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Fashioning Indigeneity:  
Representations of Ethnic Minority Textiles in Vietnam's Creative Economy

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Southeast Asian Studies

by

Chi Yen Ha

June 2022

Thesis Committee:

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The Thesis of Chi Yen Ha is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Fashioning Indigeneity:  
Representations of Ethnic Minority Textiles in Vietnam's Creative Economy

by

Chi Yen Ha

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Southeast Asian Studies  
University of California, Riverside, June 2022  
Dr. Christina Schwenkel, Chairperson

Vietnam's non-majority indigenous groups, often referred to as "ethnic minorities," have long been represented in the public space with diverse, sometimes conflicting, imaginaries of the "Other." As the most visible markers of their cultural affiliations, their textiles have become objects of fascination and commercialization and attracted increasing attention from designers and other creatives over the past decade. Examining six Vietnamese fashion brands who engage with these materials, the study finds that the figure of ethnic minority artisans is represented as skilled cultural experts, natural environmentalists, and non-innovative producers in Vietnam's rising discourse of creative economy. Brands' positive portrayals of ethnic minority artisans challenge the negative stereotypes of them, while also reproducing the hegemonic regime of representation. The diverse patterns of cross-cultural interaction between artisans and designers also raise the issue of cultural appropriation, whose theoretical framework might be limiting in its application to the Vietnamese contexts.

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## INTRODUCTION

As I lifted the curtain into the exhibition room, I found myself surrounded by walls of hanging cream-colored fabric strips filled with projected moving images of blue tinted hands swirling in a foaming deep blue liquid. The close-ups of hands alternate with wider angle scenes of women clad in dark-colored outfits harvesting a field of tall, slender plants. The accompanying texts identified them as the Nùng An, a sub-group of one of Vietnam's national minorities – the Nùng. The outfit they are wearing, recognizably different from both Western-styled clothing and the Vietnamese national dress *áo dài*, is their indigo-dyed attire. The images of them and their hands at work, coupled with the descriptive texts about their textile practices, present an emotion-laden portrayal of natural fiber making and dyeing as long-standing cultural traditions.

The portrayal of Nùng An textile artisans is part of a multisensory art installation aimed to showcase Vietnam's natural textile traditions by a group of artists and designers led by Ms. Ngọc, the founder and creative director of Vietnamese eco-fashion brand Eleven Minutes. Ngọc is a familiar name in the fashion scene, well-known for her work with ethnic minority communities in incorporating their textile techniques into Vietnam's contemporary fashion. The featured Nùng An women in Cao Bằng are the first ethnic minority community with whom Ngọc collaborated and has been maintaining close relationship for over 10 years.

The motif of ethnic minority women doing “traditional” textile work, whether harvesting fiber and dye plants, weaving intricate patterns on the loom, or working the dyeing vat, is prevalent on the public media of Vietnamese fashion brands who engage

with textiles produced by ethnic minority groups. As these fabrics become a significant site of interactions between designers and artisans both within and across cultural boundaries, the visual and textual representation of ethnic minority women via their textile handiwork speaks to the symbolic and material relationships between these communities and designers who incorporate indigenous textiles into their designs.

As a textile enthusiast, I have been intrigued by the increasing presence of Vietnam's ethnic minority textiles in contemporary fashion in the past few years. I first noticed the incorporation of the batik resist-dyed and embroidered textiles of the Hmong, one of the ethnic minorities residing in Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries, in the Vietnamese *áo dài* in 2015, when a revival of interest in the national garment sparked a massive wave of "innovating" (*cách tân*) it to express their new vision of "modernity." While the use of Vietnam's ethnic minority textiles in fashion is not entirely new, it has largely remained peripheral in Vietnam's contemporary fashion. However, the past decade has witnessed a significant rise in the number and visibility of middle and upper range fashion brands who engage with ethnic minority textiles as their primary materials. What is even more remarkable is the diversification in the forms of engagement between artisans and designers. More designers have gone beyond the usual strategy of "cut-and-pasting" ready-made textiles into new designs to interact with ethnic minority artisans from a more technical dimension that involves knowledge transfer and creative collaboration.

These diverse, novel ways of centering ethnic minority textiles and techniques in contemporary fashion have formed the basis of my research questions: What values do these brands, who target a middle-to-upper class clientele, attribute to the textile



traditions of ethnic groups who are often marginalized in a society dominated by the Kinh majority? What images of ethnic minority artisans are constructed and represented in these brands' public media, and how do they challenge or reproduce hegemonic discourses of ethnic minorities in Vietnam? In broader contexts, what do they reveal about Vietnam's contemporary creative economy, particularly in relation to issues of indigeneity, identity, and inter-ethnic relation?

### **Ethnic Minority Textiles in Vietnam's Fashion**

The history of the Vietnamese state-building is built upon the construction of ethnic classification and integration. Turning the diverse ethno-cultural groups inhabiting Vietnam's current territory into fixed categories is a historical process initiated by French colonial ethnography (Salemink 1999). Post-independence Vietnamese ethnologists inherited this taxonomy and applied the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist model of Soviet and China to construct a unified multi-ethnic nation-state (Keyes 2002). Today, Vietnam's populace is categorized by the government into 54 official ethnic groups, among which the Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) makes up about 86% of the population and the other 53 groups are considered national minorities (Center of Archive and Statistical Service 2019).

Most of these minority groups qualify for the global definition of "indigenous peoples", for they have their own cultures distinct from that of the majority Kinh, have established their residence in Vietnam's current territory since pre-colonial times, and have been subjected to various forms of discrimination and dispossession in a Kinh-dominated state (ILO 169; UNDRIP 2007; Merlan 2009). However, in Vietnam, the term

“indigenous peoples” is not often used to formally refer to these groups, for the lack of acknowledged ongoing settler colonialism and the political connotation of the term seen as a potential thread to the state’s authority. These are also common reasons for not recognizing the “indigenous peoples” status in other Asian states (King 1998; Baird 2016; Inman 2016). In this study, I use “ethnic minority” and “indigenous (people)” interchangeably to refer to these groups to reflect both the global and Vietnamese understandings. While “ethnic minority” remains the official and common term, various constellations of “indigenous” have increased in circulation in recent years, as seen in the public events on creative economy that I examined in this research.

Like indigenous peoples around the world, ethnic minorities in Vietnam have been depicted in a plethora of condescending and exoticizing images in the mainstream media. In Vietnam, where state-owned media holds the hegemony in ethnic minority’s representation, these imaginaries range from uncivilized primitives and political rebels to nature dwellers and tradition preservers (Đặng 1975; CEMA 2000; McElwee 2008; Culas 2010; Turner, Bonnin and Michaud 2015; Phan 2018; Vương 2019). Such portrayals are the accumulative results of the complex, multilayered histories between these groups and the central authorities.

As the most visible markers of their cultural and social identities as ethnic minorities, their distinctive dress and textiles are key features in their public representations. In many groups, the outfits are customarily handmade by women for individual and household use, featuring decorative patches rich in patterns and colors. These visually striking textiles are collectively referred to as *thổ cẩm*, an umbrella category devoid of ethnic and technical specificities, but rather carries the generic

connotation of what is commonly imagined as “ethnic” or “tribal” aesthetics, typically featuring intricate geometric motifs in multiple colors. As mass media portrays *thổ cẩm* as a recognizable signifier of ethnic minority cultures, these textiles have become highly commodified in Vietnam’s growing tourism industry, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Bonnin 2015; Diệp 2005; Howard and Howard 2002a; 2002b; Phạm 2019; Cohen 2000).<sup>1</sup>

Since the 2000s, incorporating *thổ cẩm* into *áo dài* has been a creative strategy pioneered by high-fashion designers like Sỹ Hoàng and Minh Hạnh to symbolize multicultural nationalism (Leshkovich 2003; 2019). Today, this practice of “cut-and-pasting” ready-made *thổ cẩm* into new designs of *áo dài* and Western-style clothing remains popular among fashion practitioners who seek inspiration in ethnic minority cultures, such as upscale fashion houses Lý Quý Khánh and La Phạm. In his study of commercialized craft in northern Thailand, Erik Cohen (1988; 2000) calls this material incorporation “the boutiqueisation of tribal textiles,” which is also prevalent in touristic areas in Vietnam like Sa Pa and souvenir shops in Hanoi, catering mainly to the tourist clientele. In these practices, the use of ethnic minority textiles tends to be limited in scale and time, used only as an additional inspiration for high fashion, a token of national cultural diversity for public performances, or souvenir diversification to boost tourism. In recent years, however, more designers have gone beyond this “cut-and-pasting” practice to engage with ethnic minority artisans on a deeper level. Designers request for certain

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<sup>1</sup> In Vietnam, since ethnic minorities are considered an integral part of the nation, their dress and textiles provide useful visual tropes to symbolically express their integration into a unified Vietnamese identity (Jonsson and Taylor 2003; Leshkovich 2003).

adjustments, learn textile-making techniques from artisans, and collaborating with them to create new forms and aesthetics. These material and technical involvements have diversified and deepened the interactions between artisans and designers.

In Vietnam, these diverse modes of incorporating ethnic minority textiles and techniques in fashion are often invoked as part of the rising discourse on creative economy in recent years. Having gained global endorsement since its emergence in the 1990s in Australia and the United Kingdom, the concept of “creative economy” emphasizes “individual creativity, skill and talent which have a potential for job and wealth creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (DCMS 2001). In Southeast Asia, this framework has attracted considerable financial and political support from both governments and international agencies as a path to sustainable development (Janamohan et al. 2021; ASEAN Secretariat 2021). For the region’s developing countries, it offers an opportunity to enhance their positions on the international stage and push against their stereotype as sources of cheap materials and labor for the Global North, with no innovation of their own, especially in the field of fashion. In Vietnam, Hanoi’s participation in UNESCO Creative Cities Network in 2019 attests to the state’s endorsement of the “creative economy” framework which now subsumes the previous rhetoric of “cultural industries,” thus kickstarting a proliferation of public events and talks on creative economy ever since. Within this rising discourse, cultural heritage and national identity remain salient, as Vietnam, like other Southeast Asian countries, strive to articulate a particular vision of modernity and creativity imbued with its distinctive cultural mark (Leshkovich and Jones 2003; Matsumoto 2004; Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black 2015). As creatives and designers increasingly articulate

these cultural identities through the rhetoric of “indigeneity,” my study examines how its current understandings and expressions in fashion function to bolster multicultural nationalism in contemporary Vietnam.

Considering the growing significance of the “creative economy” discourse, my research interrogates the complex interactions between ethnic minority artisans and fashion designers. It teases out the salient images through which these artisans are represented in Vietnam’s contemporary fashion. At the same time, it examines how such representations reinforce or challenge preexisting stereotypes of ethnic minorities in Vietnam. These representations underscore how indigeneity and innovation undergird creative economy in Vietnam, while highlighting the related issues of inter-group relation and cultural appropriation.

### **Representations of Ethnic Minorities in Fashion**

In his seminal work “Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices” (1997), Stuart Hall defines representations as relational systems between things, concepts, and signs that construct and solidify meanings into shared codes of interpretation that enable effective communication of these meanings among people. Drawing from Saussure’s semiotics and Foucault’s discourse, Hall’s constructionist approach considers meaning signification through a dual reading for both content and context to examine not only what is coded and communicated in these “regimes of representation,” but also how these systems are produced. He highlights “intertextuality,” the accumulation of meanings across different texts and images which “interplay with

each other to add or alter meanings” (232). Due to “intertextuality,” the relationship between concept and sign within a coded system of meanings, while relatively fixed, is never absolute. With the contemporary democratization of mass media, this fluidity opens up the possibility to use politics of representation to unsettle hegemonic stereotypes in the racial regimes of representation, albeit without completely detangling from its dominant narratives. To do this, Hall proposes several strategies: reversing popular evaluation of the same stereotypes, substituting negative stereotypes with positives ones, and using existing stereotypes to make them expose their own absurdities. Reading representations of ethnic minority artisans in fashion along this line, I draw from Hall’s concepts of “regimes of representation” and “inter-textuality,” in both spatial and temporal terms, to read into how Vietnamese contemporary practitioners collectively construct the figure of indigenous artisans, and how these representations shift and reinforce preexisting images of ethnic minorities throughout history.

In fashion’s regime of representation, the figure of ethnic minority artisans is characterized by their association with certain values. By examining the specific qualities highlighted in the public portrayals of these artisans, my work then asks: How have these features become valued by contemporary Vietnamese society and affiliated with particular materials, practices, and practitioners? Arjun Appadurai would argue that the answer lies in a political “regime of value.” In “The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective” (1986), Appadurai marries Marx’s and Simmel’s formulations of commodity value to theorize that economic logic is deeply entrenched in cultural design. The connection between economy and culture is determined by a “regime of value” (4) - a system of value exchange that is reflective of the larger sociocultural

structures of a specific space and time, and highly political and dynamic in nature. Such politics of value, in other words, renders certain values salient and ascribe them to certain material objects in an “eminently social, relational, and active” way (31), as it undergoes numerous shifts in different temporal and special dimensions. Within these regimes of value, things not only attain meanings from their context, but also give meanings to their context, a concept Appadurai calls “methodological fetishism” (5). Therefore, the demand and consumption of commodities are in fact the demand and consumption of values, in materialized form. Appadurai’s theory of “regime of value” allows us to understand how ethnic minority textiles gain value from their original makers and cultures, while also transferring the values carried in its materiality onto their makers, the artisans. As Ian Hodder (2012) points out, objects and humans are intimately intertwined and co-constituted by each other. As such, the material qualities and technical processes of ethnic minority textiles have catalyzed artisan-designer relationships and impel designers to portray artisans in terms of the values they perceive in the artisans’ textiles and techniques.

Drawing from these two theories, it is clear that representations of Vietnam’s ethnic minority artisans in seemingly depoliticized arenas such as fashion are by no means apolitical in their implications. To marginalized and minority communities, public representations are important as the primary ways in which the mainstream society imagine and perceive them. Echoing Appadurai’s “regime of value” and Hall’s “regime of representation,” Anette Hoffman and Esther Peeren (2010) stress that these imaginings do not occur in a vacuum or by accident, but are rather “embedded in history, power relations, and current politics” and “not all forms of representation are equally conducive

(to the emancipatory projects)” (Hoffman and Peeren 2010, 14). As fashion itself is a regime of representation, its portrayals of minority artisans can speak volume about social phenomena and sentiments in Vietnam’s creative economy and nation building. Scholars have shown that such representations can both reenact familiar tropes and produce alternative ways of imagining indigenous minorities (Hall 1997; Jonsson and Taylor 2003).

