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# **SUVANNABHUMI:**

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SUVANNABHUMI means “The Land of Gold” in Pali, which location implies Southeast Asia.

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# Special Topic







## Introduction on Special Topic

# Special Topic on Globalization, Vietnam and ASEAN



Victor T. King\*

This is a fascinating combination of papers on situating Vietnam and ASEAN in the processes and consequences of globalization. The special topic brings together a diversity of interests and issues which embraces the ways in which particular countries, regions and peoples negotiate globalization. What is of special importance in these four papers is the proposition that we have to address a range of globalizations, and to do so in a framework of theory, practice, representation and identity. Publications on globalization are legion. Open any internet reference to globalization and you have to address a veritable inundation of publications, so numerous that you cannot possibly read and absorb them all. On some internet sites we are now directed by publishers and pundits to globalization materials with such titles as “49 books directly related to globalization,” “Best sellers in globalization,” “Shop globalization book author,” “The top 10 books on globalization,” “Globalization books—Five Books Expert,” “Globalization (list)—Best business books.” Journals on globalization also abound: *Globalizations*; *The Journal of Globalization and Development*; *Journal of Globalization*; *Journal of Globalization Studies, Competitiveness and Governability*; *Journal of Global History*; *Global Society*; *Research in Globalization*; *Globalization and Health* and so it goes on. We tend to lose count

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of the number of journals on globalization.

The editorial introduction to the papers proposes that we should be turning our attention more decisively to agency and the negotiation of globalization. In doing this the editors cast doubt on the thesis that globalization is a Western-dominated, homogenizing force and that global integration in such arenas as the transformations in production, labor markets and trade, the internet and global communication, technology and its rapid diffusion, climate change, political and military interventions, and the cross-border movement of refugees and asylum seekers produce a world that has become increasingly connected, integrated, copied and replicated. Instead, as these special topics demonstrate, globalization is generating different responses and actions among different populations in different places. But we have to recognize that it is a long-established process (Frank and Gills 1993).

When I examine what is happening in my own country, the United Kingdom, I am sometimes amazed, indeed intrigued, that major sections of the population are domestic-oriented and parochial, preoccupied with local or regional activities, on occasion, national ones. This is rather different from the alacrity with which academics address the subject. Of course, the lives of the populace are affected by globalizing processes, but they either do not realize or articulate how, in detail, these are impacting on them or, quite simply, they choose to ignore their importance and they find their own local ways of addressing and coping with globalization. They are concerned with the daily round, with shopping, feeding their families, working from home or commuting (or not working at all and depending on the largesse of government and charitable organizations), taking their children to and fetching them from school and nursery (and then taking them to sports training, music and dancing lessons and so on), watching television, gazing into their smart phones and engaging in social media, contemplating how they spend their leisure time at weekends, bemoaning the quality of their local environment and public services, where they will go on holiday and whether or not they can afford it, and engaging in the usual cycle of life (births, marriages, divorces, and deaths) and the move from marriage to co-habitation and serial

relationships.

This is not necessarily “thinking beyond” globalization; it is either that they are only vaguely aware of it, or deliberately ignore it, or blame their national government for their woes. They experience a degree of freedom but also feel themselves to be trapped, sometimes without consciously articulating this experience. Their range of choices expand, their consumer tastes are all-consuming, generating confusion and increasing non-confidence; they are immersed in social media but want to be part of others’ lives, though they are unable to realize these other lives themselves.

Nevertheless, in the academic arena it has become necessary to conceptualize and contextualize what is happening to us. How do we respond to the expansion of world markets, and the insecurity, instability, uncertainty, and individualism which this generates, the economic hegemony in world markets exercised by multinational corporations, capital market flows and international trade, the movement of people, the de-localization of political decision-making, the loss of communities, the increasing importance of cross-border networks, the compression of time and space, the convergence of work and consumption, the gulf between the rich and the marginalized poor? Globalization divides as much as it unites within and beyond nation-states as seen in the territorial aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine; and the People’s Republic of China and its ambitions in the South China Sea area and in relation to those countries with which it shares its land borders.

Among the major contributions which paved the way for studies of globalization were the early pioneers, among them John Maynard Keynes (1920), Karl Polanyi (1944, 2001), Fernand Braudel (1973 [1967], 1977, 1982-1984 [1979]), and Roland Robertson (1990, 1992). Of particular note is Robertson’s concept of “glocalization” and the simultaneous tendencies and processes of “universalizing” and “particularizing.” Surely our concerns with globalization did not commence with Jean-François Lyotard (1979, 1984; and see Scholte 2005).

In the political-economy arena, some of us in the more radical

wing of sociology and anthropology turned to theories of development and underdevelopment and dependency, global inequality, and that of the division of the world into “core, semi-periphery, and periphery” We were captivated by the writings of key figures in these debates: in particular, Andre Gunder Frank (1978a, 1978b; Frank and Gills 1993; and also see Sing C. Chew and Denmark 1996; Manning and Gills 2011) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 1980, 1989, 2000, 2004).

Other important works on globalization, agency and responses were provided by such luminaries as Eric Hobsbawm, obsessed, as he was, with “ages,” of “revolution” (1962), “capital” (1975), “empire” (1987), and his ultimate triumph, the “age of extremes” (1994); Richard Baldwin on information technology and the “new globalization” (2016); Zygmunt Bauman where everything that happens in an increasingly globalized world is “liquid” (1999, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2013); Joseph Stiglitz (2002), one of the most renowned international observers of economic globalization; and Martin Wolf, who proposes that globalization “works” (2004). In capturing the Asian context and experience, we also have to return to Gunder Frank (1998; and see Frank and Denmark 2014), an interesting collection by Yamashita and Eades (2003; and see Hainsworth 2004) and Coclanis and Doshi (2000).

In my view, Zygmunt Bauman captures one of the concerns of this “special topic.” How do we, as social scientists and historians, understand globalization and what is happening to us? Bauman addressed this issue over twenty years ago in *Liquid Modernity*. “Do humans—the makers and the made, the heroes and the victims of history—indeed carry forever the same volume of possibilities waiting for the right time to be disclosed? Or is it rather that, as human history goes, the opposition between discovery and creation is null and void and makes no sense. Since history is the endless process of human creation, is not history for the same reason..... the unending process of human discovery?” (2000: 203; and see Campbell et al. 2018).

Then I must end my introduction with Richard Sennett and his analysis of urbanization, “disorder” and the “new capitalism,” which

also gives expression to the post-modern condition, and how it is affecting humans “as makers, users of tools and creators of common life” and as workers. Along with the special topic in this issue, Sennett explored the responses to globalization and its everyday consequences; the middle classes retreat to the “secure cocoons” of the suburbs in that suburbanites are fearful of living in a world over which they are unable to exert control and influence. What is more they decide, perhaps without thinking too much about their future lives, to reside in “a morally and psychologically impoverished environment” (1998). Sennett asks “What values and practices can hold people together as the institutions in which they live fragment?” And, we have to pose the question, “Is it is happening in Asia with a rapidly developing middle class and the process of suburbanization?” But then there is a further question: “Can they or will they respond differently from those in the West to a globalizing world?” Finally, a question Ulrich Beck raised some decades ago “Are we all not living in an increasingly globalized “risk society?” (1992 [1986]).

There is something more. To cement these concerns into the Vietnamese-oriented papers in this issue, we should refer to a publication written some 20 years ago by Nguyen Phuong Binh, who addressed both an ASEAN and a Vietnamese perspective (2001). And very finally there is also more general work going back over two decades on globalization and its impacts in Southeast Asia and the local and regional responses to these far-reaching processes of economic, political, environmental, and socio-cultural change (see, for example, Apodacha 2002; Coclanis 2006; Coclanis and Doshi 2000; Hill and Menon 2016; Loh Kok Wah and Öjendal; Mallet 1999; Pangestu 2001).

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## Introduction on Special Topic

# **Negotiating Globalization and its Aftermath in Vietnam and ASEAN: Theory, Practice, Representation, and Identity**



Liam C. Kelley\*.Catherine Earl\*\*.Jamie Gillen\*\*\*

The four papers in this special topic were first presented at the 12th “Engaging With Vietnam” conference, August 24 – 28, 2021. “Engaging With Vietnam” is an annual conference organized by Senior Professor Phan Le Ha and Associate Professor Liam C. Kelley, both from Universiti Brunei Darussalam. The conference deals with issues relating to “Vietnam” in the broadest sense. In keeping with this spirit, in 2021, the theme of the conference was “Engaging with Vietnam and ASEAN: Mobilities and Identities in an Age of Global Transformation.” Conference participants were encouraged to think beyond the boundaries of the country of Vietnam and to examine issues relating to Vietnam and its neighbors from global and transnational perspectives.

While there were over 100 presentations at the conference, the four papers in this special topic are emblematic of the diverse ways in which conference participants engaged with the conference theme. The “age of global transformation” that we find ourselves in is, of course, an age that is deeply influenced by processes of globalization. These papers all deal with that phenomenon.

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However, rather than simply examining globalization, we see these papers as demonstrating how people have been “negotiating” with that process and even starting to think beyond it.

This is understandable because the notion that market-led transformations of economies in Vietnam and other countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will inevitably lead them to follow a Western-dominated “globalization” is in early 2023 unequivocally false. Big “G” Globalization—a Western-dominated phenomenon marked by a borderless market economy, supported by representative democracy and propelled with such force as to inevitably transform all corners of the world in its image—has famously not come to pass (Friedman 2005; Fukuyama 1992). Instead, a more dynamic and interesting set of globalizations has emerged, with multiple, conflicting origins of power having only a provisional impact on peoples and places at any one time.

Astonishing for those observing matters of globalization from the “New Yorks” and “Londons” of the world, but unsurprising from those of us on this side of the planet (and readers of this journal) come Asian societies’ transformative impulses. What may be most confusing from leaders in traditional sites of power are the difficulties generating logical patterns of seemingly antithetical causes and effects: how can politically authoritarian nations like China and Vietnam economically outperform late-capitalist democracies? Why has the COVID-19 virus flattened countries with the resources to support the health of its people like the United States and the United Kingdom while those “developing” nations (particularly in Southeast Asia) have enjoyed minimal crashes to their public health sector and done a compelling job of protecting its citizens? Though the term “globalization” continues to be seductive because it captures patterns and processes that bring disparate populations into worldly communities, the papers in this special issue anticipate novel globalizations (small “g” and plural) and even a world of deglobalization.

Spanning a range of contemporary questions in, of, and beyond Vietnam, this special topic puts the global political economies of Southeast Asia on full display. Seemingly contradictory

movements depict the extraordinary dimensions of the region. We see the rhythms of Vietnam's leadership in Asia being critically reassessed under the specter of deglobalization while at the same time the public face of its economy (tourism) remains a lodestar. Chinese "Belt and Road" influence in Southeast Asia has many detractors while Chinese identities underpin every corner of ASEAN, including Brunei. This collection is thus a timely reminder of Southeast Asia's ability to reformulate globalization in the twenty-first century and a recognition of the contradictions of region that make it a spectacular and beguiling site of scholarly critique.

The central conceit of globalization—that it is an inevitable, all-consuming force homogenizing the world according to the principles of late capitalism—is a seductive if flawed interpretation of a vastly more interesting concept. In "Vietnam and the Spectre of Deglobalization," John C. Walsh provides an overview of some of the theoretical issues which globalization raises as well as the reasons for deglobalization. While Walsh opens up a number of fascinating lines of inquiry into what Vietnam could be if it sought to deglobalize, the key takeaway in his essay is that toeing the line between full-throated globalization and protectionist, insulating measures associated with deglobalization require Vietnam's leaders to be careful yet quietly ambitious as they attempt to carve out an identity in ASEAN, with China, and globally. A piece for anyone interested in big picture thinking, Walsh's article helpfully grounds (de)globalization in a set of opportunities and challenges for Vietnam.

In "Vietnam's Response to the Digital Silk Road in Southeast Asia and Implications for Regional Cooperation," Nguyen Dang Dao brings readers up to speed on the ways in which Vietnam's digital sovereignty clashes with ASEAN and China, and the delicate ways in which its policy-makers maneuver into and out of diplomatic relationships with them, given that Vietnam is a glaring outlier in the "Digital Silk Road" initiative. Nguyen also examines how China-ASEAN-Vietnam coordination is transforming Southeast Asia's technological infrastructure alongside the better known and studied "Belt and Road" physical infrastructure initiatives.

In “‘Say Hello to Vietnam!’: A Multimodal Analysis of British Travel Blogs,” Thuy Thi Hieu Tran undertakes a forensic, multidimensional analysis of British travel bloggers’ experiences in Vietnam to capture the present dimensions of the Western gaze on Vietnamese society. Her research is a *tour de force*, a meticulous product that heralds the best of mixed- methods research coupled with a strong theoretical edifice. Moreover, and set within the world wide web/internet repository of information in which it is immersed, Tran persuasively illustrates how Vietnam’s identity is as much a dialogue between “Self” and “Other,” as between Vietnamese hosts and their tourists, and as it is produced from within Vietnam’s borders itself.

Finally, in “Reframing Loss: Chinese Diaspora Identity in Brunei Darussalam,” Hannah Ming Yit Ho analyzes the fictional writing of K.H. (Kok Hing) Lim; the author’s *Written in Black* (2014) depicts a young diasporic Chinese family living in Brunei shattered by the abandonment of their mother to examine the concept of “supermobility.” Itself a generalizable concept that frames much of the current migration literature, Ho’s paper moves “supermobility” forward by illustrating the embodied ambiguities of loss, recovery, resetting, and belonging that make migration a unique experience for every family that crisscrosses the world in search of a better life.

Taken together, these four articles correspond to the four concepts in the subtitle of this special topic: “theory, practice, representation, and identity.” Walsh examines the theories of (de)globalization and considers possible futures for Vietnam. Nguyen considers how the global imperatives of China’s “Digital Silk Road” initiative struggle in practice to gain traction in Vietnam. Tran, meanwhile, demonstrates how Vietnam is to some extent beholden to global tourist representations. Finally, in this complex world of global interactions, human beings still seek to find an identity, even as they partake in lives of “supermobility,” as Ho illustrates. Together, these four works reveal how people and governments are “negotiating globalization and its aftermath in Vietnam and ASEAN”.

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## Vietnam and the Specter of Deglobalization



John Walsh\*

### [ *Abstract* ]

Just as globalization has many aspects and has developed in various, sometimes contradictory ways with both positive and negative impacts, so too would the reverse process of deglobalization have wide-ranging effects for individuals, communities, and nations. Some parts of globalization began to fray during the coronavirus pandemic (e.g. failing supply chains and disarray in the global shipping industry). Deglobalization would bring about much more significant changes in focusing on local production and consumption, eschewing non-essential flights and international tourism, and replacing personal experience with virtual presence. These impacts would be particularly severe for Vietnam, since its government has placed intensive connectivity with global production at the center of its model for the rapid development on which much of its legitimacy rests and it has joined as many international, multilateral organizations, and protocols as it has been able to do. Through critical analysis of secondary data from a wide range of sources, this paper examines the motivations that people, institutions, and governments might have to pursue deglobalization and

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then seeks evidence for whether the changes that would bring have started to affect Vietnam. While it is difficult to be too certain about this while the pandemic continues, it is evident that pressures are building in the global north to reconfigure supply chains for greater security, to reduce carbon emissions through regulating long-distance exchanges, and to withdraw from personal contacts. It is argued that a focus on digitalization in economy and society will help to mitigate the negative effects of deglobalization on Vietnam, at least in the medium-term.

**Keywords:** deglobalization, digitalization, economic development, globalization, Vietnam

## I . Introduction

In recent decades, globalization has appeared to be an irresistible force installing ever deeper forms of neoliberalism in every corner of the world. The dictum of the neoliberals, acquired from former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that “there is no alternative” seemed to have an air of historical inevitability about it. Governments might seek to negotiate an opt-out here or there but had little choice but to accept their place in the new world order. However, the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic has brought about a “revenge of the real” (Bratton 2021) that not only betokens the re-emergence of a new biopolitics but also indicated the fragility of the global economic order, reliant as it has become on lengthy and complex transnational supply chains. This fragility has lent more strength to a developing movement towards deglobalization resulting from awareness of the climate emergency and both positive and negative political forces. Appadurai (1990) observed that previous instances of transnational interactions resulted from warfare or religious expansionism. What is different in contemporary globalization is the role of technology in democratizing forms of interaction. These are forms of technology that have become central to the daily life of billions of people around the world. Although there have been calls that the internet must be completely

dismembered for there to be any hope of surviving the current crisis of capitalism (e.g. Crary 2022), there will be numerous problems for states obliged to disentangle themselves from international interactions, if that comes to pass. Currently, the Vietnamese government has become committed to a digitalization process that will knit together all parts of the country and, among other goals, make many public services available online. This has in part been spurred by the response of providers of online education during the coronavirus period. The vision for the country is much greater involvement in international networks and exchanges. Transnational supply chains can only be successfully created and maintained during peacetime and offer additional space to government and civil institutions to negotiate with partners to enhance relationships and reduce tensions. For a country such as Vietnam, which has based its contemporary political and economic strategy on engagement with the outside world, the prospect of deglobalization is indeed a specter, a threat to the inmost being and a means of undermining everything that has been built since 1986 and the return to the international stage. During the colonial period, Vietnam was deeply connected to the rest of the world but in ways in which Vietnamese people had little if any agency. From the revolution to 1986, it was isolated and boycotted. The emergence of the country in the *doi moi* period involved not just a move to employing market mechanisms in economic development but also engagement with the outside world as an equal. Giving up globalization would be a significant blow not just to the country's economic system but to its entire strategy. It would represent a threat to the legitimacy of the ruling Communist Party.

To some extent, deglobalization has been theorized by Polanyi (2001) in the concept of the double movement. According to this concept, a first revolutionary step is taken and then met by a reactionary response seeking to realign the various forces as they previously were. In this sense, the first step is the creation of a market economy with some free-market characteristics and the second movement is the creation of trade rules, labor protection schemes and so forth. The greater the initial step has been, the more that the phenomenon involved has become disembedded from

society and the greater the second movement will need to be to redress the new situation. As a holistic approach (and Polanyi has been criticized for being contradictory on this point (Gemici 2008)), embeddedness becomes: "...an analytical construct to discern the changing place of economy in society throughout human history (ibid.)" and the market economy is prodigious in being the world's first disembedded economic system. Should globalization be seen, therefore, as an embedded system which cannot be reversed? There are certainly indications, as described below, that this is not the case and the deglobalization will take place—some will argue that it must take place.

This paper considers the issue of the extent to which deglobalization and the post-pandemic new normal might really affect Vietnam and what might be done to try to offset any such problems. It continues with a description of Vietnam's engagement with globalization through economic, political and diplomatic means, as well as an appreciation of the benefits of engagement to a country facing the particular political issues that it does face. It then continues with analysis of the various factors that are leading towards deglobalization, broadly defined and, finally, a consideration of what might be achieved through reconfiguration of the country's economic and diplomatic resources in the face of this new threat. The paper is influenced by an eclectic approach to considering the country as a whole that is derived in part from Pettigrew's (1997) description of processual analysis as a methodological approach which recognizes temporality, contextuality, and complexity in the phenomenon being studied. In doing so, it builds on the practice familiar to students of international business of employing an eclectic paradigm to explain business success or failure (Dunning 2000)—the approach can be fruitful in a wide range of contexts when a higher level of theory has yet to be fully established. In this case, aspects of deglobalization and the country's response to its existence have been selected to illustrate the argument that deglobalization would be disastrous for Vietnam and should be addressed. There is scope for rigorous quantitative and qualitative research to substantiate the argument.

This paper is not just tied to the case of Vietnam but has

wider application to other countries that have become embedded within transnational chains as their approach to achieving rapid economic development. It has taken on fresh urgency with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the resultant extensive sanctions placed on Russia by western countries as a result. To counteract these sanctions, at least in part, Russia has sought to reinvigorate its relationship with China and other countries which have not condemned the invasion. It is possible, therefore, that the world will turn to a two-bloc system of USA-Europe opposed by Russia-China. Third party countries will be obliged to choose one of these sides and either uphold or reject the use of sanctions. Vietnam's longstanding relationship with Russia would make it very difficult to side with the West and there are likely to be serious ramifications resulting from this. It is important to be aware of the high stakes that such a decision would involve.

## **II . The Benefits of Globalization**

Globalization involves both increasing global connectivity and increasing global consciousness, relevant at the level of the nation-state, world politics, and individuals, acting through the dimensions of politics, economics, culture, and society (Robertson and White 2007). It is characterized by worldwide changes in both production and consumption. People can consume various kinds of media production that would have been unavailable before internet technology, while being involved in production of components that might have been designed in one country, assembled in another and distributed to markets in remote third countries. Countries that have benefited from global consumption tend to be those who can mobilize soft power in the form of media output such as Hollywood, Bollywood, and the Korean *Hallyu*. Countries that have benefited from global production tend to have been those such as Vietnam which introduced a model of import-substituting, export-oriented, intensive manufacturing based on low labor cost competitiveness through the operation of the New International Division of Labor (NIDL) (Frobel, Heinrichs and Kreye 1976). Although most production that takes place in Vietnam is destined for export, there

is an emergent aspirational middle class, mostly urban in location, which is generally enthusiastic in participating in new consumption opportunities. These include not just consumer goods and services but also international education and travel when that has been possible.

Vietnam has been able to maximize its economic gains using the special economic zones (SEZ) approach, which encourages inflows of foreign direct investment (FDI) into specific areas where special legal regimes have been put into practice which (further) privilege capital over labor. The Chinese example, which saw hundreds of millions of people lifted out of poverty by this approach in an unprecedented economic success story, showed what could be achieved in the economic sphere without the government having to make any concessions to political plurality. China focused on coastal areas which offered reduced shipping and transportation costs and which could be isolated from the rest of the economy if necessary. Vietnam’s geography offers many opportunities for coastal zones; areas around the two major cities and in the Mekong delta region have also been targeted. In general, the Vietnamese government, in common with others, sees the benefit in enhancing its legitimacy with the people through achieving economic success while maintaining a strong grip on freedom of speech, freedom of association, and other rights.

<Table 1> Inwards FDI in Vietnam, selected year; source: World Bank (2022).

Year	Amount (US\$)	Year	Amount (US\$)
1980	1.7 m	2005	2.0 bn
1985	-80,000	2010	8.0 bn
1990	180 m	2015	11.8 bn
1995	1.8 bn	2019	16.1 bn
2000	1.3 bn		

Inwards FDI is beneficial not just in terms of the direct effects of employment and taxation but also through technology transfer and spillover effects. Technology transfer means bringing new

technology from overseas into the local economy (e.g. in Vietnam, the creation of a modern retail sector) while spillover effects include showing the response of local companies to more competitive overseas companies (e.g. in Vietnam, the upgrading of local Vietnamese coffee shops in the wake of the arrival of Starbucks and similar chains). These changes have contributed to the rises in living standards for Vietnamese people and in the emergence of a new, urban middle class. In line with what has been said about the SEZ policy, Earl (2013) has argued that these lifestyle changes have not been accompanied by changes in values disseminated through officially sanctioned media.

Economic data reveal just how much Vietnam's economy has been integrated with that of the rest of the world. The structure of Vietnam's labor market has changed as would be expected for a country undergoing rapid industrialization. In 2000, 62.2% of the employed labor force worked in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, 13.0% in industry and construction and 24.8% in services. By 2020, those figures had changed to 33.1%, 30.8%, and 36.1% (GSO 2020: 28). Meanwhile, the number of waged workers had increased from 33.4% in 2009 to 48.4% in 2019 (*ibid.*: 29). The contribution of inward FDI to the growth of the Vietnamese economy may be judged by the fact that it is estimated (as the figures are not released) that more than one quarter of the country's total exports by value is accounted for by Samsung alone (Vietnam Credit 2020).

The benefits of globalization to Vietnam are political and diplomatic just as much as economic. Common membership of international or transnational organizations provides opportunities for informal negotiations and lobbying in the form that used to be known as "ping pong diplomacy" (Itoh 2011)—that is, diplomacy which could be pursued on the sidelines of international table tennis tournaments, which was one of the very few sporting or cultural events in which China participated. The term is now no longer needed as China has emerged into the mainstream of international relations. Such diplomacy may or may not be directly related to the stated aims of the organization involved. As Table 2 shows, Vietnam has entered into many international agreements in a limited period of time. The collapse of the Soviet system required

the Vietnamese government to reinvent its economic stance to embrace market characteristics, which it did under the concept of *doi moi*—reform. However, nearly a decade more was to pass before the US announced the ending of its embargo and a further year, in 1995, before normal diplomatic relations were established. In the same year, Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and, in the following year, joined the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), together with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (1998) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) (2007), along with many other engagements with the world.

<Table 2> Vietnam's International Economic and Strategic Relationships, selected; source: Various references.

Type of Agreement	Details
Free Trade Agreements	26 in total; 9 proposed/under consultation and study; 3 negotiations launched; 13 signed and in effect; 1 discontinued
	ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) (1993); ASEAN-Australia and New Zealand FTA (AANZFTA) (2010); ASEAN-India FTA (AIFTA) (2010); ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (AJCEP) (2008); ASEAN-Republic of Korea FTA (2007); Chile-Vietnam FTA (CVFTA) (2014); Japan-Vietnam Economic Partnership Area (JVEPA) (2009); Vietnam-Eurasian Economic Union (2016); Republic of Korea-Vietnam FTA (VKFTA) (2015); Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (2019); Vietnam-European Union FTA (EVFTA) (2020); Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (2022)
Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships	China (2008); Russia (2012); India (2016)
Strategic Partnerships	Japan (2006); Republic of Korea (2009); Spain (2009); UK and Northern Ireland (2010); Germany (2011); Italy (2013); France (2013); Indonesia (2013); Thailand (2013); Singapore (2013); Malaysia (2015); Australia (2018)
Comprehensive Partnerships	South Africa (2004); Venezuela (2007); Chile (2007); Brazil (2007); New Zealand (2009); Argentina (2010); Ukraine (2011); USA (2013); Denmark (2013); Myanmar (2017); Canada (2017); Republic of Korea (2018); Brunei (2019); Netherlands (2019)



It is notable that majority of these organizations and treaties have been joined on the grounds of economics rather than for social or civil grounds. This follows the model of ASEAN, which is organized on similar lines. While these measures of engagement with the external world during the period of reform might suggest an ideological shift within the central government, this does not appear to be the case and government sources remain committed to Marxism-Leninism. Instead, “As a result of globalization, Vietnam has a widely expanded repertoire of models and examples to choose from in responding to the challenges and opportunities of globalization (Elliott 2012: 5).”

Any such change should be understood in the context of Vietnam’s geography and history. Vietnam was colonized by China for a thousand years and the war of 1979 led to an unknown number of Vietnamese casualties with estimates in six figures. The weight of that nightmare heavily oppresses the brains of the living. Nearly every geopolitical event in Asia is scrutinized for its impact on the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. Tensions can very quickly rise: in 2018, nationwide protests broke out on the announcement of a new law related to the SEZ policy that would permit international investors, including Chinese, to take out 99-year leases of land in a small number of locations (Fawthrop 2018). Meanwhile, at the beginning of 2022, pre-existing tensions exacerbated the situation surrounding some 6,000 lorries on the Vietnamese side of the border as Chinese authorities refused to reconsider their policy on the eradication of the COVID-19 virus in all its variants (Reuters 2022). This has coincided with the inauguration of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which was expected to improve trade facilitation and reinvigorate supply chains that had frayed during the pandemic period. This made it more difficult to address the very substantive issues with which Vietnam would like to negotiate (on a multilateral basis) with China. These issues contain complexities sufficient to be beyond existing international law. There are two specific issues: the contested islands in the East Sea (outside of Vietnam known as the South China Sea) and riverine management. These issues do not affect Vietnam alone but several Southeast Asian neighbors as well. Consequently, the ability to

convene multilateral rather than bilateral talks in these cases would considerably help Vietnam. It would be hyperbolic to claim that Vietnam is facing an existential threat under current circumstances but international conflict involving the USA and China would certainly represent serious difficulties for the country and its people which deglobalization would exacerbate.

Although the paper has so far discussed events and tendencies primarily at the national level, globalization has certainly offered opportunities to people at the household and individual levels that deserve to be considered. There are some 4.5 million ethnic Vietnamese living overseas, the majority of whom fled the country at the end of the Second Indochinese War (i.e. the Vietnam War). The largest proportions live in countries welcoming refugees, such as the USA and Australia, or neighboring countries. Many Vietnamese now are keen to study, live and work overseas, partly for the experience and partly for an escape from sometimes claustrophobic family relationships. Capital may be exported to build lives overseas, which movement is the opposite of remittances returning to Vietnam from the many thousands of overseas migrant workers. Coronavirus strictures significantly affected both groups of people, particularly migrant workers who might have lost their jobs and been left stranded overseas. Certain Vietnamese corporations (some with links to the government) have begun to look overseas to expand their markets, as well as help enact state-level developmental goals on behalf of the government (e.g. Walsh 2021). Where pathbreakers lead, other Vietnamese corporations will be sure to follow, and they too would suffer from a reversal of the globalization process.

### **III. Deglobalization**

There has been a strain of quietism or asceticism that predates deglobalization but derives from similar tendencies. These instances were often motivated by socio-economic reasons, such as identifying the other as undesirable or hiding the way that social relations were organized in a specific context. Sometimes the

rejection of the external was a valid and often quite successful response to the threat of others: China, Japan, and Korea all closed themselves to external traffic to varying degrees as a means of fending off potential conquest and imperialism. Such a strategy may appear unnatural to countries of the West, but given the histories of countries that were colonized by European powers, was both reasonable and efficacious. After all, the spread of trade routes around the world is also the creation of the network that will spread disease and contagion. This has been made evident in the spread of the COVID-19 virus, which inspired several countries to isolate themselves from the rest of the world for varying periods of time.

Connectivity between remote people has always had two aspects, although human optimism has tended to laud the positive aspects and gloss over the negative ones. Even today, one strand of the rejection of globalization rests on antipathy to modernity or change. This has manifested itself in many ways: in the history of the British economy, there are numerous examples of workers taking the newly imposed and improved means of production into their own hands and breaking them to maintain a measure of power in their own hands (Mueller 2021). In the English Civil War (1642-51 CE), neutralist uprisings of so-called “clubmen” resisted attempts by either Royalists or Parliamentarians to enter what they considered to their territory (Underdown 1979)—and this is a phenomenon found across Europe during the wars of the C17<sup>th</sup>.

There is no doubt that when change of this sort did come to affect communities, the results were often very damaging to social relations and the ways in which people were able to obtain their livelihoods. The archetype of this was Enclosure, which brought about “...not simply a physical fencing of land but the extinction of common and customary use rights on which many people depended for their livelihood (Meiksins Wood 2017: 108).” The very same effects are taking place across the developing world where people are being resettled to make way for dams, bridges, special economic zones, and all the infrastructures of the globalized country. This is occurring across Asia and particularly in mainland Southeast Asia.

Since globalization involves the development of different

dimensions and realms, so should deglobalization involve the diminution of the same number of dimensions and realms. The realm of economics is important but it is not the only one. The desire for deglobalization may be divided into four somewhat overlapping tendencies. These all involve various realms, including the economic, the political, the social, and the cultural. The first is in response to the climate impact of existing globalization and its processes; the second is political-economic in nature and decries globalization's promotion of existing and new forms of inequality; the third incorporates a feminist view of contemporary design of urban structures with the 15 minutes city, the sharing society and the circular economy; the final approach is from the willful inward turn of autocrats and would-be autocrats who wish to close their countries to the outside world for a variety of mostly dismal reasons. These will be dealt with individually as follows.

### **3.1. The Climate Emergency: Small Is Beautiful**

There is a school of thought that continual growth of any sort in human affairs is physically unsustainable. Malthus (2008), for example, used a flawed methodology to argue that food supplies as then imagined could not support the foreseeable increase in population. This approach found further expression in the work of Schumacher (1993) who argued that contemporary capitalism was leading towards increasingly wasteful use of scarce resources by large corporations. In its place, attention should be focused on smaller-scale systems based on meeting actual needs with available resources. There is a clear message that if demand exceeds the supply of resources, then demand will have to be curtailed in one way or another. Schumacher's work resonates with James Lovelock's (1979) work on the Gaia hypothesis, which posits the Earth as an interlocking, living system that is damaged by the excesses of over-consumption and might even be overwhelmed by it. The Gaia system has a theoretical limit to production under current understanding of technology and that consumption should be linked to that amount. There is a sharp edge to this analysis, which dates to Malthus at least, who argued that since overpopulation would inevitably lead to the poor suffering the most, the kindest thing to

do would be to let them all starve. This argument was taken to its logical, satirical extent in the *Modest Proposal* of Jonathan Swift (2009), who proposed eating the children of the impoverished Irish as a practical means of making ends meet. Acts of eugenics do take place at the individual level, as the abortions of millions of unwanted girls in India and China attest (Eklund and Purewal 2017) and, historically, in Vietnam as well.

Perhaps the central question to be considered in this respect is whether sufficient food can be delivered to the people of the world at an affordable price in the context of the global climate emergency. Even before pandemic, hundreds of millions of people were suffering from food insecurity to some extent, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) (FAO 2015). The scale of food insecurity includes not just the inability to eat because of lack of food but also the lack of access to customary, nutritious food that has contributed to the obesity crisis across the developed world (e.g. Dhurandhar 2016). To produce food at the current level, producers have resorted to extensive use of economies of scale and scope and multinational supermarket systems driven by the desire for profits.

Unfortunately, this system produces significant negative externalities. A recent report by the Rockefeller Foundation (2021) estimated that, considering the US\$1.1 trillion spent by US consumers on food in 2019, when factoring in the contribution to water and air pollution, loss of biodiversity, and greenhouse gas emissions, the real cost was some US\$3.2 trillion per year, nearly thrice as much. Many factors work together to bring about this situation, including the hold that corporations have on political institutions, not just in the USA but worldwide. Wallace (2016) has chronicled the presence of intensive farming practices globally and the threat of life-threatening viruses and disease. Indeed, the most likely cause of COVID-19 was a zoonotic leap from bats to humans first observed in or around the city of Wuhan in China. It mirrors a similar origin for the earlier SARS outbreak, which has been strongly linked with horseshoes bats in Yunnan province (e.g. Yu et al. 2019). These leaps across the species seem most likely to have occurred because of unprecedented contact between diverse species

resulting from the destruction of the habitat of one by the other. Many species of bats were largely unknown to science until very recently.

Further to these problems, the approach to agriculture favored by the instruments of the Washington Consensus is to intensify the move towards globalization. This is problematic in many ways. Bello (2009) argues that not only does the large agro-industry model lead to inequitable and unsustainable practices but also dramatically undermine to the point of destruction the peasant populations of the world, with disastrous results for their quality of life and for human rights and democracy. Peasants may have a bad reputation politically (Bello notes that Marx (1852) considered them little more than a sack of potatoes) but they have demonstrated resilience and a capacity for reinvention that Bello considers to be worthy not just of respect but of emulation. Their survival is important for sustainability, political, and equity issues. In the case of Vietnam, agriculture has historically been based on rice production and rice consumption represents the great majority of nutrition for all or nearly all Vietnamese people (Gorman 2019). Rice growing in rural areas leans on intra-village household cooperation and is bound in traditional seasonality. The country benefited from the green revolution in rice production up until 2003, with varieties introduced from the International Rice Research Institute in the south and from China in the north, together with effective local management and innovation, contributing significantly to enhanced food security (Tran and Kajisa 2006), which is defined in Vietnamese law as “rice security” (Gorman 2019). Even so, various factors in the capitalist development of the country have led to the rapid increase in meat consumption among Vietnamese people and meat production lends itself to different expressions of economies of scale and scope that rearranges agricultural production norms (Hansen 2018). The Vietnamese government also works with local communities to concentrate on production of specialty goods which depend on specific geographic and climatic conditions, and which can link the communities with international markets. Fish farming (Vietnam News 2017) and ginseng growing (Vietnam News 2019) are among the activities to receive this attention. Combined with the

increasingly obvious effects of the climate emergency, these changes to production and consumption risk removing agency from local producers and giving it instead to capitalist producers. It also indicates the increasing internationalization of the Vietnamese economy, not just in terms of exporting commodities but also in producing for gourmet domestic restaurants and international hotels. The Vietnamese government has made various commitments to developing agriculture in this light as part of its digitalization strategy (Dharmaraj 2022). Its SEZ strategy is based on inwards FDI of leading international companies and one of its greatest problems is preparing local small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) so that the incoming companies will be willing to make partnerships with them, while also producing people who can thrive in the environment of a large, overseas firm.

The analysis of agricultural production resonates with the small is beautiful paradigm. It has grown in importance because of the increasing awareness of the contribution to the global climate emergency of air travel and the decision by some high-profile individuals to refuse to fly as a result. The Swedish environmental campaigner Greta Thunberg has been a noted leader in this issue (Jang et al. 2020). If personal travel by air is considered to be an unsustainable practice, then so too must be the flying of perishable products around the world for profit. One well-known product in this category is baby sweetcorn, which is flown from Thailand to enliven the once dowdy supermarkets of Britain at great cost in externalities (it might be noted that shipping is also a significant contributor to carbon emissions but as an industry has resolved to reduce this amount since 2018 (Acciaro and McKinnon 2020).

### **3.2. Inequality**

It is possible to draw a parallel between Polanyi's disembeddedness and the malaise discerned by authors such as Hines (2000) and Bello (2004), who consider globalization as a form of hothoused creature that has grown, as part of a misguided experiment and become something monstrous and destructive. It is possible to see this occurrence as either an unanticipated product of an attempt to follow the economic logic or else the more or less deliberate attempt

to recreate the world following either the logic of neoliberalism or as a means of creating and recreating hegemonic domination of the USA using tools such as the Bretton Woods institutions and the Washington Consensus. The work of Hines (2000) is an example of the former, with nations showing the desire to outcompete each other leading to beggar thy neighbor zero sum results and the inevitable extirpation of globalization resulting in part from “(i)ncreasing resort to unilateralism and the brazen manipulation of multilateral mechanisms to achieve hegemony by the United States” (Hines 2000: 4).

This strand of thought sees globalization as a deliberate attempt to implant corporations around the world that would negate if not destroy corporations from other countries and the local institutions that might appear to protect them. There are, of course, plenty of precedents for this, as the formation of banana republics indicates (Chapman 2007). These situations provoke inequality. The Vietnamese government’s policy to prepare a nest for the eagles or multinational companies (Hoang 2020) (and also some sparrows) risks provoking such inequality by instituting a dual economic system, with the FDI-fueled international sector lying on top of a much less productive domestic sector. World Bank figures show that Vietnam’s poverty rate is 1.8% of the population and a Gini index of inequality of 35.7, which is a testament to the work that the government has done in attempting to eradicate poverty throughout the country. Poverty is now mostly to be found in more remote provinces and regions where difficult terrain affects the reach of public services. These areas tend to be places where ethnic minority people live.

Firms situate themselves where they can make a profit, mainly in the case of Vietnam through low labor costs. However, the managers and executives of such firms require a standard of living commensurate to their rank and so factories should not be too far from cities and there should be appropriate healthcare, education, retail, and leisure services available. Consequently, successful SEZs tend to crowd together in areas that provide profitability together with standard of living. This in turn promotes internal migration which, despite remittances to the home community, exacerbates



inter-province inequalities. Despite evidence that some migration flows have reversed and remittance flows are multi-directional (Luong 2018), there is still a concentration of movement towards the larger cities for the jobs available.

At a broader level, the Trump trade war against EU countries, China, and numerous other states was indicative of a new form of the conflict that continues the underlying struggle for supremacy. The erasure of local communities and expressions of solidarity are forms of collateral damage in this struggle. Just as the British crown licensed private sector operations such as the East India Company to enact its imperial acquisitions, so has the US government entrusted its corporations, implicitly or explicitly, to perform the same role and to work through transnational rules-giving organizations such as the WTO to fulfil the required tasks. Hines (2000) describes this method of operation in this manner: "... trade rules should be seen for what they are: a grubby set of global guidelines drawn up at the behest of the powerful for the benefit of the powerful" (Hines 2000: 10). It is certainly true that the US has used its position in the WTO to prevent the promotion to office of judges capable of decision-making, thereby rendering the WTO unfit for purpose in its aspect as adjudicator of international trade disputes, leaving corporations with unmerited ability to game the system as they choose. There is a lengthy history of abuses by multinational corporations operating overseas no matter where they might have originated.

These approaches to globalization do not deny the benefits that it might bring along the way. Just as the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) acknowledged the extraordinary and sometimes egregious productivity of capitalism while nevertheless arguing that it was not the final destination of economic evolution, so too do proponents of deglobalization from this perspective acknowledge, sometimes a mite grudgingly, the increases to efficiency and related standards of living brought about by globalization, while also maintaining that it cannot be sustained indefinitely. However, they are quite clear about the need to rebuild at the local level to replace global structures and processes. Bello (2009) specifies an 11-point plan to achieve this, which includes measures to enhance local production, focusing on

quality of life rather than growth and democratizing decisions which are currently made by corporations.

This plan is certainly broad ranging and includes a wide swath of equity issues which would be resisted by powerful forces in the global system and media and political forces would certainly be mobilized to resist it. There is a need to challenge mainstream media discourse about what it is possible to achieve and to focus on facts rather than rhetoric or obfuscation. It is difficult to imagine how this might be successfully achieved without extensive regulation. There will be a need to reassert the importance of local, national, or regional legal bodies as being capable of overriding global institutions. This is problematic in Southeast Asia since its regional organization, ASEAN, has proved itself incapable of providing a coherent response to successive crises, including the expulsion of the Rohingyas, the 2021 coup in Myanmar and the issue of sovereignty in the South China or East Sea. Most ASEAN countries lack technical capacity to negotiate effectively on a bilateral basis and, should any try to do so with regional giants such as China, Japan, or South Korea, they would be likely to be overwhelmed. Vietnam also needs agreement on riverine management with upstream countries, China in particular, which would be better tackled on a multilateral basis and with external support for technical issues. Vietnam has benefited from membership of international and transnational organizations and would be lessened by their absence.

### **3.3. The 15-Minute City Dream**

As the world increasingly becomes urbanized, particularly with respect to the need to add resilience in the context of the intensifying global climate emergency, the focus on localization becomes a focus on the organization of the city. Kern (2020) describes the ways in which the city has been designed, deliberately or not, in favor of men and men's interests. Given that many mundane activities are customarily organized along gendered lines, journeys tend to be different—men drive significant distances from one place to another while women tend to make numerous shorter journeys, zigzagging back and forth between a variety of

commitments (shops, schools, clinics) more or less randomly scattered across the map. One means of improving the prospects of urban localization, therefore, would be to reorganize these local or neighborhood facilities in a more rational manner. However, such reorganizations of cities tend to follow the lead of capital, with local residences and retail businesses having been eliminated to make way for broad carriageways to enable large cars to drive in from the outskirts of the city to central shipping centers and department stores in a more convenient way (cf. Rimmer and Dick 2009). These factors have increasingly come to be seen as detrimental to a happy and productive urban living experience. Carlos Moreno (2019) has become the person most associated with a response to these issues through the creation of the 15-minute city, who explains what is required in the following way:

This means transforming the urban space, which is still highly mono-functional, with central city and its various specialised areas, into polycentric city, based on four major components: proximity, diversity, density and ubiquity, in order to offer this quality of life within short distances, across the six essential urban social functions: living, working, supplying, caring, learning and enjoying (ibid.).

The appeal to this form of a good life is closely linked with reduction of consumption and simplification of lifestyles in various forms, including the application of the sharing economy, in which useful items (e.g. tools) which are occasionally needed in every household but rarely used for long may be jointly owned by community members and borrowed like a book from a public library, as well as greater application of the circular economy, in which more attention is given to recycling and reusing. Smarter city design could also include urban farming schemes, which reconfigure existing urban space uses to challenge food deserts in cities and promote community participation in mutually-useful production. There is already a tendency among at least some consumers to consume food produced in a relatively narrow sphere around their homes and to reject air travel or international tourism for their negative environmental consequences. However, there are lifestyle issues related to such sacrifices which make them less appealing to

many and, consequently, it is helpful to introduce these concepts as a means of supporting existing standards of living. Vietnamese consumers in one study (Figuíé et al. 2019) observed that they trusted local wet or fresh markets because it was convenient to determine freshness, while supermarket food could offer the appearance of freshness through keeping the produce under cold conditions. Vietnam's retail sector, particularly with respect to supermarkets, is currently restricted by limitations on foreign ownership. The memory of famine lives in the memories of the current generation of leaders and there appears to be no rush to imperil existing levels of food security.

It might further be noted that this concept of urban life is quite distinct from the so-called Smart City concept, which ostensibly uses big data in real time to make better resource allocation decisions (e.g. for traffic or power generation and distribution) but which quickly becomes a reason for adopting closed-circuit television systems for surveillance and "crowd control."

### **3.4. Closing the Country**

The decision by a small majority of British voters to leave the European Union (EU) was largely based on racism and xenophobia that were legitimized as a result and these forces are in the process of being used to foment nationalism to the detriment of the country and, indeed, the remaining 27 members of the EU. Nationalism has taken hold in a variety of countries, from Hungary to Turkey to the Philippines. It was given sustenance by the election and presidency of Donald Trump and represents a form of inward-turning deglobalization that challenges political rather than economic structures. Since deglobalization requires cooperation as a core principle, it is antithetical to nationalism. Further, nationalism locks in place national borders (which may be real or imaginary) that have been created for a number of reasons but rarely because of the logic of localized economic systems. Colonization, most obviously, inflicted arbitrary lines across maps with little or no regard for the people living there and their interactions with their own communities and neighboring ones.

As mentioned above, there are issues of confrontation in the East (South China) Sea and riverine management which are causing tension between China and Southeast Asian neighbors, including Vietnam. At a moment when there is a need on all sides for flexibility in discussions and potential negotiation, the coronavirus pandemic led to closed borders and increased tension. In the USA, President Trump was complicit in increasing anti-Asian hatred by blaming China for the origin of the virus (Moynihan and Porumbesco 2020), which was seemingly a new front in his campaign against the country that he also blamed as a creator of a supposed climate change hoax (Wong 2016). Rhetoric was combined with the administration's numerous tariffs imposed on Chinese products (CNBC 2019). The decision taken by the subsequent administration tried to cut the link between GDP and military power by taking steps to ensure that Chinese companies, government-linked or otherwise, will be locked out of crucial future technologies relevant to the projection of hard power worldwide (Tooze 2021). Although diplomacy continues behind closed doors, these needless spats damaged the possibility of constructive talks at a moment when Chinese President Xi Jinping was acting to consolidate his own power and to centralize Chinese political thought around the possibility of Chinese leadership with a vanguard of the Chinese Communist Party (Brown 2018). These barriers have been joined by a physical barrier brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. The Chinese government continued until the beginning of 2023 to commit to the complete eradication of the virus and kept the borders closed. One side-effect of this approach has been, in many countries, the vilification of migrant workers accused of spreading disease recklessly and a general cooling of the welcome for any international visitors. The situation was exacerbated by vaccine hoarding by the richer countries, which has further promoted inequality and made it more likely that further variants will evolve in largely unvaccinated populations. China was able to use this situation to make some diplomatic gains by donation of effective vaccines to poorer countries (Jennings 2021).

Vietnam's relationship with China remains precarious and it does not take much for public sentiment to be roused. The folk

memory of the thousand-year colonization by China makes the issue of territory sensitive and Chinese presence in SEZs has been particularly problematic. It is notable the no instances of China's Belt and Road Initiative overseas infrastructure building campaign have been accepted. However, China is a crucial partner economically both for trade and inward investment. There is now a trend for firms to divest from China on account of the extended COVID lockdowns and possible conflict over Taiwan; some firms might shift production to Vietnam (Kawase 2022). If this does happen at any scale, it could prove a further point of tension.

Where interstate tensions exist or can be fostered, then cross-border links wither, which include but are not restricted to trade. They damage everyone involved through a combination of unfulfilled potential, loss of opportunities, and squandering of human capital. Less developed countries suffer to a greater extent because their chances of rapid economic development are intrinsically connected to assembly and manufacture of goods for export. Developed countries can source these products from many places (or use 3D printing) and retain the principal income-generating activities at the beginnings and ends of value chains within their own borders. Given the actions of many countries in response to current flows of refugees and asylum-seekers and the almost certain hardening of attitudes when the flow of climate emergency refugees increases, it is not unlikely that a number of countries will seek to recreate themselves as fortresses.

Having considered the various forms of and motivations for deglobalization, it is necessary to assess the evidence for whether Vietnam is, indeed, undergoing this process.

#### **IV. The Specter in the Distance**

If deglobalization is a specter to be feared, then what is the evidence that it is actually taking place? This section considers that evidence under various headings according to the eclectic paradigm approach of processual analysis previously discussed. It might be

noted that this analysis takes place at a time of some uncertainty. New variants of the coronavirus might emerge. The rebounding of the global economy is being hindered by sporadic outbreaks of inflation, stimulated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There are credible threats to the rule of democracy in the USA. There is a tendency to hope for the best and assume that things will work out well but it is far from certain. For example, on first inspection it appears that Vietnam might be a beneficiary of deglobalization because of divestment from China and relocating economic activities to the south (*The Economist* 2022). Meanwhile, the World Bank (2021) is bullish about the country's prospects through institutional reform and adherence to norms of international trade. However, there are reasons to suspect a fracturing of the current global order which would certainly court disaster and which are discussed in this section.

#### **4.1. International Organizations**

Global climate change, economic slowdowns and coronavirus tensions are all putting pressure on international organizations. This is particularly true in the case of ASEAN, since the organization had been assumed to play a leadership role in response to the coup in Myanmar and incipient civil war there that it is simply not equipped (or willing) to take. Although the region has been reassured by the Biden administration that it remains committed to friendly relations (*Thai PBS World* 2022), its actual performance has been fitful. More will be needed to reassure regional leaders of genuine commitment after the damage of the Trump years, albeit that Trump was popular in Vietnam on the basis that he took a tough line against China.

