Cultivating the Hip Hop Self

> "Spontaneous movement is the constitutive source of agency, of subjecthood, of selfhood." (Sheets-Johnstone 1999: 138)

The importance of sensation, not only for embodiment but also for conceptions of the self, has been outlined by David Marr in his article, "Concepts of 'Individual' and 'Self' in Twentieth-Century Vietnam." Marr (2000) ascribes an at least 600-year history to conceptions of self in Vietnamese literature. He determines that the use of *thân* and *tâm* derive from the Classical Chinese used in essays and poems. *Thân* can be translated as "body-person," signifying the animate, sensual self, often used in opposition to *thể*, which could be translated as the physical, objective, instrumental body. *Thân* can also be contrasted with *nhân* or *người*, humans in general or other persons. *Thân* retains a bodily connection distinct from the person's spirit or soul. By contrast, *tâm*, translated as "heart-mind," connotes the sentient, perceptive, reflective, and sympathetic dimensions of human nature. *Tâm* is used in poetry to assert the inner self. Body-mind and heart-mind must be considered conjointly, since each holds implications for the other. For instance, diet and physical exercise enhance the mental state, whereas the heart-mind contributes to bodily well-being (Marr 2000: 769-770). The symbiosis of body-mind and heart-mind is apparent in hip hop practitioners' assessments of dance as having an overall positive impact on their lives, as expressed by Yen Hanh: "Dancing gave me a lot of things. Dancing made my life more colourful and meaningful." Here Yen Hanh implies reference to the body-mind. Through dance, the young people introduced in this book are able to realize parts of themselves that cannot be easily expressed in words, let alone be merely achieved through the private accumulation of wealth. They take good care of both their mental and physical health. Aware of the importance of their corporeality, and need for good health, they regularly exercise while taking care of their diet.

Tu thân, or self-cultivation, builds etymologically on the notion of body-person, thus maintaining a connection with corporeality. Self-cultivation comprises a diverse range of techniques in order to achieve personal enlightenment. While the idea and discourse of self-cultivation has a long history in Confucianism, it used to have a clear gender and class bias, as self-cultivation was a "life-long project of elitary men" (Li Zhang 2018: 47). Through literary debates that occurred in the first half of the 20th century, the idea of self-cultivation resurged among writers and literary scholars. However, during the period of collectivization, concern for the self was replaced by concerns for the collective, at least formally. Eventually, the passing of the Doi Moi economic reform program in 1986 can be regarded as the official recognition of practices already occurring on the ground. Benedict Kerkvliet (1995) intriguingly shows how households were much more eager to put their labour power to work in the cultivation of the small lots of land privately allotted to each household, rather than contributing to the cooperative. In post-Mao China, concerns for and with the self particularly re-emerged in the realm of literature and literary criticism, and were further revived in popular psychological education and the revival of Confucianism (Li Zhang 2018). For contemporary Vietnam, Nguyen (2019) outlines the desires produced and shared for collective well-being and social harmony on the one hand, and "fictional expectations" (Beckert 2016) based on consumption and the private accumulation of wealth on the other. For the hip hop self, these desires that at first blush may be considered binary opposites are integrated with one another. Doing what they love most is a main motivation to continue dancing. As I have shown in the chapter "SELF-ENTREPRENEURISM AND SELF-FASHIONING," many are able or at least try to make a living from dancing, while at the same time receiving recognition from their peers. Dance success is also remunerated financially, when dancers win money prizes for coming in first, second, or third place in a battle. The "bringing home of achievements," as Nguyet calls it, referring to the materialisations of success in terms of awards, trophies, and certificates, may also result in the recognition of their aspirations and lifestyles by their parents, who might otherwise prefer that their children were focused on their studies and making money. In fact, their personal and collective success, both as individual dancers or as a collective crew, must be read against the framework of striving in the new economy. According to Nguyen (2019), the dominant ethic of striving encourages and even generates social pressure to continuously pursue and access wealth and power. It means that if an

individual fails to accumulate wealth and power, it is because they were not enterprising enough, not daring enough, and not responsible enough. Yet, at the same time, it is important to achieve social recognition, such as by putting such personal profit to work for the poor and marginalized (Nguyen 2019: 152, 172). As Li Zhang (2012: 663) suggests, "while there is a general shift toward a private self and an increased concern with self-care engendered by a new mass consumer culture and an increasingly commodified society, social embeddedness and socialist moralities remain salient in the remaking of the self and living in postreform Vietnam."

Consequently, the hip hop self sits at the intersection of longing for a good and self-determined life, and societal, economic, and state demands on citizens to perform well in the socialist market economy. Youth has to deal with intersecting and sometimes ambivalent demands formulated by market socialism. Consequently, dancing youth navigate the late socialist city by developing mobile, flexible, and precarious lifestyles, having aspirations of their own, while adhering to their social responsibilities.

Meaning of hip hop: self and community

> "And when they hear about hip hop, they will think that this kind of dance is not good. Because it's from the street. Some of the dancers is like homeless, don't have any job – like bad people, they always think like that." (popper Rufu)

In the public eye, hip hop dancing is considered "useless," as it does not provide a "good job" or steady income. Rufu recalls how her parents used to tell her that although she was young and fit to dance, they were anxious about her future, asking her what she would do five years in the future. This question became stuck in her mind, as she realized that dancing was not a mere hobby for her. For Rufu hip hop is a lifestyle, which implies making choices about the future. As a result, it has become her aspiration to change people's beliefs about hip hop, transforming the negative image into a positive one. Graduating from university and still dancing, she was able to prove that she remained a "good" person, and was able to earn money from dancing. Rufu's assessment of what it means to be a "good" person expresses her agency. According to Ortner, agency presupposes awareness and self-reflexivity concerning the circumstances in which the subject acts. While Rufu was seeking personal

happiness embodied in dancing, she acted within moral constraints imposed by social expectations about her economic success and her moral conduct as a daughter. In fact, she acted against the circumstances she found herself in, as she made enough money from dancing to become financially independent from her family. Like Rufu, many dancers felt the need to somehow "prove" themselves. They aimed to prove that, despite dancing – or perhaps even *because* of dancing – they were able to act as socially responsible citizens, taking on respective roles in family and society.

In my conversations with dancers, both male and female, the good person was a recurrent trope. Good was defined as industrious and money-making, recalling the ethic of striving outlined by Nguyen, and the promotion of moral personhood by the late socialist state. The continuous striving for wealth and power must eventually take place in the moral framework of *thành người* and *làm người*. *Thành người* means becoming a morally and socially responsible person. In order for an individual to become *thành người*, one needs to be cared for, fed, educated, and socialized to assume one's obligations and responsibilities for oneself, for intimate others, and for society at large. The status of *thành người* is achieved when a person is able to reciprocate the care she has received from others. *Làm người*, in turn, refers to the work of leading a moral life. The art of leading a moral life requires "constant work of cultivating moral behaviours, dealing with the moral challenges of life while maintaining a coherent moral orientation as a member of a family, community, and nation, above all, through socially accepted ways of caring" (Nguyen 2019: 106). For instance, Yen Hanh left her home town in Ha Tinh Province, 200 kilometres away from Vinh City, to study in Hanoi. After graduating from university, she continues to live, work, and dance in Hanoi, which she appreciates for its way of life. However, she aspires to return to her home town once she has acquired enough money. With money made in Hanoi, she would like to sponsor the tourism industry in her home province. Her future imagination is intimately linked to skills and knowledge acquired in Hanoi, as she studies tourism and now works in marketing. Acting within the moral framework of *thành/làm người*, she wants to give back to her local community by drawing on the merits she has earned by leaving home and expanding her horizon in Hanoi. Like Yen Hanh, while disagreeing with their parents about the value of dance, many dancers sought to fulfil their responsibilities and obligations as members of a family, community, and the nation.

Consequently, the uptake of hip hop is not only motivated by the desire to develop and explore the self, but is also shaped by the longing for social in-

teraction and communication, resulting in new forms of sociality beyond the family and work place. Sociality denotes the relationship between humans, non-human objects, and the material world, including the meanings that such relations confer (Ortner 2006). Many respondents claimed that, for them, hip hop meant helping each other, talking with one another, being connected, and hanging out with people you like. CK Animation, an icon of the Northern Vietnamese popping scene, says that in order to become a member of his crew, newcomers must practice persistently and be good at training. But equal or more important is that all members must enjoy playing with each other (*chơi với nhau*), which means spending time and having fun together beyond crew practice. As dancers spend a great deal of time together, it is important that they are on good terms with and support each other. In a similar vein, Tien, a young dancer from Ninh Binh, says the following about his high school dance club: "It's very fun, we're very close just like a family, because we have to play and support and practice with each other a lot." Tien's teacher Hien, likewise, considers her fellow dancers family. In the embodied practice of dance, she is able to connect with other dancers, and feels fondness for them. Dey Dey, a female world popping champion, shares Hien's assessment of what it means to dance together, pointing to the energy and confidence her female crew members provided each other when dancing. Nguyet also emphasized moments of intersubjectivity in dancing, explaining that other friends who have normal day jobs, and who are not dancers, "cannot … experience the feelings of people who join and dance together. " Sensory intersubjectivity refers to the continuous resituating and remaking of oneself in relations to others through face-to-face encounters, and thus through the senses (Pink 2009). Dance techniques render the body legible in a shared idiom, while allowing interpersonal and sometimes intimate conversations about these moving bodies. Additionally, such techniques also offer possibilities for imagining new ways of being oneself, as well as being together (Hamera 2007). As Yen Hanh says, dancers "have beautiful souls. They know how to enjoy life, they know how to follow their passion. (…) I feel that everything in my life is beautiful, everyone and everything, and everyone around me."

Accordingly, dancing becomes a shared experience resulting in the creation of new collectives. The belonging to and identification with a particular crew, team, or club is highly relevant for hip hop practitioners. Success is not only measured in individual performance, but also in terms of giving something back to the community. In fact, the idea of sharing parts of the power and wealth one has achieved as an individual back to the community,

B Nashor/Big Toe Crew

Source: B Nashor (2020)

immanent in the moral framework of becoming a socially responsible person (*thành người*), is also evident in the Vietnamese hip hop community of practice. Thanh Phuong invests her management skills in the organization of dance events, whereas Mai promotes young upcoming dancers at dance battles. However, Phuong Silver Monkey feels a generational rupture between the old timers and the younger generation of dancers with respect to the idea of giving something back to the community:

> "The young generation has great potential and skills, but they have yet to think about contributing to the community. They just want to be champions, and to express themselves. Maybe we need to give them some time to grow up until they think about how they can develop and contribute to the community." (Hanyi 2014)

Rufu, who has seen the Ho Chi Minh City dance community develop, longs to be able to participate in more battles overseas. However, she also wants to invite renowned international dancers to Vietnam to organize workshops and to share their knowledge about their dance styles with Vietnamese dancers. Many younger dancers, in turn, appreciated the support they received from the advanced dancers, and pointed to their social involvement and support for the dancing community. Contributing to the community, among other things,

means creating public awareness of hip hop, and raising awareness about the positive impacts of dance for society at large. Particularly for hip hop elders, like Thanh and Phuong Silver Monkey, the coproduction of a positive public image for hip hop is of the utmost importance. Therefore, they promote hip hop as a physical, inclusive, and creative experience. For them, hip hop is neither a youth culture, nor an exclusively urban culture, but it is open to anyone of any age, gender, social background, and place of residence. Recently, a group of young people living in a remote village in the northwestern province of Dien Bien Phu contacted Thanh via social networking, asking him to come to their village to teach them breaking. To Phuong Silver Monkey, hip hop is also about bringing generations together. He once organized a flash mob in Hanoi, for which a number of older people were willing to join, too. That is why they readjusted their practice time to 5 to 6 a.m., when older urbanites usually indulge in their physical exercise in the city's public space. Thanh had similar experiences. Growing up in Hoan Kiem District, he was asked by the elderly women, who routinely conduct their morning exercise on the banks of Hoan Kiem Lake, to teach them some hip hop moves. The next day, he posted photos of himself training with the women by the lake at dawn.

