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The Ordinary Family?:
Adaptation and Mimicry in Vietnamese Transnational Television

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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The television show called “Gia Đình Là Số 1” (or “Family is Number 1”) was originally produced in South Korea under the title “High Kick” in 2015. The sitcom was recast and reproduced in Vietnam in 2017. Both versions of the show are about a three-generation family who pass through life’s trials and tribulations in humorous ways. Although the Vietnamese version of the show follows the same plot as its Korean counterpoint, there are small differences that highlight the nuanced ways in which comedy reflects specifically Vietnamese ways of life. These differences ultimately highlight what makes this Vietnamese family sitcom singularly unique to Vietnam as well at the same time as it formulates the “ordinary family” in Vietnam.

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INTRODUCTION

In beginning of the 48th episode of Gia Đình Là Số 1, Nguyễn Đức lovingly cleans an antique vase. The vase is white, with a beautiful blue coy fish design painted onto the side. "My beauty," he proudly shows his son, Đức Hạnh, while he continues to clean his prized vase with a vibrant blue cloth. "I got a good price for it locally," he explains, admiringly.

"You're asking for trouble," Đức Hạnh gestures toward the vase.

Feeling accused, he rebukes, "I take good care of it."

"Ba ơi! In a sitcom, the vase breaks. That's just what happens."

As if on que, Đức Hạnh's two son's burst into the room where Nguyễn Đức carefully holds his precious vase. Đức Minh chases Đức Phúc right into their grandfather, who falls over the side of their couch, still clutching the vase. Now panicked, Nguyễn Đức puts his vase carefully back on a decorative end table.

Moments later Lê Thị Diễm Thúy, Nguyễn Đức's wife, precariously holds the vase between her thumb and index finger while she dusts the table. Đức comedically waves his arms above his head and frets while his wife nonchalantly puts the vase back, not worried. No harm has come to it. But Đức's noticeable discomfort is not only palpable, it is hilarious. After all, why would anyone in his family so carelessly break something so important to the family's patriarch?

The next day, Nguyễn Đức wakes up to find the vase shattered on the living room table. For the rest of the episode Nguyễn Đức wrongly accuses the members in his family of breaking his vase.

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I discovered the television show *Gia Đình Là Số 1* while browsing on the internet. I was initially swayed into watching the show because of its large audience. But ultimately, I fell into many sessions of binge-watching episode after episode of *Gia Đình Là Số 1* largely because the platform's "playlist function," which queued up each episode in order and played one right after the other. I quickly realized that I had seen this show before.

During my childhood, my mother, who worked as a civilian for the United States military, was stationed in South Korea. It was during my four years of living there (from the age of five to nine) that I watched and was completely absorbed by Korean gameshows, sitcoms, and dramas. My mother was stationed in Korea again during my final year of high school and the entirety of my undergraduate education and I traveled there during the summer of each of those years (2007-2012). It was during my first summer there in 2007 that I had first watched the Korean sitcom *Unstoppable High Kick!* that *Gia Đình Là Số 1* is nearly, although not perfectly, a replica.

This scene, depicted above, in Vietnam's successful sitcom, *Gia Đình Là Số 1,* aired in 2016 on the VTV7 broadcast channel approximately seven years after the Korean sitcom *Unstoppable High Kick!* aired the same scene. It is a "translation" insofar as the plot lines across episodes in the older, Korean program are mimicked (or mirrored) in the

later Vietnamese version. Vietnamization (*Việt hóa*) of the show *Gia Đình Là Số 1* included recasting the show and altering aspects of the characterization, dialogue, and plot. Production of *Gia Đình Là Số 1* included the efforts to make the famous Korean sitcom more suitable for Vietnamese audiences.

In the above scene, the character Đức Hạnh does not know he is in a sitcom when he says, "That's just what happens." In fact, Đức Hạnh's concept of humor is contingent upon the worlding of *Gia Đình Là Số 1* to the extent that the Vietnamese adaptation shows humor in ways that must be familiar to local viewers of the show. Local audiences must agree that, in a sitcom "That's just what happens." Scholarship has shown how cultural forms are often reproduced and then localized for national audiences (Hall 1983) (Nguyen-Thu 2019). It is important to note that adaptations of cultural forms are not new phenomenon as much as the ways these forms are transmitted to audiences are variant and extensive. Stuart Hall (1983) argues that popular culture is an "arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured" (17).

I use the family sitcom *Gia Đình Là Số 1* as a "contact zone" (Pratt 1991) to develop an Inter-Asian understanding of how cultural forms and mass media are reproduced and then changed across borders. Where many scholars make the argument that appropriated forms are a part of colonial and postcolonial discourse (Bhabha 1984) (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991), I argue that this approach inadvertently leaves out inter-Asian influences that are historically much older than the Western colonization of Southeast Asia and continue to influence Vietnam today. Aihwa Ong (2011) warns against positing universalist causalities (like global capitalism) or actors (like colonial

forces) that oversimplify nationhood in Asia and Southeast Asia. Instead, she advocates that research take a "worlding" approach in order to analyze shifting "forms and norms" that are reimagined in complex inter-Asian spheres of influence (Ong 2011, 4).

To develop an understanding of traveling cultural forms in Vietnam during a global pandemic is to launch a line of inquiry through several disciplines: anthropology, cultural studies, and media studies. The questions that this particular sitcom raise for me that I attempt to answer in this thesis are as follows: How do cultural forms shift as they travel across national borders? What remains and why? How do Vietnamese producers and state-run television networks adapt, transform, and translate inter-Asian cultural forms and media into their own meaningful idioms? What is significant about the changes made during the process of localizing transnational forms? And finally, is there something identifiable as 'Vietnamese Comedy'? Analyzing these shifts in *Gia Đình Là Số 1* from its original Korean production across time and space allows us to consider how an example of reproduced television media is adapted from its initial context in South Korea and localized in Vietnamese society. This matters because sitcoms are contextually situated to challenge and reinscribe cultural and social imaginaries, particularly of family. This sitcom, after the Đổi Mới economic reforms, has integrated Vietnam into the global economy and television broadcasting, as a state run media, and is used to reinstate "faimly values" in light of modernization efforts. I argue that the new "Vietnamese family" presented in *Gia Đình Là Số 1*, offers conflicting gender ideologies by the consuming, middle-class family that must confront and balance

both traditional and nontraditional kinship roles and values in ways that reimagine the modern Vietnamese family.

PART 1: BINGE-WATCHING AS METHODOLOGY IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020-2021, in-situ research in Vietnam became impossible. "Field sites" became inaccessible landscapes, and as a result, anthropologists were either forced to hold off on research plans or reconceptualize their projects altogether. As a master's student with a limited time to conduct research, I had to change both the scope of my project and my concept of "the field" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

Transitioning my work from stand-up comedy clubs to internationally influenced comedy media, like cinema and television, was not difficult. Much of my research on humor transcends the genre of stand-up comedy. Not to mention, studying popular media has proven a useful lens to understand Asian countries' relationships with each other, while provincializing the West as an object of desire (Chakrabarty 2008). I was initially interested in the ways humor, comedy, and laughter and the emergence of stand-up comedy in Ho Chi Minh City was adapted, transformed, and translated into local Vietnamese idioms. By analyzing the written content (discourse analysis) and performance (social dramas) of these comedians, I wanted to understand the cultural contexts of humor in relation to gender, political economy, and kinship.

Our view of "the field" as a physical landscape has expanded from the traditional framework that Malinowski set for us in his research for *Argonauts*. The "fieldsite" for my research became removed from a physical landscape. I spent much of my time scouring the internet for Vietnamese movie reviews and binge-watching Vietnamese

television that was re-distributed to audiences on internet platforms (like YouTube and Vimeo). As Tom Boellstorff (2008) states, field sites are not only partially constructed by ethnographers but "fieldsites" do not have to be physically constructed at all (6). In the preface to a newer edition of *Second Life*, Boellstorff reflects on his research in digital spaces,

> The issue of understanding an online culture 'in its own terms' might seem unique to virtual worlds, but it is relevant to all digital topics, including those of mobile devices and the 'Internet of things' …. It is possible to study any of these phenomena on their own terms, compare multiple such phenomena, or examine relationships between online and offline contexts (2008, xxiii)

Here, Boellstorff discusses the 'Internet of things' as its own fieldsite. Where it is possible to study digital topics "on their own terms," many disciplines in the humanities do this important work in several ways. In a time of precarity and crisis, I propose an interdisciplinary approach to research on "mass culture" and "the internet of things" where traditional field methods may not provide a fully well-rounded analysis. Anthropologists in media have been on the cutting edge of bringing us into the living rooms of television viewers around the world (Nguyen-Thu 2019) (Pandian 2015) (Abu-Lughod 2005) (Mankekar 1999). However, instead of face-to-face interactions and participant observation with audiences, my research focused on internet comments and audience participation, with blogs and other online forums which played a large role in my research. "What is critical about television's meanings are produced somewhere- for

most viewers, somewhere else- and consumed locally in a variety of localities" (Abu-Lughod 2005, 45). Individuals who consume television on the internet also become a part of the "media world" where they can begin to produce textual criticism or praise that are, in turn, witnessed and viewed by other audience members.

The methodology for this research included careful, critical viewings of Vietnamese television. Because of the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than conducting interviews, I refocused my approach to reading online reviews, blog posts, and comments that are commentary or reflections on the various films and television shows in my research.

During the winter break between fall and winter quarter (December 17, 2020 – January 3, 2021), I watched the first season of the Vietnamese television show "Gia Đình Là Số 1" (more commonly referred to as *High Kick* after the Korean version of the show). This show, like many Vietnamese network shows, are available to stream on Youtube for free. There are 208 episodes in the first season and each episode is about thirty minutes long. I watched many episodes of the earlier Korean version as well (of which there are 167 episodes). I watched the first 50 episodes of each version. While reading blogs, reviews, local media outlets, et el (see below), I pinpointed important episodes that were referenced and viewed those as well.

Visual and media studies allows for a more nuanced articulation of *how* and *why* images, symbols, and narratives are produced and perceived. Where an average cable network audience member might not see these television shows side-by-side, "the internet of things" provides potential viewers with such a platform. Both television shows

are accessible for free (*Gia Đình Là Số 1* on YouTube, *Unstoppable High Kick!* on an Asian television internet platform called Kiss Asian) and can be queued and watched one after the other. "Binge-watching" and endless internet scrolling becomes a new and necessary methodology. Watching several episodes at a time, consecutively, became a way to fall into the world of *Gia Đình Là Số 1* where there was no impending end. It was through binge-watching the show that I was able to make connections between Korean and Vietnamese television and the methodology for my research began to take shape.

Comedy television itself depends on stylized popular myths, narratives, and "signs" that literary critiques have produced a wide array of collective knowledge. Myths must be accepted by their audiences first in order to get the desired outcome (laughter). As stated previously, in order for comedy television to function, the world of the television show must be agreed upon by its audience (Hume 1972). Here, Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* demonstrates how cultural mythology plays a significant role in the construction of these worlds. Mythologies become tools for building imagined communities (Anderson 1991). Myths are stereotypes or figures that appear in popular forms that, together, create a collective argument about the conditions or environment of the sitcom world. It is important to study the myths created in comedy television, especially in recycled cultural forms, because although forms are borrowed, it is the mythologies that are replaced and adapted.

