CITY & SOCIETY

The Boss: Conspicuous Invisibility in Ho Chi Minh City

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Abstract

This article introduces the figure of the Vietnamese boss, (ông chủ), in this case, the Chairman of the Board of Directors of a Ho Chi Minh City securities trading company. The boss's body techniques, lifestyle choices, and movement through different spaces in the city offer a view into the "everyday presentation of wealth" among business leaders who drive much of the economic transformation in contemporary Vietnam. In order to illuminate how the figure speaks to a particular moment in Vietnam's great urban transformation, the essay describes practices of "conspicuous invisibility" through which the boss manages what can and cannot be seen about his wealth. As a figure, the boss stands out against the background of economic privatization, the emergence of a stock market, rapid urbanization, and the changing moral valuation of those who accumulate wealth. The article also suggests that conspicuous invisibility both produces and is produced by new kinds of urban spaces. [Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City, Saigon, New Urban Zones, elites].

The man in charge

Mr. Vũ is the boss (*ông chủ*).[1] The founder of a successful Ho Chi Minh City securities trading company, he both presides as Chairman of the Board of Directors and calls himself the "owner" (*chủ*) of the company. On the company website, his picture appears at the top of the personnel section of the site, overshadowing every other staff photo on the page. In conversation, he makes it clear that everyone—from the CEO to scores of highly-educated analysts and receptionists—works for him. He also employs a team of employees managing his real estate holdings, a full-time driver, a staff of servants at his home in Phú Mỹ Hưng (one of Ho Chi Minh City's most prestigious New Urban Zones), and a full-time live-in staff of servants and workers who tend to his suburban "garden home" (*nhà vườn*) on the urban fringe.

While he is easy-going and quick-to-laugh, Vũ points out in no uncertain terms that he is in charge. Being the boss drives his presentation of self and defines his life ambitions. "I will never work for anyone," he told me, "even if I have to sell every house I own." (He claims to own "at least ten" houses, including several in Saigon's most expensive gated community.) Being the boss organizes the way he interacts with others and guides the way he moves through the city; it also demands that he manage a tenuous relationship between conspicuousness and invisibility. Like Goffman's classic analysis in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Vũ's presentation of wealth depends on managing impressions and controlling what can and cannot be seen about his life and money (Goffman

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City & Society, Vol. 25, Issue 2, pp. 195–215, ISSN 0893-0465, eISSN 1548-744X. DOI:10.1111/ciso.12016.

1973 [1959]:48). On the one hand, he stands out as a figure of wealth and success against the proletarian ground of everyday Vietnamese urban life. He is the man at the top of the web page, the very important passenger in the chauffeured automobile, and the host who pays the bills and invites his colleagues into restaurant VIP rooms and to his favorite massage saunas throughout the city. Yet on the other hand, he often works to conceal his wealth and the modes through which he accumulates and spends it. He leads a life of conspicuous invisibility.

This article is based on three years of ongoing research into the social life of Vietnamese New Urban Zones (Khu đô thị mới), a term used in Vietnam to describe mixed-use master-planned residential and commercial developments increasingly common in Vietnam' periurban spaces. As part of this project, I conducted seven months of direct participant observation and formal interviews among residents living in Phú Mỹ Hưng, a New Urban Zone which has been celebrated by the Vietnamese government as a model for urban development, but also critiqued as an exclusive enclave that subordinates the public good to the profit motives of the Phú Mỹ Hưng Corporation (Douglass and Huang 2007).[2] Mr. Vũ was one of several key informants I came to know over the course of this research.

In the course of following Vũ between his home, work, and leisure destinations across the city, it became clear that Phú Mỹ Hưng was just one part of the larger urban ground against which the lives of well-to-do Vietnamese figures like Vũ become meaningful. As we show throughout this special issue of *City & Society*, the anthropological study of an urban figure of modernity requires relating the figure to the ground against which it stands out. The reverse is also true: particular grounds and contexts themselves become meaningful precisely through their relationship to particular figures (Barker, Harms and Lindquist 2013:3). Like the famous gestalt image of a candlestick—or is it two smiling faces?—the figure of the boss sometimes stands out against the ground of urban life and sometimes recedes behind it; figure and ground make each other possible. As I show in this article, being a boss entails constant negotiation between presence, absence, conspicuousness and invisibility, played out against the background of a modern city.

Managing impressions and controlling what can and cannot be seen drives the social life of elites in today's Vietnam, where holding great wealth brings both admiration and great risks (Leshkowich 2006, 2011a, 2011b). If wealthy Vietnamese are increasingly powerful, they are also vulnerable to theft and accusations of corruption (Gainsborough 2003; MacLean 2009). Like the "New Russians" in the former Soviet Union, the consumption practices of Vietnam's new rich are sometimes "regarded as unjust consumption, the outcome of some unfair magic" (Humphrey 2002:62). Controlling who sees one's displays helps minimize such suspicion and resentment. Bosses like Vũ craft elaborate performative worlds that allow them to frame their stewardship of wealth in narratives of morality, and carve out places to enjoy it either in private or with members of their "team," i.e., those who are "in" on the perfor-

mance (Goffman 1973 [1959]:83). These performative worlds, in turn, are enabled by new urban forms that set the boss apart in Ho Chi Minh City. On the city's roads, in New Urban Zones, in upscale cafes, restaurants, VIP rooms, and massage saunas, as well as in the office spaces of the emerging financial world, the boss's movements and performances highlight the intimate, embodied and highly gendered ways in which class dynamics play out.[3] He shows the spatialization of social distinction in the city, and highlights recent shifts in the moral values associated with wealth. All of these dynamics play out against the backdrop of a post-*đổi mới* (renovation) city defined by "market-oriented socialism," where the contours of what can be conspicuous and what must remain invisible are linked to emerging financial markets, real estate privatization, the restructuring of status identities, and the very organization of city space. Like the boss, the modern economy of Ho Chi Minh City itself demands conspicuous invisibility. The spaces of the city make this possible.