Economic organizations that might also help to reduce tensions and improve relations have been hampered by continued border closure issues, particularly with respect to China. The RCEP has not been able to reach its potential, even given how early a stage this is for its operation, because of supply chain issues and because transportation into and out of China is complicated by the additional checks China requires as part of the ongoing policy to eradicate the virus. The same phenomenon has also affected bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements (FTAs). Sporting

events such as the Winter Olympics held in China in early 2022 were at first threatened by political boycotts by some western countries for a variety of reasons, including the treatment of the Uyghurs of Xinjiang province, attacks on democracy in Hong Kong, and the high-profile disappearance of the tennis player Peng Shuai. The beneficial effects that might accrue from mutual membership of international organizations are not currently being realized.

#### **4.2. Supply Chains and International Trade**

The Vietnamese government enforced a strict lockdown policy throughout the country and particularly in the two major metropolises from the outset of the pandemic until 2020, which proved to be broadly successful. For months, the claim was made that no one had died from the disease throughout the whole country. However, this policy could not deal with the social pressure required, especially with the emergence of the more contagious omicron variant. Consequently, the disease soon became rampant in the two main cities and other parts of the country. As of July, 2023, official figures reveal 11,614,583 positive cases and 43,206 deaths (Worldometer 2023). International flights were stopped in March 2020. When factories closed, thousands of workers fled to their provincial homes and relative safety. Factories were reopened at partial capacity and many workers lived and slept onsite in the wake of significant losses in garment and footwear exports, among others (Hoang 2021). The partial and delayed reopening meant that the standard understanding of value chains—that they are naturally resilient and will snap back to their usual shape when a temporary impairment is removed—has had to be reevaluated. There have been too many interruptions and their combined problems have sapped the ability of chains to retain their integrity. The blocking of the Suez Canal by the *Ever Vision*, for example, led to a cascading series of effects along the supply chain, sequentially, costing billions of dollars per week, denuding shops of goods and backing up containers in places far from where they were needed (Russon 2021). Vietnam suffered from truck and barge hold-ups in its multimodal logistics system and a shortage of containers for its exports industry (Wallis 2021). Korean corporations announced a



plan to open a container factory in Vietnam which would eventually build 100,000 units annually to help combat the unavailability of containers (Li 2021), which continues to intensify with persistent asymmetric trade. Short and medium-term stopgap measures seem likely to be able to overcome supply chain problems for the moment and the international shipping industry is taking seriously its commitments to reducing carbon emissions. However, it is possible to envisage these measures becoming unsustainable if pressure on the system increases.

#### **4.3. International Relations**

It is a common theme for political scientists to observe that when two whales fight, the shrimps suffer, meaning, that conflict between two large powers will bring negative impacts upon the smaller powers in the vicinity. This would certainly be true should the almost unimaginable occur and China seek to re-incorporate Taiwan into the mainland state then Vietnam would suffer turbulent times. At once, the country and many of its neighbors would have to do something they have been trying to avoid for some time and choose between China and the USA—American money will flow to those who agree with this. Then there will be the fall-out from the fighting, refugees, possible environmental pollution, the destruction of trading patterns, and so forth. It is likely that side-skirmishes will break out over the already-contested islands and islets in the seas between China and Southeast Asia. There will be long-term consequences for such acts. In Vietnam, there will be voices to join in an attack on China. There would likely be social unrest in various dimensions. Much of the country's engagement policy with the world will have been destroyed.

Other conflicts or potential conflicts also have the potential to bring about significant disruptions in the international order. Unfortunately, as democracy comes under increasing stress in western countries, led by the far-right movement in the USA, provoking external conflict will become a more possible and likely response to challenges to political legitimacy or the threat of internal divisions. It will be important for secondary powers to do what they can to shore up existing alliances and find new means of promoting

unity. The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine threatens to help destroy the current international order and create a Russia-China bloc that would be in effective opposition to the US-Europe bloc. If this were to occur, Vietnam would be placed in a very invidious position.

## **V. Conclusion**

Although deglobalization would be problematic for every country, it would be particularly difficult for Vietnam to manage because of the state policy of engagement with the world, the presence of an extensive diaspora, and the creation of links with societies and economies internationally. A breakdown of the international system would not perhaps represent an existential threat to the country. It would however put so much pressure on it to deal with other countries, particularly China, on a bilateral basis that, combined with an inevitable decline in standards of living, it would be much more likely that the legitimacy of the current political settlement would be questioned. In the absence of an alternative political infrastructure of parties, policies, and discourse, it is difficult to imagine that this would be a peaceful process. If this takes place at a time of international conflict and even open warfare, it is possible to imagine that Vietnam will be drawn into confrontations in the East (South China) Sea and that these will not end well.

The theoretical framework of the double movement provided by Polanyi has been helpful to an extent in explaining the potential for deglobalization. Globalization may certainly be seen as a revolutionary step forward (although, of course, it the most recent of such revolutions rather than the first) and should provoke an inevitable reaction. The benefits of globalization from the perspective of the Vietnamese state have become embedded in the economic model being pursued and the method by which the country is being modernized. Deglobalization would be a serious blow to these state-level policy goals. The areas of investigation employed in this paper selected according to the eclectic approach do demonstrate some application of the double movement. The

initial movement towards globalization that has taken place over 50 or more years is now in the process of being countervailed by a reverse movement. Vietnam as a state has staked its status on continued globalization and so the reverse movement would be a negative outcome. The paper has shown that at least some of these threats are genuine and depend on forces beyond the control of the Vietnamese state.

It is common at this stage to acknowledge methodological weaknesses in the paper and intimate that further research would be able to solve any such shortcomings. It is certainly true that the paper is being written in media res in the hope that it will be able to make some sense of events as they transpire. Davies (2020) has called this approach, at least as he employed it, “real-time sociology” and claimed a lineage through Gramscian conjunctural analysis and the work of Stuart Hall. I do not make these claims for my own work but I am happy to be in some small way to be associated with it.

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## China's Digital Silk Road in Southeast Asia and Vietnam's Responses from 2015 to 2021



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### [ *Abstract* ]

China launched the Digital Silk Road (DSR) in 2015 as part of the existing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to expand its influence in digital and technological development across Asia, Europe, and Africa. Southeast Asia is one of the key targets of the Digital Silk Road due to its geographical proximity to China and the rapid growth of the digital sphere. Although the DSR opens several potential opportunities for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states to foster the digitalization process in the region, how each country reacts to projects under the DSR is varied. Secondly, Vietnam is the only ASEAN member state that has not signed any official agreement under the BRI framework, and thirdly, Vietnam opted out of Huawei technology. This paper aims to understand the perspective of Vietnam and how Vietnam has responded to the growing technological presence of China in Southeast Asia until 2021. By using qualitative methods, the author argues that the DSR has allowed Beijing to overcome the limitations of the original strategy, BRI, and strengthen its influence in the field of information and communication technologies, particularly

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fifth-generation (5G) telecommunications. Furthermore, the paper examines Vietnam's digital development and digital diplomacy and how the Vietnamese government has responded to DSR projects. In light of both the potential threats and economic benefits that the DSR has brought to Vietnam and Southeast Asian countries, in the last section, the policy implications for cooperation are discussed.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, China, Digital Silk Road, Southeast Asia, digitalization

## **I . Introduction**

Since 2013, China, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, has made significant changes in its foreign policy. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as a multi-continent and multi-ocean infrastructure strategy, reflects the increasing ambition of the Chinese government to strengthen its control over Eurasia. The Digital Silk Road (DSR) is the technology component of the BRI. It embraces many digital areas, including satellites, cables, wireless networks, and so on. The DSR aims to strengthen China's digital capacities in artificial intelligence, big data, and other strategic fields (Hillman 2021). The DSR, however, has not been studied as extensively or in-depth as its parent effort, the BRI, and has gotten less attention than the BRI. It continues to be overlooked both as a government project and as a business endeavour. Even defining the DSR's boundaries is challenging since there is scant literature, mostly vague and occasionally inconsistent. Some government documents define the DSR as those digital technologies that boost connectivity or aid in the development of digital economies. They highlight investments in telecommunications network infrastructure, including 5G, submarine and overland fibre-optic cables, satellite ground stations, data centres, whole-of-system integrated solutions like smart cities and security-sector information systems, and some "over-the-top" applications and financial services (David and Nouwens 2022).

Southeast Asia is one of the key target regions of the DSR. Apart from China's historical influence and geographical proximity,

Southeast Asia is crucial to China in terms of exporting models for data in cyberspace and business. The responses of ASEAN member states to this situation are varied. Some countries generally accept Chinese technologies, while others resist projects under the DSR. Among the member states, Vietnam is arguably the most cautious and sceptical state, although Hanoi has already endorsed the BRI. As such, this paper aims to answer how DSR has been implemented in Southeast Asia, and how the Vietnamese government responded to the risks and opportunities associated with DSR from 2015 to 2021. The findings show that on the one hand, Vietnam has been aware of the economic benefits that the BRI and the DSR could bring to the digitalization process. On the other hand, Vietnamese leaders are also concerned about the political and strategic impacts of the DSR, particularly in light of the ongoing South China Sea conflicts. Until 2021, Vietnam and China had not officially signed any projects under the framework of the BRI. Given the rising influence of China in regional technological development, Hanoi has been adjusting its foreign policy to deal with China's digital diplomacy as well as strengthening its role in the rollout of digital connectivity in Southeast Asia (Le 2018).

In order to understand the dynamics between Vietnam and China, the article first examines the changes and main patterns of the new foreign policy of China under Xi's leadership, with a focus on the digital aspect. The next part discusses how China is implementing the DSR in Southeast Asia, and how it has triggered some concerns from both the Vietnamese and other ASEAN governments. The next and main part of the article focuses on Vietnam's policy responses to China, both directly and indirectly. The last part discusses implications for cooperation and healthy competition between maximizing cooperation with China and reducing the potential risks from the DSR.

## **II. Methodology and Contributions**

The research methods used in this paper are qualitative, including case study design (Vietnam), documents analysis, and discourse

analysis. Qualitative methods were selected to produce rich, complete, and contextual analyses of the topic, particularly when tracing the development and dynamics of DSR in Southeast Asia and its impacts on Vietnam-China relations. First, regarding documents analysis, a wide range of documents were used, including printed and online versions; formal documents such as governmental announcements and strategies; and informal documents to gain background information in Vietnamese, Chinese, and English; and contextual and historical insights into the topic. Key documents include but are not limited to the Vietnam National Digital Transformation Programme by 2025, with an orientation towards 2030; the Fudan University Digital Belt and Road Centre DSR Bluebook 2018; China Key Points in the Work of National Standardization in 2020; the National Standardization Development Outline (China Standards 2035); the ASEAN ICT Masterplan 2020; and the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025. Second, the research also used discourse analysis to evaluate the speeches and announcements of national leaders, governmental officials, and diplomats at bilateral and multilateral dialogues involving parties, including Vietnam, China, and ASEAN. Even though many experts doubt that DSR is a rhetorical concept rather than an umbrella covering all key digital sectors, analyzing the discourses of national leaders and experts from China, Vietnam, and other ASEAN member states also contributed to the understanding of DSR.

As for the contributions of the paper, first, China and Vietnam are two neighboring countries that share distinct political, economic, and social characteristics. It is impossible to thoroughly understand the development of Vietnam, including digital development, without taking into account China-Vietnam relations and China's impact on the economic and political realms. Secondly, since Vietnam can be considered a unique case study in Southeast Asia with the arguably most cautious attitude towards DSR and BRI in general, investigating Vietnam's response can meaningfully contribute to the study of the Digital Silk Road by understanding the drivers, functions, and impacts of DSR before and during the COVID-19 pandemic on Southeast Asian countries. Last but not least, the paper provides more insights for researchers, political leaders, and policymakers. It

draws policy implications on how Vietnam can leverage the opportunities that DSR brought to the country and region and address the risks correctly without exaggerating or overlooking them.

### **III. China's Digital Silk Road: Aims, Scope, and Operations in Southeast Asia**

#### **3.1. China's Foreign Policy Shift in Light of its Technological Rise**

China's foreign policy has undergone drastic changes under the leadership of Xi Jinping. Xi's thought of diplomacy refers to the shift to "major-country diplomacy" with Chinese characteristics (Wang 2018), namely a community with a shared destiny of humankind, win-win cooperation, the development of people, partnerships, and an accurate understanding of justice. The new diplomacy of Xi Jinping marked a departure from Deng Xiaoping's "hide your ambitions and disguise your claws." If Deng's diplomacy reflects realism, particularly his philosophy that "it doesn't matter whether a cat is white or black, as long as it catches mice," Xi's leadership embraces idealistic and moralistic aspects, in which the Chinese Dream is at its core (Wang 2018).

One of the prerequisites to achieving the Chinese Dream is the establishment of new universal norms and moral values in global governance. The rapid growth of big data, the internet, or artificial intelligence has increased the level of interdependence between China and the West. It is aligned with the vision of a community with a shared destiny. Indeed, with its rise in every aspect is the urge to expand its influence across different regions, a recreation of Eurasia.<sup>1</sup> It also aligns well with the current rise of China, which, according to Beeson and Li (2015), is instead a re-emergence. Throughout history, apart from the "hundred years of shame" of being colonized by the West, this country has been the most important center of trade and had huge impacts on Asian countries in terms of culture and politics (Beeson 2009). In the past, Deng

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<sup>1</sup> Eurasia in the paper refers to Asia and Europe spaces, stretching from Portugal to the Bering Strait, from Lapland to Malaysia in the Grand Chessboard of Zbigniew Brzezinski (1998)

Xiaoping announced the strategic guidelines under which China needed to hide capacities and bide time to avoid conflict with the U.S., prevent the risk of being encircled by other countries, and create room for economic development and social stability. Three decades on, along with China's re-emergence, Xi Jinping confirmed in the media that Beijing had moved away from its low-profile foreign policy and started to follow the "fenfa youwei" (striving for achievement) strategy in foreign policy (Xi 2013). In 2014, President Xi asserted that China had become a major power (Jun 2014).

As such, the BRI has become increasingly salient in the foreign policy of China, and the BRI is described as China's Eurasian pivot. The key concept of BRI is connectivity, in which the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), and the Digital Silk Road aim to link a network of roads, railways, and sea routes with technological infrastructure. The focus of this paper, DSR, was introduced in 2015 with the aim of improving China-centered digital infrastructure and strengthening digital connectivity. DSR serves three primary purposes: 1) to promote regional and international connectivity; 2) to innovate traditional industries and increase employment opportunities in recipient countries while promoting dependency on the Chinese digital economy; and 3) to establish a regional community with common interests in various digital industries, particularly in neighboring regions such as Southeast Asia (Digital Belt and Road Centre 2018). China believes that in the process of implementing the DSR, it is necessary to promote the role of the government and international organizations, create top-tier policies, build a transnational cooperation mechanism, and forge alliances on industry cooperation, public service creation, dispute settlement mechanism establishment, increased risk warning and network safety, unification of technical standards, promotion of international standardization cooperation, perfecting the legal system, and building an effective management system (Hoang 2022).

DSR has four main components. The first component is the investment in digital infrastructure in various countries. There are different types of investments, including 5G telecommunications, cellular networks, cables, or data centers. The second component of DSR is the domestic technological development that improves



China's advantages in global trade, supply chain, and military, such as AI, quantum computing, or the satnav system. Thirdly, in order to reduce economic interdependence, Beijing has been improving its e-commerce system by lowering foreign trade borders and building new logistics centers in various regions. Lastly, China has been promoting a digital environment that is favorable for its development through digital diplomacy and global governance, such as the International Telecommunications Union (Cheney 2019).

Fudan University's Digital Belt and Road Center also points out five key aspects of DSR, namely infrastructure, trade, finance, people, and policy. Regarding infrastructure, Chinese telecommunications companies, submarine cables, and cloud computing providers are leading digital infrastructure connectivity across Eurasia. For instance, Huawei is the leading company in 5G telecommunications, with 3325 patents compared to approximately 2000 by Nokia and 2400 by Ericsson (Lytics 2021). Chinese corporations own 60% of the smartphone market in Southeast Asia, including Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Another important aspect of infrastructure are smart cities. China aims to become the new global smart-city provider to BRI recipient countries (Ekman 2019). The second pillar, regarding trade and finance, is closely linked to the Made in China 2025 plan. The Digital Silk Road allows China to gain better access to different markets and provide cheaper digital goods and services to these markets. Furthermore, Chinese companies such as Alibaba also facilitate the development of developing countries in terms of digitalization by connecting these economies to the worldwide e-commerce system, as well as providing finance and fulfilling the needs of developing countries by sponsoring education, training, or digital infrastructure programmes. The last aspect is policy, which refers to China's efforts to change international standards. By establishing themselves as leaders in the field of technology, the Chinese government and Chinese companies have been challenging existing trade and economic regulations set up by the Westphalia consensus. In particular, Beijing wants to become a rule-maker in cyber governance and data management through China Standards 2035 (Dekker 2020). In general, DSR is an important part of China's

strategy to promote its technology and standards across various regions of the world.

Nevertheless, several experts argue that the DSR idea has developed into a catch-all phrase for numerous digital projects that the Chinese government is interested in. Furthermore, there is no exhaustive list of project types that ought to be included in the DSR. Another challenge is that, unlike BRI infrastructure projects, majority of international information and communications technology (ICT) projects carried out by Chinese businesses are not advertised or identified as DSR initiatives. Therefore, instead of being understood as a project or initiative directed or carried out centrally by Chinese ministries in Beijing or as a concept in which all business operations related to the digital economy are grouped together under its rubric, the DSR is best understood as an umbrella branding effort and a narrative for China to promote its global vision across a range of particular key technological sectors. More importantly, despite having its origins in the BRI, the DSR appears to have grown more naturally via the actions of China's domestic technology corporations and ICT sector than as a government-driven program. For this reason, the next part examines the operations of DSR in Southeast Asia in three primary domains: infrastructure, trade finance, and policy.

### **3.2. Digital Silk Road in Southeast Asia: Infrastructure, Trade and Finance, and Policy**

Given the main features of DSR and as one of its main targets, how has Southeast Asia been affected by DSR? Southeast Asia has witnessed the increasing technological influence of China due to the geographical proximity between China and ASEAN countries, the increasing economic growth rate in Southeast Asian countries, and the strategic values and benefits that China can gain from these markets. This section discusses China's presence in three main aspects, namely digital infrastructure, trade and finance, and policy, with a focus on Vietnam.

As reported by *Xinhua News* (2021), China and ASEAN are supposed to witness rapid growth in their combined value of digital

economies, which can reach more than USD 9.5 trillion by the end of 2025. Professor Zhai Kun of Peking University and Yuan Ruichen, researcher of the BRI Big Data Innovation Experimental Project, also emphasised the potential of ASEAN-China digital cooperation, notably in the fields of cybersecurity, digital governance, and e-commerce. While ASEAN has great potential because it is the fastest-growing internet market in the world, Beijing has advanced digital transformation, the biggest market, and a leading digital ecosystem. Bilateral cooperation is critical for digital development on both sides (Zhai and Yuan 2021).

Currently, China has been acting as the main player in the digitalization process in Southeast Asia, with investments in infrastructure, e-commerce platforms, finance, and other fields. In particular, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the Initiative on Building China-ASEAN Partnership on Digital Economy have brought more opportunities for both ASEAN and China in the digital space, such as infrastructure, electronic commerce, and digital financing. Zhai Kun also noted that cybersecurity cooperation should be considered the key field for bilateral cooperation, starting with establishing a multi-level cybersecurity cooperation mechanism to develop a regional governance system (*ibid.*).

China's DSR has always been integrated into bilateral and multilateral dialogues in order to expand policy linkages and enhance trust with other countries in order to accelerate the process of building the DSR. For example, the ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in July 2019 discussed and agreed that digital economic cooperation should be a new focus for both China and ASEAN. At the following 22nd ASEAN-China Summit, China and ASEAN discussed issues affecting standards, application areas, and integrated solutions for smart city technology.

Regarding digital infrastructure, infrastructure building is the core of the Belt and Road Initiative. As such, it is also the key pillar of DSR. China mainly focuses on building telecommunications infrastructure, submarines, and fiber-optic cables to connect Southeast Asia with other regions like South Asia, the Middle East,

Africa, and Europe. Besides, investors from China, including Alibaba and Didi Dache, invested in rising e-commerce companies in the region like Tiki, Lazada, and Grab with the aim of building stable e-commerce platforms in Southeast Asia (Boudreau and Nguyen 2021). Nevertheless, digital infrastructure in this region still lags behind, particularly in less developed member states such as Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos (Zhong 2019).

Regarding trade and finance, as a leading country in the internet and financial services, Beijing has been working on improving the fintech sector. In 2020, China's Ant Group established the mobile payment system in Southeast Asia through its investments in Ascend Money in Thailand, Digital Money in Myanmar, Dana in Indonesia, and Mynt in the Philippines (Iwamoto 2020). Furthermore, the Chinese government has advised Chinese banks to use the RMB as the main currency for the payment system, which helps China become less vulnerable to financial transactions and the supply chain. In 2015, the Central Bank of China established the Cross-Border Interbank System globally with the aim of promoting the RMB across the world (Shen 2019). In 2019, the Chinese government will strengthen its efforts in the five-year blueprint to turn Guangxi into a financial gateway to Southeast Asia. The primary objective of this plan is to promote the use of RMB in Southeast Asian countries by facilitating regional trade, currency transactions, investing, and financing in the Chinese yuan (Pal 2019).

Regarding policy, China has been working on altering the existing standards and establishing new ones in technology and science. Many Southeast Asian countries have not established comprehensive laws and regulations in the digital space, which allows China to convince them to adopt their standards. By exporting Chinese platforms and investing in digital infrastructure through DSR, Beijing has made ASEAN countries more dependent on its technology. For instance, most Southeast Asian countries embrace Huawei, notably the Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Singapore and Indonesia also welcome the operations of Huawei Technologies (Le 2019). Currently, Vietnam is the only ASEAN member state that does not support the operations of

Huawei within its territory. Instead, the Vietnamese government has been working on developing its 5G network by cooperating with a Swedish company, Ericsson. By leading the telecommunications and digital platforms in the region, ASEAN countries are expected to be locked into China's DSR projects and reluctant to switch to other platforms (Le 2019).

China is identified in the Masterplan as the key trade partner that ASEAN needs to include 4.0 technologies in trade facilitation processes (ASEAN 2021a). China has been advocating for the ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which embraces "e-cooperation in the economic, technological, cultural, and political fields" with multi-level diplomatic cooperation at the government and people-to-people level to deal with both bilateral and multilateral issues, and intensive partnerships on the digital economy and technology innovation were mentioned as the key to future growth (Li and Ye 2019). This can be considered an important effort by Beijing to strengthen the presence of DRS in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, according to the survey of Singapore's think tank, The ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, trust in China is very low in ASEAN, and there are concerns that this partnership will blur the strategic autonomy of ASEAN in the physical and digital space (Seth and Seah 2021).

#### **IV. Vietnam's Digital Transformation and its Responses to DSR from 2015-2021**

##### **4.1. Digital Strategy and Digital Diplomacy of Vietnam**

In light of the increasing influence of China in the digital space, Vietnam has been worried about security implications and increasing dependence on China's economy and technology if it embraces DSR. However, previously, state-owned companies from China did have access to telecommunications networks in Vietnam, such as ZTE, when Hanoi developed a 3G network. Since the rise of fourth generation of broadband cellular networks, Vietnam has been working on producing its own base stations as one of the starting points of its national strategy to embrace the Fourth

Industrial Revolution (Zhong 2019). As such, this part will unpack the digitalization process and strategy of the Vietnamese government.

As for domestic development, it is worth noting that previously, Vietnam did not have a comprehensive policy on digitalization. During the past few years, Hanoi has achieved critical milestones in digital transformation. For instance, the digital economy of Vietnam has increased steadily and reached USD 14 billion by 2021 (compared to USD 9 billion in 2018) (VNA 2021a). In 2021, new Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh officially concluded at the first meeting of the National Committee on Digital Transformation that digital transformation is an inevitable trend not only in the country but also on a global scale, especially in the context of facing a dual challenge—both fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and proactively adapting to digital safety and security for socio-economic recovery and development. Furthermore, Vietnam also approved the National Digital Transformation Programme by 2025. As stated in the Digital Transformation Plan through 2025, digital transformation in Vietnam has three main pillars: digital government, digital economy, and digital society (Sameul 2021). While digital governance enhances the digital capacity of the Vietnamese government in every aspect of governance, digital society primarily refers to the digital access and applications for every citizen. The most relevant pillar to Vietnam-China relations, digital economy embraces three main elements, namely the ICT digital economy, platform digital economy, and sectoral digital economy (Thai 2022).

E-commerce platforms and online payment systems like Sendo and MoMo are among the fastest-growing digital subfields in Vietnam. In 2020, e-commerce grew by 18%, and it is expected to rank third in Southeast Asia by 2025 (VNA 2022a). Vietnam also launched the program "Vietnam National Pavilion" on the Chinese JD.com in 2021, which marks the first goods space of Vietnam on a Chinese e-commerce platform (Vietnam News 2021).

Furthermore, telecom is another important field. Currently, Viettel Group is the main company that takes charge of it. This

state-owned enterprise decided not to cooperate with Huawei Technologies and used supplies from Nokia and Ericsson. Other major telecommunications companies, namely Vinaphone and MobiFone, also did not choose to work with Huawei and opted for other partners. (Onishi 2019).

As for foreign policy, at the 13th Party Congress, Deputy Foreign Minister Le Hoai Trung emphasized the importance of the digital aspect of Vietnam's foreign policy. Hanoi still follows three aspects of its foreign policy, namely party, state, and people-to-people, but makes it more modern and comprehensive by expanding the digital aspect of foreign diplomacy (VNA 2022b).

The Vietnamese government demonstrated its understanding of digital diplomacy as the new form of public diplomacy in which ICT and social media channels are tools to foster foreign relations and achieve national interests (VNA 2021a). According to the survey about the role of ICT in public policy, Vietnamese diplomacy practitioners agree that digital diplomacy is becoming increasingly important to the digitalization process in Vietnam. ICT has transformed Vietnam's public diplomacy into an interconnected one, with digital diplomacy being used as a tool to achieve domestic and international policy goals. To be specific, ICT has played an important role in promoting political legitimacy and international reputation. Therefore, any hindrance to the development of digitalization, such as blocking international social media, would paint Hanoi as a restricted and unappealing environment for business and socio-economic activities (Lam 2021).

Furthermore, the Ministry of Information and Communications aimed to improve its training in digital technologies, the digital economy, and society to support the digitalization process in Vietnam. Key fields of technology include AI, cloud computing, a new generation of cellular network technology, robotics, and data management. In terms of the digital economy, key fields are digital banking, payment services, data analysis, digital transactions, and so on (Anh 2020). At the 14th Annual Conference of Deans and Directors of ASEAN+3 Diplomatic Training Institutes, Ambassador Nguyen Nguyet Nga also emphasised the importance of adopting

new approaches and gaining the necessary digital skills to embrace the new challenges and opportunities of digitalization (Vietnam News 2021).

However, similar to its strategy on digital transformation, digital diplomacy is a new field for Vietnamese policy-makers and diplomats, and Hanoi has paid more attention to digital diplomacy to respond to the digital diplomacy of other countries and catch up with the digital transformation at the global and regional level. The next part will discuss how Vietnam has responded to DSR.

#### **4.2. Vietnam's Response to China's Digital Silk Road**

First of all, the Vietnam-China bilateral relationship is very complicated and unsettled. Both countries share the same political ideology and a one-party system, yet they also face several issues such as geopolitical competition and maritime disputes. Although Vietnam has been sustaining and managing its trade and economic cooperation with China, it always finds ways to minimize the influence of China to protect its sovereignty and national interests. Vietnam has been skeptical about BRI and DSR and their political and security implications, despite the economic benefits they might bring to the digitalization process in the country (Le 2020).

Regarding the cooperative side, China is the largest trading partner of Vietnam; Vietnam is the fifth-largest trading partner of China in the world. Therefore, collaborating with China is unavoidable. In many fields, China plays a critical role in the development of Vietnam. For example, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh highlighted the importance of China in promoting its digital economy (Hai 2021). Furthermore, there is a need to foster cooperation with China and Chinese technology companies in other digital fields, including education and training. He emphasized that Vietnam had been aware of the significance of digital transformation and on the path toward a more digitalized economy and society. Furthermore, Vietnam is also an active player in advocating for the ASEAN-China Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (ACFTA), with a focus on e-commerce to promote free trade agreements with both parties (VNA 2022c).



However, the Vietnamese government encountered several challenges in dealing with China in general and the DSR in particular. Both policymakers and international relations analysts in Vietnam often adopt a realistic, practical, and pragmatic approach to China. China's Belt and Road Initiative and later the Digital Silk Road have raised several concerns for Vietnam. As one of China's main geopolitical competitors in Southeast Asia, the geopolitical implications of BRI are clear. Since 2013, China, under the leadership of Xi, has made significant changes in its foreign policy. The BRI, as a multi-continent and multi-ocean infrastructure strategy, reflects the increasing ambition of the Chinese government to strengthen its control over Eurasia. Scholars argued that geopolitical theories, particularly the classical land power theory and sea power theory, have been guiding the foreign policy of China. In 1904, Mackinder predicted that China would become a threat to existing great powers, as it had both sufficient resources and advantages to become a land power and a sea power. With a 9,000-mile temperate coastline and many favorable natural seaports, China has the great potential to serve as the next sea and land great power (Mackinder 1969). Indeed, a century later, Beijing is expanding its influence on sea and land from Asia to Europe and Africa.

Furthermore, during the feudal period, the kings of Chinese dynasties perceived China as the center of the world, and the surrounding countries were vassal states. As one of the so-called vassal states of China, according to the map, it is understandable why Vietnam is often cautious about any projects under the BRI. Since the map of power in modern politics is not simply defined by physical borders but also by control over data, technology, goods, and international standards, the concept of sovereignty is also expanded and associated with critical infrastructure and new technologies (Leonard 2021). DSR allows Beijing to overcome the physical limitations of BRI by applying digital principles and norms in recipient countries. Therefore, once Vietnam officially signs a project under DSR or uses Chinese technologies intensively, there is a high chance that Vietnam will have to adopt China's norms and requirements in cyberspace. It does not only increase the

dependence of Vietnam's economy on China but potentially leads to other risks and negative consequences, such as intelligence gathering or intellectual property infringement. "There were reports that it was not safe to use Huawei. So Viettel's stance is that, given all this information, we should just go with the safer ones," said Le Dang Dung, Viettel's Chief Executive Officer, in an interview with *Bloomberg* (Nguyen 2019). Le Hong Hiep, a reputable Vietnamese scholar at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, also shared the same view: "Vietnam cannot trust China" in the article published on the *Jakarta Post* with the title "Vietnam prefers its mobile networks to be free of Huawei." They cannot risk their critical infrastructure just because they offer something cheaper than other companies (Boudreau 2019).

Another challenge is the US-China trade war and great power competition in general. Vietnam has been following a hedging strategy in which it does not align with the US against China, as PM Pham Minh Chinh said to the Chinese Ambassador to Vietnam: "Vietnam will not side against China"; however, it does not support the operations of DSR-related projects either (Lau 2021). This is the most concrete evidence of Vietnam's diplomacy towards China's growing digital presence in Southeast Asia.

More importantly, the digital application of China-Vietnam cross-border cooperation is also facing serious challenges. Over the past few decades, the disparity and dissonance in the level of use and methods of digital technology management between Vietnam and China at the border gates in the customs clearance process has always been a negative factor for the development of Vietnam. In the content of BRI and DSR cooperation, China clearly stated that it would improve clearance equipment at border gates, speed up the implementation of the one-stop mechanism at border gates, reduce costs, and improve customs clearance capacity. In recent years, the efficiency of managing border trade activities at Vietnam's border gates has been quite low due to not being able to keep pace with China's e-commerce level and the COVID-19 pandemic (ibid.). Vietnam's digital infrastructure equipment and inter-network services have not kept up with the requirements of cross-border trade connectivity, easily leading to congestion of goods and a waste

of time in customs clearance. The trade management by the digital system between two countries is not in sync, which makes it difficult for cross-border trade, including storage, data transfer, and transparency in tariffs. The situation worsened during the pandemic as Vietnam's information system failed to meet China's requirements, which caused spoilage of products for several small businesses (ibid.).

Therefore, Hanoi develops its digital capacity as a solution to being dependent on China's technologies and giant technology companies. The World Bank's report "Digital Vietnam: The Path to Tomorrow" highlights several efforts of Vietnam in the digital revolution, including improving the quality of digital infrastructure, promoting the digital economy by establishing a secure and efficient internet payment system, and harnessing the digital economy (The World Bank 2021). Vietnam is one of the only two ASEAN states that avoids Chinese telecommunications companies. However, instead of signing an agreement with other international vendors like Singapore in 2020, Vietnam chose to build its own 5G network. It is worth noting that Huawei is not the only company that is kept out, but it is also a part of the 5G and national digital transformation plans, which help Vietnam be more competent in cyberspace and less fragile because of the emerging digital standards and norms of China (*Vietnam Investment Review* 2022).

Besides building its own digital capacity, another solution that Vietnam adopted was to diversify its partnerships and collaborations with other countries, such as the US, India, and Switzerland. For example, the Vietnamese Minister of Information and Communications (MIC) and the United Kingdom's Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport have agreed to foster bilateral cooperation in the digital economy and digitalization under the framework of the UK-ASEAN Digital Innovation Partnership. Similarly, Vietnam and Switzerland also agreed to promote digital transformation and high-tech applications in various fields (Nhan Dan Online 2021). In late 2021, India and Vietnam also signed an agreement to facilitate cooperation in the field of technology by enhancing the digital economy, digital government, and tech start-up ecosystems in both

countries (Chaudhury 2021).

Secondly, Vietnam chose to enhance regional collaboration with the ASEAN member states to both collaborate with China and minimize the influence of DSR and Chinese companies in the region. Among various partners, partnerships with the ASEAN Member States still play a fundamental role in dealing with China's digital strategy in the region.

According to the World Economic Forum (n.d.), ASEAN is the fastest-growing digital market globally, and its digital economy is expected to add USD 1 trillion to the GDP of the region in the next ten years. Acknowledging the importance of digital transformation, ASEAN announced the Masterplan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 and the e-ASEAN Framework Agreement as the two key documents to foster intra-bloc cooperation (The World Economic Forum 2021). To be specific, priorities of the ASEAN Digital Masterplan include: 1) Digital infrastructure; 2) Digital transformation; 3) Resilience, Trust, and Security; 4) Digital Policy, Regulation, and Standards; and 5) Cooperation and Collaboration (ASEAN 2022). Vietnam, as a member state of ASEAN and the co-chair of the OECD's Southeast Asia Regional Program, supports and advocates for the implementation of the master plan in the region (VNS 2022). In particular, Vietnam, at the ASEAN-China Special Summit commemorating the 30th year of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations, supported the new partnership framework and called for closer collaboration between the two parties in economics, trade, and investment (VNA 2021b). Moreover, at the 42nd General Assembly of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, incoming State President (and outgoing Prime Minister) Nguyen Xuan Phuc also advocated for ASEAN parliamentary cooperation on AI, robotics, the digital economy, and pro-business e-government. Hanoi also suggested setting up "a pan-ASEAN roaming charge for mobile phones" mechanism, cybersecurity intelligence collaboration, and training skilled manpower in ICT (Nguyen 2021). Indeed, in the past few years, Vietnam has become an active player in regional digitalization. Viettel, a state-owned and largest telecommunications service provider in Vietnam, also operates in three other ASEAN countries.

In Cambodia, the Viettel (Metfone) network covers 97% of the country and accounts for a significant market share. This Vietnamese company also supports Laos in launching a 4G network and improving the rate of data-using customers in Laos to over 49%. In Myanmar, Viettel (Mytel) worked on increasing the internet and telecommunications system across the country from 31% in 2018 to 55% in 2019 (Viettel Group 2020).

In general, it can be concluded that although Vietnam has not had comprehensive digital diplomacy, until the end of 2021, it has been actively working on the domestic digital transformation and enhancing cooperation with other countries within and outside Southeast Asia to respond to the increasing presence of DSR in the region. The last part will discuss the implications of DSR for China-Vietnam relations.

## **V. Implications and Ways Forward for Vietnam-China Digital Cooperation in Southeast Asia**

### **5.1. Implications on Vietnam-China bilateral digital cooperation**

Dr. Le Hong Hiep, a senior research fellow at the Singapore Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, explained that Vietnam does not want to receive Chinese funding because it does not want to be dependent on China, even if it needs more capital for infrastructure development. The root cause lies mainly in the disputes in the South China Sea. Regarding the possibility of implementing DSR in Vietnam in the future, Dr. Pham Sy Thanh, the Director of the Mekong-China Strategic Studies Programme, emphasized that this decision relies more on businesses than on the government. "It will purely depend on the strategy of the companies and not the choice of the government," he said; "Businesses will know what they need to do." (Van and Kim 2021).

However, whether the opportunities are in the hands of government or business, there is still a need to understand DSR in a more comprehensive way in order to maximize efficacy and limit the risks of DSR. More studies about the content and status of

cooperation in the DSR, particularly cooperation with Southeast Asian countries, as well as forecasting the development scenario of the DSR in the region (*ibid.*). These studies should involve relevant ministries, local governments, and ICT companies in Vietnam, and if possible, foreign stakeholders and other governments.

Secondly, Vietnamese telecommunication carriers like Viettel, Mobifone, and VNPT are now capable of building a 5G network without the Chinese companies, as by 2020, they will account for over 95% of the market share. According to the World Bank, in terms of mobile phone usage, it currently compares favorably to peers and aspirational comparable countries, and its people and businesses have good Internet access. All of its provinces are covered by a very advanced digital infrastructure that is financed by national telecommunications corporations that are focused on the future. Additionally, it is home to numerous top-tier IT companies like Apple, Samsung, Intel, etc. This shows how competitive Vietnam is and provides a special platform for local businesses and developers, following the example set by Japan and Korea in the 1970s and 1980s and, more recently, China (Morisset 2021).

Nevertheless, Vietnam still needs to collaborate more with other countries, including China as the front-runner of e-commerce and mobile applications. This is in order to strengthen the national digital capacity and realize the National Digital Transformation Program by 2025 in all three components, namely the digital economy, the digital society, and the digital government. In particular, utilizing digital applications like ordering, shipping, and paying online has become a universal skill for all classes of Chinese residents for more than a decade. Vietnam can carry out training items for high-quality human resources in ICT with both the Chinese government and companies, thereby expanding the scope of digital use in the country. Cooperation in education and training in the digital period is also a recommendation of Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh at the 2021 Global Service Trade Summit. There must be focus on "cooperation in education and training of human resources in the field of human resources, science, and technology that supports workers to gradually adapt to digital technology". It is also covered under the framework of DSR. (Vietnamplus 2021).

Thirdly, it is important to strengthen the digital cooperation between China and Vietnam on cross-border trade as it can serve as the breaking point for the cooperation under the framework of DSR and can gradually build trust between the two sides for further collaborations in other digital fields. In order to foster the digitalization process of the country, Vietnam needs to accelerate the process of completing the digital infrastructure system across the border in order to facilitate the stages of transportation, customs clearance, payment, and control of entry and exit of people and goods. The digital infrastructure system at border gates should be compatible with some basic standards of the Chinese side to maximize the application efficiency of the digital infrastructure system according to digital commercial requirements between the two countries. This is in line with one of the main goals of DSR: digital standard setting, as China has been signing joint initiatives on strengthening standards cooperation on 5G networks, smart cities, and other digital infrastructure, focusing more on the digital economy (Dai 2021). Although agreement on 5G telecommunications has not been feasible at least in the near future, a more coherent cross-border digital system is achievable if greater efforts are made by Vietnam-China border provinces like Lao Cai, Guangxi, Yunnan, Cao Bang, and Ha Giang to facilitate provincial initiatives (VnEconomy 2022).

## **5.2. Implications on Vietnam-China-ASEAN Digital Collaboration in Southeast Asia**

Dealing with DSR and other Chinese policies and initiatives requires regional collaboration given the asymmetry in power and national capacity between Southeast Asian countries and China. There are challenges for both Vietnam and China to strengthen their collaboration with other ASEAN member states and facilitate the operations of DSR in the interest of digital integration and development in Southeast Asia.

From the point of view of ASEAN, all member states have been supporting the cooperation between China and ASEAN. The Year of the Digital Economy in China and ASEAN China-Vietnam Cooperation was launched in 2020 to foster cooperation in the

digital economy during the global pandemic under the chairmanship of Vietnam (Zheng 2020). Still, all of the above-mentioned challenges and concerns remain the same. Therefore, it is necessary for this association to continue to work with China while minimizing the potential risks of DSR in the region.

First, a significant effort in enhancing a regional digitalization process is the ASEAN E-Commerce Association, Public-Private E-Commerce Dialogue, and ASEAN Work Program on Electronic Commerce 2017–2025, where a regional e-commerce value chain is encouraged. ASEAN acknowledges that an E-commerce Framework or ASEAN Agreement on E-commerce is the key to economic growth and economic development, and an official agreement was signed in 2019 and entered into force in December 2021 (ASEAN 2021b).

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated efforts to boost e-commerce growth as a path towards economic recovery. A healthy regulatory environment is crucial for ASEAN countries to penetrate the electronic commerce market more efficiently. This challenge still remains because there is a lack of alignment of standards and regulations across Southeast Asia, and with the participation of Chinese technology firms in the region through the Digital Silk Road, regulatory harmonization is crucial to enhancing regional integration and regional electronic commerce growth (US-ASEAN Business Council 2021). However, in practice, Southeast Asians still take various approaches to security and privacy issues. Among ASEAN members, Indonesia and Vietnam are applying the most far-reaching restrictions on data flows across the region due to data sovereignty and data security (The World Bank 2019). Only three out of ten members, namely Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines, have developed complete data protection statutes, so there is room for regional coherence on data protection laws and regulations (Ingram 2020: 13). The ASEAN Telecommunication Regulators' Council can act as the leading agency by analyzing national regulations from each country, comparing the regulations, and coming up with pan-ASEAN regulations.

Furthermore, digital connectivity at the regional level is still underdeveloped, despite foreign investment from China, Japan, and



other countries. Lack of cargo and commercial flights, ports, and railways currently hinders the digital transformation in ASEAN in general and Vietnam in particular. Telecommunications infrastructure is the most costly to install, particularly for less developed countries in the region such as Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Mobile broadband is also more expensive in these countries than in Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore, which continue to widen the infrastructure development gap between ASEAN member states (*ibid.*). The United Nations (2020) estimated that by 2040, the gap could reach USD 500 million. In light of that, China's telecom companies like Huawei provided cheaper products than their competitors, Nokia and Ericsson. Indeed, affordability can be considered the main reason why many Southeast Asian countries welcome DSR, although they are also worried about the security consequences associated with Chinese companies.

The ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement by 2025 is expected to continue what the e-ASEAN Framework Agreement has highlighted before: the need for improvement of digital infrastructure. "Member States shall enhance the design and standards of their national information infrastructure with a view to facilitating interconnectivity and ensuring technical interoperability between each other's information infrastructure" (ASEAN 2003). In the ASEAN Digital Masterplan, the ASEAN Secretariat also noted that the second series of outcomes for this plan is "An excellent telecommunications infrastructure is at the heart of any digital transformation. Achieving this outcome ensures that telecommunications infrastructure in ASEAN is upgraded to higher data rate capabilities and resilience in a timely and cost-effective manner and that its coverage is extended into rural areas" (ASEAN 2021a). However, how to implement it is the big question because of the lack of infrastructure financing. Apart from cooperating with each other, diversifying the sources of funding to improve digital infrastructure in the region is another priority, notably with Japan, Korea, and other RCEP countries, to establish a Digital Economy Partnership Agreement with them. It requires more multilateral, regional, and bilateral cooperation mechanisms by hosting meetings with potential stakeholders around the world. Besides, Southeast

Asia can also receive financial aid from international institutions; for example, the Asian Development Bank established the ASEAN Infrastructure Fund solely for the ASEAN member nations to develop infrastructure in Southeast Asia (ADB n.d.).

Nevertheless, DSR should still be considered a potential source of funding for digital connectivity and infrastructure in the future, even though there are some national cybersecurity and geopolitical concerns regarding Chinese technology. Given the fact that China's economy is operating under socialist market economy principles, investments and business activities overseas by Chinese companies are primarily motivated by market-oriented strategies for increased market shares and maximum profits. Therefore, even though their investment can be influenced or facilitated by DSR, it does not necessarily support the Chinese government in achieving its goals, as we can see in the case of Tiktok (He 2022).

Vietnam has been one of the leading actors, along with Singapore and Indonesia, in the digitalization process. The paper identifies two main issues that hinder Vietnam from cooperating with the rest of the ASEAN member states. The first problem is the fear of digital authoritarianism. Since Vietnam and China share the same type of political system, the US has been accusing China of conducting intelligent activities within and outside its territory. It is reported that the mobile application called "MFSocket" allows Chinese police to extract data from users' phones (Wang 2020). Looking at the case of Vietnam, the government seems to be attracted by the strategy of promoting and subsidizing state-owned technology companies like China. Moreover, in 2018, Vietnam ratified its cybersecurity law, which requires tech giants to store all data in Vietnam and allows the government to control various media platforms and business activities to some extent. It does raise the same concerns on cybersecurity and data storage for the rest of the ASEAN countries. Even if Viettel was successful with its own 5G network, other countries choosing it over Huawei Technologies is still a question. Second, there is a growing gap within ASEAN, in which some countries, such as Cambodia, strongly support China and DSR projects in the region.

Disagreements are likely to happen in the future, particularly from Vietnam's side as the most cautious member state of ASEAN, like the way Cambodia blocked the ASEAN joint statement in 2016 (Mogato 2016). As such, finding a common ground within the association to collaborate with China is crucial. In practice, this is hardly achievable given the varying degrees of engagement of each ASEAN country with China. However, given the fact that ASEAN has been trying to institutionalize cooperation in the field of digitalization with the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025, the ASEAN Framework on Digital Data Government, the ASEAN Data Management Framework, and the ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy 2021-2025, it is still feasible for ASEAN to institutionalize its cooperation with China under the framework of DSR in the post-COVID 19 world.

## **VI. Conclusion**

As a part of the grand strategy on infrastructure, the Digital Silk Road has contributed to the increasing presence and influence of China in Southeast Asia in different ways, including digital infrastructure, digital economy and trade, and policy. During the past 6 years, from 2015 to 2021, DSR has allowed China to become the main provider of the 5G network in several ASEAN countries, promoting the use of online payment systems and Chinese currency, as well as gradually applying Chinese standards in member states' economies. In its three focus areas in Southeast Asia, namely infrastructure, trade-finance, and policy, DSR has allowed Chinese technology companies to access Southeast Asian markets and increase their influence in those countries, although it is not necessarily that those companies always support the agenda or geopolitical goals of the Chinese government, as some overstatements from a number of scholars suggest. In short, despite having its roots in the BRI, the DSR appears to have developed more as a result of technological developments and technology companies in China than as a result of a government-driven initiative.

As one of the leading players in digitalization and one of the two countries that rejected Huawei Technologies in ASEAN, Vietnam's response as studied in this paper contributes to the literature of China-ASEAN and Vietnam-ASEAN relations. Furthermore, the technology field is relatively new; hence, there is a lack of in-depth research on Vietnam's response to DSR. As such, this paper fills a gap in the existing literature. In principle, apart from strengthening its national digital capacity, particularly in terms of the 5G network, and fostering collaborations with ASEAN Member States and other partners, Vietnam still needs to collaborate with China in order to facilitate the digitalization process. On the one hand, Hanoi has been very cautious about the geopolitical implications and cybersecurity risks of DSR and Chinese companies. On the other hand, Vietnam also collaborates with China, both bilaterally and multilaterally, under the framework of ASEAN and other international forums.

In light of that, the last part discusses the implications and future directions for the digital collaborations between China and Vietnam and China-Vietnam-ASEAN at large. The cooperation between Vietnam and China plays a crucial role in enhancing Vietnam's digital capacity, particularly in terms of mobile applications, e-commerce, and cross-border trade. In order to leverage opportunities from DSR and enhance regional digital integration, a more institutionalized and cohesive framework for the digitalization process and coordination, both within the 10 member states and with external partners like China, is needed, particularly in the post-COVID-19 world.

As a reminder, the primary contribution of this research is that it allows us to have a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of Vietnam's viewpoint and response to the Digital Silk Road. Future research may also look at the viewpoints and diplomacy of other ASEAN countries to compare with the Vietnamese approach, which will benefit the research on ASEAN-China digital cooperation in general.

