

Daily Deference Rituals and Social Hierarchy in Vietnam

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Abstract

Since *Doi Moi* (i.e. *the Renovation*) in 1986, Vietnam has substantially transformed its society from one of the poorest countries into a middle-income country. The socio-economic reforms have led academics to the focus on studying macro problems such as economic reform, weak government, civil society or social inequality. In the mean time, the investigation of micro aspects presented in everyday life has been often neglected. The presentation of everyday life, however, is essential to understand social structure in general. This paper employs the concept of “deference rituals” developed by Erving Goffman to investigate the ways Vietnamese people address others, give them exclamations, and perform salutation rituals in their day-to-day life. By doing so, the paper aims to answer the question that why it is functional for society that those deference rituals are carried out; and what their performance does accomplish for maintenance of social interaction order. The paper finds out that although these small rituals are usually considered as mundane forms, their displays serve to help Vietnamese participants show their respect to and readiness to comply with the wishes of the seniors, ensuring the stability of a hierarchical order.

Keywords: daily interaction, deference rituals, social hierarchy, Vietnam, address, polite exclamation, salutation, age

1. Introduction

A Vietnamese elderly woman encounters a boy who is at her granddaughter’s age. She feels strongly that the child should greet her immediately when seeing her. His greeting must be in a very formal form of language like “Cháu chào bà ạ!” in which “cháu” is a personal pronoun that indicates the status of a grandchild, and “bà” refers to a title of person who is at the position of a grandmother. Responding to this greeting, the woman solely nods her head and asks the child like “Cháu đi đâu đấy? (Where are you going?) (excerpt from Interview number 6).

What does that example tell us about Vietnamese social structure? The exchange of the two suggests that they are on different social statuses which give them dissimilar powers to enact their social relationship. While the woman, appearing to be a person of high rank, behaves in a patronizing manner, the child must pay a high regard to his elder. The exchange seems to imply the principles lying behind the surface of daily greetings and addresses. Therefore, investigating day-to-day routines would provide a base for understanding society at macro level.

However, it seems that the micro life has not been paid a due attention in Vietnamese scholarship. This situation can be explained by big socio-economic problems that Vietnam has experienced since the country’s reunification in 1975. After 11 years of crisis (1975-1986) stemming from the failure of its centrally planned economy, Vietnam started to adopt *Doi Moi* (i.e. *the Renovation*) in 1986. Since then, the country has witnessed rapid growth and impressive achievements in virtually every socio-economic area. By 2011, from one of the poorest countries in the world, Vietnam reached the status of a lower-middle income country. Despite of these successes, social problems such as corruption, weak governance, rising territorial disputes with China, and social inequality and disorder remain big challenges. The context of Doi Moi era has motivated most academics and policy researchers to put more emphasis on macro topics, among which are economic reforms and poverty reduction (Anh, 1994; Đặng & Beresford, 1998; Fforde & De Vylder, 1996; Fritzen, 2002; Kerkvliet & Porter, 1995; Ohno, 2009; Scott, 1977; Witter, 1996); politics and policy transformation (Abuza, 2001; Beresford, 1988; Kerkvliet, 2005); and politics and civil society (Abuza, 2001; Dalton & Ong, 2005; Gray, 1999; Thayer, 1992, 2009), to

name a few. This mainstreaming tendency explains why little examination of micro aspect of Vietnamese society has been carried out. In this neglect of academics, the efforts of anthropologists and sociolinguistics in exploring Vietnamese daily practices should be appreciated. Luong's discourse analysis, for example, provides many insights into the relation of linguistic practices (e.g. the use of person-referring forms such as personal pronouns and "status" terms) to ideology and power structure (1981, 1984, 1988, 1990). From sociolinguistic perspective, other studies reveal rules and patterns of Vietnamese politeness in the practices of linguistic forms including addressing others, making a request and the likes (Chew, 2011; Nguyen & Ho, 2014; Nguyen & Le Ho, 2013; 1997). Besides those studies on linguistic practices, other daily interaction patterns explored in recent years such as food-buying habits and exchanges (Jensen & Peppard, 2007; Thi Hong Nguyen, Wood, & Wrigley, 2013; Wertheim Heck, Vellema, & Spaargaren, 2014), the use of social capital in interpersonal transactions for example, gift-giving (Luong, 2007) also help to draw academic attentions to "everyday life" as a significant area of knowledge in its own right. In this line, the current paper, deriving from the sociological perspective, aims to clarify the connection between Vietnamese micro life and macro structure. To do so, it utilizes Erving Goffman's theory of social interaction, especially the concept of "deference ritual" established in 1950s.

