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Doing Bodhisattva's Work: Charity, Class, and Selfhood of Petty Traders in Hồ Chí Minh City

At four o'clock one morning in August 2019, I arrived on my bike at an alleyway tucked deep inside a working-class neighborhood in District 4 in Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam. I was looking for Sáu and her charity cooking team. The sky was dark and the neighborhood was still asleep, yet there was one alleyway humming with the sound of conversations and laughter of eight middle-age and older women. They were cooking outdoors, hurriedly assembling hundreds of hot meal boxes that would later be transported to General Hospital 115, one of the major hospitals in HCMC, to be distributed to patients there.

Every two weeks, these women gather in this alleyway under the coordination of Sáu, a shopkeeper and housewife, and stay awake the entire night to cook charity meals from scratch. The number of hot meals they cook varies from five hundred to one thousand servings, depending on the amount of money, rice, other ingredients, and gas that they have received from donors, neighbors, and petty traders (people involved in small-scale sales) from a street market nearby. Each serving costs about 20,000VNĐ or one dollar.

At nine o'clock, after spending the entire night cooking and assembling seven hundred lunch boxes, the volunteers sent the food to the hospital in

an auto rickshaw. When the food arrived, there was a long line of people waiting already. The team members insisted that everyone queue up and present their food stamps, which had been distributed by a group member at the hospital rooms while the rest of the team was cooking. The food stamps read "Aunt Sáu's (District 4) charity cooking team. Bring this stamp to Gate A at 10 a.m. for food."

Little did the people queuing up for the free lunch know that the food was made in a back alley of a working-class neighborhood by a group of working and retired petty traders, many of whom are also Buddhist practitioners. Sáu, the group leader, is living a life that could not be described as much easier than that of the recipients. A sixty-three-year-old Buddhist practitioner, she lives in a simple one-story house that also functions as a small shop, where she sells a limited variety of goods of modest value, such as snack sachets, soft drink bottles, homemade vinegar, and soy milk. This shop is the main source of income for her and her sick husband, who is cared for at home and is completely dependent on her. Sáu, therefore, definitely did not fit into my preconception of charity givers as people with abundant means.

During my field research in 2013 and 2019, a fact that stood out for me was that a considerable number of charity givers I met were people from modest social and economic backgrounds. These people themselves needed to be careful in their daily expenses to make ends meet. Many of them were above sixty years of age. For example, for Sáu, the twenty million đồng that she collected for cooking charity meals every other week was several times greater than her own monthly income from the little shop. Recent studies also point out that Vietnamese people from the lower working class, who have no steady income, or the self-employed, such as petty traders, are more likely to contribute their income to charity, as compared to white-collar workers with office jobs.¹ Hence, this popularity of charity among the working class in Vietnam raises questions about the meaning of benevolent work for Vietnamese people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

This paper focuses on charity givers from a petty trading background in HCMC. Most of the participants are women petty traders who sell raw or cooked food at street markets in the city. Some own shops that sell products for everyday household use. For those who have retired, the only

income is the allowance they get from their children. The charitable work undertaken by these people is the angle through which I explore social stratification within the lower class. The discussion in this paper is based on the social fact that petty traders are generally considered as the lower class in Vietnam's traditional social hierarchy, as well as in the postwar socialist stratification.²

Not only are studies exploring charitable practice in contemporary Vietnam scarce, the existing works tend to focus on organization-based charity and have thus paid insufficient attention to grassroots charitable giving.³ Studies on faith-based charity in Vietnam have highlighted the activities of religious institutions, such as the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha or significant temples in the country, rather than spontaneous charitable events organized by lay practitioners.⁴

Although individual charitable giving has not been the focus of much scholarly work, it has long received the attention of domestic media. Some noteworthy examples include the popular television program *Cặp lá yêu thương* [Pair of Affectionate Leaves] on VTV1 (Vietnam national television), and columns in prominent newspapers dedicated to fund-raising for vulnerable members of society. These media channels are also platforms for the public recognition of individuals who conduct charitable and voluntary work in their communities. In emphasizing the Vietnamese moral tradition of mutual aid in the portraits of charity volunteers, the dominant narrative behind the media coverage is a message about national unity and ethnic solidarity. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam, many small businesses, households, and individuals gave away food and rice to street vendors, motorbike taxi drivers, garbage collectors, and recyclable-waste collectors, whose livelihoods were affected during the social lockdown in April 2020. The news on domestic television and periodicals described this surge of charitable spirit and activities in large cities in Vietnam using widely known cultural adages on Vietnamese solidarity, such as “affection shared between people from the same egg sac” [*nhĩa đồng bào*], “mutual care between gourd and pumpkin” [*bầu bí thương nhau*].⁵ In drawing from the state-endorsed myth that all Vietnamese originated from “the same egg sac” [*đồng bào*], the media coverage emphasizes the spirits of solidarity and mutual assistance, thus overlooking the

social inequalities and class dynamics within charitable giving. Studies by Vietnamese scholars on charitable work also emphasize this cultural tradition of giving and highlight the Buddhist concept of compassion that pervades Vietnamese people's everyday practice of giving.⁶ As such, a media-based and scholarly analysis of how this cultural morality attached to charitable giving is intertwined with Vietnam's present social structure is still largely absent.

In his work on philanthropy in Vietnam, Sidel points out that individual and corporate charitable giving started to rise in Vietnam during the *Đổi Mới* [Renovation] era.⁷ This phenomenon is not inherently unique to Vietnam. In China, where the state has retreated from an array of social services, a surge of nonprofit and voluntary sectors aimed at complementing the state's welfare system can also be observed.⁸ Since *Đổi Mới*, a deepening of class divisions and inequalities in society has arisen in Vietnam, along with the privatization of welfare services and economic development policies.⁹ Previous studies have insufficiently explored how this increasing prevalence of institutional and grassroots charity reveals how people display and make sense of their class-specific identities through their participation in charitable giving and receiving.

Charity is inherently an intensive, socially engaging practice, and hence it offers a platform for people from different classes and backgrounds to meet and interact. It is, therefore, also a space where people navigate social hierarchy and negotiate their positions in this stratification by interacting with others. Charity at the grassroots level thus offers an opportunity to explore how Vietnam's social stratification is perceived and made sense of by people, especially those who belong to the lower class. In this research, I will be focusing on how petty traders, working or retired, define themselves as a class unit through their interaction with the recipients of their charitable work.