Revisiting this observation, my findings reveal that while the brands generally present positive images of ethnic minorities against the dominant discourse, these favorable framings function partly by building on pre-existing narratives of these groups in Vietnam. The emphasis of the artisans’ expertise and ingenuity challenges the hegemonic view of their backwardness, while building on the historical legacy of characterizing indigenous minorities as both distinctive from and integral of the Vietnamese national identity. The highlighting of environmental sustainability, on the other hand, reflects a relatively recent shift to the general discourse of Vietnam’s ethnic minorities, although not completely detached from their earlier framings as nature dwellers. In addition, an implicit perception of minority artisans as lacking the capacity for modern innovation emerges, revealing the hierarchies of labor and creativity within the discourse of creative economy.

In practical terms, the research also explores alternative praxes of cross-cultural representation and collaboration beyond the usual “cultural appropriation” framework, which tends to situate ethnic minority actors as passive traditionalists with limited agency and creativity. This intervention thus might open up possibilities to imagine



ethnic minorities in a more nuanced way in the public space and help reduce the power imbalance in inter-ethnic interactions.

## **Methodology**

This research's methodology combined digital ethnography and qualitative analysis of primary data collected from media sites, public events, and interviews between December 2021 and March 2022. As the global COVID-19 pandemic has brought numerous obstacles to the anthropological practice of ethnographic fieldwork for the last few years, anthropologists started to explore alternative ways to carry out their work, especially digital ethnography. I too have headed this path in this research, not only for its practicality, but more importantly, for its relevance to the particular purpose of the study. While there are certain limitations to this approach, many of my originally planned sites of data collection became accessible online due to the pandemic.

My particular positionality is crucial in shaping my initial interest in the subject and providing background knowledge. I started to notice the increasing presence of ethnic minority textiles in Vietnamese fashion around 2015 while living abroad. After my repatriation in 2019, my experience working in various projects on ethnic minority textiles has allowed me to build connections with textile makers, traders, and designers from various ethnic backgrounds (including Kinh, Hmong, Cham, Muong, Pa Then, and Thai). Despite belonging to the Kinh majority, I was accepted by minority communities to a certain (and uneven) extent as a fellow Vietnamese national. Moreover, since textile-making in many ethnic minority cultures in Vietnam is associated with womanhood and most brands currently working with these fabrics are also women-owned, my positionality as a young woman allowed me to enter the circle with relative ease.

Drawing from my connections and observation, I selected six Vietnamese apparel and accessories brands as key research subjects based on their reputation for working with ethnic minority textiles and the representativeness of their practices in the field. Their visibility allows them a certain level of social influence to propagate certain representations and discourses of ethnic minorities. All of the selected brands were founded in the 2010s, mostly in the earlier half. Their price range indicates that the main customers are middle to upper class. I made a point to include actors from ethnic minority communities to investigate whether their perspectives and approaches to the textiles differ from those from the majority Kinh. The six examined brands include Embroidered Hemp, Cloud Sky, Ua Hmoob, Quả Dứa, Thu Handicraft, and Eleven Minutes.<sup>2</sup>

The first component of the research, media analysis, was conducted on the data collected from the official websites and Facebook pages of the six brands between December 2021 and February 2022. In Vietnam as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, social media are among the most popular platforms for digital commerce, making them a rich site to observe how certain discourses of value are articulated and circulated<sup>3</sup>.

The second component involves online public events and talks on Vietnam's creative economy. These include the events and talks organized as part of Vietnam Festival of Creativity and Design (VFCD) and Vietnam Design Week (VDW) in 2020 and 2021, with a focus on fashion and other design industries. These two related series of

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<sup>2</sup> All individual and brand names have been changed for privacy purpose. See Appendix for more details.

<sup>3</sup> Besides Facebook pages, five of the brands also have Instagram accounts, which in most cases feature the same post content as their Facebook pages. Thus, I mainly examined the brands' Facebook pages and websites.

events attest to the Vietnamese state's official endorsement of the creative economy discourse, and two of my key informants also participated in these talks. While the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic prevented me from doing traditional ethnography, it allowed me online access to these events, which were moved to hybrid or completely online formats.

The last component, in-depth semi-structured interviews, was conducted individually with the selected informants in February 2022. My connections in the scene proved useful in recruiting target informants. Four out of the seven interviewees were my personal contacts, and the rest were approached through mutual connections. After obtaining their informed consents, I interviewed them via Zoom. In most of the brands, the interviewee acts as both the designer and the brand founder-owner, except for Cloud Sky, of which the founder-owner and the main designer were interviewed separately. The designer/founder of Quả Dứa brand was unable to arrange a real-time direct interview, so we exchanged interview questions and responses through email.

\*

Though diverse in practices, the brands also share several similar themes in their representations of ethnic minority artisans and textile traditions. The following chapters will discuss these themes in detail through three major “figures,” following the method of enfigurement employed by Barker, Harms, and Lindquist (2014) in their discussion of modernity in Southeast Asia and Vang (2021) in her analysis of Hmong American's refugee epistemologies. Combining both of these approaches, I use “figures” as representational and representative archetypes of real individuals and groups that are

discursively and experientially produced and performed in association with particular value presences and absences, reflecting the modes of perceiving and representing ethnic minority artisans by the examined brands. The three thematic figures are skilled cultural experts, natural environmentalists, and non-innovative creative agents, which are not exclusive to the particular discussed brands, but rather reflective of broader discourses in the field.

## CHAPTER 1: THE SKILLED CULTURAL EXPERTS

“Are you curious about how we stone polish the trousers that we shared yesterday? This is it! One end of a dyed cloth is placed on top of a hard wood log. Then the Hmong artisan stands on a solid rock which rests on top and perpendicular to the wood log. She moves her legs rapidly from side to side like on a seesaw. The movement plus the weight of the artisan creates the perfect amount of pressure to soften and polish the fabric... There are 3 different sizes of rock which are used for each different type of fabric. The one in this video is the heaviest one. And I am telling you it takes lots of practice, and a few accidents, to be able to skate smoothly on this rock. Not every Hmong artisan can do this step well either. So, much respect goes out to the true masters! They're not only textile experts but also circus artists with incredible balance.”

[Video caption from Eleven Minutes Facebook page]

This vivid snippet of the time-consuming, skill-intensive work of ethnic minority artisans illustrates their prevalent representation as skilled and knowledgeable textile experts in Vietnamese fashion scene. All examined brands feature at least some content related the textile-making process. Common visuals include artisans weaving at the loom, working with dye baths, preparing botanical dyestuffs, washing and drying freshly dyed strips of cloth, and patterning the fabrics using various techniques, such as embroidery or batik drawing. Accompanying texts often provide detailed information about the techniques, required time, number of steps in the process, and their difficulty and arduousness. As representational devices, these images and texts serve to discursively frame indigenous women as experts of culturally rooted skills and knowledge.

Eleven Minutes, in particular, has consistently focused on the artisans and their fabric making process on their online platforms since the brand's beginning in 2012. Other brands, such as Ua Hmoob, Quả Dứa, and Cloud Sky, also present this type of information, albeit to a lesser extent. For Thu Handicraft and Cloud Sky, post content on

artisans and textile making does appear, but frails in comparison to the posts about products and promotions. However, both Thur Handicraft designer, Ms. Thur, and Cloud Sky founder, Ms. Tú, expressed their admiration for the artisans in the interviews. Thur stressed the importance of learning from local ethnic women whose knowledge was accumulated from years of practice and generations of wisdom. Tú echoed this attitude: “I was amazed at their extraordinary skills and patience, they produce phenomenal works with the traditional knowledge they learned from their mothers and grandmothers. Weaving just three centimeters of fabric could break my back, but they weave the whole three meters as if it was no big deal.” She also recounted her marvel at the Bahnar weaving frame, which is “comprised of nothing more than three bamboo poles and one wooden bar but can produce beautiful fabrics under the artisans’ ingenuous hands.”

Embroidered Hemp includes little content on artisans’ work on the Facebook page, but in the interview, the founder-designer, Ms. Mùà, emphasizes the exceptionality of the expertise required for this work even within Hmong communities. According to her, it takes up to 24 different steps in order to produce plain fabrics from the hemp plant, requiring a lot of dexterity and experience.

### **(Re)Enchantment of the Manual**

It is not a coincidence that images of artisans’ working hands are frequently featured on brands’ media. This visual storytelling highlights the delicate but strenuous nature of handiwork and the artisans’ mastery. All brands extensively emphasize the quality of handmaking with phrases such as “handmade,” “handwoven,” “hand-

embroidered,” and “handcrafted” in product descriptions and brand statements. Although there is sometimes machinery involved in the process, there is no mention of it. This selective presentation of information clearly centers manual labor and dexterity as a major value of the textiles.

The focus on handmaking seems to be in opposition with Vietnam’s national agenda of “industrialization and modernization” (*công nghiệp hoá, hiện đại hoá*) that started with post-colonial independence in the 1950s and accelerated since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. The project follows the Soviet and China’s industrial socialist model, one that promotes mechanization and industrialization as the crucial means to national development. Although Vietnam has increasingly focused on the service sector since the shift to market economy in the mid-1980s, industrialized production remains critical to the its economy.

Given Vietnam’s historical valorization of machine-based industrialization, what has made labor of the hands so valued and fetishized today? As Arjun Appadurai (1986) would postulate, the assessment of a commodity’s value is political, as it is contingent on the “regime of value” at a particular time-space. Put differently, the particular conditions of contemporary Vietnam have made hand-making a desirable quality, though only a few decades ago it attracted little attention and was even seen as a sign of underdevelopment to be replaced by machinery – the symbol of socialist modernity. The very success of Vietnam’s national project of mechanization and industrialization that has set the fertile ground for new value constructions to sprout. The economic boom since the Economic Reforms in 1986 both raised people’s general income and produced new aspirations for individual distinction and self-expression among the growing middle class. Meanwhile,

as industrialization becomes pervasive in all fields of production and machine-produced commodities readily available, handmade items became rarer and thus more covetable to those among the Vietnamese middle class who seek to distinguish themselves through certain forms of consumption as “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1985).

The re-enchantment of the manual is thus a combined effect of relational scarcity, heightened individualism, and social nostalgia for pre-industrial practices. As a physical embodiment of the makers’ personal expertise, the attraction of handmade products paradoxically lies in the very feature that makes them less preferable to the machine-made in the first place: inconsistency. As Walter Benjamin (1969) theorizes, the “aura” of handmade items comes from its quality of being unique and original, marked by the inconsistencies of the human hands. Even if the subtle differences are not always detectable to the untrained eyes, it is the belief of owning a unique item that draws customers in. Embroidered Hemp designer Mù also emphasized this “one-of-a-kind” quality of vintage handmade Hmong clothes in her interview. In Vietnam, economic and cultural globalization has also increasingly encouraged individualism among young Vietnamese. As handmade items are perceived to possess uniqueness, it becomes a desired token of personal distinction.

On the spiritual appeal of the handmade, Howard Risatti (2007) argues that its intimate connection with the maker’s body underscores human physical limitations and allows it to engage with people in a way that is different from that of machine-made objects. As the hands’ capacity to manipulate materials are limited and limiting in both quantity and quality<sup>1</sup>, it requires the artisans to enter a “dialogical/dialectical” relationship with the material, continually figuring out ways to interact with its quirks and



qualities. Therefore, the handmade item reminds us of our interconnection and embeddedness with the surrounding worlds, and is perceived to have more “human-ness” imbued in it. This sentiment is echoed in Tú’s explanation of her decision to choose only handwoven textiles, despite higher prices and longer production time: “Handwoven textiles have more soul to them.” In a sense, valorizing the handmade in a world where machine-made objects are the norm is a way to counterbalance “an institutional mentality that today is more and more modeled on a mechano-techno-scientific rationalism that has done much to disenchant the world and the things in it.” (Risatti 2007, 186).

Risatti’s reference to the “dialogical/dialectical” relationship between the artisan and the material is closely related to what James C. Scott (1998) calls *métis*. In Scott’s conceptualization, *métis* is the dynamically evolving, context-specific practical knowledge, which contrasts *techne*, the universal, comprehensive knowledge that goes beyond specificities. *Métis* is acquired from bodily experience which emerges in the continually revising process of making and adapting essential to handicraft. In the case of Vietnam’s indigenous textile artisans, their *métis* comes from not only individual, but also collective experience, as the knowledge gets passed down for generations and around within the community. Ngọc, Eleven Minutes founder-designer, especially stressed this dimension of embodied knowledge in indigo dyeing: “The art is too complex to be learned cursorily, as movements (*thao tác*) are of utmost importance. Even if you are taught all of this information, you will not succeed if you don’t actually do it for hundreds of times.” Embroidered Hemp designer Mùa shared the same view when discussing hemp making, saying even she, a local Black Hmong from Sa Pa, was unable to do all the steps to make hemp fabric, despite knowing the how-to’s. These testimonials

show how the concept of *métis* is useful in understanding why ethnic minority artisans' skills and knowledge are so valuable to designers who cannot easily replicate these textiles.

### **Cultural Distinctiveness**

The textile-making expertise of ethnic minority artisans is also remarkable for its implication of cultural heritage, as textiles and dress are considered important markers of ethnic and regional identities (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992). Matching textiles and dress with ethnic categories has been a common tactic of ethnic classification in Vietnam, where sub-groups are often named after their distinctive attires, such as White Hmong, Blue Hmong, Black Hmong, and Flower Hmong. Rooted in French colonial taxonomy, this method of “ethnographical profiling” was common among many colonial regimes in Asia and inherited by post-colonial states<sup>4</sup> (Salemink 1990, 1999; Sharma 2019).

These visual and material signifiers of culture are produced by each community's technical repertoire that is closely tied to local environment and history. The connection between textile technicality and culture is salient on many brands' media sites, where product descriptions often include information about the techniques used and the practicing ethnic group/sub-group. While the general methods are not exclusive to any single groups, there are subtle differences in the details of the procedures which correspond to each group's tradition and locality. For example, according to Ngọc, the designer of Eleven Minutes, while many groups practice indigo dyeing, the Hmong's

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<sup>4</sup> Vietnam's current ethnic classification also takes major influences from the Soviet Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist model of “national ethnicities” besides its foundation in French taxonomy.

technical repertoire mainly consists of dip-dyeing, while that of the Nùng An includes additional steps of color fixing and fabric treatment. Ua Hmoob, Thu Handicraft, Cloud Sky, and Embroidered Hemp also frequently include ethnic and regional denominators in their product descriptions to highlight the specific origins of the textiles.

