A battle worth winning: The service of culture to the Communist Party of Vietnam in the contemporary era

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ABSTRACT

The Communist Party of Vietnam’s (CPV) market reform policies—introduced in the late 1980s and carrying on today—have opened the country to foreign investment, deregulated state-owned enterprises, decollectivized agricultural cooperatives, and encouraged foreign direct investment. However, what the Party has not wanted reformed, and has fought strongly on behalf of, is culture. Using primary source official CPV cultural policy documentation and secondary sources highlighting contemporary meanings of Vietnamese and foreign cultures, this paper evaluates the Party’s use of culture as a resource in the direction and regulation of the nation’s market economy with a socialist orientation. While culture is expedient for all governments, I argue that the CPV’s intent is unique in that it uses culture as an instrument to maintain its ownership, rather than simply to legitimize its regulatory ability, over the national political economy. This paper aims to show how culture is part and parcel of post-socialist governance’s political-economic framework and contributes to debates surrounding the reach and impact of neoliberalism in formerly command economies.

Introduction

As the sole representative of the Vietnamese government, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) is in a position to create, administer, and pronounce its own authored version of “national culture” to the Vietnamese population. Their understanding of culture is a uniquely Vietnamese system, fixed in time and resistant to outside influence, seen concurrently as a powerful, supervisory force on Vietnamese ideologies and on citizens’ daily livelihoods. In this paper I argue that the CPV uses its power to author and use what it calls “Vietnamese national culture” (văn hóa dân tộc Việt Nam) as an expedient resource to assist in preserving its domain over the Vietnamese political economy in the midst of a rapidly transforming society. Using archival documentation published as the “dôì mở” (“open door”) market reform economic policies have reached their maturity, as well as secondary sources surrounding debates by Party leaders over how best to protect their Vietnamese cultural ideology from foreign influence, I highlight the importance of culture and its expediency at the scale of the state in a period marked by Party concerns over the encroachment of Western values into the composition and direction of non-Western political institutions (McGee, 2008; Raffin, 2008; Rydstrom, 2006; Tan, 2003; Thompson, 2004).

Vietnam’s reform era began in 1986 with the introduction of “market socialism” (Hayton, 2010), and the country’s economy has in the subsequent twenty five years expanded markedly (Fforde, 2009). Yet to hear the CPV tell it the country’s economic growth and accomplishments have been dampened by a corresponding weakening of national culture. I critically assess the Party’s goals in their construction of this conundrum. I argue that the Vietnamese state’s cultural case is unique because the Communist Party uses their discursive construction of national culture as a means to maintain ownership, rather than simply to preserve its regulatory ability, over the Vietnamese political economy. As the country’s largest landholder (Kim, 2008), real estate owner and developer (Fforde, 1999; Gainsborough, 2005), corporate stakeholder (Gainsborough, 2005), and official regulator (London, 2009), the Party has a deep-seated interest in perpetuating its control over the Vietnamese political economy. Culture, unlike everyday politics and resistances (Kerkvliet, 2005), public space (Thomas, 2002), the stifling of dissent (Wells-Dang, 2010), and the economy (Fforde & De Vylder, 1996; Forbes, Hull, Marr, & Bogans, 1999; McGee, 2009), has been largely ignored in recent debates that seek to determine the ways in which the CPV exercises power in contemporary Vietnamese society. Similarly, work in socialist and post-socialist states in geography aims to highlight alternative, local, and diverse economic production (Smith, 2002; Smith & Stenning, 2006) and the complex development goals of these states (Reid-Henry, 2007) without addressing the imbrication of “national” cultural strategies and the
state-led economy in the policy values of transitional states. In explaining the Party’s use of culture to preserve its domain over state-owned industries and market control, I also wish to counter claims that formerly command economies are inevitably forced down a path toward neoliberalism or whose leaders are actively restructuring their economies in order to bolster their competitive edge in the global marketplace (Harvey, 2005; He & Wu, 2009; Springer, 2010, 2009). In the broadest terms, cultural strategies such as the CPV’s illuminate how leaders in formerly command economies are not resigned to recalibrate their leadership to conform to the dictates of neoliberalism but expect the global economy to adjust to their own unique methods of governance, methods that in the Party’s case involve the evocation of culture to protect Party-owned enterprise. Methodologically, this paper adds to calls by geographers and others to utilize non-Western sources (Bruner, 2004; Domosh, 2010) to highlight contestations over the “globalizing world” (Jackson, 2004).

I open with a discussion of George Yúdice’s (2003) treatment of cultural expediency, which is used as its conceptual framework. The first section also includes an introduction to the Party’s political and economic control in Vietnam, which is entertained in relation to cultural expediency. Yúdice states that “the notion of culture as a resource entails its management” (2003, p. 4), and the subsequent section shows how the CPV adheres to his message through its concerns over culture in the everyday lives of Vietnamese. Using secondary sources, the section focuses on the CPV’s contemporary understandings of culture in everyday Vietnamese life in order to show how the government establishes a national culture based on the bifurcation of Vietnamese and foreign society.