While they are open to newcomers, and seek to create a broader societal basis for hip hop, the elders of hip hop have and still seek to maintain authority over the meaning of hip hop. For instance, they promote drug-free events, and social responsibility among peers. Aware of wider international associations of hip hop with social ills, such as drugs, some dance event organizers have made the renouncement of drugs and cigarettes compulsory to dancers' participation. For instance, the announcement of the Waack your Soul 2020 event on Facebook included a note concerning the prohibition of the use of cigarettes and stimuli (*chất kích thích*) at the dance site. In cases of violation, transgressing participants would have to pay a fine of 1,000,000 VND (36 Euro), equal to the prize money for the freestyle battle winner, and amounting to half the prize money for the waacking battle champion.

The need to assume social responsibility was also emphasized by Thanh, for whom it is important to provide an income to his fellow crew members and students. In his dance academy, he is able to provide some with jobs, allowing them to finish school and dance, while earning money. Similarly, Thanh Phuong seeks to support the hip hop community through her expertise in marketing and finance, allocating financial resources necessary to host events and create platforms for dancers to interact. Fashioning themselves as hard working subjects engaged in life-long learning, they all seek to overcome

prevailing images of dancers as "bad" people who hang out late at night while doing useless things. Young people, in particular, struggle with their parents about their decision to lead a dancing life. In late socialist Vietnam, intergenerational struggles are on the rise as the lifestyles and experiences between children and their parents drift apart.

Generations

At the turn of the millennium, Jean and John Comaroff (1999: 284) suggested that, in South Africa, "the dominant line of cleavage here has become generation." By this claim, among other things, the Comaroffs refer to "rapid shifts in experience that create age-conscious cohorts" (Durham 2000: 113). Jennifer Cole (2010: 6) argues that many contemporary, and principally European, analyses of the role of generations in history are characterized by a language of crisis, as indicated by terms such as "post-soviet generation" or "generation X." In Vietnam, my own generation is referred to as 8X, whereas most of the dancers who participated in my research are members of generation 9X. While such generational references were not mentioned by the dancers, I did encounter such self-descriptions – as belonging to generation 8X or 9X – in my earlier research on public space. The generations 8X and 9X refer to those born in the 1980s and the 1990s, respectively. In 2008, the b-boys and b-girls whom I met at Ly Thai To Garden used these time indices as markers of shared experiences, and as terms for belonging. In her research on Madagascar, Cole considers youth modes of agency and activities across multiple temporalities (Cole 2010: 8-9). Here, I consider agency "as the relatively flexible wielding of means toward ends" (Kockelman 2007: 375), or, in Laura Ahearn's terms, "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001: 112). Youth agency is of particular interest, as it develops under social and cultural constraints, especially during this specific period of the life cycle. According to Sherry Ortner (2006: 127), agency presupposes a complex subjectivity, meaning that subjects partially internalize and partially reflect on in specific circumstances, and thus constraints they find themselves in. Consequently, young people's agency needs to be considered in the larger context of multiple generations. This is particularly the case in Vietnam, where the imperative of filial piety (*hiếu*) continues to determine intergenerational relationships, and in particular the relationship between parents and children. And, the Vietnam War, as well as the reform process of Doi Moi, created a

