The Construction and Mainstreaming of a Community: How the informal economy is entangled with the visibility of the emerging trans-community in Ho Chi Minh City

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"When the enemy is at the door, it is the woman who goes out to fight."

Vietnamese proverb

Abstract:

In low-resource contexts such as Vietnam, many people turn towards the informal economy to survive, gaining back their agency by bypassing the government and formal employment opportunities. These networks rely on oral history, community-building, and locally-based activist activities (such as fundraising or cultural events). While the transgender community in Vietnam have been getting more attention through social media, an interesting trend has started to manifest; transwomen have become public figures and known for their work selling food on the street, with such videos being broadcast online through YouTube and TikTok. Although legislation has been tolerant but not fully supportive of the LGBT+ community in Vietnam, advocacy through the informal economy and through digital representation have opened up a new way to gain acceptance and recognition outside of the traditional legal frameworks. For example, according to Vietnamese culture, one is honourable and respectable if one runs a business and takes care of one's family. In assuming the traditional and esteemed role of the matriarch, these transwomen are contributing to a social change in the Vietnamese community in a subversive and persevering manner.

This research paper draws upon these oral histories, uploaded as videos onto the internet, of this new phenomena, and provide the foundations for analysis into the construction of a community through the informal economy and through the appropriation of traditional cultural values. In so doing, the paper aims to contribute to a more down-to-earth understanding of activist movements in South-East Asia and to examine the potential impacts of advocacy through non-traditional methods.

As much of trans-advocacy in academia is focused on more 'Western' aspects of the transgender experience (on gender-affirming surgery, for instance), this research attempts to contribute to the other trans-experiences of those in the Global South. Understanding norm diffusion, inherently linked to how culture works in South East Asia, is necessary for documenting and developing further modes of activism that are adapted to different contexts.

Keywords: transgender, Vietnam, informal economy, LGBT rights, Ho Chi Minh, transactivism, resistance, trans-advocacy, South East Asia, social media, digital representation

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Introduction

In the past decade, LGBT+ activists in Vietnam have become increasingly visible and vocal, leading to movements within society that inevitably pressure the government to make more tolerant and accepting alterations to existing legal structures. In 2013 and 2014, Vietnam made changes to Marriage and Family Law, for example, effectively lifting the ban on same-sex cohabitation and weddings.[1] This shift in policy continued in the following years, when the National Assembly legalised sex reassignment surgery as well as provided the possibility for people to legally change their gender in 2015.[2] Although much traditional research in Western contexts can be applied to assess the effectiveness of campaigns by NGOs and civil society activists, the qualitative field of research in understanding these social changes from the ground-up and with regard to the specific local cultural context has only just begun to emerge. In low-resource countries such as Vietnam, many transpeople turn towards the informal economy to survive and to regain their agency by bypassing the government and formal employment structures, but, in conjunction with these survival strategies, they have also subverted social norms and adapted to community-building, locally-based tactics to advance their movement and increase LGBT+ visibility in Vietnamese society. By appropriating the tools available to them, namely taking advantage of the vibrant and widespread informal economy structure and digital representation, they have created a political space in which trans-advocacy can take place without social or political censorship. This research paper draws upon

[1] Oosterhoff, Pauline, Hoang, Tu-Anh, Quach, Thu Trang, *Negotiating public and legal spaces: The emergence of an LGBT movement in Vietnam* (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2014).

[2] Paul Horton, "Recognising shadows: masculinism, resistance, and recognition in Vietnam," in *International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 14, no. 1 (2019): 70.

existing literature of the complexities and appropriation of traditional cultural values, the informal economy and its entanglement with transgender entrepreneurialism, as well as oral present-day archives from YouTube of Diva Cát Thy, a prominent transwoman who sells noodles on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, in order to contribute to a more down-to-earth understanding of LGBT+ activist movements in South-East Asia.

