

# Material Symbolism on Saigon's Edge: The Political-Economic and Symbolic Transformation of Hồ Chí Minh City's Periurban Zones

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## ABSTRACT

Cities and their fringes are both symbolic and material, imbued with subjective meanings as well as objective physical attributes. In this paper, I show how the physical and social transformation of periurban space in Hồ Chí Minh City emerges from and also contributes to a dynamic interaction between symbolic understandings of space as well as material, political economic forces that transform space in concrete ways. On the symbolic level, I show how conceptions of “inside” versus “outside” as well as rural versus urban play into Vietnamese meaning systems that lend a sense of conceptual order and coherence to the larger organization of urban space. In rapidly urbanizing contexts like Hồ Chí Minh City, the periurban fringe is dynamic and ever-changing, and the political-economic forces of real-estate speculation, city planning and infrastructure development interact with Vietnamese notions of what an ideal city might look like. This paper shows how periurban spaces in different parts of Hồ Chí Minh City can best be understood as spaces of “material symbolism,” places where the material attributes of space, the political economy of development, and the symbolic meaning attributed to space all restructure each other in dialectical fashion. Just as symbolic meanings frame how residents perceive these emergent spaces, these same spaces also transform the symbolic meaning of Vietnamese cities.

**KEYWORDS:** Vietnam, Saigon, Hồ Chí Minh City, space, periurban

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## Introduction

The spaces of a city and its periphery, while clearly forged out of distinctly material attributes, also carry powerful symbolic meanings.<sup>1</sup> In Hồ Chí Minh City the space that foreign social scientists and urban planners call a “periurban zone” is a richly symbolic zone positioned at the interface of a key spatial divide denoted by the opposition between the terms *quận nội thành* (inner-city district) and *huyện ngoại thành* (outer-city district). *Huyện ngoại thành* not only have unique political, material and economic value as particularly situated spaces on the edge of the city, they carry a host of symbolic meanings structured by Vietnamese notions of rurality, organic relationships of complementarity and spatial-temporal models of kinship and social organization. Such spaces are simultaneously symbolic and material, spaces of *material symbolism*. Understanding how Vietnamese planners govern and how Vietnamese economic actors invest in such material symbolism requires understanding what Hồ Chí Minh City residents think when they utter the word for “outer-city district” and what possibilities such a space comes to represent. What images does the term *huyện ngoại thành* conjure up? And how do these images impact the material development of the city? Furthermore, how does the material development of the city impact the symbolic meanings of the *huyện ngoại thành*?

This paper synthesizes over ten years of research and engagement with Vietnamese urban development, as well as 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2002-2003 in one of Hồ Chí Minh City’s *huyện ngoại thành*: Hóc Môn district. I have published a detailed ethnographic description of life in Hóc Môn elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> and the purpose of this essay is to describe, in general structural terms, the symbolic associations that Hóc Môn and other outer-city districts held for nearly all of the people I encountered during fieldwork and subsequent research in both inner-city and outer-city districts alike.<sup>3</sup> To describe these symbolic associations, I focus on three ways

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<sup>1</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Setha M. Low, “Spatializing Culture: The Social Production and Social Construction of Public Space in Costa Rica,” *American Ethnologist* 23, no. 4 (1996); Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (London: Blackwell, 1991 [1974]).

<sup>2</sup> Erik Harms, *Saigon’s Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Many readers will likely harbour reservations towards the avowedly structuralist analysis of binary oppositions presented in this essay. Nevertheless, while recent social theory has productively moved away from attempts to understand the world in structuralist terms, my informants in Hồ Chí Minh City consistently referred to the opposition between inner-city and outer-city spaces in decidedly binary terms. Their categorization of city space into the opposition between inside and outside was and remains unmistakable and omnipresent. Instead of discarding their own explanations as false or overly simplifying binaries, this essay takes their explanations seriously, trying to understand the dynamism inherent within what appear at first glance to be inflexible categories. This essay should also be understood as one form of analysis among many, and readers interested in a more ethnographic approach should consult the monograph cited in the preceding note.

in which the Vietnamese term for *huyện ngoại thành* carries culturally specific symbolic meanings that affect the ways Hồ Chí Minh City residents conceive of, and thereby interact with the rural-urban margin. First, I describe how *huyện ngoại thành* carry connotations of rurality, with specific implications conditioned by Vietnamese conceptions of rural-urban relations as well as the history and aftermath of the Vietnamese revolution. Second, I show how the notion of an “outer-city district” both resonates with and violates organic conceptions of symbiosis that idealize the *ngoại thành* as the complementary opposite of the *nội thành* (inner city). Finally, I show how the conception of being “outside” evokes specific and highly idealized idioms of Vietnamese kinship, which are organized around the patrilineal notion of “inside” and “outside” lineages. Taken as a whole, the *huyện ngoại thành* symbolizes a space that is at once exalted and denigrated, impoverished and full of potential, a source of vitality for the city and a space in need of stewardship. These meanings simultaneously make the outer-city districts attractive as sites for investment and subject them to paternalistic control by inner-city elites.

### **Huyện Ngoại thành: The Material Symbolism of the Outer-City District**

#### ***Rural and Urban as Material Symbolism***

In the administrative structure of Hồ Chí Minh City, the outer-city districts are called *huyện ngoại thành*. The word *huyện* refers specifically to a rural or largely agricultural district, and is defined in opposition to the word used to signify an urban district, *quận*. Symbolically, a space designated by the term *huyện* evokes powerful Vietnamese images of rurality, which in turn evokes both reverence and paternalistic subordination to the urban centre. In ways that resonate with many other nations around the world, anthropologists such as Philip Taylor and a host of other scholars have described how Vietnamese conceptions of rurality both celebrate the rural as a source of national identity and denigrate the rural as a reminder of national underdevelopment.<sup>4</sup>

This contradictory symbolism is neither unique to Vietnam, nor to Asian societies. Writing about literary representations of the country and the city in England, Raymond Williams identified a very similar condition:

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<sup>4</sup> Montira Rato, “Class, Nation, and Text: The Representation of Peasants in Vietnamese Literature,” in *Social Inequality in Vietnam and the Challenges to Reform*, ed. Philip Taylor (Singapore: ISEAS, 2004); Lisa Drummond and Mandy Thomas, eds., *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Patricia M. Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008); Philip Taylor, “Poor Policies, Wealthy Peasants: Alternative Trajectories of Rural Development in Vietnam,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2, no. 2 (2007); Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam's South* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).

