



## Southeast Asia as Theoretical Laboratory for the World



Oscar Salemink\*

### [ *Abstract* ]

Area studies are sometimes framed as focused on specific localities, rooted in deep linguistic, cultural and historical knowledge, and hence empirically rich but, as a result, as yielding non-transferable/non-translatable findings and hence as theoretically poor. In Europe and North America some social science disciplines like sociology, economics and political science routinely dismiss any reference to local specifics as parochial “noise” interfering with their universalizing pretensions which in reality obscure their own Euro-American parochialism. For more qualitatively oriented disciplines like history, anthropology and cultural studies the inherent non-universality of (geographically constricted) area studies presents a predicament which is increasingly fought out by resorting to philosophical concepts which usually have a Eurocentric pedigree. In this paper, however, I argue that concepts with arguably European pedigree – like religion, culture, identity, heritage and art – travel around the world and are adopted through vernacular discourses that are specific to locally inflected histories and cultural

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\* Professor in the Anthropology of Asia, University of Copenhagen,  
o.salemink@anthro.ku.dk

contexts by annexing existing vocabularies as linguistic vehicles. In the process, these vernacularized “universal” concepts acquire different meanings or connotations, and can be used as powerful devices in local discursive fields. The study of these processes offer at once a powerful antidote against simplistic notions of “global”/“universal” and “local,” and a potential corrective to localizing parochialism and blindly Eurocentric universalism. I develop this substantive argument with reference to my own professional, disciplinary and theoretical trajectory as an anthropologist and historian focusing on Vietnam, who used that experience – and the empirical puzzles and wonder encountered – in order to develop theoretical interests and questions that became the basis for larger-scale, comparative research projects in Japan, China, India, South Africa, Brazil and Europe. The subsequent challenge is to bring the results of such larger, comparative research “home” to Vietnam in a meaningful way, and thus overcome the limitations of both area studies and Eurocentric disciplines.

**Keywords:** Area Studies, Eurocentric concepts, Vernacular discourses, Comparisons, Cultural production, Vietnam

## **I . The field of Vietnam as a laboratory for theorizing**

For more than three decades since 1987 I have been perfectly happy to describe myself as an anthropologist and historian of Vietnam, having invested heavily in learning the language and in establishing networks during the more than ten years that I spent in the country in my various capacities as a student, researcher, teacher and development professional. While focusing on one country, my thematic interests traveled to different substantive topics. I started my career with an interest in ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands and in the ways that they were integrated into the subsequent precolonial, colonial, neocolonial and postcolonial states from 1850 onwards. The encounters between Highlanders and outsiders generated knowledge that we usually call “ethnographic knowledge”. I traced the genesis and development of the various

ethnographic discourses about the Central Highlanders, linking the production of specific textual foci and tropes with the historical contexts giving rise to these encounters and with the specific political and economic interests of the ethnographers – be they Catholic missionaries, military explorers, colonial administrators, plantation owners, military officers, journalists or professional anthropologists. On the other hand, I traced the impact of these ethnographic discourses on the Highlanders who were represented through these discourses, in terms of (loss of) land rights, of ethnic identification (tribalization, ethnicization), gender transformation and religious conversion. This resulted in a PhD thesis, a monograph, and two edited volumes on the history of anthropology.

After 2001 I began to focus on religious change in Vietnam, not just among the Central Highlanders (who converted massively to Evangelical Protestantism in the 1990s and 2000s), but also among other Highlanders and among lowland Vietnamese in various parts of the country (Salemink 2003a; 2003b; 2004; 2015). This interest was triggered by the religious efflorescence which became apparent in the 2000s. This substantive interest took me out of the Central Highlands – which had become mostly inaccessible to foreign researchers because of political developments – into various parts of Vietnam, including the northern, central and southern lowlands and some of the bigger cities (Salemink 2007a; 2007b; Turner and Salemink 2015). In other words, while I extended my interest geographically to many other parts of Vietnam, I remained firmly focused on Vietnam in my empirical research. My interest in a wide variety of religious practices – including Buddhism, Christianity, Islam but especially various forms of spirit possession – in various parts of Vietnam allowed me to conceptualize post-Revolutionary Vietnam as a veritable religious laboratory which enabled me to question the usual categorical distinctions and classifications regarding the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane. After all, in contrast with Weberian prophesies concerning rationalization, secularization and disenchantment there is a growing awareness that the world is embracing a plurality of “modernities” that are often defined as religious rather than secular (Hefner 1998; Van der Veer 1996). Globally, this is evidenced by the growing social

