

*Essential trade: Vietnamese women in a changing marketplace*

By ANN MARIE LESHKOWICH

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014, Pp. 252. Photos, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S0022463417000509

Ann Marie Leshkovich's anthropological writings on postwar Vietnam have been among the most insightful about the shifting dynamics of class and gender in the fast-changing country. Her sharp analyses based on astute observations and long years of engagement with social and economic life in the urban milieu of Ho Chi Minh City should be required reading for scholars and students of contemporary Vietnamese society. *Essential Trade* will soon become a classic. Its meticulously crafted ethnography of female traders in the signature market of the city, Ben Thanh, tells us as much about everyday lives and economic practices as about the political-economic transformations that have been shaping these lives and practices in past decades.

Leshkovich carried out the first stretch of her ethnographic research on Ben Thanh market between 1995 and 1997 and after that revisited the market and maintained relationships with the women traders in her study over a decade. She was thus able to document long-term developments in the market, although the dynamics of the mid-1990s seem central to her arguments. The mid-1990s were fascinating times, with much reshuffling and experimentation in a society that had just emerged from decades of central planning, war and internal geographical and ideological divisions. Almost a decade following the formal introduction of economic reforms (*đổi mới*), the political economy remained laden with anxieties about an unknown future in which past regional and class antagonisms and ideological forces continued to loom large alongside the greater penetration of global ideas, linkages, and institutions. The Vietnamese state was taking further steps in advancing what it termed market socialism, a system in which a market economy operates under the Communist Party's political monopoly. As a symbolic marker of Ho Chi Minh City, Ben Thanh market represents a space that simultaneously invokes a traditional past (despite it being an emblem of colonial civilisation) and a future in which the South regains its stature as the economic engine of the country, a place infused with the contradictions of the new economy. In Leshkovich's skilful ethnography, the lives and livelihood strategies of women traders in Ben Thanh market do not just bear the marks of the uncertain political economy of post-war Vietnam, they are agents in the reproduction and remaking of it.

Central to her analysis of their trading practices, which includes managing the relationship to local cadres and the state, their family life, spirituality and consumption, is the notion of essentialism, the idea that socially and historically constructed categories are taken as naturally given. Accordingly, certain qualities are attributed to particular groups in society as innate characteristics, creating a social and moral order in which some are necessarily of lower value than the other. Essentialism thus serves the purposes of social and political domination. Furthering Gayatri Spivak's discussion of strategic essentialism, however, Leshkovich shows that the female traders of Ben Thanh market themselves consistently portray market trading

as an essentially female activity, as characterised by feminine features of being small-scale and involving largely domestic relations, and as something suited to a lower class whose political power can be ignored. In doing so, they reproduce the very essentialist categories imposed on them throughout history, notably for the purpose of regulating small trade and traders during state socialism.

Leshkovich argues convincingly that such a strategy is anchored in anxiety over past treatment of Southern properties and people by the current regime and memories of the war and antagonisms between regional actors who came to occupy differential places in the social order. By downplaying the potential of their trade and its profitability through these deeply gendered forms of essentialism, they seek to ward off the scrutiny of state officials and the envy of fellow traders, latent dangers to their trading activities. Through working within the dominant categories of tradition, family and kinship, class and gender for their own purposes, Ben Thanh's female traders deal with risks and uncertainties, and with state bureaucracies and officials, with varying outcomes. Some of them are able to surreptitiously entertain middle-class lifestyles and aspirations that contrast starkly with their self-portrayal of surviving as small-scale traders. This is an important argument in itself, but Leshkovich goes a step further in showing that these essentialist categories are also meaningful for the people involved. They provide them with the moral resources needed to navigate the uncertainties of market socialism and the anxieties of operating in a marketplace intimately linked to a political economy that is both globally connected and shaped by the contingencies of power under market socialism.

The contributions of Leshkovich's book go beyond Vietnam studies. It makes a critical intervention in gender studies by articulating the complex historical and cultural dynamics with which gender and place become constitutive of broader political economic processes, especially in the context of market socialism. Meanwhile, her expert treatment of gender and place as integral to people's economic lives brings fresh insights to the sub-field of economic anthropology, revealing the workings of the economy through the everyday practices and lived experiences of the social actors involved.

MINH T.N. NGUYEN

*Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology*