**The Vietnamese relational “Ego”.**

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**Abstract**

The analysis of the Vietnamese unique mode of person reference can offer original contributions to the international philosophical debate. Presenting a conception of the individual which radically differs from the self centered entity that characterized the origins of so-called “western” idea of the “Ego”, it has been recognized by some authors[[1]](#footnote-1) as an interesting instrument for deconstructing several universalist assumptions about the “self”. In the same time, it casts a new light on the connections between the “Ego” and the world in which – or thanks to which – he/she lives.

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“Knowing Vietnamese language and culture means using personal pronouns properly. Addressing people with the correct pronouns makes you a member of the Vietnamese family and society” (Nguyễn Văn Nam, Ambassador of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam in Italy)

The analysis of the Vietnamese unique mode of person reference can offer original contributions to the international philosophical debate. Presenting a conception of the individual which radically differs from the self centered entity that characterized the origins of so-called “western” idea of the “Ego”, it has been recognized by some authors[[2]](#footnote-2) as an interesting instrument for deconstructing several universalist assumptions about the “self”. In the same time, it casts a new light on the connections between the “Ego” and the world in which – or thanks to which – he/she lives. The Vietnames personal references system is here presented as a good angle from which observing the extent to which the language and the culture that characterize a group of people could be considered interwoven when conceptualizing the world and acting within it. It is here assumed that this socio-linguistic and philosophical examination is likely to offer an important perspective on the concept of the self and its relation with the others as it has been conceived in a non-western context. In fact, interesting conclusions can be drawn about the meaning of becoming or being a member of the Vietnamese family and society by inquiring on the peculiar conception of the selfhood portrayed by the personal reference system.

It can be argued that none of these topics is explicitly related to the main issues of this article, namely what is intended by the definition of “relational Ego”. However, it is here suggested that the meaning, or one of the possible meanings, of this definition clearly emerges when analyzing the complex system of Vietnamese personal references in its connection with other elements of the Vietnamese culture: for example kinship relations, social structures and status, linguistic choices, ethical values and moral codes.

The approach of Intercultural Philosophy that guides this article tends to avoid any essentialization of concepts such as culture and tradition. Thus cultures are not presented as monolithic entities, structured by fixed and unchangeable principles and patterns, that deterministically lead to certain theoretical assumptions or practical behaviours. But as complex organisms, capable of modifying themselves and harbouring diverse, sometimes contrastive, voices and perspectives, connected by some – using a Wittgensteinian definition - “family resemblances”.

The necessity of de-essentializing is also perceived in addressing concepts such as language and meaning. Using the suggestions of the philosophical Hermeneutics more radically, “meanings” are seen in a dialogical context, thus presenting themselves neither as fixed, nor as absolute, but “performative”[[3]](#footnote-3) and depending on several factors, such as historical and cultural backgrounds, practical conditions,languages, emotional dispositions, gender, etc. of the interlocutors. Meanings are “negotiated”[[4]](#footnote-4) and agreed through a difficult and never-ending dialogical process, capable, however, of letting interlocutors understanding each other, at least to some extent.

The approach presented here places itself in a middle way, simultaneously refusing Universalism on one hand and Relativism on the other. It is here argued that these two extremist positions, in fact, while opposing each other, share the same rejection of a dialogue between different realities: the former flattening differences, the latter negating the possibility of understanding reciprocally. Moreover, the two perspectives sometimes perceive culture, language and meaning in the essenzialized way we are trying to contrast: the relativistic glorification of the differences goes hand in hand with the universalistic presupposition of a shared notion of sense in assuming these three concepts as entities.

Considering Universalism and Relativism as the two sides of the same essenzializing coin, the practical approach of Intercultural Philosophy adopted in here aims to offer a third way, made of diverse paths created by the *praxis* of what Panikkar defined dialogical dialogue. “Dialogical dialogue, which differs from the dialectical one, stands on the assumption that nobody has access to the universal horizon of human experience, and that only by not postulating the rules of the encounter from a single side can Man proceed towards a deeper and more universal understanding of himself and thus come closer to his own realization.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The aim is to show to what extent some verbal patterns – in this case the Vietnamese personal reference system - are played and mirrored in non-verbal behaviours, such as the creations of ethical codes in certain societies, and vice-versa. Focusing on the implications of this “reflection” from the perspective of Moral Philosophy, this paper has no intention of taking part directly in the so called Chomsky Vs. Sapir-Worf discussion on the relation between language/languages and epistemology. This essay is not going to address the issue of whether different languages imply diverse ways of conceptualizing the world, considering “conceptualization” as the mental capability of understanding and thinking. However, it is here suggested that languages are likely to influence – and influenced by – the way people perform in the world. In fact, the “non-neutrality” of language in the perpetrations of behavioural patterns has been a theme highlighted since the 1970s by several scholars, mainly feminists and anti racists, from diverse backgrounds and perspectives and already changed into political and social claims and practises.

Moreover, as Nussbaum suggests, is here assumed that the formation of practical and moral judgements is based on the interconnection between rationality and emotions[[6]](#footnote-6), where “language differences shape emotional life in some ways.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Conditioning emotions, at least to some extent, some linguistic habits could frame the creation of moral judgements and, consequently, of ethical codes. The socio-linguistic and philosophical analysis of certain structure of the Vietnamese language proposed here intends to show that social and “cultural” models are strongly conditioned by – and conditioning - some linguistic practises: not deterministically but, affecting the emotive perception of the world, tendentially.

Taking these premises into account, the system of personal references in Vietnamese language is not presented here to show any substantial and immutable reality of “the Vietnamese culture” or people. It is rather considered as an Ariadne thread that helps to unravel the complex interweaving of elements that constitutes the peculiar construction of the selfhood in the Vietnamese context, and its implication in the formation of ethical and moral codes.

**The “westernalization” of the Vietnamese person references system**

A great number of textbooks that introduce the Vietnamese language to foreigners highlights the importance, as well as the difficulties, faced in learning how to correctly address people. In fact, addressor/addressee references are often equated with personal pronouns without giving any further explanation. Consistently, the necessity to clarify the reasons for this assimilation is not felt by most of the readers of Vietnamese language textbooks, especially if they are Indo-European languages native speakers. In the conceptual categories of the majority of these languages, [[8]](#footnote-8) pronominal usages, address and self-reference are virtually synonymous in speech interaction. This remark underpins a more general criticism towards the presupposition of the neutrality of terms and tools used in addressing not only linguistic studies but also comparative subjects.[[9]](#footnote-9) Since scholars and researchers belonging to various linguistic and cultural backgrounds are joining the international debate, the problem of a “non colonialist” approach towards categories adopted in examining “non-western” cultures and issues has been raised. As Cao Xuân Hạo[[10]](#footnote-10) pointed out “an accurate reading of the Vietnamese grammars so far available, including those used in grammar schools and universities, shows that the real object of the descriptions is not Vietnamese sentences and constructions as such, but their equivalents in French, English or Russian”. Instead of analyzing this criticism as a relativistic assumption of the impossibility of understanding each other, this research attempts to apply this viewpoint in terms of examining some aspects of Vietnamese linguistic and cultural structures. The intention is also to deconstruct neo-colonialist paradigms that are limiting a better knowledge not only of so called “other cultures”, but also of our schemata. The main cause of this misleading approach is found in the linguistic and cultural ethnocentrism, which is responsible for the lack of a more contextualized analysis and for the universalization of criteria originating from diverse cultural and linguistic settings. According to Cao Xuân Hạo, the ethnocentric attitude towards the Vietnamese grammar has been internalized by several native scholars, who suffer from a “complex of inferiority” vis-a-vis the “Western” studies, originated in the Colonial period and still affecting the work of some linguists: “not all the Vietnamese authors can overcome the eurocentric prejudices acquired during their studying of European languages, even though not everyone of them are so firmly convinced that everything that is described in European grammars is universal [...] Those victims of European language, ignoring their own linguistic habits.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Although this criticism seems to be very radical,[[12]](#footnote-12) it points out an interesting issue for the purposes of this present work, because it implicitly highlights the necessity of a dialogical reinterpretation of grids that are supposed to be scientific and objective. What is claimed here is not a nationalistic refusal of “western models”, but the necessity of an international plurilinguistic dialogue, capable of breaking the monologue in which even the international debate is sometimes imprisoned. It could be argued that the use of a common language is necessary in order to gain a mutual understanding and that some objective criteria have to be established in order to avoid confusion. However, the criticism is not challenging the importance of fixing criteria, but challenging the presupposition that the paradigms which are leading the contemporary international debate should be universally accepted. Following the suggestion of Cao Xuân Hạo's remark, it could be said that the conventional nature of certain definitions and terminologies has been, to some extent, forgotten by several scholars and theories, thus rising ambiguities and fuelling “essentializing” tendencies. As Van Brake argues, the “universal language syndrom” is a myth that “goes back to the origin of western philosophy”, and implies essentialistic and universalistic prejudices, as well as the - western – necessity of a shared notion of truth. [[13]](#footnote-13)

Cao Xuân Hạo implicitly recommends that we should bridge the gap between theory and practise that frequently affects several “western” research, reminding us that the task of a grammar book is to guide the reader to understand and speak a certain language better. What has been raised here is not just a question of effectiveness. This criticism also points out the risk of separating a language from its living context, thus crystallizing them as abstract entities. This reification of languages is neither considered capable of helping to achieve a better comprehension of the linguistic and cultural system of a certain group of people, or of guaranteeing the accordance on right norms. According to Van Brake, in fact, the necessity of a shared language is less likely to be assured by an agreement on the criteria that have to be adopted in examining a specific context than it would be by “mutual attunement” on some contextual issues and meanings.

