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INEQUALITY IN ETHNIC REPRESENTATION IN SECONDARY-SCHOOL LITERATURE
TEXTBOOKS AND NATIONAL EXAMINATIONS IN VIETNAM

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Introduction

Article 5 in the 2013 Vietnamese Constitution claims that all of the 54 officially recognized ethnic groups in Vietnam live under the principles of equality, unity, and mutual development. Yet, studies reveal a widened gap in not only income, health, and education between the ethnic majority and minorities (Dang 2012; Oxfam 2017) but also cultural and political representation (Evans 2018), suggesting that ethnic groups in Vietnam are, in fact, not equal.

Under the condition of a large gap between the elite and the mass, Rew (2009) suggests formal education designed by the elites might well be the mechanism to maintain and reinforce rather than eliminate inequality. In this way, educational issues of minority students, rather than being the results of educators' lack of attention to students' needs, are the manifestations of institutionalized racism and inequality in the society (Skutnabb-Kangas and Cummins 1988, 3). Thus, this essay seeks to understand the relationship dynamic between the ethnic majority and minorities within the Vietnamese education setting. While previous researches are often preoccupied with data of statistical indicators of education enrollment and graduation to deduct a picture of the education gap among ethnic groups (Imai, Gaiha, and Kang 2011; Dang 2012), this study aims to examine standard educational materials and examination content in literature in order to reveal the cultural narrative and ethnic representation in the Vietnamese national education system. In other words, I will assess *what* students study rather than *how many* children get to go to school.

My analysis suggests that the Vietnamese education framework and content comply with the national construct of a Vietnamese identity across ethnicities, which undermines distinctive cultural aspects of different ethnic minority groups and submerges them into a Vietnamese

identity that resembles that of the Kinh majority. The state determines educational materials and selectively permits only aesthetic, politically benign, and Kinh-like narratives of ethnic minorities' cultures, often written and/or chosen by Kinh authority rather than the ethnic minorities in concern. This creates an implicit cultural hierarchy in favor of the Kinh majority in the national education setting that boasts ethnic equality, reinforcing the majority's socio-cultural norms and privileges rather than celebrating actual multiculturalism.

Literature Review

Education and Identity

Education is a fundamental site for identity construction (Davidson 1996; Napier and Majhanovich 2003). Since the creation of nation-states, education policies have been wrestling with the quest to create a cohesive national identity in relation to ethnic and racial identity. This issue is particularly pressing in post-colonial nations with diverse ethnicities, where education becomes a powerful tool both to promote national political integration and to train human capital for economic development in the global market (Tran and Walter 2010). Because education is closely linked to culture and provides a medium to mass construct social identity, an analysis of education policies is instructive to understand the struggle over who holds the authority to shape whose identity in a nation. In other words, education policies are the manifestation of a state's politics of identity. In constructing a cohesive national identity, different states balance between maintaining national integration and preserving ethnic minorities' heritages (Flores-Crespo 2007; Takeda and Williams 2008).

To understand the ethnic/racial dynamic in education policies, it is important to first consider the relationship between a pluralist state and its relations to ethnic/racial groups. In this

case, the four models developed by historian George M. Fredrickson (2009) are particularly helpful. The first model, “hierarchical,” describes a state in which a dominant ethnic/racial group sits on top of the racial hierarchy and dictates the state’s politics. The second mode, “one-way assimilation,” refers to societies where subordinate ethnic groups assimilate to the dominant group socially, culturally, and institutionally. In the third model, “cultural pluralism,” there is no dominant ethnic/racial group and the cultures of all groups are celebrated equally in both social and institutional structures of a society. The last model is “group separatism,” whereby different ethnic/racial groups seek to separate from the larger nation-state and establish their own “nations.” Each of these models then provides a framework to examine the position of a state in its relationship with its ethnic/racial groups.

In all of the above cases, state education provides a powerful platform for the hegemonic ruling group to construct and shape group identity by controlling the language(s) of power (Anderson 1991; Clothey 2005), access to education, curriculum, and schooling environment (Watson 2007; Nguyen and Hamid 2017). An exemplary case is the multiethnic Malaysian society, in which education has been the main site to politically empower the economically disadvantaged Malay ethnics. Preferential higher education admission policies highly favored Malays, and university education functioned to construct a Malay national identity and legitimize the rule of the Malay state. Chinese ethnics have few choices besides studying abroad or joining Malay private tertiary education (Sato 2005; Brown 2007). Similarly, in other ethnically diverse countries such as Canada and New Zealand, research on nationalism and ethnic identity regularly study cultural assimilation policies. As a result, subsequently, the indigenous populations have called for a self-determination agenda for more bilingual education and more culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy (Bishop 2003; McLeod 2003).

