

## Young Women and Emergent Postsocialist Sensibilities in Contemporary Vietnam

NGUYEN BICH THUAN\*

*National University of Singapore*

MANDY THOMAS

*Australian National University*

### Introduction

Two teenage girls are flicking through the latest glossy women's magazines on a street corner, pointing out items to each other and giggling. One of the magazine sellers is a young woman who has moved to Hanoi from the country and barely makes enough money to feed herself, let alone buy the magazines which she sells for the owner of the store. Another young woman parks the latest sleek red sporty Honda motorbike on the pavement while she answers her glittery mobile phone. In one of the new cafes, a group of teenage girls wearing the latest youth fashions – tight jeans, tight tops, and make-up – sit and chat together. The working girls in the kitchen gossip about what the customers are wearing, and wonder how they could ever afford it themselves. An internet cafe is teeming with young people eager to get online to chat, to surf the net for university courses, and to chat with friends. One girl in a short skirt wiggles on a chair in front of a computer equipped with a videocam so that her male penfriend overseas can see her. Outside the internet cafe a young woman in simple plain clothing and plastic sandals is serving tea on the pavement.<sup>1</sup>

As one walks along Hanoi streets today it is clear in a myriad of ways that young women are exploring gender, space and relationships in inventive ways, forging new parameters for social change in postsocialist Vietnam. This paper examines the complexities of this phenomenon and argues that at the same time as a minority of élite young Vietnamese women are becoming attached to new forms of social capital quite distinct from those of their mothers' generation, most young women do not have these avenues open to them. Social cleavages are becoming more apparent in young women's lives than in any other group. While the recent economic changes are bringing opportunities for young women to break with tradition and carve their own styles of Vietnamese womanhood, the state continues to intervene and mould societal expectations and values, albeit to varying degrees in different contexts.

When the Vietnamese movie *Bar Girls* (*Gai nhay*) was released in 2003 its success took Vietnam by storm, for **it managed to be both titillating and moralistic**. The film's screening was viewed as a dramatic departure from the state's censorship line. Normally the state cracks down not only on pirated CDs and videos but also on foreign books and magazines

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Corresponding author: E-mail: [clsibt@nus.edu.sg](mailto:clsibt@nus.edu.sg).

that contain “poisonous and harmful” content. Such materials include pornography, certain “superstitious” religious materials and anti-government tracts. In July 2003, a state-owned student periodical, *Sinh Vien* [*Student*], was suspended for three months. *Sinh Vien* ran “inappropriate articles, including stories that stimulate young people’s sexual curiosity” despite repeated warnings from authorities, according to Do Quy Doan, director of the Press Department of the Ministry of Culture and Information (*The Baltimore Sun*, 18 July 2003).<sup>2</sup> *Sinh Vien*, run by the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League, carries a column called ‘Love Garden’ that features stories about premarital sex and kissing in public. Authorities say the magazine crossed the line when it featured the wooden statue of a naked couple on the cover of its 7 July 2003 issue. The images presented to young people through the recent crackdown on foreign popular culture and on magazine content and the film *Bar Girls* reflect in numerous ways the “in-between” position of young women in Vietnam today – striving for an image of modernity, beauty and desire while also upholding a nationalist moral femininity. It is this borderland position of conflicting moral sanctions and endorsements for young women to which we turn our attention in this paper.

The material we have collected for analysis is from interviews in Hanoi as well as from popular texts, newspapers, magazines, films and internet sites. From October to November 2001 and November to December 2002 Mandy Thomas conducted a series of interviews with young people in Hanoi in five internet cafes located in the densely populated old city, centrally located near Hoan Kiem Lake. Internet cafes in Hanoi are the principal sites for accessing the internet as most young people do not own computers at home or have domestic internet access. The old part of the city, in which there are many restaurants, tourist cafes and small hotels, has become the major site for these cafes, which are small, crowded spaces often overflowing with young people online or waiting for access to a computer. In total more than 20 in-depth interviews were recorded along with observations at each of the internet cafes and throughout central Hanoi, all of which were also sites for research into the everyday popular activities of young women. During these two research periods, interviews were also conducted with a cross-section of families about their consumption of popular cultural products. On separate field trips to Vietnam, Nguyen Bich Thuan interviewed ten young women in Hanoi from a diverse range of backgrounds in May 2002, and a comparative group in Ho Chi Minh City in February 2003. Further, the present research builds on a decade of research on social change that both authors have undertaken in both major cities. Through our attention to both everyday culture and recent media and internet articles we read popular culture as the key site in which many of the current preoccupations of young people are played out. We focus on the meanings of women’s bodies and their use of public space in different social contexts, looking at young women’s leisure activities and, in particular, their embrace of the internet and other communication technologies; the world of sensual enjoyment and consumption; and finally, young women’s desires and aspirations with respect to identities and appearances.

### **Girl Culture, Communication Technologies and the State**

In March 2003 a new music sensation hit Hanoi – an all-girl rock and roll band. Eighteen-year-old Nguyen Yen Thi plays bass in this all-girl band. She used the internet to create an online forum where people could discuss popular music, and it was there that she met the members of her band in a chatroom on her website. Vietnam’s rockers remain part of a mostly underground movement whose gentle subversiveness is part of its allure. But as fans share their musical obsessions in internet chatrooms and pass along favourite

songs by word of mouth, rock is slowly going mainstream. “We’re the first female rock band in Hanoi,” notes Nguyen Thi Thai Thanh, the lead singer in Thi’s group, The Halleys, named after Halley’s comet. “Everybody wants to know, how can these girls play rock’n’roll? They think we are supposed to concentrate on clothes, shopping and boyfriends” (*Knight Rider Tribune*, 2 March 2003). This all-girl rock band demonstrates that the change in gender roles in the postsocialist era reflects a change in leisure activities and public space. A rapidly developing consumer culture, along with exposure to global popular culture, has grafted onto evolving forms of the feminine. Websites, chatrooms and internet cafes, along with bars and live music venues, are a very recent transformation in Hanoi life and, as is the case in China, the emergence of these new sites for socialisation enhances the desire for “commodity consumption and libidinous indulgence” (Zhang, 2001, p. 133). In these new sites and in various other cultural locations of feminine representation and experience – the entertainment industry, women’s magazines, foreign offices, advertising, and on the streets – the unglamorous collective priorities of building Vietnamese socialism have been transmuted into a consumer regime, but one with socialist characteristics. At the same time, the interlinking of libidinous indulgence with the state’s modernising projects has the effect of distracting the populace from the political. Asserting its control through purging pleasure, the state’s power to define popular culture has a contradictory effect: the state is developing a new relationship with consumers, testing the ground of possibility by simultaneously authorising and disallowing. Working in tandem with mass culture, a new mass-oriented state has become the mark of the postsocialist era.

