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This is the Accepted version of the following publication

Do, VHT and Brennan, Marie (2015) Complexities of Vietnamese femininities: A resource for rethinking women's university leadership practices. *Gender and Education*, 27 (3). 273 - 287. ISSN 0954-0253

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Complexities of Vietnamese Femininities: A Resource for Rethinking Women’s University Leadership Practices

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Subsequently published in *Gender and Education* 27 (3) 273-287.

DOI: [10.1080/09540253.2015.1024619](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2015.1024619)

Abstract

This paper develops a dialogical encounter between northern-inspired theorizations of gender and Vietnam’s historical and cultural differentiation identified through the presence of matriarchy in ancient societies and its popularity in folklore and contemporary politics. The article draws on interviews with twelve senior women from eight universities in Northern and Southern Vietnam. Three main themes are explored: (1) the Vietnamese woman as ‘General of the Interior’; (2) the ‘Woman behind the throne’; and (3) ‘Behind a woman is another woman’. These themes illustrate the distinctiveness of a historically produced Vietnamese gender order as reflected in current university women’s experience. By providing insights into the complex dynamics of Vietnamese women’s ‘informal power’, as evident in both spheres of home and university, the paper presents a discussion of forms of Vietnamese femininity that contributes to re-theorizing Connell’s concepts of ‘hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity’.

Keywords: Vietnamese femininity and masculinity, gender and women’s university leadership, gender relations, Vietnamese universities

Challenges in analysing gender in Vietnam

There are challenges in discussing gender, femininities or masculinities in Vietnam. For a start, there is no term for gender or feminism in the language, and only a relatively small history of feminist-inspired analyses. However, many international loans and grants require official policy changes around gender, largely based on

analyses that have emerged from countries in the global North. We do not work from a neat binary between North and South: the term ‘Global North’ is used to refer to rich countries, while ‘Global South’ also ‘references an entire history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change through which large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and access to resources are maintained’ (Dados and Connell 2012, 13). In *Southern Theory*, Connell (2007) contends that the dominant genres of Northern theories that ‘picture the world as it is seen ... from the rich capital-exporting countries’ obviously does ‘matter’ (p. vii). She asserts that we can have social theory that:

... does not claim universality for a metropolitan point of view, does not read from only one direction, does not exclude the experience and social thought of most of humanity, and is not constructed on *terra nullius*. (2007, 47)

She also argues that ‘the alternative to “northern theory” is not a unified doctrine from the global South’; rather ‘a genuinely global sociology must, at the level of theory as well as empirical research and practical application, be more like a conversation among many voices’ (Connell 2006, 262). These views provoked us to explore local conceptualizations of women that might contribute to a wider and more diversified global conversation about gender and higher education leadership. In this paper, we explore a dialogical encounter between Northern theorization of gender and Vietnam’s historical and cultural differentiation of femininities, identified (1) through the presence of matriarchy in ancient societies and the continued popularity of women leaders in folklore and popular culture; and (2) from political uses of women in anti-colonial and modernization struggles. The insights drawn from this conversation are believed so helpful in considering the place of women in Vietnamese universities, where there is a difficulty in raising issues of gender equality in public debates about

the university.

The data for this article are part of [first author's] doctoral thesis, drawn from life-story interviews with twelve senior women from eight universities in Northern and Southern Vietnam about their experience in work and life. There was no specific criterion for choosing informants except that they were or currently are leaders/managers in Vietnamese universities. Each interview was analysed to identify key themes or patterns of Vietnamese femininity. The project was given ethical clearance by the Ethics Committee of the University of South Australia. To maintain anonymity, position titles are not mentioned since the representation of senior women in university educational leadership is modest. Consistent with Vietnamese naming protocols, first name pseudonyms are used throughout.

After this brief introduction, there are three major sections to this paper. First, folklore is used to discuss the interplay between Vietnamese historical matriarchy and Confucianism in constructing distinctive Vietnamese femininities. The next section is a dialogical encounter between Connell's theorization of gender, particularly masculinities and femininities, and Vietnamese folklore literature: treated as a cultural source for the distinctiveness of Vietnamese women. The third section provides insights into the complex dynamics of women's 'informal power' in settings of family and university, to foreground arguments on (1) the differentiation of Vietnamese femininities, and (2) the under-theorisation of the interrelation nexus between 'informal power' and 'formal power' in gender and educational leadership research. The paper argues that the complexity of Vietnamese femininity emerges from the dynamics of Vietnamese women's 'informal power' evident in both spheres, home and university. This complexity helps to construct certain forms of Vietnamese femininity, which are not adequately accounted for in Connell's (1987, 2009)

theorization of gender order and ‘hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity’. By using the term ‘complexity’, we refer to the diversity, contradiction and overlap of Vietnamese femininities manifested in the gender politics of families and universities. The article ends with questions to open up analysis, debate and action in terms of theorizing femininities and masculinities in universities in one country with implications for gender debates locally and globally.

