

***“THỂ DIỆN”: THE VIETNAMESE CONCEPT OF FACE***  
**- *PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGE TEACHERS FROM NHA TRANG* -**

Submitted by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	vi
AUTHOR'S NOTE .....	vi
SUMMARY.....	vii
STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP .....	viii

### CHAPTER ONE

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
I. THE REASON FOR THE STUDY .....	1
II. FACE IN VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE.....	2
III. THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY .....	3
IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY .....	4
V. THE STRUCTURE OF THESIS .....	5

### CHAPTER TWO

<b>LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>6</b>
I. THE CONCEPT OF FACE: SOME THEORIES .....	7
II. FACE RESEARCH IN EAST ASIAN CULTURES.....	11
III. FACE AND SELF IN VIETNAMESE CONTEXTS.....	18
1. Some theoretical relations and considerations .....	18
2. The position of the concept of face in Vietnamese daily life .....	21
3. Picturing face and self in Vietnamese contexts through research and folklore.....	23

### CHAPTER THREE

<b>METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>45</b>
I. PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND GENERAL FRAMEWORKS.....	45
1. A social constructivism framework.....	45
2. A sociocultural approach.....	46

3. A multiculturalist approach .....	46
4. An exploratory study .....	48
II. METHODS AND SAMPLE .....	51
1. Methods of data collection .....	51
2. Sample .....	53
III. THE INTERVIEW DESIGN .....	55
1. The corpus .....	56
2. A little experiment with repertory grid interviews .....	59
3. The interview design .....	61
IV. THE PARTICIPANTS .....	63
1. Recruiting participants .....	63
2. The participants .....	64
V. THE INTERVIEW PROCESS .....	66
1. General information .....	66
2. The handling of the interviews .....	68
3. Ethical issues .....	71
VI. DATA ANALYSIS .....	71

## CHAPTER FOUR

<b>THỂ DIỆN: AN ORIENTATION TOWARDS OTHERS</b> .....	78
I. THE IMPORTANCE OF OTHERS' OPINIONS ON <i>THỂ DIỆN</i> OF A PERSON .....	78
1. Public context .....	78
2. Public opinion .....	84
3. Social norms .....	89
4. Majority behaviour .....	91
5. Implications .....	94
II. THE INGROUP RELATION IN TERMS OF <i>THỂ DIỆN</i> .....	96
1. The relation between a person and his/her important groups .....	96
2. The relation between a person and his/her important others .....	99
3. Discussion .....	103
III. MAINTAINING <i>THỂ DIỆN</i> OF OTHERS .....	103
1. 'Dĩ hòa vi quý', or the importance of interpersonal harmony .....	103
2. Methods to save <i>thể diện</i> of others and maintain harmony .....	108

3. Discussion .....	112
IV. <i>SĨ DIỆN</i> – THE OBNOXIOUSNESS OF SELF-FACE CONCERN .....	114
1. Examples .....	114
2. General evaluations .....	115
3. Why <i>sĩ diện</i> has a ‘bad’ meaning .....	116
4. Discussion .....	118

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ***THỂ DIỆN* AND SOCIAL ROLES:**

<b>TEACHERS, GENDER RELATIONS.....</b>	<b>121</b>
I. <i>THỂ DIỆN</i> FOR TEACHERS .....	121
1. The importance of <i>thể diện</i> to teachers .....	122
2. Components of teachers’ <i>thể diện</i> .....	123
3. Students’ opinions/evaluations were important to teachers’ <i>thể diện</i> .....	130
4. How <i>thể diện</i> of teachers is traditionally maintained in interactions with students .....	131
5. Discussion .....	137
II. <i>THỂ DIỆN</i> AND GENDER .....	140
1. Women should pay attention to men’s <i>thể diện</i> .....	140
2. The concept ‘ <i>thể diện đàn ông</i> ’ .....	143
3. Reflections of a gender inequality .....	150
4. Discussion .....	152
II. THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL ROLE AND POSITION .....	155

## CHAPTER SIX

### **INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES:**

<b>VARIATION, TENSION AND CHANGE.....</b>	<b>159</b>
I. TENSIONS BETWEEN “LIVING FOR SELF” AND “LIVING FOR OTHERS” .....	160
1. Pressure from “living for others” .....	160
2. <i>Thể diện</i> as a barrier to emotional expression .....	161
3. The possibility of rebellion against public opinion .....	163
II. TENSIONS AND CHANGES OF <i>THỂ DIỆN</i> IN THE TEACHING CONTEXT .....	166
1. The tension between concern for others’ <i>thể diện</i> and professional integrity – The case of teachers’ exams .....	166

2. The principle of honesty .....	169
3. <i>Thể diện</i> , guilt, conscience and personal morality .....	170
4. Change and the possibility of new bases for teachers' <i>thể diện</i> .....	172
III. CHANGING ATTITUDES TO GENDERED FACE: THE IDEAL OF GENDER EQUALITY .....	177
IV. DISCUSSION .....	182
 <b>CHAPTER SEVEN</b>	
<b>IMPLICATIONS</b> .....	184
I. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS .....	184
1. In terms of <i>thể diện</i> as a face concept .....	184
2. In terms of Vietnamese culture and society .....	185
II. CONTRIBUTIONS .....	190
1. Knowledge .....	190
2. Theory .....	191
3. Methodology .....	193
4. Practical contributions to cultural awareness, education and gender policies .....	194
III. A REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MULTICULTURALIST APPROACH .....	197
IV. FUTURE RESEARCH .....	200
V. CONCLUSION .....	201
 APPENDICES .....	
APPENDIX 1 - INTENDED QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS .....	202
APPENDIX 2 - ETHICS APPROVAL .....	207
REFERENCES .....	208

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## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
<b>Table 1.</b> Participants' information.....	64
<b>Table 2.</b> Information of the interviews.....	66

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

1. By Vietnamese language in this whole thesis, I mean language of the Kinh people, the biggest ethnic group in the multi-ethnic Vietnam, who account for 87% of the country's population. This is also the official language in Vietnam.
2. In this thesis, I intentionally do not use English articles 'a' and 'the' in front of *thể diện* and *sĩ diện* where they are normally required by English grammar rules. For example, "she was concerned about *thể diện* of her husband", rather than "she was concerned about **the** *thể diện* of her husband". This is because I feel that such a combination is odd and may invade the indigenous sense of the terms, which I aim to retain in this topic.
3. Some authors' names (particularly authors from East Asian cultures such as Vietnam, China, Japan and Korea) used in in-text references are preceded by initials, for example, L. H. Phan (2007) and V. H. Phan (2008). This is to distinguish between authors who have the same family name, which is quite common in East Asian cultures.

## SUMMARY

Despite the wide attention to the concept of face in linguistic and intercultural communication research, the Vietnamese concept of face as expressed by *thể diện* and related terms has not yet been systematically explored. Much of our existing knowledge has been filtered through Western theoretical frameworks. These have, in their pursuit of theoretical generalizability, neglected until recently the other-oriented characteristics of East Asian manifestations of face, the extent to which it is a gendered phenomenon and its concrete manifestations in the daily experience. Based on the holistic and culturally inclusive framework suggested by Shi-xu and an emic analysis of a corpus of *thể diện* and related terms on the internet, Vietnamese folk expressions, and most importantly, intensive interviews with 15 Vietnamese college teachers in Nha Trang, this research provides an exploratory map of how the Vietnamese talk about face.

*Thể diện* is found to be characterised by an intimate and recursive relationship with core Vietnamese values, gender and power relationships, ethics and professional behaviours. It both reflects and influences social structures; it provides guidelines for collectivist social cohesion but simultaneously nurtures self-oriented instrumental motivation; it strengthens professional status and behaviours among teachers but provides the rationale for resistance to innovations in pedagogy and for questionable ethical practices. It is also contextualised and gendered; men and women both accept that there is male face that must be upheld, but not female face, and that its unequal application reinforces gender inequality. Some participants interviewed also recognise the need for and the incipient emergence of change in the content and application of *thể diện* as Vietnam experiences challenges to the Confucian tradition and the effects of global information exchange. Changes in perceptions of *thể diện* will pose challenges for current government family, gender and education policies.



## **STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP**

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

The thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the Education Faculty Human Ethics Committee of La Trobe University, Melbourne (see Appendix 2).

Nguyen, Thi Quynh Trang

02 October 2013

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **I. THE REASON FOR THE STUDY**

It has been widely noted in academic as well as popular literature about Vietnamese culture that the Vietnamese are strongly concerned about face – the notion demonstrated in the concepts of face saving and face losing. The idea appears in most web pages about Vietnamese culture for a public audience. Also in research, this idea has been strongly reinforced. For example, studies in intercultural business communication have advised foreign business partners that in order to do business successfully with the Vietnamese they should be concerned about face needs of the Vietnamese in interactions (Chew, 2009; Smith & Pham, 1996; Truong & Nguyen, 2002; V. T. Vu & Napier, 2000). Comparisons in intercultural communication with the Americans have shown that the Vietnamese place much more importance on face concerns than do the Americans (McKinney, 2000; V. T. Vu & Napier, 2000). Studies in teaching and learning with the Vietnamese have also pointed out that the Vietnamese students' reluctance to participate in university classroom activities is largely due to their fear of face loss for both themselves and teachers (T. H. T. Pham, 2010; L. H. Phan, 2007; Watson, 1999; Yates & Nguyen, 2012).

Despite the fact that face has been widely mentioned in literature about Vietnam, I have found very little academic concern about studying this concept in Vietnamese culture. In the meantime, the research picture about face in other nearby cultures is vivid, for example in relation to face among Chinese (Bond & Lee, 1981; Gao, 2009; H. C. Hu, 1944; Ji, 2000), Japanese (Haugh, 2007; Haugh & Watanabe, 2009; Lin & Yamaguchi, 2007; Matsumoto, 1988), Korean (Choi & Kim, 2004; Choi, Kim, & Kim, 1997; Choi & Lee, 2002; Lim, 2009) and Thai (Ukosakul, 2003, 2009). Furthermore, in the above discussions about Vietnamese culture, the concept has often been mentioned from outsiders (foreign researchers) or from outside perspective (with Western ideologies). No study has systematically shown what the Vietnamese actually view, think or say about the concept. Therefore the concept remains

abstract, even alien to the common Vietnamese readers themselves. Vietnamese concept of face as an under-researched area is, therefore, a motivation for this research.

Furthermore, as a college teacher, I have also been concerned about the operation of this concept in college and university classrooms. As with other aspects in Vietnamese life, concerns about face are not absent from classroom interactions. As mentioned above, it has been evidenced by research about Western classrooms that people who grow up experiencing Vietnamese education care about face saving so much that they are very cautious to voice their opinions and so often are absent in tertiary classroom discussions (T. H. T. Pham, 2010; L. H. Phan, 2007; Watson, 1999; Yates & Nguyen, 2012). However, little has been studied about what really happens in terms of face concerns in Vietnamese classrooms. This lack of literature in part is also a reason for my study about the native Vietnamese face concept.

## II. FACE IN VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE

The original physiognomical meaning of face as a human body part is labelled ‘*mặt*’ in Vietnamese. As in many other languages, the term is also used as a metaphor for human social face. It has often been associated with spiritual and moral meanings such as honour, dignity and virtue (V. H. Phan, 2008). This spiritual meaning is recognized when ‘*mặt*’ is in combination with some other words, for example, *bẽ mặt*, *xấu mặt*, *ngượng mặt*, *sượng mặt*, *muối mặt*, *xám mặt*, *lên mặt*, *vênh mặt*, *đẹp mặt*, *nể mặt*, *qua mặt*, *nở mặt* (or *nở mày nở mặt*, or *nở mặt nở mày*), *bôi tro trát trấu vào mặt*, and *đeo mo vào mặt*. Among these collocations, the most relevant to our studied face concept is *mất mặt*, as it almost equates to the term *mất thể diện*, both mean ‘losing face’. I generally do not consider *mặt* in other combinations as necessarily a face issue, as their meanings can be ambiguous. For example, the closest/direct meaning of *bẽ mặt* is ‘being ashamed’, which may refer to the state of losing face or may not; even when it refers to face loss, it is the second layer of meaning. Another example is *nể mặt* (have regard for someone), in which *mặt* almost means a representation of a particular person.

The term that best represents the face concept in Vietnamese is ‘*thể diện*’, therefore it is the main subject of my study. According to the *Vietnamese Dictionary* by the Vietnamese Linguistics Institute compiled by Hoang et al. (2002), *thể diện* is defined as “*những cái làm*

*cho người ta coi trọng mình khi tiếp xúc*” (things that make people respect us when in contact) (p. 932). Accompanied examples of the use of the term in speech are: “*Vì dối trá mà mất thể diện trước bạn bè*” (As being deceitful, one loses face in front of his friends), and “*Giữ thể diện cho gia đình*” (Save face for family) (p. 932). While *mặt* is a pure Vietnamese word, *thể diện* has a Chinese origin with the element *diện* believed to be the Vietnamese pronunciation of *lien* (face) in Chinese (H. N. Pham, 2007a). Familiar collocations with *thể diện* are *giữ thể diện* (save face) and *mất thể diện* (lose face).

A term that is in the same area of meaning with *thể diện* is *sĩ diện*. Like *thể diện*, *sĩ diện* refers to face, but it is “personal face” (*thể diện cá nhân*) as defined in the same dictionary by Hoang et al. (2002, p. 857). While *thể diện* can only be used as noun, *sĩ diện* can be used as noun or verb. As verb, it is defined as “to want to prove not being inferior to anyone to gain others’ respect, or want to hide things that are inferior to others to avoid others’ contempt” (*muốn làm ra vẻ không thua kém ai cho người ta coi trọng, hoặc muốn che giấu sự thua kém của mình cho người ta khỏi coi thường*) (Hoang et al., 2002, p. 857). Although *thể diện* is the main object of my study, where relevant, *sĩ diện* and *mất mặt* as related expressions of face concept are also involved.

### III. THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Generally, first of all, I want to explore the theoretical nature of *thể diện* as a face concept; in particular, what contents, boundaries, and if possible components that this Vietnamese concept of face represents that make it distinct from face concepts in other cultures. Secondly, I would like to explore Vietnamese socio-cultural characteristics that are involved and reflected in the exploration of the concept.

My approach to these goals is an empirical, emic, and sociocultural approach. In particular, I aim to examine how *thể diện* is perceived and operates in Vietnamese society, and how it influences Vietnamese behaviours. Within the scope of this study, I examine what *thể diện* generally means to, and how it influences perceptions and behaviours of Vietnamese teachers in a college teaching context. Besides, as partly alerted to me in the early stage of my exploration of *thể diện* via a web data corpus (which will be reported in later chapters of this thesis), gender perspective will be an important concern of the study. In particular, I aim

to explore whether my participants' perceptions reflect that males and females have different relations to or views of *thể diện*, and if yes, what are particular values that each gender is associated with *thể diện*

#### **IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY**

I hope that my research can contribute to the broadening of theoretical understandings of face. While face has been a popular concept in social, linguistic and psychological areas, there has not yet been an inclusive theory for face on its own. Face has until recently been approached from a largely Western perspective which has implicitly assumed to apply globally. My research, which adds to the growing focus of non-Western scholars on investigations of face from culture-internal and culture-specific perspectives will hopefully contribute to the understanding of the face concept that can accommodate face across cultures.

I also hope to make a contribution to the area of intercultural communication by widening the understanding about Vietnamese culture with respect to communication behaviours. This study about Vietnamese face may provide some new explanations about certain aspects of Vietnamese behaviours, for example the unpopularity of apology, ambiguity in speech, the avoidance style in communication and the lack of a consistent view of certain issues among the Vietnamese, which may be incomprehensible to people from other cultural systems. It may also explain some Vietnamese perceptions of classroom behaviours that have been noted in some other studies, for example, why Vietnamese students often think of their Australian peers as having no face at all when the Australians are often ready to let others see their limited knowledge by asking any spontaneous and 'silly' question without thinking about them thoroughly (L. H. Phan, 2007, p. 27).

This study about *thể diện* also helps distinguish this concept in Vietnamese culture from that in other Asian cultures. 'Asian face' has often been used as a big bracket for diverse face concepts in Asian cultures. The belief that East Asian cultures are homogeneous in terms of face may bring problems into intra-Asian communication. For instance, cultural shocks have been found between Taiwanese and Japanese (Tsai, 1996). While the Japanese often apologize to save face, the Taiwanese tend to see the act as face threat. The Japanese tend to view 'being the same' as themselves as a symbol of acceptance of a person into their

community, and hence grant the person face, whereas such an ‘acceptance’ is often not appreciated by the Taiwanese, who want others to respect their qualities or differences. “In attempting to protect their *mientzu*, Taiwanese tend to act in an exaggerated Taiwanese way by aggressively showing their differences from Japanese” (Tsai, 1996, p. 313). It has also been noted by Tsai (1995, 1996) that reactions from cultural shock to an Asian host culture are even stronger from Asian foreigners than from non-Asians. This danger of miscommunication between people from different Asian cultures requires further attention to developing cultural understandings among them. In the light of this, my investigation of the Vietnamese face *thể diện* may be beneficial not only to the cultural sympathy between Vietnamese and Westerners but also between Vietnamese and other Asians. Face as in Vietnamese *thể diện* might be different from face as in Chinese *mientzu*, and so might be their entailed behaviours.

As one of the pioneers in study about *thể diện*, it is hoped that my study can attract further research attention to this topic. And finally, I also hope that my thesis can contribute to the development of qualitative research in Vietnam. Research in social science in Vietnam has been dominated by the positivist paradigm and quantitative methods. Questionnaires, surveys and mapping have been employed in most research designs and practices rather than the use of interviews, observations and other participatory research methods (Scott, Miller, & Lloyd, 2006). A successful accomplishment of this study can hopefully encourage more of the latter approach in Vietnam.

## **V. THE STRUCTURE OF THESIS**

My thesis is presented in seven chapters. This first chapter is the introduction to the study. The next chapter is my review of literature. Chapter Three is the presentation of methodologies used in the study. Results of my study are shown in chapters Four, Five, and Six. Chapter Seven, where I summarize findings, discuss contributions and suggest future study directions, completes my whole thesis.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I will discuss important premises for my exploration of Vietnamese face *thể diện*. By examining relevant contents in the literature of face and cultures, I aim to demonstrate that little work has been carried out on *thể diện*, and, therefore, to establish the relevance of my research and to justify a need for an open-ended approach to data collection. In addition, I hope to show that relevant knowledge obtained from previous research also provides a bigger context to locate and expect possible results about *thể diện* I might find in my study.

The chapter is organised around three main dimensions: face, self and culture.

In part I, I will examine the origin of the face concept in research and some supposedly universal theories relating to the concept of face. I argue that while these Western-based theories may provide useful conceptual tools to understand face in universal contexts, and indeed provide me with useful frameworks and conceptual tools to examine *thể diện*, there are questions about their capability to capture the complexities of face in non-Western contexts such as Vietnam.

Then in part II, I focus on the development of research about face in East Asian cultures such as Chinese, Japanese and Korean, those that share the same Confucian heritage with Vietnam. I suggest firstly that only with a culture-internal approach can face in different cultural contexts be seen with its culture-specific elements, which the Western approach has often failed to see. Secondly, I show that while research about face in some East Asian cultures is establishing a growing reputation, little scholarly concern has been paid to the concept of face in Vietnamese culture.

In part III, I aim to establish an understanding of Vietnam with respect to three areas of concerns of my study: face in the general perspective, face and gender, and face in the tertiary teaching context. Unlike the two previous sections, this part does not primarily aim to give an explanation of how and what my study will do to fill the gap in the literature; rather it mainly aims to give a background understanding of Vietnamese culture in relation with face to give a context for possible results of my study of *thể diện*. This third part is

designed in accordance with and for a better reception of the results of the thesis. The concept of face in this section is viewed and discussed under the perspective of self concept, in particular how self is expected to behave to maintain face for self and others in Vietnamese contexts. Discussion in this section draws on relevant psychological and sociocultural knowledge in the areas. Where literature about Vietnam is lacking, relevant research about East Asian in general is analysed, considering the Confucian root of the cultures. In addition, scholarly literature is combined with folkloric evidence to provide readers with knowledge about how the Vietnamese may view themselves and face in the three contexts (i.e. general, gender, and teaching). Beside traditional features, mobility and challenges to tradition in Vietnamese culture reported in the literature are also reviewed.

## **I. THE CONCEPT OF FACE: SOME THEORIES**

The term ‘face’ was originally used by Chinese scholars such as H. C. Hu (1944) and Yang (1947) as a literal English translation of the two Chinese concepts ‘*mientzu*’ and ‘*lien*’ (Ho, 1976, p. 867). According to H. C. Hu (1944), Chinese face manifested through the concepts *mientzu* and *lien* is about reputations of *ego* (the word used by Hu throughout his article). In particular, *mientzu* refers to the social reputation that one achieves in life and *lien* refers to moral reputation that one is supposed to maintain to be considered a decent human being (H. C. Hu, 1944). Yang (1947) depicts face in Chinese as “a social esteem accorded by others” (p. 167).

Goffman (1955, 1967) has often been considered the pioneer in the Western research on face. He generally viewed face as a presentation of ‘self’. Face is defined as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact”, and/or “an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). In this definition, face is conceptualized in terms of a projection of self-image in situational contacts in compliance with social norms to gain approval from others. Goffman (1967) divides face into self-face and other-face, which need to be constantly addressed in interactions. Accordingly, people normally have defensive orientation towards self-face and protective orientation towards other-face.

While Goffman has often been acknowledged for establishing the concept of face into Western research, it is Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) who have been most mentioned in



the application of face. The authors give face a primary position in their politeness theory which then dominated the linguistic research on politeness and speech acts. Drawing from Goffman's concept, Brown and Levinson define face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (1987, p. 66). Face is perceived in terms of one's personal desires to be appreciated, i.e. positive face, and unimpeded in actions, i.e. negative face. While positive face seems to be widely accepted, negative face has encountered numerous challenges in its application in many cultures, especially non-Western ones (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003; Ide, 1989; Mao, 1994; Matsumoto, 1988). In considering these cultures, Brown and Levinson's model of face is criticized for being overly individualistic with an emphasis on the avoidance of imposition, making it far from being as universal as claimed. However, setting aside those controversies around negative face, to put it fairly, face in Brown and Levinson's theory as originally used should be seen as a means to investigate linguistic phenomena, particular politeness phenomena in speech acts, rather than the face concept on its own.

Among efforts to address the drawbacks in Brown and Levinson's face model, Spencer-Oatey's (2000, 2008) perception of face has gained prominence. Face occupies a central position in her theory of interpersonal rapport management. Face is considered in its social and personal dimensions. In particular, face is no longer narrowed as an individual's possession but includes both personal and social perspectives. It describes individuals as both separate identities, i.e. quality face, and individuals in relation with others, i.e. identity face. Quality face concerns one's sense of personal self-esteem, which is expressed via personal qualities such as one's abilities, competence, and appearance. Identity face concerns one's sense of public value demonstrated via one's social roles such as father, brother, group leader, friend, and so on. What is called negative face by Brown and Levinson is not considered a face concern; rather it is categorized as part of another concept of sociality rights, where people have certain social expectations to be treated by others.

On the development of face in Western research, the intercultural communication approach has also made considerable contributions, where face is considered as the major motivation in interpersonal and cross-cultural communication and conflicts. Typical scholars of this approach are Ting-Toomey and her colleagues with their face negotiation theory (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). In this theory, self-construal and cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism are major values.

Dimensions of collectivism and individualism as a way to generalise and categorize societies in terms of cultural basis have been made famous by scholars such as Hofstede (1980, 1991, 2001) and Triandis (1995). The distinction between collectivist cultures and individualist cultures has been based upon the types of goals that people in cultures tend to pursue. Triandis (1995) argues that people in individualist cultures tend to pursue goals set by their personal wants and desires whereas people in collectivist cultures tend to pursue goals set by community and their important others.

It is mainly argued in face negotiation theory by Ting-Toomey and her colleagues that self-face rather than other-face or mutual face (i.e. the common image of both parties or image of their relationship) is prioritised in individualistic cultures; in contrast, other-face or mutual face is paid more attention to than self-face in collectivistic cultures. It should be noticed that among the Western-based research reviewed above, Ting-Toomey is the first one who paid systematic attention to the cultural aspect of face. Her theory has provided me with a general framework to look at face in Vietnam, a widely claimed collectivistic culture.

I should include in this review the popular notion of facework. Facework has been generally and simply understood as the necessary ‘works’ people do in relation with face needs of their own and others. It refers to “the communicative strategies people uses to enact self-face and to uphold, support, or challenge another persons’ face” (Oetzel et al., 2001, pp. 235-236). I do not specifically use the notion of facework as a term for analysis in my work; however the term may be understood as included when I describe people’s justifications and comments for what they do and what should be done for face purposes.

## **Summary**

My analysis of the literature so far has led me to several main themes and issues, which in turn lead me to some general frameworks to consider for my study.

First of all, the above review of face in literature has provided me with a basic conceptualisation framework of face. Face is generally associated with positively perceived social attributes. Furthermore, face has been conceptualised in terms of self in dual dimensions: outward presentation and inward quality, self and other, public and private contexts, or individual and social dimensions. This conceptualisation of face can be applied

to understand face in specific cultures. It is argued that cultures differ from each other in terms of the correlation of those dual factors. This provides me with a basic knowledge background for my investigation of *thể diện*.

Second, the observations about the development of research about face raise several questions on the nature of face concept. One of these questions is: is face one's self-awareness of one's quality, or others' approval of one's qualities? In other words, does face come from and depend on self-awareness or from social judgments? In Brown and Levinson's viewpoint (1978, 1987), it seems that face is only a matter of personal desires and awareness that undesirable impacts from others may upset one's perception of one's own face. Goffman (1955, 1967), on the contrary, shows in his definition that a social interactional aspect of face is needed, since he assumes that one needs approvals from others to have one's face. My upcoming review of face in East Asian research in a following section of this chapter will reveal that face in East Asian cultures seems to incline towards the social aspect of face. It seems that that a theory of face as solely a product of self-consciousness is more a product of Western individual-oriented ontological thinking than a culture-general phenomenon as hypothesised by Brown and Levinson.

The second question is: does face only arise in actual interactions or can face exist in a static form in people's minds as living principles? Literature has shown that there seem to be two kinds of face. The first one is face as consistent, enduring across interactions, representing people's important moral and social values and living principles. This face is stable as it presents a person's identity and individuality, or "provides the basis of identity of a person" (Cheng, 1986, p. 329). The second kind is face as changing constantly and only actualized in specific moments of interactions. Face in this kind is interactive and contextually dependent. To Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), it is quite obvious that face is perceived for interactional purposes, in particular for analysing and handling speech acts and politeness in interactions. Goffman (1955, 1967) seems also to mean actual interactional contexts in his definition of face, since he refers to the metaphor of a performance stage for interactions between self and others. Swann and Bosson (2010, p. 590) comment that "Goffman envisioned the self as an ahistorical construction that emerged and vanished at the whim of the situational cues that regulated its form and structure". To Goffman and Brown and Levinson, it seems that face represents no enduring sense of self. However, in later research, face in terms of quality face and identity face, as proposed by Spencer-Oatey (2000, 2008) seems closer to a type of static face existing in people's minds that can be used to evaluate

themselves prior to or without real contacts with others. Also, explorations of face in non-Western cultures such as Chinese, Japanese and Korean (as seen in the coming section) seem to present a type of stable enduring face, which can be both actualised in specific interactions and pervasive in various aspects of life.

It can be seen that a sole reliance on Western frameworks will not be able to provide satisfying answers to these two questions. Non-Western culture-specific perspectives need to be taken into consideration to explore those complex existences of face.

To sum up, in spite of starting from its Chinese origins, the concept of face in mainstream Western-based research has been developed gradually far from its original root with the ambition to generalise the universal essence of face without going beyond Western philosophies. Although the concept of face as a metaphoric social-psychological concept implying human social image is popular across cultures, it is perceived and functions differently in different cultures (Ho, 1976). Assumptions such as face is *individual-based* (as in Brown and Levinson's model) and is actualized only in *situational interactions* may not be true in many cultures such as in China, Korea and Vietnam. A review of face in its original Chinese origin and in other East Asian cultures can return to face its culture-specific attributes and show that research following Western frameworks of face has failed to capture the variety of its manifestations.

## **II. FACE RESEARCH IN EAST ASIAN CULTURES**

This section presents an overview of face research in East Asian cultures via reviewing typical studies about face in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean cultures, therefore indicating the limitations of Western conceptualisations in explanations of face in these cultures and the necessity for employing an indigenous approach to culture-specific analysis. Later I will examine the status of Vietnamese face in research in order to show that while face in the above East Asian cultures has received substantial scholarly interest, research about Vietnamese face is still a neglected and rudimentary area.

I begin with the most famous Asian face in research - Chinese face. There have been two approaches to Chinese face. One is studying face with Western frameworks, for example,

Brown and Levinson's theory with face in association with politeness in speech acts. Some researchers adopting this approach are Chiu, Tsang, and Yang (1988), Du (1995), Ji (2000), Wang (2008), and M. Yu (2003). The other is studying face in an emic perspective where face is seen via the two indigenous concepts *mientzu* (which is often called social face) and *lien* (which is often called moral face). Since first being brought up by H. C. Hu (1944), a body of studies have focused on analysing different functions of these two concepts in the Chinese behavioural culture (Cheng, 1986; Ge Gao, 2006, 2009; Ho, 1976; Mao, 1994). It has been made popular to the research knowledge, both theoretically (e.g. Cheng, 1986; Ho, 1976; H. C. Hu, 1944; Mao, 1994) and empirically (e.g. Ge Gao, 2006, 2009), that *mientzu* is a kind of face one achieves through one's social successful performances in life, which can be decreased or increased in quantity; meanwhile, *lien* stands for the basic face based on one's integrity or moral reputation that one should have in order to be accepted in the community, which is to be lost or maintained in a whole. Beside these two concepts, scholars such as Yabuuchi (2004) also mention other related concepts in Chinese face concern such as "*guanxi*" – concern for interpersonal relationships.

Gaining prominence in the picture in the East beside Chinese face is Japanese face. Early studies such as by Matsumoto (1988) and Ide (1993) mainly focus on arguing the inapplicability of Brown and Levinson's theory, especially their negative face, in analysing face in Japanese contexts. They both argue that the Western theory, by concentrating on personal autonomy, has failed to capture social constraints and relational aspects of Japanese face. Recent studies by Haugh (2007), Lin and Yamaguchi (2007) and Yabuuchi (2004) pay attention to Japanese folk face concepts. Haugh (2007) argues that the notion of 'place' (i.e. one's social role and position among others) holds a critical role in an emic understanding of Japanese concept of face. Similarly, Lin and Yamaguchi (2007) indicate the importance of social role to the Japanese face. Yabuuchi (2004) in a comparative study emphasizes the attachment to obligation and duty of Japanese people to avoid face loss. Particularly, Japanese face in these later studies has been seen through emic notions such as *menboku* and *taimen* (Haugh, 2007), *mentsu* (Lin & Yamaguchi, 2007), and *mentsu* and *kao* (Yabuuchi, 2004), which means it has been actualised and recognized in the actual daily life of the people rather than being an academic concept coming from Western research suggestions. The concept *mentsu* has even been compared with its neighbour Chinese *mientzu*, for example by Suedo (2004) and Yabuuchi (2004).

Korean face has also gained research attention. For example, Lim (2009) considers Korean face in the context of a *relativistic, holistic* Korean society. Within this context, Korean face is seen to exceed interaction-specific concern to cover every concern of a person's living, and be attached to one's respective position in broad social networks or the whole society. This relativism maximises differences so that faces of people of different social standings are often referred to with different terms, such as *che-myun*, *naht* and *ul-gul*, *mo-yahng-sae*, *che-mo* and *che-sihn*, or *nyun-mohk* (Lim, 2009). Especially, a considerable body of research about Korean face has been dealing with the indigenous notion of Korean social face *chemyeon* (Choi & Kim, 2004; Choi et al., 1997; Choi & Lee, 2002; Y. Kim & Yang, 2011). These studies have focused on examining structures of *chemyeon*, and its influence on cultural behaviours and conflict styles. Generally, it has been seen that *chemyeon* reflects concerns for social expectations and interpersonal harmony.

Several things can be drawn from the review above. First, face in Chinese and other East Asian cultures contains different connotations from the English concept of face. For example, it has been observed that although the notion of face in English is borrowed from Chinese, it does not reflect Chinese face. In particular, it does not deliver the distinction between the two types of moral face (as in *lien*) and social face (as in *mientzu*), and therefore cannot see the relationship between them. As a result, while the English talk about 'saving face' and 'gaining face' as semantic oppositions to 'losing face', the Chinese only mention 'losing face' and nothing in Chinese lexicons is found as literally compatible with 'saving face' and 'gaining face' (Carr, 1993). This is explained by Huang (as cited in Carr, 1993, p. 75) as "a potent reminder that losing face has far more serious implications for one's sense of self-esteem or decency than gaining face". 'Losing face' is attached with the significance of one's moral decency, which is absent in the English view of face. In addition, while face in English is often equated to concepts such as 'prestige', 'honour' or 'dignity', face in Chinese culture is seen as an independent unique concept and has an even more basic meaning than the others (Carr, 1993). This is to say that an English understanding of face, in practice and consequent research, is probably insufficient to provide understanding of face in other different cultures.

Second, the English scholarly conceptualisation of face as individual possession has failed to reflect the social aspect of face in East Asian cultures. In particular, it does not capture the social hierarchy, the importance of social roles and positions, and social harmony in the nature of face in these cultures. Face in Japanese and Korean cultures expresses a strong

need to preserve and a requirement to behave according to one's position in the social order. In order to maintain face, one needs to be aware of and consider oneself in the larger scale of the social hierarchy in which one functions. Chinese face also emphasizes the importance of relationship (*guanxi*) in face maintenance: in other words the relationship with others is significant to one's face. Only with an emic or culture-internal approach can these social perspectives be displayed.

Third, face concepts in East Asian Confucian cultures are not limited to specific interactional situations but can extend to most aspects of social life. Face in these cultures can have an enduring, pervasive form of existence that can have direct relations with native people's life perceptions and behavioural principles rather than just impacts on their communicative strategies in specific social encounters. Face in these cultures has also been viewed with Western interaction-specific approaches where face is analysed within conversational interactions, often in relation with speech acts (e.g. Haugh & Watanabe, 2009; Koutlaki, 2002; Q. N. T. Tran & Harding, 2009; M. Yu, 2003). However, only with an emic approach is the enduring form of face in these cultures recognized.

It is necessary to explain an emic perspective in research. An emic perspective in studying concepts is defined as an approach in which the concepts are elucidated "in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by native members of the culture whose beliefs and behaviours are being studied" (Lett, 1990, p. 130). An emic perspective in social and linguistic research in general and research of face in particular has been advocated by Goddard (2006), Lin and Yamaguchi (2007), Miike (2007), and Shi-xu (2006) in their efforts to protest against the dominance of Eurocentrism in human research. However, employing a culture-internal approach does not mean that one should exclude completely frameworks proposed by Western research. For example, while advocating Afrocentric and Asiatic paradigms, Shi-xu (2006) means to achieve a multicultural co-equality rather than a vicious attack on Eurocentric paradigms. The reality of research of face in East Asian cultures has also shown successful blends between the Western and culture-internal forms of knowledge.

In terms of emic studies about face concepts in East Asia, it can be seen that very few of them are empirical research, which is also the fourth and last point of my argument. Among the few empirical research studies are those from Choi and Lee (2002), Ge Gao (2006), Lim (1994, 2004, as cited in Lim, 2009) and Suedo (2004). Their methods include interviews

(Lim, 1994, 2004, as cited in Lim, 2009; Suedo, 2004), questionnaires (Choi & Lee, 2002) and open-ended surveys (Ge Gao, 2006). There is a need for more research of this type to examine emic face concepts through actual contacts with cultural members and explore the living existence of the concepts in real life. A growing evidence-based research about face in different cultures is vital for an establishment of sustainable theories of face.

### **Vietnamese face in research**

Face has often been widely mentioned as an important Vietnamese cultural feature in assisting successful intercultural communication (Chew, 2009; Truong & Nguyen, 2002; V. T. Vu & Napier, 2000). However research about Vietnamese face concept is still scarce. A limited number of studies showing interest in Vietnamese face to date according to my research are summarized below.

D. H. Nguyen's PhD study in 1956, titled *Verbal and Non-Verbal Patterns of Respect Behaviour in Vietnamese Society* (as cited in H. N. Pham, 2007a, p. 258), is probably the earliest research mentioning the important influence of face on Vietnamese communicative behaviours. Face in this study was generally described as pride in one's social qualities. However, face in the study was not given a central concern.

Serious academic attention to Vietnamese face is found in recent works by Khuc (2005, 2006), H. N. Pham (2007a, 2007b), Q. N. T. Tran and Harding (2009) and T. T. H. Vu (2002). Among them, Khuc (2005, 2006) and Q. N. T. Tran and Harding (2009) explore Vietnamese face concerns in a situational approach. Face concerns of Vietnamese native speakers have been studied in some specific communicative contexts such as formal meetings between academic managers of a faculty (Khuc, 2005, 2006), and consultation between an international student advisor and a Vietnamese student (Q. N. T. Tran & Harding, 2009). Vietnamese face as demonstrated via the indigenous notion *thể diện* only appears in articles written in Vietnamese by T. T. H. Vu (2002) and H. N. Pham (2007a).

T. T. H. Vu (2002) has contributed a theoretical discussion of *thể diện*. It is seen as an integration of both personal and social aspects. 'Self' is used as a clue to explain the Vietnamese notion of face. The author claims that self in Vietnamese culture consists of two



components: independent self and relational self. Therefore, Vietnamese face also includes two corresponding aspects: personal face, which is expressed as one's desire to have his/her individual attributes respected (e.g. want to think and act independently, have a private zone, have freedom to choose and decide), and social face, which is showed as one's desire to have others in relationship with him/her respect his/her social values such as age, gender, position in family, social status and personal achievements. It can be seen that the author has made an effort to apply and reconcile Brown and Levinson's face theory with the Vietnamese context. The author's concept of personal face bears an influence from the Western scholars' negative face, while social face seems a Vietnamese feature added to the concept. Putting aside the question of whether the concern for one's personal zone actually composes Vietnamese face concern, it can be seen that her conceptualisation is a valuable contribution to Vietnamese face in research. The author, on the one hand, has tried to bring *thể diện* into academic attention of face, and on the other hand, called for a respect to Vietnamese culture-specific features in the application of the universal model of the concept.

The study by H. N. Pham (2007a) may be the only academic work so far studying the concept *thể diện* empirically. Data collected from collocation possibilities of *mặt* and *thể diện* (terms standing for face in Vietnamese) produced in written forms by 43 Vietnamese were used to explore components of the concept. H. N. Pham (2007a) found that the Vietnamese face concept possesses two main components: 1. individual positive qualities and competence, and 2. individual social roles and characteristics that the roles are associated with. The author also argues that the notion of negative face central in Brown and Levinson's theory is not a component in the Vietnamese concept of face. Vietnamese people often do not consider violations of personal freedom to act an issue of face-concern. In contrast, it is imposition on others' acts that sometimes serves as a demonstration of one's *thể diện*, for instance the case of invitations in which invitation repetitions with an increasing level of imposition on the hearer is often seen as sincere, hospitable, and therefore, upholding the inviter's *thể diện* (H. N. Pham, 2007b). H. N. Pham also gets back to face in her later publication in 2011 – an English language book about Vietnamese culture of behaviours and communication. This work has given a more comprehensive analysis of Vietnamese face as in *mặt* and *thể diện*. She adds another feature to the Vietnamese face concept: collectiveness, i.e. the Vietnamese share face with their group and the persons associated with them. She also analyses the conditional existence of Vietnamese face on

public judgment and the people's sensitivity to public criticism. Her support materials were examples of daily conversations and excerpts from Vietnamese literary works.

However, H. N. Pham's examined objects of Vietnamese face include collocations of *mặt*, and as I have previously analysed, many of the Vietnamese expressions containing *mặt* are not really the same face issue as *thể diện* conveys. For example, some collocations with *mặt* that appeared in H. N. Pham's article in 2007 (such as "*sạm mặt*", "*sượng mặt*", "*rát mặt*", "*ngượng mặt*" (p. 260)) are expressions indicating states of people when they are upset, ashamed or embarrassed. They might be results or emotional consequences of the state of 'losing face' (which is expressed in another collocation of *mặt* - '*mất mặt*') or they might not. In another collocation - "*nhề mặt*" (H. N. Pham, 2007a, p. 261; 2011, p. 30), *mặt* can refer to specific persons that the speakers talk about. Another term - "*máu mặt*" (H. N. Pham, 2011, p. 29) tends to refer to a person's fame or reputation rather than face as in *thể diện*.

Furthermore, the writing by H. N. Pham (2007a, 2011) on face, like that of T. T. H. Vu (2002), still follows the general tendency of testing the validity of Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) face theory on Vietnamese face. One of their main arguments is that face of a person in Vietnamese contexts is not simply the individual's possession, reflecting the individual's wants and desires; rather it involves community image, community expectations and judgments. Over all, there is a sense that H. N. Pham (2007a, 2011) and T. T. H. Vu (2002) did not really consider *thể diện* in the position of an indigenous concept of face specific to the Vietnamese; rather *thể diện* seemed to be used as a compatible Vietnamese term to "face" in English. The term *thể diện* appeared in their studies probably due to the facts that one of the studies was written in Vietnamese (T. T. H. Vu, 2002), and the term was needed in instructions to Vietnamese participants to collect data in the others (H. N. Pham, 2007a, 2011). Furthermore, since all of their publications are either in Vietnamese (H. N. Pham, 2007a, 2007b; T. T. H. Vu, 2002), or from internal publishers (H. N. Pham, 2011), their road to the international scholarly audience is limited.

Nevertheless, H. N. Pham and T. T. H. Vu's works are encouraging and helpful to me in my approach to *thể diện*. Beside their theoretical analysis of the concept, H. N. Pham's real life data, though not shown to me as a systematic body of data from a project about face, has brought *thể diện* a more vivid existence and made it an attractive research subject. It shows

that there is much more to learn and it is worthwhile to explore *thể diện* as a specific Vietnamese face concern.

In general, it has been shown that Vietnamese face has presented a very modest voice (perhaps we should say it is still unheard) in the lively research discussion about face in East Asia. While face in Chinese, Japanese and Korean cultures has gained many scholars' interests, Vietnamese face still remains a mysterious area. Particularly, very little attention has been paid to Vietnamese emic face *thể diện*. An understanding about it is still very limited, compared with many East Asian cultures. There is a need for more research about the concept, especially with empirical results, in order to gain a position for Vietnamese face in the general research knowledge. This is the gap for my study to fill in, at least in part.

To this point I have argued the necessity to study Vietnamese face *thể diện* and with a culture-internal approach. Next I will present literature that I consider necessary and useful to an understanding of *thể diện* in Vietnamese culture.

### **III. FACE AND SELF IN VIETNAMESE CONTEXTS**

#### **1. Some theoretical relations and considerations**

##### **1.1 The relation between face and self concept**

The notion of 'self' in this thesis is defined in the sense of a mental representation or set of representations about oneself, i.e. "the entire set of beliefs, evaluations, perceptions, and thoughts that people have about themselves" (Swann & Bosson, 2010, p. 591).

Definitions of face have had to deal with self-concept. For example, Goffman (1967) has defined face in terms of a presentation of self in interactions to gain social approvals, face as "an image of self, delineated in terms of approved social attributes" (p. 5). In this process, self can achieve social approvals by paying attentions to defence self-face and protect other-face. Spencer-Oatey's (2000, 2008) theory of face has also mainly dealt with self perspective. Her categories of quality face and identity face are about personal and social aspects of self respectively, where self asks for a confirmation of self-esteem (quality face)

and recognitions among others (identity face). Ho's (1976) definition of Chinese face also contains a view about self. Face is "the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct" (p. 883).

An examination of self concept in psychological literature has provided me with valuable information and understanding about the concept and its relation with face. Scholars from different psychological perspectives have proposed different structures of self. For example, based on forms of existence, Higgins (1987) proposes three types of self: actual, ideal, and ought self. While ideal self covers people's personal ambitions and others' hopes for them, ought self encompasses their beliefs of their obligations, duties, and others' expectations for them, and all of which can be different to the actual self one possesses. One of the ways to construct self is based on the relation of self with others. In this perspective, Triandis (1989) provides two types of self: private and collective. Accordingly, private self is based on assessment of self by the self, while collective self comes from assessment of the self from a certain relevant group. Brewer and Gardner (1996) propose three levels of self-presentation: individual level, which produces personal self; interpersonal level, which produces relational self; and group level, which comes with collective self. Each of these three modes of self is based on corresponding social motivations, i.e. self-interest, other's benefit and collective welfare respectively.

The categories that I mostly employ to discuss face in my study are those made popular by Markus and Kitayama (1991): independent self - self as an independent entity with personal feelings, cognitions and motivations, and interdependent self - self as dependent on relationships with others. These two modes of self from psychology are also employed in face studies of many famous scholars such as Morisaki and Gudykunst (1994), Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998), and Spencer-Oatey (2002). Under the sociocultural approach, self is claimed to be culturally constructed (Suh, 2000), therefore the balance of these constructs of self is culturally different. It is widely claimed that in individualistic cultures, independent takes precedence over interdependent self, whereas in collectivistic cultures, the opposite is true (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This, in turn, affects the modes of face concern in cultures.

*Thể diện* in relation with and *self* and *others* is an important theme of this thesis. Therefore, a sociocultural approach is the major approach of my study (for more, see Chapter Three,

section 2. *A sociocultural approach*, page 46). But at this point it is important for me to clarify my approach to the issue of comparing the cultural bases on which we construct sociocultural analyses.

## **1.2 Cultural dichotomies**

I am aware of the danger that one may over-generalize and simply label Asian cultures as collectivist and Western cultures as individualist, or even categorize cultures into a distinct dichotomy of Western culture and Asian culture. This way of evaluating and contrasting cultures and societies may lead one to ignore unique and distinct characteristics of national cultures within a category. In fact, certain studies of cultures in the same categories have shown that they may vary significantly in terms of cultural values and orientations. For example, a study by Tsai (1996) about the Japanese and the Taiwanese in the same East Asian culture shows that the people differ greatly in terms of collectivistic and individualistic orientations. In particular, in contrast with the Japanese and the common East Asian scheme that has been pictured as the dominant stereotype, the Taiwanese show that they do not like the idea of ‘fitting in’ to the community; rather, ‘standing out’ is what they treasure. De Kadt (1998) suggests that there should be more empirical studies from a wide range of different cultures so that researchers can use the terms in a more “differentiated and hence meaningful manner” (p. 179).

I have not yet found other tools to substitute, so I still employ this distinction between the West as individualist and the East as collectivist to analyse cultural operations in my study. However, my attitude follows G. M. Chen (2009), who argues that these apparent opposites should not be seen as presenting two dead ends; instead, they should be seen in a continuum, where each cultural area tends to spread towards different directions, which means that they can have some areas overlapped in between. Values such as collectivistic or individualistic should be treated as core values and orientations of cultures rather than absolute characteristics (G. M. Chen, 2009).

By East Asian cultures, I mean cultures sharing the same Confucian heritage, i.e., China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam. Furthermore, by referring to and contrasting Vietnamese face with face in Chinese, Japanese and Korean cultures, my aim is not to make a comparative study. My motivation is rather that discussing face in other cultures helps me form a

framework and provides me with basic conceptual ideas to understand face in Vietnamese contexts. The underlying premise is that face is a universal concern; however it has different cultural faces.

### 1.3 'Face' and '*thể diện*'

It needs to be made clear that 'face' in the general discussion of this section may not be coterminous with *thể diện*, which I am specifically concerned with and explore later. 'Face' is used as a general perception as directly mentioned in research about Vietnamese and other East Asian cultures. What I will find in *thể diện* later may fit the 'face' notion I mention here, or may not, since the realities of research on indigenous face concepts, for example Chinese, have proved that the English notion of face is much more limited than the indigenous Asian face notions. In general, I do not aim to find an equivalent to English face in this study. What I aim to explore is the specific Vietnamese *thể diện* and I try to display those contents in the nearest possible concepts in English.

Sometimes for ease of expression, the term 'face' is still used when I describe or discuss analyses and results of *thể diện*, with the underlying idea that *thể diện* is a kind of 'face' to the Vietnamese. Generally I use the term 'face' as translation of *thể diện* in presentations of interview data. However it is necessary for readers to keep in mind the indigenous status of *thể diện* as the researched subject of my study.

## 2. The position of the concept of face in Vietnamese daily life

The Vietnamese are familiar with the concept of face in their daily speech. Expressions about this face concept such as *mất mặt / mất thể diện* (lose face), and *giữ thể diện* (keep face) are familiar both in our casual communications and in formal settings, in colloquial language as well as in serious writing forms. This is probably because the notion of *bộ mặt / thể diện*, or face, is important in Vietnamese people's minds, as stated by N. T. Tran (2001). In comparison, Tran and Harding (2009) suggest that although Australian people are also concerned about face, they do not usually mention the word in their speaking as much as the Vietnamese. The common mentioning about face must have been the background

assumption for research methods in the study by H. N. Pham (2007a), who chose to ask the Vietnamese participants to write sayings they had used or seen others using containing the terms “*mặt*” and “*thể diện*”. Various colloquial examples of such expressions in the study denote how popular the face concern is to the Vietnamese in daily speaking.

