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Rich Sentiments and the Cultural Politics of Emotion in Postreform Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Allen L. Tran

ABSTRACT Linking socioeconomic and personal transformations, recent scholarship on neoliberalism in East and Southeast Asia has examined the role of various emotional experiences in reconfiguring selfhood toward values of personal responsibility and self-care. However, studies rarely focus on how such experiences come to be understood as specifically emotional themselves. In this article, I examine the growing use of emotion (*cảm xúc*) as a conceptual category to define the self and everyday life in a psychologistic idiom among middle-class residents of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. While more established discourses of sentiment (*tình cảm*) define selfhood in relation to notions of obligation and care, the emerging model of emotion emphasizes individuated self-knowledge. However, instead of replacing sentiment, newer understandings of emotion have developed alongside and in relation to sentiment. In categorizing various feelings as explicitly “emotional” in nature, people participate in a self-fashioning project that cultivates an emotionally aware and expressive self that is informed by neoliberal sensibilities yet does not supplant socialist or Confucian models of selfhood. I argue that emotions are not only central to the subjective experience of the transition to a market-oriented economy but also that emotion as a category itself is a medium through which economic transformations reorganize selfhood more generally. [*emotion, self, neoliberalism, ethnopsychology, Vietnam*]

RESUMEN Conectando transformaciones socio-económicas y personales, investigaciones recientes acerca del neoliberalismo en Este y Sudeste Asiático han examinado el papel de varias experiencias emocionales reconfigurando el concepto de individualidad orientándolo hacia valores de responsabilidad personal y cuidado de sí mismo. Sin embargo, los estudios se enfocan muy poco, en cómo tales experiencias llegan a ser entendidas como específicamente emocionales en sí mismas. En este artículo, examino el uso creciente de emoción (*cảm xúc*) como una categoría conceptual para definir el self y la vida cotidiana en un modismo psicológico entre residentes de clase media de la ciudad de Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam. Mientras discursos más establecidos acerca del sentimiento (*tình cảm*) definen la individualidad en relación con nociones de obligación y cuidado, el modelo emergente de emoción enfatiza el autoconocimiento individual. Sin embargo, en vez de reemplazar el sentimiento, las comprensiones más recientes de emoción se han desarrollado junto a, y en relación al sentimiento. Categorizando varios sentimientos como explícitamente “emocionales” en naturaleza, los individuos participan en un proyecto de auto-creación que cultiva un self expresivo y consciente emocionalmente que es informado por sensibilidades neoliberales, pero que sin embargo no suplanta los modelos socialistas o confucionistas de la individualidad. Argumento que las emociones no son solamente centrales a la experiencia subjetiva de la transición a una economía orientada al mercado sino

también, que la emoción como una categoría en sí misma, es un medio a través del cual las transformaciones económicas reorganizan la individualidad de manera más general. [emoción, self, neoliberalismo, etnopsicología, Vietnam]

Sometime in the late 1990s, “emotion” (*cảm xúc*) became trendy in Vietnam. Its popularity, I was told, began after one of the first extended broadcasts of a foreign television series in the country, a Korean soap opera whose title *Neukkim* (*Feelings*) was translated as *Cảm Xúc*. The word *cảm xúc*, which once had a primarily academic connotation, appears in advertisements for tour packages to Singapore. The name brand of my friend’s Thai-manufactured Honda motorbike knockoff is “Feelings.”¹ Customers at the Maximark supermarket food court in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) can order a *cảm xúc* coffee, a standard Vietnamese iced milk coffee but with additional cherry syrup. The opening of the lush Café Cảm Xúc in the city’s former French quarter was followed by a number of imitation “emotion cafés.” While the ubiquitous Highlands Coffee chain locations feature cloistered lounging areas modeled after international chains such as Starbucks, the emotion cafés boast wide spaces and spectacles of waterfalls, light displays, and koi ponds. The emotions of these emotion cafés are to be experienced and displayed in the open alongside the crowds of fellow patrons who rove from café to café in search of the next most fashionable nightspot. Unlike informal sidewalk cafés with tightly packed rows of chairs facing the mayhem of Ho Chi Minh City’s traffic, the inward spatial arrangement of these cafés, with customers seated in front of each other across a small table, facilitates an intimate, face-to-face emotional exchange between customers.²

Of course, various discourses and expressions that are broadly emotional in nature have long been prominent in Vietnamese social life (Jamieson 1995). While *cảm xúc* is the Vietnamese word that best conveys the meaning of *emotion* as it is understood in English, it is not the most commonly used one. That term is *tình cảm*, which occupies much of the same semantic space as “emotion” does in English but primarily refers to sentiment. It sometimes refers to people’s feelings but usually denotes people’s feelings for others. Thus, it describes the emotional connections between people rather than an individual’s state of feeling. Whereas many Vietnamese regard *tình cảm* as the essence of Vietnamese tradition, the new and sometimes contradictory meanings attached to *cảm xúc* reflect recent socioeconomic changes.

In 1986, a series of reform policies known as *đổi mới* (renovation) initiated an ongoing process of economic liberalization, decollectivization, and privatization of labor that has been widely credited with launching Vietnam’s “tiger economy.” However, the rapid emergence of *cảm xúc* as a seemingly new addition to contemporary life is not limited to market goods.³ The commodities attached to *cảm xúc* do not promise to induce a specific feeling such as joy or excitement. Rather, their allure stems from shifting perceptions

of emotion or perhaps of being emotional. Increased financial resources may certainly be understood to free people to explicitly dwell on their feelings instead of attend solely to basic survival, but they are not wholly sufficient to account for the particular forms that emotion has taken in Vietnam. Made possible by social conditions that make feelings worth categorizing, new understandings of *cảm xúc* have become the basis of reimagining one’s self and its place in the world.