The importance of a different approach to the examination of the Vietnamese language structures is thus pointed out by Cao Xuân Hạo, who suggests an inquiry into some sets of problems which are considered closely related to the Vietnamese context. Among these problems, he indicates the system of personal references and its connection with Vietnamese social behaviour as a pivotal point for a better understanding of Vietnamese thought and culture. Quoting Luong: “I suggest that the rules regulating the usages of person-referring forms are inextricably bound to the fundamental structural principles of the Vietnamese sociocultural universe – structural principles which constitute the core of native models of and for sociocultural reality.” [[14]](#footnote-14)

**The Vietnamese system of personal references**

It is impossible to translate personal pronouns such as “I” or “you” into Vietnamese out of a specific speaking context. The correct form to address “myself” and the “you” I am speaking with – or I am referring to - varies according to different social and emotive relations between the interlocutors. Remarkably, the term the speaker decides to adopt during a conversation is not only decided by objective factors, such as gender, age, status, kinship relation, but also by the degree of emotive distance or proximity to the listener – or of the level of agreement between interlocutors in any specific context of it. Terms adopted referring to “myself” and “you” can vary several times even during one single conversation. Furthermore, the category of person can be considered nearly irrelevant: quoting Thompson “little in the structure-of the language itself forces the speaker to indicate specifically whether he refers to himself, to his listener or to another person.”[[15]](#footnote-15) If “persons” are unemphasized during a conversation, the relationship between them play a pivotal role. It can be argued that the personal reference system not only relates to, but also constitutes an integral part of the Vietnamese sociocultural sphere: lexical choices act in shaping interactional situations.

Vietnamese scholars Nguyễn Ðình Hòa[[16]](#footnote-16) and Hy Vong Luong[[17]](#footnote-17), offered a wider and deeper description of the complex system of personal references. Following their theories, which divided the system of personal references into several subgroups, it can be derived that the usage of the bare definition of personal pronouns in referring to the whole system is a consequence of several non critical assumptions and prejudices[[18]](#footnote-18). Both Luong and Hòa agree in considering the person referring lexical units as parts of a single and interconnected system. Luong highlights the three criteria on which the subclasses[[19]](#footnote-19) can be recognized as a single, integrated system. First of all, these linguistic forms are considered as structural equivalents, which means that “they formally and recurrently substitute for one another in the same syntactical structure in person reference”. [[20]](#footnote-20) Secondly, units of the subclasses frequently co-occurr, even in the same utterance. Thirdly, the subclasses are integrally related in terms of contextual variables: the use, for instance of personal names instead of common nouns “would radically alter the definition of interactional situation”[[21]](#footnote-21) in a specific speech event. It is suggested that a more comprehensive insight into the complicated system of person reference can be better gained through an observation of the entire complex, in relation with the sociocultural setting in which it has been originated.

**Kinship terminology**

The Vietnamese kin terms can be considered as the most prominent subset of person references in terms of frequency of usage and social importance. Kinship titles are employed not only for addressing relatives, but also for third-party references and currently when indicating addressor and addressee. Anticipating some of the conclusions that this present paper aims to demonstrate, it could be said that the Vietnamese person reference system tents to extend the notion of family, and the moral implications of it, to relations with non-relatives.

The pragmatic function of the usage of the kinship terminology, in fact, must not be underestimated: it reinforces the continuation of the Vietnamese sociocultural organization, in which every single member of the family and the village has specific roles and duties towards the others. Similarly to what is implied when adopting status terms, the usage of a certain kinship term determins the behavioural pattern that the speaker is required to endorse towards the listener or the third person.

It is commonly said that a Confucian ethical code underpins the Vietnamese kinship structure and reference terminology. However, some ethnologists, historians and linguists highlighted the peculiarity of the Vietnamese lineage system, that has integrated its native matrilineal structure with the Chinese patrilineality,[[22]](#footnote-22) giving birth to the so called “double kinship system”. Noticeably, as it will be shown in the following paragraphs, the choice of using some kinship terms instead of others reflects, to some extent, the degree of prominence given to the mother-side or the father-side lineage inside the family.

The integration of different systems reinforces the idea that social organizations, as well as practical and cultural behaviours, are not fixed entities, but subject to modify their shape in different historical conditions, in accordance with some cultural guidelines. Furthermore, the possibility of these choices underlines the extent to which members of a “culture” are allowed to select from a cluster of behavioural options without risking any loss of cultural identity.

Table 1 shows the scheme of an hypothetical Vietnamese family tree, in which the principal kinship terms are presented.



Key: ▢ male relative ; ◎ female relative; ⎯ sibling relation; ― marital relation; | line of descent

Although the diagram offers a useful visual aid when giving an initial consideration to the intricate Vietnamese kinship system, it has just to be considered as a schematic representation. In order to avoid misleading and ethnocentric interpretations, the diagram needs to be further explained and contextualized. Nuclear words are sometimes followed by secondary terms (in [] brakets in Table 1), which occur only in referential use. Luong suggests that these sets of secondary terms reflect “antagonist” kinship-relational models, which “oppose each other in that they involve sets of elements in relation of exclusive disjunction to one another”.[[23]](#footnote-23)

It could be said that the genealogical tree, which seems to be homogeneous at a first sight, is divided into several sub-branches. The sub-divisions “cut” the tree from different angles, showing diverse criteria of interpreting the family relations and relationships. Notably, these sets of structural oppositions within the kinship system overlap, mirroring the complexity of perspectives from which the relationships could be perceived. All the structural oppositions, to some extent, reflect a female/ male or– using a Vietnamese definition - *âm/dương* dichotomy.[[24]](#footnote-24) As Jamieson[[25]](#footnote-25) states, the *âm/dương* alternation constitutes a fundamental category of the Vietnamese tradition. It still permeates diverse aspects not only of the philosophical and religious sphere, but also in literature[[26]](#footnote-26) and in daily life experiences. Originated in China, the *yin-yang* philosophy[[27]](#footnote-27) entered the Vietnamese culture along with Confucianism and, to some extent, Buddhism,[[28]](#footnote-28) syncretizing itself with the local cults and traditions. Due to the pre-eminent role of Neo-Confucianism in the formation and education of the Vietnamese ruling class and scholars, the influence of the *yin-yang* philosophy is generally underestimated by researchers.[[29]](#footnote-29) However, this body of theory and activities deeply affected the Vietnamese interpretation of the world, especially in the traditional rural context, namely the majority of the Vietnamese people.

The two sets of operating principles, or values, indicated by the *âm/dương* harmonic opposition can be used as the basis for a model of society and culture. If the *âm/dương* pattern holds a fundamental heuristic value for understanding the Vietnamese *Weltanschauung*, it is nevertheless here suggested that the historical development leads to a profound redefinition of the categories themselves and of the elements subsumpted by them. Therefore, the *âm/dương* dichotomy is here interpreted as a functional instrument for a better understanding of the Vietnamese perspective, also on kinship relations.

