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Training to Become Entrepreneurs: Vietnamese Migrants in the Nail Business in
Southern California

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

Master of Arts

in

Southeast Asian Studies

by

Violette Hoang-Phuong Ho

June 2020

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Christina Schwenkel, Chairperson

Dr. Sally Ness

Dr. Weihsin Gui

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2020

The Thesis of Violette Hoang-Phuong Ho is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Training to Become Entrepreneurs: Vietnamese Migrants in the Nail Business in
Southern California

by

Violette Hoang-Phuong Ho

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Southeast Asian Studies
University of California, Riverside, June 2020
Dr. Christina Schwenkel, Chairperson

Since the first group of refugees who fled Vietnam after the Fall of Saigon in 1975 arrived in the United States, Vietnamese migrants have become significantly involved in the expansion of the ethnic business of professional nail care. As the numbers of new migrants from Vietnam who find employment in the nail industry continue to grow, this study seeks to understand the experiences of first-generation immigrant Vietnamese who went through a training program to become professional manicurists. This research draws on data collected from interviews with 22 manicurists-in-training and six months of ethnographic fieldwork at a major beauty college in Southern California. I argue that the manicurists-in-training understood their future work in the nail industry as a form of independent entrepreneurial labor rather than contracted labor, which allowed them to move freely within the ethnic business network of nail care around the United States for their entrepreneurial work as manicurists.

As these manicurists-in-training went through the program, they carved out new forms of entrepreneurial selves, which were discussed in terms of liberation from exploitation and compliance with the law. These two understandings of the self work in

tandem within the state's neoliberal project, which seeks to produce subjects capable of self-government and self-realization (Rose, 1999, p.142). The training program was designed to produce compliant entrepreneurial subjects while also promising freedom in the form of autonomy (Rose, 1999). The program's training practices were not about beauty but about "rendering moral" (Leshkovich, 2012), or producing good, disciplined and compliant entrepreneurial migrants. The training site showed tension between the state's neoliberal entrepreneurial project, (which aimed to produce self-sufficient and liberated individuals who also comply with the law) and the Vietnamese migrants' cultural sensibilities (which are linked to socialist-oriented collectivist understandings of the self). Students mitigated this tension by realigning the neoliberal logics of individual self with the collectivist understandings of the self exemplified in Vietnamese moral parenthood. This research offers an understanding of the stakes for migrants in engaging in an "ethnic business" such as the nail care profession.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

On March 14, 2020, the day after the United States President Donald Trump declared a national emergency to combat the COVID-19 outbreak, I was rushing over to Southern California Beauty College (SCBC) to grasp my graduation certificate and a sealed transcript before the school ceased its operation. A word about the school closure had spread among current and former students of SCBC as they were also trying to graduate from the school before it shut down. As I entered SCBC, the office was quiet with only two staff members, down from four, helping students. Five students were there, including me. All of us were trying to get our diploma, and more importantly, the sealed envelope containing our transcriptions (which the California Board of Barbering and Cosmetology (State Board in short) required students to bring along as proof of training to take the license exam.) The main lecture room was almost empty. Only one teacher, Janice, was around. I saw Ninh come to the front talking to Janice. Very few there, including the staff, wore facemasks or practiced social distancing.

The next few days were hectic, as several of my participants rushed to graduate from SCBC. My phone constantly vibrated with calls and messages. Tammy had a long discussion in our group chat about how she could log in enough hours to graduate before the school closed. Tammy needed only 24 hours more. Around 5:00 PM the next day, she messaged us, screaming with joy. She only needed two more hours to reach her 600-hour training the following Monday. On the same day, Hai called to rush me to the college to get my certificate of completion and transcript. I needed these things to get into the manicuring license exam, which was scheduled on April 14, 2020. He mentioned that two other women, Ly and Tra, came to the office to talk with the administrators but were not allowed to graduate any time sooner. Hai mentioned that both Ly and Tra were so

stressed because they were afraid that they could not graduate before the school closed, which meant that they could not get a professional manicuring license anytime soon.

The calm environment inside SCBC was opposite to the sense of urgency on the streets of Little Saigon right outside the college, where people rushed to the supermarket to stock up on food and groceries. Nails supply stores across Orange County ran out of alcohol, an essential chemical for professional nail care, disposable facemasks, which had already run out of stock a month before the coronavirus outbreak started hitting the United States. A sales representative at a large supply store nearby SCBC told me their suppliers kept promising new inventory, but no such new inventory actually showed up at their store, and customers kept pressuring them for more supplies.

On March 16, 2020, tension among those about to finish their programs at SCBC rose. Several of my participants contacted SCBC asking about graduation as news of the COVID-19 continued to sweep the nation. Rumors of possible school closings added to the pressure as the outbreak escalated. In my group chat, those who had not gotten the license anxiously asked questions about the possible delay of the state board exam. Students seemed to prioritize getting their professional manicuring license than hurrying to the supermarket to stock up on food, groceries, toilet papers, hand sanitizer, and disinfecting wipes.

Why did the participants in my research choose to study manicuring? What does it mean for them to become a manicurist in the United States? What makes the manicuring license so crucial to them to the point that the COVID-19 outbreak was considered less pressing than the hold on their exam date? How does the process of learning to become a professional manicurist reconfigure their concept of self? Following manicuring students through their training programs to obtain a license that allows them to work as professional manicurists in California, this study explores the entrepreneurial

self among first-generation Vietnamese immigrants. I find that the training program's goal is to produce compliant entrepreneurial subjects, and manicuring training has been used as a technique to make the individual free (Rose, 1999). At the same time, however, contradictory ideas underly the understanding of freedom that I am mobilizing in this research. Training is not about beauty but about "rendering moral" (Leshkowich, 2012), which means to produce competent, compliant, and disciplined entrepreneurial migrants. The training program becomes a site of tension between the United States' neoliberal entrepreneurial project (which aimed to produce self-sufficient and liberated individuals who comply with the law) and the Vietnamese migrants' cultural sensibilities (which are linked to their upbringing in a socialist system that prioritized the collective over the individual). The students mitigate this tension by reconfiguring the neoliberal logic of individual freedom to fit their socialist-oriented understandings of selfhood.

Chapter 2 – Methods

My preliminary research in the nail industry began in August 2019 at a salon in the Inland Empire, California. A few weeks after that, I registered for a professional manicuring program at SCBC. SCBC offered two courses on manicuring, a 600-hour and a 400-hour class. 600-hour students received more advanced training, while the 400-hour received enough training to prepare them for the professional manicuring license. When I registered for the course, the 400-hour class cost \$1,800, while the 600-hour class cost \$4,500. 600-hour students, however, could receive financial aid of up to 90%. 400-hour students, by contrast, did not qualify for federal aid from the United States government. These students, therefore, had to pay tuition out of pocket. SCBC received students weekly. New students have to start their program on Tuesday. If they miss the Tuesday enrollment, they would have to wait until the following Tuesday to start their programs.

On my first day at the beauty college, new students of both 600-hour and 400-hour were asked to gather in the same room for orientation. There were eight people, including me, in this group. Only two of us, myself included, were 400-hour students. The rest of the group belonged to the 600-hour class. All of us were women between the ages of 30 and 60. This group became my focus group, and I continued to follow them throughout their training programs, and as they went on to work in the nail industry after obtaining their license.

During my training program at SCBC, I spent a considerable amount of time getting to know the students before recruiting them for my study. I found that participant-observation in this research is crucial, as the Vietnamese students seemed to be cautious about having a researcher asking them questions. For each participant in my research, I waited patiently for them to become acquainted with me and to feel comfortable enough talking with me before asking if they wanted to be in my study. The knowledge I gained from the training program was critical, as it equipped me with the appropriate language and trade knowledge to converse with my participants in ways that fostered meaningful discussions and opened up avenues for more discussions. I was able to invite more students to participate in my research as I continued with the training program.

In total, I interviewed 22 SCBC students from both the 400-hour and 600-hour classes. Among the students I interviewed, 19 of them were women, and three were men. I recruited them based on the personal relationship I had with them in the classroom. Many of them were new to the United States; a few of them have been in the United States for more than three years. I conducted unstructured interviews, asking the participants open-ended questions about why they registered for the manicuring programs at SCBC. I interviewed each participant at least twice, depending on their availability and willingness to share their thoughts. Most of the interviews were conducted during the

practice session at SCBC when students were allowed to work on one another's hands, feet, or on fake fingers. I also had interviews while hanging out with them at nearby restaurants, eateries, and residential locations. The first interview was always in-person. Most follow-up interviews were also in-person, with some conducted on the phone at a later time.

During my almost six months on and off at SCBC, a number of my participants graduated from the program, obtained a manicuring license, and started working before I was done with the training. I nevertheless continued correspondence with them as they graduated, passed the state board exam, and moved on to work at various salons in Southern California. By the end of March, SCBC closed its doors due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Once Californians were ordered to stay at home, my follow-up interviews became strictly via phone.

My observation was conducted during the 400 hours I spent on the training program at SCBC. As a registered student in the Nail-400 program, my training started in August 2019 and ended in March 2020. The observation was also conducted several times at Top Ten Nails & Spa in Southern California, where two of my participants worked after earning their license. Hanging out with my participants and other students after class and traveling to Top Ten Nails & Spa at weekends were part of my participant-observation routine. These activities spanned over the course of six months. After completing the training program in March 2020, I was scheduled to take the state board exam to get my professional manicuring license on April 14, 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, forced the California State Board to cancel their entire scheduled exams from April onward with no details for when my classmates and I would be able to go back for the exam.

Chapter 3 – Background and Literature Review

Manicuring was not recognized as a profession in the United States until 1980. Asian immigrants participated in the nail care business quite early with Korean women pioneering this industry in the 1980s (Federman et al., 2006). The story of how the Vietnamese started getting into the nail business can be traced back to the end of the Vietnam War in April 1975. After the Fall of Saigon, the United States government evacuated and sponsored 125,000 South Vietnamese refugees to America. In an effort to help Vietnamese refugees resettle in the United States, Tippi Hedren, an American actress and humanitarian, also known as the “godmother of the of the nail industry,” brought her personal manicurist, Dusty Coots, over to train a group of 20 Vietnamese women in a refugee camp in California (Morris, 2015; Staff, 2018; Driver, 2019).

The success of this first group of nail technicians soon led to more Vietnamese joining the trade. Since the 1990s, many first-generation Vietnamese Americans have found employment at nail salons (Pham, 2019). Vietnamese dominate the fast-growing nail industry in the United States, worth approximately \$7.3 billion in 2017 (Bates, 2012). The participation of Vietnamese migrants in the nail business drives the price down significantly. In the 1970s, a typical set of manicures and pedicures cost \$50 (the equivalent of \$320 in 2018). According to *Nails Magazine* (2020), the price had recently been significantly lowered to around \$23, a price tag that fits the budget of many middle- and low-income Americans (Willett, 2005).

