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Vietnam Without Guarantees: Consumer Attitudes in an Emergent Market Economy

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Vietnam Without Guarantees: Consumer Attitudes in an Emergent Market Economy

A Thesis Presented

by

KYLIE R. LANTHORN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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Department of Communication

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ABSTRACT

VIETNAM WITHOUT GUARANTEES: CONSUMER ATTITUDES
IN AN EMERGENT MARKET ECONOMY

MAY 2016

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This research explores how Vietnam's embrace of capitalism and global markets has impacted consumer culture. Through ethnographic research conducted in Hanoi, Vietnam in June-August 2015, this study seeks to interrogate how the political atmosphere in Vietnam coexists with market freedoms in a country which opened its economy to the world during the 1986 *Doi Moi* (renovation) reforms. Vietnam now conducts a considerable amount of foreign trade with major foreign investment from countries including Japan, South Korea, and Singapore. This study emphasizes the role international relations have played in these developments as Vietnam has embraced partnerships with countries with which it was previously at war. This approach includes a self-reflexive critique of my role in the research process as a young, white American. This research engages conceptually with critical cultural studies and theories of articulation to challenge the assumed evolution of communism to capitalism within modernization theory as well as the global, homogenous spread of neoliberalism by examining how these articulations manifest in everyday life. To this end, this study seeks to explore how changing patterns of consumption brought on by open market economics are articulated with global political relationships. The analysis argues that neoliberalism is applied selectively to maintain single-party politics and an oppressive state formation,

and that foreign advertising in Vietnam serves as an index of narratives of progress and economic growth. This research has significant implications for consumerism within developing countries, studies of neoliberalism, and postsocialist state formations.

Key words: Vietnam, consumer culture, cultural studies, neoliberalism, ethnography.

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CHAPTER 1

VIETNAM

“Happy birthday to your country!” exclaimed my young Vietnamese friend as I joined their group around the famous Hoan Kiem Lake in Hanoi, Vietnam. I looked at her, startled, until I remembered the date: July 4th, 2015, Independence Day for the United States of America. As she pulled out the small plastic American flag she had purchased for the occasion I found myself laughing at the fact that she (and many of my other Vietnamese friends) had remembered this holiday while I did not, and was again faced with the surprising embrace by (most of) the people of Vietnam of American culture. Only forty years after a devastating war, whose legacy lingers in the forms of unexploded ordnance and Agent Orange, the mere fact that people I met wanted to talk, eat, and take pictures with me appeared to be nothing short of amazing. The question of how this seemingly unlikely embrace of the U.S. operates so soon after the war is one of the driving questions this research seeks to address.

Vietnam is a rapidly modernizing country of about ninety million, home to two major river deltas—the Red River and Mekong—as well as a unique hub of biodiversity and more than two thousand exquisite miles of coastline. As an emerging player on the globalized stage of trade and industry, Vietnam is becoming increasingly important in terms of global economics and politics. Vietnam has been moving towards a capitalist oriented economy since the 1986 *Doi Moi* (or, renovation) reforms which opened their market to engage with the rest of the world. As the country pursues capitalistic interests and wealth, these economic changes present an opportune case-study of capitalism and

open up important questions around impacts on the consumer culture of Vietnam.

“Consumer culture” is used in this research not to presuppose a culture defined through consumerism, but rather an emergent culture associated with consumption as a result of economic changes. The extent of this change and its impacts is something this research seeks to explore. The impacts of these economic shifts on domestic politics was one of the questions which initially drew me in to try and understand how capitalism and communism can coexist. The role international relations have played in this development is also of great interest as Vietnam has embraced partnerships with countries with which it was previously at war, including the U.S. and Japan. The thirty-year anniversary of *Doi Moi* makes this an especially significant time to evaluate how these impacts have resonated through Vietnam over the past three decades.

Vietnam presents an important case study of capitalism as it has made this transition within the modern context of an increasingly globalized landscape. Coexisting cultural influences (local and global) have formed a hybrid combination of localized street vendors and small-scale commerce with global brands and corporations, altering the appearance of consumer culture in Vietnam. This has manifested in the introduction of global companies like McDonalds and Starbucks over the past few years. All of these changes are appealing from a research perspective, however as a young, white female, I am almost always greeted with surprise and confusion when others learn that my research takes place in Vietnam and hear of the deep affinity I have developed for this country. My attraction to Vietnam began when I studied abroad there in 2013 as an undergraduate,

and my research interests were piqued by questions of how the old and new (old buildings, traditions, new billboards, products) can coexist.¹

This research is primarily concerned with the following question: how has Vietnam's embrace of capitalism and global markets impacted its consumption practices? A communication perspective offers a critical standpoint from which to consider Vietnam's current conjuncture as is informed by the quotidian, or ordinary, performances of everyday life, political economic analysis, and mediated representations. In an attempt to survey consumer culture, this research takes an ethnographic approach to studying the proliferation of advertising through observing the physical appearance of the city and talking with people about their experiences and opinions. This study is focused in the Old Quarter in the capital city of Hanoi using semi-structured interviews to explore changes in consumer culture and explicate subjective constructions of culture/country in relation to increased consumerism. These understandings are then articulated with the economic and political conditions in Vietnam in a conjunctural analysis of present day Vietnam.

This research is contextualized within a project of articulations between Vietnam's economic formation, cultural sphere, and political climate. Vietnam's "socialist oriented market economy" is not just capitalism by another name (Hayton, 2010), but rather a very specific formation of capitalism that cannot be assumed to contain what are often understood as homogenizing effects of capitalist projects. Much existing research concerning contemporary culture in Vietnam has focused on Ho Chi Minh City in the South (HCMC—formerly Saigon) because at over 3.5 million it boasts

¹ This construct is of course informed by my own perspective as a native of the western coast of the U.S. where most structures are much more new, but this entry point has led to broader questions.

the largest population, is rapidly modernizing, and is the economic center of Vietnam. This project seeks to fill the gap in the literature by examining burgeoning consumer culture in the capital city of Vietnam. At a population of over 1.4 million, Hanoi is Vietnam's second largest city, and due to its later introduction to market capitalism (whereas HCMC was exposed during the Vietnam/American War²) and more conservative population, the effects of recent marketization are perhaps more pronounced.³ This study also provides a novel perspective to post-war Vietnam through a self-reflexive critique of my role in the research process as an American within the context of the Vietnam/American War. Findings will have important ramifications for the locals inhabiting the tensions of local culture, globalization, and a market economy. Additionally, this research has far-reaching implications in communication, development, and political economy studies through theoretical insights from the case study of Vietnam.

My research questions fall into two broad categories: political economic conditions, and consumer culture. This thesis project will begin by introducing the research in chapter one and establishing a conceptual framework. The second chapter details the methodology of this study. The third chapter employs a political economy framework in order to tease out how some of the seeming contradictions between

² The conflict between Vietnam and the United States from 1955-1975 is known throughout most of the world as the Vietnam War but is known as the American War in Vietnam, so this joint name will be used to address the multiplicity of perspectives surrounding this armed conflict.

³ Shultz (1994) notes less than a year after the U.S. trade embargo was lifted that market segmentation had already begun to shift traditional differences between north and south to market-based categories such as age and income. There remains, however, a difference in how northerners (conservative) and southerners (lazy) are perceived by other Vietnamese.

communism and capitalism operate. This approach seeks to answer: How have political and economic changes shaped consumer culture in terms of the physical landscape of the Old Quarter? Within the spread of consumer capitalism and neoliberalism, how has market freedom interacted with state intolerance of media and political freedoms? The fourth chapter will address more concretely how these changes are manifested in everyday life through the lens of consumerism. This section asks the following questions: How are changing patterns of consumption impacting culture? Are there generational differences in how foreign brands and changes in culture are perceived? How do people think about the influence of foreign advertising on billboards and TV commercials? Has the increased availability of goods changed how people make purchases in what has traditionally been a cash economy? And the fifth chapter brings all of these sections together into a broader discussion and also suggests avenues for future research. Through these questions, this research engages conceptually with critical cultural studies and theories of articulation to challenge the assumed evolution of communism to capitalism within modernization theory as well as the global, homogenous spread of neoliberalism by examining how these articulations manifest in everyday life.

Conceptual Framework

Upon my first visit to Vietnam in 2013 I was immediately drawn in by the seeming contradictions. Walking through the streets reveals stark contrasts between coexisting cultural forms of the local and global: a teenager texting while driving an old, beat up motorbike; a woman peddling fruit in baskets supported by shoulder poles standing outside a KFC; middle aged women in fake designer shirts; light-skinned

models in store windows with blonde wigs, and more. This research approaches analysis of the present historical moment in Vietnam as a conjuncture. In the preface to the second edition of their seminal book *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law & Order* (1978), Stuart Hall et. al define ‘conjuncture’ as “a concept developed by Gramsci and Althusser that designates a specific moment in the life of a social formation and refers to a period when the antagonisms and contradictions, which are always at work in society, begin to ‘fuse’ into a *ruptural unity*” (p. xiv-xv, emphasis in original). This theory deploys an approach of what Grossberg (2015) refers to as “radical contextuality,” or an understanding grounded in historical specificity in which the articulations are what define the conjuncture. Radical contextuality is an applicable mode of analysis to any society at a given place and time, including conjunctures which are a specific moment of contradiction and rupture.

This research is situated within the theoretical frameworks of critical cultural studies and the political economy of communication. Through conjunctural analysis, the context surrounding Vietnam must be considered in order to situate any analysis of current issues and the powerful influences shaping the current political moment. Vietnam’s history of war and occupation, as well as perceptions of Vietnam within the U.S., is an important starting point for thinking about how Vietnam became the country it is today.

Vietnam

Any fruitful study of Vietnam requires a patient, self-reflexive approach sensitive to the past, present, and future of the country. Vietnam has endured a long history of foreign occupations and conflict, with a unique, resilient culture which has survived

thousands of years of Chinese rule, French occupation, and American warfare. One cannot begin to think about present day Vietnam without first addressing its history of war and how centuries of foreign occupation have shaped modern day Vietnam.

The Vietnam/American War

The last forty years in Vietnam have been the first of peace and independence for many years. Separating any discussion of the country from its history of war is like the Vietnamese saying of trying to separate the sticky rice and the bean: “a favorite daily fare made by steaming inside a banana leaf glutinous white rice with black beans, which, once cooked, are inseparable” (Chong, 1999, p. 36). 2016 marks 41 years since the fall of Saigon and end of the Vietnam/American War, and the 21-year anniversary of normalized relations between the two countries. The United States decimated the land and population of Vietnam, with enduring effects even today in forms such as unexploded ordnance and the infamous toxic herbicide Agent Orange. Within such a short time span, the general lack of animosity towards Americans is seemingly contradictory.

Kim Phuc is a famous survivor of the war, not known so much by her name but by the famous photograph of her as a child, naked and running straight towards the camera screaming from the napalm burning her skin. She was severely burned at only nine years old by a napalm bomb dropped by the South Vietnamese army (supported by the Americans) and has subsequently suffered years of daily pain. When Kim Phuc was asked by a journalist many years later what she would say to the pilot who dropped the napalm on her, her reply was typical of Vietnamese sentiment:

I want to meet him, but I don't want to talk to him about the war. The war is in the past. We cannot change history. War is terrible and I want to stop war, not just in

Vietnam but in the world. I want to say to him that we have to do something to build peace. (p. 258)

Vietnamese culture is characteristically extraordinarily forgiving and forward looking (Ashwill & Thai, 2005), a feature that I undoubtedly benefitted from during my research.

Within this context, I am positioned as a young American born only a few years before normalization and with parents born in the early years of the war before American combat boots hit the ground. Although history and culture have conditioned me in certain ways, along with the youth in Vietnam who also have no memory of this war, I never experienced any animosity directed at me as an American. Today in Hanoi, there are many American tourists, as well as Brits, Germans, Aussies, and many others, who seem to melt into the modernizing landscape of the city. The United States is largely forgiven, while French architecture and ancient Chinese temples still stand. Vietnam, however, has received a very different treatment in U.S. culture.

Vietnam and U.S. Popular Culture

Popular culture in the United States has overwhelmingly villainized Vietnam in an attempt to rewrite memory of the war in a way favorable to its imperial history. Popular films such as *Platoon*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Good Morning Vietnam*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* overwhelmingly focus on the role of the United States in the war, vilifying or ignoring the Vietnamese. These representations support the common sense animosity towards communism and the bad taste losing the war left in the mouth of the U.S., both antithetical to its mission of global dominance and the spread of capitalism. The narratives in these films often function as a frame of reference for American youth with no memory of the war, providing a very different understanding from what Vietnamese youth are taught. Some popular books tend to provide a more

balanced narrative than films and include the perspective of the Vietnamese. While there are hundreds of books written about the Vietnam war, there are also many popular narrative-based books written by novelists, journalists, and survivors, including: *The Quiet American*, *The Things They Carried*, *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War*, *The Sorrow of War*, *Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, and many others. Having read or seen almost every book and movie listed, it is astonishing how vastly the genres differ from one another. However, Americans are more likely to have seen these movies than read the books, and these popular films do not do justice to the legacy of the war.

Non-Determinate Relationships and Cultural Politics

This research is primarily concerned with how the politico-economic conditions after *Doi Moi* have shaped the manifestation of consumer culture in Vietnam. As Lawrence Grossberg (2010) notes, within the cultural studies project:

The initial object of study must never displace the context as the real object of concern and investigation. It is the entrance point into the context, an assumed point of articulation or a crystallization of lines of determination, which is not the same as a symptom, since the latter can be read in Hegelian terms, and suggests a hidden cause. (p. 26)

Rather than insights gained from interviews being “symptomatic” of broader contexts, they are conceptualized as starting points for analysis of the surrounding conjuncture. Quoting Hall, Grossberg (2010) emphasizes that “Cultural studies... can only really work by moving from historical conjuncture to historical conjuncture using an evolving theoretical framework which is not conceptually purified” (p. 27). This approach calls for abandonment of preconceived notions of capitalist formations and a theoretical rigorosity in order to trace the conjuncture.

