

# Chapter 2

## Cultural Modalities of Vietnamese Higher Education



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**Abstract** The chapter adopts an inside-out approach to interpreting the cultural modalities of the Vietnamese higher education. It debunks these modalities in three categories: Vietnamese traditions, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Also, it attends closely to post-1945 nation-state identities dominated by Marxism–Leninism and Ho Chi Minh ideologies. This chapter serves as a cornerstone for subsequent chapters to explore various aspects of higher education reforms.

### Introduction

There have been a plethora of policy texts addressing Vietnamese higher education (VHE) and the reforms implemented over the past decades (Nguyen and Tran 2017). Most of the research literature has investigated extensively the crisis and issues associated with higher education reforms. Harman et al. (2010), for example, discuss the challenges and priorities of the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA) and other aspects of higher education reforms, such as teaching and learning quality, financing, research, university governance, strategic planning, and management. Insights from these authors' work are useful. However, it is insufficient.

There is a critical need for a more rigorous conceptual tool which helps deconstruct the VHE reform phenomenon in a way that it enables the development of a more nuanced understanding of the decades-long higher education crisis. Equally, few researchers have offered such a philosophically robust ground for which a conceptual lens is erected to meticulously capture various modalities of higher education reforms. This chapter seeks to respond to this challenge. The author is intrigued to move her analysis beyond to a more philosophically grounded understanding of the VHE by uprooting the hidden connectivities between Vietnamese culture and

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the centuries-long colonial history of Vietnam (Nguyen 2011, 2013; Nguyen and Lehy 2015).

Central to the framework of this chapter are the notions of cultural identities, core values, being and becoming. Acknowledging other influences of Christianity, Caodaism and Hoahaoism in Vietnamese culture, the chapter will, however, limit its analysis to Vietnamese traditions, Confucianism, and Buddhism, the ones that have been perceived as the prominent characteristics of Vietnamese culture. Marxism–Leninism and Ho Chi Minh ideologies that entered Vietnam after 1945, when the country officially gained independence, will also be brought into discussion.

## Vietnamese Cultural Identities and Core Values

Identity is generally understood as the characteristics or the fact which determine who a person or what the thing is. Cultural identities have become seen as core to VHE. Upon conceptualising identities, there are two dominant approaches to uncovering what identities mean and what constitutes identities in the research literature; they are essentialist and non-essentialist. The former suggests that identity may be seen as something static, fixed, unified and predictable throughout a person's life (Hall 1992a, b, 1996a). Most noticeably, the concept of identity is closely linked to the matter of the subject, as Hall (ibid) observes. The concept of subject is derived from the notion of human person as fully centred, unified individual, endowed with reasoning capacity, consciousness, and action. Central to the human person existence is the inner core emerged right after the subject's birth and unfolded with it, whereas its essence stays unchanged, as continuous and identical with itself over its lifetime. Therefore, a person's identity is premised essentially on the centre of the self. Seen in this way, human identity is precisely associated with the full consciousness and the consistency of the centring self as the wholeness.

The essentialist perspective of identity is taken by a number of Vietnamese scholars who see cultural identities as being bounded and relatively solid over the passage of time (Phan 1994, 1998; Tran 1999, 2000, 2003). These scholars advocate for treating Vietnamese identities as being coherent and oneness that remain fairly stable and unchanged throughout a person's life. Identities are therefore interpreted as core identities, or *being*.

The latter approach – the non-essentialist – to interpreting identity differs starkly from the essentialist proposition in a number of ways (Austin 2005; Bhabha 1987; Hall 1987, 1991, 1992a, 1996a, b, 1997). First, the non-essentialist scholars criticise the ethnocentric nature of essentialism on identity in light of the postmodern context, globalisation. Most importantly, Hall (1992b) raises the issue of cultural identity in late-modernity and the crisis of identity as well as what this consists of, and in which direction it is moving. He indicates change forces transforming the modern societies in the late twentieth century. Second, in his line of argument, Hall alerts us that the identities which guarantee our subjective conformity with the objective needs of the culture in this contemporary world are infringing as the result of

structural and institutional change (ibid). As a consequence, modernity and its constant, rapid changes have made the process of identification, in which the subject projects itself into cultural identities, problematic and capricious. It results in the birth of the post-modern subject with, describes Hall, no fixed, essential and permanent identities. Identities become a “movable feast”, formed and transformed incessantly in the way we are represented and addressed in the cultural systems that bound us. Additionally, identity is defined in resonance with historical conditions. The subject holds multiple identities which are not unified around a coherent “self”. Hall, in his discussion of postmodern identities, points, for example, to the paradoxes of identities, arguing that these identities are pulled into different directions so that identifications of identities are continuously being shifted away (ibid. p. 277).

