

Cooking the ‘Imperialist West’

The Exchange of Non-Marxist Non-Evolutionist Ideas in Vietnamese Institutionalized Anthropology in the Pre-Renovation High-Socialist Period

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Introduction

Intellectual exchange has on numerous occasions taken the form of a ‘clash of civilizations’ (Huntington 1996). But as anthropologist Susan Bayly repeatedly shows throughout her scholarly endeavours, particularly through her works on past and contemporary Vietnam, intellectual exchange is also ‘a bridging of worlds’ (Bayly, this volume). Inspired by her accounts of post-colonial Vietnamese intellectuals as active moral agents capable of traversing and connecting knowledge systems supposed to be mutually antagonistic (Bayly 2004, 2007), this chapter seeks to add insight to an enduring, and still vibrant, line of enquiry in anthropology about intellectual life in both revolutionary socialist and post-/late-socialist contexts (Gellner 1977; Humphrey 1984; Tishkov 1992). My focus is on a striking theme in the recollections of many Vietnamese anthropologists about an important chapter of their scholarly life in the 1970s and 1980s pre-Renovation high-socialist period, and a theme that is powerfully conveyed in their published works as well as non-public letters they exchanged with one another in this period.¹ At the time, my interlocutors were employed in public research institutes and universities in northern Vietnam. Yet the narratives and written works by those ‘state’ anthropologists showed that they actively engaged in the exchange and dissemination of ideas and theoretical views widely associated with ‘Western’ non-Marxist, non-evolutionist anthropological perspectives, particularly those associated with cultural relativism and structuralism.

The literature on pre-Renovation Vietnamese anthropology (Nguyễn Văn Tiệp 2011; Truong 2014; Nguyễn Duy Thiệu 2016) has described the institutionalized discipline of anthropology practised in state research institutions and universities in northern Vietnam in the 1970s and 1980s as a highly restricted ‘sphere of intellectual exchange’. My use of the term ‘sphere’ is inspired by, yet not fully identical to, Bohannan and Bohannan’s influential use of the concept (1968), which refers to a system of exchange in which objects are classified according to different spheres of values, and restrictions exist to prevent the exchange of objects in one sphere with those in another. Instead, I use the term ‘sphere’ to describe a network of exchange regulated by specific rules regarding what can be circulated within the network. Examples of such spheres include Frances Pine’s account of a norm in the Polish highlands that exchanges within the house economy and village community should be made in the form of gifts, not direct monetary payment (2002: 85); or Heonik Kwon’s study of a rule in Vietnamese traditional ritual economy that one should offer gods and ancestors votive money in the forms of gold and silver bars, not brass coins, which should be offered only to wandering ghosts (2007: 83).

In the international literature on pre-Renovation Vietnamese anthropology, state anthropologists have widely been described as being confined to an officially sanctioned Soviet version of Marxist evolutionism as the single theoretical framework for scholarly discussion (Luong 2006: 374). The reason for such confinement was either because they were oblivious to, or unable to access, non-Marxist, non-evolutionist theories, or because for them such ideas were too bourgeois, imperialist and reactionary to be legitimate objects of intellectual exchange, the circulation of which would contaminate the institutionalized discipline of anthropology as a site to facilitate the transformation of the country’s ethnic minority citizens in line with Marxist ideals of social evolution (Evans 2005: 43–46; Nguyen Van Chinh 2019: 91).

This chapter presents a different account of the so-called ‘state’ anthropologists. By exploring the recollections of their scholarly life in the pre-Renovation period, together with examining their published works and non-public written communications they had with one another during this particular chapter of Vietnamese anthropology, I draw attention to active exchanges of Western theories within the institutionalized discipline of anthropology in northern Vietnam. By so doing, I first lend weight to scholars such as Bayly (2004, 2007) and Truong (2014), who convincingly demonstrate that even under high-socialism, intellectual life in Vietnam was far from being cut off from the ‘Imperialist West’ (Evans 2005: 46). Instead, Vietnamese scholars and anthropologists were able to live a life of remarkable connectivity, in which they were linked to ‘Western’ anthropological knowledge in diverse and creative ways.

As I will show, the anthropologists I knew amassed Western knowledge from a wide array of sources. They included translations of Western works in French by senior scholars who had been influenced by French scholarly

traditions in the pre-Revolution era (before 1945) (Kleinen 2005), as well as used books and scholarly texts available at street vendors in Vietnam's capital Hanoi after the collapse of the US-backed regime in the south and since the country was reunified under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1975 (Bayly 2004: 332). Another crucial source was verbal communications with senior anthropologists richly endowed with cosmopolitan knowledge, thanks to their training in Western countries before the 1945 Revolution, their fluency in French by virtue of family background, or experiences as experts (*chuyên gia*) in former French-ruled colonies (Bayly 2004, 2009).

Yet if access to Western theories was one thing, treating them as objects of exchange to be circulated within the 'state' sphere was quite another. Thus, the second goal of this chapter is to understand the sense those anthropologists made of Western theories, in the face of the remarkable pressure on them to defend state anthropology as a sphere to uphold Marxist ideals of social evolution and to promote those ideals among the country's ethnic minorities.

In the limited literature on the encounter between Vietnamese anthropologists and Western theories in this period, the search for and exchanges of Western ideas were driven by both their dissatisfaction with Marxism-Leninism as the only theory officially available to them in their training and later scholarly endeavours, and by a determination to break away from an imprisoning sphere of intellectual exchange, the purpose of which – that is, the facilitation of a Marxist frame of social evolution among ethnic minority groups – was considered cold and instrumental (e.g. Truong 2014).