The data presented in this paper specifically revolve around the interactions between charity givers who are petty traders and their recipients. A prominent theme emerging from the fieldwork is the notion of deservingness, or "the right person" [*đúng người*] to give charity gifts to. Not only does deservingness underlie the giver-recipient connection, but it also highlights the relationships between charity givers and their recipients. Several

studies on gift giving and charity have drawn the connection between deservingness and suffering, as well as the impulse to eliminate a fellow human being's adversity through benevolent work. Deservingness also underlies the relationship and tension between social classes, as charity serves the purposes of both the privileged and underprivileged classes. On the one hand, charity further enhances the social status and recognition of the upper class,¹⁰ while on the other hand, it is a "weapon of the weak" to shape the behavior of the wealthy.¹¹ Weber also points out that charity naturalizes hierarchy and the class system.¹² In these studies, charity is usually done by people from the upper classes to assist those from lower classes. Their relationship, therefore, characterizes the class tension while charity naturalizes the existing social hierarchy. Building on these existing studies, I question how these relationships are manifested in the case where charitable assistance is given and received from the lower classes in a society. This paper also investigates what charitable work reveals about class-based self-identification of givers from the petty trade.

Extended from the discussion on class, this paper will then analyze the relationship between the HCMC petty traders and the state. Recent studies of postsocialist society in Vietnam have inspired my exploration of the concerns of these traders about social class and the impact that their charitable work has on the wider society. Ken MacLean's work illustrates the simultaneous combination and collision of different modes of political rationalities in postsocialist Vietnam.¹³ This combination exists in the hybridity of Vietnam's so-called socialist-oriented market economy, while the collision is evident in the fact that the high socialism of the past continues to have an impact on the perception of many Vietnamese people and thus creates a "historical disjuncture" between the present market economy and the past centrally planned economy.¹⁴ MacLean's observation parallels the ethnographic data of HCMC petty traders' charitable work that is analyzed in this study. Charity is a social practice through which petty traders, drawing on their dispositions and skills in the marketplace, define not only their class-specific identity, but also their moral status in society. They position themselves with respect to the state through their work of care for the poor and needy. Drawing on MacLean's argument about Vietnam's sociopolitical hybridity and

disjuncture, I argue that charitable work of HCMC petty traders reflects the attempt of this group to negotiate and define their social and moral status in Vietnam's society.

The "Right Person": Deservingness and Incapability

I developed an interest in charitable practices during my 2013 fieldwork on elderly women who followed Buddhism in HCMC. Shortly after that I became acquainted with a woman who led a charity group that consisted of her friends at a Buddhist temple and from her neighborhood. I realized that there were many others like her. They cooked and distributed hot meals at hospitals, old-age homes, and orphanages inside and outside the city. They brought gifts to rural villages in districts that were on the outskirts of HCMC and in the Mekong Delta. They were connected to the recipients and local authorities in these remote areas through their Buddhist friends or their relatives who lived in the areas. Inspired by their work, I returned to the same group in 2019 to participate in and observe their activities. At that point, I was introduced to other people who also participated in the charitable work.

During my involvement with the groups, I noticed that the charity givers often wondered where to find deserving recipients. A number of the workers mentioned that charity givers from HCMC had to travel to remote rural areas, as it had become difficult to find poor people in the city to whom basic gifts like a free meal, dry food, or school supplies would be meaningful. On one such trip to a remote village where people lived without electricity in Vĩnh Long Province, I participated in a conversation with ten members of a charity group. They were discussing if they should start raising funds from their relatives and friends for an amount of ninety million đồng (approximately \$3,800) to sponsor a construction project that would connect the village to the commune's electric station. One of the women said they should help the village out, because the women there could not do anything at home for a living without electric light. Another woman, however, disagreed with her friend, saying that the villagers were still young and could work to earn money to bring electricity to their area. In their discussion on the deservingness of these villagers, the women mostly focused on the villagers' capability to help themselves, given that

they were young, healthy, and able to work, and thus external help might not be necessary.

How charity givers assign meaning to their work, which people they believe deserve help, and how they define deservingness sheds light on the way in which these people perceive the disparities between themselves and others. Charitable work is a way of assisting others by providing them with the resources that they are deprived of, such as food, utilities, or shelter. How charity givers define deservingness indicates their perception of the gap between themselves and the recipients with regard to material resources, social status, or capability.

As illustrated in the vignette above, a recipient's deservingness is defined through the capability to work to support themselves or their family. This capability-based definition can be seen in the specific criteria that charity givers rely on to choose recipients. A number of charity givers whom I met said that they preferred helping people with disabilities, such as the blind; people with leprosy or mental illness; elderly abandoned by their children; or small children at orphanages, hospitals, and poor rural schools. These people are not capable of supporting themselves. The following vignette will further illustrate this point.

In the seventh lunar month of 2019,¹⁵ I joined Mrs. An, a retiree in her eighties, in a gift-distributing event being held in her home. She distributed gifts at this time every year because in Buddhism it is believed that this is an important time to make merit for one's living or deceased parents. Before the day of the event, she and her friends, who were also donors, walked on the streets in the vicinity of their homes to distribute gift tickets to random people they believed were "the right persons." By "right persons" they meant those who "crawled on the ground" [*lết lăn*], meaning people with severe physical disabilities that restricted their mobility, the blind, and people with leprosy. They gave gift tickets to many lottery ticket sellers and beggars with disabilities.

The first time I heard the terms that Mrs. An and her friends used to describe disabilities, such as "crawling on the ground," "walking with sticks," "limbless," "blind," or "lepers," I was taken aback. These terms are usually frowned upon in other social contexts, as they have discriminatory implications. However, I later found that Mrs. An, as well as the other

charity givers, used these terms simply to describe the most visible traits of bodily suffering of their recipients. Le Hoang Ngoc Yen's study on people with leprosy in central Vietnam also shows that bodily traits of suffering are among the physical traits that the patients deployed to make themselves appear as legitimate to receive aid from charity groups in HCMC and elsewhere.¹⁶ At first glance, it appears that charity givers also define deservingness based on traits of suffering. However, underlying this focus on suffering is the emphasis on a person's incapability to work to support himself or herself. These traits of suffering point to their powerlessness and vulnerability.