David Harvey (2005) notes that “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (p. 2). Neoliberalism as “the financialization of everything” (Harvey, 2005, p. 33) has spread across the globe as a mantra of open trade agreements, freedom, and individualism. Harvey (2005) provides a case study of changes in China, showing the existence of a very large difference in income between rural and urban areas. China has witnessed mass migrations from rural areas to urban centers, particularly of women workers who are able to make more money in the cities. This same phenomenon is documented in Jensen, Peppard, and Thang’s (2013) study of basket ladies in Vietnam—the iconic women who sell fruit or other goods from large heavy baskets balanced on shoulder poles—in *Women on the Move: Hanoi’s Migrant Roving Street Vendors*. The overwhelming majority of these women are migrant laborers from surrounding rural provinces who leave their families for weeks or months at a time to earn the extra money necessary to make ends meet at home. The open market in Vietnam does not mean everyone has been able to achieve wealth, but it is rather concentrated in urban centers, leading to rapid urbanization⁴ and wealth disparities.

Discussions of neoliberalism necessitate a parallel discussion of the question of economic determination. Within the classic Marxist tradition, this has often been

⁴ While rural workers seeking extra income in cities is not a new phenomenon in Vietnam, the open market has created opportunities in urban centers on a much larger scale, and has also made this income more important as some forms of farming have become less profitable and income less stable due to a lack of state support (Jensen, Peppard, & Thang, 2013).

interpreted as a powerful, unidirectional relationship where the economic base of society determines the whole of relations within the superstructure. This relationship is theorized as determination in the last instance, where at the end what ultimately determines the form of the superstructure is the economic base. Within the Marxist tradition of the base-superstructure model, the ultimate determinacy of the base, or material relations, has been commonly interpreted from the writings of Karl Marx as the creation of a simplistic totality.

Marx's 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* provides a condensed summary as an entry point into his position within the debate of Hegelian idealism and materialism. Rejecting Hegel's conception of ideas as the driving force but retaining his notion of the dialectical movements through history, Marx combined the dialectical with materialism to account for both complexity and the determinate force of the base. Marx states that human beings are born into a set of relations beyond our control which form the base from which the superstructure arises. Reversing the tenets of idealism, Marx (1859) theorized that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (p. 181). However, terms such as 'determines' are open to further interpretation, which has resulted in reductive readings of a direct relationship between the economic base and the social formation in the last instance. In "Engels letter to Bloch," Engels (1890) attempted to clarify and complicate these simplistic interpretations after Marx's death by emphasizing production as the "ultimately determining element in history," but not the "*only* determining one" (p. 682). Engels did not provide an answer to

how to theorize this complexity, but rather restated the problem of the necessity for complexity with determination.

To complicate this simple, direct relationship of the relations of production as determinate in the last instance, Stuart Hall has taken up this question and theorized the relationship as determination in the *first* instance. As a way of accounting for agency within a set of dominant relations, Hall and his colleagues submitted that human beings are born into “maps of meanings” which “form a sort of historical reservoir—a pre-constituted ‘field of the possibles’ [sic]— which groups take up, transform, develop” (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1976, p. 4-5). The classic model of determination is direct and one-dimensional, prescribing limits that do not allow for autonomy in the superstructure. As a result, as Hall states, “the determinacy of the economic for the ideological can, therefore, be only in terms of the former *setting the limits for defining the terrain of operations*” (Hall, 1996b, p. 44, emphasis added). The terrain of operations is therefore already constrained by economic considerations in the first instance, but not determined by it in the last.

Through this lens, consumerism within the ideological domain of Vietnam is limited in the first instance by economic formations. During communism, markets and businesses were regulated by the state and only certain consumer goods were available. Under capitalism, however, the ‘field of the possibles’ has shifted as the open market permits new ideas, cultural influences, etc. to enter and shape the ideological terrain. The market is the most evident form of determination in the first instance within capitalism: it is what provides the guiding logic for how we understand the world, and makes these relations seem innate and natural. However, as Harvey (2005) remarks, “The freedom of

the market that Bush proclaims as the high point of human aspiration turns out to be nothing more than the convenient means to spread corporate monopoly power and Coca Cola everywhere without constraint” (p. 38). Rather than theorize this “cocacolonization” of culture as a determined relationship within a project of cultural imperialism, however, this research seeks to conduct a more concrete analysis of how these new products and forms are actually spread and resisted and/or taken up and incorporated into traditional culture through the logic of a non-determinate relationship, or one with no guarantees.

This research approaches analysis of non-determinate relationships within the framework of transcultural political economy of communication scholarship. In order to comprehend the political and economic contexts surrounding these articulations, this research follows the long tradition noted by Charkravartty and Zhao (2008) of avoiding media centrism and rather “places communication within broader political economic cultural processes and treats communication research as an inherently integrative exercise that cuts across disciplinary lines” (p. 10). They acknowledge the historical tensions between political economy and cultural studies, bringing them together in a framework they articulate as “transcultural political economy.” Following this model, the present research adopts this approach to transcultural political economy as a praxis which “enables us to integrate institutional and cultural analyses and address urgent questions in global communications in the context of economic integration, empire formation, and the tensions associated with adapting new privatized technologies, neoliberalized and globalized institutional structures, and hybrid cultural forms and practices” (p. 10).

This research is a contribution to filling this gap in developmental literature by focusing on the understudied case of Vietnam. Harvey (2005) notes that neoliberalism

has spread unevenly from the U.S. since the mid-1970s. He also points out the contradictions between the theory of neoliberalism and “it’s supposed distrust of all state power” (p. 21) when in practice neoliberalism has required a strong, militant state to enforce its hegemony when consent falters. Thus, the combination of state power and market liberalization in Vietnam seems to make more sense as a “socialist oriented market economy” than at first glance: the combination of a militant state and “financialization of everything” actually serves to bolster neoliberalism rather than challenge it. Harvey argues for a definition of neoliberalism “as a *political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (p. 19).

Neoliberalism as a form of freedom materializes in Vietnam as a particular type of freedom: the freedom to consume. This new consumerism is theorized as a path towards modernity, or civilization, which simultaneously transforms state interests away from those of the people and towards neoliberal self-interest:

Civilization means prioritizing the interests of property, of foreign investors and of middle-class shoppers over the interests of the poor. It is truly the end of communism as a political principle—although it’s entirely compatible with the continuing rule of a Communist Party which needs to shore up its support from the most powerful sections of Vietnam’s new society. (Hayton, 2010, p. 52)

Following Harvey (2005) and Hayton (2010), neoliberalism can be theorized as having political aims through which the state plays an important role, rather than state control and interests seen as at odds with a free market.

For instance, the specific formation of marketization in China has been described by Harvey (2005) as “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics” (p. 120), and I would argue a similar case can be made for neoliberalism with Vietnamese characteristics where

the same market logic operates under a unique set of political and social circumstances. Harvey (2005) provides a case study of economic and social changes in China, documenting the existence of a sizable difference in income between rural and urban areas. China has undergone a shift similar to Vietnam towards marketization within a comparable time period, and while the situations are not strictly analogous, there is much more literature about China and it is an analytically useful comparison. Zhao, in her analysis of communication and the state in China, works to challenge assumptions about the formation of the state within capitalism (Charkravartty & Zhao, 2008). Zhao applies Ong's (2006) theory of neoliberalism as exception to modern day China. Neoliberalism as exception theorizes the Chinese political formation as one which emphasizes governmentality⁵ and political rationality and uses neoliberalism as a tool to support these aims. Zhao notes that China is not openly committed to neoliberalism but uses it as a tool to shore up its political power (Charkravartty & Zhao, 2008), similar to how neoliberal ideas are used in Vietnam to further state interests.

Neoliberalism serves to emphasize some aspects of reality over others, creating hidden relations, or what Marx referred to as *fetishisms*. Marx discusses commodity fetishism in Volume One of *Capital* as the masking of material relations by social relations where labor is made invisible by the final product (Tucker, 1972). This fetishism serves to obscure where commodities are produced and the conditions of the workers who make them (Jhally, 1987). This disguise seeks to obscure real value, or labor relations, in order to privilege the exchange value or socially constructed meanings

⁵ This definition follows Foucault as “the array of knowledges and techniques that are concerned with the systematic and pragmatic guidance and regulation of everyday conduct” (Ong, 2006, p. 4).

of objects. For Marx, the fetishism of commodities resides in the invisible labor relations: “commodity fetishism and the mystery of the commodity concerns the false appearance of the commodity as possessing value in itself rather than as the result of labor” (Jhally, 1987, p. 39). As a result, this mystification exists not at the level of use value but of exchange value (Jhally, 1987).

The selection of some goods over others based on their exchange-value or ability to display symbols of wealth and taste was termed by sociologist and economist Thorsten Veblen “conspicuous consumption.” Veblen (1899) argues that in leisurely lifestyles, consumption surpasses the boundaries of subsistence to make certain products superior. Therefore, according to Veblen, “since the consumption of these more excellent goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit” (p. 190). Jhally (1987) builds upon conspicuous consumption as a source of satisfaction whereby we are judged and judge others on a sliding scale in relation to others. As he notes, “The notion that goods are communicators and satisfiers is based upon a relational view of consumption, not as a private affair but a social activity” (p. 12). Thus, consumption does not take place in isolation but is rather shaped by the consumption practices of others as well as how one may wish to portray themselves.

Through an integration of institutional and cultural analyses informed by transcultural political economy (Charkravartty & Zhao, 2008), this chapter applies concepts of neoliberalism, fetishism, and conspicuous consumption within the context of Vietnam. Nguyen (2008) notes the inconsistencies within liberal governments such as the U.S. where the mantra of freedom exists alongside practices such as high rates of

imprisonment. She notes that within Vietnam, the conservative forces of political oppression contradict neoliberal freedoms, suggesting that “perhaps it would be fruitful to see certain freedoms, namely entrepreneurial and consumerist choices, as the features with which particular governments operate” (xviii). Through this lens, I theorize that the theory of neoliberalism as exception can be used to untangle the seeming contradictions in how oppression and freedom operate in Vietnam. Just as Marx theorized the fetishism of commodities as the conditions of labor obscured by social relations, so does neoliberalism mask political oppression through selective application in the market where “freedom” becomes *the freedom to consume*.

Modern Day Vietnam and Consumer Culture

Vietnam is currently undergoing a period of rapid change as global forces penetrate social relations and younger generations grow up with no memory of war, but perhaps an affinity for Adidas shoes or Apple products. As Hayton (2010) aptly states,

Vietnam is in the middle of a revolution: capitalism is flooding into a nominally communist society, fields are disappearing under new industrial parks, villagers are flocking to booming cities and youth culture is blooming. Dense networks of family relationships are being strained by demands for greater personal freedom and traditions are being eroded by the lure of modern living. It’s one of the most breathtaking periods of social change anywhere, ever. (p. xiii-xiv)

Examination of the specificities of the current historical moment and dynamics of Vietnam is integral to the formation of an understanding of how socialism and capitalism are actually coming together in this period of revolution without assuming that capitalism is a uniform force which homogenizes everything in its path. This perspective is also informed by cultural analyses of Vietnam, such as in *Vietnam Today: A Guide to a Nation at a Crossroads* (2005), by Mark Ashwill (an American who has lived in Hanoi for over a decade) and his Vietnamese co-author Thai Ngoc Diep.

There are a small number of recent studies specific to the relationship between rising standards of living and consumerism in Vietnam. Nguyen Huong's (2015) article "Globalization, Consumerism, and the Emergence of Teens in Contemporary Vietnam" uses analysis of state-owned newspapers between 1995-2005 to critique the role of media and Western influence in cultivating a brand new "teen" culture in Vietnam. Huong argues that *Doi Moi* has changed the identities of youth into individualistic consumers and documents how youth culture and consumerism are increasingly intertwined. Freier (2009) provides one of the only studies of youth and consumer culture specifically within Hanoi through an analysis of motorbikes as icons of consumption. His article looks at motorbikes as mass-produced consumer goods symbolic of economic reform (since the number of motorbikes in Vietnam has exploded post-*Doi Moi*), but also as possible spaces of contestation through subversive acts such as street racing and intimacy (the back of a motorbike is one of few public places it is socially acceptable for young couples to be touching each other). While Huong's work is a more general analysis of Vietnam as a whole and Freier's focus on Hanoi is exceptional, most research is focused on HCMC.

Ho Chi Minh City attracts the majority of research in Vietnam due to its size and position as a hub of finance and business. My research draws primarily from works focused more broadly on culture in HCMC, including Catherine Earl's (2014) ethnography of its new middle class where she studied the unmarried, educated, urban migrant women who constitute an important part of the new middle class emergent after the economic reforms. Earl argues that new opportunities (for employment, education, etc.) draw these migrant women to the cities where they are able to live successful lives

as single women and help support their families in the countryside, leading to increased urbanization and a new type of professional lifestyle. Higgens (2008) likewise conducted ethnographic research regarding HCMC, focusing on how social class relates to gender and consumerist identities by using the “concept of middle-class 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” (p. 146-7). This research also builds upon Nhuyen-vo Thu-huong’s (2008) particularly provocative book, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam*, which explores neoliberal contradictions in HCMC between freedom and tradition through the lens of the commercial sex trade. Nhuyen-vo analyzes how the paradoxical nature of neoliberalism and open market policies in Vietnam intersect with governmental power to create different kinds of consumers. Research by scholars such as Earl, Higgens, and Nhuyen-vo are integrally important as insights into the impacts of economic reforms on the everyday life practices with which this study is concerned.

