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How to Forge a Creative Student-Citizen: Achieving the Positive in Today's Vietnam

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Abstract

The exaltation of achievement as a measure of collective and individual worth and moral agency has been one of the defining features of Asian developmentalism. Yet in today's age of globalized neoliberal attainment monitoring, the question of who and what an achiever actually is within an achievement-conscious society is far from straightforward or uncomplicated. In Vietnam, the notion of doing well and creditably for self and nation can be deeply problematic for those called upon, either officially or by living and ancestral kin, to embody qualities of attainment and creditable life-course functioning in ways recognizable to those who reward and monitor aspiring achievers. Building on recent fieldwork in Vietnam, this paper explores the ways young Hanoians have engaged with a rapidly changing set of ideas about how the country's tightly regulated schooling and examination system can both unleash and constrain the potential for new and 'creative' forms of attainment on the part of the nation's most promising and productive citizen-achievers.

Introduction

The exaltation of achievement as a measure of collective and individual worth and moral agency has been one of the defining features of Asian developmentalism, not only in its high-growth 'capitalist tiger' forms, but also in its older state socialist and more recent late-socialist variants. To have one's country recognized on the world stage as both a miracle-economy achiever nation and a land of exemplary citizen achievers has been a double-edged aspirational vision recognizable in the ways leaders as diverse as Singapore's former state-builder Lee Kuan Yew and Vietnam's current governing Party elites have sought to steer public policy in fields ranging from

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citizenship education to the memorialization of their homelands' march to nationhood.[1]

Today's most conspicuous forms of Asian achievement awareness are those related to the market-driven 'optimization goals' and 'self-enterprise' skilling and talent-shaping techniques that are often represented as fundamentals of contemporary globalized neoliberalism.[2] It might therefore seem that all of Asia has come to speak a uniformly globalized language of attainment, success and competitiveness. It might even be thought that a key consequence of contemporary globalization is that the whole world now shares the same criteria for national and personal performance measurement, not least because of the power and influence in everyday imaginaries of the great globalized ranking exercises enacted by the World Bank and other giant international evaluation agencies.[3]

To suggest this as a starting point for an account of globally framed national achievement consciousness does not imply an outmoded view of late-twentieth and twenty-first century globalization as culturally or economically homogenizing. On the contrary, what I am drawing attention to as a plausible if over-simplified understanding of universal 'human capital' metrics is very much in line with what has come to be established about today's conditions of globalized 'transplanetary connectivity':[4] that is, the analysis of globalization as an ever-shifting dynamic of 'translocal mélange', 'rhizomic assemblages', 'intercultural fusions' and 'proliferating cross-national network ties'.[5]

[1] For Lee Kuan Yew's exhortation to Singaporeans to become selfless 'team achievers' as well as embodiments of 'Asian values', see Alfred L. Oehlers (1997), 'Cultural Values in Singapore', in Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Jennifer W. Jay, eds, *East Asian Cultural and Historical Perspectives: Histories and Society, Cultures and Literatures* (Edmonton: RICLCCS), 97–123 (p. 99); for Indonesia, compare Nicholas J. Long (2011), 'On Having Achieved Appropriation: *Anak Berprestasi* in Kepri, Indonesia', in Veronica Strang and Mark Busse, eds, *Ownership and Appropriation* (Oxford and New York: Berg), pp. 47–50. Research for this paper was funded by ESRC award RES-000–22–4632 in support of a joint project with Dr N. Long on the Social Life of Achievement in Indonesia and Vietnam. For valuable comments and suggestions I warmly thank Dr Long, and Professor Caroline Humphrey, Dr James Laidlaw, Dr Maryon McDonald and Dr Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov.

[2] Aihwa Ong (2012), *Neoliberalism as Exception* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press).

[3] Susan Bayly (forthcoming), 'For Family, State and Nation: Achieving Cosmopolitan Modernity in Late-Socialist Vietnam', in Nicholas J. Long and Henrietta L. Moore, eds, *The Social Life of Achievement* (Oxford, New York: Berghahn).

[4] Jan Aart Scholte (2005), *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd Edition (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

[5] Mauro F. Guillén (2001), 'Is Globalization Civilizing, Destructive or Feeble? A Critique of Five Key Debates in the Social Science Literature', *Annual Review of*

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My interest in the tensions between these dynamics and the universalizing idioms that pervade local understandings of success and competitiveness in Vietnam has close connections with what has been widely recognized about the importance of consciousness and subjectivity as critical concerns for the study of globalization.[6] Far from being best understood in terms of objectively determined effects and properties, it has been highly productive to note the particular kinds of narrativized self-awareness that have been fundamental to the shaping and experience of globalized cultural life. My particular interest in globality's distinctive modes of consciousness is the extent to which they entail assertively positive self-images and representations, both official and personal, of what it is to think and act successfully in a global world. What I have in mind is a focus on contexts where being globalization-conscious entails a highly explicit sense of one's place in a triumphalist domain of achievement. What I am therefore pointing to are settings where even in the face of painful doubts and uncertainties, what is important to say and seek to live up to is the claim that 'we' are never globalization's losers; it is others, whether close to home or in distant lands, who fail to do well and creditably to meet its challenges and opportunities.

This is the context in which I want to stress the importance of regimens of standardized evaluation and measurement to contemporary global life in Vietnam. As can be seen from the study of 'regulatory objectivity' in such globalized fields as medical accreditation procedures and scientific testing practice,[7] the norms and protocols of such things as academic examinations and comparative league tabling metrics create modes of 'distributed universality'[8] that can both enhance and contest the exclusions and misrecognitions that so often occlude the 'experiential hybridities' of world society.

Sociology, 27: 235–260; Mike Featherstone (2006), 'Genealogies of the Global', *Theory Culture Society*, 23(2–3): 387–419; Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2009), *Globalization and Culture: Global Mélange* (Lanham, Boulder, New York: Rowman and Littlefield).

[6] For example see, Arif Dirlik (2003), 'Global Modernity?: Modernity in an Age of Global Capitalism', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 6(3): 275–292; and Jack R. Friedman (2007), 'Shock and Subjectivity in the Age of Globalization: Marginalization, Exclusion, and the Problem of Resistance', *Anthropological Theory*, 7(4): 421–448.

[7] Alberto Cambrosio, *et al*. (2006), 'Regulatory Objectivity and the Generation and Management of Evidence in Medicine', *Social Science and Medicine*, 63(1): 189–199.

[8] Stefan Timmermans and Marc Berg (1997), 'Standardization in Action: Achieving Local Universality through Medical Protocols', *Social Studies of Science*, 27(2): 273–305.

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So-called regulatory objectivity has certainly not been seen as a one-dimensional tyranny of subjugating assessment disciplines. Yet quite a hard-edged vision of the world's many converging forms of measurement and standardization regimens is a pervasive feature of contemporary global life. All of Asia's BRIC and CIVET 'tiger' states, including Vietnam and its far richer regional trading partners, take a fiercely competitive approach to this side of globalization, continually seeking ways for their citizens to prove themselves in its evaluation arenas. Notable examples include the trumpeting of high-profile findings about the examination skills of their schoolchildren, and the inventiveness of their young entrepreneurs.[9] These are among the many contexts where it is found to be advantageous and attractive to represent the world as one in which globally framed achievement metrics are to be applauded as virtuous and attainable in ways that bring credit to people and nation.

This is why it is important not to assume that those subjected to such evaluations are necessarily victims or passive objects of coercive disciplinarity. State authorities, and also parents and youthful seekers of overseas school and university places, are among the many participants in these regulatory practices with good reason to try to make these processes look self-initiated, doing their best even in unpromising circumstances to represent themselves as active makers of an interconnected arena of rationalization, standardization and control, and their homelands as successful players rather than humble suppliants in such endeavours.

Yet the question of who and what an achiever actually is within an achievement-conscious society is far from straightforward or uncomplicated. There will inevitably be the kinds of doubts and uncertainties to do with the pressures mentioned above: that is, how to make good on the claim that it is 'we' who will never be thought of as globalization's underachieving losers. In Vietnam, where revolutionary past and late-socialist present merge and interpenetrate

[9] It is a matter of great pride in Vietnam that in 2010 the country was ranked as the world's top CIVETS economy, i.e., the strongest of the world's emerging, fast-growth, non-commodity-dependent powers (Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey, South Africa), classed just behind the super-emerger BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China) in terms of its globalized development potential. A key criterion for this listing was Vietnam's strong showing on the various international performance rankings attesting to its status as a site of high-grade 'human resources'. See http://vietnamtodayonline.typepad.com/blog/2011/04/vietnam-cements-ranking-as-ideal-investment-location.html [accessed 13 June 2013].