On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved center: of learning, communication, light. Powerful, hostile associations have also developed: On the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation.<sup>5</sup>

The categories Williams describes here have a peculiar quality. While they are posed as binary opposites, the hierarchical relationship of the opposed pairs has the capacity to invert, according to context. Similarly, on the outskirts of Hồ Chí Minh City the categories of rural and urban, as well as “inside” and “outside,” must be understood as flexible and constantly inverting symbolic opposites. While the symbolic valuation of the rural and the urban or the inside and the outside as positive or negative constantly changes, the meanings of these spaces are not simply multivalent or limitlessly flexible; instead, the shifting of meaning operates by inverting the values of the binary terms rather than by completely discarding the terms themselves. In other words, the spaces of the city are typically divided into the categories of rural and urban, as well as inside and outside, but what these categories mean can shift, or more precisely, invert, according to context. This flexible and constantly inverting symbolic quality is a nearly universal property of “rural” and “urban” symbolism, and has been described by anthropologists working in China,<sup>6</sup> Africa,<sup>7</sup> South America<sup>8</sup> and India.<sup>9</sup> The shiftiness of rural and urban symbolism in recent American electoral politics further indicates that the capacity for the meaning of such symbols to invert is not confined to the developing world.

Because the symbolic meaning of signifiers such as “rural” or “urban” are never fixed or stable, the contours of this relationship can only be determined in relation to particular contexts. In the Vietnamese case, this structural relationship is conditioned historically by the paradoxical way in which Vietnamese nationalism celebrates the Vietnamese peasantry as the driving

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<sup>5</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 1.

<sup>6</sup> You-tien Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks Within China's Floating Population* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Li Zhang, *In Search of Paradise: Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010); Helen Siu, “Grounding Displacement: Uncivil Urban Spaces in Postreform South China,” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>7</sup> James Ferguson, “The Country and the City on the Copperbelt,” in *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Daniel M. Goldstein, *The Spectacular City: Violence and Performance in Urban Bolivia*, Latin America otherwise and index (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, eds., *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya*, expanded paperback ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

force of the revolution but also poses the peasantry as a symbol of lingering underdevelopment. At the level of national symbolism, the narrative construction of Vietnamese resistance to foreign aggression painted the Vietnamese nation as one of peasants fighting off colonial and neo-imperialist aggressors at the same time as it depicted the peasantry as a largely uneducated mass incapable of organizing itself without the guidance of urban intellectuals.<sup>10</sup> A similar structure continues to inform elite Vietnamese conceptions of the countryside, which is depicted, on the one hand, as a pristine rural repository of essential Vietnamese identity traits and, on the other hand, as a space of rural backwardness that needs to be uplifted by the visionary guidance of a highly educated, cosmopolitan urban planning elite.<sup>11</sup>

While the meaning of rurality is clearly symbolic and subject to inversions of meanings, ideas of rurality also index very real material conditions. The rural represents not only a place, but a way of life stereotypically associated with a particular mode of production quite distinct from the urban. Aligned symbolically with this notion of the rural, the livelihoods of outer-city residents are conflated with stereotyped depictions of peasant householders who are assumed to live in a state of pre-industrial rural simplicity, toiling virtuously according to the rhythms of the agricultural cycle, and existing as repositories of a “village cultural character” (*bản sắc văn hóa làng xã*). For example, tourist trips passing through Hóc Môn on their way to the Vietnam War-era tunnels at Củ Chi explicitly boast of opportunities tourists will have to view farmers plowing the fields with water buffalos, and residents from central city districts would commonly describe outer-city districts as the last vestiges of an older way of living. In less boastful fashion, this idealization of a certain temporality associated with a prior era is also illustrated by the ways in which the margins of cities are marked as key sites for modernization (*hiện đại hóa*), or as places that “lack civilization” (*thiếu văn minh*) or have “not yet developed” (*chưa phát triển*).<sup>12</sup> This stereotypical representation contradicts certain material realities, such as the fact that the numerous factories located in the outer city enforce labour techniques and time discipline very different from that imagined to exist in rural life. But rural-urban differences are reinforced by other material considerations: the income gap in Vietnam, for example, largely reproduces the spatial distinction between rural and urban, where “[u]rban poverty rates are consistently much lower than Rural poverty rates,”<sup>13</sup> and average per-capita income in urban areas is at least twice that of rural

<sup>10</sup> Hùynh Kim Khánh, *Vietnamese Communism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 103.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, “Poor Policies, Wealthy Peasants.”

<sup>12</sup> Hồng Hạnh, “Đất Hóc Môn: Đề phòng giá ảo” [Hóc Môn land: Precautions to prevent illusions about prices], *Việt Báo*, 7 March 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Bob Baulch, Nicholas Minot and Michael Epprecht, “Poverty and inequality in Vietnam: Spatial patterns and geographic determinants,” (International Food Policy Research Institute and Institute of Development Studies, 2003), 68.

areas.<sup>14</sup> In 2008, the average monthly expenditure of residents classified as rural in Hồ Chí Minh City was 924,570 *đồng*, while that of urban residents was 1,739,580 *đồng*. Average per-capita income was 1,248,900 *đồng* in the rural sectors of the city and 2,632,100 *đồng* in the urban.<sup>15</sup>

Such material differences in spending and income might seem to trump the symbolic plasticity of what a rural district might mean—the income differences are, after all, very real and not “just symbolic.” But even “real” differences can be interpreted in different ways. For example, the rural outer city might be considered “poor” and “underdeveloped” in some interpretations or it might be considered “affordable” and “full of potential” in another. Such interpretations, in turn, have material effects. Politically, outer-city *huyện* are often depicted as incapable of modern self-governance and local decisions are routinely overruled by the interests and demands of the central city core, which poses itself as a kind of paternalistic vanguard possessing knowledge and know-how that will guide the outer-city districts on the path of modernizing development.