This emphasis on the role of face for the Vietnamese is consistent with the wider context of Asian Confucian cultures. Yabuuchi (2004) states that the Americans are not aware of face as much as are the Chinese and Japanese in their daily life. Hu and Grove claim that while terms standing for the Japanese face notion such as *menboku*, *taimen*, *mentsu* and *kao* are mentioned frequently in daily communication, people in the United States are usually not aware of and do not often mention the concern of face (as cited in Yabuuchi, 2004). A semantic analysis of Chinese and English common expressions containing ‘face’ (as in facework) by N. Yu (2001) reveals that English does not contain as many conventionalised expressions involving face as Chinese, which may be explained by the close attachment of special cultural values to the concept in Chinese culture.

Indeed, face has been mentioned as an important daily life concern and motivation to the East Asian people. Face has been asserted to hold a very important, if not vital role in determining Asian people’s behaviours (Bond, 1991; Ho, 1976; H. C. Hu, 1944; J. Y. Kim & Nam, 1998). For example, J. Y. Kim and Nam (1998) argue that Asian people tend to forgo immediate material rewards to save their face, hence they recommend Western managers to pay careful attention to Asian workers’ sensitiveness to face. Chinese *mientzu* has been documented to be one of the Chinese people’s common life dominators and daily causes of stress. Yet, it became one of their important motivations once overseas (Chu, 1991, Lin, 1997, as cited in Tsai, 1996). It is because of this great concern for face that East Asian cultures are often named as typifying the concept of ‘face culture’, while the title of ‘dignity culture’ is given to describe an Anglo-American country (Y.-H. Kim & Cohen, 2010). After all, the term face in English does not come from within English culture; it was borrowed, or translated from what were considered equivalent terms in Chinese.

The importance of face in Asian people’s behaviours and living is explained through the fact that once one loses his/her face, he/she often experiences the feeling of shame, a far more hurting emotion than mere embarrassment (J. Y. Kim & Nam, 1998). It is analysed that shame involves the concern for the whole self rather than just some specification (Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992). In face loss, the entire self is negatively evaluated by others;

the person endures feelings of shame and the sense of being small and worthless. It is the close attachment of self with others that underpins the significance of face in the cultures.

### **3. Picturing face and self in Vietnamese contexts through research and folklore**

In order to try to picture an image of self and face in Vietnamese contexts, I base my analysis on relevant research about Vietnam and other East Asian cultures often considered as sharing the same core cultural values with Vietnam. Also, beside conventional research articles and books, I consider folklore a useful source of reference. It is observed that in comparison with people in Western cultures, Vietnamese and people in other East Asian cultures like to use a lot of folklore such as proverbs in their daily communication (N. Nguyen, Foulks, & Carlin, 1991). This is a valuable repertoire and reflection of the Vietnamese living principles and experiences. Furthermore, the use of folklore may help bring a closer understanding of Vietnam from an inside, daily life perspective.

Face and self are considered in three main parts in the following sections, corresponding to the three perspectives around which my thesis is organised: general, gender, and teaching perspectives.

#### **3.1 Face and self in the general context**

##### **3.1.1 The opposition to individualism**

Self in Vietnamese culture has not often been seen as ‘individual’, or in the Vietnamese term ‘*cá nhân*’. Examining the development of the concept ‘individual’ in the Vietnamese society, Marr (2000) notes that its status has been quite fragile and usually contested. It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that people started to mention it. However, the concepts ‘individual’ (*cá nhân*) and ‘individualism’ (*chủ nghĩa cá nhân*) were connected with negative attributes such as selfishness and a short-sighted manner. In the recent past, the term ‘individualism’/‘*chủ nghĩa cá nhân*’ was put in the same box with some other socially and traditionally objectionable concepts like “anarchism, hedonism, weepy romanticism and nihilism” (Marr, 2000, p. 789), which were considered ‘foreign’ to Vietnamese culture and



life style. “Individualism thus remains a convenient barrel into which diverse phenomena deemed to represent a threat to the state and society can be thrown and shot at routinely” (Marr, 2000, p. 794). The idea of an ‘individual’ striving for his/her own benefits is disturbing to the common Vietnamese mind. Instead, ‘individual’ is expected to create harmony with people and the surrounding environment (Marr, 2000).

Young (1998) pays attention to the fate of individual-self in Vietnamese social structure. He has written:

To the extent Vietnamese adopt the orthodox point-of-view, they should be validated by others, not for what they are as a unique psychological expressions of will and value, laughter and tears, but for their adherence to the punctilios of role responsibility. The inner self, the self of intimate personal cognizance, is not recognized as being worthy. Far from it, the inner self, a source of individualism and ego-assertion, threatens the person’s ability to conform. The self therefore contains danger and should be disparaged, belittled, placed under control, the better for the person to meet the requirements of role. (p. 159)

About the adherence of individual-self with its community, Marr (2000) says:

Each individual was urged to be a loyal citizen of the nation, an eager participant in some new political organization, or a responsible member of society. Individuals were often compared with cells in the body, each one having a legitimate role in sustaining and enhancing the vitality of the organism, but meaningless and incapable of surviving on their own. (p. 769)

As an interesting analogy, this collectivism may be seen through the popular Vietnamese house structure which is, unlike popular Western private living spaces, quite open. People of a family tend to live together in ‘one room’ houses rather than in closed private rooms.

### **3.1.2 The importance of public opinions**

It has been observed that while self in European- American cultural contexts tends to be an independent and active agent that can exert influences on others, self in East Asian cultural contexts is fundamentally interdependent and tends to be influenced by other people (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Due to the need to achieve support, acceptance and recognition from community, East Asian people are especially concerned about what others think of

themselves. This reliance on external factors characterizes the social nature of the face concept in Asian cultures (Choi & Kim, 2004; Ho, 1976; J. Y. Kim & Nam, 1998; Y.-H. Kim & Cohen, 2010; H. N. Pham, 2011). For example, J. Y. Kim and Nam (1998) believe that in Western cultures, people tend to base their face on self-judgments of behaviours, whereas in Asian cultures, such self-evaluations are much under the influence of opinions of others. A study by Y.-H. Kim and Cohen (2010) showed that Asian American participants felt the greatest need for moral cleansing when they thought that others' judgments of their transgressions were involved. When others were not involved, the effect did not hold. Similarly, H. N. Pham (2011) mentions the conditional existence of face on public judgment in Vietnamese culture:

...the existence of one's *Face* is dependent on public judgment and/or evaluation of one's behaviour. In other words, although people's *Face* is basically composed of concrete elements such as their abilities and their role, its existence is conditional on the presence or witness of a second party. In particular, a person can hardly lose his *Face* to himself, but rather he loses *Face* to other people. (p. 34)

Indeed, there is evidence that public presentation plays an important role in Vietnamese ways of thinking. The Vietnamese have the proverb “*một miếng giữa làng bằng một sàng xó bếp*” (a piece (earned) in public equals a pile/stack in the kitchen), expressing the importance of public display. One of the most severe punishment forms in the Vietnamese society in the past was to make the offender humiliated, shamed or ridiculous in front of community rather than impose a physical fine on him/her (Vu, 1996, as cited in Khuc, 2005). As a result, for the benefit of face, the Vietnamese favour dealing with things in private settings rather than bringing them out to public. Private includes close or intimate persons so that the face loss threat is minimal.

Related to the concepts of public and private, it is suggested by research that the distinction between ingroup and outgroup is important to the Vietnamese. As defined by Triandis (1995), ingroup includes people with whom one shares a close connection, welfare, privileges and a sense of being secure, which does not happen with outgroup members. It has been claimed that outgroup situations increase the concern for self-face (Oetzel, 1999), and members of collectivistic cultures have a greater distinction between ingroups and outgroups compared with members of individualistic cultures (Gudykunst et al., 1992; Triandis, 1995).

Vietnamese folklore has provided supporting material for this statement. It has been shown that ingroups are very important for the Vietnamese to preserve face. Everything troublesome happening or belonging to an ingroup should be handled within its own boundary. “*Đóng cửa bảo nhau*” (close the door to tell each other) is a sensible way to behave in such situations. Otherwise, one is scolded “*vạch áo cho người xem lưng*” (to take off clothes to show one’s own back in public). Since public space with outgroup members is insecure, people are advised to “*tốt khoe, xấu che*” (display good things, hide bad things), in other words, display good things to maintain or earn face, and conceal things that are vulnerable to public criticism. People can be very relaxed with ingroup members. For example, research by V. T. Vu and Napier (2000) shows that the Vietnamese may frankly criticize and correct each other within a work team without worrying about face, which is a shock to their Westerners’ colleagues.

The importance of public judgment to face results in the idea of projected or manipulated face. The idea of projected face is popular in East Asian cultures. For example, C. C. Chen (1988) and Hwang (2011) refer to a type of virtual face of the Chinese, i.e. an orientation of people who do not have real achievements, but who try to gain public attention and admiration by covering up their weaknesses and/or using certain symbolic decorations, actions or speeches to show off a special position. Buss (as cited in Tsai, 1996) also indicates that Chinese *mientzu* behaviour in the individualistic eyes of the Westerners is likely to be seen as an over managed ‘public self’. Korean face *chemyeon* is also seen to have a similar tendency (Choi *et al*, 1997; Choi & Kim, 2004). For example, Choi and Kim (2004) describe that people can often be seen “intentionally establishing or manipulating *chemyeon* compatible with the expectations befitting social status or position” (p.48-49). It is possible that my exploration of perceptions by Vietnamese of face might indicate that Vietnamese culture shares this characteristic with other Confucian cultures.

### **3.1.3 The concept of ‘great self’ - or the inclusion of important others**

Self in Confucian societies is called ‘great self’ for being expanded to encompass significant others in its content (Bedford & Hwang, 2003). This is considered the reason why face concern to the people in these cultures is not only a personal but a collective concern. In particular, consequences of face gain or face loss are not only on the person himself/herself

but more importantly, on his/her family and close persons (Cheng, 1986; Ge Gao, 2006; Haugh & Hinze, 2003; Ho, 1976; King & Bond, 1985). For example, according to Bedford and Hwang (2003), the Chinese are more sensitive than the Americans to being personally shamed by actions from their related others. Early study by H. C. Hu (1944) has pointed out this collective or relational nature of Chinese face *lien* with various life examples. Accordingly, a Chinese involved in scandals will be reprimanded for losing the face of his whole relatives; a student with bad behaviours will be blamed for losing the face of his/her school, and a Chinese often fears losing the face of his/her country by his/her inappropriate behaviours in front of people of another country. The reminder "Don't lose *lien* for us!" is easily found in advice from the elders to the young to reinforce the young's correct behaviours and the responsibility to the face of their family.

H. C. Hu (1944) also mentions the relational face teachers share with their students. As a result, the teacher's face will be affected by the failure of his students since he is assumed to be responsible for the success of his students. Liu and Su and Hwang (as cited in Hwang, 2006) have empirically found that the closer the relationship the stronger face relation between the persons. Research in other areas also confirms the importance of collective face to the East Asian people. For example, Wong and Ahuvia (1998) argue that luxury consumption in Western and Confucian societies differ in consumers' motivations of satisfying personal taste for the former and family face for the latter.

Family ties seem extremely significant. The spiritual connection between members is especially strong. Hwang (1999, 2011) characterises the concept of 'greater self' with the bond between a person and his/her family members.

An individual's family members, especially parents or children, are more likely to be included in the territories of one's self. The relationship between parents and children is usually perceived as a single body ... Family members are described as intimately as one's own flesh and blood. As a result, family members are especially liable to the feelings of "having glory or shame together" under the construction of the *greater self*. (Hwang, 2011, p. 281)

As a result, self is obliged to behave according to its roles in relation with others. Here one can see the strong impact of Confucianism which requires everyone to behave according to his/her position in society and in relation with others in order for the whole society to operate properly (Gu, 1990; H. N. Pham, 2011). For example, being filial to one's parents (one of

the most important obligations in the Confucian paradigm) means giving love, listening to, taking care of the parents and doing whatever one can to make them happy (King & Bond, 1985). Therefore, it is common in East Asian cultures to expect a child to study well in schools in order to satisfy his/her parents' wishes and face. In other words, they study *for* their parents, which is often considered not a valid reason for, say, American counterparts (H. N. Pham, 2011), who tend to behave “by reference to one's own internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings and actions, rather than by reference to the thoughts, feelings and actions of others” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 226). Oishi and Diener (2001) claim that Asian people consider interdependent goals (i.e. to please expectations from others such as family and friends) more important and bring them more sense of satisfaction upon accomplishment than personal goals (i.e. for personal fun and enjoyment). However, Markus and Kitayama (1991, 1994a) do not see interdependent goals and personal goals as different. They explain that since the Asian self-concept is so closely attached to expectations and perceptions from others that expectations from others become the people's own goals.

As with self in East Asian cultures, Vietnamese self shares face with its significant others. Vietnamese folklore shows evidences of this perception. For example, “*con khôn, nở mặt mẹ cha*” (a wise child boosts his parents' face / makes his parents proud). It is common in Vietnamese society that face of a person is strongly influenced by his/her child's social achievements. This social performance is actualized by study results when one is young and by social positions when he/she is mature. The folk song below is another example.

*Anh mau thức dậy học bài  
Mong cho anh sớm thành tài  
Trước làm đẹp **mặt** nở mày mẹ cha  
Sau là không phụ tình ta bao ngày*

(You please wake up to study, (I) wish you succeed soon, so that firstly (you can) beautify parents' face, secondly our love can be rewarded)

It can be seen that social achievements of the person in the folk song are first seen in the benefit for his parents and the benefit for the relationship between him and his partner rather than for himself.

There are other materials showing that a person is necessarily connected to his/her larger family of relatives and lineage. For instance, the proverb “*giàu ở làng, sang ở họ*” (a person is rich thanks to his/her village, and famous/proud thanks to his/her clan) shows a close

connection between a person and his/her community in terms of both wealth and face. Another example “*một người làm quan cả họ được nhờ*” (a person becomes a mandarin, the whole clan get favours/benefits) indicates shared benefits between a person and his/her relatives. A person with privileges in society is responsible for helping his/her relatives. And it is normal and acceptable for his/her relatives to expect to be helped and given advantages by him/her. He/she should share his/her privileges to people he/she is associated with, otherwise, he/she is very likely to be criticized not only by relatives but also the general public.

By exploring familiar collocational expressions containing the term *mặt* and *thể diện*, H. N. Pham (2007a) shows that Vietnamese perceptions of face are characterized by group-orientation; for instance, the damage of an individual's face is attached to the damage of his/her family face. She strongly suggests collective face is a prominent feature of Vietnamese face, coexisting with individual face. Khuc (2005) also mentions relational face concepts such as collectivity-face (*bộ mặt/thể diện tập thể*), community-face (*bộ mặt/thể diện cộng đồng*) and national face (*bộ mặt/thể diện quốc gia*) as familiar concepts in Vietnamese culture. In general, ‘great self’ is a suitable term to describe the common Vietnamese self.

### **3.1.4 The concept of ‘multiple self’ – or flexibility in contexts**

As a suggestion from research about East Asian cultures, a consequence of social obligations in Vietnamese culture is a common existence of ‘multiple self’, i.e. a person can have different forms of self, or behave differently in different contexts, depending on age, gender, social position and other social factors of the person and the people he/she interacts with. This multiple and flexible self is in contrast with the idea of a need to project a consistent and unified self in cultures such as North America (Suh, 2002). In fact, this self-consistency of the American may be judged by Confucian Asian people as lack of flexibility (Markus & Kitayama, 1994b). Particularly, attributes culturally appreciated by the Westerners such as honesty and straightforwardness are likely to be considered immature and “without face” (Bloodworth, 1980). This is because the East Asians’ adherence to contexts and obligations to others in contexts often recommend them to regulate, control and adjust inner feelings, attitudes and intentions for interpersonal purposes. One may behave differently from one’s

thoughts and feelings in order to please others and maintain interpersonal harmony (Iwao, as cited in Triandis, 1989). Research has shown that compared to North Americans, East Asian people are less likely to think that people's behaviours should be consistent with their personal attitudes (Kashima, Siegal, Tanaka, & Kashima, 1992) and they have a higher tolerance towards an incongruence of acts between public and private spaces (Fu, Lee, Cameron, & Xu, 2001). An ability to promptly detect and adjust oneself to subtle expectations of social situations is appreciated in East Asian cultures, for example, the Korean and the Japanese express this appreciation via concepts such as *nunchi* (Choi, as cited in Suh, 2002) and *kejime* (Bachnik, 1992) respectively.

However, research elsewhere has revealed negative psychological consequences of this incongruence between outer expressions and inner sentiments of self in Confucian societies. For example, Oishi and Diener (2001) mentioned that Asian people who are set to pursue independent goals are more likely to experience psychological conflicts than European Americans. Swann and Bosson (2010) also predict that psychological distress is more likely to happen when self is based on external motivations and expectations rather than based on internal virtues. It was reported in a study by Diener and Diener (1995) that only 36% of Japanese and 49% of Korean men scored above neutral levels of life satisfaction, whereas those numbers in America and Canadian were 83% and 78% respectively. It seems that the cost of social conformity has sometimes to be paid by a reduction in individuals' well-being.

### **3.1.5 The priority of relationships and interpersonal harmony**

Due to the interdependence tendency, concern with interpersonal harmony and relationships are especially prominent in East Asian as well as Vietnamese cultures (Bedford & Hwang, 2003; Moore, 1967; Rosenberger, 1992), typically reflected in communication styles, conflict styles, and the way people make decisions and judgments.

#### *In communication*

Priority given to interpersonal harmony in communication is outstanding when being compared to the value of truth among Westerners. It has been claimed that truth is given the most important position in the Anglo-cultural norms of communication (Clyne, 1994). For example, Grice's Cooperative Principles (1975) define four maxims for a good

communication: informative, truthful, relevant and unambiguous. In other words, the uppermost concern is how information is conveyed in communications. In contrast, in order to save face and preserve harmony, the East Asians often speak indirectly at the expense of clarity (Fong, 2003; Kwon, 1994; Merkin, 2006; C. Nguyen, 1994; Shih, 1988; Steil & Hillman, 1993; Q. N. T. Tran & Harding, 2009). For example, the Chinese often say “no” when receiving compliments to show themselves humble (Fong, 2003), and tend to use hints instead of explicitly expressed requests (Shih, 1988). When refusing an offer, Koreans are observed to be more tentative, hesitant and indirect than the Americans. Furthermore, their reasons need not to be true; they just need to be reasonable so that they do not harm relationships between interactants (Kwon, 1994). Implicitness and ambiguity may be problematic to Anglo-based people, but are often needed in cultures such as Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese (Clyne, 1994; H. N. Pham, 2011). As D. L. Nguyen (1994) puts it,

The essential question is not whether a statement is true or false, but what the intention of the statement is. Does it facilitate interpersonal harmony? Does it indicate a wish to change the subject? Hence, one must learn the “heart” of the speaker through his/her words. (p. 48)

As H. N. Pham (2011) points out, the Vietnamese are in line with other Asian Confucian people in the preference of relationship over truth in communication. In order to achieve relationship goals, the people may ‘beat around the bush’, and even tell lies to satisfy face needs of communicators. C. Nguyen (1994) says that the Vietnamese have a high tolerance for ambiguity and the ability to read between the lines is essential. For example, the Vietnamese saying “yes” may not mean “yes” as in the English sense. In many cases, they mean “I am listening”, “I understand what you say”, “I wish I could accept your offer or invitation but I can’t, but I would not want you to be angry or disappointed by saying no”, or “I disagree with you but I have too much regard for you to say so to your face” (C. Nguyen, 1994, p. 70). An Australian may view such behaviour as insincere and judge the speaker as unreliable, but a Vietnamese who does so often simply thinks that he/she is trying to be polite and considerate. By saying “yes” instead of “no”, the speaker saves face for both self and the other. The Vietnamese are often reluctant to say “no” as observed by Chew (2005) in intercultural business interactions, as they tend to view a direct “no” as offensive and damaging to hearers’ face and hence to their relationship.



The Vietnamese have the common proverb: “*lời nói không mất tiền mua, lựa lời mà nói cho vừa lòng nhau*” (words cost nothing, so choose words to please each other). In the spirit of this saying, the use of words is for the upmost aim of pleasing each other. Here language is considered a means to build, maintain and develop relationships rather than to convey information. As a result, truth in words is not a big deal. In fact, the Vietnamese also have another saying: “*sự thật mất lòng*” (truth causes face loss / (or) truth makes people unhappy). Therefore words should be flexible; they should be *chosen* (*lựa*) so that they serve the purpose of making interactants feel good.

### *In conflicts*

Preferred conflicts styles in Confucian cultures also mirror their respect to interpersonal harmony. It has been widely claimed that in Western individualistic cultures, each party involved in a conflict is encouraged to articulate their perspective and preserve their rights. In other words, direct confrontation is preferred to solve the conflict (K. Kim & Kim, 1997). In contrast, people in Confucian collectivistic cultures do not like the idea of direct confrontation; instead, they value negotiation, compromise or yielding. They prefer indirect, non-confrontational conflict-solving methods such as avoiding, involving a third party, and private discussion (Dsilva & Whyte, 1998; G. Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; K. Kim & Kim, 1997; Morris et al., 1998; Oetzel et al., 2001; Ting-Toomey et al., 1991). The uppermost goal is to maintain interpersonal or group harmony and social order. Persons who are overtly self-assertive, contentious or litigious are even considered contemptible under Confucian ideologies (U. Kim, 1994).

It has been noted that the Vietnamese favour avoidance conflict styles in order to maintain relationships. According to C. Nguyen (1994), the people tend to prefer withdrawal to assertiveness in conflict resolutions. Assertiveness is often associated with lack of respect and hence can ruin interpersonal harmony. Investigating conflict styles of Vietnamese refugees in America, Dsilva and Whyte (1998) also found that compared to the American local residents, the Vietnamese tended to employ avoidance solutions for conflict situations. Folklore also provides supporting evidences. In conflicts, the Vietnamese are often advised with “*ngậm đắng nuốt cay*” (keep the bitter in one’s mouth and swallow the spicy), “*một sự nhịn chín sự lành*” (one endurance can bring nine peace), “*chín bỏ làm mười*” (nine can be considered to ten, meaning people’s leniency towards each other), and “*dĩ hòa vi quý*” (let’s consider harmony as important). Repressing one’s negative emotions and feelings is

considered better than venting them, since by repression interpersonal harmony (though it may just be on the surface) is saved.

### *In decisions and judgments*

In 1998, Wei and Hwang (as cited in Hwang, 2006) reported a cross-cultural study on moral judgments between Taiwanese and American college students. In a part of this study, 194 students of both sides were told to give their evaluations of the extent of wrongness of people through behaviours such as “giving a gift to bribe someone or being bribed”, “trying to be first and not standing in a queue”, “tax evasion”, “using insider information to make a profit in the stock market”, “littering”, and “maltreating one’s child”. The offenders were assumed to be in different relationships with evaluators. Results indicated that the American remained consistent in their judgments of wrongness of the behaviours, regardless of their relationship with the transgressors. However, the Taiwanese tended to judge the behaviours based on their relationships with transgressors. In particular, the behaviours were more wrong when they were done by people that were not associated with them.

This difference in ways of evaluations is consistent with the distinction proposed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) between *universalism* – people judge things based on consistent social codes across contexts, and *particularism* – people judge things mainly by relationships and contexts. While the Americans were more concerned about the nature of incidents and behaviours, the Taiwanese seemed more concerned about who caused them.

Like the Taiwanese, the Vietnamese seem to favour particularism. N. T. Tran (2001) states that Vietnamese culture is a relationship-respected culture (*văn hóa trọng tình*), in contrast with rationale/rule -respected cultures (*văn hóa trọng lý*) in the West. This claim refers to the way the Vietnamese think about others and evaluate things. Further about this characteristic, C. Nguyen (1994) asserts that the Vietnamese differ considerably from the Anglo-origin people in their bases for decision making. While the Westerners tend to base their decisions on rationality, the Vietnamese often rely on emotions and feelings. This even extends to organizational levels; for instance a decision to fire a staff member because of a serious fault can be withdrawn because his father just passed away, or a teacher can refuse a principal’s position just because the predecessor used to be her teacher. He writes: “It is not unusual for

a group discussing important decision to say that "from a strictly rational point of view, we should be doing this but, from an emotional point of view, we should try to find another solution"" (C. Nguyen, 1994, p. 71). In business, V. T. Vu and Napier (2000) have noted the role of relationships and building relationships in business activities. The confusion between personal relationships and business sometimes even leads to a sacrifice of business goals to maintain a relationship, "an action less common in Western societies, where "business is business" and personal friendships can remain outside of the office" (V. T. Vu & Napier, 2000, p. 10).

So far, I have presented a picture of Vietnam as a collectivistic culture. However, research has also alerted a caution about this categorization since some typical or current expressions and behaviours in Vietnam are found to be not so collective.

### **3.1.6 What is not so collective**

The Vietnamese are not always seen as collectivists. For example, results from Chew's (2009) survey of 149 participants, both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese, in business sectors from 2004 to 2007 suggest that the 'taken for granted' view of the Vietnamese as being collective may not reflect what the Vietnamese perceive of themselves. More participants in Chew's study thought that the Vietnamese were not group-oriented than the number of the participants who thought they were. In particular, V. T. Vu and Napier (2000) point out that the Vietnamese are not as good at team building and team work as their American counterparts, which suggests that they are not really working towards group goals; in other words, not as collective as often perceived. Vietnamese teams are viewed as composed of discreet individuals, each focussing on their individual goal rather than their common goal. Onishi and Bliss (2006) argue that, although the Vietnamese may share a preference for avoidance of conflict styles with their East Asia neighbours in comparison with Anglo-origin cultures, it is not strong compared to other East Asian cultures. The researchers found that the Vietnamese favoured competing styles slightly more than avoiding styles, and they even had stronger preferences for competing styles than the Thais and people from Hong Kong.

The difference between Vietnam and other Confucian cultures is a noticeable point. Young (1998) pays attention to what he calls 'individualism' of the Vietnamese in comparison with the Chinese. The author claims that in comparison to Chinese culture, Vietnamese culture

may be seen as more individualistic. In particular, this is explained under the Vietnamese concept of fate or destiny (*số*). Accordingly, the Vietnamese believe that each person has his/her own fate which sets out not only his/her personality but also his/her achievements or failures in life. “Society is the sum total of individual accretions; individuals do not take their purpose and their coherence from the social order but from fate itself” (p. 148).

More noticeably, Young (1998) believes that one of the demonstrations of this ‘individualism’ is the uprising of individuals to fight against pressures for social conformity. He claims that while people are expected to conform to social expectations, this conformity is often surface. Underneath this external conformity, personal desires are still strong. Therefore when opportunities arise, people may refuse to conform to social responsibilities to follow their ‘selfish’ desires. The pressures in such situations are formidable.

The individual self is not valued unless it demonstrates powers of self-restraint, and so becomes trustworthy. But Vietnamese individualism tugs against such limits on thought and action. Maintaining strong self-esteem under such conditions is a challenge. Many find the struggle to do so fatiguing. (Young, 1998, p. 159)

Apart from those inherent resistances to social conformity, rebellions for individuals’ rights under the impact of foreign cultures have been documented in Vietnamese recent history. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a movement in poetry initiated by Western-educated intellectuals aiming to criticize traditional social rules and fight for individual rights and freedom, especially in the family. Typical of this movement was the establishment of the literature group *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn* (Self Reliance Pen Club) which under the influence of Western ideologies and via their works called for a reformation and modernization of Vietnamese society. In particular, traditional social norms rooted in Vietnamese villages were considered by them harmful to the development of individuals and therefore were ridiculed and criticized. Liberty for individuals, for example the freedom to love and choose one’s partner, was praised and advocated. This movement created a considerable impact on the change of Vietnamese minds at the time (Young, 1998) .

Changes are particularly accelerated by globalization in recent decades. Since 1986, Vietnam has been in a renewal (*đổi mới*) process, in which the country befriends with the world and joins the globalization (T. B. Nguyen, 2014). This action has created dramatic changes in the national economy as well as culture, in particular it has caused the weakening of collectivism

in Vietnam. The ties between individuals and their community have gradually been loosened with “people’s departing their village, loosening family ties, choosing their own occupations, and joining voluntary associations” (Marr, 2000, p. 796). Strong changes have been taking place in every aspect of Vietnamese life, from normal daily activities to beliefs and perceptions. Many traditional values have been being challenged and some have been added. For example, according to T. B. Nguyen (2012), people are talking less and less about an absolute obedience to seniors; rather they talk more about respect; women have gained a larger role and right in family as well as in social spheres; and children’s rights, such as the right to be respected and protected in terms of body, human dignity and honour, are increasingly articulated. There have been increasing concerns about invasion of foreign cultures, erosion of traditional values and the maintainance of national cultural identity in the age of globalization ("Impacts of globalisation in Vietnam," 2006; T. B. Nguyen, 2014; W. Nguyen, 2010). As a result, views of Vietnamese contemporary culture need to take into account this big transformation. My overview of Vietnamese traditional values earlier noted that it is necessary to understand the national core culture; however knowledge of traditional values should be accompanied by an awareness of current social movements. An appropriate attitude is to examine how and to what extent traditional values have changed under the impact of the modern world. My study of *thể diện* not only investigates traditional values associated with the concept but also pays attention to changes from the culture and society reflected via perceptions of the concept.

## **3.2 Face and self with gender**

### **3.2.1 Gender roles in Vietnam**

Vietnamese culture has often been viewed as a male-controlled culture. Historically, this patriarchal feature came from the influence of Confucianism from China. Vietnamese original culture before the Chinese dominance (from 221 B.C.) had followed a matriarchal pattern which entitled women to an important role in family and inheritance (N. H. Nguyen, 1998; N. T. Tran, 2001; Young, 1998). Under 1000 years of Chinese domination and subsequent centuries later of Chinese feudal influence, the Vietnamese slowly adopted Chinese social ideologies, among which was the orthodox role for men. The folk song below partly reflects this important role for Vietnamese men in society and in family.

*Con ơi! muốn nên thân người  
Lắng tai nghe lấy những lời mẹ cha  
Gái thì giữ việc trong nhà  
Khi vào canh cửi khi ra thêu thùa  
Trai thì đọc sách ngâm thơ  
Dồi mài kinh sử để chờ kịp khoa  
Mai sau nối được nghiệp nhà  
Trước là đẹp **mặt** sau là **ấm thân***

(Dear child! (if you) want to be a good person, listen to your parents. Girls (should) take on housework with weaving and embroidery. Boys (should) read books and study poetry, be studious to the classics and the history to wait for exams. Then (you can) succeed family tradition, (which is) first good for your **face**, then for your prosperous life)

This folk-song can be seen as advice from parents to their children, both boys and girls. There is a very clear distinction between girls' and boys' work in the advice. One is limited to household space, while the other extends to the open space of society. There seems a much more demanding role for boys, who are supposed to continue and be responsible for family face and family tradition by their social achievements. Among the benefits of one's social success, face as a spiritual benefit (*đẹp mặt* / good face) is considered more important than material benefits (*ấm thân* / prosperous life), since a 'prosperous life' comes after a 'good face' in the advice. It can be seen that face is attached to men's responsibility rather than women's. This may help explain stronger concern for men's face, from themselves and from the society.

Patriarchy has been noted in scholars' concerns about Vietnam (Bélanger, 2002; Schuler et al., 2006; Slote, 1998; P. P. Tran, 2007; Young, 1998). Accordingly, Vietnamese men are supposed to hold a higher social position and stronger power in the family and in the whole society. In the Vietnamese traditional model of family, the father holds the authority. He is often visualized to be strict, stern, and quite distant. His words are of great importance and influence to his wife and children. He owns the absolute power in his family. In return, he is responsible for earning honour and social status for his family, therefore making his parents and ancestors proud and setting a good example for his descendants. This is often fulfilled

via achieving high social status in society. As a boy, one should study hard to earn a possible highest career later in life (Slote, 1998; Young, 1998).

In contrast, a woman's role is limited to family space. She is the one who obeys and serves. The complying role of women to men is best reflected in the Confucian code of "*tam tòng*" (three follows/obedience): "*Tại gia tòng phụ, xuất giá tòng phu, phu tử tòng tử*" (when at home, follow/obey father; when married, follow/obey husband; when husband dies, follow/obey son) (Schuler et al., 2006). Women are responsible for housework, i.e. cooking, cleaning, nourishing and educating children; and they are expected to mobilize family resources to support their husband's social career (Young, 1998).

There is a very clear division of performing areas for men and women. Men's sphere is outside family, in social and national areas. Women's field is within family. In Young's (1998) opinion, there seems to be a tacit deal between the two: women support men's face and his power over her in public, in return, women get real power within family private space. "To preserve face, meaning his role in public, he invariably gives his wife the covert power she seeks. A deal is struck: he has power in public; she has power in private" (Young, 1998, p. 158). Although his idea of women's power in private is not elaborated further, what is noticeable in his observation is a connection between Vietnamese men and a need for face in public spheres, and the supporting role of women in this business.

For a successful integration with the world, the Vietnamese government has made observable efforts towards gender equality. As a result, gender equality has been reported as one of the most rapidly improved areas in Vietnam. Statistics from Vietnam Government Statistics Office in 2005 (as cited in Kelly, 2011) showed that Vietnamese women have had equal participation in labour force and primary education with men. They have also gained considerable participation in government offices and national parliament.

Nevertheless, recent studies have pointed out that gender realities in Vietnam do not live up to paper reports. In particular, the Vietnamese perceptions in this area are still very much tradition-bound and due to the requirements of modern life, Vietnamese women are facing huge burdens from maintaining both new social and traditional family tasks (Abjorensen, 2010; Kelly, 2011; T. L. H. Nguyen, 2012; Schuler et al., 2006; P. P. Tran, 2007; T. M. T. Tran, 2012). It is argued in these studies that although their social roles have been widened, their family roles have not been allowed to be lightened at the same speed. In fact, they are required, no matter what their context is or no matter how many new social roles they have,

to still preserve their traditional roles in their families as mothers raising their children, wives serving their husbands and in all, as care-givers. In a study of gender perceptions in Vietnam and the functions of the Vietnam Women's Union, Schuler et al. (2006) finds a paradox that the Vietnam Women's Union, on the one hand, endorses women's advancement in terms of educational, political and economic areas, on the other hand, encourages them to fulfil their traditional Confucian roles. It is considered impractical for women to maintain both economic social progress and household work. Yet it is revealed that women who neglect their family duties to pursue economic and social or political advances are often criticized by both genders (Schuler et al., 2006). These contradictory and unfeasible ideals put huge pressures on women, and the traditional gender hierarchy is blocking efforts for gender equality. In another study, T. L. H. Nguyen (2012) also finds that females holding the position of Dean in universities face tremendous obstacles from family obligations and negative gender stereotypes. It is very likely that I will find these gender roles and norms are reflected in the Vietnamese views of face and its obligations.

### **3.2.2 Gender in research about face**

Gender has been a big concern in social and linguistic research. In particular, research has paid great interest to how gender correlates with the use of particular linguistic devices for facework, mostly in studies of speech acts, politeness and communication strategies, especially in Western languages. Generally, studies in this area have deemed women as more polite, or more attentive to the face of their interlocutors than are men (Lakoff, 1975; Shimanoff, 1994; Smith, 1992; Tracy & Eisenberg, 1990). For example, Lakoff (1975) has early described that English speaking women often do not impose their views or claims on others and they tend to leave a decision open. Interestingly, the scholar sees this as a consequence of women's subordinate and marginalized status in societies. Research in particular male-dominated societies such as the Akan speech community (in Ghana) by Agyekum (2004) also indicates that men's economic power in such societies gives them linguistic power, for example, "men normally use face threatening acts on their wives, and ironically any little slip of the tongue by a woman vis-à-vis her husband is considered disrespectful and is perceived as an obvious face threat" (p. 75).

However, gender is concerned more with face in specific interactional situations than face as a culturally variable indigenous concept. Among the research about face in various Asian



Confucian cultures that I mentioned previously, it is hard to find one giving a gender perspective serious consideration. I have only found a study by Zuo in 1993 (as cited in Ge Gao, 2009) studying the cognition of the Chinese concepts of face among college students, in which gender was concerned. Unfortunately, this study was written in Chinese so that I could not come to it directly. However, via citation by Ge Gao (2009), it is known from Zuo's study results that Chinese women viewed both concepts of *lian/lien* and *mianzi/mientzu* as more important than men did and they were more sensitive to them than male participants. This calls for an attention to gender issues in this area of indigenous face.

In the process of trying to picture the correlations between gender and face perceptions, however, results in other areas are helpful. It is revealed through various studies in Western cultures about gender, facework, and self-concept that males and females differ in their thoughts of what is important in their self-image, and therefore, what can be important in their face needs. For example, a review of gender perspectives on facework research by Shimanoff (1994) has shown that males have often been found to be in favour of the need of competence approval whereas females are in favour of the need of cooperation and relationships. In particular, Herbert's (1990) study on compliments by students of an American university shows that males pay compliments mainly for praising others, while females pay compliments mainly for creating solidarity. Holmes (1989), from her study of a corpus of apologies and apology responses made by New Zealanders, claims that apologies are often viewed by women as a means to enhance interpersonal harmony, whereas by men as a threat to their face. Results from Jenkins (1984, 1986) and Johnstone (as cited in Tannen, 1990) in American or European cultures indicate that storytelling and humour are perceived by men as a demonstration of their competence, meanwhile women tend to see them in the purpose of sharing and bonding.

Accordingly, Shimanoff (1994) advises an application of Lim and Bowers' (1991) two-component model of '*fellowship-face*' (i.e. the need for inclusion) and '*competence-face*' (i.e. the need for respect) into gender research. Taking independent and interdependent self as dimensions, Cross, Bacon, and Morris (2000) assert that while women develop more interdependent self, men develop more independent self. Josephs, Markus, and Tafarodi (1992) indicate that while women often view their self-esteem in relational qualities, men often link their self-esteem to independent attributes. These are generally in line with ideas from popular gender theorists such as Gray (1992) and Tannen (1990), who claim that men

tend to be task-oriented, and more concerned about establishment and maintenance of social status and power, whereas women are more caring and relationship-oriented.

Although gender and face relationships seem a promising area, gender has so far been neglected in research about culture-specific face. It is therefore worthwhile for me to pay attention to this aspect in my study about *thể diện*.

### **3.3 Face and self in teaching contexts**

There has been a huge body of research about teaching and learning in Confucian cultures in the context of higher education. Most of the studies are comparative studies between Confucian and Western learning styles in higher education intercultural classrooms. It has been pointed out that face plays an important role in the thoughts and behaviours of people from Confucian cultures in their tertiary classroom practices. In particular, the students' hesitance to argue, raise questions and participate in other classroom activities often results from their concern about face of their own and face of their teachers (T. H. T. Pham, 2010; L. H. Phan, 2007; Watson, 1999; Yates & Nguyen, 2012). It needs to be noted that most of this research focusses on students' perspectives, exploring how students think about classroom functions, their teachers and students from other cultural backgrounds and how they act in their classrooms (e.g. Burns, 1991; California Department of Education, 1994; Meggitt, Tourkey, & Singh, 1995; T. Q. T. Nguyen, 2009; Park, 2000; Ruby & Ladd, 1999; Vang, 1999; Watson, 1999; Yates & Nguyen, 2012). Very few studies have examined the perspectives of teachers and explored teachers' perceptions and behaviours. This is a neglect I try to overcome in my study about Vietnamese face.

Some of the rare studies that examine Vietnamese teachers' perceptions of what they may think about teaching and learning ideals are L. H. Phan (2007) and Yates and Nguyen (2012). These studies investigated Vietnamese participants' perceptions when they were students in Australian university classrooms, who were also teachers in Vietnamese tertiary institutions. It can be said that being Vietnamese teachers formed part of their identity which in turn influenced their perceptions when they transferred to the role of students in the Western context (L. H. Phan, 2007). It was found that cultural influences were a major concern in their thinking of classroom behaviours, some of which related to what they

believed was a proper image of a teacher. In particular, they expressed their beliefs in teachers' authority, students' obedience, teacher-student hierarchy, and teachers' master role in knowledge transmission. If the distance between teachers and students was not maintained or teachers' knowledge was questioned, teachers' face was hard to be maintained (L. H. Phan, 2007; Yates & Nguyen, 2012).

If face is a social image of a person, Vietnamese teachers own a respectful face in society. Under the traditional Confucian view, teachers are among the three most important positions in society, just below the King and even above fathers (T. H. T. Pham, 2010). Through popular folk songs and proverbs, for example "*không thầy đố mày làm nên*" (without the teacher you surely cannot be successful), "*nhất tự vi sư bán tự vi sư*" (anyone who teaches you a word is your teacher, who teaches you half a word is also your teacher), and "*muốn sang thì bắc cầu kiều, muốn con hay chữ phải yêu lấy thầy*" (one should make a nice bridge to cross a river, one has to love one's teachers to study well), the Vietnamese are reminded to respect their teachers and treasure the tradition "*tôn sư trọng đạo*" (respected moral venerated teachers). The Vietnamese even have a day called Teachers' Day on 20 November when students and their parents show their respect to teachers in various ways. Respect to teachers and the teaching profession was emphasized by tertiary teacher participants in the study by L. H. Phan (2007). In particular, the participants in this study reported that they felt pleased when often receiving, both inside and outside class, respectful greetings from their past and present students, many of whom may be older than them (L. H. Phan, 2007, pp. 28-29). Therefore, if face is a social approval to one's image, teachers in Vietnamese society are probably among the people who have the biggest amount of face.

"*Thầy ra thầy, trò ra trò*" (teachers behave as teachers, students behave as students) is a popular motto in Vietnamese education. This is to say that there are certain behavioural standards for each person in their respective role, which have to be complied with for the position to be preserved. Teachers, for example, should act to confirm the Confucian premise that they are the most reliable source of knowledge to their students (C.-T. Hu, 2002). In a study in 1997 about Australian-student Chinese-teacher university classrooms by de Courcy (as cited in Yates, 2003), the Confucian teachers tended to view the Western students' questioning and argumentative attitude as an offence and a challenge to their power and knowledge rather than a part of classroom communication. In other words, Confucian teachers may not be accustomed to being questioned as this would often be considered by them as a threat to their knowledge face. For this reason, East Asian classrooms are often

associated with teacher-centred styles, contrasting with student-centred styles advocated for Western classrooms (Park, 2000). Teachers are often considered the centre of their classes mainly due to the reason that they are the ones constructing knowledge for their students. Although there have been national efforts in recent years to facilitate student-centred teaching and learning approaches in Vietnam, this Confucian thinking of teachers being the absolute source of knowledge continues to be prevalent in Vietnamese classrooms up to the level of higher education (T. H. T. Pham, 2010). T. H. T. Pham (2010, p. 28) comments: “It seems really hard for Vietnamese teachers to lower their role from a 'king' to a facilitator”. In terms of face, this equates to the teachers’ face loss.

Furthermore, teachers should be a model for their students in moral aspects of life. Scollon (1999) states that teachers in Confucian education contexts serve as perfect examples for their students not only in terms of knowledge but also virtues. Teachers are expected to be responsible not only for their students’ academic achievements but also their moral and spiritual development and their behaviours (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Boss, 1983). Often seen in common rooms for teachers in Vietnamese schools, especially from primary to high schools, is the motto “*Mỗi thầy cô là một tấm gương sáng cho học sinh noi theo*” (every teacher is a bright mirror for students to look at and follow), translated in English as “every teacher is a good example for students”. This motto is given to teachers as a reminder for their self-cultivation into a perfect role model for their students. It is expected for the Vietnamese to consider moral aspects of teachers more important than their intellectual aspects, just as their students are always taught to learn to behave before learning knowledge (Vietnamese interviewee's idea from L. H. Phan, 2007, p. 28).

Therefore to summarise, in terms of concerns for face of Vietnamese teachers, the literature has provided us with these two main components - knowledge and morality - in what should be an appropriate image of teachers in Confucian education. More has been mentioned in terms of teachers’ knowledge, since knowledge is considered vital to maintain an authority image of teachers in classrooms. Less has been mentioned about teachers’ moral aspects; however it is sufficient to suggest that this aspect may be more significant than the knowledge aspect in terms of face, for not only teachers but probably every person in Vietnamese society. An investigation of perceptions of *thể diện* of teachers in a tertiary teaching context will help illuminate these issues and be beneficial to educational practices, especially when there is a shortage of studies about teachers.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, this chapter has set out important premises for my research. In the context that Vietnamese research about face is still lacking, and research about face needs more culture-specific studies to rectify the Western dominance in approaches to face, my study about the indigenous Vietnamese concept of face *thể diện* following a culture-internal approach is therefore needed. Since *thể diện* is still a new concept in research, the study is exploratory in nature, which means that hypotheses do not yet exist and should not be the starting point for it. However, a review of literature in the field of face and culture has alerted me to what might be important in my exploration of this concept. In particular, I am prepared with the notions of collectivism and with caution about it. I am aware of the strength of traditional cultural practices but also aware of possible changes.

I have also presented in this chapter background literature necessary for an understanding of gender and the tertiary teaching context pursuits of my study. This review also suggests several questions for my study in each aspect. In terms of gender, I want to know whether men and women have different perceptions about *thể diện* and whether perceptions about *thể diện* reflect gender issues in Vietnam. In terms of teaching, I want to find out the contents of college teachers' *thể diện*, what are behaviours that maintain or weaken teachers' *thể diện*, and whether the current changes in Vietnamese society and the corresponding changes in status and authority of Vietnamese teachers are reflected in perceptions of *thể diện* of teachers.

The next step is finding ways for my exploration.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

According to Creswell (2003), there are three elements in defining a research framework: philosophical assumptions about the nature of knowledge claims, general strategies to approach research objects, and detailed methods of data collection and analysis. This chapter will step-by-step provide information to these aspects of my study.

The chapter is divided into the following six main sections:

- Philosophical assumptions and general frameworks;
- The choice of methods and sample;
- The design of interviews;
- Information about the participants;
- The interview process; and
- Data analysis issues.

#### **I. PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND GENERAL FRAMEWORKS**

##### **1. A social constructivism framework**

Research is always carried out under certain philosophical assumptions. These assumptions formulate the way researchers see problems, set questions and seek information to answer the questions (Creswell, 2013). This study is guided by philosophical beliefs associated with the framework called social constructivism as detailed by Creswell (2013).

In this framework, it is accepted that knowledge, or in my case knowledge about “*thể diện*”, is subjectively, socially and contextually constructed. It is constructed via individual experiences and social interactions of participants and the researcher. As a result, it is acknowledged that there can be multiple and diverse knowledge or realities about the researched in people’s minds and they all deserve equal recognition. This is in contrast with the belief of another framework called postpositivism, which states that there is only one

single and absolute knowledge or reality about the researched ‘out there’ and hence, the researcher’s task is to reach that absolute truth by minimizing subjectivity and using measurable statistical tools (Creswell, 2013).

These beliefs in social constructivism also guide the choice of qualitative methods such as interviews, observations and text analyses to answer research questions instead of scientific methods used in postpositivism. In studies following a social constructivism framework, an inductive process is employed, in which the researcher develops participants’ evidences into themes, combines participants’ interpretations with his/her own interpretations, and finally develops theories based on those.

## **2. A sociocultural approach**

My approach to *thể diện* in this study is a sociocultural approach. According to the father of this approach - Vygotsky (1978), social interaction plays a fundamental role in individuals’ cognitive development. In other words, the community, society, or culture in which individuals live decides how individuals make meaning of concepts. A person’s cognitive formation cannot be detached from his/her social cultural environment. As a result, a concept such as *thể diện* is viewed as a result of social and cultural features specific to the Vietnamese in different contexts, formed from social interactions among the Vietnamese. An understanding of the concept *thể diện* cannot be complete without relating it to Vietnamese cultural values about behaviours and communication in a particular context. In this study, *thể diện* is viewed in relation with cultural values, principles of behaviours, and other social cultural aspects.

## **3. A multiculturalist approach**

In this thesis, I follow the *multiculturalist approach*, or *multicultural-epistemological stance* suggested by Shi-xu (2006). To put it simply, this is “an epistemological attitude to or stance on knowledge seeking and making that, beyond an ethnocentric monopoly of truths, draws critically, reflexively, and creatively on culturally differing and competing systems of knowledge”, the outcome of which is “the construction of historically conscious, culturally

inclusive and locally-and-globally-minded forms of theory” (Shi-xu, 2006, p. 384). Generally speaking, in this approach, the researcher goes beyond the singular, often claimed universal (but still Eurocentric) view of the world to reach diverse cultural views of knowledge. According to Shi-xu, this stance is very much needed to rectify the imbalance between Western and Eastern worldviews and value systems in the current academic world, and can bring researchers a more inclusive, sophisticated and innovative understanding.

Shi-xu describes steps to achieve this epistemological stance. First, the researcher should determine for his/her research focus or theory construction some particular, culturally specific discourse, or context. Yet, second, he/she should not be constrained by local perspectives but seek connections between different relevant theories. Third, the theorist should keep a close observation and reflection on the focused discourse in order to produce his/her own theoretical ideas. According to Shi-xu, this research stance also facilitates researchers’ sensitivity to new changes in the target contemporary globalized culture and opportunities to see how local culture responds to global impacts. It satisfies the interconnected, hybridized and diversified condition of cultures resulted from increasing globalization.