In this article, I explore the implications of the rising prominence of new models and discourses of “emotion” on the self in light of neoliberal reforms in Ho Chi Minh City. In examining the relationship between emotion as a social construct and emotion as a self-process, I describe the reorganization of the self via the conceptual tool of *cảm xúc*. This reorganization is offered by the shifting configuration of the emotions as a category of psychic phenomena in relation to models of sentiment. Furthermore, the acceptance of *cảm xúc* as the foundation for new types of relationships, in addition to the reconceptualization of self and society in an affective register, is not merely the result of Vietnam’s version of neoliberalism but instead is critical to the process of neoliberalization itself. According to popular discourses of modernity, the rising middle class’s culture of self-interest threatens the Confucian and socialist ethics of collective sacrifice and restraint exemplified by notions of *tình cảm* (King et al. 2008; Shohet 2013).⁴ However, it can also be understood as emerging alongside and in response to Confucian and socialist principles. In identifying and categorizing various feelings as explicitly “emotional” in nature, people participate in a self-fashioning project that cultivates an inner self that is informed by neoliberal sensibilities yet does not wholly replace socialist or Confucian models of selfhood.

While forms of largely middle-class selfhood in Vietnam are increasingly thematized as “emotional,” it would be a mistake to assume its automatic correlation with intensely felt affective experiences. Instead of implying that the emotional lives of lower-class Ho Chi Minh City residents or people living before 1986 are simpler or shallower than they are today, the growing popularity of *cảm xúc* suggests that people are rethinking the significance of emotion in their personal and social lives. Indeed, Eva Illouz (2007:38) argues that the “emotional style” of late capitalism entails a division between “an intense subjective life and an increasing objectification of the means to express and exchange emotions.” Although ideas about and experiences of emotion should not be conflated, neither should they be dichotomized. Emotional experiences and conceptualizations interpenetrate, such that “raw” experience cannot exist in

isolation (Csordas 1994; Throop 2003). Furthermore, people do not simply feel “emotion.” Rather, they feel specific affective experiences that they may (or may not) have learned to identify with the general category of emotion.

Indeed, this process is what many Ho Chi Minh City residents are increasingly taking for granted, in turn naturalizing not only *cảm xúc* but also the political-economic regimes that have made the new social forms associated with it possible. To avoid reproducing Western conceptualizations of emotion, I examine a rapidly changing ethnopsychology of how emotions arise and are interpreted and experienced (Lutz 1988) and analyze how this ethnopsychology becomes internalized by and meaningful to Ho Chi Minh City residents. Their folk models of emotion, sentiment, and selfhood at times contradict and coincide with each other, revealing the emergence of the new meanings that emotion takes on. Although I distinguish between the emotions as a set of discrete feeling states (e.g., happiness, anger, etc.) and affect as a felt bodily intensity, I focus on their overlap. Characterizing affect as concerned with inchoate feelings and emotion as concerned with expression and meaning reifies Cartesian dichotomies of mind and body or reason and passion. Moreover, because affect and emotion share an ethnopsychological context, the frequent slippages between them can make such distinctions difficult. For example, no distinction between affect and emotion is made in Vietnamese.

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork from 2007 to 2008 on the changing emotional lives and health of middle-class residents of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam’s largest and wealthiest city, in psychological counseling centers, psychiatric hospitals, and the more informal spaces, including emotion cafés, where people work through their feelings. I draw from conversations and observations about people’s attempts to recast themselves and their relationships through an emotive lens. Additionally, a series of person-centered ethnographic interviews (Hollan 2001) had respondents reflect on the role that “emotion” played in an abstract sense as well as consider various examples of emotions in their own lives and the lives of others. This did not yield an encapsulation of their experience or theory of emotion. Rather, interviewees resorted to a wide range of implicit assumptions about emotion, sentiment, and selfhood to construct a response. This allowed me to observe their process of relating, and thereby reworking, various cultural models of self and society to each other. Here I focus less on expertise than on the diverse array of assumptions about self and society that are used in the construction of a folk model of *cảm xúc*. Hence, most of the perspectives presented do not come from people with a specialized background in psychology or psychiatry. However, I note the few that do. Although many share implicit models of how *cảm xúc* operates within individuals and collectives, the specific meanings attached to these models and ways they are mobilized with regard to selfhood vary according to class, gender, and individual purposes. While most germane to members of Ho Chi Minh City’s growing middle class, many of the trends described in this article also

influence people of different socioeconomic and regional backgrounds, both within and beyond Vietnam.⁵

REFORMING ECONOMIES AND SELVES

Theories of the origins of modernity in the West often note that relationships among the individual, society, and state take a self-reflexive turn (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991; Taylor 1989). Following Thomas Csordas (1994), I conceptualize the self not as an objectified entity but rather as a process of engaging or being engaged by the world. In East and Southeast Asia, where Vietnam is geographically, culturally, and politically situated, modernization projects similarly sparked new ideas about the self, individual, and emotions. For example, under Maoism, many Chinese were individuated by dismantling traditional kin and village organizations to foster allegiance toward the state (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Yan 2010). Furthermore, much of China’s recent economic growth has been attributed to neoliberal reforms that disembedded people from state collectives used to define them in relation to the state.⁶ Once championed as the foundation of a socialist utopia, millions of state-owned enterprise (SOE) employees lost their jobs under neoliberalism and had to reinvent themselves apart from the state to find work in privatized labor markets (Yan 2010).

However, increased individualism is not merely an automatic or natural outcome of diminished state collectivism. Contemporary modes of late-socialist governance in Asia increasingly encourage individuation along neoliberal principles of responsibility, competitiveness, and choice (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Ong and Zhang 2008). For example, Chinese state-sponsored campaigns to promote happiness among employees laid-off from SOEs configure reflection on the self in a way that instills neoliberal values of self-care and self-realization, thereby rendering socioeconomic problems in a psychologistic idiom (Yang 2014). In neoliberal economies in which individual abilities are prioritized, people can explore personal interests in a manner that turns inward for self-definition (Liu 2002). As average incomes rise, a consumerist pursuit of cultivating one’s own identity takes precedence over sacrificing for the nation. Popular interest in psychotherapy, self-help literature, and positive psychology to realize one’s authentic self heralds an emerging “psychoboom” that reflects a growing industry of self-interest (Yang 2014; Zhang 2014). Deemed publicly inappropriate before reforms, desire and emotionality in China have become prominent in people’s private and public lives (Kipnis 2012; Rofel 2007). Everyday discourse legitimizes forms of self-expression that privilege intimacy and subjectivity, and “the customary use of an indirect and embodied language of emotion has changed into a psychologically expressive discourse” (Kleinman et al. 2011:29–30). Thus, the development of an emotional self is in part a product of neoliberal techniques of governance.