- *Nội – ngoại:* the literal translation of *nội* is “inside”, while *ngoại* is “outside”. Within the kinship context, it marks a division between the paternal (*nội*) lineage and the maternal (*ngoại*) genealogy. As Thompson observed, the words appear most commonly to distinguish maternal grandparents (*ông* *bà* *ngoại*) from paternal grandparents (*ông* *bà* *nội*) and grandchildren of the son side from grandchildren of the daughter side. According to this division, the paternal lineage is considered the “inner”, the most privileged and relevant, meanwhile the maternal lineage is external, extraneous to some extent. The prominence of the paternal genealogy expressed by these definitions mirrors the patrilineal structure of the Chinese Confucian model, in which the female role in the recognition of the lineage is almost negligible. As a matter of fact, *nội* and *ngoại* are Sino-Vietnamese terms,[[30]](#footnote-30) while the Vietnamese word for “inside” is *trong* and for “outside” is *ngoài*. It seems that the usage of the terminology borrowed from the Chinese genealogical system indicates the adoption of patrilineality in the Vietnamese lineage recognition.

Notwithstanding the Confucian, male-oriented shape of the *nội – ngoại* contraposition, the Vietnamese kinship recognition presents a particular co-existence of an alternative bilateral model, that can be better understood by analyzing the following dichotomy.

*- Họ - ruột*: *họ* literally means “extended family” or “clan”, and *ruột* “intestine” - defined also by the term *nhà*,home. Added to the nuclear kinship terms, these words mark a distinction between the proximate member of the family and the other relatives. In order to give an example, *chị* *ruột* is older sister while *chị họ* is older female cousin.

The term *họ* hasa remarkable semantic extension, that could not be exhaustively clarified in this present work. Here it has been considered as a patronymic, which is defined as “ideally a corporate local entity supposedly with its own properties (land and ancestral hall).”[[31]](#footnote-31) It is lead by rules of patrilocal residence and patrilineal recognition, comprehending patrilaterally related males, their wives and - temporarily - their daughters. Ancestors are regarded as an active part of the *họ*, to some extent the most important. Nguyễn Ðình Hòa affirms that within the *họ* “the strongest tie is without contradiction the religious one.”[[32]](#footnote-32) The worshipping of ancestors constitutes not only an occasion for the *họ* members – or part of them - to gather, but also the principle on which the conception of lineage itself is based.

The *họ* can be considered as a temporal and spacial criterion that links relatives to each other. As Cadière (1944:35) observed, it “is organized from the civil point of view, and even to a certain extent from the penal, or let us say rather moral point of view”. Interestingly, this French observer also noticed the link between the duties prescribed by the assumption of the proper kinship term and the moral code underpinned. The relations among the members of the same *họ* are defined by a set of rules, in which reciprocal duties are expected to be fulfilled in accordance with the position held within the family. These duties respect a hierarchy based first and foremost on age, i.e. paying respect to the elders. Filial piety (*hiếu*) is, in fact, a fundamental principle on which the *họ* is based, situated at the very core of the Vietnamese social structure. The concept of *hiếu* encompasses a notion of the utmost importance for understanding the ethical criteria on which the Vietnamese society is based: moral debt (*ơn*). The indebtedness towards parents is considered so immense that it can never ever be solved. Thus, children have been raised by exemplar stories and legends which emphasize the importance of filial piety even with extrem consequences.

Reciprocity is another fundamental principle that guides the rules of the *họ*, in order to guarantee solidarity and unity among its members, ensuring tangible and non- tangible aids are provided within the *họ*, reinforcing this sense of membership. However, the reciprocity within the *họ* has to respect some rules, which differentiate inner from outer *họ* relations, especially in terms of material aid. The *họ* can be also considered an economical and social web, capable of assuringreciprocal assistance, on the basis of a mutual assumption of roles, duties, behavioral and respect patterns.

The hierarchical and patrilineal nature of the *họ* is mitigated by the presence of another model of kinship recognition, which constitutes the other term of the structural dichotomy: *ruột.* In the context of familial relations, *ruột* assumes the meaning ofinner, close, core, giving *họ* the sense of outer, peripheral, distant. Thus it highlights the degree of proximity of the relatives more than the vertical hierarchy, making no distinctions between mother and father lineage, male or female relatives. The term *ruột* identifies the *nhà*, home, by which more equal realtions are endorsed. In fact, the core relation of the *nhà* is the linkage between wife and husband (originally belonging to different *họ*) and their descendants. From a gender perspective, it can be observed that within the *nhà* the patriarchal rules of the Confucian ethic are, to some extent, disobeyed. According to the Confucian “Three obediences” criterion, a “respectful” woman has to follow the commands of her father before marriage, of the husband after marriage and of the son if she is a widow[[33]](#footnote-33). Principles of the Confucian ethic towards women can be founded in Vietnam in the *Gia Huấn Ca* (Family Training Ode), an exposition of proper female behaviour, aimed at shaping a perfect daughter and wife. Summarized into four rules, or *tứ đức* – *công*(housework); *dung* (appearance); *ngôn* (speech); *hạnh*(conduct) – these guidelines indicate that women were generally expected to confine themselves inside domestic walls, taking care of parents, husband, parents-in-low and sons. However, the Confucian ethic has been “Vietnamized” in a milder form, by virtue of a different conception of the woman that characterizes the indigenous society.[[34]](#footnote-34) From a political and legal perspective, Vietnamese women had rights which were unimaginable in other East Asian countries. Although Confucian patriarchal structure, that shaped the Vietnamese court since the 3rd century A.C., was officially adopted as state doctrine under Lý dynasty (10th century), Lê Thánh Tông's (1422-1497) *Hồng Đức* Code, for instance, guaranteed women's high status.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Resuming the description of the family system, one can notice that wife and husband often refer to each other using the expression *nhà tôi*, my home, underlining the consonance of the concept of *nhà* with the couple itself. According to Luong, the importance of the conjugal unity and equity is also reflected in the use of other linguistic forms among spouses. The term *mình* (lit. body) for instance, is adopted to refer to both to oneself[[36]](#footnote-36) on the one hand and to one's spouse on the other. However, the presence of a certain degree of asymmetry within the *nhà* is suggested by the usage whithin the couple of another pair of kinship terms: *anh* (older brother) and *em* (younger sibling). The husband, in fact, may also address his wife by using the term *em*, thus considering his wife as a younger sister, her age notwithstanding.[[37]](#footnote-37) By calling himself *anh,* the husband re-introduces the age-based hierarchy within the couple, affirming that the wife is, to some extent, inferior to him. Therefore, the choice among these different forms of addressing terms mirrors emotive and behavioral decisions, which emphasize the degree of symmetry or asymmetry between husband and wife.

The couple in itself, however, is not likely to be considered as an accomplished *nhà* unlessit produces children. Being the core of *nhà*, raising sons and daughters[[38]](#footnote-38) constitute the principle on which the unity of the family is based. Noticeably, the continuity of the *họ* is also guaranteed by the descendants, who play a fundamental role from both the *họ* and *nhà* perspectives. However, it is here suggested that the two points of view, although sharing the same task, differ in the emphasis given to the emotive aspect of the parental relation towards their offspring. The context of the *nhà* is the sphere in which the affective nature of kinship bounds is emphasized, and the process of mutual identification reaches the highest level. Furthermore, one can go as far as to say that the more this emotive aspect is underlined, the more symmetrical the relationships within the family becomes. The diverse nuances of the familial relational perceptions are, also in this case, mirrored by the choice of different terms in person referring and addressing.

According to Luong the two structural contrapositions *nội – ngoại,* and *họ – ruột,* conjoin on one level and oppose each other on another. In the Vietnamese sociocultural system, what Luong defines as “male – and non male-oriented models of kinship relations” (or, using the Vietnamese categories, *âm/dương*) exists inextricably in opposition to each other, shaping an interconnected structure. The *họ* itself presents some male- oriented aspects (recognition of the lineage by the paternal side; patrilocality; hierarchical division between genders) as well as non-male oriented traits (importance of the proximity of the relationship, with no distinction between maternal and paternal side, gender or matrilocality/patrilocality). Although the *nhà* emphasizes the importance of a different set of relationships, affective links and ethical patterns, it is, nevertheless, a constitutive part of the *họ.* If the two relational models contradict each other, the prominence to be given is a question of personal choice. Thus, it would be too simplistic to consider the male-oriented pattern as a juxtaposition of the Chinese patrilineality on the indigenous matrilineal lineage, or as the result of the conflict between tradition and modernity

The capability of traditions to harbour diverse and contrasting voices should not be interpreted as evidence of the validity of relativist claims. As already suggested, the cultural possibility of modifying paradigms and adapting new elements to the pre-existent context contradicts the interpretation of culture as immutable entities that relativism underpins. However, not all the traditions react in the same way, or are guided by the same idea of rationality and sense of “the individual” assumed by the universalist theories. In the Vietnamese kinship system, for instance, several “alien” cultural traits have been accepted and integrated, giving birth to new scenarios. Some other elements have been simply rejected, because of the incompatibility with the cluster of cultural possibilities that characterize that particular historical context.