While my informants did convey a sense of dissatisfaction with the fact that only Marxism-Leninism was accepted as the medium of scholarly exchange in the 'state' sphere, they did not describe the Western ideas they learned and shared as challenging the goal of state anthropology to promote social evolution. Instead, for them, Western ideas offer both exciting knowledge and novel means to sustain the vitality of institutionalized state anthropology, by providing new insights into effective paths for promoting social evolution among ethnic minorities, in ways Soviet-style Marxist theories had insufficiently addressed. Thus, their exchanges of those ideas were definitely not intended to be a disruption of the 'state' sphere. By breaching the sphere's boundaries, they contribute to reinforcing it.

I therefore coin the phrase 'cooking the "Imperialist West"'. This phrase is inspired by Carsten's work on Malaysian women, who spent the money their husbands earned when working outside the home on the food they cooked and shared among family members, thereby converting money from a symbol of commercialized and individualized labour into an embodiment of the spirits of collectivism, mutual sharing and non-calculation that could be safely exchanged within the home sphere as moral objects (Carsten 1989: 132). In a similar vein, the Vietnamese 'state' anthropologists, through their own distinctive interpretation of Western theories, 'cooked' those ideas into novel forms suitable to be circulated within the institutionalized anthropology.

Inside the State Sphere

Most of the anthropologists I worked with originate from the countryside, having passed a highly competitive entrance exam to become students in the Faculty of History of Hanoi University. Until the late 1970s, it was the only tertiary education institution in northern Vietnam where anthropology was taught, under the name *Dân tộc học* (ethnology/ethnography).² Upon graduation, most have been employed in public universities and research institutions, notably Hanoi University and the Committee for Social Sciences (now Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences). It is precisely thanks to such specific academic training and affiliations that my interlocutors are among the few who still retain vivid memories of the official space for anthropological exchange and practices in the pre-Renovation period.

Typical of Vietnamese anthropologists who became university undergraduates in the early 1970s, Prof. Ba did not choose anthropology as his major at first. Now in his late sixties, he recalled that he originally applied to the Faculty of Literature, then one of only two faculties of social sciences at Hanoi University. Yet back then the subject they would study was not chosen by students themselves, but instead administrative decisions were made by university managers. Prof. Ba was assigned to the Faculty of History, an unexpected turn that began his bond with anthropology for the next forty years. Upon graduation, he became a lecturer in ethnology at Hanoi University, where he worked until retirement.

In Prof. Ba's days as a university student, anthropology, under the name of ethnology, was offered not as an independent undergraduate programme, but only as part of the programme in History. This teaching model was influenced by the way anthropology was taught in the Soviet Union. In the 1960s, senior Soviet anthropologists were sent to northern Vietnam to help prepare textbooks and teaching curricula. Prof. Ba told me when I accompanied him on a visit to his alma mater:

In the first three years of our undergraduate programme, students only had a sixty-hour 'Introduction to Ethnology' course [*Cơ sở dân tộc học*]. Not until the end of the third year did we get to choose ethnology as the major to commit to during the final year.

Undergraduate students had merely two textbooks for official learning materials in ethnology. The first was a translation of a Russian textbook, *Introduction to Ethnology*, by E.P. Buxughin, a Soviet ethnologist invited to Hanoi University to lecture and help coordinate the teaching of the new discipline in the early 1960s. In the early 1970s, another textbook of the same title, *Cơ sở dân tộc học (Introduction to Ethnology)*, was written in Vietnamese. The author, Phan Hữu Dật, was among the first Vietnamese to obtain the Candidate Nauk degree (Candidate of Science) in ethnology from the Soviet Union. The textbooks were later supplemented by articles published in newly established

journals, notably the *Journal of Ethnology* (*Tạp chí Dân tộc học*) launched in 1974. However, until the 1980s, what those textbooks and articles offered were either descriptive accounts by Vietnamese ethnologists without theoretical framing, or translations of selected works by Soviet scholars such as Bromlei and Tokarev that embraced strictly evolutionist and Marxist perspectives (Bromlei 1974; Tokarev 1976).

For those who studied ethnology and later became professional anthropologists in state research institutions in the 1970s and 1980s, social evolutionism was the only accepted theory and Marxism-Leninism was considered the only 'scientific method' (*phương pháp khoa học*) (Nguyễn Văn Tiệp 2011). Prof. Ba recalled vividly what he and his peers were taught in their first year at university, on a course regarded as foundational to all students in the faculty: *Phương pháp luận sử học* (Methodologies of Historical Studies). This course was meant to equip students and future researchers with knowledge of Marxism-Leninism, regarded as the single proper worldview and theoretical approach, to be embraced at all times in their learning and work. Prof. Ba recalled:

We learned about the thoughts of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin about history. Basically, we were taught that the history of mankind was a development through five socio-economic forms, from lower to higher, each was characterized by a particular force of production and a relation of production. This applied to all human societies. The task of ethnology, a subfield of historical science that focused on the history of ethnic groups, was to explore how an ethnic group had developed through time, to which socio-economic form that ethnic group currently belonged, and most importantly, how to guide that ethnic group to advance to higher forms of social evolution, which basically meant a classification of their cultural practices into progressive ones, to be promoted, and backward ones, to be eradicated. (See also Buxughin 1961: 57)

The dominance of the Marxist evolutionist framework in pre-Renovation state anthropology not only defined the ultimate goal of anthropology as the promotion of social evolution among ethnic minorities, but also regulated what should be considered proper, scientific methods to achieve that goal. Prof. Le, another undergraduate student in the faculty in the 1970s, who later became a senior fellow at the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, recalled:

During our university training and later our work in state research projects, the topics of studies were very limited: ethnic history, material culture, cultivation techniques, land ownership, class differentiation and social organizations. Back then the main goal of state research projects was to identify cultural practices of ethnic groups and determine the position of a given ethnic group in the development ladder, so as to devise policies to help them develop in accordance with Marxist-Leninist theory of social evolution. Therefore, we had to focus on aspects of their cultures that could indicate where they were, in what ways they were lagging behind, what practices to promote and what to eradicate. Of course topics of particular concerns were the force of production, i.e. whether they were wet-rice or slash-and-burn cultivators; and relations of production, i.e. types of land ownership and the degree of class differentiation.

