

Woman, Buddhist, Entrepreneur: Gender, Moral Values, and Class Anxiety in Late Socialist Vietnam

In March 1997, Vietnam's celebration of International Women's Day included profiles in local newspapers of prominent female entrepreneurs who had achieved success during the prior decade of market-oriented reforms, known as *Đổi Mới* [Renovation]. Hiền (not her real name) was one of these women. The president and co-owner with her husband of a garment factory outside Hồ Chí Minh City, Hiền had worked for the state as a teacher until the economic chaos of the early 1980s forced her to find a more lucrative occupation. She and her husband opened a construction business, but the pair switched to clothing manufacture in the late 1980s. The company had grown steadily over the years, and by the late 1990s employed about eight hundred workers, most of them women, in three production plants. Their garments were made to order for foreign companies and exported to Asia, Europe, and the United States.

Shortly after her profile appeared, I had the opportunity to interview Hiền as part of my research into the lives and business practices of female entrepreneurs in Hồ Chí Minh City. In 1995–1997 and 2003–2004, I conducted fieldwork with small- to medium-scale female cloth and clothing traders in several Hồ Chí Minh City marketplaces. Most of the women I knew eschewed the term “businesspeople” [*nhà kinh doanh*] and instead described themselves as “women petty traders” [*các chị em tiểu thương*] engaged in “selling small” [*buôn bán nhỏ*]. Although many had experienced

more financial success than “petty” and “small” imply, they felt marginal in economic and political terms that were also related to gender. Economically, they identified themselves as mothers and wives focused on family welfare, rather than as independent business owners seeking to accumulate capital. Politically, they described themselves as poor women lacking the kinds of well-placed networks and ties to officials that they viewed as necessary for expanding a business (Leshkovich 2000). Eager to explore how political connections, gendered subjectivities, and economic strategies might differ for women who had developed larger businesses, I contacted a Women’s Union cadre in Hà Nội who organized workshops for successful female entrepreneurs. She cited Hiền as an example of a southern woman who had parlayed the friendships and skills she had acquired as a state employee into private financial success. Hiền was thus of interest to me as a comparative case that would help to contextualize the experiences of the market traders who were my primary informants.

My sole meeting with Hiền, a life history interview that lasted several hours, did provide the instructive contrast I had anticipated, but it also raised intriguing new questions that merit sustained attention in their own right. During our conversation, Hiền repeatedly described herself as a devout Buddhist whose economic success was the natural outcome of her religious quest for virtue and personal enlightenment through hard work and textual study. Why did Buddhism appeal to her as an entrepreneurial ethic? How did her claims relate to broader discussions of entrepreneurship and moral values in Vietnam and throughout the region? What role did gender play in Hiền’s embrace of Buddhism? What does her performance of piety reveal about the tensions surrounding late socialist economic transformation and class stratification?

This article addresses these questions by exploring the relationship between Hiền’s Buddhism as expressed in her life story and broader national and regional anxieties in the 1990s about the morality of profit making, the gendered dimensions of entrepreneurship, and the cultural and economic consequences of class inequalities. It is important to note at the outset, however, the limitations to this discussion. Unlike conventional ethnography, my account of Hiền relies exclusively on a description of her life generated for a particular audience at one moment in time. As Ruth Behar (1990) and

Paul Rabinow (1977) note, life histories are not direct mirrors of experience but mediated, intersubjective commentaries that require tellers to offer ad hoc interpretations that in turn shape how they subsequently view and lead their lives. Absent the broader contextualization afforded by long-term participant observation, I can only speculate on the reliability of Hiên's account. As my fieldwork focused on smaller-scale business owners, determining whether Hiên's description of the connections between religion and entrepreneurship are typical or exceptional for highly successful female entrepreneurs must await future research.

What one person's story can do, however, is offer a rich, unique perspective that is "good to think" (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 89). Hiên may or may not be typical in the positivist sense of social science, and her account may or may not accurately describe her daily activities. But in confronting broader dilemmas of morality and profit making that others also face, Hiên's particular representations of the dilemmas raised by ethics, religion, gender, and money invite us to consider interpretive possibilities that might otherwise be overlooked. On the one hand, a life narrative attempts to order or at least rein in the open-endedness of one person's experience. On the other hand, the story simultaneously opens up new vistas: questions raised, connections suggested, opinions reconsidered, tantalizing details implied but not revealed. Behar aptly notes the advantages to a focus on an individual's story: "A life history narrative should allow one to see the subjective mapping of experience, the working out of a culture and a social system that is often obscured in a typified account" (1990, 225). Hiên's story demands that we consider why she might have chosen to represent herself in particular ways and what insights her representations can yield.

Weaving together cultural notions of virtue, fate, and gender, Hiên depicted Buddhism as a set of principles guiding her life. Following my recounting of Hiên's narrative, I consider how Hiên's attraction to Buddhism reflects a broader history in which elements of Mahayana philosophical teachings on fate and talent have proven attractive to Vietnamese women, even as the constraints of their daily lives have often made sustained study and meditation impossible.

Hiên's demeanor and detailed discussion of Buddhist philosophy conveyed a depth of conviction, but her words also betrayed a hint of anxiety.

To explain why she might feel uneasy, I briefly outline debates in Vietnam during the 1990s in which moneymaking was viewed as necessary but not necessarily righteous. In spite of the *Đổi Mới* banners spanning urban thoroughfares that confidently proclaimed, “Rich people, strong country” [*dân giàu nước mạnh*], the media, officials, and intellectuals expressed concern about whether one could pursue profit without sacrificing moral character. Such worries appear to have fueled both an upsurge of spiritual practices in Vietnam and a concern with preservation of so-called traditional cultural values (Kleinen 1999; Luong 1993; Malarney 2001, 2002, 2003; Taylor 2004).

Two types of religious or ethical practices in particular were closely associated with entrepreneurship: (1) market traders’ worship of spirits of fortune identified as Buddhist by some and superstitious [*mê tín*] by others and (2) male business owners’ cultivation of “Confucian” values of trust, benevolent hierarchy, loyalty, and mutual responsibility, which were experiencing renewed popularity in Vietnam. Although scholars have recently questioned whether the influence of Confucianism on Vietnamese society was as strong or widespread as had previously been assumed (Li Tana 1998; McHale 2004; Whitmore 1997), and twentieth-century Vietnamese historians have grappled with the ideology’s foreign, feudal, and imperial associations (see, for example, Nguyen Khac Vien 1972; Pelley 2002), most people I met described Vietnamese tradition as resting on concepts that they identified as Confucianism [*Nho Giáo*]. These included the four virtues [*tứ đức*] for women and general moral principles of filial piety [*hiếu*], benevolence [*nhân*], and loyalty [*trung*]. This form of “Confucianism” may be so diluted as to hardly merit the designation, but the term was nonetheless central to popular conceptions of historical or cultural legacies that were called upon throughout the 1990s to make essentializing claims about Vietnamese identity. I therefore use “Confucianism” in an ethnographic sense to refer to these kinds of discursive invocations, which, as I suggest below, resonated with a broader regional tendency to attribute economic prosperity to the vitality of what are termed “Asian Values.”

