

COSMOPOLITAN OR CULTURAL DISSONANCE? VIETNAMESE MIDDLE-CLASS ENCOUNTERS WITH THE OTHER¹

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Introduction

This paper is a condensed version of a longer paper which focuses on urban middle-class Vietnamese attitudes to outsiders in southern Vietnam during the postcolonial period (1955-1975), a period of intense urbanization characterized by migration to the southern capital. At this time, the influence of Westernized foreign culture (particularly American) became as dominant in the urban environment as it had been at the height of the French colonial period. Whilst this diversification of imported popular culture and urban lifestyle occurred, differences between urban and rural life in southern Vietnam became more pronounced with urban areas rapidly developing whilst rural areas stagnated as a result of urban migration and war. Framed by this backdrop of dramatic social change and urbanization, many young people accompanied their families when they relocated to Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City),²

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² All place names are spelled according to common English usage for ease of readership.

leaving behind their friends, their schools and their ancestral homes. Through the processes of migration, these young people encountered new and diverse social and cultural influences in daily lifestyles and habits, entertainment and fashion, as well as popular culture.

Contemporary Ho Chi Minh City, the largest city in socialist Vietnam, has been developing rapidly since economic reforms (*đổi mới*) in the mid-1980s. In many ways contemporary leisure culture in Ho Chi Minh City now resembles aspects of the postcolonial Saigonese middle-class past (Earl 2004). This paper aims to embellish contemporary ethnographic work by exploring the middle-class past through literary memoirs. Through the perspectives of gender, class, and culture, I focus on how young, independent, career-minded women came to terms with outsiders in their lives. Processes of migration meant that for many they had themselves been considered outsiders when they arrived in a new place but, more importantly, that unlike many middle-class women of the time, these young women had had direct sensory experience of distant places and of Others, including highlanders, peasants, foreigners and urbanites from other cities.

This paper addresses an issue that stems from my ethnographic work which explores how young urbanite women deal with a conglomeration of local and imported cultural influences in their social lives in Vietnam today (see Earl 2008). The issue is whether social experiences with outsiders and Others allow young urbanite women to develop *enabling* cosmopolitan lifestyles by *assimilating* a diversity of cultural influences into their social lives, or to develop *disabling* cultural dissonance through the *displacement* of Vietnamese cultural influences by imported or foreign cultural influences in their social lives. Although not described with this terminology, it is the second response – cultural dissonance – that has been of particular interest to the Vietnamese postcolonial and socialist societies in the latter twentieth century, as outlined below. The issue of cosmopolitanism or cultural dissonance among educated and urbanite youth is important to consider as a reformed – and arguably now postsocialist – Vietnam tries to locate itself in an increasingly socially differentiated, urbanized and globalized world.

The sources

The source material for this discussion is the self-writing of young middle-class urban women who lived in Saigon in the postcolonial era. While ethnographic records of encounters with Ho Chi Minh City are few, autobiographical accounts of migration to Saigon-Ho Chi Minh City detail not only encounters with cosmopolitan Saigon but also the resulting changes to the authors' lives and prospects. Such changes are demonstrated by the authors' accounts of their experiences with imported and foreign cultural influences. As a result of these encounters, young urban migrants reveal much about themselves as they came of age in southern Vietnam in the postcolonial period. For them, encounters with the world were simultaneously encounters with the self.

Self-writing of urban Vietnamese lives seem to be almost exclusively have been published by women. Female authorship makes these sources a unique set of documents as, in other studies involving female informants, scholars have commented on Vietnamese women's reluctance to volunteer as cultural experts (Pettus 2003, p.20; Soucy 2000, p.185). The set of sources I draw on comprises nine autobiographical memoirs and one biographical account of middle-class women who lived in Saigon between the mid 1950s and mid 1970s. Each account provides rich descriptions of middle-class Saigonese life as it was encountered by young urbanite women during the mid- to late-twentieth century. While it is necessary to acknowledge various problems with the use of evidence based on personal memory and oral sources, the value of these stories centres on the glimpse they provide of middle-class Saigonese life, a world which is largely absent from official history for political – among other – reasons.