The current popular interest in emotion in China and Vietnam contradicts popular assumptions of neoliberal forms

of modernity that entail an increased rationalization of the self and desiccation of emotional life. Indeed, in the case of East and Southeast Asian neoliberalisms, the emergent self is profoundly emotive. Instead of reductively conceptualizing emotion as either oppositional or epiphenomenal to capitalism, scholarship on neoliberalism in the region has focused on how various emotionally laden practices facilitate the rationalization of the self typically associated with neoliberalism (Hien 2012; Jones 2004; Lindquist 2008). Analiese Richards and Daromir Rudnyckyj's (2009) notion of the "economies of affect" highlights the role of emotion in those practices through which people transform themselves into modern individuals and how they are experienced and reflected on in everyday life. For example, Indonesian steelworkers practice weeping during spiritual reform training sessions to achieve a "management of the heart" that encourages personal discipline and collective productivity (Rudnyckyj 2011). State constructions of affect (Jenkins 1991) link structural transformations and the self's organization under precarity in Burma (Skidmore 2003) and Japan (Allison 2013). These lines of inquiry suggest that the performance and experience of certain emotions are not only central to the subjective experience of the transition to a market-oriented economy but also the conduits through which political economies transform selfhood.

RETURNED SPIRITS

In general, the entire spirit of ancient times . . . and the present time . . . may be summed up in two words: "I" and "we." . . . Our lives now lie within the sphere of "I." Having lost breadth, we seek depth. But the deeper we go, the colder it gets . . . Along with our sense of superiority, we have lost even the peace of mind of previous times . . . The West has returned our spirit to us.
—Hoài Thanh [Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân 1988(1942), quoted in Ninh 2002:24]

Hoài Thanh, a literary critic writing in the 1930s and 1940s, foreshadowed many of the same doubts about the self that would arise half a century later. Anticolonial reformers at the beginning of the 20th-century blamed the failure of Vietnamese resistance to French conquest in the late 1800s on the inadequacy of Confucian principles to withstand incursion from the West. Subsequent debates about societal reform often centered on the extent to which Confucian norms or French notions of civilization should shape the "inner spirit" of the Vietnamese or the outer or secondary aspects of modern Vietnamese society (Ninh 2002). By the 1920s, alternative discourses of civilization were appropriated to reconsider individual behavior and obligations toward society, and neologisms for the individual, society, and democracy, among others, fed into this ongoing engagement with Western forms of personhood and society (Marr 2000).

The eventual spread of socialism throughout Vietnam was considered by its supporters to be a dramatic break with past ways of relating to one another as well as to one's self. Institutions and ideologies associated with anything

considered feudal or foreign were demonized as antithetical to the goal of a new socialist modernity (Tai 1992; Taylor 2001). To redirect people's primary obligations from filial ties to the nation, the state emphasized affectively laden ideologies of utopianism, egalitarianism, and patriotic sacrifice. Christina Schwenkel's (2013) concept of "socialist affect" traces the affective mobilization of social and political action in northern Vietnam and how it shaped, and still resonates with, present subjectivities and the everyday experience of capitalism. The Communist Party promised a future of prosperity achievable through collectivist projects that engineered both urban infrastructure and workers' profound attachments to socialist ideals, to each other, and to the ends and means of labor itself. State discourses were designed to counter dwindling morale amid wartime despair with utopian sentiments. However, when such promises never materialized, the objects of these affections came to represent for many the state's inability to care for its citizens and citizens' exclusion from the radical change of course the state subsequently pursued with *đổi mới*. The fate of the "individual" in Vietnam's discourse of society has gone from the denigration of selfishness during the various stages of collectivizing reforms starting in 1954 in the (northern) Democratic Republic of Vietnam and in 1975 in the (southern) Republic of Vietnam to the post-*đổi mới* celebration of individual ingenuity (Maclean 2008).

However, the extent to which selfhood in East and Southeast Asia has become neoliberalized is debatable. Instead of marking a simple transition from socialism to neoliberalism, recent changes in self-understanding demonstrate the reaches of both political-economic regimes and suggest that no steady teleology runs through Confucianism, colonialism, socialism, and neoliberalism. Thus, like so many other neoliberal projects throughout the region, the very incompleteness of *đổi mới* suggests neoliberalism is best viewed not as a monolithic and autonomous entity but, rather, as a historically contingent set of divergent practices and institutions that encourage or stem from the deregulation of economic activity and the privatization of formerly public domains (Nguyễn-võ 2008; Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012).⁷ Anthropological approaches to *đổi mới* retheorize neoliberalism from the perspective of everyday life as an alternative approach to totalizing master narratives about global conditions and highlight "the fluidity and coarticulation by which new subjectivities are being formed that are neither clearly socialist nor clearly neoliberal in their identity" (Pashigian 2012:532).

SENTIMENT OR EMOTION?

The granddaughter of one of the wealthiest Vietnamese men in Saigon during the 1930s and 40s, Bác Lan, 57, bridged the entrepreneurial self from Vietnam's colonial era to its postreform one. She asked me to visit often so I could provide informal English lessons, which she wanted for potential business ventures despite receiving a substantial income from leasing the bottom floor of her home to a car dealership. Like

many of her generation and upbringing, she spoke English with a French accent. The following exchange, in which she describes a long-ago trip to Belgium to visit her sister, comes from one of our lessons:

Allen Tran (AT): What do you remember about Europe?

Bác Lan (BL): The houses [buildings] are very tall. The streets are very long, very wide. Everything is beautiful and clean.

AT: What about the people?

BL: *Cái suy nghĩ là gì?* (How do you say “suy nghĩ”?)

AT: Their thinking. Or mentality.

BL: Ah, *mentalité*. Their *mentalité* is real [“realistic” or “practical”]. They think about money and work.

AT: What do Vietnamese people think about?

BL: Emotion.

AT: How do you say “emotion” in Vietnamese?

BL: *Tình cảm*. [Conversation with author, February 23, 2007]

Despite their overlap, the ways that *tình cảm* (sentiment, emotion) and *cảm xúc* (emotion, feelings) are conceptualized, monitored, and discussed have different implications for selfhood. Although the contrasts between *tình cảm* and *cảm xúc* can be subtle to the point where many of my interlocutors could scarcely differentiate them during interviews, they are being made more explicit by mostly younger and college-educated members of a growing middle and upper class who perhaps represent an affective vanguard in Ho Chi Minh City.

