

Rich Sentiments

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 South Korean soap opera whose title, *Neuk-kim* (*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 brand name of my friend’s Thai-manufactured Honda motorbike knockoff is “Feelings.”¹ Customers at the Maximark supermarket food court 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.” Unlike the informal sidewalk cafés² with their 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 a face-to-face emotional exchange between customers. The primary allure of the emotion cafés is not the quality or uniqueness of the drinks—most of their menus are identical—but rather the wide spaces and spectacles of waterfalls, light displays, and koi fish 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. Today, the emotion cafés sit largely empty as customers increasingly prefer smaller venues tucked away in the cramped city center’s alleys. The seating is set up to enclose spaces that foster intimacy with one’s companions instead of a celebration of consumption in open areas. The interior design elements are less opulent and emphasize details over spectacle to encourage the use of close-up, high-resolution photography. Pictures geotagged from these locations on Instagram often feature people with wistful expressions, staring off into the distance or reading a book. The affects displayed at these cafés are directed not just toward a person’s companions but to an audience mediated by phones, reflecting the evolution of the aesthetic appreciation of subjective states



FIGURE 3. A sidewalk café in Binh Thanh District faces customers toward the street instead of each other.

among the middle class. These commercial fads were tentative when I first noticed them in 2007, but they foreshadowed a remarkable advancement of the emotions in Ho Chi Minh City's public spaces.

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. Rather, *sentiment* (*tình cảm*) occupies much of the same semantic space as *emotion* does in English, in addition to denoting people's feelings for others. Thus, it describes the emotional connections between people rather than an individual's state of feeling. In contrast to Ho Chi Minh City residents' associations between sentiment and Vietnamese tradition, the new and sometimes contradictory meanings attached to *cảm xúc* signify the socioeconomic changes of the reform era. 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) itself. Increased financial resources may certainly be understood to allow people to explicitly dwell upon their feelings instead of attending solely to basic survival, but they are not wholly sufficient to account for the particular forms that emotion has taken in Vietnam.

Rather, 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



FIGURE 4. The apartment complex at 14 Tôn Thất Đầm Street in District 1 is the site of trendy cafés, vintage clothing stores, and private residences.

the process of neoliberalization itself. What social conditions make feelings worth categorizing? How are new understandings of emotion used to reimagine one's self and its place in the world? What is the relationship between emotion as a social construct and emotion as a self process? Within 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 *tinh cảm* (Shohet 2013; King et al. 2008).⁴ However, it can also be understood as emerging alongside and in response to Confucian and socialist principles. In identifying and categorizing various feelings, including anxiety, as explicitly “emotional” in nature, people participate in a self-fashioning project that cultivates an inner self that, while informed by neoliberal sensibilities, 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 an automatic correlation with intensely felt affective experiences. Rather than implying that the emotional lives of lower-class Ho Chi Minh City residents or people living before 1986 are simpler or shallower than those of people today, the growing popularity of *cảm xúc* suggests that people are rethinking the significance of emotion in their personal and social lives. Although ideas about and experiences of emotion should not be conflated, neither should they be dichotomized. Furthermore, people do not simply feel “emotion.” Rather, they feel specific affective experiences that they may 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. In order to avoid reproducing Western conceptualizations of emotion, I examine a changing ethnopsychology of how emotions arise and are interpreted and experienced (Lutz 1988) and analyze how it becomes internalized by Ho Chi Minh City residents. Their folk models of emotion, sentiment, and selfhood at times contradict and coincide with each other’s, revealing the emergence of the new meanings that emotion takes on.

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 (1988 [1942], QUOTED IN NINH 2002, 24)

Hoài Thanh, a literary critic writing in the 1930s and ’40s, underscored many of the same doubts about the self that still haunt Vietnamese today. Anticolonial reformers at the beginning of the twentieth 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. Neologisms for the individual (*cá nhân*), society (*xã hội*), and democracy (*dân chủ*), among others, further engaged with Western forms of modernity that took a self-reflexive turn to relationships between the individual and state (Marr 2000; Taylor 1989; Giddens 1991; Beck 1992).

Its supporters considered the eventual spread of socialism throughout Vietnam a dramatic break with past ways of relating to one another as well as to oneself. 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). In order 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 with utopian sentiments. However, when such promises never materialized, the objects of these affections came to represent both the state's inability to care for its citizens and their own exclusion from the radical change of course that 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-reform celebration of individual ingenuity (MacLean 2008).

As average incomes throughout Vietnam rise, a consumerist pursuit of cultivating one's own identity has taken precedence over sacrificing for the nation. After years of isolation from much of the world, many in Ho Chi Minh City have access to a global culture of consumerism and self-interest that would have been difficult to fathom a generation ago. Once criticized for its associations with selfishness under collectivist policies, the "individual" is now celebrated within Vietnam's discourse of society for its ingenuity and adaptability in a market economy (MacLean 2008). Although colonialism, socialism, and neoliberalism have all focused on establishing a Vietnamese form of modernity (Brook and Luong 1997; Leshkowich 2006; Marr 2003; McHale 2004; Turley 1993), it is primarily projects associated with the colonial and neoliberal eras that have legitimized individualism, often through individualized consumption, as a means to become a new type of Vietnamese citizen (Vann 2012).