During fieldwork I conducted in the outer-city district of Hóc Môn, local district authorities regularly lamented the ways in which their capacity to make local decisions was overruled by authorities from the urban core, who disparaged their capacity for making informed decisions, and often dismissed them as under-educated rural simpletons. Such logic was commonly taken as self-evident among urban elites, and has been enshrined in many administrative statements about the need to reform and modernize “rural” administrative approaches for quite some time. In 1995, then prime minister Võ Văn Kiệt disparaged rural administration as antithetical to the “Industrialization and Modernization” of the country. To eradicate what he called rural mentalities in urban administration, he urged policymakers to bring “proficiency in administration, and also to modernize the level of administration, so as not to allow the scourge of bureaucracy [*nạn quan liêu*] to become a fertile ground [*mảnh đất màu mỡ*] for the evil [*tệ*] of harassing and pestering [*những nhiễu*] all the people.”<sup>16</sup> His comments asserted that all of these negative qualities directly resulted from rural ways of thinking. It is quite common to hear urban residents attribute problems associated with corruption or inefficiency to the “peasant way of thinking” (*cách suy nghĩ của nông dân*). And rural district authorities are routinely dismissed as

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<sup>14</sup> Philip Taylor, “Social Inequality in a Socialist State,” in *Social Inequality in Vietnam and the Challenges to Reform*, ed. Philip Taylor (Singapore: ISEAS, 2004), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Cục Thống Kê Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh [Ho Chi Minh City Statistical Office], “Số liệu kinh tế xã hội 2008” [2008 Socio-economic Data], (2009). The 2008 exchange rate was approximately 16,000 *đồng* to the US dollar. 924,570 *đồng* equals nearly 58 dollars, 1,739,580 *đồng* equals nearly 109 dollars, 1,248,900 *đồng* equals just over 78 dollars, and 2,632,100 *đồng* equals nearly 165 dollars.

<sup>16</sup> H.D. and T.A., “Không thể tiếp tục quản lý đô thị như quản lý các làng, xã [cannot continue administering urban areas in the same way of administering villages and communes],” *Tuổi Trẻ*, 27 July 1995.

unable to handle the challenges of urban development. A 2003 article from the *Tuổi Trẻ* (Youth) newspaper describes how “some rural communities are suddenly faced with problems of land transfer, building approvals, utilities, road building and environmental degradation that commune People’s Committees are ill-equipped to handle.”<sup>17</sup> In recent years, a small cottage industry of scholarship on the problems of “urban ruralization” routinely attributes the majority of urban administrative failures to the problem of rural features of urban life.<sup>18</sup> The constantly shifting and inverting rural symbolism of the outer-city district allows it to be celebrated as important to the spiritual and environmental purity of the city at the same time that it is depicted as beyond the capacity of rural administration.

This persistent denigration of outer-city rurality legitimizes the centralization of decision making in the hands of the central urban districts, with distinct material consequences. Controlling the zoning and planning of the city, for example, becomes a key source of political and economic influence. Because urban elites control the process of designating what actually counts as an urban or a rural space, they can literally control the value of different spaces. Economically, the designation of such spaces as rural has profound implications for land values and other economic factors associated with the cost of living, wage rates and the price structure of a wide range of consumer services. Average income and expenditure indices mark the rural outer-city districts as governed by very different scales of value and price. The difference between price systems is itself exploited as an economic strategy. For example, inner-city entrepreneurs may employ outer-city residents for manual labour or piece-work. Or outer-city residents may seek work in the inner city while continuing to live in the outer city—earning wages at inner-city rates while maintaining expenditures at outer-city costs.

Because rural and urban spaces are associated with these dramatically different scales of value, the administrative designation of a space as rural or urban has profound consequences for both official and market-based land values. The categories “rural” and “urban” become very real in official documents. For example, the 2004 *Decree Providing for the Implementation of the Law on Land* (184-2004-ND-CP), which formally enacts the 2003 revisions

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<sup>17</sup> Paraphrased in David Marr, “A Brief History of Local Government in Vietnam,” in *Beyond Hanoi: Local Government in Vietnam*, eds. Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet and David G. Marr (Singapore: ISEAS, 2004), 48-49.

<sup>18</sup> Hân Nguyễn Nguyễn Nhã, “Các biện pháp giáo dục cụ thể về tác phong văn minh đô thị tại Việt Nam” [Concrete educational procedures for the urban lifestyle in Viet Nam], in *Hội thảo quốc tế: Phát triển đô thị bền vững, vai trò của nghiên cứu và giáo dục* (Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh: 1999); Lê Như Hoa, *Quản Lý Văn Hoá Đô Thị Trong Điều Kiện Công Nghiệp Hoá Hiện Đại Hoá Đất Nước* [Managing Urban Culture in the Circumstances of Industrializing and Modernizing the Nation] (Hà Nội: Viện Văn Hoá và Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hoá - Thông Tin, 2001); Trần Hồng Vân, *Tác động xã hội của di cư tự do vào Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh trong thời kỳ Đổi Mới* [The Social Impact of Spontaneous Migration into Ho Chi Minh City During the Doi Moi Period] (TP.HCM: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2002).

to the *Law on Land*, specifically differentiates the regulations for use of agricultural land (Chapter VII) and non-agricultural land (Chapter VIII). These are the only categories of land that receive their own chapters, and the document does not specifically identify other gradations, except for noting that careful zoning should be carried out on a more micro-scale.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, the *Law on Land* stipulates that provincial authorities publish comprehensive annual lists of officially sanctioned land prices. In these lists, the symbolic differentiation between rural and urban land quickly assumes distinctly material properties, arranged according to dramatically different pricing structures. While official price lists for Hồ Chí Minh City subdivide the major categories of “urban land” (*đất đô thị*) and “agricultural land” (*đất nông nghiệp*) according to proximity to major roads, all of the land prices are arranged and priced in a district-by-district fashion, correlating the administrative classification of the different districts with land value, and further reinforcing the distinction between *quận* and *huyện*. Comparing the outer-city *huyện* Hóc Môn, with the inner-city *quận* District 12, for example, is particularly instructive because these districts are contiguous, and in fact District 12 was formerly part of Hóc Môn, before the district was split up in 1997. The average official land prices in Hóc Môn for 2010 are 1,050,000 *đồng* per square metre, with the lowest price set at 260,000 *đồng* per square metre. In District 12, the average official land prices are 2,149,000 *đồng* per square metre, and the lowest price is 1,300,000 *đồng* per square metre.<sup>20</sup> Rural and urban land are not the only categories used in detailed zoning plans, which might refer to everything from “cemetery land” to “military land,” but “rural” and “urban” remain the main poles around which primary land classification is organized.

There is also a fundamentally different pricing system for “agricultural land” which assigns prices based on various gradations of rurality. “Agricultural

<sup>19</sup> Socialist Republic of Vietnam, “Decree Providing for Implementation of the Law on Land (No. 181-2004-ND-CP),” in *181-2004-ND-CP*, ed. Office of Government and Pham Van Khai (Hanoi, 2004), available at <[http://www.eng.hochiminhcity.gov.vn/eng/news/default.aspx?cat\\_id=551&news\\_id=3390#content](http://www.eng.hochiminhcity.gov.vn/eng/news/default.aspx?cat_id=551&news_id=3390#content)>.

<sup>20</sup> Vũ Lê, “TP HCM ban hành bảng giá đất 2010” [Ho Chi Minh City Releases Land Price Schedule for 2010], *vn.express.net.*, December 24, 2009, available at <<http://vnexpress.net/GL/Kinh-doanh/Bat-Dong-san/209/12/3BA170FF/>>.

For a useful analysis of the 2010 land prices, see Tùng Nguyễn, “Toàn cảnh Bảng giá đất năm 2010 của TPHCM” [All about the HCMC Land Price Schedule for 2010], *Dân trí*, 29 December 2009, available at <<http://dantri.com.vn/c20/s20-369981/toan-canhh-bang-gia-dat-nam-2010-cua-tphcm.htm>>; Ho Chi Minh City People’s Committee, “Bảng giá đất 2010 (Ban hành kèm Quyết định số 102/2009/QĐ-UBND ngày 24 tháng 12 năm 2009 của Ủy ban nhân dân thành phố Hồ Chí Minh)” [Land Price schedule: Issued in conjunction with Decision number 102/2009/QĐ-UBND December 24th, 2009 by the Ho Chi Minh City People’s Committee] (Ho Chi Minh City, December 24, 2009), available at <[http://dantri.vcmmedia.vn/Uploaded/Download/bang\\_gia\\_dat\\_2010.xls](http://dantri.vcmmedia.vn/Uploaded/Download/bang_gia_dat_2010.xls)>.

The 2010 exchange rate was nearly 19,000 per US dollar, so 1,050,000 *đồng* equals just over 55 dollars; 260,000 *đồng* equals nearly 14 dollars; 2,149,000 *đồng* equals just over 113 dollars; and 1,300,000 *đồng* equals just over 68 dollars.



land is divided into 3 zones: the inner-city *quận* are zone I; *huyện* Cần Giờ is zone III; and all the other outer-city *huyện* are zone II.”<sup>21</sup> Within each zone, further gradations are made based on how far the plot of land is from a road. These distinctions are then mapped onto a table that differentiates the value of land based on its location either in an outer-city *huyện* or an inner-city *quận*, as well as its position in relation to major roads. Based on this system, a plot of agricultural land within 200 metres of a road located in a *quận* is to be valued at 162,000 *đồng* per square metre, while a plot of agricultural land in a *huyện* more than 400 metres away from a road is to be valued at 58,000 *đồng* per square metre. These figures themselves demonstrate the dialectical interaction between symbolic representation and material value. First, the highly symbolic categories of rural, urban, *huyện* and *quận* organize the way land values are presented. And the values, through their dramatic differences, reinforce the notion that these are meaningful categories that reflect a stark, and very real, division between regimes of value.

Because symbolic categories themselves come to represent material distinctions, controlling the transition from “rural” to “urban” can itself generate profit. In Vietnamese planning practices, rural or urban land designations have such a profound effect on land values that many land investment schemes literally bet on the future designation of peripheral lands.<sup>22</sup> Real-estate speculators hedge bets on the prospects that a piece of rural land will be rezoned as urban land, increasing its value exponentially.<sup>23</sup> When a *huyện* becomes a *quận* the latent capital value of land multiplies, linking great financial incentives to the careful manipulation of zoning designations. This process of shifting the designation of land is called “land conversion,” but also amounts to capital conversion, for it converts investment capital into profit without actually engaging in any productive activity. An investor can buy cheap and sell dear simply by buying land designated as rural and selling it as urban. But this process requires first dispossessing rural inhabitants from their land, relying on a very modern form of so-called “primitive accumulation” through displacement.<sup>24</sup>

While rurality is itself a flexible category that can shift symbolic meaning according to context, the meaning of “rurality” is tied into very material political and economic processes that themselves depend on the meaning of rural and urban distinctions. One of the consequences of this symbolic association of the outer-city districts with rural space is that it produces a

<sup>21</sup> Tùng Nguyễn, “Toàn cảnh Bảng giá đất năm 2010.”

<sup>22</sup> Annette Kim, *Learning to Be Capitalists: Entrepreneurs in Vietnam's Transition Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 39-45.

<sup>23</sup> Theo SGT, “Mua đất ngoại thành để ‘đón đầu’” [Buying Outer-City Land to ‘welcome investment’], *VnExpress.Net*, December 7, 2007, available at <http://www.vnexpress.net/GL/Kinh-doanh/Bat-Dong-san/2007/12/3BA0C375/>.

<sup>24</sup> David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 137-182.

political economy of “rural” identification. Being identified as rural signals a mode of life which has both material and symbolic dimensions. It also subjects the rural to control by urban elites, who manipulate the identification of rural and urban zoning distinctions in order to transform the rural outer-city districts into a certain kind of economic frontier for potential investment.

### ***Inside and Outside as Material Symbolism***

The outer-city districts are not only understood as rural, they are seen as “outside.” The word *ngoại*, embedded in the term for a *ngoại thành* outer-city district, means “outside,” and immediately conjures up a relationship with its opposite, *nội* (inside). Together, inside and outside combine to form a paired set of binary oppositions that amount to an organic vision of symbiosis. The very mention of the word *ngoại thành*, for example, necessarily implies the existence of the *nội thành*. Furthermore, in the symbolic model of the city, the paired concepts of the inside and the outside forge a relationship of organic unity as well as structural hierarchy in which concepts of inside and outside are conceptually bound together as parts of a larger whole, but where the needs of the inside dominate the needs of the outside. In such conceptions of the city, what appears like, and in fact often operates as, a largely material relationship between a parasitic core extracting surplus from an exploited periphery, is recast as a relationship of symbiotic complementarity that resonates with long-standing traditional Vietnamese notions of cosmological harmony. This harmony, however, like harmony ideologies in many other contexts, itself masks unequal relations of power and domination.<sup>25</sup>

Symbiotic complementarity has a long and important role in Vietnamese philosophical understandings of ideal social relations. While ideals often diverge from actual practice, formal understandings of social relations idealize the unity that comes from the combination of opposites. This unity, which organizes central features of time, space and human relations according to the complementary oppositions between *đương* (yang) and *âm* (yin), amounts to nothing less than a cosmological worldview of idealized social conduct. In this system, oppositions such as male and female, sun and moon, urban and rural and “inside” and “outside,” represent asymptotic poles of cosmological energy that only unify into powerful harmony when combined in proportionate and balanced fashion. As a wide range of Vietnamese scholars have noted (and as any school child who has been given carefully modulated combinations of “hot” and “cold” foods to fight off illness can corroborate), mastering the balance of *âm* and *đương* involves properly coordinating these opposites into a relationship of complementarity.

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<sup>25</sup> Li Zhang, *In Search of Paradise*, 213-216; Laura Nader, *Harmony Ideology: Justice and Control in a Zapotec Mountain Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

In the case of urban (*duong*) and rural (*âm*) relations, the proper balance is organized in such a way that city and countryside productively produce each other both as unity and as opposites.<sup>26</sup> For example, Trần Ngọc Thêm, a leading Vietnamese professor of culture studies, explicitly argues that the space of rural village society (*làng xã*) is *âm* and the space of urban society (*đô thị*) is *duong*. Furthermore, he notes that there is always latent rurality within the city, and always latent urban qualities within the countryside.<sup>27</sup> Mapping this symbolic framework for organizing the cosmos onto human social relations and the organization of the city produces a model of the city that conceptually unifies the urban inner city (*nội thành*) with its symbolic opposite, the rural outer city (*ngoại thành*).

This notion of symbiotic complementarity between inside and outside emerges most clearly at the level of the urban master plan, where a relationship of organic solidarity largely frames the model of the city. The urban plan maps the city as an organic body, conceived as a functioning organism divided into an inside (*nội thành*) and an outside (*ngoại thành*) which function together precisely because they are recognized as different, fulfilling unique functional tasks. This relationship itself depends on Vietnamese notions of the city as a bounded space surrounded conceptually by a wall (*thành*).<sup>28</sup> While the physical walls of the citadel Nguyễn Cửu Đàm built in 1772 no longer physically separate the inside and outside in modern Hồ Chí Minh City, the colorful distinctions on the master plan clearly demarcate inside from outside. Furthermore, the designation of outer-city spaces as “green belts” and “lungs to the city,” as well as the placement of key elements of urban infrastructure such as ring roads, garbage dumps, transport hubs and the relocation of polluting factories to outer-city spaces, reproduce the distinction between inside and outside, giving it material substance. The very concept of inside and outside becomes inscribed onto the landscape in response to the idealized images projected onto space by the urban plan. As Stephanie Burlat notes, the Hồ Chí Minh City Master Plan, “in making visible an ideal image, has the role of promoting its creation.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Lê Văn Chương, *Cơ Sở Văn Hóa Việt Nam* [Vietnam's Cultural Basis] (Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 1999), 154.

<sup>27</sup> Trần Ngọc Thêm, *Cơ Sở Văn Hóa Việt Nam* [Vietnam's Cultural Basis] (Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Giao Dục, 1999), 122, 124.

<sup>28</sup> Historians explain that Saigon-Hồ Chí Minh City first became recognized as a “city” (thành phố) in the true sense of the word when Nguyễn Cửu Đàm built a citadel in 1772. The formative conception of inside and outside emerges from the notion of a complementary relationship between the space inside the walls (*nội thành*) and the surrounding hinterland supporting it (*ngoại thành*). Nguyễn Đình Đầu, *From Saigon to Ho Chi Minh City: 300 year history* (Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh: Land Service Science and Technics Publishing House, 1998), 20.

<sup>29</sup> Anne Burlat, “Processus Institutionnels et Dynamiques Urbaines dans L’Urbanisation Contemporaine de Ho Chi Minh Ville (1988-1998): Planification, Production, Gestion des “Secteurs D’Habitat”” (Thèse de Doctorat en urbanisme et aménagement, Université de Lyon II, 2001), 217.

This idealized notion of the city as a bifurcated yet integrated structure, forged out of the harmonious conjunction of inside and outside, often contradicts the material qualities of actual space. There are two important consequences to this. First, Vietnamese understandings of the city do not embrace the notion of hybrid spaces, and cast rural-urban mixtures as problems to be overcome rather than seeking to understand them as emergent spatial forms. Thus, while scholars in other contexts have increasingly noted the importance of hybrid rural-urban interfaces in modern urban development, the Vietnamese conception of inside and outside demands that the inside and the outside, as well as the urban and the rural, remain conceptually discrete categories.<sup>30</sup> Instead of developing concepts that accommodate these new hybrid mixtures of land use, urban planners compulsively seek to maintain a strict distinction between the rural and the urban that does not always accurately reflect the reality of space and land use on the ground. The clearest example of this is evident in the practice of land conversion and redistricting that constantly entails reclassification and reorganization of the administrative structures in urbanizing districts. Currently, the administrative region of Hồ Chí Minh City is divided into 19 inner-city *quận* and 5 outer-city *huyện*, but the number of *quận* and *huyện* has changed over time. In 1989, for example, there were only ten inner-city districts. In 1997 inner-city districts 2, 7, 9 and 12 were formed out of formerly rural outer-city districts and Thủ Đức was redesignated as an inner-city *quận*. In 2003, two new inner-city districts, Bình Tân and Tân Phú, were added. These administrative changes have ostensibly come in response to increased population densities in formerly rural districts. But the restructuring of districts is especially important on the symbolic level, because it maintains the formal differentiation of rural and urban in the city. At the same time, such redistricting also transforms the political economy of the city, as these new designations transform the status of leaders in the newly designated districts, and also dramatically alter the land values of the spaces they cover.<sup>31</sup>

Second, the rigid distinction between inside and outside and the insistence on maintaining symbolic distinctions between rural and urban produces what might be termed a crisis in categories, where the mixing of symbolic elements creates an aesthetic clash or leads to the denigration of the outer-city space as dangerous and vice-ridden. In popular conceptions and media representations of many *ngoại thành* spaces, for example, they are depicted as “uncivil” (*thiếu văn minh*) spaces of debauchery where couples meet to engage in extramarital affairs, or as sites of “social evils” (*tệ nạn xã hội*)

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<sup>30</sup> T.G. McGee, “The Emergence of *Desakota* Regions in Asia: Expanding a Hypothesis,” in *The Extended Metropolis: Settlement Transition in Asia*, eds. Norton Ginsburg, Bruce Koppel and T.G. McGee (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991).

<sup>31</sup> Fieldnotes, 2008.

overrun by sex work and drug use.<sup>32</sup> Newspaper reports have also detailed outer-city districts as sites where unhygienic food-production practices abound, where building violations go unchecked, and where the melding of country and city produces a general sense of danger and anxiety.<sup>33</sup> But the rural-urban interface also produces more material contradictions that are not purely symbolic. Among other things, newspapers have reported on water-bottling facilities that obtain water from wells drilled into cemeteries, vegetable gardens polluted by industrial wastes, corrupt authorities who allow industrial sites or residential housing developments to be built on land designated for agricultural production, and so on.<sup>34</sup> It is important to note that people will criticize such practices elsewhere in the city, and that the outer-city districts are not the only spaces subject to critique. However, when disagreeable practices occur in the outer city, they are often coupled with stereotypes about these areas, implying that the conditions of being “outside” specifically contribute to the proliferation of such unwelcome practices.

In short, the mixture of land use that characterizes periurban development produces a sense of anxiety which is simultaneously symbolic and material. On the level of urban administration, the only way to resolve a clash of categories such as this is to transform one category into the other. In this process, rural areas are generally converted into “urban” areas by administrative fiat, and “outside” areas are incorporated into the “inside” by changing them from *huyện* into *quận*. Symbolically, this process realigns space and balances the harmonious complementarity of inside and outside. But the process also reinforces a hierarchical distinction between the inside and outside, such that the direction of urban development has always prioritized the needs of the urban core, which are deemed more modern and drive the development direction of the city as a whole. During the American War, Saigon authorities established outer-city districts as a military buffer zone known as a “*vành đai trắng*” (no man’s land, “clear belt”). After the war, they were converted into a “*vành đai xanh*,” agricultural green belts intended to serve the urban population through the development of agricultural collectives on the outskirts of cities.<sup>35</sup> Even after the dismantling

<sup>32</sup> T. Đ., “Nhà nghỉ ven đô—điểm hẹn của các cặp tình nhân” [Hotels on the urban fringe—where lovers meet], *VNexpress*, 24 August 2003.

<sup>33</sup> Lê Văn Hải, “Nạn rải đinh đã về Hóc Môn” [The plague of spreading nails has returned to Hóc Môn], *Tuổi Trẻ*, 28 February 2003; Phúc Huy, “TP.HCM: nỗi lo ... nhà siêu mỏng” [HCMC: Worried feelings ... Super thin houses], *Tuổi Trẻ*, 10 December 2004.

<sup>34</sup> VNexpress, “Nhiều hộ dân TP HCM đang uống nước từ nghĩa địa” [Many families in HCMC are drinking water from cemeteries], *VNexpress.net*, 20 July 2002; VNexpress, “Ô nhiễm nguồn nước do nghĩa địa tự phát ở TP HCM” [Spontaneously built cemeteries pollute water sources in HCMC], *VNexpress.net*, 27 May 2003.

<sup>35</sup> Đinh Huy Liêm, “Chuyển Biến Của Kinh Tế Nông Hộ và Kinh Tế Hợp Tác Trong Nông Nghiệp Ngoại Thành Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1975-1994” [The Transformation of the Agricultural Household Economy and the Collective Economy in Ho Chi Minh City's Suburban Agriculture, 1975-1994] (Thesis, Viện KHXH tại TP.Hồ Chí Minh, 2001), 76-77.

of collectivization in Vietnam, the organic metaphor of the outer city as a complementary supplement to the inner city persisted with subsequent five-year plans that emphasized how agricultural production in the outer-city districts should serve the industrialization of the city. As Hồ Chí Minh City authorities explained with the onset of *đổi mới* reforms in 1986: “Investing in the outer-city is truly a service to the inner-city, to industry...”. A hierarchy emerges in which the Vietnamese term *phục vụ* (to serve) frames the relationship of outside to inside, such that “the outer-city must clearly change in terms of economy and culture and meaningful service to the inner-city.”<sup>36</sup>

The outer city is thus subordinated to the industrial and development goals of the urban core, often serving as a safety valve to accommodate the expanding needs of the city.<sup>37</sup> As a Vietnamese handbook on urban planning puts it matter of factly, the rural periphery must be made urban to accommodate the forward march of urban development:

Reality shows that the social life in the developing countries is gradually taking on an urban more than a rural character. With such reality, the urban areas are using the power of government to encroach upon (*xâm lấn*), expand into (*bành trướng*), and annex (*thôn lẫm*) the rural outer-city areas in order to develop industry and commerce.<sup>38</sup>

While the logic of this progressive march of urban development appears at first glance to contradict the ideal of organic complementarity, the official conversion of ostensibly rural outer-city land into “urban” inner-city land maintains the fiction of a strict differentiation between rural and urban zones. Converting land from rural to urban and from inside to outside is depicted as an inevitable feature of urban development, something which follows “reality.”

Symbolic understandings of the complementary unity of inside and outside frame the relationship between the inner-city and outer-city districts as a relationship of complementarity that underscores and justifies relations of hierarchy dominated by the “inside” of the city. Viewed from the perspective of the city as an organic whole, this corresponds with and reinforces the distinction between rural and urban described in the previous section; indeed, rural spaces seem to surround the city, forming a clear zone “outside.” However, on another level, from the broader perspective of the nation, this relationship inverts; the rural is not understood as “outside” so much as it is

<sup>36</sup> Đinh Huy Liêm, “Chuyển Biến Của Kinh Tế Nông Hộ và Kinh Tế Hợp Tác Trong Nông Nghiệp Ngoại Thành Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1975-1994,” 118.

<sup>37</sup> VNexpress, “Sắp có đô thị xanh ven sông Sài Gòn - Rạch Tra” [Soon to Have a Green Urban Zone on the edge of the Saigon River-Tra Canal], *VNexpress.net*, 22 September 2002.

<sup>38</sup> Nguyễn Ngọc Châu, *Quản lý đô thị* [Urban Administration] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Xây Dựng, 2001), 66.

symbolically located at the centre of national identity. The *quê hương*, or ancestral home or native place, for example, is typically understood as decidedly rural. The term to “return to one’s ancestral home” (*về quê*), for example, can also mean “to go to the countryside,” and the native place associated with the countryside is generally understood as the site of the patriline. This “land of the father and ancestors” (*quê cha đất tổ*) is spatially identified as the centre of the family lineage. Symbolic flexibility marks the outer-city districts precisely because they operate at the interface of these two symbolic systems: rural and urban as well as inside and outside. At times, the meaning of these symbolic systems can converge, and at other times they provide dramatically opposed models of social inclusion and exclusion. Viewed from the perspective of the city alone, the outer-city district is degraded as an underdeveloped rural margin in comparison to the city. But in the national symbolism of rural and urban, this relationship is inverted, because the rural is understood as the heartland of Vietnamese tradition and the cities are understood as some of the most foreign points in the nation, connected with what is largely exterior to Vietnamese tradition. Within one conceptual system, the outer city is linked with the category of the rural, and is thus located symbolically in the centre of Vietnamese tradition, at the proverbial source (*nguồn*) of national identity. Within the other conceptual system, it is located at the periphery of the city, as an excluded space, a place which should support the development of the ideologically superior urban centre.

This seeming contradiction between the meaning of the outer-city district as inferior servant to the inner city and as a symbolically rich space of tradition and Vietnamese identity has a distinct parallel in Vietnamese notions of kinship, which are also founded on a flexible and inverting binary relationship between inside and outside. The kinship idiom proves a fitting model for understanding Vietnamese modes of conceptualizing the dynamic relationship between inside and outside as a field of social action.

### ***The Kinship Idiom as Material Symbolism***

Like the conception of the city, a symbolic opposition of inside and outside organizes Vietnamese kinship relations. In idealized models of Vietnamese kinship and in everyday terms of address, the father’s side of the family is associated with the inside (*bên nội*), and the mother’s side of the family is associated with the outside (*bên ngoài*). In ideal terms, as with the city, the inside and outside join into a formal complementary relationship that is understood to be both hierarchical and harmonious. It is hierarchical in the sense that the formal lineage is associated with the male-oriented ancestral line; it is deemed harmonious in the sense that the formal union of opposites drives the logic of the system. In ideal models of Vietnamese kinship, opposites attract.

Ideal models of kinship parallel ideal models of the city in striking ways. For example, the inside-outside idioms used to organize kinship and ideas of the city depend on similar conjunctions of spatio-temporal order. Spatially, the patriline (*bên nội*) is understood as rooted in a particular ancestral space that is geographically fixed and inherently limited, confined to a plot of land. Similarly, the inner city (*nội thành*) is understood as rooted in the heart of the city and is also inherently fixed and limited. Temporally, the patriline is understood as extending backwards deep into historical time, such that current generations link themselves to the founding origins of the lineage by tracing descent through the male line. Similarly, the inner city is associated with the historic core of the city, located in and around the spot where the city was founded. In this idealized patrilineal scheme, the outer realm of the lineage (*bên ngoại*), which is associated with the mother's side of the family, is idealized as geographically dispersed and historically shallow. Certainly, many individual families actually do trace their "outer lineages" quite far back into historical time, but idealized patrilineal models used for determining lines of descent emphasize tracing deep historical ancestry through the "inner lineage" rather than the outer. Furthermore, even in cases when a wife's side of the family continues to be celebrated in a family home, it is typically the wife's patrilineal "inner lineage" that receives formal attention rather than her "outer lineage." Similarly, outer-city districts (*ngoại thành*) are understood as spreading broadly over a wide geographical space but they are not associated with founding histories of the city. In short, the inside-outside relationship organizing the ideal structure of Hồ Chí Minh City directly parallels the spatio-temporal relations inherent to the idealized model of Vietnamese patrilineal kinship. The socio-cultural model that gives symbolic meaning to urban form is analogous to the socio-cultural logic of social organization found in the idealized patriline.

Vietnamese kinship, however, is more complex than the idealized patrilineal model implies. In addition to the formal model of the "male-oriented" system, Vietnamese kinship also incorporates a "non-male-oriented" model that accommodates bilateral forms of kinship organization.<sup>39</sup> While idealizing the patrilineal form in many formal contexts, Vietnamese families do not forsake the mother's side of the family. Instead, social actors tend to oscillate between these two conceptual models, producing a hybrid form of kinship that formally idealizes the patriline while pragmatically engaging with a wide range of kin networks derived from both the father's side and the mother's side. Again, this pragmatic extension of kinship relations beyond the idealized boundaries of the patriline parallels the way Hồ Chí Minh City residents conceptualize the city and its outer-city districts. While the inner

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<sup>39</sup> Hy Van Luong, *Discursive Practices and Linguistic Meanings: The Vietnamese System of Person Reference* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1990).



city is idealized as a core historical centre of the city, everyday social actors pragmatically move between the inside and outside of the city in productive ways. The flexible and inverting meanings associated with categories of urban versus rural and inside versus outside create the possibility for people to alternately valorize and denigrate the outer-city districts, to exclude them and to incorporate them at various moments within socio-cultural life.<sup>40</sup> In this symbolic system, the extreme oppositions between inside and outside are seen as asymptotic poles which have both positive and negative qualities associated with them. Vietnamese kinship offers an example of how it is possible to simultaneously reproduce and to move between such poles, idealizing the “inside” at some moments and pragmatically engaging with the “outside” at others for strategic effect.

The kinship idioms of inside and outside offer a model for the pragmatic manipulation of socio-spatial affiliations according to context. This oscillation between inside and outside is also evident in the ways in which outer-city districts are alternatively valorized and denigrated. In interviews from Hóc Môn district, for example, residents described their lives in the outer city as both a source of structural exclusion as well as a source of great opportunity. On the one hand they lamented how Hóc Môn was denigrated as a subordinate district beholden to the whims and ambitions of those wielding political and economic power in the “inside,” and they noted how they were often marginalized from opportunities and economic potentialities. On the other hand, they saw themselves as liberated by their position outside the centres of state power, idealizing life on the edge as an unbounded space of creativity and possibility. While it is possible to see outer-city residents as having been pushed to the margins of society, many residents described their lives on the edge as a strategic choice that allowed them to capitalize on the structural qualities of being outside. More precisely, most of the residents I came to know described the power of the *ngoại thành* as arising from the way it both reproduced and transcended ideal structures of Vietnamese social-spatial organization. While they lived in the outer-city districts, they were also engaged in complex social and economic relationships that linked them with the urban core. Just as distinctions between inside/outside scales of value enabled real-estate speculators to buy land cheap and sell it dear, outer-city residents “live cheap and earn dear” by living on the outskirts and engaging in trade with the inner city. They were not simply pushed to the

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<sup>40</sup> A similar double symbolic association can be seen in the gendered meaning of femininity, which also ranges from celebratory to highly derogatory. “Women’s crucial importance as symbols makes them central to national imaginings, but their supposed propensity for lapses from normative ideals—feminine disorder—means that they can just as easily threaten the national essence.” Ann Marie Leshkovich, “Feminine Disorder: State Campaigns against Street Traders in Socialist and Late Socialist Việt Nam,” in *Le Việt Nam au féminin* [Việt Nam: Women’s Realities], eds. Gisèle Bousquet and Nora Taylor (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2005), 190.

outside, but actively participated in the production of the outside as a meaningful space which is forged in relationship to the inside. It is precisely such a model of thinking about the edge of the city that drives the symbolic position it holds in the city. A place of opportunity as well as a neglected margin, the *ngoại thành* is understood as serving the inner city as well as offering an alternative to it. Both benefitting from and feeling marginalized by their position as “outsiders,” residents in *huyện ngoại thành* like Hóc Môn often appear ambivalent about urbanization, which both facilitates their inclusion in the city and petrifies the symbolic meaning of their position on the city’s fringe.

## Conclusion

The concept of “periurban” means very little to a Vietnamese speaker living in Hồ Chí Minh City. More important is the concept of *ngoại thành*, a descriptive term that evokes spatial, temporal and socio-cultural associations alive with symbolism and full of the complexity, contradiction and emotive power that comes with living in what they know as the “outer city.” Symbolically, the outer-city districts are framed within potent and deeply meaningful symbolic categories that appear as strict binaries but are also flexible; they are sites of marginality and potential, places pushed to the edge of social consciousness as well as places on the cutting edge. As material symbolism, they are linked to the existential conditions associated with being “rural,” “outside the city” and “outside the patriline,” as well as the economic challenges and opportunities associated with land on the edge of the city. The dynamic flexibility of meaning entailed by such conditions makes them dramatic sites of contested development because the very name they are given—whether they are dubbed rural or urban, inside or outside—can produce dramatic economic and symbolic effects. Land conversion can convert capital into profit, living within a rural scale of value while earning urban wages can be a livelihood strategy, and the “outside” can be an epithet or a word of praise. An increasingly important strategy of accumulation in contemporary Hồ Chí Minh City literally depends on the strategic manipulation of these categories, as real estate investors and land speculators attempt to buy land categorized as rural in the hopes that it will be recategorized as urban. As a result, the flexible symbolic meanings of rural and urban as well as inside and outside become folded into extraordinarily material processes of urban development. Symbolic distinctions acquire monetary values, and capital investments drive the transformation of the landscape. But the material processes of development taking place in the rural outer-city districts transform the symbolic meaning of such spaces. While the symbolism of a rural outer-city district is flexible, concrete material developments of infrastructure, housing and the urban built environment are less flexible. They accumulate on the landscape, transforming it with a

sense of permanence and fixity. As a result, development projects, despite the fact that their economic logic emerges from exploiting the multivalent symbolic meanings of the edge, ultimately fix and reify what were previously flexible categories. Ideas may be fluid, but concrete always hardens; and when *ngoại thành* becomes *nội thành* the act of “becoming urban” has both symbolic and material consequences.

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