

Food consumption, habitus and the embodiment of social change: Making class and doing gender in urban Vietnam

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Judith Ehlert

University of Vienna, Department of Development Studies, Austria

Abstract

This article draws on Bourdieu's concept of habitus as a means to analyse social distinction and change in terms of class and gender through the lens of food consumption. By focusing on urban Vietnam, this qualitative study looks into the daily practices of food consumption, dieting and working on the body as specific means to enact ideal body types. Economically booming Vietnam has attracted growing investment capital in the fields of body and beauty industries and food retail. After decades of food insecurity, urban consumers find themselves manoeuvring in between growing food and lifestyle options, a nutrition transition, and contradicting demands on the consumer to both indulge and restrain themselves. Taking this dynamic urban context as its point of departure and adopting an intersectional perspective, this article assesses how eating, dieting and body performance are applied in terms of making class and doing gender. It shows that the growing urban landscape of food and body-centric industries facilitates new possibilities for distinction, dependent not only on economic capital but on bodily and cultural capital also, and furthermore, how social habitus regarding food–body relationships are gendered and interlaced with class privilege.

Keywords

embodiment, food, gender, habitus, social change

Introduction

This article investigates food consumption and body work in contemporary urban Vietnam in order to examine the rapid social transformations taking place there. In reference to Bourdieu's habitus concept, it will show how mundane practices such as eating, dieting, feeding children and exercising can offer insight into these social transformations by elaborating how food-related body work helps to draw and maintain social distinctions.

Corresponding author:

Judith Ehlert, University of Vienna, Department of Development Studies, Sensengasse 3/2/2, 1090 Vienna, Austria.

Email: judith.ehlert@univie.ac.at

According to Bourdieu, habitus constitutes the paramount frame through which a person perceives the social world, and is, at the same time, itself framed by a person's socio-cultural and economic conditions of existence and social class position. Habitus thus not only makes certain classifiable practices possible but also instils in a person the capacity to differentiate, appreciate, judge, and thus to distinguish the practices that make up their own scheme of 'taste' from that of others (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 165ff.). In relation to the field of nutrition, this means that taste for certain foods and the ways they are consumed are socially learned. The same applies to the specific orientation to one's own body and the bodies of others, which in this article is called body work. The way bodies are treated in terms of sustenance and appearance produce and are embedded in social differentiations (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 187ff.).

This study will focus on the burgeoning middle class in urban Vietnam and asks of that group two main questions: (1) how does the middle class perform and negotiate its class position through food consumption and body work; and (2) what role does gender play in relation to class in this dynamic context?

Contemporary urban Vietnam provides a vibrant context for studying social transformations in general. This is due, first, to the country's (post)socialist¹ setting and dramatic economic performance in recent decades. Doi Moi, Vietnam's wide-reaching economic reform programme, which has framed the country's transition from a planned economy into a socialist-oriented market economy since the mid-1980s, has facilitated rapid economic growth, industrialisation and urbanisation (Vo & Pham, 2004). Nowadays, Vietnam is amongst the fastest growing economies globally and preminent among the countries in Southeast Asia in terms of consumerism, massive middle-class expansion, and the emergence of the so-called 'new rich' (Thu, 2015). Economic progress in Vietnam has been successful in poverty reduction, has paved the way for (the feminisation of) rural urban migration (Earl, 2014), and has spurred social mobility through education (see Cuong & Lam, 2019; Earl, 2004, 2014). Yet, growing class stratification and social inequality are on the rise as well and fit uncomfortably alongside the egalitarian ideals of the socialist central state (see King et al., 2008; Taylor, 2004; Thu, 2015). Secondly, urban Vietnam is an interesting case for research on class-based habitus because it challenges conventional measurements of class in the first place. The application of indicators such as income and private and public sector differentiation hardly apply in this research setting because of the overlap of private and public sectors and the considerable amount of informal income (see Gainsborough, 2010; Hansen, 2017; King et al., 2008; Nguyen-Marshall et al., 2012). Furthermore, for a (post-)socialist context like Vietnam, it remains highly debated what relative role political capital and human capital play in social mobility and market reforms, also making it difficult to neatly define 'middle class' (Kim, 2004). Given the limited analytical power to research the middle class by income and occupation alone, I applied a wider conception by explicitly focusing on the mundane social practices of food consumption and the meanings and norms involved of drawing social boundaries. This approach utilises the concept of habitus because it brings into focus the elements by which social agents enact class – or 'make class' (Skeggs, 2004) – while 'being' a classed person (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 165ff.).

Furthermore, contemporary urban Vietnam constitutes an interesting case for understanding social transformations through the specific lens of food-related body work because

of the profound changes in the local food system. Vietnam's historic experience of food insecurity brought on by colonialism and war contrasts with today's general food abundance. With economic growth, the domestic food industry has diversified, offering local consumers divergent opportunities to signify their social location and to articulate their social aspirations. Supermarket development has brought foreign foodstuffs into domestic urban markets. Multinational pharmaceutical and industrial food and beverage companies have also played their part in making sure branded products fly off the supermarket shelves (Ehlert & Faltmann, 2019a). Vietnam is said to be currently undergoing a so-called 'nutrition transition'. Changing consumption patterns in favour of high-calorie, high-sugar foodstuffs and beverages, not to mention industrially processed convenience foods, have accompanied rising obesity rates for adults, but especially for young children and adolescents in urban areas (see Ehlert, 2019; Mai et al., 2020; Wertheim-Heck & Raneri, 2020). As a consequence of global economic integration, increasing commercial and consumerist attention has been placed on changing people's relationship to food and their bodies (see Caldwell, 2009). This has become apparent in Vietnam in the thriving market for dieting products, functional food, and healthy and organic foodstuffs. It fostered the emergence of the urban fitness sector in the late 1990s (Leshkovich, 2012) and more recently has led to a boom in yoga studios. Lately, the 'abject' obese body has been put on public display by adapting the US reality show *Dance Your Fat Off* to the local market.

