

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Globalising Vietnam's national identities in the early twentieth century

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Abstract

This article attempts to map some of Vietnam's national identities that were constructed in the early twentieth century (1900s–1930s). Instead of treating Vietnamese national identity either as a monolithic entity or as too fragmented to be considered a useful concept, it shows that at least three interactive and overlapping national identities emerged, each with its own political significance and state institutionalisation. To map them, this article re-traces several key nationalists in the early twentieth century. It situates each of their national imaginations within interconnected global relations, namely, Civilisational relations of hierarchy, cultural relations of equality, and radical relations of exploitation and oppression. This analytical approach to mapping national identity offers a framework that may prove valuable for cross-national comparative studies.

Keywords: civilisation; culture; national identity; nation-state formation; revolution; Vietnam

Introduction

This article explores a seemingly unintuitive question: how many national identities have been constructed in Vietnam? Where did they come from? And what has been their political significance? When reviewing Christopher Goscha's *Vietnam: a New History* (2016), Keith Taylor (2017) provides a surprising answer: “historical scholarship on Vietnam has until recently been confined to a narrow, linear interpretive path in service to the notion of a united ‘Vietnam’ that has followed a teleological trajectory from ancient times to the present.” It seems that there is often one stable “Vietnam.” This is puzzling in the sense that pre-colonial Vietnam was a place accommodating different ethnic identities and also different political regimes separating the North from the South (Li, 1998).

Taylor's comment has some merit if we examine the literature about Vietnam's nationalism and state formation in the 1980s and 1990s. Vietnamese national identity was rationalised with different types of “unity” (Vu, 2007). “Modernist” views saw it as a political product of modern state building, and in colonised countries like Vietnam, political elites benefited from inheriting European pre-made templates to build their own national unity. In short, the nation was “invented” by the state, and, at the same time, this established a sharp cut between “modernity” and “tradition.” In contrast, ethno-symbolist scholars look into early modern histories, not to identify some mythic cores that expanded and contracted over time, but to establish continuous historical practices or patterns that have constituted a resilient Vietnamese bounded national identity. For example, multiple forms of resistance against Chinese, French, and American imperialisms were put together, effectively producing a continuous Vietnamese tradition of resistance against foreign invasions (Marr, 1980). Alternatively,

some searched for a communal, supportive identity within village organisations. Through village-based practices, socio-economic and political structures emerged, producing a coherent sense of being Vietnamese before modern interventions (Phan, 2006).

Since the 1990s, these “unity” views have not disappeared,¹ but they have been challenged by “fragmentary” scholarship. Instead of establishing a bounded “united” Vietnam, “fragmentary” scholars see Vietnam’s nationalism as a space of overlapping debates, intellectual resources, and contestations. National identity becomes a pluralistic phenomenon forged by different social groups (McHale, 2008; Taylor, 2001). The linkage between a singular national consciousness and the state, especially the Communist Party, is destabilised. Thus, history is read differently. Instead of making explicit cultural patterns that have shaped “one Vietnam,” researchers focus more on excavating multiple interactive debates that unfolded at different sites. This is the reason I use “fragmentary,” which is similar to Goscha’s (2016) “multiple Vietnams.”

The “unity” camp has been criticised mostly because it glosses over various empirical evidence showing that many Vietnamese communities do not fit into a monolithic national identity. This historical reductionism simplifies complex and wider relations into linear trajectories. Being Vietnamese often implies resistance against foreign intrusions, for example. Normatively, this intellectual tradition not only risks excluding certain constituencies, but it also complicitly supports state legitimacies. This is not only a problem in Communist states but also in other types of nation-state building.

Meanwhile, the “fragmentary” camp, despite providing many useful assessments about the heterogeneity and inconsistent components of national identities, has made few attempts to situate different identities in an evolving process with wider debates and enduring political significance. At the same time, there has been a tendency to retreat from “the nation” as a useful concept (Vu, 2007, p. 212). This is because the fluidity of national identities suggests that the state has been unable to forge a “united Vietnam.” Rarely, however, does the state stop drawing national boundaries through the use of organised violence. More importantly, the state does not invent “the nation” by itself but often draws upon heterogeneous national narratives not only for domestic legitimations *but also to cope with dynamic global situations and relations*. Put differently, national identities are not constructed in isolation but by positioning different Vietnams within wider global worldviews. Moving away from “the nation” would further obscure the ongoing and evolving creation of dynamic national boundaries, including their wider debates, global implications, and enduring political technologies to organise them.

This article does not shy away from “the nation,” nor attempt to bring back a “united” Vietnam. Rather, following Taylor and Goscha, it sees national identities not only as “fragmentary” but also as a relational evolving process of inventions, reinventions, and exclusions. Over time, it has produced situational national identities and enduring political practices not only for “being Vietnamese” but also necessary “national memberships” for being in corresponding global worldviews conceived by different communities of nationalists. As Tuong Vu (2007, p. 212) argues, national identities are often products of various relations, from “global to national to local, [which] still contend with each other to cultivate loyalty among Vietnamese.”

More precisely, in examining and situating “Vietnamese national identities” in broader global worldviews, this article focuses particularly on the three Vietnamese identities identified by the “unity” camp: “modern,” “tradition,” and “revolution” to show that they are not “either/or.” Instead, they interacted, evolved, and overlapped with each other. In this evolving process, these identities emerged along with three respective global relations, namely, Civilisational relations of hierarchy, Cultural relations of equality, and Radical relations of exploitation and oppression. Positioning Vietnam within these relational global worldviews, *different* nationalists actualised them domestically by distributing

¹Two recent examples are *Bộ Quốc Sử* (National History, [forthcoming](#)) and Ben Kiernan’s *Việt Nam* (2017). The former follows a Marxist teleology while the latter sees Jiaozhi and aquaculture as territorial and symbolic markers of a stable ‘Lạc Việt’ (Sasges, 2017).

these identities, not within an entire population, but within specified constituencies that were deemed eligible for specific national memberships. People in Vietnam have been surrounded by such overlapping boundaries. I will call these Civilisational, Cultural, and Radical identities.

A focus on these three national identities is not meant to be exhaustive. Seeing national identity as an ongoing, evolving, and pluralistic process means that it is always open for further enrichment by incorporating more actors, contexts, and agencies. In this article, the three national identities are useful in two ways. First, not only did they situate different Vietnams in respective global worldviews, but they also emerged through direct conversations with each other and produced enduring sociopolitical symbols and practices. Second, these dynamics also existed outside of Vietnam's context. I will provide comparisons where possible. Further research can use them as comparative axes to identify similar processes and contingent outcomes when different national identities and entailing political praxis contest with each other in different contexts. As Goscha argues:

We need to recognise that the history of Vietnam, like any other place in the world, is a series of interlocking forces and people, occurring and acting at specific points in time and space, each generating its own possibilities and eliminating others at the same time. (2016, p. xxxiv)

This article proceeds in four sections. The first part provides an understanding of nationalism that allows us to examine pluralist, evolving national identities. The three remaining sections, respectively, explore the emergence of the three Vietnam's national identities within respective global relations: Civilisational, Cultural, and Radical. To briefly restate the answer to the research question, there were *at least* three national identities that were constructed in early twentieth-century Vietnam (1900s–1930s).

An understanding of nationalism

National identities are products of nationalism. Hence, it is essential to revisit this core concept to avoid conflating it with “patriotism,” which refers to a dedication and belonging to a desirable nation or country. Nationalism specifies the desirable content. It seeks answers to the question: what makes a good nation?