Prof. Le's experience was far from unusual. All the anthropologists I worked with recalled that in state-funded studies in which they participated before Renovation, aspects of ethnic lives that did not indicate the level of social evolution of ethnic groups, such as decoration motifs, funeral songs, symbols and local knowledge, were rarely the focus of attention. They were considered trivial topics (*vụn vặt*), to be ignored so as to focus on important topics such as forces of production and relations of production (Nguyễn Huệ Chi 2005).

Prof. Ba recalled a similar experience as he participated in the only fieldwork trip during his undergraduate study: a one-month fieldwork study organized by the Faculty of History. It was an annual course of intensive training, arranged for all second-year students, in which about 100 students were sent to live in a far-away community, often in rural and ethnic minority regions.

While intended to familiarize students with how to conduct ethnographic research, those fieldwork trips were frequently expected by higher authorities to carry political agendas. Prof. Ba recalled the official goal of his fieldwork training in 1974: to learn about scientific socialism (*chủ nghĩa xã hội khoa học*). The trip was launched soon after the promulgation of a major resolution of the Communist Party on three revolutions (*Ba cuộc cách mạng*). For the faculty leaders at the time, the fieldwork trip was an opportunity to educate students on the first and most important revolution, in relations of production. Prof. Ba's cohort thus was sent to a village regarded as a role model in implementing the cooperativization movement in agriculture (*phong trào hợp tác hóa nông nghiệp*), the cornerstone of the revolution in relations of production in the countryside (Standing Committee of the National Assembly 1969). What was supposed to be a period of intensive fieldwork training had been redesigned as a time to inculcate political agendas. As Prof. Ba recalled:

At days we helped villagers with farm work on cooperative fields. At nights we attended meetings of the local cooperative, listening to reports, directives, and resolutions. Throughout the trip, we received no fieldwork training. Instead, we were asked to participate in local life as deeply as possible, to understand how the revolution in relations of production was taking root in the countryside.

The influence of Marxism set substantial limits not only on the topics Vietnamese state anthropologists should study, but also on how to make sense of what they found. For example, a key task of Soviet-style Marxist anthropology was to classify cultural practices of a given ethnic group into progressive ones (*tiến bộ*) and backward ones (*lạc hậu*). The former should be promoted because they would facilitate the transition of an ethnic group to higher levels of evolution. The latter should be eradicated because they would obstruct the transition (Buxughin 1973: 57). However, the identification of 'progressive' and 'backward' practices was based on a universal set of standards, which did not always do justice to the sophistication and local embeddedness of cultural forms and institutions under study (Keyes 2002; Phạm Như Cương 1989: 9-17; Evans 2005). As Prof. Ba explained:

Back then it was simple. Handicraft items produced by artisanal, locally specific methods were always inferior to those produced by industrial production. A hand-made piece of cloth was always inferior to a piece made by machine in a factory. Local knowledge should be replaced with scientific knowledge. A lavish funeral was definitely a backward, wasteful custom of superstition, to be eradicated without question.³

The dominance of Marxism and evolutionism meant that non-Marxist, non-evolutionist theories were widely criticized in state anthropology: as Western, idealistic (*duy tâm*), subjective (*chủ quan*), reactionary (*phản động*), and as tools of oppression wielded by the ruling class, colonial rulers and imperialists (Phan Hữu Dật 1973: 1). Prof. Le recalled that Bronislaw Malinowski was mentioned in a methodology lecture as an object of criticism: someone with a 'reactionary' perspective, who 'dedicated his entire life serving British and American imperialists'. Malinowski was particularly criticized because he held that non-Western societies were in a state of equilibrium that 'should not be touched'. In the view of Soviet-style Marxist anthropology, this approach was driven by the 'Imperialist' mindset of Western colonial rulers, who sought to dominate non-Western peoples without the will to help them develop (Buxughin 1961: 47). Marxist anthropology, by contrast, had as its ultimate aim the facilitation of the transition of all ethnic groups and nations to higher stages of social evolution.

Another example of the official hostility towards non-Marxist, non-evolutionist theories was illustrated in the case of the renowned Vietnamese anthropologist, Nguyen Tu Chi (1925–95). Born to a family of intellectuals in the revolutionary tradition, Tu Chi was fluent in French, and worked in Guinea between 1961 and 1963 as one of many experts (*chuyên gia*) the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) sent to African states as both tokens of selfless friendship and a means of earning much-needed remittances for the country (Bayly 2009). Widely acknowledged as one of the most well-known Vietnamese anthropologists of the twentieth century (Truong 2014), Tu Chi was particularly famous for his pioneering works that employ Lévi-Strauss's structuralism to examine the social structure and cosmologies of the Viet and Muong ethnic groups in northern Vietnam (Trần Tử 1978, 1984).

Yet although Tu Chi was much respected by students and young anthropologists of Prof. Ba's generation, he was officially viewed in the 1970s and 1980s as a problematic figure, and his efforts to disseminate structuralism to younger colleagues were often met with vilification. In a tribute article to Tu Chi, his cousin Hue Chi recalled a dramatic event in 1972, when Tu Chi was an academic staff member at the Institute of Ethnology, Committee for Social Sciences. He was invited to present a talk on a Western theory of his choice for the institute's staff. His talk on Lévi-Strauss's structuralism was enthusiastically received, causing him to extend the talk that was scheduled for one day to three days. Yet on the last day, a committee senior official was informed of the talk and became enraged. For him it was an act of 'propagating capitalist

scholarship while the country was fighting the American' (Nguyễn Huệ Chi 2005). The talk was immediately stopped, the institute's leaders had to submit a 'self-criticism' report (*báo cáo*) to account for the event, and Tu Chi eventually left the institute.