This article will pay special attention to gender as a powerful principle in social differentiation. One common critique of the concept of habitus is that it is class-centric and easily overshadows gender (Krais, 2006; Silva, 2016, see also Reay, 2004; Wacquant, 2016 for broader critical debates). Yet, I regard habitus as especially productive for gender analysis as my understanding of gender shares the same conceptual ground with habitus. Gender is omnipresent in all social situations as the structuring framework through which one perceives the world and, on the other hand, through which one is perceived as a gendered person by others (see Krais, 2006, pp. 125ff.). This understanding follows feminist scholarship that theorises gender as a relational practice between social agents who through everyday social interaction 'do gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Last but not least, the article aims to understand how gender is accomplished in the context of middle-class positioning and privilege. As will be seen, Bourdieu's habitus concept focuses on the body and on the social agent as an embodied subject (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The goal of this article is to help develop a sociology of food that is embodied, in order to make up for what Murcott (2017) calls food sociology's blind spot. Also, the article contributes to the literature on food, gender and class within the dynamic contexts of the Global South.

This article is based on fieldwork in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) between 2014 and 2019 and draws especially on six semi-structured interviews conducted with body experts (as I would like to call them) in October 2017 in HCMC, such as fitness trainers, body coaches, health and nutrition counsellors, medical doctors specialising in nutrition, as well as promoters of functional food. The interviews were part of a broader qualitative research project on food consumption and body-politics in Vietnam, funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF).² Over the course of the research project, which followed a mix of ethnography and grounded theory design, these professionals were key to understanding food habitus and body work and their role in social distinction.

Food, body and social distinction

In general, eating and dieting are social practices that are deeply embedded in people's everyday lives (e.g. Colás et al., 2018; Mennell et al., 1992; Murcott, 1983a; Poulain, 2017). This is especially the case in Vietnam. As Catherine Earl has put it: 'it [is] inconceivable to be social without sharing food' (Earl, 2014, p. 153). While publications on food consumption in Vietnam are rather scarce³ (e.g. Avieli, 2012; Ehlert & Faltmann, 2019b; Figuié & Bricas, 2010; Wertheim-Heck & Raneri, 2020), there is agreement that food and eating are essential social practices in constituting social belonging and identity. Behind the sharing of food lies a whole script of hospitality, seniority and gender norms that codify the social status of those eating together (Ehlert, 2016). The growing academic interest in Vietnam's emerging urban middle class categorises food as one of the many categories that signify class identity, including fashion, art and housing. Middle-class food tastes are characterised by a mixture of globalised, localised and cosmopolitan influences, ranging from downtown eateries offering local foods, to hipster and globalised coffee culture, to fast food and local street food stalls. While distinct for its generally open-minded stance towards new foods and culinary influences, the middle class also identifies with Vietnam's tradition-oriented national food culture (Earl, 2014; Nguyen-Marshall et al., 2012).

Bourdieu's seminal work *Distinction* (1984) on class and lifestyles in 1960s/70s France has been very influential for sociological enquiries into the role of food as a medium for the construction of social location (see Atkinson & Deeming, 2015; Bridl-Fitzpatrick, 2016; Carfagna et al., 2014; Wills et al., 2011; for Vietnam, see Earl, 2014). In the Bourdieusian sense, eating preferences and manners are not simply the effect of the liberal ideal of individual freedom of choice. Instead, consumption patterns are constitutive of habitus. Habitus is the framing system of dispositions that enables as well as constrains a person's perception of the social world. Socio-symbolic structures like material conditions of existence, societal discourses and knowledge systems as well as lifeworld experiences are inscribed into habitus and sediment the ways a person thinks, feels, acts – and eats (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 165ff.). In terms of food, Bourdieu found the working classes to be more inclined towards cheap, nutritious and fatty foods (carbohydrate and meat-based) as compared with the professional classes' choice of eating for pleasure, of what is health-giving, and light but not fatty. Such food preferences are but one manifestation of a general system that structures class-based consumption in which the dominant classes' taste is characterised by exclusivity while the working classes' taste is characterised as the 'choice of necessity' (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 171ff.). Ultimately, a person's taste and preferences are socially imparted and triggered by available forms of capital: such as economic capital that draws on money and property, social capital that is a gatekeeper to certain social relations and milieus, and, finally, cultural capital which arises out of formal education, symbolic mastery, and command of knowledge that is conceded as true in specific social fields. Furthermore, Wacquant (1995) has coined 'bodily capital', recognising the body as a form of capital in its own right (see also 'physical capital' in Shilling, 2012, pp. 135ff.). For Bourdieu, physical capital rather refers to the body as paramount repository of socio-cultural influences and to the embodiment of habitus more broadly (Bourdieu, 1984). In *Distinction* he writes:

Tastes in food also depend on the idea each class has of the body and of the effects of food on the body, that is, on its strength, health and beauty; . . . the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste, which it manifests in several ways. It does this first in the seemingly most natural features of the body, the dimensions (volume, height, weight) and shapes (round or square, stiff or supple, straight or curved) of its visible forms, which express in countless ways a whole relation to the body, i.e., a way of treating it, caring for it, feeding it, maintaining it, which reveals the deepest dispositions of the habitus. (1984, pp. 187–188)

