

Cultural Hybridity and Postmodernism: Vietnam and the West

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Abstract: Postmodernism in Western humanities and social sciences emphasizes multivocality and cultural hybridity in the so-called postmodern era. On the basis of data on urban wedding ceremonies and rural spiritual space from northern and southern Vietnam, this paper suggests:

1. Multivocality and cultural hybridity have long existed in Vietnam;
2. The theoretical linkage of multivocality and cultural hybridity to the postmodern era is rooted in the West's particular historical and cultural trajectories. Such a linkage does not work well in many non-Western contexts, including Vietnam.

Keywords: Postmodernism, wedding, spiritual space, history, Vietnam

Postmodernism which developed in architecture and the arts in the 1960s in the West spread quickly to other fields by the 1980s, including philosophy (e.g. Lyotard 1984) [1] and the social sciences (e.g., Clifford 1983) [2]. In general, postmodernism argues that the grand theory/narrative/form of the modern period has given way to the multivocality and hybridity in discourse and culture in the postmodern era. We can see this multivocality and hybridity in architecture at the Louvre museum in Paris and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto¹. It is not a coincidence that postmodernism has spread quickly in the context of accelerating globalization in the past few decades, a period in which capital, labour, technology, commodities, people, ideas, and images move more easily and quickly among different corners of the globe.



Illustration 1a. Louvre Museum, Paris, France.

In this paper, from an anthropological perspective and on the basis of data on urban weddings and rural spiritual space in Vietnam, I argue that:

1. Multivocality and hybridity in discourse and culture have long existed in Vietnam;
2. The theoretical connection in postmodernism between multivocality and hybridity on the one hand and the postmodern era on the other is rooted in the particular cultural and historical trajectories of the West. Such a connection does not work for many non-Western cultural and historical trajectories. This

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¹ At the Louvre, the glass-and-steel pyramid was added in 1989. At the Royal Ontario Museum, the glass-and-steel triangular building was added to main Victorian stone building in 2007.

is a major problem for the application of postmodernism to the study of discourse and culture in Vietnam and in many other non-Western contexts.



Illustration 1b. Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada.

In Vietnam, there seems to be a greater multivocality and cultural hybridity in the past 1-2 decades. However, multivocality and cultural hybridity have existed in Vietnam for a very long time. I make this argument by examining a rite of passage, the wedding, in Hanoi and Hồ Chí Minh City, as well as spiritual space for rites of solidarity among rural ethnic Vietnamese in Vietnam.

1. The ethnographic present

1.1. Vietnamese urban weddings

Multivocality and hybridity emerge clearly, not only in the two urban weddings that I have attended in 2016 (in Saigon and Hanoi), but according to my informants, also in numerous contemporary urban weddings in Vietnam². It is clearly a reflection of Western practices and voices when in the two observed weddings, the bride and the groom in locked arms walk to the

banquet hall stage, or the bride's father walks her to the stage, followed by the bride's and the groom's parents. According to the grooms in these 2 weddings, wedding hall management offers these two procession solutions as standard parts of wedding banquet packages in urban Vietnam nowadays.

As discussed below, the two observed weddings are laden with diverse symbolic and discursive practices from different cultures, both at the wedding banquet and in the structure of the wedding at large. On the one hand, in both of the observed urban weddings in Vietnam, the procession of the bride, the groom, and their parents is inspired by the wedding ceremony in the West. On the other, such a procession takes place in the highly secular setting of a wedding banquet hall instead of in a religious or strictly ceremonial setting as in the West. The two patterns of procession to the stage involve different configurations of interaction with Vietnamese culture.

a. In the observed Hanoi wedding, the bride's father walks the bride to the banquet hall stage, and returns to join the 3 remaining parents. The 4 parents then walk in pair to the stage. This solution differs from that in an observed French church ceremony in which the groom marches with his mother, the bride with her father, and the groom's father with the bride's mother. The marching of the groom's father with the bride's mother would be unacceptable in Vietnamese culture. A Western ceremony is thus modified or localized in the Vietnamese cultural context, leading to cultural hybridity.

In the larger structure of the wedding, the Western solution of the bride's father marching with her to the wedding hall stage is discordant with the previous Vietnamese marital union ceremony which has taken place before the ancestral altar at the groom's house. It is discordant that a couple already becoming husband and wife through a Vietnamese ceremony acts as bride and groom again in a Western-inspired procession at the wedding banquet hall. The wedding itself is thus multivocal, with symbolic and discursive

² In both of the weddings that I have attended in 2016, the brides and grooms are all university graduates, and work in white-collar or university lecturer positions. 3 of the 4 of them have received post-graduate degrees from Western universities. Their average age is about 30.

practices from both Vietnam and the West. The result is a cultural and discursive hybridity.