visibility of religious beliefs and practices in the public sphere (Casanova 1994; Turner 2006a) and - within Europe - by enhanced religious plurality as a result of migration and religious experimentation (Katzenstein and Byrnes 2006; Turner 2006b).

Yet, in spite of Asad's (1993; 2003) analysis of religious and secular categories as genealogically and historically connected, Eurocentric assumptions of religion as a discrete category denoting a separate domain of social and cultural practice still dominate scholarly and public debate. Thus, conceptual dichotomies between the religious domain and this-worldly, secular domains of political and economic practice are kept in place. As secularization in Europe is historically connected with the separation between church and state, one could question whether Western categories of religion and the secular make sense in other parts of the world (Kipnis 2001; Turner 2006a). Raymond Lee asserts that secularization in Asia assumes the form of individualization of religious choice and a concomitant competition for local religious "consumers" in a globalized religious market that is both local and simultaneously integrated into national spheres and transnational networks (Lee 1993; Turner 2004; Salemink 2007b). In Vietnam's impressive "religioscape" (cf. Appadurai 1996; Turner 2006a) more or less institutionalized religions like Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Sinitic religious ideologies of Confucianism and Daoism are practiced side by side with local community religions or in combination with spirit or ancestor worship.

It is a truism to state that religious beliefs and ritual practices have made a "come-back" in post-*Đổi mới* Vietnam, as is obvious from the expansion of religious organizations, the proliferation of ritual practices and the seeming ubiquity of pilgrimages, festival and other events. This observation of a religious revival – evidenced by the currency of such terms as *đạo* [(religious) ethics / creed], *tôn giáo* [religion], *tín ngưỡng* [(religious) beliefs], *dị giáo* [heresy], *mê tín dị đoan* [superstition], *sùng bái* [pray(er)], *thờ cúng* [worship], *nghi lễ* [ritual], *linh thiêng* [miraculous / enchanted], *giác ngộ* [enlightenment / consciousness], *tinh thần* [spiritual], *thiêng liêng* [sacred] – is predicated on two assumptions. The first is that this 'religionization' follows on a period of secularization, actively promoted by the Communist

Party before 1986. The second assumption is that the distinction and the boundaries between the religious and the secular, between sacred and profane, are clear and unambiguous. Neither of these two assumptions, however, hold against available evidence, as the communist and capitalist projects can be analyzed as political religions as well (Salemink 2003b; 2004). In other words, as a hotspot of neoliberal globalization and rapid cultural change, post-Revolutionary Vietnam can be regarded as a religious laboratory and Vietnam constituting a promising field for theorizing the study of contemporary religion. From this geographically bounded field of Vietnam – which I re-baptized a religious laboratory – I engaged with theorizing about Asian forms of religion and secularism, both in Vietnam and in other parts of Asia, and published a number of theoretically inclined papers and edited a number of collective volumes, including the *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia* (Turner and Salemink 2015).

