very similar. Many of these conversations were as fragmented and confusing as the one about Omo. Inquires revealed that only sometimes was there a strong personal affinity for the middle-class alternative to products associated with poor people. There was nothing inherently wrong with bicycles, or locally produced soft drinks, people admitted. There was something wrong, however, with the meaning they carried.

Product advertisement heavily reinforced these norms. There was no comparison between the marketing regimes for low-end locally made soft drinks and more expensive version. Television advertisements, billboards and posters at cafes and restaurants for Coca Cola, for example, were more appealing to a middle-class audience on at least two levels. Firstly, the design and production was more advanced. The quality of various forms of marketing for Coke far exceeded that of locally made cola, and this was not missed by middle-class people, who would comment on how clever a television commercial was or how well-designed a poster was. These differences were clear to me, too. Coca Cola posters did indeed appear to have involved more thought, more money and more advanced design techniques. Secondly, the content matched perfectly with the logic of middle-class culture about what it meant to be a modern Vietnamese person. One Coke poster, for example, features a couple, dressed well, but not too fancy, sitting at a table and eating bowls of *pho* (a Vietnamese staple). They are drinking Coke and smiling, and the images and the colors are crisp and clear. The *middleness*—the effort to occupy a cultural middle ground—was perfectly maintained.

A similar logic was applied to products that were determined to be “for the rich.” A segment from a conversation I had with a co-teacher reveals this. Trai and I had worked together for a about a year and gotten to know each rather well. He and I had talked a lot about my research project, in general, and then I eventually asked him if he would take part in my research. As we sat drinking beer at a local restaurant, we were talking about social class, when Trai ordered a pack of cigarettes. Trai was a heavy smoker, and though I had seen him smoke regularly, until this conversation, I did not know which brand of cigarettes he smoked. Interestingly, the idea of “his brand” had recently gone through a significant transformation:

Rylan: Can you tell what class people are?

Trai: People in cafés and restaurants, look at their houses, you can see the changes. At first, I was surprised to see people... more hotels, more restaurants. It means people are richer.

Rylan: But do you know someone is middle class when you see them?

Trai: It depends on what kind of official [person who works in an office] they are. If they work for a foreign company, you can look at the way they dress. That is important. The means of transportation—if someone peddles a bicycle it means they don't have something better. Young people with brand new clothes—they must be rich.

Rylan: So is there a difference in how middle and upper class people dress?

[Trai tried unsuccessfully for a few minutes to articulate his thoughts about how peoples' clothing could communicate their social class.]

Trai: And cigarettes. Which class does a smoker belong to—you can tell. Rich people smoke 555. The middle class, like me, smoke cheaper brands—Craven—because 555 costs around 65,000 now. A few months ago they were only 15,000. It's because of a new important tax or something. I used to smoke 555, but now they are unreasonable, some kind of luxury.

Trai held up for display the pack of Craven cigarettes he had just purchased just a few minutes earlier, and smiled slightly. Trai changed his cigarette brand and his reasons for doing so were complicated. I asked him whether he switched because he could not afford to buy the 555 brand any longer. This was not exactly the case, according to Trai. Based on the salary that Vietnamese English teachers make, he could have afforded to continue smoking 555s. To be certain, the increase in cost would have been materially significant. Given that he bought a bout a pack a day, the dent this would make in his week pay was significant. But that is not how Trai reasoned his change entirely. Not spending that amount had as much if not more to do with what it would signify symbolically.

Trai: My wife would kill me. And my friends would say that it was unreasonable to smoke 555s. And I agree. My friend has changed also. We both agree that 555 is no longer for us [Trai laughed a bit at what he was about to say]. 555—they are for rich people, I guess.

Rylan: Is the Craven brand different.

Trai: At first, they tasted different, but now I think I prefer them. And the new advertising for 555, it is...the way they advertise is different than it used to be. About the same time they raised the price, they change the advertising. It's not for me either. [laughing]

In this case, as for many middle-class consumer choices, material and symbolic values became intimately intertwined. Trai had given up the 555 cigarettes because it made financial sense. As importantly, he had given the brand up because it made sense within the larger middle-class culture in which he was participating. To spend unwisely, was something that this culture frowned upon heavily, to the point where people were, without much hesitation, willing to adjust their consumer behavior according to class-cultural beliefs. Because smoking 555s had become the cultural terrain of class-culture others, Trai had could easily justify the switch. Furthermore, the new marketing campaign executed for the 555 brand no longer seemed to be directed at Trai, according to his interpretation, that is. I was quite familiar with this campaign, because small 555 placards had, just a few months before, started appearing on tables in coffee shops throughout the city. They were filled with images flashier and more obtuse than those associated with other cigarettes. In fact, these placards and other 555 imagery no longer used the "555" logo, replying instead on the brand's color scheme to communicate the link between promotional deals and the brand. People in advertising I knew thought it was a great marketing scheme. For Trai, it proved he had made the right choice in switching brands.

As Chua and Tan (1999) argue, the key to understanding the cultural boundaries between classes is the through an examination of consumption beliefs and practices, as “the body has become the locus of consumption” and wherein there is “emphasis on clothes and other accessories of self-adornment” (144). This was especially true with regard to how women’s fashion factored into the making of Vietnamese middle-class culture. Middleness, furthermore, explains much about women’s choices about what to wear and how to adorn themselves.

Jewelry came up in conversations when I asked women about whether they could tell someone’s class standing by what they wore. Linh, who worked in factory management, for example, talked at length about women vendors she saw in the market when she went shopping. Many of these vendors, she explained, wore gold jewelry. Linh also pointed out that nearly all vendors had the same look or style when it came to wearing such jewelry. Their earrings were long and dangly, and they wore multiple gold bracelets. Linh claimed to have seen some women with as many as 8 or 10 bracelets on one arm. “That’s too many,” Linh commented. “It does not look nice.” Her rationale for saying this was partly about aesthetics: she found dangly earrings and a wrist covered in bracelets unappealing.

However, there was more to her disapproval than her simply not liking the way the jewelry looked. The transgression, in Linh’s mind, that these women vendors had committed was not only or perhaps even foremost a fashion faux pas:

They are trying to look like somebody they are not. They are trying to look like they have a lot of money. But it does not work. It looks like something else. If they had one really nice bracelet, not 10 cheap

[bracelets], it would look nicer. And their earrings that dangle down like that, it is too much, too showing off [showy].

