

**LIVING IN UNCERTAINTY - PROSPERITY AND THE ANXIETIES OF NGO MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN IN THE CONTEXT OF MARKETISATION AND PRIVATISATION IN VIETNAM**

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**ABSTRACT**

Studies of the new middle-class often write about the anxieties of falling behind with its members acquiring their middle-class status from uncertain and unpredictable market values. This type of anxiety is typical for members of the white-collar middle-class who often deal with pressures to maintain a conspicuous consumption level to remain in the middle strata. I argue that some of the anxieties associated with wealth experienced by the new middle class in Vietnam are also the result of a mode of governmentality that is used by the state to boost individual self-reliance and economic efficiency with the appeal of public contributions. Governmentality, in Foucault's proposition, consists of technologies that allow the state to govern individuals from a distance with the vision of correct conduct. This mode of governance is done in Vietnam through the idea of "moral conduct", by which the state guides the autonomous economic activities of individuals with the moral appeal of public contributions. This paper looks at the performance and experiences of Vietnamese female NGO professionals in the process of marketisation and privatisation in Vietnam. I show that their economic and professional performances demonstrate the morality of domestic responsibilities and public contributions, resembling the symbol of the virtuous woman in Vietnam's Confucian and socialist tradition, a symbol which continues to be applauded by the state. The findings in this paper are drawn from my PhD research project at the University of Leeds, with data collected from a six-month fieldwork study conducted in Hanoi between 2016 and 2017.

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**Introduction: The New Middle-class's Anxieties**

Studies of the new middle-class in emerging economies in Southeast Asia often depict the "new rich" as a group which grows concomitantly alongside the ever-growing economic prosperity in the newly industrialised economies in the region, including those coming from the post-socialist cluster. This new middle-class comprises a stratum of white-collar professionals who have grown proportionately with the industrialisation and commercialisation of the economy in the region (Hutchinson and Brown 2001; Robison and Goodman 1996; King 2008; Lange and Meier

2009; Zhang 2010). Compared to the "old bourgeoisie," with class power associated with ownership of capital and the means of production, the mass of salaried professionals illustrates the middle-class in the Weberian tradition, whose status is acquired through conspicuous consumption, lifestyle, education, professional positions and social relations (Robison and Goodman 1996; Liechty 2003). Weber's proposition about the middle classes emphasises the status acquired from consumption and the professional lifestyles rather than through the class contingencies as either labourers or capitalists (Liechty 2003; de Mello 2009; Reusswig and Isensee 2009).

Weber's proposition about status-driven society suggests a relationship between the middle-class entrepreneurial culture and market morality that sustains the market expansion in capitalist economies. Rather than a contingent of property owners or labourers, the professional and entrepreneurial lifestyles of the middle-class account for a "moral distance" from the capitalists or labourers who own merely capital or labour (Liechty 2003, p. 17). Being embedded in this culture means that members of the middle-class are pressured to maintain fashionable lifestyles and substantial consumption levels (Liechty 2003). Pressures to present as "fashionable", and to demonstrate a conspicuous consumption level mean that members of the middle-class often encounter a high degree of anxiety at their precarious position.

The anxiety of falling behind is felt especially in supposedly class-free societies in post-socialist Vietnam and China. Li Zhang (2010) in her research of the middle-class urbanites in China proposes the fear of falling behind of the newly rich whose immediate wealth, which is neither ensured by property rights nor the fragile market miracles, does not guarantee social prestige. Wright Mills (1957) also suggested that the panics associated with a lack of a system of social prestige that compels members of the white-collar middle-classes to "borrow" the prestige of their employers or prestigious customers. As Mills correctly pointed out, members of the new middle-class, who are experts in symbolic accumulation, are so desperate to make an honoured claim of prestige that they often imitate the lifestyles or consumption tastes of the most prestigious in society. This phenomenon illustrates the anxieties of the new middle-class in the context of Vietnam's post-socialist economic reforms, where the nature of exploitation and the accumulation of wealth is often incompatible with the socialist ideology which still rules in Vietnam.

My research on the female NGO staff working in Hanoi reveals that the anxieties of the middle-class in Vietnam are the result of not only a lack of social prestige but also a mode of governmentality that continues to link wealth accumulation with the prestige of the socialist person in Vietnam's collectivist and socialist culture. It is noticeable that wealth is often associated with uneasiness in Vietnam's collective tradition and in the Marxist-Leninist ideology, which remains orthodox in the one-

party ruled political system (Leshkowich 2012; Jellema 2005). According to Jellema (2005, p. 233), private wealth evokes a "nagging sense of moral anxiety". It is not coincidental that people in Vietnam, mostly the wealthy, are increasingly searching for ways to demonstrate their higher level of morality through contributions to the family, local communities or society (Jellema 2005; Leshkowich 2012; Nguyen 2018, 2019). I will show that the middle-class women working in the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Vietnam have always dealt with pressures to fulfil responsibilities to the family and society in order to provide a balance to their economic success. This is not only because of the unpredictable nature of the market but also because of the fear of some kind of punishment if they are perceived as acting with moral negligence and motivated by greed, selfishness and corruption. This type of fear, I argue, is associated with a mode of governmentality, which is critical to the socialist state's efforts to maintain forms of surveillance over the economic activities of individuals. This is in the context of increasing individual autonomy and liberalisation as a consequence of market reform, but a market reform that is still governed by the moral norms or conduct of public contributions. In this mode of governmentality, the economic reforms in Vietnam, when they are dependent on private means of wealth accumulation, are still driven with the moral conduct of collectivism and socialism.

### **Governmentality**

Governmentality, as proposed by Foucault, is the technology of government that allows the state to maximise the economic efficiency of individuals with the freedom to engage in choice-making, risking-taking and autonomous decision-making for economic maximisation (Foucault in Rabinow 2000; Rose 1996; Miller and Rose 2008). According to Ong (2006), governmentality is essential for newly emergent economies to boost economic efficiency for the competitive advantages of autonomous decision making. Rather than repressions, the state maximises the autonomy and economic rationality of individuals in the market for maximum economic profits (Ong 2006; Zhang and Ong 2008). Governmentality allows the state to govern with the "conduct of conduct", that rests on the interplay between knowledge and power to enforce the voluntary compliance of people with the "correct" conduct of self-reliance and optimisation for economic efficiency (Li 2007;

Ong and Zhang 2008; Zhang 2010; Nguyen 2018).

This mode of government allows the state to maintain a mode of surveillance from a distance, by influencing the economic decisions of individuals in the market through the principles of correct conduct (Miller and Rose 2008; Zhang and Ong 2008; Nguyen-vo 2004, 2008; Leshkovich 2012). Several authors have written about the mode of surveillance in the Taylorism production system, which maximises productivity and flexibility through the control of “docile” bodies by using a mode of governmentality to control workers’ obedience and adaptation with profit-making machines (Ong 1991; Martin 1997, 2000; Dunn 2004). This mode of surveillance in the workplace deploys images or spaces contingent with images or filial duties of women to acquire female workers’ submission to varieties of norms and forms domination (Ong 1991, p. 291; Nguyen-vo 2004). This technique is proposed by Foucault as the technology of subjectification which allows the state to educate and enforce the compliance of people through knowledge, which is pedagogically and socially established into types of norms or conduct (Ong 2006; Nguyen-vo 2004). In light of self-governing conduct, the autonomous activities of individuals are shaped by the vision of normality which is also inseparable from the state’s surveillance (Ong 2006; Zhang and Ong 2008; Li 2007; Bui 2015).

