

Preface

The first time I was exposed to Vietnam (and Asia for that matter) was in 2006 when I went there as a visiting tourist. Having been impressed by the dynamic and forward-looking spirit prevalent among the people I encountered throughout my journey, I developed a profound longing to familiarise myself with the country, its people and their lives. I returned to the country in 2008 and stayed there for a period of six months in order to conduct ethnographic research for my master thesis, and again in 2011 to collect data for another research project on small- and middle-scale private businesses in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. It was during my recurrent sojourns that I first began to take notice of the remarkable pace of transformation in the country.

It was not until July 2012, when officially I arrived in Hanoi for commencing the fieldwork stage of my Ph.D., that I embarked on a much longer ethnographic inquiry. Soon after settling in, I was constantly under the impression that a vibrant atmosphere prevailed wherever I went. This was in large part due to the countless and very-well-frequented shops lined along the streets of the city centre. The locals appeared to be constantly on the move. To my amazement, Hanoi had undergone even further change since my last visit. But this time in

addition to the bustling streets filled with even more cars, the painstaking traffic jams, the newly built high-rise buildings in the south-western part of the city, the conspicuous presence of shopping malls also drew my attention.

Scattered across the city, these brand new multi-storey malls now host international luxury labels, food courts and large entertainment areas with cinemas. Traditional marketplaces, which are still the favourite places for most Vietnamese to buy fresh foods and grocery as well as household articles, clothing and other items for daily life, exist next to these shopping malls. However, according to the state's vision of modernity and its developmental model, more and more of these traditional marketplaces are undergoing what the state refers to as an "upgrade", which in reality results either in renovation of the building or in changes made to marketplace ownership and their transformation into commercial centres. This process is not confined to urban areas but extends to places well beyond it. I became aware of this during my first visit to Ninh Hiệp, when I began to appreciate the various indicators of the pace and extent of marketisation. However, it was throughout the course of my fieldwork that I saw more vividly the centrality of the marketisation process to the lives of Ninh Hiệp traders. Although a great deal of this book is about the operation of the marketplace, it also addresses the broader topics of economic restructuring, governance and participation that inform the market.

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