This epistemological stance seems very useful for my study of *thể diện*. First of all, its assumptions of theoretical and practical bias in the academic world fit the current status of face research, as I have discussed above. Thanks to its empowerment to the marginalized and minority, the approach can help me create a stage for *thể diện*, which is, similarly, still neglected in the major research about face. The second point, which is important, is that Shi-xu’s multiculturalist tendency, though it emphasizes local properties, still maintains a global perspective in research. This encourages me to, on the one hand, take advantage of the long-built traditional Western conceptualizations and theorizations of face concept to equip myself with background understanding and useful conceptual and analytical tools for my study. It also, on the other hand, encourages me to penetrate the contemporary existence of the Vietnamese face concept to explore its specific cultural and social traits. My main study object is both *face* – a universal concept described by Western theories, and *thể diện* – a specific Vietnamese way of seeing and understanding face. In other words, the approach renders explicit my consciousness of universality and particularity of face concept. Thirdly, the approach keeps me conscious of the impacts of globalization on the way *thể diện* operates in contemporary Vietnam. In addition, under this approach, I am alerted to the complexity, diversity, multiplicity and dynamism of my study object *thể diện*. It reminds me



to pay attention to both tradition and integration. Last but not least, the multiculturalist stance entitles researchers to the central role in their research: they are critical mediators and meaning makers, in order to “create a relevant, novel, and helpful understanding of the discourse in question” (Shi-xu, 2006, p. 397). This stated role encourages my responsibility, flexibility, and confidence throughout the study processes in order to bring out a reliable understanding of *thể diện* to my readers.

In general, the approach requires me to achieve a balance between universality and particularity, local and global perspectives, and stability and mobility of the phenomenon. Although it seems difficult to achieve and I do not know how successful I can be in the implementation of the approach, its guidelines are kept fresh in my mind during the study process.

#### **4. An exploratory study**

Although this is not the first time *thể diện* is mentioned in research, understanding about it is still very little, especially an understanding about how it functions in the popular and daily culture of the Vietnamese. Given little has been done about *thể diện*, my study is an exploratory study of the notion.

Exploratory research as a type of research has been elaborated by Stebbins (2001). It is described as a contrast with confirmation as a type of study. Unlike confirmation studies whose main goal is to test hypotheses, exploratory studies aim at generating hypotheses or tentative generalizations about a group, object, process, activity or situation about which little has been known. Whereas confirmation research requires a control of variables, exploratory research calls for flexibility and open-mindedness in finding sources of data, the purpose of which is to obtain firsthand understanding of the phenomenon. Data can come from various sources such as observation, interview, archival sources (e.g., newspaper articles, government statistics) and life records (e.g., letters, diaries, and biographies). Throughout the exploratory process, the researcher often bases his/her approach on what are called *sensitizing concepts*, which are drawn from selected aspects of existing general theories, to come with guiding ideas (at the beginning) and generalizations (at the end) of their exploration. Due to these features, Stebbins (2001) alerts us to the danger of applying

confirmatory benchmarks to exploratory works. According to him, people, who are used to confirmation type of studies

... when faced with exploratory work, are likely to insist on evaluating its validity and reliability from a confirmatory perspective or to resort to inappropriate formulas such as applying inferential statistical tests to the data, even though there is, in fact, nothing to infer. (p. 30).

In terms of presenting style, according to Stebbins (2001), exploratory research often asks for a creative, imaginative and fiction-like style of writing with the use of “literary devices such as metaphor, story line, recurrent theme, and use of vivid description” (Stebbins, 2001, p. 42). Emphasizing a close association between exploratory research and qualitative methodology, Stebbins (2001) advises us to resist any quantitative description in exploratory research. He argues that a quantitative generalization, such as “80% of the respondents believe/say that...”, is misleading, because the questions in interviews are often not consistent. It may convey a sense of precision which is not of an exploratory research nature. Instead one can say in phrases, for examples “about half”, “the majority of” and so on.

The small paragraph below illustrates well the idea of exploratory research by Stebbins (2001):

Exploration is no place for data collection formulas distilled from conventional theory and methodological practice. On the contrary, exploration is where the art of science is most widely exercised, the area of science where imagination reigns most freely. Creativity in this domain comes through inductive reasoning, as researchers discover order in what initially appeared to them as chaos. (p. 23)

It can be seen that exploratory research following Stebbins guidelines is a specific type of research with certain requirements from data collection to writing style. It is not just about the nature of exploring and the exploratory spirit of research as suggested by its simple connotation.

Given these features, my research has many shared points with Stebbins’s descriptions. I find in the Stebbins’ exploratory research suitable spirit and useful guidelines for my exploration of Vietnamese face. First of all, my study is an exploratory study in the sense that it differs from confirmation type of studies by its hypothesis-generating nature, flexible data collection approaches and ‘exploratory research’ benchmarks for validity and reliability.

Similar to exploratory research as described by Stebbins (2001), my research is carried out from a very little understanding of the concept from literature. My aims are to come with first-time theories of *thể diện*, generate ideas about it, perhaps suggest possible generalizations for later investigations. The distinction between confirmation studies and exploratory studies helps me be careful about using confirmatory means in stages of my study, and reminds me of the tentativeness of my generalizations. In another aspect, it can inform my readers of a suitable perception of my study. Other aspects are also helpful, for example, the idea of *sensitizing concepts* encourages my employment of relevant linguistic, social and cultural theories to form pre-hypotheses about *thể diện*.

However, I am hesitant to call my study a precisely exploratory as in Stebbins's meaning. My adaptation of it may contain less imagination and creativity, at least in writing, than Stebbins desires. Firstly it may be because of my limited ability to handle the distinctions between writing imaginatively, fictionally and writing formally, precisely and academically as research normally should be. Secondly, I feel a need to satisfy the latter style of writing in a PhD dissertation. Besides, quantitative descriptions are still used in my report in order to deliver my readers as precise as possible impressions of my data, which contrasts with Stebbins's advice.

### **Relation with grounded theory**

My study might seem to resemble grounded theory research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in the sense that it aims to generate suggested hypotheses or theories about a phenomenon based on data collected from participants who experience the phenomenon. Furthermore, grounded theory also lends me techniques for data analysis which I will discuss later. However, I do not consider my study grounded theory because of the reasons I present below. My discussion of grounded theory is based on the description of the theory by Creswell (2013).

Firstly, the study object of grounded theory is often a practical social process, action or interaction of people, which occurs over time with distinct steps or phases. Examples might be the studying of the development of an education program, or how a faculty is supported and how this support enhances research performance of faculty staff (Creswell, 2013, p. 85). Meanwhile, my study object is an abstract cultural concept of face. Although I am also interested in the movements or changes of the notion over time (if my research allows me to

see this), the concept is viewed more in its stability which underpins the people's living and behaving principles.

Second, in terms of research process, grounded theory requires a constant back and forth contact with participants to elaborate, fill the gaps and improve theories (Creswell, 2013, p. 85). My theory of face, differently, is built upon one main important contact with participants to come with first-hand understandings of *thể diện*.

Lastly, it is important for grounded theory that the researcher “needs to set aside, as much as possible, theoretical ideas or notions so that the analytic, substantive theory can emerge” (Creswell, 2013, p. 89). This forms the major spirit of grounded theory. However, in my exploration of *thể diện*, I welcome theoretical ideas and suggestions to help me form pre-understanding of the notion and approaches to it. This can be seen via my previous chapter in which I review the literature to identify what we do and do not know about the area at this stage.

Up to this point, I have presented major frameworks I employ for my study about *thể diện*. These frameworks guide my choice of methods, participants and data analysis. I will elaborate these processes in coming sections.

## **II. METHODS AND SAMPLE**

### **1. Methods of data collection**

#### **1.1 Interviews**

I specifically study the concept *thể diện*; therefore I aim to find data in which the term is directly written or spoken. Observations or natural conversations are not appropriate since people normally do not bring up abstract issues such as *thể diện* in their daily communication. Among the conventional qualitative methods, interviews and text analyses are suitable options. I chose interviews as the major method due to the reasons below.

Interviews are often rhetorically seen as a means providing researchers a window onto interviewees' mind or 'life-world' (Kvale, 1996). The main aim of indepth interviewing is to

“generate data which give an authentic insight into people’s experiences” (Silverman, 1993, p. 91). In particular, interviews can generate multiple views on a given topic and open the ability to explore emic perceptions of members of a certain group (Edley & Litosseliti, 2010). Respondents’ viewpoints therefore, hold the “culturally honoured status of reality” (Miller & Glassner, 1997, p. 99). These abilities suit my research purpose since they can give me an emic indepth understanding of *thể diện* via exploring cultural informants’ perceptions of the notion. Plus, other advantages of this method, such as flexibility and economic advantages in terms of money and time compared to other methods, are hard to ignore.

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were employed to create as much as possible flexibility and space for participants to elaborate their views and experiences.

## **1.2 Corpus from web data**

In order to help me with ideas for questions in interviews, I carried out a small corpus study of how *thể diện* appears in texts. Due to the lack of scholarly literature about *thể diện*, the corpus is considered a bridge to guide me into the area and develop interview contents. I hope this corpus helps me with semantic issues as well as preliminary ideas about how *thể diện* is used in discourses and what topics are often associated with it. Its results can also assist me in the interpretation of interview data later.

I chose web data because I considered them a rich and the most convenient and quickest available source of data on the topic. The use of internet texts has been increasingly employed and acknowledged in qualitative studies as “a means of studying the way social realities are displayed” (Markham, 2004, p. 114).

However, I am also aware of limitations of this source of data. One of them is the heterogeneity of data, which gives no guarantee that data I found on the websites contain a proper use of the term “*thể diện*” in contexts. Furthermore, there is no control on information of language users. There is no or little information about gender, cultural regions, professions and other background knowledge of the internet users often considered important in analysing data.

However these should not be much of a trouble. What I hope to obtain from this source of data is a general sense, meaning and contents of the concept in contemporary Vietnamese life. I think this can be reasonably achieved if my analysis of the corpus only focuses on general tendencies in which *thể diện* appears. I have no intention to use data collected from this source as a main body of data for my research. They form a little bridge for me to come closer to the concept *thể diện* so that then I can examine it carefully with the interview method.

## **2. Sample**

### **2.1 Sample size**

The sample size for interviews was planned to be approximately 20 participants. The matter of size of sample is a prominent concern if research aims at a broad generalization about a social structure or process. In this case, the size of sample needs to be large enough to validate generalizations of research findings. In contrast, if research is inductive, exploratory and concept-generating rather than concluding and generalizing, a small number of respondents is not only reasonable but also advantageous, since what matters is the depth of data rather than the size of sample (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

### **2.2 Participants as college teachers**

As stated before, my reason for choosing teachers as participants partly comes from my professional position as a college teacher and my interest in *thể diện* in tertiary education teaching contexts. Furthermore, there are also other reasons supporting my choice of college teachers as participants for my study of *thể diện*. First, teachers are often among the most critical, articulate and expressive when discussing abstract issues such as cultures and face concepts. Due to their role as educators, teachers are likely to have critical opinions of cultural issues and people's behaviours. Besides, given their acquaintances with higher education research, they are likely to be familiar, and hence feel comfortable with interviewing conditions (e.g. with recordings). Teachers were also chosen as main

informants in another research about face: the study by Gao (2009) of Chinese face concepts *mianzi/mientzu* and *lian/lien*.

Second, teachers, especially tertiary teachers in Vietnamese society, have an important role in cultural preservation and social development. On the one hand, teachers are often seen as protectors of traditional cultural norms. On the other hand, they also belong to the most advanced class of the society who have a higher opportunity to approach innovative information, technology and new ideologies. These make them important agents in both preservation and transformation of cultural values, and hence, a valuable source of data for my study.

Lastly, there is the convenience of using teachers. Being in the same professional network makes my contact and relationship-building with participants easier, and can bring a relaxing atmosphere in our interactions, which is desirable to gain authentic data.

### **2.3 Participants' age range**

With a small sample size, it is not ideal for me to have a wide age range of participants. I chose my participants to be under 40 years old. There are several advantages with this age group. First, considering that we were not much different in age, our interactions were likely to be more open and comfortable, especially when hierarchy is an important feature in Vietnamese culture. Second, this age group of teachers is probably the one most updated with new knowledge and changes, therefore interviewing them gives me a better chance to capture the contemporary form of *thể diện* in current Vietnamese society.

### **2.4 Consideration of participants' other information**

I am aware that other information about participants, for example their cultural origin (i.e. what cultural area of Vietnam they come from) and their marital status possibly influences their responses. For instance, different relationship experiences may result in not only different views about topics such as *thể diện* and gender, *thể diện* in relationships, *thể diện* in family, but also might influence the reliability/strength of their opinions. Single-status people (by single I mean 'never married') do not often have experiences to discuss face

issues between husband and wife. It needs to be made clear that in Vietnamese culture, it is unusual for people to have a partner without marriage. Therefore, I only distinguish two conditions - 'single and 'married' - for my participants.

Regional identity can also be an influential factor. Vietnam is considered as having three main geographical and cultural regions: the North, the Middle (also called the Central part), and the South, which differ from each other considerably in terms of culture of communication and behaviours, especially the North and the South (Chew, 2009; McLeod & Nguyen, 2001; P. P. Tran, 2007). Scholars, for example McLeod and Nguyen (2001), suggest that people from the North are more concerned about issues of ritual behaviours, social appearance in public, and more face sensitive than people in other regions, especially people in the South.

However, due to the exploratory, small-size-sample, hypotheses-generating-rather-than-confirming nature of my study, it was neither feasible nor my purpose to examine influences of these features on the participants' perceptions. Therefore, these were not set out as selection criteria of my sample. Instead, information such as participants' regional identity, family backgrounds, marital status and any other information that I deemed possibly to have a relation with their responses were noted to assist later data analysis. However, it is suggested that these features are worth investigations in following studies.

### **III. THE INTERVIEW DESIGN**

This section will start with a general description about the work with corpus data and its results, which lent me ideas for designing interview contents. Then I will describe a small interview experiment using the technique of repertory grid, which also contributed to the design and conducting of main interviews. Finally I discuss the design of the interviews.



## 1. The corpus

### 1.1 Corpus data collection

I built the corpus by collecting web data containing at least one of the three Vietnamese terms referring to face: *thể diện*, *sĩ diện*, and *mất mặt*. *Mất mặt* was included because I consider it a synonym with *mất thể diện*, both mean ‘losing face’. *Mất mặt* may even be more frequently used than *mất thể diện* in spoken language. *Sĩ diện* was included because after collecting some data about *thể diện*, I noticed its appearance along with *thể diện*, sometimes used interchangeably with *thể diện*. This suggested that *sĩ diện* is closely related with *thể diện*, which was confirmed after I consulted its dictionary definition (details about *sĩ diện* definition were provided in Chapter One).

The searching of data began on April 14<sup>th</sup> 2010 and ended on June 10<sup>th</sup> 2010. It was carried out via the Vietnamese Google search function [google.com.vn](http://google.com.vn), with each of the above terms searched. Data came from a variety of sources such as news, letters, social forum and novels. Each piece of data chosen (which I call an example) no matter how short or long had to be able to be identified in terms of its context of using the face terms. In the situations where the original text was too long, for example a novel chapter, only the relevant part was extracted, in three steps: defining where the targeted term appeared, defining the basic complete unit containing the term (which was often a sentence), defining necessary surrounding sentences which were essential for identifying the context in which the term was used. Each example was numbered according to the order of being found. I stopped the collection when I observed that the data had formed clear patterns and these patterns repeated more frequently. The overall corpus contained 276 examples, in which *thể diện* appeared 252 times, *sĩ diện* 73 times, and *mất mặt* 68 times. The corpus was analysed using the method of content analysis, in particular thematic analysis.

The work on the corpus itself was initially planned to be a separate chapter. However, due to the space constraint of the thesis and considering its supporting role to the major method of data collection by interview, I only describe it briefly and present its major results which had direct influence on my planning of interview contents.

## 1.2 Results of corpus analysis

The most frequent collocations with *thể diện* in the corpus were “*giữ thể diện*” (keep face) (61 times in 51 examples) and “*mất thể diện*” (lose face) (56 times in 52 examples). This suggests that these are probably the most usual collocations of *thể diện*. A lack of terms for ‘gaining face’ suggests that the need to preserve *thể diện* and the fear of losing *thể diện* are probably more important than the desire to gain more of it, which means that *thể diện* is such a basic value to the Vietnamese that the maintenance of it is essential.

In terms of *sĩ diện*, there were two situations in which the term appeared. In the first situation, *sĩ diện* had the exact same meaning as *thể diện* (13 times in 12 examples). However it appeared more in the second situation: *sĩ diện* conveyed a related meaning with *thể diện*, in other words *sĩ diện* had its own connotation (60 times in 49 examples). This was confirmed by a simple test in which I replaced *sĩ diện* with *thể diện* to see if the meaning in the context remained. In particular, in the second situation, *sĩ diện* conveyed the meaning of ‘personal face’, or concern about personal face/self-face. Furthermore, in these situations, *sĩ diện* tended to be used with a disapproving tone, meaning something undesirable (41/60 times). For example,

Example 165: *Có những lúc tôi biết bản thân mình sai nhưng tôi không thể vứt bỏ sự ích kỉ, sĩ diện, và tính bảo thủ của mình. Những lúc đó tôi thấy bản thân mình thật xấu xa.*

[Sometimes I knew that I was wrong, however I could not get rid of my selfishness, my *self-face concern*, and my pigheadedness. At those moments, I felt that I was so nasty]

Content analysis showed that the concern about self-face in those situations was considered by speakers as unnecessary, inappropriate, or undesirable. For example, it prevented one from doing something that one should do, or encouraged one to show off to be ‘above’ others. In the corpus, whereas *thể diện* was associated with concepts such as honour (*danh dự*), and self-respect (*lòng tự trọng*), pride (*lòng kiêu hãnh*) and dignity (*phẩm giá, phẩm chất*), *sĩ diện* was associated with false pride (*lòng tự ái/ tự cao*), and false face (*sĩ diện hão*).

The analysis of the corpus also showed that *thể diện* is a relational phenomenon. It was expressed in 43 examples that people who were in the same group or close to each other shared the same *thể diện* and/or had remarkable impacts on *thể diện* of each other. For example, one lost face when one’s spouse (example 1) or father (example 23) had an

extramarital affair; one lost face when his/her relative dressed inappropriately or carelessly in public (example 3 and 44); or a girl lost her family face when people knew that she was a lesbian (example 77). In these examples, the persons did not hold the sole right to and responsibility for their *thể diện*. Similarly, face of a person may not be a direct result of his/her own behaviours but a result of behaviours of someone else who had a close relationship with him/her. What was important was that this connection was as strong as an obligation, which might make it different to similar expressions in other cultures. The connection was strongest in the family relationships

Gender was another noticeable aspect in the corpus. The ideas “men are concerned so much about their face” or “men pay special attention to their face” were articulated in 17 examples, whereas there was no such idea for women. In addition, in 30 examples there was an idea that “women should save men’s face” (including advising women to do so; criticizing women failing to do so; men complaining as their women failed to do so; women regretting for not doing so). The opposite idea, i.e. “men should save women’s face” (including criticizing men failing to do so; approving men doing so; advising men to do so), was only seen in 7 examples.

In particular, noticeable was the term/concept “*thể diện/sĩ diện đàn ông*” (male face / men’s face / face of a man), which appeared 8 times in 5 examples. It seemed that the term had its own connotation, making it be able to stand independently out of contexts. In particular, maintaining *thể diện/sĩ diện đàn ông* was maintaining an inherent face of men that held them in a higher position in families and in the society in comparison with women. Meanwhile, there was only one similar term for women in the corpus: “*thể diện của người con gái*” (face of a girl) (example 137). However, this term needed its context to be understood. It was about a girl who was afraid of losing her ‘girl’ face if she took the initiative to tell a boy that she loved him. That face was made up from the socially expected shyness and passivity - waiting for men to approach - of girls. Without its context, it was hard to know this meaning, for “face of a girl” did not enclose any particular connotation for itself as in the case of “*thể diện đàn ông*”. There was no concept “*thể diện đàn bà*” or “*thể diện phụ nữ*” (female face / women’s face) in the corpus.

These findings fit into the collectivistic and patriarchal orientations of the culture described in the general literature. More importantly, these results suggested several tendencies about *thể diện* for me to explore in the interviews, i.e. the concern for self-face, attitude towards

personal face, the balance between self and other, face as a relational phenomenon, and gender-based face.

Beside the corpus, in the process of building semi-structured interviews, a small interview experiment I did with three Vietnamese teachers to trial a technique called repertory grid also gave me valuable ideas for the main interviews in this research, especially in the aspect of *thể diện* in teaching context – a focus of my study that was not yet covered in the corpus results. Furthermore, this repertory grid interview exercise also gained for me useful experiences in terms of handling interviews.

## **2. A little experiment with repertory grid interviews**

Repertory grid interviews are a form of structured interviews based on Kelly's (1955) Personal Construct Theory, which states that people construe the world in terms of contrasts (bi-polar constructs) rather than absolutes. This interview technique is based on a provision, either by interviewer or interviewees themselves, of certain facts/incidents and interviewees are asked to describe them in their own terms, classify them and rate them on grids. The technique aims at exploring the interviewees' understanding of an issue by their own words with a least contamination from the interviewer's opinions.

In the process of doing this research, I had the intention to employ repertory grids as an important interview technique for my study. To experiment with this method, I carried out trial interviews in Vietnamese with three Vietnamese teacher participants, two males and one female, aged 30 – 32, who were also studying for their PhD in Australia. However, after this trial, I abandoned this intention, considering semi-structured interviews likely to offer more possibilities for my study. Nevertheless, what I learnt from this little experiment was useful to me in my design and implementation of the semi-structured interviews.

In particular, what I learnt from these participants was situations in which a person, and particularly a teacher, lost *thể diện*. This was because an important part of these interviews was my request to the participants to provide me with situations that caused loss of *thể diện* to a general person and situations that caused a loss of *thể diện* to a teacher. Among the situations provided by the participants about loss of *thể diện* for a general person, noticeable were the situations of extramarital affairs and “a man cannot support his family financially”.

I included these situations into semi-structured interviews, considering their high level of seriousness of loss of *thể diện* as perceived by the repertory grid interviewees, and the possibility to elicit opinions about *thể diện* and gender from them. In terms of *thể diện* for teachers, the participants seemed to emphasize the importance of academic knowledge to teachers' *thể diện* by citing incidents such as “teaching wrong knowledge in class” and “being unable to answer students’ questions”, and considered them important in all of the interviews. Other situations were: often being in a drunken state, being hit by students, sexually harassing their students, losing in arguments with colleagues, and dressing carelessly in classrooms. These examples assisted me with ideas for designing semi-structured interview contents.

### **A lesson for handling interviews**

From these trial interviews, I learned that face concern can significantly influence interviewees’ responses and attitudes. In particular, in the second interview, the male interviewee seemed to be concerned about saving his own face from my questions. For example, when I asked “What things/incidents do you think are most likely to make a teacher lose face?”, he replied “In my 10 years of teaching I have never encountered things that can be said to make me lose face, but through my knowing of other colleagues...”. He used hedging statements to distance himself from the examples. He was also cautious and reserved in the whole interview. Also, he was hesitant to give his personal opinions and evaluations of the incidents. He often articulated evaluations under the forms of the general social evaluations of the incidents, such as: “our society often consider that...” rather than “I think that...”. If he said “I think that...”, the idea was often neutral and did not seem ‘personal’. Listening back to the record and learning from it, with the later interviewee I particularly emphasized that examples he provided to me were not necessarily about himself, and that he could tell me any example he ever knew from his own experience, people around him, and any source of media. This was to prevent the concern that face loss examples he gave were understood by him or by me as real incidents he experienced. Also, I reassured him that he should not be worried about judgments or evaluations of his opinions. I was not going to look for what was right or wrong in what he may say. This seemed to work well with this interviewee as he provided examples of incidents faster and easier compared to the

other two interviewees. It was useful for the semi-structured interviews to give these kinds of reassurance before the interviews.

### 3. The interview design

Semi-structured interviews included two types of contents: the first was to seek for participants' general perceptions about the concepts (*thể diện*, *sĩ diện*, *thể diện đàn ông*), and the second was discussion about some situations that involved concerns for *thể diện*.

In terms of the situations, beside the ones suggested in the corpus and the repertory grid interviews, there were some coming from my own observations and experiences. For example, the reluctance of the Vietnamese, especially people of higher social positions, to apologize was such a situation. The idea came from a mass media criticism that Vietnamese politicians did not have the custom to apologize to public and resign from their wrongdoings. I saw this phenomenon as not unique to the leader class but also popular to people of perceived higher positions in Vietnam, for example parents (in relation with their children) and teachers (in relation with their students). To my deduction, there is possibly an involvement of self-face concern in this denial. I included this phenomenon in the interviews for discussion, considering it was likely to elicit interesting issues of face in relation with social positions.

In the teaching context, based on my own teaching experience in Vietnam, I added two situations in which I believe *thể diện* of teachers very likely to be concerned. They were the situations of teachers cheating in their own exams and teachers commenting on their colleagues' teaching. Contextual explanations are needed for these situations. In the Vietnamese educational system, teachers in schools are often required to attend various examinations during their career, for example for upgrading their knowledge, for the so called national 'standardization' of their expertise, or for postgraduate studies. Most of these kinds of training and their exams are often not considered as serious as their stated purposes. Therefore, there is an implicitly accepted reality that cheating in those exams is common. I wanted to explore what my teacher participants may feel about this act in relation with *thể diện* of the teachers who cheat. As to the other situation, it was based on the context that teachers in Vietnamese schools often have regular occasions in which their classrooms are

attended and evaluated by other teachers. After these teaching presentations, the teachers are supposed to hear comments (about their teaching capabilities, methods, lesson contents, etc.) from their colleagues in a meeting called ‘evaluation meeting’. Conclusions in those meetings are often an important base to evaluate the teachers, for example in that year or that semester. I consider giving comments in those meetings a face sensitive act. Consultations with four of my Vietnamese teacher colleagues supported these supplements.

I divided the interview contents into three main topics: *thể diện* in the general perspective, *thể diện* in teaching contexts, and *thể diện* in gender relations. In each area there were issues for interview.

### ***Thể diện* in the general perspective**

- Meaning of *thể diện*
- Relations between a person and his/her important others in terms of *thể diện*
- Exposed extramarital affairs and reactions to exposed extramarital affairs to *thể diện* of a person and his/her partner
- The concept *sĩ diện*
- Reluctance to apologize and *thể diện*

### ***Thể diện* in teaching contexts**

- Relations between *thể diện* and teachers in general
- Relations between close persons of a teacher and the teacher’s *thể diện*
- Extramarital affairs and *thể diện* of a teacher
- Sexual offence with students by teachers
- Being unable to answer students’ questions in class
- Teaching content is pointed out as wrong by students in class
- Commenting on colleagues’ teaching presentations
- Cheating in exams
- The most serious loss of *thể diện* to teachers
- School leaders’ actions to save *thể diện* of their institutions

### ***Thể diện* in gender relations**

- Meaning of the term “*thể diện/sĩ diện đàn ông*”

- The idea “men pay more attention to their *thể diện* than women do”
- The advice “women should keep their men’s *thể diện*”
- Extramarital affairs by men and extramarital affairs by women
- The situation: men do housework and women do paid jobs in a family

A list of detailed intended questions is given in Appendix 1.

## IV. THE PARTICIPANTS

### 1. Recruiting participants

I recruited my participants from staff of a college in Nha Trang City, Vietnam. To my native cultural awareness, direct face-to-face contact is very important to the Vietnamese if one asks another an important favour. In my case, I asked my participants to participate in my research, even though some of them were my seniors in age and/or social status. Each potential participant therefore was personally contacted and I arranged an informal meeting. In this meeting, I introduced my research to the person, invited them to join my project as an interviewee, and if they agreed to participate, prepared them with general interview contents. Details of my project were given to them in Information sheets. I also explained to each participant that my interviews with them were to ask them opinions about issues related to the concept *thể diện*, their teaching experience and some issues related to genders. Detailed questions were not revealed. This first meeting was also for establishing relationships and also I sought to know if anything they expected from me and from the interviews.

I prepared a list of 20 potential participants whose information suited my criteria. They were distributed evenly in terms of gender and marital status (single and married). Their teaching subjects were chosen to be as varied as possible so that most participants did not fall into a particular subject or type of subject (e.g. natural science or social science). After 15 interviews, considering that collected data was adequate, which was evidenced by saturation and replication, I finished my data collection.



## **2. The participants**

My participants were 7 male and 8 female teachers from 26 to 37 years old in a college in Nha Trang City (of Khanh Hoa Province), which is on the South Central Coast of Vietnam. There were 9 married (3 males, 6 females) and 6 single (4 males, 2 females) at the time of the interviews. In terms of regional identity, 14 participants identified themselves as from the Middle of Vietnam (8 from Nha Trang; 3 from Nghe An; Thanh Hoa, Quang Tri, and Hue each had 1 participant), only 1 participant came from the North (Ha Noi).

In order to keep my participants' identities confidential, I will not report hometowns of each participant and name of their college. I will also not present teaching subjects of the participants, since they can be cues to track the college and the participants. This is because there were, at the time of the research, only five colleges in Nha Trang City, each focused on training a particular expertise (e.g. Nha Trang Medical College, Nha Trang College of Pedagogy, Nha Trang College of Arts and Tourism, Nha Trang Vocational College...). Their teaching subjects will therefore reflect the training nature of the college. Furthermore, they were small-scale colleges, mostly having fewer than 200 teaching staff each. With information about where and what they taught, plus their age and marital status, it can be easy to identify the participants. Besides and more importantly, no significant impact of this type of background was found on the interview outcomes.

The participants were considered the young, less experienced group of teachers of their college, compared to the other group of old, experienced teachers who were above 40 years old. All of them started their teaching career at their current college, around the age of 23-24, after they graduated from pedagogy training universities from other parts of Vietnam. The students they taught were mostly people graduated from high schools of Khanh Hoa Province, aged 18 to 21. Every year there has been a university and college entrance exam for all high school graduates all over the country and points achieved in this exam decide whether one is accepted into a certain university or college. Points needed for college entrance in Vietnam are often lower than those for university. This group of students are often not evaluated as high as university students in terms of learning ability, especially independent learning ability. A usual course in colleges in Vietnam takes three years.

Each participant was assigned a code name in my study. Participants' information is given in Table 1.

<b>Number</b>	<b>Participant' code</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital status</b>
1	BC	F	27	single
2	CH	M	34	single
3	DN	M	31	married
4	HN	M	26	single
5	HQ	F	30	married
6	KL	F	37	married
7	PT	F	31	married
8	QH	F	28	single
9	TA	M	32	married
10	TC	F	28	married
11	TH	F	27	married
12	VA	F	34	married
13	VD	M	27	single
14	VT	M	31	married
15	VTh	M	30	single

M: Male, F: Female

**Table 1. Participants' information**

## **V. THE INTERVIEW PROCESS**

### **1. General information**

Interviews were carried out during January 2011. Locations and times of interviews were chosen considering what was most convenient for the interviewees. There were four contexts in which the interviews took place: interviewee's home, the college, café, and my home. Before the interviews, consent forms were given to the participants. Other background information of the interviewees such as their birth place, marital status, family background, and education were noted during our casual chat as a warming up before the interviews. There were two recorders operating in each interview and both were started when the first interview question was given. Lengths of the interviews varied with the shortest one lasting about 32 minutes and the longest one about 1 hour and 13 minutes (time as shown in the main digital recorder). Vietnamese was the only language used in all of the interviews. Information about the order, locations and lengths of the interviews is given in Table 2.

Number	Interviewees	Interview locations				Lengths of the interviews
		Interviewee's home	The college	Café	My home	
1.	TA			x		01:13:22
2.	KL	x				01:02:00
3.	HQ				x	00:41:41
4.	QH		x			00:55:01
5.	VTh		x			01:04:21
6.	HN		x			01:13:46
7.	TC			x		00:57:51
8.	VD		x			01:01:13
9.	CH			x		00:47:31
10.	BC			x		00:45:21
11.	TH				x	00:32:56
12.	VT			x		00:36:59
13.	DN			x		00:32:50
14.	VA	x				00:39:46
15.	PT	x				00:46:18

**Table 2. Information of the interviews**

## 2. The handling of the interviews

My position to the participants in the interviews was a colleague (who does the same job of teaching), a researcher, and to some participants a friend. I did not define myself to the participants as an ‘interviewer’ (*người phỏng vấn*) and tried to avoid using the term in the interviews, since in the Vietnamese language the connotation may create a sense of a higher position to me and hence a formal and serious distance between us. Learning from the repertory grid experience, I explained to the participants that I wanted the interviews as a casual natural event as possible, where they were welcome to tell me anything without worrying about their personality being judged and if their opinions were right or wrong. I deliberately sought for their personal opinions, and I did not expect them to give me certain points of view.

I tried to accommodate the respondents’ wants and make them feel as relaxed and comfortable as possible in their interviews. When I sensed that they were tired or had lost interest, I stopped for few minutes for a casual chat and refreshment, and then asked them if they wanted to continue. Their wish not to use the recording device was also respected. All of them allowed me to record their talks with the exception of one small incident. In particular, VT did not want his opinions about administration and politician issues to be recorded. In this case, I stopped the recording.

As stated, the interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions. The questions were therefore used as stimulus to elicit the participants’ involvement in the topics, so they could be flexible. The division into three separate topics (i.e. *thể diện* in general, *thể diện* in teaching context, and *thể diện* with genders) was not necessarily retained clearly in the interviews. Although all of these three areas were covered in all of the interviews, the order of them was flexible; often they were mixed together, following the natural line or development of our interaction. As a result of this elasticity, not every issue was mentioned in all of the interviews. It depended on the line of the interview and the interviewee’s enthusiasm. However, according to my calculation on transcriptions, each issue was discussed in at least 10 out of 15 interviews. Issues which were not in the interview outline but emerged from the interviews were also welcome.

The interviews were preferred to develop naturally. For example, on mentioning the impact of one's child's behaviours on one's own *thể diện*, I continued to relate to the context of teachers to ask if the impact would be different if one was a teacher. In another situation, when talking about a certain general topic, one interviewee by chance mentioned that men were very much concerned about *thể diện*, I grabbed this statement to guide the interview into gender issues. I also adjusted the interviews according to the participants' interest. For instance, the participant HQ seemed not to be interested in issues other than issues between men and women, husband and wife. When I asked her about *thể diện* in general and *thể diện* in the teaching context, though I tried to break down questions into small aspects to encourage her thoughts, her answers were still quite brief and perfunctory. Instead, she was inclined to talk about *thể diện* in relation to gender. A possible explanation was her unhappy marriage status (which I knew from our casual chat before the interview) which triggered her emotions on this topic. Therefore, I decided to focus on this aspect in most of our interview, and it turned out that she was one of the most voluble and fluent contributors to the topic of gender.

There were new issues included in the interviews from participants' suggestions. For example, from the first three interviews, when I asked the participants about their opinions about teachers who cheated in their exams, the participants all mentioned the situation of cheating in examinations by *in-service training teachers*, who they believed should be considered with a different lens about *thể diện* to regular teachers. I did not expect this situation when I designed the interviews. However, considering that this was an interesting case of *thể diện* to teachers and I wanted to examine more about it, in later interviews, I raised the situation to the participants if they had not yet mentioned it themselves. This finally became an important part of my research and a contribution to my results.

Interviews have often been expected to be a neutral device, i.e. they should ensure the neutrality of interviewers by standardizing the delivery of questions and eradicating possible leading or ambiguous ones. In other words, the role of interviewers or moderators is quite 'inactive' during the data gathering process in that they should withhold their own attitudes and opinions upon both delivering questions and receiving respondents' answers in order to place no impact on what respondents might say (Edley & Litosseliti, 2010). Bearing this in mind, I avoided questions that might contain particular pre-set assumptions. For example, I avoided asking "*what would you do to save your thể diện when you cannot answer your students' questions in class?*", since this question may infuse the idea that having no answer

to students' questions is a loss of *thể diện* to teachers. Instead firstly asking "*is there any influence on thể diện of a teacher if he/she cannot answer students' questions in classrooms?*" created a chance for participants to tell their own opinion.

As discussed before, face concerns of interviewees is an inherent obstacle for the interviews. The fear of losing face and the often consciousness of maintaining face are very likely to restrain the participants from telling what they really feel, think and act but what they should say so that they sound good. Hence, it was important for me to minimize concerns about face of the participants so that I could get authentic responses. One of the ways I used was a depersonalization of the questions. Instead of asking how one would feel and what one would do in a certain situation, I asked about how he/she thought a normal person would feel and act. By making the issue impersonal, the interviewees were less likely to fear to be judged.

Similarly, there was a problem about face from several first interviews regarding questions about meanings of the concepts such as *thể diện*, *sĩ diện*, and *thể diện đàn ông*. The participants seemed to think that my investigation of their understanding of the concepts was from a linguistic perspective. They seemed to be afraid that their understanding might not be true to the linguistic semantic/definition/connotation of the terms. Therefore, they expressed a reluctance to voice their understanding of the concepts. I had to assure them, and learning from them, I assured later participants at the beginning of these questions, that my study was not about examining their linguistic knowledge but rather seeking their opinions on social cultural issues, so they did not need to worry if their perceptions of those terms were linguistically right or wrong. I explained to them that what I needed to know was their personal thinking and feelings about the concepts, and there was no assumption from me to the concepts or expectations for what their answers should be. Besides, to make it easier, I suggested them to write down any word and phrase that they thought related to the concepts. I specifically emphasized that they were free to write anything that made sense to them, without worrying if they made sense to me. The answers were then used for me to ask for further clarification and from these answers, interview contents were gradually developed. These helped the participants talk about the concepts in their own ways.

In my opinion, my field work went smoothly and was on schedule. There were no data that I had to discard, although some were not as effective as I expected. Data about *thể diện* and apology, and *thể diện* of teachers in the situation of teachers having sexual offence to

students were such incidents. Data obtained about these issues were not as fruitful as I had expected. Questions on these issues were often answered quickly and superficially. This was either due to my techniques, or because the participants lacked interests in them, or there was actually not much to talk about them. A possible reason for the question about of sexual offence is that sexual issues such as “*tình dục*”, “*mua dâm*”, “*bán dâm*” have often been an embarrassing subject in Vietnamese talks.

### **3. Ethical issues**

During my research project, I paid careful attention to ensure that my participants had no pressure, stress or any other psychological harm from their participation in my project. They were made sure that their participation was voluntary, anonymous, and they had the right to withdraw at any time. Strategies were considered to keep their identification confidential; for example their names, the name of their college, their hometowns and teaching subjects were not revealed in my thesis writing, as I have mentioned. As previously stated, my efforts were also directed to create maximum comfort for the participants during the interviews. They had control of the decisions for locations, time, when they wanted to stop, and whether they accepted the recording. Methods of raising questions were planned to minimize face threats to the participants. There was one participant (HQ) who seemed quite emotional when I mentioned gender issues, since this was related by herself to her bad marital relationships. However, it seemed that my interview was an opportunity for her to vent her feelings, since she expressed a better mood after the interview. My research processes conformed to the requirements of the ethics approval, numbered R031/10, from the La Trobe Education Faculty Human Ethics Committee.

## **VI. DATA ANALYSIS**

All of the interviews were transcribed. Records and transcriptions were imported into and analysed with NVivo 8 program.



With each transcription, I read through to get a general sense of it, then divided it into small parts, each contained a solid idea or topic talked by the participant, which could be said via one or several speaking turns. These parts were numbered to be used as reference in my analysis, for example, HN (17) means the example 17 in the transcription of the interview with the participant HN.

The data coding was mainly performed on the function “Tree Nodes” of NVivo. In particular, there were three main categories created, namely “*concepts thể diện, sĩ diện*” - for coding participants’ theoretical perceptions of these concepts, “*situations*” - for coding discussions about situations involving *thể diện*, and “*gender*” - for coding gender issues. Each main category had its sub-categories. For example, the category “*concepts thể diện, sĩ diện*” contained two sub- categories “*sĩ diện*” and “*thể diện*”. “*Thể diện*” had sub-categories for itself, namely “*thể diện in general*” and “*thể diện in teaching context*”. Below last categories, themes and sub-themes were built. A theme, to my perception, is different from a category in that it conveys a meaningful idea withdrawn from data, whereas a category is to group those themes into a topic basket.

Methods of Open coding and Axial coding identified by Strauss and Corbin (1990) were applied to build categories and themes. This meant I looked for meaningful segments of text and assigned them appropriate labels, and then looked for relationships and possible connections between these labels to create themes and sub-themes. For example, in the category about the meaning of *sĩ diện*, participants’ words/phrases such as “*selfishness*” (*sự ích kỷ*), “*heightening the role of oneself*” (*đề cao vai trò của bản thân*), “*paying little or no concern to surrounding others*” (*ít hoặc không quan tâm tới những người xung quanh*), “*only concerned about themselves*” (*chỉ quan tâm đến bản thân mình*) formed the themes “*sĩ diện as too much self-concern*” and “*sĩ diện was negatively evaluated*”. The latter then was coded as the bigger theme of the former, since other data about *sĩ diện* formed another theme, namely “*sĩ diện represents fake values*”, which together with “*sĩ diện as too much self-concern*” formed the common theme “*sĩ diện was negatively evaluated*”. These labels or codes were in turn reapplied to new appropriate segments of data that I found in the ongoing analysing process. I need to say that my understanding/interpretations of segments of texts were based on wider contexts in which those segments appeared, to make sure I got a proper understanding/interpretation of them. Themes and sub-themes were also checked for consistency and coherence. Commonalities as well as differences in the respondents’ quotes were paid equal attention.

There was a special case with coding responses of the participant TC regarding the general connotation of the concept *thể diện*. The participant had difficulty with the concept *thể diện*. In particular, she was not very comfortable with the task of breaking down the term connotation to her understanding and she was not confident using the term herself in her speech. Therefore, I decided to direct her to an alternative – the colloquial term ‘*mất mặt*’ which I considered an equivalent to ‘*mất thể diện*’ (lose face). This replacement seemed to work well for her. Simultaneously, in my questions, I mentioned ‘*mất thể diện*’ along with ‘*mất mặt*’, implying that they were just about the same thing. However, this raised the concern for my coding about her understanding of *thể diện*. I decided to still code her responses about “*mất mặt*” into *thể diện* category. This was because it had been shown via the corpus that the terms ‘*mất mặt*’ and ‘*mất thể diện*’ can be used interchangeably in texts for the same meaning. Furthermore, her perceptions of the concept of face initiated from “*mất mặt*” were generally not different to other participants’ about *thể diện*.

To randomly check the validity of my coding, I picked some themes and its coded data and asked one of my Vietnamese PhD colleagues to see whether she found themes and the coding matched. The person agreed with my analysis with only a few minor variations which did not influence my interpretations of the results.

### **Language issues**

Before discussing some language considerations in the process of data analysis, I would like to mention similar concerns in the implementation of interviews. As said the language used in interviews was the official Vietnamese from Kinh people. Although some of the interviewees originally came from parts of Vietnam which have strong dialects such as Nghe An and Quang Tri, none of them used dialects that caused trouble to our communication and intelligibility. The language style we used in the interviews was casual as a daily talk, yet still reflected a formal style of middle class educated language. Probably because the Vietnamese teachers were conscious of the nature of the interviews as research interviews, and being teachers, they were also often very conscious to maintain a proper educated speaking style in almost every context.

Following a casual daily speaking norm of the Vietnamese, I addressed myself and the interviewees according to our age. Accordingly, “*em*” was used for persons of younger age, “*anh*” for older males and “*chị*” for older females. I addressed myself “*chị*” with interviewees younger than me, and “*em*” with interviewees older than me. To people of the same age, I used my name and their names for addressing. I considered this style created a more casual and relaxing relationship in our communication than using the formal and neutral pronoun “*tôi*” (for self-addressing) and “*bạn*” (for addressing interviewees). These latter options may have created a sense of distance and seriousness in our exchanges, which were likely to hinder me from getting authentic responses from the participants. Most of the interviewees used the same addressing rule, except for one male participant who preferred to address himself “*tôi*” in his interview.

As to the data analysis, translation was the main language issue. In particular, I had to make sure that the Vietnamese meaning of my data remained with any English translation. Accordingly, with some simple Vietnamese concepts given by the participants that have similar connotations in English, I used directly the English translations without the need to put the original Vietnamese next to them to compare. “*Đạo đức*” (morality), “*giữ khoảng cách với sinh viên*” (keeping distance from students), and “*vâng lời*” (obedient) were such examples. With the concepts I thought that their English translations might not be compatible to convey properly their meaning, I retained the Vietnamese, and/or gave a detailed explanation next to the English translations. For example, some of the participants talked about the concept “*xử lý tình huống*”, which was a technical term to Vietnamese teachers implying the way they should behave and handle difficult situations in their classrooms promptly, flexibly and smartly. Nearest English translations such as “situational handling” or “handling situations” were considered not enough to capture the essence of the term. Therefore I retained the Vietnamese term as the main subject to be coded and discussed, and accompanying it was a detailed explanation of its connotation. “*Dĩ hòa vi quý*”, a term used by a participant, was also such a term I retained in the writing. Although its meaning was not hard to translate (*dĩ hòa vi quý* means “taking/considering harmony as important”), I wanted to retain the Vietnamese spirit of it by using the original term, considering that this is a popular motto of the Vietnamese recommending a behaving and conflict solving style.

Interviewees’ lines were only translated if they were used as quotations in thesis writing. These translations were done carefully, with attention not only to semantics but also register

and tone. In those quotations, the meaning that the participants wanted to convey was more my concern than word-for-word exact denotation. I also consulted two Vietnamese teachers who specialised in English teaching and translation in Vietnamese universities. Besides several consultations about particular translation issues, I gave them a sample of about 10% of the quotation translations, asked for their opinions and had them reply independently. Changes, which were minor, were made upon their suggestions.

My educational background with bachelor's degree of literature and philology in Vietnam and a master's degree in applied linguistics in Australia, plus my experiences as previously a teacher in Vietnam and a resident in Australia for several years provided me with confidence to deal with these language issues.

### **The issues of validity and reliability of my research**

Different terms have been suggested to replace the terms 'validity' and 'reliability' in qualitative research; for example, quality, rigor and trustworthiness (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Seale, 1999; Stenbacka, 2001). However, as argued by Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002), 'validity' and 'reliability' should also be used for addressing quality issue of qualitative research rather than other terms, for qualitative studies not to be marginalised from the mainstream of science. In another aspect, Patton (2002) suggests that in qualitative research, validity also includes reliability, since the former implies and encompasses the later.

Triangulation is often used to confirm validity of qualitative research. Triangulation is defined as "a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126). One of the popular methods of triangulation is data triangulation, which involves collecting data from different sources to increase the strength of research generalizations. This method was applied in my study when I compared data between the corpus and the interviews. These two types of data provided consistent and no contradictory results. Furthermore, they were also tested against my cultural insider's intuition, sensitivity and understanding of the culture.

Here I would like to discuss the important role of the researcher in exploratory qualitative research. Stebbins (2001) argues that validity of this type of research is different from that in

confirmation study. While in confirmation study, it is connected to the researcher's ability to find measures that indirectly deliver correct impression of the study phenomenon, the validity concern in exploratory studies lies with the researcher's ability to obtain directly a precise impression of that phenomenon. While quantitative researchers have been advised to maximize their distance from the research process as much as possible, in qualitative research people should expect and acknowledge the involvement and role of researchers within their projects (Golafshani, 2003). In other words, as Patton (2002, p.14) puts it, in qualitative research, "the researcher is the instrument". After all, the researcher's job is to "make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world" (Creswell, 2013, p. 25). Therefore, in this paradigm, the researcher should acknowledge their own social, cultural, personal impacts on their interpretations. Everyone has their own view regarding a certain issue and each researcher has his/her own stand point to analyse his/her data.

This rationale underpins argument by Morse et al. (2002) that a confirmation of quality of qualitative research should be returned to researchers' responsibility rather than rely on external judgments. While checks by reviewers following completion of a research study may be useful to evaluate rigor, they do not ensure rigor (Morse et al., 2002, p. 9). Furthermore, these external checks may contain problems. For example, the authors point out issues with member checks, i.e. returning results to participants for verification. Accordingly, "study results have been synthesized, decontextualized, and abstracted from (and across) individual participants, so there is no reason for individuals to be able to recognize themselves or their particular experiences" (p. 7). Otherwise, to enable participants' reception, the researcher may have to bring their results to a more descriptive level, in other words being close to the data, which also means invalidating the work of the researcher.

Morse et al. (2002) believe that quality of this type of research should come from within and during the research, i.e. from the researcher and his/her own verification strategies during the research. Verification strategies include (a) ensuring methodological coherence (i.e. ensuring a match between research question, methods and analytic procedures), (b) ensuring appropriateness of sample, (c) collecting and analysing data concurrently, (d) thinking theoretically from data, and (e) developing theory from data. These contain constant back and forth checking the match between components of the research such as methods, data and research questions. The researcher therefore can make appropriate and timely adjustments to research questions, sample, and components of methods to ensure a valid and reliable

research as a whole. Overall, this calls for researchers' responsiveness, openness, and sensitivity to data. While I did not totally disregard checks from outside to validate my study results, I found validating approaches recommended by Morse et al. (2002) meaningful. They remained valuable guidance for me during my research procedures for valid and reliable results about *thể diện*

## CONCLUSION

I have presented in this chapter the main approaches as well as methodological details for my exploration of the Vietnamese face concept *thể diện*. Overall, my study was an exploratory study about the concept, using multiculturalist approach as the main guide. The concept was approached with a qualitative approach, in particular, the major body of data came from indepth interviews with a group of Vietnamese teacher participants about the concept and related phenomena in three main contexts, i.e. the general, gender, and college teaching context. In the whole process of my research, to the best of my ability I was aware to maintain caution in every step I made, adjust to all the changes, and maintain a responsiveness and sensitivity to my data. What I aimed was to deliver a precise and as closest as possible understanding of the concept in Vietnamese culture.

