



Original research

The moral middle-class in market socialism: An investigation into the personhood of women working in NGOs in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

The paper uncovers the values that Vietnamese women produce and accumulate from the NGO sector to acquire a morality central to their middle-class identity. They present an idea of a moral middle-class that conforms to the neoliberal criteria of self-reliance and self-optimisation within the economic segment, in which values are generated in the forms of sacrifice and giving away. I argue that this idea is associated with a mode of governmentality whereby the socialist state shapes the moral subject for the sake of governance in the context of marketisation. Morality, as a governing device, motivates and polices women's compliance with their subordinate position. This paper presents findings that illustrate the slipperiness of the notion of middle-class between theories and practices and from women's perspectives. Perceived in part in terms of women's sacrifices, this study illustrates how middle-class identity is negotiated through moral, gender and class divisions in a post-socialist society.

Introduction

Vietnam's economic reforms, known with the *đổi mới* or economic renovation policy, were initiated by the socialist state in the late 1980s in order to develop a multi-sectoral economy. The policy has accounted for the proliferation of a private sector that has contributed significantly to Vietnam's economic transition from one of the world's poorest nations to a lower middle-income economy by 2010. Privatisation in Vietnam has also accounted for the mushrooming of voluntary and not-for-profit organisations offering services to grassroots communities as the state withdraws from the broad-based provision of welfare (Beaulieu, 1994; Nørlund, 2007; Wischermann, 2010).

With market liberalisation, the growing interest in humanitarian and not-for-profit businesses represents the assignment of special values to particular populations: mainly women, who are traditionally considered the carers and nurturers of Vietnamese society and families. Rather than dealing in monetised terms, acts of selfless care in the work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) offer the care-givers value in terms of morality, which accounts for women's distinct position in society in parallel with the other forms of material value. The values associated with humanitarianism and NGO activism, as revealed by a growing body of anthropological research, are especially attractive to those groups in society that encounter heightened anxieties as a result of being excluded

or isolated as social beings. This kind of anxiety accompanies the neoliberal regime of personhood which includes regimes encroaching on citizenship and ruling by self-government with economic talents becoming the key provider of entitlements and benefits (Ong, 2006; Rose, 1996; Zhang, 2010). Therefore, anxieties involved with identity crises have become a global phenomenon, which make morality attractive to those populations jeopardised by neoliberal standards, such as dependents (Muehlebach, 2012), the excluded (Malkki, 2015) or those who aspire to proclaim a middle-class status through acts of giving (Bornstein, 2012). In the domain of morality, people acquire new identities derived from the regime of *ethical citizenship*, as the values they generate in terms of compassion, love and empathy become acutely necessary in a society experiencing a decline in trust and solidarity (Muehlebach, 2012; Nguyen, 2018).

In this paper, I will present one middle-class identity acquired by women working in NGOs and profoundly intertwined with the idea of ethical citizenship. It attempted to add new findings to the notions of middle-class material accumulation that are infused with moral norms promoted by the socialist state as it intensified its strategies of privatisation and marketisation. It reveals a middle class that is neither entirely rooted in its relationship with property ownership, as per the Marxist tradition, nor totally identified as free floating citizens as per Weberian thought. On the contrary, it highlights a middle class

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employing morality to cope with the heightened anxieties associated with the uncertainty of wealth, which is neither politically nor legally protected by the socialist rule.

This situation reveals the constraints and challenges faced by members of the new middle-class in post-socialist Vietnam. With a socialist state remaining the ruling power, members of the new rich in Vietnam still encounter tremendous political constraints with the absence of associational or free rights to consolidate their power (Kerkvliet, 2015; Kerkvliet, Heng, & Koh, 2003; Thayer, 2009). Without a legally protected autonomous civil society, people's economic activities, despite being proclaimed as based on freedom of choice, remain controlled by the state, albeit from a distance (Leshkovich, 2012). As widely reported, the state employs techniques of governmentality to encourage free choices and the private pursuits of individuals in the economy while still strictly controlling politically oriented activities in the public sphere with repressive measures (Bui, 2013, 2015; Hannah, 2007; Kerkvliet, 2015; Nguyen-vo, 2008; Thayer, 2009).

In this inquiry into the middle class, I will describe the paradoxical situation of the new middle class in Vietnam under the rule of the socialist state, who face a high degree of uncertainty about their social and political positions, which are incompatible with their wealth produced by the market. While wealth often evokes antipathy in Vietnam's socialist tradition, it is further problematised by moral issues, which are used by the state to classify people based on their choices to appear with moral appropriateness (Leshkovich, 2014). I argue that with the growing visibility of wealth, people are exposed to a heightened level of anxiety that urges them not only to stay *wealthy* but *moral* too. Rather than wealth alone, I will show that morality also defines *middle-classness* according to the moral criteria sponsored by the state, which classify citizens with human capital in terms of self-reliance and economic optimisation. I will show the gendered infusion within the idea of the middle class, with women urged to make choices in terms of a sacrifice morality, which appeals to Vietnam's patriarchal socialist tradition. NGO work, an area which is already close to the feminine and domestic realm, becomes an attractive domain for women, in which they can optimise themselves into this middle-class category with moral and gender factors contributing to the slipperiness of the concept.