The themes of “revolution” and “national equity” are featured in a prominent policy document I obtained from Party officials and which is promoted as the cultural arm of the reform policies at the dawn of the 21st century. I evaluate this document in the empirical section of the paper. While the Party uses many different avenues to get its cultural message out, including various media outlets and state-run civil society and community organizations, it is arguably in the pages of the market reform policies that the Party’s cultural strategies are most carefully constructed. In the empirical section I trace the Party’s creation and use of a loosely designed ideal of national culture in its policies to highlight culture’s pliability and contradictions in line with Yúdice’s argument. I also link what the Party has determined is culturally important in its market reform policies with some of the valuable sectors of the economy that are dominated by state-owned firms, providing a lens into which sectors of the economy the Party would in recent years like to preserve for its own economic profit and protection. As such, the Party’s cultural strategies are malleable insofar as they are linked to transformations of Vietnamese society at large and are used as one important component of the Party’s political agenda—alongside economic policies such as trade agreements and business licensing law and less formal actions such as intimidation and clamping down dissent—to maintain the Party’s domain over the Vietnamese political economy. This in turn demonstrates culture’s expediency to Communist governments whose public intention is to forge an alternative political-economic path that continues to rely heavily on the decisions of a single ruling Party. Seeking to understand more clearly culture’s power in the political agendas of the governance schemes of Communist societies, as well as to understand more plainly how Communist governments communicate their principles, decisions, and motives to their people, the conclusion cautions against the presumption of a relentless, penetrating, and inevitable Western domination of political-economic force (generally called neoliberalism) that draws formerly socialist and Communist governments into its web with the promise of unadulterated economic growth, political stability if not representative democracy, and certain electoral and public opinion benefits that come to those non-Western leaders who surrender their economic institutions to the ebb and flow of the unregulated marketplace (Harvey, 2006, 2005). I also speculatively question whether governments such as the CPV whose policies oppose neoliberalism are believed to encourage a more equitable and socialist-based society in practice. Lastly, the paper adds to a growing body of work that brings non-Western and socialist-inspired primary sources to bear on questions surrounding “alternative”, non-representative governance schemes and shows how the language of national policy “speaks” in resistance to Western economic and political models.

The expediency of culture and the question of Vietnamese “openness”

Culture’s instrumentality in the neoliberal era

George Yúdice believes that, in an age of increasing competition between states, firms, entrepreneurs, and societies for economic investment, political legitimacy, and the socio-economic currency that comes with a stable business climate, “the role of culture has expanded in an unprecedented way into the political and economic at the same time that conventional notions of culture largely have been emptied out” (2003, p. 1). Culture becomes hallowed out, malleable in its form and instrumental in its utility. He asks: how has culture become a useful tool for state and non-state actors who are intent on directing or disrupting the elements of the political economy? Emphasizing the activities of Latin and Latin American communities as they create alternative spaces in those realms that are already “targeted for exploitation by capital”, such as “the media, consumerism, and tourism” (2003, p. 6), Yúdice’s cultural discourses are presentational, strategically “wielded” by actors and institutions in battles over market share and political change (2003, p. 1, also see Eagleton, 2000; Mitchell, 2000, 1995). In this sense culture can be used discursively to counter hegemonic governance or economic polarization and can also be used to create material effects such as street art, indigenous music, and impromptu performance to disrupt notions of politically appropriate and conventional cultural products. The ambiguity and contradictions of culture supports the hallowed out nature of the idea, while at the same time the value of culture lies in its political currency and is exemplified in, on the one hand, state and local-level cultural policies and big-business market strategies and, on the other, difference-based alternatives scripted by non-governmental organizations, activist groups, and the like. A sufficiently broad concept under his treatment, it is in the following passages that Yúdice comes closest to defining culture as “more than an anchoring ensemble of ideas and values. It is... premised on difference” (2003, p. 23). He explains that culture’s power comes from its ability to substitute for enfranchisement, “as a group’s difference from overarching norms, (culture) has become the foundation for claims to recognition and resources” (2003, p. 56). Conveying difference by claiming “that you have a culture (a distinctive set of beliefs and practices)” (2003) now acts for actually existing cultural tenets and traits (also see Duncan & Duncan, 2004). While this paper’s focus is on the strategic discursive use of culture by the CPV, an alternate study involving culture’s use in practice could include an investigation into the ways in which specific business dealings, entrepreneurial activities, and products generated by state-owned enterprises are coded in cultural terms.

According to Yúdice, culture’s conventional power has been vacated due to neoliberalism, a process driven by “trade liberalization, privatization, the reduction of state-subsidized social services like health care and education, the lowering of wages and the evisceration of labor rights” (2003, p. 82). In different terms, Yúdice argues
that a particular type of global process named neoliberalism is being implemented throughout the world which is conditioned by the capitalist marketplace, and the goal of expanding the market economy therefore takes precedence over other social measures designed to improve dimensions of human life besides individual financial wealth.

For Yúdice, the process of neoliberalism is countered through the use of culture by governments, firms, non-profit organizations, artists, musicians, entrepreneurs, and others who believe that the terrain of culture is a more accessible platform to pursue action than (for example) voting or running for office are. At the national scale, state governments use culture as a resource to highlight national uniqueness, encourage and regulate investment, and filter foreign ideas. In this sense culture is used by states as a kind of protective armor to seal in national difference and to shield citizens from unwanted socio-economic and political infiltrators. As Yúdice comments, culture is in a unique position to “stave off the symbolic aggression of foreign powers” (2003, p. 29). He asks, “What is accomplished socially, politically, discursively?” when culture is invoked (2003, p. 25; quoted in Dominguez, 1992, p. 21). For Yúdice, the fluid discourses of cultural producers shed the clearest light on how culture is appropriated and used to accomplish many goals at once. It is for this very reason that I use Yúdice’s expedient treatment of culture in this paper: the Vietnamese state’s official discourses of culture are as important as its cultural ideology, and are much more accessible too, given the secretive nature of CPV decision making (Scott, Miller, & Lloyd, 2006). The next section introduces Party management of the Vietnamese political economy in the reform era and illustrates how culture is treated in the Party’s public statements surrounding the implementation and development of đổi mới.

Background and context of CPV control in the reform period

The Party’s cultural policies work differently from those governments that deploy culture under a neoliberal economic model. In fact, the Party’s cultural strategies are potentially more forceful than those driven by purely “neoliberal” national economies for two reasons. In the first place, the CPV hasn’t turned political power over to the invisible hand of the market after introducing market socialism in the late 1980s, but rather has decentralized governmental jurisdiction and the execution of political decisions from the capital Hanoi to individual cities and provinces (see Vasavakul, 1997). It is clear that the Party desires an additional layer of cultural and economic oversight in the midst of rapid economic change occurring in the country. In Gainsborough’s words, “The (market) reforms have increased the economic decision-making responsibilities of local governments” (2003, p. 2), and his point is not meant to suggest a zero-sum game in which the national supervision of cultural and economic policies gives way to stronger local governance decision making. While the CPV creates national economic, political, and cultural dictums, it is up to local governments to make sure that national cultural ideology is woven in to the fabric of local policy and their constituents’ lives on an everyday, mundane basis.