Since the process of reform began, urban space in Vietnam has been transformed not so much by architectural reconfigurations but rather by the use of available space brought about primarily by economic transformations. Throughout most of the 1980s it was reported that even if there had been money to buy goods there was nothing to buy. There was no street trading, only large state-managed outlets for the distribution of goods from state-controlled cooperative farms and industries. People were under the close scrutiny of neighbours and employers and there was little activity on the streets, except at Tet (Vietnamese New Year). The economic transformations that then took place led to a rapid evolution of consumption patterns, to a highly diverse street-trading cultural life, and also to the possibility of people congregating in groups: at noodle soup shops, in parks, and with tea and cigarette sellers on the pavements. The transformations in the use of space and the corresponding dynamic city life that developed out of these spatial and economic changes have become too complex and uncontrollable to be disciplined by the police or the Party despite ever-present directives and sanctions on street activities.

Cities in Vietnam now provide streetscapes and public areas where previously suppressed economic, political and cultural activities are being engaged in and are openly viewed and enjoyed. Public spaces like Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi, although for the most part empty, enjoy the possibility of being filled by citizens who hope to subvert their planned meaning (McDonogh, 1993, p. 15). While state-legitimated organisations of the past, including those of workers, the military, women and youth, are now crumbling, new spatial configurations of people have arisen to replace them, and often to undermine them. Groupings and networks of individuals develop around the sharing of domestic or commercial space or as interest groups with common goals and activities. In June 2002 Reuters reported from Vietnam that a few hours before the start of the 2002 World Cup, which was co-hosted by the Republic of Korea (RoK) and Japan, Hanoi football fans packed into cafes around the city to watch the opening match between France and Senegal. Thousands of young people, finding all the seats taken inside cafes all over the

inner city, simply sat outside on the pavement, drinking and talking about the World Cup. Many bet on their favourite teams and discussed the injuries incurred by star players. Newspapers at pavement kiosks and stands sold in large quantities, especially World Cup “Express” News issued by numerous media organisations. And Coca Cola Corporation joined hands with JVC Electronics in organising a “Football Festival” program at the Vietnam-Russia Friendship Cultural Palace, where 300-inch TV screens were installed. When crowds such as that for the World Cup in 2002 form, young people are able to connect in new allegiances and solidarities (25 June 2002, [www.vnnews.net](http://www.vnnews.net)). At the same time, during these events young women become part of the “spectacle” of public display, not only on large billboards but also in their own display of themselves.

Young Vietnamese women’s fevered reaction to the internet, magazines and global pop culture reflects the changing relationship between popular youth culture and media in Vietnam, a society on the brink of becoming a fully-fledged media culture in which popular narratives and cultural icons are reshaping political views, constructing tastes and values and consolidating the market economy. Until the policy of renovation [*doi moi*] in Vietnam began in 1986, the media had the role of spreading propaganda and focused less on reporting news than on educating the populace. The changing role of the media in Vietnam has permitted the public to be exposed to new forms of leisure and entertainment. In the last two years young people have effectively rejected state-controlled media and moved to magazines and the internet, which is available at hundreds of cafes throughout Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Chatting online to friends and strangers and accessing global celebrity sites have become prime leisure activities of young urbanites. One of the most popular sites for young women is *Tin tuc Vietnam* ([www.tintucvietnam.com](http://www.tintucvietnam.com)), which features a page on love and sex [*tinh yeu, gioi tinh*] that has articles on taboo subjects such as infidelity, and provides information and advice on relationships. While the government reveals its uneasiness over these activities in its frequent crackdowns and directives, ultimately, leisure activities do not appear to pose a serious threat to the overall political and social structure; hence the dynamic give-and-take in government reactions to these consumer trends. These emergent modalities of governmentality reveal not the insertion of the state into private life, but rather a reorganisation of the state’s activities to suit a market regime.

It appears then that the combination of the telephone, cafes and the internet should be conceived as a new space in which young women can communicate relatively freely in Vietnam. The question remains as to how political this type of popular consumption is. Unlike the situation in many other urban centres in Asia, very few Vietnamese have computers at home, and the few who do often do not have access to the internet in their domestic spaces (Thayer, 2002). Almost all internet activity is conducted in public at internet cafes. In late 2001 and 2002, we undertook research in these internet cafes to find out who was using the internet and for what purposes. Our findings indicate that it was mostly young women who used the internet. The most popular activity was chatting online on a Vietnamese dating chatline or with friends on MSN messenger or ICQ. After chatting, the most popular activity was looking at the celebrity sites of actors, pop singers and others, both in Vietnam and overseas. Another netsurfing activity that was very popular was researching university courses throughout the English-speaking world. Here, the enjoyment of certain cultural forms and conceptions of pleasure are mobilised by a configuration of cultural and historical meanings. Until very recently the powerful intervention of the state in the desires and needs of the populace was successful in implementing a regime of pleasure associated with nationalist ideals. The stories about women’s lives that are reported in most of the national newspapers are still concerned with women’s everyday struggles, “their ongoing efforts to support their families – and isolated

tabloid tales of domestic strife or nostalgic portrayals of heroic sacrifice” (Pettus, 2000, p. 188). The impact of a rejection of this form of mass media by young women and their enthusiastic engagement with the internet has been upon notions of pleasure and entertainment, away from the revolutionary nationalistic fervour of the past and into the symbolic space of the future.

Historically, the relationships between men and women in the Vietnamese family provided a metaphor for the relations between different social groups and nations, and between the people and the state (Lowe, 1996, p. 119). We suggest that recent formulations of male and female relationships are also a metaphor for wider societal relations. Our interviews reveal that young women are becoming more active agents in dating, are marrying outside their class and region as well as outside Vietnam, and are crossing the boundaries of state-sanctioned behaviour in relation to sex and family relations. Two popular ways of describing changing social relations were evident in our interviews with young Vietnamese women about dating and relationships. The first involves getting wired, networked, being in the loop, being connected. The second is a reference to the imagination, conjuring up the possibilities of imagining strangers through their cyber relations. These two poles of social relations – being connected and present, and being disconnected, alienated and imagining – operate simultaneously in local, regional and diasporic sites. As John Urry has pointed out, “the relations of co-presence always involve nearness and farness, proximity and distance, solidity and imagination” (Urry, 2003, p. 15). Through the question “How do we make sense of the pervasive transformation of sociality and relationships in Vietnam in the global present?” it is possible to see some quite distinct departures from more traditional modes of relating.