Previously theorized as emotion or feelings (Gammeltoft 1999; Rydstrom 2003), family feelings (Leshkovich 2012), and care and concern (Shohet 2013), *tình cảm*, depending on context, is used synonymously in everyday conversation with affection, platonic love, compassion, or pity. Examples include the type of sentiments between parents and children, teachers and students, and fellow citizens with each other. Thus, *tình cảm* provides a subjective commentary on interpersonal relationships and forms the basis on which people interact with each other and understand themselves and their relationships.

Demonstrating *tình cảm*, often through “checking in” (*hỏi thăm*, lit. asking and visiting) with people and gift giving, requires an intimate understanding of proper decorum and a range of virtues, including respect, conscientiousness, and self-denial, to navigate the bustle of everyday social interactions with minimal confrontations (Shohet 2013). Moral behavior requires the acceptance of the social role one occupies as prescribed by Vietnamese neo-Confucianism. A hierarchical and, to a lesser extent, mutual mode of emotional investment between lords and subjects as well as parents and children characterizes what Haiyan Lee (2007) describes as the “Confucian structure of feeling.”⁸ Within the discourse of *tình cảm*, sentiment and emotion refer not to private feelings but to those communal emotions that are inherently moral; negative feelings toward someone else are not generally understood as *tình cảm* but merely as one’s opinions about someone. *Tình cảm* renders moral behavior subjectively meaningful, as Bác Dũng, a 66-year-old man, describes:

People with *tình cảm* are different than those without. If I don’t have any feelings about a friend then it doesn’t create any sentiment. If you have sentiment, you have to love, and vice versa. The heart of a person who sees something like a baby . . . and doesn’t know how to love it is numb . . . Their emotions are brittle. [Conversation with author, March 1, 2008]

According to most of my respondents, *tình cảm* contributes to the essentially relational nature of Vietnamese selfhood, which is defined not in opposition to the world but instead in relation to its social, physical, and supernatural surroundings. The sentimental self is a matrix of sociomoral relations to be cultivated and evaluated through other people. A primary tenet of anthropological theories of emotion is that all emotions are about something (Levy 1984); that is, they have objects. Throughout my interviews, hypothetical examples of emotions that were not about another person were rare. That notions of *tình cảm* strongly imply that its object is a person underscores its distinctness from Western understandings of emotion as a standalone category of individual feeling states.

However, an alternative discourse of the self, one based on *cảm xúc*, is being carved out of notions of *tình cảm* as many Ho Chi Minh City residents relate a wide range of emotional experiences to each other under the conceptual umbrella of *cảm xúc*. Increasingly influential Cartesian models of the self in which personal identity is located in the recesses of one’s private thoughts certainly play a role in this shift (Dixon 2012; Lutz 1988). However, the Vietnamese ethnopsychology of the emotions is not merely becoming Westernized, and the role of *tình cảm* in the construction of the self is not just being supplanted by *cảm xúc*. Rather, the categorization of feeling is made possible through a redefinition and reorganization of the emotions that are being worked through preexisting understandings of sentiment in which *cảm xúc* is embedded.

Although *cảm xúc* more frequently refers to a broader range of subjective feeling states than *tình cảm*, it also connotes a similar meaning as *tình cảm* in much the same way that “feelings” does in the English language expression of “to have feelings” for someone (i.e., to be romantically attracted to someone). If *tình cảm* principally refers to enduring bonds between people, then *cảm xúc* can be considered a sligher and more capricious variant because of its associations with the initial stages of attraction that have not yet become known and, therefore, made real to others through verbal expression. Thus, the attachments of *cảm xúc* are less durable, reliable, and trustworthy as its occurrence and experience is more interior. *Cảm xúc* is alternately conceptualized as a subcategory of sentiment or a necessary step toward sentiment. From this perspective, there are no such things as “pure feelings”; rather, various feeling states are primarily considered to be vehicles for the evaluation of positions from whence an individual is to make moral judgments.

Thus, for many in Vietnam, to conceptualize affective experience as a primarily abstract, interior, and mental state and as a classification of discrete feeling states such as anger,

sadness, and boredom is a fairly new trend because the distinction between one's affective bonds with other people and how one feels about anything else is not explicit. Many were aware of the dual meanings of *tình cảm* as both sentiment and emotion but, in articulating their models of how it worked, rarely differentiated them. The construction of the emotions as a neutral, standalone category for our feelings is itself rooted in Western philosophy. Early 19th-century psychologists replaced theories of immoral passions and moral affections with a new conceptualization of the emotions as psychophysiological energies that are bodily and irrational, secular and morally disengaged, and uncontrollable and spontaneous (Dixon 2012).

It should be noted that a categorization and scientific disciplining of the emotions in Vietnam is not limited to the current *đổi mới* era. In the prominent scholar Đào Duy Anh's *Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary* (1932), *cảm xúc* was defined by the *thất tình*, or seven emotions: *hỉ* (joy), *ái* (love), *nộ* (anger), *ô* (hatred), *lạc* (happiness), *bi* (pain), and *ai* (melancholy). Relating to a theory of excessive emotion as a pathogen, this set stems from the *qīng* (seven emotional reactions) of traditional Chinese medicine.⁹ However, currently the *thất tình* are not widely known in Vietnam to nonspecialists of Eastern medicine or philosophy.¹⁰ A more contemporary definition of *cảm xúc* reflects the new criteria for the emotions: a vibration in the heart–gut through exposure to something (Viện Ngôn ngữ học 2002). In this definition, *cảm xúc* shifts from a delimited set of feeling states to a more abstract physiological principle that allows for the incorporation of a broader range of psychosocial experiences and ironically produces a greater proliferation of categories that can be used to psychologize more elements of social life.