In the next three chapters, I will present results of my data analysis.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ***THỂ DIỆN*: AN ORIENTATION TOWARDS OTHERS**

As reviewed in the literature, Vietnam has always been viewed as a collectivistic culture, where ‘others’ get a priority over ‘self’. Results of my data analysis gave support to this statement. In particular, my participants’ perceptions about *thể diện* showed that the concept entailed a strong concern about ‘others’, i.e. concerns about impacts others’ cause on self, and concerns about relationships with others. I organize the chapter into four main themes. The first shows that *thể diện* of a person (or self-face) was importantly influenced by opinions from others. The second demonstrates that people of close relationships were bound together in terms of *thể diện*. The third focuses on efforts to maintain *thể diện* of others. The fourth reports how concern for personal face expressed via *sĩ diện* concept was disapproved.

#### **I. THE IMPORTANCE OF OTHERS’ OPINIONS ON *THỂ DIỆN* OF A PERSON**

Based on my analysis of the interviews, I have organised the teachers’ perceptions of public influence on *thể diện* of a person into the following themes.

- *Thể diện* was vulnerable in public contexts.
- *Thể diện* was strongly influenced by public opinion.
- *Thể diện* required compliance with social norms.
- *Thể diện* was safe when one followed majority opinion.

##### **1. Public context**

In all of the interviews, the idea that *thể diện* was vulnerable in public situations was dominant. By public context I mean in front of people whom one does not have a close relationship with.

Phrases for general public contexts were mentioned frequently during interviews in a close association with the sense of *thể diện*. People were said to lose face, and/or be concerned about their face in the context of “*trước nhiều người*” (in front of many people) (BC, 4; TC, 9; ...), “*trước đám đông*” (in front of crowds) (VA, 3; ...), “*chỗ/chốn đông người*” (crowded places) (TA, 9; VT, 2; ...), “*quan hệ giao tiếp*” (interactive situations) (KL, 1; ...), “*giữa đường*” (on streets or in public) (BC, 4; ...), “*khi ra ngoài*” (when going out) (BC, 25; HQ, 6; ...), “*ngoài xã hội*” (in social contexts outside family) (VD, 21; ...), “*người bên ngoài*” (outside people) (VD, 21; ...), and so on. VT (2) believed that the more people set eyes on one’s wrong doings, the more *thể diện* he/she lost. To TA (44), people of higher social positions were in a higher danger of losing *thể diện* because “*the higher position they are in, the more people set eyes on them*”. Due to an association between *thể diện* and ‘public’, most of the participants believed that women often needed *thể diện* to a much lesser extent than men did because women were often attached to the small private space of family, while men were often linked to outside social activities. This will be elaborated in a later section on the relation between *thể diện* and gender.

As a result, “*keeping/making things private*” was highlighted among ways to save *thể diện*. In fact, private solutions for saving *thể diện* were advised by all of the respondents. Talking to a person in a private space, in an intimate atmosphere, or between people of close relationships was advised as one of the most important ways to save *thể diện*, not only of that person but also all related parties. I describe in the following the most noticeable situations raised in the interviews that illustrated this aspect.

#### *Dealing with a partner’s affair*

Married couples were advised to deal with their partner’s extramarital affairs discreetly, i.e. between themselves, to save each other’s *thể diện*. Seven participants strongly disapproved that one should publicize those incidents caused by his/her partner, since this act was considered to cause his/her partner to lose face (BC, 21; CH, 13; DN, 6; PT, 26, 27; TA, 20; VT, 14; VTh, 15), or make both lose face (BC, 21; CH, 13; DN, 6; TA, 20). Rather, they should “*tìm cách êm đềm*” (find a smooth way – VTh, 15), or “*đóng cửa bảo nhau*” (close doors to talk to each other – VT, 14). Especially wives who “*dealt within family*” (*giải quyết trong nội bộ gia đình*) to their husbands’ affairs were praised (VD, 21).

This tendency of privatizing family affairs was illustrated in other situations by DN, HQ and QH. Privatizing in these cases meant concealing problems and appearing happy. In



particular, DN (11) said that wives “*should not let outside people see conflicts in their marital life*”. QH (28) said the responsibility of “*maintaining a happy face to outsiders*” should be shared by both parties in a relationship. Particularly, if her partner did something that hurt her *thể diện* in public, she would “*nhịn*” (endure, withhold one’s reactions) at the time to preserve her partner’s *thể diện*, and then have a private talk with him later. It was considered better for *thể diện* of couples for them to still appear happy to the public even during a bad mood. HQ (6) was such an example. She told me whenever she and her husband were in a fight she still tried to show a normal smiling face to others, and she wished her husband could act in the same way.

### *Commenting on colleagues’ teaching presentations*

Of 14 participants who were asked about the situations of commenting on a colleague’s teaching presentation, six people had the idea of keeping the comments private between two persons. They appreciated ideas such as “*góp ý riêng*” (private contribution - TH, 21), “*trao đổi riêng*” (private exchange – QH, 16), “*gặp riêng*” (private meeting– DN, 3; TA, 32), “*nói riêng*” (privately speaking– TC, 10; QH, 16), and “*nói nhỏ*” (small talk- HN, 10).

In addition, four participants KL (18), VA (31), VT (3) and VTh (24) agreed that one should avoid comment on a teacher’s teaching presentation in the presence of either the teachers’ students or other colleagues. Contexts of “*after class*” (*sau buổi học* – DN, 3; KL, 18; QH, 16), and “*after the meeting*” (*sau buổi họp* – QH, 16) were recommended.

It needs to be restated that having teaching presentations is a regular professional requirement for Vietnamese teachers and there is often an ‘evaluation meeting’ after the presentations for all of the comments and the evaluation. Yet it was advised by my teachers that those comments were given in a private space, between two persons. In other words, this profession-related act was not separated from private spaces. This inclination to privatize professional tasks suggests a certain tension or at least ambiguity in the teachers’ perceptions of how best to save their colleague’s *thể diện* and at the same time act professionally.

Privacy, however, could exist within a group context. KL (19) said that between members of her professional group, people could give straight comments to each other. However, to save *thể diện* for the person, those comments should never be leaked to outsiders. In particular, they were never written in official reports which were sent to higher administrators and the teaching performances were always reported as good in the reports.

It can be seen that the idea of ‘commenting’ seemed to be unwelcome. It seemed that to the participants, making comments meant making *negative* comments or criticisms. This sensitiveness to criticisms was probably a direct result of the people’s sensitiveness to face. There was an impression that emerged from all of my interviews that contributing ideas to a teacher’s teaching performance meant pointing out what needed to be fixed or improved. Is this because of the collective cultural aspect emphasising that the responsibility of the group is to make individuals better (hence making the whole group better) by pointing out individual weaknesses so that they can fix them, rather than praising their individual achievements and thus promoting individual distinction, which may be considered no use for the group’s benefit?

#### *Warning people who cheated in examinations*

One of the common tasks of the participants – college teachers – was to supervise exams in which examinees were teachers in schools. However this job was not always viewed to belong to the area of rules. Rather it was also viewed as a place in which people can apply their personal relationship, sympathies, negotiations, and compromise. This was because *thể diện* of examinees was still a supervisors’ concern. Especially, methods were reported to save *thể diện* of the teachers who cheated and at the same time the supervisors could still fulfil their role as exam rule maintainers. The most general idea was to make their interactions as private as possible.

Five participants provided this idea. DN (4) and HQ (15) said they would “*talk discreetly to them*” (*nói nhỏ với họ*). PT (10) said “*I would act discreetly, come to signal them that yes, I know they are copying documents so they’d better put them away*”. VA (24) often warned them gently as if “*only I and that person know about it (their cheating)*”, or even more discreetly, “*give them eye signals*”. BC (15) would “*come to their place and remind them individually*”.

I found another, small finding in here: in the situations of commenting on one’s teaching and warning cheating examinees, the sense of *being public* had a close association with the sense of *being formal*. For instance, in the context of making comments on a colleague’s teaching, the people avoided giving their opinions in evaluation meetings as these meetings were considered formal events, where comments were to be written in reports to be sent out. People may try to turn such a supposed-to-be-formal meeting into a private one by leaving reports out of the real content of the meeting, as seen in the instance of KL (19). Similarly, in

the case of examinees violating exam rules, handling the infraction secretly eliminated the need for making reports. As often set out in exam rules, supervisors are expected to make reports including the signature of offenders once they are caught cheating in their exams. However, being mindful of offenders' *thể diện*, my participants advised that supervisors should remind them gently in a closed interaction, without formalizing or publicizing the incident by reports. Informal interactions were often favoured in this context to save *thể diện* for examinees. 'Formal' was associated with 'public', 'informal' was close to 'private'. The link between face concern and formality of situations has been seen in Chinese behaviours, as put forward by Hwang (2011).

The sensitivity to face-threat is heightened with the degree of formality of the situation. In informal situations, Chinese people may not be as sensitive to face-threats as on formal occasions. Formality of the situation means the occasion in which persons are requested to interact according to their role relationships, and all parties are urged to fulfil their role obligations. (p. 290)

Returning to the privatization tendency, other evidence was found supporting it. For instance, VD (35) told me that teachers in high schools often chose to take the entrance exams to post graduate courses secretly. Often they did not want people in their schools to know that they had the exams as they feared that if they failed, they would lose their *thể diện*. Only when they succeeded would they be happy to inform others. This may mirror a usual attitude of the Vietnamese that they tend not to want others to know about projects they are doing until they are certain about their success.

Leaders' acts to save face of their organizations were another example. According to five respondents, school leaders were responsible to make any shameful incidents in their schools sealed from the public (CH, 12; DN, 8; VA, 36; VD, 15; VT, 15). They mentioned ideas such as "*làm việc/giải quyết nội bộ*" (working/dealing internally - VA, 36; VD, 15, 27), "*họp kín*" (closed meeting / caucus - VA, 36), "*nói chuyện riêng*" (private talk - CH, 12), and "*xử kín*" (private handling - DN, 8). By hiding such incidents from other people in the organization and the general public, *thể diện* of the organization was kept safe. In general, people who knew how to deal things in private were complimented as tactful (*tế nhị*) (DN, 3, 6), clever (*khéo léo*) (CH, 13; DN, 3), and sensitive (*tâm lý*) (DN, 6).

### **Different understandings of the concept ‘public’**

The distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ can be confusing. For instance, via examples provided by the participants, space within a couple could be ‘private’ so that the man could freely act as he wanted without fearing for losing *thể diện* in front of his wife. He feared to lose *thể diện* only with a presence of a third party (BC, 26; TA, 57), even though the third party may be his own parents (VA, 13). However, that space could be ‘public’ since it was said that a husband may lose *thể diện* in front of his wife due to his clumsy acts (VA, 4). Similarly, the space between parents and children could be non-private and hence face-threatening (VA, 13; VTh, 14). However, it was private in comparison with other public relations (KL, 33; VA, 30). In other cases, things happened within larger groups could be seen as private; for example, things happened within a subject group (KL, 19) (each subject group in a school is a group of teachers teaching the same subject or area of subjects), or within a school (DN, 8; VT, 15). In those cases, people outside these particular defined groups were public.

As a result, what was considered private or public (in terms of *thể diện* concern) depended on contexts. ‘Private’ could be among persons in a certain group. ‘Public’ needed not to mean before many people or strangers; it could be before another person who was considered a possible judge of one’s *thể diện* in a certain context. Generally speaking, a context was seen to be public where there was a high chance that *thể diện* of a person was judged by other(s). The other type of context, where *thể diện* of a person was less likely to be judged, was private. The notion of ingroups and outgroups (see Chapter Two, section 3.1.2 for details) seems relevant at this point. In particular, face loss to the Vietnamese, living in the so-called ‘collectivistic’ culture, has been claimed to come from ‘outside’ people rather than ‘inside’ (V. T. Vu & Napier, 2000). Depending on context, certain people could be defined to belong to ingroup or outgroup in a relationship with a person.

The idea of *thể diện* associated with outgroups was articulated by several participants. For example, HN (31), KL (33), and QH (9) used the concept “*người ngoài*” (outsiders). HN (31) had an idea that two persons having a quarrel should be aware that their unpleasant scene would be judged by ‘outsiders’. KL (33), when telling me about an embarrassing incident between her and her child at the presence of her students, said “*that was such a big face loss with presence of outsiders*”, with “*outsiders*” were her students. According to QH

(9), a person who involved in an extramarital affair and his/her partner were likely to lose *thể diện* to the same degree, since “*outsiders don’t know much about us*”. She implied that it was outsiders, not close people, who decided *thể diện* of a person in the society.

There was an exception to this perception. QH (30) implied that people lost *thể diện* to ingroup rather than to outgroup members. According to her, parents needed to preserve their *thể diện* in front of their children more than care about their *thể diện* in front of outside people, as she considered parents’ image to children was far more important than their image in outsiders’ eyes.

Overall, the finding is consistent with findings about face in cultures such as Korean (Choi et al., 1997) and Akan (Agyekum, 2004). These findings show that the closer the persons are, the less the face concern between them.

## 2. Public opinion

It was seen from all of the interviews that public opinion was very much a concern to the Vietnamese. Vietnamese people were pictured to place a special concern on how they were seen in the public eye, since public was considered the source, evaluator, examiner, and decider of *thể diện* of a person. Below I will analyse some prominent evidences among the interviews.

Everyone in my interviews referred to the public as a major reference for their opinions. Occurring frequently during the stories related to *thể diện* were phrases such as “*thiên hạ*” (people), “*mọi người*” (everyone), “*người ta*” (people, others), “*xã hội*” (society), “*dư luận xã hội*” (public opinion) “*tiếng đồn*” (rumour), “*người ta nói*” (people say), “*người ta đánh giá*” (people evaluate), “*người ta phản đối*” (people disapprove), “*người ta phê phán*” (people criticize), “*người ta lên án*” (people condemn), “*đánh giá của xã hội*” (social evaluations), “*trong mắt mọi người*” (in others’ eyes), “*do quan niệm xã hội*” (due to social opinions) and so on. These community images and actions were viewed to have a remarkable impact on *thể diện* of a person. *Thể diện* seemed not to exist and function within personal territory and personal awareness; it was inevitably connected to public evaluations.

The participant TA believed that *thể diện* of a person “*depends on evaluations from community*”, hence “*it depends largely on community culture*” (TA, 57). VA (38) stated that

whether a teacher lost his *thể diện* or not when he had a love relationship with his student depended on whether he was condemned by his community for his behaviour. In another example, which was about *thể diện* of bureaucratic leaders who refused to apologize to the public and resign for their wrong doings, HN (36) said: *“Face of the persons will be decided by society. But our society does not say anything about it, because our society is accustomed to it”*. In other words, since *“our society does not say anything”*, *thể diện* of those leaders was just fine.

More evidence came from CH (15) and VT (20), who said that in the situation of a man who was unemployed or making less money than his wife, his *thể diện* would depend on others' and most importantly, his wife's opinions about him. For example, if his wife did not look down on him, his *thể diện* was maintained. Otherwise, he would lose *thể diện* seriously. It can be seen from the participants' ideas that the man could not decide his *thể diện*; rather, it was in hands of others. Furthermore, the fact that he made little contribution to family finance was not a direct cause to his *thể diện* status. Direct influence lay in others' and his wife's evaluations of his ability.

In general, whenever I asked my participants if a person would lose *thể diện* or not in a given situation, the answers were often based on the respondents' evaluation of whether the action was condemned, criticized, disapproved or not by *the general population*. If there was a loss of *thể diện*, it was because the interviewees thought the general society would judge it to be so. If it was not, it was because he/she thought the general society would not think so. For example, VTh (34) replied to me when I asked what he thought about husbands who were unemployed and stayed at home for housework:

*If it is in this Vietnamese society, it will be decreased, be criticized by others, .... Imagine when you drive your motorbike, your friends may say “you drive this motorbike, but it was not bought with your money, you did not buy it. You batten on women”. When they say so, it is hard for your face to avoid damage.* (VTh, 34)

In another situation, when I asked TA his evaluations of *thể diện* of teachers having extramarital affairs, he replied:

*In my opinion, teachers who commit such a thing will lose lots of face. In other countries it may be a different story, but in Vietnam, it is judged very harshly.* (TA, 18)

Personal opinions played a very small role in such evaluations. They often came in forms such as “I think society would think...”, as above by TA (18). If personal opinions were *really* given, they occupied a modest place next to social opinions, they were hesitantly articulated, and usually they needed support from social opinions. This suggests that personal opinions generally do not decide the status of one’s *thể diện*. The evaluation of one’s *thể diện* often does not come from a person’s internalised behavioural and moral principles; rather it comes from community voices, or what one thinks community voices will be.

To illustrate further, in the interview with PT (25), she told me an incident in which wives wrote denunciations of their love rivals (who had sexual affairs with their husbands) to their work place, which was also PT’s school. I asked if she agreed with the action of the wives to her colleagues. PT was a bit hesitant answering my question. She said “*I think I agree too, because...*”, then she began to explain the reasons why she approved of the action, by analysing the nature of incident, the consequence of an extramarital affair, the attitude of girls who were accused, and so on. At the end of her explanation, she said with a noticeably more confident and eager tone:

*Besides, I see in our school, when knowing the denunciations, everyone criticized C. and H. (names of girls who involved in sexual affairs), people criticized them severely, no one criticized those wives. (PT, 25)*

From my observation, she felt hesitant to talk about her personal opinions, but became more confident when her idea was supported by public opinion (she talked faster, in a higher pitch, more eagerly). She was more confident finding herself on social ground sustained by others. The process was something like “I have this opinion and I think this opinion is reasonable, because everyone else, or many other people I know, also think like me”. Clearly, public opinions (although public may be a small group of her female colleagues) became substantial, solid and persuasive reasons for her own opinion. She felt safe when her ideas were in line with others’ ideas.

The influence of public opinion on *thể diện* was especially clear when there was a conflict between personal opinions and public opinions upon evaluating a certain incident. There were cases in which an interviewee personally did not perceive an incident as loss of *thể diện*, but he/she knew the general public may have a different idea, which he/she believed to be more important than his/her personal ideas about *thể diện* of the person in the situation.

For example, the participant TC (18) personally did not consider teachers having a love relationship with students as losing *thể diện*; however she advised that people involved in the situation should care about “*những cái xì xào bàn tán của dư luận*” (whispered talk of the public). Probably, it was “*whispered talk of the public*” that decided the status of *thể diện* of the people involved. In another interview, when I asked for HN’s opinions about the notion *thể diện đàn ông/male face* in the family, he said:

*So I think... (pause).....it depends....(pause)... Because, male face in family, according to normal perceptions, is that men are persons who give decisions, important decisions. Now people also say that men have to decide important decisions. But the best, according to my opinions, the best is that decisions come from a consensus between two people, an agreement between husband and wife. However afterward, to social presentation, men should be seen as having more power. As you see, people say, “in that house wife takes control”, and “in that house husband takes control” with different tones. Apparently people will comment on the man. If the woman has power, people will have no good comments on the man, like... “letting wife dominate”. It is usually like that, the role of the men is seen so in our traditional views. However I prefer the Western view, being equal. (HN, 26)*

And later, he continued his clarification:

*Two people (husband and wife) discuss and decide together, but when making decision in the public, it’s best for people to see that the man’s role is not less important than the woman’s role. Because it’s clear that if the role of the man is less important than the role of the woman, people will comment on that family, not good at all. For instant when drinking with friends, clinking glasses they joke, like “you ... under your wife’s control”, it is also irritating. (HN, 26)*

In the above quotations, rather than focusing on personal opinions as I asked, the participant tended to talk about social opinions. Personal opinions, expressed through phrases such as “*I think*”, “*according to my opinions*”, and “*I prefer*”, constituted only a small proportion of his whole saying above. Instead, phrases such as “*normal perceptions*”, “*people say*”, “*people will comment*”, and “*traditional views*” were used more.

Furthermore, HN said that his personal opinions were different from the general public opinion. However, they were not clearly and strongly articulated. They were of little proportion in the first paragraph and absent in the second. Furthermore, they were quite ambiguous. He said “*But the best, according to my opinion, the best is that decisions come*



*from a consensus between two people, an agreement between husband and wife*". However, this was immediately negated by the followed social perceptions (*However afterward...*). The last line "*However I prefer the Western view, being equal*" was rather weak and out of place, considering the context of his previous saying. It was not clear what he meant by his personal opinions, because there was a sense that he also advocated social opinions.

HN's references to personal thoughts occupied a humble place. Furthermore, they were presented rather weakly and ambiguously. There may be these reasons:

- In terms of *thể diện*, personal opinions have little significance compared to social opinions. It is social views that matter to *thể diện* of a person in Vietnamese society. Social opinions decide *thể diện* of a person, which explains why HN mentioned more about them.
- Public opinions about the issue were also the participant's opinions. He also thought what others in his community thought, as in fact, he later took the popular stance as his own stance. However, he might have thought that public opinions were likely to be seen as unequal (in terms of gender) or biased, so he tried to make his opinions sound right to me by stating a different, rectified point of view.

HN seemed to feel that the gender-biased public opinion in this case was not reasonable according to the contemporary standard. This was based on the way he used words. He talked about "*normal perceptions*" and "*traditional views*" in contrast with "*Western view*", probably with an implication of the contrast between old and new, East and West opinions, in which old and Eastern were the current Vietnamese public opinions. However, he seemed to indicate that though public opinions were traditional, old or outdated, they were still very strong and influential to cultural members, of whom he was not an exception. Everyone should conform to that if they did not want to be badly judged, ridiculed, and hence, lose their *thể diện*.

Overall, social opinions had a remarkably strong impact on the function of *thể diện* in the interviewees' perceptions.

### 3. Social norms

In order to maintain *thể diện*, one needs to conform to social norms. I came to this conclusion from various examples and opinions that were expressed in all of the interviews.

The idea itself was articulated in different ways by six participants below:

According to VA (2), people lost face when their behaviour was not in compliance with “*chuẩn mực xã hội*” (social norms).

QH liked to use the notion “*quan niệm xã hội*” (social perceptions) (6 times in 4, 11, 24, 25 and 26), which she believed underpinning people’s assessments of *thể diện*.

In relation to *thể diện*, KL (1, 2, 4) mentioned the importance of “*quy định của xã hội*” (social regulations), “*tập quán xã hội*” (social customs), “*truyền thống*” (traditions), “*luật lệ*” (rules), “*nghi thức*” (rituals), and “*gia phong*” (family rules and traditions). She also mentioned the English terms “*convention*” (as social conventions) and “*prejudice*” (as social prejudices) as influential notions to *thể diện* (KL, 1).

VTh’s favoured term in discussing *thể diện* was “*chuẩn*” (standard/ benchmark) (16 times, in 2, 5, 8, 10, 13, 14, 15, 17, 22 and 23). Analysing his use of the term, I found that “*chuẩn*” meant certain social standards specified by one’s social roles and positions to guide one’s behaviour and speech in a certain context of interaction. One should conform to “*chuẩn*”, i.e. act and speak according to social norms set for him/her, in order to preserve one’s *thể diện*. VTh specifically emphasized “*chuẩn*” of teachers, for example:

*To each type of people, we should follow a certain chuẩn to communicate with them, so that they can view us properly as teachers. (2)*

*To teachers, this type of outside face needs more chuẩn. I think that compared to other careers, it must be more standardized. (8)*

*In fact, chuẩn of us teachers, I think, does not allow us to do that. (15)*

*We use what is called chuẩn set by our job to apply in our family relationships. (13)*

Another participant, HN, talked about the influence of *cultural traditions* on the differences in attitudes towards the acts ‘apologizing’ and ‘resigning’ in different cultures. He explained that Vietnamese leaders rarely said sorry because it was due to “*our tradition*”. In particular

he believed that Vietnamese people tended to consider the act of apologizing not as serious as in other cultures, and when people did wrong, they could just fix it or do it again without apologizing, which was in contrast with Western traditions.

TA explained *thể diện* with the concept “*social norm*” (*chuẩn mực xã hội* – TA, 18). He considered face-loss incidents in education that attracted public attention recently (e.g. students fought with each other in class, students hit teachers, and teachers bought sex from students) as expressions of ‘a degradation of social morality’ (*đạo đức xuống cấp* – TA, 36). He emphasised “*faults of our system of behavioural culture*” (*lỗi của hệ thống văn hóa ứng xử của mình* – TA, 36). This meant that he did not simply see the incidents as individual cases related to specific personal loss of *thể diện*; rather he saw them in the whole cultural system. He maintained that when the whole social foundation deteriorated, perceptions of cultural participants were affected. An act that should be and used to be considered bad was no longer bad but normal. The sense of loss of *thể diện* associated with the act then also faded. A new social norm was formed (TA, 36). In other words, what he seemed to believe was that individuals’ perceptions about *thể diện* were not arbitrary, personal and separate phenomena. They were rooted in the systematic norms and conventions of the persons’ society.

### **Social norms were culture-specific**

As widely acknowledged by research, each culture has its own norms of behaviours embraced by its cultural participants. Four of my participants showed that they were aware of this cultural uniqueness.

Of these four participants, TA was the one specifically paying attention to cultural distinctiveness. He emphasized the importance of “*văn hóa cộng đồng*” (community culture - 57) to the Vietnamese awareness of face. The term “*văn hóa cộng đồng*” (community culture) appeared 7 times in his responses. In addition, related terms such as “*văn hóa ứng xử*” (behavioural culture) and “*văn hóa*” (culture) appeared 3 and 10 times respectively. Furthermore, TA constantly contextualised his evaluations of *thể diện* with expressions such as “*in Vietnam*” (18, 21), “*in our Vietnamese society*” (57), “*in the context of Vietnam*”, “*in Vietnamese culture*” (21), “*in the Vietnamese educational context*” (23), “*this is quite strict*

*in Vietnam*” (34), “*due to Vietnamese culture*” (36), “*due to our cultural system of communication*” (36), and so on.

Specifically, TA tended to highlight the difference between Vietnam and foreign cultures in terms of face evaluations. For example:

*The judgment of good and bad depends on the evaluations by the whole cultural community. Maybe overseas, it is normal, but in Vietnam, it isn't.* (TA, 21)

*For instance, with the same act, in our Vietnam, it may cause face loss, however overseas, it may be not a face loss at all.* (TA, 57)

In particular, in the case of teachers having extramarital affairs, he confirmed that this absolutely led to a severe loss of *thể diện*, according to Vietnamese usual points of view or social norms, which were probably a bit harsher than those in foreign countries (TA, 18).

This distinction was also seen scattered in other interviews by HN (36), QH (4) and VTh (34). In detail, a man would lose *thể diện* if he was jobless in the Vietnamese society (VTh, 34); the Japanese and the Vietnamese had different senses of face associated with apologies (HN, 36); and the teaching job may be viewed as simply as a job in foreign cultures but as honourable in Vietnam (QH, 4). The contextualisation suggests that the respondents were well aware that standards of face were different in different cultural communities.

#### **4. Majority behaviour**

The participants tended to believe that doing a thing that the majority did was less likely to cause loss of *thể diện*.

The most typical situation was cheating in exams. Normally, this act should cause a loss of *thể diện*, especially when transgressors are teachers. However, most of my interviews (14 out of 15) revealed that this act was not necessarily seen as such. This was because cheating, for example copying documents to their exam papers and exchanging information with each other in exam rooms, was considered a usual reality in Vietnamese examinations. It was so common that “*in a room in which most people cheated, the persons who did not do so were also considered as having cheated like others*”, and “*even when you did not copy documents, you are also equated with others who did*” (BC, 13). This was also used as an excuse by

participants who admitted that they had cheated in their exams before such as BC (13) and VT (9). VT (9) said “*I did since everyone did it*”.

In such a situation, cheating persons were less likely to lose their *thể diện*. The participants said:

*Everyone is the same, so they don't feel embarrassed.* (HQ, 14)

*In Vietnam, copying documents in exams is so popular that people do not feel they are losing face because of it.* (VT, 9)

*In the context of Vietnamese education, in a group of people doing an exam together, when so many people lose face (because of cheating), it turns out no one loses face. Because loss here is a shared loss.* (TA, 23)

*A person loses face, it is serious. Many people lose face, then no one cares. When everyone is the same, it isn't a serious issue anymore.* (TA, 23)

*If everyone does not copy documents, one person does it, that is extremely losing face to him. If everyone copies, it becomes normal.* (TA, 23)

*They (the cheating examinees) think that it is normal to cheat in their exams.* (VA, 23)

The term “*bình thường*” (normal) was favoured not only in this situation but also in others, when respondents wanted to show that certain transgressions were common in the population and hence they were less likely to cause loss of *thể diện* to transgressors. The term appeared in 10 out of 15 interviews, with the total frequency of 65 times. The least frequent user of the term was KL with only one time; the most frequent user was CH with 19 instances.

In the context that “everyone is the same”, it was believed that even social status made no significant difference to people’s perceptions of *thể diện*. This meant that a person would not care about his/her social position and its attached norms and expectations when he just did things he thought everyone else just did. PT (14) gave me an example of an exam room she supervised in which examinees were all school principals and vice principals and they all copied documents. Another example she gave was about two people who were in a teacher – student relationship. However, being in the same exam room still could not stop them from cheating, even though each knew that their behaviour could be seen by the other (PT, 11). In these situations, their positions as a principal, or a teacher in relationship with their student normally would be too demanding of respect for them to do such an act. PT described these

people “*cá mè một lứa*” (fish of the same school) (14) - a Vietnamese idiom referring to people who have no regard to each other according to any hierarchy.

Although most retained a distant position when they mentioned the act of cheating, all of them expressed an understanding rather than a criticizing attitude to it. Only one female participant, TC, had a different opinion. She asserted that cheating in exams in whatever circumstance was unacceptable and absolutely led to loss of *thể diện* for any teacher.

Other situations also displayed the ‘majority’ tendency. For instance, the lack of apologies from powerful people was explained by TA and VT as below:

*When everyone around them is the same, they no longer have the feeling and sense of face. Face no longer exists to them. .... If Mr A, B, C, D apologized to the public and resigned from their positions due to their faults, Mr E would more likely to do so, otherwise he lost his face. In contrast, no one did that, why would Mr E have to do that? (VT, 1)*

*It has been seen as a usual thing by the whole community. If a person resigns in this situation, he will be seen as odd. (TA, 61)*

Similar views were applied to bullying in schools, bribery among bureaucrats, infidelity, and love relationship between teachers and students. For example, TA (36) contended that in a class where everyone considered fighting and bullying normal, one would feel no loss of *thể diện* behaving like that. However if his class mates were all well behaved, the bullying one would feel ashamed and be likely to correct his/her behaviours. Similarly, a principal tended not to see bribery as a big deal, as he saw his colleagues or people of even higher positions all bribed. “*They see nothing wrong with it*” (TA, 36). In another example, VA (34) talked about adultery:

*Many people now agree that this is a fashion. It means that apart from one’s spouse, one is free to have feelings for someone else in their working place, or one can have an affair with someone else. And I think this is..., it seems that... people think it normal, yes, it is condemned very mildly, uhm, condemned very mildly. Sometimes people do not care about it, they don’t talk much about it. It seems that everyone has adultery, so they sympathize with each other. (VA, 34)*

In the above quotation, since adultery was considered a “*fashion*”, “*condemned very mildly*” and received little attention from public, *thể diện* of people who had it was safe.

Similarly, the case of a love relationship between teacher and student was agreed by nine participants as a normal phenomenon in the current society, given many real examples in their working place (BC, 8; CH, 11; HN, 14; PT, 39, 40; QH, 20; TC, 16, 18; TH, 17; VA, 38; VD, 13). Therefore, it did not bring loss of *thể diện* to teachers as it used to in the past.

In general, the implication was that the original nature of an act did not decide *thể diện*. In these situations, whether an act caused loss of *thể diện* or not did not depend on how the act was viewed in the traditional moral scale. It depended on the degree of popularity of the act in the current society. The act may be seen as wrong, but being wrong did not always mean loss of *thể diện*. Especially when the act was done by many people in a certain context, it was inclined to be seen as normal in that context. And being normal was safe for *thể diện*.

## 5. Implications

I have above described how social evaluations held an extremely important role in the status of one's *thể diện*. This is consistent with the general interpretation in the literature of Asian Confucian cultures (Choi & Kim, 2004; Ho, 1976; J. Y. Kim & Nam, 1998; Y.-H. Kim & Cohen, 2010; Mao, 1994; Matsumoto, 1988; M. Yu, 2003), and in particular, H. N. Pham's (2011) claim about Vietnamese face. In other words, it is the matter of how one is viewed in others' eyes.

Indeed, the idea that *thể diện* was one's "image" (*hình ảnh, hình tượng*) in "others' eyes" (*trong mắt người khác/ mọi người*) was directly voiced by seven participants (BC, 5; DN, 1; PT, 2; TH, 6; VD, 35; VT, 2; VTh, 4, 24). Other participants such as HN, KL and TA had comparable ways of putting the idea. In particular, HN (6) and KL (1) believed that "*thể diện was when others look at us*", KL (1) said that *thể diện* was self (*cái tôi*) in others' eyes. TA (23) claimed that *thể diện* depended on "*evaluations from others' eyes*". *Thể diện* was perceived to be built from "*sự tôn trọng/ kính trọng*" (respect) (DN, 1; QH, 29, 30; TC, 5; TH, 6, 18), or "*sự công nhận*" (recognition) (KL, 22) from others of the image that one built. Losing *thể diện* was losing respect (TC, 5), or receiving "*contempt*" (*khinh thường/ xem thường*) (TH, 11, 19; VTh, 17) from others. This shows that 'respect' is probably an important notion in Vietnamese culture. It shows that *thể diện* is not an individual property. Rather *thể diện* depends on others' judgments. This perspective is in line with Ho's (1976)

definition of face as “the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others” (p. 883).

Consequently, *thể diện* tends to need a real or at the very least an imaginary audience. “Of course I would not lose face if there is no one there” (KL, 33). In other words, *thể diện* becomes a concern of a person when the person’s image is likely to be evaluated by other(s), when people think of their particular act or image in relation to a real or possible public judgment. Consequently, the more social exposure one has, the more *thể diện* one may be concerned about. KL (1) said:

*According to me, face only comes from interactive situations. If I am with myself, when I face myself, there is no face concern. Because we want others to see us as good/ beautiful, we have to try to keep ourselves to appear/act accordingly, that is face. So it cannot exist without social relations, interactive situations.*

In general, *thể diện* seems not to be a matter of ‘inner’ consciousness; rather it tends to be a matter of ‘outer’ evaluations. It is a matter of others’ eyes, rather than a matter of self-evaluation. An act may be wrong in one’s self-assessment; however, only when it comes to some public awareness does it become a *thể diện* concern, or wrong in the lens of *thể diện*. A wrongdoing hiding in a private place is less likely to cause a concern for *thể diện*. This concealing tendency and the sensitivity to public criticism have long been reflected in Vietnamese folklore, as I described in Chapter One.

Another result of the association between *thể diện* and social evaluations was *thể diện* being perceived by the participants to be an “outside image” (*hình ảnh bên ngoài*) (VD, 10; VTh, 7). *Thể diện* was associated with “outside face” (*bộ mặt bên ngoài*) (HN, 25; TA, 6; VTh, 29), “outside surface” (*bề mặt bên ngoài*) (TC, 4), “outside expressions” (*biểu hiện bề ngoài*) (BC, 2). It was “more about outside” (VTh, 29), “things of outside surface” (TA, 5), and “something to show to others, not something inside” (TC, 4). This suggests that in the teachers’ perceptions, *thể diện* was more a social outside cover of a person than his/her inner qualities. This could be reflected in an opinion from HN (21) that *thể diện* was strange to be mentioned along with charity works. Doing charity should come from one’s heart (*từ tâm*), which was in contrast with *thể diện* – a thing for outside image. *Thể diện* was perceived to be a matter of social cover, which was alien to the human inner sphere of heart and soul.



As an ‘outside cover’, *thể diện* can be projected. People can project a certain image of themselves to present in public and it is not necessarily consistent with their inner traits. This feature is in agreement with the general claim that face is often a person’s manipulated image in Asian Confucian cultures (C. C. Chen, 1988; Choi & Kim, 2004; Choi et al., 1997; Hwang, 2011).

As *thể diện* was understood as a person’s whole image in front of others, losing *thể diện* resulted in a sense of the whole self being rejected, or shamed. Losing *thể diện* was described with terms of shame such as “*xấu hổ*” (BC, 13; HQ, 14; PT, 13; QH, 10; TH, 9; VA, 23, 27), “*ngượng*” (KL, 33; VTh, 20), “*bẽ mặt*” (VT, 9), “*muối mặt*” (PT, 20) (these are different Vietnamese terms for being ashamed), and “*không dám nhìn mọi người*” (dare not to look at others (PT, 20). People who lost face may feel themselves “*small*”, “*inferior*”, and “*incompetent*” (VA, 9, 17, 27).

To sum up, in this section, I have shown that *thể diện* as a Vietnamese concept of face was perceived to be under strong impacts from external forces. It was vulnerable in public contexts, and strongly influenced by public opinions, social norms and majority behaviours. In the part II, I will display results about the relation between people with close relationships in terms of *thể diện*.

## II. THE INGROUP RELATION IN TERMS OF *THỂ DIỆN*

### 1. The relation between a person and his/her important groups

The interviews revealed that Vietnamese people tended to blend their individual face with the face of their groups. This process was recursive: the face of an individual *influenced*, and *was influenced* by the face of groups that the individual belonged to. A person was supposed to share face with his/ her groups. In particular, he/she benefitted or suffered from, and was responsible for maintaining the face of his/her groups. Two participants pointed out this general individual - group connection. VA (1) gave notions such as *cá nhân* (individual), *dòng họ* (clan), *gia đình* (family), *bạn bè* (friends), *đồng nghiệp* (colleagues) in her first thoughts about *thể diện*. In other words, *thể diện* of an individual was believed to have a close connection to groups that the individual was attached to. The other participant KL (3), while discussing the pressure to maintain *thể diện* of a person in a tradition-rich family,

revealed that “*sometimes people do not live for their own face but for the face of their family and the community they live with*”.

Different kinds of groups were mentioned. For example, KL and QH gave evidence of a connection between *thể diện* of a person and *thể diện* of the person’s family. KL (2) said that everybody was supposed to be responsible for their family face. This responsibility was even heavier for people born in traditional Confucian families with long-standing traditions of academic achievements, or people who were descendants of royal families. In another aspect, QH emphasized that family was important to *thể diện* of teachers. Particularly, “*to people, who are married, their families should be at least ok, not too problematic*” (QH, 3). Also in the kin relationship, another participant, VD (25), claimed that one could affect *thể diện* of one’s whole clan. In particular, people, especially women, having an extramarital affair would bring a bad reputation to the whole extended family, especially in rural villages.

The connection was seen similarly between individuals and their professional groups, such as between teachers and their schools. It was widely agreed among the participants that teachers’ inappropriate behaviours which were public, for example having extramarital affairs (CH, 12; HQ, 18; PT, 21; TH, 16; VT, 15), and sexually harassing students (BC, 11; DN, 8; HQ, 23; VA, 36, 37; VD, 27), would ruin *thể diện*, or the reputation of their organizations. Even teachers’ clothing outfits were said to affect *thể diện* of their schools. TA (13) said that dowdy dressing was likely to affect not only the teacher’s *thể diện* but also *thể diện* of his/her school.

TA (38), in particular, mentioned the relation between individuals’ *thể diện* and *thể diện* of bigger groups such as the whole education industry and the nation. He believed that condemned behaviours of certain individuals in the education field would affect *thể diện* of the whole industry, making it less and less a respectable area as it used to be. Scandals such as students hitting teachers, sexual abuses and sexual exchanges between teachers and students were among the most likely to damage *thể diện* of the education industry, and if they were known to the world, they would ruin the national face (TA, 38). In return, he also said that *thể diện* of a nation also influenced *thể diện* of its people: “*when we come to other countries, if our Vietnam is good, we feel more comfortable, that is face of a whole country*” (TA, 59), implying that his own face was heightened by the good face of his nation.

The close attachment between individuals and their groups in terms of *thể diện* brings up a consequence that groups, or people representing groups, could make an authorized

intervention into one's personal business. Two incidents told by PT provided illustrations. They were about a female teacher (PT, 21) and a female student (PT, 22), both involved in sexual affairs with married men, whose wives later uncovered the affairs and sent denunciation letters to the school administrators. As she said, these caused a huge public concern and a considerable damage to *thể diện* of their school, and therefore, requiring prompt strategies to minimize the damage from the school administrators. In particular, the union had a meeting with the female teacher to talk about the issue. In a later general meeting with the whole staff, the principal mentioned the case and gave a mild warning to her (though they did not specify her by name) and to the whole staff in general. The incident of the student was more complicated. Once having received the denunciation letter from the wife, a school department called Student Management identified the student based on information provided in the letter, which was quite difficult as clues were not specific. The vice principal then called her in his office for a talk. She promised to quit her affair with the man. The student received a warning and was disciplined within her class. It should be explained that in Vietnam each class is often a unique group of students, usually with a teacher in charge, and its members remain together throughout the whole level of education (e.g. high school, college, university). PT's understanding was that the student was not disciplined at a higher level in front of the whole college because there had not yet been clear proof of her fault other than the accusing letter from the wife.

A similar story in school was also told by HQ (18). Furthermore, seven other participants suggested similar strategies to deal with this kind of incident from a leaders' perspective. They included examining the status of the relationship (CH, 12; VT, 15), talking privately to the person and asking the person to stop their affairs (CH, 12; DN, 8), disciplining (VD, 27; VT, 15) or warning the person (VA, 36), changing the person's position from teaching to non-teaching tasks (TH, 16), forcing the offenders to leave school (BC, 11; TH, 16), concealing the incident from public awareness (CH, 12; VA, 36; VT, 15), and denying responsibility (DN, 8; TH, 16) or reducing the severity of the incident (VA, 37) when facing media or public interest. While it seems normal in the Vietnamese context to take those actions, such interventions into individuals' emotional sexual affairs might be seen as intruding and insensitive from Western viewpoints.

Another noticeable example of interventions from groups was given by VD (25, 26). He told me that in his hometown, a whole clan would gather for a meeting to deal with a person

committing adultery. Usually, they asked the person to write a statement of commitment to end the relationship. If the person relapsed, stricter methods would be applied such as forcing a divorce.

In general, people who are in charge of a group normally have the right to interfere into individuals' matters (such as love affairs, sexual relationships) if individuals' actions are considered harmful to *thể diện* of their group. Personal is not personal any more when it comes to group face and group concern. As a result, groups become a powerful tool for sanction. It was reported by BC (21) and PT (27) that some wives considered their husbands' institutional leaders a powerful, ultimate and effective source to tame their husbands' behaviours. Or more often, they reported the affairs to leaders of organizations employing the other females who had the affairs with their husbands (BC, 24; HQ, 18; PT, 26).

## **2. The relation between a person and his/her important others**

In my interviews, the idea that the Vietnamese had a close relation in terms of *thể diện* with their important people was outstanding. In most of the situations these persons were family members.

**2.1** Ten interviewees talked about *thể diện* in the relation between a person and his/her spouse. This relation was expressed in various aspects. For instance, TC expressed the idea that the social position of a person might affect *thể diện* of his/her partner. For example, a working, socially knowledgeable, fashionable wife would enhance *thể diện* of her husband rather than a housewife who always stayed at home; or *thể diện* of a man of high social position would be damaged if his wife had a job that was considered not compatible with his, for example if the husband was a director and the wife had a cleaning job (TC, 29). Similarly, failure or bad reputation of a person would also lead to face loss for his/her partner (KL, 34; QH, 6, 8). KL (34) told me she once felt she lost her *thể diện* in front of others because they knew that her husband failed in his business.

Other daily life situations were also mentioned in terms of *thể diện* relation between husbands and wives. TC (30) said that a man would lose his *thể diện* if his wife treated his friends with lack of respect when they visited their home. In another situation of guests

visiting, a man was told he would lose his face and his wife's face if the guests saw he washed dishes, as this was often believed to be his wife's job (CH, 15). The female participant HQ complained that her spouse often lost *thể diện* of both of them in front of their friends, since he often appeared to be cranky towards their friends when he was in a bad mood. She said: *"being partners we should keep face for each other, but he did not, so it was like we all lost face, what else left for my face"* (HQ, 6).

Among the discussed situations, adultery of a person was believed to bring serious loss of *thể diện* to the person's partner (TA, 42; VD, 21). However, it was also concerned that reactions of a person to his/her spouse's extramarital affairs had consequences for *thể diện* of his/her spouse. According to DN (6), TA (20), and BC (21), if a woman made a scene in public on knowing her husband was having a love affair, she would lose not only her *thể diện* but also her husband's *thể diện* in the public's eye. Hence she should behave discretely and tactfully to preserve *thể diện* for both of them, as their face was mutually attached. About this situation, BC (21) used the Vietnamese idiom *"xấu chàng hổ ai"* (if he is bad, who gets shame), implying that a woman shared *thể diện* with her husband, if he lost it, so did she.

Talking about the relation of *thể diện* between husbands and wives, KL a female (34) said:

*...there is often a concern about our partners' behaviours, and whether they make us lose face. This is intense sometimes. The truth is once we are married, we tend to pay attention to our partner's behaviours to see if they affect our prestige. ... Likewise, our partners also expect us to behave properly.*

Another participant VA (22) told me the difficulty of maintaining one's *thể diện* without the cooperation of his/her partner:

*A person himself cannot keep his face, it requires both parties, it cannot be one. What if I want to keep my face to you but my partner does not keep my face? For example, when going out, my husband kept behaving boorishly..., I really wanted to keep my face in front of people, but my husband kept behaving boorishly, how could I..., so eventually I lost my face in public. So this is hard, it needs a cooperation of the persons involved to keep face for each other.*

As a result, wives were advised to preserve *thể diện* for their husbands (BC, 3, 4, 26, 28; CH, 13, 15; PT, 26; TC, 26, 30; TH, 13, 24; VA, 14, 18; VD, 21; VT, 20; VTh, 31, 32), and vice

versa (HQ, 6; TA, 55). It can be seen that women's influence on men's *thể diện* was more concerned than men's possible impact on *thể diện* of their women. However this is the story of another section.

**2.2** The relation between parents and children was also mentioned. Likewise, *thể diện* of a person in many situations was dependent on his/her parents and children, according to 10 interviewees.

Parents were said to have a remarkable impact on their children's *thể diện* by four participants DN, KL, TA and VT. In particular, VT (16) remembered how he cared about evaluations about his teacher parents from their students and the surrounding public, since these were considered influential for his own face. As his parents were respected in the public eye, his *thể diện* was also heightened. Similarly, TA believed that if *thể diện* of the parents was in trouble, so was their children's *thể diện*.

*A person loses face, so does everyone in his family. For example, if the parents have some trouble with their face, so do their children. They will lose their confidence in their study community, with their fellow students, their friends. (TA, 59)*

Another participant, DN (6), meant that whatever they do, parents should be aware of possible impacts of their behaviours on their children's *thể diện*.

The other direction, children causing effect on *thể diện* of their parents, was mentioned by more participants (BC, 29; CH, 16; KL, 33; QH, 7; TA, 39, 43, 59; TC, 31; TH, 23; VA, 15), probably because I did ask some of them how they would think about their children's influence on their *thể diện* as a teacher. Accordingly, in order for a person to maintain *thể diện*, his/her children should generally behave and/or study well (CH, 16; KL, 33; TA, 59; TC, 31). TC (31) said:

*Children have a great effect on one's face. For example, they study well, have certificates of merit, go study abroad, or gain awards from schools, then their parents will be very proud, and they may often, for example, show off their children to other people, their outside face will be very good. I mean they will be very happy and their face seems to be brighter than that of people whose children study poorly and are disruptive or something.*

The connection was seen in some real life situations. For example, KL (33) told me an example of her son once losing her *thể diện* by replying to her with lack of respect in front of her students, and in another example, by not greeting people they met when she brought him to her work place. Another female participant VA (15) anticipated that her parents-in-law were likely to lose their *thể diện* if they saw their son did household chores for her, since those were perceived by them to lower his male face *thể diện đàn ông*. In other words, *thể diện* of their son was also their *thể diện*.

It should be noted that the issue was believed to be especially important to parents who were teachers. It was argued by BC (29), CH (16), KL (33), QH (7), TA(39, 43) and TH (23) that if a teacher could not teach his/her own children well, their ability to teach others was also doubted, and so, he/she would lose face. According to these interviewees, there was a pressure on teachers in educating their own children, and likewise, for children whose parents were teachers. It was generally and naturally assumed that teachers' children had to excel over other children, in terms of their personalities and their study achievements. Therefore, if you were a teacher and your child was said to be spoiled or study badly, it would be more likely for you to lose *thể diện* than a person in other careers who had children performing at the same level. For example, BC (29) said:

*When, for example, parents are farmers or traders, it is not a big matter if their children study a bit not well, because the parents are always overloaded with their work / working like slaves, so their children may study not so well. But to teachers: one is a teacher yet his child studies badly, people say, my god, parents are teacher but they study stupidly like a cow, yes people say so. I mean, people always think that teachers' children have to study well, or at least better than children of other 'common' people.*

**2.3** *Thể diện* of a person could also be judged based on people he/she was associated with in other relations. They could be some surface acquaintance. For example, VT (8) shared the view that one would be likely to lose his/her *thể diện* if people saw him/her socialise with 'rogue elements of society'. Or, from TC's (8) opinion, a teacher could lose his/her *thể diện* from bad performances of his/her students.

### 3. Discussion

These teachers' perceptions express another facet of *thể diện* - the relational nature. The sense of being relational is that *thể diện* does not only reside within individuals but also extends to other people and groups associated with the individuals. *Thể diện*, or face in Vietnamese culture is therefore not simply an individual's possession as suggested by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). A Vietnamese often does not solely own his/her *thể diện*; he/she shares it with his/her groups, and he/she also shares it with persons that he/she is connected to. If his/her *thể diện* is heightened, so is *thể diện* of the people he/she is identified with. Likewise, if his/her *thể diện* is lost, *thể diện* of the people he/she is attached to is lost as well.