As we have indicated, the internet has provided young women with a new means of meeting partners and experimenting with their own emotional self-expression. These young women have recently been labelled the “@ generation” [*the he @*] by a young Vietnamese poet and playwright on the internet, who proposes to make a film on the subject (*Tin tức Vietnam*, 6 October 2003, [www.tintucvietnam.com](http://www.tintucvietnam.com)). Urban women are marrying later and have more options with respect to marriage partners, because new forms of mobility in Vietnam allow them to meet more men, including men from different regions of Vietnam, foreign nationals living and working in Vietnam, and overseas Vietnamese. This is particularly so for those who work for foreign companies and speak English. Many young women who chat to boys on the internet seek out partners with nicknames that make reference to *viet kieu* [overseas Vietnamese], such as *traixaxu* [boy away from home]. Nguyen Bich Thuan’s interviews with some female Vietnamese university students studying at the National University of Singapore indicated that these days girls often declare *khong muon lay chong Vietnam* [they do not want to marry Vietnamese guys]. It is so common to seek out overseas Vietnamese as potential marriage partners that some young Vietnamese men ask their parents to send them overseas to do a short course so that they can wear the label of having been overseas. Such preferences have led some young local men to adopt nicknames in internet chatrooms, misleading girls into thinking they are from overseas.

For young men the choice of marriage partners is much more restricted, and they are far less likely to date overseas Vietnamese women or foreigners. This situation leaves elite, single young women in an advantageous position, with a range of options. Again this sets them apart from their poorer female peers who do not have the same opportunities to meet men outside their immediate social world or to use technology for dating. Some of the latter young women, who are from poor rural areas, put their hopes in matrimonial agencies in Ho Chi Minh City that try to find them husbands from Hong Kong,

Taiwan or Singapore. One agency in Singapore, which has business partners in Ho Chi Minh City, charges US\$12,000 to fly a man to Saigon and organise 20 to 50 girls to parade in front of him. If the man picks a girl, a wedding is organised the next day, with the family of the bride brought in at short notice from the country. The photos and reception take place in a restaurant at a cost of around US\$500. Next, the husband flies home to prepare immigration papers, while his bride stays behind with a “godmother” and goes through an intensive course of language training and cooking, with the threat that if she does not do well she will be rejected by her husband. The bride’s family receives US\$200 for their daughter. Newspapers sometimes report that agencies such as this treat women like merchandise, allowing them to be stripped naked and touched by their potential husbands (*Tin tức Vietnam*, 14 October 2003, [www.tintucvietnam.com](http://www.tintucvietnam.com)). While these new forms of dating and meeting marriage partners are growing in popularity, this news article reveals that they are frequently viewed negatively by the mainstream press.

While widespread use of new technologies, such as mobile phones and text messaging, is common throughout the region, communication via technology has also increased in particularly Vietnamese modalities. In Ho Chi Minh City, for example, “chat phone cafes” are becoming very popular, as reported in the following news article: “These days, the tables at Chat Phone Cafe in Ho Chi Minh City are filled with teenagers and twenty-somethings who talk not among themselves, but into telephones” (Kenichi Okumura, *Daily Yomiuri*, 16 April 2002).<sup>3</sup> Customers visit the cafe specifically to talk to complete strangers over the phone. These cafes can be considered the Vietnamese version of a telephone club. Currently Chat Phone Cafe has around 10,000 members. Telephone numbers are managed by the cafe. Visitors inform the cafe of the type of person they would like to talk to, the cafe pairs them up with a suitable candidate from among its members, and they are introduced over the telephone (Kenichi Okumura, *Daily Yomiuri*, 16 April 2002).

While romance provides the motivation to engage in these forms of communication, an epiphenomenon of these changing practices is the opening up of spaces for critical discussion and sharing ideas. Internet cafes, coffee shops and leisure sites will undoubtedly be key sites for the further development of civil society in Vietnam, with students playing an increasingly important role in initiating social and political change and taking on new forms of media and technology. Here, the desire to feel both modern and at home gives a particular Vietnamese flavour to the impact of transnational popular culture, with young people seeking a “communicative” form of popular culture.<sup>4</sup> In China the survival of the socialist state allows ordinary Chinese to “feel one does not have to become a westerner to enjoy life” (Zhang, 2001, p. 400). Likewise, in Vietnam the appearance of a consumer society in the same time and space as a socialist state means that the aspirations and political choices of young people continue to be deeply influenced by revolutionary and local cultural models, even if they are inverting these. But what is the “state” in contemporary Vietnam? The state is both omnipresent and impossible to see as an object of study. The state is “not simply an abstract and distant entity” but acts in practice through local agents (Truong Huyen Chi, 2002, p. 29). It is also grounded in the everyday experience of public spaces, in monuments, parades, sculptures and images of Ho Chi Minh. The state issues directives from loudspeakers in Hanoi streets, and influences all news media, magazines and television. A large number of people still work for stagnant state-owned enterprises, which pay them minimally but give them job security. At the same time “the language of development, the rhetoric of inclusion of the newly powerful private sector, all recalls other Vietnamese nationalist vocabulary” (Fforde, 2002, p. 3). The state is like an octopus reaching into every aspect of domestic life, issuing residency cards, determining what news people can hear and read. The contradictory attempts of

the Vietnamese state to both ban and allow, to restrict internet usage at the same time as encouraging information technology to spur economic development, is notable (Thayer, 2002, p. 19). The work of political scientists such as Ben Kerkvliet (2001) reveals ongoing negotiations between the state and the people, the lack of clear boundaries between them, and the unofficial political changes that are occurring, with people whittling away gradually at the authoritarian state. Nevertheless, the state and its representation in public space still have an emotional valence from which many citizens feel distant. There is a common understanding of unofficial culture as in contrast to official ideology.

