Exploring Vietnamese and Filipino Language of Self: In Search of a Shared Identity within an Imagined ASEAN Community

RAYHAN KHAYR HAMAD[1]

Curtin University

rayhanhamad@yahoo.com

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a group of ten nations in the Southeast Asian region, is building a strong socio-cultural community that aims to unite 650 million people under one regional identity. While this endeavor continues to remain a dream rather than a reality, the organization is working hard to ensure its success. At the moment, institutional markers, blueprints, and policies symbolize the existence of the ASEAN identity. But beyond that, it is still hard to see how the myriad of people living in this diverse region can begin to identify themselves as ASEAN citizens. The path to making this dream a reality is still a work in progress. And although its success is uncertain, one thing remains true – the millions of people living in this part of the world cannot be simply coerced to assume an identity through policies and mere symbols. This article aims to contribute to the discourse on ASEAN identity by exploring an area that could potentially provide the impetus for Filipinos and Vietnamese to begin seeing each other as part of the same social group. The Philippines and Vietnam are two countries which at first glance seem to lack many cultural and social commonalities. For that reason, the language of "self" in both countries will be explored to establish a shared identity between Filipinos and Vietnamese. This will not only strengthen mutual understanding of cultures but also provide a starting point upon which we can reexamine our connections within the region. Although our ASEAN is but an imagined community, the acceptance of shared identities among its diverse population can be the glue that will bind us into one collective identity. Similar research undertakings exploring not so salient topics can enhance the discourse on ASEAN identity and help us move beyond the current conundrum in establishing our regional identity.

Read online

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online

INTRODUCTION

ASEAN's dream of uniting the people living in this diverse geographical area under one regional identity is far from being a reality. At the moment, every effort to define ASEAN identity has placed more emphasis on cultural diversity rather than commonalities. While promoting unity in diversity will result in enhanced mutual understanding of cultures among ASEAN people, creating a regional identity must also entail searching for shared realities within this imagined community. This study aims to contribute to that goal. It will look into philosophical and social expressions of *self* in the Philippines and Vietnam as a starting point for the search for a shared identity between the citizens of the two countries which may at first glance seem to be polar opposites across cultural, political, and social vantage points. For that reason, this study will explore, compare and demonstrate the similarities between Filipino and the Vietnamese notions of the individual *self* and how these shape social relations in their respective communities. By examining the language *self* in both countries, this study also hopes to shed light on philosophical, social, and cultural elements that will reveal a shared identity among their people. Establishing a deep sense of shared identity among Filipinos and Vietnamese can lead to a deeper mutual understanding of cultures. The realization of sharing deeply held cultural and social beliefs and practices can also provide a strong impetus for them to start seeing each other as part of the same social group which will then foster a stronger feeling of their belongingness to the ASEAN community.

Establishing a normative understanding of ASEAN identity should entail examining and making connections between the shared values of the people in the region. Although the ASEAN has already identified the common values and principles that characterize its regional identity, these sets of "constructed" values may not capture the real soul of the people as ASEAN's priority is to institutionalize a set of norms that would benefit the organization.[2] As such, this paper argues that to enrich the discourse on ASEAN identity we must look deeper at our social and cultural commonalities which had been the result of the interconnectedness of our territories and peoples long before Western colonialism had interrupted and rewritten our regional history.

A strong and lasting ASEAN socio-cultural community will be hinged on the popular acceptance of a shared identity in the region. This is evident in the collective effort and determination of the member states to bring this dream into fruition. This shared or collective identity, also known as "ASEANess", is grounded on common values and a sense of belongingness. However, though there exists a substantial amount of literature on ASEAN identity, the topic has remained enigmatic, like a puzzle with so many missing parts it is impossible to imagine the whole picture. For the longest time, we have had to rely on institutional markers such as the ASEAN motto, flag, anthem, emblems, and other symbolic representations to convince ourselves that we are united under one regional identity. Even a concrete definition of what exactly constitutes ASEAN identity has eluded us for many years. Most of us vaguely understood it as *Unity in Diversity*. But there is irony in espousing "unity in diversity" while at the same time promoting "one identity."

[1] The author has a BA in History from the University of the Philippines and an MA in Applied Linguistics from Curtin University. He is a member of the Pi Gamma Mu International Honor Society in Social Sciences. He is currently pursuing his MAEd in Social Sciences. He is currently residing in Vietnam and spends most of his free time learning the country's language, history and culture.

[2] See article 2 of the ASEAN Charter. ASEAN Secretariat. Chaos: *The ASEAN Charter*, 2008.

Some people may argue that every nation is unique and cross-cultural comparisons are futile and useless endeavors, but it is quite the opposite for the ASEAN. While the organization celebrates its diversity, it is also seeking out various elements that will unify its members into one collective identity. But how does a regional bloc establish a common identity among people separated not only by mountains and seas but also by diverse cultures, ideologies, and political systems? Perhaps by looking inwards and searching deeper, we can discover the missing pieces of the puzzle and begin to establish a better understanding of our regional identity based on shared inherited values which portray the real soul of the ASEAN people. It is therefore incumbent upon us, people of ASEAN, to look within us and search for the unifying elements of ASEAN citizenship amidst the background of our vast regional identities. If we can highlight and celebrate our similarities in the same way we promote tolerance for our differences, there will be a greater chance for ASEAN's dream of "one identity" to become a reality.

A Shared Identity in an Imagined Community

This study explores the philosophy of *self* in the Philippines and Vietnam to establish a shared identity in terms of how the people in both countries perceive themselves as social beings and how their notions of the individual *self* shape social structures in their respective communities. In establishing a shared identity, we are seeking common beliefs and practices that are present in both Vietnamese and Filipino societies, which emanate from the soul of the people. This shared identity will become evident when we examine the language used to refer to the individual *self* and other members of their social spheres. In doing so, we will inevitably compare values,

virtues, cultural beliefs, and other social practices that are similar to both people.

The ASEAN community, as made clear by the organization itself, is an imagined community.[3] While the notion of ASEAN as an imagined community undoubtedly subscribes to Benedict Anderson's idea that a nation is but a socially constructed imaginary community, in the ASEAN context this imaginary community encompasses multiple nations each with an abundant diversity of its own.[4] As an imagined community, it naturally follows that the ASEAN community is expected to behave and function as a psychological group, which is defined as a group of people who see each other as members of the same social group.[5] At the moment, the organization is hard at work in creating a regional identity that will promote social cohesion in the region. To accomplish this feat, we must find the answers to questions such as, *what will provide the impetus for ASEAN people to feel a sense of common identity with their neighbors whom they have never met?*

Milton Osborne noted that anthropologists and historians as early as the 1920s have taken interest in the similarities among societies and states in the Southeast Asian region.[6] An important fact to note here is that the existence of shared realities in this part of the world has historical foundations that precede even the notions of nationhood and regional integration as we understand it from the modern socio-political perspective. The presence of pre-colonial interstate relationships in the region is

---

[3]   ASEAN Secretariat. "Understanding How Young People See ASEAN, Awareness, Values and Identity." 2021, https://asean.org/book/understanding-how-young-people-see-asean-awareness-values-and-identity-full-version/.
[4]   For a detailed discussion on imagined communities see Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1991.
[5]   Neville, Fergus G., et al. "Shared Social Identity Transforms Social Relations in Imaginary Crowds." *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 2020, p. 1-16., https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220936759.
[6]   As cited in Archaya, Amitav. *The Making of Southeast Asia, International Relations of a Region*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012.

a widely researched topic and provides evidence for the existence of intricate cultural and socio-political systems that have produced not only cooperation among various groups of people, but also provided the impetus for the emergence of shared identities.[7] In recent history, the shared struggle for independence from our colonizers and the ensuing quest for the decolonization of newly independent societies have served as a potent source of regional commonality.

While a shared history is an integral element in constructing an ASEAN identity, one must ask if it is enough to command a feeling of belongingness to an imaginary community where diversity is often highlighted more than commonalities. Perhaps a better route to establish cohesiveness among the more than 650 million ASEAN people is to call attention to the fact that many communities across this vast geographical area share many social and cultural similarities. These shared social and cultural identities transcend modern-day borders and are the outcomes of historical interactions that prove the interconnectedness of the people in this region long before its Western colonizers carved the lands for themselves.

CONSTRUCTING ASEAN IDENTITY

The ASEAN is a diverse and dynamic community composed of ten member countries-- each with unique history, cultures, and peoples. From its original founding members composed of Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines in 1967, the organization's membership has since increased to ten nations, including Brunei in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and then Cambodia in 1999.

One of the three pillars of ASEAN is its role as a social and cultural community. Under this principle, member countries are expected to work together towards the realization of an ASEAN identity. A blueprint for the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) that promotes the ASEAN identity through ASEAN awareness and sense of community was adopted by the member states in 2007 in the Philippines. A year earlier, the term "ASEANess" had been first mentioned during an ASEAN Education Ministers meeting.[8]

The Philippines, as a founding member of the ASEAN, plays an important role in the construction of a strong socio-economic pillar in the region. In fact, the country has not only been instrumental in the creation of the ASEAN itself, but it also continues to participate in the shaping of the organization's regional agenda.[9] In 2007, several landmark declarations that include the acceleration of the establishment of the ASEAN community and *One Caring and Sharing Community* were announced in the ASEAN Summit in Cebu alongside the blueprint for the ASEAN charter. During the organization's 31st summit held in Manila in 2017, a plan of action that aimed to promote a culture of peace, intercultural understanding, respect for all, resilience, care for the environment, healthy lifestyle, and moderation was adopted by the member states. Moreover, the Philippines has contributed to the goal of establishing an ASEAN identity by promoting people-to-people exchanges, strengthening networks among ASEAN universities, and hosting conferences and exchange students.

---

[7]   For a detailed discussion on the topic, see pages 52 to 93 of Archaya, Amitav, *The Making of Southeast Asia, International Relations of a Region*.

[8]   From Toshifumi. "Citizenship Education in Member Countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations." *Regional Contexts and Citizenship Education in Asian and Europe*, edited by Kerry Kennedy and Andreas Brunold, Routledge, New York, 2016, pp. 89–106.

[9]   "The Philippines' Relationship with ASEAN." ASEAN Briefing, https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/philippines-relationship-asean/

An important source of ASEAN regional identity is the cultural norms of its member countries.[10] Therefore, one of the challenges for the organization is how to reconcile the region's myriad of cultures, ethnicities, languages, religions, and political systems with its motto, *One Vision, One Identity, One Community*. Efforts to establish *one identity and one community* are also threatened by internal conflicts such as border and maritime disputes in the region. Moreover, while there is an abundance of official documents and blueprints that promise to usher in deeper socio-cultural integration among the ASEAN people, there is still a scarcity of published works that attempt to clearly define its "one identity".