Curriculum is yet another site to “perpetuate, and in many cases manufacture, national myths for the twin purposes of grounding national consciousness in some kind of legitimizing historical tradition and garnering the allegiance of people in the existing political status quo” (Richardson 2002, 54). Through national curricula, teachers, and textbooks, students receive powerful messages about their own identities in contrast to the ‘others’ (Hardwick et al. 2010). In Taiwan, for example, the national curriculum created by the Kuomintang in 1945 was sinocentric in nature, chiefly aiming to construct a Chinese identity across the Taiwanese majority. Frustrated at a stark contrast between learning about an abstract notion of China while living in a different reality hardly taught in formal education, Taiwanese urged for the indigenization of curriculum, the result of which was the education reform in the 1990s. Not only were more positive characteristics of the Taiwanese natives (specifically the Hoklo, the Hkaha, and the aborigines) included, but the pervasive promotion of a Chinese identity was also challenged. In that sense, curriculum became the sphere of struggle for representation, making it one of the primary vehicles in the politics of identity (Mao 2008). In Canada and the United States, studies have found that social studies and history are two specific subjects instrumental to the creation of common national citizenship identity. Social studies, in particular, are the medium to socialize students into the homeland’s values and habits and to realize in them what it means to be Americans or Canadians (Tomkins, 1983; Apple and Christian-Smith 1991; Osborne 2000; Hughes and Sears 2008).

Education in Vietnam and Ethnic Minority Identity

In Vietnam, the government declares a cultural pluralism model in principle, echoed in official documents of the Indochinese Party 1930s, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam’s 1946

Constitution, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1992 Constitution, and the Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs (CEMA) (Pholsena 2003, 11; Tran and Walter 2010). All of these documents portray Vietnam as a ‘unified family’ of 54 ethnic groups, and the government denies repression and assimilation of Vietnamese minority groups (DeJaeghere, Wu, and Vu 2015). Yet, statistics on poverty (Baulch et al. 2004) and ethnic classification projects (Keyes 2002) indicate that the relationship between the Kinh majority and ethnic minority groups are more unequal than presented on paper. Analysis of education policies for ethnic minorities in Vietnam suggest that Vietnam fits in Frederickson’s “one-way assimilation” model rather than “cultural pluralism.” State education, by putting ethnic minorities in a subordinate position in both socio-cultural and economic development, manifests the Kinh-majority’s desire to sustain power (DeJaeghere et al. 2015).

Scholars have identified this culturally and linguistically Kinh-dominated education system as a major cause for ethnic minority students’ lack of achievement and high drop-out rate (Tran and Walter 2010). For example, Nguyen’s (2019) study on the role of language in minority education concurs that the ethnic minorities that study in a language other than their mother tongue(s) generally lag behind in terms of academic achievement and experience a transformation of identity to a hybrid between their original one and that of the language of instruction. She also found that a subtractive learning environment, defined as a school system that involves “adding a second language and culture, usually the dominant one, to minority students, or subtracting the cultural and linguistic resources brought to school by minority students,” creates the conditions for minority students to devalue their own language and cultural identity and integrate into the mainstream norms (Nguyen and Hamid 2017, 144). As such, both

a language of power and a subtractive schooling environment forces the construction of new identities upon minority students for the sake of adjustment.

A part of the Vietnamese government's effort to tackle this gap in schooling enrollment between ethnicities is preferential policies which establish residential preparatory schools for ethnic minorities in the highlands, provide scholarships at higher education levels, free textbooks and office supplies, as well as waive tuition and even the national-university-entrance-exam requirement upon nomination of local authorities (*Luật Giáo Dục* [Education Law] 2002). Those with government scholarships are obliged to government employment after graduation, allowing the government to control and ensure that ethnic minorities' economic placement is in line with the national ideology (Tran and Walter 2010).

Although a large proportion of the literature is dedicated to studying the impacts of hierarchy in languages and schooling environments in Vietnam, little research has examined the cultural narrative and ethnic representation in national curriculum and education materials. However, what students learn about ethnic minorities' heritages and minority-majority relationships in general education are important indicators of the government's perspectives on ethnic minorities. In particular, an analysis of education framework and content will reveal both the national construct of a Vietnamese identity across ethnicities and the power hierarchy between ethnicities. Therefore, this research sets out to examine ethnic relations and depiction in the national curriculum and content for literature study (*Văn học*) in Vietnam.

Although previous studies have focused on social studies and history as a site of national political identity development (Hardwick et al. 2010), this study chooses to analyze literature content for two reasons. First, literature is a site to cultivate, sustain, and reinforce the cultural identity of a people (Cleary 2002; Pfister and Hertel 2008). Second, literature occupies a special

place in the Vietnamese national education curriculum. It is a mandatory test subject for all high school graduation exams and more than half of national university entrance examination categories, including two major regular categories C and D.¹ As a result, naturally, literature likely becomes a ‘more important’ and more studied subject throughout students’ schooling, as opposed to social sciences subjects such as history, civics, or geography that are only optional test subjects for high school graduation exams and required for only a few categories in university entrance exams.