The associations between popular Buddhist religious practices, Confucian ethical codes, gender, and class placed Hiên in a quandary. She seemed to wish to distance herself from the lower-class stigma of feminine

superstition, but she found elite Confucianism uncongenial to her as a woman. Intriguingly, her reasons for rejecting Confucianism mirror scholarly critiques of Asian Values discourse for privileging men and providing a moral veneer to justify paternalistic authority (Abelmann 2002; Fahey 1998; Greenhalgh 1994; Heng and Devan 1992; Hooper 1998; Kendall 2002; Ong 1999; Sen and Stivens 1998; Stivens 1998a, 1998b). Unlike these scholars, however, Hiền did not seem interested in unmasking claims to tradition as inherently partial, political, essentializing, or sexist. Rather, she seemed eager to craft an alternative formulation of Vietnamese values so that she might establish her own moral virtue in the unimpeachable idiom of a cherished tradition. In a move reminiscent of Weber's argument about Calvinism and capitalism in Western Europe, Hiền also seemed to assert those beliefs to be the primary factor explaining her financial success. I argue that performing Buddhism allowed Hiền to embody a feminine morality (Rydström 2003) through which she might display herself to be a proper woman and a trustworthy, ethical entrepreneur in an environment in which it seemed challenging to be either, and nearly impossible to be both. The result of such discursive work is a vision of cultural economy that is more gender-inclusive but equally essentialist in its depiction of Vietnamese traditions as the primary factor to explain economic outcomes.

While Hiền described her Buddhism primarily in gendered terms, her narrative contains provocative hints about how emergent class stratification under Đổi Mới is both subjectively experienced and publicly debated. The philosophical Buddhism that Hiền performed—the result of hours of study and practice—marked her as higher status than the market traders who propitiate spirits in the hope of immediate gain. While class may seem a fixed status or identity, scholars have recently argued that it can better be understood as a fluid, yet anxious, process of relational subject formation and social production (Liechty 2003; O'Dougherty 2002; Pinches 1999; Robison and Goodman 1996). This conception is particularly apt for considering class in Vietnam. As legacies of revolution and socialism lead to acute ambivalence toward private accumulation, not only are people's class positions unclear, but the overall framework within which they are attempting to position themselves is also perceived as shifting and potentially treacherous. Seen in this light, Hiền's performance of class status was an attempt

not only to stake out a position as virtuously successful but also to envision socioeconomic formations in which class difference would be accepted as natural and moral—a rather precarious claim in a late socialist political context. This account thus draws attention to the ways in which individual performances and narratives of class both construct one's own subjective location and contribute to the gendered, political, religious, and moral discourses through which class is reified so that it seems a fixed system of statuses and identities.

Hiền's Life Story

Woman. Buddhist. Entrepreneur. In narrating her life history, Hiền used these three nouns repeatedly. As we sat in the air-conditioned conference room above her factory's production floor, these three words intertwined in a persuasive tale of how Buddhism's quest for virtue and personal enlightenment had provided Hiền with a compelling philosophy of ethical entrepreneurship.

Hiền was born in the central part of Vietnam in the late 1940s. An only child whose father died when she was young, Hiền loved school. With her mother's support, she attended a teachers' college. After graduation, she taught in a public school. She maintained this job even after Liberation [*Giải Phóng*] in 1975, which suggests that her family either had not been connected to the defeated southern regime or had actively supported the revolution. Married to a construction engineer, Hiền had five children. The middle son worked at the plant full time and hoped to go to business school in the United States. The two oldest children lived in Moscow, where they helped to arrange exports for Hiền's business. Although Hiền owned the garment factory with her husband, they both described her as its primary director.

After hearing of my interest in comparing the experiences of the mostly small-scale market traders with whom I was conducting fieldwork to those of more successful businesswomen, Hiền offered a lengthy account of women's status in Vietnamese society. Her comments took on a didactic tone, as she presumed that I, as a foreigner, would need detailed contextualization of Vietnamese history, social structure, and culture. Perhaps because our introduction had been facilitated by the Women's Union,

she focused at first on the gains that had been made since 1945, when a Marxist-led coalition of Vietnamese nationalists began actively fighting for freedom from French colonialism. Hiền believed that this struggle involved not just emancipating Vietnamese from French rule but also liberating different groups of Vietnamese, including women, from the traditional cultural and economic structures that oppressed them within Vietnamese society. While Hiền claimed that women had earned equality in Vietnamese society, she worried that they continued to be hindered by family responsibilities, for which they bore a disproportionate share of the burden. This led to a feminine ethic of self-sacrifice:

Vietnamese people, the wife and the husband both, let the wife carry the load. It's never the man, because Vietnamese women always bear pain, always bear hardship. They feel pity for their husbands, for their children [*tôi chồng tôi con*], so they pick up the load and they worry about it. Even in poor families in the countryside, the women give up rice, they give up their food for their husband and children. . . . So, I think that the heart of Vietnamese women is that they always sacrifice [*hy sinh*] for everyone, their life is always sacrifice, including in business.

As the interview proceeded, Hiền continued to explore this general theme of sacrifice and femininity, but perhaps in response to my assertions of familiarity with gender history in Vietnam, she replaced her pedagogical tone with a more personal one. She portrayed herself as compelled to sacrifice in overseeing her garment factory:

As for me, when I work in business, I see it as a sacrifice. For example, [in] our field of garment production, our profit from turnover isn't in fact enough to put money in the bank, yet on average I work from 12 to 14 hours per day. It's very hard, and I always have a bad headache, every day I have to solve such problems that I have a bad headache. First, it's because of the customers; they always demand that I do this, that, and the other thing. I've got to satisfy the customers. Then, there are the workers who demand that I do this, that, and the other thing for them. But I'm in the middle, so I have to solve things so that both sides get what they want, and that means that I must sacrifice.

Hiền asserted that gender played a central role in compelling her to sacrifice, because all sides viewed it as her particular duty as a woman. She

implied that men were not expected to be so solicitous of others, and that this gave them a firmness of will that made it easier for them to succeed in business:

Because men, no matter what, they're more resolute [*bản lĩnh*] than women, men are more self-confident [*tự tin*] than women, they're more courageous [*can đảm*] than women. They can decide some issue, they can settle it decisively. We women, we are more cautious [*dè dặt*], more careful [*thận trọng*], more deliberate [*cân nhắc*]. That's still good, but often we lose opportunities. Many times I don't dare do something, I hesitate a moment, I deliberate for just a second, and the opportunity is already lost.

Hiền claimed that a lack of courage had in fact led her to open the garment factory in the late 1980s, a move that at first looked like a mistake. When she left the teaching profession in 1982, Hiền drew on her husband's expertise to open a construction firm. This was an unusual time to go into business, as the government was engaged in campaigns to socialize private companies. I assumed that Hiền and her husband could do so only because they had strong political connections, but she seemed reluctant to describe them, beyond a claim that they knew people, proceeded with care, and were lucky. The couple managed many projects, but with inflation in the 1980s soaring into the triple digits, what looked like profits on paper turned out to be net losses of their investment capital. In addition, Hiền occasionally felt unsafe on construction sites and worried about the time spent away from her husband and children. Not only would textile manufacturing ensure a sufficiently rapid turnaround to minimize the impact of inflation, but it would also be "a more suitable occupation for women like me." Within a few years of opening their first garment factory, however, Hiền and her husband watched as profits in the construction industry soared. Economic reforms had led to an influx of foreign investment that stabilized the currency and fueled a building boom.