For example, Châu, 30, who proudly described herself as a “modern and sensitive woman,” said, “If explained according to science, then the emotions are what enters your eyes, then has an effect in the brain, and then in your heart so there's some substance that pushes through the body and makes you have an emotion in your heart” (conversation with author, January 20, 2008). Looking back on her twenties, she speculated that she had spent so much time in her room by herself to avoid any interactions that would inexplicably (even to her) leave her in tears. For her, a wide range of stimuli can turn into an emotion. The shift from sentiment as an ethical relationship to emotion as a physical substance took a metaphysical turn in a more romantic definition given by Vy, a college student, to her boyfriend at a party: “*cảm xúc là khí trong lòng*” [emotion is the energy in the gut–heart] (field notes, September 12, 2007). This conceptualization repurposes the cosmological principle of *khí* (*qi* in Chinese) to better reflect the Western theory of emotion as an internal substance. However, that it was derided by her friends as maudlin reflects how *cảm xúc* is still couched in a discourse of romance. Models of emotion and selfhood shape the parameters of who people think they could be, who they want to be, and who they think they should be. Châu and Vy

elaborate on the conceptual distinctions between *cảm xúc* and *tình cảm* not only to explain their respective introversion and romanticism, which were criticized as excessive by their families, but also to assert an emotive self that differs from models of selfhood rooted in sentiment. The emotive self is particularly appealing to them and other mostly young, middle-class residents of Ho Chi Minh City because it orients them toward new opportunities and challenges of *đổi mới*–era Vietnam.

THE *ĐỔI MỚI* SELF: NEOLIBERAL, SOCIALIST, AND CONFUCIAN

In their descriptions of affective life over time, my respondents often made clear distinctions between historical periods in Ho Chi Minh City: colonial, socialist, and *đổi mới*, or before and after the “liberation” (*giải phóng*) of Saigon on April 30, 1975. However, these periods' legacies cannot be so neatly parsed. Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương (2008) posits that Vietnamese neoliberalism is strategically deployed by the state and that, rather than threatening or replacing socialism, a market-oriented economy has strengthened state sovereignty. I examine the limits of neoliberal self-making projects associated with rational self-calculation and self-sufficiency (Freeman 2011; Ong and Zhang 2008). Such traits can certainly be found in the self in post-*đổi mới* Vietnam, but they are often produced through engagements with socialist and Confucian models of selfhood. Thus, purely neoliberal, socialist, or Confucian selves exist only as idealized forms in Vietnam. People draw from them, sometimes concurrently, to define and redefine themselves. Together, these multiple strands make up the *đổi mới* self, a collection of neoliberal, socialist, and Confucian ways of living in Ho Chi Minh City. The *đổi mới* self is the process of becoming oriented by or toward the marketized values, ethics of personal responsibility, and practices of self-cultivation that have become the hallmarks of neoliberal projects in Vietnam and elsewhere (Ong and Zhang 2008; Rose 1999). The results of this process are contingent on an individual's age, gender, socioeconomic status, and regional background, but while *đổi mới* selfhood hinges on any number of variables, emotion and sentiment provide a constant terrain for such divergences.

The neoliberal construction of the rational self ironically depends on a complementary understanding of the self as emotional and irrational. Despite having no historical associations with the dichotomy between emotion and cognition, many of my respondents invoked the yin–yang (*âm–dương*) cosmological theory to explain the supposedly dualistic nature of people's emotional and rational character. Mastery over the self requires recognition of one's susceptibility to emotion to identify its threat to rationality, and the more emotion is viewed as a source of self-knowledge, the greater the need for self-control becomes. As Minh, a 42-year-old former counselor now working as a teacher, told me, “When a person ‘understanding’ [the self] then it's easier to ‘control’ it.”¹¹ His previous clients' disparate problems

to be addressed through self-understanding included marital strife, work difficulties, and conflicts with parents, but what unites them is a resolution through careful consideration of people's own motivations and emotional reactions. In these situations, individuals strategize ways to interact with others and to handle themselves. Disentangling affective states from social life, the imperative to understand the self to control it invites reflection on a monadic, autonomous, and sovereign self.

When he was 18, Anh left the central coast to major in finance in Ho Chi Minh City and take advantage of its business opportunities but found himself distracted by the city's myriad diversions. After graduating two years late, he has been unable or unwilling to find employment with enough growth potential to satisfy his parents. Now 25, Anh thinks he is more emotional than most of his peers but draws on technological metaphors to represent his psyche. His playfully computerized self contains an A: drive for himself, a C: drive for control, and an E: drive for his emotions. Admittedly, his C: drive cannot compensate for his outsized E: drive. For example, he failed some accounting exams because he was too bored to study. When a romantic relationship ended, he channeled his despair into exercise, hoping that training his body would also discipline his emotions, to no avail. The practical advice his friends offered did not mitigate his boredom or heartbreak because, according to Anh, his emotions expressed a fundamental truth about himself and, thus, could (and should) not be restrained. The privileging of *cảm xúc* validates his rejection of others' expectations of how he should prepare for his future, allowing Anh to determine his own.

At first glance, Anh's sense of self corresponds with Western constructions. His formulation of the A:, C:, and E: drives broadly parallels the psychoanalytic tripartite theory of mind that consists of the ego, superego, and id, which he learned from Wikipedia. However, his C: drive does not just contain the practices of self-care and governance often associated with neoliberalism (e.g., regularly exercising) but also practices of sentiment (e.g., calling his parents every week). In relating the superego or C: drive and his parents together, he draws on a practice of sentiment, specifically "checking in," to construct his sense of rationality. In doing so, he splits the emotional component from the filial obligations toward his parents as dictated by *tình cảm*. When Anh eventually returned to his hometown to take a position in his ailing father's business, he coped with the transition by framing his new life as a test of his mettle that would make him a better person. In effect, he drew on the imagined powers of the self so often associated with neoliberalism (Ong and Zhang 2008) to fulfill obligations of filial sentiment. New ways of imagining the self create new relationships both to one's own self and to others.

In imagining a specific repository for his emotions, Anh objectifies and locates them within the core of his being. At times, he seemed more preoccupied with his emotions than with the objects of those emotions. As a metaphysical

substance, emotion constitutes an essence of his self. Assumptions of emotions as discrete entities residing within the self allow him to observe and attempt to control them as if they were detached from him. Ironically, emotions here have a seeming distancing effect on the self; they objectify the self to render it decipherable to him. By contrast, *tình cảm* cannot be separated from its relational context and underscores its ability to orient individuals to subsequent action by indexing one's relationship to the object of emotion (Shohet 2013).

