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The Quest for Research on Social Class in Contemporary Vietnam: Overview of Current Approaches and Suggestions for Considering Pierre Bourdieu's Theoretical Framework

The powerful influence of social class on how people live and thrive constitutes a well-established theme in sociology that has enjoyed a surge of interest from researchers across the world since the 2000s.¹ Yet, in contemporary Vietnam, the ruling Communist Party still claims a non-conflicting social structure of “peasants,” “workers,” and “intelligentsia” three decades into a reform program that has gradually replaced a centrally planned economy with a market-driven economy.²

In this article, I present a critical overview of current approaches to studying social stratification and class in the post-reform Vietnamese context. I expound on the ideologically driven and politically mediated nature of discourse on social class in Vietnam, and examine the ideological, political, and academic challenges that arise from the development of such a discourse. I then make a case for the importance of sociological research on social class in contemporary Vietnam in light of existing empirical evidence. Finally, I introduce Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework as a potentially relevant approach to studying class in Vietnam.

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Research on Social Stratification and Class in Contemporary Vietnam

Academic sociological research on contemporary Vietnam is inchoate. The sociological research controlled and financed by the Vietnamese establishment—that is, research conducted by academics who are employed by Vietnamese state firms, state institutes, or state think tanks—dates roughly back to the reform era. The Vietnam Institute of Sociology was established in 1983. The first issue of the Vietnamese Journal of Sociology [*Tạp Chí Xã Hội Học*], the only existing sociological journal in the country, was published in the same year. Establishment research on social stratification did not emerge until the early 1990s.³ The first time the term “social stratification” occurs in Vietnamese research is in a 1992 study about social changes during reform in Hà Nội, carried out by researchers at the institute.⁴ Non-establishment sociological research on Vietnam is even more recent. Most academic articles and working papers by foreign or foreign-based researchers discussing political-social issues in Vietnam not directly related to the war date from 1995. This was the year of Vietnam’s entry into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), signing of a framework agreement with the European Union, and establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States—all marking Vietnam’s official international debut.

In this section, I discuss the main existing approaches to studying social stratification and class in the post-reform Vietnamese context by both establishment and non-establishment researchers. While research on social stratification in post-reform Vietnam is dominated by statistical analyses of the rich/poor dichotomy,⁵ non-establishment researchers have also studied the state/non-state dichotomy. Class, on the other hand, remains a neglected topic.

RICH/POOR INEQUALITY

Income inequality is the most popular topic in post-reform social stratification research.⁶ Observers of Vietnam agree that the rich-poor gap is a consequence of reform.⁷ According to these authors, whereas the pre-reform socialist society can largely be viewed as egalitarian, the post-reform society has seen unprecedented discrepancies among social groups

in living standards and access to social services. Researchers identify these social groups based on household income or expenditure and routinely refer to them as the “rich” [*giàu*] groups and the “poor” [*nghèo*] groups.

Much of the rich-poor inequality research conducted in the Vietnamese context is quantitative, policy-oriented, and focused directly on one dimension of the dichotomy (i.e., poverty). The common approach is to compare income and expenditures among five quintiles of the population from poorest to richest, and to calculate a Gini coefficient (a measure of income inequality) based on income data.⁸ The Gini coefficient is generally employed to evaluate how unequal the country or a part of it was at a particular point in time. Monthly per capita income is used by governmental bodies to define the national poverty line, and local authorities base their identification of “the poor” and distribution of benefits on this assessment.⁹

The income inequality literature provides nationally representative statistical evidence of the consequences of income stratification. In their earliest studies, establishment academics report simple descriptive results of the discrepancies among different income or expenditure groups with regard to economic living standards such as housing conditions, property ownership, and ownership of household durable assets.¹⁰ Non-establishment researchers have made a breakthrough in investigating the rich-poor differentials in access to social services. The first ever analysis of the association between household income and children’s schooling in Vietnam was published in 1999.¹¹ Based on data from the *Vietnam Social Sector Financing Survey* gathered in conjunction with the Vietnam General Statistical Office in 1996, Jere R. Behrman and James C. Knowles find the effects of household income on children’s schooling to be significant and positive. Since then, numerous studies have reaffirmed this conclusion. Among these, a few studies further demonstrate that educational inequality intensifies as one moves up the educational ladder. Enrollments among the poor population start dropping off at the secondary and post-secondary levels and are dramatically lower than those among the rich population at the tertiary level.¹² Researchers also provide statistical evidence of a positive association between household wealth and access to health services,¹³ and between household income and access to formal financial credits.¹⁴

Researchers scrutinizing the determinants of income stratification have found several factors that exert statistically significant influence on household welfare. These include household demographic characteristics, household assets, household engagement in farm and non-farm activities, educational level of the household head, occupation of the household head, and household geographical location. The last three of these factors recur frequently in the literature. There is evidence that households with a higher probability of being in the top two quintiles based on income are more likely to have highly-educated heads. They are more likely to be located in urban or inner city areas, rather than in rural or suburban areas. It is more likely for the heads of these households to work in leader, business owner or professional positions; in white-collar, industrial, or service occupations as opposed to agricultural occupations; and in state or foreign-invested sectors as opposed to the private sector.¹⁵

Rich-poor inequality research has advanced awareness about, and policy-making regarding, market-based social inequalities. In the early 1990s, the state started withdrawing provision of social services.¹⁶ Since then, financial responsibility for education has been shifting from the state to households.¹⁷ Thus, the consequences of household income on household welfare and children's schooling have become urgent areas for social research. Studies in these areas shed light on timely issues of economic inequality. They introduce income as an appreciable indicator of inequality in the post-reform society. The evidence they provide has helped expose the impact of reform policies on the livelihoods of low-income groups and inform pro-poor policies.

There are, however, a number of limitations in this literature. Even though income data have been widely used by economists and sociologists due to simplicity of measurement, transparency in meaning, and suitability for a wide range of robust statistical tools,¹⁸ there are reservations about the volatile nature of these data and their proneness to being misreported.¹⁹ Critics estimate that income data in Vietnamese living standard surveys are under-recorded.²⁰ Reporting accurate income is difficult for the majority of the rural Vietnamese population who earn their livelihood from self-employment (agricultural work, unskilled non-farm jobs, and seasonal work) and often have multiple and varying monthly income sources.²¹

People who work in the state sector are unlikely to disclose their informal earning sources, such as exploiting their positions of authority or provision of services for private gains.²²

Furthermore, a complete reliance on quantitative methods, a lack of qualitative inquiries, and an absence of theoretical guidance severely limit researchers' understanding of inequality. Since the benchmark *Vietnam Living Standards Survey (VLSS) 1992–1993*, the first national living standard survey conducted by the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, social researchers have had unprecedented access to nationally representative surveys on Vietnam that employ internationally standardized measurements and procedures.²³ Many studies cited in this essay employ these national living standards and household surveys. Quantitative data are favored in meeting the demands from state and international research funding bodies for formalized indicators and clear-cut statistics for policy-informing purposes.²⁴ Qualitative methods such as observation or in-depth interviews, which would facilitate informed hypothesis testing and explanation as well as critical evaluation of quantitative results, have been far less utilized than statistical methods.

The lack of theoretical and in-depth inquiries results in superficial analyses. Establishment researchers' analyses of the causes of poverty best exemplify this superficiality. The common practice is to enter every independent variable at hand into statistical models and, in addition, to fully rely on statistical significance in considering meaningful predictors, without reflecting on well-founded hypotheses and in-depth explanations or critically engaging with previous research. As a result, researchers identify a range of predictors of household welfare without being able to interpret the processes through which these predictors exert their influence.²⁵

These limitations underlie a lack of understanding of the deep-rooted causes of income inequality. Researchers analyze income inequality as the cause of social disadvantages. As such, their studies are not able to account for the social disparities that do not seem to directly relate to income. Income inequality researchers link the low rates of poor household children participating in higher levels of schooling to no other factors than unaffordable school fees,²⁶ long travel distances, and lack of access to additional tuition.²⁷ Their policy recommendations are thus limited to the problem of

school fees. Researchers stress that the government simply needs to reduce school fees and provide more fee subsidies for poor children in order to increase school attendance.²⁸

These income-centric policy recommendations can be contradicted by empirical evidence from the same literature. In their surveys, researchers find more than half of their respondents cite nonfinancial reasons for school nonattendance or dropouts.²⁹ Studies reveal that even at the fully subsidized secondary level, far fewer children from low-income families are being enrolled in school than their better-off counterparts.³⁰ In addition, differentials in school attendance remain even when household expenditure on education has been accounted for.³¹ Such evidence suggests that continuation of schooling for disadvantaged people depends on more factors than their ability to pay the school fee alone.

STATE/NON-STATE DICHOTOMY

In social stratification research on Vietnam, the social division between those working in the state sector (also known as the “public sector”) and those working in the non-state sector (also known as the “private sector”) has drawn the attention of non-establishment researchers. Researchers grappling with the state/non-state dichotomy have a different view of post-reform social stratification than researchers focusing on the rich/poor dichotomy. The former group rejects the orthodox consensus that pre-reform Vietnam under the centralized economy was socially equal.³² Instead, they see the pre-reform society as polarized between statesmen, who enjoyed economic and political advantages, and ordinary people, who did not.³³

Researchers concerned with the state/non-state dichotomy diverge from the “default discourse”³⁴ in scholarship on Vietnam that reform was tantamount to change; instead, they stress perpetuation and reproduction. They view the post-reform society as a continuance of its antecedent. Underpinning this view is the assumption that there can be no social change without political change. As these researchers see it, certain social stratification patterns along the state/non-state line have remained largely undisrupted in the transition from a state-centralized to a market-driven economy under the Vietnamese Communist Party’s monopoly of political power.³⁵

Researchers speculate that state-employed parents under socialism are able to transmit their privileges to their children under the market system, and their studies proceed to examine the patterns and mechanisms of such transmission. The empirical patterns they find only modestly support the hypothesis of transmission. According to an analysis of household survey data on a Red River Delta province in 1995, whereas many more children of state parents (i.e., parents employed by the state) than those of non-state parents are highly educated, children of state and non-state parents are roughly similar in occupational achievements.³⁶ These results suggest that state parents might have been more capable than non-state parents of providing their children with educational advantages but not occupational advantages. An analysis of data from 1993–2006 national household surveys reveals that children of state parents are 1.3 times more likely to enroll in tertiary education than those of non-state parents.³⁷ Another study, based on *Survey Assessment of Vietnamese Youth 2003* data, claims there is continuity in state employment between the young post-reform generation and their parents who were employed in the socialist system.³⁸ Findings demonstrate that fifty-one percent of children of state-employed professionals, compared to forty-four percent of children of technicians and thirty-three percent of children of unskilled workers, end up working in the state sector.

These studies are not able to illuminate the mechanisms through which state employees transmit advantages to their offspring. One study suggests that the educational system enables such transmission.³⁹ Yet, the evidence the authors provide—a correlation between parental status and children's educational attainment and a correlation between children's educational attainment and children's occupational attainment—is insufficient to support such an assumption. The missing link is one between parental status and children's occupational attainment. To explain the differential likelihoods between state household and non-state household children entering high education, the authors outline a rational-action hypothesis: Since state parents already have connections that help their children gain state-sector jobs, they invest more in their children's education, as opposed to non-state parents who do not have such connections. However, this hypothesis has not been put to an empirical test.

The key question of inequality of life chances between children of state parents and those of non-state parents has yet to be asked. In one study, the researchers attempt to explain the intergenerational continuity in state employment in terms of choices, rather than in terms of chances.⁴⁰ Based on qualitative interviews with one hundred young people between 1999 and 2002, Victor T. King et al. find that those whose parents work in the state sector are more likely to choose state employment. These young people's decision-making seems to be strongly influenced by their parents, to whom the security and stability of state employment enjoyed under socialism remains desirable in the new economy. Some young people are also attracted by the state sector's offers of overseas postgraduate training opportunities and other benefits. Regrettably, the authors leave untouched the crucial question of how children of state professionals are more likely than others to realistically enter the state sector.

Despite the limitations of the state/non-state dichotomy literature, there is much value in its premises about the continuity in stratification patterns and the reproduction of state-affiliated advantages of pre-reform and post-reform societies. Perhaps, stratification research in Vietnam should "start from history and process, not from policy and economics."⁴¹ The post-reform patterns of stratification may be seen in part as a socialist legacy rather than as a completely new phenomenon of market reform.

Indeed, inequality along the state/non-state line remains a relevant issue in the post-reform context. For one thing, state employment is as ever highly desirable. State positions are (perhaps increasingly) scarce, skilled, and rewarding. Only about 10 percent of employees in the over-fifteen labor force worked in the state sector between 1999 and 2010.⁴² The state sector was the dominant provider of education and health services during this period. State hospitals accounted for more than 80 percent of health-care visits in 2010 while public institutions accounted for more than 80 percent of the total colleges and universities between 2005 and 2010.⁴³ As an analysis of *Vietnam Household Living Standards Surveys (VHLSS) 1993–2006* data reveals, an increasing majority of public employees were working in government, education, and health services.⁴⁴ Returns on state employment have been high and on the rise. Another analysis of national household data demonstrates that whereas in 1993 public and private employees

had similar earnings per hour, in 2006 the former earned 40 percent more per hour than the latter. Furthermore, in the last decade, per capita incomes of households that have at least one state-employed member were considerably higher than those of non-state households.⁴⁵ Notably, state workers consistently occupy the top positions in a number of post-reform social structures.⁴⁶

There is research gathered outside the state/non-state dichotomy literature about the unequal distribution of access to state employment along the state/non-state line. As discussed, state/non-state dichotomy studies assume that state employees are able to use their networks to help their children secure jobs in the state sector without backing it up with sufficient evidence.⁴⁷ Recent discussions of nepotism and patronage in the state sector have tackled the empirical gap. State job appointments have been found to be largely connection-based: direct influences from preexisting connections within the state sector and monetary bribes are essential routes to attaining state jobs.⁴⁸

Nonetheless, it seems oversimplistic to conceive of contemporary Vietnamese society as divided between a small state elite and a non-state mass, considering its multisector economy and the stratification within each of its economic sectors. Under a market economy, the state sector became more stratified. Its pay scale was modified by the government in 1993, when the ratio of high to low salaries was raised from 3.5:1 to 13:1.⁴⁹ State workers were paid differently based on education, skills, responsibility, and job performance.⁵⁰ The state ceased to be the sole source of desirable employment. The non-state sector rapidly expanded and provided highly skilled workers with rewarding jobs. From the mid-1990s, more and more university graduates began to join non-state enterprises—a nonexistent phenomenon in the early 1990s.⁵¹ The foreign investment sector, in particular, offered lucrative jobs and recruited highly skilled workers. As an analysis of *VHLSS 2002* data shows, the average earnings of employees in foreign-invested enterprises was 170 percent the average earnings of those employed in wholly state-owned enterprises.⁵²

Neither income grouping nor economic sector grouping has served as an adequate stratifying factor for the population of contemporary Vietnam. What about class? In the following section, I will attempt to explain why

class has not yet been established as a valid indicator in current stratification research on Vietnam.

SOCIAL CLASS

The literature on the role of “social class” in post-reform Vietnam has been, paradoxically, dominated by antitheses to class. The use of the term “class” is perceived as politically incorrect by establishment academics and perhaps politically irrelevant by many non-establishment researchers studying post-reform Vietnam. Establishment writings and research—conducted by state-employed academics, funded by the state, and conforming to state orthodoxy—show opposition to the notion of class conflict and resistance toward viewing class as a basis of social inequalities. In the establishment literature, the issue of class inequality is either dismissed, rendered invisible or misconstrued in a way that it seems legitimated or detached from structural inequalities. Non-establishment discussions, embedded in a pro-democracy agenda and criticisms of the monopoly of power of the Vietnamese communist state, have mostly grappled with the consequences of class formation for a democratization process. Since theorists do not observe any formation of classes with distinct political roles, they consider class study premature in the current context.

State Orthodoxy and Propaganda

“Class alliance,” a counter-notion to the Marxist concept of “class conflict,” was and has remained a core element of the Communist Party ideology in Vietnam. Article 2 of the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (established in 1946; revised in 1959, 1980, 1992; amended in 2001) declares the following:

The State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a State of the people, by the people, for the people. All State power belongs to the people whose foundation is the alliance between the worker class and the peasantry and the intelligentsia.⁵³

A social structure of workers, peasants, and intellectuals was regarded by the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) as a successful outcome of the land reform, which took place during the 1950s under its lead.⁵⁴ During the land reform, the VCP employed the Marxist notion of antagonistic classes as

a political tool to mobilize landless peasants against those promulgated as the exploitative agents: the land-owning class and the capitalist class. Land reform was preconceived to bring forth the eradication of all class conflicts and even to the disappearance of classes. As the Constitution proclaims, after land reform, Vietnam has become a society governed “by the people, of the people, for the people,” where people of all classes and strata share equal opportunities in all aspects of their lives.⁵⁵

There can be no place for class inequality in the state discourse. While the term “class” has remained in the dominant discourse regarding the worker class [*giai cấp công nhân*] and the peasantry [*giai cấp nông dân*] as seen in propaganda writings by establishment academics (which will be discussed later in this section), the state persistently avoids or misrepresents the Marxist concept of “class” that encompasses notions of conflict and exploitation in relation to political power. In this sense, “class” would evoke serious challenges to the legitimacy of the socialist state, which was built upon the state’s claim of being the vanguard party of the proletariat and the worker class, and a defender of social equality and social justice.⁵⁶ In hindsight, the land reform, legitimized on the basis of class conflict, left “deep scars” on the legacy of the socialist state.⁵⁷ Even though it changed the lives of millions of peasants for the better (at least for its first few years) by giving them unprecedented shares of agricultural land, land reform resulted in loss of lives and suffering among a substantial population accused of belonging to or associating with the alleged exploitative classes.⁵⁸

Another conception that the socialist state finds threatening to its legitimacy and thus unyieldingly rejects is that of a cadre-capitalist class. As nonorthodox Marxist academics bring to light, in post-communist societies, there are acute conflicts between a cadre-capitalist class—that is, the capital-owning, exploitative class with affiliation to the state—and an exploited mass.⁵⁹ Milovan Djilas envisaged that Communist Party bureaucrats in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe constituted “a new class” that seized political control of productive resources and resembled the propertied bourgeoisie in capitalist societies.⁶⁰ In subsequent decades, Vietnamese and foreign dissident intellectuals, including former high-ranking Communist Party official Nguyễn Kiến Giang and former BBC correspondent in Vietnam Bill Hayton, discussed issues of power exploitation and corruption

among high-level cadres in Vietnam in terms that mirrored Djilas's thesis.⁶¹ Their publications came under severe censorship, as did any criticisms of the VCP made by domestic dissidents and foreign pro-democracy intellectuals and watchers.⁶² Hayton's book⁶³ was never granted a publication license in Vietnam and he was banned from reentering the country, allegedly because of his book.⁶⁴ Nguyễn Kiến Giang's book⁶⁵ was published by a US publishing house and banned in Vietnam. His writings have disappeared from the state press since 1990, and the author remained under police surveillance for his "revisionist" views for twenty-five years until his death in 2013.⁶⁶

The state also objects to the idea that the formation of distinct classes inevitably leads to political change. Martin Gainsborough and Thomas Heberer assert that the formation of classes with their own political identities must potentially mobilize the democratization process and displace the one-party ruling system.⁶⁷ Needless to say, this is considered reactionary by the "hyper-defensive" one-party state, which equates its legitimacy with the nation's political stability.⁶⁸ The state has been uncompromising about its monopoly of power. Penal Code Article 88 of the Criminal Law of Vietnam carries imprisonment of up to twenty years for the offence of "conducting propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam"—that is, against the VCP.⁶⁹

It is through pro-party propaganda that establishment academics, especially heads and directors of state institutions, appropriate and validate the state orthodoxy around issues of social stratification and class. These writings, published in a wide range of channels—academic journals, state newspapers, and online platforms—and targeted at academic as well as general audiences, serve to disseminate state views. Seeking to obscure and disregard the existence of class inequalities in Vietnam and to legitimize social stratification, the works discussed below aim to reinforce the legitimacy of the state.

These propagandistic works employ two main lines of reasoning. The first is that high-low positions in a social hierarchy are the objective outcome of disparities among citizens according to their "natural" abilities, talents, conducts, efforts, and contributions. Nguyễn Đình Tấn, the former Director of the Institute of Sociology at Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics-Administration, contends that more talented and useful people deserve high

rewards and social power in return for managing society, while those less able to contribute deserve low status and low rewards, thus making social stratification inevitable and reasonable.⁷⁰ Nguyễn Đình Tấn notes that the concept of “legitimate social stratification” is endorsed in the institute’s program.⁷¹

As the second line of reasoning goes, since each “class” or stratum consists of a wide range of occupations and positions, classes are equivalent and not antagonistic toward each other. Nguyễn Khánh Mậu defines “the worker class” as consisting of all workers “in production and reproduction of material goods” regardless of their skills or positions.⁷¹ Others address social stratification in terms of within-class income stratification, either by constructing the notion that “the peasantry class” includes both “billionaire farmers” and deprived hired laborers,⁷² or by adopting the terms “middle social group” and “affluent household group” to indicate “the elite components” across “all social classes and strata.”⁷³ Nguyễn Thanh Tuấn argues that because each class includes high earners and low earners who differ in their abilities and skills, the three income groups in the society—“rich,” “middle,” and “poor”—are dispersed evenly across different classes.⁷⁴

These arguments are ill-founded and lacking in empirical support. The idea that unequal positions are an outcome of “natural” inequalities in personal endowment, resting on arbitrary assumptions, echoes the functional view of social stratification,⁷⁵ which has long been rebuked as attributing moral justifications to economic inequality.⁷⁶ The idea of legitimate stratification in the Vietnamese context is further contradicted by existing evidence about the association between social background and individual achievements in post-reform Vietnam.

In their analyses, authors of propaganda uncritically adopt the very notion of “class” the state designates as a political-ideological tool. Even though “the worker class” or “the peasantry” might arguably represent homogeneous groupings in historical-political terms for the specific Vietnamese case, they do not constitute socioeconomic or sociocultural groupings. Only in Vietnamese propagandistic writings may readers find a social class being conceptualised as a group of people of different—or even opposing—occupations, positions, and conditions. The classification of “the worker class” as including both higher-income skilled workers and lower-income unskilled

workers⁷⁷ serves the political purpose of obscuring the existence of class differentials between skilled and unskilled workers.

