



Neoliberalism in a socialist state: Political economy of higher education in Vietnam

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abstract

Over the last three decades, Vietnam has experienced significant economic growth, with millions lifted out of extreme poverty through economic reforms and global economic integration. However, assumptions within this dominant discourse have largely gone unchallenged. This study aims to use a neoliberalism lens and critical theory approach to develop an alternative view of the current developmental trend in Vietnam. The analysis consists of three interconnected themes: political economy, higher education, and subjectivity. I argue that neoliberalism – as an economic paradigm – leads to the emergence of rent-seekers and a crony capitalist economy despite being under a socialist state. The dual impact of the rent-seeking economy and neoliberal globalization has promoted higher education neoliberalization, featuring financial autonomy, privatization, marketization, and Englishization. This transition also creates certain vulnerabilities that manifest through education commodification, ideological domination, and hegemony. Under such a system, educated youths exhibit characteristics of neoliberal subjectivity and experience a range of mental illnesses, disproportionately more than the general population. The study ends with a discussion on the tensions (or lack thereof) between socialism and neoliberalism.

Introduction

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a one-party state, with the ruling party – the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) – having no opposition parties that

are legally tolerated. Although the economy has undoubtedly been liberalized, the state remains a soft authoritarian regime (Thayer, 2010). Vietnam is a lower middle-income country with 97 million people. Social-culturally, the country is shaped by internal conflicts and a long history of struggle against Chinese domination, revolutionary wars against French colonial rule, and American neocolonial control. The intertwining of historical matriarchy, Confucian patriarchy, and Western ideologies has also influenced Vietnamese society deeply (Do and Brennan, 2015). Vietnam has been experiencing political stability and high socio-economic growth and development over the past three decades. Higher education is a top priority to build a workforce for globalization and sustained economic growth, contributing to the legitimacy of CPV and overall political stability (Phuong and Chai, 2018; Thayer, 2010).

The current stage of capitalism, known as neoliberalism, upholds capitalist realism – the perception that capitalism is not only the only viable political and economic system, but that an alternative to capitalism is unimaginable (Brown, 2015; Fisher, 2009). The neoliberal project was established by capitalist elites in response to a crisis of profitability in developed economies in the late 1970s after three decades of Keynesian economic policies (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005; Wright, 2019). Neoliberalism is not a unified project because there is no such thing as pure neoliberalism, and the term is subjected to misunderstanding and abuse (Birch and Springer, 2019). As Fletcher (2019: 537) suggested, neoliberalism can be understood as a multidimensional process that manifests diversely in various contexts with a framework ‘comprising an overarching philosophy, a set of general principles through which this philosophy is expressed, the specific policies via which these principles are implemented and the forms of subjectivity all of this seeks to cultivate.’

Birch and Springer (2019: 473) noted a common criticism of neoliberalism: ‘why not just critique capitalism instead?’ Concerning Vietnam, the socialist state label and the communist party are dependent on the propaganda that capitalism was historically banished. Implying that capitalism still exists in Vietnam can be considered anti-progressive (To et al., 2019). Such a direct challenge to the CPV’s legitimacy can potentially face censorship issues. Furthermore, the discourse of global market integration proliferates while

compatibility between capitalism and market socialism remains considerably overlooked (Thayer, 2010). Thus, neoliberalism is useful as an alternative politico-economic critique of capitalism in Vietnam. For this paper, neoliberalism is treated as an economic paradigm with neoliberal principles, consisting of the promotion of free markets and free trade, business activity de/reregulation, commodification, privatization of public enterprises, and marketization (Fletcher, 2019; Harvey, 2005; Reinsberg et al., 2021).

There are growing bodies of scholarship on market-oriented Vietnam and its higher education (Warren, 2020), most of which assume that the current developmental trend is good. This development, however, warrants more critical scrutiny (Pham, 2020). The purpose of this study is to challenge the dominant discourse by putting forward three main arguments. Firstly, I problematize the developmental trend by positing that a neoliberal economic paradigm has been incrementally implemented in Vietnam despite being under a socialist structure. Secondly, with a critical theory approach, I claim that the neoliberal economic paradigm has allowed socialist higher education to be neoliberalized. Higher education simultaneously promotes and legitimizes neoliberalism under socialism. Forms of subjectivity are essential to Fletcher's (2019) multidimensional framework. So lastly, I explore and develop the concepts of *neoliberal student* and *neoliberal other* as subjectivities produced by the neoliberal educational system. The terms university and higher education are somewhat interchangeable throughout the paper.

Neoliberalism in Vietnam

Neoliberalism and inequality go hand in hand, and many recent socio-economic studies show growing inequality worldwide caused by the capitalist market economy (Brown, 2015; Stańczyk, 2021). Inequality in Vietnam is also growing along with the economy (Nguyễn, 2017). According to Oxfam's calculations, the wealthiest people in Vietnam earn more in a day than the poorest do in 10 years (ibid.). In theory, a socialist state should be more egalitarian. Such glaring economic inequality in Vietnam suggests that elements of neoliberalism are at work under the socialist state. Gainsborough (2010) assessed that neoliberalism has little impact on the political realm in Vietnam. Conversely, I claim that neoliberalism exists in Vietnam as an

economic paradigm. Along with political corruption, economic neoliberalization has facilitated the rise of rent-seekers, resulting in a crony capitalist economy and rising inequality.

Neoliberal practices are apparent in recent reforms by the Vietnamese government (Ngo, 2020). In 1986, the CPV initiated *Đổi Mới* (meaning innovate or renovate) reforms to transform Vietnam from a command economy to a socialist-oriented market economy. The reforms aimed to address a severe economic crisis, with inflation soaring over 700 percent (Thoburn, 2013). Since then, the Vietnamese government has extensively engaged with neoliberal institutions to expedite its economic reforms. First, through conditional lending, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank put pressure on the government to restructure the economy and liberate the market based on neoliberal principles (Evans and Hai, 2005). Second, the country's key donors – the United States and Japan, which have been criticized for heavily relying on neoliberal economic policy – also advise Vietnam on its structural adjustment (Bix, 2013; Evans and Hai, 2005). Third, in 2007, Vietnam became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), a neoliberal economic enforcer for the world economy (Slobodian, 2018; Walsh et al., 2021). Vietnam continues to integrate itself into the global economy through different free trade agreements with the Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2018, and with the European Union in 2019.