California remains the state with the highest concentration of nail salons in the United States. The state also has the highest number of licensed nail workers. The

California Board of Barbering and Cosmetology reported a total number of over 100,000 licensed manicurists in 2017 (UCLA Labor Center, 2018, p. 24). UCLA Labor Center listed California as the state that had the highest number of nail salons in the United States, with at least 4,407 salons, and approximately 69% of nail salon workers in California were Vietnam-born immigrants (UCLA Labor Center, 2018, p. 24).

The growing body of literature on migrant labor in the age of globalization has brought to attention a wide variety of topics, such as social mobility, economic status, class division, gender roles and expectations, remittance, affect, women agency, and the politics of citizenship and belonging. How migrants come to the United States and how they manage their lives in this new home have been at the subject of recent scholarship. At the center of researchers' attention are the entanglements of immigration with race, class, gender, and citizenship (Espiritu, 2007; Choy, 2003; Parreñas, 2015). For instance, Espiritu (2007) examines gendered inequality, marriage, and labor in Asian American families in the United States history and argues that the oppression and discrimination against Asian immigrants were the results of the United States massive plans of economic and military expansions and discrimination policies and ideologies such as the legal exclusion of Asian Americans and white supremacy.

Southeast Asian immigrant experience in the United States is no exception. In *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History*, Catherine Choy's (2003) examined how the Philippines has become the largest provider of nurses to the United States. Choy argues that the migration of Filipino nurses to the United States were not simply economic but linked to imperialism and colonialism in a complex

entanglement of its relationship with the United States In *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work*, examines the *dislocation* Rhacel Parreñas' (2015) research centered on race and citizenship among Filipino migrants in the United States and Italy finds that Filipina migrants who worked as domestic helpers experience upward mobility economically and downward mobility socially. The author also finds similar *dislocation* of Filipino migrant workers across cultural, economical, and political different territories, placing them in marginalized position in the society they came to work for. The research also looked at how domestic migrant workers, however, resisted and exercised their agency to negotiate their place in the host society.

Not many studies paid attention to entrepreneurial activities among migrants in the United States, especially on nail care, which is another popular profession in the service sector that has been growing significantly in recent years. The growing nail care business has been receiving heightened media attention for labor and health-related issues (Do, 2015; Barker & Buettner, 2016). Research since the early days of the nail care industry has exposed sub-standard working conditions at many salons. Labor relations in the nail business made headlines in the United States and the United Kingdom as the media reported terrible working conditions associated with the exploitation of nail care workers. In these reports, nail technicians were portrayed as exploited individuals or victims of modern-day slavery that needed immediate intervention (Nir, 2015; Garbers, 2018). Until recently, health issues related to the working condition and occupational physical problems at nail salon continue to be at the focus of researchers' attention (Quach et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2019).

Vietnamese immigrants in the United States have engaged in small business and trading since the late 1970s (Waldinger, 1990; Gold, 1994) but are often excluded from research about immigrant entrepreneurs (Hoang, 2015). A recent study by Eckstein and Nguyen (2016) concludes that the Vietnamese have created an ethnic niche labor market, a concept describes certain business areas within it a certain ethnic group tends to get involved more than others, that expands the nail service to clients of different class and racial backgrounds. Recent studies of the nail care industry often focus more attention on health issues, labor relationships, race, and class (Harvey, 2005; Federman et al., 2006). Other studies have explored how racial, class, and labor relations play out as interethnic contacts have become popular at nail salons (Kang & Kang, 1997; Kang, 2010; Hoang, 2015).

While these studies have provided insights into the histories of Vietnamese involvement in the nail industry, the focus on labor relationships, race, and class do not provide an adequate account for why many first-generation Vietnamese immigrants wanted to work on nails. The language barrier model that has been used as the most valid reason for choosing the nail profession does not provide a more comprehensive understanding of the choice of this profession. Few studies examine migrant entrepreneurship and the entrepreneurial aspect of the self. Regarding the formation of the entrepreneurial self, Freeman noted, “The entrepreneurial enterprise constitutes a primary site and central practice of neoliberal self-creation and labor in today’s global economy, a dual project in which economic livelihoods and new subjectivities are being forged in tandem” (Freeman, 2014, p. 2). In other words, Freeman found that

entrepreneurship fostered a new self as an individual engaged in economic activities.

Understanding the formation of the self based on an individual's business engagement is an essential framework to understand the entrepreneurial self in the manicuring business.

This study explores entrepreneurship among Vietnamese who have started their economic engagement in the nail business from the first stage of their manicuring career. I investigate why Vietnamese migrants decide to obtain a manicuring license and participate in the nail care business. I ask questions like: Is manicuring their first choice when it comes to jobs? Why is it vital for them to invest time and money to obtain a manicurist license? As they grew up in a non-liberal context, how might their understanding of the self reflect their socialist upbringing background? Following students through their training programs to obtain a manicuring license to be able to work as a professional manicurist in California, I explore how the entrepreneurial self forms or reforms during their entrepreneurial engagement with the nail care profession.

Chapter 4 – Observations of the training process

About Southern California Beauty College (SCBC) and its nail salon

Established over two decades ago by a Vietnamese couple who came to the United States after the Fall of Saigon in 1975, SCBC is a pioneer in nail training. The founders of SCBC established the school in 1987 under a different name after becoming successful with their beauty salons. Today, SCBC offers courses in manicuring, cosmetology, barbering, esthetics, teacher training, and massage therapy. Manicuring is their most popular course, and the program is among the most popular in the United

States. Growing from a small beauty school at the beginning to now a leading program in the training of nail services, SCBC claims to have graduated over 40,000 students from their manicuring programs. On its website, SCBC highlights its mission as “providing quality education and preparing each graduate for employment.”

Located at the center of Little Saigon, SCBC was at the heart of the Vietnamese community in Orange County, California. The college is close to several popular Vietnamese supermarkets, restaurants, manicuring suppliers, and convenience stores. The school was also close to major freeways in Orange County, which provide access to nearby Southern California counties, such as Los Angeles, San Diego, and Riverside. SCBC’s prime location makes it a convenient place for Southern California students to come for their training programs. Its location provides easy access for many recent Vietnamese migrants who have resettled with their families or have family members in Orange County. SCBC attracts a large number of first-generation Vietnamese students. These students have registered for their manicuring programs as they want to become licensed manicurists.

The college has several entrances. The main one for customers is on the south side of the building and closer to WestPoint Ave. The door that most students used to enter their classroom is also facing south, approximately ten yards to the east of the main entrance. On the west side of the building is WestPoint Avenue, one of the busiest streets in Little Saigon. In front of the building was a smaller parking lot. Some of the parking spaces in this lot are reserved for SCBC’s instructors and staff. Sharing the same parking lot in front of the college were several Pho, noodle, and other Vietnamese restaurants.

Within walking distance, there are two large Asian supermarkets, two big nail supply stores, a Starbucks and a Highland coffee shops, a popular Vietnamese food-to-go chain Banh Mi and Che Cali, and numerous other restaurants and specialty food stores that many Vietnamese students love to go to after school or during their lunch break to hang out.

To the east side of the building is a larger parking lot that the college shared with a supermarket facing northward. SCBC students are told to only park along the northward wall to avoid being towed. On the east side of the building overlooking this parking lot is a small teaching room that housed the 400-hour students in January 2020. The door to this room is facing the larger parking lot. There is a small outdoor area with outdoor benches and tables where students used to sit down for fresh air in their lunchtime. The larger parking lot was in front of a supermarket where SCBC students usually came to buy limes for Saturday's lime-cutting section. Offices and restaurants occupied the top level of this supermarket. One of those provided immigration services to mostly Vietnamese customers. While in operation, this office played from 9:00 AM until closing every day a loud recording tape explaining the correct answers to the 100 questions in the United States naturalization test, and the frequently asked questions about how to sponsor your loved ones to America.

While it was in operation, SCBC was open from 9:00 AM to 9:00 PM on weekdays and from 9:00 AM to 5:30 PM on Saturday. The college was closed on Sundays. Students who wanted to get credits for the theory section had to come in at 9:00 AM. Missing this section meant they had to wait until 10:30 AM when the section was

over. As theory was only taught from 9:00 AM to 10:30 AM or from 7:30 to 9:00 PM, a significant portion of the class came in at 9:00 AM because everyone had to get enough theory credits to graduate from SCBC. Failing to fulfill the theory requirements would stop one from completing the nail care program at SCBC, which also meant they were not qualified to sit for the professional manicuring license exam. The theory section ended at 10:30 AM, and students began their practice time under some guidance from SCBC instructors. The lunch break could be taken at anytime for half an hour if students stayed for eight hours or more. A 30 min break was required for every four hours of studying. Several students came in and out throughout the day. They mostly came after getting out of work or getting off their babysitting responsibility at home. At 5:30 PM, many students logged out to go home to take care of their kids or to be back with their families. Some left for the 30-minute break and came back for the night class, which began at 6:00 PM. Only about a quarter of the students in the morning class stayed for the night class, which would end at 9:00 PM.

The morning time at SCBC was always busy. As time was about to reach 9:00 AM, hundreds of cars would come into the parking lots, and some hurried to rush out. Many students drove to the school to attend their training programs. Those who did not have a car or a valid driver's license had their family members, distant relatives, friends, and acquaintances drop them off at SCBC in the morning and pick them up later in the afternoon. Lunchtime was also a busy time at the college, as family members and friends stopped by to drop off lunch boxes. Groups of students could also go to a nearby restaurant for lunch together. Alternatively, students could gather in the small outdoor

area with their lunch boxes and talk with others. The immigration office on the top floor of the building that shared the same parking lot with SCBC broadcasted their advertisement for Vietnamese migrants who wanted to take the naturalization test to become U.S. citizens. Throughout the day, the immigration office played the same recording file explaining possible test questions and answers. Sounds of students calling one another, talking on the phone, joking, or laughing mixed with the sounds of the engines in the parking lot. Sounds of the nearby busy street and the questions and answers from the naturalization office filled the air surrounding SCBC with excitement and a sense of hope for a better future in the United States.

The main entrance was mostly for customers who came to SCBC for services. The main entrance led customers directly to the reception area where Ms. Phyllis, the receptionist that had been there for years, sat behind the reception counter. The entire floor was open space with no real wall to separate the space. There was a small partition behind Ms. Phyllis to cover up the hairdressing area where the “hair class” or barbering courses were conducted. To the east of the reception area was the “nail area” where the manicuring courses were carried on. SCBC’s main office located toward the end of the nail area, facing the student’s entrance. To the very end of the building was a staircase leading up to the rooms where cosmetology and esthetic programs were taught.