Asked whether she felt she had made a mistake in abandoning construction, Hiền answered that this was her fate:

I saw that by running away from heaven you still couldn't avoid your fate [*số*], which is to say your destiny [*số mệnh*]. In Vietnam, there's a phrase: "Man proposes, heaven disposes [*mưu sự tại nhân, thành sự tại thiên*]." That means that all of our plans, all of our intentions are what we make,

but whether we succeed or not is because of the man in heaven [*ông trời*], because of God [*Thượng Đế*]. I believe, but it's not like I have to sit waiting for the fig to fall, as if I sit at the root of a fig tree, open my mouth wide, and wait for the fig to fall into my mouth so I can eat it. It's not sitting and waiting like that. I work honestly, with all my heart, but whether I succeed or not is because of God [*Thượng Đế*]

Pointing to a calligraphy painting on the wall, Hiền continued:

I hang on the wall this word, the Chinese character “*tâm*,” which means “heart”; it's a piece of calligraphy to decorate. It means that I think that only if I live according to my heart, according to my spirit, only then will good things come to me. In business, a businessperson is someone who has many strategies to bring profit to himself [*sic*]. But I believe that a businessperson, I agree that he has many strategies, but these must be consistent with and live in accordance with your conscience, consistent with your heart. Only then will you succeed. That's my philosophy in life.

Hiền asserted that religion played an important role in the development of a person's conscience:

I follow Buddhism. I view religion as a brake [*một cái thắng*] for a person if he [*sic*] has religion. Every religion is like that, Buddhism, or Christianity, they all advise us to live with morality [*đạo đức*], so I think that religion is a brake for people. When I have thoughts or desires that aren't good, then religion forces him [*sic*] to think more correctly, it allows him to avoid throwing himself into a deep abyss. Because when he does something against his conscience, if he is a person who has religion, then naturally he has to think in order to follow a different road. That's the role of religion, and I think it's very important.

Hiền described herself as a fairly devout lay Buddhist. While many Vietnamese Buddhists practice vegetarianism on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month in order to signify their ability to self-abnegate so as to lessen the killing of sentient beings, Hiền did so ten times per month. After describing the spiritual and physical benefits of this practice, Hiền noted that being a woman often forced her to compromise her piety:

I eat a vegetarian breakfast and lunch—ten days—but at night I have to eat with my children. Because I'm not able to be away from them, I'm gone every day, so at night if I don't share the same food tray with my children

then the feelings between parents and children will push them out into society [*đẩy nó vào xã hội*], I'll push my children away. If that happens, a young child is just like a thermometer, it's influenced by the weather. So I set aside dinnertime for my children, for my friends.

While Hiền did not state so explicitly, the implication was that her friends and children did not share her Buddhist devotion. Her desire to eat with them thus forced her to modify her diet.

After discussing the role of vegetarianism, Hiền began to explain why Buddhism's underlying tenets appealed to her so strongly. Here, again, she assumed that my foreignness would render me less conversant with Buddhist teachings, so she concentrated on a few key concepts:

The philosophy of Buddhism, it's very profound. Thousands of years ago, they already could say what today would be like. For example, they said that people would go to the monastery, that in going to the monastery there would be straight roads, both sides would have flowers, and there would be hanging lights. That means that twenty-six hundred years ago Buddhism said what we should do to have straight roads, not a bumpy road, to have two sides with electric lights on poles straight as an arrow. Or, the Buddha said that at some point people would be able to sit here and see the three corners and ten thousand skies of the world. It's clear that today, Vietnamese can see soccer in Europe, or I only need to pick up the telephone to speak to anyone right away. Buddha said that thousands of years ago. He also said that there were types of people on other planets, and it's clear that now we are doing research to find another planet. The spirit of Buddhism is also very free [*tự do*], it doesn't force anyone to follow anything at all. Go ahead and think whatever you like. The Buddha said, "I am the Buddha who is, you are the Buddha who will be." So it's like a monk will become a Buddha; there isn't a supreme being [*đấng tối cao*], there isn't monotheism. For example, if somebody is the head of the religion, then that person is supreme. But with Buddhism, it's not like that: "I'm the Buddha that is." If the monk is the Buddha who will be, then we are equal [*chúng ta bằng nhau*]. The concept of Buddhism is very equal. Buddhism urges us in this way: plants, animals, humans—all have a spirit that we must respect. So, primarily because of this, I think that the spirit of Buddhism is a very expansive spirit [*tinh thần rất thoáng*]. Whatever you want to think, you can go ahead and think, you're not forced to do anything. If you want to be a vegetarian, be a vegetarian; if you want to eat meat, eat meat.

While Hiền's description of Buddhist philosophy seems to celebrate what she perceived as the religion's "anything goes" ethos, her next statement evoked a humility and concern for others that the religion also afforded her: "And in life, the spirit of Buddhism is very oriented toward everyone, because I very rarely think about myself. The 'I' [*cái 'tôi'*], I certainly have that, but I never place it first. So I live and work following the spirit of Buddhism, as its disciple. It's very straightforward."

Toward the end of the interview, Hiền once again related her notions of Buddhism and fate back to her daily activities as a factory owner:

I work in the factory, so I blend in with the workers, I'm compatible with them, I live according to the spirit of Buddhism. The spirit of Buddhism is "plant a seed, reap its fruit." The "seed" is the origin. For example, if I throw out an orange seed then I will have an orange fruit, if I sow a sweet orange tree, a good strain, then I'll get a good fruit; plant a bad seed, then I'll gather bad fruit; if I plant a good tree, I'll get good fruit, if I plant a poison tree, I'll get poison fruit. For example, if someone plants a "seed" that is using drugs, then he'll get the fruit that is death. . . . It's all fate, just like I've told you today that whatever limitations I've faced are all because of my preordained fate. Asians have a proverb: "Everything one drinks, everything one eats is preordained." This means that even all our food has been determined ahead of time.

After describing her efforts to impart these values to her children, Hiền concluded the interview by answering my more mundane questions about the day-to-day operation of her business. Later, as her son gave me a ride home on his motorbike, I had a chance to ask him about his mother's Buddhism. He confirmed her devotion: "Oh, yeah, she's pretty religious. She's really quite strict about it. People seem to respect her for it."

Gender in Buddhist Philosophy and Practice

Two aspects of Buddhist doctrine play a prominent role in Hiền's life story: the moral precepts through which one crafts a virtuous and successful life and the power of fate in preordaining the course of that life. These tenets seem contradictory, for the first emphasizes an individual's ability to cultivate oneself, while the other suggests that the vicissitudes of life reflect a grand design that individuals cannot alter. For Vietnamese Buddhists, however,

these are the two poles between which one navigates one's life. As experiences oscillate between those one can control and those one cannot, the best course of action is to attempt to live honestly and respectfully. Hiền located an essential sense of equality in Buddhism's acceptance of arbitrary constraints. She suggested that it provided a practical life philosophy that everyone could follow even while fulfilling the mundane obligations of a business or household.

Buddhism's welcoming acceptance of difference is reflected in its apparent gender neutrality. Unlike Confucianism, Buddhism does not overtly discriminate. Hiền's narrative suggests, however, that women and men may not be equally positioned to acquire Buddhist knowledge or apply it to their daily lives. Similarly, while men and women both have preordained fates, Vietnamese commonly expect women to be more decisively fated, in that their attempts to alter destiny face greater constraints. Although a detailed discussion of Buddhist principles lies beyond the scope of this article, a brief overview of the history of Buddhism in Vietnam highlights its appeal to women, as well as the practical difficulties many face in pursuing devotional practices and in grappling with Buddhist notions of fate.

Mahayana Buddhism spread to Vietnamese society during the early centuries of Chinese occupation (111 BCE to 939 CE), although there is debate about whether the religion traveled directly from India or indirectly through China (see, for example, Minh Chi et al. 1993; C.T. Nguyen 1997). Mahayana Buddhism promotes an ethic of active engagement, as in the ideal of the bodhisattva, an individual who is on the verge of achieving nirvana but is devoted to relieving the suffering of others. Vietnamese Buddhist monks typically administer to (as well as depend upon) lay congregations by providing ongoing counsel, direction, and ritual services, such as at mortuary ceremonies. For lay Buddhists like Hiền, Mahayana principles offer an apt model for integrating spirituality with daily material concerns.

