



Café Creatives *Coffee Entrepreneurs in Việt Nam*

By Sarah G. Grant

Mountaintop coffee plantation and shop on Phan Xi Păng Mountain in Sa Pa, Việt Nam. Source: © Shutterstock.

Việt Nam is the second-largest producer of coffee in the world.¹ If this comes as a surprise to regular coffee consumers living outside Việt Nam, it would certainly not be a surprise after spending even a brief amount of time in the country. Cafés line major through streets and fleck back alleyways while blurring the line between public and private space. In fact, one industry-known café down an alleyway in an outer district of Ho Chi Minh City does not appear to be a café at all—a local coffee enthusiast opened his home (and his costly espresso machines and refrigerator) to young amateur baristas looking to develop their latte art skills. In informal spaces like the alleyway café, prospective entrepreneurs share ideas and pour steamed milk into locally roasted espresso while visually documenting the experience for dissemination on social media platforms.

Although cafés are highly visible in much of the country, coffee itself is also widely recognized as a major cash crop grown in Việt Nam. Buon Ma Thuot, the “Coffee Capital” of Việt Nam and provincial capital of the leading coffee-producing Dak Lak Province, holds a biannual coffee festival that draws thousands of visitors for the event, often sponsored by major coffee joint stock companies with intimate ties to the state.

Of course, coffee is not indigenous to Southeast Asia. The colonial history of coffee cultivation by the French dates to the late 1800s and is sometimes capitalized on by café-branding narratives. This history is also romanticized in domestic and international tourism promotions for Việt Nam, waxing on about the “pleasant legacies from its years of French rule.”² The complicated colonial (1946–1954) and successive American war (1963–1975) periods directly affected coffee production in Việt Nam, but it was *Doi Moi* (renovation) in 1986 and the influx of foreign investment in the Vietnamese coffee industry that drastically altered the production and consumption landscape. The latter has been driven by a growing community of cosmopolitan, social media-savvy young entrepreneurs who have created a space that brings together creative design minds with the pursuit of creating a globally recognized café scene.

The *Doi Moi* economic transition also introduced new possibilities in and anxieties around young adult employment. Not long after the *Doi Moi* reforms in urban cities like Hanoi, young adults were “increasingly showing their entrepreneurial spirit by establishing enterprises, running export and import companies, and managing service-sector industries, amongst other ventures.”³ The economic reforms and the booming Vietnamese coffee economy of the 1990s resulted in the growth of a massive coffee export industry, although domestic consumption was relatively slow to catch up.⁴ Today, domestic coffee consumption is on the rise, with increasing rates documented annually in USDA Foreign Agricultural Service reports.⁵ With the growing domestic consumption rate, an emergent popularity of café culture and creative entrepreneurial opportunities in café design, drink development, and branding illuminate what it means to be an entrepreneur in contemporary Việt Nam.

Vietnamese café culture is only partially about the coffee—Vietnamese young adults and their creative, often-self-taught photographic and creative design talents are molding the face of Vietnamese coffee culture, and entrepreneurs are quick to capitalize on these emergent talents. Drawing upon several entrepreneurial experiences, the following narratives examine how the process of becoming an entrepreneur is also a way to mitigate the uncertainty of the future for young adults in Việt Nam. Similarly, I address how creative talent is utilized to both offset the risks of entrepreneurship in order to realize personal business aspirations. The remainder of this essay is a more in-depth introduction to both one of Việt Nam’s leading industries and the significant number of entrepreneurs, many of them young people, coffee is helping create.

Entrepreneurial Backdrops

Vietnamese specialty café entrepreneurs reflect an innovative use of creative talent while attending to local and national consumption patterns and global trends in the coffee industry.⁶ Rather than investing in large multinational cafés such as Starbucks, local entrepreneurs are taking

advantage of talented interior and graphic designers, architects, baristas, and content managers to shape an image of a new Vietnamese café scene—an image that positions Việt Nam as a coffee-producing and -consuming country. These entrepreneurs move away from a colonial nostalgia marketing scheme toward global design trends and modish styles of coffee preparation that favor high-quality coffee over adulteration with sugar and artificial flavors. Exploring these creative networks as one node of a larger entrepreneurship framework in Southeast Asia encourages a nuanced understanding of what it means to aspire, consume, and brand self and business in contemporary Việt Nam. Furthermore, exploring private entrepreneurship from an ethnographic perspective reveals the everyday tensions entrepreneurs experience