Vendors and their gold jewelry not only looked aesthetically displeasing; to Linh, the Vendors' use of accessories revealed an attempt to be an imposter, so to speak, with regard to a person's class standing, and a lack of cultural understanding of taste. These class-other women were trying to look rich when they were not, and they had failed.

It was clear that showing off or being too showy ran against middle-class notions of appropriateness. Some of the most common instances wherein people debated or negotiated what counted as too showy involved the most recent trends in jeans and skirts. Like they were in many other parts of the world, low-rise women's jeans and skirts were increasingly visible in Viet Nam during my study. They were also increasingly common topics of discussion as middle-class women started to purchase these items and saw them in public on people they perceived as class others.

As I discussed in Chapter Four, Hanh (Shampoo World) considered herself to be more traditional than many other middle-class women she knew. She was nonetheless also one of the most fashion-conscious women I knew. Her appearance always suggested that she put a lot of thought into the clothes she wore and the image she presented; she admitted to me that this was indeed the case. Low-rise jeans produced somewhat of conflict for her, and for other women trying to strike a balance between being neither too traditional nor too modern.

This style of jeans rides low on the hip, as the term implies, oftentimes exposing part of a woman's buttocks and even her underwear. In 2004, at coffee shops throughout the city, women wearing low-rise jeans were relatively common sites. And they attracted

attention from men and women alike. By this time, Hanh had made the decision to purchase and wear low-rise jeans. But she was careful not to buy jeans that exposed too much. During our discussion about Hanh's somewhat recent decision in this regard, she subtly indicated for me to look at another woman in the same café as an example of what she was trying to explain to me. I looked. This other woman was sitting two tables over and with her back to Hanh and me, and she was wearing jeans that sat so low on her hips that a sizeable portion of her buttocks was showing, as were her underwear. Laughing quietly and somewhat embarrassingly, Hanh explained simply that, "That shows too much. I would never buy that kind of jean. It is not polite. Look how much everyone can see."

The jeans that Hanh was wearing, however, sat perhaps only one inch higher on her hips. It was true that Hanh's underwear was not exposed, nor was as much of her buttocks as the other woman. Even so, her jeans seemed pretty showy to me. I asked whether there was really that big of a difference. There was. In a hushed voice that had taken on a more serious tone, Hanh made this clear:

Yes, it is a big difference. My jeans show a little, which is in style now, but hers show too much. She looks like a prostitute. I am sorry, I know that is mean, but it is true. Look at her. I know that in America it is more common, so I would not say that about someone from America. But for Vietnamese women, it is too much. Her jeans show too much. People will think that she is not a good girl.

Middle-class women also made efforts to avoid looking too traditional. Compared to the dangers of being too showy or looking too modern, however, these efforts were significantly less burdensome. There was less to negotiate, in that one inch of fabricate did not make as big of a difference as it did when it came to the complexities of low-rise

jeans. Middle-class women simply avoided wearing most of the clothing that they associated with the fashions from the past, or with the clothing typical of rural or poor women. Pajama-like pants and shirts from the same fabric and conical hats were the hallmarks of this look. Though middle-class women wore these items at home, they almost never did in public.

Generally speaking, in conversations about clothing and jewelry, Vietnamese middle-class women had considerable difficulty pinpointing middle-class fashion. It did not seem to really exist on its own. Rather, as the above stories reveal, the goal of dressing the part of a female participant in middle-class culture was primarily focused on *not* dressing like class others. This entailed adorning oneself in ways that were neither too traditional nor too modern.

Global Flows and Consumption

As the previous section begins to reveal, it was within the arena of consumption that middle-class culture interacted most frequently with global flows. I demonstrate more thoroughly in this section the dynamics of this interaction as it took place within the arena of retail marketing events, wherein local cultural forms and institutions and the participants in my research acted as mediators in how global flows impacted life in Ho Chi Minh City. For this reason, the notion of hybridity (Kraidy 2005) provides a useful framework for understanding the outcomes of this engagement. This framework, as I will expand at the end of this chapter, challenges the notion that local cultures are defenseless, so to speak, in the face of global homogenizing powers, as some have argued (see for

example Schiller 1993). Foreign influences interacted with local processes, producing new cultural forms showing at least some foreign persuasion, but also with distinctive Vietnamese characteristics. This interaction, in turn, impacted middle-class attitudes and behaviors.

According to the participants in my study, marketing events were memorable socio-cultural experiences, ones that were often recollected with surprising detail. Marketing events arrived on the city's social scene in the mid 1990s, and they were almost entirely novel at that time. They provide a good example of how the global and the local mix. Furthermore, whereas few people had stories about such things as weddings or graduation parties to share—stories about going to the wrong wedding were in fact the only exception to this I encountered—people conveyed interesting tales about their favorite marketing events with little prompting.

“It was so good,” Tra commented, when I asked her about the Nokia product launch she had attended the week before this particular meeting. “They did a great job. I do not really like the singers, because I prefer Western music. Everything else was great.” Curious about what specifically had impressed her, I pressed her for details.

The event company did a good job with all of it. They are a Vietnamese company, but they have learned a lot from the foreign event companies. Everything matched. Do you know what I mean? The theme was the future of cell phones, so everything was like the future. You had to wear this tag around your neck that was supposed to be your nametag for you job. Not your real job, but pretend. It had jobs from the future, and the date on all the tags was 2020. I did not like the music, but the signers were dressed like the future, too. One singer had this silver dress that looked like nothing you would wear now. But maybe in the future right?

She laughed and sack back into her chair.

I asked her what made her think that the Vietnamese company had learned a lot from a foreign company. She continued:

I could tell that it was Vietnamese people who arranged everything. The gift bag was appropriate for Vietnamese people, for example, and even the style for everything matched Viet Nam. But it was also professional, and better planned than some other events. Events are hard to plan. My friend does events management, and she had to learn a lot from her boss—he was a foreigner—about how to make everything match, and to have good taste. Do you know what I mean?

I initiated a similar conversation a few weeks later with Chi, who explained the origins and the evolution of marketing events in Viet Nam and expanded on Tra's comments. Chi's perspective was informed by nine years of experience, starting in 1995, working for three different companies involved in various aspects of marketing in Viet Nam. Large foreign companies, such as Pepsi and Coke, had entered Viet Nam in the mid 1990s, immediately after the lifting of the US trade embargo.⁴³ Product launches were among their first activities. For the first 3 or 4 years, these launches were aimed at distributors of their products, not at potential consumers. The goal of these events was to facilitate the development of distribution networks in large cities, including Ha Noi, Da Nang, Ho Chi Minh City, and Can Tho. After this was underway, companies contracted local media outlets to advertise their products and create brand awareness. The most significant development for the purposes of this discussion took place in the late 1990s, however.

