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‘Lộc Bestowed by Heaven’: Fate, Fortune, and Morality in the Vietnamese Marketplace

Kirsten W. Endres

Drawing on six months of fieldwork in Lào Cai City at the Vietnam-China border, this paper explores how the intersecting notions of fate, fortune and luck play out in the Vietnamese marketplace and intertwine with moral ideas expressed in economic choices and ethical conduct. Whereas small-scale traders agreed that one needs to work hard in order to prosper, the ways in which economic success is conceptually framed reveal that discipline, rational calculation and personal skills were often downplayed. Instead, a person’s propensity for trade and the wealth generated by it were narratively constructed as part of a person’s fate decreed by heaven. Moreover, a trader’s success in business was referred to as lộc—a key concept in Vietnamese thought that relates to good luck, fortune, prosperity and divine benevolence. Together, rather than fostering a fatalistic attitude towards life, the notions of heaven/trời and fortune/lộc reinforce ideas of moral responsibility for the wellbeing of both present and future generations and thus, indirectly, for the welfare of society as a whole.

Keywords: Vietnam; Fate; Fortune; Heaven; Markets; Morality; Petty Trade

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,

Which we ascribe to Heaven.

William Shakespeare

Introduction

At the time of my research at Lào Cai market, Mrs Tâm operated one of approximately thirty stalls in the souvenir section of the main market building, referred to as ‘Zone A’.¹

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Her merchandise was aimed primarily at international and domestic tourists and consisted of a jumble of items ranging from Vietnamese cigarettes and instant coffee to Chinese-produced key rings, manicure sets and hairpins. Some of her merchandise had been smuggled into the country by trader-intermediaries who channel various goods from the neighbouring Chinese town of Hekou to Lào Cai market. As such, her display of goods did not differ much from that of neighbouring stalls. What distinguished Tâm from the majority of vendors in this part of the market is that she, allegedly, did not offer strictly prohibited items for sale under the counter, such as weapons (that is, electric tasers, guns and knives) and ‘adult toys’ (such as vibrators, dildos and rubber dolls). Two weeks earlier, several stalls in her section had been raided by the police, and their owners had ended up paying twenty-five million đồng penalties (around USD1200) for violating the law. ‘In the souvenir section, it’s only myself [and three others] who don’t trade in these things, all the others sell them like mad (*kinh khủng*) and reap huge profits,’ Tâm said in response to my inquiries about these events. ‘I just can’t do that, my conscience does not allow me to’ (conversation with author, September 2, 2012). Whereas she did not consider the sex toys to be particularly harmful, Tâm was concerned about the possibility of the weapons being used in crime. Moreover, vendors of these items risked hefty fines and faced having their stalls closed down for several weeks if caught red-handed. ‘I see no need to compete in selling prohibited items and make my life miserable,’ Tâm reasoned. Instead, she contented herself with the much smaller gains from trading in licit goods; she explained:

Wealth is fortune bestowed by heaven (*lộc trời cho*)...of course I’m not lazy or extravagant, and if my income is enough for food and bills, that’s fine. Everything in life depends on heaven, if heaven wants you to enjoy, you’ll enjoy, if heaven wants you to suffer, you’ll suffer. Nobody knows what will happen. I just think it is heaven that provides me with good fortune.

In common with borderland traders in many other parts of the world, Lào Cai marketeers do not necessarily regard the unlawful aspects of smuggling and trading in contraband, counterfeits and grey market goods as morally reprehensible. Itty Abraham and Willem van Schendel’s (2005, 18) differentiation between ‘legal/illegal’ and ‘licit/illicit’ is useful at this juncture: certain goods that cross the border (as well as other transborder movements and practices) may be considered as perfectly legitimate (‘licit’) by local citizens, but not necessarily by the state, which would categorise them as ‘illegal’. Rather than expressing a general condemnation of contraband merchandise, Mrs Tâm’s reasoning points to a moral differentiation between smuggling (and selling) weapons or drugs (that is, goods that are both legally prohibited and morally illicit) or carrying a bag of undeclared hairpins or electric shavers (that is, illegally imported but morally licit goods) across the Vietnam-China border. Likewise, her decision to rely on heaven instead of joining her fellow vendors in trading in illicit items does not necessarily express a fatalistic attitude towards life, but can be understood as part of her effort (and choice) to live a morally upright life in accordance with the will of heaven (Wang 2011, 79).

