

THE ANTICIPATORY FUNCTION OF NARRATIVE LITERATURE: FORESHADOWING STRUCTURAL CHANGES IN CONSUMPTION PRACTICES IN 1930S VIETNAM

Noel Murray, *Argyros School of Business & Economics, Chapman University, 1
University Drive, Orange, CA 92866, nmurray@chapman.edu*

Ajay Manrai, *Lerner School of Business & Economics, 218 Alfred Lerner Hall,
University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716, manraia@udel.edu*

Lalita Manrai, *Lerner School of Business & Economics, 217 Alfred Lerner Hall,
University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716, manrail@udel.edu*

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the anticipatory function of popular culture artifacts, such as narrative literature, in foreshadowing structural changes in consumption practices. We focus on one period of cultural discontinuity, 1930s Vietnam. Drawing on methodologies of structural analysis and text analysis, we examine two 1930s Vietnamese novels that gave rise to an event termed the “Battle of the novels”. We find that structural oppositions of traditional Confucianism versus French-inspired modernism foreshadow structural changes consumption practices.

Keywords: Vietnam, history, consumption practices, structuralism, text analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The interplay of competing cultural values over time sets the context for consumers’ reception of contemporary globalization (Hampden-Turner and Troupenaars 2000). Yet little is known of how competing narratives for consumer behavior manifest themselves in popular culture and project themselves into historical and predictable structural patterns of consumption-related behaviors. This paper is part of a larger project, employing dilemma theory (Vogel 1998) and text analysis to establish micro-macro linkages between popular culture texts, personal values, national myths, and consumer behavior. The broader project uses an analysis of early nineteenth century Vietnamese poetry, 1930s novels, and contemporary film to reveal a set of structural oppositions of Confucian versus Buddhist-inspired market values that manifest distinct patterns of consumption practices.

Our approach is illustrated, in this paper, in the analysis of two, competing, popular novels - *Breaking the Ties* (T. Nguyen 1935/69) and *Miss Ming, School Teacher* (C.H. Nguyen 1936/67). We focus on novels in Vietnam during the 1930s as this represents a period of cultural discontinuity during which the Vietnamese people were torn between two visions of the future – French-inspired Westernization and modernity, versus a traditional and national ideology of Confucianism (Woodside 1976).

Consumption practices in 1930s Vietnam

Hanoi in the early 1930's was the center of national debate on the future of Vietnam. Westernization and modernity were seen by some in the new generation of artists as one and the same. The national ideology of Confucianism, so dominant prior to the French occupation of Vietnam, was being questioned by intellectuals. Much was now open to question, including the role of the state in relation to the individual, the relation of individual to family, and other core foundational values embedded in Confucianism. These writers pointed out inherent contradictions in the traditional order that raised anxieties and caused tensions among competing factions. The authors sought, through their writing, new symbolic resolutions to resolve these tensions.

Holt reminds us, that at times such as these, new myth markets and consumption practices play a crucial role in negotiating an emerging consumer ideology from the cultural fissures produced during such debates (Holt 2004, 57). In 1930's Vietnam there was a rush to replace the old with the new in fashions, activities, and ideas. The external trappings of modernity became popular. Upper-class men and women started wearing western style clothing. Among those Vietnamese women who could afford it, the latest Paris fashions became popular. Women started to apply French cosmetics for the first time. Upper class Vietnamese women took up Western style dancing. Some females dared to go bathing in newly popular beach resorts. The traditional Vietnamese tunic, or *ao dai*, became more form fitting than before, replacing a baggier, more conservative look. Outdoor sports, once frowned upon because exposure to the sun was to be avoided, were now becoming popular. Young males started playing soccer and tennis. While the older generation still preferred to travel in carriages or sedan chairs, teenagers could be seen dashing about on bicycles and gasoline powered mopeds (Woodside 1971, 77-89). The Vietnamese economy was undergoing rapid structural change and its effects were felt in the changing nature of society. The traditional elite civil servant and land owning classes were being challenged for status by the up-and-coming business enterprise class and the newly emerging professional classes. Movie theatres came to Vietnam in 1930, often showcasing the extravagant lifestyles of Western cultures (Ngu 1965, 423-434).

The new literature

The early 1930s also saw an increase in publication of books, newspapers, and magazines in *quoc-ngu*, the new Vietnamese Romanized script, made compulsory by the French administration in 1910. The new literature they produced was dramatically different from the previous generation in both form and content. French literary models were mimicked and writers explored new issues of personal identity and romantic love. Though relatively small in number, by the early 1930's, this group of writers had obtained a sufficient critical mass to project themselves and their tastes on the marketplace. They had become a powerful force for cultural change. For many writers their personal goal was nothing less than the complete transformation of Vietnamese society in their own image. Authors sought to create new models for social behavior they hoped would validate their sense of purpose and give meaning to their lives. This new generation of authors was disproportionately young, middleclass, and male (Jamieson 1995, 102-103).