Non-essentialist scholars urge us to resuscitate identity within the context of intensified globalisation. As a result, identity should be viewed as flexible, open, non-static, and even, fragmented under the impacts of globalisation. Ngo Tu Lap (2005) in his article entitled *Cultural Identity: Relativity in Diversity*, argues, for instance, that cultures are ceaselessly changing under numerous impacts of social and natural forces, especially when being conditioned by globalisation forces. These cultures permeate into one another; they are conditional and thus conditioned by the other. In face of these forces and the flows of different cultures occurring both locally and globally, the survival of a community is recognised through its differences and dichotomy with other communities. Despite their need to assert their physical existence, these cultures possess a strong desire to emphasise “who they are” – the critical question of identity.

Additionally, the essentialist approach to identity relates the Vietnamese identities to the geographical, historical and economic conditions which, argue these scholars, have shaped Vietnamese cultural identities (to be discussed in the coming section). This explanation has for long time enjoyed the merit of the whole society. Since Economic Reforms initially introduced in 1986, the country has experienced various transformations in many aspects of life. The wider integration of Vietnam into globalisation is, the more alarming the issue of Vietnamese identity fragmentation seems to be (Tuong Lai 2009). Unfortunately, neither the essentialists nor the non-essentialists can adequately explain the fragmentation of the Vietnamese identities under the conditions of globalisation. This is because new Vietnamese cultural identities are postulated; they are contradictory to the existing Vietnamese identities. They can become “unresolved”. Importantly, these identities are pulled into various directions and become fragmented, and the identifications of these Vietnamese cultural identities are constantly shifted, which make the tracking and interpretation of modern Vietnamese identities somehow problematic. This issue of Vietnamese identity fragmentation can be best captured in Hall’s remark of modern identities as the result of structural and institutional change in modern societies as follows:

Correspondingly, the identities which composed the social landscapes “out there,” and which ensured our subjective conformity with the objective “needs” of the culture, are breaking up [which means “fragmented”] as a result of structural and institutional change. The very process of identification, through which we project ourselves into our cultural identities, has become more open-ended, variable, and problematic. (Hall 1996b, p. 598, emphasis added)

Hall's discussion of identity fragmentation, multiplicity of identity and the notion of identification is inherited by Phan Le Ha who studies cultural identities of TESOL Vietnamese teachers. Adapting a multiple approach to interpreting modern Vietnamese identities, Phan Le Ha (2008) submits to the argument that [Vietnamese cultural] identities must be seen as both *being* and *becoming* (pp. 56–57), fragmented, multiple, changing, and at the same time, stable, continuous and connected with a sense of belonging (pp. 64–65).

However, Phan's study (ibid.) does not discuss yet the current context of Vietnam in regards to globalisation (be it cultural, economic and political) and how global forces, to a greater degree, impact, condition, shape, and reshape modern Vietnamese identities. So, what is actually happening to Vietnamese identities under the impacts of globalisation? Why do most essentialists and non-essentialists fail to provide a satisfactory answer to the emerging issues of identity fragmentation? Why are identities central to the base of the Vietnamese higher education and core to the shaping of and navigating the Vietnamese higher education field?

Welsch (1999) fills in this gap. The scholar critically remarks:

... recent acceleration of cross-cultural flows and processes of cultural mixture has produced new form of identity. The intensification and diversification of flows in cultural traffic have put into question many of the earlier models for understanding the boundaries of culture and the configurations of identity. It is the failure to recognize this that makes 'the classical model of culture not only descriptively unserviceable, but also normatively dangerous and untenable' (cited in Papastergiadis 2005, p. 54).

Following Welch, the flows and mixture of culture have generated novel forms of identity and challenged the traditional ways of understanding and interpreting culture and identities. Again, the problems of reframing our understanding and interpretation of Vietnamese cultural identities (Hall 1996b; Phan 2008; Nguyen 2011; Welsch 1999) convince the author of this chapter of going beyond the existing parameters to look at the politics of Vietnamese identities as the product of the older traditions and the modern nation-state under the conditions of modernity (Nguyen 2011).

## *Vietnamese Traditions*

Initially, tradition is understood as the collection of ideologies, customs and habits in the thought pattern, lifestyle and behaviours of a certain community. It is gradually formed via that community's history, preserved and relayed from generation to generation (Pham et al. 1996). Traditions form a nation's identity. Although it is difficult to clearly define Vietnamese singular identity, two most striking features are *collectivism* and *nationalism* (Karnow 1983).

Collectivism derived from Vietnam's wet rice growing. This wet rice growing required human labour and urged them to collectively protect crops by building dykes, irrigation systems and many other means. Without collective power, individuals would have not survived under the severe natural conditions (Pham et al.

1996). Collectivism became a powerful driving force for uniting the Vietnamese people and sharpening their self-determination to fight for independence.