To a large extent my reconceptualization of Vietnam as a religious laboratory was in line with wider trends within anthropology that sought to reconceptualize the Malinowskian “field” as a spatial metaphor derived from biology, namely the geographically bounded, often far-away site where the “fieldwork” takes place and which forms at once the methodological basis for the ethnographic encounter and the object of ethnographic description and analysis. In his book *Localizing Strategies: Regional traditions of ethnographic writing* Richard Fardon (1990) had shown that this geographic focus of anthropology (and, of course, of area studies) gave rise to distinctly different thematic, analytical and theoretical emphases in different parts of the world. At the time of the publication of Fardon’s book, for instance, one would look in vain for studies of social and political movements in Asia, whereas Latin America would be a fertile field for theorizing about social movements – not because Asia lacked social and political movements, but rather because Asian protagonists might use a different vocabulary and especially because scholars would engage with an established anthropological canon and discursively re-inscribe the categories used in that canon.

In the mid-1990s this notion of the geographically bounded

field came under attack from the likes of Arjun Appadurai, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, and George Marcus. In “The production of locality”, Appadurai (1996) argued that locality and the spatialized sense of belonging associated with it – which he calls “neighborhood” – is not a given but a fragile accomplishment against the backdrop of perennial change and (internal and external) threats to cohesion. Locality must be constantly produced and re-produced through, for example, ritual and kinship work and Appadurai suggests therefore to reinterpret the anthropological canon as ways to produce locality than as depictions of the status quo. In *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, Gupta and Ferguson (1997) move away from the concept of the anthropological field as a bounded spatial site towards the concept of the field as a political location with its localized historical, linguistic and cultural peculiarities, simultaneously connected up with other places and larger contexts, and hence subject to outside interventions – including ethnographic interventions. Finally, in “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography” George Marcus (1995) then drew the methodological consequence from the unpacking of the ethnographic “field” as a bounded, unitary site of encounter by proposing to do multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in various – and variously interconnected – places. Regardless of their theoretical and methodological innovations, these authors nevertheless re-inscribed spatialized notions of the “field” as a site – however contextualized, connected up and cross-cut – or as a multitude of sites of ethnographic encounter, thus remaining firmly tied up with spatialized notions of the field prevalent in both anthropological and area studies.

## **II . The field of cultural production**

Around the same time that religion appeared on the forefront in Vietnam (seducing many Vietnamese and international scholars to study religious practices), the country rapidly developed a “heritage craze.” Since the 1993 inscription of the former imperial capital of Hué on the World Heritage List, Vietnam has made great efforts to

have its cultural heritage recognized by UNESCO as world heritage. Belatedly beginning with its monumental (Huế town, Hội An town, Mỹ Sơn temple complex, Thăng Long citadel, Hồ dynasty citadel), natural (Hạ Long Bay and Phong Nha Kẻ Bàng national park) and mixed heritage (Tràng An landscape complex), Vietnam has more recently focused on its “Intangible Cultural Heritage” (abbreviated by UNESCO as ‘ICH’). In 1994 Vietnam hosted UNESCO’s first ICH “expert meeting” on the cultures of ethnic minorities and of Huế, and invited me to be the “rapporteur” for the first meeting on ethnic minority cultures, and subsequently the editor of its first country-specific volume on ICH (see below). Even before the ICH lists were formalized, *nhã nhạc* court music from Huế was recognized as a cultural treasure (in 2003, the year of the ICH Convention), and in 2005 the gong music (*không gian văn hóa cồng chiêng*) of ethnic minorities in Vietnam’s Central Highlands. In addition, since 2009, *Quan họ*, *Ca trù*, *Xoan* and *Đon ca tài tử*, *Ví* and *Giặm* singing and the *Gióng* Festival of Phù Đổng and Sóc temples and the Worship of the Hùng kings in Phú Thọ, Tugging rituals and games (in Cambodia, Korea, the Philippines and Vietnam), Practices related to the Viet beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms (northern Vietnam), and the art of Bài Chòi in Central Viet Nam have been inscribed. In total, since 2003 12 ICH “elements” have been inscribed by UNESCO, with the nomination of Practices of Then by Tày, Nùng and Thái ethnic groups in Vietnam pending.