Comedy as Lifeway in Vietnam

A year before the novel coronavirus pandemic, the New York Times published an article called "Ho Chi Minh City's Hilarious Side." The article paints a vibrant picture of English-Speaking comedy clubs popping up all over H`ôChí Minh City. The genre was brought to the city largely by American and European expatriates craving the Western comedy performance. The New York Times journalist highlights how relieved Vietnamese comedians newly obtained an outlet to discuss family life and gender inequality, which the article states are "generally considered taboo locally" (2019). Overall, the general tone of the article suggests a new frontier of building humor in H`ô Chí Minh City that was bursting with potential – and defiance.

It comes as no surprise that journalists from the United States would transpose their own comedy world onto other countries. The New York Times article makes several assumptions about comedy in contemporary Vietnam. First, it suggests that humor is a new performative genre that was brought from Western expatriates. And second, it assumes Vietnamese society does not have adequate outlets to broach the topic of family or gender.

Comedy in the United States is racialized and politicized in the cultural context of their audience where comedians must situate "Asian-ness" into a "legitimate" and expected worlding. The negative American stereotype of Asians being unfunny is deeply imbedded in the NYT article. Typically, in America, women and people of color use humor to upend the status quo and/or to shed light on these inequalities. Film critique and scholar Normal Schulman (1994) calls this "system of blatantly stylized communication

that is perpetuated by an oppressed group…to cement its own distinct identity" as a "minor discourse" (109). In this way, a "minor discourse" becomes a "hidden transcript" that audiences then participate in and accept (Scott 1990). Asian-American stand-up comedian Margaret Cho rose to stand-up comedy celebrity in the late 90s and early 2000s. Themes in her stand-up routines included gender, sexuality, transnational personhood, queer identities, and race. In her performances, Cho often affects the voice of her mother. The mother's affected accent is performed to American audiences who already have preconceived notions of how an "Asian voice" *should* sound. Rhetorician Elaine W. Chun (2004) suggests that Cho's performance is successful because of her own perceived "Asian-ness", which provides a sort of "authenticity" to her performance despite how this is not her 'actual voice' (Chun 2004). Chun argues that an audience's ideas of perceived authenticity make Margaret Cho's performance "legitimate." Comedy genres rely on a "legitimacy" that is co-produced by both the audience and the producer of the comedy form. In the United States, there are many contemporary comedians in America who have a full (or partial) Asian heritage. Notable are Ali Wong, Ronny Chieng, and Ken Jeong. Like Margaret Cho, all of these comedians affect a relative's "Asian voice" in order to discuss their parents and/or their transnational childhood. Both Ali Wong and Ronny Chieng discuss their split heritage between East Asian and Southeast Asian identities as simultaneously highbrow (East Asian) and lowbrow (Southeast Asian) cultures. Even differences between East-Asia and Southeast Asia are actualized within these skits where East-Asian (or inter-Asian) prejudices become legitimatized on the comedy stage.

Despite the New York Times article's perception of Westerners bringing humor to H`ôChí Minh City, comedy is not new in Southeast Asia. Katherine Bowie's *Of Beggars and Buddhas: The Politics of Humor in the Vessantara Jataka in Thailand* (2017) about the comedic play in which Thai audiences are encouraged to give away their worldly possessions, argues that state actors position or suppress older and well known comedy narratives in order to control dissenting and anti-royalist sentiments throughout northern and central Thailand. Interestingly, Bowie admits her initial distaste of the story as the protagonist, Vessantara, gives away his wife and children in a display of generosity. However, Bowie notes that although the story is used to legitimize kingship in central Thailand, it is embellished with humor in order to satirize royalty in northern Thailand (Bowie 2017). The *Vessantara Jataka* is a popular Theravada Buddhist comedy narrative that is told throughout Southeast Asia and is so renowned that it is reproduced in countries that follow Mahayana Buddhism as well (2017).

The first recorded Vietnamese performance was a satire (Mackerras 1987). Many traditional performances (hát chèo in the Noth, and cải lương in the South) include humor (Meeker 2013). The earliest documentation of a hát chèo was performed before the Chinese emperor during the Le dynasty (980-1009) (Mackerras 1987, 2). Despite this early recorded performance, there is no evidence that suggests the hát chèo was adopted from Chinese influences alone. Instead, Vietnam's rich history in comedy forms actually suggests the form was adapted from traveling shows by villagers and then performed locally (Mackerras 1987).

Vietnam's literary canon is also rich with satirical and humerous texts. Vũ Trọng Phụng was a celebrated satirical author in the early 1900s who wrote humorous narratives that satirized and exposed French colonial forces. Most notably known for his work of satire, *Dumb Luck*, his novels are all politically provoking. Vũ Trọng Phụng's books, short stories, and reportage were later banned by the communist state from 1960 to 1986 during the Cultural Revolution for "outraging morality" (Zinoman 2014). I want to make clear that Vũ Trọng Phụng was not viewed as a revolutionary by his contemporaries, nor was he seen as a Vietnamese patriot (2014), but his comedy works do critique the political and social landscapes of his time.

In each of these examples of comedy, the genre is used as a political tool to shape or resist the nation. However, as Vietnamese television is state run, comedy programming and narratives are not overtly political. A popular television show called Thách Thức Danh Hài (English title: "Crack Them Up Vietnam") began airing in 2015 in which contestants have one minute to provoke two of the three judges into laughter in order to win cash prizes. This game show highlights several genres of comedy acts, including skits, improve, and stand-up comedy.

By studying the nuances of humor in comedy television in Vietnam, I seek to dismantle the false, Western notion that Asian identities are not humorous (which is perpetuated in the New York Times article). I would like to note here that preliminary research was a challenge due to the lack of English scholarship in Southeast Asian humor. In fact, through many scholastic search engines, typing in any variation of the words "Vietnam" "Vietnamese" "Comedy" and "Humor" brings up pages upon pages of

texts on American soldiers who use humor to cope with their experiences of the American War in Vietnam. Although I certainly do not wish to slight or diminish these experiences, I feel strongly that the absence of scholarly texts on actual Vietnamese humor seems like an erasure in itself.

Mass Media and Cultural Forms

Transnational adaptations of film and television are numerous. Prominent thinkers of mass media, Horkheimer and Adorno (1947) argued that "culture today is infecting everything with sameness" (41). This pessimism is misleading. Mass culture is anything but "infected with sameness," although the ways in which transnational forms differ are not easy to codify. Although shows like *Gia Đình Là Số 1* and *Unstoppable High Kick!* appear to mirror each other in plot, nuanced adaptations are evident. In this way, conversations about mass media transferences between nations must reconcile sameness with adaptation in stylized, often precarious ways.

Cultural studies advocate, Stuart Hall (2016) argues that mass media and the beginnings of television allows for a transference of cultural forms that might resist previous theoretical frameworks that endeavor to "pin it down" (Hall 2016, 6). Mass produced television, as a field of inquiry demands more nuanced approaches that seeks to understand the "worlding" of television comedies and dramas and how these worlding projects fit into the social imaginary of nationhood or subjectivity.

One notable objection to Horkheimer and Adorno's claims comes from John Berger who is less critical about homogenized forms. He thought the reproduction of

popular works would diminish the original (in direct opposition to Benjamin's "aura"). Berger suggesting, "the uniqueness of the original now lies in it being the original of a reproduction" (1972, 32). Mass media, then, is less about the "aura," or the uniqueness, of the original (Benjamin 1935), and more about the first experience of visualizing a media. "In a film the way one image follows another, their succession, constructs an argument which becomes irreversible" (Berger 1972, 26). Audiences legitimize *Gia Đình Là Số 1* as a Vietnamese narrative by simply visualizing the media from their localities.

In the debate between adaptation and homogeny of culture forms, postcolonial scholars discuss hegemonic power structures in relation to "appropriation" and "mimicry," (Bhabha 1984) (Comaroff and Bhabha 2002) which I will discuss in Part 3 of this paper. These terms do not account for adaptation and shifts in original narratives, despite how small the shifts may be. Although adaptation legitimizes the new worlding that occurs within cultural forms it does not adequately define television shows like *Gia Đình Là Số 1* that appear to mirror another nation's entertainment narratives.

Comedy and humor lead to valuable insights into "legitimate worlds" where television is a worlding process that constructs national pedagogies at the same time as it contributes to flowing inter-cultural ideas (Abu-Lughod 2005) (Ong and Roy 2011). Experts involved in the production of *Gia Đình Là Số 1* imbed culturally specific narratives of women and family into the sitcom programming.

In Vietnam, studio experts make deliberate choices and inferences to create an "argument" that their audiences will find agreeable. These experts (i.e. producers, directors, writers, actors) depend on popular opinions to approximate a "best guess" of

what communities will consume (Nguyen-Thu 2019). Expert visual practices of television narratives (specifically sitcoms) in Vietnam see desirable story lines in South Korean television. Because sitcoms, as a genre, engage with familial structures and values, it stands to reason that Vietnam perceives a strong similarity between the nations' family practices.

Figure 1 (above) Gia Đình Là Số 1 (below) High Hick!

Charles Goodwin (1994) calls this expert mode of production "professional vision" which "consists of socially organized ways of seeing and understanding events that are answerable to the distinctive interests of a particular social group" (606). Vietnam's use of Korean television is one such stylized visual experience and the sitcom *Gia Đình Là Số 1* is such a recycled form (Minh 2015). Despite how these two sitcoms often match, narratively, frame for frame, purposeful stylization and careful adaptation of the comedy sitcom transcribe the originally Korean show into long-standing Vietnamese cultural frameworks (of which I will discuss in Part 2).

Because comedy relies on a complex set of cultural grounding work, it is important to clarify my use of the word "comedy". Comedy is a large genre that encompasses many subgenres: stand-up comedy, satire, sitcom, parody, slapstick, etc. For the sake of clarity and continuity, I will use the word "comedy" to mean a plot driven story that utilizes humor to achieve nuances of meaning, metaphor and subterfuge in order to spectacularize ordinary and everyday life. Nothing in nature is in itself a comic or a comedy. Comedy depends on the use of a spectator noticing or appreciating some defect, ignorance, or mistake, that she then makes into a spectacle (Hume 1972). Similarly, a defect itself is not comedy, just as the comic herself is not comedy, and a joke by itself is also not comedy. A character, or characters, must play out an action. Movement must occur. Second, comedy is not universal. Humor is not universal. What we might consider as a defect in one culture may not be a defect in another (Hume 1972, 87).

The many genres of comedy are not without their own complications. In fact, historically, early Western scholars critiquing comedy denounce the entire genre as frivolous, uneducated, and below the level of scholastic discourse (Blackmore 1717, Kant 1790, Shaw 1897, etc.). Despite how comedy is now accepted as a "valid" subject of cultural critique, anthropologists continue to study art forms that are considered more "traditional" (Way 2019). Contemporary comedy genres in Southeast Asia are left widely unstudied with a few notable exceptions. Katherine Bowie's (2017) research on the humor in the *Vessantara Jataka* in Thailand and Henry Spiller's (2012) work on comedy sketches in Indonesia that critique traditional and modern gender roles both discuss the role of humor in critiquing state ideologies on gender and family while simultaneously upholding those beliefs. A large part of this thesis could not have been written without the aid of Giang Nguyen-Thu's (2019) recent work on television in Vietnam and its role in the average, middle-class Vietnamese household.

