

# UC Riverside

## UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

On Culprits and Crisis: Branding Vietnam in the Global Coffee Industry

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4sj9r50x>

### Author

Grant, Sarah G.

### Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

On Culprits and Crisis: Branding Vietnam  
in the Global Coffee Industry

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Anthropology

by

Sarah Gayle Grant

June 2014

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Christina Schwenkel, Chairperson

Dr. Paul Ryer

Dr. Derick Fay

Copyright by  
Sarah Gayle Grant  
2014

The Dissertation of Sarah Gayle Grant is approved:

---

---

---

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the students, faculty, and staff of the University of California, Riverside Department of Anthropology for their patience, support, and encouragement over the past years. In particular, I am indebted to my advisor Christina Schwenkel for her mentorship and ability to challenge me to think in new and productive ways but also to develop my own voice and perspective on contemporary Vietnam and cultural anthropology. I thank Paul Ryer for his impressive ability to share oral anthropological lore that is at once humbling and helpful, but more importantly, our conversations about commodities and market-socialism that inform my scholarship at large. I thank Piya Chatterjee for her perspective, guidance, wisdom, and presence as a meaningful ally throughout my time in Riverside. And I thank Derick Fay for his theoretical depth and input on the environmental and agricultural aspects of my work. David Biggs, Mariam Lam, Rene Lysloff, Hendrik Maier, Sally Ness, Deborah Wong and everyone in the UC Riverside “SEATriP” community brought me here many years ago and I am forever grateful for the lively Southeast Asian Studies community in the Inland Empire.

Conducting research in Vietnam is no small task and I owe a debt of gratitude to many people who live over eight thousand miles away. The University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City sponsored my research and provided administrative and bureaucratic assistance that made my project a reality. Funding from

the Fulbright International Institute of Education and the UC Pacific Rim Research Program enabled this research. Lưu Văn Hoàng opened the coffee floodgates for me and Thiênn Vũ Do Nguyễnn lessened the struggle of interpreting many Vietnamese phrases and concepts. Phứcc, Vảnn, and Long Nguyễnn fed me countless bowls of mì quảnn, cups of coffee, and bottles of Saigon Đỏ, welcomed me into their home and fixed my beloved Honda Super Dream. Of course, I acknowledge the many local coffee farmers, traders, investors, and friends who shared their stories, impressions, fears, and ambitions in the coffee industry. I have attempted to represent your lives and the industry as accurately as possible and any errors or deficiencies are mine and mine alone.

My family, friends, and colleagues stateside have been invaluable on many fronts ranging from detailed feedback on drafts and ideas to unconditional support. I thank Seth Archer, Cisco Bradley, Josh Brown, Laura Chirot, Jen Chmilar, Erin Collins, Phuoc Duong, Lisa Garibaldi, Hanna Garth, Trung Nguyen, Jelena Radovic Fanta, Allen Tran, Chika Watanabe, Nick Welcome and too many others to list. I would also like to thank Chris Cayford and Scott Dedo for their continued support and interest in my research. My family and especially my beautiful sisters Kristen and Alisa also deserve mention too large for words. Lastly, I would like to thank the global coffee community in general for expressing interest in my research and its implications for the industry as a whole. May we continue our dialogue for years to come.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

On Culprits and Crisis: Branding Vietnam  
in the Global Coffee Industry

by

Sarah Gayle Grant

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Anthropology  
University of California, Riverside, June 2014  
Dr. Christina Schwenkel, Chairperson

Vietnam is the largest exporter of Robusta coffee beans in the world, making the industry a pillar of Vietnam's post 1980's market transformation and two-decades of remarkable economic growth. Yet Robusta coffee production is also a primary conduit of risk and uncertainty for the Vietnamese economy generally and acutely so for individual producers, collectors, and traders. Meanwhile, though Vietnamese coffee is starkly visible as a global commodity, it remains invisible in global consumption markets. Through the lens of these contradictions, this dissertation offers an ethnography of the Vietnamese coffee industry, framed as a transnational site of knowledge production constituted through risk, uncertainty, and value. Grounded in twenty-four months of ethnographic

research in the central highlands coffee growing region, it offers an analysis of the modes of power through which knowledge about global industrial commodity markets is accessed and exchanged. The coffee market, I contend, is constituted through both real and imagined, local and global spaces of encounter. As such, I take certification schemes, quality control and auditing procedures, and geographical indexing rights related to branding and trademarks as my key sites of ethnographic engagement. Here the economic logic that guides international and domestic investors commingles with local knowledge, historical experience, and ambiguity, at once defining and redefining the industrial coffee market itself. As Vietnam's remarkable economic growth stagnates, the economic landscape of the market-socialist state reveals the tendencies of local, state, and transnational actors to engage with this market. I explicate how, in the wake of the 2001-02 coffee crisis and as global coffee producers move beyond it, Vietnamese farmers and traders directly engage with the economic logic and language of crisis, though they do so, again, with the label of "culprit" looming ever-present.



## Table of Contents

<b>List of Figures</b> .....	x
<b>Note on Transliteration</b> .....	xi
<b>Introduction</b>	
Unveiling Coffee in Vietnam.....	1
<b>Chapter 1</b>	
Seeking Higher Quality: Industrial Dreams and Regulatory Regimes.....	33
<b>Chapter 2</b>	
Producing Coffee Experts in the Laboratory and in the Field.....	70
<b>Chapter 3</b>	
Certifying Vietnam: Legitimizing Coffee and Reputation.....	93
<b>Chapter 4</b>	
Bitter Gourds, Complicated Webs: Risk and Uncertainty in a Volatile Industry.....	122
<b>Chapter 5</b>	
Branding Vietnam: Domestic Coffee Consumption in the Central Highlands.....	157

**Conclusion**

Merging Coffee Worlds: Cultivating A New  
and Critical Approach to the Study of Industrial Commodities.....183

**Bibliography**.....192

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 0.1	
Đà Lạt’s “Valley of Love” .....	19
Figure 1.1	
Sample audit form page.....	45
Figure 1.2	
Coffee defects and standardized assessment form.....	59
Figure 1.3	
Cafe Control, physical assessment and green bean sorting.....	60
Figure 1.4	
Quality Robusta Coffee for your Farm.....	65
Figure 2.1	
Standards Map Exercise.....	90
Figure 3.1	
UTZ Certified Traceability System.....	95
Figure 3.2	
Standards Map Training Seminar, October 2011.....	113
Figure 5.1	
Coffee Tour Jeep, Buôn Ma Thuột.....	168
Figure 5.2	
<i>Global Coffee Review</i> March/April 2012 cover.....	176

### **Note on Transliteration**

Vietnamese terms are italicized throughout the dissertation. I chose to use diacritic marks for all Vietnamese terms as well as place names in an effort to convey accurate meaning for readers of Vietnamese but also to illustrate the nuance of certain terms. In some instances, Vietnamese phrases or terms were extremely difficult to directly translate. With the assistance of former Vietnamese tutors, friends, and colleagues, I have done my best to accurately represent meaning but any errors are mine and mine alone.

## INTRODUCTION

### *Unveiling Coffee in Vietnam*

Fieldnotes, October 2010: Coffee processing and storage facility, Lâm Đồng province, Việt Nam:

*It's still damp and humid from the constant rain. It shouldn't be raining this much this late into the rainy season. Hoang mentioned this morning's Thanh Niên newspaper article about it. The rainy season had a late start this year and he was wondering, along with anyone and everyone working in coffee what the weather meant for the forthcoming harvest. Hoang wanted to quickly stop by (though it took us nearly ninety minutes to arrive from Đà Lạt) a relatively new wet mill processing and storage facility. He wanted to "help out" an unnamed client of the facility who was concerned about the quality of the product they had recently received.*

*A small wooden sign displaying the daily prices for cherries and green beans rests against the front of the building and the large metal shutters are drawn up exposing the coffee washer and sorter. The storage facility is empty save two young men — one sweeping the floor; the other, the owner, speaking on his phone until we greet him. It's a rather small space and the lingering cherry-cola scent of mucilage and fermenting beans permeate everything. And the muted musty scent of over-fermentation. Hoang confirms this when he points to a pool of stagnant water filled with pulp and coffee waste.*

*Hoang went off somewhere to have a private conversation with the owner of the facility. The young man sweeping the floor asked what I'm doing here with Hoang and went on to explain that they have only owned the wet mill for a year — they have little experience in wet processing coffee. There are some concerns about the pulping mechanism in their machinery and he mentioned that they might have to sell or trade their truck to replace the broken part. They buy coffee from collectors in the vicinity who buy from local family farms and travel to the facility. At a relatively remote 1700 meters it must be a hike. They sell coffee to a variety of companies, under contract. He didn't want to talk about "the problem" they had with the last shipment (apparently the moisture content in the processed green beans was too high) but showed me their storage space. It was stacked up with dozens of sixty-two kilogram burlap sacks — some had company and/or certification scheme labels, others didn't. It was hard to get a sense of the organizational system. There were several stencils on the concrete floor and the remnants of spray paint used to mark the burlap sack with their respective certification or company logos.*

*Pointing to some processed green beans I asked him if they were from certified farms or not. He said, "I think so." "How do you know?" I replied. "I just know..." [biết mà]. But he seemed ultimately unsure. Or indifferent? "Does someone come to check the coffee? To make sure it's certified [đã kiểm nghiệm]?" His response: I don't know [không biết]. I wonder what certification means (and does) for those who fall outside the dichotomy of producer/consumer. Does the certification matter at all? Is*

*this what a formal (or informal) regulatory regime looks like? He doesn't really seem all that bothered about the presence of Hoang and the purpose of this visit as a sort of informal audit and gauge of quantity/quality control. He gave them numerous suggestions on how to improve their wet processing (primarily through a stricter standard of hygiene) but also how to navigate their relationship with foreign buyers. On the drive back to town I asked Hoang if he thought their facility would improve. He thought it would be "very difficult for them [to improve]" but it wouldn't matter much in the end because their coffee likely still met the requirement for export. He seemed mildly dejected by this realization but continued on to tell me how long he has known the owner of the facility and the sense of responsibility he felt to make sure there were no more (or fewer) problems with the exporter.*

### *Invisibility in the Aftermath of Crisis*

I drank approximately four hundred cups of coffee in Vietnam between early February 2010 and late November 2011. Rarely did I drink a cup of coffee alone. Some of these cups were sipped (and subsequently spit out) with state employees as part of a quality control effort to determine potential defects within a coffee supply. Some were consumed among coffee industry entrepreneurs under the rubric of social exchange, gossip, business, or simply the pride of a farmer's crop quality or "special" (*đặc biệt*) preparation method. At times, drinking a cup of coffee was simply about experiencing the ambiance or history of a local cafe. While consuming coffee or frequenting cafes

across the central highlands I was often talking *about* coffee with someone from the coffee industry.

In early 2010 Vietnam was nearly a decade beyond “the crisis” as it is referred to in the global coffee industry. Although the quantifiable oversupply of coffee in the early 2000s and the end of the International Coffee Agreement (ICA) in 1989 are cited as possible explanations for the crisis, two alternative explanations are also recognized.<sup>1</sup> First, the market reforms in countries such as Vietnam — “the great ‘success story’ of coffee supply grown in the 1990s...where the World Bank was instrumental in financing programmes for the expansion of new plantings” — are cited as one possible factor (Ponte 2001:4410). And the major multinational corporations that in effect controlled the the less visible sectors of the coffee trade (e.g. trade, roasting, processing) were also alternative recipients of blame. The byproduct of Vietnam’s great success story was a high quantity of affordable (or “cheap”) coffee, suddenly available for purchase and trade. Vietnam had become a culprit in the crisis.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The International Coffee Agreement (ICA) was originally signed in the early 1960s as a way to regulate production quotas and price among producing and consuming nations. After disbanding in 1989 the agreement was reinstated in 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Media sources ranging from Time to the Boston Globe published articles on Vietnam’s role in crisis and the subsequent implications for other coffee producing countries. One piece in particular related the increase in coffee availability to the money lost by farmers in Latin America and East Africa: “this year, Vietnam has flooded the market with cheap, low-quality beans, driving prices to an eight-year low. From Guatemala to Tanzania, Mexico to Kenya, farmers who produce quality beans are losing money on their harvests as a result” (Neuffer 2001).



The legacies of and narratives about this crisis are critical to the contemporary socio-cultural landscape of coffee investment and those working in the industry. They figure into representations by spokespersons from other producing countries of Vietnam as a culprit. They also figure into the moral economy of Vietnamese coffee farmers and traders. In using the term moral economy I am referring to a process of moralizing economic behavior that moves beyond rational choice (See Popkin 1979) but also a usage that posits local communities as resistant to capitalist forces and the imposition of specific economic practices (See Scott 1977). Moral economy in my analysis also includes economic decisions and behaviors that construct a larger economic discourse about how market socialism operates in everyday life in Vietnam.

In a summary of recent ethnographic approaches to moral economies Fischer (2014) states that “people moralize their economic behavior and consciously so” (2014:8). The use of “conscious” is key to the way I understand economic behavior in contemporary Vietnam. This dissertation argues that economic decisions and behavior in the Vietnamese coffee industry are indeed conscious but also consciously complicit in framing Vietnam as an important and influential player in relation to other global coffee producing countries. In the wake of the coffee crisis and as the crisis moves further away from the present, Vietnamese farmers and traders engage in conscious economic behavior with crisis looming ever-present. The moral economy within this industry is driven by ambiguity, uncertainty, ambition, and the experience and anticipation of further crisis.

My experience with and understanding of coffee in Vietnam is largely framed by ethnographic research in the central highlands with a particular community of coffee producers, auditors, and entrepreneurs. However, I conscientiously map a discourse about coffee in Vietnam that extends well beyond this community to the multinational corporations purchasing coffee, those responsible for branding it, and ultimately consumers both within Vietnam and its primary export markets. The ways in which “crisis” and thus concepts related to risk and uncertainty are used across these communities is a major focus of this dissertation. This dissertation is also an ethnographic unveiling of Vietnam’s invisibility in global consuming markets and stark visibility within the coffee industry. The Vietnamese coffee industry is a relational and irresolute site where foreign capitalist investment commingles with local knowledge, historical experience, and ambiguity to transform foreign economic relations into local leverage within the industry.

Fischer’s (2014) treatment of anthropology’s traditional approach to economic behavior recognizes “that economic behavior is everywhere embedded in moral, cultural, and political systems,” (2014:4). While this realization is nothing new or novel, he also calls attention to the consciousness of moralizing economic behavior in contemporary global economies. In contrast to economist claims that economic decisions are guided by rationality, anthropologists have long considered the social relations inherent within economic activity (See Mauss 2001; Mosse 2005; Polanyi 1957; Watts 2001) but increased attention to consciousness, ambiguity, and anxiety, especially as these concepts

relate to “the market” may reveal new dimensions of moral economies. To begin the task of exploring these new dimensions in Vietnam and addressing the invisibility of the coffee industry, an examination of the culprit discourse is a useful place to start.

I began conducting my research at an important juncture in Vietnam’s young industrial coffee production history. At the start of my research the global price of coffee was extraordinarily high and Vietnam had cornered the Robusta export market.<sup>3</sup> Farmers were fetching record prices for their harvests and international press coverage began to recognize Vietnam as a coffee powerhouse (e.g. Bland 2011; Minh 2011). Much of this media coverage pitted the industry’s seeming success against its past — a past that included many instances of media coverage constructing Vietnam as a culprit in the crisis. Vietnam was even dangerous and polluting (See Douglas 2002). And yet, crisis as it is understood within the Vietnamese coffee industry takes on an entirely distinct meaning. A coffee crisis is not only “the crisis.” Anxiety surrounding a coffee contract and demand elasticities or anxiety about shifting prices or weather, and the ambiguity of concepts such as risk, quality, and regulation all play a role in local perceptions of what constitutes crisis.

---

<sup>3</sup> The genus *coffea* is made up of several species but the two primary and most widely recognized are *coffea arabica* and *coffea robusta* (sometimes cited as *coffea canephora*). Robusta coffee was reportedly “discovered” growing wild in Congo by Belgian botanist Emile Laurent in 1898 and subsequently cultivated for a horticultural firm in Brussels (Ukers 2010[1935]:281). Today, Robusta is widely used in industrial coffee production and noted for its volume of production (nearly double the yield of Arabica), resistance to disease, and bitter brew characteristics.

Concepts such as these are referenced in a variety of contexts, their meaning and usage varying depending on the time and place. For example, the Vietnamese term for risk, *rủi rỏ*, was used in formal institutional settings such as World Bank seminars and the World Coffee Outlook conference in Hồ Chí Minh City in 2010. It denoted the risk associated with volatile futures markets, risk management, and market outlooks as they may relate to climate change, global financial crisis, or generally rising commodity prices — the fodder of potential crisis. In local contexts, *rủi rỏ* was used to denote the aforementioned risks at times but also the risks associated with locally determined decisions to stockpile or sell coffee, replant a particular variety or shift to another cash crop altogether. Or the term referenced the risk inherent in arbitration with contracts and foreign traders. The ambiguity surrounding these terms stems not solely from a disconnect between local knowledge or more formal (and often foreign) institutional expertise but also the ideological and abstract space of “the market” where vested economic interests across Vietnam and the global coffee industry muddy the meaning and allow for its flexibility. It is the market too, and specifically the market in a market-socialist state that facilitates the invisibility of Vietnamese coffee within the global consuming market and its visibility within trading markets.

### *“The Market’s Place”*

Timothy Mitchell (2002) has written at length about “the market.” That is, the capitalist economy in which “attempts to capture what distinguishes the market system

from the nonmarket, or the capitalist mode of production from the noncapitalist” give “capitalism its identity” (2002:245). He rightly points out that “the ideas of the economy and the market seem so matter-of-fact that they would appear as central categories in almost any discussion of the changes transforming the rural Third World...yet when they are taken for granted they conceal more than they reveal” (2002:246).

The term for market in Vietnamese is “*thị trường*” and coffee market, “*thị trường cà phê*.” These terms are widely used in the context of foreign investment meetings and farm visits or institutional settings and seminars (e.g. at a World Bank training seminar) by foreigners and Vietnamese alike. It is highly problematic albeit simple to take the market for granted — to assume that because the term is seemingly normalized in Vietnam, that it holds a universal meaning across communities or worse yet, that its meaning is fixed. This dissertation aims to explore the identity of capitalism and the diverse meanings of the market in contemporary Vietnam beyond the normalized conception. As the ethnographic vignette above demonstrates, knowing the market also means recognizing the flexibility of it — audits do not necessarily make or break a processing facility and social relationships go a long way.

Thinking about the market in Vietnam requires particular attention to the “new emergent forms of neoliberal capitalism in Vietnam” (Schwenkel and Leshkovich 2013:384). Schwenkel and Leshkovich (2013) contend that

“contrary to popular belief, ‘market socialism’ or ‘market economy with a socialist orientation,’ as it is commonly called in Vietnam, need not be

intrinsically paradoxical or contradictory — observations that tend to reify socialist and capitalist formations as fundamentally oppositional and uniformly fixed, rather than recognize the broad range of institutions and practices that have enabled culturally and historically varied forms of socialism, capitalism, and also neoliberalism” (2013:384)

This dissertation thinks through the meaning and identity of the market generally speaking and the coffee market specifically to better understand the ways in which capitalism operates alongside traditional socialist values — the values espoused by government ministry representatives at official coffee functions (e.g. “building consensus in the community about agricultural coffee development in the central highlands” [*nhất trí về phát triển nông nghiệp cà phê*]). Local conceptions of the market figure into the way these values are enacted and from a theoretical perspective, examining them helps illuminate what it means beyond its abstractions. As Benson, et. al. (2014) state,

“markets are contrivances, social constructions...yet at the same time, market relations and structures are also conduits of power: markets are always embedded in particular places and times, implicated in particular social and political projects, and endowed with certain moral valences” (2014:28)

In the pages that follow, I explicate the particular places and times but also the social and political projects by which Vietnamese coffee comes to be produced, traded, and consumed. I argue that although the market is socially constructed and constituted by

particular moments and power relationships, the market is constructed in a way that enables Vietnam to make it work.

### *The Largest Coffee Exporter*

In 2011-12, Vietnam produced approximately 20,200,000 sixty-kilogram bags of Robusta coffee accounting for over one-third of the entire global production that year (USDA 2012). Nearly reaching the production level of Brazil, the largest coffee producer in the world, and already the largest exporter in the world, the story of Vietnam's rise in the global coffee industry is a long and complicated one with countless angles of inquiry to explore. I became interested in Vietnamese coffee as a subject of study and the focus of this dissertation in part because after several years of involvement with the coffee industry in the United States in varying capacities, I had seemingly not yet come across a single bean of Vietnamese coffee. Most consumers in the United States who have had a cup of unlabeled coffee from a convenience store, campus coffee-shop, or an industrial tin can from a grocery store have likely consumed Vietnamese coffee in some form or another. Soluble coffee — the instant crystal granules popularized by major corporate brands such as Folgers and Nescafe — and ambiguous coffee “blends” likely contain a measurable percentage of Vietnamese coffee. It is the very invisibility of Vietnam in this consumer market, as a final comestible product, that intrigued me at the start of this project in 2007. Of course, Vietnam is not invisible on the global market. In the central highlands of Vietnam where I conducted the bulk of my

research and within the industry, Vietnam's presence in the industry is visible and its coffee is ubiquitous. Vietnam and its role in the global industry is a rather hot topic of conversation for producers, exporters, and major coffee companies around the world because of the sheer volume produced and the implications of Vietnam entering the coffee trade relatively late compared to other coffee producing countries.

The global coffee crisis brought Vietnam to the attention of anyone working in the coffee industry who had not yet focused on the up and coming producer. Global coffee prices across the world are intimately intertwined and thus, an unforeseen problem or shift in production volume from Latin American producing countries in the winter can directly impact the trading price of coffee during the Southeast Asian harvest at the end of the calendar year and vice versa. The uncertainties of industrial agriculture made visible by the crisis reframed coffee as an inherently risky crop to grow in Vietnam. Navigating this risky terrain requires an incredible wealth of knowledge — knowledge that is at once local, global, and institutional.

In the past two decades, during Vietnam's paramount rise in the industry, international coffee media related to Vietnam often focused the spotlight on the picture of Vietnam's exports and not necessarily what was happening on the ground, in-country with the exception of one Time magazine expose on a small ethnic minority uprising in the central highlands in which Ede and Gia Rai demonstrated and "rioted" in response to land encroachment linked to coffee production (See Johnson 2001). More recently, coffee trade media has focused on the success stories in Vietnam rather than the eyesore



that is a culprit in the crisis and bearer of too much bad coffee. Instead, these stories focus on the rise of domestic brands such as Trung Nguyên and the growing domestic “coffee culture” (See Global Coffee Review 2012). Or the media has framed coffee as a symbolic marker of status and the success of a market economy as the first Starbucks cafe opened in Ho Chi Minh City in early 2013.

Although it is easy to cite statistics that suggest how significant Vietnam’s coffee production is in relation to the rest of the coffee producing world, this dissertation is not an exercise in quantitative commodity analysis, econometrics, or agricultural policy. Instead, it explores how such a high volume of coffee can remain largely unbranded and invisible within its primary consuming markets in the European Union and United States (that incidentally, make up over half of the coffee consuming population worldwide). Despite nascent certification schemes across Vietnamese agricultural markets and concerted efforts to improve the quality of Vietnamese coffee, it remains instant, soluble, unbranded coffee.

### *Coffee as a Mode of Inquiry*

Coffee is an excellent commodity to use as a lens onto larger cultural practices in Vietnam for three reasons. First, the coffee industry in Vietnam speaks to a particular moment in Vietnam’s history when economic reform contributed to the legalization of some economic activities but also an increase in migration to the central highlands as shifts in residency status became possible (See Hardy 2003). The industrial coffee

industry is a relatively new (relative to other major coffee producing countries), post-American war economic development venture with the underpinnings of state incentivized migration schemes and dabbles with international investment projects. In Vietnam today, the industry is massive and a compelling aspect of the global coffee trade. Second, much like any cash crop, the coffee industry is risky and volatile. But in Vietnam, risk and volatility (especially post-crisis) were navigated despite very little experience in coffee production and without the assistance of a well established coffee informational or advisory board. Producers, traders, exporters, and the state must carefully navigate this risk and speculate about the future largely from a local context and within small communities. They must do so from harvest to harvest and over the long term as concern and attention to environmental sustainability and climate change enter global coffee discourse. Lastly, domestic coffee consumption is not “traditionally” Vietnamese and yet the preparation through locally produced metal coffee filters called *phin* and pervasive cafes in the south-central highlands are somehow distinctly Vietnamese. Coffee culture in this region sheds light on emergent patterns of conspicuous consumption and the burgeoning ambitions and dreams of local residents — producers and consumers alike.

Coffee, as Paige West (2012) illustrates, is a multifaceted, mobile, and social agricultural product that connects lifeworlds and constructs people and places. Imagined constructions of coffee producers are reproduced, circulated, and laden with value in Papua New Guinea although the village producers view coffee strictly as a commodity

with exchange value — the social relationship between producer and consumer and the fantastic images of producers who love and care about coffee are merely imposed by brands and coffee consumers in the U.S., Australia, and Europe (West 2012). The imagined producer in Vietnam does not yet exist on neatly packaged bags of Robusta coffee in the U.S., Australia, and Europe. In Vietnam, the invisibility of the brand, the weak presence of certification schemes, and the industrial nature of production and processing masks the social relationships, circulation, and kinds of value produced. Unlike a majority of the anthropological literature on coffee that focuses largely on fair trade relationships, labor and justice, cooperatives, or the environment (See Jaffee 2007; Lyon 2010; Lyon and Moberg 2010; Weiss 1996) this project demonstrates that large scale industrial coffee that is not certified (or even certifiable), not grown in cooperative systems, and not a part of larger labor and justice discourse deserves merit and ethnographic attention. Industrial grade coffee — the like produced in Vietnam — is, after all more representative of coffee production and consumption around the world.

#### *Historical Context and the Central Highlands as an Ethnographic Field Site*

Coffee reportedly arrived in Vietnam in in the 1850s (See Ha and Shively 2008) although other accounts pinpoint 1857 as the date of arrival and 1888 as the date of cultivation (K’Dam 2007). During the first decades of the twentieth century coffee was planted in small plantations throughout the “northern midlands” of Vietnam and by the 1960s toward the end of the Second Indochina and American War pest and disease

*(hemileia vastatrix)* decreased the total coffee production area drastically from over 5,000 hectares to under 3,000 hectares across the northern and central regions (K'Dam 2007:6-7). After reunification in 1975 coffee production areas nearly tripled in size and attention turned to the basaltic soil in the central highlands region. By 1987 Vietnam's export market, although small, was growing with consistent demand from the Soviet Union and other socialist countries in Eastern Europe (K'Dam 2007:7).

Coffee development in the central highlands undoubtedly impacted the ethnic minority communities living in the region. According to Winkels (2008) "around 1 million permanent migrants are said to have moved to the Central Highlands between 1976 and 1995, both as part of official resettlement programs and as independent migrants" accounting for a "majority of the region's population increase" in the 1980s and 1990s (2008:34). Historical ethnographer Oscar Salemink's (2002) work on Kinh<sup>4</sup> migration to the central highlands, territorialization, and the politics of ethnic minority land use in the central highlands also addresses the state policies of sedentarization in the early 1990s. Salemink suggests that government officials responsible for the policy shifts maintained an idealistic viewpoint that Kinh migration to the central highlands would benefit the local ethnic minorities despite the reality on the ground:

"Kinh migrants might settle in the same commune (*xa*) but hardly ever in the same hamlet (*thôn, plei, buôn*); that few Kinh cadres (teachers, health workers,

---

<sup>4</sup> "Kinh" is a term used to reference the majority Vietnamese people and distinguish them from the other officially recognized 53 ethnic groups in Vietnam.

agricultural extension workers, even ethnographers!) were prepared to literally risk their lives in malaria-ridden areas for an insufficient salary; that a recent wave of Kinh migrants looking for gold, precious stones, and easy profits in profitable crops like coffee and pepper, had resulted in the Wild West scenes, land grabbing, and inter-ethnic conflict beyond the control of local authorities in one of the last frontier areas in Vietnam” (2002:271)

And yet, in some areas in the central highlands, sedentarization efforts worked out relatively according to plan. Salemink (2002) states that

“in some places, notably on the fertile red soil plateaux in the provinces of Đak Lak, Lâm Đông, and around Pleiku (the capital of Gailai province)...many villages grew rich through the cultivation of industrial crops (coffee, tea, rubber, pepper) or due to sericulture” (2002:271).

In the central highlands, particularly in Lâm Đồng province where I focused much of my ethnographic research, coffee production was encouraged by the state as early as the late 1970s. Shine Toshihiko (2007) tells the story of Mr. K’Pheng, a Srê “coffee millionaire,” who began to expand a small plot of coffee land when arable land for subsistence became scarce (2007:68-69). He links the emergence and spread of coffee land to the decrease in wild cultivatable forests but also state development plans designed to provide an economic livelihood for ethnic minority communities in the province.

The growth rate of coffee production area and tons produced between 1990 and the present is exponential. This is also the point at which I begin my research and project

in earnest. The introduction of new pest and disease resistant varieties, global price stimulation, and the opening up of the Vietnamese economy through a plan of economic liberalization known as *đổi mới* (renovation) in 1986 are all major factors in the subsequent coffee boom along with migration.

Stan B-H Tan (2000) explores both planned and spontaneous migration to the “coffee frontiers” of Đắk Lắk province where coffee cultivators knowingly invested in a risky and precarious lifestyle with the hope of survival and eventually affluence. Similar to the nascent coffee production areas in Lâm Đồng province, these coffee frontiers were subject to the external variables and inherent risk that accompanies cash crop production. And like the coffee millionaires, many of the early coffee pioneers studied by Tan in the late 1990s and early 2000s have experienced a vast spectrum of risk and “crisis” involved in coffee production for a global export market.

The central highlands consists of five provinces: Đắk Lắk, Đắk Nông, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, and Lâm Đồng. These provinces account for approximately ninety-six percent of Vietnam’s overall coffee production with a majority of production occurring in Đắk Lắk (USDA 2013). I lived in Đà Lạt, the capital of Lâm Đồng province for approximately eighteen months between the beginning of 2010 and the end of 2011. Đà Lạt is a small mountain town and a former colonial hill station approximately 1,500 meters above sea level. The altitude and corresponding temperate climate makes it an ideal (and “romantic”) vacation and honeymoon destination for domestic tourists during the hot summer months in major urban areas. Đà Lạt always seemed a bit out of place

compared to the rest of the tropical country — the pine trees always stood out as a stark reminder of the French colonial presence in Vietnam. The town itself contains a mere 200,000 residents, spread across no more than one dozen wards with Hồ Xuân Hương Lake right in the middle. Though the temperature rarely dipped below twenty degrees Celsius, the central market sold hot soy milk and knitted sweaters year round. The



altitude, coupled with the climate made Đà Lạt an ideal place to grow vegetables, fruit, and flowers and the town is known for producing all three in an extensive greenhouse system and the terraced farms that dot the surrounding area. It was also the ideal climate to grow just about any variety of coffee.

Figure 0.1. Đà Lạt’s “Valley of Love”

I based myself in Đà Lạt for several reasons. The primary reason was simply about feasibility. Living in Buôn Ma Thuột, the coffee capital, would be difficult if not impossible as a foreign researcher for a number of reasons including political sensitivity related to ethnic minority-state politics, new and controversial bauxite mining facilities in the surrounding regions, and a dearth of resources for requisite letters of introduction to visit farms and government offices. In fact, the research that I did conduct in Đắk Lắk was often under the auspices of international development aid projects such as the International Trade Cooperation and USAID or as a tourist, attending the annual coffee festival. I also spent considerable amounts of time in the farming regions around Đà Lạt — in Bảo Lộc and Di Linh to the south and Hồ Chí Minh City for the purposes of meeting domestic businessmen, traders, and foreign investors who were either based abroad or in the city, traveling to coffee production areas only when necessary.

Thick description and a sense of loss and urgency permeate early ethnographies in highland Southeast Asia (See Condominas 1977; Hickey 1982) yet capitulate in more recent ethnographies and writings addressing indigenous knowledge or the “will to improve” (e.g. McElwee 2008; Li 2007). Moreover, attention to the history of development schemes in Vietnam and highland Southeast Asia spans a large expanse of literature although primarily finds home in agricultural and development economics or policy relevant studies addressing land use reform (See Fford and de Vylder 1996; Rambo 1995). Yet few studies of development and modernity in Southeast Asia address the implications of creating new consumer spaces and global trajectories for agricultural



commodities. Nor do they address the presence of foreign capital in the central highlands. This dissertation explores these consumer spaces from an ethnographic perspective with special attention to the ways in which the central highlands, namely Buôn Ma Thuột as the “coffee capital of Vietnam,” figure into the creation of a coffee consuming place and the political economy of the state more generally.