In contrast with World Heritage, ICH focuses on cultural practices, which have historically been the object of anthropological research. Much like the booming interest in religious practice among Vietnamese and foreign scholars, I witnessed a similar interest in cultural heritage, but primarily among my Vietnamese colleagues rather than my international colleagues. Since this interest in cultural heritage emerged within my geo-ethnographic field of Vietnam, I also became involved at an early stage of “ICH development” in Vietnam as rapporteur for the 1994 UNESCO expert meeting in Hanoi. This developed into an edited book project for UNESCO Publishing’s Memory of Peoples book series, and which was published in three languages (*Viet Nam’s Cultural Diversity*:

*Approaches to Preservation and Diversité culturelle au Viet Nam: enjeux multiples, approches plurielles* [2001]; *Tính đa dạng của văn hóa Việt Nam: Những tiếp cận về sự bảo tồn* [2002]). Yet the editorial experience made me unenthusiastic about working for or with UNESCO – which I felt was an impossible organization to work with – or indeed for working on the question of cultural heritage – which I felt was a theoretically stale topic within the UNESCO parameters. But towards the end of the 2000s I was – like my Vietnamese colleagues – gripped by the “heritage fever” when I was invited to take part in their projects and to critically reflect on heritage as process – as “heritagization” – with myriad interlocking dimensions (spatial, temporal, cultural, religious, social, economic, political) which intersected various social domains.

My interest in heritage and especially in what might be termed the “heritagization of living culture” in Vietnam was piqued in different ways, which somehow came together in 2009. Firstly, I was invited to a conference organized on the side of a major celebration in Pleiku in Vietnam’s Central Highlands of the UNESCO recognition of “The space of Gong Culture” as ICH. The event was unforgettable as a travesty of everything that was special, remarkable and sacred about the ritual gong music that I had experienced during my ethnographic research in that region. It taught me that ICH recognition does not necessarily and inevitably produce the results desired by UNESCO. Secondly, I participated in a Harvard workshop on property in Vietnam, convened by Professor Hue-Tam Ho Tai, where I presented a paper on intangible cultural heritage as a form of property – or rather: as political appropriation – which was eventually published in a volume on *State, Society and the Market in Contemporary Vietnam* edited by Mark Sidel and Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2013). A few years later, I was invited by Vietnamese colleagues to be an advisor of an independent assessment of the social and cultural effects of UNESCO recognition of four different ICH “elements” in a number of different locations in Vietnam. The results were mixed but, according to my Vietnamese colleagues, tended to disenfranchise the local heritage communities or constituencies. During the meeting in 2011 I used the Vietnamese neologism *di sản hóa* [heritagization] which was quickly adopted in



the meeting as a term that covered the various heritage-related processes on the ground. The report (issued in 2012) was published in 2014 in a volume on *Di sản văn hóa trong xã hội Việt Nam đương đại* [Cultural heritage in contemporary Vietnamese society] edited by Lê Hồng Lý and Nguyễn Thị Phương Chăm (2014).

Gripped by the analytical potential of the concept of heritagization – which has been coined in the late 1980s but had enjoyed fairly limited traction until the mid-2000s – I explored the literature in the anthropology of heritage and in critical heritage studies which I now discovered to be an exciting empirical field with analytical and theoretical potential (see Salemink 2016). This field was not a spatial one evoking specific geographic, national or otherwise spatial delimitations – like Vietnam – but indeed a field understood as a specific subset of social or cultural dimensions of life. This brings us to the non-spatial definition of “field” that the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu coined in “The field of cultural production” (1993 – or. 1983; see also Bourdieu 2005), where he proposed a radically different conception of field, made possible by his ruminations about the field as a system of position-takings within a substantive domain (of arts and “high culture”). For Bourdieu, “the field of cultural production” is at once hierarchically encompassed within a larger capitalist system and relatively autonomous as predicated on “degree specific consecration” (Bourdieu 1993: 34-8). This non-spatial, analytical definition of “field” is made possible by an un-reflected ethnocentric focus on the West – in particular France – which, as metropolitan center, did not seem to require the same historical and cultural contextualization and spatial circumscription as “marginal” fields outside of Europe. In spite of the implicit ethnocentrism in Bourdieu’s approach to the field, his recasting of the field from a spatialized metaphor to an analytical concept as a system of power-related position-takings potentially creates space for a view of the field – or better: of *fields* in plural – that does not re-inscribe its boundaries while seeking to overcome them. This was a position that I eventually found myself thrown into because of external funding requirements, but only after developing a renewed interest in cultural heritage, following developments in Vietnamese society.