Although it may seem contradictory for an entertainment narrative from Korea to be used as a state building tool in Vietnam, the careful, stylized Vietnamization of inter-Asian cultural forms plays a large role in how nation-states, individual actors, and outside countries are built and idealized through television broadcasting. The careful adaptation of *Gia Đình Là Số 1* from the Korean *Unstoppable High Kick!* demonstrates the ways Vietnamese media producers and state agencies see themselves, the nation, and viewers in relation to the inter-Asian forms they choose to Vietnamize.

PART 2: ADAPTATION

When the first episode begins, it is the year 2044 and a young psychologist, Nguyễn Đức Quận, has just written his first novel aptly titled Gia Đình Là Số 1. After one year of success, Đức Quận is interviewed on the contents of his new book about the importance of family. The room is crowded with applauding fans. An enthusiastic interviewer asks him where he got the inspiration to write Gia Đình Là Số 1.

"I am inspired by my beloved family," he says, to which his interviewer eagerly tells the audience they will read the entirety of the book together and waves a remote control that launches us into a scene in 2016 when Nguyễn Đức Quận is a baby in a crib surrounded by an adoring family.

The entire show of *Gia Đình Là Số 1,* is framed in the first episode as a flashback from the point of view of a successful psychologist. In the next 208 episodes of the first season, audiences never revisit the adult Nguyễn Đức Quận. Within the sitcom, *Gia Đình Là Số 1* is a futuring. An idyllic worlding occurs when we see the Nguyễn Đức Quận of the future, who holds holographic gadgets and wears luxury suits. This man-of-the-future is not only a beacon of success, he is an authority (a psychologist) on what makes family the most crucial element of life. Nguyễn Đức Quận has lived the empirical experience of the ideal Vietnamese family.

What is interesting here is the Vietnamized television show's departure from the original South Korean frame. In the Korean version, a stranger is in space, looking back

at the earth and reflecting on his childhood and his past. In fact, the title of the Vietnamese show, *Gia Đình Là Số 1* ("Family is Number 1"), as opposed to the Korean title, *Unstoppable High Kick!*, puts family front and center of the entertainment narrative. More than this, the character Nguyễn Đức Quận adds authority to the sitcom's idyllic family. As a psychologist, he would know what a successful family looks like surely. The Vietnamese version of this popular sitcom finds its authenticity in its presupposition of an imagined Vietnamese ideal family.

Central to *Gia Đình Là Số 1* are "figures of modernity," myths that symbolize modern life after the Đổi Mới reforms (Barker et al., 2014). These figures serve as a model for the modern Vietnamese household ascribed by studios and state-run networks and consumed by local audiences. Figures within a community of viewers are built from the imagined ideals of those same viewers and, if television media is state run, figures are also built by the nation. In what follows, I will discuss how the sitcom portrayed class, gender, and inter-generation familial relationships in culturally specific, historically situated, and nationally stylized ways through the figures portrayed by individual characters.

Gia Đình Là Số 1

Unstoppable High Kick! was originally produced in South Korea in 2006. The show was so successful that it had a large following in other countries when it aired in Japan in 2007, Vietnam in 2009, and the Philippines in 2010. *Unstoppable High Kick!* broke viewing records in South Korea when it became the first comedy show to receive

higher ratings when it re-aired compared to when it was first released, which resulted in two sequels. Due to its popularity, the sitcom was purchased and then recast and reproduced in 2016 as *Gia Đình Là Số 1* (with the Korean "*High Kick*" preserved as its subtitle) on Vietnamese network television.

After the privitization of the economy during the Đổi Mới reforms, television media in Vietnam, although run by the state, was comprised of private companies who owned the production studios (Nguyen-Thu 2019). VTV (Đài Truyền hình Việt Nam or Vietnamese television) broadcasted *Gia Đình Là Số 1* on their station VTV7 which aired in Hồ Chí Minh City. My research is situated within VTV7 that began operation in 2016 and aired *Gia Đình Là Số 1* as one of the first sitcoms broadcasted on the network.

The show was produced by the private company Điền Quân Media, then broadcasted again on Youtube in 2017. *Gia Đình Là Số 1* is housed under the "Điền Quân Comedy" Youtube channel. Now, the Điền Quân's comedy subgroup has garnered over 5.5 million subscribers on Youtube, with over 12.5 million views of the first episode of *Gia Đình Là Số 1*. As of 2020, the show has aired four seasons. Each episode runs for thirty minutes and consists of two to three simultaneous stories involving different members of the family. There are a total of eight family members in the household, and nine total main characters. To assist in the deeper analysis later in the paper, I have included a brief character biography below:

Nguyễn Đức: Patriarchal father figure. This man is the "head-of-the-household" and grandfather.

Lê Thị Diễm Thúy: Grandmother and housewife, this character often feels disrespected by her family.

Nguyễn Đức Hạnh: This character is the oldest son of Nguyễn Đức and Lê Thị Diễm Thúy and causes the most slap-stick comedic conflict as he is the topic of many jokes.

Vũ Hoàng Anh: This character is the daughter-in-law of Nguyễn Đức and Lê Thị Diễm Thúy and the wife of Đức Hạnh. She is smart, successful, and very capable and she works as a doctor at her father-in-laws private practice.

Nguyễn Đức Phúc: The youngest son of Nguyễn Đức and Lê Thị Diễm Thúy, this character works as a gym teacher at the school attended by Đức Minh and Đức Man. He has one child with Kim Chi.

Nguyễn Đức Minh: This character is the son of Đức Hạnh and Hoàng Anh. He is very smart but is overlooked by his family and peers in favor of his brother Đức Man.

Nguyễn Đức Man: Considered attractive by his peers, this character is not very academic and often stands in oposition of his brother Đức Minh.

Kim Chi: Ex-wife of Đức Phúc, this character moves away in the beginning of the show in the hopes of becomes a famous composer, but she is unsuccessful and has to move back.

Dieu Hien: An English teacher at Đức Minh and Đức Man's school, she is attracted to Đức Phúc.

One of the family members in this television show is an infant, Nguyễn Đức Quận, who is not a main character. The baby makes an appearence in the first episode as an adult in the future, but remains a baby for the rest of the show.

After watching several episodes of *Gia Đình Là Số 1,* one right after the other, I began to notice more nuances about each character and how these nuances develop and change over time. For example, Daughter-in-law Hoàng Anh is a confident woman who, on multiple occasions instructs Diễm Thúy, the matriarchically mother-in-law, on how she should take care of the household. It is understandable that they get into arguments. Multiple episodes into one viewing session raises questions. After repeated offenses from one episode to another, does it look like Diễm Thúy is purposefully obstinate? Is Hoàng Anh beginning to tread lightly in the way she asks Diễm Thúy for help around the house? After watching several episodes in a row, I am able to see trends dissolve over time and new ones arise.

The Cultured and Middle-Class Family

After the reform, Vietnam initiated a campaign called the "Mobilization campaign to build a cultured life in our neighborhood" (Cuộc vận động xây dựng đời sống văn hóa ở khu dân cư) to protect socialist cultural standards after expanding into the global market (Nguyen-Thu 2019, 71). Originally proposed for individuals of Northern Vietnam in the 1960s, this campaign granted the title of "cultured family," "cultured village," and

"cultured neighborhood" to houses across Vietnam (Leshkowich 2014). The official rules of a "cultured family" included responsibility, lifestyle, health, hygiene, gender equality, education, and poverty reduction (Nguyen-Thu 2019).

Imagining the idyllic middle-class family includes the "cultured family" at the same time as it coopts ideologies of modernity. "In practice, the government has sought to manage the inherent contradictions between economic policy and political ideology by promoting a vision of national modernity based on the 'civilized' and comfortable middle-class family" (Puttes 2003, 12). A civilized and cultured family is an economically comfortable and political socialist one.

The television show *Gia Đình Là Số 1* is about a middle-class family. Like its Korean original, the show highlighted values and aspirations that mirrored the desired qualities of a "cultured family." Undoubtedly, humor in the show comes from where members fall short. For example, daughter-in-law, Vũ Hoàng Anh, is very economically disciplined and often manages the entire family's financial affairs. In several episodes, she lends money to her mother-in-law, husband, or sons, who mismanage these funds and cannot find ways to repay her. Another example is how the character Kim Chi leaves her infant child in the care of her older grandparents in several episodes. Nguyễn Đức and Lê Thị Diễm Thúy struggle to change diapers, lose him, or cannot think of what to feed him.

In both of these types of scenes, audiences laugh at how the family has difficulty with their role in a modern middle-class family. These examples are in both versions of the sitcom (Korean and Vietnamese) and reflect a possibility as to why the Korean show was an attractive fit for Vietnamese audiences and could be an indicator of the show's

initial success when it aired on VTV3 in Northern Vietnam. The middle-class family in *Unstoppable High Kick!* resembled a moral "cultured" or "civilized family."

However, the Korean version was not a perfect fit for Vietnam's national vision of a model, middle class family. Several changes to the sitcom family were made that Vietnamized the show for both audience appeal and national production of the idyllic family. First, the family in *Gia Đình Là Số 1* practice socialist family values. Buddhism is the national religion of Vietnam, however in *Unstoppable High Kick!*, the sitcom family is a Christian household. In one episode (episode 12), one character (Đức Minh in the Vietnamese version) uses the bible to convince his parents that his brother should be let out of trouble. In this version, the citation of the bible gives his argument credibility and finally releases his brother from the family's punishment. In *Gia Đình Là Số 1*, however, not only is the bible (and any instance of praying) omitted, but the brother fashions his argument out of reason and logic rather than spirituality. The socialist Vietnamese family, so impressed by his educated and well-reasoned logic, like the Korean version, releases his brother from the family's punishment. While the Korean version of the show frequently alludes to their Christianity, the Vietnamese version omits any trace of religiosity in favor of evidence of education and logical reasoning.

Second, the Vietnamized family emphasized hygiene where the Korean family in *Unstoppable High Kick!* did not. In several episodes of *Unstoppable High Kick!*, humor is found when family members are confronted with bodily waste (a clogged toilet, a soiled diaper, a bathroom emergency, etc.). In every instance where this occurs, the Vietnamese version of the show omits it or replaces the conflict with something else. For

example, a coworker of Nguyễn Đức Phúc and schoolteacher (Dieu Hien) moves into Kim Chi and Đức Phúc's old house (as Kim Chi leased it to her). Strange things start to happen that Dieu Hien cannot explain. The television is left on, items are found where she did not leave them. It is not until the stranger leaves the shower running that the episode reaches its climax and Dieu Hien finds out Đức Phúc has attempted to move back into the house. Although these events seem innocuous, it is important to note that the Korean episode reaches its climax when Dieu Hien's character finds a bowel movement in the toilet (whereas in the Vietnamese version, she finds the shower left running). Many similar examples occur throughout the entirety of the series. These omissions demonstrate an attunement to the social purity of its viewers. All cultures have ideas on what is pure or not. Concepts of purity, cleanliness, and hygiene are socially and historically contextualized. Mary Douglas (1966) argues that what is viewed as "dirty" is also regarded as "out of place" and a barrier to regulating the visible world. "Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment" (1966, 2). In removing scenes that were considered "unclean," networks and producers could control the worlding and *Gia Đình Là Số 1* and the idyllic family who lives within it.