Like the boss, the modern economy of Ho Chi Minh City itself demands conspicuous invisibility

Social scientists have long recognized the way that conspicuous consumption enacts a performance of status and social position. Veblen noted that "offices must be performed" via ostentatious acts of consumption that "shall point to the master to whom this leisure or consumption pertains" (Veblen 1953 [1899]:66). Anthropological and theoretical work on practices as varied as the *potlatch*, excessive expenditures on the arts and on spectacles of power, as well as the flamboyant excesses of 19th century Parisian flâneurs and 20th century Congolese "Sapeurs" or Ivoirian "Bengistes" support Veblen's assertion that the performance of consumption often signifies and reaffirms social status (Bataille 1988; Benjamin 1968; Boas 1966; Friedman 1994; Newell 2012). Bourdieu's study of distinction and taste, however, highlighted how the control or limitation of consumption also plays into class differentiation. Actively restricting certain "natural enjoyments" in some cases reaffirms the superiority of those satisfied by more sublimated and refined pleasures (Bourdieu 1984:7). Taken together, Veblen's and Bourdieu's perspectives both highlight different ways in which consumption is a performance that must be managed within the context of a particular time and place.

In the post-colonial, post-war, post-Soviet, "post-anti-capitalist,"[4] and post-reform context of contemporary Saigon, bosses assert status in ways that resemble Veblen's conspicuous consumption more than the sophisticated discrimination Bourdieu describes. Reacting against decades of involuntary austerity imposed by extended military conflicts with France, the United States, and Cambodia, border conflicts with China, and state-imposed restrictions on consumption during the subsidy period, Vietnamese bosses now express their status through excessive consumption at expensive meals, drinking establishments, karaoke bars, luxury cafes, and possession of expensive cars and homes (much like the post-Soviet "new Russians," or the post-Mao Chinese patrons of Karaoke Bars (Humphrey 2002:175–201; Zheng 2009:105–145)). This consumption is not subtle: competitive drinking, aggressive, shame-inducing gifting, and highly sexualized performances of masculine virility all recall the

aggressive consumption that Mauss (1967 [1925]) described as "agonistic displays." When Vietnamese bosses invite others to drink alcohol, they typically engage in a race to finish off an entire bottle of a generically "expensive" kind of whisky such as Johnny Walker Blue Label. Restraint *is* important, but not in the ways described by Bourdieu. Among Vietnamese bosses like Vũ, restraint comes not so much in the *forms* conspicuous consumption takes but in the control of *who* can see it, *when* it takes place, and *where* (Ngô Thị Ngân Bình 2007). A central tension emerges: In order to be recognized as the boss—to stand out as a figure—one must perform the role of conspicuous consumer and free spender. Yet the boss must constantly control where and when these displays are performed. Conspicuous invisibility refers to the strategy bosses employ to engage in ostentatious status display while also hiding those displays.

Similar tensions between socio-structural "opposites" exist in other Southeast Asian contexts. Javanese elites accrue something similar to "power" by managing the visible (*lahir*) and the invisible (*bathin*) as well as tempering a quest for crude (*kasar*) material desire with refined (*alus*) cultivated detachment (Anderson 1990; Errington 1984). In Thai and Burmese forms of Theravada Buddhism, "merit making" may spur economic activity by encouraging people to generate wealth or construct ostentatious temple complexes, but Buddhist emphases on austerity can temper public displays of wealth (Keyes 1993:374). Throughout upland Southeast Asia, the prestige associated with competitive feasting is often held in check by egalitarian values (Kirsch 1973; Leach 1964 [1954]). Similar tensions between opposites can be found in Vietnamese conceptions of prestige (*uy tín*). Describing prestige and obligations in a village outside of Hanoi, Shaun Malarney (1993; 1997) has described how, on the one hand, social actors commonly seek to assert social status and perform hierarchy through ostentatious display. On the other hand, social prestige is also gained by enacting a sense of sentimental solidarity (*tình cảm*) and equality with others. The "high socialist" emphasis on ritual and cultural austerity (Malarney 2002), furthermore, has interacted with pre-socialist ritual forms as well as post-renovation market forces to create a "dialogic" restructuring of ritual practice that emphasizes *both* grand displays of "wasteful" excess *and* more cautious awareness about how excessive material opulence might be perceived by others (Luong 1994; Malarney 1996). The conspicuous invisibility I describe in urban Ho Chi Minh City can be understood as the expression of similar principles, transposed to an urban setting.