Mahayana Buddhism's orientation to the concerns of this world made it a powerful political force as part of official state religion in the centuries following independence from China. Dependent on monks' support, emperors sought merit by mandating the construction of pagodas throughout the countryside. Although it has been common to assert that Confucianism supplanted Buddhism as the ruling orthodoxy by the early fifteenth century,

recent scholarship suggests that Confucianism was often idiosyncratically interpreted by leaders and unevenly absorbed by the population, and that Mahayana Buddhism continued to play a strong role in government ideology and techniques of rule, particularly in the southern part of the country (Li Tana 1998; McHale 2004; Whitmore 1997). Away from the corridors of state power, Buddhism provided a formidable current of the syncretic triple religion [*tam giáo*] that combined it with Confucianism and Taoism (see, for example, McHale 2004; C.T. Nguyen 1997; Tai 1985b).

Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism may have mingled in popular belief, but distinctions between them remained, particularly with respect to gender. With its focus on literary texts and male hierarchy in family and social life, Confucianism became a male domain of scholarship, ancestor worship, feasting, and the political quest for status titles. While women performed much of the labor necessary to support these practices, men reaped the resulting prestige. Buddhist practices that centered on the home and local pagoda became the realm of women, who joined Buddhist associations, conducted rites, celebrated festivals, and made offerings to ensure their families' prosperity. Unlike Confucian education, which explicitly barred women, Buddhist study welcomed them. Vietnamese Buddhist women could pray, study the scriptures, and cultivate their own virtue while still going about their daily business of earning money to feed their children. That one of Vietnamese Buddhism's most popular and powerful bodhisattvas is the Goddess of Mercy [Quan Âm] seems to reinforce the religion's compassion for the particular demands of women's lives.

As Hiền's narrative suggests, however, practical concerns have limited the time available to women to cultivate their beliefs. Gender turns out to be a difference that, to borrow Jane Atkinson's phrase, does indeed "make a difference" (1990, 59). Although not denied access to Buddhist education, women have traditionally had lower literacy rates than men. Many thus could not study Buddhist texts or concentrate on increasing their knowledge of Buddhist doctrine. Sometimes, their responsibilities to family and religion could conflict, in which case family had to come first. Hiền's life history provides a contemporary account of this dilemma. While she was able to choose vegetarian meals for breakfast and lunch ten days per month, she feared that not partaking of a shared dinner with her children could weaken

the ties between them. She thus subordinated her religious beliefs to her conception of maternal responsibility and ate the same meat dishes as her children did. In traditional Vietnamese society, only as women aged and they transferred their family responsibilities to younger female relatives could they possess the time and economic means to devote themselves to Buddhist study. This trend continues today, with the most devout lay Buddhists generally being elderly women (Malarney 2003; see also Sangren 1983). Some, such as Hiền's widowed mother, choose to live in a pagoda.

It is perhaps because of the more pressing mundane matters to which women must attend that they tend to be viewed as more decisively fated than Vietnamese men. According to popular Vietnamese belief, two opposing forces shape the lives of both men and women: destiny [*mạng*] and talent [*tài*]. Destiny refers to things beyond individual control, such as the family into which one is born or certain inborn characteristics, such as intelligence, artistic ability, or physical appearance. The opposing force, talent, describes the individual's ability to cultivate these attributes and make the most of the hand dealt by fate. Fate may determine all, but it can also be fickle and can exert its wrath on those who waste their abilities or live immodestly. According to Hue-Tam Ho Tai, Vietnamese notions of the relationship between talent and destiny typically apply differently to men and women. While "a woman's life depends on forces that are deemed to be beyond her powers to alter," a man "can make the most of what assets destiny has handed out to him through the sheer exertion of his will, his intelligence, his efforts" (1985a, 2). When women do possess talent, the result is not the mastery of destiny that men can achieve, but a life of hardship, a point dramatized most famously in Nguyễn Du's early nineteenth-century epic poem, *The Tale of Kiều* [*Truyện Kiều*] (Nguyễn Du 1983).

Hiền mentioned the disadvantages that contemporary Vietnamese women face in having to sacrifice for their families and others, but she did not explicitly describe herself as more fated because she is a woman. Instead, she implied that all human beings are subject to the same interplay of fate and talent. To the extent that she has avoided a negative fate or has realized a positive one, it is because she has cultivated her talents through an ethic of self-sacrifice, virtue, and humility. In addition to modifying prevailing conceptions of women and fate, this narrative of Buddhist piety implicitly

challenged widespread concern in the 1990s that moneymaking was inherently evil or amoral.

Entrepreneurial Anxiety and Women's Market Spirituality under Đổi Mới

The mid 1990s seemed an opportune time to be an entrepreneur in Vietnam. More than ten years of market-oriented policies had generally convinced people of the government's long-term commitment to some level of private production and commerce. The opportunity to generate income in this sector led many to leave state employment or to supplement their fixed salaries with sideline businesses. In Hồ Chí Minh City, stores and boutiques seemed to "pop up like mushrooms" [*mọc lên như nấm*], as a popular phrase put it. At the larger end of the spectrum were factories run by government agencies, such as the army, and often in collaboration with foreign investors. These did a brisk business producing garments and consumer items for export. Other factories were opened by private families and individuals, many of them former state officials and employees eager to capitalize on their political connections.

Alongside this entrepreneurial exuberance was a persistent anxiety. Market traders often reminded me that after all, it had not been that long since southern entrepreneurs had seen their businesses confiscated as part of postwar socialist restructuring. Nor had much time passed since businesspeople had been condemned as cheats, who would stop at nothing to procure profit. Less than twenty years earlier, one southern journalist had confidently proclaimed in *Tuổi Trẻ*, "There's no way a trader can be an honest person" [*Kẻ buôn bán không thể là người chân thật được*] (Thạch Trúc 1978, 11).

Such memories proved so strong that even as the late socialist government encouraged the population to pursue wealth, many entrepreneurs viewed their political fate with uncertainty. As Thomas Heberer points out, there was certainly room in officials' minds for a socialist entrepreneur who would work for the best interests of the state and not commit class crimes (2003, 58–59). Generally, however, those who had achieved success seemed automatically suspect, either for unscrupulous exploitation of their workers or for harboring reactionary political sentiments hostile to the current

regime (see, for example, Tran Phuc Thanh 1997, 7). Success in business was “rewarded” with official scrutiny, increased expenditures on taxes and payoffs, and open hostility. High-profile corruption cases during the mid to late 1990s lent credence to entrepreneurs’ sense that in the midst of great opportunity lurked significant peril (Gainsborough 2003). Most quickly learned that while their businesses might no longer be illegal and the Constitution explicitly gave them the power to conduct their affairs as they saw fit within the parameters of the law and national interest, it was safest to conceal the scope of their activities.