View of downtown Dalat, also known as “Little Paris.” Source: © Alamy.

at the interstices of the state and a larger global community. Anthropological work on entrepreneurship in Thailand has explored domestic entrepreneurs’ roles in a posteconomic crisis Asia and larger contexts of Thai citizens engaging in global economies with an entrepreneurial spirit.⁷ As anthropologist Ara Wilson points out, “Paradoxically, the form and figure of the entrepreneur is represented as both very American and very universal.”⁸ In Việt Nam, the socioeconomic context in which discourses of entrepreneurship emerge reveals a much broader cultural landscape about private enterprises, and local, regional, and global ambitions. The Vietnamese figure of the entrepreneur is, paradoxically, a product of post-Doi Moi economic liberalization and the limitations of a market-oriented socialist state bureaucracy.

In Dalat, a small highland town in south-central Việt Nam, small cafés and affiliated coffee-producing ventures capitalize on a growing cache of amateur photographers by spreading their brand through consumers’ social media feeds rather than traditional marketing campaigns. This social media-based method of advertising is not new, but the way it is utilized in Việt Nam explains a form of grassroots entrepreneurship in which Vietnamese consumers shape the domestic market while being shaped by global markets. Developing a unique signature drink and promoting it through social media is one way café entrepreneurs can set themselves apart in the sea of cafés. Drawing inspiration from international barista competitions, Duc, a young café owner, explained that “a signature drink tells my customers that I am different from the rest” and that attention to seasonal produce, fresh flowers, a rotating music selection, and development as a business owner matters.⁹ A stagnant menu is not a good sign, and Duc can continually share updates to his menu on Instagram while encouraging his customers to share their own hashtagged photographs and captions. Duc was careful to point out that none of his photos “look like traditional Vietnamese coffee . . . because there is Vietnamese coffee everywhere in Dalat.” By likening and branding his small café as similar to specialty cafés in Singapore or Tokyo, Duc is attempting to reach a market of young Vietnamese consumers who will not only drink the coffee he prepares but also promote it—many of Duc’s patrons are tourists from Ho Chi Minh City with far-reaching social networks.

The backdrop of Dalat itself is important for several reasons. It is the capital of Lam Dong Province, and the region is increasingly known for

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the production of “high-quality” specialty coffees that can only be grown at high altitude. It is also a long-standing domestic tourism destination, known for temperate weather, beautiful vistas, and a “romantic” atmosphere.¹⁰ More recently, Dalat has become a destination for *song ao* (virtual life) photo and social media culture.¹¹ Dalat is also a relatively affordable town to pursue private business ownership compared to urban centers elsewhere in the country. Duc, as a first-time café owner, gave up a lucrative career working for a bank in Ho Chi Minh City to pursue his passion for coffee, independence, and an opportunity to create something in his vision rather than that of his corporate job working for someone else. This was possible in Dalat but not in the big city, where he felt stifled by economic and cultural constraints. Entrepreneurial opportunities in small towns where social capital may not be as immediately significant are starkly different from those in major urban centers.

Entrepreneurial Aspirations

“I really want to open my own café chị.” At the time, Mai was working for a rapidly growing regional “farm-to-cup” coffee company with impeccable branding, a strong social media presence, and a promising future in Việt Nam’s emergent specialty café scene. Despite the company’s success and plans for expansion, Mai wanted to pursue her own creative dream in Vietnamese coffee—a dream that would, ideally, propel her beyond the limitations of her socioeconomic circumstances and the national boundaries that sometimes prevent people like Mai from leaving Việt Nam. Highly educated, fluent in English, and active in the virtual global spaces where coffee enthusiasts share their expertise and training videos, Mai was poised to eventually be her own boss. For a time, she shared her enthusiasm on a YouTube channel, virtually training other Vietnamese baristas in coffee preparation, latte art, and the history of coffee production in the region.



