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Shamed Citizens: A Case Study on the Lived Experiences of Mature Vietnamese Queers

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ABSTRACT

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities in Vietnam have recently made progress in terms of legal equality, public visibility, and social acceptance. Major historical events include the first Viet Pride (2012), decriminalization of same-sex wedding ceremonies (2013), and the revised Civil Code to allow trans* people to register under a new gender (2017). However, the "social evils" campaign, as a shaming mechanism through derogatory discourses, has been targeting sexual minorities for not conforming to social and cultural norms. This campaign, as a sign of state and public anxieties towards globalization, HIV epidemic and external influences, has not only marginalized and silenced mature queers, but also intensified the queer movement. Through this qualitative research, the author interviewed 65 LGBTQ individuals and allies, including both young and mature queers of Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh, and other cities. Focusing on those who were born before 1970 specifically, the author aimed to explore how the notion of shame characterizes the lived experiences of mature queers to give them voice and to document their lived experiences. While perceived to be passive, shamed citizens, and "silent supporters" of the movement, the author argues that shame has an empowering, transformative capability for mature queers as "decent citizens," while young queers promote same-sex marriage, and civil and political rights through universal human rights standards. As one of a few communist nations in the world, this case study in Vietnam on advancing the rights of sexual minorities is unique not only in the ASEAN region, but also in the world.

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Introduction

In recent years, Vietnam, a socialist republic with the central leadership of a communist party, has proved to the world that it can make progress in terms of equality and non-discrimination for its LGBTQ citizens. Achievements include a first Viet Pride (2012) and lifting the ban of same-sex marriage ceremonies (2015) after a series of public defenses by Mr. Hà Hùng Cường and Mr. Nguyễn Việt Tiến, Ministers of Justice and Health, respectively. In addition, amendment to the Civil Code allows trans* people the right to register their sex and gender marker changes. At the ASEAN or Asian level, Vietnam's LGBTQ rights movement is regarded as somewhat progressive. By saying "yes" to the United Nations' (UN) Human Rights Council resolution on the Independent Expert (IE) on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, Vietnam showed its consistent support for equal rights of LGBTQ communities and sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) issues. It was one of three Asian States (Vietnam, Mongolia, and South Korea) to vote favorably for the IE mandate. I hope that this research will shed light on how queer movements could make progress despite the repressive political conditions and traditional, social, and cultural pressures in the ASEAN countries by a Vietnamese example.

Amidst this public sensitization, the most visible, active, and vibrant ones are the young LGBTQ Vietnamese, whereas one can hardly see older queers during public events, such as Viet Pride. Reasons behind the invisibility of these sub-groups could be multifold: laws, state media campaigns, and "environments of homophobia and heterosexism across institutions, such as the family, nationalism, and racialized identity formation" (Newton, 2014, p. 260). While the Law on the Elderly (2009), defines citizens aged 60 or over as elderly and formulates the rights that Vietnamese elders should enjoy, it also lays out obligations. It states that elders are obliged "to set bright examples in moral quality and lifestyles: to educate young generations to preserve and promote the fine traditions of the nation; to be exemplary in observing and mobilizing families and communities to observe the Party's policies [...] and the State's laws."

In other words, older citizens have moral obligations to set exemplary lifestyles and to educate young generations, to pass on "the fine traditions of the nation," and to act as role models within families and communities. This makes it harder for older queers, as they should fulfill these imposed obligations while enduring discrimination based on SOGIESC. To make matters worse, in 2002, Vietnam's state media declared homosexuality a "social evil," "a sin comparable to gambling, prostitution, and drug trafficking, and called for arrests of homosexual couples." The government stipulates that older people should be model citizens for the public, yet it shames them through its media for being members of sexual minorities.

In Vietnam, the number of older people is increasing while the birthrate has dropped, accelerating the rate of population ageing. According to HelpAge International, "by 2050, the number of people 60 years and over will triple from 8.9 percent to over 30 percent or 32 million." Although the Government of Vietnam issued national policies for the elderly and is signatory to the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA), its implementation report (2002-2012) does not address the issues of the elders of sexual minorities, especially in the plan for the implementation of MIPAA in 2012-2020. Currently, there is no formal data on the number of older queers in Vietnam, except for the Institute for Studies of Society, Economics and Environment (iSEE) estimate of 1.65 million LGBTIQ people living in the country. Thus, older, or mature queer individuals of Vietnam are not only recognized at the policy level, but also hardly participate in organized queer spaces. In this context, having worked on LGBTQ rights activism in Mongolia, I had an opportunity to explore lived experiences of Vietnamese mature queers.

When I started my research on exploring the lives of mature or old queers in Vietnam, the first thing I heard, which startled me was: "it is safer to talk about LGBTQ rights than human rights in Vietnam." In most countries, it is the other way around. When I advocated for LGBTQ rights in Mongolia as a gay man, general human rights discussion was an entry point to address sexuality rights. Coming from a nation, which was under the Russian-style socialist rule until the 1990s, it has been my desire to discover the historical reality of older generation of our queer community (because simply we know very little of it). Given the "dire" status of human

rights records, including freedoms of speech and opinion restricted, one can understand why civil and political rights are more controversial to discuss than sexual minority rights in Vietnam.

This research is about finding out about how shame characterizes the lived experiences of mature or old queers of Vietnam through an ethnographic case study. There are many who suffer from structural barriers and family "rejection" due to societal and cultural norms. Shame and fear, love and longing, acceptance and rejection, nationalism and modernity, and sexuality and norms play crucial roles in the lives of queers. Without knowing the nature of the past lived experiences of LGBTQ communities, it would be challenging for the current movers and shakers of the queer movements to define how they should strategize, plan, and act upon various aspects of sexual minorities towards equality, acceptance, and a better future. In this sense, this research contributes to the movement by doing the much-needed soul-searching and finding ways to internalize universal human rights on the ground with its unique social and cultural characteristics.