Recent studies on philanthropy also focus on self-sufficiency as an indicator of deservingness for institutional charity aid in several societies. Melissa L. Caldwell, for example, points out that starting in the seventh century in Russia, the poor became "a politically salient category" and "poverty" became known as a social phenomenon that needed to be addressed.¹⁷ Having poor people was problematic because they were not contributing to the state. Consequently, charitable institutions assisting the poor in Russia focus on "teach[ing] personal skills and cultivat[ing] personal habits that would make people self-sufficient."¹⁸ Dickinson also states that charitable aid in the United States is no longer given with the intent to alleviate suffering of others.¹⁹ Instead, it is now used as an incentive and assistance for people who work on low-income jobs. For example, the reformed welfare program in New York City creates internal stratification within the lower working class by prioritizing recipients who are working on low-income jobs, while penalizing those without jobs by making them work for less than the minimum wage to receive food stamps.²⁰

As an extension of these studies, I argue that not only is self-sufficiency a means of identifying deservingness for charity, it is also the attribute that charity givers from lower economic backgrounds use to distinguish themselves from their recipients. Given that many charity givers are not steady or high-income earners and are often retired and rely on their children, their demarcation between the recipients and themselves is not marked by material wealth. Calling themselves "people with a good heart" [*nhà hảo tâm*], the Vietnamese term for charity givers, they are usually not the donors, or the major donors, in their own charity projects. Charity givers

who have retired use their own savings from the allowance given by their children or from various life rituals that are celebrated in their family, such as new year celebrations when they are given money by relatives or funeral offerings at the death of their spouses, and with this they donate a few hundred thousand đồng to charity. The income of charity givers who are still working to earn a living, like Sáu, is usually not high or stable. While their contributions are not significant in monetary terms, they invest a substantial amount of effort and time in visiting their wealthy friends, neighbors, relatives, and petty traders in the markets where they work or used to work to solicit donations, as well as to prepare, transport, and distribute charity goods to the poor and the needy.

As such, the main criteria that they use to distinguish themselves from their recipients is the ability to support themselves. Although the interaction between charity givers and recipients is very brief, usually only a couple of hours during gift or food distributing events, all the charity givers that I met had similar perceptions about the people that they help. They often described recipients as incapable, and this is represented through their physical limitations or vulnerability (being old, being disabled, or being abandoned).

However, this distinction between charity givers and their recipients can be blurred by the recipients' conduct. For example, several women who cooked hot meals for hospital patients told me that they preferred cooking and bringing food directly to the patients, instead of giving them dry food such as rice, instant noodles, and spices, which do not require a lot of labor and preparation. Having seen many recipients hoarding and then selling the distributed dry food to others or to shops at a lower price to earn money, they preferred cooking the meals so the recipients would eat them. If recipients make money by selling the gifts, the charitable actions lose meaning. By selling the gifts, recipients also display their capability to conduct trade to earn money for themselves and their families, thus removing the gap between themselves and their benefactors.

This emphasis on the capability to work is also evident in the way the charity givers defined the charitable activities as "work" [*công việc*]. Many Buddhist women I met perceived charity not only as a Buddhist merit-

making practice, but as “Bodhisattva’s work” [*công việc Bồ Tát*]. It is the work of a Bodhisattva, a divine being in the Buddhist pantheon, to save sentient beings living in this mundane world from suffering. I will further analyze this association between charity and Bodhisattva in the latter part of this paper.

In addition, perceiving their recipients as more vulnerable and in need of assistance, charity gives obscure their own humble backgrounds. Many of them only start doing charity work after their retirement, when they have more free time. These retirees both focus on the incapability of their recipients and work on their own feelings of vulnerability. Thus, by doing charitable work to take care of vulnerable people, retired charity workers place themselves back on the capable side of the paradigm of capability and incapability. This centrality of capability in petty traders’ conceptualization of the gap between themselves and their recipients reflects the significance of work in their lives. It also demonstrates the meaning of work in Vietnamese people’s sense of place in the society. The following section will further elaborate on this point.

Intertwining Trade, Care, and Class

The significance of work can be seen in both political and cultural discourses in Vietnam. As Tine M. Gammeltoft and Le Hoang Ngoc Yen point out, engaging in productive work is an important factor underlying one’s personhood and belonging to a community in socialist Vietnam.²¹ The salience of work is, however, not merely a characteristic of socialist citizenship—the values of hard work and contribution are also embedded in Vietnamese culture. Regarding charity and voluntary practice in Italy, Andrea K. Muehlebach also elaborates on how unwaged work is important as a means to retain “ethical citizenship” and a sense of social belonging for people.²² She highlights that people from the so-called “passive population” in Italy, such as the unemployed, early retirees, and the elderly, participate in charity and voluntary work, or “ethical labor,” to retain their social position as productive citizens of society.²³

For Vietnamese petty traders, work has been a defining factor that determines their position in society. In traditional society, traders were at the bottom of the social and moral order. The traditional hierarchy of work

classifies trade as the least noble means of earning money.²⁴ The Communist Party has also used work to demarcate class in Vietnam. Considering itself as the party of the working class, the Vietnamese Communist Party praised the role of workers as the force that could drive the revolution of Vietnam's society. However, the kind of work that was valued and touted as politically and socially revolutionary did not include the work of traders, who sold goods and made a profit from the sales. This fact can be observed in the period after the fall of South Vietnam under communism in 1975, when petty traders were treated with suspicion by the government. Traders were branded as "potential anti-revolutionaries" who needed to be reformed by the state.²⁵ After 1975, and well into the 1990s after *Đổi Mới*, traders were rendered as classed and gendered subjects by the government. Their capitalist orientations toward making money, maximizing profit, and accumulating wealth led to them being given a low moral status in the society. Petty traders, many of whom were women, were perceived as an uneducated, backward, weak, feminine, and marginal class. Their economic contribution was also considered unimportant for the state's developmental goals.²⁶

However, charity works toward reversing this low social and moral status. Trade is the essential foundation for the ethical work of charity. Not only does trade identify petty traders as socioeconomic agents, but it also shapes their method of charitable work. It provides them with resources, skills, and the network needed to implement charitable projects. Charity thus combines the ethical work of care for non-kin recipients and traders' habitus and skills of calculation, accumulation, wise use of money, and tactics to build trust and create a network. As such, work in trade and work in charity intertwine and result in the charitable practice echoing the manner in which the traders conduct trade.

For example, Khai, a charity team leader I met in 2013, drew on her business skills and network to successfully run her charity projects. Her group funded repairs to roads, small bridges, and houses that were damaged after the flood seasons in remote villages in the Mekong Delta. Despite her lack of formal education, Khai was an excellent bookkeeper and maintained records of all the amounts she received as donations, whether large or small. She would then make copies of her records and would distribute

them to the people who donated money to her. As a result, she came to be known as a charity organizer who was transparent with money. When she traveled to rural villages to distribute gifts, she would ask a member in the group to film the events. The footage would be recorded onto several DVDs, which she would distribute to current and potential donors. With these DVDs, her charity team quickly recruited more members because people wanted to see themselves doing charity in remote villages and enjoyed being in videos. With time, her projects started raising larger donations as well.