Third, middle class consumerism took on different national idioms within the Vietnamese "cultured family." The Korean family of *Unstoppable High Kick!* live in a relatively nice apartment building in Seoul. They have two cars and their older son dreams of owning a motorcycle. In the first several episodes of *Gia Đình Là Số 1*, family members drive motor bikes from work or school to home in a spacious second floor

apartment in H`ôChí Minh City. However, *Gia Đình Là Số 1* was developed during large economic growth and urban development. Halfway through the first season, the family is frequently seen driving in newer models of cars instead of riding motor bikes. The family also rarely has financial struggles.

Despite the cultured, middle class family of *Gia Đình Là Số 1,* audiences laugh most at the show when characters break away from their more idyllic characteristics. The stakes of "getting it all wrong" are not high. To become a "cultured family" in Vietnam is not an easy task and even though the family of *Gia Đình Là Số 1* make it look easy, they also make room for moral growth. According to Lila Abu-Lughod (2005), morality is state made and then individually internalized where national ideologies are prescribed on television media which are viewed by local audiences who use the prescription to "self-monitor" (113). Individual identities are created by "the self" that embody televised, national pedagogies. The state-run television network reproduces the "cultured family" on the small screen, demonstrating standards of socialist family values, cleanliness and hygiene, and middle-class consumerism that can then be received by their audiences with the intent of audience internalization.

Generations

The Korean version of the show is named *Unstoppable High Kick!* because the male family members have learned martial arts and, presumably, pass it down from one generation to the next. The high kick is their signature move. Not only does the title of *Gia Đình Là Số 1* omit this, but the entire Vietnamized sitcom takes out that story line

altogether. The family of *Gia Đình Là Số 1* never alludes to, or practices, martial arts and do not have any obvious trait or apparent trait that is passed from one generation to the next. Also, any conflict from *Unstoppable High Kick!* that resulted in any kind of violence was re-dramatized in the Vietnamese version (often as a chase instead).

Pronouns in Vietnamese are familial, gendered, and generational by nature. When one character addresses another, the relationship between the two becomes apparent. Also, characters within the family treat each other according to the family hierarchy that is dependent on their generational status. In fact, much of the humor in the sitcom is derived from when characters act outside of their hierarchal status, or when other characters in the family treat them outside of that same hierarchal status.

Patriarchal head-of-the household, Nguyễn Đức, is the oldest male family member and sees himself as having the most authority and often tries to teach his sons about "cultural matters" like artistry and Vietnamese tradition. He is the owner of a prominent medical clinic called Nguyễn Đức Oriental Medicinal Clinic (later renamed to Vũ Hoàng Anh Oriental Medicinal Clinic in episode 49). Although Nguyễn Đức demands the most respect, he often feels disrespected and unheard. Others in the family ignore him or make fun of his traditional ways as Nguyễn Đức does not pay attention to trends or new scientific advancements. For example, in one episode, a client tries to speak with him through mobile texting and his daughter-in-law translates each text (episode 15). Similarly, many patients prefer Vũ Hoàng Anh as their doctor because she keeps up to date with modern medical procedures (episode 3).

As the family matriarch, Lê Thị Diễm Thúy feels similarly unheard. As mentioned above, Diễm Thúy and daughter-in-law, Hoàng Anh, do not always get along. Where Hoàng Anh is a very educated woman, Diễm Thúy often says she has been "educated by life." Constantly feeling unheard, Diễm Thúy has a group of friends that she regularly vents with. Together, this group of women talk about their children and grandchildren, regularly discussing the difficulties of raising children who do not respect their elders or their traditional family values.

Both grandparents Nguyễn Đức and Lê Thị Diễm Thúy worry about being underappreciated and disregarded. This is especially the case with Diễm Thúy who represents the "traditional" Vietnamese woman. "While older women of the Revolutionary generation easily identified with a concept of national tradition that combined heroic sacrifice with a Confucian-informed sense of family duty, women in their thirties and forties struggled to reconcile the mundane pressures of their lives with the contradictory demands of middle-class morality" (Pettus 2003, 14). The middle generation within this household each have conflicting personalities that exemplify the contradictions that come with a modernizing Vietnam.

Although I will speak on the women of the household more in the next section, the middle generation in the family of *Gia Đình Là Số 1* is occupied by young and middle-aged adult males (aged about thirty to forty-five). In this generation are Đức and Diễm Thúy's two children, Nguyễn Đức Hạnh and Nguyễn Đức Phúc, and Đức Hạnh's wife Vũ Hoàng Anh. All three of these individuals have children, but the two brothers relate to their parents and their children differently.

Đức Hạnh is the oldest son and his mother's favorite. He constantly feels split between remaining loyal to his mother and to his wife. He does not have a job as he has lost it before the start of the show and is sometimes shown to lose his wife's money from trying, and failing, to play the stock market. However, he is not incompetent, Đức Hạnh has skill with computers and is in many scenes of the show helping his family with their respective technologies. Youngest son, Đức Phúc is a gym teacher at the local high school. Like Đức Hạnh, he relies on his parents for support (housing and childcare) and lives above his parents' house in a detached separate room as his ex-wife lives in his old house. Both of these characters rely heavily on their parents (and in Đức Hạnh's case, his wife) to support them and their children.

Here, the middle generation of *Gia Đình Là Số 1* were born in a pivotal moment in Vietnam (the late 1970s and early 1980s). This 'transition' generation came of age in a post-war, pre-reform interim where much of Vietnam's propaganda and media advocated for socialist ideologies that did not prepare them well for "market-era codes of domesticity" (Pettus 2003, 14). Đức Hạnh and Đức Phúc both feel lost in their ability to help raise, and be a part of, a "cultured family."

Đức Hạnh and Hoàng Anh also have two sons, Nguyễn Đức Minh and Nguyễn Đức Man. Both children are in high school and in their teens. They both consistently get into trouble, although one, Đức Minh, is significantly better at getting out of said trouble. Đức Minh and Đức Man are nearly opposites in that Đức Minh is a smart, academic who primarily seeks guidance and support from his mother, Hoàng Anh, where Đức Man is more interested in motorbikes and girls. Đức Man is more favored by his father, Đức

Hạnh. Both boys are rambunctious and many of their plotlines involve getting into trouble with other forms of power (i.e., parents, school administrators, grandparents, teachers, etc.). At the same time, both Đức Minh and Đức Man go to their parents and grandparents for help and advice and do not often find solutions to their problems within their generational group (other kids their age or each other).

Đức Minh and Đức Man are very representational of how comfortable younger people in Vietnam are with global trends and modern technologies. They both have smart phones, text their friends as their primary source of communication, and sometimes find it difficult to relate to their grandparents. What is most humorous about the representation of Đức Minh and Đức Man in *Gia Đình Là Số 1* is their inability to grasp "common knowledge" practices of their elders. As the youngest generation of the household, the two younger sons are often scolded by their parents and grandparents for not listening to their elders, not having proper respect for their superiors, or simply not demonstrating the desire to uphold the standards of a "cultured family." For example, Đức Man is often chastised for ditching school or getting bad grades.

Characters in all three generations of the sitcom family represent their "ordinary life" counterparts in the "real world." Humor found between the generations of the show is meant to be relatable to Vietnamese audiences who go through similar experiences in their own household.

Gender

Socialist ideologies flout that gender equality (bình đẳng năm nữ) has been actualized in the Vietnamese "cultured family." Danièle Bélanger and Magali Barbieri (2009) argue, "In state discourse, the family became an emblematic site for the construction of idealized social relations prescribed by Marxism as the cornerstone of an egalitarian and socialist nation" (17). The Vietnamization of *Gia Đình Là Số 1* mirrors this ideology. In many episodes of the show, women have more screen time than the Korean original. In fact, more than ten episodes of the first season of the show, reverse emphasis on the two concurrent story lines (the A-story and the B-story) from the original Korean show. For example, the eleventh episode of *Gia Đình Là Số 1* centers around the grandmother's (Nguyễn Đức Năm) continued conflict with her daughter-in-law (Vũ Hoàng Anh). Tensions are high because Đức Năm believes Hoàng Anh often oversteps her role in the family hierarchy. The B-story in this episode revolves around the younger brothers Nguyễn Đức Minh and Nguyễn Đức Man who have inadvertently set fire to their school building. In the Korean version of this sitcom, the narratives are near replicas, however these two plots in *Unstoppable High Kick!* are inversed. The A-story and the B-story are flipped from the Korean original where the brothers who set their school on fire take up the majority of the screen time. Female stories are given more dialogue, representation on screen, and character agencies. In the first fifty episodes of *Gia Đình Số Là 1*, thirteen of them have female characters speaking more than their male counterparts and four of them reverse the A and B-story to give preference to female centered stories.

In discussing how the state envisions the ideal "socialist family," Hy Van Luong (1989) explains that Vietnamese kinship is complex and not as bilateral and/or patrilineal as previously debated (by bilateral, I mean that many scholars argued that after Đổi Mới, or new order, communist Vietnam propagandized gender equality across the board). Many researchers had argued that Vietnamese kinship followed with Marxist theories of moving toward gender equality. Luong argues that this bilateral kinship is not exactly the correct term as women continue to do more of the household chores while making less important discissions regarding family or business. Despite the show's attunement to creating equal time and space for men and women on screen, it is still clear that women in this sitcom are not fully equal. Warring matriarchal characters, Vũ Hoàng Anh and Lê Thị Diễm Thúy care for the household in different ways that illuminate power hegemonies within the household.

Some male and female characters share the same level of power in the family hierarchy of *Gia Đình Là Số 1*. For example, the patriarchal Nguyễn Đức works as a doctor in an Eastern medicine clinic. His daughter-in-law, Vũ Hoàng Anh also works as a doctor in the same clinic. Although Nguyễn Đức owns the clinic, Hoàng Anh is a more successful doctor. This dynamic is the same in the Korean version of the show, although it is dramatized and highlighted more in *Gia Đình Là Số 1*. For example, in episode 49, the title of Nguyễn Đức's medical clinic is changed to Vũ Hoàng Anh Oriental Medicinal Clinic. However, in the Korean version, the daughter-in-law's name is simply tacked on to the patriarchs original sign to imply they both hold equal status.

Hoàng Anh consistently gets the upper hand of her father-in-law. Not only does she have more patients, but she is also quick to point out when Nguyễn Đức (or anyone, for that matter) is wrong. Where the Korean version of the show frames this as a pitfall, *Gia Đình Là Số 1* paints her in dual female roles: first as a strong, female role model, and second as a woman whose need to be right often gets in the way of her connecting to the rest of the family. It is important to note here, that she *is* always right (not that she *feels* she is right). In this way, Hoàng Anh, as an addition to the family, is simultaneously infiltrating the family and "taking over" Nguyễn Đức's role in the family hierarchy, and she is fully capable of the feet.