Methodology and Data Collection

The research employs content analysis methods to study the perspectives of curriculum designers and textbook writers. Specifically, in order to study the occurrences and patterns of contents related to ethnic minorities’ heritages, I will unpack education claims, underlying assumptions, and what is left unsaid in the literature curriculum, as well as what materials students study and are tested on at secondary education level.

Data collection and analysis, as guided by Bowen (2009), include evaluations of key education policies, most up-to-date curriculum designs and textbook materials, as well as national high school graduation and university entrance exams from 2002-2019. Policy documents include education laws and policies, regulations regarding ethnic minorities, and laws on social/cultural issues. Institutional documents regarding national curriculum for literature at

¹ All 12-grade students must take the national high school graduation exam administered by the MOET in order to receive high school graduation certification. From 2001 to 2013, students were tested on Math, Literature, a Foreign Language, and three other subjects chosen among Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Geography, and History, depending on each year’s regulation. In 2014, requirements changed to examination in only Math and Literature along with two elective subjects of students’ choice. After high school graduation examination, students can participate in the national higher-education entrance exam, also under the MOET’s administration. Students must choose a particular category that is most suitable to their desired major. The 2015 reform in examination system combines both of these examinations into the National High School (Graduation) Examination, in which students are tested on Literature, Math, a Foreign Language, Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences.

secondary education level (including middle- and high-school) and the most recent standard literature textbooks in each grade are collected as well. Because Vietnamese education materials at both primary (1-5) and secondary (6-12) education levels have been centralized and dictated by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) until 2019,² a study of textbook and examination materials between 2002 and 2019 remains reflective of the education content that students across Vietnam study regardless of provinces or school. Data from the high school graduation examination in 2002 is missing. In addition, due to the scope of this research, middle-school entrance examination and materials at primary education level will not be evaluated.

As I obtained 14 Literature textbook volumes from 6th to 12th grade of the latest edition, I read, counted, and documented every literature work under study. I looked for ethnic-minority-related literature lessons, which had (1) content that mentioned or depicted the lives of ethnic minorities and/or (2) authors from an ethnic minority group. The latter's information was obtained from the author biography sections in the textbook; additionally, I double-checked every author's biographies published elsewhere to ensure their ethnicities. This process deemed eight literature works relevant to my study. Subsequently, I conducted an in-depth analysis of each of these eight literature pieces, noting their main themes, story setting, major messages, and the depiction of ethnic minorities' roles and heritage. I paid particular attention to the Analysis Guide (*Hướng dẫn đọc bài*) and Core Message (*Ghi nhớ*) sections and how they framed and directed the study focus for each lesson. Afterward, I categorized the main themes and depictions found under three major pillars of content that the government's literature curriculum guideline

² Vietnam Constitutions in 1980 and 1992 stipulate that Vietnamese education system is centralized. In specific, Article 36 of 1992 Constitution states that the government is responsible for ensuring the centrality and unity in education objectives, curriculum, content, plan, standards, examination, and certification. However, with recent education reforms, [Education Law 2019](#) decentralizes learning materials and allows local and other authorities to determine their own education materials as long as they satisfy the general framework and learning objectives set out by the MOET. Hence, in the future, different provinces will likely have different sets of textbooks.

emphasized: national heritage (including thoughts, philosophies, and culture), political ideologies (including spirits of patriotism, independence, and sovereignty in revolutionary wars context), and morality/humanity (including lessons about humans' relationships with their own kinds and with nature; humans' emotions).

Pillar 1: National heritage	Freq uency	Pillar 2: Political ideologies	Freq uency	Pillar 3: Morality and humanity	Freq uency
Wishes for heritage preservation	1	Heroism; defense of kin and nation	2	Romantic love and family affection	4
Cultural/heritage references	1	Love for kin and nation	3		
		Life in cruelty, hopelessness, cynicism, and poverty under colonial times	3		
		Communist revolutions as metaphorical promise for a better life	5		
		Revolutionary righteousness and morales of the people	5		
		Class/National awakening and consciousness	5		

Table 1. Themes highlighted in literature work by and/or about ethnic minorities in national 6th-12th-grade literature textbooks and their appearance frequency.

I also scanned national high school graduation and university entrance exams from 2002 to 2019 and documented literature works to be analyzed in each exam. I only considered questions that asked students to state the main content and analyze a literature piece to be relevant to this study, as they required students to interpret the meanings and messages of the

literature piece in examination. Questions about memorized facts such as the author's biographies and famous works were not considered. For questions about an ethnic-minority-related work, I paid particular attention to the focus of analysis, which suggested the relative importance or unimportance of ethnic components.³

Background Context

Ethnic composition

Vietnam recognizes 54 ethnic groups. According to the 2019 Viet Nam Population and Housing Census, the ethnic majority, the Kinh (or Viet) people, makes up 85.3% of the population and reside largely in the coastal plains. The 53 ethnic minority groups are spread out across $\frac{2}{3}$ of Vietnamese territory and often occupy the mountainous regions (Vasavakul 2003, 216-7). The two major regions with ethnic minority habitants are the Northern Highlands (*Việt Bắc*) and the Central Highlands (*Tây Nguyên*) (Viet Nam Government Portal, n.d.). The six most populous ethnic minorities are the Tay, the Thai, the Muong, the H'Mong, the Khmer, and the Nung, each with over a million people. The smallest ethnic minority groups have only hundreds of people.

