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Essential Trade: Vietnamese Women in a Changing Marketplace

ANN MARIE LESHKOWICH

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014.

Bến Thành Market, where Ann Marie Leshkovich did her field research for *Essential Trade: Vietnamese Women in a Changing Marketplace*, is the most famous market in Ho Chi Minh City. Built more than 100 years ago and still standing at the heart of the city, this market and its iconic clock tower are a familiar sight for all Saigoneses, domestic and overseas tourists, or simply anyone who has read a guidebook about Ho Chi Minh City. The market still holds firm to its reputation as a traditional Vietnamese market, where transactions of goods and money have never ceased since its opening in 1914 under the French colonial regime. As a long-standing market that has witnessed myriad political, economic, and social transformations in Ho Chi Minh City, Bến Thành Market was a fruitful site for Leshkovich to conduct her research on commercial activities, social and political transformations, petty traders' trading practices, and subjectivity formation during a turbulent period of shifting to socialism and to post-socialism in southern Vietnam.

Starting her fieldwork in 1988, when Renovation (Đổi Mới) started and gradually reformed Vietnam's socialist economy into a market economy following a socialist direction, Leshkovich observed myriad transformations in politics, government, and state regulations targeting private businesses. Alongside these vigorous changes, Leshkovich encountered many timeless claims about gender, trade, class, kinship, and social relations that were constantly reproduced in state narratives and in public perceptions about women petty traders. Intriguingly, these forms of essentialism were also internalized by the petty traders themselves in their daily work and social interactions, although many of these essentialist perceptions about their trade and womanhood did not match the reality; some even denigrated them as ignorant, low-class, superstitious, greedy, and incapable of being virtuous mothers and wives.

In her book Leshkovich explores essentialist perceptions about gender, class, and trade that traders used to talk about themselves, and which the government used to classify traders as low class and trade as a feminine activity. However, instead of completely accepting or debunking these essentialist claims, Leshkovich uses essentialism as an analytical lens that offers an insightful understanding of traders' formation of subjectivity in response to these dominant social and cultural conceptions about their gender, class, and trade. Leshkovich argues that women traders embody and enact these essentialized claims about their gender and trade to become socially legible subjects who can react meaningfully to the social, political, and economic circumstances that they are enmeshed in. In so doing, they also manage to secure a strategic advantage for their businesses during highly volatile political and economic periods.

The seven chapters of the book gradually unfold Leshkovich's engaging ethnography, theoretically integrating discussions and analyses on the operations of essentialist perceptions about

gender, class, family, kinship, and social relationships in southern Vietnam's marketplace, and how these ideologies are enacted and performed by women petty traders in their everyday work to cultivate a socially desirable gendered and classed subjectivity. All the chapters are eloquently interconnected by the same characters appearing several times in the book, giving the reader an easy-to-follow storyline and many opportunities to get to know the traders and their world by turning the pages.

In Chapter 1 Leshkowich carves out the setting in which the traders' stories will be developed. This chapter chronicles the history of Bến Thành Market since its construction following the French colonial regime's master plan to civilize and modernize the Vietnamese indigenous trade. The chapter discusses space-human interactions by illustrating how the market's space was eventually transformed by stallholders and their ways of doing business to become an icon of Vietnam's traditional chợ (marketplace). Stallholders who inhabited such a traditional space were also naturalized as those who performed traditional kinds of trade.

Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the essentialism about gender and trade, which is a theme that recurs in the following chapters. It tells the story of the socialist government's configuration of commerce in the south right after 1975. During this immediate postwar period, women had more advantages than men in owning market stalls to earn a living for their families. This endorsement of women's trade was based on the socialist state's belief in a naturalized notion that women were an underclass whose productive activities were merely to support their own families and thus were not associated with bourgeois capitalism. This movement led to petty trade being dominated by women, and thus further reinforced the essentialized beliefs that women, unlike men, had the natural skills for trade, and that petty trade was naturally a woman's domain. By defining petty trade as a feminine activity, the socialist state reshaped southern Vietnam's political economy. In response to this, women stallholders consciously internalized the state-endorsed narrative that entangled trade, class, and gender as a strategy to secure their businesses during this difficult period.

Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 characterize personal and social networks that have a direct impact on women's trade, and discuss how through their performance of these interpersonal relations for pragmatic reasons, as well as for conformity to gender essentialism, women enact a socially recognizable gendered, relational, moral, and classed subjectivity. Chapter 3 describes the family nature of many businesses operated in Bến Thành Market. Leshkowich points out that while familism reflects traders' performance of the naturalized perception of Vietnamese people as being family oriented, it is also traders' pragmatic response to the postwar social and political circumstances. In keeping their stalls looking "small" and classified as family businesses, stallholders defend their enterprises from appearing "capitalist." Their family businesses are also evidence of their conformity to the state-idealized image of a Vietnamese cultured family as an economic unit and a repository of Vietnamese traditional values and culture amid the threat from a Western

market economy, excessive materialism, and individualism. By presenting themselves and their stalls surrounding this rhetoric of traditional family-centeredness, women traders bestow a sense of virtue upon their identities as traders, whose morality is often questionable in Vietnamese traditional thought.

Continuing the discussion in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 portrays the rich personalistic network that traders rely on to facilitate their businesses. This chapter characterizes the binary of inside and outside in the Vietnamese conceptualization of social relationships. Leshkovich argues that this essentialist distinction between inside and outside is, in reality, made in fluid and permeable ways by the traders to grow their networks, sustain and develop their businesses, and make the marketplace appear not just as a harsh environment for profit-seeking but also a community infused with an ethic of care and feminine sensibility. While relying on their “inside” network of kin for assistance, stallholders also focus on turning “outsiders” such as customers, competitors, creditors, or moneylenders into “insiders” by cultivating mutual obligations, sentiment, and trust. Leshkovich concludes that in utilizing insider tactics to cope with the uncertainties and anxieties of doing trade under market socialism, traders are also crafting a sense of self infused with feminine care and morality.

Chapter 5 discusses one of the prominent outsiders in the traders’ network, which is the government. In describing disputes over resources between traders and cadres, this chapter opens up a complex discussion on memory of war, postwar differentiation in status and class between non-revolutionary traders and revolutionary cadres, and traders’ experiences of market socialist governmentality during Renovation. This chapter unfolds many unexpected twists of analysis and narrative. For example, traders’ warning about wandering ghosts inside BẾN THÀNH Market was in fact a metaphor for the never-diminishing existence of the state’s control. Wandering ghosts also speak to the lingering memory of the war, and the postwar hardship and humiliation that many traders and their families experienced. This chapter makes a valuable contribution to the literature of gender and war in Vietnam, especially when it highlights the voices of people whose memory of war is marginalized in official history making. Leshkovich argues that gender essentialism was again drawn upon by both women traders and the government in their narratives of the present conflicts, to conceal and divert attention from the unspeakable past tensions between them. This argument would benefit from further development as it may illustrate another dimension in traders’ formation of gendered subjectivity through their embeddedness in the present connections with male authorities, while delving into the memories of their past aspirations and social status.

Chapter 6 turns to another dimension in the everyday interpersonal relations of traders, which is with spirits and deities. Spiritual activities enable traders to inculcate a moral and caring femininity that conforms to social and cultural expectations. They also reinforce the commonly held image of female traders as superstitious, weak, and ignorant. This image, however, affords women a protective rhetoric for their status as traders. Engagement in spiritual practice turns the mar-

ketplace into a community where care, obligation, and sentiment are cultivated not only between humans but also between humans and spirits.

The seventh chapter nicely bundles up elements of gender, class, subjectivity, traders' social and political status, and socialist governmentality into an elaborate discussion on class making and classed subjectivity. Leshkovich draws attention to the contradiction between the socialist ideologies of "class-ification" and the actual process of class making and class performance, which both the state and women traders pursue for their own needs and advantages. The book closes with an epilogue where Leshkovich's narrative zooms back out to an overview of Bến Thành Market as a marketplace and an icon of traditional petty trade, and how it is positioned in the redevelopment plans of Ho Chi Minh City in the 2000s. Through updates on what has happened to the market and its traders, the epilogue shows that Bến Thành Market continues to embody both timelessness and change.

Essential Trade is a fantastic ethnography of the everyday life of women petty traders in Ho Chi Minh City, and an important contribution to the literature on southern Vietnam's society, history, and economy. It offers a brilliant analysis and insightful understanding of commercial practice, gender dynamics, class making, social stratification, and the operations of socialism and post-socialism in people's lives. One aspect that may benefit from further exploration is the empowerment that women get from owning a business and playing an important economic role in their families. Leshkovich briefly mentions the potential empowering aspect of matrilineal familism in trade, in the ways women traders create jobs for relatives, afford middle-class lifestyles for their own families, and mobilize their husbands to help them at their stalls as well as in household tasks. It would be intriguing to find out how women traders balance their internalization of gender essentialism with their obvious economic power in their performance of a socially acceptable gendered subjectivity as family-oriented moral and caring women. Further exploration may reveal a dimension of gendered subjectivity that is formed through negotiations between power and modesty, or between the enactments of timeless feminine traits in their interactions with the "outside" society versus the "inside" kin network.

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