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*Dear readers! The editors of the Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies" congratulate you on the coming Year of the Tiger and wish you health, prosperity and great success in everything!*

*The first issue of the journal this year opens with an article dedicated to its formidable and beautiful symbol.*

## SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

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### THE SOVEREIGN OF THE JUNGLES, OR THE TIGER IMAGE IN FOLKLORE OF VIETNAM

A.S. Legostaeva<sup>1</sup>

*Vous êtes né dans la profondeur des forêts; vous êtes le roi des animaux.  
Quand la nuit est obscure, vos yeux brillent comme des étoiles. Votre rugissement produit la  
tempête.*

*Votre force est sans égale et vous entendez distinctement tout ce que se passe au loin.  
Quand vous traversez la forêt, tous les autres animaux s'agenouillent devant vous.*

*You were born in the depths of the forests; you are the king of animals.  
When the night is dark, your eyes shine like stars. Your roar produces the storm.  
Your strength is unparalleled and you distinctly hear everything that happens in the distance.  
When you cross the forest, all the other animals kneel before you.*

[Giran 1912: 102]

**Abstract.** The tiger image has become an integral part of world art and literature. No artists and poets could remain indifferent to its regal appearance and gracious movements, deceptive calmness and sudden transformation into a vicious predator; and they devoted their works to this animal.

Using rare matters connected with superstitions and folklore of Vietnam, the author observes the relations of the tiger and the human and determines its place in spiritual life and oral tradition of the Vietnamese.

**Key-words:** tiger image, beliefs, totemism, superstitions, symbols, folklore.

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## Introduction

The tiger's cult was widespread in countries of South, East and Southeast Asia, in mountain forest areas, where these mighty felines used to be found. Numerous peoples dwelling there revered and worshipped this majestic animal and endowed it with sacral features. Researchers find a lot of common traits in the tiger images by various ethnic groups<sup>2</sup>. “The one who never lived in Himalayas does not imagine how great the power of superstitions in this incomparable area. But the various kinds of beliefs, who are confessed by the residents of the valleys and footiggers, are not much different from the superstitions of simple illiterate horses. Essentially, the difference is so small that it is difficult to decide where beliefs end and superstitions begin” [Corbett 1964: 3].

It is mostly true as far as Vietnam is concerned. There the tiger is an integral part of the country's life. Its image has had a long evolution since the Dong Son culture (a Bronze Age culture of ancient Vietnam), when its images had much more decent place in bestiaries (beasts' descriptions) of ancient Viet compared with other animal species, till the status of the key image of mythology, art, and folklore.

“In those distant times humans and animals spoke the same language and lived in peace and concord. Even the tiger, when passing by a rice field in harvest time and seeing the hard work of people, stopped and helped them, and after the work they had meals together” [Skazki i predaniya 2021: 113]. Such was the idyllic picture of human life in the environment created by story-tellers of the bygone past.

As a matter of fact, the existing firm opinion of tigers' extraordinary ferocity and bloodlust has been formed not so long ago, which is confirmed with the history of “relationship” between the animal and the humans. Virtually, tigers were a serious threat and caused fear, but people who existed in the severe environment for centuries, could “include” them in their traditional way of life and build somewhat “friendly” relations with them. Jungle animals, tigers had enough food, and they needed not to go out into the open, create chaos and “terrorize” villages. Besides, their neighborhood was somewhat useful to the communities' dwellers, as the predators used to reduce the quantity of herbivores, who destroyed crops and damaged people. Also, a tiger hunt was seldom due to beliefs and superstitions of the local population, who believed that the spirit of a killed tiger could come back and revenge. Thus, precautionary measures, both domestic and ritual ones (bamboo hedges around villages, various rituals etc.), allowed to collect mushrooms and berries in the forest, to hunt game, as well as to plough and cut wood.

The situation was radically changed by Europeans. When there appeared missionaries and travelers in the country, when there emerged big trading stations and developed colonial expansion, the hunt became widespread. Numerous photos of the late 19th – early 20th centuries show either men in safari-style suits pleased with themselves, posing with guns in their hands and with a foot stepping on a killed tiger's carcass or “natives” with loincloths, who were carrying the killed striped predator hanged to a pole by its paws. The desire to get a hunting trophy for a study of one's house, as well as trapping

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<sup>2</sup> For more details, see [Maretina 2009, 2012; Strelcova 2014; Choi 2017], etc.



of exotic animals for numerous botanical gardens and private menageries<sup>3</sup> in Europe and colonies resulted in serious reduction of the Indochinese tiger population. Besides, the destruction of the environment, deforestation and animals' displacing disturbed "the peace balance": in search of food tigers had to contest people for a place under the sun and actively attack domestic cattle and humans<sup>4</sup>. Such actions provoked more mass killing of animals. The colonial administration announced a reward for every killed tiger's "head" which resulted nearly in the annihilation of this species in the wild nature. Currently, poachers' activity and the growing "black market" trade in wild animals listed in the Red Book, as well as illegal raising of animals in private nurseries to get components for "miraculous" medicines<sup>5</sup>, capable according to Vietnamese superstitions to prolongate youth, improve health and bring good luck in business, love etc., are the logical outcome of human economy and human ill-conceived intervention in natural environment. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) data show that in 2016 there were no more as five tigers in the forests of Vietnam, though five years earlier they had been thirty [Denisovich: 21.04.2016]. It is to be hoped that new generations will not be forced to study tigers only in the works of art, literature, and cinema, which left the image of this beautiful animal.

### The Tiger's Place in Culture of Vietnam



**Fig. 1.** Relief "Tiger" in the temple of the Chyng sisters, Hanoi. *Photo by the author, November 2016*



**Fig. 2.** Tiger (one of the paired statues) in the courtyard of the Temple of Emperor Li Thai-to near Hoan Kiem Lake, Hanoi. *Photo by the author*

<sup>3</sup> In the opinion of some authors, mass passion for big predators and the mode to raise rare "domestic pets" continued to the end of the colonial rule. Thus, in 1875 municipal decree of Saigon forbade to walk in the streets of Cochinchine with a tiger, even on the lead [Taboulet 1978: 12; Guérin 2010: 212].

<sup>4</sup> The analysis of memoirs by travelers and tiger hunters, both Europeans and residents [Guérin, Seveau 2009, Corbett 1964, Singh 1972, etc.] shows that hunters' failures mostly were causes for the emergence of man-eating tigers: the wounded tiger is more aggressive to humans, its body not strong enough (or its age) forces it to search "a light" prey, particularly, domestic cattle and humans. Besides, reports of the colonial administration of Indochina give the statistics of the attacks at humans and the sums of rewards per year.

<sup>5</sup> The traditional medicine uses various parts of the tiger's body, from the scalp, bones and teeth to claws, skin and whiskers. Thus, fangs and claws are used as good-luck charms, for making keychains, necklaces etc. Teeth are used to cure dogs' bites [Pouchat 1910: 604].

Not occasionally, the tiger is called the sovereign of jungles in the title of this article, though this status is oftener ascribed to the lion in literature. However, the latter, being not present in the rich fauna of Vietnam, was essentially a kind of “model” for works of art. In particular, in monumental stone sculpture it was represented as fantastic or somewhat realistic figures *sư tử đá* (Chin. *shī-jǐ*) either in the bottom of the altar “Buddha throne” base or as two statues guarding entrances to emperors’ tombs and Buddhist temples, and later to secular buildings. This (borrowed from China) tradition of guarding sacred sites from penetration of evil spirits had been taken by the tiger upon itself as a guardian at the gate. Its images, more often as high-relief sculptures (fig. 1), rarely like a sculpture in the round (fig. 2)<sup>6</sup>, show themselves on the protective screens at the entrances to temples or in their small patios.



**Fig. 3.** Cave sculpture in the Marble Mountains.  
*Photo by the author, November 2008*

The tiger image is multifaceted and many-sided. In Vietnamese beliefs it appears in various guises: it is a totem ancestor “of the first kin formations Lon, Luong и Quang of Thai people” [Stratanovich 1978: 18], living in North Vietnam and Laos; it is a spirit-patron of mountains, it is “the war deity, who helps armies’ leaders”. In the sphere of the magic the tiger is the mortal enemy of evil demons, who threaten both the living and the dead” [Duran 2007: 330]: it is a true servant of Buddhist deities, part of *Thánh Mẫu* (Holy Mothers) cult (fig. 3). The tiger is one of eight sacred animals *bát vật*, more detailed version *tứ linh* or *tứ thánh thú* (Dragon, Phoenix, Tortoise, Unicorn or Horse-Dragon), added with exclusively realistic living creatures, such as the tiger, the fish (carp), the crane and the bat. Unlike most *tu linh* they belong to the category of real animals “mythologized in popular consciousness” [Nguyen Phi Hoanh 1982: 119], celebrated in legends and endowed with some supernatural abilities.

### Superstitions

The folk belief in these abilities celebrated the tiger image emphasizing its natural qualities, such as his strength and ferocity, his camouflage color and his ability to steal up imperceptibly. Not in vain the most dangerous adversaries of the human are mentioned in the proverb-warning: “The crocodile in the river, the tiger in the forest”. Other proverbs use the knowledge of jungles and their inhabitants. Thus, a folk omen “When the crows’ flock flies with cries, the tiger is nearby” had been turned into the proverb “The owl’s cry points to the devil’s presence, and the crows’ cry to the tiger’s den” [Pouchat

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<sup>6</sup> The tiger statues are more typical for the religious tradition of the South, where the name of the animal is widely reflected in the toponymic map. In a number of provinces in the south of the country there are many temples and community houses, dedicated to the tiger, where its statues are put in the patios or at the entrance to temples and *dinh*, for instance, in community houses Tân Thới Nhì, Tân Thới Tam, Tân Thới Tứ, Thới Tam Thôn [Nguyễn Thanh Lợi 2010: 7].



1910: 604]. Also, the stability of the superstitions linked with the tiger is reflected in the current fiction, for example, in a bedtime story for children: “If this bird cries, the tiger is about to appear. These are birds-ghosts. They seize the souls of the humans eaten up by tigers, and they show the tigers the way to other humans. They want other souls to replace them. Then they will be born again” [Doan Gioi 1972: 102].

The fright of the mighty animal engenders numerous names of respect<sup>7</sup>, which the Vietnamese use to avoid mentioning its real name. The taboo was connected with the superstition that when the tiger hears its name, it can come. They believe that the tiger has a sensitive ear and can hear a human speaking at a great distance. But if something falls near and frightens it, while it is listening, it will forget everything it has heard [Pouchat 1910: 603]. Before going to the forest people took a number of measures for security. Thus, one can “avert the tiger’s eyes” by means of a small bone *vây khái*, *vây cọc* from the tiger’s left shoulder or from the tigress’ right one. Moreover, they can change their place depending on a season; sometimes they are on its shoulder, sometimes on its breast. It is important not to mix them up; otherwise, they will be inefficient. But if one manages to get such a bone, one can go to the forest fearlessly. [Cadière 1901: 134–135].

When the beast is trapped, they offer it a sacrifice before killing it [Giran 1912: 52] and render honors and respect to it. A number of rituals are performed after the predator has been killed. Folk beliefs are that the tiger’s whiskers can give birth to a very poisonous creature. One should just put some hairs of whiskers in the split young bamboo spring, and in time there will appear numerous worms, a mouse or a snake (there are variants). Also, small poisonous caterpillars are born from the tiger’s saliva, dropping to the earth [Giran 1912: 16; Cadière 1901: 132–134]. Therefore, first of all, after having killed the tiger hunters pulled out its whiskers and burnt them in order nobody could make the mortal poison. In her diaries Gabrielle Vassal<sup>8</sup>, who participated in hunting, describes how all the Annamites surrounded the killed tiger and struggled for its intestines hoping that they would make them invulnerable. The tiger’s eyes were of a special value. A local cook prepared unusual broth of them for his son and said: “Now you will see the tiger before it sees you” [Vassal 1911: 288].

Also, the tiger’s choice of its victim was treated differently. They believed that the tiger attacks only those who were doomed to be eaten up by this predator. It was such a bad sign both for the victim’s family and for the village that sometimes all the dwellers left it after the animal’s attacks [Pouchat 1910: 604]. In Cochinchine the son of the man who had been eaten up by the tiger was to await the same fate and make offerings to avoid it [Pouchat 1910: 87]. It was connected with the belief that the wandering soul of the victim (*ma*) remains in the real world and moves on the tiger’s back. It shows the way to the tiger forcing it to the house where it lived and where it hopes to find sacrificial gifts. This is how the

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<sup>7</sup> “Master”, “host”, “Lord of mountains” “sovereign” or the variants of these words (more in Vietnamese: “Sơn quân chi thần”, “Sơn quân chúa xứ”, “Sơn quân mãnh hổ”, “Sơn lâm chúa tể”, “Sơn lâm chúa xứ”, “Sơn lâm đại tướng quân”, “Sơn quân chúa động”, “Chúa xứ sơn lâm”, “Mãnh Hổ”, “thần Hổ”, “Ông”, “ông Thầy”, “ông Cả”, “Ngài”, “ông Ba Mươi”, “Hương quân” [Nguyễn Thanh Lợi 2010: 5].

<sup>8</sup> Gabrielle Maud Vassal, a British subject and the wife of a French military doctor, was a famous naturalist. She published her memoirs of her sojourn in Vietnam in 1907–1910. They throw light on many aspects of mountain men’s life in Central Vietnam.

Annamites explain repeated abductions by the tiger of several persons who lived in the same house. Besides the altar sacrifices it was necessary to find at least some remains, which were added with paper images of the human and the tiger. They were burnt and thoroughly buried to let the soul move to the tomb, and the family live quietly [Cadière 1901: 135–136]. Besides, it was allowed to sacrifice a cock, a symbolic substitution of the corps [Giran 1912: 19].

They believe that the sure way to catch the tiger is first to get rid of the souls *ma* on its back. Thus, when they make a pitfall trap, they put roast ears of corn round it. The souls attracted with their tasty smell will jump down to get them, and the tiger deprived of celestial defense will get into the trap [Cadière 1901: 136].

Leopold Cadière tells the story about the soul *ma*, which appeared to its friend in his dream, and about its misfortune. As there were several souls on the tiger's back and it was short of room, it felt uncomfortable being too close to the tiger's tail. The friend promised to save the soul, if it helped him to trap the tiger. Following the soul's advice, he made an offering in the temple of the tiger and put two sticks on the altar of the "Noble master's" soul (fig. 4), which meant the invitation for the soul to the feast. After that the man made a pitfall trap and caught the tiger [Cadière 1901: 136].

They believed that it was possible to count the tiger's victims by its ear. Every victim was marked with a notch on the ear [Cadière 1901: 135; Giran 1912: 604]. When the tiger had eaten up hundred humans, it could be transformed into a man or a woman and began to speak [Giran 1912: 604]. On the other hand, mountain men of South Vietnam believed that the *ma lai* (a man possessed by a spirit) had a potion to transform the appearance; it helped him get various forms, also, the form of the tiger [Shinkarev 2002: 82].



**Fig. 4.** A modern version of the *ha ban* – tiger altar at *chua Sùng Hung Cổ Tự*. Vietnam, prov. Kien Giang, Duong Dong.  
Photo by the author, December 2018

In some forest areas, before cutting a tree, people humbly sought the tiger's permission [Giran 1912: 51], who, when appropriately respected, was equable and left harmlessly. Such is the effect of polite requests and low bows.

Curiously, the Vietnamese have a legend of the transformation of the tiger into other representatives of the felines. Thus, the tigress leads her cubs to a steep bank of a stream. There she jumps to the other side, the cubs after her. The one who could do it in a jump, becomes a real tiger; the one who falls into the water, gets the appearance of *chồn cáo mèo* (a wild cat), and the one who is afraid to jump is transformed into a cowardly panther [Giran 1912: 14; Cadière 1901: 13]<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Curiously, "The Family", a story from "Stories and Legends of Annam" told by Clotilde Chivas-Baron the same version of the tiger's transformation is given in the context of human relations, attitudes and groundless accusations brought to the family due to negative traits of some of its members. Mentioning antagonistic qualities of the children born by the

### The Tiger in Vietnamese Folklore

Despite the above-said, as if in contrast to its reputation of a mighty and cunning animal, in folklore the tiger is usually the anti-hero, i.e., a silly, too credulous and even humble creature, who can be deceived by any small and weak character. In tales this strong and brave predator is the image far from comely. In one of the Viets' tales ("Strong, but Silly") it is killed being deceived by a peasant; in another ("The Black Toad, the Tiger, and the Monkey") he was deceived by a monkey [Chuyên doi xua 1888: 6–8; 47–51]. In the tale "The Hare and the Tiger" he was four times fooled by the Hare, who did not only manage to get away with him, but every time he also managed to harm the tiger, using everything "at hand". The tiger, this "powerful sovereign", is either bitten by bees, or loses its tail, or even his skin, when hunters had killed him [Skazki narodov V'etnama 1970: 31–35] (fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** Tiger fight. Reproduction of the relief of the XVII century from Chai Community House, Vietnam, prov. Ha Nam Ninh. Mid 20th century. *From the collection of the State Museum of the East (Moscow)*

The Hare is often the offender of the Tiger and the defender of other victims. Thus, in a Ba Na tale of "The Tiger, the Hunter, and the Hare" he saves the Hunter from the death, and in a Jarai story of "The Hare, the Elephant, and the Tiger" he rescues the Elephant being clever and shrewd [Skazki narodov V'etnama 1970: 216–220; 247–248]. In "The Tiger the Elephant and the Bunting" tale a small bird having deceived the Tiger helps the Elephant [Cadière 1901: 138–139]. Perhaps, the only subject matter with no bloody details is "The Horse and the Tiger", a meo tale about an unsuccessful attempt of the Tiger and the boastful Horse to make friends [Skazki narodov V'etnama 1970: 280–282], and among the severest ones is "The Opium Smoker and the Tiger" [Dumoutier 1890: 172–173]. This story tells how the protagonist went to a distant rice field every day to indulge in his fatal habit of smoking. One evening the Tiger wandering nearby saw him and ask for smoking. The Man prepared three opium pipes for him. The Tiger smoked them in turn. He liked the drug, and the next day the whole thing happened again. Then the Smoker, who began being tired of his visitor, came with the loaded gun and told the Tiger that it was a new kind of a pipe, the best one. The Tiger obediently lied and took the barrel into his mouth to inhale the smoke. But when the Man brought the flame to the gun, the gun shot and broke the Tiger's head.

In "The Old Tiger", a Xo Dang (Sedang) tale, the Tiger itself decided to turn to a ruse, but the Fox had discovered His snare and saved not only himself, but also other animals, and the Old Tiger died

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same parents is concluded with the morale: "Don't tell the man, who behaves wrong, that he is from the Trans or the Macs. It is unjust. If my brother is a thief, but I am a poor honest man, I deserve your respect" [Chivas-Baron 1920: 87–89].



of hunger [Skazki narodov V'etnama 1970: 183–184]<sup>10</sup>. Comparison of the oral tradition of ethnic minorities suggests that the priority in the Tiger's image is not the fright of it, but the desire to deride and deceive the strong enemy, having gained a victory over it<sup>11</sup>. The mightier the defeated enemy is, the higher the merits of the victor. Thus, in the story "Cau Khai" of the Tai people the protagonist's deed is visibly embellished. His glory is disseminated worldwide, when he "pulled several bamboo trunks out of the earth, followed the Tiger and beat him to death. The tiger was so large that four men could not raise him, but Cau Khai took it under his arm and ran like nothing had happened" [Ibid.: 335–336].

In a number of cases the Tiger asked the Human for help. Thus, in the story "The Tiger and the Midwife" it brings the Midwife to his mate in labor and later brings the Midwife a stolen pig as a reward for her work<sup>12</sup>. The same reward serves for the gratitude of the Tiger in "The Tiger's Gratitude" [Landes 1886: 126–127; 293–295], a story telling how a peasant saved the Tiger of death, delivering a fish bone from his throat. However, in the latter case the Tiger is the embodiment of a kind spirit, because it looked after the family of the man, who soon died, during several centuries, under his protection the peasant's descendants took high places and glorified themselves.

Vietnamese folklore reflected Vietnamese totemistic beliefs. G.G. Stratanovich wrote that the belief in the kinship with the Tiger itself, the ability to communicate with him and even to accept his appearance and then to return to one's own human appearance can be found by many mountain peoples of Indo-China<sup>13</sup>. In his opinion, approximately at the same time (the early period) there emerge the plots on mysterious animals-assistants in mythology and legends [Stratanovich 1978: 21; 25], linked with the human idea of supernatural strength of the animals-totems. Hence, perhaps, the origin and the motif of the marriage of the Man and the Tigress (the Tiger and the Woman). Usually, the initiator of such an association is the animal in "the totem pair", which steals the human or forces the human to make a family. Thua in "The Drum of the Tiger Skin", a meo tale, the Tigress-leader chose a youth to be her husband. The youth must surrender to save the dwellers of his village [Skazki narodov V'etnama 1970: 318–320]. In "The History of the Human-Tiger" the protagonist was born by a woman who had been stolen, when working in the field. In time, having become a werewolf, partially transformed into a beast (the tiger's head, the human body) he possessed unusual abilities. Due to them he did a service to the emperor and got the title of a Great General with Tiger's Force. Later he became a spirit *than phu* by the name of a mountain in Ninh Binh province. He lived in a cave of that mountain [Landes 1886: 31–33].

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<sup>10</sup> This is one of wide-spread vagrant plots. There is a Tai tale with the same title, literally repeating this story [Serebryanj klyuch 1961: 141–142]

<sup>11</sup> It is strengthened with their satirical understatement, and the opposition of haughty rich men and clever common people etc.

<sup>12</sup> The more detailed version of this *truyen* is given in the article of Nguyen Thanh Loi [Nguyễn Thanh Lợi 2010: 9], but the author analyses the legend rather as a real event of the past, linking the action to concrete names and geography and throwing light on history of functioning temple Ba Mu Troi in Đồng Nai, in the village Ben Go. Also, there are other variants of the temple's locations connected (so local residents tell) with the similar story, for example, in Phu Yen [Phan Văn Lương: 02.08.2016].

<sup>13</sup> The like subject matters can be found in mythology of East and South Asia.

In the Xo Dang tale “One kindness deserves another” the merciful Youth saved a White Tigress of the trap<sup>14</sup>. In return she helped the Youth to marry the girl he loved, whose parents were against their marriage. And on the contrary, the Tiger appears in the role of the evil spirit’s envoy and its will’s performer in “How the Spirit, who Puts to Death, was Put to Shame”, a sre tale [Skazki narodov V'etnama 1970: 186–187; 272–273]. The topic of werewolves and the Tiger-Spirit image are often found in folklore, mythology and in Buddhist subject matters, life stories with folklore tale and mythological foundation (according to N.I. Nikulin), where a mythological and legendary archetype is seen through a Buddhist subject matter. The desire to show the place and time in early short stories originated in the historical prose [Nikulin 1977: 124–125]. Thus, in many pagodas of North Vietnam, for example in Keo Pagoda (Thai Binh province), Co Le (Nam Ha province), Quan Su (Hanoi) they worship monk Nguyen Minh Khong. The legend tells that he was the most skilled shaman and possessed magic powers of transformation [Hà Văn Tấn 1993: 25]. Nguyen Minh Khong is believed to be the man who cured the hereditary son from the Ly Dynasty, future emperor Ly Than Tong, after he had suddenly transformed into a tiger in 1138. The ruling family gave the pagoda a statue of the Tiger in commemoration of that event [Dumoutier 1888: 45].

The opening of “True Story [about Revolt] in Lam Son” gives “facts” of Le Loi, another ruler’s, reincarnation. Before his birth in the bushes nearby there lived a black tiger who did no harm to anybody. After Le Loi’s birth nobody saw the tiger. However, in his childhood Le Loi had sparkling eyes, a wide mouth, a high nose, a dragon’s face, and seven birth-marks on his left shoulder, he walked like a dragon, stepped like a tiger, was hairy, his voice sounded like a big bell, and he sat like a tiger [Knorozova 2020: 122–123].

Thus, in Vietnamese mythology and folklore it is possible to find several main Tiger’s images having different functions paradigm. He is a victim and a deceived character in everyday fairy tales, but in the magic ones he has special abilities which help him to get what he will or to help others. At any rate, the Tiger’s employ is wider. Being a werewolf or a spirit, he knows the art of transformation and can reincarnate, embodying the traits both of the animal, and the human.

### **Conclusion**

The popularity and many-sidedness of the Tiger in Vietnamese culture consist of several factors. In the country where a complicated syncretic system of religious views had been formed, with animist cults and other folk beliefs as an important component, from times immemorial people believed in the existence of numerous invisible creatures living in a parallel world. Endowing them with supernatural abilities of animals, plants, strengths and phenomena of nature, deifying them, they, naturally, tried to get their defense and patronage. The Tiger as the embodiment of strength and power inspired justified fear. People using it in their favor transformed the fear into respect and delight in front of the beast. Having recognized the Tiger their spirit-patron, they performed rituals and made offerings to it. The cult practice being extended, a number of the predator’s qualities were “humanized”, which was mirrored in complimentary comparisons of historical persons and national heroes with it (“strong as a tiger”, “valiant

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<sup>14</sup> The White Tigress is a patron spirit in far eastern culture, particularly worshipped in China and Vietnam.

as a tiger”, etc.). The Tiger’s image had a long evolution from a totem ancestor of some clans to its inclusion into systems of religious doctrines (Buddhism, Daoism) like a bearer of a number of qualities, rooted in a set of notions of the Vietnamese at different levels.

The transfer of superstitions and ancient beliefs into the sphere of oral poetical tradition contributes to the popularity of the image also in folklore of the country, reflecting the world-outlook of its people. The image ambivalence mentioned in the article shows its glorification, emphasizing its authority as a powerful spirit-patron, who can guard against evil forces. On the other hand, the same qualities and dignities of the tiger are the background for glorification of other characters, often small and weak, oppressed and poor. In the second case, the Tiger’s image, bearing a totality of senses, a number of symbolic images and meanings in it, serves to strengthen the effect of superiority of other characters, suggesting social links, revealing satirical concealed meanings, hidden, but easily understood by everybody.

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## INWARD POLITICAL PROCESSES AND FOREIGN POLICY

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### THE MEKONG ISSUE ON ASEAN'S AGENDA AND VIETNAM'S MIDDLE-POWER DIPLOMACY

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**Abstract.** Since Vietnam assumed ASEAN Rotational Chairmanship in 2020, for the first time, the Mekong issue has been put on the association's agenda. This can be considered a crucial milestone, not only for the Mekong riparian countries but for ASEAN as a ten-member regional community as well. The necessity of re-positioning the Mekong issue on ASEAN's agenda is not entirely new in both academic and policy-making communities, but perhaps has never been as pressing as it is today due to objective and subjective reasons. Vietnam's rotational chairmanship of ASEAN has increasingly spurred advocates of discussing the Mekong issue in ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms. Espousing to a comprehensive approach rather than adopting a single International Relations (IR) theory, this paper attempts to shed light on ASEAN's strategic motivations to raise the Mekong issue on its agenda and concurrently, disentangle the puzzle "why Vietnam's ASEAN Chairmanship Year is the turning point for the Mekong's fate" from the perspectives that Hanoi is a key driver. Vietnam is particularly vulnerable to negative impacts of natural and artificial activities on the Mekong River, the country's furthest downstream. Both the association and Vietnam have legitimate interests to push for the inclusion of the Mekong issue on ASEAN's agenda. The article implies that Vietnam's middle-power proactivism is one of the most motivational catalysts for ASEAN's choice.

**Keywords:** the Mekong, ASEAN, Vietnam's middle-power diplomacy, IR theory.

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### Introduction

The longest river in Southeast Asia, the 7th longest in Asia, and the 12th longest in the world, Mekong flows through six countries including China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The Mekong basin is one of the richest regions of biodiversity on the globe, sustaining

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approximately 66 million people, 10% of ASEAN's total population, including 'most of the population of Laos and Cambodia, one-third of Thailand's 65 million, and one-fifth of Vietnam's 90 million people' [Eyler 2019: 1–20]. The last few decades witnessed the sub-region's fast and dynamic economic growth. Currently, due to its strategic interests, the Mekong has been witnessing the intense engagement of middle-to-great powers including the United States, China, Japan, South Korea and India, to name a few, through cooperation mechanisms. The Mekong is now the convergence of more than 15 cooperation mechanisms including those between the countries of the Mekong sub-region and those between Mekong countries and external partners [To Minh Thu & Le Dinh Tinh 2019: 395–411], which are designed and implemented in a way highly dependent on the policies of external parties, especially major powers. Meanwhile, the Mekong issue seems to be 'the forgotten' within ASEAN as this association leaves the sub-region to be heavily controlled by external partners.

In both academia and policy-making, the Mekong issue has not received commensurate attention compared to the South China Sea issue, albeit the Mekong has also been assessed as a hotspot and a potential flashpoint in the region [Busbarat 2018; Pongsudhirak 2020; Kausikan 2020]. Existing research-works on the Mekong issue predominantly revolve around current Mekong cooperative mechanisms, great power rivalries, etc. without bringing ASEAN into the focus. In 2020, when Vietnam assumed ASEAN Chairmanship, this 'forgotten' issue was revitalized. The raising of the Mekong matter to regional forums, particularly ASEAN, has shown controversy in both decision-making and academic communities due to the sensitivity of water diplomacy and complexity in harmonizing all member states' interests. Both the Association and Vietnam have legitimate interests in the Mekong issue being put on ASEAN's agenda. It is noteworthy that recently the Mekong issue has been often addressed in ASEAN studies [Pongsudhirak 2020; Kliem 2020; Kausikan 2020; Marwaan Macan-Markar 2020; Le Hai Binh & To Minh Thu 2020; Phan Xuan Dung 2021]. Those academic efforts demonstrate the increasing attractiveness of the Mekong issue. The current literature facilitates the author's new approach to the Mekong and Vietnam's diplomatic studies.

Espousing to a comprehensive analysis rather than adopting a single International Relations (IR) theory, this paper attempts to clarify the rationales of ASEAN's decision to raise the Mekong issue from a sub-regional level to a regional one being a topic of concern from both structural and agent perspectives. Using middle-power theory to decode Vietnam's foreign policy, the article contends that Vietnam has been pursuing a more proactive and high-profile foreign policy in ASEAN by putting the Mekong issue on ASEAN's agenda.

### **Rationales of ASEAN's Pivot to the Mekong Issue**

In addition to the first-ever launching of ASEAN Forum on Sub-Regional Development: Converging Mekong Sub-Regional Cooperation with ASEAN Goals and the Special Meeting of ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) on Sub-Regional Development, joint documents of the meetings on the sidelines of the 37th ASEAN Summit also mentioned the role of sub-regional cooperation [ASEAN 2020a, ASEAN 2020b, ASEAN 2020c]. It was for the first time that the Mekong issue has entered ASEAN's policy documents, evincing its importance, not only to the riparian countries, but also to Southeast Asia.

*Firstly*, from the realist and institutionalist perspectives, putting the Mekong issue on ASEAN’s agenda helps the regional grouping both avoid becoming a bystander in solving its own problems and respond to external powers’ pressure. The riparian countries need room for manoeuvre with neutral diplomatic, economic and informational tools to keep the region cohesive and interdependent. ASEAN with existing cooperation mechanisms is the most feasible institutional tool to help small and medium-sized countries ensure their interests as well as keep the regional equilibrium and ‘say no’ to a coercive power of the larger ones.

*Secondly*, ASEAN and its ASEAN-led mechanisms create strategic room for manoeuvre for member countries to cooperate on the Mekong-related issues. Currently, in terms of geo-security, the Mekong River Basin is facing several non-traditional security issues such as water security, environmental pollution, transnational crime, etc. As non-traditional security issues are borderless, there is the potential for unintended negative outcomes for other non-basin ASEAN countries. Therefore, a whole-of-region approach is required for a comprehensive solution. It should be emphasized that non-traditional security is one of the issues of concern in ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC). Therefore, the engagement of all stakeholders in the region to achieve a joint strategy for the sake of comprehensive security and cooperation is essential.

Next, in terms of geo-economics, the common concern of cooperation mechanisms in the sub-region as well as in ASEAN is to find solutions to narrow the development gap between mainland and island Southeast Asian blocs (Table 1). At the same time, it is to promote the integration of CLM countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar) into the development process of the entire region. Strengthening regional connectivity and supporting ASEAN Community building through the implementation of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC 2025) is a top priority on ASEAN’s agenda [Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2016].

*Table 1. Macro-economic indicators of ASEAN countries: compare mainland and maritime blocs (data of 2020)*

Country	GDP (USD bil)	GDP per capita (USD)	GDP, PPP (USD bil)	GDP, PPP per capita (USD)
Indonesia	1,060	3,920	3,300	12,220
<i>Thailand</i>	<i>501.89</i>	<i>7,190</i>	<i>1,270</i>	<i>18,240</i>
Philippines	362.24	3,330	919.37	8,450
<i>Vietnam</i>	<i>340.82</i>	<i>3,500</i>	<i>1,060</i>	<i>10,870</i>
Singapore	339.98	58,900	560.21	97,060
Malaysia	338.28	10,270	902.6	27,400
<i>Myanmar</i>	<i>81.26</i>	<i>1,530</i>	<i>278.85</i>	<i>5,240</i>
<i>Cambodia</i>	<i>25.95</i>	<i>1,660</i>	<i>73.61</i>	<i>4,700</i>
<i>Laos</i>	<i>19.08</i>	<i>2,630</i>	<i>58.94</i>	<i>8,110</i>
Brunei	12.02	26,090	28.73	62,370

Mainland ASEAN average	193.8	3,302	548.28	9,432
Maritime ASEAN average	422.504	20,502	1,142	41,500

Source: [World Economic Outlook Database 2021]

Also, from a development perspective, liberals are interested in, solving the Mekong problem within ASEAN’s cooperation frameworks is associated with the inclusive and sustainable development goal. The ‘inclusiveness’ aspect implies that a dynamically developing ASEAN region, currently equivalent in size to the world’s fifth economy, cannot let mainland ASEAN countries lag behind. Meanwhile, the aspect of ‘sustainability’ and more recently ‘resilience’ has been increasingly emphasized in the context of post-COVID-19 recovery.

*Thirdly*, ASEAN, putting the Mekong issue on the agenda is linked to maintaining its community identity. ASEAN has long been considered to be bifurcated into the maritime and mainland blocs [Hoang Thi Ha & Seth 2021]. Thus, by raising its stake in tackling a sub-regional challenge, ASEAN consolidates its cohesiveness of the community.

### **Hanoi’s Motivations to Raise the Mekong Issue from a Sub-Regional Level to a Regional One**

While the discipline of IR leans towards a structure-oriented approach, foreign policy analysis (FPA) chiefly focuses on agent-centered levels, favoring a micro-scope scale of analysis. This theoretical argument implies that to disentangle the reason for 2020 to be a pivot for the Mekong’s destiny, it should be viewed at both systemic and agent levels, of which the latter, under this circumstance, plays a game-changing role. It is evident that before Vietnam’s endeavours, ASEAN had only stood on the sidelines of the Mekong story [Ibid.] as it had assumed the role of a convener of various middle-to-great powers’ meetings related to the Mekong issue rather than an agenda-setter.

In the regional panorama, recent years have been witnessing the increasing interest of middle-to-great powers in the region. The upgrading of cooperation mechanisms related to the Mekong sub-region that is part of grand strategies such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision (FOIP), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Act East, New Southern Policy, etc. and other countries’ support for ASEAN centrality show that ASEAN needs to take advantage of this so-called megatrend to promote this urgent issue.

For Vietnam, the Mekong region is of geo-strategic importance, directly related to the country’s security and development. Jointly with the South China Sea, the Mekong plays the role of Vietnam’s survival and development space associated with legitimate national interests in sovereignty protection, economic development, and social and security stability. Traditional and non-traditional security issues in this area are directly and deeply impacting the livelihoods of tens of millions of people in the Mekong Delta in particular and the country in general. Under the impact of unsustainable and uncoordinated water use activities in the upper Mekong, the lower Mekong, especially the Mekong Delta, has witnessed the most severe drought ever. So far, water and alluvial shortages have contributed to increased saltwater intrusion and serious landslides.

Like the South China Sea, the Mekong has been witnessing increasing major powers’ engagement. The Mekong has become an area of cooperation and competition between dozens of



powerhouses which contribute to the expansion of the countries' influence into Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Vietnam, effectively handling the Mekong issue is not only solving the problem among the six countries in the sub-region, but also has harmonious relationships with three crucial neighbors, with broader regional countries and with major powers.

There are several motivations for Vietnam to proactively push the Mekong issue on ASEAN's agenda. It should be explained through the lens of middle-power diplomacy theory. Middle power is a sovereign state falling in the middle of the scale measuring a country's international strength and influence, having a diplomatic conduct which is neither extremely drastic and ambitious nor negatively defensive, and simultaneously representing a certain identity [Le Dinh Tinh 2018: 6]. From a behavior-based approach, middle powers give prominence to multilateralism, international laws and the network of diplomatic relations in foreign policy [Ungerer & Smith 2010; Emmers & Teo 2014].

In terms of capacity, in the group of mainland ASEAN countries, along with Thailand, Vietnam is currently the most powerful economy (see Table 1). Vietnam also has a demand to narrow the development gap between CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam) and more developed countries in the region. It is this geo-economic feature that enables Vietnam to perform the role of a bridge. Notably, Vietnam has also played this role in efforts to integrate Cambodia and Laos into the regional security and economic architecture [Emmers & Le Thu Huong 2020: 12].

With regard to diplomatic behavior and identity, Vietnam has been emerging as an active middle power regionally and internationally. Vietnam has recently been seen as an increasingly important member bringing strong and positive energy to ASEAN [Le Thu Huong 2016]. Such typical roles of a middle power as an initiator, a bridge, a coalition coordinator and a normative spreader have been also more clearly demonstrated and recognized worldwide [Le Dinh Tinh & Vu Thi Thu Ngan 2020: 127]. Since Vietnam has assumed the Chair of ASEAN, it has been trusted by the regional and international community to revive and refresh the Mekong issue in ASEAN [Pongsudhirak 2020].

### *The Pursuit of Multilateralism*

Officially placing the Mekong issue on ASEAN's agenda is the realization of Vietnam's multilateral foreign policy course. The 12th Communist Party Congress marked for the first time that multilateral diplomacy has become a strategic orientation rather than a tool for policy implementation [Communist Party of Vietnam 2016]. Then, Directive 25 of the Secretariat on promoting and enhancing multilateral diplomacy by 2030 continued to emphasize the need to renew multilateral diplomacy [Party Central Committee's Secretariat 2018]. Hence, Vietnam's foreign affairs at regional and international organizations not only aims to act as a passive observer but a proactive participant, 'striving to play a pivotal role, leading or mediating at forums, multilateral organizations of strategic importance to the country that is suitable to the specific capabilities and conditions of the country' [Party Central Committee's Secretariat 2018]. This spirit continues to be reflected in the process of developing the draft document of the 13th Communist Party Congress, especially in the pivotal year 2020 when Vietnam assumed the Chair of ASEAN [Communist Party of Vietnam 2021]. The grand question for policymakers is how to realize this course to make Vietnam lead ASEAN's agenda. Vietnam has been regarded as a rules-based order advocate for its persistent and resolute efforts to promote the South China

Sea issue in ASEAN (e.g. putting the South China Sea issue in the Association's declarations and promoting the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea) [Le Hong Hiep 2017]. Continuing to uphold this spirit in the Mekong issue, one of Vietnam's top security and development interests, not only helps protect crucial interests but also expands Vietnam's influence in the region as a rule-maker instead of a rule-taker.

By placing the Mekong issue on the official agenda of ASEAN, Vietnam has partially demonstrated the pivotal, leading and conciliatory role as stated in Directive 25 [Party Central Committee's Secretariat 2018].

*Firstly*, Vietnam's core membership and leadership are evinced by the fact that jointly with Thailand, who revived the Ayeyarwady – Chao Phraya – Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) in the ASEAN Chairmanship 2019, Vietnam is a country with the highest political determination to make the Mekong a common concern of ASEAN [Pongsudhirak 2020]. Having assumed ASEAN Chairmanship 2020, Vietnam integrated the content of sub-regional cooperation into the general cooperation of the ASEAN region. In addition to the successful organization of the ASEAN Forum on Sub-Regional Development: Converging Mekong Sub-Regional Cooperation with ASEAN Goals and the Special Meeting of the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) on Sub-Regional Development, policy documents of the meetings during the 37th ASEAN Summit week also mentioned the role of sub-regional cooperation [ASEAN 2020a, ASEAN 2020b, ASEAN 2020c].

Raising the Mekong issue on the agenda manifests Hanoi's efforts to maintain ASEAN centrality at the heart of the regional security architecture. Virtually, before the Mekong issue was brought to the fore of ASEAN, there had been a proliferation of cooperation mechanisms. Meanwhile, ASEAN consisting of five mainland countries with direct interests in the Mekong River has given almost no commensurate attention to this region, thereby leaving the sub-region to be heavily controlled by external partners. ASEAN Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC), established as early as 1996 with the aim of enhancing economic integration among member countries and building ASEAN Economic Community by 2015, by comparison, is not as progressive as other dynamic external powers-led mechanisms in the sub-region [Ho & Pitakdumrongkit 2019]. The long apathy toward the Mekong issue, especially on the part of maritime ASEAN countries, betokens "a narrow transactional approach" that fails to perceive "Southeast Asia holistically as one strategic theater", according to a Singaporean senior diplomat [Kausikan 2020]. The traditional multilateral architecture of the Asia-Pacific consists of ASEAN-led mechanisms. This is the essence of ASEAN centrality, helping it keep the region cohesive despite conflict and tension. Meanwhile, multilateralism in the Mekong sub-region is currently being led by major powers. Existing Mekong governance mechanisms are not multipolar multilateralism, but monopolistic institutional arrangements that will be paving the way for the expansion of US-China rivalry by other means [Kliem 2020: 5]. In the long run this will threaten the strategic autonomy of small and medium-sized countries in the sub-region.

*Secondly*, the conciliatory role here implies an effort to harmonize the interests between the mainland and island ASEAN countries that Vietnam has interests in both groups and act as a bridge to balance ASEAN's agenda. Elevating the Mekong matter to one of the leading battlegrounds in ASEAN is obviously a progressive process, but this initial step serves to shape ASEAN's overarching approach

to a flashpoint in the region and associate the Mekong's fate with the Community-building process. Narrowing the development gap between ASEAN countries and regions, linking and harmonizing sub-regional development efforts, such as the Mekong, with the development process of the whole association have been highlighted on ASEAN's agenda by Vietnamese leaders [Chairman's Statement 2020].

With high capacity and political will, Vietnam has succeeded in bringing the Mekong into discussion in ASEAN, an important step in raising awareness of the Mekong issue within ASEAN as well as a pivotal stepping stone for this association to strengthen its voice and role in handling issues related to sub-regional cooperation in the forthcoming time.

#### *The Advocate of International Laws and Norms*

With respect to the Mekong issue, Vietnam has anchored its rules-based stance to ensure water security and the implementation of sustainable development goals in conformity with international practices and laws, including the 1995 Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin, and in the spirit of respecting other parties' legitimate interests [Le Dinh Tinh & Vu Thi Thu Ngan 2021: 10]. From the rule-based perspectives, Vietnam is the only sub-regional signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (UN Watercourses Convention). Besides, Vietnam is also expected to lead a code of conduct on the utilization and protection of the Mekong River [Phan Xuan Dung 2021] due to its quite comprehensive network diplomacy with neighbors and middle-to-great powers.

#### **Prospects and Policy Implications**

The Mekong sub-region in particular, the Indo-Pacific region and the world in general has been undergoing unprecedented profound movements under the impact of COVID-19. In the Mekong sub-region, security-development challenges are still a hardship for national governance of the riparian countries. Now, with the resonance of the pandemic, new problems have arisen. Unilaterally, countries cannot overcome these challenges. Multilateralism remains an approach more relevant than ever for small and medium-sized countries. But in the face of the overlapping of sub-regional cooperation mechanisms (the "spaghetti" phenomenon), countries need to reshape cooperation in a self-centered structure, rather than being led by external actors. ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms will be an appropriate forum to exchange information, build trust and seek common solutions to solve security-development problems as well as contribute in building a cohesive and responsive Community to adapt to new political megatrends.

Theory and practice show that Vietnam's promotion of the Mekong issue in ASEAN can help, *firstly*, create a common stance of ASEAN countries to respond to external partners (similar to the AOIP). *Secondly*, it increases institutional power for sub-regional countries. *Thirdly*, it contributes to strengthening the feasibility of building a rules-based order in the sub-region with the promotion of a Code of Conduct (COC) in the Mekong (similar to the COC in the South China Sea). *Fourthly*, it helps narrow the development gap between the groups of ASEAN islands and mainland countries (focusing on intra-regional trade, connectivity, digital economy, etc.). *Last but not least*, from development issues, applying a progressive approach to include water security on the table that can be discussed at ASEAN

meetings from working to senior levels, forums such as ADMM+, ARF, EAS, etc. Of course, it is of significance to govern expectations as ASEAN is an intergovernmental organization rather than a super-government in which countries pursue their self-interests and values. Nonetheless, all efforts to raise the Mekong issue to ASEAN's concern are entirely in line with Vietnam's interests and the joint interests of other countries. ASEAN Forum on Sub-Regional Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Inclusive Growth organized in November 2021 under the Brunei's Chairmanship continues this approach. Vietnam collaborates with Brunei placing sub-regional cooperation on the ASEAN's agenda.

In the upcoming time, Vietnam and ASEAN countries need to, *firstly*, continue to maintain discussion mechanisms on the Mekong in ASEAN, make sub-regional development a regular meeting of the organization, and bring this topic in other relevant meetings. *Secondly*, they should promote the development of a regional legal framework and negotiate to sign a new regional legal document on the governance of the Mekong River. Thorough study of the 1995 Agreement and its accompanying implementing documents to make recommendations to strengthen these legal documents and the construction of arguments proving the existence of principles of international law that are legally binding on countries sharing international water resources is of particular importance to such downstream countries like Vietnam. In the future, it is necessary to develop a Code of Conduct on the Mekong River [To Minh Thu & Vu Thi Thu Ngan 2020: 232]. *Thirdly*, in channel II diplomacy, building a joint research network of ASEAN countries on the Mekong able to take advantage of the network of ASEAN International and Strategic Research Institutes (ASEAN-ISIS) to exchange research and policy consultation useful for more effective policies and strategies for cooperation. Cambodia, ASEAN's Chairman in 2022 and also a riparian country, is expected to remain the association's pathway to the Mekong issue as it is a stakeholder in the sub-region.

### Conclusion

Applying a comprehensive approach to analyze several theoretical perspectives on the importance of the Mekong issue on ASEAN's agenda, the paper argues that elevating the Mekong issue helps ASEAN maintain its centrality in the regional economic-security architecture by tackling non-traditional security issues and promoting equal and sustainable development, as well as building a collective identity, towards a vision of ASEAN Community.

From Hanoi's perspectives, the placing of the Mekong issue onto ASEAN's agenda is linked with its strategic interests. *Firstly*, the Mekong is of geo-political and geo-economic importance that is placed on the national security and development agenda. *Secondly*, raising the stakes over the Mekong, especially in ASEAN's Chairmanship Year, helps the country demonstrate the rising role of a middle power and a sectoral leader in ASEAN. Vietnam's middle-power diplomacy over the Mekong issue is denoted by its concentration on promoting ASEAN-led mechanisms and international laws and norms. As a proactive and responsible member in ASEAN, Vietnam's efforts are expected to be continued in the next years. The first bricks in 2020 will be the basis for Vietnam, sub-regional countries and ASEAN to strive for a more peaceful, stable, prosperous and connected Mekong in the future.



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## SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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### SURPLUS IN BALANCE OF PAYMENTS AND SOME POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VIETNAM<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The balance of payments (BoP) is a critical macroeconomic indicator that helps understand the overall picture of a country's economic transactions with foreign ones. Vietnam's BoP has continuously been in surplus in recent years, even when heavily affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on descriptive statistical methods, comparison, analysis and synthesis, this article has shown that the surplus in the current account of Vietnam was mainly due to the surplus in the trade balance. In addition, despite receiving large remittances, the amount of money that Vietnam had to pay to foreign investors was always much more excess than that Vietnam earns from investing abroad, causing the balance of income to run in deficit. Vietnam's financial account was also in surplus because she has received an enormous amount of foreign direct investments. The surplus in Vietnam's BoP has enhanced Vietnam's external position, but it has put pressure on the domestic currency to appreciate and warn of future macroeconomic uncertainties. Therefore, in the future, Vietnam needs to determine the priority in its policy whether to stabilise the exchange rate or have an independent monetary policy in the context of increasingly liberalised capital accounts.

**Keywords:** balance of payments, current account, financial account, Vietnam, surplus.

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### Introduction

The BoP is a summary record of economic transactions between residents of one country and residents of another during a specified period. It could help policymakers do their job well because it reflects the overview of trade and investment in a given period.

Vietnam's BoP has continuously been in surplus in recent years, even when heavily affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The BoP surplus accounted for 7.63% of GDP in 2020 and 4.67% in three quarters of 2021 [GSO 2022]. In particular, the surplus in Vietnam's BoP occurred in both the current account and the financial account balance, putting pressure on exchange rate stability and causing

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macroeconomic instability in Vietnam. Besides, the US Treasury determined that Vietnam was a currency manipulator in December 2020 [US Department of the Treasury 2022]. Although the US Treasury determined that there was insufficient evidence to make a finding that Vietnam manipulated its respective exchange rates in 2021, but the US continued enhanced engagements with Vietnam since she met the three criteria of currency manipulator under the 2015 Act [US Department of the Treasury 2022]<sup>3</sup>. So what has made Vietnam's BoP continuously surplus in the past time? Was the surplus in Vietnam's BoP one of the reasons that the US accused Vietnam of currency manipulation? What should Vietnam do in the context of liberalisation of capital flows? This article will find answers to these questions.

### **Literature review**

Research on the BoP situation of Vietnam has not received much attention from domestic and foreign scholars. Vietnam's BoP is often only briefly and generally mentioned in the macroeconomic reports of Vietnam's research organisations or economic research agencies. Therefore, there were only a few research works on overall Vietnam's BoP, such as To Trung Thanh [2013], Nguyen Thi Vu Ha [2017, 2018] and Nguyen Van Song [2020]. From a theoretical perspective, Nguyen Van Song analysed the status of BoP and the influence of some key factors on the BoP and the national income by using mathematical modelling. The results showed that BoP played an essential role in the national income and foreign currency reserves of one country. It was affected by many factors, namely, bank interest rates, prices of goods and services in the country, the elasticity of the export of goods to the price of domestic goods and services, and exchange rate. Using descriptive statistics, To Trung Thanh analysed the risks from BoP surplus and increasing foreign exchange reserve from the trilemma in Vietnam. First, the author showed Vietnam's dangers when intervening in the foreign exchange market without effective neutralising measures. Then, he has suggested several policies that Vietnam can apply until 2020, such as having an effective capital control mechanism to stabilise the exchange rate, increase foreign exchange reserves, and raise effective neutralisation measures. Also, using qualitative research methods, Nguyen Thi Vu Ha examined Vietnam's BoP fluctuations from Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) to 2017. The author has shown that integration greatly influences the partial balances in the BoP of Vietnam.

The research on the BoP situation is not very attractive, but the research on the specific balances of Vietnam's BoP has attracted much attention. These studies usually focus on analysing the current account (CA) relationship with other macroeconomic indicators in Vietnam. Using the VECM model, Nguyen Duc Trung and Le Hoang Anh [2021] found evidence that the CA and FDI positively impact economic growth in both the short and long run. Nguyen Thi Lien Hoa and Le Ngoc Toan [2016] investigated the relationship between savings, net foreign asset position and CA volatility in 44 developed and developing countries 1980–2013, including Vietnam. Tran Thi Cam Tu [2018] studied the components of the BoP that affected the state budget balance in 10 developing

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<sup>3</sup> The three thresholds of US currency manipulation criteria under the 2015 Act:

1) A significant bilateral trade surplus with the United States is at least USD 20 bil. over 12 months (at least USD 15 bil. from December 2021);

2) A material current account surplus is at least 2% of GDP over 12 months (at least 3% of GDP over 12 months or estimate Current account Gap at least 1% of GDP from December 2021);

3) Persistent, one-sided intervention in the foreign exchange market occurs when net purchases of foreign currency are conducted repeatedly, in at least 6 out of 12 months (8 out of 12 months from December 2021). These net purchases total at least 2% of an economy's gross domestic product (GDP) over 12 months.



countries in Asia. Using the general least squares regression, she found that the impact of the CA balance, FDI on the state budget balance is in the same direction.

Although Vietnam's BoP has run surpluses continuously in the last years, the research on this topic has not been given much attention. Besides, there have been some signals of macroeconomic instability lately. Vietnam has been labelled a currency manipulator by the US since December 2020 after being on the Monitoring List since December 2019. In addition, according to WTO commitments, the need to change the exchange rate mechanism to a floating arrangement has appeared when liberalising the CA and FA in 2018 [To Trung Thanh 2013]. Therefore, it is necessary to learn about the BoP surplus and its effects on other macroeconomic indicators. By collecting data from the State Bank of Vietnam (SBV) and Vietnam General Statistics Office (GSO) and databases of the World Bank (WB), IMF, Trademap, this article review the surplus in the BoP's component balances. After that, the article evaluates the relationship between the balances and other macroeconomic indicators of Vietnam. Last, the paper provides some policy implications for Vietnam in the coming time.

## Results and discussion

### *Trade balance*

*Vietnam's trade balance has continuously been surplus from 2016 to 2020.* In detail, Vietnam's balance of goods was always in surplus, and the balance of services was always in the opposite site – deficit. It implies that Vietnam has comparative advantages in supplying goods and disadvantages in providing services to non-residents. *The surplus in the goods balance* increased from USD 11.94 bil. in 2016 to nearly USD 30.59 bil. in 2020. It caused the goods balance percentage of GDP to increase from 5.82% in 2016 to 11.35% in 2020 [WDI & SBV 2022]. Due to the pandemic impact, the surplus in 2021 has decreased by more than 54% compared to last year [GSO 2022]. The surplus in the balance of goods significantly contributed to Vietnam's economic growth. It created jobs for domestic residents, especially when coping with the Covid19 pandemic. However, it also indicates the scale of excess supply of goods and services in the Vietnam economy. *Vietnam's services balance* always was in deficit but on a small scale since the value of import and export of services was much smaller than those of goods. The pandemic has seriously affected Vietnam's service exports, causing its value to drop more than five times from USD 19.92 bil. in 2019 to USD 3.64 bil. in 2021 [SBV & GSO 2022]. Thus, Vietnam's service balance deficit skyrocketed to USD 15.76 bil. in 2021, about 3.58 times larger than the deficit in 2016 2021 [Ibid.]. As a result, Vietnam's trade balance fell into a deficit after many years of persistent surplus.

*The US was Vietnam's largest export partner* with a goods balance surplus of USD 80.1 bil. in 2021, near six times Vietnam's goods balance surplus and accounting for nearly 22% of Vietnam's GDP this year [GSO 2022]. On the other hand, *China is Vietnam's largest import partner*, with trade deficits of USD 54 bil. [GSO 2022]. It is one of the reasons why the US continuously accused Vietnam of currency manipulation in 2021.