Concurrent with these political concerns, officials, the media, literati, and the broader public worried about the moral fate of a populace focused on money, profit, and wealth. Some Vietnamese scholars noted that although a market economy fostered dynamism and productivity, it also promoted greed and selfishness (Duong Thoa 1995; Thanh Duy 1998). Increasingly prosperous middle-class parents were described as obsessed with material comforts: “In urban areas, many parents care only for giving their children good food, beautiful clothes, lots of money to attend different classes, to have numerous entertainments” (Duong Thoa 1995, 32). This made their children vulnerable to the “alien currents of wind” whipping through Vietnam’s increasingly open doors [*mở cửa*] (Le Minh 1997, 76). So great was the moral panic that Nguyễn Khoa Điềm, minister of Culture and Information, called on Vietnamese to “stall the flow of garbage from foreign degraded, reactionary culture which is strange to our tradition of humanities, and benevolence” (Nguyễn Khoa Điềm 1997, 56).

With economic and cultural global modernity seen as corroding Vietnamese traditional values, it should not be surprising that the entrepreneurs who were singled out as particularly vulnerable to pernicious influences might seek refuge in some aspect of traditionalism. One example of this was an upsurge of market-oriented, transactional spiritual practice. Most observers have explained the so-called religious revival as a consequence of increased official tolerance of religion, coupled with widespread popular need for some kind of cosmic reassurance in the wake of economic uncertainty (Kleinen 1999; Luong 1993; Malarney 2001, 2002, 2003; Taylor 2004). The revival seemed particularly vibrant among small-scale market traders, the vast majority of whom are women.

The occupation of trade in Vietnam is commonly thought to be the domain of Chinese Vietnamese at the higher end of the scale and of women at the lower. So strong is the latter association that when one speaks of market traders, street sellers, or even owners of small shops, the trader is presumed to be female—an assumption justified by a quick look at the sellers in any marketplace. Most people, including scholars, tend uncritically to proclaim selling a natural and enduring feature of Vietnamese femininity, one sometimes also cited as proof of grassroots resistance to patriarchal Chinese Confucianism (Rydström and Drummond 2004; see also Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1978; Pelley 2002; Taylor 2004; Tran Thi Que 1999). At the same time, traders are thought to be ruthless in clinching sales, a quality that places them on the fringes of the normative, civilized [*văn minh*] moral and social order (Leshkovich 2005). In this way, trade and the market women who conduct it are simultaneously central to Vietnamese tradition and yet culturally or morally alien.

Discussions of market women's spiritual practices in the 1990s continued to display these conflicting attitudes of praise and disdain for this supposedly traditional occupation and the women who pursued it. In the markets in which I conducted my research, the most common spirits invoked by the majority of traders who identified as Buddhist were the austere, venerable Ông Thần Tài [God of Wealth] and the jolly, roly-poly Ông Địa [God of the Earth]. Statues of both gods were positioned toward the back of most market stalls and propitiated with daily offerings. While markets might be oriented toward profit, traders described Ông Địa as their primary benefactor. As one explained, "He's one of the household gods. He protects families and makes them wealthy, so they have enough to eat. . . . Things are so slow in the market right now, there's so much competition. Only by praying and rubbing Ông Địa can I sell enough." Such a claim was indicative of market traders' broader tendency to position themselves as women struggling to make a living, rather than as businesspeople seeking fortunes (Leshkovich 2000).

The instrumentality that characterized relations with Ông Địa became even more marked in the propitiation of spirits of fortune, such as Bà Chúa Xứ [Goddess of the Realm] and Bà Đen [Black Lady]. Most Buddhist traders, and even some Catholic ones, regularly made pilgrimages to these

goddesses' shrines, particularly in the weeks following Tết [Lunar New Year] and during the spirits' festivals. They described these trips as being about both worship and recreation [*vừa cúng vừa chơi*]. The throngs of fellow pilgrims and later testimonials of windfalls acquired after praying to or, in the case of Bà Chúa Xứ, engaging in a loan transaction with a goddess provided proof of their power (see also Taylor 2004).

Both Philip Taylor (2004) and Ashley Pettus (2003) interpret these practices as a source of agency and reassurance for marginalized female entrepreneurs whose family survival depends on good fortune in the marketplace and who must also juggle competing notions of their responsibilities as women (see also Luong 2003; Malarney 2003). Steven Sangren notes similar themes in Taiwanese women's worship of female deities (1983). Such beliefs clearly did provide an element of comfort for the traders I knew. They also had the attractive allure of folk tradition, then being celebrated as key to the preservation of Vietnamese identity in the midst of cultural transformation.

The power ascribed to these female spirits, however, rested more on tales of their efficacy than on a broader religious or philosophical framework. This, in turn, made these practices vulnerable to accusations of superstition [*mê tín*] by officials and intellectuals. That it was poor, uneducated market traders who worshipped such spirits lent credence to this claim, for petty female sellers were thought to be more vulnerable to seduction by "backward" [*lạc hậu*] beliefs. This association between superstition, femininity, and small-scale trade persisted even in the face of growing evidence that a sizeable number of successful male entrepreneurs in both the private and state-operated sectors were also regularly worshipping goddesses of fortune or consulting spirit mediums to determine efficacious business strategies (Bút Bi 1997; Gillespie 2005; Le Hong Ly 2001; Mydans 1996).

Classifying Hiền's Buddhist Ethic of Entrepreneurship

In identifying herself as Buddhist and in asserting an intimate tie between her business and her religious practices, Hiền would seem to resemble the market traders I studied. Both Hiền and the traders seemed to find Buddhism welcoming of them as female entrepreneurs—a source of stability or reassurance in a transforming economic climate. The differences between Hiền's conceptions of Buddhism and the traders', however, were as vast as

the status gulf separating the well-educated owner of three factories employing hundreds of workers from the proprietors of small market stalls dependent on the labor of family members. Through narrating a particular form of Buddhist piety, Hiền reflected and perpetuated this distinction by distancing herself from stigmatized, lower-status female traders. In so doing, she offered an implicit rationale for the class stratification emerging under Đổi Mới.

As an educated intellectual, Hiền seemed to share elite disdain for the marketplace superstitions that she viewed as masquerading as Buddhism. Although we did not directly discuss these practices, she clearly described her form of Buddhism as the result of careful study and reflection. Her beliefs, she suggested, were not propositions that had to be proven by beneficial transactions with the spirit world. Rather, she was engaged in a quest for truth guided by the legacy of more than two millennia of thought and meditation. That she was indeed progressing on the path to enlightenment and acquiring merit was made manifest in her financial success, but—and this is significant—this was not because she had explicitly requested prosperity. Wealth for Hiền was a welcome side effect of spirituality, not the crass goal of a self-interested engagement with the gods.

In suggesting that Buddhist beliefs could indirectly promote entrepreneurial activity, Hiền's statements raise interesting parallels to Max Weber's famous analysis in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1976 [1920]). Weber argues that the rise of Western European capitalism was facilitated by an ethos of "worldly asceticism" marked by inordinate dedication and self-discipline in the service of material accumulation. Weber traced this ethic of self-abnegation to two strands of Western European religious thought: (1) Protestant injunctions that individuals find a calling through which they could satisfy their moral obligations to serve others in their daily lives and (2) the Calvinist notion of predestination, which holds that some individuals are preselected by God to be saved from damnation. Weber argued that the combination of these two ideas made possible the view that one's calling could be seen as a sign that one had been chosen for salvation. Business could be a calling, and thus the money that this activity generated was not necessarily evil. What mattered most were the behaviors and attitudes of the people generating that money and the uses they made of their profit.