Life in Ho Chi Minh City offers someone like Vũ new ways to strategically manage the tension between overt consumption and egalitarianism. What might be understood in village society as the "contradiction" between hierarchy and egalitarianism (Malarney 1993:18–29) becomes, in the city, a mode of strategic interaction made possible by urban spaces designed to allow swift movement between visibility and invisibility. If the metropolis is a place to be seen and to flaunt one's wealth, it also combines increased "bodily closeness and lack of space" with ample opportunities to disappear into the anonymous freedom of

crowds (Simmel 1971:334). Vũ's use of space maximizes such possibilities: his home in the New Urban Zone links him to prestigious living, but also protects him from inquiring eyes; his luxury car cutting through the city puts him on display, while also setting him off from the prying demands of the masses. New urban forms enable him to control the oscillation between display and invisibility. When I first met Vũ in his semi-detached villa, for example, he reflected on what he had gained and lost by moving to a New Urban Zone, which many Vietnamese complain lacks the sociality of the older urban core. While he first thought life in Phú Mỹ Hưng was boring, he came to value the privacy and the fact that neighbors did not intrude in one's business without being invited. The key, he explained, was simple: one could *choose* who one interacted with, what one revealed to others, and when and where one would interact. The older Ho Chi Minh City neighborhoods he used to live in, by contrast, were no different from his home village in Thái Bình: everyone in the alley always knew what you were doing; one could never escape their inquiring eyes. Impression management is much more difficult in older Vietnamese urban spaces where the public and the private, or the "inside" and the "outside" are blurred (Drummond 2000). In Ho Chi Minh City's "alleyway culture" (Tôn Nữ Quỳnh Trân 2007), guests and neighbors visit each other's homes without invitation, and hosts must receive them inside their homes, often for extended visits. New Urban Zones and the other spaces Vũ frequents facilitate conspicuous invisibility by allowing him to regulate who does and does not have access to parts of his inner life. If conspicuous invisibility is a performance, the new spaces of the city are its stage.

If conspicuousness reaffirms status, invisibility helps manage it. Invisibility redirects attention away from overt signs of wealth and enables the boss to sculpt a moral identity that conforms to the demands of state socialism, discourses of corruption, the moral tenets of expected social behavior, and also protects him against the rise of crime in urban spaces (cf. Caldeira 1999). Such attempts to moralize one's life amount to a form of "self governance" through which bosses like Vũ police themselves and unwittingly conform to the demands of the state, which is enacted less through discipline than an incitement to individual self perfection—akin to what Zhang and Ong (2008) term "socialism from afar." While Vũ often describes himself as operating outside of politics, his tactics depend on new state orientations to the economy, to privatization, to capital accumulation, and to slogans encouraging people to become rich in order to strengthen the nation (*dân giàu, nước mạnh*). At the same time, however, attempting to make oneself invisible while accumulating prestige through ostentatious display is something of an art, an urban version of what James Scott calls "the art of not being governed" (Scott 2009 *passim;* 7–9). Yet for bosses like Vũ, state evasion is often something of a ruse, commonly taking place in full view of, if not actually alongside, state authorities. The invisible practices of bosses like Vũ are rarely completely hidden. They are framed, like so many elements of contemporary Vietnamese political, social and cultural life, as "open

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secrets," which everyone knows about but no one claims to see.[5] Conspicuous invisibility is a kind of performed invisibility that can, without contradiction, be seen everywhere.

Embodying the boss: A vigorous moral calling

Mr. Vũ is a confident man. Short and stocky, with a pragmatic buzz-cut, he exudes self-assurance, energy, and no-nonsense pragmatism. Every morning of the week, from 5 am to 7 am, before his personal driver chauffeurs him to his office in Ho Chi Minh City's financial district, Vũ plays several sets of tennis with his tennis buddies (who are also business associates) at a private court behind the walls of a gated-community in Phú Mỹ Hưng where he owns property. When not on the court, he projects healthy alertness, vigor, and athletic confidence. He constantly massages his calf and forearm muscles, sometimes thumping them with his fists in the middle of a conversation, interjecting comments about the way he needs "a massage to release the tension," or adding offhand remarks about his "stamina" on the court. This bodily confidence and outward vigor underscores the self-assured, authoritative declarations he regularly makes on topics ranging from real estate and financial markets to food and womanizing (*chơi gái*). Bodily techniques, assertions of business acumen, masculine virility, and authority intermingle as a total performance of self.[6] He deploys healthiness as a marker of his competitive spirit, which at once embodies the spirit of emerging Vietnamese capitalism and connects him to a longer socialist and colonial history of expressing potency through athletic bodies (Brownell 1995; Larcher-Goscha 2003).[7] The connection Vũ makes between cultivating the body and his identity as the boss is not unique; most of the residents in Vũ's elite Phú Mỹ Hưng neighborhood work on their bodies as part of a larger ethic of self-cultivation.[8]