To the west of the reception area is SCBC’s nail salon. The salon has large window panels overlooking WestPoint Ave to the west and the smaller parking lot in front of SCBC to the south. The front area of the salon, closer to the reception area, serves as a waiting space for customers to wait while the nail technicians get set up. Next

to the waiting space is the manicuring area where about ten manicuring tables were recently brought in to replace the old one. Occupying more than half of the space in the salon is the pedicure area. The school recently brought in about ten brand new spa pedicure chairs, so customers now can enjoy spa pedicure sections, a luxury that had not been offered before the salon went through the major renovation in February 2020 and reopened after Tet – the Vietnamese Lunar New Year.

The salon spreads over about 2,000 square feet and has a broad white panel separating it from the hairdressing area. The other end of the salon is the “logistics area,” where the students in charge would stock up the supplies needed for the salon operation, such as alcohol, cuticle remover, massage oil, cotton pads, some nail polish, towels, and other supplies. This salon was where many students had their first experience working with customers and learned how to perform a manicure or pedicure service professionally. The significant uplift gave the salon a professional look of a high-end nail and spa salon. Many students liked the new environment, as it gave them the feeling of working at a high-end salon now, unlike the uncomfortable feeling of working at a low-end salon before the renovation.

The need for a license

A significant number of students who enrolled in a manicuring program at SCBC were Vietnamese. Many of them were first-generation immigrants. A few of them had been here for years and were able to communicate in English. The majority had been in the country sometime between a few months to a couple of years and could not speak or understand English very well. They registered for the nail care training programs at

SCBC so they could sit for the state board exam to get a manicuring license. This license enabled them to work anywhere in California and in some other states (some states would require them to transfer their California license). As some of them came from low-income families, the ability to earn money to support their families was their top priority.

Seemingly in line with students' primary goals, SCBC designed their manicuring programs to prepare students for the exam so they could obtain a professional manicuring license in California. Students who wanted to obtain the license could enroll in one of the two available manicuring programs at SCBC, commonly known as the 400-hour and 600-hour courses. Although the board required that only those who had completed the 10th grade in the States or the equivalent were allowed to take the exam, SCBC only accepted students who had already graduated high school (grade 12) in Vietnam to their programs. In the second half of 2019, a 400-hour course costs students \$1,800, while the 600-hour cost is \$4,500. Those who took the 600-hour course and qualified for financial aid could receive a government subsidy for 90% of the school fee, leaving students with only \$450 to pay out of pocket. Those who were able to study full-time, which meant they could log in eight hours each day, needed four months to complete the 400-hour program or six months to get over the 600-hour course.

The California Board of Barbering and Cosmetology (usually referred to as the "state board") requires an individual who has to be at least 17 years of age and completed a manicuring program at a school approved by the board to qualify for the license exam. At SCBC, students had to complete at least 400 hours of training to qualify for the test. The exam consists of two parts: the theory test, which usually takes place in the morning,

and the practical exam, which happens in the afternoon. Students who complete 60% of the required time could pre-apply to have their exam dates scheduled before they graduate from SCBC. In March 2020, many students in my cohort, including myself, were scheduled to take the license exam in April. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, put all of the board's exams to a halt. On March 19, 2020, the board posted on their website a note saying, "the Board regrets to announce that it will be cancelling all examinations thru April 17, 2020." It later announced that it would continue to close its building until further notice (California Board of Barbering and Cosmetology, 2020).

A typical day at SCBC

Except for Saturdays, other students and I had a similar daily routine while attending SCBC. Arriving at 8:50 AM after an hour-long driving from Riverside, I would slowly pull my car into the school's parking lot. The parking spaces close to the school building would be full. The school's main doors would still be locked. Some students who had arrived early would still be sitting in their cars waiting for the main door to be opened. Other students would be dropped off in front of the building. Some would chat with one another while waiting, while others would talk on the phone. Most of them would speak Vietnamese. A few of them would speak English and would refuse to join in on Vietnamese conversations.

I would park my car on the side of the school building along the long wall facing north in front of City's Supermarket, then grabbed my notebook and placed it in my bag. I would then get out of the car and retrieve from the trunk all of the tools and materials that I would usually need for training. I kept all the items in two bags. In a black duffle

bag, I stored fake fingers, mats, a box of nail tips, some buffers and files, and scissors to trim the shape of the plastic nail tips. In a sizeable 99-cent store bag, I kept my supplies of over 20 different color nail polish, gel polish, easy-peel-off base for gel polish, some powder and liquid for acrylic nails, a box of cotton, face mask, hand sanitizer, files, buffers, bottles of acetone, cuticle softener, cuticle oil, massage lotion, and alcohol. Boxes of nail tips, nail forms, glues, brushes, and disinfected tools were also in this bag. I would quickly grab the book of *Milady's Standards*, the official textbook of this program, and place it into the black bag, then look around the back of my car one more time before locking it.

It would take about five minutes to carry everything I needed into the classroom. The main doors would be open by now. I would find my group, get a chair for myself right next to them, and place all of my items (minus my handbag) on the floor. After signing my time card, I would go to the instructor's table in the front of the room and place it among the other students.' I would then get in the line to scan my ID before 9:00 AM. About 50 students would have already formed a long line in front of the scanning device on the instructor's desk.

At around 8:57 AM, an instructor would arrive, take out an iPad from a drawer, and scan her teacher ID before telling the students they could start scanning. The line would move quickly. Other students would get out of their seats to scan their ID as well. Other instructors who finished scanning their IDs would stand around checking on the students to ensure no one scanned the ID cards for other students who were not present. By 9:00 AM, almost everyone would have finished scanning and settled down, ready for

a theory section. Several students who came in late would rush to the desk to log in. At exactly 9:07 AM, the instructor would remove the iPad. Several students who arrived right after the iPad was put away would try to persuade the instructor to let them scan in. The instructor would bar them from logging in until 10:30 AM once the theory section had ended. Some of these students would express their disappointment, whispering something no one could hear as they would leave their bags and suitcases filled with training materials in the room and would exit for an unwanted break. On average, one to two hundred students would begin their class at 9:00 AM each day.

At 9:10 AM, the theory section would begin. Carolina, an experienced instructor at SCBC, would take over the microphone and ask students to take out the book, *Milady's Standard Nail Technology, 7th edition* by Cengage Learning, and turn to chapter nine, titled "Nail Disorders and Disease." As Carolina began her lecture, two other lecturers, Janice and Victoria, would walk around the classroom. Janice was a Spanish and English-speaking instructor in her thirties who could speak and give some instructions in Vietnamese. Victoria was a Vietnamese American in her early forties who had years of experience working as a nail technician and a licensed physical therapist. She spoke a little English. Carolina was probably in her late fifties or early sixties. She spoke English well and was able to instruct the class in both English and Vietnamese. Carolina was among the most knowledgeable and respected instructors at SCBC, and she would often draw from her years of experience in the industry during her lectures. As she worked through the materials with students, explaining to them the importance of understanding the various types of nail disorders or diseases, she would emphasize the

types of nail diseases that manicurists were not allowed to treat. Specifically, she would emphasize how nail technicians could be fined or sued for treating certain diseases and would warn students to comply with the law by refusing service to clients who came in with those diseases.

The majority of the students would pay close attention to the instructor. The class would never really be quiet, as I would often hear people's whispers and side conversations as well as Janice's voice closed by. On at least one occasion, she told Hanna, who would sit right next to me, to stop playing on her phone. Hanna stopped and mumbled something before going back to play with her phone. A few minutes later, Janice came back to Hanna, which prompted the two of them to argue over using cellphones during the lecture. Janice then left angry while Hanna was mad. Carolina would continue her lecture until 10:30 AM. Students would then put away their books and begin their practice time, which focused on a different topic each day. For example, Mondays would typically be for mock board practice, Wednesdays for nail tips, Thursdays for acrylic and sculptured nails, Fridays for gel manicures, and pedicures. The assignments for each day would be flexible, and the instructors in charge of each day could change the topics as they would see fit.

Working with customers on Saturday

For those who spent almost every single day at SCBC, Saturdays were the "happy days." The instructors called it "chemical-free day" as the school encouraged students not to use chemicals on Saturday. Whether students complied with the school's regulations, however, was a different issue. About one-third of registered students did not show up on

Saturdays. It was an easy day in general since students were asked to nip the rinds of four limes before they could go about their day. Using a nail nipper and imagining that the rinds were clients' nail cuticles, each had to trim the outer part of the rinds, making sure they did not cut off the white portion underneath the green part of the lime.

On Saturdays, students arrived at the school, scanned their IDs, submitted their time cards for signatures, and went back to their stations. Immediately after settling down, numerous people began turning around, asking for those who were supposed to bring limes for everyone in the group. On one particular Saturday, Trang brought the limes for our group. She took out a bag of about 26 limes she had picked from the lime tree in her backyard for the five of us. We quickly took our limes and kept four for Thuong as she would probably come later in the afternoon. A few students moved around the class, asking if anyone had extra limes. The instructor in charge of this particular day was Victoria. She was sitting at her desk and occupying herself with the computer. Several students arrived late and rushed through the scanning machine. The class was noisy as students kept running around and calling one another for more limes, some asked around for a nipper or a knife to cut the limes.

Our group was asked to move to the left side of the classroom, away from the familiar seats we had on the right side next to the hairstyling area. I was sitting beside Trang. Thu and Lan were sitting on the table right in front of us. Nam and Ninh came in a few minutes late. They quickly took the limes from Trang and began to cut them. Hai was sitting next to me, but he went off somewhere. The room smelled good as the oil from the rinds escaped and filled the air when students started nipping the lime rinds. The

instructor did not even bother to see what students were doing. She was busy looking at her computer. People were chatting and gossiping as they were nipping off tiny pieces of the green outer part of the limes. Nam announced that he had finished trimming his first lime, impressing everyone in the group. Trang turned around and picked up the lime on Nam's table to have a closer look, then started laughing. She passed the lime to us, commenting that Nam would cut to the bone of his customer if he had trimmed the way he did. We all laughed. Nam joked about his manicuring skills, then moved on to the second lime.

On the other side of the room, a group of students in their twenties broke up with laughter. The people around me shared stories of their lives and families. Some talked about how difficult it was for them to relocate to the United States and start from the beginning again. Others expressed their strong belief that everything would become so much better once they passed the board exam, got their license, and started working at a nail salon. People cheered each other up, telling one another to work hard for the board's exam, citing specific examples of those who became successful after just a few years getting into the business. The air was filled with hope for a better future.

At around 10:00 AM, Victoria called Nam and Ninh, asking if they wanted to work with customers, adding that Ninh could perform a manicure, and Nam would do a pedicure for the same client. Ninh was hesitant at first, citing that she was not confident enough to do a set of manicures for a client. Victoria gave her some encouragement and asked her to give it a try, to which she agreed. Nam did not want to go, but Ninh encouraged him to try it out. As they were about to leave, Janice called my name, asking

if I wanted to “trực lab,” or do “lab work.” It meant supporting other students while they performed manicuring services for customers. I said yes and quickly gathered my stuff to go over to the salon after Nam and Ninh.