This theory, developed in different works throughout his academic life (Goffman, 1955, 1956a, 1956b, 1957, 1959, 1963, 1967, 1969, 1974, 1975, 1981, 1983), has provided numerous theoretical models for analyzing social interaction such as the dramaturgy analysis (Goffman, 1959), the "frame analysis" (1974), and the "ritual" perspective (1955, 1956b, 1967). The last model offers us an approach to see how a social interaction, on the one hand, depicts the rules of macro structures, on the other, contributes to the maintenance of those structures. This theoretical approach is based upon an assumption that society in general needs powerful mechanisms to be united as a whole. One of the mechanisms Goffman proposes is the practice of giving deference among interactional participants. To be precise, it can be understood that every individual comes into a social encounter with an expectation and a responsibility associated with such social deference. First of all, the individual hopes to be the sort of person who is desirable and respected in observers' eyes. However, this social respect cannot be gained by the individual her/himself, as Goffman expressed this brilliantly: "The individual may desire, earn, and deserve deference, but by and large, he [sic] is not allowed to give it to himself [sic], being forced to seek it from others" (Goffman, 1956b, p. 478). But how does the individual obtain such a respect from others? One of essential ways is to oblige to pay her/his respects to others through her/his behaviors towards them. In doing so, the individual designs her/his action into "deference rituals" to which Goffman defines as a component of ceremonial activity "which functions as a symbolic means by which appreciation is regularly conveyed to a recipient" (Goffman, 1956b, p. 477). So to speak, the deference one gives to others is coded into ritualized behaviors and decoded by the recipients based on the shared meanings of those behaviors constructed by different groups in society. These exchanges of deference are significant because they not merely satisfy every social actor's expectation of being respected but also require them to connect closely with others, and therefore, this mechanism leads to social solidarity and cohesion. Otherwise, society could suffer from the disintegration and social disorder.

To better describe social structure, Goffman (1956b, p. 476) also develops two rules controlling deference rituals: 'symmetrical' and 'asymmetrical' rules. The first rule expects an equivalent exchange of respect rituals between two parties in their social encounter. For example, A greets B and also expects B to greet A back. In this rule, both A and B share the same social expectation for a person's behaviors in a certain social interaction. In other words, society expects A and B to pay their respect to the other. This shared expectation is the key making A greet B with the belief that B will do the same to her/him. Based on such expectation, every individual is equal in their exchanges of rituals. The asymmetrical rule, on the contrary, presumes no reciprocity in the exchange of respect rituals between those two parties. For instance, A says thank you to B when B does A a favor but B will not do so in the same circumstance. This reveals the inequality of the social structure in which B holds a higher position than A does.

Goffman's the theory of social interaction addresses the significance of performing deference rituals in everyday life for the maintenance of society as a whole. Based on this approach, this paper will attempt to demonstrate how deference rituals present in Vietnamese urban context. It will answer these questions: why it is functional for society that deference rituals are carried out; and what their performance does accomplish for maintenance of social interaction order. Although deference rituals are expressed in numerous interactional forms, in the limited space of this paper, I select and examine solely its three social patterns: address, polite language and salutation. I start analyzing the way Vietnamese participants address other people with a variety of honorific titles; then move to discuss the role of polite language in the maintenance of interactional order in social interaction; and finally, analyze how age distinction, polite exclamation and address are employed in salutation. Due to the limitation of

the dataset, the paper will focus more on verbal rituals rather than non-verbal ones.

2. Method

This qualitative study draws on data of 20 in-depth interviews and 65 observational notes conducted in Hanoi city by Nguyen (2014) and the findings discussed in Nguyen (2015). Hanoi, the second most populous city in Vietnam with around 6.844 million people in 2012 (Vietnam General Statistics Office, 2012, p. 61), was chosen to conduct this research. At the same time, urban population of Hanoi city was around 2,931 thousand people, accounting for 42.8% of its total population. Hanoi has 12 urban districts, 1 town and 16 rural districts (Hanoi's People Committee, 2012); of which, the former type of districts were the sole field of data collection. This part of the city is metropolitan as it attracts annual flows of immigrants looking for jobs or study opportunities. The immigrants come from various regions of the country, in particular Midland, Northern Mountains, Red River Delta, and Northern Coastal Central regions, making the city culturally mixed and diverse. The interplay between the natives who have been living in the place for a long time (more than three generations living in the capital, usually referred to as *Hanoian*) and immigrants, most of them from rural areas, who have moved in for a shorter period of time (from less than three generations to short-term visiting, travelling, studying or business) has been recognized as one of this city's traits. This background differences between these city-dwellers gives rise to the complicated interaction rituals, promoting various nuances of deference rites.

The research participants include nine females and eleven males; seventeen Vietnamese participants and three non-Vietnamese; eight interviewees aged from 19 to 35, six aged from 37 to 50, and six persons aged from 60 to 92. At the time of interview, most of Vietnamese participants are doing manual or low-paid jobs such as taxi motorbike driver, used-materials seller, street barber, street restaurant seller, market seller, waiter, student, or retiree. In other words, this sample focused more upon deference rituals of the lower class living or working in Hanoi. The selection of this sample leads the findings of this paper to the informal side of Vietnamese urban life where the working class enacts their interactional rituals, instead of the more formal side held by the middle class who have been more affected by Western cultural trends.

Three non-Vietnamese people including two male Australians and one male Chinese-American who have experience in interacting with Vietnamese daily life were included into the data. These participants have Vietnamese wife or usually interact with Vietnamese people in their day-to-day situations. Their experience especially with greeting, addressing and age rituals serves to provide objective insights on Vietnamese deference rituals from outsiders' perspective.

The small sample is the limitation of this paper. Therefore, the author aims just to provide some initial insights into Vietnamese micro life, of which more thorough future investigations are needed.

3. Address

In almost all societies, address is the way an individual gives an interlocutor an appropriate "title". However, the title's appropriateness is subjective to personal choices which, in turn, are ruled by each society's principles. In other words, each certain society creates a set of principles that make sense of each personal choice with regard to addressing others. In other words, this is what Thomas calls "definition of the situation" (1972), enabling both individuals to gain the same understanding of their statuses and how they should behave towards each other.

In this section, I will present how Vietnamese people structure and ritualize address terms to enact their structural relationships.