Like "figures of modernity," female characters and members of the *Gia Đình Là Số 1* household are representative of larger social formations within the "cultured family" (or outside a "cultured family") (Barker et al., 2014). These three figures are "the socialist/idealistic woman," "the traditional Vietnamese matriarch," and the antithesis to both of these figures.

In conducting her own fieldwork on women in the household, Jayne Warner (2009) observed that women's unions in Vietnam frequently discussed liberation in conjunction with state held ideologies, saying, "I had come to view 'women's liberation' not only as a social condition or personal issue but as a political discourse tied to state building under both revolutionary and post-revolutionary conditions" (2). Her observations of women and their role in "living up to" the figure of "the socialist woman" was expressed as "liberating." In this way, the state creates the myth (as Barthes would call it) of the ideal socialist woman.

The myth of the ideal, socialist woman fits well into the "cultured family" by committing herself faithfully to "The Five Goods" (Pettus 2003). The Five Goods was a campaign launched by the Women's Union in 1961 which advocated that women should, "1. Fulfill the goals of production and economize well. 2. Follow all state policies and laws. 3. Participate in management. 4. Advance in their studies. 5. Raise their families and educate their children well" (Pettus 2003, 39). This Five Goods movement laid significant grounding for state-held ideas about how women should be represented in media and television as well as how women should hold themselves accountable in their everyday lives (Nguyen-Thu 2019). Hoàng Anh has fulfilled all of the Five Goods by 1. holding her status as a middle-class parent who helps keep her family financially stable, 2. following all state policies and laws, 3. becoming the most prominent doctor at her father-in-law's clinic, 4. graduating with a medical degree, and 5. raising her two children well within the household.

Despite her execution of the Five Goods, Hoàng Anh is often seen as a woman who has infiltrated the family with her demanding demeaner. However, Hoàng Anh's dichotomous roles as infiltrator and ideal socialist woman mark her as both a socialist hero and an overzealous, over-achiever. She often comes off as self-righteous and her correctness is not appreciated or realized by other members of the family. Despite how Hoàng Anh is usually right, she buts heads with the matriarch of the family, Lê Thị Diễm Thúy, who did not receive a similar education and is a stay-at-home parent.

While Hoàng Anh might provide for the family financially, Diễm Thúy provides important household services, like cooking and cleaning after the family. The roles of

these two women demonstrate a conflict of how women are meant to perform in the household. In an article by Merav Shohet (2017), she explains the role of sacrifice for women in the family.

> "[S]acrifice" (*hy sinh*) is held up by individuals, families, and the state as an ideal virtue that requires curtailing affective expression and silently embracing suffering for the sake of another… While these sentiments help many in Vietnam avoid conflict by bridging class, gender, and generational divisions, they also reentrench inequalities through state laws and policies premised on this morality (556).

Diễm Thúy sacrifices a lot for her family and feels unappreciated by her husband, her children, and especially her daughter-in-law. Often venting to her friends about Hoàng Anh's constant corrections and suggestions, Diễm Thúy is a traditional Vietnamese housewife whose primarily knowledge about caring for the household comes from generations of passed-down knowledge.

During and after the Cultural Revolution (1945-1965), "tradition" was both problematized and upheld (Ninh 2002). Vietnam viewed traditional practices as a direct barrier against modernity (and were therefor seen as "backwards") while simultaneously calling for traditional cultural practices to be preserved in order to create an "authentic Vietnam." The characters Hoàng Anh and Diễm Thúy demonstrate how this dichotomy might be received by viewers.

While Hoàng Anh is perceived as being "correct" in her efforts to modernize this Vietnamese household, audiences are meant to feel sorry for Diễm Thúy as Hoàng Anh is

not kind in her corrective behavior. Diễm Thúy, matriarch of the household, has sacrificed much to provide for her family and, as one of the older members in the family hierarchy, is meant to command respect (according to Southeast Asian family values) (Luong 1989). The sacrifices Diễm Thúy has made for her family are not uncharacteristic of depictions of Vietnamese women her age who came of age during or just after the American War where women in popular magazines and propaganda were characterized as long-suffering heroes who have sacrificed a great deal for their family and nation (Puttes 2003) (Nguyen-Thu 2019).

Both Vũ Hoàng Anh and Lê Thị Diễm Thúy together reflect the conflicted nature of the Vietnamese "cultured" woman. Where Hoàng Anh is a successful doctor and confident member of the household, Diễm Thúy is comedically put down by her daughter-in-law and her traditional and hierarchical ways of mothering tend to be the punchline of many jokes. Both women are invariably wrong in their demeanor: either too shrewd or too traditional (and therefor seen as "backward").

Hoàng Anh's ability to obtain all Five Goods and Diễm Thúy's devotion and self-sacrifice make them prominent figures in an idyllic Vietnamese household. What is most interesting is that much of the show's humor comes from where these two figures clash. Although, the two family members are idyllic in their figuring, they cannot, in spite of themselves, get along. Where one is educated and confident, the other values traditional ways of knowing and often feels confronted by "modernity" or new ways of doing things. Where much of the show's comedy comes from Hoàng Anh and Diễm Thúy's arguing,

the ends of these episodes are resolved when the characters listen to each other and agree to meet in the middle.

A foil for both of these battling female characters is another archetypal character, Kim Chi, who devorced her husband and left her child in his care in the hopes of pursuing a carreer as a famous composer in Singapore. Unlike Hoàng Anh who is smart and successful, Kim Chi is neither. In the beginning of the first season of *Gia Đình Là Số 1,* Kim Chi fails to succeed in Singapore and must come back to live in the house purchased by her ex-husband's family. For the rest of the first season, Kim Chi fails to find a permanent job. She becomes a figure for the anti-socialist woman. Kim Chi is also the antithesis of Lê Thị Diễm Thúy for one prominent reason. Where Diễm Thúy has sacrificed her life and wellbeing for her family, Kim Chi gave up her own child and husband to "follow her dream." The family in *Gia Đình Là Số 1* make up for this neglect. In fact, Diễm Thúy, as the matriarch, is often seen caring for the child.

Kim Chi is not only represented as "flighty" and noncommittal, but much of her plot lines include awkward encounters with other men (who are not her ex-husband), or other perceived morally ambiguous or potentially taboo plotlines. One particularly humorous scene in *Unstoppable High Kick!* occurs in an early episode (episode 6). The Korean version of Kim Chi is in Morocco when she befriends a male, Russian ballerina. This ballerina bears the brunt of much laughter because his tights are too tight and his dance belt (meant to protect his genitals) makes a large protrusion that is difficult to ignore. Although he is a friendly enough man, audiences (and Kim Chi's Korean counterpart) cannot help but feel uncomfortable.

In the Vietnamese version, however, this dancer is replaced by a Singaporean businessman (not a dancer at all) who smells bad. Audiences only know this because when he raises his arms, large tendrils of CGI'ed green smoke drift from his body and Kim Chi makes a noticeable expression of discomfort. Here, the Vietnamization focuses more on the impurities of hygiene or dirt, and away from physical and bodily impurity that can be displayed through sexualization and/or sexual tension. .

Kim Chi's proximity to unhygienic bodies or bodily taboos marks her as an antithesis to Hoàng Anh's ideal, socialist woman and a "cultured family." Where Hoàng Anh and Diễm Thúy try their hardest to achieve the appearance of having a "cultured family," Kim Chi does not. In fact, the character Kim Chi does not meet any of the criteria for the Five Goods as she 1. consistently buys merchandise that she does not need, 2. plagiarizes songs as her own. 3. is constantly looking for a job, 4. abandoned her degree in composition in Singapore, and 5. leaves much of the child rearing to her parents-in-law. Much humor surrounding Kim Chi comes from her lack of awareness about how to live her own life. Here, comedy often comes from her ignorance, and her plotlines are typically resolved when other characters in the sitcom family come to her rescue.

The three women represented in *Gia Đình Là Số 1* are each a figure within Vietnamese family life, a socialist family-woman (Vũ Hoàng Anh), a traditional matriarch (Lê Thị Diễm Thúy) and the foil for both of these (Kim Chi). Despite its adaptation from the Korean *Unstoppable High Kick!*, all three are figures within an authentically Vietnamese sitcom.

Conclusion: Building Imagined Families

Despite how many television shows on Vietnamese airwaves are copies of other country's entertainment narratives. Vietnamization works by coopting Vietnamese moral values and socialist family structures. What makes Vietnamized family sitcoms unique is how they address the "family unit." Korean (and other Asian countries) have more desirable media narratives than those found in Western media (Nguyen-Thu 2019). This is because of two reasons. First, Korean family sitcoms have similar three-generation family structures and similar family dynamics withing this structure, and second, there is a large Korean cultural influence in Vietnam.

Because the state gets final say in the Vietnamized television programs, many adjustments from the original Korean television sitcom serve to perpetuate the myth or the ideal Vietnamese socialist family that reflected the morality of the nation. As Benedict Anderson (1991) demonstrates, nations are "imagined communities" in that they are culturally formed and created rather than fixed presupposed boundaries. According to Anderson, nations (and nationalism) formed during the spread of print capitalism (specifically in reference to newspapers and novels) which was a critical development in enabling citizens of a nation to imagine themselves belonging to the same sovereign state (44-43). It is important to note here that imagined does not mean false. Imagined communities are purposefully built, culturally contested, and visually represented.

Television is one such visual nation-building tool. Further, nation-states are not formed solely within the vacuum of a single nation. After economic reforms and the opening of transnational markets, foreign influences impact Vietnam's national identity. Vietnamization of foreign media serve the dual purpose of taking advantage of the popularity of other countries' influence (China, Thailand, and especially South Korea) while furthering state-held agendas of creating one unified and authentic Vietnam.

The protection of a singular and authentic cultural Vietnam is an ongoing state project (Ninh 2002). Media anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2005) states, "the culture industry seems to be in the business of producing not just art of entertainment but national pedagogy" (158). Producers of media and entertainment narratives do not simply look to economic worth alone, but each media is an argument that upholds viewers' expectations. Television, therefore, is a media both creating and perpetuating state-making ideologies that viewers consumer and act out in their everyday lives (Anderson 1991).

In the 1930s the ideal family was a central target for propaganda from the Communist Party (ICP) founded by H`ôChí Minh. During and after the two anti-colonial wars, first against France and second against the United States, revolutionary practices reformed the Confucian family and brought women into the public arena (Werner 2009). After the American war and before popular television media in Vietnam, tabloids and magazines were another source of state-run, mass-produced media (Pettus 2003). Magazine covers often depicted larger-than-life, national figures that resembled the ideal "cultured family." At the same time, the Woman's Union was pushing The Five Goods

campaign, real-life families were finding it difficult to make their lives resemble the lives of women and families on these magazine covers. Real people could not live up to government entertainment narratives (in magazines and then on screen) that included grandiose, ideological lifestyles. Women especially found it difficult to advance their education, progress in their career, and raise well-rounded children all at the same time (Pettus 2003).