Barista making coffee in a café in Dalat, Việt Nam. Source: © Shutterstock.



Customers enjoying a street café in Hanoi, Việt Nam. Source: © Shutterstock.

Mai grew up in a coffee-farming community, and like many others from her village, she was active in a multigenerational farming family. Unlike some of her peers who sought to use education as a way out of coffee, she envisioned her advanced education as a way to transform Vietnamese coffee by opening her own café that highlighted high-quality, small-scale production for local consumption rather than commodity-grade coffee for export. Sharing her personal café vision and developing a unique entrepreneurial sensibility depended on her personal experience and ability to transfer the sentimentality of mountainous coffee farms in the south-central highlands to urban centers in Hanoi, Danang, and Ho Chi Minh City. She occasionally traveled to these places; nonetheless, she lived in a village outside Dalat.

The word *eventually* is key to understanding entrepreneurship in Việt Nam and Mai's aspirations. The eventuality of entrepreneurial success implies longing, ambition, and a willingness to try new things in the face of risk. It implies that entrepreneurship in Việt Nam is an arduous process, whether one is pursuing a private or social enterprise. Two years after Mai first shared her dream, she had left the established coffee company for an ostensibly riskier venture working at a café at a small homestay just outside of town. She understood the risk, at once afraid of limited upward mobility and the risk inherent in working for someone else's new private business. She was still in Việt Nam, in the same town for that matter, working for someone else. On the surface, not much had changed. Indeed, Mai was still poised to eventually bring her café vision to fruition. In the meantime, her YouTube channel had fallen silent and the long hours of working for someone else's entrepreneurial dream had taken a clear toll on her. Mai's kinship-based obligations and the immediate necessity to financially support herself and extended family limited her ability to produce the capital necessary for a private business.

When it comes to women-owned enterprises in Việt Nam, there is a clear gender financing gap and geographic partiality.¹² Mai faced these structural limitations, in addition to a dearth of personal savings and access to networks with start-up funds. Ultimately undeterred and feeling stagnant in her new job, she revived her social media presence with an aesthetic new Instagram feed and campaign to raise funding for a barista exchange and training visit to a neighboring Southeast Asian country—learning from successful entrepreneurs and experiencing other coffee-producing countries was an important part of her personal development. Still hopeful about developing her café, Mai was hustling as a barista and promoting herself and her vision on various social media platforms. While working her way toward this vision, Mai's previous place of employment was thriving, with café expansion into Ho Chi Minh City and a dedicated following on Facebook and Instagram.

Entrepreneurial Success

I first met Hoang outside of Dalat while visiting a coffee farm and small tasting and quality-control laboratory he used to sample roast his harvested and processed coffee before storing it in warehouses. In the laboratory, I heard about Hoang's entrepreneurial ambitions—they seemed large yet feasible. He was in the early stages of developing an all-inclusive café experience that would cater to locals and foreign tourists alike. The café would feature locally grown varietals of coffee and a roasting space, storage facility, and classroom for lectures and other forms of educational exchange. Several years later, on a return trip to Dalat, the café was open. When I first visited, I had to wait for a seat to open; the café was packed with young out-of-town photographers sharing and editing their work, while other patrons took selfies and mobile phone photographs of their latte art and carefully plated pastries. What was once an entrepreneurial dream for a coffee enthusiast eventually became a thriving private enterprise with ambitious local, national, and global plans. At the local level, the company's original location became a space for coffee education through farm tours and classroom lectures, while the financial success of their wholesale venture and café became increasingly evident.