PART I: The Economic Context

The Informal Side-Walk Economy

Many developing countries in the global South, including Vietnam, have a thriving informal economy that exists in parallel with the official, formal economy.[3] This informal economy typically allows for people to earn money to survive outside of the capitalist framework, often represented by street vendors who occupy the side-walks and who have become semi-permanent fixtures in the cityscape.[4] Here, we may refer to the definition of the informal sector also used by Vietnamese academics: it is the "[m]arket-based production of goods and services, whether legal or illegal, that escapes detection in the official estimates of GDP".[5] With this reading, we can estimate the size of Vietnam's informal economy to be about 26.9% of GDP in 2015,[6] which necessitates research not only on the economic importance but also the social proliferation of the informal sector. As Gibson-Graham puts it, the informal economy, with its alternative market transactions and diverse economic activities, due to its high visibility in contexts such as Vietnam, deserve to be recognised as "objects of inquiry and activism".[7] The

[3] Nguyen Thai Hoa, "How large is Vietnam's informal economy?," in *Economic Affairs* 39 (2019): 81.
[4] Sarah Turner and Laura Schoenberger, "Street Vendor Livelihoods and Everyday Politics in Hanoi, Vietnam: The Seeds of a Diverse Economy?," in *Urban Studies* 49, no. 5 (2012): 1028.
[5] Philip M. Smith, *Assessing the Size of the Underground Economy: The Statistics Canada* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1994): 4.
[6] Nguyen Thai Hoa, "How large is Vietnam's informal economy?," in *Economic Affairs* 39 (2019): 93.
[7] J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Minneapolis, MN : University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 616.

main motivation for street trading is to earn a living for the family,[8] and these street vendors are predominantly women who are poor.[9] Essentially, there is a need for economic survival, coupled with the usually pressures of 'marginalised people' in a socialist state. In order to adapt to these everyday realities and build resilient livelihoods,[10] alternative economic spaces such as the side-walk inherently become political spaces of resistance. Informal economies, therefore, play a positive role in mitigating poverty by providing employment to those who are less likely to get a job through formal structures because of discrimination or stigma, particularly women and transwomen.

Marginal Livelihoods: Political and Social Pressures

Due to stereotypes, transpeople are often relegated to 'lowly' jobs such as sex work, performing at weddings and funerals, dancing, or doing circus tricks.[11] The lack of family support, continued stigma and discrimination in employment, and social norms stemming from pre-1975 Vietnam when homosexuality and gender non-conformity were considered 'social evils',[12] force transwomen to turn to street vending, but beyond the practical concerns of livelihood, they have utilised this reality as an opportunity to "prove themselves and be recognised and socially accepted" by their families and by their neighbours.[13] Diva Cát Thy, for example, was a singer and bingo singer, but the onset of the Covid pandemic compelled her to look for more practical ways to earn a living. Since social welfare provisions are hard to obtain for marginalised people, she decided to sell noodles on the street, without a permit, to

[8] Sarah Turner and Laura Schoenberger, "Street Vendor Livelihoods and Everyday Politics in Hanoi, Vietnam: The Seeds of a Diverse Economy?," in *Urban Studies* 49, no. 5 (2012): 1034.
[9] Ibid, 1031.
[10] Ibid, 1041.
[11] Tu-Anh Hoang and Pauline Oosterhoff, *Transgender at Work: Livelihoods for Transgender People in Vietnam* (Brighton: IDS, 2016): 4.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid, 9.

provide for her biological family. Furthermore, she adopted young queer people who had no support structures around them,[14] involving them in the business and assuming the responsibility as a care-taker. By adapting to the realities of strict Covid measures and economic pressures, Diva was able to take advantage of the two main benefits of informal work, that is, economic sustainability (through street-vending) and community respectability (by providing for her biological and adopted families).