Establishment Research

The lack of establishment academic research on class is not surprising. It is a widely known fact that domestic intellectual freedom and freedom of expression are strictly limited under the governance of the Vietnamese socialist state.⁷⁸ The scholarly environment in Vietnam remains under the rigid control of the state: the majority of research institutes are state-owned, and the role of these state institutes is to provide intellectual and policy support to the state.⁷⁹ As a former Head of the Vietnam Institute of Sociology acknowledges, Vietnamese sociological studies are implemented “by demands” from authorities at the provincial and state levels.⁸⁰ Thus, much of the establishment academic research strictly conforms to the views of the state and researchers steer clear of unsanctioned topics.

Consequently, research on social structure and class is rare in Vietnamese sociology. Among twelve state-level research projects conducted between 1978 and 2015, one-third studied migration while the remaining two-thirds focused on housing, rural social life, grassroots political systems, and the environment. There was only one study on social structure, published as a journal article in 1993,⁸¹ and no studies on class.⁸²

In his unique 1993 study on social structure, *Tường Lai* discusses the connections between political power and economic advantage in post-reform Hà Nội.⁸³ This study was the only establishment academic work available at the time in which political power is explicitly addressed as the main basis of wealth differentiation. *Tường Lai* recognizes income inequality, often glossed over in earlier research as an inevitable, harmless outcome of market transition, as a threat to the regime’s promise of sustaining social equality. However, since this landmark study, establishment research has omitted the notion of power and strictly refrained from linking issues of social inequality with the credibility of the state.

It may be argued that, being confronted with the potential challenges that a discourse about social inequality as rooted in power could pose to its legitimacy, the state has taken measures to shun related inquiries. Yet, why are perspectives which do not overtly foreground political power and hence

may pose less risk of offending the state orthodoxy (e.g., occupational class) also absent? According to Đỗ Thiên Kính, a scholar from the Vietnam Institute of Sociology, the reason why occupation has not become the main indicator of social stratification in Vietnam as it has in countries such as the United States and Japan is because the Vietnamese socialism-oriented market economy is different from Western market economies.⁸⁴ However vague and dubious this argument might be, it is clear that domestic researchers hesitate to consider “class” analytically applicable to the Vietnamese context. Certainly, the lack of survey data suitable for class analysis is a contributing factor. The most used *VLSS* and *VHLSS* data, as critics point out, exclude detailed labor market information such as wages, working conditions, security, sector compositions, seasonality, and mobility. Thus, across analyses of people’s access to stable employment there has been an overemphasis on demographic and geographical characteristics at the expense of structural factors (such as class).⁸⁵

Interestingly, it was Đỗ Thiên Kính who conducted the second establishment study on social structure in post-reform Vietnam.⁸⁶ Contrary to his previous view,⁸⁷ the author has come to see occupation as a “comprehensive criterion that reflects socioeconomic status.” Based on *VHLSS 2002–2008* data on education, expenditure, residence value, possession of computers, and internet access, the author’s classification produces nine hierarchical groups: (1) leaders and managers, (2) entrepreneurs, (3) high-level professionals, (4) salaried officers, (5) factory workers, (6) the trading/service stratum, (7) the handicraft stratum, (8) simple workers and freelancers, and (9) the peasant stratum. Đỗ Thiên Kính has made the initial attempt to devise a post-reform Vietnamese social structure based on coherent criteria and empirical evidence. As such, his study demonstrates the potential of occupation as a meaningful indicator of social differentials under a market economy.

Previous researchers’ attempts at categorizing social groups have been mainly literature- and observation-based, incomprehensive, and methodologically inconsistent. Studies have focused on single groups such as the nascent social stratum of private entrepreneurs⁸⁸ or the young, urban, salaried professional “middle class.”⁸⁹ Jee Young Kim, as an exception, delineates a complete occupational hierarchy based on *Vietnam Longitudinal*

Survey 1995 data.⁹⁰ This occupational hierarchy consists of state-sector jobs, off-farm self-employment, and private farmers, with a small elite of administrators and professionals at the top, relatively better-off workers in the middle, and farmers at the bottom. Regrettably, it is unclear whether the analytical principle that the author employs for this classification is occupation, economic sector, or form of employment.

Notwithstanding its merit, Đỗ Thiên Kính's study fails to position class as a structural variable influencing people's life conditions and life chances.⁹¹ Its analyses obscure issues of unequal opportunity and provide support for the state orthodoxy of legitimate stratification. As Đỗ Thiên Kính argues, the two conditions the offspring of disadvantaged agricultural workers need to escape farming are "personal effort" and "changes in the national economic structure."⁹² Instead of linking agricultural workers' disadvantages with their offspring's life chances, the author espouses the state functionalist orthodoxy that individuals' achievements are outcomes of their talents and efforts. He overlooks the role of the opportunity structure in determining social mobility chances. Disadvantaged people's upward mobility must depend not only on greater availability of socially desirable positions (i.e., changes in the objective economic structure), but also, and more importantly, on greater substantive equality in access to those positions (i.e., changes in the opportunity structure).⁹³ In the establishment study, the effects of people's social origins on their abilities and opportunities are absent from the discussion.