Vietnam’s market reforms rely on measures of marketisation and privatisation. The state promotes self-reliance and economic optimisation as the correct way for individuals to care for themselves whilst it continues to reduce its spending on welfare (Nguyen 2018). The acquisition of privileged consumer commodities illustrates the notion of middle-class status in the Weberian tradition but is also a symbol of self-worth in Vietnam’s socialist tradition (Nguyen 2018, 2019; Drummond 2004). I argue that the acquisition of high levels of economic, professional and educational performance of the women working in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Vietnam in the context of market liberalisation is inseparable from a mode of governmentality that continues to associate individual economic performance with a vision of collective well-being with the collectivisation logic (Nguyen 2018). The anxieties of the middle-class women included a sense of spiritual burden combined with deep

concerns about possible punishment for perceived selfishness and greed associated with a mode of governmentality that continues to signal the morality of public contributions as the “correct” means of wealth accumulation (Leshkovich 2012). Their performance of this kind of morality through their social work in NGOs suggest that these women appear with a moral distinction in line with the state-led emulation and propaganda campaigns of the virtuous woman for a happy family (Pettus 2003). The reliance of the women on both the market and the morality and ideological symbolism of the “socialist person” illustrates the social and political situation of the new middle-class women during a transitional period in the post-socialist economic reforms in Vietnam.

### **Methodology**

The findings in this paper are drawn from one of the main themes of my PhD thesis completed in 2020 at the University of Leeds (UK) with the title: *The making of the civil society person: civil society and personhood of female NGO workers in the context of post-socialist transition in Vietnam*. In this research, I conducted a fieldwork study in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam, between October 2016 and March 2017. I implemented multiple qualitative data collection methods to gather the life stories of the informants. My dataset comprises 36 verbatim transcribed interviews; three transcribed focus group discussions; 30 concept maps and a collection of audio-recorded and hand-written field notes. Narrative and inductive qualitative data analyses were subsequently implemented to find themes for this research. To protect the identity of the informants, pseudonyms are used in place of the informants’ real names.

### **The Prestige of the Intellectuals**

During my fieldwork, I heard from the informants, especially young professionals, about the reasons they came to work in NGOs that can be expressed as *phát triển bản thân*. The phrase in Vietnamese can be interpreted as a process to develop one’s self or personality: *phát triển* in Vietnamese means to develop (or to build) and *bản thân* means self or personality. The phrase can be literally interpreted as a process of accumulating skills and knowledge for one to be a better person. It is noticeable that, rather than economic outcomes, the informants often highlighted the sacrifice of self-interested economic benefits to contribute to the collective

well-being of local communities. This sacrifice is often illustrated in the process of learning-by-doing where young NGO professionals, mostly starting from unpaid and low paid voluntary positions, learn to contribute selflessly to the well-being of vulnerable communities.

Early career professionals often told me that they prioritised the opportunities to learn from unpaid or low-paid volunteering jobs in NGOs rather than working for higher salaries in the business or the state sectors. For example, Huong, 23 years old, who had started to work in a local NGO as a volunteer, told me that she learned a lot by taking over different tasks in the organisation. For an early career professional like Huong, learning is an important process to improve the working skills and knowledge which would help her to get a better position in an international NGO. Apart from her fulltime job in the NGO, she also worked part-time with other voluntary groups in Hanoi in evenings or weekends to give free talks and developed a free computerised application to provide young people with knowledge of sexual health and sexual rights. Huong told me that she presently prioritised learning from different tasks in the NGOs and from volunteering activities outside to accumulate skills and knowledge rather than making more money.

Many of the other younger informants also expressed their aspiration to make more contributions to the community than from economic maximisation. For example, Phuong, 26 years old, who had been working in a local NGO for four years, accepted the low salaried job to gain the learning experience in the NGO. She told me that she appreciated the learning opportunities in the NGO, from the services provided to the poor, which were also the reasons for her to continue her low paid job in the local NGO. Phuong said that she prioritised making a moral contribution to society over making money. Despite struggling to make ends meet with her low level of income, she highlighted the respect and goodwill she received from the beneficiaries and the people around her for her contribution to society.