3.1 Hierarchical Address

It is a good way to start viewing Vietnamese society from outside perspectives. Here I examine experience by three non-Vietnamese participants who have deeply involved in Vietnamese communication through their job, personal life and travelling. The first impression seems that Vietnamese society is enacting on a highly structured order. This is captured by Dan, 37, a program manager, an Australian who has been in contact with Hanoi's culture since 2003. His daily experience makes him quickly realize that Vietnamese people often judge their interlocutors on social structure's signal. Dan expresses this in the following lines:

Like I have said, Vietnam has been one of a *few structured societies*... So there is a very *complicated* social structure of Vietnamese. They *very quickly find out where you are* in the structure depending on where are you from, your family, your job, where you studied. These things are the utmost importance when you start to deal with someone, to know *how I should talk to you*. (Interview number 18, italics added by the author)

As Dan points out, Vietnamese strategies to approach a social encounter is based on social structure or status distinction. They place present persons into a system of statuses deriving from their hometown, job, family, or

education achievement. These statuses serve to create an imagination of structured society in which the speaker and the interlocutor are tied to two distinctive positions and they are somewhat connected through a structural relationship. The identification of the interlocutor's status in comparison to the speaker's own status turns out to be a communicative device, helping shape the speaker's way of showing deference to the person to whom s/he is paid attention. In this start of the conversation, address terms will be used to show the speaker's sense of aforementioned structural relationship and deference rituals applied to that relationship.

It seems that obtaining the imagination of structured society is substantially more significant than linguistic competence in participating well into Vietnamese social encounter. This viewpoint is discovered in the story of Bill, an Australian, who has been in contact with Vietnamese culture since 2001 which resulted in his marriage with a Vietnamese woman at the end of 2008. This participant considers himself a good Vietnamese speaker because he could communicate fluently with Vietnamese people in general and his wife in particular. Despite of this confidence, Bill expresses that he used to get trapped when joining a group of local people. He recalls this experience:

Cultural difference [between] Vietnam [and Australia] reflects in their languages. In English, you [just] have 'you and me', in Vietnamese, you have 'anh, chị, bà ngoại, bà nội, ông, chú [brother, sister, maternal grandmother, paternal grandmother, grandfather, uncle] etc. So respect for the elders is so important, so the language has the vows to support that. I find it difficult in a situation where I am in the group of people, elder and elder, younger and younger. So I am in place that I would be referred myself to 'anh, cháu, bác, con' [brother, grandchildren, uncle, son] [in conversation with different people]. (Interview number 17)

The problem Bill faced is that rather than using just "You" and "I" in conversation, Vietnamese people use many address terms for different types of relationship. The situation will get worse for a Vietnamese non-native speaker like Bill when joining none one-on-one conversation but a group of three or more participants. In this case, address terms used are varied. These address terms do not solely function linguistically, but also socially in the sense that they carry the structural meaning ascribed to the speaker's and the interlocutor's statuses. Therefore, I regard them as "social titles" that help facilitate social interaction. They reveal that the engagement in Vietnamese communication requires not solely language competence but also in-depth cross-cultural understanding. Nonetheless, knowing those terms does not ensure one to appropriately address others in a Vietnamese interaction. Let us analyze the situation where Bill joins a group of people at his wife's home, featuring many people at different levels of hierarchy.

Table 1. Illustration of various terms addressed in Bill's case

Relationship with Bill	Bill addresses this person as...	Bill addresses himself as...
Wife	"Em" (Wife on the level of younger sister)	"Anh" (Husband on the level of elder brother)
Wife's male friend at Bill's age	"Anh" (Mr.)	"Tôi" (I)
Younger uncle-in-law	"Chú" (younger uncle)	"Cháu" (Grandson-in-law)
Younger aunt-in-law	"Di/cô" (younger aunt)	"Cháu" (Grandson-in-law)
Father-in-law	"Cha/bố" (Father-in-law)	"Con" (Son in-law)
Father-in-law's friend	"Chú" (younger uncle, who is younger than Bill's father) or "Bác (elder uncle, who is older than Bill's father)	"Cháu" (Grandchild)
Elder sister-in-law	"Chị" (Elder sister-in-law)	"Em" (Younger brother-in-law)
Sister-in-law's friend	"Em" (Younger sister, who is younger than Bill)	"Anh" (Elder brother)
Grandfather-in-law's male friend	"Ông" (Grandfather or Mister)	"Cháu" (Grandson)

Source: Interview number 17

In the situation above, Bill, instead of using just two terms "You" and "I" to address himself and every person he meets, must employ a specific pair of titles for each certain relationship. Table 1 shows that, except the pair of titles "Anh" and "Tôi" (which are equivalent to the pair "You" and "I" in terms of equality between two parties' statuses), other pairs refer to a hierarchical order. For example, the pairs "Con-Bố" (son-grandfather), "Cháu-Chú" (grandchild-uncle), "Anh-Em" (older brother-younger sister) all carry the sense of status distinction

between the two parties, in which “bó”, “chú”, and “anh” are the higher rank. One conclusion can be drawn from this situation is that, Vietnamese people utilize many kinship terms in addressing others in everyday life encounters. The use of kinship terms to form hierarchical social titles will not matter if the higher rank does not hold their advantage in performing the address rituals. Indeed, transferring kinship titles to social titles appears to have considerable impact on the way people address each other. Let us analyze this in details.