Secondly, Vietnam’s state-owned organizations continue to receive preferential treatment from the national government in terms of access to real estate, receipt of tax and regulatory breaks, and restrictions on private competition (Gainsborough, 2003). In other words, the CPV hasn’t necessarily retracted economically from the national marketplace like other state governments have, which is often considered a primary feature of neoliberalism. In Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam’s economic engine, for example, individual city departments are in charge of regulating the local market under the national CPV’s policies and are allowed to operate “private” companies that compete against non-state firms (Gillen, 2010; Koh, 2001). “In Ho Chi Minh City”, states Gainsborough, “there is scarcely a city department or a district that does not have companies under its jurisdiction” (2003, p. 19). Though many nascent democratic or post-socialist economies have dissolved state-held companies and industries and encouraged the privatization of most sectors of the economy, the CPV has acknowledged that some of its state-owned enterprises are insolvent (Economist, 2006) and closed them, but has also made a concerted move to maintain economic prominence through restructuring, rebuilding, and creating new state-owned enterprises, specifically in rapidly developing sectors of the economy such as real estate and tourism (Gainsborough, 2003, p. 19; Womack, 2006). It is therefore vital for the CPV to protect its economic interests in developing and profitable industries by tagging them with a label of “cultural importance”. Prominent examples include Party-owned television stations and newspapers, museums, tourism companies, and real estate conglomerates.

Vietnam’s tourism sector is now its second largest economic activity (behind agriculture) (Economist, 2009), and Party-owned tourism enterprises Saigontourist and Hanoitourist are the two largest tourism companies in the country, recently diversifying into real estate ventures, theme parks, hotel chains, and restaurants. The rapid development of these companies is tied to Party depictions of a Vietnamese culture that may be diluted by foreign conglomerates companies that bring negative cultural institutions such as nightclub, karaoke bars, and DVD shops into Vietnam’s societal fabric. Therefore, only culturally “sound” companies such as Saigontourist and Hanoitourist can be allowed to open nightclubs and karaoke bars (Koh, 2001; Suntikul, Airey, & Butler, 2008). Hence, the rhetoric of national culture is spun to limit non-state, private competition.

The CPV’s cultural narratives have been constructed over time through their rhetoric in 1945, when Vietnam achieved independence and the Communist Party first came to power (Duiker, 1996; 1995; Marr, 1995; Pelley, 2002; Tai, 1992; Tonesson, 1991), and in 1975, when the Americans left and the country reunified (Beresford, 1989), but it is the contemporary era, during what Vasavakul calls the “Third Wave” of state building (1997), when the CPV clashes against foreign interests by lauding the successes and struggles of its national culture that is of interest to me in this paper (Drummond & Thomas, 2003; Gainsborough, 2007; Marr & Rosen, 1999; Turley & Seldon, 1993). The CPV’s efforts to project a benign, impenetrable national culture have in reality been fraught with contradiction. In the đổi mới era, the CPV struggles with this paradox: how does the Party frame national culture on the basis of “Vietnameseness” (as opposed to “foreignness”) when they have opened their country to the spoils and challenges that come with foreign direct investment and economic deregulation? The answer lies in creating a state-wide tension between foreign cultural interlocutors and the enduring strength of a state-authored Vietnamese culture.

Market socialism and Vietnamese culture: strange bedfellows?

Post-socialist development and the Vietnamese reform era cultural alternative

Vietnam is generally grouped among other “post-socialist” countries, including China, Russia, Cuba, and Poland (Reid-Henry, 2007; Smith & Stenning, 2006; Wu, 2003; Young & Kaczmarek, 1999; Zhang, 2002). “Post-socialist” countries are broadly defined as states that historically followed a Soviet-style command economy system and are now engaged in nationwide “transitions to capitalism”. This transition on the part of formerly socialist economies is often understood to be a natural occurrence in the current era of globalization, one which is characterized by the adoption of
neoliberal policies, and the free market’s ability to touch every “nook and cranny” of everyday life through its mechanisms (Leyshon & Lee, 2003, p. 1). This global economic shift has led world leaders (perhaps most famously former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher) to exclaim that there “is no alternative” to the unregulated free market economy (Leyshon & Lee, 2003).

In 1986 the CPV ostensibly followed the lead of former socialist countries like China and the Soviet Union and announced what the Vietnamese government called “đổi mới” (“open door” or “new change”) policy reforms with an eye toward integration into the global economy. The CPV announced a broad set of policies to increase productivity, accept foreign investment, and (at the same time) retain a socialist foundation. The central tenets of the policy package, to be instituted purposefully, peacefully, and over time, are the decollectivization of agricultural collectives, the deregulation of state-owned enterprises in favor of transparent competition among private companies, and the “opening up” of the country’s borders to outside investment.

Vietnam’s leadership and by extension its đổi mới package continue to feature the term “market socialism” to describe the Vietnamese economy. The phrase, coined by the Party to reflect a top-down management style to policy creation, implementation, and management, separatas Vietnam’s economy from other more liberal or neoliberal market economies. This idiom (and its repetitive use by the CPV) suggests that the Party continues to embrace its socialist moniker and eschews a “one-size-fits-all” economic model of globalization favored by Western governments and leaders. When read in statistical terms, the đổi mới policies have been remarkably successful to the national economy and arguably to the credentials of the Party’s management approach (Förde, 2009; Luong, 2003, p. 17).