More recent literature coming from the organization has provided a clearer direction for the community's common identity building. The document *The Narrative of ASEAN Identity* discusses the social construction of the ASEAN identity as a product of *constructed* and *inherited* values.[11] The ASEAN charter has clearly defined and enumerated these *constructed values* which the organization also presents as "shared" and "common" values. Whether one believes that shared and common values can be forced upon people through policies is not really the concern of this article. Particular attention is given to *inherited values* which the organization defines as *values that the people of the Southeast Asia region ascribe to, which have been passed on for generations, through the natural process of human interaction that develops into various types of communities with much similarities.*[12] It is in this area that my study proposes that a deeper understanding

of ASEAN values and virtues which emanate from the soul of the people be explored. By demonstrating that people in this region have similarities at the core of their being, which extends to social relationships in their respective communities, the discourse on ASEAN identity can be enriched.

VIETNAM AND THE PHILIPPINES: PAST AND PRESENT

Not many great details can be said about the relationship of Vietnam and the Philippines throughout the known history of the two countries, at least if we are to consult our history books. Looking back at the Vietnam War, we bear witness to how past Philippine presidents had sided and aided the Americans as early as 1953.[13] A tally of Filipino personnel who joined the coalition of countries against the Vietnamese forces fighting for the freedom of their motherland is still displayed at the Reunification Palace in Ho Chi Minh City to this day.

Vietnam's membership in ASEAN two decades after the end of the war presented a fresh opportunity for the two countries to mend ties and chart new trajectories for its bilateral relationship. The recent Hague ruling favoring the Philippines against its case against China on the legality of its "nine-dash line" has been received positively by the Vietnamese government and thus signifies the willingness of both ASEAN countries to abide by international laws while continuing to assert their own positions.[14] Evidently, the two countries today are at an all-time high in terms of social, economic, and political cooperation thanks to ASEAN. But

[10] From Archaya, A. "The Evolution and Limitations of ASEAN Identity." Building ASEAN Community: Political–Security and Socio-Cultural Reflections, 2017, https://www.eria.org/ASEAN_at_50_Vol_4_Full_Report.pdf. Accessed 5 Dec. 2021.
[11] From ASEAN Secretariat. "Understanding How Young People See ASEAN, Awareness, Values and Identity." 2021, https://asean.org/book/understanding-how-young-people-see-asean-awareness-values-and-identity-full-version/.
[12] Ibid., page 6

[13] For a detailed account of the extent of Philippine participation in the Vietnam War, see pages 52 – 83 of Larsen, Stanley R., and James Lawton Collins. *Allied Participation in Vietnam*. Dept. of the Army, 1975.
[14] See "Vietnam Welcomes 'South China Sea' Ruling." VNExpress International, July 12, 2016, https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-welcomes-south-china-sea-ruling-3435294.html.

whether the citizens of the two countries can develop a deeper sense of shared identity within the ASEAN is still a monumental task that has yet to be realized. We should begin this long and arduous journey by asking questions such as, *on what grounds can Filipinos and Vietnamese see each other as having a shared identity beyond the use of the same lane at ASEAN airports or seeing the ASEAN flag in their capital cities?* In the case of these two countries, whose shared history could cause more division than unity, we must be able to find a deeper sense of shared identity for Filipinos and Vietnamese people. Thus, they will see each other as an extension of themselves and as members of a larger part of a community, which extends beyond the borders of their countries.

VIETNAMESE SYSTEMS OF THOUGHT

To gain insight on the nature of Vietnamese philosophy, one must be able to understand the influence of Vietnamese history on its development. Like other Southeast Asian states, Vietnam was not spared from invasions and wars with its neighbors, and later on, Western colonialism. In fact, long before the French had laid their eyes on the country's territory, various Chinese dynasties had extended their rule over Vietnam for more than a thousand years. Due to the constant struggle of the people against foreign aggression, its history has been described as a *stubborn resistance to all aggressors, no matter how powerful.[15]*. Hà Văn Tấn explains that Vietnamese history can be characterized by its long and hard-fought battles against foreign invaders, and its people's constant struggle to cultivate and defend their ancestral lands at the same time clearly show

the love for the motherland as a virtue of the Vietnamese people.[16] It is also due to the hardships brought about by these circumstances that the Vietnamese people did not have time for theoretical work.[17] Nonetheless, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism would eventually enter the consciousness of the people and exert influence on Vietnamese philosophy and society.