Historical matriarchy, Confucianism and Vietnamese women

The literature on Vietnamese folklore plays a crucial role in supporting the argument that ‘Vietnam had a matriarchal society’ (Drummond and Rystrom 2004, 1) or that ‘Vietnam was originally a matriarchy’ (Chiricosta 2010, 126). The presence of Vietnamese matriarchy forms a historico-cultural foundation as well as a nationalistic aspiration for Vietnamese womanhood.

According to Vietnamese folk literature, a unique Vietnamese femininity originates from the legend of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ who are believed to be the Father and Mother of the Vietnamese People’s ancestors known as the Hùng Kings, the eighteenth of whom died in 258 BCE. In spite of the numerous ways such folklore has been orally transmitted and subject to possible distortions, the story of Âu Cơ ‘testifies to the presence of an original “matriarchy” in North Vietnam’, as well as ‘the uniquely high status’ of Vietnamese women’ which is believed to be ‘an emblem of national distinctiveness’ (Chiricosta 2010, 126). One of the most distinctive characteristics of Vietnamese women is that they ‘feature prominently as warriors and defenders’, emerging as ‘keys icons of heroism in the fight against Chinese cultural and political domination’, patriarchy and discrimination against women (Chiricosta 2010, 126). Examples include: The Trưng Sisters (14–43CE) who led a rebellion to

drive out the Chinese in around 40CE; Lady Triệu Thị Trinh (226–48 CE) who led a revolt against the Wu of China (A.D. 222–280); Queen Regent Ý Lan who successfully ruled the country; and the historical figure of Liễu Hạnh later recognized as an incarnation of the Mother Goddess. Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết (1987) contends that historical documents about those female figures such as ‘social anthropological documents recorded scattered in old files during the first millennium ... affirm that until the tenth century the role and social status of Vietnamese women remained remarkable’ (95).

This tradition lived on: the spirit of such honoured characters was called upon during the wars against France and America, aiming to mobilize women to the national revolutionary cause, and then again in the post-war period for the national development cause, and most recently for modernization of the country. With strong ‘masculine’ attributes (bravery, heroic, resilience, indomitability and patriotism) constantly encouraged through Vietnamese women’s movements launched by the Vietnamese Women Union,ⁱ Vietnamese women appear as ‘a metaphor for the entire nation’s struggle for Vietnamese independence’ (Chiricosta 2010, 126). Working in the fields at night and fighting during the daytime, Vietnamese women were ‘not simply replacing men, but more importantly, strengthening the nation/family by directing their feminine virtues’ to the cause of national liberation and protection (Pettus 2003, 46). This strong image of Vietnamese women is respectfully described in ‘eight golden Vietnamese words’ (or four golden phrases) awarded by President Hồ Chí Minh in March 1965: ‘Heroic, Indomitable, Faithful and Responsible’, and women’s invaluable contributions were acknowledged by a number of prestigious awards, of which the highest is the ‘Heroic Vietnamese Mother’.

The existence of matriarchal culture, with a ‘double kinship system’ in Vietnam, ‘combined matrilineal and patrilineal patterns of family structure and assigned equal importance to both lines’ – which continued until the XIth century (Lý Dynasty) when Confucianism officially became the state philosophical ideology (Chiricosta 2010, 126). More than a religion, Confucianism was considered as a ‘mandate for an entire way of life’ (Bergman 1975, 20) promoting a social hierarchy based on the leading principle: ‘nam tôn nữ ti’—man respectable, woman despicable (Bùi Trân Phượng 2011, 2-9). However, it needs to be noted that, in spite of the strong influence of Confucianism and the harsh and strict rules of feudalism, ‘virtually every dynasty produced at least one woman who took part in politics and state affairs, served as a military leader, or distinguished herself nationally in public office’ (Duong 2001, 255). The clashes of Confucianism, feudalism, colonialism, socialism, and historical patriarchy resource an ambivalent and contradictory set of Vietnamese femininities.