⁴³ It is worth noting here that, like is often the case, the lifting of the US trade embargo against Viet Nam, was initiated by neither the US nor the Vietnamese government. Rather business lobbyists, responding to pressure from clients wanting to do business in Viet Nam, lobbied congress for this change aggressively in the years leading up to the embargo being lifted.

With networks established and product awareness on the rise, companies moved to create marketing strategies directly targeting consumers by 1999. This would eventually involve a range of techniques including kiosks at supermarkets, various door-to-door marketing campaigns, and marketing events of different styles and sizes. Initially, Chi explained, these events were small and low budget. Chi laughed, almost in disbelief, as she reminisced about one of the first projects that she organized in 1999, which had had a budget of under \$3000 and required one small event in each of six cities. “That would not pay for anything now,” she joked. By 2004, companies such as Dutch Lady and Castrol were paying \$200,000 US for a single-night event at a stadium with as many as 5,000 people in attendance, and hosted by foreign celebrities such as David Beckham.

Chi explained further that marketing events achieved their popularity and, in the eyes of companies paying for them, their effectiveness quickly, but not without considerable challenge. Certain products, Lipton teas, for example, were not easy sells in Viet Nam, so there was added pressure to perfect direct marketing strategies. This quickly resulted in expectations that direct marketing campaigns and marketing events would be tailored in design and execution to norms and expectations in Viet Nam. Initially, this had not been the case. Foreign companies, such as Intel, according to Chi, simply did not trust local companies to do much at all. They quickly learned, however, that local staff and companies provided two essential ingredients: cultural savvy and political positioning.

In the latter instance, Chi continued, like it is for many business practices in Viet Nam, bribes were required to get events off the ground, especially if a quick turnaround

was important, which it often was with events management. Foreign companies were up against at least two challenges in this regard. On the one hand, most foreign companies in Viet Nam were under strict orders from their government representatives in Viet Nam not to partake in corruption practices of any type. Even for those companies or individuals willing to risk doing so, it was not a simple process in the least. They first had to know whom to bribe and under what circumstances. It was nearly impossible to find a Vietnamese bureaucrat or civil servant willing to take bribes directly from foreigners, because they were advised by their superiors not to do so.

Finally, Chi explained, foreign branches of course had to account for the money they spent, and some bribes were large enough that they could not be easily disguised as miscellaneous expenses. For a local partner, however, there were a number of ways of getting around this. Vietnamese people I knew, for example, occasionally asked for an official receipt, validated with a government issued stamp, when we went out for dinner. I eventually learned that these were often taken back to their offices to provide a receipt to cover for money spent on “hidden agendas,” as one participant put it. And employees at most local companies did not need to worry about covering up these expenses at all, because owners and accountants knew well that they were simply part of doing business.

Cultural savvy was also important. Foreigners working for marketing companies, such as Saatchi and Saatchi, brought marketing expertise and professionalism, according to Chi, but marketing events in Viet Nam also required a formula unique in comparing Viet Nam not only to Western countries, but also to places as close as Singapore. The Vietnamese formula relies on two main features. Marketing events that are likely to be

talked about for days or weeks after must be busy affairs. There has to be a lot going on and the action has to be nonstop. Chi compared it to a traditional festival, but said that most importantly individual parts must reflect both modern and traditional qualities. This improves the events chances of appealing to an entire family, with members from young child to grandparents in attendance. And, Chi emphasized, “You must have a lucky draw. I know this sounds funny, but you have to have the lucky draw in Viet Nam. Everyone expects it, so you must have it.”

Event themes must make sense to a Vietnamese audience as well. Chi described how companies like Unilever and Proctor & Gamble initially had no idea how to create marketing campaigns that appealed to average Vietnamese people. Though one does not have to understand Vietnamese cultural especially in-depth, for example, to know that David Beckham is a much better choice of celebrity than, say, Roger Federer, it does take at least a basic knowledge of contemporary Vietnamese society to make these decisions. Professional tennis had virtually no following in Viet Nam at the time of my study. Soccer, on the other hand, was blamed for low levels of productivity when the World Cup and even much smaller tournaments were underway.

Incorporating local holidays and traditions requires even more local knowledge. Marketing campaigns have to be based on what will work well in mixing local customs with global brand images and message, and, more importantly, designers need to know whether particular customs are either off limits or less effective. In Viet Nam, for example, what are originally Buddhist holidays, such as Tet and the Autumn Festival, present prime opportunities for direct marketing, because these holidays are so popular.

On the other hand, national holidays, such as Independence Day and Liberation Day are both less enthusiastically celebrated and more politically charged.

If the stories from people in my study were any indication, local/global partnerships in designing and executing marketing events were effective. If the goal was to weave brand names and corporate messages into the social fabric, companies, both domestic and foreign, were making much headway in this pursuit. Middle-class people remembered marketing events like they did other important social activities. They could reminisce about them like they would an especially good holiday or pop concert. Some larger events and campaigns were nearly the stuff of legends in fact. “Shampoo World” from Chapter One was a good example of an event whose overall character left lasting impressions. Those involved in the production process could reflect back on a job well done for months, and people in attendance had a memorable evening they could discuss with friends, one sponsored by and promoting the products of a corporation, that is. All of this in turn was impacting middle-class people’s attitudes and behaviors.

This was especially true with regard to the ever-changing environment within which women in Viet Nam were negotiating their roles and identities. Though “Dare To Wear Black” took place more than a year before I arrived in Viet Nam, people were able to describe the evening as though it had just happened. Unilever hired a local company in 2001 to promote their anti-dandruff shampoo, Clear, via a one-night extravaganza. Thuy (the textile factory manager) attended the event and was impressed by the decorations, the many performances, and, most of all, by the way the product itself was presented. She claimed to have learned a lot about the shampoo, about what causes dandruff and about

how to prevent it. I asked her whether she had thought much about dandruff before the event. She replied:

Dry skin [on you scalp] is not new. Worrying about it is not new. I can remember when I was a student at university thinking about this, when I wore black. But now there is something that we can do about it. *That* has changed. Now we can buy shampoos to fix the problem. When I was young we did not have that. I remember thinking about this that night [at the marketing event]. Clear shampoo is made to improve your scalp. There is Head & Shoulders also, which is what I use. After the event I bought Head & Shoulders, not Clear. I do not remember why [laughing]. And it works.