In this paper, I draw on my recent research among Vietnamese (ethnic majority)² small-scale traders in Lào Cai City, Vietnam, in order to explore how the intersecting notions of fate, fortune and luck play out in the Vietnamese marketplace and intertwine with moral ideas expressed in economic choices and ethical conduct. James Laidlaw (2002, 316), drawing from Bernard Benjamin, characterises moral thinking as ‘a matter of weighing obligations and deciding where one’s duty lies’, whereby ‘moral judgement rests on whether one chooses, whatever one’s desires or inclinations, to act in accordance with this duty’. The purpose of this paper is to examine how the moral beliefs, imperatives, obligations and duties that inform the semantic fields of ‘fate’ (heaven/*trời*) and ‘fortune’ (*lộc*) are implicated in the everyday economic life of Vietnamese women traders.³ I show that even though these traders generally tend to perceive the market—in its wider sense—as a battlefield (*thị trường là chiến trường*) in which fierce competition and greed for fast profit seem to prevail over affectionate sentiment (*tình cảm*) and virtuous conduct, the intimate economic sphere of the Vietnamese marketplace remains deeply imbued with metaphysical assumptions and moral meanings. Moreover, I argue that, rather than fostering a fatalistic attitude towards life, the notions of heaven/*trời* and fortune/*lộc* reinforce ideas of moral responsibility for the wellbeing of both present and future generations and thus, indirectly, for the welfare of society as a whole.

Fate, Fortune, Luck: Conceptual Interlinkages

It has been a basic assumption of modernisation theories that notions of fate and destiny would—together with spirit beliefs and other so-called superstitions (see Endres & Lauser 2011)—gradually disappear in modern societies as a consequence of individualisation and the loosening hold of tradition. According to Anthony Giddens (Giddens & Pierson 1998, 102), ideas of fate would then be replaced by ideas of risk:

The more social activities are structured by what has been done in the past, the more people tend to think in terms of fate. The more we take active decisions about future events, the more, whether people are aware of it or not, they think in terms of risk.⁴

This argument is certainly valid to an extent. Yet as Esther Eidinow (2011, 16) correctly notes, imageries of fate, fortune and luck continue to be invoked around the globe, offering ‘those who hold them both a source of hope for the future and a sense of control over daily events’. Moreover, rather than fostering a sense of passivity and determinism, notions of fate, fortune and luck may ‘do precisely the opposite, promoting action and the taking of responsibility’ (Eidinow 2011, 157).

We all know that many things can go wrong in life and that talent and effort alone cannot account for success in a chancy world shaped by unpredictable events. This is where ideas and beliefs about fate, fortune and luck come into play (Statman 1993; Rescher 1995). As ‘manifestations of the quandaries of the inherent limits of human knowledge’ (Da Col 2012a, 6), notions of fate, fortune and luck are universally employed to negotiate the predicaments and uncertainties of everyday life. There is,

however, significant variation in how these concepts are understood and practised in different social, cultural and religious settings.

Vietnamese beliefs in the role of fate in human life have been profoundly influenced by Confucian and Daoist ideas of predestination as well as (to some lesser extent) by Buddhist notions of reincarnation and karmic return. Most commonly, fortune and luck are seen as part of a person's fate (*số mệnh*) allotted by heavenly decree, as indicated by the adage 'life and death are matters of fate, riches and honours depend on heaven (*từ sinh hữu mệnh, phú quý tại thiên*)'. During my research on spirit mediums in Hanoi (Endres 2011), a *thầy cúng* (ritual master) called Mr Hiền elaborated on the Vietnamese concept of fate as follows: 'A person's fate [*số mệnh*], if we speak true to the meaning of it, comes down from heaven at the time of birth.' This, he went on explaining, basically meant that a person's life cannot deviate from its predestined course. 'If fate has predestined me to become a professional thief I have to become a thief, no matter what,' the ritual master continued. 'If I try to change to another occupation I am doomed to fail—for example, if I decide to work in an enterprise, that company will go bankrupt, the next one will be disbanded and so on. Regardless of what I try, it'll all be fruitless' (interview, June 16, 2006).

Yet the Confucian-derived notion of heaven (*trời, thiên*) goes beyond the idea of an impersonal force controlling the fates and fortunes of humans in that it also 'provides a goal for moral striving' in order for a person to 'realize the moral potential inherent with his human nature' (Alexander 1980, 408; see also Wang 2011, 78). People can thus also positively affect their destiny through the cultivation of virtue and moral righteousness. Mr Hiền explained, 'We also have the proverb "morality wins over fate" (*đức năng thắng số*), that means if a person lives in a morally good way this will conquer fate.' Amoral determinism (or 'blind fate') is therefore only one side of the coin. The other side is that fate also offers a certain degree of scope for the improvement of one's lot through self-cultivation, hard work, dedication and a morally upright lifestyle—albeit it should be noted that due to prevailing gender assumptions, a Vietnamese woman's fate is commonly considered to be much more unyielding and therefore more difficult to alter than that of a man (Leshkovich 2006, 288).