The central highlands coffee industry and swath of coffee production land mapped onto an increase in domestic coffee consumption in Vietnam — a consumption rate that jumped sixty-five percent between 2008 and 2011 to 1.583 million sixty kilogram bags (ICO 2011). The caveat of this dissertation is that a majority of the coffee consumption in Vietnam is concentrated in a particular region — most coffee consumption in Vietnam occurs in the south and central highlands regions where I conducted my field work. To say that there is a distinct Vietnamese coffee culture is to overgeneralize Vietnam broadly speaking and the south and central highlands regions specifically. However, the central highlands is the site of many of the state media articles I draw upon, national coffee festivals, local cafe scenes, and of course, coffee production. Drinking coffee is a daily ritual for many men (and some women) in this region of Vietnam and I argue that this is part of a larger domestic branding effort to project Vietnam as a legitimate coffee country, able and willing to compete with the branding efforts of its primary competitors (e.g. Juan Valdez in Colombia).

Focusing my research in the south-central highlands drew special attention to stories about coffee, cafe and coffee recommendations, and boasting rights about who

serves the best coffee in Đà Lạt, Buôn Ma Thuột, and Hồ Chí Minh City and what region grows the best coffee in Vietnam (or the world for that matter). While the overarching picture of this dissertation is transnational in nature and speaks to Vietnam's relationship with foreign interlocutors — particularly those investing in Vietnamese coffee — I also aim to unveil Vietnamese coffee in Vietnam. Advancing from a set of interconnected research questions regarding how the everyday lives of Vietnamese coffee industry workers become embroiled in a larger global process of coffee production, trade, and consumption this project specifically addresses the relationship between (Vietnamese) coffee producers and (largely) foreign consumers but also questions the modes of power through which knowledge is accessed and exchanged.

The imagined and real spaces that constitute the market are key sites of ethnographic engagement and serve as a means for international and domestic investors to engage in extensive capitalist ventures in Vietnam, at once defining and redefining the industrial coffee market itself. I approach these scholarly interventions through an examination of the following topics: coffee certification schemes, quality control and auditing procedures, training courses and knowledge production, commodity risk assessment and future speculation, and domestic coffee consumption in the central highlands. Although these subjects each map onto individual chapters, interspersed throughout this dissertation is a sense of what local Vietnamese coffee consuming culture feels/smells/tastes/sounds like. After all, much of my research took place over a cup of

coffee, at cafes, or around warehouses packed to the brim with sixty-kilogram bags of green beans.

Whether intimately involved in the coffee industry or not, most people I met during my fieldwork had strong opinions about their favorite cafe (e.g. the cafe with the best view of the lake), coffee origin (Buôn Ma Thuột for example), and preparation method (e.g. slow drip through a small metal filter “phín” over ice with plenty of sweetened condensed milk). Often times in Lâm Đồng and Đắk Lắk province (and even sometimes in Hồ Chí Minh City) people I spoke to at restaurants, hotels, and cafes mentioned an extended family member who “has a small coffee farm” somewhere in the province. These stories are not the focus of the dissertation but I find ethnographic value in their ubiquity and timeliness.

### *Methodological Approach*

A majority of this research was conducted between February 2010 and November 2011 although shorter preliminary research trips (June 2007, June-July 2008) and one post-fieldwork trip (June 2013) also inform this work. The primary method of inquiry is participant observation. I conducted approximately two dozen formal interviews with government officials from MARD, Cafe Control, and several community based coffee development projects. I also conducted hundreds of informal interviews with producers, traders, potential investors, and well established corporate investors. When granted permission, I participated in training seminars sponsored and conducted by international

organizations such as the World Bank, International Trade Centre (ITC), Rainforest Alliance, and the US Agency for International Development (USAID). At times I sat in the audience along with dozens or sometimes hundreds of Vietnamese coffee farmers, traders, and exporters listening to seminars and lectures. On other occasions I helped these organizations develop and facilitate focus groups and smaller format group discussions. Participating in these seminars was integral to developing coffee connections and arranging more focused formal and informal interviews with participants. These seminars sometimes resulted in farm or processing factory invitations where I would chat with industry workers in an informal manner and gain a stronger sense of what Vietnamese coffee farms and factories look, smell, and feel like.

Perhaps the most informative aspects of this research were conducted at the Cafe Control Lâm Đồng branch office where I drank many cups of coffee and spent “after hours” time eating and drinking with the state employees responsible for quality control assurance. They served as brokers for any company interested in purchasing Vietnamese coffee for export and they always had plenty to gossip about. Cafe Control, although a small state organization, is the hub and go-to information source for Vietnamese coffee. The Cafe Control office was a point of intersection between international investors and buyers interested in local Lâm Đồng harvests and I was fortunate to attend many of the associated meetings and farm audits that arose.

Much of my research was conducted from an improvisational standpoint. Liisa Malkki and Allaine Cerwonka (2007) argue that “ethnographic research is embedded in a

complex, emotional landscape that should not be viewed as it traditionally has been in the social sciences – as a hindrance to understanding – but as enabling knowledge production” (2007:37). While the knowledge produced through ethnographic fieldwork is undoubtedly situated knowledge (Haraway 1998), it is necessary to think about our own preoccupations with methodology and the epistemologies we subscribe to as ethnographers. The incorporation of improvisation, although not new to ethnographic research, is a necessary and invaluable way to engage with questions of knowledge production but also challenge preoccupations with methods while recognizing that improvisation is necessarily a method with its own sets of tools and techniques (Malkki and Cerwonka 2007). Because I was perceived as a foreigner with extensive knowledge about the global coffee industry I often found myself navigating a blurry line between ethnographer and a sort of cultural consultant or broker for both Vietnamese producers and traders and the foreign investors who sought to purchase coffee.

I believe that this position along with my training and ability to (albeit rudimentarily) cup test coffee for both defects and quality opened up access to spaces that I would not otherwise have traversed. If asked to taste and provide my opinion on a particular farm’s coffee I always did so with the vocal caveat that my job in Vietnam was to research (*nghiên cứu*) and learn about coffee, agriculture, and development. I still carry the concern that despite my explanations and formal letters of introduction from my host university in Hồ Chí Minh City that some small producers may have believed that I was there to purchase and promote their coffee. I take this concern however, to be one

aspect of my ethnography — despite the overwhelming attention on high yield, high volume production, farmers still want their coffee to taste good to a foreign consumer.

Because industrial agriculture is necessarily improvisational — pests, disease, inclement weather are not entirely predictable nor is the global price — my methods were too. I observed several unannounced informal audits that taught me more about the nature of social visits than regulatory regimes. I conducted several formal interviews in which I submitted a list of questions for approval, only to receive the answers ahead of the scheduled interview. My time with those particular government officials read like a frustrating play rehearsal as we read our scripted questions and answers back and forth. Viewing these ethnographic moments as improvisational allowed me to take a closer examination of bureaucratic procedure and gauge potentially sensitive subjects.

At times, like Cerwonka, I felt complicit by participating in various community activities. In my case, I felt that I times, simply by being a foreigner among other foreigners I was complicit in reproducing stereotypes about Vietnamese coffee as poor quality. At other times, simply by speaking Vietnamese with farmers, I felt that I was complicit in criticizing particular development aid initiatives. I took last minute 4:00am bus rides to Bảo Lộc to attend an impromptu meetings with a new potential investor. The deviation from my proposed (and prescribed) methods allowed me to incorporate the emotionally charged frustrations, ambitions, and social relationships that exist in the coffee industry beyond a commodity chain study or quantitative analysis.

As many critical food studies scholars have shown, it is not an easy methodological task to trace, let alone engage with and unpack, what happens to a commodity between production and consumption (e.g. Foster 2008; Bestor 2004). In Paige West's (2012) recent work she acknowledges the dearth of attention to the distribution phase of commodities and the ethnographic limitations of such a vast enterprise. Employing an admittedly problematic "journalistic method" to shed light on the distribution of coffee from Papua New Guinea, West provides us with a general sense of the spaces and labor involved in moving coffee around the world. Yet I am left wondering how to study this aspect of commodity circulation more effectively; for example, what does the distribution angle tell us about the coffee industry? What are the connections between container shipping, quality inspectors, and regulatory regimes?

We know why distribution is difficult to trace (particularly from an ethnographic perspective) but perhaps this is an opportunity to re-examine why we should study distribution at all, and how it might contribute to further understanding the social life of a commodity (See Appadurai 1988). This dissertation takes on some aspects of this distribution angle, positing coffee as perpetually on the move whether physically or in the imaginary of farmers and traders. I do so through improvisational ethnographic encounters with industry members who never see or touch a bag of coffee and the real and imagined spaces where coffee is valued, devalued, produced, traded, and consumed.

### *Dissertation Outline*

This dissertation is composed of five chapters and a conclusion that serves in part as epilogue to the project. The first chapter, “Seeking Higher Quality: Industrial Dreams and Regulatory Regimes” analyzes the regulatory mechanisms by which Vietnamese coffee quality is determined. I introduce Cafe Control — what Ikemoto Yukio (2007) refers to as a “semi-governmental organization...keen to improve the quality of coffee” (2007:128) — through an ethnographic lens and analyze how accountability and the audit (*kiểm tra*) shape and are shaped by individual and collective perceptions of quality. These perceptions run counter to largely foreign narratives about what constitutes a “high” quality coffee as local coffee industry workers, the state, and farmers seek to (re)define quality and its possibilities for further developing the industry. I argue that the audit as a procedure generates accountability not necessarily about quality as it is often framed by corporate and state auditors but rather about Vietnam’s role in the industrial coffee industry.

The second chapter, “Producing Coffee Experts in the Laboratory and in the Field” draws upon the interactions between international organizations such as the World Bank, ITC, and USAID and the local “coffee circuit” comprised of farmers, agricultural specialists, traders, exporters, and state employees who regularly attend seminars and training programs sponsored by these organizations. I argue that there are multiple experts being produced in vis-a-vis these interactions as well as a complex expertise that sometimes pits local knowledge against the “expertise” of international organization



representatives in a way that may be counterproductive for the goals of both parties. In the laboratory — the spaces where coffee hybrids are developed and samples are cup-tested and evaluated — the knowledge produced normalizes the standards for quality and expert coffee production (See Latour 1979). I also highlight the ways in which expertise is constructed and perceived locally among coffee growing communities and the techniques (e.g. soil modification) that, at times, redefine the very conventions that make for successful, modern agricultural production. This is a chapter about knowledge production but also the power relationships that ultimately lead to constructing experts and expertise in ways that disallow reflexivity. On a local level however, a highly reflexive “expert” discourse circulates and challenges normalized, ostensibly empirical ideas about “good” coffee and “modern” production methods.

The third chapter “Certifying Vietnam: Legitimizing Coffee and Reputation in Vietnam” explores nascent certification schemes and their intended and perceived role in the industry. Because certified coffee represents a relatively small percentage of the coffee produced in Vietnam and Vietnamese coffee is largely not labeled by country of origin certification schemes operate differently in Vietnam compared to other coffee producing countries where fair trade and organic certifications map onto social justice (See Jaffee 2007). I argue that certification schemes in Vietnam espouse the effort and ability of the industry to engage with the seemingly progressive momentum of the global industry while still simultaneously positing the values of certifications (e.g. sustainability, fair prices, access to farmer extension programs) in local terms — terms that redefine

sustainability as sustaining the volume of production and short and long term economic prospects.

This segues into Chapter 4 in which I analyze various perceptions of risk and uncertainty within the context of international organizations and the local industry. Risk mitigation manifests in different ways across the industry and the local context in particular speaks to the larger ambition for Vietnam to become the “number one coffee producer in the world” and to gain international recognition for producing a high quality coffee. This chapter also reveals a subtle reluctance and anxiety about inevitable future crises and the reality that a majority of the coffee farmers in Vietnam do not have an inherent desire to farm coffee. While risk and uncertainty are framed by international organizations as definable and thus preventable, I argue that risk and uncertainty in the Vietnamese coffee industry are the result of a larger stagnating economic landscape in which uncertainty defines risk mitigation and interactions between foreign investors and local producers.

Lastly, “Branding Vietnam: Domestic Coffee Consumption in the Central Highlands” addresses the rising domestic coffee consumption rate in the primary coffee producing region of the country as well as national franchise efforts to brand Vietnam and develop a distinct sense of place that is at once local and global. I take consumption as an active and performative process (See Douglas and Isherwood 1996) in which Vietnam can position itself as a legitimate coffee producer for audiences around the world. This audience — domestic and international — consumes Vietnamese coffee in a comestible

material sense but not necessarily as an act of desire (See Graeber 2011). Consumption here is also the result of branding. Domestic coffee consumption in Vietnam is also about challenging the stereotype that Vietnam is subject to the global industry — that Vietnam produces coffee best fit for unlabeled tin cans. This chapter examines local (Đà Lạt and Buôn Ma Thuột) coffee branding and consumption and a locally situated but intentionally national branding effort through Vietnam’s first franchise — Trung Nguyên. I approach this chapter with appropriate caution as domestic coffee consumption does not translate into a general Vietnamese “coffee culture.” I argue instead that domestic coffee consumption performs Vietnamese ambition on a local, national, and transnational stage.

The conclusion, “Merging Coffee Worlds: Cultivating a New and Critical Approach to the Study of Industrial Commodities,” is both conclusion and epilogue to the project in its entirety. Drawing upon contemporary anthropological and food studies literature on commodities, I pay heed to a growing interest in critical approaches that move beyond unilinear commodity analysis and propose increased attention to industrial commodity studies. I address new developments (and controversies) in the Vietnamese coffee industry since the completion of my fieldwork in late 2011. As such, this chapter takes into consideration the less tangible, more abstract spaces of commodity production and consumption including a now defunct commodity exchange floor.

Throughout the dissertation is attention to the aspirations of those working within the industry — failed and prospective dreams but also an optimistic sentiment that if Vietnam can become the largest producer of coffee in the world, the livelihood of those in

the Vietnamese coffee industry will improve drastically. Of course, the title of “largest coffee producer in the world” is an arbitrary one but powerful nonetheless. And while this discourse may circulate widely throughout the coffee producing and trading community in Vietnam, so too does the reality that a title is not what sustains an industry nor the people working within it.

## CHAPTER 1

### SEEKING HIGHER QUALITY: INDUSTRIAL DREAMS AND REGULATORY REGIMES

In late February 2011 I was invited to Bảo Lộc to observe European based company Sara Lee's visit to the Lâm Đồng province Cafe Control office and help arrange a "cupping" session with Hoang and his colleagues.<sup>5</sup> I arrived at 7:00 in the morning and promptly shared a cup of coffee with Hoang, the director of the Cafe Control branch, as his colleagues rushed around the office to prepare Sara Lee's cupping session. "Guess the percentage of Robusta in this blend." We played this game every time I visited the office. Hoang had prepared a cup of coffee in typical Vietnamese style – slow drip using a phin filled with grounds and hot water that requires several minutes to finish filtering.<sup>6</sup> When I finally took a sip I ventured a guess. "Maybe...30% Robusta?" Hoang laughed and quickly corrected me.

---

<sup>5</sup> Cupping is the coffee industry's taste test in which several samples (labeled or not) of green beans are sample roasted on site and prepared unfiltered at a specific temperature. While cupping is sometimes used to evaluate taste profiles, in Vietnam cupping is primarily used to assess defects in coffee, i.e. over-fermentation, diseased coffee, etc., which is indicative of coffee purchasers' a priori assumptions but also expectations about the quality of Vietnamese coffee. I have yet to experience a cupping session in Vietnam that focused solely or even primarily on the positive taste profile of a Vietnamese coffee.

<sup>6</sup> A phin is a small metal coffee filter commonly used in Vietnam. It consists of three or four parts: a cylindrical filter chamber with small holes in the bottom, a filter press used to compact the grounds and create a slow, espresso style pressure, a cup spanner (sometimes welded to the chamber), and a lid that keeps the water hot during the filtering process but also serves as a space to place the chamber once the water stops dripping.

No, no! You have it the wrong way. It's 70% Robusta. Can you believe that?

It's special, very good Robusta that I found near Đà Lạt at 1700 meters. Can you believe that? I know it tastes like a good Arabica but it's Robusta and I blended and roasted it myself. This is what I want to show them [Sara Lee] today. When they taste it, they will be surprised. I know they will.

The significance of a seventy-percent Robusta coffee blend lies in the assumptions about coffee quality and what constitutes a “high” quality coffee versus industrial grade.

Within the global coffee industry, high quality coffee is often associated with Arabica varieties and it maps directly onto its economic value — there were periods throughout my fieldwork when Arabica fetched double the price/kilogram of Robusta on the global market. In Vietnam, Robusta production makes up over 90 percent of the entire industry. Robusta is the affordable, consistent, and high yield industrial grade variety sought out by a vast majority of the large multinational corporations such as Sara Lee. Hoang would later attempt to challenge the myths surrounding the quality of Robusta by serving a high quality blend that might catch the consumer off guard when it was revealed to be primarily Robusta. It soon became apparent that he wanted to impress Sara Lee with the quality of the local Lâm Đồng coffees but also the potential for Vietnam to develop and move beyond the pigeonhole of industrial high volume production.

### *Brokerage and Navigation*

Hoang is a broker in the Vietnamese coffee industry. He occupies a key position in contemporary Vietnam, navigating between the state, international coffee buyers, international development aid agencies (e.g. World Bank and USAID) and local producers. Brokerage highlights “the ways in which social actors operate as active agents building social, political, and economic roles rather than simply following normative scripts” (Lewis and Mosse 2006:11). Brokerage in Vietnam and especially brokerage navigating the edifice of foreign investment and development aid illuminates a cultural incommensurability that stifles the projects (the “script”) envisioned by foreign development aid workers and Vietnamese producers, transforming the projects and the industry in the process.

The brokers themselves are left to define and then translate the role of foreign investment and development aid to the state but also local producers. They must also define and translate the role (and potential) of Vietnamese coffee to a larger global market, e.g. “this is why you should continue to buy coffee from this farmer.” When a major company such as Sara Lee visits one of their primary coffee origins, brokerage becomes not simply an act of building and bridging social-political-economic roles but also an act of “creating order” (Lewis and Mosse 2006:14) that in effect eliminates problem inducing external variables to a successful coffee producer-buyer relationship. The business practice of economic exchange but also the quality and quantity of coffee to be exchanged is translated clearly and orderly across parties through the broker and the

process of brokerage. I argue that the process of navigating international coffee investment in Vietnam appears orderly because of this process and the institution of formal regulatory regimes, though these regimes operate only to produce a sense of order and assent from Vietnamese working within the industry.

Hoang was the director of the Lâm Đồng province Café Control branch – the state owned office responsible for certification scheme auditing and quality control in the Vietnamese coffee industry. He studied food chemistry at a large public university in Hồ Chí Minh City in the mid-1990s and post-graduation immediately accepted a job as a coffee roaster and physical profile specialist with Café Control. His passion for coffee exists as both an ambitious entrepreneur and someone committed to further developing Vietnam’s potential in the global industry. I met Hoang in early 2010 while accompanying a small German and Vietnamese joint stock coffee sourcing company on a trip to a high altitude farm north of Đà Lạt. Hoang was the government official assigned to join us and answer questions about local coffee production as well as introduce us to potential farmer clients. I worked closely with him throughout my time in Vietnam. Our conversations ranged from risk and price fluctuation in the local and global coffee markets to accountability, quality control, and nascent certification schemes for coffee as well as other industrial cash crops in Vietnam such as cashew, pepper, and tea. Working for a state owned company, he explained his situation as being caught in a personal struggle as he grappled with fourteen years of experience in the Vietnamese coffee industry and an ambition to start his own coffee roasting and sourcing company. He felt a



strong commitment to a progressive and optimistic picture of the Vietnamese coffee industry and he espoused this perspective as often as he expressed concern about risk and the future.

Café Control was responsible for handling interactions between Vietnamese coffee producers and processors and the myriad foreign corporations and exporters who ultimately purchase Vietnamese coffee. The office garnered a great deal of respect from foreign coffee investors and is often a point of reference, coffee purchasing organizer, and liaison for new and long time foreign coffee investors. The office itself was small and bare – a two story building at the end of a street on the outskirts of Bảo Lộc. A large glass table sat in the front greeting room providing a space for social coffee and tea drinking with visiting investors. Several coffee posters adorned the walls illustrating the physiology and anatomy of Robusta and Arabica coffee. One poster in particular bore the smiling face of Mr. Son<sup>7</sup> alongside his successful coffee grafting (*ghép cà phê*) experiments, incidentally, the first of their kind in Vietnam. The back room on the ground level served as a preparation space for coffee samples and a staircase led up to several sample roasters, bags of green coffee, and a laboratory with comparison coffee samples from all over the coffee producing world – Brazil, Indonesia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Costa Rica.

---

<sup>7</sup> Mr. Son was a prominent figure and somewhat of a local hero in revolutionizing coffee growing technology in the region. His extensive research and experimentation with coffee grafting led to the propagation of a successful strand of high yield and largely disease resistant coffee utilized widely by farmers in the region.

On the surface of the Vietnamese coffee industry, value lies squarely in the quantity of cherry produced. At the household level, when a small farm completes its harvest, the cherries will often end up at a local processing factory and a price will be displayed on a sign: price/kilo. At this stage, there is often little distinction between ripe cherries, unripe cherries, and potentially defective coffee. If Sara Lee moved forward with the certification procedure, Hoang explained that “Café Control becomes their service provider so we need to make sure that we provide this service well.” The service in this particular case was a compliancy audit of coffee production to determine which certification standard might already work for their company. Cafe Control was merely one office responsible for auditing over 300,000 coffee producers in the province, rendering Hoang’s audits important not only in terms of checking compliancy but also regulating future farming practices and encouraging self-regulation. It was impossible for Hoang and his colleagues to visit each and every coffee farmer in the province so the promotion of self-regulation techniques and training courses focused not only on meeting certification criteria but “educating the farmer” on the benefits of producing a high quality product.

Hoang worked at the apex of the Vietnamese “coffee paradox.” Daviron and Ponte (2005) argue that

the global value chain for coffee is currently characterized by a coffee ‘paradox’: a ‘coffee boom’ in consuming countries and a ‘coffee crisis’ in producing countries...a paradox within this paradox is that the international coffee

market is awash in coffee of ‘low quality’, while there is a dire shortage of ‘high quality’ coffee – and it is the latter that is generating sales growth [2005:xvi]

The “market” awash in coffee of “low quality” is the supposed problem that Vietnam contributes to. Between 2008 and 2011 MARD espoused a discourse that highlighted a move towards “high quality” (*chất lượng cao*) while recognizing that a majority of the coffee revenue in Vietnam comes from “grade two five percent black and broken coffee” – a grade of coffee primarily used in soluble coffee. The idea that producing a higher quality would generate sales growth is indisputable but managing that feat in Vietnam is not an easy task. In fact, improving the quality of the “low quality” coffee rather than producing high quality coffee seemed to be more in line with quality improvement efforts proposed by the state. Unwittingly mediating between local coffee producers and foreign coffee purchasers, Hoang was deemed to be the broker who understood an abstract desire for quality, the international global coffee industry’s necessity for quantity, and the reality of “good enough” quality and “very good” quantity. Hoang and his colleagues regularly employed auditing practices to mitigate expectations between local producers and foreign purchasers regarding quality and quantity.

### *Qualifying Vietnamese Coffee*

Hoang knew that business with Sara Lee was extremely important, and stamping a certification on their coffee, or even verbally acknowledging that it was of sufficient quality, was a step in line with MARD attempts to brand Vietnamese coffee as a certifiably good, high quality, and desirable global commodity. The certification itself was not as important as legitimizing the quality of the coffee however. Foster's (2007) notion of "qualifying products" suggests that the quality of a product becomes, at particular moments, temporarily fixed and closed to added value. Local Vietnamese producers, auditors, and the large multinational companies that purchase local coffee all have their own understanding of what quality is and when it becomes fixed as a good, with little space to add additional value in Vietnam. Value may be added later through branding efforts and (re)marketing but coffee at its source eventually becomes a good to be requalified later. Foster notes that the process

"of qualifying and requalifying products, unfolds at all moments in the biography or career of a product—design, manufacture, marketing, use, recycling, and so forth. But at certain moments, the qualities of a product are stabilized; the product becomes a "good," its list of qualities closed at least temporarily" (2007:713)

In addition to his notion of qualifying products, Foster (2007) also takes notice of the consistently shifting nature of producer and consumer interests, how inherently inchoate a commodity chain actually is, and what this implies for value creation. For Foster, "the

notion of the economy of qualities implies that consumer agency operates, if at all, embedded and distributed within commodity or product networks” (2008:726).

Consumers in this ethnographic context are multinational corporations.

Vietnamese coffee is qualified by Hoang, Cafe Control, and other auditors as something *already* above the expectations of their multinational corporate buyers — as something other and better than the corporate industrial soluble coffee that it will eventually become. Yet multinational corporations such as Sara Lee qualify Vietnamese coffee as something reliable, consistent, and most importantly, available in the quantity necessary to satisfy the demand of *their* global consumers. These global consumers qualify Vietnamese coffee insofar as it is affordable, ubiquitous, and maps onto the brand recognition of a multinational corporation — they likely do not know it is from Vietnam at all.

The creation of new consumer spaces – spaces engendered by communicative technologies and increased awareness on the part of consumers about how market capitalism operates – fosters a new kind of social relationship between consumer and corporation (Foster 2007). When a multinational corporation brands their coffee as high quality though pays no mention of the place of origin, consumers develop brand loyalty to the company but not a specific country or region. This is in stark contrast to the “third wave” or specialty coffee industry in which increased specificity to origin (down to the individual farm owner in some instances), production methods, and detailed information

about varieties and terroir clearly mark (and celebrate) the country of origin.<sup>8</sup> And, at least on the surface, there are vast differences in quality across these distinct coffee industries.

New consumer spaces reveal the ways in which coffee purchasers and traders influence the creation of value, define quality, and become embedded in global socio-economic processes of commodity production. By embedded, I mean drawn into and situated within a larger socio-political sphere in which profit and quality of life are potentially determined by the subjective ways quality is defined. In Vietnam, coffee buyers and traders are further embedded via media reports on local and global price fluctuation, government policies related to coffee development and regulatory audits within certification schemes that segregate valuable coffee from less valuable coffee.<sup>9</sup>

Here I examine a Vietnamese coffee “audit regime” (Strathern 2000) and the materiality of bureaucracy (See Hull 2012) that results from state regulatory projects. I analyze material coffee documents (e.g. sample audit forms and informational materials distributed to those subject to auditing procedures) that reveal the bureaucratic

---

<sup>8</sup> The “specialty coffee industry” is first coined in the *Tea and Coffee Trade Journal* in the 1970s and refers to a marked move from large scale operations in which coffee was purchased and roasted commercially with little attention to the origin or establishing producer relationships to an industry in which coffee is purchased at origin and roasted in small batches with increased attention to quality standards and “transparency.”

<sup>9</sup> The term “embeddedness” is defined in detail by economist sociologist Mark Granovetter (1985) as economic behavior “embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations” (1985:487). His primary point is that economic behavior and exchange is at times less important than the social relationships cultivated through the process of economic exchange.

inconsistencies at work in the industry as a whole. I also explore several ethnographic contexts in which the audit is utilized, seemingly as a regulatory tool. I argue however, that audit regimes, rather than reveal the “problems” and “violations” on the farm or in the factory, actually conceal quality and other values meant to be regulated by the audit. The broker is a key actor in navigating the audit regime and the blurry subjective ideas about quality and how coffee is qualified as “high quality” (*chất lượng cao*).

*The Coffee Audit in Vietnam — Fabricating Transparency, Reinforcing Invisibility*

If a major Vietnamese coffee buyer wants to certify their coffee with one of the four major coffee certification schemes operating in Vietnam, Hoang became one of several go-to experts.<sup>10</sup> The process works like this: a company wants to stamp a certification onto their packages of coffee. This certification, although not necessarily visible to the final consumer in a grocery store or the household level in major Vietnamese coffee importing countries (e.g. Germany, Switzerland, United States), was becoming an increasingly important standard and benchmark of competition across the industrial coffee industry. The company has the ability to carry out an internal audit with the coffee producers and processors they work with. For example, they can send a representative to Vietnam to visit the farms, factories, and potentially the site of export.

---

<sup>10</sup> While there are more than four certification schemes available for coffee in Vietnam, only four have been established specifically for coffee and maintain reputations as reliable and valuable for coffee companies and producers. These certifications will be discussed in detail in forthcoming chapters.

But if they want to carry out an external audit without being present in person, they will likely utilize Café Control. Café Control will verify the company's internal auditing standards and go directly to the coffee collectors, selecting ten to twenty percent of the collectors and half of the farmers providing to those collectors to formally audit. Within the audit, Café Control is checking primarily for criteria in the company's contract with the producers to verify that it meets certification criteria. Of course, MARD, VICOFA, and by extension, Café Control have their own quality control criteria and an auditor may or may not relay this to the local farmers and collectors. Ultimately, third party auditors follow the company's quality criteria as closely as possible. Hoang explained this as a way to ensure that farmers and collectors have the possibility to make as much money as possible, lest the industry slip into sloppy processing and further stigmatize Vietnam as a poor quality producer. An external audit of a coffee producing operation is not as simple as a farm visit however.

At the factory level an audit requires a careful examination of production records and organization – is certified (or certifiable) coffee separated from uncertified coffee? Does the level of coffee production on record (i.e. bags of physical coffee in the warehouse) comply with the realistic yield of the farm space? Hoang once relayed a story of a factory supposedly collecting forty hectares of certified coffee from a farm that had a much smaller production capacity. Sometimes these violations go unnoticed but often they are egregious enough to raise red flags. At the farm level the audit goes beyond coffee plants extending to checks on fertilizer, labor use and working conditions,



and pesticide application per the company’s criteria. At the export level, an audit translates to compliancy checks on bagged green coffee – if an auditor were to slice open a bag, would the final exportable product represent the desired grade of coffee to be exported?

**HỆ THỐNG KIỂM SOÁT NỘI BỘ - ICS**

**KẾ HOẠCH QUẢN LÝ QUY TRÌNH KỸ THUẬT SẢN XUẤT**  
**VĂN BẢN ICS SỐ 08**

Trang 2/2 Được thực hiện bởi: - Đã thông qua ngày: - Ngày: -

**TÊN NHÓM HỘ**

**4. CANH TÁC BẢO VỆ ĐẤT:**

Giới thiệu qua các thông tin về đất tại đơn vị mình. Nhấn mạnh tầm quan trọng của canh tác bảo vệ đất trong sản xuất bền vững sau đó liên hệ thực trạng tại đơn vị mình bao gồm những điểm nào đã làm được, những điểm nào chưa làm được, biện pháp cần phải thực hiện là gì, khi nào thực hiện, cách thức thực hiện.

.....Tương tự như vậy tiến hành cho đến phần cuối cùng của quy trình là thu hái, chế biến và bảo quản và các yếu tố liên quan đến bảo vệ môi trường trong Bộ nguyên tắc yêu cầu.

**LỊCH THỜI VỤ**

TÊN NHÓM SX \_\_\_\_\_

DIỆN TÍCH/SẢN LƯỢNG: .....Ha./.....Tấn \_\_\_\_\_ NĂM \_\_\_\_\_

CÔNG VIỆC	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Cura đồn	X	X										X
Ghép				X	X	X						
Tạo hình				X	X			X			X	X
SX phân hữu cơ	X	X	X									X
Bón phân			X		X			X		X		
Tưới nước		X	X	X								
Phòng trừ sâu bệnh		X	X	X	X	X	X	X				
Harvesting					X	X	X					
Bổ sung cây che bóng											X	
Bảo dưỡng thiết bị	X											X

NGÀY LẬP: \_\_\_\_\_

ĐẠI DIỆN TỔ CHỨC \_\_\_\_\_ TRỢ LÝ KỸ THUẬT \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 1.1: Sample audit form page — includes a twelve month calendar with farming guidelines that farmers agree to abide by once they sign off as a family or group of families (*tên nhóm hộ*)

In Shore and Wright's (2000) discussion of "audit as instrument of government" they suggest that audit is "a means through which individuals actively and freely regulate their own conduct and thereby contribute to the government's model of social order" (2000:62). Perhaps the vision of social order in the Vietnamese coffee industry is one in which exporters and producers alike fulfill contracts without dispute, confront the external variables of coffee price fluctuation and risk (*rủi ro giá cà phê*) with the utmost preparation, while both Vietnamese exporters and large foreign companies turn a profit in a given harvest. The rise of the audit in the Vietnamese coffee industry maintains this vision (or version) of social order by developing trustful relationships between foreign companies and local producers in an (ideally) mutual learning environment in which local Vietnamese coffee expertise is exchanged with foreign expertise on world market prices and improved farming techniques.