Citing Nguyen Van Ngoc's (1991) study, Pham Minh Hac and colleagues show that the nature of their agriculture activities requires them to strengthen community solidarity. So, communalism<sup>1</sup> plays a no less important role in an individual's life. Throughout one's lifetime, a person is closely attached, primarily to her family and then her community. She is supposed to manage her multiple identities, being centred on the individual–family–community–country equation. And yet, communalism appears to reproduce class hierarchy; it is additionally linked to “corruption” practices. For instance, the leading positions in the commune were usually negotiated by the use of money and affluence. Collective values were central to the village's communal life, manifest in administrative meetings and the village's common feasts. As a result, individualism is extremely biased, and thus despised. The following dictums cited by Nguyen Van Huyen (1995, p. 80), a famous Vietnamese scholar, illustrate the point clearly:

A piece in the middle of the village is as valuable as a great tray in a corner of one's kitchen (*Một miếng giữa làng bằng một sàng xó bếp*).

One piece from the village is as valuable as a great tray of meat bought at the market (*Miếng thịt làng sàng thịt mua*).

Also, worth noting is that communalism implies a strong sense of origin, rootedness and belongingness. At the same time, it biases and derecognises the “stranger” or the “outsider” within that community. If a person is labelled as a stranger, then it is not uncommon that he or she will be treated with little – or even no – recognition or even discrimination in the community where that person resides. Equally, communalism is itself, in some measure, completely estranged to “cosmopolitanism” in reference to the identification of a person's origin<sup>2</sup> and identity. Since communalism plays an important role in shaping social institutions, it exerts its decisive influence on the formation of Vietnamese social mentality and cultural identities. Nguyen makes an important point that:

For a Vietnamese, it is always honourable to have a village of origin in a province. Otherwise, one will be labelled by a rather derogatory term, in the eyes of the villagers, *người tứ xứ*, people of the four corners of the world. With the facilities of movement, people can settle down elsewhere, but will always claim to be a native of their original village, they pay their personal tax to the village, they contribute to the communal charges, even they do not enjoy material advantages, they register their children and grandchildren in the village and try to possess at least a portion of land there, although they can give it to poor relatives. Quite a few make effort to secure a plot and to erect a very humble hut for the installation of the altar of their ancestors. (1995, pp. 70–71)

<sup>1</sup>Interestingly, communalism is derived from the notion of “commune”, defined as “a union of several families grouped into one agglomeration or separated into many individual ones. It is formed not only by those who live there but also by all those who originated there and may return only once or twice in a lifetime, but have the tombs of their ancestors in the commune and their familial temple is maintained by a member of the clan” (Nguyen 1995, p. 70).

<sup>2</sup>Another interesting case in point is, believe it or not, the Vietnamese identity card still spares a space for specifying the card holder's place of origin.

Family and kinship play an equal role in shaping a person's identity. Pham Minh Hac and colleagues remark that "Family spirit was the most essential for Vietnamese people regardless of their social classes. Family means everything to them" and "The core of the Annamite society is the family. It centralizes all benefits and thoughts" (1996, p. 24). Responsibilities tie individuals to family and clan<sup>3</sup>, *tộc* or *họ*, family<sup>4</sup>, *gia* or *nhà*, *chi* or *phái* and clan to village, and village to country. They result in the Vietnamese religion, particularly the cult of ancestor worshipping: "The most sacred and traditional is ancestor worshipping to Annamite" (Ory 1894, cited in Pham et al. 1996, p. 24).

Apart from being collectivist, communist and nationalist, Vietnamese people are characterised as resilient, harmonious and adaptable (Jamieson 1993; Tran, 2000, 2003). Being largely dependent on the weather conditions in their cultivation activities, Vietnamese people tend to be adaptable and harmonious in their behaviour and resilient in all situations. They are open and amenable to the Other's culture. Also, the Yin-Yang (*âm-dương*) (Jamieson 1993; Phan 1994, 1998; Tran 1999, 2000, 2003) principle dominates Vietnamese people's life. It constitutes their epistemology in a way that it regulates how they see the cosmos. Furthermore, it informs their ontology to the extent that it principally guides how they lead their life in this cosmos which reaps large the shaping of their national identities: resilience, harmony and adaptability.

## Confucianism

In her work, *A Historical-political Approach to Interpreting Contemporary Vietnamese Identity* (Nguyen 2011), the shadow of Confucianism across Vietnam is unquestionable. Following David Marr (1981, 2000) and Nguyen Tai Thu (1997), Nguyen contends that the Confucian intellectual content is deeply embedded in Vietnamese moral teachings. It is engraved in the people's minds and behaviours, serving as a point of reference against which a person's morality is judged. Also, it cements the Vietnamese's values system: benevolence, customs, morality, government and so on.

At the heart of this moral guide are five, *hierarchically structured relationships*, encompassing those between the ruler and the subject, the father versus the son, the husband and the wife, the elder brother versus the younger one, and friend and friend. Each Vietnamese person takes up their role which is strictly defined by Confucian discourses that endorse a vertical hierarchy. Amongst these five key

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<sup>3</sup>Nguyen Van Huyen (1995) also remarks that clan is the basic social regime of Vietnam, comprising a number of families. It includes all individuals sharing the same stock, *đồng tông*, with a common ancestor. The relations of the clan may spread to nine generations, *cửu tộc*.

