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**Reality Television as a Neoliberal Technology of
Citizenship?**

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Điều Ước Thứ Bảy

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MSc in Media and Communications

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Reality Television as a Neoliberal Technology of Citizenship?

A Critical Discourse Analysis of *Điều Ước Thứ Bảy*

Vu Anh Ngoc Nguyen

ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this Dissertation is to examine the extent to which using a Foucauldian analytic of government in the form of a neoliberal technology of citizenship is relevant to the study of reality television in a non-Western country like Vietnam. In particular, the researcher has selected *Điều Ước Thứ Bảy* (Lại, 2014a), a local Vietnamese reality television programme produced by the state broadcaster Vietnam Television. The researcher has applied a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to the analysis of a purposive sample of three episodes. The researcher argues that, while *Điều Ước Thứ Bảy* seems to champion neoliberal criteria of citizenship in the logic of choice and consumption, they point toward the continuing ability of the Vietnamese socialist state to promote a carefully selected version of neoliberal citizenship, one that not only differs from the Western interpretation but also aligns with state agenda.

INTRODUCTION

Reality television has become a prominent feature in the television landscape of the 21st century. Originating mainly from Western countries, reality television refers to a loose variety of subgenres that are concerned with documenting the conduct of ordinary people and testing their capability in their specific roles as contestants in competitions (e.g. *Idols*, *The Amazing Race*, *The Big Loser*), as romantic partners (e.g. *The Bachelor/The Bachelorette*), as housemates (e.g. *Big Brother*), as job seekers (e.g. *The Apprentice*), and so on. With their focus on an ethic of self-awareness and self-improvement, research on reality television has been connected to the works of Michel Foucault on governmentality (Foucault, 1978, 1991, 2010). Contemporary practices of governmentality in the West are often associated with the ascendancy of the ‘advanced liberal’ or neoliberal order, a market-based ideology that is also moral in that it entails a social reorganisation that promotes the retreat of the state from the domain of private individuals (Brown, 2003; Rose, 1996, 1999). Influenced by this, much scholarship on reality television has argued that reality television can be understood as a cultural technology of the self under the current neoliberal order, where it plays a crucial moral-pedagogical role in directing the conduct, behaviour, and aspirations of individuals, in a way that is independent of state interference (Ouellette and Hay, 2008).

As neoliberalism travels in the form of corporate outreach, the ‘good governance’ discourse of international financial institutions, and the proliferation of non-governmental organisations that tackle local social problems traditionally in the domain of the state, neoliberal discourse of the self has also become increasingly articulated around the world. At the same time, reality television has spread across national borders as it benefits from changes in cabling technologies and especially ease of movement of personnel and capital in the post-Cold War order (Moran, 2008). The visibility of reality television formats around the world, most of which champion individual lifestyle, consumption, and competition, seems to confirm Francis Fukuyama’s (1992) ‘end of history’ hypothesis of the globally triumphant Western liberal man and his free market. Nonetheless, quite the contrary, in practice, most original reality television formats have been significantly modified and locally adapted to suit the audience, while others have inspired the blossoming of a number of locally produced programmes that incorporate selected techniques and conventions of reality television to communicate local values (Kraidy and Sender, 2010).

Following the vein of research on reality television in a non-Western context, I investigate the claim that reality television promotes a neoliberal discourse of citizenship in Vietnam, a country that hasn’t stood outside the global flows of neither neoliberal capital nor reality

television despite still retaining one-party Communist rule. In order to carry out the research, I have selected the local Vietnamese reality television show *Điều Ước Thứ Bảy* (Lại, 2014a), which is produced by the national broadcaster Vietnam Television, as the main case study, and applied a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to a purposive sample of three episodes. The results of the analysis demonstrate that in employing certain techniques and conventions commonly used in reality television, the show seems to champion a Western form of neoliberal citizenship. This is articulated in three overlapping common themes that can be identified as: 1. the visibility of the problematised subjects; 2. the role of expertise in governing the conduct of problematised subjects; and 3. the governing of oneself through confession and the will to improve. Nonetheless, in situating the television text within contemporary socio-cultural practices in Vietnam, I discover that *Điều Ước Thứ Bảy* promotes a set of criteria of neoliberal citizenship that can be traced back to the Vietnamese state discourse on gender, class, ethnicity, and nationalism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Neoliberal Governmentality and Technology of Citizenship

As a historical mode of inquiry, governmentality is linked to the emergence of political economy and the population as an object of interest to be managed by the state in Western societies since the late 18th century. Government increasingly becomes ways of thinking about governing and the associated regimes of practices that have its primary concern with the management of population in pursuit of key objectives such as health, wealth, and happiness (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1991, 2010; Gordon, 1991). Governmentality understands government as not a singular entity and governance a top-down hierarchical process. Rather, it consists of a 'plurality of forms of government' that aims to 'establish a continuity, in both an upwards and a downwards direction' (Foucault, 1991: 91). In this way, Foucault and scholars of governmentality conceptualise the state and political power in a way that replaces the dominant state-centric approach by one that articulates the complexities of the relations between the state, institutions, and organisations, in their capability to govern subjects through the production of truth and knowledge (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1991; Rose, 1999).

The process through which Western states became increasingly governmentalised is associated with liberalism as the dominant mode of political government in Europe and the US, where the purpose is to safeguard the freedom of the individual against political encroachment, and to protect the market as the sphere of economic exchange between free individuals (Burchell, 1996; Rose, 1996). Neoliberalism, or its neoconservative equivalent in

the US, is the latest form of liberal governmentality. Neoliberal rationality is associated with the thoughts of Friedrich Hayek in response to the crises of the Keynesian interventionist state in the US and the welfare state model in Britain (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 2007). According to Brown (2003), who discusses neoliberal governmental rationality, neoliberalism inscribes a negative and anti-naturalist conception of freedom in contrast to classical liberal thought, where the role of government is to create the conditions for the market rather than something to be protected under liberal thought. Neoliberal governmental rationality therefore lies in the application of market rationality into all spheres of social life. According to Rose (1996: 54–61), this takes the forms of: privatisation and infiltration of performance assessment technologies into realms of institutions that traditionally fall within the domain of the welfare state (e.g. health care, education); the central role of expertise in guiding socio-economic activities as well as the conduct of individuals under the logic of consumption and choice; and the responsabilisation of individuals as being active in the management of themselves and their families independently of the state.

While most theorists of governmentality root their analyses in the Anglo-Saxon and European contexts, they have ignored the reality that neoliberalism is also a project around the world. Works on neoliberalism that take into account the global conditions come from a range of different traditions in the social sciences, but its most resonant critiques come from from a Neo-Marxist perspective (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Harvey, 2007). These works have connected neoliberalism with the emergence of a transnational middle class, the ascendancy of the Washington Consensus associated with international financial institution regimes, and the increasingly ubiquitous practices of lifestyle and consumption around the world. Whether in the tradition of governmentality studies or not, they often abstract and generalise processes of globalisation, in order to critique the economically exploitative conditions of global market reforms, yet without accounting for situated processes and practices under specific local conditions (Kipnis, 2007, 2008). Consequently, I have found Aiwah Ong's (2006) work on the logic of exception in neoliberal governmentality most relevant to this study.

Ong's (2006) approach neither reduces neoliberalism to a Northern phenomenon that merely travels to the South, nor as the latest stage of capitalism that reinforces structural hegemonic notion of progress associated with the market. Her ethnographic studies on East and Southeast Asia, where statist political cultures often come into conflict with neoliberalism, suggest otherwise. On one hand, Ong (2006) focuses on the active interventionist aspect of neoliberalism in non-Western contexts where neoliberal governmentality is considered

exceptional to the political establishment of the country, and which nonetheless introduces market mechanisms into administrative practices and population management policy of the state. On the other hand, exceptions to neoliberalism, where certain types of population and places are excluded from neoliberal calculations and choices, can either protect traditional social safety nets or exclude noncitizens from the benefits of capitalist development (Ong, 2006: 3–4). Therefore, neoliberal governmentality becomes a malleable technology of governing, one that embraces a ‘market-driven logic of exception,’ rather than a totalising phenomenon to be embraced from the West (Ong, 2006: 5).