The family members in *Gia Đình Là Số 1*, although each a hyperbolic figure in a "cultured family," often make mistakes. Audiences can find enjoyment from the figures who are struggling to find their place within the worlding of the perfect "cultured family." *Gia Đình Là Số 1* fits within the national context of Vietnam and viewers can see themselves in the struggles of fictional characters despite not fully actualizing all of the tenants of becoming a "cultured family" themselves. Both viewers of *Gia Đình Là Số 1* and the characters within *Gia Đình Là Số 1* are a part of the same imagined community.

PART 3: MIMICRY

VTV7 (H`ôChí Minh City Television) hosts a number of American-based reality television shows like The Bachelor, So You Think You Can Dance, and Deal or No Deal. Despite America's large influence over southern Vietnam's most viewed reality television, more viewers tune in to television sitcoms and dramas which are largely copies of already existing Korean televisions shows.

Many Vietnamese blogs, and other internet media, hold open forums for a wide range of varying ideologies on the Vietnamization of Korean film and television. Concerns, criticism, and praise hold a spectrum of these beliefs. For example, blogs about the Vietnamization of television house headlines such as "The Beautiful and Famous Actor Could Not Save 3 Vietnamese Films from Korea" (Minh 2019), "Wearing Down of Vietnamese Artistry" (Tri 2018), "Foreign scripts as lifeline" (Lan 2020), and "Vietnamized movies from Korea receive many compliments" (Han 2019). Where some blogs discuss the "wearing down" of traditional Vietnamese stories, others advocate for the use of foreign scripts as a "lifeline."

As Korean influence rises in Vietnam (Minh 2015), so too does its stakes in Vietnamese television, despite what some critiques have to say about how it affects "authentic" Vietnamese artistry (Tri 2020). Even before diving into research, a preliminary glance over blogs, community forums, and social media platforms, it was apparent that Vietnamese viewers overwhelmingly thought positively of Vietnamized adaptations of Korean television.

Because of Vietnam's complex history of colonization and liberation, the popularity of Korean narrative television sitcoms and dramas over American or European non-reality television could be markers of a political choice rooted in state-making ideologies. Researchers in postcolonial studies might argue that, because this sitcom is not copied from a past colonizer, it does not fall under the scope of post-coloniality. Korean influence (over American and European influences) is arguably a social and political choice. *Gia Đình Là Số 1* (and movies and television shows like it) have obvious similarities, and minute differences with its Korean original programming. Although postcolonial studies help anthropologists articulate how cultural forms are imported or translated between countries, television media in nation-states like Vietnam may be important cites of contradiction that will appropriately complicate the ways we view post-coloniality.

Postcolonial scholars don't necessarily account for stylized adaptations of foreign influences that don't fit within power dichotomies. Where Giang Nguyen-Thu (2019) suggests the Vietnamese government, although they have final jurisdiction of what gets put on network television, does not play a large role in creating or censoring VTV networks. This does not mean there are no hegemonic structures at play. When it comes to adapting foreign medias, as we have seen, localization is often political and positioned to fit the needs of the national imagined community.

Literary theorist, Mary Louise Pratt (1991) uses the term *contact zones* to describe "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (34). Popular culture, specifically television,

contains these "relations of power." In this sense, all mass (and popular) culture is a *contact zone* where comedy television, especially on YouTube and other internet platforms, are particularly a site of interest because open forums allow audience members to converse with each other globally and across national pedagogies. Comedy exists as a site of contestation where jokes are made to critique existing sites of power. Jokes that are made within the Korean original are sometimes contested and omitted in the Vietnamese version. But, more often, the Vietnamized adaptation stays true to its Korean original. This tells us quite a lot about how Vietnam sees more similarities within inter-Asian entertainment narratives than Western ones. Sitcoms too contest and reify gendered hierarchies, kinship rules, and stereotypes rooted in income inequalities and these power hegemonies, again are more familiar within inter-Asian cultural forms.

Mimicry and Appropriation

Homi Bhabha (1984) uses the term "mimicry" to describe when citizens under colonial rule appropriate or imitate the culture, beliefs, or values of their colonizers. He argues, "mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which 'appropriate' as it visualizes power" (1984, 126). According to Bhabha, although colonized groups may take on their colonizer's ideologies and cultural forms, the agency of colonized peoples cannot be ignored and, in fact, play a large role in the relationships between the colonized and the colonizer.

Postcolonial scholars looked to provide much needed agency to colonized subjects (subaltern subjects) where their voices were previously unheard.

In academia, large and important conversations arise about the stakes of appropriated cultural forms. Although the term "appropriation" began in postcolonial scholarship to describe how subaltern groups took cultural forms from their imperial colonizers and imbedded these forms with their own localized idioms, the term is now popularly used to describe the exact opposite. In this paper, I will use the word "appropriation" in the same way that academics, and the layman, use the word today: to describe how imperialists steal cultural forms from other cultures. Appropriation, in Western discourse, is particularly controversial and exploitative when individuals of dominant social groups take on the cultural forms of minorities.

"Mimicry" and "appropriation" reside on opposing sides of a hegemonic spectrum where appropriation occurs when groups in power copy forms or ideologies from colonized actors. "Mimicry" occurs when colonized peoples fold in the cultural forms of their colonizers into their own everyday lives in ways that still reflect their own local beliefs. Here, modes of power become the largest signifier of "appropriation" and "mimicry." According to Bhabha "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (1984, 126). Mimicry is both an acceptance and a refusal of colonial forms where subaltern actors copy and localize the colonial form. If mimicry is a choice in resisting colonial normative ideologies by localizing cultural forms, how then do we formulate a

theoretical structure to Vietnam's television programming where Korea is not a current colonizing power?

During the Cold War, South Korea and northern Vietnam were on opposing sides of the Cold War. South Korean troops fought with America in the American War in Vietnam. Although Korea was not a colonizing power in Vietnam outright, the country was involved in an ideological war fight against the spread of Communism. However, South Korea's complicity of imperialism in Vietnam, does not necessarily deter global influence.

Vietnam's adoption of Korean comedy television is complicated. This is significant because although Vietnam is a quickly developing country, South Korea is seven times wealthier of a nation. Not to mention, many of Vietnam's depts are in South Korean investments. Although Vietnamese studios and audiences may find it more hospitable for adaptation than other Western medias, these remakes and adaptations are still created because of South Korea's large cultural influence over Vietnam. In fact, Vietnam takes much of its artistic influences from Korea. According to Pham Quang Minh (2015), South Korean television influences started in H`ôChí Minh where "Medical Brothers" (a Korean drama series) was shown on network television in 1998. Since 2014, South Korea has been Vietnam's largest foreign investor, bringing with it more and more Korean popular media, K-pop, drama television series, and fashion.

The sitcom *Gia Đính Là Số 1* was licensed from the Korean Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) where each episode was licensed and sold separately, costing Đi`ên Quân Comedy more money. Despite how broadcasting companies in

Vietnam are governmentally owned, Điền Quân is a private corporation. After Đổi Mới and the privitization of the Vietnamese market, private owners made claims to broadcasting that must be approved by the state. In this way, although private companies create and produce television media, the state holds the final say on what gets put "on the air."

Vietnamese studios purchase the rights to Korean television. *Gia Đính Là Số*, was bought by Điền Quân Media because the original Korean *Unstoppable High Kick!* was already doing well in Vietnam on the VTV3 network (broadcasting in Hà Nội), and the studio expected the easily adaptable scripts to make a profit in southern Vietnam as well. Although there is a clear power hierarchy where South Korea owns much of Vietnam's national dept, Korean influences still cost money that Vietnamese studios pay. The original studios of Korean television and film (like MBC) make a profit from the licensed rights of their television shows and movies. At the same time, Vietnamese studios make a decent profit from their vast amount of viewers.

Although there may be a hegemonic power structure at play here, in terms of economic status, these transnational power hierarchies are common globally. Because *Gia Đính Là Số 1* is a purchased commodity and the Korean MBC makes a large profit, it would be hard pressed to call the transfer of this media as an appropriated one. At the same time, Korean influence is still grounded in economic hegemonies. Despite this, Vietnam has a lot to gain from acquiring and adapting this cultural form from South Korea.

Homi Bhabha calls this relationship of attraction and repulsion, "ambivalence" (140). Both colonizer and colonized maintain a double articulation of proximity and distance. First, from the colonizers' point of view where the colonizer's desire to subsume the colonized while simultaneously keeping their distance to maintain an appearance of superiority; and second, from the colonized point of view where the colonized mimiks colonial discourse in localized ways that might begin to look like mockery. "It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of writing the nation" (145). Bhabha argues that the performance of local actors to use colonial forms articulates a notion that modernity is achieved through foreign and imperial forms, despite how these forms are mocked.

The problem becomes clear when we hold the postcolonial lens up to popular media in Vietnam where television shows like *Gia Đính Là Số 1*, although localized, do not look like subterfuge, a hidden transcript, or mockery, but instead benefit both localities where the sitcom takes place, South Korea and Vietnam.

Here, popular culture, specifically television and cinema, provides a new lens to postcolonial and subaltern studies. In a recent 2017 study by Vietnam Business News from Video and Market Research, eighty-four percent of people between the ages of fifteen and fifty-four watch television and videos on the internet (Thuy 2017). As the most viewed and longest running sitcom in H`ôChí Minh City, Vietnam, *Gia Đính Là Số 1* had the largest production value compared to any sitcom on Vietnamese network television. *Gia Đính Là Số 1* also became available on many platforms including HTV7's television broadcasting network, Vimeo, and YouTube, making the show accessible to

more viewers. On YouTube alone, the first episode of the popular sitcom is currently running at 14,308,330 views (as of March 18, 2021).

The question arises, are television shows like *Gia Đính Là Số 1* appropriative of Korean television? and How might anthropologists analyze national opinions about foreign cultural forms? Vietnamization of foreign media is a complex national project that would be oversimplified by calling these imported forms appropriative. At the same time, reducing the transference of cultural forms to coloniality often perpetuates the kinds of colonial discourse that postcoloniality sought to dismantle.

Mimicry and Gia Đính Là Số 1

Because Vietnam's television networks are state-run media, sitcoms can be viewed as a state-making project where the Vietnamization becomes a way to localize international narratives. Comedy in popular culture becomes a dialectic where the nation-state and its subjects shape each other in interesting ways. Sitcoms and other forms of television comedy in Vietnam, and everywhere, rely on audience participation where the audience is made up of "common people."

Since the 1990s, television in post reform Vietnam was enjoyed by 84 percent of H`ôChí Minh City households where viewers tuned in on a daily basis (Nguyen-Thu 2019, 27). In the late 90s, television networks began broadcasting, what Giang Nguyen-Thu (2019) calls "ordinary television," that transformed the way Vietnamese television depicted "ordinary Vietnamese" people rather than didactic and overt state propaganda.

By the time VTV7 began broadcasting in H ồ Chí Minh City in 2016, viewership was at an all-time high and sitcoms were no rarity.