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## **“Say Hello to Vietnam!”: A Multimodal Analysis of British Travel Blogs**



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### **[ Abstract ]**

This paper reports the findings of a multimodal study conducted on 10 travel blog posts about Vietnam by seven British professional travel bloggers. The study takes a sociolinguistic view to tourism by seeing travel blogs as a source for linguistic and other semiotic materials while considering language as situated practice for the social construction of fundamental categories such as “human,” “society,” and “nation.” It borrows concepts from Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics for interpersonal metafunction to develop an analytical framework to study how the co-occurrence of text and still images in these travel blog posts formulated the portrayal of Vietnam as a tourism destination and indicated the main sociolinguistic features of the blogs. The analysis of appreciation values and interactive qualities encoded in evaluative adjectives and still images show that Vietnam is generally portrayed as a country of identity and diversity. It provides tourists with positive experiences in terms of places of interest, food and local lifestyles and is cost-competitive. Strangerhood and authenticity are two outstanding sociolinguistic features exhibited in these travel blog posts. The findings of this study also

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underline the co-contribution of the linguistic sign, in this case evaluative adjectives, and the visual sign, in this case still images, as interpersonal meaning-making resources. To portray Vietnam, still images served as integral elements to evidence the credibility of verbal narrations. To unveil sociolinguistic characteristics of travel blogs, still images supported the linguistic realizations of authenticity and strangerhood on the posts, and in some case delivered an even stronger message than words. Not only does the study present a source of feedback from international travelers to tourism practice in Vietnam, but it also provides insights into multimodal analysis of tourism discourse which remains an under-researched area in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** travel blogs, multimodal analysis, appreciation, still images, sociolinguistics

## I . Introduction

The practical motivation for this research lies in the fact that tourism plays an essential role in the economic structure of Vietnam and so, understanding how Vietnam is portrayed and appreciated as a tourism destination in travel blog posts, may assist in the promotion of Vietnam travel. The statistics by the World Travel and Tourism Council (2021) has shown that after two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism sector has suffered great losses with its contribution to global GDP plunging by nearly half compared to the 10.4% of world GDP in the year 2019. While 2021 saw some improvements, tourism stakeholders are working hard on adaptive solutions to recover the industry.

For Vietnam, tourism is a key component in the country's strategic development scheme. To some extent, positive results have been achieved. In 2018, Vietnam was ranked by the United Nations World Travel Organization as the third fastest growing destination in the world. Being honored twice with the World Travel Award as Asia's leading destination (in 2018 and 2021), the country has been chosen by an increasing number of international tourists as a

destination for their leisure pursuits and discovery of Asian cultures. More efforts are being made, especially for the post-pandemic recovery. For example, Decision No 147/QĐ-Ttg signed on January 22, 2020 identifies the general objectives to Vietnam tourism as:

By 2030, tourism will have become a spearhead and sustainable economic sector. Vietnam will have become a particularly attractive destination, in the top 30 countries with the world’s leading tourism competitiveness, meeting sustainable development goals.

To realize such objectives, it is important that tourism policy-makers as well as travel agencies be proactive about the growth and preservation of their industry. Over the difficult years of the Covid-19 pandemic, the importance of maintaining prospective travelers’ interest in the country has been emphasized. This can be realized through efforts to encourage digital transformation in the tourism sector so as to get ready for restarting safe tourism activities, and possibly, word-of-web communications that recount positive tourism experiences in Vietnam. This leads to many questions. For example, is there a consistent picture of Vietnam in online travel reviews? Among discussions about Vietnam tourism on travel blogs, are the appreciations positive or negative? And do posts on travel blogs show an inclination for authenticity and uniqueness, or are there cultural and ideological clashes that the travelers experienced during their Vietnam trips?

On considering travel blogs as a source for data collection to answer the above questions, it was discovered that travel bloggers communicate their messages through an integrated use of texts and media. The more embedded media factors like images and videos are in the blog posts, then the clearer the picture of the destination is depicted, which may ultimately leave an impact on “the reader’s travel choice and decision-making process” (Cacchiani 2014: 196, cited in Denti 2015: 49). Such co-occurrence of, and interrelation between visuals and texts, methodologically imply that the analysis of travel blogs can be conducted on both of these modes of meaning-making, and that there might be significant findings from such a multimodal analysis.

The fact that more and more people are blogging about, responding to, and sharing travel-related contents about Vietnam indicates that blog posts can provide rich information to construct a portrayal of Vietnam and offer valuable data for linguistic study. However, to date, not many research works have focused their objectives on linguistic analysis of travel blogs (Orlando 2009; Fina 2011; Cappelli 2012), particularly travel blogs about Vietnam. This is the gap that this study will address. It investigates British travel bloggers' textual and visual accounts of their experience of travel in Vietnam in order to construct a portrayal of Vietnam and highlight the sociolinguistic perspective of tourism discourse which are reflected in their accounts. It seeks answers to two research questions:

- (1) Which domains of Vietnam tourism were appreciated in the travel blog posts about Vietnam?
- (2) Which sociolinguistic feature(s) of tourism discourse are prominent in these travel blog posts?

## **II . Theoretical Background**

### **2.1. A Social Semiotic Approach to Multimodal Analysis in English**

Multimodality is an interdisciplinary approach which attributes communication and representation to more than one communication mode. As recognized by numerous linguists, all communication is inherently multimodal with various semiotic systems complementing each other for meaning-making (Matthiessen 2006: 1; O'Halloran 2011: 120; Andersen and Boeriis 2012: 75).

The development of multimodality have been significantly influenced by Halliday's Systemic-Functional Linguistics (hereafter SFL) and social semiotics approach. Halliday (1978) holds that every sign serves three meta-functions simultaneously: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. These are umbrella concepts, and it would be impossible to work on every single aspect of each meta-function encoded in the text and the images. Instead, a sensible selection should be made in terms of which meta-function



to take on, and which SFL frameworks to be adopted for data collection and analysis. For example, to understand the interpersonal meta-function, particularly evaluation domains, a conceptual and analytical framework that integrates elements of the Appraisal Theory (Martin and White 2005) and the Grammar of Visual Design (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) may work.

In addition, according to Kress (2010), the goal of social semiotic approaches to multimodality is to broaden the social interpretation of language and its meanings to include the means of representation and communication of a particular culture. Like the meanings of speech, the meanings of multimodal signs are shaped by the social origins, motives, and interests of people who create the signs in specific social circumstances. As multimodality proves crucial in the process of change and innovation, multimodal analysis is feasible for the examination of tourism discourse in general and travel writings in particular.

## **2.2. The Language of Tourism from a Sociolinguistic Perspective**

Tourism discourse can be characterized by its being expressive, emotive, and affective in both verbal and visual modes. These functions can be realized through the use of lexico-grammar devices and appropriate choices of camera shots, angles, and modality. Tourism discourse is conditioned to reflection and self-reflection of its participants, whose verbal behavior mirrors and influences their social behavior. It is characterized by four major theoretical perspectives:

- *The authenticity perspective* is connected with the work of MacCannell (1989), who claims that the tourists’ main motivation is the search for authenticity (cited in Dann 1996: 7-11) although, for the sake of tourism, the real life of the Others has been largely manipulated and commercialized.
- *The strangerhood perspective* emphasizes that a driving motivation for travelling is the search for strangeness and new experiences (Dann 1996).
- *The play perspective* treats tourism as a game and

provides tourists with special experiences, which do not often match cultural and natural conditions of the visited destinations (Dann 1996).

- ***The conflict perspective*** concerns differences between the provided thrilling experience and the authentic past and present of the visited areas and their inhabitants (Hollinshead 1993, cited in Dann 1996).

The sociolinguistic treatment of tourism, until now, often draws on the content of promotional tourism media, such as brochures, magazines, pamphlets, booklets, and guidebooks. Recently, the rising popularity of travel blogs, a genre of tourism discourse, together with the richness of travel contents being shared in the blogosphere, has triggered the possibility of travel blogs themselves being a terrain for sociolinguistic inquiry.

### **2.3. Travel Blogs and Sociolinguistic Inquiry**

The advent of technology has brought about substantial changes in the ways that travel experiences are shared. What previously could only be found in special columns of travel magazines have now yielded to digital narration available on personal travel blogs and online travel communities. The birth and development of the travel blogosphere has allowed travelers, within just a few clicks, to keep a record of their travel experiences both textually and visually, discuss the experiences with ex-travelers of the destinations, and share them with future travelers.

Travel blogs belong to the informal category of tourism text. They are personal accounts being published online, and therefore they do not follow any specific criteria for publication. Travel blogs facilitate two-way communication, playing the role of a “customer-to-customer” communication platform, and can be characterized as of informative, descriptive, persuasive, and advisory functions. Travel blog posts focus on a number of topics such as history, nature, entertainment, food and drink, and so on, and they have distinctive linguistic features.

As D'Egidio (2014) summarizes, linguistically, narration on

travel blog posts is in the first person, consisting of many positive and negative expressions, and conveying the writer’s subjectivity regarding various aspects of the destination as well as their cultural needs and expectations. Posts on travel blogs often include both textual and multimedia materials, such as photos, videos, and hyperlinks. They contribute to the communication of the message, complementing each other in the manipulation of the readers. The persuasive force which drives tourists towards destinations and cultural assets is achieved through a set of discursive linguistic and visual strategies. Practically, travel blogs intend to “make see,” by means of description and images, “make know,” by narration and practical information, and “make do,” by means of advice.

Francesconi (2014) and D’Egidio (2014) explain why consultation with travel blogs before making travel decisions has gained much popularity. First, they offer up-to-date information. Second, since the travel bloggers have been considered “unmediated witnesses to the events, places, services or facilities they describe” (Francesconi 2014: 64), the stories they tell are perceived as a more reliable and “real” source of information than promotional guidebooks or brochures. Finally, although bloggers may consciously or unconsciously remediate both “pre-figured, mediatized representations and embodied, mediated actions” (Thurlow and Jaworski 2014: 471) while narrating their experiences, blog readers actually look for those evaluations and pieces of advice when they consider traveling to a certain destination.

The more popular they become, the richer the data that travel blogs can provide for analysis. Given that not much has been done on this subject (Orlando 2009; Fina 2011; Cappelli 2012), it was reasonable for this research to collect multimodal data from travel blogs for analysis and the accomplishment of its research aims.

### **III. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Data Criteria**

Data for the study were taken from 10 blog posts by seven British

professional travel bloggers who were referred to as B1, B2, B3, B4, B5, B6, and B7 in order to retain their anonymity. The group of seven British professional travel bloggers were selected based on a number of criteria that singled them out from other bloggers.

Firstly, prior to Covid-19, 2017-2018 tourism statistics show that compared to other countries in Europe, the UK held the second largest number of arrivals to Vietnam, after Russia, so it made sense to focus on travelers that originate from this English-speaking country. British travelers are among representatives of Western culture. While this article has no intention to discuss cultural issues, this choice ensures the reliability of applying Grammar of Visual Design since Kress and van Leeuwen have made clear that to them, visual language is culturally specific, and their theory applies to all forms of visual communication within Western visual designs (2006: 20). Second, they should be professional bloggers so that they abide by an unregulated ethical code, and the language use on their blog posts should be appropriate to a general public. As professional writers, they are supposed to be more careful in choosing language and visuals that exactly reflect their appreciation. Third, they are in the 25-45 age group, which implies that they are generally presenting mature views on the social situations which they experienced and encountered, and that they take responsibility for their evaluations and assessments. In addition, this age group fits in well with their main audience as frequent internet users and also between 20 and 45 (Kassegn and Sahil 2020). Next, they had to travel to Vietnam themselves and set foot in destinations in the northern, central, and southern regions of Vietnam so that their experience of the country was not biased or distorted due to the lack of exposure to local communities. Further, although their posts may contain affiliate links to tourism service providers, the posts being selected for study must not be written-to-order by any organizations, which will otherwise be expressed in a “disclaimer” under each post. Finally, their posts concerning Vietnam and reflecting their experience of leisure and heritage tourism must all date from 2014 to 2022 so as to provide up-to-date information about Vietnam.

To be included in the data set, posts on these seven travel

blogs had to recount the bloggers’ exposure to different parts of the country, and/or be a form of itinerary that they themselves followed when in Vietnam. Posts should not be giving tips about or describing a small aspect of a particular destination. In terms of data, there must be both texts and still images in the blog post. Interactive media, such as livestream clips, embedded clips from video hubs, or promotional videos, however, should not appear on the chosen posts because it may interfere with the interactive meaning making of the visuals in the posts.

### **3.2. Collection of Multimodal Data**

Since the focus of the study is on “static” texts, namely travel blog posts, the data were readily available. The major problem was that there were so many travel blogs. This was solved by firstly making a list of the 50 most popular travel blogs by British writers and then keying their information in a matrix with the abovementioned criteria. By doing so, from the initial list, the data log was narrowed to seven travel blogs (B1 to B7) to be included in this study.

Then, each post about Vietnam in the data log was put under many instances of viewing. Data sampling was conducted purposively in the sense that multiple layers were adopted to screen out the most suitable posts for the database. I engaged closely with the collected posts, sometimes covering one mode and focusing on the other and asking myself “what sense can I make of this text if I cannot see the images?” and vice versa. I focused on outstanding features but was always ready to return to the data pool to test the analysis of the selected extracts or incidences against it. By this step, the number of blog posts included was limited to 10 posts on seven travel blogs.

### **3.3. Description of Data**

As explained above, data for this study comprised 10 posts on the travel blogs which date from 2014 to 2022 and reflect the bloggers’ experience of leisure and heritage tourism. The database consisted of both words and still images. The text part of the database had 21,062 words, of which 256 are adjectives that

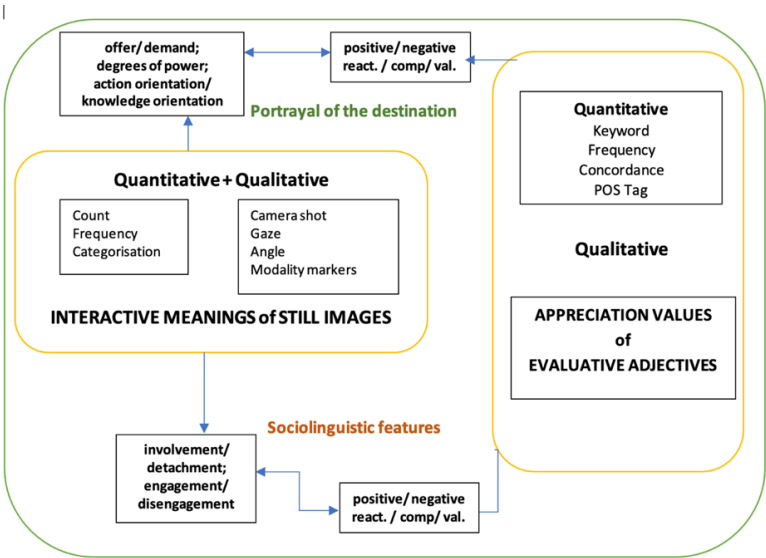
appeared 1162 times in total. The still image part of the database had 133 photos. A summary of word counts and photo counts from each blog is presented hereafter.

<Table 1> Summary of word and photo counts

Posts by...	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	B6	B7
<b>TEXTS</b> <i>Total:</i> <b>21,062 words</b>	2362	1337	2703	2828	3572	5035	3225
<b>PHOTOS</b> <i>Total:</i> <b>133 photos</b>	26	8	15	29	22	15	22

3.4. Analytical Framework

The framework below was constructed to find out how the appreciation values of evaluative adjectives (linguistic resource) and the interactive meanings of still images (visual resource, with attention being paid to contact, social distance, attitude, and certain markers of modality) were put under analysis to construct a portrayal of the destination and draw out the sociolinguistic features in the travel blog posts.



Martin and White (2005) categorize *appreciation* into three types: reaction, composition, and valuation, each of which could be further identified as either positive or negative. Adjectival use can express reaction to impact or quality by answering the question “did it grab me?” and “did I like it?” They can also explain the composition in terms of balance and complexity, or address the worthiness of the appraised items. As in travel blog posts, the use of adjectives can indicate how interesting the object is, i.e. the reaction to impact. It evokes certain aesthetic feelings that the bloggers may have experienced at the site, making the site even more or less desirable, i.e. the reaction to composition. It also allows readers of the post, who may be potential travelers, to compare the appraised item with others of the same category and position it in a scale, i.e. the reaction to valuation.

Among three elements that Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) regard as essential to the analysis of a visual, interactive meanings are a range of ways of semantically relating interactive participants. An image has with it a contact/image act, a social distance and an attitude. Such meanings can be expressed with the choice of camera shot and angle, participants’ gaze, and certain modality markers. An image, with its image act, i.e., whether an image offers information or demands a response or reaction, the degrees of power, and certain modality markers, can interact with the appreciation values of adjectival phrasing to portray a destination. Similarly, the degrees of involvement and engagement encoded in the image can contribute to the expression of the four sociolinguistic features in tourism texts.

### 3.5. Quantitative and Qualitative Content Analysis

The study was conducted quantitatively and qualitatively. First, data from each post were color-coded before going through a cleansing process. I then extracted a key word list from the text body to identify the aspects of Vietnam being narrated in the posts, and ranked the frequency of key words also to establish which aspect(s) were most mentioned. Next, I tagged the parts of speech for the text body to filter out the adjectives and created a list of evaluative adjectives. To present the analysis of appreciation, I resorted to the

coding system by Martin & White (2005).

+    positive appreciation value		-    negative appreciation value	
reac			
qual			
imp			
comp			
val			

For example, by using the coding system above, I coded *+reac* for positive reaction; and *-val* for negative evaluation. A more detailed list includes such codes as *+qual/-qual*, *+imp/-imp*, *+comp/-comp*, and *+val/-val*. In the extracted data for analysis, adjectives to show appreciation would be in bold and italicized. The analysis of an extract like

“... ***Delicious*** street food... ... slurped on ***heartly*** beef Pho... My first Vietnamese iced coffee (***super strong, so delicious!***)” (B4)

may result in a table as follows.

Appraised	Appraising item	Appreciation
Food	<b><i>Delicious</i></b> street food	<i>+qual</i>
	<b><i>Super strong</i></b> coffee	<i>+imp</i>

Since visual materials in a blog post can combine with verbal description to tell the blogger’s appreciation of the destination, the analysis of still images in the database focused on answering two questions:

- Who/What are the represented participants in the images?
- What message(s) – interactive meanings could be sent to the audience with these images?



The identification of represented participants in the images depend largely on what has been previously described verbally (appraising items). The interactive meanings were analyzed by using the toolkits by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 148-149).

## IV. Result and Discussion

### 4.1. An Initial Sketch of Vietnam in the Travel Blog Posts

The bloggers B1, B2, B3, B4, B5, B6, and B7 started their Vietnam trip either in Ho Chi Minh City (Ho Chi Minh City) or Hanoi, suggesting that these two metropolitan centers are the hubs to explore neighboring areas like the Mekong Delta, Ha Long Bay, or Sapa. They experienced different lengths of stay to discover the country, from one week to six weeks. They all stated that their time in Vietnam had been well spent and recommended a longer time or a more relaxed tour to discover the destinations to the fullest.

All 10 blog posts in the data collection started with a brief introduction about Vietnam before recounting the trip and/or describing different aspects of the country. A scan of adjectives presented at the beginning of each post shows that in these posts, Vietnam was portrayed as a vibrant place which features diversity.

... *bustling* Saigon.... the *lush* vegetation of the Mekong Delta, ... the *charming* town of Hoi An .... *chaotic* Hanoi with its distinct French flair, ... the *beautiful* hillside town of Sapa... (B1)

...*chaotic* streets of Ho Chi Minh, and Hanoi, Vietnam’s deep history, *delicious* food,... one of the world’s most *pristine* natural wonders, Ha Long Bay... (B3)

... an *interesting* place with bustling cities, floating markets, terraced green rice fields and white sandy beaches. (B6)

Vietnam is a *magical* place, with so much culture and cool things to do. (B7)

The use of opposite adjectives such as “bustling” and “lush,” “charming” and “chaotic,” and so on entails visible contrast

between a Vietnam of bustle and hustle and a Vietnam of beautiful nature.

The choice of title photos in the blog posts contributed to the initial sketch of Vietnam.

<Table 2> Some title photos of the blog posts

	
<i>Vietnamese lifestyle (B1)</i>	<i>Dawn in Lagoon, Hue (B3)</i>
	
<i>A woman in Ninh Binh (B5)</i>	<i>Ho Chi Minh City Post Office (B7)</i>

Among the seven bloggers, B3 and B7 used stock photos while the rest posted their own original or processed photos. Represented participants and interactive participants in these photos depict a variety of aspects of Vietnam, ranging from Vietnamese cultural identity (B1) to the scenic landscapes of smaller cities and towns (B3, B4, B6), places in metropolitan areas (B7), and local countryside people in their daily work (B5), all of which characterize a country of identity and diversity.

In short, the initial impression from the blog posts was that Vietnam was a destination of interesting contrasts, which was promising for further discovery when travelers exposed themselves more to and cast an intent gaze on the destination.

## 4.2. Appreciation of Vietnam as a Tourism Destination

By means of extracting a keyword list and a frequency ranking list for the text body, and categorizing still images in the blog posts by themes, a consistent correlation was revealed between the distribution of the photos in use and the text body with regards to the domains for appreciation. Accordingly, **places** are the most commonly appreciated domain, followed by **activities** that the bloggers experienced at the destination, the lifestyle of the **local people**, local **cuisine**, and finally **accommodation**. The text body has 21,062 words, with 256 adjectives, many of which were used repeatedly and contributed to 1162 counts of total occurrence in the database (*delicious*, *good* [food], *beautiful* [scenery], *crazy* [traffic], *fascinating* [country, history], to name but a few). With regards to the visual resources, there were 133 still images, the breakdown of which by bloggers and themes is presented in Table 3. Since photos of places might contain local people or the bloggers engaging in some activities, the number of photos as pictured in the table comprise more counts than there are actually in the database.

<Table 3> Photo distribution, by bloggers and themes

Bloggers	Places	The bloggers in activity	Food	Local people	Accommodation
B1	8	6	1	5	2
B2	6	2	0	1	0
B3	11	0	0	4	0
B4	11	7	3	5	3
B5	10	9	0	4	0
B6	12	0	1	2	0
B7	15	0	1	4	2
TOTAL	73	24	6	25	7

A comparison between the number of running words and the number of images in these blog posts show that texts play the main role and still images play a subordinate role in recounting the experience of the travelers. In other words, still images act as evidence of “been there, done that” to clarify the textual account.

4.3. Appreciation of Places to Visit

Analysis of the text body shows that Hoi An and Ha Long Bay were the two most favorite places. While Hoi An received positive impact and quality reactions for its cultural richness, Ha Long Bay was loved for its natural beauty. Other places that were appreciated for natural beauty were Sapa and Phu Quoc. For Sapa, it was its breath-taking a mountainous character that left a great impact on the bloggers; on the contrary, Phu Quoc was complimented for its spectacular ocean feel. As for the rest of the destinations, there were mixed appreciations. Hue City, although valued for its historic nature, received negative appreciation in terms of its commerciality, which was attributed to the crowded cafes, street entertainment and market vendors along the Perfume River at night. Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City shared common negative appreciation for their hustle and bustle, together with hygienic problems in certain areas while possessing distinguished features that were appreciated positively. Ho Chi Minh City left a strong and consistent impact because of its “crazy” city life that moves very fast while Hanoi was noted for a distinct flair of culture and history under a messy, chaotic, and sometimes, indifferent cover. Hanoi and Nha Trang received higher counts of negative appreciation than other destinations on the list.

Adjectives expressing valuation, composition, and reaction are found in this theme. “Beautiful” and “unique,” for example, are confirmation of quality (the answer to the question “did I like it?”) and value (the answer to the question “was it worthwhile?”), while “different” exhibits the composition balance property (the answer to the question “did it hang together?”). Examples of appreciated destinations can be seen in the table below.

<Table 4> Appreciation values - places

Appraised	Appraising Items	Appreciation
Hoi An	<i>charming</i> town (B1) probably one of the <i>prettiest</i> towns (B2) the <i>exotic</i> orient that we Westerners dream of discovering (B5)	+imp +qual +comp
Ha Long Bay	the most <i>beautiful</i> place in the world (B7) this <i>magical</i> landscape (B4)	+qual +val

Appraised	Appraising Items	Appreciation
Ho Chi Minh City & Mekong Delta	<i>Crazy</i> city life (B7) <i>bustling</i> Saigon (B1) <i>Buzzing</i> (B5)	+imp +imp +imp
Nha Trang	<i>crazy</i> party life (B7) [Nha Trang] <i>doesn't</i> offer <i>much</i> in terms of culture (B1) a fairly <i>decent</i> city beach and nightlife (B2) <i>touristy, characterless</i> (B4)	+imp neg +qual  +val -val, -imp
Hanoi	I <i>didn't</i> feel very <i>inspired</i> to go out ... (B1) <i>chaotic</i> Hanoi with its <i>distinct French</i> flair (B5) ... <i>isn't</i> the most <i>friendly</i> or <i>relaxing</i> place to start ... (B4) Hanoi is a <i>tough</i> city to love (B6)	neg +val -comp, +imp neg +imp neg +comp, -comp

Together with verbal description and evaluation of places, still images play an indispensable part in helping the audience of blogs to visualize the destinations. Photos of places without the co-presence of people accounted for the largest number and appeared in all posts. There are 57 photos which fit in this category, all of which were taken in long shot, from a far or very far distance, from low or eye-level angles. The ones listed below could demonstrate this kind of consistency in *places* photos.

<Table 5> Places of interest

 <p>Hoi An's Old town (P3 – B6)</p>	 <p>City view from Chill SkyBar, Ho Chi Minh City (P4 – B4)</p>
 <p>Ha Long Bay (P5 – B2)</p>	 <p>Nha Trang beach (P6 – B1)</p>

The long shot in photos of places and destinations represents an impersonal relationship between the travelers and the destination. The photos are to show travelers' objectivity in description. They persuade readers that what they have described textually are original and worthwhile, which realizes the *valuation property* of the evaluative adjectives in the text body. For example, Photo 3 compliments Hoi An as a colorful and picturesque Old Town; Photo 4 shows off Ho Chi Minh City as a vibrant city; Photo 5 accompanies texts that describe Ha Long Bay as a must-visit; and Photo 6 illustrates the characteristic of Nha Trang as a "beach town" with clean sand and wide beaches. The photos visualize the characteristics expressed by the list of evaluative adjectives *beautiful*, *amazing*, and *spectacular*.

#### 4.4. Appreciation of Activities to Do

Together with describing the places they set foot in, the bloggers provided a narrative of the activities in which they engaged in each place and provided evaluations of their experiences. Appreciation of activities was expressed with diversified adjectives. For example, **visiting markets** for shopping or gazing at local people's lifestyle, a popular activity in Hanoi, Hoi An, Sa Pa, the Mekong Delta and Ho Chi Minh City, was mentioned 21 times in the corpus, with different adjectives to characterize them.

[Ho Chi Minh City] the *bustling* Ben Thanh Market (B4)

[Ho Chi Minh City] – Ben Thanh market] the *massive* market (B5)

[Hoi An] ...a trip to the local market to pick up *fresh* food... (B5)

[Hanoi Night Market] ... well worth a walkthrough for the *chaotic* atmosphere... (B5)




While Ben Thanh market in Ho Chi Minh City was suggested to be a must-visit and appraised for its being *massive* (+*comp*) and *bustling* (+*imp*), the local market in Hoi An was appraised for its *fresh* food (+*qual*) and the night market in Hanoi was where travelers could enjoy a *chaotic* atmosphere (+*imp*).

Other activities varied according to the destination characteristics. Nha Trang and Phu Quoc both featured seaside breaks, but Nha Trang had more nightlife. Da Lat did not have much to offer apart from the cool climate, a walk around the lake, and a coffee in the street while “people-watching.” Hue might be attractive to those who love history; however, all bloggers mentioned it as a stop for them on the way to Hoi An, with the best part of all being the motor ride across Hai Van Pass. Positive impact reaction was decoded from the bloggers’ use of the evaluative adjective “exhilarating” to describe the ride.

...an *exhilarating* ride, with *staggering* views, and is one of the *most fun* things I’ve ever done. (B3)

Turning to the still images, there are 23 of them in the photo database featuring the bloggers taking part in activities at the destination. Here are some examples.

<Table 6> The bloggers in activities

		
<p>Rowing a boat in Ha Long Bay (P11 – B1)</p>	<p>Taking a cooking class in Hoi An (P8 – B5)</p>	<p>Trekking through Sa Pa valley (P12 – B4)</p>

This group of “activities” photos were often taken in medium or close shot, with either a high or eye-level angle. This position expresses the social distance that the bloggers would like to create with their audience. The full details together with the representation of smiles or facial expressions of the bloggers helped to state their willingness and readiness to try the activities, and that they participated fully in the activities they recounted. Therefore, the reviews and advice in their blog posts, explicit or implicit, are valid and reliable.

#### 4.5. Appreciation of Local Lifestyle

As discussed earlier, in the blog posts, Vietnam was portrayed as being of pronounced contrast. On one extreme, the bloggers noted “the craziness of Ho Chi Minh City” (B3), “traffic rushing past to every side of us, in front and behind” (B7), “the buses [...]– imagine kamikaze-style drivers who are not afraid to swerve onto oncoming traffic in order to pass vehicles” (B1), “smelly streets [in Hanoi]” (B4). On the other extreme, they appreciated “the scenic Hoan Kiem Lake,” “French-influenced style building,” “lanterns hanging over the streets,” or “enjoying a coffee in a cool cafe and watching the world go by.” Even within a place, contrast could be depicted, like “the *narrow* streets of the *bustling* Old Quarter.”

The bloggers characterized Vietnam’s disorderly **traffic** with narrow streets packed with scooters and bikes. “Traffic” also received negative appreciation—all blog posts described the bloggers’ embarrassment when navigating and crossing the streets. Adjectives used to describe traffic were mostly realizations of negative composition and negative reaction to quality. The most common adjectives for appraising traffic were *crazy* and *chaotic*. Though traffic chaos posed difficulties to them, none of the bloggers got angry with it. Instead, they viewed this erratic traffic flow as an exotic challenge during their Vietnam tour, and even advised on motorbike rental to get round.

Another category with negative appreciation, though only mentioned in two out of 10 blog posts, was the activity of the vendors who “turned out in their thousands to sell all kinds of products” (B5) or “would try anything to get you in their shop” (B7). B5 and B7 described their experience with vendors in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi as *annoying* (-qual) and *frustrating* (-qual).

All blog posts characterized the **locals**, mostly hotel staff members and local people in the street, with two adjectives “*friendly*” (+qual) and “*helpful*” (+val), and intensified them with adverbs like “super” and “extremely.” This inscribed a positive appreciation.



... the Vietnamese people were **super friendly**. (B1)

The staff are **extremely friendly and helpful**. (B3)

The last category to be appraised in the lifestyle theme is **prices**. All travelers praised the country as one of the most affordable travel destinations. The adjective for prices is **cheap** (+qual). As B7 commented, “Vietnam is so cheap for a salaried Londoner.” Some comments from the other posts go by like:

flights are really **cheap** (B2)

handmade boots, shoes, suits and dresses for **unbelievably cheap** prices (B4)

**cheap** dorm rooms ... **cheap** beers... (B5)

Transport around Vietnam is **relatively cheap** (B6)

While “**cheap**” appraised Vietnam for being super affordable, it does not mean that there were no costly services. For example, B4 went to Sky Bar in Ho Chi Minh City, which was “the most expensive bar in the city,” and B6 recommended travelling by train, which is more expensive than bus. However, they both claimed that the extra money was worth the experience. In addition, B5 also advised future travelers that they should bargain when getting around by taxis and shopping at the market. Yet, there was no sign of a negative attitude in their advice towards overpricing.

In the blog posts, there are 24 photos depicting the locals in activities. Here are some of them.

<Table 7> Locals in activities

		
<p>The busy streets (P22_B4)</p>	<p>A Sa Pa woman (P24 – B3)</p>	<p>Night market (P25 – B5)</p>

In this collection, photos were taken in long shot or medium shot, from behind or the side, while two had frontal view, one of a Sapa woman and the other of a shop keeper at Hanoi Night Market (see P24 and P25). Local people are portrayed working or doing their daily activities. Mostly, they appear at a certain distance, both physical and interpersonally, sometimes walking away or riding away from the travelers. In none of the photos can the co-presence of the travelers and the host be seen. The lack of travelers' appearance in these photos to some extent indicates that the travelers appreciated the local lifestyle—they valued it and found it captivating but were not ready to experience it.

Findings from this category indicate that the Vietnamese way of life was appreciated both positively and negatively by the bloggers in the text data. The photo data, however, did not give significant elaboration of the textual meaning. Rather, they suggest a position of the outsider that the bloggers preferred to take when viewing the local life and their refusal to temporarily emerge into the local community.




#### 4.6. Appreciation of Food

The blog posts said that in Vietnam, food could be sampled everywhere, in hotels, at restaurants, in the streets and at the markets. *Vietnam-style coffee* was mentioned 16 times, *Pho* especially *pho bo*, or beef pho, 15 times, and *beer*, or *bia hơi*, 11 times. Other popular dishes were *spring rolls*, *banh mi* and *banh xeo*. Such frequency indicated that in the portrayal of Vietnam, the above-mentioned foods and drinks were signature.

Among the 10 blog posts, only the one by blogger B6 included a section to advise would-be travelers on must-try dishes and good restaurants at each destination. Other bloggers described foods in general rather than naming the specialties of each place. Evaluative adjectives found in this domain expressed travelers' positive impact and quality reaction to Vietnamese food. Food and drinks in general, and *pho*, coffee and beer in particular were appraised as *delicious*, *amazing*, *spectacular*, and *cheap*. There were no adjectives that described the exact flavor of each dish.

Regarding still images, there are six photos of food and drink altogether. This correlates with the small percentage of detailed verbal description for food in the database. Also, only photos of *pho* and coffee were captioned with their specific names. There were no photos of beer, or of such popular foods as *bun cha*, *banh mi* or *banh xeo*. In two out of six photos, the bloggers, i.e. the interactive participants, were co-present with the focused foods, i.e. the represented participants. Here are examples of food photos.

<Table 8> Vietnamese food

		
<p>Pho in Hanoi (P16 – B6)</p>	<p>That was less than FIVE POUNDS. (P19 -B7)</p>	<p>Vietnamese steamed bun with crispy fried chicken (P20 – B4)</p>

**Food photos** which were taken singly were all in close shot, being in the foreground, being color saturated, from top down, with frontal or oblique angles. This offered an attention to the detail of the dishes. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 148), the close shot presents an intimate/personal realization while the frontal angle of the photos expresses an involvement with what is happening. The photos, therefore, illustrated how delicious, amazing, spectacular, and cheap Vietnamese foods are and why Vietnamese cuisine is among the top reasons for visiting the country.



#### 4.7. Appreciation of Accommodation

The blog posts showed a diversified choice of accommodation in Vietnam, from luxury resorts to homestays and hostels. Among them, hotels in the crowded streets near city centers were prioritized. They are mostly complimented as being **clean** (+qual) and at reasonable prices. Besides, accommodation in Hoi An and cruises on Ha Long Bay were appreciated for being **charming** (+imp)

and *comfortable* (+qual). The positive evaluation was not for Hanoi airport hotel, however, which was complained for being skanky.

There were seven photos of accommodation such as houses, hotels, or cruise ships in the collection of blog posts, all of which were without people.

<Table 9> Accommodation

	
Nexy hotel (P26 – B4)	A homestay in Hoi An (P27 – B1)

These photos were taken in medium, close, or very close shot and from frontal view, with full details. In this way, they feature a subjective shot, creating a sense of belonging, differentiating the bloggers from “other” tourists. However, the lack of the bloggers’ co-presence at the accommodation once again indicated that they would prefer to gaze at the others rather than stepping in and be an impermanent member of their community.

## V. The Portrayal of Viet Nam from a Sociolinguistic Perspective

Dann (1996) suggests that tourism can be treated sociolinguistically by drawing on both the semiotic analysis of tourism and the content of tourism materials. In the data collection of this study, authenticity and strangerhood are the strongest expressed sociolinguistic features. Conflict occurred in one instance, and play was not exhibited at all.

### 5.1. Authenticity Perspective

As stated by MacCannell (1989), tourists travel in the search of a sense of authenticity that they could not otherwise experience in their home life. Accordingly, any instances that make the experience “truly” or “typical” of Vietnam is an expression of authenticity. In this data collection, **authenticity** is exposed in the travel bloggers’ narration of the places they visited, the activities in which they participated, the food they ate and the people with whom they came into contact with.

In general, the adjectival structures that express authenticity often include adjectives with positive impact reaction and positive quality reaction. The adjectival phrases which serve as indicators of authenticity in this aspect consist of adjectives like “unique,” “local,” “truly,” and adverbs like “really.” For example,

[Halong Bay]... **Unique** (B4)

... the colorful traditions of the **local** cultures (B4)

Vietnam is a magical place, with **so much** culture\_and cool things to do. (B7)

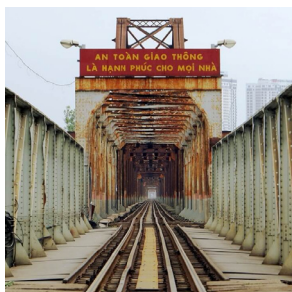
Ranking top in the database was the adjective “**local**” which appeared 18 times, 6 times of which were in collocation with cultures, places, and the rest 12 were for beer, street food, way of life, woman, and service/ transport. “**Unique**” was used twice for appraising the authenticity of Ha Long Bay and four times for commenting on activities. For example, they described the water puppet show to be unique, shops with unique souvenirs in Hoi An, and a unique coffee shop. “**Typical**” is another adjective to exhibit authenticity, which was found in the collocation “typical Vietnamese gifts.”

In terms of adverbs, “**really**” was used to intensify the bloggers’ liking of the travel with 15 times, cheap prices with 3 times, attractive activity with 2 times and good hotel once. “**Truly**” appeared once, in combination with “delicious food.” Other adverbs like “**extremely**” and “**super**” in combination with “friendly and helpful” to describe local people were another indicator of the

authentic experience that the travel bloggers were describing to their audience about the country.

Other important words expressing authenticity like *authentic*, *true*, *pure*, *genuine* did not appear in the data collection. However, when viewing the data multiple times, the researcher came up with other phrases and sentences that describe authenticity, such as “I loved seeing that piece of Vietnamese culture.” (B3).

Photos of places, the bloggers in activities, and food strengthened the authenticity that were described verbally, and to some extent, even had a louder say in the display of authenticity. The photos of places, for example, had a frontal view and a medium or long shot, were taken at eye-level or from a high angle, and supplied full details with maximum representation of the place. Let us take a look at the following examples and analysis.



**The Old Bridge, Hanoi (P28-B7)**

The inanimate participant represented in this photo is the Long Bien bridge in Hanoi. There is an absence of animated participants represented, and so is the gaze. This leaves the image act to be of information offering value instead of demanding an action from the viewer. The long shot with wide camera makes it possible for the viewers to see the length of the bridge as if they were seeing it in reality.

The eye-level angle expresses an equality between the viewers and the represented participant. The high resolution brings about a maximum representation of the bridge. The frontal angle makes it at the center of the gaze, and so brings it to the focus of the viewers. The viewers were invited to observe it in detail and consume a place which was unique to Vietnam.

It is notable that though the photo had a lot to tell the viewers, the text that accompanied it simply noted a list of suggested places of interest in Hanoi instead of making any comment about the bridge itself. The scenario may be because blogger B7, like other bloggers, perceived Hanoi as a place of contrast, and a combination of new energy under an old cover, and she unintentionally shared her perceptions with others. This is one way that a taste of authenticity, or the trademark of a destination, could be spread to prospective travelers.

Photos of the bloggers in activities and photos of local foods,

presented the clearest representation of authenticity. These photos were often in medium or close shot, taken from either low or high angle. The medium or close shot featured a social or personal relation, while the high angle presented an imaginary power of the viewers over the activities the bloggers were participating. As such, the viewers were invited to observe the activities and consider taking up the activities with the bloggers. The analysis of a food photo below illustrates these comments in detail.



**Vietnamese steamed bun with crispy fried chicken at the Ben Thanh Food Market, Ho Chi Minh (P29 – B4)**

The inanimate participant represented in the photo was a kind of bun that blogger B4 tried at Ben Thanh Food Market. The bun was placed in the forefront, with its crispy fried chicken, herbs and sauce being the center of the attraction. The photo was taken top-down, which suggests the viewers to be at a dominant position to the bun. The close shot shows the bun in elaborate description so as to encourage the viewers to give it a try because it is “local” and “delicious.”

Although the blogger did not appear in the photo, she was in fact holding a stick, which kept the fillings in place and signalled that this was how the local people would consume it, and that the blogger herself was going to try it. The absence of the direct gaze of the animate participant (blogger B4) could be compensated by her implied instructions on how to keep the bun and eat it. By doing so, the blogger was making an announcement to the viewers that she was there, in Ben Thanh Food Market, and was trying the local food in the same way as the locals.

Similar analysis was performed on other photos of places, food, and the bloggers themselves in activities in the data collection. It turned out that 30 out of 73 photos of places, 18 out of 23 photos of bloggers in activities, and all six photos of food had authenticity encoded in them. The photos were taken by the bloggers or chosen from some photo hubs and posted with a primary purpose of evidencing their verbal narration; however, they happened to narrate the experience in a higher degree of authenticity than the verbal narration. The frontal view and eye-level angle of the photos translate into their authentic experience of what is happening. The viewer is invited “to enter the represented natural or artificial space,

which seems to be waiting to be visited” (Francesconi 2014: 82). The bloggers give evidence of the authenticity of the represented, and persuade the reader to experience it.

Findings from the analysis of multimodal data in the concerned travel blogs showed that texts and images co-contributed to the manifestation of authenticity. While adjectival structures with positive impact reaction and positive quality reaction played as linguistic realizations of authenticity, photos which either offered information or demanded action from the viewers could realize a sense of authenticity, provided that they inscribed the bloggers’ willingness to accept the local way of life.

## 5.2. Strangerhood Perspective

Dann (1996) defines *strangerhood* as the search for strangeness and new experiences of tourists. In the multimodal data base of this study, the strangerhood characteristic was mostly observed in the bloggers’ description of places, food, and the Vietnamese way of life through the incidences they came across in different places. The strangerhood came out from both positive and negative appreciation.

### 5.2.1. Positive Strangerhood

In general, expressions of *positive strangerhood* tend to utilize the adjectival structures whose adjective has positive impact reaction and positive composition. The adjectives for strangerhood in this database included “*picturesque*,” “*quaint*,” “*fascinating*,” “*exotic*,” “*spectacular*,” “*different*,” and “*cheap*.”

the food was *spectacular*\_(B1)

a visit to this museum is both *fascinating* and *shocking* in *equal* measure (B4)

The roadside coffee though, now wow, that’s a *different* thing all together (B7)

“*Cheap*,” the adjective that appraises prices, has the highest count, with 24 combinations with food, clothes, transport, and



accommodation. Comments for things that are cheap may express both authenticity (Vietnam = super affordable) and strangerhood (Vietnam = ridiculously cheap or unbelievably cheap).

The adjective “*different*” appeared 14 times, 8 times of which collocated with look, feel, side, or thing. There were two incidences of “*exotic*,” one for describing Hanoi and the other for Hoi An. “*Fascinating*,” a common adjective for strangerhood, was collocated with the War Museum, the streets, the history of Vietnam and the country in general. “*Fascinating*” was used 10 times to describe either mesmerizing places in Vietnam or the strange things that made the bloggers shocked but still wanting to observe, such as the War Museum and Hoa Lo prison.

Other words expressing strangerhood like unsophisticated, unchanging, primitive, and untouched were not found in the data collection. Similar to the linguistic realizations for authenticity, there were other expressions in the database besides adjectives that could express strangerhood.

Certain photos of places, food, and local people in activity also indicated strangerhood. They elaborated in their verbal descriptions and visualized what was different and strange about Vietnam. Let’s take for analysis a photo of a local street vendor.



**Vegetable vendor (P31 – B1)**

There are two types of participants represented in the photo. The inanimate participant represented is the two baskets of morning glory. The animate one is the street vendor, a local woman in the typical outfit of local female vendors. She is wearing a conical hat, which is typically Vietnamese. The photo was taken from

the back of the vendor, showing her walking away from the viewers, and concentrating on her task rather than paying attention to the viewers. This indicates a detachment. Both participants were placed in the forefront of the photo, not so far from the viewers. The medium shot shows that the publisher (blogger B1) might be willing to be in a social relation with the animate participant, however this willingness was not strong because she let the participant walk away from her. The eye-level angle shows that the viewers and the animate

participant are in equal position of power, and, the viewer can observe the locals' daily work, but needs an "invitation/ permission" to enter that community.

In the blog post by B1, the above photo follows a paragraph about *warm, kind* and *caring* local people. However, it does not seem to directly support B1's verbal description. This may indicate that the choice of photos may sometimes not match the verbal intention of the bloggers. More than being for illustrative purposes, the photo in use may actually encode a viewpoint of its publisher, and in this case, the bloggers. Other photos of local people in activities which were mostly taken in long or medium shot, from side or behind reveal that the travelers viewed the destination and the locals' routine activities through the lens of an observer. For most of the time, they gazed at "the Other", i.e. Vietnam, with curious eyes and seemed excited at seeing strangeness. While these photos could be an indicator of *been there, seen that*, the non-presence of the travelers in such photos might imply that the travelers would like to view how local people practice their routines rather than try to participate in those routines

The findings above lead to a number of relevant issues. First, adjectival realization for strangerhood characteristics gave a positive impact reaction and positive composition. Second, the visual realizations featured a detachment of the viewers from the local ways of life or vice versa. Third, the distinction between authenticity and strangerhood in a photo was not linear. For most of the time, photos that showed local ways of life could make a bold statement about authenticity as well as expressed how different the instances/practices were to the bloggers.

### 5.2.2. Negative Strangerhood

While positive strangerhood was exposed in the use of adjectives with positive impact reaction and positive compositional value, **negative strangerhood** was exposed through the use of adjectives of negative quality reaction and negative composition, such as "chaotic," "crazy," "frustrating," and "shocking" which expressed the bloggers' comments on "the strangeness of the offered" (Dann 1996: 16). This characteristic was unveiled in the bloggers' narration of

two instances of lifestyle, which were the traffic and street vendors/sellers, and two places of interest, the War Museum (in Ho Chi Minh City) and Hoa Lo Prison (in Hanoi).

get *frustrating* ... constantly being nagged by the vendors ...(B5)  
the roads are *crazy* (B7)

[Hoa Lo] the exhibits were *interesting* (and quite *disturbing*) (B3)

The War Remnants Museum is *not* an *easy* place to visit for some people. (B5)


This museum is a *sobering* experience (B6)

In the blog posts, “*crazy*” appears in 13 combinations, eight of which were about Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, traffic and roads. “*Chaotic*” had nine counts, and all of them collocated with Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, streets and old town. Following these appreciations, the bloggers told how they themselves managed to cross the street, or navigate in such a “crazy network of traffic-packed streets.” It indicates that although the bloggers found the traffic in Vietnam different from what they experienced in their home culture, they did not really hate it. Rather, they considered it an exotic feature of the destination. While they were not willing to be a part of it, due to the need to travel around, they were forced to step out and engage the traffic. To some extent, they had overcome the strangeness to recount the thrill of conquering the traffic challenge in Vietnam. In this way, negative strangerhood was exposed while it did not always mean that the bloggers hated it and wanted to get rid of it.

A similar complicated evaluation lied in the use of contrasting pairs of adjectives such as “*interesting*” and “*disturbing*,” “*fascinating*,” and “*shocking*” for Hoa Lo Prison and the War Remnant Museum. While “*interesting*” and “*fascinating*” expressed positive strangerhood, “*disturbing*” and “*shocking*” were indicators of negative strangerhood. Though perceiving the two places in both extremes, all bloggers recommended them in their must-visit list, perhaps to indulge themselves into another world where they could observe the same incident in the lens of the Other. Also, their recommendations

indicated that an instance of negative strangerhood did not correlate with a demand to ignore a chance to see the place in person.

Respectively, photos of Hoa Lo Prison, the War Remnants Museum, and busy roads which loudly voiced negative strangerhood. Let us analyze a photo of traffic in Hanoi.



**Busy streets in Hanoi (P33 – B4)**

In this photo, the animate participants represented are local people in Hanoi in the morning. They are on their way to work or school. The inanimate participants are the motorbikes that they are riding. The street is crowded, with some people moving and some not. Some are obeying the traffic law by wearing helmets while some others are not. There is a man who is crossing in front of some bikes. The street looks crowded and disordered, and it feels chaotic and a bit scary for those who have never been in such a traffic maze. However, the brightness and colourfulness of the picture encode the excitement of the blogger on observing and managing to navigate the road. The photo was taken from the back of the people, showing them riding away, and not paying attention to the viewers. This indicates detachment. The medium shot shows that the publisher of the photo might be willing to be in a social relation with the animate participant, but would choose another way if she could avoid the participation.

In general, **Strangerhood** was found to be the strongest sociolinguistic feature of this collection of blog posts. Strangerhood photos were taken in medium or close shot, from side or behind, from an oblique camera angle, at eye-level. They revealed that the bloggers mostly viewed the destination and the locals’ routine activities through the lens of an observer. For most of the time, they gazed at “the Other” (Vietnam) with curious eyes and seemed to be excited on seeing strangeness. In addition, the instances/aspects of Vietnam that were considered negatively strange were not rejected by the bloggers, but instead were recommended to the blog readers as something that they should try with caution for a taste of difference.

**5.2.3. Conflict Perspective**

According to Dann (1996), conflict perspective concerns

differences between the provided experience and the real past and present of the visited areas and their inhabitants. While the other three elements are directly and explicitly incorporated into language use, conflict perspective manifests itself much more implicitly.

A marked finding in discussing conflict is that there is a tourist dilemma arising in this data pool. Tourists dislike some destinations such as the beach city of Nha Trang.

The town of Nha Trang doesn't offer much in terms of culture (B1)

Just a city with lots of holidaymakers and you really don't feel like you're in Vietnam there (B3)

There isn't any culture or history here (B4)

For crazy party life with other backpackers go to Nha Trang (B7)

Nha Trang was appreciated for a sea break, a stop by the sea for the travelers to recharge their energy during their Vietnam travels. While they understood what should be expected at a beach city—the sun, the sea, lots of hotels, parties, and a great number of tourists—they kept commenting on its lack of history and culture. This created the tourist dilemma, which could be translated into the exhibition of conflict. In the data pool, this sign of conflict was expressed through the verbal narration of the bloggers. There was no photo to depict it.