substantial experiential rift between generations, resulting in (grand) parents' and government officials' belief that young people are no longer acquainted with the hardships of the war and the later famines of the 1980s. As a result, young people are often blamed for engaging in conspicuous consumption and embracing modern urban lifestyles. Such appraisals of youth are not unique to Vietnam, but can be found elsewhere in Southeast Asia and beyond. For instance, sociologist Chua Beng Huat (2002) identifies a conflict between the generation that grew up in Singapore prior to the period of economic growth, and the younger generation from the turn of the millennium, which grew up with relative prosperity and extravagance, marking them off from the thrift of older generations. Schwenkel (2011) suggests that young people engage with values of the revolution, such as development and social betterment, by making use of the tools of capitalism. In fact, recent studies of socioeconomic change, particularly those that undertake gender analysis, show that young people still adhere to familial responsibilities as daughters and sons, while embracing lifestyles that diverge from those of their parents, such as seeking employment in urban areas or even with international corporations abroad. In *Vietnam's New Middle Class: Gender, Career, City*, Catherine Earl (2014) examines the experiences of female family members among the first-generation of Vietnam's middle class. Young women leave their natal homes in the countryside to attend university and pursue professional careers in the city. As a result, the urban lifestyles of well-educated female migrants differ from those of family members who remain in the countryside. Earl identifies consumption patterns, and especially the possession or renovation of houses or motorbikes, as symbols of their newly achieved social status. However, she also remarks that first-generation middle-class women appear to carefully manage their newly won wealth. Most of the women interviewed use their income to provide for their families in rural areas. For instance, some financed the renovation of their parents' house or bought technical equipment to modernise their parents' homes. In a similar vein, yet with a different focus group, Nguyen (2019) identifies the differing spatial orientations of consumption among male and female waste traders. While most waste traders leave their home towns to engage in waste trading in the city, men felt more entitled to engage in ephemeral pleasures of the urban, whereas female waste traders tended to focus on inner-directed consumption patterns, meaning that they abstained from urban consumption in order to focus on the family's needs.

The female dancers presented in this book simultaneously embrace urban consumption, while taking on social responsibilities. Many of the young

women had stable employment, while engaging in dancing during leisure time or else making extra income by teaching dance classes. They invested the money they earned to travel abroad, such as to participate in international dance battles, as well as to participate in the conspicuous consumption of branded products, such as iPhones, cameras, and hip hop apparel, including sneakers, hats, hoodies, and so on. They also fulfilled their responsibilities as daughters and wives, by looking after their parents and providing for their families by maintaining stable employment. Thanh Phuong, for instance, invited her parents to leave her home town, Ha Long, to live with her in Hanoi. Nguyet embraces responsibilities as wife and future mother to provide for her family financially, which is why she does online work while teaching dance classes in studios. However, this care-taking and adherence to their social roles does not necessarily imply that their aspirations conform with social expectations, particularly those of their parents. In fact, dance has evolved as a contested field, which is constantly negotiated among children and parents.

Dancers struggling with their parents to continue or even to begin dancing is a recurrent theme in the hip hop community of practice. Several dancers I talked to encountered problems with their parents, who wanted them to focus on their studies and careers rather than on their passion for dance. One young male dancer recalls how his school dance club had difficulties recruiting new members since most parents of his fellow students were afraid that dancing could have a negative impact on their education, ultimately preventing them from thriving in the socialist market economy. Similarly, a female dancer reported that her parents feared that she would not get enough rest for school the next day, as she would go directly from school to dance practice. In Vietnam, it is common for students to pursue extra-curriculum lessons after school. Sometimes the same teachers who taught in the mornings gave private lessons in the afternoons and evenings, for which the parents need to pay extra. This system has become so institutionalized that, without private tutors, many students are reportedly unable to pass their exams. This is why activities such as after school dancing are considered to interfere with academic learning.

Apart from concerns about the potentially negative impact of dance on young people's future, in particular their ability to secure employment, there is also scepticism about dancing in general. Rufu explains that people in Vietnam know little about hip hop, and rather associated it with something bad, such as young people returning home late at night, living on the streets, and being unemployed. Along similar lines, one female dancer in her mid-twen-

ties reported that her father thought dancers are not "good people," and that dancing poses a threat to his daughter's well-being. This belief may be related to a prevalent anxiety that a child might be "broken" (*bị hỏng*) (Nguyen 2019: 19), and could also be informed by representations of youth decadence in the media. Since the early 2000, media reports on youth drug abuse, laziness, lack of financial discipline, and generally their "aimlessness," have mushroomed (Drummond and Nguyen Thi Lien 2008: 179). To this young dancer's father, dancing seems to be an expression of such aimlessness, as an activity that does not pay off, whereas her mother, in contrast, supports her dance activities. Knowing that her father only wants the best for her, she hopes to prove to him that dancing is really important to her and a part of her life. While many dancers reported on the lack of their parental approval, one dancer was physically prevented from dancing. Another female dancer explained that her parents locked her in her room so she would not be able to attend class. On other occasions, they refused to drive her to class and denied her the money needed to participate in a battle.