*For balance in value of products, Articles of apparel and clothing accessories; Footwear, gaiters and the like; Machinery, electrical equipment and components were significant contributors to goods balance surplus in Vietnam.* The excellent point is that the import of apparel and clothing and footwear was minimal, implying that Vietnam's localisation and advantages in producing these products are high. However, Vietnam is heavily dependent on imports of machinery, electrical equipment and components and this product were dominated by foreign enterprises. *Plastics and articles thereof; Mineral fuels, minerals and products of their distillation; bituminous substances*

were the commodity groups with the most significant trade deficit in Vietnam in 2020, but these groups provide input materials for production in Vietnam [Trademap 2022].

### ***Income balances***

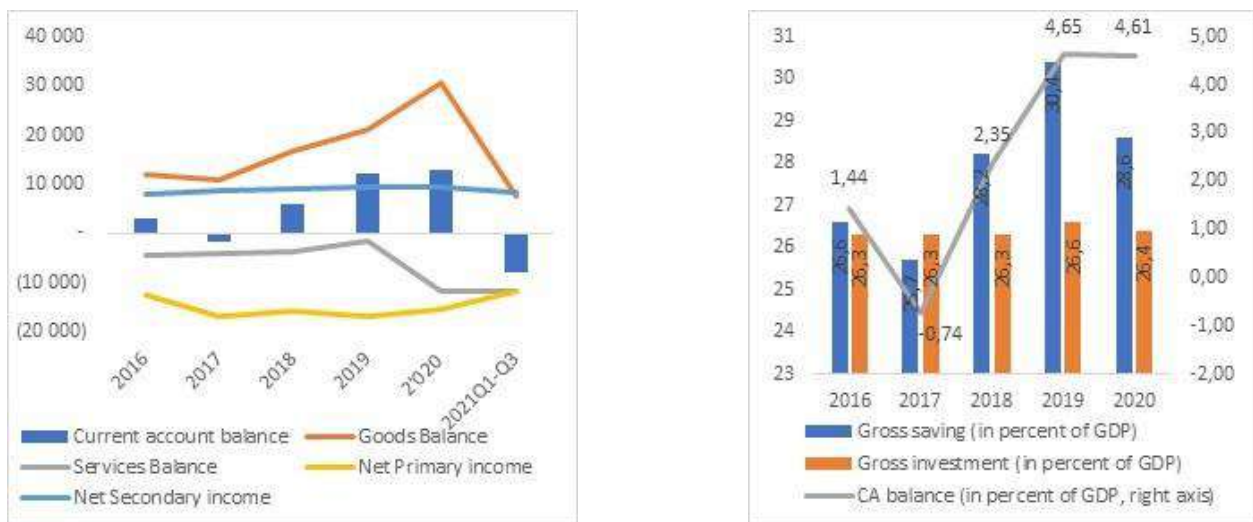
Vietnam's income balances were divided into two clear directions: the primary income balance always in deficit and the secondary income balance in surplus. The investment payments in Vietnam was much larger than the income received from Vietnam's investment abroad (about 13 times over the period). The payment value for foreign investment in Vietnam from 2016 to 2021Q3 was about USD 96.82 bil. Meanwhile, the income from the outward investment of Vietnam was only USD 7.39 bil. Vietnamese residents earned less on their investments abroad than foreigners made in Vietnam. Therefore, Vietnam's primary income balance was always in deficit, with a value of USD 89.43 bil. for the whole period [SBV 2022]. This deficit has caused Vietnam's CA surplus to drop considerably.

Contrary to the state of the primary income balance, the secondary income balance or net unilateral transfer of Vietnam was always in surplus. Vietnam received USD 63.3 bil. of current unilateral transfer, and the amount of unilateral transfer out of Vietnam was USD 10.91 bil. from 2016 to 2021Q3 (Ibid.). Consequently, remittances have become an essential resource for economic development in Vietnam. However, if this flow is not used correctly, it may cause a speculative bubble in Vietnam's property and real estate market, as happened in the past.

### ***Current account balance (CA)***

The trade balance and income balance fluctuations mentioned above have shaped CA fluctuations. After peaking in 2020, the CA balance plummeted in 2021 due to the impact of the pandemic (fig.1). The surplus in CA contributed a lot to economic growth and offset the gap between saving and domestic investment in Vietnam. When domestic saving was greater than domestic investment, CA was in surplus, and conversely, CA was in deficit (fig. 1). In reality, policymakers may prefer that domestic saving be devoted to higher levels of domestic investment and lower levels of foreign investment. The returns on domestic capital may be easier to tax than those on abroad assets. Moreover, an addition to the home capital stock may reduce domestic unemployment and lead to higher national income than an equal addition to foreign assets. Domestic investment by one firm may have beneficial technological spillover effects on other domestic producers that the investment firm does not capture [Krugman 2018: 269].

Excessive CA surpluses may also be inconvenient for political reasons. Countries with large surpluses can become targets for discriminatory import barriers imposed by trading partners with external deficits. For example, the trade war between the US and China from 2018 is partly due to China's trade surpluses with the US. Thus, surplus countries may try to keep their surpluses from becoming too large. Now, US Treasury is working with the Vietnamese authorities to develop a plan with specific actions to address the underlying causes of Vietnam's currency undervaluation and excessive external surpluses.



**Fig. 1.** Balances in CA (mil. USD) and Gross saving and investment (in per cent of GDP) in Vietnam in 2016-2021

Source: [IMF, SBV 2022]

### *Direct investment (DI) balance*

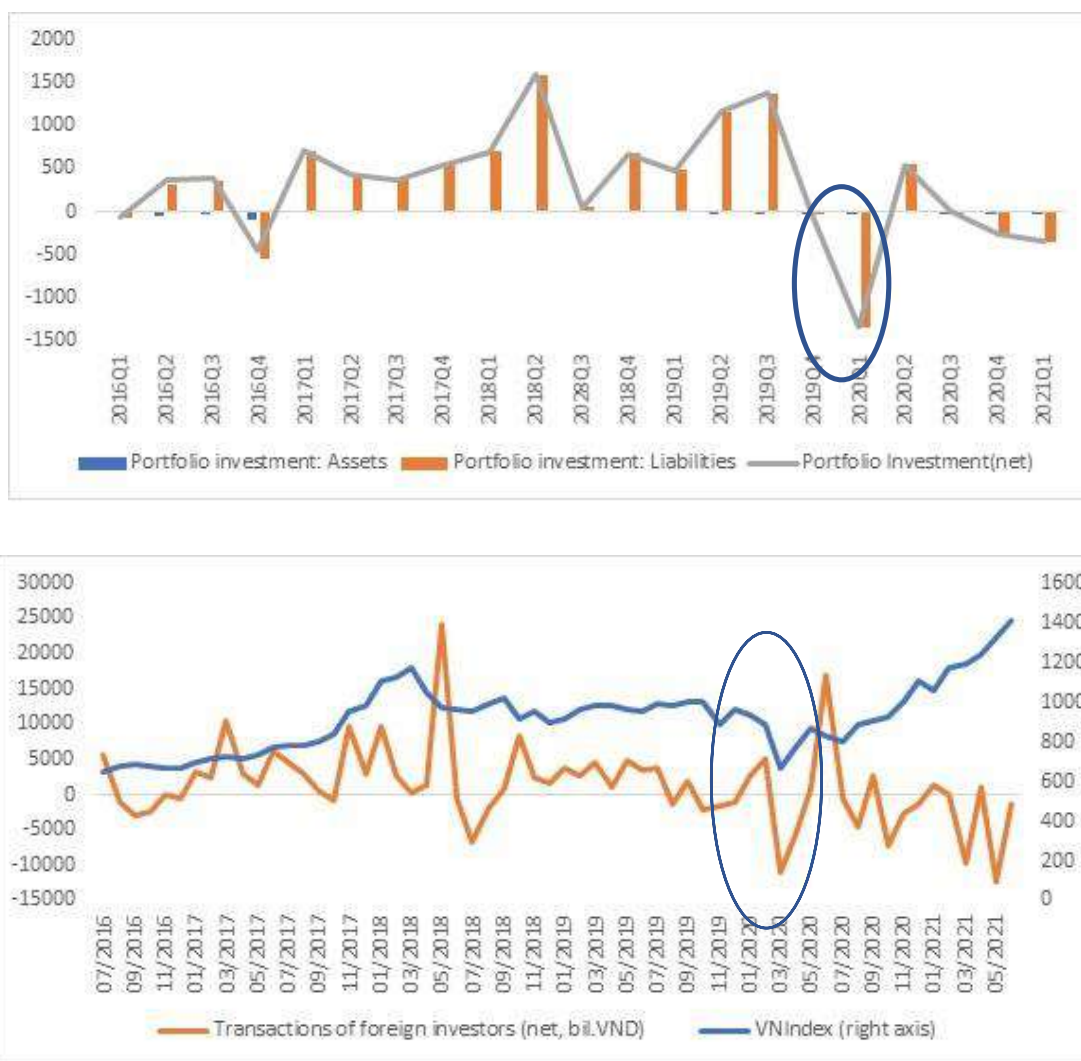
Direct investment (DI) flows were the most stable among the international investment flows in Vietnam, and its balance always was in the surplus (see Annexe). Vietnam received more than USD 90 bil. of FDI from 2016 to 2021 [SBV and GSO 2022]. FDI has actively contributed to creating jobs and promoting exports in Vietnam. The FDI sector contributed more than 72.33% of Vietnam's GDP in 2020 and 73.6% of its exports in 2021 [GSO 2022]. During the pandemic's lockdown time, the DI inflow slightly declined but gained momentum afterwards. Therefore, most of the FDI enterprises operating in Vietnam were not affected by the pandemic in 2020 and only have slightly affected in 2021 [GSO 2021].

Vietnamese investors invested abroad with a total value of nearly USD 3.06 bil. in 730 outward FDI projects from 2016 to 2021Q3. Outward FDI projects mainly focused on mining and quarrying, agriculture, forestry and fishing, and information and communication. Viet Nam invested in 31 countries and territories and Vietnamese investors mainly invested in Australia, Laos, Germany, the US, Russia and Cambodia [GSO 2022].

FDI into Vietnam was nearly 30 times larger than Vietnam's FDI abroad. It is one of the reasons why the income received from investment in Vietnam was much smaller than the payment for the investment that Vietnam had to pay to non-residents.

### *Portfolio investment (PI) balance*

The balance of PI had relatively large fluctuations in Vietnam. From 2016 to 2021Q3, Vietnam received USD 7.81 bil. in PI. However, this period witnessed the withdrawal of PI of Vietnamese residents but with small value. Moreover, there have been seven quarters out of 23 quarters from 2016Q1 to 2021Q3 while foreign investors withdrew capital from the Vietnamese stock market with a total value of up to USD 2.61 bil. (accounting for nearly 28% of the whole foreign PI to Vietnam). Especially in the first quarter of 2020, when the pandemic began to break out, raising concerns about the Vietnamese economy, foreign investors withdrew more than USD 1.33 bil. from Vietnam [SBV 2022]. However, the VN-Index in the first months of 2021 will continue its uptrend due to the confidence of domestic investors in the Vietnamese stock market.



**Fig. 2.** Portfolio investment balance (USD mil.) and the changes of Vn-Index in Vietnam in 2016Q1-2021Q1

Source: [SBV and State Securities Commission 2021]

Of course, the role of foreign investors in Vietnam's stock market cannot be denied. However, due to the flexibility of this flow, foreign investors' actions have significantly influenced the VN-Index in Vietnam in the recent period (fig. 2).

### *Other investment (OI) balance*

The balance of OI in Vietnam from 2016 to 2021Q3 also has extreme fluctuations on the assets and liabilities sides. Vietnamese investors made OI abroad with a value of nearly USD 42.07 bil. Meanwhile, foreign investors have made OI in Vietnam with a value of more than USD 42.98 bil. (approximately 47.7% compared to FDI). Therefore, the balance of OI was in deficit, with a total value of more than 0.91 bil.\$ in the whole period [SBV 2022]. It was the only item in which Vietnamese investors invested abroad nearly as much as foreign investors did in Vietnam.

Vietnamese investors made OI abroad mainly in the form of money and deposits. The banking sector accounted for about 32.83%, and the private sector accounted for 67.17% of money and deposits abroad [Ibid.]. Although accounting for a significant proportion, the flow of other private investments abroad in the form of money and deposits tended to decrease and not fluctuate as strongly as the capital inflow of the banking sector. In the banking sector, this sector's outward investment

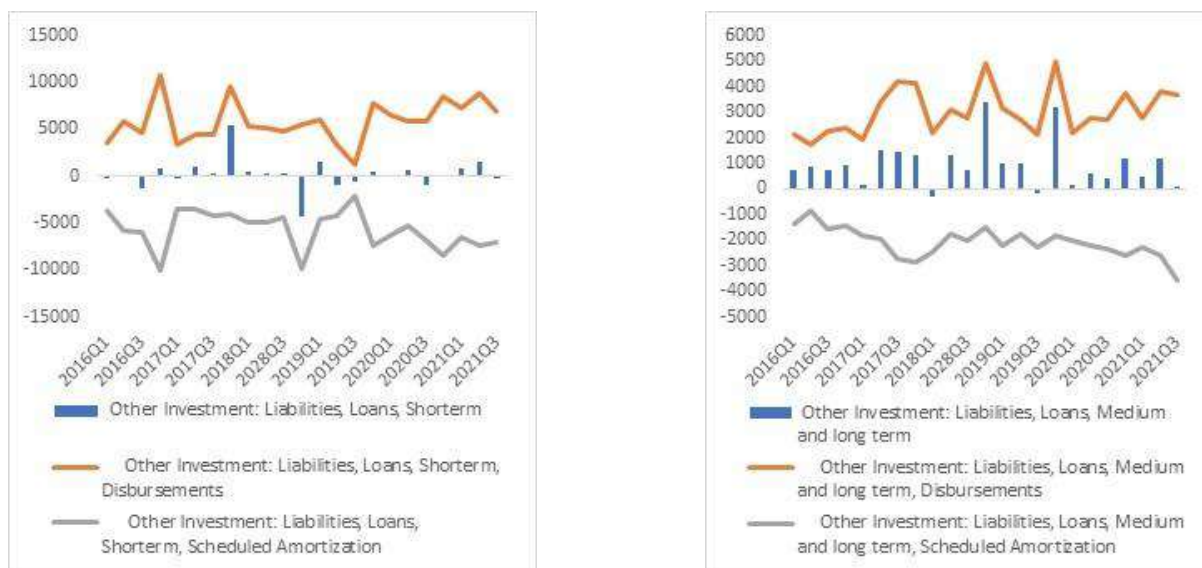


capital flows were very volatile, and there were periods when these flows came back to Vietnam. Due to the pandemic, OI flowed to foreign countries in the banking sector decreased sharply in 2020 and returned to Vietnam in 2021. Particularly in the three quarters of 2021, this capital flow has flowed back to Vietnam with a value of USD 2.6 bil. [Ibid.]. It demonstrates the increasing integration and connectivity of the Vietnamese banking system with international financial markets and therefore increasing sensitivity to global market fluctuations.

Foreign investors made OI in Vietnam mainly in loans (accounting for nearly 63.12% of the total value) and depositing money into the Vietnamese banking system (31.32%). From 2016 to 2021Q3, loans into Vietnam were mainly in medium and long-term capital, with a value of over USD 21.97 bil. Short-term flows were only about USD 5.15 bil. However, looking at each component, we see a relatively large fluctuation from 2016Q1 to 2021Q3 (fig. 3).

Specifically, for short-term loans, Vietnam borrowed from abroad more than USD 135.69 bil. from 2016Q1 to 2021Q3, which was 1.94 times larger than the disbursed medium and long-term loans and 1.6 times larger than the total disbursed FDI. However, the principal debt that Vietnam had to pay to foreign countries in the same period also reached nearly USD 130.54 bil. [Ibid.]. Therefore, if Vietnam borrows short-term money to pay the short-term debt, it will put significant pressure on the macroeconomic stability of the economy.

For long-term loans, the total disbursement from 2016Q1 to 2021Q3 was about 69.93 bil.\$, of which disbursement was mainly to the private sector (accounting for 78%). The total repayment of long-term loan principal in the research period was nearly 47.95 bil.\$, of which the government sector and the private sector accounted for about 19.33% and 80.67%, respectively [Ibid.]. However, the amount of scheduled amortisation was gradually increasing in Vietnam. Therefore, the long-term loan balance was often in surplus, causing the primary income balance in deficit.



**Fig. 3.** Shorter and long-term Loans (USD mil.) in Vietnam in 2016Q1-2021Q3

Source: [SBV 2022]

### **Financial account balance (FA)**

The FA records transactions related to investment, borrowing and lending of Vietnam with foreign non-residents. Vietnam's FA balance continuously ran into surplus with the value of USD 90.34 bil. from 2016 to 2021Q3, three times higher than the surplus in the CA. It shows the Vietnamese attractiveness to international capital flows in recent years, especially FDI. However, global money flows into Vietnam were still volatile, so the surplus in the financial balance was

unstable, ranging from USD 8.2 bil. to nearly 24 bil. per year. In Vietnam, DI flows tend to be the most stable among the three investment flows and OI flows were the least stable.

Because the FA measures the difference between acquisitions of assets from foreigners and the buildup of liabilities to them, it creates a foreigner's claim to our residents in the future when FA runs a surplus. Therefore, a surplus in FA can create risks when foreign capital flows reverse or decline suddenly. In Vietnam, the surplus in FA mainly came from DI, so when foreign economic conditions are less favourable, or Vietnam's economic environment is unstable (e.g. stopping production when dealing with the Covid19 pandemic), this capital flow could fluctuate enormously. Moreover, it will strongly affect Vietnam's goods exports (as analysed above, Vietnam's goods exports depend significantly on the FDI sector).

### *Official reserve balance*

The official reserve balance records transactions that the Central Bank intervene in the foreign exchange market. This balance deficit implies that the central bank has bought foreign currency and increased the country's foreign exchange reserves. In Vietnam, two main accounts were in surplus. First, it put tremendous pressure on the exchange rate and forced the SBV to intervene in the foreign exchange market. Then, from 2016 to 2021Q3, the SBV bought more than 79 bil.\$, accounting for over two-thirds of the total surplus in Vietnam's current and financial balance. The SBV had strongly intervened in the foreign exchange market to stabilise the exchange rate. During periods of excess foreign currency, the SBV continuously bought. In periods of shortage, it sold, for example, 2018Q4 (when both the CA and the FA of Vietnam were in deficit), the SBV sold more than USD 1.9 bil. in reserves. The SBV also sold more than USD 1.26 bil. of reserves to finance the CA deficit in 2016Q4 [SBV 2022]. It is also one of the reasons that the US accuses Vietnam of manipulating its currency in recent years.

Vietnam's total reserves by the end of 2020 reached nearly USD 94 bil., equivalent to about 4.5 months of imports and almost 35% of GDP and 70% of the total national debt in 2020 [WDI 2021]. In 2021Q3, Vietnam accumulated about USD 106 bil. of reserves. It is a reserve level that can ensure safety for Vietnamese importers and help Vietnam avoid economic shocks. However, the SBV needs to be tactful when using this tool because it can cause trade tensions for Vietnam. In addition, when the central bank purchases foreign currency without neutralisation, the domestic money supply will increase and cause inflation in the economy. Therefore, SBV had continuously performed open market operations to reduce the money supply and inflation pressure. As a result, the total value of offering SBV bills from 2016-2019 made by SVB was 3.73 million bil. Vietnam dong (approximate USD 162 bil.). Especially in 2019, when the current and financial account surplus peaked, SBV sold its bills with nearly 1.52 tril. dong (approximate USD 64.8 mil.) [SBV Annual Report 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020].

Due to such an intervention, the IMF assessment indicated that the Vietnamese dong was 7.8% undervalued on a real effective basis in 2019, broadly with its evaluation of dong undervaluation in recent years. On net, the dong depreciated 4.3% and 4.7% over 2020 on a nominal effective basis and real effective basis, respectively [US Department of the Treasury 2021].

### *Official settlements balance*

According to the double-entry principle, the BoP is always in equilibrium. However, people still refer to a country's BoP surplus or deficit. It refers to the Official settlements balance (OSB) or the nation's overall balance surplus and deficit. During the last years, Vietnam's overall balance has always been in surplus with a value of more than USD 79 bil., which means that the receipts of the

Vietnamese economy were more extensive than its payments in its external transactions, excluding reserve asset transactions. As a result, based on 2019 data, Vietnam's external position was significantly more potent than warranted by fundamentals and desirable policies, reflecting a less productive domestic economy relative to the export sector, constraints on private sector investment [Ibid.].

It is worth noting that the error and omissions in the BoP of Vietnam are pretty significant. For example, in 2016-2021Q3, the total value was close to USD -35.67 bil., equivalent to 45.13% of the overall balance. Unrecognised or omitted value flows to Vietnam during the whole period were nearly USD 6.5 bil., and unknown value flows out of the country were close to USD 40 bil. (6 times larger than the inflow) from 2016 to 2020. In addition, the number of reliable transaction reports related to money laundering that SBV received also increased from 1300 reports in 2016 to 2000 reports in 2019 [SBV 2021]. It is a big formula for the economic policymakers of Vietnam.

### **Conclusions and policy recommendations**

There are some conclusions and policy recommendations after studying the surplus in the BoP of Vietnam in the last several years, namely:

*First*, the surplus in CA in Vietnam was mainly due to a massive glut in the trade balance. Thus, it shows Vietnam's comparative advantage in supplying goods. However, Vietnam's exports were primarily from the FDI sector, so any fluctuations in the DI balance would significantly affect Vietnam's exports. In terms of income balances, although Vietnam receives an abundance of remittances, Vietnam had to pay foreign investors is always much more significant than the amount that Vietnam earned from investment abroad. Further, it created pressure on VND revaluation, causing SBV to intervene to stabilise the exchange rate. On the one hand, this intervention creates pressures on money supply and inflation; on the other hand, it causes trade tensions with partner countries. Therefore, in the future, Vietnam needs to determine the priority in its policy whether to stabilise the exchange rate or have an independent monetary policy in the context of increasingly liberalised capital accounts.

*Second*, the surplus in FA in Vietnam was mainly DI. When foreign economic conditions are less favourable or Vietnam's economic environment is unstable, this capital flow can fluctuate enormously. The surplus in Vietnam's FA was not sustainable because besides DI, other investment flows into and out of Vietnam fluctuated very strongly. Specifically, loans fluctuated wildly in both the short-term and long term. Although the surplus in the balance of long-term loans could partly offset the short-term deficit, total short-term loans were nearly twice larger than long-term. It would make it challenging to manage foreign capital flows in Vietnam and may create risks of capital flow reversal in Vietnam. Currently, the management of capital transactions is carried out to facilitate the attraction of foreign investment capital flows into Vietnam while strictly and prudently managing outward investment capital flows. According to P. Krugman [2018: 270], China and Taiwan, which maintained capital controls and had current account surpluses over the pre-crisis period, were greatly unscathed in the crisis. However, according to WTO commitments, Vietnam needed to liberalise the FA in 2018. Therefore, capital controls will have to be removed in the future.

*Third*, the surplus in Vietnam's BoP has enhanced Vietnam's external position. However, it may reflect the degree of inefficiency of the domestic economic sector in supplying export goods or constraints in the domestic private investment sector. Accumulation of excess foreign exchange reserves can put upward pressure on inflation and lead to a credit boom in the future. In addition, the cost of neutralisation in Vietnam is relatively high [To Trung Thanh 2013], so continuing to intervene





Annex: Vietnam's balance of payment from 2016 to 2021Q3 (mil. USD)

Vietnams balance of payment	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021 Q1-Q3)
<b>A. Current account balance</b>	<b>2960</b>	<b>-1651</b>	<b>5769</b>	<b>12168</b>	<b>12949</b>	<b>- 7840</b>
Goods: Exports f.o.b	176484	215119	243697	264189	282629	240632
Goods: Imports f.o.b	164540	204273	227158	242968	252040	233213
<b>Goods balance</b>	<b>11944</b>	<b>10846</b>	<b>16539</b>	<b>21221</b>	<b>30589</b>	<b>7419</b>
Services: Exports	12505	13070	14775	19920	6512	2658
Services: Imports	16908	17100	18585	21421	18241	14345
<b>Services balance</b>	<b>-4403</b>	<b>-4030</b>	<b>-3810</b>	<b>-1501</b>	<b>11729</b>	<b>- 11687</b>
Investment incomes (Primary income): Receipts	635	745	1615	2237	1428	729
Investment income (Primary income): Payments	13201	17738	17433	19032	16795	12617
<b>Primary income balance</b>	<b>-12566</b>	<b>-16993</b>	<b>-15818</b>	<b>-16795</b>	<b>15367</b>	<b>- 11888</b>
Transfers (Secondary income): Receipts	9125	10031	10870	11609	11427	10240
Transfers (Secondary income): Payments	1140	1503	2012	2366	1971	1924
<b>Secondary income balance</b>	<b>7985</b>	<b>8528</b>	<b>8857</b>	<b>9243</b>	<b>9456</b>	<b>8316</b>
<b>B. Capital account balance</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>C. Financial account balance</b>	<b>10697</b>	<b>20028</b>	<b>8466</b>	<b>18971</b>	<b>8313</b>	<b>23864</b>
Direct investment: Assets	-1000	-480	-598	-450	- 380	- 148
Direct investment: Liabilities	12600	14100	15500	16120	15800	10550
<b>Direct investment balance</b>	<b>11600</b>	<b>13620</b>	<b>14902</b>	<b>15670</b>	<b>15420</b>	<b>10402</b>
Portfolio investment: Assets	<b>180</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>
Portfolio investment: Liabilities	<b>48</b>	<b>2069</b>	<b>3021</b>	<b>2995</b>	- 1048	535
<b>Portfolio investment balance</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>2069</b>	<b>3021</b>	<b>2998</b>	<b>- 1044</b>	<b>542</b>
Other investment: Assets	-5322	-9603	-11143	-7789	- 8746	538
Other investment: Liabilities	4191	13942	1686	8092	2683	12382
<b>Other investment balance</b>	<b>-1131</b>	<b>4339</b>	<b>-9457</b>	<b>303</b>	<b>- 6063</b>	<b>12920</b>
<b>D. Net errors and omissions</b>	<b>-5265</b>	<b>-5833</b>	<b>-8204</b>	<b>-7885</b>	<b>- 4631</b>	<b>- 3849</b>
<b>E. Overall balance</b>	<b>8390</b>	<b>12544</b>	<b>6031</b>	<b>23254</b>	<b>16632</b>	<b>12175</b>
<b>F. Reserve and related items</b>	<b>-8390</b>	<b>-12544</b>	<b>-6031</b>	<b>-23254</b>	<b>16632</b>	<b>- 12175</b>

Source: [SBV 2022]

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## MULTIDIMENSIONAL POVERTY AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT OF VIETNAM IN COMPARISON WITH SOME SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES

Nguyen Dinh Tuan<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** According to the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) Annual Human Development Report and global multidimensional poverty data published by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) in recent years, Vietnam has made encouraging achievements in its human development and multidimensional poverty reduction. However, there still remain limitations in comparison with other countries in the region. Based on the UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI) and OPHI's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) data, this article seeks to analyze, compare and contrast the MPI and HDI indicators of Vietnam with those of some other Southeast Asian countries to clarify the trends of human development and reduction in multidimensional poverty in Vietnam compared with some Southeast Asian countries in recent years.

**Keywords:** multidimensional poverty, human development, Southeast Asia.

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### Introduction

At present, the concept of human's role and poverty in development has changed. Accordingly, the role of people and poverty can be analyzed in an increasingly fuller and more comprehensive manner. Poverty is rated not only according to the economic dimension, but also to many others. The UNDP Human Development Report is considered one of the most important factors in changing people's points of view and the assessment of people in terms of poverty. In its Human Development Report, the UNDP has developed a set of indicators and methods of calculation for human development and multidimensional poverty of a particular country<sup>2</sup>.