Dialogical encounters between Connell’s theorization of gender and Vietnamese folklore literature

Gender relations occur everywhere, from formal institutions such as schools or state offices, to informal milieux such as markets and streets. Any institution is always ‘structured in terms of gender and can be characterized by their gender regimes’ in which ‘the state of play in gender relations’ occurs (Connell 1987, 120). We are not free to make gender entirely in the way we like; instead, ‘our gender practice is powerfully shaped by the gender order in which we find ourselves’ (Connell 2009, 74). Connell’s theorisation of gender order/regime has been widely acknowledged as ‘a preliminary taxonomy of gender relations’, which is not only demonstrates ‘important nodes for analysis but guides for practice’ because of Connell’s emphasis

on the dynamics of practice in the context of multiplicity and contradiction' (Hollway 1994, 247-8; see also Kojima (2001) and Alsop, Fitzsimons & Lennon (2002)).

Connell's concept of a 'gender order' is particularly relevant to our research as it is neither essentialist nor universalist, allowing for production and reproduction of power relations while focussing on the specific practices by which this occurs in diverse cultural settings, including in Vietnam. The concept is also analytically helpful to unpack the practices which are specific to the institution and how they link to wider practices in the society.

Breaking the concept of a gender order into four main distinguishable but inseparable dimensions, Connell develops a four-dimensional framework to provide a broad map for thinking about 'gender relations of contemporary industrial, post-industrial and global society' (76): (1) Power relations; (2) Division of labor; (3) Emotional relations (Cathexis); and (4) Symbolism, culture and discourse. These point to ways to 'identify and map the structures involved' in a gender order as gender relations are 'internally complex ... involving multiple structures' (Connell 2009, 75).

According to Connell (1987), power relations are embodied in social hierarchies from the state to families, and through every facet of life, where 'the main axis of the power structure of gender is the general connection of authority with masculinity' (107). Bureaucracies or university leadership in this case, function as sites for 'the mobilization of masculine bias', which is exercised through such processes as selection and promotion of staff (Burton 1992). Another site is the domestic sphere (Franzway 1997), where gender relationships are 'so extended in time, so intensive in contact, so dense in their interweaving of economic, emotion, power and resistance' (Connell 1987, 121) that the domestic sphere is central to the production of gender relations.

To provide more insight into the dynamics of power relations, Connell (1987, 1995) develops the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, which has been influential in analyzing gender, especially masculinities (Demetriou 2001; Hearn and Morrell 2012; Wedgwood 2009). For Connell, hegemonic masculinity is a pattern of gender practices which guarantees and supports men’s domination over women and over other marginalized men; however, it is not ‘a self-reproducing system’ but ‘an historical process’ (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 844). Hegemonic masculinity is ‘always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women’ as ‘the interplay between forms of masculinity is an important part of how a patriarchal social order works’ (Connell 1987, 183). Although favoured in social power relations, men do not evenly enjoy privileges in their labour segregation; other social regulations based on class, ‘race’, and qualities of masculinities divide them into different groups with different levels of privileges. Connell (1995) proposes four major forms of masculinities, including: (1) hegemony (heterosexual); (2) subordination (homosexual); (3) complicity (referring to those who are not actually meet the normative standards of masculinity); and (4) marginalization (always relative to *authorization* of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group) (76-81, *Italics original*). These forms are ‘historical mobile’ and ‘subject to change’, she contends.

Despite acknowledging that ‘actual femininities in our society are more diverse than actual masculinities’ (187), Connell (1987) has not yet theorized multiple forms of femininities. Instead, she argues:

At the level of mass social relations... forms of femininity are defined clearly enough. It is the global subordination of women to men that provides an essential basis for differentiation. One form is defined around compliance with this subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of

men... Others are defined centrally by strategies of resistance or forms of non-compliance. Others again are defined by complex strategic combinations of compliance, resistance and co-operation. (184)

She asserts 'there is no femininity that is hegemonic in the sense that dominant form of masculinity is hegemonic among men' (183). However, in reflecting on such theorizations in the Vietnamese context, there appear some critical differentiations that need to be accounted for.

First of all, it is important to note that the overall picture of power relations in the Vietnamese context is not much different from Connell's argument above. The main patterns of power relations remain those of male dominance and patriarchy as comprehensively captured in one of the famous poems *Bánh Trôi Nước* (the floating cake):

The Floating Cakeⁱⁱ

My body is white; my fate, softly rounded,
Rising and sinking like mountains in streams.
Whatever way hands may shape me,
At centre my heart is red and true.

Using the metaphor of floating cakes, the famous feminist poet Hồ Xuân Hương demonstrates the 'fate' of Vietnamese women. Each step in the cake-making process illustrates a stage of a Vietnamese woman's life, from childhood to elder-hood. The poem pictures a woman with her whole life dependent on men's hands. They not only 'knead' women's lives to whatever size and shape they want, but also require women to be submissive and subordinated with a heart that is 'red and true'.