Students’ views of working with customers at SCBC’s salon were mixed. As an apprentice at SCBC salon, students did not get paid for their services to customers. Tips were allowed, but students said the majority of customers did not give much more than \$1, and some did not give a tip at all, to the students’ disappointment. Some students regarded the work at the salon as a great way to practice on a real person, helping them gain confidence. Others, however, complained that it was too much work without pay. At times, students had to register in advance to be able to work with customers. Other times, however, the instructors had to coax students to work in the salon as no one wanted to go.

The rest of the students continued their lime-cutting. Another waited at the logistics station in the back of the salon when I arrived. She greeted me with a smile, then continued cutting the limes she brought with her. I noticed that she had difficulty cutting the rinds. The technique of using a nipper to trim the lime rinds was not officially taught. Nowhere in the teaching materials provided by SCBC that this technique could be found, even though the technique was considered a crucial practice to help manicuring students learn how to trim cuticles. The lime-cutting session happened every Saturday for at least four hours or until everyone was done. More experienced students could take up to an hour to get the task done. New students could take up to six hours to complete trimming all of the four limes. Students mostly relied on one another to improve their cuticle-trimming skills. Instructors once received the lime submissions, commented on how bad

or good the job was done, but gave no specific instructions on how to trim the lime rinds. Nonetheless, the trimming sessions allowed students to practice the essential technique of cuticle trimming. The school's failure to provide adequate training suggested that SCBC's training program primarily focused on teaching students how to deal with the state and less on real-life working technique and experience.

Training materials and state disciplinary discourse

Cengage Learning's *Milady – Standard Nail Technology, 7th edition* (Botero et al., 2015), was the official textbook of the manicuring program at SCBC. The English version of the book included four parts: "Orientation," "General Sciences," "Nail Care," and "Business Skills." These four parts were divided into 22 chapters. Vietnamese students who did not understand English were allowed to choose the Vietnamese version of the book, which was a lot shorter and included only two parts, which were "General Sciences" and "Nail Care." Within these two parts, five chapters were removed in the Vietnamese version (Milady, 2011).

The comparison between the two versions suggested what was most important in SCBC's curriculum, as the shorter Vietnamese version must have contained the most critical information students had to study. Topics included how to control infection, prevent skin problems in the salon, identify and work with nail diseases, and refer clients to healthcare professionals in order to avoid lawsuits later on. Other topics, such as safety and hygiene, nail care and creativity, were translated into Vietnamese for students to learn as well. The contents of the Vietnamese book suggested that while learning to

manicure was an important topic for a manicurist, complying with the law and the state board's regulations was of equal importance.

The significance of compliance with laws and regulations was repeatedly underscored in the classroom as SCBC lecturers always reminded students of what not to do, both during the state board's exam for the professional license and during employment at a nail salon. Among the lecturers, Victoria seemed to be the expert on what to avoid. She owned a business that helped prepare students specifically for the license exam, including a prep course, test kit renting, and transportation service to and from the exam location in Glendale, California. Many students from SCBC took her prep course and passed the exam. Several students failed and had to retake it. She often talked about students who failed the test and told the rest of the class why such students did not make it, pointing out their mistakes and warning students what not to do.

While Victoria focused her attention on the board's exam, Carolina often shared her expertise dealing with state board's officers who came to nail salons to check for compliance. She provided vivid and recent examples of how her students and other people in the industry were fined for non-compliance. For example, she told a story of how the board once fined her student for leaving a disposable buffer in a drawer without properly labeling it as "to be discarded."

In the classroom setting at SCBC, compliance seemed to be even more critical than manicuring skills. The board was presented as the figure who could penetrate every aspect of a manicurist's life. A manicurist was required to comply with the board's regulations if the person wanted to continue their practice. Exactly what was required,

however, was not taught in great detail. These requirements could easily be found in the board's booklet or website. Students, however, relied mostly on the instructors to learn what to expect.

Rules, regulations, and requirements for taking the board's professional manicurist license exam remained the most crucial topic in SCBC's curriculum. Morning hours were critical for students to learn what not to do during the exam. Safety and hygiene were the two topics that teachers at SCBC repeatedly highlighted to students. To ensure students paid attention, instructors often added what one would have to pay for non-compliance, which usually meant failing the exam. The gloomy picture of failing the license exam scared students. That meant they could not start working to make a living; it also meant dedicating further time, energy, and money toward study again to take another test.

Teaching students to comply with the state's rules and regulations remained one of the most important goals at SCBC. Yet to students' surprise, the school was not spared from being fined by the board. In October 2019, SCBC was fined over \$5,000 and three-year probation for non-compliance with the laws. I learned later that they were penalized for presenting the materials, during lecture time, in Vietnamese without a license. In the weeks after the citation, SCBC's manicuring classrooms became chaotic as the college regularly changed their teaching structure, forcing students to move from one classroom to other many times. Most students had no clue what was happening as teachers and administrators rushed to break their big lectures into smaller class sizes to satisfy the

teacher/ratio requirement of 30 students per teacher to avoid getting another citation if the board came back.

Chapter 5 – New forms of entrepreneurial selves

The entrepreneurial self in training

While the state of California has yet to settle fully on whether or not manicurists can be classified as employees or independent contractors, the manicuring students in my research understood their future work in the nail industry as independent, entrepreneurial labor rather than typically contracted labor for several reasons. First, like neoliberal selves, they were willing to take on the risks that come with a lack of a formal employment contract. Second, they believed that they had high levels of autonomy in being able to pick which salons they wanted to work. Third, their incomes were based mostly on splitting profits with the salon owners rather than fixed salaries from their employers. Finally, many of them considered being an independent manicurist as an essential stepping-stone toward owning a nail salon in the future.

As the manicurists-in-training prepared for work in the nail business, they understood that their future work would be different from corporate employment, and they were willing to take the risk. In their daily conversations, the manicuring students at SCBC hardly questioned or discussed terms of employment like healthcare insurance, sick leave, childcare, or unemployment benefits at their future workplace. Their attention instead focused on which cities and states had a higher demand for Vietnamese manicurists, which neighborhoods had more high-profile clients, or what kinds of

services or nail arts they should learn based on their targeted clients. They also discussed how best to handle an unhappy customer should a manicurist make a mistake when performing their job, and how to acquire more clients and make more profit. Absent from these conversations were topics that some would deem more practical, like how to write a solid resume or ace a job interview. The students' attitudes toward their future work, coupled with the lack of concern about their fixed monthly wages or employment terms and benefits, suggested that they perceived their participation in the manicuring business as entrepreneurial labor rather than traditional employment.

In addition, the students' entrepreneurial spirit also manifested in the shared perception that their work as manicurists allowed for a high level of autonomy in choosing where to work. They had no fear of losing work at one business location because they believed that there was always another one waiting for them. A common sentiment I heard from students who explained how one would quit working at a nail salon in Southern California was, "Mình hông thích thì mình đi làm chỗ khác. Thiếu gì tiệm cần thợ em" [I'll go to work at another place if I don't like [this salon]. There are many [salons] out there that need nail technicians]. This response captures the manicurist's perception that being able to decide where they wanted to work or with whom they wanted gave them a sense of autonomy.

Unbounded by employment benefits (such as health insurance and sick leaves that often came with a contract that required their devotion over the success of their corporate employers in the long run), these students felt they were autonomous in being able to decide for whom they would work. This autonomy further manifests in their ability to

negotiate the terms and conditions of their work as well as decide the hours of their work or the amount of time they would work at one salon. Many students affirmed that they were in control of their employment and able to quit should they find themselves unhappy with the salon owners or their co-workers. The stories that were discussed more often were how a manicurist would stop working at a salon and would move on to the next one. Rarely did I hear about a salon owner firing a nail technician on the spot. This was never the case when these women worked a low-wage job at nearby restaurants or manufacturing companies.

In Southern California, the system of *ăn chia*, or splitting profit (Hoang, 2015), in which the manicurist takes 60% of the cut while the owner takes 40%, was popular. Through this system, a manicurist was also entitled to any tips from their clients. Nail supplies and equipment, rent costs, taxes, advertisements, and other expenditures associated with the operation of a nail business were the owner's responsibilities. There was little to no formal employment contracts between a manicurist and a salon owner. Technically, a manicurist could quit their job and move on to another at any time. Hoang's (2015) research indicates that this system made nail technicians feel they were a part of the business, as it allowed manicurists and salon owners to share the profits. The manicuring students in my research considered this practice of sharing profits as the norm in the nail business. As a result of this system, they felt that their work was akin to an independent entrepreneur rather than a traditional employee.

Some students went to SCBC for their nail licenses with a specific goal in mind: to open their own salons. Indeed, many students were open to the prospect of running

their own nail salons sometime in the near future. Regardless of their short terms goals, many of them considered being a manicurist an essential step toward this entrepreneurial goal. Jenny, a woman in her thirties I met during my fieldwork, exemplifies this case perfectly. She went to get her manicuring license with the intention of opening her own nail shop someday. She explained in an interview the need for the salon owner to have a license and to be able to perform professional nail care,

Trong nhà em cousins nói không cần bằng vẫn mở tiệm được but I don't want it. Nếu mình không biết thợ sẽ qua mặt. [...]. Em học vì phải biết mới làm được. Mình làm chủ mà biết nói nó mới nghe. Nếu không nó nói ngược lại 'bà ngon bà ra bà làm đi.'

[In my family, my cousins told me I didn't need a license to open a (nail) shop but I don't want it. If I don't know it, the technician will fool me. I study because I have to know it so I can do it. As the owner, I must know how to do it so they will listen to me. If I don't know how to do it, they will say back, 'if you think you are so good, then do it yourself'].

Jenny was not alone. Tammy, another woman I met who was also in her mid-thirties, had a similar goal in mind. Tammy came to SCBC because she wanted to get her license and gain experience working as a nail technician before opening a salon of her own. Although possessing a manicuring license is not required to open a salon, they insisted on having one anyway. They considered the license as essential for running a nail business.

These stories illustrate how the manicurists-in-training I met embraced an entrepreneurial spirit. These stories moreover demonstrate how these future nail technicians were willing to take on the risks associated with the profession (e.g., lacking an employment contract or health benefits) in order to possess a higher level of autonomy. This autonomy gave them the possibility of controlling their work environment and making additional money in the form of tips. It also gave them the

possibility of upward economic and social mobility, as some of these manicurists aspired to run their own business in the future. Whether these plans would come to fruition or these expectations would prove true once they actually began working was not clear at the time. In any case, these stories illustrate the students' shared perception of manicuring as a profession that embraced entrepreneurial ethics and that allowed for a sense of agency.