Crony capitalism (or rentier capitalism) is a negative inclination by rent-seekers within capitalist systems (Sayer, 2020; Shammas, 2018). Rent-seekers seek to acquire unearned or undeserved revenue through close connections with bureaucrats and government manipulation (Ngo and Tarko, 2018; Sayer, 2020; Shammas, 2018). Reinsberg et al. (2021) found that the structural reforms authorized by the IMF facilitate corruption and give rise to crony capitalism by enabling collusion between rent-seekers and bureaucrats. Vuving (2010) suggested that the politics of Vietnam can be imagined as a game between three key players in the central government: regime conservatives – who are more likely to choose closed-door and party-first policies; modernizers – who prefer openness and the development of the country as a whole; and rent-seekers – who do whatever brings them the most money and benefits by extracting wealth from society. Rent-seekers have been using money to gain access to the CPV and utilizing that political

monopoly to collect hyperprofit (Vuving, 2010; 2019). China is another influential player due to its proximity and powerful influence (Vuving, 2010). China, which has been described as having ‘neoliberalism with distinctly Chinese characteristics,’ has indirectly contributed to the rise of rent-seekers in Vietnam (Harvey, 2005: 157; Vuving, 2019). Corruption in Vietnam is believed to be endemic, and elite rent-seeking is likely to remain prevalent (Gregory, 2016). Therefore, the case of neoliberalism in Vietnam is not only recognizable by Vietnam’s integration into the global capitalist economy through economic neoliberalization, but the phenomenon can also be observed from the signs of corruption and rent-seeking facilitated by such neoliberalization.

Evans and Hai (2005) documented the early stages of the ‘equitization’¹ of state-owned enterprises, which played a central role in the neoliberal economic reforms. They found that, during the equitization process, the rights of Vietnamese workers (e.g., social welfare, permanent contract, etc.) were largely neglected. Progressive labor laws and state-sponsored unions are being weakened to accommodate external capitalist actors, causing labor unrest in recent years (Tran, 2013). To et al. (2019) found that corruption and collusion are evident in the case of land accumulation and concentration, predominantly by foreign firms. The authors also noticed a shift to the neoliberal logic of privatization, with land leases being non-tradable in 1988 to the current trend of land commercialization and large-scale land concentration. Provincial bureaucrats can enrich themselves by seeking rent from foreign direct investment influx (Kim, 2019). Ngo and Tarko (2018) found that three major industries – textile-garment, telecommunications, and motorcycle – operate under the rent-seeking regime and involve different foreign actors. Most notably, the motorcycle industry involves a trilateral rent-seeking relationship between three countries – Vietnam, Japan, and China. As the economy continues to grow, the middle class will likely stay politically conservative and generally satisfied, and rent-seekers will continue to consolidate their power and maximize profitability (Gregory, 2016; Ngo and Tarko, 2018). The Vietnamese economy is now crony capitalist due to its rent-seeking tendency.

¹ A Vietnamese-English term for privatization.

Socialism developments are vulnerable to pressure from external capitalist actors (Domingues, 2022). ‘After three decades of reforms, despite the label *Socialist* in its official name, Vietnam has become largely similar to capitalist countries in the world, except for a state-owned sector that is ineffective and irresistibly diminishing’ (Lap, 2020: 128, emphasis in original). The economic paradigm prescribed by the neoliberal institutions (IMF, World Bank, and WTO) and the free trade agreements have facilitated Vietnam’s integration into the globalized capitalist economy. The neoliberal economic reforms were effective in establishing genuine markets and liberating the economy from state control, as indicated by high growth rates and significant poverty reduction (Ngo and Tarko, 2018; Thayer, 2010). Schwenkel and Leshkovich (2012) claim that it is good for Vietnam to have turned to neoliberalism. At the same time, neoliberalism has also given rise to crony capitalism, with a new governing elite of rent-seekers, focusing on extracting profits from society. The rhetoric of the communist revolution and socialism becomes nothing more than empty propaganda for the *red capitalists* (Davies, 2015) or, in this case, red rent-seekers. Vietnamese neoliberalism is approached pragmatically rather than ideologically (Evans and Hai, 2005). If being a part of the global capitalist economy enables sustained growth, Vietnam’s governing elite is likely to remain committed to economic neoliberalization.

Neoliberal university

Universities operate under a form of contract with society (Brown, 2014). For a certain degree of autonomy and financial privilege, universities, in return, perform important functions of discovering, authenticating, disseminating, and preserving knowledge (Brown, 2014; Giroux, 2020). However, affordable and accessible higher education has gradually been dismantled by neoliberal policies (Brown, 2014; Brown, 2015). Most problems in higher education are likely related to a lack of public funding (Giroux, 2020). According to neoliberal logic, any institution in a free-market economy should be privatized rather than nationalized (Wright, 2019). Following this logic, it would be beneficial for educational institutions if the state cut public funding and relinquished control. Universities would become more competitive in the free market as private capital would be permitted to flow into higher education. In other words, problems with higher education can be solved by

policies that diminish financial privileges and expose institutions to market mechanism and private funding. Higher education neoliberalization affects both the natural and social sciences: widespread influence of pharmaceutical corporations in medical schools (Glauser, 2013); corporate propaganda in economic education and practices (Collison, 2003); a decline of the humanities as perceived to be risky majors to find jobs (Shumway, 2017), to name a few. Neoliberal universities no longer serve as an independent source of information about society or play a role in the betterment of humankind (Brown, 2014; Martin-Sardesai et al., 2020), thus breaching the contract with society.