3.2 From Kinship Terms to Social Titles

A detailed examination by Luong (1990, p. 58) shows that the dimension of equality/inequality is a clear distinction between hierarchical intra-family relations and *họ* (relative) and egalitarian friendship relations. The system of kinship terms [such as *anh* (elder brother), *chị* (elder sister)] help create ‘hierarchical relations within the *họ* [relative]’, as Luong argues. In our research, we take this point further to say that the kinship terms with not solely their forms and sounds, but their hierarchical dimensions and powers, are transferred into social relationships.

In family context, to identify whose status is higher, one must base on family hierarchy. This structure embeds the power in certain family positions, so that family titles tied to each specific position are not equal. The inequality of those titles results in the distinction between the superior and the inferior, in which the lower rank has to give more regard to the higher rank but not vice versa. It is interesting to notice that in the domestic context, personal pronouns reflecting equal statuses are rarely used. Even between siblings, it seems that the elder brother (called ‘anh’) or the elder sister (called ‘chị’) has more power than the younger sibling (called ‘em’). The power is represented in the way that the person of higher position could address the junior by less polite title. This is the case in An’s family:

...in family, I am able to rely on my higher position [compared to my younger brother’s in my family] so that I can call [my younger brother] ‘thằng’ [as a lad] you mustn’t do this or do that. (Interview number 1)

An’s story shows that the higher position in family hierarchy a person holds, the more power in addressing s/he can gain. In the example, she can address her younger brother as ‘lad’ – an informal personal pronoun that is often considered as rude when speaking with the other. This, however is accepted by the brother so that An even can command her brother to do her favor.

The transition of the personal pronouns based on family hierarchy into social interaction is not just the use of personal pronouns. It also carries the structural power each couple of personal pronouns contain. The story of Phuong, 24, a female nurse (Interview number 11) will help illustrate how family titles are used in a working environment. At the clinic she is working, Phuong addresses herself as ‘con’ (means child/daughter) and calls seniors who are as old as her father “cha” (means my father/dad). In response, those elder persons would address her as ‘con’ (means my child/daughter) and call themselves “bó/cha” (means your father/dad). In fact, the personal pronouns ‘con’ and ‘bó’ (child and dad) in social contexts are similar to those in family context in terms of word forms and sounds but their meanings are a little bit different. The difference is that calling oneself ‘con’ (child) and addressing the other as ‘bó’ (dad) in a social interaction do not mean the real child–father relationship, but rather they help shape the social relationship in a family hierarchy. Hence, from the relationship between two social individuals, the female participant in this case transforms her relationship into a “quasi-family relationship” with her being a “social” child, whilst the elder ones jump to be a ‘social’ father. In this case, it is common to expect the ‘social’ child to pay respect to the ‘social’ father in the way s/he does to her/his biological father. Put it another way, by addressing the other in the same way as addressing family members, one creates an image of society as an “extended family” where the social higher rank is rewarded somewhat the same power as the family senior. In addition, as Phuong reports, that way of address serves to facilitate her relationships with people at work, assisting deeper understanding and sympathy between colleagues.

Not just the child-parent relationship being employed, other family status connections are effectively used in social address. For instance, Giang, 45, a shop keeper, has this experience of transferring her respect for her parents to that for the elderly people coming to her shop. Her dialogue is shown below:

Question: How do you address a person?

Answer: For example, if he is very young, I call him as *my grandchild* (cháu), or *my elder brother* (anh) or *my younger uncle* (chú) [if he is elder].

...

Question: To you, how different is it between giving respect to people of different ages?

Answer: Usually with the elder I exchange goods with them, I must respect them. They are old so that I

have to respect them... Because the elder is *just like our father and our mother* at home. (Interview number 12, italics added by the author)

In her case, the address manner she practices with the elder persons is to borrow not just the verbal or linguistic forms from family context, but also the respect she usually gives to her parents. This interviewee's perception gives us another evidence to remark that the image of society as an 'extended' family, at least in terms of communication, is quite common among research participants.

3.3 Age-based Address

In addition to the impact of kinship structure in social address, it can be also recognized that age distinction is essential to the address ritual. The age-based rule dictates the respect rituals in not only family context, but also social one. In social context, age ritual is one of the first ones to be performed at the beginning of a social encounter. One participant assures that "[r]espect... at first... must be... age distinction, or to *identify age's difference* [between two speakers]... It means you have to..., for example, [to the elder] call them by 'uncle', 'grandfather' or 'father' or so on.' (Male, 67 years old, Interview number 14). To find out the other's age is fundamentally important because it sets the schema for both parties' ways of addressing each other. We will grasp this sense when consulting the experience of initiating an encounter with a stranger of Anh, 45, a male hairdresser living in Dong Da district of Hanoi city:

Generally, if we haven't met each other before, I would *ask that person's [his/her] age* so I could easily address [him/her] during conversation, *to know whether I am younger or elder*, as a common means of Vietnamese communication, so we *can easily address each other*. If they are elder than me, so I would call them my elder brother (anh) or my elder sister (chị). If they are younger than me, so they must accept being my younger sibling (em). (Interview number 3, italics added by the author).

'[T]o know whether I am younger or elder' is the rule of thumb for instigating any social interaction. This rule helps not solely know age's difference but also to situate the conversation within Vietnamese social structure. In other words, it assures that interactional participants are able to automatically associate herself or himself to a specific status relationship on the hierarchical ladder. Furthermore, the information on age distinction is one of the most important sources that enable one to perform successfully the ritual of addressing the other.