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in unpredictable ways in the framing of present-day globalization consciousness, the notion of doing well and creditably for self and nation can be intensely problematic for those called upon, either officially or by living and ancestral kin, to embody qualities of attainment and creditable life-course functioning in ways recognizable to near and distant observers.

Building on ethnographic fieldwork in Hanoi, this paper explores present-day Vietnamese educational reform initiatives as a critical arena for citizens' experience of the dilemmas achievement can entail. My research has entailed intensive on-going fieldwork with inner-city Hanoi families of moderate means who have made substantial yet far from secure or lavish gains from Vietnam's 20-year marketization process (known officially as Renovation: *Đổi Mới*).

Central to these dilemmas, and to the great anxieties they can engender in Hanoi families, is the sensitivity of schooling as a site of unpredictable and even dangerous interactions between old high-socialist achievement norms, and those of today's market-oriented views and values. What makes education especially revealing for these concerns is not just that there are such stringent hoops for the aspiring student achiever to jump through in the attempt to bring credit to their family and nation. Even more productive of anxiety is that the youthful classroom achiever is now being told to be disciplined, authority-loving and dutifully Vietnamese in the quest for achievement, yet also 'creative' and indeed 'creatively' attuned to a host of new and alien attainment modes emanating from some of capitalist Asia's wildest embodiments of hedonistic globalized consumer culture.

Particular focus here is on the vigorous public debate that has been engendered around the question of how creativity (*sáng tạo*) can be cultivated and tested for within the country's relentlessly examination-driven national education system. I take particular interest in the moralizing terms in which these issues are being addressed: that is, with the examination process as an arena of aims and purposes concerned as much with the nation's moral health as with the skills and motivations of its youthful productive 'manpower' (a term much used in these discussions: *nguồn nhân lực*).

The language of achievement

In today's era of what in Vietnam is called 'market-oriented socialism', the Vietnamese student-citizen is a critical embodiment of aspiration and ethical reflection. Whether visualized as a bright-eyed 'model

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learner' (*học sinh giỏi*) following the most exalting of heroic exemplarship models, or a 'herd-minded' (*bệnh bầy đàn*) K-pop worshipper embracing decadently homoerotic modes of consumerist excess, what is revealed about thier capabilities and 'national spirit' is much poured over and reflected on in both personal and public life.

Central to these concerns is the surprisingly outspoken airing of claims that, despite the remarkable success of marketization and the socialist revolution's proud legacy of mass literacy and near-total school attendance, the country's giant state education sector has become disordered and sclerotic. The state media now regularly publish fierce critiques of the schools' bare-bones facilities and low-comprehension 'drill and grill' rote-learning modes. Much is also said about schools as sites of the many forms of target-chasing and 'beautiful-numbers'-mania for which the term 'achievement disease' (*bệnh thành tích*) is widely used.[10]

This notion of achievement disease is part of a constellation of ideas defining the aims and limits of the initiatives explored here. Indeed the students now being challenged to demonstrate creative thought in the examination room have been presented with a set of high-profile questions requiring them to show knowledge of these ideas as a test of their creative capacities. It is therefore important to begin with an account of these idioms and the underlying concepts which have both animated and complicated the state's creativity initiatives.

Thành tích is only one of the words that can be used to mean achievement in Vietnamese, and the complexities of this vocabulary's representation of good as opposed to bad ways to conceptualize attainment and success relate very directly to what is being struggled over in the battle about educational creativity issues. It is much easier to speak of achieving and achievement in Vietnamese than to find an equivalent for 'achiever' as used in Western contexts. A child who does well at school is *học sinh giỏi*, literally an 'excellent student', though with connotations of worthy or model learner. The full-marks pupil is *xuất sắc* (outstanding); the poor performer is 'weak' (*yếu kém*), also with a moralizing thrust implying deficient worth and effort. These are all official marking categories corresponding to the upper and lower

[10] Among its commonly cited manifestations is the cooking of good-news statistics, e.g. the pressure to report perfect success rates in the annual higher-secondary graduation examinations; also 100 per cent upgrading rates, i.e. no children being made to repeat a year's study through failing to meet the passing-on standard (http://vietbao.vn/Giao-duc/Hang-tram-truong-THPT-do-tot-nghiep-100/55464263/202/ [accessed 13 June 2013]).

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levels of the 10-point school and university test score scale. This makes 'underachiever' virtually untranslatable, since the 'model learner' is by definition a child who has 'got it', i.e. has 'achieved' in the sense of secured or attained (*đạt* or *đạt được*) something desirable and positive, in this case good marks and examination results.

What these idioms imply is what present-day schooling still tacitly or directly conveys, which is that to be examined in the educational context is to be tested on matters that combine the truth of science with matters that are fundamental to morality and answerable selfhood. One is thus examined on that which is to be mastered and internalized, then affirmed and explicated in proper examination-room format, rather than questioned or problematized. The idioms *đạt* or *đạt được* for the child who 'achieves' good marks are thus yes or no absolutes, not terms one can easily turn into 'underperform' or 'underachieve'. When one tries to explain these foreign terms people say, 'oh, of course—'bad student': *yếu kém*; or *học sinh hư*: 'bad boy' the waste-of-space student who is spoiled and of no account.

Học sinh giỏi/model student is much used by proud parents and the happy school staff who may themselves be rated *giỏi*/exemplary through the award of an excellent-teacher certificate. Such recognition is for those whose students win such things as top-pupil prizes at regional or national level. So as with good workplace performers in classic high-socialist contexts, when singled out for commendation *học sinh giỏi*/model learners are taught from early childhood that they should not take undue personal credit for their successes. The task of youth is to do honour to family, school and nation and to recognize that like a kindred, a country and its communities are achieving collectivities in whose interest the individual must strive and attain.

So the use of *học sinh giỏi* signals diligence and the meeting of expectations. A closely associated term is *ý thức học tập*, meaning study-awareness or learning volition. This suggests something like what would be called an achieving mindset in the West. But *ý thức* is the word used for consciousness: both in general and in the Marxian sense, as in exhortations to Party members to raise (*nâng cao*) the citizenry's consciousness in regard to such things as law and civic obligation. It is thus a term for the striving agent's achieved sense of responsibility and duty, not a personal drive to shine or outdo. It also signals the need for alertness to the deficiencies of will and character that can subvert good socialist virtues and the ordered functioning of the nation's life.

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The making of moral citizens and classroom achievers

In today's Vietnam, the raising of consciousness and the steering of action by its lights are processes the citizen is being called on to understand in new and challenging ways, and education has become a critical context for these messages. Since the initial stages of market opening, both the domestic family unit and private-sector business have been officially vested with key complementary roles in the paramount national goal of making Vietnam a 'rich, modern and civilised' country.[11] The ubiquitous red-banner slogan for this is *Một đất nước giàu văn hóa*: '[Strive for] a prosperous and modern/civilised/cultured country'.

Văn hóa ('culture'/'cultured'), a term which turned out to be particularly problematic in the most recent creativity examinations, is a critical part of this message. The term is always strongly positive and is often juxtaposed to the equally important notion of that which is moral/ethical, as in the notion of those things that are 'in keeping with Vietnamese morality (*đạo đức*) and culture'. What the term suggests is something valuably two-pronged in regard to the good citizen's consciousness of roots and identity: that of a 'cultured' Vietnam striving for ever-increasing advancement and civility as defined by standards all the world knows and recognizes, yet retaining the features of a multifaceted 'traditional culture' which is uniquely and profoundly Vietnamese.

It is still the state and Party that propound these truths of consciousness. But the patriotic private corporation is expected to take a leading role in giving them life and form through the acts of

[11] A related phrase is *ý chí làm giàu* – having and showing 'will' (*ý chí*) to *'làm giàu'*: that is the will and fortitude required to 'make wealth' or simply 'get rich'. *Ý chí* means something like moral fibre; it entails being unswerving, never succumbing to demoralization—the qualities of the dedicated patriot and leader. So the notion of having the will or goal-directed energy required to get rich or make wealth is now something good and moral: the phrase is used approvingly in media stories about the worthy farmer toiling away until he finds the ideal crop for his hitherto unproductive soil, then sharing the knowledge he has gained so all his neighbours benefit. See http://www.baomoi.com/Y-chi-lam-giau-cua-anh-Nguyen/45/6401606.epi [accessed 13 June 2013]; Shaun K. Malarney (1998), 'State Stigma, Family Prestige, and the Development of Commerce in the Red River Delta of Vietnam', in Robert W. Hefner, ed., *Market Cultures: Society and Morality in the New Asian Capitalisms* (Boulder: Westview), pp. 268–289; Philip Taylor, ed. (2004), *Social Inequality in Vietnam and the Challenges to Reform* (Singapore: ISEAS); for China, see Judith Farquhar (1996), 'Market Magic: Getting Rich and Getting Personal in Medicine after Mao', *American Ethnologist*, 23(2): 239–257.

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nation-building philanthropy now referred to as 'socialisation' (*xã hội hóa*). This means that 'society', i.e. the wider citizenry—and more specifically the prospering businessman/woman—can and should enhance what the state provides through lavish sponsorship of everything from temple festivals exalting the nation's divinized forebears, to the funding of bright-pupil scholarships and new 'capacity-enrichment' facilities for their local schools.

The family, particularly the mother in what the banners and merit awards call 'cultured' and harmonious households, is also a critical unit of this socialization process, hence the exaltation of every mother's central role in raising the particular kind of consciousness she in particular must see to: that of her children's will to study well. Mothers must do this on a daily basis, by admonition and continual checking on what their children do with their time. A typical admonishment to a son wasting precious study hours in online gaming, or a wilful daughter addicted to Korean romance serials, is that he/she is failing to evince proper study-consciousness (*ý thức học tập*).

The term for such vigilance is *quản lý,* management, as important an ideal for home life today as it is for the well-run school and business enterprise. Among the numerous supplementary services for which schools now charge substantial fees are subscription texting schemes to assist parents in the 'management' (*quản lý*) of their children by sending them weekly or even daily updates on their child's test scores, class rank and conduct marks.

A parent committing cash and energy to her child's educational needs is a loving provider, not a heartless 'tiger mother'.[12] Such a

[12] This is a key distinction: a 'tiger mother' is Chinese or Chinese-descended, her children trophies and assets rather than the beloved little treasures for whom the Vietnamese mother gives her all. See Ashley Pettus (2003), *Between Sacrifice and Desire: Gender, Media and National Identity in Vietnam* (London and New York: Routledge); Jayne Werner (2004), 'Managing Womanhoods in the Family: Gendered Subjectivities and the State in the Red River Delta in Vietnam', in Lisa Drummond and Helle Rydstrøm, eds, *Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam* (Singapore: Singapore University Press), pp. 26–46; for India, compare Henrike Donner (2008), *Domestic Goddesses: Maternity, Globalization and Middle-Class Identity in Contemporary India* (Hampshire and Burlington Vermont: Ashgate), Chapter 4). The Western notion of the pushy middle class parent unfairly 'working the system' at the expense of those with less social capital is also hard to convey in Vietnam. In theory, no-one likes the woman who buys her child a place at a favoured school or pays to raise a test score or ensure a teacher's attention in a crowded classroom. But such things are understandable, people say: no mother can or should deny her children's needs; where the child of the poor is a poor school performer, it is only natural to suspect fecklessness and lack of loving care in the home. On the centrality of female images of mother and motherland to the processes

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child's response to attaining good marks and prizes should therefore be to 'remember the source' ('*nhớ nguồn*'), as enjoined in the most famous of the country's many wise-saw ancient-wisdom epigrams. In the schoolroom, this means the high scorer should always credit what they achieve to the teachers and loving kin who equipped them to strive for worthwhile ends. Their attainments are not theirs to glory in: they are of and for the collective. When such performances are recognized with awards and merit certificates they are to be seen as setting an emulation standard (*thi đua*) for others to surpass, not as personal wins to be rewarded and acclaimed for.[13]

It is important to note how all these maxims are presented, that is as opposed and mutually exclusive absolutes. Children rapidly become accustomed to learning the various precepts that speak of attainments one either gratefully attributes to others, or wrongly seeks credit for, as well as merit markers one either righteously wills others to meet and surpass, or improperly regards as personal wins or gains. This structure of antithesis is still central to the way the educational process is supposed to form the morally active self in Vietnam. The morals education classes (*giáo dục đạo đức*) which are a compulsory element of state schooling from primary school to university are taught through precisely this kind of oppositional formulation.[14] Absolute good—the person of stainless virtue (*người chân chính*)—should be contrasted with the embodiment of absolute wrong: the duplicitous double-dealer or opportunist (*kẻ cơ hội*). And the path of virtue and good citizenship is

of nation formation enacted in Indian educational settings, see Véronique Benei (2008), *Schooling Passions: Nation, History and Language in Contemporary Western India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

[13] Compare Nicholas J. Long (2013), *Being Malay in Indonesia: Histories, Hopes and Citizenship in the Riau Archipelago* (Singapore, Copenhagen and Honolulu: NUS, NIAS and University of Hawai'i Press), on Indonesian contexts where attainment can and should be both personal and a matter of emulation for all. The 'remember the source' epigram is: '[When] drinking water, remember the source'; [when] eating fruit, remember the man who planted the tree'. Like the other proverbs children learn as expressions of *đạo lý* (ancestral core values), this exaltation of the dutifully remembering self is identified as the essence of Vietnameseness: never as a Chinese-derived inheritance from Confucianism, nor as a precept known as widely in China as in Vietnam. See Ellen Oxfeld (2011), '"When You Drink Water, Think of its Source": Morality, Status and Reinvention in Rural Chinese Funerals', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 63(4): 961–990.

[14] Officially 'morals education' (*giáo dục đạo đức*) is the term for the primary school syllabus covering the initial basics of good conduct and social values, though the term is also widely used for the upper-level version taught at secondary school and university as 'citizenship education' (*giáo dục công dân*).

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to be recognized and differentiated from the radically antithetical qualities and behaviours for which there can be no excuse or justification.

To know the terms that belong to each value (*đức tình*) or defect, and to articulate correctly, in correct examination-format mode, what it is that allows the dutiful citizen to recognize their manifestations for either good or ill, is both essence and function of the educational process. So the lesson on the value (*đức tình*) of 'unity' (*đoàn kết*) will teach the class to write precisely what the curriculum requires. This on-paper display of educated will and morals must take the form of the standard three-part what/why/how essay, with a specified number of marks to be allocated to each segment. For 'unity', there must be an initial 'what' section establishing how to define the good citizen's pursuit of unity in society. Next comes the why: i.e., what makes this a critical virtue for all; then finally the how section specifying some ways this particular virtue should be manifested in human life. This could be by loving our classmates, or selflessly helping those in need: flood victims are always a safe-option example. Playing a worthwhile sport together is another good 'how' to mention, as so easy to pair with the antithetical bad quality the child should also know how to name and illustrate: the bad 'individualist' (*người cá nhân*) is the player who takes pride in his prowess rather than 'submerging' herself to create the unity that beats the other side.

Even at maturity, the idea of being a particular kind of person to be recognized and called an 'achiever' is hard to express in Vietnamese. For an adult who has done well in life, the usual term is *người thành công*, a 'successful person'. Its connotations are of someone who has worked their way to what people call high position (*vị trí cao*): this is meritorious if thought of as the means to do honourable public service (*công*) and to provide for the needs of kin. In this case too, what is emphasized is the notion of meritorious striving for a recognizably moral end, not that of a goal-driven striver charting an individualistic course through life, i.e., someone to praise for being motivated by personally defined aspirations and attainment targets.

Of course there is keen interest today in the seductive if dangerous idea of precisely this: personal direction-setting of a kind the morals-education classes never describe as a quality of the world-changing creative exemplars the young are enjoined to admire and emulate. In their morals education textbooks, creativity (*sáng tạo*) is presented as one of the key animating virtues for the young to recognize in others, and to aspire to in their own lives as striving citizens. But the creators

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they are instructed to focus on are scientists, specifically makers of wonderful new things that improve the lot of humanity. Edison, Marie Curie and famous Russians as well as Vietnamese and other high-socialist scientific and medical greats feature in these exaltations of creativity as the critical factor in human growth and progress. There are no painters or poets, since artists achieve in the very different realm of 'culture', and certainly no-one who might sound like a self-indulgent follower of personal whim or inspiration.[15]

Like 'unity' (*đoàn kết*), creativity/*sáng tạo* has a whole chapter to itself in the current national citizenship education textbooks for class 6, i.e., middle-school 14-year-olds. What this lesson teaches about Edison and the other exemplars of creative will and action is that they were strivers who 'worked hard', mastered their disciplines, and never flagged in the selfless pursuit of truth. So their version of creativity was an exercise in self-effacing hard work, a tailoring of will and disciplining of wit and ingenuity for the creation of new things to meet real-world human needs and wants. In no sense are its exemplars to be seen as stand-alone rule-breakers yearning to make their mark. The creativity chapter's mini-biography of Edison features a key life episode which is said to have set him on the path to inventing the electric light. It is a moment of filial devotion, when the young creator's love of his ailing mother sparked the realization that with a reflecting mirror he could give her doctors the illumination they needed for the dangerous night-time operation that saved her life. It is very much not a story about personal passion for science, or a drive to challenge convention and change the world.

In fact it is now easy for the internet-savvy Hanoi young to steep themselves in just that kind of 'follow your passion' winner's philosophy by accessing the many popular websites offering tips and training in the rapidly expanding field of 'life goals' coaching (*mục tiêu cuộc sống*). Yet even on these sites, it is striking that terms like 'achiever' and 'winner' are proving hard to translate from the works of the foreign how-to-succeed gurus whose publications have become Renovation-era best-sellers in Vietnam. Some sites avoid the problem altogether by treating achiever and winner as synonymous with 'successful person' (*người thành công*: the person who has 'made it'). Others try to

[15] For an exploration of ideas of desirably teachable as opposed to subversively disruptive forms of creativity in a variety of past and present contexts, see Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold, eds (2007), *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation* (Oxford and New York: Berg).

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signal that they are offering a decidedly novel though not explicitly Western or 'capitalist' self-advancement strategy by using the popular neologism *người thành công trong cuộc sống*, meaning something like 'a person making a success of [their] life'. What this adds to the idea of the successful person is something people say they find daringly un-Vietnamese: an idea of one's life as a worked-at project of personal goals and achievement strategies.[16]

The college-age students and recent graduates I know who have considered signing up for such courses say they are much at odds with the ticket-for-life idea their modestly prospering parents tend to have for them: top-flight examination success, getting into a 'famous' university, securing a contract rather than a temporary probationer's status with a high-status firm or public service body. The key question is therefore whether these are conceptions of success and life goals that suggest the virtuous creativity the young citizen is now told to pursue within and beyond the classroom, or a form of the self-serving 'opportunism' (*chủ nghĩa cơ hội*) their textbooks vilify as the source of anarchy and moral collapse.

Young Hanoians who like such websites say they prefer those that frame these ideas about personal life goals with a moralistic gloss that makes them sound excitingly 'global', yet also 'in accord with' (*hợp*) the essences of Vietnamese culture and character. And what they draw on in making these points is a Vietnamese vocabulary of 'achievement' rather than 'achievers' which echoes much that is being said by officials and the state media about the issue of how to pursue creativity in the classroom. There is in today's complex melding of socialist and neo-traditional ideas of moral knowledge a language of personal capacity-building that young adults in Hanoi say they have

[16] The newer idioms for achiever or winner are sometimes combined with the phrase *người thành đạt*, an old-style notion of the distinction achieved by laureates in the old imperial mandarin examinations, so attainment more exalted and also more specifically moral than mere 'success' in life. The sites feature Asians, especially Singaporeans, as well as American success gurus. http://www.hoclamgiau.vn/news/Onlinedetail.aspx?id=81 [accessed 13 June 2013] is one of numerous websites extolling the American 'father of success-science', Napoleon Hill, author of the most popular of the many self-help make-it books on sale in Vietnam under the title *Think and Grow Rich*. Hanoians who know that this Depression-era manual of 'will to win' positive thinking and personality enhancement was first published in 1937 say this makes it a 'classic' (*kinh điển*), rather than an outdated celebration of the American dream. In 2012–2013 it was made a featured free gift for those taking part in a widely publicized 'Creative Youth for Vietnam Aspiration' campaign jointly sponsored by the Communist Party Youth Union and one of the country's most successful private business corporations.

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been familiar with from childhood. Both at school and beyond, the citizen is still officially enjoined to enhance or 'build up' (*nâng cao*) his/her will and moral fibre (*đạo đức*) for purposes both great and small. Their capacity for endurance and hard work are to be 'firmed up' (*tăng cường*) and worked on: another favoured idiom in textbooks, red-banner slogans and other official contexts is that of tempering, *rèn luyện*, suggesting strenuous willed action like the hammering and forging of the industrial workplace.

What this provides for the dutiful citizen is a language of accountable agency in relation to creditable outcomes. Thus rather than speaking directly of winners and achievers, what everyone knows is a host of familiar terms for achieving and achievement, i.e. for the various kinds of goals and purposes to which an individual or collectivity may direct a tempered will. Central to this vocabulary are its distinctions between mundane wins and gains, and accomplishments on a more exalted plane. The outcome of selfless thought and striving leading to an obviously worthwhile goal is *thành quả* (literally 'fruitful' achievement). 'My father struggled and saved; he felt so happy when he could build a modern [*văn minh*: literally 'civilized'] house for us: that was his *thành quả*', his son Phong told me.

In this account, Phong made a particular point of his father's joy at having installed a fine new ancestor altar (*bàn thờ tổ tiên*) in the new house. Like family tombs, altars are critical points of interaction between living and ancestral kin.[17] The dead participate as actively as the living in the projects and moral concerns of a kindred's mortal experiences. So what a father accomplishes as a provider and nurturer for those he loves must be firmly anchored in the on-going chain of interactions and attainments linking past, present and future manifestations of both individual and collective achieving selfhood.

For the greatest attainments, there is the more recondite term *thành tựu*. This has a semi-archaic ring. For the many Hanoians now keen on the cultivation of Buddhist devotional knowledge, it is evocative of what their preceptoral texts say about the life-long striving which may bear fruit as progress towards enlightenment. *Thành tựu* is used in other contexts too, for such things as the winning of national independence, or for achievement in the sense of the world-changing contributions for which scientists win the Nobel prize.

[17] Susan Bayly (forthcoming), 'Mapping Time, Living Space: The Moral Cartography of Renovation in Late-Socialist Vietnam', *Cambridge Anthropology*.

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Thành tích is a much more ordinary word for targets met or successes one is given credit for. The good student knows it is the proper term for what his/her school 'achieved' in coming top in the regional examinations results list, but never for great things such as the *thành tựu* attained for the country and wider world by the nation's heroes. *Thành tích* implies enumeration: coming first or top, fulfilling a production quota (for which the old red-banner idiom is still 'strive to meet the target: *thi đua lập thành tích*), hence today's use of *bệnh thành tích* in the sense of a social problem to be referred to as 'targetism' or making-records syndrome. The word *bệnh* (disease, syndrome) is also a critical part of present-day achievement language. It is used in medical contexts, but is also a familiar high-socialist term for dysfunctional social behaviour. Both past and present-day students encounter it in the morality-education texts which are still compulsory curriculum elements at every level from primary school to university, with particular emphasis on the teachings of the nation's revolutionary war leader and moral lodestar, President Ho Chi Minh.

Every schoolchild is well versed in these texts, including 'Uncle' (*Bác*) Ho's many aphorisms on the virtues (*đức tính*) of the good revolutionary, as in the rhyming couplet meaning 'diligence, thrift, incorruptibility, integrity' (*cần, kiệm, liêm, chính*). This is an updating of the classic quartet of ethical self-refinement goals as propounded in Vietnam's never wholly repudiated version of the Confucian scholar-gentry tradition. As a basis for essays and examination answers, this ideal of the revolutionary's virtues is a model of principled conduct still taught in every classroom as a pattern of perfection. And in keeping with the thesis/antithesis logic in which the young are grounded from early childhood, they are qualities to be set in diametric opposition to such stigmatized deviances as 'opportunism' (*chủ nghĩa cơ hội*) and 'individualism' (*chủ nghĩa cá nhân*).

The textbooks teach these concepts as a moral system comprising a perfect fusion of 'Vietnamese tradition' and the incontrovertible truths of Marxist revolutionary science.[18] Indeed morality/ethics (*đạo đức*), tradition (*truyền thống*) and science (*khoa học*) are all presented as embodiments of truths that are both absolute and mutually compatible in Vietnamese classrooms. So the diligent examination candidate would do well to recall the scientizing language in which such points are conventionally made as, for example, in President Ho Chi

[18] 'Vietnamese tradition' is *truyền thống Việt Nam;* Marxist revolutionary science is *tính cách mạng khoa học của Chủ nghĩa Mác.*

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Minh's much-cited declaration that 'individualism and opportunism are toxins or dangerous germs (*thứ vi trung rất độc*) causing malignant disease or dysfunction (*bệnh*) in the healthy social body'.[19]

The perils of 'achievement disease'

Despite the familiarity of these idioms, it was novel and even shocking for Hanoians to be confronted with the sudden appearance in the late 2010s of the notion of an achievement-related disorder of the social body, *bệnh thành tích*. In a host of official media accounts and public policy statements, it was made clear that the term was to be understood as a pointer to forms of impropriety and social harm (*bệnh*) arising from the hitherto wholly positive idea of citizens pursuing achievement-mindedness in the form of wins, gains and output markers: *thành tích*.