In addition, certain materials, patterns, and techniques are presented as culturally meaningful to a particular community. Cloud Sky sometimes explain the symbolism of common motifs of Cham and Bahnar textiles, while Eleven Minutes, Quả Dừa, and Thu Handicraft feature stories about the gendered significance of textile making within local communities. In one Facebook post, Thu Handicraft described how the woman in many ethnic minority groups was customarily charged with producing fabrics and clothes for her household. Her products showcase her competence and desirability as an ideal woman, and strengthen social relationships by expressing her care and dedication to the family. This belief explains why customary weddings in many ethnic minority communities, such as the Mường, the Thái, the Hmong, and the Dao, require the bride to bring a good amount of textiles into her new family.

In another instance, Ngọc recounted the time when she was ridiculed by her Nùng An artisans for trying to create a new shade of indigo dye on cotton. Seeing her creation, they jokingly said: “You would not be able to get a husband here with that ugly color.” As the Nùng An outfit only features two shades of indigo dye – pastel sky-blue and almost-black navy – these colors become the embodiment of skill and beauty and the ultimate benchmark of womanhood. Therefore, the new middle-range blue, while appealing to Ngọc, does not meet the Nùng An standards. This story shows how moral connotations are embedded in particular expressions of skills and knowledge in ways that

are unique to each indigenous community. Although these days this custom is unevenly observed depending on localities and generations, it remains an important cultural ideal.

Another example of the material-cultural association is the iconic significance of hemp in Hmong culture. It is featured by all brands working with Hmong textiles and especially emphasized by the two Hmong designers, who take this material as a focus in their brands. Mùa said, “Hemp is a major Hmong symbol, because only Hmong people make it. Dao and Tày people here (in Sa Pa) live near Hmong people, but they don’t grow hemp, they grow cotton instead.”<sup>5</sup> Hemp cloth is sturdy and durable, making it suitable to high altitude and rigid terrain where most Hmong communities originally settled. Although it is quite rough and hard at first, repeated washing, boiling, and stone polishing help soften the fabric and smoothen its surface, making it easier to sew and more comfortable to wear (Diệp 2005). Moreover, hemp is an important part of Hmong spiritual practices, such as in healing ritual and funerals (Tapp 1989; Clarke and Gu 1998).

The value of these textile-making traditions is constructed as signifiers of indigenous cultures which attract attention for standing out from the mainstream society. Indigenous and minority cultures have long been considered an inspiration in fashion for their distinctiveness, a motif of “exotica” as Jennifer Craik (2016) calls. In her discussion of Aboriginal elements in Australian fashion, she argues that these cultural markers provide white Australian consumers with an aura of “difference” while still being

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<sup>5</sup> I have encountered at least one other ethnic group, the Pa Then people in Ha Giang Province, who used to grow hemp in the past and still keep some handwoven hemp bags as heirloom/dowry for their daughters’ marriages. It is, however, unclear whether they learned this practice from the nearby Hmong, of whom they are considered linguistically related.

“patriotic” via their consumption of “Australian” Indigenous elements. This “exotica” connotation of ethnic minority textiles is replicated in the interviews with Cloud Sky founder and designer. Ms. Tú, the founder, wanted to present a Vietnamese identity but specifically sought out ethnic minority textiles instead of Kinh’s because “there are already too many people working with Kinh textiles.” When asked about the benefits of working with ethnic minority textiles, Ms. Nga, the designer, said that they were “lạ” (meaning exotic, unfamiliar, unconventional) and helped distinguish their brands from others. The distinctive aesthetics of ethnic minority textiles, typically marked by multi-colored, intricate geometric patterns, makes them an attractive source of inspiration in fashion.

As the skills and experience of the ethnic minority artisans are portrayed as markers of specific cultural heritages, the historical and collective nature of their knowledge becomes apparent. As these practices are usually passed on vertically and horizontally within the communities, this mode of representation depicts them as having historical continuity with pre-industrial society, which reminisces of the global view of indigenous peoples (Cobo 1986; Kingsbury 1998; Kuper 2003; Barnard 2007; Morton et al. 2016). As such, they are perceived as preservers of pre-industrial techniques that have largely been forsaken among Kinh textile makers<sup>6</sup>. This characterization is related to the imaginary of ethnic minorities as Vietnamese “contemporary ancestors,” whose connection to the past helps safeguard “pre-modern” traditions that the majority have given up (Salemink 2008). This temporal understanding is also present in Cambodia,

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, some Kinh sericulture communities still engage in hand-spinning threads and weaving on manpowered wooden looms, such as Nam Cao silk village in Thái Bình Province, but ethnic minority communities are often approached for their manual techniques with natural materials.

where highlander groups are imagined as “original Khmer” to signify both their connection to the Khmer majority and their precedence in time<sup>7</sup> (Baird 2011; Baird 2016b; Padwe 2013).

The affiliation of handmaking techniques with ethnic minority cultural heritage has catalyzed various types of textile-based interactions between artisans and designers beyond the ongoing *thổ cẩm* trade. Since not only the aesthetics, but also the practices, are perceived as carriers of cultural essence, handmade fabrics, despite its high price, are highly sought after in the ethnic minority textile trade, even when the same patterns can be easily reproduced by machines. This focus on techniques also prompts artisan-designer interaction to go beyond the purely commercial exchange of finished materials to knowledge transference and processual collaboration, in which ethnic minority artisans teach Kinh designers their techniques. From this perspective, it is easy to understand why Ngọc insisted on preserving the “process” over the aesthetics when engaging with Vietnam’s indigenous textile cultures.

### **National Indigeneity**

The cultural distinctiveness of indigenous minorities, however, is situated within the ambit of the Vietnamese nationhood. The incorporation of ethnic minority cultures into the constructed national unity is a salient topic in the public talks on Vietnam’s creative economy. It is evident in Vietnam Festival of Creativity and Design (VFCD)

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<sup>7</sup> This temporal relationality is ambivalently interpreted, sometimes in negative valence as developmental backwardness, other times in positive valence as “primitive communism” under the Khmer Rouge (Baird 2016b; Padwe 2013).

2021's theme, Awakening Tradition. Out of 25 finalists, six draw inspiration from ethnic minority cultures or work directly with ethnic minority artisans. The same narrative is echoed in the public discourses of Eleven Minutes and Cloud Sky. Ngọc created Eleven Minutes with the purpose of exploring Vietnam's indigenous textile traditions to change the global image of the country as a mere factory providing cheap materials and labor to international fashion brands. Tú, likewise, founded Cloud Sky with the mission to create products that are "distinctively Vietnamese" after her frustration of not finding high-quality presents for her international business partners. On Facebook, both brands frequently use the denomination "Vietnam" in descriptions and hashtags, illustrating their aim to promote an image of Vietnam as culturally rich and ethnically diverse.

In accordance with this imagination of ethnic minorities as both distinctive from and integral of Vietnamese nation-state, the way Kinh designers relate to ethnic minority artisans shows a fluid dual imagining of the Self and the Other. For brands like Eleven Minutes and Cloud Sky, the active choice of ethnic minority textiles as an expression of "Vietnamese heritage" implies the integration of ethnic minority cultures into the national indigeneity. In doing so, designers/founders self-identify with ethnic minority cultures as part of their own. In the interview, Cloud Sky founder Tú discussed how the development of a brand depended on its "root" (*cái gốc*), which she explained as the culture one grew up in. Being a Kinh, however, Tú did not grow up in Bahnar or Cham cultures, which her brands engage with. Nevertheless, she identified with these ethnic minority cultures as her "roots," implying the all-inclusive Vietnamese heritage. Thu Handicraft founder-designer, Ms. Thu, also mentioned briefly in the interview that she wished to help people

learn more about “our Viet culture(s)” (*văn hoá Việt mình*), which include the Hmong she works with.

In Vietnam, cultural heritage has been a major focus of the state agenda since the 1990s for two reasons: international tourism and national identity anxiety. Since opening its door to globalization with the Economic Reform in 1986, Vietnam has tried to attract foreign visitors with its image as a multicultural country. Inheriting the colonial infrastructure as a former French hill station, Sa Pa was opened to foreign visitors in the mid-1990s and became a quintessential location of ethno-tourism in Southeast Asia. The highland town populated by various ethnic minority groups fascinates both domestic and foreign tourists with colorful ethnic dress and spectacular landscapes. As the state realized indigenous cultures could be commercialized for tourist consumption, the images of smiling ethnic minority women in their colorful traditional dress became ubiquitous in mass media and tourist brochures. This visual representation of ethnic minorities acts as a discursive tool to both materialize their difference and incorporate these groups into the symbolic unified nation (Jonsson and Taylor 2003).

Moreover, Vietnam’s historical tension with French colonialism and American imperialism underlies its uncomfortable relationship with globalization and its national preoccupation with (re)creating a Vietnamese identity distinct from the West, as well as China (Ninh 2002). Once Western influences flushed in following the 1986 Economic Reform, public anxieties arose that encroaching Western cultures would degrade Vietnamese morality. The trope of young generations “losing their roots” (*mất gốc*) - preferring Western values and tastes to traditional Vietnamese ones - prompted the state to promote cultural nationalism in the globalizing era, which is embodied in the motto



“integration without dissolution” (*hoà nhập nhưng không hoà tan*). Therefore, the anti-superstition campaign during socialist era is loosened, leading to the revival (as well as performatization) of many ethnic minority rituals. Development projects also pay attention to ethnic minority textiles as symbolic capital for international tourism as well as national consumption, where their cultural heritage (*bản sắc văn hoá*) is considered resources to be preserved and developed (*bảo tồn và phát huy*). The anxiety of losing cultural identity is closely tied to the “discourse of decline,” which expresses nostalgia and fear of loss or degeneration of native traditions caused by contact with foreign influences (Sharma 2019).

Vietnam is not the only Southeast Asian country to use indigenous minority textiles in fashion to symbolize national unity and express their own vision of modernity. Scholars of Lao studies have discussed the significant role of Lao handwoven textiles in “fabricating national identity” in the post-socialist era (Van Esterik 1999; Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black 2015). By integrating textiles of various ethnic groups into a symbolic unity and interweaving foreign and indigenous elements into the post-socialist Lao nationhood, Lao designers are “moving outward to connect to the wider Asian and Euro-American worlds, while also moving internally to meld various previously distinct Lao ethnicities,” creating “internal and international border-crossing fabrics and fashions” (Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black 2015, 94). Yuka Matsumoto (2004) discusses a similar tendency of hybridizing “Indonesian tradition” and “Western modernity” in Indonesia, where designers fuse diverse regional and ethnic inspirations into one single piece to materialize the narrative of multicultural nationalism embodied in the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). Like in Laos, the target audience of

these hybrid designs is the national market, as urban elite consumers became increasingly appreciative of cultural fashion after the Asian economic crisis in 1997 and the collapse of Soeharto's regime in 1998.

These articulations of cultural indigeneity in creative practices illustrate how Southeast Asian ethnic minorities are constructed as constituent of the broader national indigeneity in a "state-based ontology" (Morton 2017). The global discourse of indigenous peoples often emphasizes their autonomy in opposition to the state, without completely separated from it (Conklin 1997; Ludlow et al. 2016; Duile 2021). In Vietnam, however, such political undertone is obliterated in the use of specific expressions of "indigenous," such as "indigenous cultures" (*văn hoá bản địa*) and "indigenous knowledge" (*tri thức bản địa*). Resembling China's argument in contesting the UNDRIP 2007, the naturalization of indigenous minorities into the nation-state shows how the term can be understood and mobilized in entirely different way (Inman 2016). In Vietnam, its public circulation has increased significantly, but mainly for the purpose of nation-building and ethnic integration rather than ethnic autonomy.

Nevertheless, designers' self-identification with ethnic minorities does not negate their awareness of ethnic boundaries, that they are only "outsiders who "borrow" from ethnic minority cultures" (Thu, in interview). This is most evident in their contemplation on the issue of "cultural appropriation" which has attracted increasing attention in Vietnam in recent years. One of the major cases involves Biti's, a big Vietnamese shoes brand, who in 2021 released a sneakers collection advertised as showcasing the nation's cultural pride by using Vietnamese brocade and "Central Highland tribal textiles" (*thổ cẩm Tây Nguyên*). The collection sparked immediate controversy for its marketed

“Central Highland” textiles, which are in fact Cham textiles produced in the famous Cham weaving village Mỹ Nghiệp in Ninh Thuận Province, featuring their iconic “dog’s feet” and “chicken’s eye” motifs<sup>8</sup>. The denomination “Central Highlands” also lumps together the diverse distinct ethnic groups living in this region, obscuring specific cultural ownership. Eleven Minutes designer Ngọc wrote an opinion piece for L’Officiel magazine commenting on the case, in which she critiqued “indiscriminating nationalism” as stealing from minority cultures, while also warning against tribalism. In her interview, Thu explained cultural appropriation as claiming authorship on something that is not one’s own, stressing the importance of proper accreditation by outside designers. Ngọc shared the same concern and expressed her disappointment in some young Kinh practitioners who learned from ethnic minority communities then practiced elsewhere by themselves without acknowledging the source of their learning

Cloud Sky founder Tú also admitted in the interview that although she would like to present more information about indigenous cultures on the brand’s media, she was conscious of her “outsider” position, which deterred her from claiming knowledge of these cultures. Meanwhile, Ngọc described her interactions with indigenous artisans as “walking on strings sometimes,” as she takes caution to avoid their communities, reproducing stereotypes and aggravating power inequalities. These designers’ comments demonstrate how Kinh designers, while including ethnic minorities in the overarching Vietnamese nationhood, are still deeply aware of the ethnic boundaries between them.

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<sup>8</sup> Although Cham textiles did influence many Central Highland groups, who borrowed and incorporated some Cham-originated symbols into their own repertoire, their current forms are distinguishable from each other in color combination and pattern composition.