Non-Establishment Research

Even though non-establishment scholars' research interests are not restricted in the same way as establishment researchers', non-establishment inquiry into class has its limitations. The research interests of those specializing in political sciences and economics are predominantly focused on the political utility of class. In much of their research, class is understood in Marxist terms as a group with an established consciousness of its identity, a real potential to be mobilized for political purposes, and a clear-cut capacity to act. For instance, in a discussion of Vietnamese entrepreneurs in the post-reform era, Heberer argues that entrepreneurs constitute a class on the basis of their "desire to change the system" and political power, as well as their active involvement in

democratization.⁹⁴ Likewise, Gainsborough analyzes emerging classes under reform in terms of their prospective roles in a democratization process.⁹⁵ As such, both authors conclude that “classes” have not yet formed in the post-reform context. The implication is that a class study in the current context is premature.⁹⁶

In the English-language scholarship on class in sociology and anthropology by authors not based in Vietnam, which has seen a vibrant growth of qualitative inquiries, the most analyzed class is the so-called emerging middle class. Middle-class studies are divided between those focusing on consumption patterns and those on political roles, but there is also some convergence between the two. Researchers such as Catherine Earl, King et al., Allison Truitt, Jacqueline Elfick and Van Nguyen-Marshall et al. examine the ways in which middle-class identities are being established and expressed through consumption behaviors.⁹⁷ As such, this literature offers valuable insights into the qualitative experiences of class differentiation and the factors shaping those experiences. Regrettably, there has not been a consensus among the studies about what the middle class is. The middle class might include people (mostly urbanites) who occupy leadership, professional, high- and middle-technical positions, as well as university graduates⁹⁸ plus entrepreneurs and artists.⁹⁹ In addition, insights are lacking into the links between these middle-class individuals’ own class backgrounds, their behaviors, and their ability to reproduce their privilege for the next generation, which would further illuminate the issue of class distinction as expressed through their consumption patterns.

Across both the establishment and non-establishment bodies of literature on and involving class, predetermined political agendas have held back the progress of academic knowledge about post-reform Vietnamese society. In establishment research, class is used as a political tool to, paradoxically, both obscure and legitimize social inequality. Đỗ Thiên Kỉnh’s study exemplifies how powerfully the state antitheses to class inequality is imposed on and embedded in establishment social research.¹⁰⁰ In non-establishment, foreign-based research, class is employed as an indicator of a democratization process that will transform the current one-party system. This is consistent with the preexisting political agendas of researchers who regard political transformation as inevitable.

Class has not been adequately examined as a potentially meaningful stratifying factor of the post-reform Vietnamese society. Preoccupied with the political meaning of class, researchers have sidestepped the multiple—notably economic, social, and cultural—dimensions of class. Researchers' fixation on issues of social change discourages questions of social continuation and social reproduction. This is not a uniquely Vietnamese situation. In Western sociological research, the Marxist notion of "real classes" or "class for itself" has been routinely adopted to challenge class as a meaningful social indicator.¹⁰¹ Yet, research has provided indisputable evidence of significant and persistent inequalities along the class line as regards to life chances.¹⁰²

The Quest for Research on Social Class in Contemporary Vietnam

Why bother with social class in Vietnam? As laid out in this section, inequalities based on social class are a relevant and pressing topic for sociological research about Vietnam. Existing empirical evidence suggests the emergence of profound class-based inequalities in post-reform Vietnam.

In recent decades, Vietnamese people have enjoyed unprecedented opportunities in education and employment; at the same time, however, they have experienced unprecedented degrees of social inequality. Since 1986, under the pressure of a deep socioeconomic crisis and waning post-war international funding, Vietnam has undergone a major transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-driven economy. This economic reform has effected decollectivization, elimination of the subsidy system, and removal of restrictions on the private economic sector. Reform has elevated the general living standard and weakened social barriers set up by the state in the socialist era. Vietnam has been praised for its achievements in relation to the sociopolitical challenge of poverty reduction.¹⁰³ According to national household living standard surveys, the number of people living below the poverty threshold fell from 70 percent in the mid-1980s to 60 percent in the early 1990s, to 30 percent in 2002 and less than 10 percent in 2010.¹⁰⁴ However, due to allegedly high degrees of bias influencing the results of these survey samples, critics caution an overestimation of poverty reduction in Vietnam.¹⁰⁵

Other post-reform achievements include greater geographical mobility, job mobility, and school enrollment. The relaxation of the household registration system has allowed rural residents to migrate to urban areas to earn a better income.¹⁰⁶ The rapid growth of the private sector has freed people from depending on the state allocation of a small amount of salaried employment, thereby facilitating social mobility between economic sectors and jobs.¹⁰⁷ Safety-net programs as well as the universalization of primary education by 2000 and of secondary education by 2010 have promoted poor people's access to formal schooling.¹⁰⁸

The grip of family political background on social life has been relieved under reform. The consensus among researchers of the socialist era in Vietnam is that family political background was the determining factor of life chances both in the 1954–1975 period of socialist development in the Northern regions and in the 1976–1985 period of the centrally planned economy nationwide.¹⁰⁹ Despite the public appearance of an egalitarian distributive system, people who came from families with proven loyalty to the Communist Party—families of revolution officials, peasants, and workers—were rewarded with almost guaranteed access to college/university education, education abroad, state employment, and other social services. By contrast, those who had—or were thought to have had—any kind of relation to landowners, colonialists during the French war (1945–1954) and the American war (1955–1975), banned political parties, and/or the bourgeoisie were largely excluded from these services. Since the beginning of the reform program, the formal barriers created through political screening have been gradually eradicated, except in politically sensitive sectors such as police training. Efforts have been made by the state to promote universal and equal access to employment in the state sector and to education through national exam-based admissions to college and university.¹¹⁰

Yet, since the beginning of the post-reform period, social inequalities have increased significantly in Vietnam. In this context, it appears that class as measured in socioeconomic terms has replaced class as defined in political terms as a major source of inequality. The income gap between the richest quintile and the poorest quintile of the Vietnamese population doubled between 1990 and 2006, according to results from the *VHLSS*.¹¹¹ Governmental statistics report that the country's Gini coefficient increased from