Companies promoting skin whitening lotions relied on the same strategy. It was the basic notion that an increasing number of personal concerns (mostly with regards to beauty and health) could be addressed via the marketplace. There were an increasing number of products—the majority of which were being promoted and distributed by Unilever and Proctor & Gamble like never before—that women consumers could purchase in the pursuit of health and beauty. As discussed by other scholars (Thomas and Drummond 2003, Nghiem 2004), globalized advertising messages were promising Vietnamese women that consumer products could greatly improve their attractiveness, especially in the eyes of men. As Taylor (2007) puts it, the media determined process of redefining the image of Vietnamese women as erotic (yet also monogamous) wives or boyfriends was well underway.

In this process, furthermore, as Thuy's recollection of the "Dare To Wear Black" event reveals, companies were, at least to some degree, trusted as experts regarding these issues. I asked Thuy what she learned about dandruff, and she explained in some detail that:

They taught us what dandruff is. I listened carefully because it was a problem that I had. They said that people lose skin all the time. That it was normal. But people like me lose too much. They said this was abnormal. I remember them using that word, abnormal. I do not want to be abnormal [laughing]. They said it was about nutrition and even stress. It was like they knew everything about me. I told you before that my job is stressful, and I do not eat well all the time. Sometimes at work I eat unhealthy food. They were telling us to change our habits and to use their shampoo. And they knew so much about it [dandruff].

Listening to Thuy, I was impressed by how much of the event she remembered, which had taken place more than a year before our conversation. I was also struck by how much it had influenced her with regard to her sense of self and how that self related to the outside world. She had a problem that was, after the event, both more of a problem and yet also a more manageable problem, with the right product, that is.

When I asked Thuy why it was important for her to deal with this problem, she looked at me like I had asked a rather ridiculous or naïve question. In retrospect, I probably had. Even so, she offered a short but telling reply. It was about men. As Thuy and I had discussed before, she was feeling a lot of pressure to be married, and she had made a conscious decision to start making her self more desirable regarding her physical appearance. Head & Shoulders was one of her tools, so to speak, in making this happen.

Not all media messages and marketing events were targeted at women based on the idea that these women were hoping to improve their physical appearance through increased consumption of health and beauty products. As Taylor (2007:41) also points out, the nurturing mother and domesticated housewife were also images that concerned Vietnamese women. These, consequently, were also images on which retail companies

pinned their hopes of creating the links between certain products and particular lifestyle choices.

Many people I knew in Ho Chi Minh City, including the majority of the women and some of the men participating in my study, knew about a campaign Unilever put on in 2001 to promote Omo, the laundry detergent discussed earlier in this chapter. The month-long campaign was titled “White Clothes, Bright Futures” and included an opening ceremony, a door-to-door charity drive, and a large closing ceremony. The company sent local “representatives” (i.e. average people in need of work) to go door-to-door collecting used clothing from city residents. These representatives explained that they were collecting clothes for the poor on behalf of Omo and Unilever. (People who gave got invited to the closing ceremony.) Then the company’s hired help washed all of these clothes, in Omo of course, and gave them to poor school children in several much-publicized visits to schools. Both the opening ceremony and the finale incorporated a group of school children into the evening’s activities.

Though it took place in 2001, like other large successful campaigns, people could talk about it in surprising detail more than two years later. People explained the basics of the overall campaign, described above, which featured prominently on local television, including during news segments. Those who attended the final event, also spoke about how it had explained a lot with regard to how to do laundry, about how to use Omo most effectively to get out stains. There were demonstrations, free samples and lots of entertaining performances. To top it off, the closing event was “touching,” according to many. Children who would otherwise not likely attend such events, in the first place,

were not only present, but featured on stage, happily accepting their new (used, but clean) clothing.

In conversations with people about the event and about Omo, both of what I presumed to be the event's intended messages were stuck in people's minds: Omo was a great product; Unilever was a caring company. People with whom I spoke felt that Unilever showed considerable civic engagement and people seemed to genuinely appreciate this sentiment. They were also impressed with what they considered technical knowledge about how Omo got clothes clean, and the product itself. Dutch Lady's stadium event had a similar effect. Though the company's event did not include an actual charity event, they too offered apparently convincing evidence that they were in Viet Nam to help children grow to be strong and healthy. This particular event featured Dutch Lady single-serving milk drink boxes of many flavors and highlighted in considerable detail how regular consumption of these would lead to healthy children.

Not all marketing was aimed at women either. Long (a computer technician not yet featured in this dissertation) consider himself fortunate to have been invited to a 2002 marketing event for Intel. Many of the features of the event, according to Long, were not especially memorable. It was that fact that Craig Barrett, then CEO of Intel, was the host of the event, which took place in Ha Noi, where Long lived at the time. Long felt strongly that Barrett's willingness to come to Viet Nam, at a time when virtually no CEOs from large multinational companies were coming to Viet Nam, indicated a special and important relationships between Intel and Viet Nam.

Long recounted:

It was hard to get tickets. But I knew someone who worked for Galaxy [the event management company]. The way [Barrett] talked...he talked about how important Viet Nam would be for Intel. And he said that Intel would be important to Viet Nam. He made a commitment to that. Do you know that he was the first big CEO from America? It is important for us to have a relationship with him. He can make a big difference for Viet Nam. Just one person can make a big difference. He was willing to come all the way here just for an event. You asked if I thought the event was important. No. It is not the event. He came. That is what is important. I do not care about the performances. They spent a lot of money on that. But I heard an American CEO speak live! Few Vietnamese people get that chance. Not yet. It is changing. More CEOs will come.

Long's reaction indicated to me that he took a rather specific message away from the event, despite his claim not to be impressed with the event itself. Though I am confident that Intel expected Barrett's presence to be the highlight, and that this was likely part of a larger strategy to make inroads into Viet Nam foremost in pursuit of profit, Long saw it as a commitment on behalf of both a person (Barrett) and a company to establishing a relationship. Furthermore, Long viewed this relationship not only as mutually beneficial, but also as necessary and perhaps even inevitable.

The attitudes and practices described in this chapter reveal an important pattern with regard to how middle-class people were viewing themselves in relation to the world around them. They increasingly were linked, through consumer practices and various forms of media, to corporate institutions both domestic and foreign. They were at times keenly aware of these linkages, when for example, the price of a favorite commodity increased dramatically. They were sometimes less than fully aware—it seemed to me—of the nature or underlying dimensions of these relationships, when for example, an international recognized CEO came to establish a “relationship” with Viet Nam.