There is an awkward dialogue between the state and consumers, nowhere more apparent than in the work of state censors. In June 2002 in Hanoi 44,000 CDs, VCDs and CD-Roms were destroyed by government censors, and images of young women in tight-fitting tank tops and hipster jeans were ripped out of women's magazines and labelled culturally polluting. This was part of a campaign against "poisonous cultural products", according to state media reports. Agence France-Presse reported that Prime Minister Phan Van Khai had begun the cultural purity campaign by ordering a nationwide inspection of internet cafes on the grounds that they could be morally harmful (Agence France-Presse, 24 June 2002). In July Khai issued a directive reiterating the restrictions on access to satellite television. Only senior Communist Party and government officials and a few others were permitted to watch international satellite programs (<http://www.tin.le.org/archive>, 16 August 2002). Nearly 3,000 books and 570 advertising banners were also destroyed in the purge, according to the *Lao Dong (The Worker)* daily (Agence France-Presse, 12 July 2002). Over June and July a small-scale cultural revolution was in process in Hanoi with controls tightened on internet cafes and confiscation of "socially evil" products, mostly comprising salacious music, romantic movies and women's scantily-clad bodies. Under increasingly heavy bombardment from MTV Asia, soft drink commercials and late-opening discotheques, the youth of Hanoi were caught in a confusing cultural crossfire (*The Register*, 14 February 2002). Within just two weeks, however, all of the internet cafes reopened and billboard advertisements of attractive young women selling products reappeared. The contradictory gestures of the regime in simultaneously unleashing market forces and controlling their direction have the effect of linking commodification and consumption with politics. While it appeared that the government was responding to the appearance of anti-government literature on the internet,<sup>5</sup> the simultaneous general bans and focus on advertising and magazines revealed the difficulty in separating dissident behaviour from popular culture. Mass culture has become a means of grasping the legacies of the socialist past as well as their reconfigurations under a regime of global capitalism. At the same time the anti-political politics of Vietnamese youth do not lead to radical resistance, but open up cultural spaces in which resistance assumes new forms. In this landscape, consumer activities require state sanction, but also provide the means for young people to nudge the boundaries of political possibility. The recent crackdown and the subsequent re-emergence of internet cafes and fashion reveal that the state remains effectively impotent at defending its borders against cultural traffic.

The desire of young people for engagement in new forms of pop culture beyond what is locally available has effectively ended the considerable global media isolation of Vietnamese youth that marked previous decades. Our 2001–02 interviews with young people in Hanoi indicate that a startling change in public culture and media accessibility is under way. The growth of a range of popular figures who appeal to youth is significant because of the noticeable contrast between these figures and those that are popular with older people. Parents often become aligned with state views in perceiving these activities as representing a dystopic image of the future. As indicated in the interviews conducted by Mandy Thomas in 2001–02, the understanding that celebrity is anti-party is widespread in

Hanoi, and the peaceful numbers that celebrities attract are indicative of a new postsocialist media revolution that is, by contrast, leaving the party isolated from public appeal. The triad of the linked concepts of celebrity, media and democracy is intensifying in the same way that journalism has shown a tendency throughout the twentieth century to take over and textualise the democratic function of the nation (Hartley, 1996, p. 200). The emerging public figures in Vietnam offer a set of tropes through which transgressive ideologies and desires can have an outlet. Until recently, political celebrations and dramas were the only events that drew the masses. It is only in the last few years that crowds have been evident at what appear to be entirely non-political activities. Nevertheless, the new mass culture penetrates and coexists with the state media. The shared social-cultural space of the media conveys the cultural demands and imagination of the consumer masses while carrying on the propaganda function of the state. The postsocialist moment in Vietnam is thus one in which mass consumption reflects neither an *ad hoc* free market economy nor a corrupt fading command system, but is rather a political and social alternative in the making.

While Jürgen Habermas (1989) argued that the growth of urban culture – eating, leisure and meeting places – fuelled the development of a public sphere, Hannah Arendt suggested that it is public space that allows a public sphere to flourish (Arendt, cited in Howell, 1993, p. 306). In Arendt’s vision, public spaces have the potential to be the sites for the articulation of public concerns through popular mobilisation around local issues, precisely as is occurring in Hanoi today. If landscapes are, as Duncan and Duncan (1988, p. 125) observe, “the transformations of social and political ideologies into physical form”, then we are set to see the erosion of the hegemonic authoring of Hanoi’s public spaces by the state and the rise of a city that more closely incorporates its citizens’ yearnings for participation. In a public protest in late 2001 in Hanoi, when a group of elderly women gathered near Ba Dinh Square to complain that they had been robbed of land, the police and government officials watched, but did not try to move the women on (Reuters, 7 December 2001). This reveals that as the spaces of the city change through the claims of the populace the state may not be standing in the way. The public’s control over public space at these moments is a fusion of a positive emotional expression and a will to reconfigure political power. In these unauthorised crowds Vietnamese subjects are not gazed upon as they once were in authorised parades and celebrations. Rather, in the formation of public spaces, created by the layering and juxtaposition of different regimes, the crowd now moves out of its authorised place within relations of domination and subordination, to create disorder and to signal a public sphere that marks an extreme contrast between active social presence and the state’s social control and citizen removal. As Susan Bordo suggests, “the fact that resistance is produced from within a hegemonic order does not preclude it from transforming that order” (1997, p. 190).

How then do young women transform and invert the power of the state through their bodies and their senses? To answer this question we will now explore the “everyday embodiments” of experience – those sensory elements of material culture, of food, fragrance, clothing, bodies and the landscape – that are commonly mentioned in the narratives of young women describing social change in Vietnam.

### **Sense and Sensibility**

By the 1980s Hanoi had been under a Communist regime for over 25 years, and had suffered through a long war in the south, bombings in the north, extreme poverty and malnourishment. The contrast between the ascetic, carceral Hanoi of the 1980s and the sensuous, lively Hanoi of the present is exemplified by the following comments by a Hanoi resident:

Our bodies and spirits were crushed then. It was a hunt for food every day. There were dark streets at night because there was hardly any electricity. We were miserable. Our food became more and more basic – rice, and fish sauce, if we were lucky. Everything had no taste. We all wore our dark clothes – it was the only fabric available. We all looked the same. No hairdressers, no clothes shops, the grimmest of food, no drinks, just tea and water. And now we can get anything we want from anywhere in the world. We can buy, but we can also have fun. We can travel around the country, go visit temples and pagodas in the countryside. There's music again and people are doing up their houses and painting them, and we can all wear beautiful clothes. People are out much more – everyone's on the street, activity everywhere; it's fun to watch, you know, just sitting on the step and seeing all that colour go by. And the food is so varied, so abundant, so fresh. This morning in the market I could smell the green mangoes from the south. It was like heaven. My mother is teaching me recipes her mother taught her when she was a child – she had forgotten them until now because there was no food to cook with! It's like a totally different world, an utterly different place from the one that I grew up in.<sup>6</sup>

The emerging focus on bodily pleasure rather than bodily discipline in contemporary Vietnam is mapping out social and political change and providing a cartography of a nation passing through a phase of critical re-evaluation. That many young women describe the economic changes in the country in terms of a change in sensory experiences is mostly related to the contrast with the denial of pleasure that was evident in the post-1975 period. The market reforms have provided an array of bodily pleasures for the populace, but it is elite young women in particular who have seized upon these for their own strategic purposes.