Cảm xúc orients people toward a new social and material environment by pluralizing the emotions as well as their objects. In recasting social experience within a rubric of emotion, individuals not only pay more attention to the emotions but modify the concept of emotion itself such that the criteria for what is considered an "emotion" changes. Categorizing and coding discrete feeling states as emotion means each of those states inhabit an equal amount of conceptual terrain as others. That is, anger, happiness, and sadness are equal to each other in the extent of their "emotion-ness." Conversely, sentiment is a more hierarchically organized social field in which certain cases of sentiment are more important than others and more exemplary of sentiment. The parent-child relationship is the gold standard of a sentimental relationship, while friendships between peers, though valued, are not imbued with the same level of import.

When understood as a natural and value-neutral phenomenon, people link *cảm xúc* with individual freedom and use it to legitimize one's individuality and new social relationships. Attaching to other people as well as objects, practices, and ideas, the possible objects of *cảm xúc* are more inclusive than the more person-oriented notions of *tình cảm*. This horizontal effect produces a sense of the individual self as those feelings' source. The emotivist self is not defined by one's incorporation into social groups; no more authentic version of this self exists beneath such relations. Cutting through the explicitly interpersonal fields of sentiment, *cảm xúc* has become a principal means through which people can understand themselves as fundamentally in conflict with filial obligations and expectations. For example, Anh often clashed over the direction of his career with his father. His primary excuse for increasingly disregarding his father's advice, vocational or otherwise, was that he himself needed to find a calling about which he was genuinely passionate. Taking on this challenge helps Anh understand himself as being able to exercise power over his own self and negotiate his own position in the world. A professional, romantic, and personal path would follow the discovery of his *sui generis* self.

Looking inward for spiritual growth and subsistence, a self organized by *cảm xúc* takes the heart as both the source and arbiter of moral action. Emotions are conceived as a privileged source of self-understanding. Whereas discourses of *tình cảm* emphasize the obligations people have toward each other, people see themselves as having "rights" to feel a particular way, irrespective of who or what the object of

that emotion is.¹² The balance between these rights and obligations can often seem to tip either way, depending on the purpose for which it was invoked. For example, Trâm, 37, is old enough to remember the lean years of the immediate postwar subsidy (*bao cấp*) period yet young enough to come of age under *đổi mới*. Despite the gravity of her childhood circumstances, according to her, the biggest crisis of her life was the recent discovery of her husband's extramarital affair. According to her, this shock (*sốc*) was the only justification needed to start an affair of her own if she so desired, but she maintained that she would not follow through with this course of action out of commitment to her own spousal obligations (*tình nghĩa*). These sentimental duties refer the continued responsibilities that spouses are expected to carry out even in loveless marriages. However, when she conducted a brief affair of her own, Trâm blamed her emotions and the capriciousness of the heart. That she experienced tremendous guilt about the matter, despite the assuredness of her prior justification, indicates her own struggle between regimes of emotion, sentiment, and selfhood.

Furthermore, many Ho Chi Minh City residents frame the self as absorbed in the demands of everyday life, reflecting the individuated subjectivities associated with neoliberalism. Submerging emotional life in the quotidian highlights the personal self at the expense of the national self and its emphasis on heroic socialism.¹³ No longer bound to the actions of revolutionary zeal, selfhood is firmly rooted and finds intrinsic meaning in the banalities of family and work life. Moreover, an emphasis on how an individual feels about something shifts from both Confucian and socialist forms of social organization that valorize communality and hierarchy. The breakdown of such institutions is frequently associated with opening new spaces for alternative sources of meaningful content in people's lives.

For example, Thiện, a 23-year-old bank employee, viewed the everyday as the setting in which self-discovery is achieved, even in tragedy. When I ran into him one evening, he was still mulling over a conversation at a café he had earlier that afternoon with Hiếu, his roommate's 38-year-old brother, and two of Hiếu's friends, a heterosexual couple in their forties. Widowed some months prior, Hiếu spoke of wanting to remarry in the near future, and his friends advised him on the difficult but important task of finding a suitable woman near his age. Thiện was struck by Hiếu's desire to move on with his life so soon after his wife's death but was even more puzzled by the "strange community" that Hiếu and his friends constituted. How could people of that age and life experience cope with a wife's death simply by replacing her? Why did they not realize that Hiếu needed more time by himself to process his grief? According to Thiện, remarrying so quickly could only be a temporary solution, akin to plugging a few holes in a balloon that would inevitably deflate. Perhaps to find some closure on the matter, he declared them simply to be "not very Vietnamese."

Contrary to Thiện's assessment, however, Hiếu's actions can be construed as falling in line with various

Vietnamese traditions. For example, finding another wife would allow him to reestablish a social order that restores his role as a husband who is the provider and public face of his family. The death of a spouse here is conceived not just as an emotional loss but also one of social status; the corrective for this social problem relies on external measures to address matters of the heart.¹⁴ Moreover, the notion of marriage as a primarily emotional institution in Vietnam is linked to *đổi mới* (Phinney 2008). Problems are to be resolved, not dwelled on, in Ho Chi Minh City's actions-speak-louder-than-words spirit. Thus, advice from many family and friends often focuses on the correct course of action based on whatever relationship of sentiment is involved, such that the affective and role correctives are fused.

On the other hand, Thiện's model of proper grieving requires the scrutiny of one's own emotions to determine the needs, desires, and contours of the self. From this perspective, Hiếu was only going through the motions of coping with his wife's death—more "mechanical," in Thiện's words, than fully human. Thus, it is Thiện's assumptions about the emotive self that seem "not very Vietnamese." He wondered why the people he was having coffee with had not yet developed the "tools" to understand themselves. Answering the question of how he came to possess them, Thiện joked that he was good at English. His flippant answer points to the relative novelty of emotion as a technology of the self in Vietnam. Its power is evident in how Hiếu and his friends were made unrecognizable to Thiện as fellow Vietnamese. Perhaps for Thiện, one of emotion's greatest ironies is that, despite its promises to provide access to the self, it has a simultaneous pull toward estrangement from others as well as from other parts of his self.