It is clear that *phát triển bản thân* is aspired to by the young women for opportunities to accumulate skills and experience, to improve their employability in the market. However, *phát triển bản thân* is not only about gains but also sacrifices. Specifically, the informants often

highlighted the gains from their contributions to collective well-being which outweigh their sacrifice of individualistic wealth accumulation. Instead of wealth, the informants often expressed their satisfaction for the contributions to society rather than accumulating more personal wealth. Ngan, who was working in an American non-profit organisation, said that she had higher job satisfaction in the NGO than in the business sector where she might have earned a higher salary with a post-graduate degree from a European university. Though Vietnamese people have increasingly encountered pressures to earn higher salaries or to consume more, wealth is often treated with antipathy. In other words, wealth does not seem to account for the prestige of these female NGO staff who often relinquished opportunities for wealth maximisation to care for the well-being of the poor. Ngan, though earning less than professionals in other sectors, regards herself as middle-class with the prestige of the intellectuals recalling their contribution to society. The account of the intellectual illustrates her white-collar profession in the NGO. Without speaking, we implicitly acknowledged that her post-graduate qualifications completed in Western Europe also contributed to her intellectual identity.

Like King et al. (2008) who highlighted the continuity of tradition among young middle-class professionals in Vietnam in achieving higher education qualifications, I also found women working in NGOs often embodied the prestige of Vietnamese intellectuals regarding their high level of education. In addition, the account of the intellectual illustrates not only the education level but also their individual economic performance in the economy. My informants often compared themselves with the higher earners in the business and state sectors for the higher level of consumptions. The acquisition of higher value and quality consumer products is also associated with the intellectual status of these women in society.

This account of the intellectual reflects the description of *dân trí* in Nguyen's study of the socialisation policy, which is highlighted by the state for the connection between people's intellectual level and the modernisation and industrialisation of the country. The notion of *dân trí*, which in Vietnamese signifies a person's intellectual level, yet tends to associate intellectual level with the well-being of the person

in society, particularly through the acquisition of consumer products and services at personal expense (Nguyen 2018). Nguyen wrote: “*Dân trí* is supposed to have a causal correlation with human development, i.e. because you have low *dân trí*, you are poor and unruly, and vice versa; low *dân trí* thus is deemed both the cause and the effect of poverty, disorder and underdevelopment” (Nguyen 2018, p. 634). As Nguyen (2018) points out, *dân trí* gives an idea of the self-worth of an individual for the self-reliance and self-responsibility for his/her well-being while stigmatising those who fail to meet these criteria. Moreover, this idea, though it urges individuals to be reliant on the market to care for their well-being, evokes the responsibilities of the socialist person for the collective well-being as a new normality in the process of marketisation and privatisation. For women, the acquisition of consumer products also illustrates the prestige of virtuous women who care well for the family with their economic resources. I will present in the following section that women’s maximisation of consumption levels also illustrates the morality of the socialist woman as consumer products have become the symbol of modernity and civility that constitute a happy family in the state’s emulation campaign of Cultured Families (*Gia đình văn hóa*).

### Consumption for the Happy Family

In my interviews with the informants, they shared knowledge of how to choose wisely among the varieties of commodities which have become abundant and complex in types, styles and qualities in the open market. Their articulation of what or where to buy or to entertain to be considered “genuine” seems to demonstrate not only their wealth but also the status associated with a selection of commodities to consume in the mass-production market. For example, Dong, who worked in a state-owned mass organisation, told me that she had recently bought a new flat in a high-rise residential tower. Dong talked with pride about her choice of buying the flat located in a high-ranged residential complex (*chung cư cao cấp*) and in a civilised neighbourhood (*khu văn minh*) in a newly developed area in Hanoi. After buying the new flat, she leased her old flat to make additional income for the family. She is satisfied with the modern and civilised living space for people with a high intellectual level (*khu dân trí cao*).

It is not a surprise that NGO professional women also face pressures to consume more high-value assets within a constrained level of income. Pressures to possess privileged products and services reflect the anxieties of failing to achieve a substantial consumption level to attain the intellectual status. Moreover, for women, this status often demonstrates their fulfilment of their duties as filial daughters and dutiful mothers. When compared with the wealthier strata, the informants often highlighted the value of the goods and services that they consumed for the benefits of their families.

I often heard from the informants about their responsibilities to improve their consumption levels for the well-being of their families. Especially, they mentioned their own consumption needs as minimal while emphasising the priority to consume for their families, usually the dependents in the family, for example, their children and parents.