As Nhung commented above, food has been one of the most obvious changes in everyday experiences. The domain of eating is reintroducing concepts of pleasure into the realm of the popular. In the 1990s the combination of a return to open-air provision of food through stalls and streetside restaurants and far better access to food led initially to a sharp rise in the quantity of food consumed. Later, higher incomes and better supply enabled a shift to better quality and a widening of the range of food eaten. As Probyn argues, food brings our senses to life (2000, p. 7) and foregrounds the viscosity of living. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the change in food in Hanoi has been a return to an earlier style of cooking, whereby women remember the way things used to taste before the Communists came. There has been a huge growth in the number of restaurants and the new urban wealthy are having long large family lunches on West Lake, ice-creams by Hoan Kiem Lake, and coffee on Hang Bong, an important shopping street. One woman noted that “(o)ur tastes have returned”. She was referring to her perception of indigenous “tastes” – even though this is expressed using the French loan word *gu* (see Fforde, 2003, p. 55).

John Kleinen, in his study of northern Vietnamese village life, reports that family feasting at weddings, funerals and death anniversary banquets has been revived, often with spectacular displays of food and music (1999, pp. 182–83). And ceremonial processions, where gifts and wedding robes are displayed and traditional umbrellas are erected, are coming back in often flamboyant fashion (Kleinen, 1999, p. 177).<sup>7</sup> These strikingly changed ways of making “sense” of events like marriage are being seen throughout the north of Vietnam. And it is young women who are determining the format of their weddings and transforming them into sensual and luscious events. Yet again, however, the state attempts to intervene with regular directives against lavish weddings and “superstitious” practices. In December 2002 the Ministry of the Interior was ordered to produce a set of rules on how to hold “proper, economical and civilised weddings”, and the media was asked to produce stories that depict modest weddings between state workers (Reuters, 5 December 2002).

In spite of government anxiety, religion in Hanoi has also seen a resurgence since the beginning of the Renovation [*doi moi*] period in the late 1980s. Pagoda [*chua*] and communal house [*dinh*] rituals are once again being performed as part of the religious lives of communities within the city (Soucy, 2003; Malarney, 1997; Marr, 1994, p. 15). Other officially prohibited religious activities such as shamanistic rituals [*ten dong*] and séances [*goi hon*] have also become popular, although they are less prominent because of continued state disapproval. As Hue-Tam Ho Tai notes, there has recently been a proliferation of ancestral halls, pilgrimage sculptures and structures of commemoration refurbished or newly built with the help of overseas remittances (2001, p. 229). She reports that “(c)ommemorative fever is threatening to blanket the Vietnamese landscape with monuments to the worship of the past. Every year it seems another museum opens, a new memorial is dedicated. Temples are refurbished, and rural roads bristle with signs pointing to historical sites” (p. 1). As Alex Soucy (2003) has written, travelling to pilgrimage sites throughout Vietnam is almost entirely the domain of women, who organise the trips and focus on the food, the enjoyment of travel and the social program of the pilgrimage. The pilgrimages have a carnivalesque atmosphere with lively consumer activities, performances and food. The sites of pilgrimage, cemeteries for the war dead, and temples are reinvigorating not just public memory but also the landscape. A by-product of economic reform, this re-enchantment of the landscape brings with it travel for pleasure, complete with travelling performance troupes and musical groups and an explosion of restaurants, drink stands and souvenir stores at the sites and along the road. There are many sensory correspondences in Vietnam that create a sensory code, where colours may be associated with smells, flavours and musical tones. In the period of sensory depression not only was fragrance unavailable, but music was restricted and foods rationed. This reinforced the notion of the sensory integration of experience. Rituals can be performed now in taste-ful splendour, with music, wines and new types of incense, more pungent than before. Now one sense conjures up another, in a cultural synaesthesia where smells, tastes, textures and sensations are intertwined. In the last decade local markets for music, foodstuffs and body products have simultaneously expanded. The Vietnamese cosmetics and related markets are exhibiting a classic trajectory. According to economist Adam Fforde, the market for perfumed body products is exceptionally large compared with other countries in the region. According to one survey, the proportion of women’s incomes in Ho Chi Minh City spent on perfumes, cosmetics, skin care, shampoo and so on has climbed from around 1 per cent in 1991 to around 20 per cent today (Fforde, 2003, p. 54).

Tattoos, once reviled in Vietnam as the preserve of prisoners, gangsters and soldiers, are becoming increasingly popular among the country’s emerging “MTV generation”. Young women with swirly designs on their lower backs, and men with barbed wire designs or other patterns around their biceps or shoulders, have become a familiar sight in Ho Chi Minh City’s nightclubs and bars. The concept of tattoos as a form of artistic expression is new to Vietnam, a country in which tattoo parlours are illegal and permanent body art is usually taken as a sign of criminal connections. But Linh, a 22-year-old woman with long painted fingernails, wavy brown hair and large sunglasses, says that times are changing. “We think of tattoos as an art form now. They are beautiful, and that’s why I got my tattoo,” she says, referring to the 20-centimetre-wide design on her lower back (Australian Associated Press, 25 May 2003, [www.aap.com.au](http://www.aap.com.au)). Linh and three friends marked themselves out as unapologetic members of Vietnam’s new, and often highly privileged, leisure generation when they hired a tattoo artist to decorate their lower backs in a hotel room two years ago (Australian Associated Press, 25 May 2003, [www.aap.com.au](http://www.aap.com.au)). Alan Tomlinson (1990) argues that there is an “aura” to commodities.

This air of fantasy, the aroma of the commodity, carries meanings of status, freshness and effectiveness. There is a desire not just to smell good but to carry an aura of modernity and status and a whiff of prosperity. In this case the commodity, the tattoo, is worn on the body and carries with it connotations of modernity and the West. At the same time it literally embodies an opposition to state control and traditional conventions.