Given the vibrancy of grassroots charities in HCMC, charity giving is a competitive field where skills that are needed to survive in the marketplace are valuable and largely applicable. Charity givers need to be creative so that they can customize their gifts to address the needs of their recipients and come up with donations that other groups have not thought of yet. They need to find their own expertise as providers of specific gifts or services. There are groups that specialize in cooking hot meals for patients, and groups that collect used clothes and household utility items from their relatives and acquaintances in the city and then redistribute them to poor households in rural villages. Other groups collect money to dig wells or repair houses, small bridges, and roads in rural villages that have been affected by floods.

As such, trade is valorized as ethical work because it enables charity. Petty traders use their work experience and network as a resource to leverage the skill, connections, and finance needed for charity. For them, trade does not imply social marginalization and impugn them as belonging to a low, economically unimportant, and morally ambiguous class. Instead, trade is celebrated as a channel for meaningful social contribution and belonging. This claim is evident in the fact that a major part of my conversations with petty traders who carried out charitable work revolved around two topics, trade and money. Organizers of charity teams generally had pieces of paper on which they would note the amount of donations from friends, relatives, and acquaintances, and they would show these records to me as soon as we would start interacting, to show me that they handled the money of donors very carefully. They often expressed their gratitude and appreciation for the “difficult trade” [*làm ăn khó khăn*] that

the donors must have gone through. A charity organizer often joked with her friends who were donors that she liked “Uncle-Hồ-in-blue,” more than “Uncle Hồ in other colors” (because the banknote with the highest value, 500,000VND, equivalent to twenty dollars, has a picture of President Hồ Chí Minh and is blue in color).

In distinguishing themselves from their recipients by line of work, they also credit their trade with a class-identifying effect. Being capable of working, petty traders identify themselves as a self-reliant group, which in turn echoes the quality of self-mastery and self-dependence considered as the “morally appropriate, neoliberal personhood” in modern Vietnamese society.²⁷ This interweaving of trade and charity therefore gives petty traders and their work a moral significance.

This moral significance can also be seen in the existing studies on social stratification in present-day Vietnam. These studies highlight consumption patterns, ownership, and income levels as the main indicators to identify classes in Vietnam.²⁸ However, some studies also point out that other factors, such as morality and knowledge, are the criteria that distinguishes the middle class in Vietnam, and not wealth.²⁹ This emphasis on morality rather than on wealth is not unique to Vietnam but is also seen in other late-socialist societies, given the past suspicions of personal property ownership.³⁰

However, charity simultaneously reveals the petty traders’ feelings of precarity about their place in society. They feel that they share this sense of precarity and vulnerability with the charity recipients. The answers I got when I asked why they did charity work often pointed to the hardship not only their recipients but also they themselves were going through. For example, a woman who sold vegetables in a street market in HCMC explained that she did charity because even though she was not wealthy, she saw around her so many people facing far more hardships and deprivation than her. The following conversation between a Buddhist woman practitioner and an inmate of a leprosy village portrays this sense of responsibility and sympathy toward the adversities faced by others. The woman traveled with her group to a leprosy colony on the outskirts of HCMC to distribute rice, instant noodles, soy sauce, sugar, and salt.

Laywoman: We sell food at the market and some of us sell lottery tickets. We receive allowances from our children. They work very hard to support their families. We are not in abundance. Our situations are worse than many others in society, but we have come here to do charity.

Man with leprosy: You have a kind heart.

Laywoman: We must help sentient beings. We must love the patients [implying the people in the village]. You are sentient beings who are facing this miserable plight. We must do whatever we can do for you. There is a lot of suffering in other places too and we must go there to help the people. We sisters can only give very humble gifts. You can live on these gifts for only a few days, is that right? We wish we could give you more, but that is beyond our means.

This dialogue indicates the experience of precarity that charity givers share with the people they help. Hence, when asked why they do charity work, women often cite a Vietnamese saying, “Looking up, I am equal to nobody, yet looking down, nobody is equal to me” [*Nhìn lên mình không bằng ai, nhìn xuống không ai bằng mình*]. A fish dealer that I met during a charity trip organized by a neighbor also quoted this saying to me when explaining why she contributed to charity groups every now and then, even though she was in her late sixties, living alone without any support from her children, and had to work to earn money to pay for her house rent, food, and health care. She said, “I am not rich. I work very hard to earn money. Looking up I am not equal to anyone, but if I look down, I am still better off than many others in the society.” Some women also quoted another popular Vietnamese proverb that praises compassionate spirit, a proverb often used in media events, television programs, and the government’s official ceremonies to celebrate charitable efforts of entrepreneurs, organizations, and individuals: “A complete leaf covers a torn leaf” [*Lá lành đùm lá rách*]. However, the women I spoke to often improvised on this by adding a second clause, “An already torn leaf covers an even more badly torn leaf” [*Lá rách đùm lá rách hơn*].

Through these sayings, the women explain the reasons for their benevolent work based on their understanding of Vietnam’s increasingly stratified society.³¹ In this society, their own status is rather modest. However, these sayings also address their awareness of their own relatively

privileged position compared to many others who have been left behind in the country's overall rapid economic development during the recent decades. Yet simultaneously, this precarity also unites the lower groups. This intertwining of division and unity clearly manifests in the ways HCMC charity givers perceive their relationship with the recipients. On the one hand, the metaphor of being more "complete" [*lành*] compared to the "badly torn" [*rách*] reveals the petty traders self-identification as an in-between social group, which, albeit lower than others, is in fact better than many people in the society. On the other hand, it also shows their own understanding of the value of solidarity and interdependence to survive in Vietnam's society.

"Beneficial for the country and for society"

Charity and voluntary work is also a social context where the state and citizens interact. Bin Xu, studying the revival of voluntary work after the Shichuan earthquake in 2008, points out that the emergence of civic activities reflected the Chinese people's perception of the state.³² Although the anticipated formation of a civil society in China that could balance the power of the Communist Party did not happen, this resurgence of civic activities revealed the people's questioning about the role of the state in providing security and care to its citizens. By the same token, Paul Lichterman and Nina Eliasoph also argue that civic actions represent how the participants imagine the society and which improvements they believe can stem from their actions.³³

Inspired by these studies, I draw on the case of charity givers to explore the connection between Vietnamese citizens and the state. I demonstrate that the petty traders' past and present interactions with the state define the meaning that charitable work has for them. In addition, charitable practices reflect their expectations regarding the care expected from the state. Therefore, grassroots charitable work opens up a fruitful understanding of the interaction and negotiation of citizens from specific social backgrounds and classes with the state.