### **III. Funding constraints and theoretical opportunities**

In February 2011 I moved from the Netherlands to Denmark for a variety of personal and professional reasons. Although I had left a full professorship in Amsterdam for another full professorship in Copenhagen, I knew very little about Danish academia and felt that in practical and professional terms I had to start all over again, lacking networks and indeed credibility in my new academic home. One expectation that I encountered was that I would write successful grant applications, which is not easy in an unfamiliar place. One thing that I found out quickly was that to enhance chances of success, grant applications needed to have some connection with Denmark or at least Europe, which is an obvious constraint for someone who had staked his career on research in Southeast Asia. It meant that I could not be content with defining my empirical field in narrow spatial terms: Vietnam or Southeast Asia. Instead, it forced me to think creatively and work with the theoretical insights that I was developing on the basis of my Vietnam material in order to travel those concepts to other parts of the world. In other words, I had to redefine my spatially-defined field as an analytically-defined, Bourdieuan field. With heritage, and the multiple dimensions and intersections of heritagization, I had developed the theoretical toolbox to conquer Denmark's and Europe's research funding bodies.

One such idea for a funding application was a more or less direct result from my empirical and analytical preoccupations in Vietnam, namely related to heritage and to religion. In Vietnam I observed that many sites, object and practices that are recognized as cultural heritage - material or intangible, by the state or by UNESCO - are simultaneously perceived and experienced as religious. For Vietnam we can think of sacred sites such as temples (in Huế and Hội An; the temple of the Hùng kings in Phú Thọ; ancient Chăm towers, etc.); sacred objects (including statues, reliquaries and amulets in temples); and ritual practices (like gong music played at funerals and other life cycle rituals, for instance). With this hint I looked in other places and found that with the increased recognition of shared heritage after the devastation of

World War II, buttressed by UNESCO's 1972 and 2003 heritage conventions (Meskell 2013), a process of heritagization of religious sites, objects, and practices was initiated around the world under the auspices of expert knowledge, authentication, and the simultaneous emergence of mass tourism (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Hitchcock et al. 2010). This is not an uncontested process as heritagization implies a secular gaze on things that are often experienced as religious (Paine 2013), which may lead to tensions, conflicts and even destruction. The global criteria for heritage recognition, as brought out in the UNESCO heritage conventions, are secular in nature in the sense of immanent, predicated on this-worldly values – cultural, aesthetic, historical, communitarian – but never or seldom on transcendental, religious values. In that sense, validating specific religious sites and objects as cultural heritage partly secularizes them, and potentially desecrates them by overlaying their sacred character and religious uses with a secular heritage gaze.

But heritagization may also sacralize such sites, objects and practices, to the extent that heritage recognition renders them non-every day and non-profane, to be separated from the everyday, treated with awe and contemplated for their inherent values. Thus, while heritagization comprises a secular gaze, it simultaneously authenticates, validates and *sacralizes* specific sites, objects and practices not for their inherently religious aspects, but for their *secular* meanings for specific populations (nations, ethnic groups, religious communities) or for humankind in forging a temporal connection between present and past, and through conservation with the future (Fillitz & Saris 2013; Lowenthal 1998). As pointed out by Meyer and De Witte in their Introduction to a special issue on "Heritage and the Sacred": "Not unlike religion, heritage formation involves some kind of sacralization, through which cultural forms are lifted up and set apart so as to be able to speak of what is considered to be central to social life" (Meyer and De Witte 2013: 276).