These new embodied symbols are also embedded in new relations of gendered power. As the edited volume *Aroma: The cultural history of smell* reminds us, unlike vision, which is focused on surfaces, through smell one interacts with interiors (Classens, Howes and Synnott, 1994). Odours cannot be readily contained; they escape and cross boundaries (Classens, Howes and Synnott, 1994, p. 4). Evoking or manipulating odour values is a common and effective means of generating and maintaining social hierarchies (Classens, Howes and Synnott, 1994, p. 8). Foreigners are thought to exude undesirable odours, and workers are thought to smell of poverty. Groups with power are characterised as smelling good and those on the periphery as odorous.

Bodies are not only adorned with fragrances or covered in odours in this new economy of Vietnamese taste but are also decorated and clothed. Hairdressers have had a spectacular growth in trade, along with beauticians and manicurists. The feel of cloth, the smell of leather, the silkiness of skin are all linked to bodily pleasures and are eroticised, even fetishised. Until the early 1990s almost all shoes in Hanoi were plastic, even high-heeled court shoes. In Shoe Street, women now rub their fingers over the leather shoes, either made in Vietnam or imported from Korea and China, and smell them before buying. Where cotton and acrylics were once the major fabrics, now silk and satin have had a resurgence in popularity. Skin-whitening creams are selling extremely well, and women are often seen in arm-length gloves as they zip around city streets on their motor-bikes. Hat, sunglasses and a colourful handkerchief tied gangster-style across the face complete an outfit fashioned to beat the skin-browning rays of the tropical sun. For many, white skin is a symbol of femininity, purity, sophistication and high social class. "I want my skin to be white because I think it is beautiful," stated Dang Thi Ngoc Nga, a 31-year-old office worker at a state-run company in Ho Chi Minh City. Since the late 1990s, middle-class women throughout Vietnam have adopted similar attitudes as rising household incomes enable them to spend more time and money on their personal appearance. Not surprisingly, beauty salons and companies specialising in skin-whitening products enjoy a captive and lucrative market (Agence France-Presse, 16 June 2003, p. 12). The new young female élites are attempting to distinguish themselves through conspicuous consumption of brands and odours, from sanitising their homes with the smells of disinfectants and deodorisers, to adorning themselves with modish styles, hair products and French perfumes, and whitening their skin.

As the aromatic smoke rises from the grilling of meat in outdoor markets the smell of the baked bread rolls carried on the heads of women in the street wafts down the avenues, chickens tied to bicycles squawk on their way to their deaths, and groups of girls in their freshly washed white *ao dais* [Vietnamese traditional dresses] brush each other's hair in the sun while awaiting their school graduation, it is clear that the senses have been awakened and now explode in many dimensions, predominantly for young women. *Song gap* [live in a hurry, live urgently] and "party on" (in English) have become mottos for young women from well-to-do families, which was confirmed in Nguyen Bich Thuan's interviews, adding to reports already circulating on the internet (*Tin tức Vietnam*, 16 October 2003, [www.tintucvietnam.com](http://www.tintucvietnam.com)). They go to bars, meet foreigners, smoke, drink and have one-night stands. "Live like the West" [*Song nhu Tay*] is their motto, and these young women look down on Vietnamese ways of eating – sharing the same food, and eating from the same bowls – calling them unhygienic, as only the

West is “civilised”. These new activities also have to be negotiated with an unpopular regime that is still viewed as pleasureless. An efflorescence of new religious movements that explode in textures, sounds and tastes are enticing the populace away from the solemn state(stage)-managed spectacles in which bodies of high-ranking cadres are offered up as sense-less signifiers of “nothing but” the people, the nation, and the Party. Formerly women’s bodies provided images of control and embodied service to the state and the socialist revolution. Currently, the forms of women’s bodily transgression in religious pilgrimages and festivals are met with a nervous disquiet by the state. When these public actions transform into political unrest they are quickly suppressed (see Thomas, 2003). The bodies of the Vietnamese populace here both signify and generate social transformation and subversion of the regime’s dominant ideology of bodily denial.

We have sketched the way in which economic changes have impacted upon the sense-worlds of the Vietnamese, particularly young women. As Nadia Serematakis has argued, the senses can mark “the political polarity between institutional memory and unspeakable memories of cultural alterity” (1994, p. 135). The volatility of the contemporary political world of Vietnam is matched by the vitality of the physical and sensual environment. As Paul Rodaway suggests in his book *Sensuous Geographies*, the sensuous – the experience of the senses – is the base on which a wider understanding of space and place can be constructed (1994, p. 3). By viewing the bodies of women as the focus of cultural change, the senses, situated on the body and operating through the body, and the body itself as a sensuous dimension, gain new significance in social and geographical understanding. As Serematakis argues, “within a society that is undergoing turbulent shifts in material values, modes of representation and systems of reference, there can be a systemic character to these movements which frequently only registers at the level of the senses” (1994, p. 135). The particular ways in which young women are orienting themselves through their bodies to the new social worlds that they confront reveals the system of competing dispositions (Butler, 1990) they are affected by, from the lure of the material and aesthetic pleasures of consumerism and popular culture to the home, family and responsibility produced at the intersection of tradition and the state.

### **From Model Citizens to Models**

In late 2002 Mandy Thomas interviewed a group of young people in Hanoi about the changes in Vietnamese society, and after they had chatted for a while, one young woman stood up to say:

We can read newspapers like *The People (Nhan Dan)* or *The Worker (Lao Dong)* and hear about oil production and rice production, or we can choose to read magazines which are much more about consumption – style, soap, clothing, cosmetics. Until now we weren’t allowed to consume, so we got an ache in us for products. I don’t want to be a model citizen [*cong dan mau*] like my parents – I want to be a *model [nguai mau]*!

She laughed, and the entire group applauded. In the interviews conducted by Nguyen Bich Thuan most young women suggested that those who aspire to be beauty queens have been inspired by numerous accounts of former beauty queens who later became models. The so-called glamorous lifestyles of these models since their rise to fame are illustrated in women’s magazines under the section ‘A day in the life of . . .’ (*The Gioi Phu Nu*, Women’s World, 6 August 1998). The numerous photographs and accounts of their lifestyles, their trips to Italy, the visits to fashion magazines, the promise of becoming an international model, the opportunity to participate in international beauty contests,

and ultimately the acquisition of a beautiful house within a short period of time, all fuel the imagination of young women.