<sup>4</sup>The Gia Long code places a high value of the importance of family. It says "The families in the *chau* or *huyen* share the land, establish the taxation system, and all families assume the government of the locality" (Nguyen 1995, p. 22).

relationships, family lies in the centre. As a result, family values may hold special meanings not only for individuals but for the stability of the society and the whole nation. Behaviours within a family are strictly disciplined. For instance, a person is expected to maintain *filial piety* (hiếu) to his father. And, a father or an elder brother must rule by example (Jamieson 1993; Marr 1981, 2000; Nguyen 1995). In these ways, Confucian teachings shape Vietnamese family morality and ethics.

Specifically, hierarchy has, argues Nguyen Van Huyen (1995), made the basic unit of Vietnamese society. Under Le dynasty, the code, *Hồng Đức* – which is a rather comprehensive law-making sovereign but considerably differs from the ancient Vietnamese law – was first introduced. Borrowed heavily from Chinese law and appropriated to the Vietnamese context,<sup>5</sup> it specified familial relationships. The code recognised the absolute power of Vietnamese male. For example, article 7(2) of the *Hồng Đức* code<sup>6</sup> stated that children had to obey and take care of their parents and grandparents. Amongst ten most serious crimes listed, at least one-third of which were about serious breach of moral norms relating to, for example, immorality (bất đạo), disrespect (bất kính) and disloyalty (bất hiếu).<sup>7</sup>

Nguyen (ibid) even moves his analysis deeper, recalling 24 cases of filial piety, *nhị thập tứ hiếu*, a collection of 24 folk stories about filial piety which were used as moral examples<sup>8</sup> to teach young Vietnamese centuries ago. As for the scholar, the Tokin Civil Code of 1931 defines the obligations of filial duties and paternal power. The children and grandchildren were to be dependent on the head of the family. Regardless of age, a child had to honour, obey, and respect his/her parents and grandparents. The Mencius, the famous ancient Chinese philosopher, famously puts that “the duty towards parents is the foundation of all duties” (ibid). Sharing the same indication, Neil Jamieson emphasises:

Children were taught filial piety (hiếu), to obey and respect and honour their parents. Children were made to feel keenly that they owed parents a moral debt (on) so immense as to be unpayable. A child is supposed to try to please his or her parents all the time and in every way, to increase their comfort, to accede to all their wishes, to fulfil their aspirations,

<sup>5</sup>The *Hồng Đức* remained effective until the end of the nineteenth century when Gia Long, in his 11th year of reign, introduced another code constituted by the *Hồng Đức* code and the Chinese code of the Tsing dynasty (Nguyen 1995).

<sup>6</sup>Retrieved from the following website as of 17 February 2014: [http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lu%E1%BA%ADt\\_H%E1%BB%93ng\\_%C4%90%E1%BB%A9c](http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lu%E1%BA%ADt_H%E1%BB%93ng_%C4%90%E1%BB%A9c).

<sup>7</sup>See also: <http://pacific.net.vn/Home/NewsDetail.aspx?newsid=31>.

Also, disloyalty includes “accusing or abusing one’s grand father, grand mother, father or mother; refusing to adequately provide for one’s parents; taking a wife during the mourning of one’s father or mother; merry-making, or indulging in pleasures and wearing clothes other than the mourning garments; learning of the death of one’s grand father or grand father and concealing the news without announcing the mourning; or falsely declaring that one is in mourning for one’s grand father or grand mother, one’s father or mother” (Nguyen 1995, p. 63).

<sup>8</sup>Nguyen Van Huyen (1995, p. 63) instanced the case of the child “who disowned his child to keep the little quantity of good rice remained for his mother; that of a son who dipped his warm body in the ice-cold river in the hope of catching fish that his parents liked; that of a son who slept in the evening with a naked body to attract all the mosquitoes to himself and to offer peaceful sleep to his father”.

to lighten their burden of work and of worry, and to comply with their wishes in all matters, great or small... The parent-child relationship was at the very core of Vietnamese culture, dominating everything else. (1993, pp. 16–17)

As previously reported, in Vietnamese education, Confucianism is an important affective factor determining the roles and conducts of its stakeholders (Huu 2005; Marr 1981, 2000; Nguyen, 1995, 1997, 2011). Analogous to the hierarchy of five relationships, students are inculcated with a fixed set of attributes such as “respecting the teacher, respecting the knowledge”. In the classroom, they are expected to be recipients of knowledge and strictly follow what the teacher expects them to do. Meanwhile, teachers’ roles are assumed as the source of knowledge, the knowledge transmitter and the moral guide. This teacher–student relation is clearly reflected in the following traditional teaching which reads

To get across the river, you have to build a bridge  
To have a well-educated child, you have to respect the teacher.