That said, Bourdieu's concern with the classed body and his emphasis on embodied ways of being share common ground with Foucauldian theories on power and disciplining technologies (1988) as well as feminist perspectives on gendered bodies (e.g. Kraiss, 2006; McNay, 1999; Reay, 2000; Skeggs, 1997; Threadcraft, 2016). While I am aware of the debate on whether Bourdieu can be accused of proposing the concept of biological sex while being gender-blind, it would take us too far beyond the scope of this article to enter this debate (see Adkins & Skeggs, 2004; Kraiss, 2006; Silva, 2016). Instead, what is of interest here is what embodiment as an inherent aspect of habitus can uniquely elucidate for us. Embodiment means the social agent's incorporation of experience with the social world; embodied habitus is expressed in gestures, posture, and the way the body is used (Kraiss, 2006, p. 127) and structured by gender:

. . . the concepts valid in a particular society for perceiving and experiencing one's own body, . . . are determined by the comprehensive symbolic order of gender . . . : by body ideals, images of the 'perfect' body, . . . a sense of one's place in a society's patterns of subordination and domination All these aspects of the symbolic order of gender are intimately connected to ideas about either the masculine body or the feminine body. (Kraiss, 2006, p. 127)

Such a heteronormative binary of masculine and feminine bodies is then accomplished through situated enactments of 'doing gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

The body is both an object of knowledge as well as a lived space of embodied subjects (see Shilling, 2012; Threadcraft, 2016). For this reason, the body becomes a marker of and, at the same time, vehicle for social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Embodied subjects are formed by disciplinary discourses (Foucault, 1977, 1988) and yet are, based on their reflexive capacity, also agents of 'personal resistance, social innovation and structural transformation' (Wacquant, 2016, p. 69).

Besides habitus, this study draws on food feminist scholarships and looks into dietary regimen and ideals of body image, aesthetics, health (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Casotti, 2004; Lupton, 1996), and the naturalisation of the relationship between femininity and self-control (e.g. Bartky, 1990). Food and eating-related discourses are instrumental in replicating feminine ideals and fuelling women's ambivalent relationship with food and their bodies (Jovanovski, 2017). Furthermore, research on 'food femininities' examines the gendered performance of women's role in nourishing bodies and providing food to others (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; see also Counihan, 1999; DeVault, 1991; Murcott, 1983b). Other feminist scholarship criticises Western nutritional science for decontextualising the eating body, reducing it to universal metrics, like calorie counts and the Body Mass Index. Instead, they propose to re-embodiment nutrition by culturally contextualising it and by paying attention to other ways of experiencing food by underscoring the visceral, sensual and emotional dimension of consumption (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2013).

Approaching body work

During my fieldwork in HCMC between 2014 and 2019 my ethnographic research not only examined the omnipresence of the food and beverage industry's product promotion, but also the large number of techniques and services for curbing relentless consumption. For instance, larger-than-life banner ads on streets promote abdominal fat reducing technology, slimming products and healthy foods, coupled with the burgeoning of beauty clinics, fitness clubs, or yoga hubs, all of which offer remedies for excessive consumer lifestyles. The omnipresence of such body-centred services is essential to understanding contemporary urban food consumption in Vietnam.

I observed through my ethnographic work that there has been an increase in public discourse and state intervention policies about the rise of obesity in urban Vietnam (see Ehlert, 2019). The question thus arose: Where do people turn for nutrition counselling besides the medical system? Through online research I came across a career consulting page for aspiring nutritionists, promising job opportunities in canteens, food corporations, private companies, large fitness centres, and as self-employed entrepreneurs. Through this desk research I contacted a certified health and nutrition coach in HCMC and the owner of a fitness company whose fitness clubs as well as health and diet-oriented restaurant services target women. The other contacts were made via snowball sampling. I was referred to one body coach and a medical doctor specialising in nutrition by peers and a Vietnamese colleague's family. Other friends and interlocutors in HCMC put me in contact with a company selling food supplements and a yoga teacher.

The data in this article mostly came from semi-structured interviews with these six female body work professionals conducted in October 2017. The decision to examine dieting via body work professionals was made on the following grounds: As experts intervening in the particular social field of dieting, weight control and health orientation, these individuals help to define and adapt to socially valued bodily ideals. Their expert status invests them with the power to normalise bodily practices (Bourdieu, 1978, pp. 826ff.) and situates them in a certain power-knowledge complex (Foucault, 1977). Body work experts are thus instrumental in 'educating bodies and labelling as legitimate or deviant, particular ways of managing, working on and experiencing our bodies' (Shilling, 2012, p. 154), thereby demarcating the practices that constitute classed and gendered Others. Understanding the experts' approaches towards the bodies and food consumption patterns of their clients provides insight into the trends of socially desired bodies, as well as the practical means and competences to cultivate them, not to mention which demographics are represented. Furthermore, the body experts' own data made it possible to deduce that this professional section overwhelmingly serves white-collar women,⁴ a conclusion that could also be made based on the cost of training and counselling services. Given this female, economically privileged clientele structure, cross-class and gender comparisons could not be made. Nevertheless, through these six interviews I assess how the experts ascribe social status to their clientele and how class and gendered boundaries are thereby (in)directly articulated.

Some fieldwork data derived from the larger research project on food consumption and body-politics in Vietnam that this was a part of also feed into the following analysis. The expert interviews are complemented by prior ethnographic observations in fitness studios, yoga clubs, spas, pharmacies, supermarkets and the gastronomic scene. They were also supplemented by guided interviews with individuals and groups (mostly

women) in HCMC on their experiences with dieting. The data profile is rounded off by data derived from art-based body mappings done by female participants working with diverse art-supplies for visually illustrating (on life-sized body maps) part of their personal trajectories, experiences and emotions regarding body ideals and food consumption (see Gastaldo et al., 2012).

The six interviews from the major data corpus were conducted in English and lasted between one and one and a half hours. Open and pattern coding of the interview transcripts in first and second cycles was used as an analytical strategy (Saldaña, 2016). All interviewees gave informed consent to participate in this study. For reasons of anonymisation, participants are referred to by their profession.