Being the boss is important to Vũ's sense of self, and he takes every opportunity to distinguish himself. One afternoon, as his driver guided us through the dense city traffic in his luxury SUV, I told Vũ about an acquaintance of mine, a young CEO running the real estate wing of a major Ho Chi Minh City corporation. Not quite 30 years old, this young man had studied abroad in Singapore, earned a master's degree at an Ivy League University, rose through the ranks of a major Singaporean investment capital firm, and was heading the operations of a vast real estate empire with assets throughout the country. "That's quite impressive," Vũ replied. "But does he own the company? Or is he just a hired hand (*làm thuê*)?" Vũ's use of the term *làm thuê* evoked a common Vietnamese opposition between "worker" or "hired hand" (*người làm thuê*) and "boss" (*người chủ*) that summarily dismissed all the achievements of this successful young CEO.[9] More importantly, this simple jab reveals the degree to which Vietnamese workers—who were at one time idealized along with the peasantry as the backbone of the Vietnamese revolution (Duiker 1996:21)—have become denigrated in Vietnam's post-reform era. This derogatory usage, especially coming from a northerner like Vũ,

is particularly surprising because wage labor was outlawed in the northern revolutionary economic reforms of the 1950s. *Làm thuê* was portrayed as a practice that thrust the masses into poverty and many northerners were alarmed when wage labor in farming reappeared in the early 1990s.[10] Vũ's use of this term not only asserted his own status, but his rather righteous statement signals how dramatically perspectives have changed in Vietnam regarding the moral right to be a boss.

As Vũ explained, all hired workers, regardless of the work they perform, are limited by the extent of their skills. A worker hired to build a house must know how to build. A financial analyst must have the technical skill needed to evaluate markets. One doesn't need skills to be a boss. One simply needs to be the boss. In this logic, a boss is graced by something transcendent, a kind of charisma reminiscent of the Weberian notion of a "calling" (Weber 1991 [1930]):79). In the Vietnamese context, the notion of being "chosen" corresponds to popular notions of fate (*số phận*), and a pragmatic neo-Confucian justification of the moral goodness of hierarchy (Leshkowich 2006:295). While reinforcing the Confucian *idea* of hierarchy, such thinking also reworks the specific ordering of such hierarchies. For example, Vũ's celebration of hierarchy itself rejects older Confucian precepts in Vietnam that once equated business interests with the lowest status on the social hierarchy *sĩ-nông-công-thương* (scholar- peasant-artisan-merchant).

One doesn't need skills to be a boss

Vũ's pride in being the boss also builds from a post-renovation discourse that, since the 1990s, increasingly associates business leadership with moral leadership. These discourses recall the "entrepreneurial proselytizing" of Vietnam between the World Wars (Marr 1981:119, 123), but even more clearly resonate with global trends posing entrepreneurs as heroes in order to counteract assumptions that their avarice contributed to the various global financial crises (Economist 2009). While Saigon's entrepreneurs once faced re-education in the years following the Liberation/Fall of Saigon in 1975 (Duiker 1989:16), by the late 1990s and throughout the 2000s, entrepreneurs were increasingly celebrated for their expertise and moral qualities. As Leshkowich notes, the "businessperson or entrepreneur earned praise for contributing to the nation, even amid accusations of corruption," and they are celebrated in new events such as a national "entrepreneurs day" (2011:282, 284). These new discourses literally "take place" in the spaces frequented by these entrepreneurs, especially upscale cafes. All of the upscale cafes in Ho Chi Minh City stock multiple real estate circulars, architecture magazines and free issues of magazines such as *Doanh Nhân (Entrepreneur)*, *Nữ Doanh Nhân (Business Woman)*, and *Thế Giới Doanh Nhân (Business World)*, typically filled with articles profiling stand-out business figures whose portraits grace the covers. In 2011 the magazine *Doanh Nhân Sài Gòn* (*Saigon Entreprenuer*) announced a new scholarship competition for students named after Lương Văn Can (1854–1927), an entrepreneur credited with writing the first formal works on business ethics for Vietnamese, and who also had credentials as a hero of Vietnamese anticolonialism (Lê Quý Đức 2009). Just as Confucianism could

be reworked to place the entrepreneur at the top of the hierarchy, inventing a tradition of business ethics, and situating it in a world saturated by the discourse of real estate and "New Urban Zones," not only contributes to shifting moralizations of wealth in late-socialist Vietnam, but links that shift to new kinds of city space.

In line with these moralizing trends, Vũ tempers his outward displays of competitive vigor with an alternate sense of moral compassion and generosity that softens the shrewd pragmatism of his money-making ethic. He often reminded me that he "spends a lot of money" supporting cultural projects in his ancestral home village in Thái Bình province (approximately 100 km southeast of Hanoi). When he single-handedly financed the rebuilding of a Buddhist pagoda in his home village, he echoed Buddhist practices of "improving merit (*đức*) through the act of giving" (Soucy 2012:81), and secular notions of supporting one's *quê hương* (hometown) (Jellema 2007), all while fulfilling obligations to temper the accumulation of wealth with "sentimental" practices of redistribution to kin and home villagers (Malarney 2002:127–134). In this way, Vũ managed the conspicuous consumption associated with his wealth by linking it to a kind of competitive morality, not unlike the Vietnamese religious practices Alexander Soucy revealingly calls "conspicuous devotion" (Soucy 2012:142–144). Calling attention to feigned anonymity, Vũ explained, "I give a lot of money to all kinds of causes. I just don't make a big deal about it."