I also follow the vein of studies that applies an analytic of government into the field of government and citizenship, where the relation between the government and its citizen is not constituted in a strictly juridico-legal sense (Agamben, 1998; Turner, 1990). Rather, citizenship is broadly conceptualised in the form of a regime of practices that mobilise technologies of self-governing. Barbara Cruishank (1999: 66) has coined the term ‘technology of citizenship,’ which is influenced by Foucault’s notion of ‘technology of the self,’ in order to account for the process in which citizens are constituted through being subjects of ruling, thus linking their subjectivity to their subjection. In non-Western contexts, according to Ong (2006: 6), neoliberal citizenship is ‘disarticulated and rearticulated with forces set into motion by market forces’ transformed by neoliberal criteria of reform. Combined with earlier ethnographic works of the transnational Chinese entrepreneurs in Southeast Asia and Cambodian refugees in the United States, which are two seemingly opposing poles of citizenship, Ong (1999, 2003, 2006) suggests that contemporary notions of citizenship are increasingly linked to neoliberal market-based criteria in terms of human capital and level of expertise rather than a purely politico-legal basis. This reflects the transcendence of border as territoriality of citizenship is embedded in global capitalism rather than the nation-state. On the other hand, neoliberalism as technology of governing comes into conflict with the ethical regimes in the context, or what she has termed ‘situated ethics’ i.e. the alternative conceptualisations of ethical norms of humanity like socialism, Islam, etc., in non-Western contexts (Ong, 2006: 9). Indeed, the logic of exception in neoliberalism and neoliberal technology of citizenship is particularly useful in conceptualising governing practices in Vietnam, which will be the focus of the next section.

Neoliberal Governmentality and Citizenship in Vietnam

A brief consideration of the literature on neoliberalism and technology of citizenship in China is particularly useful because China and Vietnam are both post-socialist countries with neoliberal market reform yet still retain socialist political systems. Socialism and

neoliberalism seem to be at odds with one another, yet practices of neoliberal governmentality can even be compatible with socialist ethics. Notably, Lisa Rofel (2007) detected the emergence of new subjectivities in China that were linked to the articulation of desire in the contemporary post-Mao order as Chinese subjects became exposed to cosmopolitanism. There has also been a salience of literature that examines the emergence of a discourse on *suzhi* or the quality that is often associated with neoliberal criteria of subjectivity (Anagnost, 2004). These initial works on neoliberal citizenship in China have nonetheless been criticised by some scholars for applying, unproblematically, a Western academic concept toward China, where discourse of the self is complex and mediated by a variety of cultural values and actors, notably the government (Kipnis, 2008; Nonini, 2008). For example, Kipnis (2007) has identified three other angles from which *suzhi* can be theorised without a recourse to neoliberalism, namely, an authoritarian use of language for policy dissemination, the entanglement with nationalism, and Confucianist and Marxist values in the form of self-cultivation. In addition, instead of witnessing the death of government in the face of the influx of foreign capital and liberal values, Ong and Zhang (2008: 4) argue that the introduction of a neoliberal logic into the economic and social realms has led to the ‘reanimation of state socialism realizing through a strategy of ruling from afar,’ where the Chinese government aims not only to produce desirable economic benefits but also new forms of subjectivities that align with the state’s economic agenda without challenging state rule.

Like China, Vietnam has also embraced a market-opening reform since the late 1980s while remaining firmly in the hand of a Communist government. Vietnam not only shares with China a similar Marxist-Leninist political system underpinned by state-back notions of nationalism, but also cultural similarities such as a Confucian focus on the family, self-cultivation, and hierarchy (Turley and Selden, 1993). Nonetheless, to merely posit Vietnam as a small or an early market socialist version of China is misleading, as demonstrated by a range of ethnographic scholarship that examines the ways in which neoliberal rationalities are articulated and disarticulated in Vietnam. This scholarship has demonstrated that ‘neoliberalism’ is not a uniform project but rather ‘a globally diverse set of technical practices, institutions, modes of power, and governing strategies informed by cultural and historical particularities’ (Schwenkel and Leshkovich, 2012: 380).

In Vietnam, neoliberal rationality has been articulated in the form of a transfer of governance from state to private, corporate, transnational actors, as well as the proliferation of market criteria for assessing health, aesthetics, and government performance (Harms, 2012; Hien, 2012; Leshkovich, 2012b; Montoya, 2012; Schwenkel, 2012). Indeed, unlike in China, the

Vietnamese government has deliberately surrendered a much more significant part of its responsibility for economic and social policy to international financial institutions and non-governmental international organisations. These institutions have pressed for further neoliberal reforms that aim to minimise state involvement in the market and expand the intrusion of foreign systems of knowledge and expertise. At the same time, the continuation of socialist political values and cultural practices is invaluable proof that neoliberalism can be a very dynamic process and even compatible with other regimes of governing deemed other to neoliberalism like socialism. These include, for example, continuing practices of geomancy in housing despite urban gentrification (Harms, 2012), reproductive treatment that gives priority to older women over younger women due to a Confucian ethic of social hierarchy as well as state policy that extends motherhood to women of all ages in society (Pashigian, 2012), or a socialist legacy of self-criticism that corresponds well with corruption audit regimes (MacLean, 2012). Indeed, according to Schwenkel and Leshkovich (2012: 398):

The persistence of socialist notions of personhood, claims to morality, and ways of making sense of radically different forms of socioeconomic organization complicate ideas of neoliberalism as transition, victory, and endpoint not only because of state rhetoric about socialist continuities but also because they represent visions of the world that people find familiar and compelling. At the same time, these visions are not opposed to neoliberalism and its potential 'rewards' but may in fact make neoliberal processes translatable and exchangeable, that is, able to integrate into social worlds and practices that 'fit' with Vietnamese past and future imaginaries.

Reality Television as a Technology of Citizenship

Reality television's obsession with documenting 'real' people and their reactions in designated social situations has become one of the most prominent features of the global television landscape in the 21st century. The name 'reality television' doesn't necessarily obscure the fact that it consists of many sub-genres and borrows widely from other television genres and techniques including documentary, soap operas, talk shows, etc., thus possessing a high degree of malleability 'between fact and fiction, labor and leisure, reality and artifice' (Andrejevic, 2010: 19).

A body of literature that attempts to connect reality television to an analytic of government has become prominent since the late 2000s. This body of literature studies reality television in the West where they interrogate the connection between the popularity of reality television

and the current neoliberal order in the West (Couldry, 2008; Lewis, 2008b; Miller, 2007; Ouellette and Hay, 2008; Palmer, 2003). The diversity of reality television shows that deal with all aspects of social life including makeovers, dating shows, interventions, lifestyle, charity, etc., focuses on a strong ethic of self-management and empowerment of the subjects through choice and consumption, with an intermediate advisory role of experts and volunteers. Reality television therefore can be construed as a cultural technology of citizenship in the contemporary retreat of the welfare state in private lives, where it ‘governmentalizes by presenting individuals and populations as objects of assessment and intervention, and by soliciting their participation in the cultivation of particular habits, ethics, behaviors, and skills’ (Ouellette and Hay, 2008: 13).

Contemporary global changes in technological infrastructure including cable, satellite, and the Internet have also enabled the spread of format television including reality television from the West to the non-Western context, as well as the production of new indigenous forms of reality television in local areas (Chalaby, 2005). While Western television shows used to be re-broadcast by local media industries around the world, the recent decade has witnessed the rise of format television, which allows for the flexible adaptability of the original script to suit the tastes of local audiences, while benefiting from the ‘successful commercial knowledge and know-how’ of the host programmes (Moran, 2008: 461). On the surface, the rising popularity of reality television seems to champion the victory of a neoliberal conception of the self that travels from Western societies. Nonetheless, studies of reality television in non-Western contexts cannot be homogeneous as its salience is shaped by the contemporary cultural and national contexts to which they address. For example, Volcic and Andrejevic (2009), in their study of the popular Balkan reality TV show *To Sam Ja (That’s Me)*, has argued that the show promotes a discourse of unity among the Former Yugoslavian states by depoliticising ethnic conflicts and transferring them into the realm of the personal.¹

Notably, Lewis, Martin, and Sun’s (2012) study of lifestyle television in China, Singapore, and Taiwan has disputed the notion that Anglo-American model of consumer-citizenship can account for the popularity of lifestyle television Asia in general, and questioned the assumption that the Western neoliberal version of the self is globally hegemonic. In particular, lifestyle television in Singapore is generally less melodramatic than its Anglo-