Yet, along with such a major pattern of power relations, there remains another pattern emerging that may not be as strong but is not subtle either: women's power over men in the domestic sphere, both symbolic and practical. Such a distinctive form

of the power of women in the family economy historically constructs a form of power in which the voice of women is more powerful than that of their men in the domestic sphere. This special role is praised through the title, *Nội Tướng*, General of the Interior, who ‘lock[s] the key and open[s] the drawer of treasury’ (Duong 2001, 227) and/or who has the highest responsibility to control and manage internal affairs including finance.

This pattern of power is also found in gender symbolism that is transmitted in Vietnamese language by the word *cái* (female) in a compound noun. *Cái* is used to refer to *fertilizing ability* or *reproductive capacity*. Interestingly, when *cái* comes after a noun to form a compound noun, it not only expresses the sense of *fertilize* but also refers to something very large and very important. For example, *sông cái* (a big river), *trống cái* (the largest drum in a drum kit), or *đường cái* (highway or inter-communal/-district roads). There is no equivalent term for *masculine* or *male* in such usages. This seems to predicate a consistency between this form of language and the power and high status of women in folklore stories about historical matriarchy.

The role of ‘General of Interior’ is also captured in the poem ‘Love for my wife’ written by Tú Xương in the 19th century, in which he expresses gratitude to his wife who replaces him as a family breadwinner by ‘trading at the riverbank all the year round to nurture five children and one husband’ (Trần Phi Phương 2008, 3). Women as household heads were common during the French and American wars when almost all men were mobilized for the front. They were recognized as ‘the arbiters quasi-exclusively’ (O’Harrow 1995, 164) in the national economy by running small businesses as active and successful merchants (see also Drummond & Rydstrom 2004). This practice did not change much after the colonial wars because thousands of men never returned and many men returned home injured. This role of women is still

relevant in the contemporary context of Vietnam (see Lan Anh Hoang and Yeoh 2011).

It is not difficult to find proverbs and folk songs and stories about men who are bullied at home or who are not able to act as ‘king’. Nor is it difficult to find stories about women who replace men and occupy the elite and powerful position in the domestic sphere, such as: ‘*Nhất vợ, nhì trời*’ (Wife first, God after). This form of feminine power is also evident in the relationship between a stepmother and her husband’s children, where the husband’s voice is often ignored or unheard in this triangular relationship.

The contested dynamics of power relations between different forms of femininities is profoundly evident in the relationship between daughter-in-law and her husband’s mother, in which the husband’s mother uses her power to ‘mistreat’ or ‘maltreat’ the daughter-in-law (Phạm Văn Bích 1999). As Werner (2004) observes:

[m]other and daughter-in-law relations are marked by parent/child terms of address. Mother is the “parent”, not a lateral relative as implied in the English “in-law” terminology. This gives Mother higher status and seniority, while conferring a junior status on the new addition to the family. (28)

This higher status of the husband’s mother is reinforced when she plays both roles of being a carrier and a maintainer of Confucianism. By using Confucian teachings to exert her power in the domestic sphere, she is often known as ‘King’s Mother’ in terms of her harsh and strict supervision of her daughter-in-law who is required to meet the traditional standard of a self-sacrificing mother, devoted daughter-in-law, and dedicated wife (Ngô Thị Ngân Bình 2004). The status of the son/husband is ambiguous between these two women (Werner 2004), seen in the dilemma of deciding which is most important: love (his wife) or filial piety (his mother). Often,

the Confucian filial piety code does not permit the husband to act against his mother by expressing his commitment to his wife.

According to Connell (1987), ‘no pressure is set up to negate or subordinate other forms of femininity in the way hegemonic masculinity must negate other masculinities’ (187). Nevertheless, the overlapping authority of women in the Vietnamese domestic sphere discussed here illustrates the complexity in power relations both between and within genders, which provides a necessary basis for differentiation between the Vietnamese context and the contexts about which Connell writes. The domination and oppression by the husband’s mother of her daughter-in-law and the step-mother of her husband’s children is recognized at the level of mass social relations as a harsh practice which is no less contested than the power relations of men on women. This kind of mother’s/wife’s power amongst Vietnamese women constructs specific forms of femininity and masculinity which are different from those in Connell’s (1987) theory of ‘hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity’. Additionally, with the growth of a monetary economy, women’s capacity to maintain the family economy as head of the household through retail business has reinforced their power in the domestic sphere and created more complexity in the dynamics of power relations.

In examining how such a form of gender relations affects gender practices in Vietnamese universities, we are able to see something of the distinctiveness of the historically produced Vietnamese gender order as played out in the gender regime of universities.