Ernest Gellner's answer is, perhaps, still useful. In the context of globalising modernisation and industrialisation, every state, he argues, needed a homogeneous “national unit” to function as a productive “labour force.” A “good” nation, in this understanding, is a “national unit” that was invented by the state and intellectual elites for achievements in modernisation. The goal was to have a “congruence” as in Gellner's (2008, p. 1) oft-cited definition of nationalism: a “political principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.”

This conception is useful in two ways. First, it does not equate “the nation” with the entire population within a given territory. Rather, it identifies “national units” or “national memberships” that were ideologically created. This suggests that “the nation” has boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Second, the conception is not only about “nation-building” but “nation-state building.” Building a nation involves creating a congruence between a national constituency and a state's purpose. Hence, in an ideal scenario, the state is always “representing the nation.”

The problem with Gellner's conception is that it identifies only one type of “good” national unity that was functionally “invented,” almost “fabricated,” in a statist top-down fashion to serve modernisation. He admits that many traditional ties were destroyed in these processes. This effectively creates a sharp cut between “tradition” and “modernity”:

The general imposition of a high culture on society... is the establishment of an anonymous, impersonal society, with mutually sustainable atomised individuals, held together above all by a shared culture of this kind, in place of the previous complex structure of local groups, sustained by folk cultures reproduced locally and idiosyncratically by the micro-groups themselves (p. 57).

It is Benedict Anderson who attempts to correct Gellner's excessive attention to vertical statist fabrications. To do so, he creates a typology of nationalism, separating vertical statism or “official nationalism” from a “popular nationalism” based on “horizontal comradeships” (2006, pp. 9–36). In

changing the style of imagination from vertical to horizontal, a much more dynamic space, Anderson brought to our attention not ideology, but multiple national stories written by different groups of people. Facing unsettled situations when imperial and religious authorities collapsed, people re-narrated themselves and shared their stories in printed forms such as novels and newspapers. “These forms,” he argues, “provided the technical means for ‘representing’ the kind of imagined community that is the nation” (p. 25).

Equally important, the reason individual narrations became national narrations is that storytellers structured their dynamic experiences along the capitalist “homogenous” and “empty” time. Time in seconds, minutes, hours, etc., is empty because it has no concrete social qualities in it. Hence, when reading novels or newspapers written in a national language, people from different places are “simultaneously” exposed to similar life contents embedded in empty time. They became sympathetic with each other’s life experiences by being in the “same time.”

Shifting from vertical statism to horizontal imagination, Anderson opens a vast playing field for studying nationalism. Instead of limiting “the nation” to statist modernisation entirely cut off from “traditions,” “horizontal imaginations” relegate statism or “official nationalism” to a secondary role and flatten social reality, capable of accommodating diverse national imaginations.

Nevertheless, there is one objection from Partha Chatterjee that may help sharpen our understanding of Anderson’s “horizontal style of imagination.” Chatterjee takes issue with Anderson’s “nation as printed stories” becoming “modular” across different countries. In Anderson’s words:

The creation of [the nation] . . . was the spontaneous distillation of a complex “crossing” of discrete historical forces but that, once created, becomes “modular,” capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations (p. 4).

If imagination styles can be modularly transplanted, “what do [colonial peoples] have left to imagine” other than being “perpetual consumers of modernity” (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 5). In his answer, Chatterjee not only considers Anderson’s “imagination” as “Western,” technological materialist, and “derivative discourses,” but also develops an “Eastern” inner authenticity – a distinct spiritual sphere living not in “homogenous” but “heterogenous” time (2003). This inner authenticity is distinct from “the West,” and also beyond the reach of capitalism.

[Anderson’s style applies] only to the domains of the “outside” . . . The spiritual is an “inner domain” bearing the “essential” marks of cultural identity. The greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture (1993, p. 6).

This is, I think, a misrecognition of Anderson’s “imagination.” It is not a fixed arrangement that allows “copying in any simple manner,” he confirms (1998, p. 32), but contextually situated “self-conscious” learning processes joining varying frames of reference to make sense of contemporary situations. Such creative agency derives from situated storytellers (novelists, journalists), capitalists, and politicians. Thus, with “modular imagination,” Anderson means something that can be disentangled into separate parts and re-merged with a wide variety of other political and ideological factors. New nebulous “constellations” or creative “mixtures” of old and new experiences emerge (like a book written from many citations). “The peculiarity of nationalist images,” he argues (p. 26), is that they are “replicas without originals” or “pure mix” (p. 259). Hence, “there is no Originator of the nation, or rather the Originator is a ceaselessly changing, here-and-now, Us” (p. 57). Chatterjee misrecognises Anderson’s “imagination” style by situating it within fixed boundaries of “origins” and “derivations” and of East and West, rather than an unbounded learning process.

This conversation, however, remains a useful methodological reminder. Whenever one embarks on tracing the journey of an imagination and its political significance, context is important as it allows us to describe the “merge and be merged” processes that may contain varying contingent contestations, disentanglements, and re-entanglements, effectively producing diverging national imaginations.

Given these considerations, I agree with Pheng Cheah’s conception of nationalism that synthesises both Gellner’s and Anderson’s insights. He sees “nationalism” as “prestatished nationalism” meaning

that the lack of congruence between “the nation” and “the state” “gave rise to the nationalist desire to inspire and transform the existing state structure in the nation’s image” (2003, p. 5).

This conception is synthetic because, first, it begins with “the nation,” not the state nor modernisation purposes. This way of thinking about nationalism allows researchers to continue travelling across Anderson’s horizontal flatland searching for diverse interactive national imaginations. By searching, I mean tracing different contextually situated actors who weave together varying experiences to craft their desirable national images for Vietnam. And by interactive, I mean each national image was not curated in isolated corners. Nationalists were often “talking” to, “amplifying” or “critiquing” each other and, by so doing, developing their national imaginations. Nationalism, understood in this way, is not about generating a united national identity, but a “horizontal” field of evolving interconnected debates.

Second, Cheah’s conception does not ignore the state. Taking “nation’s images” as the starting point to avoid excessive statism does not mean forgetting the state. Imagining “the nation” often comes with nationalists’ desires to socialise it through novel state-building practices, effectively transforming existing state structures. In so doing, they generate particular “national” constituencies and representative state leadership that altogether become the bearers of that very national image. With this logical move, Gellner’s “congruence” is also reincorporated.

Cheah’s conception is not entirely alien to Vietnamese writers. “Prestatised nationalism” is relatable to Trần Quốc Vương’s (1993, pp. 221–268) idea of “*văn hóa dân gian*” (popular culture) influencing “*văn hóa chính thống*” (official culture). Vương does not primordialise “*dân gian*” but sees it as a fragmented but resilient sphere, like Anderson’s “horizontal” worldview. If we follow Anderson, Cheah, and Vương, we have to travel on a “flatland,” not “up there” structures nor “deep down” cultural substratum, to capture everyday stories. Such stories may be the “prestatised” resources that inform “multidimensional interactions between popular culture and elite, official cultures” (p. 246).

With this understanding of “prestatised nationalism” established, I proceed to examine the three national identities, which were situated respectively within Civilisational, Cultural, and Radical relations.

Civilisational national identity

“Civilisation” has two popular meanings: a “universal” progress, as in “the Standard of Civilisation,” and a “particular,” locally bounded phenomenon, as in “the Clash of Civilisations,” or, more precisely, “the Clash of Cultures.” In this section, I pay attention to a national image made possible within “universal” Civilisation.