While Vũ's actions seem to evoke Theravada Buddhist conceptions of merit-making, Vietnamese Mahayana notions of meritorious work are not about earning credit for the next life. Instead they are more precisely linked to expressions of "moral virtue" and the idea that such actions might bring good luck (Soucy 2012:212). Vũ asserted that he had a good "fate," but never linked this concept to religion. Instead "fate" accounts for the unexpected twists and historic transformations Vietnam has passed through in his lifetime. It is a way of explaining why some people become bosses and others don't. Vũ, for example, holds a PhD in machine science from a Ukrainian industrial university in the former Soviet Union, where he lived from 1984 to 2002. While he often proudly boasts of his PhD as a status marker, he is quite aware that the skills he acquired from this degree do not themselves contribute to his success in Vietnam's transformed, post-Soviet era market-oriented economy. This is quite common. Despite being top students, many Vietnamese who had studied scientific and technical fields in the former Soviet Union found that their "scientific knowledge and skills for building a modern and prosperous socialist society had no place in a market driven economy" (Schwenkel 2013:60). In the years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, wealth emerged less from manufacturing than through brokering, deal making, trading, and, especially, real estate and financial speculation.

Like others from his generation who studied in the former Soviet Union, Vũ parlayed his time in the Ukraine into a set of opportunities and connections that allowed him to become a successful businessman, even as his technical skills became devalued. All six members of the

board at his securities firm, for example, undertook graduate training in the former Soviet Union and only one of them studied anything remotely connected to finance. As Vũ explained over lunch one day, "everyone who was a student there had to become involved in business in order to survive. We all imported and exported things." And Vũ made his first fortunes in the Soviet Union by linking up with Ukrainian real estate speculators who helped him buy property in Vietnam before the real estate boom really took off. These kinds of connections persisted into the post-Soviet era when many students returning from the Soviet Union relocated to Ho Chi Minh City and laid the foundations for a great number of business opportunities in Vietnam after the *đổi mới* reforms. Coming together in the city allowed them to connect around a common experience. And now, in the city, their connections bind them together; their specific skills are irrelevant.

Being the boss sets Vũ apart from his employees, who are only as valuable as the kinds of skills they possess. Outside his inner circle of Soviet-trained comrades, most of Vũ's employees are decorated with advanced degrees in business, accounting, finance and economics from prestigious Australian, European, and North American institutions. Unlike Wall Street, where analysts are constantly praised for their "smartness" (Ho 2009:39–72), Vũ sees his employees as simple bearers of skills, technicians for hire. On one occasion, Vũ introduced me to an employee who held an MBA from Columbia University, and then to another who had just received a master's degree in economics from NYU. While these credentials were impressive, Vũ still considered both of them to be hired hands who labored (*làm thuê*) on behalf of his company. Indeed, the higher their degrees, the more Vũ reveled in the fact that they worked for him. In this way, Vũ playfully mocks a more common sentiment in Vietnam, "that doing business entails modern expertise that can be acquired through education and credentials. Bookstores lined with the *Harvard Business Essentials* series and other manuals promote entrepreneurial self-help" (Leshkowich 2011:284). By placing himself above this rising credentialed class, which is otherwise generally admired, Vũ places himself in an entirely different class, one that cannot be attained through hard work but is occupied only by those called to it by good fortune. Vũ is the boss not because he has a particular skill, but because he is the boss. Compared to Vũ, even a rising star with the most current graduate degree from the most well-known university abroad was nothing less than a person performing a service, different in degree but not in form from the laborers he hired to build lotus ponds at his garden home.

Conspicuous invisibility: The presentation of wealth in everyday life

The figure of the boss is by nature conspicuous. One proves oneself as the boss by the very act of standing out. But bosses also need privacy. While Vũ often asserts that he is the boss by displaying his wealth in

certain contexts, he also carefully manages what can and cannot be seen. While he owns several homes in one of the most expensive gated communities in all of Ho Chi Minh City, (where villas sell for upwards of three million dollars), he chose to establish his family home in a nearby semi-detached row house. He says, "I don't want people to know I'm rich." He rents his most conspicuous villas to foreign expatriates, but he still uses the private tennis courts, where he invites his associates to play. It is thus not entirely accurate to say that he does not want people to know he is rich. More precisely, he wants to control who knows he is rich and in what contexts. He enjoys sharing the privileges of his wealth with those he chooses without displaying it to others.