While *The Protestant Ethic* has rightly been criticized for overstating the significance of a relatively minor strand of Western European Protestantism in a model that consequently seems historically determinist, Weber's thesis is echoed in key aspects of Hiên's self-presentation. There is, however, a key difference. Weber does not suggest that Calvinists consciously embraced a philosophy to foster their business activity. His sense of causality is indirect, in that cultural circumstances set a broader structural context for the incubation of capitalism, without individuals necessarily perceiving the synergy between these factors. The logic that Weber describes as an implicit ethos becomes in Hiên's account an explicit philosophy of entrepreneurship. Her desire to accumulate merit by committing virtuous acts propelled her entrepreneurial career. When she experienced success in that career—the accumulation of wealth or the expansion of her enterprise—she saw evidence that her efforts were indeed meritorious, that she was fated to succeed, and that she deserved this success. Because merit must be continuously proven and accumulated lest a positive fate be altered for the worse, the incentive to pursue profit-making enterprise never dissipates. Buddhism provided Hiên with a deeply felt and compelling rationale for her materialism that not only reconciled her success with morality but made success the marker par excellence of her morality. At the same time, the clear philosophical component to her beliefs reflected and consolidated her identity as higher in status than other women who engaged in smaller-scale business.

As part of a growing group identified, rather problematically, as Asia's New Rich, Hiên's life story suggests the complex processes of relational subject formation that accompany and enable the production of class stratification. Building on Marxist and Weberian analyses of the in-between-ness of middle classes, Mark Liechty (2003) has argued that class should be viewed as a narrative and performative process. Those who see themselves as middle class or newly affluent feel tremendous anxiety, which leads them to distance themselves from those above and below by emphasizing their own superior morality and respectability; such assertions become an integral part of class production. Although part of this anxiety reflects broader critiques of class differentiation as a socioeconomic process, this can be difficult to see in the accounts of Liechty and others (see, for example, O'Dougherty 2002; Pinches 1999; Robison and Goodman 1996) because modernization agendas

in the countries they studied have persuasively glossed the emergence of middle and entrepreneurial classes as a generally positive sign of growing affluence. Ambivalence about inequality therefore becomes channeled, not into broader questioning of the system of class stratification, but into individual and group contests over who deserves to belong to privileged echelons.

Vietnamese debates about class bring into sharp relief a more thoroughgoing ambivalence surrounding class production. While the central government may have indefinitely postponed the Marxist goal of a classless society, anxiety about emergent inequality under Đổi Mới reflects not just the lingering memories of property confiscation or labeling of enemies of the people, but a sense that class hierarchy itself is fundamentally problematic and immoral. If newly comfortable middle and upper middle classes in general seek to rationalize their status in moral terms, then the even stronger sense in Vietnam that status based on wealth was wrong made Hiền's project of self-justification all the more urgent. As with emergent capitalism in Western Europe, the prosperity of entrepreneurs like Hiền required a more thoroughgoing, affirmative philosophy than the kinds of appeals to respectability or invocations of proper lifestyles and etiquette that have been championed by middle classes elsewhere in Asia (see, for example, Abelman 2002; Jones 2001; Kendall 2002; Pinches 1999; Robison and Goodman 1996). In defining her success as the effect of a spiritual virtue, Hiền paved the way for conceiving of class inequality as a reflection not just of different talents or opportunities but also of karmic merit mapped onto the material world. Class difference, in this view, might move beyond what officials and intellectuals typically depicted as an evil necessary for Vietnam to achieve prosperity. It might instead become an index of righteousness.

Entrepreneurial Confucianism and Asian Values

Although Buddhist practices were experiencing increased popularity among petty entrepreneurs under Đổi Mới, Buddhism was not the traditional philosophy most commonly cited by Vietnamese as a potential ethic of entrepreneurship. Some well-placed male businessmen and managers no doubt propitiated the same spirits as female traders, but I sensed that male entrepreneurs shunned visible participation in what was deemed a lowly

feminine realm. Instead, the form of piety that they sought to embody was more typically of the filial kind, through performance of a set of values associated with Confucianism. Confucian values shaped relations vertically within businesses and horizontally between business associates. Within firms, owners typically sought to style themselves as benevolent patriarchs looking out for the welfare of their employee-dependents, from whom they in turn demanded loyalty and respect. In dealing with business partners or potential associates, businessmen sought to build trust by showing themselves to possess *uy tín* [“prestige” or “face”]. These qualities were emphasized through reciprocal social exchanges, often cemented by outings to *bia ôm* [hugging beer] and *karaoke ôm* [hugging karaoke] establishments that offered female companionship. While some, including Hiền (as will become apparent below), might question the propriety of such carousing, it was part of a moral vision attributed to Vietnamese and East Asian traditions in which the entrepreneur conducted his business with concern for the welfare of others. According to Thomas Heberer, over 84 percent of the entrepreneurs he surveyed viewed businesses as analogous to a family, with the owner as the benevolent patriarch (Heberer 2003, 328–340).

Appeals to Confucianism may have helped men acquire prestige in business without descending into the realm of superstition, but they risked another sort of critique: that they were practicing an elite feudalism. Throughout the twentieth century, Vietnamese Marxist historiography depicted Confucianism as a remnant of Chinese rule that was blamed for backward [*lạc hậu*], feudal [*phong kiến*], or superstitious [*mê tín*] elements of Vietnamese tradition. This did not prevent such Confucian principles as filial piety or feminine modesty from being celebrated as quintessentially Vietnamese. But Marxist historians implicitly criticized Confucianism as inauthentic, as what Patricia Pelley calls a “veneer” under which lay “a powerful substratum of indigenous culture that was shared by all Vietnamese” (Pelley 2002, 131; see also Nguyen Khac Vien 1972; Phan Ngoc 1998; Taylor 2004, 251; Thanh Duy 1998, 37). These kinds of “veneer models” ascribing feudal backwardness almost exclusively to foreigners and elites were consistent with a longstanding Marxist nationalist agenda that classified elements of Vietnamese tradition into two camps: the foreign, elite, feudal, and bad versus the indigenous, mass, and good.

In keeping with the revisionist impulse of *Đổi Mới*, evocations of Confucianism as an entrepreneurial ethos in the 1990s reversed earlier cultural classifications to redesignate a greater array of traditions as “good.” Whereas the collectivizing campaigns of high socialism had tended to condemn tradition as patriarchal and feudal, scholars now implied that the state, in its fervor, had neglected the positive, natural, moral, and affective aspects of traditional life. Confucianism might, for example, be understood as an indigenized tradition that, in light of the contemporary need to Vietnamize market economics, could provide a buttress against the destabilizing assault of transformation. In this vein, legal scholar Phạm Duy Nghĩa has recently argued that Confucianism offers a traditional yet flexible Vietnamese ideology that could provide a “rich set of norms and institutions that could underpin economic and social development in Asia in general, and Vietnam in particular. . . . Confucian ethics can substitute for some functions of law; hence family capitalism is preponderant in Asia, and Confucian-based government and collectivism substitute and supplement the law to maintain social order and discipline” (2005, 86). As Cao Xuan Pho opined, if one removed the class and mystical elements from Confucianism, it could offer an instructive moral foundation for modernity (1993, 30).

It was no coincidence that depictions of, and anxieties about, the relationship between Confucian traditions, economics, and entrepreneurial morality that circulated in Vietnam during the 1990s contained echoes of the neo-Confucian Asian Values previously popularized in the “tiger economies” of Singapore, Malaysia, and elsewhere. Asian Values consisted of a loose *mélange* of traits, such as hard work, frugality, self-discipline, respect for authority, loyalty to kinship and social relations, mutuality, and orientation toward long-term group prosperity over short-term individual gains (see, for example Chen 1977; Lee Kwan Yew 2000; Manthorpe 1996; Wu 1977). For such notable Asian Values proponents as Singapore’s Lee Kwan Yew and Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohamad, explaining economic success in cultural terms appealed to a pan-Asian sense of identity that turned negative Orientalist claims of the fundamental Otherness of Asia into a positive celebration of regional distinctiveness and superiority. It also reversed modernist claims that Confucianism impeded economic development, claims that were still in circulation among Asian intelligentsia in the 1970s (see, for example,

Ho Wing Meng 1977; Shanmughalingam 1976). With Asian Values, not only could Confucianism promote economic development, it could also produce a modernity superior to that of its Western originators because of its moral core (see, for example, Rajaratnam 1977). It was as if Ruth Benedict had been resurrected to turn Marxian and Weberian analyses of an Asiatic Mode of Production on their heads.