4. Polite Languages and Discussion

In addition to the use of personal pronouns in address, Vietnamese people also use a wide range of exclamations and particles in their conversation, which I shall regard them as 'polite languages' (kính ngữ). Those polite languages, however, are used differently by the inferiors and the superiors. This typical distinction is often referred by my research participants to two common proverbs. The first is 'Gọi dạ, bảo vâng' that means the inferiors must say "dạ" (yes) when being called or summoned and must say "vâng" (yes) when being told something (Hoa & Van Giuong, 2006, p. 63). Another instance is 'Một dạ, hai vâng' which means no matter how many times superiors tells or asks you to do something, you have to say affirmatively 'yes'. Both proverbs confirm that one must show one's elders respect and ready to comply with the wishes of one's elders. In other words, disagreement is not often morally acceptable when one inferior converses with superiors.

It seems that my research participants have still followed the rules based on those proverbs. Let us have a look at the following example told by An, a female interviewee at her middle age, who was a restaurant owner by the time of interview.

To the elder, of course, our words with them must contain the words like 'Yes' (Vâng) or 'Yes ah' (Vâng ạ) but not 'Uhm' (ừ). When young people like those children here call me I am able to reply with 'Uhm' (ừ). Whenever they say anything to me I can respond with just 'Uhm' (ừ). But when the elderly persons ask me to do them a favor, I must say '*Yes, please wait me for a while*', for example... Whenever talking with elder people we must say 'Yes' (Vâng/dạ) and being courteous (lễ phép), but when talking with younger people we can say 'Uhm' (ừ), and speak impolitely (không lịch sự) such as [addressing] 'mày (means 'You' but contains impolite meanings) have to do this, 'mày' have to do that'. (Interview number 1, italics added by the author).

An's story differentiates two ways of enacting polite languages between the superiors and the inferiors. While the inferiors must pay more respect to the superiors by saying "Vâng", "Dạ" in a courteous voice and manner, the seniors can just use "Uh" or "Uhm" to response. Table 2 summarizes their opinions on the differences between the low-rank's and the high-rank's use of exclamations.

Table 2. Comparison of the use of polite languages between seniors and juniors

Grammatical functions	Inferiors' usage	Superiors' usage
Affirmative exclamation	'Vâng' 'Đạ', 'Vâng ạ' or 'Có ạ': means 'yes'	'Ừ' (Uh), 'ừm' (Uhm), or 'Được' (OK): means 'yes'
Negative exclamation	'Đạ, không', or 'Không ạ': means 'no', used to show disagreement in response to superiors	'Không': means 'no', used to show disagreement in response to inferiors

As seen in Table 2, the higher rank and the lower rank have different ways of using polite languages. The first employs "Ừ" (Uh), "ừm" (Uhm), or "Được" (OK) to express their affirmative response, while using "Không" (No) in negative ones. These exclamations, rather aiming to show the respect to the inferiors, demonstrate the power of higher statuses. This makes the way of communication that the superiors conduct seem more patronizing, often leading to "negative" responses, instead of "affirmative" ones. On the contrary, the lower rank must say 'vâng' and 'ạ' (yes) when they want to reply affirmatively to the higher rank in a conversation. These words make the way of responses seem to be more dependent and powerless in front of the higher rank's opinion. Noticeably, 'ạ' is an additional exclamation that often comes after either affirmative or negative interjections when inferiors answer to superiors. It is worth noting that 'ạ' is pronounced like 'r' in English plus the drop tone, making the accent of the sounds go downward. This conveys a sign of dependence that inferiors have when dealing with superiors. Along with "ạ", "ạ" (yes) is also used even when the inferiors want to express their disagreement. This of course limits the extent of disagreement that the inferiors have when conversing with the superiors. In sum, two manners of utilizing polite languages to facilitate the opinion distinguish the position and power of the seniors from the inferiors. It, on the one hand, serves to build the advantage of maintaining the seniors' own viewpoints, and, on the other hand, decreases the chances of the juniors to protect their own.

5. Salutation Rituals

From the use of personal pronouns as honorific titles to the use of polite languages, Vietnamese people frames the etiquette into a hierarchical order. This order will be more clarified by examining greeting rituals - a type of rituals that is essential to Vietnamese everyday life.

A Vietnamese interaction often instigates by making salutation. This interactional ritual serves to convey the individual's acknowledgement of and appreciation to others present in certain day-to-day encounters. Therefore, Vietnamese people always put their emphasis on salutation. One proverb mentioned by my Vietnamese participants in order to stress the role of salutation is: '*Lời chào cao hơn mâm cỗ*' (greetings are considerably more important than meals'. To understand this expression, we must put meals into perspective of Vietnamese traditional life where poverty and starvation virtually happened to Vietnamese people, most of them are poor farmers who lived at or close to the bottom of social hierarchy. Meals hence are strongly associated with the chance of survival. Thus, putting greetings – a kind of social ritual, over foods reveals Vietnamese people's high regard of rituals (lễ nghi).

The significance of salutation appears to keep remained in contemporary Vietnam, at least it is supported by research participants in my data. For example, Phong, 31, explains plainly that each greeting is not just the words, but contains the 'respect of Vietnamese people [given to other people], i.e., their affection and consideration [that] are more valuable than foods and materials [money]' in daily life (Interview number 13). Another elderly participant also asserts this point: '...when people meet each other, they respect each other, so that greeting is not only a social communication, but shows affection [for each other]' (Ech, 92 years old, Interview number 10). In other words, a greeting is more than just a social action. It is constituted by social values of regarding and appreciating other members of groups or society. The respect, affection, love, and consideration contained in greeting exchanges provide Vietnamese individuals with an irreplaceable element to start an everyday encounter. Without this starting ritual pattern, every social encounter would fail from the beginning. Practicing greetings in Vietnamese context ensure that the speaker and the interlocutor enter their social conversation with the acknowledgement of the other's presence and face. In other words, to greet someone is to give them a respectful 'gift' – to borrow a term by Manning (1989, p. 376), that can help to facilitate social interaction.