The training program at SCBC fostered new expressions of the entrepreneurial selves among the manicurists-in-training. As these students were going through the process, they carved out new entrepreneurial selves, namely the liberated and the compliant self. The liberated self can be understood in terms of liberation from the exploitative working conditions of low-wage jobs; meanwhile, while the compliant self can be understood in terms of compliance with state laws and regulations to become a good entrepreneur. These two selves might look like they were in conflict with each other; I would explain later how both selves worked within the framework of the neoliberal logics of the self.

The liberated self

Flexibility is a crucial term often brought up in conversations about entrepreneurial labor and its effects. Freeman (2014) states, “the single most powerful motivation for becoming an entrepreneur was this self-described promise of *flexibility*.” The flexibility allowed many female entrepreneurs in neoliberal Barbados to lead “a new, neoliberal way of living, working, and feeling.” Flexibility also appeared to be an essential tool for female entrepreneurs to balance work and family, making profits and

taking care of loved ones. The author, however, also cautioned that flexibility could mean different things in different parts of the world (pp. 134-135).

Similar to Freeman's findings, flexibility was a key concept discussed among the manicurists-in-training when asked why they chose their profession. Unlike the entrepreneurs in Freeman's study, these future manicurists at SCBC discussed flexibility in terms of employment prospects. For these students, the nail industry promised the possibility of a better economic future and guaranteed a backup profession if they are unable to find other means of work. Here, the term *backup profession* refers to an occupation that one can always rely on should one be laid off from their current job, or in some cases, be in urgent need of cash. This backup profession gave them an extra layer of financial security.

For this reason, flexibility worked as a tool for "self-protection." Flexibility allowed these manicurists-in-training to quit their low-wage job without worrying about going hungry. Because of their precarious, marginalized status as migrant workers, formal employment was particularly difficult for them (Parreñas, 2011). Equally important was the removal from their *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984) as one who was born and raised in Vietnam. This *dislocation*—i.e., removal from their *habitus*—translated into a limited *cultural capital* that significantly narrowed their support network in a time of great difficulty (Bourdieu, 1986).

Elaborating on the idea of having manicuring skills for self-protection, Hang, a woman in her 30s, disclosed:

Em không thích nghề nail nhưng khi đi qua trong thời gian chưa có việc làm thì để lỡ không có việc hoặc đi làm hãng cho off thì mình có bằng. Giống như ở Việt Nam mình kêu là ‘phòng thân’ á chị.

[I don't like manicuring, but when I came here during this time when I have no work (I go get the license) in case I can't get a job or being laid off when working for a manufacturer I still have the license (to back me up). In Vietnam, we call for “personal protection”].

Hang explained that manicuring was a job that she could rely on even in the case of an emergency. This job functioned as a layer of self-protection that shielded oneself from the uncertainty of the job market. My participants seemed to know their precarious conditions well, as they pointed out how simple it was for one to be laid off. Knowing their precarious conditions, many began to find solutions to solve that problem, and in many cases, the answer they got was manicuring.

This self-protection rhetoric was also exhibited in my discussions with Nam, a man in his fifties. Nam cited the same idea of getting a manicuring license for “personal protection” in case he needed it later:

Mình đi học để có động lực, có nghề để sau này để phòng thân. Mình làm hãng nếu không đi làm hãng sợ sau này lớn tuổi không còn làm hãng nữa buộc mình quay về để làm nail.

[I study so I have motivation and a profession for my personal protection later. I am working at a shop. If there is no more work when I am old or can't work anymore, I have to go back to nails].

Nam was working part-time at a bakery manufacturing company together with his wife Ninh. They went to work early in the morning and came for their manicuring training after 3:00 PM. They stayed in the class till 9:00 PM. It did not take long for the couple to recognize their precariousness and sign up for the course together. To Nam, the nail license could help counterbalance his age issue, which he saw as a barrier to attaining future employment.

By attending the manicuring program at SCBC, the students in my research found liberation from exploitation. This liberation alleviated the state of precarity these had previously found themselves in by giving them a sense of control over their future in the United States. Those who were struggling with low-wage jobs complained about the exploitation they experienced as new migrants with limited knowledge of English and American law and culture and no formal education. To this group of students, liberation meant low-wage jobs were no longer their only option. Liberation came when they received a license that enabled them to work at a nail salon, which to many of them was a much better working environment with higher compensation, better treatment, and greater respect (namely from salon owners and customers).

This liberation of the self among SCBC future nail technicians aligns with what Freeman (2014) describes as a work-in-progress: “Entrepreneurial self-making is always work *in formation*” (Freeman, 2014, p. 2). Their journeys reflect Rose’s (1999) notion that “life is to become a continuous economic capitalization of the self” (p. 161). These students invested a significant amount of time practicing a set of skills that would allow them to capitalize after graduation. This in-progress element gave the students in my research a sense of control over their future in their newly adopted home country, even though they did not seem to be sure exactly what would happen after they receive the license.

The neoliberal logic of making an individual free, as Rose (1999) notices, relies on the assumption that the individual has not been free before and needs to be freed now. Rose states, “Further, the previously unfree subjects of these societies cannot merely be

‘free’ – they have to be *made* free in a process that entails the transformation of educational practices to inculcate certain attitudes and values of enterprise” (p. 65). In this argument, Rose highlights how the acquisition of freedom of choice is contingent upon an individual’s education. In the case of the manicurists-in-training at SCBC, the training program, through its educational measures, assumed the responsibility to make the individual, in this case, the future manicurists, free. By going through the program, these future manicurists were promised a form of freedom that can be actualized through a newfound marketable skillset. The instructors educated the students, highlighting how the freedom would look to them by providing vivid examples of the people they knew who became successful after receiving their manicuring license and working in the nail industry.

The beneficiaries of freedom

The students’ fixations on this promise of liberation (being “freed”) seemed odd, considering that many Vietnamese manicuring students at SCBC were highly educated and had a better life in Vietnam before immigrating to the United States. All of them graduated from high school. Many of them had some college education and had a bachelor’s or higher degree. The majority of them were either employed or attending college and had better financial and social life before they arrived in the United States. During our interviews, Thu, a woman in her late 40s, expressed her frustration with the new reality of being a manicuring student.

Ví dụ ở Việt Nam người ta khổ không làm ra tiền người ta qua đây thích còn mình mình làm ở Việt Nam nhiều tiền hơn nên đâu có thích đâu, qua thấy nản luôn. Ngồi với con Lan than chị mệt quá không muốn học luôn. Ở Việt Nam sướng lắm, làm gì làm chiều tối đi chơi.

[For instance, those who didn't make money in Vietnam like to come here. For me, I made more money in Vietnam so I don't like [to come here]. I was thinking of quitting. I told Lan when we were sitting down together that I am so tired I didn't want to study anymore. Life was very good in Vietnam [for me]. It didn't matter what I did throughout the day, I always hung out [with friends] in the evening].

Thu owned a successful business in Vietnam as a regional distributor of consumer goods. She stocked up cleaning, personal hygiene, baby, and hair products of well-known brands, such as P & G, Unilever, Johnson & Johnson, and resold them to retailers at wholesale prices. She made good money and seemed to have a high level of autonomy over her life before immigrating. In the United States, by contrast, her life felt exhausting. She spent endless hours at SCBC trying to get a license to become a manicurist, a profession she was not proud of and did not like.

Hai's story parallels that of Thu. Hai was a man in his late 30s. Before coming to the United States, Hai was an architect and owned a successful business related to his profession in Danang, the largest city in Central Vietnam. Determined to get the manicuring license as soon as possible so he could start working to support his family, Hai rented a room close to SCBC and did not visit his wife and daughter when he was at SCBC. Hai was always complaining about his lack of sleep and how exhausted he was trying to get through school.

Considering the high level of autonomy and economic prosperity they enjoyed before relocating to the United States, both Thu and Hai assured me that they came to the United States mainly because they wanted a better life for their children. Thu and Hai's

attitudes of prioritizing their children's welfare seem consistent with the Vietnamese state-sponsored project of moral self and proper parenthood, which suggests that "family stability and quality have become increasingly linked to having sufficient resources to ensure proper education and health" of children. (Leshkovich, 2012, p. 391).

In contrast to my other participants, who moved into the nail industry for the self-liberation and economic freedom that the industry promised, Thu and Hai decided to move into the industry to give their children a better quality of life. This brings to light the Vietnamese logic of selfhood. Schwenkel and Leshkovich (2012) point out that in post-socialist and market-oriented Vietnam, neoliberal forces come together with socialist projects in order to cultivate good citizens: "The imbrication of the individual in a collectivity in turn involves multiple ideologies that work to produce subjects who are neither fully state determined nor liberally autonomous, neither public nor private" (Schwenkel and Leshkovich, 2012, p. 395).

Schwenkel's and Leshkovich's (2012) findings are useful toward understanding the tension between the United States' neoliberal entrepreneurial self-sufficient and liberation project (which the students bought into to some degree) and the manicurists-in-training's cultural sensibilities (rooted in their habitus as Vietnamese citizens born and raised in a socialist system with more collective customs and less emphasis on the individual). The tension between the discipline of the training program to turn them into good entrepreneurial, self-supporting migrants on the one hand and their own cultural sensibilities on the other is illuminating. It illustrates how, at a micro-level, migrants' reception and adoption of neoliberal logic depends on how they could reconfigure these

logics in ways that make sense both within the habitus they were brought up in and the cultural milieu in which they currently reside.

The freedom that comes with the license allowed them to quit their current low-wage jobs at restaurants or manufacturing firms in favor of manicuring jobs that offered higher pay and more respect. Nhan, a woman in her late 40s, was very clear about her decision to come back for her manicuring license. She discussed the choice by citing a conversation she overheard from a group of young men in the class. One man was working hard on filing a set of nail tips when his friend asked him why he was working so hard. The first one answered, “Ừa, mà có muốn thoát khỏi nghề nhà hàng không? Ăn không có giờ mà phải đứng suốt. Nếu muốn thoát khỏi nghề nhà hàng thì mà ráng giũa đi” [Well, do you want to get out of restaurant jobs? No time to eat, and (you) must stand the entire time. If you want to get out of the work at a restaurant, keep filing]. Nhan told me she would never forget that conversation because it validated her decision to come back to SCBC to get her nail license. Nhan reasoned that even the young men in that group, most of whom looked like they were in their twenties and were young and full of energy, had to learn manicuring to avoid the low-wage jobs at the restaurant. Her decision to go for manicuring, therefore, must be a good one.