This paper presents one of the main themes of my PhD research on personhood and civil society and is drawn from an analysis of women's narratives and life histories regarding working in the NGO sector, taken from fieldwork I conducted in Hanoi in 2016 and 2017. Through the use of snowballing, an established sampling strategy, I met my informants, with whom I generated qualitative data from narrative interviews, focus group discussions, concept mapping and participant observation. Based on the chain referral method, I selected informants from different age groups who were working in local NGOs and international NGOs and a few from the group of mass organisations in Vietnam, in order to compare different groups across the sector. A narrative analysis was then conducted to construct the social narratives of the group under study. I then scanned through the data set to identify and analyse the repetitions and variations of individual narratives to construct the social structure of the collective narratives of the group (Shenhav, 2015). All informant names in this paper are pseudonyms to mitigate the possible disclosure of their identities. All participants in this research were asked for their consent prior to and during the study to ensure that their participation was voluntary and free from coercion.

Middle-class anxiety: Uncertainty and morality

Studies of the new middle class depict the rise of the "new rich" in Asia as a phenomenon associated with the economic miracles in newly emerging economies, especially those from the formerly socialist cluster, such as China and Vietnam (Hayton, 2010; Hsiao & Wang, 2001; Robison & Goodman, 1996; Zhang, 2010). Compared to the "old bourgeoisie," whose class power was extracted from production relations, the new middle class is associated with strata of white-

collar salaried professionals and entrepreneurs that grew in proportion to the process of commercialisation and urbanisation in these economies (Hsiao, 2014; Hutchison & Brown, 2001; Lange & Lars, 2009; Robison & Goodman, 1996). They illustrate the Weberian notion of the middle classes competing for class status associated with the symbolic values of consumer goods, education, social circles or white-collar occupations, which separates them from both the blue-collar working class and the capitalist class (Hsiao, 2014; King, 2008; Liechty, 2003; Robison & Goodman, 1996).

Weber highlights the social mobility of the new middle class in terms of entrepreneurial lifestyles and consumption power, which enjoy a reciprocal relationship with the market and consumerist culture (Hsiao, 2014; Liechty, 2003). They are neither the capitalist nor the working class. Members of the new middle class appear morally and culturally distant from either of the aforementioned groups as their engagement in consumerist culture and entrepreneurial lifestyles are borne by the process of market intensification and competition (Liechty, 2003; Mills, 1951). Their dependence on the market also reveals the precarious situation of the new middle class, the rise and falls of which depend on the health of the market (Hattori, Funatsu, & Torii, 2003; Hsiao, 2014; Robison & Goodman, 1996). In post-socialist countries like Vietnam and China, where the previous structure of property owners had been debilitated by communist revolutions, the rise of the new middle class in these economies has been rather ambiguous. The power of the new middle class in these contexts is often associated with their rising consumer power in the open global market, even as they are still restricted socially, politically and locally by authoritarian regimes (Drummond, 2004, 2012; Gainsborough, 2010; Hattori et al., 2003; Robison & Goodman, 1996; Zhang, 2010).

With only a vague relationship to the productive economy, members of the new middle class, who are neither capitalists nor labourers, constantly encounter a high degree of anxiety associated with the typical uncertainty of their *middleness*, which is neither high nor low (Liechty, 2003; Mills, 1951). Zhang (2010), based on Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*, argues that the uncertainty of the new rich in post-socialist China is associated with the absences of social and cultural capital which, besides wealth, are key elements of the structure of the middle class in Western societies. As Zhang points out, in China, rather than class, people engage with the ephemeral concept of "*zhongchan jieceng*" or "middle propertied stratum," an idea associated with the state discourse around the "human quality" concept (*suzhi*), which interprets people's self-worth in relation to their responsible consumption and behaviour without mentioning their link with the productive economy (Zhang, 2010; Zhang & Ong, 2008). With a middle-class identity perceived mainly from the perspective of new wealth that is neither legally nor economically protected, people constantly fear falling behind socially if they fail economically (Zhang, 2010:8-9).

Despite conspicuous levels of consumption indicating a new middle class on the rise, class negligence also accounts for the uncertainty of the new Vietnamese propertied middle class. Like their Chinese counterparts, Vietnamese middle-class members also fear that wealth alone cannot assure them a respectable position in society (Jellema, 2005; Leshkovich, 2012; Nguyen, 2018). This is because immediate wealth, which often results from rapid and sometimes illegal means, is not only unprotected legally, but also morally, which problematises their prestige, and thus their standing in society.