All coffee certification schemes in Vietnam have requirements related to social, economic, and environmental criteria but quality (*chất lượng*) is vital to each element of the auditing process. While initial audits are scheduled, "surprise" visits by Cafe Control may occur if full compliance is not met during the initial audit. Furthermore, Hoang also serves as an informal consultant for friends and former colleagues in the investment side of the industry. If a trader was interested in a particular variety of coffee available in Lâm Đồng province, Hoang might help them by visiting a farm or factory to assess the quality of their production. Sometimes he did this for a small amount of money but often it was on his own time and dime. Rather than conducting favors, Hoang viewed these

consultant opportunities as necessary to upholding pride in the Vietnamese coffee industry and furthering the development of quality farming practices and a quality end product, undoubtedly for foreign consumption. They were undoubtedly about maintaining strong reciprocal social relationships too. Of course the overall impression Sara Lee or other major multi-national corporations might construct about Vietnamese coffee reflect directly upon Hoang and his ability to perform his job well and train others to self-regulate.

Self-regulated audits also harken to Shore and Wright's (2000) research on "coercive accountability" in which they suggest "that audit technologies being introduced into higher education and elsewhere are not simply innocuously neutral, legal-rational practices: rather, they are instruments for new forms of governance and power" (2000:57). Audit technology does not exist solely in an official Vietnamese bureaucratic context but also in an everyday, self-regulated one in which citizens such as Hoang become individual agents of quality control. Hoang told his friends: "*if* an audit were to take place on this farm, this is what it might resemble." In illuminating what "audit culture" looks like, Strathern (2000) suggests that:

Procedures for assessment have social consequences, locking up time, personnel and resources, as well as locking into the moralities of public management. Yet by themselves audit practices often seem mundane, inevitable parts of a bureaucratic process. It is when one starts putting together a larger picture that they take on the contours of a distinct cultural artifact. [2000:3]

Assessments of the Vietnamese coffee industry, certification schemes, company and third party audits alike employ a vision of Vietnam's place in the larger global industry. The "mundane, inevitable parts of a bureaucratic process" are indeed indicative of the larger picture – of the agents necessary to maintain Vietnam's current coffee production level and its role as a primary global provider of grade two Robusta, five percent black and broken soluble coffee.

The global industry in the context of coffee is what Ong and Collier (2005) might call an "assemblage." They argue that "as global forms are articulated in specific situations – or territorialized in *assemblages* – they define new material, collective, and discursive relationships" and "they are domains in which the forms and values of individual and collective existence are problematized or at stake, in the sense that they are subject to technological, political, and ethical reflection and intervention" (2005:4). It is a localized form of the audit that renders the Vietnamese coffee industry global in the first place – not merely a pattern of "local" production and "foreign" consumption. The material artifacts and discursive relationships between local regulators/regulations and the international standards for quality define and continually redefine what Vietnamese coffee is and should be.

The ways in which coffee is valued – by the London futures market, a certification scheme representative, individual coffee producers, or MARD – renders the Vietnamese coffee industry global, an "assemblage," an arbiter of social relationships and experience. The audit becomes a tool to illuminate these relationships and attention to

the discourse surrounding quality and quantity expectations (local and global) seemingly subjects Vietnam to the industry as a whole. Vietnam becomes accountable to produce both high quality and high quantity coffee even though it will not go recognized as Vietnamese coffee by its final consumers.

In the “Tyranny of Transparency” Marilyn Strathern states that “there is nothing innocent about making the invisible visible,” (2000:310). In government media statements related to coffee, one of the primary concerns is increasing transparency – transparency in price and risk analysis, futures trading and hedging, quality control, and production techniques. Stamping a certification label on a burlap sack of coffee is one way to do this. The entrance and subsequent explosion of coffee certification schemes in Vietnam is an apt way to explore Strathern’s question and concerns me here because certification schemes in the Vietnamese coffee industry exist at the crossroads of international development aid, shifting government agricultural policies, and the Vietnamese coffee producer’s desire to maximize annual profit. By transforming an ostensibly low grade Robusta coffee into a certified high quality, even Fair Trade coffee in some instances, the invisible – challenging labor dynamics, over fertilization and pesticide use, environmental degradation, and foreign matter in processed coffee – is rendered visible but also seemingly eradicated vis-à-vis the auditing practices of private certification schemes.

The audits and subsequent certifications that render Vietnamese coffee production and processing methods (and thus quality) transparent are the same tools that conceal the

possibility of and access to niche coffee markets, extensive agricultural knowledge about long term risks of coffee production, and results in what Hoang referred to as “bringing salt to the ocean.” As the Vietnamese coffee industry becomes increasingly transparent vis-à-vis government regulation of quality control and foreign investment into quality control, the risk of adulteration – too many certifications and a farmer premium rendered meaningless – ultimately threatens both the rhetoric of a high quality Vietnamese coffee *and* the reality of a low grade high quantity Vietnamese coffee. The role of certification schemes in legitimizing Vietnam’s role in a global market economy will be explored in the coming chapters.

Yuson Jung’s (2009) analysis of shifting attitudes towards standardized food products in Bulgaria she argues “that a growing consumer competence enabling people to execute their own control over the food they consume is a significant aspect of changing attitudes towards standardized food” (2009:33). With Sara Lee in Bảo Lộc, it was clear that the participants were thinking critically about whether or not a farm deserves a certification simply because they pay for it. While paying for a certification may have been good enough in the early days of the Vietnamese coffee industry, standards are shifting and reputation is increasingly important for individual farming households and companies alike. Quality control regulations will undoubtedly continue to shift as Vietnamese coffee producers navigate and negotiate their relationship with the local government and international certification agencies. Of course, certifications themselves are still not standardized across Vietnam. A farmer will still find a buyer for their

uncertified coffee and the price incentives may not be high enough to justify seeking out a certification and employing their standard practices. The general notion of quality is achievable because it is a malleable concept and one mediated by material artifacts and the everyday lives of Vietnamese coffee producers and processors while certification standards of quality still represent a small percentage of all coffee produced in Vietnam.

Sara Lee's visit was significant for several reasons. The company chose to send approximately one dozen representatives from several European head offices in Greece, Germany, Italy, and Switzerland to see the origin of the coffee that they sell in bulk and provide a forum for questions and concerns related to coffee quality, taste, and the general background of coffee production in Vietnam. They were noticeably eager to explore local coffee production areas. Vietnam was a first time destination for a majority of the representatives, despite the volume of Vietnamese coffee purchased by their company.<sup>11</sup> Beyond travel and a nascent connection to the coffee "origin" the company representatives had a specific task in Vietnam. For Sara Lee, as a (then) majority buyer of Vietnamese coffee, their interest in certified coffee warranted an extended conversation about the compliance requirements necessary to join a specific certification scheme and the audit procedures necessary to maintain it. Because Sara Lee was uncertified and did not have a Vietnam representative working in-country, if they moved forward with the

---

<sup>11</sup> Because Vietnamese coffee is a grade consistent with high volume industrial production, auditing is something that can be done third party without regular visits to origin. Thus, a majority of the visitors had not yet been to Vietnam, let alone seen the farms their company purchased coffee from.

certification, they would rely on Cafe Control, namely Hoang, as an external third party auditor. Many of the audits conducted by multinational corporations were conducted by a Vietnamese Cafe Control worker. The notable exceptions were the few certification schemes that maintained personnel on staff in Vietnam and would likely utilize that person to conduct the audit. There was an expectation that self-auditing techniques developed through farmer training programs would also monitor the coffee producers and collectors they purchased from.

When Hoang and I finished our coffees I asked him about the schedule for Sara Lee's visit. In addition to the question and answer and cupping sessions, they had plans to informally "see" the farms which they purchase from. The coffee Sara Lee purchased was uncertified and the company was clearly interested in exploring the value-added potential of an official certification scheme stamp.<sup>12</sup> Hoang believed that these informal farm visits, although under the guise of exploration may serve as informal audits – a peripheral form of auditing that exists outside of the bureaucratic framework of formal certification scheme or state audits. It was part of the complex web of formal, informal, official, and unofficial regulation of coffee quality.

The introduction of quality centered certification schemes and the subsequent rise of an "audit culture" and "audit regime" (Strathern 2000) provide a forum for

---

<sup>12</sup> I address the process of certification and the differences between various certifications in Chapter 3. It should suffice to say that Sara Lee was interested in applying a third party certification, i.e. using a pre-existing scheme to assess and certify their coffee rather than developing their own company specific, and thus unrecognized certification brand.



Vietnamese coffee industry members to navigate and further regulate their relationship with the increased presence of foreign capital and international coffee companies.

Strathern (2000) contends that

“audit regimes accompany a specific epoch in Western international affairs, a period when governance has become reconfigured through a veritable army of ‘moral fieldworkers’ (NGOs), when environmental liability has been made an issue of global concern (after the Rio convention), when the ethics of appropriation has been acknowledged to an unprecedented scale in respect of indigenous rights, and when transparency of operation is everywhere endorsed as the outward sign of integrity” (2003:3)

The audit is an accountability tactic, designed to render the invisible visible, or at the least, to provide a sense of accountability and transparency for consumers and investors. In Vietnam it illuminates the shifting relationship between foreign investors and Vietnamese farmers and traders. The presence of foreign investors – a presence encouraged by the state – engenders the production of an audit regime and regulatory practices. Because the formal audits of the Vietnamese coffee industry only came about with the presence of international investors, it is a relatively new, post-economic reform phenomenon. Vietnamese farmers are still attempting to make sense of the audit and what it means for their earning potential.

Akin to Dunn’s (2004) study of the privatization process of a Polish baby food factory, the application of regulation techniques and subsequent effects on Polish

personhood, the entrance of global capital into the Vietnamese coffee industry parallels the effects on communities and also the self-regulation processes (and opposition to such) that are mired in individual and corporate accountability. In the Polish context, transparency:

is set up as a proxy for external governance, because it supposedly forces a firm to govern itself. By having to produce auditable accounts, the firm is supposed to become fiscally accountable, in the sense of having to show that it produces profit for investors, and morally accountable, in the sense of following rules, avoiding criminality, and behaving honest. [Dunn 2004:41]

In the Vietnamese coffee industry, the audit is similarly an external form of governance but one that regulates the farming practices on thousands of hectares of coffee. Of course, there is a financial and moral engagement here — auditing thousands of hectares of coffee can directly impact the financial well being of a farmer but also their self-regulation techniques. It can create another audit regime in which local communities assess and act upon their perceptions of quality and the market. In his work on corruption and accountability in the Vietnamese government, MacLean (2012) contends that

“Attention to how these multiple and often overlapping forms of accountability [the overlap of financial and moral realms] are defined, measured, and deployed in specific settings thus offers an important if underutilized means to explore the

ways in which different audit cultures coexist, challenge, or become counter-woven with one another.” (2012:601).

The audits conducted by the brokers like Hoang and other Cafe Control representatives are designed to hold Vietnamese producers accountable to multinational corporations and thus the state insofar as it desires a friendly relationship with foreign investors. At the same time, these multinational corporations are accountable to Vietnamese farmers in that they encourage the production of a product that meets their consumer demands. The audit is conducted according to either form of accountability and the way it is conducted adjusts accordingly. Though they may appear to be contentious, both operate to produce a sense of transparency.

Transparency is a concept that carried significant weight but largely from the foreign investment side of the industry. Rarely, if ever, did I hear a Vietnamese equivalent of transparency used in a local context and it was often presented only in English (or simply not translated) at training seminars or international functions. Sara Lee visiting the farms they purchased from was one way to maintain transparent business relationships. This version of an informal audit is also a way to encourage transparency from coffee producers. Sara Lee could ostensibly visit any day, any time and coffee producers should be able to produce material evidence that their farming *and* financial practice is according to contract. Transparency in and among foreign investors and local producers engenders self-governance and accountability in ways that exist in startling

ways in post-economic reform in Vietnam. Both quantity and quality, in theory, must be accounted for at all times.

Hoang had gone out of his way to prepare for his visitors – coffee samples from across the province were upstairs in the lab waiting to be sample roasted and eventually cupped by the respective representatives. When the Sara Lee representatives arrived I sat in the back of the room next to Hoang’s assistant as he moderated an information session for the representatives. The remainder of the day was wrought with discussion about Vietnam’s perceived role in the global coffee industry, about Vietnam’s incredible coffee yield in a geographic space that simply does not come close to other major coffee producing countries, and about corruption. Several of the representatives would later ask me what I thought about Vietnamese business practices and the likelihood that certification schemes, audits, coffee quality, and farmer premiums were legitimate and truly transparent.

During the initial information session, it was immediately clear that the representatives were interested primarily in an UTZ certification – an internationally recognized certification focusing solely on coffee, tea, and cocoa. Their questions addressed how a massive company with no regular direct interaction with farmers can be sure that their coffee was truly certified and audited at the export stage rather than on the

farm in the early stages of the commodity chain.<sup>13</sup> In other words, Sara Lee wanted accountability at all stages of the coffee commodity chain within Vietnam. Because there were simply too many individual farming households to audit, the coffee must be checked continually from its harvest to processing to export out of Vietnam.

Sara Lee regularly purchased an large volumes of Vietnamese coffee and simply put, when dealing with such large volume, it was difficult to keep track of the product. Coffee traceability in Vietnam will be addressed in later chapters but suffice to say that industrial coffee production rarely implements the kinds of traceability schemes often associated with popular coffee certifications such as Fair Trade. An audit at the export level would assure Sara Lee that the coffee was not being shifted around or adulterated in the processing stage. Once convinced that Café Control was a responsible government agency, fully capable of performing audits and checking *all* criteria in respective contracts, the questions turn to the quality of UTZ certified coffee.

While there is most certainly a distinction to be made between qualities here – quality of commodities and cash crops and the quality of life of a community of people –

---

<sup>13</sup> UTZ Certified is one of the most stringent certification schemes in Vietnam but also one of the most widely recognized coffee specific certifications in the world. The UTZ motto – “so you know your product is Good Inside” – is stamped on all of their training course and promotional materials (in English) and emphasizes environmental, social, and economic sustainability through a four year certification process. While some criteria are simply recommended at first certification, the goal is to achieve all criteria for maximum quality coffee. Based in the Netherlands, UTZ Certified has a strong local presence in Vietnam with a representative office and a local director who has over 35 years of experience working in Vietnamese agricultural development and management. UTZ Certified currently certifies nearly 70,000 tons of Vietnamese coffee annually for more than a dozen trading and export companies.

the shift from quantity to quality is a prevalent discourse among local Vietnamese coffee producers and state employees such as Hoang. Paradoxically, VICOFA and Café Control both espouse this discourse in the face of perspectives such as Sara Lee; that is, perspectives which assign value to quality and certification schemes and yet expect high quantity yields of coffee (at a standardized and acceptable quality) above all else. Quality, particularly quality represented by an international certification, in the Vietnamese coffee industry suggests not simply the physiological quality and chemical make-up of coffee itself but also the quality of commodity management and the Vietnamese state in its ability to regulate and control a massive influx of global capital. Cooperation and the development of mutual understandings of quality, although often distributed in a top-down fashion that implies a lack of knowledge at the producer level, are nonetheless effective management and accountability check tools for foreign investors and auditors.

In the Café Control office there were several local Arabica and Robusta coffee samples in display trays so Sara Lee could examine the physical quality of the green beans prior to tasting a roasted sample. The cupping was arranged on a circular table with both green and roasted beans placed in front of a small, shot glass sized unfiltered coffee. In this particular cupping, Hoang and his colleagues selected seven coffees to sample and arranged them by their own interpretation of their quality — an interpretation of quality certainly informed by a standardized grading system that many coffee industry agents use to assess coffee quality (and defects).



Figure 1.2 — Coffee defects and standardized assessment form

In a cupping session coffee is ground and then placed in the glass, hot water added, and the coffee is left to “bloom” at which point cuppers have the opportunity to note and grade coffee aromas at their strongest point. Once the coffee has steeped and the bloom deflated, the grounds of the coffee are carefully removed from each cup and the tasting can begin. Much like wine tasting, coffee cupping is a slurp and spit affair. The coffee is slurped from a deep spoon and then spit into a vessel (a small paper cup in this case) after noting the taste specifications of that particular sample. In Vietnam, this is one of the most effective ways to detect defects in coffee beyond a physical inspection of the green beans.



Figure 1.3 — Cafe Control, physical assessment and green bean sorting

One Sara Lee representative was particularly savvy when it came to cup testing and he took the lead, commenting on each sample. Overall, he was largely impressed and Hoang encouraged him to try the last sample – the seventy-percent Robusta blend he was excited about earlier that morning. It was sourced from a small farm outside of Đà Lạt and though lower yield it would rate higher quality in terms of taste profile. Once cupped, Sara Lee’s representative exclaimed that it was one of the best coffees he had tasted in Vietnam and yet “it’s very sad” because they have no market for this kind of coffee. This particular coffee did not belong in an instant coffee pack and yet it was not Vietnam’s role to provide this kind of coffee for the global market.



Hoang pressed further but seemed let down by the thought that his special blend would go unrecognized as representative of Vietnam's coffee producing ability. In a later conversation, he asked me if I knew anyone in the United States who would enjoy a coffee with such a taste profile. There was a very small quantity of this high quality coffee available in Vietnam but Hoang argued that if farmers had enough of a price incentive to produce it, they would take care to maintain a consistently high quality product. He asked me to think about how the coffee would taste if processed "the right way." His concern and reference to the "right way" alludes to the potential value lost in processing. In Vietnam, perhaps some varieties (such as the one he blended) are high quality but they lose that value because Vietnamese processing is set up specifically for industrial grade and high volume. Audits at the factory level could potentially mitigate this "problem" but it was not a pressing one for Vietnam's immediate coffee future.

The future of Vietnamese coffee was a major concern for the government and foreign exporters. Speculation about the role of producers in the industry led to rampant stereotypes that producers tend to think only in day-to-day terms about ways to immediately maximize profit rather than prepare for an uncertain future in an uncertain global coffee climate. The question for Hoang was how he could mediate those concerns with reality. It was his job to "get the best out of the particular varieties we have to work with" and keep extensive social and agricultural data on as many coffee producers in Lâm Đồng province as possible. Given the dearth of direct interaction between producers and foreign companies, it was extremely important for Hoang to have as much hands-on

interaction with producers as possible – he must “help them to understand [the way the coffee industry is operating now and the ways it might operate in the future].” These interactions were integral to shaping the identities of producers themselves but also the industry as a global coffee powerhouse. Because coffee production in post-đổi mới Vietnam was focused specifically on a high yield, the understanding of quality was shaped by a minimum standard for exportable grade two Robusta which inevitably becomes invisible, mass produced soluble coffee, often mixed with non-dairy creamer and sugar.

Understanding the global demand for this grade of coffee but anxious to convince Sara Lee that Vietnam had more to offer, Hoang had the opportunity to showcase his coffee quality knowledge to foreigners in the industry who might “respect and appreciate” it but seemed disappointed in their response. Months later Hoang would confide that perhaps those interactions with foreign coffee buyers were indicative of Vietnam’s complicated relationship to the global industry – a relationship that suggests both a great amount of power (in the country’s ability to single-handedly shift global prices and supply) and weakness (in its dependent relationship to high volume grade two purchasers).

### *Quality Versus Quantity*

Do coffee farm and factory audits *really* improve quality? Do they make a difference in terms of taste and flavor profiles in a way that is detectable to consumers?

Sara Lee had questions not solely about the regulation process in Vietnam but also the quality standards for specific certification schemes. Before the questions were answered, a representative from Sara Lee exclaimed that it did not matter. Quality control was important for the certification which deals with environmental, social, and economic criteria but the future of coffee (for Sara Lee *and* Vietnam) is “volume, volume, volume!” and when a high volume of low grade Vietnamese coffee becomes certified coffee, it raises the benchmark of quality for consumers around the world and provides a premium for the farmers producing it. The representative was decidedly optimistic and framed his response as a win-win situation. Vietnamese farmers would receive a fair price, a respected name as a global coffee producer while Sara Lee would receive a consistently high volume crop and further develop a consumer base that could relate to the certification while still paying a reasonable and affordable price for a cup of coffee.

Hoang had questions too. What does Europe want from Vietnamese coffee? How could he help develop a market for some of the smaller quantity but higher quality varieties that Vietnam produced? What happened to the blend that we tasted earlier that morning? The questions speak volumes about the underlying expected role of and assumptions about Vietnamese coffee in a larger global sense. The market Sara Lee represents did not have a place for these varieties. Their expectations lay in reality – a majority of the world consumes low-grade soluble coffee. Hoang knew this and I suspect that he already knew the answers to the questions he asked. The group took a brief break

and as I broke away from Hoang, I struck up a conversation with the most vocal of the representatives and asked him to clarify his thoughts on quantity and quality.

He explained the story like this: Sara Lee would sell a labeled certified coffee product to their consumer market, Café Control was paid to audit local coffee production and processing, MARD and VICOFA make good on public statements to increase the percentage of certified coffee in Vietnam, and producers receive a premium for adhering to certification criteria. The quantity was sufficient and the quality good enough.

Beneath the surface, the paradox of high quality rhetoric and high quantity reality is forged by the certifications and audits themselves as more industry members are trained to conduct audits and stricter regulations muddy the relationship between certified and uncertified producers. Furthermore, as access to knowledge about certification criteria and premiums became increasingly available, those providing the information became more adept at regulating access to premiums, ultimately regulating the everyday lives of producers.

### *Regulatory Artifacts*

A major part of the coffee quality narrative within Vietnam is the production and circulation of quality related educational materials. Café Control in conjunction with Sara Lee, Kraft, GTZ (German Technical Cooperation) and VICOFA published an educational training manual in the form of a comic book titled: Quality Robusta Coffee For Your Farm (*Chất lượng cà phê ROBUSTA từ trang trại của bạn*) that is regularly

dispersed by Café Control officers and at training seminars or information sessions.

According to Hoang, the dissemination of these materials was necessary because there were simply too many small household farms to visit individually and the information within such materials goes a long way in maintaining the basics of coffee quality. The discourse mediated by such documents however, suggests more than a simple guide to producing quality coffee.

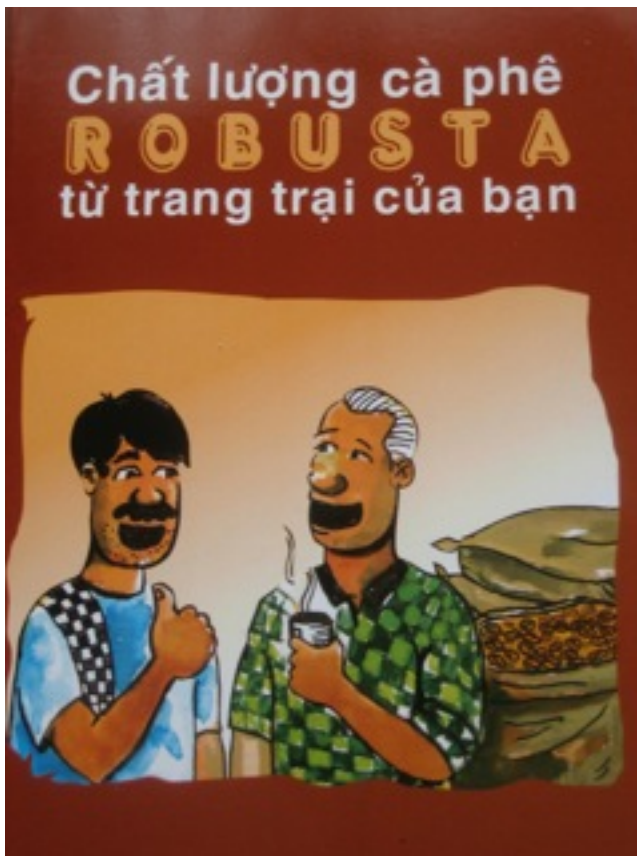


Figure 1.4 — Quality Robusta Coffee for your Farm

Matthew S. Hull (2012) argues that actions on an artifact allow artifacts to “move through different sociocultural categories, becoming simultaneously or successively, for example, information bearers, ritual objects, commodities, and fuel” and that “attention to how artifacts endure, circulate, change, and cease to exist takes us beyond notions of information ‘storage’ to an understanding of how material artifacts shape the discourses they mediate” (2012:23). The circulation of ethnographic artifacts such as the coffee comic book illuminate the flow of knowledge and the ability of coffee producers to alter, filter, and disseminate discourse according to their own locally situated experiential knowledge. These discourses are regulating ones about acceptable farming and processing practices.

The comic begins with a conversation between two Vietnamese farmers from the central highlands: “Ông Bậy, do you know that in Germany, people have four cups of coffee per day and they import a lot of coffee from Tay Nguyen, our hometown?” and continues:

“Europeans’ ways of coffee drinking are different from ours. Europeans have been importing a lot of coffee from Vietnam. However, we do not know what their taste is and what they think of coffee quality. In such a situation, how can we sense their demand?”

Fortunately, a Café Control officer was readily available, sitting immediately next to the two farmers. As the comic progresses, the farmers and Café Control officer move through several coffee production spaces and learn valuable lessons about coffee quality

control, European consumer interests, and dangerous coffee toxins that develop under poor farming and processing conditions. The materiality of the comic book and its circulation from the publishers to farmers at training courses and farmer field schools leaves little to question. Farmers are aware of “good” farming practices, that perhaps Europeans “drink big cups of coffee mixed with fresh milk” rather than “sweetened condensed milk and ice” as in Vietnam. And yet, the discourse about what defines quality (and how farmers can achieve it) persists throughout the comic book with no mention of the high quantity demanded by European consumer markets.

When I spoke to coffee producers and processors about the knowledge contained within material artifacts and their prevalence, the response was often the same. Perhaps some were unaware of the “OTA toxin” but most understood how quality was being framed and what it meant in relation to the expectations of buyers. This did not mean, however, that the expectations of buyers were legitimate or catered to. If a majority of the consumers of Vietnamese coffee are unaware of their coffee’s origin, why should the producers at this origin cater to their desires when the coffee will undoubtedly be purchased, despite the quality.

### *Conclusions*

In her afterward to *Food and Everyday Life in the Post-Socialist World* Elizabeth Dunn (2009) points out that in an era of increased development aid in agribusiness the rise of multinational firms creates a pool of managers who “have been provided with

intellectual capital, including knowledge of logistics, processing technologies, and methods of packaging that make them equals of their Western counterparts” (2009:). Given that Vietnamese coffee is always processed and sometimes packaged in-country, the extent of intellectual capital afforded to local factory owners and certification scheme representatives is notable and undoubtedly influences the life trajectory of Vietnamese coffee and the livelihood of those who produce and regulate it.

The trope of visibility/invisibility is enacted through regulatory regimes. Vietnam visibly demonstrates its accountability to the state and foreign investors when a farm successfully undergoes an audit without any major requests for improvement or the suspension of farming activities. And yet, after being approved and validated as a legitimate operation, the coffee is then relegated to the depths of instant, unbranded, industrial production. By industrial coffee I mean mass produced for large scale commercial consumption with little or no attention to the origin or nuanced characteristics of the coffee itself. Vietnam is invisible because this is an effect of the industrial coffee industry — that is, to erase the origin and blend it (literally and figuratively) with other industrial coffees — and the outcome of regulatory regimes. As regulation vis-a-vis the audit validates the quality of coffee and farming operations it also reinforces the idea that it is quantity that truly matters.

As an increasingly powerful mediator of the global coffee industry, Vietnamese coffee regulations and regulatory regimes speak to both the desire to develop “Vietnam” as a quality coffee producing brand and “Vietnam” as a global actor with the ability to



influence global price trends due to the sheer volume of coffee produced. While auditor training courses and coffee comic books may attempt to guide coffee production trends and discourse about quality, it is through the audit and daily conversations, production processes, and processing that local discourses and uniquely situated understandings of quality emerge. The audit is a tool of mitigation and regulation that concretizes expectations rather than developing new production practices.

## CHAPTER 2

### PRODUCING COFFEE EXPERTS IN THE LABORATORY AND IN THE FIELD

I first saw Mr. Son adorning a poster, smiling and demonstrating his locally renowned grafting technology. The poster hung in the Cafe Control office in Bảo Lộc. Months later Hoang invited me to visit a “beautiful and famous farm” approximately twenty kilometers from the city center. It seemed that Hoang wanted to talk to Mr. Son about something but the visit was primarily a friendly and social one. Upon arrival we toured his humble house and relatively large garden overlooking dozens of hectares of Robusta and Arabica coffee trees. Mr. Son’s wife was a particularly adept flower keeper — orchids and a wide variety of tropical flowers covered the garden and their outdoor tables and chairs. Mr. Son had been planting coffee in the region since the mid-1980s and although he had no previous experience with coffee when he started, he quickly caught on and grew to love the challenge of risk mitigation and high volume production. He began to experiment with coffee grafting techniques: “I wanted to make the strongest coffee possible, my own coffee.” We sat in his open air kitchen, eating a lunch of vegetables from his local garden and steaming bowls of rice with small glasses of local artichoke tea. He was quiet and calculated in his words but extremely forthcoming when it came to sharing his experience and knowledge.

I had heard that Mr. Son was well known in the region, not solely for developing an effective grafting technology but for his willingness to share that knowledge with

other local farmers and engage in a kind of informal community exchange network. He explained that many local farmers were new to coffee production and it would benefit the local industry and community if everyone understood not simply how to grow coffee but also how to develop it into something new and sustainable (*chống đỡ*). The idea that coffee could be something “new” was a reference to the new varieties of coffee, engineered specifically for local soil, altitude, and climate. The coffee, as Mr. Son imagined it would literally be new to Vietnam — the first time the variety had been grown anywhere. The reference to “sustainability” was not the environmental sustainability espoused by development aid and foreign investment projects. Rather it referred to the sustainability of the coffee plant as a productive income generator for family farmers. Sustainability in this local sense is integral to local knowledge exchange — when an individual household decides to plant a hearty and disease resistant albeit completely new variety for the sake of long term sustainability, they do so with an understanding of the knowledge networks at their disposal.

Mr. Son’s expertise is referred to as “*thành thạo*” or a kind of experiential expertise marked not by formal education but rather time and local knowledge. Mr. Son had been farming coffee for well over two decades and through much trial and error, his grafting technique had become an industry standard for the surrounding region. Yet he remained humble and when I asked him why he lived so far from the town center he explained that he wanted to be close to his coffee and the other farmers in the area who might need assistance or want to talk about coffee. He was constantly educating himself

about coffee propagation online and through word of mouth. If someone in the surrounding community had a problem with their plants, he made an effort to find a solution. He had studied about grafting techniques on his own, consulting available agricultural propagation texts and asking others with experience. Mr. Son eventually successfully spliced two distinct varieties of coffee and grafted them into one strong root system and plant that became a high yield, disease resistant coffee tree. He had created his own variety of coffee that would become a desirable commodity throughout the immediate region.

We all met again later that evening at a crowded local restaurant. Upon entering, Mr. Son was greeted by no less than a dozen diners and restaurant staff on our way to the “VIP room” where we spent the next several hours drinking local rice wine, snacking on central highland dishes, and debating the agricultural merit of coffee grafting and varietal development. For the first time in months of coffee conversations, no one mentioned the “big four” or the global market.<sup>14</sup> Local expertise on coffee does not necessarily rely on or even reference the expert opinions of large multinational corporations and foreign agricultural development experts. I argue that on a local level, multiple ideas about what constitutes legitimate knowledge and expertise challenge norms about how coffee should be produced, traded, and consumed.

---

<sup>14</sup> The “big four” is a reference to Nestle, Kraft, Procter & Gamble, and Sara Lee, the four largest coffee purchasing multinational corporations in the world.

It is no secret, nor is it new to suggest from a social science perspective that knowledge production operates in distinct locally situated ways. Profiling Mr. Son and the ways in which institutional forms knowledge that circulate widely across the global coffee industry illustrate how specific types of knowledge, expertise, and experts (predominantly coffee/agricultural and financial) are constructed and exchanged. Studying how expertise, experts, and their knowledge is constructed helps us understand the formation of empirical scientific facts in the laboratory (See Latour 1979) and how these facts are used to shape the global coffee market. The classroom also becomes a sort of laboratory where empirical scientific facts are taught to local farmers who are then expected to extend this knowledge to their respective communities.

In these scenarios, it is obvious who plays the role of the expert. Unpacking the construction of experts and expertise in these sorts of classroom and laboratory spaces where international organizations and local communities intersect sheds light on the power relationship between foreign investors and local producers. I argue however, that in the field, these power relationships unravel as local ideas about what constitutes expertise come into play. This chapter engages with the several instances of these intersections in the laboratory (including formal institutional settings) and the field (where experience growing coffee is necessary to become an expert).