However, the interesting mix of the socialist authoritarian ideology and Vietnam's *Doi Moi* programme of neo-liberal economic reform since 1986[15] causes conflict between the informal economy and official policy-making. Since street-vending is not part of the central authorities' vision and "plan to modernise the country and urban spaces" in Vietnam,[16] the practice has been increasingly banned in selected streets in city centres, which stifles the development of this cultural survival tactic and leaves those already in poverty with fewer rights and limited options for livelihood stability.[17] Local authorities carry out raids and impose fines on street vendors (on average twice the daily profit)[18], and street vendors are subjected to the whims of state officials.[19] This represents a risk particularly to ethnic and LGBT minorities, given that acceptance of this community is neither full nor complete. Despite this, the political apparatus being localised allows a potential for negotiation at different levels, and successful instances

[14] Trang Quynh Nguyen, Karen Bandeen-Roche, Katherine E. Masyn, Danielle German, Yen Hai Nguyen, Loan Kieu-Chau Vu and Amy R. Knowlton, "Negative Family Treatment of Sexual Minority Women and Transmen in Vietnam: Latent Classes and Their Predictors," in *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 11, no. 3 (2015): 206.
[15] Pauline Oosterhoff and Tu-Anh Hoang, "Transgender employment and entrepreneurialism in Vietnam," in *Gender & Development* 26, no. 1 (2018): 36.
[16] Sarah Turner and Laura Schoenberger, "Street Vendor Livelihoods and Everyday Politics in Hanoi, Vietnam: The Seeds of a Diverse Economy?," in *Urban Studies* 49, no. 5 (2012): 1030.
[17] Ibid, 1032.
[18] Sarah Turner and Laura Schoenberger, "Street Vendor Livelihoods and Everyday Politics in Hanoi, Vietnam: The Seeds of a Diverse Economy?," in *Urban Studies* 49, no. 5 (2012): 1036.
[19] Sarah Turner, Celia Zuberec and Thi-Thanh-Hiên Pham, "Visualizing frictional encounters: Analyzing and representing street vendor strategies in Vietnam through narrative mapping," in *Applied Geography* 131 (2021): 6.

of negotiation rely on long-term relationships or interactions.[20] In order to develop this social capital, transpeople therefore need to adhere to cultural and social norms, or at least reappropriate them in such a way that is deemed respectable and acceptable to the wider community. We can also see this dependency manifest in Diva's daily Youtube videos;[21] she initially gets fined for gathering too many people in front of her street food cart, but eventually a compromised is reached with the local police as her social capital grows with her increasing visibility online. Her role as the matriarch or general of her community, which brings in revenue to her part of the city from richer areas, grants her the agency and power to negotiate. In so doing, she displays a certain tenacity and resourcefulness, relying on convert resistance social relations[22] to subtly unbalance the dominant discourses (both against transpeople and against the poor).

PART II: The Cultural Context

Gender Variance and Familial Norms

Unlike in other South East Asian countries like Thailand, Vietnam does not have a historically-based understanding of transgenderism as part of established, mainstream religion or culture. In the region, transgender people have often constructed creative alternative spaces in which gender identities can be played with, "negotiated, and performed", predominantly as 'mediums' who communicate with spirits. They communicated with deities by transcending the male-female duality,[23] but this further ostracised them as the 'other' in countries like

[20] The Hien Dang, "Street Life as the negotiation process: case study of Sidewalk Informal Economy in Ho Chi Minh City," in *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 143 (2018): 16.
[21] Am thuc Cha Rong, "Diva Cat Thy bi Cong an phat, nghi ban banh trang tron tai cho, chi ban online," Youtube video, 11:47, 16/04/2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3J7cfskZtA&t=70s
[22] Sarah Turner and Laura Schoenberger, "Street Vendor Livelihoods and Everyday Politics in Hanoi, Vietnam: The Seeds of a Diverse Economy?," in *Urban Studies* 49, no. 5 (2012): 1040.
[23] Michael G. Peletz, "Transgenderism and gender pluralism in Southeast Asia since early modern times," in *Current Anthropology* 47, no. 2 (2006): 312.

Vietnam in which transpeople were not viewed as goddesses. Therefore, members of the LGBT community, in particular transpeople, were "hidden in general culture and [could] only be detected by accident".[24] Increased digitalisation, access to technology and the internet, and the opening up of Vietnam to the world in the decades following the war have contributed to the potential for marginalised communities to gain visibility by reclaiming their voice through both overt (social media, entertainment) and covert ways (subverting cultural codes and norms).