But people caught on quickly, and the phrase *bệnh thành tích*/'achievement disease' is now widely understood as a reference to contexts when it can be bad and pernicious to go all out to meet targets—through trickery and fraud, the cooking of statistics and the faking of performance returns. The question of why such behaviour is a feature of current life is left carefully unexplored: what matters is that it does happen in the here and now, and spells danger for future life if left uncorrected, especially in matters to do with the quality and capabilities of the nation's young. So as manifested in the pressure to manufacture ever-brighter good-news performance data for 'opportunistic' rewards and gains in education, achievement disease is now routinely blamed for a host of social ills ranging from classroom indiscipline and 'exam-hell' suicides, to national underperformance in global academic league tables. Even in the big-name, selective-entry, high-achiever schools, it is widely said, produce either 'battery-chickens' (*gà công nghiệp*) processed for examination success on a diet of force-fed textbook formula answers, or 'fighting cocks' (*gà chọi*) groomed like a gamester's killer birds for dead-end wins in the big international mathematics and science olympiads. The dangers are clear, the critics say: Vietnam will lose its precarious niche in the skill-hungry global knowledge economy unless its students gain

[19] http://www.ctu.edu.vn/associations/youth/dtn/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=516&Itemid=60 [accessed 13 June 2013].

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the real-world competencies and 'life skills' (*kỹ năng sống*) that typify other countries' young achievers.[20]

Such anxieties are often framed in a notably nuanced vision of the world's divergent achievement cartographies. Go-getter Euro-American models appeal to some Hanoians, but for many others the ideal is a young Singaporean or South Korean in a snappy tie-and-blazer uniform, speaking confident English and radiating problem-solving brio and 'teamwork' ability. This notion of teamwork (*làm việc nhóm*) refers to an idea of 'Western', or more specifically Singaporean/South Korean/Japanese workplace virtues. Hanoians I know were amused to find I had assumed they thought of 'teamwork' or its close equivalent 'cooperation' (*hợp tác*) as something close to the 'collective spirit' (*tinh thần tập thể*) extolled in red-banner slogans and poster captions, and still used as a basis for classroom merit marks.[21]

The notion of even mildly unflattering comparisons between the home-grown striving citizen and their overseas Korean or Singaporean counterparts is far too sensitive even today for anything other than hints and tacit inferences. In the key national narratives of revolutionary triumph and wartime heroism, youthful attainment inspired by the twin virtues of love of learning and 'collective spirit'

[20] Other contexts for debate about 'achievement disease' are explored in my contribution in Long and Moore, eds, *The Social Life of Achievement*.

[21] 'Not a good community person/not a joiner-in' (*không hoà đồng*) is a black-mark comment no parent wants to see on a son's or daughter's school report. But no-one would think of 'community-mindedness' as anything like the 'soft skills' and 'real-life' capabilities aspiring high-flyers are told they now need for career success. (http://tuoitre.vn/nhip-song-tre/441589/di-ung-voi-lam-viec-nhom.html [accessed 13 June 2013]; 'College graduates lack teamwork and communication skills', http://tuoitrenews.vn/education/4962/college-grads-lack-teamwork-communication-skills [accessed 13 June 2013]). It is now official education policy to press the state schools to impart 'real world' capacities with new-mode teaching strategies (e.g., 'democratic' discussion in the classroom). The word used for 'team' in teamwork, '*nhóm*', is the word for the ordinary kind of group from which 'cooperation' (*hợp tác*) might emanate. *Hợp tác* has connotations of businesses entering into mutually profitable cooperation deals; the team or *nhóm* group is thus quite distinct from the high-socialist term '*đội*', used for work-unit or collective. For parents with the necessary means, the commercial sector is full of enhancement options for their children, including super-star private tutors like the so-called king tutors in Hong Kong, and the widely advertised operations identifying themselves as education centres which offer spare-time 'life skills' tuition at every level from pre-kindergarten to pre-university. There are important gender differences in the ways conventional 'collective-mindedness' qualities are represented and taught (see Helle Rydstrøm (2003), *Embodying Morality: Growing Up in Rural Northern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press)); commercial 'life-skills' teaching is ostensibly gender-neutral.

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is still exalted as the essence of Vietnameseness, the source of all that made Vietnam a shining exemplar nation to its friends and allies of the old global socialist ecumene.[22] What the much-scanned NGO statistics keep reporting is now publicly acknowledged: that the country is in danger of lagging behind in today's market-era race to produce high quality 'human resources'. But like other officially designated 'society problems', this particular hot-topic issue (*chủ đề nóng*) has to be represented as a manageable peril that can be safely negotiated by the setting of clear goals and targets both by and for an achievement-conscious citizenry.

In education, this has given rise to strategies aimed at reshaping without de-Vietnamizing the ways the country's best and brightest—meaning those seeking admission to its front-rank universities—are groomed, ranked and motivated. Of particular interest is the premise these initiatives are now building on: that examinees' minds can be made more dynamic and fertile, hence better equipped to serve the nation's problem-solving needs, through the creation of a more creativity-testing kind of examination.[23]

The making of 'creative' achievers

The use of creativity as the key policy term for these initiatives is in itself a telling instance of the balancing act individuals and state

[22] On the notion of socialist ecumene, a moral community in which Vietnam's remembered life is very much not that of cap-in-hand seeker of other peoples' tutelage, see Susan Bayly (2008), *Asian Voices in a Postcolonial Age: Vietnam, India and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). There is no everyday noun for Vietnameseness, though people say 'very Vietnamese' (*rất Việt Nam*) of anything steeped in tradition yet consistent with modern 'civilized' (*văn minh*) life (Liam Kelley (2003), 'Vietnam as a "Domain of Manifest Civility"', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 34(1): 63–76; for China, see Ann Anagnost (1997), *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press), pp. 77–78).

[23] http://english.vov.vn/Society/Vietnam-lacks-high-quality-human-resources/230387.vov [accessed 13 June 2013]; http://123.30.128.29/cmlink/tuoitrenews/education/education-news/curricula-at-the-heart-of-3–3b-education-proposal-1.33732 [accessed 13 June 2013]; 'Educational reform plan to promote student creativity', http://vietnamnews.vn/Opinion/229830/educational-reform-plan-to-promote-student-creativity.html [accessed 13 June 2013]. This is emphatically not conceived as the kind of 'creativity' associated with Euro-American notions of 'creative play' and self-expression. And it is not publicly acknowledged that Vietnam's problematic 'elder sister', China, is also pursuing high-profile creativity goals as part of its neo-Darwinian quest for enhanced 'population quality' (T. E. Woronov (2008). 'Raising Quality, Fostering "Creativity": Ideologies and Practices of Education Reform in Beijing', *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 39(4): 401–422).

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agencies need to perform in the representation of market-era change as 'renewal' rather than 'reform' or transformation. In these instances, the term creativity reassuringly evokes both the high-socialist vision of people and Party allied in 'creative' productivity, and today's calls for the fostering of 'creative' problem-solving skills to meet the needs of globalized market life.[24]

Since its inception in 2009, a key focus of the creativity initiative in education has been the nationally-administered university entrance examinations. Each year's cohort of over 600,000 aspiring university entrants must sit these life-or-death rite of passage examinations for which final-year higher-secondary school students undergo a ferocious process of after-school commercial crammer teaching. What the creativity agenda has injected into this system is a requirement that for all students opting to sit the Vietnamese language and literature papers as one of their three chosen subjects, one of three essay-mode questions they are required to answer now takes the form of a 600-word composition on a topic referring either directly or indirectly to the ethics of achieving and achievement, and to do so on a basis that has astonished their old-style teachers and exam-tip preceptors.[25]

[24] Compare James Lawler (1980), 'Collectivity and Individuality in Soviet Educational Theory'. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 5(2): 163–174; Caroline Humphrey (2008), 'The "Creative Bureaucrat": Conflicts in the Production of Soviet Communist Party Discourse', *Inner Asia*, 10(1): 5–35.

[25] It is rare for Hanoi parents to believe a child can achieve examination success and eventual admission to a good university without recourse to commercial after-school crammer teaching ('extra study'/*học them*) provided by their own classroom teachers and/or the wide array of commercial study centres and private tutors whose operations constitute a massive free-market industry in today's Vietnam (see Jonathan D. London (2006), 'Vietnam: The Political Economy of Education in a "Socialist" Periphery', *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 26(1): 1–20). Language/literature is a subject rooted in elegaic evocations of Vietnameseness and a view of expressive communication as the chief embodiment of moral personhood. Teachers tell only the brightest students to opt for anything other than 'safe' examination answers, meaning rigidly formulaic essays on the ethics and 'social truths' to be found in the key works of the official syllabus. Today's curriculum follows a model introduced during the initial stage of market opening in the late 1980s, which in literature was considered a daring departure from the existing classroom staples which included elaborately formal penmanship and a narrow high-socialist reading list. What replaced this was today's far wider mix of highlights from the national literary canon together with selected global greats (still including Gorky; but also Tagore as well as Dickens, Victor Hugo, Jack London and Mark Twain), a juxtaposition establishing Vietnam as confidently 'cultured' in its own right and master of what the whole world creates and propounds, in no sense a humble heir to colonial or Soviet postcolonial versions of *mission civilisatrice*.