Since the role has changed from public good to private interest (Giroux, 2020), universities must reorganize to accommodate the new role. The neoliberal university, which can be depicted as an *edufactory*, resembles a profit-driven business, operated by neoliberal managers (Aureli, 2015; Giroux, 2020; Peetz, 2019). Public education is gradually privatized, while not-for-profit private education increasingly seeks more profits and higher market competitiveness (Shumway, 2017). As neoliberal organizations, universities rely on strict centralized hierarchical management and bureaucratic processes, reduce departmental autonomy, and focus on productivity through hypercompetition (Martin, 2016; Verhaeghe, 2014). Teaching, learning, and research are driven by assessment and performance targets, leading to escalating pressures to secure grants, publish in top journals, and win awards (Martin, 2016; Martin-Sardesai et al., 2020). Universities are also in tune with the needs of businesses to provide the skills, knowledge, and qualifications to build the workforce (Giroux, 2020). The terms educational consumers, human capital, knowledge workers, and so on are good indicators of neoliberal universities (Verhaeghe, 2014). In short, power in neoliberal universities is structurally shifted away from academics, management culture is corporatized, and the universities operate like factories to produce ever more graduates and research publications.

Making a case against neoliberalizing higher education in Vietnam

Neoliberalism's influence continues to pervade Vietnamese socialist higher education, whereas the Soviet higher education model² has gradually been renounced (Lap, 2020; Ngo, 2020). Policies under the neoliberal economic paradigm have particularly pressured public sector organizations like universities to restructure to become more neoliberal or market-oriented (Peetz, 2019). Examining laws and regulations might thus provide insight into how the Vietnamese government institutionalizes the neoliberal logic. A few noteworthy examples are N^o16/2015/NĐ-CP[1] on the *Autonomy of public education units* and N^o127/2018/NĐ-CP [2] on *The responsibility for state management of education*. These (de)regulations seek to implement institutional autonomy and accountability based more on market mechanisms and less on state control. Institutional autonomy is praised as one of the greatest achievements of Vietnamese higher education (Salmi and Pham, 2019). Proponents of institutional autonomy claim that, with financial autonomy and the ability to set tuition fees, Vietnamese universities would be more competitive, and the quality of education would be improved through market mechanisms (Chau, 2020; Parajuli et al., 2020; Pham, 2020). This claim has largely been criticized in the extant literature on the neoliberal university (Giroux, 2020; Martin-Sardesai et al., 2020). Institutional autonomy can be interpreted as an introduction to the neoliberal concept of efficiency (Brüsemeister, 2002). Marketization and financialization of higher education facilitate the domination of capital (Hall and Bowles, 2016) rather than improving education quality.

Salmi and Pham (2019) assessed that marketization and privatization happen slowly but irreversibly. Since the early 1990s, 'socialization'³ has consistently turned into privatization through mergers and acquisitions, with higher education being treated as a commodity to be traded by the private sector

² A highly centralized system in which all institutions were public, aiming to produce socialist citizens for socialism development (Lap, 2020).

³ A Vietnamese-English term for nationalization. The term was originally associated with communism, referring to the collectivization of assets and resources; however, its current meaning is contested, and the process often involves private actors (M.T.N. Nguyen, 2018).

(Pham, 2020). As a result, despite the decrease in the number of Vietnamese universities, the number of non-public institutions increased between 2015 and 2017 (Truong, 2020). Privatization alone does not signify neoliberalization. Combined with the predominant theme of financial autonomy and profit-driven issues, these aspects become central to the neoliberal logic that is prevalent in higher education contexts (Phan and Dang, 2020). Favorable conditions enabled by the state government have allowed higher education to follow the neoliberal logic of marketization and privatization, resulting in university neoliberalization.

Nguyen et al. (2010) documented one of the first accounts of neoliberalized universities in Vietnam with the case study of the Vietnam National University in Hanoi. Their findings suggest that neoliberalization has been permitted and applied thoroughly at the university, even under a socialist political framework. One of the main themes that the authors identified is institutional autonomy, which pressured the university to become financially self-reliant. The downside of financial self-reliance is that academics and administrators have 'become increasingly subjected to the kinds of values that drive an intense pursuit of private profit' (Pham, 2020: 183). Other features of neoliberalization that were exhibited at the university include university-industry partnerships, adoption of corporate culture, and cost-effective operations (Nguyen et al., 2010). The most significant feature is the income diversification strategies through increased tuition fees and student enrollment, commercialization of academic research, and consulting services. The factor that allows the neoliberalization process to happen seamlessly is that academics and scholars are unaware of or unfamiliar with the ideas of neoliberalism (*ibid.*).

The change at Vietnam National University is not a rogue case but a leading model of the neoliberalization of Vietnamese higher education. Three decades under the neoliberal economic paradigm, education 'has witnessed a trend towards greater autonomy and openness, less state control and more marketization' (Salmi and Pham, 2019: 114). Universities must employ different strategies and practices (Lap, 2020) to cope with the change. An increasingly common practice is to offer more courses and programs with English as a medium of instruction (EMI) (Vu, 2020). English is not a neutral skill, and the rise of EMI in universities is not ideology-free. English is

believed to be a manifestation of neoliberalism (Manan and Hajar, 2022). In English-as-a-foreign-language countries, English is loaded with neoliberal spirits of marketability, competition, and economic success (Choi, 2021; Kubota, 2011; Manan and Hajar, 2022). Not only because English allows universities to internationalize, but it also allows them to advertise the promise of success with English proficiency. Consequently, the gradual adoption of EMI is another indicator of university neoliberalization. Another salient strategy is copying education models, curricula, and textbooks from the West (Lap, 2020). Moreover, students are regarded as consumers, and their demand for strong academia-industry partnerships is being met (Nguyen et al., 2010; Rizvi, 2020).