Rather than marking a simple transition from socialism to neoliberalism, recent changes in self-understanding demonstrate the reaches of both political-economic regimes and reveal 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 that neoliberalism is best viewed, not as a monolithic and autonomous entity, but 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 Leshkovich 2012).⁵ 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 AND/OR EMOTION

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 sentiment and emotion 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 highly educated members of a growing middle and upper class in Ho Chi Minh City. 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 (Lutz 1988; Dixon 2012). However, the Vietnamese theory of affective life 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 is being worked through preexisting understandings of sentiment.

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 *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* is considered a slighter and more capricious variant because of its associations with the initial stages of infatuation 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 because its occurrence and experience are 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 vehicles for the evaluation of positions from which 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, since 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, stand-alone category for our feelings is itself rooted in Western philosophy. Early nineteenth-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).

However, the scientific disciplining of the emotions in Vietnam is not limited to the *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), *ố* (hatred), *lạc* (happiness), *bi* (pain), and *ai* (melancholy). Relating to a theory of excessive emotion as a pathogen,⁶ this set stems from the *qìqīng* (seven emotional reactions) of traditional Chinese medicine. However, currently the *thất tình* are not widely known in Vietnam to nonspecialists in Eastern medicine or philosophy.⁷ 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. Ironically, this produces a greater proliferation of categories that can be used to psychologize more elements of social life.

For example, Châu, a thirty-year-old international NGO worker who proudly describes 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.” 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 Thuận at a party: *cảm xúc là khí trong lòng* (emotion is the energy in the gut/heart). This conceptualization repurposes the cosmological principle of *khí* (*qi* in Chinese)

to reflect the Western theory of emotion as an internal substance. However, that it was mocked 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 to 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.

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. The current popularization of emotion is driven 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. Online message boards and social media (*mạng xã hội*) have recently become popular sources of information and misinformation about self-care and wellness strategies, psychiatric diagnoses, and mental health services. 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 people’s understandings of the emotions (rather than 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 seventy-year-old retired professor, posited that scientific advances had increased the amount of known emotions in Vietnam from seven to more than five hundred. 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 minimize the impact of the social institutions that once supported them. Voicing common anxieties about people’s evolving lifestyles, Mai, a forty-year-old entrepreneur, asserted that sentiment still plays an important role in her life but is fast becoming a relic of Vietnamese traditions that are 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 (*ý thức hệ từ đời ông đời cha*). It's in our genes now."

Hierarchical social relationships are 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 forms of modernity and their 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 post-reform 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 thirty-three-year-old psychiatrist, asked me in casual conversation where I found my "joy" (*niềm vui*). His choice of that word 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 earns 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. When considering a career change that would engage his interests more extensively, Hoàng himself 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-reform 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 twenty-four-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 prior means of self-discovery to be haphazard and contingent on external factors in order to be a genuine self-fashioning project, reflecting the increased psychologization of social life following *đổi mới*.

In the midst of the emotional awakening of the reform era, many people expressed anxieties about an accompanying emotional fallout. Linh, a forty-six-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." Common anxieties over the increasing soullessness of modern life and a supposedly unmoored sense of self link modernity with the waning of sentiment. 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 experienced their feelings only 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 between 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 by 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 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. People are not merely "freed" from prior regimes of governance, but must be made free by instilling different notions of and relationships to social life (Rose 1999). The collective reckoning of sentiment's purported fall and emotion's rise assumes a modernist teleology and has compromised the long-standing sources of the social identities that inform selfhood as people turn inward.

THE RENOVATED 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. Rational self-calculation and self-sufficiency can certainly be found in the self in post-reform Vietnam, but they are often produced through engagements with socialist and Confucian models of selfhood. Thus, a purely neoliberal, socialist, or Confucian self exists only as idealized forms in Vietnam. People draw from them, sometimes concurrently, to define and redefine themselves (Leshkowich 2022). 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 (Rose 1999; Ong and Zhang 2008). The results of this process are contingent on an individual's age, gender, socioeconomic status, and regional background, but although *đổi mới* selfhood hinges on any number of variables, emotion and sentiment provide a constant terrain for such divergences.

Ironically, the neoliberal construction of the rational self depends on a complementary understanding of the self as emotional and irrational. Despite its 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 emotions

in order to identify their 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 forty-two-year-old former counselor now working as an elementary school teacher, told me, “When a person [is] ‘understanding’ [the self] then it’s easier to ‘control’ it.”⁹ Unlike the strategy of remaining silent as a means of self-control discussed in chapter 2, his argument focuses less on an outward expression of the self than on disciplining the inner self through seemingly benign practices of self-exploration. Minh’s previous clients’ disparate problems to be addressed through self-understanding include 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 in order to control it invites reflection on a monadic, autonomous, and sovereign self.