The HDI is calculated by the UNDP to assess the progress of each country towards the goal of human development. The HDI is based on three dimensions, such as the health dimension (assessed by life expectancy at birth), the education dimension, and the standard of living dimension (measured by gross national income per capita). In respect to multidimensional poverty, according to the UN, "poverty is a state in which a person lacks minimum capacity to effectively participate

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<sup>2</sup> In the UNDP Annual Global Human Development Report, the approach to and assessment of multidimensional poverty was devised after those for human development. The Human Development Index (HDI) was introduced for the first time in the Human Development Report in 1990. Meanwhile, the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) was introduced in 2010 and replaced the poverty index of human development, or the Human Poverty Index (HPI).

in social activities. Poverty means not having enough food and clothing, being unable to afford schooling, not having access to healthcare services, having no land for cultivation or jobs to support themselves, having no access to credit. It also means poor people are unsafe and are excluded, have no rights nor power, are vulnerable to violence, live in risky conditions, and have no access to clean water and/or sanitation facilities” [Dang Nguyen Anh 2015]. Therefore, poverty must be approached and evaluated in a multidimensional way and there exist various approaches to and methods of assessment to poverty from a multidimensional perspective. However, most studies and assessments of multidimensional poverty conducted by organizations and countries at present, including the UNDP and OPHI, employ the methodology of Alkire and Foster [2011] to measure multidimensional poverty.

The poverty assessment method of Alkire and Foster is considered comprehensive, as it not only assesses the general poverty rate, but also shows the depth and width of poverty. To assess multidimensional poverty, Alkire and Foster developed a method of measuring the MPI based on 10 indicators, developed from the three dimensions related to the HDI, namely health, education and living conditions.

In general, the UNDP’s approach to the assessment of human development and multidimensional poverty has helped evaluate human development and poverty in a more comprehensive and humane manner.

### **Literature review**

In recent decades, the perception of poverty has changed a lot, in which Amartya Sen (1976) is one of the scholars who has a different view on poverty when suggesting that poverty is a dynamic and multidimensional phenomenon. According to A. Sen, poverty is the lack of basic capabilities of individuals or families; the lack of basic capacities is multidimensional and includes premature mortality, malnutrition, disease and widespread illiteracy, etc. To reduce poverty, it is necessary to strengthen the capacity of the poor through education and health care which in turn will increase their productivity and income. This is also the approach to human development [Sen 1999]. Therefore, it is necessary to have a multidimensional perspective on this issue instead of just using a monetary-related approach. Sen proposed two-step poverty measurement: (i) identifying the poor by the deprivation threshold; and (ii) aggregating information on poverty across the society [Sen 1976]. To approach poverty in a multidimensional way many scholars believe that it is necessary to rely on the approach of capacity, needs, social exclusion etc. From the changes in the perception and approaching to poverty, many scholars around the world have proposed different dimensions and measurement methods of multidimensional poverty. For example, when approaching poverty, Atkinson & Bourguignon [1982] consider two factors: income and life expectancy of people. Foster & Shorrocks [1988] established the poverty index based on three components: head count rate, income gap per capita and the index of distribution sensitivity. Up to now, there have been different approaches and assessment methods on multidimensional poverty with different dimensions. However, the most commonly used multidimensional poverty measurement method today is that of Alkire and Foster, developed by the OPHI. Alkire and Foster’s multidimensional poverty assessment method is based on three large dimensions: education, health care and living standards (this is also the dimension of the HDI). Since 2010 global human development report, UNDP has included the national MPI instead of the HPI.

In a comparative study on living standards of Vietnam, China and India, Ray and Sinha (2011) used a multidimensional approach and built an index of multidimensional deprivation at the

household level. The authors used data from national surveys of China, India and Vietnam. In it, China's data are taken from China Health and Nutrition Survey – CHNS (1989–2006); the Indian data set came from the National Family Health Surveys –NFHS (1992–2006); and the Vietnamese information came from the two Vietnamese Living Standard Surveys – VLSS (1992–2004). From these data sources, the authors distinguish between multidimensional deprivation (MDD) in the sense of Chakravarty and D'Ambrosio (2006) and multidimensional poverty (MDP) in the sense of Alkire and Foster [2009] that was the background study for HDR, 2010, and provides comparative empirical evidence on the difference between the multidimensional measures in these three countries [Ray & Sinha 2011: 17].

In Vietnam, since 2016, the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) has approved the Master Plan to transform the poverty measurement approach from single-dimensionality based on income to multidimensionality as a basis for the planning and implementation of the Sustainable Poverty Reduction Program for the period 2016–2020. MOLISA's multidimensional poverty measurement method is a combination of Alkire and Foster's multidimensional poverty determination method applied with 10 indicators belonging to the five dimensions of basic social services and income poverty lines according to the traditional approach. Accordingly, the new poverty standard was determined to replace the old poverty standard with higher poverty escape criteria. Vietnam has become one of the leading countries in Asia-Pacific in measuring multidimensional poverty to reduce poverty in all dimensions [Dinh Quang Hai 2021: 97].

On the basis of applying the multidimensional poverty calculation method of the MOLISA (combining the multidimensional poverty determination method of Alkire and Foster with income poverty lines), the author group Luong Thuy Duong and Vu Quoc Huy [2017] used the data of the 2010, 2012 and 2014 VLSS to calculate multidimensional poverty across regions in Vietnam. Also, the authors have adjusted a number of indicators on income, health, access to information, housing quality to suit actual conditions and data to determine multidimensional poverty levels for regions. The overall results show that the proportion of poor households, especially of deep poverty, has increased in recent years, although access to basic services has improved significantly [Luong Thuy Duong & Vu Quoc Huy 2017: 15].

A review of a number of studies shows that there are studies on multidimensional poverty, multidimensional poverty calculation methods and a number of comparative studies on Vietnam's multidimensional poverty index. However, the analysis of the multidimensional poverty index and the human development index of Vietnam in comparison with other countries in Southeast Asia still deserves much attention. Therefore, this article aims to analyze and compare Vietnam's MPI and HDI with some Southeast Asian countries, thereby clarifying the trend of multidimensional poverty reduction and human development of Vietnam compared with some countries in the region in recent years.

### **Methodology**

This article uses the data of research works along with descriptive analysis methods. Sources of data related to the multidimensional poverty index and human development index in Vietnam and some Southeast Asian countries are from reports by ADB, OPHI and UNDP for the period 2011–2020. From this data source, the article analyzes and compares multidimensional poverty and human development in some Southeast Asian countries. However, as the data sources vary, there



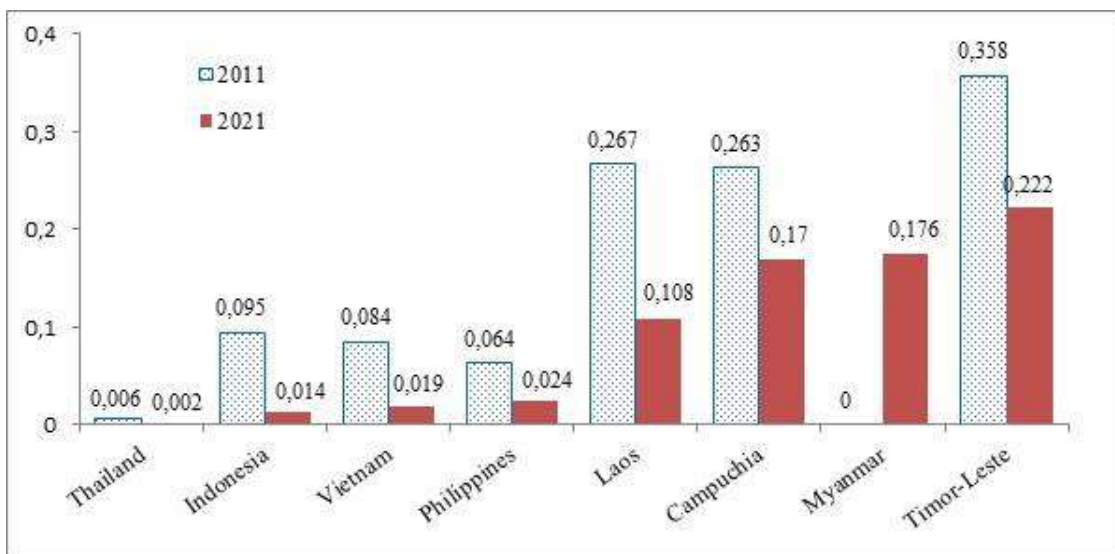
are limitations when analyzing the interaction between multidimensional poverty and human development.

Southeast Asian countries include 11 countries, namely Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Philippines, Timor-Leste and Brunei. However, OPHI’s multidimensional poverty data source has but 8 countries (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, Philippines and Timor-Leste). Therefore, we only analyze and compare Vietnam with 7 Southeast Asian countries.

**Multidimensional poverty indices in a number of Southeast Asian countries**

**Multidimensional poverty indices in a number of Southeast Asian countries in 2011 and 2021**

According to the OPHI, Vietnam’s MPI in 2021 decreased by 77.4% (from 0.084 points to 0.019 points) compared with the figures in 2011. This is the second highest decrease compared with the six countries (except Myanmar for no 2011 data) in Southeast Asia (Indonesia decreased by 85.3%, from 0.095 points to 0.014 points; Thailand decreased by 66.7%, from 0.006 points to 0.002 points; Philippines decreased by 62.5%, from 0.064 points to 0.024 points; Timor-Leste decreased by 38.0%, from 0.358 points to 0.222 points; Cambodia decreased by 35.4%, from 0.263 points to 0.170 points; and Laos decreased by 59.6%, from 0.267 points to 0.108 points). Compared with seven Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam’s MPI in 2021 is only higher than that of Thailand and Indonesia, and lower than that of the Philippines, Indonesia, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Timor-Leste (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1: MPI of a number of countries in Southeast Asia in 2011 and 2021<sup>3</sup>**

Source: [UNDP 2011: 143–144; OPHI 2021]

<sup>3</sup> Although the nations’ multidimensional poverty indices were published by the OPHI in 2011 and 2021, the data used for the calculation of the indices were collected a few years before. Myanmar has no data for 2011. However, due to insufficient data, not all countries’ indices were calculated based on all ten indicators. For example, the MPI in 2021 of Vietnam, Indonesia and Philippines were defined without the nutrition indicator.

**Rate of poor households, intensity of deprivation and MPI rankings of a number of countries in Southeast Asia in 2021**

According to the MPI rankings by countries in 2021 released by the OPHI, Vietnam is in the low MPI group, not just in Southeast Asia. In 2021, Vietnam ranked 38th out of 109 countries with the multidimensional poverty rate of 4.9% and the intensity of deprivation rate of 39.50%. According to the rankings, among the eight countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand is the best, ranked 12th out of 109 countries, followed by Indonesia ranked 30th out of 109 countries. Meanwhile, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Timor-Leste were ranked in the lower group (Laos 62th, Cambodia 68th, Myanmar 71th and Timor-Leste 78th out of 109 countries).

According to the multidimensional poverty data published by the OPHI in 2021, Thailand has the lowest multidimensionally poor household rate (0.58%), followed by Indonesia (3.62%), Vietnam (4.90%), the Philippines (5.80%); Laos (23.07%), Cambodia (37.19%) and Timor-Leste being the highest (48.25%) (Table 1). The multidimensionally poor household rates of these seven countries in Southeast Asia show that there exist large differences among them. To note, the difference between the country with the lowest rate (Thailand) and the country with the highest rate (Timor-Leste) is about 40-fold higher (0.58% compared to 48.25%). Comparing Vietnam’s multidimensional poverty rate with the seven countries in the region, it can be seen that its rate is four times higher than that of Thailand and 1.4 times lower than that of the Philippines. Vietnam’s multidimensional household rate is about nine times lower than that of Timor-Leste.

**Table 1. Rate of poor households, intensity of deprivation and MPI rankings of a number of countries in Southeast Asia in 2021**

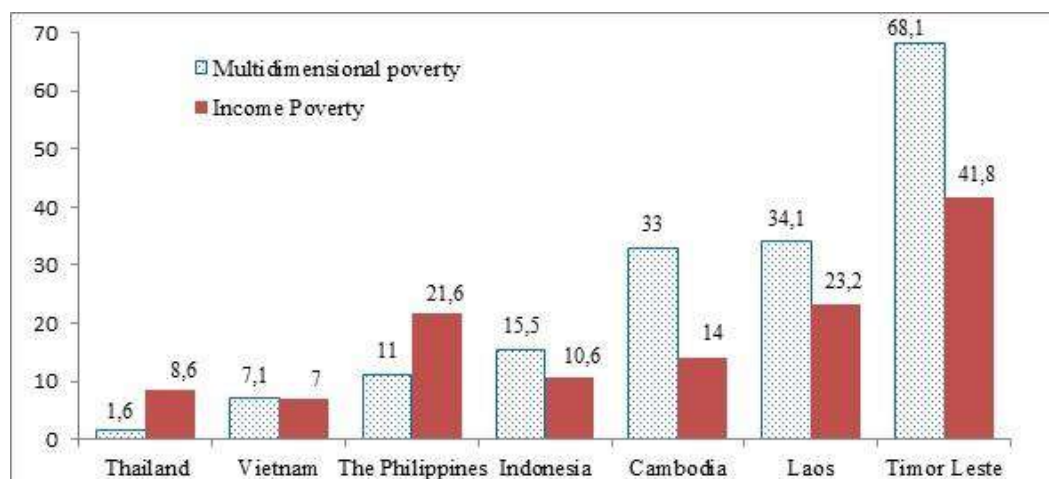
Country	Population in multidimensional poverty (H) %	Intensity of deprivation among the poor (A) %	MPI by countries
Thailand	0.58	36.07	12/109
Indonesia	3.62	38.71	30/109
Vietnam	4.9	39.05	38/109
The Philippines	5.8	41.84	41/109
Laos	23.07	46.95	62/109
Cambodia	37.19	45.81	68/109
Myanmar	38.32	45.89	71/109
Timor-Leste	48.25	45.91	78/109

Source: [OPHI 2021]

**Rates of poor households and income poverty under national standards of a number of countries in Southeast Asia in 2021**

The statistics in Fig. 2 show a significant difference in the multidimensional poverty and income poverty rates of these countries. Among the eight countries in Southeast Asia, except for Vietnam, where there is no significant difference, the rest experience differences are between their multidimensional poverty and income poverty rates. Thailand and the Philippines are the two countries where the multidimensional poverty rates are lower than their income poverty rates (the multidimensional poverty rate of Thailand is 10.7 times lower than its income poverty rate; the Philippines, nearly 2.9 times lower, Indonesia is 2.7 times lower). In contrast, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Timor-Leste have multidimensional poverty rates higher than their income poverty rates (Laos is nearly 2.1 times higher; Cambodia 1.7 times higher; Myanmar 1.5 times higher; and

Timor-Leste 1.2 times). This shows that, although Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines still have high income poverty rates, people in these countries have less difficulty in accessing social services and meeting their basic needs in daily life. Meanwhile, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and especially Timor-Leste not only have high income poverty rates, but many people of these countries also face difficulties in accessing social services and meeting their basic needs in daily life.



**Fig. 2.** Rates of multidimensionally poor households and income poverty in accordance with national standards of a number of countries in Southeast Asia in 2021 (%)

Source: [OPHI 2021; ADB 2021]

***Rates of deprived multidimensionally poor households in a number of countries in Southeast Asia in 2021***

The rates of deprived multidimensionally poor households in the eight countries in the region show that Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines are the four countries with relatively low rates of deprivation in different indicators. Thailand has the highest rate of deprived multidimensionally poor households with the indicator of nutrition, accounting for 0.34%. As for Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines, the highest rate of deprived multidimensionally poor households is with the indicators cooking fuel. Meanwhile, Timor-Leste has the high rates of deprived multidimensionally poor households in most indicators. For Timor-Leste, in four out of ten indicators, the rates of deprived multidimensionally poor households reach more than 30%, of which seven indicators are more than ten times higher than the rates of Vietnam (Table 2).

**Table 2. Rates of poor households by indicators of a number of countries in Southeast Asia in 2021 (%)**

Indicators	Thailand	Indonesia	Vietnam	The Philippines	Laos	Cambodia	Myanmar	Timor-Leste
Nutrition	0.34	n/d	n/d	n/d	12.04	20.41	17.51	35.37
Child mortality	0.15	1.46	0.88	1.48	1.93	1.83	2.01	3.56
Years of schooling	0.40	1.55	3.62	2.95	16.65	21.56	25.01	15.87
School attendance	0.17	0.70	1.32	1.57	9.13	10.81	9.04	14.90
Cooking fuel	0.28	2.38	4.44	5.20	22.90	36.24	37.25	46.97
Sanitation	0.08	2.18	4.05	3.62	17.19	30.61	27.64	32.49

Drinking water	0.03	1.35	1.50	1.98	10.44	21.31	13.60	19.06
Electricity	0.03	0.77	0.45	2.53	6.07	26.22	26.64	19.55
Housing	0.10	1.31	3.08	4.43	12.02	21.80	34.95	41.86
Assets	0.11	1.71	1.16	3.47	7.12	6.62	15.73	29.70

Source: [OPHI 2021]

According to the OPHI’s statistics of the deprivation rates in the indicators of the MPI of the eight countries in Southeast Asia in 2021, there are differences in these countries.

In particular, when considering the deprivation rates of the three dimensions in the MPI of these Southeast Asian countries, Laos, the Philippines, Timor-Leste and Myanmar are the four countries with the highest rates of deprivation in the dimension of living conditions (49.23%, 48.67%, 47.56% and 46.57% respectively); Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia are countries with a high percentage of shortfalls in the education indicator contributing to the MPI (45.07%, 42.62% and 39.67%); while health spending has the lowest contribution to the country’s MPI (Fig. 3).

It can be seen, therefore, that compared with the seven other countries in the region, Vietnam does not have a high multidimensional poverty rate. However, the intensity of deprivation of multidimensionally poor households in Vietnam is relatively high. In addition, the years of schooling rate contributes considerably to the country’s MPI.

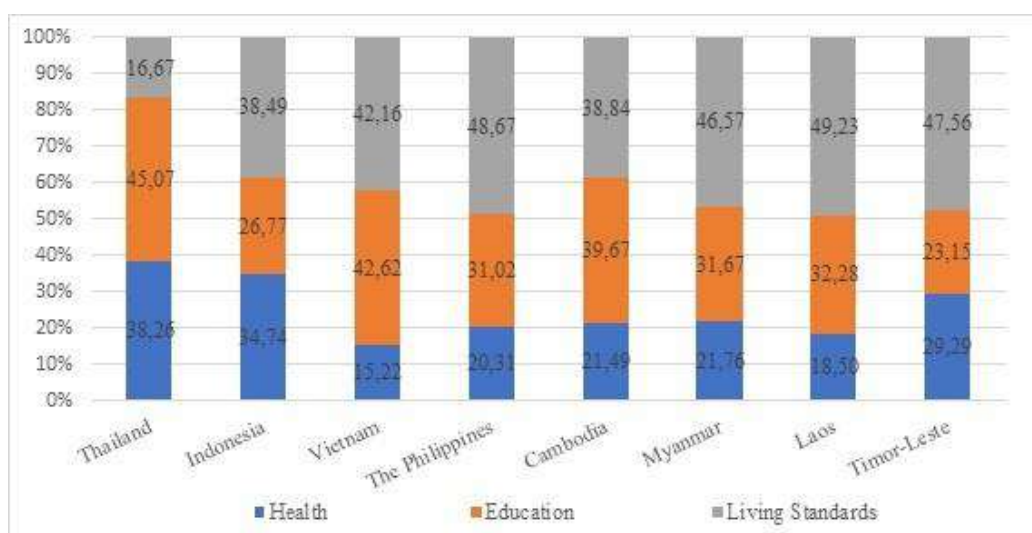


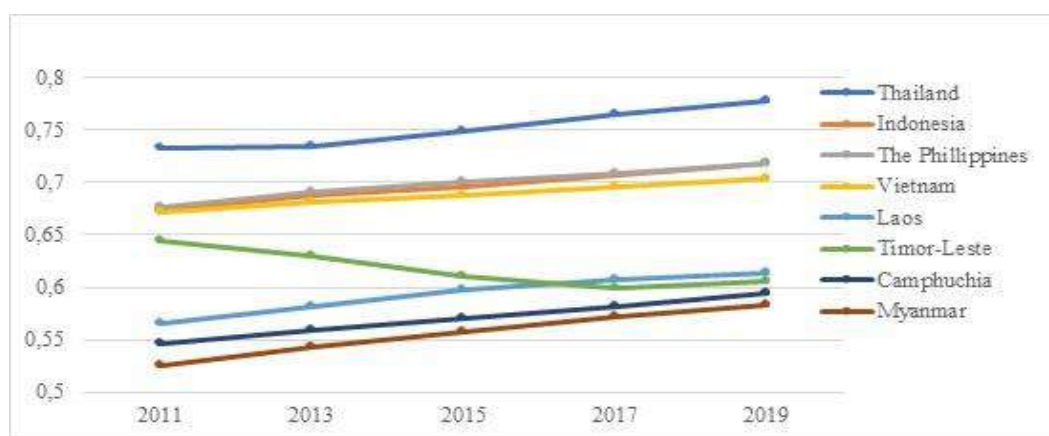
Fig. 3. Rates of deprivation in indicators of MPI of a number of countries in Southeast Asia in 2021.

Source: [OPHI 2021]

### Human development indices of a number of countries in Southeast Asia

Since the time the HDI was devised by the UNDP - in general, and for the past 10 years in particular - the human development indices of most countries in Southeast Asia have been on the rise. Among the eight countries data which the article uses to compare, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos are the countries with the most impressive growth rates in the past 10 years (Myanmar’ HDI increased by 1.3% every year; Cambodia, 1.1%; and Laos, 1.0%). The indexes of the Philippines, Timor-Leste, Thailand and Vietnam have a slower growth rate (the Philippines’ HDI increased by 0.76% every year; Thailand, 0.73%; and Vietnam, 0.60%). The slow growth trend of these countries is due to their belonging to the group of high human development countries, so their breakthrough to rapid growth will be more difficult than in the medium human development group (except Timor-Leste).





**Fig. 4:** Human development indices of a number of countries in Southeast Asia in the 2011–2019. *Source:* [UNDP]

Over the past 10 years, Vietnam's HDI growth rate has been slower than that of the other seven countries (Fig. 4). This leads to an increasing lagging behind the group of countries with a higher HDI index than Vietnam, namely Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines (for example, when compared with Indonesia, the gap in 2011 was only 0.002 points, but by 2019 it was 0.014). In contrast, the gap is narrower when compared with such countries with lower HDI as Laos, Timor-Leste, Cambodia and Myanmar (for example, when compared with Myanmar, the gap has decreased from 0.145 points to 0.121 points).

The component indicators of the HDI of Vietnam compared with the seven countries in Southeast Asia in 2020 (Table 3) show that Vietnam is not far behind the seven other countries in terms of life expectancy, expected years of schooling and the mean years of schooling. In the region, Vietnam even takes the lead in terms of life expectancy. Compared to Thailand, which has the best HDI among the seven Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam has a higher mean of years of schooling (8.3 vs. 7.9). This can be seen as encouraging the achievements that Vietnam has made in recent years in improving mean years of schooling for its people.

**Table 3. Human development indices and sub-indices of a number of countries in Southeast Asia in 2019**

Country	HDI	Life expectancy at birth (years)	Expected years of schooling (years)	Mean years of schooling (years)	GNI per capita (PPP \$)	HDI by countries
Thailand	0.777	77.2	15.0	7.9	17,781	79/189
Indonesia	0.718	71.7	13.6	8.2	11,459	107/189
The Philippines	0.718	71.2	13.1	9.4	9,778	107/189
Vietnam	0.704	75.4	12.7	8.3	7,433	117/189
Timor-Leste	0.606	69.5	12.6	4.8	4,440	141/189
Laos	0.613	67.9	11.0	5.3	7,413	137/189
Cambodia	0.594	69.8	11.5	5.0	4,246	144/189
Myanmar	0.583	67.1	10.7	5.0	4,961	147/189

*Source:*[UNDP 2021: 344–345]

However, Vietnam's Gross National Income (GNI) per capita remains low and there is a large gap between it and other countries in the region. Vietnam's GNI per capita is 2.4 times lower than that of Thailand, 1.6 times lower than that of Indonesia; and 1.3 times lower than that of the Philippines. Vietnam's GDP per capita in 2015 reached USD 7,433, while that of Thailand was USD 17,781; Indonesia USD 11,459; and the Philippines USD 9,778. Vietnam's GNI per capita is only higher than Myanmar, Timor-Leste and Cambodia (USD 4,961, USD 4,440 and USD 4,246 respectively). Low GNI per capita is one of the reasons that led to the fact that Vietnam's HDI is always lower than that of other Southeast Asian countries, even though Vietnam has higher results in the remaining indicators. In the HDI rankings in 2020 - although Vietnam was lagging behind Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, but ahead of Timor-Leste, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar - in terms of rankings, Vietnam is 38 levels behind Thailand<sup>4</sup> and 30 levels ahead of Myanmar (the country with the lowest HDI among the eight countries). In the future, it is believed that to improve Vietnam's HDI and its HDI rankings, jointly with maintaining the achievements in the indicators of the dimensions of health and education, Vietnam needs to concentrate on indicators of the living conditions dimension.

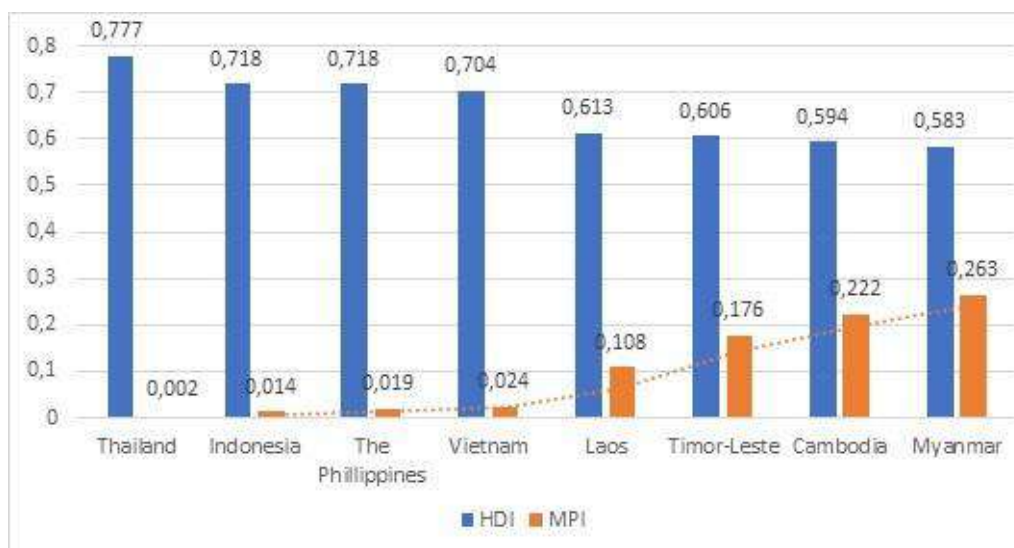
Vietnam's other indicators have reached relatively high levels; therefore, growth rates in these indicators may slow down over time. Meanwhile, the figures of a number of the countries in the region that currently have low HDI rankings may increase more quickly, as they have focused on implementing health care and education policies to reduce child mortality and increase average life expectancy as well as mean years of schooling. Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar will tend to increase rapidly in the coming years, because - for the last five years - these three countries have seen the fastest improvement in the human development indices in the region. In the period 2015-2019, on average, Laos' HDI increased by 2.06% every year; Cambodia, 2.13%; and Myanmar, 2.61%. Also in that period, Vietnam's HDI average annual growth rate was but 1.21%; Thailand 1.47%; the Philippines 1.52%; Indonesia 1.63%. Meanwhile, that index of Timor-Leste decreased by an average rate of 1.51% per year.