There is a hierarchy of knowledge about industrial commodity production and coffee that determines who can be an expert on Vietnamese coffee. In the context of the coffee crisis, expertise becomes even more valuable as it may aid in risk mitigation but

also alleviates uncertainty about the future of the market. Because of the hierarchy of knowledge, the expertise conveyed is framed through a subjective lens that may or may not be relevant to a community. For example, an international organization may frame their risk mitigation discourse through expertise on global climate change but this may have little impact on a community of local Vietnamese farmers who are primarily concerned with the spread of a pest or an outbreak of mold. In other words, how does knowledge become shared knowledge (and when is it allowed to be shared) and authoritative in mitigating crisis?

Dominic Boyer's 2008 manifesto on expertise is a call to "humanise the expert!" (Boyer 2008:45). I wonder to what extent anthropology (and related disciplines) unwittingly avoid positioning seemingly non-skilled people as sites of expertise or expert "human-subjects" whereas science and technology studies and those of highly skilled and more obviously "expert" and "intellectual" people are quick to define these spaces as such. If expertise is studied from a particular vantage point that inherently compartmentalizes the very meaning of expertise, who can be an expert and what skills and trades are worthy of expertise? How does this signify a need for more critical approaches to the study of knowledge production and a move away from the hierarchical frameworks that map and define it? Mr. Son has not yet been invited by the state or the World Bank to provide an expert opinion on Vietnamese coffee development and propagation.

By taking expertise and the expert to be locally constructed concepts (and humans!), this chapter argues that diverse forms of experts and expertise can coexist but it is the dearth of attention to how expertise is defined within Vietnam that creates a disconnect between the policies and expectations of foreign investors and local producers. If expertise was allowed to exist in multiple ways, the hierarchy and legitimacy of knowledge and knowledge producers might be less powerful and normalized. Furthermore, locally valued expertise that manifests as a particular skill set may be recognized as a legitimate form of expertise and knowledge by the state and international organizations. Boyer (2008) continues:

“...anthropological research with experts tends too often to stay within the ideological radius of possibility, which contends that what is really important and interesting to know about a culture of expertise is the expertise, its procedures and instruments, themselves” (Boyer 2008:44)

This chapter focuses less on the expertise and more on the experts and the ways in which they are valued differently by local and international communities. I do this by reconsidering what it means to be an expert in the Vietnamese coffee industry and recognizing locally defined ideas about expertise.

The World Bank, ITC, MARD, and various other institutions of agricultural development knowledge regularly send their in-house experts to Vietnam to train and educate coffee producers and traders — these figures are undoubtedly referred to as experts and powerful ones with money to invest. These experts are complicit in the

“convention of imagining countries as empirical objects...” and thus “the value of what people produce, the cost of what they consume, and the purchasing power of their currency are determined by global relationships of exchange” (Mitchell 2002:230). As Mitchell (2002) warns, it is all too easy to frame expertise in the context of globally recognized and normalized conventions of where knowledge and power reside. In Vietnam however, local experts exemplified by the concept *thành thạo* regularly, even subversively challenge the institutionalized expert convention of what it means to be a modern, developed coffee producing state.

#### *Experts on Production — Soil Modification*

The ways in which Vietnamese coffee farmers envision their future is often framed locally in terms of high yield production — the more coffee they produce, the more money they receive. Local knowledge about “sustainability” [*bền vững*] is not necessarily couched in terms of the environment or the soil in which coffee is produced but rather the ability to sustain the industry. Although this sometimes relates to concern about soil erosion and long term depletion of soil effectiveness, it is not necessarily an environmental concern. When a healthy coffee plant comes to harvest in the central highlands of Vietnam it is a farmer’s dream — cherry laden branches with an almost impossible production rate. This production level is made possible in part by local Robusta varieties developed by agronomists and local farmers as well as their locally developed grafting techniques, but also the extensive NPK (Nitrogen, Phosphorous,



Potassium) fertilizer inputs used across the industry. According to an oft circulated manual for coffee production in Vietnam, “together with hired labour, fertilizer is the largest investment on most coffee farms...” (Kuit et al 2004:67).

The application of NPK fertilizer is an integral aspect of coffee production in Vietnam, especially in relation to Robusta coffee that responds especially well to fertilizer application. Nitrogen (N) is used by the coffee plant to form chlorophyll and uptake water. Phosphorus (P) is used primarily in photosynthesis, respiration, and energy storage. And Potassium (K) is used by the coffee plant in protein synthesis.

Deficiencies of these elements may be visibly obvious to a farmer — discoloration of leaf, stunted growth, leaf drop (See Kuit et al 2004). If there is a problem with a coffee plant and a pest or disease is not immediately obvious, the next culprit in line may be a fertilizer deficiency. When a tree is thought to be nutrient deficient, there are specific recommendations for applications of NPK to the deficient soil area. Of course, these recommendations are often third party, coming from someone who may or may not be familiar with the context of the Vietnamese coffee industry and its primary growing areas. That is, international development schemes, certification schemes, and international organizations are the conduit for espousing their recommendations for NPK fertilizer application to local farmers. On the ground in the south-central highlands, however, and among MARD’s fertilizer application takes on new and multiple meanings.

The application of NPK does not serve the sole purpose of alleviating nutrient deficiency as often taught and explained in farming manuals and at international

organization sponsored training seminars. Rather, the application of NPK may serve to boost the yield of a coffee plant while assuring that no nutrient deficiency develops. Coffee cultivation manuals (See Kuit, et al 2004) do not generally employ the idea of NPK application for anything other than nutrient deficiency, thus ignoring the local use of fertilizer for increased yield. The Vietnamese state's recent investment in local NPK production may speak to local usage and encouraging high yield production (See PetroVietnam 2014). For agricultural development aid organizations, however, the consistent use of NPK beyond recommended levels may have long lasting environmental effects on the soil such as the inability of future plants to take up necessary micronutrients and polluting run off in surrounding streams.

James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998) explores the different forms of agricultural knowledge employed in state-making that have so often detoured or failed altogether. Various state agents turn "lesser developed" or simplistic settled populations into the cultural and aesthetic seats of high modernism (1998:193). In the context of Soviet high modernism, Scott argues that it was in part the dearth of local knowledge application that ultimately failed the creation of the original planned archetype. Before a state can achieve this level of high modernity, "contemporary development schemes, whether in Southeast Asia or elsewhere, require the creation of state spaces where the government can reconfigure the society and economy of those who are to be 'developed'" (1998:187). The relationship between development and modernity thus

materializes in these historically contingent visions of the modern, achieved through the complex formation of “development schemes” addressed by Scott (1998).

In Vietnam, the vision of modernity differs greatly across actors in the coffee industry. For farmers, the question of modernity may be one of economic potential — as one small coffee farmer mentioned to me, “a modern (*hiện đại*) Vietnam? That’s when I have a new motorbike and extra room in my house.” From the perspective of international agricultural development organizations and international proponents of certification schemes, the question of modernity may be one about environmental sustainability and concepts rooted in social justice values such as “fair trade” (See Lyon and Moberg 2010). That is, sharing international expertise about environmental sustainability and operating under the assumption that there is a lack of social justice within Vietnamese coffee farming communities. On more than one occasion the European or American directors and representatives of international certification schemes lamented to me: “they use too much fertilizer...no matter how many times we tell them it’s bad for the soil and they can actually save money by holding back!”

The Vietnamese state actively participates in conversations with international organizations through state sponsored agricultural training seminars and workshops. This reinforces an image that Vietnam is a modern World Trade Organization (WTO) member with the ability to engage in international coffee production and trade with other modern coffee producing nations. In practice, however, the illusion of Vietnamese certified fair trade, organic coffee is not the goal of local farmers, nor is it a part of local knowledge

circulation related to successful or “modern” coffee farming practices. Rarely (with the exception of Nestle) do the major buyers of Vietnamese coffee participate in these image generating conversations; their presence in Vietnam is instead relegated to the occasional in-country tour of farms, factories, and storage warehouses and visits with state officials.

Vietnam holds somewhat of a niche market in terms of industrial coffee production. The higher the volume produced (cheaply) in Vietnam, the more benefits reaped by local farmers and Nestle in a very immediate and practical economic sense. This relationship exists in both invisible and visible ways. It is uncommon for industrial grade coffee to be labeled with Vietnam as the country of origin label (COOL) and thus it remains invisible to global consumers residing in key markets such as the United States and Western Europe.<sup>15</sup> In Vietnam however, knowledge about where coffee goes and who buys it is relatively well known and circulated — Folgers, Nestle, Kraft. NPK application and rendering the soil especially productive facilitates the economic relationship between multinational corporations and coffee producers.

---

<sup>15</sup> The March 2009 Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) legislation that came out of the 2002 Farm Security and Rural Investment Act (See Section 10816 of 7 U.S.C. 1638-1638d) defines the requirements for origin labels on comestible products. COOL legislation was designed as a large scale traceability system — a way for consumers to establish the country of origin for muscle and ground cuts of beef, fish, shellfish, and a variety of fruits, vegetables, and nuts. However, “specific processing that results in a change in the character of the covered commodity” can render that commodity exempt from labeling requirements (Williams 2012:3). Even if coffee was a “covered commodity,” the processing procedure would necessitate exemption from COOL. In other words, there is no requirement to stamp “Made in Vietnam” on a tin can of Folgers, Maxwell House, or any large industrial coffee product.

Rooted in a long history of frontier studies and historical works on Nature (e.g. Williams 1980; Cronon 1991; Grove 1996), Scott's (1998) chapter "Taming Nature" delves into how "imperial pretensions" of agronomic science – its inability to recognize or incorporate knowledge created outside its paradigm – sharply limited its utility to many cultivators" (Scott 1998:264). Scott's piece highlights the role of technological (agricultural) knowledge and the ways in which practical knowledge becomes devalued in the context of modernity – the more modern, the less agricultural:

“Ultimately, the simple ‘production and profit’ model of agricultural extension and agricultural research has failed in important ways to represent the complex, supple, negotiated objectives of real farmers and their communities...that model has also failed to represent the space in which farmers plant crops – its microclimates, its moisture and water movement, its microrelief, and its local biotic history.” (1998:262)

Not only does the model of high modernity fail in many of the case studies Scott looks at but it often does so at the expense of local knowledge and expertise. Representations of agriculture as models of “production and profit,” reinforce the idea that a hierarchy of expertise is at work. Institutional knowledge is at the top of this hierarchy. Whether or not the model is implemented on the ground is another story. The complicit use of NPK fertilizer to increase coffee yield appeases international investors and local farmers alike. But the expertise of development aid organizations that “teach” farmers how to apply it

correctly does not accurately reflect the practice of soil modification, nor the motives of farmers and investors.

If transforming the basaltic soil of the central highlands into “proper” nutrient rich soil increases Vietnam’s legitimacy as a modern coffee producer, what of the “over”-application for the purposes of higher yield? The latter is viewed by international agricultural development aid agencies as an improper practice and one that decreases the legitimacy and the value of coffee and the very soil it is grown in and by extension, Vietnam and Vietnamese products for export. For local farmers, however, it is an economic necessity as NPK is viewed literally and symbolically as currency — coffee or other cash and subsistence crops can be exchanged for NPK and NPK rich soil may serve as a symbolic marker of the good harvest to come.

I met Tu in 2010 through his cousin Lam, a local motorbike driver in Đà Lạt. Tu lived with his wife and three year old child in Bảo Lộc, approximately three hours south by motorbike. He had been growing a four hectare plot of Robusta coffee for nearly fifteen years. Tu moved to the central highlands from a southern coastal province in 1995 when the price of coffee land was affordable enough for his family to help him invest. He purchased the four hectare plot of land and with the help of the local coffee growing community, taught himself how to cultivate it. We took a meandering drive through a tea field to arrive at his plot — a small farm in the midst of many. Tu asked if I thought the coffee was beautiful (*cà phê có đẹp không*). We toured his land on foot, through the coffee but also the durian, jackfruit, passion fruit, cinnamon, and chili he grew in an

effort to offset expenses during the dry season. A small cement structure stood in the center of his land serving as a space for him or other laborers to rest and eat with shade cover from the sun or protection from the rain.

While I had conducted many interviews with state officials who regulate the coffee industry as well as numerous traders, exporters, and processing factory employees this was my first time on an informal farm visit. It was also the first time NPK was a principal point of conversation. Tu pointed to an empty pile of NPK bags at the base of a coffee tree and explained that the fertilizer blend is the most important item on his farm. While the “natural” strength and ability of the tree, its variety, and its strength are important — a concept exemplified by the word “*gióng*” — the water and fertilizer are something that no coffee farmer could do without. The red, rich basaltic soil in the central highlands is fertile and optimal for coffee cultivation but “normal” coffee cultivation alone cannot account for the massive volume produced in the region. Tu quickly learned to alter the soil, rendering it ultra rich to ensure a production volume beyond the “normal” output of a Robusta tree.

Although Tu spoke about his current livelihood and future in an optimistic tone, the first years in his new life as a coffee farmer were not easy:

I thought coffee farming would be easy. I read about it in the newspaper. There were[*state*] agricultural bank loans available and my family also thought it was a good idea. But when I started I didn’t know about the other factors in coffee, like fertilizer, like NPK. That was so important. And you don’t make a profit or even

have coffee for several years. When I had my first harvest, I sold it to collectors but not for money. For more NPK to use on my coffee. Money and NPK are the same thing [*giống nhau*]. Now it's different. I know about NPK and how to use it and if I have enough money, I can use a lot of it to make sure my harvest is good. I sell my coffee for profit now.

Tu's first few years in coffee were marked by a struggle to gain knowledge in an industry he had no experience in. NPK is available from both domestic and imported sources and Tu purchases a domestic brand locally from a small agricultural supply station at the edge of the tea fields near his land. He used the local NPK because, based on word of mouth from his neighbor farmers, it was reliable and "strong" [*mạnh*]. A local knowledge circuit among coffee farmers in the region offset the inexperience of many migrant farmers. Base level understandings about the benefits of NPK rich soil were among the first things Tu learned and this enabled him to develop his own trial and error approach to fertilizer application. After several years of struggle, Tu had his formula down and by 2010 when I first met him, he was ecstatic about the high price of coffee on the global market and looking forward to his potential income from the coming harvest.

When coffee farmers speak about their future or the collective future of the Vietnamese coffee industry the concept of sustainability [*bền vững*] is often referenced as a primary motive of development aid initiatives. Sustainability however, must be defined and situated in a local context with due attention to personal and collective ambition. The environment and soil quality, although a definite concern among coffee farmers is a less



pressing and pertinent issue when compared to a desire to maximize profit in a given coffee growing season. Like Tu, many coffee farmers are “*thành thạo về cà phê,*” or knowledgeable experts through experience rather than “*chuyên gia,*” or experts through formal education and title. But many are also Vietnamese farmers who have invested the time and money to seek a better socio-economic life and status. The most effective (and time and labor efficient) way to do this is through a high volume yield of cherries.

There is an optimistic sentiment circulating through coffee networks (farmers, traders, exporters, and the state) that if Vietnam can become the largest producer of coffee in the world, the livelihood of those in the Vietnamese coffee industry will improve drastically. Of course, the title of “largest coffee producer in the world” is an arbitrary one but powerful nonetheless. And while this discourse may circulate widely throughout the coffee producing and trading community in Vietnam, so too does the reality that a title is not what sustains an industry nor the people working within it. Meeting the supply and demand of an industrial coffee consuming world and doing so with the assistance of NPK sustains the industry and those embroiled in it.

*Experts on Trade: Institutional Expertise*

July 2010, Buôn Ma Thuột. The Switzerland based International Trade Centre (ITC) in conjunction with a now defunct USAID “STAR” project based in Hanoi and the government body Directorate for Standards, Metrology, and Quality (STAMEQ) arranged a “Standards Map Training” course for farmers and traders from Đắk Lắk province. The

latter, STAMEQ, is responsible for standardizing the quality of material goods produced in Vietnam through issued “TCVNs” (*tiêu chuẩn Việt Nam*). The former, ITC, was the third party international organization responsible for introducing and training Vietnamese coffee farmers, processors, and traders how to use the Standards Map computer based application system. According to the ITC Standards Map website, the application:

provides comprehensive, verified and transparent information on voluntary sustainability standards and other similar initiatives covering issues such as food quality and safety. The main objective of the programme is to strengthen the capacity of producers, exporters, policymakers and buyers, to participate in more sustainable production and trade” (<http://www.intracen.org/itc/market-info-tools/voluntary-standards/standardsmap/>).

Joe and Mattheiu were in from Switzerland to run the workshop. They both had extensive experience in training agricultural workers in areas deemed by their organization to be prime agricultural development sites how to utilize the standards map system but this was the first time they had worked with coffee farmers in Vietnam. The participants in the training seminar were screened by STAMEQ from around the province. This was a significant point because STAMEQ selected participants who likely have regular internet access and experience with web based applications. A training course in how to set up the standards map profile would not necessarily helpful for them — they did not necessarily need one-on-one assistance. More importantly for the context of this chapter, the Standards Map training course was designed to introduce the various

certification standards available to coffee farmers throughout the region — the requirements necessary for initial certification, sustained certification, farmer premiums, and contact information for in-country certification representatives.

As will be discussed in the next chapter, certified coffees make up a significantly small percentage of the coffee produced in Vietnam but certified coffees are a branded and thus visible marker of quality and regulation. The assumption by foreign experts on coffee development in Vietnam that certification schemes are necessary in order for Vietnam to become a successful global coffee producer, to achieve a desired level of visibility and recognition, is one that rests squarely in the the realm of institutionalized perceptions about expertise and knowledge. The focus groups conducted at the Standards Map training however, revealed that this particular kind of expertise is limited in its recognition and scope among the experiential experts of Vietnamese coffee production and trade.

Midway through the day the facilitators asked seminar participants to conduct a practical exercise on Standards Map (See Figure 2.1). The exercise required participants to choose a country and product to focus on. Subsequent questions and prompts included “how many standards are relevant to that country as an importing/retailing/consuming market? and “use the Standards Map tool to identify the research papers and materials that can provide useful market information, analyses and reviews of standards published by universities, research organizations.” One section asked participants to “generate a comparison table of all standards to review their policies with regards to GMOs [*lập bảng*

*so sánh tất cả các tiêu chuẩn để xem xét các chính sách về sản phẩm biến đổi gen (GMO)].”* Participants, working in groups, grappled with the slow wi-fi connection and the individual registration process to access the Standards Map tool in the first place. Slowly, as participants began to navigate the site and work through the exercise, the realization that perhaps Standards Map did not apply to many of them began to sink in.

I asked one participant if “Standards Map” [*bản đồ tiêu chuẩn*] was translated well and she responded “yes, because that means standard map...but it doesn’t mean anything in Vietnamese, understand?” The concept of a Standards Map was of course, a foreign one. After nearly an hour of working through the exercise, the facilitators brought everyone together to discuss the results. While some simply went through the motions to fill in the blanks, a minority of the participants had unrelated questions about the standards for certification generally: “How much does it cost to certify coffee in my village?” or “will I receive the profit from certification directly?” and “do I still choose who to sell my coffee to?” These were valid questions and ITC certainly answered them.

It soon became apparent that a majority of the participants in the room were not coffee farmers but worked in the industry in some other capacity, namely trade and management. They were supposedly present to gain knowledge about the Standards Map application to then extend to coffee farming communities across the province. These participants were selected by STAMEQ and represented the best of Vietnamese coffee expertise in the region, with a few well connected farmers in the mix to round out the room. What constituted expertise in this case was not the experiential variety and this

likely prevented the kind of mutual knowledge exchange that would benefit both ITC and local farmers.

Operating under the assumption that the participants would indeed convey their newly gained knowledge to their respective communities, ITC continued with the seminar and ultimately deemed it to be a relatively successful one. The participants, however, knew that the Standards Map would likely not make much of a difference. As one experience coffee trader put it, “who will use it [the Standards Map application] when they know how expensive certification is...if they want certification, it’s easier to talk directly to Sy [the Nestle certification representative] than to go online, find the application.” The idea that Standards Map and the ITC efforts would propel the Vietnamese coffee industry into a brighter future was dismissed early on in the seminar. But the seminar did bring together a group of industry men and women who used the time on their own accord to discuss their latest experiences on the farm and with contracts and to share insight on the forthcoming harvest. The participants built a new skill set to further their own individual and collective expertise in navigating the industrial coffee industry.

## Bài tập thực hành sử dụng Bản đồ Tiêu chuẩn

### A. XÁC ĐỊNH NHỮNG TIÊU CHUẨN LIÊN QUAN

Dùng công cụ Bản đồ Tiêu chuẩn để xác định các tiêu chuẩn được áp dụng tại các quốc gia cụ thể và các ngành cụ thể.

1. Tên quốc gia bạn muốn tìm hiểu: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Tên sản phẩm bạn muốn tìm hiểu: \_\_\_\_\_

Lưu ý: trong BƯỚC 1, chúng ta xem xét danh mục sản phẩm sẵn có trong Bản đồ Tiêu chuẩn bằng cách nhấp chuột vào đường link "[Click here to review the list of products/services which can be queried](#)"

3. Xác định các tiêu chuẩn đang áp dụng tại quốc gia cụ thể (mà bạn đã lựa chọn)

Có bao nhiêu tiêu chuẩn hiện được áp dụng tại quốc gia đó? \_\_\_\_\_

Lưu ý: trong BƯỚC 1, chọn vào mục "Identify standards that are currently operational in ...", và sau đó chọn quốc gia bạn muốn tìm hiểu, rồi nhấp chuột vào "Next step" (Tiếp theo).

Có bao nhiêu tiêu chuẩn có thể được áp dụng đối với hàng xuất khẩu từ quốc gia đó?

Lưu ý: trong BƯỚC 1, chọn "Identify standards that are applicable to ..." rồi chọn quốc gia bạn muốn tìm hiểu, và nhấp chuột vào "Next step".

Có bao nhiêu tiêu chuẩn liên quan đến quốc gia đó áp dụng cho thị trường nhập khẩu/bán lẻ/dùng?

Lưu ý: trong BƯỚC 1, chọn vào "Identify standards that are relevant to importing/wholesaling/retailing/ etc) markets in .....", rồi chọn quốc gia bạn muốn tìm hiểu, và nhấp chuột vào "Next step".

4. Xác định các tiêu chuẩn áp dụng tại quốc gia đó VÀ áp dụng đối với sản phẩm cụ thể mà bạn đang muốn tìm hiểu

Có bao nhiêu tiêu chuẩn hiện đang áp dụng tại quốc gia đó đối với sản phẩm cụ thể đó? \_\_\_\_\_

Liệt kê các tiêu chuẩn đó?

---

---

---

Figure 2.1 Standards Map Exercise

## *Conclusions*

Mitchell's (2002) focus on the techno-politics expertise that engineered a modern Egypt was part of a colonial-imperialist project but the experts of these kinds of projects were themselves warrant ongoing critical ethnographic examination. As Boyer states:

“a car mechanic or a street performer are clearly experts in their respective crafts although the qualitative and social dimensions of their expertise are very different (and valued differently) from those of more technocratic (and widely recognized) experts like doctors, lawyers or scientists. Indeed, by linking expertise to skill, competence, attention and practice, it becomes clear that there is no human being who is not ‘expert’ in some fashion, much as Gramsci wrote that all men are intellectuals even if not socially validated as such. Although the very openness of the definition may therefore appear to weaken its analytical capacity, I would argue that the way in which it highlights the tension between the experiential-performative and social-institutional poles of skilled knowing and doing actually gives us analytical traction in just the right place.” (2008:39)

What constitutes knowledge, experiential expertise, and a defined skill set relevant to the coffee industry is still not recognized as expertise by “legitimate experts.” In other words, the state and the international investment and development organizations that are often public spokespersons for the Vietnamese coffee industry still speak with their own authority and expert views, thus diminishing or entirely ignoring an entire community of local experts who demonstrate *thánh thạo* across their communities and in their daily

work. Within this community, however, the ability of experts to recognize the hierarchy of experts in the coffee industry and its inherent flaws calls for further attention to the practice of expertise and who constitutes experts in industries born out of foreign capitalist investment. The ways in which expertise is practiced through NPK inputs and soil modification and coffee grafting technology suggest that local communities have already found a way to subvert the hierarchy of experts, albeit quietly and without due recognition. And the ways international organizations structure their training seminars suggests that the hierarchy is active, alive, and well. Though Standards Map has been translated into Spanish and French and the possibility of a Vietnamese translation was mentioned in passing during the training course, the application for Vietnamese users must be navigated in English. In Vietnam, the language of foreign experts is undoubtedly English, further exacerbating the tension between (largely foreign) technocratic experts on coffee and local experiential experts who have much to share.



## CHAPTER 3

### CERTIFYING VIETNAM: LEGITIMIZING COFFEE AND REPUTATION

In May 2011 I heard my first “traceability” speech at a large wet and dry coffee processing facility in Lâm Đồng province. It was in English, delivered by an American regional representative of the Rainforest Alliance and translated by Dung – a new employee of the local factory but a long time Vietnamese coffee industry member and worker across several export companies and governmental organizations. Rainforest Alliance, like all foreign certification programs, was relatively new in Vietnam but already a globally recognized option for agricultural, forestry, tourism, and forest carbon industries around the world (Rainforest Alliance 2012). In Vietnam, Rainforest Alliance focused specifically on coffee certification and did so under the rubric of environmental sustainability. In 2010 Rainforest Alliance had organized a “training of trainer” course for local coffee producers and the Vietnamese industry members who would soon become Rainforest Alliance auditors ultimately responsible for determining whether or not a coffee was certifiable.

I arrived at the Rainforest Alliance training of trainers seminar to see several familiar faces. There was a tangible Vietnamese “coffee circuit” in the south-central region of the country. Many of the same Vietnamese coffee industry employees tacked between seminars, conferences, farmer field schools, and meetings. This seminar was no

different and I had met several of the participants at other coffee related events earlier in the year. The morning began at a small hotel where a group of approximately 25 Vietnamese men and women with extensive experience in the coffee industry (often a decade or more) piled into a small bus to visit Atlantic Commodities Vietnam Ltd.'s (ACOM) processing and milling plant to run through a check-list of Rainforest Alliance's certification standards and auditing procedure.

The lecture portion of the seminar focused largely on the goals and global worldview of Rainforest Alliance as a certification agency and Vietnam's role in maintaining that global standard. The ultimate goal was to train trainers to espouse sustainable management techniques – Rainforest Alliance's visit was framed as a sustainability management seminar with four focus points: 1) bringing coffee experts from throughout Lâm Đồng province together, 2) create a small network of sustainable agriculture managers, 3) explain the Rainforest Alliance certification criteria and 4) train the trainers. It all began with traceability. Of course, traceability is not simply for the consumer. It is also a way to ensure and track deliveries, to hold traders and storage warehouses accountable for their contracts.

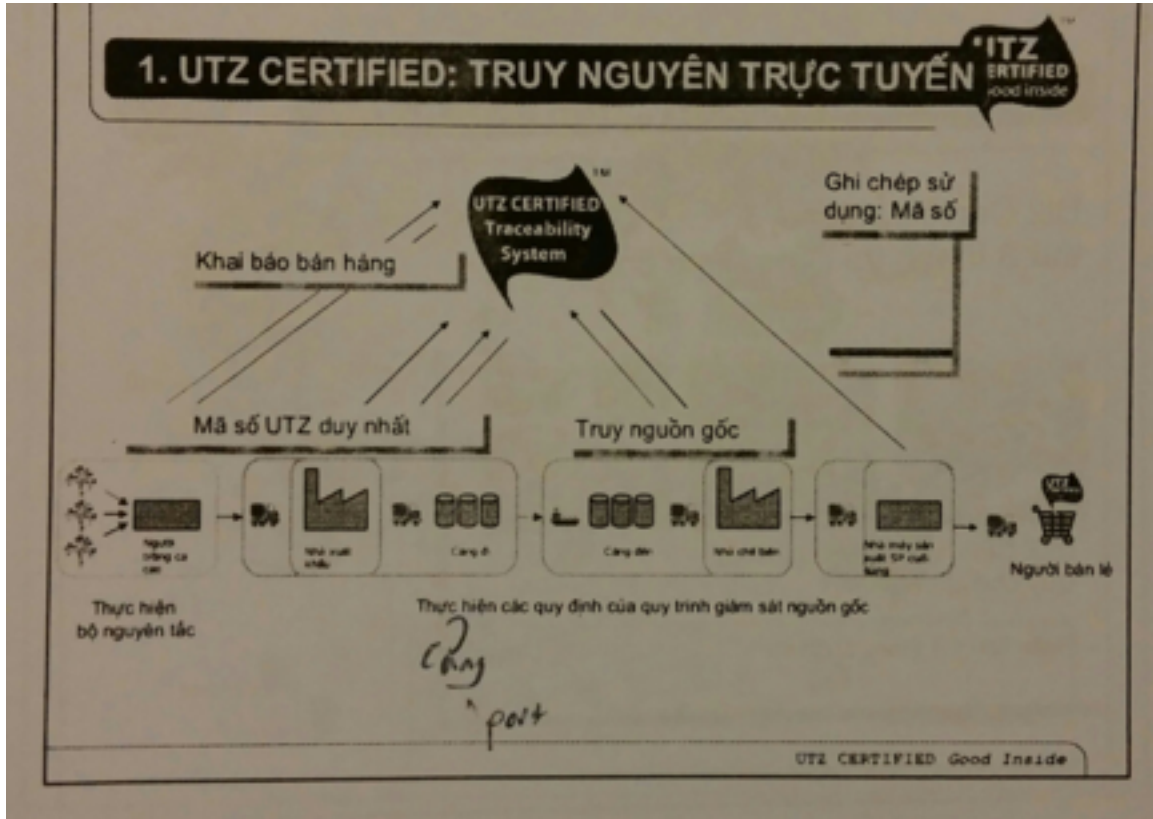


Figure 3.1 — UTZ Certified Traceability System (from “people planting coffee” to “people buying goods”)

As Dunn (2003) and Guthman (2004) have shown, standardized traceability and monitoring is equivalent to answering one’s own question. The way traceability systems are structured in industrial food systems assumes that there is a universal method to production and distribution thereby ignoring the complexity and diversity within these systems. In the Rainforest Alliance’s public discourse, traceability is what their consumers desire — to know that their coffee has come from a reliable (and regulated) source with respectable labor conditions, fair pay, and an all around high quality operation. On the ground however, in Vietnam specifically, traceability sanctions

something else — the ability to develop ongoing social relations with international investors who may continue to invest time, money, and effort into the Vietnamese coffee industry.

After arriving on site at ACOM, we gathered together within the courtyard of the large gated and secured facility, carefully eyed the large German Shepard guard dogs and settled in for an overview of the day's events. The Rainforest Alliance representative, Noah, was a former Fulbright fellowship recipient who conducted extensive research on palm oil plantations in Malaysia and later settled in as Rainforest Alliance's regional auditor of cash crops. Because Rainforest Alliance was relatively new to Vietnam and the organization only had one in-country Vietnamese representative, he provided an outline of their mission statement and goals to the new audience. Recognizing that the seminar participants were veteran coffee industry employees, Noah felt that while they didn't necessarily have direct experience with Rainforest Alliance, they represented some of the most knowledgeable and experienced coffee experts in the region if not the whole of Vietnam. From the Rainforest Alliance perspective, it seemed logical then that the next desirable step for the Vietnamese coffee industry necessarily involved a move toward increasing the volume of officially certified beans.

This chapter examines the role of certification schemes operating in the Vietnamese coffee industry. I focus primarily on Rainforest Alliance because their new presence in Vietnam offered a particularly interesting look at how a certification scheme

is established in-country. At the end of the Standards Map seminar I used the application to get a sense of how many certification schemes operate in Vietnam's agricultural sector. I was surprised at the large quantity but not surprised at the dearth of public attention to certifications. That said, certifications are accessible though not necessarily affordable for an increasing number of Vietnamese coffee producers and traders. An individual household farm would not be able to afford the cost of certifying their coffee and the premium received coupled with the additional attention to certification criteria and added labor would not offset the extra income. Larger farms, communities of farmers, and small coffee companies, however, are beginning to explore the pros and cons of certification systems.

The entrance of internationally recognized certifications such as Rainforest Alliance signal a trend in developing Vietnamese coffee as an internationally reputable and visible producer. Other certification programs such as Nestle's 4C (Common Code for the Coffee Community) and UTZ bring attention to improvements in coffee quality and concepts such as sustainability and traceability. Certifications are visible and tangible when visiting coffee processing and export spaces. At the ACOM factory three distinct certification scheme logos are stamped onto burlap sacks and stacked up in their storage warehouse. These logos have little to do with Vietnam but rather represent Vietnamese coffee reaching a particular benchmark of quality and international standards (that include "social, environmental, and economic" requirements).

