

Dressing Up, Dressing Down.

Women's Clothing and Boundary-making in the Vietnamese Marketplace

Kirsten W. Endres

(Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany)

From an anthropological perspective, clothing is a useful starting point for thinking about boundaries. In fact, dress itself can be seen as marking a boundary – the boundary between self and other, or between individual and society (Entwistle 2001: 37). According to the distinguished anthropologist Mary Douglas, the boundaries of the body are thought of as especially powerful and dangerous (Douglas 1984: 122). It is therefore not surprising that clothing and dress are commonly subject to social regulation and moral evaluation. But dress can also be used to draw, mark or negotiate other boundaries – boundaries of class, of gender, of ethnic belonging, or of group membership. In this essay, I explore the role of women's clothing in the Vietnamese marketplace. In particular, I look at the clothing styles of Kinh (ethnic majority) women vendors in three different localities: the bustling streets of Hà Nội, a peri-urban village in the Red River Delta, and an enclosed public market at the Việt Nam - China border. From these ethnographic examples, I argue that street vendors and market women do not base their dress decisions on practical and aesthetic considerations alone. Their clothing choices also provide a powerful means through which female traders negotiate and perform their gender and class identities in creative, tactical ways.

Performing rural-ness in the streets of Hà Nội

In contemporary Việt Nam, the city is usually portrayed as a place for civilisation and modernity (Endres 2014). In this urban context, itinerant street vendors are seen as representing an undesirable past of backbreaking manual labour. Through the binary construction of the city as the site of modernisation and the countryside as the epitome of backwardness, rural-ness in the city becomes despised and is considered to be out of place (Barthelmes 2016). It is in this context that we have to look more closely at the appearance of itinerant street vendors. During the 1990s, itinerant vendors claimed that they were just poor peasants engaging in small-scale trade in order to justify their involvement in previously stigmatised private commerce (Abrami 2002). Today, itinerant street vendors continue to perform their rural-ness by wearing the *nón lá* [conical hat] and worn-out clothing, thereby playing on the stereotype of the poor and backward rural migrant struggling to make a living. Their claims of being “small” are also deeply gendered, as they are typically voiced by female traders (Leshkovich 2014). However, by performing their rural-ness, itinerant vendors also reinforce and reproduce their marginal position in the city.

Constructing a “traditional village identity“ in Ninh Hiệp

The village of Ninh Hiệp is famous for its cheap fabrics and clothing. A substantial part of the clothing on sale targets students, office employees, and young, trendy urbanites. While some Ninh Hiệp traders wear what they sell, most of them keep with a simple clothing style that usually consists of the pyjama-like *bộ đồ* or jeans and a t-shirt. As one of the fabric vendors phrased it: “Although iPhones are common nowadays, we still wear jeans, not dresses (Horat 2016: 194).” This statement refers to the different dress codes in the city and the countryside with a slightly moral undertone. It implies that whereas city women may go about wearing fancy skirts and dresses, it behoves rural women – despite embracing modernity – to dress more modestly and simply. Ninh Hiệp villagers often raise the issue of reconciling increasing material wealth with “traditional” customs and values. Drawing an ideological, and ultimately moral, boundary between the village/countryside (imbued with community solidarity and family values) and the city (as a potential place of social evils and moral corruption), is thus a means of constructing a positive village identity, and dressing modestly is an important part of it.

Dressing up for better sales in Lào Cai City

The women vendors I met during my research in the city of Lào Cai are the exact opposite. Particularly in the market sections that receive many foreign clients – tourists and businesspeople from China and from Việt Nam’s lowland areas – women vendors invest a lot of effort into their looks, including eyelash extensions, permanent makeup, intricate nail art and stylish outfits. “If a vendor wears ugly clothes, she will have fewer customers compared to those who dress stylishly,” one vendor explained. Many of them once migrated from the rural lowlands to the Việt Nam-China border in search of better livelihood options (Endres 2015). Their income from vending has helped them achieve a middle-class lifestyle that includes not only to *ăn ngon mặc đẹp* [eat well and wear pretty clothes], but also to “display themselves to others (and themselves) as attractive, cosmopolitan, and economically comfortable” (Leshkovich 2012: 105). Lào Cai’s market women thus not only dress up to attract more customers, but also to assert their new identities as savvy urbanites in a “remote” and mountainous part of the country. At the same time, they also attempt to distance themselves from their own past as poor lowland migrants. Their dress thus marks yet another boundary between rural and urban, past and present, “tradition” and modernity.

References

Abrami, Regina M. 2002. “Just a Peasant: Economy and Legacy in Northern Vietnam,” in *Post-Socialist Peasant? Rural and Urban Constructions of Identity in Eastern Europe, East Asia and the Former Soviet Union* edited by Palema Leonard and Deema Kaneff, pp. 94–116. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Barthelmes, Lisa. 2016. *Peddlers and Peasants. Itinerant Street Vendors in Hanoi, Vietnam*. PhD dissertation, Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg.

Douglas, Mary. 1984 [1966]. *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York, London: Routledge.

Endres, Kirsten W. 2015. “‘Lộc Bestowed by Heaven’: Fate, Fortune, and Morality in the Vietnamese Marketplace.” *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 16,3: 227-243.

Endres, Kirsten W. 2014 “Downgraded by Upgrading: Small-scale Traders, Urban Transformation and Spatial Reconfiguration in Post-reform Vietnam.” *Cambridge Anthropology* 32,2: 97-111.

Entwistle, Joanne. 2001. “The Dressed Body,” in *Body Dressing* edited by Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson, pp. 33-58. Oxford, New York: Berg.

Horat, Esther. 2016. *Market Transformation and Trade Dynamics in a Peri-urban Village. Reflections from a Vietnamese Marketplace*. PhD dissertation, University of Zurich.

Leshkovich, Ann Marie. 2012. “Finances, Family, Fashion, Fitness, and ... Freedom? The Changing Lives of Urban Middle-Class Vietnamese Women,” in *The Reinvention of Distinction. Modernity and the Middle Class in Urban Vietnam* edited by Van Nguyen-Marshall, Lisa B. Welch Drummond, and Danièle Bélanger, pp. 95-113. Dordrecht, Heidelberg: Springer.

Leshkovich, Ann Marie. 2014. *Essential Trade. Vietnamese Women in a Changing Marketplace*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press.

Please follow our website <http://swfp3.org/> and <fb.com/SkylinesWithFlyingPeople3>

for more SEMINARS and EXHIBITIONS of SKYLINES WITH FLYING PEOPLE 3