The adoption of ordinary television over state-didacticism does not mean that the state-run network opted out of politically encoded messaging. Sitcoms are a genre of comedy that follow rules where audience members must "be in on the joke." Having observed comedy sketches in Guadeloupe, Kathe Managan (2012) describes the ways in which Guadeloupeans perform comedy after French colonial rule. Managan demonstrates how Guadeloupean performers include "stock characters," taken from the city commons that mirror Guadeloupe's ethnic and linguistic minorities in order to create a state narrative of inclusion and a homogenization of the state. Audiences members are "invited to share in stances taken toward different types of persons" (2012, 86). Managan's research is one example of "mimicry" that demonstrates not only the state-making power of comedy, but also the ways in which people within the state create comedy and are therefore co-collaborators. All comedy has an indexical connection and relation to public spheres of influence where performances "succeed" if they "expect their audiences to evaluate and align themselves toward what is presented" (Lindfors 2019, 279). Comedy, as a style, relies on audience participation and agreement of the authors' or performers' "setting the stage" (their upholding and simultaneously critiquing the state narrative). "If the nation is presented as the framework within which … cultural difference occurs, then one has, despite loud differences in responses, state-supported pedagogic television reinforcing a kind of national unity" (Abu-Lughod 2005, 179). This raises the question, if state-made comedy media relies on collaboration with local audiences, why are foreign,

imported television shows so successful in Vietnam? And further, why does Vietnam choose South Korean foreign influences over Western influences?

Mimicry's Success

The imported sitcom, *Gia Đính Là Số 1,* may be successful in Vietnam for several reasons. First, the three-generation family structure parallels popular family structures in Vietnam which is integral to Vietnamese culture. One of the first anthropologists in Vietnam after Đổi Mới, Hy Van Luong (1984), researched pronoun usage and kinship categorization, which commonly overlapped. Pronouns in Vietnamese are relational in kinship terms. Using a specific example of an introduction in which a friend introduces Luong to another person (a younger woman). Luong illustrates that kinship pronouns can be used as both goal-oriented action *and* communication. In this example, Loung says that he can either be called "anh" (older brother) or "chu" (mother's younger brother) to the young woman. Each pronoun carries with it different meanings and potentially different ways of navigating identity, kinship, and hierarchy that could also change the tone of communication at the same time as it could change the goal of the establishing the hierarchy in the introduction. Similarly, Luong could have responded in such a way that either accepts or adjusts the kinship pronoun. The Vietnamese language is itself situated in kinship that centers the three-generation household.

In *Gia Đính Là Số 1*, the characters use the same familial pronouns. For example, Vũ Hoàng Anh calls her mother-in-law "mẹ" (mother) when they speak with each other but when she is talking about her mother-in-law to her two children, she calls

her “bà” (grandmother). Every character within the family of *Gia Đình Là Số 1* is directly inspired by a character in *Unstoppable High Kick!* In both shows the grandparents are heads-of-household, Nguyễn Đức and Lê Thị Diễm Thúy. These grandparents have two sons, Nguyễn Đức Hạnh and Nguyễn Đức Phúc. Đức Hạnh and Hoàng Anh also have two sons, Nguyễn Đức Minh and Nguyễn Đức Man.

Figure 2: (left) Gia Đình Là Số 1 promotional poster (right) Unstoppable Unstoppable High Kick! promotional poster

Side by side, the family dynamic of the show looks identical. Each generation in both shows perform generational struggles that cannot be replicated across generations. For example, in one episode, the patriarch of the household (Nguyễn Đức) has difficulty treating a patient because that patient, who is the same age as his grandsons, “speaks a different language” (episode 15). Both patient and doctor exchange confusing multi-generation encoded texts to each other. After a series of miscommunications, Đức asks

his daughter-in-law (Vũ Hoàng Anh) to translate the texts. It is only because she has sons of her own that she is able to understand the "teen-speak" and all communication issues are resolved.

Multi-generational miscommunications provide the show with much of its comedic draw. Ordinary Vietnamese audiences who watch the show can see potentially themselves in a show with three-generations represented. Not only do most Western sitcoms center two generational households, but contemporary American sitcoms focus on non-traditional families: single-parents, multi-racial families, etc.. *Gia Đính Là Số 1* and *Unstoppable High Kick!* center traditional families where members in the family simultaneous solve and cause each other's problems.

A second reason for the show's success is that aspects of the South Korean *Unstoppable High Kick!* highlight Korean nationhood and Korean values that could easily be modified for Vietnamese audiences. Characters in both sitcoms are rewarded for prioritizing their family over their other social commitments. Daughters-in-law are wildcards that either assert their dominance in the family (exhibited in the character Hoàng Anh) or abandon the family altogether (Kim Chi). In both versions of the show the family unit lives in a continuously developing city, Seoul and H`ôChí Minh City, and inhabit that city in ways that are unique to their respective countries (eating at the "best" restaurants, wearing fashionable versions of tradition clothing to special events: Korean hanbok and Vietnamese áo dài).

The portrayal of an "ordinary" family in Seoul or H`ôChí Minh City is a political one. "People appear on television to perform their distinctive ordinariness…in ways that

are either entertaining or useful to viewers and often both" (Nguyen-Thu 2019, 58). At the same time, this picture of "the ordinary" was chosen by Vietnamese state-television to be reproduced and localized. South Korean ordinary looked similar enough to Vietnam's ordinary, with a few tweeks of course, that Điền Quân Media sought to mimic it. Postcolonial mimicry is achieved when the subaltern asserts these tweaks in order to particularly highlight what is different about the two nations. What is articulated in that distance between the two shows is where postcolonial thinker Homi Bhabha (1984) suggests resistance takes place. The imagined differences between the two nations, and the two shows, "emerges as a process of disavowal" (126). However, because remakes and adaptations of Korean dramas, sitcoms, and movies are so common across Asian and Southeast Asian countries, South Korean influence over Vietnamese popular culture demands more nuance.

Mimicry's Failure

Despite the similarities of both shows, Vietnamese audiences are adamant that the Vietnamese version of the show is superior. Since its airing on VTV7, the show was also published on YouTube from Điền Quân Comedy. Millions of viewers watch each episode on this platform and contribute to the public forum of the YouTube comments, where popular comments are voted on and ranked from most popular to least popular. Many of the most popular comments are adamant expressions of the superiority of *Gia Đình Là Số 1* compared to the South Korean *Unstoppable High Kick!* ("VN version is not inferior to Korean" [989 likes] and "The Vietnamese version is better than the Korean

version. Does anyone agree? [667 likes]). In this way, Vietnamese viewers participate in the Vietnamization of the popular sitcom.

In Vietnam, the processes of repurposing foreign media into a more "authentically Vietnamese" and localized style is common. Since gaining indipendence in 1945, Vietnamese government programs have been preoccupied with creating a Vietnamese identity that is separate from their European colonizers (France, and later the United States) (Ninh 2005). As Bhabha puts it, "in the post-colony, the postwar period represented a phase of nation-building, while the current 'global' moment seems to be concerned with the construction of the 'trans-nation' or the inter-national" (Comaroff and Bhabha 2002, 2). Korean television, with a focus on familial relationships and moral values, were more compatible with Vietnamese audiences who shared similar values.

Despite how Vietnam's state-run media profits from imported Korean cultural forms, some scholars argue that postcolonial nations borrow cultural forms as a means of resistance. The nature of postcolonial mimicry lies in the subversion of colonial ideologies. In the case of *Gia Đình Là Số 1*, neither the plot or the characterization is subversive of Korean ideologies. Media anthropologist Purnima Mankekar (1999) warns against reading postcolonial ideas about subversion and resistance into every text, or media, where subaltern groups only enact agency in order to resist state or colonizer ideologies. "This has tended to slide into a somewhat romantic insistence on reading resistance into every instance of viewing subjects' active interpretations of hegemonic texts. Such conceptions of resistance are problematic because they ignore the multiple contexts in which these processes occur, and hence implicitly reinscribe viewers as

sovereign subjects" (102). Instead, Mankekar suggests that we pay special attention to how audiences react to media. Viewers' agencies appear in reactive responses to media that is being watched. Internet viewers of *Gia Đính Là Số 1*express their opinions openly in the YouTube comments of each episode, reifying the localization of the show by expressing their preference to the Vietnamese version.

Bhabha suggests subversion lies within the articulated differences or adaptations from one nation to the next. However, it would be overly simplifying to suggest that these differences were meant to advocate that first, the subversive nature of the show was meant to articulate Vietnam's agency over Korean hegemonies, and second, that Vietnamese television is not first and foremost subverting its own media past.

In fact, there is a slight subversion involved in *Gia Đính Là Số 1* not against Korea, but against Vietnamese pre-reform media. Television before the economic reforms consisted of propaganda narratives where television figures where most commonly war heroes or long-suffering women who sacrificed greatly for her country (Nguyen-Thu 2019).

Non-didactic, ordinary families were highlighted on contemporary, imported sitcoms and dramas when they were not a large part of earlier media. "This television genre, understood as a new technology of power (and resistance), had enabled a space where post-Reform, everyday living could be talked about, recorded, made sense of, given order, and power" (Nguyen-Thu 2019, 37). Comedy television viewers can see themselves within comedy sitcoms. Real, ordinary families relate to the ordinary families represented on the screen. The Vietnamese version of *Gia Đính Là Số 1* resists Vietnam's

own media past of war heroes and moral patriotism (Nguyen-Thu 2019) that looked to valorize Vietnam's cultural legacy after liberation from colonial powers. Sitcoms themselves act as a demonstration of how "ordinary families" are placed within their historical, cultural, and moral contexts.

Gia Đính Là Số 1 critiques the modern Vietnamese family by articulating the intergenerational struggles to maintain traditional family values and strive for a modernizing, global middle-class-ness. Female characters, Lê Thị Diễm Thúy and Vũ Hoàng Anh bear the brunt of the hardships and responsibilities that define the political, temporal moment. Similarly, the comedic genre itself relies on the tensions derived from this conflict. While the family's grandmother and daughter-in-law are figures of Vietnamese media, they still exist in the Korean original and were adapted from it. Their departure from the Korean figures was not a subversive one, so much as it fit the real needs of Vietnamese producers and audiences in powerful and necessary ways.

Where audiences swear by *Gia Đính Là Số 1*'s superiority of its Korean original, the show arrived in Vietnam when television began broadcasting sitcoms about "ordinary families" that were simultaneously idyllic and flawed. Female responsibilities are both domestic and national. Women are expected to be prominent roles in the economic sector at the same time as they manage a household and resolve and reconcile national ideologies about the "traditional Vietnamese woman" within the household. These women and families served as a blueprint for a rising Vietnamese middle class where conflicts in the show are relatable because they are representative any audience members who might be paying close attention.

Postcolonial Studies and Media in Vietnam

In critiquing postcolonial studies, K. Sivaramakrishnan points out that problems in postcolonial dichotomous thinking (self/other, western/nonwestern, colonizer/colonized) might simplify hegemonic constructions and "constrain the study of the ways in which power is engaged, contested, deflected and appropriated" (398). Sivaramakrishnan, critical of postcolonial studies, argued that postcolonial theory ran the risk of ahistorical representation that overgeneralized the agency of subaltern individuals outside of existing hegemonic structures.