Although there is an absence of scholarship focused on how market reforms have changed consumer culture in Hanoi as is articulated with advertising, this research builds upon studies of other emergent market economies. Mark Liechty’s (2003) book *Suitably Modern* documents his ethnographic study in Kathmandu of economic changes, consumerism, and the middle class after opening its market to the world in 1951. He traces tensions between traditional values and consumer demands brought by modernity. Liechty notes a proliferation of ads in Kathmandu similar to Vietnam:

...the sheer cacophony of images and promotions that assault Kathmandu residents as they move about the city contributes to a general ethos that privileges a material realm of consumer commodities as the domain of *real* value and

fulfillment. It is this atmosphere of intense consumer promotion that helps to shape middle-class consumer desire. (p. 90, emphasis in original)

This concept of ads as an “atmosphere” of consumerism is useful in conceptualizing the role of advertising in consumer culture as an omnipresent force rather than something which is always identifiable and can be separated from its surrounding context. Similarly, William Mazzarella (2003) in *Shoveling Smoke* recounts his ethnographic study of advertising businesses in India. Markets in India opened to foreign companies in 1991, and Mazzarella highlights the complexities of how the local and global come together in unexpected ways, “heightening rather than effacing the importance of locality and local identity” (p. 5) in the far-reaching spread of advertising, providing a useful framework for understanding how these transnational forces are taken up in real life.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted during a six-week trip to Vietnam June-August of 2015. I also previously traveled to Vietnam for four weeks in August and September of 2013. My fieldwork was concentrated primarily in Hanoi's Old Quarter. Vietnam's large capital city is divided into several districts, and the Old Quarter is an area heavily influenced by both ancient culture and modern industry. At over one thousand years old, this area is known for the ancient 36 streets named for the goods sold on them during Chinese rule when artisans concentrated around the empire's headquarters (some of these streets still sell the goods reflected in their name, like Hang Gai, or, silk street). Hanoi served as the capital of French Indochina from 1902-1954, was the capital of North Vietnam from 1954-76, and was named the capital of reunified Vietnam in 1976. The confluence of old and new makes the Old Quarter a hub of global influences and a potent case study of culture and consumerism.

This study draws on multiple sources of data: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, visual ethnography, and a research journal. Each of the interviews were audio recorded except for one, and are stored on a password-protected computer and anonymized in the research. I used the snowball method to create a network of contacts in Vietnam, and in total interviewed 24 people which each lasted an average of forty minutes. Participants range in age from 14 to 62, and most of the people I spoke with are educated, many with a college degree or students who are currently attending a university. A few of the participants are also high school students. The range

of occupations of the informants are diverse, including an employee of an environmental NGO, a journalist, a nurse, a hotel manager, and a couple people who are retired. Their family backgrounds are also diverse: some with parents who work as university professors, own a small drink shop, or are rice farmers.⁶ In order to explore my interests in generational differences before and after economic changes in Vietnam in 1986, subjects are classified in two categories: those born after 1986 (approximately ages 29 and below), and born before 1986 (approximately 30 and above) in order to provide different perspectives informed by experiences of different economic and cultural conditions.

Twelve of the twenty-four interviews were conducted in English, and when a translator was necessary one of my friends proficient in English would serve as a translator.⁷ In the majority of cases when a translator was not necessary there was still a third person present, or sometimes even a small group of people. For example, when I interviewed some students at a local university, we sat in a group on the floor of their dorm and I interviewed them individually, but at times others would jump in to clarify something or add their opinion, creating a more open dialog. This was a very different context from when a different associate ferried me around on the back of her motor scooter to different appointments where I interviewed government officials (who all spoke English) in their offices, but my friend remained largely silent and uninvolved during the interviews. This type of interaction was markedly different: the three of us would talk and joke together during introductions, and then during the interview my

⁶ See Appendix for a full demographic description of the participants.

⁷ These interviews are transcribed as close to the original as possible with light editing for clarity.

friend would usually text on her phone or even leave the room to take a call. Throughout each of these different contexts, this “third party presence” served as the link between myself and the interviewee, as it was culturally appropriate for the person introducing me to remain present.

These interviews took place within the most appropriate context for people—inside a government office, outside washing dishes, and on the floor of a small food and drink shop are just a few examples of the varied locations. This was challenging at times simply at the level of physical comfort as I was not as accustomed to sitting in a squatting position for long periods of time, sitting on the floor or on narrow benches, or to the extreme heat (at times over 100 degrees Fahrenheit). Interviewees varied in social power, with some very comfortable being interviewed, recorded, and giving research consent, and others more wary because it was unfamiliar. This diversity in participants was intentional in an attempt to “study up and down,” versus “studying up” or “studying down” from my relative social standing. Thus, I included a wide range of participants: those who could be considered powerful elites (studying up), as well as others lacking social power (studying down). These interviews cannot be considered a transparent view into participants’ attitudes and beliefs, but are always constructed within the interaction of the interview experience (Sender, 2013).

This research takes an ethnographic approach to an examination of daily life in Vietnam as a type of conjunctural moment overdetermined by cultural, economic, and political forces. Through living in the Old Quarter, ethnography was employed as a guiding framework for cultural immersion and self-reflexivity. My electronic daily journal became a reservoir of descriptions, memories, and reflections, supplemented by

notes scribbled in notepads I carried around in my bag or on my smart phone. This research approaches ethnography as both a process and a product, requiring research reflexivity to illuminate the journey forming the end product (Murphy, 2011). As Stuart Hall remarked, culture is a question of a journey, not an origin, defined by “the routes, R-O-U-T-E-S, by which people have come to their present situation and we’ve all come by different routes. But not just as roots, R-O-O-T-S, not just as something always buried in the same sand or living off the same cultural resources or embedded in the same society” (Personally Speaking, 2009, p. 29). This approach starts with the specific and traces the routes connecting the individual with society in an attempt to identify the current conjunctural moment.

Aside from the experience of everyday life in Vietnam, I engaged in participant observation through two primary groups: a weekly English club, and a group of young people assisting tourists. I was put in touch with Ngoc, the 29-year-old coffee shop owner who runs both of these clubs, through one of my primary contacts and started attending their weekly meetings as soon as I arrived in country. The English club is run once a week from the coffee shop and hosted by different people who select different topics for discussion each week. These varied widely from storytelling to LGBT rights, and my last week there I hosted a meeting about listening. The tourist group met on Saturdays and Sundays at a major cultural site in the Old Quarter with a large whiteboard and tee-shirts encouraging tourists to stop and talk to them. Their goals were threefold: to practice foreign languages (some in the club spoke English, Japanese, German, Chinese, French, and more), learn more about the culture and history of Hanoi, and meet people.

Along with providing invaluable insights into youth culture in Hanoi, these clubs became an important source of friendship as a foreigner who did not know anyone in the city. We would often eat, drink, and play games together, and I was even given one of the tee-shirts worn by the tourist group as signifier of group membership. The reaction of tourists and locals walking by when they inevitably noticed my tall figure and white skin wearing the same shirt as this group of young Vietnamese was often of surprise, confusion, and/or interest. This experience, even with the shirt explicitly highlighting my group membership, underscores the inability to simply "observe" in Vietnam in any manner aspiring towards objectivity as my physical body automatically highlighted my presence. Over time I learned to negotiate this insider/outsider relationship as I grew more comfortable in the city and the locals grew more accustomed to my presence.

Some of my gatekeepers and participants commented on their motivations to support research being conducted in and about Vietnam (since scholarship in this area is minimal). The relationship between myself as an American and the Vietnamese I interviewed positioned myself and the interviewee as ambassadors of sorts for our respective countries, perhaps placing pressure on the interviewee to portray Vietnam in a positive light towards a developed country like the U.S. whose status Vietnam aspires to. Sender (2012) notes a similar initial concern of participant motives in her research about makeover television show audiences, but rather than invalidating data, she remarks that "I now see them as part of a fundamental shift in understanding the data not as neutral or transparent accounts of participants' media engagements, but as an account of their awareness of being 'an audience' in the research context" (p. 172). This ambassador function, or "awareness of being 'an audience'" placed my interviewees in a position of

reflexively constructing themselves, and by extension their country, to myself as the researcher. My initial concern with these relationships biasing my data seems to reflect an idealized sense of objectivity which could somehow be obtained if my subjects were chosen carefully enough and were uninformed about what my specific interests were. Data, however, can never be “neutral,” and the consideration of contextual factors shaping the interaction, within society and the research itself, is vital to any interpretation.

Sampling

My project was only able to achieve success through the generosity shown to me by each person I got to know in Vietnam as I built-up a network of contacts. I started with one contact, a prominent Vietnamese environmental journalist I had met while in country in 2013, who served as my primary gatekeeper. She then put me in touch via email with four further gatekeepers of her colleagues in Vietnam, and it snowballed from there. The snowball method was very effective within the context of Vietnamese culture as personal connections are so important to networking. Being introduced by a gatekeeper is crucial to building a respectful relationship. Even if my contacts did not know the person themselves (as in the context of spontaneous interviews), they, as a local, were able to serve as an in-between for me, an American, to be able to speak with them.

Some interviews were scheduled for me, such as the government employees, but most were more spontaneous. Sometimes I would take a taxi to my friend’s university where we would walk around the adjacent area together and she would ask random people if they were willing to speak with me. Through this strategy I talked to a diverse

range of people, from a middle aged man at a tea stand, to a teenage boy working as a parking lot attendant. The importance of face-to-face interaction in Vietnamese culture and the slow building of connections necessary before I could do any interviews (I did not conduct my first interview until I had been in Hanoi for over a week) explicates why it is not possible to do this kind of work online. The personal nature of this work also contributed to my decision not to interview my primary contacts/friends. Not only had they already provided me with an immense amount of help, but the value of my relationships with them and maintenance of a research ethics of respectability was more important than gathering more data. In order to thank my participants and gatekeepers for their time and effort I brought small gifts to express my appreciation.

Limitations

This study, like all cultural projects, is necessarily an incomplete rendering of a partial image. As Hall (1996a) notes, “identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and formation” (p. 4). Limiting my area of inquiry to the Old Quarter excludes rural populations, as well as other large cities such as Da Nang in Central Vietnam, and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) in the South. While the sample is diverse in terms of age and gender, it is not representative and thus not generalizable. The political climate in Vietnam also precluded direct questions about politics or the Vietnamese government due to potential negative ramifications both for the interviewee and myself.

The language barrier and use of translators may also have limited the willingness of participants to speak their minds. However, these concerns were lessened by the usual presence of a third party, even when I did not need a translator, who was able to jump into conversations and help clarify misunderstandings. Having someone there who knew both parties also made things more comfortable and helped the interviewee be more relaxed. Sender (2012) notes the concern that within the researcher-subject relationship responses may be shaped to the interviewer's preferences. My participants were usually very excited to speak with an American and flattered by my interest in their opinions, but the third party presence tended to ease this concern to please because it was as if they were not only talking to me, but also their friend or fellow countryman. I often consulted with Vietnamese friends if I realized I did not understand something from an interview, and was also able to check with the third party contact and/or translator usually present as the interview progressed. I sometimes learned afterwards that my questions prompted further critical conversation among participants after I left, implying a peaked interest and honesty which allowed respondents to engage further with one another after the interviews were finished.

CHAPTER 3

THE FETISH OF FREEDOM: POLITICAL ECONOMY AND CONTRADICTIONS IN NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE

Vietnam is a rapidly modernizing country of about 90 million, and as a quickly growing economy is becoming increasingly important in terms of global economics and politics. The State and Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) play a major role in shaping the political economic milieu of the country. The State enforced centralized control of resources after the fall of Saigon on April 30th, 1975 and official end to the Vietnam/American War. Uneven distribution of resources, corruption, and inflation, however, pushed the government in the late 1970's to begin looking for other solutions to these problems. While Vietnam began liberalizing the economy in the early 1980's, the 1986 *Doi Moi* (renovations) marked the official launch of changing economic policies to allow Vietnamese to once again own their own local businesses, set prices for staples such as rice according to the market, and begin to free up international trade. Consumer society looks remarkably different in Vietnam than just thirty years ago, where there is now an influx of foreign products from countries including Japan, South Korea, and the United States. Vietnam has also achieved many milestones in joining the international community over the past twenty years: in 1995 relations with the US were normalized; in 2000 Vietnam and the U.S. established the Bilateral Trade Agreement; and Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization in 2007 (to name a few). Liberalization within the economy, however, has not directly translated to other spheres of society.

In Vietnam, a major vehicle for disseminating information about foreign products and narratives of modernity is the media, including forms such as commercial advertising, films, and billboards. China uses state control of the media to enforce Chinese Communist Party ideology (Zhao, 2012), and Vietnam has adopted this type of model through censorship and creation of ideological content. For example, beginning in the mid-1990's the government began attacks on the growing commercial sex trade by labeling it as a social evil through government sponsored advertising, museum exhibits, rallies, and more (Nguyen-vo, 2008), and in 2003 the government of Vietnam implemented a campaign to promote "civilized living" (Hayton, 2010). While analysis of state ideology in Vietnamese media is beyond the scope of this research, the construction of consumer subjectivities as it is influenced by commercialism is integral to understanding the effects of domestic as well as transnational flows of information.