Dynamics of Vietnamese femininity as evident in women’s university leadership

This section explores the dynamics of women’s ‘informal power’ in the settings of

family and university, and argues for the differentiation of Vietnamese femininity as well as the under-theorisation of the interrelation nexus between ‘informal power’ and ‘formal power’ in gender and educational leadership research. This section is organised under three sub-headings: (1) Vietnamese women and the ‘General of the Interior’; (2) the ‘Woman behind the throne’; and (3) ‘Behind a woman is another woman’.

Vietnamese women as ‘Generals of the Interior’

The military title ‘General’ provides a descriptor of Vietnamese women’s power and position in the domestic space. However, the real power of the ‘General of the Interior’ is often confined to the interior and hidden in external relations to ‘save face for the husband’ for the sake of keeping family harmony. What follows are two narratives from Đào and Vy that provide insights into how Vietnamese senior women engage as the ‘General of the Interior’.

The first story from Đào describes her mother as the most powerful person in orienting and deciding her higher education and career. Đào’s mother, in her words, is a woman who is ‘very smart, nimble, responsible, and decisive’. In her family, her mother is the person who has ‘full responsibility’ to ‘decide all domestic decisions despite my father being the breadwinner’. She recalled her childhood here:

Honestly, I was a good looking girl and had abilities in the arts. I was crazy with the dream of making art. I loved singing and dancing so I participated in every artistic activity held by the schools. It may be the reason why I was not an excellent student at secondary and high school. My mother yielded to me a lot. Even my grandmother said to my mother ‘I do not care what you will do, if she still keeps thinking of taking up that ‘outcast’ (xương ca vô loài) career, do not blame me [for what I may cause if you fail]’ (nếu nó cứ vương vấn trong đầu đi làm cái nghề xương ca vô loài thì mày đừng có trách tao). So my mother wiped

my mind of any thinking about that career. She told me ‘do not think about arts, study only’. As I was good at literature, I really wanted to enroll in Tổng hợp văn (Faculty of Literature) to study journalism. I liked travelling. I thought, if I could not do art, I would become a journalist to travel ... However, my mother did not agree. She did not allow me to pursue journalism as she thought I was too romantic and often spoke about things that were not practical and suitable for a girl, a woman in this society. Instead, she advised me to choose this profession [her current area]. In the first year of the university program, I had a literature subject; my teachers often said to me that I was sitting in the wrong class because my score was always far higher than my classmates. They said my seat should have been in the literature faculty. I said I also thought so and I wished to be in the literature faculty, but my mother did not permit so I had to accept [it].

The first point underscored here is the role and power of women in the family through the presence of Đào’s grandmother. In one sentence, Đào describes the ascendancy of the mother in the family through the relationship between the husband’s mother (her grandmother) and the daughter-in-law (her mother). The phrase ‘do not blame me’ is not simply a warning but also invokes the power of the husband’s mother to evaluate the responsibilities of the daughter-in-law.

The second point to note is the mother’s domination over her children’s education. In reshaping the children’s desires in a direction she thinks is best, she is a policy-maker for the family, regulating ‘have-to-dos’ and ‘not-to-dos’. Đào’s mother, in Đào’s words, is ‘extremely dominant in making decisions’ about her study regarding what is suitable and what is not in her preparation for a ‘good’ future. Obeying the mother’s decisions is seen as a moral duty for children, and satisfying a mother’s expectations and respecting her wishes is one of the child’s duties so as to fulfil for the requirements of filial piety.

Importantly, the continuity of a mother’s interference in her children’s life reveals the strength and vitality of a mother’s power. More nuances in this theme can

be found in another story that Đào recalled about the first steps of her career. She said:

In spite of graduating at the university with excellent results, I was refused the opportunity to stay and work at the university because they did not want to receive a female. At that time, a university in [...] offered me a lecturer position. After the war, [that university] were seriously lacking teaching staff in my area. However, my mother did not agree to let me go. She said I could not go so far away because I was a girl. I had to find a job somewhere that was near home. Taking the home as the centre, the radius from my home to the workplace could not be farther than a few kilometres. Later I finally found a job in an institution which was not far from my house.

Making sense of this mother's interference cannot rely on the explanation of the child 'lacking experience' as Đào assumes. In constructing gender identity, Đào's mother uses her authority as a mother, her knowledge and experience to decide and judge what is and is not suitable for a girl (Đào). As a consequence, Đào was not given any space either to develop her hobbies and capacities or to pursue the study area she wished. Even finishing university in her twenties was not considered a milestone for Đào to access the right to make independent decisions about her life. The authority of her mother remained even after society recognized her as a mature person who could access her civil and political rights, such as the right to vote.