¹ Even within the Anglo-Saxon context, Lewis (2008a) has pointed out the differences among reality television in the US, Britain, and Australia. In particular, makeover television in the US tends to embrace an aggressive form of individualism and radical self-transformation that is indicative of American cultural obsession with entrepreneurialism and upward mobility. Meanwhile, British makeovers tend to promote a middle-class lifestyle and consumption, thus reflecting the historical class structure in British society. Australian makeovers tend to

American equivalent and fits well with state discourse that promotes cosmopolitanism, flexible citizenship, as well as traditional femininity. Meanwhile, *shenghuo*, the Chinese equivalent of Anglo-American lifestyle television, is encouraged as part of a strategy by provincial and local television stations to promote entertainment programmes that are not overtly political. More importantly, they fit into the Chinese government's attempt to promote the *suzhi* (quality) or human capital of the population and transform Chinese citizens into self-governing subjects, in order to 'fill the gap left by the retreat of the Reform Era state from the care of its citizens' (Lewis et al., 2012: 553). Although there has been no similar study on reality television in Vietnam, very recently, in a discourse analysis of *Người Đương Thời (Contemporaries)*, a popular talk show produced by Vietnam Television where the host, journalist Tạ Bích Loan, invited successful figures (mostly business owners) in Vietnamese society, Nguyen-Thu (2015) has detected the coexistence of a discourse on that promotes nationalism and responsibility for the broader community, rather than a purely self-centred approach to wealth accumulation. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap of research on reality television and neoliberal technology of citizenship in Vietnam.

Contemporary Media and Broadcasting in Vietnam

In order to study the connection between neoliberalism and reality television in Vietnam, it is imperative to discuss the media industry in Vietnam in order to set the context for the show. Due to the absence of studies with a political economy perspective on the Vietnamese television industry, I have consulted the literature on television studies in China, which I believe can inform very well on practices in Vietnam.

According to Zhao and Guo (2005), although the Chinese state still owns broadcasting in China, since 1989 the television industry has been largely commercialised and regionalised, with entertainment television already marketised and partly privatised. This has led to a proliferation of local and regional television stations and entertainment programmes that directly compete with one another for audience and funding from advertising (Keane, 2002). Nonetheless, television in China engages in tacit complicity with the state in order to enforce censorship and self-censorship of sensitive topics that challenge the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (Zhao and Guo, 2005: 530). In addition, the government has encouraged the re-articulation of television programmes that promote nationalism, traditional morality, and humanism, with the aim to 'address an increasingly stratified Chinese society and create

embrace neither American individualism nor the British emphasis on class, and instead focus on the themes of aspirationalism and responsibility for the community.

a sense of belong to a national family' (Zhao and Guo, 2005: 531). In recent years, vastly improved conditions of living have also led to the rise of a consumerist discourse on television that promotes the achievement of social status through consumption, and which is specifically targeted at urban middle-class women. In this way, the Communist Party does not only play an important role in the globalisation of the Chinese television industry, but also responds to new developments in a timely and flexible manner by reformulating its own strategy (Zhang, 2011).

Like in China, the Vietnamese Communist government also regulates the broadcasting industry, which is specifically stated in government documents to be an organ of the government entrusted with the responsibility to 'disseminate the policy route of the [Communist] Party' (Vietnam Government, 2013). Nonetheless, unlike in China, where the broadcasting industry is stratified among different administrative and regional levels that come into direct competition with one another, Vietnam Television (VTV) holds a monopoly over the television industry in the country due to its resources, technological capacity, and backing of legitimacy by the government (Nguyễn, 2015). Like China, VTV came under pressure since the beginning of the market reform to commercialise its activities, and so despite being legally owned by the government, the majority of funding for its operations now come from advertising and sponsorship, with parts of it also becoming increasingly privatised (Nguyen-Thu, 2015). Due to commercial pressures to attract audience as well as to cut costs, VTV has also participated in the global format television trade with the glocalisation of famous Western television programmes and proliferation of local programmes that are influenced by imported formats. However, as VTV is under the regulation of the government, this has led to, on one hand, a situation of censorship and self-censorship of information that directly challenges the ruling of the Communist Party, and on the other hand, a proliferation of programmes that mix together different types of discourse including government propaganda, popular culture, and business language. To understand broadcasting content in Vietnam, one therefore needs to avoid the passive audience hypothesis, and instead reconsider how the government does not claim a monopoly of message but rather actively seek to disseminate its policies in much subtler ways.

ĐIỀU ƯỚC THỨ BẢY: A SYNOPSIS

Điều Ước Thứ Bảy (ĐUTB) can be literally translated as the *Seventh Wish* or *Saturday Wish*, a Vietnamese way of word playing, as the term 'thứ bảy' can be translated as 'number seven,' 'the seventh,' or 'Saturday,' which in Vietnamese means the seventh day of the week on which the show is broadcast. *ĐUTB* was produced by VTV in order to commemorate the

18th anniversary of the birth of VTV3, the main entertainment channel of VTV, established in 1996 as the third free-to-air public television channel in Vietnam (Lan Chi, 2014). The programme was broadcast weekly on Saturday at 1:00PM from 29 March, 2014, until 2 January, 2016, when the schedule was changed to once every two weeks on Saturday at 9:10AM (VTV News, 2016).

The chief director of *ĐUTB* is Lại Văn Sâm, a famous Master of Ceremonies on VTV3 since the birth of the channel, as well as on the other channels of VTV. The executive director of *ĐUTB* is Lại Bắc Hải Đăng, who is also the son of Sâm and who has participated in other entertainment programmes of VTV. Like most other contemporary reality television programmes around the world, *ĐUTB* enjoys an online social media presence on Facebook² with more than 206 000 likes (by 4 August, 2016) and YouTube where its episodes are regularly uploaded on the official YouTube entertainment account of VTV named VTV Showbiz.³ In addition, the show also enjoys regular cover on two popular online tabloid news websites in Vietnam, *Kênh 14*⁴ and *Zing*.⁵

In *ĐUTB*, every episode features an underprivileged individual who retells their story and expresses a wish to be picked up by the production team of the show, who then helps them fulfil the wish without their prior knowledge. After watching in detail more than 30 episodes and skimming through the titles and content of the rest, the researcher has detected certain common themes that appear in the episodes of the programme: disability or illness; offender or prisoner; ethnic minorities; old age; sexual minorities; and those who have done good deeds to their family or the surrounding community. Although the researcher has counted these separate themes, there are also cases in which the individuals assume more than one of these identities. The show has often been described by a lot of Vietnamese online newspapers to be a tearjerker with high moral and humanist values (Lan Chi, 2014).

In public forums in Vietnam, the show is perhaps most famous for an incident with one episode aired on 10 January, 2015 about a touching love story between a blind girl named Đào and her husband Thanh, a graduate of the prestigious National Academy of Music, both of whom busked on the street every day to earn a living (Lại, 2015c). One week later, it was discovered that their story was fabricated by the participants, and that Thanh never attended Vietnam National Academy of Music and even already had a wife and two children before

² <https://www.facebook.com/dieuuochthu7/>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/user/VTVShowbiz>

⁴ <http://kenh14.vn/dieu-uoc-thu-7.html>

⁵ <http://news.zing.vn/dieu-uoc-thu-7-tin-tuc.html>

being with Đào (M. Anh, 2015). The incident caused an uproar in the media and the public, leading to a temporary suspension of the programme and a fine of 40 million Vietnamese Dong by the Ministry of Information and Communications (Hoang Anh, 2015). This is interesting evidence of the continuing role of the government in regulating the content of the television industry, a situation that is similar to that in China, despite the introduction of a logic of commercialisation into the industry in itself.

Although never explicitly categorised, the format of *DUTB* is very similar to charity reality television in the US. A famous example is *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, in which television producers mobilise and coordinate private resources in order to help less fortunate individuals with their hardship (Oullette and Hay 2008). The concept of the show is therefore somewhat similar to a now defunct show named *Three Wishes* on ABC in which a famous American Christian musician travels to rural areas in the US to help needy citizens fulfil three wishes in each town. Nonetheless, whereas *Three Wishes* was suspended after ten episodes, *DUTB* has been on-going since 2014 and proved to be popular with a particular group of audience in Vietnam. Indeed, according to the Vietnamese internet market research company YouNet Media (n.d.), the show ranked among the top ten most popular reality television shows in Vietnam in 2014.