**No name for the “Ego”**

In the Vietnamese kinship terminology there is no trace of a word that identifies the “Ego” him/herself. It could be argued that there is no place for “Ego” in the Vietnamese family. What is expressed by the English term “I” - as well as the Italian “io”, the French “je”, the Spanish “yo”, the German “ich”, etc. - in the context of the Vietnamese bloodline is defined by the relationship that links “Ego” to another member of the family. Thus, when addressing to a certain relative, “Ego” has to take her/his perspective, referring to himself/herself by using the kinship term which denote their blood relation from that relative's point of view. In the Vietnamese kinship terminology self reference is based on “relational pattern”, i.e. is determined by the relation that links “Ego” with another relative. The meaning of “I” is given in the context of a dialogue, real or imaginary, in which “Ego” adapts himself/herself in order to be the right “you” of his/her interlocutor. The shape of “Ego” thus is not fixed, depending on the interlocutor's perspective and on the relation between the interlocutors. Relationships are more meaningful then atomistic units when defining identities in the context of the Vietnamese family. Identities are delineated by a dialogical and reciprocal assumption of roles, that are agreed by the usage of certain terms for self referring and addressing the interlocutor.

Far from being just descriptive, these criteria underpin patterns of behaviour and respect within the lineage. By addressing properly a member of the family, and simultaneously oneself, a precise ethical code is endorsed, in which every single element plays his/her role and has his/her duties. It can be said that the usage of kinship terms gives shape to - and confirms - the familial hierarchy. Thus age, as well as the other criteria, determines the degree of respect that has to be paid to a relative and lead, to some extent, the family member's behaviour. The personal identity within the family is thus defined by the pragmatical assumption of responsibilities and duties that characterizes a specific role. Moreover, the importance of the emotional dimension within the *nhà* suggests that the relational construction of the personal identity is not to be considered as merely formal, in the meaning that the European common sense gives to this term. Far from being explained by our contraposition between formal and “substancial”, the concept of form itself plays a pivotal role in several East and Southeast Asian societies. It could be argued that in the context of the Vietnamese tradition, as well as the Chinese and several others, form *is* substance, especially in the sphere of social relations and ethical conducts. Thus, to “lose face” (*mất mặt*),namely to fail to achieving social expectations or to behaving appropriately in accordance to the shared sense of ethical code, is one of the most disgraceful things that could happen to a person. The shame caused by one member, as already said, overshadows the entire family.

In addition to this well known aspect of “eastern” formality, it will be here emphasize the peculiar role played by emotions in the assumption of responsibilities within the family. Rephrasing Nussbaum's sollicitations from a different perspective, it is here suggested that the Vietnamese relational “formality” affects - and in the same time is affected by – the emotive perception of familial relationships, conditioning the intellectual conception of moral values and the practical behavioural patterns. Consequently, as it is intended to demonstrate, the extension of this pattern to a wider social context implies a different conception of human relations and, to some extent, of the moral assumptions of being part of the humankind.

The kinship terminology in Vietnamese, in fact, is not adopted only within the clan or the family, but is extended to the whole society of the “Vietnamese speakers”. Non relatives, even strangers, may be referred to as *anh* (older brother) or *em* (younger sibling) or *chị* (older sister), etc. according to their age - or, more precisely, to the age difference between the interlocutors - sometimes, to their social position or profession. Consequently, the addressor is expected to refer to himself/herself using the kinship term which denotes the other side of the correct relation that links him/her to the addressee. Therefore, a person who apparently is slightly older than the addressor can be called *anh* or *chị -* the speaker designating himself/herself as *em*; *chú* (younger uncle) or *cô* (younger aunt) if he/she is about five years older, and so on. However, it would be too simplistic to reduce the extended use of kin terms to a strict age-based hierarchy The decision of using one kin (or non kin) terms instead of another equally suitable mirrors more complicated models of social interaction. In order to give an example, the adoption of the addressee's perspective in third-party reference, in which is implied a certain degree of superiority of the speaker, constitues another socio-linguistic possibility. It can be said that the status of the interlocutors is mutually defined by agreeing on the reciprocal usage of one kin term or another. Thus, the social identity can be considered, to some extent, contextual, not being assigned *per se*, but *vis-á-vis* an interlocutor and in a specific context.

The Vietnamese sense of community is, to some extent, shaped by the perception of belonging to a wider clan, in which diverse *họ* are embraced to give birth to a national lineage. As Marr[[39]](#footnote-39) points out, an ambiguous and, to some extent, contradictory interpretation of the concept of national family characterized the Vietnamese way to Communism. On the one hand, the centrality of the family was severely criticized for being particularistic, while a more complex model of social interaction was promoted. Notions such as *dân tộc* (people-hood), *công dân* (national citizenship), and several others that underpin a less ascriptive idea of social relations were introduced into the Vietnamese sociolinguistic context, as well as the operative concept of *đoàn kết* (to unite) - from which *sự đoàn kết* (Union) derives. On the other hand quasi-familiar perspectives permeated Communist language and symbolism, and a family-like atmosphere characterized the relationships among Uncle Hồ's close comrades.

**Status Terms and Titles**

The ambiguity of the Vietnamese Communist policy towards the extension of familial relations, and the related kinship terminology, to the social sphere is also mirrored in the partially failed attempt to introduce a different system for person addressing. In fact, during the most egalitarian period of the Vietnamese history, the term *đồng chí* (comrade) as second person reference was ushered in, emulating – as Marr suggests[[40]](#footnote-40) - the French *citoyen* of the 1789 Revolution and the Russian *tovarich*. The intention was to eradicate the feudal hierarchy endorsed by the usage of the kinship terms, giving birth to a more equitable society. However, this attempt eventually resulted into a restricted usage of the word *đồng chí* for official and rhetorical purposes only. If the familial relation model resisted the egalitarian assault, another mode of address and reference was deeply transformed. In fact, the linguistic and social revolution underpinned by the adoption of *đồng chí* was directed above all against status terms and titles. Vietnamese people also use status terms - or add honorific or occupational titles to proper names and Kin terms - to address others and to refer to oneself. Thus, professional titles such as *bác sĩ* (doctor) or *giáo sư* (professor) often occur alone or together with a kin term (i.e. *ông* *bác sĩ*, literarily “Grandfather doctor”) if the name is obvious.

It seems redundant to notice that status terms reflect the social hierarchy more evidently than kinship terms do. However, a less banal reflection could suggest that they mirror another ranking criterion, another layer of - or perspective from which – observing the complicated Vietnamese sociolinguistic context. Social transformations in diverse historical periods originated disparate sets of status terms, which structured social interaction. As already reported, *chính danh*, namely “giving the right name” to someone is not just a matter of etiquette, but also affects the construction of the identity of the self and the other, in terms of ethical and social implications and consequences. The word *danh* simultaneously means “name”, “fame” and “reputation”. Inferring the existence of a relationship between these diverse meanings in the Vietnamese sociolinguistic and ethical context does not seem therefore so illogical.

In this status-minded Vietnamese society, the position – official or social – of each individual is clearly defined, not so much in terms of rights and obligations (as in Western bureaucracy for instance), but mainly in terms of interpersonal behavior. Applying the “correct name” (*chính danh*) in social intercourse is the concern of everyone. [[41]](#footnote-41)

It is noteworthy that in this quotation Nguyễn Ðình Hòa sets the “western” conception of rights and obligations against the Vietnamese interpersonal behaviour when indicating what defines the social position of each person. It seems that the role of the individual – and, to some extent, his/her identity itself - is not even understandable out of a relational and ethical context. From this point of view, concepts such as rights and obligations show themselves as vague abstractions if not practically embedded in an interactional and dialogical situation.

In addiction to, and in conjunction with, kinship and status terms, several other commons nouns are used in both address and third party references. Among them, *ngài*/*người* (person, man), *bạn/bồ* (friend) *tớ* (servant) and, above all, *tôi/tui* (subject of the king) play a pivotal role in expressing and shaping the meritocratic basis of non-kinship hierarchy[[42]](#footnote-42) and in combining the kin authority ranking with other forms of social systems. These terms co-occur with kin and status terms in dialogical interactions, in accordance with the social hierarchy defined by the interlocutor's mutual assumption of their respective role. Therefore, these common nouns are not interchangeable, but each of them has to be used in conjunction with specific terms or sets of terms. Generally, common nouns and personal pronouns do not co-occurr in person referring.

