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Recognising shadows: masculinism, resistance, and recognition in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT
Pride parades, LGBT rights demonstrations, and revisions to the Marriage and Family Law highlight the extent to which norms and values related to gender, sexuality, marriage, and the family have recently been challenged in Vietnam. They also illuminate the gendered power relations being played out in the socio-cultural context of Vietnam, and thus open up for a more in-depth consideration of the ways in which LGBT people have experienced and resisted these relations in everyday life. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Vietnam’s two largest cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, in 2012, this article discusses the relations between these power relations, the dominant Vietnamese discourse of masculinity, or masculinism, and the politics of recognition. In particular, it focuses on the ways in which Vietnamese gay men have resisted heteronormative normalising practices in their search for the recognition of self and others. Utilising the local term bóng, or ‘shadow’, the article highlights the ways in which light and shadow can be used metaphorically to understand gay men’s struggles for the recognition of self and others in contemporary Vietnam.

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Introduction
In August 2012, a Pride parade was held in Vietnam’s capital city, Hanoi, for the first time. The Pride parade was one of a number of events that have recently served to significantly challenge long-held socio-cultural norms regarding the family, marriage and sexuality in Vietnam, and to prompt a shift in stance from the Vietnamese government. Not long after the Pride parade, for example, the Ministry of Justice and the United Nations Development Program jointly hosted a workshop dedicated to LGBT rights, at which the chairman of the workshop argued that the Marriage and Family Law needed to be changed to reflect these shifting values (“International Workshop on LGBT Rights Protection”, 2012; UNDP & USAID, 2014). A few months later, another workshop was organised, this time by the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE) and the National Assembly Standing Committee, where delegates were invited to discuss LGBT rights (Horton, Rydstrom, & Tonini, 2015; Oosterhoff, Hoang, & Quach, 2014; Rydstrom,
2016). Events such as these have provided the groundwork for legal revisions to long-standing laws discriminating against LGBT people.

On 24 September 2013, the National Assembly of Vietnam issued Decree 110/2013/ND-CP, which removed the ban on same-sex cohabitation and the imposition of fines on same-sex weddings, but stopped short of legalising same-sex marriage (Horton et al., 2015; Nichols, 2013; Oosterhoff et al., 2014; UNDP & USAID, 2014; “Vietnam to remove fines on same-sex marriage”, 2013). On 19 June 2014, the National Assembly took it a step further and amended the 2000 Marriage and Family Law, and thus removed the ban on marriage for ‘people of the same sex’, which had been added to the law in the wake of a number of same-sex wedding celebrations and attempted marriage registrations in the late 1990s (Khuat, Le, & Nguyen, 2009; Horton, 2014; Horton et al., 2015; National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1986, 2000; Rydstrom, 2016; UNDP & USAID, 2014). This recent ‘political electricity’ surrounding discussions of same-sex marriage and LGBT rights in Vietnam offers insight into the gendered power relations that have been played out, and continue to be played out, in Vietnamese society (Scott, 1990, p. xiii).

While there has been an increasing political willingness to engage in issues related to same-sex marriage and LGBT rights, dominant socio-cultural norms regarding the family, marriage and sexuality mean that there is still a great deal of resistance to change in the broader society (“53% protest gay marriage legalization in Vietnam: study”, 2014). In this article, I consider in more depth the ways in which gay men have resisted such socio-cultural norms in their search for the recognition of self and others, and in their attempts at avoiding recognition. In doing so, I utilise the Vietnamese language term bông as a means for making sense of the intersections between masculinism, resistance, and recognition in the Vietnamese socio-cultural context. The term was used by a couple of the men I interviewed to explain how they navigated the recognition of self and others. It provides a culturally contextualised framework for understanding Vietnamese gay men’s experiences and allows for a qualitatively nuanced consideration of local practices of gendered resistance at a time of significant socio-political change.

The stem-term bông has numerous meanings. Bông can be used to refer to a soap bubble (bong bông), the clouds in the sky (bông mây), or darkness (bông đêm). It can be used to refer to spirits and mediumship, such as in bông via (spirit), dòng bông (spirit medium), and bông lai cái (with a female spirit) (Blanc, 2005; Endres, 2011; Khuat et al., 2009; Ngoc, 2012; Nguyen, 2016; Tran, 2014). It may also be used to refer to something shiny (bông), and here there are links to the ways in which it is sometimes used to refer to those who deviate from socially accepted masculine norms, as when a man is well dressed or flamboyant in appearance (bông bâ) (Khuat et al., 2009). In this article, though, I will rather focus on the ways in which bông is used to mean shadow (bông), as in bông cây (the shadow of a tree). It is as shadow, that the term has been most commonly used to refer to gay men in popular literature and art (Tran, 2014), and how it was used colloquially by a couple of the men I interviewed.