Ethnic minorities in Vietnam are both indigenous and migrant as a result of several waves of cross-border and internal migration, especially during times of territorial rivalries and border wars. Consequently, each ethnic group has a complex linguistic system influenced by either or both Chinese and Sanskrit-based characters (Vasavakul 2003, 219). Since French occupation, many groups have been developing their own romanized writing systems (Vasavakul 2003, 224-225).

³ A full record of textbook and examination data can be accessed [here](#).

The politics of ethnic classification

Article 5 in the 2013 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam proclaims that Vietnam is a “unified State of all nationalities⁴ living together in the country of Vietnam,” functioning based on the principles of equality, unity, respect, mutual assistance, and mutual development among ethnicities. However, historical accounts of the relationship between the Kinh and other ethnicities reveal an unequal cultural dynamic, both before, during, and after colonial times.

According to anthropologist Charles Keyes (2002, 1171-3), during dynastic periods, Vietnamese empires adopted “frontier policies” similar to that of China. In this system, fundamental differences between people were not based on biology or language but on Sinitic or Buddhist civilization, locality, and kinship. People living on the frontiers of the empire were seen as barbarians and uncivilized. Territorial expansions, thus, were justified as benevolent acts to incorporate and educate barbarian people into civilized society. Vietnamese “push-to-the-south” (*nam tiến*) to the central and south lands of the Cham and the Khmer in the 15th century is an example of such frontier policies. Slurs against the frontier people include “border barbarians” (*phiên*), “upper barbarians” (*cao man*), and “savages” (*mọi*).

The Kinh’s conquest of civilization ended with French colonization. The difference between people was no longer inside and outside the frontiers but within or with-out legally recognized borders, converting some people living within these borders into vulnerable ethnic minorities in different nations (Michaud 2009, 35). Colonial and war-of-independence times

⁴ The concept of *dân tộc* in Vietnam is often used to refer to both “the nation” and the diverse peoples or ethnic groups, the latter meaning often subsumed in the phrase *dân tộc thiểu số* (ethnic minorities), according to Charles Keyes (2002, 1184).

brought influences from Western ethnological and linguistic research to taxonomize people based on “races” or cultural differences (Keyes 2002, 1175). Notably, the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881) proposed a powerful theory that all human societies could be classified based on social structure, economies, and cultures, the latter defined as language and religion. According to this model, there are three stages of social evolution, including savagery, barbarism, and civilization (Morgan 1877). Morgan’s theory deeply influenced the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel, whose work was later reworked by V. I. Lenin and Josef Stalin for the communist science of ethnology. Vietnam later adopted Stalin’s definition of a nation as “a historically evolved, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture” (Keyes 2002, 1168-9). Therefore, ethnography projects during and after the Vietnam War in Vietnam using Western principles also assume that there are fundamental static differences in social, cultural, and economic structures among people that allow a scientifically precise taxonomization of societies. This problematic assumption overlooks the idea of culture as a fluid process, hence allowing the perceived hierarchy between people to persist on the basis of cultural differences. Finally, the politics of modern nation-states not only creates the concept of ethnicity and confirms the dominance of the historically established majority but also propagates a national identity under which all ethnicities presumably share.

Ethnic relations and development agendas

During the two Indochina Wars,⁵ the communist revolutionary forces sought to ally with minorities living in strategic locations, often promising autonomy after independence. This

⁵ Often referred to in the West as French-Indochina War (1945-1954) and the Vietnam War (1956-1975).

promise was briefly granted when the Democratic Republic of Vietnam set up two autonomous zones in the northeast and northwest of Vietnam, but the Vietnamese government dissolved both of them after unification (Pholsena 2003, 11). Both the Northern and the Southern governments sought aid from minority groups in the Central Highlands in order to secure the Ho Chi Minh Trails (Michaud 2009, 26). After independence, the new communist government faced the question of integrating all minorities into the new Vietnamese nation. Part of the concern stems from government's anxieties about security in the border areas and the Central Highlands (Pholsena 2003, 19-20).

