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# Reality bites

**Traders in Motion: Identities and Contestations in the Vietnamese Marketplace**
Kirsten Endres and Ann Marie Leshkowich (eds)
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Le Thi Thuy has been a street food vendor in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's booming commercial centre, for a decade. She spent most of the years serving *banh cuon*, or rice noodle rolls, from a mobile cart outside the city zoo. Business was good, but also stressful. "Back then, if there was a policeman or urban security officer in sight, I would tremble in fear and get ready to run away," she told me through an interpreter.

Early this year, she was rounded up by local police and told that she had to relocate to a new street-food zone set up on a relatively quiet street near Notre Dame Cathedral. This area features twenty stalls where vendors alternate between breakfast and lunch shifts. They no longer have to fear a surprise police patrol, and the municipal health department helps them maintain hygiene, a common concern when it comes to street food.

Thuy's relocation to a more permanent setting is part of a broader footpath-clearing initiative run by Doan Ngoc Hai, the vice-chair of District 1, Ho Chi Minh City's shopping, business and tourism heart. This effort began in February 2017 and immediately made national headlines, as Hai and his aggressive team towed cars from footpaths, smashed walls that impeded walkways and confiscated food carts.

This was all done in an effort to realise Hai's dream of turning the district into a Little Singapore. Since then, this journey has been a rollercoaster. The campaign lost steam when the public sided with poor footpath vendors who had abruptly lost their primary source of income, and the official even offered to resign.

His resignation was never accepted, and throughout 2018, Captain Sidewalk, as he has been dubbed by the local media, has taken stabs at clearing apartment fire exits of rubbish and rounding up stray dogs.

The footpath vendors, however, remain, and District 1 is no closer to becoming a new Singapore than it was when Hai started his crusade well over a year ago. This type of push and pull, in which officials make halting progress, for better or worse, towards a stated goal only to see much of it reversed by the realities of life in Vietnam, is the subject of *Traders in Motion: Identities and Contestations in the Vietnamese Marketplace*, edited by Kirsten Endres and Ann Marie Leshkowich. Through twelve chapters, the book examines the relationship between the state and the marketplace across the country. Its broad geographic scope ranges from the mountainous border with China down through the south-central coast and on to Ho Chi Minh City.

The book starts in Lao Cai, a relatively small city with outsized economic importance thanks to its setting as a crossing on the Chinese border. Through research conducted from October 2010 to March 2011, Endres, in her chapter "Making the Marketplace: Traders, Cadres and Bureaucratic Documents in Lao Cai City", takes a look at relations between vendors at the main market and the officials who oversee it, as well as the contentious plan to build a new market building.

Endres explains the concept of "papereality", or conditions created by mountains of documents and paperwork that the Vietnamese bureaucracy is so adept at building. This is not unique to Lao Cai — there are rules and regulations covering many facets of life in Vietnam, but enforcement is an entirely different matter. Driving your motorbike on the footpath, for example, is illegal, but you will never see someone being stopped for doing so.

This holds true in markets as well, as Endres writes: "In the experiential reality of the everyday market bustle, however, the boundary between formal state rule and informal social and economic practice often gets blurred."

There can be ample flexibility when it comes to regulations, especially if bribes are involved, though this flexibility also extends only so far. The decision to build a new Lao Cai market is one example. The municipal People's Committee wanted to build a more "modern" facility, as many local governments desire because a new market helps cities access more development funds.

The vendors, however, didn't want to move. They petitioned city leaders, but in the end their pleas were ignored. Hung, a trader in the market, told Endres: "What do we know about the state's policy; they do whatever they see fit. They will hold meetings and announce their decisions by loudspeaker, that's how we will learn the news."

Similar ground is covered by Sarah Turner in a chapter on Sa Pa, a popular tourist town in the northern mountains. “Run and Hide When You See the Police” examines “rural livelihood diversification”, an effort to move residents of poorer provinces out of agriculture and into more stable lines of work. However, as this chapter shows, this has a highly uneven impact across ethnicities. Northern Vietnam is home to more than 6 million members of the country’s various ethnic minority groups, yet large-scale commerce is dominated by Kinh, the country’s majority ethnic group.

Turner illustrates that officials in Sa Pa — all of whom are Kinh — give preferential treatment to Kinh vendors, offering them the best locations in markets while harassing minority vendors, many of whom don’t speak Vietnamese, who work on the street. Gender dynamics play a key role here as well, as the vast majority of itinerant vendors are women, while most officials are men.

The main flashpoint in this section involves another market, specifically the relocation of the main Sa Pa market. The old facility was located in the centre of town and easily accessible for visitors, while the proposed new location was a kilometre away in an area off the tourist trail.

As in Lao Cai City, the vendors working in Sa Pa’s market did not want to move, yet the local government decided it had to be done. One day officials simply carted everything out, locked the doors and cut the power, forcing vendors either to move to the new, distant market or to risk hawking their wares on the pavement.

A quote from a local official in another chapter on Sa Pa clearly illustrates the state view on these markets: “There is no need to ask for people’s opinions. We can do whatever we like. It is the right of the authorities and the final decision is that the market must be moved according to the plan.”

Having reported on Vietnam for the last six years, I find this fascinating. Taken together with the decisions to move the Lao Cai and Sa Pa markets over vocal objections from vendors, it appears that officials are able to get away with more when they are far removed from the social media glare of major cities.

Granted, much of the research for this book took place from 2010 through 2014, before Facebook and smartphones had penetrated Vietnam as deeply as they

have now, but I have a hard time envisioning such a scenario playing out in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City today.

Take the footpath-clearing campaign. Hai and the rest of the District 1 People's Committee have the authority to clear out anyone illegally occupying a footpath, yet they have been unable to do so effectively since images of crying *banh mi* vendors on Facebook evoke a visceral reaction.
Hanoi attempted to carry out a similar campaign of its own last year, and that sputtered even more quickly than its southern counterpart.

Officials in Ho Chi Minh City have also proposed plans to demolish a popular wet market in District 1 and remove cafes and clothing boutiques from post-war apartment buildings that have been refashioned as hip new destinations. This has not happened, likely for a variety of reasons, but there is little doubt that officials are aware of the online uproar that would follow any actions in this area.

What is clear from *Traders in Motion* is that these tensions exist far beyond the cosmopolitan inner districts of Vietnam's major cities, where footpath vendors roam outside gleaming mega-malls.
From the south-central coast to the Chinese border, the Vietnamese government and the people it oversees are engaged in an ever-shifting, complex relationship. For an academic volume, this book provides a highly readable and valuable examination of what this looks like in the various iterations of marketplaces around the country, allowing readers to zoom in on issues such as market relocations and ethnic minority vendors, which are often overlooked by the media.