Not only influencing her teenage years, her mother continues to influence Đào's life after marriage. After Đào's husband passed away, her mother was diagnosed with cancer and whilst the mother was in the hospital for treatment, she advised Đào to change her job:

Before passing away, my mother advised me to shift my career into teaching. In her opinion, teaching would lighten me up as it was a joyful job. I followed my

mother's advice and became a lecturer in the university where my mother had worked.

What would have happened if Đào's mother had not influenced her? What would her life have been now? It is impossible to predict; however, she would not have become a senior manager in a leadership position in university education. Her mother's authority did shape her options to take up her current position in leadership.

A final point here is the absence of Đào's father in family issues. The father's silence illustrates Đào's comment about the domination of her mother in the domestic sphere. As Đào says, her mother 'makes decisions from A to Z' related to domestic issues, but 'when moving out of the domestic sphere ... my mother always steps back and stands behind my father to let him perform as the household head'. In her words, this behaviour is very 'tactful and delicate', which 'is only recognized by the family members'. The hidden power of the mother as a 'General of the Interior' and the dependence of men on women in maintaining their hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy in both social and domestic spheres is again revealed.

On the same theme, another senior woman, Vy, asserts that 'actually, women are family organizers'. She gives an example to clarify her comment that 'my family's dining time is very flexible. It depends on my working schedule'. According to Vy, her husband and children do not feel uncomfortable with her arrangements nor her working schedule. 'They never make any complaints. They often sit quietly [lãng lãng] to wait for dinner'. Their compliance tells a story of a pattern of dependence of men on women taking care of their personal and daily needs. Vy's husband retired since they got married, so she became the family pillar in terms of economy and her children's education. Simply put, she was not only the key decision maker in her

university, but also in her family as well. Vy's story reinforces the presence of the 'General of the Interior' in normal Vietnamese family life.

To sum up, Đào's and Vy's stories have provided insights into how patriarchy influences power relations in the domestic sphere and its interdependent relationship with patriarchy. Being the prop and stay of the home on which men rely to maintain their wellbeing and daily needs, and making decisions on almost all domestic affairs from physical labour to emotional labour, women appear much more decisive and powerful than men. However, this practice is still undervalued by men and/or sometimes ignored by women in the shadow of cultural beliefs 'Xấu chàng, hổ ai' (the husband's disgrace is the wife's shame). Therefore, although women are often decision makers for internal affairs 'from A to Z', they 'step back and stand behind' men and let them 'perform as the household head' (Đào's story). This practice reflects conflicts and clashes in the paradox of power between women and men that need more attention in Connell's 'hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity'. The notion of the 'General of the Interior' is not the only practice which requires further theoretical work. The next discussion—Women behind the throne—is further evidence for depicting a distinctiveness of Vietnamese femininity as well as the need for such theoretical work.

Women behind the throne

Analyzing the stories of senior women reveals a strong theme of the power of the woman who stands behind her husband's leadership to help and/or control his authority: the 'Women behind the throne'. This theme is drawn from stories narrated by two informants from the same university. Whilst one informant retells her own story as a victim, the other talks about it as evidence for the intrusion of personal

relationships in university leadership regarding selection and promotion of senior managers.

In order to maintain confidentiality of the informants, the two informants whose stories are presented in this discussion are not mentioned even by their pseudonyms. Instead, they are presented with another code based on the time order they participated in the interviews. Cutting off cross-referencing between sections or other papers eliminates the possibility of identification.

The theme ‘Women behind the throne’ is first mentioned as a critical incident for SW02. She was a potential dean at her university. The incident occurred when her new university president recruited deputies for his presidential management board. A recommended list of prospective candidates was announced and a survey poll was held. SW02’s name was on that list. When the result of the poll was disclosed, she was shortlisted as the highest voted candidate. She also gained the highest credibility in comparison with other female counterparts. In spite of ‘having the highest number of confidential votes and satisfying all the necessary and sufficient conditions in terms of age, experience, expertise, and achievements’, SW02 was not the person selected for the position of deputy president, refused without any specific reasons given. However, through her networks and other information channels, SW02 understood that she was not selected for a very particular reason. She smiled and said:

A manager of the human resource department tells me that ‘the boss chooses you, but the boss lady does not agree’. The president is a person who understands other people as well as himself (biết người biết ta). He understands very clearly what I am: responsible, capable, credible, faithful, and serious minded. He knows my validity but he does not use me. He listened to his wife as he may reckon that it would be too risky if he let me sit side by side with him on the university management board. He nominated a very normal woman in terms

of experience, capacities, and achievements. She has nothing to excel or to highlight BUT she is his wife's friend.