Strategies to tackle this issue involve pushing ethnic minorities to the periphery in the development scheme. For example, under the New Economic Zone scheme, the government allowed lowlanders to migrate to and collectivize the highlands, further pushing the highland-dwellers to the higher mountainous areas and diluting ethnic minority concentration in security-sensitive highlands. Furthermore, the post-war socialist development model viewed development as a culture trajectory going from feudalism, capitalism, socialism, to communism. Ethnic minorities were seen as a backward and feudal class at the lowest mode of economic development by the enlightened, socialist Kinh majority. Hence, government education policies for ethnic minorities aimed at "assisting" ethnic minorities with "matching" their cultural level to that of the Kinh majority. The 1980 and 1992 Constitutions explicitly aimed to eradicate backwardness and ban "reactionary and depraved ideologies and [...] superstition," reflecting what the Vietnamese ethnographer Nong Quoc Chan called the selective cultural preservation tactic (Pholsena 2003, 22; Michaud 2009, 32; DeJaeghere et al. 2015). The state's role to improve ethnic minorities' materialistic and spiritual life, as stated in Article 5, reflects a desire to mold ethnic minorities into a Kinh social class (McElwee 2004).

Renovation Program (*Đổi Mới*) in 1986 marked a shift from a centralized economy to the market-oriented model in Vietnam. Development and the education agenda aimed for modernization and fostering ethnic minorities' participation in the market, which favored the majority's language (DeJaeghere et al. 2015). Once again, ethnic minorities' cultural identities were marginalized, and ethnic inequality was linked to economic underdevelopment rather than structural disempowerment. As such, although official narratives claim equality and unity among ethnicities, ethnic minorities have been historically marginalized under new political development and banners of development.

Literature curriculum design and examination in Vietnam

General literature curriculum design

In Vietnam, literature has both functional and aesthetic-humanistic purposes. According to Circular 32/2018/TT-BGDĐT on the Secondary Education Program for Literature issued by the MOET in 2018 (3), this subject trains students not only in language and literary analysis skills but also in fundamental qualities of a Vietnamese human, ranging from awareness of national root and cultural identity to healthy and kind lifestyle. In other words, literature functions to build both capacity and characteristics, with the latter being a major focus at secondary education level. To further elaborate, the essential qualities that the Vietnamese literature curriculum is meant to cultivate in a cultured Vietnamese person include patriotism, philanthropism, diligence, honesty, responsibility, awareness of national roots and identity, and an open spirit to integrate in universal humanity values (5). As such, the characteristic training through literature relies on three major pillars: national heritage, political ideologies, and morality/humanity.

Before 2015, the literature curriculum in Vietnam was highly centralized. The MOET determined both textbook contents and lesson allocation framework across the nation (MOET 2009a, b). In 2015, the MOET changed to allow an open curriculum, under the overarching objectives listed above. The new curriculum design has similar requirements for key learning criteria while allowing textbook writers' flexibility in choosing text corpus relevant to students' intellectual capacity and government's goals of training. Notably, chosen text for teaching needs to reflect exemplary national literary and philosophical accomplishments, patriotic morals, and spirits of altruism and humanism (MOET 2018, 16). Aside from a long list of important elective texts and suggestions for corpus selection, the MOET requires six mandatory texts to ensure certain core contents. Five of these pieces are closely integrated with the Kinh's fights for national independence throughout Vietnamese history. The last piece, *Truyện Kiều* by Nguyễn Du, is considered the most exemplary humanistic work using Nôm language (MOET 2010b, 94), a widely used language by Vietelites between 15th and 19th century. These text selections reflect a special emphasis by the Vietnamese government on developing and celebrating national integrity orienting toward Kinh majority-centered histories and heritages.

Ethnic-minority-related literature in Vietnamese literature textbooks

From 6th to 12th grade, there are in total 248 lessons on literature. Only eight of these lessons have content related to ethnic minorities or have authors from a minority ethnic group, making ethnic minority representation only 3.23% in literature study, a significantly low representation of the 14.7% ethnic minority population in Vietnam. This arrangement also suggests that only a handful of the 54 ethnic minorities are represented, reflecting an unequal

cultural power dynamic in education in contrast to the government's principle of unity of the diverse peoples.

Literature work studied in textbooks (6-12)	Frequency of appearance	Percentage frequency
Number of ethnic-minority-content literature less by Kinh author	4	1.61%
Number of literature work by ethnic minority author	4	1.61%
Total number of ethnic-minority-related work	8	3.32%
Total number of literature work studied	248	

Table 2. Rate of appearance of literature work by and/or about ethnic minorities in textbooks from 6th to 12th grade.

Notably, not all of the eight literature works reflect a representation chosen by the portrayed ethnic minority rather than by the ethnic dominant. Only half of the lessons involve a literature piece written by an ethnic-minority author or belonging to the folklore reservoir of a minority group. Half of them are labelled “self-study with guidance” (*tự học có hướng dẫn*), thus less likely to receive an equal amount of emphasis compared to other regular lessons. Due to this arrangement, only one ethnic-minority folklore and one work written by an ethnic-minority author receive standard attention in literature study, making an actual representation of minority groups by themselves as small as 1.61%.