Saigon's economy itself operates through conspicuous invisibility. This management of how, when, and to whom one's wealth appears, structures not only Vũ's life, but the role of money in the city, where wealth is everywhere present but is often associated with social problems, leading people to hide and conceal it (Truitt 2007:57). A cultural-historical explanation for this might be traced back to the ways Vietnamese villagers traditionally felt a contradictory compulsion to display status through displays of wealth and to express sentimental relations through redistributive sharing, all infused by lingering values of austerity and reserve associated with revolutionary socialism (Malarney 2002:217–218). Many Vietnamese also recall times in the past where ostentatious wealth might have made them vulnerable to revolutionary zeal. Yet more base explanations must also be considered. It is an "open secret" that power and wealth in Vietnam is regularly gained through extralegal means (corruption, insider knowledge, nepotism); but these practices are carefully concealed behind walls of secrecy. The physical environment of the city itself operates as proof of this. With official government salaries barely enough to support a family, the chauffeured automobiles, luxury homes and conspicuous spending habits of high-level state officials indicate that there are alternative, undocumented sources of wealth that flow to those with official positions (Painter 2006:325–326; Tenev, et al. 2003:16). The extremely visible delays in basic infrastructure projects commonly serve as popular "evidence" that construction funds are being siphoned off to corrupt officials. Even more modest professions, such as teaching, and, more famously, police work, are commonly understood to be supplemented by the secondary, unofficial "salary perks" (*lương bổng*), without which employees would struggle to make ends meet (Overland 2008). In real estate and construction, where most of the wealthiest Vietnamese like Vũ have built their fortunes, profit is most often earned through speculation and "land conversion"—the purchase of land classified as rural followed by its resale as urban—which fundamentally depends on simultaneously knowing about and concealing the true market value of land (Harms 2011:461–464; Kim 2008:39–45). Corruption is both routinized and rendered invisible by the compulsion to constantly talk about it (cf. Herzfeld 2009:259). This often leads to generalized suspicions that anyone with money must have gained it

through extralegal means. Managing the display of wealth is thus important to managing impressions others might have of one's ethical and moral character.

Conspicuous invisibility also structures key economic institutions. When the Ho Chi Minh City Securities Trading Center opened to trading in July 2000 it was hailed as a symbol of Vietnam's full-scale transition to a market-oriented economy. But the visibility of the stock market as a symbol of capitalist development conceals secretive practices. In 2009, an economist's external review of the market revealed that "[t]ransparency and disclosure of the listed companies were very low." Without reforms, "Vietnam's equities markets will remain in the nature of gambling casinos" (Suiwah Leung 2009:50). Many Vietnamese involved in the securities market describe their labors in precisely such terms. When I first visited V's office and asked him what they do all day, he said it was "easy to understand. We gamble with stocks" (*cá độ chứng khoán*). This "gambling," however, is masked by the official, formalized style of the securities office itself. Designed to look like a bank, the office is staffed by smartly-dressed tellers, stocked with glossy brochures detailing the kinds of financial services available, and filled with banks of computer screens that display a constant stream of market information and financial news. The office mirrors the very structure of the stock exchange itself; it simultaneously puts the company on display and conceals what really happens behind closed doors.

Despite the cosmopolitan veneer, the culture of business remains based on local modes of establishing contacts and cementing relationships (Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương 2008:3–24; Ngô Thị Ngân Bình 2007). Business deals are conducted over opulent banquets, and potential partners are treated to massages, hostesses, and sessions at "hugging" bars (Hoang 2011, 2012; cf. Zheng 2009). The very structure of such encounters depends on conspicuous invisibility, which is made possible by specific spaces in the city. For example, after a lunch with the board of directors, Mr. Vũ made a conspicuous display of paying with his credit card and then inviting the whole group for foot massages. The group piled into his SUV, and the driver, who had clearly driven there many times before, took them directly to a sauna in a non-descript alleyway near the city center. As Vũ entered the sauna he whispered, "We like to come to this place because it is hidden in this alley. It is nice but not too fancy. The fancy places are targets." Vũ's friend, one of the members of the board of directors, chimed in, "If they know you are rich, they give you trouble, follow you (*theo dõi*)." Whispering, Vũ explained who "they" were: "the police, security. They might take pictures of you and then try to get money from you. If they know you are rich. But this place is safe. And it's nice." In his interactions at the massage sauna, Vũ engaged in a careful, yet largely routinized, management of conspicuousness and invisibility. Paying for lunch-time foot massages for the board of directors following a sumptuous meal was clearly an ostentatious display of wealth. But his choice of massage

sauna indicated that he was concerned about how the practice might be viewed and that he wanted to manage his appearances. Inside the establishment, however, Vũ found himself in a safe space for flaunting wealth and authority and he made a show of paying for everyone, leaving large tips, and speaking in authoritative, demanding, and direct terms: "Next time bring one of the young long-legged girls (*một em chân dài*)," he laughed as he paid the receptionist.[11]

Less than twenty minutes later, they were back at work, dressed in business attire, trading securities (or, gambling) in their modern office. "Come back in two hours," Vũ said. "We'll go out for coffee." This fluid, highly normalized transition between the massage parlor, the modern office, and the anticipation of the café, reveals how quickly the ostentatious display of wealth and the bodily performance of a masculinized identity of the boss can be reeled in and recast in the professional setting of outward appearances. It also reveals how specific spaces in the city are designed to facilitate the controlled management of conspicuous invisibility. The standing invitation to coffee was an invitation to move once again from the professional setting to another space of consumption and display. Indeed, at the café in Ho Chi Minh City's District One, where Vũ heads after work each day at 4:00 p.m., he once again shifted into a display of masculine bravura. "This is where all the models hang out," he said, scanning all the female patrons as he strolled in, sat down, and proceeded to order drinks and expensive cakes for his male buddies. While drinking tea and eating overpriced carrot cakes and puff pastries, Vũ and his companions evaluated the women around them. "I think I'm going to get that one's number." "Look at her!" he points. Moments later, when the woman he singled out turns around, he exclaims,"Trời ơi! [My God!], she's much too old!" Vũ then calls to the waiter with a snappy demand, "Bring us a fruit plate."