In my conversation with Xuan, a 40-year-old woman working in an international organisation, she said that she had spent most of her salary to upgrade her house. According to Xuan, the consumption for the house was prioritised because the housing condition represents the prestige of her parents in the neighbourhood. She told me the story of her parents, who were disgraced in the community for their shabby house compared to the better housing landscape in the neighbourhood. Renovating her house, therefore, was her priority, when she earned a higher salary in an international NGO.

When compared with the intellectuals in the neighbourhood, Xuan is proud of achieving a high salary job in an international organisation, and a post-graduate degree in Australia. Moreover, the better housing condition contributed to the intellectual status of Xuan’s family in the neighbourhood. Xuan expressed her “spiritual relief” when fulfilling the daughter’s responsibilities to her parents. Rather than buying for her individualistic needs, the consumption for the family demonstrates her filial duty to her parents, which according to her, accounted for her spiritual relief. It is noticeable that women’s roles are especially highlighted for the consumption for the family, which is promoted by the state in line with its vision of the happy family in the emulation campaign of *Cultured Families* (Drummond 2004; Pettus 2003; Leshkovich 2012, Nguyen-vo 2008).

The emulation campaign of *Cultured Families* has been promoted by Vietnam's Women's Union since the 1990s. The campaign highlights the criteria of the "harmonious and progressive family", and stipulates the husband and wife's responsibilities to meet the criteria of "culture", "civility" and the "model citizen", for which a cultured family stands (Hayton 2010; Pettus 2003; Drummond 2004). The emulation campaign specifically addresses women's key role in maintaining a happy family through their economic and educational accomplishments. As Pettus (2003, p. 84) points out, Vietnam's Women Union, which runs the campaign, appraises women with a standard of civility that is associated with an "educated and affluent middle class" in Hanoi. Specifically, the campaign guides women's productivity activities to maintain the well-being of the family through consumption and to perfect their appearance as a way to protect the happiness of their families (Drummond 2004; Leshkovich 2002; Nguyen-vo 2008). The accumulation of privileged consumer assets has clearly resonated with the vision of the happy and middle-class family.

In other words, the accumulation of high value and high-quality products in the market demonstrates not only the status of middle-class women but also the prestige of the women in their fulfilled domestic responsibilities. This prestige is shown in the morality of their sacrifice of their individualistic and materialistic needs for the consumption of their children or parents. For example, Tien, a mother of two, said that she reduced substantially the spending on herself since she had two children. She said: "Most of our salaries are now spent on my children's needs. Our children's needs are prioritised when parents' needs are reduced" (Tien, interview).

The performance of these women in consumption reminisces the morality of the virtuous woman which is embedded in Vietnam's Confucian tradition and which was not eliminated by but is continuously highlighted by the socialist state through its vision of Vietnam's heroic mothers (Pettus 2003). In the process of privatisation, women's consumption is especially highlighted by the state as it becomes the key source of welfare production as the state continues to withdraw from the subsidy mechanism (Drummond 2004). Women's consumption to care for the materialistic well-being of the family, echoing a woman's virtue (*công*) in the Confucian doctrine, continues to

resonate the distinctive prestige of women's productive labour in Vietnam's late socialist transformation (Marr 1984; Jellema 2005; Leshkovich 2012; Pettus 2003; Drummond 2004). Rather than wealth, women's performance of their filial duties illustrates the distinctive prestige of the middle-class woman, which is inseparable from the vision of the virtuous woman in Vietnam's Confucian and socialist tradition. In the following section, I will show how working in NGOs has accounted for a distinctive prestige for these women, arising from their public contributions).

### **Contributions to Society**

As already noted, the informants often expressed a sense of happiness gained by working towards the benefits of the community. The work in NGOs is morally appealing to women for the opportunities it provides to contribute to the well-being of the vulnerable and less privileged in society. They often expressed pride in making contributions to society. They highlighted their usefulness in terms of their contributions to society rather than merely their accumulation of wealth. Even though these women represented the middle-income strata, they rarely spoke explicitly about wealth. Wealth, on the contrary, was often expressed with uneasiness in relation to growing concerns about the pervasiveness of corruption in Vietnam. Several informants told me that they could have made more money in business but preferred working in the NGO sector for the opportunities to help the poor and less privileged people in the community. For example, Nhung, talked about the satisfaction of helping other people rather than making more wealth. Instead of making more profits, she accumulated "kindness" from her contributions to society. It seems clear that when wealth is often associated with corruption, kindness accounts for the distinctive prestige of these middle-class women who are not only less wealthy but also useful for society.