Another important manifestation is the revised *Higher education law* N°08/2012/QH13 [3]. The law states that the primary role of higher education is to create a workforce for socialist development and to integrate the country into the global economy. The changes in the higher education environment can be seen as subtle compliance with capitalist ideology (Trần et al., 2014). Universities prioritize teaching market-based skills due to their role as the primary workforce providers for economic development (Phuong and Chai, 2018; Truong, 2020). Students also demand these skills for competitiveness in the job market (Giroux, 2020). This development parallels the global trend in the role of universities in educating a competitive workforce for globalization (Hall and Bowles, 2016). Unlike features of the global trend, Vietnamese university neoliberalization is still in its early stages and has different characteristics. Elements like curriculum design, leadership appointment, faculty recruitment, and pedagogy have been largely disregarded in the process (Chau, 2020). The features of university neoliberalization in Vietnam are the emergence of private universities, financial autonomy, internationalization through EMI, industry partnerships, and teaching globalized market-based skills.

Despite the burgeoning and explosive changes in higher education, there has been only a limited number of academic research on higher education in Vietnam (Warren, 2020). Among them is the book *Higher education in market-oriented socialist Vietnam*, edited by Phan Le Ha and Doan Ba Ngoc (2020), which provides most of the evidence for my argument about Vietnamese university neoliberalization. The research focuses primarily on reporting and

critiquing the organizational changes and new pressures on academics. For instance, switching from Vietnamese to EMI is an extremely complex process that requires training and development (Vu, 2020). Faculty members are frequently assigned targets that are intimately associated with financial outcomes (Pham, 2020). The critiques, however, place more of an emphasis on methods and practices than on justice and ideologies. It cannot be denied that neoliberalization has increased the number of people attending higher education from under four percent to 30 percent in just a few decades (Rizvi, 2020). I argue that such discussion of pedagogy vis-à-vis economic growth and global capitalist economy integration overlooks student perspectives and issues with socialism and coloniality specific to Vietnam. The analysis also predominantly focuses on practice and outcomes rather than ideology (de)construction and subjectivity. Furthermore, utilizing the logic of marketization and privatization as an attempt to improve education downplays the interrelated complexities of the dual influence of the rent-seeking economy and neoliberal globalization.

To dissect the complexities of neoliberalism in higher education in Vietnam from a fresh perspective, I use critical theory to analyze the existing empirical evidence in the aforementioned research. Critical perspectives are largely ignored, whereas the functionalist paradigm, which primarily explores practices or outcomes, is preferred for research in and on Vietnamese higher education. Grounded in Marxism, the critical theory approach to education research, as proposed by Strunk and Betties (2019), is a powerful tool for tracing power, domination, and exploitation. Critical theory can also unpack ideological construction, inequalities, and injustice through education (ibid). This approach is particularly useful because neoliberal higher education in a socialist state implies ideological friction and contradictions between capitalism and socialism. Another advantage of applying critical theory to research is that it allows researchers to focus on systems as opposed to individuals (Giroux, 2020; Strunk and Betties, 2019) in a way that can offer a critical overview of Vietnamese higher education. My analysis follows the framework put forth by Strunk and Betties (2019), which includes the commodification of education, ideological domination, and hidden curriculum.

Commodification of education through privatization

In this section, I focus specifically on the tuition fees at private universities as a central aspect of neoliberal privatization. Vietnamese universities have been bought and sold by an increasingly wealthy group of investors since 2013 (Pham, 2020). It can thus be assumed that private universities are profitable businesses. Higher education is commodified in the sense that universities are being traded. These privatized universities have also been enjoying the privileges of less state control, more autonomy, and a flexible ceiling on tuition fees and enrollment quotas (Lap, 2020; Salmi and Pham, 2019). Institutional autonomy of higher education means that universities are expected to be financially self-supporting through partial or total reliance on tuition fees (Pham, 2020). Tuition fees at private universities tend to be two to three times higher than their public counterparts (Hayden and Le-Nguyen, 2020), and much higher at foreign-owned higher education institutions such as RMIT University Vietnam or British University Vietnam. More middle-class students consider private or foreign-owned universities as their top choices (Chau, 2020; Truong, 2020).



Figure 1: A screenshot of a Facebook post sharing a student’s complaint about high tuition fees at UEF and how the student’s parents were unable to pay the fees.

The logic of the market holds that competition encourages universities to maintain accessible and affordable tuition fees. Yet, tuition fees continue to rise at most Vietnamese universities due to the reliance on the fees. Tuitions have become a heavy burden for many parents due to the economic recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Minh Giang, 2021a). The Ministry of Education and Training responded by recommending that higher education institutions refrain from raising tuition fees for the upcoming academic year (ibid.). Some universities were still determined to increase tuition. Two prominent examples are the University of Economics and Finance (UEF) and HUTECH University, both privately owned by HUTECH Education and located in Ho Chi Minh City. The universities stated that tuition fees could not be

reduced because online teaching costs more than the traditional mode of teaching and learning (Minh Giang, 2021b). This claim is unsubstantiated. Online mode tends to be cheaper than institution-based learning due to lower overall costs (Dhawan, 2020). Private universities rely on tuition fees for profitability (Pham, 2020). This for-profit drive has led to the commodification of education (Strunk and Betties, 2019). Those in power are incentivized to maintain the commodified educational system (often through oppression) to maintain their power and wealth (Strunk and Betties, 2019; Marx, 2013). The two overtly profit-driven universities came under fire from the student bodies for being exploitative, which led to protests against the institutions. The protests operate primarily online on social media. Figure 1 shows a Facebook post from one of the pages that protest UEF. The pages collect and disseminate information related to the education and service quality of the universities. A Facebook page even crowdfunds online advertisements to discourage high school students and their parents from applying to those universities.