After twenty-five years, the đổi mới policies are today lauded for their successes and used to create an even more sound and profitable Vietnamese economy. That said, what is often missed in discussions of the Vietnamese reform period is that the Party’s production of national culture is critical to the presentation of the Vietnamese political economy in light of its socialist-inspired growth model and is also a useful tool in attributing disruptions to the reform model to attacks on Vietnam and its culture. The Party’s handling of Vietnamese and foreign culture at the beginning of the reform process is entertained in the next section.

Early reform era concerns with culture

As will be shown below, Party rhetoric and policy documents authored by Party leaders prove that the use and promotion of national culture is part and parcel of the đổi mới policies and the reform era in general. However, preceding pronouncements of Vietnam’s cultural strength and associated cultural campaigns, which began in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the reform era was characterized early on by Party worries over the loss of culture as a result of market expansion. According to Party leaders, globalization’s benefits to Vietnam—rapidly increasing jobs and wages, global trade opportunities, stronger currency value, the betterment of everyday life for many Vietnamese citizens, and more exposure on the global stage through foreign tourism, media attention, and World Trade Organization membership—were being offset by the erosion of national culture by external forces.

A few examples of concern over imperial cultural encroachment attest to its importance to Party leaders and demonstrate culture’s value in the management of Party authority. Party cadre misgivings regarding cultural loss went public just as economic benefits attributed to the reform era were being felt by many of Vietnam’s citizens. A quote by Marr and Rosen confirms Party concerns:

“Elderly revolutionaries routinely express worries about today’s youth losing interest in the nation’s proud history, to the extent that Vietnam’s existence may be threatened once again by a national inferiority complex and a tendency to ‘rent ourselves out to others’, rather than self-strengthening. Concerns like this have prompted Vietnam’s Communist Party in recent years to become more concerned than a couple of decades ago in claiming to defend and preserve authentic Vietnamese tradition and ‘national culture’ (1999, p. 181).

Vietnam’s youth often play a critical role in Party worries over the detrimental effects of negative, foreign culture on the country’s social fabric. Therefore, state-sponsored youth organizations are the primary acceptable means for young Vietnamese to organize, and a major state-owned national newspaper Tuổi Trẻ (Youth) is seen as an appropriate outlet for young people to give voice to their opinions. Arguing that relations between young people and the CPV are “complex, interactive, and subject to significant change” (2006, p. 329), Nguyen shows how young people, in contrast to other societies which lament the decadence and immorality of youth, are considered by the Party to be “in the vanguard of the process of nation building” (Nguyen, 2006, p. 330). This point is amplified by Thomas, who shows how youth mobilization in Hanoi’s public spaces are fraught with, on the one hand, Party concerns over appropriate public behavior and on the other encouragement for creating communities that serve pro-Vietnamese political propaganda (2002).

Philip Taylor highlights CPV worries over culture after market reform had first taken hold (2001). Party officials, sensing the country was spiraling into a “moral and cultural crisis” (2001, p. 127), issued official decrees deriding “bad cultural products” such as gambling, drugs, theft, juvenile delinquency, fraud, smuggling, and corruption (2001, pp. 127–128). A series of announcements highlighting negative culture solidified into a program which was adopted nationally and is focused on ridding the country of “social evils”. The campaign was instituted in the late 1990s and has been a passionately announced if arbitrarily executed initiative to rid Vietnam of foreign negative cultural evils and readjust the country according to the state’s ambiguous vision of traditional Vietnamese values. Importantly, Vietnamese values are less well defined in the social evils program than “bad cultural products” are, and as technological advancements have made their way in to Vietnam the Party has expanded social evils to include hazards such as internet pornography, Facebook, and democratic activist blogger sites.

Government officials run the gamut in assigning culpability for allowing foreign cultural ideologies to enter Vietnam, from rogue border agents and private entrepreneurs to foreign tourists and the internet. More broadly, they cite the failure of such quintessentially yet vaguely defined “Vietnamese” principles such as national integrity, spiritual and moral values, and “national essence” in allowing cultural depravity to seep into the country (P. Taylor, 2001, pp. 127–132). The social evils program thus constitutes an important ideological umbrella that has colored and directed the management of the Vietnamese reform era. On the other side of the coin, the CPV has more recently mounted a cultural offensive by proclaiming, sharing, and protecting its own unique and special national essence, to the extent its proud history, to the extent
As mentioned earlier, the Party’s vision of Vietnamese culture is vaguely defined but it is generally characterized by and repetitively linked to the twin themes of revolution, which harks back to colonial and imperial incursions into Vietnam and the protracted fight for national independence and socialism, based on Vietnam’s long-standing socialist principles. The two terms are relational, with national equity serving to paint a picture of national solidarity and Vietnamese revolution spurred on by the unique ability of the Vietnamese people to congeal in times of external assault on them. In general then, revolution and national equity are the twin pillars of the Vietnamese culture. They are also tools used in the “social evils” campaign to attack negative cultural ideals and reward those communities and businesses that live up to the CPV’s cultural standards.

The state labels communities with a “Vietnamese culture” tag and state culture is now cemented materially and discursively throughout the country in a number of different ways and highlights culture’s malleable value to the Party. Proving that the Party uses culture as both a “thing” and an ideology, there are signs in front of individual homes throughout Vietnam that declare the residence is home to a cultural family, cultural village or cultural community. Though the official measurement and specific criteria for awarding cultural status to these sites have not been publicly announced, home and neighborhood spaces are given the “cultural” designation by local CPV leaders if, for example, parents do not fight with each other for a period of X months, husbands do not beat their wives, no member of the family is a drug addict or a prostitute, the family is well-respected in the community, and sometimes (though not always) the family must include Party members. Other than the distinction of being labeled “cultural” there do not seem to be any tangible prizes to these awards, but it is clear that cultural designations are used not only to promote the cultural discourses of the state but also to keep social evils out of the fabric of society. And given their ubiquity in the Vietnamese landscape, the adage “culture is everywhere” applies to Vietnam (Mitchell, 2000).

Another way to understand the Party’s cultural instrumentality in society is to study recurring themes associated with the term. As mentioned earlier, revolution, and specifically the rising up of the Vietnamese people against foreign aggression and their collective triumph over imperialism, is at the forefront of the CPV’s cultural strategizing. Visits to historical museums owned by the state throughout the country describe Vietnam’s heritage in terms of its struggle and triumph over Chinese, French, Japanese, American, Khmer, and other “outside” aggressors. It is significant to note that these museums—most critically the War Remnant’s Museum Ho Chi Minh City and the “Hanoi Hilton”—are some of the most popular sites in the country visited by foreign tourists, signaling that the Communist Party intends to manage the message tourists receive, encourage a particular type of tourist venue, and control revenue streams from foreign visitors in Vietnam. Additionally, a frequent slogan on street corners, and emblazoned on billboards in the central squares of towns throughout Vietnam is “Viet Nam Muôn Nam”, which literally means “Vietnam (for) a million years” and has long been used as a rallying cry to inspire and mobilize Vietnam’s people against external threats.

Finally, the Party uses culture as a means to caution Vietnamese society against consumerism and the perils of individual wealth. Taylor’s comments below suggest consumerism’s unwelcome infringement on the successes of the đổi mới policies and on Vietnamese culture more generally:

“At the time that the economic benefits of Vietnam’s ‘open door’ (mở cửa) policy were just becoming noticeable, in the early 1990’s, this reform began to be linked to a perceived crisis in the country’s cultural and artistic traditions. Among the adverse effects identified by concerned commentators of opening the nation’s doors to the non-socialist world were a ‘cult of exotic taste’, the dizzying pace of borrowing, the resurgence of a cultural inferiority complex and the emergence of consumerism” (Taylor, 2003, p. 139).

For these “concerned commentators” (cited by P. Taylor as Party leaders) standard economic practices in Western society like borrowing and lending infringe on Vietnam’s cultural traditions. Since members of the CPV cannot renege on their self-praise for the creation and implementation of đổi mới, because that would degrade the Party’s capacity to implement and oversee economic policy decisions in the future, they have chosen to externalize Vietnam’s societal problems on outside forces. Vietnamese individuals are seen as succumbing to, rather than contributing to, destructive cultural influences such as selfishness and consumerism. CPV leadership blames the “vice of reverence for foreign countries” and identifies a range of problems, from impure mentalities to illegal behaviors and from the pervasiveness of “un-Vietnamese” cultural symbols to a lust for Westernized products for “doing harm to our great custom”. As examples, Marr and Rosen cite common themes like selfishness, smuggling, the ubiquity of foreign advertising, and the increased interest in culturally deviant materials such as “Coca-Cola, Madonna, and Hollywood” (1999, p. 181). According to the Party, these examples arrive in Vietnam from the outside and have no local foundation, forcing Vietnamese cultural narratives into a defensive position strengthened by the ideals of revolution and national equity. Through this discourse the Party is able to control which types of products reach the marketplace, and it would seem that when Vietnam is under cultural “attack” from outside forces that state-led or state-supported companies are in a privileged position to satiate Vietnamese consumers.

As this section has shown, the tension and management of Communist Party inspired cultural strength and cultural erosion in the context of market reform has become a centerpiece of the Party’s public discourse. Another facet of Party rule is that its economic strength through state-owned enterprises and “private” business ownership is inextricably tied to its unchallenged political control over the non-socialist world. Over the span of the đổi mới policies’ existence, Party oversight of the national economy has been nearly as important as the implementation of the policies themselves. VCP leadership congratulates itself as the creator of đổi mới policies and expounds frequently on the successes of đổi mới. In a recent speech, Communist Party Secretary General Nông Đức Mạnh prefaced the achievements of the đổi mới policies with a nod to Party supervision: “Political stability is the most important factor that will lead to improving the country’s comprehensive renovation process in an effective and sustainable way” (Vietnam News Agency, 2010). Later in the speech Party Secretary General Mạnh stated that development and socio-economic matters were related matters, “affirming that the country must maintain socio-political stability if it wants to develop...[and] development creates the foundations for stability” (Vietnam News Agency, 2010).

The ties between economic development and socio-economic stability are crucial for the Party to maintain its one-party leadership but the quote above also hints at the ways in which political stability allows for the reform conditions set by the Party to continue to sustain economic growth. By extension, Mạnh’s comments silence criticism aimed at the Party’s capacity to rent-seek. In the next section I argue that concerns about the wearing away of culture mask the CPV’s own worry that a loosening of state control over the national economy and the enhanced pursuit of wealth by non-Party actors will disrupt the Party-owned enterprises’ economic viability
and undermine their political command. If đổi mới is an instrument designed to build the national economy, how is the Party’s fluid description of culture and its cultural program used to make sure the growth (or at least the maintenance) of the state-owned economic sector continues to be served by CPV’s political leadership? The next section evaluates this question using Party created cultural policies.

**Culture the Party’s way: national policy directives and foreign critiques**

The cultural policy document I translated has been explained to me by CPV officials during fieldwork conducted in Ho Chi Minh City in 2006 as the distinctly cultural component of the reform era policy package, which also includes economic and political directives. Entitled “The Resolution of the Fifth Conference of the Party’s Central Executive Board (session VIII) on Building and Developing an Advanced Vietnamese Culture, Which is Typical of National Character”, it was written in the run up to the Ninth National Party Congress in early 2001 by then Vietnam Secretary General Lê Khả Phiêu, who as secretary general held the most powerful political position in Vietnam between 1997 and 2001. Secretary General Phiêu was subsequently ousted following the session but the document—he authored was revised sporadically between 2001 and August, 2005, and continues to carry his signature. When I inquired about the CPV’s cultural policies to officials on the Ho Chi Minh City tourism board, this was the document they provided me, saying that it can answer all of my questions about Vietnamese and foreign culture in the reform era. I showed the document to officials on the city’s real estate board and it was independently confirmed to be the official cultural document of the CPV. The document I received was a hard-copy version and one was also published online. The document is 7800 words long and the Party website stated that the publication was first published online on August 18, 2005. I secured the document online at the end of 2006, and although it is no longer accessible there, it continues to be available in Vietnam’s National Archives in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. As a relatively closed country politically, I was unable to interview Party officials about the cultural reform policies nor was I able to attend Party meetings in Vietnam to determine the process behind CPV decision making and the creation of policy and law in the country. In the absence of these opportunities and with the desire to understand how policy is conveyed directly by the Party to its citizens rather than through the state’s various mouthpieces, “The Resolution…On Building and Developing an Advanced National Culture” serves as the empirical backbone of the paper because it has been used as the Party’s official cultural guidelines through the early part of the 21st century.