First and foremost, I will pose the questions of how shame has discursively constructed the lived experiences of mature queer community in Vietnam. I will also explore how queer people in Vietnam acknowledge, resist, and even embrace shame emotionally and affectively. Subsequently, I will problematize the notion of "LGBTQ community" as a researcher by contemplating the questions such as, "To what extent do LGBTQ people create a community? To what extent is the sense of belonging established on the experience of discrimination or stigmatization?" I hypothesize that acknowledged affective shame has an enabling, empowering, and even transformative force for the queer communities from generation to generation. Novelty of the research would be in the critical examination of what other issues related to the country's queer community I can unfold through the concept of shame.

Secondly, I acknowledge that the concept and terminology of shame became prominent as interviews with queer community members progressed. Meeting with Vietnamese LGBTQ people has coincided with my exposure to the academic notion of shame, per se; thus, this case study is an entry point about lived experiences of old or mature queers of Vietnam and simultaneously, it motivated me to think hard on the link between shame and sexuality. In other words, initial purpose of studying the old generation of LGBTQ

communities of Vietnam led to a narrower focus on how the notion of shame has characterized the lived experiences of its mature or older queers.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Cheryl Glenn (2004) argues that dominant groups in any society use "the rhetorical move of silence" to suppress marginalized groups by rendering their experiences invisible. Drawing on Glenn's position, Maria Brown (2009) argues that silencing LGBT elders in queer theory and gerontological theory because of their age and sexuality, respectively, excludes them from the creation of a cultural form (Brown, 2009, p. 67). This historical invisibility and silencing "have left LGBTQ elders without adequate social or material supports, isolating them from both the LGBTQ and the older-adult communities, as well as the agencies serving those communities" (Brown, 2009, p. 65). This illustrates that older queers are in in-between, temporal spaces, somewhat isolated from their own communities and heterosexual counterparts due to identity categories, such as age, sexual orientation, gender and national identities, health status, ability, to name a few.

This universal reality for elderly queers applies to the Vietnamese queers. Given the political, legal, social, and cultural circumstances and emerging questions about their identities, it is important to investigate the lives of elder queers of Vietnam as lived, as opposed to how the state, media or public portray and construct their lives and experiences discursively. Lived experiences make agencies visible and documenting the history of older and mature queers would not only fill gaps in overall historiography of the country, but also empower the next generation of queers to claim their existence. "There are indeed complex connections between life as lived and life as talked about and there are differentiated yet intertwining discourses of heteronormativity in contemporary Vietnam" (Earl, 2014). In other words, dominant discourses judge and frame the lived experiences of queers within heteronormative "boxes." State and public discourses are colorfully biased to "silence" or "erase" the actual, lived experiences of elder queers.

Apart from this conflicting nature of identities, negative state and public discourses, and political, legal, social, and cultural environments, there are additional dimensions, which have to do with modernization and colonial legacy. In fact, Vietnam has never criminalized homosexuality, but "the very first discussion of homosexual practice, transgender expression and cross-dressing as a sin came from Western literature" (United Nations Development Programme & United States Agency for International Development [UNDP & USAID], 2014, p. 13). Based on the observations of the indigenous culture in the nineteenth century, the French colonialists interpreted homosexual practice as imported from the Chinese culture and labeled acts of young boys in female roles on stage as shameful (ibid). As Frantz Fanon argued, "a major weapon of the colonizers was the imposition of their image of the colonized on the subjugated people" (Taylor, 1994, p. 65). Indeed, it was the European men who engaged in sexual activity with young Vietnamese and Chinese boys; referred to as the derogatory term "pêđê" as in pédéraste", a French word describing men who have anal sex with boys (UNDP & USAID, 2014, p. 13). Today in Vietnam, "pêđê" refers to "people with any sexual orientation and gender identity that deviates from social norms" (ibid), a lingering colonial discourse.

Here I want to emphasize the derogatory terms referring to Vietnamese queers in terms of the colonial past, ownership, and representation of the queer community, as well as the struggle by the community to challenge the power of the term while embracing and coping with shame attached to it. Judith Butler (1993) argues, "the term "queer" has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names or, rather, the producing of a subject through that shaming interpellation. "Queer" derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, [and] insult" (Butler, 1993, p. 18). For Butler, this shaming act through repeated citation creates social bonds of the oppressing communities, who keep reinforcing their actions from generation to generation.

The term "queer" once a derogatory slang now refers to a theory challenging the norms. The Vietnamese word "bóng" (literal meaning in English is "spirit," but some sources cite "shadow"), is "perhaps the closest approximation to queer, as both terms are flexible and convey many meanings" (Black, 2017, p. 34). "Pêđê" has a shaming, derogatory meaning

due to its colonial root, "pederast." However, it is observed that some young queers in Vietnam use "pêđê" during the Viet Pride events in northern cities of Thái Nguyên and Thái Bình in August 2017, where they called each other "pêđê" to tease, or to sound "cool." It seems that "bóng" is used in the North of Vietnam usually by mature or old queers, whereas "pêđê" is a relatively mainstreamed, derogatory term used more commonly than "bóng." It still is debatable which one has a similar fate as "queer." In this research, I use the category of "queer" to include LGBTI people and those who identify themselves having non-normative gender and sexual identities in Vietnam.

Maturity is another key concept in this research. Even though definitions of what it means to be "old" vary and the Vietnamese law defines it above the age of 60, older LGBTQ adults of some countries include the population of sexual and gender minorities over the age of 50 (Choi & Meyer, 2016, p. 0). To be inclusive of both mature and old queers in this research, I will use "old" or "elder" when the individuals are above the age of 60; I will use "mature," when they are below 60. When it comes to the data I collected, I initially aimed at age groups, who were born before 1970. Thus, the research addresses both mature and old LGBTQ people of Vietnam, who experienced the Vietnam War (1945-1975), post-colonial era (1954-1975), or the so-called Đổi Mới period, which is the economic and administrative reform of 1986. The use of terminology "maturity" also stems from cultural sensitivity.