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Starting with a 2009 question about exam-room cheating, aspiring high-flyers have found themselves obliged to write 'creatively' yet also 'safely' about market-era life as an arena confronting young citizens with dangerous temptations to indulge in misdirected target-chasing, and to be emulators of shockingly improper achiever role-models. The initial 2009 creativity question was about Abraham Lincoln supposedly telling his son's schoolmaster to teach the child that 'failure is better than cheating'. The markers who contribute model answers and accounts of the best and the worst of students' answer papers to the state media said that almost all the candidates failed to produce the kind of 'sharpness' (*sắc sảo*) and 'critical thinking' (*tư duy phản biện*) the Ministry planners said examiners should be looking for, opting for the kind of safe-option answer they always deplore yet never explain how to eliminate. In this case the tendency was to exalt Lincoln 'the great man who freed the slaves' as an all-purpose exemplar or moral mirror (*tấm gương*), rather than risking potentially 'sensitive' comments about real-life cheating tolerated or encouraged by schools and teachers to bump up their league table performance.

The students I know who sat this examination were more amused than irritated to be criticized in these terms, insisting that to write a full-marks set of safe-option platitudes in response to such questions takes more ingenuity than the commentators were willing to admit. The Lincoln question was tricky to answer 'creatively', they said. This was because like the morality-education questions they were accustomed to, the format was a sententious little maxim setting out a truism on which they were clearly to comment in the properly ordered way they had been drilled to produce from their earliest school years: a three-section composition setting out an orderly sequence of 'what, why and how' truisms as an exposition of the particular virtue they were called on to explicate.

So the Lincoln question was framed as an instruction for candidates only to 'give their opinion' on the virtues of truthfulness (*trung thực*). It was emphatically not phrased as an invitation to venture into anything remotely controversial or challenging, meaning challenging towards established authority: for example, by suggesting that there are people in real life who think they might be entitled to cheat or otherwise deviate from absolute righteousness in certain cases, and may actually do so for good or at least not wholly bad reasons, or that today's society is full of dangerous incentives for good people to do devious or unethical things, or even that sometimes what might look like cheating the system may actually entail being innovative—'thinking

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outside the box'.[26] The correct way to be creative about the Lincoln question was to tell a 'sharp' or 'pointed' story (*sắc sảo*: i.e. with a clear and unmistakable moralizing point) about something in real life. The right kind of thing, people told me would be something like: 'I recall a terrible day when I succumbed to temptation: I cheated in class and was so miserable. But then I owned up and was happy again', i.e. brought back to the warmth of teacher's and classmates' loving approval.

One aspect of the new education agenda students almost never mentioned was the idea that 'creativity' in examinations and school performance should actually be allied to or even productive of a display of 'critical thinking' (*tư duy phản biện*) skills. 'Critical', virtually everyone agreed, would imply being critical or subversive of established truths. No-one calls the new agenda a push for 'creativity and critical thinking'—'creativity' is the safe word they have taken from the Ministry texts and speeches, as have their teachers.

All the subsequent creativity questions have provided candidates with similar maxims to explicate. And what rapidly became clear in the fascinating forum comments and media stories about what the old teachers have found so astonishing—allusions to 'real life' social issues for students to comment on in the examination room— is how evident it is to all that a creative examinee is potentially a highly dangerous ethical subject for his/her kin and the nation at large since displays of creativity can so easily take him/her into the wrong kind of real-world performance and attainment terrain.

In 2012 there were two such questions. One was quite specifically on the distinction between the right and wrong way to conceptualize achievement and success. 'The virtuous man strives for true attainment (*thành tựu*: the great discoveries and achievements that change the world for good); the low 'opportunist' (*kẻ cơ hội*) chases after mere 'targets' (*thành tích*: achievements for which one gains renown and credit)'. Intriguingly, a significant number of students found this question's phrasing so abstract that it baffled them, to the irritation of many academic commentators. The idea that there could be young high flyers unable to distinguish between worthy and unworthy attitudes to achieving and attainment, and too ill-taught to grasp the moral significance of the two different idioms, was to them a

[26] Part of the online controversy about the first 'creativity' examination was the claim by several commentators that the 'fail don't cheat' dictum was not an authentic Lincoln quotation.

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shocking sign of deficiency in the education system—their concern with the articulation of moral principles far outweighed their concern with 'creativity'.[27]

Much more sensational however was the second of the 2012 questions, which was also framed as a maxim with an oppositional contrast between good and bad: in this case the virtuous and disastrously unvirtuous ways in which an 'idol' might be admired and emulated in today's society. For those with big-city tastes and media savvy, what was provocative about this one was that its focus was taken to be the glittering big-money foreign K-pop stars whose manic fan-culture excesses and gender-bending performance styles have become an ongoing matter of anxious national debate.[28]

[27] (*Kẻ cơ hội thì nôn nóng tạo ra thành tích, người chân chính thì kiên nhẫn lập nên thành tựu.*) 'Opportunist' (*kẻ cơ hội*) is a slogan term known to students in the pre-marketization period as a classic high-socialist reference to Trotsky. It is used today for the depraved individual who profiteers from others' need: 'the man who sells rice to flood victims'. And the running after mere 'target' forms of achievement markers puzzled many more: most avoided the dangerous notion of 'opportunism' and simply produced unexceptionable variations on the theme of 'my idol is my father/Darwin/Edison/our nation's leaders'. Students told me they struggled to point to any actual difference between the term they were supposed to understand as 'great attainment' pursued with selfless life-long dedication (*thành tựu*), and the mere win or gain (*thành tích*) for which one receives personal recognition and rewards. Markers said they were annoyed by the high proportion of answers saying with varying degrees of coherence that *thành tích* was an easier to achieve form of success like making a modest profit, and *thành tựu* a bigger one, i.e., a harder to achieve version of the same thing, with no idea of a moral difference between what the 'opportunist' and the 'virtuous man' were being said to aim for. They said that since the point of the question was so unclear to many candidates, they just gave better marks to those who wrote coherently and grammatically about 'working hard' and being determined and honest in pursuit of worthy aims. Some students told me they had imagined an answer saying that a big-name hero like Steve Jobs achieved great things because he had a 'go-for-it' personal sense of ambition, but would never have written in such terms, knowing that the 'old professors' who act as markers would never reward such indecent 'Western' sentiments.

[28] As in headline stories such as: 'Fans go wild, faint out of excitement at Soundfest': http://123.30.128.29/cmlink/tuoitrenews/lifestyle/fans-go-wild-faint-out-of-excitement-at-soundfest-1.68620 [accessed 13 June 2013]. Compare Ashley Carruthers (2001), 'National Identity, Diasporic Anxiety and Music Video Culture in Vietnam', in Yao Souchou, ed., *House of Glass: Culture, Modernity and the State in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), 119–149; Philip Taylor (2001), *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam's South* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press), pp. 43–55. One key social-media complaint after the 2012 examinations was that the fan/idol question disadvantaged students from the 'mountainous areas' where internet access is limited and the world of fandom outside most people's experience: many saw this as an example of what makes students from

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Pop-culture idols and the achiever's moral compass

Like online gaming addiction and other contemporary 'social evils' (*tệ nạn xã hội*), K-pop mania is a serious worry for Hanoi parents, hence the special frisson attached to a question apparently coming so very close to a whole host of deep and growing real-world fears that the world of globalized East Asian 'teamwork' and productivity modes is a potential carrier of something corrosive and sinister into precisely those settings of loving home and maternal care that the textbooks exalt so emphatically.

My friend An, a mid-level public service worker whose husband runs a modestly successful software business, tries to make her own sense of the non-stop public moralizing about how proper Vietnameseness can be imparted to the children of the Renovation age. Such young people are called '9X', meaning the post-1990 generation with no memory of Vietnam's war years and grim pre-market 'Subsidy' era. What the use of 9X evokes particularly is the still small but much reported-on minority of urban students and schoolchildren with unparalleled leisure time and spending power. Indeed even for the children of the poor, fears are continually articulated about how in a world of glitteringly globalized things and images, the young can be taught to tell the difference between the good and bad things to be learned from Vietnam's rich Asia-Pacific neighbours: especially Korea, which has made such an intoxicatingly high-tech export industry out of its mass-market amalgam of cult-hero pop stars and teen-culture fashion regalia.