None of these common nouns can be defined as a pronouns, although several Vietnamese grammar books include, for instance, *tôi/tui* and *tớ* in that class. Furthermore, *tôi* is commonly used in Vietnamese language textbooks for foreigners to translate “I” without any further explanation and distinction, giving therefore the impression not only of accomplishing the same functions, but also of having the same, or analogous, meaning. Being literarily translated as “subject”, however, the term *tôi/tui* can notbe considered self -standing, implicitly presupposing an interlocutor, i.e. “the king”. As Phan Thị Ðắc[[43]](#footnote-43) reminds, *tôi/tui* is used in such native expression as *nghĩa* *vua tôi* “obligation between the King and the subject”; *bầy tôi* “subject of the King”; *phận* *tôi con* “condition of dependence” (literarily: “condition of the subject and the child”, in which the age-based hierarchy and the conception of monarchy tends to coincide). Where this misinterpretation of the term *tôi* came from? During the seventeenth century, Catholic missionaries, mainly Jesuits, entered Vietnam. Following the principles of what has later been referred to as “inculturation” - i.e. adapting Church teachings to the context of non-Catholic cultures – the Jesuit missionary Alexander de Rodhes compiled the first European dictionary of the Annamite language, in which the difficulty to render the Vietnamese relational perspective on the self is implicitly manifested. It seems that, in spite of his deep knowledge of the Vietnamese language and culture, de Rodhes refused to accept the absence of a non-relational term to define the “Ego”. It can be argued that this refusal mirrors the fear of endorsing a different idea of the self, whose “essence” is determined by moral relationships and social relations rather then by an individual “soul”. Therefore, when rendering into Latin the first-person singular *tôi*, de Rodhes assimilates it firmly to the Latin “*ego*”, adding only that it denotes a sense of personal modesty: “*tôi: ego, meus, a, vm. loquendo demisse”.* According to de Rhodes, *tôi*, along with *ta,* expresses an enhancement of the listener's status, that has to be interpreted in a metaphorical sense. Not implying any literal servant-master relationship, the use of *tôi* only reflects an honorific nuance. Furthermore, it allows to politely address the interlocutor while avoiding to adopt terms that reflect familial relationships.

De Rhodes gave another separate dictionary entry for *tôi*, translated as “servant”: “*tôi: feruus, i. famulus, i. subditus”.* Bydistinguishing the two entries, it seems that any connection between *tôi* as “ego” and *tôi* as “servant” is rejected. However, in the grammatical appendix to the dictionary, in which de Rhodes tackles the issue of the Vietnamese “pronouns”, the existance of this separation is implicitly questioned.

*Tôi*: I, is the common way of addressing whenever a person is speaking with a superior, although because of the different ways of being superior, other terms have to be added, at least at the beginning of the speech: for instance, when talking to the most important person that in Tunkin is called *Bua*, King [...] Finally when speaking with anyone who is superior, even if only slightly, and also with peers, without specific rules is used *tôi* *chièng*, i.e. your servant[[44]](#footnote-44)

In the first sentence, de Rhodes translates *tôi* with “ego”, adding that this form is used when speaking with a superior. De Rhodes, than, introduces the relation between the King and the subject – in Vietnamese vua/ *tôi* – and other hierarchical relation in which *tôi* has to be used for self referring. In this passage whether *tôi* means “ego” or “servant/subject” is not clear. However, when describing which term the addresser has to adopt when speaking with people of a slightly higher or equal status , he explicitly affirms that *tôi* means “Vestra dominatio”, i.e. “your servant”.

The same amphibological use of *tôi* results from this other passage:

In place of first person pronouns, several names are used when addressing people: in fact, superiors use their proper names with inferiors, which they are referred to by when speaking friendly [...] thus, it commonly happens that, in place of the first person, a term is adopted that indicates the kinship relation [...]If the Holy Virgin is referring to herself, when speaking to Lord Christ, She can use the term *mẹ*, Mother in place of the first person, such as *mẹ theo con*, mother follows the son, i.e. I, Mother follow you, son. Although, when the King of Tunkin is speaking with his mother, he uses the term *tôi*, which means subject, when Lord Christ is speaking with His Virgin Mother, He consequently adopts the term *con*, Son, as first person, such as, *con nói cu mẹ*, the Son follows the Mother, i.e. I, Son follow you, Mother. In fact, because He is God, it seems inconvenient to appear rude when referring to a creature, even if she is the Mother. In my opinion, if the Virgin Mother had spoken the language of Tunkin, she would have rather used the term *tôi*, servant, when speaking to the Son of God. However, it also seems not inadequate that she would have used the term *mẹ*, Mother, when speaking openly and privately with her Son. However, I will leave all of this issue to the judgement of more expert people.

De Rhode is here tackling the well known issue of the overlap of different codes in person reference, wherein the relationship between mother and son coincides with the relation between the King –or God – and a subject. Interestingly, in both the examples de Rhodes translates *tôi* as “servant” (servum; ancilla). Moreover, when describing the use of kinship terms in second person addressing, de Rhodes states:

It has to be noticed that this kinship terms are used also for other people which are not relatives, thus when an husband is speaking to his wife, as well as when a person is talking to somebody inferior the term *anh*, older brother, is used: however the wife when speaking with a man has always to use the term *tôi*, servant.

In this case also the term *tôi*, used for first person reference, is translated as “servant” (ancilla). It seems that de Rhode purposely decided to split *tôi* into two different meanings: the absence of an equivalent of the term and, most significantly, the ontological meaning of “ego” was simply unacceptable for the European philosophical and religious context of that period. This mis-interpretation of *tôi*, accepted by several other missionaries, consented the employment of it in the “impersonal, non dyadic manner of 'I' or 'me' in English.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

The misinterpretation of the “grammatical” role of the common nouns, in the context of the Vietnamese person referring system could lead to the underestimation of the ethical and pragmatical implications of the selection of these terms, instead of others, in a specific linguistic interaction. As Luong suggests, for instance, “as a non-kinship term, *tôi/tui* stands in contrast with kinship terms in foremost indication of co-membership within the larger sociocultural system of non-kinship nature”.[[46]](#footnote-46) Being used in co-occurrency with status and kinship terms, the noun *tôi* pragmatically does not presuppose a negative relation between the interlocutors or in reference to a third party. However, it implies a weaker sense of solidarity if compared to the choice of mutually addressing using kin terms.

According to Luong, the choice among status and kinship terms in co-occurrence with *tôi* for self reference is structurally connected with the co-existence of two hierarchical criteria within the framework of the Vietnamese society. The first is based on gerontocracy, encompassed by the familialstructure. The other is meritocratic, and is underpinned by the usage of status terms. Although these two principles seem to be in reciprocal opposition, the both of them contributes to shape the various behavioural patterns of the Vietnamese social interaction. Thus, *tôi/tui* sometimes co-occurs with a combination of both kinship and status term (i.e. *ông* *bác sĩ*), contributing “not only to render more specific the reference to the occupant of a non-kinship role [...]. It also facilitates the finer differentiation in the behavioral patterns towards the referent on the basis of referent's age.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Far from nullifying one of the two, or both of them, the tension between the criteria on which the social hierarchy has to be based constitutes a structural opposition of the Vietnamese culture in the past and in present times. The two principles have found their way to harmonize with each other by virtue of “hierarchical formality and social stable solidarity”.