It is difficult to quantify what entrepreneurial success looks like in Việt Nam, but expansion, profit, and praise are certainly important indicators. While some small café ventures have taken a "slow and steady" approach to growth, others have taken a much more aggressive line to business development while thinking carefully about economies of scale and realistic ways to navigate the complicated private business landscape in Việt Nam. Hoang's venture is one such example of a successful and aggressive café venture. Of course, the success of this café was carefully planned and executed by a Vietnamese entrepreneur who innovatively found a way to forge a café with a new style of drinking coffee, distinct from many other cafés in the country. Notably, Hoang has openly expressed the opinion that coffee quality and the long-term sustainability of the Vietnamese coffee industry should come before their own financial success—rarely does he talk about the company's economic success or expansion plans. When asked about next steps, he once told me that "putting Vietnamese coffee on the map for quality" was an immediate and feasible goal. The ostensible success of this venture is marked not by conspicuous consumption, but rather the publicly shared praise for the café aesthetic, unique signature drinks, and proximity to Việt Nam's high-altitude coffee-producing region. Much of this success is exhibited visually across the social media accounts, blogs, and travel video logs of the Vietnamese who frequent the original location in Dalat. With limited advertising and promotion on the part of the café itself, ubiquitous hashtags, amateur photographs, and word of mouth create an organic spread of popularity and marker of success.

By shaping and sharing their aspirations for success within the confines of the state, entrepreneurs like Duc, Mai, and Hoang reveal personal limitations while recognizing the productive role of developing an entrepreneurial spirit and intentionally embracing the challenges of innovating. For young women like Mai, the challenges are structural—her

socioeconomic position as a third-generation coffee farmer in Việt Nam and the kinship obligations that come with this are especially poignant. For others innovating in the Vietnamese coffee industry, they are creating a new entrepreneurial platform that challenges already-conspicuous consumers to explore new forms of consumption. For example, opening a café that reimagines the style of a nearly iconic Vietnamese drink, the *ca phe sua da*, is an entrepreneurial move that invites domestic consumers who desire a traditional drink to flourish alongside those who have immediate access to global spaces of consumption. These creative innovations and the work of consumers to promote nascent enterprises require significant sacrifice and energy to the point that “entrepreneurs are constantly busy without having any specific plans to be so.”¹³

The overlay of private entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship is an especially “busy” place for entrepreneurs to navigate as state regulations and bureaucracy seem to reveal with growth and financial success. This overlay is also a space for unpacking the ways in which entrepreneurship emerges as a cultural category in Asia while affirming that the categories of and practices of social entrepreneurship and private entrepreneurship are not necessarily mutually exclusive. This becomes especially clear in commodity industries where the problematic nature of larger certification agencies and projects like “fair trade” have been disclosed and taken into account as cafés develop their own ways to address social inequalities in the larger Vietnamese coffee community.¹⁴ One barista I have known since 2014 is especially open about her desire to give back to her community through her passion for coffee—a passion realized in selling coffee directly to consumers, having conversations with them, and creating an educational environment about coffee production in Việt Nam alongside consumers.

Private entrepreneurship in Việt Nam is partially about capturing a larger cultural moment—a hashtag-heavy culture in which symbolic capital is shaped by the experiences captured and cataloged for a larger sphere of Vietnamese and global social networks. The coffee quality and attention to where it comes from, how it is produced, environmental sustainability, and reputation are important, but so too is the extent to which a café space potentially serves as an influencer in the cultural lives of Vietnamese consumers. The entrepreneurial spirit of people like Hoang is especially noteworthy, as his business training is informal and experiential. Like many entrepreneurs elsewhere in the world, he is a creative self-starter with an eye for the future of coffee in Việt Nam. Following the success of Hoang, several other specialty coffee initiatives took off in Dalat, but rather than framing this as a competitive grappling for customers, the specialty coffee community in Dalat is relatively supportive and community-focused, with entrepreneurs quick to acknowledge their shared goals.

Entrepreneurial Futures

In post-Doi Moi Việt Nam, as the effects of neoliberalism, state development, and private entrepreneurship unfold, one may be hard-pressed to avoid seeing the entrepreneurial spirit at work. Tactical marketing schemes abound in Việt Nam, transcending rural-urban divides and encouraging questions about who can be an entrepreneur and what constitutes entrepreneurship in the first place. Duc, Mai, and Hoang, despite their different paths and backgrounds, are all driven by the opportunities present in Việt Nam’s entrepreneurial landscape. They are also acutely aware of the potential for failure—many of their friends and colleagues pursued entrepreneurship, starting small with desired expansion and industry recognition, only to shutter their doors within a year. These entrepreneurs are distinct in that their creative vision of entrepreneurship rests upon an intimate knowledge of global café culture, new coffee technology, and an aesthetic that bridges the gap between global and local. To pursue private entrepreneurship in Việt Nam is to recognize the risks and rewards inherent in the “economic dynamism” of the country and its youth.¹⁵