Their fear is not without good reason, considering the uneasy past of their predecessors under the rule of the socialist state, most notably with the state's backlash against proprietors and land owners during the land reforms which occurred in the North in the 1950s and the South after 1975 (Leshkovich, 2014; Malarney, 2002). The growing visibility of the newly wealthy following the exposure of material assets has recently provoked discontent and open criticism, fuelled by messages from anti-corruption campaigns attacking corrupt state cadres as victims of selfishness and greed (Jellema, 2005; Leshkovich, 2014; Nguyen-vo, 2008). According to Leshkovich (2014), the anxieties en-

countered by the new middle class in post-socialist Vietnam are associated with the ambiguity of the new propertied middle class under the rule of the socialist regime, which, rather than recognising a class in relation to the means of production, disaggregates production and consumption to classify citizens through distinctive moral codes. Therefore, while a middle class related to the means of production continues to be condemned for its exploitative nature or moral degradation, one that accommodates state-sponsored moral codes such as consumption or charitable acts is often considered a middle class for virtuous labour (Jellema, 2005; Leshkovich, 2012, 2014).

The women working in the NGO sector who took part in my research can be said to represent a middle class in this classification logic on account of their studious labour at work and in education and their domestic labour at home. When working in NGOs, they make a distinction between themselves and others, including wealthier people, by emphasising their distinctive feminine role of caring for the wellbeing of the family and marginalised communities. This account of the middle class also illustrates the idea of *ethical citizenship*, which is shaped by a state-led economic restructuring policy, which tends to idealise citizens with neoliberal criteria in terms of self-reliance and economic optimisation (see *dân trí* in Nguyen, 2018). The emergence of the new middle class in Vietnam's post-socialist market economy illustrates a class in the making. It involves varied, sometimes contradictory, subjectivities about class embodied within moral and gendered norms that are not only validated by the market but also approved of within Vietnam's cultural socialist tradition (Drummond & Rydstrom, 2004; Leshkovich, 2012). For the middle-class women in post-socialist Vietnam who often boast of an honoured and advanced position in their economy, it is not merely the accumulation of wealth *per se* that they seek. Rather, they aim to demonstrate, through wealth, their alignment with the moral and ideological position of the "virtuous woman," an idea which is increasingly associated with the economic and materialistic assets they acquire in the market.

Governmentality and ethical citizenship: Moulding moral classness

Since the late 1980s, Vietnam, like other formerly socialist economies, has taken marketisation and privatisation measures to develop a market-based economy. Like China, Vietnam's *đổi mới* economic reforms have not dismissed the ruling power of the socialist state with the model of market socialism. Instead, economic performance becomes the new source of legitimacy for the socialist state, which has switched to a mode of governmentality in order to optimise economic outcomes of free choice and thereby achieve socialist goals (Bui, 2015; Nguyen, 2018; Nguyen-vo, 2008). By employing these governmentality techniques, the state withdraws from the mode of direct control but continues to govern from a distance in order to maximise people's capacity to make free choices and follow their private pursuits in the market.

Proposed by Foucault, governmentality is the technology of optimisation based on people's self-government through economic rationality and calculative strategies (Foucault in Rabinow, 2000). The technology involves the techniques of subjectivity and subjection that allow the state to shape people's economic behaviour and choices by employing knowledge of normality and rationality, which is known as the "conduct of conduct" (Li, 2007; Nguyen-vo, 2008; Ong, 2006). With the power of the state exercised from afar, individuals seem to be free in their private choices, and act on their own "habits, beliefs and aspirations" by voluntary access to knowledge and techniques with "the will to improve" (Li, 2007:5). This technology does not conflict with the political regime, as it treats people's problems, such as poverty and inequality, as non-political and technical issues which can be solved through optimising techniques or productive strategies (Ferguson, 1994; Li, 2007; Ong, 2006).

In authoritarian post-socialist economies like China and Vietnam, the socialist states use this form of governmentality to involve people in optimising strategies and a neoliberal logic of self-government to maximise

the capacity of free choices in prioritised areas set by the state rather than liberalising people's free rights. For example, Ong (2006) proposes that governmentality allows the state in China to create special economic zones connected with global markets where citizens are governed with the sovereign principles of the global capitalist regime rather than the juridical process confined to the space of the nation-state. Rule through sovereign principles allows the state to govern people with overlapping political spaces and rules.