Literature by ethnic minority		Literature about ethnic minority by ethnic majority	
Literature work	Related ethnic minority	Literature work	Related ethnic minority
Chiến thắng Mtao Mxây	Rhede (<i>Êđê</i>)	Khúc hát ru những em bé lớn trên lưng mẹ	Ta-oi (<i>Tà Ôi</i>)
Lời tiễn dặn (self-study)	Thai (<i>Thái</i>)	Kịch Bắc Sơn (self-study)	Tay (<i>Tày</i>)

Nói với con	Tay (<i>Tày</i>)	Vợ chồng A Phủ	Hmong (<i>H'Mông</i>)
Đọn về làng	Tay (<i>Tày</i>)	Rừng xà nu	Jeh-Tariang (<i>Giê Triêng</i>) ⁶

Table 3. Literature works by and/or about ethnic minorities in national literature textbooks from 6th to 12th grade.

Ethnic-minority-related literature in examination

The hypothetical importance of a literature work for students is not only decided by their appearance in textbooks. In most likelihood, its significance is also shaped by its position in major exams. In an exam-rigid context such as Vietnam, students are more likely to pay more attention to literature pieces that frequently appear in the high school graduation and university or high school entrance exams. My analysis of national high-school-graduation and university-entrance exams from 2002 to 2019 indicates that only less than 9% of test questions ask students to analyze an ethnic-minority related literature work. Furthermore, because these exams largely focus on materials learned in 12th grade, only two pieces with content related to ethnic minorities are frequent candidates for exams. They are both written by Kinh authors that had joined the communist revolutionary forces and spent an extensive time living and working with ethnic minorities in their story's setting. Of the 47 literature pieces that have appeared on exams,

⁶ In *Rừng xà nu*, the protagonist is said to belong to the Strá ethnicity in the Central Highlands in Vietnam. However, no recent demographic or ethnographic records in Vietnam mention the existence of this ethnicity. Journalists that traced the prototype based on which the fiction *Rừng xà nu* was written show that the characters were inspired by the Tà Rệt people, branch of the Giê Triêng ethnicity. This suggests that the names of people, ethnicity, and locations have been altered in the fiction. Alternatively, Strá might be an obsolete transcription for Giê Triêng, although ethnographic documents of this ethnicity has not confirmed this possibility. For the sake of this research, I assert that the ethnicity central to *Rừng xà nu* is Giê Triêng. Notably, descriptions of the people in this fiction in the 12th-grade literature textbook (MOET 2011, 49) and tests frequently refer to “the Central Highlands’ people and culture” (con người và văn hoá Tây Nguyên) rather than a specific ethnicity. This treats the 20 ethnic groups that belong to three different major language families in this region as one and undermines many fundamental diversities in their cultures, reflecting a blurred nuance in perception of ethnic minorities in the Vietnamese education system.

they are among the top seven most regularly tested, indicating their relative importance to high school students.

Tested literature work	Frequency of appearance	Percentage frequency
Vợ Chồng A Phủ	8	4.02%
Rừng Xà Nu	9	4.52%
Total number of questions about ethnic-minority related work	17	8.54%
Total number of test questions	199	

Table 4. Rate of appearance of literature works by and/or about ethnic minorities in national exams for high school graduation and university entrance 2002-2019 (n=199).

Nevertheless, higher regard does not necessarily equate to better representation. Instead, it means that these portraits of ethnic minorities are more widely circulated and accepted among the educated Vietnamese population. As such, the authority of representation rests upon the narratives chosen by authors, textbook writers, and ultimately the MOET of Vietnam. A deeper dive into the content of the eight selected texts by and/or about ethnic minorities reveals, once again, a cultural hierarchy in favor of Kinh-dominated, national ideologies.

Three major pillars of characteristics training can be derived from the list of characteristics the government wishes to cultivate in students through literature study, including national heritage, political ideologies, and morality/humanity. Major themes in each literature lesson naturally fall under at least one of these categories, as detailed in Table 1. Aside from two epic stories from the Rhede and the Thai, all literature pieces about ethnic minorities were written by authors that belonged to the Vietnamese revolutionary forces during the Franco-Indochina War (1945-1954) and the Vietnam War (1956-1975). Inevitably, themes relating to political ideologies, ranging from depiction of a cynical, hopeless life under colonial regimes and