An is immensely proud of her multi-talented daughter Cam. This ebullient 15-year old shares her passion for K-pop with a lively circle of like-minded friends. 'She isn't crazy', An said, meaning that whilst Cam is aware and modern, is admirably well informed about the wider world and can impress her elders with her command of the internet and its English-language teen-culture idioms, she had never done any of the things An reads about in the sensational media accounts of frenzied fans screaming themselves into fits at K-pop concerts, and threatening suicide and even murder to extort ticket money from their families.

Yet An is still worried, even though Cam has the kind of achievement record Hanoi parents delight in. She regularly achieves marks in

'undeveloped' regions so much less successful in high-stakes examinations than their big-city peers.

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the top-level 'outstanding' (*xuất sắc*) band, and has been a winner of national competitions in singing and English. From primary school onwards, Cam spent long evenings uncomplainingly refining her exam-room skills at the 'extra study' (*học thêm*) tuition classes to which aspiring high-flyers' families commit a significant part of their domestic budgets. More recently, with the dazzling prospect of overseas study before her, Cam's parents had invested in the novelty of weekend 'life-skills' classes for her: 'to help her with everything else', An said: 'speaking up, being modern like the students who can 'self-study' (*tự học*) and discuss in class'.[29]

At the time of fieldwork, Cam had been shortlisted for a scholarship offered by one of the English-medium schools in Singapore targeting a predominantly southeast Asian fee-paying clientele. These are called 'brand-name' schools in Hanoi. An loved the brochure slogans: 'a well-rounded education for active global citizenship'; 'combining Eastern values with an international outlook'. But whilst awaiting the scholarship decision, An began to fear the K-pop effect on her hitherto mannerly and hard-working daughter. She had heard from other parents that her daughter's favourite fan-sites were awash with lurid fantasizing about the boy-band members' single-sex, bed-hopping. She was told too that Hanoi teenagers were becoming avid participants in a new and terrible form of globalized 'creativity': the authoring of on-line pornographic fiction fantasies about their favoured male stars.[30]

This horrified An. Like other Hanoians I know, she had long told me that one parented successfully not by moralizing aloud: but silently, by example. To propound rules and principles 'like a morals-education textbook', people say dismissively, is not the way to impart values to the young. In this case, however, given that Cam might soon be on her own in a foreign land pervaded by what her mother thinks of as a bewildering mix of very good achievement models and very bad ones exalting pop-star, make-it-big excess, things hitherto unsaid and unsayable had to be spelled out.

[29] Self-study (*tự học*), meaning the student working towards a personal understanding of material, rather than merely memorizing: like 'soft skills' (*kỹ năng mềm*) and 'teamwork', this is another key term in the current new-education lexicon.

[30] The K-pop fan-bases call this 'shipping', and of course no Hanoi parent would regard it as in any way like the good forms of creativity the young achiever is now supposed to be taught and examined for. See http://seoulbeats.com/2012/07/why-homoerotic-fanservice-is-just-not-okay/ [accessed 13 June 2013].

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An is in no doubt that what is in the morals-education textbooks is good and truthful. However clumsily and didactically conveyed, she makes clear that what they propound are still the truths by which a moral compass can and must be set. The virtues the syllabus teaches—not only 'unity', but such absolutes as truthfulness, constancy, patriotism and loving filiality—are more than ideals a child should recognize and aspire to: they are truths of nature, precisely the same as the truths of what man and woman must be, meaning true and virtuous, in line with both the beautiful qualities of Vietnamese culture and the fundamental qualities and essences of male and female nature.[31]

So to ensure that Cam was not 'spoiled' and denatured by what she read in the forum exchanges, An sat with her at the computer screen and read the fan-site chat with her, looking for boy-band virtues to praise so she would not come across as wholly hostile to her child's enthusiasms: lauding the star who said he spent time doing charity work; the hard worker who said he valued his classroom prowess as well as his skills on stage. Then, having done what she could to show she was not closed-minded about Cam's heroes, An said she told her why it was so important not to join her friends in becoming gripped and 'swallowed' by the sex-life side of the K-pop world.

What she said to her daughter was: '*Đàn ông nông nổi giếng khơi, đàn bà sâu sắc như cơi đựng trầu*' ('Even the shallow man's intelligence is deep as a well; the most profound of women is shallow as a betel-tray'). She knew her daughter would recognize this as another of the wise-saw sayings children learn in school as emanations from the nation's ancestral folk culture. I have never met a parent or teacher willing to say that this particular precept might be at odds with

[31] Hanoians say the textbooks are about the 'virtues' (*đức tình*) a child must live by; the word usually translated as 'value' in Vietnamese (*giá trị*) suggests the possibility of difference and personal choice: present-day skills centres use such phrases as 'life values' (*giá trị sống*) to convey the idea of learning new 'values' for present-day needs, as in the idea of there being 'science values' meaning innovation, the spirit of creativity: creativity itself is now represented as something to be taught and developed as a 'value' in a wide range of Vietnamese contexts. Some centres go so far as to exalt creativity exemplars such as Steve Jobs whose life-values included 'doing what he loved': love is a selfless Vietnamese virtue, but to be expressed as 'love of mother/love of country', not pursuing 'my dream' or 'doing what I love for the sake of the joy and fulfilment it brings me'. The key question in Vietnam then becomes whether the object of such love is creditable and 'suitable', i.e. a proper man's job, a proper patriot's work or aspiration.

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what the good revolutionary should propound about gender equality. On the contrary, Hanoians say, it is a matter of straightforward truth as known to science, and enshrined in the nation's ancient knowledge traditions. Men and women have different natures, hence fundamentally different though complementary roles to play as achievers of good and fruitful things in the home and wider world. Without due recognition of these fundamentals of order and virtue, there can be neither productive family life nor Vietnameseness.

So for An, the maxim summed up everything she wanted to be sure Cam could grasp and indeed verbalize about the virtues of companionate marriage, and the 'natural' family unit as the true and proper expression of a loving life and nature. It was therefore an articulated antidote to what she feared about the dangerous new world where her daughter was already meeting and potentially even generating online articulations of things An's own mother, a Party member and ex-army officer with impeccable revolutionary family credentials, would have found not just unthinkable and unsayable, but impossible to imagine a well-schooled and virtuous child conveying and celebrating by means of the written word.

The media had been full of horror stories about young fans from 'good' urban families and good city schools using fan fora and chatrooms for precisely these kinds of written expressions, i.e. writing in praise of the K-pop singers' single-sex pseudo-families, and exalting their chosen stars as 'idols' embodying a form of love they called 'truly true' and 'selfless': superior in its morality and depth of feeling to the 'corrupt' and 'parasitical' Vietnamese family unit in its traditional time-honoured form. Hence, for An, the importance of the unusual step she was taking in articulating that which would normally be left to exemplification rather than speech, precisely because her daughter had the chance to go off to Singapore to achieve great things beyond the safer spaces of home and motherland.

Its meaning in this case, she said, was that there could be no happiness in life for anyone failing to appreciate the fundamental nature of man and woman, the importance of proper male and female natures in happy harmony—one could 'go wrong' if sucked into the depraved and abnormal world the fan-sites were glamourizing for unwary, innocent teenagers. In today's world there are new things for parents to learn almost every day about the novel sites and settings in which their children are being offered opportunities to achieve.

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'Late-socialist' achievement dilemmas in the global world

An was therefore one of the many parents I know who expressed enthusiasm for the new creativity examinations, particularly the controversial 2012 K-pop/idol question. 'They should have opinions about real life', she said. Her use of the word opinion was striking. The traditional question format for examinations in the so-called morals subjects has been to instruct the candidate to 'give your opinion' about the syllabus's wise-saw proverbs and aphorisms. But every achieving child learns from class 1 onwards that this does not mean they should produce anything remotely like a questioningly personal take on ideas such as 'remember the source'. This would be as unthinkable as to answer a high-school level literature question on the hallowed national classic *Tale of Kieu* (*Truyện Kiều*) with anything other than an anodyne set of conventionalisms about the 'good morals' and perfect values the text propounds.

The good student learns the right conventionalisms from his/her teacher's model essays, which make it clear that a successful examination answer must assert in concise and formulaic prose that the values taught by *Kiều* are filial love, sacrifice and 'struggle' (*đấu tranh*: as in its wartime ideological use, a term for unswerving strength of will in the following of a righteous path). It would be unthinkable to say that the poem's heroine Kiều is anything other than an ideal of perfect Vietnamese femininity, for example that, as a daughter who sells herself into concubinage to save her virtuous father, and contemplates suicide when her lover is executed, she can be read as a tortured modern, faced with a clash between values of filial piety and chastity that are fundamentally incompatible. Even worse would be to suggest that there is anything problematic about extolling either of these as ideals for a modern socialist society.[32]

[32] There was a massive outcry in April 2012, including a widely quoted attack by a prominent member of the National Assembly, when students sitting a creativity-mode entrance examination for admission to a private technology university were set a question raising precisely this kind of issue about the Kiều story. The question was deemed indecent for quoting from one of the poem's passages about the value of chastity, and asking candidates for their 'opinions' about the value of virginity in contemporary life, although readers surveyed by the main national education newspaper reported approval ratings of 10 to 1 in favour of the examiners' daring (http://giaoduc.net.vn/Giao-duc-24h/De-thi-trinh-tiet-cua-DH-FPT-co-giet-chet-su-sang-tao/152316.gd [accessed 13 June 2013]; http://giaoduc.net.vn/Giao-duc-24h/Bat-ngo-hang-nghin-doc-gia-ung-ho-de-thi-trinh-tiet/151622.gd [accessed 13 June 2013]).