5.1 Greeting First That Matters

Despite being common among everyday social encounters, greeting is hierarchically constructed. The practice of greeting is not the same between two persons who hold different statuses on the hierarchical scale of social

structure. These two persons' greetings are being attached to distinctive rules and hence, patterns. While making salutation is viewed as the compulsory responsibility of juniors, it is solely an optional task for seniors. Hoa (Interview number 15), a person who has experience of contacting Western culture in her studying and working environments, recognizes the inequality between seniors and juniors in the exchange of greetings. While salutation should be an equal practice among people joining a certain interaction in Western societies, she quickly learns that this knowledge cannot be straightforwardly applied to Vietnamese context. Re-contacting Vietnamese after studying in Europe, she acknowledges that Vietnamese manner of making salutation should stick to the status comparison between the speaker and the recipient. This female interviewee expresses her point of view as below:

Yeah, I must [greet the elder] because I'm living within Vietnamese culture so we have to behave following the rules of ritual [cái phép]... [And] because I know that I am younger than them so I have to greet them *first*. (Interview number 15)

Hoa's expression discloses an insight of salutation's rule, that is, who does the greeting first matters. Greeting first or second between the two, the superior rank and the inferior rank, becomes vital because it signifies the statuses the two persons involved in the conversation are holding. Who salutes first should be the one staying at a lower status. For instance, Bich, 35, a female bank accountant, considers that this pattern of active greeting must be the younger's responsibility. For the elder people's part, they respond to their younger fellows solely if the younger already did salute him or her: 'a master [or teacher] greets back when a student already greeted him/[her]' (Interview number 2). This viewpoint is also confirmed by the elderly participants, for instance, Manh, 70, a retired Vietnamese soldier who was working as a three-wheel motorbike transporter when being interviewed:

For example, for Vietnamese people the younger *must* greet the elder [first]... Well, if the younger lets the elder say hi [before s/he does], s/he *will be* judged as discourteous/impolite (vô lễ). Courtesy is, for example, if I'm on the same rank as someone's uncle or parents (bác cha chú), so I *should never* greet that person first, I *must* let that person say hello to me first (Interview number 20).

Let us consider Manh's usage of words in the dialogue above. While he uses "must" and "should" suggests that both the younger and the elder must compulsorily follow the rule of salutation because of not merely a communicative function, but moral one. Furthermore, his words such as "will be", "never" also indicate the extent of certainty on what he thinks should be done in greeting exchanges between two different statuses. For one thing, young persons could be criticized as "discourteous" (vô lễ) for not making initial greeting to their elderly fellows. For another thing, elder people must also understand this unwritten rule of etiquette in order to give her/his younger fellows the opportunity to be courteous by actively saying hello to her/him at the beginning of the meeting. This evidence underlines the hierarchical aspect of Vietnamese greeting. A greeting involves a social value of highly regarding the elderly people who are placed as seniors in the ladder of Vietnamese social structure.

5.2 Formal Greeting Is the Subordinate's Responsibility

Not solely the order of who does the greeting, but also the manners of greeting are of highly significant. When a junior greets a senior one, his/her greeting must contain both verbal and non-verbal acts. The frequency of using non-verbal salutation, however, is different between urban dwellers and rural ones. For instance, Ech, a former government official who used to travel between urban and rural areas says that rural inhabitants do not acquaint themselves with the urban manner of shaking hands. "As manner of politeness, they [rural people]", Ech addresses, "could shake back when you give them a hand-shake, but they are not used to this gesture. They would feel embarrassed when shaking hands with a stranger" (Interview number 10). Regarding urban context, common non-verbal greeting gestures are shaking hands (e.g. Interview number 4, 10), giving a smile (Interview number 4, 5), making eye contact (Interview number 5, 8), nodding head, or weaving hands (Interview number 2, 5, 6). For example, Em, 19, a student (Interview number 8) emphasizes that in salutation, she often uses eye contact to signal elderly persons that she is interested in and ready to join them in a new conversation, and which shows her respect to them. The extent (tight or loose) to which one holds the other's hand in hand-shake also implies the respect Vietnamese people put into this greeting gesture.

Despite their importance in greeting, non-verbal gestures often are not mainly responsible for clarifying status differences. Verbal greeting gestures do. This form suggests that the juniors must do salutation in somewhat "formal" (trịnh trọng), while the superiors in "informal" (bình dân). For example, a fully formal formula of a greeting a junior practices before a senior must contain the following parts:

Table 3. Formal formula of verbal greeting by juniors

In Vietnamese	Cháu	Chào	Ông	ạ!
In English	I (your grandchild)	Hi/hello	Grandfather	Ah with downward accent
Grammatical formula	The subject	Verb	The object	Polite exclamation

The aforementioned formula denotes that a complete sentence of Vietnamese speaking usually consists of a subject of the sentence (referring to the speaker who is actively doing the greeting and represented by the first-person personal pronoun), the verb of greetings (referring to the greeting that subject is performing), the object (referring to the interlocutor being greeted, represented by the second-person personal pronoun), and lastly the polite exclamation. Notice that the first-person personal pronoun indicates inferiors' position while the second-person personal pronoun represents superiors' position. In the example above, the unequal relation is depicted by the position of 'cháu' (means grandchild) and that of 'ông' (means grandfather). Failing to address these personal pronouns, a greeting of inferiors can be regarded as impolite.

