Essential Trade

Vietnamese Women in a Changing Marketplace

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Essential Trade

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POLITICS, MEANING, AND MEMORY

David Chandler and Rita Smith Kipp

SERIES EDITORS

For Noah and Allegra,
whose love, patience, and wit have sustained me and
who have taught me to find joy in the
little pleasures of daily life.

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Introduction

Trading Essentialism under Market Socialism

> He doesn't sell as well as me. Naturally, it's because he's a man.
>
> Bến Thành market clothing seller, speaking about her husband

When I first visited Ho Chi Minh City in 1988, trade was sluggish. Bến Thành market, one of Vietnam's most famous and enduring symbols of commerce, was dingy and in ill repair, its stained cement walls and stall counters crumbling and its aisles strewn with dirt and trash. Haggard and bored, the female sellers beseeched customers to buy produce, housewares, and clothing displayed in baskets or arranged on tarps. The quasi-legal trade on the streets outside the market seemed to fare only slightly better.

This disheartening state of commerce contrasted sharply with optimistic accounts in the international press that for the previous two years had heralded market-oriented policies known as Đổi mới as a sign that Vietnam would move away from socialism and follow China down the road of reform and prosperity. Literally "change to the new" and commonly translated as "Renovation," Đổi mới did not yet have readily apparent effects in Bến Thành market and its environs. In fact, 1988 proved an economically trying year. A poor harvest in the north fueled rumors of impending famine. Annual inflation rates soared to 500 percent. Declining foreign aid and continuing military involvement in Cambodia left the Vietnamese government unable to fund social services such as education and health care. Everyone I met voiced concern about the growing gap between those with means and those without.

Less than a decade later, the promise of Đổi mới seemed closer to being realized. Downtown Ho Chi Minh City, which residents continued to call by its pre-1975 name of Saigon, buzzed with commerce. Almost every housefront and curbside was taken over by petty traders. A casual walk down

most streets in the former capital of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) yielded a cornucopia of items for sale. As one local saying goes, "Step outside your house, and there's a market" (*Bước ra khỏi nhà là chợ*).

In the midst of this resurgent metropolis-as-market, the literal marketplace known as Bến Thành also seemed reborn. Its iconic clock tower repainted and its stalls repaired (Figure 1), Bến Thành was recovering its former luster, its prominence on tourist itineraries, and its reputation for cutthroat competition and sweet-talking traders that required buyers to beware. The market offered just about every conceivable commodity: housewares, prepared food, vegetables, fruit, meat, fish, clothing, cosmetics, sundries, shoes, handicrafts, jewelry, and cloth. Stallholders responded to growing tourist traffic by stocking souvenirs, such as lacquerware, beaded slippers, embroidered handbags, artwork, and fabric for *áo dài,* Vietnam's much-touted national costume. Perhaps because of this growing international clientele, which included both foreigners and emigrated Vietnamese returning to visit relatives, many Saigon residents preferred outlying markets with cheaper goods and selections that better met their needs. Others worried that the exuberant consumption occurring in Bến Thành and elsewhere signaled the rise of a selfish materialism that would exclude the working class and poor. For the city's growing middle classes, however, Bến Thành remained a popular shopping destination, particularly on Sunday afternoons and in the weeks leading up to the Lunar New Year (Tết), when the aisles were packed with women and families comparing goods and prices.

Its prominence made Bến Thành market a focal point in debates about Vietnam's cultural heritage and future. In preparation for the city's three hundredth anniversary in 1998, several readers of local newspapers proposed the French colonial structure as the city's symbol due to its international renown and significance to Vietnamese domestically and overseas (Nguyễn Vĩnh San 1997; Trần Hoàng 1997). With its recently recovered vitality providing evidence of the benefits of market-oriented reforms, it seemed an apt emblem of past, present, and future commercial fortunes. Its more than 1,400 stalls packed into 10,800 square meters also suggested the dynamism of Vietnam's grassroots entrepreneurship and the hope voiced in the ubiquitous government slogan, "Rich people, strong country" (*Dân giàu nước mạnh*).[1]

Less favorable reports suggested that Bến Thành was not modern enough. City planners entertained proposals to raze the building and replace it with an international trade center. The economic crisis that hit the region in 1997 granted a reprieve from these plans. Soon after, tourism and the expansion of the urban middle class rebounded and, with them, the market's fortunes.

Figure 1: Bến Thành market, Ho Chi Minh City.