In a country such as Vietnam that had long and quite self-consciously felt itself to be not quite modern (Taylor 2001), the idea that tradition was a means, rather than a barrier, to prosperity had enormous appeal. Vietnamese academics and local politicians repeatedly told me that Singapore provided a development model they hoped Vietnam would emulate, in large part because its one-party government promoted stability through traditional morality. At the same time, because growth in Vietnam in the 1990s did not reach heights as spectacular as those of Singapore, Taiwan, or Malaysia, appeals to cultural particularity were tinged with insecurity, most notably an insistence on classifying exactly which elements of tradition should be celebrated.

Appearing with increasing frequency in newspaper articles, politicians' speeches, scholarly works, and casual conversations, Confucian discourse and its attendant appeals to a presumed core of Vietnamese identity struck me as both vague and self-evident. Exactly what traditions were valorized varied according to the purposes of the speaker, making it a flexible ideological tool. Most Vietnamese nevertheless seemed to take for granted the uniqueness of East Asian traditions in general and Vietnamese culture in particular, as well as the need to preserve them while adapting an economic model presumed to be derived from the West. Discourse that aimed to promote or advance Vietnamese national culture [*văn hóa dân tộc*] tended to resonate with ethnic Vietnamese in an inclusive manner. Most people with whom I spoke seemed to think they knew what was being referenced in such appeals, even though they in fact had specific personal interpretations of these ideas.

Embodying Buddhism as an Alternative Vietnamese Value

Whether one sees Confucian entrepreneurship as a time-honored tradition or as an ad hoc coping strategy to regulate business ethics and obligations in the absence of legal frameworks (Backman 1999), the ideology is clearly far

more congenial to men than to women. Critics of appeals to pan-Asian cultural heritage have suggested that they enshrine different expectations for how men and women should display cultural identities (see, for example, Ong 1999; Heng and Devan 1992). Depending on the context, women can appear in idealizations of Asian-ness as Others threatening morality or the nation, as commodified symbols used to market products, or as vulnerable subjects for whom domesticity is the sole refuge of virtuous femininity (Abelmann 2002; Fahey 1998; Greenhalgh 1994; Heng and Devan 1992; Hooper 1998; Kendall 2002; Ong 1999; Sen and Stivens 1998; Stivens 1998a, 1998b). Such attempts to preserve a cultural essence can sanctify women as the guardians of the domestic realm in which values are transmitted from one generation to the next, but they do so by placing them in a distinctly passive position. Unable to cultivate morality through active study and practice, women seem ethical blank slates vulnerable to pernicious influences. As Aihwa Ong argues, this rhetoric enshrines a paternalistic state as the moral inheritor of values, discipline, and authority in ways that allow for the exploitation of women (1999).

Compared to other women, female entrepreneurs are in an even more uncomfortable position with respect to Asian Values. If women were to wine and dine their prospective business partners, they would lose rather than gain *uy tín*. They cannot as easily call on family metaphors to meld their corporate leadership with the moral authority of the patriarch. Women thus have to develop other tools to display their virtue and trustworthiness, such as unrelenting hard work and self-sacrifice to promote the well-being of others (Greenhalgh 1994; Weller 1998). For Hiền, these qualities were central to her life narrative of an explicitly Buddhist, rather than Confucian, piety.

During our interview, Hiền only once referred to the ways of doing business that have been highlighted as reflecting Asian Values: “Men do business through *quan hệ* [‘relationships’—the Vietnamese version of the famous Chinese *guanxi*]. They go out and get drunk at *bia ôm* and *karaoke ôm*. That’s how they cultivate *uy tín* and get people to trust them. I can’t do that, because I’m a woman. I can’t go and get drunk and hire women. What I can do is show people my faith. My business partners trust me because they know I live honestly and virtuously.”

As a woman, Hiền is prohibited from and does not want to engage in businessmen's typical *quan hệ* carousing. Hiền's Buddhism thus has an instrumental quality as an alternative strategy for accumulating *uy tín*. But Hiền also implies that it is a morally superior approach, for it involves not prostitutes and alcohol, but a conception of merit that is a more fitting and inclusive representation of so-called Asian Values. Hiền's interpretation of Buddhism suggests a symbiotic relationship between profit and merit. As a Buddhist, she seeks to live truthfully and with concern for others, and she believes that her embodiment of these principles has produced her success. Her business expands because her customers and workers recognize her piety and feel confident in placing their faith in her. As a woman, she finds that Buddhism offers a more practical code of ethics that enables her to pursue business opportunities in the absence of the male-specific techniques of *quan hệ* and without having to portray her work as virtuous solely because it reflects her traditional duty to care for her family. Through Buddhism, Hiền aligns her modern, public role as a leading entrepreneur with an accepted strand of tradition in Vietnam and throughout Asia in ways that do not cast aspersions upon her femininity.

Hiền's stance, although different from ways in which Buddhism, morality, and profit are typically discussed in contemporary Vietnam, is consistent with recent anthropological calls to understand the morality or immorality of money and enterprise as dependent on religious or moral contexts that define virtue and relate it to specific assessments of money-making activity (see, for example, Parry and Bloch 1989; Znoj 1998). While Buddhism has typically been seen as antithetical to the profit motive of late capitalism (Norberg-Hodge 1997; Schumacher 1973), there are nonetheless echoes of Hiền's philosophy in some versions of Buddhism. For example, Theravada Buddhism permits a justification of capitalist accumulation as a means for acquiring merit through the financing of monks and temples (Bao 2005; Bowie 1998; Davis 1989; Keyes 1983, 1993; Kirsch 1975; Sarkisyanz 1965; Spiro 1970; Tambiah 1973). Within the Mahayana tradition, a focus on engaged Buddhism in both Japan and Taiwan suggests that attending to mundane matters can help to cultivate a Pure Land in this world (Davis 1989; Pacey 2005). What makes Hiền's argument different from these claims is the implicit association she makes between Buddhist traditions and entrepreneurship as gendered.

On one level, Hiền's Buddhism might seem an acceptable female morality that engenders trust, much as Confucian ethics of respect for hierarchy and reciprocity might allow male entrepreneurs to build prestige. On another level, however, Hiền's assertion of ethics seems less openly instrumental in that she positions profit as the side benefit, but not the goal, of her beliefs and practices. Her Buddhism has an internalized, fundamental quality consistent with what Helle Rydstrøm has described as normative patterns of female ethical education in Vietnam, in which morality becomes embodied (2003). Central to Rydstrøm's discussion of feminine moral training is the notion of *tình cảm* ["feeling" or "sentiment"], a self-abnegating sensitivity to others that allows for the smooth flowing of social interaction without any visible agency on the part of a woman. In Hiền's narrative, *tình cảm* is implicit in her description of putting aside her own feelings and interests in order to yield to the desires of her children, business counterparts, or employees. Rather than demand obedience from others, she seeks more subtly to demonstrate her attention to *tình cảm* in that she can be counted on to provide what they need. Her feminine ethic of sacrifice is also evident in her self-description as hard working (e.g., her assertion, most likely exaggerated, that she works twelve to fourteen hours a day) and in her downplaying of her own talent by describing what was obviously a profitable business in much more modest terms (e.g., "barely enough money to deposit in the bank").