Capitalist ideological domination under a socialist structure

Ngo (2020) claimed that higher education in Vietnam is still strongly attached to the socialist ideology because (1) the CPV governs the structure of the education system, (2) higher education contributes to the transition from a centrally-planned economy to market socialism, and (3) compulsory teachings of Marxist-Leninist philosophy and Ho Chi Minh thought. However, all three arguments can be dismissed. First, the state is relinquishing control of the system to facilitate the neoliberalization process of higher education, resulting in widely-celebrated institutional autonomy (Salmi and Pham, 2019). Second, Vietnam is now socialist only in name, but in practice, its economy is crony capitalist. Higher education, therefore, does not contribute to market socialism but to capitalism. Third, Marxism-Leninism and philosophy are consolidated into a single compulsory course in higher education (Salomon and Vu, 2007), delivered via transmissive lectures, and assessed with standardized tests. Education on socialism and communism is thus rendered decorative. Like Giroux's (2002) observation, courses that cannot be immediately converted to market value are either eliminated or technicized.

Alternatively, I argue that, even under a socialist structure, neoliberal capitalist ideology quickly takes hold and dominates higher education. Vietnam has been exposed to socialist and communist ideology in less than 100 years, whereas the culture and society were heavily ‘sinicized’⁴ by more than 1,000 years of Chinese occupation. Consequently, Confucianism influences Vietnamese education robustly (Ly, 2015). While neoliberalism and socialism dogmatically oppose each other, neoliberalism and Confucianism show compatibility in some respects (Ngo, 2020). First, both neoliberal logic and Confucian utilitarianism see education as a private investment and a tool for private gain. Second, Ngo (ibid.) argued that educational inequality produced by neoliberalism conflicts with the essential Confucian value of egalitarianism. However, the supposed Confucian value of egalitarianism did not exist, especially in higher education. The system of Confucian higher education was designed exclusively for men of the upper classes, while women and people of the lower classes were not able to access formal education (Ly, 2015). Both neoliberal and Confucian education sustain inequality. For these reasons, socialism does not shape higher education as much as neoliberal capitalism does due to its compatibility with Confucianism.

Neoliberalized Vietnamese universities are primarily concerned with economic development, human capital, workforce development, and global market integration by embracing vocational and technical education (DeJaeghere et al., 2021; Truong, 2020). This means reducing all levels of education to job training, prioritizing instrumental knowledge over substantive knowledge, and prioritizing workers over thinkers (Giroux, 2020). Gramsci (1971) suggested that such vocationalization seeks to produce working classes rather than ruling classes. Confucian higher education in Vietnam was criticized because it produced useless bureaucrats during the feudal era (Ly, 2015). Neoliberalized universities, rather than educating students to think critically and govern public life, transform students into human capital (or workers) for businesses and corporations. Ideological domination justifies oppressive activities and inequitable consequences as legitimate and fair by reifying the domination as a part of common sense (Strunk and Betties, 2019). Student-turned-workers and their role in

⁴ A process through which non-Chinese societies are subjugated to Chinese culture.

economic development belong to this realm of common sense. Subtly imparted capitalist ideology remains unchallenged in socialist Vietnam.

Curriculum and pedagogy of hidden hegemony

As opposed to the visible yet ineffective method of teaching socialism or communism, capitalist ideology is effectively disseminated because it 'is taught in ways that are often subtle, even invisible' through hidden assumptions in curricula (Strunk and Betties, 2019: 74). A hidden curriculum is a set of lessons – including norms, values, and beliefs – that are taught in the classroom and learned during socialization processes in a way that is not openly intended (Apple, 2019). Hidden curricula function as a key tool for manufacturing consent and maintaining the hegemony of dominant groups (Apple, 2019; Gramsci, 1971, 1995). More universities in Vietnam are starting to teach market-oriented and competency-based skills, intending to create a workforce for a globalized knowledge economy (DeJaeghere et al., 2021; Phuong and Chai, 2018). The higher education sector does not yet have a strategic plan for curriculum improvement to achieve such a goal (Trần et al., 2014). The most popular approach is the wholesale borrowing of curricula, textbooks, and educational models from Western English-speaking countries (Lap, 2020). Education in English-speaking countries tends to reinforce global corporate propaganda and neoliberal ethics (Collison, 2003; Lakes, 2008). Furthermore, the dominant Western knowledge, texts, and social practices in curricula are still influenced by the legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and privilege (Giroux, 1992a, 1992b). The wholesale borrowing of Western curricula and textbooks not only furthers capitalist ideological domination, but Vietnamese universities also risk engaging in a collective unremembering of the history of anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism.

Englishization of the curriculum has enjoyed immense popularity in countries where English is a foreign language (Choi, 2021; Dang, 2021; Kubota, 2011). English as a language has long been understood both as a symbol of the opportunity for national success in the world economy and as a capital for individual success and private wealth through future employability (Choi, 2021; Dang, 2021). In South Korea, English is an increasingly recognized symbol of social reproduction and a mechanism for expressing class-based privileges (Choi, 2021). EMI has been fast adopted by Vietnamese universities

to internationalize and improve education quality (Dang, 2021; Vu, 2020). However, it was found that the primary driving force for EMI in Vietnamese universities is social status (Pham and Doan, 2020). EMI courses and programs are relatively more expensive than those taught in Vietnamese. The advantages of English proficiency are thus reserved for the financially privileged. Neoliberalized universities are also obliged to follow the logic of neocolonialism that ‘undermine[s] local and indigenous forms of knowledge, as well as theoretical and critical forms of knowing’ (Gyamera and Burke, 2018: 462). And educators are impartial providers of decontextualized information (Saunders, 2007). When it is taught that ‘some ways of knowing, establishing knowledges, or representing knowledges as *better* than others, they also teach that the ideology aligned with those *better* ways is superior’ (Strunk and Betties, 2019: 75, emphasis in original). When English as a language is used as an indicator of quality education, class privileges, and status, the Vietnamese language is reflexively assumed to be inferior (Dang, 2021). Yet, this kind of pedagogy with hidden values and ideologies is practiced unsuspectedly.