Tu Chi and his works remained targets of official criticisms for the rest of the pre-Renovation period. His main topics of enquiry, notably decoration motifs, women's skirts and funeral songs, were all considered 'useless' (*vô bổ*). They offered little insight into forces and relations of production of an ethnic group, which according to Soviet-style Marxist anthropology were the only topics of study that could help facilitate social evolution. Tu Chi was also criticized because he defended cultural practices of ethnic minorities officially regarded at the time as unquestionably backward, to be eradicated, instead treating them as sophisticated and valuable (Truong 2014).

Transcending Boundaries

Despite the tremendous constraints on anthropological research and practice before Renovation, the memories shared by anthropologists I worked with are far from accounts of those who passively complied with official rules regarding what could be circulated within the institutionalized discipline of anthropology as a highly regulated 'sphere of intellectual exchange'. What they convey are powerful recollections of how they actively moved beyond the boundaries of Soviet-style Marxist evolutionism to engage with other anthropological approaches.

While acknowledging the dominance of Marxist evolutionism in publicly available texts, anthropologists I know emphasized that there were opportunities to access a much wider range of anthropological theories through non-public sources, three of which deserve attention. The first were scholarly materials available in the library of the Faculty of History. Although a modest in-house library, it stored a rich collection of academic texts in French, Russian and Chinese, contributed by faculty members and academics who considered the faculty a worthy address to which to donate their valuable texts.

Many of those works were translated into Vietnamese by a group of non-teaching faculty staff. Most of them were of highly educated backgrounds. Some were mandarins under the Nguyen, Vietnam's last imperial dynasty overthrown in the 1945 Revolution. With various factors preventing them from attaining higher positions in the post-Revolution state system, particularly 'bad-class' background or affiliation with the overthrown monarchy (Malarney 2002), they joined the faculty to work exclusively as translators of academic materials.

The materials they translated were often available in the form of a single handwritten copy, as there was no typewriter. Such valuable copies were for in-house loan only, meaning that students and even faculty members had to

read them inside the library's cramped space. Yet former students of the faculty told me that they devised a system to make those materials into forms that could be more widely circulated. 'We divided ourselves into groups, each was responsible for making handwritten copies of certain texts. Then we shared them with each other,' explained Prof. Ba. Although the students originally planned to share the texts among themselves only, those handwritten copies became objects of exchange within a much larger network, including fellow anthropologists in other state institutions. Prof. Ba showed me a handwritten copy he made himself. It clearly had changed hands a lot, being filled with notes and comments in different colours of ink by those who had participated in this network of scholarly exchange.

Of the translated texts most widely circulated among the students, faculty members and anthropologists outside the faculty, accounting for the largest number were works by Soviet scholars, such as 'Nations, Races, and Cultures' by Cheboksarov and Cheboksarova (1985); and texts by Chinese scholars on the history and cultural customs of ethnic groups residing on the land that is now Vietnam in the past, such as 'Lĩnh ngoài đại đáp' 嶺外代答 by Chu Khứ Phi 周去非. Yet the most sought after were works by French colonial scholars written in the pre-Revolution period, two of which were particularly influential on Prof. Ba and anthropologists of his generation: *Les Paysans du Delta Tonkinois* by Pierre Gourou (1936) and *Les Muong* by Jean Cuisinier (1946).

The second source of Western non-Marxist materials much valued by my interlocutors were books on sale at various used book stores and street vendors across the capital Hanoi.⁴ For most university students before the Renovation, used books were a much-preferred source of learning materials may be compared to brand-new books available in official bookshops. This was not only a matter of price. As Prof. Le recalled:

In official libraries and bookshops, you could only find a very limited range of texts: classic works by Marx and Engels, anthologies of works by Party leaders, translation of orthodox works by Soviet scholars. Yet in used book stores and street book vendors, you could run into books printed in the pre-Revolution period, works by Western scholars, even non-Marxist works that no state publisher would accept for mass publication.

It was on a visit to a used book store in a deep alley of Hanoi that Prof. Le obtained one of the most treasured books in his family library, now located on his house's third floor: 'I was looking for some novels when I ran into a much-worn text, "*La civilisation primitive*".' Thanks to his fluency in French, he immediately recognized what it was: Edward Tylor's infamous *Primitive Culture*. It was a book widely talked about among students in the faculty, and regarded by many of their teachers and senior anthropologists as a must-read. However, it could not be found in university libraries or public bookshops as its author was regarded as a 'colonial' scholar. 'It cost everything I had in my pocket that day,' Prof. Le said warmly.

Such memories were widely recalled by anthropologists I know. All showed me much-used books they obtained from street vendors before the Renovation. In addition to works by foreign scholars, I was struck by books written by anthropologists working in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), the American-backed regime defeated by the DRV in 1975. After the reunification in 1975, various works that had been published in the RVN were quietly brought to the north by returning northern Vietnamese military servicemen and civil servants. As shown below, although never treated as legitimate sources of knowledge by DRV officials, these works were greeted with great enthusiasm by northern anthropologists as novel sources of insight into the anthropological world.

Books of this kind were all much worn, and there were clear signs that they had been exchanged a lot. For owners of such books at the time, they were personal treasures. Prof. Ba showed me one of his most cherished texts, with a hard cover he had made himself to protect it. Yet my interlocutors were also generous sharers, rarely refusing to lend out those texts to fellow anthropologists. A former junior of Prof. Ba at Hanoi University recalled:

One day I told brother Ba in a casual conversation, 'Have you read *Les Paysans du Delta Tonkinois*? I was dying to read it, but no one had it'. Some days later, he suddenly called me out and pulled out from his bag a handwritten copy he made himself. 'Treat it with care, and remember to return it'.