collaborators to the promises and morales of the communist revolution, are heavily emphasized. Significantly, five literature pieces praise the revolutionary morales of ethnic minorities in Northern Vietnam and the Central Highlands, including all four works written by a Kinh author. This reflects a historical reality, in which the communist forces needed to strategically secure aid of ethnic groups residing in the mountainous areas in order to achieve war success (Michaud 2009, 26). The two literature works that likely receive the most attention because they are frequently tested in the national exams for high school graduation and university entrance also support a portrait of colonialists and oppressors as cruel and inhumane. In contrast, the revolution's promise of a free, peaceful, and just life is weaved into the stories either rhetorically or explicitly. In examination, questions on *A Phu and Wife* (*Vợ Chồng A Phú*) focus on the depiction of class oppression and life difficulties rather than on ethnic minority heritage. Meanwhile, most exam questions about *Xa Nu Forest* (*Rừng Xà Nu*) direct students to make connection between the ethnic minority characters with heroism, courage, and nationalism. One question specifically asks about the portrait of Central Highlands minorities, but in order to earn points, according to the grading guideline, students need to relate it back to the ideal image of revolutionary forces. Consequently, it is likely that students receive messages of ethnic minorities most frequently as being associated with righteous revolutions, national unity, and the legitimate ruling of the communist party.

Besides political teaching in defense of the communist revolution and ruling, there are a handful of themes relating to cultural heritage and humanity. However, the stories are carefully selected in order to portray a picture of ethnic minorities that are culturally benign and politically aligned with revolutionary forces. Although there are eight literature lessons relating to ethnic minorities, only one, *Talk to you* (*Nói với con*), explicitly expresses the wish for heritage

preservation in separation from the revolutionary context. Even this piece highlights family affection, the tradition of resilience and hard work of the Tay ethnicity to which the author belongs, and the importance of motherland and customs. Although the motherland here refers to that of the Tay people, all of these messages still conform to the ideal characteristics of a Vietnamese person that the government wishes to cultivate.

Another piece, a famous Rhede epic called *Victory against Mtao Mxay* (*Chiến thắng Mtao Mxây*), offers an extensive depiction of a radically different cultural reality from the majority's social norms. According to 10th grade textbook volume 1 (MOET 2010a, 36), the core lesson from this story is that honor, family love, and wishes for peace and prosperity of the clan are the motivation for the protagonist to fight the enemy and achieve victory. Its main theme-- heroism and the fight to defend tribal kins-- can be a story of righteous characteristics and morality that the government wishes to cultivate in a Vietnamese citizen. On the other hand, it can connect to a larger message about patriotism and the fight against invaders, making the epic a subtle political lesson. Remarkably, the analysis guide in the textbook refers to the Rhede clan and community rather than making a larger connection to the defense of a nation, making *Victory against Mtao Mxay* potentially the most subversive to national integration in case it conflicts with ethnic clans' interests. Finally, themes of romantic and family affection frequently show up. These stories either suggest a larger connection to the Vietnamese kinship or remain purely about love. *Reminders upon seeing off* (*Lời tiễn dặn*), the other epic belonging to the Thai culture, is an example the latter narrative.

By this account, portraits by and/or about ethnic minorities chosen by the MOET chiefly present a picture of political awakening and eagerness to support the revolutionary causes of ethnic minority groups, supporting the government's rhetoric of national integrity and unity. If

not a political message, narratives about ethnic minorities selectively highlight the more benign and romantic features of their heritage acceptable to the Kinh majority's social and national norms. With an exception of *Victory against Mtao Mxay* and *Talk to you*, there is no mention of more controversial discourses, such as polygamy, long-day and community-based funerals, environmental unsustainability, which are often seen as taboos, superstitions, and wasteful ceremonies by the majority Kinh. Consequently, general Vietnamese students likely perceive stratified images of ethnic minorities, wherein one depicts ethnic minorities as congenial and culturally submissive, and the other portraying them as backward and uncivilized. Both of these narratives reject ethnic minorities' heritage as culturally and inherently valuable and equal, while perpetuating a perception of ethnic minorities' cultural and economic inferiority.

Discussion

Despite principles of unity, equality, and no discrimination among ethnicities as stated in the 2019 Vietnamese Constitution, this analysis of state curriculum, textbooks, and examinations of literature study at secondary level reveals an implicit cultural hierarchy, in which representations of ethnic minorities are both marginalized and politically distorted by the Kinh state. After wars of independence, the majority-dominated socialist state wishes to forge a national political identity across ethnicities. The model it adopts closely resembles Frederickson's one-way assimilation framework, which reinforces the cultural and social power and privileges of the Kinh majority, molding the image of a Vietnamese state in Kinh's social norms and realities (McElwee 2004). Thus, multiculturalism exists chiefly in paper but not in practices. In a larger context, this implicit cultural hierarchy is pervasive in the general socialist and market agendas for development that link ethnic minorities to cultural and economic

backwardness, underdevelopment, and poverty, as opposed to the enlightened and well-off Kinh majority (DeJaeghere et al. 2015; Michaud 2009).