Rule through sovereign principles also applies in Vietnam, where people are treated as ethical citizens across multiple moral regimes (Leshkovich, 2014; Nguyen, 2018). With marketisation, the state highlights human capital not only in terms of self-reliance and optimising skills but also of the moral codes of the socialist person for the responsibility for collective wellbeing (Gammeltoft, 2014; Harms, 2014; Leshkovich, 2012; Nguyen, 2018). The mode of government across moral regimes aims at shaping the kind of economic person not only desirable for the process of marketisation but also governable by the socialist state (Makovicky, 2014; Nguyen, 2018; Ong, 2006). The socialisation policy (*chính sách xã hội hóa*) is one example that shows how the state has involved people in the privatisation of public services, with people's optimising for welfare at private costs recognised as ethical citizenship (Nguyen, 2018). As Nguyen (2018: 629) points out, this policy aims at constructing a "moral subject" that "is self-governed in accumulating human capital for the sake of market, yet loyal to family and community while being governable by the party state." In the domain of morality and with governmentality, the socialist state moulds a kind of moral subject that is self-governed by market rules and moral codes convened by the state (Leshkovich, 2014; Nguyen-vo, 2008). Through state-controlled media, street banners, expert guidance, beauty magazines, and self-help books, the state continues to feed society with recipes for becoming appropriate Vietnamese people with modernity and civility symbolising the process of industrialisation and modernisation (Drummond & Rydstrom, 2004; Harms, 2014; Leshkovich, 2012; Nguyen, 2018). In Vietnam's marketisation, people internalise the government's policy in different ways and demonstrate self-worth through economic and material assets, with a heightened duty towards the family and community (Gammeltoft, 2014; Leshkovich, 2012; Nguyen, 2018; Pettus, 2003).

The middle-class women I am describing in this paper represent the *moral subject* in this sense. They exemplify virtuous women through their sacrifice for the collective good of the family and community, which is involved in the process of self-improvement through learning, producing and consuming. It is important to realise that women are recognised by the socialist state and granted an advanced position of full and equal employment with men in the formal economy (Luong, 1989; Shohet, 2017; Werner, 1981). In the context of Vietnam's marketisation, women are no longer ensured full employment in the state. However, the socialist state continues to legitimise women's formal role in the economy by recognising their sacrifice in the family as "virtuous labour" which accounts for a large part of women's power in socialism (Leshkovich, 2014; Nguyen, 2019; Pettus, 2003). In this paper, I will show that women make sacrifices in the forms of economic and materialised optimisation, in the economy, at home and in society, as the source of power they accumulate from the domestic realm.

Women's performance in the domain of morality illustrates *moral middle-classness*, which results from the technical device of governmentality often known as "rendering moral" with morality being the technical solution for the moral problems involved with wealth (Leshkovich, 2012:98; Li, 2007) that is, by problematizing wealth with moral issues, the state directs people into optimising forms or norms that are considered morally *appropriate*. It is evident that when wealth is often wedded to fear of moral inappropriateness, morality has been perceived as both the cause (by a deficit of) and solution to (by increasing) a form of wealth creation which is "correct" and "appropriate" in terms of its contribution to family and public welfare (Jellema, 2005; Leshkovich, 2012; Nguyen, 2019). This technology allows the state to

mould the person for the sake of governing with morality serving as the governing device enabling the socialist state to rule from a distance.

Self-development through sacrifice

During my fieldwork, I often heard from informants, especially younger professionals, about the reasons they came to work in NGOs. Many stated that they worked in NGOs to develop themselves, using a phrase common in Vietnamese: *phát triển bản thân*. This expression in Vietnamese literally means one to develop (*phát triển*) oneself (*bản thân*) through learning. It also can be understood as a process of accumulating skills and knowledge to become an accomplished and useful individual with common sense. It resonates with Gammeltoft's (2014) proposition regarding the concept of *becoming*, which invokes socially expected human qualities that one must yield to become a person of self-worth in present Vietnamese society. The women working in NGOs often highlight the value of learning through which they wish to become accomplished people: not through wealth but through their sacrifice and contributions to society.

Many young NGO professionals I know volunteered in unpaid and low-paid jobs, in projects working with vulnerable groups in society, such as children, migrant women, people with disabilities or living with HIV/AIDS, and groups categorised as marginalised or unprivileged. For example, Hường (23 years old), who had first started to work in a local NGO as a volunteer, said that she was happy with the learning opportunities provided by the NGO to improve her professional skills and knowledge. Apart from that full-time job, Hường also worked part-time, often unpaid, with other voluntary groups in Hanoi during evenings or weekends, giving free talks to young people about sexual health and rights. Hường told me that she had learned a tremendous amount by taking multiple tasks inside the organisation and from volunteering activities, which helped her to advance her career in the NGO sector with a better-paid job in an international organisation, for example, or a scholarship overseas.

Hường is one among many young women I know who wish to work in NGOs for the learning opportunities which have become abundant for people in the sector. Numerous postgraduate scholarships become accessible for women in specialised, often feminised, areas such as gender, childcare, social work, public health, community development and so on. With many scholarships prioritising female candidates, women working in NGOs should easily find a postgraduate scholarship to study overseas. Many women with postgraduate degrees earned from Europe, Australia, or Japan are able to work in higher professional positions – for example, in INGOs – with a relatively high salary. It is clear that learning and education have always been the traditional way for Vietnamese people to move up the social ladder. Several scholars have written about the relationships between education and the social mobility of the middle classes in Vietnam, with King (2008), for example, suggesting that education contributes to intellectual prestige, or Earl (2014) associating white-collar jobs with the high levels of income of the professional middle-class women in Vietnam. While I agree with both, I found that sacrifice as part of the learning process also accounts for the women's middle-class status.