Mai (2016) argues, "For Vietnamese queer identity politics, the intersectionality between class, gender and sexuality is an issue that should not be overlooked, as these axes together create a hierarchy that marginalizes certain subgroups of the queer community" (Mai, 2016, p. 113). When emphasizing this claim, Mai reminds us that caution is necessary when adopting Western knowledge and discourse in non-Western societies. Mai also demonstrates that class, gender, and sexuality oppressions characterize a queer hierarchy among the Vietnamese queer youth community, where classed patriarchal societal norms perpetuate homonormativity and homonormative values (Mai, 2016, p. 102). Consequently, through these values the queer hierarchy places certain identities such as gay men and lesbians as privileged groups and marginalizes the bodies of transgender individuals and sexual lives of bisexuals as subgroups (Mai, 2016, p. 102). If we extend this logic and analysis by adding age as an additional

axis, it will be clear that old queers would be another subgroup subject to marginalization along the queer hierarchy.

Based on the above-mentioned accounts of various arguments and discussions, I will answer the question of how shame has discursively constructed the lived experiences of mature LGBTQ communities in contemporary Vietnam. Through the "social evils" campaign discourses, aligning the LGBTQ individuals with other "evils" such as gamblers, prostitutes, and drug users, it explicitly "profiles" the sexuality minority as "criminals," besides the hitherto categorization of pathologization and deviance. This seemingly innocent, simple question then leads me to ask what it means to be a Vietnamese mature or old queer citizen today in terms of one's being "Vietnamese," being "queer" and being "old," implying the intersecting identities that transpire (inter-/trans-) nationality, society, culture, economics, law, sexuality, gender, race, class, personality, modernity, and age. Ruled by the communist party, yet benefiting from economic growth, one is constantly reminded of how the state discourse of "social evils" restricts personal freedoms and human rights, while seemingly promoting the same rights in the eyes of the international community.

"Social evils" campaign as an ongoing shaming mechanism

Although sociology, social science and social psychology approach the notion of "social evils" and define it in various formulations, some argue that it is almost impossible to define what constitutes "evil," thus it is socially and culturally constructed (Javaid, 2015). Apart from the philosophical and more academic contemplations of the definition, "social evils are issues which in one way or another affects members of a society and is often considered controversial or problematic in terms of moral values." Major focus is on "moral values" and common acts of social evils are categorized as prostitution, disease, gambling, alcoholism, racism, and organized crime. Another example is that in 1904, Joseph Rowntree, British philanthropist and social reformer, identified "poverty, war, slavery, intemperance, the opium trade, impurity and gambling as major social evils facing British society" (Watts et al., 2008, p. 3). If the notion of "social evil" is extremely complicated to define and socially and

culturally constructed, there must be a way to think about the nature of this concept as every society creates their own "social evil" discursively, be it human or non-human.

The concept of "social evil" in Vietnamese state discourse is vague, but it has been described as "[undesirable values] introduced to Vietnamese society by virtue of what was seen as the country's increased involvement in a morally polluted world" (UNDP & USAID, 2014, p. 14). The emphasis on "morality" is still there, but more importantly, this kind of "evil" is being introduced from outside. On the other hand, Natalie Newton (2014) claims that "'social evil' is a loose legal category of social behavior in Vietnam that has included homosexuality," and that "the state has regulated non-normative gender and sexuality indirectly through campaigns against social evils since the 1950s" (Newton, 2014, p. 259). Furthermore, Newton states that while "social evils" are implicit in legal documents even though Ho Chi Minh's public declarations of the new Vietnamese constitution introduces social evils in the Vietnamese Civil Code in 1953, local authorities manipulated its interpretations and took measures against those deviated from the norms (ibid). Overall, one can see that the concept of "social evil" is not a twenty-first century phenomenon; it goes back to post-colonial era of the 1950s and possibly earlier than that.

What is more, Newton investigated the direct linkage between the socialist Vietnam's "social evils," the Republic of China's "hooliganism" (*liumang*) and the former Soviet Union's "hooliganism" (*khuliganstvo*) (Newton, 2012, pp. 121-132) and discovers that for these socialist governments, social evils or hooliganism were the umbrella terms that illustrated "behaviors outside of social or legal norms, from premarital sex in the former Soviet Union to dancing in karaoke bars in contemporary Vietnam" (Newton, 2014, p. 260). More importantly, in the case of Vietnam, "social evils" have to do with the country's anxieties around global capitalism and the HIV and AIDS epidemic, as the government defined social evils as the "unholy trinity of prostitution, drug use and gambling," further expanding the categories, groups and identities (Newton, 2014, p. 260). Anxiety could well have to do with "not knowing what to expect" as in the "Cartesian anxiety," or in the existential sense that in anxiety, as in fear, there is threat and a certain sense of vulnerability attached to it. It can be argued that these 'socialist' nations

indeed branded undesirable social behaviors that are inherent in its society and culture as "social evils" as a way to alienate the "naturalness" and authenticity of these phenomena.

With the economic reform of 1986, Vietnam has also experienced cultural shifts, especially strongly and rapidly in the south, while the capital city Hanoi still wrestles with moral dilemma. In this circumstance, young men and women in Vietnam face age-, sex-, and gender-defined norms that discourage, for example, "extramarital affairs, same-sex relations, and the buying of sex, as such behaviors are recognized as expressions of polluted morality with a negative impact on family happiness, customs, laws, and even social security" (Horton & Rydstrom, 2011, pp. 543-544). Overall, "morality's aim is to produce acquiescent subjects who, despite distress and humiliation, are adjusted to the authoritarian order; furthermore, the family is the authoritarian state in miniature, to which children must learn to adapt as a preparation for the general social adjustment required of them later" (Reich, 1970, p. 30). Growing up queer under the pressure and accusation of being "social evils" and constant moral policing, this authoritarian regime would be existent both at home in the private sphere and nationally in the public domain.