Hard work and diligence are thus not understood as the only avenues to good fortune in the sense of wealth and prosperity. Like Mrs Tâm, the souvenir vendor quoted in the introductory vignette, many women traders believe that wealth is not just the result of personal effort or other this-worldly circumstances, but also 'fortune bestowed by heaven' (*lộc trời cho*). *Lộc* (in Chinese: *lu*) is a Sino-Vietnamese word that, in ancient times, referred to the salary of a scholar-bureaucrat in the imperial administration, a position that signified a high social status and material wellbeing. In combination with the concepts of *phúc* (happiness; in Chinese: *lu*) and *thọ* (longevity; in Chinese: *shou*), *lộc* carries the general meaning of good luck, fortune, prosperity and divine benevolence (Soucy 2006, 109). In combination with the notion of heaven as the ruler of fate, *lộc* has come to denote a person's 'fate-fortune', that is, the material assets and benefits which she or he has been endowed by heaven. *Lộc* has thus a predominantly material and tangible quality, either in the form of wealth or in

a very concrete sense of an object, for example a fruit offering taken back from an altar, or a talisman bought during a pilgrimage. As such, *lộc* is also transferable to others and forms part of larger social processes of care-giving, reciprocal exchange and relationship construction (Soucy 2006).

Recent anthropological inquiries have focused attention on the ways in which notions of luck, fortune and fate are imbricated in the creation of ‘interlaced spheres of exchange’ (Da Col 2012a, 17) between human and non-human agents. Such exchange relations between the earthly world and its counterpart—the realm of deities, spirits and ancestors—have long been central elements of Vietnamese religious belief and ritual practice (Taylor 2004, 225). The supernatural world is imagined as a reflection of the human world (*‘đương sao, âm vậy’*), which is why its inhabitants are thought of as having the same needs and desires as mortals. Material wealth in this world also entails the moral duty of the living to fulfil their ritual obligations towards otherworldly beings with proper sumptuousness. Transactional sacrificial practices are therefore to be understood as a constitutive part of the reciprocal relationship between people, ancestors and deities that keeps the flow of wealth and prosperity—that is, *lộc*—in constant motion. As I shall show in this paper, the metaphysical assumptions that frame Vietnamese perceptions of the self *vis-à-vis* the powers believed to govern a person’s fate-fortune in this world also impact on perceptions of economic success and moral responsibility in the marketplace.

Contraband and Competition

Lào Cai market is a huge, state-owned indoor market in the provincial capital that hosted a total of 702 registered vendors in 2012. Due to the harsh climate conditions in northern Vietnam, the T-shaped, two-storey main building (Zone A) constructed in 1996 looked dated and weather-worn. The ground floor was divided into different sections specialising in different types of goods: household electronics; Vietnamese handicraft; traditional herbal medicine; and bags and suitcases. For the majority of vendors, trading constitutes the main source of the family’s income. During fieldwork, my assistant and I frequently hung out at the souvenir section, moving from stall to stall, chatting with the vendors during the quiet hours and watching the scene when the market was bustling with shoppers (see [Figure 1](#)). With one exception, all of the approximately twenty vendors in the souvenir section were women, with an average age of between thirty and forty-five years.

As mentioned above, the souvenir section of the market was patronised mainly by tourists. Most tourists only spent a few hours in town before heading to their actual destination, given that Lào Cai City itself does not have much to offer in terms of major tourist attractions. Vietnamese and non-Chinese international tourists were typically on their way to (or from) the former French hill station of Sapa that has turned into the most important tourist hub in the province since the early 1990s (Michaud & Turner 2006). Chinese tourists, in contrast, had either booked a one-day Lào Cai city tour (for example, as part of their organised travels in Yunnan province)

or a five-day package that included Hanoi and Halong Bay (see Chan 2013). Whenever a group of Chinese tourists came into sight, the vendors sprang into action. Armed with cartons of Vietnamese cigarettes, candy bags and boxes of instant coffee, they entered into fierce competition with each other over prospective customers. As the tourists walked past the stalls, they were approached by the vendors chirping in basic Chinese: ‘Come on, buy from me! I sell cheap cigarettes, genuine ones with tax stamp, come buy a few cartons, I give you a good price’. A common vending strategy was to offer free samples—a cigarette, a cup of instant coffee—and get the Chinese tourist to sit down at the stall. Some vendors, especially those fluent in conversational Chinese, had established friendly relations with tour guides, who led their groups to the vendor’s stall on a regular basis. Whereas small groups of wealthier Chinese (most often businessmen) easily succumbed to the charms of pretty Vietnamese women vendors and often ended up buying lots of things mainly for the sake of it, many of the group tourists just seized the opportunity of having free coffee and cigarettes without buying anything.