*(Muốn sang phải bắc cầu kiều  
Muốn con hay chữ, phải yêu lấy thầy.)*

Confucianism is extremely influential on the Vietnamese meritocratic system. It is deeply imprinted in the Vietnamese social mentality which has, for its centuries-long existence, wholeheartedly embraced the scholarship of academic achievements. Marr (2000, p. 773) concisely notes that Confucianism focuses on developing the self as a full person. It lays a cornerstone for cultivating both morality and intellectuality. Education becomes a sole means to attain self-transformation. Education co-implies academic excellence and a genuine embrace of the self in the self-forming process.

Confucianism is under the hammer. Since it lays a great emphasis on hierarchical relationships, it is far from unpopular that Vietnamese students are to fulfil their filial piety duties, submitted to their parents’ choices of university and future career. The Vietnamese teaching “*Cha mẹ đặt đâu con ngồi đấy*” (A person should do whatever his/her parents want him/her to) makes a clear showcase of this point.

...a bounded domain that includes institutions with cross-border activities in these areas. Although this domain is frayed at the edges by diploma mills, corporate ‘universities’ and cross-border e-learning – and despite its connections with other social formations – its boundedness and distinctiveness are irreducible. (Marginson 2008, p. 305)

In her cultural study, *Confucianism and its Influences in Vietnam*, Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai (n.d.) scrutinises the limits of Confucianism in Vietnam. She argues Confucianism is deeply embedded with male-dominated idiosyncrasy and gender discrimination. It did injustice to female social status (Marr 2000; Nguyen n.d.; Rambo 2005; Ratliff 2008). A man is, without doubt, expected not only to carry their family surname, but also fulfil their parents’ pride by succeeding in the doctoral exam and climbing the ladder of fame. Consequently, education and doctoral exams used to discriminate female, with very few exceptions, whose life was traditionally bounded with domestic duties and strict obedience to her father, her husband and her son.



Precisely, gender differences and/or inequality, social exclusion and filial obligations deeply inform the meritocratic mentality of Vietnamese people, serving as a powerful platform for self-(trans)formation in Confucianism.

## ***Buddhism***

While Confucianism is incorporated into the ruler's ideology system and used to define the past, Buddhism may have shaped Vietnamese in popularity regardless of their social classes. It cemented Vietnamese spiritual souls. Tran Van Giap in 1930s even exemplified that there were both a temple and a Confucian Shrine in a village of 500 people. He maintained that:

Nowadays, if you ask what the Confucian shrine venerates, we can be certain that of those 500 people, only about 50 will know exactly that the Confucian shrine is for the veneration of Confucius and the sages. But if one goes to the temple, all 500 person will know that it is to worship the Buddha. We must recognize that in terms of doing good and avoiding evil, we Vietnamese are more influenced by Buddhism than Confucianism. (McHale 2004, p. 144)

Despite Buddhism reach to all Vietnamese classes, it enjoyed a comparatively long honeymoon period prolonged from Ly to Tran dynasties (1009–1400). Though originating from the Mahayana Buddhism branch, the Pure Land (*Tịnh Độ*) seemed to exert more influence compared to the Zen (*Thiền*) traditions (McHale 2004; Smith 1968). If the Zen is cultivated upon the “self-reliance” and refuses the external religious objects, the Pure Land argues over the human scantiness of their own capacity and the futility of their times; consequently, salvation can only be “achieved at another time (in the next rebirth), in another place (the Western Pure Land), and through another power (Amitabha Buddha)”.

But not all the profound content of Pure Land was translated into Vietnamese Buddhism. Rather, Vietnamese freely picked up the simple Pure Land ideology which best suited their agriculture life and worshipping rituals. For instance, the Pure Land follower believes in the Saha world – this world of suffering made human life miserable. Prayer and faith were commonly noticed to relieve the suffering and being longed for the Nirvana (*Niết Bàn*) after death. The life on earth was just temporary but life in the Nivara is everlasting. Therefore, human should keep themselves off the triple evils: greediness (*tham*), animosity (*sân*) and illusion (*si*).

## **Vietnamese Identities in Light of Marxist–Leninist and Ho Chi Minh Ideology**

In her chapter, entitled *A Historical–Political Approach to Constructing Contemporary Vietnamese Identity*, Nguyen (2011) has pointed out Marxism–Leninism was first introduced into Vietnam in 1932 when the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) was founded by Ho Chi Minh. Rationales behind the deployment of Marxist–Leninist prescriptions of the ideal socialist citizens indicate that Ho Chi

Minh and the VCP were aspired to build a novel framework for Vietnamese people after VCP had defeated the French, the Japanese and the Vietnamese feudalism in 1945.