The introduction of global cultural forces into the now open Vietnamese market parallels crises surrounding contradictions including communism and capitalism, human rights abuses and UN Council on Human Rights membership, and journalistic oppression and open market freedoms. This chapter attempts to frame a central question of this research stemming from my initial interest in how communism and capitalism combine, namely: How can market freedoms and political restrictions coexist? To address this question, this chapter seeks to highlight the political significance of specific economic developments in Vietnam over the past thirty years as a project of neoliberalism.

A Conspicuous Consumer Culture

The materialization of a consumer culture is a new concept in Vietnam (Drummond & Thomas, 2003), although one readily apparent to anyone witnessing the

growth of advertising and rapidly materializing storefronts. Liechty (2003) in his ethnographic study of consumer culture in Kathmandu notes a proliferation of advertisements similar to Vietnam: "...the sheer cacophony of images and promotions that assault Kathmandu residents as they move about the city contributes to a general ethos that privileges a material realm of consumer commodities as the domain of *real* value and fulfillment" (p. 90). This privileging of materiality was a theme that likewise emerged in my interviews. An exemplary expression of this sentiment is apparent in the following excerpt from Duong, a forty-year-old male employee at an environmental NGO and member of the middle/upper-middle class, when I asked him if foreign advertising is changing Vietnamese culture:

Modern ads are not only changing perceptions but styles, behaviors, how they [young people] use food and drinks. I don't know how they can change a whole generation of young people. They make the people equivalent to the product they use... Ads are really changing, making the people feel that, I recognize myself in the modern world. Is that value true or not? I'm not sure because it depends on how much money you have, on how you are socialized with reality. It is real and fake, real is they buy something but fake is the value is not true as they expect it to be.

Modern advertising, according to Duong, is changing how young people relate to their surroundings and the different kinds of value to be realized from products depending on how much money the consumer has.

Duong's comments, although exceptional in their critical nature and articulation compared to other participants, perhaps due to his high level of education, reveal several themes related to how "modern" advertising is perceived in Hanoi. The overwhelming response, from young and old, to my question about how ads are changing culture was that there have been significant changes, although these have taken place more rapidly with youth. Thirteen of the seventeen participants who commented on if foreign ads or

cultural influences are changing Vietnamese culture said yes, and of those thirteen, eight pointed to youth as being particularly affected. In remarking how “they” (advertisers) make people equal what they buy and use, Duong is pointing to the valorization of symbolic values within Vietnamese culture. New mobile technologies, such as the iPhone Duong pulled out of his pocket or the Apple laptops youth use in cafes, function beyond their use to make calls or write emails. This novel introduction of such luxury products creates the possibility for goods to function as indexes of wealth, symbols of modernity, membership of a certain class, and more. This is not to say that the products are not functional, as most of my participants indicated choosing products based on quality (how long shoes hold-up, etc.), but the motivations for buying certain products (particularly foreign-made) over others or spending money on different types of goods (such as electronics) are changing.

Consumption as a display of wealth and prestige is certainly not a new concept in Vietnam, but according to my research the emphasis on consumption as a primary means through which to define the self and the pressures to do so are. Since consumption is a relational act (Jhally, 1987), commercial advertising provides new reference groups of foreign populations, models, and celebrities to compare oneself to. Consumption therefore becomes a symbolic act of labeling oneself as occupying a particular place in this globalized landscape. For example, in recent years, shopping malls have also become more common in Hanoi. On a particularly scorching night near the beginning of my trip, a friend took me inside a moderately sized, high-end shopping center in the center of the Old Quarter by the famous Hoan Kiem Lake in search of air conditioning. I was surprised by how upscale this mall is as I had never seen anything like it in Hanoi: there were

doormen at every door, gold colored floors, shiny chrome or mirrored surfaces, and many expensive foreign stores (Gucci, Coach, etc.). When I inquired as to who shops there, however, my young friend informed me that it is exclusively wealthy Vietnamese who patronize these stores.

The space outside of the mall also attracts a surprising population: couples taking wedding photos. The white and grey marble floor tiles, tan marble walls, golden sconces and door frames make the outside of the building undeniably attractive, but what is also captured in these photos are the brand names, such as “Dior,” in large gold lettering along the sides of the building. The desire to utilize this fancy backdrop as one of my Vietnamese friends explained (I routinely saw at least four couples taking photos at any given point when walking by at night) and immortalize these brands in wedding photos points to the pervasiveness with which these new symbols of wealth are becoming part of Vietnamese culture.

Contradictions in Neoliberal Governance

In early 2015 as I was planning my fieldwork, one of my contacts asked me if she could order a book, have it delivered to me in the U.S., and have me bring it to Vietnam. I was rather surprised at first by this request. After all, the book was an academic study about disability, race, and gender—not the most taboo topic I could think of. It quickly dawned on me, however, that I enjoy freedoms that my contact did not just based on where I live and the fact that no one is going to monitor and potentially intercept a purchase such as this book. I am not aware of her past experiences with orders such as these, but my contact potentially had much more to fear in terms of the political implications of ordering such a book which questions concepts the State does not want

questioned. This experience is just one small example of the control the CPV still holds over freedoms in Vietnam. Although my friend is an academic and journalist, access to materials, as well as the ability to publish and disseminate information, is tightly controlled. This has historically been the case in communist Vietnam, and even today after economic liberalization, the state maintains control over the media (although it has loosened somewhat) and still jails or otherwise suppresses political dissidents and bloggers (Hayton, 2010).

This contradiction between market freedoms and political oppression operates through an ideology of what freedom is interpreted to mean: the freedom to consume. As Harvey (2005) poignantly notes,

It has been part of the genius of neoliberal theory to provide a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power, locally as well as transnationally, but most particularly in the main financial centres of global capitalism. (p. 119)

Following Harvey's argument, neoliberalism in Vietnam, as in other places, has manifested not as the often idealized freeing tool of utopian democracy or decentralization, but rather a reinforcement of State power through contradictory applications of "freedom" based on market orientations. This challenges linear conceptualizations of development theory where capitalism is theorized as the natural end-goal of modernization. Jhally (1979) in his critique of classical theories of underdevelopment quotes Banaji's argument against the notion that capitalist and feudal modes of production are necessarily opposed: "the process of integration of particular areas of the globe into a world market dominated by the capitalist mode of production was confused with the installation of the capitalist mode within these areas"

(p. 81). As a developing nation, Vietnam faces similar dilemmas in how their historically communist structure can adopt to a capitalist mode of production. This dialectical approach advocated for by Banaji is better able to account for contradiction, structure, and process, all certainly Marxist but not necessarily wholly capitalist or communist.

The question of the role of state power in a free market is one of complexity when considering the case of Vietnam. For example, Freedom House (2015) notes that “Vietnam is believed to have more than 200 political prisoners, more than any other country in Southeast Asia, and political detainees are often held incommunicado,” yet in 2013 Vietnam was granted membership to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). In theory, the UNHRC is composed of a group of countries committed to upholding human rights in their own nations as well as promoting these ideals internationally. However, as indicated by its number of jailed political dissidents, Vietnam does not fit the definition of a nation protecting basic human rights. This contradiction signals the role of neoliberalism in fetishizing inconvenient truths such as human rights abuses (and Vietnam is by no means the only country where the international community chooses to ignore such abuses) in order to prioritize means by which to gain increased access to international relationships, trade, and profit.

The recent shifts within the economic, political, and cultural climates of China, while not the same situation as Vietnam, provides useful tools for understanding the changes currently underway in Vietnam. Zhao’s (1998) work examining news media formations in post-Mao China after the Chinese Communist Party’s 1992 embrace of a market economy is particularly useful in considering how marketization and media can be theorized within shifting communist/capitalist relationships. Similar to the situation in

Vietnam, market liberalization in China has not automatically resulted in political freedom. Zhao (1998) notes that economic changes in China have had more to do with markets than civil society, asserting that “although the culture of consumerism reigns there is still little change in the overall political culture” (p. 3). As I will argue in the next chapter, the fetishization of consumer rights and international trade and omission of any articulation with Vietnam’s place in global politics in terms of human rights, political freedoms, or government power serves to confine these changes to the realm of the market. Vietnam’s transition to open market economics seems to follow Zhao’s (1998) description of China’s transition as “economic liberalization without political democratization” (p. 3). These market freedoms, while widely embraced in Vietnam, have not wholly translated to other spheres of society.

Political Freedoms

Economic liberalism in Vietnam has not necessarily equated to political freedoms. Freedom House’s⁸ 2015 evaluation of Vietnam found that on a scale of 1-7, with 7 being the worst, Vietnam ranks at a 5 in civil liberties and a 7 in political rights. They cite several laws clamping down on freedom of expression online and in print, as well as crack-downs on recent public demonstrations against poor working conditions in factories to support these conclusions. Within the media, access and use is still tightly controlled by the State. As noted by Freedom House (2015), “Satellite television is officially restricted to senior officials, international hotels, and foreign businesses, though many private homes and businesses have satellite dishes.” The most recent major

⁸ Freedom House is a U.S. based organization which serves as a watchdog for global freedom of expression. It was originally created in 1941 to encourage public support of WWII and later became an anti-communist organization.

crackdown on freedom of expression happened in January of 2014: “Vietnam’s Decree 174 was put into effect, instituting harsh new penalties for social media and internet users voicing ‘anti-state propaganda’ or ‘reactionary ideologies’ on social media sites.”

Beyond the media, other social spheres likewise operate within a climate of oppression. For example, religious groups also face serious persecution and must register or face arrest or harassment. As Freedom House (2015) reports:

In June 2014, security forces raided an unauthorized church and Bible school in Bình Dương Province, beating and detaining 76 worshippers. In February, security forces attacked a group of 15 Hòa Hảo Buddhists from an unsanctioned Buddhist church traveling to Ho Chi Minh City to visit arrested human rights lawyer Nguyễn Bắc Truyển.

These political and religious restrictions continue to contradict the freedoms promised by neoliberal conceptualizations of the market as a place of individual rights and equal opportunity and landmark recognitions such as UNHRC membership. The one arena, however, where things have improved are LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) rights: “LGBT supporters held pride days in 2013 and 2014, and the country’s state media aired a gay-themed sitcom” (Freedom House, 2015). While this recent breakthrough in tolerance of multiple sexual identities does pose some hope for the political climate, the overall situation remains rather bleak and this advance in LGBT rights does not seem to have improved other social or political issues.

Press Freedoms

The press in Vietnam also operates under restrictive conditions. Freedom House (2015) considers Vietnam’s press status as “not free,” and ranked them at 84 on a scale of 1-100, with 100 being the worst, in terms of openness. Likewise, the Committee to Protect Journalists (2015) ranks Vietnam number 6 on the 2015 list of most censored

countries. As they note, the CPV does not permit any “privately held print or broadcast outlets.” The press in Vietnam does not permit criticism of the state, and “calls for democratic reform, religious freedom, and land rights, as well as criticism of relations with China, are the issues that most commonly attract official censorship or retribution” (Freedom House, 2015). International periodicals and radio stations are sometimes censored or blocked, and the 2013 Decision 20/2011 “requires all foreign news, education, and information content on television to be translated into Vietnamese and censored by the MIC before airing” (Freedom House, 2015). Some dissent is occasionally allowed in media coverage, such as the 2009-2012 “Van Giang incident” around state land policies (Labbé, 2015).

In terms of Internet freedoms, access is not restricted as much as content and the rights of users. About 50% of the population has Internet access, mostly through public providers like Internet cafes (Freedom House, 2015). The increasing availability of Internet services and market penetration of technologies like smart phones provides hope for future possibilities of more autonomous media, user-generated content, and citizen journalism, although current regulation largely restricts use of these media technologies for dissident or reformist purposes. Recently, there has also been a shift towards more commercial ownership of broadcast TV (Hayton, 2010) which allows for more independence, although the infrastructure is still reliant on the government. Sustained restrictions on political and press freedoms highlight the continued role of the State in controlling potentially democratic spheres of society within a neoliberal context.

Neoliberalism as Exception

Growing income gaps in Vietnam and the rise of consumerism highlight how capitalism is altering socialist values. Commercial advertising was only introduced in Vietnam beginning in 1995 (Ewen, 1999), and in just the past two decades has transformed how people shop, dress, and think about their identities. This shift, however, is by no means absolute or complete. As Harvey (2005) notes, “capitalism needs resources, but the commodification of culture—as ‘lifestyle’—can never comfortably or completely encompass the life-worlds upon which it draws” (p. 20). The complexities of the commodity form mean it cannot completely contain culture as consumers possess agency and are continually actively making their own meanings out of these products. Commodification is unable to wholly envelop existing ways of life because culture is a living, breathing phenomenon which is constantly being negotiated. Consumer culture, therefore, contains potential spaces for consumers to use goods and ideas to their own ends in ways perhaps not intended by the state.

Political economy of communication literature helps to explain the role of media in Vietnam in changing consumer formations, as well as the transcultural perspective of articulations with social and political formations. As Wasko (2009) notes, the notion of “transcultural” is important because often “discussions of international communications begin and end with the powerful institutions that dominate global media and communications: in other words, the North American or European information and culture industries and the state formations that (often) support them” (p. 495). This framework takes seriously perspectives from other centers of power, and as Wasko, Murdock, and Sousa (2011) note, “critical political economy... is much more than the

study of structures and economic dynamics behind (the range of) cultural production and texts, but it also incorporates questions on cultural consumption, access, and cultural competence” (p. 8).