Vietnam has rich queer history and to validate it with empirical studies, documentations, and storytelling, while promoting human rights in the contemporary Vietnam, domestic NGOs, activists, and scholars have been making efforts to record the lived experiences as an attempt to seek truth. For example, Center for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (CCIHP), a leading sexual and reproductive health and rights NGO in Hanoi, has been archiving stories of older LGBTQ generations. One of the exciting discoveries was to spot a 1961 newspaper article about "transgender technology in the West." Surprisingly, the tone of the article was positive and hopeful that the new technology could help those who needed it. Despite these progressive moves, the CCIHP archive curator has pointed out that some old queers she reached out did not identify themselves as such, but instead talked about their feelings. This highlights how "suppressed groups' emotional experiences emerge explicitly, whereas their subordination as oppressed identity is experienced at a cognitive level" (Gould, 2010, p. 30).

Methodology

Feminist research methods, such as qualitative research and face-to-face, semi-structured interviews and intersectionality as an analytical tool guided the methodology of this study. I conducted individual interviews using a snowball method. Regarding feminist research methods and intersectionality, the former is crucial, because it gives voices to the marginalized groups that are often excluded from knowledge production and policymaking, concerned with issues of broader social change and social justice (Wambui, 2013, p. 2). Furthermore, "feminist researchers promote a participatory model for research where the relationship between researcher and the researched is nonhierarchical, non-authoritarian, non-exploitative and non-manipulative" (Oakley, 1981). In this qualitative research, my purpose was to understand the social reality of Vietnamese queers and to investigate the meaning of the lives experienced by these individuals. Ethnographic field and case study were essential, as a researcher and a fellow queer, I immersed myself among the communities in LGBTQ facilities, public events, and organizations, to get a profound look.

In May-August 2017, I interviewed 65 LGBT and queer community members, allies, and representatives of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) and other cities around the north and south of Vietnam. This number includes LGBTQ activists, community leaders, expatriates living in Vietnam, PFLAG parents and other stakeholders to get the full picture of what it has been like for the elder LGBTQ community members. Generally, the data collection process was successful, and I was able to contact some of the interviewees in April-May 2018 to ask follow-up questions. Local NGOs (e.g., iSEE, ICS Center, CCIHP, Center for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender, Family, Women and Adolescents (CSAGA), Next Gen, Hanoi Panic, Hanoi Queer, Doc Lab, etc.) have been extremely helpful and cooperative.

What's more, co-researchers, interpreters, and volunteers helped me to contact, to set up meetings and to translate interviews. In Hanoi, I worked with a co-researcher (An) and her assistant (Linh), but in HCMC, ICS center appointed three co-researchers/ volunteers / interpreters: a queer girl with the psychology background, Phuong; a heterosexual girl with the

communications background, Moc; and a Female-to-Male transgender activist, An. This technical and human resources support was tremendously helpful not only linguistically, but also logistically in terms of making the overall atmosphere and situation relaxed for the interviewees and taking notes while others were speaking.

The Hanoi part was challenging given the relatively closeted nature of the community, whereas in HCMC, interviews were planned day after day, with even 4 appointments within one day. Some interviewees also came from the surrounding cities of both North and South, such as Hai Phuong, Hai Duong, and Can Tho. HCMC was more accessible, and the interviewees were comfortable with revealing their names and other information, whereas in Hanoi most interviewees wished to remain anonymous, implying the difference between these two major cities in terms of expressing one's sexuality and gender identity and expressions, as well as the general level of openness about controversial human rights, sexuality, and other issues.

Out of 58 interviewees (of 65 contacts, 6 declined to be interviewed and one case was of a gay man whose interview transcription is used posthumously), twelve were born before 1970. Data analysis will focus on these 12 interviewees (5 gay men, 3 transgender women, one transgender man, and 3 heterosexual individuals) and the transcribed interview of a gay man who passed away in 2013. Other people's views, observations and inputs are crucial to understand the bigger picture of the lived experiences of older LGBTQ communities. Therefore, I would use them selectively in the analytical section accordingly.

In terms of identity category, there were more gay men (21), lesbians (10) and transgender women (9), who were available and accessible for interviews, and were willing to participate in the research, than queer people (5), transgender men (5) and bisexuals (2). Six heterosexual individuals participated in the interview: two PFLAG parents, a law professor who got involved in the legal committee to amend the Civil Law, a documentary filmmaker who provided me with the above-mentioned transcription, a bar tender of Golden Cock (GC), a local gay bar in Hanoi, and a Hanoi Queer co-founder who participated in the video production. The presence of intersex people was almost non-existent; only one young intersex individual in her/his/their 20s was identified through a friend of friends, but I was unable to reach that person for an interview.

The whole process started with informing the interviewees about the research project, confidentiality, ethical concerns, and/or other details. Due to the language barrier, I had to be more sensitive and sensible about using certain terminologies. For instance, first few interviewees immediately reacted in surprise or discontent with my using the words such as "old," "older", or "elders" and suggested we use the term, "mature." Refusal to participate in the interview and being unable to meet due to certain reasons also show the limits of the research. I describe the overall background of the research below.

As a researcher, I view this research project would empower the local LGBTQ community members, as well as myself through mutual learning, effective and interactive dialogues, and collaborations on the research topic. The source of funding, and the purpose, scope and content details of the research were explained to various stakeholders from the beginning of the data collection until the finalization of the project. I have been following the ethical, financial, and other required principles of the SHAPE-SEA research program.