For a small group of anthropologists, there was a third source of knowledge into non-Marxist traditions that was particularly influential in their career life: the communications they had with anthropologists of earlier generations, who were well known among the younger scholars for their rich knowledge of theories and practice beyond the boundaries of Marxist Soviet anthropology.

I return to the case of Prof. Tu Chi. Despite Tu Chi's officially marginalized status before Renovation, a small group of young researchers, most of them full-time employees in state research institutions, actively sought his mentorship. A case in point is Dr Nguyen, another senior researcher at Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences. 'For young ethnologists at the time, learning from Tu Chi was an obvious choice for those who wanted something new, beyond what was available in official teaching programmes. Few other than Tu Chi could help us,' he said.

While Dr Nguyen used the term 'teach,' he and other unofficial students of Tu Chi never learned from him through formal classes. Tu Chi never held any official teaching position at a university. He instead transferred knowledge to younger colleagues through casual, intimate discussions they had in his house or on the streets, while they were having tea and sipping rice spirit together. 'Sometimes he came to my house. A bottle of rice spirit and a dish of roasted peanut were everything I could offer him. Yet he kept telling me his ethnographic stories from noon to midnight,' recalled Prof. Ba, another of Tu Chi's informal students.

It was Tu Chi who alerted those such as Prof. Ba and Dr Nguyen to important non-Marxist texts, from Tylor's *Primitive Culture* and Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1976), to André Leroi-Gourhan's *Evolution et Techniques* (1945), and particularly Lévi-Strauss's works. Dr Nguyen noted that Tu Chi never mentioned theories directly: 'He rarely talked about theories. Most of the time he simply shared his experiences from the field, what he saw in Vietnam and Guinea. Yet we knew he was quietly mainstreaming theoretical ideas into his talks'. Prof. Ba had the same impression. He believed it was an act of caution Tu Chi took after the painful experience of his lectures on Lévi-Strauss being subject to official scrutiny.

While the discussions between Tu Chi and the young scholars have been mentioned in the literature on pre-Renovation anthropology (Truong 2014; Bù Xuân Đính 2016), less attention has been paid to the network of exchange that those scholars created themselves. Within the highly restricted 'state' sphere, knowledge they learned from Tu Chi became exciting objects of exchange they enthusiastically shared with others. A colleague of Prof. Le recalled:

Brother Le always came to see me after he met Tu Chi. Sometimes even at dinner time. He simply dropped by on his bicycle, and said: 'I just met old Tu [*cụ Tũ*, a respectful way of addressing Tu Chi]. He said something very interesting. You must hear it. Let's go for a beer. Your treat.'

Structuralism and Relativism

Among the non-Marxist non-evolutionist theories my interlocutors acquired from unofficial sources and exchanged with one another, two are regarded as particularly influential in their theoretical views. The first is structuralism, something they learned mostly from their unofficial mentor, Tu Chi. As Dr Nguyen said:

Tu Chi never spoke to us directly about structuralism. He rarely mentioned the name of Lévi-Strauss. Yet he conveyed structuralist ideas to us in almost everything he discussed, from the Muong's cosmology, their realms of life and death [*cõi sống và cõi chết*], and funeral songs. He was particularly passionate about symbols and their meanings, particularly decoration motifs found on Muong women's dress, the Dong Son bronze drums of the Kinh-Viet, and roofs of houses of the J'rai in the Central Highlands.

Structuralist perspectives learned from Tu Chi inspired Dr Nguyen and his colleagues in two main ways. First, it reminded them of the importance of moving beyond strictly Marxist concerns such as forces of production and relations of production, so as to explore a much wider range of ethnic cultural practices, notably rituals, symbols and meanings. Second, it was critical to shift the focus from ranking them in accordance with the Marxist frame of unilinear evolution

to identifying what humankind had in common in terms of perspectives, worldviews and cosmology. Dr Nguyen stated:

What ethnologists should pay attention to when studying weaving practices of the Muong, for example, was not only their weaving tools and techniques and how advanced or backward they were in accordance with universal standards, but also decoration motifs they used on weaving products, the meanings of these symbols, so as to identify ways of thinking shared by all ethnic groups and human beings.

The other highly influential theory is cultural relativism. Similar to structuralism, relativism was officially regarded before Renovation as 'Western' and bourgeois, as many of its core arguments were in conflict with Marxist evolutionism. Prof. Ba recalled that he first became aware of this theory in the early 1980s, yet not in the way relativism is taught to anthropology students today. He was not aware of Franz Boas, nor major texts by cultural relativists such as Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict. Neither did he gain access to relativism systematically, as a complete theory about cultures being the products of adaptation to historical and social contexts. Instead, relativism came to him in bits and pieces, from French, Russian and Chinese texts he read and discussions with senior scholars.

I was struck by what Prof. Ba considered the text through which the idea of relativism was first introduced to him: another much-worn book by an eminent scholar in the RVN, Bình Nguyễn Lộc, published in 1971. One of Prof. Ba's senior colleagues at university introduced the book to him, insisting that he read it despite the fact that it was published under the RVN regime. On the first page, the author quoted Pierre Huard, a French physician and anthropologist: 'No culture should be ashamed of itself, and no culture has the right to despise other cultures' [*Aucune culture ne doit avoir honte d'elle-même, pas plus qu'elle ne saurait mépriser les autres*]. Prof. Ba recalled:

The idea surprised me. It was clearly not in line with officially approved perspectives [he meant Soviet-style Marxist theories]. Yet for me it should not be immediately rejected or criticized just because the author was a scholar from the other side [the RVN]. By contrast, it was something to treat seriously, because we knew scholars from the RVN had the opportunity to engage with a wider range of perspectives than we did.