Male domestic tourists, in contrast, were often drawn to Lào Cai market by the prospect of finding items that were not readily available elsewhere, such as sex toys, aphrodisiacs, tasers and guns. The sale of prohibited items was something I was not supposed to know officially, but over time, and through the grapevine and the few informants who were open about it, I obtained a sense of how things worked. Mrs Thanh, who, besides brokering and transporting legitimate wares, also supplied Lào Cai marketeers with ‘hot’ merchandise, reminisced that when she first came to Lào Cai City in the late 1990s, she mainly relied on the river road for smuggling (conversation with author, February 12, 2011). The ferry boats across the Red River operated in bright daylight not far from the official border crossing and provided their services to traders/porters as well as to tourists who did not want to bother acquiring an official permit for just a brief a visit to the other side. The price per round trip was 100,000 đồng per person (around USD5) in 2010, of which the boat owner had to pay 70,000 đồng to the border patrol police and the river police as a bribe for running his business. Those carrying merchandise were charged an extra 15,000 đồng per kilogram (around 70 US cents). In addition, the ferry boat option required the smuggler to negotiate complicated bribe arrangements with various local law enforcement agencies and state officials (Endres 2014). Considering all the fees and costs, the ferry boat option was only worthwhile for either large loads of contraband or for illegal items that were difficult to hide on the body. Mrs Thanh had therefore shifted to using the official border gate (the bridge across Nậm Thi River that connects Lào Cai City with the Chinese town of Hekou, Yunnan province) for her smuggling activities. Each time she smuggled contraband into Vietnam, she only carried small amounts of prohibited items that were either carefully stacked underneath legal goods or hidden inside her loose-fitting trousers. She explained: ‘These fake weenies [she uses the Vietnamese expression *chim* (bird) for the vibrators] are small, just a bit larger than a mobile phone. I carry them on the body (*trong người*), strapped to my shins, because [the customs officials] can’t search

me there'. If the customs officer on duty was known to be particularly prissy, she would rather wait for the next shift than risk having her goods confiscated. Every once in a while, the woman smuggler said she was 'caught' by the mobile market control team that frequently patrolled the border gate area. 'Of course they see me going to the market [that is, crossing the border] every day, so they know,' Thanh explained. 'I pay 400.000 đồng to make law [*làm luật*; negotiate a bribe] with them. They say, "When going to the market, you need to know the right moves [*đi chợ thì phải biết điều*]"'.⁵

At Lào Cai market, these items were carefully stored out of sight, and customers interested in taking a look were asked to step inside the vendor's booth. Those who were not yet familiar with the market first needed to ask where they might find what they were looking for. A young stall-helper named Bình related:

A lot of people ask for toys [*đồ chơi*], and of course they mean adult toys, but I pretend to be naïve and refer them to the children's toys section. But some ask directly 'Do you sell hot goods?'. In this case you need to be very careful, as these guys could as well be plainclothes policemen (conversation with author, December 31, 2010).

When Bình referred a customer to one of the 'hot goods' vendors, she had to be pretty sure that this person was not an inquiry agent, otherwise she would have been in trouble as well. In case the deal worked out successfully, however, she also received a portion of the profit.

Due to the seasonal nature of tourism, Lào Cai market stallholders earned their highest profits during the peak summer season, when scores of excursionists from the Red River Delta escaped the lowland heat and spent a few days in the cooler, mountainous region. During these times, rivalry among the vendors was fierce. Rather than experiencing the marketplace as it was often idealised by the vendors (namely, as imbued with an intimate sense of community and mutual support, as expressed in the Vietnamese adage *buôn có bạn, bán có phường*; 'selling with friends, vending as a group'), many stallholders felt that it had recently turned into a combat zone for the selfish pursuit of personal wealth at the expense of moral integrity and ethical conduct. 'The vendors in this section only peer at each other,' one woman complained to me, 'They don't help or support each other much, because they don't live with sentiment [*sống không tình cảm*]. Instead, they hate and envy the success of others' (conversation with author, August 21, 2012). During the many hours I spent at Lào Cai market, I witnessed several heated arguments between stallholders that started because one felt the other had snatched customers away by approaching potential clients outside the boundaries of her stall and undercutting the prevailing price (*bán phá giá*). Ms Hiền, who operated one of the souvenir stalls, referred to such practices as 'selling goods by way of fighting and robbing from others', and pointed at one of her stall neighbours as an example:

That one over there, Vân, she's short and very fast, that's why we call her Vân-B52, she darts around the section like an arrow in order to drag clients to her stall, it's as if she's hunting them down. Or take that bitch over there, she is dumping prices

and snatches away other vendors' customers. Like when she overhears that I'm offering to sell a bottle of liquor for 400.000 đồng, she would call that customer over straight away and offer a price of 300.000 đồng. Now how mean is that?!

Mrs Tâm, a pretty divorcee and single mother, likewise condemned this behaviour:

Competing with others and thrusting goods on the customers is not my style. I act according to the principle 'take it or leave it' if a customer gives me 100.000 đồng and I owe him 40.000 đồng in change, I give him the money right away instead of [keeping it and] urging him to buy more. I just don't do that.