Certification schemes are designed and marketed to address consumer desires for the coffee that meets the criteria outlined by Rainforest Alliance: social, economic, and environmental sustainability and traceability. And yet, certification schemes are at their core subject to market forces, supply and demand, and global consumption trends. In contemporary Vietnam, a labeled certified coffee is a symbol of global awareness, quality, and accountability. Although this symbol is projected primarily to coffee exporters, the large multi-national companies that purchase a majority of Vietnamese coffee, and consumers, the act of certification seeking among Vietnamese coffee producers and Vietnamese coffee companies suggests that efforts are being made to increase Vietnam's visibility on the global market.

This chapter navigates the introduction of certification schemes and the cultural meanings and implications of the process itself. Drawing primarily upon participant observation during a Rainforest Alliance "training of trainers" auditing course, interviews with Vietnam's Nestle 4C representative, and participation in and conversations surrounding two International Trade Centre (ITC) standards map training courses I argue that the coffee certifications in Vietnam signify a specific benchmark of quality and international standard (that includes "social, environmental, and economic" requirements) but also hint at a larger desire to certify Vietnam itself as a recognizable coffee producing state in a global industry that has long rendered Vietnam invisible. At the same time, the certification schemes that qualify Vietnamese coffee as high quality and sustainable

enable Vietnamese producers to redefine what constitutes a legitimate coffee producing country.

### *Certifying Coffee*

Recent literature on commodity certification schemes largely and understandably focuses on the fair trade coffee system, often rendered official by a Fair Trade certification. Fair Trade is undoubtedly the most commonly recognized certification in coffee consuming countries across Europe, the United States, and other major coffee consuming regions such as Japan and South Korea. Smith (2010) argues, “the certification system developed within the fair trade system allows consumers to be confident about the ways in which the coffee was produced and how the producers were treated by the coffee retailer throughout the trading relationship” (2010:30). The expansion of Fair Trade in general is framed by the “global sourcing of new products, combined with the ongoing volatility associated with markets for traditional bulk commodities such as coffee, tea, cacao, and bananas” and the subsequent “heightened awareness of global wealth disparities” (Moberg and Lyon 2010: 1-2). The resulting concern over individual social responsibility for purchased commodities engenders the inspiration for increasing attention to The paradox of fair trade is that “in seeking social justice and environmental sustainability, however, fair trade pursues a market-based solution to the very problems developing from free markets” (2010: 7). Fair trade is one

of the first popularly recognized coffee certification schemes and spearheaded the subsequent escalation of global commodity certifications.

Coffee buzzwords are integral to this chapter as they flow between coffee producers, traders, exporters, “experts,” and through the media – each actor defining each buzzword in their own respective terms. In an edited volume on fair trade as social justice, Sarah Lyon and Mark Moberg (2012) write that “with the expansion of neoliberalism the need for fairer international trade has become ever more pressing to many people in the postcolonial world” (2012:3). Here, and throughout the globally diverse pieces in their volume, “fairer international trade” suggests more than a fair trade certification and label and more than a desire to exhibit socially conscious awareness of commodity producing “developing” countries but also an air of competition between global corporations that strive to compete with now ubiquitous smaller speciality commodity companies. And yet, the notion of certified commodities and fair trade certifications still focuses largely on small scale specialty interests with too little attention to the rise of certifications among the world’s largest commodity purchasing companies and consumer markets. This chapter and the larger dissertation is in part an effort to address this dearth in research on industrially produced commodities and certification schemes.

Much of the literature on coffee available in the social sciences tends to focus on relatively small scale producers and relatively small scale certification efforts or



“relationship coffees” (See Doane 2010; Jaffee 2007; West 2012) while much of the coffee produced globally is uncertified industrial grade. And though much of this literature problematizes certification schemes or explores the debates surrounding them, few look at the possibility that certification schemes may actually enable producers to project their own criteria, values, and power into these schemes. In Vietnam, I argue, this occurs not through a payment premium or the certification itself rather through social interactions with foreign investors and auditors. These social interactions create a space for local producers to perform their expertise, challenge foreign concepts about sustainability and traceability to re-situate them locally for their own use. Why then, if Vietnamese producers are usurping certification schemes for their own use, are foreign investors and certification scheme representatives increasingly investing in certifying this coffee?

Daniel Reichman (2011) has written at length about the costs and benefits of fair trade coffee in Honduras. He argues that “fair trade is a basically private act that has no adequate political platform to address systemic inequalities” (2011:154). The notion of fair trade as a private act engenders questions about Vietnam’s less visible baseline certifications that have little to do with creating a relationship between coffee consumers in the United States and Europe but rather a relationship about corporate responsibility and continued ties with major coffee producing countries and their sources. While Nestle’s 4C, UTZ, and Rainforest Alliance are certainly well respected and understood

certification schemes within the coffee industry, the question remains: who are these certifications for? If quality certification schemes are only effective on a large scale (e.g. hundreds of farmers must participate in Nestle's 4C certification to make it cost effective), it must not be about the individual producer.

This chapter is framed by multiple “keywords” (See Williams 1976) and the ways in which these words take on highly contextual and malleable meanings in the Vietnamese coffee industry. While these keywords are largely specific to the coffee industry, they are becoming increasingly familiar to consumers who read and interpret them from coffee labels and branding efforts, imbuing each word with increased complexity and multifarious meaning. “Traceability” [*truy nguyên trực tuyến*] is often one of the first terms brought up in conversations between Vietnamese coffee producers or middlemen and international certification agencies. It extends beyond a sensational consumer marketed concept of “farm to cup” to include a regulatory traceability so that coffee buyers and certifiers can determine whether or not their coffee may have gone astray at some point during the production process. I rarely heard the term used in Vietnamese or discussed locally. When I first met Noah from the Rainforest Alliance, he spoke first of the importance of traceability in new certification markets – he asked me how Vietnam, with so many small scale farmers can develop an effective traceability system. For the Rainforest Alliance, traceability requires a strong education system that

“explains” its value to all members of the coffee commodity chain starting with the producer.

“Quality” [*chất lượng*] refers to both the quantifiable physiological aspect of coffee and the discursive aspects of the term espoused by certification scheme representatives with regular frequency and utilized by producers and traders alike. Quality in terms of certification schemes is a label (visible or not) signifying attention to certification scheme criteria, production method, and processing. “Sustainability” [*bền vững*], when used in the context of certification schemes is often a reference to environmental sustainability. Locally, however, the term reflects anxiety about the future of Vietnamese coffee and excitement about the possibility of an economically sustainable industry.

In contemporary Vietnam, a labeled certified coffee is a symbol of global awareness, quality, and accountability. Yet, certified coffees are not an accurate representation of the coffee produced in Vietnam. In 2011 less than ten percent of Vietnam’s coffee went through official, recognized certification processes. While this percentage is slowly increasing, most of the certification agencies I worked with during my fieldwork expressed concern that they had nearly reached the threshold for certifiable coffee production in Vietnam. Anything beyond ten percent threatens to adulterate the certification process itself, to run the risk of offsetting any benefits that come with it. This somewhat hesitant realization underscored the reality of Vietnamese coffee for

export into instant, soluble granules under the brand of multi-national corporations exempt from labeling country of origin on their final products. Certification schemes, perhaps, enable and render the status quo as such — ninety percent of Vietnamese coffee can remain invisible in part because ten percent is stamped, certified, “officially” accounted for and visible.

### *Traceability*

At the ACOM facility Noah’s traceability speech focused on the biggest challenge in training farmers – explaining the importance of separating Rainforest Alliance certified coffee from non-Rainforest Alliance certified coffee. Because the Vietnamese coffee industry works such that one household farm (approximately 1-2 hectares of coffee) might be producing both certified and non-certified coffee or neighbors might be producing both certified and non-certified coffee, it was difficult to keep track of coffee worthy of a Rainforest Alliance green frog seal.<sup>16</sup> It was also difficult to gauge the difference between certified and non-certified coffee based on a superficial physical inspection alone. This is where traceability enters into the equation. Because Rainforest Alliance prides itself on transparency and meeting specific global quality standards for

---

<sup>16</sup> The Rainforest Alliance symbol is a small green frog and one that seemed familiar when I saw it for the first time in Vietnam. I later realized that it was the same frog adorning McDonalds coffee advertisements, chocolate bars, and the occasional bottle of Naked Juice.

certified commodities, an exporter or company purchasing certified coffee should have a clear understanding of where and how it's produced, what the processing procedure is. What happens in the farm and beyond should be traceable without question.

The notion of traceability in coffee stems from accountability efforts to maintain a precise geographic knowledge of seed to cup (or “farm to cup”) prominent among certification schemes and direct trade coffee companies. If one can trace coffee from origin and farmer to the producer, one can regulate the quality as well as the environmental and economic implications of coffee production. Many certification agencies provide a tracking system so that a coffee consumer can enter a code found on their package into a website and determine the farm (and in some cases, the actual farmer) that produced their coffee and potentially learn more about the region and farming practices. UTZ offers the “Good Inside Portal” where coffee buyers can register and monitor their purchases as well as access detailed information about the coffee commodity chain for a particular purchase. For consumers, UTZ offers links to pages about coffee production and traceability. For example, if a consumer purchases a cup or bag of coffee from IKEA, they may simply fill in the information provided on their package from a drop down menu to explore the details of a particular coffee origin.

Back at the ACOM facility, as the group moved from the courtyard to the factory and later the Farmer Training Center (FTC), I engaged several participants on the worth

of certification (more generally) in the Vietnamese coffee industry. One participant explained it like this:

The premium for certification, Rainforest Alliance or UTZ for example and really Fair Trade, is so expensive. For a farmer, with a family, in one house with only maybe two hectares of Robusta coffee, they won't even know about the certifications. That's why I think it's important for trainers to know about it. So we can explain to a farmer if a certification is valuable for them and will pay off in the future because most [coffee] farmers in Vietnam are worried about today and paying off bank loans for coffee and buying a new Honda and maybe not about the environment.

While the primary role of these trainers is to go out into the field and train other Vietnamese coffee industry members about certification criteria and the importance of maintaining these standards, Vietnam, with no national standard, must rely on a word of mouth strategy that spreads from the trainers to the farmers to begin developing an understanding about how certification schemes operate. It was most important to convey the idea that a majority of Vietnamese coffee is ultimately consumed by non-Vietnamese living in the United States and European Union. The branding and labeling of certifications is necessary to authenticate the producer-consumer relationship. Certification schemes in Vietnam are at the apex of market capitalist investment and the state's desire to maintain its stream of coffee export revenues but also to strengthen

Vietnam's identity in the global market and among international funding and developmental organizations such as the World Bank, ITC, and World Trade Organization (WTO).

A Rainforest Alliance certification, as with other coffee certification schemes in Vietnam, entails economic, social, and environmental dimensions that often play only an indirect role in the final product. Thus, articulating Rainforest Alliance's concept of traceability "from farm to cup" is an important aspect of their training course as well as one that calls into question various levels of responsibility and accountability across the Vietnamese coffee supply chain. From the perspective of certification scheme representatives, whether or not a majority of Vietnamese coffee producers can afford the certification premium is irrelevant, in theory, because most certification schemes in the Vietnamese coffee industry serve to develop consistent standards and help those who fall short reach them by the next coffee season. When farmers fall short of these standards, it is not their fault.

According to Noah (and several Vietnamese participants I spoke to throughout the training of trainers course) it was the responsibility of the collector to manage the receipt and proper labeling of certified and non-certified coffee and farms. In other words, traceability potentially derails with the numerous middlemen who bring coffee from a farm to a processing facility. The implications of non-certified coffee being labeled as certified coffee vary by certification agency but are almost always detrimental to

producer, collector, processor, auditor and producing country's reputation. Of course, this detriment only exists if and when someone detects non-certified coffee in the midst of certified coffee shipments.

Rainforest Alliance was not the only certification scheme operating in the Vietnamese coffee industry. More widely known is UTZ (formerly known as UTZ Kapeh) and its slogan "Good Inside" can be found on any UTZ certified coffee. In 2007 a press release announced the opening of their first representative office in the country:

Utz Kapeh recently opened their official representative office in Buon Ma Thuot, Daklak, Vietnam. This new location for Utz Kapeh is right in the heart of the 'Coffee Capital of Vietnam' and is a solid base for the Utz Kapeh team to intensify their support to the certified responsible coffee sector in Vietnam. [Utz Kapeh 2007]

In 2007, the notion of "certified" coffee was nearly nonexistent in Vietnam but with Vietnamese coffee exports and prices at an all time high it seemed that Vietnam had finally caught up to many other global coffee producing countries already years into certification schemes. The question remains though: why would Vietnam suddenly enter into the certification scheme regime if a majority of the coffee produced in country is unlabeled grade two Robusta?



In Paige West's (2012) comprehensive study of the coffee industry in Papua New Guinea, she points out that the development of increased consumer awareness coupled with the Specialty Coffee Association of America's (SCAA) marketing practices "people who had previously not been coffee drinkers were targeted through the creation of stories and images designed to appeal to them along generational, political, and class lines" and certification schemes are one way to make this appeal successful (2012:47). She argues that:

"Today ethical labels embed a perception of increased value in commodities that allows producers to increase their rents. Consumers pay higher prices for products with these labels because they assume that the products meet food safety, quality, and ethical standards. They also assume that they learn something about the people who produce the commodity along the way." (2012:50-51)

There are myriad assumptions built into certification schemes and in Vietnam, where baseline certifications focus largely on quality improvement, distinctions between the certifications marketed for certification and origin conscious consumers and consumers drinking unlabeled soluble Vietnamese coffee must be clarified. In Vietnam, the major certification schemes, although necessary to imbue value into coffee for traders, exporters, and consumers is largely blended with other Latin American and African coffees at the point of consumption and Vietnam receives little recognition as an origin in bulk coffee purchases of soluble coffee blends or espressos. There is a marked difference

between certified Vietnamese coffee and the “relationship coffees” that bare individual farmer stories and facts about elevation, variety, and the country of production.

Rainforest Alliance, UTZ, and Nestle’s 4C each have their own respective traceability standards built into their certifications but the focus is often not on a pinpointing a specific origin in Vietnam but on the industrial processing and transitions from farm to factory and factory to warehouse and warehouse to point of export. Even certified Vietnamese coffees are lacking the “relationship” aspect of relationship coffees that would clearly state: produced in Vietnam.

In July and October 2011 I attended and participated in a series of workshops organized by the ITC, USAID Star, and the Directorate for Standards, Metrology, and Quality (STAMEQ) designed to bring a “standards map” system to Vietnamese coffee industry employees. These standards maps were created so that large coffee purchasing companies interested in purchasing certified coffees can effectively locate farms and personnel to facilitate their purchases but also to offer a comprehensive picture of coffee certification schemes as they operate in Vietnam.

The first seminar, “ITC New Trade Tool ‘Standards Map’ and Implementation of Certain Voluntary Sustainable Standards” (Bản Đồ Tiêu Chuẩn và Triển Khai Áp Dụng Một Số Tiêu Chuẩn Bền Vững Tự nguyện), took place in a Buôn Ma Thuật hotel with approximately 100 participants (95% male) from across the industry. While much of the seminar focused on the technical aspects of reading the standards maps and utilizing the

tools ITC offers to coffee producers and companies, discussions about traceability and the governance of standards engendered significant discussion points among the participants. The presenters argued that certification standards are more important for producers in “the south” (i.e. the “developing” world) than consumers in northern markets because as northern markets become (statistically) more compliant and demanding of standards, the capacity of producers to meet these standards must increase. ITC’s platform was a starting point to access markets and the sustainability of coffee production and business in a place like Vietnam. The seminar ultimately imparted a sense of urgency and importance on Vietnam as a country to develop a compliancy system and to increase awareness about the certification options available to coffee producers. The ITC charts their progress in educating producers through an extensive standards map system that also provides information for producers about the stringent (or not so stringent) requirements for certification.

ITC Standards Map is an amalgamation of certification schemes and certification criteria in Vietnam. The map service (free to users from “developing countries”) allowed potential clients to gauge their ability to meet criteria for a specific certification and assess whether or not the investment in the criteria will pay off in the form of farmer premiums and if so, how long before the profit cancels out the cost of the certification? The ITC brought together all four major Vietnamese certification scheme representatives and their presentations, question and answer sessions, and interactions with producers

and exporters alike suggest a desire for forward progression within the Vietnamese industry as a whole. Despite the fact that these certification schemes are in direct competition with each other, the representatives each outlined the costs and benefits of their respective certification depending on the context and vetted the likelihood of success within their certification for several individual producers who asked “how do I choose a certification?”

On the second day of the seminar, speakers from each of the certification standards operating in the Vietnamese coffee industry were asked to prepare a Power Point presentation about their respective standards for the audience. The first speaker, Sy, from Nestle’s 4C Association represented the baseline standard for certification that drives competition among Vietnamese certified coffees and eventually prepares farmers to seek more stringent certifications. Of the certified coffees within Vietnam, 4C covers approximately 90% of the market (approximately nine million 60kg bags of certified coffee annually) and traceability was a key aspect of their certification procedure. Sy explained that joining 4C “is a way to improve knowledge and link farmers, government, local scientists, and businesses” together. These relationships were important for maintaining certification standards and enabling “continuous improvement [of the standard] through 4C’s third party certification verification system.” The certification schemes operating in Vietnam must perform the traceability and accountability standards

desired by foreign purchasers in order to receive a small price premium but also to demonstrate worth of an international certification logo.



Figure 3.2 — Standards Map training seminar, October 2011

### *Quality (Chất Lượng)*

Later in the ITC Standards Map seminar, discussion shifted slightly away from the standards map tool toward a “bridge” between certification schemes and producers. It fell on STAMEQ to approve the possibility of certification scheme standards in Vietnam. Vietnam became a member of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) in 1997 under the auspices of STAMEQ and thus responsible for a standardized examination of the quality of products and the regulation of the final quality of products before reaching the consumer market. I asked a representative of STAMEQ what the ISO membership meant for a local company or producer in Buôn Ma Thuột and his reply revealed his perspective on the limitations of small scale certified coffee ventures and the necessity to grow as coffee producing region and country:

How can a small farmer choose a standard and know what a private standard is?

This is why the ITC standards map is important to us. There are so many standards listed in the tool so we will try to utilize it and spread information about it to as many people as possible. There are difficulties in developing guidelines for quality with small farmers but it's easier to develop them as a province and to submit proposals [for seminars and workshops] for programs on quality and infrastructure so that more participants from the province can know. Coffee is the future of Buôn Ma Thuột and we need to focus on quality and production as a province, not alone.

This explanation hinted at the desire for intermediaries between organizations such as ITC and local government but also the ostensible lack of knowledge and access to resources on the part of the small farmer. Standards Map was important because it helped state employees who work in the coffee industry navigate the sudden presence of international certifications and their respective standards and criteria. There is value in certified coffees – value in the premium paid to small farmers, value in the recognition Vietnam receives on the global market, value in the price consumers are willing to pay for a certified coffee – and a quality standard must be met and maintained to access that value. At the same time, this value applies to a very small percentage of Vietnamese farmers and even those who it does apply to are not necessarily sold on the idea of certification as a way to create relational coffees. As the ITC standards map seminar circulated images and imaginary certified commodity flows, the participants became increasingly interested in possibilities of branding local coffee as high quality, standardized, and worthy of international certifications. These possibilities, however, were not imagined as an outcome of certification schemes but rather as a way to reframe industrial grade coffee as something better — to reimagine what constitutes high quality, to standardize coffee production locally, within their own communities, and to seek certifications that advertised Vietnam as a coffee producer and not solely the anonymous coffee within a Rainforest Alliance package.

## *Sustainability*

At the ACOM facility, the group eventually moved from the processing facility and factory to the FTC – an expansive 4.3 hectare facility that ran parallel with the Long River, approximately ten kilometers from the town center. ACOM originally rented the land but the continued rental process was too “complicated” and with supporting funds from the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation (IFC) eventually purchased it. When I visited in May 2011, FTC construction was near complete with an expected opening ceremony in October. The FTC was strategically built on along the river and several small waterfalls to provide a natural irrigation system where the rich basaltic soil of the region can more effectively work with coffee plants. Also home to a three hectare replanting project, the FTC contained a nursery and small shaded area that provided ideal growing conditions for young replanted coffee trees in addition to a small building and classroom that will eventually serve as a “school,” worker guesthouse, cherry storage house, laboratory, office space, and drying area for harvested coffee. Not far from the ACOM factory, the FTC utilized the compost from their water treatment pond to fertilize coffee and experiment with diseased coffee, pest infested coffee, and new varieties. ACOM also had development plans for a small terraced coffee area to study the effects of soil erosion on coffee in the region.

Intercropping is intimately linked to the productivity and health of coffee plants. In addition to providing shade for coffee trees, some plants are known to provide



protection against soil erosion and certain pests. The FTC was spattered with bunches of vetiver grass, durian, mangosteen, and avocado trees, and the occasional jackfruit tree. These utilitarian plants were interspersed with multiple varieties of coffee in various states of repair and health. Most of the coffee planted in the province (and Vietnam) is over twenty years old and nearing the end of production peaks. Agricultural techniques such as branch grafting (*ghép cà phê*) potentially extend the life of elderly coffee and the FTC hoped to devote an area to grafting experiments and research on aging coffee. The FTC was the first coffee experimental agriculture and training center of its kind in Vietnam and the seminar participants and organizers alike seemed excited about the prospects for facilitating “quality” training about sustainable agriculture management and addressing pressing environmental concerns in the coffee producing industry. As it would turn out, however, in small group discussion, sustainable agriculture management discussions would quickly turn to sustainable economic development and a concern not about the environment per se, rather the eventual decline of high yield production.

Because environmental sustainability is a key tenant of the Rainforest Alliance certification but also circulated in their discourse about securing Vietnam’s coffee future, the afternoon was designated for a group work project on assessing the sustainability efforts of local coffee producers. Noah split the participants into four groups: 1) agroforestry, 2) water, 3) soil and waste management, and 4) hydro-chemical usage. Each of these groups was asked to explore the FTC and assess the terrain and geography

as well as their respective group subjects and report back to Noah and the rest of the group about their findings. All of the groups developed a detailed assessment of the environmental conditions and possibilities for sustainable agriculture management implementation in accordance with Rainforest Alliance's certification criteria as well as scenarios in which serious overhaul might be required. The agroforestry group that I joined recommended that the shade trees throughout the FTC become a coffee canopy to provide shade for young and dilapidated older trees:

Because the coffee here is quite old it needs help from shade trees. They should be local species that are known to work with coffee. The coffee seems too old for grafting. The FTC should replant younger coffee trees instead. I think this is the same problem farmers around here are facing. If the coffee is replanted, in three years, the FTC will see a lot of success. The local farmers too, if they replant instead of grafting.

Although the four groups focused primarily on sustainability within the FTC, their assessments spoke to the broader implications for the surrounding coffee communities and expressed a deep concern about sustainability efforts in the coffee industry. Most participants at one point or another spoke to me individually about the importance of local producers grasping the larger picture of coffee sustainability in Vietnam. Like traceability and quality though, sustainability was defined locally and sometimes at odds with the Rainforest Alliance definition. The ways in which Vietnamese coffee farmers

envisioned their future was often framed in terms of high yield production — the more coffee they produce, the more money they receive. Local knowledge about sustainability was not necessarily couched in terms of the environment or the soil in which coffee is produced but rather the ability to sustain the industry as a whole and the economic livelihood of the community.

### *Conclusions*

Discourses about traceability, quality, and sustainability were ever present but often defined in a transnational scope that ignored state and local perceptions about these concepts. The application of certification schemes and the stamping of certification logos onto burlap sacks of coffee might shed light on Vietnam's compliance with certain quality assessment, social, and environmental standards but these certifications do not shed light on Vietnam's production level, rise in the industry, or local expertise about plant propagation and economic sustainability. The nature of Vietnamese coffee commodity chains is not that of specialty or "relationship" coffees and thus exporters, traders, and large coffee companies are undoubtedly aware of the origin of their coffee but those at the final consumption point may not be.

Discourse about certification schemes was part of an official "coffee stance" in Vietnam as both MARD and representatives from certification schemes alike espoused a

cheery image of what traceability can do “for the farmer.” Yet, these schemes were designed to represent a minority of farmers, relegating certifications to large state or joint-stock owned farms, as no single family farm of one and a half hectares (the typical farm in Vietnam) could afford to buy into Rainforest Alliance or UTZ. The simultaneous enthusiasm and regulatory and local limitations of traceability renders traceability all the more difficult to navigate.

In the ACOM storage facility, sixty-two kilogram burlap sacks of coffee were marked Rainforest Alliance or UTZ or they remained unmarked entirely, commingling in the same massive warehouse. It seemed entirely possible to lose the thread of traceability in such massive volumes of coffee. Even the traceable coffee is not necessarily traceable. As one Vietnamese coffee trader explained, “it’s not important. Some company will buy the coffee if it’s certified or not. The certification is good, that’s true...but it’s not the most important thing [for producers and the local industry].” There was a palpable sense of realism in the industry. Vietnam fulfilled a more significant role in the global coffee industry. That is, a producer of the “majority coffee” — coffee as consumed, unlabeled and seemingly without origin, around the world daily. The prominent discourse about traceability seems a spectacle — the face of a “good” coffee producing country.

Further complicating coffee traceability in Vietnam is the March 2009 Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) legislation that came out of the 2002 Farm Security and Rural Investment Act (See Section 10816 of 7 U.S.C. 1638-1638d). COOL legislature was

designed as somewhat of a large scale traceability system — a way for consumers to establish the country of origin for muscle and ground cuts of beef, fish, shellfish, and a variety of fruits, vegetables, and nuts. However, “specific processing that results in a change in the character of the covered commodity” can render that commodity exempt from labeling requirements (Williams 2012:3). Even if coffee was a “covered commodity” the processing procedure would necessitate exemption from COOL. In other words, there is no requirement to stamp “Made in Vietnam” on a tin can of Folgers, Maxwell House, or any large industrial coffee product.

This seeming invisibility is the outcome of a denied but also mutually discouraged traceability of some ninety percent of Vietnamese coffee. As Dung from the ACOM facility explained, “Vietnam has a role” in the global coffee industry. That is, to fulfill a basic economic need — supply and demand — and do it well. Traceability in Vietnamese coffee is significant to the extent that multinational corporations have the ability to follow and thus regulate shipments and volume.

## CHAPTER 4

### BITTER GOURDS, COMPLICATED WEBS: RISK AND UNCERTAINTY IN A VOLATILE INDUSTRY

In 2002 the price of coffee on the "C market" (the global coffee commodities market) plummeted and attention immediately turned to Vietnam and Brazil, the world's predominant Robusta coffee producers, with the former posited as the likely culprit after slowly flooding the world market. Leading up to the crisis was a decade long intense investment in coffee production in the south-central highlands region and the subsequent lifting of the U.S. trade embargo with Vietnam on February 3, 1994. During that period, an increase in the global consumption of instant and unlabeled Vietnamese and Brazilian Robusta coffees increased the profit margins of multi-national corporations such as Nestle (headquarters in Vevey, Switzerland), Mondelez (formerly Kraft, headquarters in Deerfield, Illinois), and the now defunct Sara Lee Corporation international (headquartered in Utrecht, Netherlands). Blame simultaneously fell on these majority multi-national corporations but also Vietnam as the supplier of ostensibly cheap, easily accessible Robusta coffee. The subsequent "blame game" created a complex terrain of risk management strategies, institutional policies, and discursive debate among Vietnamese coffee farmers, MARD officials, and international development aid organizations.

When I began my fieldwork in 2010, this discourse still featured prominently in Vietnam. Coffee producers who experienced the crisis spoke about it with apprehension and head shaking, carefully recounting the sudden onset of such a crisis but also the desire to prepare for another in the future. In formal settings, conferences, and training seminars where international organizations such as the World Bank or the International Coffee Organization (ICO) spoke about the crisis, the external variables and unexpected nature of the crisis was often cited but rarely discussed outside a framework of blame at least peripherally falling on Vietnam. Even if it was not solely "Vietnam's fault," the 2002 coffee crisis discourse circulated with a tinge of assumed blame that Vietnam had something to do with it.

In his work on fair trade coffee and sustainability in Mexico, Daniel Jaffee (2007) examines the collapse of the ICA on July 4, 1989 and the subsequent drop in the "C" price. He writes that

“overnight, coffee growers around the world were exposed to free-market forces, with devastating results. Producing nations dumped their stocks on the market, and prices plummeted...the effects on small coffee farmers — who produce more than two-thirds of the world coffee supply — were particularly devastating” (Jaffee 2007:43)

Much like the ICO, World Bank, and multi-national corporation reports about Vietnam's role in the crisis, Jaffee cites Vietnam's increase in coffee production as, at least, a peripheral cause of the price crash:

“Where did all this extra coffee come from? The implosion of the ICA, along with export-oriented lending policies by the World Bank and other institutions, led many nations, such as Brazil and Indonesia, to increase their production simultaneously. But the biggest surge in production came from an unlikely source: Vietnam, which increased production by 1,130 percent to some 14 million bags, catapulting it from tenth place in 1991 to become the world’s second-largest producer after Brazil, in 2001” (2007:44)

Jaffee’s analysis highlights the incredible oversight of these development aid and investment projects to foresee the effect of oversupply on the market and fair trade as one response to the devastated livelihoods of Mexican coffee farmers. As these farmers struggled for social justice and navigated new global market terrain, Vietnam remained in the spotlight as country that “dumped” their stock on the market once the ICA collapsed, thus leading to oversupply, price plummets, and crisis for *other* farmers. From an ethnographic perspective in Vietnam however, discourse about the cause of the crisis frames it as blurry and complicated but also reveals a framework of risk that many coffee producers, traders, and exporters readily discussed.

I met Bao, a coffee and tea farmer in his early 50s, on his well tended six hectare farm approximately 20 kilometers outside of Đà Lạt. He owned three hectares of *catimor* variety (a high yield, highly disease resistant Robusta-Arabica hybrid) and three hectares of Oolong tea as well as persimmon and other crops terraced across the farm for shade. He planted the coffee over a decade ago, prior to the crisis, and subsequently built a



massive two-story house to complement his silver antique Jeep that he drives to Đà Lạt to conduct business. As we toured the farm *the* crisis came up only in passing as he pointed across his farm to a neighbor's tea farm:

“When the price dropped, I didn't lose my coffee because I had already planted tea. People around here who planted tea did not lose money like different people who only had coffee. Now some people only plant tea. But I lost my coffee some years later. Because of disease. I used to have very good *typica* [Arabica] coffee but the disease destroyed all of my plants and I thought *catimor* would be better. If I planted more *typica*...it's very risky. Maybe I have to pass another crisis [*khủng hoảng*].”

Bao's crisis with coffee bore disease<sup>17</sup> seemed to take priority over the global crisis. Of course, Bao's six hectare farm is an exceptional example of a Vietnamese coffee farm but his observations about a crisis are typical.

Vietnam's recovery from the crisis was mitigated, at least in theory, by a government initiative to lessen the risk of crisis by diversifying the variety of coffee crops grown in Vietnam. As an intended side effect, the proposed shift from high yield, "poor" quality Robusta to "higher" quality Arabica in Lâm Đồng attracted the attention of

---

<sup>17</sup> Coffee Berry Borer or Coffee Stem Borer is an ongoing problem in many coffee producing areas in Vietnam and a widely recognized problem in much of the coffee producing world. The pest is a small boring insect that is controlled and eradicated by manually applying a pesticide specific to the age and stage of the coffee plant. I also heard several anecdotes about the borer pest attacking harvested cherries already in warehouse storage.

new investors in the coffee market (See “Vietnam’s Lam Dong” 2009). In 2010 MARD, VICOFA, and many coffee producers I interacted with were debating the merits of a shift from the predominant Robusta species of coffee to Arabica. The general director of VICOFA suggested in an interview that "this shift is risky but if Vietnam is to become known globally for producing high quality coffee, it is a shift that must happen." Although this shift was a tangible risk mitigation technique proposed by the state, it has not yet come to fruition. Instead, risk mitigation techniques remain in the realm of a localized circuit of risk construction, uncertainty, and networks of knowledge exchange.

### *Uncertainty in a Risky Industry*

Asa Boholm (2003) asks if there “can be an anthropology of uncertainty?” She explores questions of who can define risk and when, recognizing that as Douglas and Wildavsky proposed early on (1982), “decisions about risk and management of risk are socially embedded, shaped by culturally based notions about the state of the world, what the world consists of and how it works (2003:161). Boholm (2003) goes on to argue that

“...the concept of risk addresses situations when people are aware that there is a possibility of threat to something that is of value. Risk does not include situations in which something of value is certain to be destroyed or harmed. That is a situation of fate or inevitability rather than risk. If there are no stakes involved, no threat to entities valued by humans, there is also no risk. Risk entails a state of

uncertainty, something of value is at stake and uncertainty can relate both to the chances of a negative outcome and the nature of the outcomes itself.” (2003:166)

Much like Boholm I move away from a focus on the traditional economic anthropological definitions of risk in which risk “arises as a possibility that basic human needs will be inadequately met and it is mainly an empirical problem to discover the characteristic opportunities and risk in any given cultural-ecological setting” or the “unpredictable variation in some economic, social or ecological variable” (2003:175-6) I focus instead on risk “as a cognitive frame that produces contexts which link an object of risk (a source of potential harm,) an object at risk (a potential target of harm) and an evaluation (implicit or explicit) of human consequences” (Boholm 2003:175). I argue that the Vietnamese coffee industry and Vietnam, in the wake of rapid economic development, are in a state of uncertainty. In doing so, I hope to create a space for multiple knowledges and narratives to exist simultaneously as authoritative voices in risk assessment and mitigation.