As noted above, it is Japan, not the West, which is the largest foreign investor in Vietnam, and through my informal conversations and experience in Vietnam I came to learn about the significant influences of other Asian countries in Vietnam. The U.S. is a prevalent influence in Vietnam, but Vietnamese also seek to emulate nations such as South Korea, Singapore, and Japan. While many of my Vietnamese friends did listen to American pop music (the music was usually a bit dated, suggesting a lag in the transnational spread of popular culture), K-Pop (Korean popular music) was just as popular. This became especially clear to me when one day I made a comment to a Vietnamese friend about how Vietnamese try to lighten their skin to look Western, and she replied that (at least from her perspective) they were actually attempting to cultivate the pale skin of South Koreans.⁹ Cultural influences such as skin lightening point to the important implications of the growth of consumer culture in Vietnam.

A body of literature concerning postsocialist states has emerged over the past few decades after the apparent collapse of socialism. The genesis of this discussion is widely attributed to Katherine Verdery’s (1996) seminal anthropological work on postsocialism in Eastern Europe which critiqued the assumption of a necessary transition to a capitalist state. Verdery’s work has been built upon in other areas of the world, more recently including Asia (Zhang & Ong, 2008). The collection of essays in Zhang and Ong’s edited volume on postsocialist China argue that capitalism does not necessarily result in liberal

⁹ Skin bleaching products and modes of dress which shield people from sun exposure are common methods to lighten skin pigment.

individualism. Zhang (2012) has also extended this analysis to Vietnam. She uses the concept of “flexible postsocialist” assemblages to explain how neoliberalism is selectively applied rather than categorically accepted. Zhang (2012) writes about how these assemblages are not necessarily just a phase en route to full blown capitalism but may be more lasting than had previously been believed. She uses the term “flexible postsocialism” not to say that socialism is going away, but to refer to how things are transforming.

The political prioritization of rapid economic growth and new plethora of consumer choice in Vietnam raises the question of what constitutes freedom. Neoliberalism defines this as a freedom of markets, trade, and individual rights which this analysis has argued serves as a fetishization of neoliberalism and masking of political oppression. However, how are these values shaped by the socialist orientation of Vietnam and one-party rule of the CPV? Building off of Zhang's (2012) analysis of postsocialist formations in Vietnam, a useful way of making sense of how neoliberalism operates in Vietnam is to conceptualize it as the exception (Ong, 2006), rather than the rule. Neoliberalism is often viewed as a project of American imperialism and compulsory deregulation which has wreaked havoc on local markets, but many Asian governments have been successfully selective in their application of neoliberalism (Ong, 2006; Zhang, 2012). Within this framework, neoliberalism is deployed in areas such as trade and economic development which benefit the State, but it has not led to other forms of freedom such as political pluralism or democratization as classical developmental theory would suggest.

As Zhang and Ong (2008) argue in their analysis of contemporary China, capitalist formations do not necessarily result in liberal individualism. Capitalist and socialist formations are not mutually exclusive, and Vietnam demonstrates how capitalism does not homogenize everything in its path but rather leaks into existing formations and fills in and expands the gaps as it is allowed by the political structure. As Zhao (2012) notes, “in Asia, instead of collapsing, the communist states in China, Vietnam, Laos have managed to sustain their one-party rule by continuing to claim allegiance to socialism—no matter how hollow such rhetoric may be” (p. 147). Neoliberalism is often seen as limiting government, but “neoliberalism can also be conceptualized as a new relationship between government and knowledge through which governing activities are recast as nonpolitical and nonideological problems that need technical solutions” (Ong, 2006, p. 3). These assemblages of “flexible postsocialism” have as a result “not diminished but rather strengthened the authoritarian rule of the party-state” (Zhang, 2012, p. 661). Progress in Vietnam, therefore, resides in the realm of economics rather than politics where economic growth is put forth as a nonideological common good rather than a political project.

Analysis of the emergence of a consumer culture in Vietnam complicates the theory of neoliberalism as exception. Ong (2006) redefines state power as “manifested in multiple, often contradictory strategies that encounter diverse claims and contestations, and produce diverse and contingent outcomes” (p. 7). She notes how economic zones have been set up in Southeast Asia, a model Vietnam has followed, to strategically deploy market forces within defined spatial regions. My research complicates this theory as consumer culture spreads neoliberal concepts beyond the control of designated zones

for economic development. The State is unable to contain where forms such as advertising, conspicuous consumption, or associated narratives of modernity flow to, especially with growing access to the Internet. Advertising is a powerful tool which has already, as discussed above, begun to shift forms of value and consumption in Hanoi. These messages about what it means to be a citizen and consumer and how to identify one's place in the world are influential in how neoliberal ideas operate within Vietnam. This finding, however, serves to further support Ong's (2006) argument as the actions of the Vietnamese State are separated from the messages of these foreign advertisements, and the State is thus able to associate these ideological messages as simply ancillary to the nonpolitical mission of economic growth as signified by the presence of foreign corporations. These relationships are necessarily contradictory and complex, as "Neoliberalism as exception articulates a constellation of mutually constitutive relationships that are not reducible to one or the other" (Ong, 2006, p. 9). Neoliberalism as exception, therefore, operates in Vietnam as a sponsor of State power but also an ideological tool promoting neoliberal mantras of consumption, status, and modernity.

CHAPTER 4

BUYING PROGRESS: PRODUCING NARRATIVES OF MODERNITY THROUGH CONSUMPTION

On one particularly sweltering Hanoi day, I hopped on the back of my friend's motorbike and we spent the entire day driving around and meeting with her colleagues—mostly journalists and government workers (it is not an easy feat to dress professionally for ninety-degree, humid weather and still be able to don a helmet and straddle a bike, but I did my best). Mai, a 36-year-old female employee at an environmental company, was one of the last people I interviewed that day. She has a ten-year-old son and had been describing to me how much her son enjoys watching the shopping channel on TV and begs for her to buy all the products he sees. As we were laughing together at the amusing antics of this young boy, I asked Mai if she was concerned that her son seems to like shopping so much, and she replied:

The children they want to buy but they don't have money and they ask their parents to, so I think ok, that program [advertisement] is successful. I don't feel worried [that he wants to buy these things], actually I feel happy because my son watched that and he cared about the money and he knows it has promotion, so his thinking is more in terms of business way so I think it's good. He told me and he tried to persuade me and I bought one. I bought a suitcase. I think [this is common]. I see so many children now watching advertisements, they like it, and I think they're affected. I think it's new, because before the children maybe didn't see television as much as now. I don't know, many children now are more commercial because of the open market.

Mai's comments highlight several new concepts related to the emergence of a consumer culture in Vietnam, such as the rise of the “nag factor” where children (prodded on by

ads) beg their parents for these products. Marketers appear to be targeting children in a way not seen in Vietnam before, and as a result, as Mai notes, they are becoming “more commercial.”

When I asked Mai if she was worried that her son liked watching the shopping channel so much and desired all these products, she applauded his engagement with consumerism as thinking like a business person, rather than being concerned about his shopping addiction and impulse to consume. As a middle/upper-middle class family, the ability to acquiesce to the wants of her son is very much a class-based behavior because Mai possessed the material means to engage in these types of consumptive practices. The choice of a suitcase (instead of something like a toy or candy) for a ten-year-old to plead for also seems an odd choice for his age, but perhaps sheds light on the ability of advertising to impose wants and cultivate needs, creating a desire for a product for which he likely has no real use. Travel is also a class signifier of upward mobility and these narratives are perhaps also implicated in the choice of a suitcase. Throughout the interviews, interest in advertising was an overwhelmingly positive attribute seen as indicating a business-savvy individual, and foreign advertisements themselves were often viewed as symbols of interest and investment from other countries. While of course consuming products has no automatic correlation with production, this conflation between buying and creating points to a larger question of what kinds of promises ads make and the ambitions they trigger. Through the lens of advertising, this chapter seeks to explore how this slippage between being a consumer and producer operates as a hegemonic narrative of progress and aspirations of modernity.

“Actually, I love Coca-Cola!”: Advertising Affinity and Necessary Development

The landscape of consumer goods in Vietnam has changed radically over the past several decades. Higgens (2008) in his study of early 21st century consumerism in HCMC notes that the north has had less access to consumer goods for many years. During the Vietnam/American War, the north was isolated and heavily bombed while the south had access to goods brought in by their American occupiers. After the war, the entire country suffered under socialist policy and a dearth of foreign products. However, while foreign-made goods and free markets were not officially permitted, black markets have long thrived in Vietnam (Higgens, 2008). Many of these market-based consumer practices were thus already in place, and as Higgens (2008) notes of the official reforms in the 1980's, “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” (p. 275). What is new, however, is the growth of a commercial advertising industry in Vietnam which has massively changed what it means to be a consumer. As Ewen (1999) states,

It's important to note that commercial advertising has only existed in Vietnam since 1995, when America lifted its post war ban on the country. This move effectively opened the doors to the West, and meant that foreign companies could then apply to set up shop in Vietnam. Before this, advertising basically took the form of illustrated propaganda billboards and signs that conveyed party messages about work ethics and family values. (p. 2)

The difference in appearance between state propaganda and commercial advertising, or street peddlers and large retail stores, often struck me as a jarring combination. This evaluation of the “old” and “new” is of course shaped by my own perspective, as tradition becomes more marked from outside the culture. Perceptions of this seeming incongruousness between the traditional and modern, however, began as one of my

driving questions and developed into an entry point to larger questions about what ads signal about the collective aspirations of the people of Vietnam.

Advertising in Vietnam takes place on a much wider scale than it did twenty or thirty years ago. Throughout the interviews, many individuals commented that they like this increase in advertising, while others noted annoyance at too many ads blocking their views on the street or interrupting their TV shows. People both old and young were very articulate about how advertising has changed over time, and typically pointed to between the past 10-20 years as when advertising really started to change. The following statement by Anh, a 20-year-old male university student, is typical of responses when I asked how advertising has changed over time:

In the old time, the ads in Hanoi were mostly painted on the wall, or they stick a paper on a house, but now days they can create an advertising panel like this in many big houses that have a whole open wall facing the road where many people can see it. They're bigger and more colorful.

People were quick to describe how they see countless ads every day and how different they appear from the state sponsored advertising/propaganda. Walking through the streets and surfing TV channels in my hotel, it was clear to me that commercial advertising has fully penetrated Vietnam. As a native of the U.S., this looked very ordinary to me, but the bright colors, use of celebrities, and large size is a novel presence in Vietnam. Comments on the attractiveness of foreign ads, such as, *“Yes, it's very creative and lively. She watches advertisements for drinks like Pepsi on television and it's very beautiful and creative,”* were fairly common signals to the general receptiveness towards foreign advertising.

The overwhelming plastering of ads on the streets and combinations such as Swarovski Crystals signs and family-run motorbike repair shops did not seem to have the

same jarring effect I experienced on many of my respondents. When I inquired into the proliferation of Nike, Levis, or iPhone ads lining the streets, individuals often remarked that they do not care or notice, or that they outright ignore them. Nine people said they do not pay attention to ads at all or are not affected by them. The theme of not being affected by advertising is poignant in the remarks of Duong, the 40-year-old environmental NGO employee:

I myself am not influenced by advertising. It influences others, especially young generations. In my mind I'm not market oriented. I look at my internal belief rather than be influenced by external surroundings.

Duong's remarks highlight the third person effect theme in my interviews, or the belief that others are more influenced by advertising than oneself. The comment that young people are more influenced was also very common in interviews among respondents of all ages.

Advertising in capitalist Vietnam also *looks* markedly different than twenty or thirty years ago. The distinct forms of government propaganda noted by Ewen (1999) as dominating public spaces before 1995 can still be seen on the streets of Hanoi: the large yellow block letters on red backdrops are hard to miss. However, these now coexist with flashy foreign advertisements. Throughout the interviews, only three people found advertising completely distasteful, and many individuals said they like TV commercials for foreign products because they are colorful and creative. Some even said they like to watch ads over and over because they make them happy. For example, Duong commented on how much he loves advertising:

I can stay there and watch the Heineken ads every night [while watching football]! It makes me feel so happy and interested. It's changing: before it was just a picture of beer but now is different. Advertisements makes it so close to each individual, each community, to real life. When I'm watching advertising I

easily can find my connection to that, I even can find my demand, because it's beautiful, it's interesting. It's not only more realistic, it's more close. It's tackled to my mind, tackled to my perception.

The idea of being “tackled to” his mind, or somehow attached or “tacked” on, telling him what he wants to buy, is a recent phenomenon in Vietnam. The metaphors of place, or being “close” to him and his interests, also implies a kind of realness in being in such close proximity to real life. Quang (17-years-old) also commented on how attractive ads are when I asked how advertisements have changed over time: *“It's more beautiful, they try to color with colorful images, it's more lively.”* The realism and alluring visuals of foreign advertising appeals to consumers in a way Vietnamese ads do not, and are perceived by some to relate more closely to consumer needs. What they are in fact doing, however, is using targeted appeals and constructing a market.

A few respondents were able to recognize to a certain extent the targeted and constructed nature of advertising, while usually admitting to still buying into the beautiful images. The following two quotes exemplify this questioning of the constructed nature of advertising, a comment more likely to be made by older participants, the first from Duong and the second from Ha (a 58-year-old retired female):

For young people they use celebrities for advertising, but for me it makes no sense, I don't care. I don't care about any celebrities, I care about reality. Ads for something like travel, I know it's not as beautiful as how it appears on TV, but the way they make it, the way they film it makes me feel like I should be there.

Before there was not that many forms but now they're everywhere and every form. Like really huge billboards, it's bigger and not attractive. All these images and boards and colors and everything. It's too overwhelming and different from reality so I don't like it.