It is clear that *phát triển bản thân* or personal development, which involves a self-improvement process, is not only about gains but also sacrifices. Many women I know, after completing a postgraduate degree overseas, returned to work in jobs in NGOs with lower salaries compared to those in businesses. They expressed their happiness with the trade-offs they made between opportunities to maximise their economic benefits and making contributions to society, and spoke with pride about their sacrifice of private wealth to care for the collective wellbeing of the poor and vulnerable. For me, as a female researcher and also a Vietnamese woman, talk of women's sacrifice often evokes a distinctively traditional virtue shared by Vietnamese women.

Women's sacrifice, from the patriarchal society to the Confucian, and more recently in the socialist society, has always been symbolised

as the sacred and nurturing force protecting the harmony and prosperity of the Vietnamese families, society and nation (Le, 1973; Pettus, 2003; Shohet, 2017). In the Confucian tradition, although women occupy a lower position than men on the social ladder, they are treated with respect because of their sacrifice of individualistic pleasures for the harmony of the family, and their attention to improving their *domestic work, appearance, language, and behaviour* (or *công, dung, ngôn, hạnh* as seen in the Confucian Four Virtues) (Drummond & Rydstrom, 2004; Marr, 1984; Nguyen, 2018). The socialist state, however, while boasting about freeing women from the Confucian Three Submissions (to men), often idealised women's sacrifices within the family as the symbol of national heroines (Pettus, 2003). With marketisation, women's sacrifice is still applauded but now equated with commoditised and materialised terms that reinforce the traditional idea of virtue (Shohet, 2017). Thus, *phát triển bản thân* often represents the virtue of learning with paradoxical implications. On the one hand, learning enables women to enjoy materialistic opportunities in the market, but, on the other hand, it reinforces the traditional norms of women's sacrifice being a symbol of the virtuous woman. Rather than wealth, the virtuous labour of these women also demonstrates a middle class identity, not only materially but also morally in terms of their contributions to society.

Compared to those working in more profitable sectors, my informants often expressed their sense of spiritual relief or freedom when working for the benefit of the community. For example, Ngân, (39 years old), who was working in an American non-profit organisation, said that she was more satisfied than many people working in the business sector, who, according to her, worked only to accrue personal wealth. She highlighted her spiritual satisfaction (*thoải mái tinh thần*), not only resulting from her high salaried job at the international NGO but also for the contribution to the public good that makes her work more meaningful than another's wealth alone:

Spiritually, I am more satisfied than people working in other occupations because many people who work for businesses think that they are creating wealth for their bosses. By the end of the day, they do not know whether the salary is enough for their labour. However, we do not care whether the salary is higher or lower, because we are working for the social good. I don't compare or think about that. (Ngân, interview).

Compared to many working in local NGOs, Ngân, after her completion of a Master's degree in Europe, returned to Vietnam and worked for an American non-profit organisation in Hanoi. She agreed to have an interview with me in a coffee shop in Quảng Bá, Tây Hồ, which local people often call "phố Tây" (streets of foreign expatriates) owing to the high density of foreign residents and offices. Ngân called herself a middle-class woman because of her white-collar position at a foreign NGO with a higher salary than those working in local NGOs or involved in manual labour. Moreover, compared to many who graduated locally, having a postgraduate degree in Europe clearly contributed to her middle-class status. Like many people who usually compare themselves with the higher earners in the economy, Ngân said that she was only lower middle-class because of her relatively low level of consumption. Compared to the upper middle-class, who can afford a nice private house or car, she owned a motorbike and was still living in her parents' home. With her salary, she could pay for some trips domestically every year and for some personal hobbies like drinking or dining out with friends.

The account of intellectual illustrates the Weberian notion of middle class, which tends to associate it with the symbolic status of consumer goods. Nevertheless, consumption also accounts for the virtuous labour of the women who are working hard to maintain their family's consumption at a middle-class living standard. While consumption is often considered a means to realise individual satisfactions, consumption to meet domestic responsibilities, by contrast, often evokes the morality of women's minimisation of their own individualistic and materialistic needs.

Consumption: The art to care for a happy family

Liechty (2003) proposes the existence of a “fashion” culture in which middle-class consumer urbanites often engage with *fashion* and *genuine* consumer products to appear with *appropriateness*. Fashion also symbolises the status of women working in NGOs in Hanoi, where people can gain a reputation for the appearance of a sense of modernity and civility through access to the latest global fashion trends (Bayly, 2007; Drummond, 2012). As I mentioned earlier, women working in NGOs tend to quantify the higher and lower classes by aligning them with particular kinds of consumer goods such as houses or cars. Through consumer goods, they often show the ability to consume not only in terms of *fashion* but also *intellectually* by making smart choices.