Since I conducted the interviews with those who were available and accessible in major cities such as Hanoi and HCMC, there are limitations in terms of urban/rural divide, covering a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and more queers who are over 60. The fact that only two interviewees were above the age of 60 and 10 were below 60 means that the sampling was insufficient. Nevertheless, I was able to get a good idea of how and why shame plays a crucial role in the lived experiences of mature and old queers of Vietnam. In the future, it is necessary to cover rural areas, intersex, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, as well as older queers as target groups.

Findings and Analysis

Here I will explore how the Vietnamese state depiction of queers through the "social evil" campaign affected the interviewees focusing on the discourses of *"bóng" (English: "shadow")* and *"pêđê" ("pederast") from the perspectives of discursive sexuality, colonial legacy, as well as social acceptance. On the other hand, it seems that social stigma around the queer community ignited a sense of queer responsibility, especially among the youth.*

Douglas Crimp's "queer responsibility," is the idea that there is a generational obligation especially by gay men to reflect on the politics of sex and to reestablish the connection of long-lost cultures. In this context, the politics of sex refers to community health issues, popular media portrayal of gay men, and most importantly their collective attitudes towards affective notions of shame and grief (Takemoto, 2003).

Shaming campaign and its discourse

Nguyễn Văn Dũng is an openly gay, *public figure and* HIV and AIDS activist, who wrote his memoir "*Bóng*" in 2008 when he was 41. This autobiographical account of one gay man's lived experience is an example of how societal and cultural norms played an instrumental role in one's life, making him feel like a shadow or "a second-class citizen" and then embracing this shame by proudly sharing his personal story to the public. *Dũng* illustrated his personal life as a young gay man in the early 1980s and 1990s in the book, revealing some love stories, intimate narratives, and his journey as one of the mature members of the queer community. He says, "We did not want to be gay. Please sympathize with our fate." "Shame is indeed felt as an inner torment and sickness of the soul, making the "self" feel naked, defeated, alienated, and lacking in dignity or worth" (Tomkins, 1995, p. 133). This strong affect of shame is vivid in *Dũng*'s memoir. The title of his book, "*Bóng,*" means "shadow or silhouette and is a derogatory term for homosexual males because it suggests they are mere "shadows of normal men" (AFP, 2008). This "shadow" identity defines their place in the hierarchical, patriarchal society. He writes:

> *"If you were born gay, no matter whether you are a man or a woman, you were born at a bad time, on a bad day, in a bad month, in a bad year, under a very bad star." "Many gay men have struggled with deep shame for not meeting societal expectations — marrying, building a family, taking over the house, caring for their ageing parents and producing male offspring."* (AFP, 2008)

These comments seem to reflect the Confucian influence on Vietnamese culture by

way of referring to "bad" or negative attributes to having a non-normative sexual orientation, as well as social expectations and norms that dictate individuality. During the interview, he recalls the attitude of his neighbors when he was a child, "my mom and neighbors would argue, because the neighbors say, "having a gay son in the family is shame." Because of this pressure and societal norms, he explains, "Only when parents pass away or when they are finally alone, gay men can express themselves and be who they really are." He claims that for most people, being gay or queer is basically viewed as having no respect for one's ancestors. While citing from the book and reading aloud, his voice shakes and tears well up in his eyes. This clearly indicates that *Dũng*'s eyes and face are the sites of communication, with deep shame experienced of the self by the self (Tomkins, 1995, p. 137). He is still coping with shame in his own way, given his isolated way of living on his own in a small flat in Hanoi, away from his (extended) family and relatives.

"The most common term in formal written and spoken Vietnamese for homosexuality, "đồng tình luyến ái" ("same-sex love") refers to same-sex eroticism, not homosexual identity and is sometimes used in the context of the Vietnamese Communist State's indirect regulation as a kind of "social evil"" (Newton, 2014, p. 256). Contemporary Vietnamese derogatory slang reflects a stigmatization of gender ambiguity or non-heterosexual sexuality: *ái nam ái nữ* ("half man, half woman," referring to cross-dressing spiritual shamans) and xăng pha nhớt ("petrol mixed with oil," referring to homosexuality of two genders that are not supposed to mix, like when mixing petrol and motor oil) (ibid). The most common derogatory term, as I have been referring to in the study, is *"pêđê,"* a common terminology that refers to gay men or homosexuality in general. "P*êđê"*, although originally rooted in the Greek words meaning "love of boys", entered the Vietnamese vocabulary through the French colonization. The effects of affect, when using or hearing this terminology, could be demeaning or infuriating. Transgender "sisters" from southern cities of HCMC and Can Tho, An and Lan, who are 34 and 48 years old, respectively, express their discomfort with these terminologies:

> *"People call us many different names and derogatory terms such as "pêđê," "xăng pha nhớt" (meaning, "Petrol mixed with oil") and*

> *"third-world people." In Hanoi, they started using "LGBT[IQ]" increasingly, but there is a clash between the use of "pêđê" in Hanoi and "homo" in Saigon."*