Apart from general (parental) scepticisms about the dance, young dancers identified further social pressures and gendered expectations as complicating their involvement in dance. C2Low explains that, within a time period of eight years, he is already teaching the second generation of students, since his first-generation students, most of them young women, quickly quit dancing owed to social pressure to marry and start a family. Thuy, a 30-years old female dancer from Hanoi, has yet to marry and still keeps on dancing. She is aware of normative gender ideals when she explains that women her age in Vietnam are usually married, but that she was not. Consequently, Thuy's parents did not initially appreciate her lifestyle. Like many others, her parents did not want her to continue dancing, but rather to get married and have children. Interestingly, they saw a correlation between her dancing life and single status. Thuy recalls how they would yell at her when she returned home from dance practice late at night, dressed in hip hop apparel, telling her to quit dancing and to find a husband. But she kept on dancing without her parent's approval. Then one day, she explains, she invited her parents to go out dancing near their home, where there was a club that offered Latin dance lessons. At first, her parents refused to go, but she insisted on paying for the class. She asked them to give it one try, and if they really did not like it, then she would never ask again. Eventually, they took one lesson and they have been dancing ever since. Sometimes she and her father even go out to dance together in public space. Thuy concludes that she convinced her parents by

showing them how dancing makes her, and now them, happy: "Because they understand how happy I am when I am dancing – and how happy they are. And it is super joyful, you know, enjoying music and being yourself."

Thuy's narrative about the resolution of the conflict with her parents hints at a wider change of values within late socialist families, as well. Parents not only long for their children to be successful within the normative framework of striving – which many of the dancers actually are – but parents also cherish their children's pursuit of happiness. Inviting her parents to dance, Thuy showed her parents that they could trust their daughter, and they, in turn, demonstrated the ability to let go of gender stereotypes. Some parents may now even consider dancing as a potential career path. Thanh told me about a 10-years old girl who studies with him, whose mother believes that dance will be a career for her daughter. Having the resources to support her financially, she wants her daughter to participate in international freestyle and waacking competitions, while trusting Thanh to help advance her career in the right direction.

Youth's aspirations

According to Arjun Appadurai (2008: 67), aspirations are never merely individual, but are rather formed in the thick of social life, as he writes: "aspirations form parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norms." The women participating in my research were self-reflective about their positioning as women, both within the community of practice and in society at large. When asked about the four Confucian Virtues, and their relevance for women today, one female hip hop dancer relates the virtues to her personal life, when differentiating between hip hop as an art form and hobby, and job qualities that are measured against the four Confucian Virtues. To her, the four virtues of labour (*công*), appearance (*dung*), speech (*ngôn*), and conduct (*hạnh*) are ultimately linked to qualities valued in the job market, and do not relate to dancing as an art form or hobby. Therefore, she is able to distance herself from these female ideals, while recognizing that older generations might think that young women have changed a lot. Respecting their point of view, she understands that, to them, the four Confucian virtues may be important, but not in her view in relation to hip hop as an art form. Again, Rufu makes it explicit that dance is more than just a hobby to her, but has become part of her life. That is why she sees herself still dancing in the fu-

ture. Conscious about her lifestyle, she also seeks to improve and maintain her well-being by developing healthy habits. Particularly with her full-time office job, where she sits for several hours a day, she is eager to work out afterwards while paying attention to her diet.