These sources represent diverse experiences of postcolonial urban Vietnam, although the memoirs reveal that young urbanite women at that time had much in common. With the exception of Le Ly Hayslip, each of the authors have comparable middle-class backgrounds and upbringings. The majority were themselves born in or near Hanoi, or to northern parents in the centre, arriving in Saigon as children and young people (Elliott 1999; Loewald 1987; Nguyễn Thị Thu-Lâm 1989; Nguyen and Knight

2004; Sawyer 2003; Yeomans 2001).³ The remaining authors were born in Vietnam's southern provinces or Saigon (Ho Xuan Huong [pseudo.] 2002; Le Kwang Kim 1963). Two valuable 'outsider' perspectives are provided in Le Ly Hayslip's memoir of her early life as a peasant girl from the central coast working as a servant in a middle-class Saigonese household (Hayslip 1989) and in Iphigénie-Catherine Shellshear's memoir of her childhood in among European expatriates and Vietnamese middle classes in Saigon (Shellshear 2003).

The discussion is organized into two sections. The first section (briefly, in this version) outlines attitudes held by outsiders arriving in or returning to Saigon, attitudes which are based on both direct sensory experience and on indirect experience, stereotyping and hearsay before encountering Saigon. This section introduces the themes of assimilation and displacement. In the second section, the discussion considers the impact of imported cultural influences in the postcolonial urban Vietnamese social landscape as reported in women's self-writing. This section addresses middle-class women's attitudes to Westernization in Saigon through popular culture, leisure, fashion, and other urban pastimes that associate middle classes as cultural 'outsiders' in a simultaneously positive and negative light. The discussion concludes by considering how these attitudes reflect cosmopolitanism or cultural dissonance.

Encounters with Saigon

For decades, Saigon has been for the Vietnamese a land of promise bringing fortune and betterment. Saigon is portrayed in modern Vietnamese literature as a place of opportunity and risk, where characters desire to escape from their lives, make a new start, or succeed in business (e.g. Balaban and Nguyen eds. 1996; Pham Thi Hoai 1997). Like this two-faced portrayal, middle-class women's self-writing describes Saigon as a place of refuge and opportunity, but also as a place of hostility and rejection. This reputation that Saigon held in the romantic imagination of visitors, temporary residents, and migrants alike in many cases preceded their contact with the

³ All authors' names are reproduced as published.

southern capital. It is worth noting that Vietnamese accounts contrast with those of foreign visitors and expatriates who have often described Saigon simply as a place of pleasure and centre of decadence (e.g. Edwards ed. 2003).

Some of the first encounters prospective migrants had with Saigon occurred before their relocation if they met with returnees. Before moving to Saigon to work as a housekeeper in a middle-class household, the peasant girl Le Ly Hayslip remembers Saigon as ‘every country girl’s vision of nirvana’. Her own image of Saigon was molded by her sister’s friend, who returned home to Central Vietnam, ‘as if she had returned from another planet’ with her hair ‘piled up like a beehive on her head and made brittle as a bird’s nest with hair spray’. She wore clothes that shocked the young Le Ly by leaving her shoulders, arms, and thighs ‘exposed’. The image of Saigon represented by this girl in Le Ly’s mind was decorated with women who ‘wore *makeup* and brassieres and high-heeled shoes’ (Hayslip 1989, pp.112-113, original emphasis). Here the newly urbanized woman had become an outsider in her rural birthplace. Hayslip’s memoir records the experiences of her contact – indirect and direct, see below – with the diverse cultural influences of a new context.