The choice of television text as the site for this study is influenced by a British cultural studies framework of ideological analysis as derived from Marxist theorist Louis Althusser's theory of ideology and Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony (Fiske, 1992). Notably, Althusser's conception of Ideological State Apparatuses articulates the multiple channels through which ideology reproduces and circulates to produce consent for hegemonic ruling. His notion of interpellation of the subject through hailing or naming them is particularly important for the study of media texts, where the work of ideology is subtle yet constantly reproduced through language and discourse. Going beyond a class-based analysis, Foucault's framework of power and knowledge also informs the way in which media texts articulate knowledge that can reinforce power relations in society (Foucault, 1978). Because reality television is seemingly very ordinary yet also ubiquitous and intimate to everyday life, it is the site that is most worthwhile to examine the production of common sense, subjectivity, and knowledge.

The researcher chooses this reality television show since unlike other reality television shows in Vietnam that are overtly commercially driven, *DUTB* is unique in seeking to incorporate aspects that address public concerns into its fabric. In contrast to Ouellette and Hay's (2008: 62) contention that '[c]harity TV is mainly a United States-based production,' the popularity of this show can prove to be an interesting case study to test the hypothesis that reality

television promotes neoliberal modes of self-governance. Indeed, as we will see, processes of transformation that are unique to reality television can be appropriated to promote not necessarily Western forms of neoliberal values. In addition, the discourse which circulates in the show is rich and reflects the complex socio-cultural changes that are on-going in Vietnam.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND OBJECTIVE

The main purpose of this study is to examine the utility of the conceptual framework of neoliberal technology of citizenship in accounting for the role of reality television in Vietnam. In particular, the study will seek to analyse, if found, a discourse of a market-based logic of choice and self-realisation that circulates through the show. In doing so, the research draws extensively from the works of Nicholas Rose (1990, 1999), who provides the most extensive scholarship within existing literature on neoliberal governmentality, its rationalities, and associated regimes of practice in contemporary Western neoliberal regimes. In order to evaluate these types of discourse, the study aims to refer to existing contemporary governing and cultural practices in Vietnam.

The aim of the study is therefore to answer the following research question:

- To what extent, if any, can reality television be said to promote a neoliberal discourse of citizenship in Vietnam?

METHODOLOGY CHAPTER

Critical Discourse Analysis

With regard to the choice of methodology for the study of television texts, visual semiotics and CDA are the two most common options. In a pilot study for this Dissertation, the researcher has applied a structuralist semiotic approach to textual analysis that is influenced by film semiology (Seiter, 1992). While structuralist semiotics is useful in uncovering the ways in which the visuals produce meaning, it generates too much data and obscures the processes in which these meanings translate into discourse. Using CDA fits well with the study's conceptual framework that is rooted in a Foucauldian analytic of power and knowledge.

CDA refers to a range of approaches to media studies that are concerned with uncovering power relations in media practices and representations. CDA uses a social semiotics view of

language, one that sees communication through text, where text can be language, images, or sound, being achieved through the mobilisation of a range of semiotic resources in order to 'create, maintain and legitimise certain kinds of social practice' (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 19). According to Fairclough, language can be understood 'as 'mode of action' socially and historically situated in relation to other aspects of the social,' thus 'socially shaped and socially constitutive' (Fairclough, 1995: 54–55)

Fairclough's framework for CDA consists of two main focuses, the first being the communicative event and the second being the order of discourse. There are three levels from which the communicative event is analysed. The first level of analysis is concerned with the text. In television, the text needs to include visual images, sound effects, and linguistics as part of the social semiotic resources (Hodge and Kress, 1988). The textual analysis needs to draw a fundamental connection with social analysis: knowledge, belief, and ideology, particularly through representations, which stand for their ideational function; social relationships and power; relations and identities which stand for the interpersonal function (Fairclough, 1995: 17). The analysis will look primarily at speech acts and visual images in the television text to uncover the ways the characters are represented and the power relations that underline these representations.

The second level of analysis of communicative events is concerned with discourse practice, namely the aspects of discourse production and consumption, including 'institutional processes' (e.g. editorial procedures, how television fits into routines of the household) and 'discourse processes' (e.g. transformations of texts in production and consumption) (Fairclough, 1995). An analysis of the discourse practice around the show needs to examine the intertextuality of the text, namely how the text draws from other texts to create negotiated meanings (Kristeva, 1986). The third level is the sociocultural practice, namely the immediate situational context or within the wider frame of society and culture, consisting primarily of economic, political (power and ideology), and cultural (value and identity) practices, and which will provide the main frame of reference in the analysis of the episodes (Fairclough, 1995: 62).

The second focus of CDA is the examination of the order of discourse, which is constituted by all the discursive types being used in order to highlight their relationship to one another and whether boundary is maintained or mixed and also the relation between different 'orders of discourse' (Fairclough, 1995: 55). The study of the order of discourse is in order to highlight social change and conflict, with a potential cultural hegemony by dominant social groups that struggle to assert and maintain hierarchy (Fairclough, 1995: 56).

Research Design

The researcher has shortlisted three episodes, which represent three particular case studies that deal with a specific aspect of citizenship in contemporary Vietnam. The main site through which the researcher views the show is through the official YouTube entertainment channel of VTV. Although all of the episodes are also uploaded onto the official website of VTV from 31 October, 2014, YouTube is selected as the research field for reasons of practicality, namely good streaming quality, speed, and ease of navigation through different videos. While acknowledging the importance of viewership, the researcher is more interested in looking for ‘information-rich cases’ that can demonstrate the broad variety of perspectives on citizenship (Flick, 2009; Patton, 1990). For reasons of feasibility and suitability for this project, the researcher has shortlisted three episodes that the researcher considers most relevant to the criteria for selection as outlined above.

Episode 3: *The touching love story of Châu Loan, a girl with kidney failure disease.* (Lại, 2014b)

The show was originally aired on March 14, 2014. The content of the show revolves around the story of Châu Loan, a woman in her 30s who develops kidney failure in her early 20s and has to live under chronic treatment for her disease, the process of which has resulted in the weakening and shrinking of her body to only 30kg of weight and 1.3m of height. She lives with her boyfriend, Văn Vượng, an man whom she meets through her participation in the For Tomorrow Centre, a centre that teaches vocational skills for disabled people. With the assistance of the partner, the producers of the show organise a secret wedding for Châu Loan with the help of a wedding company and the participation of families and friends from both sides.

Episode 43: *The 93 year-old Hmong man who protects the border stone.* (Lại, 2015a)

The show was originally aired on April 4, 2015. The story revolves around a 93 year-old man of Hmong ethnicity named Hự from Quang Chiểu Commune, Mường Lát District, near the border between Vietnam and Laos. Hự is entrusted by the border officials with the responsibility to take care of the border stone between Vietnam and Laos. He therefore trekked once or twice a month from his home through the jungle to visit the border stone for nearly 30 years from 1984 to 2012. In response to his frustration at being too old and weak,

the producers of the show organise a trip for him to visit the border stone with the help of experienced hikers recruited from a popular online forum for backpackers named *phuot.vn*.

Episode 59: *Why do parents give birth to their children?* (Lại, 2015b)

The show was originally aired on 25 July, 2015. The story is about two individuals, a male transgender named Nguyễn Mạnh Cường from Bắc Kạn, a province in North Vietnam, who later relocates to Ho Chi Minh City, and female transgender named Jessica from Ho Chi Minh City. Both identify as conflicting with the gender assigned to their sex from birth, and both recount the difficulty and discrimination they encounter with their family and the wider society. While Jessica has more or less been gradually accepted by her mother, Cường is upset with his parents, who are still in Bắc Kạn, for not understanding his choice to become a man rather than a woman. The producers of the show organise a play that retells the story of Cường's internal conflicts at a theatre in Ho Chi Minh City, with the secret attendance of his parents as well as Jessica and members of ICS, one of Vietnam's largest non-governmental organisation that promotes the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people.

Limitations of Methodology and Research Design

There are a number of limitations to using CDA as a methodology for media studies. Firstly, CDA suffers from interpretation bias as it depends on the researcher to be familiar with the sociocultural contexts in which the CDA is mobilised (Rose, 2001). The researcher is fully aware of the subject position of the researcher as part of the sociocultural practices surrounding the production of discourse in the show. The researcher comes from a urban middle-class background, who also belongs to the dominant ethnic group Kinh, and has not resided in Vietnam during most of the past seven years, in order to receive an Anglo-Saxon elite education throughout her adolescence. However, I also perceive this as a strength rather than a weakness, one that enables me to investigate the discourse of the show in a critical and reflexive manner. I also acknowledge that this Dissertation is part of the discourse that reinforces existing power relations, and acknowledge that there can be no such thing as a perfectly objective, value-free CDA analysis, as power domination is contingent and relational.