### **Multidimensional poverty index and human development index**

Studies have shown that income poverty or multidimensional poverty affects people's ability to develop [UNDP 2010; Madan 2012; Nguyen Dinh Tuan 2014; Dang Nguyen Anh 2015; UNDP and VASS 2015; Wang, Feng, Xia et al. 2016]. In Madan's research on human development and poverty in India, by using data on MPI and HDI of states, the author showed a statistically close relationship between MPI and HDI. Accordingly, high levels of multidimensional poverty will lead to low levels of human development and vice versa [Madan 2012]. Poverty limits people's access to education, jobs, healthcare services etc. Moreover, it directly affects human development. This can be seen via the analysis of multidimensional poverty and human development data in some countries in Southeast Asia.

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<sup>4</sup> According to the 2020 UNDP HDI ranking, in Southeast Asia, Thailand was second only to Singapore, which was listed in the category of countries with very high HDI (0.938 points ranked 11th out of 189 countries).



**Fig. 5.** MPI and HDI of a number of countries in Southeast Asia in 2020.

*Source:* [UNDP 2020: 352-353; OPHI and UNDP 2021: 29–30]

MPI and HDI data of some countries in Southeast Asia in Fig. 5 show that countries with high MPI have low HDI and vice versa. This means that when a country has a high multidimensional poverty rate, many households still face difficulties in accessing social services and improving living conditions. The limitation in access to social services and development resources and improving living conditions affects the improvement of human abilities (both mental and physical) and, moreover, it affects human development. Among the eight Southeast Asian countries analyzed in the article, Thailand has the lowest MPI and the highest HDI, followed by Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam, which are among the countries with low MPI and high HDI. Laos, Timor-Leste, Cambodia and Myanmar are in the group of high MPI and low HDI.

### Conclusion

From the analysis of MPI and HDI data of a number of countries in Southeast Asia, significant differences among countries can be seen. Out of the eight Southeast Asian countries, Thailand has the best rankings in both MPI and HDI. This shows that Thailand has paid attention to human development and poverty reduction not only in the income dimension but also in the non-income one. Vietnam is also in the group of the countries with pretty good rankings on these two indicators, but compared with Thailand, Vietnam still has a long way to go to make up the shortfall. Also, the results show that usually countries with high MPI have low HDI and vice versa.

In general, and in recent years, the multidimensional poverty rates of countries in the region have tended to decrease while their HDI indices have tended to increase. However, there remain differences in the trends among countries. Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines are the countries where the multidimensional poverty rates have tended to decrease rapidly. Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar are the countries with the highest HDI growth rates among the eight Southeast Asian countries in the past five years.

In recent years, with the good implementation of policies on health care, education and poverty reduction, Vietnam has had positive achievements in its poverty reduction and is in the group of the countries with high HDI. However, to keep this achievement and to add to the implementation of the above policies, Vietnam should improve its per capita income, as it is relatively low compared with the countries in the region.

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## HISTORY, RELIGION AND CULTURE

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### THE VIETNAMESE WEAPONS OF THE 17th CENTURY FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF NETHERLANDS

V.A. Vetyukov<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** This article is a first part of an investigation of rare and little-known items from the Oriental weapons collection of Admiral Cornelis Tromp (1629–1691), which are now on display in Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam). The Dutch investigators claim, that the wooden weapon-rack with the specimens of cold-weapons and firearms, as well as the additional accessories on it, originates from Tonquin (North Vietnam).

The author undertakes research of the collection's history and the problems of its attribution. The work indicates the probable path, by which the weapons could be brought to Amsterdam from Vietnam in the 17th century. The questions of the Dutch East India Company activities in Southeast Asia are touched in that aspect.

**Keywords:** Vietnamese traditional weapons, Rijksmuseum, Cornelis Tromp, Dutch East India Company, weapon rack.

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### Introduction

Traditional weapons of Vietnam are a poorly investigated theme for today. Not only the lack of special researches concerning the problem should be stated but also the absence of some more or less significant collections of the ancient Vietnamese weapons inside and outside the country.

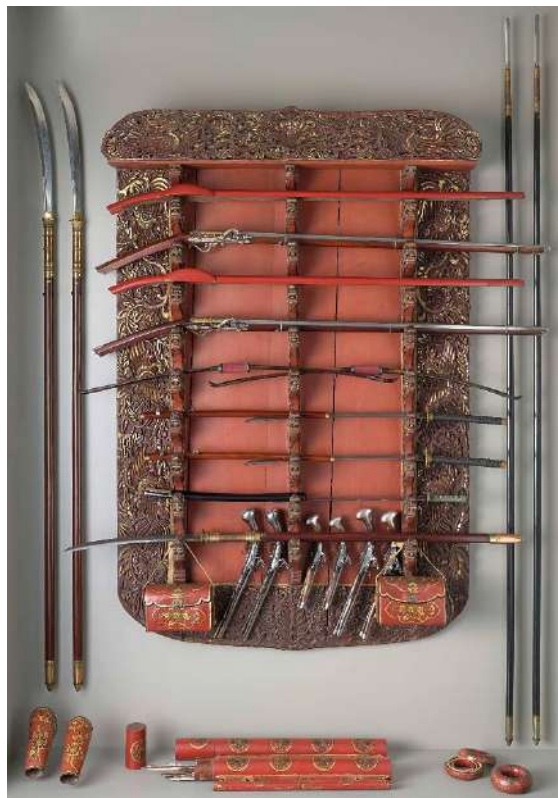
Some separate items of the old sabers and some other arms are really on display in museums of Hanoi and several other Vietnamese cities, but they often date from quite a late period (the 18th–20th centuries). Some archaeological discoveries may be called exceptional. It is appropriate to recall the gatherings of axes, daggers and other Bronze Age arms of Đông Sơn culture (5th–3rd centuries BC). A rich collection of weapons from the Later Le period (1428–1789), discovered during the excavations of the former Military Academy in Giang Vo, Hanoi, described in detail by the archaeologist Dr. Nguyen Thi Don is extremely important [Nguyễn Thị Đơn 2001]. As far as the items, displayed in the collections abroad, are concerned, it is not easy to determine their Vietnamese

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origin, due to the numerous foreign influences. Indochina weapons are often identified with Chinese and in some cases with Japanese ones.

In the light of the above-said, a group of exhibits under inventory numbers from NG-NM-6087-A to NG-NM-6094-A-2, which is now on display in the Rijksmuseum (the National Museum of Netherlands) arouses true interest [Rijksmuseum NG-NM-6087-A: 05.10.2021] (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** Weapon-rack NG-NM-6087-A. *Photo:* Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

First of all, it is a rectangular (200x132 cm) rack made of several boards of jati wood with a gilded carved frame, covered with the floral ornament and the phoenix figures. Perpendicular to the main surface there are three parallel rows (ten in each) of the curved ledges (functionally being shelves and hooks at the same time) decorated with the fine carvings, as well. Each ledge is ended with a head of a fantastic animal, holding a pearl in its mouth. The wood is covered with the red lacquer, some gilding is still preserved on the carved spaces. The entire structure is fixed vertically to the wall. A set of weapons and additional accessories is displayed on the rack (inventory numbers NG-NM-6088 – NG-NM-6099). It includes two paired long lances/spears, three battle scythes/glaives, two long sabers and a short one, two composite bows (quivers with a set of arrows, bracers and bracelets for the archer are attached), as well as two matchlock harquebuses (attached with an unusual type of covers, two cartridge bags and round boxes with wicks). The exhibits are in excellent condition. Blades and spear-heads are polished to a shine and have no traces of rust.

According to the description posted on the museum's website, the collection belonged to Cornelis Maartenszoon Tromp (1629–1691), a prominent statesman the Navy Admiral of the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** Portrait of Cornelis Tromp, 1629-1691, painted by Sir Peter Lely (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK).

Source: <https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q50855064>

For this reason, the rack is on display in the main maritime gallery dedicated to the Golden Age of the Netherlands, i.e., the era of the naval power of Holland. The rack and the set of weapons placed on it date back to the 17th century, and the origin of most of the items was identified by the museum staff as North Vietnamese (Tonkin).

Biographers of Admiral Tromp ascertained that at the end of 1680 he received a parcel from Batavia (now Jakarta) from his childhood friend Cornelis Wemans, a merchant of East India Company [Sint Nicolaas 2014: 94–95]. From the accompanying letter, dated March 16 of the same year, it appears that the parcel was a return gift for a portrait of Tromp, which he had sent a year earlier to Wemans with his nephew, Dirk Blom, who had been on his way to Java to take up an important official post in the Council of East Indies.

Wemans was flattered by the gift and initially wanted to thank the Admiral with his own portrait, which, however, could have only be finished by the end of the year [Ibid.]. As he had no wish to wait so long, Cornelis Wemans sent him the mentioned rack, adding 2 cartridge bags, 2 powder cans, 2 wick canisters with wick, 2 lead arm rings, 2 ‘lead covers over the arms’, 2 bows, 2 quivers with arrows, 2 muskets in a box, 2 lacquered bar knives and 2 spikes with lacquered caps to it [Rijksmuseum NG-NM-6087-A: 05.10.2021]. The last 4 pieces were wrapped in linen with the name of Tromp on it. The donor added several boxes of tea to the weapons set, and informed about it in his letter [Sint Nicolaas 2014: 95].

Cornelis Tromp placed an exotic gift from Batavia in his wife’s Amsterdam mansion on the Herengracht canal, adding six European-made pistols to the collection. The whole collection displayed in the mansion contained some other items of Asian weapons, as well. The exhibits were listed in the home-written inventory book. Subsequently, this collection of Asian weapons was inherited by the representatives of a parallel lineage of the Tromp family, dating back to Admiral Martin Harperts Tromp (1598–1653), Cornelis’s father. In 1819, the heirs intended to sell it to the Royal Cabinet of Rarities, but the deal did not take place due to a lack of funds in the budget of the latter [Ibid.: 92]. In 1863 and 1869 the collection was displayed by the owners at exhibitions in Delft and Amsterdam, and in the exposition catalogs it was listed as a “gift of the *dey* of Algiers” to Martin Harperts Tromp, whose coat of arms then crowned the weapon-rack [Ibid.]. In 1884 the heirs finally sold the collection to the Rijksmuseum which was at its formation period at that time. Just one year later, after the grand opening of the main museum of Holland, it was on display there.

In the early 1960s the museum staff began to doubt that the ruler of Algeria could have been the true donor of this weapons collection [Ibid.: 93]. There was an assumption that this was a gift from the administration of the Dutch East India Company not to Martin Harperts, but to his son, Cornelis Tromp. Then the coat of arms of the father had been removed from the rack. More than thirty years later, historian Robert Prudhomme van der Rijn, the biographer of both Tromps, discovered the original letter from Cornelis Wemans to his famous namesake, dated by March 18, 1680, as has been mentioned above. The document had finally shed light on the identity of the donor of the exotic arms

collection and the point of its departure [Ibid.: 93–94]. Yet, the question about the country of origin of the rack and the weapon-items displayed on it was still open.

In 1992 the museum staff attributed the exhibit under the inventory number NG-NM-6087-A as “... a red lacquered and gilded rack ... of European type but decorated with birds and flowers in Pesisir (coastal) style, the cosmopolitan decorative style used on the north coast of Java in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries first and foremost by Chinese craftsmen” [Veenendal 2014: 93]. The version about the manufacturing of the rack by *hakka* 客家 carpenters, originating from Fujian province seemed to have been proved with the decorative ornament, including the phoenix-*fēnghuáng* 鳳凰 figures. Yet, the objects, created by this manufacturing corporation in Batavia are typical of the mixed style, including not only Chinese, but also Javanese and even Dutch motifs, which are absent in the exhibit number NG-NM-6087-A.

In 2014, Jan Veenendal, a Dutch researcher, suggested that the rack did not originate from the Java-island, but from Tonkin (as in that era North Vietnam – *Đàng Ngoài* 唐外, which was under the actual authority of military rulers from the *Trinh* clan 鄭, was named by Europeans). [Veenendal 2014: 93-94]. The scientist substantiates his assumption by the obvious similarity of the curved lion heads decorating the ledges/hooks with the sculptural image of the fantastic “lion-dog” *nghe* 猊 from the Lau Thuong communal house, Phu Tho province, presented in the collection of the Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum in Hanoi and dated from 1600–1800 [Ibid.: 94]<sup>2</sup> (Fig.3).



**Fig. 3.** Left: *nghe* statue from Lau Thuong communal house, Phu Tho province. Right: a fragment of the statue (The Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi).

*Photo by the author, January 2022*

Also, Jan Veenendal points to typical ornamental motifs of the massive carved doors of Keo Pagoda (Thai Binh province), created in 1650–1700, presented in the same collection, as well as to the carved decorative elements of ancient wooden architecture, preserved in some houses of Hoi An

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<sup>2</sup> According to the author’s observation made on January 28, 2022, the sculpture dates from the 17th century.



and Hue. The researcher suggests that the stand NG-NM-6087-A could date from the same period, i.e., 1650–1679 [Ibid.].

All the above-mentioned examples include a decorative motif, resembling a cloud or a flame-tongue with a zigzag base and a straight, sharp end. This element can be either part of an abstract ornament or decorate expressively engraved images of fantastic animals, such as lions, dragons and phoenixes. On the door leaves of the Keo pagoda, it is repeated many times, forming ridges of clouds, among which fantastic animals are frolicking in pairs; they are large and small dragons, as well as “dog-lions” *nghê* (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4.** The doors of Keo Pagoda, Thai Binh province (Vietnam Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi).

*Photo by the author, January 2022*

Vietnamese authors compare this ornament with “the forest of clouds, stylized as the long blades and spears” (*rừng mây cách điệu hình đao mác kéo dài*) [Tinh Lê 2020: 29.09.2021], “protruding from the dragon’s head, back, body and elbows” (*vút ra từ đầu, lưng, thân, khuỷu chân rồng*) [Vũ Thị Hằng 2019: 29.09.2021]. The manes of the lion heads decorating the rack from the Rijksmuseum are outlined in exactly the same pattern. So far, we have not been able to find a special art history term that would designate this ornamental motif. According to Dr. Nguyen Thi Don, it can function both as a “cloud curtain” (*vân mây*), and as a flipper (*vây*) or scales (*vảy*) of a fantastic creature<sup>3</sup>.

The author of this article managed to find this element in the decor of some other sculptural images presented in the collection of the Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum. In particular, it is a *nghê* statue from the memorial temple in honor of Emperor Le Thanh Tong in Thanh Hoa province, dated from the beginning of the 17th century, as well as three other “dog-lion” wooden sculptures from the Lau Thuong and Huu Bo communal houses of Phu Tho province, dated from the 17th and 18th centuries. Also of interest is the decor of the crown on the head of a wooden statue of the Empress

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<sup>3</sup> The opinion was expressed in personal correspondence and conversations between Dr. Nguyen Thi Don and the author of this article (September 2021 and January 2022).

Trinh Thi Ngoc Truc (1595–1660) from the Mat pagoda in Thanh Hoa, where flames, framing the small gilded image of Buddha Amitabha in the middle, have the same shape (Fig. 5).

Thus, stylistically the rack under number NG-NM-6087-A fits well in the context of Vietnamese fine and decorative arts of the 17th century. As for the weapons placed on it, in 2010, Rijksmuseum experts also identified their Vietnamese origin [Rijksmuseum: 05.10.2021].



**Fig. 5.** The statue of Empress Trinh Thi Ngoc Truc from the Mat pagoda, Thanh Hoa province (Vietnam Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi).

*Photo by the author, January 2022*

Among Russian researchers, the first to pay attention to this collection was S.V. Barchevsky, a Moscow expert on Indochina weapons. The report he delivered at the conference “War and Weapons” [Barchevsky 2016: 120–126], held at the Museum of Artillery, Engineering and Signal Corps in St. Petersburg in May 2016, prompted the author of this article to visit the Rijksmuseum for direct acquaintance with the weapon-rack.

The attribution of items from the Admiral Tromp collection, proposed by the staff of the Rijksmuseum has put a number of questions for the research community:

1. What was the way by which the rack with the richly decorated arms could have arrived to Cornelis Wemans in Batavia from Tonkin?

2. How active were the trade relationships of East India Company with Dai Viet? Are the facts of acquiring the Vietnamese weapons by Dutch diplomatic representatives, merchants or sailors of that time known from historical sources?

3. Is it possible to consider that the constructive and design features of the rack from the collection of Admiral Tromp and the weapons, exhibited on it are really of Vietnamese origin?

4. Do similar items approving such a version exist in museums or private collections in Vietnam or abroad?

5. Can any mentions of the existence and usage of such weapons in the feudal principedoms of Vietnam in the 17th century be found in the written or art sources?

In her article “A Diplomatic Gift Full of Surprises” Dutch researcher Eveline Sint Nicolaas gives several suggestions regarding the way, by which the collection could get to Amsterdam from Tonkin. A response letter from Cornelis Wemans to Admiral Tromp mentions Rijklof van Goens, named Volckert, the son of the Governor-General of East India Company. It says that he lost his official status as a Batavian merchant, because he had made some trade transactions privately. Before his return to the Netherlands in 1680, he may have sold part of his household collection at an auction, and this is one of the possible ways for the weapon-rack to get to Cornelis Wemans from Tonkin [Sint Nicolaas 2014: 104].

The Dutch researcher proposes another, much more probable, assumption that the collection was acquired by Wemans from a certain Johannes Besselman, who headed the Tonkin trading post from 1677 to 1679 and then moved to Batavia and opened his own shop there on March 3, 1680 [Ibid.: 104–105]. A capable businessman (next year he became a cashier at the Batavian castle and

later was appointed a director of a factory on the Deshima Island in Nagasaki harbor, where he died in 1684), obviously wanted to sell the rarities he had brought from Tonkin. Thus, Wemans hurrying to find a worthy gift for an eminent friend of his, could be one of the first customers in Mr. Besselman's shop of exotic goods [Ibid.].

There is nothing incredible in the very fact of the appearance of Vietnamese weapons in one of the stores of Batavia. For the first time the Dutch appeared in the South of contemporary Vietnam, in the premises of Nguyen clan as early as in 1601 [Kleinen 2008:20]. When Japan was, virtually, closed for the external world in the 1630s, the Dutch East India Company (founded in 1602) became the main trading intermediate between “Land of the Rising Sun” and Vietnam [Ibid.: 20, 25]. The Dutch failed to establish the stable trade relations with Dang Trong principality ruled by the Nguyen. This, however, on a certain extent contributed to the strengthening of the contacts with the northern part of the country (Dang Ngoai, Tonkin), ruled by the Trĩnh clan, hostile to the Nguyen [Ibid.: 36]. In 1637 East India Company opened its agency there, first situated in the town of Pho Hien. In the beginning of the next decade the trading post moved directly to the capital Thang Long [Hoang Anh Tuan 2007: 189]. The Dutch used to bring the European goods, including the firearms to Tonkin [Ibid.: 139–141].

At the same time, the Company not only delivered goods from Europe, but acted as a pan-Asian trade carrier, becoming, in particular, the exclusive intermediate between Japan and other countries of the East. Its ships headed in a direct course from the harbor of Nagasaki to the ports of Tonkin: Pho Hien and the legendary Domea [Nguyen Van Kim 2008: 75–78], where cargos of silver ingots, copper, silk fabrics, lacquer and porcelain products of high quality were delivered [Hoang Anh Tuan 2007: 127–132, 183]. In the opposite direction, Dutch ships carried cheap raw silk and inexpensive porcelain tableware. These goods also reached other Asian markets (Guangzhou, Coromandel Coast, Ceylon) [Ibid.: 29, 30, 181, 182]. In 1671 (nine years before Cornelis Wemans sent a package to Admiral Tromp), the direct sea route connecting Tonkin and Japan ceased to function [Ibid.: 191]. Ships of East India Company began to cruise from Tonkin, first to Batavia, and from there to the Netherlands and “Land of the Rising Sun”, and then returned with a wide variety of goods on board. In the same years, the cases of semi-legal private trade conducted by employees of the Dutch trading post in Thang Long, were noted, as well as the delivery of local goods to Batavia by them [Ibid.: 192–193].

The Company's correspondence also indicates that not only European firearms, but the cold Japanese weapons, were also part of this grandiose trade. So, a letter from “Annam Kokbueng, King of Tonkin” (Emperor Le Than Tong (1619–1643/1649–1662) titled in international correspondence as An Nam Quoc Vuong, i.e., the Prince of An Nam)<sup>4</sup> to the head of the Company, Governor-General Anthony van Diemen, dated by 1643, literally said the following: ‘the Japanese used to come here in their junks and supply me with all kinds of rare goods, such as iron, sulfur, copper, swords, and many others, and in return they received silk. Now you can bring us these and other goods on the same terms’ [Berzin 1987: 92]. Besides, cold (bladed) weapons sometimes acted as diplomatic gifts. In the same letter, the monarch states: ‘I gave the captain two gold-inlaid swords to present to the Dutch prince as a token of my respect. I also gave a gold-encrusted sword to the captain, and a silver-encrusted sword to the junior captain’ [Ibid.]. In 1652 “Ong Siadi, the Great Mandarin of Tonkin” (Trĩnh Trang was a military ruler of Dang Ngoai in 1623–1657) wrote in his letter to the Governor-

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<sup>4</sup> A husband of Her Majesty Trinh Thi Ngoc Truc; the mentioned above statue is presented in the collection of the Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum in Hanoi.

General Charles Reinirsson: “As a sign of my favor to the Dutch I send you the gifts: a gold-inlaid sword and two catti of musk” [Berzin 1987:93].

It is of interest, that beside silk and cheap porcelain, some Vietnamese imitations of Japanese weapons also came to “Land of the Rising Sun” from time to time. In particular, there are known several *tsuba*-guards for samurai swords, which have a Vietnamese origin. [McElhinney: 06.10.2021].

Considering the above-said, we can assume for sure that the collection of weapons really came first to Batavia, and then to Amsterdam from Tonkin. However, the question is still open, what particular design and decor features of the items included do really prove their Vietnamese origin.

Some bright examples of North Vietnamese wooden sculpture from the 17th century, mentioned above, have an obvious decorative resemblance to the weapon-rack from the collection of Admiral Tromp. As for the functional analogues of the latter, we managed to find one object.

While working on this article, the author received a curious photo of another weapon rack with a bow and a set of arrows placed on it from S.V. Barchevsky. This one is presented in the collection of the Palace Museum of Antiquities in Hue. It is also made of wood and covered with red lacquer and gilding, but, unlike the exhibit from the Rijksmuseum, it is not attached to the wall, but is posed on a stand. The hooks are located on both sides in two rows, forming three symmetrical pairs [Unstrung bow and arrows: 06.10.2021]. With their curved shape and gold-plated lion or dragon heads (the photo is not much distinct), they are the very reminiscent of similar parts of the rack from the Amsterdam collection. As the bow is placed on the hooks, and six arrows are inserted into the holes of the special wooden frame fixed on the stand, this is a weapon rack. The latter casts doubt on Ms. Sint-Nikolaas’s assertion that exhibit NG-NM-6087-A was not specifically intended for preserving weapons [Sint Nicolaas 2014: 103]. Also, it should be added that the Amsterdam exhibit is structurally the very reminiscent of Japanese racks for harquebuses and other weapons found in castles from the era of feudal wars Sengoku-jidai 戦國時代(1467–1615)<sup>5</sup>. They are also vertical stands fixed on the wall with parallel rows of the ledges-hooks. These items, however, are not colored and are devoid of any decor and gilding (Fig. 6).

At first glance, the cold-weapons and firearms placed on the rack from the collection of Admiral Tromp may also seem Japanese ones. It is easy to imagine that the displayed pole-arms are the *yari* 槍 and *naginata* 長刀, the sabers are true samurai *katana* 刀, as well as the harquebuses are the Japanese modifications of the Western ones known as *tanegashima* 種子島. Among all the exhibits displayed on the rack only the short bows have a “non-Japanese” look, decisively different from the samurai *yumi* 弓, however, the attached quivers are clearly stylized as an island prototype, and even are decorated with the imitation of the samurai familial coats of arms *monshō* 紋章.

Everything reminds much of the export of Japanese weapons to the Asian mainland, especially intensive in the era of Sengoku-jidai [Sesko 2013:12.10.2021]. This period continued until the country was closed by the Tokugawa shogunate (1600–1868) about 1635. In China the *yùnlínjūn* 御林軍, an imperial guard of the Ming-period (1368–1643), was armed with the Japanese *naginata* and the large two-handed swords *ōdachi* 大太刀 [Zhōu Wěi 1957: 263, ill. 82]. Some exemplars of those kinds of weapons, presented as a gift to the Ming emperors by Japanese diplomatic missions, were preserved in the palace vaults during the next Qing dynasty (1644–1912) [Zhōu Wěi 1957: 263]. The high quality of Japanese blades, which were considered unsurpassed in a number of parameters

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<sup>5</sup> The author saw such racks for harquebuses and spears in Himeji Castle in February 2020.



(quality of steel, design features, aesthetic design), led to the emergence of their numerous local imitations [Zhōu Wěi, 1957:262].



**Fig. 6.** Weapon-rack (Japan, Himeji castle). *Source:* [http://www.digital-images.net/Images/Japan/Himeji/HimejiCastle\\_WeaponRacks\\_0455.jpg](http://www.digital-images.net/Images/Japan/Himeji/HimejiCastle_WeaponRacks_0455.jpg)

The Japanese cold weapons had a vast popularity in Vietnam, as well. Famous missionary Alexandre de Rhodes (1591-1660) wrote in his *“Histoire du Royaume de Tunquin”* (History of Tonkin-kingdom): “The Japanese people once [brought. – V.V.] a lot of silver with them to buy silk here. They also brought along a lot of weapons and swords to sell” [Nguyen Van Kim 2008: 78]. The above-cited letter from Le Than Tong to Governor-General Anthony van Diemen also says that the Japanese delivered swords to Dang Ngoai. The text of the document confirms the interest of the Tonkinese aristocracy in continuing deliveries; the letter directly states that after the closure of “Land of the Rising Sun”, the Dutch, who retained their trading post in Nagasaki Bay, could also bring the same goods to Tonkin.

According to French researchers, in the 16th and 17th centuries Japan was the main supplier of the edged weapons to Dai Viet and the other states of Indochina [Huard & Durand 1954:117]. The original Japanese bladed weapons can be seen in the expositions of Hanoi museums (the State Historical Museum, the Museum of Military History), where their local imitations are also presented. The latter are preserved in a number of museums and private collections outside Vietnam, as well. As usual, they are not an exact copy of the Japanese prototypes, but have a number of differences in the design of the blade / spearhead, handle / pole, the mount, as well as the decor.

The differences of that very type were revealed by the staff of the Rijksmuseum while investigating “Japanese” items from the weapon-rack of Cornelis Tromp. To determine the possible Vietnamese origin of these exhibits, it is necessary to scrutiny them scrupulously. That must be the subject of the second part of this research.



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## FEMALE SPIRITS OF THE MALE CULT: TUTELARY GODDESSES IN THE SOUTH OF MODERN VIETNAM (BASED ON THE FIELDWORK IN THE CITY OF VŨNG TÀU)

E.V. Gordienko<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** This article discusses the pantheon in the temple of female spirits (Miếu Ngũ Hành) located in the city of Vũng Tàu in southern Vietnam according to my fieldworks during 2018. The spirits are more various than spirits of pantheon in traditional forms of worship in the north of Vietnam. The inhabitants of Vũng Tàu worship some deities borrowed from neighbors: the Cham and Khmer goddesses, and female deities embodying the five elements of the Chinese religious system (*wu xing*). A feature of the temple is the female divine service, although usually women perform an auxiliary role in ceremonies in honor of tutelary spirits, and in traditional Vietnam they were not allowed to the altars at all. According to the community house territory plan (beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) the participation of women in ceremonies was originally assumed and, what is important, allowed by the authorities.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, Vung Tau, folk religion, tutelary spirits, women's spirits, female divine service.