Although major shifts are happening in Vietnamese society with regard to gender variance and the rights of LGBT people, dominant socio-cultural norms persist.[25] Firstly, the family institutions of marriage, reproduction, and filial piety form the foundation of social responsibility and expectation, with the continuation of the lineage the main concern. If there exist pathways for transgender and gay couples to continue the family line by having sons, either through reproduction or adoption, then the implications of having a different sexuality or gender variance become less taboo;[26] in part, this is why there is tolerance of gay and transgender people, sometimes with parents advocating for more marriage and legal adoption rights, but the condition is that the social familial norms continue to propagate. It is important to make the difference that while Western gay- and trans-advocacy bases itself primarily on individual rights and sexual liberation, the familial norms are so deeply rooted in Vietnamese society that it is necessary to confront or interact them before discussions on human rights can take place. In other words, the social and cultural framework precedes the legal struggle.

[24] Elliot M. Heiman and Le V. Cao, "Transsexualism in Vietnam," in *Archives of Sexual Behaviors* 4, no. 1 (1975): 89-95.

[25] Paul Horton and Helle Rydstrom, "Reshaping boundaries: Family politics and GLBTQ resistance in urban Vietnam," in *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 15, no. 3 (2019): 290.

[26] Pauline Oosterhoff and Tu-Anh Hoang, "Transgender employment and entrepreneurialism in Vietnam," in *Gender & Development* 26, no. 1 (2018): 33-51.

The Complexities of Vietnamese Femininities

Secondly, there is the social norm of femininities, an important aspect if we are to study trans-experiences in Vietnam. Like many cultural values in the South-East Asian region, folk stories are often the source of beliefs that were internalised and later spread throughout the fabric of society. Vietnamese folklore literature, for example, has its roots in the ideation of ancient Vietnam as "originally a matriarchy", forming a kind of nationalistic aspiration for 'Vietnamese womanhood' in the modern context.[27] Women were represented, in oral history, as "warriors and defenders", as evident in the story of the Trung Sisters (14-43 CE) or Lady Trieu Thi Trinh (226-248) who fought against invading forces.[28] This cultural thread continued into the 20th Century, when the national revolutionary movement called upon the mobilisation of Vietnamese women to fight for the country and its people. After the war, there was a slight modification of this concept, as women became the so-called 'generals of the interior', assigned with the responsibility of taking care of the family and household.[29] This position is not entirely positive, however, becomes there is an insinuation that the agency of women should be limited to internal, domestic dynamics;[30] the external facing position of the woman is inferior and powerless, so as to keep family harmony and allow the man to shine.

Diva's Resistance

In the case of Diva, there are two separate but interlinked processes taking place in the construction of her own community. Firstly, the transition from a male body to that of a female

[27] Van Hanh Thi Do and Marie Brennan, "Complexities of Vietnamese femininities: a resource for rethinking women's university leadership practices," in *Gender and Education* 27, no. 3 (2015): 274-275.
[28] Ibid, 275.
[29] Ibid, 279.
[30] Ibid.

represents a repositioning of the self, to assume the role of the woman along with all the stigma and pressures it represents. As gender is something that is done and enacted through repeated stylised acts,[31] Diva *performs* the gender that she wishes to be perceived as. However, there is an interjection, a certain political will to transform what it means to be a woman in modern day Vietnam. By assuming the role of the woman as the 'general of the interior' but inverting the practice, through social media, to make it external-facing with heightened visibility, Diva purposefully shapes society's view of femininity as well as transgenderism, building a space of resistance against the dominant masculinist framework in Vietnamese society. Whilst the risk of being misgendered renders her invisible[32] and whilst engaging in transgender stereotypes ostracises her, Diva represents a third path of queer activism that is focussed on developing the sense of social self, precisely by playing with pre-existing, widespread cultural norms. We can see this conscious entanglement when she becomes a public figure with large digital and live audiences, through the resilient 'female' survival strategies of the informal economy, and decides to render the LGBT+ community visible. On a night of conviviality, with lots of customers buying her noodles, Diva holds up a rainbow flag and, for the duration of 12 minutes, educates her audience about the meaning of each colour as well as the meaning of pride.[33]