Pursuing money too aggressively is thus not considered the proper conduct of a market vendor. Mrs Hà, whose stall in the souvenir section was conveniently located near the entrance gate, put it this way: 'You can only enjoy as much as heaven provides', she said. 'Chasing around selling things doesn't do any good, in the end the money that flows in through the front door disappears again out the back door'. Yet Vietnamese petty traders would also not deny the need to work hard in order to survive in the market, and the daily routine of running a successful stall in a public market requires them to master the 'art of vending' (*nghệ thuật bán hàng*). In this regard, Lào Cai marketeers stressed the importance of developing an individualised style of selling goods (*cách bán hàng riêng*) that set them apart from their fellow vendors. 'Each vendor has her own style,' Mrs Tâm suggested, 'if not you'll starve to death with your teeth bared'. Vending styles and techniques that were morally and ethically acceptable included treating clients in polite and respectful ways, establishing trust by persuading them of the quality and value of the goods (so that they would recommend her stall to others or return on their next trip to Lào Cai) and sweet-talking shoppers into buying more than intended. The ways in which traders like Tâm and Hiền (quoted above) conceptually framed their economic agency, however, reveal that discipline, rational calculation and personal skills are very much downplayed in personal accounts. Instead, a person's propensity for trade and the wealth generated by it were narratively constructed as part of a person's fate decreed by heaven. Concomitantly, a trader's success in business was referred to as *lộc*—a key concept in Vietnamese thought that relates to good fortune and material wealth as 'signs of supernatural blessing' (Soucy 2012, 90).

Fortune Bestowed by Heaven

When asked what is needed to be a successful trader, Lào Cai market vendors often cited a predestined affinity (or propensity) for trade (*duyên bán hàng*) that grants them good fortune in their economic pursuits. This predestined affinity for trade also accounted for Mrs Tâm's success in the souvenir section. Although she conceived of some of her fellow vendors as 'enemies surrounding her from all sides', she felt no fear of losing anything. '*Lộc* is bestowed by heaven,' Tâm argued, 'and I am heaven's child, the child of Buddha. Nobody can take away from me what heaven bestows, and no enemy can harm me, but whatever I do, I do it with moderation and reason'. Whereas her fellow vendors competed for customers by chirping and flirting, she allegedly did not have to do anything to draw potential buyers to her stall:

‘Frequently, when I take a rest at lunchtime inside my stall, a client comes by and wants to buy from me. Everyone says this woman is fated for heavenly luck’.

Whereas *lộc* bestowed by heaven forms part of a person’s pre-ordained fate-fortune, it can also be enhanced by moral acts or good deeds. Mrs Khanh, a vendor of wooden handicraft items and fishing rods phrased it this way: ‘Success in the marketplace depends on your predestined affinity for trade, on fortune bestowed by heaven, and therefore you have to be decent and kind, otherwise you’ll lose customers and can’t sell much’. What Mrs Khanh seemed to imply is that acting in accordance with moral virtue may indeed account for an enhancement of *lộc*, whereas heaven would withdraw its favour from a trader whose conduct does not comply with the social norms and moral values that regulate trading relationships.

Yet such moral considerations do not always and necessarily imply compliance with the law. Many Lào Cai traders see their illegal pursuits as a legitimate way to make a humble living, not as a way of getting rich. ‘Honest people who run legitimate businesses stay poor; they just make enough for a bowl of rice,’ a male vendor explained. ‘If you want to become rich, you have to smuggle and trade in prohibited goods’. While this certainly holds true for larger criminal networks involved in the illegal cross-border trade of ore, timber, wildlife or drugs, it is not necessarily the case for small-scale traders who trade in strictly prohibited, ‘hot’ items. Mrs Xuân, for example, whose merchandise also included strictly prohibited items, likewise justified her success in business in moral terms: ‘I used to be poor and miserable, but I was always kind-hearted and traded in a morally sound way (*lành mạnh*). I never cheated in commerce (*không buôn gian, bán lận*) and never betrayed anyone or took anything from anyone’ (conversation with author, December 10, 2010). In contrast to Mrs Tâm, who could not reconcile the sale of prohibited items with her conscience, Mrs Xuân did not seem to regard the illegal aspects of her trading activities as morally illicit. ‘I live true to my conscience (*đúng lương tâm*),’ she argued. ‘I am on good terms with everyone, I help everyone, but what other people think about me I don’t know’. For the outspoken vendor, money is allegedly much less important than her family’s happiness. ‘Having a husband and children is already happiness,’ Xuân explained. ‘We don’t worry too much about money, even in times when money is tight we are still happy and live comfortably’. In common with other women vendors, Mrs Xuân credited her predestined affinity for trade as key to her entrepreneurial success:

A person who is fated for success in trade is a person on whom heaven bestows *lộc*. That person attracts lots of customers, makes good sales and earns high profits. In contrast, a person who is not destined for trade will meet more difficulties and only make small profits.

Unlike Mrs Xuân, however, Mrs Thủy, a vendor of ritual items (incense, candles and votive paper offerings), deliberately kept her profit margins low. This, she argued, was necessary in order to ensure continued good fortune for her children and grandchildren: ‘I only sell with small profit and make sure the items are of good quality in order to draw *lộc* that I can pass on to my progeny (*để lấy lộc cho con cháu*)’.

về sau). Mrs Thủy's statement reflects both the ambiguity of moral meanings attached to commercial exchanges in Vietnamese society and the challenges that women traders face in their attempts to reconcile 'traditional' feminine virtues (including their responsibility for the welfare and happiness of their families) with their struggle for survival in the marketplace (Leshkovich 2015). From this perspective, the notion of fate-fortune bestowed by heaven may also serve the reinforcing of moral values and virtuous behaviour—or in the words of Esther Eidinow (2011, 157) quoted above, 'the taking of responsibility'.