The people's constant struggle to resist foreign aggression, coupled with various philosophical systems that entered the country, has left indelible imprints on the country's philosophy. One only needs to look at Ho Chi Minh's philosophy to see an amalgamation of different systems of thought that had permeated his country. As a child, he was brought up with Confucian education, but his heart carried Vietnamese values such as *communal sentiment* and *family ties*.[18] Later on, his exposure to Western thinking will lead him to Marxist dialectics.[19]

This article will not go into details on how outside ideologies assimilated with indigenous Vietnamese philosophy as I am not an expert in this field. Suffice to say, Hà Văn Tấn believed that foreign ideas that enter a new territory will be restructured into a new system and that is what has been done to Confucianism in his country.[20] Moreover, Hữu Ngọc stated that the influence of Confucianism is more visible on the feudal class who are also imbued with Mandarin spirit.[21] Speaking about Thiền Buddhism (Zen Buddhism), Thế Hùng noted that *Vietnamese thought was open to various ideological currents*

---

[15] From Nguyễn Khắc Viện. "National Traditions and Revolutionary Struggle in Việt Nam." *Half a Century of Vietnamese Studies,* special issue of *Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 199, no. 1, 2016, pp. 29-34. (First published in Vietnamese Studies, No.21, 1968)

[16] From Hà Văn Tấn. "Reflections on Vietnamese History and Systems of Thought." *Half a Century of Vietnamese Studies: Spiritual Life,* special issue of *Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 200, no. 2, 2016, pp. 7-15. (First published in Vietnamese Studies, no. 94, 1989)
[17] Ibid., page 13
[18] From Hữu Ngọc. "Ho Chi Minh and Western Cultural Values." *Half a Century of Vietnamese Studies: Spiritual Life,* special issue of *Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 200, no. 2, 2016, pp. 102-112. (First published in Vietnamese Studies, no. 71, 1983)
[19] Ibid., page 106
[20] Hà Văn Tấn, page 12
[21] From Hữu Ngọc, "The Vietnamese Soul in Popular Literature, page 86

which it integrated while giving a stamp of its own.[22]

THE LANGUAGE OF *SELF* IN VIETNAMESE PHILOSOPHY

If the Vietnamese language is key to understanding the character of the Vietnamese people, the language of *self* in Vietnam reveals their soul. More importantly, it depicts a sense of community as the characteristic of the Vietnamese soul.[23]

It is interesting to note that the appearance of the word "tôi", meaning the *neutral and sovereign I*, was traced only in the late 16th to the beginning of the 17th century.[24] This self-reference, as Nguyễn Phú Phong explains, is different from the words *thiếp* and *ta* (also used to refer to oneself), as the meaning of these words expressed the *self* in terms of the relationship with the interlocutor.[25] David Marr tells us that the use of *tôi* was later used like *moi* and *je* in French to give identity to the speaker regardless of one's position in reference to the "other."[26] The term cá nhân or individual would only enter the Vietnamese language in the 20th century.[27]

For the purpose of this article, I would like to highlight Hữu Ngọc's study on Vietnamese popular literature to discover the specific features of the Vietnamese character, which he refers to as the *Vietnamese Soul*. Although he does not expound on the meaning of the Vietnamese soul in his article, The Vietnamese soul in Popular Literature, I believe that he is referring to the distinct characteristics that define the innate values and virtues that Vietnamese people possess. This is apparent when he mentions that Vietnamese people have had their unique culture before the influence of Indian and Chinese civilizations spread through the land.

He chose to study the language in popular literature of the peasantry instead of the literary work of the feudal class and the bourgeois because it represents the true soul of the people. His study of the literature of the regular folks led him to conclude that the Vietnamese soul is characterized by a *communal spirit*, or the *strong socio-affective ties that bind the "self" to "us."*[28] The strongest evidence for this claim is the absence of personal pronouns to express *self*; meaning, one addresses oneself depending on the relationship with the other person.

To illustrate, the following sentences below can be uttered by a single person talking to different people. He addresses himself based on the relationship with the other person.

> *Con sẽ gặp ba lần sau.*
> Child will meet father next time.
> *Em sẽ gặp anh lần sau.*
> Younger brother will meet older brother next time.
> *Chú sẽ gặp cháu lần sau.*
> Uncle will meet niece next time.
> *Anh sẽ gặp em lần sau.*
> Husband will meet wife next time.
> *Tớ sẽ gặp cậu lần sau.*
> Friend will meet friend next time.

The communal nature of the Vietnamese soul is evident in the concept of *nghĩa*, which can signify *debt of gratitude, duty, justice, uprightness,* and *duty-based ties* depending on the context.[29] Hữu Ngọc describes *nghĩa* as a mixture of "heart and mind" or *the reciprocal moral and sentimental*

---

[22] From Thế Hùng. "Thien Buddhism." *Half a Century of Vietnamese Studies: Spiritual Life,* special issue of *Vietnamese Studies,* vol. 200, no. 2, 2016, pp. 54-77. (First published in Vietnamese Studies, no. 56, 1979)
[23] Hữu Ngọc, The Vietnamese Soul in Popular Literature, page 87
[24] Đoàn Cẩm Thi." Expressions of the Self in Vietnam: Usage of 'I' throughout Literature in nôm and in quốc ngữ." *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia,* Vol. 36, No. 1, 2021, pp. 40–67.
[25] Ibid., Đoàn Cẩm Thi, page 45
[26] Marr, David. "Concepts of 'Individual' and 'Self' in Twentieth-Century Vietnam." *Modern Asian Studies,* Vol. 34, No. 4, 2000, pp. 769-796.
[27] Ibid.

[28] Hữu Ngọc, page 86
[29] Ibid., page 87

obligation arising from human contact of more or less long-standing.[30] The concept of *nghĩa* is present in the relationship of an individual to the community he belongs to. For example, people who work at the same place have to treat each other with civility, but *nghĩa* can be observed in how people treat each other with empathy and compassion even if this kind of behavior or relationship is not mandated.

Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Du has captured the essence of *nghĩa* when he wrote this line, "*Dẫu lìa tơ chỉ còn vương tơ lòng*" (The lotus stem has snapped, but its thin fibers still unite our hearts).[31] Hữu Ngọc explains that the lotus stem symbolizes *reason* while the slender fibers represent the *heart*.

Hữu Ngọc credits *nghĩa* as the bond that unites the family in Vietnam. The terms *yêu* and *thương*, while both can be translated as love, also differ in meaning. *Yêu* means to love because of the joy it brings. *Thương* means to love despite the other person's shortcomings. Also, the term *tình* that means the feeling of love is different from nghĩa, which is the *reciprocal moral and sentimental obligation born from that love.*[32]

The ties that bind the self to the family are so strong that the cult of ancestor worship has become a national identity.[33] Nguyễn Thanh Huyền states that the individual is tied to his or her family and ancestry.

> *"Now that the cult of ancestors is restored, the individual is also restored, more exactly, as the individual is restored, the cult of ancestors is revived. That is the deepest point of what is generally called renovation (Đổi Mới) in Việt Nam."*[34]

The concept of *nghĩa* is represented among many popular stories in Vietnam such as *Phạm Công – Cúc Hoa*, *Thánh Gióng*, The Legend of the Dragon and the Fairy, and *Thạch Sanh*.[35]

In *Phạm Công – Cúc Hoa*, a young student loses his woodcutter father and has to provide food for his mother by begging. Despite his hardships, he pursues his studies and eventually becomes a mandarin. He marries his classmate and overcomes many difficulties as a general. In his absence, his wife dies, and he decides to descend to the underworld to retrieve her.

The Legend of the Dragon and the Fairy, which tells about the myth of the origin of the Vietnamese people and the founding of its first state, depicts the *nghĩa* that binds together the couple and the family, and the people to his or her village and country.

Another myth, *Thánh Gióng*, is the story of a child in a village who grows into a giant to fight an oppressive empire in the north. After increasing his size in just a matter of weeks, he drives away the Yan invaders out of his country. This tale depicts the united effort of a whole nation to expel the forces of a far stronger empire.

The story of *Thạch Sanh* is about the fight against oppression in society. It highlights virtues such as generosity, gratitude, and faithfulness in love. The part of the story where the princess marries a commoner shows the kind of love that does not consider one's social status.
The following translation shows that the love of a husband for his wife is often compared to the love that one has for his village.[36]

> *As I go away I think of my native village,*
> Of food I used to eat; boiled convolvulus

---

[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., page 88
[32] Ibid.
[33] Nguyễn Thanh Huyền, "A Typical Characteristic of the Vietnamese People's Psychic Life." *Half a Century of Vietnamese Studies, special issue of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 199, no. 1, 2016, pp. 59-83. (first published in Vietnamese Studies, No. 113, 1994)
[34] Ibid., page 61

[35] See Hữu Ngọc, The Vietnamese Soul in Popular Literature, pp. 91-93 for the summary of the stories mentioned.
[36] Ibid., pp. 92-93

And eggplant sauced in soya sauce
I think of you, darling, under the scorching sun,
Working the scoop to water the field

Night after night
I stand hidden behind the door
And look into the distance
Toward my native village
O mother!
My heart aches in nine different ways

Crossing the bridge
I tilt my conical hat
To have a better look
As many pains I feel in my heart
As the bridge has spans
Passing by the communal hose
I tilt my conical hat
To have a better look
As my feelings of love I have for you
As the roof has tiles

FOREIGN INFLUENCE ON VIETNAMESE PHILOSOPHY

Hữu Ngọc chose to focus on the popular literature of the peasantry to understand the "real" Vietnamese soul. However, the country's exposure to foreign ideas must have also instilled in the people's consciousness foreign ideas. It is therefore prudent that we also take a look at ideas that are not indigenous to the people but have been assimilated into the culture and society. We shall not go into a debate on what constitutes indigenous philosophy, or if there is such a thing. Nevertheless, let us consider what has been stated earlier; Hà Văn Tấn stated that foreign ideas that enter a new territory are no longer the same as they were where they come from. In this section, we shall take a look at the concepts of Thân and Tâm, which were derived from classical Chinese and were present in Vietnamese literature dating back at least 600 hundred years ago.[37]

David Marr's work entitled Concepts of 'Individual' and 'Self' in Twentieth-Century Vietnam is considered as a pioneering work in the study of the individual and the *self* in Vietnam, and how they shape people's attitudes and behaviors.[38] Before presenting his discussion on thân and tâm, I would like to list down several terminologies that he presented which are connected to the individual and *self*.

Cá nhân	individual
Cá nhân chủ nghĩa	individualism
Người	person/human
Tớ	first person singular pronouns
Ta	
Tao	
Mình	
Tôi	
Thân	"body-person"
Tâm	"heart-mind"

Thân is translated as "body-person" or the animate and sensual *self*, which is the opposite of *thể* and *người*; the former meaning *the physical, objective and instrumental body*, and the latter meaning person or human.[39] The line "*thân tử danh bất tử*" (bodies expire, but reputations live on) shows us the *firm corporeal connection* of thân as opposed to the soul or one's spirit.[40]

Thân combines with other words to form compound words.