The recent decline in the role of Vietnam's socialist government as the primary welfare provider has given rise to efforts from the private sector and civil groups to offer basic welfare services for citizens.³⁴ Amid this

privatization of social service, the poor and the needy in Vietnam also seek assistance from charitable groups, among which the most available aid is from faith-based organizations.³⁵ In particular, the government encourages charitable activities organized by Buddhist temples by praising Buddhism as a constant “companion of the people” [*đồng hành cùng dân tộc*], and that each Buddhist follower should practice Buddhism in ways that are “beneficial for the country and for life [society]” [*ích nước lợi đời*].³⁶ While endorsing Buddhist charitable activities, the Vietnamese government channels Buddhist beliefs toward garnering merit by doing good deeds that have a broader social impact. The government’s encouragement of grassroots and religious charitable projects can also be seen in recent television programs, newspaper columns, and radio talk shows that celebrate the exemplary cases of individuals and groups who have been doing communal work that benefits the communities and the society.

The state’s attempts to mobilize and simultaneously surveil civilian groups were also visible in several charity events I participated in. Most of these events involved people with authority, such as cadres from the local People’s Committee [Ủy Ban Nhân Dân], the Red Cross [Hội Chữ Thập Đỏ], Fatherland Front [Mặt trận Tổ Quốc], or Women’s Union [Hội Phụ Nữ]. They worked with HCMC charity groups who were funding infrastructural construction projects in their localities, such as rebuilding houses for the poor, repairing damaged small bridges, or connecting a village to the main electric station. This phenomenon is not inherently unique to Vietnam. Muehlebach’s work on Italian voluntarism and charity also shows that volunteering is among the government’s strategies for citizen making.³⁷ Likewise, Christina Schwenkel points out that affective labor in humanitarian aid is deployed as an exercise of statecraft, and Caldwell’s study of Russia’s faith-based charity also contends that compassion is a technique of governance.³⁸

From the point of view of the charity givers regarding helping others, they believe that they are lifting the burden of the state. On my first charity trip in 2013, I met a woman who explained to me that the government could not take care of all the poor people in the society, thus it had to rely on charity groups, such as Buddhist groups, to share this burden. I encountered this explanation many times during my fieldwork. In addition, I often

heard candid critiques of the role of the state in caring for people, and comparisons indicating how ordinary people, like themselves, do far more. It is common to hear women charity doers expressing their skepticism over the government's integrity in handling the budget to help the poor. For example, while donating money to charity, people prefer donating to a Buddhist temple or a Buddhist charity organizer rather than to a state-run charity agent. Also, while searching for recipients of charity gifts, they prefer relying on the recommendations of Buddhist practitioners or monastic monks in the areas, instead of referring to the record of poor households maintained by the local governments.³⁹

In addition, the petty traders' past turbulent relationship with the government defines their way of doing charity and the meaning they credit to their charity work. Most charity givers I met were elderly people and had gone through the postwar period in southern Vietnam, when their trading career was severely surveilled and controlled by the socialist state. Several still remembered the hardship they had gone through during the postwar period of highly volatile socioeconomic and political transitions. As mentioned earlier in this paper, charitable work is, thus, a space of negotiation for moral status and social belonging. Nevertheless, their way of doing charity is modeled after the state's controlling-yet-overarching care for the citizens during this postwar turbulent period in their lives. I will further elaborate on this point in the following section.

Embracing Multiple Forms of Citizenship

Upon joining charity givers in several gift-distributing events in rural villages, schools, hospitals, old-age homes, and leprosy colonies, I noticed one striking difference between givers and recipients: the level of activity. Besides the intensive preparations, the charity trip itself is a hard journey that brings charity givers to the location of the recipients to cook hundreds of hot meals or distribute hundreds of gift bags. Once, on a charity trip to an old-age home in Cần Giỏi, a rural district of HCMC, I was taken by surprise when I witnessed the energy and strength of one woman, who was one of the core group members. She was seventy-two years old, roughly the same age as the elderly residents to whom her group was visiting and distributing gifts. As soon as we arrived at the location, she immediately

unloaded boxes of instant noodles and bags of rice, carrying these heavy items all the way from the main road to the shelter home.

The recipients were not involved in any activities. They would sit or stand while waiting patiently, usually under the guidance of a charity team member, or teachers, or a cadre from their local people's committee, who kept reminding them to stay in order and in line. For example, pupils had to gather at a school early morning on a Sunday, accompanied by their parents and teachers, to wait for charity givers. Hospital patients and their relatives form long queues waiting for their turns to receive hot meals. While their benefactors are a hive of activity, charity recipients usually only wait.

With food stamps, gift stamps, and long queues, these gift-distributing events are reminiscent of the "subsidy period" of the 1970s and 1980s, when Vietnam implemented the centrally planned economy. "Subsidy period" [*thời bao cấp*] is the term used to describe the period of high socialism that began after the reunification of northern and southern Vietnam in 1975 and lasted until the start of market reforms when Vietnam became a market economy in 1986.⁴⁰ One common aspect of this subsidy period was people waiting in line to buy subsidized utilities, mostly food, from the government. Waiting for food and gifts from charity givers is quite similar to the waiting seen during the subsidy period. With charity, as it was for the subsidy period's rationing system, time is the capital that a recipient invests in the exchange for goods. Whereas the waiting time is much shorter, and is usually confined to specific places and for particular people who need charitable assistance, waiting for charity goods also leads to a power relationship between the recipients and the givers. As Pierre Bourdieu points out, making people wait is "an integral part of the exercise of power."⁴¹ The temporal experiences of giving and receiving charity gifts or subsidized goods classifies people into one "side of the powerful" and the other "side of the 'patient,'" who is involved in "anxious, powerless waiting."⁴²

Making people wait, nonetheless, is also a practice of care, because charity givers will have to do all the hard work to bring goods and service to the recipients, who need only wait. A woman who joined a charity team that cooks meals for homeless elderly sheltered in a temple in Tây Ninh

province (about two hundred kilometers south of HCMC) described how when they arrived, they would start cooking at the temple's kitchen, while requiring the elderly recipients to stay still on their beds and wait. Once the food was ready, they would bring trays of food to each resident's bed. She saw it as an expression of care. Had the residents ventured into the kitchen to help them to chop and wash vegetables, they might have slipped on the floor and been injured.

Besides, stories of recipients hoarding charity goods and selling them for money often surfaced in the conversations of charity givers. Hoarding was also a survival strategy that citizens living in the subsidy period used in order to cope with chronic shortages and uncertainty in everyday life. They gathered goods from the state's rationing system and sold the unused goods on the black market for extra income.⁴³ As I mentioned earlier, charity givers try different tactics to prevent this from happening, such as giving cooked food that has to be consumed immediately or not giving food stamps to people who have received gifts from other charity groups.