As a result, one is responsible for *thể diện* of other people. Everyone not only carries their own self face but also face of others they are identified with. Whatever one is doing, one should be aware of possible consequences of one's behaviours on *thể diện* of one's important others. This mutual, collective Vietnamese face has been identified by H. N. Pham (2011). It is also in line with face practice in other Confucian cultures. For example, Bedford and Hwang (2003) point out that this practice is in contrast with the general practice in Western cultures, where individuals are supposed to be responsible for their own behaviours; for example, parents are not necessarily blamed as much for their children's faults as they are in East Asian cultures.

### III. MAINTAINING *THỂ DIỆN* OF OTHERS

#### 1. '*Dĩ hòa vi quý*', or the importance of interpersonal harmony

Although not all of my participants put it directly in their words, all of them expressed a strong sense of valuing harmony in communication. Stories from KL and HN were the most representative.

**1.1** KL was the leader of her subject group in her college. She told me about the need for her to be flexible in her communication with other group members, especially when she had to assign tasks and give instructions to them (KL, 25). Accordingly, she had



different communication strategies for different people, based on their ages, their relationship with her, their personalities, the purpose and other contextual factors of their interactions. She told me the reason behind this careful consideration:

*I do not want to and cannot make others lose face on purpose. I wonder if people who have strong personality would criticize me as “weak”, even “cowardly”, or “adapt direction to wind direction”. For example, in my work or interactions, when I have “collision” with someone and they talk badly to me, strong-personality persons may have a quick response, but I cannot do that. I cannot respond to them in the same way because I am not that fast, secondly, because if I have a response like that, both parties lose face. Once they lose face, what they can do afterward is unpredictable. Therefore in my business, my usual motto is “consider harmony as important”. It may make me a coward, but I often choose not to be aggressive in interactions, because at those times, people are often in hot temper. They have a word, we have a word, then everyone loses temper. Nothing is solved, yet later even facing each other is hard, working with each other after that is also difficult, isn’t it? So not until I am very upset, I talk back to them, but only like “you don’t talk to me that way, it goes to nowhere”, and stop, though I was very upset, I wait till the situation cools down to explain to them. Therefore in my interactions, it takes time to solve conflicts, it cannot be solved immediately. I think when people lose face, to whom they direct their anger, of course to me. Moreover, in terms of humanity, it is pointless to make each other angry. Life is already hard enough. We are upset, they are upset, the feeling prolongs. Better be patient a little bit then solve the problem for later peace. Better than tit for tat method. (KL, 25)*

Despite its lengthy and slightly disorganized expressions, KL’s speech can be summarized in the general idea “*dĩ hòa vi quý*” (consider harmony as important). KL described this as her communication motto. Particularly, it involved an avoidance of face loss to others. Making others lose face was likely to cause “*unpredictable*” unpleasant long-term results, such as “*later even facing each other is hard, working with each other after that is also difficult*”, and a direct consequence on herself: “*when people lose face, to whom they direct their anger, of course to me*”. In other words, preserving others’ *thể diện* was important to avoid troubles. In order to achieve this, patience was recommended. Dislike was given to aggressiveness and “tit-for-tat”. However she was cautious that to another thinking style, her expressions may be judged as “*weak*”, “*coward*”, “*adapt direction to wind direction*” (*gió chiều nào theo chiều ấy*).

**1.2** I asked HN (7) how he would act in the situation that he had contradictory professional opinions with a colleague. He revealed that if he protected his personal opinions, he may run the risk of pushing the conflict to a higher degree of being acute, in other words, becoming a debate, which he did not like. In the situation that an exchange of ideas might come to a debate between him and his colleagues, he would withdraw, persuading himself that his idea may be wrong, or both he and the other made mistakes, so they needed to withdraw, review their knowledge and discuss later. Even when he was sure that he was right, he also compromised. According to him, it was important to “*know to deal with the situation smoothly*” (*biết cách xử lý sao cho êm đẹp* - HN, 33). Note that the context was a discussion of professional knowledge. It seemed that personal opinions and truths were not as important as harmony between persons.

In addition to this, HN (33) cited an incident involving his teacher, whose way of dealing with conflicts set a good example to him. Here was the story: a neighbour of the teacher had his gutter pointing into the house of the teacher which caused so much annoyance and inconvenience for the teacher’s family. In HN’s opinion, “*no doubt the neighbour was wrong, it was fine if we had fierce reactions*” (*thì đúng là người ta làm sai, mình làm gay gắt cũng được*). However, the teacher showed no complaint or attitude. Time came when the teacher renewed his house, which may be a good chance for his retaliation. However, he had his water gutter built so that it did not affect the neighbour’s territory. Appreciating this act, the neighbour finally realized his wrong doing and rebuilt his gutter properly so that it did not point into the teacher’s house. To HN, this was considered an example of being tolerant towards unwanted treatments from others. Resolving conflict took patience and time.

I asked him what if in a conflict we treated the other with tolerance and righteousness but they still did not realize their wrong doing. He said:

*If they still don’t realize [that], sometimes we have to talk. Soft talk first. I think with those situations between neighbours we should be tactful. Soft talk first. If it still doesn’t work, it’s true that we have to ask for intervention of ward authorities. However we lose each other’s heart easily with this solution, for we are neighbours. Normally it is easier for us if we neighbours live in harmony.* (HN, 33)

In HN's opinion, harmony between people living in the same residential community was considered important. The Vietnamese have a saying "neighbours nearby are better than far-away relatives" (*bà con xa không bằng láng giềng gần*), implying the significant role of this neighbourhood community. As HN said, people in this community should deal with each other with care and tact so that they can live in harmony, or at least do not lose each other's heart (*mất lòng*). Therefore, external intervention was considered the last solution to conflicts since it almost certainly caused loss of *thể diện* to people. Soft talks and tactful approaches were recommended to maintain harmony between people.

**1.3** The communication motto "*dĩ hòa vi quý*" (consider harmony as important) was important in KL and HN's opinions. "*Dĩ hòa vi quý*" was a Sino-Vietnamese term, i.e. borrowed from Chinese language but pronounced in a Vietnamese way according to certain strict rules. It shows an appreciation of interpersonal harmony, peace, and long term relationship in people's communication. It advises people to interact with each other in compromise styles so that they can preserve harmony between them. In other words, in relation to face, it advises people to preserve *thể diện* for each other.

In KL and HN's opinions, long-term relationships tended to be considered more important than momentary interactive goals. The participants showed their concern for long-term relationships if they caused face loss to others. KL said "*later even facing each other is hard, working with each other after that is also difficult*" (25). HN was also aware that as neighbours live together, "*it is easier for us if we neighbours live in harmony*" (33). Previously, HN (31) also shared the opinion that generally people should resolve conflict with patience so that "*later they could face each other*", because "*when we are impulsive, a small thing could turn into a big thing, finally (we) could not face each other*".

Three other participants, QH, VD and VTh, also had a similar concern. VTh (12) mentioned that his efforts to preserve *thể diện* of his friends who were in a lower social status than him, was also to "*preserve our relationship*". VD (41) anticipated a possible consequence if he caused his senior colleagues to lose their *thể diện* by commenting on their teaching presentations: the relationship between him and the colleagues would turn bad, and later the seniors would give harder tasks for him in their common job. QH (16) emphasized that if she made a person lose *thể diện*, "*later communications with them would be very difficult*". In particular, when commenting on a colleague's teaching, she would try to keep the person's *thể diện*, "*so that later, for later interactions in my work, it would be better*". It could be

seen that loss of *thể diện* can cause serious and prolonged damages to relationships. As a result, the participants went far beyond the moments of interaction to be concerned about this long-term consequence.

**1.4** The importance of patience and tolerance was emphasized in KL and HN's stories about harmony. Previously, I asked HN to write down words he thought related to the notion of *thể diện*. HN (6) wrote terms such as "*sự chịu đựng*" (endurance/tolerance) and "*sự nhẫn nại*" (patience). In his explanation later, he said one should be tolerant towards undesirable acts or judgments one received from others. One should not hurry to react to others; rather one should bear with it, because "*the other is already impulsive, if you are also impulsive, two people will be in conflict*" (HN, 31). The best way was "*being patient, let the situation pass, then calm your mind*" (HN, 31).

Another participant - VTh (27) - seemed to support the idea. He also displayed his critical attitude towards impulsiveness in interactions. He revealed that several years ago he often unintentionally upset people by his strong and 'straight' communicative behaviours. He criticized himself for once being "*hot tempered*", "*easy to be upset*", having "*expressed opinions and emotions strongly*", and having "*strong reactions when others criticized*". This was believed to be the reason why he often got into conflicts with other colleagues in the past. Now he learned to control his emotions and reactions to be other-face attentive, which made his interactions easier.

Patience and endurance were related to another conclusion, that resolving conflict often needed time. HN (31) said "*cứ để từ từ*" (take your time, no need to hurry). KL (25) also claimed that "*it takes time to solve conflicts, it cannot be solved immediately*". Immediate reactions were often linked to impulsiveness and were considered harmful to *thể diện* of involved parties of interactions. In this perspective, successfully maintaining *thể diện* of others required conscious effort not only to control emotions but to cultivate behavioural and communicative skills of great complexity. There are obvious connections with the role of teachers in nurturing these attributes among their students.

I have indicated that the two most vocal of the interviewees on this topic emphasised withdrawal from conflict and soft talk as their major strategies for trying to save others' *thể diện*. To what extent were these strategies endorsed by the other participants, and what additional suggestions did they make for saving *thể diện* of others? Answers for these questions are provided in the coming section.

## 2. Methods to save *thể diện* of others and maintain harmony

### 2.1 Withdrawal

This method meant that one could avoid making others lose their *thể diện* by strategies such as avoiding certain acts, withdrawing from situations, or withholding speaking certain words. Beside KL (25) and HN (7, 33), five other respondents referred to this tendency. For instance, in order not to cause their senior colleagues to lose *thể diện*, HN (10), QH (16), VA (33) and VT (3) revealed that they may not give comments about the senior colleagues' teaching in evaluation meetings. In another situation, BC (9) revealed that if one of her friends had an extramarital affair, it was best for her not to mention the incident in front of the friend to save the person's *thể diện*.

If people did have to engage in these situations, tentative ways of acting and speaking were suggested.

### 2.2 Moderation in acting and speaking

Among the interviewees, TA had this strong, consistent and uniquely expressed opinion: to avoid conflicts and save others' *thể diện*, one's talking should be "*vừa phải*" (moderate). During his interview, the term "*vừa phải*" was repeated 11 times, when he referred to how to preserve *thể diện* of people in different contexts. In addition, "*vừa vừa*" a synonym with "*vừa phải*" (in terms of describing people's communication and behaviours) was mentioned twice. The two incidents below showed what he meant by "moderate".

In order to avoid face loss for people whose teaching he commented in evaluation meetings, TA (33) said that every comment should be kept at a 'moderate' level: "*To my opinion, regardless of whether the person is close or not to us, liked or hated by us, in order to keep their face, we should speak moderately in those meetings* (evaluation meetings after teaching presentations)". As he explained later, being "moderate" meant making very few and small comments (as discussed before, comments on those contexts often meant criticisms).

In another context about how to preserve *thể diện* of teacher examinees who were caught cheating by him as an exam supervisor, TA (25) said “*in general, we can act at a moderate level, a level that we don’t cause much face loss to the people*”. By being “moderate” in this context, he meant:

*For example, catching them copying documents, we don’t make written records. Quietly, we can just collect the documents, and give them some gentle reminder, give them a reminder to alert them so that they don’t go too far. That can be seen as saving their face a bit.* (TA, 25)

It could be seen that being “moderate” equalled acting discreetly, quietly, and tolerantly to save *thể diện* of the examinees.

In other incidents, he used the term without explanation. However, I could see that the general idea was to be against the idea of acting ‘strongly’. Through the two cases above, one could see that if the acts were expressed in a continuum, being “moderate” did not mean in the middle; rather it tended to mean one end, i.e. gentle, modest, few, small, or discreet, depending on contexts. Overall, being moderate meant one did engage in situations but at a restricted level to maintain *thể diện* for one’s interlocutor.

### 2.3 Use of soft and indirect speaking style

All of the participants mentioned this behavioural style in various contexts in which they felt the need to save *thể diện* for people they interacted with. Speaking styles and word uses were specifically highlighted as important means to save *thể diện* of people one spoke to.

HN and KL, as shown before, supported this approach. HN mentioned this idea saying that people should deal with conflict situations ‘gently’ (*nhẹ nhàng*), for instance, talk to the other gently (*nói chuyện nhẹ nhàng*) (33). He also advised “soft talk” between neighbours (HN, 33). KL (22) specifically emphasized the idea when she referred to a conversation she had over the phone just before the interview between her and a member of her group, which I had the chance to witness.

*Did you just see my way of talking to AC (name of the member)? I know that 15<sup>th</sup> will be the last day of her annual leave, so I have the right to assign her the task starting on 16<sup>th</sup>, but I did not talk that way. I said “yes, I know it’s hard for you, but since there is no one else in*

*our group to be able to do this, so I hope you sympathize with me, to work on this Sunday”.*  
(22)

It should be explained that the job was the supervision of an in-service training exam, which was often held on Sundays. KL explained to me that everyone in her group, except AC, was asked to do the job not long ago, so she could not ask them to do it again too soon. Therefore she had to call AC. KL herself had another similar job to do on the day.

It could be seen that KL did not use her power as a group manager to give the task to her subordinate. In spite of the fact that it was a mandatory task, she felt the need to save *thể diện* of the other by talking about it in a way that was soft and personal. Especially, she asked for her subordinate’s sympathy. In this case, a professional task was organised based on mutual sympathy rather than on a regulated basis. KL said “*what matters is our ways of speaking so that we can save face for the other*” (23).

The best illustration of this behavioural style was found in the situation my teachers made comments on their colleagues’ teaching. There was a high consensus on this matter. All of the respondents discussing this situation shared a view that the way they used their words played a critical role for *thể diện* of the person receiving comments. For instance, never say the person was “*wrong*” (CH, 5, 6; KL, 17; TC, 9; VD, 41; VT, 3; VTh, 24), never “*impose opinions*” (*áp đặt ý kiến*) (CH, 5, 6; VT, 3), and most importantly, avoid talking directly or “*talking straight*” (*nói thẳng*) (DN, 3; VD, 41; VT, 3).

There were two ways to avoid talking ‘straight’ (*nói thẳng*). The first one was tentative talks. To illustrate, it was recommended that the talks should be “*tế nhị*” (tacful) (DN, 3), “*khéo léo*” (clever) (TA, 31) and especially, “*nhẹ nhàng*” (gentle, tender) (DN, 3; HN, 33; PT, 25; TA, 25, 31; VT, 3; VTh, 26). DN (3) said that in order to save others’ *thể diện*, one should speak in a way that was easy to absorb. For example, one could raise problems as tentative suggestions (VD, 41), and as “*probing*” (*thăm dò*) rather than “*concluding*” (*kết luận*) (KL, 20). VTh (26) was proud of himself for being able to transform his speaking style from a direct to a “*more fluid and gentle*” (*uyển chuyển và nhẹ nhàng hơn*) style. HN (10) said:

*It depends on the way we raise comments. It is different between speaking harshly and speaking in a way such as “I just have a small question about this part, if I remember right...”. The latter is totally different, it is more pleasant.*

KL (20) explained “*my idea contribution would be like under the perspective of a learner, a person attending a teaching presentation to learn more for herself, I would ask under this perspective, therefore face of everyone is preserved*”. In other words, the speaker should be very humble.

The second way to avoid speaking ‘straight’ was speaking indirectly, or ‘beating around the bush’. For example, TH (21) said: if she wanted to point out a trouble point in a lesson of a senior colleague, she would ask the person about a certain issue that was closely related to the point, saying that it was stated like this in a book she read, and she would like to know if the person had a different opinion. Making recourse to certain written evidence such as a textbook was also favoured by DN (3) and VT (3). In addition, VT (3) said he would “*borrow a certain issue to talk*” (*mượn vấn đề nào đó để nói*), or “*go around the issue*” (*đi vòng vấn đề*) so that finally he could deliver what he wanted to say to the person. To HN (11), he would ask the person as if the main purpose was to consolidate his own knowledge because senior teachers such as the person were often viewed as the best source for young teachers to check on professional knowledge. In the same situation, VD (41) would create a reason to ask the person about his/her professional knowledge, then slowly during the conversation present his way of understanding the issue to examine the person’s reception. After all, the purpose of indirect communication was to enable the other to realize the problems themselves and the speaker to have as least imposition on the other as possible (TA, 31; TH, 21; VTh, 26). Talking clearly and explicitly to the point was considered inappropriate.

Interestingly, VD (41) and VTh (25) talked about consequences of ‘straight’ talks (*nói thẳng*). Both told me about their experiences of people who received “*straight*” comments and thus became resentful towards commenters. VD (41) told me about incidents in which some of his colleagues tended to have revengeful acts towards other colleagues who spoke “*straight*” to them. In particular, “*the way he (the person receiving comments) spoke to the person (who commented) changed completely*”. Furthermore, if the comment receiver was in a senior position, he used his power to create difficulties to the other in their job. VTh (25) himself had been a victim of his “*straight*” talk to other colleagues, especially seniors. Accordingly, in the early years of his career, he had upset some of his senior colleagues with his “*straight*” commenting style. Consequently, in important meetings, they had fired back by criticizing him as uncooperative or unsociable.



It can be seen that the connection between *thể diện* and the sophistication of language use was quite clear to my participants. Some made generalizations such as “*face relates to language, and the way we use words when we talk to each other*” (VT, 2), “*this is the matter of how we use language*” (KL, 19), “*what matters is our ways of speaking so that we can save face for the other*” (KL, 23), and “*the way we speak will decide whether they lose face or not*” (PT, 15).

## 2.4 Privatization

This method to save *thể diện* of people and for oneself has been elaborated earlier in this chapter (see section I, 1), where I highlighted the importance of public context. It is understandable that since the matter of being public or private is significant to *thể diện* status of a person, a control of setting can help maintain *thể diện* of the person with whom one interacts.

Even in the case when an intervention from a third party was recommended (CH, 13; PT 27), the rule of keeping things private was still remained. In particular, CH (13) advised that women who found that their husbands had sexual affairs asked one of their close friends to talk to the husbands in a private, cosy atmosphere. PT (27) recommended those women to privately ask for help from their husbands’ bosses, hoping that they may give some influential advice to their husbands. Although this way of handling was no longer within two-person territory, it was still considered private enough to save *thể diện* of the husbands due to the trustworthiness of the third persons and the privacy of the contexts.

## 3. Discussion

Based on what has been presented, it seems that *thể diện* is very much other-face oriented. It is noticed that a preservation of others’ *thể diện* became an important standard for one’s *thể diện*. For example, HN (31) said that your patience was beneficial not only to *thể diện* of the other but also to your own *thể diện*, because “*people evaluate your face that you know how to behave*”. VTh (12) had the same idea. He told me that he should be careful not to hurt *thể diện* of his friends who were at a lower social status than him (for example, unemployed or

manual labor) in their communication with each other. This was because he feared that otherwise “*people will judge me*”, and more importantly, “*my friends may think “yeah, you have more knowledge, so you may be better than me in that aspect only, are you sure you are better than me in other things?”*”. So, my face... is also affected”. VTh’s concern for his friends’ *thể diện* was obvious. Nevertheless, the later consequence he was concerned about was his *thể diện* in his friends’ views. He cared about what his friends may think of him if he did not attend to their need of *thể diện*, which would be likely to affect his *thể diện* in return. Probably people save *thể diện* for others partly because they are afraid that if they do not, they will be badly judged and lose *thể diện* themselves. BC (21) put it into words: “*the best way to maintain our face is to respect others, maintain face for others*”.

The idea of the maintenances of self-face and other-face being interrelated was sometimes seen in the ways the people talked. For example, KL said “*everyone’s face is saved*” (if she spoke to the other tentatively) (20, 22), and “*both parties lose face*” (if she failed to save face of the other) (25). HN (31) said “*both persons have benefits*” (if compromise solutions were used to resolve conflicts). The danger of self-face loss was talked about in conjunction with other-face loss, and so was the benefit. It can be seen that *thể diện* of self and others were intertwined, and people protected their own *thể diện* via protecting others’ *thể diện*. There seemed to be lots of ‘self’ in what looked like ‘other’.

In another aspect, it can be seen that *thể diện* plays a significant role in the maintenance of interpersonal relationships, in both specific and in long-term interactions. In terms of specific interactions, the need for sophistication in language use shows how choices of linguistic devices can threaten or maintain the face of others in interactions, just as in the spirit of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory (1978, 1987). Choi and Kim commented similarly about Korean face (2004): “the mutual saving of *chemyeon* makes for smooth social interaction by reciprocally heightening self-esteem” (p. 36). However, what is worth more notice with *thể diện* is its emphasis on long-term relationships. The Vietnamese as reflected in my interviews tend to have a special concern about interpersonal relationship on a long-term basis. An interaction is not simply a concern of the moment; rather it should be put in the context of a long-term relationship between interactants. In that process, patience and tolerance are required and sympathy and mutual understanding are appreciated, just as the spirit of the motto *dĩ hòa vi quý* – considering harmony as important. This is consistent with research descriptions about indirect, non-confrontational conflict styles of East Asian cultures.

#### IV. *SĨ DIỆN* – THE OBNOXIOUSNESS OF SELF-FACE CONCERN

As noticed in the corpus data, *sĩ diện* can be used interchangeably with *thể diện* or independently, in a related meaning with *thể diện*. As an independent concept, *sĩ diện* seemed to convey a negative evaluation of *thể diện* of a person. My focus is on this additional connotation of the term, because an examination of it illuminates the boundaries of the Vietnamese concept of face as expressed in the term *thể diện*.

First, I present real life examples of *sĩ diện* provided by eight participants (BC, 31; CH, 17; HN, 22; PT, 28; QH, 34; TA, 46; TC, 33; and TH, 10, 24). Then from these examples, I analyse its connotation in the participants' perceptions.

##### 1. Examples

The most popular type of examples related to finance. Six out of the eight interviewees (BC, 31; CH, 17; HN, 22; TA, 46; TC, 33; TH, 10) mentioned these types of examples. HN (2) said: “*in spite of being poor, one always shows that one is rich*”. In particular, although one's financial condition was limited, one tried to show that he was above others by dressing in luxurious outfits and using expensive things (TA, 46), going to a wedding with one million dong (Vietnamese currency) ‘happy money’ to give to the couple instead of the popular amount of 200 thousand (TC, 33), celebrating a very sumptuous year-end party with so many guests (TH, 10), inviting others to dine in expensive places (CH, 17), or insisting to pay for the others when drinking or eating out together (BC, 31; TC, 33). BC (31) pictured *sĩ diện* with her imagined story in which, in a poor family, the husband asked his wife to bring anything valuable left in their house to treat his guests (e.g. all the food, butcher chickens to make food). The guest may ask if his wife and children had eaten, he replied “(they) *have everything, don't worry*”, whereas in fact, his wife and children had nothing to eat but fish sauce. This, to her, should be condemned, and so, she claimed that *sĩ diện* was a hateful characteristic of men. TH (10) also visualized a similar story of *sĩ diện*: a man held a very large party in his parents' hometown whereas his family in the city was living in a poor condition, for example, his wife often complained about how to pay tuition fee for their children and other living expenses. To the participants' evaluations, these behaviours were unsuitable to one's financial conditions and hence unnecessary or ridiculous. All of the

examples were given when I asked the participants to provide me with examples of a person with *sĩ diện*. Therefore, *sĩ diện* related to financial ability could be either the most popular/typical or the easiest/quickest example of *sĩ diện* to come into the minds of the participants.

Beside the economic area, CH (17) gave me an example of *sĩ diện* in the area of knowledge: teachers did not admit their mistakes in teaching as they were afraid that they would lose their face letting others know about their faults.

QH (34) came with a rather comprehensive illustration of *sĩ diện*: it was a man who wanted everything related to him that caught others' eyes to be evaluated highly, for example, beautiful wife, rich and sleek appearance, powerful job position, and children studying at high reputation schools, and so on.

All of the examples above were given upon my request. There were other examples that came naturally among the interviews without my initiation, when the term "*sĩ diện*" was used by the participants themselves to describe a particular phenomenon. Two examples of this type were found in PT and TH's interviews. In particular, when discussing how *thể diện* of a man would be if he could not earn money for his family and then became a stay-at-home dad, TH (24) said that men who had *sĩ diện* would not do housework in that situation; instead their daily life would pass with watching television and waiting for their wives to serve meals. The other participant, PT (28), when talking about the way people dealt with their partners' affairs, asserted that due to *sĩ diện*, men tended not to publicize their partners' betrayal or confront their love rivals. Instead they dealt with their partners, by tormenting them mentally and holding a grudge against them day by day.

## **2. General evaluations**

Overall, the examples and the participants' attitudes about the term expressed an unfavourable tendency of judgment of it. Indeed, five people put it in comparison with *thể diện*, saying that while *thể diện* had a good meaning, *sĩ diện* had a bad one (BC, 30; CH, 17; HN, 20; QH, 33, 34; TC, 33, 34). For example, QH said: "*in my personal opinion, this term is not as good as the term thể diện. ... People think that this is a bad human characteristic*" (33). In particular, "*when people describe someone as sĩ diện, it means that they criticize the*

person, whereas when they say that a person has *thể diện*, it means that they praise the person” (QH, 34). CH (17) put that while *thể diện* referred to a general dignity that one should have, *sĩ diện* was something that one should not have. People with *sĩ diện* were likely to be seen as “*kệch cỡm*” (ludicrous) (TA, 46). HN (21), TA (46) and TC (34) mentioned that *sĩ diện* was a usual target of public’s judgment, gossip, and laughing.

However, HN (20) gave a wider view. Accordingly, *sĩ diện* could be good or bad. In good aspect, it was the same as *thể diện*. If it was bad, it became “*sĩ diện hảo*” (false face/pride) (the term “*sĩ diện hảo*” was also mentioned by another participant HQ (13)), and this side of *sĩ diện* was major (HN, 20). This idea mirrored the results about *sĩ diện* in the corpus.

### 3. Why *sĩ diện* has a ‘bad’ meaning

The participants provided me with reasons for their negative evaluations of the term.

**3.1** The most popular reason was that *sĩ diện* meant too much focus on ‘self’, or too ‘individualistic’. Seven participants below mentioned this aspect of *sĩ diện*.

*Sĩ diện* was seen by HN (20) to be closely associated with the notion “*cá nhân*” (individual). The collocation “*sĩ diện cá nhân*” was also mentioned by PT (29). Furthermore, *sĩ diện* was explained as “*doing things for your own face*” (HN, 21), “*heightening the role of yourself*” (TH, 10), “*heightening too much one’s individuality and paying little or no concern to surrounding others*” (VD, 44), “*one considers his/her ego too high*” (CH, 17), so that “*they have little concern for others around them, they are only concerned about themselves*” (CH, 17). QH (33) linked *sĩ diện* to “*tính ích kỉ*” (selfishness), saying “*there is something a bit selfish in this term*”. HN (21) contended that doing things for one’s *sĩ diện* was “*not for a right purpose*”.

In a situation, the individuality of *sĩ diện* was contrasted with the concern for group benefit such as family happiness by PT (29). In this situation, PT talked about the differences between females and males in dealing with their partner’s infidelity. She said:

*Women in those situations are always the same. They place the fullness, the happiness of their family at a greater importance, hence at those times they do not care about ‘sĩ diện’, like, yeah, “they were so incapable that their husband had to find another woman”, they do*

*not think about it that much. They care more about the fact that their family is facing this and that danger. That, now how they can maintain their family, that is the most important to them, not their individual 'sĩ diện'.*

It can be seen that in her view, *sĩ diện*, or individual face concern of men was opposite to women's care of family. One was self-oriented and seemed to be judged as selfish, the other was other-oriented, and seemed appreciated.

The 'self-heightening' (*đề cao bản thân*) tendency was criticized by HN (6): "*sometimes when one's ego is too big, it leads to unacceptable things, not-right things*". For example, HN said, when one felt his face or his pride was hurt, one may have impulsive acts to prove one's 'self', which often led to more serious conflicts with others, even fighting. In this case, HN claimed that one's face even went worse. According to him, the 'self-heightening' (*đề cao bản thân*) was harmful since it often pushed conflicts to more severity, and the person would be viewed as "*bồng bột*" (immature) (HN, 6). 'Self-heightening' coincided with the sense of one viewing oneself as the number one and the only person who was right (*cho mình là nhất cho mình là đúng* - VD, 44).

Among the participants, VT (18) was probably the one describing the meaning of *sĩ diện* with the least disapproving attitude. He said that *sĩ diện* was when people did something to express or prove themselves but not in a right way, so it became annoying to others.

**3.2** The second aspect that made *sĩ diện* obnoxious was its superficiality. *Sĩ diện* was perceived to reflect one's false appearance, or not to reflect one's real, true nature. It implied that one was pretending, or one's expressions were fake. The remark was made by eight interviewees as follows.

*Sĩ diện* was associated with "*bề ngoài*", "*bên ngoài*" (the outside/appearance) (CH, 17; QH, 33), "*hình thức*" (form, as in the contrast with *nội dung*/content) (TA, 45, 46), and "*hư danh*" (nominal) (HQ, 13), meaning that *sĩ diện* represented something unsubstantial. DN (9), HN (20) and HQ (13) said that *sĩ diện* represented something "*không thực*" (unreal). QH said that a person with *sĩ diện* was a person who liked to show off himself to the outside (33), and like things on surface (34). That person was "*only good at the paint outside*" (*chỉ tốt nước sơn bên ngoài*) (QH, 34). QH seemed to refer to the implication from the Vietnamese popular proverb "*tốt gỗ hơn tốt nước sơn*" (good wood is better than good

paint). In particular, *sĩ diện* people were considered as only being concerned about the matter of the ‘paint’, or outside cover, rather than the inside nature of the ‘wood’. TA (46) put it “while in *thể diện*, the form and the content come together, in *sĩ diện*, form surpasses its content”.

The incompatibility between ‘form and content’ of *sĩ diện* was demonstrated through the incompatibility between one’s acts and one’s ability. One of the typical examples of *sĩ diện* described by five participants (DN, 9; HQ, 13; TA, 46; TC, 34; TH, 10) was about persons who did things beyond their abilities to prove their face. These were people who liked to make others think that they owned certain desirable things, which was in fact untrue (DN, 9), or persons who “*vung tay quá trán*” (raise one’s hand over one’s forehead, meaning ‘being extravagant’) while their financial capability did not support this (TH, 10).

As a result, HN claimed that *sĩ diện* was associated with “*tỏ vẻ*” (pretending), “*khoa trương*” (amplifying), and “*khoe khoang*” (showing off). For this reason, *sĩ diện* was “*sĩ diện hảo*” (*hảo* meant false), or false face, which was artificially created rather than came ‘naturally’ from social recognition (HN, 20, 21, 22).

#### 4. Discussion

As a concern for personal face, *sĩ diện* can be seen as a negative form of the general face concept which *thể diện* embraces. It can be seen as overdone *thể diện*, coming from people’s considered ‘excessive’ desire and concern for self-face, which was unappreciated in Vietnamese perceptions. This connotation of *sĩ diện* in the participants’ perception is consistent with a brief description of *sĩ diện* by V. H. Phan (2008), who states that *sĩ diện* is *thể diện* being excessive, an illness, or an unhealthy spiritual state of a person.

The first feature that makes *sĩ diện* unpleasant in the public eye is its selfishness, or in Vietnamese term *chủ nghĩa cá nhân*/individualism. Concern for self-face expressed via the maintenance, protection, and enhancement of one’s own *thể diện* is certainly legitimate and vital to anyone. However, excessive expressions of these to the point that surrounding others are marginalized turn *thể diện* into *sĩ diện*, which is no longer desirable but obnoxious self-face. The participants tended to view the ‘self’ of *sĩ diện* as in contrast with ‘others’. They emphasized the ignorance of ‘surrounding others’ as a hateful aspect of *sĩ diện*. The

collectiveness of the culture is partly revealed in this case, where any expressive demonstration of individualism is often unwelcome and the notion of “*cá nhân*” (self) is viewed with disdain (Marr, 2000). Ironically, it is believed that it is the attachment to the community that makes the Vietnamese pay great attention to the sense of honour, and it is too much attention to honour that makes them *sĩ diện*, or have an excessive concern about self-face (N. T. Tran, 2001, p. 281).

The second undesirable aspect of *sĩ diện* is its artificiality, which can be seen as a consequence of the first feature. The idea of face intentionally projected without real foundation is not strange to *thể diện*, as I have suggested before. Actually, the idea of a social outside, projected image of a person to present to public was found to be the major content of *thể diện*. However, these aspects do not make *thể diện* obnoxious. What turns *thể diện* into *sĩ diện* is the excessiveness of those aspects, the blatant affectation, and especially the deliberate immodesty of self-face. Perhaps the point is the degree of face projection, which should be, on the one hand, sufficient to maintain one’s face as beautiful in public, but on the other hand, not so much as to go against the cultural tradition of humility and unity. This possibly provides further explanation for the idea of projected face in Vietnamese culture, and possibly in Confucian cultures in general. It is claimed by Buss (as cited in Tsai, 1996) that the Westerners tend to view this type of Asian face as an ‘over’ managed face in public. In fact, my study results suggest that it should not be ‘over’ in Vietnamese eyes either. However, Vietnamese people have their own standards of what is an acceptable level and what is ‘over’, which is different from that of people in Western cultural systems.

## CONCLUSION

I have shown that, as a reflection of culturally approved traits, *thể diện* tends to be other-oriented in these aspects:

- One’s *thể diện* is driven by and results from others’ opinions, rather than by and from one’s self-assessment.
- One’s *thể diện* contains *thể diện* of one’s group and one’s close persons. It is not a personal possession but a shared face with many related others.



- One is highly expected, or socially required to be in a constant awareness to save *thể diện* of people one interacts with to maintain harmony with them, which is also a standard for one's *thể diện*.
- The overt concern of individual face as reflected in the concept of *sĩ diện* tends to be socially disapproved.
- The existence of the notion of *sĩ diện* and its popularity suggests that the concern of individual face is quite popular and noticeable to the Vietnamese, but it is seriously constrained to conform to expectations that others' face is paramount.

My general argument in this chapter is that my participants' perceptions of *thể diện* reflected a strong other-orientation, similar to the collectivist orientation of East Asian cultures. Like all generalizations, it has exceptions. In Chapter Six, I will show that not only collectivism is undergoing a struggle with an increasingly explicit orientation towards individualism in Vietnamese culture, but it also seems to be facing challenges coming from social changes as Vietnam modernises. In some senses Vietnamese culture is struggling to maintain its traditional values. Before that analysis of complexity, however, I will describe and examine the practical manifestations of *thể diện* in two particular areas: the teaching profession and gender relationships.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ***THỂ DIỆN* AND SOCIAL ROLES:**

#### **TEACHERS, GENDER RELATIONS**

*Thể diện* is not just a concept with general connotations for attitudes and behaviours among Vietnamese people. It also takes on particular contents and implications for social practice depending on the contexts we are examining. In this chapter I focus on the concrete applications of *thể diện* in two specific areas. The first is the world of teaching, as reported from inside experience by these college teachers. The second is the area of gender relationships, also reported from the emic perspective of the women and men in this particular sample. Given the qualitative methodology and the interpretivist epistemology underlying my research, I cannot and do not make claims for the generalizability of these particular cases of *thể diện* in practice. However, by detailed descriptions and analyses of the participants' perceptions in these two areas, I can initiate the study of how *thể diện* works in concrete examples of daily life.

#### **I. *THỂ DIỆN* FOR TEACHERS**

As the population of my interviews were all teachers, a large proportion of our talks involved teachers' incidents and their significance for how *thể diện* worked in the teaching profession.

This section has five parts. First, I present my participants' general perceptions of the relation between their job and *thể diện*. Second, I examine what seemed to be components of *thể diện* in their views. These two parts focus on the concern about teachers' *thể diện* in relation with general society. Third, I analyse the importance of students' opinions to *thể diện* of teachers. Fourth, the maintenance of teachers' *thể diện* through various practical interactive situations with students is explored. These two later parts focus on the concern about teachers' *thể diện* in relation with their students. Finally, I discuss implications of my analyses.

## IN RELATION WITH THE GENERAL SOCIETY

### 1. The importance of *thể diện* to teachers

All of my participants showed me their simple and strongly held belief that being a teacher meant having lots of *thể diện* to be maintained. Teaching was perceived to be a “*socially respected career*” (VD, 1), and even “*more noble than other careers*” (KL, 6; VD, 1). The job was believed to have been “*respected by the Vietnamese society since the old days*”, and attached to the Vietnamese tradition of “*tôn sư trọng đạo*” (respected moral venerated teachers) (KL, 6). Teachers were often seen by the general public as mature, knowledgeable, educated, and trustworthy persons (VD, 1). The word “*thầy*” (teacher) was honourable in Vietnamese minds (VD, 3). Particularly, QH (4) stated that being a teacher was not simply a job to the Vietnamese. More than a job, it was classified into a higher degree, for teachers themselves needed to be an example (*tấm gương*) of both morals and professional knowledge (QH, 4). The idea that teachers were good examples (*tấm gương sáng*) for their students was repeated by CH (11), HN (12, 32), PT (4, 23) and TH (11, 17). At a higher level, teachers could become “*idols*” (*thần tượng*) of their students (HN, 2; KL, 7; VD, 2, 3, 31). For example, HN (2) and VD (2, 3, 31) told me about some of their ‘special’ teachers who had important influences on their personalities, their study passion and their choice of career.

There was a distinction between teaching and other ‘normal’ jobs in the thinking of all of the interviewees. VTh was one of the participants showing strong awareness of the superiority of his teaching position in comparison with other jobs in society. He believed that teachers should show via their upright, polite and formal communication manners that they were different from people in other careers (VTh, 2, 5). Otherwise, they may receive negative comments from the public, for example, “*you don’t look like a teacher; you look like a seller in markets or something else, not a teacher*” (5). This would certainly lead to face loss to the teachers as they failed to maintain their position in others’ eyes. VTh also stated that *thể diện* of a teacher was more standardized than *thể diện* of people in other jobs (8). Furthermore, as a teacher, one should not be as easy on oneself as people in other careers (10).

There was a popular perception: teachers were more likely to lose *thể diện* than people in other ‘normal’ jobs, for example, when they dressed carelessly (TA, 13), cheated in exams (QH, 10, 11), were drunk in public (VT, 8), had extramarital affairs (HQ, 18; PT, 20, 23; TC,

19; TH, 11; VT, 13), had partners with a bad reputation (QH, 6; VD, 22), and had children who studied and/or behaved badly (BC, 29; CH, 16; KL, 33; QH, 7; T.A., 43; TH, 23). Generally, HN (32) claimed that people tended to judge teachers more harshly.

The expressions such as “because I am a teacher, I should not / am not allowed to do that”, or “because I am a teacher, I should do this instead of that” were common in the interviews. For example, “*I am a teacher. Probably I, in terms of being a human, occasionally like to wear in hip hop style, dress a bit casually, or freely speak young people’s slang. However, being a teacher, I dare not*” (KL, 1).

In general, teachers were viewed by themselves as people with huge *thể diện*, which on the one hand brought them pride and face in public, but on the other hand, brought them burdens.

## **2. Components of teachers’ *thể diện***

### **2.1 Dressing style**

Seven participants (BC, 6; HQ, 2; TA, 13; TC, 32; VD, 11; VT, 6; VTh, 9) mentioned dressing style as a part of teachers’ *thể diện*. Accordingly, teachers could lose their *thể diện* if their clothes were “*sexy*” (BC, 6), “*nhàu*” (creased - BC, 6), “*xuềnh xoàng*” (dowdy – TA, 13), or “*lố lăng*” (ridiculous – HQ, 2). They should wear to be “*kín đáo*” (discreet - BC, 6), “*đơn giản*” (simple – TC, 32; VD, 11), “*đời thường*” (ordinary/common - VD, 11), “*đàng hoàng*” (decent/proper) and “*ng nghiêm chỉnh*” (serious-looking) (HQ, 2). A teacher should not be concerned about dressing fashionably, but instead, dress in a careful and proper style so that he/she could feel comfortable, confident, and decent in front of his/her students (BC, 6), and more importantly, “*the students could see the teacher as teacher*” (BC, 6, HQ, 2). To illustrate, TC (32) said that teachers’ hair should not be dyed, shorts or other short clothes should not be worn, and skirts should be about knee-length or longer.

## 2.2 Knowledge

All of the participants considered knowledge as an important component of teachers' *thể diện*. The idea was directly voiced by CH (11), PT (11), HQ (5), TA (17), and VD (4). Other participants had different ways of expressing the importance of knowledge to their *thể diện*. HN (9) said that teachers should “*học mười dạy một*” (learn ten teach one), meaning teachers should have vast knowledge so that what they taught was just a small part of what they knew. VA claimed that traditionally, teachers were perceived to be “*never wrong*” (28), and “*capable of everything*” (29), which meant they knew everything and were able to answer every question from students. Interestingly, KL (14) told about a colleague she knew, who got upset when a student gave a speech in a ceremony in which there was this idea: it was necessary for them to develop an independent learning ability, to find and learn from other sources beside their teachers, since teachers were not always right. This teacher was upset believing that *thể diện* of teachers in general including hers was damaged because the student dared to doubt their knowledge. According to KL, the teacher held a belief that teachers' understanding should be completely trusted by students. On the other side, KL believed that most Vietnamese students also had an absolute trust in their teachers' knowledge (15, 16). They tended to take everything said by their teachers for granted, “*because their teachers said so*” (KL, 15).

It was the importance of knowledge to teachers' *thể diện* that made them want to hide their knowledge limitation from their students with different strategies. VTh (22) reported an interesting example: in his biology teaching curriculum, there was a part requiring of teachers some mathematical understanding; and some of his colleagues tried to cover up their restricted knowledge by not mentioning the part in their lessons to their students. However, the kinds of situations that could best illustrate the teachers' concealing tendency to protect their knowledge face were the situations in which a particular mistake a teacher made in his/her lesson was pointed out by his/her students, and a teacher was unable to answer his/her students' questions. Brought up by me for discussion, these classroom situations were admitted by the participants to be very likely to challenge teachers' *thể diện* in front of their students (BC, 16; PT, 19; QH, 15, 17; TA, 27; TC, 6; VA, 27, 30; VD, 39). VA (27) described that if she was in those situations, she would feel unconfident, embarrassed, incompetent, no longer a decent (*đường hoàng*) teacher, and not be able to talk eloquently (*đông dạc*) in class as before. When I asked the participants how they would react

in these situations, eight participants had the tendency of avoiding face loss by not permitting an acceptance of their knowledge limitation (DN, 2; HN, 9; KL, 13; PT, 19; QH, 17; TC, 7, 11; TH, 22; VA, 28, 29). It was part of what they called “*xử lý tình huống*” (situational handling) (DN, 2; PT, 19; TC, 11).

In particular, in the situation of being caught teaching wrong information to students, DN (2) said that teachers should not apologize to their students, as it would mean loss of *thể diện*. KL (13) told me that she used to pretend that she wrote too fast so it became wrong on the blackboard, instead of admitting her real mistake of knowledge. She called it “*đánh trống lảng để giữ thể diện của mình*” (changing the topic/direction of the conversation to save one’s face) (KL, 13). Two other participants, TC (11) and TH (22), went further when they said that they would tell their students that they made the mistake intentionally in order to test if the students did their homework (TC, 11), or to encourage the students’ independent learning and thinking ability (TH, 22).

Interestingly, two male participants CH (4) and VT (5) seemed not to accept the assumption that they might teach wrong knowledge in their classes. They believed that if it happened, it could only be very small details, or due to some accidental error in their presentation on the board rather than their lack of knowledge.

In the situation that a teacher did not have knowledge to answer his/her students’ questions, a favoured method was to delay the answer. HN (9), PT (19), QH (17), TC (7), and VA (28, 29) shared this solution. In particular, they would not admit that they did not have answers for the issues. Instead they asked their students to find the answers themselves at home as homework and bring their understandings to discuss in a later session. They acted as if it was not that they did not know the replies. It was just that they did not want to give the students the answers straight away and they wanted to create a chance to encourage students’ independent learning. In fact, they were buying time to study the question themselves. PT (19) said:

*This situation is often met by us, and there is only that way of dealing. If at that time we confirm to the students that we don’t know about the issue, it is apparent that ... we suddenly make our face in front of the students decrease remarkably.*

Indeed, HN (9) and VA (28, 29) also believed that their way of handling the situation was popular among Vietnamese teachers. It was both formally taught in teacher training

programs and informally passed on from generation to generation of teachers. They believed that teachers should never say to their students that they could not answer students' questions, even if the issues were about another professional area, as it would mean serious loss of *thể diện*. VA (28) stated:

*In fact, we in Vietnam are trying not to lose our face...This is a cultural feature, a perception of Vietnamese teachers that they are never wrong to their students. If they admit they are wrong, they lose their face.*

She believed that the number of teachers who could honestly admit that “*I don't know how to answer your question*”, or “*I don't know about it either*” was so small that they could be “*counted on the fingers*” (*đếm trên đầu ngón tay*). “*The majority of us would say that we knew it, but we would answer next time*” (VA, 29).

The phenomenon reveals that knowledge is a crucial element of being a teacher in Vietnamese perceptions, especially when it is compared to another part of professional ability – teaching skill. Teaching skills were also mentioned as composing *thể diện* of teachers but in a very modest frequency compared to knowledge. Teaching skill, or “*the ability to transfer knowledge to others*” (VD, 4), or “*the ability to attract students into lessons*” (HQ, 3) was only cursorily mentioned by HQ (3), VD (4) and VTh (9).

The common point of those ways of situational handling was the covering up of *thể diện* of teachers themselves by hiding what they thought as a knowledge deficiency in front of their students. In these situations, it can be seen that telling the truth meant causing face loss to the teachers, which did not suit their respected position in society. Generally speaking, the ultimate goal to maintain one's *thể diện* was to maintain the impression of qualities traditionally prescribed by one's social position, by whatever socially acceptable method. This form of teachers' behaviour is a good example of the strength of social expectations on the need to maintain *thể diện*, consistent also with the principle that behaviour practiced by the majority of one's ingroup is acceptable socially even though dubious ethically.

### 2.3 Morality

Data found in eleven interviews (BC, 5; CH, 11; DN, 7; HN, 32; HQ, 18, 19, 23; PT, 20; QH, 4; TA, 13; TH, 11; VD, 13, 14, 17; VT, 7, 13) showed that teachers' *thể diện* had a very

strong association with moral issues in general. Generally speaking by TA (13), “*teachers, especially in Vietnamese society, are required to satisfy many moral norms*”. BC (5) said that *thể diện* of a teacher was attached to the person’s honour (*danh dự*) and dignity (*nhân phẩm*). To teachers, talents and virtues should be parallel (DN, 7), and moral rectitude was even more important than knowledge (CH, 11), since losing *thể diện* in terms of morality was more serious than in terms of professional competence (PT, 20). In QH’s (4) opinion, it was moral standards that made teaching an honourable profession in Vietnamese society. As further explained by her: “*we teach others, so we ourselves have to be good/nice, we teach not only knowledge but also morals, we are like moral mirrors*” (QH, 4). Five participants mentioned the idea that teachers were supposed to teach to their students not only knowledge but also, and more importantly, morals, and therefore they themselves needed to be good examples of morals (QH, 4; PT, 24; TA, 43; TH, 17; VTh, 8). It needs to be said that the idea I presented before about teachers being a good example, or ‘mirror’ (in the Vietnamese expression) to students was in fact about this moral aspect of teachers.

Interestingly, morals and lifestyles tended to be grouped together. Unpleasant lifestyles such as drinking indulgently and frequently, having a dissipated lifestyle, having indiscriminate sexual relations, and adoring materialism were cited as moral degradations (BC, 7; HN, 32; TA, 14; VD, 3; VT, 7). Therefore, it was understandable and convincing why teachers were often expected to set examples for their students. It was because they should be ‘decent’ in every aspect of life.

Violations of social moral norms would bring serious loss of *thể diện* to teachers. For example, adulterous teachers would be considered to “*have no morals*”, and even despised by their students, no matter how great their professional competence was (TH, 11). They may “*dare not face others in school*” and should feel extremely embarrassed (PT, 20). VD (17) held contempt for one of his old colleagues who was a scammer, having been exposed in the media, in spite of the fact that the person had a great talent in teaching. HQ (23) asserted that it was already depraved (*đồi bại*) for anyone to commit sexual abuse, and it was even more depraved if committed by teachers (HQ, 23). It can be seen that in these teachers’ perceptions, virtues seemed to hold a higher position than professional competence in their image of an ideal teacher, or what composed teachers’ *thể diện*.



## 2.4 Manners

Manners, or “*the way one sits, stands, walks, eats, drinks, behaves, speaks and so on*” (KL, 5), were seen in nine interviews to be part of teachers’ *thể diện* (HN, 1, 32; KL, 5, 7, 33; QH, 5; TA, 15; TC, 32; TH, 18; VD, 11; VT, 6, 8; VTh, 2, 5, 9, 13). Accordingly, teachers should behave so that they did not breach social etiquette, i.e. they should be polite, graceful, and most importantly behave as considered appropriate for a ‘teacher’ in students’ and public eyes. Manners was a concept described by different words: “*phong thái*” (HN, 1), “*tác phong*” (KL, 5), more specifically, “*cách đi đứng*” (way of walking and standing) (TC, 32), “*cách nói năng*” (way of speaking) (TA, 15; VTh, 9), “*cách giao tiếp*” (way of communication) (VD, 11; VT, 6; VTh, 9), and “*cách cư xử*” (way of behaving) (HN, 32). Beside normal social manners required for everyone in society, it was agreed that teachers had certain special norms they had to comply with.