The policy document concerns Party authority over culture and the daily cultural battles among Vietnamese citizens, battles which are waged on production lines, in store fronts, and in the daily lives of people throughout the country. In no uncertain terms the official language from the CPV leadership in Hanoi posits a Vietnamese culture predetermined to shape the country’s current and future socio-economic development plans. In sharp contrast to the global neoliberal economy, where governments withdraw from direct ownership and the regulation of the economy, the Party affirms that the transformation and strength of the Vietnamese economy has been possible because of Vietnamese culture, with direction from the Party. Party supervision and a cautious course of action—proceeding differently (or more “culturally”) than Western and neoliberal models of growth when integrating into the global economy—benefits the Party’s desire to perpetuate its one-party rule and maintain the state’s market share through its state owned and “private” businesses (Gillen, 2010).

What emerges from the Party’s cultural policy documentation is a repetitive cadence that centers on the now familiar lines of argument regarding what belongs in Vietnamese culture and more specifically what is to be left out. Representing culture as a “front”, Secretary General Phiêu praises the virtues of a strong national culture based on revolution, national equity, and triumph. However, Phiêu warns that Vietnamese people must never let up on their revolutionary ideals because to do so will weaken national culture. Therefore, revolution is a sustained feature of Vietnamese development. He writes that “building and developing culture is a long-term cause of revolution, which requires strong revolutionary will, cautiousness and patience” (8). Thus, there are in equal measures praise for the strength of state-sponsored Vietnamese culture through revolution and warnings against easing off of Vietnam’s unique revolutionary spirit. Moreover, the cultural ideals of revolutionary struggle and equity after independence have a long historical legacy which further legitimizes their power and necessity during periods of Vietnamese transition. The opening paragraph of the signature cultural policy document states in part:

“Thanks to thousands of years of creative labor and of Vietnamese people communities’ unyielding struggles for the sake of the nation, Vietnamese culture has come into being as it is nowadays. It can be said that Vietnamese culture has sharpened Vietnamese soul and spirit, thus brightening the nation’s glorious history. In the age of Ho Chi Minh, Vietnamese culture, with the appropriate and creative policy of our Party, continues to be promoted, thus mainly contributing to our great victories in the struggle for national liberation and in the construction of socialism” (1).

The policy document thus focuses on Vietnamese culture’s illumination through Party leadership and the consistent use of revolution as a tool in beating back foreign attacks.

In another section of the policy, entitled “About the Reality of our Culture: The Achievements”, culture arises from artistic representations of struggle: “In literature and art, creative activities have had new developments. Inspired by our revolution, wars of resistance and innovation, new valuable works of art have been created” (2). Here the terrain of revolutionary struggle is instilled by a Vietnamese culture that is illustrated through cultural artifacts like art. The kinds of art most likely to be considered archetypes of Vietnamese national culture by the CPV are paintings, like “portrayals of historic events or illustrious war heroes” (P. Taylor, 2001, p. 109). They depict “legendary battles against Chinese invaders and…soldiers preparing to fight the enemy” (P. Taylor, 2001). Violent depictions of “us” versus “them” reinforce the revolutionary side of Vietnamese culture. Other acceptable artistic renderings portray the docile, determined spirit of Vietnamese farmers toiling in rice paddies, tending livestock, and using Vietnam’s rich water bodies for replenishment and cleaning (P. Taylor, 2001, p. 114). These representations of Vietnam are directly related to national equity and solidarity because they depict the often singular feeling among Vietnamese that their cultural hearth and source of honest work and a peaceful, family oriented existence resides in the countryside, while chaos, foreignness, depravity, and a decidedly un-Vietnamese way of life is apparent in the country’s cities (Belanger, 2006; Drummond & Thomas, 2003; Goscha & de Tregolde, 2003). But these passages also hint at more broadly at what kinds of art are tolerated: that which is Vietnamese and not foreign, that which is not produced for a mass global audience, and that which is produced by Vietnamese artistic labels and promoters. Since the CPV defines, owns, and controls the artistic production and distribution channels in Vietnam, continued economic dominance of the artistic industry seems to be a component of the CPV’s cultural strategies.

As representations of Vietnamese resistance and equality, artistic expressions speak back to Vietnamese culture as a grounded verification of historical struggle and, contradictorily,
tranquility and unity (N.A. Taylor, 2001). From the above examples of artistic production and the opening lines of the cultural policy package we can see that state-supported CPV Vietnamese artists have the agency to facilitate the cultural ideals of revolution and equity. The contradiction between a violent and serene vision of culture is never reconciled because the tension reflects culture’s malleability and, more specifically, its instrumentality to the Party: revolution and equitability provide the CPV with a platform both to reward Vietnamese artists for their revolutionary accomplishments and to offer the prospect of a peaceful and equitable national society. That the latter is never fully attainable is of course based on the other side of the Party’s expedient cultural canon, an enduring sense that the country is under attack by foreign powers. Additionally, “artist” is a sufficiently general category of cultural producer that the Party can include and exclude individuals, organizations, and corporations on an arbitrary basis because of the vague nature of the term.