Analogously to *tôi/tui*, another common name is often adopted in addressee's and self-reference: *mình*,“body”. Indicating the individual figure, apparently without any implication with the social or relational sphere, this term seems to show some resemblance with the “western” sense of the “self”. However, in the Vietnamese “status-minded” society, addressing oneself as “body” implies a formal renounce to one's own rank, that has to be interpreted as a polite enhancement of the interlocutor's position. In fact, a human being striped of its social definition can be merely considered as a “body”, which in this case implies the loss of a vital part of the individual's identity. Interestingly, the term *mình* can be used to address oneself in absence of interlocutors[[48]](#footnote-48). Far from contradicting the thesis of a relational sense of identity mirrored by the Vietnamese language, this observation helps to understand to what extent also the private sphere is entwined with a dialogical conception of the “self”. *Mình*, in fact,co-occurs with several pronouns and nouns, among wich *bạn*, friend, has to be mentioned. Avoiding any hierarchical implications, the adoption of this couple of nouns for person referring has originated within the Communist framework, and is still used among young urban people, denoting a very close relationship. Therefore, by calling oneself *mình*, the virtual presence of a close friend is presupposed, also “when thinking about oneself in the privacy of one's bedroom”

**The Relational “Ego”. Some philosophical reflections**

The profound philosophical consequences and implications of the Vietnamese pattern of person reference, particularly self-reference, have been considered by Laycock, among others, who, in his article *Vietnamese mode of self-reference: A model of Buddhist egology*, proposes a comparison between the Husserlian conception of the “empirical ego” and the Buddhist ontology – or, more precisely, non-ontology – of the self. Laycock suggests that the Vietnamese, or “a Vietnamese-like-use” of self reference precisely mirrors the Buddhist deconstruction of the ego, by presenting the absence of a self-standing entity which refers to him/herself as “I”. To this extent, the Vietnamese conception of the Self invalidates the philosophical function of Descartes’ *Cogito*, namely to guarantee a clear and evident access to the proof of the existence and, to some extent, the essence of the human being. The relational dimension of the Vietnamese way to referring to the “ego” implies, to some extent, the presence, at least virtual, of an interlocutor *vis-a-vis* whom defining one's identity. When translating the *Cogito* into Vietnamese, the problem of which identity is thinking arises: The Vietnamese rendering of the *Cogito* can virtually assumes hundreds of forms, depending of who is uttering it and in which context.

If this criticism of the universality of the Decartes's *Cogito* is not under discussion, the it can be argued that the fundamental role of relations and relationships in conceiving the individuality and the society offers resistance to the Buddhist complete deconstruction of the notion of the Ego and the reality of the world. If is true that the model of identity construction presented by the Vietnamese system of person reference shows itself as relational, nevertheless, relations and relationships within the Vietnamese context are not conceived as “empty” phenomena, but as pragmatical and ethical patterns of behaviour, that bind the particular “identity”, even if temporarily, to precise expectations and obligations. It is true that Buddhism has been playing a fundamental role since its introduction in the Vietnamese context[[49]](#footnote-49), to the extent that “the two are often inextricable”[[50]](#footnote-50). However, it is here suggested that Laycock's theory is excessively focused on the ontological issue, conceived as the core part of the (western) philosophical reflection. Intercultural philosophy is not just about comparing topics, but also – and above all – about observing phenomena from a different cultural angle. Therefore, before entering in the realm of comparison, it is important to consider whether Vietnamese philosophies are interested in ontology or not. Marr underlines the Vietnamese lack of interest toward the “western” concern about the meaning and the foundation of the “self”:

Amidst so many dyadic relationships, does the self in Vietnam possess any internal meaning, or is each person instead a collection of many masks accumulated through life, some carved by others, some by oneself? Put more crudely, is there anything behind the shifting masks? These may be the wrong questions, at least prior to the twentieth-century. [[51]](#footnote-51)

Namely: prior to the introduction of European concepts, theories and policies in Vietnam. According to Marr, it seems necessary, in order to gain a better understanding of the philosophical implication of the person reference system, to tackle the issue from a more Vietnamese-like perspective, trying to understand whether certain questions make sense in this context or not.

If the Vietnamese self reference model seems unlikely to offer any confirmation or denial to the theory of the non-substantiality of the self – for relationships are not conceived in Vietnamese tradition as void - nevertheless, it is here argued that the entire system of person reference is able to offer another interesting occasion for a philosophical reflection. In fact, the analysis previously conducted has shown how relations and relationships, which constitute the sense of identity, are conceived in terms of ethical and behavioral patterns, implying thus pragmatical models of interaction and the endorsement of a shared sense of social and moral rules. It seems that in the Vietnamese Buddhist reflection the ontological issue could not be considered as relevant as it has been in “western” philosophy. Or, to say it in other words, the reflection on the Vietnamese person reference system highlights the primacy of moral issues over ontology. If the construction of the self is determined by the underpinning of ethical codes in the interactional context, the question of the meaning of “being” can not, to some extent, be addressed out of a moral and pragmatical sphere. As Chánh Trí Mai Thọ Truyền pointed out, the grater influence that the Buddha Dharma has had on the Vietnamese mind has to be found in the practice of Compassion. Indicating the capability to sympathize with the suffering of all living creatures in order to help them to overcome their difficulties, compassion is considered as an outstanding virtue in the Vietnamese tradition. It can be related to the sino-vietnamese *tâm* (heart-mind), a multifaceted concept that describes “the inanimate, reflective, perceptive, sentient, sympathetic dimensions of the human nature”[[52]](#footnote-52). The notion of *tâm* encompasses not only the contemplative and meditative aspects, but also, an mostly, the capability of morally acting in the world. The awareness achieved through the “self-cultivation” enables to thinking and behaving according to the moral judgement. Not bounded to social hierarchies, *tâm* emphasizes another level of human relationships, based on the capability of mutually understanding feelings and sufferings. Noticeably, the term *tâm* has been adopted in poetry to expressing the idea of “true self”, stressing the idea that the meaning of the “self” has to be found in its relationship with “others”. Therefore, it can be argued that also “the cultivation of the self” mirrors the fundamental relational and moral dimension of the Vietnamese conception of the “Ego”.

From the reflection on the “relationality” of person referring system, this present research has inferred the practical, ethical and moral nature of this concept of the Vietnamese “Ego”. Because relationships shape identities, thus the construction of this “self” could be considered as an ethical and moral issue. However, the moral and practical vocation of most of the Vietnamese philosophies and religions is not the only result that can be derived. Another fundamental element which the Vietnamese way of conceiving moral, ontological and political issues is based on is the importance of language not only in correctly describing the ethical and social relationships, but in shaping them and acting in the world. This well known theory has been expressed by Confucius under the definition of正名 (*Zhèngmíng*) *Rectification of Names*. Constituting one of the central doctrines of Confucian philosophy, the “Rectification of Names” has played a pivotal role in every Confucianism-influenced societies. It is generally said to be composed of two aspects: the first affirms that things should be called by their proper name; the second recommends that things should conform to the name they already have. Thus one of Confucius's most famous pronouncements: "Let the ruler be ruler, the minister be the minister, the father be the father, and the son be the son"[[53]](#footnote-53). This theory does not restrict itself to recommending that everyone should strive to play his proper role in the social hierarchy. Far from guaranteeing the *status quo*, 正名 (*Zhèngmíng*) presents several unexpected implications and consequences. From an historical and political perspective, the Rectification of Names has been the philosophical base also of revolts and revolutions. Throughout history, Chinese and Vietnamese - among others - political reformers would appeal to the idea of Rectification of Names when attempting to transform or dismiss corrupt dynasties. Even today, the concept is considered one of the most basic precepts of Confucianist nations social philosophies, being frequently mentioned by political reformers. The Confucian Rectification of Names focuses on the relation between language and actions, not that between language and objects. The accordance of words to the truth of things recommended by Confucius has not to be interpreted as a conformity of a term with a presupposed ideal concept of reality which words are asked to express. Classical Chinese accounts of language are firmly extensional, occasionally adopting concepts such as sense, meaning or idea. The language-world relation is a political matter. Naming and conforming to one's name not only have political and social implications, but can also be considered such as ethical and political actions themselves.

Classical Chinese linguistic theories are generally based on the context-dependence of language. Thus, the reflection on language offered by them is more concerned on the social and moral implications of language rather than on the capability of utterances to having access to the truth or plausibly portraying “the reality”. It could be said that every definition implies a way - or more - of performing in the world, which is endorsed in the act of naming itself. Therefore, as already suggested, each name in the social relations entails certain responsibilities and duties. According to Confucius, 仁 *ren* (humanity, benevolence) is the faculty on which relies the attribution of proper terms in specific contexts, guaranteeing the pertinence of the Rectification of Names. Composed by the omophone radical 人 *ren* (human being), to which 二 *er* (two) is added,仁 *ren* suggests that humanity-benevolence is the base on which a relationship between two persons, at least, cantake place. By conceiving this faculty as the cornerstone of the Rectification of Names, its moral, social and practical vocation is unswervingly stated[[54]](#footnote-54).