For example, KL said that teachers should have “*tác phong uy nghiêm*” (solemn style), which should not only be preserved in class but everywhere (5). Specifically, she told me about an incident in her childhood that made the ideal image of a female teacher, who was her secondary school ‘idol’, collapsed in her eyes (7). That was, once accidentally riding by the teacher’s home, she saw her squatting, picking and eating jackfruit. “*Oh my god, what I perceived as my idol totally collapsed. Afterward I did not want to see her any more*” (KL, 7). This kind of image was contrary to what she perceived as the appropriate *thể diện* of a teacher at that moment. However, still in her opinions at the time of our interview, in order to maintain *thể diện* of a teacher, one needed to show to his/her students a ‘proper’, formal, serious image in every context, or in other words, not to behave and act freely and naturally as others who were not teachers. KL drew a lesson for herself:

*Hence later (after the incident with her teacher), I have also been very cautious in my behaviours. Who knows when I may accidentally encounter one of my students somewhere. From that moment on, especially when I chose to be a teacher, I thought that I have to care about keeping my face. (KL, 7)*

Evidence provided by other interviewees reinforced this thinking of a ‘proper’ teacher. As a teacher, one dared not to do things such as eating in roadside eateries (KL, 5; TC, 32), wearing shorts or skirts (TC, 32), and dating, kissing, hugging or holding hands with one’s partner in public (QH, 5). They were more cautious when going drinking with friends in

public, as being drunk or acting intimately with friends often contrasted with the usual formal image of a teacher in the public eye (TH, 18; VT, 8). They should be cautious in their speaking with their own children in the presence of their students, as the casual speaking style between family members may worsen teachers' ideal image in the students' eyes (KL, 33). They should use 'formal' language (for example, no slang, and use grammatically 'proper' sentences) in communication with anyone in any place (VTh, 2, 5). Furthermore, haggling and bargaining in daily shopping may not be very beautiful acts for teachers (TC, 32; VTh, 2). TC (32) compared her allowable behaviours before as an office worker. Now she had to be *"more careful to maintain good manners"*, and *"in general, we have to be cautious whatever we do"*. In general, to refrain from acting naturally and casually in those situations was to preserve *thể diện* of a teacher. KL admitted that she occasionally felt this task of maintaining *thể diện* burdensome and uncomfortable. *"Sometimes I also want to be free to do things like others"*, she said (7).

Generally perceived, *thể diện* of a teacher required one to be formal and serious, or as KL (5) said, *"perfect"* in their appearance and behaviours all the time, in *"every aspect and context of life"* (HN, 32; KL, 5), irrespective of whether the context was *"inside or outside classes"* (KL, 5), *"on teaching platform or on streets"* (TC, 32), and whether or not the ones you interacted with were *"insiders"* - the ones close to you, or *"outsiders"* - the ones you do not know (HN, 32). VTh (13) thought that his teacher *thể diện* should also be expressed through his behaviours in his family, so that his brothers and other family members were always aware that he was a teacher.

*It is relaxing in our family; however we also have to let people in our family be aware that we are people of our job. We use what called standards of our career to adjust, and apply in our family relationships.* (VTh, 13)

Probably, because the teaching profession in Vietnam sets a very high standard for one's morality and behaviour, it has become the biggest umbrella for these teachers' behaviours in every aspect of daily life.

## 2.5 Related people

Just as for any normal Vietnamese, *thể diện* of a teacher was also evaluated via his/her important relations such as family, friends, and students. This was in line with the relational nature of *thể diện* that was indicated in my analysis in the previous chapter. All I wish to do here is to remind us that the standards of behaviour expected for the family and relatives of teachers were perceived as higher, stricter than the expectations for relatives of workers in other ‘normal’ jobs. For example, their children should have better academic and behavioural performances than others.

### IN RELATION WITH STUDENTS

#### 3. Students’ opinions/evaluations were important to teachers’ *thể diện*

Seven respondents emphasized that students were *the most important audience* for teachers to keep their *thể diện* with (BC; 5; CH, 2; DN, 4; HN, 12; PT, 11; VD, 3; VT, 10). Details supporting this were also found in another three participants - HQ, QH and VTh. This could be seen as a quite modern view compared to the past. In the old times, students were not supposed to make any comment on teachers. Such an attitude was unacceptable even in private space, and only teachers had the right to comment on students. However, in the current society, it was commented that students were more curious about teachers’ private lives; they had more opinions about teachers, were more free to gossip about, comment on, judge and assess their teachers (though they mostly did these among themselves) (HQ, 2, 3; QH, 5; VT, 7; VTh, 9). This fact made students an important public to teachers, and their opinions contributed significantly to teachers’ *thể diện*.

As seen from my participants’ perceptions, teachers paid a special concern to what students said about them, as their opinions reflected and decided teachers’ *thể diện* in students’ minds. Teachers were aware that they were very likely to be commented on and compared with their colleagues by their students in terms of clothes, teaching methods, teaching competence, life style, family, social relationships with colleagues and others, and other aspects related to their image (HQ, 2, 3, 18; QH, 5; VT, 7, 13; VTh, 9). Although students’ evaluations of teachers could be seen as momentary and immature (VTh, 16), they were still

*... important. They [students' evaluations of teachers] affect the external image of the teacher. ... Normally they are not formal information; they are just information on the sidelines among students. They are not formally written anywhere or raised in any meeting; however they have an impact on teachers, make them think about their communication, teaching, speaking, dressing... They do have an impact on us. ... They make our face, I think in a certain way, more standardized than in other careers. (VTh, 9)*

This type of public to teachers was very capable and powerful. Students were said to know *everything* about their teachers, and have more information about their teachers than teachers themselves knew about each other (HQ, 18). If a teacher had a certain face-losing incident, it could “*explode and be spread in the student community with an extreme speed*”, and bad reputations were passed on from generation to generation of students (VT, 13). Due to its power, a young female teacher may dare not walk with her boyfriend in public, as she was afraid to be seen by her students and become a target of their gossip (QH, 5). Students' public opinions of these teachers were a kind of pressure “*áp lực*” (QH, 5). Only one participant, VA (35), held a different view, saying that students “*today*” did not care and know much about their teachers' life, since they had so many other interests.

In general, the pressure from students' opinions on teachers was quite remarkable. Teachers cared about what students thought of and what students talked about them, and teachers considered those opinions important to their *thể diện* in front of the students. It should be noted that the scope of concerns exceeded the classroom and professional space of the teachers. It extended to other private aspects of the teachers' daily life.

#### **4. How *thể diện* of teachers is traditionally maintained in interactions with students**

My analyses of the data show that the high position of teachers was perceived to be preserved via two main aspects of interactions and behaviours between teachers and students. The first was the greeting and speaking style teachers received from their students. The second was the necessity for teachers to create distance from their students.

#### 4.1 Students verbally recognize and respect teachers

This aspect was recorded with three female participants, BC, HQ and QH. Probably as females, they were more sensitive to and articulate about language and verbal issues than were the men. According to these participants, the position of a teacher should be respected by their students via the students using appropriate address terms and speaking styles when speaking to the teacher. When the position was ignored or not properly respected verbally, the teacher would lose face.

For example, in Vietnamese, people should use terms such as “*dạ*”, “*thưa*” as a reply or at the beginning of every statement in their interactions with seniors. Students are supposed to behave likewise with their teachers. BC was unhappy when her students did not talk to her in this manner; instead, they talked to her as if she was their peer. “*Many times they even said ở instead of dạ to me*” (32). Ở is the way people of the same social level often reply to each other.

As a typical demonstration of respect to teachers in the classroom, students in Vietnamese classes always stand up to greet their teachers whenever the teachers walk into class. Only after the teacher sits down (and often with a sign of allowance such as nodding or waving), are students allowed to have their seats. Therefore, QH (19) was sad when some of her students did not greet her when they saw her, either in or outside class. She had to remind the students in a friendly and gentle manner of this ritual so that they could do it properly to her. Like QH, BC also revealed that she often reminded her students when they did not show enough respect in their way of speaking with her. This reaction indicated that greeting teachers is a compulsory ritual for students, so teachers have the right to ask for the act to be done properly on the scene. Students are often embarrassed when reminded of this by their teachers.

As our interview happened in a corner of the college library, my interview with QH was more than once interrupted by her students who accidentally passed by, seeing her and so having to say “*em chào cô*” (I greet you), often with a light bow. I could see a proud look in her eyes when she smiled back to them and told me to continue: “*It’s nothing. Just some of my students see me and greet me*” (33). Probably she felt elevated by the act of her students and hence gained more *thể diện* in front of me.

The participant HQ (4) talked about a more intimate relationship between teachers and students in the current society compared to that in the past. However, the dark side of this, according to her, was expressions of what called “lòn mặt” (too close/intimate to be respectful) from the students.

*For example, sometimes meeting me on streets, they just passed by, or just said “cô” (personal pronoun for female teacher) once. They did not seem to respect me as a teacher. I was a bit upset. For instance if they saw me they folded their arms, bowed and greeted me properly, I would feel better. Yet they saw me they said “cô”, it may be intimate, but a bit not right. Anyway I am their teacher.*

HQ (4) also expressed nostalgia for the respect that teachers used to receive in the past.

## **4.2 Teachers maintain an appropriate distance from students**

In terms of the relationship between teachers and students, the term “giữ khoảng cách” (keep the distance) was emphasized by BC (8, 32), KL (5) and VA (35). BC (32) explained:

*This distance is not a geographical distance, not simply a geographical distance. I am myself very friendly with my students. In whatever class or school I teach, I am very friendly. Yet sometimes as I was too friendly, they did not see the needed distance between teachers and students. They viewed me as fish in the same school (cá mè một lứa) with them.*

According to BC, this was the distance that teachers should maintain in their interactions with their students through their behaviours, expressions and languages. What she meant was an invisible social distance. Furthermore, this distance was socially essential, as it was “needed”. Otherwise, the consequence was undesirable for teachers and students being put in the same category, being seen as “fish in the same school”. Therefore, the teachers lost their position which implied a loss of their face/thể diện.

Others interpreted this concept of *distance* in different ways.

CH (1) said:

*I think as a teacher we have to be close to our students, but no matter how close it is, we also have to maintain seriousness. Must be serious. ... We should be close to students, but not going beyond a certain limit. ..., we have to be serious to have their respect.*

This was a dilemma in the teacher-student relationship: how to ensure both closeness and seriousness, intimacy and distance? With closer scrutiny, one can see that gaining intimacy with students is an advantage, whereas maintaining seriousness is a necessity. This is because maintaining seriousness is to maintain the position of a teacher in a traditional manner.

The situation of teachers having romantic feelings for a student of theirs (at the college level) can be a real challenge to this teacher-student 'separate' perception. Although all of the ten participants who were asked about the situation perceived the feelings as normal and acceptable nowadays, three added that the teachers should preserve some distance from the students until they graduated, and the relationship should be discreet, not to be known to the public (BC, 8; TH, 17; TC, 17, 18). This was regarded as linking to the matter of *thể diện* of the teachers, as any emotional intimacy or bias towards any student that was made known to public would ruin teachers' *thể diện* in community. BC (8) put it: "*the teachers should know how to act within their boundaries to suit their position. It means that they should keep their distance*".

However, the situation discussed in the interviews that can best illustrate my participants' perception of teacher-learner gap was teachers going for drinks with students. Evaluations of this activity were various, ranging from a traditional strict view to more open-minded views across the interviews.

KL (5), who was the oldest female participant, disapproved of this activity which she believed to happen only among her younger colleagues. She thought this social gathering was too intimate to maintain the necessary gap between teachers and learners. She thought that was a loss of *thể diện* for the teachers, because

*Once we go for drinks with each other like that, of course the gap between us..., in terms of teacher and student rapport is good, but at the same time we cannot keep the teacher's role,*

*or the solemnity and style of a teacher. Style of a teacher should be kept everywhere, not only in classes. To me, if I drink and clink glasses with them, joke with them, then later in class, I feel it's hard to have a strict face with the students when I want to. I am not sure if I am old fashioned, out of date or narrow minded, but I do think so. (KL, 5)*

Another female TH (18) thought that teachers should only go for drinks with students when they went in a group, e.g. the whole class. This social activity should not be done personally between a teacher and any of his/her students. In addition, TH (18) thought on such occasions the teachers should also keep their manners, and especially should not be drunk:

*In any situation, we should keep students' respect. ... Teachers are also humans, however in teacher-student relationship, though outside class in a drinking place, we still should not lose our position. For instance, when drunk, one may swear, say obscenities, curse someone else, and say things one should not say.*

In other words, when drunk, teachers would certainly lose *thể diện*. HN (38) shared this idea with TH that teachers could go for drinks with their students; however they must not be drunk.

VT (8), a male teacher, shared the opinion with TH about 'not going personally.' He added a more open view: between a teacher and a student, drinking alcohol together was not a good idea, but coffee was acceptable. Furthermore, VT shared his opinions about the way teachers should behave in those occasions. In particular, the teachers should be more cautious or create a greater gap (*giữ kẽ*) in those interactions with students than when they went out with their friends. For example, while with friends one could be free to talk about anything, with students one should be more cautious about what one said. They should only talk about what was necessary, relevant (*những gì liên quan*), and within boundaries (*trong khuôn khổ*) such as voluntary jobs (which students and young teachers are often encouraged to do during summer holidays following particular official programs) and things in the subject area of the teacher. Especially, talking about other teachers and other subjects should be a taboo (VT, 8).

BC (33), a female, thought it was normal to have teachers drink beer with their students on some fun occasions. However she said teachers should not consider it a habit; in other



words, they should not be ready to go whenever asked by their students. To her this activity should only be accepted on appropriate occasions. It should be done with acceptable reasons or excuses.

*If some male teachers take advantage of this to go for drinks with their students whenever they are asked, for example “are you free for a beer?”, then it is really a face loss.... Going whenever asked by their students is really losing face. (BC, 33)*

Those were the respondents who gave me their opinions about social drinking activity between teachers and learners. The common thing was that they all set a certain boundary for this activity and this boundary seemed to aim at protecting the inherent higher position of teachers to their students. Whatever their attitude and reaction to the issues, they all believed that teachers should not consider themselves to be at the same social level with students, or engage in the same behaviours as their students. Teachers were teachers, not students’ peers. There should be something to tell the difference between one’s teacher and one’s mate. A mate could chat about anything whereas there were things a teacher should not talk about; a mate could be happily ready to go with you for a drink whenever you ask, a teacher needed some consideration; and a mate probably was not as worried about being drunk in front of you as your teacher should be.

Indeed, KL (6) believed that “*in students’ eyes, teachers have to be different from students*”. She specifically aimed at the very view of the students of their teachers, i.e. teachers should keep their ‘different’ image in *their students’ perceptions* so as to gain their respect. By being different, almost certainly she meant teachers maintaining a higher position and greater distance. Teachers and students could not and should not be placed in the same level, or the same position, at least in students’ eyes, as it could be very threatening to teachers’ *thể diện*. In another interview, teachers were even recommended not to eat in places students often came such as ones around their dormitories (TC, 32).

To sum up, no matter how generous an opinion might be towards the relationship between teachers and learners, the teachers should set a certain limit for closeness with students. Teachers should be friendly and have a close relationship with their students; however they were still teachers of their students. They could not and should not be as close as their students’ friends. As the distance was erased, teachers would lose their students’ respect, and

hence were certain to lose their *thể diện*. Maintaining a distance in their relationship was essential for maintaining *thể diện* of the teachers.

## 5. Discussion

Over all, it can be seen that *thể diện* of a teacher is formed from a rather comprehensive range of elements, both profession-related (e.g. knowledge, teaching skills) and non-profession-related (e.g. lifestyles, family). Since teachers are viewed as having a respectful position in Vietnamese society, they first need to fulfil the role of a decent human being before the role of a teacher. They first need to satisfy general standards for anyone living decently in society, and then satisfy specific standards for their own profession. They need to satisfy these two kinds of social general and professional specific criteria. For general requirements, they are the criteria for social appearance via clothing, benchmark moral qualities and healthy lifestyles. For professional criteria, they are standards for knowledge and manner. As to teachers' manner, it has been seen that Vietnamese teachers are inclined to be viewed with a serious, strict image which the teachers share in their perceptions of themselves to suit their perceived noble role and position in the society. This strict image also serves as a distinction between teachers and students and between teachers and other people in the society.

One aspect of the context that does emerge is an interpretation that these Vietnamese teachers are still attached in several ways to traditional values, attitudes and behaviours. The teachers' perceptions of themselves in their career still reflect the influence of Confucian ideologies. For instance, the teachers believe that teaching holds an honourable place in the society, just as before when teachers were ranked only below the King and even above fathers (T. H. T. Pham, 2010). There are still perceptions supporting the Confucian beliefs that teachers are the absolute source of knowledge to students (C.-T. Hu, 2002). In addition, teachers are believed not only to be models of knowledge but also of correct behaviours, and for those, they should be respected everywhere they go and throughout their life. These Confucian beliefs have been seen as the main hindrance to education reforms that facilitate students' activeness and independence in learning called for in recent years in Vietnam (T. H. T. Pham, 2010).

The interviews indicate teachers' awareness that their respected position comes not only with privilege but also with constraints, many of which they consider to be extremely important to observe if they are to maintain their professional and personal face. Even if some of these considerations of maintaining face are in some ways (at least to an outsider) apparent challenges to ethical behaviours and progressive approaches to pedagogy, they are considered important enough to maintain *thể diện* of teachers in contemporary society.

### **A discussion of face components**

My exploration of what elements constituted teachers' *thể diện* has given me insights into important points in the nature of the notion, i.e. components of *thể diện*, or what aspects of life the concept covers. Research about face in some East Asian cultures has given considerable attention to exploring components of face. The most famous has been Chinese face, with two important concepts or components: *lien/lian* as moral face and *mientzu/mianzi* as social reputational face (Cheng, 1986; H. C. Hu, 1944). In Korea, *chemyeon* (Choi & Kim, 2004) is found to include two dimensions: morality and ability. To preserve one's *chemyeon*, one needs to have "proper behaviour and fulfilled obligations" (Choi & Kim, 2004, p. 33). It is found to encompass notions such as individual's prestige, dignity, honour and reputation. This seemed to resemble my findings about *thể diện*, as *thể diện* was found in both corpus and interviews to be connected to similar concepts. *Thể diện* is attached to important issues of morality, reputation and competence. It is often linked to concepts such as honour, prestige, and dignity.

However, *thể diện* can be extended beyond morality and ability concerns to cover less serious issues such as appearance. *Thể diện* can be mentioned in both formal and informal ways. It does not only mean morality or living principles but also involves trivial daily expressions such as outfits and appearance, providing that they relate to one's image in others' eyes. The range of concerns that *thể diện* covers is large. People can lose *thể diện* from small things to big important things in life.

In addition, it can be seen that *thể diện* can be gained, preserved and lost at both the macro level of moral principles (e.g. being obedient, well behaving) and the micro level of specific interactional behaviours (e.g. eating, addressing, greeting). It seems that *thể diện* is a more comprehensive face than the concept in other above cultures. Further research on *thể diện* is needed to be able to confirm this matter.

From my data, it seems that the moral issue tends to be considered more important than knowledge, or professional competence in terms of *thể diện* of teachers. This is similar to Chinese face. As Cheng (1986) and Hwang (2006) state, moral face is more basic and important to most people than social face. However, I add that it is necessary to distinguish between concerns of losing face and concerns of gaining face in relation to the importance of moral and social face. This is because the importance of moral face tends to be attached to the issue of face loss. In spite of not articulating this difference, Hwang (2006, p. 278) also says “although an individual may not strive for it, he should be careful not to lose it in any situation”, since the loss of it is often more severe than the loss of social face. Empirical results from a study in 2003 by Su and Hwang (as cited in Hwang, 2006) support this distinction. It was found that the retiree participants in the study felt the greatest sense of face loss at incidents of their personal moral deficiency. However, their concerns for face gain gave social face more importance than moral face.

It was also revealed via Su and Hwang’ study the complication of judging the importance between face components. For example, in terms of what makes for face gain, people tend to pay more attention to achievements of social face of their own than their moral face; however they may focus on moral face of their important others rather than their social face. This corresponds with my participant’s perceptions of their *thể diện* coming from their children: the children’s moral behaviours were more influential than their study achievements to *thể diện* of their parents (CH, 16; KL, 33). This alerts us to the complexity in assessing the role of different components in the function of face concept in general and of *thể diện* in particular. Although the moral base may be the most important and an indispensable element for *thể diện* of a person in every context, what element is most concerned to the person in a particular context probably depends on the context, the role of the person in the context, and the person’s interactional goal or intentions in the context.

In terms of components of *thể diện*, in the next section, it will be shown that *thể diện* based on gender, in particular for men, also has its own components regulated by social and cultural requirements.

## II. *THỂ DIỆN* AND GENDER

There is a concern in my mind about whether the contents of *thể diện* and the rules of behaviour for acquiring, maintaining or losing it are the same for women as for men, and whether these rules and conventions are applied equally to women as to men. In this section, I will argue that although there seems to be a high level of agreement in female and male perceptions about the meaning and implications of *thể diện* (which enables *thể diện* as an effective regulator of social harmony), the concept itself is heavily based on expectations that concern for men's face will drive the behaviour of both men and women. In other words, it carries within it an implicit and only partly disguised tension. I will describe below the main features of *thể diện* in relation with genders as perceived by both the women and the men in my sample. I will reserve my description of the implicit tension in this gendered concept of *thể diện* until Chapter Six.

Before examining *thể diện* as a men-based concept, I will examine the common perception about the role of women in the maintenance of their men's face.

### 1. Women should pay attention to men's *thể diện*

This idea was found in 10 interviews. For instance, CH (13), DN (6, 11) and TH (13) expressed the view that women should save their husbands' *thể diện* when they found out about their husbands' sexual affairs, mainly by talking to them and dealing with the incidents in private. DN (11), a male, said that in the situation, women should understand their husbands, consider every aspect and try to produce the best solution to save their men's face. Accordingly, women should control their emotions and reactions, to act tactfully and discreetly. Meanwhile in relation to men, he said that they were not good at this: "*they may be different since they naturally have hot temper and furthermore are not good at self-restraint*".

PT (26) also confirmed that most women tended to act to save *thể diện* for their husbands in such incidents.

*Wives often act like this: to their love rivals, they can go to their offices to denunciate, but it is unusual for them to go to their husbands' offices to declare that their husbands are having*

*a sexual affair with this girl that girl. No one does that. Yes, often they know to save their husband's face, although fault in the incident may be mostly caused by their husbands.*

Women who saved their husbands' *thể diện* in the situation tended to be praised, as illustrated in the interview with VD (21). VD related an incident of a male teacher in his old school who was discovered to have sexual affairs with several of his students. However, when the scandal broke, his wife always showed to the public that she trusted her husband. VD appreciated her act, saying she was able to “*understand her husband's emotions*”, “*sensible*”, and her act was “*reasonable*”.

From my analysis of the interviews, there were two kinds of situations in which women were advised to care about their men's *thể diện*. The first one was when their home had visitors and guests. In this situation, wives should not ask their husbands to do housework (BC, 26, 28; VA, 14). The normal socially prescribed picture was given by BC (26): when guests visited, men showed the role of head of the household (*chủ nhà*). Their only task was to have conversation with the guests. Meanwhile, women did housework and other preparation and serving jobs. Male participants CH (15) and VTh (31, 32) said that it was unacceptable for their wives to ask them to wash dishes and/or do the cleaning during their guests' presence. The female BC (26) supported this, she said: “*anyway we are wives, so when we do those jobs to serve our husbands, we beautify our husbands' face. I don't see it a problem*”. She meant it was a normal, natural thing to do so that every woman should do it without question.

The second situation in which women were advised by my participants to be sensitive about their men's *thể diện* was when the men were in an inferior social or financial position or came from an inferior family background to their wives. In these situations, women were advised to never mention the fact to their spouse (TC, 26, 30), avoid saying things that might hurt the men's self-pride, pay attention to the men's mood (TC, 26; TH, 24), and not to let their husbands do all housework, so that the men did not develop an inferiority complex (TH, 24). VA (18) suggested that wives should save their husbands' *thể diện* by letting the husbands keep the money the wives earned, discussing together whenever they wanted to do something important, asking their husbands' opinions when they wanted to buy something, and letting their husbands decide every family affair. VA emphasized that husbands should be maintained as the main family decider so that they felt that they still kept the most

important position in the family (18). Similarly, CH (15), PT (34), and VT (20) stated that men's *thể diện* would be less damaged if wives behaved tactfully to their husband in the situation. VT (20) also contended that reactions of the wives had the strongest impact on *thể diện* of their husbands.

When I asked BC (3) – a single female – what she thought about *thể diện*, she said:

*There is one thing I think about most, when I think of thể diện, ... probably a bit too soon, but I think that if I am a wife, what should I do to preserve my husband's face? Because I see that to men, their face is so important. So if a wife is tactful, she will save her husband's face in every situation. That's it. I can only think about it now.*

She also provided an example about one of her male cousins and his wife. One day, after visiting some friends and being drunk, on their way home, the man verbally abused his wife in public, making a scene with many people gathering around. The wife still did not talk back to her husband a single word. She was patient to apologize to her husband, although as BC claimed, she had done nothing wrong. BC's explanation was: the wife did not want to make her husband lose face in public by talking back to him, and because of that she admired the wife's reaction (BC, 4).

These opinions remind me of a Vietnamese proverb: “Giàu vì bạn, sang vì vợ” (one is rich thanks to his friends and proud thanks to his wife). “Sang” (proud) also means having/gaining face. The proverb encapsulates the idea of the submissive and supportive role of women to men in Vietnamese society. In general, wives are responsible for maintaining their husband's *thể diện* in public.

All of these pointed to the perception among the interviewees that men seemed more concerned about self-face than women. Indeed, seven interviewees – BC (3, 24, 25), CH (14), KL (27), PT (28, 29, 31, 36), TC (23, 24), TH (13) and VT (12, 19) – asserted that men paid more attention to their *thể diện* than women did. The typical given illustration was the fact that different levels of concerns for *thể diện* gave men and women different styles of reactions when they discovered their partners' betrayal. Accordingly, since *thể diện* of men was extremely hurt when their spouse betrayed them, they tended not to forgive their partners (BC, 24; KL, 27; PT, 29, 31; TC, 23; VT, 12). This was put in contrast with

women's reactions. Women were believed to be more concerned about their family's welfare and less about their own face than men, hence it was assumed to be easier for women than for men to forgive their partners' mistake (BC, 24; KL, 27; PT, 29, 31, 36; TC, 23). In another aspect, according to CH (14) and PT (28), due to their concern for self-face, men tended not to publicize the incident, which would mean showing their incompetence and the loss of their wife's affection to their love rivals. Instead they tended to treat those incidents within the family, often by verbally and spiritually tormenting and holding a grudge against their wives (PT, 28).

The language phenomenon analysed below further illuminates the relation between gender and face in Vietnamese culture.

## 2. The concept '*thể diện đàn ông*'

My examination of the web corpus about the use of the terms *thể diện* and *sĩ diện* indicated that the terms were associated with male rather than female gender. The collocation *thể diện đàn ông* (or *sĩ diện đàn ông*) (male face) was a familiar expression, whereas the counterpart such as an association between "*thể diện*" or "*sĩ diện*" and any Vietnamese terms for female such as "*đàn bà*" and "*phụ nữ*" did not appear in the corpus. The interview outcomes support this interpretation of a gendered linguistic practice in Vietnamese discourse. All of my respondents agreed on the familiarity of the collocation *thể diện đàn ông* (or *sĩ diện đàn ông*), either directly, or indirectly by using the term themselves during their interviews (without my initiation). None identified the opposite association, which means that no participants associated "*thể diện*" or "*sĩ diện*" with terms for females naturally in their conversations, and all agreed that such an association sounded awkward.

Since I found no research about this notion, I have had to come up with my own interpretation of it. In this thesis I purposely use the term *male face*, not *men's face* for an English equivalent of *thể diện/sĩ diện đàn ông*. In my opinion, in the natural Vietnamese perception, the concept *thể diện/sĩ diện đàn ông* delivers two possible meanings. One is a simple possession meaning: *thể diện/sĩ diện* (face) of *đàn ông* (men), or men's face. The other is a characteristic, i.e. *thể diện/sĩ diện* that is characterized by male traits. Therefore, it seems to me more appropriate to use *male* rather than *men's* in this case, as *male face* can convey both meanings, and especially it can express the second one whereas the term 'men's



face' does not. I purposely checked my interpretation with other Vietnamese research colleagues, and all gave their approval of my approach.

### **The connotation of the term '*thể diện/sĩ diện đàn ông*'**

I asked the participants what they thought the term *thể diện/sĩ diện đàn ông* conveyed. As an expression of a general perspective, one of my participants said: "*male face..., for example you do the things that suit the meaning of, or reflect male characteristics..., otherwise, you will lose your face*" (VA, 6). In other words, face coincided with socially required traits for the male gender.

However, one may be concerned that if *thể diện* is simply a reference to gender traits, why is there no such equivalent term for women in the Vietnamese language repertoire? In a Confucian society like Vietnam, it is often more demanding for women than men to preserve qualities socially and conventionally required for their gender. My hypothesis was that socially required characteristics for men are to be displayed in the open, observable, watchable social areas. They are something to be exposed to social observations. Meanwhile, socially required qualities for women, called by terms other than *thể diện* and *sĩ diện* such as *phẩm hạnh* and *đức hạnh* (dignity), seems to be expressed in more hidden spheres, just as their usual places are wrapped within their family, often in their kitchens, hidden away from public view. They are not supposed to be presented or shown off at the social surface. They should remain 'silent' in social surface. *Thể diện* as a face concept in Vietnam, as I have illustrated, was perceived largely in terms of a public presentation, an outer cover, hence it suits men's rather than women's role in the society.

Indeed, my participants' clarifications of the term *thể diện/sĩ diện đàn ông* below seemed to support the value of the hypothesis.

The most prominent impression emerging across the interviews, when people talked about the connotation of *thể diện/sĩ diện đàn ông* was that a man was considered to maintain his *thể diện/sĩ diện đàn ông* (male face) when he was considered **not being inferior to women**.

In particular, emerging through all of my participants' answers for the meaning of the term *thể diện/sĩ diện đàn ông* was the sense that the term required an acknowledgement of a

higher position of men compared to women. In other words, a man was likely to lose face if he was in a lower position than women in a certain aspect.

The sphere in which this comparison was most visible was family, i.e. between husband and wife. Six participants below (three males HN, TA, and VT, and three females PT, TH and VA) provided examples of this connotation of the term.

TA said that men generally did not want to have a wife who had a higher social position than him because *“in a family, the husband should be a bit higher than the wife; if the wife is already high, how high the husband has to be”* (TA, 50). He cited a metaphor *“husband is the house, wife is the door, house is inclusive, door is only a small part of it”* to assert that men held the most important position in Vietnamese families (TA, 50). He also said that men generally did not want to marry a woman of a higher educational level. Therefore, the higher the level of education of a woman, the less chance for her in marriage.

*A low-education wife with a high-education husband is normal. A low-education husband with a high-education wife, difference in level of education, the wife is higher than the husband, this is a bit complicated. ..That one in Vietnam is a bit complicated. Complicated right in their relationship ... because the husband always feels inferior. An inferior wife is not a matter, an inferior husband is troublesome, isn't it? In general, there is a potential risk of relationship instability.* (TA, 54)

The female TH (25) replied to me below, when I asked whether there was any influence to *thể diện* of a man when his wife was a social worker rather than a housewife:

*It is ok as long as his woman's job position is not higher than her husband's, as long as she is not more successful than her husband in her career.... She could be successful, as long as at a lower level than him.*

The female PT (34) explained this idea: *“Although I think not every man says this out, surely every man is the same. In a lower position than his wife, one always feels something inferior in terms of face”*.

In such a context, a man who thought and behaved differently was appreciated by his wife. VA's husband was such a case (17). VA proudly said that her husband was different from other men who often regarded their wives' higher social positions with disdain and who often reacted with negative feelings such as feeling angry, viewing themselves as inferior or weak. In particular, she believed that if she had a chance to advance in her career into a

considered higher position than his, he was more likely to “sympathize” (*thông cảm*) with her and accept the situation with a welcome attitude (VA, 17).

Further evidence confirmed the teachers’ perception of the superior position of a man in comparison with his wife as crucial element of men’s *thể diện*. For example, the ideas of “spoiling husband” (*chiều chồng*), “fearing husband” (*sợ chồng*) were taken for granted. In contrast, “fearing wife” (*sợ vợ*) would come to public attention and become a topic for gossip (VT, 19). Similarly, HN (26) asserted that at least in the public, the husband should show his power over his wife; otherwise, the man would be ridiculed, for example, he would be told that he was in the position of “fearing his wife”, “being dominated by his wife”, which inevitably led to his loss of *thể diện*. He said “*They should let people see that the role of the man (in a family) is not lower than the role of the woman*” (HN, 26). VT (19) also claimed that “*Normally men want to prove that they are of a strong gender, prove that they are mainstays of their family, and so their wives always have to listen to them*”.

As men viewed themselves in comparison with their women, it was considered their serious face loss when their women disregarded them, or men no longer preserved their absolute position in their women’s perceptions. VT (20) talked about an assumed situation of a husband making less money than his wife:

*If people gossip and comment behind his back, (and) friends disparage him, I think he’ll be sad. He’ll be sad but... in terms of losing face, I think he does but not remarkably. Just when, for example, his wife despises him or anything like that, then I think it becomes a big problem.* (VT, 20)

The proposition that men would lose *thể diện* if they openly showed they were inferior to their wife was put forward in various forms by the participants. The two most strongly expressed were in relation to financial provision and the possession of a suitable job.

## **2.1 Financial mainstay of the family**

Ability to earn money for the security of the family was mentioned in nine interviews as an important criterion for male face - *thể diện/sĩ diện đàn ông*.

First, the concept *thể diện đàn ông* was directly interpreted as “making a lot of money” (QH, 24), “earning money for family” (TA, 52; VTh, 34), and “being a financial mainstay of family” (BC, 27; PT, 32).

Second, the idea was voiced indirectly in various ways. Typically, it was believed to be a serious face loss if a man was unemployed, lived on, or batted on his wife (BC, 27; PT, 34; VA, 10; VTh, 34). This serious face loss to a man could lead to other consequences in his behaviours, according to BC (27). In particular, men may be discontented with themselves, view themselves as useless and inferior, torment themselves mentally, get drunk frequently, and even abuse their wives verbally (BC, 27). If a man was so dependent that he had to live in his parents-in-law’s properties, he was seen as bad as “*chó chui gầm chạn*” (dog lives under pantry) (VA, 10), an idiom meaning a very shameful situation to sons in law. VTh (34) said that it was a shame for a man to spend money that his wife earned, but it was completely normal for a woman to spend her husband’s money. She would be even proud of the fact that her husband was very competent in making money, taking care of family finances, and providing money generously for his wife’s shopping.

That was the picture of a man making no money. It was also gloomy in the situation of a man making less money than his wife. DN (12) and VT (20) believed that a family in which the wife made more money than her husband was likely to be in trouble, or less likely to be happy. VA (9), a female, explained men’s feelings:

*If men see that they don’t make much money, they also feel they lose face in front of their wife, feel that they lose their confidence, feel themselves small unexpectedly, and feel that they are incompetent compared to their wife.*

TC (26) said:

*When there is no money to pay for children’s tuition fee or water and electric bills, a woman should control her temper. When the family is in hardship, the wife needs to be sympathetic and sensitive (to her husband). Besides, the husband also needs to try his best, do whatever it takes for not being looked down upon or felt sorry by his wife, and not being ridiculed by her parents and friends. (TC, 26)*

TC’s statement revealed a fact that the family money-maker role of men is taken for granted in Vietnamese minds. As a result, it was considered normal for Vietnamese women to nag at

their husbands about family financial issues, since this was considered the husband's responsibility. The woman was advised to restrain from showing her dissatisfaction to save her husband's face and their harmony. The expectation for the wife was to be sympathetic, and for the husband was to retrieve his money-making job. The woman was not expected to share her husband's responsibility of earning money.

The participant VT (21) believed that no matter how hard a man tried to take care of his family, do household tasks and take care of his children, no matter how well he accomplished these jobs, it could not compensate for the fact that he was making no or less money than his wife for his family. It can be seen that the ability to earn money for family was crucial in a man's *thể diện/sĩ diện đàn ông*.

However, there was a minor difference of opinion about this among the participants. One of the teachers - CH (15) - said that these gender roles were not fixed these days. It was not a matter to him if his wife made more money than him for his family, and he believed the situation would be very likely to be so because his career of a teacher in Vietnamese society was widely viewed as among the most poorly paid jobs. It should be noted that this respondent had six years studying in Europe before, which was very likely to have influenced his quite open attitude compared with the attitudes of the others in the study.

## **2.2 Socially acceptable worker**

In CH's opinion above, the role of man as the main finance provider can be modified in the modern Vietnamese life: *"it is important but not a decisive element of a man's face in family"*, *"it is normal to see women make more money than their husbands nowadays"* (CH, 15). However, it was not to be compromised when it came to the issue of socially acceptable work versus housework. He asserted that men had to do some job *"outside in society"*, and staying at home doing housework was unacceptable. In general, a man *"may make little money but has to have a job"* (CH, 15).

The female participants also had the same expectation that men could not be jobless, with 'job' meaning employment in the social labour market. When I asked what they would think if a man, for example, their husband, was unemployed and stayed at home taking care of the family, TC (27) said *"I don't respect them. They look weak. They can't prove men's strong"*

*nature*”. QH (25) claimed that if her husband had paid work to support the family finance, she would give him more respect. Men staying at home seemed to be incompetent and their *thể diện* decreased remarkably in her view. Similarly, PT (35) and VA (16) disapproved of the idea of men, or their husbands doing housework for women earning money. To them, men had to have a socially acceptable work role, even if it was poorly paid (QH, 25; TC, 27). No female respondent had an opposite opinion.

Therefore, in a situation of being jobless and becoming a house-husband, it was agreed by all of the respondents who talked about it that men would lose their *thể diện* (DN, 12; PT, 35; TC, 27; TH, 24; VT, 21; VTh, 34). In general, a man may earn less money for his family than his wife, but he must not be unemployed.

A consequence of this was a connection between doing housework and a loss of male face *thể diện đàn ông*. BC (26), CH (15), VA (8, 13, 14) and VTh (31, 32) stated that men tended to lose *thể diện* if they were seen doing household chores. For example, men were said by the female VA (8, 13) to often avoid being caught doing these household chores by ‘outsiders’, even their own parents, since this would bring him a loss of his *thể diện*. The females BC (26) and VA (14) said that they would not ask their husbands to do housework in the presence of someone else, in order to save their husbands’ *thể diện*. BC (26) stated that it was women’s natural responsibility to do housework. Men who gave extra assistance to their wives in doing housework were appreciated by her, implying that it was not men’s jobs to do so and women should be grateful to their husbands when they *helped* in the job. Men such as CH (15) and VTh (31, 32) said they would not do housework when their house had guests.

Noticeably, CH (15) said that he would not wash dishes *for his wife* in the presence of a third party. Here there were two ideas: he would not do the job of washing dishes, as he thought this job should belong to women – his wife (*she should wash dishes, not ask me to do it* – CH, 15); and if he actually did it, he believed he did it as a favour for his wife (as he used the expression “*rửa chén cho vợ*”/ “*wash dishes for my wife*”). The participant explained that this refusal was for the sake of his wife’s *thể diện*. Given his rationale, he probably assumed that his wife would lose her *thể diện* if someone saw her letting her husband do her job. However, one can see that it was for his own *thể diện* as well, which was probably the major reason underlying his argument.

An idea by DN (12), a man, may illustrate a popular perception of the two types of jobs: social work (I use this term for paid work in the labour market) and housework. Although he articulated that these two kinds of works had the same importance (*they complemented each other for a happy family, one could not function well without the other* – DN, 12), he then pointed out that they should be done with regard to the proper people/gender. To him gender roles were something not to be swapped nor questioned. Social work and housework were of the same significance as long as they fitted into the appropriate social and family orders. Furthermore, although DN said that those two types of jobs were equally important, he seemed to regard social work attached to men as more important than housework attached to women. In particular, he said that men's tasks were always “*heavier*” and “*bigger*” than women's, hence a man could not swap his social task with his wife without losing others' respect.

It can be seen that job division in Vietnamese society seemed to be very clear: inward family jobs for women and outward social jobs for men. PT (37) cited a proverb about these traditional gender roles: “*đàn ông xây nhà, đàn bà xây tổ ấm*” (men build house, women build home), meaning that men's task is to take care of the family economy, and women's task is to take care of family internal affairs to maintain family warmth and happiness.

### **3. Reflections of a gender inequality**

In explanation of the association between males and *thể diện*, 14 participants mentioned about a general imbalance of gender based status in Vietnamese society.

First of all, men were viewed to be especially concerned about their *thể diện* because of their prescribed, absolute position in the Vietnamese society. They were considered important since they were mainstays for their women (KL, 32; VT, 19) and their families (HN, 23; KL, 32; QH, 29; TA, 52; TC, 24; VT, 19), and they were persons who decided family businesses (HN, 26). DN (10), a man, said it was fair for men to hold a higher position than women in society because “*the role of men in Vietnamese society is higher, most of the heavy work is done by men, and men participate more in social activities*”.

To KL (32), a female, the situation was viewed with a little sarcasm:

*It (the term thể diện đàn ông) implies the role of men in family and the role of men with women. People have considered these roles seriously; therefore they care about men's face. People do whatever it takes for men not to feel their pride hurt. It is not good if the men lose their face, isn't it? Because our society has been all about men, hasn't it? In families, men are owners. In offices, men are bosses, aren't they? There are always more male bureaucrats than female bureaucrats. Yeah, so it has been just like that, they have become old paths of thinking. (KL, 32)*

Nine participants (CH, 14; DN, 10, 12; HQ, 8; KL, 28, 30; QH, 24; TA, 47, 50, 51, 54; TC, 24; VA, 13; VT, 19) mentioned directly the gender inequality in Vietnamese society. KL (30) and QH (24) said that the Vietnamese had the tendency of “*trọng nam khinh nữ*” (respect men disrespect women). In particular, a man was treated as “*king in his house*” (*vua trong nhà*), everyone cared about what he thought, whereas women were often seen as “*second-rate citizen*” (*công dân hạng hai*) in their family, and no one cared about their face (KL, 30). HQ (8) said “*being a woman is being disadvantaged*”. Comparisons with Western cultures were made by CH (14), DN (10, 12), KL (28) and VA (13); for example men in Western cultures could do housework and go shopping for daily food as part of their normal activities, whereas Vietnamese men often believed those jobs were for women only (VA, 13). Reasons were also given, such as remnants of feudalism (VT, 19), or influence from the Chinese culture (TA, 47, 50, 54).

TA raised a language example to illustrate the cultural favour for men over women: any way of behaving that was characterized as *đàn bà* (womanly) usually implied a negative judgment. “*For example, people praise by saying he is so manly, but when criticizing, people say she is so womanly*” (TA, 51). The terms *đàn ông* and *đàn bà* in the Vietnamese, except for being nouns for genders (men and women) also function as adjectives (manly and womanly) with different implied judging attitudes: *đàn ông* (manly) as good, *đàn bà* (womanly) as bad.

The social bias towards men was demonstrated most clearly in the judgment of people's faults in extramarital affairs. In eleven interviews (BC, 22; CH, 14; HN, 16; KL, 26, 28; PT, 30, 39; QH, 23; TA, 19, 42; TC, 20, 21, 23; TH, 12; VD, 26, 29; VT, 11), it was reported that women's infidelity tended to be judged more harshly than men's. These opinions were either of the participants themselves or their observations of general public opinions. Accordingly, married women having sexual affairs were “*unacceptable*” (VT, 11), “*received*



*less social sympathy*” (TA, 19), and “*saucy*” (*lãng loàn* – BC, 22). Meanwhile, with the same fault, men “*received more sympathy*” (TA, 19), since it was normal for men to have extramarital affairs (KL, 26; PT, 30), women got used to it (KL, 26), and men had “*excuses*” (VT, 11), such as their social jobs required more social contacts, their natural nature of being attracted by women (QH, 23; TH, 12), and the feudal influence which allowed men to have more than one wife (BC, 22; KL, 26, 28; TC, 20, 21, 23; TH, 12).

Even women had a stricter view on their gender in this matter. For example, according to HN’s mother’s opinion (16), extramarital affairs from men could be acceptable, but extramarital affairs from women were unacceptable. One of the female respondents, PT (30), had the exact same opinion, saying women’s adultery was unforgivable. She explained: “*our Vietnamese perceptions set a high standard “work, appearance, word, virtue” for women*”. “Work, appearance, word, virtue” (*công dung ngôn hạnh*) is a traditional four-standard requirement for Vietnamese women in society, set in the feudal time and continuing, it appears today among these teachers.

## 4. Discussion

### In relation to gender roles in Vietnamese society

The concept of face, *thể diện*, inevitably was associated with concerns of gender. This natural connection was found in the corpus, and again confirmed in the interview data. When talking about *thể diện*, the Vietnamese teachers tended to link it with males rather than females, as it seemed essential and more important to this gender than the other. In particular, *thể diện đàn ông* was viewed as a familiar collocation to the Vietnamese ears, whereas a counter concept was not mentioned. This association reveals that gender favouritism seems a prominent issue in Vietnamese society. It also indicates that language is gender biased and face as an indigenous culture-specific concept cannot be detached from social cultural issues of the host culture. In other words, an examination of gender-related *thể diện* shows connections with central social cultural characteristics and concerns.

The perceptions of *thể diện* reflect the widely described patriarchy and hierarchy of Vietnamese culture (Schuler et al., 2006; Smith & Pham, 1996; G. Q. Tran, 2007; P. P. Tran, 2007, among others). They reveal that men hold an ultimate position in family and social

areas. Men are assigned with more power and ‘heavier’ duties, the most important of which is probably that of family economic provider. This traditional model is so embedded in Vietnamese minds that when women have choices, they still prefer the male-dominant model. Kibria (1990) carried out an ethnographic study of gender roles and power in a Vietnamese community of immigrants in United States. She found that although the women’s newly acquired resources from their immigration environment had brought them greater power and chances to gain equal positions compared to men in their families, they still preferred to retain the old patriarchal family model which required their deference and loyalty towards men. One of the main reasons was that they still valued economic protection by men. Men’s highly desired social and economic value explains why Vietnamese people now still have a strong preference for sons (Bélanger, 2002).

The influence of one’s wife on one’s *thể diện* reinforces the relational nature of *thể diện* delineated in my thesis and the interpersonal connectedness in Vietnamese culture. The unpopularity of the opposite direction of connectedness (i.e. husband saves his wife’s face) expresses another feature of the culture: hierarchy. In other words, it is a hierarchical connectedness where people are linked to each other according to their role and position in the social hierarchy. Although globalization is bringing remarkable changes to gender roles in Vietnamese society, as will be shown in my next chapter, it is reasonable to believe that these core cultural values in terms of gender roles are hard to remove.

### **In relation to gender specific attitudes and behaviours**

It has been found that Vietnamese men are perceived to have more *thể diện* than Vietnamese women to be maintained. As a result, they tend to be more sensitive and vulnerable in terms of face.

However, there have been research results indicating that women are more face sensitive than men. For instant, Zuo’s study results (as cited in Ge Gao, 2009) revealed that Chinese women viewed both concepts of Chinese face *lian/lien* and *mianzi/mientzu* as more important and they were more sensitive to them than were male participants. Another finding by Tracy and Eisenberg (1990) in a study about the American giving criticisms in workplaces showed that females paid more attention to face issues than did their male counterparts. Perhaps the difference between the results of these studies and my study lies in

the difference about whose face the women were concerned about: self-face or other-face? While the focus of those studies was the face of others (for example in Tracy and Eissenberg (1990), it was about threat to face of one's interlocutors when one gives criticisms), my participants were discussing their concerns about one's own face. In fact, the finding that women are more attentive to face of others is in line with my participants' comments that women are supposed to be considerate towards their partners' *thể diện*.

About the assumed attitudes of women reflected in social advice for women, Goddard and Mean (2009, p. 83) comment: "It would be more accurate to say that social etiquette books have always dealt more with female behaviour, as male behaviour has traditionally been seen as the norm and in need of no particular advice or attention". The request for women to pay constant respect to men's *thể diện* without a counter advice for men to reciprocate reflects that social norms have special requirements for women in terms of behaviours and speech. In fact, many studies to date have pointed out that women are more polite than men in using linguistic devices (Shimanoff, 1994; Smith, 1992). This is, according to Lakoff (1975), because they are required to comply with their subordinate and marginalized status in society.

Major aspects of the concept 'male face' *thể diện đàn ông* highlight males' desire for social approval in relation to their competence, which is to be demonstrated via their position in their career and their support for their family. This supports some other research evidence which has demonstrated that males focus more on issues of competence than do women (see review by Shimanoff, 1994, p. 191). In addition, the idea is not new to the popular speculations that men tend to be task-oriented, and more concerned about establishment and maintenance of social status and power, whereas women are more caring and relationship-oriented (Gray, 1992; Tannen, 1990).