The outcomes of these local/global interactions should not be interpreted, however, as evidence that something called Westernization or cultural homogenization was taking place in Viet Nam. Rather there was plenty of evidence that Vietnamese middle-class culture had retained many distinctive elements and was being shaped in a socio-economic environment marked by hybridity. Local culture norms and expectations often were at least as powerful and resilient as those coming from outside Viet Nam.

One of the more telling examples of this involves a particular element of the cultural logic that guided consumer behavior in Viet Nam. As this chapter reveals, the purchase of high-quality, fashionable and affordable products was an important part of middle-class culture's engagement with global flows. Middle-class individuals went about doing so, however, in a consumer environment wherein consumer goods were described with locally specific vocabulary and concepts, which reveal critical insights into how *Vietnamese* middle-class people viewed their relationships with consumer goods, the companies that produce these goods and the people who sell them.

As Vann (2006) explains and as I observed at shopping locations throughout the city, local cultural understandings about consumer goods do not follow so-called international expectations with regard to the production and distribution of consumer goods. Vann (2006) explains that international laws governing intellectual property rights stipulate that national laws are supposed to uphold distinctions between the authentic and the fake, as mandated by international agreements, such as those put forth under the GATT and the WTO.

In Ho Chi Minh City, however, as Van (2006) points out, the concepts and expectations that come with these mandates factored little into how people thought about goods, shopping and property. Instead, middle-class people relied on their own vocabulary and their own understandings of what a good was to inform their shopping. People assigned labels to goods depending on how they envisioned the quality of the good. A *model good* was typically of the highest quality, and it came with the highest price tag. The producers of *mimic goods*, on the other hand, were trying to copy model goods. Middle-class consumers could rarely afford model goods, such as the Nike shoes for sale at high-end relate outlets, but they were happy to settle for mimicked versions of Nike shoes. That Nike had not sanctioned the making of the mimicked version was not an issue. Consumers were mostly concerned with whether the mimicked shoe came close enough in quality to be worth the price, which was of course several times lower than that of the model good.

Consumers also used the concepts *fake* and *real*. Unlike international or Western standards, however, the realness or fakeness of a good had virtually nothing to do with whether it was authentic in the eyes of international intellectual property rights regulators, such as the World Trade Organization. Rather fake goods, in the local vernacular, were attempts on behalf of sellers to deceive buyers into purchasing something under false pretense. Consumers might be duped, for example, into buying mimicked goods at model good prices. Or as Vann (2006) observes, a vendor might sell a bottle full of used cooking oil masquerading as bottled of shampoo. The relationships

people had with consumer goods were thus closely tied to their relationships with the people who sold those goods.

The constant possibilities for this kind of deception meant that middle-class people were eager to establish long-term relationships with sellers of all sorts of goods. In these arrangements, trust typically was first established by trying out several vendors of a particular product and then sticking with the seller who had the best product at the most reasonable price and who proven to be the most reliable and honest. This partly explains why in 2007, according to the market research TNS Vietnam, only 18 per cent of all retail purchases in Viet Nam were taking place at supermarkets and department stores. Despite the presence of large retailers in Ho Chi Minh City since 1996, the middle-class people in my study still did the overwhelming majority of their shopping at small shops, “traditional” markets, and shopping centers with individually allotted stalls. Though the economic dominance of large retailers was growing slowly in Viet Nam, the “Wal-Mart effect” (Fishman 2006) had been held in check, in part because middle-class people held strong beliefs about what was and was not wise spending behavior.

Similar patterns prevailed with regard to food and beverage consumption. Neither the “McDonaldization” nor “Starbuckization” of society were advancing in Viet Nam at the rates that these processes were taking place in the West and in countries in Asia such as China, Thailand and South Korean (Ritzer 1993). In fact, as of 2008, there were no Wal-Mart, McDonalds nor Starbucks stores in Viet Nam. There never had been. Two regional fast-food chains had been around for more than a decade, and KFC and Pizza Hut had opened restaurants more recently. Though all of these fast-food outlets were

having good success in Viet Nam, the vast majority of out-of-home food and beverage consumption in Ho Chi Minh City was taking place at small and medium size non-corporate establishments and at locally-owned chains that showed few signs of being modeled after Western fast-food restaurants. This likely was at least partly explained by the fact that the impersonal, self-serve nature of fast-food eating did not match with the more interpersonal expectations middle-class people had when they spent their money.

The issues of trust and relationship building also factored heavily when middle-class people began buying pirated DVDs. This form of consumption became increasingly common during the period of my research. Vendors specializing in this trade sold Hollywood films pirated in China and shipped to Viet Nam. Many individual vendors possessed uncanny knowledge of the quality of the hundreds of titles that they had in stock at any one point. When it came to dealing with middle-class Vietnamese consumers this was an essential part of being a reliable dealer. Quality varied widely, mostly depending on how the pirating was undertaken, and this in turn depended on how recent the movie was. In short, the more recent the movie the more likely the quality was low. International tourists bought pirated DVDs at the same stores and were faced with the risk of buying DVDs that might not even work. Middle-class Vietnamese people, on the other hand, established long-term relationship with sellers to ensure that the movies they bought were *dep* or beautiful, the local vernacular for a film that was of the highest quality.

This same system functioned when it came to the buying and selling of many different kinds of goods. Mimics of internationally known fashion brands, such as Nike,

Old Navy, and Gap, were readily available in Viet Nam, for example. Middle-class consumers cared little if at all that these were, by international standards, fake or pirated goods. They cared about quality and price, and the possibility of purchasing a good quality product at the appropriate price increased with every new trust-based relationship consumers fostered. Unlike the impersonal shopping at the huge discount and retail stores frequented by middle-class North America's, much purchasing among the middle-class in Viet Nam took place within the context of interpersonal relationships. That some large corporation's trademark was supposed to signify high quality, furthermore, played a rather minor role in these exchanges, given that it was widely accepted that the corporations behind the logo had little to do with a product's origin.