The Vietnamese specialty café world is a small one, especially considering its small presence in such a massive coffee-producing country. This is not lost on any café entrepreneur with aspirations to rewrite Việt Nam’s

coffee history—turning away from both a French colonial cash crop venture and the post-Doi Moi boom of low-grade commodity coffee—into one that tells their story of creativity and innovation. The narratives that Mai and Hoang want to sell may seem distinct, but they both express a desire to make Vietnamese specialty coffee and cafés specifically for locals, with an eye on global consumption styles. Unlike “bottom-up-pyramid” schemes in social entrepreneur development initiatives or the self-fulfilling market-oriented private entrepreneur, Mai and other café entrepreneurs help us think through the ways in which development in Việt Nam fosters entrepreneurs who fall somewhere in between the social and private.¹⁶ The creativity involved in conceptualizing a new specialty café fosters social entrepreneurship in its framing of Vietnamese coffee as something born of Vietnamese labor, quality control, and a fair price for all those involved in production. Simultaneously, conceptualizing a new specialty café emboldens private entrepreneurship while profit, expansion, and intentional branding draw in consumers. ■

NOTES

1. International Coffee Organization, “Total Production, 1990–Present,” accessed July 1, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yygxzyj2>.
2. Katherine Zoepf, “Hanoi’s Café Society,” *The New York Times*, September 9, 2001, <https://tinyurl.com/y3f7lnpr>.
3. Sarah Turner and Phuong An Nguyen, “Young Entrepreneurs, Social Capital, and Doi Moi in Hanoi, Việt Nam,” *Urban Studies* 42, no. 10 (2005): 1694.
4. See Dang Thanh Ha and Gerald Shively, “Coffee Boom, Coffee Bust, and Small Holder Response in Việt Nam’s Central Highlands,” *Review of Development Economics* 12, no. 2 (2008): 312–326.
5. See Quang Tran, “Việt Nam Coffee Annual,” *USDA Foreign Agricultural Service Global Agricultural Information Network*, June 4, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y3xbnhr8>.
6. Specialty coffee is often distinguished from commodity coffee by its varieties, production method, quality control, and grading by certified “tasters”—specialty coffee may be regulated from its production to consumption point. Cafés that sell and promote specialty coffee in Việt Nam are few, although they are known for producing baristas and roasters who compete on the global coffee competition circuit.
7. See Ara Wilson, “The Empire of Direct Sales and the Making of Thai Entrepreneurs,” *Critique of Anthropology* 19, no. 4 (1999): 401–422.
8. Wilson, “The Empire of Direct Sales,” 402.
9. All names used in this essay are pseudonyms.
10. See Eric T. Jennings, *Imperial Heights: Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indochina* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
11. For more on Dalat “song ao” culture, see Saigoneer, “Anatomy of a Teen Magnet: Da Lat’s Iconic Yellow Wall,” *Saigoneer*, May 14, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/yxmnvvsj>.
12. World Bank, “Women-Owned Enterprises in Việt Nam: Perceptions and Potential (Vol. 2): Main Report” (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2017): <https://tinyurl.com/yxkvj6qj>.
13. Megan Steffan, “Willful Times: Unpredictability, Planning, and Presentism among Entrepreneurs in a Central Chinese City,” *Economic Anthropology* 4, no. 2 (2017): 251.
14. For a more critical approach to the limits of fair trade, see Mark Moberg and Sarah Lyon, eds., *Fair Trade and Social Justice: Global Ethnographies* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).
15. For more on “economic dynamism” and Việt Nam’s “economic resilience,” see Shelton Woods, “Việt Nam in the Twenty-First Century,” *Education About Asia* 23, no. 3 (2018): 42–43.
16. See Catherine Dolan, “The New Face of Development: The ‘Bottom of the Pyramid’ Entrepreneurs,” *Anthropology Today* 28, no. 4 (2012): 3–7.

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