Beauty ideals: From fattening-up to slimming down

This is the first of two sections that analyses the body experts' social field in which body-centred food work actually takes place, namely in fitness clubs, yoga studios and nutrition and health counselling. These interviews will not only offer insights into their clientele, but also into training methods, ideologies and models for food consumption and body work. These food–body relationship approaches represent yet further avenues for social distinction. Throughout the next two sections, I will analyse social distinction, complementing where appropriate the expert interviews with data gathered directly from the body workers themselves.

According to Bourdieu (1984, p. 187), class taste in foods depends considerably on how the body is conceived as well as how food affects it in terms of strength, health and physical beauty. This first section is devoted to investigating beauty ideals, their historical dimension, and how they differ generationally. I will show that beauty and what role food plays in achieving it vary based on different stages of one's life, different generational perspectives, and are highly gendered.

'You have this fat kid, which is a sign of wealth', the owner of the fitness company noted in her interview. Her observations point to body norms as a materialisation of social class – the wealth of a family is read in its chubby child's body. This statement was echoed in the interview with the medical nutrition doctor, who provided statistical evidence for the relationship between the child's body and the socio-economic background of their family (see also Vietnam Ministry of Health, 2012). The nutritionist continues:

In our experience, poor people are thin, the fat are beautiful, so they want to feed their babies until they are very fat. . . . Vietnamese think that people who are fat, look rich and wealthy, they have some social status. They get more respect than thin people. (Interview, nutritionist, HCMC, 2017)

With this explanation, the nutritionist establishes a link between the historical embeddedness of socially valued bodies and the current weight-gain imperative for children. It has been well documented in Vietnam's colonial past that a plump child's body is a symbol of a family's high social position, whereas thinner bodies signified strenuous agrarian lifestyles (Peters, 2012). This body ideal for children can also be found historically in other Asian contexts (for China, see e.g. Jing, 2000) and continues to be a way to demonstrate social status in contemporary urban life. A prior phase of this research project

showed that 'good motherhood' means being a good food provider. The chubby child's body is perceived as the material testimony of a woman's reproductive ability. New mothers are confronted with the older generations' expectation to fatten up their children because they grew up in times of food insecurity. 'Filling-up-until-full' and making food constantly available to the child have become common urban practices under this dominant weight-gain paradigm, and this increasingly entails the consumption of Western-style fast food (Ehlert, 2019).

On this point, the medical doctor and the fitness trainer were both concerned about children's proportionally high consumption of instant and Western-style fast foods and criticised the food industry's aggressive branding, which combines images of cosmopolitan, modern consumption with mothers' love and care for their families: 'I am horrified that this fast food chain has this brand of good motherly family friendly place to go, and it is expensive, it is the sign of wealth. That level of food has zero nutrition and the damage it does to your body is crazy' (interview, fitness instructor, HCMC, 2017). The consumption of Western-style fast food in HCMC, as well as in other Asian contexts, is social status-enhancing as it is much more expensive than common Vietnamese (fast) street food. Furthermore, the person demonstrates their cultural ability to connect with what is locally perceived as modern global consumer culture (e.g. Baviskar, 2018; Bittersuermann, 2014; Ehlert, 2016; Watson, 1997; Yan, 2008).

The gender dimension of feeding and cooking for others has been widely acknowledged (see Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Counihan, 1999; DeVault, 1991; Murcott, 1983b). The food sphere has been (critically) discussed as the domain in which *she* is 'conducting herself [as] recognisably womanly' (DeVault, 1991, p. 118). This also pertains to Vietnam, where a woman's food and care work is one of the paramount performances of her femininity (Bélanger, 2004; see also Drummond & Rydstrom, 2004). In this context, in which food work is strongly attributed to female performance and ability, the social expectation that women work 'inter-corporally' (cf. Shilling, 2012, p. 124) on the bodies of their children already begins with pregnancy. During pregnancy women are expected – again especially by the older generation – to eat a lot and gain a considerable amount of weight, as this is assumed to help the unborn baby to grow big. In meetings with pregnant women during previous field research it was difficult to miss the enormous range of pregnancy milk formula products and a lot of pregnant women told me, that although they disliked the taste, they felt compelled to drink the formula and would drink it for the sake of the unborn baby nevertheless, putting on fat and providing it with the micronutrients needed for its development. After giving birth women are expected to quickly lose the weight put on during pregnancy (interview, body coach, HCMC, 2017; Ehlert, 2019). At the very beginning of the research project, owners of drugstores, where slimming products are commonly marketed, said that that the highest demand for weight reduction products actually comes from women after having given birth (interview, drugstore owner, HCMC, 2014).

This dominant discourse on children's weight gain changes completely once the body of the plump child turns into an 'abject' body, namely upon becoming a teenager. At this turning point, adolescents are confronted with another beauty regime and are urged by their parents to slim down again, curbing the appetites they had been socialised into (Ehlert, 2019). This observation was made by the health and nutrition coach (interview, HCMC, 2017):

It [slimming products] is becoming more common now I can say. As a baby, as a child, the concern is that you have to eat to get fat so that people can pay compliments to the parents that they raised them very well. And then when they grow up, they want to slim down.

The body coach I interviewed supervises children through this process from childhood to adolescence. The special methods she uses resemble Foucauldian body disciplining technologies (Foucault, 1988), such as being weighted regularly in front of the training group, food diaries to control food intake, as well as punishments in the form of extra push-ups for eating the wrong food, the wrong amount, or at the wrong time of day. The body coach portrays the challenges that teenagers face (interview, HCMC, 2017):

They join the class because they are fat. They are overweight. They are only 13 years old but their weight is around 70 or 80 [kgs]. But this is a difficult part, because the parents send them to my class, but they cook for them and they don't understand . . . what the kid needs to eat. So I make the parent come to my class. 'You expect that your kid loses weight but you feed them crap food.'