As such, the behavior of charity recipients is similar to the citizens' submission to the state's care distribution in the postwar centrally planned economy. Yet petty traders demonstrate their business and networking skills, which is part of the *habitus* that helps to sustain their daily life and trade in the current market economy. Charitable practice, therefore, manifests a multitude of modes of selfhood and self-conducts that Vietnamese citizens deploy to survive and thrive in the changing socioeconomic landscapes of the contemporary environment.

Grassroots charities showcase the "hybridity" of Vietnam's socialist-oriented market economy, where a combination and collision of "two ostensibly distinct political rationalities, one labeled "socialist" and the other "neoliberal" can be seen.⁴⁴ On one hand, charitable work displays the self-reliance and entrepreneurial disposition and conduct that are expected of citizens of the postsocialist market economy. On the other hand, it also reveals the past submissive selfhood and the waiting and hoarding practices that Vietnamese citizens who lived through the postwar centrally planned economy indulged in to survive the chronic shortages and secure the state's care. This submissive selfhood stems from the fact that the state's control and power over the citizens' time and material access were also the

state's way of displaying paternal care in the past during the time of the centrally planned economy.

Furthermore, the transition from central planning to a market economy created a "historical disjuncture" caused by a radical shift from socialization to privatization, from a past that displayed social egalitarianism to the currently increasing social inequality, and from a subsidized economy to the current celebration of individual entrepreneurial practice.⁴⁵ The way in which charity givers from petty trade backgrounds define deservingness and distribute care to their recipients also indicates that this "disjuncture" exists in contemporary Vietnamese society. This manifests itself in the internal gap within the lower working class in Vietnam's society. It is the gap between people who give and those who receive charity gifts, between people who are capable of sustaining themselves in the market economy and those who are not, between people who continue to experience chronic shortages in their everyday lives despite the overall economic development, and people, albeit not wealthy, who are better off and are willing to share their material resources.

MacLean emphasizes the disjuncture in historical narratives of the contrasting socioeconomic systems pursued by the Vietnamese government at different historical times.⁴⁶ I suggest that this historical disjuncture, when embedded in the lives of the ordinary people in Vietnam such as the petty traders, manifests itself in the form of daily life encounters and making sense of the interweaving of the conduct and form of the past and present in their everyday lives.

First, this disjuncture can be seen in the simultaneous existence of the survival tactics used by Vietnamese citizens in both the centrally planned and market economies. Grassroots charities are a platform for participants to combine and make sense of the different forms of selfhood that they have imbibed to survive in Vietnam's transitioning society and economy. By merging two modes of selfhood—that is, passive submission to the state's care and proactive self-help—in their charitable projects, petty traders also show that their trader-style pragmatism, self-dependence, and materialistic orientation are valued and beneficial in different socioeconomic systems.

Second, this disjuncture is also displayed in the contrasting emotions that Vietnamese people have toward the state. Perceiving that they are

caring for people as the state does, HCMC charity givers have attitudes about the state that exhibit both despair and yearning. The submission to the state's control and care during the subsidy period resonates with what Schwenkel refers to as socialist affect, or the affect triggered by the paternal care of the state, which produces the "affective relationship between citizens and government."⁴⁷ However, along with the "shift from state paternal care to systemic neglect,"⁴⁸ citizens are left to care for themselves and their families, which leads to the emergence of self-reliance that charity givers use as a distinction between themselves and the people who deserve charity assistance. The relationship of the citizens with the state thus shifts to a "postsocialist affect," in which citizens are left to uncertainty and disenchantment with the utopic socialist dream and distrust.⁴⁹ However, at the same time, this shift from socialist paternal care to the market economy also results in a desire for state care.⁵⁰

Intriguingly, this sense of despair and yearning for the state's care is embodied in a spiritual model for many Buddhist charity givers, the Quan Âm Bodhisattva.⁵¹ Buddhist charity givers often describe themselves as those with Bodhisattva's compassion who travel to rural remote areas or to places that are disgusting or avoided by ordinary people, such as leper colonies or overcrowded and highly infected hospitals, to "save the people, bless the world" [*cứu nhân độ thế*].⁵² Similar to Quan Âm, charity givers work to "turn" [*xoay chuyển*] bad situations for people stuck in adversities and "travel on the Bodhisattva's path" [*đi đường Bồ Tát*] to reach the people in need.

In comparing their charitable work with the Bodhisattva's compassionate care for all sentient beings, the charity of HCMC petty traders resonates with "utopian socialism," which includes charitable deeds and religious virtues.⁵³ The Bodhisattva's care applies not only to charity givers themselves, but also to the government, local cadres, and people with authority and power to change lives. Not only is Quan Âm Bodhisattva's moral self a model for Buddhist charitable work, but in voicing their skepticism toward the state's effort in providing basic welfare utilities for underprivileged citizens, HCMC petty traders use Bodhisattva's care as a yardstick to measure the state's performance in ensuring the people's well-being. Seeing their charity work as an embodiment of Bodhisattva's compassion and all-

encompassing care also indicates their desire for inclusive care from the government. The image of Bodhisattva, therefore, signifies their vision of the society as a field for care to be delivered by worldly Bodhisattvas, such as themselves and the state.

Conclusion

Charity, as a social practice, is a means through which citizens negotiate their roles and place in society and define their relationship and position vis-à-vis other social groups and the state. As “ethical labor,”⁵⁴ charity positions givers in gift-exchange relationships not only with their recipients but also with the wider society and the state. Charity places individuals in a moral relationship with non-kin recipients through open-handed gift-giving practices, which are supposed to be nonreciprocal and are aimed to ease the suffering and hardship of others. Existing studies have shown that charity and voluntary work is rendered important by states as a means for citizens to retain their legitimacy, their place, and “ethical citizenship” in their societies.⁵⁵ Several studies on social work or voluntary work carried out by the elderly, retirees, and laid-off workers in Italy, or on the communal activities of Japanese elderly, have agreed that people retain their sense of belonging in society by continuing their social contribution.⁵⁶

In Vietnam, work is a salient factor underlying an individual's sense of self and belonging in society.⁵⁷ Yet at the same time, the form of work people do defines the social class they belong to. In Vietnamese traditional society, occupations are arranged along a hierarchy of respectability and nobility. Trade, in general, is lowest in this culturally sanctioned hierarchy. In the socialist hierarchy of occupational groups, traders are classified as a bourgeois group whose capitalist dispositions deviate from the socialist ideology.