### **In relation to the nature of *thể diện***

The association between males and *thể diện* points out that to *thể diện*, or face of a person, social career or the social outer cover of the person is more relevant compared with family tasks. This is probably because family tasks as internal affairs could barely represent *thể diện* of a person to be presented to the society. This reflects the 'outside' nature of *thể diện*.

Furthermore, Vietnamese face, *thể diện*, is associated with privilege. As seen in the case of men, maintaining *thể diện* means maintaining the privilege that one is already given. In this case, *thể diện* is a reflection of an inherent privilege rather than a reflection of one's achievement obtained from one's efforts in life. *Thể diện* is a default value that is prescribed to a person as early as when they are born based on their biological traits. This prompts us to come back to the dual view of face discussed in the literature: is face static as part of an individual's identity or is it constantly changing in interactive contexts?

The association between *thể diện* and gender supports the first view of face when it points out that there is a type of face that is essentially set and fixed, based on people's birth traits. In particular, any male in Vietnamese society is automatically entitled to what is called 'male face' *thể diện đàn ông*. As a male he is supposed to maintain and if possible increase it throughout his life. It is a task beset with many difficulties, but it automatically raises him above one half of the population just by virtue of his gender.

## II. THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL ROLE AND POSITION

An important standard of *thể diện* in particular, and probably of face in Confucian cultures in general, is to judge and reflect how well one fulfils one's socially prescribed role and position. For example, teachers, men and women, husbands and wives are supposed to perform according to their social roles and positions in society and retain the traditional values adhering to them in order to sustain, obtain or enhance their face. For instance, as men are defined as home master and income maker, one is likely to lose his *thể diện* if he fails to accomplish those tasks. Wives are supposed to be compliant to their husbands and caring to their family, and failure to behave like that will cause loss of their *thể diện* in the view of society. Teachers should be upright and respected by students; otherwise they lose their position and so lose their *thể diện*. The popular idea of my teachers was "*because I am a teacher, I have to appear like this, otherwise I lose my face*". That simple statement summarizes the constraints the teachers have by being aware of their social position. Their position sets out the forms in which they should appear to the public and the norms governing their professional and personal behaviours. This definition by Ho (1976) seems a useful interpretation of the situation described by my participants:

Face is the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others, by virtue of the *relative position* he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct. (p. 883)

These social constraints observed by my teachers in their efforts to preserve their face are different from the situations in some other cultures. For example, in Akan culture examined by Agyekum (2004), people in important social positions can speak whatever language they like without worrying about judgments on their face. Ironically, while their subordinates should be very cautious in communicating with them, their acts of insulting, commanding and imposing on their subordinates are viewed as ‘normal’. In short, “they have faces that threaten the faces of other individuals” (Agyekum, 2004, p. 80). This is dissimilar to the situation facing Vietnamese people, since the higher social status, the more cautious the person should be in his/her speech to preserve his/her *thể diện*. This is because respected social status and face in Vietnamese society are linked to high morality, as the case of teachers demonstrates, at least in theory.

Research in the world has noted similar associations. Choi and Kim (2004) examine Korean social face *chemyeon* and point out that the concept is closely related to social status. In particular, the higher the social status of a person, the more others expect from his/her morality and ability and so, the more *chemyeon* he/she has to keep. They write: “Koreans tend to equate their status with morality and ability, so that individuals of high status are regarded also as virtuous and capable” (p. 36).

Not only one’s social status sets out norms for one’s behaviours, but one also expects to be treated according to one’s social role and position. H. N. Pham (2007a, p. 258) claims that face of a Vietnamese gets hurt if in social interactions he is not treated according to behavioural norms given for his position, rank, age and reputation in society. It needs to be added that these positions should be high positions. In other words, their face gets hurt if their considered socially respectable positions are not respected. It is reasonable to infer that the higher social position and prestige, the greater risk of damage of one’s *thể diện*. The damage is even intensified if the person represents his/her groups (Ho, Fu, & Ng, 2004).

One’s role and position in society and in relation with others specify the content and amount of one’s *thể diện* in front of others. Having a respected social position is therefore extremely important to the Vietnamese, for it means gaining remarkable *thể diện* to them. People strive

to obtain a respected and recognized position in society. Vietnam is often remarked by the Vietnamese themselves as a “certificate-valued society” (*xã hội trọng bằng cấp*). As an example from my interviews, in-service training teachers were taking exams due to their desire to acquire more certificates of professional achievement rather than from their intrinsic motivations to learn how to be better teachers.

The importance of social position partly explains the common reluctance of the Vietnamese to apologize to people of lower positions. I first need to say that the popularity of the ‘lack of apologies’ phenomenon was confirmed by the participants. The Vietnamese teachers said that it was unusual in Vietnamese society to see leaders apologize to the public, parents apologize to their children, and teachers apologize to their students. Various explanation of it were given by the participants, among which there was the reason of apologies lowering one’s position and hence accelerating loss of one’s *thể diện* (BC, 34, 35; QH, 31, 32; TA, 60, 61). It was widely believed that the higher the social position (as defined by factors such as age, social role and social title), the more *thể diện* one had and so, there was more to be concerned about (BC, 19; DN, 3; HQ, 3, 23; PT, 11, 13, 16; QH, 16, 21; TA, 8, 39, 44; TC, 10; TH, 7, 21; VA, 32, 33; VD, 41; VT, 3). For example, according to BC (35), as being in a respectful position to their children, parents tended to think that they were always right. Therefore, apologizing, which coincided with admitting one’s mistake, did not suit their parental position and would cause them lose their *thể diện* (BC, 35). QH (32) explained: “*That is due to, I think, long standing perceptions, our culture, which defines upper-class and lower-class people. Upper-class people are always right, and lower-class people are always wrong*”. It may be useful to know that perceptions of apologies in relation with face are culture-specific. For example, Tsai (1996) has observed that the Taiwanese and the Japanese differ on this aspect. In particular, the Japanese have the custom of apologizing by saying “*sumimasen*”, which functions as reciprocity of face “saving” or “regaining”. In other words, the act is to serve face to the Japanese. However the act brings face loss or face threat to the Taiwanese. It can be seen that the Vietnamese have more in common with the Taiwanese than the Japanese in this aspect.

In general, traditional *thể diện* seems to be attached to the maintenance of one’s social position and status and hierarchical rank. Methods to help maintain those positions tend not to be as important as its purpose. People, therefore, can take advantage of any socially acceptable method to maintain their social status, hence their face, even though the method

may not be ethically right. The hierarchical nature of the society defines people's perceptions of face and their behavioural styles.

## CHAPTER SIX

### INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES:

#### VARIATION, TENSION AND CHANGE

The previous two chapters have described and examined *thể diện* as a concept, a guide to behaviours, and particularly a Vietnamese approach to face in daily life, in the teaching profession and in the relationships between women and men. My focus has been on the main ideas, behaviours and attitudes commonly portrayed by my informants about *thể diện* as a positive, other-oriented concept.

However the real picture is much more varied. As one would expect, there are individual differences within my group of participants, reflecting variety in personalities, attitudes, and beliefs about actual and ideal behaviours in everyday life, in the practice of education and in relations between the genders. There are also other influences on perceptions of the nature and appropriateness of *thể diện*. In this chapter I make some suggestions, based on the participants' perceptions, about the most identifiable of these influences. I argue that in addition to individual differences, variations in perceptions of *thể diện* are associated with the stress of conforming to its social demands, with the frustration at not being able to adequately express natural human emotions through fear of public disapproval, with the tension perceived between ethical probity and conformity to public opinion, and with the conflict perceived between some behaviours that strengthen ingroup solidarity but at the same time damage professional integrity.

I suggest that these differences and tensions reflect broader processes that are creating modern Vietnam. On the one hand, its core values and behaviours are rooted in an hierarchical social structure, but on the other hand, national policies built through 'renovation' (*đổi mới*) and internationalisation have unleashed forces that are changing this social structure and the glue that previously held in place the balance of obligations to self and others, the relations between teachers and their students, and the role of women. As Vietnamese social structure changes, so does the concept and realization of *thể diện*.



The data on which I base my suggestions come from, in most cases, a minority of the participating teachers. On some of the issues a majority expressed more than one opinion, indicating their awareness of complexity and multiple perspectives. On others, particularly relating to gender issues, an identifiable group of women held an opinion different in degree to that of most of the men. On yet others, a minority expressed passionately held views that were not only different from the majority of participants, but were also held to represent the views of the new Vietnam and to be on the side of the future.

## **I. TENSIONS BETWEEN “LIVING FOR SELF” AND “LIVING FOR OTHERS”**

### **1. Pressure from “living for others”**

KL was probably the most eager contributor to the theme of the pressure on ‘self’. In KL’s opinions, *thể diện* was often attached to “*luật lệ khắt khe*” (strict rules) and “*nghi thức gò bó*” (confined rituals) (KL, 1, 2, 4). As a result, she felt sorry for people who were supposed to preserve their and their family’s *thể diện* by conforming to lots of strict rules and norms set by long standing traditions, the most extreme case being for descendants of royal families in Hue, the old capital of Vietnam (KL, 4).

In addition, KL (1) used the English word “*convention*” to discuss the issue. According to her, if people did not follow those social “*conventions*”, they were likely to be seen as ‘different’ in others’ eyes, with ‘different’ as not being accepted by the community. Noticeably, KL linked “*convention*” with “*prejudice*” (*định kiến*) (she used both Vietnamese term “*định kiến*” and English term “*prejudice*”). Accordingly, she considered “*conventions*” which reflected social perceptions towards a particular career or towards a type of people as “*prejudices*”, with the implication that people in the teaching profession such as her were bound to fulfil certain extremely strict requirements to protect their *thể diện* set by their social position. As *prejudices* were often very harsh, the task of protecting one’s *thể diện* under such conventions, or prejudices, was “*miserable*” (*khốn khổ* - KL, 1). Using the term *prejudice*, she probably revealed her disapproving and critical attitude. *Prejudice* to her could be understood as unreasonable and out-dated social norms imposed upon certain groups of people in society which those people have to conform to to maintain their face in

front of others. She said: “*Sometimes face makes people do things that they don’t want to do. We inherently may not want to do a certain thing but sometimes we still have to do it for our face*” (KL, 1).

To illustrate, KL (29) and another female HQ (22) believed that Vietnamese women did not often divorce their husbands when they felt unhappy with their marital status because the women were concerned about *thể diện*. Most women were said to still maintain their marriage and accept that they had to live in unhappiness and tolerance of a bad marital situation, sacrificing their own joys and emotions, because they wanted to preserve *thể diện* for themselves, their families and their children. KL believed that *thể diện* may force people to live differently from their inner wants.

*Face sometimes is bad when it makes people live not true to their ‘self’. For example, I am a teacher. Probably I, in terms of being a human, occasionally like to wear in hip hop style, dress a bit casually, or freely speak young people’s slang. However as a teacher, I dare not. So sometimes it is so confined to me. Another instant, I may like to dye my hair, but I dare not do it, though such things are not bad things, aren’t they? So I say, face sometimes is constrained.* (KL, 1)

The task to protect *thể diện* in such a social and personal contradiction was “*nặng nề*” (burdensome) and “*khốn khổ*” (miserable) (KL, 1, 7). *Thể diện* became something “*gò bó*” (restrictive/confined/cramped), and “*ràng buộc*”, “*trói buộc*” (constrained) (KL, 1, 4). Another female, QH, also mentioned that the feeling was like living under “*pressure*” (*áp lực* - QH, 5). From KL’s revelations, it can be seen that in her view people had to accept some mould that society set for them. People may be aware that these moulds were outdated, unreasonable, or different from their personal wants and natures but they somehow had to comply with them, if they wanted to keep their *thể diện* or be respected by others in the society.

## **2. *Thể diện* as a barrier to emotional expression**

In order to save one’s *thể diện*, it was believed that one needed to suppress one’s emotions and be strongly rational. This contrast between emotions and rationality in relation to *thể diện* appeared in five interviews, including DN (7), HQ (6, 20, 23), KL (25), VA (23), and VTh (3, 6).

To illustrate, HQ believed that following one's emotions was often harmful to one's *thể diện*. In particular, she explained that one embarked on a love affair when one's rationality was overshadowed and surpassed by one's emotions (*tình cảm che mờ lí trí* – HQ, 20). She said that in order to keep *thể diện*, one needed clear minds to tell right from wrong in terms of face (HQ, 20). When one was too sad, or overwhelmed by one's emotions, he/she could not have clear thoughts to maintain his/her *thể diện*. It could be seen from her ideas that maintaining *thể diện* needed rationality; emotions were harmful to *thể diện* since they were likely to lead people to live in their own way different from the ways the society expected them to live. It can be inferred the other way around that sometimes one could keep one's *thể diện* but feel unhappy inside.

The role of rationality vis-a-vis emotions in the maintenance of *thể diện* was confirmed by HQ (23) and VA (23), who believed that a loss of one's *thể diện* was associated with a lack of rational thoughts. According to VA (23), a person lost his/her *thể diện* upon doing an act because “*they did it without thinking*”, or “*they paid no thought to the behaviour*”, or “*they were thoughtless*”. In the case of sex abuse in schools between teachers and students, HQ (23) insisted that if only the teachers' rational thoughts had been stronger, they would not have committed such a crime.

The need to conceal real feelings to uphold *thể diện* was quite common in the interviews. According to VTh (3), as a part of the maintenance of a teacher's *thể diện* in front of his/her students, if the teacher was in a bad mood from his/her life or was upset by his/her students' behaviours, he/she should not let the students know about these feelings. Another respondent, HQ (6), complained about her husband for losing their *thể diện* in front of their friends because he did not hide his bad mood over their previous squabble. HQ and VTh shared an opinion that even though one was unhappy at moments, one should always show a normal happy face to others and create an as-much-as-possible atmosphere of comfort for the persons one interacted with; otherwise, one would lose *thể diện*. Furthermore, towards undesirable treatments one received, one still should not show his/her attitudes and reactions, as perceived by KL (25) and VTh (6). KL (25) advised “*better be patient for later peace*”. That “*later peace*” was the maintenance of both self-face and face of others, and the mutual relationship. DN (7) said that in order to save one's *thể diện*, one should know how to “*kìm chế bản thân*” (put oneself under control). In general, a person should not reveal his/her negative attitudes/feelings, irrespective of whether its reason was related or unrelated to the

people one was interacting with. This was because true feelings may affect one's behaviours, resulting in saying what one should not say, or acting in ways one should not act.

This aspect of *thể diện* had a relation to the physical 'face'. In particular, one should control one's spontaneous momentary feelings to maintain a usual, expected face in public, which is often a moderate smiley face. I and some of my Vietnamese friends were sometimes asked by our Western acquaintances why we always smiled and had a happy face every time they saw us. They questioned with sincere interest about how we could keep such a good mood and have such energy all the time, even though there were times they knew we were under certain hard life pressure. In fact, as agreed between us Vietnamese when we had a chat together about it, we just tended to smile when we saw people. We had the habit to smile with our interlocutors. We felt the need to make them feel comfortable in our conversations. We tried to show that we were happy talking to them, wanted to build a good relationship with them, and by smiling we were polite. That was also a part of maintaining our face or *thể diện*. We thought we would lose face and we were impolite in people's eyes if we acted otherwise, though that "otherwise" may be more true to our inner feelings at certain moments.

### **3. The possibility of rebellion against public opinion**

Those participants who expanded on the theme of how burdensome it was to have to comply with public pressure also speculated on the possibility of deflecting or rebelling against its dictates, and by doing so would be indicating one's lack of concern about the normative requirements of *thể diện*. The female HQ commented on what she saw as this solution being adopted among Vietnamese whom she knew or read about:

*... (if we) say in the view of others, in the view of society, then no one can satisfy society, no one can satisfy everyone. .... For example normally we don't do anything wrong, they still criticize. If we do, they also criticize. How can we satisfy everyone? So we live..., many people they live for themselves, face is no longer important to them. Of course it is important, but I mean many people choose to live for themselves, following what they think is good for them, they don't need to live for others. (HQ, 21)*

The participant was talking about individuals' rebellion against society. Individuals felt tired of running after others' expectations; hence they gave up and showed a couldn't-care-less attitude. This was further illustrated by a marital example:

*Say, for example, divorce. The reason we preserve husband and wife relationship, keep it from divorce, is also to keep face for others, for others to see a happy couple when they look at us. But many people, they don't want that. They want to escape that life, they want a different life, so they break out. That is their choice. ... Public will not like that face, but provided that we feel happy, and comfortable in our minds, we don't care what people think. That's it. (HQ, 22)*

HQ seemed to have a special concern to marital issues. Noticeably, she used the third person plural pronoun *they* (*họ*) and the first person plural pronoun *we* (*mình*) interchangeably and inconsistently in her above speech. There were times the participant mentioned the people who faced the situation as a third party, and there were other times she talked as if it was herself (though in plural form *we*). Probably she was voicing her own thinking and possible reactions, initiated from her unhappy marital condition at the time of our interview, as she had confided to me. Anyway, her opinions showed that the pressure from public on *thể diện* was sometimes unbearable.

In particular, in order to preserve *thể diện*, one had to comply with others' expectations, or to "live for others" (21). HQ also said "keeping face for others" (22), whereas in fact, she meant the face of the couple. When individuals chose not to "live for others" in order to "live for themselves" (21), simultaneously they chose to give up their concern for *thể diện*, because they knew it was hard to maintain *thể diện* without public approval. To HQ, people chose to "live for themselves", i.e. to follow one's true thoughts and emotions, when "living for others", i.e. live in compliance with others' expectations, was so very difficult, unhappy and uncomfortable.

## Summary

To sum up, an articulate, thoughtful minority of participants maintained that *thể diện* was a tough business sometimes, when people were forced to behave differently from their own self, their inner nature, their personal wants and desires. Therefore, the more *thể diện* one had to keep, the more pressure one would feel to constrain one's emotional expressions, resulting in a tension between social *mores* and personal wellbeing.

The tension resulting from conformity to group norms is not unusual in Asian societies. Discussing *mientzu* in Chinese, Tsai (1996) also notes the similar pressure: “he [a Chinese person] is under strong constraint to act in a manner consistent with the requirements for the *mientzu* of others” (p. 310). This also resembles the Korean reactions to *chemyeon* – social face. It is claimed that the Korean strong awareness of *chemyeon* in social interactions may cause them to behave contrary to their values (Choi & Kim, 2004). For the Vietnamese, Young (1998) has described that Vietnamese individual self has to prove its trustworthiness to the society by demonstrating an ability of self-restraint, which, contradictorily, goes painfully against its desire to maintain self-esteem. This struggle to the Vietnamese is therefore sometimes intense (p. 159).

The statement supports the idea by HQ about the difficulty of rebellion of individuals against pressure from others’ expectations. That can be seen as a demonstration of individualism in the Vietnamese culture, which is in a miserable fight against legitimate social constraints. Although a lot of Vietnamese poetry and literature has been built on the tension between individual desires and social pressures, most attention has been paid to political, regional or religious protest and nonconformity. It seems that little scholarly research attention has been given to this area of resistance to conventional notions of face. It would be worth knowing more about burdens felt and protests made by individuals in relation to social obligations imposed through *thể diện*. The consequences of the levels of perceived tensions might be far reaching. North Americans were reported to be happier and more self-positive than East Asians (Suh, 2000). In particular, in a study by Diener and Diener (1995), 83 % of American and 78 % of Canadian men scored above neutral levels of life satisfaction, compared to only 36 % of Japanese and 49 % of Korean men. Does this have anything to do with the fact that people in East Asian cultures live in societies with stronger levels of overt social constraints? And can *thể diện* be examined fruitfully as a vehicle for reducing the sum of human happiness in Vietnam?

I am conscious that only about one-third of the participants expressed these negative feelings about the burdensome nature of *thể diện*. However, their opinions did raise some more general issues. One is that the dilemmas individuals might feel when living in accordance with others’ desires reinforces an aspect of *thể diện* raised before, namely that *thể diện* tends to be an issue of one’s social outside cover, which is separated from one’s inner traits.

Another is a deduction about a dichotomy between the kinds of wants being expressed by these Vietnamese: one is personal wants and desires (personal self), and the other is the want to satisfy social expectations (social self, decided by one's social role and position). If both personal self and social self are consistent, a person feels good. If they are different, conflicts arise and one feels bad. Of these two kinds of wants, the social one is essential for a person to be considered a 'decent' human being in Vietnamese society. How to keep personal self and social self consistent to produce a happy and productive self is a question for national, cultural policy planners, especially in the light of increasing demand of personal self in the open, interactive era of Vietnamese modernisation.

## **II. TENSIONS AND CHANGES OF *THỂ DIỆN* IN THE TEACHING CONTEXT**

### **1. The tension between concern for others' *thể diện* and professional integrity – The case of teachers' exams**

At a different level of analysis, perceptions of the ambiguities surrounding the definition and sources of *thể diện* were very apparent in the participants' discussions of their role in monitoring the professional development of their colleagues in the teaching profession. Popular in my participants' perceptions was the opinion that although cheating in exams was certainly wrong for students, it was not necessarily wrong for teachers who were sitting examinations for professional development qualifications essential for promotion, salary increases and other benefits, including higher levels of *thể diện*. It appears at first glance that the teachers were guilty of hypocrisy or double standards. But this issue merits further examination because it illustrates the reach of *thể diện* into most aspects of teachers' professional behaviour and the complex nature of the concept as practised in the everyday world of the teachers.

In particular, when I asked my participants about their attitude towards teachers who cheated in their exams, eight participants talked about in-service training exams as special and exceptions to the general examination situation. Unlike cheating acts by regular training people, which was strongly disapproved of by all of the participants, cheating by in-service training people was mostly seen with sympathy and understanding (DN, 5; HN, 12; QH, 12; PT, 6; TA, 25; VA, 26; VD, 38; VTh, 17, 18)

PT (6) was as a typical example. She agreed that being teachers yet cheating in exams was a loss of *thể diện* to the teachers. Nevertheless, she believed that teachers in in-service training had acceptable reasons for cheating, and so they should be sympathized with and their cheating acts should be seen with understanding and tolerance. She explained that they were old, some came from remote disadvantaged areas, they had to do both studying and teaching at the same time, they had little time for study due to their heavy workload (especially for teachers in elementary schools), especially when they had also to prepare their lessons at home every night.

Similar considerations for the cheats were seen in another six interviews (HN, 12; QH, 12; TA, 25; VA, 26; VD, 38; VTh, 17, 18). Apart from the reasons given by PT, another important reason mentioned by the participants was the formalism of those exams. In particular, the examinees were believed to participate in in-service learning only to obtain certificates, which were compulsory for their teaching position and required by their organizations, rather than to gain knowledge (HN, 12; TA, 25; VD, 38; VTh, 17). Therefore, it was considered understandable and reasonable for them not to do the exams properly. Similar to PT, HN (12) said “*there are also many things that we have to sympathize for them*”. Particularly, QH (12) and VA (26) shared the view that elderly candidates in those exams should be given sympathy. Note that the idea of “sympathy” was shared between those participants.

As previously presented, the participants felt that, in order to maintain one’s own *thể diện*, one’s rationality should be stronger than one’s emotions, when following emotions meant paying no care to social opinions. However, when it came to *thể diện* of others, the opposite seemed be true. They meant that one should understand and sympathize with the people’s situations, in other words, base one’s behaviour on one’s emotional judgment of the people to save the people’s *thể diện*, rather than judge them by strict exam rules.

As a result, my participants found it hard to perform their role of exam supervisors, as they felt the need to treat the cheats gently to retain their face. VTh (17) put it this way: “*This causes my dilemma. When supervising those exams, I am so hesitant. I can’t not catch those people, also cannot do it in a way that is straight*”. PT (6) generalized this dilemma: “*one side is rationality, the other is emotion*”. Rationality stood for the fact that cheating was definitely a violation of exam rules, no matter what the contexts and who contestants were. On the other side, emotion was an understanding or a tender consideration of the rule



breakers' contextual factors, therefore encouraging a suitable evaluation and treatment to them to save their *thể diện*, which was often different from what was set by the legislative rules. There was a conflict between their task and their emotional considerations of the examinees' contexts.

Resolution for this conflict was given by DN (5): *“Regulations set it, however we can follow another direction which can satisfy not only regulations but also emotions”*.

As clarification for this, he explained that an ideal exam supervisor should be experienced, or have necessary skills in dealing with exam situations. That skill needed an understanding of both exam regulations and psychological issues including face issues. To candidates who were caught cheating, exam supervisors should act so that they could, on the one hand, ensure exam policies, and on the other hand, still save face for the candidates. For this reason, DN believed that old supervisors were better than young ones in this role, as young people often lacked experience in dealing with psychological, particularly, *thể diện* issues. Young people tended to act in complete compliance with policies. They often lacked flexibility to save face for candidates (DN, 5). We should be reminded again that DN was talking about in-service training exams.

It seemed that in the participants' perceptions, regulations were not fixed in the case of in-service professional development exams. There was often considerable room for personal considerations. There was a tendency for sympathy and care for examinees' *thể diện*, just as PT (10) said: *“một trăm cái lý không bằng một tí cái tình”* (a hundred reasons cannot equate to a bit of compassion). Was this hypocrisy? Not in their eyes, because it was consistent with sympathy and consideration for others. Was it an attack on professional integrity? Not in their eyes as the examinations were not tests of actual knowledge and skills relevant to good teaching, but merely bureaucratic hoops to be jumped through. Was it a negation of the criteria for gaining more *thể diện*? Not in their eyes, as the possession of more qualifications and more seniority was by definition the possession of more *thể diện*. It was face gained by certified merit that should be recognised as such and used as a lever in the difficult, competitive, real world.

## 2. The principle of honesty

Those justifications were challenged by several of the participants, whose criteria for *thể diện* of teachers were judged by a different standard – the principle of honesty. TH (19), for example, believed that teachers generally must not be associated with any kind of cheating, in whatever exams.

*When I supervise exams of in-service training examinees, seeing people who are secondary teacher examinees open documents, honestly, I despise them, really. For I think that in their classes, they could speak fire (hét ra lửa, meant have strong power), they tell their students not to copy, not to do this not to do that, but they themselves open documents. I see this ... of no form (chẳng ra làm sao cả, meant unacceptable). (TH, 19)*

Different from her colleagues, she did not have a kind of personal situational consideration of in-service training examinees to sympathize with them. To her, exams were exams and you had to follow the rules. Sharing the same opinion that teachers must not violate that rule of being truthful in exams were HN (12), TC (12) and VT (9), for “*teachers should be mirrors for students to follow*” (HN, 12), otherwise, they could not be “*standard teachers*” (*giáo viên chuẩn mực* – TC, 12). In this case, the principle of human integrity was regarded as the highest benchmark for *thể diện* of teachers.

The principle of honesty extended not only to the issue of colleagues who cheated, but also to teaching students. KL argued that honesty with students was much more important than the traditional Confucian habit of pretending to know everything, claiming to be a guru, which was impossible in the modern world. KL said “*once we respect the truth, we had our thể diện*” (12). VTh (22) also showed his disapproval of the cheating attitude of his colleagues who tried to cover up their knowledge limitation of a certain area by hiding that part in their lectures. According to VTh, the teachers had to be responsible to their students by self-studying what they did not know so that they could teach their students properly. In other words, he disagreed with the concealment of teachers’ shortcomings to protect teachers’ face. He believed that teachers should be truthful and responsible with their students and they should be brave to confront difficulties in their career. Here the wisdom standard that was traditionally assigned to teachers had to give place to the truthfulness standard of humankind.

To these teachers, it seemed that their *thể diện* was laid in their honesty and responsibility to their students. They seemed to be working on ethical principles that transcended the influence of public opinion and that queried the role of social disapproval as the arbiter of their professional behaviour and the foundation of their personal morality. They were following what in abstract terms scholars describe as the principle of universalism.

### 3. *Thể diện*, guilt, conscience and personal morality

In the two previous chapters my emphasis has been on the powerful social sanction of shame and how to avoid it as strong motivators for behaviour appropriate for gaining and retaining *thể diện*. But this association of losing face with the notion of public shame, though strong, should not lead us to ignore the personal dimension of guilt as a contributor to defining and acquiring *thể diện*. Of these two powerful emotions, shame is most often associated with public evaluations, guilt with a private evaluation (Ho et al., 2004). They represent powerful mechanisms for social control and both, of course exist in Vietnamese society. From the perceptions described below, we can see that losing *thể diện* could also be linked with guilt and its associated dimensions of conscience and self-awareness of behavioural choice.

Six participants expressed perceptions connecting face behaviour to individual responsibility and ethical choice. Their perceptions varied in the extent to which face and individual ethics were thought to be related, but all of them seem to have rejected the notion that *thể diện* based on public opinion should be the only guide to appropriate feelings and behaviours.

VA (23) thought that there were still many teachers who cheated in their own exams and had a guilty conscience about their act. *“Honestly speaking, they themselves also feel embarrassed, they don’t let people see it, but in their conscience they still feel guilty”*. She also referred to concepts of *“lương tâm nghề nghiệp”* (career conscience), *“nhận thức cá nhân”* (self-awareness), and feelings of “being guilty” such as *“day dứt”*, *“áy náy”*, *“feeling they did something not right”*. However, she did not explicitly argue that feeling a guilty conscience necessarily meant a feeling of losing face.

In contrast, other participants made a more direct connection between ethical behaviour, individual responsibility and face. Participants BC (12, 13), PT (5), TC (12, 19), VD (10),

and VTh (10) placed a certain emphasis on the significance of self-cognition, implying that *thể diện* also came from one's inner self. VD (10) believed that *thể diện* required a person to have self-awareness of his profession-based position in society. VTh (10) did not think that students were as important to *thể diện* of a teacher as was the teacher's self-awareness. A teacher should *"build their image based on what they think it should be, not on students' evaluations"*. His reason for this view was he thought that behaving under the influence of and in compliance with others *"isn't so right"*. He meant that one should have autonomy in deciding one's face based on one's own particular social (moral) *"standards"* (*mình phải đặt cho mình một cái chuẩn nào đó – we should set certain standards for ourselves - VTh, 10*). Similarly, BC believed that to protect one's *thể diện*, the role of *"self-awareness"* (*bản thân tự nhận thức – BC, 12, 13*) should come before others' opinions and evaluations of one's behaviours. Therefore, after once cheating in her exams, she felt ashamed of herself (BC, 13).

TC (12, 19) asserted that people *"from their inside"* (*tự tâm mình*) should know about the relation between their *thể diện* and their behaviours. Doing something wrong, they *"should lose face to themselves, no need for all society to know about what they've done"* (*phải tự mất mặt với mình thôi chứ cần gì cả xã hội phải biết – TC, 19*). PT (5) highlighted the importance of one's conscience. *"Don't you think that losing face is only in front of others, it is in front of your self, to your self that it is far more important"*.

The existence of these comments shows variations in people's understanding of *thể diện* and the situational nature of how it can be interpreted. The academic research on face in different cultures also shows that a feeling of face loss can happen in private; sometimes based on feelings of guilt or inadequacy not prompted by the reaction of other people, and sometimes on the internalisation of shame to produce guilt. For example, Ho (1976) noted that one may be *"losing face before oneself"* and experience shame in private when shame is internalized. Evidence elsewhere also shows that shame, like guilt, can be privately experienced; it does not necessarily occur only as a publically induced condition (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). Though this kind of connection between shame and guilt was not expressed by the participants in my research, a significant number of them were able to see the relations between internal feelings and the notion of self-face. Their comments illustrated the complex, ambiguous and contextual connections between moral concepts such as guilt and shame and the normative implications of a concept like *thể diện* for Vietnamese people.

#### **4. Change and the possibility of new bases for teachers' *thể diện***

In addition to alternative approaches to *thể diện* through the questioning of its relationship with ethics, some of the teachers were expressing different attitudes that reflected broader changes in the teaching profession itself. Some related to changes in the status of the profession, some to innovations from the West in pedagogical theory and practice, and some to broader changes in Vietnamese popular culture of which the teachers were a part. It seemed to some of the participants that, despite the traditional Confucian views, the gap between teachers and students has been more and more decreased, and *thể diện* of people doing the teaching job has been less and less strictly viewed, both by the general public and by teachers themselves. Thus, not only is there variation among individual teachers, there seems also to be a process of generational change in attitudes as Vietnam experiences modernisation and the effects of globalisation in economic and social structures and in cultural expectations of behaviour.

##### **4.1 Teaching is just a job**

Although the majority of my participants considered their profession more than a simple 'normal' job in society, and at a higher level of social respect, there was also an opinion voiced by VD (5) that: "*teaching is just a job, a tool to earn money like other jobs in society*", "*a rod to pick rice*", "*something to help us exist in society*", and "*a tool to enter life*". Different from the others' opinions, this view did not idealize the job but saw it from a very practical perspective. VD was one of the youngest and newest teachers of the college, a shy man with a heavy accent from his hometown - a province from the North of the Middle of the country. At the time of the interview, he was still in his teaching probation period, which was often known as difficult and challenging in this particular college.

##### **4.2 The foundations of knowledge are changing**

Seven participants (BC, 16; CH, 3; KL, 11, 12, 14; PT, 17; TA, 27, 29, 30; VT, 5; VTh, 21) had the opinion that it was not a big problem if teachers sometimes showed their knowledge limitation in front of their students. In particular, it was perceived as "*normal*", which meant

no face loss, for teachers to sometimes have errors in their lessons (BC, 16; TA, 27, 30), or be unable to answer students' questions in class (CH, 3). This was because “*knowledge is changing everyday*” (BC, 16), “*knowledge is immense*” (VTh, 21), and “*teachers are not saints*” (TA, 27, 30). KL (14) did not agree with the belief that teachers were always right to their students (KL, 14). In fact, BC (16), KL (11, 12), PT (17), TA (29), VT (5) and VTh (21) revealed that they would not hesitate to admit their faults, or saying “I don’t know” to their students, since they did not think it would hurt their *thể diện*. BC (16) and PT (17) even mentioned their apology to students. KL (12), TA (29) and VT (5) believed that this truthfulness brought teachers more *thể diện*. These beliefs and behaviours totally contrasted with the fear of loss of *thể diện* and the avoidance of acknowledging mistakes that have been described by the participants as a dominant response of most Vietnamese teachers.

As KL (11) explained:

*As teachers, we may have wider knowledge and skill than they (students) do, but we are still humans, our understanding may be deficient here and there. So if we are wrong and our students point it out reasonably, we should accept it.*

Notice that she considered teachers from a “human” perspective rather than a “teacher” perspective. The people were judged in the role of a human rather than in the role defined by social rank and operation.

For justifications of this behavioural style of teachers, there was a tendency to view teachers and students as equal, not necessary as categories for discriminatory treatment. VTh (21) said: “*we just outweigh our students in the fact that we precede them, learn things before them. Otherwise, we are no better than them*”. KL (11) would talk to her students honestly as if she talked to her friends when she could not answer their questions: “*I haven’t thought of this issue, could you give me more time to find out, also you find it your way, and we bring our results together to see if they match*”.

A result of the traditional belief that teachers’ knowledge is absolute is the assumption that students’ questions pose a threat to teachers’ *thể diện* and arguing is often considered inappropriate. Going against this perception, some participants expressed a welcoming attitude to students’ questions (CH, 3), arguments, even when these questions might go against their teachers’ lesson content (KL, 14; TA, 27). These teachers valued students’

independence, activeness, or critical thinking rather than just absorbing knowledge from teachers (KL, 14, 15, 16; PT, 18). These participants supported the view that teachers give their students guidance to explore knowledge themselves rather than give them everything in the form of transmitted facts and unquestioned opinions (TA, 27). KL (14) said: *“I believe that if students want to make progress, they have to question and suspect everything, go to find truths, rather than believe in whatever teachers say”*. However, KL (16) also realized that generally, *“Vietnamese students are not accustomed to this perception”*. TA (29) also said that traditional tendency to hide teachers’ knowledge defects was still dominant among teachers in the current society.

The change in this perception within an individual was reflected in the case of KL. KL’s perceptions towards whether knowledge perfection constituted *thể diện* of teachers (12, 13) were revealed to be different between when she was a young teacher before and now she is older. When she was a novice teacher, she thought that an admission of her lack of knowledge in a certain issue caused her loss of *thể diện*. She was very afraid of losing face if her teaching was wrong at a certain point, so at that time, she dared not to admit that she was wrong. Instead she pretended that it was an accidental mistake. Now she thought that bravery to admit that lack of knowledge contributed to her better *thể diện*. Now she could admit her fault honestly to her students and turn it into an opportunity for encouraging them to take responsibility for mutual learning.

In this changing period, mixed attitudes were also inevitable. The participant PT expressed uncertainty about this knowledge issue. She was honest enough to verbally acknowledge her teaching mistakes (17), however still afraid to admit to her students that she could not respond with the correct answers to all their queries (19).

#### **4.3 *Thể diện* of students is becoming more important**

I have indicated in Chapter Five that students were becoming an increasingly important audience for teachers’ *thể diện* in the respondents’ thoughts. They seemed to be gaining more power and influence on teachers than they had in the past so that teachers were more and more concerned about their opinions and evaluations.

Another aspect of this growing position of students in teachers' eyes was teachers' care about *thể diện* of their students. CH (6) and KL (8) were examples. In particular, CH (6) said that he would never say to students that they were wrong as it would hurt their *thể diện*. KL (8) strongly disapproved of the attitude of some teachers who cared only about their own face without paying any attention to *thể diện* of their students. These teachers “*always contend that they are right*”, “*rarely see good ideas in students' opinions*”, and often “*criticize students*” (KL, 8). She saw that *thể diện* of students was very important as it related to students' learning motivation, especially in the Vietnamese context where students were often passive. In her opinion, Vietnamese teachers should learn from “*foreign teachers*” who often paid more attention to giving compliments than criticisms, since it helped boost learners' face. KL revealed that she often gave compliments to her students to give them *thể diện* (KL, 10).

#### **4.4 Students and teachers should be close**

As seen when I discussed the distance between teachers and students, there was a tendency of advocating closeness between teachers and students. With different ways of expressing this attitude, seven of my participants (BC, 32; CH, 1; HN, 2, 37; HQ, 4; TC, 1; TH, 17, 18; VT, 8) raised the need for teachers to have a close relationship with students. Some directly said that there should be “*sự gần gũi*” (closeness) (CH, 1; HQ, 4; TH, 17; VT, 8), or “*thân thiện*” (friendliness) (BC, 32) in the teacher-student relationship. Teachers could be seen as an older brother or sister (HQ, 4; TC, 1), or even friends (TC, 1) of their students. Some proudly told how friendly they were with their students, to the point that they often made jokes with them in class (BC, 32; CH, 1; HN, 37; VT, 8). In particular, CH (1) said: “*my opinion is whenever I am in class, it has to be fun, and has a really happy atmosphere. My classes can be very relaxing. Teachers should never make students stressed*”. It seemed that being able to create a comfortable, relaxing, joyful, and intimate atmosphere in interactions with students was a desirable ability for teachers. For example, HN admired one of his teachers in high school, who, beside great professional competence, was pictured as a person of humour and often telling jokes in class (HN, 2).

Teachers were advised to reduce the gap by dedicatedly teaching, giving advice, answering questions, and helping students in their study, so that finally students could even confide to



the teachers about difficulties in their life, their loves and other issues (HQ, 4; TC, 1; TH, 17). To TH (17), this intimacy came with benefits for both knowledge and moral education of the students. For knowledge, it suited the ‘new’ student-centred teaching method. For morals, it enabled teachers to help students stay away from “social temptations” (TH, 17). Besides, with this closer bond, teachers could help students practically by introducing jobs to them, helping them find part-time jobs to earn money during their study (TC, 1). Teachers who built a close relationship with students were said to have a better image, or *thể diện*, in students’ eyes (TH, 17).

Generational change on this issue was mentioned by KL (5), the oldest participant, and she herself was also an example of it. KL believed that teachers in the old days were more concerned about *thể diện* than teachers in the present time. According to her, teachers now were only concerned about maintaining their role and position within classrooms, whereas in the past, teachers were conscious of maintaining their image, i.e. their face, everywhere. For example, she analysed how teachers from older generations differed from younger generation in where and how they dined. Accordingly, her grandparents who were also teachers only accepted a meal invitation if they were formally and respectfully invited to have meals in a decent place. Later, teachers of her parents’ generation did not mind to have meals in casual places (e.g. cheap restaurants) when being invited, though they normally would not go there by themselves. Now teachers in her generation would not care much about where to eat, and they would not mind eating in pavement eateries. Yet, she noticed that people of the newer generation, or young teachers as she labelled them, were even more careless about their *thể diện*, as they were free to go for beer drinking and share some intimate behaviours with their students. She disapproved as she thought this kind of behaviour affected *thể diện* of teachers in a bad way. She thought drinking beer with students would not be appropriate to maintain teachers’ *thể diện*. According to her, those young teachers did not pay appropriate care for their face.

Interviews with other respondents supported her observation that young teachers did not find drinking beer with their students a matter threatening to their face. A group of young teachers (the oldest one was 31), including BC (33), HN (38), TH (18) and VT (8), did not think of this activity as negatively as KL did. They viewed it a normal social interaction between students and teachers, and the event needed not to be avoided as in KL’s perception (though a range of boundaries were set to still maintain teachers’ *thể diện* within the event,

as described in the Chapter Five). Males such as HN (38) and VT (8) even viewed this as an opportunity to show their friendliness with their students. Being friendly with students became an aspect of their *thể diện*. This seemed to reveal that perceptions of forms and ways to uphold *thể diện* of teachers had been changing over time.

This is the new tendency for openness, closeness, and equality. KL saw that previous generations or older people often considered *thể diện* a more serious matter than did later generations. She herself did not accept the view of younger teachers. Perhaps people are inclined to view changes in behaviours of younger people with doubt or disdain. Perhaps people in the time of KL's grandparents and parents also viewed her and her peers' perceptions as careless and immature. In KL's interpretation, these demonstrated that *thể diện* was less and less meaningful to teachers. In other words, *thể diện* was not as appreciated and respected as it had been before. However, from a different lens, this ability to establish a close relationship with students might be a new criterion for *thể diện* of teachers in the contemporary society. Certainly some of the participants in my research believed so. The principle remained but the outward manifestations were changing.

The new tendency was received with mixed feelings, especially when it had to cope with the traditional values which were still very strong, as has been reflected in Chapter Five. For instance, HQ (4) said that she liked the new openness, intimacy between teachers and students. However, in her opinions, it also brought undesirable consequences such as diminished respect by students to teachers exemplified by the fact they did not greet their teachers properly and respectfully as they used to.

### **III. CHANGING ATTITUDES TO GENDERED FACE: THE IDEAL OF GENDER EQUALITY**

My analysis of the general concept of *thể diện* in Chapter Four and *thể diện* with gender in Chapter Five indicated that the men and women participants had similar interpretations of its meaning and its implications for acceptable behaviour and attitudes. Both genders agreed that male face was considered by the Vietnamese to be more important than female face. The examples provided by male and female participants were similar. However, this apparent

harmony of perceptions is worth further examination because closer scrutiny will reveal the effect of changes in Vietnamese society on beliefs about what the foundations of *thể diện* should be. While there was also an undercurrent of resignation that traditional attitudes and behaviours associated with the primacy of male based *thể diện* underpinned much of what contributed to stable family relationships, there was a strong sense of urgency in calls for change. The underlying ethical notion was gender equality based on a combination of arguments referring to injustice, human rights, more effective family units and more satisfying relationships for both husbands as well as wives.

In twelve interviews participants demonstrated positive attitudes towards the need for greater gender equality and a change in the relative emphasis on male and female face needs.

The first demonstration was the question of traditional gender roles. VA (13) put forward a female perspective, critical of the roles traditionally assigned to women. According to her, the ‘natural’ job/function/task (*thiên chức*) of women was only bearing children, not either cooking or cleaning. To her, these tasks were imposed on Vietnamese women, since her observation of men in Western countries revealed that men could do housework and do it very well. Disappointment was expressed towards Vietnamese men (VA, 13).

Along with opposition to traditional family-restricted roles, new roles for women were advocated by six other participants. Four women QH (25), PT (38), TC (28, 29) and TH (24) shared the opinion that women should not only stay at home with housework; rather they should have a paid job in society just as their husbands, which was useful for them to boost their thinking ability, build social networks and expand their confidence, and not to lag behind others, especially their husbands, in terms of social knowledge. According to PT (38), most women in the current society would not accept their position to be restricted within family kitchens. Some of the male participants seemed supportive. HN (23) said that people now appreciated women’s social career than in the past. VTh (33) agreed that the women’s roles in society were more and more expanded and appreciated.

With the expanding roles of women, the roles of men and the contents of men’s *thể diện* were also considered as potentially more flexible than before. As mentioned in a previous chapter, CH (15), a male, viewed it acceptable to *thể diện* of a man if his wife earned more money for his family. Though not a very widespread phenomenon as yet there were men like VA’s (17) husband, who regarded his wife’s career promotion (which put her in a higher

social position than him) with a welcoming attitude. Particularly, it was considered better for *thể diện* of a man when his wife was a socially adept, knowledgeable woman rather than only a housewife with limited outside interests (QH, 26; TC, 29; TH, 25).

The second demonstration of this trend was a demand for greater emphasis on *thể diện* of women. In relation to the implications of changing gender roles for conceptions of face, participants such as QH (29) and VTh (33) even suggested the counter concept to *thể diện đàn ông* - “*thể diện của người phụ nữ*” (face of females). VTh (33) described female face as an emerging concept in contemporary society, where women were becoming more and more important in family and various social areas. In families where the woman was the main source of income, she became the face of her family (VTh, 33). In QH’s opinion (29), such a notion did not exist in reality yet, but similar notions should be valued, such as respect for women. For instance, her boyfriend should pay respect to her in public, which also meant he should make every effort to acknowledge and maintain her face (QH, 29).

The idea that men should take the responsibility for saving their women’s *thể diện* was also voiced by HQ (6), TA (55) and VA (14, 15). TA (55) commented that there should be a reciprocal advice to the popular one that women saved their men’s face, which meant that there should be advice for men to pay attention to their women’s face also. HQ (6) expressed disappointment towards her husband, who often failed to save her face in public. Here a woman asked for her husband’s effort to maintain her *thể diện* in public. This was considered an equal right as she said “*husband and wife are supposed to keep face of each other*” (HQ, 6). There was no longer a one-sided requirement from men to women.

In particular, VA (19) had a different opinion of what it meant by the traditional recommendation ‘women should save their men’s *thể diện*’. When I asked VA (19) for her opinion of the popular comment for Vietnamese women that they should have constant awareness of keeping *thể diện* of their partners, she responded:

*I think it’s true. However, I don’t think it means that the woman has always to be in a lower position than her man. Saving face means, for example, in interactions with others, there is always a consensus between the two people. We consult our husbands, share opinions with them, that means saving their face. I don’t think it is necessary or advisable for us to save our husbands’ face by going stupid a bit so that our husbands can excel above us. I think it’s like fake, it’s not good. It is this perception that holds back our women’s social advancement. Many women are still bound with that perception so they don’t want to make efforts. They*

*think that yeah, it is ok for me to be just here, since my husband is only up to here, it may not be good for me to outdo him, for example.*

So VA has re-defined the traditional advice in the light of the standard of the modern, contemporary world: the standard of equality. In this case, it was the equality between genders. In terms of saving *thể diện*, she talked about ideas of “consensus” (*thống nhất ý kiến*) and “share” (*chia sẻ*) between men and women. She opposed the idea that *thể diện* of a man is constituted from them being able to or allowed to “excel” over their wives. She thought the idea of men enjoying the higher position was “fake” (*giả tạo*) and an obstacle to women’s social advancement. Overall, the old advice was still valid, but its content had to be re-defined in terms of the modern standard of the current society.

So, judging from the comments of these teachers, innovation has been happening, but its implications are perceived at different levels and in different ways by various individuals. So there was no unanimity in the participants’ attitudes to the growing economic independence of middle class women and its’ implications for the calculus of gendered face.

This raised some interesting practical issues, and illustrated some of the complexities involved in the notion of combatting gendered face. VA (14, 15) shared with me that she had mixed feelings when her husband helped her with housework in front of others: on the one hand, she felt proud and had more *thể diện*, as people would think that she was well cared for by such a good husband. On the other hand, sometimes she felt uncomfortable thinking that she might harm his *thể diện* by letting him help her. This contradiction illustrated well the tensions between old and new, traditional and modern perceptions in the people’s minds.

In general, an appropriate interpretation was given by HQ (10) and KL (31) that current Vietnamese society is being modernized and Westernized in the area of gender equality.

Perhaps the comments that touched on the sensitive issue of female sexuality were indicative of the depth of change being observed, or thought to be occurring, by these teachers. HQ (10) commented ironically that in Vietnamese society, the numbers of men and women having extramarital love affairs were now equal, for now women “*knew to rise up*” (*biết vùng lên*) rather than accepted their lives with “*resignation*” (*cam chịu*) as before. She seemed to mean that extramarital affairs were a means for, or a reaction from women to protest against the injustice they had endured. Similarly KL (31) said that gender status had been “*relatively equal*” (*tương đối bình đẳng*), since popular in the current society was the

phenomenon “*ông ăn chả bà ăn nem*” (man/husband eats *chả* – a food made of grilled chopped meat, (in return) woman/wife eats *nem* - a food made of pork hash wrapped in banana leaf), which means if the husband has an affair, the wife also has her own affair in return. This two-way interaction showed that men no longer held the absolute supremacy over women as before. In five other interviews (BC, 22; HN, 16; QH, 23; TC, 20, 21; TH, 12), the participants expressed their opinion that, although social perceptions still gave a strong favour to men in evaluating their propensity for infidelity in the form of extramarital love affairs, they preferred there to be a fairer judgment about the sexual behaviour of men and women. In particular, men betraying their wives should be judged equally as bad as women doing the same thing (BC, 22; HN, 16; QH, 23; TC, 20, 21). TH (12) was even sympathetic to adulterous women, saying that men should be blamed when their women loved someone else.