Just as experiences of internal migration confronted young women arriving in the city, years studying abroad also confronted young women returning to Saigon. Mai Elliott describes herself in contrast to her family in Saigon as cosmopolitan, recording that her family had trouble recognizing her on her return from the United States since she had become a ‘mature and cosmopolitan’ woman with bouffant hairdo, makeup, and stylish clothes (Elliott 1999, p.295). Like her, experiences abroad led Lien Yeomans to eventually describe herself as having an identity that was ambiguous and cosmopolitan-like, rather than being Vietnamese:

[Now] I can easily get away with being any kind of Asiatic. In Indonesia, the locals thought I was an Indonesian from Holland; in Singapore, an ‘ABC’ (Australian born Chinese); in Vietnam, a tourist from Japan; and in Denmark I was mistaken for an Eskimo from Greenland. Only in Paris was I recognised as being Vietnamese. I enjoyed the mistaken identities (Yeomans 2001, p.5).

Elliott's and Yeomans' memoirs record the experiences of their contact with the diverse cultural influences of new contexts in contrast to experiences of those remaining at home. In these extracts, Elliott and Yeomans each describe themselves in terms that Ulrich Beck would consider "rooted" cosmopolitanism, that is "rooted in *no* place." Beck describes cosmopolitan identities as "ones that are ethically and culturally simultaneously global and local. They... experience and – if necessary – defend their place as one open to the world" (Beck 2002, p.36, original emphasis; see also Werbner ed. 2008). The resulting hybridized identities are regarded as somehow enhanced or enabled by the process of assimilating a diversity of cultural influences into the self. Such experiences highlight the significance of a balance between necessary adaptation to new conditions and the maintenance of familiar cultural traditions in migrants' and returning students' lives.

Yet, Vietnamese women's self-writing reveals that young women in postcolonial Saigon did not necessarily accomplish a balance between new and familiar cultural influences. Despite describing herself as cosmopolitan upon her return to Saigon, as a university student in the United States, Mai Elliott revealed that she was so familiar with Western popular culture that she could not answer the most basic questions put to her about the Confucian heritage in Vietnam (Elliott 1999, p.291). On returning from her study in Australia to visit Saigon in 1965, Lien Yeomans craved Vietnamese traditions, particularly food, that was unavailable abroad (Yeomans 2001, pp.72-73). Like them, other young women returning from study abroad had to re-adjust to the changes that had taken place in their absences. After years abroad studying in Paris, re-adapting to the changed conditions in Saigon was for Saigonese pharmacist Le Kwang Kim like being 'divided between two opposing trends' where 'one is conscious of being at once strong and weak, at home and at the same time foreign, doubtful and also assured... between the frenzied urge towards Westernization and the simultaneous need to cling passionately to the old traditions' (Le Kwang Kim 1963, pp.469-470). Having studied in America, Anh Vu Sawyer no longer felt 'boxed in by the pressure to conform' to traditional Vietnamese gender norms (Sawyer 2003, p.214). Each of these examples suggests that young women were also experiencing and adopting new cultural influences *instead of* maintaining Vietnamese traditions.

Rather than describing these experiences in terms of cosmopolitanism suggesting an assimilation of diverse cultural influences, an alternative explanation focuses on a response to contact with new influences and conditions in terms of displacement.

To grapple with the issue of displacement or assimilation in hybridized identities, the discussion draws on a term coined by French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu, even though Bourdieu was not especially concerned with issues of migration. The year before his death, Bourdieu used the term *habitus clivé* to describe himself and the dissonance he felt in having left his father's village to enter the elite institutions of Paris (Bourdieu 2004, cited in Bennett 2007, p.201). Although Bourdieu does not say so, this dissonance seems to stem from the spatial as much as the social. It is not so much a "before and after" as a "here and there," since he maintains contact with his origins. Tony Bennett turns to the term *habitus clivé* to refine Bourdieu's class-based taste profiles as set out in *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984) to more adequately represent what Bennett considers an observed reality, particularly when individuals experience upward or downward social mobility to a new class-based social position and/or spatial mobility to a new cultural context. While Bennett's work – which is based in contemporary, multicultural Britain – does not explicitly deal with imported cultural influences, it does highlight that through contact, migration or mobility particular existing cultural influences might be abandoned in the process of adopting new cultural influences while others are maintained (Bennett 2007). The resulting hybridized identities are regarded to be inconsistent and, in contrast to cosmopolitanisms, are seen to be somewhat disabling and connected to individualized cultural anxiety, particularly in the fluidity – or mismatching – of contemporary class profiling. Cultural dissonance of this form seems to encapture the experiences of Elliott, Yeomans, Le Kwang Kim and Sawyer outlined above.