0.33 in 1992–1993 to 0.424 in 2012.¹¹² Arguably, income inequality in Vietnam has been escalating at one of the fastest recorded rates in the world.¹¹³ There is evidence that inequalities in life chances have been rising. Research demonstrates a significant and positive association between children's schooling with household income¹¹⁴ or household socioeconomic status (a combined measure of varied demographic characteristics including parental education and parental occupation).¹¹⁵ This is a consequence of the gradual shift of the financial responsibility for education from the state onto households since the early 1990s.¹¹⁶ There is emerging evidence of a link between family background and occupational attainment. People from privileged backgrounds have been found to have superior chances in securing satisfactory and stable employment,¹¹⁷ acquiring professional positions,¹¹⁸ and setting up their own businesses.¹¹⁹

In pre-reform Vietnam, services and opportunities were subsidized by the state, yet the state openly discriminated against politically disadvantaged groups. In the post-reform period, even though services and opportunities are open to most regardless of political background, they are accessible at a cost that not everyone can afford, and thus implicitly discriminate against socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. Much remains to be written about these post-reform socioeconomic groups—what they are, the ways in which they are differentiated, and the mechanisms underlying their differentiation. The two stratifying factors of contemporary Vietnamese society that researchers are investigating—*income and economic sector*—have so far been inadequate in facilitating an examination of the cause of inequalities and in representing the post-reform multi-sectoral economy. An alternative way to meaningfully address and explain inequalities in the Vietnamese population is needed.

In a wide range of social contexts, occupational categories have been the principal criterion on basis of which to define social class.¹²⁰ In contemporary Vietnam, there is emerging evidence of occupation as an indicator of life conditions and life chances. Analyses of national surveys have singled out the occupation of the head of household as a significant predictor of household income or expenditure¹²¹ as well as of children's occupational opportunities.¹²² Researchers have noted the emergence or maturation of occupation-based social strata and classes, whether they are single groups,

such as the middle stratum or entrepreneurs,¹²³ or hierarchical occupational structures constituting a number of groups.¹²⁴ Evidence suggests that, whereas political class was the main collective force determining life chances in pre-reform Vietnam, social class is the main collective force determining life chances in post-reform Vietnam. The constitution and development of class in post-reform Vietnam, as identified through similar life conditions and life chances shared by its members, have become pertinent and urgent issues for research.

Pierre Bourdieu's Approach to Social Class

In this section, I propose that Pierre Bourdieu's insights into class reproduction may be suitable and powerful tools for analyzing class in post-reform Vietnam. Class reproduction denotes the phenomenon of people perpetuating the same, or a similar, socioeconomic position as their class background. As my own primary research (which exceeds the scope of this article) demonstrates, Bourdieu's framework can be employed both as a thinking tool and as a methodological device, breaking the ground for investigating the underexplored social phenomenon of class reproduction in post-reform Vietnam, where it has perhaps never been applied before for such analytical purposes.¹²⁵

The emerging evidence of intergenerational continuity in socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages in post-reform Vietnam, as outlined in the previous section, indicates the relevance of the class reproduction phenomenon—the pivotal theme of Bourdieu's works. Much of Bourdieu's work is concerned with the persistence of class inequalities, as reflected in his questions of how class advantages and disadvantages are reproduced over generations without powerful resistance.¹²⁶ Bourdieu observes that as capitalist societies shift toward contemporary industrial or post-industrial forms, the overall class situations of all groups generally improve, yet their relative class positions in the stratification order remain unchanged.¹²⁷

Since Bourdieu's conceptualization of class is rooted in life chances, it allows a divergence from the Marxist, politically laden approach to understanding class, which has impeded understanding about post-reform Vietnamese society among establishment and non-establishment researchers. Marxists tend to regard class as an entity that exists in reality, as originating

in a process of exploitation in the capitalist form of production, and as being mobilizable for common purposes against another class.¹²⁸ The Marxist relational conceptualization of class endorses a dichotomous structure of two essentially antagonistic classes.¹²⁹

In Bourdieu's analysis, classes are "theoretical classes" or "objective classes" rather than groups that exist in reality by virtue of the researcher's intellectual decision.¹³⁰ A class consists of agents who have similar life conditions—similar access to resources, similar propensities to act, and similar practices.¹³¹ In line with the Weberian understanding, according to which members of a class share similar life chances in terms of individual and intergenerational mobility,¹³² a class, in Bourdieu's view, is made up of agents whose mobility patterns are similar and typical.¹³³ In other words, members of a class share a "social trajectory."¹³⁴

No less importantly, Bourdieu promises to facilitate a full account of class influences through his conceptualizations of class in both material and symbolic dimensions and of class reproduction processes as both structural and individual. Departing from Marx's structuralist viewpoint, and influenced by Max Weber's writings on religion in which Weber reintroduces agents into the theory of symbolic systems, Bourdieu brings together agents and the structures that condition them.¹³⁵ The framework of how practice is generated is summed up in the formula "[*(habitus)(capital)*] + field = practice."¹³⁶ Practice is the combined effect of *habitus*, field, and capital, which respectively account for the dispositions guiding practice, the context of practice, and the usable resources available to agents within such context.¹³⁷ In short, classes are reproduced because people born into the same class have similar conditions of existence, which produce similar schemes of appreciation, perception, and subjective chances governing and generating their action, and thus similar practices leading them to occupy the same class positions as those into which they are born.¹³⁸ Essentially, class reproduction is an outcome of two intertwining processes: the internalization of objective structures into the agent's action-generated scheme, and the externalization of this scheme into the very practices that will reproduce structures.