She draws attention to another kind of generational conflict: as kids become teenagers, mothers' approach to eating increasingly comes under attack, not only by the body coach but also by official public health policies aiming to combat obesity. The mothers' approach is rendered moot in light of alternative and oftentimes contradictory food discourses on social media or product advertisements addressing children's nutrition and health. The children and adolescents-to-be come to literally embody these conflicting messages. At the same time, food and care work practices assign responsibility to women for making sure the child attains the 'right' body at the right period of their life.

The fitness trainers brought up beauty ideals as the main motivation of their largely female clientele. They problematised the women's fixation on weight loss and addressed their clients' conflict-riddled relationships to their bodies (interview, fitness trainer, HCMC, 2017):

8 out of 10 women want to lose weight, even two to three kgs. That's the motivation. My goal is to change their attitude. Weight loss is good but let's focus on your health and think a little bit less on the weight loss because if you become obsessed with that, they are not gonna have a healthy life. They will feel guilty whenever they eat.

The health coach also recounted experiences of women who tried different kinds of diets to slim down, 'even very extreme ways like eating and vomiting'. The yoga trainer also spoke of her own conflict-ridden relationship with her body, especially during her university years when she did not like her body and tried multiple ways to slim down. The expert working for the food supplement company pointed out that a lot of her female clients feel ashamed of their body fat. She helps them adopt new habits, like exercising daily for 15 minutes, eating good food, and using supplements to help them eat less. She said that, by contrast, men *do* feel ok with excess body fat and are not ashamed like her female clients. The body coach said that many of her female teenage clients feel ashamed when having to dress in an Ao Dia – a traditional women's dress that accentuates the body silhouette: 'Some teenagers, they cover their body with a big t-shirt. But one day they need to wear Ao Dai which shows everything on the body.' They are nonetheless

influenced by the female ideal that the traditional slim dress communicates in the media (interview, health and nutrition coach, HCMC, 2017).

Women are more commonly nurtured to form their bodies as objects for others' perception (Bordo, 2004). In Vietnam, this gendered disposition is anchored in Confucianist norms and the patriarchal cultural narrative of the ideal 'woman of virtue'. There are four moral virtues that make up the ideal of feminine character, appearance and conduct: for instance, for women to be industrious and selfless in her desires, without giving in to self-indulgence; domestic skills; proper outward appearance; and the control of emotions and speech (Drummond & Rydstrom, 2004; Ngo, 2004). In a group discussion conducted in HCMC with female and male university students in 2015, the female students explained that, as women, they feel they are expected to anticipate the needs of others at the dinner table, especially men and the elderly (see Avieli, 2012; Ehlert, 2016). In interviews conducted with women during body-mapping workshops in HCMC in 2017/2018, the contemporary relevance of the norms of the 'virtuous woman' was brought up. For instance, the expectations that women do food and care work and that a decent outward appearance is not to be underestimated for success in one's career.

This section has shown how the well-fed child's body reflects Vietnam's social transformations as these historically rooted ideals come into conflict both with generational expectations and eventually, in the transition into adolescence, with a new set of beauty ideals. Throughout, food and body work is codified specifically as women's work, in which good motherhood and female practices of (food) constraint are performed.

Nutrition, body competence, and knowing one's body and self

In this second section I will analyse the world of tailored services for weight-reduction, health-orientation and well-being by examining how knowledge mediates the relationship between food and the body. I will show that the designation of what food is appropriate for weight loss or for health and well-being (1) is increasingly defined by command of nutritional knowledge; (2) requires fairly practical body competences; and (3) entails sensual and emotional dimensions of experiencing food and one's body and self. Given how much nutritional science was drawn on in the interviews as a dominant framework for understanding the relationship between food and body, I will start by attending to that first.

'They don't know how to feed the body in a proper way.' This is how the nutritionist summed up what she perceives as the common mishandling of consumer choice, weight control and health management. She believes that instead of going on a pineapple or pomelo diet for two weeks, or counting calories – dieting practices that, although discredited as unsustainable, are common – consumers require knowledge of what best suits body work as part of an overall health-oriented lifestyle. For instance, both the fitness instructor and the health coach criticised women's use of slimming products in trying to lose weight. The drug store owner told me that before slimming pills became widely available on the domestic market, people with relatives in the USA used to bring them to Vietnam after visiting their family abroad. Yet today, as the wide circulation of consumer and lifestyle goods makes weight-loss products easily available, it renders obsolete such

signs of exceptionalism on the basis of social relations (connections abroad) and money (Featherstone, 1990). The body experts remarked that as pharmaceutical slimming products flood the market it actually prevents people from adopting more coherent and integrated approaches to food consumption, weight and health management and overall lifestyle: ‘Students come to my class many of them have gone through pills, supplements, even surgeries but until then, after they have studied with me, only then they understand, that these are just temporary, useless things. It must be among long-term healthy eating and lifestyles’ (interview, fitness trainer, HCMC, 2017).

Thus, the fitness trainer sees it as her professional duty to ‘educate people what nutrition is and why. If you compare calories, it is not enough. The quality of calories is extremely important.’ Some body experts also feel responsible for guiding clients towards making healthy choices, for instance, by replacing refined sugar with honey or turning to wholefood options. For this reason, refined carbohydrates and sugar makes eat rice contentious (interview, health and nutrition coach, HCMC, 2017):

The most sabotaging ingredient when you want to lose weight is sugar. And Vietnamese people love, are addicted to sugar. But it is an education process. In the Viet cuisine, carbohydrate is in there, how can you tell people not to eat rice? How long is that sustainable? So what we do is, we put rice in the food, but brown rice, or mixed brown and white but the portions are controlled.