Đông (38 years old), who worked in a state-owned organisation, told me that she had recently bought a flat in a newly built high-rise tower where the highly educated residents (*dân trí cao*) in Hanoi lived. After buying the flat, she leased her old flat to make extra income for her family. She talked to me about her contentment with the smart decision of buying the flat when house prices plummeted, thus making a good profit. She also expressed her satisfaction with the new, modern and civilised facilities of the new living space with a clear connection to the personal qualities of the residents in the area:

I am very happy with my new flat because it is spacious and airy. It is located in a considerably high-end and civilised area with good security. I am happy with everything. We paid around three billion dong¹ for the flat, including the furnishings. The flat could be worth four billion dong now. (Đông, interview).

According to Drummond (2012), the status of people in the mixed urban landscapes in Hanoi is usually expressed through the quality and symbolic values of consumer goods such as houses, and leisure and fashion goods. Middle-class consumer urbanites in Hanoi, therefore, are considered experts not only in their knowledge of hard facts (i.e., quality, prices) but also the symbolic values (i.e., fashion, modernity, appropriateness) of items in mass-produced consumer goods markets. This knowledge has become essential for women living in the city so that they can engage with the right products for their economic and social wellbeing. In Đông's case, her choice not only benefited her family through an additional regular income but also afforded them status associated with the comforts of the modern, “civilised” private property. It seems that, with the development of the commodity economy, ideas of middle-classness are increasingly associated with materialised and commoditised forms. Material items are also expressive of women's sentiments in relation to their domestic responsibilities. I found that through consumption, women often demonstrate the efficacy of their sacrifice to optimise consumption for the happy family, with the quality and quantity of goods compatible with the love, sacrifice and dedication for the family's betterment.

My informants often demonstrate their responsibility to consume not only for themselves but also for their children and parents. With a higher salary, the participants seemed to bear greater responsibility to improve the material wellbeing of both parents and children with higher quality products. Xuân, for example, was a single woman in her late thirties. She had worked for an INGO in Hanoi for almost 15 years. As the eldest daughter in the family, she expressed a filial duty to consume for the family in order to share the burdens of her parents. Xuân said that she had spent most of her salary on buying household equipment such as a laptop and motorbike for her brother so he could concentrate on his studies, and helped her parents to repair the house. Xuân expressed empathy with the hardships of her parents who had worked as labourers in state-owned factories with low wages, yet recalled this past hardship with low esteem. She said:

The surrounding people were professors or doctorate holders. They were “smart” (oách). They had good occupations - for example, teaching jobs - while my parents were only manual workers. Some people rebuilt or repaired their houses with a beautiful look because they earned better. Because our house was shabby, the voice or image of my parents was weaker than those of the other neighbours, right? (Xuân, interview).

In the position of the eldest daughter, she said that she needed to study hard and find a high-salary job to provide for the family. Not only had she worked hard to provide for the family's basic needs but she also tried to find goods and services of a quality that matched their intellectual status. Pressures to consume to achieve a middle-class intellectual status seem to reflect what Liechty (2003) describes as status competition through fashion among middle-class consumers, which is morally validated by the market. It is slightly different in Vietnam where the acquisition of consumer goods representing fashion, modernity and sophistication tends to be associated with the morality of people who care for the betterment of the family and society (Harms, 2014; Nguyen, 2018; Shohet, 2017). According to Harms (2014), Vietnamese people consume in order to exemplify modern and civilised citizens with a heightened sense of duty and dedication to the collective good of a modern and civilised society. For Vietnamese women, consumer goods have become a means to demonstrate intimate sentiments (love, respect, care) that underscore the morality of women's sacrifices to maintain a happy, modern and civilised family (Shohet, 2017).

The state also highlights women's sacrifices in the campaign for *Già đình văn hóa* (Cultured Families) that has been promoted by the Vietnam Women's Union since the 1990s. The campaign emphasises the need to protect and maintain the Vietnamese family culture as the locus of nurturing and developing human qualities to support the national strategy of modernisation and industrialisation (Drummond, 2004; Hayton, 2010; Nguyen, 2018; Pettus, 2003; Shohet, 2017). Resonating with other cultural values, the campaign highlights women's traditional domestic talents of nurturing and building happy, progressive families (Drummond, 2004; Leshkovich, 2012; Nguyen-vo, 2008; Pettus, 2003). By positioning culture and morality as the foundation of a happy family, the campaign continues to applaud women's traditional virtue of sacrifice for the sake of a happy family (Pettus, 2003; Shohet, 2017). I also find that women working in NGOs demonstrated the tendency to care for their happy families through consumption.

As discussed earlier, women tend to highlight consumer goods as a response to their caring duties, with the quantity and quality of goods expressing their love and care for their families. Many women I met talked about their happiness in satisfying the needs of their children or parents. They often displayed the skills to consume wisely in order to maximise happiness, nutrition, and intellectual development of family members with the correct good-quality products. While women's sacrifice continues to exemplify their respectable position within both the household and society, it is associated increasingly and frequently with commoditised items as consumer goods become both material and sentimental representations of women's domestic care tradition.