Thân – 'body-person'	
Bản thân	oneself
Thân danh	reputation
Thân tài	stature
Thân thế	life experience

---

[37] Marr, page 769

[38] Đoàn Cẩm Thi, page 41
[39] Ibid., page 769
[40] Ibid. page 770

Thân phận	personal status
Tu thân	self-cultivation
An thân	settle down to life

Tâm is defined as 'heart-mind', the bearer of inner awareness, sentiment, knowledge, and moral judgment.[41] Marr elucidates the meaning of tâm in the following paragraph.

> *Multifaceted and sometimes elusive, tâm attempts to describe the inanimate, reflective, perceptive, sentient, sympathetic dimensions of human nature. A person possessing a strong sense of tâm is capable of internalizing ideas and emotions, formulating a vision, taking action, and living (or dying) by the results. Unlike most other concepts derived from the Chinese classics, tâm is not bound by hierarchy: the heart-mind of even the lowliest person on the Vietnamese social ladder is able to commune with other heart-minds, with nature, the spirits, the universe at large–and to draw sustenance from them in turn.[42]*

Like *thân*, *tâm* combines with other words to form compound words.

Tâm – 'heart-mind'	
Lương tâm	conscience
Tâm sự	confidences
Tâm hồn	soul
Tâm tình	sentiments, feelings
Đồng tâm	of one heart and mind
Tâm lý học	psychology

THE LANGUAGE OF *SELF* IN FILIPINO PHILOSOPHY

A research conducted by Luisito dela Cruz extracted the key terms present in Filipino Philosophy that are used to explore the Filipino *self*. He examined the theses on the topic of Filipino Philosophy at the University of the Philippines from the period of 1985 -2009. He then selected three theses for his study, namely:

1. 1. *Isang Pilosopikal na Pagsusuri ng Hiya* by Alwin Bobis (1997)

2. 2. *Isang Pagsusuri sa Panlipunang Konsepto ng Utang na Loob* by Borromeo Motin (1997)

3. 3. *Pagpapakatao* by Oswald Orgo (1999)

According to him, "*What could be more Filipino than Filipino philosophy's search for conceptions about the self?*"[43] The following table shows the classification of the key terms regarding the notions on the Filipino *Self* proposed by dela Cruz.

Key Terms Extracted Regarding the Notion of the Self[1]	
Ka-ako-han	*Ka-kami-han*
Loob	labas
Kalooban	kapwa
utang na loob	pakikipagkapwa
dangal/ karangalan	pakikisama
taos–puso	sakop
Pagkatao	pagkakawanggawa
pagpapakatao	puri
Kusa	damay
Budhi	dama
Kamalayan	
Hiya	

In exploring the Filipino language of *self*, dela Cruz concludes that the central theme of the Filipino *self* is the *loob*, from which stems a person's innate goodness or badness.[44] Although it is intangible, it is observable in how it extends to the kapwa through *pagmamagandang–loob,*

---

41   Ibid., page 770
42   Ibid
43   See dela Cruz, Luisito. "The Language of the Self: A Critical Assessment of Filipino Philosophy." *Scientia*, vol. 4.2, 2015, pp. 144–171.
44   Ibid., pp. 155-156

pautang na loob, kusang-loob, bukal sa loob, and *pagbibigay ng loob*. From *loob*, the term *kalooban* is derived. *The kalooban is an inner realm inherent to the self and is the very repository of man's own existence* according to dela Cruz.[45] He notes that *utang na loob*, can be used by a person to gauge someone's kindness or goodness. Therefore, it loses its meaning when it is not viewed through the intricate social relationships of people giving and receiving *utang na loob*.[46] Ultimately, *utang na loob* binds an individual to his or her community as a closer inspection of this Filipino value by Enriquez reveals it to actually mean *solidarity/ gratitude* instead of merely *debt of gratitude*.[47]

The language of the Filipino *self* clearly points to the existence of a collective self.[48] Many of the terms that are used to refer to the individual *self* reveal the kind of relationships that exist between an individual and the other individuals in his or her social sphere. For example, *pakikipagkapwa* can validate a person's goodness (*kagandahang loob*) or his or her *pagkatao*. This is the reason *kapwa* can be considered as an extension of one's *self*. As dela Cruz concludes in his study, *"Filipino self is an integration of both his inner being and social self."*[49]

Virgilio Enriquez, renowned for his work on *Sikolohiyang Pilipino*, defines kapwa as the unity of "self" and "others."[50] From *kapwa* comes *pakikipagkapwa* which is the *embodying spirit* that governs various levels and categories of social interaction such as *pakikisama* (being along with) and *pakikibaka* (to struggle with).[51] Moreover, *pakikipagkapwa* is one's way of

recognizing the *kapwa* as an equal, and bestowing upon him or her dignity and humanity.[52]

Filipino historian Zeus Salazar uses the Filipino language to emphasize the duality of the Filipino *self*. The internal and external facets of Filipino personality can be deciphered through the following words and their meanings.[53]

Internal	External
dangal (honor)	*puri* (honor)
ligaya (happiness)	*saya* (happiness)
timpi (restraint)	*pigil* (restraint)

To illustrate, when a woman is stripped of her *puri* (honor), her *dangal* (honor) remains intact.[54]

Vietnamese and Filipino Similarities in the Language of *Self*: A Shared Identity

The study and comparison of the Vietnamese and Filipino language of *self* in this article reveal that both are not individualistic in nature. The notions of *self* in Vietnam and the Philippines show that the individuals in their respective communities are bound to the other members or *kapwa*. Hence, the presence of a collective *self* is evident in the two countries.