In short, Kinh fashion designers are attracted to the textile practices of ethnic minority groups for both the inclusion and exclusion of these communities from their sense of Self. On one hand, in aligning with ethnic minority communities as part of their own Self, they reproduce the familiar representation of ethnic minorities as part of a unified Vietnamese nation-state. On the other hand, they distinguish themselves from ethnic minority, or the “Other,” in acknowledging that these groups occupy a different social and cultural time-space and thus possess different systems of knowledge. The “Other” might evoke fear and suspicion, but also curiosity and fascination. In the case of Vietnam’s ethnic minority, their representation as the “domestic Other” places them in a middle ground, where they are familiar enough to relate to, but still different enough to command attraction. Such understanding of ethnic minorities aligns with the state’s multicultural nationalism, one that can be captured by the discourse of diversity in unity that is also common in many other Southeast Asian countries.

### **Resisting and Reproducing Dominant Discourses**

Overall, the image of the indigenous artisans as experts actively serves to counter the frequent representation of ethnic minorities as underdeveloped primitive by highlighting their skill, knowledge, and ingenuity. The dominant discourse of ethnic minorities in Vietnam often sees them as uncivilized savages whose reliance on nature and continuing adherence to traditions relegate them to the past tense in the trajectory of unilinear developmentalism (Salemink 2008; Taylor 2008; Messier and Michaud 2012; Hoàng and Phạm 2012). Rooted in the pre-colonial Vietnamese court’s view of them as primitive rebels on the periphery of the monarchy, this portrayal gained significance

presence in the mainstream media during Vietnam's socialist era as a discursive device to legitimize the state's agenda of ethnic development, and continues to dominate the public imagination of ethnic minorities to this day.

However, in today's postmodern society, tradition is hailed as the new modernity, as "being modern can be realized by asserting one's own cultural values" (Tripathy 2019). Vietnamese designers' (re)turn to indigenous textile practices thus reverses the negative judgment of ethnic minorities' continuation of with pre-industrial practices by implicating them in the broader national indigenous "modernity." By reevaluating their connection with the past and cultural traditions as a valuable resource instead of a sign of underdevelopment, this narrative flips the dominant discourse on ethnic minorities in Vietnam as incapable savages stuck in outdated traditions. This phenomenon resonates with one of Hall (1997)'s strategies of countering negative racial stereotypes: by reversing the evaluation of the same image, which is the perceived connection between ethnic minorities and the past and their continuing adherence to cultural traditions.

On the other hand, the framing of the indigenous artisans within Vietnamese national indigeneity continues the discourse of multicultural nationalism that inherited the rhetoric of national unity since the early days of Vietnam's modern state-building and has become increasingly emphasized since the country's opening to globalization. This articulation aligns with the strategies of many other Southeast Asia countries where indigenous peoples are highlighted for their cultural distinctiveness from the national majority, but still situated neatly within the modern nation-statehood.

## **Contestations: Transnational Connections**

Not all designers adhere to neat imagination of ethnic minority artisans and communities as integrated markers of a unified nationhood. Moreover, the unified national identity is constantly transcended by the two Hmong designers, who see foreigners, not Vietnamese, as their target customers. The fact that their main clientele is Hmong Americans speaks to the transnational dimension of their identity. They understand indigeneity not as part of the Vietnam's nation-state, but rather as inherent in their identity as Hmong. While not rejecting domestic Vietnamese consumers, they obviously see more importance in catering to the global Hmong diaspora, who both appreciate the cultural and aesthetic aspects of Hmong-oriented designs as well as have the financial means to afford items handmade in traditional ways. Hmong transnationalism has been a focus of much scholarship, including Sarah Turner, Christine Bonnin and Jean Michaud (2015) on borderland livelihoods, Tam T. T. Ngo (2016) on religious conversion, and Lónan Ó Briain (2013) on the global expanse of Hmong music and cultural products. These transnational networks transcend national borders and unsettle the narrative of a unified Vietnamese national identity by revealing that many Hmong connect more with their co-ethnics abroad rather than with fellow citizens of Kinh ethnicity.

Moreover, even among Kinh designers, associating their practices with the national heritage is not always the norm. For Quả Dừa founder-designer, Ms. Vũ, the texts accompanying her product photos do not consistently and explicitly give an “ethnic marking” to the materials and techniques, even when the used *thổ cẩm* shows clear Hmong and Dao origins. In addition, she sometimes discusses Japanese techniques of

indigo dyeing, including *shibori* (tie dyeing) and *katazome* (stencil print dyeing), implying the transnational dimension of indigo dyeing practice. She makes no mention of Vietnamese identity on her platforms and expressed in one of her posts that she wished to connect with the global natural dyeing community. In her interview, she says that she does not intent to make any statement, but rather does what she does for her interest in the indigo plant. For Vũ, whose educational and professional background was forestry, it seems that it was mainly the natural dimension that drew her into ethnic minority textiles.

## CHAPTER 2: THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENTALISTS

“Thu Handicraft uses natural and environmentally friendly materials in northern of Vietnam, such as hemp and cotton. All pigments for dyeing at Thu Handicraft are 100% natural and environmentally friendly, such as indigo leaves, yam root and *Fibraurea recisa* plant root. Indigo leaves are used to create different tones of blue color, from light to dark. To make orange color, Thu Handicraft use yam root dyeing mixture. *Fibraurea recisa* are used to create yellow color.”

[Content from Thu Handicraft’s official website]

Thu Handicraft is among the growing number of Vietnamese brands that pursue sustainable fashion by working with ethnic minority communities who continue using natural fibers and dyes in textile-making. While indigenous minority textiles have been praised for its implication of cultural heritage in Vietnam since at least the 1990s, the propagation of their environmental values emerged relatively recently in conjunction with a rising discourse on sustainable fashion. By valorizing these textile practices as ecologically sound, the brands present their makers – the artisans – as living in harmony with the surrounding environment, thus complicating the hegemonic evaluation of their perceived connection with nature.

With the exception of Cloud Sky, all the brands promote sustainability as one of their core values, albeit to different degrees. Eleven Minutes, Thu Handicraft, and Quả Dứa explicitly locate their brands in this realm through terms such as “eco-fashion” (Eleven Minutes), “circular fashion” (Quả Dứa), and “sustainable fashion” (all three). Both Quả Dứa and Thu Handicraft upcycle vintage fabrics with patchwork, while Eleven Minutes focuses on producing new fabrics using natural fibers and dyes. All of them promote handmaking as a sustainable process that requires no fuel and causes little harm to the environment. Ua Hmoob and Embroidered Hemp also describe their products in



similar terms, focusing on hemp and indigo, the main materials used in Hmong textiles, as well as Hmong traditional handmaking techniques. Most brands present certain natural materials and handmaking techniques in association with specific indigenous cultures, thus portraying ethnic minority artisans as critical guardians of the knowledge necessary to process natural fibers and dyes.

### **Materials: Natural and Local**

Most of the brands articulate environmental values by advertising the use of natural fibers and dyes, illustrated by the detailed information about these materials in product descriptions. Eleven Minutes, Thu Handicraft and Quả Dứa especially focus on this aspect, using mostly hemp and cotton dyed with various plant and insect extracts. Eleven Minutes and Thu Handicraft are among the few brands with official websites, where they provide information about the dyestuffs they use, including the harvesting, extracting, and dyeing processes. Eleven Minutes pays special attention to the communities that hold the knowledge of these practices, identifying specific groups and locations. Hemp and cotton are frequently used by all of these five brands, while Ua Hmoob also uses linen and Eleven Minutes also uses matte tussah silk (*đũi*). Indigo and yam roots are among the most popular dyestuffs, yielding blue/green and orange/brown colors, respectively. Thu also use *fibraurea recisa* plant (*hoàng đằng*) for yellow and Eleven Minutes also use shellac, the resin from lac insects (*cánh kiến*) for pink/red and ebony fruits (*mặc nưa*) for black. Since yam roots are not often used by the Hmong, except for a few sub-groups who use it in tandem with indigo to adjust the shade, the two Hmong designers focus mainly on indigo as the principal Hmong dye.

After being replaced by synthetic fibers and dyes since late 19<sup>th</sup> century, natural fibers and dyes have witnessed a growing revival in interest in the past few decades due to environmental and ethical concerns in the textile and fashion industry. Although taking more time and labor to produce, natural fabrics decompose much faster than most synthetic ones like polyester and generate little environmental impact during its production. Likewise, natural dyes, when used with non-toxic mordants, are considered significantly safer to dyers, users, and the local ecosystem than the chemical dyes used in modern textile production (Kadoph and Gilberton 2002). While synthetic materials have mostly taken over the world's textile production, some indigenous communities continue to use natural fibers and dyes for both practical and symbolic purposes, such as maintaining cultural identity and facilitating spiritual rituals. Therefore, indigenous minorities in Southeast Asia who maintain the practices have received increasing attention from both international and domestic fashion brands (Widiawati 2009; Charungkiattikul and Joneurairatana 2021).

In Vietnam, silk, linen, cotton, and more recently, hemp are among the most popular natural fabrics. The flax plant that produces linen is native to Europe, but not Southeast Asia, while silk has had a long history in Vietnam, mainly produced by Kinh, Thai, Khmer, and Cham groups, among others. Today, it is maintained by some textile-making communities, but the process has been largely mechanized in most places<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, homegrown cotton used to be common among both Kinh and minority groups, but has been taken over by industrial cotton since the socialist era of state-building, when

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<sup>9</sup> There remain several exceptions, such as Nam Cao village in Thái Bình, where many artisans continue to practice yarn hand-spinning and hand-weaving.

the industrialized production of cotton and its associated textile industry were hailed as paramount to national development. This transformation of cotton production has replaced indigenous cotton species with the “industrial cotton” (*bông công nghiệp*) which has higher yields and shorter harvest cycle. Besides, it has mechanized most steps in the process, including yarn spinning and weaving. However, native homegrown cotton species are still cultivated and hand-processed by several ethnic minority communities, who are praised as tradition guardians and source of indigenous knowledge by designers such as Ngọc, Vũ, and Thu.

Hemp is a special case for its iconic association with the Hmong group. Hemp has long held a central significance in Hmong culture, not only as a practical material suitable for highland conditions, but also as vehicle of spirituality, often used in healing and funeral rituals. In recent years, hemp has attracted significant interest for its environmental benefits, such as providing an alternative source of renewable energy and reducing CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere (Smith-Heisters 2008; Pergamo et al. 2018). As ecological consciousness spreads in Vietnam, hemp which is handmade by Hmong artisans has become highly coveted by many urban Kinh consumers as an expression of eco-conscious, culturally informed consumption.

According to the textile practitioners and artisans I talked to, natural dyes are generally more colorfast on natural fibers than synthetic ones<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, the combination of natural dyes and fibers not only symbolizes environmentalist values, but

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<sup>10</sup> Ebony fruit is among the few exceptions, as its high content of tannin allows it to bind well even to synthetic fibers.

also serve the function of making the colors last longer. Today, natural dyeing is generally absent or considered in decline among textile makers, both Kinh and ethnic minorities, due to the prevalent use of synthetic dyes. The craft of handmaking textiles from natural fibers and dyes is thus seen as a tradition lost to the grind of industrial modernization. Therefore, ethnic minority communities who continue to practice it are now perceived as guardians of a long-forgotten knowledge and sought after by designers who are interested in these materials for their eco-fashion agenda.

Locality also plays an important role in the perception of indigenous artisans as ecologically knowledgeable. Designers are typically attracted to artisans from communities who have long inhabited rural areas or forested highlands and relied significantly on agriculture and forestry for livelihood. This close relationship with land leads to the designers' perception of these communities as connected to nature and environmentally sensitive. Since the global environmentalist movement has exposed multiple cases of transnational nature destruction and labor exploitation, "consuming local" has become increasingly popular as a political stance against neocolonialism and extractionism. Therefore, using local materials and labor is now pivoted as an ethical marker in fashion. This affinity for the "local" is especially apparent in Eleven Minutes's product descriptors such as "homegrown" and "locally sourced." Thu Handicraft and Quà Dừa also identify the geographical and ethnic origin of their fabrics as an expression of sustainable fashion.

The growing influence of the sustainable fashion movement and the art and craft revivalism in Vietnamese fashion has expanded the range of artisan-designer involvements in the indigenous textile trade, which has hitherto focused on the

multicolored, elaborately patterned *thổ cẩm*. Now other types of ethnic minority textiles are also in increasing demand for their environmental implications, including handwoven plain fabrics made from natural fibers and dyestuffs. Since ethnic minority artisans hold the knowledge of growing, collecting, and processing these materials, they are often sought after by designers and textile practitioners who wish to incorporate their techniques into new products.

### **Process: Handmaking and Speed**

“Sustainability is not only in the materials, but also the process.” Thu shared her view on sustainable fashion in the interview, concerned that some brands use greenwashing marketing to advertise so-called natural materials while disregarding the environmental impact of the making process. Similarly, Ngọc said her main focus from the beginning is not the textile aesthetic, but rather the process (*quy trình*). She reasoned that although fashion engagement with the material, visual aspects was a great way to preserve textile traditions, it was insufficient for her. According to her, the “tribal” aesthetics and patterns of *thổ cẩm* can be easily replicated with synthetic materials and machinery, but it is the techniques that allow the traditions to continue their life in the original artisan communities, which, for her, is the ultimate sustainability.

In general, the techniques often sought after are handmaking, requiring neither machinery nor fuel, and thus seen as causing little ecological harm. The working knowledge of natural dyeing, in particular, has drawn many Kinh designers and textile enthusiasts to ethnic minority communities to learn their craft through apprenticeship. A

common scenario is a Kinh practitioner going to the highlands such as Sa Pa to learn indigo dyeing from local Hmong women. As natural dyeing requires a considerable amount of time and practice, this transference of *métis* (Scott 1998) enhances the depth and the length of inter-ethnic interaction and places ethnic minorities as guardians and teachers of valuable environmental knowledge.

Moreover, the arduous and time-consuming nature of handmaking limit production to only small scale, which is important in sustainable fashion. As modern consumerism relies on the massive scale and high efficiency of industrial production for the constant turnover of new items, this pressure of time has led to the environmental and ethical crisis of global fashion. A widely promoted solution to this problem is slow fashion, a production model that prioritizes products' quality and sustainability over quantity and speed by extending their use life. Natural fabrics and dyes also require a meticulous, time-consuming production process, which makes them the antithesis of fast fashion. Identifying as slow or sustainable fashion brands, Eleven Minutes, Quả Dứa, and Thu Handicraft refuse the usual time cycle that dictates brand to churn out a different collection for every season in the year. Eleven Minutes only produce one collection per year at most, and some collections took a few years to prepare. Therefore, the slow speed of indigenous handmaking practices offers these brands an inspiration and a vehicle for their commitment to sustainable fashion.