The scope of television in Vietnam is similarly complex in ways that deviate from these dichotomies. Framing the adaption of foreign cultural forms as mimicry or appropriation oversimplifies the power and influence of foreign countries while it marginalizes localizing state agencies and audiences into post-colonial, resisting monoliths rather than engaged and supportive actors. Vietnamese studios, like Đi`ân Quân, and state-run networks not only make choices of which television shows to remake, they also make choices on *how* the show is adapted. These choices are political. In many episodes of *Gia Đính Là Số 1,* the plot ventures away from the Korean original in subtle ways. Vietnamese studios adopt Korean movies and sitcoms because they are easily adjusted to fit the desires of audiences and the needs of the state. At the same time, Vietnamese narratives are localized and translated into meaningful and engaging local idioms.

CONCLUSION: NGUYỄN ĐỨC'S BROKEN VASE

In the described video clip of Nguyễn Đức's prized vase, it is revealed that a family member was not culpable in the vase's shattering. Rather, a visiting friend of Đức Minh has broken the vase by accident. Despite the outsider's guilt, every one of the family members in *Gia Đình Là Số 1* is blamed and interrogated, especially Đức Hạnh who had guessed it would break in the first place. "In a sitcom, that's what happens," he had said.

The Vietnamization of the show *Unstoppable High Kick!* that became *Gia Đình Là Số 1*, is the longest running and most viewed show on VTV7 in H`ôChí Minh City. This show was aired again on internet platforms that made the show more accessible. The humor of every day social dramas that happen to "ordinary" people demonstrates to Vietnamese viewers how important, family and Vietnam itself ought to be. Vietnam's ideas on family and morality, both past and present, are reconciled in *Gia Đình Là Số 1* where women are primarily responsible for maintaining peace and balance in the household. In a Vietnamese sitcom, "that's just what happens."

Although the character Đức Hạnh does not know he is in a sitcom, he is aware of the particularity of his worlding. Social dramas occur and humorous miscommunications or assumptions play themselves out within their complex cultural, historical, and political contexts. And these contexts are often partially shared among nations (namely South Korea and Vietnam).

Because the state owns and runs the VTV network, Vietnamese television promotes socialist family values. VTV published the following mission statement on their website, saying:

> Vietnam television (VTV) is a government agency, a state broadcaster which main duties are: informing and disseminating the Communist Party's orientations and guidelines, and the state policies and legislation; contributing to educate the people and raising their intellectual level, enriching the people's spiritual life with television programs and other journalistic mediums and multi-media communication platforms (VTV, "about us").

VTV transmits Vietnamese national ideologies through television viewership and fandom. Despite the relative inaccessibility of this idealism, *Gia Đình Là Số 1* is a popular show that promotes national ideologies.

However, television in Vietnam, after the economic reforms, relied on sponsorship and viewership in order for private production companies to profit. This means that audiences must be coopted into the process of producing this cultural form. Both nation-building tool and cooperative narrativizing with audiences in mind complicates the ways we discuss nation building tools. Although the nation-state has apparent and powerful agencies in television creation and the formation of the nation, audiences too hold powerful autonomy. Television researcher in Vietnam, Giang Nguyen-Thu (2019), argues that, because of the dual articulations of power in television

production (from state-run producers and from local audiences), the tools of neoliberal nationalism in Vietnam is difficult to "pin down" in its political drive.

Television and Social Dramas

It comes to reason that depictions of an "ordinary family" in Vietnamese television is complex. State-run networks and audiences both participate in the making of the Vietnamese "ordinary." In the genre of sitcom television, audiences see themselves in the morality and values portrayed by characters in popular shows. In fact, the genre of comedy television (and all humor genres more generally), rely heavily on the audience's ability to relate to the characters and joking relationships portrayed in the action of each joke. In order for comedy sitcoms to be successful, it must speak to the specific cultural, political, and geographical contexts of the audience. Comedy television, and all entertainment narratives, do not rely on a script alone. Audience approval also depends upon culturally situated and localized stories about the everyday and the ordinary. These "social dramas," as Victor Turner (1980) puts it, "occur within groups of persons who share values and interests and who have a real or alleged common history" (149). If comedy television is a mirror held up to any given culture, then the dramas displayed on screen must be representative of "social dramas" that occur in everyday life. As mentioned before, sitcoms can only function if viewers can relate or "buy into" the humor displayed.

Like social dramas in everyday life, the rules of comedy and humor are identical: a character makes a mistake or is complicit in a social "defect" that is exposed (Hume

1972). Humor occurs when audiences are "in on the joke" and agree that the social faux pas has occurred. Turner goes on to say, "This breach is seen as the expression of deeper division of interests and loyalties than appear on the surface" (1980, 150). Where Turner argues that social dramas feed into and are perpetuated on a stage (and in my case, on a screen), audience members share the cultural knowledge of the social drama taking place. In other words, the mere genre of comedy sitcoms allows for an attunement to the precarity of cultural dynamics and social structures as they clash with the unexpected. Turner explains that when social dramas occur, sides are taken and if conflict is not resolved, it will likely spread.

In this way, comedy media narratives must create a platform of critique where writers and performers of comedy must "set the stage," and set a social drama into motion, in order to then critique it. This "setting the stage" becomes a reworking of the ordinary in ways that the audience must accept the culturally specific social drama in order to accept the situational nature of the comedy itself. "But just as one cannot take for granted the concept of 'the state,' one cannot turn governmentality into an autonomous and all-powerful form of power either" (Nguyen-Thu 2019, 76). Imagined communities, built to reinforce nationalist idealism, is built by state agencies and the agencies of local communities. Similarly, television, although produced by networks and production studios, rely heavily on audience viewership and opinions. Television production in Vietnam, and elsewhere, is a cooperative project that results in constructions of an "ideal world" where constructed local, social dramas must be enacted within that production of the imagined community.

In what Victor Turner calls "formal taletelling," television sitcoms are a cultural form made up of social dramas. The genre of the family sitcom may be formally universal (as in, sitcoms typically revolve around the familial, domestic sphere), but the social dramas that unfold between characterized family members are absolutely culturally relative. Figures and myths that are recognized widely in one nation may not be readily accepted by another. In the case of *Gia Đình Là Số 1,* the figures of Lê Thị Diễm Thúy and Vũ Hoàng Anh (the ideal, socialist woman and the tradition Vietnamese grandmother respectively) were visualized and then solidified from the Korean original. Imagination of the ideal Vietnamese family is a joint narrative between the nation and local viewers who endeavor to "see themselves" on the small screen. *Gia Đình Là Số 1* succeeded in this shared narrative about *how* to be an ideal family in contemporary Vietnam while reconciling traditional and modern family values.

Adaptation or Mimicry

Adaptations made from foreign media are clear in their articulations of highlighted national values within imagined communities. Where Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) bemoan that popular media is "infecting the world with sameness" (41), popular cultural forms are internationally adapted to fit the imagined worlding held by viewers and audiences alike (Anderson 1991) (Ong and Roy 2011). When popular media is state produced and attuned to local audiences, laughter becomes a pollical tool that creates a place for audiences to laugh, accept, and then endorse national narratives. In this way, comedy and laughter involved in making and reception of *Gia Đình Là Số 1*

is both a tool to create imagined communities and a cooperative worlding between national audiences and state-run mass-media producers.

Kuan-Hsing Chen (2002) argues that Southeast Asia should not be studied separate from its colonial history just as much as it cannot be critiqued without that history. "To deny the importance of colonialism and imperialism is to ignore the history of the third world, and this is theoretically and politically impossible" (22). However, he goes on to advocate for a look *beyond* colonialization. To study Asia and Southeast Asia within the narrow lens of postcoloniality would be to miss the larger implications of influence, inter-Asian transnationalism, and how mass media is adapted within these nations.

Through thorough analysis of international television media, researchers gain important insight into the exchange and adaptation of inter-Asian cultural forms outside of contemporary ideologies that remain static (i.e., "global moment" "postcolonialism"). This is especially true in Vietnam, where researchers tend to "pin down" temporal moments within the nation (e.g. "before the Cultural Revolution," "after Đổi Mơi," "during the war") when cultural exchange and adaptation is non-linear and non-static. Transitioning cultural forms is not a new phenomenon in that cultural forms have been translated to fit the needs of varying audiences for far longer than nation-states have been developed. An approach that attunes to the concept of "worlding" attempts to destabilize traditional, academic discourses in favor of cultural forms as projects, experiments, or tools to shape everyday life (Ong and Roy 2011). Actors involved in the worlding

process are precise and purposeful in their involvement in creating authentic Vietnamese media that is influenced by other nations.

Careful, stylized adaptation takes a discerning eye that is first practiced by private production studios (Điện Quân Entertainment) and then reified by local audiences. "Viewers' interpretations of what they watch are mediated by their class, gender, generations, and ethnicity. These modes of engagement contradict representations of mass culture as totalizing or intrinsically manipulative, and that of consumers of mass culture as homogeneous or passive (Mankekar 223). Audiences *act* and *engage* with mass media. Large groups of individuals watching represent the "mass" of mass media that defines popular television today and it is these masses who validate *Gia Đình Là Số 1* as an authentically Vietnamese show.

Television in Vietnam is privately made and state mediated where entertainment narratives about the modern, middle-class family are "projects to produce citizens of the nation in a society in which kinship remains important and other forms of community and morality exist" (Abu-Lughod 2005, 113). At the same time, Vietnamese governance after the economic reforms is still often overly exaggerated by academics today who rely on state-making agents to provide readily available answers to complex questions (Nguyen-Thu 2019). Many television shows place "the family, as a unit of reception of TV programs and as a unit of consumption…[which] was repositioned, perhaps even reconstituted, by intersecting local, national, and transnational fields of power" (Mankekar 1999, 46).

What conversations on mimicry and adaptation fail to discuss are the specific power imbalances *within* the text or media at play, giving preference to assigning power hierarchies to nation states instead. As a family sitcom, *Gia Đình Là Số 1* simultaneously gives more space to female stories than its Korean counterpart, but at the same time, the female characters within the show do much of the heavy lifting that is required of them to keep a "tradition Vietnam" and a "modern Vietnam" together despite their unharmoniously encoded messaging. If Lê Thị Diễm Thúy is a product of heroism and sacrifice after colonial wars and Vũ Hoàng Anh is representative of the modern, ideal Socialist woman, the two figures are similar in the work they do to uphold state narratives "of their time." Their episodic reconciliation time and time again serve as an offering to how audiences can consider reconciliation in their own domestic sphere. The reliance of family sitcoms to encourage self-monitoring place the genre "in a field of other technologies of modern self-making, some pulling in the same direction, others not." (Abu-Lughod 2005, 113). Audiences authenticate the Vietnamese narrative by watching and commenting on the show's many platforms.

Viewers watching from their homes provide the Vietnamese show with their own positionalities and frameworks within their larger political and local contexts. This back-and-forth relationship between Vietnamese audiences and the Vietnamized television sitcom along with profession producers of the show create relatable entertainment narratives that will appeal to specific localities. What is distinct about Vietnamese comedy is established after careful stylized adaptations where authenticity is transformed and/or created from transferring cultural forms. Inter-Asian influence, as a means to co-

produce individual nations is not appropriative, but rather, an indication of larger spheres of influence where individual nations share in the worlding process of other nations.

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