The notion of “universal Civilisation” arose from Enlightenment modernity rather than merely from the political rhetoric of colonialism. Its contributors often embraced a positivist assumption that there was a real world out there, both social and physical, understood as a system with stable constituent parts and arrangements (Katzenstein, 2022). More importantly, they believed that this system could be known through rigorous methodical inquiries. And with each piece of knowledge, which was supposed to be causally compatible with each other (i.e. rationalism), humanity can progressively comprehend the world in its entirety, eventually achieving complete Civilisation (Berlin, 2014, pp. 17–87).

Civilisational universality is relevant to nationalism in two ways. First, “universal progress,” through both intellectual and political interactions, congealed a competitive global worldview in which “national” units competed for progressive achievements. Each achievement was a piece of truth-knowledge, allowing countries to approach a universally better future while reviewing their pasts to measure off their imperfections. Put differently, universal Civilisational progress established a hierarchical ladder between those who achieved more and those who achieved less. In Vietnam, this worldview was circulated within different circles of French colonialism, but it also gained wider support from local actors. The Tonkin Free School (TFS) was one of the earliest examples.

Phan Chu Trinh (1872–1926), a key founder, wrote about the Civilisational hierarchy in a manner almost identical to contemporary Asian modernists (e.g. Fukuzawa Yukichi and Liang Qichao).

“Civilisation,” he said, “depends on the degree of development of the people’s knowledge that each country has acquired.” Accumulating knowledge was not particular, but universal. “Some of the world’s countries are still backward,” he claimed, while “others are partly civilised, and only a few have become civilised.” To be in this progressive world, and to improve people’s knowledge required “competition” that would “bring about more intellectual accomplishment and intensive growth in the science, [which] leads civilisation to new heights.” (1907, pp. 129–130)

While taking the Civilisational worldview as a strategic compass, they positioned not just a backward, but a uniformly “static” Vietnam within it. Even though they dismissed racial relations because “yellow-skinned people are just as able as white people,” TFS writers admitted that Vietnam’s civilisation was “static in character and lacked the dynamism that characterised other countries.” Because of this, the Vietnamese “cannot imitate [others] and make progress” (1904, pp. 370–371). Through absorbing Enlightenment positivism and rationalism, a “static” Vietnamese identity emerged, effectively requiring a “competitive” national constituency to help Vietnam overcome the status quo.

This leads me to the second relevant aspect of the Civilisational worldview: a conception of modern individuality or “citizens,” which was adopted to invent a competitive “national membership.” Those who subscribed to Enlightenment modernity had a firm belief in the rational capacity of human beings to use reason to compete, accumulate achievements, discern the laws of nature, and become his or her own master. In the words of René Descartes (1911, p. 81), “good sense is, of all things in the world, the most equally distributed . . . [and] the power of forming a good judgement and distinguishing the true from the false . . . is naturally equal in all men.” This view idealised a kind of individualist, self-reliant, unconnected personality, or atomic “rights-bearing citizen.” The best social arrangement to unleash “people’s knowledge” was a type of social arrangements, or what we now term “society,” in which there were no external impediments so that atomic “citizens” could come together, sign their “social contracts” or constitution, and enjoy “democracy.” In this sense, a “society” made up of “rights-bearing individuals” was a desirable “nation’s image,” or in nationalism studies, a “civic nation.”

Ideally, a “civic nation” is an open society where people from different backgrounds can enter and contribute voluntarily to common/universal causes, such as Civilisational progress. In nationalism studies, organising pluralist open societies as such is what Liah Greenfeld (1992, p. 11) has termed “libertarian-individualist” nationalism, in which the state is a mere artificiality while authority rests on rights-bearing citizens. She, however, admits that this has been the “rarest type of all” (1995). The more popular version is that of the “collectivistic authoritarian.” It is still open, but the requirements for membership are much more “authoritarian,” and in our case, manifest in the form of strict demands for the making of independent individuals who can contribute to the universal progress in Vietnam. In Foucault’s (1995, p. 194) productive language: “at that time, there existed a technology that could construct individuals into elements related to power and knowledge; the individual no doubt is an imaginary atom embodied in the ideology of the society.”

Phan Chu Trinh and his colleagues were civic nationalists in that sense. He spent much of his efforts discussing individual rights, *obligations*, and “democracy.” For him, Vietnam was static because it had a long history of autocracy, a “poison” that had “entered deeply into the minds of our people” and thus, “twenty million” Vietnamese were loyal only to despotic monarchs. Because of these impediments, the Vietnamese “intellectual level” was “very low” and thus people were unable to think about a “public sphere” or “national independence” by following “the path of self-strengthening and self-reliance,” which would make them “become happier each day” (1904, pp. 377–382). This would be a long journey because, in Vietnam, “men of talents no longer exist.” Trinh even blamed the French for not organising their civilising mission fast enough and left the mandarin system intact. The colonial state let the mandarins “take advantage of their official positions and behave with unforgivable arrogance” while “the peasants, the artisans, the merchants indulge in pleasure” (1907, p. 128). Thus, when Trinh said that the Vietnamese “do not know a sense of collective or community and do not consider the public good,” he did not mean that there were no social relations at all, but that people in Vietnam did not know their rights and obligations within a larger *national* public sphere (McHale, 2008, pp. 33–34).

This imagination of a “static” Vietnam led to a desire for having *capable* “citizens” who can help Vietnam join the competitive universal progress. It means that when Trinh talked about “democracy,” he did not want instant “democracy” for all people living in Vietnam. He meant “democratisation” giving rights first to the elites who had some nascent public awareness. Trinh did not enjoy situations when “servants” and “cooks” could make their way into French service (McHale, 2008, p. 16). For him, qualified Vietnamese citizens must abandon their ingrained “cowardliness” and “foolishness” to be “wise” and “strong.” They must “break the tyrannical chain” and “bring in liberal ideas from Europe as a medicine for our people” (1925b, p. 116). Thus, even a desirable national identity imagined as an “open society” had a “collectivist-authoritarian” boundary. It was not a boundary that encompassed the entire population. Rather, it “populated” a “national membership” and eligible “constituencies”: a meritocratic “middle class,” or “bourgeoisie,” who can follow the universal “world trend” (1925a, p. 125).

I am not suggesting that some scholar-nationalists single-handedly created a Vietnamese “middle class.” With the emergence of the market economy, social mobility, and public media, there were those who took their chances, accumulated wealth, and formed small, fragmented bourgeois groups. Joining hands with civic nationalists gave them a more coherent shape or “class.” Observing the emergence of the middle class in Japan, Andrew Gordon (2002, p. 110) provides a relevant observation: the making of the bourgeois class “has been a shifting cultural construct as well as a shifting in social behaviours.”

Amplifying much of Enlightenment modernity in Vietnam, Phan Chu Trinh also saw through some of its intellectual and political problems. Together with Civilisational boundaries, racism pervaded many aspects of colonial politics. Constitutional reforms were slow, with limited indigenous participation. The prison system, the most repressive institution, was left under highly ill-disciplined or “Bastille” conditions (Zinoman, 2001). It focused more on harsh punishments rather than transforming into a Foucauldian Panopticon, disciplining “yellow criminals” with individual self-governance. Trinh certainly noticed this. In everyday conversations, the French saw the Vietnamese as “barbarians and comparatively not much different from pigs.” Thus, while advocating Civilisational progress, Trinh also expected the French to treat colonial people with proper “human dignity” (1907, p. 130).