There is also a notable criticism of selection bias in CDA, that is, the researcher can choose aspects of the communicative event that confirm the hypothesis of the researcher and thus render the analysis futile (Rose, 2001). This can be a significant issue due to the small scale of

the project, which compels the researcher to make a narrow selection of the most relevant texts in order to answer the research question. In response, the researcher has aimed at selecting a variety of texts that deal with different categories of participants, so as to optimise the type of data chosen within the time constraint of the project.

A primary concern with the level of the text also excludes other sites through which the discourse surrounding the show can be produced. Although CDA provides an interpretation of the text that uncovers the dominant ideologies in discourse, it cannot guarantee that the audience will interpret the text in this way. Indeed, this is an issue that has been taken up by cultural studies scholars who criticise the textual-based approach for ignoring situated reading practices that could be uncovered through conducting audience interviews or ethnographic studies (Ang, 1989; Morley, 1992). In addition, privileging the site of the text also sidelines the political economic approach to studying television shows, which are often highly commercialised and locally driven media products (Browne, 1984). Insight into the dimension of production side can be incorporated using interviews with producers, staff, and participants of the show, as well as market research of the television industry in general. Therefore, it is imperative to call for further studies that aggregate all of these methodological perspectives, not only on this specific television show but also on television in Vietnam in general.

RESULTS AND ANALYSES

Neoliberalism Articulated: Toward a Neoliberal Citizenship in Vietnam

The researcher has identified three particular themes through which a neoliberal discourse of citizenship is articulated in the show. The first criterion is the way in which a neoliberal discourse of governing problematises the conduct of particular groups or individuals in society that are in need of being governed (Burchell, 1996). This is achieved through the process of subjectification, that is, the interpellation of problematised identities into the subjects of governing (Burchell, 1996). The second criterion involves the way in which a neoliberal discourse of governing renders the solutions to the problems of the conduct of these particular groups or individuals technical and amenable to a solution. The solution involves the mobilisation of non-state resources in the form of experts and volunteers, who help mould the conduct of the groups or individuals, so that it conforms to the logic of choice and consumption as crucial neoliberal technologies of the self (Rose, 1999). The third criterion discusses how neoliberal governance is as much about the intermediate role of expertise as it is about the role of individuals or groups in undertaking the task of governing

themselves. In particular, the governing of oneself entails the alignment of personal thoughts, feelings, and conduct in the project of self-making that establishes the achievement of themselves as happy and well-functioning models of good citizens in society (Rose, 1990). Under a neoliberal regime, this would entail understanding oneself as autonomous and entrepreneurial individuals capable of governing themselves using market-based criteria of choice and consumption.

Rendering Problematised Subjectivities Visible

The most notable tactic through which these individuals are represented is through the use of medium close-up and close-up shots, especially when all the characters are shedding tears. In the medium close-up shot, their pose is slightly slanted and frozen, with relatively enclosed shoulder gesture, which denotes passivity and a lack of energy. The framing style of the camera can be said to borrow from the portrait genre, where the character often looks directly in the eyes of the viewer in order to elicit a high level of identification. Nonetheless, unlike most portraits, in these three episodes, despite being framed mainly in medium close-up, close-up, and extreme close-up shots, none of the characters look at the viewers but rather their looks are slanted to one side, either left or right. This kind of framing can be argued to provide an ‘offer image,’ where the image is presented as information for scrutiny of their difference (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996: 124). This strategy of representation induces the audience to interpret them as static, passive, and in need of help, in order to elicit compassion.



Loan in Episode 3



Hự in Episode 43



Cường and Jessica in Episode 59

A discourse of othering is also articulated in the use of the narrative voiceover, which is interwoven throughout the episodes, and notably during confessions. In episode 42, at the beginning of the confession, the voiceover employs the discourse of anthropomorphism in the representation of the border stone (Appendix 2). The border stone presents itself as an individual who is ‘entrusted with responsibility’ by humans who are the border officials. The border stone is also ‘named,’ where it has feelings like being ‘worried’ and actions like ‘getting used to,’ and most importantly as someone who enters into a close friendship with his ‘old friend’ whom it expects to see every month. Humanising the border market denotes authenticity and objectivity as a third party in the conversation and a credible testimony to the action of Hự.

In episode 59, the narrative voiceover employs a strategy of collectivisation of the experience of Jessica and Cường by appealing to a common group and mobilising the ‘us versus them’ discourse, where ‘them’ is represented by the frequent usage of terms of reference such as ‘people like Jessica and Cường,’ ‘people like them,’ followed by such adverbs as ‘often,’ ‘must,’ ‘need,’ which are presented as directives rather than opinions and presuppositions of the narrator (Appendix 3). This is a common strategy of ‘ideological squaring’ where reference choices are made by text producers to simplify characteristics of groups and individuals and

to deliberately create opposing identities that provoke value judgements and moral positionings (van Dijk, 1993).

This way of representation can be said to embody Stuart Hall's (1997: 258) notion of stereotyping, where it 'reduces, essentialises, naturalizes and fixes 'difference'.' Indeed, representing individuals in this manner simplifies their identities and positionings in society, thus legitimising the rationale for feeling compassionate about them. This essentially conceals the power relations that serve to put them in the position of marginalised subjectivities in society, and also legitimises the subsequent intervention into their lives as the producer calls it, 'the fulfilment of their wish.'

The Role of Expertise and Non-State Resources as Technologies of the Self

Rose (1999) has articulated the role of expertise and other non-state resources in the doing of community under neoliberalism. In particular, experts replace the role of the state in providing guidance for moral behaviour, where they seek to compete with one another to define the new norms of conduct, as 'professionals seeking to allay the problems, anxieties and uncertainties engendered by the seemingly so perplexing condition of our present' (Rose, 1999: 87). On the other hand, expertise has also been transferred to the locus of the individual, who consults expertise and borrows the language of experts in the quest for the mastery of one's own capacity as a working member of society (Rose, 1999: 92). Using expertise, volunteers are also recruited into the care of marginalised peoples who do not benefit from the regime of choice and civility under neoliberalism (Rose, 1999: 89).

In all of the three episodes selected for analysis, the role of expertise becomes prominent and crucial toward the transformation of the subjects. It should be noted here that there are multiple levels of experts who exercise their own expertise or participate in the realisation of expert advice in the programme. The first level of expertise comes from producers who provide the central role in coordinating the mobilisation of non-state resources. The second level of expertise involves the participation of private organisations, groups, and companies in consulting the specific area of expert. Experts are portrayed as being objective and always in charge of the situation. This is achieved by the ways in which their actions are represented, namely through swift camera tracking and short cuts, as well as by framing them mainly in medium and medium distant shots. Experts also perform speeches that use the discourse of experts, that is, by resorting to a neutral directive language that merely diagnoses the problems of individuals.

What has caught the most interest of the researcher is the second level of expertise, which involves companies and organisations that consult on the process of transformations of the characters. In episode 3, experts are the wedding dressmaker and make-up artist Hoàn Khang Bridal, who ends up making a customised wedding dress for Loan, and the wedding planning company WedinStyle, which aims is to ‘create a modern style wedding that is romantic as well as suitable for the outdoor setting’ (Lại, 2014b). In episode 43, experts are members of the forum phuoct.vn, who accompany the production team on their journey, and the travel and outdoor gear company Umove that helps the production team purchase specialist hiking equipment. Phuoct.vn is a popular online website for people who are interested in travelling into the mountains and rural area, which is similar to backpacking in the West yet with primitive and low-cost methods and equipment and often on motorbikes (as the colloquial meaning of ‘phượt’ means ‘whiz’ or the sound of a motorbike passing by). In episode 59, experts include the non-governmental organisation ICS, which is one of the largest organisations involved in the protection and promotion of LGBT rights in Vietnam, and artist Mai Nguyễn, who consults in the performance at the theatre Hoàng Thái Thanh.