When he was eighteen, 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. Since graduating two years late, he has been unable or unwilling to find employment with enough growth potential to satisfy his parents. Now twenty-five, Anh thinks he is more emotional than most of his peers but draws upon 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. 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 contains not only the practices of self-care and governance often associated with neoliberalism, but also practices of sentiment (e.g., calling his parents every week). In relating the superego/C: drive and his parents together, he draws on a practice of sentiment, specifically “checking in” (*hỏi thăm*), 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 reluctantly returned to his hometown to take a position in his father’s office, 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 upon the imagined powers of the self so often associated with neoliberalism (Ong and Zhang 2008) to fulfill

filial obligations. New ways of imagining selfhood create new relationships both to one's 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. This reflects the "emotional style" of late capitalism that entails a division between "an intense subjective life and an increasing objectification of the means to express and exchange emotions" (Illouz 2007, 38). By contrast, sentiment 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).

Although Anh and Hoa are roughly the same age, they have remarkably different affective styles. While their unique personal dispositions account for some of this difference, the class and gender dynamics that impact their access to technologies and regimes of the self are also at play. Anh's parents, who first met as contract laborers in East Germany, have an advantageous political history, allowing his father to find secure employment for himself and his children in a state-owned company. Anh's solidly middle-class position enables him to engage in emotive discourses and puts him at odds with his family, something that Hoa avoided doing at extreme cost to herself. Furthermore, without the gendered expectations of familial care, Anh was given more latitude to pursue a future of his own design. Even when he acquiesced to his parents' demands to return home and care for his ailing father, he framed his circumstances in emotive, not sentimental, terms. Perhaps Hoa would have benefited from following some of Anh's affective lead. Rather than casting her anxieties over moving to the United States as childish and ungrateful, the contemporary discourse of emotion in Vietnam would validate her feelings. However, the extent to which this would have changed her outcome, especially for the better, is unclear. After all, Hoa ultimately lived up to her ambitions while Anh fell short of his.

A self-consciously emotive lens 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 that each of those states inhabits an equal amount of conceptual terrain as each other. That is, anxiety, happiness, and anger 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 that he was genuinely passionate about. 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 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 saw themselves as having "rights" to feel a particular way, irrespective of who or what the object of that emotion is.¹⁰ The balance between these rights and obligations can often seem to tip either way, depending on the purpose it was invoked for. For example, Trâm, a thirty-seven-year-old woman, is old enough to remember the lean years of the immediate postwar subsidy 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 extra-marital 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 are 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. We will return to Trâm's dilemmas in chapter 6.

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.¹¹ 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 twenty-three-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—with Hiếu, his roommate's thirty-eight-year-old brother, and two of Hiếu's friends, a heterosexual couple in their forties—at a café earlier that afternoon. Widowed some months prior, Hiếu had spoken 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 is not just an emotional loss but a loss of social status, and the corrective for this social problem relies on external measures addressing matters of the heart.¹² Moreover, the notion of marriage as a primarily emotional institution in Vietnam is linked to *đổi mới* (Phinney 2008a). Problems are to be resolved, not dwelled upon, 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 in order 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 *cảm xúc* 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 its promise to access a more authentic self may also have estranged him from others, and perhaps even from himself.

CONCLUSION

The current popular interest in emotion in Vietnam contradicts popular assumptions that modernity entails an increased rationalization of the self and desiccation of affective 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 (Skidmore 2003; Jones 2004; Lindquist 2008; Rudnyckij 2011; Hien 2012). 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 serve as the conduits through which political economies transform selfhood.

In constructing themselves as individuals and as members of the Vietnamese nation through the lens of the emotions, 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 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 contemporary selfhood. The elaboration of emotion in Vietnam reconstructs the self in a psychologicist register that is seen as a more accurate mode of self-understanding than ones defined in terms of sentiment. 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, post-socialist 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. Emotion dialectically constructs the person as an object recognizable to the individual and to others, as well as a self in the process of defining itself through those emotions (Parish 2008).

Part 2 of this book examines the effects of these new regimes of emotion and selfhood on how people understand anxiety in a variety of clinical settings. Whether anxiety is conceptualized in relation to *cảm xúc* or to *tình cảm* influences the way anxiety disorders are diagnosed and treated. However, the rise of an emotive discourse in everyday life in Ho Chi Minh City has implications for anxiety beyond its conceptual and discursive framing. 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. It also echoes the psychic conditions of the self faced with its own indeterminacy that lead to anxiety. When Ho Chi Minh City residents explore and engage with a fuller range of emotions, are they leaving the door open wider to some affective states than to others?