For Duong, recognition of the appeal of celebrities plays into an awareness of who celebrities would appeal to (youth) and thus who the marketers are targeting and not

targeting (such as middle aged men like himself). These quotes also both point to an awareness of the production process: while travel is a “real” appeal, the way it looks on TV is fake because it is somehow different from reality. However, even with this knowledge Duong admits to being drawn in none-the-less. Ha, however, does not like advertising, stating that it is “exaggerated” and “not true,” while also acknowledging later in her interview that young people like it more. Ha’s complete rejection of advertising was exceptional and perhaps explained by her location in a more rural part of Hanoi and love of organic, healthy eating and making as many things (especially food) for herself as possible (although she admitted their household has many foreign-made appliances).

Advertising was overwhelmingly accepted as a necessary component of Vietnam’s economic development. Only two older women in their fifties stated that they outright dislike ads because, according to them, there are too many, they are annoying, and they promote false claims. The difference between liking and being impacted by advertising is an important one as most of my respondents reported ignoring ads for foreign products (with the exception of the more critical examples described above), while also admiring their creativity and visual appeal and being aware of their utility in helping people learn about products. Their function, however, extends beyond informing people about products to serving as necessary markers of progress and signals of Vietnam’s growth. As Anh, a 20-year-old coffee shop employee, explained when describing how Hanoi has changed:

I like how Hanoi used to look at how it looks now. But of course, when time comes you have to develop, everything needs to be developing, and the developing of advertising in Hanoi shows that Hanoi is growing fast and it's a good point. So even though I love the old Hanoi, I cannot keep it just like that.

Is there a necessary connection between ads and development?

It's not completely connected, but in some aspect, more ads of the foreign countries shows that they pay more attention to our country and they are willing to invest in our country.

So that part you like?

Yes.

According to Anh, advertising from foreign companies represents potential sources of foreign investment and is a necessary part of Vietnam's development.

The logic of advertising signaling attention from foreign companies is reminiscent of Mai's encouragement of her son's affinity for the shopping channel and engagement with consumerism. Anh's equation of foreign advertising with foreign investment similarly conflates consumption with modes of production where being targeted as consumers of modernity becomes equated with a promise of modernity based on prosperous trade, industry, and investment. As 33-year-old Nguyen commented after remarking how there are more and more ads and he does not want more, *"I welcome it. Because that's good for our country."* Consuming these narratives of progress thus becomes a way of producing progress itself. The targeting of consumers is read as validating of the nation's future, and the value of the self and nation becomes that of a consumer.

The economic progress advertising represents in Vietnam helps to explain why so many people do not mind the presence of ads: it is a necessary component of the development the country collectively aspires towards. After many years of foreign invaders, Vietnamese are very proud of their resilient culture and people and have a strong faith in their ability to succeed. These beliefs help to fuel the narrative of progress signified by the presence of foreign companies who are there to help the Vietnamese

further their global aspirations. As Shultz (1994) notes,

The outcomes and compromises of a liberalized economy are still debated within Vietnamese political circles and many conservative Vietnamese condemn the concept of free enterprise, the consumption-mentality and materialism that drives it, and the willingness to dishonor self and country to make money. Yet these outcomes are tolerated because just about everyone accepts that the reform policies behind some of the “undesirable” outcomes are necessary if Vietnam hopes to fully integrate into the global economy. On a more cynical level, most members of the Communist party understand such tolerance and flexibility may solidify their power. (p. 46)

While all of the changes underway in Vietnamese society may not be desirable, they are accepted as a necessary cost of joining the world economy. These changes also have political consequences, as Shultz remarked, in that advancing materialistic enterprises simultaneously gives the people what they desire in terms of consumer goods and gives the appearance of “tolerance and flexibility” while maintaining other political restrictions such as those discussed in chapter three.

Another example of how advertising has been embraced in Hanoi comes from my conversation with Ly, a twenty-year-old university student. When I asked what she thought about the fact that there are so many more ads than there used to be, she told me: *“Ads are all over, and I think it's fine. Advertisements are fine because I can know about products.”* This interview took place at the Temple of Literature, a popular destination for tourists and locals alike and important signifier of both education and spirituality in Vietnamese culture. I had noticed the strange presence of a Coca-Cola vending machine between two of the temples, something which stood out to me as not belonging in this thousand-year-old cultural site, but when I asked Ly what she thought about it, she replied: *“It doesn't bother me that it's there, actually, I love Coca-Cola!”* In this case, foreign brands are welcomed into what is literally sacred space.

It seems that liking a brand lends it legitimacy to enter spaces in which it may not seem to otherwise belong, at least from my outsider's perspective. Through analysis, however, it becomes clear that the presence of Coca-Cola fits into a collective vision of how Vietnam should be or what it should become. This suggests that it is not so much Coca-Cola which has entered this sacred space, but instead economic progress which is embraced as a part of culture rather than something apart from it. Only one respondent, 20-year-old Phuc, remarked on the appropriateness of where ads are placed, explaining that *"You know they can build an ad and sell like everywhere, but next to the high school that's totally not fine,"* suggesting that the educational purpose of this space conflicts with the marketing mission of ads. Overall, however, advertisements are perceived as suitable to most any space. Access to the products advertised, however, is limited to those with the material ability to participate in the consumer sphere.

"I Call it Shopaholic": Modernity, Class, and Consumerism

Vietnam's strides towards modernization since *Doi Moi* seem to be largely built within the consumer sphere. Although citizens are now free to consume as they please, many of the historic issues of government corruption, journalistic constraints, and media censorship remain (only one of my interviewees ever mentioned anything about constraints on journalists). In Vietnam, modernization is tied to what you own. The role of products in this construction is highlighted in an earlier quote from Duong:

They make the people equivalent to the product they use. For example, I feel I am very modern if I use an iPhone. But actually I'm not modern, I'm still very kind of countryside man very behind society. But when I use the mobile phone I belong to the modern world. Ads are really changing, making the people feel that, I recognize myself in the modern world. Is that value true or not? I'm not sure because it depends on how much money you have, on how you are socialized with reality. It is real and fake, real is they buy something but fake is the value is not true as they expect it to be. I think ads build a not real world, but they're trying to

shorten that gap between the product and people... I believe ads make people spend more money than they should.

As Duong remarked, the transition from countryside man to modern man is made through the purchase of an iPhone. The product interpolates the consumer into their place within modernity so that they can “recognize themselves in the modern world.” He does, however, struggle with the reality of the construction or the question of if ads speak to real needs, deciding this world is unrealistic, even though he sees himself within it. At the same time that his iPhone promotes his social status, he seems to sense the falsity of this construction as he also recognizes his roots as a countryside man.

This dual sense of identity seems to mark a shifting point in how the self is defined, whether through real life experiences of growing up in the countryside, or an identity defined by what one owns. As Liechty (2003) observes in his study of the rising middle class in Kathmandu, “the meaning and experience of modernity lies in daily balancing the demands and possibilities of a transforming social and material context against those of a deeply rooted cultural milieu of moral values, systems of prestige, and notions of propriety” (p. 5). Similarly, in Hanoi these new consumer goods and their articulations with identity formations coexist with traditional cultural forms in complex ways that can be contradictory. As Duong expressed, while he feels his phone signifies him as modern, this conflicts with his internal image of himself as a countryside man caught up between traditional ways of identifying oneself based on region and occupation and the signifiers of modernity. Through constructing this “not real world,” from his perspective, advertisements “make” people overspend, and pursue the “fake” value promised to them in ads of becoming a modern subject.

Modernization in Vietnam’s future was overwhelmingly seen in the interviews in

terms of economics. The final question in each of my interviews was to ask, “What do you see as Vietnam’s future place in the world?” The answers to this almost always (nineteen of the twenty-four interviews) stressed, or at least began with, economic modernization. In fact, ten people used the word “develop” in the very first sentence of their response (an interesting finding because this is not a word which came up elsewhere in the interviews). The following are four examples, from an 18-year-old male, 20-year-old female, 58-year-old female, and 33-year-old male respectively.

..In the future Vietnam will be cleaner, and more modern. An example of how Vietnam will be modern is we will have robots to help with tasks.

..I hope there will be at least equal with Korea or Japan. The economic, or the culture.

..Vietnam will be the second or third or fourth place in Asia. Vietnam has a lot of potential to develop really fast and can be one of the biggest most economically but also other things.

..I think VN will be more and more developed. Of course more and more companies from foreigners will come to Vietnam day by day.

These comments bring to light the fact that modernity is not necessarily understood to equate Westernization. When asked about Vietnam’s future, four people referenced aspiring to the likes of other Asian countries (with comments like “*we might be another Singapore*”), while one person mentioned Western and Asian countries, and only one person mentioned emulating solely Western countries. This perspective on how the future should be defined is also limited in the first instance by economics where the possibilities are constrained by the guiding framework of economic modernization. Just as an affinity for consumerism is largely viewed as a positive attribute, perhaps promising of a future business career, the further development of the market economy is prioritized over any other social, political, or environmental concerns.

Hanoi's post-reform capitalist economy is markedly different from the south of Vietnam which had previously experienced a capitalist wartime economy during the American occupation (Earl, 2014). Capitalism is therefore a less familiar formation in the north and has resulted in a later and more sudden rise of a class-based consumer society. These formations, however, are never stable: "...class culture is always a work in progress, a perpetual social construction that is as fundamentally bound to the "concrete" of economic resources as it is to the cultural practices of people who jointly negotiate their social identities" (Liechty, 2003, p. 4). While a rapidly growing economy, Vietnam has actually been experiencing a slight economic recession over the past couple of years, a fact only noted by two highly educated people when asked about their shopping habits. According to a 2014 Neilson Survey, 85% of Vietnamese respondents reported recently reversing their spending habits in order to save more money. At the same time, Neilson also reports a sharp increase in middle class spending on electronics of 262% and 70% on cars (a rare but growing presence among the wealthy—cars are exponentially more expensive in Vietnam due to taxes and not suited to narrow roads and a culture of motorbikes) over just the past two years. The inclination to save combined with a rise in spending on leisure items highlights the post-reform growing income gap between rich and poor where the middle and upper classes are able to increase their spending and those of lesser means struggle to keep up (Luong, 2003). My research approaches issues of class and consumption through questions related to shopping habits and credit card use and resulting thematic trends of differences in consumption across generational and class lines.

Generational Differences

Throughout my interviews, I often heard comments about generational differences related to levels of consumerism. As Ha (58, female) commented, “*The changes are happening more rapidly within the younger generation. Within the older generations they are more conservative so the changes happen slowly.*” Youth and middle-aged Vietnamese are generally more open to foreign products and ideas and willing to embrace change. This proclivity of youth is also combined with targeted marketing of products geared towards young people. As Huong (2015) observes, “the import of a market economy dramatically shifted the balance of power in constituting life experiences from the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) to corporations selling teenage products” (p. 5). Phuc, a 20-year-old female university student, also commented on generational differences related to the reception of foreign brands. Phuc commented that all of her friends like to shop at foreign stores if they have enough money, and then went on to comment on generational differences:

Older people are a little different: they think foreign is good but they also think Vietnam is waaay good, so you don't have to go foreign. But our parents, like older people, they have two kinds. One is around my parents age they also like foreign stores but not as much as us. Older ones like maybe my grandfather they don't like it. They really love Vietnam so they think everything should come from Vietnam.

According to Phuc, the older two generations have more of a brand loyalty towards domestic products. This spectrum of the grandparent generation not liking foreign products, parental age liking them but not as much as youth, and the young people who prefer foreign products was typical across my interviews. Phuc also noted that the ability to purchase foreign products is constrained by their often prohibitive costs: “*A student like me with part time work nearly can't buy anything like that. It's just like, ask for*

parent, and we can't do that because we have our own job. So I just shop at local stores, but I really like foreign stores also if I have enough money to buy it.” Urban youth who have their own sources of income working part-time jobs at the businesses which have sprung up in cities can no longer turn to their parents for money and must instead save up their own earnings to buy expensive foreign products.

Engagement with consumer culture in Hanoi is clearly affected by generation.

Shopping, however, as Duong notes, is not just affected by age:

I myself have a boy, so the kids from 10-12 and up tend to spend a lot of time shopping. They are more of a target group for spending. The middle class in Vietnam is becoming bigger and has different subgroups. Consumerism is not just an age issue it is a class issue. My wife spends a lot of money on online shopping.

While acknowledging that youth (who are usually more comfortable within the capitalist market they were born into than their parents or grandparents are) often consume the most, Duong points out that the shifting consumer culture is also connected to class and rising standards of living. Young people like to shop, but this interest is not just divided across generational lines but also by class. As Higgens (2008) notes in his study of middle class culture in HCMC, “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” (p. 9). Therefore, older, middle class people, such as Duong’s wife, can also be passionate shoppers because they possess the material means to do so.

Consumption as Expression of Class

Consumer culture in Vietnam, fueled largely by advertisements for foreign products, also contains tensions between global and traditional influences. This is

similarly noted by Liechty (2003) within the emergent market culture in Kathmandu: “This contradiction presents Nepalis with a challenge—at once emotional, intellectual, and material—to *produce themselves* as members of, and inhabitants in, a world that is both modern *and* Nepali” (p. xi). Navigating these relationships reveals how “modern” symbols are understood in daily life, an example being the opening of the first Hanoi Starbucks in 2014 (the first Vietnam Starbucks opened in HCMC earlier in 2013). When I asked Phuc (20-years-old), who worked at a local coffee shop I frequented, if she likes Starbucks, she replied:

Not at all. Too expensive, it [Starbucks] doesn't fit my taste. I have some friends who go there because it's new and famous and everyone talks about it, so they go there. But when they come home they all say don't go there it's just the big new brand, it's nothing... Actually I think they [rich people] would not like the coffee there but they like to go there because the famous brand is kind of classy.