Balancing morality and wealth

During my fieldwork in Hanoi, I often heard intense debates about the recurrence of corruption in the country. The informants talked about government officers who became rich quickly from unofficial incomes (*lậu*) despite their lower salaries (*lương*). Whereas *lương*, or the salary, is the official payment to an employee in terms of their work contract, *lậu* is the irregular income from other activities outside the salary. In Vietnamese, the terms *lậu* is often associated with corrupt or illegal businesses; for example, *lậu* in *buôn lậu* in Vietnamese means smuggling or trafficking of illegal goods. In the phrase *lương lậu*, the term *lậu* is generally understood as a way of supplementing a mediocre income. However, as incidences of corruption escalate, especially within the state, the use of these terms specifically indicates a form of corruption that helps

¹ One pound sterling is approximately equal to 30,000 dong.

state employees to become rich quickly. For example, in the online version of *Nhân dân hàng tháng*, which is the newspaper of the Vietnamese Communist Party, *lậu* was specifically linked to the wealth generated from bribes or corruption:

There are multiple forms for “lậu.” There is “lậu” which is considered as a “legitimate” bonus; for example, the income from the cash envelopes that government officers receive for several reasons could be larger than their salary. Though their salary is low, they dine every day in luxurious restaurants from the corrupt money (tiền chừa), from other people’s money (Tran, 2018).

In the same analogy, my informants often compared their income with those who worked in the state sector, who, despite their lower salary, are seen as being richer because of corruption. For example, Hợp said:

My friends who are working in the state are rich now. They have to take bribes and gifts to be rich. How can they be rich from the salary from the state? (Hợp, interview).

Nhung, who had left the business sector to work in an NGO, also complained about corrupt practices in the business sector. She specifically criticised the desire for money, which is perceived as the cause of exploitation or unethical behaviour in businesses:

When you work in the business, you have to be brutal to make money; like, there is a saying “blood money” (đồng tiền xương máu). In my opinion, it is not ethical. (Nhung, interview).

In Vietnam, corruption is often associated with personal greed. In the public discourse, corrupt state officers are compared with “hungry ghosts” (MacLean, 2012:595). In the mass media, selfishness and greed are depicted as “diseases” or “social evils” that erode family and social values (Jellema, 2005; Nguyen-Vo, 2008; Pettus, 2003). State-owned media runs with daily news about trials of corrupt officers and often frames corruption as a consequence of greed and selfishness (Jellema, 2005).

Looking at the social narratives underlying morality, coincidentally, I found that the informants have a particular interest in their salaried NGO jobs because of the reputation of the sector for humanitarian and not-for-profit businesses. In the interviews, when being asked why NGOs are attractive as employers, particularly for women, my informants stated that they are attracted to particular areas such as gender, social work or childcare and less mobile positions, when men seemed more interested in other areas such as forestry, construction or climate change and positions that required regular travelling or manual work. Moreover, there was agreement among the informants that men have a greater responsibility to make money for the family while the salaries in NGOs are often lower and less attractive than those in for-profit sectors. Women accepted the lower income more often than men did in order to spend more time on childcare and household chores. Despite the salary gap, they expressed the active nature of their role in the household, where they were the people in charge. One informant told me with pride that her husband called her the boss of the household because of her talent in managing household chores (Vy, interviews).

Women’s sacrificial exchange of the productive economy for domestic duty illustrates Nguyen’s (2019) proposition regarding the logic of gender of space involved with the labour division across the inside and outside spaces of the household. This logic stipulates the status and class of men and women corresponding to the moral codes attached to gender-based space delineation. As Nguyen (2019:33–34) points out, according to the logic of gendered spaces, women, as wives coming from the *outside*, reinforce the power *inside* their married homes with domestic virtues and labour. This logic defines the roles of women and men accordingly to inside/outside spaces with distinctive moral codes. When men are often highlighted with the morality of productivity activities outside, in the economy, women’s mobility and economic activities are often aimed at accumulating virtues and contributions to the

domestic realm (Nguyen, 2019). The moral codes attached to gendered spaces explain women’s position lower in the profitable productive economy (Leshkovich, 2014; Nguyen, 2018). As argued by Shohet (2017), women’s compliance to moral norms, in the forms of sacrifice or modesty, helps them to reconcile class conflicts in relation to status, gender and generational divisions. This notion illustrates the paradoxical situation of women with a background of high economic or educational performance working in NGOs for their value in terms of selfless care and sacrifice.

Rather than wealth, the informants often expressed their happiness about sacrificing economic opportunities for dedication to the welfare of their families and society. For example, Trúc, one informant who was working in a local NGO, said:

I do not expect to be rich because from my point of view I only need enough food to eat, enough money to pay for my daughter’s nursery. I do not hope to be extremely rich. I only need to feel that I am useful in society. That is enough. (Trúc, interview).