Mrs Hương, a vendor of traditional herbal medicine products, considered her work in a similar vein: 'Trading in medicinal herbs brings *lộc* and happiness to my children, which is why I don't dare to do anything bad, as it will affect their lives in negative ways'. By emphasising the interrelation between moral behaviour and the flow of *lộc*, Thủy and Hương alluded to the Vietnamese concept *phúc đức* (merit and virtue) which holds that a person's moral merits—as well as their failures—will be passed on to future generations, thus forming part of their fate-fortune. The acquisition of *phúc đức*, as Slote (1998, 324) points out, is primarily the responsibility of women, as expressed in the saying *phúc đức tại mẫu*. Accordingly, a morally virtuous woman is seen to bring good fortune and happiness to the family, whereas a woman considered as morally depraved may be regarded as the cause of misfortune and calamity (Nguyen & Harris 2009, 132). Men, on the other hand, 'embody the *inborn* "morality", "honor", and "reputation" of their entire patrilineage' (Rydström 2001, 403, my emphasis) and display their moral virtuousness by fulfilling their filial duties and obligations towards their patrilineage, the neglect of which may likewise affect the fate-fortune of the family bloodline in negative ways.

Good deeds and moral acts are indeed not limited to the world of the living, but include paying respect and making offerings to a vast pantheon of ancestors and deities. According to Vietnamese belief, the latter are mindful of human needs and aspirations, and respond to the attention of worshippers by bestowing upon them divine favours and blessed gifts—that is, *lộc*. In the last two decades, the ritual invocation of powerful divine beings has gained in importance as a strategy by which Vietnamese traders confront the risks and uncertainties inherent to the market and 'give familiar form to that which is ineffable and apparently uncontrollable' (Taylor 2004, 87). Many members of the crowded Vietnamese pantheon of divine beings have thus assumed the (contested) role of spiritual agents of economic success and material wealth (Endres 2011, 101–102). One example among many is the Seventh Prince (Ông Hoàng Bảy), a deified, legendary mandarin-official whose shrine is located in the village of Bảo Hà, approximately 70 km away from Lào Cai City. The Seventh Prince enjoys much popularity among traders and entrepreneurs from many parts of the country, as he is perceived as particularly efficacious in bestowing luck in business. Another characteristic trait associated with the Prince is a penchant for gambling, which is why risky business ventures, speculative land deals and illegal games of chance are all perceived to be within his scope of divine agency. Unlike the stern warrior-hero Trần Hưng Đạo (and also unlike Buddha), the Seventh Prince

does not seem to care about the moral integrity of his worshippers or about the moral virtues of their purposes. Philip Taylor's (2004, 266) characterization of goddesses in southern Vietnam likewise applies to northern Vietnamese deities who, like the Seventh Prince, 'will help anyone with anything, but the assistance they offer is conditional on dealing with them correctly, believing in them, staying faithful to them, and repaying them'.

In order to invoke the Prince's blessings, Lào Cai market vendors visit the shrine on various occasions throughout the year in order to place offerings (flowers, incense, food items and votive paper money) on the altar and pray for good luck in their daily affairs. On 14 February 2011, that is, on the eleventh day of the Vietnamese lunar year of the cat, I joined a group of vendors from the market's electronics section on their motorbike trip to Bảo Hà. The temple was already teeming with worshippers at the time of our arrival in the late morning. The vendors, four men and five women, immediately started unpacking their boxes of offerings—including fruits, cans of energy drinks and beer, instant coffee, cigarettes, votive paper items, a whole boiled chicken and red sticky rice (*xôi gấc*)—and arranged them neatly on trays provided by the temple management. For each of the vendors, a ritual petition for wealth and *lộc* (*sớ cầu tài cầu lộc*) was prepared by one of the temple's petition-scribes. Further adorned with a number of small money bills and several metallic gold paper lotus flowers (bought from one of the devotional paraphernalia shops outside the temple gates; see Figure 2), the offering trays were then placed on the main altar. After performing their kowtows and invocations at the Seventh Prince's shrine, the vendors reclaimed their offerings, now transformed into *lộc*, and put them back into the boxes. The group then went on to perform a slightly less elaborate worshipping ritual at two additional temples in the vicinity before settling down in a small roadside rest house. Straw mats were laid out and the participants started unpacking their *lộc* items for equal distribution among the group. Whereas the chicken and the sticky rice were consumed on the spot (together with some additional dishes prepared by the rest house owners), the other items were stored in plastic bags for the drive home, where the vendors would offer shares of their *lộc* to family and friends. The traders' engagement with the spiritual realm, of which a pilgrimage to the Seventh Prince's temple is just one example, thus not only enhances the (conception of a) continuous flow of *lộc* between the realms of gods and humans, but also the building of relationships of sentiment (*tình cảm*) with fellow vendors and others.