While there was such a tourist dilemma, the reaction of the travelers was too mild for anti-tourist practices. Unlike anti-tourist vacationers who attempt to distance themselves from the tourist category by trying the local style and exploring unfamiliar places (Jacobsen 2000), the bloggers in this study complained about the touristic beach town, but still enjoyed it.

## VI. Discussion of Findings

The analysis of data collected from travel blog posts has addressed Vietnam as a destination with identity and diversity, with five domains being appreciated in its portrayal. The study results also highlight authenticity and strangerhood as the two most exposed sociolinguistic features. Lexical resources, which are evaluative adjectives in this study, and visual resources, which are still images, co-contribute to the bloggers' search to "discover authentic places" (D'Egidio 2014, cited in Denti 2015: 64) as well as their gaze at the locality in each place. Their choice of still images is closely linked to what is considered authentically Vietnamese.

The findings above have brought about a number of implications, especially to the issue of travelers' visit and re-visit decisions. Researchers have identified several "push" and "pull" forces that act as the travelers' motivational factors for visiting and revisiting a destination. The *push* factors can be connected to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. For example, the intrinsic motivation for one to travel may arise from their desire to escape a perceived boring daily routine, to discover themselves, to relax, or to facilitate social interactions. For the bloggers in this study, possibly the intrinsic motivation for their travel to Vietnam comes from their demand to explore themselves, and search for relaxation rather than facilitating social interactions with the local community. The *pull* factors, which are more exposed in the travel blogs, are the attributes of the destination to serve as an attraction to tourists. Novelty functions as a cultural pull factor. Tourist evaluations of destination characteristics and their perceived utility values have become an essential component in destination selection. (Woodside and Martin 2008: 18-19). The pull factors for the bloggers' travelling (and re-travelling) to Vietnam are what Vietnam has on offer to foreign tourists. They are a rich culture and local ways of life at each of the destinations on their journey, delicious local cuisine, affordable prices and even exotically disordered traffic. These findings can bring about beneficial implications to tourism stakeholders.

By mapping evaluative adjectives and corresponding interactive

qualities of still images in the database, it is possible to determine a number of relationships between “the writer and reader, the visitor and the visited, the tourist and the destination” (Denti 2015: 56) in these travel blog posts. The significance of the themes of authenticity and strangerhood showed what the bloggers viewed as being local and exotic, and featured the memories of the trips that they would like to record and retain. Such a sociolinguistic knowledge of a public discourse on tourism destinations helps researchers, as well as practicing managers, to see blogger discourse as more than a means of feeding information or marketing to prospective customers. It makes a contribution to the understanding of existing theories within tourism discourse as a field of study, and the promising future of developing the theory of tourism itself.

## VII. Conclusion

Recent advances in webpage technology have facilitated even more effective communication among tourism consumers and their active contribution to produce tourism products. According to Bruns (2008: 2), the consumer is becoming a *produser* of shared knowledge. Bruns coined this term by combining “producer” and “user” to explain that consumers are changing from being an end-user of a tourism product to becoming both a user and a producer who, by sharing their knowledge and experience of the product, can contribute to the amendment of current products or the creation of new ones.

A search on Google using “travel Vietnam” as keywords returns about 2,300 million results in 0.66 of a second. Numerous websites and travel columns recommend Vietnam to be on the top of everyone’s travel list since it has “something for every traveler” with spectacular landscapes, a long history and rich culture, coupled with delicious food and reasonable costs. The analysis in this article of the 10 blog posts by seven British travel bloggers to Vietnam confirms these outstanding features of the country.

The study offers insights into the co-contribution of the linguistic and visual resources in blog posts about Vietnam

itineraries to travel narration and recommendations, which facilitates a C2C (consumer to consumer) discussion platform. There existed a consistently positive set of appreciations about Vietnam as a tourism destination in terms of destinations, attractions, traffic or accommodation or other products consumed. However, it is unlikely that readers of these blogs would achieve a deep understanding of certain aspects of Vietnamese everyday life and the range of cultural expressions across the country, including seasonal product offerings and cuisine, and/or differences between various destination regions.

Content analysis on the text body of the data collection has shown that Vietnam tourism is generally doing well in providing unique experiences of food and destinations, plentiful options for holidaying, super affordable costs, and decent accommodation services. The bloggers underscored the authenticity of their Vietnam experiences, the activities and the local lifestyle so that their narrations are “real,” and tell stories of cultural strangeness so that their advice is worthy. The tourist dilemma regarding Nha Trang beach city may indicate a need to improve facilities in the destination. Chaotic traffic and bothersome street sellers are other issues that should be addressed by stakeholders in tourism.

The findings of this research also underline the role of still images as integral elements to evidence the credibility of the blog posts. While words dominated the corpus, still images, though occupying a subordinate role, gave clear-cut ideas about the location and its surroundings. They supported the linguistic realizations of authenticity and strangerhood in the blog posts, and in some case delivered an even stronger message than words. Practically, such research findings have reconfirmed the attractive features of Vietnam tourism in its attempt for post-Covid pandemic recovery. Linguistically, the results have proved that multimodal analysis is a feasible approach to tourism discourse study.

More work is needed to see whether there are other types of travel blog authors who write about Vietnam or other places, and a breakdown of the travel blog author market may be required to assist destinations and businesses in deciding how to make use of this content. If research shows that blogs and other consumer-



to-consumer communications, namely travel forums, product recommendations, guest books, and so on, make significant impact on destination image and travel planning, destinations may need to incorporate blogging into their overall marketing communications strategy. The case study in this research may be valuable to organizations like the Vietnam Tourism Association who may wish to encourage specific types of travelers, such as travelers of particular age groups, travelers from emerging markets, summer tourists and so on to blog about their visits to Vietnam. Another option is to locate blogs that are relevant to Vietnam travel based on author demographics and trip characteristics, and direct potential visitors to them by inserting hyperlinks or suggestions on the destination’s website.

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## Reframing Loss: Chinese Diaspora Identity in K. H. Lim's *Written in Black*

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### [ *Abstract* ]

In analyzing the Chinese diaspora, this paper explores losses that are encountered within the family in the nation. It argues that increased social and spatial mobilities that contribute to losses can be reconfigured through the productive lens of supermobility, as Laurence J. C. Ma conceptualizes it. Supermobile identities are significant avenues to consider the way that losses traditionally associated with migration and assimilation are revisited in view of new flows of migration and identification. In examining K. H. Lim's debut novel *Written in Black* (2014), this study addresses pathways from debilitating losses to productive losses journeyed by the family from the child's perspective. It offers a critical analysis of the Anglophone Bruneian novel in terms of its exclusive portrayal of an ethnic Chinese family. Departing from a fixed notion of home as cultural and physical rootedness, it explores flexible identities that are tied to shifting concepts of belonging. Rather than a magnification of social and spatial losses, the analysis highlights the way that the literary imagination of ethnic Chinese in Brunei Darussalam accommodates progressive ideas of the agency

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and advancement of the Chinese diaspora as a supermobile community.

**Keywords:** Chinese diaspora, loss, supermobility, identity, Brunei Darussalam

## I . Introduction

With the recent rise of China (Ang 2021), Southeast Asia has increasingly witnessed Chinese presence and interest in the region. The nation of Brunei Darussalam (henceforth Brunei), situated on the northwestern coast of Borneo, is no exception to an influx of Mainland Chinese migrants and workers today. In fact, the migration fever in the nineteenth century resulted in a significant first wave of Chinese diaspora. Continuing migration flows have since contributed to the status of ethnic Chinese as the largest diaspora in the world (Tan 2013: i). At present, several generations of Chinese reside in Southeast Asia, including in Chinese-dominant Singapore (Ho and Ho 2019) and Malay-dominant Brunei (Ho 2021a). With its self-declared nomenclature of being “The Abode of Peace,” Brunei manifests itself as a harmonious society living within a rich tropical environment where forest makes up 81% of the land mass and its economy is heavily reliant on oil and gas. In the last decade, Brunei has attracted global attention for its Syariah legal code that has courted critical discussions about right ethics and gender conversations (Ho 2022).

Brunei is a small nation in size and number with a land area of 5765 square kilometers and a total population of 445,400 people (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics 2022). Comprising mostly of Malays, its Chinese diaspora community remains understudied. With a dominant Malay identity, Brunei’s ethnic Chinese language and culture play peripheral roles. The visibility of Brunei’s Chinese community members—both citizens and non-citizens—is subdued given the emphasis on upholding Malay identity in the nation. The first generations of Chinese diaspora arrived in Brunei with direct experiences of economic struggles, familial separations, and uncertainties of life. Their losses were compounded by generational challenges

encountered through a subsequent lack of cultural heritage transmission, such as a disuse of the Chinese language in state schools, further migration processes, and affective responses to cultural erasure.

This article focuses on a contemporary novel that was written by a Chinese Bruneian author which narrates the personal lives of the Chinese diaspora in Brunei. Set exclusively in Brunei, K. H. Lim's *Written in Black* (Monsoon Books 2014) emphasizes a contemporary child's perspective of personal encounters with losses, including physical, emotional, and generational losses. In this respect, the analysis aims to investigate the male protagonist's attempts to manage his losses as a third-generational child in the Chinese diaspora community. Using readily available resources, he navigates through the nation when physically traversing its natural and social landscapes and uses social media as one way to locate runaway family members—both his mother and brother. As the novel illustrates, his personal thoughts and actions are profoundly driven by physical and emotional vacuums caused by his mother's decision to migrate out of Brunei.

The focus on an Anglophone Bruneian novel aims to interrogate the extent to which the literary imagination in Chinese diaspora writings produced by Bruneians accommodate the concept of loss that has thus far defined the experience of the diaspora. Significantly, this study contends that contemporary notions of loss include a subscription to a productive reframing of nostalgia, anxiety, and grief using a progressive concept of mobility, which is also referred to as "supermobility" (Ma 2003) of the twenty-first century. To date, K. H. Lim's debut novel is a contemporary Anglophone literary work that features Brunei's Chinese diaspora in an extensive and comprehensive way through its narrative, which targets younger generations (children and young adults) via its narrative focalization using the first-person voice of a school-aged protagonist named Jonathan Lee, who is just 10 years old when his journeying across the nation takes place.

## II. Background: The Chinese Diaspora in Brunei Darussalam

The Chinese account for 9.5% of the total population and are the largest ethnic minority group in Brunei. They speak a range of Chinese dialects (D. Ho 2021) and practice Chinese culture, while also maintaining Chinese traditions that can be traced back to their ancestral roots in Mainland China (Ho and Ho 2021). The Chinese first arrived in Brunei as traders in the sixteenth century (deVienne 2015). Overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) were sojourners. Since then, the Chinese overseas (*huaren*) have settled around the world because of the migration fever from the nineteenth century onwards. Today, Chinese entrepreneurial activities remain notable in Brunei with the Chinese Chamber of Commerce playing a prominent role in the society and nation. While several local Chinese have successfully gained citizenship in Brunei, there is an undisclosed segment of Chinese permanent residents who also remain stateless (non-citizens) and possess Certificates of Identity (CIs) rather than holding legitimate passports for identification and international travel purposes. Brunei's population census in 2022 indicated that there are 25,800 permanent residents, many of whom are likely to be ethnically Chinese.

Brunei's national philosophy of *Melayu Islam Beraja* privileges Malay through its official ideology of a Malay Muslim Monarchy (Ho 2019). Consequently, Chinese Bruneians are ethnically excluded from the national identity. Brunei's "*rakyat jati*" (indigenous citizens) comprise seven groups: Brunei Malay, Tutong, Kedayan, Dusun, Murut, Bisaya, and Belait. Thus, the ethnic Chinese are disqualified from Bruneian indigenous identity through its official and national creed. While Chinese Muslim converts are subsumed into the Islamic pillar of the nation's tripartite identity of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (Sahrifulahfiz and Hoon 2018), they remain institutionally precluded via their non-Malay ethnicity. These conditions contribute to push factors that led several stateless Chinese to migrate out of Brunei (Cheong 2017). Those who stay behind in Brunei assimilate into the nation with considerable efforts at localization (Ho 2021b).



### III. The Chinese Diaspora: Experiences of Intergenerational Loss

The term of diaspora has often been employed synonymously with migration. Its usage to denote an “(i)ncreasing spatial dispersal of transmigrants from different homelands” (Ma 2003: 5) identifies it as a central concept in studies of transmigration. Any tacit understanding of uniformity in the term diaspora must be challenged to account for diverse experiences and complex elements of migration (Skeldon 2003). Increasingly, formations of the diaspora are informed by “the idea of diasporic individuals as creative and mobile agents” (Ma 2003: 5). Their fluid and flexible status is encapsulated in the way that “diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational movement” (Tololyan 1991: 5). In view of contemporary flows of globalization (Ullah and Ho 2020), diasporas embody passages of transmigration across changing global landscapes.

Asian diasporas have resulted from specific migration flows of people from and to Asia (Chan 2020). With the Chinese oft subsumed under Asian diaspora, ethno labels that serve as prefixes are limiting in the sense that they may not necessarily “cover all those within the ethnic group or from a certain country” (Chan 2020: 3). In *Contesting Chineseness*, Chan and Hoon (2021) highlight challenges in the label of “Chinese” that encompasses an identity extending beyond race, nationality, and culture (1). Given dissonant diasporas due to circular migration (King and Christou 2011; Chan 2013), new migration flows have resulted in further nuances of the diaspora. Even though the term of the Chinese diaspora is highly debatable, it is employed in this paper to account for those whose families historically originate from China, as these diaspora individuals are delineated in K. H. Lim’s novel.

As part of their diaspora experience, the Chinese encounter losses that have impacted their sense of identity. First-generation migrants leave behind immediate family members and attenuate intimate physical connections to their homeland (Wang 2005). Subsumed as the old diaspora, they carry “negative characteristics of classic diasporas such as the loss of homeland, a collective memory of oppression and the gnawing desire for return [that] have been

suppressed” (Ma 2003: 6). Along with second-generation migrants, first-generation migrants in the early twentieth century tend to deal with significant pressures to build a secure livelihood in countries where they encounter continuous demands of assimilation due to different cultural norms and dominant identities (Liu 2015; Zhou 1997). Subsequent generations of immigrants often have their losses compounded by an intergenerational transmission of trauma arising from economic poverty, physical struggles of war or conflict, and other sociocultural plights of the diaspora. The losses encountered by diasporas who are ethnic minorities in their host nations can take on a pathological trait (Cheng 1997; Eng and Han 2000), which contributes to an impoverished sense of identity. In recent years, the depathologizing of diaspora identity has been a scholarly agenda (Doyle 2018; Ho 2013). This counter-concept of a depathologized racial identity crucially debunks the myth that “minoritarian subjectivities are permanently damaged—forever injured and incapable of ever being whole” (Eng and Han 2000: 693). A productive reframing of diasporic loss, as this paper argues, is further facilitated by mobility, including movement within and across national borders.

#### **IV. Supermobility: Reconfiguring losses of the Chinese Diaspora**

With transnational movements, supermobility plays an integral role to aid in reframing losses of the diaspora. Consequently, constructive pathways for a flexible identity that challenges conventional ideas of debilitating loss are opened up through continuous spatial movements. Supermobility, as applied to the diaspora community, is defined as “[one of many] positive connotations of diasporas” (Ma 2003: 6), and has been observed in the late twentieth-century onwards. Chinese diaspora scholar Laurence Ma points out the intricate relationship between diaspora and supermobility when addressing a “conceptual shift” (2003: 6) from negative to positive characteristics. Furthermore, he distinguishes between a new and old Chinese diaspora. In contrast to the old diaspora in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the new Chinese diaspora is defined by opportunities presented through globalization in

contemporary times. As Laurence Ma (2003) further writes, “[t]he new Chinese diaspora is far more complex and dynamic than the old one, always in a state of becoming and evolving in response to the changing conditions for emigration and immigration at the places of origin and destination while impacting both at the same time” (20). This dynamic identity is available to the Chinese diaspora due to their transnational and translocal or local-to-local mobility. Such connections are encapsulated in the term of supermobility, which is “driven by multiple modes of migration which include secondary migration: circular migration, and onward migration as well as internal migration around the country of migration” (Phillimore et al. 2021: 3). Thus, supermobility offers a crucial framework to rethink and reconfigure the diaspora’s personal and intergenerational losses.

In the twenty-first century, the diaspora gains avenues to supermobility that offer them transformational opportunities to develop a positive affirmation of self via confronting “the multi-dimensionality and complexity of the contemporary world” (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore 2018: 186). In Asia, supermobility is made possible by “particular political and economic realities [...] and the multifarious migration schemes drafted by various governments in and beyond Asia” (Chan 2020: 3). Necessarily, supermobility furnishes a sense of agency or at least “capacities to be agentic” (Leggett 2020: 210). Here, the “agentic imaginary—of one’s place in the world transforming into highly active engagement with the world” (Leggett 2020: 208) is brought to bear upon supermobility. In an age of globalization producing highly diverse communities or what social anthropologist Steven Vertovec (2007) terms as superdiversity—which is an inextricable facet of supermobility, the imaginative possibilities offered through migration are endless. In fact, “[t]echnologies of mobility and travel also shape ideas pertaining to the shift from ‘child to adult’; for children, especially youth, the possibility of mobility is transformational” (Leggett 2020: 209).

This is indeed demonstrated in the Chinese Bruneian community represented in K. H. Lim’s novel, which is a narrative about a young boy’s experience of “touching the ground with one’s

feet [and on] roads, velocity, and the conceptualization of moving” (Mrázek 2002: xvi). In *Written in Black*, the 10-year-old protagonist explores his agentic imaginary by travelling beyond bounded physical spaces of his Chinese familial home. He embarks on a road trip and then goes on foot to locate his runaway brother, which signals a form of supermobility. Crucially, his own desires for supermobility are fueled by his mother’s international migration to Australia, with its robust migration program that has attracted many Asian immigrants (Parliament of Australia 2010). Ultimately, Jonathan’s transformation opens up a constructive change in intergenerational relations, especially in relation to his father. Jonathan’s experience of the contemporary world and active engagement with those he meets while journeying through the nation facilitate a paradigm shift in his perception and treatment of loss with significant attempts to break its destructive cycle.

## V. A Chinese Diaspora Novel: *Written in Black* (2014)

The Anglophone literary scene in Brunei is in its nascent stage with contemporary novels in English self-published or released with international publishers (Deterding and Ho 2021). In terms of the thematic subject of Brunei’s Chinese diaspora, there is currently one Anglophone novel that deals exclusively with Chinese Bruneians who serve as the main characters. Published in Singapore, *Written in Black* (WB) is sold in independent bookstores in Brunei rather than housed at the book shop at the National Language and Literature Bureau (*Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei*, DBPB). Its self-marketing strategies employ the description of it as “a darkly humorous coming-of-age novel set in Brunei” (Lim 2014: blurb). As an exploratory piece of diaspora fiction, it grapples with the raw and intense feelings of a young Chinese boy living in Brunei who deals with his grandfather’s physical death, father’s emotional detachment, and mother’s physical leave-taking of the entire family. This paper discusses literary representations of Chinese Bruneians that delineate their hopes, dreams, and actions to mobilize themselves against personal and generational losses. In examining his insistence to move forward physically, emotionally, and socially, it highlights

the child protagonist's agentic capacities. Through a literary analysis, it contends that diasporic losses are managed in conscious efforts to seek and enhance mobility using resources in the twenty-first century, thus effectively tapping into an exercise of supermobility.

*Written in Black* is a contemporary novel that traces the mobility of various family members in the twenty first century. As this paper argues, this novel does much to narrate the way that the diaspora is no longer definitively defined through their loss of attachments and attenuated Chinese roots. Rather, it points to a reframing of loss through flexible identities forged in new migration patterns and social movements. Therefore, the theme of loss will be evaluated through a positive affective turn, and investigated via the narrative lens of its child protagonist. In this novel, a negotiation of individual, familial, and transnational selves is apparent through the child's narrative (Ho 2021a). The child narrator addresses generational experiences of his grandfather's move from China to Brunei at the pivotal point of the latter's physical demise. He also deals with a loss of an emotional attachment with his father who intensely preserves his image as the strong male leader, a role that is ascribed to him through cultural prescriptions in the Chinese family. Compounding his sense of loss, his mother's sudden physical absence when migrating out of Brunei is a further struggle he encounters. Ho and Amran (2021) have analyzed this changing familial structure as "a construct of the modern home [in Brunei]" (163) that arises out of migration. Pushing past early signs of his depression, Jonathan builds on various opportunities opened up through his ease to travel or move in the nation. Journeying through the nation, the child begins to shift his frame of thinking to that of positive hope and constructive changes that offer alternative paradigms to loss. Significantly, his actions to mobilize himself in physical and spatial movements are stimulated by his mother's migration to heal herself from her own unhappiness that is suggested in Jonathan's description of "[m]um being unwell" because she "had been the unhappiest" (Lim 2014: 14) in the family while living in Brunei. Thus, supermobility "across the seas" (Lim 2014: 14) serves as a critical counteragent to loss as it promotes fluid

and flexible identities in a mobile world. Challenging fixed and rigid notions of identity, supermobility offers the diaspora an avenue to break the cycle of debilitating loss. Exciting new attachments that aid in their growth, development, and evolution are seen to follow.

The analysis will proceed by examining Jonathan's initial sense of a lost self due to losses in the family: a grandfather's death, mother's physical absence, and father's emotional absence. Importantly, it examines the ways that losses are reframed through the child's mobile experiences. Social attachments and an active engagement with a wider host of spaces and places extending beyond his Chinese cultural realm of the familial home are developed. Ultimately, the analysis seeks to debunk the myth of the diaspora as suffering from pathological losses through an emphasis on positive expressions of identity in various forms of supermobility. Their advancement as a supermobile community is suggested through the diaspora's movements and migration that create crucial connections with those in the nation and globalized world.

## **VI. Analysis: Supermobility as an Antidote to Loss**

Amidst losing his grandfather whom he endearingly refers to as "*Ah Kong*" (the Chinese term for the familial patriarch) and missing his mother, Jonathan begins to lose partial recognition of his self. In fact, he is at potential risk of suffering from a state of an impoverished identity, one that is defined by a highly vulnerable state that signals a permanent dwelling on the past that forecloses future progress. This is apparent when he discovers that his reflection in a mirror appears, as he describes it, "miserable" and "sullen" (Lim 2014: 49)—an account that attests to his declining mental and emotional well-being due to life stressors within the family. In fact, he observes that "the mirror stared back at [him] with an eerie sort of crazed glee" (Lim 2014: 49). His unnatural depressive facial countenance illustrates a negative affective turn that threatens to deform him into a "psycho kid" (Lim 2014: 49). Contemplating the extent to which his losses have caused him mental strain, he ponders on thoughts of craziness/mental issues

that are instigated by intergenerational trauma. For one, his flashbacks of his grandfather leaving China based on shared intergenerational stories (Lim 2014: 208) and his experiencing of “hellish nightmare(s)” (Lim 2014: 74) are classic symptoms of “traumatic awakenings” (Caruth 1995: 89). Along this line, Jonathan’s estranged relations with his mother whom he has not seen and spoken to in “six months” (Lim 2014: 11) relegates her place to the realm of his nightmares that is a telling sign of his traumatic loss (Lim 2014: 73). In his narrative, it becomes apparent that Jonathan’s “belated experience of trauma” (Caruth 2016: 73) informs his hauntings of loss due to “sudden” and “unexpected” (Caruth 2016: 167) events. In view of such traumatic losses, the past is seen to have a strong hold on Jonathan’s present as it dictates his actions and shapes his self-perception. From early on, Jonathan discloses that his present existence is weighed down by past events: the recent death of the first-immigrant patriarch in the family (Lim 2014: i 20), an “unhappy[ly]” (Lim 2014: 14) mother’s migration, and loss of his older brother Michael from home (Lim 2014: 13). Jonathan’s “angry” (Lim 2014: 12) father who rarely converses with him compounds the child’s sense of loss as familial support systems are attenuated. Precisely because of these cumulative losses, Jonathan becomes thoroughly lost and feels unable to cope. His lowering threshold to tolerate familial and intergenerational loss without letting these affect his daily functioning is reflected in his declining school performance: his “not-yet-awful but still-noticeable drop in my grades” (Lim 2014: 16). However, to manage his losses productively, Jonathan’s subsequent choices to perform his agency in individual decisions and to exercise his own mobility underscore efforts to avoid self-inflicted stagnation in one space, place, and time. Instead of remaining overwhelmed with loss, he becomes determined to seek solutions by traveling within the nation.

Along this line, mobility aids Jonathan in recovering a semblance of his lost self. It provides him with a forward direction in life that helps in acquiring his confidence and self-assurance notwithstanding external circumstances of loss. Amid life’s vicissitudes, the mental spaces that he comes to occupy as well as physical places that he traverses are symptomatic of his personal

decisions to overcome his sense of loss in a constantly changing social environment. Jonathan's unhappiness, depressive symptoms, and anxiety are gradually replaced with a sense of certainty in his individual actions to take charge of, and find viable solutions to, his losses. For instance, the moment he decides to stow away on a truck that was used to deliver his grandfather's coffin, Jonathan displays his initiative to take control of a declining state of familial affairs. His sense of physical urgency to reach his brother is evident in his declarative statement: "I have to go!" (Lim 2014: 86) that lies in stark contrast to the hesitation of his older cousin called Kevin who, nevertheless, helps him locate Michael's physical whereabouts through his social media connectivity on his "brand new smartphone" (Lim 2014: 65-72). Kevin stumbles on a message thread "answered by a 'Michael Lee,' confirming that (a) meeting was to happen at Friendly Garden Pool Centre at 1.30pm. A search of the name of the place directed me to an address: Unit 32, *Simpang* 64, Jln. Badir" (Lim 2014: 71, original emphasis). However, it is evident that Jonathan's cumulative experience of losing his mother to migration, his runaway brother, and grandfather's physical death serves as collective impetus for him "to go anywhere" (Lim 2014: 87), in pursuit of his lost self with its familial orientations. Determined to re/discover his intergenerational attachments, he confidently exclaims "It doesn't matter [if his brother fails to show up]. I'm going to find him!" (Lim 2014: 87). This juncture marks an emergent stage of self-realization about his personal ability to seize opportunities and take on available spaces to him. His initial embarking into unknown places does not faze him as to deter him. Prospects of moving beyond his physical home, moving around different geographical spaces, and traveling within the nation excite and enliven him as such mobilizations offer "fortuitous discover[ies]" (Lim 2014: 88), just as the truck's company address printed on its inside base offers Jonathan a significant lead to discover Michael.

Mobilization provides a forward momentum to tackle problems, rather than allowing negative effects of loss to fester and deteriorate the self. However, this progressive motion is not a straightforward one as it takes on a spiraling pattern, which acknowledges Jonathan's continuous sadness at the absence of his



mother's affection, support, and physical presence during his formative childhood years. Despite an evasive maternal figure, his inner monologue is characterized by a tone of intervention rather than defeat. As he points out towards the end of his narrative, "I could do something about [my problem]. And sort it out I would" (Lim 2014: 237). Even as this positive statement is in direct relation to his solving a math problem in school, it is representative of his growing resilience and development of a persistent mindset. Jonathan's productive self-talk is an indicator of his increasing maturity once he is exposed to new spaces and places, and traveling beyond prescribed physical boundaries and meeting people from different cultures and races, including his experiences with dominant Malays in Brunei that signal his local knowledge and process of localization as a "Bruneian-Chinese" (Lim 2014: 15). For one, his journeying brings him to a "*durung*" (a Bruneian Malay word to describe a traditional store for local farm crops, especially harvested rice grains) that "indicated the existence of a past [Malay] settlement" (Lim 2014: 101). An abandoned house nearby also intrigues him. Its mysterious contents include "wooden figurines" (Lim 2014: 105) that seem to defy gravity as they hang from ceilings. Human loss seems to be signified in this deserted house situated on a desolate piece of land. The enigma that surrounds this house greatly emphasizes a liminal space between life and death as well as the present and past, which marks a significant transition period of uncertainty. Also, his journeying leads him to a gang of Malay youngsters who personify a distinctive Bruneian subculture in their local identification as "*poklans*" (Lim 2014: 119, original emphasis) characterized by a blending of their Malay origins and desires to emulate Western culture. On a similar note, the embeddedness and localization of Jonathan's parents who are both Bruneian citizens (albeit second-generation Chinese migrants to the nation) "sent on government scholarship" (Lim 2014: 199) for their further studies in the United Kingdom affect their supermobility to various degrees. Although his father continues to serve out his bonded employment in Brunei, his mother chooses to leave by deciding on her onward migration to Australia. These transformative sites of identity represented in various spaces, places and people expose Jonathan to further change, which he discovers via his own means of mobility

within the Bruneian nation. Precisely because of his familial circumstances, changing physical milieus and social relations, Jonathan learns to reframe loss by situating it within his worldly experiences of local society, even though limited to an intra-national mobility for now. In other words, the third generation's supermobility is illustrated in Jonathan's acquiring of an understanding and exercise of his own agency when traveling around the nation to manage his personal losses. This is evident through his positive self-talk via uplifting phrases to instill a calm mindset once he encounters these local experiences through his mobility in the nation. These include a series of validating statements and rhetorical questions such as "No need to panic," "That was doable," and "So why worry?" (Lim 2014: 237) to demonstrate his revised frame of thinking as he continues with life without certain familial members. A realignment of his expectations after experiencing mobility leads Jonathan to develop a positive attitude to manage and potentially break the destructive cycle of intergenerational losses within the family and nation.

During his journeying in Brunei, Jonathan further establishes a special friendship with a Malay shopkeeper called Mohidin who lends him personal assistance. Mohidin's willingness to offer Jonathan sincere aid to physically locate Michael results in the formulation of a new social relation through their shared experience of loss, specifically the threat of familial loss. Mohidin generously chauffeurs Jonathan to Michael's location using the former's car (Lim 2014: 175-176). This new attachment is predominantly attributed to Mohidin's rekindling of his own affection for his brother Mikhail (also called Michael, as "It's Arabic for Michael," Lim 2014: 176). However, Mikhail passed away in a motor accident at a time when he was Jonathan's age. Across different races and times, Jonathan reawakens Mohidin's trauma of surviving Mikhail following his fateful motor accident. Thus, there is a certain degree of precedence that both Jonathan and Mohidin place on recovering lost relationships. As Jonathan declares to Mohidin: "Thanks for trusting me. Anyone else would have refused to help" (Lim 2014: 177). Trust is built on their sharing of intimate experiences of loss, but also gains in terms of their friendship. Here, it is evident that

a recovery of old familial attachments and creation of new social relations become possible by their moving across spaces and places. On the one hand, Jonathan's physical mobility from one locale to another enables his physical reunion with Michael. On the other hand, it offers opportunities for new social formations with those whom he encounters. In going places, the child taps into social ties that are crucial for developing a network beyond his immediate family and school friends. Even while the Chinese diaspora arrived as strangers in a foreign land and were subjected to a process of "strangification" (Shen 2012: 35), Mohidin prompts Jonathan's ideas of establishing social attachments. For one, Jonathan recalls his grandfather's arrival on Bruneian shores in the early twentieth century that was greeted with this patriarch's predicament of being constantly chided by his foster family for not showing enough subservience (Lim 2014: 208). However, after several years, trust was earned that contributed to his exponential success in business ("buying his own shop, then two more shops, and then four more..." Lim 2014: 208). Nonetheless, this trust that enabled his first-immigrant grandfather to open up, license, and patronize his shops was not as forthcoming as Jonathan's more positive and hands-on experience with Mohidin. As the new diaspora, Jonathan signals a form of supermobility in which positive connotations of diaspora are forged through his tapping into technologies of mobility to facilitate social attachments within the nation, which is an important mechanism to counteract loss.

Jonathan's mother embodies supermobility in her migration to Australia. Self-betterment choices result in new migration flows of the diaspora. Even as the diaspora suffers a loss of attachments and attenuated Chinese roots through migration, it is evident that new patterns of migration shift the focus to new relational avenues produced through a conscious exercise of agency for a flexible, not fixed, identity in a global landscape. By moving to Australia and traveling halfway around the world to Dubai, Jonathan's mother exhibits open possibilities of the mindful choice of migration that teaches her children the value of a flexible identity. As the new diaspora, Jonathan and his siblings represent the younger generation with their hopes, "individual responses within dreams and desires

[for success]" (Ho 2021a: 5). These personal aspirations forge a mobile identity contrasted with the old diaspora's identity that is firmly defined through a communal preservation of a strong sense of cultural rootedness as demonstrated through their zealous performance of Chinese funeral rituals in the familial home. Among the new diaspora, a search for alternative belonging results in an eagerness to move across the nation. For one, Michael runs away to set up his Western-inspired rock band with his Malay band mates, thus fragmenting himself from the Chinese cultural center of his immediate familial home (Lim 2014: 69-70). Despite their mother's absence as an instigator of both Jonathan's depression and Michael's angst, the brothers are reminded of the lessons gleaned through her migration. As Michael states, "When I get to Australia, I'll finally have the space to do what I want" (Lim 2014: 174). Both siblings yearn for flexibility that has been modeled for them through their mother's act of migrating. Through this supermobility, the diaspora actively engages with wider cultural spaces and topographical places when traversing across intra-national and international boundaries.

Just as his education at school offers him opportunities to grow and develop, mobility serves as a channel for forging flexible identities that are attentive to a diverse set of orientations and evolving socio-physical environments. Significantly, Jonathan draws an analogy between what is learnt in school and his family's increasingly mobile networks as a Chinese diaspora living in an era of globalization. He points out school lessons in "facts and figures [that are treated] as articles of wisdom handed down since the dawn of civilization from one generation to another" (Lim 2014: 64). The fixity of factual history that teachers transmit becomes "the stuff we [the schoolchildren] had to remember for life" (Lim 2014: 64)]. Although this kind of education facilitates a development of Jonathan's knowledge, its fastidious nature is set in contrast with evolving intergenerational relations, desires, and changing demands of a globalized diaspora that embrace a notion of success within mobile identities. Rather than failure due to losses of migration, supermobility underscores a positive development of a child, especially in terms of Leggett's (2020) sense of a transformational

shift in maturity from a child into an adult. The first semblance of maturity is indicated through Jonathan's persistence and resistance in the safe space of the classroom situated beyond his familial home. On a symbolic level, his favorite black pen that he uses in class despite his teacher's disapproval ("Black ink was so much stronger, so much bolder than the crappy blue that Mrs. Yap preferred" Lim 2014: 63) suggests his formulation of his own voice and personal agency that governs his insistent actions. More than a pre-teen act of rebellion, he also listens to his growing inner voice that then encourages him to set off in search of his brother during his grandfather's wake at the patriarch's home (Lim 2014: 86-87). Breaking with Chinese cultural tradition, his calculated leave from Ah Kong's wake ceremony contravenes a familial conformity with fixed ways of dealing with loss established by the old diaspora. Furthermore, he implements an observation of a pet monitor lizard that has been placed in "a small enclosure" (Lim 2014: 80) in the house compound. Jonathan says, "There was something I liked about the way he carried himself; [...] he strutted around like the king of his own world, and without a care for whatever was outside the borders of his realm" (Lim 2014: 80). While this natural wildlife appears not to take heed of that which lies beyond its cage, this quote also suggests that this terrestrial animal has a mindset of living in a borderless environment as it positively reframes its experiences of restriction, constraint, and entrapment. Its demonstrably adaptable attitude adds impetus to Jonathan's zeal to travel and overcome the borders of the Chinese patriarch's home.

Knowledge of Jonathan's mobility triggers a positive transformation in his father too. Learning of his son's agency and independence in tracking down his other son, Jonathan's father named Chin Seng (Lim 2014: 76) begins to initiate conversations with Jonathan. This signals small, but vital acts of growing a closer relational bond with Jonathan. Raised by old diasporic conventions in the family, the father is expected to conform to prescriptive Chinese cultural norms including a preservation of reticence as a feature of strong leadership among men who typically uphold the motto of "actions are louder than words" (Low and Ang 2012: 121). In other words, Chin Seng subscribes to traditional ways of control

to prevent an attenuating or loss of Chinese roots, and such prohibitions also encompass male social bonds: “Confucian norms govern [sic] human relationships in male culture” (Mann 2000: 1603). Jonathan’s renewed relationship with his father is apparent at the end of the novel when the former expresses his surprise at the latter’s “unprecedented” attempt to communicate with him: “Was my father actually initiating a conversation with me? [...] Had I stumbled upon that rarest of prizes, getting treated like a normal person by my father?” (Lim 2014: 236-237). Jonathan’s implicit comment about his father’s presentation of communicative traits that humanizes the latter further demystifies and personalizes him. Jonathan, thus, learns that humanity is about living with and communicating losses. However, rather than being defined by loss, Chin Seng works through his loss productively when attempting to connect with Jonathan after the latter’s return from his journeying with Michael. Via an exercise of affectionate modes of verbal communication, the second-generation diaspora forges emotional attachments and opens up support systems for the third-generation diaspora. Personal growth is developed in social systems within the family, and supermobility aids this process to shift the discourse away from lost attachments in attenuated Chinese roots to a positive development of flexible identities. Herein, mobility in the twenty-first century reflects evolving needs and demands of the diaspora whose global lens precipitates challenges to cultural, social, and physical boundaries.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Following on from the analysis above, this paper highlights that the Chinese diaspora is a community that is fast advancing into supermobility through their various stages and articulations of mobility. In examining a Chinese diaspora novel from Brunei, it underscores the way that literary representations reframe intergenerational losses within a Chinese Bruneian family as productive, especially in their opportunities for growth that are opened up and not foreclosed in their diverse emotional, cultural, and social challenges arising out of travel and migration. In view of

transnational possibilities of existence instigated by new migration flows and independent travel in the age of globalization, flexible and mobile identities are assumed by younger generations precisely because of their experiences of loss in the diaspora family. As the child protagonist embodies, an exercise of agency in physical, spatial, and social movements leads to a positive shift in identity—renewed expectations, regulated emotions, and a recalibration of social attachments.

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# Articles





## **The Shifts of Masculine Domination in Vietnam: Examining Mixed and Hybrid Characteristics in Feminist Texts on Vietnamese Newspapers in the Early Twentieth Century**



CAO Kim-Lan\*

### **[ Abstract ]**

This paper aims to identify the shifts of masculine domination, illuminating Vietnamese men and women's actual position in society through surveying the mixed and hybrid characteristics described in the feminist texts in the early twentieth century. This paper concentrates on the feminist writings of the two exceptionally male intellectuals Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh (1882–1936) and Phan Khôi (1887–1959). In order to implement these goals, the paper first examines the popular phenomenon of ventriloquism among Vietnamese male intellectuals, whose dominant attitudes may still be unveiled in feminist texts. Secondly, the paper focuses on surveys of men's direct discourse in constructing the model of women's liberation. From these two contents, this paper answers the following questions: Why have Vietnamese men become feminists? What were the causes, purposes, and effects of this phenomenon? To look at the nature of Vietnamese feminism, this paper will show the shifts of masculine domination in Vietnam as another form of protecting men's privileges. All analyses in this study will ground discussion on the economic, political, and social

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contexts and conditions of Vietnam in the early twentieth century.

**Keywords:** feminism, masculine domination, feminist texts, Vietnamese newspapers

## I . Introduction

Vietnamese society in the early twentieth century is multifaceted and complex. This issue is publicly discussed in the press which served as a major medium for conveying and reflecting on Vietnam's social, political, economic, and cultural aspects during this period. In these shifts in all aspects of life, although Western thought is imprinted in every element of the Vietnamese in urban areas (see Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân 2007), especially in the upper classes, traditional view of women's roles and functions is quite conservative, which seems hopeless for women. Therefore, the emergence of a series of social phenomena such as women committing suicide, prostitution, and women trafficking (mostly through marriage) can be viewed as an inevitable consequence of Vietnam's concession process (which includes acculturation and cultural resistance). The gravity of this social trend has shifted public debates toward women's issues, emphasizing determining the causes and finding solutions to prevent that gloomy reality.

With the appearance of columns devoted to women in many newspapers such as *Lục tỉnh tân văn* (Six South-Vietnam Provinces' News), *Đã cổ tùng báo* (Dai Nam's Daily News), *Đông Dương tạp chí* (Journal of Indochina), *Nam phong tạp chí* (Journal of South Wind), *Hữu thanh* (The Sound), *Thực nghiệp dân báo* (A Civil Newspaper of Professional Practices), *Trung Bắc tân văn* (The Centre-North's News), *Đông Pháp thời báo* (The Indochinese Courier), or the publication of specialized newspapers for women such as *Nữ giới chung* (Women's Bells), *Phụ nữ Tân văn* (Women's News), *Phụ nữ thời đàm* (Women's Discussions), *Đàn bà* (Women), *Đàn bà mới* (New Women), *Nữ giới* (Female Gender), *Việt Nữ* (Vietnamese Female), women became a pressing issue and had a profound influence on many areas of Vietnamese society at that time. In the

context of a colonial country, French colonial policies, the new ideas of Western feminism, social emergencies, and gloomy realities in Vietnam altered the face of society, fractured personal and community relationships, and sparked debates about women's issues, compelling men to reconsider their views on women's roles and functions in society.

However, the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century feminist movement in Vietnam was not a purely social phenomenon that fought for women's equal rights and emerged from the influence of Western feminism in the context of Vietnam's becoming a French colony. It was also a campaign related to many political, economic, and cultural issues as well as nationalism. Writings supporting this feminist movement reveal that gender oppression, the reception of Western thoughts, and an antagonistic relationship between Feminism and Confucianism contain many factors concerning the historical and political fate of Vietnam. They became the underlying motivation for the development of Vietnamese feminism. Based on examinations in the female newspapers, this paper aims to identify the shifts in masculine dominance, illuminating Vietnamese men's actual position in society as well as showing another form of protecting men's privilege through a survey of mixed and hybrid characteristics described in the early twentieth century feminist texts. This paper concentrates on the feminist writings of the two exceptionally male intellectuals, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh (1882–1936) and Phan Khôi (1887–1959).

It is an obvious fact that the "women's issue" in Vietnam did not just begin with the establishment of female newspapers; it started earlier, even before the first women's newspaper, *Nữ giới chung* first saw light in 1918 (Nguyễn 2001). This is a movement that was initiated and carried out by men—radical male intellectuals. In the early stages, when women had voicelessness, feminist texts appeared either in the form of ventriloquism or masculine discourse. Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, one of the two authors on whom this writing concentrates, was a well-known Vietnamese journalist, writer, and radical politician. He was not just an exceptional intellectual with a profound understanding of Western culture but also of Vietnamese traditions and customs. Known as the "father of journalism in

Vietnam," he was the editor-in-chief of two newspapers, *Đăng cổ tùng báo*,<sup>1</sup> a Vietnamese and Chinese bilingual newspaper in Tonkin<sup>2</sup> (1907), and *Đông Dương tạp chí* (1913), the first Vietnamese newspaper that gathered most of the leading personalities, including Confucian (conservative) and new intellectuals, as well as the first newspaper to instruct people on how to use the Vietnamese script. He was elected to the Tonkin Advisory Council and held some important positions in the colonial government. Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh continuously served as the principal editor of the newspaper *Trung Bắc Tân văn*, (founded by Schneider) in 1914, and he founded the French newspaper *L'Annam Nouveau* with the intention of promoting his ideology in 1931. After witnessing Western civilization firsthand, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh desired to reform the nation by developing domestic publishing business to spread the Quốc ngữ script (Vietnamese) and refute the backward feudal practices. The second individual is Phan Khôi, a talented journalist and one of the leading intellectuals who established the cultural groundwork for Vietnamese society in the early twentieth century. In his journalism, Phan Khôi proved himself a scholar and thinker. He contributed significantly to various newspapers, including *Đăng cổ tùng báo*, *Nam phong*, *Lục tỉnh tân văn*, *Thực nghiệp dân báo*, *Hữu Thanh*, *Thần Chung*, *Phụ nữ Tân văn*, *Phụ nữ thời đàm*, *Tràng An*, and *Sông Hương*. In addition, he was also a notable translator of the Protestant Bible, a Vietnamese linguist, and literary critic. Phan Khôi discussed a wide range of topics in his writings, including criticizing Confucianism's old views and receiving Western ideas. These two eminent intellectuals' voices had a profound effect on the spiritual life of Vietnamese people in general and women in particular. Selected to survey two authors, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh and Phan Khôi, where one writes in the name of a female voice<sup>3</sup> (the female

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<sup>1</sup> *Đăng cổ Tùng báo* is the follow-up newspaper of *Đại Nam Đồng văn nhật báo*, published weekly, in two languages: Vietnamese and Chinese. No. 1 of *Đăng cổ Tùng báo* (also known as *Đại Nam*), followed by *Đại Nam Đồng văn nhật báo*, started with No. 1 (793), March 28, 1907; the last edition is No. 34 (826), November 14, 1907. The director is F. H. Schneider and Editor-in-chief is Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh.

<sup>2</sup> North Vietnam

<sup>3</sup> In *L'Annam Nouveau*, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh admitted to impersonating a female voice in *Đăng cổ tùng báo* and *Đông dương tạp chí*, and in this French newspaper, he wrote entirely as a male intellectual.



ventriloquistic cross-dressing), and one who openly speaks from a male's perspective, the article aims to provide a convincing interpretation of a representative facet of the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century feminist movement in Vietnam and to highlight the shifts in masculine domination that were revealed in this movement—a movement that fought for women's equal rights, but fiercely initiated and enforced by men.

To implement these goals, firstly, the paper examines the popular phenomenon of the female ventriloquistic cross-dressing of the Vietnamese intellectuals, whose dominant attitudes were embedded in feminist texts. Secondly, the paper focuses on men's direct discourse in constructing the model of women's liberation. From these, the paper answers the following questions: Why did Vietnamese men become feminists? What were the causes, purposes, and effects of this phenomenon? Finally, to look at the nature of Vietnamese feminism, this paper will show the shifts of masculine domination in Vietnam as another form of protecting men's privileges. All analyses in this study will be based on the economic, political, and social contexts and conditions of Vietnam in the early twentieth century.

## **II . The Phenomenon of Ventriloquism in the Early Twentieth Century Vietnamese Feminist Movement: A Wake-up Call for Gender inequality and the initial Changes in Men's Consciousness**

In a country heavily influenced by Confucian thought and haunted by the "curse" (idea) of Confucius that "women and servants are hard to deal with" (Waley 2012), women are naturally marginalized in important agendas and they become men's shadows and have to endure many disadvantages and losses in their spiritual and material life. As the editor-in-chief of the Vietnamese section of the first Vietnamese-language printed newspaper in Vietnam, *Đảng cổ tùng báo* (1907) Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh took advantage of the golden opportunity, under the civilizational politics of the colonial rulers, to enlighten the people as to Vietnamese women's roles. Although this

newspaper has only existed for nine months, its column *Women's Words* strongly tackled women's issues. This was the first time in the history of Vietnamese journalism and publishing that women's voices were registered in the public forum. Although it had some troubles with ventriloquistic cross-dressing, this phenomenon became the foundation for the feminist movement in Vietnam in the early twentieth century. Later, when *Đăng cổ tùng báo* was suspended, the column *Women's Words* continued to appear in *Đông Dương tạp chí*,<sup>4</sup> also edited by Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh under the pseudonym Dao Thi Loan, starting from issue number 55 (see more Mai 2017).

Concretely, arguing about women's issues by gender crossing, *Đăng cổ tùng báo*'s editor-in-chief tried to completely conceal his male identity and spoke out with a female voice, Miss Dao Thi Loan, a gentle and humble girl. For example, "i am only a shy girl, who got used to obeying but now dares to discuss social issues. Although you might feel bored because nothing can be compared to your strong arguments, the hope of my voice's whispers and gentleness might attract you" (V. V. Nguyễn 1907a No. 801). To overcome voicelessness for thousands of years, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh's ventriloquism as the female voice of Dao Thi Loan was hidden by women's foolish and "clumsy" words, such as "i only use reasonable and sweet words to talk to you with the hopes that you listen to me in happy emotions" (Nguyễn 1907a No. 801). in that way, in spite of dealing with women's issues, women's discourse defaulted to sweet, gentle, easy-to-listen words. in addition, in the cases where many readers had a suspicion of Dao Thi Loan. On behalf of the newspaper *Đăng cổ tùng báo*, Nguyen had to confirm Dao's female identity in many different ways (V. V. Nguyễn 1907b No. 802; 1907c No. 809; 1907d No. 816; 1907e No. 817). He even used to take another man's name to illustrate that Dao Thi Loan is a real woman, and that he has seen her "pearl face". This immediately

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<sup>4</sup> *Đông Dương tạp chí* published its first issue on May 15, 1913 in Hanoi. This is a weekly newspaper published on Thursday.

<sup>5</sup> Women's issues continued to be discussed in the column *Women's Words* (*Propos de Femme*) in the magazine *Trung Bắc tân văn*. However, many different authors wrote about women's issues in this period.

dispelled doubts about "the counterfeit of a female voice in "Mr. Tan Nam's mouth" (Nguyễn 1907e No. 817) and people believed that "indeed the Moon (shows a girl) appeared under the sky of Annam"<sup>6</sup> (Nguyễn 1907e No. 817).

Using a gender-crossing mark/voice, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh appeared in the public forum as an educated woman who created an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of Vietnamese journalism. He used female ventriloquistic cross-dressing to bring a new nuance to writing. The female voice was a strange phenomenon that surely stimulated the reader's curiosity and touched their psychological expectations in the early twentieth century. On the one hand, by masking under a woman's words, all the stories, evaluations, or judgments about men were reflected from a woman's angle, so men would be curious to hear them irrespective of whether they followed/affected them or not; on the other hand, it also made sexual attractions. For example, male readers confessed that "from listening to the voice of the peach cheeks, every night is not unthinking, every day is not unexpectant" (No. 817). On the contrary, for female readers, the woman's speeches-insider's voice-surprised them. They admired her from building an image and an example to follow. No doubt, the public emergence of a woman's voice made a deep impression on the community. Vietnamese men who had never respected women's words suddenly had to listen to them, even if they were still very annoyed.