The new literature foreshadows structural changes in consumption practices

The new literature also offered a window into the structural dynamics of cultural change in Vietnam. Fictional behavior is not always a good index of actual behavior since the latter is constrained by the daily realities of social existence. Nonetheless, writing about behavior is itself a form of behavior; it is a socially significant act that thrusts itself into the dialectic of contemporary discourse on culture. Writers are free, within the constraints of narrative structure, to create imagined social contexts, wherein characters act out their own psychosocial dramas free of the constraints of external realities. Literature can reveal aspects of culture not apparent from directly observing behavior generated within the constraints of daily reality (Jamieson 1995, 104). In this way literature can serve an anticipatory function, foreshadowing changes in the social matrix before they are physically manifest in the society at large.

Vietnamese novelists in the 1930s were heavily influenced by their Western style educations and their French literary models. They created leading characters in their fiction who challenged the status quo, represented as an oppressive, controlling society, intent on thwarting the individualistic ideals of the young. Role-based conflict provided the basic plot structure of many of these novels. A series of oppositions was created in these novels between the characters representing the traditional Confucian order versus those representing the Western, or modern order. In the new literature, fictional characters representing the new order were invariably portrayed positively.

A derivative set of second order oppositions is revealed in consumption and lifestyle practices of characters in the novels (Woodside 1976). There is a structural homology or correspondence between certain classes of individuals and classes of products and activities (Bourdieu 1984). Acts of consumption mediate a sense of homology between goods and groups defining societal tastes and fashions. Choosing in this sense becomes an act of identifying goods that are objectively attuned to one's values and which go together because they are situated in equivalent positions in their respective places. This choice is assisted by the institutions that generate popular culture (Bourdieu 1984, 230-233).

Several contemporary novels captured not only the essence of this new cultural conflict, but also the popular imagination of a small but increasingly influential group of young educated Vietnamese. Two of these novels gave rise to an event that has been labeled the "Battle of the Novels" (Jamieson 1995, 135-154). In the first novel, published in 1935, *Breaking the Ties*, Nguyen Tuong Tam challenges the concept of role based hierarchy at the heart of Confucian tradition (T. Nguyen 1935/1969). The heroine of the novel is Loan, an educated young woman; she falls in love with one man, but must sacrifice romantic love (*Tinh*) for the sake of filial piety (*Hieu*).

The second novel so closely paralleled the first in its structure and initial characterization, that there were allegations of plagiarism by Nguyen Tuong Tam. The central characters in *Miss Minh, the School Teacher* (C. H. Nguyen 1936/67) were structurally parallel to several of those in *Breaking the Ties*. Miss Minh and Loan were of the same age and came from similar social background. Both characters shared a similar education level. Miss Minh, like Loan, was forced into an unhappy marriage out of a sense of filial responsibility (*Hieu*) to her father's wishes. Similarly, Miss Minh despaired of her ineffectual husband, Sanh. She too quarreled with her in-laws. Minh's circle of liberated friends and work colleagues urged her to leave her husband. Minh decides to escape from her husband, Sanh. She secretly arranges for a teaching post transfer to a province far from Hanoi. The mother-in-law hears of Minh's plan and blocks the

teaching transfer. Miss Minh is severely beaten by her mother-in-law for this act of disloyalty to the family. Minh reconsiders. She will stay with the husband's family. Minh resolves to accept her traditional role as mother, and to work within the confines of that role to gradually "get the old to admire the new." *Miss Minh* concludes – in a direct rebuke to *Breaking the Ties* - with the novel's heroine proclaiming "Breaking ties with the old family is a selfish thing to do." Table 1 presents the structural oppositions of literary characters representing the traditional Confucian order versus the modern Western order. Table 2 presents structural oppositions of consumption practices of the traditional/Confucian order (*Miss Minh, School Teacher*) versus the modern/Western order in 1930's Vietnam (*Breaking the Ties*). These consumption homologies are revealed in both the consumption choices of fictional characters in the new literature and by contemporary reports in the press (Woodside 1976).

Table 1**Oppositions of Literary Characters Representing Traditional/Confucian Order versus those Representing Western/Modern Order**

New Order/Positive Portrayal	Old Order/Negative portrayal
Youth	Age
Children	Parents
Wives	Husbands
Non-persons (prostitutes, itinerant singers)	Authority figures (high-ranking government officials)
Students & peasants	Petty functionaries (low-ranking government officials)
Younger siblings	Older siblings

Table 2**Oppositions of Consumption Practices Representing Western/Modern Order versus those Representing Traditional/Confucian Order**

Western cosmetics	Clear, clean skin
Western dancing and music	Imperial court dance accompanied by <i>nhã nhạc</i>
Beach bathing	Sun avoidance
Bicycles & mopeds	Carriages & sedan chairs
Form-fitting <i>ao dai</i> 's	Turbans and loose fitting tunics
Tennis and soccer	Sun avoidance
Revealing bodies	Concealing bodies
Modern style furniture	Traditional Chinese style furniture
Birthday parties	Death anniversary parties
Motion pictures	Traditional poetry

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