The financial rewards of winning beauty competitions in Vietnam are significant. For example, the Miss Vietnam contest in 2000, which was sponsored by Suzuki and Fujifilm, had prize money of US\$5,000 for the winner and US\$4,000 for the runner-up, along with a two-week trip to Europe to visit international magazines. The top three place-getters each landed a contract with an international modelling agency for a year. For those who did not make it to the final round, the prospect of marriage to a wealthy businessman was a possible consolation prize. The beauty contest was a platform for young women to make news and become known to overseas Vietnamese and expatriates working in Vietnam. The current popular joke in Vietnam is that beauty contests are a spouse market for Taiwanese and Hong Kong businessmen. Model agencies perpetuate the myth, and one magazine, *The Gioi Phu Nu*, organises monthly contests to choose Miss Vietnam from photographs. The three people selected each month receive half a million piasters (around US\$34, a month's salary for a worker). A huge growth in women's magazines has meant that the focus on beauty has intensified, leading to a marked change in images of Vietnamese womanhood. As Ashley Pettus suggests, "through its national newspaper, *Phu Nu Viet Nam (Vietnamese Woman)*, the Women's Union in the past sought to inculcate the proper subjectivity of the new socialist woman by presenting private dilemmas of readers' lives as questions of political commitment and ideological correctness" (2000, p. 287). During the war and in the postwar period, the most highly praised women were the mothers and spouses of dead soldiers. However, today Vietnamese femininity and beauty are marketed as commodities.

The model has replaced the model citizen in the many new public images and advertisements that circulate throughout the country. The Vietnamese flagship Vietnam Airlines frequently has photos of Vietnamese models on the cover of its inflight magazine, with displays of Vietnamese young women in the latest *avant-garde* fashion, a mixture of East and West cultures. Pictures of Vietnamese girls grace advertisements on billboards on major roads in and out of the major cities. Even the conservative newspaper *Lao Dong (The Worker)* has a page on youth [*tre*] that covers beauty and modelling. Secondary schools encourage the focus on beauty by organising "Miss Schoolgirl" [*Hoa hau hoc duong*], an event sponsored by Kotex. Events such as this are being organised in secondary schools across the country, provoking controversy and an outcry from educators, although the criteria are based on *duc, tri, the, my* [virtue, intelligence, good health, and beauty] and no parades in swimsuits are permitted. Modelling businesses such as Elite Vietnam offer training courses for young women who hope to become models. Promoting beauty is a growing business trend. A video film company in Ho Chi Minh City, Thanh Nien Film, produces a series of videos titled *Duyen Dang Viet Nam (Vietnamese Charm)*, with music, songs and contests under different themed formats: fashion design contest, beauty contest, *ao dai* contest. The videos have become hot commodities for young Vietnamese women at home and overseas, and compete with the very popular *Thuy Nga* music and cabaret videos, the production of which originated in France. Modelling and grooming agencies have sprung up everywhere to feed the dreams and aspirations of young girls who hope to lead a life in the limelight as models.

While this attention to physical appearance may be ubiquitous, it is not without its critics, both within the state and among ordinary people. As Ashley Pettus suggests, in newsprint and on billboards the government still focuses on advancing the pastoral concerns of the family, "its health, harmony and happiness – under the competent care of the modern middle-class woman" (2000, p. 289). There may have been a recent shift in thinking about how respectable the lifestyle of a beauty queen or a model is. One of

the Vietnamese beauty queens, Ha Kieu Anh, made headlines when her overseas Vietnamese partner was caught in a tax evasion scheme related to the illegal import of mobile phones ([www.vnn.vn/450/2003/8/26516](http://www.vnn.vn/450/2003/8/26516)), and two other models were involved in a Vietnamese triad ([www.vnn.net](http://www.vnn.net)). Recently, the Ministry of Culture has issued regulations regarding the dress codes of stage performers (*Vietnamnet*, September 2003, BBC.UK, 27 October 2003). As performers are seen as trendsetters, the government hopes that these measures will encourage the younger generation to revert to the traditional images of Vietnam, such as girls in graceful *ao dai* extolling feminine virtue.

Within families, there is often friction between parents and their daughters over the intense interest in clothing and sexuality. Nguyen Bich Thuan found that parents are often delighted about stricter government measures, as they often feel that they themselves have no control over what their children are wearing. To appease their parents, girls often cover up their flimsy outfits with a cardigan or a long skirt. Once out in public spaces, they reveal fashionable low-cut pants revealing brand-name G-strings, short shorts and skirts, and tops with spaghetti straps. But not all condemn the new fashion. A number of articles praise the new fashions and hair colours, because they liven up the streets of Hanoi (*Tin tức Vietnam*, 16 September 2003, [www.tintucvietnam.com](http://www.tintucvietnam.com)). It has been difficult for the state and parents to impress the notion of tradition on youth, as the internet, advertisers and importers are so publicly present, aggressively selling their products and influencing taste. It should not be forgotten, however, that these trends have not touched the great majority of young women in rural areas and in poorer economic situations. The gap between elite girl culture and working-class femininity is growing. New configurations of the family depend on social class. Many of our interviews reveal that poor families are still struggling to make ends meet, while rich families, with fewer children to support thanks to the family planning campaign, tend to pamper their offspring, who have significantly increased purchasing power. The state and popular culture continue to problematise the morality of market reforms and their impact, and often represent poverty and hard work as morally superior. As Pettus (2000, p. 225) demonstrates, in popular television dramas in Vietnam, such as the Japanese drama *Oshin*, which screened in the late 1990s, poverty constitutes the basis for expressing the human virtues of feminine endurance, simplicity and hard work. These competing visions of femininity enter everyday talk about women's roles and reinforce the contradictory impulses of women to simultaneously pursue national tradition and personal aspirations (Pettus, 2000, p. 225).