Nhung added that even though she could have made more money in the business sector, she preferred working for an NGO as it benefits other people outside society rather than her own wealth. Like many other informants, Nhung also expressed her satisfaction with working in NGOs to better the lives of less privileged people, which is considered an act of kindness. Whereas money was often considered as the source of spiritual troubles (*mê môi tinh thần*), “kindness,” by contrast, accounts for the women’s satisfaction (*thoải mái*) and usefulness (*có ích*):

Working in NGOs is more than making money. There are times I do not work to make money but to help someone. It means I am doing charity (việc thiện). Honestly! I have a feeling that when I am working, I am helping this community or this province. I am contributing to [the policy]. Certainly, I did not make the policy on my own. However, when I try my best, I will contribute to changing that policy. Therefore, I am happy with that. (Nhung, interview).

Rather than private wealth, these women repeatedly highlighted their “usefulness” in terms of their contributions to poor communities or policies to improve the lives of the less privileged. Compared to those they perceived as wealthier but making less of a contribution, they expressed the belief that their contributions to the social good benefitted them with happy families, healthy lives, and more successful careers.

It would be misleading, however, to see morality as purely a tool of ideology. As Leshkovich (2012) has warned, morality, when signalled in relation to the problems of selfishness, greed and corruption, is also highlighted as the panacea that brings prosperity and happiness. The informants often told me about the importance of living and working morally in order to have a happy life. Ngọc (42 years old), one of my informants, who is also a Buddhist, shared with me the recipe of her happiness: knowing about “having enough.” She talked about her satisfaction with her healthy and well-raised children and her harmonious relationship with her husband and attributed this to her sacrifice of wealth.

For example, Trúc told me about the ethics that contributed to her educational achievements. Trúc, 35 years old, was studying for a PhD in Australia and mother of a daughter. She told me with pride about her family’s reputation for educational achievement. Trúc highlighted the benefits of the accumulation of “*đức*” (ethics) that had contributed to her family’s reputation as well as the prospects of her offspring:

What can I say about ethics (đức)? Until now, we have all been well-educated. That was the ethics that our ancestors have passed to us. My uncle taught me one thing that when you go out, you have to live ethically. That’s it. We have to be ethical so that our descendants can benefit from it. Do not only grapple with the short-term benefits. (Trúc, interview).

Women’s reputations were accrued not from their wealth but by their ethical lifestyles including their sacrifices and contributions to the poor and less privileged. In both their private life and professional activities, the women emphasised the moral norms of giving and sacrifice. The

older women often recalled the virtuous lifestyles (*sống có đạo đức*) of previous generations as a reminder to the younger generation to avoid greed and selfishness and foster a desire to contribute to society and family. It seems clear that, despite having established a certain level of economic success, these women continued to demonstrate a heightened sense of duty towards family and society, displaying their middle-class status on the basis of their moral and gender distinction.

Conclusion: Middle-classness, morality and gender in the configuration of Vietnam's market socialism

The women working in NGOs in Hanoi exemplified a middle-class whose status is associated with the possession of consumer goods symbolic of fashion, modernity and civilisation. They represent a middle class in the Weberian tradition, rendering a distinction between other classes through access to the privileged goods and services that maintain their reputation in society as intellectuals. Beyond the expression of naked wealth, consumption is articulated together with women's domestic duties to care for their happy families, underscoring the sacrifices women make to support a productive economy. On the other hand, as living standards are connected to welfare, women's sacrifices for the material wellbeing of their families often resonate with the state's categorisation of human qualities and the labour values compatible with commoditised and materialised terms. Through their consumption of goods symbolising fashion and modernity, women have also produced a sense of self-worth in relation to their domestic labour for the welfare of the family. In this way, through consumer goods, the women working in NGOs in Vietnam also present a version of middle class identity associated with the logic of ethical citizenship based on (neoliberal) qualities, which resonates with the official discourses of *dân trí* about the state in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2018) or *suzhi* in China (Anagnost, 2004; Zhang & Ong, 2008).

Moreover, women working in NGOs in Vietnam represent a distinctive status with the virtues they have accumulated from the traditional domestic realm. It is important to recognise that the status that they acquired is not from the productive economy, where women have often accepted the sacrifice of maximum economic benefits. Rather, they reinforced the power from the domestic realm with their domestic virtues and labour. NGO work, in this respect, offers women opportunities to demonstrate their virtuous labour through acts of sacrifice or giving away. The performance of women in this economic segment, which mainly involves domestic and not-for-profit values, reveals how NGO work has naturalised women's inferiority within the economy. This finding reflects the paradoxical situation of women, and also of people as reported elsewhere, who seek humanitarianism and NGO activism to acquire a class distinction through domestic products and labour, in order to discover class and gender inequalities produced by the nature of work (Bornstein, 2012; Malkki, 2015).

In this paper, I have shown an idea of the middle class that is infused with moral and gender dimensions. By bridging class with gender and moral distinctions, middle-class women working in NGOs in Vietnam seemed to reconcile the moral and political conflicts and tensions caused by the ambiguity of class under the socialist regime. However, by reproducing the traditional moral and gender norms, they continued to internalise the gendered division of labour that continues to subordinate women in both the family and economy.

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