The governance of religion and of cultural heritage implies very different attitudes: For instance, if a site, object or practice is considered religious, then the (liberal) state must take a backseat,

foregrounding the principle of freedom of religion. If the same object is considered heritage however, then the state must take a front seat and assume responsibility for protection. On a more bottom up level, these different attitudes manifest themselves in the practices involved in recognition and maintenance of heritage. Local and national, religious and secular sentiments play overlapping roles. What is more, both heritage and religion depend on everyday commitments of volunteers and non-professionals whose commitment impacts and is impacted by the processes of sacralization as outlined above. Inversely, the role of the state in recognizing heritage means that minority religions might have more difficulty in gaining public recognition, protection and financial assistance in highlighting cultural relevance. In short, these two forms of sacralization are not mutually exclusive and in practice the heritage and religion labels oftentimes function as mutual authentication, but they may evoke tensions and conflict as well. It is this mutual authentication and mutual tension that are at the heart of this equation.

I translated these ideas into a Europe-wide project involving research partners in five different European countries as well as non-academic partners like museums, NGOs and media organizations. The resulting project application, titled “The heritagization of religion and the sacralization of heritage in contemporary Europe,” was funded in 2016 and focuses on the heritagization of religious sites, objects and practices in relation to religious and secular experiences connected to these, thereby exploring secular and religious forms of sacralization. The project plays into a European anxiety about cultural heritage which since World War II is increasingly seen as defining identities in times of change. The project seeks to understand the consequences of the heritagization of religious sites, objects and practices which were not considered heritage before. Where the object of heritage is experienced as religious, heritagization may lead to tensions and conflicts as it involves an explicitly secular gaze that sacralizes non-religious aspects of religious sites, objects and practices in a cultural, historical, or otherwise secular, immanent frame. Sometimes this creates tensions between religious and secular forms of sacralizing

heritage. As heritage and religion are studied by separate disciplines and subject to different policies, this process is poorly understood – both theoretically and practically, which the project promises to remedy by producing new insight which can be used to understand, manage and defuse tensions, benefiting both religious and heritage constituencies within Europe. In other words, I suddenly reinvented myself as a scholar of Europe, but focusing on the “field of heritage.”

For another project I was inspired by Michael Herzfeld’s notion of the “global hierarchy of value” (Herzfeld 2004), which is a classificatory concept that he developed with reference to his seminal work on cultural heritage. Oftentimes, the heritage of today is the art of yesterday, which would imply that today’s “global hierarchy of value” is predicated on yesterday’s art production. But in a globalizing world characterized by a rapidly changing geopolitical constellation it would be a valid question to ask how today’s worldwide artistic production, circulation, collection and exhibition of art in museums and other artistic venues articulate possibly shifting global hierarchies of value, given the global rise of the BRICS countries (Brazil, India, China, South Africa), especially China. I had been grappling with similar questions in the early stage of my career when I researched and published on the history of anthropology in its wider historical – social, political, economic and cultural – context. While I was interested in continuing to do research in Asia, I knew that such research could not be done in Vietnam, but that it had to involve major emerging nations with established or emergent art scenes, such as China, Japan, India, Brazil and South Africa.

But in order to “sell” the project to the Independent Research Fund Denmark I knew I had to create a connection with “home,” so I called the project “Global Europe: Constituting Europe from the outside in through artefacts,” and again playing into present-day European anxieties about loss of power and identity. The project, funded in 2015 as a major “advanced grant” of which only five per year are awarded across all disciplines, investigates the idea of Europe – as continent, as civilization, as social imaginary, as transnational territorial institution – which has been studied from

various disciplines, but usually from within Europe. Historically, the idea of Europe emerged through the collection, circulation, classification and museum exhibition of objects from outside of Europe - Africa, Asia and the America - in the curiosity cabinets of the early modern period when Europe rose to world dominance. The heirs of the curiosity cabinets - museums - became public institutions that classified and exhibited the nation and the world in a hierarchical manner, and that as exhibitionary technologies were imposed and/or adopted in colonial, neocolonial and postcolonial contexts. The aim of the Global Europe project is to explore how the collection, circulation, classification and museum exhibition of objects define Europe from the outside in during Europe's present loss of global hegemony - especially in relation to Japan and four non-European BRICS countries, in comparison with the early modern period of European ascendancy. The research involves five researchers doing anthropological, historical and museological research in museums in these five countries as well as in European museums, with myself doing research in China.