The language of *self* in the Philippines and Vietnam point to the existence of both an inner reason and emotion governing one's relationship and interactions with other members of the society (*nghĩa* and *tâm* in Vietnam and *pakikipagkapwa, utang na loob* and *pagpapakatao* in the Philippines). In both countries, how a person treats others in the society is not only an indication of his or her morals or upbringing, but also of his or her *being* or *pagkatao/ thân*. In

---

45 Ibid., page 157
46 Ibid.
47 From Pe-Pua Rogelia and Elizabeth Protacio-Marcelino. "Sikolohiyang Pilipino (Filipino Psychology): A legacy of Virgilio G. Enriquez." *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 3, 2000, pp. 49-71.
48 Ibid., page 160
49 Ibid., page 163
50 From Aquino, Clemen. "Mula sa Kinaroroonan: Kapwa, Kapatiran and Bayan in Philippine Social Science." *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 32, no.1, 2004, pp. 105–139.
51 Ibid., page 108

52 Ibid
53 Ibid., Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino, page 56
54 Ibid.

the Philippines, someone accords another with *utang na loob* when one sees the goodness of that other person. In Vietnam, *tâm* (heart-mind) is the source of one's reputation (*tâm sự*) and stature (*tâm hồn),* while *nghĩa* is the bond that holds relationships together despite trials and hardships.

The Vietnamese and Filipino *self* show not only the rationality, but also the emotional aspect of their being. In his thesis, Motin claims that "*sa etikal na konsepto ni Kant, ang kagandahang loob at ang katungkulan ay isang lohikal o rasyonal na pagtupad na walang halong emosyonal; samantala sa kaisipang Pilipino naman, ito ay may halong emosyonal.*"[55] This is evident in how *utang na loob*, *pakikipagtao* and *pakiramdam* are exhibited by the Filipinos towards their kapwa. In Vietnamese social relations, *nghĩa* (heart and mind) *governs all human relations*[56] and tâm (heart-mind) represents the *sympathetic dimensions of human nature.*[57]

The *internality-externality* of the Filipino personality put forward by Salazar can also be observed in the Vietnamese concepts of *thân* (body-person) and *tâm* (heart-mind) especially when we consider the words derived from them such as *thân danh* (reputation) and *thân tài (stature)* which can be observed through outside appearances; and *lương tâm (conscience)* which can only be known to its bearer. *Nghĩa* (heart-mind) also represents this *internality-externality* which is encapsulated in the line, "The lotus stem (reason) has snapped, but its thin fibers (sentiment) still unite our hearts."

The dominant presence of a strong collectivist ideology in Vietnam, which can be seen in the collective struggle of its people against oppression throughout its history, is possible because of love for the motherland, strong societal relationships, and collective identity within the country. Many know of Vietnamese people's relentless defense of their country against invaders despite the disparity in power, but unbeknownst to many people, this fighting spirit comes from the fact that the Vietnamese body and mind are tied to the motherland, which is a manifestation of *nghĩa.* Vietnam's national slogan, "*Independence, Freedom,* and *Happiness*" remains as a testament of the people's devotion to their motherland and a reminder of the sacrifices of the people in the past. The Philippines too has been conquered but never divided, as our language of *self* affirms the strong socio-affective ties that bind the *kapwa* to one's self. The Filipino people continue to persevere because of love for the motherland and our continuing quest for *kalayaan* and *kaginhawaan.*[58]

The strong family bond is a national identity in Vietnam as it is in the Philippines. In both countries, people use kinship terminologies when addressing family members or relatives. In Vietnam, a person may even use *con* (child) as a pronoun to refer to one's self when talking to one's parents, uncles, and even other people in the society in which he or she has no familial relationship but feels an emotional attachment. Although Filipinos do not use *anak* (child) as a pronoun to refer to one's self when addressing parents and relatives, they may refer to older people (even without any familial relationship) as nanay/ 'nay (mother), tatay/ 'tay (father), lolo (grandfather), or lola (grandmother) to show affection or respect. Vietnamese and Filipinos also call other people em/ate (sister) and anh/kuya (brother) even though they are not related by blood. The choice of terms one uses to refer to one's self or other people has its

---

55 As cited in dela Cruz, page 164
56 Ibid., Hữu Ngọc, page 93
57 Ibid., Marr, page 770

58 *Kalayaan* (freedom), *Kaginhawaan* can be translated as ease or comfort, but a more appropriate translation would be happiness. This happiness is achieved when one experiences ease, comfort or freedom from poverty and oppression.

socio-linguistic functions and is an indication of the interconnectedness of the *self* with others.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has shed light on some philosophical, social, and cultural elements that highlight similarities between Filipinos and Vietnamese. By comparing the language of *self* in both countries, and eventually reaching an understanding that the Filipino and Vietnamese social *self* bear similarities, it would now be justified to claim that a shared identity exists between the two people.

The findings of this study can be highlighted in order to persuade Vietnamese and Filipinos to see one another as each other's *kapwa*; for what greater impetus and rationale for seeing the other person as an extension of yourself than knowing that he or she possesses the same values and virtues that you have – the use of both "heart and mind" in relationships, the strong family bonds, and the love for motherland, among many others. The principle of *nghĩa* (heart-mind) and *pakikipagkapwa tao* can be used to improve the bilateral relationship between the two countries, particularly in certain volatile situations. Decision-making on issues where the two countries may have contrasting points of views could be governed by "heart and mind" and "emotion and rationality."