Prof. Ba did not know the ideas he was learning were something widely taught in Western countries as 'cultural relativism', a term he only learned much later. However, he felt strongly that the new perspective offered a novel reference point to make sense of the life of the ethnic minorities he worked with, in ways that had not been satisfactorily explained by mainstream Marxist theories of unilinear evolutionism. Ever since Marxist evolutionism was first introduced to him, he had sensed it should be treated with caution. 'The more I worked with ethnic minority people, the more I realized they were far from backward, or ignorant. They were kind, hard-working, and creative. Many of

their cultural practices were beautiful and sophisticated,' said Prof. Ba, recalling how impressed he was by the skills his ethnic minority informants demonstrated when building stilt houses, and how they cleverly designed irrigation systems to channel water from rivers through challenging mountain terrains to rice fields. Prof. Ba thus was excited about the idea of cultures being equal.

As soon as I was aware of the new idea, it immediately made much sense to me, given what I had experienced when working with and living amongst ethnic minorities. Clearly their cultural practices had many aspects that should be preserved and respected, because they were actually the results of their creative adaptations to the particular natural and social environments in which they lived, so as to meet their specific needs and aspirations. These practices must not be dismissed as 'backward' and something to be eradicated.

It was fascinating that for Prof. Ba there was evident similarity between the idea of cultures being equal and the idea conveyed by French colonial anthropologists, particularly Gourou. Although my interlocutors still describe Gourou as one of the '*học giả thực dân*,' literally 'colonial scholars,' particularly for their orientalizing perspectives in which they treated their subjects of study as retainers of 'exotic culture' (Kleinen 2005: 345), they all express remarkable respect for those 'colonial' works. 'The materials in those books were so detailed, meticulous, and comprehensive,' said Prof. Ba, using the term '*toàn diện*' (comprehensive). They particularly admired those 'colonial' works for providing a broad-range view of ethnic lives and for showing respect towards local cultures, instead of treating ethnography as a discipline confined in focus, concentrating only on topics of immediate interest to Marxism and dismissing other cultural practices as backward and lowly.

I was fascinated by what Gourou wrote: that the small-scale, low-productivity agricultural economy of peasants in Tonkin [northern Vietnam] was actually in great harmony with the particular natural and social environments of the Red River Delta where they had lived for centuries, and very much tailored to the needs of the peasants, which were simply to have enough to eat rather than to get rich.

The acquisition of novel theoretical perspectives, through works by RVN scholars or colonial anthropologists, was a prominent theme in my interlocutors' narratives. Rather than treating those bodies of knowledge with disdain and as mere subjects for criticism, their narratives convey a sense of enthusiasm for novel ideas and mutual scholarly respect for those officially classified as 'colonial,' 'enemy' or 'reactionary.' There was absolutely no sense of them being confined to Soviet-style Marxist evolutionism as the only exchangeable theoretical perspectives within the 'sphere' of state anthropology, either because they were passive, lacking motivation for learning and uncritically embracing the views imposed on them without independent perceptions of their own, or because they were narrow-minded and treated works by Western, non-Marxist non-evolutionist scholars as reactionary and toxically idealistic

(Nguyen Van Chinh 2019: 92). What I document shares great similarities with Bayly's account of intellectuals in post-Revolution northern Vietnam as eager learners and active explorers of diverse knowledge systems, who were far from being confined by ideological fault-lines (2004, this volume).

Cooking Theories

While I have constantly been struck by my interlocutors' active engagement with and exchange of Western theories, what is equally striking is the way they interpreted the novel ideas they learned and shared. Of course, a central feature in their narratives was how the new theories offered novel frameworks to understand aspects of ethnic minority lives that Marxist evolutionism could not. Yet another powerfully conveyed theme was that they did not see those Western theories as undermining or in conflict with the official goal of state anthropology: to foster social evolution. The following quote was taken from a letter Prof. Ba exchanged with a junior colleague. Prof. Ba had lent the colleague a book by RVN scholar Binh Nguyen Loc to introduce relativist ideas to him. The junior, excited yet confused by the ideas, sought Prof. Ba's advice on how to make sense of relativism. Prof. Ba replied:

Relativism is right to say that each culture is created by its own surrounding conditions. Thus no culture should be regarded as backward, nor forced to change in ways similar to others. Yet relativism does not dismiss evolutionism. It just gives us a different idea about how to facilitate social evolution. All cultures and societies will still evolve from lower to higher forms, but they will do so in their own way, in accordance with their own conditions. In this sense, relativism is actually a useful tool for ethnology. It shows us that in order to help our ethnic minority compatriots achieve a better life, we must not force them to change in the way we want. Instead, we must help them develop in the way they want.

Prof. Ba did not use such terms as 'modern' (*hiện đại*) or 'progress' (*tiến bộ*), in ways that convey a sense of universalization and arbitrary judgement of local practices by external standards. Instead, he used such terms as 'develop' (*phát triển*) and 'a better life' (*một cuộc sống tốt đẹp hơn*) in combination with remarkable phrases, 'in accordance with their own conditions' (*phù hợp với điều kiện của họ*) and 'in the way they want' (*theo nhu cầu của họ*). This was, for him, precisely how ethnology/anthropology should facilitate social change among ethnic minority people. He told me:

On a fieldwork trip to a northwest mountain, I stayed with a host family of ethnic Muong, in a stilt house. The house was old and had seriously deteriorated. As the family was classified as a poor household, they were eligible for state funding to rebuild the house. However, when local officials proposed to build them a new house of bricks and concrete built directly on the ground, similar to those of the Kinh in the lowland, they refused. Yet it didn't mean they didn't want a better house. They

absolutely wanted a house that was more stable, with better roofing, even with electricity. But a better house in their view was still a stilt house, which was more suited to the mountain environment, where stilt houses can protect you from wild beasts, flash floods and mosquitoes. The task of ethnology then was to find ways to help them improve their stilt houses, rather than forcing them to convert to lowland-style houses.