ACCOUNTS OF EMOTION

The contemporary transformations of affect, emotion, and the self in Vietnam can be further seen in the stories told through which human nature "discovers" itself. Common explanations for the current interest in emotion typically attribute its emergence to social changes introduced by *đổi mới*—era globalization or modernization. However, these accounts are simultaneously rooted in yet elide a much-longer process of redefining the self in relation to the West. Early 20th-century anticolonial discussions about societal reform centered on the extent to which Confucian norms or new ideas about civilization from the West should shape the "inner spirit" of the Vietnamese and modern Vietnamese society (Ninh 2002). Reformers blamed the failure of Vietnamese resistance to French conquest in the late 1800s on the inadequacy of Confucian principles to withstand Western incursion (Bradley 2004). Their ensuing attempts to cultivate self-knowledge and self-realization assumed that national liberation required a new model of personhood.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the engagement with Western discourses of civilization and selfhood that began during the colonial period continues, but conversations about the social philosophy of John Locke, Jean-Jacques

Rousseau, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels have been replaced by the psychological and behavioral sciences, which decades before had been brushed aside in favor of more politically minded disciplines. The current popularization of emotion is spurred by the supposed scientific and medical expertise of sources such as advice columns and translations of Western self-help books that became available when Vietnam's isolationist period ended in 1986. Although the formal study of academic psychology in Vietnam is limited largely to educational psychology, general interest in the field is pervasive, with avid readers hoping to unlock the secrets of human nature. Common assumptions that Western academic psychology has deepened their understandings of the emotions (instead of shifting the terms of the conversation themselves) depict prior understandings of emotion as simplistic or incorrect. For example, despite his evident knowledge of and respect for Eastern philosophy, Thầy Vững, a 70-year-old retired geography professor, posited that scientific advances increased the amount of known emotions in Vietnam from seven to over 500. Notions of the *thất tình* now appear even more antiquated when compared to contemporary psychological theories of the mind that posit a seemingly infinite combination of emotional experiences.

The advances of psychologically oriented discourses of the emotions not only make prior theories of emotion seem meager but also minimize the impact of the social institutions that once supported them. People often specify living in accordance with *tình cảm* as the defining feature of Vietnamese identity. Drawing on common anxieties about the future of this identity, Mai, a 40-year-old businesswoman, asserted that sentiment still plays an important role in her life but is fast becoming a relic of Vietnamese traditions, increasingly at odds with the country's integration into the global economy.

The Vietnamese are actually a people that live mainly through sentiment so people decide things based on sentiment alone. There aren't any principles. Principles are principles. If you satisfy me and my demands, then it's OK . . . Westerners understand that you have to have principles in life and can't base everything on sentiment. Vietnam still isn't familiar with these principles because we've had this ideology that's been passed down from grandfather to father (*y thức hệ từ đời ông đời cha*). It's in our genes now. [Conversation with author, September 5, 2008]

With its emphasis on hierarchical social relationships, sentiment has several associations with Confucianism, which itself is often blamed for the previous dearth of attention to people's inner lives. Many in Vietnam have strong memories of their strict upbringing and heard stories of their own parents' even more severe childhoods. As a result of the unquestioned internalization of parents' perspectives, according to Mai's argument, people grow up alienated from their own needs and desires. Mai assumes an internal and perduring self that can exist, at least in a diminished form, apart from active cultivation and engagement with others, waiting to be discovered. The logic that people set aside either "traditional" beliefs to better understand their true

nature and access their psychic potential naturalizes both *đổi mới* forms of modernity and its transformation of affect.

Accounts that highlight the influence of modernization on recent changes in people's emotional lives focus on the diversity of choice in postreform Vietnam. A wide array of choices now characterizes self-cultivation and the social identities that define the self. According to this explanation, with access to more choices and greater control over their lives, modern, enlightened people presumably had richer emotional lives that were untethered to "tradition." For example, Hoàng, a 33-year-old psychiatrist, asked me in casual conversation where I found my joy (*niềm vui*). His choice of the word *joy* is notable in that he did not ask about happiness (*hạnh phúc*), which is traditionally defined by family cohesion and cooperativeness. Conversely, his definition of *joy* entails having an interesting job that earned enough money to pursue everyday pleasures. Hoàng emphasizes an individually cultivated sense of satisfaction that emerges from making self-motivated choices within a crowded marketplace of options. Considering a career change that would engage his interests more extensively, Hoàng found inspiration in what he saw as an emphasis on inner passion as a motivating force that was not as widely available before *đổi mới*.

Hoàng's question stands in contrast to a recent past when, according to many of my interlocutors, extreme suffering stunted people's souls as much as their bodies. Because the rise of emotion is often associated with self-discovery, pre-*đổi mới* subjectivity was depicted by some as barren and emotionally bereft. People with few memories of the Vietnam-American War and its immediate aftermath imagined the process of understanding the self during those difficult circumstances to be found in the actions needed for basic survival, not direct self-contemplation. For example, a 24-year-old self-styled polymath who gave herself the nickname "Vic" claimed that the definition of "happiness" was one of the main differences between her and her parents and grandparents' generations. She parlayed her considerable marketing savvy into high-profile jobs that permitted extensive overseas travel. Meanwhile, her mother worried that Vic's outspokenness and wanderlust might cause people from her rural hometown to deem her ill-bred and unfit for marriage, at least to a "traditional" Vietnamese man. According to Vic, those who came of age under privation emphasize stability in their version of happiness. Parents want their children to be happy, but what makes both parents and children happy is not the same thing. Echoing Anh and Mai's conflicts with their parents, Vic's argument alludes to mutual understanding as a resolution to the unintended conflicts produced by her generation's emotional expectations. She deems previous generations' means of self-discovery to be too haphazard and contingent on external factors to be a genuine self-fashioning project, reflecting the increased psychologization of *đổi mới*-era social life.

In the midst of the emotional awakening of *đổi mới*, many people expressed anxieties about an accompanying emotional fallout. Linh, a 46-year-old counselor, echoed

the widespread notion that people's emotional lives have deepened in recent years but, unlike Vic's more optimistic reading of emotional life in contemporary Vietnam, focuses on the dangers ahead:

Vietnam is on a path of development after years of famine, sickness, war, and scarcity. Then, people only worried about food and clothing; they only ate enough to feel full and wore enough to warm themselves . . . Now things are modern and civilized. Material needs have limits, but spiritual needs are bigger. Nobody's cared about them until now. From here on out people will care more about them because as society develops people will confront spiritual crises. [Conversation with author, July 29, 2008]

Common anxieties over the increasing soullessness of modern life and a supposedly unmoored sense of self link modernity with the waning of sentiment—an inversion of the oft-heard maxim of Vietnam being “a poor country, but rich in sentiment” [*nước nghèo, giàu tình cảm*]. According to this logic, the frenetic pace of life in contemporary Ho Chi Minh City that partly makes more proactive self-cultivation possible also threatens the intimate social bonds that have been used as a self-conscious marker of national identity (Trương 2009).