On one hand, mobilising private resources has led to the situation where participants’ problems are rendered amenable to a technical solution and thus abstracted from the broader socio-political environment. On the other hand, the naturalisation of the mobilisation of resources masks the fact that, organising a lavish Korean style wedding, hiking into remote areas and conquering the mountains, or owning a well-equipped television set, belongs to consumptive and lifestyle practices that are associated with the middle class (Bourdieu, 1984). In addition, the places where the final resolutions occur are in big cities, namely Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Under the neoliberal order, cities are the sites that attract the most capital and where processes of modernisation take place, thus epitomising the ideal social space for the realisation an ethic of self-achievement (Bélanger, Drummond, and Nguyen-Marshall, 2012).

The Governing of Oneself: Therapeutic Confession, The Will to Improve, and Self-cultivation

As Michel Foucault (1978: 59) famously dictated, ‘Western man has become a confessing animal,’ confession culture has become one of the most prominent tools of producing truth about oneself and the other in Western countries. Rose (1990) has noted the transformation of the confession culture under neoliberalism, where it shifts from the private realm to becoming public narratives. Therapeutic confession constitutes the second set of technologies for the self that is concurrent with the proliferation of psychotherapies and rise of complex

systems of psychological studies in the second half of the 20th century. Contemporary Western media in the form of magazines, talk shows, reality television, and so on, has enabled the confessional discourse of the self to flourish and most importantly to become immersed into public narratives, where one can confess the ‘most intimate problems for free and have them instantly analysed - or eavesdrop on the difficulties that so many of our fellow citizens appear to have while conducting the business of their lives’ (Rose, 1990: 218).

In *DUTB*, and like many other reality television shows in the genre of life intervention, the role of confession is central and realised through the inclusion of a convention of self-assessment at the beginning of each episode, where it borrows from therapeutic confession techniques that are traditionally in the domain of psychiatry and psychology. Here, confession is also inherently linked to an ethic of the self. Under the neoliberal regime, the citizen is ‘obliged to choose’ (Rose, 1999). Enabled by confessing, the individual takes on the task of analysing and justifying one’s own thoughts and behaviour, not only to one self but also to others, in order to render their action intelligible and as rational choices in the pursuit of one’s own happiness. Indeed, Châu Loan has used the logic of choice where she reassesses the costs and benefits of her action upon discovering her illness. In particular, she responsabilises herself by not only not committing suicide but also actively seeking vocational training opportunities in order to take care of her own internal psychic problems:

Then in my head I thought about committing suicide by jumping from the fourth floor. But when I calmed down, I rethought about it, [and] I realised that my parents gave birth to me, [they] raised me up to be an adult, [and] put so much hope on me. If I had committed suicide I would leave the pain to my family, and I thought that I had to live my life not for me but for my parents, for my brothers...I told my parents I wanted to have a job just in order to solve my spiritual problem, for fun. Then I knew about the centre For Tomorrow, which is a vocational centre for disabled people, I called up and asked to be part of it. (Lại, 2014b)

This mode of actively taking charge of one’s own destiny regardless of individual circumstances can also be said to articulate ‘the will to improve,’ namely the way in which governmentality is a project of those who govern as much as of those who are governed (Li, 2007). In particular, individuals must inculcate a sense of high self-esteem and an unswerving commitment to moulding their thoughts and behaviour, both by themselves and with the help of experts (but not the state), in order to achieve an ethic of self-betterment (Cruikshank, 1996). Indeed, as Cường narrates about his own thoughts, he seeks to improve himself at his own vocational skills at a hair salon in Ho Chi Minh City, because he believes that this will enable him to earn the respect of society:

I opened a hair salon at home. Because it was in the countryside, the income was not very high, so I wanted to learn an extra craft in order to help my family, because I just recently started studying here. Even if this society discriminates against me, I still try my best in my work. I believe that if you do good things then people will look at you with a different attitude. (Lai, 2015)

In one way or another, it can be said that the characters are more or less similar to Ouellette and Hay's (2008) remarks about contestants on charity reality television in that they who are helped by reality television are demonstrated to have already helped themselves through choice of self-empowerment. Nonetheless, construing upward mobility through self-initiatives individualises their personal achievement while also eliding the broader systematic discrimination in both the economic and socio-cultural realms toward these characters in Vietnam, a country that is witnessing diverging social inequalities since the beginning of the 21st century. Despite the socialist government's propagandist slogan of protecting the welfare of its citizens, in practice, it is increasingly absent in many different aspects of everyday life, especially for those whose identities are susceptible to marginalisation.

Neoliberalism Reassessed: Toward a Socialist Version of Neoliberal Citizenship

Although it emerges from the above analysis that the show indeed circulates a discourse of neoliberal citizenship, this study suggests that there are fundamental differences in the neoliberal techniques of the self in Western studies of governmentality compared to those in the show. In Western reality television, structural inequalities in race, class, gender, or disability, are not acknowledged; rather, subjects are transformed and transcended using the neoliberal logic of choice and consumption into confident and self-fulfilling post-race, post-class, or post-feminist individuals (Tasker and Negra, 2007). Nonetheless, it is not clear that life transformation is the main purpose for the subjects in all three episodes. On the contrary, the convention of each episode focuses on the articulation of their specific discursively marked forms of difference that have put them in marginalised positions in the first place, rather than to help them transform these differences.

In addition, in many charity reality television shows in the US, the acts of compassion are carried out by private broadcasting organisations. This is underlined by the reasoning that state involvement in the care of citizens is inefficient, paternalistic, and 'dependency-breeding' (Ouellette and Hay, 2008). Nonetheless, in the case of the reality television landscape of Vietnam, as a monopoly player with government backing, VTV has the capacity and resources to purchase formats and produce series by itself. The fact that the participants entrust VTV and subject themselves to the process of transformation can be better construed as their perceiving VTV as the official representative of the government. This is most evident

in the central role of the production team of the show and their claim to legitimacy in representing individuals and interacting with them. Their action can be argued to approximate an old socialist ethos, where citizens rely on the state to provide for help on housing, education, and healthcare.

I argue that the show draws from a discourse about state-society relations that is fundamentally different from neoliberal discourse in Western societies, where any connection from individuals' problems to the state is considered taboo. This is particularly relevant to the case of Vietnam, where the state has taken an active part in managing the neoliberal reform. Hence, rather than being interpreted as a retreat of the state, it should constitute a regrouping of the state, one that is similar to Ong and Zhang's (2008) conclusion on contemporary governing practices in China. Indeed, it is not entirely coincidental that despite the lack of explicit mentioning of the state policy, all of the three episodes can be positioned within specific lines of discourse that are traceable to the Vietnamese socialist state.

Revisiting Episode 3

It's not hard to detect that the content of this episode is heavily permeated with a state-sponsored discourse on gender. In Vietnam, the socialist state has played an active role on gender policy since its birth. From the revolutionary period until the launch of market reform in the late 1980s, women were often expected to participate in economic activities in order to build the socialist state (Pettus, 2003). Women's aspiration was therefore first and foremost to show allegiance to the state, which nonetheless came into conflict with a Confucian ethic that frames women's values through her devotion toward the family. Nonetheless, since the beginning of the market reform, the state has promoted a form of femininity that links it primarily to the family and especially reproductive capability (Pettus, 2003). With the rise of new forms of consumption and lifestyle choice, femininity becomes increasingly indexed to women as savvy consumers capable of taking care of their homes, kids, and husbands (Leshkovich, 2012a).



Loan and Vượng during a treatment and at the final wedding

In this episode, the representation of Loan's circumstances have been viewed entirely through her illness and her association with Vượng, who is presented as the saviour who helps Loan overcome her illness and enjoy her life. During this episode, Loan is also the one who is tricked by her husband and the production crew as they stage the wedding to create a surprise for her without her prior knowledge. This is reinforced at the end of the wedding, when Lại reminds her about the reason why the wedding takes place in the first place:

It all originates from the love that your husband wants to give to you, and everything we did today is just because when we talked to him and all the ideas originated from our conversations with him and you.
(Lại, 2014b)

Loan's gender construction is also implicitly linked to the issue of reproduction and her strong desire to have kids. Indeed, the topic of children is mentioned twice in the episode, being firstly addressed as the reason why the family oppose to their wedding. Nonetheless, even though Loan acknowledges she cannot have children because of her illness, she later discloses that her partner and her have an imaginary kid that they sometimes talk to. In this way, even though Loan, in the capacity of a woman, cannot have children, she still desires to be seen as a mother. Overall, organising a lavish wedding for her, which is a middle-class practice that in fact essentialises gender difference through consumption, can be seen as a reward for her achievement. The achievement is her desire to fulfill an ideal image of a woman, one that is in accordance with the state's stance on gender issues rather than one that reflects a neoliberal discourse of self-empowerment.