Remarkable interpretations of relativism of this kind were widely communicated by anthropologists of Prof. Ba's generation, not only in verbal discussions or non-public exchanges of letters, but also through written works published before Renovation. It should be noted that my informants never mentioned the term 'relativism' in their published works. Given official criticisms of Western theories in pre-Renovation institutionalized state anthropology, a common solution my interlocutors employed had been to use those theories without mentioning them explicitly.

In the works of many state anthropologists of this generation, there was an argument I encountered with striking frequency: the importance of promoting traditional cultural values (*các giá trị văn hóa truyền thống*) of ethnic groups in the process of development. In classic Marxist theories, as Prof. Ba explained, industrialization was treated as the highest, most advanced form of production. Development/social evolution in the classic Marxist sense, therefore, means abolishing 'traditional', that is, pre-industrial forms of production, such as handicraft workshops and artisanal techniques, and replacing them with machines and industrial production.

A key theme in the works of those anthropologists, however, was that industrialization was not the only way to achieve social evolution. It could also be achieved through refinement/improvement of traditional, ethnically distinctive techniques, because it was those traditional techniques that were much more suited to the specific needs of each ethnic group. The following quote was taken from an article published in the mid-1980s by Dr Luong, a junior colleague of Prof. Ba, on how to develop weaving practices of ethnic minorities:

Today developing weaving production of ethnic minorities to meet the growing need of the people has become a crucial task. To achieve this goal, it is important to promote traditional folk knowledge in weaving ..., particularly family-based, lineage-based and locally based handicraft techniques ... Even in the age of industrialization and post-industrialization, ethnic groups still retain their need for distinctive ethnic and local cultural characteristics. In this aspect, it is artisanal, handicraft production, not industrial production, that can meet such need.

Such narratives suggest that when those anthropologists communicated relativist ideas to other scholars within the state sphere and to the public, they did not seek to disseminate criticisms of the official goal of state anthropology to facilitate social evolution. For those anthropologists, Marxist approaches have proven insufficient to address that aim, and it was in Western, non-Marxist theories that they thought they had obtained the solution to address this

gap. The relativist ideas they communicated through public scholarly exchanges had been converted into novel forms, much in line with the idea of social evolution: the principle of respecting other cultures was interpreted as a matter of active, sensitive and sympathetic intervention into ethnic minority lives, rather than as a matter of leaving them intact.

Structuralism was another Western theory that my interlocutors saw as an important new tool to facilitate social evolution. Dr Nguyen shared with me a written note he exchanged with a friend and fellow state anthropologist, showing his excitement about the value of structuralism in promoting social change.

On the one hand, structuralism reminds us that human beings all think in the same way. Thus all cultures are actually created from similar thinking. Therefore, we must treat all cultures, all ethnic groups as equal. Yet on the other hand, if deep inside, human beings think in similar logics, then it means other ethnic groups can also think like us. They also have aspirations for change and a better life. They may also want what we want, do what we do. In light of structuralism, the mission of ethnology to facilitate social evolution is both correct and feasible. We can help ethnic minorities change and share our achievements with them. Structuralism, however, reminds us that to do so, we must really understand what they think deep inside. We cannot force them to become like us in every way, but only in ways we are similar.

In the same letter, Dr Nguyen recalled a fieldwork experience when he lived among a Hmong community, an ethnic group widely stereotyped in official narratives as anti-modern. 'Local officials kept complaining that their way of thinking was too "backward" [*lạc hậu*] and different from us [the Kinh majority]. For example, they could not be persuaded to change from shifting, slash-and-burn cultivation to permanent settlement and wet-rice cultivation similar to the Kinh,' Dr Nguyen recalled. However, an incident made Dr Nguyen question these criticisms:

One day the son of my host family had a serious fever. The father went to the forest to get some leaves and boiled them with water for him to drink. He also invited a sorcerer to perform a healing ritual. Yet the boy's situation did not improve. When I asked to see the boy, I recognized it was malaria. The boy would die unless he received treatment. So I immediately persuaded the family to take him to hospital. They finally agreed as the boy's condition got worse. The father and I carried the boy to a local infirmary 20 kilometres away, on my motorbike as there was none in the village. Fortunately, the dose of quinine prescribed by local medical staff effected a cure.

What struck Dr Nguyen was the tragic story of the boy's sister who was infected with the same disease, which was recalled to him by the father. In the father's words:

She had the same disease some years earlier, but she was not that lucky and eventually succumbed to the sickness. We knew we needed more effective means of cure. But we did not have the conditions. Back then there was no infirmary, nor

motorbike, nor medicine. All we could do when somebody got sick was to get medicinal leaves and invite a sorcerer. Had we got what we have now, my daughter would have been saved.

That moment made Dr Nguyen recall what his mentor Tu Chi had taught him. He wrote this in the letter to his colleague:

Old Tu said while our cultures might be different, deep down we all thought in the same way. What he said definitely applied here. The Hmong I worked with did not want to become permanent settlers like us, nor did they want to practice wet-rice agriculture. But it did not mean our thoughts were entirely different. Deep down, their thinking was also one of change, towards the better for them and their children. They were also capable of understanding the value of modern technologies, of motorbikes and quinine. There were clearly areas where we could help them change for the better.

What is conveyed is a creative interpretation of structuralism: its core argument about the structures of ideas shared by all human beings is perceived in a distinctively Vietnamese way, as the similarity in aspirations for social evolution and constantly improving living standards among all ethnic groups. The view that all human beings share the same structures of ideas is seen as highly compatible with the goal of state anthropology to foster social evolution. It means that introducing one's views and practices to others is not always an arbitrary imposition of external standards that never make sense in local contexts, but something that can be accepted, provided that it is introduced cautiously and sympathetically.

