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Enframing the Petty Bourgeoisie: Gender, Expertise, and the Classification of Market Traders in Postwar Vietnam

**March 6th, 12:10-2pm
Arts Screening Room**

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Over the past two decades, the swelling ranks of urban middle classes in Vietnam have been a welcome sign of prosperity, but they have also raised the moral and political dilemma of growing inequality. This paper explores how various levels of government and individuals in southern Vietnam have made sense of and effected economic change through moralizing narratives about the petty bourgeoisie, particularly female marketplace traders, an ambiguous group in both socialist and capitalist schemes of classification. Since the end of the war in 1975, state planners in Hồ Chí Minh City have variously “enframed” (Mitchell 2002) marketplace traders as potential anti-revolutionaries who must join socialist cooperatives (1975-1986), as backward vestiges of tradition unable to drive modern economic development (1986-2000), and as tourist attractions and potential sources of flexible entrepreneurial expertise in a rapidly shifting global economy (2000-present). Keeping in mind that class narrations are never simply top-down, I explore how traders in a Hồ Chí Minh City marketplace have constructed their own class positions in dialogue with postwar state policies. What makes discussion of the petty bourgeoisie in Hồ Chí Minh City noteworthy is that much official enframing and traders’ responses to it has been accomplished indirectly, by associating class with essentializing rhetoric about the enduring qualities of Vietnamese women. This analysis suggests that processes of enframing politically volatile class categories can be most effective when they transmogrify dilemmas of class into presumably more “natural” categories such as gender.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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