In our conversations, my informants repeatedly highlighted their "usefulness" for their contributions to society. Compared to the wealthier strata, their contributions to the public good or collective well-being often evoked the tradition of the virtuous woman in Vietnam's Confucian and socialist tradition for their sacrifices for the family and society (Nguyen 2018; Le 1973; Pettus 2003). It would, however, be misleading to see morality as purely the tool of

ideology. As Leshkovich (2012), has warned, morality, when often signalled in relation to the problems of selfishness, greed, and corruption, is also highlighted as the panacea that brings prosperities and happiness. It is clear that women working in NGOs often expressed their happiness and economic success as arising from and because of the “moral work” of making public contributions.

My informants often told me about the importance of living and working morally in order to have a happy life. Ngọc, one of my informants, who is also a Buddhist, shared with me the recipe to make a happy family from knowing about “having enough”. When quoting Buddhist teaching, she explained to me: “*Tri túc* is when you know how much is enough and how much is adequate to stop at the right time” (Ngọc, interview). She expressed her satisfaction with the merit accrued from the moral work and lifestyle, which rewards her with healthy and independent children and a harmonious relationship with her husband. Similarly, Trúc, an informant, told me about ethical deeds (*đức*) which reward her achievement in education. Trúc was about to complete a PhD degree in Australia to continue her family’s intellectual tradition. She highlighted the benefits of accumulation of “*đức*” (ethics) rather than wealth, and believed that the former had contributed to her family reputation as well as for the future success of her offspring.

The ethical lifestyles described by the women reveal the distinctive prestige of these NGO middle-class women. It is noticeable that public contributions account for the way in which these women assume as a sense of morality. Being economically successful, they often demonstrated the prestige of the socialist women for taking good care of both the family and the vulnerable in society. Rather than wealth, their contributions to society account for the distinctive prestige of the virtuous woman, which has roots in Vietnam’s Confucian and socialist tradition. Women’s performance of work for the community has also been associated with the anxieties about increasing corruption as a form of “social evil”, a phenomenon that is highlighted daily in the media as arising from selfishness and greed. In our conversations, it is also noticeable that the notions of the “Bolshevik” or “proletariat” were often recalled and highlighted for the incompatibility of these concepts with individualism. It seems clear that when individualism was often stigmatised by association with corruption, greed and

selfishness, morality appears central to the reputation of these women who, despite being wealthier than women at earlier times, continued to reproduce the symbol of the moral socialist woman in their contributions to the well-being of the family and society.

### **Conclusion: Middle-class Women with the Morality of the Socialist Person**

In this paper, I have presented a middle-class that has emerged from the growth of salaried occupations in the NGO sector in the context of marketisation and privatisation in Vietnam. The professional positions in NGOs is attractive to women in post-socialist Vietnam for not only the opportunities to earn a higher income but also the moral and symbolic values that typically account for the women’s prestige in Vietnam’s Confucian and socialist tradition. Despite making more money, women’s productive performance continues to be valued for their public contributions or domestic duties. In these responsibilities, Vietnamese women are often required to sacrifice individualistic and materialistic satisfaction. Their interest in the humanitarian work in NGOs reveals the connection between the moral appeal of public contributions and the anxieties of being associated with “immoral” means of wealth accumulation. This connection reveals the constraints of the middle class in the post-socialist Vietnam, who are subjected to a mode of governmentality that continues to shape individual economic activities with the moral and ideological principles of the socialist woman in the context of Vietnam’s post-socialist market reforms. This mode of governmentality allows the state to govern women’s voluntary compliance to their domestic responsibility, which has been essential for the process (and success) of welfare restructuring in the context of Vietnam’s marketisation and privatisation.

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