Equally important, as one of those who had many insights into Civilisational politics, Trinh was aware of another predicament: atomised citizens can fall into excessive individualism. For this reason, he took a step further, bringing Confucianism back into the public sphere as moral bonds. “Individual rights” for him must come with a “new morality” because “European ethics” were “much superior” but also “imperfect.” In “European society,” he said, “there are drawbacks, such as excessive freedom . . . [which led to] enormous gaps between the rich and the poor; between those who are unemployed or overworked.” To moralise citizens, Confucian ethics should be another medicine to stabilise an emerging “civic nation” (1925b, p. 121). In a comparative sense, using Confucianism as a homogenous national ethic was not limited only to Vietnam. In China, Kang Youwei even “religionised” Confucianism. He wished to merge Emperor Guangxu with Confucius by confiscating temples and setting up Confucian “churches” and “clergies” all over China (Tay, 2010). Likewise, in Japan, the Imperial Rescript of Education (1890), the cornerstone of Meiji education, was filled with Confucian moral maxims. It encouraged Japanese citizens to be “filial” to parents, “affectionate” to brothers and sisters, “harmonious” as husband and wives (Jansen, 2002, p. 411).

Those who put much of Phan Chu Trinh’s prestatised national image into state practices, other than the French colonial forces, were the “Saigon bourgeoisies,” with names such as Bùi Quang Chiêu, Nguyễn Phan Long, or Trần Chánh Chiếu. These members of the Indochinese Constitutionalist Party unsurprisingly supported the French Civilising Mission. They became rights-bearing individuals through constitutional practices set up by the French in Indochina (Peycam, 2012). But this did not mean that they simply wanted to be French “lackeys.” Nor did they want to be forever in the “waiting room of History,” to use Dipesh Chakrabarty’s terms (2009). These men, like Phan Chu Trinh, wished that there were more capable, public-minded Vietnamese citizens so that Vietnam could be at the forefront of that universal History. That moment would not have happened if “a Vietnamese school

teacher is not the equal of a French school teacher in teaching the Vietnamese,” or “a native graduate at Polytechnic is not equal to a European in commanding artillerymen” (*Tribune Indigène*, Feb 20, 1933). They were demanding national independence and self-determination based on Civilisational recognitions of local achievements.

With these dedications, they began taking on sovereign responsibilities. Knowing the French colonial regime had limited budgets for education, the Constitutionals actively created and expanded private educational institutions, including the founding of the Ecole Gia Long, the most prestigious school for female students. As a result, women were entering an emerging individualist society, no matter how small it was. In the economic sphere, industrialist Trần Chánh Chiêu advocated self-reliant citizenship by encouraging Southern Vietnamese to compete with Chinese businesses, from making soap to running hospitality services.

As their wealth and political power grew, these Saigon bourgeoisies sought further changes in the structure of the colonial constitutional apparatus. They consistently pressured the French authorities to expand the constitutional space to give local representatives a greater voice in discussing colonial affairs. Not only did they request a bigger Colonial Council, but they also wanted to have “local assemblies.” Knowing that French colonial regimes were having difficulties in recruiting competent locals for the Civilising Mission, these men demanded that, in the urban areas, more communes should be made into municipalities with elected councils, and each local district should have an elected independent judicial officer. In the countryside, they turned their attention to the village elite and landowners. For them, they should be given improved status and granted more autonomous power (Cook, 1977, p. 119). The vision was clear: a more independent Vietnam in the future should have more capable rights-bearing citizens, and state structures had to change to accommodate them. There must be a “congruence” between an “open society” and a “constitutional state.”

The Constitutionals, however, achieved little. Many items on their wish list were not translated into actual results. Civic nationalism did not systematically infiltrate villages and remained an urban movement. Adding to these limits, their elitist visions may have created some cleavage between their members and wider communities. Bùi Quang Chiêu’s Party welcomed members across Indochina, but “membership” was reserved for sovereign “citizens.” If a Cambodian wanted to join constitutional institutions, they had to compete for their positions, and if they could not do so, it was primarily because of “their ignorance,” “their inadequacy,” and “their incapability” (*Tribune Indigène*, Aug 10, 1938). Like Trinh, Chiêu was disturbed when there was a recommendation to award French citizenship to all Indochinese returnees from European battles after 1918. “The result of a legislative election,” for him, could not “depend on the vote of our rickshaw boys and our cooks” (Tai, 1992, pp. 43–44). Qualified constituencies must be businessmen, educated personnel, civil servants, commercial and industrial employees, and military officers (Tai, 1984). Only these constituencies should be eligible for a civic “national membership” as they were not only capable rights-bearing individuals but also aware of their “national duties.”

We wish with all our hearts that our compatriots might possess these fundamental rights, but equally, we wish that [having rights] should imply that each man has a clear consciousness of a citizen’s duties and of the higher interests of the community (*Tribune Indigène*, Aug 12, 1931).

Cultural national identity

As mentioned above, the concept of civilisation can also be understood in a particular sense, which is “culture.” Unlike universal Civilisation, which we can attach seemingly coherent understandings (the West, science, modernisation, etc.), “culture” is a slippery term and often used unreflexively. But, like “Civilisation,” “culture” is “modern” as well. In 1784, according to theologian Moses Mendelssohn, “enlightenment” and “culture” were still “newcomers to our language,” which belonged “merely to the language of books,” while “the common masses scarcely [understood] them” (Cheah, 2003, p. 38). Likewise, in China, Wang Hui (2011, p. 114) confirms that while *wenhua* has ancient etymological roots, “the category of culture itself was only defined explicitly in modern history,” which “cannot simply be

projected in its entirety onto ancient history or rationalised as a special category.” It would not be an exaggeration to assume that “culture” or *văn hóa* had similar modern appeals in Vietnam. Before the colonial era, it was *văn hiến* (civility or public aesthetic practices) that was popularly used (Kelley, 2003).

The emergence of “culture” was a romantic reaction against Enlightenment modernity. Contrasting differences between the two fields of knowledge production can be seen through the comment of sociologist Robert Merton in 1936:

Civilisation is “impersonal” and “objective.” A scientific law can be verified by determining whether the specified relations uniformly exist. The same questions will occasion the same results, no matter who performs them . . . Culture, on the other hand, is thoroughly personal and subjective, simply because no fixed and clearly defined set of operations is available for determining the desired results . . . It is this basic difference between the two fields which accounts for the cumulative nature of civilisation and the unique (noncumulative) character of culture (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 52).

The implication here is that if “universal Civilisation” was dominating the public sphere with its positivism and rationalism, “culture” was meandering somewhere in the personal and private realms, where inward refinement was unmethodical. “Culture” differed precisely because it signified plural, “noncumulative” or interpretative progresses actualising diverse “inner” values. Thus, the emergence of cultural imaginations had its own effects as it relativised Civilisational universality into distinctive lines of progress, and by being distinctive, they were equal at least between “the East” and “the West.” Put differently, the global relations that emerged together with Cultural imaginations were equality.