The café and the massage parlor, while very different places, both allow Vũ to enact his wealth through masculine displays of indiscriminate spending, performed against a highly sexualized ground composed of women reduced to props and cast as sexual servants or potential conquests. The audience for this performance, however, is not the women but a preselected group of men Vũ hopes to impress. In his efforts to impress, Vũ manages where and when these performances of wealth can be put on display, and who gets to see them.

Timing, place, and audience are key. In one of our meetings, for example, Vũ moved our conversation fluidly from a café (where we talked about his son's education), to the back of a motorbike (where he invited me to go drinking and visiting brothels), to the front gate of his house (where he evoked our families and offered me mangoes from his garden). First we met at the Phú Mỹ Hưng branch of a Western style café chain. Vũ, as always, insisted on paying for the most expensive drinks and cakes on the menu. He then raised the subject of his son's education at an elite East Coast boarding school in the United States, and his plans for getting him into college. "It's easier," he assured me, "to get into

private schools because the tuition is so high they will take anyone who can pay." Vũ said his son would study finance or business, after which he would bring him back to Vietnam to work in his company, eventually planning to make him the boss. Repeating a common theme, he explained, "I don't want my son to be a hired hand (*làm thuê*) working for someone else." Next, while giving Vũ a ride home on my motorbike, he asked me if I would like to go out drinking vodka with his "Russian buddies," old Vietnamese friends from his days in the former Soviet Union. And then he asked me if I wanted to go with him "to play with girls" (*chơi gái*). Attempting to identify with my position as a foreigner, he explained that he always made a point to sleep with local women when he travelled abroad: "Whenever I travel to other countries I like to carry their flag."

The motorbike ride was short and we arrived at the gate of his house before I could respond. As we approached his house, Vũ quickly changed the subject once again: "I want to give you some mangoes." Vũ explained that he had a periurban garden home, and his mango trees were in the height of production. "There is nothing so delicious as a mango that has ripened on the tree. . . . The taste is different." He then called out to his wife. "Get a bag of those mangoes. I want to give them to Erik and his wife and kids. He has the two cutest girls, you know."

This seemingly banal interaction and apparently disjointed conversation illustrates how fluidly Vũ moves between different aspects of his presentation of wealth. Discussing his son in the café, he was a concerned father wanting the best for his child, but he also emphasized how he was ready to use his wealth to get his son into a private college and sculpt him into a boss. Later, when we were alone, he switched to a more "intimate" exchange that parallels other cases in East Asia, where males perform their masculine vigor as a way of asserting their confidence and charisma in other realms, and also to "test" their new acquaintances (see Zheng 2009:120–129, 134). But sexual conquest, while certainly part of Vũ's presentation of wealth as a kind of vigorous success, did not constitute his entire identity. It was framed by a kind of moral conception he held of himself as a deeply caring family man. The gift of mangoes—performed, importantly, in front of his wife and while mentioning my own daughters—created a moralized connection between us. It also offered him an opportunity to boast of his garden home, a status symbol among the emerging elite.[12] The literature about Asian sex work rightly highlights the ways in which male business elites play out their masculine identities on the bodies of women. But this example, by situating the invitation to partake in such activities within a larger (and largely banal) context, shows that assertions of virility and the invitation to partake in sexual services must be understood as only one among many spaces in which the assertion of mastery is played out. Bookending an invitation to seek out sexual adventures within discussions of his son's education and a deceptively simple gift of mangoes actually played an important role in the skillful way he managed the art of revelation and concealment.

Urban spaces of conspicuous invisibility

Conspicuous invisibility appears throughout the city. It infuses mundane actions and also produces new spatial dynamics throughout the city. The spaces of sex work typify how practices and modes of conspicuous invisibility become inscribed into material space (Wilson 2004:79). Saunas, massage parlors, hugging bars, karaoke bars, and darkened cafes appear throughout Ho Chi Minh City; they are highly visible. But they are structured on concealment, offering their users both guarantees of invisibility and a venue to magnify their persona to those they wish to impress. But perhaps more importantly, such structures of conspicuous invisibility are also replicated in many other, often exceedingly mundane spaces; in New Urban Zones, office buildings, cafes, VIP rooms, garden homes, and a host of other spatial innovations that make the city "work" for emerging elites like the boss.

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For most Saigon residents, the structure of conspicuous invisibility most often appears in the figure of the boss cutting through traffic in chauffeured luxury automobiles. Exceedingly visible for the way they stand out against the majority, cutting through the dense fabric of working- and middle-class motorbike traffic, the automobiles themselves also enact a form of spatial separation by removing their passengers from the spatial dynamics of bodily interaction on the streets. Traffic patterns on the large arterial roads leading in and out of the city increasingly reproduce class distinctions, as roads are divided into lanes for cars and lanes for motorbikes (Truitt 2008:7–9). But the people inside the cars, while omnipresent, are simultaneously invisible. Their wealth is overt but their lives are largely concealed. The occupants of these cars are figures of urban Vietnamese modernity in the most basic, visual sense; they stand out against the ground of everyday traffic in luxury automobiles that literally protrude from the ground formed by a mass of motorbikes. Yet the sources of their wealth and the things they do with it are an "open secret."