Phuc’s answer is standard of responses to this question by both old and young. As a new, American, expensive, global corporation, Starbucks represents a way to interact with this famous brand as well as engage in a higher class coffee form. Only five people I spoke with said they have gone to a Starbucks, and three of them noted that they have not returned because it is too expensive and not as good as local coffee (a point with which I must acquiesce).

Several individuals also commented on other ways they engage with the Starbucks brand. An older man and a middle aged woman I interviewed remarked that Starbucks is not the place to get your daily cup of coffee, but is a good place for a business meeting if you want to impress the person you are meeting. Two people also mentioned that young people go just to “check-in” (a geo-tagging feature on Facebook that shows your friends where you are), or to take photographs or “selfies.” Thus,

patronizing Starbucks is more about engaging in “classy” behavior and the experience rather than enjoyment of the coffee itself (a point which I would argue also holds in the U.S.) as most Vietnamese prefer Vietnamese coffee. These behaviors center more around the Starbucks brand and the kinds of immaterial labor (such as experiences and feelings) that lends value to brands (Arvidsson, 2005). Starbucks thus does not function primarily as a purveyor of beverages, but rather of affective community: “brands work as platforms for action that enable the production of particular immaterial use-values: an experience, a shared emotion, a sense of community” (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 248). The experiences of going with friends or to meet someone (several people mentioned they would never go there alone) or taking photos are the types of immaterial values produced by patronizing Starbucks, and also lends value to Starbucks in the form of brand promotion and customer loyalty. Because Starbucks is a prominent global brand, it correspondingly functions as an indicator of modernity, and the immaterial use-values the consumer receives from interacting with the brand also includes a connection to the wider world. While Starbucks originated in the U.S., they also exist in numerous countries across the world, and thus by sharing a similar experience to those visiting Starbucks in places such as Boston, London, and Tokyo, Vietnamese are able to connect with global market culture.

The types of places Vietnamese patronize, such as Starbucks, are slowly changing as these foreign brands become available in Vietnam, and so is how people pay for these products and experiences. Vietnam has traditionally been a cash economy, but over the last few years credit cards have started to become more common, although still rare. As Duong (40-years-old) shared with me,

2-3 years ago most cards were only debit, not credit. I had only one card... but now I have six cards and it's very hard for me to control and not use it... I try to manage myself to use debit card only to withdraw money, I can't control it otherwise, I would kill myself.

For Duong, the impulse to spend seems to be further fueled by his availability of credit (a privilege reflective of his class status as most people I spoke with did not have a credit card, let alone six). The few people I talked to who had credit cards mentioned using them for traveling, and usually not for daily purchases. When I asked Duong if he always pays his bills on time, he said sometimes he forgets and can incur debt, but that he does not want to get rid of them because of their status value: *“The number of cards and kind of phone in your pocket, that's a way you show off.”* Thus, credit is not only a means for the consumption of status goods, but one in itself. Duong, in fact, was so eager to show me his wallet and prove how many credit cards he has that he left the room to look for his wallet, and seemed disheartened when he failed to find it.

The youth I spoke with, however, do not own credit cards and are not faced with the problem Duong mentioned of trying to control his spending. The comment below from a 20-year-old university student is exemplary of the perspective of young people on credit cards:

I think that is not really popular in our nation. Just the rich people. The rich people usually go to the big store or shopping center and they will use credit cards. But for us, like students or normal working people, most of them use debit cards... It's really common because most Vietnamese stores you can't pay with a credit card. I don't know anyone with a credit card.

Credit is seen as a symbol of class, rather than something that has much utility. Their use only extends to certain places, like big shopping centers, where it is appropriate to use these cards, but are useless on the streets (where the majority of shopping takes place) where you cannot use a credit card. Higgins (2008) argues that in HCMC “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” (p. 260), to which I would add within the context of Hanoi the important knowledge of *how* to purchase these goods, or through what type of material transaction (cash or credit).

Along with the appropriate knowledge of transactions when shopping, the way people shop is also changing. A few younger people mentioned that they shop online, or at least look at products online before going in person because they might not trust buying things online without seeing them first. For example, when I asked 33-year-old Nguyen if he likes to shop, he said:

I don't have much time for shopping or something, so mostly I'm shopping online. Normally I do shopping by myself maybe on the motorbike to go around on the street to look at what I want. But today I have no time, so maybe I want to buy something for my kids, so I will search online and compare about the quality or the price and I go directly there to buy it or order it online.

Is online shopping new?

I think the online marketing has just been for a few years. Before the people mostly do the local shopping and buy direct, not online. Because they couldn't access the internet. Today everywhere has the internet. My daughter is only nine years old, but she's using the internet very good. They learn in school.

The recent widespread availability of the internet (at least in urban areas like the Old Quarter) has created new possibilities for shopping aside from the way it has operated for many years (and still largely does) by patrolling streets on your motorbike and pulling up to roadside stores to check out their wares. One does not need to leave their bike to get a sandwich, a bottle of water, a toy for their child, or countless other products, but new demands on people's time (as Nguyen, a busy hotel manager, mentioned) combined with new technologies is beginning to change these practices.

The types of consumptive practices people engage with were also highly gendered, as many of my respondents, young and old, specified that women like to shop more than men. For example, when I asked Phuong, a 14-year-old secondary school student, if she likes to shop, she replied: “*Yes, I like to go shopping. I like different things in the shop with the famous brands, like shoes, tee shirts, jewelry.*” Male respondents also sometimes commented on gendered shopping habits, for example when I asked Anh what he typically spends money on, he said:

I spend most of my money on food. My parents have many things to spend money on, like electric and water bills. Wedding and funeral gifts, and repair things. Most money is spent on everyday things. Friends also spend money on food or rent if they have it, or maybe on their girlfriends. Most girls spend a lot of money on clothes, only a few boys.

Anh points out how needs are differentiated by age, where older people like his parents have responsibilities such as bills, while younger people can spend their money more freely. Young urban girls seem to have the most disposable income, according to Anh, as they spend their money largely on clothes and might also have a boyfriend buying them things.

Shopping conducted by men was usually characterized as utilitarian and practical, and when women went shopping it was more likely to be for items not seen as necessary or just for the pleasure of shopping. Duong, a member of the middle or upper middle class, pointed a few times to gender differentiation, in shopping:

I do not belong to the consumptionism, and I try to use the good at its end. But for women, for my wife, it's different. They just, they, I don't know, they buy for what, I don't know! Just buying. Not for using. What do you call it? I call it shopaholic.

Women like his wife are shopaholics, while he differentiates his own spending as more practical, preferring local products except when it comes to goods which endure a lot of

wear-and-tear like shoes or jackets. Tu, another 40-year-old married man, also described the different shopping habits among men and women:

I think for most of the men, we go for shopping on our demand. When we need something we go shopping, not like my friend here [points to my female colleague], sometimes she goes shopping for fun, she really likes to do that. When I need to buy something normally I search for the information on the internet and normally try to buy products produced in Vietnam, no matter if it's a foreign brand or local brand but if it's made in Vietnam or not. Especially clothes, if you go on the street in Hanoi or HCMC I like to shop in the Made In Vietnam shops. The very high class like Burberry or Louis Viton, for ordinary people we prefer to go to the Made In Vietnam.

Tu describes how he carefully researches products and looks for ones which are locally produced, while middle-aged women like my friend who brought me to the interview or his wife prefer fancier stores, even though they are not wealthy enough to shop at stores like Burberry, although his wife likes to venture inside. Made In Vietnam stores are very common clothing shops in the Old Quarter, although some Vietnamese I met believed that many of the products they sell are not actually made in Vietnam but come from cheaper places like China (a question which I was never able to verify). Consumption as a performance of class and gender roles were highlighted throughout the interviews, but the political sub-text of where these products come from was a much more sensitive issue.

All the Products Without the Politics: Common Sense and Consumerism

Vietnam's relationship with China is both lengthy and highly contentious. The Viet people which make up the majority of Vietnam's fifty-four ethnic groups originally came to Vietnam from what is now central or southern China, and as Ashwill and Thai (2005) note, "the very name of the country refers to the majority of people, who are Viet (*Kinh*) ethnic origin, *and* to the location of the country in relation to present day China—

“nam” (south)” (p. 30). Therefore, Viet Nam actually means southern (in relation to China) land of the Viet people. There have been many conflicts between the countries spanning over two centuries, with China occupying northern Vietnam from 179 B.C. until 938 A.D., again briefly from 1407 to 1427, and a short border war in 1979 after Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia and defeat of the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge (Ashwill & Thai, 2005). More recently, Vietnam and China (as well as the Philippines and Malaysia) have been at odds over conflicting claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. The Chinese deployment of an oil rig near the Paracel islands in May of 2014 led to violent anti-China protests in Vietnam, burning Chinese factories and heightening political tensions (see BBC, 2014).

Although conflicts between Vietnam and China are undoubtedly part of the political atmosphere in Vietnam and something with which most everyone is familiar, the role of politics remained a silent actor in my interviews and most of my experiences. One exception from my time in Vietnam, however, stands out: I attended a conference in Hanoi on the future of higher education in Vietnam and relations with the U.S., and a British man was speaking at a presentation session and mentioned the South China Sea (where these conflicts have been taking place). In response, an older Vietnamese man in the audience calmly stood up and said, “We don’t call it that here, it’s the East Sea.” The man apologized, and it became clear how sensitive this issue is as well as the importance of naming and how labels relate to power (the sea is south from the perspective of China versus to the east from the perspective of Vietnam). When it comes to consumption, as Ashwill and Thai (2005) note, there are mixed opinions among Vietnamese about whether to buy Chinese products or not.

A question I asked during my interviews was whether the individual prefers to buy local or foreign made products. Only one person, Nu, commented on the provocative nature of my question. Nu had previously traveled in the U.S. and told me about how she dreams every night of going there to study, and so perhaps due to her young age of seventeen and regard for me as an American, she was exceptionally open in voicing her opinions. When I asked Nu if she prefers local or foreign products, she quietly thought for a moment, then replied:

That's a controversial question in Vietnam. Because in Vietnam people, the government encourages us to buy local products because it will boost our economy, dominant products in Vietnam. But the common sense in Vietnam is products from foreign companies will, are, um, much better than the local. So if we have enough money we will buy foreign products, I think so.

The preference for foreign products due to their higher quality operates at the level of common sense. However, as Nu points out, this is controversial because this common sense conflicts with governmental propaganda to support local companies.

People of all ages commented on their cautious attitude towards Chinese products, usually when I asked about if they like to buy local or foreign products. For example, 21-year-old Minh, in a translated interview, said:

She doesn't pay attention, but she's kind of careful with Chinese products. Mostly it's very bad because, maybe you know some problems with products from China, the quality, and they try to make some fake things sometimes.

Minh remarked that she usually does not notice where products come from, but tries not to buy products from China because they can be of a lower quality. The preference to not buy goods made in China was a common theme in my interviews, but it did not have the political connotations one might expect. Rather, the concern always appeared to be over quality as Chinese products are perceived to be cheaply made and break quickly. Due to sensitivity over these political relations, however, I was not able to ask explicitly about

relations between Vietnam and China in my interviews. In total, seven people commented that they are wary of the quality or in general do not like Chinese products. When I asked Ha (58-years-old) what she thought about how foreign advertising might be changing Vietnamese culture, she said:

The changes are in both directions, good and bad. In a bad way because there are many many products that are fake from China. Then it's also good in the sense that the quality is increasing and quantity.

Ha liked that there are more products available, but not the influx of fake goods, or products which are cheap imitations of foreign products, from China.

Generation also seems to be a factor in preferences towards where products come from, with older people preferring local products. When I asked 62-year-old Diep about how foreign products are impacting Vietnamese culture, he pointed to how age factors into these perceptions:

Old people prefer the Vietnamese tradition, except maybe from China. For example, some products from Japan or other countries maybe some old people would like more than the Chinese things. They prefer the Japanese things or American things, not Chinese things. Old people prefer Vietnamese products more than the younger people.

Members of the older generation were more likely to prefer Vietnamese products, but here Diep also says some older people might like foreign products but makes a distinction between Chinese products and those from other countries. The older generation has a more salient memory of war which perhaps affects consumer taste, but Vietnam has been occupied by the Chinese, the Americans, and the Japanese at different points in history. Therefore, separating the Chinese from the Americans and Japanese seems to point to a deeper issue.

The relationship between preferring foreign goods and relations with China can perhaps begin to be understood by looking at the three people who stated that they only buy Vietnamese products. During one of my interviews, my translator explained to me how the government promotes buying local products while elucidating 17-year-old Quang's preference for local products:

He prefers Vietnamese. We have a kind of famous sentence that we are Vietnamese, we prefer Vietnamese products. It's kind of a really important sentence or quotation that we label in every shop in Vietnam. We have the sentence: "We are Vietnamese so buy Vietnamese products."

Another 21-year-old female respondent gave a similar answer to Quang, along with 57-year-old Linh who stated:

I prefer Vietnamese products, the domestic product. Because Vietnamese use Vietnamese products. We are Vietnamese so we should respect Vietnamese product first.

Almost every other respondent indicated a preference for foreign products when they are able to afford them because they are higher quality. This finding seems to point to two levels of common sense operating among different groups in Vietnam.

Common sense works at the level of assumptions and the "obvious" manifestations of everyday life. Statements such as "*Of course foreign products. The quality is much better*" and the confused looks I sometimes got from participants as to why I would ask a question with such an obvious answer all point to consumer preferences operating at the level of common sense. Gramsci defines common sense as both fluid and historically specific:

Common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life. 'Common sense' is the folklore of philosophy, and is always half-way between folklore properly speaking and the philosophy, science, and economics of the specialists. Common sense creates the

folklore of the future, that is as a relatively rigid phase of popular knowledge at a given place and time. (Class, Culture, and Hegemony, p. 203)

This widespread popular knowledge, as Gramsci notes, changes with the times. Thus, perhaps the preference for foreign products is a modern form of common sense, but a common sense only certain people have access to.