Impersonating a woman, Nguyen began to discuss some important issues related to women's status. Firstly, there were discussions about banning women from being educated. Facing views that "Educated girls are easy to love an amorous and dissolute person. Women who are literate might write love letters to other men" (Nguyễn 1907a No. 801), Dao Thi Loan argued: "How should a man live so that his wife respects him? it is better than to keep her only at home. if a man has narrow-minded thinking, he just makes a bondage life for his wife and just loves himself" (Nguyễn 1907a No. 801).

Besides direct arguments, addressing concise and vivid daily

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<sup>6</sup> Annam or Dai Nam is the old name of Vietnam.

stories is another way that Dao used to criticize men's backward viewpoints. This matches women's timidity and gossip, and Dao Thi Loan's touches on many important issues retold in the form of collectedly ordinary stories. For example, she describes a scene at a railway station where a man leisurely walks without anything in his hands while his wife is very busy being subservient, bringing a child in one hand while in the other bag and baggage; she carries a bamboo basket on her head (*Woman's Words*) (Nguyễn 1907f No. 803). She also represents scenes of some men using vulgar and obscene words to tease women (Nguyễn 1907g No. 806). It can be seen that publicly retelling these facts in the newspapers strongly impacts communication, especially among men, forcing them to wake up. Even one reader had to say: "Men's mouths/words are enough, why does the newspaper need to bring Ms. Dao's mouth/words so that she can tell men that are not good...". (Nguyễn 1907i No. 814). On behalf of the newspaper *Đãng cổ tùng báo*, Nguyen replied: "Our Dai Nam is the first to appear with Ms. Dao Thi Loan. Although sometimes she is quite hot, her words are indeed reasonable and meaningful. So, we should please her" (Nguyễn 1907i No. 814).

In particular, when talking about a viewpoint of men's polygamy, Dao's "womanly" voice became harder and clearer: "A gentleman says to respect weak women. That means he must be fair first. If a man wants his wife to only have a man/husband, he must have a wife" (Nguyễn 1907j No. 815).

Paralleled to criticizing conservative men, in the discourse of ventriloquistic cross-dressing, Nguyen also turned to teach and criticize women's bad habits in order to induce them to change. In a "counterfeit" woman's eyes, gambling, drinking, and drug addiction, as well as gossiping and slandering others, were women's bad habits and completely unacceptable (V. V. Nguyễn 1907j No. 818; 1907k, No. 819). Thus, the education of girls was an important thing. Because, according to Nguyen (Ms. Dao Thi Loan's voice), "teaching women" is the best way and it relates to the race of Vietnamese people and "Dai Nam's future." (Nguyễn 1907m No. 822). Women are human beings who take care of everything in their homes, from taking care of their children's education to building a

cozy sphere in their homes.

Despite having existed for a short time and having a small number of publications, the voice of Vietnamese "women" in the press in the early twentieth century created a huge impetus, marking the first movement that fought for women's equal rights and initially changing their position in society. Because of political reasons, *Đảng cổ tụng báo* was suspended, and the column *Women's Words* continued to be published in another newspaper called *Đông Dương tạp chí* also by the name Dao Thi Loan. However, "her" language is more decisive in this period. For example, "i think that good and reasonable words have been used by gentlemen, but bitter medicine must also have sugar to take it easier. Whenever the newspaper's editor-in-chief allows me to whisper a few words a week, i will try to cleverly bring sweet "gifts" and mix them with bitter words" (Nguyễn 1913a No. 5), she said. Her "bitter words" here mean the criticism directed toward both men's and women's backward viewpoints to reform/rescue the nation. The purpose of the column *Women's Words* was clearly outlined in the first writing of this 5<sup>th</sup> issue of *Đông Dương tạp chí*. "in the family standards, we need to have good housewives. This task is partly dealt with now thanks to the civilized wind, then we have to educate the skills and preserve women's virtues" (5).

From the viewpoint of "Happy and virtuous things depend on the mother," that means, women's role in the family is very important because they take on the responsibility of raising children. However, their illiteracy and ignorance resulted in extremely harmful educational practices (Nguyễn 1913b No. 7). The lack of knowledge made women raise their children and look after themselves after giving birth with many old-fashioned and barbaric things (Nguyễn 1913c No. 8; 1913d No. 9; 1913e No. 10; 1913f No. 11; 1913g No. 12; 1913h No. 13). Also, Dao discussed some trivial things in women's daily lives, such as *how to be happy* (Nguyễn 1914a No. 38), *making women more beautiful* (Nguyễn 1914b No. 48), *how to eat betel nuts* (Nguyễn 1914c No. 49), *using vulgar words* (Nguyễn 1914d No. 50), and *wearing and making up* (Nguyễn 1914e No. 51). it can be seen that *Women's Words* directly mention the criteria of a woman's virtues, called the *four feminine virtues* (diligent work, tasteful

appearance, proper speech, and good morals). in Dao's discourse, women's *four feminine virtues* were supported as the norms that Annamese women must uphold (Nguyễn 1913i No. 16). And to encourage those virtues, Dao reminded Vietnamese women by telling them about French women's qualifications, including 7 virtues: sweetness, gentleness, patience, merry face, courage, understanding, and determining their fate (Nguyễn 1913i No. 16).

Thus, requiring a perfect woman as well as speaking out about some issues that had never appeared in the female mind before, including the perception of polygamy, expose the fact that Ms. Dao's discourse contained men's desires with hybrid characteristics. Female ventriloquism is a "solution" for the feminist movement in Vietnam, making the relationship between men and feminism a particular phenomenon in the early twentieth century. *Women's Words* can be considered the earliest case in this period. Later, a number of other phenomena of female ventriloquistic cross-dressing also appeared, such as the case of Dã Lan Nu Si (see more Lại 2022), the pseudonym of Đào Duy Anh who was the main pen of the column *Women's Forum* in *Tiếng dân*<sup>7</sup> (*People's Voices*) in Huế. And more particularly, Dã Lan Nu Si was also named for the translation book *"Women in Campaigning"* (translated into Vietnamese), published by Quan Hai Tung Thu, Hue, 1928. This book's popularizing of socio-political knowledge, in which many political, social, and philosophical terms are explained, has a significant impact on society's awareness of the feminist movement<sup>8</sup> (Dã Lan 1928). Female ventriloquism becomes an interesting use of "masks."

Actually, ventriloquism is not Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh's unique creation, it could be seen as a part of Vietnamese literature and has a long history, spanning folklore, medieval literature, and even modern literature. in medieval literature, for instance, male poets used female ventriloquism to speak for women when they were

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<sup>7</sup> The gentle style of writing in discussions on women's issues in the column *Women's Forum* of the newspaper *Tiếng dân* edited and written by Đào Duy Anh in the years 1927-1929, significantly impacted society.

<sup>8</sup> The book has five main sections and focuses on issues of women's movements, the two major trends on women's issues in the world, and the movement that fought for women's political rights, feminism in the UK and China as well as knowledge for women.

voiceless and uneducated, as evidenced in works like *The Lament of an Odalisque* (宮怨吟曲) by Nguyễn Gia Thiều, *Lament of the soldier's wife* (征婦吟) by Đặng Trần Côn, and poetry of two female poets whose identities are still unknown, namely Hồ Xuân Hương and Đoàn Thị Điểm. However, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh's female ventriloquism is distinct from the works of medieval poets in terms of content, quantity, and voices. Concretely, if the fundamental topic of medieval poems is the women's loneliness and sufferings under male dominance as the tragic victims, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh's counterfeit voice, despite still being a kind of gentle voice, is the fight for women's rights to be human beings, to be educated, and to have professions. If few names spoke for women during the Middle Ages, Dao Thi Loan's female voice (Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh's mask) inspired many other female voices, forming a movement that fought for women's rights and changing the entire society's perception. If female ventriloquism in the Middle Ages imbued with the dreary, helpless, and lamenting voice, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh's was the strong and determined voice, facing men's backward views and condemning them. It can be said that these differences made Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh's discourse more convincing.

However, ventriloquistic cross-dressing is probably been awareness as only a temporary solution by male intellectuals due to forced circumstances. Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh profoundly understood his ventriloquism as a pressing requirement. "if we want to witness a liberation, then it must be the liberation made by the woman herself, not anyone else" (Nguyễn 1934a No. 304). Thus, "those who signed under their female pseudonyms will spread their ideology to the many other women and girls who were those newspapers' readers," he explained (Nguyễn 1934a No. 304).

### **III. Men's Direct Discourse in Vietnamese Feminism: A Model for Women's Liberation was Constructed by Men.**

From the female ventriloquistic cross-dressing in the column "*Women's Words*," women's issues were openly and enthusiastically discussed in many different newspapers, especially the appearance of women's specialized newspapers. However, as mentioned, even in

female newspapers such as *Phụ nữ tân văn*, *Phụ nữ thời đàm*, *Phụ nữ tân tiến*, *Đàn bà*, *Đàn bà mới*, and *Nữ giới*, the male intellectuals' role in writing is still huge [see more (Cao 2019), (Đặng 2008)]. Besides Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh's female ventriloquism, or later Đào Duy Anh's (Dạ Lan 1928), mostly men directly showed their strong voices on women's issues. Male intellectuals supporting feminism include Confucian intellectuals and Western intellectuals such as Phan Bội Châu, Phan Chu Trinh, Phạm Quỳnh, Nguyễn Phan Long, Phùng Ngọc Tường, Ngô Thúc Diệp, Trịnh Đình Rư. However, Phan Khôi was a special case. He devoted his whole life to "women's issues" in order to change communication perception and communication, in which he focuses on discussions about the relationship between women and Confucianism in Vietnam. In his analyses, gender inequality in Vietnam is a consequence of Confucian backward ethical practices. Confucianism, especially from the Han and Song dynasties, and also known as neo-Confucianism, teaches that a virtuous woman must obey the men in her family, and its tenets lead to a decline in women's status in society.

As the main pen of both *PNTV* and *PNTĐ*, Phan Khôi fought strongly against Confucianism's backward ideas. His speeches attracted the attention of different social classes and it was strong and direct language. For example, when encouraging women to participate in educational activities, he said that "women must realize their basic requirements and rights" (Phan June 13 1929a No. 7); when discussing the precepts that force women to obey, Phan used judicial language: "The precept that compels a woman to keep her loyalty to the memory of her dead husband is due to men's selfishness and thereby makes women's lives dark" (Phan 1929a No. 21). Men and women "are born as human beings in the world"; thus, "under any political regime, it is important to maintain our personality..." (PNTV No. 21 19/9/1929); and he expressed that "if we want to wake up women and develop society, we must change the rituals that are dominating women" (Phan September 26 1929c No. 22).

Thus, the difference in the use of language, including utilizing vocabulary and the rhetoric of feminist discourses (reasoning techniques), between men and women, undoubtedly, reveals their



attitudes and real status in society. Phan's male discourse and Nguyen's female ventriloquism are quite typical if compared with Robin Lakoff's point of view presented in her work *Language and Women's Place*: "Our use of language embodies attitudes as well as referential meanings. Woman's language has as its foundation the attitude that women are marginal to the serious concern of life, which are preempted by men." (Lakoff 1973: 45) Although illustrations of marginalized women have gradually changed in Kira Hali, Miriam Meyerhoff, Susan Ehrlich, and Scott Fabius Fiesling's research (2004), especially in Susan Lanser's "Toward a Feminist Narratology" (Lanser 1986), undeniably, the concept of women's discourse in Vietnam is still bound by many social conventions such as women's voice is "weak," gentle, and emotional (Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh).

In order to overcome many unequal prejudices that existed as normal standards in the male-dominated society of Vietnam and fight for women's equal rights, Vietnamese male intellectuals first had to quell their egos. in their feminist texts, they chose a way that did not pay much attention to abstract theoretical issues and elaborated philosophical views of feminism, and also did not seek to encourage a radical revolution in society about gender with demands for "powerful equality between men and women," "women's liberation," or "freedom in sex," and "free marriage," but rather to discuss "women's daily issues." Phan Khôi and many other male intellectuals shared the same viewpoint of helping women become themselves (Phan 1933d No. 12). Women were not only taught to sew, go to the market, cook, give birth, and raise children, men wanted women to become "human beings." "What a man knows, a woman should know." "The only thing women need to remember is that while learning new knowledge, women should depend on themselves level" (Phan 1933c).

From the purpose of awakening women and helping "*women in being human*" rather than being *a servant* (Phan 1933d No. 12), Phan Khôi advocated: "What should be done for women? They have to be educated and have a certain knowledge foundation" (PNTV 1929 No. 1). "Everything, if just as necessary for men, is also necessary for women. There is no law, no custom that can force

women and girls not to enjoy the happiness of those three essential upbringings" (*PNTĐ* No. 21 2-3/6/1931). Thus, defining education as the "root of human evolution," feminism from Phan Khôi's and other male intellectuals' perspectives in Vietnam raised the issue that education is first and foremost. if a woman gained independence in both material and mind, she would be able to take care of her body and spirit. And they would have the "knowledge and ability" to be equal to men (Phan 1933a No. 1).

Furthermore, education from men's perspective not only helps wives and mothers have knowledge about traditional morality and culture but also gives them cognition about social and historical issues that related to the fate of the country. All these reasons are perceived as education's goals, but what men expect from educated women is their perception of limitations and abilities that are suitable for each circumstance of Vietnamese women: "Let the woman realize that there are many good and noble things in our traditional morality and customs that should be preserved and respected. Modifying and changing to suit the times is a natural thing, but we need to carefully think about what identities we must keep respectfully, what bad customs we should remove" (*PNTV* 1929 No.1). Thus, education's great role was realized and implemented by male intellectuals at the beginning of Vietnamese feminism.

The next issue that Phan Khôi fought for women's equal rights is women's motherhood and profession. Talking about women's motherhood and profession, it seems that the initiators and activists have touched on the most difficult and sensitive issues of the feminist movement. The question of the woman's profession becomes a difficult issue to compromise on. Facing the rooted cultural viewpoint in the community's psychology that a woman's profession is to be a wife and mother, Phan Khôi explained: "We must make sure that every woman respects her profession in order to live on her own abilities, giving up the habit of living off her husband and relying on her children, asking for her uncle, losing all the motivation of her actions. As we know, if we live depending on someone, that means, we are slaves to them. Thus, how we can say about freedom and equality" (*PNTV* 1929 No. 1).

Phan's advocate initially helped Vietnamese women realize that equality is not an issue that can be achieved by empty words. Women who want to occupy an equal position in society must have equal knowledge and occupation first (Phan 1933a No. 1). However, social occupations and the job of motherhood that are associated with "being a wife and mother" were not easily reconciled and accepted in both sexes. Vietnamese women's occupations became a difficult problem to solve. This situation seems to be similar to the concept of European and American women's social occupation from the beginning to the 40s of the twentieth century. "Happy housewife" is a women's ultimate goal, and they will feel "embarrassed" if they have to go out to work (Friedan 2010: 53-100). If working outside deprives American women of their desire to be happy (Friedan 2010), Vietnamese women's professions also do not escape from the boundary of their houses. Phan Khôi, in his article "Opposition to the article *On the Motherhood of Women*,"<sup>9</sup> thoroughly analyzes the so-called "motherhood/natural job" of Vietnamese women and strongly opposes considering motherhood as a women's profession: "Motherhood! Women's natural duties! On what basis does the author say that a woman's profession is in the kitchen, the room, and the inner house? An outlook of the natural job should be changed from time to time." Because "considering women's work that is only placed in the kitchen and the room is a sentence that is just created by people, how can it be called a women's profession?" (Phan 1933b No. 5) According to Phan, for a woman's natural job, he accepted two things, including giving birth and breastfeeding. A woman's genital organ can produce a baby, and the same is called the breast, but only the women's breast can flow milk to nurse a child. Thus, he only admitted that "women are born in order to entrust these two things to them." That is a natural job" (Phan 1933b No. 5).

To give more convincing arguments, based on the changes in

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<sup>9</sup> in this article, Phan Khôi argued with Bang Hoang Tang Bi's article published on *Trung Bắc tân văn* about women's divine duties/working wife and mother. Bang Hoang said: "Women should only stay at home, take care of the kitchen, manage servants, and work in the garden work, but should not be involved in outside work."

circumstances in Vietnam, Phan showed that in the early twentieth century, in reality, Vietnamese women started to go out for work. Because of being a French colonial country, most of the work at home, including silkworm and silk rearing, cooking alcohol, and sewing, disappeared due to the appearance of factories. This leads to a situation where there is no work at home but more and more outside jobs and more businesses that need women to work. He confirmed, "Nowadays women can't stay in the kitchen because of new circumstances and requirements. Anyone who understands the fact that in our country for almost half a century now, it has been found that in this society, inevitably, there must be some women going out to work like men; hence, going to work is not because of their gossip" (Phan 1933b No. 5).

Thus, the law of supply and demand in society is the foundation for the notion of professional women to appear. Although the view of women's occupations and their duties is not easy to change, these arguments initially help women realize who they are and their place in society. The long-term suppression of male rule deprived Vietnamese women of awareness and the will to be human. The argument that "motherhood is a woman's profession," associated with staying at home and being a wife and mother, had begun to waver and is no longer relevant.

Based on fighting for women's rights to be educated and have a profession, Phan Khôi expanded women's issues into *"Women with Literature."* According to him, when the level of human evolution developed equally, men and women shouldered social work equally, and knowledge would not be exclusive to men (Hoai Thanh and Hoai Chan 2007). Facing the reality that most writers are male and the literature is written by men, while its contents mainly talk about women, using women's stories to express their feelings, even impersonating women (the phenomenon of ventriloquism) to talk to women, Phan Khôi openly persuades women to take this opportunity: "if literature is truly feminine-centered, women should actively advocate their literature, and then literature may be more advanced than before." Because how can men talk to women more delicately than women talking about their own affairs?" (PNTV 1929 No.2). "in this context, i think if women have not yet accepted the

burden of literature as her own, it is a disadvantage for mankind and society" (*On the literature of Vietnamese women*) (Phan Khôi) PNTV 1929 No. 1).<sup>10</sup>

However, Phan Khôi's advocacy and enthusiasm for the issue of *women in literature* were opposed by some male intellectuals. These intellectuals believed that literature and "literary studies need to be diligent in finding, recording, and remembering a lot and also need to be compared and considered carefully. Women who are inherently shallow in nature can not do it" (Phan 1929b No. 6). Thê Phụng even emphasized that women's femininity was not suitable for literature: "if a man writes good poetry, he must be an elegant, profound person, and he also has a sense of purpose and determination. How can a woman have these qualities? Women are inherently shallow, a bit like children, although all the "romantic" looks and characteristics are there." (Phan 1929b No. 6) Responding to Thê Phụng, and expressing enthusiasm for the future of women's literature which may be at that moment "just a hypothesis," Phan Khôi strongly protested: "if the feminine feature is women's nature, why have women always been under oppression, being toys for men?" To be oppressed for a long time makes them cowards as men's toys, becoming weak and sniveling" (Phan 1929b No. 6).<sup>11</sup>

Although "*women with literature*" is the last issue in the "women's issues," in fact, it is also a crucial aspect to show women's voice and their position in society. *Writing* is proof of a woman's evolution of knowledge. By gaining a certain level of knowledge, women can change their awareness and move their internal minds. it can be seen that, in the early twentieth century, it was impossible to expect *L'écriture Feminine* as proposed by H. Cixous (Cixous and

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<sup>10</sup> The Phung strongly opposed the fact that women could compose poetry (PNTV No. 6 6/6/1929).

<sup>11</sup> Thê Phụng's argued that men often don't want to shed tears directly because they will "lose their self-esteem," so they must entrust themselves to a woman. Because when the women cry, it is easy to make people feel pity," Phan Khôi exposed the cowardly falsehood: "His view is very heartless that he confessed the men's feelings. Why do men all have thoughts and feelings that they can blame on women and refer to women? (...) Then those men are both despicable, cunning, and timid; the same thing with women in your eyes!" (PNTV No. 6/6/1929).

Sellers 2014) in Vietnam, but women began to express their views on social life through certain discourses. Phan's incentives, although considered as his hypothesis and causing some objections from conservative male intellectuals, actually wake up women and initially form a new desire for women. in fact, women's *writing* has gradually improved.

Although Lakoff supposed that women use a kind of language that is different from men's and is a discourse of powerlessness (Lakoff 1973), many researchers debated that "women's language" is more complicated. it seems to not only exist with characteristics of "polite, emotional, enthusiastic, gossipy, talkative, uncertain, stupid, and chatty," as opposed to men's words, which are "capable, direct, rational, rational, illustrating a sense of humor, unfeeling, strong (in tone and choice word) and blunt" (Kramarae 1980: 58). Women's strong and active voices may be hidden under gentle and resigned marks, or other sexual models, or depend on their contexts (Lanser 1986; O'BARR and ATKINS 2005; Spender 1985). This indeed raises a question about the nature of Vietnamese feminism in the early twentieth century. Obviously, we can find an effective social movement toward women's issues, but it is not a revolution with comprehensive and radical changes. it is still a gradual change and is convincingly illustrated in the language. in Phan Khôi's discourse, although we can recognize a strong voice fighting for women's equal rights, these rights and an emancipative model are chosen by men. Feminism's nature requires the development of internal forces, thus, when the internal capacity of Vietnamese women is weak, it is unavoidable to have a strong masculine voice in feminist discourse, and women's liberation is still evaluated and controlled by men.

#### **IV. The Shifts of Masculine Domination in Vietnam: Another Form of Protecting Men's Privilege**

The fact was confirmed by the men themselves: "in this social regime, people and women have always been suffering. The people are fooled by the rulers in order to oppress them, just as men make women stupid in order to control them easily" (Phan 1929c No. 3).

This reality is one of the crucial reasons to force radical male intellectuals to speak out. Thus, considering this feminism in the context of colonial Vietnam in the early twentieth century, it shows some of the following characteristics:

First of all, feminism in Vietnam is a particular phenomenon because its initiators and executors in the beginning period were male intellectuals. This led to the relationship between men and feminism being a controversial issue and containing many implications that transcend the boundaries of so-called "women's issues" or "women's rights." in the complicated context of the colonial nation, the most significant goal of this feminist movement was mainly to focus on the country's destiny, in which its reform from the inside is the best way to escape slavery. Hence, feminism is associated with two main tasks, including raising the female labor force and opposing Confucianist backward ideas. Phan also confirmed this meaningful purpose in his struggles as to "preparation to lead our nation on the path of development, avoiding to destroy it" (Phan 1933a No. 1). it was an intellectual's important duty to "understand that meaning," and to have a heart for the nation's future in bringing out women's issues in order to "research and help women's evolution, that is, to help our nation's evolution" (Phan 1933a No. 1). This can be considered an urgent cause associated with the nation's fate. it becomes a driving force for men to change their perception and stand up to fight for women's equal rights besides the other reasons arising in society, such as women committing suicide, prostitution, and trafficking in women at this time (Cao 2019; Firpo and Goscha 2013).

In order to encourage women to join social activities, male intellectuals encouraged them overcome obstacles in their minds that originated from Confucianism, the tenets of which are deeply entrenched in Vietnamese communication (Trần 1996; Cao 2019). in the complicated political situation of a semi-feudal colonial nation, Western thoughts transformed many traditional values (Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân 2007) and made the "peaceful land" (Phan Khôi) alter with new nuances, including both good and bad. Everything is presented and fully displayed in the mixture of light and darkness, chaos and hope, opportunities and tricks, and attempts and

achievements. Obviously, the feminism of Vietnamese male intellectuals is different from other feminist movements in the world because of special reasons (see more Mackie 2003; Allen 1991). Living under French colonial rule, radical intelligentsia found that half of the major workforce in society had been "forgotten" as unfamiliar Western ideologies permeated society, rendering Confucianism backward. They live under strict control of unsound ethical standards, losing their human rights and failing to promote their strengths. Recognizing that women are half of the labor force that contributes to the recovery and prosperity of the country, radical male intellectuals spoke out and fought for women's human rights to wake up the whole nation about their independence and sovereignty. At that time, the sense of men's male supremacy was not as pressing as national destiny. Thus, men's proactive change does not lose or reduce their position, but rather maintains their authority in another form.

Thus, perhaps it would not be necessary to question men's "sincerity" when they express their "sympathy," fight for women's equal rights, and be feminists as some Western academic scholars mentioned (Jardine and Smith 1987; Kiberd 1985). In fact, Vietnamese women during the French colonial period did not "forget" their desires, did not "repress" their dreams, or "felt" lacking in something "ambiguous" (as American women in *The Feminine Mystique*) (Friedan 2010). They have never experienced the so-called "complete pleasure" of being a working mother and wife in their whole lives. Subsistence life takes up their whole time and energy. What they faced were survival, hunger, ignorance, and even family violence. So feminism was indeed understood by the aristocracy and the intelligentsia. Feminist thought and practices occurred in the small groups of the upper class or wealthy families. As for most lower-class women at that time, feminism was something completely unknown. Therefore, the feminist movement in Vietnam, first of all, was a movement that fought for women's rights to be human beings, the right to be educated, the right to have a job and enjoy happiness. Feminism and its philosophical foundation, thus, are understood quite simply, without the comprehensive and profound knowledge of philosophy and anthropology as Western feminism in



the later period.

Secondly, based on an examination of the relationship between men and/in feminism, it is not only to recognize this movement's nature but can also determine men's roles and contributions to Vietnamese women's liberation. Living under gender oppression for thousands of years, Vietnamese women were taught to be good wives and mothers. Their sphere was limited at home; thus, there was not any woman capable enough to shoulder the responsibility of undertaking social work and confidently fighting for their rights. Due to the lack of educated and talented women, the emergence of men's voices, especially those who are influential people in society, became an inevitable phenomenon and provided huge support for the movement that fought for women's equal rights. Phan Khôi himself also defended this solution and opposed the requirement of having female newspapers that are advocated by women. He asserted, "it is too hasty to say that in our country today. it makes no sense at all." "The women's issue has just emerged for several years, and most women do not have the right to be educated" (PNTV No. 15 8/8/1929). Therefore, "women are naturally slower than men in the path of evolution" (PNTV No. 15 8/8/1929). Also, according to Phan, "if there is no woman to do the feminist movement, men can do it for her. There is no reason that is not right" (Phan 1933c No. 12). This reality becomes one of the crucial reasons why Vietnamese feminism is different from others in Asia.

Looking back on men's roles in Western feminism, we can realize the same point here that Mill's contributions to the Western feminist movement in the 1860s are considered a turning point as he fully outlines the injustice and brutality against women in all aspects of society (in his book *The Subjection of Women* 1869) (Mill 2018). Vietnamese male intellectuals also play an important role in the feminism of colonial Vietnam. However, the difference is that Vietnamese men not only initiate "women's issues" but also carry them out, even using female ventriloquistic cross-dressing to stimulate women's activities.

The last point that the article would like to discuss is men's

discourse in the feminist movement. it is uncovered here that men's authoritative voices were still maintained and prevailed. if almost all feminists agree that feminism must be necessarily created by women's voices, in which they are subjects who carry out feminism's tasks and then aim to change their position, then feminism in Vietnam would be a "particular phenomenon." The most significant speeches in the Vietnamese feminist movement are men's discourse in the first stage. in the circumstance of a colonial nation, because women "are still very weak," and "cannot be self-sufficient," it is inevitable that men's discourse emerged as sympathy and understanding. This feminist movement, as Phan Khôi said, emerged as "forced by natural law" (Phan 1933a No. 1), but "most of them were unresolved and still pended." Thus, most significantly, besides understanding "its true meaning" (Phan 1933a No.1), Vietnamese feminism has been unavoidably imbued with men's "authority," expressed through reminders, admonitions, teachings, and warnings in male or ventriloquistic discourses.

When men played a key and proactive role in all activities of fighting for women's equality in society, they were both subjects and objects of investigation and analysis. Thus, we have the right to suspect the so-called "renunciation," or removing authority, which has been deeply rooted in the Vietnamese man's ego, is hard to lose. That is why Phan Khôi's discourse (and other male intellectuals) as well as the phenomenon of Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh's female ventriloquism, on the one hand, aims to gradually eliminate injustices against women, on the other hand, has protected and maintained masculine domination (in the active position). in Vietnam, the disparity between men and women regarding their knowledge and capacities was so huge that led to the result of remaining in men's dominant position of power, although women might achieve certain human rights in the early twentieth century. Hence, men could share, sympathize, and encourage women, but the "liberation" considered from the Western point of view (for example, Cixous, Cohen, and Cohen 1976; Cixous and Sellers 2014) could not achieve. it can even be said that men learning feminism may just protect their "privileges through the discourse of resistance" as Robert K. Pleasants showed in his examination (Pleasants 2011).

Women still live in the divine "golden circle" of this male-dominated ideology. Phan Khôi himself, when discussing "*Women and national affairs*", on behalf of PNTV also wrote: "Yes, Vietnamese women do not need to argue in the parliament. Women just stay in the bedroom, worriedly advise their husbands, and teach their children. That is to do national affairs in a very profound and noble way." (Phan 1933b No.5)

if the women's *voice* is considered the key guide in any feminist movement in the world, it can be seen that the Vietnamese women's voice is quite vague, whereas mainly men's voices have emerged. For the first stage of feminism, women's voices are just a kind of ventriloquism (counterfeit voices), although undeniably appearing female language of this phenomenon strongly influences society and becomes a "revolution" for communicational perception. As i mentioned above, the immediate requirement of having a strong and decisive female voice would be blasphemous. However, when considering the issue of gender inequality in Vietnam, it is necessary to reiterate here that implementing Confucian practices has various nuances caused by the influence of indigenous religion called Mother Goddess religion that John K. Whitmore used to recognize in his research on Confucian beliefs in Vietnam: "Think twice before using the term *Confucianism* in Vietnamese history" (Whitmore 1987). This reality also reveals that the Mother Goddess religion makes Confucian practices different from other cultures. This indigenous religion that deifies women has greatly influenced the Vietnamese family members and community's behaviors, becoming the reason for many distortions in Confucian practice in Vietnam. Vietnamese women seem to enjoy a form of "soft power" in their families.<sup>12</sup> in addition, as researchers on Vietnamese Confucianism show that Confucian practices in Vietnam have just been strictly carried out in the upper class, there have been quite a few shifts in Vietnamese families in the lower (Phạm 2016; Trần 1996; Trần 2008). Thus, male intellectuals' support for women's equality may have originated from communication's respect for the

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<sup>12</sup> in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, women began to work in factories, so economic power caused her status in the family to change, although Confucianism was still strong.

Mother. From another perspective, sharing equal rights for Vietnamese women in this period is also a share of responsibility with the work related to the country's destiny. However, in my opinion, the view of a woman's virtues as "good at social work and housework," from which a new standard has been formed and prevailed, seems to be the heavier burden on women.

Since women's issues were discussed mainly from men's female ventriloquistic and direct discourse, the views on women's liberation were strongly influenced by the male perspective. Or in other words, the emancipative model of Vietnamese women was constructed by men. For example, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh himself also said that "women have some things that cannot be done because they are bound by women's divine duties of working wife and motherhood or certain physical limitations." (Nguyễn 1934a No. 304 ). He emphasized: "An Annamese woman needs to realize who she is and what she needs to change in learning feminism, and they must prepare to live with an irreversible trend, not by claiming rights that they have never been denied, not by demanding things that they do not feel they really want, not by the self-delusional way, stroking oneself with false things that men crammed into their heads"(Nguyễn 1934a No. 304).

Facing the fact that the vast majority of women were not interested in the feminist movement due to their resignation or their submissiveness originating from "their absolute inability to implement certain civil rights" (Nguyễn 1934b No. 356), Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh suggested that women could achieve their emancipation and reduce inequality by "doing it through the renewal of women's roles in their family, begin by herself, and denying all ties of power to her husband and her children, as an individual" (Nguyễn 1934b No. 356).

And also, from a man's perspective, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh strongly affirmed that: "it is useless to praise and flatter the masculine qualities in a woman while ignoring the natural feminine qualities that make women stand out from men in the poetic and tender aspects of life" (Nguyễn 1932 No. 102). For him, while waiting for a woman to express her desire and be able to implement all her rights, "the fact of this new life will do the job of accelerating this

process without our rushes to push women to have to leave their motherhood" (Nguyễn 1932 No. 102).

Although the feminist movement in Vietnam took place within the boundary of the French colonial rulers' "civilizational" policy, it gained certain achievements by male intellectuals in effectively implementing policies associated with the nation's existence and prosperity. It also faced a great deal of censorship by the French colonialists, but the French's policies and decrees promulgated at this time (the 1900s) relating to colonist education are the great results of this movement.<sup>13</sup>

## V. Conclusion

The phenomena of female ventriloquistic cross-dressing and men's direct discourse that fought for Vietnamese women's equal rights in the early twentieth century are significant representations that demonstrate important shifts of thought which, remarkably, form the foundation for changing women's position in society. However, all these phenomena do not decline the male's position in society. This shift's illustration is quite complicated because, in the feminist movement that fought for Vietnamese women's equality, men were the ones who actively initiated, penned, and implemented in the

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<sup>13</sup> On education: During this period, the French implemented a renovation of the entire educational system and then formed a new education with three levels, in order to completely get rid of the influence of the Sinology model. This system of schools had many different levels of training and professionally organized classes. Education was developed in a variety of schools and classroom models; the education system was widely distributed. The curriculum at schools was built with comprehensive content, not only social sciences but also natural sciences, technology, foreign languages, etc. According to John K. Whitmore's assessment, for the construction of this new education, "the French invasion" has a more important meaning in: "bringing to the end of the Confucianization by abolishing the exams in Chinese and the popularization of Vietnamese (Quốc Ngữ)." Although the process of Westernization did not really "help Vietnamese culture get rid of China completely" (Tong Phong 1988), it was an important turning point to shake the Han cultural foundation in Vietnam. On policies for women: women had permission to go to school; women could participate in education and training work, and women could work in other professions.

press (popular media at that time) and were the main force at the early stage. Male intellectuals also bring the strongest discourses on fighting for women's equal rights. Therefore, it is inevitable to be confirmed that Vietnamese feminism is a movement developed under the "control" of male power. The "rights" that male intellectuals aim at are mainly the right to "be a human being," within the limits of the traditional moral standards that have been modeled and taught in the community associated with women's physical characteristics and motherhood. Also, in this struggle, because men are both the object and the subject, the shift of masculine authority when the feminist movement prevails is an active shift within a certain framework. The supremacy of male domination is not lost when feminism appears, but rather the act of "sharing" responsibility with the nation and community when Vietnamese society has changed, becoming a colonial country.

Thus, the cause of men's "voluntariness" in fighting as well as the concession of equal rights for women is the compromise between cultural and political goals, between traditional cultural norms and national interests. In addition, in the context of a colonial country, losing its sovereignty forced the male intelligentsia to call for the improvement of women's position to gather the strength of the entire population to reform the country. Men's discourse at that time is the first voice that helps women realize their abilities, that women were born to "be human beings" and not to "become a tool, let people show off, serve and satisfy the pride" of men (Nguyễn 1932 No. 102).

Vietnamese men do feminism, either by female ventriloquism or by directly fighting with their strong voices, so this movement is in men's domination. Inconcretely, within male supremacy, Vietnamese feminism, although publicly opposing backward tenets of Confucian doctrine towards women, maintains these norms in criteria on *công, dung, ngôn, hạnh*.<sup>14</sup> Equality here is only on educational and professional grounds. That means women have the right to study, have a job, and participate in social activities.

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<sup>14</sup> Four Virtues (*Công, dung, ngôn, hạnh*) are "morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work"

However, besides those, they still have to ensure the completion of household chores as an inalienable duty or compulsory work. invisibly, liberation and equality force women to make efforts and try many times over to ensure both tasks in the family and society. Thus, although the change in men's consciousness of women's roles and position is a basic and solid foundation for the feminist movement to have a chance to develop, the shifts of masculine domination are effectively another form of protecting men's privileges in Vietnam in the early twentieth century.

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## Breaking Limitations: Constraints and Strategies of Indonesian Migrant Entrepreneurship in Taiwan\*

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### [ Abstract ]

As migrants develop businesses abroad, entrepreneurship needs specific strategies due to some barriers when establishing and doing businesses. This paper examines the kinds of problems that have been faced in Indonesian migrant entrepreneurships in Taiwan and how the entrepreneurs cope with the difficulties. They use structural and cultural strategies for survival, seize the opportunities for self-development, and develop future careers. Research result shows that the limitations of Indonesian entrepreneurships in Taiwan are related to institutional issues, migrant status, business regulations, resource-providing institutions, language barriers, competition among migrants and locals, and capital. Hence, migrant entrepreneurs must conduct strategic actions to continue their businesses by developing innovations to grow and survive. Some measures include changing from offline to online marketing especially when the COVID-19 pandemic

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hit, product diversification using migrants and local people's assistance and networks, and setting competitive prices. This paper is based on qualitative research. The data were obtained through interviews in East Java-Indonesia and in Taiwan in 2022. The data were analysed using the descriptive analysis with sociological perspectives.

**Keywords:** constraints, coping strategies, innovations, entrepreneurship.

## **I . Introduction**

Migrant entrepreneurs who belong to minority groups in foreign countries often face challenges. These obstacles arise from various aspects such as the economic, social, cultural, and regulatory factors of the host country. Nonetheless, despite these challenges, some migrant entrepreneurs manage to overcome them and achieve success. In order to comprehensively understand and analyze the strategic approaches and adaptation of migrant entrepreneurship, it is recommended by Glick-Schiller, Ayşe and Thaddeus C (2006) and Brettell (2003) to broaden the analysis beyond individual entrepreneurs and the economy of ethnic enclaves. Instead, it is more advantageous to consider the symbolic and social dimensions of entrepreneurial activities. Recognizing the importance of individual values in the economic mobility of migrants is crucial for understanding the role of migrant entrepreneurship in shaping their pathways to economic incorporation (Glick-Schiller, Ayşe and Thaddeus C 2006). Similarly, according to Zhou (2004), migrant entrepreneurship should not be regarded solely as a consequence of economic activities, but rather as the endeavor of individuals operating their businesses. This highlights the significance of uncovering both external and internal factors that contribute to their entrepreneurial patterns and strategic models. These two concepts form the basis for constructing the research perspectives.

The challenges faced by entrepreneurs can be categorized into internal and external factors (Rusdiana 2018). The internal factor comes from personal issues, while the external one comes from the

interaction between the persons with their environment. However, when discussing migrant entrepreneurship, some scholars mention that factors such as discrimination, unequal access to financial resources, or lack of information transfer are the barriers (Hatziprokopiou in Davidavičienė and Lolat (2016). Meanwhile, Moon et al. (2014) explains that capital factors for opening a business, understanding regulations and taxes, advertising, licensing processes and requirements, and getting a location are some obstacles for migrant entrepreneurs, either being a new entrepreneur or being in business for a long time. They even find difficulties to get capital from financial institutions. Although the language problem is not so significant, there appears to be cultural differences in this matter (Moon et al. 2014). Meanwhile, Davidavičienė and Lolat (2016) explain that bureaucracy, education levels of the ethnic labor force, lack of knowledge of business culture, competition of EMBs (Ethnic Minority Businesses), access to finance, administrative burden, language, skills, low quality, niche market, and access challenge migrant entrepreneurs in European countries. Almost similar to it, according to the European Commission (Davidavičienė and Lolat 2016), migrant entrepreneurs' limitations also include lack of capital and entrepreneurial skills, training, human resources, organising production, distribution and marketing, and technology. Last but not least, the COVID-19 pandemic has become the current challenge that has made an impact to entrepreneurship in the world (Liñán and Jaén 2022).

This article aims to explore the socio-cultural and legal challenges encountered by Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs, regardless of gender, in Taiwan, as well as their coping strategies in overcoming these obstacles. How Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs have difficulties expressing their social-economic activities, and what strategies they employ to evade strict labor regulations are the questions of this paper. This study provides specific academic contributions in three areas. Firstly, it explores the phenomenon of intra-Asia migrations, with particular focus on migrant entrepreneurship. Secondly, it sheds light on the entrepreneurial endeavors of Indonesian migrants in Taiwan, a prominent but underrepresented migrant population in the country. Lastly, the

study emphasizes the significance of socio-economic and cultural perspectives in understanding the limitations faced by migrant entrepreneurs, as well as the diverse strategies employed to overcome these challenges within different host country contexts.

Based on qualitative research, this study aims to analyze the problems of Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs in Taiwan and strategies to cope with them. This study began with a literature study on migrant entrepreneurs in Taiwan and their profiles, and how they established their businesses in Taiwan. Then, it was followed by field research. The data were obtained through interviews with informants from different professions. The interviews were all recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed. In total, between March to July 2022, there were 18 informants interviewed through the snowball sampling technique. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some interviews were conducted with a second layer of informants from East Java, family members of the entrepreneurs and academicians. Then it was followed by field research in Taipei and its surroundings. Online and offline interviews were conducted with Indonesian entrepreneurs residing in Taiwan. The informants consisted of migrant entrepreneurs (12), Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) representatives (2), a government representative (1), a member of the Indonesia-Taiwan entrepreneur association (1), and professionals (2). To analyze the data, socio-economics approaches were used.

This paper is organized as follows: Part 1 introduces the background, significance, purpose, and study method. Part 2 is about migrant entrepreneurship in Taiwan. It discusses the pros and cons of developing business migrants in Taiwan. Part 3 is about Indonesian entrepreneurs in Taiwan. It discusses who the Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs are, their business characteristics, and how they established their businesses. Part 4 is about the barriers to Indonesian entrepreneurs in Taiwan as a minority. Part 5 is about how they cope with the barriers, and finally part 6 is the conclusion.

## **II . Migrant Entrepreneurship in Taiwan**



Some research topics that have been covered in the study of migrant entrepreneurship in Taiwan are as follows: the entrepreneurship mobility of professional western migrants in Taiwan (Tzeng 2012); the Indonesian community and migrant entrepreneurship in Taiwan (Koike 2014; Yuniarto 2015); a study of an Indonesian eating house beside a train station in Taoyuan County (Huang 2009); a study by Chen (2008) on the factors contributing to the politics of location in Indonesian entrepreneurship; the economic constraints of Vietnamese female spouses at eateries in Taiwan (D. Huang, Ching-lung and H. H. Hsiao 2012); migrant shops and public spaces for migrant workers in Little Taipei (L. Huang and Douglass 2008); spatial migrant enclaves as public spaces for migrants (K.-H. Chen 2014); and the enclave economy's creation of a social network for migrant workers in Taichung (Nga 2010). These studies on migrant entrepreneurship in Taiwan show that entrepreneurial migrants spread ideas about identities, politics, memories, ethnic solidarity, gender, and transnational space. Under these circumstances, immigrant entrepreneurship not only focuses on ethnic products and ethnic food, but also on immigrant lifestyles, economic disadvantages, and sociocultural connectedness.

Other dimensions, such as identity and memories, involve the values and meaning of migration and entrepreneurship have also been studied. For example, Chi and Jackson (2011) study Thai food in Taiwan and discuss hybridity, authenticity, and transnational products in culinary traditions that affect relationships between people and food. The personal experience of migration and distant memories of travel and tourism form tangible connections to a particular "hometown" cuisine that become imaginative connections between people and places (Chi and Jackson 2011). Similarly, Yuen (2014) discusses how the sale and consumption of Vietnamese cuisine recalls memories that remind migrants of their collective identity as Vietnamese. Their identity as a member of the family and community is negotiated and constructed through cooking, eating, and opening a restaurant.

The development of migrant entrepreneurship is derived from the transnational migrant identity in the host country. Several studies offer examples. Wu (2003) studies how migrant Filipinos

form a community space in Taipei, and L. Huang and Douglass (2008) explore how foreign workers create places for community life, describe the role of entrepreneurship (ethnic shops), and serve to illustrate how migrants re-territorialize the space. Thanks to entrepreneurs, this space not only satisfies the migrant workers' transnational life needs in Taiwan, but also provides a place for the labor community's leisure, consumption, and use as a cultural center. K.-H. Chen (2014) conducts research on "migrant consumption space" in Kaohsiung and Tainan City, showing that migrants and their mode of entrepreneurship influence and change the culture and space; this is referred to as the "result" of a "transnational space" or "divided space." The connection between migrant entrepreneurship and migrant activities affects local lifestyles and changes a shop's mode of operation because of the presence of different cultural groups. Similarly, H.-Y. Chen (2008) identifies a dimension of identity politics in an ethnic enclave economy in the way a migrant economy faces exclusion/inclusion and (de)territorialisation, because it is located far from Taiwan's bustling centre, neighborhoods, and state development. H. Huang (2009) focuses on the way a patriarchal structural system affects the migrant enclave economy and leaves it with only one choice: a "demarcating-the-border operation" rather than a "crossing-the-border operation." A marked difference in flavor makes it very difficult for Taiwanese and migrant food to blend, which has also prevented migrant eatery operators from crossing the ethnic border.

Geographical advantages and traffic convenience, city parks, enclave economies, and train stations are all important factors in forming places for migrant workers to gather and socialize. A study by Nga (2010) on maintaining Vietnamese ethnic networks in the city shows that these relationships and gatherings form a cultural space for the Vietnamese in Taiwan. Location as a factor offers the best opportunity for creating a new social network built on an old social network, thereby contributing to the creation of best conditions for building and forming a Vietnamese community in Taiwan (Nga 2010). One concern regarding migrant entrepreneurship in Taiwan is the presence of female entrepreneurs. D. Huang and Tsay (2012) explore the situation of Vietnamese spouses in Taiwan

and explain the role of gender in migrant entrepreneurship. This study shows that their husbands' families fall mostly into low-income groups in Taiwan. Some husbands are unemployed. Often, female migrant entrepreneurs have to earn enough to support their own families as well as their families in the homeland.

In the multicultural subject area, positive developments have occurred with regard to economic activities and the demand for religious goods/attributes. In writing about Muslims in Taiwan, Widyowati (2014) mentions nine religious activities and ceremonies of Islam: weddings, death processions, Friday prayers, the Ramadan/month of fasting, the celebration of Islamic holidays, Tabligh Akbar, Islamic education, Islamic exhibitions and seminars, and Hajj. These events are very significant to the new market (of business and religion). By providing a strong foundation for Indonesian Muslim entrepreneurs to exploit, they have given rise to very important new business opportunities, especially in Muslim-oriented markets. This situation is related to structural opportunities and migrant enclaves. Such an enclave (niche) provides a very useful and specific catalogue of the types and aspects of ethnic/group businesses, such as the initial help that entrepreneurs give to newcomers, thereby providing a sense of belonging because of shared experiences in their business places, facilitating help in response to discrimination and alienation, or providing a place where religious rituals can be conducted (Nga 2010; Wang 2007).

### **III. Indonesian Migrant Entrepreneurship in Taiwan**

The early 2000s was a critical time when Indonesian migrant entrepreneurship started to develop massively in Taiwan. From 2000 to 2005, Indonesian migrant workers began to scatter throughout many major cities of Taiwan such as Taichung, Kaohsiung, and other port cities. Every Sunday or holiday, the migrants gathered around Taiwan shops or foreign restaurants, and formed queues to enjoy South-East Asian foods. The enthusiasm of the Indonesian workers for food and the difficulties of getting Indonesian products

encouraged the emergence of new Indonesian entrepreneurs in the business. From 2005 to 2008, more Indonesian migrant businesses were set up in the northern region locations of Taipei City, Danshui, Keelung, or Yilan, and then spread to various places in central and southern Taiwan as well. Estimations by the head of the Indonesian Entrepreneurs Association in Taiwan (*Asosiasi Pengusaha Toko Indonesia di Taiwan, APIT*) show that from 2007 to 2015, the number of Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan increased, and about 500 mini markets and restaurants were opened. Overall, Indonesian entrepreneurs in Taiwan employ approximately 800-2000 staff, with 2-5 staff each. The current development has undergone a diversification of Indonesian migrant business activities, and it can be categorized into certain types: 1) A halal food, small restaurants and grocery (stalls) combined with simple karaoke facilities; 2) “calling card,” electronic items, and “migrants” magazines; 3) services (shipping goods and call-order commodities); 4) women's products (clothing, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and others).

Among the informants interviewed, there were 12 migrant entrepreneurs, four of whom were male, and the rest female. Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs in Taiwan came from different backgrounds, namely 1) students who took Mandarin courses, 2) degree students, 3) professionals, 4) migrant workers, and 5) women married to Taiwanese spouses (Table 1). Taking a look into the visa status, some of the entrepreneurs interviewed cannot be categorized as entrepreneurs or have illegal status as entrepreneurs. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Overseas Chinese and Foreign Investment Commission identify migrant entrepreneurs as foreign investors who invest in Taiwan ([https://www.moeaic.gov.tw/businessPub.view?lang=en&op\\_id\\_one=1&tab=1#horizontalTab](https://www.moeaic.gov.tw/businessPub.view?lang=en&op_id_one=1&tab=1#horizontalTab)). According to the Indonesian government official data,<sup>1</sup> there are 12,000 Indonesians holding business visas. Indonesian entrepreneurs have to hold a business visa to establish a company. This requirement does not apply to those who are married to Taiwanese residents. They can utilize the status of their spouse as Taiwanese to open the business. As local people, they do not need to fulfil any specific requirements to establish a business. Based on our research

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<sup>1</sup> SY, personal communication, July 12, 2022.

among the interviewees, their characteristics are as follows:

<Tabel 1> Characteristics of the informants

Category	Number	%
TOTAL	12	100
Gender		
Male	4	33
Female	8	67
Business Modes		
Offline	4	33
Online	2	17
offline and online	6	50
Business areas		
Montessori	1	8
Retail and Restaurant	2	17
Restaurant	2	17
Retail	3	25
MLM	1	8
Commerce and trading	1	8
Services	2	17
Previous background		
language course student	1	8
degree student	3	25
Professional worker	1	8
Mixed marriage	4	33
Indonesian couple	1	8
Indonesian worker	2	17

Source: data compilation, fieldwork 2022.