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### Introduction

Among the deities worshipped by the Vietnamese, an important place is occupied by female spirits. Along with male deities, they perform various sacred functions, including patronizing the area. This article offers an ethnographic description of one of the temples in the south of Vietnam, dedicated to female spirits, according to my fieldworks in 2018, and I also offer an interpretation of the collected material. The temple which I consider is located in the southern lands inhabited by the Vietnamese only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (the seaside city of Vung Tau). The spirits are more various than spirits of pantheon in traditional forms of worship in the north of Vietnam: the inhabitants of Vung Tau (and especially women) worship the Cham and Khmer goddesses and the five female deities embodying *wu-xing*, the five elements of the Chinese religious system. In addition, women conduct ceremonies and perform rituals in front of the altars of the spirits. Therefore, besides the description of the female spirits, I will analyze the phenomenon of female divine service to spirits in the framework of the tutelary spirits cult (which is traditionally male cult, since religious rites were performed exclusively by men for many centuries).

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In my study, I rely on published works on the cult of female spirits in Vietnam, which include descriptions of the origin of goddesses, their role in the pantheon and texts related to them. The most important work on the female spirits of Vietnam is the investigation of Ngo Duc Thinh “Worship of mother-goddesses in Vietnam” [Ngô Đức Thịnh 2009]. Russian scholars also studied female spirits [Knorozova 2000; Knorozova 2020; Sharipov 2001]. Their research works are based on the study of Vietnamese mythology and literary heritage. I use their works as a starting point for the interpretation of the field material. I also rely on works on the history of the tutelary spirits cult in Vietnam [Nguyễn Văn Khoan 1930; Nguyễn Vinh Phúc, Nguyễn Duy Hình 2009; Tạ Chí Đại Trường 2014; Antoshchenko 1997; Novakova 2012].

This article is written following up upon the series of my articles devoted to the study of Vietnamese folk religion basing on fieldworks and on translation of sacred texts about spirits [Gordienko 2018; Gordienko 2021].

### Temple of the goddesses of the five elements and its altars

The temple we are studying (Fig. 1) is located in the city of Vung Tau, on the territory of the communal house of the Thang Tam quarter (*Đình thần Thảng Tam*) in the central part of the city (address: 77 Hoàng Hoa Thám). It is named after the goddesses of the five elements (Miếu Bà Ngũ Hành 廟婆五行, or Miếu Ngũ Hành 廟五行).



**Fig. 1.** Temple of the goddesses of the five elements on the territory Thang Tam communal house, city of Vung Tau. *Photo by the author, March 2018*

The Thang Tam communal house is a temple complex located in a living quarter. All the temples on the territory of this complex are one-story buildings constructed in the 1820–1830’s. The main pavilion is the communal house itself built in 1820. It has an altar dedicated to the main tutelary spirit of the quarter<sup>2</sup>. The main pavilion has an attached ceremonial hall on its back with additional altars dedicated to mythical characters patronizing the area as well. Later, two more temples were built in the depths of the courtyard: to the right of the main pavilion is the temple of the whale with a crypt for storing the giant bones of these sacred animals (in 1824); to the left of the main pavilion is the temple of the goddesses of the five elements (in 1832) which I am concerning.

<sup>2</sup> The figure of the main tutelary spirit is a historical character – commander Ngo Van Huyen, the founder of Thang Tam settlement in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century [Gordienko 2021].



As for the temple main altars of the goddesses of the five elements, several female spirits are venerated (Fig. 2). These spirits are borrowed from neighboring peoples – the Chinese, who influenced the Vietnamese for centuries, as well as from the Chams and Khmers pushed to the southern lands by the Vietnamese<sup>3</sup>. The main reason for the inclusion of the Chams and Khmers deities in the Vietnamese pantheon was apparently the belief that “foreign” spirits can also harm or patronize and therefore require sacrifices to establish a good relationship.



Fig. 2. The main altars of the temple of the goddesses of the five elements.

Thang Tam communal house, city of Vung Tau. Photo by the author, March 2018

As it appears from the name of the temple, the central altar honors **the five goddesses embodying the elements** (*năm bà Ngũ Hành*) scilicet iron, wood, water, fire, and earth. Although the five elements cult refers to Chinese philosophy, these goddesses have no direct analogues in Chinese folk religion. It can be regarded as a comprehension of Vietnamese material in the categories of Chinese culture. The main Vietnamese researcher of female spirits Ngo Duc Thinh believes that the influence of Chinese culture was “patriarchal” (*phụ quyền*), while the Vietnamese since ancient times have identified the forces of nature with the feminine, so the elements were “identified” (*đồng nhất*) with female spirits [Ngô Đức Thịnh 2009: 257]. According to Ngo Duc Thinh, the veneration of the five goddesses is widespread on the seacoast, as the five elements are associated with a variety of crafts (not only agriculture, handicrafts and trade, but also fishing and salt mining) [Ngô Đức Thịnh 2009: 259].

The right altar (Fig. 2, photo on the right) is dedicated to the **goddess *Thiên Y A Na*** depicted accompanied by her sons. *Thiên Y A Na* traces her origin to the Cham goddess Po Nagar, which is the most influential goddess of the Chams patronizing agriculture. In Vietnamese pantheon she acts as

<sup>3</sup> Until the 17<sup>th</sup> century the lands from Vung Tau to the extreme south of modern Vietnam were inhabited only by the Khmers. A Khmer settlement Okap (អុកាប) was located on the territory of modern city of Vung Tau at the mouth of the Sai Gon River. At the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Vietnamese peasants gradually began to populate the lands along the Sai Gon River and the Mekong Delta. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there was a significant Vietnamese population, as well as numerous Chinese immigrants there. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Vietnamese had conquered the Cham lands to the north of Vung Tau and the Khmer lands along the left bank of the Mekong Delta, including the territories of the modern cities of Vung Tau and Hồ Chí Minh City [History of Kampuchea... 1981: 89–93, Deopik 1994: 262–263].

the goddess of storms and floods as well as rain-giver [Knorozova 2020: 371-375]. Vietnamese tradition tells the story of a teenage girl adopted by elderly parents. When she grew up, she disappeared into the storming sea and escaped “to the north” where she married a prince and had two sons. Suddenly she left her husband, returned with her children to her native place, put up the temple to her already deceased parents and ascended as a fairy to heaven [Knorozova 2000: 72–73, 173]. Veneration of *Thiên Y A Na* is extremely widespread in central and southern Vietnam. In Thang Tam communal house, there is an addition altar dedicated to *Thiên Y A Na* in an attached ceremonial hall on the back of the communal house main pavilion (aside from the alter in the temple of female spirits).

The left altar (Fig. 2, photo on the left) is dedicated to the local **goddess *Thủy Long***. She is believed to be a patroness of rivers, canals, islands, and she is largely worshipped by fishermen in the area of monsoon winds and typhoons [Dương Hoàng Lộc 2010]. Goddess *Thủy Long* is often perceived as a local deity “embodying” (hóa thân) the goddess *Thiên Y A Na* [Ngô Đức Thịnh 2009: 259]. Goddess *Thủy Long* is also associated with a Khmer princess in story from a temple dedicated to her on the island of Phu Quoc. The plot tells about the flight to Phu Quoc of representatives of the deposed Khmer dynasty including a princess who arranged fields and pastures on the new lands [Phương Trần 2021]. Since *Thủy Long* is venerated beyond the lands mastered by the princess, we can consider her cult on Phu Quoc as a worship of a more ancient goddess of water, which was locally personified in a (pseudo)historical character who has great merits and evident connection with the island. We cannot constate which exactly Khmer goddess influenced the Vietnamese pantheon. Perhaps it is referred to tutelary spirits of *neak-ta* (នេកតា), worshipped by the Khmers in this seaside area, or to a deity of a higher order, for example, to the progenitor of the Khmers – the Naga princess (នាគនារី, i. e. snake girl)<sup>4</sup>.

The goddesses of the five elements, *Thiên Y A Na* and *Thủy Long* worshipped in the considered temple in Vung Tau are interrelated, mutually influenced and can act as an embodiment of each other. According to Ngo Duc Thinh, this is due to the fact that the traditional beliefs of the Vietnamese, Chams and Khmers have similarities, and therefore their cultures, “meeting” each other (*gặp gỡ nhau*) in the same territory, inevitably “mix” (*pha trộn*) [Ngô Đức Thịnh 2009: 286]. And yet, in my opinion, there is no confusion: the creators of the temple and altars in Vung Tau diversify the female deity and depict it as characters that have origins in the traditions of different peoples and thus have different functions. In this case, we are talking about the integration of borrowed deities into the Vietnamese pantheon. According to Phạm Chí Than, a Vietnamese researcher from Vung Tau, “the people of Ba Rịa – Vung Tau province are unwilling to reject the culture of neighboring peoples, in particular Chinese culture. On the contrary, they always openly choose the most valuable features in order to enrich the treasury of ancient cultural values of the Vietnamese people” [Phạm Chí Thân 2008: 936].

### Female deities as tutelary spirits

The cult of the tutelary spirits (*thành hoàng* 城隍) was formed as part of the state religion in Vietnam in the 15<sup>th</sup> century during the formation of the Neo-Confucian state ideology. Hundreds of local spirits worshipped since ancient times in the framework of vernacular religion, were put at the service of the state: their altars were installed in the communal house (*đình*) which was the place of meetings and taking the most important decisions of the village commune. In addition, the Court

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<sup>4</sup> See the myth about the founding of an ancient Khmer state dynasty as a result of the marriage union of an Indian prince with a Khmer Naga princess (ព្រះខែងនាមនាគ). I enclose gratitude to Irina N. Shmeleva for the suggestion of this idea.



chancellery established the pantheon several times during the 15<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Normative biographies of spirits (*thần tích* 神蹟) were compiled and edited in classical Chinese language [Nguyễn Vinh Phúc, Nguyễn Duy Hình 2009: 74-97]. Tutelary spirits were approved by special royal decrees (*sắc phong* 敕封, or *sắc phong thần* 敕封神, *thần sắc* 神敕) which were issued until 1924 [Đặng Chí Huyền 1987: 34-63, Novakova 2012: 84-85].

Among the tutelary spirits we can find both mythical and historical (pseudo-historical) characters [Antoshchenko 1997]. The most priority for the authorities were the founders of a locality (or crafts of a locality), as well as spirits who had merits to the country, especially military merits. These spirits often received the status of the main guardian spirit, and the rest of the spirits were worshipped on secondary altars or even forced out of the communal house [Nguyễn Minh Tường 2013: 99]. Female deities can be found among the state guardian spirits as well because of their traditional veneration in the framework of vernacular religion.

Thang Tam communal house in Vung Tau was built in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Court no longer compiled stories about spirits but still continued to approve the pantheon by issuing royal decrees. The founder of Thang Tam settlement was proclaimed the main tutelary spirit, and auxiliary spirits were worshipped on the altars of the attached ceremonial hall (including the goddess *Thiên Y A Na*). Later, additional temples appeared on the territory of the communal house. That can be regarded as a step made by the authorities towards vernacular cults of female spirits and the whale spirit which existed in this area for a long time already. These spirits venerated on the territory of the community house were recognized by the Court and indicated in the royal decrees as tutelary spirits [Phạm Chí Thân 2008]. I had an opportunity to see some of these decrees during the festival in honor of the main tutelary spirit in April 2018 (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Demonstration of the royal decree dedicated to a female spirit (mid-19<sup>th</sup> century) after the ceremony at Thang Tam communal house in Vung Tau. *Photo by the author, April 2018.*

The main feature of the female spirits cult as tutelary spirits in Thang Tam communal house is women divine service. Women conduct rituals, although in traditional Vietnam communication with the other world at the community level was carried out only by men who had the authority to manage this community<sup>5</sup>. The festival in the temple of the goddesses of the five elements takes place

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<sup>5</sup> Women's religious practices spread largely as a part of vernacular religion during the French colonial period (1862-1954) which was filled with the influence of Western culture, with the loss of the actual power of the Court and state support of Buddhism [Tạ Chí Đại Trường 2014: 307]. At the same time ceremonies in the communal houses remained the prerogative of men even in the context of the crisis of traditional culture.

once a year for three days from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> days of the tenth lunar month (in November according to the Gregorian calendar) (Fig. 4). Worship consists of offering ritual food and flowers, lighting and installing incense on altars, prayerful appeals to spirits with bows. Ceremonies are accompanied by drums and gong beats as well as traditional music (performed by men).

According to my observations, the activity of women in the religious sphere and in particular in male religious practices of the tutelary spirits cult has now become ubiquitous in Vietnam. As Hanoi cultural scholar Phạm Lan Oanh argues, “the most remarkable thing today is the participation of women in rituals. In many villages, symbolic sacrifices with the participation of women appeared in festivals. Such a phenomenon did not exist at village festivals in the North before 1945” [Phạm Lan Oanh 2020: 111]<sup>6</sup>.



**Fig. 4.** Festive ceremony in front of the altars in the temple of the goddesses of the five elements on the territory of Thang Tam communal house in Vung Tau. *Photo by the author, November 2018*

### **Spatial characteristics of the cult**

In order to clarify the aspects of women divine service in the temple of the goddesses of the five elements, we need to turn to the spatial characteristics of the temple. This method of anthropologists is effective especially in cases where certain religious practices are not articulated (or not recognized as significant) by the members of culture [Gordienko 2020]. The plans of two communal houses can be compared: 1) the plan of Thang Tam communal house (fig. 5b) and 2) plan of a common communal house of French colonial period [Nguyễn Văn Khoan 1930:114] (fig. 5a).

The classic plan of a common communal house (fig. 5a) provides moving through the territory from a profane space to the sacred one: at the entrance we can see auxiliary rooms, and there is the main pavilion of the communal house with altars in the depth of the courtyard. This principle is disordered in Thang Tam communal house (fig. 5b): entering the territory we can immediately see the main pavilion of the communal house with the altar of the main spirit, and there are outbuildings and additional temples behind it in the backyard. The temple of the whale on the right is a place of

<sup>6</sup> The activity of women in religious practices has its own history in Vietnam. American anthropologist S.C. Malarney writes that back in the 1990s, after the abolition of anti-religious policies, when the gradual revival of religious life began, in the case he studied, it was women who had the initiative to restore religious ceremonies in communal homes (men did not dare to resume the veneration of spirits in front of altars, destroyed by them several decades ago). [Malarney 2002: 189-207].

worship for fishermen, and the temple of the goddesses on the left can be described as a place of worship for the wives of fishermen. As we can see, the additional temples are gender-specific. At the same time, from the entrance to the territory there is a view of the main pavilion and the temple of the whale, while the women's temple is “hidden” behind pavilions. Apparently, the participation of women in ceremonies in a community home (generally unacceptable) in this temple was originally intended, but not demonstrated to a wide audience.



**Fig. 5a.** Buildings of a common communal house in the north of modern Vietnam.  
 Source: [Nguyễn Văn Khoan 1930:114].



**Fig. 5b.** Buildings of Thang Tam communal house in the city of Vung Tau.  
 Plan drawn by author

Why did the local authorities at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century go to break the taboo and allow the participation of women in ceremonies on the territory of the communal house, albeit in a small temple hidden from view? First, the seaside village community was located far from the Court, in new lands, where the central authority in everyday life was less tangible than in northern areas inhabited by Vietnamese for centuries. Secondly, the reason for the loyalty of the authorities lies in the special status of women in the coastal area, since marine fishing is an extremely risky type of economic activity, and the mortality of fishermen at sea due to frequent storms has remained high till nowadays. As a result, the role of fishermen's wives in local religious practices is traditionally important.

### Conclusion

The considered case demonstrates several phenomena of Vietnamese folk religion. First of all, it has ability to borrow and integrate foreign elements “Vietnamizing” them, turning them into an organic part of its own belief system and cults through rethinking the borrowed material and saturating it with characteristics of Vietnamese culture. Due to the deep influence of the Cham and Khmer traditions, female deities retained their sacred status in the Vietnamese pantheon and their importance in the religious practices of the Vietnamese settled in new territories (in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries).



However, the most significant phenomenon is the loyalty of the authorities and the flexibility of their policy towards the local pantheon and women's religious practices (even though they rigidly controlled the cult of the tutelary spirits as a part of state religion). Thang Tam communal house was built after the state pantheon forming had been completed, and its spirits were not affected by periodical Court unifying and approval. Moreover, the location of Vung Tau in the new lands, away from the Court gave the cult of female deities in the south its special flexibility and, according to the plan of the communal house and its temples, the female divine service was allowed in the male territory - in the communal house. Consequently, the Court chancellery not only recognized female spirits here as guardians of the area (issuing special royal decrees), but also allowed women service in the temple of female deities. Thus, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the worship of the goddesses of the five elements was transformed from vernacular practice that had long existed in this area into a part of the state cult of spirits, which for centuries performed by the male representatives of the local clans (as a pillar of state power).

In 1945, with the fall of the Court, the state cult of spirits ceased to exist, and communal houses lost their importance<sup>7</sup>. Since 1986 ceremonies in communal house was gradually resumed. Nowadays the cults of local spirits are supported by the Vietnamese state as a significant part of national identity and culture. At the same time, we can see an increasing role of women in rituals in communal houses, which can be considered as a manifestation of a larger phenomenon - a general trend to expansion of the role of women in various religious traditions of the world. Currently, women's ceremonies are held everywhere in Vietnam, so the female worship of goddesses in Vung Tau fits more and more organically into the modern system of ritual practices and cults of Vietnamese folk religion.

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<sup>7</sup> Oblivion and destruction of communal houses also affected the southern provinces of modern Vietnam [Tạ Chí Đại Trường 2014: 373-374], although the anti-religious policy of the Communist Party was maintained here only since 1976.

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## EARLY CONTEMPORARY ART IN VIETNAM: *ĐỔI MỚI* SHIFT AS SPUR OF INNOVATION IN GLOBALIZING 1990s-HANOI

Iola Lenzi<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** The social impacts of 1986 *Đổi Mới* economic reform in Vietnam are well-studied. However, connections between *Đổi Mới* change and 1990s artistic transformation are not. This study examines these ties to reveal how post-*Đổi Mới*, outside Vietnamese mainstream art, and in not yet globally-open Hanoi, vanguard expressions emerged. Using artwork analysis and cross-disciplinary literature, this paper spotlights how material and social landscapes of 1990s-Hanoi impacted art. It uncovers parallels with Southeast Asian contemporary art to conclude that Hanoi vanguard practices constituted early Vietnamese contemporary art expanding regional 20<sup>th</sup> century art history without obligatory recourse to outside models.

**Key words:** Vietnam, globalization, Vietnamese and Southeast Asian art, avant-garde, *Đổi Mới*, urbanization.

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### Introduction: historical context

At its 6th Party Congress in 1986, the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (hereafter Vietnam) instigated *Đổi Mới* (renovation) reforms that transformed the country's centrally planned economy into a socialist-oriented market system [Beresford 2006]. By 1995, after trade sanctions were lifted and Vietnam joined ASEAN, foreign goods and businesses were more visible. Art historians agree economic opening altered the Hanoi art arena, which integrated international markets [Taylor 2009: 133; Huynh-Beattie 2006: 277]. Yet what of the art itself? Some scholars note only moderate evolution in 1990s painting [Nguyễn Quân 2008: 11-12; Taylor 2012; Bùi Thị Thanh Mai 2014], a stasis ascribed to continued government control on culture, and absent foreign models [Huynh-Beattie 2006: 275; Taylor & Corey 2019: 25]. Yet is political freedom requisite for expressive innovation, and must artists rely on foreign models to invent fresh forms? Some may, but shift is seldom led by mainstream creators. While mainstream painting evolved moderately, scrutiny of 1990s-Hanoi art uncovers practices sufficiently aesthetically and conceptually original and *contemporary* to be included in exhibitions of contemporary art in Europe and Asia-Pacific [Lenzi 2020: 2].

Drawing on recent research, this paper spotlights academically overlooked vanguard art sprouting in 1990s-Hanoi, asking what inspired its production if not foreign models, and how it

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circulated pre-internet and on mainstream margins. Unlike Vietnam's rural, grassroots-driven 1980s economic adjustments [Kerkvliet 2005], *Đổi Mới*-fostered economic expansion brought sweeping change as Vietnam rose from very poor to lower middle-income country [Thoburn 2009: 1–2]. Abrupt growth yielded prosperity but also social and urban disruptions [Beresford 2006: 204–208] that this study connects to new art. Linking 1990s innovation to its Vietnamese context understood through a multidisciplinary literature, it establishes how artists pioneered practices outside institutional frames by harnessing *Đổi Mới* images and paradigms. This vanguard, generating art comparable to Thai, Indonesian and Singaporean contemporary practices, is thus located in Southeast Asian contemporary art historiography. Since Vietnamese contemporary art emerged without a plethora of external models, the study contends Southeast Asian capacity for endogenous artistic innovation. The paper recalls artistic conventions in Vietnam and contemporary art definitions, then traces Vietnamese contemporary art emergence connected to *Đổi Mới*, inserting it in Southeast Asian art history.

### Early-1990s transition

After 1956, Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) painters produced socialist realist images of farmers and workers—impressionism and abstraction linked to French colonialism were taboo. *Đổi Mới* reforms didn't significantly loosen cultural rules, especially after the fall of European communism and the Tiananmen events of 1989 [Abuza 2001: 17–18]. Yet by the late-1980s Hanoi painter-reformers Nguyễn Quân (b.1948) and Đặng Thị Khuê (b.1946) were advocating expansion beyond socialist realism. Already in 1984 Bùi Xuân Phái (1920–1988) had exhibited his Hanoi landscapes, manifestly *not* socialist realism, that he never embraced.<sup>2</sup> As in rural life, cultural directions could be altered through grass-roots activism [Kerkvliet 2005: 240], so anticipating *Đổi Mới*, Vietnamese art renewed itself organically. But this renewal was not innovation, rather a return to 20<sup>th</sup> century Vietnamese modern painting supported by foreign dealers sourcing old-fashioned but technically virtuous painting in Vietnam [Huynh-Beattie 2006: 275]. Significant for this study, once popular with the international market, this painting was officially endorsed, evidenced by its Vietnam publication. From this one infers market-friendly anachronistic abstracts and landscapes were adopted as suitably “reformist”, the 1990s mainstream.

Yet a few creators, disdaining mainstream appeal, seized *Đổi Mới* contradictions as content of new art like other Southeast Asian artists who drew on social shift as material. This vanguard included Vũ Dân Tân (1946–2009) who served as a cartoon draughtsman for state studios, and lived in Perestroika USSR 1987–1990 where his work was formally exhibited;<sup>3</sup> and younger Hanoi University of Fine Arts alumni Trương Tân (b.1963), Nguyễn Văn Cường (b.1972), Nguyễn Quang Huy (b. 1971), and Nguyễn Minh Thành (b.1971).<sup>4</sup> Of distinct generations, education and social backgrounds, these independents congregated at *Salon Natasha* which Vũ Dân Tân and his wife opened after returning to Hanoi in 1990 [Asia Art Archive10.05.2021]. Vietnam's first private gallery, Salon Natasha was by 1995 a magnet for vanguard artists who translated intangible *Đổi Mới* frictions and promise using images and paradigms of opening Hanoi to invent visual-conceptual languages engaging the complicated times.

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<sup>2</sup> Paintings by Bùi Xuân Phái, Vietnam Association of Visual Artists, Hanoi 22.12.1984-22.1.1985.

<sup>3</sup> House of Vietnam Friendship, Culture Centre & Cinema, Moscow, 1988; State Gallery of Fine Arts, Penza, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Other non-conformists were Đinh Thị Thắm Poong, Lê Hồng Thái, and others.

### New times new art

Art historical shift occurred as modern Vietnamese art went contemporary.

#### *Contemporary art defined*

Contemporary art as a global genre, not period, designates contextually forged praxis connected to contemporary life transitioning from modern “art for art’s sake” in a multipolar world [Smith 2011: 82]. Southeast Asian contemporary art is multi-media, content-driven, and concerned with social issues [Clark 1998: 290-291; Turner 2005; Lenzi 2011], sometimes espousing oppositional modes [Lenzi 2014]. My transregional research has uncovered distinctive Southeast Asian formal-conceptual methodologies for engaging local contexts and addressing social-political status quo. Though national specificities vary, artwork analysis has found comparable strategies surfacing throughout the region from 1970 onwards that reveal Southeast Asian modern art becoming contemporary as aesthetics integrated conceptual underpinnings to create critical conversations on shared issues [Ibid.]. Traits of post-1970 Southeast Asian art probing collective reality include storytelling; literal-metaphoric juxtapositions where concept underpins form; aesthetic appeal; viewer-familiar/vernacular materials, media, and iconography; public space coopting. Vanguard Hanoi art examined here shares features of Southeast Asian contemporary art as elucidated in writings since the 1990s, so is included in an existing Southeast Asian contemporary art discourse where aesthetics has critical function drawing audiences on the contemporary condition.

In Hanoi, the transition to contemporary art was connected to urban *Đổi Mới* shifts. Works are analyzed to show how, unlike mainstream painting, vanguard art deployed familiar or vernacular materials and signs to enlist audiences on the complex contemporary condition; and how, via public circulation pieces altered reception, marshalling viewers into critical dialogue.

#### *Material innovation for conceptual methods and criticality*

In the early-20<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnamese modern painting, a Vietnamese-French hybrid merging European oil on canvas techniques and genres with Vietnamese aesthetics was developed. Vietnamese saw the form as progressive, particularly in its introduction of individualized signing painters, who with new *fine-art* supplanted craftsmen producing functional objects. But by the 1990s modern painting as conventionally taught and practiced in Vietnam struggled to address *Đổi Mới* complexities. Some art historians [Taylor 2012; Bùi Thị Thanh Mai 2014] have proposed field rejuvenation post-2000, once Vietnamese painters were exposed to foreign currents accessible after the country opened fully and became digitally connected. This is well-founded for most creators. Yet 1990s artistic innovation occurred *despite* Hanoi’s semi-closed status, as evidenced by the inclusion of 1990s vanguard art in global curated contemporary shows. This indicates that artists pioneered new forms through their personal response to altering circumstances, independent of overseas trends.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Before Vietnam’s 1990s opening, some Hanoi artists travelled to Eastern Bloc countries where they acquired knowledge of modern art, and sometimes modern painting styles—for example Phùng Quốc Trí (b.1957) who studied at Surikov Art University, Moscow, 1980-1986; Nguyễn Quân (b.1948), a painter, educated in mathematics in East Germany; Lê Thông (b.1961), educated at Kiev State Art Institute, now teaching at the Vietnam University of Fine Arts. Modernist paintings by returning artists were possibly influential for some artists in Hanoi. However, analyses of early contemporary artworks produced in 1990s Hanoi, the focus of this paper, reveal no aesthetic or thematic connection to modernist works by returning artists or others. Instead, 1990s vanguard Hanoi works exhibit a new critical and conceptual

Vũ Dân Tân, Trương Tân, Nguyễn Văn Cường and a few others adopted urban novelties motorcycles, cars, Karaoke, AIDS, consumer packaging, speed, rural-urban tensions and more as components of home-grown contemporary art that enlisted viewers in answering 1990s-Hanoi. Works' aesthetic-conceptual construction, siting, and circulation innovated by recasting communication modes and audience relationships. Moreover, the low-art/high-art Asian modern art divide was abandoned, and pieces, though not utilitarian craft, acquired agency, a central feature of contemporary Southeast Asian art [Lenzi 2014].

By 1995 painters such as Đặng Xuân Hoà and others in the group 'Gang of Five' were heralded for renewing fine art in Hanoi. But their expressionist landscapes and abstraction, while emancipated from socialist realism, didn't evidence critical function or conceptual underpinnings emblematic of contemporary art. Vietnamese contemporary art in the above-defined sense came to global attention in 1996 when Vũ Dân Tân showed *Monsters, Devils and Angels* (1992–1996) and *Suitcases of a Pilgrim* series (1996–2009) at Australia's Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT2). These series comprised discarded cigarette and film packaging, bearing shop-style labels. Significantly, *not* mimetic painting, these pieces were made with trash, which in the case of *Suitcases*, was enclosed in glass-lidded Hanoi street-vendor display cases, all banal objects repurposed as art (Fig.1).