Channelling Luck

Whereas *lộc* bestowed by heaven can be secured and enhanced through good moral conduct, ethical economic practice and transactional engagements with the spirit world, the vicissitudes of the Vietnamese marketplace also leave ample room for chance luck. One woman vendor likened her work to that of a fisherman who depends on luck rather than on personal skills and hard work: 'On a lucky day, you may catch a lot, but if you're unlucky, you may not even catch a single fish'. The same

applied to trade, she said. ‘When the market is crowded with customers and you’re lucky, you may sell lots of goods with a high profit. Yet on other days, when the market is deserted, it is a waste of energy to even open your stall’ (conversation with author, December 5, 2010).

Chance luck (*may mắn*) can be fostered by a number of means: choosing an auspicious day and hour for re-opening the market stall at the beginning of the new lunar year, for example, is crucial for securing good luck in trade. Auspicious dates are commonly calculated based on the Vietnamese lunar calendar. Although the solar calendar was adopted as Vietnam’s official calendar in 1954, the lunar calendar (*lịch âm* or *lịch vạn niên*) was never completely abandoned and has, in the post-*đổi mới* era, reasserted its important role in structuring the ritual year with its religious commemorative days, traditional festivals and ancestral death anniversaries, as well as in ‘indicating when to avoid certain foods, buying certain things, travelling, building a house and getting married’ (Derks 2015, 7). Whether a day is considered as auspicious or inauspicious for certain activities depends on astrological calculations that consider the twelve zodiac signs of the Sino-Vietnamese lunar calendar and link them with the Five Elements (*ngũ hành*; water, fire, wood, metal, earth) and the principles of Yin and Yang. This method not only calculates the influence of good or bad stars at particular times of the hour, day, month or year, but also the ways in



Figure 1 A Typical Stall in the Souvenir Section of Lào Cai market (Photo by the Author).



Figure 2 Gold Paper Flowers for Sale as Offerings in Front of a Temple (Photo by the Author).

which these stars impact on a person's fate, thereby predicting major and minor obstacles (*đại hạn, tiểu hạn*) in the course of life (Hữu Ngọc 1995, 664–665).

Besides consulting their lunar calendars (or an astrologer, fortune-teller or geomancer) in order to select an auspicious time for important endeavours, certain days are generally avoided for certain activities. Vendors selling items that are associated with bad luck due to their colour (such as black beehive coal briquettes, see Derks 2015) may have difficulties finding customers on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month. Many traders avoid borrowing or spending money (that is, repaying debts) on the first day of the lunar month, as they believe it would bring them bad luck for the whole month. On a daily basis, it is the first customer who determines the luck of the day: 'The first customer of the day (*người mở hàng*) is very important,' Mrs Xuân related. 'If this person has a good, nimble soul (*via tốt, nhanh nhẹn*), then the vendor will be very lucky on that day, she will sell lots of goods or feel very easy-going' (conversation with author, December 10, 2010). The Vietnamese concept of the soul distinguishes between the spiritual soul (*hồn*) and the material soul (*via*). Whereas the former is 'a facet of humanity rather than personality', the material soul 'configures the moral person and his or her unique personality' (Kwon 2008, 106). The first deal of the day has to be sealed in a smooth way, without much haggling by the buyer. Vendors often feel jittery before their first sale, and many Vietnamese

avoid going to the market in the early hours for fear of feeling obliged to buy an item they in fact find too expensive or not nice enough just to ‘open the stall’ (*mở hàng*) of the vendor. Others, in contrast, take advantage of the vendor’s desperation in order to strike a particular bargain. As one vendor explained, ‘For the first sale of the day it is not important to make a big profit, one may sell for the cost price or even with a small loss, because it’s only for good luck on that day’. If the first sale turns out to be a difficult one and the vendor feels that her stall remains deserted, she may ward off bad luck by ‘burning the material soul (*đốt vía*)’ of the allegedly responsible client. For that purpose, the vendor sets fire to a small sheet of paper and waves it around while whispering the words ‘favourable soul, remain—wicked soul, fly away (*vía lành ở lại vía dữ bay đi*)!’. If the market day was profitable, the vendor would attribute this success to the first customer who brought good luck to the stall.

The practice of *đốt vía* can still be observed despite being prohibited due to fire regulations in the marketplace. For the same reason, vendors are not allowed to worship the god of wealth (Thần Tài) and the god of the land (Ông Địa) at their stalls, as this involves burning incense.⁶ Both deities are believed to enhance good fortune and protect wealth. Small altars containing their figurines are most common in shops and restaurants, where they are placed on the ground facing the entrance door. Good luck can also be attracted by so-called feng-shui objects—such as frogs, horses and lucky Buddhas—that are believed to channel the random flow of vital geocosmological energies to where they are needed most. These objects were widely available for sale at Lào Cai market and had become popular with tourists as gifts and souvenirs that bring good luck, happiness and prosperity to their owners.