By 2006, trade had become so lucrative that the international press reported the value of one square meter of retail space in Bến Thành to be the most expensive in the world (Aglionby 2006; Vũ Bình and Hoài Trang 2006). Although rightly doubted by the denizens of the marketplace, this exaggerated claim, plus a new floor, video monitors displaying ads, and a bustling outdoor night market, enhanced the market's cachet as a retail hotspot (Figure 2). Talk of rebuilding surfaced once again, only this time with greater attention to preserving the market's "traditional" charm.

Bến Thành's straddling of timelessness and change, of tradition and modernity, may have fueled its economic fortunes, but it also raised contradictions that frequently worked to denigrate or marginalize its traders. Far from being appreciated as part of modern growth, Bến Thành evoked images of an old-fashioned *chợ* (marketplace) in which women hawked small amounts of goods, many of them produced at home, in order to support their families. This presumed character of the *chợ* and of the *tiểu thương* (petty traders) who operated its stalls in turn rested on two kinds of essentialism that ascribed their distinctive features to supposedly underlying, natural

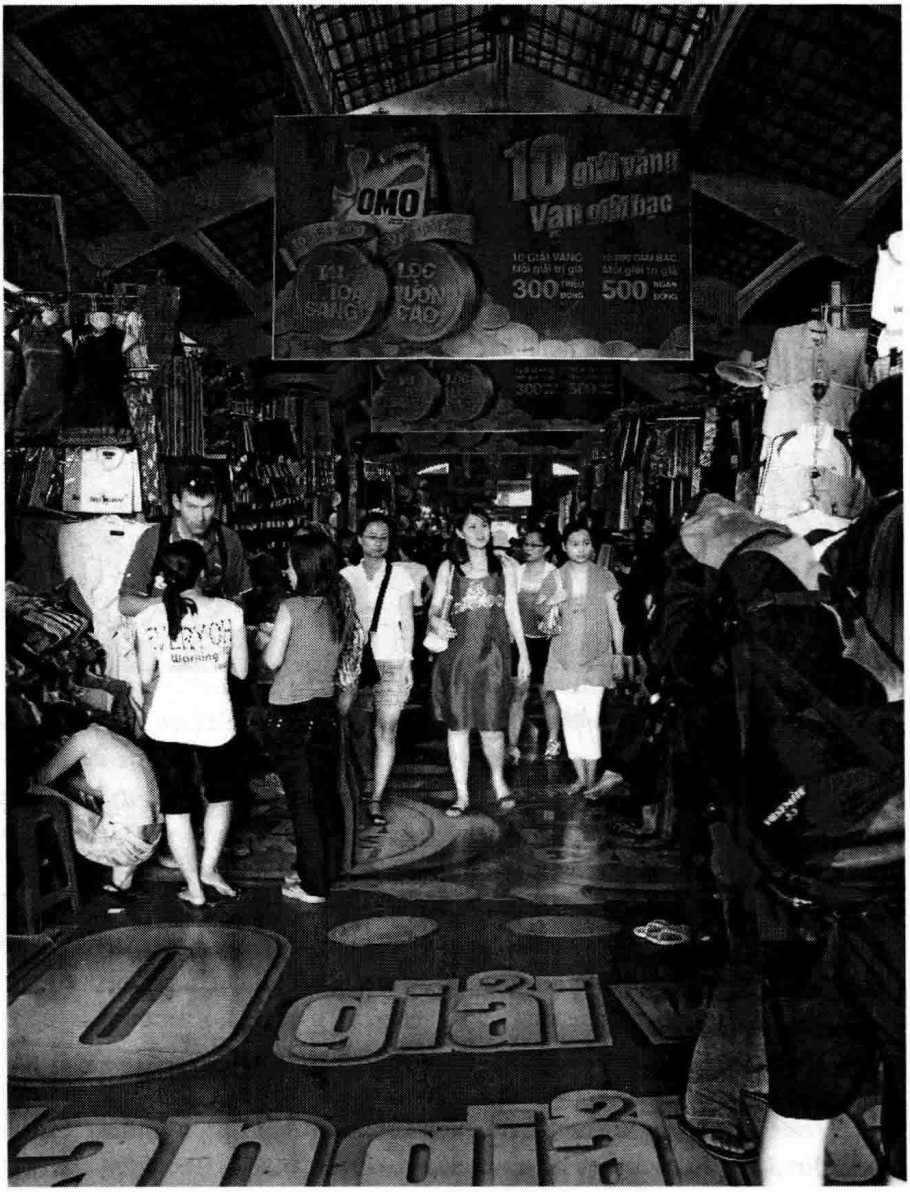

Figure 2: The market's central aisle in 2008.