SW02's story was also repeated in SW04's narrative. The consistency between the two different interviews about one 'boss lady' or 'first lady' (Sếp bà) reinforces the significance of SW02's story and signifies another difference of Vietnamese femininity. According to SW04:

Since he became the university president, it could be said that his wife was his counsellor or his right hand woman who helped him in organizing human resources for his leadership cabinet and stabilizing the university situation. For example, she phoned twice and each call lasted over an hour to discuss what the president intended to do to reform my department due to criticism about my male boss' weak points and incapacities.

Almost all of the recruitment for deputies of the presidential management board occurred as she planned. For example, without her lobby, I think nobody voted for the current female deputy as nobody thought of her when the president commenced staff selections for his presidential cabinet. The reason was she had nothing special in terms of capacities, qualifications, and achievements.

However, she was still nominated because she was the boss lady's friend, and she was not beautiful (smile).

No wife wants another woman who is more active and intelligent than her husband to become his assistant. In addition, nobody wants to have a beautiful woman working beside her husband. Consequently, this woman (SW02) was pushed far away.

There are three consistent points in their stories. The first is the interference of the 'first lady' in her husband's leadership. The second is the unexpected nomination of the current female deputy in terms of her capacity and achievements. The last is the woman (SW02) who is 'pushed far away' from the chair of deputy. These three points reveal the power of a woman behind the scenes, who has no apparent formal authority, but great influence over her husband. This kind of power is described by an

old Vietnamese proverb: ‘His command is not as powerful as her gong’. The assured authority of the wife is exercised in the shadow of her husband’s power. Behind the university leader, the ‘boss lady’ does have a hand in arranging and organizing her husband’s cabinet as she wants. Her invisible authority is apparent through her lobbying for a woman who has ‘nothing special’ to be selected as a deputy. It is obvious that the dominance of the ‘boss lady’ has institutionalized the structure of leadership practice of the university as her husband’s shadow. In this way, ‘unofficial power’ is actually translated into ‘official power’ and possibly shapes a significant part of the gender regime of universities. This kind of ‘power outside the symbols of power’ (Roces 2009) is inconsistent with Connell’s (1987) argument, in which she proposes that ‘the concentration of social power in the hands of men leaves limited scope for women to construct institutionalized power relationships over other women’ (187). This form of Vietnamese femininity reveals an absence in Connell’s theory of femininity, where she claims that ‘all forms of femininity in this society are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men’ (185). This absence is reinforced by a third theme about the distinctiveness of Vietnamese women—Behind a woman is another woman—which is the focus of the next discussion.

Behind a woman is another woman

This title is extracted from another senior woman, Xuân’s response about how professional women balance their work and family life. ‘Behind a woman is another woman’ refers to physical and mental support from female kinship, as well as female paid assistance. Female paid assistance emerges as the normal way to balance senior women’s commitments to both family and university. Out of twelve informants:

- Four had full time home help (live-in servants);
- One employed a full time home help during a two-year pursuit of extra evening classes;
- Three others hired part-time or seasonal home help;
- The other four manage their domestic burdens by themselves; of these one was a single woman, one was a widow, one was a divorced woman, and one had only one child.

Having a domestic servant was seen as slavery in feudal times due to the division of class and class discrimination. This type of job declined during the period when Vietnam shifted to social collectivism. However, this kind of labor has returned because of work demands, but under a new name ‘người giúp việc gia đình’ (home help). A home help is still supposed to cover all of the housework that a domestic servant did previously.

According to Thu, if women want to advance in their professional careers ‘they need to have a home help’. For Thu, having a home help is crucial to ameliorating the high demands for commitment to both university and family. As she says ‘I am very lucky to have a trusty home help, so I almost do not have to think at all about shopping and cooking. I think it is one of my advantages in advancing my career’. Similarly, Hà confirms that she would not have advanced as far as she did in leadership had she not employed a home help because ‘the university workload was so heavy that I hardly ever got home before 9 p.m. I was always the last person who turned off the lights and left the office’. She describes this devotion to university work as requiring her to sacrifice some of her family responsibility.

However, it is undeniable that the labour purchase of paid home help involves unequal power between employers (intellectual women) and employees (poor and/or

country women and country girls who have not finished their schooling). In such a relationship, the woman 'behind' takes up a subordinate and/or compliant femininity and the woman 'at the front' is more dominant. Connell's theory on this point does not account for the two forms of femininity evident in 'behind a woman is another woman'. Why is a woman 'behind' another senior woman not as powerful as a woman 'behind' a senior man (the throne)? The differentiations between these forms of femininities as well as the different notions of being 'behind' have not yet been accounted for in either the theory of femininities specifically or theories of gender in general.