There were other features of the way Vietnamese middle-class people participated in the economy that made it distinct from that of their Western counterparts. Credit was rare. None of the people participating in my study had credit cards. Nor did they take out loans for large purchases, such as motorbikes or homes. Saving money was a top priority for many, but as I have mentioned, doing so in banks was only beginning to become common. From the year 2000, Viet Nam's fledgling stock market provided another option for people with which they could handle their savings, through investment. This, too, was rare. Middle-class people expressed considerable fear when it came to the stock market. A few of the people I knew in Ho Chi Minh City had started to make small investments in the stock market, but they were cautious. When I asked people about the US economic system, emphasizing that many middle-class people's retirement depended in no small part on stock markets, they strongly questioned why people would be willing to risk their

money in such a way. Hai, to whom I put this question, noted that it was like “gambling” your retirement. “Why not just go to Las Vegas?”

CHAPTER EIGHT: EPILOGUE

At about the midpoint of my primary research period in early 2004, a struggle between middle-class (and upper-class) people and the government erupted. I followed the events closely even after my research ended (in August of 2004), until its resolution in 2005, when in essence the government ceded defeat. It began when the central government instituted a “one person, one motorbike” policy, which limited the number of motorbikes a person could register in their name to one. The announcement of the policy was followed by a government campaign designed to inform people of the new policy and to facilitate compliance. The aim of these measures was to mitigate traffic problems in major cities like Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City. Restricting ownership was intended to reduce the number of motorbikes on streets, thus alleviating congestion and decreasing the number of motor accidents. In Ho Chi Minh City, people were frustrated by this decision and explained to me that it was both ill conceived and likely to be resisted. They also talked about the ban on new sales in Ha Noi, which they saw as even more disturbing.

As Truitt (2008) points out, the city government in Ha Noi actually implemented a ban on new registration altogether, in an attempt to deal with Ha Noi’s infamous traffic congestion, which many considered to be the worst in Viet Nam. As several of the people participating in my study were from Ha Noi, they heard about the reaction to this policy firsthand from family and friends. One woman’s younger brother, in fact, was in his first year of university, and she had been planning to help him buy a motorcycle and was

initially concerned that she might not be able to. As the new policy took effect, however, she explained to me that people from Ha Noi were going to resist this measure. People were talking about simply going around the new law, like they did many others in Viet Nam.

By January of 2005, in fact, the media was reporting that resistance to the policy was widespread and that a somewhat troubling situation had developed because of the specific nature of how wealthier people were getting around the restriction. One report explained that:

Since the registration of new motorbikes was temporarily halted in seven inner-city districts, many people in those districts have asked people living in non-banned districts to register their bikes for them. Consequently, many poor families in outlying districts have registered expensive bikes like Dylan or Spacy models under their name. This has limited these poor families ability to register for their own bikes in the future as prevailing regulations only allow each person to register one motorbike (Thanh Nien 2005c)

Newspapers also reported that this noncompliance was widespread in Ho Chi Minh City with regard to the less stringent one-person-one-motorbike law.

People in Ha Noi, furthermore, were willing to channel their resistance to these measures in an unprecedented way: they were willing to protest the law *collectively* as *unconstitutional*. As Truitt (2008) reports, motorbike users and lawyers fought to have the ban lifted, and they were successful in this pursuit. That Vietnam's constitution was evoked in this fight and that average middle-class people were key players in this struggle is telling. Freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom of religion are all rights clearly defined in the same constitution. These rights were regularly violated, to the point that most people did not consider themselves to actually

have these rights. The right of poor citizens to own property, furthermore, also regularly has been violated, primarily in the form of land grabs orchestrated by corporations and the state. None of these concerns had roused the collective political will of the middle-class. It took the state infringing on their rights to consume freely to motivate middle-class political action.

By the time I returned to live and work in Ho Chi Minh City in the fall of 2005, the government had decided to lift the ban in Ha Noi and had revoked its one-person-one-motorbike policy. My experiences as an expatriate resident over the next three years and my continued association with many of the people who had participated in my study allowed me to track this and other developments important to my research. Among the most important of these were the patterns that I had begun observe regarding how middle-class people were garnering and wielding social power.

In addition to fighting the government head-on over private property rights, middle-class people were also exerting influence in concert with the state. Though further research is needed to allow concrete analysis of this development, I can offer a handful of observations that middle-class people were starting to align themselves with the state, a state that they previously and in many cases still considered corrupt and even illegitimate. Anthropologist Philip Taylor, for example, explains the change in attitude and practice of middle-class families who own small business or who have made money from selling land in southern Viet Nam. Having lost much of their family fortunes from post-1975 policy, these families had previously harbored much distain for the government and government officials. By the time of my research, changes had been underway for several

years. These families were socializing somewhat regularly with officials and working with them to facilitate business deals.⁴⁴

Toward the end of my study and in the period afterward, I saw this more and more often among some of the people participating in my research as well. The “special payments” that many people had to make to officials usually took the form of some sort of social outing. Often these involved taking officials out for lunch or to coffee. In some instances, there was even some socializing with the family members of officials. Chi (in marketing events management) noted, for example, that more than once officials had inquired about getting tickets to the events she was planning. She would meet with an official to make a special payment, and upon hearing about the event, the official would ask if he and his family could attend. Chi explained that she did not feel that these officials were trying to coerce her into giving tickets. It was more like they were simply asking an acquaintance for a personal favor, for example, because their children liked the pop singer performing at the event. While she did not feel obligated to honor such requests, Chi knew that doing so would only further cement her ties with an official.

Significantly, in the two years following the completion of my study, Chi and two other women eventually used the socio-political connections that such interactions fostered to start their own companies. Having reached the highest salaries they could as employees in either domestic or foreign firms, they decided to create their own events management firms. The social and cultural capital they had stocked over several years were key elements of their success in this regard. These contacts and forms of knowledge

⁴⁴ These understandings come from personal communication with Philip Taylor, a long-time scholar of Vietnamese studies, whose published work is cited throughout this dissertation.

were in fact more important than financial capital, given that many companies in need of marketing events were willing to pay large deposits up front if they knew they were working with reputable individuals. Chi, for example, started work on her own with an initial investment of 2,000 USD, which she recovered after her first event.

There were other ways that middle-class people were making use of their newfound power to influence socio-economic developments in Ho Chi Minh City. One of the more common and important ways had to do with the fact that middle-class people, to a limited degree, were mediating the flows of money within Viet Nam. Though the actual flow of FDI into the country was shaped and directed by individuals higher up in government and corporate structures, once the money was invested locally, middle-class people were influencing how that money was distributed. This mediating of capital flows came in various forms.