These two ongoing projects appear to resonate with emerging scholarship in a variety of different disciplines and fields, and the research teams have finished most of the field research and are currently planning for the publications and exhibitions that will be among the project outputs. At the same time, the projects raise new theoretical questions which allow me and my fellow researchers to think about follow-up projects. Last year, one big European H2020 application which I led was not successful in acquiring funding, but this year (2018) I am again part of a heritage-related application by a European consortium (albeit this time fortunately not as principal investigator). Whatever will be the outcome of that application and whatever the merit of the publications in the making, this trajectory shows that there may be theoretical merit in shifting from a spatial definition of one's empirical field (Vietnam) to an analytical definition (heritage, material culture). My research questions were inspired by my research in Vietnam, by developments in Vietnamese society, and by the responses of my Vietnamese colleagues to these developments. The funding constraints that I encountered in my new abode - Denmark - forced me to be more creative with the

insights and questions that I developed in Vietnam, and to travel my ideas to other geographic areas while defining my empirical field analytically in a post-Bourdieuian (and hopefully less ethnocentric) manner.

#### **IV. Beyond spatial and theoretical straightjackets**

Using analytical insights and theoretical inspirations from my Vietnam-related research to formulate research questions helped me craft projects that turned out to be competitive in terms of acquiring research funding. This success in raising money required and requires me to do field research in China and Europe which enriches my research experience immensely but which inevitably takes much time away from Vietnam. In practice, this means that I spend much less time in Vietnam now than before, when I visited the country on average twice a year, in different capacities (teacher, researcher, advisor, conference participant), for various purposes (research, teaching, presentations) and for varying lengths of time. But this does not mean that I abandoned Vietnam - on the contrary. I continue to engage with the country and its people and scholars, and I still find time to engage with my Vietnamese colleagues and with a wider Vietnamese audience by publishing in Vietnamese. Over the past year I managed to get four publications out in Vietnam covering a variety of topics, and three of which are in Vietnamese - something that never fails to elicit feedback from Vietnamese colleagues, both familiar and unbeknownst to me.

But there is something even better that my recent theoretical and empirical forays outside of my spatial field of Vietnam brought me: I have become “attractive” to scholars and artists within Vietnam because I am now increasingly seen as someone who brings something more than an outsider’s knowledge of Vietnam to Vietnam. I am still considered as someone familiar with Vietnamese language and culture, but in addition as someone familiar about certain analytical fields - fields of cultural production - outside Vietnam. The combination means that I can be relied upon to connect Vietnamese colleagues to global domains of scholarship.

One recent example is that I was asked to act as discussant for a Vietnamese-initiated and -organized panel at the Association for Asian Studies annual meeting in the US, and subsequently as guest editor for a theme issue of an international journal that this same group of Vietnamese scholars wish to target - both on the theme that connects and excites us, namely the politics of intangible cultural heritage in Vietnam. In other words, my position as a relative outsider makes me attractive as a node of connection with, and possibly a gateway to international scholarship.