Voices for the ideal gender equality came from both males and females, although strong voices mostly came from female participants. Their opinions showed a strong commitment towards a fairer balance in gender relationships and the kind of face that was attached to equitable gender relationships.

In general, as with the picture of teachers, under the impact of globalization the roles and positions based on gender in society have been experiencing critical changes, as have been reflected in several recent studies by T. L. H. Nguyen (2012), Schuler et al. (2006), and P. P. Tran (2007). As globalization allows people to widen their view of the world, they have chances to compare their lives with people of other places (as seen with some examples in the interview data), which helps re-form their perceptions. Women are encouraged to have social jobs for their own benefits and men are seen in more household affairs. The absolute social distance before between men and women, husbands and wives has been decreased. The hierarchical order has been loosened, and so the content of face for each gender changes. ‘Male face’ or ‘*thể diện đàn ông*’ is transforming to incorporate new criteria, one of which is an accommodation for a modern concept of ‘female face’. Once again, one sees that face as a cultural concept echoes social and cultural fluctuations.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The teachers' minds appeared to have been affected to some extent by different ways of thinking from outside, and were possibly beginning to see *thể diện* with fresh new standards. In particular, if the traditional perception of *thể diện* was mostly associated with the preservation of a traditionally sanctioned social hierarchy and its use of shame and obligation to enforce obedience to the status quo, then social change would almost certainly influence how people regard *thể diện* and its implications for attitudes underlying acceptable behaviour. These include the claim for a recognition and satisfaction of personal desires, and the requirement that honesty should be the uppermost standard in the contents of *thể diện*.

Also among these teachers, changes were occurring in approaches to pedagogy, in the role of the teacher, in relationships with students and assumptions about how teachers influence their students in moral development as well as in gaining knowledge. Clearly notions of *thể diện* were strongly associated with patterns of behaviour and belief endorsed by the teachers. Some of these related specifically to professional issues, but many seemed to be those aspects of *thể diện* believed to be essentials of Vietnamese life and culture. Even though perceptions of *thể diện* among the teachers in my study were still largely influenced by the residue of the traditional Vietnamese approach to teaching and learning, some of their verbally expressed views indicate that our attention also needs to be directed to the nature, pace and direction of changes in the profession and the implications for how face is perceived and how it affects teachers' everyday lives. From my study it is not possible to anticipate the pace and direction of changes in teaching in particular and in Vietnamese society generally, but it does seem that teachers are already feeling the impact of globalization and modernisation, and the implications of these transformations for how they are to retain their *thể diện* in a rapidly changing world.

To illustrate, there is a phenomenon, which might seem to an outsider to be a trivial example, but to Vietnamese people it is important. In the case of apologies, five interviewees (BC, 35; HN, 36; QH, 31; TA, 60; VT, 17) believed that apologies gained face for the person apologising. TA (60) explained in justification of this departure from orthodoxy that, in contrast with the popular belief, people who had better education and understanding were beginning to think of the act of apologizing as heightening one's position, gaining more respect from others, and so, being better for maintaining one's face. VT (17) revealed that he

did not mind apologizing to his children. Sharing the same idea with TA, VT believed that people of lower education and little social knowledge were often afraid to apologize to their children, whereas knowledgeable people did not see it as a problem. In fact, this would create more face for the parents in his view. By doing so, the parents became a good example for their children when the children learnt that one should apologize when one had faults (VT, 17). Two female respondents BC (35) and QH (31) also stated that it was not a big deal for them to apologize when they should do it. HN (36) appreciated the apologizing habit of people in other cultures such as the Japanese. In particular, it was advised that we, the Vietnamese should learn from the Westerners (BC, 35) and the Japanese (HN, 36) in this aspect, i.e. attaching apologies to face maintenance.

In a similar way, the more critical attitudes about gender inequality and their desires for greater status of women are also reflections of changes in Vietnamese social developments. At this stage they are only attitudes held by a small part of the educated population of Vietnam whose perceptions of universal concerns such as gender often precede those of people in other social classes. Nevertheless, with rapid changes in social and economic structures and their pressures for change, it is not surprising to see their effects of changes in attitudes. I cannot, of course, provide incontrovertible proof that social structural changes are the source of pressure to change conceptions of *thể diện* and its appropriate sources and behavioural implications. But the participants in my research believed that changing attitudes to *thể diện* did stem from the decline of traditional structures and values, whether they agreed with them or not.

Summarising these perceptions, it seems that for at least a significant number of these teachers, and to at least a small degree for all the teachers, the winds of change in society and education were impacting on their behaviours and values. *Thể diện*, like other cultural constructs, has been under some pressure for change in line with broader social developments.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter I pull together the various themes in my thesis. There are five sections. In the first section, I summarize my whole thesis to draw out important findings in terms of two central focuses: *thể diện* as a face concept, and the Vietnamese culture and society. In the second part, I will draw out possible contributions of my thesis in terms of knowledge, theory, methodology, and educational policy and practice. The third section is given to a review of my application of the multiculturalist approach in the study. Suggestions for future research are given in the fourth part. The fifth and final section is the conclusion.

#### I. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

##### 1. *Thể diện* as a face concept

*Thể diện* is found to represent a specific Vietnamese concept of face. The term and its connotations are familiar to the Vietnamese. It is popular in the people's daily speaking, thinking, evaluations, and self-evaluations.

*Thể diện* is commonly perceived as an image of a person in social evaluations, in specific interactions or across interactions. *Thể diện* covers a wide range of concerns and components. People can lose *thể diện* from trivial things such as clothing, personal gadgets and possessions to significant moral values such as dignity and reputation. Of all the concerns, the moral basis is reflected as the most important foundation of one's *thể diện*.

*Thể diện* is found to be a matter of social approval rather than self-evaluation. As a result, it is often attached to the sense of shame rather than guilt. Even in rare occasions when *thể diện* is associated with guilt feeling, inner self-evaluation and self-awareness, it is also often based on the person's prediction of social reactions to his/her behaviours. In other words, society, or social opinions play the role of a real, or at least imaginary, audience to one's *thể diện*, setting standards to assess *thể diện* of a person.

Due to its close association with social opinions, *thể diện* tends to be an outside presentation of a person rather than a representation of the person's real inner values. *Thể diện* is often face that a person projects to present for social evaluations. However, a considered over manipulation of it may turn *thể diện* into *sĩ diện*, which is often frowned on in society. But how much is too much? It can be seen that the boundary between *thể diện* –socially approved face, and *sĩ diện* –socially disapproved face, is fragile. The Vietnamese are required to live towards collectivity by maintaining their *thể diện* via conforming to social norms and others' expectations. A little manipulation to this *thể diện* so that it can be presented in good forms to suit social expectations is acceptable and almost required. However when this face is judged or labelled 'individualistic', it becomes *sĩ diện*. This is because the notion of being 'individualistic' (*cá nhân*) is hateful in common Vietnamese thinking. Therefore, what is important is an adequate calculation to maintain *thể diện* of oneself within its socially acceptable boundaries.

## **2. Vietnamese culture and society**

### **2.1 Going with the stream: Expressions of Vietnamese collectivism**

*Thể diện*, as reflected in the Vietnamese perceptions, mirrors Vietnamese cultural characteristics. In line with conclusions in the general literature, collectivism has been found pervasive in manifestations of *thể diện* in the Vietnamese life.

Firstly, the people's voices about *thể diện* reflect an orientation towards 'others'. They highlight the importance of others in individuals' life. They express an appreciation of relationships, community, public opinions and other community impacts. They reveal that the Vietnamese tend to feel vulnerable in public contexts, shrink away from outgroup members, are susceptible to social opinions, compliant to social norms, and afraid to do something different from the majority. It is also shown that a person in Vietnamese culture is expected to be a 'greater self' encompassing responsibilities to significant groups and others, and similarly, a loss of *thể diện* of a person entails the spiritual damage of related others. The people tend to see and evaluate 'self' via 'others', and reinforce 'self' values via the channels of 'others'. As a result, interpersonal harmony is greatly valued, which is achieved via maintaining each other's *thể diện*. Conflicts, debates, or arguments are disliked, undesirable

and unwelcome since they tend to be connected with a destruction of harmony between people. Especially what is socially and explicitly labeled “*cá nhân*” (self/ individualistic), as a connotation of *sĩ diện*, is the target of explicit social disapproval. The notion of living for ‘self’, directly announced or expressed is unacceptable.

Secondly, the teachers’ perceptions display the importance of social role and position in the Vietnamese’s awareness of face, which is a consequence of their collectivistic tendency. As demonstrated through the professional role of teachers, and gender roles, each person in the society is required to appear and behave according to the norms prescribed by his/her social role and position. *Thế diện* of a person is defined by the person’s position in the social hierarchy. Fulfilling one’s gender role and obtaining and preserving a respectful social status are crucial to one’s *thế diện* in society.

Generally speaking, *thế diện* is important to the Vietnamese because more than any other concept, it is where one sees one’s values in social evaluations. It is a concentrated lens of social assessment of every person. It sets and at the same time reflects one’s position in the society. Gaining and maintaining a position in the community among others, which means being accepted and respected by surrounding others, is a more important living goal for the Vietnamese than asserting one’s individual uniqueness. It is in this aspect that the perceptions about *thế diện* express collectivistic traits or the other-orientation that are familiar in the literature on Vietnamese culture. In this aspect, it can be said that my study results provide confirmation of the general picture. What I have found seems to fit well with the general picture in research about the culture, the collectivization, and face in other societies, especially Asian Confucian societies.

## **2.2 Going against the stream: Challenges to Vietnamese collectivism**

### **2.2.1 Inherent challenge: Self-face concern**

From a different viewpoint, the strong concern for *thế diện* as self-face brings out the sense that the Vietnamese are quite self-oriented in terms of face, which can be considered a challenge to the common perception of their collectivism.

In particular, the concern for their own *thể diện*, or self-face, can explain many of the people's withdrawing and 'negative' psychological and behavioural traits, such as the reluctance to apologize, the common timidity and shyness in interactions, the sensitivity to public criticism, and the avoidance style in interactions. In all of these, people are concerned so much about self that they do not seem to be collectivistic. Various examples from the interviews provided illustrations. For example, it is revealed that the Vietnamese tend to refuse to apologize to others since the act is likely to threaten their own *thể diện*. Due to *thể diện*, they are also very sensitive to critical comments - the idea that was well demonstrated in the case of evaluations for the teachers' performances. Furthermore, they tend to employ whatever method, including hiding, avoiding, and even lying to others to save their own *thể diện*. For example in the teaching context, it is popular for teachers to conceal their knowledge limitation to students by ignoring or pretending that they want their students to study the issue themselves. These behaviours seem to serve 'self' rather than 'other'; in fact, they seem at the expense of others and the common group solidarity. 'Other' does not receive the fair treatments that they deserve. This self-orientation is expressed via a withdrawing, defensive way rather than in an assertive way, which may be different from the common behaviours of Westerners in this respect.

Furthermore, even the care for other-face is revealed as a result of the concern for self-face. In particular, people care about others' *thể diện* because they are worried that their own *thể diện* will be badly judged if they act otherwise. While in other cultures such as American, people can claim for their self-face directly on their self-ground by asserting their own distinctiveness, Vietnamese people seem to maintain and claim their face in a more circular, indirect way – via the channel of 'others'.

Along with the strong self-face concern, examinations of other Vietnamese daily activities will disclose that the Vietnamese might also be considered real individualists in many activities; for example, the people's habit of not queuing, disregarding regulations (e.g., about not smoking in prohibited areas) or the competing participation in traffic, in all of which the Westerners seem more collectivistic than the Vietnamese. Another expression where the Vietnamese are seen as not very other-oriented is the practice of the act of complimenting. It has been found that giving compliments to others is not a familiar act to the Vietnamese and the Vietnamese usually do not give compliments as much as Westerners (D. T. Nguyen, 2007). In classroom contexts in particular, as reflected by D. T. Nguyen (2007) and one of my participants KL (8), Vietnamese teachers tend to refrain from praising

their students. This applies even with teachers of English, who normally should receive the strongest influence from Western ideas compared to other teachers. They are sensitive to critical comments, yet, in their turn, hold back from giving compliments to others. This suggests that in this aspect the Vietnamese are not as other-face concerned as are the Westerners; in particular, they are not as attentive to the positive face need of their interlocutors as much as are their Western counterparts. All of these suggest that one needs to be aware, before naming Vietnam a collectivistic culture, that this big basket may not accommodate all the Vietnamese traits and may leave out some important expressions of the culture. This is in line with viewpoints of some scholars whose research results express caution towards the commonly claimed collectivism of the Vietnamese. They have noted that the Vietnamese may not be as collectivistic as claimed, and may not be collectivistic in every area (Chew, 2009; Onishi & Bliss, 2006; V. T. Vu & Napier, 2000).

### **2.2.2 Modern challenges**

Beside the inherent, subsumed expressions of individualism, the participants' voices also reveal challenges for the preservation of collectivism coming from the current changing Vietnamese society. Besides the traditional values, new open ideas have also been gaining prominence, which put collectivism of the Vietnamese into a difficult situation in this new age.

First, it is seen that the collectivism is far from operating smoothly in the current society. Especially when the needs and voices of individualism have been increasing, and are somewhat accepted and encouraged in contemporary globalized society, the need to live up to others' expectations may become suppressive and burdensome. With insights into concrete individuals' worlds, one may see the heaviness that the individuals suffer from constantly working towards social demands. *Thể diện* sometimes is consciously viewed as being upheld at the expense of personal emotions and desires. The price one pays for maintaining *thể diện* may not be small; some of the costs can be depression, anxiety, and feelings of guilt. Therefore, under a deeper layer of general compliance, there have been signs of implicit resistance. This was noted among the participants in their desires to live up to one's personal passions and wishes, or to live free from others.

New elements of the culture have been specifically displayed when I examined two areas of *thể diện* applications: *thể diện* to the profession of teachers, and *thể diện* in relation with gender. It is in these two areas that one can see the softened role of social hierarchy and have a sneak glimpse into the complicated picture of social cultural perceptions of contemporary Vietnamese society. On the one hand, the people show an attachment to old-style values, i.e. one's social role and position defines forms and contents of one's *thể diện*; for example the seriousness of appearance, the know-all attitude, the essential higher position and distance from students in the case of teachers, the family caring roles for women and the master and social role for men. On the other hand, people are increasingly employing modern views; for example, the need for teachers to be close to their students, the expanding role of students in the teachers' eyes, the expanding social roles for women, and the 'softer' roles for men. In particular, comparisons and wishes to follow Western standards in both teaching and family affairs are also articulated. The principle of honesty begins to be appreciated as an important standard to evaluate behaviours. In general, there is a parallel existence, or a blend between old and new, traditional and modern, Eastern and Western ideas, which happens within a social class, even within individuals. They may be viewed as either integration, or a struggle for the once collectivistic hierarchical Vietnamese society to maintain its old form in the modern world. All of these warrant a need for a cultural holistic view, as Shi-xu (2006) states:

... contemporary culture is becoming increasingly globalized. This means that cultures are being interconnected, hybridized, and diversified. Cultural ways of thinking, speaking, and acting are becoming more complex, pluralist, varied, and dynamic. Traditional, singular, and closed ways of knowing are no longer adequate for theorizing about the new globalized condition of discourse (p. 390).

This however raises a concern for Vietnamese cultural development. Certainly the increasing expansion of globalization in Vietnam with the exposure to and impacts from Western cultures is undeniable. Furthermore, it is reasonable to worry about the maintenance of traditional values when later generations have even wider chances of education, travel, and information access. There come questions like: Will Vietnamese culture retain its traditional values or come nearer to Western values? Will the young generation change the look of the culture or still be attached to old values of their culture?

Experience suggests that in the cultural globalization process, things attached to cultural traditional values such as thinking and behavioural styles take more time to change than surface things such as food, clothes, music, architecture and entertainment. This is because these values have been deeply embedded in the people's minds from generation to generation. They form specific styles of thinking and behaving for the Vietnamese which have been preserved and built up throughout thousands of years in the history of the culture. From a cultural perspective, it seems that these core values will be maintained in the coming change and condition in order to still maintain the Vietnamese image of who they are, not Americans, English, or Chinese, at least in the foreseeable future. The current changes from globalization can shorten or soften cultural differences but not erase them. Research has also shown that Vietnamese people still remain their cultural values such as patriarchy and orientations towards others even when they have long established their permanent residence in Western cultures (Campa, 2010; Kibria, 1990). Furthermore, along with better and wider education and exposure to the world, young generations also have a better cultural awareness and sense of cultural equality, which should be an advantage rather than a disadvantage to cultural preservations.

## **II. CONTRIBUTIONS**

### **1. Knowledge**

My research contributes to our understanding of the face concept, in particular the Vietnamese concept of face *thể diện*. Although this is not the first time *thể diện* has been mentioned in research, my study has probably been the largest with a systematic body of evidence and the most dedicated to the concept to date. From an abstract concept, *thể diện* has been operationalized or actualized via native perceptions for a detailed description, explanation and interpretation. This has pointed out that *thể diện* is an important concept to the Vietnamese, reflecting core Vietnamese values. Related notions such as *sĩ diện* and *thể diện đàn ông* (or *sĩ diện đàn ông*) have also been brought into the research for the first time. An understanding of these concepts can illuminate interesting aspects of the variety and boundaries of the various aspects of face in the culture.

Secondly, my study enriches our understanding of Vietnamese culture of behaviours. It empirically explains in detail the common claim often seen in communicative guides that the Vietnamese are so much concerned about face. Furthermore, my exploration of *thể diện* not only encompasses cultural characteristics which have been widely described in the common knowledge of the culture, but also sheds light on interesting aspects of the culture, less known in the general research. Besides the confirmation of generally shared characteristics with Asian Confucian cultures, such as the collectiveness, the hierarchy, the value of harmony and the accommodating conflict style, my study gives readers a look into corners that are less known such as tensions from collectivism and face as a gendered concept in Vietnam. Last but not least, my study has helped present a picture about the current status of Vietnamese cultural values and perceptions under the impact of globalization. I have argued that the effects on the culture from the economically changing society need to be taken into account of an overview of the culture.

My aspiration, as explicated in the previous section, has been also to reinforce a careful and evolving view about Vietnamese culture. In particular, I have argued that the Vietnamese can be considered individualistic rather than collectivistic in some aspects. It is therefore necessary to avoid over-generalizations about the culture.

## **2. Theory**

I have built up in this study a theory of Vietnamese face *thể diện*, to my knowledge, probably the first of this kind, given that no previous research from Vietnam as well as from international scholarship has given a systematic theory about Vietnamese face. Face as in *thể diện* is found as a guide to behaviours, a means of social sanction, a value that influence people's sense of self and evaluations of others, a quality granted to one by society that defines and also mirrors one's value and position in society. This concept of face to the Vietnamese is heavily influenced by social expectations, social role and positions. Although the face concept has been popularly employed in various social, psychological, linguistic theories, such as theories of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987), rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2000, 2008), and intercultural communication (Ting-Toomey, 1988), face has not yet earned a complete theory for itself in the mainstream Western



research. In this context, along with the establishment of other culture-specific theories of face, the introduction of a theory of Vietnamese face is meaningful.

In particular, I have built up a theory of the culture-specific face concept *thể diện* by employing and combining several theoretical perspectives and frameworks. This combined framework draws upon theories of face in linguistics and communication areas, self-concept and cultural values. It is a joint area of cultural psychology, sociolinguistics and sociocultural studies. Face is viewed holistically as a social, cultural, psychological and linguistic concept. It can be examined as a joint product of a micro psychological level analysis of self-perceptions and a macro level analysis of cultural and social perceptions. Accordingly, face is viewed under the perspective of self within culture and society, in particular self in relation to cultural values of behaviours and communication, self in relation with surrounding others and under social impacts, within or across contexts. Face is considered under the perspective of how self is viewed and positions itself within the social surroundings, in relationship with others, and vice versa, how others view self following social norms and expectations. Face becomes a tool to inform a person of how to function properly and be accepted and respected in his/her society. Face is a joint product of self awareness, cultural values of behaviours and other influential social factors in contexts. This is important considering the fact that theories of culture and self have not often dealt with face, and theories of face have not often included culture. We can see in this framework the correlation between face and cultural indicators such as individualism and collectivism. We are also alerted to the psychic costs to the individuals in their maintenance of face following a strong social conformity and other-oriented face behaviours. Other aspects of face are also displayed when studied in this framework, for example face is gender-discriminated and profession-specified.

One of the questions I set out in the literature review of face in the Chapter Two is whether face is changeable as a product of specific interactive contexts, or a stable notion underpinning people's behaving principles regardless of contexts? Under my theory, face can be both. On the one hand, there is a kind of face that is associated with and influenced by core cultural values, which are relatively stable across contexts. This kind of face defines a person as a decent member of society, for example the kind of face you have when you are considered humble, caring towards others, or preserving relationship harmony. This kind of face is defined by qualities expected of every member of Vietnamese culture by the majority. On the other hand, there is face that adapts to a person's roles and positions according to

contexts. As context changes, so do their roles and positions and their face. For instance, in contexts where your role as a teacher is highlighted, you are expected to act formally and sedately in order to preserve your face, whereas when you are primarily considered a student in a Vietnamese classroom context, you may be expected to act respectfully and obediently towards your teacher. Also beside relation with contexts, my model of face also takes into account social changes and movements. It observes and reflects in face in the dynamic ever-changing status of culture and society rather than in the traditional, conservative, static culture values.

This framework can be applied to the studying of face concept in other cultures.

### 3. Methodology

The way I have constructed the theory of *thể diện* could be useful for other research of this type. Rather than a top-down approach, i.e. going from a macro level of theories to form hypotheses about *thể diện* and then testing them with evidence, a bottom-up approach was followed, in which I started with gathering real life examples, demonstrations and native perceptions of the notion, then from analyses and interpretations of these, gradually built up a theory of *thể diện*. Related theories about face and cultures have been consulted in the starting point of the theory projection; however, these provided analytical conceptual tools and anticipations of *thể diện* rather than hypotheses about its particular components in Vietnamese society. The major part of the study has been based on the empirical investigation of *thể diện* in the real written language and the native cultural participants' voiced perceptions in three areas: *thể diện* in relation to the general social context, *thể diện* in relation to gender and *thể diện* in relation to the teaching profession. I consider this approach appropriate given the lack of former substantial research information about the phenomenon.

In the context that qualitative methods have not been viewed with appropriate strength by Vietnamese scholars in particular (Scott et al., 2006) and in studies about Vietnamese culture in general, qualitative method have been effectively employed in my study. In particular, the semi-structured open-ended interview method has allowed me to penetrate the people's beliefs of their cultural values and behaviours and examine *thể diện* from inside the culture. This method not only provided me with phenomena, examples and real life demonstrations

of the concept but also provided me with reasons, interpretations, feelings, and other kinds of personal reflections from cultural insiders. It has given me insightful cultural understanding and explanations of operational mechanisms of *thể diện*. It could be useful for exploratory studies - which aim to explore new phenomena in face or other topics of research, as well as follow up studies - which further investigate known phenomena.

The qualitative approach in my study has also demonstrated the usefulness of a combination between interviews and corpus. Thanks to the language corpus from web data, I had a clearer view of my research object -- *thể diện* -- and it was an important stepping stone for me to come with research questions to explore in the later interviews. Several prominent issues such as the notion of *sĩ diện* and the relation between *thể diện* and gender were first suggested from the corpus analysis. Therefore, language *corpora* can be a useful way to begin an exploratory study of cultural linguistic phenomena. When researchers are still confused about their research object, or do not know what directions to go from it, a collection and preliminary investigation of available folk data can also be very helpful. The material provides researchers with a general impression of the phenomenon in its real life existence, via observing the way people use, mention and talk about it, and what possible contents that people often relate with it.

Finally and generally, it has been shown through my research the usefulness of the multiculturalist approach in the study of culture-specific face. An evaluation of the implementation of the approach in this study is discussed later.

#### **4. Practical contributions to cultural awareness, education and gender policies**

##### **4.1 Cultural awareness**

I hope that my study can provide Vietnamese people with better awareness of their *thể diện* concerns and its possible influences on aspects of their daily life and communication. Especially in intercultural communication, this understanding might help them with timely adjustment to their needs of *thể diện* so that it will not cause hindrance to their interaction outcomes. It is useful for the Vietnamese to know that what they take for granted in their thinking and behaving styles is culture specific and therefore, may be different to that of their boss, colleagues or acquaintances who come from other cultures.

However, as a study about the Vietnamese and Vietnamese culture, my study seems more beneficial to people from other cultures whose communications are involved with the Vietnamese, especially those from a different cultural system such as Australians or Americans. In particular, this study can prepare them for accommodation to the Vietnamese concern for *thể diện* so that both can achieve effective and desirable communication results. For example, it is useful for a Westerner to know that often Vietnamese people base their evaluations and decisions on emotion rather than on rational grounds (as is the ideal in Western cultures). Or, they should know that the Vietnamese concealing behaviours and attitudes are often for the sake of saving their *thể diện*, therefore the Westerner may avoid judging the Vietnamese face according to his/her Western face standards, which may often be based on the principle of honesty and frankness. However, it is also advised that they should be careful with stereotypes of the Vietnamese, especially in the current changing Vietnamese society.

## **4.2 Education**

In the educational domain one of the contributions is that my study has raised attention to the issue of face of teachers inside and outside classes. Although more research needs to be done in this area for a stronger confirmation, my findings within the scope of this study could be beneficial to both teachers and students who want to know about the influence of the issue of teachers' *thể diện* on their classroom interactions. For example, my preliminary analysis of components of teachers' *thể diện* can be valuable information for teachers in the maintenance of their own *thể diện*; or students may find it helpful to know that 'distance' and greetings are significant concepts to uphold *thể diện* of their teachers.

At a higher level, it is hoped that my study is meaningful to educational planners. In particular, it is suggested that teacher training programs pay more attention to equip teachers with knowledge to deal with face-related classroom situations, since it has been found that teachers' concerns for their *thể diện* are profound among their professional concerns. More importantly, it is suggested that the culturally embedded concern for *thể diện* of teachers needs to be tackled for a successful implementation of interactive student-centered teaching approaches in Vietnam. In a more general perspective, the findings raise the importance of cultural issues in the implementation of educational policies and campaigns. In order to solve

educational problems, policy makers may need to deal with culturally long-standing teaching and learning beliefs of teachers, students and other related participants.

There seems a contradiction in the Vietnamese current educational directions. On the one hand, efforts from the Vietnam MOET, which are expressed in terms of both the amount of money invested and related activities implemented, have been made towards a transformation of the old-fashioned traditional teacher-centered model to an interactive student-centered model of teaching and learning. However, on the other hand, the nation has also been called for a preservation and promotion of the national cultural identity. Accordingly, the tradition “*tôn sư trọng đạo*” (respected moral venerated teachers) and resulting mottos such as “*thầy ra thầy trò ra trò*” (teachers (behave) as teachers, students (behave) as students) have become daily reminders in Vietnamese schools. In other words, while students are desired to be the central focus of classroom activities, teachers are not encouraged to step back from their traditionally venerated position which includes features such as the unquestioned trust in teachers’ knowledge. As a result, outcomes have been ‘half-hearted’. In particular, the traditional model of teacher-oriented classrooms is still dominant in Vietnamese classroom practices, and particularly in Vietnamese teachers and learners’ perceptions (T. H. T. Pham, 2008, 2010). The contradiction needs to be seriously considered by policy makers for successful educational reforms and integration into international education.

### **4.3 Gender**

My findings call for attention to the role of language and cultural values in gender issues in Vietnam. It is suggested that if people want to tackle gender issues and improve gender equality and equity in Vietnamese society, providing higher social chances and resources may not be enough. Rather, they need to deal with issues of gender roles and stereotypes deeply embedded in Vietnamese minds. Languages and images in school textbooks and social media should be considered with caution, so as not to cause the invisible impact of excluding women’s participation in social areas, but to encourage their diverse participation. In addition, the traditional connotation of *thể diện đàn ông* may need to be introduced with new contents such as caring role in family and respect to partners. This can be done via social forum discussions on webs, television, newspapers or other discussion platforms.

Just as with the case of education, it is suggested that the contradiction between preservation and development in the national policies needs to be addressed. National policies on gender issue have also been confusing. In particular, parallel to governmental efforts to promote women's participation in social development are similar efforts to endorse traditional family models. This paradox has long been noted by Western scholars interested in the gender situation in Vietnam, such as Abjorensen (2010), Kelly (2011), and Schuler et al. (2006). It has been shown that via periodic campaigns by the Vietnam Women's Union (the largest official organization for Vietnamese women formed by the Vietnam Communist Party) Vietnamese women have been encouraged to perform well in *both* spheres of social jobs and family. For instance, they were encouraged to be 'good at national tasks' (*giỏi việc nước*), and at the same time 'good at household tasks' (*đảm việc nhà*), or to 'study actively, work creatively' (*tích cực học tập, lao động sáng tạo*), and at the same time do not forget to 'raise children well and build happy families' (*nuôi con giỏi và xây dựng gia đình ấm no hạnh phúc*) (Schuler et al., 2006). In general, the government has done a good job of enshrining gender equality in the constitution and in legislation, but has been very cautious about supporting the liberation of women from traditional deference to men and from personal (e.g., career and sexual) freedom because of concerns about the effects of such departures from tradition on social cohesion and national unity. It is an issue fundamental to both gender relations and teachers' roles, and probably to other areas of development, for governments and their education systems wanting to retain the best core values of Vietnamese society and at the same time build a nation of people with the necessary behaviours and attitudes for success in an increasingly modernizing international economy. This is the question: how to keep the best of tradition and retain group cohesion and individual obedience, but take in attitudes from the outside world that will increase international competitiveness of groups and individuals?

### **III. A REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MULTICULTURALIST APPROACH**

I have stated that the multiculturalist approach proposed by Shi-xu (2006) has provided the main guidelines for my study. In this section I will review my implementation of the approach. I will base this on Shi-xu's description of the result of the approach, (i.e.

“multicultural theory” in Shi-xu’s term), to evaluate the extent I have succeeded with the approach in my study.

First, a theory resulting from multiculturalism should provide understanding about the distinctive characteristics of the local discourse, which leads to an acknowledgement of the diversity and equality of human discourses (Shi-xu, 2006, p. 393). I consider my study satisfies this aspect of result when, via examining Vietnamese perceptions of *thể diện*, it represents distinctive aspects of the Vietnamese behavioural and communication value system. It has pointed out that *thể diện* represents a specific concept of face of the Vietnamese resulting from unique Vietnamese thinking and behaving styles. The concept has its own connotation, but shares common characteristics with and also contributes to the understanding of the general concept of Asian face and face as a human concept. By doing that, it has also shown that *thể diện* deserves equal attention from the research world as have similar concepts in other cultures.

Second, the resulting theory has to be able to show “internal discursive complexities, hybridities, and even conflicts or contradictions of an otherwise unified cultural discourse and consequently the porosity and openness of its boundary” (Shi-xu, 2006, p. 394). This feature has also been observed in my study result. My exploration of *thể diện* has brought up several issues of this type, e.g. variations in the way people talk about *thể diện*, *sĩ diện* as a variant of *thể diện*, the struggle to maintain collectivism in the culture, the contradictions between ‘self’ and ‘other’, old and new values, and the tension between traditional and modern thinking styles in the operation of *thể diện*. It has shown impacts from the globalization on the perceptions of the concept and its changing tendency in the coming future.

The third and fourth criteria for the theory are interrelated. They require an attention to “the historicity of human discourses” (Shi-xu, 2006, p. 395) and therefore, attention to “cultural power relations and practices involved in and through discourse (as text and context) - tensions, domination, exclusion, resistance, etc., between and upon different cultures, East and West” (Shi-xu, 2006, p. 396). These attentions to historical and power relation aspects were one (though not the central) of the concerns of my study. In particular, I have addressed the Confucian foundation and the Chinese linguistic origin of *thể diện* as a concept, and the influence of Chinese culture on perceptions of the concept, all of which were partly results of

Chinese imperialism in the past. Besides, contemporary impacts from Western cultures were also discussed.

However, I do not consider cultural power *relations* - or more exactly, as I sense from Shi-xu's meaning, *inequality* - as part of my argument about *thể diện*. There were two reasons. One was because historical development of the concept was not the focus of my study; therefore I did not have enough substantial evidential and rational background to argue about it. Second, in the case of discourse about *thể diện*, I tend to see those cultural influences as cultural adaptation rather than imposition, or signs of cultural inequality. The only dimension in which I systematically give attention to inequality is in my analysis of gender differences.

Finally, Shi-xu suggests that a multicultural theory should try to reflect the "self-critical consciousness of discourse", or the inherent ability of the discourse community to create changes and transform towards a considered better future of discourse (Shi-xu, 2006, p. 396). This description seems to fit well with reflections from my Vietnamese participant cohort. It has been shown that the people were intelligently conscious of the concept, for example in terms of its cultural origins, current existence, and future changes. More than passive cultural participants, they expressed an active role in the meaning making of the concept towards a more advanced, inclusive and transformational form. Typical examples would be suggestion for the infusion of new concepts such as respect for 'female face' and the principle of honesty into *thể diện* connotation.

Overall, the multicultural-epistemological stance proposed by Shi-xu (2006) has enabled me to include both local and global viewpoints, and to cover both stability as well as mobility of the phenomenon. This approach has proved its strengths in addressing local and native concerns and rules. It has alerted me to dangers in using Western theories of face and culture so that I am careful not to invisibly be influenced and hence impose certain external viewpoints to evaluate *thể diện* – the culture-specific concept; rather I have tried to let the context and its discourse speak up to provide an emic perspective themselves. Under this approach, I was also reminded to pay attention to marginalized voices, of which the women were an example, and therefore, develop more inclusive interesting findings in this aspect of the phenomenon. In my perception, this kind of multiculturalist approach therefore can be a reliable framework for research involving culture-specific contexts.



#### IV. FUTURE RESEARCH

As an exploratory study, my research opens up possibilities for further research in the field. In particular, quantitative research can be done about the findings from my study. The effects of different age ranges and cultural regions on perceptions of *thể diện* are suggested research concerns. In terms of *thể diện* content, future research could focus on components of *thể diện* and the relations between them. My exploratory research has opened up a large range of *thể diện* components and the importance of moral face. However, it has not been able to suggest systematic categories of them: this kind of typology development will require a larger range of data and different research designs. The relation between a person and groups also needs further examination to answer the question of how and in what ways *thể diện* of a person and his/her groups are formed, maintained, broken or changed.

*Thể diện* in educational context has been shown as an area that invites research attention, which then can bring useful implications for improvements of teaching and learning methods. Future research can continue to examine *thể diện* of teachers from teachers' perspectives themselves, or from students' perspectives, or a comparison of both. In addition, not only *thể diện* of teachers, *thể diện* of students in tertiary education also needs research concern. It has been widely claimed in studies of intercultural classrooms that face (and its relation to politeness) is an important reason for East Asian students' passivity. However, face has not been a central concern in those studies.

In addition, it is necessary to have empirical studies of *thể diện* in other working areas such as doing business in international companies, where face concern has been seen as a considerable obstacle in the demonstrations of competence, communication and therefore the working effectiveness of Vietnamese employees and managers. Another opportunity is exploring possible transitions and changes of *thể diện* awareness of Vietnamese who move to another cultural context, especially Western contexts, for example when they study overseas, or work with Westerners on a daily basis abroad or in Vietnam.

In terms of gender, mostly I have focused on contents about gender voiced by the participants. Little attention has been given to analyze whether male and female participants perceive *thể diện* differently. Further research can focus on this aspect with a large enough number of participants of both genders to draw valid comparisons. In addition, future studies can work on *thể diện* in relation with men and women of different social backgrounds,

different social classes and careers. For example, it is expected that people working in offices would differ from those who are on farms in their connotations of *thể diện đàn ông*, and females in business would probably differ from housewives in their perceptions of their responsibility to *thể diện* of their partners.

*Sĩ diện* with the specific connotation of ‘too much’ self-face concern is an interesting concept to explore. A collection of more diverse expressions and examples of the concept can show in what context *sĩ diện* (with the connotation of selfishness) applies and what concerns and contents for self-face it covers.

## V. CONCLUSION

Through my exploration, I have displayed *thể diện* as an important feature of Vietnamese culture that deserves research attention. It reflects important cultural values, ways of thinking, behaving and handling sometimes delicate situations by the Vietnamese, the way the Vietnamese people think about themselves and think about others. I have reflected that *thể diện* of a person is so important in social interactions that one needs to first uphold it for oneself and then pay attention to that of others. Otherwise one loses social respect. Maintenance of one’s *thể diện* is the maintenance of one’s position in society and the maintenance of social respect by aligning with qualities and norms of expressions and behaviours that the persons’ social position prescribes. The understanding of *thể diện* is therefore useful for various social areas in which Vietnamese participate, especially in the increasingly intercultural context.

The journey of exploring *thể diện* is also the journey by which I have learned about my own culture. As put by Fowers and Davidov (2006, p. 585), the benefit of this kind of process is to learn that “our perspectives are limited, partial and relative to our own backgrounds.... [We] must give up the comforting ethnocentrism, sense of cultural superiority, and unrecognized privilege that is often part of our untutored cultural outlook”. If by this research, I can contribute to the infusing of this insight into people in Vietnam and other countries, I consider it my upmost PhD delight.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1 INTENDED QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS

**Note:** Since the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, I include the Vietnamese version of intended questions. In this Vietnamese version, the word “*bạn*” – Vietnamese second person personal pronoun - was used for the whole question list. However in reality, it was replaced by “*anh*”, “*chị*”, or “*em*” corresponding to the position of the interviewee with me.

#### ***Thế diện* in the general perspective:**

- Meaning of *thế diện*:

What does the notion “*thế diện*” mean to you? Please note down any word or phrase that you think to have relation with *thế diện*? What do the terms *giữ thế diện*, *mất thế diện* and *mất mặt* mean to you? When does a person lose his/her *thế diện* in your opinions?

*Khái niệm thế diện theo bạn có nghĩa là gì? Hãy ghi ra bất kì từ hoặc ngữ nào mà bạn cho là liên quan đến khái niệm này. Theo bạn như thế nào là giữ thế diện, mất thế diện và mất mặt? Theo bạn thì người ta mất thế diện khi nào?*

- Relation between a person and his/her important others in terms of *thế diện*:

In your opinion, is there any relation between a person and his/her important people, for example, partner, parent, and children, in terms of *thế diện*? If yes, what do you think could be possible relations? Can you give some examples?

*Theo bạn, liệu có hay không mối liên quan về mặt thế diện giữa một người với những người thân của anh ta? Nếu có thì đó là những mối liên hệ như thế nào? Bạn có thể cho vài ví dụ được không?*

- Exposed extramarital affairs and reactions to exposed extramarital affairs to *thế diện* of a person and his/ her partner:

In your opinions, is there any influence on *thế diện* of a person and *thế diện* of his/her spouse if the person is found to involve in an extramarital affair? If yes, how is the influence? What do you think about people who go to their partners’ workplace to make a fuss about their partners’ extramarital affairs? Do you think people should save *thế diện* of their partners

when they find out that their partners have an extramarital affair? According to you, what should or should not they do in those situations to save their partners' *thể diện*?

*Theo quan điểm của bạn thì liệu thể diện của một người và bạn đời của người đó có bị ảnh hưởng hay không nếu người đó bị phát hiện ngoại tình? Nếu có thì ảnh hưởng như thế nào? Bạn có suy nghĩ như thế nào đối với những người lên cơ quan của vợ hoặc chồng họ để làm âm ỉ chuyện vợ hoặc chồng họ ngoại tình? Bạn có nghĩ là người ta nên giữ thể diện cho bạn đời của họ khi họ phát hiện ra bạn đời của họ ngoại tình? Theo bạn họ nên hoặc không nên làm gì trong những tình huống đó để giữ thể diện cho bạn đời của họ?*

- The concept *sĩ diện*:

What do you think about the concept *sĩ diện*? Is there any relation between *sĩ diện* and *thể diện*? If yes, what is the relation? Can you give some examples about *sĩ diện*?

*Bạn nghĩ gì về khái niệm sĩ diện? Theo bạn liệu có mối liên hệ nào không giữa sĩ diện với thể diện? Nếu có thì là mối liên hệ như thế nào? Bạn có thể cho vài ví dụ thế nào là sĩ diện không?*

- Reluctance to apologize and *thể diện*:

There is a judgment that Vietnamese people rarely say sorry, for example leaders to public, parents to children, teachers to students? What do you think about this? If this is true, what do you think could be the reasons behind this? Do you think the concern for *thể diện* has a role in here?

*Có một cái đánh giá là người Việt Nam hiếm khi nói xin lỗi, chẳng hạn lãnh đạo đối với quần chúng, ba mẹ với con cái, giáo viên với học sinh. Bạn nghĩ gì về điều này? Nếu bạn cũng cho rằng nhận xét này đúng, bạn nghĩ điều gì có thể là nguyên nhân đằng sau nó? Bạn có cho rằng thể diện có vai trò ở đây không?*

### ***Thể diện in teaching contexts***

- Relation between *thể diện* and teachers in general:

What do you think about *thể diện* in relation with teachers? What aspects do you think *thể diện* of a teacher includes?

*Bạn nghĩ như thế nào về thể diện đối với giáo viên? Theo bạn thể diện của một giáo viên được thể hiện qua những khía cạnh nào?*

- Relation between close persons of a teacher and the teacher's *thể diện*:

Is there any influence from your close persons on your *thể diện* as a teacher? As a teacher, what do you think possible influences of your family reputation / your partner's behaviours / your child's behaviours or study results on your *thể diện* ?

*Liệu có một sự ảnh hưởng nào từ những người thân của bạn lên thể diện giáo viên của bạn không? Trong vai trò là một giáo viên thì bạn nghĩ danh tiếng của gia đình bạn/ bạn đời của bạn/ hành vi hay kết quả học tập của con bạn có thể có ảnh hưởng như thế nào đến thể diện của bạn?*

- Extramarital affairs and *thể diện* of a teacher:

Is there any consequence on *thể diện* of a teacher when he/she is found involving in an extramarital affair, in your opinion? If yes, what are possible consequences?

*Theo ý kiến của bạn thì liệu thể diện của một giáo viên có bị ảnh hưởng không khi mà anh ta hay chị ta bị phát hiện ngoại tình? Nếu có thì ảnh hưởng thế nào?*

- Sexual offence with students by teachers:

What do you think about *thể diện* of a teacher when he/she involves in sexual offences such as sexually abusing, harassing their students, or buying sex from their students?

*Bạn nghĩ như thế nào về thể diện của một giáo viên khi anh ta hay chị ta làm những việc như là lạm dụng hay quấy rối tình dục sinh viên, hoặc là mua dâm sinh viên?*

- Being unable to answer students' questions in class:

Is there any influence on *thể diện* of a teacher if he/she cannot answer students' questions in classrooms? If you think this is a loss of *thể diện*, what do you think the teacher should do to maintain his/her *thể diện* in the situation?

*Theo bạn liệu thể diện của một giáo viên có bị ảnh hưởng nếu người đó không thể trả lời câu hỏi của sinh viên trên lớp? Nếu bạn cho rằng điều này là mất thể diện, bạn nghĩ người giáo viên đó nên làm gì để giữ thể diện của họ trong tình huống đó?*

- Teaching content is pointed out as wrong by students in class:

Is there any influence on *thể diện* of a teacher if something he/she teaches is pointed out as wrong by students in classrooms? If you think this is a loss of *thể diện*, what do you think the teachers should do to maintain his/ her *thể diện* in the situation?

Theo bạn thì *thể diện* của một giáo viên có bị ảnh hưởng hay không nếu như một nội dung nào đó mà người đó dạy trên lớp bị sinh viên chỉ ra là sai? Nếu bạn cho rằng điều này là *mất thể diện*, bạn nghĩ người giáo viên đó nên làm gì để giữ *thể diện* của họ trong tình huống đó?

- Commenting on colleagues' teaching presentations:

What do you do to maintain *thể diện* of your colleagues when you comment on their teaching presentations?

*Bạn sẽ làm gì để giữ thể diện cho đồng nghiệp của bạn khi bạn góp ý giờ dạy của họ?*

- Cheating in exams:

What do you think about *thể diện* of a teacher when he/she copies documents in their own exams?

*Bạn nghĩ như thế nào về thể diện của một giáo viên khi người giáo viên này quay cóp khi đi thi?*

- The most serious loss to *thể diện* of teachers:

In your opinion, what can be the most dreadful incident (which can be among the incidents above or an incident that has not yet mentioned) that damages *thể diện* of a teacher?

*Theo ý bạn thì sự việc nào (có thể là một trong các sự việc đã nêu hoặc là một sự việc nào đó chưa được nêu ra) có thể làm tổn hại thể diện của giáo viên nhất?*

- School leaders' actions to save *thể diện* of their institutions:

If you were school principal, what would you do to save *thể diện* of your school when your staff has done something that damage *thể diện* of your school?

*Nếu bạn là hiệu trưởng, bạn sẽ làm gì để giữ thể diện cho trường của bạn khi có một việc không hay xảy ra trong trường bạn hoặc đối với nhân viên của bạn làm tổn hại đến thể diện của trường?*

### ***Thể diện in gender relations***

- Meaning of the term “*thể diện/sĩ diện đàn ông*”:

What do you think about meaning the term “*thể diện đàn ông* (or) *sĩ diện đàn ông*”?

*Bạn nghĩ gì về ý nghĩa của cụm từ “thể diện đàn ông (hay) sĩ diện đàn ông”?*

- The idea “men pay more attention to their *thể diện* than women do”:

There is an opinion that men pay more attention to their *thể diện* than women do. What do you think about this opinion?

*Có ý kiến cho là đàn ông quan tâm tới thể diện của mình hơn là phụ nữ quan tâm tới thể diện của mình. Bạn nghĩ gì về ý kiến này?*

- The advice “women should keep their men’s *thể diện*”:

There has been a common advice that “women should keep their men’s *thể diện*” but there is hardly an advice like “men should keep their women’s *thể diện*”. What do you think about this?

*Có một lời khuyên phổ biến là “phụ nữ nên giữ thể diện cho người đàn ông của họ” nhưng hầu như không có lời khuyên ngược lại là “đàn ông nên giữ thể diện cho người phụ nữ của họ”. Bạn nghĩ gì về điều này?*

- Extramarital affairs by men and extramarital affairs by women:

How do you evaluate the incidents of a married man having an affair and a married woman having an affair? What do you think is more serious in terms of *thể diện*?

*Bạn đánh giá như thế nào đối với trường hợp đàn ông có vợ ngoại tình và trường hợp phụ nữ có chồng ngoại tình? Bạn nghĩ cái nào nghiêm trọng hơn về mặt thể diện?*

- The situation “men do housework and women do paid jobs in a family”:

What do you think of the incident of a man being unemployed, stay at home doing house work while his wife works to support their family finance? Do you think this might affect his face? If yes how?

*Bạn nghĩ gì về việc một người đàn ông thất nghiệp, ở nhà làm việc nhà trong khi vợ anh ta kiếm tiền cho gia đình? Bạn có nghĩ chuyện này có thể ảnh hưởng đến thể diện của người đàn ông không? Nếu có thì ảnh hưởng như thế nào?*

## APPENDIX 2

## ETHICS APPROVAL



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16 June 2010

Trang Thi Quynh Nguyen  
28 Summerhill Rd,  
Reservoir, Vic, 3073.

Dear Trang

**RE:** YOUR APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL  
**FHEC No:** R031/10  
**Supervisor/s** Dr K. Simkin  
**Project/Activity Title:** An exploration of the Vietnamese concept of face "thể diện"

Thank you for submitting your project for consideration by the Education Faculty Human Ethics Committee. The proposal has now been considered by the Committee and has been assessed as complying with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. Your project has now been granted ethics approval and you may now commence the study.

The project has been granted approval till **31/12/2011**.

The following standard conditions apply to your project:

- **Complaints** - If any complaints are received or ethical issues arise during the course of the project, researchers should advise the Secretary of the Education FHEC.
- **Limit of Approval** - Approval is limited strictly to the research proposal as submitted in your application while taking into account the conditions and approval dates advised by the FHEC.
- **Variation to Approval** - As a consequence of the previous conditions, any subsequent variations or modifications you wish to make to your project must be notified formally to the FEHC. This can be done using the 'Application for Approval of Modification to Research project' which is available at the following website:  
<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/research-services/ethics/human.htm>.
- **Progress Report** - A condition of approval is that you submit a Progress Report to the Committee annually throughout the approval period, to cover activities of the previous calendar year and is due on **12 February**. Failure to submit a progress report may result in the withdrawal of Human Ethics approval. A Final Report will be due within 6 months of the expiry date of the approval period. The Report Form is available from <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/research-services/ethics/human.htm>. Please note that your application has been reviewed by a sub-committee of the FHEC in the interest of facilitating a decision before the next committee meeting. The decision will require ratification by the full Human Ethics Committee and, as a consequence, approval may be withdrawn or conditions of the approval altered. However, you may commence your project prior to ratification of the approval decision and you will be notified if the approval status is altered.

If you wish to discuss any aspect of your project, please contact your supervisor (if you are a student) in the first instance, the Secretary Ms Joan Freeman, ([j.freeman@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:j.freeman@latrobe.edu.au)) or the Chairperson Dr Ramon Lewis ([r.lewis@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:r.lewis@latrobe.edu.au)).

On behalf of the Committee, best wishes with the success of your project.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Freeman  
Executive Secretary, Education Faculty Human Ethics Committee.

cc: Chair: Supervisor/s Dr K. Simkin



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