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In theory, everyone knew that the same principle applied to the new 'hot topic' theme questions. Whilst they were unmistakably what students call 'today's modern life questions', the widely espoused safety-first position is that no sensible candidate would misinterpret the official call for 'creativity' as an invitation to challenge established truth and virtue. What this meant was that not even the brightest candidates should try to show their 'sharpness' by even hinting at the existence of doubt or ambiguity in the way the architects of the country's miracle-economy status have been setting the many policies which impact on the life chances of its citizen-achievers. So there could be no question of identifying 'the market' or even 'today's more affluent life' as cause or context for the social-problem behaviour they were expected to moralize about.

There was no mystery about this, students said. It was fine to deplore fandom as the silly extravagance of individuals and their misguided hunger for un-Vietnamese pursuits and pleasures; it was not at all okay to connect it with anything more far-reaching or historicizing. So they were definitely not to say anything like 'we are living in more challenging times now than when the country was still poor but rich in revolutionary spirit'; or 'our culture is in danger of decline or pollution'. This was evident, candidates and markers told me, from the framing of the questions as moralistic pronouncements offering a clear path to ahistorical truisms about what constitutes good as opposed to bad versions of an achiever's life-course. Hence the K-pop question: 'Emulating worthy idols is fine/beautifully 'cultural' (*nét đẹp văn hóa*); crazy idolization is a disaster for all'. The format was conventional enough, but the idioms used signalled unmistakably that this was an allusion to the excesses of pop fandom.

The phrase referring to the bad forms of 'idolizing' was conspicuous for its use of the word *thảm họa* for disaster*: thảm họa* is now a pop-world term of abuse for bad performances and other matters of fan opprobrium. And 'idol' itself, *thần tượng,* is now widely associated with Western-style reality Television and celebrity culture. Though also used more generally in ways corresponding to the various meanings of 'idol' and 'idolize' in English, its connotations of an individual making their own choices about who to set as a personal lodestar makes it very different from the exemplars or 'mirrors' (*tấm gương*) the textbooks and red-banner slogans prescribe as guides to an achieving life, starting with one's parents and the nation's founding father, President Ho Chi Minh.

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So on the topic of their examination strategy, 'Easy', students told me: 'VTV-1', meaning they knew perfectly well that the questions were not invitations to be 'creatively' challenging towards what their textbooks taught about the nation's history and good 'traditions' (*truyền thống*). They were to take their cues from items on the main state television channel about whatever key social-problem issues were receiving headline coverage in the run-up to examination time. And it was obvious what tone to take. The young high-flyer must be a guardian of future good order, equipped with all the nation needs to stave off the dangers of consumerist demoralization, though without actually saying in so many words that such dangers are actually a potential peril of contemporary life. He or she were clearly not to write as fans themselves, but in anticipation of that future ordering role, i.e. as a responsible elder-sibling moralizer reproaching an imagined younger set of fan-cult extremists for the decadent un-Vietnameseness of the shrieking star-worship that had been one of the year's hot-topic media stories. This kind of exercise is something many young people say they rather enjoy: since no-one expects anything like 'free expression' in a classroom exercise or examination essay, being 'sharp' about the right moralizing sentiments to convey in response to something that is so obviously clear and pressing in contemporary life: 'The crazy fans are silly and irresponsible—they waste their parents' money by spending their time on useless pursuits'.

Yet what galvanized online comment and a vast amount of anxious public moralizing in the 2012 post-examination period were reports about a much-publicized handful of K-pop lovers whose almost unimaginable act of impropriety was to deface their question papers and stage walk-outs from the examination room.[33] At least one Facebook group was set up by admirers of the rebel students, denouncing the question for its implied attack on the virtue of their fandom. Intriguingly they read the ambiguous phrasing about 'cultural beauty/beauty of culture' (*nét đẹp văn hóa*) as disparagement of K-pop as worthless, low culture since it did indeed leave unclear whether the idea intended was that humanity has a natural and innate need for

[33] http://english.vietnamnet.vn/en/education/24679/vietnamese-k-pop-fans–throw-stones–into-literature-exam-question.html. [Bo-Giao-duc-phai-xin-loi-vi-de-thi-van-Khoi-D/213150398 9/202] [accessed 13 June 2013]; 'Shock: Fan Hysteria—demand that the Ministry Apologise for its Group *D Literature exam question'* (*Sốc: Fan cuồng đòi Bộ Giáo dục phải xin lỗi vì đề thi văn Khối D*), http://vietbao.vn/Giao-duc/Soc-Fan-cuong-doi-Bo-Giao-duc-phai-xin-loi-vi-de-thi-van-Khoi-D/213150398 9/202/ [accessed 16 June 2013].

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'high culture' or that it was part of 'culture' in general to express one's in-built and healthy disposition towards the emulation of good (but not bad) idols or exemplars.

There was also an opposition group proclaiming itself to be a body of outraged young citizens eager to champion the Ministry and defend the good morals and patriotism they accused the K-pop fans of defaming. The two sides engaged in a widely publicized torrent of what current youth-culture idiom calls 'stoning' (*ném đá*), meaning vitriolic online abuse of those with objectionable opinions and fan loyalties.

The debate about the value of testing and teaching potential young achievers for 'creativity' has certainly not been resolved in Vietnam, and it may well seem that the lessons learned thus far have been painful and problematic for all concerned. Discovering that there is even a micro-minority of students in today's Vietnam with the effrontery to go rudely off-script in the sanctified precincts of the examination room was certainly not greeted with any kind of openly expressed gratification as a sign of desirable 'creativity' in the minds and morals of young achievers. Yet in some ways the exercise is being thought of as an instructive one, with even a few hints in some quarters that there are young people in today's challenging times who may be tiptoeing towards some kind of positively creative synthesis between the achievement models they see in dangerous K-pop Korea and safely solid tie-and-blazer Korea, with an added infusion of verve and dynamism derived from their sense of confidently distinctive Vietnameseness.

Conclusions

It is far from easy to be or aspire to be a recognized achiever in present-day Hanoi. The forging of creative student-citizens who bring credit to family and nation is a process fraught with complex moral entailments. In the hotly competitive spaces of globalized market life, these complexities are deeply felt and worried over, even in contexts where the achiever's self-awareness is narrativized in highly positive terms: that is, as consciousness productively enriched and gloried in, and challenges triumphantly met and mastered.

In today's Vietnam, education in general and the examination process in particular are of paramount importance to the delicate business of telling the story of the country's market entry in persuasively up-beat terms. In so doing, it becomes possible and plausible to knit together the purposeful aims and sensibilities of the old global

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socialist ecumene with today's more dauntingly open-ended achievement regimens.

The forging of young achievers is a process undertaken in the glare of public scrutiny directed in highly unpredictable ways towards those now being called upon to perform their most sensitive and difficult enactments. A key example is the pressure on Vietnamese mothers to be globally conscious themselves as well as effective raisers of their children's consciousness, as this old-socialist idiom is now understood. So it is the student-citizen's mother who must serve in uneasy alliance with school, state and 'society' as maker of the moral awareness which must anchor and 'Vietnamize' the achieving child's productivity in a world of universalizing global evaluation arenas. The outcome of these interactions is an extensive though unstable interlinking of many different levels of achievement awareness, relating and interpenetrating the strivings of mothers and families through to those of the school, the state and the world beyond.

What this therefore provides are instructive instances of the ways globalization can be productively explored and theorized, that is with a focus on issues of consciousness and subjectivity, whilst still taking note of its on-the-ground effects in both economic and conceptual terms. Hanoians experience real and pressing anxieties about their personal stake in these matters, even though they clearly do not engage the vast interpenetrative world of global achievement space as an arena of one-dimensionally coercive or subjugating attainment regimens. What this paper has sought to show is that what is equally striking in this regard is the extent to which a multi-faceted array of achievement ideas has come to serve and animate the complex self-positionings the state and its productive citizens are being called upon to register and articulate in the age of market-entry Renovation.

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