Under the shadow of Marxism–Leninism and Ho Chi Minh ideology, these identities must, argues Nguyen (2011), be aligned with the strategic building of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam within the newly independent context. However, it is noteworthy that this framework shaped largely in light of Marxist–Leninist spirit was confined solely to the North and the Centre of Vietnam. Due to the different and complex historical conditions, the South of Vietnam was not imprinted by Marxism–Leninism until 1975 when the VCP officially united the North, South and the Centre of Vietnam. The VCP correspondingly pushed the American to withdraw their army troops out of South Vietnam as a result of the January 1973 Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring the Peace in Vietnam between the VCP and the US Government. Because of such historical complexities, the Southern Vietnamese were heavily influenced by the French in late 19th and early 20th centuries and the American between 1953 and 1973.

When applying Marxism–Leninism to the new context of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh and VCP had purposefully retained the fundamentals of Confucian values. Instead of coercing or rubbing Confucianism off, they integrated Confucianism into Marxism–Leninism (Nguyen 2011). Ho Chi Minh made a critical remark:

... But as far as we are concerned, we Annamites, let us perfect ourselves intellectually through the reading of Confucius, and revolutionarily through the works of Lenin. (Brocheux 2007, p. 38)

Although inheriting Confucian values, Marxism–Leninism applied in post-1945 in Vietnam had witnessed a reversed hierarchy. Confucianism consolidates the Vietnamese conducts and accords them with a set of cardinal virtues such as “benevolence” (*nhân*), “righteousness” (*ngĩa*), “ritual” (*lễ*), “knowledge” (*trí*), “sincerity” (*tín*), “loyalty” to the country and “piety” to the people (*trung với nước, hiếu với dân*) (Dinh and Nguyen 1998; Pham et al. 1996). Recognising and balancing equality and equity amongst three social classes including peasant class, working class and intellectual one, Marxism–Leninism designates the conducts of the intellectual and Communist cadres. These pre-set conducts were, again, heavily imprinted by Confucian values. For instance, if Confucianism stressed loyalty and piety towards the King and the superior, Marxism–Leninism and Ho Chi Minh ideology placed a high value on the people. They regarded them as the bedrock of the nation’s wealth and power. Collectivist spirit was boosted. However, it is harmonised with individual, especially the material self-interest via economic production activities; the form of “*hợp tác xã*” and “*khoán*” were popular in the countryside where agriculture still dominated the economy.

Dominant in the Vietnamese individual life is the attachment to family and multiple interest groups, classes, “peoplehood” (*dân tộc*), national citizenship and many others (Marr 1981). A person is expected to cultivate their new citizenship duties while sustaining and promoting their love for the nation. The model of Vietnamese character was ambitiously reconfigured by the Communist Party’s Fourth National Congress held in December 1976 and configured a vague model of the Vietnamese characteristics whose aims were to build up a *new life* and *new type of people*. The

new type of people demarcated as those with not only a strong commitment and devotedness for the collective mastery principle (Nguyen 2011) but also with a zest for labour, socialist patriotism and affiliation with proletarian internationalism. The novel identities of the Vietnamese described by the VCP in light of Marxism–Leninism are defined as “socialist in content and national in character” (Pelly 2002, p. 122).

Pressed by the quest for national economic development, VCP implemented Economic Reforms (Đổi Mới) in 1986. More remarkably, VCP officially acknowledged individual self-interest as an important constituent among other economic motives for economic development. Two significant studies of Vietnamese traditions on the national scale in 1993 and 1994 conducted by Pham Minh Hac, Phan Huy Le, Vu Van Tao and Le Huu Tang (1996) highlighted a number of emergent Vietnamese characteristics under the impact of series of economic reforms and Vietnam’s integration into the global economy as following:

- (a) the individual self-interest, values and family interest were prevalent over the collectivist values;
- (b) the national interests are more intimate than the international;
- (c) the economic interest prevails the spiritual;
- (d) the temporary values won over the permanent ones; and
- (e) the modern values predominate the traditional.

These scholars outlined a list of Vietnamese values based on the humane traditions, national pride and national essence which are essential to train the future Vietnamese citizens. They include

- (i) the traditions of benevolence, solidarity and interdependence;
- (ii) the tradition of study passion, teacher respect, talent nurturing and national culture treasure;
- (iii) professional values including knowledge, skills and benevolence;
- (iv) love and well-behaved family;
- (v) individual health and environment and cultural protection;
- (vi) the lifestyle principles: hardworking (*cần*), economical (*kiệm*), honest (*liêm*), impartial (*chính*), disciplined (*kỷ luật*) and law-obedient, and (*pháp luật*); and
- (vii) gender equality.