The Rectification of Names is considered as a criterion to be adopted in every interactional context, the appropriate term not being absolute, but depending on the situation. Thus, the “self” is asked to gain access to the capability of correctly interacting with another “self” by virtue of “self cultivation”. Although several aspects of the traditional Confucian philosophy have been criticized by Vietnamese intellectuals since the Colonial period, it seems that this supremacy of the ethical and moral perspective still affects the interpretation of some political issues. In other words, because Ethics includes Politics, ethical and moral concepts encompass political theories[[55]](#footnote-55).

The discussion concerning principles and criteria to be adopted in reforming words and terminologies fuelled the productions of theories and research. One of the most outstanding intellectuals of the colonial period, Phan Khôi, explicitly emphasized the moral and political implications of the use of certain terms or linguistic patterns, not only citing “cases where incorrect terminology could be politically damaging”[[56]](#footnote-56), but also pinpointing the social and ethical implications of the use of *status* terminology.

The success of this Confucian paradigm has not deterministically influenced Vietnamese perspectives. Several intellectuals had (and have) taken diverse positions, confronting “Asian” theories with the results of “Western” philosophical productions. Nevertheless, it can also be argued that - until recent times - the interest that Vietnamese intellectuals have manifested towards European philosophers mirrors this all-encompassing shape of the ethical and moral sphere. At the beginning of the Colonial period Kantian moral philosophy attracted the attention of Vietnamese thinkers, which rewised several similarities with the Neo-Confucian approach, “sharing the a priori assertion of human virtue and life as a quest for the ultimate good”[[57]](#footnote-57). Therefore: “Kant's call to individuals to act in such way that what they willed might also be thought of as universal laws was simply a more ‘rational’ expression of the sage in search of the Way (Dao) – or so some Vietnamese might feel.” This moral norm was, thus, interpreted in Vietnam as a new ideology of liberation, in which the selfish and transitory interest of the individual was overcome by the aspiration to gain immortality and perfection for humanity as a whole. For similar reasons, Rousseau gained the attention of Vietnamese intellectuals. Translated into *quốc ngữ* in the 1920s, *Du contrat social* was appreciated for the importance it assigned to the community, whose members had chosen to form a single moral person, relinquishing the rights they could claim as free individuals. Conversely, as Marr (2000:779) points out, Locke's concern on individual rights, private property and restriction of the power of the state was simply neglected by Vietnamese scholars. Moreover, although Bentham's Utilitarism and Smith's Social Darwinisim found some appreciation among members of the nascent bourgeoisie, they were generally considered abominable by both traditionalists and progressives. These “individualistic” conceptions were criticized for their rejection of social grouping rather than for their assumption that the individual is driven by selfish desires: “Marxism attracted many young Vietnamese intellectuals because of the way it appeared to combine materialist self-interest with idealistic assertions regarding the perfectibility of human character.” [[58]](#footnote-58)

**Conclusions**

The reflection on ethical and social implications of the correct use of language presented by the conception of Rectification of Names has shown to what extent the Vietnamese system of person reference mirrors a relational conception of the “self”, not only theoretically, but practically, politically and morally. According to this perspective, to separate the individual from his/her familial and social relations and relationships means to deprive the “self” not only of the criteria for defining his/her “identities”, but also, because the ethical sphere is considered the source of humanity, of his/her human dignity. It is not being implied that the Vietnamese are not likely to harbour selfish desires for accomplishing their own private interests, but it is suggested, however, that this not-self-centered conception of the “ego” and “society” shapes a different perspective on the interpretation of moral and political issues.

It could be argued that the Vietnamese rejection of individualism and selfishness matches the “western” fear of collectivism. Interestingly, concepts and words for indicating the “Individual” (*cá nhân*) and “Individualism” (*chủ nghĩa cá nhân*) were imported into the Vietnamese language in the first decades of the last century, “along with a host of other evocative neologism, such as 'society' (*xã hội*), 'ethnic group/nation' (*dân tộc*), 'ideology' (*chủ nghĩa*), 'democracy' (*dân chủ chủ nghĩa*), 'science' (*khoa học*) and 'progress' (*tiến hóa*)”[[59]](#footnote-59). The introduction of these terms into Vietnamese reflects the encounter with a different perspective on the perception of personal and socio-political relations and conceptions, that fuelled philosophical and political discussions. As previously stated, since the Colonial period the introduction of European philosophies into the Vietnamese context led intellectuals, writers and poets, among others, to rethink several aspects of their own traditions, by comparing them with the new ideas. The negative meaning given to the term “individual” has not to be interpreted as a mere nationalist refusal of other perspectives, but as the theoretical and practical result of a cultural decision.

During the Colonial period, several Vietnamese intellectuals and writers promoted the use of *tôi* as anequivalent of *moi* and *je,* which were already adopted by the Vietnamese francophone bourgeoisie. The connection between this new employment of *tôi* and the influence of the western conception of the individual was noted by Vietnamese writers:

The first day – who knows when – that the word “I” [*tôi*] appeared in Vietnamese poetry, it was truly surprising. it was as if “I” were lost in a strange land. This is because it brought with it a perspective not yet seen in this country: the individual perspective. Since ancient times there was no individual in Vietnamese society. There was only the collective: the large one being the country, the small one, the family. As for the individual, its unique characteristics were submerged in the family and in the country, like a drop of water in the sea. [[60]](#footnote-60)

Although the introduction of the individual's perspective in literature and poetry mirrors -and is mirrored by - a transformation of several aspects of the Vietnamese sociocultural context, the relational pattern continued to structure the conception of the self. In spite of the attempts to assimilate it to the same use and meaning of Indoeuropean pronouns, *tôi* needs a second-person to be related to: the failure to find a neutral form for “you” highlighted the resistence of the Vietnamese sociolinguistical structure to adapt itself to a self-centered idea of relationships and society.

Moreover, the terms individual (*cá nhân*)and individualism (*chủ nghĩa cá nhân*) mantained a pejorative sense even in the writings of those intellectuals who were supporting the adoption of the *tôi* perspective, not only in literature and poetry, but also in everyday interactions. Individualism was generally conceived by traditionalists, as well as by radicals, as a cultural and social poison, threatening group solidarity and being the theoretical structure of “anarchism, hedonism, weepy romanticism and nihilism”[[61]](#footnote-61). Therefore, not surprisingly Nguyễn Văn Huyên, who was an expert connoisseur of both French and Vietnamese culture and language, when comparing the two conceptions of the individuality, affirmed that in the Vietnamese context: “l'individu n'est rien”[[62]](#footnote-62).

This statement should not be interpreted as the admission of the intrinsic despotism – or, vice versa, of the altruism - of the Vietnamese traditional culture. It simply shows a different equilibrium in the relationship between the individual, the others and society, which tends towards collectivity and the relations by which it is constituted, rather than on the discrete parts of it.

In the framework offered by Marxist theory, this conception found a new formulation, according to which “individualism” was the product of the western bourgeois colonial approach and, therefore, a menace to the Vietnamese freedom and ethics. As Nguyễn Khắc Viên points out: “Three hundreds years of capitalist development has caused western people to cut all their roots, to become dynamic, self-made autonomous individuals who are also rather isolated”[[63]](#footnote-63). The atomistic conception of the individual is here rejected not only from a political perspective, but also from an ethical, moral and cultural. Individualism constitutes the antithesis of the relational pattern that structures the construction of the Vietnamese sense of “ego”.