All of my respondents who commented on generational differences in affinities for advertising stated that younger people like advertising more. This is due to several factors such as age and interest, but also language. Two of my interview participants pointed out to me that sometimes people are unable to read foreign ads because they do not speak English, and that older as well as less educated people have less access to language training. All three of the people who said they prefer to buy products from Vietnam because they are Vietnamese did not speak English, one was older and retired, and the two younger participants were from the countryside and had less education and exposure to city life. This generational and class differentiation seems to point to a shift currently underway in what constitutes common sense when it comes to consumer behavior. While older people and those with more rural upbringings may continue to adhere to the VCP's slogan to buy Vietnamese products because they are Vietnamese, those who are younger and like foreign advertising more have a different common sense about what is desirable. This is also shaped by class, and as living standards continue to rise more youth have access to foreign language classes (an extra expense in schools) and thus to consumer culture.

Differing messages about whether to consume local or foreign products suggests conflicting notions of what is best for Vietnam's future. The government advocates for Vietnamese to buy Vietnamese products and thus believes supporting the domestic

economy will spur growth, but many other Vietnamese believe that foreign advertisements and products signal foreign investment and that they should support and encourage this attention. However, the government promotes this rhetoric which encourages prioritizing support for local businesses while simultaneously welcoming foreign companies and investment, so which do they really envisage to be the path to prosperity? The answer appears to be that they believe in both. The government supports these different routes towards economic prosperity to appeal to different age and class segments in Vietnam and encourage everyone to consume in ways that best fit their individual ideologies. The government recognizes that if older and rural Vietnamese are more nationalistic, encouraging them to buy Vietnamese products will encourage them to consume. If younger, more urban or upper class Vietnamese are more interested in foreign products, supporting this will encourage *them* to consume. Thus, the overall neoliberal mantra of consumption and political project of economic growth is supported by these seemingly conflicting claims. The overall goal is profit through whatever means, not political allegiances to certain products.

Common sense about what is best to buy and why harkens back to the earlier question of how market freedoms and political restrictions can co-exist. How can we understand a rejection of Chinese products based on quality and not the political connotations this would seem to invoke? This question relates to how political compromises are articulated with lived experience. The political need to have successful relationships with countries like China, Japan, and the U.S. as argued above is connected to the hegemonic narrative of progress and the priority of economic development. It is impossible to know whether the rejection of Chinese products is truly correlated with

concerns over product quality, or is perhaps reflective of the current political climate. While Vietnam has historically been at odds with all three countries, currently China is a major competitor both economically and in the East Sea, while the U.S. supports free navigation in that region and Japan is the largest source of foreign direct investment in Vietnam. However, whatever the driving reason may be, common sense prevails in a way that supports the ruling hegemony of the VCP to embrace free trade with other countries while remaining cautious of China in a nonpolitical fashion (as in people prefer not to buy Chinese products based on perceived quality—or at least this is what they report—rather than an overt protest against Chinese companies). Although products are tied to other countries as a matter of origin, by separating consumption from politics (in the everyday, lived experience sense of the word), consumerism remains an open-market phenomena regulated by consumer choice and unfettered by political realities. As Gramsci notes of the function of hegemony,

If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer 'leading' but only 'dominant', exercising coercive force alone; this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear. (Class, Culture, and Hegemony, p. 199)

In the case of Vietnam, while the “old” (communism) is dying off, the “new” (capitalism) is being born simultaneously. The old and the new, however, are not mutually exclusive, and modern day Vietnam demonstrates how the leading class can maintain its hegemonic rule during a time of transition by depoliticizing the new and not letting the old fade away.

Common sense narratives about the preference for foreign products and embrace of global culture (both from Asia and the West) can also perhaps begin to address one of

the initial points of intrigue which drew me to Vietnam: how can Vietnamese be so forgiving and tolerant towards Americans? Part of this phenomenon can be explained through understanding the forward-looking nature of Vietnamese culture. As Ashwill and Thai (2005) observe,

Despite its ancient history, Vietnam is by nature and necessity a future-oriented country in which people are not prone to dwell on the past. While Vietnamese are rightly proud of their victories over the Chinese, French, and U.S. forces, and continue to celebrate these victories, in festivals and holidays, they have followed Ho Chi Minh's advice by distinguishing between peoples and their governments. (p. 43)

Ashwill and Thai's explanation fits with my experiences in Vietnam, although this account certainly cannot encompass all individual attitudes and belief systems. Lee (2001) similarly notes in his study of how Korea and Vietnam have been able to negotiate their national identities and history of war by focusing on the acquisition of a prosperous future. He argues that "for economic expediency, both the socialist Vietnamese and the capitalist South Korean governments... rather than hiding the issue of massacres, they claim that the future of both nations would only be possible if the past is left behind" (Lee, 2001, p. 633). The characteristic future-oriented nature of the Vietnamese indicates that while the history of conflict has certainly not been forgotten, it is thought to be in the past and it is believed that energy is better focused on the future. As discussed above, this future is defined by progress and economic development, and global relationships are understood in some sense to be inevitable in achieving this goal. One possible explanation for how the United States fits into this picture is that as a world superpower, an affiliation with the U.S. is part of this vision and thus consuming U.S. products is not understood as a political act but part of the common sense narrative of progress.

CHAPTER 5

NO GUARANTEES

This research has begun to explore how economic changes in Vietnam have impacted consumer culture in Hanoi. The narratives of modernity and class associated with these changes underscore the inability to separate these macro changes from radical shifts in everyday lived experience. Indeed, “as the experience of other modernizing Southeast Asian nations has shown, however, it is nigh impossible to open oneself up to global flows of capital without also opening oneself up to global flows of culture and information” (Drummond & Thomas, 2003, p. 1). Cultural changes likewise cannot be predicted or explained away by labeling them as categorically positive or negative, or the origins of these shifts attributed simply to centers of global capital.

As Appadurai (1996) argues in response to theses of cultural imperialism and homogenization, these influences are not passively received, and “at least as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized in one or another way” (p. 32). Many of the cultural influences in Vietnam come from countries such as Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore. As Iwabuchi (2001) notes, the West is not the only supplier of modernity within the diffuse landscape of globalization. In order to complicate our understanding of culture, it must be conceptualized not as an empirical or predetermined condition, but a space where people perform “themselves into cultural existence” (Liechty, 2003, p. 265). Only then can we “begin to see how the local and the global are brought together in cultural process, not

cultural outcome” (Liechty, 2003, p. 21). Future research must continue to explore these complex cross-cultural influences as dynamic flows not only from the West but also between nations in the non-West.

Advertising in Hanoi has become a vehicle through which to join the modern world. This research contributes to the growing body of literature seeking to understand capitalist formations, political economic structures, and consumerism within emergent market economies. While this research focused on Hanoi’s Old Quarter, future avenues of research could examine differences in consumerism in more rural areas. In Hanoi, I had expected to see differentiations in levels of consumerism primarily between generations, but instead found that consumerism is more likely to be determined by class. Participants of all ages remarked that young people are more influenced by commercial advertising and like foreign products more than older people. Youth who possess the material means to do so purchase these products, but are not willing to go into debt or work extra to buy expensive goods. Many young people I spoke with work part-time as English tutors, coffee shop employees, and other similar jobs. Because credit cards are also not very common and are only used by the wealthy, not by young consumers, their spending abilities are more constrained.

The appeals of advertising certainly motivate young people to buy foreign products whenever they can afford to, but among the teens and university age people I spoke with I did not sense an all-encompassing drive to consume. These young people are more interested in investing in education and socializing with friends over food and drinks (perhaps due to a lack of affluence, or perhaps due to personal preference). For example, when I spent time with the members of the English club and tourist club, the

avored pastime was very simple and inexpensive: ordering in or cooking food together and playing card games. These experiences emphasize social and distributive aspects (we all pitched in for food and all played the card games), rather than individualistic concerns promoted by commercial advertising. There were certainly other less social possibilities for how we could have spent our time together, such as seeing a movie or going to a mall. Ads are the main propaganda arms of neoliberalism, and do not just spread the message to buy more stuff but also circulate an ideology of individual needs. As Shultz (1994) remarked over two decades ago, “transforming from a society in which harmony and collectivism were importuned, sometimes with harsh measures, into one in which individuals are now encouraged to compete and to be profitable does not occur without some social costs” (p. 44). As standards of living continue to rise, the balance between consumerist and social priorities will likely continue to shift and material access to more goods by youth may lead to more individualistic mentalities.

Advertising was also tied throughout the interviews to narratives of globalization and economic growth. Ads were often seen as a signifier of attention to Vietnam and indicator of potential investment. Narratives about what Vietnam will look like in the future were almost always tied to ideas of progress as the ability to “*develop*” and become more “*modern*.” These comments highlight the central finding of this study, that the embrace of commercial advertising does not only speak to an embrace of foreign products as indexes of modernity and status icons, but of the future of Vietnam itself. The country’s prospects are connected to continued integration into the global economy and foreign direct investment from other powerful countries, and advertising serves to index all of these complex narratives of progress. This concept points full circle back to the first

instance of determination where an economic frame sets the scheme for what is possible or desirable. Vietnam may be losing some aspects of traditional culture and consumerism is becoming more prevalent in society, but according to those I interviewed, these are all necessary changes due to the lens of economic progress through which society is evaluated.

The Vietnamese government has successfully maintained a strong hegemonic State through periods of rapid transformation by applying neoliberalism strategically, or as exception, to promote consumer freedoms while maintaining a strong (albeit oppressive) political structure. This research was limited by the inability to ask directly about political oppression, which future research could seek to address. Market freedoms and political suppression seem to come into contradiction as opposing progressive movements, however this analysis suggests that contradiction does not necessarily require resolution, but is rather something to live with and explore rather than reject as nonsensical. As Nhuyen-vo (2008) notes, global linkages often lead to hybrid formations:

What the case of Vietnam highlights is that governance in current neoliberal globalization may and does take paradoxical forms, sustained not by vestiges of a time passed but by contemporary conditions. Of mutual benefit to both the neoliberal global economy and the ruling party in Vietnam is the use of entrepreneurial and consumer choice differentially among different segments of the population. But also of mutual benefit to both is repression enabled by a ruling party with well-developed apparatuses of coercion from its past. The freedom and unfreedom pair reveals the split personality of the ruling party that enters into the neoliberal global economy. (p. 246)

Neoliberalism is deployed unevenly across Vietnam and certainly the globe, but in Vietnam these freedoms have been incorporated into an existing structure of “unfreedoms” without dissolving these apparently contradictions. As Ong (2006) notes, “the neoliberal exception is a crucial analytic for rethinking sovereign power as neither a singularity nor a simple opposition of normativity and exception but a shifting and

flexible ensemble of heterogeneous calculations, choices, and exceptions that constitute security, life, and ethics” (p. 10). The careful management of this exception to the otherwise repressive governmentality has allowed this paradox to remain intact. It remains to be seen whether the Vietnamese government will be able to continue its rule alongside increasing consumer freedoms, or whether a political challenge will rise from these new found freedoms and individuality.

Although global influences have undoubtedly had a marked impact on daily life, the specific articulations between these forces and Vietnamese politics, economics, and society remain a unique formation with no direct path to follow. There are no guarantees in what the future holds for Vietnam as capitalism is not the assumed final stage of developmental evolution: “It’s common for foreigners to assume that the reformers’ victory is inevitable; that the great march of History will take Vietnam into the promised land of free markets and, later, to political pluralism,” however, “there is nothing inevitable about what is happening in Vietnam; the outcome will be the result of day-to-day choices made by the Party and the people” (Hayton, 2010, p. 111-12). While Vietnam will undoubtedly continue to transform and develop, the question of where this journey will lead is not predetermined and remains open to unknowable potentials.

APPENDIX

Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Gender	Education	Occupation	Family Occupation*
Nguyen	33	Male	University	Hotel manager	
Ly	20	Female	University student	Part time private English tutor	Parents own a drink shop
Binh	29	Male	University	Coffee shop owner and previous employee at a Vietnamese bank	Dad works at a construction company, mom has a small tailor shop
Phuc	20	Female	University student	Coffee shop employee	Parents own a small market business
Anh	20	Male	University student	Coffee shop employee	Father is in the military, mother is a government employee
Thu	21	Female	University student	University exercise center employee	
An	50	Male	College	Different jobs	
Minh	21	Female	University student		Parents do different jobs
Nguyet	21	Female	University student		
Hanh	21	Female	University student		
Nu	17	Female	High school student		Mother was a farmer (now retired)
Duong	40	Male	University (MA)	Local environmental NGO employee	Mom works at a hospital, dad works at a beer company
Tu	40	Male	University law degree	Government Environmental Branch	Parents worked for the government education department
Hang	34	Female	University (MA)	Journalist	
Mai	36	Female	University	Environmental company	
Quang	17	Male	9 th grade graduate	Motorbike lot keeper at Hanoi University	Parents are rice farmers
Pham	30	Female	University	Owens two food shops	
Diep	62	Male	University	Employee at the university student market	
Giang	50	Female	University	Has owned a small drink/snack shop for	Parents were teachers

				20 years	
Lan	18	Male	High school		
Phuong	14	Female	7 th grade		Father a University teacher, mother in finance
Ha	58	Female	University		
Linh	57	Female		Nurse	
Huyen	59	Female	University	Retired (was an accountant for the government)	

*I asked mostly younger people their parents' occupations to get a sense of their class position

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