Elite young women are also exposed to foreign influences in other forms of popular culture such as movies and music. Our interviews reveal that the idea of being *van minh* [civilised/modern] in a *van minh* society, a campaign launched by the authorities a few years ago while Vietnam was opening up to the world, is interpreted by young women nowadays as being "like the West". Today's women's magazines, on the one hand, tell the stories of exemplary women who make sacrifices for their families, and on the other hand run articles from the West on how to achieve equality for women, with images of Western models, Western fashion, Western lifestyles, and pages of advertisements for cosmetic products and hair dye lotions. The notion of sacrifice is no longer readily accepted. In Hanoi more and more women are disgruntled at the way peaceful times and the new economy have changed their lives: there are no more subsidies from the government, which means they are on their own in making a living (Pettus, 2000). Many are sole breadwinners, looking after children's education and their in-laws. Young women openly say that they do not want the kind of life their mothers have had; thus, the notions of sacrifice and traditional values are fading. However, in spite of this trend, popular culture is also exploring the negative effects of consumerism and the loss of tradition (Pettus, 1990, p. 290). For example, films made recently in Vietnam depict

a more sinister side to the market reforms and the embrace of the West. Films such as *Luoi troi* (*The Net of Heaven*) and *Gai nhay* (*Bar Girls*) do not carry themes of sacrifice, but of a dystopic society. Soap operas reveal that family life can be destroyed by women's economic interests or an obsession with physical appearance and sexuality. These soap operas and filmic representations of women work to police the limits of female agency and desire within the commonplace settings of provincial economic striving (Pettus, 1990, p. 290). Here, women's self-expression is seen to thwart the well-being of society as a whole. Helle Rydstrom, who has explored the ways in which Vietnamese children are socialised, has revealed that there is a common perception that female children need to be imprinted with morality [*dao duc*] in order to be properly socialised (2001, p. 394). Further, these forms of morality and national ideals are seen to be inscribed on the body, through the demeanour of women in public, in appropriately expressing *tinh cam* [sentiment] and in self-control over their movements (Rydstrom, 2001, p. 408). Thus, the competing claims on Vietnamese womanhood position young women both at the awkward and unstable forefront of change and also as bearers of tradition and nationalism through their performance of embodied movements and expressions.

## Conclusion

In the Vietnamese nationalist war rhetoric that filled the public sphere with images of women as heroines there was little room for women to represent individual or personal identity (Lowe, 1996, p. iv). However, in spite of the dominance of those images, women even in that period continued to place their "real kin" above the "imagined kin" of the nation, and often resisted communal images of themselves (Lowe, 1996, p. iv). Since then, in spite of the many public commemorations of women's role in wartime and nation-building, these representations have failed to strike a chord with young women. While women who pursue self-interest, a desire for money, for clothes or romance are still somewhat demonised in popular culture, they are at the same time eroticised and viewed as independent, modern and Western. As Larson argues has been the case in China, "personal desire and sexuality have emerged as the counterpoint to revolutionary action and practice" (2000, p. 339). Young urban women have increasing levels of disposable income and many have become the primary earners in their household because of the growth and diversification of forms of employment open to them (Pettus, 2000, pp. 189–90). Currently the Women's Union advocates a socialist response to gender issues, primarily in an attempt to eliminate inequalities between men and women and between different groups of women. However, the changes in society have been so rapid that they have left the impact of the Women's Union and government programs for women behind. To participate in cybercultures, to eat in outdoor restaurants, to use perfume, to read magazines and to buy the latest clothes becomes a way of constituting young womanhood against a regime the populace may wish to oppose. No longer content to be in the Party's Youth Brigade, young women are entering the symbolic spaces of a Vietnamised youth pop culture, which could ultimately threaten the state's hold on power. As Zhang Zhen suggests is the case in China, economic changes have brought greater and sometimes empowering opportunities to young women. These young women, neither marked by revolutionary ideals nor by the deprivations of wartime and reconstruction, "are learning to want, and to gratify desire rather than to sacrifice" (Zhang, 2001, p. 150). At the same time, as Ashley Pettus argues, "new discourses of nation-ness problematically conflate progress and prosperity with a retraditionalization of the feminine" (Pettus, 2000, p. 191); that is, in statist discourse modernity is equated with good mothering and cultural traditions of maintaining a family. Young women

draw on the state for dominant images of womanhood at the same time as they enthusiastically embrace glamorous and often sexualised images of themselves. The youthful valorisation of modernisation strikes a revolutionary and nationalistic chord, and in doing so brings a popular affirmation of the postsocialist Vietnamese state, even if young women are rejecting “tradition” in the process. It is the overlap and coexistence of such a pastiche of previously alien styles, social structures, state-sanctioned activities, political organisations and everyday modes of life that constitute a new array of possibilities for young women in the Vietnamese postsocialist moment.

## Notes

- 1 Fieldnotes, Mandy Thomas, 12 November 2002.
- 2 Unless otherwise stated, all news items in this article are available at <http://www.tin.le.org/archive>.
- 3 Another particularly Vietnamese mode of contemporary communication is the “talking internet”. In Vietnam, where the internet is carefully controlled, the 1080 information service and its upmarket cousin 1088 have become the nation’s problem-solvers. There are few topics that this national dial-a-question service does not tackle outside the universally sensitive realms of politics and religion. Established in 1992, the 1080 service has been a lifeline for millions of Vietnamese, and even with growing internet use, users are proving reluctant to change, preferring to speak to a soothing operator’s voice rather than surf the net. And if the subject is more demanding, Vietnamese can also dial 1088, a premium consultant-run phone information service. “Many customers consider 1080 and 1088 as the encyclopaedia that gives the quickest information,” stated Bui Quoc Viet, the director of VNPT’s Information Centre for Posts and Telecom. Ho Chi Minh City, with eight million residents, employs 1,000 operators for the twin services and receives around 35,000 queries a day. Capital city Hanoi in the north has 100. The services operate around-the-clock in a country where there is an average of 4.6 phones for every 100 people and a total of 5.57 million fixed line and mobile phone users (Kenichi Okumura, *Daily Yomiuri*, 16 April 2002). This provides a particularly Vietnamese solution to a general lack of information only recently attended to by the internet.
- 4 Another example of the popularity of interactive popular culture is *Green Wave*, an hour-long weekly radio show widely credited with setting the pace for Vietnamese musical tastes. Aired on the state-run Voice of Ho Chi Minh City People, it became the first radio program to invite audience participation. The show receives around 1,500 requests a week, and is credited with fuelling a boom in locally produced CDs and cassettes.
- 5 During 2002 five dissidents were arrested. As Carl Thayer reports, “One common thread was that they posted material on the internet relating to the 1999 Sino-Vietnamese border agreement or material relating to democracy” (2002, p. 14).
- 6 Nhung Tran, in interview conducted by Mandy Thomas, October 2001, in Hanoi.
- 7 Before the mid-1980s weddings were rather spartan, involving a limited number of guests and a modest dowry. Dowry was officially limited to personal clothing, a pillow or a blanket. During that time government rules restricted the size of wedding feasts by limiting the quantity of pork or the amount of rice delivered by the groom’s family to the bride’s.

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