For the part of elders or superiors, greeting in a full or formal sentence to a younger person is considered as a ritual failure. Gioi (Interview number 14) affirms this point strongly:

...if I come in another's house and see a kid, I don't have to say the words like 'I hello you my grandchild ah' (Bác chào cháu ạ)... Greeting like that... is just *ridiculous*. I'm older than that him (nó), why do I have to say hi like that?

The sense of being absurd that Gioi experiences tell us how greeting is hierarchically constructed. For Vietnamese elder people like Gioi, being too formal when greeting a child is to disobey social etiquette. The failure of obeying this social rule would lead the elderly people to a great embarrassment and the younger people to impoliteness.

Instead of greeting in that complete form, the elder persons tend to greet by other means. For instance, Chung, 60, a female used-material collector and seller (Interview number 6), asks the younger questions rather than greeting them: 'To the younger, no one [the elder] greets. For instance, I may be asking like, 'Are you selling anything today?'. That's it.' Asking that question helps put the elder in command instead of a passive position when doing the formal greeting. Chung even differentiates the 'courteous greeting' from the 'encouraging greeting', in which the former is used by the juniors to deal with the elder while the latter is used typically by the seniors to deal with the younger: '*Encouraging greeting* is [used by us] for the younger. Greeting the younger is [just] to encourage them, while *courteous greeting* is [by the younger to show respect] to the elder... [Encouraging greeting is] to greet the child and to make him [her] happy.' It is noteworthy that showing respect is not the primary purpose of encouraging greeting. Rather, this type of greeting enables the elders to reduce the formality and the absurdness while still ensuring the smooth flow of the conversation. The type of encouraging greeting that Chung practices is shared by other elderly participants such as Binh (Interview number 4) and Gioi (Interview number 14). Gioi, for instance, expresses this type of greeting in some models of questions like: 'Have you had your meal?' or 'Haven't you gone to school?' (Interview number 14).

6. Discussion

Let us refer back to the two rules Erving Goffman proposes when building theoretical framework for analyzing deference rituals: the symmetrical rule and asymmetrical one. While the first serves to bring equality to social encounters, the latter aims to classify interactional parties into a hierarchical ladder. Based on my data, it is apparent that the practices of respect rituals in Vietnamese context is more biased in favor of asymmetrical rules. The presentation of address, exclamation and salutation rituals shows the dominance of respect for the person of high rank and the dependence of the person of low position. The high rank possibly gains more respect and gives less to the junior. The asymmetrical aspect of social interaction in everyday life is confirmed by a few studies such as Luong (1981, 1988, 1990), Vu (1997), McCann and colleagues (2004), Chew (2011). In his thorough examination of Vietnamese system of person reference in family and *họ* (relative), for instance, Luong states that "the junior's behavior", are "highly ritualized" (Hy Van Luong, 1990, p. 59). This intensive ritualization of the junior's social action is to stress the obligations of the juniors towards the senior, and therefore, maintain the hierarchical order between the two. The conclusions on the hierarchical relations are also found in Luong's sociolinguistic analysis of the use of address terms, honorifics (e.g. *vâng, dạ, thưa*, what we regard as polite languages in this paper), *mời ăn* (respectfully offer food at the beginning of a meal) (Hy Van Luong, 1990, pp. 57-60). In another sociolinguistic study of politeness of Hanoian people, Vu provides other evidences of

hierarchical dimension in everyday life that the status difference between speaker and hearer results in “speaker-hearer power differences” in the practice of politeness such as doing *lễ phép* (courteous rituals) (see for example, Vu, 1997, pp. 233-234).

In Vietnamese society, the rewards of being elder are to be given more respect, and more power to dominate the exchange of respect rituals during conversation. The elder a Vietnamese person becomes, the more respect he/she would receive from other people, especially from younger persons. On the one hand, age-based rules lead to inequality in the exchanges of respect rituals between the elder person and the younger one; on the other hand, age-based rules are the fair treatment to everyone because everyone has a chance to getting old, therefore, getting more respect. Research findings on the respect towards elder people in social interaction are confirmed by other studies. For example, McCann and colleagues in a study of young adults’ communications with elder adults in northern Vietnam and southern Vietnam (McCann et al., 2004). This research shows that age is “a powerful intergroup marker” (p. 286). At the same time, the low-rank often feels his/her obligation to pay respect or even looking up to the high-rank. This research’s findings also affirm that elder adults tend to be more patronizing when interacting with younger adults. Elder adults are perceived by young adults as “more non-accommodative (e.g., more negative, more self-centered, less positive in their manner of communication)” (McCann et al., 2004, p. 286). It can be agreed that this tradition is related to the norm of filial piety that McCann and colleagues address in their work (McCann et al., 2004).