## Cultural Modalities of VHE: An Example of Confucian Imprints

In the higher education landscape, Johnathan London (2011) discusses the historical roots and current trends of Vietnam education system. He sees the pivotal role of Confucianism which leaves deep imprints in the Vietnamese education system. The scholar writes:

Confucianism blended education and normative governance. Confucian institutions imposed constraints by linking organized education and the study of classics to governance and authority relations. Confucian ideals and institutions shaped attitudes and behaviours

concerning education, but in non-determinant ways, contingent on actors' interests, capacities, and circumstances. Perhaps most important, the development of education systems in Vietnam, as in China and Korea, occurred in interdependent relation with the development of authority relations – proto national, local and familial. Grasping this helps us to appreciate the historical significance of education in Vietnam. (2011, p. 5)

And London reaffirms his proposition, claiming that:

The practical significance of Confucianism and Confucian institutions with respect to education needs to be clarified. (2011, p. 6)

In the Confucian shadow, education is premised on social exclusion and social hierarchy as is accessible only to a small group of population, often circulated within Vietnamese elites (London 2011; Marr 2000). London (2011, pp. 7–8) makes an important remark:

Although Vietnamese custom did allow education for non-elites, Confucian ideas and institutions nonetheless often promoted and reproduced hierarchies of power, wealth and status.

The author further concludes:

Confucian thought and Confucian-inspired social institutions had wide impacts on the development of education systems in Vietnam and legacies of these impact remains. (ibid, p. 8)

According to Ngo and colleagues, emerging in the university restructuring and changes are key concerns relevant to cultures, values and beliefs and thus power relations when a higher education institute transitions from one system structure to another or restructures the system itself. Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh – while inheriting the pre-existing values system – generates a new complex network of relationship and new leadership, let alone the teaching staffs of different disciplines and faculties found it comparatively difficult to adapt to the new culture and the system of belief. Certain clashes in culture, values and beliefs inevitably occur, resulting in chaotic mix, the emergence of sub-cultures and internal contradictions and conflicts. These scholars remark:

The policy cycle and vernacular globalisation contained internal contradictions and conflicts. (p. 235)

And that:

As conflicts occurred both within new groups of teaching staff who came from formerly different faculties or different universities and among groups within the university, it was therefore crucial for the university to have a certain period of time to rebuild its history of shared assumptions so that some degree of culture formation could take place, and so that there could be some harmony between the 'restructuring' and 'reculturing' within the institution. (p. 235)

Without attending to local specificities and responses to globalisation forces at a specific local reception point – in this case, Vietnam National University (Ho Chi Minh city) – we might be caught in the trap of wholeheartedly celebrating globalising discourses of higher education. Local context pays tribunes to higher education reforms. The research done by Ngo and colleagues is useful in the sense that studies

in higher education reforms in Vietnam need to meet dual demands. They are to serve challenges of globalisation and the accomplishments of particular national interests, and at the same time, adhere closely to the micro-context so that desired outcomes of higher education reforms could be maximised.

Towards Vietnam higher education field, Ngo Thanh Minh, Bob Lingard and Jane Mitchell (Ngo et al. 2006) examine, for example, the vernacular globalisation, taking into account the impacts of local forces. Using Vietnam National University, Hochiminh as a single case, these scholars remark that developments within the university sector are mediated by both globalisation discourses of higher education reforms and local histories and culture. Pertinent to the micro-politics of implementation, argued Ngo and colleagues, are local factors: institutional size, intra-organisational relations, staff commitment, and capacity and institutional complexities. These factors are significant for enacting institutional responses to the educational policies and appropriating the Western ideas of higher education at almost all levels. What really captivates us is institutional culture and re-culturing, in the analysis of Ngo and colleagues, are detached from legitimate authority structure and power conflict.

Although focusing on two different countries, Ngo and colleagues' observation of VHE intersects with Yang's (2011). Chinese higher education's, in Yang's analysis, route to modernising higher education and the aspiration of building up the world-ranked universities are to a large extent akin to the Vietnamese HE. The scholar interrogates the concept of university and how this concept has evolved over time in China, taking into consideration Western external influences.

Specifically, Yang (2011) speaks assertively of the importance of "*cultural text*" and *the structure of Confucian culture in interpreting Chinese Higher Education development*. Examining the impacts of Chinese traditional way of viewing self, the other and nature of higher education development, especially education reforms, the scholar reveals that it is Chinese traditional culture that has presented obstacles towards indigenising Western concept of the university.

Digging deep into the root of cultural structure, Yang argues Chinese cultural context has been the catalyst for indigenising Western concepts. It is structured by three reciprocal layers: material, social (institutional) and ideological. The last layer, the ideological or psychological, is central. Drawing on Pang Pu (1986), he critically notes:

Culture is never static. Contacts and communication between cultures begin at the material level and gradually influence social and ideological culture. As material culture is constantly progressing, social and ideological culture are also changing. Culture at the third level is deeply rooted in a nation's tradition and ideology and *is resistant to change*. It is this relative *stability of the core aspect of culture which makes it possible to discuss the variations of culture*. But being stable does not mean that it is static. History moves forward; so does culture. (2011, p. 343, emphasis added)