The conversation between Culture and Civilisation emerged perhaps because of the exhilarating attacks of Enlightenment modernity on traditional relations. We can sense this through the discourses of Phan Chu Trinh and his followers. It created an effect that Max Weber calls “disenchantment.” “The ultimate and most sublime values,” he said, “have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations” (1958, p. 133). Ferdinand Tönnies provided similar discourses when he compared “community” and “society.” The former is governed by custom, religion, mutual support, and *culture*, while the latter is dominated by individual calculations and competitions. Organic *gemeinschaft*, he said, “is the lasting and genuine form of living together,” while mechanical *gesellschaft* is “transitory and superficial.” The former brought about the “joy and delight of creating and conserving” while the latter was filled with the “decay and destruction of the people” (1887, pp. 34–35).

As we will see later, in Vietnam, Phạm Quỳnh (1892–1945), a culturalist, had similar thoughts, but chose not to live in the elegiac mood of disenchantment. Rather, he wished to “re-enchant” contemporary public spheres by enlivening “the past” and combining with, if not localising, Enlightenment modernity. With such Cultural sensitivities, “the past” no longer appeared “obsolete” or “static” as in Civilisational national imaginations. The past was filled with Romantic passions for the pure and uncorrupted traditional lives, or “communal sensibilities of belonging.” Folkloric vernacular languages and symbols were crucial because, through songs, ballads, and literature, one can access the cultural spirits of historic peoples (Smith, 2009).

The political side of Culture that was highly relevant to national imaginations was what Hobsbawm and Ranger have made popular, the “invented traditions.” Unlike Gellner, they seem to hesitate about whether “invention” is “fabrication,” or if it actually has empirical bases, leading them to conclude that traditions are “partly invented, partly evolved.” This ambiguity is resolved when they identify a more political aspect of culture. Invention, according to Hobsbawm, is an attempt to establish *continuities* across historical practices of different ethnic communities. It was “responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, which establish their own quasi-obligatory repetition.” (1992, pp. 2–4). With these invented continuities, which constituted a fictive unbroken *national* ethnicity (Balibar, 1990), equal cultural sensibilities were also equal ethnocultural “traditions” constantly refined through historic actions of a people.

In Vietnam, romantic sentiments can be found in the thought of Phan Bội Châu (1867–1940). Like Phan Chu Trinh, when discussing the necessary *national* dedication to Vietnam, he criticised both the king and the people. Rulers in Vietnam, in his view, “have never known their people,” while “people have never known their country” (1906). However, unlike Trinh, Châu’s writing was much more emotive and nostalgic. He wanted more than a break from “tyrannical chains” to take “liberal medicine.” In Châu’s imagination, heroic events in the past were recalled as if something beautiful, an “old national soul” (*hồn cổ quốc*), was lingering for a wake-up call. That “soul” did not live in the hands of the evil French nor the Nguyen, an ignorant monarch who cared little for her people. It was Phạm Quỳnh who knew where that “soul” was.

Quỳnh is often regarded today as another “lackey” of the French, as he was a key writer who connected French colonial policies with local people. He used the French-sponsored media platform, the *Nam Phong* (Southern Wind), to communicate French “benevolence.” But Quỳnh also took this chance to disseminate different worldviews so that he could position a Vietnamese culture in there. In doing so, he did not reject Enlightenment modernity entirely. He reorganised it by paying attention to French names like René Descartes and François Guizot. Progress, Quỳnh wrote, was a search for indisputable truths (*chân lý*) that required “intelligence” (*tri tuệ*) and also a will (*ý chí*) for truth-seeking. Without “intelligence,” people would be confused between “right” and “wrong” (*lẫn lộn sai nhảm*). To improve “intelligence,” liberty was needed. Liberty was not only about willingly nurturing reason but also about being free from “external pressures” (*áp lực*) such as prejudices or frivolous emotions. To have liberty was to be entirely “independent” in wilful thinking (1917, pp. 102–104). Thus, the normative dimension of Civilisational progress, as he found in Guizot, was essentially individual progress (1920, p. 177).

Explaining Civilisational progress through the Cartesian *cogito*, however, was also to criticise it from a romantic perspective. Thinking about Civilisational progress, Quỳnh said, people were often occupied with “quantifiable” knowledge, but not “unquantifiable” moralities. In pursuing mechanical achievements, traditional values, aesthetic courtesies, and amicability were lost. Referring to an Italian Romantic, Guglielmo Ferrero, the editor of the *Nam Phong* wondered if Civilisation was bringing about progression or regression (1917, pp. 29–42). His answer was both. “Every step taken in the acquisition of modern Western science marks for man a setback in the field of moral and spiritual values,” and this was, for him, a problem of “moral malaise” (*bi kịch tinh thần*) (Pham, 2024, pp. 102–130). To escape this problematic and re-enchant the public sphere, language became his focus.

First, Quỳnh recommended reintroducing Chinese characters into education because most of the ancestors’ principles were written in Chinese. Without knowing Chinese characters, there will be no way of accessing Vietnamese cultures and traditions (1918, pp. 341–342; 1920, pp. 83–97, 463–472). But this did not mean he wanted to make Vietnam ethnoculturally Chinese. For Quỳnh, written and spoken languages were not the same. Every Chinese character, when adopted in East Asia, was often reappropriated with different phonetic sounds (*thanh âm*). By memorising the Vietnamese “sounds” of Chinese characters, one can approach a hidden metaphysical content that existed beyond mere linguistic “forms” (*hình thức*). It was a “national soul” (*quốc hồn*) echoed within “national sounds” (*quốc âm*). For him, the Vietnamese soul will not be lost if its people remembered the “sound” of it (1920, pp. 85–86). To concretise this “national soul,” Quỳnh often put classic literature on his platform with nationalist endeavours. One of the most memorable examples is Nguyễn Du’s *The Tale of Kieu*. The main protagonist of the story was signified as a symbol of a beautiful Vietnamese soul being lost in despair.

Among the people of our country, who does not know the *Tale of Kieu*? . . . Who does not know clearly the story of the maiden *Kieu*, or does not feel for her—a beautiful lady, cursed by fate, full of talent and beauty, but who encountered a destiny of broken hearts, fifteen years of bitterness in life, as though cruelly spurned by Heaven to make a shining mirror for those of shallow disposition? (1921, p. 480)

Quỳnh knew what he was doing. Nationalising the Romantic figuration of Kiêu would appear entirely irrational in the context of endemic Civilisational encroachments. He took time to elaborate on “beauty” or “emotion aesthetic” as something to be apprehended rather than comprehended, or to be felt rather than understood. Advocating feelings for Kiêu was to have an “imagined empathy,” a belonging to a national “soul” echoed in the “sounds” of *The Tale of Kieu*. In Quỳnh’s view, this was nothing peculiar worldwide. In Europe and America, there was not only mechanical thinking but also deep respect for “masters of literature.” “Pascal, Corneille and Racine” would live forever as long as “there are men who speak French under heaven, so long as there are men who understand deep and subtle ideas.”

So long as there are Annamese living on this peninsula of the Eastern Seas, and so long as the Annamese still know how to speak the Annamese language, then *the Tale of Kieu* will continue to have readers. And so long as *the Tale of Kieu* continues to have readers, the spirit of [Nguyễn Du] will continue to drift amid the rivers and mountains of the land and [thus] Vietnam will never be lost (1921, p. 491).