Conclusion: Vietnamese ‘Cosmoeconomics’

Drawing from Isabel Stengers (2005) who employed the neologism ‘cosmopolitics’ to conceive of a political pluriverse where non-humans assume the role of agents within political horizons, Giovanni da Col (2012b, 191) has suggested the term ‘cosmoecconomics’ to account conceptually for the ‘hybrid spheres where transactions of forces such as fortune, luck, and vitality materially inhabit economic exchange and conceptions of value’. Vietnamese ‘cosmoecconomics’, as I have shown, revolve around the notion of *lộc* bestowed by heaven, that is, a concept of fate-fortune closely related to issues of morality and social (or human) responsibility. Whereas chance luck (*may mắn*) in the market is essentially circumstantial and amoral, a person’s propensity for trade and the wealth generated by it is conceived of as part of a person’s fate-fortune decreed by heaven. This fortune—*lộc*—may be secured by moral virtue (and possibly also lost by immoral behaviour), enhanced by ritual practice, reciprocated in ritual exchange, distributed among kin and transferred to future generations. *Lộc* is thus in constant circulation: from heaven to humans; from humans to deities and ancestors; and from deities and ancestors back to humans. Rather than being conceived of as the result of an amoral (blind) fate, or as solely dependent on moral virtue and proper human/moral conduct, *lộc* bequeathed by

heaven's will, a predestined affinity for trade (*duyên bán hàng*) and good moral and ethical behaviour in trade affairs are mutually reinforcing elements of success in the marketplace.

Yet, as Katherine Browne (2009, 17) aptly remarks, 'market economies make fewer moral demands on economic actors than precapitalist economies, where all economic exchange carries a moral mandate'. The deliberations of the Lào Cai women traders quoted in this paper indicate that, since Vietnam's turn to a market-oriented economy, the marketplace has turned into a contested terrain wherein new (and often illicit) opportunities for economic self-advancement and competitive selling strategies clash with ideas of moral virtue and principles of ethical conduct. In the morally ambiguous sphere of the market, the notion of fortune bestowed by heaven may thus also exert a moderating force oriented towards human responsibility by emphasising the importance of cultivating virtue in order to prosper in this world and ensure the wellbeing of future generations.

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Notes

- [1] All proper names in this paper are pseudonyms. Research was conducted from October 2010 to March 2011, and in August/September 2012, followed by a short visit in March 2013. At the time of writing (February 2015), the municipal government's long-standing plan to demolish Zone A and construct a new, modern market has reached fruition. It may take a few years until the vendors are relocated from their current temporary vending spaces into the new market, and their futures remain uncertain.
- [2] Although highland minority groups (Hmong, Yao, Tay, Nung, and so on) account for the majority of the overall population in Lào Cai province, the provincial capital (as well as most district towns) is now overwhelmingly dominated by Kinh (or Việt) lowland settlers and migrants. The concepts of 'fate' and 'fortune' considered in this paper are deeply engrained in Vietnamese (ethnic majority) society, but, as in every society, the extent to which individuals subscribe to certain beliefs varies according to a number of factors, such as gender, education, religious denomination and local tradition. Furthermore, as Kate Jellema (2005, 236) aptly remarked, 'Vietnamese moral resources are diverse, heterodox, and full of internal contradiction'. This paper does not claim to do justice to this diversity, nor does it give a full account of how certain beliefs and moral norms play out in the life courses of the market traders portrayed. Rather, it attempts to draw attention to the hitherto neglected impact of

metaphysical assumptions on Vietnamese economic practice in the hope of stimulating further research in this direction.

- [3] The vast majority of Lào Cai stallholders were ethnic Kinh who originated from various lowland provinces. Those who considered Lào Cai City as their hometown were usually the offspring of earlier lowland migrants. Women traders dominated the market (as they do in Vietnam as a whole), but male traders were not exceptional and could be found in almost every section of Lào Cai market, with the highest proportion selling household electronics, mobile phones and Vietnamese handicraft. In many cases, husband and wife operated a stall together or tended separate stalls in the same or in different sections.
- [4] Note that in his chapter ‘Fate, Risk and Security’, Giddens (2006, 29) also acknowledges that ‘the notions of fate and destiny have by no means disappeared in modern societies’.
- [5] Consisting of the words ‘to know’ (*biết*) and ‘word, sentence, fact, matter, pretext’ (*điều*), the Vietnamese compound *biết điều* is translated as ‘reasonable, judicious, sensible’ in the dictionary. Its connotations, however, seem to go well beyond this meaning and translate into ‘knowing how to behave appropriately in a certain situation’ as well as ‘knowing one’s place in the interaction’. Thanks go to Minh Nguyen for pointing this out.
- [6] Unlike many other public markets in Vietnam, Lào Cai market did not have a room with a central altar for worshipping.

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