Revisiting Episode 43

The Vietnamese government's policy toward the 53 ethnic minorities in Vietnam has been particularly discriminatory after the end of the Vietnam War. In particular, the government has practised social reforms that threaten their main economic practices and promote assimilation into the dominant ethnic group Kinh, which accounts for nearly 90% of the

population (Choi, 2014). Since most ethnic groups live in the mountainous regions of the North and the Central Highlands, the opening economic reforms, which focus mainly on the development of urban areas, have led to sharp social inequalities between the lowlands and the highlands, thus contributing toward the impoverishment of ethnic groups in Vietnam (Choi, 2014). In the past, Hanoi's discourse on ethnic minorities is infected with paternalistic and patronising undertones that regard ethnic minorities as children to be assimilated into the dominant Kinh culture. In recent years, this has taken the form of branding ethnic minorities as economically and culturally backward members of Vietnamese society, especially thanks to the assessments of an increased presence of international economic agents that use neoliberal criteria to evaluate wealth and happiness (Taylor, 2004).

Out of all three episodes, this episode contains a discourse that explicitly refers to the government, and which can be construed as a form of toeing the ideological line (Appendix 2). The episode presents Hư as a man who shows unswerving allegiance to the state, through his unquestioning commitment to the task of hiking to the border stone every month for almost thirty years. This ignores the extent to which in the past a significant proportion of Hmong people were also recruited by French and American authorities to fight against the Vietnamese, as well as the fact that many Hmong had also fled the persecution of the Hanoi regime in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

By recruiting volunteers from the lowlands and the forum phuot.vn, the show also articulates a discourse on patriotism and nationalism. Like in China, nationalism has been a particularly salient populist ideology promoted by the state in order to reinforce national unity and the legitimacy of the continuing rule of the Communist Party, which often links itself to a mandate of liberating Vietnam from foreign oppressors (Vu, 2007). The strategic use of the territory marker has nationalist connotations as being conscious of territory boundaries often contributes to a sense of wholeness of identity and serves a mode of belonging for citizens. For example, in the episode, when the crew members finish climbing up the mountains, they organise to sing the national anthem at the border marker that synchronises with a ceremony held at the same time in Hanoi. In this way, Anderson's (1983) concept of 'imagined community' encapsulates very well the emotions that connect those in the lowlands with Hư in the mountain.



Hanoi Tower and Border Marker 304 during national anthem ceremony

On the other hand, the extent to which this version of state-sponsored ‘imagined community’ is shared by different ethnic groups in Vietnam is highly contestable, considering the historical marginalisation of ethnic minorities by both the Vietnamese state policy as well as by the dominant Kinh people. Indeed, as seen in the screenshots below, it is not really clear whether it was Hự or the production crew and the phuot.vn volunteers who really enjoys visiting the border stone.



Volunteers from phuot.vn at the end of the trip

Revisiting Episode 59

An analysis of this episode cannot ignore a discussion of the recent changes in the stance of the Vietnamese state toward sexual minorities in the country. Mostly absent from discussion of government policy, and at times even categorised as a ‘social evil’ in the mid 1990s, the

Vietnamese government has started to pay attention to the issue of LGBT people since 2000, when a lesbian couple asked to be granted a marriage certificate from the local authorities in Ho Chi Minh City (Horton, 2014). Campaigns on the issue of LGBT recognition have been relatively fruitful since then, with the Vietnamese government passing a legislation legalising gay weddings as well as debating gay marriage in 2013, and most recently recognising transgender rights (Horton, 2014). The Vietnamese cultural scene throughout the 2000s has also witnessed the visibility of public literature and films that depict the lives of LGBT people. Nonetheless, most of these depictions tend to cater to the 'straight audience,' often resorting to stereotypes of LGBT people as deviants and social outcasts with tragic fates (Vinh, 2015). Heteronormativity and gender binarism still remain particularly entrenched in Vietnam, with LGBT people being perceived to threaten the reproductive role of women, who have always been addressed as daughters, wives, and mothers in dominant state discourse.

In episode 59, choosing transgenders as participants should be construed as political rather than incidental, because transgenders are often represented as reinforcing gender binarism. Indeed, this is exactly the ways in which Cường and Jessica are represented in the episode, where both of them aspire to cross the boundary of the binary gender system to the other side rather challenge the heteronormativity that is prevalent in the first place (Appendix 3). This also poses a problem to the solution in this episode. In adopting a discourse of visibility and recognition of LGBT people rather than a deconstruction of heteronormativity, this nonetheless depoliticises their marginalisation and subjects them to being othered by society. This strategy is carried out by specifically inviting ICS to participate in this episode, which speaks of the reality that neoliberalism as exception in Vietnam has led to the NGO-isation of state sovereignty, where the state actively devolves social responsibility to international organisations. Nonetheless, ICS's approach of visibility and recognition has also left the state's dominant binary gender discourse unchallenged.

In addition, the issue of acceptability of LGBT people becomes thwarted in the domain of the family, and particularly upon women as mothers, who must undertake the responsibility to protect their children regardless of their sexual orientation, rather than seeing discrimination as structural and rooted in wider societal perceptions (Appendix 4). Throwing the burden upon the mothers to accept their children is also tinged with a gendered discourse of motherhood and femininity, and in this particular episode, it is also infected with a noted class undertone. This is demonstrated when the team invites Cường's parents, who live in the mountainous rural province of Bắc Kạn in northern Vietnam, and Kim Châu, who is the president of ICS in Ho Chi Minh City and who also has a gay child, in order for Kim Châu to convince Cường's parents to accept his true sexuality (Appendix 4). The ways in which these

two groups are represented are markedly different, especially thanks to the guidance of the patronising voiceover that stresses the lack of knowledge of Cường's parents:

Perhaps, with a mother who only goes to jungle to find woods, a father who is busy every day with tires, it is difficult to fathom that they could know about terms like homosexuality, bisexuality, or transgender. And it's very easy to understand, when they don't know what is happening, with their girl. (Lại, 2015b)



The rural mother who does not understand anything about homosexuality versus the city mother who does everything to protect her child.

The purpose of this representation strategy can be argued to juxtapose between the LGBT expert mother and the mother without such knowledge, who would need to be directed in her conduct in order to effectively govern her family. Indeed, there is a growing amount of literature that discusses the Vietnamese government's paradoxical application of different criteria of femininity for women from different classes in society. Notably, according to Nguyen-Vo's (2008) studies of the market for commercial sex in Vietnam, whereas government policy encourages urban middle-class women to learn new sexual techniques with the help of expert knowledge, lower-class sex workers are re-educated with traditional notions of femininity in rehabilitation camps while also being contracted with piecework. Indeed, similar to the situation in China, whether in Kipnis's (2007) work on *suzhi*, or in Lewis, Martin, and Sun's (2012) work on lifestyle television, in *DUTB*, class status becomes entrenched as a marker of difference rather than transformed by neoliberal techniques of the self as being the case in Western societies.

CONCLUSION

Having drawn from existing literature that examines reality television as a neoliberal technology of citizenship in Western societies, this study has tested the applicability of this conceptual framework to the study of reality television in Vietnam. Using *DUTB*, a local charity reality television show produced by the national broadcaster Vietnam Television, as the case study, the researcher has discovered the utility as well as limitations of this theoretical framework to study television in Vietnam. With Aiwah Ong's (2006) logic of exception in neoliberal citizenship as the key conceptual reference, coupled with an attempt to locate the reading of the text within contemporary socio-cultural practices in Vietnam, the study has discovered that rather than seeing neoliberalism as a globally hegemonic top-down force that infiltrates into the lives of individuals around the world, it is better to construe neoliberalism as an extremely mobile technology of governing and citizenship that can be appropriated and refashioned by governments, organisations, and citizens, one that does not necessarily conflict with the situated ethics and practices in the contexts in which it is applied.