## **Global Environmentalism**

The global environmentalism and sustainable fashion movements have had major influence on the rise of conscious consumption in Vietnam over the past decade. Interrogating human's environmental impact in the Anthropocene, these movements have highlighted ecological and social issues of global capitalism and industrialization, especially in the fashion industry. International organizations such as The Slow Factory and Fashion Revolution, the latter of which has a national charter in Vietnam, have garnered momentum across the globe. It is not a coincidence that the first Vietnam Design Week (VDW) 2020 had "Regenerative Designs" as its theme. Almost all finalists engaged with natural materials, and six of them drew inspiration from ethnic minority cultures. The environmental turn in Vietnamese public consciousness correlates with a collective desire for a more "natural" or sustainable lifestyle by engaging in "green" consumption. To fulfill this demand of eco-consumption, many Vietnamese brands started to "sustainabili-fy" themselves by marketing the use of natural and recycled materials. Many see ethnic minority traditions as an abundant source of environmentally friendly materials and ecological knowledge.

Some designers did not have any background in fashion training and initially went to the highlands for a nature harmonious lifeway, but later learned natural dyeing from local indigenous women. Vũ, in particular, is one of the many young natural dyers who also partake in permaculture and adopt its philosophy as a lifestyle. With a background in agroforestry, Vũ initially moved to Sa Pa for its nature and later took up indigo dyeing from her Hmong friend's mother, especially upon learning about the plant's multiple benefits as not only dyestuff but also medicine. She is also an avid proponent and

practitioner of permaculture, a model of sustainable and self-sufficient agriculture through the symbiosis of planted crops and existing ecosystems. It draws from indigenous ontology and epistemology to view the world as a holistic whole and argue that human's agricultural activities should be an inter-related part of nature, opposing the Western high-modernist industrial agriculture that aims to suppress and manipulate nature (Mollison and Holmgren 1978). Quà Dừa's Facebook posts show evident influence of this philosophy, as the designer Vũ frequently features citations from "The One-Straw Revolution," a famous book on natural farming by Masanobu Fukuoka, a prominent permaculturalist whose work catalyzed the global spread of the movement in the 1980s-1990s. His writings, among others, have attracted many Vietnamese, including young urban-raised followers, to the close-to-nature lifestyle and the natural farming practice that interweave indigenous and scientific sources of knowledge.

This community of Vietnamese sustainability movement also draws from other Japanese aesthetic and philosophical influences, including *boro* (patchwork), *sashiko* (mending hand-stitch), and *mottainai* (no waste). The principle of *mottainai* encourages exchanging used items with others, buying secondhand, or reusing or repurposing them to avoid wasting things. In fashion, it is often translated into upcycling old clothes into new items, while *boro* and *sashiko* are common techniques to mend worn or torn clothes that emphasize instead of hiding their marks of time-worn use in a decorative way (Siniawer 2014; Briscoe 2005; Wada 2004). Their distinctive "raggedness" creates an iconic aesthetics in and of itself, besides their original purpose of mending. These techniques are frequently employed by Vũ and Thu as their signature styles to convey a sense of freedom and spontaneity.



## **Resisting and Reproducing Dominant Discourses**

The view of indigenous minorities as environmental stewards has emerged as a discursive shift in Vietnam in recent years, although the association of them with nature has long been a familiar trope in public discourse since pre-colonial time. French colonial ethnography constructed highland ethnic minorities as the Noble Savage whose close connection with the surrounding environment symbolizes their nature-like naiveté and fragility (Salemink 2008). In post-colonial Vietnam, ethnic minorities' reliance on nature is viewed as backward and underdeveloped. As the socialist state agenda of industrialization and mechanization follows the Enlightenment-rooted modernist ideology that glorifies human control of nature via technological progress, the discourse of ethnic minorities' dependence on nature is used to justify development programs in their areas. As Marisol de la Cadena (2010) argues, this way of thinking creates an “ontological distinction between “Humanity” and “Nature,”” which leads to the hierarchy between the “civilized Man” and the “natural Man.” This racialized ranking legitimizes Lockean liberalism and modernist developmentalism to dispossess indigenous land through a narrative of “productivity,” which stipulates that as “(indigenous) closeness to nature made them unproductive, land had to be incorporated to civilization via the agricultural work of the white man.” (de la Cadena 2010, 344).

A similar discourse of land ownership and management based on productivity is endorsed by the Vietnamese state. In Vietnam, the practice of swiddening agriculture and its related semi-nomadism among many highlander minorities are labeled inefficient,

wasteful, and environmentally destructive<sup>11</sup> (Đặng 1975; McElwee 2008; Phan 2018).

The association of ethnic minorities with deforestation and other forms of environmental destruction is also common in other Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia (Morton and Baird 2019; Baird 2015; Padwe 2013).

This politically charged representation delegitimizes many indigenous groups' access to land and natural resources while sanctioning ethnic development programs, including relocation, agricultural reform, and transmigration. Communities who practice swiddening agriculture and shifting residence were sedentarized or resettled to a lower topography accessible by state infrastructure or to make space for hydropower plants. Extensive agricultural reforms also replaced native species with new engineered seeds for higher yields, promoted the use of machinery and chemicals (e.g. pesticides and herbicides), transformed family-based production into state-owned collectivities and plantations, and supplanted traditional subsistence polyculture with the intensified monoculture of irrigated rice (Evans 1992; CEMA 2000; McElwee 2008).

The human vs. nature bifurcation also informs modernist conservationism which conceptualizes environment conservation as devoid of human interaction. This logic encourages the enclosure of vast forested lands as designated national parks and conservation sites, which often leads to the displacement of local indigenous peoples from their homelands. Investigating the establishment of two national parks in Vietnam, Pamela McElwee (2006) points out that as environmentalism becomes one of the major

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<sup>11</sup> Swiddening agriculture, also called slash-and-burn, involves the controlled burning of the vegetation in a particular area to prepare the soil for a new farming season. Many ethnic minorities, such as the Montagnard groups, rotate this practice among several different patches of land. After a few years of farming the same area, they fallow it to recover before returning when the cycle restarts.

concerns of the post-socialist states, conservationist rhetoric blames the local indigenous practice of foraging forest resources for environmental damage in order to disempower and vacate them from valuable lands. The communities were thus relocated, often with little preparation, making way for other agents to come exploit the resources at an even higher rate, sometimes with the complicity of park authorities. There is, however, little scientific evidence that prove the benefits of resettlement for natural protection.

Considering how highland minorities have been disempowered by the dominant representation of them as environment destroyers and inefficient users of natural resources, their image in fashion as environmental stewards brings promising challenges to this hegemony. Like the figure of skilled and experienced experts, the inclusion of ethnic minority artisans in the global movements of sustainable fashion and environmentalism destigmatizes their stereotypical connection with nature by reversing its negative connotations. In this way, these communities are presented as important contributors to the contemporary global environmentalism, thus shifting the construction of them as stuck in the past. The valorization of natural materials and indigenous knowledge illustrates a clear shift in the interpretation of modernity in Vietnam, which decenters the monopoly of mechanization and Westernization as icons of modernity. Instead, the Natural and the Indigenous are now promoted as the latest forms of “modernity,” a kind of “post-modernist modernity.”

This shift in public discourse parallels a steady emergence of Vietnamese academic literature that emphasizes the role of indigenous knowledge in land and natural resources management since the late 2000s - early 2010s. This growing body of Vietnamese-language scholarship reflects a move in policy making towards a recognition

of indigenous knowledge as an important resource, rather than a hindrance, to development (Đặng et al. 2013; Nguyễn 2013; Vũ 2015; Dương et al. 2020). The state's adoption of indigenous knowledge in ecological management and economic development, however, has been warned by some scholars as neoliberal tactics to govern and manage indigenous peoples under state apparatus (Chandler and Reid 2018). While this skepticism is indeed sobering, the shift towards indigenous knowledge nevertheless presents potential opportunities for indigenous voice and participation in Vietnam, where indigenous ecological practices have long been dismissed. The caution also seems more relevant to the Western contexts where indigenous peoples are often positioned in opposition to the settler state. It becomes less applicable when indigenous minorities are imagined as integral parts of the nation-state and indigenous rights are articulated within a state-based framework, such as in Vietnam and Thailand (Morton 2017).

The emphasis on indigenous artisans' expertise of natural dyeing also prompts the inter-ethnic transfer of traditional knowledge, which reverses the usual ethno-social hierarchy that constructs Kinh as the "big brothers" who teach ethnic highlanders about civilization and modernity. This dominant discourse is salient in the paternalizing state projects of ethnic development. It is especially apparent in the New Economic Zone policy, which encouraged mass transmigration of Kinh into highland areas to help "modernize" indigenous highlanders away from their "outdated", "wasteful", "environmentally destructive" practices (Evans 1992; Pelley 1998; CEMA 2000; Duncan 2004). Upturning this narrative of Kinh "big brothers" teaching highland "young brothers," the artisan-designer relationship in fashion turns ethnic minorities into guardians and teachers of knowledge to the Kinh students.

Although the representation of indigenous minorities as environmental stewards is an emerging shift in Vietnam’s public discourse, it is a prevalent image in the global indigenous movement. Developing in tandem with the civil rights and environmental movements in the Americas in the 1960s and 1970s, this representation characterizes indigenous peoples as living in harmony with nature and maintaining ecologically sound traditions, thus drawing environmentalists to these communities for inspiration and solutions to contemporary environmental problems (Merlan 2019; Kuper 2003; Harris et al. 2013; Chandler and Reid 2018). It is also connected to the ontological turn in academia that decenters human to refocus on the interrelations between humans and more-than-human “earth beings,” or what indigenous peoples in the Andes call “Pachamama” – the Nature (de la Cadena 2010).

### **Contestations: Cultural Change and Secondary Environmentalism**

It would be a misconception to think that all, or even the majority, of ethnic minority communities make textiles entirely with natural materials. In fact, many have switched completely or partially to mass-manufactured fabrics imported from China. Proponents of the “discourse of decline” (Sharma 2019) often cite this phenomenon to illustrate the disappearance and degradation (*mai môt*) of textile traditions. However, indigenous minority groups have always incorporated external elements and materials, and those who maintain long-standing practices of textile-making today also use fabrics bought from the market. For example, many Hmong communities replace hemp with machined-made, market-bought cotton for batik drawing or with manufactured aida cloth

for embroidery<sup>12</sup>. Many Hmong vintage and contemporary outfits show a combination of handmade details and machined-made parts, including replicas of the French Indochinese silver coins that have come to symbolize wealth and beauty during colonial time. These adaptations allow minority communities to keep their traditions alive in the face of circumstantial changes and upheavals, rather than a sign of cultural erosion as the discourse of decline would suggest. Such approach is similar to what Morton et al. (2016) call “intimate place-making cosmologies,” a strategy used by the Akha in Mekong Delta to appropriate new spaces into their cosmology and preserve their identity in new lands of migration through ceremonial adjustments.

Moreover, although the environmental value has become increasingly popular as a selling point, cultural significance still plays a major role in brands’ decision to use indigenous textiles. Cloud Sky, for example, prioritizes the cultural narrative of ethnic and national identities, without using the environmentalist rhetoric. The founder Tú explained that she could only preserve the motifs, not the materials. The high cost and long production time of natural materials would impose more financial pressure on the brand, thus compromising their aim to popularize ethnic minority textiles in everyday life by keeping the price affordable. More importantly, the Cham and the Bahnar groups that the brand works with have long ceased using natural fibers and dyes in their textiles, like many other groups in middle-south Vietnam. The regional history mired in land dispossession and environmental degradation, along with the impact of market economy,

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<sup>12</sup> Aida cloth is a type of polyester open-weave fabric often used for cross-stitch that allows for even stitches with more ease compared to the tighter weave of hemp or cotton, for their embroidery

has rendered it unfeasible for them to continue these practices. As the local ecosystems change, many fiber and dye plants have also become difficult to grow or forage.

Some designers whose original branding rests mainly on cultural heritage have responded to the rise of environmental value by adjusting their branding accordingly. For the two Hmong-owned brands, Ua Hmoob and Embroidered Hemp, the primary focus is on Hmong identity. The environmentalist rhetoric developed later to promote natural materials within the framing of Hmong heritage. The expansion of value articulation can be seen as a strategic move to associate with the growing environmentalist movement. Ua Hmoob designer, Mr. Minh, explained that his initial motivation to start the brand was to spread public appreciation of Hmong culture through adaptations of Hmong textile techniques, such as cross-stitch embroidery, reverse appliqué, and batik, and to provide economic opportunities for his Hmong fellows, including both southward migrants and northern local artisans. Using natural materials, he said, would give Hmong artisans more incentive to maintain their “authentic” traditions amidst the influx of manufactured synthetic fabrics mainly imported from China.

Occasionally, Minh does accept commissions that require synthetic materials. He recalled his hesitance when receiving a customer order of swimwear that required him to use polyester fabrics with machine-printed Hmong patterns. After much consideration, he agreed to make the designs, saying that while the material was not natural and therefore not “traditionally Hmong,” the patterns were Hmong. Another reason he cited was the need to balance his cultural agenda with the brand’s finance, as taking the commission would bring a steady inflow of work for his in-house tailors who are Hmong migrant workers in Saigon. His case illustrates how cultural and economic aspects sometimes

come before environmental quality, which is prized for its link with cultural tradition rather than as an intrinsic value.

Similarly, Mụa explained she was determined to focus on hemp and cross-stitch embroidery as symbols of Hmong culture. She admitted that she was not aware of the environmental benefits of hemp until her foreign customers pointed them out to her. Like Vũ and Thu, Mụa is involved in the vintage textile trade, buying from Hmong communities not only in Sa Pa but also in many other locations, because “vintage pieces are more rare and beautiful, thus selling for better prices.” Like the two Kinh designers based in Sa Pa, she also upcycles vintage textiles and leftover fabrics into small products. While all of them said they did not want to let these textiles “go to waste,” they explained this practice in different ways. Mụa said that doing so helped her save cost, while Thu mainly stressed her appreciation for the artisans’ time and labor in making the textiles, and Vũ specified her choice as part of circular fashion philosophy.