The complexity of being “freed”

Liberating the self from exploitation involved getting official recognition from the state. It had to certify the new abilities to carry out a professional manicuring session with a valid license. Providing a migrant with a manicuring license could also mean that the state empowered an individual with its recognition, making them feel confident for being

able to start a new life – a life free from exploitation. As many mentioned, with a California nail license, they would be free to go “xuyen bang” [across the states] to many different places in the United States where the demand for nail technicians was high and salon owners were willing to take in newly graduate technicians. With the new license, one no longer had to worry about working low-wage jobs at a nearby restaurant or being scolded in front of others. This backup profession now also backed up by the government. The manicurists-in-training believed that the professional skills they learned, coupled with the state’s recognition, could transform their lives, thus letting the self be freed from the confinement of limited choices of work, which unfortunately were often related to exploitation.

The path to liberation of the new subjectivity, however, did not take into consideration the limitation of nail care as an ethnic business. Because of their limited English skills, moving from one nail salon to another, no matter it was within the same state or to a different state, often meant that the nail technician would move from one Vietnamese-owned nail salon to another salon owned by another Vietnamese. Thus the freedom many future nail technicians discussed was only partial as it was limited within the coethnic network of Vietnamese migrants.

The path to liberation of the new subjectivity did not necessarily come in the same order. For some of the students, it was linear progress; for others, it was different. For example, one could begin working a low-wage job, before starting to learn nail care, getting their license, working in the nail business, and never looking back. For others, it was a circular motion where one started the program at SCBC first, stopped schooling,

began working, and then returned to the same program for the same purpose of getting their backup profession. Nhan, a woman in her late forties, was an example of this. She started the program at SCBC for a few weeks, then took six months off to work as a care worker and returned to school after being laid off without prior notification. Similar to Nhan, Jenny had started her program when she was pregnant with the second child, then stopped for over a year before coming back to complete the program.

For those who plan to open their own business in the nail service industry, obtaining a license also meant they could work as a nail technician at their salon. To them, owning a nail business while unable to perform services for clients meant the owner was vulnerable to exploitation from their employees. Entirely depending on other nail technicians was considered the owner's precarity, as the salon could lose its clients if the employee quit their jobs, putting the owner at risk of losing their business. Knowing how to perform professional nail care and possessing a valid manicuring license meant these owners could liberate themselves from entirely depending on their employees to provide service to customers. In both cases, the students in my research discussed how freely they would be once they get the license, and to them, the moment they received the license marked the end of their current precarious condition.

For those who did not have to work low-wage jobs, such as Jenny and Tammy, the license provided them with relief not to overly depend on nail technicians, thus liberating the self from overtly depending on their employees. To this group, manicuring was also a backup profession in that they could back themselves if they needed to take over their employees' clients. In this case, the liberation of the self was discussed in

terms of business opportunities. Their freedom meant getting a license to liberate the self from the constraints of labor dependency upon others. However, the freedom they enjoyed was partial, as salon owners also relied on co-ethnic manicurists to run a nail business.

The entrepreneurial self's liberation from exploitation also meant one would be treated with respect at work. To many students who took part in my research, getting a manicuring license helped an individual to secure a higher earning income at a more respectable workplace. Among this group of Vietnamese in my research, being publicly admonished at work was taken seriously as the action was considered disrespectful. Kimmy recalled the incident she had with the Vietnamese restaurant owner where she had worked before, “nó nhỏ mà nó xài xẻ mình vậy đó” [she was younger but (how dare) she criticized me like that], implying that the restaurant owner's action was unacceptable because it made her feel humiliated. Kimmy quit that job. When she found herself in a similar situation at another restaurant, she resigned from the job and went to SCBC to register for the manicuring program.

Like Kimmy, Trang, a woman in her mid-fifties, explained that she could not wait to get the license. Her son, a working manicuring professional in another state, paid for her school and gave her a monthly allowance of \$2,000 so she could be freed from working at a nearby restaurant and go to SCBC to study for her manicuring license. Trang was still mad as she recalled how she was scolded by her boss, the owner of a bakery shop, for not making enough bread for sale. Completely upset for being scolded, Trang made up her mind to quit that job. “Chị ở nhà luôn từ đầu tháng 11, cuối tháng 11

chị đi học nail luôn. Giờ thấy khoẻ nhẹ nhàng luôn. Nghĩ lại thấy sợ luôn” [I stayed home since the beginning of November. By the end of November, I started (this) manicuring program. I feel good now. It’s scary when I look back]. Trang explained that it was unacceptable for the (younger) employer to admonish her in front of her co-workers. To Trang, the scariest part of her job was not the hardship of overworking in the kitchen, but the derogation she had for being reproached by a much younger person who had the money and the control over her at work.

My participants pointed out that being admonished on the spot while other co-workers were around was humiliation, and that experience could make them leave the job. Some of them, such as Trang, quit the job immediately after such encounter. Others continued working as if nothing ever happened, but they quietly began searching for a better job—or at least a job where they could feel respected and had the freedom to move to another job when they pleased. In many cases, these people ended up with the manicuring programs at SCBC, as these programs offered viable solutions to what they had been looking for. In these cases, derogation worked to motivate the self to be always in the process of remaking and reinventing itself, which Rose (1999) regarded as the “capitalization of the self.” The above cases showed how the entrepreneurial-self found a way to liberate itself from exploitation and the risk of threats—more specifically, the exploitation that came from low-wage jobs and the threat of being laid off, subjected to abuse from co-workers, and treated disrespectfully by their employers.

Jenny assured me that the women’s belief in getting more respectful treatments working at nail salons was valid. She offered me insights about how nail technicians were

treated with more respect from their employers. According to Jenny, at least in California, nail shop owners were not in control of their nail technician employees. She also explained why the employers were afraid of their employees at many nail salons. In other words, nail technicians had more power over their employers in California.

Ở Cali, chủ sợ thợ. Nhiều tiệm quá nên cạnh tranh. Nếu thợ bỏ đi nó kéo theo nhiều khách hàng nên chủ sợ. Giống như tóc, nail cũng vậy, xưa em làm tóc khi tiệm sang chủ thì em không tới nữa vì thợ cũ làm rất đẹp. Nail cũng vậy, để sợ sảy thợ bỏ đi lôi khách theo sẽ mất nguồn khách hàng.

[In California, the (nail salon) owner is afraid of nail technicians. There are too many salons and so much competition. If nail technicians leave a salon, they will bring with them many clients, so the owner is afraid of that. Just like hair, nails are the same, I did my hair before and when a new owner took over the shop, I didn't want to come back because the former hairdresser did a great job. It's the same for nails, if you are not careful, the technicians will leave you and bring the clients with them and you will lose your customers.]

At the core of the nail business, as Jenny's explanation captured, was the retaining of loyal customers who often came back to the salon to get their nails done. Most clients had a favorite nail tech, and they usually came for the same person. According to Jenny, the main reason for nail technicians to be in control was that they had loyal customers who would follow the nail technician to a different salon, which meant taking away the salon business once the technician quit their job. According to Jenny, the nail technicians' abilities to attract new customers and retain loyal customers to the salon was vital to the business. Without the nail technicians to bring customers to the salon, no business could sustain as customers were loyal to their favorite nail technicians, not to the salon. For that reason, salon owners had always taken good care of their employees, as happy manicurists, in this case, brought more happy customers, bringing more profit to the salon owners.

The above examples show how Vietnamese nail technicians and salon owners had to depend on one another in the coethnic circle of the nail business. To make money, a manicurist needed to be at a nail salon. In turn, a salon owner relied on the nail technicians to generate income for the shop. Even though they all wanted to liberate themselves from overtly depending on the other, they needed each other to thrive in this industry. No one was completely free, as one needed the other to be able to do well. This coethnic circle of the Vietnamese nail business fostered the liberated self and, at the same time, made one's existence depend on the other. making the freedom and liberation they aspired for partial.

Chapter Six – The Compliant Self

SCBC's curriculum focused more on producing good and disciplined migrants who followed the law than skilled nail technicians capable of providing high-quality beauty service to clients. On the one hand, the college promoted a promising picture of life, tied with one's ability to work as a professional manicurist after passing the exam and obtaining the license as the reward for students' compliance. Promising a good future to those who complied was a disciplinary strategy that used "gratification" as a reward to encourage good behaviors (Foucault 1977). On the other hand, the instructors painted a gloomy picture of the future should one fail the test, thereby becoming unable to work as a manicurist. They also underscored the out-of-pocket fine for working nail technicians who did not comply with the board's regulations. Through its training program, SCBC

administered the “double system” of “gratification-punishment” (Foucault, 1977, p. 180) by highlighting both a reward and a penalty to encourage students’ compliance.

The goal of the manicuring training program at SCBC was to produce compliant entrepreneurial subjects. It did so by promising those who complied with the state’s laws and regulations access to a better life while exploiting students’ fears to ensure they followed the codes of conduct. This process of creating the compliant self brings together the state’s *technologies of power*, which “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination,” and *technologies of the self*, which makes an individual “effect by their own means” and responsible for their thinking and action to achieve the desired self (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). At SCBC, this system seemed to work as it fostered a compliant self among the Vietnamese students who attended the program.

It seems as if the liberated self and the compliant self contradict each other. The two forms of the self, however, work together within the framework of the state’s neoliberal self-monitoring project. According to Rose (1999), “The power of the state thus had to be directed to empowering the entrepreneurial subjects of choice in their quest for self-realization” (p. 142). In other words, the state makes its citizen free and responsible for making choices that could advance their interests. At the same time, the citizens are responsible for self-governing within the legal framework set up by the state (p. 142). According to this model, the liberated self was to be freed so it could choose where it wanted to work. This self was freed from the constraint of low-wage jobs it was previously tied to. This liberation, however, was only partial, as this liberated self still had to comply with the state’s rules and regulations regarding how they could conduct

their manicuring work. Violations to the rules and regulations would result in different forms of punishment, and the entrepreneurial self's best interest was to comply with the state. Therefore, the liberated and the compliant self work within the state's framework of the entrepreneurial self in the state's interest.

SCBC's insertion of the idea that compliance was essential to a good manicurist brings to mind what Leshkowich (2012) terms, "rendering moral," a technology of the self used to instill a new moral standard on individuals or groups of people. This "process of creating a new moral landscape" (Schwenkel & Leshkowich, 2012) brings to light the tension between the newer neoliberal self and the socialist-oriented self among the manicurists-in-training. On the one hand, the neoliberal self aspires for liberation and freedom; this self is ready to go in search of a lifestyle that promises self-reliance and self-mastery while embracing the ethical code of compliance to the state's authority emphasized the individual self. On the other hand was the Vietnamese socialist-oriented self influenced by a socialist understanding of selfhood predicated more on collectivity. In many cases, this collectivist sense of self is epitomized in the ties one maintains with their family (Leshkowich, 2014).