Some of the most common and interesting instances of this had to do with the hiring of staff. Factory managers at foreign owned facilities had perhaps the most influence in this arena. Vietnamese managers did nearly all of the hiring at many factories. Thuy (textile factory manager), in fact, had been with the same company for so long that she was doing nearly all of the hiring, even that of new managers. (As of the writing of this chapter, she has worked for the same company for almost 8 years.) Thuy commented that her position at the factory was well known in her neighborhood, and that her parents were getting more and more visits at their home from people looking for jobs for their children. Her family's status, in turn, had benefited greatly from her power as a broker in the labor market. This was only heightened by the fact that Thuy's company

was considered a particularly desirable place to work regarding wages and working conditions.

When I saw Thuy in January of 2008 for the first time in more than a year, I compared her appearance that evening to the first time I met her. In short, I barely recognized her. Her hair was cut according to the latest styles, she was wearing some makeup and her black dress was fashionable and much more provocative than anything I had ever seen her in previously. I asked how she was doing, and she told me about how good things were going with regard to her job and her family. She also mentioned that her father had finally stopped trying to tell her how to live her life and how to dress. I thought to myself that these newly found freedoms and the fact she was the source of her family's growing prestige were very likely closely related.

Rapid growth in the marketing event industry also meant an increase in social influence for people who did the hiring within this sector. As the description of Shampoo World suggests, marketing events were major logistical and economic undertakings and their increased prevalence created entirely new forms of labor and increased the demand for existing types of work. "Promotion girls" and MCs (masters of ceremony), for example, became staple roles in Viet Nam's marketing event economy. Both of these positions paid relatively well, and many young people sought this kind of work either during university or as part-time work to supplement other service sector work.

In 2004, for example, if a young woman had moved to Ho Chi Minh City to attend university, on average, she would have paid around 80 USD per year for university and about 30 USD per month for rent. If she had made the right connections in the

marketing industry, had proven herself reliable, and, importantly, she had the “right” body type, she could pay her tuition and rent with money earned working one or two events per week. Promotions girls in 2004 could earn 10 USD per event, which typically involved no more than 3 hours of work.

On two of the dozen or so occasions that I had coffee with Hanh (Shampoo World), young women she had hired previously approached her during our conversations to ask if she had any work for them. I noticed that these young women approached Hanh with respect, excusing themselves for having interrupted our conversation, and politely asked if they could bother her to inquire about any work opportunities. Hanh did not appear to be put off by these interruptions in the least; rather she seemed to enjoy the prestige that came with having control over the budgets and hiring associated with marketing events. On one of these occasions, the young woman who approached Hanh was a server at the café. When our bill came, we received two coupons for complimentary drinks. Hanh explained somewhat boastfully that she got special treatment at several cafes where women she hired worked as servers.

There were several other kinds of part-time work that middle-class people brokered. Marketing events required construction crews and security staff, and there was always a host of random tasks that needed to be completed. The same went for other types of offices. Deliveries needed to be made, for example, and Ho Chi Minh City had not developed a professional office-to-office deliver system, such as the bicycle messenger common in North American cities. Office workers increasingly employed *xe om* drivers (motorcycle taxi drivers) to make quick deliveries or pickups throughout the city. By 2005,

some of the women in my study, in fact, had stopped driving their own motorcycles to work because the traffic and parking situation had become so bothersome. They had hired *xe om* drivers both to take them to work every morning and to be on call whenever they needed rides.

These arrangements transformed one of the lowest paying and most itinerant jobs in Ho Chi Minh City (i.e. *xe om* driving) into a somewhat more stable form of work. This in turn benefited both *xe om* drivers and office workers, with the balance of power favoring the latter. Middle-class office workers were keen to establish long-term, though informal, relationships with one or a small number of *xe om* drivers. They needed to be able to trust drivers to complete tasks quickly. They also would eventually come to trust drivers with small amounts of money to make purchases. A driver, for example, might run to an office supply shop or travel to the train station to buy a train ticket for someone working in an office, and he was given cash to do so. Because these arrangements meant increased stability for them, some *xe om* drivers were eager to earn this kind of trust, often returning even very small amounts of change without being asked.

In these transactions, *xe om* drivers were paid slightly more per task than they would normally charge a stranger for a ride somewhere in the city, and they were likely to get work more regularly. Middle-class office workers, on the other hand, had informal assistants they could rely on at a moments notice to help out during especially hectic workdays. As I have mentioned, because these were informal arrangements, and because there was no shortage of *ex om* drivers, office workers had the upper hand in these relationships. *Xe om* drivers were eager to stay on good terms, and would thus remain on

call nearly constantly. These arrangements, while established through work-related interactions, also factored into non-work arenas. Middle-class people could, for example, call one of their trusted *xe om* drivers when they needed to pay an electricity or phone bill and either did not have the time or did not want to stand in line to do so.

In such arrangements, their control over the flow of money within Ho Chi Minh City benefited middle-class people considerably. Though not paid to them directly, this money was at their disposal and could be used to purchase various other forms of capital that they could later draw on personally and professionally. For many of the people participating in my study, this capital originated outside of Viet Nam. The continued increase of FDI into Viet Nam and the country's overall economic success were critical to the continuation of the influence that the middle class was able to exert. For the vast majority of the three-year period that I lived in Viet Nam (post-research, from 2005 to 2008), many signs could have been interpreted as evidence that things were likely to continue to benefit middle-class people in this regard.

Economic growth and accompanying inequality continued almost entirely unabated for much of this period. Especially for people working in marketing/advertising and as managers in manufacturing, this continued prosperity meant increased earnings that were the result of both pay increases and growing end-of-year bonuses. With very few exceptions, the companies for which the people in my study worked enjoyed great success. This also meant that people were getting promoted and/or switching companies in search of better pay. In the latter case, certain individuals switched jobs more than once a year, as offers for better pay seemed to be around every corner.

The year immediately after the conclusion of my study, 2005, brought economic growth at a rate of approximately 8.4% and approved FDI that amounted to nearly 6 billion USD—in both cases these levels were the highest the Vietnamese economy had experienced since 1997. In this climate, the government liberalized foreign indirect investment by increasing the percentage of shares allowed by law to be held by foreign entities from 30% to 49%. At the same time, the government and state firms continued to supply over half of the total investment capital, in accordance with a long-standing strategy wherein the economy was stimulated through increased governmental spending (Luong 2006).