The concept of uncertainty (signified by the Vietnamese term *không chắc chắn*) plays a significant role in understanding how risk is perceived and interrogated in the Vietnamese coffee industry. The uncertainty of what will happen to future coffee prices, trading relationships with international buyers, and the Vietnamese agricultural landscape rests heavy on the minds of coffee farmers and local traders. An ethnographic account of uncertainty must consider who is uncertain — when and why — and how they enact and

embody this uncertainty in their daily lives. Vietnamese coffee becomes a timely lens onto uncertainty precisely because the coffee industry is inherently uncertain but simultaneously teased by historical continuities and local knowledge exchange.

In what follows, I argue that risk and uncertainty are understood and locally mitigated through a series of networks — social, economic, technological — that are sometimes engendered by the physical presence of international organizations and global actors such as the World Bank but more often by the everyday social interactions of Vietnamese working in the industry. I explore the ways in which organizations such as the World Bank define and regulate risk in the Vietnamese coffee industry, opening the possibility for new local social networks to develop and flourish, at once defining, redefining, and exploring possibilities for risk management.

Thus, this chapter explores a discourse of risk and the future as defined by Vietnamese coffee producers, auditors, and industry experts but also by the international organizations that seek to regulate them. As foreign investment in the coffee industry increases and diversifies, Vietnamese notions of risk and visions of the future become mediums of success and failure, hope and frustration. Risk is inherent in the industry as external variables — frost in Brazil, a pest infestation in Indonesia, coffee trademark violations — mediate the future livelihood of those working in the industry and the future of the industry itself. I argue that local discourses about risk and the future are integral in elucidating the complexities of global commodity production and trade, thus creating a

space for Vietnamese coffee actors to apprehend, cultivate, and contest risk and future visions of Vietnam's role in a modern global economy.

*Faces of Coffee, Faces of Risk*

In a 2004 glossy and image intensive publication titled “Faces of Coffee” Nestle Public Affairs addresses the role of “big companies” in relationship to the coffee crisis:

“The contrast between the flourishing profits of coffee companies and the rising poverty among farmers has made headlines around the world. These are contrasting aspects of the same global industry – disparate players linked in most cases only by their dependence on the international coffee market. Yet the precise relationship between the booming retailers of the developed world to the catastrophe in growing countries is difficult to trace. Blaming big companies for the predicament of poor farmers is a recurring feature of campaigns highlighting the coffee crisis – but it is a difficult argument to sustain. To a significant extent, the forces which weigh on the coffee market are the same now as ten or even twenty years ago. Prices reflect the balance of supply and demand, adjusted for variations in quality and climate, the estimated size of stockpiles and the impact of regulation. Companies have realized that they are sitting with a commodities crisis and there is only so much that they can do.”

(“Faces of Coffee” 2004)

In this defense, the crisis is framed and mediated not only by the prominent Vietnamese coffee buyers but also an elusive relationship between “booming retailers of the developed world” and “the catastrophe in growing countries” as well as the market forces that shape global coffee prices. Crisis only becomes crisis when discourse defines it as such. What is the catastrophe in growing countries and is this a supposedly universal experience for those who represent the faces of coffee? An element of semantic dispute tinges this explanation. Although many Vietnamese coffee farmers speak of “crisis” (*khủng hoảng*) at seminars and formal institutional settings, they rarely use the word to describe their own experience or the future. What Nestle and the World Bank speak of as crisis might be translated as a longer continuum of ebbs and flows in the global coffee economy that farmers are savvy to in their own experiential ways. Risk [rủi rò] is spoken of far more often than “crisis” or “catastrophe” in ways that render it a tangible concept — something to be studied and known and thus mitigated.

In a classic analysis of risk and crisis, Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) argue that “risk should be seen as a joint product of knowledge about the future and consent about the most desired prospects” (1982:5). As argued in previous chapters, knowledge production in the contemporary Vietnamese coffee industry demonstrates a tension between large and powerful multinational corporations such as the “Big Four” (See Stein 2002) but also state discourse about what Vietnam should be doing in order to remain an accountable global producer and what local farmers, traders, and investors bring to the dialogue through their personal perspectives.

Nestle and its current iteration of instant soluble coffee, Nescafe, has been in Vietnam since 1995 and recently established a coffee “farmer connect” program in 2012 but Nestle branded products have been in Vietnam since the early colonial period in 1912.<sup>18</sup> Nestle is a widely recognized brand in the south-central highlands and one that represents the possibility of risk aversion for local farmers through their farmer training programs and quality certification programs. In doing so, Nestle’s discourse about coffee, crisis, and the risks facing Vietnamese farmers is circulated widely in coffee communities, becoming entangled in a larger discursive production of risk and knowledge. Nestle’s “Faces of Coffee” however, does not map cleanly onto Vietnamese ideas about what caused the crisis or how the concept of risk operates in daily life.

As the effects of the global crisis came to fruition in the form of a 2002 price drop and farmers in Latin America faced a significant income loss, the "culprit" discourse became a mainstay in major coffee news sources such as the international coffee trade journal, *Global Coffee Review*. Although this discourse circulated widely within the coffee industry, few conspicuous public news sources developed extensive stories about Vietnam’s role in the global crisis. CNN featured one prominent news story titled “Crisis in a Cup” with a tedious but dramatic subtitle: “The price of beans has crashed. Growers around the world are starving. And the quality of your morning cup is getting worse. So

---

<sup>18</sup> According to Nestle’s July 2013 Vietnam Factsheet, Nestle established its first trading office in Saigon in 1912 (“Vietnam Factsheet” 2013). Although Nestle coffee is distributed in Vietnam as Nescafe (also a globally distributed coffee brand), the company also produces Milo, an instant chocolate drink, La Vie, a commonly consumed bottled water, and Maggi, a soya based condiment.

why is everyone blaming Vietnam?” Stein (2002) refers to the Big Four (Nestle, Kraft, Procter & Gamble, and Sara Lee), the four largest coffee purchasing multinational corporations in the world, as well as technological advancements in coffee production and processing as equally responsible for the growth in global coffee production and thus a subsequent drop in prices that affected Vietnamese, Latin American, and African coffee producers. He explains the crisis but also the role of accountability. “Vietnam is not just a victim of the crisis. For many, it is also the chief culprit, responsible for flooding the market over the past five years with millions of bags of unwanted coffee, upsetting the fine balance between global supply and demand for its own short-term gain” (Stein 2002).<sup>19</sup>

The construction of a culprit but also the mention of “short-term gain,” still, at the time of writing plagues Vietnamese coffee producers and traders to some extent. Among the coffee producers and traders I regularly worked with, remarks about onus over the crisis seemed intentionally more abstract than the overt CNN expose. One producer in Lâm Đồng province explained, “I was not prepared for the future because I did not think about it and only thought about tomorrow, next week.” There is a profound risk in

---

<sup>19</sup>The assumption that Vietnam produces “unwanted coffee” is, I believe, a reference to the rapidity and relative placidness with which Vietnam entered the market. It may also be a reference to later claims that Vietnamese Robusta coffee is of lower quality than other Robusta producing countries. The question of quality (addressed in previous chapters) is one that pits Robusta against Arabica but also considers quality certification schemes – schemes that take time to develop. Here, the claim of “unwanted coffee” is a generalized statement that does not take into consideration the eager willingness of coffee buyers to purchase cheap Robusta.



thinking only about tomorrow or being driven by “the power of money” (Truitt 2013:11) and increasing “currency consciousness” (Truitt 2013:3; Polanyi 1957). The risk is partially retrospective in that the coffee producers who experienced the crisis in 2001-02 have a firsthand perspective on the implications of prioritizing short-term gain but also a decade of subjection to a discourse of supposed risks coming from the government and international development organizations. But the coffee crisis was not necessarily a crisis at all in Vietnam.

Farmers that I interviewed about the crisis explained that they (and many of their friends in the coffee industry) were relatively new to coffee production in the early 2000s and did not fully understand the link to other coffee producing countries or global prices — they grew coffee and sold it to collectors for a profit. Alternatively, they were early enough in their coffee growing ventures that they did not yet expect to turn a profit and the crisis did not have any immediately obvious implications for them. The same producers, however, became an integral part of the discourse about crisis and risk that would become a significant factor in shaping the way perceptions about risk were constructed and circulated in the months and years following the crisis.

The global coffee crisis is over but Vietnam remains, in the circles of some industry spokespersons and media circuits, the responsible party. Vietnam, as a branded culprit in this context becomes a particularly fruitful object of inquiry into the social construction of risk and uncertainty — the label of culprit paradoxically paved the path for Vietnam to redefine risk and uncertainty in productive ways. Rather than hinder or

redesign and moderate Vietnam's large scale industrial Robusta coffee production, the label germinated a new perspective on risk, crisis, and the uncertainty of global industrial cash crop production.

### *Productive Risk*

Zaloom (2004) writes about the "productive life of risk in contemporary capitalism." She focuses specifically on the idea that "aggressive economic risk is crucial to the social and spatial constitution of the marketplace" as "traders sustain the market, and at the same time, the market is a site for the production of risk takers." (2004:365). She goes on to explore how risk is "mobilized as a cultural object" by critiquing studies that effectually render impossible the possibility of risk as productive. This leads me to ask how risk (and risk taking) might be productive in the Vietnamese coffee industry.

During my fieldwork, MARD became a proponent of producing more highly coveted and profit garnering Arabica varieties. Shifting from Robusta to Arabica is risky for many reasons but necessary as the VICOFA director mentioned above. According to the VICOFA director, the shift is risky because many coffee producers do not have experience with Arabica coffee and it is, after all, a different plant. From the producers' perspective, the shift is risky not because of the dearth of experience per se but rather the three year dormant period before seedlings produce harvestable coffee cherries. Not all producers can afford to lose coffee income for three years. Even if a producer has another source of income (or several sources), this does not guarantee that the coffee will

survive until the first harvest or that the price of Arabica will still be high three years into the future.<sup>20</sup> One producer explained his risk perception:

maybe I start to grow fifty percent Arabica but what happens if there is an Arabica pest in Vietnam or maybe the next crisis is about Arabica...what do I do if that happens? Maybe I don't know when the next crisis comes or what it will be but sure it will come.

The idea that the next crisis will inevitably happen but when and what form it will take is impossible to predict. This uncertainty is pervasive within coffee producing communities. In the face of that risk -- a risk created by the construction of a crisis -- many producers with the resources to make this shift contemplated the advantages and disadvantages but refused to move forward without extensive and close (economic) assistance from MARD.<sup>21</sup>

Some Vietnamese traders perceive the risk of Robusta-Arabica transition as rooted in Vietnam's relational position to other global coffee producers. A young trader with an advanced degree in Economics from a university in Ho Chi Minh City explained

---

<sup>20</sup> A majority of Vietnamese coffee farmers rely on additional sources of income to supplement their coffee during the off-season. In Lâm Đồng province, many farmers grow vegetables or fruit alongside their coffee not merely as potential shade trees or nutrient dispersing crops but as possible income earners at local markets.

<sup>21</sup> The shift from Robusta to Arabica requires not only the ability to weather a three year drop in income but also the resources to maintain and ween young coffee seedlings. This is a difficult and expensive endeavor to undertake and small family farms (on average 1 1/2-2 hectares) would not pursue this without help from a local coffee organization such as the Buôn Ma Thuột Community Development Center (CDC) or an international agency such as Rainforest Alliance.

to me that Vietnam "has a role in coffee." The role is to produce Robusta coffee for expansive global consumption because "Arabica is a lot of money, yes, but Robusta is sure money because there are so many [Robusta coffee] consumers who like that." The risk in removing Robusta to plant Arabica is not contingent upon a future (and somehow certain) crisis. It is dependent on the ostensible certainty of income in Robusta sales and the consumer market -- a consumer market made visible by quantifying the growing rate of Robusta consumption worldwide. Another Ho Chi Minh City based trader suggested that even if the transition was positive, "it is difficult to convince so many farmers in central highlands to grow Arabica" because outreach to thousands of one-two hectare small family farms is impractical at best.

Despite the risks involved, many producers and traders alike agreed in principle that it would be a positive move for the Vietnamese coffee industry in a holistic sense but difficult to implement and undoubtedly add more risk to an already risky venture. Coffee producers are susceptible to global price fluctuation, rust disease spreading throughout Latin American coffee producing countries, unpredictable rainy seasons in Vietnam, and the risk involved in negotiating coffee contracts with collectors and foreign companies. The inherent danger in the global coffee industry – the volatility of the market but also the fragility of the species and complicated nature of fruit processing engenders risk simply by working with coffee. Becoming a “successful” coffee farmer, trader, or exporter requires careful management of risk and uncertainty.

Catherine Ziegler's (2007) work on risk in the fresh flower industry explores "the way knowledge, innovation, and vertical networks...help middlemen to balance risk and reduce uncertainty in the specialty chain and increase their economic and communicative power" (2007:165). What is useful here is the notion of uncertainty as a condition and the ability of Vietnamese coffee producers, middlemen, and the local industry "experts" to balance risk and reduce uncertainty not by increasing their "economic and communicative power" but rather by utilizing economic and communicative power through social networks. In the Vietnamese coffee industry, these social networks consist of producers, exporters, traders, and numerous international actors. These networks are significant because the way that knowledge about risk is deemed legitimate (or not) and perpetuated within and across social networks holds immediate implications for everyone involved.

Annelise Riles (2000) understands "The Network" as a "set of institutions, knowledge practices, and artifacts thereof that internally generate the effects of their own reality by reflecting on themselves" (2000:3). Of course, there are multiple networks at play in the Vietnamese coffee industry. Bureaucratic official international networks consist of the World Bank, USAID, and the international certification agencies working with these organizations to regulate the quality and quantity of coffee as it emerges on the market. Although these networks, in their attempt to regulate the coffee industry, ultimately and unwittingly create new ways to assume and challenge risk on the ground via social networks. They render risk productive.

In April 2011 I attended a two day workshop at a small rundown hotel in Đà Lạt, Lâm Đồng. *Quản lý rủi ro giá cà phê*, (managing risk and coffee price) was organized by the World Bank and designed as a risk management training course. The aim was to alleviate risk related to price fluctuations in the coffee industry. Unlike many coffee related events and conferences in Ho Chi Minh City, this event was attended solely by Vietnamese coffee traders, collectors, investment bankers, and (Vietnamese) certification scheme representatives.<sup>22</sup> With the exception of a few Ho Chi Minh City based commodity traders, all participants were from the south-central highlands region -- Buôn Ma Thuột, Bảo Lộc, Gi Linh, Đà Lạt, -- and I recognized many familiar faces from other coffee seminars and training events.

Despite the prevalence of small farms and nearly one and a half million coffee producers in Vietnam, those with the privilege of attending these workshops tend to circulate regularly and overlap with each other several times each year. When I arrived at the workshop, about twenty of the roughly forty participants were catching up over coffee, fruit, and pastries, complaining about the quality of the instant coffee on offer. Hoang, my ticket to nearly all of the formal coffee events I attended, introduced me to Tuan, a local banker responsible for many of the agricultural loans distributed in Đà

---

<sup>22</sup> Conferences, workshops, and seminars in Ho Chi Minh City tend to attract Southeast Asian regional coffee investors, traders, and agronomists as well as government officials from Hanoi.

Lạt.<sup>23</sup> He was attending the workshop to learn more about the climate of risk in the coffee industry and to develop a stronger "coffee vocabulary" for potential clients. When the workshop began, I found a seat in the back of the small conference room next to Tuan.

Steve, the first speaker in the opening session, was the World Bank Agriculture and Rural Development coordinator. He began by explaining that Vietnamese coffee is gaining a trademark in the world market and because risk and price fluctuation remain ever present, the World Bank has paid increasing attention to Vietnam. Steve claimed that price is only one of the risks in commodity production and a broader understanding of risk is required to unravel why there are "losses in coffee" — e.g. a company that was once in the coffee industry is no longer because of risk — by prioritizing risk. He proudly related that the *first* Washington D.C. agricultural risk management team supply chain project in Southeast Asia happens to be about coffee in Vietnam. The opening speech seemed intent on empowering the room of participants, in generating a palpable hype about Vietnam's coffee industry. Steve went on to define "risk" (*rủi rỏ*), "uncertainty," and "constraint" as the World Bank perceives these terms. He contextualized risk into two dimensions: historical risk and future risk. In other words, from the World Bank's perspective, when attempting to explore "default risk" or

---

<sup>23</sup> The Agriculture and Rural Development sector of the World Bank issued an official Vietnam coffee sector report in 2004. In a brief section on credit availability, the document states that there are “nearly US\$170 million in open loans to farmers with at least 25 percent classed as non-performing” (Giovannucci, Lewin, Swinkels, and Varangis 2004:xi).

"reputation risk" one must understand both the historical and future dimensions of that risk. For example, Vietnam is the largest exporter of Robusta coffee in the world but the quality is sometimes inconsistent or "borderline exportable."<sup>24</sup> He posed questions to the audience: how might quality propose a risk to Vietnam's coffee reputation and how is this risk historically situated? What degree of uncertainty exists for the future of Vietnamese reputational risk? Steve argued that one important way to mitigate risk is to engage in hedging and futures contracts to offset potential losses in a given harvest.

His presentation continued for the better part of an hour as he offered the World Bank's assessment of the risk facing the Vietnamese coffee industry after their two week jaunt around the country, "meeting everyone in the industry." He concluded by outlining the purposes of the workshop: to "learn how to manage risk through future options, applications of coffee cooperatives, understanding development and change as it relates to the coffee value chain analysis, and improving competitiveness and sustainability, and advising MARD." This was a tall order to fill but Steve seemed set on exploring it all during the three day seminar. As the audience clapped for Steve and the floor opened up for a question and answer session, Long, a trader for a Singapore based company with an office in Ho Chi Minh City leaned over me to tell Tuan that "no one understands hedging, no one has knowledge of that kind of trading...the risk is not in hedging, the risk is a lack of knowledge." Tuan nodded and encouraged him to raise his hand and make the

---

<sup>24</sup> The phrase "borderline exportable" was used by Steve, I believe in reference to a recent spate of coffee that did not meet sufficient export standards.



comment aloud. Long laughed, as if this was impossible and a rhetorical comment that could never be understood nor addressed by Steve because "this is Vietnam."

In recognizing that "this is Vietnam," Long reminds his fellow participant that they are on the same page, utilizing the same resources, and facing the same risks as each coffee harvest approaches. This also suggests that a familiar intimacy with Vietnam as a place, the inner-workings of agricultural production and exchange that span far beyond the expertise of a two-week long risk assessment project. As the training course wore on small group work designed to address specific coffee risk case studies shifted from scripted World Bank questions and case studies to personal anecdotes and conversations. Groups discussions honed in on experiences with risk on individual farms, individual and collective goals for particular coffee growing communities throughout the province, and hopeful visions for Vietnam's coffee future. The World Bank failed to successfully implore the dozens of participants to engage in hedging for the time being. The participants, however, reconnected with their colleagues, exchanged their thoughts on successful and not so successful coffee experiments and trials and their own respective interpretations of "*rủi rỏ*," thus creating their own local "risk management" seminar and vision for future harvests.

Risk-taking is productive in the Vietnamese coffee industry precisely because it sustains the market and renders it knowable and manageable for coffee farmers and traders. If understanding risk is only possible through "total knowledge" (See Douglas and Wildavsky 1982:3), participating in risk management seminars does not achieve this.

The development of local coffee knowledge networks that at once challenge institutional definitions of risk and define it in new ways, however, brings Vietnamese coffee farmers and traders one step closer.

*Bitter Gourds, Complicated Webs*

The rainy season is usually in full force by May, especially in the south-central highlands. Mid-2011 was different. The consistent farm-drenching downpours had not yet arrived. Lâm Đồng was sunny, dry, and exceedingly temperate. The coffee industry was abuzz, wondering what might happen if the rainy season came too late or lasted into what would normally be the beginning of harvest. Many farmers had signed time sensitive production contracts with local processing facilities and wanted to know more about the repercussions of a late delivery. One afternoon, I was sitting at a shady cafe near the city center of Đà Lạt with Hoang, chatting about the latest coffee gossip and

spike in global Arabica prices.<sup>25</sup> This is when he extended an offer to participate in the two day "training of trainers" seminar arranged by Noah, an American representative of the Rainforest Alliance, 150 kilometers south in Bảo Lộc. I gladly accepted his invitation and a week later made the two and half hour trip south. The fine details of the seminar, attendees, Noah, and the training center itself are the subject matter of Chapter 3. What emerged, however, from the spaces in between the formal training schedule, focus groups, and auditing documents is an illuminating local discourse about risk and the future.

It was late morning on the first day of the training course and we had just finished a tour of the ACOM FTC— a soon to be a fully operational farmer field school with seminar rooms, dormitories, and a variety of "coffee conditions" for local farmers to study. The ground, steamy with afternoon heat, encouraged most of the twenty participants to take an early lunch break. Hoang and his long time colleague, Dung,

---

<sup>25</sup> I understand coffee "gossip" to be a general form of discussion about coffee news whether the source is a national daily newspaper, word of mouth, blog, or personal observation. I use the term loosely, in a colloquial sense not situated in the linguistic anthropological research on gossip and rumor. The gossip at this particular ethnographic juncture, related to the rainy season, posited various authoritative voices and discourses as reasonable explanations for the dearth of rain and the potential implications. This regular "coffee gossip" sometimes materialized in the form of a rumor with specific ideas about what was going to happen during the harvest or in the following production season. Although gossip sometimes referenced individuals or companies ("Starbuck is in Vietnam this week" – "Starbuck" being the colloquial term for "Starbucks Coffee Company") it was often seemingly innocent and observational in nature with weather being a regular and highly accessible topic of conversation enabling historical and experiential contexts to shape the direction of gossip. For a full and recent anthropological discussion on the descriptors "rumor" and "gossip" see Paz (2009).

however, fell behind the group as we began the long walk back to the entrance of the facility. I slowed my pace to stroll alongside them, ready to ask questions about the day and their impressions of the training course. Reminded of the degree to which coffee is entrenched in their lives -- that is, coffee is not merely a career for them but something of a hobby and passion -- they suddenly stopped walking. Hoang pointed out the dearth of shade trees for much of the coffee and the poor irrigation system that did not take into account the slight slope of the hillside. Dung noticed a citrus tree and explained that many citrus trees are prone to a disease that can devastate a coffee farm in its entirety. They joked about taking out the sample audit form again and performing a "true audit."

A moment later we came across a particularly sad seeming Arabica coffee tree with brown, dried up leaves, pest ridden bark, and no promise of healthy cherries come harvest. Hoang pointed and exclaimed "*tê tua xơ mướp!*" Dung barreled over in laughter. When the laughter subsided I carefully confessed that I had no idea what "*tê tua xơ mướp*" meant. After much difficult to follow deliberation between the two, Hoang slowly explained:

I do not know how to say this in English. It is more like an expression. You know how some words or ideas do not translate? It is like that. You know the bitter melon? The one that is in soup? But the inside of the bitter melon, before you cook it. It is like that, if you chop it open. Like a web, a complicated web.

I made another confession. "I'm sorry Hoang but I still don't understand the expression!" Dung chimed in. "The bitter melon is so complicated inside that you want to die. Like this tree. But not just the tree. Like coffee in Vietnam. Understand, no?" While I had a vague sense of the expression for the moment and made a mental note to bring it up again later, I realized that the Vietnamese coffee industry is always phức tạp (complicated). Like the inside of the bitter melon, it is so complicated you do not know where to start and how to end. It is risky and uncertain. It is risky in part because of the external variables — the disease on the citrus tree, the slope of the hill, the rainy season — and although some of these external variables can be mitigated or are thought to be easily mitigated, many of them are outside a structured framework for "risk management."

*Tê tua xơ mướp* is literally the loofah like innards of a gourd. It is an expression occasionally used by farmers to express concern over something terrible or to indicate exhaustion. The way Dung explained the expression — "the bitter melon is so complicated inside that you want to die" — is a combination of both. The sickly coffee tree is terrible and represents a lack of knowledge related to Arabica cultivation — windbreaks, shade trees, cover crops, disease — or perhaps a lack of resources. Dung and Hoang know this but speculate that not all producers have this intimate knowledge of Arabica cultivation and its differences with Robusta. It is terrible that perhaps producers do not have this kind of knowledge but equally terrible that the push for Arabica encourages production without proper implementation of infrastructure and training. The situation is exhausting because Dung and Hoang, as employees of a major coffee export

company and the government respectively, know what it takes to produce Arabica and feel as if they could successfully cultivate it if they wanted to. But they also hold the belief that there is not a big enough market for Vietnamese Arabica coffee to offset the costs of a transition and subsequent production. It is exhausting because the industry is just as complex at the local level as it is at the global level. It is exhausting to see the potential in an Arabica tree wither in the face of fungal growth and compost pathogens. And it is disconcerting because the care of one tree can speak volumes about the larger industry, access to knowledge about coffee cultivation, and micro/macroscopic risks.

The conversation between Dung and Hoang was representative of many conversations I had throughout my fieldwork. There was undoubtedly coffee gossip at every event, informal or not but this gossip sometimes creates a space for conversation and speculation about the state of the industry on any given minute in any given day. As seen above, there is a Vietnamese "coffee circuit" of actors who overlap at annual events and intersect on a regular basis as they pass through major production areas to inspect a crop of coffee for quality or meet an incoming buyer. The social network of the coffee circuit enables Vietnamese coffee actors to develop their own discourse about risk and uncertainty about the industry or a particular aspect of it. Because these social networks often convene in the shadow of a larger institutionally organized events, discourse about risk and speculation circles widely.

Dung and Hoang illustrate one construction of risk and subsequent attempt at mitigation. I wondered what would happen to our conversation about the sick coffee tree.

Would Hoang and Dung bring it up again? Would they share the anecdote with their fellow training participants? Later that night at another common social occasion for Vietnamese coffee actors (sharing beer, grilled meat, and even more coffee gossip), “tê tra xơ mướp” did indeed resurface. Not only was the sick coffee tree brought back to life in conversation but the stories tacked between the causal relationship between knowledge exchange (or a lack thereof), troubled coffee cultivation, and potential solutions that can be enacted daily by local farmers.

The communicative efforts of this small coffee social network but also the recognition of Vietnam's power in the global industry —a power to influence the happenings within the industry that is at once perceived and real —helped alleviate any worry for the moment. As images of the sickly coffee tree faded away with each beer, the conversation turned to investment schemes and branding opportunities — the face of the Vietnamese coffee future. With a full day of training beginning at dawn, a mere six hours away, the conversation wrapped up with one final reminder from Hoang. The spectrum of coffee quality allows for anything and everything in between “poor quality” and “high quality.” Risk is potentially mitigated by intimately knowing the coffee market in its full capacity and willingness to find a buyer, somewhere. For now at least, there is always a role for Vietnamese coffee in the global industry.

### *Networks of Risk*

Throughout my time in the Vietnamese coffee industry but especially with Hoang and Dung, I was told stories about the complicated nature of coffee. Like a bird's eye perspective on the bitter melon, coffee itself is often described as complicated (*phức tạp*). Of the dozens of coffee producers I crossed paths with in the south-central highlands, none of them perceived the coffee industry to be straightforward or without considerable risk. Many producers expressed their frustration by illustrating the disconnect between the coffee on their small house hold plots and the coffee collectors who will ultimately purchase their ripe cherries during harvest at the market price.<sup>26</sup> An experienced farmer explained that even if she knows what the price of coffee is, geographic and environmental limitations and the practicality of transporting heavy sixty-two kilogram bags of coffee weighs heavy on producers. As one woman expressed to me:

Sometimes a collector will buy my coffee but sometimes I want to know what the price is [price the collector receives] at the factory. So maybe I will walk to the factory but that is very difficult. I worry that I am not getting a fair price...and I worry that even if I check the price by text message and it is different [from what the collector offers], what can I do?

There is an obvious power relationship between producer and buyer in these exchanges but the way her community and other coffee communities mitigate these risks

---

<sup>26</sup> Of course, not all coffee producers sell directly to collectors but many small villages in the Lang Bian Mountain range north of Đà Lạt operate largely on a small farmer-collector-processing facility trajectory.



calls on the legitimacy and authority of knowledge sources beyond the individual and even the community. The risk she expressed relative to her community and life far from the city center of Đà Lạt is a risk that reflects a degree of uncertainty not about the concrete price of coffee but rather the exchange between producer and collector. Ziegler's (2007) argument that uncertainty is necessarily a relative condition and one that can be mitigated by vertical networks and innovative techniques" is an apt description of recent permutations in the Vietnamese coffee knowledge network (2007:165).

The farmer quoted above along with many of her neighbors and coffee producing friends expressed concern over price ambiguity but developed innovative mitigation techniques that draw upon the networks and techniques Ziegler writes of. Coffee producers in more remote areas did not necessarily have the advantage of comparison shopping for a buyer unless their production area is already contractually connected to large scale buyers. One way for these producers to counter low prices or seeming inaccuracies in quoted prices is to access authoritative sources for global and local prices. Through an active social network, small coffee producing communities could share the latest price, sent daily to their mobile phone by one of several coffee price "hotline" services.

I was first introduced to the coffee price hotline in the spring of 2010. I met Tung Bảo Lộc. He moved north to the coffee producing region with his family, from Vũng Tàu in 1995 when the price of coffee and land was affordable enough to make a substantial investment. His family helped him purchase a four-hectare plot of land and with little

background in agriculture and no background in coffee, Tung taught himself to farm. I met Tung at the crest of a vast tea farm and after exchanging formalities, traveled down a snaking motorbike path to his plot of coffee. As we walked between flowering trees, I asked him what it was like in 1995, having less access to local and global prices and how he stays informed about the ebb and flow of coffee prices now. He pointed to his head and said “headache” (đầu đau). He pulled out his battered Nokia phone to show me the daily text message hotline for the coffee market:

Ngay [day]: 16/10/2010

LD [London Futures Exchange]: 1,651/+1

NY [New York Mercantile Exchange]: 186.4/-1.2

Daklak [Dac Lac province]: 29.000

LamDong [Lam Dong province]: 29.000

GiaLai [Gia Lai province]: 28.900

DakNong [Dak Nong province]: 28.900

Tieu: [pepper] 68.000

To subscribe to the hotline one simply had to send a generic text message to a designated phone number. The service was free save the cost of the initial text message (approximately three cents). Although there are numerous services, Tung subscribed to one he heard about from a coffee farming friend. The message, generally received at 5:00 in the morning, provided the daily trading price for the London Future's Market and

the New York Coffee Exchange as well as the average price for green coffee in a particular province and the average national price of pepper. There was also a daily price report on TV that farmers and investors could follow:

See little sister? The price of coffee is high right now (29.400đ/kilo). I think I will make a lot of money this harvest. If the price changes tomorrow, do not worry because I follow everyday and it seems steady. If something happens in some other country, I will hear about it and know what to do. The television report will help me understand what to do. I will ask my friends who have internet and we will find out about it.

Despite the headache of deciphering ever shifting market prices, Tung was aware of the resources for coffee farmers such as himself and his network of colleagues. By studying the global price of coffee, Tung bolstered a safety web for potential coffee crises, planning for the future, and setting himself up for successful bargaining with a local collector when harvest begins. He also connected himself to thousands of coffee producers and their network of knowledge across the central highlands region.

Consuming coffee knowledge in Vietnam is integral to making profit and mitigating risk. The ostensibly paltry daily text message connected producers across the region vis-a-vis social network formation in response to uncertainty about selling price.

The decade following the crisis allowed for an introspective consideration of how to do it “successfully” this time around. When asked if he had implemented any changes

in his production or management of his farm the disconsolate producer above commented that now he pays more attention to the global industry and prices but also thinks about backup plans (growing tea for example) in an effort to lessen the risk associated with another crisis. Rather than speculate about responsibility or even future accountability, this particular producer focused on coping mechanisms and planning for the immediate and long term future.

Beyond the text message service, online blogs, websites, and forums became spaces of risk mitigation and network formation. While coffee price hotlines were easily accessible and affordable to anyone with a mobile phone, those with internet access turned regularly to several coffee focused websites, listservs, and forums. One particularly popular and widely accessed website is "*Giá Cà Phê*," (Coffee Price). The website itself was impossibly vast in scope, compiling all coffee related news from local and national newspapers and trade magazines with independent pages designated for agriculture, coffee market information, global coffee models, related cash crops, and coffee culture in Vietnam.