Organizationally, Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs in Taiwan are divided into two groups of formal and informal. The formal group consists of entrepreneurs who are members of *APIT*, an organization that does not only collect data about entrepreneurs in Taiwan but also helps them improve their businesses. Taiwanese authorities also recognize this group. Meanwhile, the informal group usually originates from friendships forged by people from the same area in Indonesia or studying at the same school (Mandarin school), and some groups of entrepreneurs who come from or were under the same migrant workers agency. Some of these include the “Borneo Group”; mixed-marriage Indonesian-Taiwanese Association; “Medan Group”; and “Surabaya Group.” Migrant entrepreneurs may

be any of the following: 1) of Indonesian-Chinese descent (generally from Singkawang, Surabaya, Jambi, Palembang, and Medan) who is married to a Taiwanese man; 2) Indonesian and Taiwanese joint business partnership intentionally forged because of business opportunities; 3) former factory or domestic workers who stay on to become entrepreneurs after contract work; 4) graduate students who put up businesses after learning Mandarin in university and doing part-time jobs (e.g. as translators/language teachers, waitresses at a restaurant, private tutors, office staffs, etc.).

Regarding motivation, they decided to become entrepreneurs for the following reasons: 1) to make money, 2) to take an opportunity, 3) to create activities, 4) to create something new, 5) to do da'wah, and 6) to do self-actualization. Da'wah is an Arabic term that means making conscious efforts to describe how Muslims teach others about the beliefs and practices of their Islamic faith (Huda 2018). These reasons often overlap. For example, some of the Indonesian migrant workers want to make money to survive since they cannot enter any job in the labor market. The only available job is to become an entrepreneur. In addition, some of them see entrepreneurship as part of da'wah activities. As most of the Indonesian restaurants in Taiwan are well-known for their karaoke and alcoholic drink, some of them want to create halal restaurants. Rather than building a karaoke room, they provide a prayer room for their customers.

#### **IV. Constraints of Entrepreneurship**

Constraints of migrant entrepreneurship can be divided into four categories: 1) the governing institution, 2) resource-providing institutions, 3) host country societies, and 4) competition. Governing institution refers to governmental legislation, agreements, and norms that can foster or hinder entrepreneurial activities in the host country (Hamid 2020). Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs have three categories of migrant statuses in Taiwan: Indonesian women married to Taiwanese men, Indonesian entrepreneurs as Alien Permanent Resident Certificate (APRC) holders, and Indonesian

entrepreneurs as Alien Resident Certificate (ARC) holders. Indonesian women married to Taiwanese men have almost no concerns with the governing institution because most of them register their businesses in their husband's name. Besides, many of them have changed their nationality to Taiwanese, allowing them to establish businesses lawfully in the country. Problems may emerge if they divorce their husband while still possessing Indonesian nationality. Indonesian entrepreneurs who hold an APRC may establish a business in Taiwan, subject to the conditions outlined in the chapter on the constraints of entrepreneurship. However, according to an interview with APRC holders, they still struggle to comprehend the regulations on how to set up and run a business in Taiwan due to language barriers. For example, according to DA, "Due to my language barrier, I can only utilize a few words to advertise my product. Given the number of rivals, expanding the market to Taiwanese customers is currently impossible. Because not all Taiwanese understand English, I must choose a language that can be written when deciding what product to promote. The product must therefore be advertised in Mandarin. Even when I asked my husband, he did not comprehend. So everything must be completed by myself."

Another issue is the intricacy of evaluating their business and producing reports under Taiwanese government regulations; they hire a public consultant to address this issue. The last is Indonesian entrepreneurs who are ARC holders; these individuals could be migrant workers or students from Indonesia. Students and migrant workers who hold an ARC are not permitted to have more than one job in addition to the one specified on their visa. A violation of this policy may result in the imposition of fines and even deportation to Indonesia. In order to prevent this, it is feasible to shift the ARC status to APRC, as Taiwan allows eligible migrant workers to switch between ARC and APRC statuses. However, a result of an interview with the Global Worker Organization (GWO) shows that the APRC status of migrant workers differs significantly compared to professional workers or former students. Migrant workers' holding of APRC may prevent them from conducting business in Taiwan. For students, if they have graduated and completed the requirements to

register for the APRC, they can change their status. However, it takes time to change the status from ARC to APRC, despite the fact that students are conducting business in Taiwan primarily to survive during their studies due to limited or no scholarships. Consequently, many of them conduct business secretly. LE, one of the students who manages a photography business in Taipei, states that he frequently refused requests from Taiwanese customers. This is his means of prevention, as he is concerned that local Taiwanese may report him, consequently terminating his endeavors. Therefore, he restricts Taiwanese from purchasing his products and services. In the beginning many Taiwanese curious of his product and services, but later, someone who disliked his business reported him to the police. Since then, Taiwanese have not been involved in his business. A similar case happened to NT, a student in Taichung. She prefers to limit her market to Indonesian and some Filipino workers. She also gains the backing of her professor and a local Taiwanese acquaintance to preserve her business indirectly.

Resource-providing institutions in this regard refer to funding, employee, and protection from unions. Migrant entrepreneurs usually have limited access to funding and resources due to their status as non-citizens. Such is the case of JH who runs an online shop. He mentions that obtaining financing from financial institutions such as banks and supporting agencies is difficult for Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs. When he decided to grow his business by seeking a larger warehouse, he discovered that obtaining a giro and cheque from the bank as a condition to rent a larger warehouse is troublesome. The support he could access is only from family and friends, and by reinvesting all of the earnings he has made thus far. These strategies also apply to the other types of Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs. Indonesians married to Taiwanese take advantage of the "Entrepreneurship Accelerator for Immigrant Women" program established in 2016. Private foundations, government subsidies, and regional immigrant service centers support the initiative. Operating for one year based on the notion of an "accelerator," the program provides immigrant women professional training and start-up capital entrepreneurship courses encompassing finance, operation management, marketing strategy,



and customer management. Participants are encouraged to submit company proposals, compete in entrepreneurial competitions, receive mentoring, and win awards ((LEAP 2019), However, none of the interviewees joined the program due to limited information from and network with immigration officers; the businesses were also not attractive.

In finance, another strategy that may be utilized is acquiring financial support from other Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs. HA, a senior businesswoman in Taiwan with multiple business units in the form of an Indonesian shop, Indonesian catering, and Indonesian snack products, frequently lends money to new entrepreneurs. HA gives financial assistance to several entrepreneurs who want to establish an Indonesian shop or catering to develop the halal food sector in Taiwan. Unfortunately, this financial assistance initiative did not work as planned since establishing and maintaining business continuity are not simple. The Indonesian shops for which HA had provided financial assistance collapsed one by one and could no longer operate.

Another issue for resource-providing institutions is the difficulty in finding employees. Taiwanese law makes it difficult for Indonesian employers to hire workers to support their businesses. LK, an Indonesian student working as a part-timer in a Indonesian restaurant states that Mrs. HA was overwhelmed and had difficulties finding employees back and forth. Indonesians are qualified staff to work at her company; however, it is difficult to employ them due to Taiwan's regulations on hiring migrant workers.

Most Indonesian entrepreneurs are not qualified to bring their own staff from Indonesia. Only Indonesian entrepreneurs with APRCs are able to employ Taiwanese or Indonesian workers for their businesses. This type of migrant entrepreneurs can also provide visas to their workers. However, in order to hire staff, a minimum yearly income of 10 million NT dollars is required. For Indonesian entrepreneurs married to Taiwanese, they may employ a deception strategy to hire Indonesian migrant workers for their business. Those who have an elderly and sick father or mother-in-law will appeal to the government to recruit Indonesian

migrant workers. In the end, Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs appear to have hired migrant workers to care for their parents. Still, they are actually deployed in an Indonesian restaurant. In practice, these migrant workers work in their businesses rather than as caregivers for the elderly. One of the most effortless alternatives to the employee shortage is to hire part-time Indonesian migrant workers or students. In some cases, entrepreneurs invite family members to study in Taiwan and to assist with the business during their free time.

Regarding union protection, most informants state that there are no Indonesian trade unions in Taiwan. APIT is an organization that unites Indonesian entrepreneurs in Taiwan; however, it simply serves as a point of social gathering and not a trade union. Consequently, if they encounter a business problem or obstacle, they attempt to resolve it independently or seek advice from a known senior entrepreneur. Occasionally, they seek assistance from Taiwanese acquaintances familiar with similar obstacles. EA, an Indonesian entrepreneur in the food industry in Zhong Li states that she recognizes the existence of APIT but has no plans to join. EA mentions that the exclusive nature of APIT discourages new entrepreneurs from joining them. Similarly, JH, a young Indonesian entrepreneur, shares EA's view. Though JH often seeks advice from some members of APIT, he has found that the organization is unsuitable for some of the business issues he has faced. He mentions that Indonesian entrepreneurs lack a sense of community in Taiwan. The age difference is relatively significant; thus, the conversation is somewhat out of sync.

The third is the host country's society. It refers to the opportunity for Indonesian entrepreneurs to access the more lucrative local market during business expansion. Attracting local markets is challenging for most Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs in Taiwan. The first obstacle is that most Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs specialize in the food industry. Indonesian food is famous for its mouth-watering flavor and abundance of spices and ingredients. On the other hand, Taiwanese food is frequently bland and prepared differently from Indonesian food. It is challenging for the seller to attract Indonesian buyers if they decrease the flavor to

suit the Taiwanese taste. However, if they stick with Indonesian flavors, the Taiwanese will find eat it unpalatable. Additionally, Indonesian cuisine is generally more expensive than Taiwanese food, discouraging Taiwanese consumers from purchasing it. Customers from Indonesia purchase Indonesian food to suit their cravings. Most Indonesian customers, especially migrant workers, are not concerned with high costs or poor food quality. On the other side, there are about 300,000 Indonesians residing in Taiwan, which is a substantial number. This situation leads many Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs to believe that expanding their target market to Taiwanese is unnecessary. It is sufficient to target the Indonesian population in Taiwan.

However, EA who sells Indonesian meatballs plans to expand her market to Taiwanese. She thinks that many Taiwanese do not consume beef because they respect cows in their culture. Additionally, Taiwanese beef noodles are popular and Indonesian meatballs could not easily compete. As a result, she introduced Indonesian chicken noodles to diversify her product. When introducing Indonesian chicken noodles, EA understands that Taiwan is popular with its beef noodles. When Taiwanese are introduced to Indonesian meatballs, they say it is excellent, but beef noodles are considerably tastier. Additionally, many Taiwanese are non-beef eaters, so she redirected them to chicken noodles. Many Taiwanese enjoy chicken noodles because the noodles are similar to ramen. She also gives away samples of her products for free to local Taiwanese who come to Longkang Mosque every Friday. With these strategies, local Taiwanese customers started using apps like Ubereats and Food Panda to order her food.

DA who sells Montessori toys does not intend to market her products to local Taiwanese. DA's target markets are Indonesians in Taiwan, particularly Indonesians married to Taiwanese. As a foreign bride, DA has problems obtaining an appropriate instructional medium for her children; therefore, she began importing educational toys from Indonesia. Not all available toys suit her and her children needs particularly in learning Mandarin. She designed educational materials required to learn Mandarin with the assistance of Indonesian craftspeople. Surprisingly, her toys are in high demand

among Taiwanese, with clients from Hong Kong also purchasing her products. She emphasized that Montessori toys have not yet been marketed in Taiwan, nor are they popular there. However, they are abundant in Indonesia. She posts in a Taiwanese mother's group on Facebook every time she purchased Montessori toys from Indonesia. Many Facebook group members became interested in her posts and inquired where to buy the toys. Due to the high demand from the group, she started to sell toys such as playing boards and wooden toys, including Indonesian toy products. The experience of EA and DA demonstrates that product innovation and diversity can be used as strategies to increase the market, including expanding to the local Taiwanese market.

The next constraint is competition with local Taiwanese or Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs. The competition with local entrepreneurs or fellow Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs varies depending on the business types, like YB, an Indonesian migrant entrepreneur based in Hsinchu. YB is currently operating an Indonesian store. His business activities include offering everything Indonesians need in Taiwan, from food and cooking spices to daily necessities like soap, cosmetics, shampoo, etc. His shop also handles deliveries from Taiwan to Indonesia and vice versa. It also offers remittance services from Taiwan to Indonesia and vice versa. However, because of the intensive competition from other similar Indonesian businesses, he expanded his business by offering a selection of halal frozen meats that can be delivered throughout Taiwan. Furthermore, he intends to import goods directly from Indonesia by collaborating with Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs who have established similar enterprises in Japan. However, according to his observation, this strategy is quite tricky since he must compete directly with the local Taiwanese entrepreneurs who are experienced competitors.

Another example, JH who operates a similar business to YB, states that business competition in Taiwan is undoubtedly challenging. Moreover, many Taiwanese entrepreneurs are currently attempting to penetrate the Indonesian market in Taiwan. Together with students and migrant workers who also do the culinary business in Taiwan JH collaborated with Taiwanese entrepreneurs

by purchasing supplies from a Taiwanese entrepreneur. To compete with other Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs, JH uses an online store and social media to target the Indonesian market. This strategy is quite helpful because many Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs focus on offline shops. This strategy boosted JH's business during the COVID-19 pandemic. JS also encourages migrant workers and students to become resellers of his products to lessen the competition.

Selling high-quality products at competitive prices is one of YI's strategies for growing her new restaurant business. As a new player, YI realizes that her products must be distinct from the other competing products that have existed in the market for a long time. YI employs the "fusion strategy" to create products acceptable to Indonesian and Taiwanese tastes by combining Indonesian and Taiwanese styles, spices, and cooking processes. Several competitors have attempted to imitate YI's strategy, but she is sure that the strategy she is using is difficult to duplicate. It is because in the process of creating her products, YI tries numerous times and improves by taking cooking classes and learning first-hand from Taiwanese chefs. A different story comes from FA. According to her, many Taiwanese and Indonesian competitors have attempted to ruin her business. One of their methods is to report certain business activities in her Indonesian shops to be illegal. FA confesses that she lacks the knowledge about Taiwanese business rules; consequently, when a competitor reported it to the police, she explained it to them. FA was disposed to pay the fine since she perceived it as the cost of gaining information and expertise in running a business in Taiwan. She was reported 14 times but had to pay fines only a few times. The police also gave her many directions and information so she would not make the same mistakes again. FA also hired a local Taiwanese consultant to assist her when the report or cases were severe. So far, this technique has shown to be reasonably effective in defending FA's business from competitors' attacks.

LE who owns a photography business employs several strategies to confront his competitors. The first strategy was offering affordable photography services to his core target market, the Indonesian migrant workers. The second strategy is offering other

countries' national costumes to customers. He bought South Korean, Chinese, and Indian traditional costumes in his photography businesses. LE purposefully brought Korean, Chinese, and Indian clothing from their respective countries to enhance the photographs. In addition to making his business difficult to copy, this strategy also distinguishes his established photography business. Unfortunately, LE's business strategy frequently finds barriers particularly from competitors. Many competitors advertise using images of his work. And some competitors are displeased with LE's photographic business and threaten him. He said many Indonesian migrant workers verbally threatened him because he offered inexpensive photography services. They attacked him verbally over Facebook Messenger. They alleged that he charges unfairly. He tried to explain that he is not a professional photographer. His main business is renting costumes. However, some customers request his services to photograph them.

These findings demonstrate that immigrant entrepreneurs from Indonesia confront numerous obstacles and constraints in Taiwan while establishing and expanding their businesses. Several strategies were employed to overcome the barriers and limitations, depending on the types of problems they encountered and their business form. Typically, they attempt to solve the problem independently or seek assistance from friends and family. Some obtained assistance from local public consultants or agencies to deal with more complex cases. Some others relied on the support of the networks from Indonesians or Taiwanese in Taiwan. The support from both the Indonesian and Taiwanese governments is very little.

## **V. Confronting and Overcoming Difficulties**

Most of the Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs in Taiwan started from below. They did not have much money. Just like their co-migrant workers, they struggled to adapt, to make a living, and to do business in Taiwan. One of the strategies to develop business in Taiwan is by maintaining resident status. Indonesian entrepreneurs changed their visa status through marriage or business to continue

staying in Taiwan. As mentioned above, marrying Taiwanese or Indonesian men/women with Taiwanese citizenship to obtain business license is one option for migrant entrepreneurs to regularize their status and realize their business aspirations in Taiwan. According to RA, a female hair salon entrepreneur, marrying a Taiwanese is often done by foreign immigrants who come from low-level economic backgrounds and lack higher education. With this, migrant entrepreneurs can change their visa status from working (business) status to foreign bride status, and thus they can keep running a business and continue staying without a visa status barrier. Indonesian entrepreneurs use this rule to regularize their personal visa business status in Taiwan. On the other hand, according to SS, a female grocer with 20 years of experience working in Taipei, Indonesians who marry Taiwanese also use the marriage as a “ticket” to enter a business, to get financial assistance, and a cheap or free business place, as well as to help the spouse change their status from that of a foreign business person to a resident.

In this context, marriage variables play a significant role, particularly in terms of sustaining long-term entrepreneurship in Taiwan. More specifically, marriage serves as the connection between business operation and sustainability of entrepreneurship because of the migrant's foreign status and other barriers such as lack of Mandarin language. First, business ownership by one of the spouses can provide a way for family-based migrant entrepreneurs to bring in additional family members as employees or under labor contract workers. Second, married Taiwanese spouses can use their status to fulfil business administration regulations.

Taiwan's foreigner regulations to some extent prevent migrants from entering high-end migrant entrepreneurship professions. Foreigners must follow certain standard procedures in establishing a formal business in Taiwan. YB, a senior Indonesian migrant man and household goods reseller in Taipei, reveals that they must apply for a business visa and register the company's name to Taiwan Economic and Trade Office (TETO) in Jakarta. The application forms that must be fulfilled like 1) a copy of bank savings certification ranging from N.T. \$500,000 and 1,000,000 at any of Taiwan banks

(such as Cathay Bank, City Bank, or China Trust); and 2) visa business forms and interviews to get an approval letter; in 60 days TETO immigration office releases a business visa, which means that it must be used immediately to set up businesses in Taiwan. After setting up the business place, the migrants have to submit a business name while Taiwan immigration checks authenticity. Hiring auditors or public accountants check business progress each month (NT\$5,000 per two-month salary) and report it to the local government. Entrepreneurs pay taxes in the amount of NT\$35,000/NT\$2,916 per month. Eventually, they renew their visa and pay NT\$2,000 every two years. These rules are quite troublesome, especially for entrepreneurs with low saving budget.

According to WT, a female street vendor in the Taipei Main Station, some the Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs run business on the street in order to save renting money and avoid taxes. Indeed, the Taipei City Government has forbidden street vendors, and police patrols have wracked the nerves of migrant sellers. For instance, around Taipei Main Station, most of the retailers and services recently have relocated to another place and moved to the Taipei Main Station underground mall. This mall which was not successful in attracting Taiwanese shoppers used to have many empty spaces. Now it has become vibrant after the inflow of migrant-related businesses. In this case, when business activities are incorporated into the formal economy, it makes things more expensive and this place becomes less attractive to migrant workers as the main costumers.

One of the street-business-type obstacles is expulsion by the local police, especially if there is a special event around the station; this is the biggest constraint. The local police will clean up the area from street vendors and migrant workers, which automatically leaves the entrepreneurs' products unsold. This condition reduces revenue, which also means reduce profits. Regarding how to cope with police raids, street vendors share information and call others to hide. Therefore, when the police officers come to their place of business, the place has already been emptied; and when the police walk away and stop their patrol, they immediately open carts again. According to RA, if entrepreneurs are unlucky enough due to being caught by



police officers, they will be ticketed and given a fine, usually as much as NT\$500 (US\$16). No space is provided for street vendors inside of the stations, and if there are stalls available, the price is too high. The cheapest stall is around NT\$20,000 (US\$630) per month for a 2x3 meters area. Therefore, the only way to cope with this problem is through tactical thinking, understanding police behavior, and strategically adapting to other challenges.

To overcome financial barriers, Indonesian entrepreneurs in Taiwan employ various strategies, including leveraging the support of their families, collaborating with fellow businesspersons, or seeking assistance from friends. Joint business ownership and partnership also become a way for entrepreneurs who lack human resources to develop a business. Entrepreneurs who successfully develop their own businesses tend to expand sales and consumer networks. They search for someone who wants to become their business partner as a retailer of their products. For instance, DV, the owner of Indo Sari, one of the largest chains of Indonesian food shops, grocery stores, and restaurants in Taipei, has developed relationships through a partnership (collusion and nepotism) mechanism for business entrepreneurship. Every day, he provides catered food and phone cards from Indo Sari, and rides a bike to his retailer to go to Taipei Hospital and Yonghe Park near his place of residence, selling his products to Indonesians. This is how Indonesian entrepreneurs resolve financial barriers and develop businesses in Taiwan.

When it comes to employee recruitment, entrepreneurs often prioritize hiring relatives, close friends, or even taking on the responsibilities themselves. Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs in Taiwan also employ additional strategies, such as recruiting and effectively managing diligent, trustworthy, skilled, and cost-effective employees. Furthermore, collaborative partnerships often revolve around familial connections, and cultivating relationships with customers has proven crucial in demonstrating the quality of service. For instance, gaining consumer support through services like courier business remittance or organizing birthday party celebrations has been observed.

Entrepreneurship necessitates a broader range of skills, including adeptness in business management, acquiring knowledge about consumer culture, and securing capital investments. Market changes and emerging competitors are obstacles that are often encountered and not avoidable. Copying other businesses and replacing or occupying other businesses usually happen in businesses related to migrant entrepreneurs. Actually, business does not always go smoothly. According to KR, ex-migrant entrepreneur who was return back Indonesia, most of the entrepreneurs use new strategies by connecting with their family or friends in Indonesia to send packages of products, and then applying a direct selling system around mosques and factories, or visiting parks where migrants usually gather. Online social media such as Facebook or LINE are also commonly used for selling products. The combination of cheap gadgets and cheap internet makes selling migrant products (clothes, food, or electronics) easier. However, these alternative ways have challenged the well-established entrepreneurs resulting in the decrease in the number of customers. Thus, there are always business risks faced by the entrepreneurs.

Developing a business by investing in product innovation to make one's business as dissimilar as possible from the competitors' is not easy. This may be in the form of creating new markets and target new customers, may involve not only Indonesians but also migrants from other countries or new entrepreneurs too. This strategy seems to be less frequently done. As observed from hundreds of Indonesian restaurants, very few are well-known among Taiwanese, such as "Muslim Restaurant" in Kaohsiung or "Satay House" in Taipei. From observation, only few Indonesian business owners have tried to invest money to develop their businesses and to make them more attractive by putting in great decorations and expanding locations. However, compared to Western or other South Asian countries, Indonesian restaurants are relatively less known. According to DE, head of the Indonesian Entrepreneurs Association in Taiwan, Indonesian entrepreneurs typically prefer to open business branches in various regions in Taiwan to retain benefits as much as possible rather than make their shops to be more attractive. Many entrepreneurs thought migrant businesses may not

be marketed out of the box.

Training programs that encompass essential skills, including language courses, culinary training, financial education, and financial management, are highly sought after and necessary. Consequently, numerous entrepreneurs actively participate in these activities to enhance their expertise and capabilities. However, most of the skills and training programs set up by government institutions, trade unions, and private educational and training institutions are only dedicated to migrant workers. The purposes of these training programmes are to prepare migrant workers to do the tasks and functions as workers in the host countries, to develop communication skills with employers and local residents, to impart knowledge, and to prepare when they return to their home country for good. Regarding this matter, Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs require access to training activities that can help them develop improved business skills. However, it is important to note that such specialized skills and vocational training programs for entrepreneurs are currently limited and not extensively developed.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Considering the aforementioned explanation, it is evident that Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs in Taiwan encounter various challenges. Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs in Taiwan may face social and cultural challenges, including language barriers, cultural differences, discrimination, limited access to capital and resources, navigating work permits and legal regulations, and difficulties in social integration and networking. Formal constraints, among others, limited access to formal business loans and government tax credits, made inadequate personnel management practices, yielded low participation in institutionalized training programs, encouraged non-recognition of degrees and professional qualifications acquired in their home countries, provided insufficient awareness of government support programs and benefits for new ventures, gave inadequate capital, and resulted in concentration in specific locations.

In addition, our study found that entrepreneurship provides migrants with social dignity in their host country. This means that engaging in entrepreneurial activities allows migrants to gain a sense of respect, recognition, and social standing within the community they have migrated to. By becoming entrepreneurs, migrants are able to establish themselves as productive contributors to the local economy, create job opportunities, and make valuable contributions to society. This can lead to increased social acceptance, integration, and a sense of dignity, as their entrepreneurial endeavor are valued and acknowledged by the host country's society.

The research on Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs in Taiwan's multicultural society reveals the distinctiveness of their strategies, which encompass interactions with governing institutions, resource-providing institutions, host country societies, and competition. In contrast to migrant entrepreneurs from Thailand, Vietnam, or the Philippines who often adopt formal approaches, Indonesian migrant entrepreneurs in Taiwan's multicultural society exhibit a distinct tendency towards informal strategies. Economic activities of Indonesians in Taiwan tend to concentrate in specific areas and neighbourhoods closely connected to co-ethnic employees and consumers. The entrepreneurial pursuits of Indonesians are deeply embedded within a social structure comprised of families, neighbours, friends, and acquaintances. When Indonesian entrepreneurs embark on business ventures, they often rely on support from fellow Indonesians, activating their networks within their immediate circles to harness social capital. In conducting business, migrant entrepreneurs predominantly establish informal relationships with enclave firms, utilizing intricate, embedded relationships to access suppliers, clients, workers, and capital. These combined socio-cultural factors play a significant role in shaping the institutional and environmental frameworks that underlie Indonesian migrant entrepreneurship activities.

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## Determinants of Economic Growth in ASEAN Countries (2002-2019)



Khin Theingi Aung\*

### [ *Abstract* ]

This study analyzes the effect of macroeconomic indicators such as foreign direct investment (FDI), domestic investment, trade, inflation, unemployment, population, and governance indicators on economic growth and points out the GDP growth rate in 2002- 2019 among ASEAN countries. Data were compiled from the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) and the World Bank, and the effect of variables on GDP was predicted using the pooled ordinary least squares (POLS), fixed effects model (FEM), and random effects model (REM) methods. As a measure of growth, the GDP growth rate has been taken; FDI and domestic investment, trade, inflation, and governance indicators are positively connected and have an influence on economic growth in these ASEAN countries; domestic investment, population, and unemployment have a negative relationship to economic growth. The macroeconomic indicators and institutional stability of the nation have an effect on its economic growth. Comprehensive institutional stability and well-laid macroeconomic policies are required for growth to materialize.

**Keywords:** economic growth, ASEAN countries, panel analysis.

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## **I . Introduction**

ASEAN is a regional intergovernmental organization composed of ten Southeast Asian countries to foster cooperation, coordination, and facilitation of sociocultural, educational, military, political, security, and economic interconnection between its members and other Asian countries. The ASEAN's main objectives are to promote cultural development, socioeconomic development, and economic growth in the area; to encourage area peace, collaborative effort, and mutual support on matters of common interest, to support training and research facilities with each other; to work collaboratively for better agricultural and industrial utilization to elevate people's living standards; and to stimulate Southeast Asian studies.

There are different levels of economic growth depending on whether a country is emerging or developing. This study provides preliminary empirical evidence for a set of macroeconomic hypotheses about economic growth in a group of ASEAN nations.

Economic growth would be able to lessen the country's reliance on other factors and also provide capital for productive sectors, enhancing the country's economy. The economic growth pace is so energetic for economic development. Thus, it is critical to look into the shape of economic growth and how it responds to macroeconomic changes in the nation since the economy's growth rate is highly significant. Sluggish economic growth could delay investments in productive industries. Every government, developed or developing, has the most crucial task of all: to develop a country's economy and enhance people's lives.

When compared to local assets, FDI has a greater progressive effect on economic growth (Eduardo Borensztein and Jose De Gregorio 1995). FDI always has a positive effect on most countries, but here we would like to analyze whether foreign direct investment has a positive effect in ASEAN countries because most studies show that FDI has a positive and substantial effect on economic growth, but Alfaro and Johnson (2013) verified that FDI is preferable to domestic investment in Malaysia and Indonesia but not in Thailand and the Philippines.

The study demonstrates that FDI is not always beneficial to developing countries.

Blomström et al. (2000) found that large amounts of foreign direct investment alone are not enough to generate economic growth and wealth in host countries. Foreign direct investment and trade are commonly cited as important drivers of growth in developing nations. Meanwhile, independent variables such as FDI, domestic investment, trade, inflation, and unemployment are the determining factors of GDP since they can impact economic growth (Saidin 2012).

According to Kojo Menyah and Wolde-Rufael (2014), Babak Soukhakian (2007), and Yang and Shafiq (2020), trade and the growth of the country's relationship are positive. In Bibi et al. (2014), the 1980–2011 era is examined in connection to the growth rate, foreign direct investment, imports and exports, inflation, and exchange rate. Foreign direct investment, imports, and exports all contribute to economic growth in Pakistan.

Fetahi-Vehapi et al. (2015) found that gross fixed capital formation, foreign direct investment, trade openness, the initial level of GDP per capita, and human capital developments were all positively and significantly associated with economic growth. In contrast, population was found to be negatively and significantly associated with economic growth when a fixed effects panel regression estimation method was used in ten countries in Southeast Europe between 1996 and 2012.

The following are the research's contributions and differences from earlier studies: First, as ASEAN has been expanding not only in economic but also geopolitical importance, most of the nation's leaders in government, business, education, and the nonprofit sector continue to struggle to build positive relationships with ASEAN member nations. Moreover, this association is quite large in Asia and needs to analyze how macroeconomic indicators affect all of its member countries.

Second, there are developed and developing countries in ASEAN countries, as well as many issues of heterogeneity.

Therefore, it is questionable which macroeconomic factors are driving forces that affect economic growth in ASEAN countries. It is crucial to understand the factors that affect economic growth in ASEAN countries. Moreover, existing empirical Asian and ASEAN studies such as Yang and Shafiq (2020), Intisar et al. (2020), and Nguyen (2011) are primarily focused on the efficiency issues produced by macroeconomic indicator changes on economic growth, while ignoring the institutional quality issues generated by policy change effects on regional governments. In this paper, the benefits of FDI, trade, domestic investment, inflation, unemployment, population, and institutional quality on economic growth were explored, including voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and corruption control.

Finally, numerous studies have been conducted to demonstrate the link between macroeconomic indicators and economic growth in ASEAN-4 (Saidin 2012), ASEAN-5 (Thanh 2015), ASEAN-6 (Sofilda et al. 2015), and one country among ASEAN countries (ThuThi Hoang 2010; Hussin et al. 2013). However, there have been few empirical studies on economic growth across the entire ASEAN region. This study fills the gap left by the components in growth empirics because there have been major departures from previous studies.

For all these reasons, this study strives to afford insight into the elements that predominantly define economic growth in ASEAN nations. Research questions are whether foreign direct investment, domestic investment, trade, population, inflation, voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and corruption control have a positive impact but the unemployment rate does not.

This research's goal is to study the elements that influenced ASEAN countries' economic growth from 2002 to 2019. The appropriate econometric model and variables are used in this research to clarify this. Panel regression with a fix effect was applied to achieve this objective. According to this study, FDI,

trade, inflation, unemployment rate, corruption control, political stability and absence of violence, and voice and accountability influence ASEAN member nations' economic growth. Population and domestic investment demonstrate a substantial negative effect on economic growth. This research offers various policy ideas that can be implemented in ASEAN countries.

The findings will be used to develop policy recommendations for enacting relevant policies that will boost economic growth in ASEAN countries. This study will look at success criteria based on international practice and the current situation in ASEAN countries to assist governments in achieving their objectives more quickly.

## **II . Literature Review**

Economic growth is defined as a country's rise in goods and services, which can result in increased consumption, according to Hussin and Saidin (2012). Economic growth, they added, comprises a rise in the economic ability to produce of goods and services over time. The happiness and prosperity of billions of people worldwide depend heavily on economic growth.

An occurrence linked to a significant component of an economy rather than a particular population is referred to as a macroeconomic factor. The characteristic could be a main environmental, economic, or geopolitical event that has an important effect on the economy of a nation. When assessing growth rate, there are many relationships among macroeconomic issues, such as FDI, inflation, gross domestic product, population growth, unemployment, government spending, imports, exports, unemployment, interest rate, and so forth. Such economic success elements are taken into account by governments, corporations, and customers. Macroeconomic variables may be advantageous, disadvantageous, or neutral. According to Acemoglu (2012), the role of associations in economic growth is a new area of research in economic growth theory. He concludes that labor is more effective at organizing economic activity and enabling the use of existing

technologies than individual labor. ASEAN is one of the most appealing organizations among the others. This study not only underlines the importance of organizations, but also adds to the growth of knowledge on standardization as both a driver and a stumbling block to economic growth.

Chirwa and Odhiambo (2016) show that fiscal policy, foreign direct investment, investment, trade, foreign aid, the development of human capital, demographics, monetary policy, demographics, natural resources, reforms, and geographic, regional, political, and financial factors are among the main macroeconomic drivers of economic growth in developing nations, and trade, financial, and technological factors, as well as physical capital, demography, monetary policy, fiscal policy, human capital, and commerce, are the main macroeconomic factors linked to economic growth in developed countries.

### **2.1. GDP growth (annual %)**

In this study, the figures are based on constant local currency at market rates and the annual percentage GDP growth rate. GDP is determined by adding together the total gross value contributed by all domestic producers, subtracting some product duties, and adding some subsidies not reflected in the product value. It is considered without accounting for asset depreciation or the deterioration and depletion of natural resources. Economic growth is measured by the rate at which each ASEAN nation's GDP grows. Divide the difference between this year's GDP and the previous year's GDP by the previous year's GDP and multiply by a factor of a hundred to get the GDP growth rate.

For instance, a comparison of the GDP growth rates for 2010 and 2009 might demonstrate the economic expansion in 2010. As a result, the economy expanded in 2010 if the 2010 growth rate of GDP was greater than the 2009 growth rate, and vice versa.

Meanwhile, independent variables such as FDI, domestic investment, trade, inflation, and unemployment are the determining factors of gross domestic product since they can impact economic growth (Saidin 2012).

According to Hussin et al. (2013), the causes of Malaysia's economic growth are examined, and indicators of economic growth include gross fixed capital formation, foreign direct investment, trade openness, and public development spending. According to the study, foreign direct investment and trade openness have a significant but short-term unfavorable influence on economic growth.

Economic growth also aids a nation's efforts to eradicate poverty and raise the standard of living for its population. In this study, the dependent variable is GDP growth rate because it can indicate a country's economic growth.

## **2.2. Foreign direct investment (FDI) (% of GDP)**

A net influx of capital applied to purchase a long-term managerial stake in an enterprise working in a different nation than the investor's investment is known as a foreign direct investment. The net influx of foreign capital into the reporting economy is depicted in this data, which is divided by GDP.

Eduardo Borensztein and Jose De Gregorio (1995) argued that FDI is a vital way of spreading awareness. It adds more to economic growth than domestic investment.

Numerous studies have examined the relationship between FDI, trade-related factors (exports, imports, openness to trade, trade restrictions), and growth (Boldeanu and Constantinescu 2015). Researchers have presented their studies not only within one country, but also for regions via a variety of methods to analyze the FDI and GDP connection. FDI enhances economic growth in India and China (Agrawal and Khan 2011).

Thu Thi Hoang (2010) investigated how FDI affects Vietnam's growth rates. They made use of panel data from 1995 to 2006 and demonstrated that FDI significantly impacted Vietnam's growth rates.

According to Asghar, Nasreen, and Rehman (2011), foreign direct investment and economic growth have had a positive association in Asian nations from 1983 through 2008. Song and Wu

(2012) investigated and concluded that FDI, government spending, and population increase all had a favorable effect on economic growth in ten Asia-Pacific nations from 2009 to 2018.

Sofilda et al. (2015) examined the variables influencing capital inflows of FDI into the six ASEAN nations between 2004 and 2012 (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam). To identify the variables influencing FDI in the six ASEAN countries, this study uses panel data analysis. The gross domestic product, global competitiveness, interest rate, currency rate, and trade openness are the elements that influence foreign direct investment.

Besides, Sofilda et al. (2015) found out that ASEAN has risen in prominence as an investment destination and regional manufacturing base during the previous two decades. Natural resources, as well as favorable demography and regional residents' increasing purchasing power, hold promise. As a direct consequence, inflows of foreign direct investment (FDI) have been steadily rising year after year. In terms of growing their own potential, this is tremendously beneficial to ASEAN countries.

According to Iamsiraroj (2016), FDI's total impact is positively related to economic growth and vice versa. He also stated that the significant factors affecting foreign direct investment in a country are economic freedom, labor force, and trade openness. An open economy and trade openness attract FDI.

FDI is one of the most significant sources of financing for a nation, specifically for unindustrialized countries. Moreover, FDI is a critical tool for transferring technology from developed countries to developing countries. By shifting assets, enhancing management, and shifting technologies to increase a nation's economy, this investment greatly contributes to its development. In addition, a remarkable occurrence is currently taking place among ASEAN countries, in which several multinational corporations are shifting their core manufacturing operations there. The ease and attraction of investing in ASEAN countries vary substantially, and ASEAN desires to attract more foreign investment.



### **2.3. Gross Capital formation (% of GDP)**

Gross capital formation was formerly known as gross domestic investment, as expenses on accompaniments to the economy's fixed assets are defined by World Bank. Fixed assets include land expansions; manufacturing works, tools, and tools buying; highway structure, and other comparable constructions like schools, workplaces, clinics, not-publicly inhabited apartments, and profitable and industrialized constructions. Businesses store inventory to account for unanticipated changes in production or sales. Feldstein (1994) found a strong negative link between FDI and domestic investment in cross-sectional research in OECD countries. Desai, Foley, and Jr. (2005a) implied that more foreign investment leads to more domestic investment and mentioned that there are positive relationships.

Examining the economic development and gross fixed capital formation for Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines from 1981 to 2008, Saidin (2012) used a pooled model, a fixed effects model, and a random effects model and discovered that each of the ASEAN-4 nations' GDP growth is positively and significantly impacted by gross fixed capital creation.

### **2.4. Trade (% of GDP)**

The World Bank describes trade as the overall amount of goods and services that are imported and exported as a share of GDP. International trade, according to Frankel and Romer (1999), is an instrument for economic progress.

Anaman (2004) discovered that Brunei's exports grew significantly faster than expected long-run economic growth rates. The role of trade in economic growth is still controversial. Researchers, such as Barro (2015) and Frankel and Romer (1999) found a positive relationship between trade and economic growth, while Rodriguez and Rodrik (2000) found that trade cannot guarantee faster economic growth. Furthermore, according to Sofilda, Amalia and Hamzah (2015), the country's exports and imports are booming, and it has become more involved in international trade.

Although trade plays an important role in economic growth, its impact on growth is still debated. Some economists discovered that trade and economic growth have a favorable relationship, while others did not find any link at all, according to Khalilov and Yi (2018). According to relevant studies, developing countries may not obtain the full profits of trade due to a lack of absorptive ability and inefficient institutions. The amount of profit that a country makes from trade is determined by a variety of economic policy instruments, including liberal economic policies, education, infrastructure, geographical location, institutional quality, and a favorable business environment. His study found no consistent results for openness, fertility, and government growth spending. For example, in Central Eastern European countries, openness was a critical element in controlling growth, whereas, in the former Soviet Union countries, it was not. Differing fiscal and monetary policies, the quality of administration, different exchange-rate systems, and an adverse competitive climate for exporters and importers could all be contributing factors.

## **2.5. Inflation, GDP deflator (annual%) and unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate)**

The annual growth rate of the implied GDP deflator is used to estimate the percentage change in prices across the economy. The proportion of current local currency GDP to constant local currency GDP is known as the GDP implicit deflator. Unemployment refers to the proportion of the labor force that is unemployed yet searching for a job.

In OECD countries, Grier and Tullock (1989) discovered no positive correlation between inflation and growth and a significant negative correlation between inflation fluctuation and growth.

Barro (1996) concluded that rising inflation is associated with slower economic growth. Regarding the effects of inflation and growth, they have a positive relationship, but unemployment and growth have a negative relationship. According to Barro (2015), inflation has a slightly negative influence on economic growth. Thanh (2015) asserts that when inflation rates exceed a cutoff point

of 7.84%, inflation and economic growth have a significant negative association in ASEAN-5 countries, and that rising inflation then starts to impede GDP growth.

However, inflation had a minor impact on GDP and unemployment in India from 2011 to 2018, and the link is negative. Inflation was found to have an insignificant effect on GDP and unemployment, with an undesirable correlation (Singh 2018) .

Shrikant Krupasindhu Panigrahi et al. (2020) investigated whether unemployment, inflation, and interest rates had substantial long run impacts on GDP in ASEAN 5 countries from 1995 to 2018. Moreover, Cahyadin & Ratwianingsih (2020) explore that selected ASEAN nations' unemployment rates vary somewhat but generally go down. The unemployment rate in Thailand and Indonesia is comparatively high.

Net exports, unemployment, inflation, and investment have all had an impact on Austria's gross domestic product, according to Xurmatovich (2020). Many factors, both directly and indirectly, influence the change in GDP. Economists tend to focus on unemployment, inflation, investment, and export and import rates because it's difficult to account for all of them when computing GDP. However, because theory does not always accurately reflect reality, it is crucial to investigate the impact of Australia's unemployment rate on GDP. According to a study published in the journal *Austrian Facts* in 2018, the unemployment rate increased between 2014 and 2016, but GDP expanded at a nearly comparable rate. Notwithstanding, it would have been a mistake to conclude that an increase in the rate of unemployment really does have an optimistic effect on real GDP, because a rise in the unemployment rate does not imply a decrease in the unemployed; rather, it simply informs us about the labor force percentage that is unemployed. An increase in the number of employed individuals may increase GDP, as more people working means higher overall spending. However, due to another demographic factor, employee unit gains were substantially smaller than population growth resulting in higher unemployment rates.

## **2.6. Total Population**

The total population is built on the de facto definition of population, which calculates all residents without considering legal status or citizenship. The values shown are midyear estimations.

Kyaw (2019) found that in developing nations, income per capita would rise dramatically with slower population growth. Conversely, Spengler (2017) found that large populations encourage greater specialization and increased investments in knowledge. Ridzuan et al. (2018) examined gross domestic investment, foreign direct investment, trade opportunities, and population growth variables influencing growth in the ASEAN-5 nations of Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore and found this link between GDP and its independent variables (FDI, GDI, TO and POP) from 1970 to 2013. The results demonstrated that these countries have long-term co-integration and concluded that each of the criteria included in this research was crucial for fostering growth in the ASEAN-5 nations.

## **2.7. Institutional indicators for economic growth**

A nation's economic growth may be impacted by institutional stability and macroeconomic policy. Voice and accountability, rule of law, and government effectiveness were significant in 50 African nations applying fixed and random factors from 1996 to 2010 (Gangi and Abdulrazak 2012). Moreover, Gangi and Abdulrazak (2012) mentioned that economic growth in Latin American nations is positively influenced by investment, population, and political stability. The institutional quality that a nation experiences have an impact on corruption in addition to growth.

According to Asamoah, Mensah and Bondzie (2019), sub-Saharan African nations' institutional quality is evaluated based on their ability to manage corruption and provide the rule of law and political stability. The writers demonstrated that institutional qualities all have negative average values. Although they significantly contribute to increased investment, trade openness, and growth, institutions' quality is not directly observed.

Tilak (2014) expressed that the Asian region's various countries are geographically connected and contiguous with one another. They are also a homogeneous group in terms of sociopolitical, historical, and, to some extent, economic and educational backgrounds, essentially being heirs to some shared cultural and civilizational heritage rich in history, and the traditions of this common heritage can still be found in these countries.

In this paper, when examining ASEAN nations, we will measure institutional quality as the average of six governance indicators, including voice and accountability, government effectiveness, political stability and the absence of violence, rule of law, regulatory quality, and control of corruption. These indicators have a scale from -2.5 to 2.5, where a positive sign indicates a high level of institutional quality and a negative sign indicates a low level of institutional quality. An atmosphere that is conducive to doing business would be produced by improved institutional quality.

### III. Model and Data

#### 3.1. Model

To demonstrate our findings, we used POLS, FEM, and REM methods to demonstrate the significance of the specified variables for the economic development of the ASEAN nations. Our estimated model is:

$$\begin{aligned} GDP_{it} = & \beta_1 + \beta_2 FDI_{it} + \beta_3 K_{it} + \beta_4 T_{it} + \beta_5 INF_{it} + \beta_6 UNEM_{it} + \beta_7 (\ln POP_{it}) \\ & + \beta_8 (PSAV_{it}) + \beta_9 (GE_{it}) + \beta_{10} (RQ_{it}) + \beta_{11} (RL_{it}) + \beta_{12} (CCOR_{it}) \\ & + \beta_{13} (VA_{it}) + e_{it} + u_t \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

$$i=1,2,\dots,10, \quad t=1,2,\dots,18$$

Where GDP positions for growth rate of gross domestic product, foreign direct investment (% of GDP) is FDI, gross capital formation (previously known as gross domestic investment) (% of

GDP) is K, T is exports and imports of goods and services (% of GDP), INF is GDP deflator (annual percent), and UNEM is unemployment (% of total labor force), lnPOP is population, total, PSAV is political stability and absence of violence, RQ is regulatory quality, GE is government effectiveness, VA is voice and accountability, RL is rule of law, and CCORR is corruption control.

### 3.1.1. Pooled Ordinary Least Squares

In order to discover the elasticity of the dependent variable with respect to the explanatory variables,

$$\begin{aligned} GDP_{it} = & \beta_1 + \beta_2 FDI_{it} + \beta_2 K_{it} + \beta_2 T_{it} + \beta_2 INF_{it} + \beta_2 UNEM_{it} + \beta_7 (\ln POP_{it}) \\ & + \beta_8 (PSAV_{it}) + \beta_9 (GE_{it}) + \beta_{10} (RQ_{it}) + \beta_{11} (RL_{it}) + \beta_{12} (CCorr_{it}) \\ & + \beta_{13} (VA_{it}) + uit \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

Here we expect that the  $uit \sim iid(0, \sigma u^2)$  is error term; that is freely dispersed with a zero average and constant variance. For the purpose of our analysis, it is also supposed that error terms are normally distributed.

However, when we regress the pooled ordinary least squares (POLS) model, we do not distinguish different countries and treat one country as the same as the others. The individuality of each country is included in the error term, and thereby we consider this term the composite error term  $uit = \gamma_i + eit$ , and thereby we consider this term the composite error term. In this case, our model can be written as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} GDP_{it} = & \beta_1 + \beta_2 FDI_{it} + \beta_2 K_{it} + \beta_2 T_{it} + \beta_2 INF_{it} + \beta_2 UNEM_{it} + \beta_7 (\ln POP_{it}) \\ & + \beta_8 (PSAV_{it}) + \beta_9 (GE_{it}) + \beta_{10} (RQ_{it}) + \beta_{11} (RL_{it}) + \beta_{12} (CCorr_{it}) \\ & + \beta_{13} (VA_{it}) + \gamma_i + eit \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

Where  $\gamma_i$  is not directly observable and is an unobserved effect, which can be an unobserved country effect and/or an

unobserved time effect. As a result, it is quite possible that the  $\gamma_i$  term, which is part of the term of error, may be connected to some of the right-hand side variables in the model. Due to this, the estimated coefficients of POLS may be biased and inconsistent, which violates one of the main expectations of typical linear regression models that the term of error is uncorrelated with regressors. We handle these POLS problems with the fixed effect model (FEM), random effect model (REM), or error component model (ECM) methods.

### 3.1.2. Fixed Effect Model

In the FEM method, among the cross-sections, we allow for heterogeneity by assigning each entity its own intercept:

$$\begin{aligned} GDP_{it} = & \beta_1 + \beta_2 FDI_{it} + \beta_2 K_{it} + \beta_2 T_{it} + \beta_2 INF_{it} + \beta_2 UNEM_{it} + \beta_7 (\ln POP_{it}) \\ & + \beta_8 (PSAV_{it}) + \beta_9 (GE_{it}) + \beta_{10} (RQ_{it}) + \beta_{11} (RL_{it}) + \beta_{12} (CCorr_{it}) \\ & + \beta_{13} (VA_{it}) + \quad uit \end{aligned} \quad (4)$$

Although the intercept term may differ across the cross-sections, it does not vary over time.

### 3.1.3. Random Effect Model

In the case of the REM, as a substitute for handling the intercept term ( $\beta_1 i$ ) as fixed, we suppose that it is a random variable with a mean value of  $\beta_1$ . The intercept term for each country can be expressed as  $\beta_1 i = \beta_1 + \alpha_i$ . Based on these assumptions, we may illustrate REM as

$$\begin{aligned} GDP_{it} = & \beta_1 + \beta_2 FDI_{it} + \beta_2 K_{it} + \beta_2 T_{it} + \beta_2 INF_{it} + \beta_2 UNEM_{it} + \beta_7 (\ln POP_{it}) \\ & + \beta_8 (PSAV_{it}) + \beta_9 (GE_{it}) + \beta_{10} (RQ_{it}) + \beta_{11} (RL_{it}) + \beta_{12} (CCorr_{it}) \\ & + \beta_{13} (VA_{it}) + \quad \alpha_i + uit \end{aligned} \quad (5) \text{ or}$$

$$\begin{aligned}
 GDP_{it} = & \beta_1 + \beta_2 FDI_{it} + \beta_2 K_{it} + \beta_2 T_{it} + \beta_2 INF_{it} + \beta_2 UNEM_{it} + \beta_7 (\ln POP_{it}) \\
 & + \beta_8 (PSAV_{it}) + \beta_9 (GE_{it}) + \beta_{10} (RQ_{it}) + \beta_{11} (RL_{it}) + \beta_{12} (CCorr_{it}) \\
 & + \beta_{13} (VA_{it}) + \varnothing_{it}
 \end{aligned}
 \tag{6}$$

where  $\varnothing_{it} = \alpha_i + u_{it}$ . So, the compound error term  $\varnothing_{it}$  contains two components, which are as the cross-section error part, and as the collective cross-section and time-series component. We assume here that  $\alpha_i \sim iid(0, \sigma^2\alpha)$  and  $u_{it} = iid(0, \sigma^2u)$ .