This implies that sometimes people use the above-mentioned terms as an umbrella term for both homosexuals and transgender individuals. The "third world" (*"thế giới thứ ba"*) is a term that I have discovered during this interview. When Vũ Trọng Hùng, the self-proclaimed oldest gay man from Hanoi died at the age of 73 in 2013, a local newspaper featured the news in which it stated, "His funeral takes place in the regret of the close relatives of the "third world."" French demographer Alfred Sauvy coined this term in his article, "Three Worlds, One Planet" in 1952 (Greene, 1980, p. 16). Although the Cambridge Dictionary defines "third world" as "countries of Africa, South America, and Asia that have less developed industries," in a broader sense for the Vietnamese "third world" in this particular case refers to gender and sexual non-normative "third-sex / gender" people, following men (first-sex / gender / world) and women (second-sex / gender / world). When it comes to the terminologies that refer to queers in Vietnam, we can identify that at least "*pêđê"* derives from the French colonial past. In fact, "the very first discussion of homosexual practice, transgender expression and cross-dressing as a sin came from the French colonialists" (UNDP & USAID, 2014, p. 13). This illustrates that the public in Vietnam are coping with issues of sexuality using discourses some of which come from foreign languages, Chinese, French, and English, which have a strong resonance with the country's colonial era. Perhaps it is not that the government is naïve or uninformed about the connotations or implications of using these discourses through the "social evils" campaign, but the authority to put it out there through a state-orchestrated media campaign allows the public to exploit the discourses in any way they desire. On the other hand, as Foucault's "friendship as a way of life" suggests, "the potentiality of same-sex love and its impact on society the institutions are most concerned with, rather than the expressed notions of morality and sex concerns" (Foucault, 1997, p. 137).

Another point that needs attention and analysis is how citizenship aspects manifest itself in the responses of the interviewees. Older queers focused on how to lead decent life

as a valuable citizen of Vietnam, whereas younger generations highlighted the discourses of human rights – the right to equal marriage, and to civil and political rights. On the notions of nationalism, respectability and sexuality, George L. Mosse (1985) argues that "the clearly defined moral and aesthetic boundaries of what it means to be a figure of ideal manliness or masculinity in society became an important symbol of the threat to nationalism and respectability in the modern era" (Mosse. 1985: 31). In this regard, the ideal manhood in the contemporary Vietnamese society would be heterosexual, educated, morally decent, reproductively capable, and respectable citizens, whereas morally "polluted," "dirty," "evil" and reproductively "infertile" men, gays, bisexuals, transgender, and queer men, as well as those whose gender and sexual identities are non-normative would be abnormal.

Therefore, for some elder interviewees, being "decent citizens" is more desirable than being queer or identified as such as a primary identity marker. When I asked *Dũng, "*In your book, you wished to be reborn as a 'normal person.' Do you still feel the same?*"* He answered, "It is a very difficult question. Now there is almost no struggle, and I am happy. Although I have no regrets about my past, I still think about hardship that I had to endure to get here. Thinking about it, it is like "a deep dark cave" that sinks me down. In my next life, I want a loving, understanding family and enabling environment." This suggests that the ideal discourse of "normalcy" is so powerful that it is as same as a state or sense of achievement; on the other hand, the opposite is "a deep, dark cave" that one does not wish to visit ever again. National identity, in this case, does not have to dichotomize between human rights and citizenship. As Hannah Arendt once stated, citizenship is the right to have rights. The context in which Arendt made this claim was during the inter-war periods in relations to the issues of statelessness and citizenship under the totalitarian regime; however, her claims are still relevant today in terms of expressing one's being herself, himself, or "queer" self, while enjoying one's fundamental rights under the authoritarian regime of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Kim Sa is a former singer, entertainer, and a transgender woman, who was born in 1950. She calls the years of her active performance on stage, the "golden age," between 1979 and 2012. It was in 2012, when she fell ill and could not perform anymore. The entertainment

troupe or the crew was her "family" and the only community she knew well. Her illness was an opportunity for her to see the dynamics between young and old transgender individuals and she now has a sense of queer responsibility. She says, "In the past, people [transgender] were closer to each other, but now young people only care about earning money. LGBTQ community members are happy on the outside, but sad on the inside, because they faced many tough times. Human quality changed." From her point of view, human decency, and the quality of being "good" lies in the fact how individuals care for one another. However, from most young people's perspectives, it is an individualistic society where neoliberal selves are too busy caring for themselves in pursuit of personal happiness (for most people).

Community as "home"

As I mentioned earlier, when Vũ Trọng Hùng, a former government inspector passed away, the local newspaper called the LGBTI and queer community as "close relatives of the "third world" (*"thế giới thứ ba"*). The media reference to the community as "family members" or "relatives" is not inaccurate, but indeed, it is the point. Late Hùng's colleague, Mr. Nguyen Son Minh, Member of the Executive Board of the Hanoi Association of HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control said, "Dad lived a proud life, but the end of his life he had to live in a rented apartment, with no family and no money." Although late Hùng might not have had his blood family with him until the end of his life, he had his community as a family – the Hoàn Kiếm community of his work colleagues and the gay community of Hanoi, both old and young. In other words, "home" is not a family in a conventional sense, but it is a "community" of the marginalized groups.

Born in 1962 as the youngest son with four sisters and two brothers, Phung is a painter and professional Master of Ceremonies (MC). He moved to HCMC from his hometown Hue when he was 20 to settle down. He considers himself lucky, because he has an understanding, accepting family. In fact, when a girl was attracted to him romantically, his mother was the one to tell her that her son was gay. Among his relationships, the longest one continued for 11 years, from 2004 to 2015. Phung says:

> *"Older queers have not been able to come out, lack confidence and are afraid to show up in public venues. They feel they are old and unattractive; that is why they do not come out. However, there are many secret groups where older gay men who create their own support networks. There is such a group in Saigon, and they work quite secretly. If there is a death in the family of one friend, all the other friends support and even attend the funeral. These groups are very active. Small things are best to be secretive and perhaps it is more effective if these groups are tight together and they do not need to be integrated into the bigger movement. The smaller you are, the easier you are eliminated though. It is not good, but it is difficult too, because of cultural and traditional gaps. I follow some activities and value small events, but they are not sustainable, as they would fade over time."*

"Shared shame strengthens the sense of mutuality and community whether it is between parent and child, friend and friend, or citizen and citizen" (Tomkins, 1995, p. 156). It seems that in smaller friends' circles among old or mature queers, they tend to create their own communities because of collective shame, or "group solidarity" in Tomkins' terms and unnecessary exposure. Phung continues, "Even now there are some older gay men, who refuse to admit that they are gay by saying, "I am straight, and I just did it to satisfy your needs." So, this kind of self-denial happens to many older [and LGBTI] queers. You do not need to hide your true self like this."