The page is linked to a coffee price hotline and provides up to the minute market prices, also pitting those against the US dollar and the value of gold. Each page contains related articles and each article contains an extensive comment section. It is, in short, an anthropologist's dream — for nearly two years coffee industry members exchanged dialogue about a government stockpiling initiative such that the flurry of comments lasted all day and night at times. At any given time during my fieldwork there were dozens of

active members online at *Giá Cà Phê*. Coffee news would occasionally appear in national daily newspapers Thanh Niên and Tuổi Trẻ and more regularly in agriculture, economic, and business periodicals. *Giá Cà Phê* compiled these articles and added additional pieces composed by members of the coffee industry who shared their perspectives on coffee in Vietnam and the global industry.

Throughout my fieldwork I spoke to Hoang and numerous Lâm Đồng coffee farmers at length about *Giá Cà Phê* and later met the proprietor of Y5Cafe, a similar, although smaller blog and coffee news source. Many farmers explained that the ability to have up to date information on interprovincial prices and global trading prices helped them formulate trading and budgetary plans for the season. Hoang suggested that knowing the price in London helps to keep a system of accountability running smoothly in Vietnam. When the price is low and risk palpable, accessible information encourages conversation and debate about risk mitigation. The interactions between *Giá Cà Phê* forum users such as “*nông dân một nữa* ("one more farmer") and "*café vỉa hè*" ("streetside cafe") took on nuanced meaning as they discussed the most effective techniques for price negotiation, the challenges and risks of the forthcoming rainy season, and the proposed plan for Arabica development.

*Giá Cà Phê* participants consumed a very particular kind of knowledge as broadcasted daily by local and national newspapers but also redefining it and circulating it through their own comments and engagement with each other. The knowledge gleaned

from a coffee price hotline does not subject a coffee producer to the global market but rather provides a way to influence it and speculate on a daily basis.

### *Emerging Risk*

During my extended fieldwork period, for all of the discourse about preparing for a future "crisis" or "the next crisis" in the coffee industry, I rarely heard mention of a "Vietnamese coffee crisis" -- one situated locally and outside the context of a global crisis. In June 2013 I took a brief follow-up research trip back to the south-central highlands and reconnected with many of my former acquaintances and research contacts from the industry. Upon a brief reintroduction to Buôn Ma Thuột, the "coffee capital of Vietnam," and several employees of Cafe Control Buôn Ma Thuột and Trung Nguyen Coffee (the first and largest franchise in Vietnam) I half-jokingly asked the broadest question possible. "What's new in Vietnamese coffee?" Their response was much more pointed and serious than I expected. "So many companies are bankrupt. Out of money. Dead already" (*chết toi rồi*).

In a very recent development, small local coffee export firms found themselves unable to repay significant loans and without a surge in global coffee prices and production, many simply went bankrupt and ceased export operations. Coffee gossip was no longer about the weather. Attention turned to the complicated nature of debt and bankruptcy and possible solutions for local exporters, including Vinacafe, one of the major Buôn Ma Thuột state-owned coffee corporations. Following my brief trip, a slew

of national newspaper articles surfaced with headlines such as "Coffee Turns Bitter for Vietnam Exporters" ("Coffee Turns Bitter" 2013), "Crippling debts and bankruptcies brew Vietnam coffee crisis" ("Crippling Debts" 2013), and "Coffee Business Reveal Debt Woes" ("Coffee Business" 2013).

The headlines framed the crisis in such a way that Vietnam was the sole victim and not necessarily the rest of the coffee producing world. Farmers in Guatemala would not suffer from Vietnamese exporters' loan defaults. The global supply of coffee would not suffer as economists speculated that Indonesia and Brazil would pick up any Robusta sales or production lost on Vietnam. The risk of another crisis was suddenly real but in a microscopic sense that did not create a national culprit. The risk(s) perceived post-crisis (2001-2002) may help to situate how risk, now, in 2013-14 is culturally constructed, appropriated, and challenged. What can be gleaned from these new developments in relationship to a specific moment in Vietnamese agricultural development and the complex tension between Vietnamese coffee as a success story and failure (or as both simultaneously)? How does risk and uncertainty produce a particular kind of consumer and domestic market (and marketing)? Perhaps risk and crisis propel the local industry forward as various formulations of mitigation materialize in the domestic sphere of coffee.

While the implications of the new coffee crisis remain to be seen, a new discourse about risk has already emerged, circulating in Vietnamese coffee gossip, reinforcing the significance of local coffee networks and flexible understandings of risk and the future.

The Vinacafe offices may be empty but production is strong, potentially reaching record breaking levels in the forthcoming 2013 harvest (October - December), and local coffee exchange networks such as the participants on Giá Cà Phê seem optimistic in the face of frustration. What happens to the bankrupt Vietnamese export companies is beyond the control of many small farmers and traders who deal primarily with foreign export companies and uncertainty about the future abounds. Risk, however, remains productive as it circulates widely across coffee networks, becoming a mitigator in its own right as the new coffee crisis is questioned with skepticism in the central highlands of Vietnam.



## CHAPTER 5

### BRANDING VIETNAM: DOMESTIC COFFEE CONSUMPTION IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

*“Bạn đọc thân mến, Hãy cùng trải nghiệm những cảm xúc của bạn về hương vị cà phê Tây Nguyên! Bạn có muốn khám phá vùng đất Nam Tây Nguyên với đậm đà hương vị cà phê, của nông nàn đất đỏ bazan, của chan chứa tình người phố núi? Đặc sản Dalat Info trong kỳ này sẽ giới thiệu đến bạn những bài viết về các vùng đất của Tây Nguyên hùng vĩ, giàu tiềm năng; sẽ cùng nhau chia sẻ những cảm xúc rất Đà Lạt khi thưởng thức ly cà phê ngon cùng tiết trời se lạnh của Phố núi!” (Dalat Info 2011:7)<sup>27</sup>*

In April 2010 I sat in a small well known cafe in Đà Lạt, waiting for the morning rush of farmers, welders, construction workers, shop owners, and elderly gentlemen out for a morning walk to settle down. The cafe had been a staple in town for over thirty years — a family run operation serving 5.000 đồng (approximately twenty-five cents) *cà phê sữa nóng* (hot coffee with sweetened condensed milk) or *cà phê đen* (black coffee) in small tea glasses at fractured wooden benches and tables. It was a bare bones operation with little more than coffee, cigarettes, and a steaming container of *bánh bao* (steamed buns) that inevitably sold out by sunrise. The volume of patrons served and the turnover from 4:30 in the morning until the rush ended around 6:30 was incredible. The owner, Mr. Tran, employed his seven children and prided himself on sourcing local coffee,

---

<sup>27</sup> Dear readers! Let’s experience your feelings for the Central Highlands coffee flavor! Do you wish to discover the Southern Highlands, its tasty coffee flavor, fiery red basaltic soil, love for the mountain town? This special issue of Dalat Info will introduce you to all of the articles about the potential lands of the Central Highlands, the feeling of Đà Lạt when enjoying a delicious cup of coffee in the cold weather of the mountain town.

roasting in his home, and preparing coffee on a stovetop with a sock filter rather than a standard flimsy metal phin. The cafe was not meant for lingering or conversation. The phin would take too long and the patrons were usually in a rush to start work. It was coffee as utility — a warm caffeinated start to a foggy mountain morning.<sup>28</sup> Speaking to Mr. Tran’s only son when the crowd cleared out he explained:

it’s very cold in the morning when they [patrons] go to work and I think the coffee helps keep them warm and also, the coffee here [at this cafe] is so good and famous...also cheaper than other new cafes by the lake. I like preparing coffee in the morning because of the fragrance (thom) and it’s what my family always does.

The history and resilience of Cafe 171 but also Mr. Tran’s commitment to carefully selecting his favorite local coffee farms and plant varieties speaks to a larger trend of origin focused coffee branding in the coffee producing region of Vietnam. Cafe 171 did not package or sell its coffee in the same manner as franchise powerhouses such as Trung Nguyên or Vinacafe but nonetheless remained a significant site of local efforts to — wittingly or not — brand Vietnamese coffee for local consumption.

In his exploration of *The Gift* (Mauss 1990[1925], Daniel Miller (2001) suggests that “some commodities have been around long enough to represent tradition, stability, and history” (2001:109) in reference to “long-term brands” and their continuity. This chapter explores the possibility that newly branded commodities can also represent

---

<sup>28</sup> For an interesting and general historical discussion on coffee as a utilitarian labor inducing drug see Clarence-Smith and Topik 2003.

tradition, stability, and history through a concerted collective effort to revalue their worth. I argue that concerted efforts to brand Vietnamese coffee are part of a larger ambitious project to project Vietnam's success as a powerful, global coffee producer, in part as a response to the culprit discourse and in part as a way to explore coffee not as a legacy of French colonialism but more-so a re-appropriation of coffee as distinctly Vietnamese. Domestic coffee companies achieve this by connecting coffee to specific Vietnamese traditions, stability within the industry, and history, however recent.

*“A Coffee Worthy of Deneuve<sup>29</sup>” — Colonial Nostalgic Foreign Expectations*

Domestic Vietnamese coffee consumption has been covered by western media for well over a decade and the content often smacks of colonial nostalgia and resistance to the inevitable entrance of Starbucks (which incidentally happened 2013). A 2001 *New York Times* piece titled “Hanoi’s Cafe Society” is part travel guide, part romanticism as she details the traditional cafe scene in Hanoi:

“The day a visitor to Vietnam can order a grande-skim-no-whipped ca phe chon to go is probably years away, yet the character of Hanoi's cafe society is changing. Since 1996, dozens of Trung Nguyen coffee shops, a nationwide chain that is Vietnam's first domestic franchise, have sprung up all over the capital. They are decorated with photos of pop stars, and packed day and night with trendy

---

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Deneuve is a French actress who starred in *Indochine* (1992) which was shot on scene in Vietnam. She portrayed the owner of a French colonial rubber plantation in Indochina circa 1910s-20s.

students. Hanoians complain that shops that used to serve only coffee are forced to diversify their menus and offer other things -- lime soda or coconut juice, for example -- just to compete. But smaller, traditional cafes still abound, and they are a good way for a first-time visitor to experience a bit of Vietnamese daily life. So, when you're wandering through Hanoi's Old Quarter and the afternoon heat and the haze and the traffic become too taxing, go in. Let your eyes get used to the light, and find a table with a good view of the street. There are family photographs on the walls, perhaps a battered Happy New Year! calendar. And the usual display of the cafe's wares are on the counter at the back: cans of Coke and Sprite stacked in neat pyramids, bottles of Tiger beer, jars of Ovaltine, big glass jars of apricots in syrup, Vinataba cigarettes, Juicy Fruit and Doublemint gum in their little revolving display case. A child may bring a menu. Then you can make your request: "Xin cho toi mot ca phe sua da" -- one milk coffee, please. For a respite, with a coffee worthy of Deneuve." (Zoepf 2001)

I quote at length to demonstrate the exaggerated and fabricated idea of what constitutes a "traditional" cafe in Vietnam. According to Zoepf, a traditional Hanoian cafe owner must now serve coconut juice to compete with the diversified trendy Trung Nguyên and the traditional cafe harkens back to Deneuve's days sipping coffee at Cafe 252 during the filming of *Indochine*. In her oppositional binary, Trung Nguyên is anything *but* a traditional Vietnamese cafe. In Buôn Ma Thuột, however, Trung Nguyên is the epitome of a traditional Vietnamese cafe and one with history and stability that reclaim the origin

of Vietnamese coffee to be Vietnam rather than a French colonial import. The branding efforts of Trung Nguyên capture a particular moment in Vietnam as the rapid economic growth of the past two decades stagnates and anxiety spawns new ambitions that encourage both foreign capitalist investment and domestic brand development.

### *Branding in Vietnam's Domestic Coffee Industry*

In using the term “brand” throughout this chapter, I build upon Robert Foster’s (2007) work on consumer-brand relationships and the value engendered by them. He contends that there is an emotional attachment (even love) for the brands we consume. Companies are aware of this and thus create emotional experiences for their consumers. I address two distinct types of brands. First, the local, ostensibly unlabeled brands of local cafes — their name spread primarily by word of mouth and reputation, recognizable to many local consumers in a respective town (Đà Lạt in this case). Second, I explore what Foster (2007) might refer to as “corporate brands” — those recognized on a wider scale with extensive distribution networks, perhaps nationally and internationally. For Foster (2008), the creation of value is necessarily tied to the circularity of production and consumption: “value creation occurs as a product circulates through multiple hands of both producers and consumers” and “helps make sense not only of how brands ideally connect persons (consumers) with things (products), but also how the management of this connection opens up possibilities for political action on the part of both corporations and consumers” (2008: xviii). The value created by local brands in the Vietnamese coffee

industry is simultaneously economic, social, and cultural. Local brands adorn billboards around town, sponsor festivals, or simply exist in the cafes that provide reliable spaces for social engagement, music, photography lessons, and wistful entrepreneurial dreaming.

Manning and Uplisashvili (2007) approach brands and branding from a semiotic and socialist-postsocialist perspective in Georgia. They suggest that in Georgia,

“brands are potentially Janus faced, now indexing a figure of the producer, now a figure of the consumer. They are Janus faced in another way as well, in that they are somewhere between the material world of commodities and an immaterial world of signs, representing an incursion of the material category of “wealth” into the “immaterial” world of signs.” (2007:629)

In Vietnam too, particularly with the development of local franchises, branding maps onto producer and place but also consumer and what the brand wants consumers to be.

Trung Nguyên for example created a starkly nationalistic brand, indexing the soil of the central highlands, the farmers who live in Buôn Ma Thuột, and the CEO’s personal past in the region as marketing tactics. The consumer can be Vietnamese, foreign (though usually the former), or both but is always consuming a taste of the central highlands.

Sometimes they are indexing themselves as modern, trend savvy urban Vietnam and at other times they are simply interested in consuming a product marketed by Trung Nguyên as one of Vietnam’s greatest success stories.

The “politics of expertise and connoisseurship” influence the creation of value in commodities and the ways in which these interlocutors construct their own imaginings of

the social life of commodities (See Appadurai 1986). In both types of branding, coffee is linked to a particular origin — Buôn Ma Thuột, Lam Ha, or even Vietnam — as the distinctive coffee traits of these places are narrated, defined, and normalized. On a local scale, these brands are the realization of success stories, aspirations, and challenges to the large scale multinational corporations that purchase ninety percent of the coffee produced in Vietnam. On a corporate scale too, brands such as Trung Nguyên seek to take onus over Vietnamese coffee from multinational corporations such as Nestle. I spoke to numerous local coffee and cafe entrepreneurs who sought to develop their brand locally in an effort to pronounce Vietnamese coffee as reputable, legitimate, and high quality. These sentiments echo widely in the south-central highlands where coffee production is on the rise and ubiquitous small cafes seek to develop loyal followings of local customers in lieu of precarious contracts with multi-national corporations.

Coffee is an excellent commodity to think about value creation and branding with precisely because of the diverse ways it is consumed and the production and export politics that surround it in Vietnam. The ways in which local and corporate coffee brands sell their product and represent themselves reveals a complex picture of tradition, change, and multifaceted negotiations with development and foreign investment in the region but also how consumers appreciate, alter, and consume brands. In her recent work on money and value in Hồ Chí Minh City, Allison Truitt argues that “daily life and ritual practices... are neither immune to nor isolated from broader transformations in the international political economy and global finance” (Truitt 2013:13). In citing Michael Callon et. al.’s

classic work on the “economy of qualities” (Callon et. al. 2004), she suggests that “economies of quality are especially visible in developing countries such as Vietnam, where consumers have not yet been disciplined by branding as a form of authentication” and in the context of motorbike production in Japan (compared to China or Vietnam) “by privileging the place of production rather than the brand itself, Vietnamese consumers drew on their local knowledge of production and position in the global economy” (Truitt 2013:106). In the central highlands, Vietnamese coffee consumers draw upon their knowledge of coffee varieties (Robusta or Arabica for example) and the geographic particularities of the south-central highlands. In places like Đà Lạt and Buôn Ma Thuột, widely recognized national franchise brands and the growing popularity of international brands such as Starbucks hold little influence as coffee entrepreneurs negotiate their future via local branding efforts.



## *Coffee in the South-Central Highlands*

“*Dalat is a singular, unexpected, almost incoherent place.*” (Jennings 2011:1)<sup>30</sup>

Cafes and coffee consumption take many forms in Vietnam — cà phê cóc, cà phê vỉa hè, cà phê bệt, (coffee sitting like a frog on a small chair at a cheap cafe, streetside coffee, coffee sitting on a cardboard mat on the ground) in addition to the new bookstore cafes in city centers, Starbucks, Trung Nguyên, Highlands Coffee, and the local cafes in the south-central highlands.<sup>31</sup> Although ethnographically situated primarily in the central highlands, this chapter argues that domestic coffee consumption and the associated branding efforts and narratives that accompany specific coffee and cafe brands are key to

---

<sup>30</sup> I had the pleasure of reading *Imperial Heights: Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indochina* (Jennings 2011) while conducting fieldwork in Đà Lạt and various surrounding south-central highland towns. Although I subjectively agree that Đà Lạt is indeed an “almost incoherent place,” (what place is coherent) the anthropologist in me sought to challenge this statement from the present and an ethnographically situated perspective. After nearly two years of fieldwork there, most of my local friends and research acquaintances from Đà Lạt and friends from elsewhere who had visited Đà Lạt with some regularity simply found the town to be *buồn* (sad) and *lạnh nhưng mà đẹp* (cold but beautiful). In the context of my research on coffee however, Đà Lạt was unexpected or peculiar at the very least. Sitting at Cafe 171 at 4:30 in the morning, warming his hands with the teacup sized shot of *cà phê sữa nóng* and gazing out onto the foggy and still street, one friend expressed his view on the special nature of cafes in Đà Lạt: “there’s no cafe like this in Sài Gòn, with this kind of culture (văn hoá) and romantic weather...and 5.000 đồng coffee.” Months later in Ho Chi Minh City, sitting in an upscale cafe in District 3 with the same friend, he said with longing “I miss the cafes in Đà Lạt...they were so peaceful in the rainy season and the coffee tasted so fresh.”

<sup>31</sup> I do not intend to generalize coffee consumption across the whole of Vietnam, knowing that coffee is, of course, not consumed universally or even at all in some regions of the country. With this in mind, much of the discourse about coffee in the context of agricultural development, production and consumption, and branding espouses various efforts to spread “coffee culture” across the nation from its origin in the central highlands.

understanding the larger picture of Vietnamese entrepreneurship and ambitions for the future.

A specific set of questions frames the ethnographic material in this piece. Why is there an effort to brand Vietnamese coffee in local settings and what underlying meaning and purpose fuels this effort for individuals and collective institutions? What do contemporary branding efforts suggest about the future dreams, aspirations, and hope of coffee entrepreneurs and where does the larger state of Vietnam fit into this vision? As the second largest coffee producer in the world, I would be remiss not to recognize and acknowledge the gravity and implications of the Vietnam's production level but as an anthropologist, I would be remiss not to recognize the diverse local forms of consumption and aspirations that are, for all intensive purposes, locally situated.

In examining the particular Vietnamese inflection of these entrepreneurial visions and ambitious branding efforts, this chapter considers the peculiar domesticity of coffee consumption in the south-central highlands, the way it manifests, and the ethnographic limitations of studying a commodity at once rhetorically celebrated and denigrated by state and international media alike. In her afterward to a recent edited volume on consumption and the middle-class in Vietnam, Elizabeth F. Vann writes that “in Vietnam's modern history...registers of distinction and taste have been anything but stable. Rapidly unfolding contexts of colonialism, war, socialism, and market reform have made for exceedingly fragile and often fleeting experiences out of which something that might be identified as a ‘Vietnamese middle-class lifestyle’ might be formed” (Vann

2012:159). Coffee consumption, particularly consumption cutting across regions of production such as Lâm Đồng and Đắk Lắk to urban city centers such as Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi is by no means an exception as cafes and consumption styles map onto local histories, complex socio-economic politics, and even distinctive regional cuisines and food preferences. This chapter also explores consumption through locally situated and national-cum-local branding efforts in the industry.

A vast majority of Vietnamese coffee is produced in Lâm Đồng and Đắk Lắk as the recent proliferation of cafes, local brands, and coffee showrooms in the region might suggest. Small districts on the outskirts of the major provincial cities now boast coffee farms that stretch to the horizon and attract the interest and investment of local, national, and multinational coffee companies. One small farm in Lâm Hà district, just a forty-five minute drive from Đà Lạt has gone from a semi-defunct and low yield farm with little recognition or attention from investors in 2009 to a high quality and specialty variety farm with investors from upscale cafes in Ho Chi Minh City and specialty distributors in Taiwan just last year. Of course there are less successful stories and instances of downright failure in the local coffee industry but the success stories fuel the ambitions of other local businesses and farm models across the province.

In Đắk Lắk, the main street running through the center of Buôn Ma Thuột is lined with coffee showrooms and cafes, each advertising their available coffee varieties and packaging. Occasionally, the “Coffee Tour” Jeep will make an appearance around town, advertising (to scant domestic tourists) the town’s slogan and agricultural pride: the

“Coffee Capital of Vietnam.” Far more conspicuous than the coffee consumption in Lâm Đồng, the coffee capital of Vietnam prides itself on volume and spectacle — the 2011 Vietnam Coffee Festival sought to break a world record for the largest cup of coffee ever served. Both provinces thrive on the coffee industry in both an economic sense — coffee production accounts for the livelihood of over one million farming families in these two provinces alone — and a cultural one as Vietnam brands itself as a coffee producing country with more to it than high volume industrial grade products.



Figure 5.1 — Coffee Tour Jeep, Buôn Ma Thuột

### *Origins of the Coffee Origin*

The subjective opinions and experiences of coffee consumers in the central highlands pointed to a larger trend of attention to coffee consumption style but also the origin of coffee — geographic region, varieties, and the potential relationship between a coffee farmer and a cafe. The extent of this trend’s visibility will be explored below through the

Vietnam Coffee Festival but it is more immediately visible in local cafes spattered intermittently across the south-central highlands. Coffee "origin" is an industry term (and an increasingly popular consumer term) that refers to the

geographic point of coffee production. Popularized by coffee franchises such as Starbucks, origin is often represented aesthetically through lavish packaging and perceived images of an origin and verbally through an "origin story" or narrative about the place of production. Paige West (2012) explores the implications of origin stories and images on consumers in the context of Papua New Guinea, arguing that western consumers engage in elaborate marketing projects that see "difference and authenticity as enduring and that values them above the idea that western ways should permeate places and peoples outside the West" and "this fantasy is grounded in a failure to understand that the social lives of people in Papua New Guinea, and places like it, have shifted and transformed radically over the past few hundred years" (West 2012:221).

Vietnamese coffee origins necessitate a deeper scholarly inquiry for several reasons: 1) Vietnamese coffee is consumed largely outside of Vietnam but often in unlabeled, soluble form with little or no recognition of the place of production, 2) Vietnamese coffee consumed domestically is often characterized by an origin story of either colonial origin or one of much more contemporary regional or national pride, and 3) recent attempts to brand Vietnamese coffee *as* Vietnamese are an amalgamation of origin stories and situated knowledges about the local and global coffee industry.

The ways in which local and corporate brands have developed in the south-central highlands speaks to a larger consumer consciousness that draws upon deep ties (both real and imagined) to histories of specific places, distinct tastes formed by local and global forces, and the circulation of preferences as foreign capital invests in some local coffee

farms but not others. In Đà Lạt in particular, local coffee entrepreneurs have made specific efforts to keep their brand local — to serve coffee from neighboring farms and to actively avoid instant coffee brands such as Nescafe and Trung Nguyên.

### *Local Branding and Consumer Consciousness*

Cafe 171 is one of many in Đà Lạt but only a few have managed to reach his local brand recognition on such a large scale. In the town’s center square, Hoà Bình, Cafe Tùng is another mainstay, its reputation circulated through the lore of folk singer Trịnh Công Sơn’s utilization of the space in the 1960s and more contemporary local artists and photographers who chat and share photos and photography techniques in the dark corners of the cafe. Much like Cafe 171, Cafe Tùng carefully selects and prepares local coffee according to specifications that “taste good to the people of Đà Lạt.” A young photographer who spent hours in Cafe Tùng sorting through his photo negatives and writing about his travels around the country explained that he

learned about photography here...the cafe is perfect for that because there is a tradition of artists who studied here and shared ideas and music...and the coffee is good and from local farms instead of Đắk Lắk or Nescafe...they [Nescafe] taste so artificial.

For more social occasions, to chat with friends, or to access free wireless internet, he walks down the street toward Hồ Xuân Hương lake to any number of cafes along “Cafe

Street” that serve a wider variety of drinks including *sinh tố* (smoothies) and *sôcôla* (chocolate served hot or iced).

I think Đà Lạt has a lot of coffee history and the cafes are different from my hometown [Nha Trang] and the city [Ho Chi Minh City]...like there is a friendly coffee community here and in the city it’s so loud and difficult to see, difficult to look at photographs and read...

At the start of my fieldwork, anyone who knew I studied coffee suggested that I visit Cafe Tùng or Cafe 171 because they serve “the most delicious coffee” in town and “everyone knows Cafe Tùng.”

Across the lake at the other end of town, the owner of Boss Coffee focused his efforts on introducing his specially roasted local coffee to Đà Lạt in espresso form, although a majority of his sales were more typical Vietnamese coffee drinks. He invited me to tour his small roasting facility where he kept his locally sourced coffee carefully divided by variety and explained that “most Vietnamese don’t know about espresso but the first time I tasted it I thought that it would be the best drink for Đà Lạt.” His vision, although never fully realized by the last time I visited him in late 2011, was to create a cafe space for “intellectual conversations” and perhaps live music and poetry but most importantly, good espresso, “like Italian style.” As a newer cafe venture (opening in 2010), Boss Coffee did not have the same brand recognition that longer standing local cafes celebrated. Yet Boss Coffee was widely recognized within the coffee industry for sourcing and roasting some of the “best local varieties” and focusing efforts on quality

and spreading ideas about different preparation methods to the community. A desire for greater consumer consciousness about coffee quality in Đà Lạt drove the ambition of Boss Coffee's owner but the local brand loyalty to Đà Lạt's more historic cafes attracted more customers.

Local branding efforts in the Vietnamese coffee industry and consumer consciousness may be read as a response to negative international press about Vietnamese coffee. In the early days of the current Vietnamese coffee boom, discourse about coffee consumption *in* Vietnam took a rather uncouth tone. In *Fortune* magazine, following the 2001-02 global coffee crisis a journalist explained that

there are various stages in the development of a coffee culture...it's no good offering an Asian consumer a very high-priced coffee to draw him to coffee as a beverage. You have to offer him something he can afford and appreciate, and then as that coffee culture develops you start to introduce more-sophisticated products. (Stein 2002)<sup>32</sup>

Farmers and cafe owners who weathered the crisis and recovered after 2002 were well aware of the culprit label placed on Vietnam and the supposed inability to develop a domestic coffee drinking culture which was seen as one potential solution to the crisis.

One local coffee farmer told me that she knew about the crisis and the blame on Vietnam

---

<sup>32</sup> Immediately following the onset of the 2001-02 global coffee "crisis," *Fortune* published an article quoting a Nestle representative on the possibility of expanding the specialty market to Asia as one potential solution for recovery. His quote is a crystal clear imagining of what Asian coffee consumers are "capable" of drinking.



but also remembered local cafes thriving like nothing had happened. She explained that it was “important to know that somewhere people are still drinking coffee and they are drinking it here [in Đà Lạt].” With frequent reports in local and national media about the crisis, knowledge about the coffee industry drew attention to the coffee producing regions and the implications for local cafes and farmers. A year after the crisis, Trung Nguyên launched its most successful coffee product, G7 instant coffee, and marketed their public slogan “khơi nguồn sáng tạo” (inspire creativity).

*National Branding and Conspicuous Consumption: “The No. 1 Coffee in the World”*

In Buôn Ma Thuột, the “coffee capital of Vietnam,” Trung Nguyên is the most recognized and consumed brand of coffee. As Vietnam’s first franchise, their packaged coffee products extend throughout the country. Trung Nguyên cafes in city centers, especially Ho Chi Minh City, cater to a wide swath of socio-economic classes. Trung Nguyên has recently invested in a global expansion project by franchising cafes in Japan, Thailand, and Singapore. In a 2013 interview with the coffee industry’s leading trade magazine, *Global Coffee Review*, Trung Nguyên CEO Chairman Vu stated that he wants their:

coffee to carry with it to the world the fascinating cultural values of the people and the land that produced it...to put not just Vietnamese coffee, but Vietnam’s coffee culture, on the map...to make the Dak Lak province an international role

model of sustainable and community-friendly economic development. (Grimand 2013)

Trung Nguyên and dozens of domestic brands from the coffee producing region have established new origin stories, mapping place onto product and creating informal networks of traceability through increased specificity on packaging. A package of “the leading Vietnamese coffee” (Trung Nguyên G7 instant coffee) is made from “the choicest coffee beans from Vietnam’s legendary basaltic region.” Domestic tourists can participate in an official Đắk Lắk coffee tour (*tour học hỏi, khám phá và trải nghiệm về cà phê*) — “a tour to discover and spend time learning about coffee” to visit the Trung Nguyên “coffee village” and “world coffee museum.” Increased attention to origin coupled with a rapidly growing domestic coffee consumption rate have encouraged interest in how coffee is grown, processed, and ultimately, where it comes from.

Even from a distance, international coffee media networks are focusing on domestic coffee consumption in Vietnam. Trung Nguyên has been in the spotlight as chairman Vu graced the cover of *Global Coffee Review* and has been cited in numerous coffee trade magazines since 2011.<sup>33</sup> Writing about the opening of Trung Nguyên and its subsequent branding and brand mimicking Elizabeth F. Vann (2006) states that

when the first Trung Nguyên cafe opened in HCMC, it was just one more in a city filled with coffee shops. Unlike most of their East and Southeast Asian neighbors,

---

<sup>33</sup> The March/April 2012 edition of *Global Coffee Review* espoused the mission of Trung Nguyên and chairman Vu. The magazine is the most widely read coffee trade magazine and is distributed primarily within coffee industry communities.

Vietnamese are serious coffee drinkers. Young men and, increasingly, women spend time in coffee shops and at sidewalk cafes drinking ca-phe sua (strong coffee mixed with sweetened condensed milk). Residents began to take notice of Trung Nguyên Coffee shops after several branches—each displaying the company name and distinctive red arrow logo—appeared around the city. The novelty of a chain of coffee shops, as well as their upscale appearance and standardized products, gained special interest among the city’s middle class, especially office workers and college students. (Vann 2006:292).

Vann notes that the success of Trung Nguyên does not come at the expense of other smaller cafes that have mimicked their brand nor vice versa. The brand was popular, perhaps more-so since Vann published her article, but so are many other local brands that also claim their origin in the central highlands. Trung Nguyên had become something beyond local as cafes and the Trung Nguyên village distribute glossy brochures about the Trung Nguyên vision.



Figure 5.2: *Global Coffee Review* March/April 2012 cover

During my last visit to Buôn Ma Thuột, Đắk Lắk, Chairman Vu’s hometown and the birthplace of his brand, I visited the “Trung Nguyên Coffee Village” – a local tourist destination replete with a collection of East German coffee roasters, Pele and President Obama coffee bean portraits, and a meandering outdoor cafe that profiles each of the Trung Nguyên coffees available for purchase in great detail. The space was designed for domestic tourists and showcases a form of consumption that is at once global and local – regulated by both the norms of Vietnamese and global branding models. Conspicuous

consumption exists on several levels. The consumption of a brand name and a specific geographically linked origin story is obvious but the consumption of conceptions *regarding Vietnam* as a coffee producing country and a powerful entity within the global market, are much more difficult to tease out.

If there is an increase in attention towards a social recognition of coffee produced in Vietnam, there are vast implications for branding, legitimacy, and the global economy of value on a local scale. Coffee consumed on a daily basis, cafes frequented, and the conduits for coffee related knowledge are all increasingly visible forms of consumption in the south-central highlands. Attempts to brand local coffee and display these brands on a national stage at coffee festivals or roadside billboards, or ostensibly unbranded coffee sold at local cafes are all significant ways in which the everyday consumption of coffee illuminates the new modernity and hopeful aspirations of entrepreneurs in Vietnam. The intensification of daily coffee consumption and visions of a rich, Arabica producing country, however, do not necessarily represent a shift in the Vietnamese coffee landscape, rather elucidating preexisting coffee ambitions about Vietnam's role in the larger, global industry but also efforts to maintain local renowned cafes and brands.