Centralized literature textbooks and examinations permit and emphasize selective images of Kinh-like and aesthetic features in ethnic minorities' cultures, often written and/or chosen by Kinh authority, which fit in the state strategy of selective preservation (Michaud 2009). Of the eight literature lessons that either has authors from or content related to an ethnic minority group, only two possess subtle subversion to the one-way assimilation model, with one expressing the desire for ethnic heritage preservation independently from revolutionary context and other employing extensive cultural references opposite to the majority Kinh's norms. Regardless, the core messages of both of these pieces, like all others, still underscores the major characteristics of a Vietnamese identity that the government constructs-- courage, patriotism, hard work, loyalty, and family affection. Meanwhile, the two pieces that appear in national examinations and thus likely are most well-studied are work of Kinh writers, with the story backgrounds in the communist revolutions setting. Both feature the close association and collaboration between ethnic minority groups and the communist forces while implicitly criticizing the cruelty and oppression of the colonist ruling class. This complies with the Vietnamese state's boasted principle of unity among ethnicities while undermining potential distinctions in the heritages and motivations between ethnic minorities and majority.

The text corpus selection and examination design reflect that it is the state, rather than ethnic minority groups, that has the power to decide what aspects in the cultures of ethnic groups are worthy of preservation and what aspects amount to "superstitious beliefs and bad customs" prohibited under Education Laws throughout the years.⁷ In this scheme, only ideologically

⁷ See Article 21 in Education Law 2005 and 2019.

appropriate portraits of ethnic minorities appear in the unified state curriculum, leaving ethnic minority groups little room for self-determination and local expressions, especially subversive features to state view (Tran and Walter 2010, 502-507).

A majority-dominated portrait of minorities has several potential damages on ethnic minorities. For most Kinh students, their perception about ethnic minorities may be fixed on a stalled version of ethnic minorities' cultures. Cultural fluidity and nuances are largely neglected, rendering the Kinh perception something closer to tourist-like fascination rather than understanding and respect of different cultural realities (Michaud 2009). For students from ethnic minority groups, fragmentation in learned cultural images, living realities, language used at school, and language used at home can result in dual or multiple identities associated with cultures. Because of the hierarchy in culture, ethnic minority students likely shift toward the more powerful languages and dominant norms of the mainstream for social integrity at the cost of a central part of their previous identity and cultural values (Nguyen and Hamid 2019).

This by no means undermines efforts to “loosen” imposition of state ideology on ethnic minority heritages and beliefs. Some ethnic customs previously labelled superstitions, such as ancestor worship, rain prayers, and buffalo sacrifices, have increasingly been casted under a positive light as folk traditions to be respected, valued, and preserved (Koh 2004, 12).

Vietnamese research on issues of agriculture, land tenure, and forest management increasingly see customary law and traditional wisdom of resource conservations as a complex, indigenous-knowledge base system rather than unscientific and harmful (Michaud 2009, 41). Undergraduate Ethnic Studies curriculum and teaching show higher regards to and curiosity about various folk traditions that were previously dismissed (Tran and Walter 2010, 504). Furthermore, as an attempt to include local relevance, the previous, centralized literature curriculum designated one

to two lessons on local literature or heritage (*chương trình địa phương*) at the middle-school level (MOET 2009a, 2). In high school, local contents only appeared in advanced-level lessons for a selected number of students (MOET 2009b, 2). Local People's Committee, cultural experts, and artists decided teaching materials for these lessons (MOET 2008). Although this initiative did not guarantee that local contents would be a representation of ethnic minorities in the region, it still opened up a way for them to participate.

The most recent education reforms have also increased room for the potential voices of ethnic minorities in their own secondary education. Decision 404 in 2015 passed by the Prime Minister shifts the power to compile textbooks from the MOET to local authorities. This initiative, also referred to as “socialization of textbook compilation” (*xã hội hoá việc biên soạn sách giáo khoa*) or “one curriculum, many textbooks” (“*một chương trình, nhiều sách giáo khoa*”) was eventually incorporated in Article 32 of the [Education Law 2019](#) (Tran 2017). The MOET's responsibilities now only entails (1) building education curriculum, general education requirements and objectives, mandatory content for all students nationwide; as well as (2) evaluating and approving textbooks written by various organizations using these standards. This reform allows local People's Committees and capable groups/individuals to shape education content more closely related to local realities and developments in history and cultures. As the reform unfolds, further research is needed to examine new textbook contents and selections, especially in residing areas of ethnic minorities. How the results of the teaching materials reform reflects in teaching and examination realities, and how they, together, influence the cultural dynamic between ethnicities are other topics for further study.

Finally, it is important to note that this research rests on the assumption that students will internalize the learning materials that they study. Although discrepancy in learning materials and

reality might result in conflicting cultural identities as indicated in Chin-Ju Mao's (2008) study, the impact might not be as strong if studying and examinations are only a formality, considering the examination-oriented culture in Vietnamese education. Thus, further research using an ethnographic approach is needed to examine on-ground teaching and learning practices of teachers and students in everyday school life, students' degree of material internalization, and their conceptualization of personal identity.

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