Fear to fail

The official training materials centered on the state board's disciplinary discourse and the school's curriculum focused primarily on students' compliance with the board's rules and regulations. To ensure a high level of compliance, SCBC applied two different strategies on their students, depending on which stage of their career they were at. To those working on getting a license at SCBC, the school targeted their fear of not being

able to obtain a professional manicuring license. As this group would eventually move to the second stage of their career, working at a nail salon after getting their license, SCBC targeted their fear of financial penalties to ensure these students would comply with the state board's regulations. Ensuring that students made less costly mistakes during the exam and while working seemed to be fundamental to SCBC as their instructors spent a substantial amount of time and effort to secure students' conformity.

Among the instructors at SCBC, Victoria was most well known for pointing out which mistakes would make a student fail their license exam, especially during the mock board practice test. This practice test usually happened two to three times each week in class. During the practice test, she would give step-by-step demonstrations to students. Before demonstrating the procedure, she would repeatedly emphasize that students must copy as closely as possible every movement she did in order to pass the license exam. According to her instructions, for example, a student had to sit upright and look slightly down at their table, where the manicuring kit had been set up. Upon hearing the examiner's instruction to begin, the student would extend their right arm to pick up the acetone bottle, which was the first one on the right-hand side and the closest to the student's body. The student then held the bottle to the front, stopped for a few seconds to read the label to ensure that it was acetone, then opened the bottle. While still holding the body erect, the student should extend their left arm to the left and pick up a cotton pad in a plastic box placed on the left side of the table. They would use the cotton pad to get acetone from the bottle, then close the cap before putting it back to its place. Victoria did

not forget to add that maintaining the right posture would help the student move quickly and accurately during the exam.

She would then ask the class to practice and would start moving around to check on students. The instructor would often stop someone in the middle of the practice session, and would tell the class while pointing at the person's mistake, “Cô nói rồi, làm như vậy là rớt nhe mấy em. Vô là giám khảo đánh rớt liền nhe mấy em” [I told you, doing this will fail you. The examiners will fail you]. She then would ask the class to look at what the student did and identify the mistake. Most of the class would have no clue. A few students would be able to figure out the mistakes. Victoria would explain how to do the procedure the correct way and would ask everyone to continue. She then would move around and would often find another student making another mistake a few minutes later. She would stop and warn the class before moving on again.

The embedded message in the teacher's instructions was that a good manicurist knew how to coordinate the body and the gesture to make their movements fast and effective. For instance, the erect body with the extended arms made reaching the objects on each side of the table effortless. This coordination was what Foucault (1977) called, *the correlation of the body and gesture*. Teaching students about the body and gesture might seem about efficiency. However, a closer examination of the training suggested that teaching how to coordinate the body and gesture trained students to become disciplined. As “[d]iscipline imposes the best relation between a gesture and the overall position of the body, which is its condition of efficiency and speed” (Foucault, 1977, p. 152), the underlying effect of this technique was to make a student's body and

mind accustomed to disciplinary actions, making each movement more precise in correlation to the body.

Another technique highlighted in the instruction was how each object must be handled in relation to the body—how far, for example, the bottle should be from the student’s eyes or which fingers should be used to open the cap was explained in detail during the exam practice session. The training program claimed to teach students essential techniques to help them pass the license exam so they could start working and earning money. Nevertheless, the underlying effect of the training went beyond obtaining a license. As “[d]iscipline defines each of the relations that the body must have with the object that it manipulates,” this technique of *body-object articulation* again trained the individual to get used to disciplinary actions (Foucault, 1977, pp.152-153) to become a disciplined self.

To the students who were in the first stage of their nail care profession, the instructors’ strategy of making them fear to fail the license exam proved to be more relevant to many students, as they needed to work as soon as they could to support their families. The possibility of failing to obtain a license was daunting to most students. Many students said that they needed to work and make money as soon as possible because of their financial hardship, and failing the exam would exacerbate their precarious condition. Cammy, a 32-year-old woman, and mother of a seven-year-old girl explained the importance of the license to her, “bằng nail là mở cánh cửa của cuộc đời em” [the nail license opens the door of my life]. Cammy explained that manicuring was her only option to liberate herself from the mundane, unstable, and low-pay job of sewing

pieces of clothing at home. The sewing job did not generate enough money for her to put food on the table. Cammy's mother had to come in to help her and her child. More than ever, Cammy felt the urgent need to get out of the situation. The fear of not being able to get her manicuring license prompted Cammy to work really hard on her techniques, practicing “day and night” in preparation for the license exam. Her effort paid off. She was among the first ones in our group who received her manicuring license.

Obtaining a license was still a priority to those who were not under pressure to work as a manicurist. For those who planned to open a nail salon, the delay in getting a license meant it took them longer to start their own business. Even for those who were doing okay financially, failing the exam meant having to spend more money on retaking both the test and prep course and to wait several months for the new exam date. It did not matter if they needed to work immediately or not, passing the exam to get their licenses was one of the most important tasks they had to fulfill as soon as they could. Therefore, many of them were afraid of failing the test, so they listened to the instructors’ warning to ensure their higher chances of passing the license exam.

Fear to be fined

SCBC also prepared the same group of students for compliance well before these students began working at any nail salon. Every day during the 1.5-hour theory section in the morning, SCBC instructors kept reminding students how costly it would be if one failed to comply with the board’s safety standards and procedures. Carolina seemed to be an expert after over 20 years of experience working in the nail business. She was able to provide detailed examples of how much each mistake, such as those related to health and

safety, would cost a nail technician if a state board's inspector walked into their salon and caught them. According to Carolina, each common mistake, such as forgetting to throw away the disposable buffer or not placing the used nipper in a separate box with a clear label of "soiled tools," would cost the manicurist \$100. She also had many stories of how her friends, co-workers, and students got caught and fined for similar mistakes. She often mentioned how one person got a \$100 ticket on the very first day that person starting their career as a manicurist at a nail salon. To most of the students who recently came to the United States, the fine was hefty. Being fined while working would eat up their meager income. For that reason, most students chose to comply with the board's regulations to avoid paying these high costs.

Highlighting the costly tickets one could get for not complying with the state's regulations was not the only strategy the teachers used to encourage students' compliance with the board's regulation. On the one hand, the instructors emphasized how expensive the fine was for non-compliance tickets, with the possibility of suspending one's license if they kept violating the state's regulations. On the other hand, they highlighted the prospect of making decent or even high income as a professional manicurist to make students feel encouraged for compliance so they would be allowed to continue working. By juxtaposing the hefty penalty and the possible decent income, the instructors were able to make a clearer picture of what a manicurist might lose, adding more weight to the request for students to adhere to the state's guidelines.

In addition to promising the students a better future as a reward for the students' effort, the teachers also systematically elicited fear among the students, threatening the

students that they could fail the exam while consistently reminding them how costly each mistake could be. In these instances, the instructors' strategies of exploiting the students' fears in order to sway them into compliance did not seem to align with the idea that "[i]n discipline, punishment is only one element of a double system: gratification-punishment" (Foucault, 1977, p. 180). In my observations, the teachers' strategies of putting more weight on students' fears without a clear promise of immediate reward worked differently. Scared that they could fail the license exam, many students tried to get closer to the instructors, especially Victoria, hoping to learn more about the tricks and secrets to help them pass the test. Some students brought fruits and snacks, while others offered her Vietnamese food and drinks. Victoria was able to remember many students by name and talked more frequently with those she knew. SCBC's strategy resembled Rose's (1999) idea of the *technology of sensibility*, which suggests that the more a teacher knows about a student, the better chance the teacher will have in guiding the student. As Victoria became closer to many students, they were more willing to listen to her instructions.

In addition to health and safety regulations, being caught for working without a valid license was also a fear many students had as SCBC instructors continued to emphasize the possible consequences connected to the illegality of working without a valid license. Instructors warned students that they had to comply with the state law and never come to a salon to work before receiving their manicuring license. At times, the instructors stopped their lectures and started talking about someone who had been caught working without a license, then explained the consequences. The punishment for working

without a valid license was two years of not being able to sit for the license exam and a penalty of \$1,000 for both the worker and the employer.

The amount of money one could be fined shocked many students and created fear of the surveillance state. When VyDa told the group that she knew a salon owner who needed students to work at weekends and did not mind if they had no license, few students expressed their interests in joining. Other students, however, advised the rest not to do that because they could get caught and placed on probation for two years. Several students assured the rest that they had known cases where workers at the same salon took photos of those who worked without a license and reported them to the state board. The result was that the unlicensed workers got caught and were barred from sitting for the license exam for two years. To many students, waiting for two years meant they would lose a substantial amount of income, and it was not worth trying.

Working without a license was a topic that came up from time to time, as many students who went to SCBC were tight on cash. At another time, there was gossip about how some students in the class had gone out to work at a salon over the weekends. Similar to the other time, students immediately expressed concerns and discussed again if one should work before getting their license. Again, many of them expressed their fear of being caught, citing that not only was the fine too high, but that being caught also meant one had to wait for two more years to sit for the license exam. The lost time translated into lost income one could lose in these two years. The total cost to many students did not justify the risk of working without a license, and they decided not to work until they were licensed to do so. These examples showed that, although many students already knew

they were not allowed to work at any nail salons, even as a part-timer in California, before they passed the exam and received their licenses, their fear of being caught heightened significantly as the instructors often brought up the topic and provided vivid examples of the consequences. The result was that many students decided to listen to the instructors and refused to work at a salon before getting their manicuring licenses.

The examination

As no student was fined or even had an opportunity to encounter the California state board during their time studying at the SCBC, the spread of fear for the state among the students happened mostly through the college's instructors. At SCBC, the power of the state pervaded nearly every aspect of a student's life as the state figure, which was represented by the state board, was frequently mentioned in the instructors' conversations, later it also spread to students. To correct a student's mistake, an instructor would bring the state into the conversation. Phrases such as, "làm vậy là bị phạt nhe" [you will be fined for doing that], or "lỗi này là phạt \$100 nhe" [this mistake would cost (you) \$100], were common in daily conversations at SCBC. The state figure was presented as a powerful authority who could take the money out of its citizens' pockets by giving them a ticket for not complying with its standards. This authority could also punish its residents by denying their access to a better future in the manicuring profession when they took the license exam.

For most students at SCBC, the first encounter with the state's power happened at the California Board of Barbering and Cosmetology's office in Los Angeles when they took their manicuring license exams. To many of them, the experience was unforgettable

and only reinforced their fear for the state figure and authority. Although many students already saw the board's officers come to SCBC occasionally to check for the school's compliance with the state's regulations, most students had never personally talked to any of those officers before. The board's agents came in, walked around the premise, observed how SCBC taught their classes, and discussed several things with SCBC's staff before leaving. During the time of their visit, the majority of the students went about their business, and most of them did not even bother to ask who those visitors were.