If formally unorthodox, these series attracted audiences via their unpretentious elements that recontextualized from life, introduced social meanings into art. Plural meanings opening to myriad interpretations are crucial to the allusive underpinnings that distinguished these series from standard paintings. Instead of canvas and paint, without inherent significance, or the random objects of Dada, *Monsters* and *Suitcases*, by borrowing deliberately selected social objects such as discarded cigarette packs and hawker boxes, produced polysemic art figuratively "conversing" with viewers. Western cigarettes Marlboro were recently available in Hanoi, while Vinataba brand was local, so cigarette boxes operated as code alluding to consumer choices and empowerment, new in globalizing Vietnam. Likewise dangling pseudo-price-tags humorously interrogated consumerism in Vietnam, transforming these artworks into handleable "merchandise". Few touched, but participatory options were implied, driving critical engagement with Đổi Mới. Long spurned, capitalism was now welcome in globalizing Vietnam, these pieces prompting scrutiny of this ideological contradiction. The peddler cases used for *Suitcases of a Pilgrim* harbored significance too, recalling illicit street trading, which for some tested authority: "pursuing a living via street vending are (...) Hanoi residents who feel fully entitled to their small slice of public space(...)vendors' entrepreneurship and everyday politics combine in a flexible mix of compliance and subaltern resistance" [Turner & Schoenberger 2012: 1029].

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aesthetic language engaging with Đổi Mới Vietnam in non-descriptive ways, art by Vũ Dân Tân and others forming early contemporary art [Lenzi 2020: 290–297; 139 (note 375)]. Likewise, while after North-South reunification of 1976 Southern painting styles, themselves influenced by American 1960–1970s art, infiltrated the Hanoi art world, analysis demonstrates that early contemporary art in Hanoi draws on local social-aesthetic shifts to develop new languages of art, not on Southern formalism [Lenzi 2020: 30–33].





**Fig. 1.** Vũ Dân Tân. Suitcases of a Pilgrim. 1996.  
Mixed media with text, part of a series.

*Photo: JL Morisot*

What did Vũ Dân Tân intend with such work? From discussions, interviews [Were 1997] and his art, one gleans his goal of making art part of dynamic, complicated life: via their new polysemic construction so distinct from descriptive painting, these early-1990s pieces cryptically raise the possibility of freedom in globalizing Vietnam.

Similarly, through function and associated references, Trương Tân's 1995 tactile, multi-piece *Nappes* (tablecloths), emerging from contextual requisites, bridged the viewer-object separation. Painted predominantly by Trương Tân, *Nappes* was produced for a restaurant party during which the work altered as food stains accrued.<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 2). Site and event-specific, and numerically and spatially-adaptable, the work suggests installation. But it is *Nappes'* blurring of the art/function (or high/low art) divide that marks it as Southeast Asian contemporary art, as through integrating ordinary life by operating as tablecloths, *Nappes* compels users to observe its iconography and so countenance issues of transforming Vietnam: mobility, choice, sexuality. Recently exhibited, *Nappes* still engages viewers observed clandestinely caressing the formal-functional cloths, so demonstrating how materials can draw audiences into exchange.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Referenced [Bùi & Phạm 2012: 31].

<sup>7</sup> Author witnessed at *Moving Pledges-art and action in Southeast Asia*, ICA Singapore, 2018.



**Fig. 2.** Trương Tân. Nappes. 1995  
Acrylic paint on cloth, part of a series.  
*Photo: Iola Lenzi*

Nguyễn Văn Cường too adopted low-art materials that derived critical function from their embedding in Vietnamese social life. *Porcelain Diary*, 1999–2001, which Cường produced in the ancient kiln village of Bat Trang, comprised 80 porcelain vases referencing the underbelly of globalizing Vietnam – louche bargirls; barking businessmen; disenfranchised peasants. Porcelain vases are culturally significant in Vietnam for their ritual and domestic functions, so the medium operated as a disarming foil for presenting *Porcelain Diary*'s rambunctious images questioning *Đổi Mới* sexual freedom and capitalism [Lenzi 2013: 132]. *Porcelain Diary* took no position, but via innovative material-iconographic alliance evoked the story of opening Vietnam too complex for mere mimetic

picturing, thus embodying a new visual idiom for accessible critical engagement (Fig. 3).

These examples, and others using money, pianos, clocks etc., illustrate how vanguard art deployed non-conventional imagery, materials and media linked to 1990s life. Through associations such components with social links provided aesthetic-conceptual entry to difficult-to-picture, intangible aspects of *Đổi Mới* such as capitalism, consumerism, corruption, and choice. Yet vanguard artists continued to paint, inferring their expanded material repertoire was not a reaction against painting, but instead spawned by shifting contexts that necessitated new art languages of all media spurring critical exchange: the artwork-audience relationship became active, unlike conventional gaze-absorbing painting.



**Fig. 3.** Nguyễn Văn Cường. Porcelain Diary. Mixed dates, 1999, 2000, 2001.  
Polychrome hand-painted porcelain vases, part of series, approximately 80 pieces, 1999–2001.  
*Photo: Iola Lenzi*

The Hanoi vanguard was not alone inventing such idioms. From the 1970s onwards, across Southeast Asia and mostly unknown to each other, artists speaking back to evolving times excavated materials in everyday city life to forge art with critical purview. Field study shows this

literal/figurative play devising critical meanings via social associations of materials was a particular expressive method of Southeast Asian contemporary art post-1970 [Lenzi 2014]. Filipino art in the 1980s, and Indonesian in the 1970s evidenced appropriated objects advancing social criticism and citizen empowerment. FX Harsono and Jim Supangkat of Indonesian collective Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GSRB, New Art Movement) produced *Paling Top* and *Ken Dedes*, both 1975, respectively incorporating toy guns and a copy of a sculpture of Javanese queen Ken Dedes as means of referencing contentious social issues. Vanguard Southeast Asian visual idioms departing mimetic painting answered the specificities of regional contexts where citizens sought more voice. Artists, few of whom had travelled, often had limited awareness of contemporaneous Euramerican art, FX Harsono asserting the term *installation* was unfamiliar in 1970s-Indonesia when he first coopted objects to produce art with conceptual underpinnings [Ibid.]. While GSRB formal novelties challenged both the institutional academy and social discourses, the Vietnamese vanguard did not repudiate painting or confront official art institutions, but rather innovated with and outside them [Lenzi 2020].

In addition to art's material evolution, *Đổi Mới* changes triggered new modes of art circulation by rallying the city and its dwellers.

*Vanguard art circulation: tussling with the public-private tension*

Nineties exhibition launches saw canvases formally unveiled to invited guests in closed locales. But vanguard artists conceived alternative modes of artistic encounters, exploiting shared city space by installing works in public or semi-public zones accessible to ordinary Hanoians. This permitted art's direct dialogue with co-citizens: "my work was for everyone, about what we were all experiencing" said Cường.<sup>8</sup> Trương Tân's *Nappes* was unorthodox both for its material and accessible restaurant siting where many used it. His 1995 street banners, briefly adorning a Hanoi building façade, presented queer imagery to *all* Hanoians, not a select few in an exclusive gallery. Vũ Dân Tân was yet more deliberate in his engagement of anonymous viewers in public space. Perched in the window of his street-facing Salon Natasha studio-living-room-gallery space, he made art in full-view of pedestrian traffic, exposing his expressive process to all. This suggests Tan saw artmaking as part of urban fabric, an occupation as vital to ordinary citizens as that of tradesmen who plied Hanoi pavements, corroborated by his words: "My work is part of the street, with its constant audience and ambivalence" [Were 1997: 39]. The artist infiltrated the city with sound pieces, 1998, and materially with his 1990s *Money* series, mock-paper currency designed for public trading. It was however his 1999–2000 *Cadillac/Icarus* installation/performance that best exemplified his commitment to new circulatory and reception modes that marked the inception of Vietnamese contemporary art. Produced in California in 1999, at the Pacific Bridge Art Residency, *Cadillac/Icarus* was a 1961 Cadillac that Tân transformed into art with cut-out wings and gold paint – part of the exhibition *RienCarNation* with Lê Hồng Thái. Filmmaker Nicholas Brooks hatched a plan to ship *Cadillac/Icarus* to Vietnam to film the car in motion, but the plan floundered when Vietnamese customs confiscated the engine. Undeterred, Tan placed engineless *Cadillac/Icarus* on a flatbed truck and "drove" his work through Hanoi (Fig. 4).

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<sup>8</sup> Nguyễn Văn Cường personal communication with author Hanoi 16.12.2014.





**Fig. 4.** Vũ Dân Tân. Cadillac/Icarus  
Installation 1999 Oakland, California, Pacific Bridge  
Residency; performance Hanoi streets, 2000.  
Photo: Natalia Kraevskaia

This performance, astonishing in Hanoi where automobiles were still rare, with the vast golden Cadillac overwhelming narrow streets, referenced the shock of US consumer culture brought by *Đổi Mới*. Tân's word game—*Icarus* played phonically on “car”—signaled the Greek myth allegorizing misguided ambition, revealing playful probing of outcomes of capitalism, now welcome despite its defeat a generation before. By infiltrating public streets *Cadillac/Icarus* brought complex ideas and contradictions to all, embodying the accessible critical language of contemporary art.

Nguyễn Văn Cường also innovated with vehicles by producing sound performances with motorcycle wheel-spokes.<sup>9</sup> Motorbikes emblemized late-twentieth century Asian urbanization, so Cường's Hondas operated as critical code signifying opening, mobile Hanoi and *Đổi Mới* shift, a connection later explored by sociologists [Hansen 2015]. But more than bikes it was Cường's pop-up murals that drew audiences with location and public accessibility (Fig. 5).

**Fig. 5.** Nguyễn Văn Cường.  
Artist painting a mural at House  
of World Cultures, Berlin, 1999.  
Photo: Natalia Kraevskaia



Performative works such as *Cadillac/Icarus* and *Give it a Title* took fractious questions about Vietnamese life and nation in the globalizing era directly to ordinary citizens by enlisting the street, or village square in the case of Trương Tân and Nguyễn Quang Huy's 1996 Moc Chau village performance *Water Buffalo*. In 1990s Vietnam such aesthetic tactics were unprecedented, only the US-trained artist Dinh Q. Le adopting such a device in his 1998 *Damaged Genes* sited in a Saigon market.<sup>10</sup> Methods used by Vũ Dân Tân, Trương Tân, Nguyễn Văn Cường, Nguyễn Quang Huy and Nguyễn Minh Thành are analogous to those of Tang Da Wu, FX Harsono, Amanda Heng, Vasari Sitthiket, Lee Wen and other Southeast Asian artists who post-1970, answering

<sup>9</sup> *Motor-Rad-Klang* 1995, with Til Schonherr.

<sup>10</sup> Analysis doesn't evidence works by USA-trained Dinh Q. Le as influential on the Hanoi vanguard. Dinh returned to live in Vietnam in 1997 when contemporary art in Hanoi was already established, he exhibited in HCMC where Hanoi vanguard artists seldom went, and finally, artists examined in the paper produced works inspired and driven by local contextual shifts in Hanoi, unrelated to Dinh's pieces of the 1990s.



local contexts, developed globally innovative aesthetic-conceptual methods. No label existed for such art in Vietnam, yet pioneering mechanisms such as public siting and circulation, deployed by the Hanoi vanguard to answer local conditions, engaged ordinary viewers on fraught social paradigms to foster agency, a core feature of Southeast Asian contemporary art.<sup>11</sup>

Nineties-Hanoi boasted few spaces for unconventional or large art, so installations, murals, and sound pieces were likely displayed in public zones from necessity. But the *Đổi Mới* condition demanded art forms whose shifting function, synched with their formal-conceptual evolution, precipitated inclusive, public presentation. *Give it a Title* and *Cadillac/Icarus*, as open exchanges problematizing novelties of globalization, accrued meaning in public loci.

Political and material analyses of globalizing Hanoi's landscape posit public spaces as contested zones where commercial interests, the state, and citizens cohabit, the latter encroaching on public space for various forms of self-empowerment, engendering citizen-state friction [Thomas 2001; Kurfürst 2012: 101–103]. This perspective makes sense of 1990s vanguard artworks that both articulated and utilized Hanoi's new public-private tension, pulling viewers into their indirect questioning of status quo. Anywhere open and accessible was usable. While social geographers grappled in the 2000s with Hanoians' struggle for urban space, a decade before works by Vũ Dân Tân, Nguyễn Văn Cường and Trương Tân enlisted the city and its associated power, mining the critical possibilities of public zone infiltration, and thus speaking back to the times [Lenzi 2020: 130–137].

*Đổi Mới* changed everything for everyone, thus vanguard artists responded by using elements from life and public siting that through familiarity marshalled audiences: *Đổi Mới* tensions were topic, driver, and materials of innovating practices. The premise of social change as a nurturing force of artistic innovation is supported by studies examining post-*Đổi Mới* challenges to status quo as public zones became stages for evolving citizen-state relations “fraught with contradictions and anomalies” [Thomas 2001: 306]. In Hanoi as in wider Southeast Asia, burgeoning contemporary art by vanguard artists and characterized by audience critical engagement disrupting the conventional viewer-picture separation, was connected to late-twentieth century social shifts—such relationships, existing across Asia, have been analyzed in national contexts since the 1990s.

### Conclusion

Despite Hanoi vanguard artists' diverse biographies and expressions, 1990s pieces by Vũ Dân Tân, Nguyễn Văn Cường, Trương Tân and their colleagues are comparable for their dialoguing aesthetics probing *Đổi Mới* social novelties—works asked but didn't tell or describe as did mimetic painting. While but a fraction of visual art in 1990s Vietnam, these practices that eroded conventional viewer/artwork separation, jettisoned the high/low art divide, employed conceptual strategies, and forged critical viewer exchanges, constituted early Vietnamese contemporary art.

Pragmatically, risk-taking idioms could flourish in the broadening Vietnamese art arena. Yet it was powerful paradigm shifts in 1990s Vietnam that, requiring answer, prompted new aesthetic-conceptual alliances and art-life melding. After fifty years of war and isolation, innovation was spurred by social changes caused by *Đổi Mới* opening that saw Hanoians swap bicycles for Hondas, and Vinataba cigarettes for Marlboros. Creators had no artistic model – commercial opening did not bring current global art until the 2000s – but *Đổi Mới* promise and paradox were propeller and subject

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<sup>11</sup> Some dispute Vũ Dân Tân and Nguyễn Văn Cường as globally vanguard since they ignored New York trends [Taylor & Corey 2019: 25].

of novel approaches, even as political control persisted. This corroborates individual creative response to shared local context as a key shaper of expressive renewal. Vanguard practitioners were few, and formed no group, but in making pieces responding thoughtfully to the shifting era, they redirected Vietnamese art history by producing contemporary art. Moreover, inventing conceptual aesthetics endogenously, they disrupted the notion that innovation in Asian art inevitably springs from Euramerican models, as was the case with the transfer of Euramerican oil painting to Asia. Vietnamese contemporary art reveals capacity for self-renewal, so holds a key place in post-Cold-War Southeast Asian art history.

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## PHILOLOGY

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### ACCOMMODATION IN DIALECT CONTACT: EVIDENCE FROM AN URBAN COMMUNITY IN VIETNAM

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**Abstract:** Applying Giles' communication accommodation theory and Trudgill's accommodation model through quantitative analysis method, this paper presents the investigative findings of accommodation of the Northern dialect community in Ho Chi Minh City of Vietnam. Communication accommodation is demonstrated by selecting dialect variants of the community in the new settlement. Research shows that the communicative environment has created significant pressure that influences the level of accommodation. It also shows that the accommodation index is compatible with some of social variables such as prestige status of an immigrant dialect, duration of living in a new city, type of communication, and marriage models, in which, prestige status of an immigrant dialect and duration of living in a new city are the most important.

**Key concepts:** accommodation theory, dialect contact, convergence, divergence, speech community, Northern dialect, Southern dialect.

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This article portrays a typical social linguistic phenomenon in modern-day Vietnam: accommodation in dialect contact in major cities. "Accommodation" here is understood as the adjustment or change in the way of using language in communication of people from dialect A region when moving to a dialect B region in a way for easier communication in the new dialect one. The research starts with the perception of Ho Chi Minh city (HCMC) and Hanoi [Trinh 2007]<sup>2</sup> as typical urban communities and the two largest convergence centers in the country with influxes of immigrant population. Collaborators in this research were from the Northern dialect (ND) community, and their accommodation indexes in communication with the new community was measured by the ratio of usage of

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<sup>2</sup> Before HCMC, we did a survey on the language change of the Nghe Tinh community in Hanoi. The findings showed impressive changes in the community to adapt to a new dialect community [Trinh 2007].



Southern dialect (SD) variants in selected language variables. These are sentence-final modal particles because of the differences between their Northern and Southern variants.

In general, migrant communities often inevitably find a way to adapt their communication in the new environment. The problem they face is how to adapt their language usage so that it ensures its communicative effectiveness. While studying the Nghe Tinh community<sup>3</sup> in Hanoi a few years ago, we found that they had to adapt their language largely for accommodation. Previous studies have shown that this is a universal trend.

This paper will confirm the trend of accommodation in dialect contact in Vietnam through the evidence of the ND community in HCMC.

### Theoretical foundation

#### *Contact linguistics and dialect contact*

‘Contact’ is a term used in sociolinguistics to refer to a situation of geographical continuity or close social proximity between languages or dialects. The impact of contact situations can be seen linguistically, in the growth of loan words, patterns of phonological and grammatical change, mixed forms of language (such as creoles and pidgins), and a general increase in bilingualism of various kinds (see bilingual). In a restricted sense, languages are said to be ‘in contact’ if they are used alternately by the same persons, i.e. bilinguals [Crystal 2008: 107–108]. Crystal gave the term *Contact Linguistics* and suggested that the contact occurs all languages and dialects. However, while linguists have invested heavily in the study of language contact, dialect contact has not received adequate attention [Meyerhoff 2018: 267]. Dialects in contact became a promising research direction only after Trudgill’s earliest research [Trudgill 1986].

The contact between different groups of people is often said to be the ultimate consequence of social mobility among regions or social groups. Such contact can occur at the individual or community level as a result of migration [Milroy 2002]. Dialect contact within a country often takes place at the local level due to the frequent travel of individuals or communities between different areas. At the local level, mobility includes small scale movement of individuals between communities or localities, including frequent travel for seasonal businesses [Britain 2010: 208–229]. At the national level, it could be large scale migration from regions far away from each other, leading to contact situations between dialects containing many linguistic differences [Trudgill 2003].

Although there are differences, it is acknowledged that the two types of contacts (language and dialect) have similar linguistic effects. For example, codeswitching or codemixing forms are considered a result of both language and dialect contact. But, there are also forms that are the result of only one type of contact. For example, the mixed form (pidgin) is said to be the outcome of language contact, while the phenomenon of dialect leveling is the outcome of dialect contact.

Variationists have used accommodation models to investigate the linguistic outcome of contact between different dialects of the same language. Their research is focused on dialect mixing, dialect leveling, simplification and reallocation of dialect variants [Kerswill 2003; Kerswill & Trudgill 2005].

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<sup>3</sup> Nghe Tinh is a province in Central Vietnam, belongs to the Central dialect. Nghe Tinh community is one of the largest immigrant communities in Hanoi.

*Accommodation in dialect contact*

Many linguistic processes taking place in dialect contact situations leading to a change in usage from one dialect variants to another [Trudgill 1986]. The changes in usage are influenced by many factors, but individual and community psychological mechanisms play an important role. In this way, according to Trudgill, Giles's accommodation theory is an important basis for understanding the way of linguistic accommodation of people who speak different dialects when interacting with each other in a certain communicative situation. Indeed, the studies mentioned above have found in Gill's accommodation theory persuasive explanatory mechanisms.

The first form of this theory knowing as the Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT) was presented in Street and Giles [1982]. 5 years later, 1987, Gill developed and expanded its scope of application and appropriately labelled it the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) [Giles, Gallois & Ogay 2006: 121–148]. In this theory, Giles introduced the model of accent mobility to discover '*accent convergence*' among individuals and mentioned that in communication, the different accent of individuals (due to dialect differences) can be adjusted to reduce the differences through accommodation. The reverse process is called '*accent divergence*' by Giles. That is a situation in which communicators have no goodwill to come together by maintaining, even emphasizing local features in their voices [Ibid: 121–148].

Applying Giles' Accommodation Theory flexibly to explain the phenomena of dialect contact, Trudgill expanded this theory and made it capable of covering all phenomena of dialect contact and formation of new dialects through dialect contact. In Trudgill's model, dialect contact and accommodation are closely related. According to him, accommodation in dialect contact can be short-term or long-term. Short-term accommodation is often the result of temporary contact when communicators interact with each other in a specific communication context. This is said to not cause long-term effects on a speaker's language competence [Trudgill 1986]. It means that when the temporary contact ends, the behaviors that are considered to be provisional accommodation will end and probably leave no imprint if they are not repeated. However, if the short-term accommodation occurs regularly for a long period of time, the change and adjustment of the voice can become permanent, which is a long-term accommodation [Ibid.]. Like Trudgill, Kerswill also argued that long-term accommodation can often be because of numerous short-term accommodation behaviors in specific interactions [Kerswill 2003].

In terms of accommodation type, Trudgill has focused on long-term accommodation for its effectiveness in explaining situations of dialect contact and interpreting the internal mechanisms of language change that are caused by contact [Kherbache 2017]. In terms of methods, Trudgill in particular, sociolinguists in general determined the ratio of mixing variants of both dialects in the context of communication through quantitative analysis to quantify the accommodation indexes. In this way, researchers all have a common denominator that contact with people outside the community can motivate migrants to adapt new regional features that they are not familiar with [Trudgill 1986, Kerswill 2003; 669-702, Kerswill & Trudgill 2005].

In this study, we will examine the accommodation in the contact between the Northern and Southern dialects in the communication language of the ND community in HCMC. The research data is the performative variant of some sentence-final modal particles collected from 63 participants in this community. Accommodation indicators will be determined through the ratio of usage of the Southern dialect variants of these particles in speech community from the ND.

## Materials and methods

The sentence-final modal particles is one of the most important modal means in Vietnamese. Among the kinds of lexical means of expressing modalities such as modal verbs, performative verbs, adverbs, modal adverbs, modal collocations... the sentence-final modal particles is considered to have a special role, although they are not in large numbers.

In this study, there are 6 selected sentence-final modal particles, including: *à, chứ, há, này, nhé, nhĩ*.

This selection is based on the difference between the ND and SD variants. It could be the difference in form, expressed on the phonetic aspect (*nhé, nhá* and *nha*, or *này* and *nè*), it could be the difference of some semantic features or a certain illocutionary force among variants.

The one-to-one correspondence, that is, the ND particle corresponding to a single variant in the SD in all the used illocutionary forces is found only in the two particles *à* and *này*. The remaining particles (*há, chứ, nhé, nhĩ*) do not correspond one to one. It means that a variant in the ND can correspond to more than one variant in the SD, typically the particle *nhé* in all illocutionary forces. The complexity is also revealed in the phenomenon of overlap between variants. A certain variant in the SD, *há* for example, can be both a variant of *à*, of *há* and of *nhĩ*... in the ND.

However, in this study, we undertake not to analyze the difference in semantics and pragmatics between the variants. For the purpose of finding out the accommodation evidence in multi-dialect communication, we only investigate the appearance of ND variants of this particles in the speech of the ND community as an expression of the language change in multi-dialect communication. Therefore, the semantic and pragmatic differences between the variants in the two dialects, if any, are left to discuss in another study.

As such, this research was conducted based on two main sources of materials:

a. Data from questionnaires of 63 participants of the ND community in HCMC. Besides linguistic behavioral information, the questionnaires includes information about personal traits that the researcher, based on a few indicators, thinks may have a certain influence on the accommodation indexes such as gender, age when moving to HCMC, duration of stay in HCMC, type of communication<sup>4</sup>, marriage models, etc. This information can help find the correlation between accommodation and the social characteristics of the speakers (Table 1).

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<sup>4</sup> With this type of communication, we want to talk about the communication range of the Northern people in HCMC. Accordingly, those who tend to only communicate or mainly communicate with compatriots, those in their own community are called *intra-group communication*. In contrast, those who tend to communicate a lot with people outside of their Northern community (ie with a lot of communication with the Southerners), we call it *intergroup communication*.

Table 1: Social characteristics of the speakers

Characteristics		Frequency	Ratio %
Gender			
	Male	28	44.4%
	Female	35	55.6
	<b>Total</b>	63	100.0
Age on coming to HCMC			
	Before 18	22	35.6%
	After 18	41	64.4
	<b>Total</b>	63	100.0
Duration of residence in HCMC			
	1 – 9 years	15	23.8%
	Over 10 years	48	76.2
	<b>Total</b>	63	100.0
Type of communication			
	Intra-group communication	13	20.6%
	Intergroup communication	50	29.4
	<b>Total</b>	63	100.0
Marriage models			
	Not married yet	13	20.6%
	With the Northern people	38	60.4
	With the Southern people	12	19.0
	<b>Total</b>	63	100.0

b. Data from natural language: 28 natural conversations (with the participation of researchers) in different communicative situations, including 4 conversations in taxis, 9 conversations in restaurants or cafes, 6 conversations on the streets and in the markets, 2 in a hair salon, 4 in a family context, 2 in an office setting, and 2 phone conversations. In addition to the above 28 contacts, there were also some conversations between the researcher and the ND participants before answering the structure questionnaire. The total amount of natural conversation is estimated to be over 5 hours. There were 39 speakers of the ND participating in the conversations who produced 57 sentence-final modal particles.

The basic research methodology that we applied is the linguistic fieldwork method. The survey data was processed by quantitative analysis method on SPSS statistical software which checked the statistical significance.

### Results and discussion

#### Accommodation through the selection of language variants

Table 2: The data from questionnaires

Variable	Var	Frequency	Ratio %	Total	Variable	Var	Frequency	Ratio %	Total
à	var 0	52	82.5	63/100.0	này	var 0	47	74.6	63/100.0
	var 1	11	17.5			var 1	16	25.4	
chứ	var 0	50	79.4	63/100.0	nhé	var 0	35	55.5	63/100.0
	var 1	13	20.6			var 1	28	44.5	
hả	var 0	56	88.9	63/100.0	nhi	var 0	42	66.6	63/100.0
	var 1	7	11.1			var 1	21	33.4	

Note: - Variant 0 (var 0): the ND variant; - Variant 1 (var 1): the SD variant



On average, the number of uses of variant 0 (ND) is 47/63 times, accounting for 74.6%; and the number of uses of variant 1 (SD) is 16/63 times, accounting for 25.4% (Table 2).

Table 3: The data from natural language

Variable	Variants	Show	Frequency
à	var 0	à	10
	var 1	ha	2
chứ	var 0	chứ	6
	var 1	cơ/hè	2
hả	var 0	hả	3
	var 1	hả/ha	4
này	var 0	này	2
	var 1	nè	1
nhé	var 0	nhé	10
	var 1	nghe/nha	7
nhi	var 0	nhi	4
	var 1	hả/ha	7
<b>Total</b>			<b>57</b>

Thus, variant 0 appears 34/57 times, accounting for 59.65%; variant 1 appears 23/57 times, accounting for 40.35% (Table 3).

Although the usage rate of the ND variant is quite high (74.6% on data by questionnaire and 59.65% on natural speech data) as compared to the presence of the SD variants (25.4% on data by questionnaires and 40.35% on natural speech data), the ratio of mixing SD codes is not small. This is evidence of accommodation of the ND community in HCMC, even though it is not as impressive as seen in some other communities.