Saskia Sassen has demonstrated how new kinds of global urban spaces emerge in response to the structural demands of new economic formations (Sassen 1994). The conspicuous invisibility of the bosses who control some of these new economic forms also produce a host of unique spatial forms throughout the city. In restaurants, private rooms prominently marked with the words "VIP" both call attention to the spaces where elites gather and provide a secluded space away from other patrons. In office buildings, luxurious facades and modern waiting rooms advertise wealth and an "open door economy" while security guards regulate access and business actually takes place behind closed doors. As elsewhere, in Vietnamese gated communities or other forms of luxury housing, prominent homes stand out against the ground of lower-class housing, yet actively restrict interaction through urban cleansing or elements of "fortress architecture" (Appaduari 2000; Caldeira 1999; Davis 1992; Kuppinger 2004a; Kuppinger 2004b; Low 1997; Low 2001; Siu 2005; Waldrop 2004; Zhang 2010).[13] These elements of the built

environment are quite literally figural constructions designed to stand out against the ground of everyday life and to serve the conspicuous invisibility of the figures who use them. The figure of the boss not only stands out against the ground of everyday life but transforms it. The spatial practices associated with his wealth leave very material traces on the city. Enjoying while simultaneously concealing wealth is a delicate art. In art, figure and ground form a composition. So it is in life, where the boss and the city compose each other.

Notes

Acknowledgements. Funding for this research was provided by National Science Foundation Award No. BCS-1026754. I would like thank Joshua Barker and Johan Lindquist for reading the first drafts of this paper, and to the excellent anonymous reviewers, whose detailed, yet always fair criticism showed the marks of great intellectual generosity. These comments improved the manuscript on every page.

[1]"Vũ" is real person, but the name is a pseudonym.

[2]Sometimes referred to as Saigon South, Phú Mỹ Hưng is part of a global trend towards "urban segregation" and exclusive residential housing that has been fruitfully explored in an earlier special issue of this journal (Kuppinger, et. al. 2004).

[3]By "intimate," I refer to the way "social meanings and relationships" such as ethnicity, gender, and kinship, identity formation (not to mention class and morality) enter into otherwise abstract economic processes (Wilson 2004:9). On the notion of gendered constructions of class in Vietnam, see Leshkowich (2011).

[4]Because it remains formally incorrect to describe the Socialist Republic of Vietnam as post-socialist, I use the terms "post-anti-capitalist" and "post-reform" to acknowledge that there has been a marked shift in political orientation to embrace the "market economy" and other capitalist institutions without formally renouncing the political identity of being a socialist state.

[5]A recent example of these open secrets emerged when the dissident blogger Huy Đức published an exposé on abuses of power in post war Vietnamese history. The editor of a Vietnamese publishing house could tell a *Wall Street Journal* reporter that the book could not be published in Vietnam, but that it offered "a true history of Vietnam written through the perspective of a professional journalist" (Nguyen Anh Thu 2012). In other words, the editor knows this history well enough to recognize it as true but also knows that such open knowledge but must be kept secret.

[6]On body techniques and the performance of self and habitus, see (Bourdieu 1977:94; Mauss 1979 [1934]). On Chinese body techniques quite similar to the Vietnamese case, see (Farquhar 2002; Zheng 2009).

[7]The role of tennis as an identity marker for those who styled themselves as "civilized" during the colonial period was memorably parodied by Vũ Trọng Phụng (2002:39).

[8]See also Ann Marie Leshkowich (2011b), who has convincingly shown how middle-class Vietnamese women engage in fitness regimes to literally "work out" the moral anxieties associated with financial prosperity in a late socialist context.

[9]"Boss" is also typically gendered male as *ông chủ* (lit. Bossman, or Mr. Boss).

[10]I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for making this observation about the surprise northerners expressed about the return of wage labor. For similar observations, and anthropological analyses of the Vietnamese land reforms, see Malarney (2002:24–33) and Luong (2010: 166–178). For northern village reactions to the return of socioeconomic differentiation after economic reforms, see Luong (2010:207–225).

[11]No actual cash-for-sex transactions transpired during my interactions with Vũ or his associates and I did not conduct explicit research into their sexual exploits. However, refraining from indulging in readily available sexual conquests is also part of the process through which a boss cultivates status (Hoang 2012).

[12]While I will avoid an extended symbolic analysis here, readers may also entertain the possibility that the story of these mangoes from Vũ's "garden home" plays on the symbolic associations Vietnamese men associate with outer-city districts as spaces where the consumption of "fresh" rural foodstuffs is often conflated with and blurs into sexual adventure (Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương 2008:46–56). Suburban fruit orchards and garden cafes in Ho Chi Minh City often double as "hugging cafes" with a variety of sexual services available.

[13]New Urban Zones embody conspicuous invisibility in distinctly material forms. The ostentatious structures in Ho Chi Minh City's elite housing developments literally invite people to gaze at them. (In fact, it is common for couples to visit the neighborhood and take wedding photographs in front of these houses). But these homes are, not surprisingly, largely shielded from the outside world by "fortress architecture," gates, and surveillance cameras, bars, etc (Caldeira 1999; Davis 1992; Low 1997).

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