b. In the observed Saigon wedding, in the wedding banquet hall, the bride and the groom march together in locked arms to the stage, followed by the groom's parents and the bride's parents. This solution avoids the cultural problem of the bride's mother and the groom's father marching together as in a French wedding. According to the groom in this wedding, the solution of the bride and the groom in locked arms marching together is culturally appropriate as they have become husband and wife in a Vietnamese ceremony before the ancestral altar half a day earlier. However, although already husband and wife, the bride wears a bridal veil in the procession, and on stage, the groom symbolically lifts the bridal veil in a Western-inspired practice. In the West, the lifting of the veil, either by the bride's father before handing her to the groom, or by the groom, is integral to the marital union process. But in this wedding, although the bride and the groom have become husband and wife, the husband still lifts the bridal veil. The multivocality and hybridity emerge in this bridal-veil-lifting act after a Vietnamese marital union ceremony half a day earlier.

c. A significant difference between Western wedding ceremonies and Vietnamese ones is that in the former, the bride's and groom's parents would take their seats before the priest or wedding ceremony official performs the marital union ritual in order to turn the bride and groom into husband and wife. In both of the observed urban weddings in Vietnam, the bride and groom offer wine to the parents on stage in a Vietnamese ritual of filial piety. This renders multivocal the ceremony in the wedding banquet hall. Such an offering of wine to parents is a common practice in urban Vietnamese weddings nowadays.

Hybridity and multivocality characterize both ceremonies at the observed wedding banquets and in the two observed weddings at large. On the basis of information from my

informants, they characterize urban weddings in Vietnam nowadays in general.

Even when a wedding banquet is organized at home, without a stage and without a Western-inspired procession of the bride and groom and their parents to the stage, multivocality and hybridity can be found in other steps along the way. For example, in an engagement ceremony one week before the observed Hanoi wedding, the tray of betel leaves and areca nuts, an important Vietnamese symbol at such a ceremony, has images of two Chinese children and two white doves as symbols of the West (Illustration 2).



Illustration 2. Tray of Betel Leaves and Areca Nuts at Engagement Ceremony, 2016.

1.2. Public spiritual space in the countryside

The first illustration (3a) of hybridity in rural spiritual space is an offering of meat on the 15th day of the lunar month at a village pagoda in Tiên Du district of Bắc Ninh province, a village where I started doing in-depth research in 1990. Pork is offered to the tiger deity worshipped inside the Buddhist pagoda. On the pantheon of this pagoda are not only the tiger deity but also Mother Goddess ones (called "cô" and "cậu", picture 3b), as well as the Jade Emperor (*Ngọc Hoàng thượng đế*),

Nam tào (southern star) and Bắc đẩu (northern star) deities (picture 3c). The hybridity of deities from different religions is seen not only in this pagoda in Bắc Ninh province, but also in many other village pagodas in the Red river delta (see Diệp Đình Hoa 2000: 380-381) [3].



Illustration 3a. Meat Offering to Tiger Deity in Village Pagoda, Bắc Ninh Province.



Illustration 3b. Mother Goddess Deities in Village Pagoda, Bắc Ninh.



Illustration 3c. Statues of Jade Emperor (*Ngọc hoàng thượng đế*), Nam tào and Bắc đẩu, Village Pagoda in Bắc Ninh Province.



Illustration 3d. Statues of Quan Công (and Châu Thương & Quan Bình), Village Pagoda in Long An Province.

a. In the main pagoda of a village in southern province of Long An, a village where I also started in-depth research about a quarter of a century ago, the pantheon includes Quan Công and his two assistants Châu Xương/Thương and Quan Bình (picture 3d).³ In

³ According to Trần Hồng Liên, the leading specialist on southern Vietnamese Buddhism, southern village pagoda pantheon commonly includes Quan Công, Châu Xương/Thương, and Quan Bình. The pantheon may also include the Jade Emperor (*Ngọc Hoàng*), Nam Tào, Bắc Đẩu, Cửu Thiên Huyền nữ, Ngũ Hành (*nuông nương*) (Trần Hồng Liên 1995: 123-132 [4]; Trần Hồng Liên 2004: 83-89, 250-262) [5].

this village, there are also 3 Cao Đài temples. As widely known, Caodaists worship the Jade Emperor, Shakyamuni Buddha (Phật Thích Ca), Lao Tse (Lão Tử), Confucius (Khổng Tử), Jesus Christ, Quanyin Buddha (Phật Quan Âm), Quan Công, the Tang dynasty poet Li Tai-Pe (Lý Thái Bạch), as well as many other deities (see also Hoskins 2015 [6]; Jammes 2014: 107-125 [7]; Werner 1981: 8-10) [8].

In postmodernist theory, the multivocality and hybridity observed in urban weddings and rural spiritual space in Vietnam indicate that discourse and culture in Vietnam are in the postmodern era. However, an important question is how long multivocality and hybridity have existed in Vietnam. A historical perspective has major implications for postmodernism as a theory.

2. From a historical perspective

2.1. Urban weddings in Vietnam

We do not have the detailed description of any particular non-royal wedding in twentieth-century Vietnam. The description of wedding customs in publications on Vietnamese culture presents cultural models rather than information on any particular wedding. It pays little attention to possible differences between the classes and regions of Vietnam.