In Asian context, there have been a number of studies agreeing that the respect for the elder is heavily influenced by ideology of Confucian which supports filial piety (Chow, 2009; Hwang, 1999; Ikels, 2004; Sung, 1995, 2001, 2004). The hierarchical aspect of respect rituals has been found in other Asian societies. Remarkably, as many scholars pointed out, Chinese and Japanese politeness has been affected by the same Confucius traditions (Erbaugh, 2008; Leech, 2007; Mao, 1994). So has Vietnamese politeness been. In Vietnam, the terms ‘*lễ*’ (rites) and ‘*lễ phép*’ (courteous/courtesy rituals) both refer to the respect inferiors must give to superiors. These two terms represent what we shall call ‘social responsibility’ any inferior must hold when engaging in a social encounter with a superior. Indeed, ‘*lễ*’ in Vietnamese language is a Chinese-Vietnamese word, being borrowed from Chinese language through the long history of interaction between two countries (for the influence of Confucian ideology in family education, see Huou, 1991; for a review of the Confucian incursion in Vietnam, see Huy, 1998). The properties and functions of ‘*lễ*’ (*rite* in English) are similar to those of *li* in Chinese. They both come from Confucian’s philosophy (see Creel, 1949; Creel, 1954; Dao, 2010; Vu, 1997). In Confucius ideology, these terms would be regarded as ‘ceremonial’ and ‘the rules of propriety’ (see more about Confucius’s philosophy in Creel 1949, for example, pp. 82-83, 1954, pp. 43-46). It can be said that Confucius’s ideology was based on the classification of social classes in Chinese society (see Creel, 1949; Creel, 1954; Gu, 1990, pp. 238-239), leading to the apparent distinction between the superior and the subordinate. Additionally, being different from Europeans and Americans, courtesy and rites in Chinese do not only include politeness but also moral obligations (Creel, 1954, p. 32). In other words, the practice of showing respect towards other people, especially the higher rank, is both to follow social etiquette and to fulfill the duties of morality. This is not different from Vietnamese practice of respect rituals.

It seems that Chinese society, Japanese society and Vietnamese society share many similarities with regard to the relation between everyday rituals and social hierarchy. In a study of Chinese courtesy, for instance, Erbaugh addresses the asymmetrical status during conversation in Chinese society (2008, p. 621). Her study reports that traditional Chinese courtesy also possesses the ‘hierarchical and non-reciprocal’ qualities because it depends on various status indicators such as gender, age, marital status, children, income, and so on. These status indicators classify Chinese people into two categories: the superior and the subordinate. This fact leads to inequivalent interchanges of rituals between those two groups. For example, Chinese people would see ‘saying “thank you” to a daughter or an employee’ could mean ‘insulting’ (Erbaugh, 2008, p. 622), rather than purely expressing gratitude and paying respect. This finding is similar to the sense of being ridiculous when a female Vietnamese participant greets her younger friend in full sentences or a male participant greets a child first.

Evidences from Erbaugh’s study show another similarity between Chinese address and Vietnamese address in using title: ‘Chinese prefer to address people by title than by name or by a pronoun’ (2008, p.626). Compared to Vietnamese address, Chinese people often use occupational title to address others, for instance, ‘teacher’ (*laoshi*), use kinship titles, for instance, “elder brother” to address non-family member, or combine occupational title and kinship title, for example, “Auntie Nurse”, “Uncle Bus Driver” to address people in social situations (Erbaugh, 2008, p.626). My study indicates that along with title, ‘polite exclamation’ functions as a crucial means of expressing respect to the high-rank. In greeting, if Vietnamese people usually greet other persons by asking questions related to current context, Chinese people also greet a person by title and make ‘context-sensitive

comments' which focus on context in which the speaker and the addressees engaging in (Erbaugh, 2008, p. 627). Other researches on Japanese courtesy also confirm the likeness between this society and Chinese and Vietnamese societies. For instance, Japanese society is also structured on hierarchical statuses (Erbaugh, 2008; Fukada & Asato, 2004) which result from the influence of Confucius ideology. Many scholars have confirmed the hierarchical features of Japanese society, among which are Reischauer and Jansen, who considers this society as a 'vertical society' (Reischauer & Jansen, 1977). Other scholars readdress this point by underlining how significantly 'status difference' is present in Japanese society (Fukada & Asato, 2004). *Keigo* in Japanese, for example, means 'honorifics' or 'honorific language', reflecting the hierarchical qualities of the superior-subordinate relationships (Wetzel, 2004). Wetzel shows that social statuses such as age, gender, area of geographic origin, socioeconomic class and profession are utilized in expressing *keigo* (Wetzel, 2004, p. 6). Another study of Japanese honorifics by Ide (Ide, 1989, p. 227) also confirms that Japanese people are required to practice honorific form when referring to the higher rank, even when the higher-rank are not present in the current situation. This finding is not different from Vietnamese everyday interaction found in my data.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this paper show that mundane rituals in everyday social encounters explain the bigger picture of Vietnamese social structure. When two individuals encounter, they bring in their social interaction their statuses and social values attached. A social interaction is a social game in which individual try to match her/his status with her/his interlocutor's status by looking at status' signals. That is to say, an individual must identify herself/himself to be on a higher or lower position compared to that of the interlocutor. Staying at lower position means s/he must show veneration and at the same time, her/his willing to oblige the wishes of the seniors. Staying at higher position indicates that s/he has the power of receiving more veneration from the subordinate while being able to behave in a patronizing way. This rule helps control Vietnamese people in conversation with others in everyday life; which, in turn, serves to maintain the social hierarchy at macro level. Put it another way, if individuals dare to violate the rule, it would put them into a danger of not solely breaking their social relationship, but also damaging the hierarchical order, leading to social chaos or disorder. In sum, everyday life rituals seem to be insignificant, trivial, or small, but they indeed are performing the functions of demonstrating the power of the macro principles, as well as preserving the order created by those principles.

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