One development more outside my comfort zone is the fact that my current research on contemporary arts - globally but especially in China - helped me understand that contemporary artists and anthropologists share many things: they read the same philosophical literature and social theory; they use the same embodied, qualitative research methods; and they develop similar perspectives on the social issues that they research. But the output of the respective research by artists and anthropologists is very different, as anthropologists produce mostly texts while artists also produce material, embodied and performative work (which in the present often requires textual interpretation and explanation as well). My foray into contemporary arts outside Vietnam was quickly picked up by old acquaintances in the Vietnamese art scene, resulting in reconnections, joint appearances in meetings and conferences, joint performances, and joint publications in art-related outlets. My learning from these encounters inspire me to more deliberately than before seek to involve artists in my research projects. In August 2018, for example, I convened an international conference on "Changing Global Hierarchies of Value?" in Copenhagen as part of my Global Europe project, and the keynote speech on the first day was followed by an art performance by a young South African artist at the National Museum in Copenhagen. In current grant applications that I am co-developing, artistic performances, museum collection formation and exhibitions are part and parcel of the project, along with the more traditional textual work that scholars usually produce.

This is an unplanned but very fortunate turn of events which would not have happened if I would not have distanced myself



somewhat from the spatial field of Vietnam in order to focus on the analytical fields of heritage (art of the past), contemporary arts and museums. What I learn from my interactions with Vietnamese artists and art and museum professionals is that I can and should integrate their work - their research, their analysis, their output - into mine, and vice versa. This effectively broadens the scope of my theoretical and practical interactions both outside and within Vietnam. In other words, my adoption of an analytical field beyond - but not outside - the spatial field of “Vietnam” that I defined in the 1980s as the empirical delimitation of my scholarly endeavor helped me reconnect with Vietnam in different, and theoretically fertile, ways. This is not to say that the field of Vietnam studies is theoretically barren - far from that! My study of a wide variety of processes in various locations in Vietnam helped me understand those in their mutual interconnection and frame analytical insights and theoretical research questions that helped me understand the world beyond Vietnam better - which in turn helped me understand Vietnam better, and with a novel theoretical vocabulary.

## **V. Vietnam as a theoretical laboratory for the world**

Against the backdrop of an all too common distinction between things deemed “global” and “universal” and things deemed “local,” I show in this paper that concepts with arguably European pedigree - like religion, culture, identity, heritage and art - travel around the world and are adopted through vernacular discourses that are specific to locally inflected histories and cultural contexts by annexing existing vocabularies as linguistic vehicles; their universalizing pretensions obscure their own Euro-American parochialism (Chakrabarty 2000; Trouillot 2002; 2003). In the process, these vernacularized “universal” concepts acquire different meanings or connotations and can be used as powerful devices in local discursive fields; one simple example is the (Marxist) term for consciousness in Vietnamese, which was tagged on the existing Buddhist term for enlightenment: *giác ngộ*.

But such terms and concepts produce different socio-cultural

effects in different places, evoking new questions that can be researched and theorized effectively. In this paper I show how my encounter with the - historically fairly recent - adoption of notions and practices of heritage (and attendant preservation, conservation and safeguarding practices) in a Vietnamese context allowed me to understand “cultural heritage” differently from the continent where the authoritative discourse of heritage emerged: Europe. One fairly common scholarly response to such an observation could be to just compare situations and note discursive and practical differences. But another road would be to use the analytical insights from that specific Vietnamese research experience and question supposedly “universal” notions of cultural heritage that are still stooped in Eurocentric assumptions. I was more or less forced - or at least incited - by specific funding constraints to take this second road, and develop penetrating research questions underpinning research applications that focus on other spatial fields than Vietnam.

The study of these traveling concepts and practices and the locally inflected effects they produce offer at once a powerful antidote against simplistic notions of “global”/“universal” and “local,” and a potential corrective to localizing parochialism and blindly Eurocentric universalism. With reference to my own professional, disciplinary and theoretical trajectory as an anthropologist and historian focusing on Vietnam, I showed in this paper how I used that experience - and the empirical puzzles and wonder that I experienced - in order to develop theoretical interests and questions that became the basis for bigger, comparative research projects in Japan, China, India, South Africa, Brazil and Europe. In addition, I show that the subsequent promise - and ongoing challenge - is to bring the results of such larger, comparative research projects “home” to Vietnam in a meaningful way, and thereby overcome the limitations of both area studies and Eurocentric disciplines.

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