Tình cảm does not seem expressly connected to Buddhism. Indeed, Rydstrøm's monograph on the concept focuses on Confucianism and Taoism in the ethical education of boys and girls and hardly mentions Buddhism (2003, 171n14). Nevertheless, Hiền's Buddhism does seem central to her ability to build financially beneficial social relations based on *tình cảm*. In the intense, multistranded, and enduring social relations characteristic of the village life Rydstrøm describes, *tình cảm* becomes a ubiquitous but taken-for-granted feature of daily social interaction. Perhaps because business involves more instrumental, limited, and ad hoc interactions, Hiền has had to work to develop a more explicit means to foster trust and confidence. Performing piety by emphasizing key Buddhist terms or conducting meetings in a conference room decorated with the character "*tâm*," Hiền can subtly demonstrate her morality. For a male entrepreneur, a trip to a *karaoke* *ôm*

establishment might cement a business transaction, or a paternalistic provision for his employees' welfare, coupled with the latter's fear of retribution for disloyalty, might be sufficient to ensure his workers' productivity. This kind of overt assertion of instrumentality or success would be seen as unseemly if exhibited by a woman, so for Hiền, Buddhism serves to establish her as a reliable entrepreneur, honest and accommodating.

Hiền's discussions of Buddhism can be read as an attempt to diversify pervasive claims about Asian Values or Vietnamese cultural economy by moving them away from a vague but narrow and exclusionary focus on Confucianism. It would be incorrect, however, to see her move as a de-essentializing one. In defining her success as representing the inherent truths of a worldview fundamental to Asian societies, Hiền aligns herself with the moral and cultural authority of an aspect of tradition in a way that protects her from moral panics about capitalist individualism and materialism. She also reinscribes equally essentializing discourses of Vietnamese femininity. She is thus not demolishing the notion that Asian identity has propelled the so-called Asian Economic Miracle. Nor is she contesting stereotypical constructions of Vietnamese womanhood as requiring hard work, submission to fate, sacrifice on behalf of others, and *tình cảm*. Instead, she is seeking to fill in new content for those identities—content that includes her and justifies her successful entrepreneurship.

While Hiền's discomfort with Confucianism resonates with scholars' analyses of the exclusionary tactics embedded in Asian Values discourses, it also suggests that this same rhetorical vagueness and slippage can be manipulated to produce strategic reformulations. Hiền's Buddhist variant of Asian Values alters this conceptual framework, but also confirms its power. She seeks to assert membership, as a woman, in the successful entrepreneurial class, joining others who are perceived to have succeeded, not by abandoning tradition in favor of Western modernity, but by building on that tradition to craft a specific kind of modern Vietnamese cultural economy.

Conclusion

It has been my intent in this account to illuminate the various strands of culture, religion, gender, economics, and modernity to which Hiền's life history speaks. On the most literal level, this is a story of a woman's struggle for

success in a shifting economic and cultural landscape in which wealth evokes simultaneous desire and suspicion. Hiền seeks to protect herself from the resentment of those who have not experienced similar prosperity. She also wishes to develop a business strategy that will distinguish her from less elite female entrepreneurs, compensate for her lack of access to male *quan hệ* networks, and protect her from moral panics scapegoating “immoral” entrepreneurs for the broader dilemmas of late socialist transformations. In both its ideological and practical dimensions, Hiền’s position mirrors the national one, in which a ruling communist party seeks to encourage market-oriented development in ways that achieve wealth but do not challenge its claims to political or moral authority as the legitimate protector of Vietnamese culture. And in this way, Vietnam’s situation parallels the broader conditions of the growing economies in which Asian Values discourse has emerged as a powerful means for reconciling rapid change and growing foreign influence with a sense of distinctiveness and tradition.

While implicitly supporting critiques of Asian Values and other neotraditional discourses for justifying unequal configurations of political power, Hiền’s account reminds us not to dismiss the enormous power and attraction of cultural economic models to people attempting to make sense of changing conditions. The flexibility of this discourse allows women such as Hiền to reformulate Asian Values to include a gendered model of Buddhism as part of the fundamental traditions that both propel and explain economic success.

Hiền’s life history provides a compelling account of money making as embedded within a cultural and moral context that defines its meaning. To those who would view the rise of a market economy as threatening traditional morality, Hiền counters that one can both live morally and generate wealth. Indeed, it is virtue that ultimately determines one’s success in business. Like Weber’s Calvinists who saw their accumulation as evidence of their predetermined salvation, Hiền hints that the expansion of her factory provides evidence that she has indeed conducted her business in a way that is consistent with her heart and her conscience. Her success is deserved because it rests on and reflects a firm moral foundation. While one could argue that Hiền’s statements are defensive in that she is well aware of contemporary critiques of businesspeople as immoral and selfish—critiques to which both female entrepreneurs and the newly wealthy are particularly

vulnerable—I do not doubt her own belief in the honesty of her statements or her commitment to Buddhism. The calligraphy on the wall, her vegetarianism, and her son’s description of her as devout all support her claims to use Buddhist principles to guide her life and her business activities. To critics who decry capitalism as a foreign entity threatening to erode Vietnam’s traditional values, Hiền’s life history poses an alternative: it is precisely by holding fast to long-held religious principles that Vietnamese will be able to prosper both financially and morally in this era of rapid social and economic transformation.

In this way, Hiền’s life story affords an interesting perspective on the ambivalence surrounding class production under *Đổi Mới*. In an environment of late socialist market-oriented economic transformations, the desirability of having middle and wealthy classes at all was conspicuously open to question. Images of well-off entrepreneurs who had abandoned morality to pursue money and consumer goods served not just to condemn individuals’ behaviors but also to indict the idea of social differentiation itself. In its particularity, Hiền’s life story suggests a vision of class as a morally contentious, performative subjectivity mediated by gender, politics, and religion. The Buddhist piety that Hiền narrated for me and presumably performed for others enabled her to construct an identity as a female entrepreneur more virtuous than her equally successful male counterparts, but no less feminine than the market women from whom she sought to distinguish herself as more advanced and civilized. When Hiền used Buddhism to make sense of her success, she was attempting not only to shield herself and her family from critique but also to construct a moral philosophy that justified the existence of inequality. Beyond constituting her specific class location, Hiền’s narrative participated in the process of reifying class categories as natural and self-evident. What is at stake in Hiền’s life story, as well as in discursive claims about tradition, culture, religion, and Asian Values more generally, is not just a particular person’s position within a given socioeconomic order, but the construction of a class system in which inequality comes to be seen as normal, and perhaps even righteous. ■

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ABSTRACT

By the 1990s, Đổi Mới had sparked both desire for profit and suspicion of wealth as a threat to traditional Vietnamese morality. This article explores how one successful businesswoman responded by attributing her prosperity to Buddhist piety. In rejecting the Confucian ethics favored by businessmen, she advanced an interpretation of traditional morality more accommodating of women and defended her class privilege as righteous. Her narrative draws attention to individual performances of class as a means both to justify one's own status and to contribute to the gendered, political, religious, and moral discourses through which class stratification comes to be seen as natural.

KEYWORDS: *Buddhism, female entrepreneurs, Asian Values, morality, class, late socialism*

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