Overall, many of the dancers I talked with regarded hip hop not just as a hobby, but as a way of life. This way of life requires a particular commitment from dancers. Most of the female dancers who had become icons within their particular style were in the mid- to late-twenties. Except for Nguyet, who had just married the same year I met her, the others had yet to marry and none of them had children. In fact, a large number of them was still single and they did not feel the need to marry or have children, pointing out that they were still young and not in a hurry to start families. Any potential partners had to be open to and supportive of their dancing lives. As shown earlier, leading a dancing life means meeting after work, often late into the evening, hanging out with both female and male peers. Moreover, participation in international dance battles means travelling a lot. Female dancers were looking for equal relationships in which a partner could understand more than their needs, but also their passion, and provide them with emotional and mental support. In contrast to Valentin's (2008) findings on the focus of Vietnamese youth on their responsibilities, such as preparing themselves for professional careers, marriage, or to support their parents financially, the female dancers I spoke to emphasized their freedom and the possibility of making an independent living. Yet, to these women, leading a dancing life does not mean an exclusive focus on dance and generating an income from dancing, but it often entailed aspirations to build a parallel career, while and because of dancing. Thanh Phuong makes it quite clear that, without hip hop dancing, she would not be so successful in her marketing job. Likewise, Yen Hanh says that she wants to focus on her work, but still continues to dance and enjoy the life she leads. What all of the women I talked to shared in common was their financial independence, both from their parent's households and from their boyfriends' or spouses' incomes. They all succeeded in generating income on their own, allowing them also to invest money in dancing, for example, by financing trips to international dance competitions. That said, most of the women were well aware of the social pressure, particularly their parents' expectations, to marry and establish their own household. Nonetheless, they aimed to pursue their vision of the good life, which, to them, meant being independent and continuing to dance.

Overall, the ideas of being oneself in hip hop, gaining self-esteem, and achieving personal completion, were recurrent themes in the conversations that I had with young women. Like Thanh Phuong, Yen Hanh considers dancing as a language that helps her to present who she is. While both dancers participate in different styles, both use language as a metaphor to describe the meanings that dance has for them. To both, dance is a means of representation and communication. Moreover, Hoang Phuong explains that hip hop, to her, is a vehicle for self-expression that works for her today, if not forever: "But I don't know, maybe in a few years, I'll try other things that can help me to express myself. I don't know. I don't think too much about it." While hip hop may be an ephemeral form of representation for Hoang Phuong, she nonetheless has the "capacity to aspire" for self-expression and representation (Appadurai 2008). The intimate relationship mentioned above between body-person and heart-mind is also evident in female dancers' choice of a dance style, as they chose styles based on the fit with their personalities. That is why, for instance, Yen Hanh chose funk, Rufu popping, and Hoang Phuong hip hop dance. Sometimes dancers tried out different styles before finally deciding on the style that was for them. Hien, for example, started out doing cover dance. When she saw breaking for the first time, she was so fascinated that she thought about starting b-girling. However, she soon found that she was not strong enough to practice breaking. Then one day, while at a battle, she saw another dancer doing something that she had not seen before, something that seemed close to sexy dance. She appreciated the beauty of the dance, and later found out the style's name – waacking. As there are only a few waackers in Vietnam, however, and it is hardly featured as a battle category, she chose freestyle. Finally, she found a style that she could really pursue, explaining: "I like to go with freestyle because freestyle – that is really me."

In dance, young people, and particularly young women, are able to realize themselves in ways that both benefit themselves in terms of self-cultivation, as well as benefit society at large. Navigating the ambiguous moral landscape of late socialism, they oscillate between being true to themselves, their aspirations, and desires, and contributing to the community. As Li Zhang (2012: 663) explains, the search for the private self and the good life are deeply intertwined with larger social relationships and moral concerns. Accordingly, female dancers negotiate their roles as aspiring and self-determined subjects, while being socially embedded in hierarchical social relations. However, as many take on responsibilities within their families – as daughters, in-laws, and wives – they simultaneously establish new relationships beyond the home

and workplace, departing from both traditional and socialist ideas of community. In other words, the uptake of hip hop is not only motivated by the desire to develop and explore the self, but also by the longing for social interaction and communication. In dance, individuals strive to bring their skills to perfection and to develop a personal style, while simultaneously investing in and building social relations among fellow dancers, both in and outside of Vietnam. At the same time, the bodily practice of dance has a performative function, as it incites action. Dancing in public, performing among mostly male peers, female dancers rework existing notions of femininity, paving the way for gender fluid performances. Through their actions, they rework gendered hierarchies both within the community of practice, and in the Vietnamese (speech) community. In conclusion, hip hop expresses a notion of the good life, which allows female dancers to combine striving for individualized goals and desires, and the reworking of gendered identities, while maintaining the moral personhood necessary to achieve social recognition as well as performance within the socialist market economy.