Culture-based artistry also facilitates more than the fluidity of the CPV’s Vietnamese culture and the promotion of state-sector artistic products. The state’s cultural policies are a means to redress discrepancies between elderly imaginings of culture and young people’s perceived ambivalence toward Party inspired culture through an endorsement of a revolutionary type of artistic expression which appeals to all age groups. After the state exuberates over art as a tool for the continuation of the revolutionary cause, the policy’s wording goes on to tie historical art to young artists’ revolutionary training. The policy explains,

“Most of the writers and artists have been trained as well as challenged in the reality of revolution. They are, therefore, experienced and patriotic. They still keep their virtue and determination to devote their creations to the public as well as maintain their role of being both soldiers and artists. Some artists and writers, despite being of old age, still pursue their creative careers while the young generation has taken great effort to look for something new” (2).

Troublesome, negative cultural trends on the part of Vietnam’s young people are mollified by relating their artistic progress to elderly revolutionaries’ work on behalf of the state. Additionally, the state gives young people artistic space to build “something new” while confining true artistry to Vietnamese revolution, depicted as it has been through warscapes ranging from border wars with China to long battles with the United States. Importantly, Western media is a frequent source of derision by the Party and often barred from legally being distributed in Vietnam. Therefore, stressing Vietnam’s independent revolutionary spirit in the arts pulls the country toward state-sponsored and approved arts and media outlets and draws it away from Western cultural-economic and media products.

Revolutionary art is the dominant product of Vietnamese material culture in the reform era. The national struggle against foreign culture includes many more products and are, as mentioned previously, much more clearly defined if always in the process of unfolding in Party ideology. The Party’s cultural resolution seeks to broaden the scope of the Vietnamese cultural battle by identifying foreign countries’ negative cultural baggage. A selection from the Party’s cultural policies has this to say on the subject of cultural damage: “The vice of reverence for foreign countries and disregard for national cultural values, the selfish individualism, etc...are doing harm to our fine customs. Cases are due to money and fame...Corruption and smuggling are increasing. Drugs, prostitution and other social evils are on the rise. Superstition is still quite popular” (3).

This passage functions for the Party on two levels. First, the Party seems hesitant to directly equate foreign influence with degrading cultural mores. The passage works to a more subtle extent than the Party’s previous calls to categorize foreign culture do. Specifically, categorizing foreign cultural products for Marr and Rosen (1999) means issuing hypothetical permits for some products, like computers, while negating others, such as Hollywood films. The CPV recognizes that direct confrontation and dismissal of foreign culture and its products has the potential to adversely affect economic exchange, so the Party treads lightly around cultural exchange. To proceed in an antagonistic way toward foreign culture also risks drawing the ire of the Party’s many investors who facilitate international cultural production. “The vice of reverence for foreign countries” allows the Party a basis to reward foreign cultural products with the more philosophical vagaries associated with foreign cultural thought. But the decree, in its introductory remarks about “the vice of reverence and disregard for national cultural values”, clearly suggests that everything from drugs and prostitution to individualism and fame fall under the banner of foreign culture.

In a related passage, the CPV explains the tension between the Vietnamese market and negative culture this way: “Free market and international integration, despite their enormous positive effects, reveal their flip side, which negatively influence our people’s ideology, morality and way of living”. What this passage indicates is a desire on the part of the Party to effectively manage the contradictions it sees arising out of the global economy: for example, supervising the betterment of Vietnamese society through gradual increases in access to capital, and cautioning against this global capital’s negative undertones. For Party managers, foreign culture isn’t only a part of the transaction cost with other countries; foreign culture exists in foreign currency itself. This instills an air of caution to every encounter Vietnamese people have with foreign money or “outside” inventory and presumes that Vietnamese know the difference between internal and external transactions, between Vietnamese goods and foreign products. And in its association of foreign culture with some of the harmful features of this new, dôi mới economy, the CPV further orients Vietnam to acquiesce to its power by explicitly defining Vietnam’s chronology based on a Party roadmap, drawing attention to the CPV’s leadership throughout this progress, and keeping the outside world separate from Vietnam in times of both war and peace.

The excerpts of the CPV’s cultural policies underlined in this section highlight the Party’s realization of power through the state’s idea of Vietnamese culture. In invoking Vietnamese culture to consist of the agency of the Party and Vietnamese people the CPV can strategize for a variety of purposes. For example, the cultural policies can exalt the usefulness of Vietnamese culture in the work of Vietnamese artists, which tacitly divorces Party leaders from the construction of Vietnamese culture. The CPV can also regulate its version of Vietnamese culture depending on which citizen base needs “cultural” training at the time. It segments Vietnamese citizenship based on artwork: it can condemn artists with “deviant” aspirations and laud those who serve a never ending revolution. The Communist Party can also raise culture to a level above the practices of individuals, a beacon guiding society as a whole (Duncan, 1980).