In all mechanisms of oppression, an alternative to brute force and open repression is the ability of the dominant group to obtain the consent of the oppressed (Gramsci, 1971; Pyke, 2010). Hegemony is the dominance of one group over others through systems of reality construction, ideological reproduction, and knowledge circulation throughout society (Apple, 2019; Gramsci, 1971). This hegemony is legitimized by education that informs social norms, organizational practices, bureaucratic procedures, and common sense (Apple, 2019; Foucault, 2008; Pyke, 2010). Using critical theory, I have identified three themes within the ongoing neoliberalization process of Vietnamese higher education: (1) privatization has allowed education to be commodified and traded, resulting in high tuition fees; (2) capitalist ideology is subtly taught in a socialist environment; and (3) hegemony of the West and superiority of the English language. As long as its contribution to economic growth still holds, the power of neoliberal higher education and the Western capitalist hegemony it perpetuates remain uncontested. But a question remains: who are the kinds of people this education system produces?

Neoliberal students and student others

Today's society is no longer Foucault's disciplinary world of hospitals, madhouses, prisons, barracks, and factories. It has long been replaced by another regime, namely a society of fitness studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls, and genetic laboratories. Twenty-first century society is no longer a disciplinary society, but rather an achievement society. (Han, 2015: 8)

In such an achievement society mediated by neoliberal governmentality, the people are no longer obedience-subjects but achievement-subjects – or neoliberal subjects (Han, 2017; Kiersey, 2009). The great ingenuity of capitalism, according to Marx (2013), is not only that relative surplus (in the form of profit) from production by wage workers goes to capitalist classes, but also the constant reproduction of the wage workers as wage workers. However, as Han (2015) noted, the differentiation between workers and capitalists in the Marxist sense no longer holds in a neoliberal society. The neoliberal subject sees themselves not as a worker, but as an entrepreneur (Han, 2017). This subject is capable of unlimited self-production and has unbounded freedom for improving human capital (Foucault et al., 2008; Han, 2017; Kiersey, 2009). By synthesizing Foucauldian discourse-truth-power and the dialectics of critical theory, it is possible to claim the neoliberal subject is dialectically shaped by and responsible for the (re)production of neoliberal governmentality (Kiersey, 2009; Strunk and Betties, 2019).

Forms of subjectivity need to be examined, as they constitute an important part of Fletcher's (2019) multidimensional neoliberalization framework. Paraphrasing Simone de Beauvoir's statement, Houghton (2019: 626, emphasis added) proclaimed '[n]o one is born a *neoliberal subject*, but rather may become one.' Education is an integral part of hegemony, and universities are gears in the wider mechanisms of domination (Foucault et al., 2008; Gramsci, 1995). Learning is fundamentally related to processes of identity and value formation (Desjardins, 2015). And becoming a neoliberal subject requires educational investments and ideological learning (Houghton, 2019; Strunk and Betties, 2019). As a precursor to the neoliberal subject, the concept of *neoliberal student* will be developed in line with critical theory. Kiersey (2009) wondered if neoliberal subjectivity is a ubiquitous and global

phenomenon. Thus, I seek to develop the *neoliberal student* in the Vietnamese context and against the backdrop of the neoliberal subject on a global scale.

First, neoliberal students must learn to assume personal responsibility for creating their identities because neoliberal society significantly reduces the scope of collective responsibility (Brown, 2015; Verhaeghe, 2014). Identity construction processes are dependent on education and socialization (Houghton, 2019; Strunk and Betties, 2019). Despite the collectivist culture in Vietnam, education is fiercely competitive (Ngo, 2020; D. Nguyen, 2018). Competition within higher education urges students to think of themselves in economically competitive ways (Houghton, 2019). Students can obtain more competitive advantages through self-help workshops, motivational conferences, mental training, and networking events (Cho, 2015; Han, 2017). They also use a variety of techniques to appear competent and positive (Nguyen et al., 2020). As a result, overeducated students tend to construct adaptable identities (Besley, 2012; Cho, 2015; Verhaeghe, 2014). Neoliberal students with flexible identities learn to become neoliberal subjects not to belong to a community (Besley, 2012), but to compete with others.

Second, neoliberalism turns everyone into consumers, interested primarily in what is beneficial and brings instantaneous satisfaction (Han, 2017; Matković, 2015; Verhaeghe, 2014). It is extremely difficult not to get caught up in a consumerist world with omnipresent advertising that promises to solve all problems (Bauer et al., 2012; Dittmar, 2008; Matković, 2015). Vietnamese students are likely to reject the communist identity and avoid political and civic engagement despite the purported socialist education (King et al., 2008; Nguyen et al., 2017; Salomon and Vu, 2007). Vietnamese acquire higher education primarily for professional and career aspirations and in pursuit of a consumerist lifestyle (King et al., 2008). Consumerist identity is viewed as the means of individualization and self-actualization (Nguyen et al. 2017). From being consumers of universities, neoliberal students further learn to construct consumerist identities to realize themselves.

Third, contract cheating has become a widespread phenomenon that thrives in neoliberalized higher education. Contract cheating is outsourcing student academic work to third parties (Lancaster and Clarke, 2016). Contract

cheating is particularly pervasive in Vietnam. Disguised as educational support services, contract cheating businesses openly advertise to students (Hai Van, 2021). The work is guaranteed to be written by graduates who have earned degrees from prestigious universities or even by academics. The prices as advertised can vary: 800 thousand đồng (32 euros) for an essay; one to three million đồng (37 to 112 euros) for a bachelor's thesis; and a master's thesis costs substantially more, ranging from 10 to 20 million đồng (356 to 791 euros) (ibid.). It costs more for works written in English. For reference, the average monthly wage in urban Vietnam in 2020 was 7.26 million đồng (288 euros) (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2022). Financially privileged students can resort to paying for assignments, degrees, qualifications⁵, or other appearances of success to become neoliberal subjects.