$\varnothing_{it}$  is not correlated with any of the right sides control variables in the model, according to the key assumptions of the classical linear regression model. Since is a factor of  $\varnothing_{it}$ , it is quite probable that  $\varnothing_{it}$  may relate to some control variables. In this case, the coefficients of REM may be biased and inconsistent. The Hausman test discusses this part and chooses the appropriate one between FEM and REM.

### 3.2. Data

The World Bank Indicators and Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) were used to generate the data used in this paper. The period covered in this research is only 18 years 2002-2019, and the analysis is focused on ASEAN countries.

The characteristics listed have been determined to be the most important predictors of economic growth in ASEAN countries. The dependent variable is the growth rate of GDP in ASEAN countries, FDI (percent of GDP), domestic investment (percent of GDP), trade of goods and services (percent of GDP), inflation, GDP deflator (annual percent), and unemployment rate (percent of labor force), Population, voice and accountability, political stability and the absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption are the independent variables.

Using the statistical software Stata 15 package, we estimated our model using POLS (pooled ordinary least squares), FEM (fixed effect model), and REM (random effect model) approaches, and chose the one that best fit the data.



### 3.3. Factors of Economic Growth

Established on the prior lessons cited in the review of literature, the most significant variables of economic growth and their indexes were selected.

<Table 1> Variables List

Variable	Description	Predicted Effect
GDP	GDP growth rate (annual %)	Dependent Variable
FDI	Foreign direct investment (% of GDP)	Independent Variables (+)
K	Gross capital formation (%of GDP)	Independent Variables (+)
T	Trade (% of GDP)	Independent Variables (+)
INF	Inflation, GDP deflator (annual %)	Independent Variables (+)
UNEM	Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (ILO estimate)	Independent Variables (-)
lnPOP	Population, total	Independent Variables (+)
VA	Voice and Accountability	Independent Variables (+)
PSAV	Political stability and Violence Absence	Independent Variables (+)
CCORR	Corruption Control	Independent Variables (+)
GE	Government Effectiveness	Independent Variables (+)
RQ	Regulatory Quality	Independent Variables (+)
RL	Rule of Law	Independent Variables (+)

### 3.4. Descriptive Statistics for ASEAN countries

The data is explained with the following tables and figures to offer a thorough description of practical proof for this work. For ASEAN countries, statistical information is presented in Table 2. The results show a high GDP growth rate of 14.52, a low of -2.50, a standard deviation of 3.07, and an average of 5.67. FDI (% of GDP) has a high of 32.16 and a low of -2.75 with a standard deviation of 5.97 and an average of 5.39. Similarly, domestic investment (% of GDP) has a high of 41.065 and a low of 10.43 and an average of 25.24 with a standard deviation of 6.34. Furthermore, trade (% of GDP) has a high of 437.32, a low of 0.167, a standard deviation of 96.33, and a

mean of 122.3, while inflation has a high of 41.50, a low of -22.09, and is below the standard. The standard deviation is 7.038 and the average is 5.38. The unemployment rate has a high of 9.316 and a low of 0.393 with a standard deviation of 2.166 and an average of 2.95. Population has a high of 19.416 and a low of 12.756 with a standard deviation of 1.796 and nm average of 16.932. Voice and accountability have a high of 0.321 and a low of -2.233 with a standard deviation of 0.685 and an average of -0.759. Political stability and absence of violence has a high of 1.615 and a low of -2.094 with a standard deviation of 0.929 and an average of -0.159. Control of corruption has a high of 2.325 and a low of -1.672 with a standard deviation of 1.004 and an average of -0.274. Government effectiveness has a high of 2.436 and a low of -1.617 with a standard deviation of 1.010 and an average of 0.107. Regulatory quality has a high of 2.260 and a low of -2.344 with a standard deviation of 1.012 and an average of -0.045. Rule of law has a high of 1.878 and a low of -1.739 with a standard deviation of 0.880 and an average of -0.202.

<Table 2> ASEAN countries’ Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
GDPgr	180	5.666	3.074	-2.508	14.52
FDI	180	5.528	6.048	-1.320	32.169
K	180	25.702	6.175	10.437	41.065
T	180	122.083	96.764	0.167	437.326
INF	180	5.139	6.608	-22.091	41.508
UNEM	180	2.937	2.213	0.393	9.316
lnpop	180	16.932	1.796	12.756	19.416
VA	180	-0.759	0 .685	-2.233	0.321
PSAV	180	-0.159	0.929	-2.094	1.615
CCORR	180	-0.274	1.004	-1.672	2.325
GE	180	0.107	1.010	-1.617	2.436
RQ	180	-0.045	1.012	-2.344	2.260
RL	180	-0.202	0.880	-1.739	1.878

Note: Calculations for each variable were created on a real data source with Stata software15

## IV. Results, Empirical Analysis and Related Discussions

### 4.1. Unit Root Test for ASEAN nations

This check is the first step in the inquiry, and it has been completed, allowing the data examination to continue. The results of these tests show that the stationary series is free of unit root issues. The steady nature of the variables employed in the investigation is ensured by this experiment. Levin-Lin-Chu test is also beneficial, and results exist in table-3. The results show that non-stationary variables become stationary at a specific level, and at the first difference, stationary becomes I(I). As a result, a unit root problem does not have and can be used for further research.

<Table 3> Test of Unit Root for ASEAN nations

Variables	Levin, Lin, and Chu (H0: Unit Root)			
	I(0)		I(1)	
GDPgr	-6.235	-2.145***		
FDI	-7.317	-4.247***		
K	-3.586	-1.063	-9.636	-3.977***
T	-3.107	-0.632	-10.818	-6.167***
INF	-6.933	-2.425***		
UNEM	-4.788	-2.122***		
LnPOP	-4.272	-4.287***		
VA	-4.386	-1.837***		
PSAV	-6.685	-3.842***		
CCORR	-4.635	-1.780***		
RQ	-2.789	-0.349	-10.543	-4.833***
RL	-4.167	-1.357***		
GE	-3.707	-0.484	-13.499	-9.386***

Note: \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* show levels of significance at 1%, 5% and 10%.

### 4.2. Co-integration Test for ASEAN nations

The following stage analyzes the long-run link between FDI, domestic investment, trade, inflation, unemployment, population, and governance indicators by testing variables from the unit root.

The Kao co-integration test outcomes reveal that the null hypothesis is rejected and that there is co-integration, as seen in Table 4. As a result, from 2002 to 2019, we can extract the long-term association between the variables. If the variables are stationary and co-integrated, this research can predict levels of variable regression without fear of encountering a bogus regression.

<Table 4> Co-integration (Kao) test for ASEAN countries

<b>Ho: no co-integration</b> <b>Ha: co-integration</b>	<b>Statistic</b>	<b>Probability</b>
Modified Dickey - Fuller t	-6.095	0.000
Dickey-Fuller t	-6.0331	0.000
Augmented Dickey - Fuller t	-3.1751	0.000
Unadjusted modified Dickey - Fuller t	-10.008	0.000
Unadjusted Dickey - Fuller t	-6.986	0.000

Note: \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* show levels of significance at 1%,5% and 10%.

4.3. Test of Multicollinearity

Table 5 shows the multicollinearity test. These concerns show that CCORR, RQ, GE, and RL have multi-collinearity problems; therefore, we remove some of these variables from the model and perform another regression. Unfortunately, there are once again multi-collinearity problems; hence, GE is once again penalized. All of the variable values in this table are fewer than ten. In our investigation, the multi-collinearity issue will not exist if the value of these variables is less than ten. As a result, our regression equation is once again as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} GDP_{it} = & \beta_1 + \beta_2 FDI_{it} + \beta_3 K_{it} + \beta_4 T_{it} + \beta_5 INF_{it} + \beta_6 UNEM_{it} + \beta_7 (lnPOP_{it}) \\ & + \beta_8 (PSAV_{it}) + \beta_9 (GE_{it}) + \beta_{10} (RQ_{it}) + \beta_{11} (RL_{it}) + \beta_{12} (CCorr_{it}) \\ & + \beta_{13} (VA_{it}) + e_{it} + u_t \end{aligned} \tag{7}$$

<Table 5> Test of Multicollinearity

Variable	VIF	VIF
FDI	3.01	2.8
T	5.91	5.41
K	1.80	1.75
INF	1.25	1.22
UNEM	2.67	2.39
lnpop	6.19	4.67
VA	8.62	4.57
RL	55.65	
RQ	35.94	
GE	35.42	
CCORR	26.00	8.85
PSAV	6.07	4.8

Note: Calculations for each variable were created on a real data source with Stata 15 software

#### 4.4. Pooled Regression Estimation, Fixed Effect and Random Effects Estimation, and Hausman Test Results

As already noted, the regression was applied to 10 ASEAN countries from 2002 to 2019. By using the Stata 15 statistical software program, we used the pooled ordinary least squares (POLS), fixed effect model (FEM), and random effect model (REM) approaches and selected the one that best fit the data.

##### 4.4.1. Pooled Regression Estimation, Fixed Effect and Random Effects Estimation of the ASEAN Countries

First, we pooled and estimated the effect of discussing factors, and the methods were applied in sequence to find the most appropriate one. Firstly, we regressed our model using the POLS method. In POLS, we assumed that the coefficients of regression were identical for all nations. That is, there is no dissimilarity between the nations—one nation is as worthy as any other. So, heterogeneity among countries has been ignored, and the individualism of each country is included in the disturbance term, and we call this the unobservable, or heterogeneity effect in econometrics. Due to this

reason, the term error may be connected to some of the explanatory variables that are included in POLS. This is the major problem with the POLS method.

Furthermore, there may be collinearity, autocorrelation, and/or heteroscedasticity problems in our data since it has both a time series and cross-sectional nature problems, which interrupt the important assumptions of the classical linear regression model. Due to these problems, we checked the necessary tests in our study; fortunately, our estimated coefficients of POLS may not be biased and consistent. Moreover, to allow heterogeneity among cross-sections, we applied the FEM and REM methods. In FEM, we allowed for heterogeneity among cross-sections by permitting each country to take its own individual intercept value. In REM, the cross-section differences are random rather than fixed, and the individual differences in the intercept values of each country are reflected in the error term. Below, we show the results of POLS, FEM, and REM. In econometrics, it is known that if REM is appropriate, then it is preferred. One of those reasons is that REM is a generalized least-squares (GLS) estimation while FEM is a least-squares estimation, and for this reason, GLS has a smaller variance than the least squares estimation. We applied the Hausman test to choose an appropriate test between REM and FEM. The null hypothesis here is that the REM and FEM estimators do not change significantly, and the random effects do not correlate with one or more regressors. Based on the joint test, the Hausman test rejects the null hypothesis. Even if the  $H_0$  (null hypothesis) were true, the probability of attaining a  $\chi^2$  value of 69.66 or greater would be practically 0.000. So, this implies that we should use FEM in this case.

#### **4.4.2. Hausman Test**

This check is used to decide which of the fixed effect and random effect models is the most appropriate. Both models are intended to bolster the removal of heterogeneity concerns that plague the majority of investigations. Researchers are frequently perplexed as to which model to use when they have access to reliable panel data. This test determines the researchers' choice. If the p value is less

than 0.05, we should use the fixed effect model. When the p value is greater than 0.05, the random effect model outperforms the fixed effect model. Here, the value of significance of the Chi-square probability is equal to 0.000 when the model is examined using the Hausman test, making the fixed effects model the best one to estimate. Therefore, the fixed effect model is now appropriate in this situation.

<Table 6> Regression Results

	POLS	FEM	REM
FDI	0.143*** (0.048)	0.156*** (0.064)	0.413*** (0.048)
K	0.006 (0.037)	-0.032 (0.037)	0.006 (0.037)
T	-0.003 (0.004)	0.003*** (0.008)	-0.003 (0.004)
INF	0.147*** (0.029)	0.083*** (0.030)	0.147*** (0.029)
UNEM	-0.672*** (0.121)	-0.031 (0.250)	-0.672*** (0.121)
lnPOP	0.130 (0.209)	-7.930*** (3.110)	0.130 (0.209)
VA	1.188*** (0.542)	0.338 (1.027)	1.188*** (0.542)
PSAV	-0.142 (0.410)	0.423 (0.602)	-0.142 (0.410)
CCORR	-0.181 (0.515)	1.425 (1.270)	-0.181 (0.515)
constant		139.884*** (52.874)	4.956 (3.154)
Hausman test	<i>Chi square</i>	69.66	<i>p – value</i> -0.000
R-squared	0.46	0.46	0.46
Number of observations	180	180	180

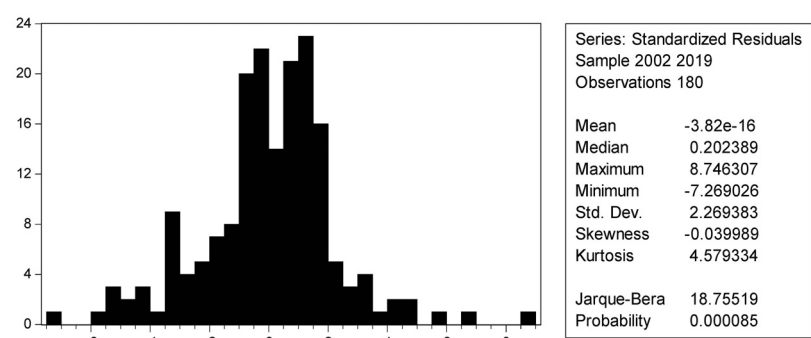
Note: \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* show levels of significance at 1%, 5% and 10%.

In Table 6, according to fix effect estimation, FDI's coefficient demonstrates a positive and significant trend. If FDI increases, the GDP growth rate increases. If FDI rises by 1 percent, GDP rises by 0.156 percent in these nations. Furthermore, foreign direct investment, trade, inflation, voice and accountability, political stability and the absence of violence, and control of corruption have a progressive association with economic growth. However, domestic investment, population, and unemployment are not. If unemployment decreases by 1 percent, GDP rises by 0.031 percent.

<Table 7> Diagnostic tests for ASEAN countries

Durbin Watson's Serial Correlation Test	
Durbin Watson stat(p-value)	1.221
Test of Normality	
Jarque-Bera(p-value)	0.0008
Test of heteroskedasticity	
Obs* R-Squared(p-value)	0.76

Using the Durbin-Waston test for ASEAN countries, we must determine whether our model is serially correlated. In Table 7, the p-value is greater than 5%; therefore, we cannot rule out the null hypothesis. As a result, residuals lack serial correlation. This is a great model. Here, the p-value is 1.221, which is greater than 0.05. The model is not serially correlated as a result. Moreover, we determine whether our data are normally distributed using Figure 1. The residual is not normally distributed since the p-value is less than the 0.05 level value. Then, using the heteroskedasticity test, we decide whether our variables have constant variance. The p-value is 0.76, which is more than 5%. Residuals are hence homoscedastic (constant variance).



<Figure 1> Normal Distribution Test for ASEAN Countries



## V. Conclusion

As noted in the introductory section, the most important responsibility of every government, whether in developed or developing countries, is to develop a country's economy and enhance people's livelihoods. Many studies have been conducted to analyze the elements that play a vital role in maintaining growth. The factors we discussed in this study are important factors that determine economic growth. This study found that some factors are important for the economic growth of ASEAN countries, and we found that foreign direct investment, inflation, trade, and unemployment are significant factors in ASEAN countries' economic growth.

According to our first contribution, ASEAN is expanding in not only economic but also geopolitical importance; this association is quite large in Asia, and we analyzed how macroeconomic indicators affect all their member countries. The study's findings may also shed insight on each nation's economic condition and performance within the ASEAN community. Each member country would be able to contribute to ASEAN's common riches if they were united. The research set out to investigate the causes underlying the diverse patterns of ASEAN countries, as foreign direct investment, trade, and inflation are broadly recognized as key drivers of economic growth. As FDI, trade, and inflation increase, economic growth also increases. And then, according to these data and running the fixed, random effects and Hausman test, FDI, trade, inflation, voice and accountability, political stability and the absence of violence, and control of corruption have a positive association; however, domestic investment, population, and unemployment have a negative association in ASEAN nations.

As mentioned in the second and final contribution, existing empirical Asian and ASEAN studies are focused on macroeconomic indicators and changes in economic growth, while ignoring institutional quality issues, and governance indicators. In this paper, the benefits of FDI, trade, domestic investment, inflation, unemployment, population, and institutional quality on economic growth were explored. Governance indicators such as political

stability and the absence of violence, voice and accountability, and control of corruption also have a positive relationship with economic growth in ASEAN countries. This means that the more countries that maintain the quality of their governance indicators and macroeconomic policies, the better for foreign direct investment, trade performance, and economic growth they will be.

Fixed effect model estimates were recommended for the policy recommendation process, as emphasized by the Hausman test. The findings indicated that FDI, trade, and inflation were the most important factors in economic growth, with a significance level of 5%. According to the anticipated hypothesis, inflation, as does the unemployment rate, has a beneficial influence. The findings have led to the conclusion that people in ASEAN countries spend primarily to protect themselves against macroeconomic uncertainties; they invest as a hedge against future economic risks. The more they invest, the faster their economy grows.

Moreover, increases in trade between ASEAN nations, also brought on by easier access to rich nations' markets, may have a significant impact on the economic outcomes of emerging nations. However, the population coefficient shows that nations can benefit from other indicators but not from their total population. Spengler (2017) found that larger populations support higher specialization and increased knowledge investments. On the other hand, in developing countries, economic growth will rise sharply with slower population growth, according to research by Kyaw (2019). Moreover, according to Fetahi-Vehapi et al. (2015)'s study, in South-Eastern European countries, population was found to be negatively and significantly associated with economic growth between 1996 and 2012.

This report includes policy recommendations for every government to consider to improve economic growth, as well as certain governance indicators and macroeconomic policies that international investors and traders should consider when making investment, export, and import decisions. Furthermore, the outcomes of the study are valuable to policymakers, who may use them to develop effective government guidelines and policies that

would improve the nation's economic growth rate. Further research on all ten ASEAN countries would be highly valuable in the future, as each country has unique characteristics that allow it to impact the world with its economic power.

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## Continuing Marxist-Leninist Perspectives of Literature in Vietnam: Social Criticism in Vietnamese Ecocriticism



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### [ *Abstract* ]

Many publications of ecocritical research papers and translations of ecocriticism occur in Vietnam in recent years. This paper examines ecocritical scholarly writing in Vietnam, understanding how it corresponds to—reflects and attends to—contemporary Vietnamese society and politics. Specifically, this paper contextualizes Vietnamese ecocriticism in contemporary social and political concerns—embodied in journalistic and administrative documents—about the modernity-oriented postcolonial nation-building of Vietnam. In revealing critiques of political and social degenerations implied in ecocritical writings in Vietnam, this paper suggests that the emergence of ecocriticism in present-day Vietnam indicates a recent “political turn.” More importantly, such emergence reflects and engages with the continuing Marxist perspective of literature as an instrument for social criticism and cultural revolution in Vietnam. Vietnamese ecocritics bear the mission of prophets of the time, public educators, and soul engineers, writing is an act of engaging with and influencing reality. Writing (literary and scholarly) still forms an

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idealized ideological instrument in the struggles for national homogeneity and sovereignty and social democracy in present-day Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Vietnamese ecocriticism, literature and politics, social criticism, Marxist perspectives of literature

## I . Introduction

Environmental analyses of literature form a major interest among Vietnamese scholars of literary studies in recent years. Many ecocritical research papers and translations of ecocriticism have been published in recent years. This paper examines ecocritical scholarly writing in Vietnam, understanding how it corresponds to—reflects and attends to—contemporary Vietnamese society and politics. Specifically, this paper contextualizes Vietnamese ecocriticism in contemporary social and political concerns—embodied in journalistic and administrative documents—about the modernity-oriented postcolonial nation-building of Vietnam. In revealing critiques of political and social degenerations implied in ecocritical writings in Vietnam, this paper suggests that the emergence of ecocriticism in present-day Vietnam indicates a recent “political turn.” More importantly, such emergence reflects and engages with the continuing Marxist perspective of literature as an instrument for social criticism and cultural revolution in Vietnam. Vietnamese ecocritics bear the mission of prophets of their time, public educators, and soul engineers, writing is an act of engaging with and influencing reality. Writing (literary and scholarly) still form an idealized ideological instrument in the struggles for national homogeneity and sovereignty and social democracy in present-day Vietnam.

## II . Presence of Ecocriticism and Its Social Engagements in Vietnam

Environmental analyses of literature form a major interest among Vietnamese scholars of literary studies in recent years. There are two international conferences on ecocriticism in recent consecutive



years. In 2017, the American Embassy in Hanoi and the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences co-organized the first conference on literature and environment in Vietnam, *Ecocriticism: Global and Local Voices*. The conference attracted presentations from twenty international scholars and 102 Vietnamese scholars. In addition, in January 2018, the newly-launched ASLE-ASEAN held its second workshop *Ecologies in Southeast Asian Literatures: Histories, Myths, and Societies* in Hanoi. This conference had more than sixty presenters from not only all-over Southeast Asia but also from Taiwan and China in East Asia, and France in Europe. Some workshops and conferences at the national level have taken place in universities and research centers. For example, in 2021, the Institute of Literature (Hanoi), in cooperation with Thủ Dầu Một University (Ho Chi Minh City) organized an international conference, *Southern Ecology and Culture in Vietnamese Literature*. Many publications of ecocritical research papers and translations of ecocriticism occur in recent years including *Phê bình sinh thái: Tiếng nói bản địa, tiếng nói toàn cầu (Ecocriticism: Global and Local Voices)* (2017) by the Institute of Literature; *Rừng khô, suối cạn, biển độc...và văn chương - phê bình sinh thái (Dry Forests, Parched Streams, Poisonous Seas... and Literature—Ecocriticism* 2017) by Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy, professor of Hue University; and *Phê bình sinh thái với văn xuôi Nam Bộ (Ecocriticism with Southern Vietnamese Prose* 2018) by Bùi Thanh Truyền. These papers and publications attempt to figure out their representations of ecological and environmental issues in Vietnamese literature from the past to the present; researchers and educators in big cities and districts have collaborated in research projects that address ways through which to educate children and learners at large about environmental awareness through literature reading.

Although Vietnamese ecocriticism is thematically diverse, it addresses, directly or indirectly, critical environmental and ecological issues in the present day. The papers and published articles share the ideas of how Vietnamese literature touches upon ecological and environmental crises that have been caused by modernization and industrialization.

Implicit in the critical and analytical arguments about the

environment of Vietnamese scholars through their works are concerns that warn about environmental and ecological destructions due to the impact of the modern nation project that aims at modernization and industrialization. In other words, methodologically, ecology-oriented literary criticism in Vietnam embodies public concerns about Vietnamese modern-nation building and ecological and environmental consequences. Vietnamese ecocriticism is conducted in relation and reference to environmental and ecological realities in present-day Vietnam. For example, Đặng Thị Thái Hà (2017), by employing the theory of ecological ambiguity and ecotourism in approaching Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, points out the paradox of infatuation where breathtaking natural beauty leads to destructive actions that destroy ecosystems (deforestation, cutting mountains). She says that ecotourism deprives people of the coast, expels mountain people of their living space, and exoticizes indigenous people for visitors. Thus, there is a contradiction in the way people behave with nature at present, giving rise to skepticism about civilization, development, and tourism. Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt (2016, 2017) surveys Southern prose, focusing on the content of ecological imbalance in the Southern region (landslide, mountain avalanche, drought, saltwater intrusion, prolonged floating water); Modern life makes farmers lose their support in the ecological space in the field. Hoàng Tổ Mai (2017), in analyzing Y Ban (1961-)'s *Cấm Cù* novella, pointed out the ecological underground circuit on sanitation, organic and inorganic fertilizers, and the impact on the environment, and argues about the negative impact of industrialization and modernization on the environment. Author Lê Hương Thủy, reading fiction by Đỗ Phấn (1956-), focuses on the topic of polluted urban life (environmental pollution, noise pollution, smog pollution, water pollution, destroyed trees, hunting wild animals, killing animals, etc.) in Hanoi, where people live in frustration and suffocation in ecological insecurity and indicated aspirations for a peaceful living space. Other authors such as Trịnh Đăng Nguyên Hương (2017), Nguyễn Diệu Linh (2017), and Đỗ Hải Ninh (2017) read contemporary Vietnamese literary works (by Nguyễn Ngọc Tư (1976-), Đỗ Phấn (1956-), and Hoàng A Sáng (1976-?) in relation to the destruction of human society to the natural environment. It is a phenomenon that the downstream river is flooded with salt,

causing vegetation destruction (poor, sparse forests), river leveling, and river erosion (many people are swept away suddenly, terrible disasters). Upstream rivers and forests are destroyed; the environment is destroyed due to the consequences of climate change.

### III. Vietnamese Ecocriticism on Nature Writing

While lamenting its representation of nature's beauty, Vietnamese scholars read nature writing as arguing idea that man and nature are not in opposition to each other. Instead, man is a part of the natural cycle, therefore, all changes in human life will affect nature. Vietnamese ecocritics recognize that ecological aesthetics were expressed quite clearly in medieval Vietnamese literature, typically with the poetry of royal writers such as Trần Nhân Tông (1258-1308), Nguyễn Trãi (1380-1442), and Nguyễn Du (1766-1820). While critic Trần Thị Nhung (2017) taps the aesthetic aspect of ecological holism in Trần Nhân Tông's poetry, some other critics such as Đoàn Thị Thu Vân (2017) and Nguyễn Thanh Tú (2017) emphasize natural beauty in harmony with emotional feelings of love and appreciation for life as well as for nature; this is observable in the poems by Nguyễn Trãi. Ecological aesthetics is also exploited in modern Vietnamese literature to show the diverse and colorful natural beauty in the poems of New Poetry<sup>1</sup> (Bùi Thị Thu Thủy 2017) or the idyllic beauty of the countryside associated with the love of nature and people's homeland in the short stories by writer Ngọc Giao (1911-1997) (Lê Tú Anh 2017). In addition, Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt looks for ecological aesthetic sense in Vietnamese literature since the Renovation Period (1986).<sup>2</sup> She considers Vietnamese

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<sup>1</sup> New Poetry is a concept used to refer to a trend of composing non-classical poetry influenced by the rules of rhetoric, rhyme, themes, and ideas of Western poetry. New poetry appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in countries such as Japan, China, Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Thailand, and Malaysia and became a common phenomenon in East Asian literature.

<sup>2</sup> 1986, an important milestone in the history of socio-economic development of Socialist Vietnam, was when the Communist Party of Vietnam decided to revitalize the country's economy. The program called *Đổi Mới* transformed Vietnam from a command economy to a socialist-oriented market economy. As a result, the economy has achieved a high growth rate and the living conditions of the

ecological prose after 1986 as filled with the romantic discourse on nature which could be seen in the way it recreates the motifs of country homage and hermitage, sanctifying, and beautifying nature. According to Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt, such a way of appreciating nature has deep roots in the idealized oriental culture which has the traditional harmony between humans with plants and trees (Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt 2018: 116). For other scholars, Vietnamese nature writing also demonstrates the ecological feelings of people before nature's beauty, the human infatuation with nature, and the expression of human love for fragile beings such as plants and animals. By listening to nature, people will understand and respect nature, thereby leading human behavior to be in harmony with nature. Thus, ecocriticism upholds natural beauty, praising the lifestyle of people in harmony with nature in literary works. It conveys the importance of ecological harmony, reminding people of the value of living with respect for nature. (Nguyễn Thị Thúy Hằng 2017: 552).

Noticeably, while appreciating the so-called traditional harmony between humans and nature in Vietnamese nature writing, Vietnamese ecocritics discuss concerns about modern ecological problems. For example, while reading ecological aesthetics in Trần Nhân Tông's poetry, ecocritic Trần Thị Nhung wonders about "the world reality (that) is in more danger, the problem of environmental pollution (that) is getting more serious every day" (2017: 331). She asserts that it is necessary to promote ecological aesthetic education for everyone, especially the young generation. In particular, this author emphasizes that "literature is the 'most suitable' field to do this educating function," and ecological aesthetic education "can form a new generation of people who respect nature, harmony with nature, consciously fighting for the protection of the global ecological environment" (Trần Thị Nhung 2017: 331). Bùi Thị Thu Thủy, another female ecocritic, by way of analyzing nature's beauty in "New Poetry," emphasizes "knowing how to find the beauty of nature, cherishing, respecting and living in harmony with nature form a positive attitude to life" (Bùi Thị Thu Thủy 2017: 474). Bùi

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Vietnamese improved drastically. However, economic growth gave rise to many challenges, including pollution and income inequality.

Thị Thu Thủy attempts to refer to such poetic nature as a contrast to the present-day reality of the environment of Vietnam which is being destroyed. She fears that one day nature, as it was in New Poetry, "remains only in the nostalgia" (Bùi Thị Thu Thủy 2017: 474). This is a way of criticism on the current state of degraded nature in Vietnam. Ostensibly, criticism of aesthetics and ecological sensibility in medieval and modern Vietnamese literature makes audiences think about the environmental and ecological.

Such appraisals of nature's beauty in literary works published in the past seem to imply criticism against the increasing destruction of nature in present-day Vietnam. Data indicate that the area of natural forests in Vietnam is declining at a rapid rate. According to statistics before 1945, forest covers accounted for 43.8%; now it is just over 28% (i.e. below the alarming level of 30%). The main cause of this situation is due to projects of cutting forests for hydropower, factories, farms, and road constructions. In addition to primary forests, coastal protection forests are also cleared to make aquaculture ponds. Accordingly, the species of flora and fauna in primary forests and protection forests are reduced; many species face extinction, for example, red coral reefs; cranes have disappeared; and finally, biodiversity is severely degraded. At the same time, deforestation also causes floods and saltwater intrusion takes place with greater frequency. Droughts become frequent in the Mekong Delta, while floods have occurred in the central and northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam (Hội đồng lý luận trung ương 2021).

#### **IV. Vietnamese Ecocriticism on Writings about Non-Human Beings**

In a more direct way, criticism of literary works about animals and other non-human beings echoes public concerns about animal respect and recent losses of species diversity. The article "Tinh thần sinh thái trong văn xuôi Nam Bộ" (Ecological Spirit in Southern Prose) by Bùi Thanh Truyền (2017) emphasizes livelihood and freedom of all species. According to Bùi Thanh Truyền, Vietnamese

short stories and novels in Southern Vietnam demonstrate how animal freedom is taken away with the portrayal of men's brutality in killing sharks, hunting elephants, catching monkeys, and trapping birds (Bùi Thanh Truyền 2017). Also following this tendency, Trần Ngọc Hiếu and Đặng Thị Thái Hà (2017) analyze the short story "Salt of the Forest" (Muối của rừng) by the famous author Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, considering the act of Mr. Diều (the hunter) in shooting the male monkey and accidentally pushing the baby monkey into the cliff as an embodiment of the ferocious human treatment toward non-human beings. Later, the critic appreciates the diversion of Mr. Diều's behavior: he bandages the wound to save the male monkey he has shot. The essay shows the viewpoint of animal liberation and respect for the life of all species. Looking at other short stories by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, critic Nguyễn Thị Thúy Hằng (2017) warns of the consequences when humans attack animals in the forest (wolf, tiger and monkey). The destruction of nature and the cruel treatment of other living creatures cost people their own lives.

Such ecological warnings by Vietnamese writers correspond to the decline and extinction of many species of animals and plants that have been recorded in contemporary Vietnamese journalistic and scientific publications. Tigers, bears, rhinos, and elephants are killed for tiger bones, bear bile, rhino horn, and ivory, respectively. Many other animals and birds are hunted simply for food or amusement. Regarding the risk of extinction for tigers, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) estimates that until January 2022, Vietnam has only about 5 tigers left in the wild (Sputnik Việt Nam 2022). Meanwhile, the Javan rhinoceros (one-horned rhinoceros) was confirmed to be extinct in Vietnam in October 2011. Also as recorded, the last rhino was shot dead by hunters in the Cát Lộc area of Cát Tiên National Park, Southern Vietnam (WCS Vietnam). Besides, according to the Center for People and Nature (PanNature) report, the number of wild elephants in Vietnam as of 2020 was only about 124 to 148 (Mạng Thông tin Bảo vệ Môi trường 2022). In general, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List updated in November 2020, the number of threatened species in Vietnam was 745 species, including 64 species of mammals, 53 of birds, 70 of reptiles, 45 of amphibians, and 96

of fish. The Red Book of Vietnam also records 6 species that have been categorized from endangered to extinct, including two-horned rhinoceros, gray cow, tapir, otter civet, lilac crocodile, and star deer (Vietnam Plus 2021). Besides habitat loss, it is indiscriminate hunting, killing, and exploitation of humans that are the main causes of decline and extinction of many species of flora and fauna in Vietnam. This fact must have prompted Vietnamese ecocritics, along with writers, to urgently speak out to protect the ecosystem as well as to combat the cruel destruction of other species by humans.

Along with killing living creatures, seeking and exploiting precious minerals by all means also form a way for humans to destroy nature. Ecocritic Bùi Thanh Truyền (2018), by way of examining some fictions by the famous contemporary Vietnamese eco-writer Nguyễn Trí (1956-) such as “Gold mining Sites, Gemstones, Agarwood” (Bãi vàng, đá quý, trầm hương); “Butcher” (Đồ tể); “Fantasy and Fear” (Ảo và sợ), “Old stories from the forest” (Chuyện cũ từ rừng), and his novel *Paradise of Illusion* (Thiên đường ảo vọng), highlights the reality of “forests being destroyed by many methods for “gold, gems, agarwood, cut wood, burn coal, collecting rattan, bamboo, hunting animals, and trapping birds... The forest is dying and it is people who are dying” (Bùi Thanh Truyền 2018: 145). Bùi Thanh Truyền emphasizes Trí Nguyễn’s statement that as long as man is not aware of his wrong actions with nature, “nature is still being destroyed and devastated and invisibly which form a way of humans destroying themselves” (Bùi Thanh Truyền 2018: 145). Sharing Bùi Thanh Truyền’s thought on the consequences for humans when over-exploiting nature, ecocritic Nguyễn Thùy Trang (2017) examines post-1986 Vietnamese novels, highlighting regret and criticism about human stupidity, greed, and disregard for nature when they plunge into the forest and deep river to explore resources; in return they pay with their own lives. Thus, in way of appreciating ecofiction that condemn man’s excessive exploitation of nature, Vietnamese ecocritics warn people about the terrible consequences that people will suffer when they abuse nature.

## V. Vietnamese Ecocriticism on Writing about Forest

In Vietnamese ecocriticism, forest literature is a subject of special attention. Many ecocritics such as Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy (2017), Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt (2016, 2018), Bùi Thanh Truyền (2017, 2018) Nguyễn Thị Thúy Hằng (2017), Nguyễn Thị Diệu Linh (2017), and Lê Ngọc Bích (2017) pay attention to forest-related topics in literary works, from people's feelings of attachment to forests, human exploitation, deforestation, and brave people's struggle to protect the forest. One of the most concerned Vietnamese ecocritics on the problem of deforestation is Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy. Her concerns, as well as those of other ecological critics, regarding the issue of forest exploitation and protection in the literature, are apparently linked to the rising concern of the Vietnamese public about deforestation in recent Vietnam: as recorded, in 1945 Vietnam had 14.3 million hectares of forest (accounting for 43% of the natural land area), but by 1995, the natural forest had shrunk to only 8.25 million hectares (*Người Lao động* 2020). The decline in forest areas has many causes, but one of them is illegal logging. Even so, there are many illegal deforestation cases directed by forest rangers themselves. For example, in 2003 there was large illegal deforestation in Kon Ka Kinh National Park (Gia Lai) and Mang Den Forest Enterprise (Kon Tum) led by the directors of Mang Den SFE (State Forest Enterprise) and Tân Lập SFE. By criticizing the work "Cross in the deep forest" (Thập giá giữa rừng sâu) by writer Nguyễn Khắc Phê (1939-), ecocritic Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy not only condemns illegal deforestation but also calls for and supports the struggle to protect forests. Her research represents "writing for an endangered world" and "raising one more cry for help from the forest, and the forest" (Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy 2017: 332-333).

Also "raising one more cry for help from the forest," ecocritic Trịnh Đăng Nguyên Hương (2017) worries about the decline and disappearance of coastal protection forests in Vietnam. Emphasizing the image of "the sparse mangrove forests and the saltwater intrusion from the sea into the river" in the novel *The River* (Sông) by Nguyễn Ngọc Tư (1976-), Trịnh Đăng Nguyên Hương relates to a similar recorded reality: based on 2017 data, hundreds of hectares



of mangrove forest, as well as other coastal forests across the country are being severely damaged; mangrove forests in Tân Ninh, Quảng Bình are desolate and sparse; many mangrove trees are dead. "The forests are like wastelands because inside the forest are construction sites for digging ponds and dams..." (Trịnh Đăng Nguyễn Hương 2017: 750). Trịnh Đăng Nguyễn Hương's reference to the recorded data indicates her deep concern about people's activities of destroying protection forests in Vietnam and her desire for the restoration of the forest system.

## VI. Vietnamese Ecocriticism about Fictions on Pollution

Besides forest degradation, many Vietnamese ecocritics pay attention to presentations of sea pollution as well as the depletion of rivers in Vietnamese literary works. Bùi Thanh Truyền (2018) analyzes the novel *River* (Sông) by Nguyễn Ngọc Tư and other works by contemporary Vietnamese writers such as Lý Lan (1957-), Võ Diêu Thanh (1975-) and Lê Minh Nhựt (-) to criticize the human act of damaging rivers. The ecocritic shows his concerns with the described reality of "prolonged droughts that make people not have enough fresh water for their minimum needs even though they are living on the banks of a large river" (Bùi Thanh Truyền 2018: 149); at the same time, he expresses his anxiety and insecurity when people in dozens of provinces in the Mekong Delta area are daily facing drought, making them unable to cultivate on familiar fields. According to this southern ecocritic, those disasters of the South are not only caused by global climate change but are also the consequences of "the destruction of watershed forests and protection forests due to human greed" (Bùi Thanh Truyền 2018: 156).

The ecocritical research by Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy, Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt, and many other ecocritics, do not only reflect their pursuit of a new literary approach in the world but also engage with the rising concerns of Vietnamese intellectuals about the reality of the country's ecological systems and environment of water being destroyed. Examples of projects that threaten water environments in Vietnam include the bauxite mining project in the Central Highlands

(2007-2025) (Thế Kha 2018); the untreated waste discharges of the Vedan Company, directly thrown into Đồng Nai River (Hà Hồng and Tuấn Anh 2008); and Formosa Hà Tĩnh factory's pouring of toxic waste into the central seas causing massive fishkill (Xuân Long 2017). These are typical environmental disasters in Vietnam over the past decade, creating public fervent debates. Most Vietnamese ecocritics are concerned about the considerable destruction of the ecological environment caused by industrializing and modernizing processes in Vietnam. In addition to directly speaking out to require the government to adjust the way of socio-economic management, the intelligentsia, specifically researchers of ecocriticism, also look to literature to continue to express and reflect on their belief in the intrinsic relationship between society and nature and their concerns about ecological degradation. This is not only a way to create a trend to protect the ecological environment, thus protecting the sustainable life of people, but also contributes to creating pressure to reform the production and environmental management mechanism in Vietnam.

## **VII. Vietnamese Ecocriticism with Social Justice**

Aside from paying attention to environmental issues, Vietnamese ecocritics are also concerned with the fate of the disadvantaged social groups in Vietnamese ecological literary works. Poor people in general, displaced peasants, women, and ethnic minorities are all disadvantaged groups in society. Their miserable fate can be seen in Vietnamese literature from 1975 until the present day. After 1975, when the Vietnam War ended, the theme of war in Vietnamese literature was gradually replaced by the theme of people's daily lives, in which the poor, such as displaced farmers, fishermen, workers, and women have been typically represented. Realizing the consequential connection between market economy, ecological change, even patriarchal cultural factors, and the fate of these vulnerable people in literature, Vietnamese ecocritics mentioned the issues of class-based ecocriticism and ecofeminism as important parts of Vietnamese ecocriticism. Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt (2017), Nguyễn Thùy Trang (2017), and Bùi Thanh Truyền (2018) were the

first researchers who have conducted research on this. Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt (2017), focusing on a series of post 1986 Vietnamese literary works about farmers, indicates that the farmers have to "grapple with the land, the weather, the natural disasters" and have to "leave the land behind which is like leaving the roots of the soul and spirit". These are farmers who are "poor, hungry, illiterate, insecure, caught up in the whirlwind of the market economy" but they are all "attached and loving to the land, the fruit trees, the sky, and the river... with a deep love" (Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt 2017: 566-567). Here, the critic's sympathy and understanding of the farmers is not based solely on the literary text, but more deeply rooted in the critic's concern about the reality of ecology and environment being destroyed when farming land becomes industrial zones, which disperse farmers' right on their own land. Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt explains that the fact that many Vietnamese farmers have to give up their familiar farming land, become unemployed, and then engage in prostitution and drugs, all emanating from "environmental injustice" (Nguyễn Thị Ánh Nguyệt 2017: 567). The destruction of traditional ecosystems to build urban areas, industrial parks, and tourist areas does not only take away traditional jobs but also makes poor people deprived of their access to nature. Bùi Thanh Truyền, in his reading of the story "Tears and Dust" (Áo rách và năm bụi) by Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, stresses that recently built eco-tourism areas "(rob) people's coastal areas... (by) not giving them access to the living space that once belonged to them, (and) pushing them to the margins of society"; meanwhile the tourists, the "outsiders," occupy and drive away indigenous people (Bùi Thanh Truyền 2018: 263). Likewise, Nguyễn Thùy Trang, looking into many modern Vietnamese literary works, points out the difficult living situations of people living along the coastal area of the Red River who depend on river water for both their livelihood and daily life (Nguyễn Thùy Trang 2017).

For some other Vietnamese ecocritics, particularly those who have an ethnic-minority background, ecocriticism is a way of addressing social problems concerning ethnic policies. Lê Ngọc Bình (2017) works on the epic of Xơ Đăng, an ethnic group in Central Highland Vietnam, to explore the relationship between the human

and nature. Focusing on the epic's portrayal of Xơ Đăng people traditionally exploiting nature for farming, trading, and for other socio-cultural activities, Lê Thị Bình highlights the traditional harmony "between people, nature, and gods" based on the traditional harmony of interests, the "fairness," in the way of "giving and receiving" (Lê Ngọc Bình 2017: 289). Such a traditional harmony, as stated by the female ecocritic, is contradictory to the critical situation of the natural landscape in present-day Central Highlands: "Day by day, hour by hour, the forests of the Central Highlands are disappearing, many forests are now becoming bare hills" in the process of economic, cultural, and social development in the region. Lê Thị Bình highlights that the processes of urbanization, migration, and the dominance of science and technology have degraded the natural landscape of the Central Highlands and caused the loss of many typical cultural and moral values of the region. Here, the ecocritic does not limit herself solely to completing literary criticism; instead, she tends to warn the public about environmental, political, and social issues in her country. Such a social engagement is evident in her way of writing as though she was giving a public speech about how people around her should behave towards nature: "Humans who want to exploit nature must also understand that they are a part of that nature. If humans want to receive back, they must give away and respect the things that have nourished them" (Lê Ngọc Bình 2017: 289). This ethnic ecocritic also raises the question of how the government's policies on hunger eradication, poverty reduction, and socio-economic development for the Central Highlands must aim at the goal of "sustainable development." She also sets responsibility for her community in the Central Highlands to "protect the ecological environment, to revive the lost forests while developing the economy, culture, and society in a sustainable way" and to "keep the forests of the Central Highlands green while preserving cultural and social space of the indigenous inhabitants" (Lê Ngọc Bình 2017: 290).

Similar to Lê Ngọc Bình, Bàn Thị Quỳnh Giao, a scholar with a Dao ethnic minority background, studies the ecological spirit in the poetry of Dao ethnic poets. While emphasizing the natural

beauty embodied in the Dao's poetry and the Dao's deep attachment to the mountains and forests, this female critic also taps into the feelings of loss and grief felt by the Dao poets when writing about Dao nature which is badly treated by the humans: beautiful nature is being destroyed due to human's exhaustive exploitation of the mountains and forests (Bàn Thị Quỳnh Giao 2017: 307). The critic reminds her audience to be "aware of their roles and responsibilities about nature"; she asserts that the descendants of the Dao need to "love and protect, know how to fear natural life" so that "the Dao people today and forever in the future have a peaceful and happy life in the mountains and forests" (Bàn Thị Quỳnh Giao 2017: 319). Bàn Thị Quỳnh Giao's concerns about environmental and ecological issues in her ethnic area appear to correspond to modernizing policy concerning ethnic minority areas that Vietnamese government has been conducting for years. Between 1980 and the early 1990s, the Vietnamese government vigorously implemented policies that aimed to modernize the Central Highlands through a program of "clearing the wilderness" (*khai hoang*) and its derivative, "building new economic zones" (*Xây dựng các vùng kinh tế mới*). This program attempted to relocate lowland and city residents in general and farmers, in particular, to supposedly "empty" or "virgin" forest areas to clear lands and cultivate them for cooperatives and the agro-industrial complex (McElwee 2016: 76-7; Evans 1992: 280-82). The program, as clearly written, strongly encourage organizations, collective groups, and farmers in areas that lack cultivated lands and unemployed non-agriculturalist householders to invest their own labor and capital to move to wildland areas for living and developing). This strategy is stated in Decision 254-CP, *khuyến khích khai hoang phục hóa* [encouragement? to clear the wilderness and to recover civilization] issued on June 16, 1981, by the Governmental Committee (Chính phủ 1982). Decision 254-CP, in fact, forms part of the nationally implemented governmental program initiated in the 1960s and further developed with Decision No. 95-CP on March 27, 1980, "strongly developing the cultivation of large wildland areas for new economic zones."

### VIII. Vietnamese Ecocritical Statements about Social Engagements

It can be seen that Vietnam's ecocriticism has embraced the traditional arguments of ecocriticism as a literary approach originated from American and English humanities. Vietnamese critics and researchers have studied a fairly large volume of literary works in the country, from fairy tales, and myths, to medieval, modern, and contemporary literature (poetry, short stories, novels, children's literature); from northern to southern literatures; from majority and minority literatures. Vietnamese ecocriticism has shed more light on critical issues of ecological environment that have been happening in Vietnam recently: environmental pollution, resource depletion, land loss, the decline of living species, and the plight of vulnerable people in ecological destruction. Each ecocritical project potentially forms a call to warn society about the danger of ecological destruction to human future life. At the same time, discussed in Vietnamese ecocritical writing is discontent about socio-political issues related to the ecological environment, and calls for literature and literary criticism to be more active in the struggle to protect ecosystems and sustainable human life.

Particularly, many Vietnamese ecocritics have directly stated their social orientations in their research. Typical work for this trend of ecocriticism in Vietnam is *Dry forests, parched streams, poisonous seas... and literature* (2017) by Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy. This is an outstanding work in Vietnamese ecocriticism with its attachment to social and political issues. This political orientation is shown at the beginning of the book when the author writes:

Vietnam is a country directly affected by climate change. Environmental pollution from daily life and economic production has been and will be a problem, or a great disaster, for people and all other species. Dry forests, parched streams, poisoned seas, dead fish, floods, droughts, broken dams, mudslides, etc., form common disasters in present-day Vietnam (16-17).

The paragraph lists a series of ecological and environmental disasters in present-day Vietnam. According to this passionate female critic, approaching literature from ecocritical perspectives is

an embodiment of human responsibility in tending to and listening to the earth. This literary approach is not a way of "seeing people eating potatoes, carrying shovels to dig" (the Vietnamese idiom "thấy người ta ăn khoai cũng vác mai đi đào") which refers to the way Vietnamese scholars imitate foreign ones or outsiders to take up ecocriticism. Instead, ecocriticism is "the work to be done by the insider...who must show the response of literary studies, as a science, to the cry for help of the ecological environment" (2017: 17). Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy's definition of "eco-literature" (văn học sinh thái) also shows the author's emphasis on the social commitment of this body of literature:

Ecological literature also shows ecological responsibility and ecological ideology, to criticize the dark side of civilization, and reflect ecological risks, spiritual risks, ideological risks and social origins of those dangers" (1997: 93).

The occurrence of the terms "responsibility" and "ideology" and their synonyms in the quotation indicate the social tasks that eco-writers and ecocritics take upon themselves.