In many cases, environmental values emerge unexpectedly as a collateral to the cultural dimension on which designers initially focus. Ngọc said that she did not know about the sustainable side of indigenous textile traditions until she had worked alongside the artisans for an extended time and gradually realized the ecological wisdom in indigenous practices. For example, Nùng An artisans often grow indigo together with other crops in the same plot of land, which helps them grow faster and healthier. The women also harvest only the yam roots old enough to produce potent dye, leaving the young ones to keep growing, as they help retain water and maintain soil health for the forest. This indigenous knowledge allows the Nùng An community to co-exist effectively with various species in the holistic system of their local ecology.



Unlike the value of cultural heritage that is primarily located in ethnic minority artisans, environmental values are associated with both artisans and designers. While the artisans hold the knowledge of extracting fibers and dyes from natural sources, designers upcycle used and scrap fabrics, practice natural dyeing alongside artisans, and articulate the environmental value of these materials and processes to consumers. Artisans and designers develop an interdependent relationship in which designers rely on artisans for knowledge and materials, while artisans rely on designers to expand their audience.

However, some brands' descriptions of environmental values mainly focus on the materials and the designers' use of them, without explicitly recognizing the artisans' role. In this way, it is the materials that imbue their makers with environmental values and attract designers to the artisans, unlike in the first figure, where the artisans' expertise is seen as the origin of the textile's value. This mode of representation thus risks implying indigenous artisans as "accidental environmentalists," who follow traditions without necessarily being aware of their ecological significance or presenting themselves as environmentalists as do designers. Many brands in Vietnam draw from these ecological knowledge and values without highlighting the role of the original practitioners. Indigenous scholars like Zoe Todd (2016) have critiqued this appropriation of ecological knowledge and values as "perpetuating the exploitation of Indigenous peoples." (Todd 2016, 16).

### CHAPTER 3: THE NON-INNOVATIVE PRODUCERS

I really wish our artisans could design and produce the end products so that they themselves, not we, can add value to their textiles. But it is extremely difficult, because artisans usually just want to follow their beaten path and do what they are accustomed to, unlike designers who are always beaming with new ideas. Artisans tend to think of the new as strange and difficult, and therefore don't want to do it. That's their biggest weakness... When I requested my main artisan to use new colors in her textiles, she came up with really ingenious ways to combine them into beautiful textiles, so I think she's very capable. But like other artisans, she just doesn't want to go above and beyond to "level up." That's the essence of artisans, they grew up with the craft, so they don't have the will to get out of their comfort zone."

[Interview with Tú, Cloud Sky's founder]

This sentiment about indigenous textile artisans, as well as "traditional" artisans in general, is shared by several designers and event speakers when discussing Vietnam's creative economy. It insinuates a view of artisans as passive sticklers to past experience with little capacity or will to innovate to meet the market demands. Unlike the positive images of the first two figures, this negative portrayal is completely absent in brands' social media and websites. It instead finds tacit manifestations in public events and interviews, and in the absence of content on artisan creativity on social media.

The rhetoric appeared in both apparent and subtle ways in the talks of Vietnam Design Week (VDW) and Vietnam Festival of Creativity and Design (VFCD) 2021. In the conference "Designed by Vietnam – Design and Production" in VDW 2021, Mr. Thiết, a well-known expert on Vietnamese traditional handicrafts, posited that the fossilized artisanal traditions were often incompatible with the market economy's demand for constant transformation and diversification of products, making their creative ability inadequate for the market's standards. This issue was raised again in the

Awakening Tradition #2 webinar, where the audience and Mr. Ngạn, Vice President and General Secretary of Vietnam Handicraft Association (Vietcraft) discussed the difficulty designers and creatives encountered when working with “traditional artisans” due to “(artisans’) conservative tendency and unwillingness to change.” In the same event, Dr. Mai, Lecturer of Vietnamese Studies at Vietnam Japan University and Co-founder of Vietnam Cultural Initiative League (*Liên minh Sáng kiến văn hóa Việt Nam*), also pointed out that “improving designing capacity for artisan communities” and “enhancing collaboration and exchange between traditional practitioners and designers, creatives, researchers, etc.” were the major challenges to Vietnam’s creative economy. Her recommendations suggested that artisans’ lack of designing ability prevented them from expanding their market and thus necessitated designers’ help to elevate products’ value.

Some informants reiterated this point about ethnic minority artisans in their interviews. Echoing Cloud Sky’s founder Tú’s above-mentioned narrative, other designers commented on the difficulty of working with ethnic minority artisans due to their resistance to change. Thu admitted it took a lot of time and patience to work with her two Hmong assistants at first. “They didn’t like to do new and difficult things. When I first taught them to sew new products, they would want to give up whenever encountering something unfamiliar. It took me a while to convince them slowly and teach them each step carefully.” Ngọc encountered similar challenges when she first tried to convince artisans to produce textiles in her novel ways and ended up receiving finished textiles way off from her expectations. This experience prompted her to change her approach in working with artisans from unidirectional request to mutual collaboration.

As the framework of creative economy underscores the importance of innovation, the view of traditional artisans as non-innovative paradoxically places them in the center (as source of inspiration) but in the backseat (as passive subjects) of creative agency in the innovation-based neoliberal capitalism.

### **Hierarchy of Labor: Manual Craft vs. Intellectual Design**

The exclusion of artisans as innovative agents is rooted in the hierarchy between craft as manual work and design as intellectual labor. Despite the glorification of handmaking for its distinction from mechanized mass-production, the physical aspect affiliated with craftsmanship is still considered inferior to the conceptual nature of design. Vietnam's public discourse of creative economy tends to reify this dichotomy, consistently placing the focus of value on design as intellectual labor. Appearing on Cultural Radar, a news segment on VTV (Vietnam's national television), Mr. Tứ, head of the VDW organizing committee, claimed that commodities needed to carry higher "gray matter" (*chất xám*) and "intellectual content" (*trí tuệ*) in order to have more value on the market. Speakers in the conference "Designed by Vietnam – Design and Production" also shared this view. Mr. Thiết encouraged Vietnamese companies to shift from manufacturing to designing, while Mr. Ngạn declared: "Designing forms the competitive edge for the nation-state."

The prioritization of intellectual over manual work reflects the hierarchical separation between design and craftsmanship. As David Pye (1995) explains, a designer uses creative imagination to conceive and create an abstract idea, while a craftsman

simply carries out non-creative manual labor. This view reflects a Cartesian modernist dualism which divides mind and matter and prioritizes the former over the latter. In the modern industrial world, the division between mental conception and physical execution have become even more pronounced (Risatti 2007). The framework of creative economy further accentuates the primacy of mental creativity over other forms of value production. For Southeast Asian developing nations, creative economy is endorsed as a powerful means to advance the national status from a manufacturing economy to an intellectual power (Janamohan et al. 2021; ASEAN Secretariat 2021).

In parallel to the design vs. craft bifurcation, a hierarchy between fashion and souvenir arose in brand interviews. As Appadurai (1986) locates the value of commodity in exchange, indigenous textiles first gain exchange value beyond their original use through the textile trade tied to ethno-tourism. Therefore, in Vietnam, products from these textiles are usually seen as souvenirs due to their association with ethno-tourism. To counter this dominant narrative, most of the brands situate themselves in the fashion domain and actively distance themselves from the souvenir category. Cloud Sky's designer Nga described the textile products made by indigenous artisans that she had seen as "not of high quality and aesthetics, so visitors only buy them once as souvenirs, but would not buy them again." Eleven Minutes designer Ngọc spoke of souvenirs in a similarly dismissive light. Both Cloud Sky's founder Tú and Ua Hmoob designer Minh expressed their aspiration to "elevate" ethnic minority textiles into fashion items that "can be used widely in modern life, not just souvenirs that people buy and forget about." The informants clearly imagined these genres in a vertical regime of value, which results from the perceived differentiation in their use-value and the creative labor involved in their

production. Souvenirs are seen as mere travel reminders that require little creativity to make, while fashion items have higher intellectual content and use-value as consumers' personal expression. Therefore, brands who wish to reinvent and improve the market and social status of ethnic minority textiles often associate themselves with fashion.

Mùa was the only informant who did not reject the putatively lesser category of souvenir in the interview. Offering a wide range of products, she does not seem to shy away from the “souvenir” label. “Whatever earns money,” she said. Based in Sa Pa, her brand, Embroidered Hemp, has made substantial profits from selling small trinkets upcycled from vintage textiles and scrap fabrics as souvenirs to foreign tourists.

In reality, these two constructed categories are not clear-cut and often bleed into one another. Thu, for example, acknowledged that her brand's location in a center of ethno-tourism naturally made it seem like souvenirs, though she considered her works as fashion and disliked customers who saw them as mere souvenirs. “Brands in urban metropolitan areas like Hanoi and Saigon are easily identified as fashion. Mine is also a fashion brand, but since it is located here in Sa Pa, it is sometimes seen as a souvenir store, which is not my intention. However, I have come to accept that and just try to explain to customers the true value of my works, and hope they understand and appreciate them as fashion.”

### **Hierarchy of Creativity and Modernity**

The portrayal of traditional artisans as non-innovative does not necessarily mean that they are completely bereft of creativity. In the conference “Designed by Vietnam –

Design and Production,” Mr. Thiét commended traditional crafts as products of inter-generational collective creativity, which was highly local-specific and pragmatic. Cloud Sky founder Tú also praised the creativity of her Bahnar weaving artisan in using the new requested colors to produce beautiful textiles: “Seeing what she did with the colors I requested, I realized she herself had a great sense of aesthetics.” Thu, while distinguishing artists and designers from artisans based on creative work, acknowledged their similarity: “Artisans are also artists in their own way. When I watched the old Hmong artisan do batik drawing, I thought she was just like an artist, in all her concentration and dedication to the art. Her ideas naturally flow out of her hands into patterns on the fabric. None of her works are the same. That entire process, to me, is truly artistic.” This conceptualization of the artisan as artist, despite seeming rather romanticizing, recognizes the creative aspect of the artisan’s work.

Scholars have also deconstructed the myth of craftsmanship as devoid of creativity. Howard Risatti (2007) maintains that craftsmanship goes beyond the manual execution of techniques. He equates it to *poiesis*, the Aristotelian concept of knowledge involved in the creation of something new, as it is “a creative act in which actual physical form is brought together with an idea/concept.” (168). Therefore, craft requires an amount of mental creativity not unlike that of art and design. This kind of creativity is connected to James Scott (1998)’s concept of *métis*, the dynamic experiential knowledge that emerges through continual interaction and adaptation.

However, a hierarchy exists within the spectrum of creativity itself. In an analysis of creative economy, John Howkins (2010) distinguishes between two types of creative work:

“Creativity is internal, personal and subjective, whereas innovation is external and objective. Creativity often leads to innovation, but innovation seldom leads to creativity... Where success depends on personal expression, people want to be creative; if it depends on calculation and implementation they aim for innovation.” (10)

In other words, innovation is a particular functional kind of creativity that is aimed at a practical purpose. Creativity for its own sake is more associated with arts, while innovation plays a more central role in design, a view explicitly endorsed by Mr. Công, an artist/designer and speaker at the conference “Design for Awakening Tradition” in VDW 2021. Therefore, design innovation can translate ideas into economic value by fulfilling and creating market demands. As the framework of creative economy favors ideas that can be converted into money (Howkins 2001), artisans’ creativity is considered insufficient to satisfy the mainstream market.

Many designers and event speakers consistently stressed on practicality or functionality (*tính ứng dụng*) as the main strategy to bring “traditional” crafts into contemporary life. In this view, practicality is understood as the compatibility to modernity in both functional and aesthetic terms. The more an item can be used by consumers, the more practical it is perceived to be. According to Eleven Minutes designer Ngọc in the conference “Designed by Vietnam – Design and Production,” crafts have to be “functional and pragmatic, and traditional resources should be used to create products that can go into modern life” (*đi vào đời sống hiện đại*). In the TV news segment of Cultural Radar on Vietnam Design Week 2021, Mr. Tứ, one of the event’s main organizers, claimed that the aim of incorporating traditional elements in creative



industries was to reach a broader audience. His comment implies that purely “traditional” forms are not attractive to many contemporary customers and thus have to be rendered more commensurable with modernity. Several participants of Vietnam Design Week 2020 and 2021 also stressed that innovation should be relevant to daily life.

Many of the brands that I observed reiterate this discourse of bringing “tradition” into contemporary life. On their online media, Cloud Sky repeatedly stresses “practicality” as one of their core values, while Ua Hmoob, Eleven Minutes, and Thu Handicraft all emphasize “modernity” and “contemporaneity” in their works as a way to increase the value of ethnic minority textiles. Such spatial and temporal distancing insinuates an association of these materials and practices with the past and the un-modern.

However, ethnic minority communities have always created and adapted their textile products to fit their own use and preferences. Despite lamenting artisans’ lack of innovation, designers have also acknowledged their creative capacity. This apparent paradox thus compels me to ask: To whom is this “practicality” directed? Products created by indigenous artisans are functional to them and their communities, but might not always appeal to other consumers. The “practicality” that designers and speakers describe is clearly not aimed at said communities, but rather, at the larger mainstream market mainly comprised of a predominantly Kinh urban middle class.

This mismatch in practicality takes technical as well as aesthetic forms. In his interview, Ua Hmoob designer Minh acknowledged that Hmong artisans who were accustomed to making fabrics for household use often paid little attention to details that

might affect the appearance and functionality of the products. For example, the typical messenger bag size they produce is suitable for a trip to the farming field or into the forest, but too small for a laptop or a A4 notebook. Flimsy zippers and uneven seams might not affect the bag's function much in the rural settings, but heavily compromise its appeal for urban consumers who are often worried about pickpocketing. Minh recounted the time he helped a local Hmong artisan sell her products in Saigon: "The seams of her bags were not done carefully and the strap width was uneven. Some bags did not have zippers, which deterred urban customers. It was such a waste, because the textiles themselves were beautiful, but few customers bought her products because of these drawbacks." As he observed, textile cooperatives tended to fare better than individual producers, which he attributed to "external assistance," referring to the financial and technical support from NGOs.