In the eyes of the students who took the professional license exam, the board examiners, who proctored the manicuring license test and decided whether a student would pass or fail, represented the power of the state. Those examiners were seen as powerful and highly knowledgeable about the subject matters, which were manicuring skills. Kimmy, a woman in her fifties, described the examiners as ones without compassion, “thấy giám khảo cũng có cảm giác lo sợ nhưng nếu giám khảo thông cảm biết chia sẻ với học viên thì người học viên sẽ thi tốt hơn” [seeing the examiners made me worried, but if the examiners had empathy (and) were understanding, the students would do better in the exam]. Represented by the judges, the state seemed to watch over the students, exerting its power over the lives of its newly immigrated citizens as it had the power to decide who would be allowed to empower oneself by getting the license and beginning making money.

The majority of SCBC students were scheduled to take this test at the California Board of Barbering and Cosmetology office in Los Angeles. Entering their premises for the exam and seeing the examiners for the first time made many students feel anxious.

Kimmy described them as, “mấy bà mô-đen lắm, tóc để dài vuốt không mút diện lắm tự nhiên mình là người mới học mình thấy sợ” [they were very fashionable, with long hair without using mousse, very well-dressed so naturally I was scared (of them)]. Cammy added, “Nhìn mấy bà cũng dữ dằn, fashion, lắm. Tâm lý là nếu em biết người đó biết nghề của em tự nhiên em phải sợ chứ.” [They looked very fashionable. Psychologically, if I knew the person was knowledgeable of my profession, then, of course, I was afraid of that person]. The intensive labor and money invested in clothing, hair, makeup, and especially nail care showed how these examiners had gone out of their way to ensure the students see them as an authority. The image of the state as powerful, authoritative, and “all-knowing” reflected in how the examiners conducted themselves, only making students feel more aware of their precarious conditions by the time they were ready for their new career.

Taking the professional license exam was an unforgettable experience as students as this first “face-to-face” encounter with the state’s representative exposed their precarity and reaffirmed many students' ambiguous fear of state power. Many students experienced high levels of anxiety as they worried so much about not passing the exam. VyDa said, “Hai ngày trước khi thi đâu có ngủ đâu” [I didn't sleep for two days before the exam date]. Even as someone who had been professionally working as a manicurist in other states before coming back to California, Hanna, felt the pressure. She worried too much that she overslept and made others wait in the van for her for over an hour at a location nearby SCBC so they could carpool to Glendale to take the exam.

Not all students were afraid of the examiners, but almost all of them agreed that the examiners looked really serious. Danny, a man in his late 40s, assured me that he was not afraid of the examiners, but when I asked him to describe them, he said, “mặt giám khảo lạnh như tiền, giống y người thi lái xe DMV. Nói chung ai vô cũng run.” [The judges’ faces were as cold as money, exactly like the driving test examiners at the DMV. Overall, everyone was nervous coming inside (the exam room)]. The lack of communication with students, especially on how they fail a student, made students scared and upset. Hang’s complaint reflected the lack of direct communication with the board.

Mặc dù mình rớt mình làm cũng đúng quy trình mình không biết tại sao rớt. [...]. Bữa đó về ngủ hồng được, trong lòng vừa buồn vừa tức, mà tức nhiều hơn, mình làm được mà hông biết nguyên nhân gì mình rớt.

[I failed, I followed the procedure. I didn’t know why I failed. [...] I couldn’t sleep that day after coming home. I was both sad and frustrated, but frustrated more (because) I could do it so I had no clue why I failed].

Failing the test intensified a student’s precarity, as they felt more vulnerable and subject to state power. Most students who failed the license exam could not figure out why they did not make it. Without a proper explanation of why they did not pass the test, students felt helpless because, to them, the state had complete control over their future. Failing the license exam made these students feel the uncertainty as these precarious beings were subjected to the scrutiny of the examiners as if the students’ futures were at the mercy of the state.

Undermining state power

The rendering moral project of the training program, which aimed to produce good compliant entrepreneurial selves, had not been as effective as the programs’ coordinators may have anticipated. Listening to the rhetoric of compliance did not

necessarily mean that these manicurists-in-training completely agreed with what they were told to do. In fact, they worked hard to defy the compliance discourse the school instilled by forming alliances. Through these alliances, students would share essential practical information that the college would neglect to teach. These allegiances further allowed students to demand that the college provide the means to their success.

The first strategy the students devised was a double standard manicuring procedure, which involved two sets of manicuring practices. One was used when the instructors were around because this procedure followed the state board's standards. The other one, as these future nail technician claimed, was to be used in actual practice when they worked at a salon after receiving their licenses. As many of them pointed out, the procedure established by the state board for the license exam was impractical in an actual salon setting. In this sense, the resistance and the will to defy the compliant project stemmed from the students' very entrepreneurial ethics that inspired them at the beginning. They wanted to do well in their manicuring service later, yet they had to learn the state board's impractical procedures in order to pass the board's exam and get a license.

The next strategy these students adopted was to build up an exam question bank and share it among themselves. The exam bank was a collection of questions that either appeared in a previous version of the state board's exam or could appear in an upcoming version of the exam. Students compiled this archive of questions over several years. The questions in the question bank were largely based on memories of the exam from students who had taken it (the state board did not allow students access to their exam bank for

practice, nor did they allow anyone to take notes or photos during the exam.) The exam bank was a collective effort of several generations of Vietnamese students at SCBC. Those who took the exam would come back to the college and share the questions they could remember with other students. Other students would then take notes and type up these questions. They would also find questions other students posted on social media and add those questions to the exam question bank, which was widely circulated at no cost among the Vietnamese students. Many students claimed that the question bank was efficient in helping them pass the license exam. The success of the student-based exam question bank shows that, despite the state project's aim at making them self-responsible and self-reliant, the students' communal efforts against the state board's policy relied primarily on a more collectivist understanding of the self.

Another strategy these students adopted was to come together to demand that the college provide instructions in the language they could understand. As I mentioned earlier, in October 2019, SCBC was fined and placed on probation for presenting training materials in Vietnamese during theory sessions without a permit. The verdict prompted SCBC to reconstruct their teaching structure and training materials to comply with the state board's requirements. The college immediately instructed its teachers to remove all the Vietnamese translations in the materials presented in class, which affected both of the morning and evening theory sessions. Some of the instructors prepared their teaching materials before the class started, while others hastily deleted the Vietnamese translation in the document after discovering that the Vietnamese version still existed in the documents they were showing on screen.

The Vietnamese students, most of whom had no clue about the fine, were shocked as they witnessed their teachers deleting the Vietnamese translations right in front of them. For some, these translations were their only way of understanding the presented materials. Some students were upset and openly complained during the theory session: “Trời ơi toàn tiếng Anh không ai mà hiểu cái gì trời!” [Oh my goodness, who will understand all of these when everything is in English!]. Others were confused and kept asking around, “Hổng có tiếng Việt rồi làm sao mình hiểu?” [How do we understand (the materials) without (the) Vietnamese (translation)?]. No one could provide them with a solid answer.

A few days later, the English-only teaching strategy began to wear out the students. They asked the Vietnamese instructors if the college would provide Vietnamese translations to help them understand the materials. The instructors retorted that they did not know because the English-only policy came from the top level of management. After continually bringing up these questions to the predominantly Vietnamese administrators, the students were still ignored as the college carried on its English-only teaching strategy to protect itself from receiving another citation.

A few weeks later, after SCBC continued to refuse to address the students' concerns, the students began to go on strike. Instead of listening to the English-speaking instructor during the morning theory session, many of them turned around and talked to one another. Some kept quiet and played with their phones, sending text messages or playing games. The instructor repeatedly asked the students to remain quiet and listen to her, but the students refused to listen. The tension escalated as the students quickly turned

the morning theory session into chaos. They talked, joked, and laughed with one another; some talked loudly on their phone, played games on their phone, or took a nap. Janice quickly ran around the room demanding that the students be quiet, but still no one listened to her. After ten minutes, the two English-speaking instructors failed to restore order. They finally gave up and ran to the main office asking for help. A few minutes later, the general manager came into the main training room to see students running around, talking and playing with others as if they were on break. The general manager left the room, and not too long afterward, a Vietnamese-speaking teacher came into the room and asked students (in Vietnamese) to come back so she could begin teaching them. The students slowly returned to their seats, and the class started again. The instructions this time were presented in both English and Vietnamese.

Under the students' pressure, SCBC had to readjust their teaching methods to help students understand what was being taught while not violating the state's regulations. Bilingual English and Vietnamese instructors, who were able to translate their teaching materials into Vietnamese as they spoke, now conducted theory sessions. Non-Vietnamese instructors were no longer allowed to teach theory classes, and they had to ask for a bilingual student volunteer to assist in translating instructions during practical sessions. Letting bilingual teachers translate the materials as they taught and asking students to interpret practical sessions were critical to the survival of SCBC. On the one hand, these strategies helped the college retain its current Vietnamese-speaking students and to recruit more of them to the program. On the other hand, because the Vietnamese translations were not shown on screen as official training materials, SCBC was not in

violation of state regulations. This newly adjusted strategy helped the school to avoid another violation ticket. These changes would not have happened without the Vietnamese students' collective effort to undermine the English-only policy, and the students were happy that they were able to receive instruction in Vietnamese again.

Conclusion

The stories of the manicurists-in-training in this study demonstrate the various ways that state power permeates many aspects of migrants' lives. Among those who received training for a profession in nail care service, the neoliberal logics of the free self only worked within the available space allowed and defined by the state. In this context, the self is only free to make choices if it complies with the state's power; and this power continually shapes migrants' lives from the moment that they begin training for a new profession. It also shows that the neoliberal rhetoric of individual freedom has to be framed within the available space provided by the state.

The students in this study offer different accounts of migrant experiences in ethnic businesses. These accounts complicate the popular narratives of modern-day slavery and labor exploitation. Moreover, their stories question the unmarked category of migrants as suppressed laborers with little to no agency to negotiate terms of their employment contracts. The possibility to reframe migrants as entrepreneurs offers an opportunity to understand a different dynamic of the migrant-labor relationship while acknowledging the differential experiences among migrants. Some migrants possess higher autonomy levels that allow them to navigate their new lives in the United States more freely.

Unfortunately, this autonomy still has to be understood within the same structures of power that govern these migrants' lives.

This study has examined how manicuring training reflects the state's project of creating compliant entrepreneurs. What remains to be explored is the racialization of manicurists and their customers in the context of beauty training. Also, my observations show that the majority of the manicurists-in-training and the nail salon clients at SCBC were women. However, my research reveals that there is a growing number of men from different age groups getting involved in the nail industry—either as professional manicurists or as salon clients. This observation challenges the gendered stereotype that links manicuring jobs and nail care with femininity. The gender dynamics among the future nail technicians and the clients they interact with during their training further remain to be studied.

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