The indices from 2006 signaled that this approach was working—at least if one agrees that growth is the primary marker of success. Economic growth remained above 8%, and this momentum was explained by growth specifically in exports, consumer spending and investment spending. The countries biggest export markets were, as they had been for many years, the United States, China and Japan. In 2006, Viet Nam also became further integrated into global markets. The conclusion of a bilateral trade agreement with the US in May, accession to the World Trade Organization in November, and the US Congress's approval of Viet Nam's Permanent Normal Trade Relations status were the main indicators of stronger global integration (Luong 2007).

This economic progress and greater global integration impacted the nature of the social cultural project of making middle-class culture. Foremost was the shift in the range of what was considered appropriate spending. Whereas at the beginning of my research 2,000 USD was the highest price most people in my study were willing to pay for a

motorcycle, more recently, motorbikes costing even twice this were being purchased and rationalize as appropriate. One woman, for instance, explained that she needed a more expensive motorbike because it had several features that had become “necessary,” including an enclosed space to store her purse and a body design that limited the spray from wet pavement during the rainy season. The range of the *type* of consumer goods deemed necessary also expanded. Digital music listening devices, such as MP3 players, and laptop computers became requisite personal accoutrements for a growing number of people, for example. Additionally, the role that middle-class men played specifically also changed. In short, men were becoming much more active when it came to both shopping and acquiring the cultural knowledge required to be a so-called good shopper, including understandings about fashion and about how to haggle.

By 2007, World Bank President Robert B. Zoelck had only praise for Viet Nam’s development. As GDP growth reached 8.48% that year, he declared that Viet Nam had the potential to be amongst the greatest successes in terms of development, citing the country’s improvements in living standards and poverty reduction as among the best in the world (Han 2008). At the same time, the specific contours of the Vietnamese economy in 2007, in retrospect, can be read as writing on the wall. That same year, inflation continued to rise and prices for housing and construction material increased at their fastest rates ever (Han 2008). Economists and journalists pointed to a variety of positive signs at the time, such as strong export growth, which had increased more than 20% from the previous year, and the lasting significance of the Viet Nam-US bilateral trade agreement. As I point to later in this chapter, however, there would soon be reason

to question the sustainability of an economy experiencing dramatic inflation, on the one hand, and one that was so heavily dependent on export to the West, on the other.

Well before the Vietnamese economy truly faltered in 2008, however, a series of events starting as early as 2004 begin to highlight the possibility that Viet Nam's overall development strategy was in need of reconsideration, despite the impressive growth. Inflation began to catch some people's attention as early as 2004, yet it came with no move by the government to increase the minimum wage. In fact, as Luong (2007) explains, cumulative inflation between 1999 and the end of 2005 was 36.4%. That there was no corresponding readjustment of the minimum wage likely explains the spike in the number of wildcat strikes that took place in the first six months of 2006. (There were 303 such strikes, a six-month total double that from the entire previous year.) Generally, inequality continued to increase and reports of increases in crime began to surface.

As of the writing of this chapter, economic developments both within and outside the country raised the question as to whether Viet Nam's economy will continue to grow at its current pace, and whether FDI will continue to enter the country in increasing proportions like it has for the past 8 years. In addition to the slowing of the global economy and the economic uncertainty regarding Viet Nam's largest export-based trading partner (the United States), several internal situations are cause for concern.

Corruption, drawn out legislative and bureaucratic processes, and major infrastructural problems exist, raising doubts as to whether FDI will continue to flow into the country at or near current levels. While corruption can be interpreted as a "greasing of the wheels" that facilitates economic growth, it also scares some investors. As I have

already mentioned, policy changes have come relatively slowly in Viet Nam. This is in part the result of the slow legislative and bureaucratic systems. Keeping up, for example, with the demands of the WTO, which Viet Nam joined in 2007, has and will continue to be a challenge. There are infrastructural concerns throughout the entire country as well. The quality and number of roads, bridges, power stations, and other public works lag far behind the demand. According to the country's current prime minister, electricity-generating capacity needs to double by 2010 (Economist 2008).

Reporting in the spring of 2008, the Economist cited rising inflation and a growing shortage of affordable housing and predicted that these situations could cause major problems for Ho Chi Minh City's poor and working class. The magazine speculated that this, in turn, would likely lead to growing class conflict. By the summer of 2008, these predictions seemed like self-fulfilling prophecies. Summer headlines from international news sources took the opportunity to sensationalize a situation the Vietnamese government considered troubling but not cataclysmic: *The New York Times* exclaimed "Inflation Delivers a Blow to Vietnam's Spirit" (Mydans 2008); *The Vancouver Sun* observed "Hard times fall on a once investment-rich Vietnam" (Manthorpe 2008); and the *International Herald Tribune* pointed out "How quickly Asia's newest 'Tiger Economy' has stopped roaring" (Stocking and Tien 2008). Whether the government's appraisal or the foreign media's near-doomsday predictions were more appropriate remains to be seen.

What was clear as of the summer of 2008 was that Viet Nam's economy had faltered significantly for the first time in more than a decade. Inflation was starting to

impact many people adversely, especially the poor; but middle-class individuals were also expressing concern. Overall inflation rose to 27 per cent in July, which was the highest in Asia, and food prices that month were 74 per cent higher than during the same month in 2007. The news reports cited above explained that the worldwide economic downturn was partly to blame, as were rising fuel prices. They added, however, that part of the cause also had to do with an “overheated economy” that was moving forward too quickly and without adequate safeguards. There was, according to economists cited by these media source, too much FDI, much of which met with bottlenecks in infrastructure and capacity (Mydans 2008).

The government attempted to curb inflation by controlling interest rates. But it also cut the gasoline subsidy by more than 30 per cent, which resulted in a spike in prices at the pump. In response to inflation, workers in factories throughout the country were calling for higher wages and many were striking in an effort to convince owners and managers of the seriousness of their demands. The BBC (2008) reported, regarding only one such strike, that 20,000 workers from a Taiwanese-owned plant making shoes for Nike had walked off the job demanding a 20% increase in wages.

Up and until this point, the middle-class individuals in my study had been negotiating class relations opportunistically, forming alliances with political/economic elites when it made sense to do so, and teaming up with less economically advantaged people when it served their interests. As it appeared that push might come to shove with regard to the emerging economic landscape, there was a distinct possibility that the middle-class would have to choose sides in a more concrete fashion. As of the writing of

this chapter, in October of 2008, it is not clear to me which way they will throw their support, or even that all or even most of the people in my study will move in the same direction. Though how these developments turn out will likely influence its evolution, regardless of the outcome, I suspect middle-class culture in Ho Chi Minh City will persist in something like its current form well into the future.

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