Second, living in the localised “sounds” of traditional Chinese characters did not mean that the ethnocultural soul was static. Quỳnh advised his readers that French expressions should be further appropriated so that the “national sound” can be enriched. If this were done properly, the Vietnamese can approach modern knowledge while, at the same time, remember who they were and not fall into paranoiac half-hearted “Westernisation.” Thus, it seems that Quỳnh wanted Culture to be not only a supplementary but also a localisation moulding Enlightenment modernity into his national soul. When this initiative faced “disenchanted” criticisms, he provided further romantic responses. For example, there was an opinion that the Vietnamese language was not good enough to appropriate Civilisational vocabularies, thus making it very inconvenient for political debates. Quỳnh did not reject this but carefully put the “East” and “West” on equal terms. For him, it was true that the Vietnamese was poor at explaining French expressions. There is no way to translate a French term into Vietnamese while being able to exhaust dynamic semantic relations. However, this also applies the other way around. A Vietnamese proverb or poetic verse is also inexhaustible in a foreign language (1920, pp. 279–286). Equality here thus was a romantic equality between distinctive, inexhaustible infinities or souls.

There are two further considerations that may give us a balanced understanding of Phạm Quỳnh. First, regarding targeted constituencies, Quỳnh was not much different from civic nationalists. With that much (meta)philosophical elaboration, *Nam Phong* generally attracted educated constituencies. “Moral and national discipline,” the editor (1930, p. 390) admitted, “must be recognised as necessary and accepted by the elite of the nation, who must set example for the masses and who are ultimately responsible for their education.” Attention to destitute constituencies was the contribution of those with Marxian eyes. Combining this with promotions of Franco-Annamese collaboration policies, Quỳnh was criticised by those who did not wish to rely on French support. For example, the Self-Reliant Literary Group ridiculed *Nam Phong* as a sycophantic voice, even though they understood and shared some of its literary commitments (Nguyen, 2020).

Second, Phạm Quỳnh was creative, but his creativity was situated in a much larger global turn to Culture. Direct evidence of this lies in his engagements with Romantic writers. Ideas, however, do not breed ideas. There were also sociopolitical situations that had cast further doubt on Enlightenment beliefs. World War I, with all the carnage in the trenches, was witnessed by thousands of Cochinchinese recruited by the French government. In those theatres of war, man, instead of experiencing progressive betterment, became “slaves of machines” (Tan, 2004). Such developments sit atop various resistances in colonies, from the 1857 Indian Mutiny to Phan Bội Châu-inspired assassinations. The colonial governance system thus also had to learn and adapt.

The arrival of Albert Sarraut, a two-time governor of Indochina, occurred during this cultural turn. Together with trusted advisors Louis Marty and Pierre Pasquier, they decided that the Civilising Mission was not applicable to the whole of Indochina. The colonial state needed to preserve some

“traditional attachments” to make the best out of heterogeneous situations in Indochina. For this reason, they reformed colonial education systems with the establishment of more Franco-Indigenous schools teaching a Vietnamese continuous culture, tradition, and ethnic solidarity (Anderson, 2006, p. 127). Importantly, they restructured colonial state institutions by re-educating the last emperor of the Nguyen, Bảo Đại, so that he could enjoy a “strong air of liberty” without “rejecting his own past” (Goscha, 2020, p. 154). The *Nam Phong* was part of these “culture” and “tradition” promotions. This is why Quỳnh is often considered a puppet of the “ambiguous” French colonial regime. But if we look at his contributions, he was one of those who keenly developed for Vietnam a “culture.”

Radical national identity

So far, I have counted two Vietnamese national identities, Civilisational and Cultural. Neither is an unchanging, internally bounded entity with settled attributes. Instead, these national identities were “moving entities” with world-historical identifications. Being “static” in the Civilisational worldview was not accepting the “status quo” but to change it towards “dynamic” or “civilised” directions. Likewise, searching for a beautiful past was not to “show off” Vietnamese aesthetic dimensions. Cultural identities were employed to fix the “disenchanted” problem. Unlike the Civilisational worldview, which rested on hierarchical relationships, cultural identities brought about a sense of equality between nations. The last national identity that I wish to discuss here rests neither on hierarchy nor on equality. Imagining radical or revolutionary nationhood came from attempts to fix the global historical problem of exploitation, oppression, and alienation. It was a narrative about making a “revolutionary” Vietnam to overcome neither a “static” nor “lost” but a “have-not” Vietnam.

To avoid leading this national identity right into Marxist-Leninist materialism (discussed later), I begin with a broader term: “radical,” which is often understood as extreme actions advocating fundamental social change. This conception has some merit as radicals in the early twentieth century, be it anarchists or Marxist-Leninists, had one thing in common: they valued *action*, not as mirrors of grand historical narratives, be it “universal progress” or “continuous tradition.” Instead, for them, in human actions, we produce contingent and creative solutions to existing problems and, by so doing, generate our own radiant future, instead of replicating Civilisational “standards” or following the voice of our “forefathers.” History thus became something less deterministic but an active *manmade* product (Tai, 1992, p. 1).

One problem that radicals identified was inequality generated by unregulated capitalism. Situations of struggling people gained wide attention. For example, in a short pamphlet written in 1900, anarchist Leo Tolstoy identified what he called “the slavery of our time.” This observation was derived from a puzzling situation where a group of goods porters who worked continuously for thirty-seven hours. And this occurred in the “indifference” of modern societies where “men perish” (1900). In Yoshikawa Eiji’s memoir, “people [in Japan] were . . . ashamed of appearing poor to the outside world . . . [because] the poor are, by definition, inferior beings” (Daikichi, 1985, p. 241). Likewise, in Vietnam, observing the emergence of the individualist society and the French rising repressions against left-wing movements, anarchist Nguyễn An Ninh lamented, “many small happinesses which old society granted them have been destroyed.” It seemed that Vietnam “is still very far from the day when a little well-being will help men escape from ignorance and moral misery . . . so that they can become conscious of their rights to live and of their dignity” (Tai, 1992, pp. 77–87). Improving material well-being, for him, did not seem sufficient to generate “dignity.” These observations tell us that in capitalist societies, there is both economic exploitation and spiritual marginalisation. Such problematisation of capitalism and its desirable players, the atomised citizens relentlessly competing for achievements, carried not concerns for individualist liberty, but enormous communitarian and humanist sensibilities. At the same time, they also sharpened the boundaries of destitute constituencies, be it the “proletarian” class or “colonial” peoples. This effectively accentuated societal polarisations.

In Vietnam, when searching for a way out of these anomic situations, Nguyễn An Ninh (1900–1943), however, did not follow existing solutions. He criticised both the Saigon bourgeoisies and

culturalists. He derided those who wished to become “a Bùi Quang Chiêu” or “a Nguyễn Phan Long.” Such men only wanted to imitate and tried to achieve their goals with minimal effort (1923, p. 385). Ninh was probably referring to their collaboration with the French and their failures in pursuing constitutional reforms. More importantly, he criticised the core of Enlightenment modernity: liberty. “What liberty is being demanded? Liberty to do what? Does a child who is not yet sure of his steps need the whole earth to learn to walk?” Ninh asked, “liberty is not something that can be transmitted, given, or sold” (1923, p. 383). This criticism is deep because Enlightenment liberty was what Isaiah Berlin (2014, pp. 155–207) calls “negative liberty,” or “the absence of external impediment” that helped unleash a rational “human nature.” In Ninh’s view, there was hardly a pre-given “human nature” and hence freeing a person from all external shackles will be meaningless if that very person did not know what to do with their liberty. Living without life’s purposes, one remains a child or an anomic person.