People from the same class share similar conditions of existence or similar endowments of capital. "Capital" refers to active resources and powers that can be efficiently mobilized, appropriated, and employed by agents¹³⁹ to

earn access to scarce rewards.¹⁴⁰ Not all but only “actually usable resources and powers”¹⁴¹ with “scarcity value” that yield profits¹⁴² can be considered capital. Capital comes in many forms—economic, cultural, social, and so on, all of which can be interconverted into each other. Capital conversion refers to the translation of forms of capital into other forms; the root form, economic capital, is usually exchanged for other forms of capital, which are then converted back into economic capital.¹⁴³

The concept of cultural capital occupies a central role in Bourdieu’s analysis of reproduction as well as in Bourdieusian education research. Bourdieu develops the theory of cultural reproduction to explain the unequal educational attainment of children from different class backgrounds amid salient class inequalities in French higher education in the 1960s.¹⁴⁴ This theory traces educational inequality to the class-differentiated endowments of cultural capital upon the family throughout upbringing. Bourdieu seeks to challenge what he calls “commonsense” explanations that link differential academic achievements to differential natural aptitudes, as well as economic (“human capital”) explanations¹⁴⁵ that emphasize differential monetary investments from parents.¹⁴⁶

Children from a “dominant” class, being brought up in more cultivated homes, are better endowed with inherited cultural capital than those from a “dominated” class.¹⁴⁷ Since the cultural differences between these children are formed during their upbringing, however, they may appear to represent “natural” differences. This is why Bourdieu considers the transmission of cultural capital from parents to children the best-hidden form of intergenerational capital transmission,¹⁴⁸ and thus places considerable emphasis on it in his explanations of educational inequality. The Bourdieusian cultural class literature on educational inequality in Western societies¹⁴⁹ may offer useful insights into non-economic factors in social disparities in the Vietnamese context, which remain a major gap in our current rich-poor inequality research.

Bourdieu’s concept of social capital may also be applicable in analyzing the Vietnamese phenomenon of nepotism (i.e., social connections, especially familial ones, are instrumental to job attainment in the state sector).¹⁵⁰ Contrary to James Coleman and Robert Putnam, who conceptualize social capital as widely available in the form of collective assets, Bourdieu defines

social capital in terms of the class-specified resources that can be effectively mobilized and transformed into economic capital. For Bourdieu, social capital is also closely interconnected with other forms of capital. Thus, the value of one's social capital depends on the value of various forms of capital held by the self as agent, and by other people in one's network.¹⁵¹

Finally, Bourdieu's theory of practice offers a fuller and more insightful account of human practice—as an outcome of the internalization of experienced life conditions into an individual's action-generated scheme and the externalization of this scheme into present action—than that of rational action theory, widely used in economics and positivist sociology, which overlooks the preexisting features of practice. While rational action is pushed and pulled by immediate opportunities and constraints,¹⁵² habitus-generated practice is shaped not only by the present context of action but also by experiences from the past. Therefore, rational action and habitus render different powers for empirical research. Rational action has limited explanatory capacity. Because the conceptualization of rational action constricts action to its immediate environment, rational action can only partially account for choice-making. The conceptualization of habitus, on the other hand, facilitates the interpretation of a wide range of practices, including the processes of generation and realization of decision-making. The reproduction of advantages and disadvantages can be interpreted through agents' engagement in all kinds of activities throughout their entire lives, and not merely through some decision made at a particular point in time. While rational action theory explains how social reproduction results from specific individual choices, theory of practice advances our analysis of how social reproduction can occur beyond deliberate choice.

Researching contemporary Vietnam calls for a context-specific and critical application of Bourdieu's theoretical framework. My own research into the influences of social class on life chances in post-reform Vietnam, while demonstrating the explanatory power of Bourdieu's framework in illuminating the perpetuation of class disparities, diverges from some of the conceptual and empirical dimensions characterizing the works of Bourdieu and his followers. My study employs the full framework as opposed to the partial appropriations more commonly found in the current Bourdieusian

literature. My empirical findings challenge an emphasis on built-in and culturally embedded inequalities in the existing Bourdieusian literature and highlight the need for more thorough understanding of economically structured inequalities. I also find it valuable to look beyond the transmission of class-based resources across generations and venture into exploring the activation process carried out by young people.

Conclusion

Socioeconomic inequalities in present-day Vietnam have not been adequately described, let alone explained, along the lines of income or economic sector, two principles of stratification that have been emphasized in existing research. Thirty years into Vietnam's transition from a socialist state-regulated economy to a capitalist market-driven economy, two generations have experienced the post-reform opportunity structure. This calls for research into the inequalities that emerge and perpetuate among people of the post-reform generation from an intergenerational perspective. In this article, I suggest that social class is an indispensable tool for such research. Social class is a major source of inequality in contemporary Vietnam and must be considered alongside income and economic sector a meaningful principle of social stratification.

Pierre Bourdieu's works have illuminated much sociological research on the themes of inequality and class. In this article, I suggest that Bourdieu's conception of class as rooted in life chances is a viable alternative to the ideologically driven, deterministic views of class in the current literature on Vietnam. Bourdieu's framework could be used to raise questions about social class inequalities and its reproduction in contemporary Vietnam that have rarely been asked, and certainly not systematically addressed. An application of the framework that is both context-sensitive and critical could potentially inform meaningful analyses of the perpetuation processes over generations of class advantages and disadvantages.

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I present a critical overview of current approaches to studying social stratification and class in the post-reform Vietnamese context. I expound on the ideologically driven and politically mediated nature of discourse on social class in Vietnam, and examine the ideological, political, and academic challenges that arise from the development of such a discourse. I then make a case for the importance of sociological research on social class in contemporary Vietnam in light of existing empirical evidence. Finally, I introduce Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework as a potentially relevant approach to studying class in Vietnam.

KEYWORDS: *Vietnam, social class, life chances, Pierre Bourdieu, sociology, social inequality*

Notes

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