Indeed, couched in a humanist discourse of compassion and embedded in sentimentalism, the reality television format nonetheless renders *DUTB* particularly useful to promote norms of citizenship in contemporary Vietnam, namely through surrendering oneself to expert knowledge, embracing consumption and choice, and a celebration of self-betterment. On the other hand, these technologies of citizenship cannot be abstracted from the social domains in which they are inherently part of. In fact, as demonstrated in this study, these norms can be relatively compatible with contemporary agenda of the Vietnamese socialist state in the act of governing its population. These include upholding middle-class norms of consumer-citizenship, promoting nationalism as an instrument of galvanising support for state rule, and politicisation of class and regional differences. Indeed, these neoliberal technologies of citizenship appear to be available only to certain types of population and not to others, the latter including ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, ill and disabled people, or women from a rural lower-class background, who need to be 'helped' to 'fulfil their wish' and become exemplary citizens of the socialist state.

In terms of reflexivity, the researcher acknowledge that the process of doing research on this project has been met with a disappointing lack of relevant, systematic, and updated literature with regard to the study of neoliberal rationalities and practices as well as media studies on Vietnam, especially in comparison to scholarship on economics or history. The researcher therefore call for further studies that address this skewed imbalance of perspectives in

Vietnamese studies. With regard to this study, which has a serious textual analysis bias, future research needs to be carried out to examine audience reception and especially the political economy perspective, which has so far been non-existent, not only for this reality television show but also for the media industry in Vietnam in general.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Episode 3 (6:59-15:30)

- Male voiceover: If life is like a long marathon, and everyone is an athlete, we will need to appreciate every second, every minute, to overcome so much difficult to reach the goal of life. Reaching the goal is not the most important thing but that overcoming difficulties and challenges is what's worth caring about. On that road, if there is a companion, the hardship will become [much] lighter.
- Female voiceover: Today, *Saturday Wish/Seventh Wish* will bring you the story of a woman. A woman who is like every other woman. During the most mature time of her youth, with a bright future ahead, but everything has collapsed, when she discovers that she has a fatal disease.
- Loan: I was feeling that I couldn't eat, [and feeling very] tired, [so] my family took me to the hospital. I discover that I was in the fourth stage of kidney failure, [and since then I] just live every day without knowing what will happen next. Then in my head I thought about committing suicide by jumping from the fourth floor. But when I calmed down, I rethought about it, [and] I realised that my parents gave birth to me, [they] raised me up to be an adult, [and] put so much hope into me. If I had committed suicide I would leave the pain to my family, and I thought that I had to live my life not for me but for my parents, for my brothers. I told my parents I wanted to have a job just in order to solve my spiritual problem, for fun. Then I knew about the centre For Tomorrow, which is a vocational centre for disabled people, I called up and asked to be part of it.
- Female voiceover: And even Loan didn't expect that, right there, she was able to meet the man of her life.
- Vưõng: My first impression of my wife is [that she is a very] rural girl.
- Loan: Then I called him as 'em' [a mode of address for younger brother], then when we became closer, I called him 'cu em' [an intimate mode of address for younger brother], then he called me sister. At the beginning I didn't know who to text then I texted him. I told him that I wanted to be able to wear a wedding dress for once, to become a bride for once.
- Vưõng: I will let you borrow me as your groom.
- Loan: I thought that he was kidding so I texted 'My cu em is so humourous.'
- Vưõng: At the centre [when] they were organising a Moon Festival celebration, I texted her to go to the pond near Nhà Sàn.
- Loan: I said, 'No you just go I don't want to go there. I'm very tired.'
- Vưõng: I told her that if she didn't come out I would not go back. I waited for a while until she appeared.
- Loan: We talked for a while and then he suddenly held my hand and told me that he wanted to take care of me for the rest of my life. I was so touched and then both of us started to hug and cry.
- Vưõng: I was determined to ask her to let me take care of her.
- Interviewer (not seen): You changed the mode of address!
- Vưõng: Changed from 'em' [mode of address for someone younger] to 'anh' [mode of address for older].
- Loan: When we were together both of our families didn't agree. He is the only son of the family, he has the responsibility to have children to continue the lineage of the family and take care of his family. If he marries me, I cannot have children. With the dialysis treatment my body only gets weaker, there is not hope for me to become healthy again.
- Vưõng: I told my mother that she should regard it as if she didn't have a son like me. I have found the other half of my life. I am determined to bring happiness to the other half of my life.
- Loan: My sister and my mother, to be honest, when I took him home she didn't agree, she said it outright that she didn't agree.

- Vượng: [She said that we] could only be friends but could not live together, 'if you live with her then you get out of the house.'
- Female voiceover: Overcoming all the difficulties, all the barriers, they still came together, and this small rented house is always full of love.
- Vượng: Since we got together in 2008, we have moved in at the end of 2008.
- Doctor Trung at Saint Paul Hospital: This patient is already in the last stage of kidney failure, and there are also unexpected symptoms like high blood pressure, the most serious symptom being that the patient has a neurotic condition on her four limbs that makes the bone feel very painful. [She also has a] scoliosis spinal condition, which tremendously affects her everyday behaviour, or that can even break her bone. Every time patient Loan comes to have a dialysis, he rides his motorbike into the gate, and then he will carry her onto the patient bed and after the end of the treatment he stays there to take care of her. After a dialysis treatment he carries her onto the motorbike and takes her home. Witnessing this much affection I really admire the ways that they devote their lives to each other as well as the love they give each other. It is a very beautiful affection and very difficult to find in contemporary life.
- Interviewer (not seen): So normally do you take her to the park like this?
- Vượng: If my legs are strong I still take her, sometimes to the West Lake, sometimes to Thủ Lệ park.
- Loan: We often go to the Sword Lake to eat ice cream.
- Vượng: Go to the church.
- Loan: Go to eat deep fried cake.
- Loan: He often names me Coconut, and now at home he only calls me Coconut. I call him Watermelon, and we imagine that if we have a kid together we would name the kid Pineapple. At home sometimes we still imagine that the kid is at home and we talk to each other. Then the husband becomes the father and the mother becomes Pineapple.
- Interviewer (not seen): Is Pineapple a son or a daughter?
- Loan: A son.
- Female voiceover: So the character of *Saturday Wish/Seventh Wish* today is Vượng anh Loan. They have a lot of plans in their lives, some of which they haven't carried out yet, some of which have already passed. Living together for eight years, it seems that they no longer think about organising a wedding, and so, the crew of *Saturday Wish/Seventh Wish* has a very daring idea...

Appendix 2: Episode 43 (1:47-7:38)

- The border stone (by a male voiceover): Thirty years have passed by, I was entrusted with the responsibility to stand in front of Mường Lát forest, which divides the border between Vietnam and Laos. It was then that I started to be named G8. Now all the border soldiers call me by my new name that is milestone 304 but I am still used to the name G8 that my special old friend usually called me for the past thirty years. And we call him father Hự.
- Hự: My name is Lòu Văn Hự. [I] worked at the milestone G8 since 1984 until 2012. I walked on bare feet. The road was too steep I was not used to wearing shoes, [so] walking on foot was much faster.
- The border stone: About thirty years ago, father Hự was the head of a lineage and a Hmong village, [who was] entrusted by border soldiers with the task to look after the Vietnam-Laos border in the area of Quảng Triều. Since then, every month, he trekked there to inspect the situation near my position.
- Hự: During the war against America, [I visited the border stone] twice a month. Then when the Americans returned [to the US], [I visited it] only once a month.
- The border stone: For thirty years, every month he trekked tenths of kilometers of jungle road, many parts of which were so stiff and dangerous, just to [be able to] reach to me. But no matter how difficult the journey was, he

still didn't miss our appointment. Only once, he was late for a few days. After that, I just knew that during that time, on the way to the mountain, father Hự met with a group of people who grew poppies, so he had to return immediately to inform the border soldiers. Luckily that after that day, my old friend was still safe and sound. If he came here late [at night], it would be very dangerous, [just] like the time he narrowly escaped death from the stone that was a ton kilogram heavy, then I wouldn't expect him to come see me regularly anymore. The jungle road is always full of hidden danger, yet my old friend became weaker and older, and so a few years have passed by yet I still haven't seen him. [I] don't know how he is doing now...

- Hự: These three years, I became old, I don't visit the border stone anymore. During those days that I [know that I] should have gone to see the border stone, I imagine that I was visiting it. Because I'm old, I can no longer visit G8, so I stay at home to help my children on the fields.

- Hự: Since I was able to visit the G8 border stone, I have always been proud that I am working for the Party, for the government. To me, the G8 border stone is like my father, like Uncle Hò standing next to me. Although Uncle Hò has passed away but he's like a mirror that is still shining next to me. The border stone is [important] like that to me, so I also want to go there again.

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