At the same time, Ninh thought that Quỳnh’s solution to the national question was not useful either. This is because no matter how one looked into the past, much of the Vietnamese “traditional” and “cultural” legacies of the ancestors, be it “literary and artistic achievements,” were “sparse” and “meagre alongside the heritages of other peoples.” Hence, the “national culture” or “soul” echoed within “national sounds,” for example, appeared to Ninh as mere exaggeration “of decadence, lassitude, the taste of an impending agony [and] not the kind of heritage that will help give us more vigour and life to our race in the fight for a place in the world” (1923, p. 385). Thus, while criticising existing answers to the national question, Ninh was also ashamed, if not deeply internalised, of an inferior Vietnam, even when it was understood in Cultural sensitivities (Pham, 2020). But these criticisms made Ninh a “radical,” in the very conventional understanding of the word, a person who wished to turn every existing order upside down, to liberate Vietnam from the straitjacket of Civilisational orders and also from its “father’s house.” Radical imaginations thus seemed quite “revolutionary” – a revolution against what? Apparently, against “everything.” In this setting, “revolution” was more than a quest for regime change, but “cultural” (or “social”) change, similar to the New Cultural Movement (1910s–1920s) in China (Dirlik, 1985).

But where to find life’s purposes? What would be “Vietnam” if both the Civilisational future and Cultural past were not the answers? This is where “action” came into play. Ninh encouraged the Vietnamese to “act,” and by “acting,” they would “experience” something new by and for themselves. By acting, they would find “new ideals, their ideals, new activities, their activities, new passions, their passions.” Active life, he argued, “not just life in Annam but all life, demands to be eternally new.” A new, radiant future for Vietnam thus had to be “manmade” in the revolutionary actions of those who wished to act, to be “great men” or “men of action.” These terms carried desires for an active personality or a leading agency of revolutionary transformations. “We need artists, poets, painters, musicians, scientists,” Ninh said, “to enrich our intellectual heritage” (1923, pp. 384–386).

To give more depth to “action,” which would allow us to further understand Ninh’s radical criticisms of a Vietnam being within Enlightenment worlds, we can understand “action” itself as “positive freedom.” Unlike thinkers of negative liberty, those who advocate “positive freedom” do not think that there is a “human nature” ready to jump out when external impediments are lifted. For them, instead of “being” free, we are “becoming” free in our actions. In performing actions, we actualise our infinite potentials and contingently reach our life purposes. Put simply, the more we do, the more we *experience*, and hence the more we know about our evolving self and its relations with the world we have actively created. In “action,” the means are already the ends (Berlin, 2014, pp. 174–175).

At this point, readers may have a sense of “idealism” or “romanticism” looming large behind the formations of not only Cultural but also Radical national identities. For the sake of clarity, I offer a simplistic reflection on this globalising movement based on Vietnam’s context so that we have a clearer sense of the contradictoriness in the formation of national identities. Through actors’ creativities, with names such as Phạm Quỳnh and Nguyễn An Ninh, romanticism established desires to be in different “times.” It encompassed a desire to move backward, to go home, searching for a sense of Cultural belonging; and a desire to move forward, in a contingent, revolutionary manner, to leave one’s father’s house, and begin something anew. From various critiques of Enlightenment modernity, romanticism evolved into worldviews wherein there are active agencies restlessly standing in the openness of varying

contingent possibilities and infinite horizons of intelligibility, or a “becoming” in different fulfilling “times,” not just empty time.

Returning to my story, as we have seen, the Vietnamese “nation’s image” evolved dynamically. The radical national image seen through Nguyễn An Ninh’s activities became a premonition for a “revolutionary nation,” a kind of “active” membership capable of acting, learning, and creating a new Vietnam.

These radical ideals were not limited to anarchists. Marxists and Leninists were certainly experts of “actions,” but they also made “revolutionary action” less idealistic and more purposive. Indeed, when developing his economic interpretation of history, commonly known as “class struggle,” Marx expected more than to give suffering people political power and economic gain. He looked at their working conditions and saw not only exploitation but also anomic alienation. Workers were alienated from the labouring process, labouring products, and labouring relations, while functioning mainly like atomic cogs in capitalist assembly lines. Marx’s “labour” is similar to Ninh’s “action.” “Labour” was much broader than economic production, and more of a self-formative action (Cheah, 2003, pp. 191–200). “Labour,” he wrote, is a relational “process” in which “man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates, and controls the metabolism between himself and nature.” In so doing, “he acts upon external nature,” while “simultaneously changing his own natures.” Much of this depends on the “social relations within which men work” (1867, pp. 283–286).

Being a “have-not” thus was not simply about economic exploitation, but an alienation depriving suffering people of their chances to act autonomously and become free. Hence, Marx advocated “revolutionary action” (*praxis*) to create a classless society, a communitarian environment for collective action. With this sociology, it can be argued that Marx provided a spiritual “community of faith,” a communist utopia-in-action, and also another “prestatised” materialist boundary, a “community of hate” built along class lines. The latter was a radical element that anarchists like Ninh did not prioritise.

Lenin and his Bolsheviks, like Hồ Chí Minh, politicised much of Marx’s problem and solution. They had a communitarian concern for the lives of the labouring masses but also accentuated class-based antagonistic relations. For them, with the cartelisation of large banking institutions and frenzied financialisation, capitalism had become a form of decaying “imperialism.” In this form, “parasitic” capitalists with little manufacturing activity survived only because of labour exploitation from the “Third World.”

More creatively, Lenin thought that labour extractions were used ideologically to bribe European labour unions into “national chauvinism” (1917). This labour aristocracy theory regrouped European classes into an exploitative whole, as all classes benefited from the global relations of exploitation and oppression. With this regrouping, Lenin situated “the East” and “the West,” no longer in a Civilisational hierarchy or Cultural equality, but in an antagonistic relation with “the nation” as the primary unit of analysis. Situated in this global worldview, countries like Vietnam were not just a colony needing French tutelage, but a “have-not” Vietnam needing “revolutionary national membership.” In fact, Lenin already prepared the most eligible constituencies for this membership. For him, to do revolution was not to talk about it, but to act, and to act, revolution needed “actors.” Relying on previous anarchist and socialist idealisations of heroic peasants, he located his “men of action” into the figuration of vanguards understood as the most energetic agencies of transformation, who would “go among all classes” through “all directions” to bring in revolutionary consciousness from without (1902). This move was certainly important as it foreshadowed the desire to restructure the state with the formation of a communist party, a “heroic” party representing a revolutionary nation.

With this much like-mindedness across different radical actors, it was not surprising then when Hồ Chí Minh was enlightened when he read Lenin’s *Thesis on the National and Colonial Question*:

In those Theses, there were political terms that were difficult to understand. But by reading them again and again, finally, I was able to grasp the essential part. What emotion, enthusiasm, enlightenment, and confidence they communicated to me! I wept for joy. Sitting by myself in my room, I would shout as if I were addressing large crowds: “Dear martyr compatriots! This is what we need! This is our path to liberation!” (2007, pp. 189–190)

Global Relations	Civilisation & hierarchy	Culture & equality	Radicalism & exploitation/oppression
National identities	A <i>static</i> Vietnam requiring ‘ <i>becoming Civilised</i> ’ membership	A <i>primordial</i> Vietnam requiring ‘ <i>Cultural refining</i> ’ membership	A <i>have-not</i> Vietnam requiring ‘ <i>revolutionary</i> ’ membership

----- Anderson’s horizontal flatland -----

Figure 1. Situating Vietnam’s national identities in global worldviews.