However, the material comforts and cultures of self-interest associated with modernity do not just allow for certain people to “get in touch with their feelings” as if they were waiting to be activated. A number of my respondents even suggested that before *đổi mới* people only experienced their feelings superficially. However, when I asked them to reflect further on this claim, many of them reversed their positions. That this characterization is so widespread yet does not stand up to much scrutiny reflects the persistence of the imagined links among modernity, progress, and individual self-discovery. Rather, the various passions that were idealized or motivated for political ends during the country's colonial, war, or immediate postwar eras were certainly deeply felt for many people, but the new subjectivity—psychological, political, class, or otherwise—that is offered by *đổi mới* and the immense potential it offers are connected with different affective and material desires that have become central to what it currently means to be Vietnamese. In blaming a history of feudal traditions, war, and poverty for people's detachment from their emotions, now so emblematic of human nature, Ho Chi Minh City residents render prior political regimes as a violation of their humanity.

Popular notions of emotional life after 1986 assume that modernity offers people a way to combat a perceived alienation from their own individual selves. However, it is not just Confucian and socialist legacies that may have alienated people from their feelings. Perhaps just as culpable for the increased attention on this emotional fallout is the newfound emphasis on emotion, which is characterized as innate to human beings yet also somewhat foreign to Vietnamese culture. As Nikolas Rose (1999) argues, people are not merely “freed” from prior regimes of governance but instead must be made free by instilling different notions of

and relationships to social life. The collective reckoning of sentiment's purported fall and emotion's rise assumes a modernist teleology and compromises the longstanding sources of the social identities that inform selfhood as people turn inward.

CONCLUSION

In constructing themselves as individuals and as members of the Vietnamese nation through the lens of *cảm xúc*, Ho Chi Minh City residents simultaneously make sense of ongoing societal changes and alter the meaning of their individual and collective past. The emergence of emotion as a category to structure the self provides people with a different way of imagining both everyday life and one's larger life of significance. Thus, how people conceptualize emotion in relation to their own lives powerfully mediates the production of *đổi mới* selfhood. The elaboration of emotion in Vietnam reconstructs the self in a psychologistic register that is seen as a more accurate mode of self-understanding than prior sentimental notions of selfhood. Doing so does not give individuals access to their true, inner selves. Instead, it maps interiority to make it increasingly legible to themselves and others. This process naturalizes regimes of neoliberal, postsocialist statehood and selfhood and creates individuals oriented toward the dynamics of both social and personal transformations.

Cảm xúc has become an abstracted category that relates a select range of physiological, psychological, and social phenomena to each other and unites them with the common denominator of an inner self. This creates a relationship to one's own self marked by reflexivity, and these formulations of *cảm xúc* set different parameters on acceptable versions of the self, in turn allowing people to act in accordance with an amalgamation of neoliberal, socialist, and Confucian expectations. Emotion dialectically constructs the person as an object recognizable to the individual and others as well as a self in the process of defining itself through those emotions (Parish 2008). The new meanings that emotion takes on in Vietnam become particularly salient in light of the value placed on the individual self under *đổi mới*. Martha Nussbaum (2001) argues that emotions are judgments of value that attribute importance to things and persons outside of one's own control, effectively acknowledging a lack of self-sufficiency. Certainly, more attention directed toward one's own emotions accords with a neoliberal ethos of self-care. However, along with the recognition of the lack of control over the object of the emotion, emotion perpetually underscores the impossibility of self-sufficiency. As many in Ho Chi Minh City are beginning to realize, this impossibility becomes a defining feature of the self.

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NOTES

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1. Schwenkel (2012) notes that “emotion” appears in English in Vietnamese advertisements for Vespa motorbikes.
2. Harms (2009) examines sidewalk cafés’ status in the city’s public and increasingly privatized spaces.
3. This is not to deny the importance of emotion’s newfound associations with consumerism. Self-fashioning as modern Vietnamese through consumption is encouraged within state-determined parameters, marking a shift from the immediate postwar era (1975–1986) when consumerism was antithetical to socialist morality. Currently, commercial activity has become further dissociated from the state and legitimates state authority by depoliticizing consumption and the self-work involved therein. The state is heavily invested in the production of subjectivities through encouraging citizens to remake themselves in ways that promote state and market ideals (Leshkovich 2012; Vann 2012).
4. Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) and Yan (2011) observe similar patterns in Chinese cities.
5. Scholars have explored *đổi mới*’s impact on the selfhood of various socioeconomic classes in the urban and periurban areas of Hanoi (Drummond 2012; Gammeltoft 2014; Trường 2009), Vinh (Schwenkel 2012), and Đà Nẵng (Shohet 2013).
6. Makovsky (2014) examines neoliberal and postsocialist selfhood across the Soviet Bloc.
7. Throughout East and Southeast Asia, neoliberalism is associated with market economies, consumerism, and privatization as well as entry into free trade organizations like the World Trade Organization (Nonini 2008; Rofel 2007; Rudnyckij 2011).
8. Shohet (2013) analyzes asymmetrical reciprocity in Vietnamese families.
9. See Ots (1990).
10. For example, most of my interlocutors assumed that *thất tình* referred to “lovesickness” as *thất* refers to both the number seven in Sino-Vietnamese and “loss” in Vietnamese. Those that are aware of the seven emotions typically can only recall three or four items.
11. Both “control” and “understanding” were spoken in English. Space does not permit discussion of what English terms used

to discuss emotion index in Vietnamese, but it should be noted that many of my respondents who spoke at length about *cảm xúc* are at least moderately proficient in English, a correlation partly accounted for by their mostly middle-class backgrounds.

12. Yan (2010) describes a similar shift from responsibilities to rights in China.
13. Tang (2000) and Yan (2011) note that Chinese discourses of everyday life have expanded to legitimize self-expression.
14. Although a prolonged period of bereavement before remarrying occurs in Vietnam, it is more expected of widows than widowers and is idealized more often than actually practiced because this Confucian valorization of spousal loyalty is predicated on a social order that no longer exists.

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