Looking for the reason for this, we thought of the status of the dialects, and accordingly their reputation in the communities. Vietnamese language in Hanoi is a prestigious dialect, or at least it is recognized as the dialect of the capital, a kind of the standard variant of Vietnamese. Vietnamese language in Nghe Tinh does not have this status. That will be an important factor affecting the accommodation of the Nghe Tinh speakers in Hanoi. And it will explain why the people who speak Hanoi dialect in particular, the ND in general, when moving to other dialectal region, will be less likely to change strongly to adapt to the new dialect. The same goes for the ND residents in HCMC. Since they already own a reputable dialect, even if the assimilation of the new dialect is strong, the change, inevitably, will not reach the same level as the changing both to adapt to a new communication environment, and towards a stronger dialect.

Regarding the type of accommodation, according to Trudgill's model, after considering factors such as residence space, regular contact environment, duration of residence, etc., it can be seen that the accommodation in these two communities is largely long-term accommodation. In the Nghe Tinh community, besides some old men (about 60 years old) and young men who have recently arrived in Hanoi, the community does not show a clear accommodation tendency, since the remaining individuals have shown conscious adjustment behaviors to adapt in communication with the indigenous community.

Looking at the phenomenon in a holistic way, it can be seen that behind the adjusted behavior for the accommodation is the tendency of both communities to use Vietnamese universally. In the HCMC environment, the SD variants are considered to be of universal use. However, the ND

community in HCMC tends to preserve its original variants and shows weak accommodation to immigrant dialect variants. While the Nghe Tinh community, in accommodation to the Hanoi environment, has adjusted its usage from the Nghe Tinh variants to the Hanoi variants.

These findings support Giles and Trudgill's theoretical model but not too strongly. The tendency of accommodation is absolutely strong in environments where its native dialect is judged to be prestigious and immigrants come from less prestigious dialects, and vice versa, in environments where people comes from dialects that are considered prestigious, the tendency of accommodation will still exist but are much weaker. The gravitational pull of a dialect of the place of origin but stronger always resists the process of accommodation to a dialect of immigration but weaker. However, HCMC Vietnamese is still something of a prestige dialect in the region, and so there would still be some reason for some Northern speakers to accommodate.

From a linguistic perspective, having to answer closed questions in structured questionnaires with a certain degree of attention can put participants in the study fall in the situation of being directed to answer. The choice of the answer, therefore, is more or less subjective, governed by linguistic loyalty attitudes towards the original dialect variants which are considered highly prestigious. This may be one of the factors leading to low accommodation indexes. In other words, when attentions to speech and linguistic loyal attitudes are no longer dominant, the accommodation indexes can reach the "natural" level as the actual communication (40.35%). This is a true indicator of the accommodation trend of this community in the new communicative situation. This adaptation is completely natural, objective and without the involvement of consciousness. However, it is also influenced by the atmosphere and communication environment. Linguistic loyalty attitudes and the self-respect of the original prestigious dialect are blurred and almost ineffective, leaving only the subject of communication being governed almost entirely by rules of accommodation.

The difference seems to be a paradox between the subjective data in Table 2 (through questionnaires) and the objective data in Table 3 (through natural speech). This data shows that the sense of linguistic loyalty and the habit of using the mother's dialect seems to be deeply entrenched in one's speech but in direct contact situations, under the influence of context, they can completely change towards a strong adaptation to the new dialect. In these cases, the communicative environment and the need to come together in specific communicative situations become important. This is demonstrated by short-term accommodation in specific communicative situations and the potential to become long-term accommodation when more and more temporary contact situations occur over time. In any case, with the index of 40.35%, the accommodation of the ND community in HCMC may not be as impressive as the Nghe Tinh community in Hanoi (over 70%) but this is in accordance with the rule.

#### **Accommodation in relation to social variables**

Among the 5 social variables selected through indicators of their influence on the accommodation indexes, there is only one variable with a difference between non-significant groups: 'age on coming to HCMC' with  $p = 0.529$ . Although there is a disparity in the level of accommodation among migrant groups before and after the age of 18, the difference is not clear. This result shows that the age of arrival in HCMC is not a social variable that plays a dominant role in accommodation. The remaining four variables are gender, duration of stay in HCMC, type of communication and marriage model, which all represent significant statistical differences. In particular, the type of communication and the marriage model are two variables that are highly sensitive to accommodation

expressed at high disparities between groups. The more communicative the group is, the more accommodative they are. The group of immigrant dialect speakers that married SD speakers is more accommodative than the other two groups. This is also the group with the strongest accommodation level in all groups by social dimension (55.94%) (Table 4). This shows that the communication environment is an extremely important factor in the accommodation level. For instance, besides social communication, for immigrants, the environment is basically similar between groups. The support of a family communication environment with a marriage to a spouse from the receiving community leads to a remarkable accommodation result.

Table 4: Accommodation in relation to social variables

Features		Type of variant		Total
		South	North	
Gender	Male	3.6%	96.4%	100% (28)
	Female	17.1%	82.9%	100% (35)
<b>p = 0.049*</b>				
Age of arrival to HCMC	Before 18	31,8%	68,2%	100.0 (22)
	After 18	25,36%	74,64%	100.0 (41)
<b>p = 0.529</b>				
Duration of stay in HCMC	1 – 9 years	42,68%	57,32%	100.0 (15)
	Over 10 years	30,84%	69,16%	100.0 (48)
<b>p = 0.042*</b>				
Type of communication	Intra-group communication	10,78%	89,22%	100.0 (13)
	Intergroup communication	31,2%	68,8%	100.0 (50)
<b>p = 0.026*</b>				
Marriage models	Not married yet	23,1%	76,9%	100.0 (13)
	With the Northern people	29,31%	70,69%	100.0 (38)
	With the Southern people	55,94%	44,06%	100.0 (12)
<b>p = 0.034*</b>				

On deeper analysis particularly from the lens of gender, findings are similar to previous studies in Vietnam and other parts of the world with women having a stronger accommodation capacity but being less adaptable to prestigious variants [Trudgill 1974; Fasold 1991; Trinh 2007; Kherbache 2017; etc.]. Although women’s accommodation of the ND community in HCMC is not in line with the prestigious standard of Vietnamese variant, it is adapted more to the common variants. In this environment, however, it can be said that the prestigious variant is also the more popular and preferred variant.

The findings are also surprising when the length of settlement in the new community is inversely proportional to the accommodation indexes. This fact is in contrast to our original visualization and also contrasts with the accommodation of other migrant communities. This suggests a common psychological tendency for people who change dialects. When migrants come to a new environment, they often tend to adapt quickly, and therefore need to make many conscious adjustments. But when they have had enough time to integrate, the need to adapt urgently is weakened and the efforts to integrate themselves also gradually decreases.

The type of communication also strongly affects the degree of accommodation. Intra-group communication can make migrants without subjective motivation or objective external influences adapt to a new environment. Conversely, intergroup communication with many different people will put pressure on migrants to adapt. The accommodation shows the ability to regulate appropriate

behaviors in specific communication situations but also may be the result of pressure that communicators will find hard to ignore.

Finally, the marriage model is a social factor that has a decisive influence on the accommodation degree of the North dialect community in HCMC. This also supports the results obtained from the Nghe Tinh community in Hanoi. If the social communication environment (workplace, place of education, venues for social engagements, etc.) is an important factor, both for motivation and pressure that can lead to adjustments for accommodation. Then the home environment can contribute to strongly boosting or inhibiting that accommodation.

### Conclusion

Applying the basic points from Giles' communication accommodation theory and the adaptive model that Trudgill developed, through a quantitative analysis method, this article shows that the tendency of accommodation of the ND community in HCMC, although not as strong as adaptation of the Nghe Tinh community in Hanoi, is quite obvious with an average utilization rate of over 35% of PNN variants of modal particles in communication. The tendency of accommodation goes beyond both the confidence in the reputation of the ND variants and the dominance of these variants. The accommodation indexes found in the data of natural language also indirectly supports this community's psychological tendencies of linguistic loyalty when answering a structural questionnaire. Research findings have shown that the communication environment has created significant pressure to influence the degree of accommodation. In addition, the results also show that the accommodation indexes are compatible with a number of social variables that are sensitive to a community's changing dialect, such as duration of stay in a new environment, type of communication, and marriage models.

Although our analysis of each social variable is fundamentally carried out separately, it is necessary to understand the speech habits of the ND community in HCMC (as well as the Nghe Tinh community in Hanoi). This is the result of the combined influence of all their linguistic, social, psychological, and cultural factors. All of these factors depend on each other, influence each other, and together create accommodative trends in the language behavior of a community's changing dialect.

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## SCIENTIFIC LIFE

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### THE CONFERENCE WITH THE THEME “RUSSIA – VIETNAM COOPERATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION IN EAST ASIA”

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**Abstract.** The article is a review of the conference with the theme “Russia – Vietnam Cooperation in the Context of the Current Geopolitical Situation in East Asia”, having been held jointly with the Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia and Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences. Russian and Vietnamese researchers discussed a wide range of issues and interaction perspectives of Russia and Vietnam in the current international situation. Also, the participants considered at length the development of Vietnam’s relations with other influential world’s actors, including the US and the PRC.

**Keywords:** SRV, RF, strategic partnership, South East Asia, Vietnam’s foreign policy, Russia – Vietnam cooperation.

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On February 25, 2022 the Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia (RUDN) and Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS) held in online format the international conference with the theme “Russia – Vietnam Cooperation in the Context of the Current Geopolitical Situation in East Asia”. The participants were leading expert-Vietnamists and specialists on the South East Asian region from Russia and Vietnam.

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The participants were welcomed by special guests: Nguyen Thi Hong Nam, Ph.D. (History), Head of the Political Department in the Embassy of the SRV in RF, E.V. Koldunova, Ph.D. (Politics), the Director of the Center for ASEAN at the MFA MGIMO, and K.P. Kurylev, D.Sc. (History), Deputy Head of the RUDN Department of theory and history of international relationships. They emphasized that currently the development of relations between Russia and Vietnam are very important for maintenance of the regional stability between Russia and the ASEAN countries as a whole. In the authors' opinion, such joint measures and development of joint scientific projects contribute to strengthen friendly links in the current complicated geopolitical conditions.

*The first section* of the conference discussed the bilateral cooperation between Russia and Vietnam, challenges and perspectives of the bilateral interaction. The section's moderators were Vu Thuy Trang, Ph.D. (History), Director of the Center for Russia and CIS Studies at the Institute of European Studies VASS, and D.V. Mosyakov, D.Sc. (History), Head of the Center for Southeast Asia, Australia and Oceania of the RAS Institute of Oriental Studies, the Editor-in-Chief of the journal "Southeast Asia: Relevant Development Issues".



**Fig. 1.** Vu Thuy Trang, Director of the Center for Russia and CIS Studies at the Institute of European Studies VASS. *Photo by the RUDN*

In her report Vu Thuy Trang noted that the deterioration of Russia – West relations will soon result in the priority of eastern direction for Russian foreign policy (Fig. 1.). Southeast Asia, in her opinion, will become the priority region for Russia in the aspect of economic and integration processes in the region, but bilateral relations with Vietnam require, she believes, a higher degree of political involvement and the development of additional diplomatic tracks. V.N. Kolotov, D.Sc. (History), Professor, Head of the Department of Far East History, Director of Ho Chi Minh Institute at Saint Petersburg State University, continued the discussion. He addressed the history of Russia-Vietnam relations and pointed that the USSR was one of few countries which had contributed to Vietnam's independence, at that time having been the reflection of the rivalry of the great powers and the attempts of the USSR to oppose the making of unipolar international relationship system under the US and their allies' authority, also, in Asia. (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** V.N. Kolotov, D.Sc. (History), Professor, Head of the Department of Far East History, Director of Ho Chi Minh Institute at Saint Petersburg State University. *Photo by RUDN*

He also mentioned that currently at the background of the formation of arcs of instability in various world's regions the successful cooperation of the two countries will allow to respond adequately to quick changes within the world system and adapt to multilateral fair formats of a new reality, first of all, opposing the US attempts to establish the American world order.

The next author was E.A. Kanaev, D.Sc. (History), Head of the Asia-Pacific sector of the Center for complex European and International Studies of the Department of the world economics and world politics of the Higher School of Economics. He presented an interesting paper with the theme of the interaction of business and power in the system of bilateral Russia-Vietnam relations. In his opinion, in the conditions of growing global uncertainty it is necessary for Russia to strengthen the instrumental component of Russia's foreign policy, including also business contacts. In this connection, he believes, it is important to understand the features of interaction of the state and business in the SRV, which is shown in the practices of corporative management in Vietnamese companies. From E.A. Kanaev's standpoint, building its relationships with the SRV, Russia also must work with Vietnamese professional associations more actively, as well as build alliances, strategical ones among them, with the SRV public and private enterprises on the ground of comprehension of their corporative qualities.

Beside business, another important sphere of Russia-Vietnam interaction, in Tran Thi hanh Ha opinion (a researcher of the Institute of European Studies VASS) is education. She noted that Russia and Vietnam collaborated in the sphere of education since the era of the Soviet Union, and nowadays Russia is perceived in Vietnam as a country with a high educational level, especially, technical education. Vietnam realizing the projects within Industry 4.0. considers Russia to be one of the leading partners in the aspect of personnel training and cultural and educational cooperation.

V.V. Vershinina, PhD (History), an expert of the Center for ASEAN at the MFA MGIMO, addressing the evolution of total strategic partnership, in the aspect of long-term perspectives of Russian policy in the Asia-Pacific region, concludes that Vietnam will always remain crucial strategic partner of Russia. At the same time Vietnam is also interested in the increase of the comprehensive strategic partnership's potential. Russia can be an important strategic and high-tech partner well-experienced in the field of energy, as well as in financial, military-technical, digital, scientific and educational spheres.



In his turn, Hoang Van Tham, a representative of the RUDN students, analyzed the perspectives of Vietnam's collaboration within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in the current conditions, having mentioned that with the appropriate degree of activity the mutually advantageous collaboration of the two countries can become still more advantageous. In conclusion of the section the participants of the discussion pointed that, of course, in new geopolitical reality the cooperation of Russia and Vietnam would require to increase the involvement of the both countries, as well as to set clear goals and tasks of their interaction.

*The second section* of the conference discussed a new bipolarity and regional context in the Asia-Pacific region. A special attention was paid to Vietnam-US and Vietnam-China relations. Thus, Professor D.V. Mosyakov mentioned that for a long time Vietnam has been pursuing the maneuvering policy between the US and the PRC. At the same time the SRV desires to benefit from the both sides, and to have freedom to determine its foreign policy goals and tasks. In this policy Vietnam has adapted well enough to the current situation in the region, but his interests are, as usual, under the threat of the further escalation of Sino-American contradictions. The theme of the great powers' role was continued by Dang Thi Phuong Hoa, Ph.D. (Economics), Associate Professor, the Editor-in-Chief of "The European Studies" journal published by the Institute of European Studies VASS. Thus, she mentioned that China, despite its significant influence, has interdependent relations with Southeast Asian countries as a whole and with Vietnam in particular. In her opinion, Beijing will continue the Chairman Xi Jinping's strategy of soft regional influence, as it responds to the PRC's current foreign policy interests.

Continuing the theme, P.Yu. Tsvetov, Ph.D. (History), Associate Professor of the Chair of International Relations at the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation presented a detailed analysis of the US-Vietnam relations under President Joe Biden. Thus, he mentioned that J. Biden is more actively interested in Vietnam and in the Southeast Asian region than the Donald Trump administration, but, as usual, there are "internal limiters" in the US – Vietnam relations. In the expert's opinion, the sphere equally important for the both sides is security. For instance, Vietnam is ready to support some interaction formats in the region with the purpose to improve the general level of the regional security.

Also, no less discussed theme was the interaction of Vietnam and ASEAN. M.S. Zelenkova, a senior expert of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS), mentioned that attempts to stop the increasing tension in the region force the Association, as usual, to adapt to the new conditions and try to find the balance in the relations with China, on the one hand, and with the US and their allies on the other. I.R. Dubrovsky, an applicant at the RUDN, suggested to address the internal grounds of the great powers' foreign policy, in particular to China's active defense doctrine, the ideological support of the PRC's Army and Navy's modernization in the conditions of conflicts in the South China Sea. Thus, in his opinion, the active defense in China's coastal seas is closely connected with the urgent need to ensure economic prosperity, and regional cooperation and to level threats of stirring up the sovereignty disputes into open war conflicts.

In conclusion of the discussion both the Russian and Vietnamese sides warmly thanked each other and mentioned productive and rich intercourse, appropriate to high academic standards of the both countries (Fig.3). The participants of the conference are of the opinion that such meetings are necessary to strengthen scientific and educational interaction of the two countries.



Fig. 3. The participants of the conference. Photo by RUDN

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## **DISSERTATION DEFENSE**

**The defense of the thesis for obtaining the scientific degree of candidate of philology by Nguyen Thi Hoan [Ivanovo State University] with the theme: «F.M. Dostoevsky in Vietnam. The novel “Crime and Punishment” in Vietnamese translations»**

The defense of the thesis on specialty 10.01.01 “Russian literature” was held on March 24, 2022 at the Dissertation council D 212.062.04 at Ivanovo State University.

The dissertation research is devoted to problems of intercultural communication of Vietnamese and Russian cultures of the 19th – 21st centuries. It focuses on the novel “Crime and Punishment” by F.M. Dostoevsky. The influence of the writer on the formation of philosophical and esthetic predilection of Vietnamese intellectuals has been great since the early 20th century, when Vietnamese readers got acquainted with the novel, till nowadays. The author describes the history of Vietnamese translations of the novel, their features, the process of its perception by the Vietnamese, due, first and foremost, to historical and literary reality of Vietnam in the 20th – 21st centuries. A large part of the dissertation is concerned with the comparative analysis of the three Vietnamese translations of the novel “Crime and Punishment” and the original. The author cites authoritative literary critics, writers, and translators commenting the novel. The conclusion says: the acquaintance with the great Russian writer’s novel contributed to the renovation of Vietnamese literature.

Supervisor: D.Sc. (Philology), Professor Ermilova Galina Georgievna, Ivanovo State University, Department for Russian Literature and Cultural Studies.

Leading organization: Irkutsk State University.

The opponents:

Fedorova Elena Alekseevna, D.Sc. (Philology), Associate Professor, Professor of the Yaroslavl Demidov State University, Department of Communication Theory and Practice;

Bogach Dmitry Alexandrovich, Ph.D. (Philology), teacher at Saint-Petersburg Radiotechnical College.

### ***Main publications:***

1. Nguyen Thi Hoan, Ermilova G.G. (2019). Sny Raskol’nikova v perevode na v’etnamsky yazyk [Raskolnikov’s Dreams in the Vietnamese Translation]. *Vestnik Kostromskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta im. N.A. Nekrasova*, 4: 151–155.

2. Nguyen Thi Hoan (2020). “Ideya Raskol’nikova” v perevode na v’etnamsky yazyk [“Raskol’nikov’s Idea” in the Vietnamese Translation]. *Vestnik Kostromskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta im. N.A. Nekrasova*, 2: 139–144.

3. Nguyen Thi Hoan, Ermilova G.G. (2020). “Evangel’sky tekst” romana “Prestuplenie i nakazanie” v perevode na v’etnamsky yazyk [“The Gospel Text” of the Novel “Crime and Punishment” in the Vietnamese Translation]. *Vestnik Kostromskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta im. N.A. Nekrasova*, 3: 148–152.

4. Nguyen Thi Hoan (2021). K voprosu o vliyarii romana F.M. Dostoevskogo “Prestuplenie i nakazanie” na tvorchestvo v’etnamskih pisateley [The Novel “Crime and Punishment” by F.M. Dostoevsky: The Question of its Influence on the Work of Vietnamese Writers. *Vestnik Chuvashskogo pedagogicheskogo universiteta im. I.Ya Yakovleva*. 3 (112): 60–67.



## BOOKSHELF

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### RELEVANT PROBLEMS OF CURRENT VIETNAM IN A NEW COLLECTIVE RESEARCH OF RUSSIAN AND FOREIGN AUTHORS

I.N. Selivanov<sup>1</sup>



**Kompartiya Vietnam: Novaya vekha v istorii (The Communist Party of Vietnam: A New Landmark in History).**  
M.: IFES RAS, 2021. 282 p. ISBN 978-5-8381-0411-3

**Abstract.** The review discusses the book written by Russian and foreign researchers, and dedicated for the 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam held in late January – early February 2021. The book consists of three main parts containing 17 articles by authors from Russia, Vietnam, France and Japan. They show different aspects of the SRV current domestic and foreign policy, as well as of its social, economic and cultural development, also, in the historical aspect. It is noted that the regular congress of the ruling party of Vietnam is an important event, which summed up the results of the SRV development in 2016–2021 and determined the main perspectives of its development up to 2045.

**Keywords:** current history of Vietnam, the 13th CPV Congress, SRV domestic and foreign policy, social and economic development of Vietnam, cultural policy of Vietnam at the current stage.

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Problems of Vietnamese domestic and foreign policies, as well as the features of cultural, ideological and economic development are dealt with differently in domestic and foreign historiography, science and journalism. It is true for both the period of the country partition into two zones and unified Vietnam having recently celebrated its forty-fifth anniversary.

A special subject of consideration is the role of the Communist Party of Vietnam in the state's social development on its way towards socialism. Up to now, the Communist Party is the ruling power in Vietnam and as a whole it is devoted to the traditions having been founded by the first President of Democratic Vietnam and the Party leader Ho Chi Minh.

Like the Chinese Communist Party, the CPV manages to control the transition from the Vietnamese command economy to a system of market relations. The past Congress is a strong message of the process.

The Publishing House of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies (IFES) RAS issued a collective research work timed for the 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam held in January – February 2021. It is based on the papers of the International Round Table held in May 2021 in IFES RAS. Its participants were not only Russian researchers, but also those from Vietnam, France and Japan. For certain, such a collective of Vietnamists let the editorial board expand the range of views exposed in the reviewed book.

It is important that the editorial board fixes from the very beginning that the authors' opinion does not necessarily coincide with the standpoint of the Center for Vietnam and ASEAN Studies IFES RAS led by Professor V.M. Mazyrin, the initiator of this edition. It continues the Center's book series being prepared jointly with other Russian and foreign organizations investigating Vietnam.

The authors are 18 researchers who presented 17 articles. Three main parts let the reader get a comprehensive picture of current domestic processes, foreign policy, economy, ideology and culture of the SRV.

*The first part* contains five articles on Vietnam's domestic and foreign policy. V.N. Kolotov (Saint-Petersburg) has analyzed the SRV development strategy using the published documents of the 13th CPV Congress. He divided his work into three parts, namely, the analysis of the existing threats for Vietnam, determined by the Congress, the development of the strategy of their overcome up to 2045, the election of both the Party leadership and the government to carry out the resolutions. The position of Vietnam, in the author's opinion, "is very complicated; so, they will have to execute the Congress's resolutions and address the task of national security in the conditions of still acuter geopolitical contest between Beijing and Washington, at the same time being the main partners of current Vietnam" (p. 16). V.N. Kolotov does not exclude that "when it is a sudden change of external conditions", The CPV leadership can choose "some other tactic and strategy" (p. 21) to achieve the set goals.

G.M. Lokshin (IFES RAS) has presented his analysis of the ideological component of Vietnamese Party documents. The author has limited the scope of the problems under consideration with the most important ones for current Vietnam. First of all, these are the themes connected with the attempts of some persons to discredit Marxism and with the sharpening of internal and external challenges, which the Party and government are facing now. Marxism-Leninism in its "Ho Chi Minh" interpretation, in G.M. Lokshin opinion, "as usual, performs the most important role in the CPV and Vietnamese society life. It is supported with the powerful propaganda and agitation means of the Party and government" (p. 34–35).

E.V. Koldunova (MGIMO ASEAN Center), P.Yu. Tsvetov (the Diplomatic Academy of the MFA), and N. Chapman (Japan) have described foreign policy factors in current Vietnamese theory and practice, first of all its multidimensional character. Thus, in E.V. Koldunova's opinion, "Vietnam manages to cooperate efficiently with other ASEAN member-countries, significantly different, as far as their social and political systems are concerned, and build its dialogue with the broadest circle of its international partners, such as powerful US, China, EU, and Russia" (p. 42). P.Yu. Tsvetov's analysis seems to be very interesting and informative in the aspect of comparison of foreign policy sections of several Vietnamese Party forums (p. 56–58).

*The second part* consists of seven articles and is devoted to the CPV social and economic policy in current Vietnam. The economic aspect has been well reflected in the Congress's documents. The article by V.M. Mazyrin seems to be the most significant one. The author has analyzed the economic component of the CPV activity. In his opinion, currently Vietnamese economy is a mixed picture of both obvious successes and contradictions. He believes that nowadays it is not easy to the Vietnamese leadership to maintain economic growth rates, to overcome the disbalances existing at the macro-level, and to combine methods of extensive and intensive development in it. Also, V.M. Mazyrin emphasized a clear, in his opinion, contradiction between the CPV "socialist provisions" and "capitalist transformation" of current Vietnamese economy (p. 93–94).

The Vietnamese researcher Nguyen Quoc Hung has observed a complex of main problems connected with the SRV economic integration into the world economy. According to his evaluations, the agreements on free trade, recently signed by Vietnam with a number of foreign states, are very important to the country's economic growth. Their realization must improve the SRV position due to new business and investment opportunities, conditions for sustainable development (p. 109).

In her publication E.S. Burova (IFES RAS) has analyzed the CPV agrarian policy. In her opinion, as a whole, every development goal of the Vietnamese agrarian sector, set in the Congress's documents, contribute to the SRV movement to the sustainable agriculture. However, Vietnam "has not yet stepped on this path, but is at the stage of comprehending the new reality" (p. 122).

The French researcher J.-Ph. Eglinger has observed the place of private capital in Vietnamese economy, and A.R. Dolinina (MGU ISAA) has described new food consumption methods in the SRV.

S.V. Ryazantsev [Institute for Demographic Research (IDR) RAS] has evaluated the demographic factor in the 13th CPV Congress's documents. In his opinion, "the demographic goals set by the SRV authorities are well-grounded and attainable, because their realization is closely linked with the tasks of social and economic development and presupposes serious investments in the country's human capital" (p. 166).

M.N. Khramova (IDR) RAS) has given her evaluations of the process of Vietnamese labor migration to Russia. She believes that the regions of the Russian Far East have undoubtful, but not yet completely realized potential for Vietnamese migration" (p. 181).

*The final part* of the book contains five articles and is devoted to different problems of the SRV cultural policy. E.V. Nikulina (IFES RAS) has described the tendencies to represent the Vietnamese Party forum which received wide Vietnamese and foreign media coverage. She mentions a great interest shown by the authors who describe the work and resolutions of the

Congress. At the same time, foreign observers consider “the solution of the crucial contradiction between capitalist economic development of the country and the Party control of the Vietnamese people, young, energetic and susceptible to various trends” (p. 193) to be the crucial and hard task for the ruling party in Vietnam in the nearest future.

In their article M.A. Shpakovskaya and Nghiem Ba Tri (RUDN) have described the SPV current youth policy. T.Yu. Teplyashina (France) has shared her vision of the practice of patriotic education of Vietnamese youth. Her article is based on the results of field research carried out in March – June 2020 with the participation of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union in Can Tho.

O.V. Novakova (The Institute of Asian and African Studies) has analyzed “The Theses on Culture” (published 1943), one of the basic documents which had determined the features of cultural construction in Vietnam for many years. In her opinion, the continuity of the CPV work in the field of cultural policy depends on the fact that its leaders were bearers of the ideas originated in the traditional society of North Vietnam (p. 236).

I.V. Britov (HSE University) has described the CPV role in Vietnamese literature development in “the period of Renovation”.

The book has the Appendix with the lists of the CPV CC Politburo members elected at the Plenum held on the last day of the Congress, as well as of the SRV Standing Committee of the National Assembly and SRV Government.

This edition can be of interest not only to representatives of the RF practical institutions connected with the SRV, but also to teachers, post-graduates and students of Russian Universities, first of all, to historians, political scientists, regional experts, and specialists in international relations. The problems formulation will attract attention of specialists abroad, also, in Vietnam.



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