In fashion, aesthetics is a function in and of itself, determined by the suitability of an outfit to a particular occasion or lifestyle. As such, ethnic minority textiles are usually viewed as incommensurable with the hegemonic vision of "modernity." Therefore, lifting these materials out of their "unmodern" connotation requires making certain adaptive innovations. Tú and Nga lamented the artisans' inaptitude in this area, saying that their traditional skills and experience made them resistant to change, even if it would profit them more. Nga said: "(Textile) Products made by indigenous artisans look the same across all stores and over a long time, with little change or variation. Their appearance is, to be honest, quite crude (*thô*) and ugly (*xấu*), so customers only treat them as mere souvenirs and don't want to buy them again." Tú, in similar veins, bemoaned artisans' unwillingness to "step out of their comfort zone" (*ra khỏi vùng an toàn*), which she saw

as a weakness preventing them from creating “added value” and elevating the economic and symbolic status of their textiles.

This perspective assumes that the artisans’ creativity is parochial, which is functional only within the ambit of their tradition and locality, but inadequate for “higher-level” innovation demanded by the mainstream market of urban middle-to-upper-class audience. This rhetoric reinforces the preexisting view of ethnic minorities as incompatible with modernity.

### **Narrative of Rescue and Hybridization**

As the creative economy framework prioritizes intellectual over manual labor and market-oriented innovation over other forms of creativity, the “global hierarchy of value” (Herzfeld 2004) constructs artisans as socially and economically inferior and incommensurable with contemporary global capitalism. Such perspective necessitates intervention from external agents, including designers, artists, and creatives, as well as authorities and policy makers. In Vietnam, this rhetoric of external “rescue” tends to victimize artisans and put the agency of creativity in the hands of outside designers. Ngọc claimed in VTV’s Cultural Radar segment covering VDW 2021 that preserving craft villages and their local livelihoods was now the responsibility of young designers. A similar narrative is also present in Indian woodblock printing, in which urban cosmopolitan designers are seen as “rescuing” provincial artisans by connecting the craft with the global market, a task that artisans are deemed incapable of due to their lack of exposure and access to this market (DeNicola and DeNicola 2012).

This perspective posits that one has to achieve a delicate balance between the “traditional” and the “modern” to be considered valid innovators in the creative economy. Innovating too much risks corrupting the “authenticity” of the practice or being accused of imitating foreign influences, but staying within tradition may mean being seen as conservative and “stuck in the past.” In the conference “Designed by Vietnam – Design and Production,” Mr. Thiét advocated for external training for artisans in design, reasoning that: “If we let them create freely by themselves, they will imitate Chinese and Japanese forms and lose their traditions.” This comment illustrates the general view that artisans either respond blindly to market trends and forget indigenous roots, or ignore market demands and not innovating. This paradox requires artisans to be simultaneously “traditional” and “innovative” in “appropriate” proportions.

This double bind between “tradition” and “modernity” is also discussed in many studies on creative and cultural sectors in Southeast Asia, where creative economy continues to place significant importance on cultural heritage as an economic resource. This body of research highlights the tension between indigeneity/traditionality and Western-ness/modernity, which is often resolved by hybridization (Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black 2015; Matsumoto 2004; Rodgers 2011). In this perspective, the original “tradition” can be used to express a new version of “modernity” that is cosmopolitan and international, as well as culturally rooted.

Although the growing popularity of tradition-inspired creative productions in Vietnam has catalyzed a re-envisioning of modernity, it continues to be associated with Western-ness. In the launching event of Here/There project, an initiative of designer-artisan collaboration in Vietnam and Australia, the opening speaker advocated for a

combination of Vietnam's "traditional" craftsmanship and Western designing methods as a means to advance Vietnamese products<sup>13</sup>. Minh also attributed Kinh designers' better ability to translate indigenous textiles into "modern" aesthetics to their exposure to Western influences. Though qualifying that "of course not everything Western is all good," he recognized the importance of having a knowledge of Western aesthetics and perspective, as well as specialized training in fashion design.

In short, the contemporary discourse of creative economy in Vietnam posits that artisans need designers' help in order to effectively navigate the difficult dilemma between "tradition" and "modernity." Only by achieving an "appropriate" balance between these two elements can craft products be accepted in the mainstream market where demands are dictated by consumers whose backgrounds and tastes are much closer to the cosmopolitan middle-class designers than to the local artisans.

### **Contestations: Artisan Agency and Dialectical Creativity**

Despite being discursively relegated to the backseat of innovation, artisans in reality exercise their creative agency in various ways and influence designers throughout the creative process. They can reject or modify designers' requests in their own ways and compel designers to work according to their own terms instead. Cloud Sky, for example, engages with ethnic minority artisans by ordering certain color and pattern combinations and making requests for adjustment. However, the brand can only choose from the range

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<sup>13</sup> The project also functions as a diplomatic tool with Australia, whose government funded the program. The UK (British Council) and Australia (the Australian Embassy), two first countries to promote the framework of creative economy in the 1990s, are active sponsors of creative economy projects in Vietnam.

offered by the artisans, and it is up to them to decide whether the customizing order is taken up. Cham weavers, for instance, do not take request in color change because their textile and dress symbolism prescribes the use of certain colors to particular contexts. Bahnar artisans, after some initial hesitance, agreed to the founder Tú's requests for new colors, but delivered them in inconsistent size and proportion. Tú said: "Every time we receive the order, we hold our breath and pray that it will not be too far off from what we expected." Nga, the designer, laughed at their own powerlessness: "If artisans feel like it they will set up more threads, if they don't then we get fewer threads. This results in inconsistencies in both quality and appearance in each order." As traditional weavers estimate the thread count on the loom based on experience instead of precise measurement, they defy technical and aesthetic control from the brand. Therefore, designers often have to adapt these inconsistencies into their work. As Nga explained, they usually avoid returning the commissioned textiles even if they are different from expectations, but rather try to use them in other designs and explain to customers the inevitable inconsistency of handmade items, which can sometimes be a charm.

Brands also cannot impose deadlines on artisans who make textiles as an integral part of life instead of a specialization. There are many reasons why artisans do not, or cannot, finish commissioned orders on time, but it is often accepted as inevitable when working with ethnic minority artisans. Nga said: "We are lucky that they agree to weave for us, so we cannot afford to make too much demand. We try our best to work with whatever they end up giving us." Her statement shows a humble attitude towards the artisans, as designers defer to their terms in order to make the deal work. Cloud Sky has also attempted to work with another Bahnar weaving community for better textile quality

and pattern variety. However, they have not succeeded in establishing relationship with this community, who refused to take the brand's requests to adjust their traditional colors. Nga said: "They were really difficult to work with, as they didn't want to take our request to change anything. They were like: *This is what we do, take it or leave it.*"

Despite being constructed as two separate hierarchical categories, fashion designers and textile artisans in Vietnam constantly straddle across boundaries to influence each other's work in a relationship of dialectical creativity. Cloud Sky's experience resembles Alicia Ory DeNicola and Lane DeNicola (2012)'s observation of designer-artisan relationship in Indian block-printing. The authors argue against the dominant view, asserting that both artisans and designers engage in creative designing, and artisans have negotiating power in their interaction with designers. Thu, in her interview and presentation at Here/There Workshop launching event, repeatedly highlighted the mutual learning between designers and local artisans. While teaching her Hmong co-workers to use a sewing machine, she has learned the art of indigo dyeing and batik from indigenous artisans in Sa Pa and continues to receive their advice in her practice. She also learned their techniques of hand-measuring and cutting fabrics based on experience, without using the technical pre-planning and precise measurement typical of conventional fashion design. She described them as "fashion designers of their families" on her brand Facebook page. Trained as a painter, she also appreciated how ethnic minority artisans used color combinations in highly effective ways without any art education.

In most cases, creativity and innovation does not lie exclusively in one party. As Charles Leadbeater (2009) sums up: "Most creativity is collaborative. It combines

different views, disciplines and insights in new ways.” Collaborative relationship allows artisans to participate in the creative process by giving designers technical guidance. This approach is endorsed by Ua Hmoob and Eleven Minutes. Ua Hmoob designer, Minh, though having insider knowledge of Hmong textile techniques, often receives advice from his artisans. Their expertise and experience help him adjust and enhance certain aspects of his designs, such as material choice and forms, allowing him to realize his vision of bringing Hmong textile practices into contemporary fashion.

This philosophy of collaboration is evident on Eleven Minutes website, which states that their designer and local indigenous artisans “co-created” technical improvements to their textile-making process. Ngọc shared in her interview: “I think each party’s willingness to open up to new perspectives and practices is already innovation in itself, as designers and artisans are often disconnected from each other in conventional fashion design.” She termed this initial step “social innovation,” and saw it as foundational to all creativity to come. Once it is established, innovation then emerge from the process of collaborating and co-creating which happens not only between artisans and designers, but also within and across local artisan communities. Ngọc came to embrace this philosophy of co-creating after encountering difficulties in the early days of her brand, when she followed the usual designer-artisan relationship. The experience prompted her to meditate on the lesson of mutual collaboration. “It didn’t work because I didn’t understand them and tried to force my ideas on them. Once I learned to work alongside them instead, I can understand what changes make sense to them and what do not. After a while, they became supportive of my new ideas.”



She also incorporates artisans' ideas in the process. "The artisans now collaborate with me in innovating the textile-making process. When I present my initial idea to them, they give their opinions on it, or execute it in entirely different ways, some of which I find very fascinating and decide to develop further in my designs. Sometimes I find inspiration in their unexpected accidents, such as dots and lines that stray away from the original design, and decide to heed that alternative path." This collaborative practice challenges the perception that ethnic minority artisans are not capable of creativity or inherently resistant to changes. Rather, they exercise their agency in when, where, and how to enact innovation that they see fit, and have an active role in the making process, sometimes even influencing the designs.

Public events also sometimes advocate for this type of horizontal relationship between artisans and designers/artists. In Here/There Workshop, the moderator claimed that the conventional model in fashion production chain started to shift, albeit slowly, from designers and artisans working separately to collaborating more closely without hierarchy. Mr. Thanh, a musician-composer with long-time experience working with traditional musical artisans, echoed this in his practice. "When I first came to them, I just told them what and how to play. But now I collaborate with them as partners and apply their insights into creating new works."

Designers' accounts show that trust is a major issue when working with ethnic minority artisans. Given the historical antipathy and discrimination from the Kinh majority, many ethnic minority communities grew to distrust them. Ngọc shared that mutual trust was critical to both establishing, and more importantly, maintaining the partnership. Tú also said that it took time to gain the Bahnar artisans' trust, but once she

managed to earn it, they agreed to her requests and the working relationship became much smoother. In similar veins, Thu praised the progress that Lan, her primary Hmong working partner, has made over time after initially refusing to change: “It took some time to convince her, but now Lan has become interested, she learns to do new things really quickly.” These accounts share a common narrative: Ethnic minority artisans resist change at first, but with enough time and trust they can become more open. In other words, for these artisans, not innovating might not be a matter of trust and choice rather than ability.

However, collaboration is a continually negotiated process that does not always guarantee optimal results for both parties. Sometimes designers have to concede to artisans’ way of doing, as in Ngọc’s experience of working with the Dao Tiên in Cao Bằng. As the entire community shares one ceramic door knob from French colonial era as a fabric-polishing tool, it takes a long time to finish Ngọc’s commission. “It took almost 8 months just for a few tens of meters of fabrics.” Ngọc said. However, when she gave them other tools or more door knobs to speed up the process, they all refused, reasoning that only the original knob carries the spirit (*linh hồn*) necessary for the work. Once understanding this, Ngọc had to accept that her orders with this community would always take time to complete, thus using their techniques only sparingly in her designs.

While collaboration is indeed productive for all parties involved, it would be rather optimistic to believe it completely dismantles the power structure that have brought them together in the first place. Although all of my informants have good intentions for ethnic minority artisans, not all of them are conscious of the structural hierarchy that

privileges their positions as the cosmopolitan innovative designers with more access to the market's standards and tastes.

As I have analyzed, many designers and the public at large still believe indigenous artisans are incapable of participating in the creative economy as effective innovators, because of their deficiency in aesthetic tastes or quality standards to satisfy the mainstream market. Such understanding tends to overlook the fact that these tastes and standards are far from universal, but contingent upon the clientele. In this case, they are largely determined by consumers with backgrounds that differ from those of the indigenous artisans. Hmong designers such as Minh and Mùa are keenly aware of the different preferences of Hmong and non-Hmong customers. Minh strategically adjusts his designs depending on his target clientele, saying: "Hmong customers tend to like designs with more patterns and colors, while non-Hmong, including Kinh Vietnamese, often prefer the more minimalist ones." Sharing this view, Mùa caters mainly to Hmong customers who prefer the colorful, elaborate designs that are closer to the traditional Hmong dress and her own artistic vision. According to her, most of her clients are Hmong Americans, with very few Kinh. "Except for those who are Westernized, they (Kinh) don't understand and appreciate my products."

This shows that creations by minority artisans and Kinh designers are not necessarily inferior in aesthetics or quality, but simply suitable to a specific clientele – their own communities. When they fail to satisfy a different audience – the mainstream market, they are deemed as incapable of "innovating." As this market is prioritized as the main driving force of preserving the textile traditions of ethnic minorities, artisans are expected to make their products more appealing in its standards. In this endeavor, they

are placed at a structural disadvantage compared to the cosmopolitan Kinh designers who has more knowledge of the mainstream market, whose taste and standards are mainly dictated by those like them.

On the other hand, it is this disparity in positionality that enables collaboration, as designers seek novel inspirations in artisans while artisans rely on designers for access to the mainstream market. Their collaborative innovation rests on different and differentiated areas of expertise and positions in the market, which are not as equal as one would like to think. While partly destabilizing the negative stereotypes of ethnic minorities, it also reproduces the hierarchy, now articulated in terms of innovation in the contemporary discourse of creative economy.

## CONCLUSION

As I have argued in this thesis, Vietnamese fashion brands generally portray ethnic minority artisans and their textile traditions in a positive light, effectively challenging the hegemonic discourses that have long vilified and marginalized these groups. The depiction of minority artisans as skilled and experienced experts reverses the common belief that their cultures are unsophisticated and uncivilized. Similarly, the focus on environmentalism shifts the dominant view of them from nature destroyers into stewards.