Questions to open up analysis, debate and action beyond universities

Emerging from the discussion of the three themes, we can begin to see how the distinctiveness of a historically produced Vietnamese gender order is reflected in the gender politics of Vietnamese universities, as well as how it has been translated into the construction of the university gender regime. The complex dynamics of women's 'informal power' has constructed a certain 'order' of Vietnamese femininity and masculinity which is differentiated from or has not yet been theorized in Connell's theory of 'hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity'.

As Schippers (2007) comments, the notions of multiple masculinities and hegemonic masculinity proposed by Connell 'have been taken up as central constructs in the sociology of gender' (85). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) also agree that 'the resulting six pages in *Gender and Power* ... on "hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity" became the most cited source for the concept of hegemonic masculinity' (830-1). However, they also admit that:

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was originally formulated in tandem with a concept of hegemonic femininity – soon renamed “emphasized femininity” to acknowledge the asymmetrical position of masculinities and femininities in a patriarchal gender order. In the development of research on men and masculinities, this relationship has dropped out of focus. (848)

Femininity is still ‘under-theorized’ and ‘a compelling and empirically useful conceptualization of hegemonic femininity and multiple, hierarchical femininities as central to male dominant gender relations has not yet been developed’ (Schippers 2007, 85) in spite of many important attempts to theorize female masculinities and male femininities (Francis 2010) or ‘gender monoglossia’, ‘gender heteroglossia’ (Francis 2012; Fuller 2014).

The selection of data analysed here, only enough to illustrate key points of debate about senior women, poses important challenges to explaining the place of women in Vietnamese universities. It is clear that diverse femininities are resourced from multiple sources with historical traces in the local culture and those universities, whilst still strongly patriarchal, are not necessarily fixed in a rigid gender order but are open to the construction of different gendered relations. This is not to deny the significant struggles that lie ahead for both men and women if more equal relations of power are to emerge. The history of Vietnam, with long periods of colonization and anti-colonization struggles, has local cultural resources which can interplay with new developments across the globe. Yet the histories of Confucianism intertwined with interaction with modernist forms of patriarchy still play out, needing resources from socialist, warrior women and historical folk literature as well as global networks to continue the struggle. Being a ‘general of the interior’, a ‘woman behind the throne’ or relying on unequal relations with other women are not significant enough roles to challenge continued patriarchal domination. They do not result in shifts that recognize

that leadership practices need to change more broadly, not merely in the practices of the current incumbents.

However, this article's exploration of the complexity of Vietnamese femininities can be considered as providing new sources for theorizing multiple forms of femininities. The distinctiveness of Vietnamese femininity is formed by historical patriarchy, rooted in ancient histories, maintained in Vietnamese folklore literature, promoted in national revolutions, and embedded in contemporary gender practices. Emerging from this analysis is an image of Vietnamese women as strong, active, capable, independent, heroic and powerful in both public and domestic spheres. These can resource shifts from the accounts given in this paper of aspects of women's power that remain hidden, constrained and oppressed even when they are holding senior positions. Such complex and shifting forms of femininity appear not to have been accounted for yet in Connell's definition of the forms of femininity.

Nor does the form of femininity in which the disharmonious relationship between husband's mother and daughter-in-law is noted as an always-critical-and-unavoidable problem. These forms are, evidently, constructing some kind of hegemony over other forms of femininity as well as masculinity. The question is: Is there any possibility that patterns of femininity are socially defined not in contradistinction but in parallel, symmetry, compensation, or correlation to those of masculinity? And, is there any possibility it is shaped not only in the form of opposition and conflict but also in the form of consistency and compensation, as in the theory of yin-yang?

Finally, power relations and their dynamics in gender politics need to be questioned. Power, as a dimension of gender, is often connected with patriarchy and formal or legislative authority in political systems, often demonstrated as the

embodiment of masculinity. However, on the evidence of this study, the idea of 'power outside the symbols of power' (Roces 2009) has become important. The intervention of 'informal/unofficial power' into 'formal/official power' signifies a sense of institutions in which 'formal power' that is recognized does involve 'informal power', and domestic authority does not only embody male patriarchy. The interrelation nexus between 'informal power' and 'formal power' regarding the formation of gender relations is still under-theorized in gender and educational leadership research.

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ⁱ Some of the most famous women's movements are 'Five Goods' in 1961, 'Three Responsibilities' in 1965, and 'Good at national affairs, responsible for family affairs' in 1989.

ⁱⁱ Translated by John Balaban cited in Tran Van Dinh (2001).