The following section reveals that in postcolonial urban South Vietnam internal displacement and contact with outsiders and Others enabled young urbanite women to experience a diversity of cultural influences in their social lives, experiences that seemed to privilege imported or foreign cultural influences and displace traditional or conventional Vietnamese cultural influences.

Encounters with Westernization

The social world that unfolded in middle-class postcolonial Saigon, particularly for career girls with newly found disposable income, was characterized by an orientation towards the West culturally in leisure, recreation, and popular culture as well as through consumption. Like material benefits at home, luxury items and imported products came to be associated with the domain of the middle classes. Fashionable clothing and hairstyles, modeled in women's magazines and tailors' boutiques, also became suddenly available to urban career girls as foreign influences became more widely accessible throughout the 1960s.

In many instances, as Vietnamese women's self-writing demonstrates, middle-class migrant girls grew up to become urbanite career girls leading cosmopolitan-ish lifestyles within the increasingly globalized context of Saigon in the 1960s. Within their families, children were educated abroad, returning to work in elite positions in the government or in foreign companies. Personal relationships and marriages with foreigners in the family as well as travel experiences further enhanced the development of middle-class cosmopolitan desires and the fascination with foreign things. Lien Yeomans' oldest brother, for example, broke the tradition of taking responsibility for the cult of the ancestors in his family when he married a German girl and settled in France (Yeomans 2001, p.38). Likewise Hawaii-based entrepreneur Nguyễn Thị Thu-Lâm tells of her sister who followed her German-Japanese husband abroad (Nguyễn Thị Thu-Lâm 1989, p.84). Certainly one French expatriate schoolgirl in Saigon did not question that middle-class urban Vietnamese lifestyles were cosmopolitan (Shellshear 2003). Yet Yeomans notes the lifestyles of foreigners, not of urbanite Vietnamese, when she describes 'cosmopolitan' Saigon.

[In the 1930s, in Mother's youth], Saigon was then, as it is today, a teeming city. It had imposing office buildings, elegant French villas and modern stores selling French goods. The streets were crowded with traffic; cars, trucks, trams, rickshaws, bicycles, ox carts and coolies. During the hot afternoons, the shops closed for siesta, reopening in the late afternoon. In the evening, at fashionable footpath

cafes, the colonial French gathered to sip aperitifs and to exchange hot gossip. During the theatre season, they attended performances at the Saigon Opera House and other municipal theatres; there were also many cinemas showing French films (Yeomans 2001, p.8).

Here the urban environment provides a unique context in which a convergence of imported influences with pre-existing values and learned behaviours of Vietnamese origins is possible, yet the imported cultural influences seem to have displaced the Vietnamese cultural influences. Urban career girls may have found themselves in a new and exciting world that included new workplace practices and languages, a wide range of workplace social activities and recreation such as foreign pastimes, foreign music, and foreign food, as well as different ways of behaving and dressing. This diverse range of new activities and behaviours was perhaps more attractive to young urbanite women than conventional Vietnamese lifestyles.