There is certainly a possibility that the emphasis on social evolution in those narratives and written works was merely a cover employed to protect the anthropologists from official suspicion and criticisms. In the highly regulated sphere of institutionalized state anthropology in pre-Renovation Vietnam, questioning social evolution was a taboo that might be fatal to one's career, as the example of Tu Chi illustrates.

Yet I am reluctant to treat my interlocutors' narratives as mere cover-ups, for two reasons. First, those distinctive interpretations of Western theories, as shown earlier, were reflected not only in their published works, but also in non-public written communications they exchanged with each other. Second, even in our conversations today, Prof. Ba, Prof. Le and Dr Nguyen still convey explicit unease with the idea that ethnic groups should be left to exist in their own way. While they agree with relativism and structuralism that human beings should not be divided into civilized and backward, and no culture should force another to change according to its standards, they still hold that the most important and unique contribution of anthropology is the facilitation of social evolution from lower to higher levels. In the context of Renovation, Western theories are no longer treated as a taboo. Evolutionism has lost much of its potency in Vietnamese anthropology, and has increasingly come under attack, not only by Western scholars but also by Vietnamese anthropologists trained in

Euro-American countries (Keyes 2002; Nguyen Van Chinh 2019). Upholding social evolution, therefore, is no longer a safe political choice today, but a daring scholarly decision that makes them vulnerable to criticisms and marginalization within their own intellectual community.

Yet my interlocutors remain firmly attached to the idea of social evolution as a distinctive contribution anthropology can make, although their vision of how that goal can be achieved is far from one defined by a Soviet-style Marxist framework. As Dr Nguyen said:

Human cultures can be different, yet we have one thing in common: no culture will stay still forever. All cultures will constantly change, for the better, because it is an aspiration shared by all human kinds. Therefore, it is important that we find way to support ethnic minorities, to help them change for the better. However, we must really understand what they think, in what ways we are really similar, so as to help them in the right way. And if they want to develop in their own way, suitable to their own conditions, we must respect their choices.

In Carsten's account of 'cooking money', when money was brought into the house, it was no longer a symbol of individualism and division that threatens the household as a 'sphere of exchange' defined by unity and kinship ideals. Instead, money was qualitatively transformed, or 'cooked', by women in ways that sustained the household. Inspired by Carsten's work, I argue that when my interlocutors brought Western non-Marxist anthropological knowledge into the sphere of institutionalized anthropology, such knowledge was transformed by their creative interpretation, from something officially chastised as a toxic product of the 'Imperialist West', into novel sources of intellectual inspiration that give the sphere fresh vitality.

Conclusions

This chapter has followed the remarkable challenges but also the striking activeness and creativity of the scholarly lives of Vietnamese anthropologists who began their professional careers in northern Vietnam in the pre-Renovation period. Combining documentation of the narratives of senior contributors to the discipline with exploration of their published works and unpublished letters they exchanged with one another, this chapter lends weight to recent scholarly efforts to challenge the widely held stereotype of pre-Renovation Vietnamese anthropology as slavishly based on a crude version of Soviet Marxist anthropology, and to argue for a recognition that Vietnamese anthropologists in the pre-Renovation period were much more diverse in theoretical perspectives than is usually assumed (Truong 2014; Nguyễn Duy Thiệu 2016; Lương Văn Hy 2016: 12).

Another view this chapter calls into question is that while pre-Renovation Vietnamese anthropology indeed featured a diverse range of anthropological

approaches, Western theories were only circulated at the margins of institutionalized practice (Truong 2014). This chapter shows that there were active exchanges and communication of non-Marxist, non-evolutionist theories within state spheres, through the sharing of books and scholarly texts, the exchange of letters between state anthropologists, and the publication of written works. What I regard as even more striking is the distinctive sense my interlocutors made of Western non-Marxist theoretical frameworks that they were exchanging: as very much in sync with, rather than in opposition to, the idea of social evolution that Vietnamese state anthropology was tasked with promoting in this period.

My aim is not to dismiss accounts of Vietnamese anthropologists who upon their encounter with Western theories became disillusioned with both Marxism and the goal of state anthropology to foster social evolution (Truong 2014). I acknowledge that the view of the anthropologists I have described is not necessarily the dominant way of perceiving Western theories among Vietnamese anthropologists in the pre-Renovation period. The aim of this chapter has simply been to draw attention to the diversity of experiences among anthropologists of this generation, and the different senses they made of their adventurous, but equally exciting, encounter with the 'Imperialist West'. What I document here shares instructive similarity with Susan Bayly's pioneering works on intellectuals (*trí thức*) in post-colonial, socialist and late-socialist Vietnam as agents capable of deploying and 'bridging' a remarkable array of supposedly antagonistic knowledge realms (2004, 2007), in ways very different from what has often been depicted of intellectuals in various post-colonial and socialist Asian contexts: either treating knowledge traditions of Western origin as bourgeois and reactionary, or dismissing Soviet, Marxist perspectives as inhumane, oppressive and internally colonizing.

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Notes

1. Renovation (Đổi mới) refers to a series of market reforms officially launched in Vietnam in 1986, which entailed abolishment of the high-socialist command economy and rapid introduction of market-oriented economic policies (Beresford 2008).
2. Ethnology, or ethnography, refers to a recognized academic discipline in the Soviet Union that corresponds to social or cultural anthropology in the West. Its main concern was originally with archaic societies and later was shifted to ethnicity and more synchronic issues (Gellner 1977). In the Soviet Union ethnology was considered a subfield of history (Humphrey 1984: 311).
3. On the treatment of religious practices as 'superstitious' in Asian contexts, see Malarney (2002) and Nedostup (2009).

4. In the 1980s, as Vietnam was in an economic crisis, state authorities reluctantly turned a blind eye to small-scale grey-market trading operations of various kinds, including street vendors in major cities (Đặng Phong 2005).

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