qualities. First, the *chợ* is said to have always been a woman's domain because of Vietnamese women's natural aptitude for trade. Unlike men, women are thought to possess the patience and sweet-talking charm needed to clinch a sale. Although the prominent role of women in commerce is sometimes nationalistically heralded as the survival of an indigenous tradition predating the imposition of Chinese Confucian patriarchy, it is more often used to support a second essentialism: that trade falls outside the core of Vietnamese cultural identity rooted in an agrarian and scholarly ethos. *Tiểu thương* are assumed to be self-interested and greedy, resistant to the norms of morality and social order.[2] Banners strung from the rafters of the market reminding traders to conduct business in a civilized (*văn minh*) manner worthy of the city bearing Hồ Chí Minh's name clearly suggested that, left to their own devices, they were liable to behave otherwise.[3]

During the 1990s, the marginalization of *tiểu thương* centered on claims that traders generally lacked culture (*thiếu văn hóa*) and had low educational levels (*trình độ học vấn thấp*), two phrases that indicated a backward (*lạc hậu*) view of the world inimical to the civilized modernity sought through Đổi mới. Traders were also criticized for following superstitious (*mê tín*) practices, including divination and the worship of spirits of fortune. Such forms of marketplace spirituality compared unfavorably to the officially recognized religions of Buddhism and ancestor worship that were experiencing a revival and were redolent with presumably positive aspects of Vietnamese heritage. Taken together, these claims positioned female traders in the context of rapid economic growth in the 1990s as naturally, essentially backward—a source of disorder ready to undermine rational development.

We have, then, two visions of chợ Bến Thành: one of a marketplace in step with and contributing to broader economic and cultural transformations, the other of a repository of timeless femininity mired in unseemly Vietnamese traditions that should be abandoned. Given that Ho Chi Minh City and Vietnam had by the mid-1990s fallen under the thrall of development ideologies, one would expect traders to embrace the first image and combat the gender and identity essentialisms that trapped them in the second. Instead, during nearly two years of fieldwork in Bến Thành market, I found quite the contrary. Traders frequently said and did things that affirmed essentialism. The trader quoted at the beginning of this introduction provides a typical example: "He doesn't sell as well as me. Naturally, it's because he's a man." The statement asserts the trader's selling skill to be due to her own femininity. Her husband, as a man, "naturally" cannot sell as well as she does. That women were "naturally" at home in the marketplace could be further confirmed by a quick look around

Bến Thành, where women ran approximately 85 percent of the cloth and clothing stalls on which my research focused.

As is often the case with essentialism, it did not take much digging to unearth causal factors shaping Bến Thành market's trade and women's roles in it that were anything but natural or timeless. Over the previous forty years, traders and their businesses had weathered the seismic political, economic, and social shifts of civil war, postwar economic restructuring, socialist cooperativization, and Đổi mới. One can scarcely imagine a more volatile context for retail trade. As we will see, it was precisely these complicated twists and turns of political economy that women explained had led them to pursue trade and made it easier for them, as opposed to men, to acquire stalls in Bến Thành market. Many traders pointed to these histories to rail against the stereotypes that denied them respect. Far from ignorant and backward, they assured me, they had educations that had been interrupted by war and its aftermath. Their subsequent success came from hard work, sacrifice, and savvy, not from natural femininity. Traders also invoked essentialism strategically to secure advantage in the marketplace. When faced with critical officials, skeptical customers, or demanding creditors, a trader might refer to herself self-deprecatingly as a mere woman lacking knowledge and sophistication. Because strategy is often assumed to rest on artifice and insincerity, one might conclude that women traders mobilized gender essentialism precisely because they did not believe it—yet another throwaway claim in a marketplace in which hyperbole is just as trafficked as any material good.

These suspicions—that essentialism is objectively false, that it marginalizes or oppresses by reducing people to some presumed inevitable natural quality, and that the only constructive approach for victims of essentialism would be its rejection or, possibly, crass manipulation for strategic advantage—would all find ample support in critical scholarship on gender. In opposition to Western Enlightenment claims that who we are stems from some essence or internal core that predates our physical embodiment, most gender scholars and cultural anthropologists tend toward a constructivist position that the human subject does not exist prior to its formation through language, culture, and social relations. Such claims are inspired in particular by the work of Michel Foucault (1990 [1978]) and Judith Butler (1999 [1990]), who argue that the idea that individuals could have a presocial sex or gender is itself a cultural notion shaped through historically specific power relations. It follows from this perspective that human agency, defined as the capacity to engage in meaningful action and interaction, is not something that in-