However, a few photographs from weddings in the second half of the twentieth century show hybridity in bridal wedding dresses. The first two pictures (4a and 4b) are from a wedding in the south before 1975, and a third (picture 6) is from a Hanoi wedding in 1989. If picture 6 is from a wedding of people with means and access to a car, picture 5 is from a wedding in which participants had to march on an unpaved road on the outskirts of a city or in the countryside of southern Vietnam. In these pictures, the bridal dress combined a Vietnamese *áo dài* with a white Western veil. It shows hybridity in Vietnamese weddings in the second half of the twentieth century.



Illustration 4a. Wedding in the South of Vietnam before 1975: In Public Space.



Illustration 4b. Wedding in the South of Vietnam (same wedding): Before the Ancestral Altar inside the House.



Illustration 5. Wedding Procession on Unpaved Road.
(Source for Illustrations 4a, 4b, and 5:
“Chuyện thú vị xung quanh đám cưới xưa và nay”,
Tin tức online 24/7/2013)



Illustration 6. Bride and Groom in Wedding Vehicle in Hanoi in 1989, picture taken by American photographer David Alan Harvey. (Source: “Những khoảnh khắc hạnh phúc ghi lại đám cưới Hà Nội thời xưa”, *Trí thức trẻ online* 28/6/2014)

2.2. Rural public spiritual space

No reliable data are available regarding the pantheons and offerings before 1990 at the Buddhist pagodas in the northern and southern villages where I have done in-depth research. However, Cao Dai pantheon has been hybrid since the very beginning of the Cao Dai religion in 1926.

3. Conclusion

On the basis of data on urban weddings and rural spiritual space, we can conclude that multivocality and hybridity have characterized discourse and culture in Vietnam for at least one century. Cultural historians of Vietnam often argue that Vietnamese culture and folk religion have long combined Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, as well as Mother Goddess religion, ancestor worship, and animism. If this is correct, multivocality and hybridity have existed in Vietnamese culture for one or many millennia. Discourse and culture in Vietnam have thus been postmodern for at least one century and possibly for one or more millennia. If we use multivocality and hybridity as the hallmarks of the postmodern era,

Vietnam entered the post-modern era when most rural dwellers lived in thatched houses, knew nothing about electricity and bicycles, not to say television or the telephone. Vietnamese rural dwellers entered the post-modern era well before people in the West!

Some post-modernist theorists suggest that that multivocality and hybridity also characterize practices preceding the postmodern era (Eco 1985: 66) [9]. In the Western context, according to this argument, such practices began emerging in the late nineteenth century (Patton 2001: 11873) [10]. However, it can be argued that multivocality and hybridity (the post-modern) in practices emerged in Vietnam one or a few millennia ago, in the “feudal” period, well before the West!

In the larger picture, I would like to suggest that the linkage in postmodernism of multivocality and hybridity to the post-modern/modern era reflects Western historical and cultural trajectories. In my opinion, this has to do with the low tolerance for hybridity in the West, as seen in Western monotheist religions such as Christianity. When spreading to Vietnam, for example, Christianity does not accept ancestor worship which is deeply rooted in the Vietnamese spiritual landscape.⁴ In contrast, folk religion in Vietnam and many other cultures accept polytheism and hybridity. Given this important difference, a theory like post-modernism which is constructed to explain recent cultural patterns in the West runs aground in its attempt to account for millennium-old multivocality and hybridity in Vietnam and elsewhere outside the West. The linkage in postmodernism of multivocality and hybridity to the postmodern era does not work well for many non-Western historical and cultural trajectories.

⁴ Vatican II (1962-1965) has officially opened a small door for greater sensitivity to the local cultures of Catholics outside the West. See Nguyễn Hồng Dương (2001: 36) on recent internal debates among Vietnamese Catholics about how to deal with ancestor worship.

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Tính hỗn dung trong văn hóa và lý thuyết hậu hiện đại: Việt Nam và Tây phương

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Tóm tắt: Lý thuyết hậu hiện đại trong những ngành nhân văn và khoa học xã hội ở Tây phương nhấn mạnh tính đa thanh và hỗn dung trong diễn ngôn và văn hóa trong thời kỳ hậu hiện đại. Dùng dữ liệu từ lễ cưới thành thị và không gian tín ngưỡng nông thôn ở Bắc bộ và Nam bộ tại Việt Nam, bài viết này muốn thảo luận về:

1. Tính đa thanh và hỗn dung văn hóa đã có ở Việt Nam từ xa xưa;
2. Sự kết nối về mặt lý thuyết giữa tính đa thanh và hỗn dung trong diễn ngôn và văn hóa với thời kỳ hậu hiện đại phản ánh tiến trình văn hóa và lịch sử đặc thù của Tây phương, và không ứng dụng được vào nhiều nền văn hóa ở ngoài Tây phương, bao gồm cả Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: Lý thuyết hậu hiện đại, lễ cưới, không gian tín ngưỡng, lịch sử, Việt Nam.