In contrast to the widespread influence of East Asian popular culture in contemporary Vietnam (Thomas 2002), lifestyles of urban middle-class youth in the 1960s were greatly influenced by Western popular culture. Mai Elliott developed a familiarity with Western popular culture that left her ignorant of Vietnamese Confucian heritage (Elliott 1999, p.291) throughout her childhood and years as a student. Elliott and her sisters had regularly attended cinema screenings and listened to American pop music in preference to paying attention to Vietnamese cultural traditions and entertainment. She explains:

Occasionally, when he had won big at a mah-jong game – his favorite pastime – my father would give us a generous sum of money to go to the cinema and to buy ice cream after the show. Then we would hail a taxi and ride grandly to a decent theatre, sit in comfortable seats in the balcony, and then go to an ice cream parlor afterward. More often, we would get a smaller allowance from my mother, which meant getting cheaper seats in a cheap cinema, and coming home without any treats. At this time, American films were displacing French movies (Elliott 1999, p.264).

Elliott describes the ‘individualist’ influence believed by many Vietnamese to stem from foreign sources and which was seen as culturally dangerous as it threatened to displace Vietnamese cultural heritage. As Elliott shows, by the late postcolonial period, the dominant foreign influences had shifted from an earlier colonial focus on French culture to Hollywood and American popular culture. However, translated foreign language literature from diverse origins continued to be popular.

Reading was popular amongst girls as middle-class families often encouraged their daughters to read at home. One young student inherited her grandfather’s love of Chinese literature, her mother’s love for French literature and, under a maternal influence, developed her own love of Vietnamese literature (Ho Xuan Huong [pseudo.] 2002, p.13). However, schooling in the colonial and postcolonial eras influenced reading choices through set textbooks including Voltaire (Le Kwang Kim 1963, p.462), or Hemingway (Sawyer 2003, p.161), but also allowed young women to pursue literary heroes such as ‘the Three Musketeers’ (Sawyer 2003, p.214). Others read serialized romances rather than news in the newspapers (Loewald 1987, pp.125-126). Eventually, however, in addition to popular culture and literature, imported products also gained in popularity, further enhancing the foreign – especially American – influences available in urbanite lifestyles of the 1960s.

Other aspects of Western popular culture were also influential in Saigon in the 1960s. Fashion, for example, was a particularly clear marker of foreign influence as shown above by Le Ly Hayslip’s description of the ‘brittle beehive’ of the Saigonese girl. Uyen Loewald also records Saigonese women touring the highland resort of Dalat in impractical although fashionable high heels (Loewald 1987, p.191). But fashion was not just the domain of women, as children were also well-dressed. The middle-class housewife and businesswoman Teresa Nguyen dressed her children, for example, in brand-name jeans, ironed shirts and leather shoes (Nguyen and Knight 2004, p.21). To the middle classes, however, physical appearance was directly linked with moral character so that foreign influence reflected badly on the self, particularly for women. Le Ly Hayslip consciously learned to recognize the subtle differences between the fashion styles of urban women and of prostitutes (Hayslip 1989, p.113), whilst Uyen

Loewald observed that Western women dressed ‘like men’ (Loewald 1987, p.22). Further, Loewald’s mother warned her daughter, with naturally curly hair, that women with permed hair looked like prostitutes (Loewald 1987, p.143). Here attitudes to a Westernized appearance show that stereotypes about foreign influences included a undertone of moral deficiency which reflected negatively on outsiders.

The centrality of external influences in middle-class life is not new. Cultural historian David Marr identifies that, in the mid-1980s, a fascination with foreign objects reminded him of a similar trend in research on the early twentieth century. Concerning the great curiosity among Vietnamese about foreign countries and foreign people, Marr writes that foreign language study, for example, continued its extreme popularity throughout the 1980s. At this time, Marr judged that the range and depth of non-fiction books in any language about people outside Vietnam was inadequate to satisfy the tremendous curiosity concerning things foreign, and causing Vietnamese to depend even more greatly on oral sources of widely varying reliability. One such source of information about the West came from anecdotal experiences of Overseas Vietnamese relatives, friends, and former colleagues (Marr 1988, p.43).