The annual Vietnamese Coffee Festival in Buôn Ma Thuột, Đắk Lắk epitomized Vietnamese coffee visions. I attended the festival in March 2011 along with local residents, producers from the region, domestic tourists, traders from Ho Chi Minh City, and companies from around the world. The festival space stretched several blocks along the main drag in town with several performance spaces for anthropomorphized coffee

beans, ethnic minority “coffee song and dance,” and esteemed speakers. Much of the hype as well as national news attention to the festival surrounded football legend Pele’s appearance and speech as a Brazil-Vietnam coffee ambassador. Two weeks prior to the festival, Tuổi Trẻ announced that “health reasons” would prevent his travel. Attendees had to settle for live civet cats in cages, baskets of green coffee beans, sample robusta and Arabica trees, free beer, and luxury cars adorned with the Trung Nguyên logo.

The festival was undoubtedly a spectacle but also suggested a subtle display of competition between domestic and foreign branding – three dozen Trung Nguyên vans roamed the streets of Buôn Ma Thuật throughout the festival, distributing free samples, while Nestle staked out the largest booth with an impressive high definition television screen, speakers, and a coffee themed live dating show. There was a palpable energy at the festival and each booth had a grand vision for the future of Vietnamese coffee. No one spoke of the unexpected dip in the ever- fluctuating London future’s market price for Robusta earlier in the week. The festival was, of course, sponsored by Trung Nguyên. The spectacle and the excitement surrounding Vietnamese coffee illustrated the complex negotiation that takes place in branding the industry.

This past year, Vietnam surpassed Brazil to become the world’s largest producer of robusta coffee. Nestle – one of the largest purchasers of Vietnamese coffee – announced a new direct trade and coffee traceability initiative in the country. The first Starbucks café opened its doors in Ho Chi Minh City with Chairman Vu making a public statement about Starbucks and its potential competition with Vietnamese domestic

brands: “They sing great songs about sustainable development but at the end of the day, the return on investment is what they care about, they don’t grow coffee, do they? We do.” Criticisms focused on the taste profile of Starbucks and Nestle coffees, distinguishing Trung Nguyên as the “taste of Vietnam.” While Chairman Vu focuses on developing a high quality coffee recognized internationally as born and bred in Vietnam and opening cafes in target Asian markets in Singapore and Japan, a majority of Trung Nguyên coffee is still consumed locally, in Vietnam.

Trung Nguyên is a relatively new franchise yet they have managed to construct and successfully market their brand as something distinctly Vietnamese — major foreign brands such as Starbucks do not have the experience of growing coffee in their own hometown. The branding efforts of Trung Nguyên are at least partially a response to global coffee branding efforts that largely ignore Vietnam as a major coffee producer. Of course, Trung Nguyên’s ability to open cafes in Singapore and sell their coffee in Asian grocery stores across the United States is enabled by Vietnam’s recent ability to export goods to the United States and establish franchises outside the border of the state.

### *Conclusions*

*“We need to construct an understanding of the future by examining the interactions between three notable human preoccupations that shape the future as a cultural fact, that is, as a form of difference. These are imagination, anticipation, and aspiration” (Appadurai 2013:286).*

On a recent visit to Buôn Ma Thuột in June 2013 I spoke at length to a longtime employee of Trung Nguyên about the success of the domestic brand and its recent attempts to increase advertising and expand their cafes — not long after Starbucks opened in Ho Chi Minh City in February 2013, a new upscale Trung Nguyên cafe opened not far down the street. He explained that

Trung Nguyên is still a major coffee company because more people know it in Vietnam for sure. Maybe only in Saigon and Hanoi do people know about Starbucks. If you go to any street in Buôn Ma Thuột, even small alleyways or the countryside, they have Trung Nguyên signs and umbrellas and cups. For sure. Maybe they sell local coffee from their brother's farm but they know Trung Nguyên and advertise it. It's the most famous brand in Vietnam I think.

This is just one perspective from someone admittedly involved with very company we spoke about but it remains, nonetheless, representative of the power of the brand and scope of its distribution. In Ho Chi Minh City perhaps the new Trung Nguyên cafe is meant to challenge Starbucks but in Buôn Ma Thuột it is meant to represent the local brand and its success in the region.

### *Moral Coffee Economies*

The increase in local and national branding is part of a larger moral economy in contemporary Vietnam that is at times driven by a desire to both challenge and embrace neoliberal development and ideals in the central highlands. This moral economy is



significant because it reminds us that economic behavior and actions are conscious decisions and in this site, conscious decisions informed by a nearly three decade long engagement with foreign investors and a strong sense of domestic and foreign consumer markets. Fischer (2014) argues that “while moral values reflect the accumulation of historical experience, they also orient people to the future, shape a sense of how things ought to be, define what *better* means, and influence social and economic behaviors” (2014:8).

In his discussion of “neo-geomancy” in urban Vietnam, Erik Harms (2012) argues that Vietnamese geomancy

rests on individual rights to private property but is situated within a political-juridical regime of laws and regulations that extends beyond the individual; it operates in terms of local cultural idiom but depends on economic relations of rights and responsibilities that are posed in universal terms. (2012:408)

I am intrigued by a post-reform political-juridical regime that frames individual choice but also larger processes of economic development and branding in Vietnam. In the coffee industry however, individual rights and economic choices operate in terms of universal economic relations of rights and responsibilities that depend on local cultural idiom and *thành thạo*. The regime, although operating under the rubric of a Vietnamese moral economy is not dependent on the constructs of global economies. The regime operates in terms of global economic trade and development norms that are dependent upon the circulation of local values and cultural idioms — short term economic gain (e.g.

a new motorbike), proprietorship (e.g. Buon Ma Thuot 1896), reputation (e.g. the number one coffee producer in the world).

Coffee consumption in Vietnam takes diverse forms but in the south-central highlands it remains somehow local despite the national and global reach of Trung Nguyên. In focusing ethnographic attention on local cafes and consumption in the face of national and global branding efforts, the success of local brand loyalty and consumer consciousness is rendered visible. There are, of course, ethnographic limitations to studying coffee, namely in its intangibility and constant movement. Anthropologists of commodities and their movement across time and place have addressed the difficulties and limitations of their respective projects (e.g. Bestor 2001 and West 2012) but a careful focus reveals the ways in which local consumers utilize coffee and its geographically situated history in the south-central highlands to foster dreams and ambitions. These dreams and ambitions are perhaps individual but also collective as Vietnam becomes further recognized as a global coffee mogul and the state caters to this title with concerted efforts to develop an imagined national brand: Vietnamese Coffee.

## CONCLUSION

### MERGING COFFEE WORLDS: CULTIVATING A NEW AND CRITICAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF INDUSTRIAL COMMODITIES

#### *Imagined Speculative Possibility*

In June 2013 I took a two-week return trip to Vietnam. I focused my energy on the Buôn Ma Thuột Coffee Exchange Center (BCEC) — the first of only two commodity exchange centers in the country. I had heard about the BCEC early on in my research. The trading floor opened in 2008 and was modeled after the highly successful Ethiopian Coffee Exchange (ECX) that had opened earlier that year. The idea behind the BCEC was to bring Vietnamese coffee trading up to a globally recognized standard of exchange complete with speculators, buyers, and a warehouse to store locally collected and soon to be traded coffee.

When I arrived for my prearranged meeting with the director of the BCEC, the gate to the complex was locked and the parking lot empty, save a few guard dogs napping in the sun. The security guard told me to wait as he made a phone call. The director pulled up a few minutes later and after formal introductions, took me on a guided tour of the facility. It was musty and damp with buckets collecting water from the dripping ceiling. The trading floor was quiet and it appeared as if the computers had not been turned on in ages. The offices and conference rooms were empty with the exception of one lone woman who was there to answer the phone and gain experience working at a

Ministry of Trade funded facility. Our interview ended abruptly after fifteen minutes when I asked a seemingly innocuous question: where are all of the traders? The director stood up, shook my hand and exclaimed: “I think I have answered all of your questions.”

The significance of this space as one specifically for coffee and its geographic location in the “coffee capital” of Vietnam reminds us of the promise and capacity of the domestic coffee industry to propel Vietnam’s reputation and earning potential forward in the larger global industry. It also reminds us, however, of the state of uncertainty (Boholm 2003) that informs risk mitigation within the contemporary Vietnamese coffee industry. The BCEC, funded by the provincial government and French development aid money was a failure of the state to engage with local perceptions of risk and by extension, experiential expertise about what works for Vietnam in the global coffee industry. Experiential knowledge and expertise has proven invaluable in navigating the market-socialist terrain of contemporary Vietnam where major multinational corporations buy massive volumes of coffee and international organizations and the state tell Vietnamese how to produce and sell it. Of course, local farmers and traders do not necessarily take these suggestions at face value. Instead, their tacit knowledge about the market and experience with crisis informs their decision making and the social ties they choose to establish with foreign investors.

The BCEC was a space of imagined speculative possibility but also concrete financial speculation. The latter captures the economic value of Vietnamese coffee and allows coffee producers to work directly with brokerage organizations who are ultimately

a conduit to the London International Financial Futures and Options Exchange (LIFFE). The former captures Vietnam's global capitalist imaginary surrounding coffee investment and wistful visions of the future industry. Yet five years after opening, the BCEC remains in disrepair with buckets of rainwater and echoes bouncing off the inanimate, mute computer consoles. This was certainly not the ambitious future imagined when the project was first conceived. The BCEC represents the anxiety and uncertainty of Vietnam's coffee future as the once remarkable economic growth stagnates.

*Toward A Critical Food Studies*

In trying to make sense of the relatively defunct BCEC I realized that on the surface, perhaps this was a failure — a failure of the state (as the BCEC was indeed funded by the government) to modernize, to not achieve a bustling, loud, and world renowned trade floor such as the ECX. But this failure was also an achievement to maintain the coffee industry as a high volume powerhouse as a majority of those working within it (the producers) have always sought to do. The BCEC could not (or was not ready to) become the ECX because Ethiopian Arabica coffee is an entirely different cash crop. A broad sweeping generalization about “coffee” or a global coffee industry does not do justice to the complexity of coffee species and varieties, nor the way they are valued, traded, and consumed.

In her 2013 “Letter from the Editor,” Caldwell (2013) summarizes the primary point of Julie Guthman's keynote address at a recent food studies conference:

“whether critical food studies is really about the food or whether it is about “something else.” As became clear, both in Professor Guthman’s remarks and in the papers and conversations that followed, while food may be a starting point, critical food studies is really about the “something else” that becomes revealed through food” (2013:2)

One possible “something else” that is lacking in critical food studies is the examination of distribution networks, middlemen, and industrial food systems that may have little to do with comestible items themselves. In this dissertation, I have also explored the meaning behind certification systems in Vietnam. They do not operate as conduits for social justice or even higher farmer premiums. Guthman’s (2004) work challenges the assumption that organic and alternative food movements are a response and opposition to industrial agriculture, arguing that “existing structural conditions of agriculture potentially limit organic farming’s success” (2004:21). Certification schemes in Vietnam do not necessarily limit the potential for alternative possibilities in Vietnamese agriculture but they do enable local producers to exercise their own experiential expertise in decision making and prioritizing needs and ambitions within the industry. Certification schemes also serve as a marker of modernity, global connection, and accountability, despite their role in facilitating and maintaining unadulterated industrial production per the demand of international investors. This dissertation shed light on the ways Vietnamese expertise and knowledge about global coffee are a counter-narrative to the institutionalized and discursive conventions about what sustainable coffee production is and should be —

paradoxical conventions about a global coffee consumer base and what constitutes quality.

Vietnam plays the coffee game quite well and at times, drives the industrial industry, influencing price through MARD stockpiling initiatives and maintaining its high volume production levels. And yet, Vietnamese coffee is still largely invisible among coffee consumer bases around the world and stigmatized to varying degrees as a producer of poor quality Robusta. The question among many people I have worked with over the past eight years is not “how can we improve Vietnamese coffee quality” but rather, “when will Vietnamese coffee quality be recognized?” The recognition of quality has little to do with a quantitative measurement but rather the qualitative and rhetorical recognition of Vietnamese coffee as having certain quality properties. As I have demonstrated, coffee branding efforts have come a long way in Vietnam but still relegated, for the most part, to domestic consumer markets. Nestle and Folgers are yet to espouse the qualities, characteristics, and origin stories of Vietnamese coffee on their packaging.

Because there is no codified definition of what constitutes coffee quality in Vietnam and the regulatory framework that assesses quality operates according to the logics of market-socialism, quality itself is perpetually undergoing a shift in meaning. The value of quality coffee is also shifting as investors work with local farmers, traders, and brokers to identify the standards of Vietnamese coffee and the standards of their consumers. The ambiguity surrounding the concept of quality and the possibility that quality and quantity are not mutually exclusive concepts — that high quality *can* be high

quantity — encourages the high production level and justifies the reality of their industrial grade operation.

Though Vietnamese coffee is still not branded and stamped “made in Vietnam” in the primary spaces of consumption. But quality linked to origin, taste, and the emotional connection that comes with branding is emerging in new domestic markets of consumption. The prominence of Trung Nguyên and the origin stories that draw upon the economic development story of the central highlands (notably in a way that actively ignores ethnic minority land displacement) authenticate the experience of Vietnamese coffee production and consumption for local and global markets. Vietnamese coffee is becoming visible not through recognition on the global market but as a space with a domestic coffee consumption tradition that is no longer linked solely to a French colonial past.

I have attempted to unveil and make Vietnamese coffee visible not solely because it fills a void in consumer knowledge — Vietnamese farmers, traders, and exporters value their product and hope these consumers do too — but it addresses a void that might bring together critical food studies and the anthropology of commodities, namely through research on industrial commodities. Critical food studies in particular has turned toward fetishizing alternative food movements, urban gardening, specialty commodities, and small scale farmers and a decidedly western focus that at times, undermines the complexity of the power relationships in *all* aspects of food and commodity production. This is not to say that there are not meaningful and deeply informative studies of



industrial commodity production (e.g.) but that both critical food studies and anthropological scholarly communities are not mutually exclusive and may benefit from a new dialogue considering alternative methodological and theoretical approaches to the study of comestible commodities.

Of course, the Vietnamese coffee industry is not about the coffee at its core and a study of coffee production focused solely on certification schemes or agricultural production misses the nuance of industrial cash crop production — a complex landscape of multiple knowledges, successes, failures, and ambitions. By shifting the focus of commodity (namely coffee) studies away from coffee itself, a deeper analytical terrain is revealed as is a new way to conceptualize expertise and the power relationships and inequalities between industrial commodity producing places and their consumers.

*Future Directions: Penetrating New Markets — Vietnamese Coffee in America*

After nearly eight years researching the Vietnamese coffee industry I saw my first branded Vietnamese coffee package in the U.S. (outside of Trung Nguyên at Asian grocery stores) on December 19, 2013 at Trader Joe's in Riverside, California. Resting neatly in a package of three coffees, to the left of the Peruvian and Kenyan coffees, there it was. Bold and branded in all capital letters, "VIETNAMESE COFFEE" superimposed over an image of a 2,000 đồng Vietnamese stamp with a dragon. The coffee was part of a Trader Joe's "Cultivated Coffee Collection for the Armchair Traveler." The anonymous coffee buyer on their package explained that:

finally, we traveled to Vietnam. Known primarily for its Robusta beans, Vietnam has more recently become a player in the high quality Arabica bean arena. We've given these Vietnamese Arabica beans a dark roast, which produces a cup of coffee that's rich and pleasantly smoky, without any bitterness.

Several other coffees in circulation at Trader Joe's contain Vietnamese coffee according to the fine print on the back of the packaging ("Joe's Dark Blend" for example is a mix of beans from Vietnam and Papua New Guinea) but this was the first time they had offered a clearly branded Vietnamese coffee, complete with an origin trip story information about the industry. This is not exactly what MARD had in mind. Nor was it the vision of Chairman Vu. But in a general sense, this is what some voices in this dissertation have sought for the industry as a whole — country of origin branded recognition of a quality Vietnamese coffee on an international scale.

One possible future direction to expand on this research is to take it full circle to the points of consumption beyond Vietnam. Vietnamese products are everywhere. In the U.S., the least likely place in the world to find Vietnamese products merely twenty years ago, Vietnamese communities have the option to consume coffee, rice, and fish sauce produced *in* Vietnam whether branded as such or not. The history of Vietnamese diasporic food-ways in the U.S. is fraught with political tension over long standing anti-communist proclivities. So too is the relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam in the context of a complicated and ongoing process of "normalization" (See Schwenkel 2009; Laderman 2013). These tensions materialize as Vietnamese communities carefully

choose goods without ties to the Vietnamese state owned enterprises. The availability of Vietnamese goods from Vietnam rather than Vietnamese style goods from neighboring Southeast Asian countries transpired only recently. In December 2001 the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement went into effect after a five year negotiation and drafting period. The influx of Vietnamese goods to the U.S. and more significantly, the *possibility* of an exchange of goods serve as one conceivable reconciliation point between the U.S. and Vietnam.

Whereas a generation of immediate post-war Vietnamese may view products from Vietnam with persistent skepticism, a younger generation of Vietnamese Americans tack between two homes, circulating goods, tastes, and economic capital. These circulations have engendered new modes of conspicuous consumption in the U.S. Circuitously, Vietnamese entrepreneurs are able to move between home and a new place of economic promise, exploring a post-U.S. housing bubble and financial crisis landscape where suddenly, investment opportunities are possible. This dissertation examined the influx of foreign capital from large multinational corporations into the Vietnamese coffee industry and the invisibility of Vietnam in the coffee consuming sphere. I soon hope to examine the visible outflow of Vietnamese products, namely coffee, to the most politicized consumption point possible — California.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anagnost, Ann

2004 The Corporeal Politics of Quality. *Public Culture* 16(2):189-208.

Appadurai, Arjun

2013 *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. New York: Verso.

1996 *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

1986 *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*: New York: Cambridge University Press.

Benson, Peter, et. al.

2014 *Markets as Contrivances: A Dialogue*. In *Cash on the Table: Markets, Values, and Moral Economies*, ed. Edward F. Fischer, pp. 21-28. Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press.

Bestor, Theodore C.

2001 *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bland, Ben

2011 *Aroma of Coffee Profits Lures Vietnam Farmers*. *Financial Times*. April 19, 2011. Available: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0ba14df44-6aa2-11e0-80a1-00144feab49a.html#axzz2uCBfUyJq>.

Boholm, Asa

2003 *The Cultural Nature of Risk: Can There be an Anthropology of Uncertainty?* *Ethnos* 68(2):159-178.

Bourdieu, Pierre

1984 *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Boyer, Dominic

2008 Thinking through the Anthropology of Experts. *Anthropology in Action* 15(2): 38-46.

Caldwell, Melissa

2013 Editor's Letter. *Gastronomica* 13(4).

2009 Introduction: Food and Everyday Life after State Socialism. In *Food and Everyday Life in the Post-Socialist World*, ed. Melissa L. Caldwell, pp. 1-28. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Callon, Michael, Cecile Meadel, and Vololona Rabeharisoa

2004 The Economy of Qualities. *In The Blackwell Cultural Economy Reader*, ed. Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, pp. 58-80. Oxford: Blackwell.

Clarence-Smith, William Gervase and Steven Topik

2003 The Global Coffee Economy in Africa, Asia, and Latin America 1500-1989, eds. William Gervase Clarence-Smith and Steven Topik. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Coffee Business

2013 Coffee Business Reveals Debt Woes. *Viet Nam News*. August 14, 2013. Available: <http://vietnamnews.vn/economy/243463/coffee-businesses-reveal-debt-woes.html>.

Coffee Turns Bitter

2013 Coffee Turns Bitter for Vietnam Exporters. *Thanh Nien*. July 4, 2013. Available: <http://www.thanhniennews.com/2010/pages/20130704-vietnam-coffee-industry-threatened-of-massive-collapse.aspx>.

Condominas, George

1977 *We Have Eaten the Forest: The Story of a Montagnard Village in the Central Highlands of Vietnam*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Crippling Debts

2013 Crippling Debts, Bankruptcies Brew Vietnam Coffee Crisis. August 14, 2013. *Voice of America*. Available: <http://www.voanews.com/content/reu-debt-bankruptcies-vietnam-coffee-crisis/1730013.html>.

Dalat Info

2011 Chào mừng Lễ Hội Cà Phê Buôn Mê Thuật lần thứ 3 - 2011. Dalat Info 33.  
March 2011.

Dang, Thanh Ha and Gerald Shively

2008 Coffee Boom, Coffee Bust, and Smallholder Response in Vietnam's Central Highlands. *Review of Development Economics* 12(2):312-326.

Daviron, Benoit and Stefano Ponte

2005 The Coffee Paradox: Global Markets, Commodity Trade, and the Elusive Promise of Development. New York: Zed Books.

Doane, Molly

2010 Relationship Coffees: Structure and Agency in the Fair Trade System. *In Fair Trade and Social Justice: Global Ethnographies*, eds. Sarah Lyon and Mark Moberg. Pp. 229–257. New York: New York University Press.

Douglas, Mary

2002[1966] Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo. New York: Routledge.

Douglas, Mary and Aaron Wildavsky

1982 Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technological Environmental Dangers. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Douglas, Mary and Baron Isherwood

1996 The World of Goods: Toward an Anthropology of Consumption. New York: Routledge.

Dunn, Elizabeth E.

2009 Afterward: Turnips and Mangoes. *In Food and Everyday Life in the Post-Socialist*. Melissa Caldwell, ed. Pp. 206-222. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

2005 Standards and Person-making in East Central Europe. *In Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

2004 Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- 2003 Trojan Pig: Paradoxes of Food Safety Regulation. *Environment and Planning* 35:1493-1511.
- Faces of Coffee  
2004 Nestle S.A. Public Affairs: Vevey, Switzerland.
- Fford, Adam and Stefan de Vylder  
1996 *From Plan to Market: The Economic Transition in Vietnam*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Fischer, Edward F.  
2014 Introduction. *In Cash on the Table: Market, Values, and Moral Economies*, Edward F. Fischer, ed. Pp. 3-17. Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press.
- Fortunel, Frederic  
2000 *Le Cafe au Viet Nam: del la colonizacion a l'essor d'un grand producteur mondial*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Foster, Robert J.  
2008 *Coca-Globalization: Following Soft Drinks from New York to New Guinea*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.  
  
2007 *The Work of the New Economy: Consumers, Brands, and Value Creation*. *Cultural Anthropology* 22(4):707-731.
- Giovannucci, Daniele, Bryan Lewin, Rob Swinkels, and Pano Varangis  
2004 *Vietnam Coffee Sector Report*. World Bank: Washington D.C.
- Global Coffee Review  
2012 *Resolving the Coffee Paradox*. *Global Coffee Review*. March/April 2012.
- Graeber, David  
2011 *Consumption*. *Current Anthropology* 52(4):489-511.
- Grimard, Christine  
2013 *Establishing Vietnam's Buon Ma Thuot as the Coffee Capital of the World*. *Global Coffee Review*. October 2013.

Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson

1997 *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

1997 *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Guthman, Julie

2004 *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California*. Berkeley: University of California, Press.

Harms, Erik

2012 Neo-Geomancy and Real Estate Fever in Postreform Vietnam. *Positions* 20(2): 405-434.

2013 Vietnam. *In* *Figures of Southeast Asian Modernity*, eds. Joshua Barker, Erik Harms, and Johan Lindquist, 46-49. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Hickey, Gerald

1982 *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, 1954-1976*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Hull, Matthew

2012 *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jaffee, Daniel

2007 *Brewing Justice: Fair Trade Coffee, Sustainability, and Survival*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jennings, Eric T.

2011 *Imperial Heights: Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indochina*. Berkeley: University of California, Press.

Johnson, Kay

2001 Brewing Discord: As Coffee Prices Plunge, Tension Between Settlers and Hill Tribes is Percolating in Vietnam' Hills. *Time Asia*, 157(13). Available: <http://www.time.com/time/asia/biz/magazine/0,9754,103845,00.html>. Accessed numerous times: October 2007-February 2014.



Jung, Yuson

2009 From Canned Food to Canny Consumers: Cultural Competence in the Age of Mechanical Production. In *Food and Everyday Life in the Post-Socialist World*, ed. Melissa L. Caldwell, pp. 29-56. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

K'Dam, H'Wen Nie

2007 Coffee Production in Vietnam's Central Highlands. In *Coffee in Vietnam's Central Highlands: Historical, Anthropological, and Economic Perspectives*. Thanh Phan, H'wen Nie K'Dam, and Ikemoto Yukio, eds. Pp. 1-37. Ho Chi Minh City: Vietnam National University Press.

Kuit, Michiel, Don M. Jansen, and Nguyen Van Thiet

2004 Manual for Arabica Cultivation. Cam Lo, Quang Tri: Tan Lam Agricultural Product Joint Stock Company.

Laderman, Scott

2013 A Fishy Affair: Vietnamese Seafood and the Confrontation with U.S. Neoliberalism. In *Four Decades On: Vietnam, the United States, and the Legacies of the Second Indochina War*. Scott Laderman and Edwin A. Martini, eds. Pp. 183-206. Durham: Duke University Press.

Latour, Bruno

2000 When Things Strike Back: A Possible Contribution of Science Studies. *British Journal of Sociology* 5(1):105-123.

Latour, Bruno and Steve Woolgar

1979[1986] *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Lewis, David and David Mosse

2006 Theoretical Approaches to Brokerage and Translation in Development. In *Development Brokers and Translators: The Ethnography of Aid and Agencies*. David Lewis and David Mosse, eds. Pp. 1-26. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, Inc.

Li, Tania

2007 *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Lyon, Sarah

2010 A Market of Our Own: Women's Livelihoods and Fair Trade Markets. *In* Fair Trade and Social Justice: Global Ethnographies, eds. Sarah Lyon and Mark Moberg. Pp. 125-146. New York: New York University Press.

Lyon, Sarah and Mark Moberg

2010 Fair Trade and Social Justice: Global Ethnographies, eds. Sarah Lyon and Mark Moberg. New York: New York University Press.

Malkki, Liisa H. and Allaine Cerwonka

1997 Improvising Theory: Process and Temporality in Ethnographic Fieldwork. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mauss, Marcel

2001[1924] The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies. London: Routledge.

McElwee, Pamela

2008 "Blood Relatives" or Uneasy Neighbors? Kinh Migrant and Ethnic Minority Interactions in the Truong Son Mountains. *Journal of Vietnam Studies* 3(3): 81-116.

Miller, Daniel

2001 Alienable Gifts and Inalienable Commodities. *In* The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture, ed. Fred R. Myers. Pp. 91-118. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

Minh, Ho Binh

2011 Vietnam Coffee-Price at Record High, Discounts Shrink. *Inexim Daklak*. March 2, 2011. Available: <http://www.ineximdaklak.com.vn/portal/content/view/177/31/lang,vietnam/>. Accessed: April 14, 2011.

Mitchell, Timothy

2002 Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity. Berkeley: University of California, Press.

Miyazaki, Hirokazu

2003 The Temporalities of the Market. *American Anthropologist* 105(2):225-265.

- Mosse, David  
2005 *Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*. New York: Pluto Press.
- Ong, Aihwa and Stephen J. Collier  
2005 Global Assemblages, Anthropological Problems. *In* *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problem*. Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier, eds. Pp. 3-21. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Paz, Alejandro  
2009 The Circulation of Chisme and Rumor: Gossip, Evidentiality, and Authority in the Perspective of Latino Labor Migrants in Israel. *American Anthropologist* 19(1):117-143.
- Polanyi, Karl  
1957 *The Great Transformation*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Popkin, Samuel L.  
1979 *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ponte, Stefano and Benoit Daviron  
2005 *The Coffee Paradox: Global Markets, Commodity Trade and the Elusive Promise of Development*. New York: Zed Books.  
  
2001 Behind the Coffee Crisis. *Economic and Political Weekly* 36(46/47):24-30.
- Reichman, Daniel  
2011 *The Broken Village: Coffee, Migration, and Globalization in Honduras*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Riles, Annelise  
2000 *The Network Inside Out*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Roseberry, William  
1996 The Rise of Yuppie Coffees and the Reimagination of Class in the United States. *American Anthropologist* 98(4):762-75.

- Salemink, Oscar  
2003 *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850-1990*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Schwenkel, Christina  
2009 From John McCain to Abu Ghraib: Tortured Bodies and Historical Unaccountability of U.S. Empire. *American Anthropologist* 111(1):30-42.
- Schwenkel, Christina and Ann-Marie Leshkovich  
2012 How is Neoliberalism Good to Think Vietnam? How is Vietnam Good to Think Neoliberalism? *Positions* 20(2):379-401.
- Scott, James C.  
1998 *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Simon, Bryant  
2009 *Everything but the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Smith, Julia  
2010 Fair Trade and the Specialty Coffee Market. *In Fair Trade and Social Justice: Global Ethnographies*, eds. Sarah Lyon and Mark Moberg. Pp. 28-46. New York: New York University Press.
- Stein, Nicholas  
2002 Crisis in a Coffee Cup. *Fortune*. September 9, 2002. Available: [http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune\\_archive/2002/12/09/333463/](http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2002/12/09/333463/).
- Strathern, Marilyn  
2000 Introduction: New Accountabilities *In Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics, and the Academy*. Marilyn Strathern, eds. Pp. New York: Routledge.
- 2000 The Tyranny of Transparency. *British Education Research Journal* 26(3): 309-321.
- Tan, Stan B-H.  
2000 Coffee Frontiers in the Central Highlands of Vietnam: Networks of Connectivity. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 41(1):51-67.

Toshihiko, Shine

2007 Development History of Vietnam's Central Highlands and Montagnards: A Story of Mr. K'Pheng, A Coffee Millionaire. *In* Coffee in Vietnam's Central Highlands: Historical, Anthropological, and Economic Perspectives. Thanh Phan, H'wen Nie K'Dam, and Ikemoto Yukio, eds. Pp. 52-73. Ho Chi Minh City: Vietnam National University Press.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt

2005 Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Truitt, Allison J.

2013 Dreaming of Money in Ho Chi Minh City. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Ukers, William H.

2010[1935] All About Coffee. Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing.

USDA

2013 Global Agricultural Information Network Annual Vietnam Coffee Report. May 21, 2013. Available: [http://gain.fas.usda.gov/Recent%20GAIN%20Publications/Coffee%20Annual\\_Hanoi\\_Vietnam\\_5-21-2013.pdf](http://gain.fas.usda.gov/Recent%20GAIN%20Publications/Coffee%20Annual_Hanoi_Vietnam_5-21-2013.pdf). Accessed June 15, 2013.

Vann, Elizabeth F.

2012 Afterward: Consumption and Middle-Class Subjectivity in Vietnam. *In* The Reinvention of Distinction: Modernity and the Middle Class in Urban Vietnam, ed. Van Nguyễn-Marshall, Lisa B. Welch Drummond, and Daniele Belanger, pp. 157-170. New York: Springer.

2005 The Limits of Authenticity in Vietnamese Consumer Markets. *American Anthropologist* 108(2):286-296.

Vietnam Factsheet

2013 Nestle. Available:<http://www.nestle.com/asset-library/documents/media/news-and-features/2013-july/facts-figures-nestle-vietnam-en.pdf>

Vietnam's Lam Dong

2009 Vietnam's Lam Dong to Double Arabica Plantation Areas by 2015. Thanh Nien. September 8, 2009.

- Watts, Michael  
2011 Development Ethnographies. *Ethnography* 2(2):283-300.
- Weiss, Brad  
1996 Coffee Breaks and Coffee Connections: The Lived Experience of a Commodity in Tanzanian and European Worlds. *In* *Cross-Cultural Consumption*. D. Howes, ed., pp. 93-105. New York: Routledge.
- West, Paige  
2012 From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive: The Social World of Coffee from Papua New Guinea. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Williams, Raymond  
1976 *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Winkels, Alexandra  
2012 Migration, Social Networks and Risk: The Case of Rural-to-Rural Migration in Vietnam. *Journal of Vietnam Studies* 7(4):92-121.  
  
2008 Rural In-Migration and Global Trade: Managing the Risks of Coffee Farming in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. *Mountain Research and Development* 28(1): 32-40.
- Yukio, Ikemoto  
2007 Coffee Crisis in Vietnam. *In* *Coffee in Vietnam's Central Highlands: Historical, Anthropological, and Economic Perspectives*. Thanh Phan, H'wen Nie K'Dam, and Ikemoto Yukio, eds. Pp. 120-137. Ho Chi Minh City: Vietnam National University Press.
- Zaloom, Caitlin  
2004 The Productive Life of Risk. *Cultural Anthropology* 19(3):365-391.
- Ziegler, Catherine  
2007 *Favored Flowers: Culture and Economy in a Global System*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Zoepf, Katherine

2001 Hanoi's Cafe Society. New York Times. September 9. Available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/09/travel/hanoi-s-cafe-society.html?pagewanted=2>.  
First Accessed: November 11, 2007.