Another example of community forming their own "home" was a literal example of building their own "family/home" in Saigon. Jessica is a community leader and a transgender performer, born in 1987. Called as a "mama," or "madam," she has been living with seven other transgender girls. They are make-up artists, actors, lottery singers, funeral dancers, and other performers. According to the "Being LGBT in Asia Vietnam Country Report" (2014), "transgender people are essentially forced into sex work or "performances" such as funeral singing as a livelihood, as they lack family support and are often refused employment due to

stigma and discrimination" (Pham et al., 2012). In Vietnam, people believe that singing at funerals will help the dead's souls to be released and the living to go on being happy. Thus, people employ transgender people to do such work because they are seen as targets for mockery and a source of amusement, resulting in exploitation, sexual assaults, and violence (UNDP & USAID, 2014, p. 14). Despite this bitter reality, Jessica's living condition and arrangement with other girls are resonant with Foucault's "friendship as a way of life":

> *The affection and passion between women is well documented. [...] women do each other's hair, help each other with make up, dress each other. Women have access to the bodies of other women: they put their arms around each other, kiss each other... (Foucault, 1997, pp. 138-139).*

This was a closest-to-reality description of what I experienced when I went to interview Jessica and the girls. This kind of group living is becoming increasingly common among not only transgender girls, but also young gay men. However, I wonder whether this is happening for older queers. I mentioned of the transgender "sisters" An and Lan earlier. Lan, who was born in 1970, is older than An, who was born in 1984. Lan shared with me the most intimate stories of her life. When she had expressed her gender identity to her family and friends, they had not accepted her the way she was. Then she left home to prove them wrong: "no matter what her sexuality is, she can be successful in life." She felt the pain of being alone in early days and eventually found other transgender girls and bonded with them and started living together. She now sings at weddings, performs for the lottery at marketplaces where many families gather. She enjoys her social life and her role in society.

While leading this lone life, a fateful encounter with An occurred and An's family adopted Lan as their own daughter. Lan is like a guardian sister for An and this loving family rekindled the inner and the strongest drive inside Lan. An, living with her long-term partner, adopted a daughter of their own. Lan says, "An is lucky to have a partner and daughter," because for her it is sad and lonely to grow up alone and it is a blessing that An does not have to go through the same hardships she faced in life. Lan pointed out that the government

is committed to and expressed its acceptance towards LGBTI and queer community. There are risks in life and now she would not take any more risks. As for An, she used to perform with fire and that damaged her lungs. In this tragic time, community members mobilized help to cover hospital fees via Facebook. Lan and An feel quite strongly about the community bond. They also informed me there are well-off, (older queer) people in the community, who function as "advisors" for others in need. Another respondent said that some of these "secret advisors" are "silent supporters" of the movement.

In June 2017, when I met *Quỳnh Khưu*, a transgender man from Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), born in 1969, one of my research goals to help start dialogue between old and young queers saw its first fruit. After long online correspondences, it was a fateful first encounter of *Quỳnh* with Ân, one of the research assistants/translators, who is a transsexual man in his 20s. There is a big gap yet many common grounds between the two in terms of age, gender identity and expression, sexuality, class, education, and other categories. Speaking fluently using the language of human rights, and having started his transitioning, Ân radiates with confidence, self-esteem, knowledge of LGBTIQ rights, and hope. On the other hand, *Quỳnh* is curious about the transitioning process, but effortlessly "masculine" in his own way, and ripe with emotional maturity with life and work experiences. Born in a home of three siblings during the Vietnam War and now torn between family separation and acceptance, *Quỳnh* strives to be "a better citizen" (in his own words) for the country and a loving son of his family. However, his family neither acknowledges nor rejects him completely with his sexuality against the norm; moreover, having a "son" with a non-normative gender identity is shame in Vietnamese society. 10 years ago, a serious motorbike accident almost killed *Quỳnh, but* did not change the attitude of his family.

Shame-humiliation and contempt-disgust are the negative affect related to love and identification, and individuation and hate, respectively (Tomkins, 1995, p. 139); "Shame-humiliation does not renounce the object permanently, but contempt-disgust does. Contempt is the mark of the oppressor, and contempt and shame cannot be completely distinguished" (ibid). In this case, the oppressor has many faces, be it loved ones, the nation, community, or complete strangers. Le Vy is a lesbian, who was born in 1977, from a small town in the north

near Hanoi and I met her during the Viet Pride in August 2017. Le Vy revealed the most traumatic experience in which her father buried her alive in their yard with her head barely emerging from the ground. The father did this out of shame and disgust that she had love affairs with other women, putting her family in shame in the eyes of the neighbors. When one expresses contempt for another, the other is more likely to experience shame than self-contempt (Tomkins, 1995, p. 139).

In a hierarchically organized, highly collectivized, communal society like Vietnam, this feeling of internalized contempt-shame is extremely strong that contempt is often replaced by emphatic shame. When it comes to the relationship between shame-humiliation, guilt, and internalized contempt-disgust, the focus is on the affect of the ashamed. Although it is almost impossible to speculate how Le Vy felt when she was buried, one can assume because of her father as an oppressor felt strong shame and contempt, Le Vy might have felt a strong sense of guilt and humiliation. Tomkins explains that for some purposes it may indeed be more convenient to use another word such as guilt, which is about moral matters, in order to refer to shame and therefore distinguish it from other types of shame experience (Tomkins, 1995, p. 143). In one of the research participants' words: "Those who love you most will hurt you most."