Today, urban Vietnamese people have relatively greater access to information about things foreign. Aside from an extraordinary number of Internet cafés that allow Vietnamese urbanites to gain (selected) access to foreign information and an increasing number of foreign-based relatives returning home, Vietnamese state bookshops now stock an even more diverse range of foreign fiction and non-fiction than Marr encountered in the 1980s and 1990s. On a fieldtrip to Ho Chi Minh City in June 2008, I found that there was almost as many volumes of translated foreign literature on Ho Chi Minh City bookshop shelves as volumes of Vietnamese literature. In the large city FAHASA bookshop on Nguyễn Huệ in downtown Ho Chi Minh City, for example, foreign volumes included past and recent Nobel prize winners – Hesse, Hemingway, Sartre, Paz, Naipaul, Pamuk; European classics – Camus, Tolstoy, Dumas; mysteries – PD James, Agatha Christie, JK Rowling; crime thrillers – Jeffrey Archer, John Grisham, Frederik Forsyth; contemporary bestsellers – Alice Sebold, Banana Yoshimoto, Patrick Suskind; as well as modern political biographies ranging from Che Guevara to Vladimir Putin and Condoleeza Rice, among dozens of others

volumes. The availability of foreign literature in contemporary Ho Chi Minh City, however, does not necessarily reflect the anxieties that have stemmed from its presence, a situation that mirrors the anxieties of cultural displacement in postcolonial Saigon.

By the late 1990s, although there had been no widespread surveys of Vietnamese youth attitudes toward foreign countries, there was an ongoing concern about what it meant to be Vietnamese. The long standing concerns of socialist Vietnam's authorities about the negative effects of imported influences on Vietnamese culture had manifested in a campaign in the 1990s against 'social evils' (*tệ nạn xã hội*) and 'poisonous culture' (*văn hóa độc hại*) (Rydstrøm 2006; Taylor 2001, Ch.1). Campaigns such as these respond to desires to understand the self by looking outside and beyond to imported influences, which here remind us of 1960s Saigon. That these dilemmas continue highlights the constancy of a relationship between encounters with the self and attitudes to outsiders. Marr, for example, relays a contribution to a 1995 newspaper forum, in *Tuổi Trẻ* [Youth], that called for youth to *assimilate* pride in their origins with modern communications, technology and industry to form a meaningful contemporary identity that could be passed on to future generations (Marr and Rosen 1999, p.200). This contrasts with the dilemma faced by Mai Elliott in the 1960s, as outlined above, where Western popular culture had *displaced* her knowledge of the Vietnamese Confucian heritage.

Conclusion

Drawing on the self-writing of middle-class women in Saigon, the discussion has shown the existence of records that describe the nature of middle-class urbanite attitudes to outsiders during a period of rapid urbanization and the significant development of influences of foreign and imported popular culture. The authors lived in a relatively unique situation in postcolonial Saigon, where as young middle-class women they had greater direct contact with foreigners and outsiders as well as experience as outsiders via migration. Encounters with outsiders and as outsiders in middle-class urban Vietnam reveal a picture of middle-class life and shed light on

urban women's lifestyles, which remain with the exception of these autobiographical sources, for the most part unrecorded.

The memoirs reveal that leisure choices and recreational pastimes of young middle-class women in postcolonial Saigon were shaped by the diversity of cultural influences in Saigonese social life at that time. Young women's memoirs reporting their experiences with imported and foreign cultural influences suggest the displacement, rather than assimilation, of existing Vietnamese conventional or traditional cultural influences by newly encountered foreign – particularly Western – cultural influences. Despite one author describing herself as cosmopolitan, the experiences of young urbanite women do not seem to reflect cosmopolitan lifestyles, where a diverse range of cultural influences are assimilated into the self. Rather, their experiences seem to be more clearly explained in terms of cultural dissonance, where new cultural influences encountered through spatial or social mobility displace existing cultural influences. The significance of cultural dissonance in Vietnamese urban social life is that it has been observed as a threat to Vietnamese culture and traditions not only in the postcolonial era, but also in post-reform Vietnam by policy makers who have campaigned against imported influences due to the threat they are perceived to have against Vietnamese culture and traditions.

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