In the article 'Sáng tác và phê bình sinh thái: Tiềm năng cần khai thác của văn học Việt Nam' (Ecocriticism and Composition—the Potential to be Exploited for Vietnamese Literature" (*Văn nghệ quân đội*, No. 10, 2014), Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy points out that ecocriticism is still a "slow response" to critical environmental and ecological problems in Vietnam. This widely acknowledged ecocritic suggests that the literary composition in Vietnam should be engaged with ecocriticism so that literature can be more practically attached to social realities. This critic clearly promotes the writer's responsibility in protecting the environment. Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy's passion for social engagements in Vietnamese ecofiction is consonant with the direction of the second wave of world ecocriticism, which is attending to social and political issues

Another one that promotes social engagement is the book *Ecocriticism with Southern Prose* (quoted above). The book emphasizes the "socially committed" and "socially responsible" aspects of ecocriticism. This is reflected in the very definition of

ecocriticism that is printed on the book cover: "Ecological criticism... is the voice of literary studies, as a humanities science, in response to environmental peril" and "ecocriticism is an example of the researcher's sensitivity, bravery, mind, and civic responsibility to today's social situation" (cover page). The ecocritic Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt's contribution to this book, which emphasizes ecocriticism as a potential approach in Vietnamese literary criticism, lists a series of historical and social events such as war, industrialization, and modernization as main factors that caused environmental and ecological destruction in Vietnam. Noticeably, this ecocritic refers to some ecological destruction events that recently gets public attention in Vietnam including the disappearance of rhinoceri in Vietnam in 2010, the lack of forests for Central Highlands elephants, fields being destroyed, red-crowned cranes completely migrating to Cambodia, and the use of pesticides in agriculture that destroy the habitat of plants and animals in the regions of the country (Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt 2018). Contributions by Bùi Thanh Truyền and Phạm Ngọc Lan describe how southern areas of the country are bearing the brunt of global climate change, the destruction of watershed forests, and the destruction of protective forests (Bùi Thanh Truyền and Phạm Ngọc Lan 2018: 156). Thus, ecocriticism by Vietnamese scholars embodies socially responsible acts of Vietnamese intellectuals in the face of environmental issues in association with social, political, and historical issues.

Many other Vietnamese ecocritics directly voice their concerns about environmental problems in present-day Vietnam. The senior literary studies scholar Nguyễn Văn Dân considers "ecocriticism first and foremost (as) a modern movement within the socio-cultural movement for environmental protection" (Nguyễn Văn Dân 2017: 62). In particular, ecocriticism must "call on literature to contribute with society to fight for the protection of the ecological environment in sustainable development" (Nguyễn Văn Dân 2017: 63). In addition, Nguyễn Văn Dân also affirms that "ecocriticism is ... a theory that is more "socially engaged" (Nguyễn Văn Dân 2017: 63). He also asserts that ecology is an interdisciplinary discipline between biology, geography, and earth science, thus ecocriticism must focus on issues concerning the man's livelihood in the future,



and on the relation between humans and the environment, rather than simply lament or romanticize nature. According to this scholar, approaching literature from ecocriticism is to look for writers' engagements with environmental and associated developmental problems, and the way they suggest how to deal with those problems. The work of an ecocritic, thus, is to examine how literature suggests potential solutions for those problems rather. All constitute what Nguyễn Văn Dân addresses "the social responsibility of ecocriticism" (Nguyễn Văn Dân 2017: 64). Another senior scholar of literary studies, Nguyễn Đăng Điệp gives his thought about ecocriticism's social engagements that ecocriticism, "of course, cannot provide direct and immediate solutions to overcome environmental problems"; instead, ecocriticism, while emphasizing the intrinsic relationship between humans and nature, contributes to "changing community awareness," and "correcting harmful misunderstandings" about the ecological environment, thereby "having appropriate behavior with nature...understanding and listening to the voice of nature for the sake of sustainable development" (Nguyễn Đăng Điệp 2017: 24). In general, with Vietnamese ecocritics, ecocriticism is not a literary theory but a social responsibility. That means their ecocriticism aims to contribute to the fight for ecological protection.

It is possible to see the tendency of Vietnamese ecocriticism as such echo recent discussions among environmental historians and ecocritics that call for more engagement with issues of race, class, gender, and national identity in ecocriticism. Michael Cohen asserted that ecological literary criticism must be politically engaging, that is, literature must inform actions dealing with a rising environmental crisis (Cohen 2004: 24-27). Similarly, Dana Phillip stated that traditional ecocriticism is lingering on "the wilderness of signs"; he urged ecocritics to address present-day "complexities of acid rain, global warming, and a host of other environmental ills" (Phillip 1999: 599). Likewise, Lawrence Buell points out that ecological literary criticism should focus more on the impoverished and socially marginalized, and the voices of victims of environmental injustice (Buell 2009: 112). In general, as Terry Gifford summarizes, ecocritics have pointed to new directions for

ecocriticism including ecofeminism, toxic industry, urbanization, globalization, ethnic-national identity, and environmental justice (Gifford 2008: 15). These new directions indicate a request of scholars of ecocritical practice to be more politically committed. That is, environmental literature and ecological literary approach must engage in a serious and urgent question of social and environmental justice; it must address institutional, economic, cultural, and political factors that involve social, cultural, and physical disasters in "unjustifiably dominated groups" including women, people of color, children, the poor, and nature (Wijkman and Timberlake 1988: 27; Warren 2000: 1-10; Worster 1996: 12).

More importantly, the political and economic concerns in Vietnamese ecocriticism are derived from the tradition of politics-oriented literary criticism in Vietnam. Since medieval times, there existed among Vietnamese intellectuals a belief in writing as "a special, autonomous power to alter reality" and "to stipulate a sweeping transformation of society" (Marr 1981: 336). Đinh Công Viên in the thirteenth century wrote, "No one in this world knows all about change and destruction. That pen without mouth is still able to speak about emergence and collapse." In the nineteenth century, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, a celebrated southern author, challenged the colonial regime with his writings: "Stabbing many dishonest guys, the pen is still not blunt" (đâm mấy thằng gian bút chẳng tà). Phan Châu Trinh and Phan Bội Châu, famous patriots of the early twentieth century, respectively declared: "Pen and tongue want to turn around flood flow directions" (bút lưỡi muốn xoay dòng nước lũ) and "a three-inch tongue is like sword and gun; a pen is like battle drum and gong" (Ba tấc lưỡi mà gươm mà súng, một ngòi lông vừa trống vừa chiêng). Particularly, since the 1920s, when Marxist-Leninist doctrine and related "Chủ nghĩa hiện thực phê phán" (realist criticism) was introduced in Annam, Vietnamese intellectuals have increasingly believed in the material impacts of writing upon class and national struggles. For long, Vietnamese intellectuals believed in writing as a weapon in national and class struggles. High school students learned by heart the rhythmic sentences by Trường Chinh, a revered revolutionary character:

Using the pen to put upside down the regime  
Each poetic verse [is] a bomb and bullet [able to] destroy power and  
authority

(Dùng cán bút làm đòn xoay chế độ.

Mỗi vần thơ bom đạn phá cường quyền) (Pham 2017: 1-10)

## IX. Conclusion

Vietnamese ecocriticism conforms with the traditional perception of literature as an instrument for social criticism in Vietnam. Vietnamese literary theorists have insisted on the social responsibility of authors, who must bear the mission of prophets of their time, public educators, and soul engineers; writing is an act of engaging with and influencing reality. Nguyễn Văn Trung asserted that authors and the type intellectuals are embodiments of national conscience and mind, thus their writings take social criticism as their essential responsibility (Volume 1 1963: 170-80). In the context of postcolonial nation-building, and with continuing dominance of Marxist-Leninist doctrine, literature is still regarded as an ideological instrument in the struggle for national homogeneity and sovereignty, and social democracy. Even in the 6<sup>th</sup> Party Congress (1986), the congress that lifted reform policies, the Party still asserted that no other ideological form other than literature could effectively foster "healthy sentiment" and "renew people's thinking habit [sic] and way of life," to eliminate possible lingering colonialist and feudalist habits of the act and thought (*75 Years of the Communist Party*: 744; Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam 1993: 54-55; Tô Huy Rúa 2009: 13-19).

It is possible to say that Western ecocriticism which came to Vietnam continues the long traditional Vietnamese view of literature as one of the material forces that must reflect social and political realities. These fields include environmental, historical, and political concerns. Ecocriticism in Vietnam functions both as a literary approach and a complex political force that addresses and interrogates current public concerns about modernization and industrialization that the postcolonial Vietnamese government sees as the ultimate goal of Vietnam's nation-building.

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# Malaysia's Flawed Democracy: A Stumbling Block Towards Becoming a First World Developed Nation



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## [ *Abstract* ]

In 1991, Malaysia, under the leadership of then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, launched an ambitious 30-year national development program known as Vision 2020. The goal of this program was to transform Malaysia into a First World developed nation by the year 2020. One of the aspirations of the program was to create a psychologically liberated, secure, ethical, and mature democratic society. Vision 2020 is a failure and Malaysia is still not a mature democracy. This article identifies four main areas that make up a flawed democracy practiced in Malaysia, and shows how they work against the country's aspirations to become a developed nation. The electoral system is rigged to help the incumbent remain in power. The widespread practices of money politics have become a curse to the country. The press and media organizations are restricted. Civil society activities are suppressed. As a result of these issues, Malaysia will not be able to achieve the status of a developed nation, lacking democratic accountability and inclusive institutions.

**Keywords:** Democratic accountability, media and election, Malaysia, civil society, freedom of expression, money politics.

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## I . Introduction

In 1991, the then Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad embarked Malaysia onto a thirty-year development plan called Vision 2020. The plan aimed to transform Malaysia into a First World developed nation by year 2020. The aspiration to foster and develop a mature democratic society was spelled out in Challenge No. 3. By that, he envisioned a “mature consensual, community oriented Malaysian democracy that can be a model for other developing countries” (Mohamad 1991). Since the plan also included aspirations to ensure an economically just, caring, and ethical society, by Landman (2007)’s definition of democracy, a mature democracy is one that has progressed from a procedural democracy that holds free and fair elections, to a social democracy that includes protection of property, civil, minority, economic and social rights, in addition to institutional accountability and rule of law. A mature democracy is one where institutions, including the Constitution, are constantly adjusting to ensure that the government is always “of the people, by the people and for the people.” Government should be accountable and transparent to the people (Singh 2013).

The year 2020 came and Malaysia failed to transform itself into a First World country. Instead, 2020 turned out to be an *annus horribilis*. Not only was the country hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, the democratically elected Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition government collapsed in February 2020 because of defections.<sup>1</sup> This event reversed the hard-won democratic breakthrough the country had achieved in unseating the Barisan National (BN) coalition which had already ruled for almost six decades and created a legitimacy issue (Tayeb 2021). United Malay National Organization (UMNO) was the hegemon in Malaysian politics that had lost Federal power for the first time in 2018 (Malaysiakini Team 2020). This development showed democracy in Malaysia was still less than ideal. PH was replaced by a new coalition government called Perikatan Nasional (PN) that consisted of Bersatu, BN, PAS (Pan Malaysian Islamic Party) and a few who defected from PKR

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<sup>1</sup> There was no anti-hopping law at that time. Anti-hopping law was finally passed in Parliament on July 28, 2022.

(People's Justice Party). Muhyiddin Yassin<sup>2</sup> became the eighth Prime Minister (PM).

More undemocratic moves ensued in the next two years. Azhar Azizan Harun was unconstitutionally appointed as the new speaker without a vote (Palansamy 2020). In a voice recording that appeared on the internet, Muhyiddin Yassin was heard strategizing to woo other MPs from other political parties with offers of cabinet positions and chairmanships in government-linked companies (GLCs) (Aziz 2020). GLCs continued to be a tool for the PM to garner political support. Political appointments to these GLCs are disruptive to their operation and can affect their ability to support the economy (Gomez 2020). The PN government used the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse to call for a state of emergency (Anand 2020) and shut down the parliament. This made a mockery of democracy because elected representatives could not fulfil their duties to scrutinize government plans and raise citizens' issues (Ramakrishnan 2020). Center for Independent Journalism warned that the emergency law was being misused to curtail freedom of expression, while the Malaysian Bar and Labor Law Reform Coalition expressed grave concern that democratic rights were being suppressed (Malaysiakini 2021). Renowned local economist Jomo Kwame Sundaram and two other economic experts, Nungsari Ahmad Radhi and Muhammed Abdul Khalid, opined that the imposition of a state of emergency had not helped Malaysia's economy but instead had made it worse (Hadi 2021).

On August 3, 2021, Muhyiddin lost his majority in Parliament when 11 UMNO MPs withdrew their support for him (Teoh and Hassan 2021). With this development, graft-tainted UMNO was back in power since the ninth PM was their man. Buoyed by victory in several by-elections, UMNO called for the 15<sup>th</sup> General Election (GE15) on November 19, 2022, but it resulted in a hung parliament. In the end, at the behest of the King, PH formed a "unity" government, together with UMNO; GPS, the coalition that won in Sarawak; and PBS, the coalition that won in Sabah. Anwar Ibrahim,

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<sup>2</sup> His real name is Mahiaddin Yassin but he is commonly known as Muhyiddin Yassin.

the leader of PH, became the tenth PM after more than two decades of trying to secure that position.

It is not the first time that such power struggle occurred in Malaysia's political and democratic landscape. Over the recent years, the country had already experienced four changes of government within a span of less than 5 years. To many Malaysians, the fact that a democratically elected government could collapse easily was a cause of concern. It also highlights the country's weak democratic system, as well as gaps in the election procedure and the Constitutional framework. This research identifies the major flaws of democratic processes that have prevented Malaysia from becoming a mature democracy as aspired in Vision 2020 in the last 3 to 4 decades. Most academic researches only analyzed the state of democracy in Malaysia (Case 1993; Lemiere 2019; Tayeb 2021) and/or a component of democracy such as the media (Ismail et al. 2017; Netto 2000; Sani 2015) or civil society (Chan 2018; Bowie 200; Khoo 2018; Jayasooria 2021). I have not found any that linked it to economic growth nor explained how an immature democracy could stall Malaysia in its journey to the First World. This study fills that gap and argues that high democratic accountability is necessary for Malaysia to prosper and reach the First World, from the perspective of theory of development.

## **II . Flawed Democracy**

Democracy in Malaysia has been given many names. It is a semi-democracy that holds elections and allows opposition parties to exist but there is uneven playing ground to deter opposition from getting into power (Case 1993: 184-186). The political governance practiced in the last five decades in the country is premised on electoral authoritarianism, where elections are not overtly rigged but subtler maneuvers are used to engineer desired outcomes (Tapsell 2018: 130). Details of such subtle maneuvers are provided in Section 2.1. Political parties, professional associations, labor unions or other advocacy groups are allowed to be formed and to recruit members but they are thwarted from becoming such a force that can threaten

the power of ruling elites. Some scholars call it competitive authoritarianism (Giersdorf and Croissant 2011; Weiss 2017). Democracy cannot be measured in absolute terms but what is measured is just a subjective assessment of the relative degree a country possesses the defined characteristics of an ideal democracy (Geissel et al. 2016). Malaysia is only partly free in character according to Freedom House Report 2021, scoring 21/40 for political rights and 31/60 for civil liberties.<sup>3</sup> Elections that are set up in a clientelistic manner in non-competitive places where certain personalities dominate and unfair barriers put up against civil societies and opposition parties, point to a flawed democracy (Acemoglu 2021: 42). Patronage and money politics is a common feature at every election. Incumbent parties offer projects or programs, or material goods in exchange of votes (Ufen 2020; Hazis 2009; Bagang and Puyok 2019). Indeed, according to Democracy Index 2022, Malaysia is categorized as a flawed democracy with an aggregate score of 7.30 and ranked 40<sup>th</sup> out of 167 countries, which means it has done better than three quarters of the countries in the world, but there is still room for improvement, especially in areas of the function of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties.<sup>4</sup>

Although the three branches of government in Malaysia are supposed to balance and limit each other's power, the separation of powers was removed during Mahathir's tenure as fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia. The Judiciary has been accused of pandering to the abuses of other two branches (Neo and Tay 2018). The Legislative branch has often acted as a rubber stamp for the Executive branch (Lee and Cheng 2019). The role of Parliament to scrutinize bills in the legislative process has been undermined by the Cabinet's dominance. Bills and amendment bills are drafted by the government ministries and rushed through Parliament without adequate scrutiny by parliamentarians. In the past, many bills were rushed through due to political loyalty when BN enjoyed a two-thirds majority support. Although Malaysia has a Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) mechanism to provide post-legislative

<sup>3</sup> See <https://freedomhouse.org/country/malaysia-freedom-world/2021>.

<sup>4</sup> Democracy Index 2022 by Economist Intelligence Unit.

scrutiny, that mechanism has had limited use in the past (Khoo 2020: 62). Given the many legislations that have been introduced since Mahathir's era that arguably infringed on the constitutional and human rights of Malaysians, setting up more PSCs to evaluate and amend repressive and undemocratic laws is crucial.

From my analysis, Malaysia's progress towards becoming a mature democratic society in the last 3-4 decades has been impeded by various factors, including (i) rigging of elections, (ii) money politics, (iii) restricted freedom of speech and (iv) suppression of civil society's activities. These stumbling blocks have resulted in a lack of accountability and transparency, which undermines the principles of democracy and prevents truly capable politicians to rise to lead the nation into the First World. The following sections will elaborate in detail these four blemishes of democracy found in Malaysia.

## **2.1. Covertly Rigged Election System**

Holding an election is an inherent part of any democracy as it allows the will of the people to be brought to the fore in determining their political leaders. However, an analysis of past elections has identified many significant flaws in the Malaysian electoral system (Wong and Soon 2012). These flaws show that the job of the Election Commission (EC) is not to run a free and fair election, but rather to ensure the ruling party remains in power. That is the result of the EC being under the Prime Minister's department, effectively making the PM the de-facto boss of the EC. In addition to having control over the EC, BN amended the Constitution or introduced a slew of laws to entrench the ruling party and make it difficult for Malaysians to have a change of government (Ng n.d.). The Police Act 1967 was used to limit freedom of assembly. The University and Universities College Act 1971 was put in place to discourage student activism. The Printing and Publications Act 1984 was used to muzzle the media. The Internal Security Act 1960 was used to throw opposition members into jail without trial before it was repackaged as Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012. The Sedition Act 1984 was used to charge anyone deemed to incite hatred for the government. Official

Secrets Act was used to punish whistleblowers (Whiting 2018).

EC manipulates the electoral roll. Malaysia did not practice automatic voter registration until a court ordered EC to make all 18 years or older eligible to vote by December 31, 2021 (Aziz 2021). In terms of voter disenfranchisement, a significant portion of voters had been kept from exercising their rights to vote during election (Chan 2021: 11). There had also been many instances where voters' names were transferred to another constituency without their knowledge or permission, preventing them from voting. Furthermore, the electoral roll is not "clean" and contains phantom voters, including those who have already passed away, multiple names registered under the same address or identity card (ID) number, or untraceable persons (Pemantau 2013; Reuters 2018). While many Malaysians are denied the right to vote, some foreigners have been allowed to vote. Legalizing illegal immigrants would only encourage them to vote for those who benefit them. The impact of illegal immigrants on election results became starkly apparent in Sabah's certified electoral rolls in 1999 where a huge increase in the number of voters did not tally with its traditional growth rate and could only be explained by the influx of legalized immigrants (Frank 2006: 76).

Before 2017, postal voting was allowed for only military, police, overseas government servants, and their family members, but the system has been fraught with irregularities because the vote collection process is unsupervised by independent observers. There were past allegations of military votes being used for double voting or for stuffing the ballot box (Teoh 2011; Hornbill Unleashed 2018); there were also drastic increases of postal votes in marginal seats to tip the balance (BERSIH 2008). Ordinary overseas Malaysians were denied their right to vote until an amendment in 2017 to Election (Registration of Electors) Regulations 2002, but the enfranchisement of new overseas voters seemed half-hearted when ballot papers arrived late and insufficient time was given to post them back (Pemantau 2018). When the election process is not carried out in a free and fair manner, democracy is deliberately kept underdeveloped and goal no. 3 of Vision 2020 is made unachievable.

The partiality of EC towards the incumbent government makes

it an unprofessional body in many ways. The campaign period and the election date are set at the discretion of the EC. GE15 was called during the monsoon season since a low voter turnout would favor BN according to past data (Herrera-Lim 2018). Sensing the rise of support for the opposition, GE14 was intentionally set on a Wednesday to discourage voters from voting as a voting day is not automatically a public holiday and some voters will have to return to their hometowns to vote. Not only will East Malaysians working in West Malaysia find it hard to fly home to vote, those from northern states working in southern states in West Malaysia would also find it difficult to go back to their hometown to vote. The shortest campaign period of only 10 days was provided for the 2008 by-election of the Parliamentary seat of Permatang Pauh, which was a stronghold of the then opposition leader. Such a short campaign period is not favorable for opposition candidates as they do not get equal government media access (Gomez et al. 2018). In GE14, there were even two cases where EC officers sabotaged the nomination of opposition candidates Tian Chua (Karim 2019) and Streram Sinnasamy (Yatim 2018)

Electoral manipulation also occurs by re-drawing electoral boundaries. EC had been accused of resorting to gerrymandering and malapportionment against constitutional provisions to help its long-time political master, UMNO/BN retain power. Political scientist Wong Chin Huat (2017a) analyzed 2016 EC's proposal to redraw the electoral boundaries of federal and state constituencies in Selangor state and found the proposed re-delineation exercise was unnecessary.<sup>5</sup> In 2018, a Federal Court ruled that EC's actions could not be subjected to judicial review in a case brought up by PH-led Selangor state government (Kannan 2018). This demonstrates that the judiciary, an important constitutional entity in the country, lost its will to check the Executive's political power and allowed a flawed democracy to flourish in Malaysia (Chan 2018: 125-126). One unethical action allegedly committed by EC in violation of the spirit of democracy is the amalgamation of constituency areas. There have been several cases where two or three pro-opposition constituencies

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<sup>5</sup> The original version of this report was submitted to the Court in the judicial review filed by the State Government of Selangor, February 2017.



were combined into one, resulting in underrepresentation while a pro-BN constituency could be divided into two, resulting in overrepresentation.

Gerrymandering and malapportionment gave undue advantage to BN in many past elections. In 2018, the opposition-held Bangi in Selangor had the biggest parliamentary constituency in Malaysia in terms of voter size, with approximately 179,000 voters, while in the same state, the smallest constituency was BN-held Sabak Bernam which had around 37,000 voters (Ng 2018). When we compare Bangi constituency to Igan constituency in Sarawak, which had only 19,592 voters, we can see the significant inequality in the value of votes across these constituencies.<sup>6</sup> Malapportionment, along with other forms of electoral manipulation, is a form of electoral fraud that has been incredibly effective. For example, BN was able to win 51% of the seats in Parliament in the 2008 General Elections with only 15.4% of the popular vote, according to an analysis expressed in a memorandum submitted to the Malaysian Parliament (Ng n.d.). In recent state elections, BN won a two-third majority of contested seats with only 38% of the popular votes in Melaka (Welsh 2021) and 43% in Johor state election (Malaysiakini Team 2022).

Malaysia's "first past the post" (FPTP) voting system has effectively upheld the electoral authoritarianism and communalism perpetuated by the BN coalition, which was dominated by UMNO for almost six decades. In his analysis of FPTP in Malaysia, Wong Chin Huat (2018) provides an analysis of FPTP in Malaysia, stating:

...the ultimate critique against FPTP in Malaysia is not the malpractices of malapportionment and gerrymandering, but its mismatch with Malaysia's divided society, which produces parties with strong communal or regional bases.... Instead of promoting moderation in societies without deep divides, FPTP in Malaysia radicalizes the desperate opposition, which in turn places strain on the centrist ruling coalition ....wrongly incentivizes government and

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<sup>6</sup> Senarai Harga Daftar Pemilih Untuk Pilihan Raya Umum ke-14 Yang Diwartakan Pada April 10, 2018 (The Voter Registration Price List for the 14<sup>th</sup> General Election which was gazetted on April 10, 2018) [https://www.spr.gov.my/sites/default/files/HargaDPI ST42017\\_PRU14.pdf](https://www.spr.gov.my/sites/default/files/HargaDPI ST42017_PRU14.pdf)

opposition parties into malign competition.

FPTP system promotes negative partisanship and divisiveness, as it allows someone with a majority of less than forty percent to rule. Many scholars and activists have suggested alternative systems that are already in use in some developed countries (Wong 2017b; BERSIH 2017; Reilly 2019). Balasundram (2020) argued for proportional representation (PR) to replace FPTP. The Election Reform Committee recommended Closed-list Proportional Representation (CLPR) for parliament (Ruzki 2020). However, implementing these alternatives would require a constitutional change and the politicians who have benefited from the existing voting system might not want to support such change. More importantly, any discussion about a new voting system should involve civil society groups and opposition politicians to reach a consensus.

Subtly rigged elections only serve to entrench the non-performing incumbent government and prevent capable opposition leaders from rising to power. When elections are not conducted in a free and fair manner, Malaysia is not a mature democracy as aspired in Vision 2020. There will arise the question of legitimacy that may create political instability that is not conducive for economic growth and keep investors away. This problem of a biased EC can be resolved if the EC is made accountable to Parliament or the King, instead of the PM. Ting Mu Hung (2022) proposes that the appointment of EC chairman and fellow members be made apolitical, and that laws should be enacted to set clear criteria for constituency delineation and allowable deviation from the average size of constituency and streamlining of election management processes. This is in addition to allocation of more authority and resources to EC to function well independently. Incumbent politicians may not be in favor of reform that can reduce their chance of getting re-elected. EC has reformed itself a fair bit in the last decade, making a change of government possible in the last two elections but Malaysians must continue to demand for further electoral reform.

## 2.2. Entrenched Practice of Money Politics

The lack of laws governing political financing in Malaysia certainly strengthens ruling parties' ability to raise funds. Political parties require funds to sustain their operations all the times, including both electoral campaigns and regular non-campaign periods. These funds are necessary for providing solutions to their constituents, conducting policy research, and hiring adequate staff for service centers. Political parties can accept unlimited donations from sources in the country or overseas. They are allowed to own businesses (Amran and Azhari 2021). Ruling parties have the advantages of utilizing the resources of government-linked companies to benefit their political campaigns. UMNO was able to access significant resources and sustain resilience over the decades by engaging in activities such as vote buying or patronage, cash handouts, gifting, small favors, and promises of development during an election campaign (ibid.). Pre-2018 opposition parties, on the other hand, were not so fortunate, as they had to rely solely on membership fees, contribution from their MPs and supporters, sales of newsletters, and fundraising activities (Gomez 2012: 1383). Consequently, they were unable to make grand promises or offer freebies to voters during their campaigns.

In the existing system, there is no transparency of the sources of political funding, nor any accountability of their usage and purposes. Money given to the party may end up in an elite politician's personal accounts or in his charitable foundations (Gomez and Kunaratnam 2021). Most of the time, party members are unaware about the existence of such slush funds. The use of foundations to receive slush funds began in the 1980s, when patronage politics emerged as a result of the New Economic Plan.<sup>7</sup> The extensive nexus between politics and businesses resulted in many government-linked companies and UMNO-linked companies becoming conduits for UMNO's secret slush funds (Loh 2021). Former Prime Minister Najib Razak claimed that some of the money siphoned from the 1MDB scandal was used during the 2013 General

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<sup>7</sup> A 20-year affirmative plan started in 1971 which meant to reduce poverty and correct wealth imbalance among the races. It has been extended under different names to favor Malays and discriminate non-Malays.

Election. Zahid Hamidi, his former deputy, is now facing more than forty court charges for misappropriating RM20.8 million of the funds of Akal Budi Foundation between 2014 and 2016 (Malaysiakini 2019).

Civil societies and Transparency International have called for regulation of political funds received from private sources (Azhari and Yeoh 2021). However, it appears that political parties from both sides of the divide are not supportive of such regulation (Hisamudin 2022). Opposition parties are particularly concerned that their donors may be targeted by the state if they do not win the election (Dettman and Gomez 2020: 36-55). This has led to an increased awareness of the need to provide political parties with public funds. Unregulated private funding into political parties has a negative effect on representative democracy. This is because after an election win, the interests of these private donors must be taken care first, which hinders democracy's ability to represent and defend public interests.

The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, also known as BERSIH, has proposed the introduction of a public political funding system in Malaysia to 'make party politics more stable, institutionalized, policy-driven, gender-balanced, and professionalized (Ooi 2021: 5). Researcher Ooi Kok Hin, in his report to BERSIH, highlights the benefits of such a system, which are as follows:

The funds will aid political parties to operate more autonomously without having to exclusively rely on private funding. This will reduce the influence of rich private donors, help smaller parties which do not have resources or access to rich corporations, and slightly discharge political parties from excessive fund-raising.... This will enable elected representatives to focus more on their parliamentary duties in service of public interests e.g. by researching about policies and monitoring corruption instead of fundraising dinners with corporate donors (ibid: 70). BERSIH further suggests that funds should be allocated based on vote shares, rather than seat shares. In addition, there should be a condition to encourage female representation and indirect funding for all eligible parties.

Money politics is inimical to democracy. Malaysian voters are

generally subject to disengagement from popular politics. They are systematically disengaged from important issues and left incapable to participate in decision-making processes. As a result, many voters are vulnerable to voting for those who give empty promises or immediate gifts during election campaigns (ANFREL 2013). Vote-buying practices mean corrupt politicians are voted in and they will recoup by misappropriating development funds. In the big picture, public service delivery will be affected or there will be fewer or smaller development projects (Khemani 2013). Consequently, economic growth cannot be sustained and the country cannot achieve the income level and the democratic maturity of a First World country.

### 2.3. Restricted Freedom of Press and Information

Before the advent of internet and digital technology, mainstream Malaysian media companies were owned and controlled by component parties within the political alliance BN. UMNO and their cronies printed *Utusan Malaysia*, *Mingguan Malaysia*, and magazines such as *Wanita* and *Mastika* (Gomez et al. 2018: xxii). Media Prima, owned by government-linked companies, runs two English language newspapers and three Malay language newspapers as well as a few TV channels, including TV3, 8TV, and NTV7. MCA runs an English language newspaper, *The Star*, while some other politically connected companies are licenced to print Chinese dailies such as the *China Press* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh*. Meanwhile, MIC owns a Tamil language newspaper called *Tamil Nesan*. Ananda Krishna, a close friend of Mahathir, operates Astro satellite TV and a few radio stations (ibid.: xxii-xxiii).

These mainstream media serve as a propaganda machine for their political owners and shapes the thinking and perception of the masses. In other words, the mainstream press operated as a propaganda apparatus of BN or semi-privatized appendage of the Ministry of Information whenever BN was in power (Sani 2014: 66-71). Reading those local newspapers gave their readers a sense that everything, except for the opposition politicians or their political enemies, was fine in the country. These pro-BN media organizations often failed to uphold democratic process, including scrutinizing the

state, ensuring accountability of elected officials, defending judicial independence, and ensuring a free flow of information. Unfortunately, a large segment of society tolerated these state-backed anti-democratic actions for many decades (Wong 2000: 137).

Freedom of speech is a right guaranteed in Malaysia's Constitution, but it is subject to laws enacted by Parliament in the name of national security and public order (Sani 2015: 345). The Internal Security Act 1960 did away with the need for the government to justify its actions through judicial process. The Sedition Act 1948 gives the government wide power to define what is deemed seditious. The Official Secrets Act 1972 requires journalists to prove first what they publish is not an official secret. The Printing Press and Publishing Act 1994 empowers the Minister of Home Affairs to revoke any printing permit without the possibility of judicial review. As a result of these draconian laws, most mainstream media personnel end up practicing self-censorship. (Gomez et al. 2018: xx). In 1987, *The Star*, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and a Malay weekly *Watan* were suspended and allowed to resume only in 1988 after some editorial staff replaced (Sani 2015: 352). In 2015, *The Edge Weekly* joined the list of many publishers which had their permits cancelled (Shukry 2015). Beyond the traditional print media, many media sites such as *The Malaysian Insider*, *The Edge Malaysia*, and *Sarawak Report* were blocked from reporting on the 1MDB scandal (de Hann 2016: 4).

Reporters ended up only reporting on matters approved by their editors or owners and avoided exposing the inefficiencies or faults of authorities, including corruption, unscrupulous overcosting or waste, or lack of enforcement of preventive measures. Investigative journalism is often hindered by legal constraints, the threat of lawsuits, and the lack of whistleblowers when the law is weak in protecting them (Ismail et al. 2017). When mainstream media churned out disinformation, distortion and sensational news, the National Union of Journalists did not call out on its members or non-unionized fellow professionals to adhere to ethical reporting. The ruling coalition abused state apparatus such as national radio and TV to campaign, or painted opposition candidates in negative light (Houghton 2013).

During the BN era, a few non-BN parties were allowed to have their own print media in the form of newsletters, but not without restriction. PAS published *Harakah*, Democratic Action Party published *the Rocket News* and PKR, *Sinar Harapan*. These non-BN publications were only allowed to sell their newsletters to their respective members and at their offices. *Harakah* during its glory days in the late 1990s had a circulation in excess of 300,000 copies (more than the circulation of mainstream newspapers) in the immediate period following the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim, who was then the deputy PM under the Mahathir's administration (Netto n.d.). Alarmed with the increased circulation and popularity of *Harakah* at that time, the Home Ministry then reduced its print frequency from twice a week to twice a month (Netto 2000).

Following the availability of internet to the mass public, many bloggers and online news platforms have emerged to provide alternative news to their readers. One of the most successful online media platforms is *Malaysiakini*. On November 9, 2016, a pro-BN group "Red Shirt" of some 500 persons, gathered outside the *Malaysiakini* office and threatened to tear down part of its building (IFJ 2016), drawing condemnation from the International Federation of Journalists and the National Union of Journalists. Media personnel in Malaysia continue to face unwarranted challenges from state and non-state actors (ibid.). To punish *Malaysiakini* and try to put it out of business, the Federal Court imposed a hefty RM500,000 fine on it for anti-government and anti-judiciary third-party comments left at its online news portal (Rashid 2021). A strong and independent media is an important pillar of democracy that serves to keep society informed with alternative perspectives on any issue or matter of national interest. Any government attempt to attack the Fourth Estate is certainly against good democratic practices upheld in the First World countries.

According to the 2021 World Press Freedom Report, Malaysia dropped from 101 in 2020 to 119 in 2021 out of 180 evaluated countries. Reporters Without Borders has called on the Malaysian government to ensure that journalists can work without fear (IFJ 2021). Detractors like Chamril Wariya denies there is no press freedom in Malaysia and the evaluation of it should not be based

on the standard of Western media but to consider the context of local laws and culture (Bernama 2021). Many have supported legislations to curb hate speech (Buang 2019). Government claims that the control of the media is to ensure political stability and safeguard national security but the truth is, it is more for the political survival of the ruling power (Sani 2015: 341). The use of legislation and media ownership to curb press freedom hampers the formation of a free and informed society. The Malaysian government shows itself as immature and unable to meet Vision 2020 Challenge No. 3 to create a mature democratic community-oriented society. Press freedom is inherent in an ideal democracy and an effective tool to expose any corrupt activities of politicians. Therefore, it is essential that media institutions be respected, allowed to do their job, and contribute to the vibrancy of democracy. Political leaders and government should not be afraid of criticism and must be open to receiving feedback from members of society. This will enable the government to improve its services to the people, and establish an important cornerstone of democracy.

Political literacy among the voters is low. Many people in Malaysia still vote based on ethnic politics and religious affiliation (Welsh 2020). Therefore, press freedom and freedom of information are important so that voters can make informed choices about who has the best ability to bring real development to them and country in the long run. Schools in Malaysia do not teach students about the election process or the importance of each vote in reflecting the collective will of the people and fulfilling their civic duty to vote. EC should work with the Education Ministry to provide voter education in schools. The laws restricting press freedom and freedom of expression should be repealed or reformed to constrain the power of the authority to arbitrarily act against the citizens without judicial scrutiny.

#### **2.4. Weak Civil Society and Stalled Democratization**

Civil society groups are agents of development and democracy in their own right. They advocate for the eradication of poverty and social injustices, uphold democratic value, and call on governments to respect human rights. For example, the Malaysian CSO-SDG



Alliance is a network of NGOs with sustainable development in mind (Jayasooria 2021: 188). They reach out to empower, represent, and defend people living in vulnerable situations, triggering social improvement. Amnesty International Malaysia and Human Rights Watch Malaysia are two examples of these types of non-profit organization. Civil society can play a role in limiting and checking state power, as well as promoting political participation (Bunbongkarn 2004: 138 & 141). In Philippines, civil society movement was one of the factors that led to the fall of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. and Joseph Estrada (ibid.: 139 & 142).

However, in Malaysia, citizen participation in decision making process is still deemed limited under the semi-authoritarian state. While civil society is often seen as synonymous to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the definition of civil society should also include the entire range of organized groups and institutions that are outside the purview of the government. This means mass media, think tanks, universities, and social and religious groups that are not set up by government, can be part of civil society (Diamond 2004). For example, Malaysia's Center for Public Policy Studies, the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute, and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies are three think-tanks interested in the areas of foreign policy, social policy, education policy, and economics (Harridon et al. 2022: 169)

As civil society includes opposition political parties too, the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 was considered a critical catalyst for the growth of civil society in Malaysia. Anwar's party PKR was set up in 1999 to work with other existing political parties to raise the public's awareness about corruption, justice, and ill governance (Bowie 2004: 196-197). The BN government did not view the rise of civil society favorably. 16 people who supported Anwar Ibrahim's cause were charged under Internal Security Act 1960. Among them were Kamarudin Jaafar of Institute of Policy Research and Siddiq Baba of International Islamic University (Amnesty International 1998). When PAS managed to seize control of Terengganu in 1999, the UMNO-led federal government stopped payment of oil royalties to that state (Bowie 2004: 198). The ethnocentric government has frequently stirred up issues regarding the 3Rs (race, religion, royalty)

in its attacks on elements of civil society, spreading fear that the Chinese would take over the country or that the position of Islam and Malay privileges would be threatened (ibid.: 198-199). Such government actions to weaken civil society often generated a backlash that further hurt support for the government (ibid.: 200).

Founded in 2005, BERSIH is arguably the most successful organizer of people's movement in Malaysia. It has organized five major rallies in the past decade to demand electoral reform and greater democracy for Malaysia (Chan 2018). The government banned such rallies. BERSIH activists and protesters were hosed down with water cannon, fired with tear gas, or arrested (BBC 2011). A democratic triumph occurred in 2018 GE14 when BN was ousted from federal power for the first time since the country's independence. One of the reasons for this unprecedented feat was because BERSIH managed to delay the election until 2018 through court challenges to EC's proposed delineation exercise (Chan 2018: 126-127). This delay allowed the opposition to gain momentum on a myriad of national issues. As of March 20, 2018, BERSIH was supported by 92 NGOs working on different issues related to the 1MDB corruption scandal and unfair election system (ibid.: 112). However, the significance of BERSIH is overexaggerated according to its critics. BERSIH is viewed as uncivil for not upholding a non-partisan watchdog role but comes across as being pro-PH, displaying judgmental bias against the EC and government, and treating Malay Muslims NGOs as uncivil (Ismail 2022).

In terms of human rights issues, two major coalitions of local civil society organizations (CSOs) are involved with the Malaysian government in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process organized by United Nations. These coalitions are the Coalition of Malaysian NGOs (COMANGO) and the Malaysian Alliance of Civil Society Organization in the Universal Periodic Review (MACSA). COMANGO's members of the COMANGO consists of 52 secular CSOs operated by human rights activists and practicing lawyers. On the other hand, the MACSA's members are Muslim CSOs promoting human rights values that align with Islam. These CSOs took the approach of not challenging the state in the UPR process but instead cooperating and striving to reaffirm government policies.

Although a relationship is established between CSOs and the state in this work arrangement, the former's influence on the latter is still limited to selected issues. The accepted recommendations remain confined to conservative issues, such as those regarding women, children, and persons with disabilities (Sarune et al. 2020: 176).

In assessing the influence of CSOs on the government on sensitive or conservative issues, a group of researchers of University of Malaya, have the following to say:

Relatively, there is no open door at present for the discussion of controversial issues such as LGBT rights and freedom of religion. The state's willingness to provide a space for CSOs to participate in the UPR process is merely guided by the requirement of the mechanism itself. The substantive aspect of what exactly civil society wants has yet to materialize. The role of CSOs in the public decision-making process is therefore still marginal, as procedural democracy is still a current practice (ibid.: 176). Indeed, many LGBTs and apostates continue to be discriminated and persecuted by the state. They can be jailed up to three years, fined up to RM5,000 and caned up to 6 strokes (Human Rights Watch 2021). There is still room to expand the work of CSOs beyond submission of stakeholder reports and public relations activities.

While cooperation between civil society and government is important, the former should be careful not to be politically co-opted to the extent they are no longer independent. CSOs should adopt a non-partisan approach in order to gain the confidence of the general public and thereby legitimacy. CSOs must balance between the need to assist people and the respect for the legitimate role of government, and build their capacity to create space for effective resistance without simultaneously becoming a target for repression. For a democracy to thrive, there must be dynamic participation by the people to make government accountable for their policies and actions (Khoo 2018). Without civil society, there will be no demand for democratic accountability and better representation of different interest groups. Democracy will be under-developed and Malaysia will bear no semblance to a First World country.

### **III. Link between Democracy and Economic Prosperity**

Is democracy important for economic prosperity? According to the theory of development by economists Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (2012: Ch. 3 and Ch. 4), inclusive institutions are vital and necessary for sustainable economic growth, and extractive institutions are detrimental for any country. Inclusive institutions are those where power is spread out more evenly and they benefits the general good while extractive institutions benefit only those few where power is concentrated or do not benefit the majority nor the country. Their team of researchers found that although democracy is not a sufficient condition for a political system that can cultivate the sort of values or people participation ideally required to build inclusive institutions, it is generally conducive for economic growth, contrary to what many of its detractors think. Democracy is also very good for education, children's health, and many things associated with a modernized society. (Acemoglu 2021: 42; Acemoglu et al. 2014). The greedy leaders set up extractive institutions that work for their own interests and not for the country. That is what UMNO and its coalition partners did in Malaysia over the last six decades, to the point that Malaysia has not been able to reach First World status as aspired for in Vision 2020.

Mature democracy is a boost for economic development (Heo and Hahm 2015). A stable, mature democracy with high literacy helps reduce corruption (Dutta and Mukherjee 2016). Except for a few benevolent authoritarian regimes such as Singapore and China, sustainable economic growth is tied to a vibrant democracy that guarantees political and civil rights to people, enabling them to voice out their problems and demand appropriate government actions (Banik 2022: 235-236). The exercise of these rights provides the right incentives, be it in the economic or political sphere, for politicians and the government to serve the people. Norway and New Zealand are two countries at the top on the Democracy Index scale, enjoying sustainable economic growth that have kept them in the First World. Singapore has been able to sustain its First World status because the PAP party that has ruled it for almost six decades embraces meritocracy. Lee Kuan Yew (1990) encouraged the ablest

and best intellectuals to join politics, and advised his people to avoid voting for hypocrites, jokers, charlatans, and sweet talkers. Similarly, the Chinese Communist Party today practices meritocracy at party elections to allow their ablest to rise to power (Li 2013). So economic prosperity and social well-being depend on the quality of elected political leaders; those who think of the next generation, instead of the next election.

In his theory of development, political scientist Francis Fukuyama (2013) listed democratic accountability and social mobilization among the six dimensions of development a country should imbibe well in order to get to into the First World. Democratic accountability is important because it allows informed voters to remove those non-performing politicians in a free and fair elections (Fukuyama 2011: 321-322). In Malaysia where the electoral system is far from ideal, many tainted politicians could get themselves elected back again and again. Mahathir, who was implicated in many scandals (Wain 2009; Lim 2017) was able to rule for 22 years and again was given a chance to be PM in 2018.<sup>8</sup> Najib Razak managed to become the sixth PM in 2009 despite being linked to the Scorpene scandal and the murder of Altantuya (Mokhtar 2017); he is now in jail for the 1MDB scandal. Zahid Hamidi of UMNO still got himself re-elected in GE15 despite facing many corruption cases and is now deputy PM in the unity government. Social mobilization is also a key element in a liberal democracy because it can help a country break out from any dysfunctional political or economic equilibrium caused by rent-seeking traditional elites (Fukuyama 2011: 476). Indeed, the BERSIH movement helped topple BN from power in GE14 for the first time in history of Malaysia, and thus civil societies should be encouraged to continue their good work to demand for greater democratic accountability. Inefficient democratic institutions and weak civil society activism are stumbling blocks in Malaysia's journey towards attaining the status of developed country.

If the elections are conducted fairly, without vote buying, with

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<sup>8</sup> The current PM Anwar Ibrahim insinuated Mahathir had enriched his children during Mahathir's 22-year tenure as PM. The latter has sued the former. It will be an interesting court case to follow.

freedom of information, and the awareness of issues highlighted by civil society and media, Malaysian voters can choose wisely, thereby increasing the chance of electing truly capable leaders. If they are not performing, they can be voted out in the next election. When incumbent politicians know that the EC will “cheat” to help them stay in power, they will be less incentivized to perform or do the right thing for the country and the people. When EC ignores vote buying, power crazy politicians will find a way and often source bribes from development funds. There will be less money left for development after an election, leading to lower economic growth than can be achieved otherwise or missed opportunities for development. Money politics is pervasive among a few other types of corruption in Malaysia (Azmi and Zainuddin 2020). Emir Research tabulated that Malaysia lost approximately RM4.5 trillion to corruption and leakages in the last 26 years (Hussin 2023).

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Democracy is less than vibrant in Malaysia. There is no real separation of powers between the three branches of government. EC does not hold fair elections but works to keep the incumbent government in power through gerrymandering and malapportionment. There is little regulation on political financing and no anti-hopping laws prior to July 2022 to stop elected politicians from overturning the mandate given by the voters, but instead many laws to curb freedom of media, free expression and information, and rights to peaceful assembly. True democratic accountability is low. The fact that UMNO and corrupt politicians could still win elections even when they were scandal tainted, shows voters’ ignorance of the big picture consequence on the progress of the country. The fact that a democratically-elected PH government could be toppled so easily and be replaced with an un-mandated PN government further confirms a weak democracy.

By allowing EC and other institutions to be compromised in the last six decades, Mahathir and UMNO have tarnished democracy in Malaysia, and making it unable to meet Vision 2020 Challenge

No. 3. Undemocratic processes in turn entrenched extractive politicians in power and allowed further establishment of extractive institutions in the country that worked against achieving the other strategic challenges in Vision 2020. It is no wonder then that whole Vision 2020 program failed.

Voting in an election is a skill, and should not be done at random or based on gut feel or one's fancy and whims; it is not an opportunity to receive money or goodies in exchange for votes. Malaysian voters must be taught how to vote wisely by equipping them with better analytical skills through high quality education system. They must learn that for a country to achieve First World status, its political development must be inclusive to avoid concentration of power in too few hands, and to avoid abuse of power, and to set up other inclusive institutions that will provide quality infrastructure and efficient public services as well as to encourage a system of democratic accountability that allows citizens to appraise the leaders' performance in free and fair elections. They should vote out extractive politicians who are barriers to the country's progress towards a developed country status.

Malaysia must reform any laws or electoral institutions that impede its progress towards a mature democracy. A good start for reform is to remove EC from the purview of the PM, and allow it to carry out free and fair elections independent from executive interference, so that most capable politicians can rise to power in a meritocratic manner to reform any extractive institution to be inclusive. Malaysia needs reform-minded political leaders who can orchestrate the many dimensions of development inclusively. Without such reforms, Malaysia will not be able to progress fast towards the First World

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# ***SUVANNABHUMI***

Multi-disciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies

## **Text and Manuscript Guideline**

### **1. TEXT STYLE**

#### **1) Language**

The manuscript should be written in English.

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The manuscript should be between 5,000 to 10,000 words in length, including references, appendices, tables and figures. Book Review or Research Report submissions must be between 1,000 to 2,000 words.

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All pieces must be encoded in a Microsoft Word file, 1.5-spaced, in Times New Roman, Font Size 12.

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The Journal uses US spelling, and the author should therefore follow the latest edition of the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.

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In general, terms should not be abbreviated unless they are used repeatedly and the abbreviation is helpful to the reader. Initially use the word in full, followed by the abbreviation in parentheses. Thereafter use the abbreviation only.

#### **6) Sections, Tables and Figures**

Sections and sub-sections should be divided by "I, 1.1., 1.1.1." And tables and figures should be numbered by <Table 1>, <Figure 1>. The Journal prints papers in black and white but upload PDF files in full color at the journal homepage.

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References should be in Roman script and placed at the end of the manuscript in alphabetical order.

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All source references are to be identified at the appropriate point in the text by the last name of the author, year of publication and pagination where needed. Identify subsequent citations of the same source in the same way as the first. Examples follow:

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Wong (1986)
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(Korea Times 01/04/2014, 3).
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Taylor (n.d.)

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(Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security 1992)

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Freeman, Michael and Claude Jacques. 1999. *Ancient Ankor*. Bangkok: Asia Books.

- In case of an edited book, it shall be written in ed.

Steinberg, David Joel, ed. 1987. *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

- In case of translated books, it shall be in the order of original author, year of publication of translated books, name of translated book, author and publisher.

Coedes, George. 1968. *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. Susan B. Cowing, trans. Honolulu: An East-West Center Book. The University Press of Hawaii.

## **2) Journal Articles/ Monthly Magazine**

- In case of papers such as journals, monthly magazine, etc, volume and number shall be in volume (number), and the relevant pages shall be definitely indicated.

Egreteau, Renaud. 2008. India's Ambitions in Burma. *Asian Survey*, 48(6): 936-957.

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- In case of the text in a compilation, it shall be in the order of author, year of publication, compilation name, compiler, related page and publisher. If there is no compiler, then it can be omitted.

King, Victor T. 2006. Southeast Asia: Personal Reflections on a Region. *Southeast Asian Studies: Debates and New Directions*. Cynthia Chou and Vincent Houben, eds. 23-44. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

## **4) Thesis and Dissertation**

- In case of a thesis or dissertation, the following form shall be followed.

Parker, John. 1988. The Representation of Southeast Asian Art. PhD Dissertation. Harvard University.

## **5) Newspaper Articles**

- In case of a daily newspaper, by-line story of weekly magazine and column, the following form shall be followed.

Peterson, Thomas. 1993. The Economic Development of ASEAN. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 22: 23.

## **6) Internet Sources**

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Hadar, Leon. 1998. U.S. Sanctions against Burma. *Trade Policy Analysis* no. 1. <http://www.cato.org/pubs/trade/tpa-001.html>. (Accessed May 07, 2008).

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Multi-disciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies

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