Digital Representation as Activism

Some academics believe that the term 'transgender', especially in relation to activism, is a category that has been delimited by those of the Global North, which was then exported for

[31] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994): 156.
[32] Paul Horton, "Recognising shadows: masculinism, resistance, and recognition in Vietnam," in *International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 14, no. 1 (2019): 77.
[33] Am thuc Cha Rong, "DIVA Cat Thy phat bieu ung ho cong dong LGBT nhan ngay Pride," Youtube video, 11:57, 17/05/2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfhkPPQNxlM

Third World consumption.[34] In this travelling process, the opportunity for more complex readings gets lost; subcultural gender subjectivities and cultural uses of technology are not given the research gravitas it deserves. The utilisation of social media, for example, plays an important role in organic, grounded movements aimed at reshaping perceptions of gender roles by 'bastardising' it. At its core, social media networks have increasingly contributed to the access of transwomen to informal employment, with more than 50% of transgender[35] people using it to actively look for jobs as they try to realise their economic and social rights. The pressures mentioned earlier in this paper forces transwomen to turn towards the informal economy through the opportunities offered and generated by social media, as these platforms also serve as a way to bypass official, formal structural barriers. For instance, Diva developed her large following by livestreaming and posting daily videos on Youtube and Facebook. With the growth of social media in Vietnam, it has become a tool to explore, promote, and shape identities, but it has also provided an accessible pathway to overcome traditional restrictions, thereby increasing digital representation at a low cost.[36] However, despite the increased agency represented by transwomen assuming their human rights through modern technology, there continues to be risks associated with an imbalance of power. Namely, the concentration of social media giants' power mean that possible neo-colonial pressures continue to propagate, potentially stifling new Vietnamese modes of trans-advocacy that can bring much value to the study of queer activism in the West. Youtube ad revenue represents an important source of income and social capital for Diva, but the inequality of ad revenue between Vietnamese content creators and Western content creators contributes to downward pressure and the delaying of the queer rights movement in the Global South.

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[34] Huong Thu Nguyen, "Navigating identity, ethnicity and politics: a case study of gender variance in the Central Highlands of Vietnam," in *International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 11, no. 4 (2016): 258.
[35] Tu-Anh Hoang and Pauline Oosterhoff, *Transgender at Work: Livelihoods for Transgender People in Vietnam* (Brighton: IDS, 2016): 17.
[36] Thi Huyen Linh Nguyen, "Reading the YouTube sitcom *My best gay friends:* what it means to be gay in Vietnam," in *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 33, no. 5 (2019): 550.

Conclusion and Future Perspectives

Diva Cat Thy is not the only woman to play with gender roles, perceptions, and utilise the informal economy and social media to advance the LGBT+ rights movement in Vietnam. Since her virality during the Covid pandemic, dozens of other transwomen have created a street-vending community in Ho Chi Minh, posting content on social media, displaying their social capital, and reshaping the attitudes of the wider society towards transgenderism and homosexuality in general. This research paper has drawn upon oral histories and present-day archives, as well as literature on the informal economy as a tool for political resistance in order to contribute to a deeper understanding of trans-advocacy in the Vietnamese context. By extension, the knowledge flows, against the tide, from the East to the West may potentially represent a space for further discussion and imagination, particularly as transwomen all over the world continue to face discrimination, locally-based stigma and damaging cultural norms, which affects not only their physical and mental health, but also the communities around them by proxy. Trans-experiences should continue to be researched extensively, with close attention to the elements of alternative economies, norm diffusion and subversion, as well as technology as a political weapon in the Global South, primarily because of the special ability of this entanglement to bypass even the strongest social and political forces against LGBT+ rights movements. As Vietnamese authorities become more tolerant and perhaps even accepting of the LGBT+ community, neo-colonial and neo-liberal interests continue to pose a threat to human rights and the ability for self-determination of marginalised peoples. The maintenance of this sub-field of study within LGBT+ research, therefore, plays a crucial role in the political and social shaping of the immediate and long-term future for queer communities around the world.

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