Fourth, as a direct consequence of the long history of colonialism, colonial mentality lingers. Colonial mentality is the perception of ethnic and cultural inferiority when one values the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the colonizers over one's own (David and Okazaki, 2006). Under the Confucian education system, Vietnamese scholars often developed an inferiority complex toward the Chinese (Ly, 2015). In postcolonial Vietnam, many Vietnamese suffer from the colonial mentality, believing that white people and Western cultures are superior (Alneng, 2002; Phan, 2004). This is marked by a perception that non-whites are not as capable of teaching English as white teachers (Bright and Phan, 2011; Omar, 2013). The superiority is also reflected in the perceived hierarchies of linguistic imperialism, in which some languages are seen as better than others (Manan and Hajar, 2022; Phillipson, 2007). Universities tend to place greater value on EMI, Western curricula, and English-language textbooks than on the Vietnamese language and knowledge (Dang, 2021). At best, these practices erase the history of anti-colonial struggles; at worst, they tacitly endorse colonialism and imperialism. Students are denied a chance to critically reflect on the whiteness and coloniality of the neoliberal higher education system.

Fifth, what about students who cannot afford such an educational investment? This is the case for more and more students as tuition fees continue to rise

⁵ It is also worth mentioning that buying fake degrees is also a widespread and problematic phenomenon.

(Desjardins, 2015). For those students excluded from neoliberal education, Houghton (2019) termed them as *student others*. Student others find themselves unable to compete in a globalized market, having to engage in low-paid labor with no possibility for upward mobility. Student others are to become neoliberal others – sweatshop workers, manual laborers, precarious workers, or long-term unemployed (Wright, 2019). Students who can afford to participate in neoliberal higher education do so not because of higher learning (Giroux, 2002). Higher education has become a means for neoliberal students to distance themselves from other (undesirable) subjectivities (Giroux, 2002; Houghton, 2019). Neoliberal students are to become professionals, managers, self-employed, or bureaucrats (Wright, 2019).

Lastly, it is important to include mental health in this analysis of neoliberal subjectivity because, as Priestley (2019: 191) argued, student mental health problems can be conceptualized as ‘conditions that are, in part, (re)defined by, produced by, and (re)produce neoliberalism.’ In addition, neoliberalism has caused a broad array of psychological distress among academics and students in universities (Hall and Bowles, 2016). Research on mental health in Vietnam is still limited, and awareness has only now been raised during the COVID-19 pandemic. A study of the general population during a nationwide partial lockdown in Vietnam found that there is a low prevalence of reported depression (4.9%), anxiety (7.0%), and stress (3.4%) (Le et al., 2020). Research on mental health among students tells another story: mild to moderate depression was 24.2% and major depression was 20.7% among university students (Tuyen et al., 2019); nearly 25% of higher education students exhibited signs of depression during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tran et al., 2021); and, even before the pandemic, approximately 90% of university students suffered from either stress, anxiety, or depression (Ly and Vo, 2018). Vietnamese youths with mental health problems have increased in recent years at an alarming rate (UNICEF, 2018). Students, like anybody else, increasingly suffer from mental illness due to policies of neoliberal hegemony (Priestley, 2019; Saunders, 2007; Zeira, 2022). The case of Vietnam shows that, unlike anybody else, students are disproportionately affected by mental health problems.

The studies partially attribute the causes of mental illness to individual student behaviors or attributes, such as study plan, internet usage (Ly and Vo,

2018), drinking, smoking, household income (Tuyen et al., 2019), and lack of essential skills (Tran et al., 2021). Saunders (2007) warns against focusing on individuals, which will only be treating the symptoms of a larger problem. Using critical theory, the focus should be turned away from individual students and onto the systems, namely Confucianism and neoliberalism. Traditional Confucian values and contemporary neoliberal society both value achievement (Slobodian, 2018; UNICEF, 2018; Zeira, 2022). Pressure to achieve and compete can lead to compulsive self-exploitation, and in the long run, mental illnesses like stress, anxiety, and depression (Becker et al., 2021; Han, 2015; Zeira, 2022). In turn, anxiety and depression, according to the insidious logic of neoliberalism, maximize productivity (Han, 2018). Hypercompetitiveness and lack of connection further increase their feeling of loneliness (Becker et al., 2021). One can arguably assume that neoliberalism plays a decisive role in the current crisis of students' psychosocial wellbeing.

Discussion and conclusions

The dual influence of the rent-seeking economy and neoliberal globalization has facilitated neoliberalization in Vietnamese higher education. The main features include financial autonomy, privatization, Englishization and internationalization, industry partnership, and prioritization of market-based skills. Higher education neoliberalization is widely accepted and celebrated as it produces a competent workforce for development, modernity, and integration. However, certain vulnerabilities are made apparent when the development is critically examined. Education is commodified and traded in the sense that universities start to resemble for-profit businesses with increasingly higher tuition fees. The history of struggle, anti-colonialism, and socialist traditions is either erased or technicized. Western-, capitalism-centric curricula are borrowed and taught. English as a language is considered superior to Vietnamese. Despite the socialist education to justify the communist rule, the covert teaching of neoliberal ideology indoctrinates students with merit-based achievement, market-mediated ethics, and a value-free system (Apple, 2019; Salomon and Vu, 2007; Verhaeghe, 2014). Neoliberalization comes not only from corporate and state actors but is also aided and abetted by academics due to the perceived benefits (e.g., pay rise).

Higher education is no longer primarily about higher learning (Giroux, 2002), but rather about preserving neoliberal capitalist hegemony.

In a competitive world of efficiency, productivity, profitability, and moral ambiguity (Lakes, 2008; Slobodian, 2018), the neoliberal student-subject learns to develop a flexible identity – highly educated, English proficient, consumerist, positive, and perpetually self-optimizing. The neoliberal persona can have immense psychological tolls on the student-subject. Neoliberal students suffer from a range of mental illnesses – stress, anxiety, and depression – disproportionately more than the general population. Students are not given opportunities to critically reflect on the assumptions of the hegemonic systems. The financially privileged can pay to play in these systems and, if they so choose, can pay to win essays, bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and even doctorates. Meanwhile, the underprivileged who cannot access neoliberal education find themselves taking low-paying jobs. Neoliberal higher education thus further polarizes inequality.