What remains paradoxical is that, according to Yang (2011), cultural practices of thought have accounted for mismatches and inconsistencies in the process of receiving and appropriating Western thoughts in order to shape Chinese universities. Chinese universities nowadays tend to mobilise the American model of university

with incomprehensive knowledge of its root, identities and development trajectories. Insufficient understanding refrains the system from an attempt to retain the “Chinese learning as the essence”. Featuring Ruth Hayhoe’s work (2005), the scholar sarcastically pens:

The development of Chinese modern universities has always been confronted with the absence of both classical and modern ideas of a university. While Chinese long-standing traditions never attempted to seek the ontological significance of knowledge, top priority has always been given, consciously and unconsciously, to practical demands. (2011, p. 352)

Rui’s discussion of how the cultural context assists in tracking the development of Chinese higher education is philosophically powerful, and thus holds significant implications for Vietnam. Indeed, VHE reform policies tend to offer quick remedies for the surface problems of the system (Nguyen and Tran 2017; Tran et al. 2014; see also Chaps. 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 12) with limited thoughtful consideration what makes a Vietnamese institution traditionally and in a modern context. This is not to say that its internal dynamics conditioned by an array of complex cultural forces have been exerting unequal, fragmented and ad-hoc power over the VHE institutions. The clashes between the modern and traditions happening within the VHE system, not much of which have been explored in-depth in the research literature, would have us to reinvigorate this field and, more importantly, question the ontological nature of our knowledge about VHE institutions and education reforms, to follow Yang’s thesis (ibid). Besides, the cultural features characterised by Confucianism and Buddhism and Marxism–Leninism and Ho Chi Minh ideology discussed above do not have impacts on practices of VHE separately. Rather, these features are represented in united forms at different levels of national, organisational and individual culture. These cultural characteristics, either hindering or facilitating the VHE reforms, will be tackled at root in the subsequent chapters.

## **Conclusion and Implications for Interpreting Higher Education Reforms in Vietnam**

Throughout this chapter, it has become apparent that the cultural approach to deciphering the cultural modalities of the VHE catechises the reciprocity, fluidity and dynamics of the relationship between inward looking and outward looking. An inside-out thinking enables the system to reflect and build on its inner strengths – agency – and the cultural values cultivated over the centuries-long history, the nation’s traditions and modernity. It is vested in self-determination to navigate the education system throughout turbulences.

The outside-in thinking attends critically to global forces driving changes in higher education across the globe and Vietnam particularly. Moving this analytical stance beyond the boundaries of a single nation state helps obtain a “big picture” of

the global forces appended with globalisation and internationalisation and the complexities of global geography of power (Altbach 1989; Altbach and Selvaratnam 1989; Hawkins et al. 2013a, b; Lee 2006; Yang 2011). They create powerful forces on both the system and the nation state.

Towards an inward versus outward looking, these conceptual notions of identities, core value, and being and becoming help define the internal logics of the VHE field and its modalities to enhance the internal power, that is, the agency of VHE institutes. It leads to the transformation of VHE towards desirable end results of HERA and reform policies. An inward looking complements an outward perspective that encompasses a cross-referencing point. Being at the intersection of making changes responsive to the national demands and catching up with the pace of world universities, such an inside-out versus outside-in looking approach, cultivates cultural values, inner power and self-determination.

Paired with an outward looking is the inward one which examines in retrospect the VHE system by drawing on the centuries-long culture and values of education. It promises a viable philosophical solution for higher education reforms. This is because such an inside-out looking touts out the inner strengths – agency – and the core cultural values while cementing its self-determination to navigate the education system throughout turbulences.

Looking retrospectively into the system of culture and values in higher education is, at the same time, reciprocal to an outside-in perspective, allowing an articulation of a useful cross-referencing point against which VHE institutions bring to the fore a concert of attributes. It encompasses self-reflexivity, the core cultural values, the inner power and self-determination alongside with comprehensive understanding of globalisation forces located within the global geopolitics structure.

Multiplying referencing points overwrites this conceptual framework. It assists in reading education reforms and the history of sociology of higher education. Implied is the narration of Vietnamese history and culture that have been making and remaking VHE as it is nowadays. This resonates an eco-system of higher education and sets the cornerstone for the subsequent chapters to unpack aspects of history and culture in relation to higher education reforms. It partially contributes to the thesis of this book, the inside-out versus outside-in looking and debunks the hidden power of VHE agency.

The referencing points are propelled flexibly. VHE makes an exigent referencing point against which a substantial comparative analysis of higher education reforms is shifted around and relocated across the Asia-Pacific region. It is appended with a variety of subfields. In so doing, cross-referencing VHE with a trans-Asia Pacific comparative perspective does, without doubt, justice to postulate a more nuanced, innovative research approach and methodology. It re-enhances the inward looking versus the outward one. This chapter therefore serves as a catalyst for the coming chapters (from Chaps. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13) to explore in greater depth various aspects of VHE reforms.

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