It seems clear that the CPV wants to accomplish much in these passages, but perhaps the overarching point to come from the idea of “Vietnamese culture” is a certain political-economic bent that speaks both to the state’s own ideological course and its economic intentions. Art is permissible only if it is cultural; that is, if it depicts revolution or serenity. This approach allows the Party to monitor any art or innovation that it deems contradictory to these pillars, which includes entire sectors of the technology, media, and leisure economies. The position opens the door (and keeps it ajar) for the Party to insert its own enterprises into these profitable and rapidly developing sectors and reap the financial rewards that come from rent-seeking. Individualism and selfishness are not tenets of Party-authored Vietnamese culture, so anything that isn’t community
based will harm the country and should not be allowed to operate in Vietnam. Entrepreneurship would seem to be discouraged under this line of reasoning as individual profit seeking motivations eat away at the socialist character of the Vietnamese people. Because entrepreneurship and individual economic freedoms are centerpieces of neoliberal policies (Harvey, 2005), it appears that the Party is hesitant to pursue a path of neoliberalization. Additionally, if individual wealth is discouraged then private, non-state firms, small businesses, and foreign-operated companies can be targeted for violating the Party's cultural policies, to say nothing of the limits and strict regulation on private enterprise growth a critique of individualism provides the CPV. Indeed, though research and official news reports on Party-led crackdowns on private enterprise in the name of culture are scarce, a handful of studies demonstrate the Party's efforts and use of cultural ideologies to keep valuable industries in the hands of the state (Gillen, 2010; Koh, 2001; Lloyd, 2003). If Vietnamese covet foreign countries, they by extension covet outsiders' way of life. The government's cultural policies orient Vietnamese people toward Vietnamese products, Vietnamese-owned companies, and Vietnam's unique socialist-inspired economic growth model, each of which benefit the businesses operated by Party officials, organizations, and departments. This section has analyzed a cultural policy document authored by the CPV to show how the Party uses culture expeditiously in its control over the contemporary Vietnamese political economy. The reform era has confronted Party leadership with a number of challenges to its economic and political rule, and culture seems a useful tool in facing these challenges, which illustrates culture's value to the governing efforts of the CPV. As indicated by the Party's cultural policies, the Vietnamese state has created a binary between Vietnamese and foreign that favors the Party's management of the political economy over any external model or inclusive of any foreign characteristics. The Vietnamese national culture designed by the Party is resourceful precisely because it has been designed and executed with a deliberate malleability, a culture that despite the best efforts of the Party to project as stable and resilient is in effect in constant flux, unfolding in reaction to new threats to Party authority and goals. Thus, Party-led national cultural strategies exhibit the hollowness and impact that characterizes Party governance in the market reform era.

Conclusions

Using George Yúdice's expedient culture as a framework, I have outlined the ways in which the CPV develops and uses Vietnamese culture as a tool in Party-led nation building and an expedient weapon against foreign aggressors. These aggressors come in many forms, and today their onslaught on national culture continues unabated. The Party's national culture used to ward off foreign cultures confirms, idealizes, and positions further political decisions through revolutionary representations of the nation. And yet the counterbalance of an equitable and peaceful Vietnamese populace also serves Party purposes. If Vietnam is an equitable culture, then the CPV can invent selfish, individualistic, and free market oriented foreign enemies that upset their peace and reinforce the binary of insider/outsider once again.

But the analysis above, highlighted by the Party's cultural policies, extends the argument from a simple cultural exercise in the ongoing confirmation of statehood and one-party legitimacy to demonstrate how culture is useful in the command of its economic rule. The reform era cultural policies show that for the CPV political opportunism is the key to understanding its management of its economic agenda. Although the Vietnamese marketplace has been opened to foreign investment, the Party makes it clear that contesting the existing neoliberal economic model is paramount to Vietnamese society, with direction from the Party. In Asia, geographers critical of a neoliberal model of governance often implicate national governments in the adoption (Lee, Kim, & Wainwright, 2010; Springer, 2009) and adaptation (Harvey, 2005, p. 120) of neoliberalism. For the CPV, a free market that rewards entrepreneurship and individual prosperity is a trap set by foreign interlocutors interested in exploiting the Vietnamese economy and damaging something potentially more integral and eternal to Vietnamese society: Party-led national culture.

Perhaps the bigger question to ask with regard to the CPV's goals is this: What about the CPV's đổi mới policy package makes it seem as though the Party, and indeed other Communist states, has any interest in fully integrating into the global economy through "typical" neoliberal measures? Decreasing state-owned enterprises, reducing state services and market protections, encouraging investment and loans from a variety of sources (public and private, foreign and domestic), and exposing its national economy and its citizens to the peaks and valleys of unregulated economic development appear to have an insignificant role in Vietnam's reforms. For some commentators this seems true in China as well, especially in cities, where profitability and potential for growth are highest (Wang, 2001; Wu, 2003; Zhang, 2002). For political geographers interested in the implementation and reach of neoliberalism in post-socialist and Communist countries, the CPV case study illustrates that contesting neoliberalism is not only a localized project: organizations interested in making their communities more economically prosperous or even more equitable by resisting neoliberal hegemony can find parallels in the rhetoric of the Vietnamese government's market liberalization program. However, just because the Party opposes neoliberal thought and practice does not mean that it is accepting of an equitable and socialist-based society. A lesson to be drawn from the CPV's policies is that even if neoliberalism is not accepted as a theory of national "political-economic practices" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2) then the alternative may not by default be a more just, superior, or even adequate alternative to neoliberalism. The CPV has created an economy in which the cultural discourses of equity/us, caution, and community play a role in drawing attention away from the state's predatory economic actions, actions which create solvency for state-owned enterprises and challenge private, non-state businesses. The production of national culture is expedient to the CPV because the Party can communicate cultural ideals to Vietnamese citizens who are sympathetic to the struggle against foreign aggression and the fight for national liberation but who may not buy into the CPV's ownership of a large chunk of the country's economic pie.

For Harvey, "Neoliberalization has in effect swept across the world like a vast tidal wave of institutional reform and discursive adjustment...where no place can claim total immunity (with the
exception of a few states such as North Korea)” (2005, p. 145). Instead of showing how Vietnam has been pulled under the “vast tidal wave” of the neoliberal global economy, a closer inspection of Vietnamese reforms provides evidence of the Party’s refusal to submit to the inevitability of neoliberalization and the corresponding loss of political and economic control that comes with opening up the national economy to globalization. Thus, the more interesting exploratory question to pose with regard to cultural expiry and the Vietnamese political economy is not to ask how the Vietnamese political economy will be stifled by the Party’s restraints, but how the Party and other post-socialist and Communist governments such as China, Russia, and Cuba will decide to manage and use national culture when it confronts new challenges to its leadership. In Cuban studies, for example, Spanish language sources have become an important means to evaluate society’s response to the erosion of social services in the late 1980s (Hearn, 2004) and to illustrate why conspicuous consumption practices continue amidst the grinding poverty of Castro-led Cuba (Holbraad, 2004). In addition to the need for researchers to assess the people’s role in transforming state-society relationships in post-socialist countries, I believe that securing and analyzing primary sources from Communist governments in their communications with their citizens are a plausible means to understand the exercise of power in post-socialist governance.

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