The ASEAN, following its roadmap to build a strong socio-cultural pillar by uniting people under one collective identity, should take a deeper look at the shared values of the people in this diverse region to establish a deeper sense of belongingness through shared identities and commonalities. The exploration of topics such as the one investigated in this study should be encouraged among the academe, and the findings should reach the consciousness of as many people as possible. ASEAN Citizenship education should play a significant role in constructing an ASEAN image that is based on our shared inherited values.

In this article, it has been shown that Filipinos and Vietnamese share many commonalities at the core of their being. Though both countries are physically divided by waters and ideologically by some conflicting interests, their people hold many similar values which have been brought to light by examining the language of *self* in both countries. Similar research undertakings exploring philosophical, social, and cultural beliefs and practices among ASEAN states will help unveil more commonalities among the people in our region. May this article be an open invitation for other ASEAN nationals to continue seeking elements that will provide not only the feeling of ASEAN belongingness but of oneness.

REFERENCES

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1991. ASEAN Secretariat. *The ASEAN Charter*, 2008.

ASEAN Secretariat. "Understanding How Young People See ASEAN, Awareness, Values and Identity." (2021). https://asean.org/book/understanding-how-young-people-see-asean-awareness-values-and-identity-full-version/.

Archaya, Amitav. *The Making of Southeast Asia, International Relations of a Region*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (2012).

Archaya, A. "The Evolution and Limitations of ASEAN Identity." *Building ASEAN Community: Political–Security and Socio-Cultural Reflections*, (2017). https://www.eria.org/ASEAN_at_50_Vol_4_Full_Report.pdf. Accessed 5 Dec. 2021.

Aquino, Clemen. "Mula sa Kinaroroonan: Kapwa, Kapatiran and Bayan in Philippine Social Science." *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 32, no.1 (2004). 105–139.

Dela Cruz, Luisito. "The Language of the Self: A Critical Assessment of Filipino Philosophy." *Scientia*, vol. 4.2 (2015). 144–171.

Đoàn Cẩm Thi. "Expressions of the Self in Vietnam: Usage of 'I' throughout Literature in nôm and in quốc ngữ." *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2021). 40–67.

Hà Văn Tấn. "Reflections on Vietnamese History and Systems of Thought." *Half a Century of Vietnamese Studies: Spiritual Life, special issue of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 200, no. 2 (2016). 7-15. (First published in Vietnamese Studies, no. 94, 1989),

Hữu Ngọc. "Ho Chi Minh and Western Cultural Values." *Half a Century of Vietnamese Studies: Spiritual Life, special issue of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 200, no. 2, 2016, pp. 102-112. (First published in Vietnamese Studies, no. 71, 1983).

Marr, David. "Concepts of 'Individual' and 'Self' in Twentieth-Century Vietnam." *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, no. 4 (2000). 769-796.

Neville, Fergus G., et al. "Shared Social Identity Transforms Social Relations in Imaginary Crowds." *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* (2020). 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220936759.

Nguyễn Khắc Viện. "National Traditions and Revolutionary Struggle in Viet Nam." *Half a Century of Vietnamese Studies, special issue of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 199, no. 1 (2016) 29-34. (First published in Vietnamese Studies, No.21, 1968).

Nguyễn Thanh Huyền, "A Typical Characteristic of the Vietnamese People's Psychic Life." *Half a Century of Vietnamese Studies, special issue of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 199, no. 1 (2016). 59-83. (first published in Vietnamese Studies, No. 113, 1994).

Pe-Pua Rogelia and Elizabeth Protacio-Marcelino. "Sikolohiyang Pilipino (Filipino Psychology): A legacy of Virgilio G. Enriquez." *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 3 (2000). 49-71.

Stanley R., and James Lawton Collins. *Allied Participation in Vietnam*. Dept. of the Army, 1975.

The Philippines' Relationship with ASEAN. ASEAN Briefing, https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/philippines-relationship-asean/

Thế Hùng. "Thien Buddhism." *Half a Century of Vietnamese Studies: Spiritual Life, special issue of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 200, no. 2 (2016) 54-77. (First published in Vietnamese Studies, no. 56, 1979).

Toshifumi, Hirata. "Citizenship Education in Member Countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations." *Regional Contexts and Citizenship Education in Asian and Europe*, edited by Kerry Kennedy and Andreas Brunold, Routledge, New York (2016). 89–106.

Vietnam Welcomes 'South China Sea' Ruling." VNExpress International, July 12, 2016, https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-welcomes-south-china-sea-ruling-3435294.html.

(FOOTNOTES)

1   For non-Tagalog speakers, the following translation of the Key Terms Extracted Regarding the Notion of the Self extracted by dela Cruz in his work is offered: loob (inner being), kalooban (inner realm of one's being), utang na loob (debt of gratitude), taos-puso (heartfelt), pagkatao (humanity, personality or character), pagpapakatao (being humane), kusa (one's own initiative), budhi (conscience), kamalayan (awareness, consciousness), hiya (embarrassment), labas (outside), kapwa (fellow), pakikipagkapwa (being able to relate to a fellow being), pakikisama (adapting or getting along with others), sakop (jurisdiction), pagkakawanggawa (charity, philanthropy), puri (honor, reputation), damay (sympathize), dama (to feel)