This joy was a sublime experience, a point where a world of narrative – liberating an exploited and alienated Vietnam, and a world of reality – “proletarian revolution,” coincided. With this experience, Hô recruited youths in Indochina to create the very first “vanguards.” In his imagination, which was transmitted to various segments of Indochinese youth, colonialism did not provide “civic national identity” or a “representative constitutional state” but created a place where “prisons outnumber schools and are always overcrowded with detainees” (2007, pp. 1–2). His Vietnamese were living in “utter ignorance” without any political rights. Worse, they “died without being able to afford a coffin” while French and Indochinese capitalists “lived a luxury life” by “accumulating a huge amount of surplus.” And yet they were unaware of these “economic relations” and thus divided. For this reason, vanguard communists must form a “revolutionary party” to teach people “theory” and “ism” (1934), or to “guide” their “revolutionary actions.” Perhaps, the more revolutionary actions people performed, the more they internalised “revolutionary identity.”

As Goscha (2012) and Vo (2015) have made clear, the Radical or revolutionary national identity was embodied in various attempts to restructure the state: the formation of the communist party and its revolutionary constituencies. Revolutionary practices were organised at different sites to train vanguards and their followers. Two examples here may be sufficient. The first was the practice of “self-criticism.” Similar to what happened in Yan’an, China, becoming a vanguard or a “man of action” required thought revolutions, removing all “bourgeois” and “petty bourgeois” thoughts. Candidates from different backgrounds had to write diaries or engage in direct conversations with their peers. In the process, individuals’ diaries and backgrounds were exposed to scrutiny and rectification so that their experiences were differentiated between “bourgeois” and “revolutionary” thoughts. These practices often had to be repeated several times to achieve desirable results.

The second example is the practice of “speaking bitterness” during land reform programmes (1953–1957). Awakened vanguards formed “work teams,” disguised as peasants, and contacted small groups of the poorest peasants. After gaining some trust, they began to focus on peasants’ misfortunes. They explained that misfortunes were not bad luck but “structural” exploitative relations between peasants and landlords. After days of engineering grassroots experiences, they sent possible targets to the government for public tribunals, allowing poor peasants to speak up about their bitterness, seek justice, and, more importantly, through such very actions, form revolutionary masses. As these practices unfolded, more “men of action” were manufactured when the best practitioners of “speaking bitterness” were awarded “labour hero” titles.

Revolutionary national identity began with liberation, and in the process of restructuring the state, it became a kind of despotism, if not totalitarianism, a “mass organisation” of struggling “atomised and isolated individuals” (Arendt, 1951, p. 323). This mass organisation, according to Arendt, was not based on particular regime types nor conventional terrors (e.g. assassination). Totalitarianism was an unfolding movement with three agencies.

The first is the political agency of totalitarian leadership. It came not from narcissistic demagogues but from those who had a way of understanding contemporary social problems. They knew the

“Paradise” people had longed for and the “Hell” they always feared. The second is the intellectual agency of those who sympathised with destitute people and had the will to harness their skills to organise messy realities along these political lines. The third is the mob, a populist agency, or the most struggling, uprooted people, who formed a mass of ardent supporters.

In Vietnam’s context, we may see party leaders as those who provided leadership experiences, awakened vanguards became intellectual sympathisers, and “labour heroes,” the poorest peasants, became the mob. These roles were easily interchangeable. Together they formed a chain of totalitarian legitimisation, making Communist “congruence” between revolutionary nation and vanguard state recognisable by incorporating everyday struggles. Just like the mobilisations of cultural symbols or Civilisational meritocratic pluralism, totalitarian practices of “self-criticism” or awarding “labour heroes” remain to this day.

Conclusion

This article investigates three national identities in Vietnam. Instead of defending a particular national identity or retreating from the concept, it observes the evolving formation of at least three national identities that emerged within respective global worldviews.

Civilisational identity came from situated actors appropriating Enlightenment modernity into Vietnam’s contexts. They saw the world through the lens of “universal progress” with nations sitting within a hierarchical order. Positioning Vietnam in this hierarchy, nationalists imagined “Vietnam” as a “static” country and distributed an elitist national membership to help Vietnam jump up the ladder. Today, this national imagination is often labelled as “civic nation,” or a pluralist open society made of atomised rights-bearing citizens.

Cultural identity came from critical reactions against the Civilisational hierarchy. It was a romantic imagination searching for aesthetic pasts embodied in the language and traditional symbols. In so doing, cultural nationalists “discovered” continuous traditions for Vietnam, and these traditions, when put next to other traditions, existed in equal relations, altogether forming a desire not only for a cultural Vietnam but also for an egalitarian global relation. It is also important to note that during its formative stage, cultural identity did not reject Civilisation entirely. Instead, culturalists like Phạm Quỳnh at least attempted to recombine both.

Finally, Radical national identity emerged together with an antagonistic global relation. Vietnam, instead of being a static or aesthetic place, was reimagined as a “have-not” country suffering from global exploitation and alienation. This Vietnam was deprived not only of productive labour but also of a chance to act autonomously and to “become free.” These national identities were not curated in some isolated manner but evolved out of engagements with each other.

When national identity is understood as an evolving phenomenon, Vietnam’s responses to colonialism become much more dynamic, because both “Vietnam” and “colonialism” were highly fragmented. Each nationalist movement had its own anticolonial flavour. Trinh, while committed to Civilisational universality, reacted against racial discrimination. Quỳnh took turns and criticised mechanical disenchantments. And Ninh contested the capitalist boundaries of exploitation and alienation. Different Vietnams emerged and overlapped in the engagements and criticisms against globalising boundaries of race, rationality, and political-economic inequality.

Equally important, these three national identities allow us not only to historicise the contested nation of “Vietnam” in the early twentieth century, but also to trace their legacies into the present. From the state’s continued reliance on revolutionary rhetoric, to diasporic invocations of cultural authenticity, to civic calls for pluralism and reform, the echoes of these identity formations remain alive today. Attending to their co-construction, contestation, and adaptation helps us make a better sense of Vietnam’s past and its uncertain future.²

²I owe this paragraph to one of the reviewers.

A useful concept for this historicisation is Pheng Cheah's "prestatised nationalism." It does not start with "the state" but with diverse national images and ends up with state restructuring practices so that the nation and the state would become congruent. The method then is to follow nationalists, not to make them "great men" or sole "creators" of Vietnamese national identities, but to show their contextual and intellectual situatedness. From here, we observe how they used different intellectual resources to make sense of their situations, effectively providing their own answers to the question of what makes a good nation.

This concept of nationalism and the typology of national identities in Vietnam could be useful for comparative purposes. One can find movements seeking modernisation, cultural preservation, and radical revolutions in India (e.g. Tagorean cultural and Nehruvian civic nationalism with socialist orientations), in China (e.g. Liang Qichao, Zhang Taiyan, Cai Yuanpei), or Japan (e.g. Fukuzawa Yukichi, Hozumi Yasuka, Nishida Kitarō). What matters for further research is how they unfolded, combined, and cancelled each other in different countries.

Finally, these three national identities are not exhaustive. Within the limits of this article, I have not examined the "revolutionary identity" advanced by Ngô Đình Nhu and Ngô Đình Diệm. Their "have-not" Vietnam, which also required "revolutionary action," was not within the Marxist-Leninist order, but Christian personalism (Miller, 2013) or Marxian humanism (Nguyen, 2020). This article also has not considered national images of various "minority" peoples or religious groups such as the *Hòa Hảo* or *Cao Đài* sects. Much of this requires further engagement with situated actors and their transnational networks.

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