Interviews I conducted with women⁵ on (regular) diets showed that the ‘low carb’ method, removing all carbohydrates, was most popular. A couple times during field research I was invited to ‘low carb’ dinners by my female friends. The women I interviewed normally only diet for several weeks until improvements in their body and (physical) well-being were noticed before once again returning to their normal routines. Interesting here is the reference to rice, which is not only the major staple food in Vietnam, but constitutes a key identity marker all across Asia (Avieli, 2012; Bray, 2019; Gorman, 2019; Hamilton, 2004; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993). Under the racial gaze of Western colonialism, rice was not only deemed nutritionally poor but also culturally inferior, laying culinary ground for constructing the eating Other in terms of racial subordination and oppression (Arnold, 2019; see also Peters, 2019). Today, under the gaze of Western nutritional science, rice is broken up into nutritional units, thereby dismantling it of its cultural embeddedness.

In my interviews, nutrition experts pointed out that as everyday carbs are demoted, nutritionists and urban consumers are glorifying protein, especially pasteurised cow’s milk.⁶ While the consumption of dairy used to be peripheral to the Vietnamese diet, consumer demand, imports, as well as domestic productivity, have accelerated since the mid-1990s after the economic reforms (Nguyen, 2020). The nutritional expert explained why cow’s milk has gradually gained market share: ‘Now we know that children need milk . . . and children have higher [lactose] tolerance than the older generation. My son, for instance, is very tall. 1.8 metres. But my husband and I are very short.’ This quote indicates the symbolic power of height as another indicator of physical capital (Bourdieu, 1984), similar to body weight and shape discussed in the previous section. Body height as a general measure of social prestige and respect came up in several of my ethnographic interviews. For instance, during body mapping a female research participant mentioned that students disregard her professional expertise on the basis of being short.

Common TV or supermarket advertisements for infant or pregnancy milk formula suggest, for example, that it will make the consumer smarter and taller. Body height remains a relevant indicator for the Ministry of Health to statistically evaluate and link the bodily 'advancements' of its citizens within the overall development and progress of the Vietnamese nation (Vietnam Ministry of Health, 2012). Stunting is associated with the country's war-induced hunger and continues to be a sign of the lower class. Furthermore, the nutritional expert established a link between the increase in children's consumption of milk and tolerance for lactose. If a body does not produce lactase, the enzyme that is needed to process milk sugar, physical discomfort occurs to varying degrees. Those who have not been exposed to enough fresh milk to produce such enzymes during infancy are classified as lactose *intolerant* by biomedical science. Smith (2019) points out that in a Chinese context and with the universalisation of nutritional science, milk has been turned into a morally valued good, thus suggesting bodies that are unable to process milk, which is the majority across East Asia, came to be seen as intolerant of a valuable foodstuff. In reference to the argument being made here, drinking milk becomes a testament to nutritional competence and digestive capacity – that one's body is unimpaired, not defective, and has 'naturally' earned its social status. Yet, because of the fairly recent supply of dairy products on domestic markets this too marks a generational difference.

Foodstuffs such as rice and milk are never only natural products possessing material qualities and causing bodily effects. They are socially embedded constructions, loaded with symbolic power, authorised by specific systems of knowledge, and highly sensitive to social differentiation (cf. Leung & Caldwell, 2019). Nutritional science represents just such an authorising system of knowledge for determining what relations to the body are dominant. The nutrition paradigm, or 'nutritionism' as coined by Scrinis (2008), reduces food to its nutri-biochemical qualities and thereby isolates it from its sensual, cultural and social qualities. This system of knowledge is characterised by a discourse of precision and control, short-circuiting the otherwise complex socio-cultural and economic context in which food consumption actually takes place (see Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2013). Functional food, in the form of nutritional shake mixes or pills, exemplifies a pure mode of this paradigm applied to daily food consumption and is targeted nutrition for supplying micronutrients. It is marketed as maximising health and fitness, while also enhancing the power of concentration and supporting weight management (interview, functional food promoter, HCMC, 2017). While the drug store owner I interviewed reported that predominantly men buy functional food to promote concentration (interview, HCMC, 2014), Anh (56 years old, pseudonym) said in her interview that she integrates functional foods into her family's meals. She and her husband and two teen-aged children have functional food for breakfast as a means to conveniently replace cooking or buying food from small street food shops in the mornings. Besides convenience, Anh named health management as a decisive advantage of integrating functional food into the meal plan (interview, HCMC, 2014).

The body experts said that making sense of the nutritional value of foodstuff and its bodily effects is necessary for 'properly' navigating urban food consumerism and requires its own set of necessary skills. This practical competence is especially important when food safety – chemical contamination, the use of growth hormones, or food hygiene – generate consumer anxiety about the health of their food (Faltmann, 2019). The body coach put it this way (interview, HCMC, 2017):

One day they get sick, they get cancer and they wonder why they get that. And one thing [reason] is the food that you bring to your body. To get a better shape, better health, and better life is [through] food. Whatever you put into your body is like growing a plant. Something not nice will not make a nice flower.

In the context of heightened insecurity about what is safe to put into one's body, the promoters of food supplements pointed to functional food as a safe means to efficiently consume the nutri-components that the body needs. Most of the body experts also mentioned organic food as their clientele's preferred choice of safe food, yet it remains a pricey niche option in HCMC (Faltmann, 2019) and is thus also an expression of exclusive taste. This signifies that they value that which is health-giving and that they are able to appreciate and differentiate the pure and the natural from chemically-tainted taste which oftentimes goes hand in hand with a romanticisation of the rural (Kurfürst, 2019). In the context of the increasing risks to food safety, the gendered ideals of reproductive care ascribed to women mean women are also protecting the safety of their families.