Human rights and gender equality are major 'Western projects' Vietnam has been tackling in the post-reform era, while putting up with the implications of the so-called modernity and civilization. The educated Vietnamese born after the twentieth century were exposed to "attributes of what was perceived as "modern" civilization as introduced by the major world powers and eagerly elaborated relevant versions, which became the basis for contemporary Vietnamese culture" (Taylor, 2013, p. 517). One of these attributes is the concept of human rights as a sign of modernity. The young queers I met were familiar with and fluent in human rights and LGBTIQ discourses, whereas the mature ones would be alien, reluctant, or indifferent to refer to them. It could be due to ill-informed perceptions about human rights being "Western imports," which may be in the way of mature queers to become "decent citizens" to prove themselves for the nation. Nevertheless, only through the human rights mechanisms and frameworks, the rights organizations identify gaps and press the

government to advance the LGBTQ rights in the country, evidenced by the Universal Periodic Review reports and relevant achievements this process yielded: accepting the recommendation to enact a law on discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity and an increasing number of weddings of LGBTI couples in 2014-2018 (iSEE, 2018).

Conclusion

Drawing on the argument of rhetorical roles of silence, silencing and muted groups, it has become clear that the old and mature queers of Vietnam have been "silenced" or "muted" by the dominant discourses triggered by the "social evils" campaign which dates back to the 1950s until today, via institutional documents, rules and regulations, vague laws, state-run media and public sentiments. Although I could not identify anyone directly affected by the decision of arresting homosexuals as declared by the 2002 announcement of the campaign, it was apparent that it touched most of the research participants emotionally and affectively. To clarify further, it is not the old and mature queers who feel shame and ashamed only, the queer community itself and their loved ones are also affected by this 'shaming' campaign at varying degrees. Hence, it is sad but true to say, "those who love us hurt us," not intentionally, but due to restrictive social norms.

At the macro-level, mature queers in HCMC were relatively cooperative and talkative to share their experiences with the author, compared to those in Hanoi. Given the latter being the capital city close to the central government and potential surveillance, communities implied that they could be under watchful eyes of the authorities and showed less courage in terms of lifestyle. However, the LGBTIQ organizations operating in Hanoi could take advantage of the proximity and work closely with the central government and government agencies. With the presence of embassies and international organizations concentrated in Hanoi, it is a hub for public events for and by queer communities, making its impact far-reaching and attracting LGBTIQ individuals coming to the hub from all over Vietnam, as in the case of Viet Pride.

Being "shamed" or "un-shamed" by the discourses of *"bóng,"* "p*êđê," and "third world," old and mature queers display various ways of reactions, ranging from compliance to resistance. Those who complied simply remained "silent," which could explain why they are inactive or do not participate in LGBTI and queer rights events. However, remaining "silent" does not mean being passive or inactive; that itself is a form of communication or "activism." Although not being there physically, these invaluable members of the community support the movement in spirit and affectively. On the other hand, those who embraced shame or resisted the shaming campaign have acted in the form of writing a memoir as in the case of Nguyễn Văn Dũng, detailing one's lived experience, or simply "working" strategically behind the scenes as "silent supporters" or "advisers," as suggested by some participants.*

It can be said that shame as an affect and affect being the expression of feelings at the sub-/un-conscious, transpersonal levels are "foundational" and indispensable part of constituting a queer identity. Before doing this research, I imagined shame as a negative concept without realizing its empowering, transformative capacity in the sense that it could be a sign of one's becoming 'civilized' or feeling relieved by embracing this complex affect in a genuine manner. Through the concept of shame as an empowering tool or process, Vietnamese older and mature queers could benefit from queer theory and seeing themselves in a different light as "decent citizens" while still being aligned with fellow, marginalized social groups under the umbrella term of "social evils." Just like the colonial powers divided the nation into two polar opposites decades ago, its queer citizens have gone through degrees of separations through moral boundaries signified by national, gender and sexual identities.

As young and middle-aged queer activists have been actively introducing the Western discourses of human and queer rights, it is expected that old and mature queers will eventually become aware of basic terminologies and concept, but slowly yet firmly, given its relevance, usage, and urgency. Whereas transition, same-sex marriage, information, and technology (IT) savviness, and social media communications have been main foci of young queers, citizenship aspects, family reconciliation, economic and financial stability, health issues, and sustainable relationships were key areas of concerns for mature and old queers.

Kim Sa, Dũng and Quỳnh are exemplary, unsung heroes in the queer Vietnamese community; through embracing and 'openly' challenging the notion of shame, they could bring themselves at an equally active level as young queers who are ever so eloquent and articulate with modern LGBTI and queer discourses. Through their shame stories, they also do advocacy in their own subtle ways and inform both the public and the queer community about the historical 'truth(s)' of the older and mature queers of Vietnam.

Focusing on the lived experiences of old and mature queers revealed their authentic voices of narrating the lives as lived, detailing the venues, activities and means of communications the community members used to continue contacts and dialogue with each other before the advent of organized queer spaces which is long before queer activism, establishment of NGOs, and the Viet Pride. However, it is increasingly empowering to learn that there have been recent initiatives of documenting queer Vietnamese history by CCIHP and Hanoi Queer.

Benefits of using the concepts of "queer responsibility," "friendship as a way of life," "imagined community," as well as affect and shame theories reveal intricate yet multifaceted realities and temporal nature of the lived/living/livable experiences of the old and mature queers of Vietnam. This is the first study of its kind, opening doors in a hopefully meaningful way both academically and activism-wise with policy implications and potential suggestions in terms of possibilities and limitations of the study in the future. Without the state-run campaign such as "social evils" and its consequential impacts both negative and positive, there would be no lived experiences for the old and mature queers of Vietnam this rich and painfully colorful. However, it remains to be seen whether shame affectively felt and experienced have had any impact on the diverse queer communities in a collective manner or not.

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