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1. More precisely, few scholars have addressed this issue directly, due to the fact that knowledge of the Vietnamese language is uncommon among non-native philosophers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. More precisely, few scholars have addressed this issue directly, due to the fact that knowledge of the Vietnamese language is uncommon among non-native philosophers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. J. Butler: *Excitable speech*, London-New York, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. H. K. Bhabha: *The Location of Culture*, London-New York, 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R. Panikkar: *The Intra-Religious Dialogue.* New York, 1987, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Or at least emotions have a cognitive component, as some critics of the Nussbaum's neo-stoic theory prefer to affirm. See J. Lau: *The nature of emotions. Comments on Martha Nussbaum’s Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. In [www.hku.hk/philodep/joelau/phil/nussbaumpreprint.pdf](http://www.hku.hk/philodep/joelau/phil/nussbaumpreprint.pdf), 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. M. Nussbaum: *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions.* Cambridge, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Luong Hy Vong: *Discursive Practices and Linguistic Meanings. The Vietnamese System of Person Reference*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 1990, p. 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The problem of considering Vietnamese unity of speech as “word” has been addressed also by N.V. Stankievich and Nguyễn Tài Cẩn: *The problem of the word in its relationship to the grammatical system in Vietnamese*. In Nguyễn Khắc Viên and others. *Linguistic Essays.* Hanoi, 1976. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I. Nørlund and Pham Duc Thanh: *Asian Values and Vietnam's Development in Comparative Perspective*. Copenhagen, 2000, p. 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. There are, in fact, but few exceptions to this pessimistic remark. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. J. Van Brakel: *De-essentializing across the board. No need to speak the same language*. Proceeding of the conference What is comparative philosophy*.* 13-15 march 2008 at Wolsfon College of Oxford. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Luong Hy Vong: *Discursive Practices and Linguistic Meanings. The Vietnamese System of Person Reference*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 1990, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. L.E. Thompson: *A Vietnamese reference grammar*. Honolulu, 1991, p. 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Nguyễn Ðình Hòa: *Verbal and Non-verbal patterns of Respect Behavior in Vietnamese. Some Metalinguistic Data*. New York, 1957. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. H.V. Luong (1984, 1990) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. However, the critic of the definition of “personal pronouns” is explicitly pointed out in the work of Luong, while Nguyễn mantains an ambiguous position on the matter at issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Which include kinship and status terms, commons nouns, personal names and “pronouns”. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. H.V. Luong 1990, p.16. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. H.V. Luong 1990, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The land nowadays known as Vietnam was occupied by the Chinese Empire for nearly one thousand years (207 B.C. -939 A.D.) and also after the political independence was gained, the cultural influence of the Celestial Empire affected the Vietnamese society for long time. However, it is not fair to reduce the Vietnamese tradition to a simple epigon of the Chinese culture, as a widespread sinocentric attitude tends to affirm. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. H.V. Luong,1990, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This is the translation of the Chinese *yin/yang* theory, that has been deeply internalized by the Vietnamese tradition, giving birth to significant phenomena of syncretism with the native cultures. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. N. L. Jamieson: *Understanding Vietnam*. Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. In order to give an example of the importance of this category, the success of the new generation of Vietnamese female writers has been described by the contemporary literary critics of the local press as: “the revenge of the *âm*”. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The so called *yin/yang* school is considered antecedent to the Daoist tradition. However, it gradually merged into a Daoist setting, eventually becoming a structural part of it. Nevertheless, it has to be noticed that Daoism itself resists to any attempts of being categorized into definitions such as “school”, “theory”, “philosophy”, “religion”, “cult”, “meditation”, etc. Composed by diverse practises and theorisation, it appears in a multifaceted shape, which includes “high” philosophical theories, practises of meditation and physical exercises, worship of deities, etc.

    Moreover, the *yin/yang* theory has not been exclusively taken in by Daoism: it also influenced Confucianism and – mostly – Neo-Confucianism. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Whether Buddhism came into the Vietnamese territory following the Northern rout – i.e. from China, thus being already syncretized with the Chinese philosophies and religions - or the Southern rout – directly from India – is still a debated issue. Vietnamese scholars, in fact, have given evidence of the presence of Buddhist schools in Vietnam that preceded the establishment of the “Sinitic Buddhism”. However, the influence of the Chinese interpretations and practises on the so called “Vietnamese Buddhism” became more and more evident during and after the Heavenly Empire occupation of Vietnam. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. However, Neo-Confucianism present itself as a synthesis of diverse traditions, namely Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. Therefore, several aspects of the *yin-yang* theory have been integrated within the Neo Confucian framework. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Vietnamese language belongs to the Mon-Khmer stock. During the period of Chinese occupation, many Han loan words entered Vietnamese. While adopting many elements of the Chinese language, the Vietnamese people changed several Chinese words, gradually creating Hán Việt, i.e. Chinese-Vietnamese. The influence of the Chinese language, particularly written, persisted for long time also after Vietnam gained its independence from the Heavenly Empire. Chinese characters, in fact, served both as the medium of communication among scholars and officials, and as the instrument of “high” literature. From the tenth century, a writing system based on Chinese characters was developed by Buddhist scholars and monks. The first evidence of the usage of this script, called *Chữ Nôm* (southern script) was given by an inscription on a stele at the Bao An Pagoda in Yên Lãng, Vĩnh Phú province, dated from 1209 AD (Lý Dynasty). *Chữ Nôm* combinesHan characters with new ones, expressly created by the Vietnamese, adding also phonological elements. Several Chinese words thus were borrowed and modified according to the Vietnamese pronunciation. As a result, the Vietnamese language often presents two words for the same – or an analogous – meaning: one is defined Sino-Vietnamese and the other “pure” Vietnamese. During the Trần Dynasty (1225-1400) the script was systematized and started to be used in literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. H.V. Luong, 1991, p. 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Nguyễn Ðình Hòa,1956, p.185. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. For a more critical approach to the concept of the “three obediences” (San Cong), or Three person who have to be followed” see D. Ko: *Teachers of the Inner Chambers. Women and Culture in Seventheen-century China*. Stanford,1994. In this interesting text, Doroty Ko described the silent but effective resistance of the Chinese woman to the Confucian annihilation of their will. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. I personally addressed the topic of the ambiguity of the Vietnamese reception of Confucian ethic towards the female role in A. Chiricosta: *Following the Trail of the Fairy-Bird*. In M. Roches and L. Edwards: *Transnational Feminist Movements in Asia*. London-New York, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Even if based on Chinese law, the Code included Vietnamese features, mainly in respect of female dignity. In order to give some examples, the *Hồng Đức* Code prohibited marriage without the woman's consent; even after an official announcement, a woman could break her engagement if the future husband was deemed critically ill, or found guilty of a serious crime, or if he squandered his family property. After being married, a woman could divorce if the husband abandoned her for more than five months, or, if the couple already had children, one year. A man could not divorce if his wife simply became ill, or if she was judged guilty of minor crimes. Furthermore, a married woman could never be enslaved, and had the right to inherit from her family. The *Hồng Đức* Code also stipulated an equal division of the family inheritance between daughters and sons. Noticeably, in the absence of sons, the first daughter would be allowed to perform the rituals of ancestor worship. Women also had the possibility of participating in the exams for entrance to the mandarinate. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. The usage of the term *mình* for self – reference will be discussed later on. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Generally speaking, in Vietnam it is suggested that the broom has to be older then the bride, in order to avoid terminological and hierarchical confusion. However, this norm is nor absolute neither constraining. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. In the Vietnamese tradition, as already pointed out, the Confucian rules have been blunted to some extent. Thus, the importance assigned to having a male heir is less fundamental than in China. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. D.G. Marr: *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial. 1920-1945*. Berkeley, 1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. D.G. Marr: *Concepts of ‘Individual’ and ‘Self’ in Twentieth-Centrury Vietnam.* In Modern Asian Studies, vol. 34, n.4 (2000). p.21. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Nguyễn Ðình Hòa 1954, p.62. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Luong 1990, p.133. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Phan Thị Ðắc: *Situation de la personne au Vietnam.* Paris, 1966. P. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. All the latin texts have been translated by the author of this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Marr 2000, p.776. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Luong 1990, p. 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Luong 1990, p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. This usage of *mình* was reported by several students of the University of Foreign Language of Hanoi, which the author is grateful to. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Nowadays, the predominant forms of Buddhism in Vietnam are Pure Land and Zen – along with combinations of the two. The latter, with its emphasis on meditation is mostly pursued among the monks and nuns, while the former is preferred by the lay-people. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Chánh Trí Mai Thọ Truyền*: Le Bouddhisme au Vietnam*. Saigon, 1962. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Marr 2000, p. 774. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Marr 2000, p.770. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Confucius, Analects, XII, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. It could be interesting to draw a comparison between this theory-practise and the Butler's reflections on the “words that wound” political agency. However, it would open another field of research, which can not be addressed in this present work. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. It has to be noticed that in ancient China an attempt to contrast the Confucian supremacy of Morality over Law was maid by the Legalists, or Legists. According to this group of scholars, 法*fa,*“law”*,* has to be considered as the base of political decisions, and not the moral power defended by Confucianism and the other schools. The capacity should not thus be related on the personal value of the sovereign but to the effectiveness of the law and the institutions. Remarkably, Legalism lost its battle. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Marr 1981, p. 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Marr 1981, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Marr 2000, p. 780. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Marr 2000, p. 769. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân: *Thi nhân Việt Nam*, Hanoi 1942. Pp. 51-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Marr 2000, p. 789. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Nguyễn Văn Huyên : *La civilisation annamite*. Paris 1944. p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Nguyễn Khắc Viên: *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam*. Berkeley, 1974. P.12. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)