Besides weight loss and health orientation, still another approach towards the food-consuming body arose in the data, especially in discussion with the fitness trainer, yoga trainer and health coach. The fitness trainer referred to it as body acceptance: 'Instead of being obsessed with losing three kgs, we want to empower them to think that they are beautiful the way they are. If they care for their bodies and are healthy, they may not lose weight but they feel good about themselves.' These alternative competences and orientations towards female bodies are understood as a kind of empowering knowledge about how to feel good about oneself, how to feel good within one's own body, and how to emancipate oneself from socially defined body norms. When compared with the strongly restrictive and rational approaches to food elaborated above, this approach to food draws much more on the pleasures and emotional dimensions of food consumption. For instance, treating oneself well through food can mean indulging in it with all one's senses. In this approach, food consumption along with enjoyment and body work, like yoga and meditation, fulfil the function of comforting self-care and emotional well-being, stressing the visceral and sensual dimension of bodily experience (cf. Csordas, 1994; Shilling, 2012).

I analysed in this section a whole range of ways of relating to one's body. Yet, what emerged from the interviews as central to the relationship between food and the body, whether it be weight loss or health orientations, was nutrition science. Under this paradigm, a person eating becomes a rational consumer who treats their body as an object that, like the food that is divided into isolated nutrients, can be conceptually split into different parts for reasons of optimisation, standardisation and control.

Body-centred food work and middle-class tastes

What can be inferred from the presented research material? This will be answered in this section by bringing together the analysis of the two prior sections on (1) middle-class body ideals; (2) the forms of capital involved in performing middle-class identity in the food-body sphere; and finally (3) how this embodied class position is gendered.

‘Now, everyone wants to lose weight. But we want them to do it in a sustainable way, with good nutrition, not starving the body’ (interview, fitness instructor, HCMC, 2017). This is how the fitness trainer summarised her approach to combining physical exercise with special nutrition in order to guide her female clients towards achieving their desired bodies. In her statement she also classified different modes of slimming down – the ‘good’ and ‘sustainable’ versus the less refined, i.e. ‘starving down’. What the body experts offer are refined ways of ‘cultivating’ bodies, which signifies high social positioning by competently manoeuvring food abundance by dint of modern nutritional knowledge. Social and physical sophistication is marked by consuming what is defined as ‘good’ foods and through the ability to adapt to new food, as in the example of milk. Food and body cultivation further signifies a contrast to sculpting the body like an object in the raw pursuit of weight loss. Despite weight loss being the most common reason why women consult body experts, trying to lose weight via ‘cultivated’ body work means doing so with health and overall lifestyle in mind, not in opposition to it. This is where social status then comes in.

Physical capital in the form of volume, weight and height was portrayed as constituting the materialisation of class in its most ‘natural’ features (Bourdieu, 1984). This was most vividly highlighted by the ideal of the plump child that was once the paramount sign of a family’s wealth and future prosperity. Even today, it is not uncommon when two mothers meet to ask about the child’s weight. Fattening up the child as a practice of class making de-centres dominant Western beauty norms and shows that beauty concepts and related class taste form a deeply sedimented frame of local perception. Yet, this kind of physical capital starts to diminish as rising economic affluence and disposable income make a variety of foodstuff widely available to the general urban population. Children’s physical shapes converge, gradually losing their status as exceptional, while such tangible dimensions of class-making start to fade (not regarding body height though), thereby redefining the ‘natural’ and symbolic features of the middle class. Despite its socialist orientation, it has become widely accepted in contemporary Vietnam for the ‘new rich’ to display their wealth (Hansen, 2017), such that opulent children’s bodies become a manifestation of urban wealth. Because of such a display of opulence rooted in raw economic capital, those with less economic currency draw on cultural capital to demarcate their position. Increasingly nutritionism is drawn on by body experts as well as in public health discourse more generally to recast the plump child as abject and obese according to global physiological standards and measurements.

When products that used to be rare become mainstream, as was the case with slimming products, know-how becomes a prestigious asset for class performance: knowing how to eat ‘properly’, what effect foods and nutrients have on the body, going as far as developing a sense of what feels good for one’s body and for oneself. While there are various consumption and body-centred landscapes in HCMC offering diverse products, services and food–body approaches, these modes of body orientation and food consumption are not mutually exclusive but rather coexist, albeit in conflict. In the dynamic context of economic change in urban Vietnam and the profiling of emerging consumers and of middle-classness, social ideas about the ‘right’ bodily capital and the ways to cultivate it through eating are themselves in flux.

Yet, what has become clear is that for the middle class the body has turned into a popular project to be formed (Shilling, 2012). They have the resources to approach

their bodies as projects rather than as a machine-like object of necessity, as Bourdieu described working-class habitus (Shilling, 2012, pp. 135ff.). Yet, as the yoga teacher added, it is only on the basis of secured economic means that people start concentrating on relaxation and well-being in their lives. Not only does knowing what is good for your body symbolise cultural sophistication and become one of the primary materialisations of classed bodily health, but so too does commanding resources in order to access what is perceived locally as safe and healthy food (e.g. organically certified produce). These means of distinction are available to the better-off segments of society – a class dimension that was brought up by the nutrition and health coach herself in explaining that she wanted to appeal to office workers, corporate and business people because this is the kind of clientele that can afford to think about food quality and health rather than being concerned with making a living. As the nutritionist explained, ‘a lot of people sit on the market [as market vendors] and don’t have time to exercise, and they eat a lot’, thus pointing to class disparities as a determining factor in access to food, body work and knowledge. Hence, knowledge for deciphering food scientifically is defined in opposition to the supposed ‘knowledge poverty of the working class’ (Hollows & Jones 2010, p. 309 as referred to in Cairns & Johnston, 2015, p. 104). ‘They don’t know how to feed the body in a proper way’, said the nutritionist, constructing the lower-class position as one being ignorant.