Neoliberalism started in the West and now pervades globally. In Confucian Asia, neoliberal globalization manifests itself diversely. Rent-seekers in Thailand and South Korea exploited the ideological and organizational weaknesses of their respective states in pursuit of profits (Kim and Im, 2001). Japan relied heavily on a neoliberal economic policy, leading to a bubble economy based on inflated real estate and stock prices that eventually collapsed (Bix, 2013). South Korea's abrupt and violent neoliberal transformation has resulted in a crisis of biosocial reproduction among young people (Choi, 2015). Neoliberalism-mediated consequences in Vietnam are catching up to these countries. As Thi (2020: 226) observed, Vietnam is 'neither fully authoritarian, nor democratic; neither a communist or socialist state, nor is it a purely capitalist project.' The marriage between authoritarian socialism and neoliberal capitalism is slowly being institutionalized, but how long can the honeymoon last?

Although it is undeniable that neoliberalism has been a favorable force for economic growth in Vietnam (Schwenkel and Leshkovich, 2012), this neoliberal project has had an (un)intended consequence – the rise of rent-seekers and cronyism. For a formerly colonized country that celebrates the triumph of communists over capitalism and imperialism (Davies, 2015; Yu,

2020), the contemporary Vietnamese economy is paradoxically crony capitalist. The new elite of rent-seekers is gradually gaining influence in the CPV, aiming to solidify the neoliberal economic paradigm to reap hyperprofits. The paradigm creates glaring inequality, conflicting with socialist values for an egalitarian society. But how do the contradictions between socialism and neoliberalism result in a relatively stable system? How is it that neoliberalism is seemingly invisible in a socialist state? And that friction and resistance are virtually absent? There are a few explanations that I have identified throughout the study.

- Neoliberalism is treated as an economic paradigm rather than a philosophy of capitalism, which makes it easier to be implemented in a socialist structure without an overt clash between the two ideologies.
- Marxism-Leninism has lost its prominence, and socialist values are reduced to mere propaganda (Davies, 2015; Thayer, 2010). Sustained economic growth is now the main source of legitimization for the communist party. Pragmatism prevails over substantive socialism and communism.
- Policy programs have provided conditions and pressure for universities to reorganize to become more neoliberal. Higher education simultaneously promotes and legitimizes neoliberalism by upholding capitalist hegemony.
- Contradictions and frictions between neoliberalism and socialism in education are smoothed by the prolonged cultural influence of Confucianism – an ideology that shows high compatibility with neoliberalism.
- The discussion of global integration and economic growth proliferates, while the meanings and effects of neoliberalism are either largely ignored or not well understood, resulting in the lack of substantial discourse and criticism.
- Neoliberal subjectivity endorses the system in which it is produced.

Adapting Davis' (1971) formula, one can thus claim that what seems to be socialism, or what is accepted as socialism, is actually crony capitalism.

As some scholars have remarked, the market economy and market-oriented higher education have been good for Vietnam (Salmi and Pham, 2019; Schwenkel and Leshkovich, 2012). Conceptualizing the development as neoliberalization or universities as neoliberal universities can seem to undercut the achievements of Vietnamese higher education in the past decades. Another significant limitation of this paper is that it is full of critiques and lacks an optimistic outlook or solutions.

Profit-driven universities have been met with resistance. The above-mentioned students' online protest is a great example. But such resistance is rare, and I doubt that any meaningful reform can be achieved. The greater the power, the quieter it works (Han, 2017). Neoliberalism influences Vietnam diversely and, arguably, deeply because it works quietly, even academics know relatively little about it. Resistance cannot be forged without an understanding of how oppression is internalized and reproduced (Pyke, 2010). Emancipatory knowledge can be the beginning of a solution, and thus resistance. Curbing rent-seeking has been a major concern of the CPV (Vuving, 2010; 2019). But little has been done structurally, so the results are mixed at best (Vuving, 2019). Knowledge of neoliberalism can enable policymakers to be critical of neoliberal programs that have facilitated the rise of rent-seekers and cronyism. This says nothing about the fact that rent-seeking can exacerbate ecological crises, threatening our collective existence (Sayer, 2020). Being an official socialist state ruled by a communist party, Vietnamese academics are in a unique position to legitimately resist neoliberalism, restore higher education to the commons, and critically contribute to socialism beyond the empty label. Mental health issues are often disregarded as a generational weakness in Vietnam. Educators can play the role of healers for young people blighted by neoliberalism and foster hope and resistance (Desai et al., 2019).

Looking at neoliberalism as an economic paradigm provides meaningful insights into its pervasiveness under a socialist system. In particular, the critical theory approach has illuminated different interplaying facets of neoliberal capitalism in a socialist state, university neoliberalization,

ideological construction, hegemony, and subjectivities. Two signs that may be useful for future research have come to my attention during this research. First, paralleling the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s is the emergence of neo-imperialism – marked by the defeat of US imperialism in the Vietnam War in 1973 (Harvey, 2003; 2005; Yu, 2020). The theme of coloniality appears sporadically throughout this paper, associated with the pervasiveness of international institutions and foreign-owned enterprises. Decolonial epistemology is useful as it allows researchers to examine issues related to the production and validation of knowledge in the Global South (Couto et al., 2021). Decoloniality also provides a juxtaposition to the Global North and its superiority and universality of managerial perspectives and organizational practices (Couto et al., 2021; Girei and Natukunda, 2021). Second, Neckel (2020) suggested the use of Habermas' concept of refeudalization as an analytical lens. Refeudalization involves a process of paradoxical counter-movement that generates inequality with the re-emergence of unfree labor and super-rich oligarchies (ibid.). In the same vein, Dworkin (2015: 158) observed that 'feudalism has returned in the form of crony capitalism.' One can identify some resemblances in this study. The Vietnamese communist revolution was supposed to bring about socialism but instead brought rising inequality, cronyism, and rent-seekers. In my view, decolonial epistemology and refeudalization can complement critical studies of neoliberalism for future organization studies.

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