These representations allow for the attribution of values to indigenous artisans and the transfer of value from them to brands, illustrating a dialectical relationship between the regime of value (Appadurai 1986) and that of representation (Hall 1997). Combined with Vietnam's longstanding agenda of tourism economy and multicultural nationalism, the emerging discourses of sustainability and creative economy have highlighted cultural heritage, environmental sensibility, and market-oriented innovation as desirable traits. Such cultural politics renders these qualities salient in fashion and its forms of representation, where the figure of ethnic minority artisans is constructed as the carrier of tradition and environmentalism from the materiality of their textiles. These representations also serve to transfer the values associated with artisans into brands. By articulating artisans' expertise and their knowledge of natural fibers and dyes, brands identify themselves as cultural preservers and environmentalists, and therefore distinguish themselves from unethical fast fashion. Moreover, these vignettes help realize

the rapport that designers have cultivated with artisan communities and add the values of authenticity and ethics to their brands.

However, the value of modern innovation remains primarily in the hands of designers. With the few exceptions where designers actively embrace artisans' input in the creative process, artisans' creativity is often secondary, while designers take on the role of transforming ethnic minority textiles into new products that appeals to their vision and market. Distancing artisans from the status of valid innovators also serves to justify designers' intervention. Public events and interviews with designers show how the mainstream audience often considers products designed by indigenous artisans as lacking aesthetics and practicality, thus proving their incapacity to innovate while overlooking the circumstantial differences between the preference and need of the urban middle-class Kinh clientele and those of ethnic minority makers often based in the rural highlands, with notable exceptions.

### **Cultural Appropriation**

In this process of value transfer, the risk of cultural appropriation arises when designers are cultural outsiders and artisans' voice is sidelined in their engagement with those designers. In Vietnam's indigenous textile trade, the majority of those who are categorized as designers are Kinh, while ethnic minority actors often occupy the material supply node in the nexus (Turner 2007). Given the inter-ethnic power structure in Vietnam, the phenomenon of Kinh designers and creatives increasingly seeking

inspirations from ethnic minority cultures in recent years has stimulated the debate on the topic of cultural appropriation.

First originated from anti-colonial critiques in the 1980s, the cultural appropriation paradigm criticizes privileged corporations and consumers, usually in Western contexts, who borrow or use cultural elements from minority groups as decontextualized decorations for their own financial or social enhancement, especially without proper crediting or benefit sharing<sup>14</sup> (Scafidi 2005; Young 2008). Scholars have examined various criteria of this issue, including cultural harms (misrepresentation, stereotyping, and economic inequity), profound offense (disrespect or misuse, and violation of sacrilege or privacy), ownership breaching (lack of accreditation or misrecognition, and lack of insiders' permission), and quality diminishment (aesthetic inadequacies and inauthenticity) (Young 2008; Siems 2019). Among these dimensions, power dynamic and insider permission are considered the most crucial factors (Matthes 2019; Nguyen and Strohl 2019).

While previous cases of cultural offense have sparked public outrage, it is not until the Biti's incident in 2021 that the topic of cultural appropriation (*chiếm dụng văn hoá*) gained significant attention and in-depth discussion in Vietnam. These debates show that the common understanding of cultural appropriation in Vietnam has mainly revolved around cultural offense and misinformation, including misattribution of origin and lack of

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<sup>14</sup> While academics define the term “cultural appropriation” in a relatively neutral sense (Young 2008, Scafidi 2005), the common understanding with a negative connotation is specifically termed “cultural misappropriation” (Scaffidi 2005), or “objectionable cultural appropriation” (Young 2008). To avoid confusion, I use “cultural borrowing” for the neutral type, and “cultural (mis)appropriation” for the negatively appraised practice.

crediting. In fashion, it is not uncommon for brands to obscure cultural specificity with generic umbrella terms such as “tribal textiles” (*thổ cẩm*) or “ethnic minorities,” or misidentify ethnic affiliation of the textiles, as in the Biti’s case, which Cloud Sky founder Tú attributed to “unintentional ignorance.”

The absence of proper accreditation is also present in the cross-cultural transfer of natural dyeing knowledge, especially indigo. As this craft is practiced widely around the world, Kinh practitioners sometimes forgo the crediting of indigenous artisans as their learning resources, de-ethnicizing artisanship in the public domain of knowledge. Eleven Minutes designer Ngọc described this phenomenon as a “lamentable lack of gratitude” in her interview. In other instances, ethnic minority artisans are relegated to a passive backseat role in the cultural preservation agenda, as their agentive presence often pales compared to designers who are presented as taking the leading role in maintaining all cultures of Vietnam and rescuing the artisans. However, these cases are usually normalized and not seen as cultural appropriation, as the debate on the topic in Vietnam so far has mostly revolved around appropriate usage and accreditation. Therefore, as long as the borrower does not commit cultural offense and origin misattribution or lack of attribution, they do not attract criticisms as cultural appropriation.

However, the cultural appropriation framework, while productive in its postcolonial critiques of cross-cultural creative practices, is rather limiting. In the context of Vietnam, the issue is somewhat in murky waters, for the problematic of cultural boundaries is not always as clear-cut as the cultural appropriation framework assumes. Vietnam’s nation-building agenda has portrayed ethnic minorities as integral, inalienable parts of a unified Vietnamese nationhood, obscuring ethnocultural specificities and



underlying power imbalance (Phan 2018, Vương 2019, Mạc 1997, Keyes 2002, Tapp 2002). This fluidity of group boundaries can be seen operating in both Kinh and ethnic minority actors. Kinh designers have long incorporated ethnic minority textiles into the national dress, *áo dài*, as an expression of Vietnamese multicultural nationalism in international and national events (Leshkovich 2003, 2019). It is also common for ethnic minority performers to don traditional dress from other groups in cultural performances to represent an overarching ethno-regional identity (Ó Briain 2014)<sup>15</sup>.

By stressing on inter-cultural boundaries as immutable, the framework of cultural appropriation tends to disregard intra-group contestations and dynamics. Public talks and designers' opinions on the topic reveal that the debates in Vietnam are primarily concerned with how the act is done. While an outsider indeed runs higher risks of misappropriation for their lack of cultural knowledge, an insider membership does not provide absolute impunity either. In the conference "Design to Awaken Tradition," Dr. Mai raised the issue of how to innovate traditions without offending original practitioners who might disapprove of excessive changes to their local practices. Ua Hmoob designer, Minh, also resonated with this concern: "I am Hmong, but that does not mean I can do whatever I want to Hmong traditions, because Hmong communities might react negatively to it. Therefore, I always make sure to design in a way that would honor Hmong culture as it is, not changing it into something unrecognizable or offensive to the

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<sup>15</sup> During a work trip in Điện Biên Province, I noticed a performance where Thai dancers wear a performative, stylized version of the Hmong dress. Ó Briain (2014) observed the same phenomenon in Sa Pa (Lào Cai Province), where non-Hmong performers dressed in Hmong clothes and pretending to play *qeej*, a Hmong instrument, in public cultural performances. In both cases, the representation of various ethnic groups serves to materialize the imagined "Northwestern region" (*Tây Bắc*).

communities.” These accounts illustrate how even insiders have to tread carefully in order to avoid misuse or sacrilege when innovating traditions. Regional and sub-group cultural variations, as well as socioeconomic stratification, can also further complicate the relationship between actors of the same ethnic category.

More importantly, the paradigm tends to pigeonhole inter-ethnic exchanges into a binary of appropriation and appreciation, overlooking their complexities. In reality, most cases of cross-cultural borrowings fall in the gray zone, and collaborative pursuits often involve both appropriative and appreciative elements. While brands rely on the values associated with ethnic minority artisans as their own, they attribute these qualities to artisans as an act of appreciation. In this case, appropriation and appreciation are concurrent, as indigenous artisans’ presence gets amplified in brands’ marketing while simultaneously assimilated into designer’s creative vision. Collaborations between designers and artisans also operate on their positional differentiation. Whereas ethnic minority artisans contribute their cultural expertise and environmental knowledge, cosmopolitan Kinh designers utilize their market familiarity to articulate these values to the mainstream audience, expanding economic opportunities for both parties.

The results of these relationships, however, are ambivalent. They facilitate benefit sharing between the two parties, albeit uneven, while reproducing the underlying power structure. They underscore the positive qualities of indigenous artisans while limiting them to the area of technical production which is considered inferior to creative design in the hierarchy of labor. Although these partnerships have gone a long way from the cultural offense, misuse, and lack of attribution or misattribution that are still common in

Vietnam, only few designers have gone over and beyond to share creative agency with artisans.

All of the informants agree that it is crucial to give due credits to the original cultural owners to avoid cultural appropriation. Thu specifically stressed this point in her interview: “These textile knowledge and techniques belong to ethnic minorities. Designers like me only borrow them as a medium for artistic vision, and therefore must credit indigenous artisans who contribute to their creative process.” Minh added that ethnic minority practitioners are not immune to cultural appropriation either, pointing to some Hmong traders and designers who attract criticisms from both Hmong and Thai communities for advertising the Thai textiles they use as Hmong.

Designers also find it necessary to provide “correct information” about minority cultures to avoid offense and misrepresentation. Tú, in commenting on the Biti’s case, said that designers and brands need to take time and effort to “learn and understand the culture you borrow from.” Nga also expressed her hesitance to talk about minority cultures without reliable sources, saying: “It would equal a crime if we presented the wrong information about them.”

More importantly, the relationship between brands and artisans can also facilitate mutual benefits and power sharing. All of the informant brands procure materials directly from artisan communities and see their partnerships as providing artisans additional economic opportunities. As Embroidered Hemp and Cloud Sky only purchase ready-made textiles, artisans’ influence on the end products mainly functions through the materiality of the textiles they make. In the cases of Thu Handicraft and Quả Dứa,

minority artisans impart their knowledge to designers and participate directly in the making process alongside designers, deepening their relationship beyond commerce. Some designers, such as Ua Hmoob and Eleven Minutes, go even further to establish an interdependent collaboration with local artisans for both technical and creative contribution, despite the geographical distance. This strategic move, as they explained, is to encourage artisans to preserve their own traditions within their local communities while developing a “new sub-tradition” (Ngọc, in interview) for the large market.

### **Limits of Representations**

Although these representations of ethnic minority artisans have raised the ethical standards of cross-cultural partnerships, it is far from being the norm in Vietnam’s creative scene. Due to the obscure meaning of the term *thổ cẩm* in common parlance, it is not uncommon for brands to promote messages of cultural heritage while ignoring specific ethnic origins of the textiles, or even using imported mass-manufactured fabrics of similar aesthetics. Although the informant brands pay more attention to this, not all of them center the role of indigenous artisans. This means that artisans sometimes become invisible or only cursorily mentioned as sources of inspiration rather than active creative agents.

Even when brands successfully emphasize the role of ethnic minority artisans, their reversal of negative representations into positive ones, while productive and promising, carry certain limitations. Hall (1997) warns that this strategy risks producing another stereotype which simply replaces the old essentialism with its opposite extreme

instead of destabilizing the representational regime. Some designers, such as Ngọc, are aware of this issue and strive to avoid it by depicting the artisans as specific individuals and communities, rather than as generalizable representations of the entire groups.

Moreover, the positive representations often rely on preexisting images to operate, even by building on the very narrative it sets out to challenge. The view of ethnic minority artisans as tradition guardians continues to relegate them to the past and characterize them as the “domestic Other,” giving way to the implicit belief that they lack the capacity for modern innovation (Fabian 1983; Clark 2001; Salemink 2008; Taylor 2008; Messier and Michaud 2012; Hoàng and Phạm 2012). Similarly, the environmentalist argument continues to highlight their connection with nature, a prevalent mode of imagining both ethnic minorities in Vietnam and indigenous peoples in the global discourse (Conklin 1997; Li 2000; Kuper 2003; Barnard 2007; Culas 2010; Chandler and Reid 2018). The persistence of these dominant narratives affirms Hall’s argument that even when a new discourse emerges to challenge the hegemony, the shift is in constant negotiation and never determinate.

Furthermore, the valorization of indigenous artisans as traditionalists and environmentalists risks producing an implicit hierarchy among minority groups and perpetuating the “Noble Savage” trope. Its neoliberal implication prioritizes communities who “resist” the allure of “modernity” to maintain “traditions” over those who have compromised and thus are not considered praise-worthy. This pressure on ethnic minority actors to perform certain roles is reminiscent of indigenous activism in Brazil, where indigenous peoples don a carefully curated version of their traditional attire that fulfills Western expectations in order to gain political legitimacy and public support (Conklin

1997). In addition, the cliché glorification of indigenous peoples as “an exemplary neoliberal subject” is critiqued as a tool “to discipline the indigenous themselves into performing their own resilience” (Chandler and Reid 2018, 262). The myth of pure indigenous minorities overlooks the reality that many communities have changed their practices for the very national urge for modernization and market integration.

More importantly, the content presented by the brands is mostly limited to textiles, an already state-sanctioned aspect of ethnic minority cultures. Even brands whose professed aims are to spread public awareness of said cultures, such as Cloud Sky and Ua Hmoob, admit that they fear customers would find cultural information either irrelevant or difficult to understand. Eleven Minutes designer Ngọc, despite her public discussion of labor migration and environmental exploitation, left out other sensitive issues she witnessed among her artisan communities and brought up in the interview, such as land dispossession. Given the political atmosphere surrounding land grabbing in Vietnam, her selective presentation is unsurprising.

The incorporation of indigenous textiles in fashion and the growing representations of ethnic minority artisans in creative practices have been productive in encouraging cultural pride, enabling livelihood diversification, creating fruitful collaborations, and challenging social prejudices. However, it is sobering to keep in mind that these constructive pursuits are still far from being the norm in Vietnam’s creative landscape and have yet to maximize their potential in calling attention to other critical issues around equal rights faced by ethnic minorities.

## APPENDIX: BRANDS AND KEY INFORMANTS

Brand	Designer/Founder	Ethnicity	Brand location	Year founded	Main artisan communities
Eleven Minutes	Ms. Ngọc	Kinh	Hanoi	2012	Nùng An, White Thái, Blue Hmong, Black Hmong, Khmer
Cloud Sky	Ms. Tú (founder) Ms. Nga (designer)	Kinh Kinh	Saigon	2018	Cham, Bahnar
Ua Hmoob	Mr. Minh	Hmong	Saigon	2016	Hmong
Embroidered Hemp	Ms. Mùa	Hmong	Sa Pa	2013	Hmong
Thư Handicraft	Ms. Thư	Kinh	Sa Pa	2016	Hmong and Dao
Quả Dứa	Ms. Vũ	Kinh	Sa Pa	2014	Hmong and Dao

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