In this paper, I have demonstrated that two kinds of work, the work of care in charitable practices and the work of trade, contribute to how HCMC petty traders identify their class and role in society. The significance of work is central in shaping their experience not only of charity per se but also of their moral place in the society. Through their charitable work, HCMC petty traders assign a moral meaning to their work of trade. Trade is a moral

practice because it is a resource and a foundation for any charitable work to take place. As such, work for money (trade) and work for the good of others in the society (charity) intertwine to create the petty traders' social contribution and hence contribute to their feeling of belonging to the society at large.

This moralization of trade through charitable work thus contributes to the identification of the class position of petty traders. Unlike the Vietnamese cultural and socialist state's perceptions of traders as low, morally ambiguous, weak, and even a feminized class,⁵⁸ petty traders see their trade as a means that allows them to be self-reliant, which is the basis of their class identification. They identify themselves as a class that embodies self-reliant and entrepreneurial personhood, which are qualities that are desirable in modern citizens of postsocialist Vietnam.⁵⁹

Simultaneously, charitable practices also reveal Vietnamese citizens' feelings of precarity and yearning for state-provided care and security. While comparing their charitable work with the state's care, petty traders show their perception of an ideal state-citizen relationship, in which the state, like charity doers, embodies the mission and selfhood of a Bodhisattva, devoted to saving all beings from the adversities that they are suffering. In addition, HCMC petty traders' work of care for their recipients is similar to the form of state care that was offered by the subsidizing and rationing system that the socialist state carried out in the 1970s and 1980s. The coexistence of market economy entrepreneurialism and socialist economy self-subjugation to the state's care speaks to the lived experiences of Vietnamese citizens in the present society. It reflects the gap between the two modes of selfhood and self-conduct that citizens have embodied to sustain their belonging in Vietnam's changing socioeconomic conditions. This disjuncture and hybridity of socioeconomic realities causes Vietnamese citizens to adjust themselves to sustain their livelihood amid the politicoeconomic transitions, as well as to make sense of their positions and roles in the transitioning society. Thus, charity is a means for the citizens, especially those from a particular demographic group such as HCMC petty traders, to make sense of the socioeconomic realities that they are living in, and to make sense of their selfhood and self-conduct, which ensures that they continue to feel a sense of belonging in society.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the charitable work of Buddhist women who work as petty traders in Hồ Chí Minh City. By focusing on the social interaction between givers and recipients, it examines the traders' class identity, their perception of social stratification, and their relationship with the state. Charitable work reveals the petty traders' negotiations with the state and with other social groups to define their moral and social status in Vietnam's society. These negotiations contribute to their self-identification as a moral social class and to their perception of trade as ethical labor.

KEYWORDS: *charity, social stratification, petty traders, postsocialism, Buddhism*

Notes

1. See, for example, Viện Nghiên cứu Xã hội Kinh tế và Môi trường (iSEE), *Nhận thức của người dân về hoạt động từ thiện và khả năng gây quỹ của các tổ chức phi chính phủ Việt Nam* [Citizens' Perception of Charity and the Capacity for Fundraising of NGOs in Vietnam], (Hà Nội: Giao thông Vận tải, 2015); *Philanthropy in Vietnam* (Hà Nội: The Asia Foundation and Vietnam Asia Pacific Economic Center, 2011); both cited in Huong T. Hoang, Trang T. Nguyen, Jerry F. Reynolds II, "Buddhism-Based Charity, Philanthropy, and Social Work: A Lesson from Vietnam," *International Social Work* 1, no. 13 (2018): 5.
2. Ann Marie Leshkowich, *Essential Trade: Vietnamese Women in a Changing Marketplace* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014).
3. See, for example, Jonathan D. London, "Welfare Regimes in China and Vietnam," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 44, no. 1 (2014): 84–107; Mark Sidel, "The Emergence of a Voluntary Sector and Philanthropy in Vietnam:

- Functions, Legal Regulation and Prospects for the Future,” *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 8, no. 3 (1997): 283–302.
4. See, for example, Huong T. Hoang et al., “Buddhism-Based Charity”; Huong Nguyen, “Mental Health Care for Elderly People at Formal Mental Health Systems and Buddhist Temples in Vietnam: Making a Case for Mindful Elder Care in Vietnam,” *Ageing International* 41 (2016): 394–413; Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc, “Social Activities of Vietnamese Buddhism in Relation to Charity,” *Religious Studies Review* 3, nos. 1/2 (2009): 47–63; Trần Hồng Liên, “Những chuyển đổi của phật giáo Việt Nam thời hội nhập” [Transformations of Vietnamese Buddhism in the Period of International Integration], in *Hiện đại và động thái của truyền thống ở Việt Nam: Những cách tiếp cận nhân học (quyển 2)* [Modernity and Mechanism of Tradition in Vietnam: Anthropological Approaches, vol. 2], ed. Lương Văn Hy, Ngô Văn Lê, Nguyễn Văn Tiệp, and Phan Thị Yến Tuyết (Hà Chí Minh City: Đại học Quốc gia TP.HCM, 2010).
 5. See, for example, Nguyễn Ngân, “Nhiều tấm lòng góp sức chống dịch COVID-19” [Hearts Poured into the Battle against COVID-19], Vietnam Television, April 10, 2020, <https://vtv.vn/chao-buoi-sang/nhieu-tam-long-gop-suc-chong-dich-covid-19-20200410095939015.htm> (accessed May 10, 2020); “Nghĩa đồng bào và tinh thần Việt Nam” [Compatriot Emotion and Vietnam’s Spirit], Tuổi Trẻ Online, April 12, 2020, <https://tuoitre.vn/nghia-dong-bao-va-tinh-than-viet-nam-2020041208341109.htm> (accessed May 10, 2020); “Nặng sâu nghĩa đồng bào!” [Deep Compatriot Love!], *Hà Nội Mới* [New Hà Nội], April 13, 2020, <https://hanoimoi.com.vn/tin-tuc/Xa-hoi/964259/nang-sau-nghia-dong-bao> (accessed May 10, 2020).
 6. See, for example, Huong T. Hoang et al., “Buddhism-based Charity,” 5; Đặng Nguyên Anh, “Hoạt động từ thiện của người dân qua một khảo sát xã hội học ở cộng đồng” [People’s Charitable Activities in a Community-based Sociological Survey], *Tạp chí Xã hội học* [Journal of Sociology] (2016); Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc, “Social Activities.”
 7. Sidel, “Emergence of a Voluntary Sector,” 293.
 8. Ibid., 297.
 9. London, “Welfare Regimes,” 95.
 10. See, for example, Katherine A. Bowie, “The Alchemy of Charity: Of Class and Buddhism in Northern Thailand,” *American Anthropologist* 100, no. 2 (1998): 469–481; Nancy Eberhardt, *Imagining the Course of Life: Self-Transformation in a Shan Buddhist Community* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), 138; Chien-Yu Julia Huang and Robert P. Weller, “Merit and Mothering:

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 12. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 582.
 13. See, for example, Ken MacLean, “Enacting Anticorruption: The Reconfiguration of Audit Regimes in Contemporary Vietnam,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 20, no. 2 (2012): 595–625; Ken MacLean, “The Rehabilitation of an Uncomfortable Past: Everyday Life in Vietnam During the Subsidy Period (1975–1986),” *History and Anthropology* 19, no. 3 (2008): 281–303.
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 15. In 2019, the seventh lunar month fell in August of the Western calendar.
 16. Le Hoang Ngoc Yen, “Living Leprosy in Vietnam: Care, Affliction and Agency in the Shadows of a Cure” (PhD dissertation, The Australian National University, School of Culture History and Language, 2015).
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 18. Adele Lindenmeyr, “Charity and the Problem of Unemployment: Industrial Homes in Late Imperial Russia,” *Russian Review* 45, no. 1 (1986): 1–22, cited in Caldwell, *Living Faithfully*, 130.
 19. Maggie Dickinson, “Working for Food Stamps: Economic Citizenship and the Post-Fordist Welfare State in New York City,” *American Ethnologist* 43, no. 2 (2016): 270–281.
 20. Ibid.
 21. Tine M. Gammeltoft, “Childhood Disability and Parental Moral Responsibility in Northern Vietnam: Towards Ethnographies of Intercorporeality,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, no. 4 (2008): 825–842; Le Hoang Ngoc Yen, “Living Leprosy,” 237.
 22. Andrea K. Muehlebach, *The Moral Neoliberal: Welfare and Citizenship in Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
 23. Ibid., 139.
 24. Leshkowich, *Essential Trade*, 4.
 25. Ann Marie Leshkowich, “Making Class and Gender: (Market) Socialist Enframing of Traders in Ho Chi Minh City,” *American Anthropologist* 113, no. 2 (2011): 277.
 26. Leshkowich, *Essential Trade*, 4, 11–18.

27. Christina Schwenkel and Ann Marie Leshkovich, "Guest Editors' Introduction: How Is Neoliberalism Good to Think Vietnam? How Is Vietnam Good to Think Neoliberalism?" *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 20, no. 2 (2012): 381.
28. See, for example, Arve Hansen, "Consuming Doi Moi: Development and Middle Class Consumption in Vietnam," *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 3, no. 2 (2017): 171–186; Nguyen Dinh Tan and Hoang Ba Thinh, "Social Stratification in Vietnam (Survey through Several Provinces and Cities)," *International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education* 2, no. 9 (2015): 8–15; Allison Truitt, "On the Back of a Motorbike: Middle-Class Mobility in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam," *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 1 (2008): 3–19.
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30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Bin Xu, *The Politics of Compassion: The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).
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35. Huong T. Hoang et al., "Buddhism-based Charity," 1.
36. Government Committee for Religious Affairs, "Tốt Đời, Đẹp Đạo" [Good in Life, Virtuous in Religion], http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/o/245/o/2949/Tot_doi_dep_dao (accessed September 22, 2016).
37. Muehlebach, *Moral Neoliberal*.
38. Christina Schwenkel, "Post/Socialist Affect: Ruination and Reconstruction of the Nation in Urban Vietnam," *Cultural Anthropology* 28, no. 2 (2013): 265–266; Caldwell, *Living Faithfully*, 67.
39. This skepticism resonates with some studies on faith-based charities in Vietnam. These studies show that under the strong influence of Buddhism in Vietnam and the prevalent skepticism about the transparency of official charitable agencies, donating to Buddhist networks is among the most popular

- channels for charitable giving among Vietnamese (see, for example, Huong T. Hoang et al., "Buddhism-based Charity," 5).
40. MacLean, "Rehabilitation," 282.
 41. Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 228.
 42. Ibid.
 43. See, for example, Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), cited in Caldwell, *Living Faithfully*, 171; MacLean, "Rehabilitation," 290–293.
 44. MacLean, "Enacting Anticorruption," 602, 603.
 45. MacLean, "Rehabilitation," 285–287.
 46. MacLean, "Rehabilitation."
 47. Schwenkel, "Post/Socialist Affect," 261.
 48. Ibid., 267.
 49. Ibid., 268.
 50. Ibid., 257.
 51. Quan Âm Bodhisattva is the most widely revered and venerated divine power in the Buddhist pantheon in Vietnam (Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc, "Social Activities," 28). She is believed by her followers to exist everywhere. Her pervasiveness is implied in her full name, "Quán Thế Âm," meaning "Hearing the Sounds of the World." Hedges's study on the history of the development of Quan Âm's identity in China observes that she is seen as offering the most immediate help to her followers, rather than the more immaterial and transcendental rebirth into the Pure Land that Amitabha Buddha offers (Paul Hedges, "The Identity of Guanyin: Religion, Convention and Subversion," *Culture and Religion* 13, no. 1 (2012): 91–106). Thus, Quan Âm is more popular and followers feel closer and more immediately connected to her. Quan Âm's efficacy also focuses on worldly activities, rather than otherworldly pursuits. Buddhists believe Quan Âm's compassion and efficacy can help them in difficulties and can "turn" [*xoay chuyển*] the bad situations that they face in life. The commonly heard statement "Quan Âm will turn [the situation]" [*Quan Âm sẽ xoay chuyển*] illustrates the deep belief that followers, especially women, have in the Bodhisattva. They feel certain that Quan Âm's mercy and care will "save" [*cứu độ*] them from the bad situations they have to face in life.
 52. "Save the people, bless the world" [*cứu nhân độ thế*] and "turn" [*xoay chuyển*] are the terms usually used to describe Quan Âm Bodhisattva's efficacy.
 53. Le Duan, "Role of the Vietnamese Working Class and Tasks of the Trade-Unions at the Present Time," speech originally given at the enlarged session of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Federation of Trade-Unions, December

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54. Muehlebach, *Moral Neoliberal*, 138.
55. See, for example, Muehlebach, *Moral Neoliberal*, 139; Caldwell, *Living Faithfully*, 5.
56. John W. Traphagan, *Taming Oblivion: Aging Bodies and the Fear of Senility in Japan* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 165–170.
57. See, for example, Gammeltoft, “Childhood Disability”; Le Hoang Ngoc Yen, “Living Leprosy,” 237.
58. Leshkovich, *Essential Trade*.
59. Schwenkel and Leshkovich, “Guest Editors’ Introduction,” 381.