The previous sections also elaborated the gender dimension of food and body performance and suggested there is a strong relationship between local food, body work and feminine identity. The social practice of thinking about food is not only a class issue but has, in many respects, always been a gendered practice. Having been socialised into indulgent food practices, teenage clients are expected to police their bodies to attain an ideal *feminine* aesthetic. Thinking about food and making well-calibrated decisions about how to eat and feed one’s children safely does not only enact ‘class-ness’ but remains an exclusive realm for doing femininity (cf. Cairns & Johnston, 2015). Female bodily capital has been described as career facilitating and body height was mentioned as a physical symbol of a woman’s professionalism. Working on one’s own body as a project – and that of one’s own children – gives women a lot of responsibility in consumption and body work. However, this gendered performance is also tied up with class privilege. Having the means to book a body coach in the first place, to gain access to safe and healthy food, to become sovereign in interpreting nutritional (mis)information by the food industry, or to immerse oneself in self-care, are not only gendered practices, but exclusive to privileged bodies.

Conclusion: The embodiment of social change

This article has spotlighted a specific field of consumption in urban Vietnam that is located at the very intersection of indulgence and restraint and has led to the burgeoning food and diet industries. The whole field of nutrition counselling and other body work is still developing as Vietnam’s urban centres continue to undergo a nutrition transition. By conducting research where people receive help with weight loss, health and body aesthetic concerns, I analysed the dynamic social field of body workers in HCMC in terms of gender and class.

The conclusion of this study on food consumption and body practices reveals the social transformations taking place in urban Vietnam. Rapid changes in the food system have had an effect on people's relationship with food. In Vietnam food is the embodiment of the social. To repeat again Earl's statement: 'it is unthinkable to be social without sharing food' (Earl, 2014, p. 153) as commensality, community and social belonging are constituted deeply through food. Yet efficiency, optimisation and standardisation as paradigms of nutritionism risk decoupling food from its social context. The body becomes reduced to an object manageable through food and disregarded as an embodied repository of social intimacies and relations established through food consumption. At the same time, relating to food via scientific knowledge is increasingly key for social differentiation, giving consumers sovereignty in rationally managing the pitfalls of abundance and ill-health in a capitalist food system. Given the food industry's sharp profit orientation and struggle to gain market share, respective food knowledge can be regarded as an important asset in manoeuvring the current food system. And yet, it is the food industry that is bound tightly with nutrition science, constituting a mutually sustaining power-knowledge complex (Clapp & Scrinis, 2017; Foucault, 1977; Nestlé, 2013). Certified organic food becomes a market in urban areas but remains a high-priced niche, only accessible to the privileged and those having the resources to be reflexive. What develops alternatively, however, are local food networks through which consumers, mainly women, practise low-scale urban gardening and distribution of their organic produce via social networks (see Faltmann, 2019; Kurfürst, 2019).

In addition, this article highlighted the gendered patterns of food consumption and body work practices. While economic growth in Vietnam opened up divergent opportunities for middle-class expansion, gender norms remain quite static in food and body work spheres. The historically ingrained gender habitus means women perform femininity through self-improvement and care for others (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Given the growing food options, body services and the corresponding diversification of the food and body industries, navigating these new food and health systems while setting them in relation to culturally sedimented norms becomes increasingly complex and contradictory – and it is women manoeuvring these complexities and contradictions on a daily basis. I have shown how body work experts reproduce gender norms. At the same time, there were subtle avenues that body experts themselves called 'women's empowerment'. As we can see in the case of Vietnam, there is still a lot at stake concerning the direction food consumption is taking and how women, as the relevant agents in this sphere from generation to generation, will practice, negotiate and normalise food-body relationships.

Despite the supposed banality of eating, feeding others and dieting, this article has explicitly put the eating body centre-stage with the aim of highlighting its epistemological potential for understanding processes of social change in the food sphere, as well as more broadly. This article has taken inspiration from Warde, who has argued that the mundane practices of consumption can be productive as 'a lens to magnify aspects of common social processes' (2014, p. 279). Hence, it is neither the political activism of the food sovereignty movement, nor the strategic buying decisions of individual consumer choice that bring about changes in the food system and consumption patterns alone. Instead, nutritional and social transitions can also occur much more tacitly and mundanely, as habitual

processes of making class and doing gender take place on a daily basis simply in the way that people eat and the way they treat their bodies.

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Notes

1. The official name is Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Vietnam is governed by a one-party system with the communist party holding power. The ‘(post)’ in socialist indicates the parallelism of socialist ideology, the party system, and radical market liberalisation and capitalist development.
2. FWF project (P27438) ‘A Body-Political Approach to Food Consumption - Vietnam and the Global Transformations’.
3. Research on dieting and other forms of food–body relations in Vietnam is even less common (e.g. Ehlert, 2019; Leshkovich, 2012), much as is scholarship on the body in Asia/Vietnam. One of the exceptions for body studies in Asia is the edited volume by Turner and Yangwen (2009) that redirects the general Western focus on body studies by attending to the research on symbolic and material bodies conducted by scholars in and on Asia. Hoang’s study (2015), which looks at the materialisation of class through embodiment practices of female sex workers and their male clientele in HCMC, represents another of the scarce examples of body-centric research in an Asian context. See also Smith (2019) and Leung & Caldwell (2019) on nutrition and health in Asia.
4. Except for functional food, which is demanded more equally by male and female consumers (interview, functional food promoter, HCMC, 2017).
5. These interviewees were between 30 and 45 years old, well-educated, and worked in white-collar jobs, mostly in administrative positions. Some stated they went on a diet after having children.
6. For a discussion on meat-based protein in Vietnam, see Hansen, 2018.

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Author biography

Judith Ehlert is a sociologist and earned a PhD in development research. Currently she holds a postdoc position in development sociology at the Department of Development Studies at the University of Vienna. From 2015 to 2019 she was principal investigator in a research project on the body-politics of food consumption in Vietnam, funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF). Her general research areas are situated at the intersection of development and food studies, body sociology, the sociology of knowledge, and qualitative methodology.