The article draws on data collected during three months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in 2012, just prior to the first Pride parade. The fieldwork included ethnographic observations and informal interviews conducted in bars, nightclubs, cafes, restaurants, and houses of residence, semi-structured group and individual interviews with gay men and lesbian women, and interviews with people working in
organisations dealing with issues related to gender, education and LGBT rights. Ethical guidelines were followed and all informants were informed about the focus of the research, that participation was voluntary, and that their responses would be treated confidentially and anonymised. In this article, I draw in particular on semi-structured interviews with eight men, ranging in age from twenty to forty-six, all of whom were living in Hanoi at the time of the interviews. Three of the men were recruited with the help of a local organisation, while the other five were recruited through snowball sampling.

**Masculinism, resistance, and recognition**

Within masculinity studies, sex role theory has long been critiqued for its inability to adequately account for power relations (Brittan, 1989; Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985; Connell, 1983; Whitehead, 2002). Through the concept of *hegemonic masculinity*, Raewyn Connell and others instead sought to emphasise the ways in which dominant understandings of masculinity are not simply taken on, but rather are historically situated and sustained by social institutions at the global, regional and local levels (Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 1983, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is historically situated and founded on taken for granted heteronormative notions about the relations between men and women, which position gay men as the despised and threatening other (Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 1983, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

In a similar vein, Arthur Brittan (1989) conceptualised *masculinism* as a way of distinguishing between masculinity and the ideological justification and naturalisation of male domination. As Brittan (1989, p. 4) put it:

> Masculinism is the ideology that justifies and naturalizes male domination. As such, it is the ideology of patriarchy. Masculinism takes it for granted that there is a fundamental difference between men and women, it assumes that heterosexuality is normal, it accepts without question the sexual division of labour, and it sanctions the political and dominant role of men in the public and private spheres.

Stephen Whitehead (2002, p. 38) has pointed out that masculinism can also be understood as a ‘dominant discourse’ instead of an ideology. Thus, in contrast to sex role theory, the question becomes not whether to take on a typical male role, but rather how to best position oneself in relation to the masculinist discourses available. As Whitehead (2002, p. 110) has noted, though, the discourses available to any particular person are ‘heavily localised and thus constrained by numerous variables, such as age, cultural capital, body, health, ethnicity, geography, nationality and, not least, the unique history of that subject as individual’.

In considering masculinism in the Vietnamese context, it is useful to consider the ways in which men and women are generally distinguished from one another. Boys and girls are categorised into the oppositional categories of male and female at an early age, with young boys sometimes referred to as ‘penis boy’ (*thằng cu*) (Horton & Rydstrom, 2011; Rydstrom, 2002, 2003). Female genitalia are not focused on in the same way, as sons are valorised within the patrilineal kinship structure, because of their perceived important role in maintaining the links between the family and the ancestors (Hirsch, Wardlow, & Phinney, 2012; Horton & Rydstrom, 2011; Khuat et al., 2009; Leshkowich, 2014; Liu, 2001; Nguyen et al., 2015; Shibuya, 2015). The bodies of males are perceived to encapsulate
their patrilineage and males are thus positioned as ‘inside lineage’ (ho nôi), while females are positioned as ‘outside lineage’ (ho ngoai) (Rydstrom, 2001, 2002). The relative importance of daughters is tied to their ability to find a suitable husband and provide sons for his family line. This is illustrated in the Confucian saying, ‘If you have a son, you can say you have a descendent. But you cannot say that if you have even ten daughters’ (Liu, 2001, p. 400; see also Bélanger, 2004; Goodkind, 1995; Marr, 1981; Werner, 2004).

Distinctions between males and females are reinforced through Taoist interpretations of male and female gendered characters. The male and female bodily forces of duong and âm are perceived to be complementary, with males understood to be ‘hot’ (nóng) and females understood to be ‘cool’ (lạnh) (Horton, 2015; Jamieson, 1995; O’Harrow, 1995; Rydstrom, 2003, 2004). Male character is thus associated with heat, activeness, boldness, assertiveness, aggressiveness, and so on, while female character is associated with the oppositional characteristics of cold, passivity, timidity, shyness, and diffidence (O’Harrow, 1995; Rydstrom, 2004, 2006).

While masculinism is a dominant heteronormative discourse that underpins male domination, this does not mean that it necessarily determines men’s behaviour. This is illustrated by those men who have participated in the recent Pride parades, for example. As Philip Martin’s (2010, 2013, 2017) research into heterosexual masculinities in the Vietnamese context has highlighted, uncritically accepting the dominance of masculinist discourse may serve to obscure the lived experiences of those who do their gender in ways that do not adhere to its dictates (see also Tran, 2014). Indeed, as Martin (2013, 2017) has pointed out, while dominant localised understandings of gender relations may underpin men’s understandings of masculinity, their relational practices may often demonstrate a great deal of ambivalence, particularly post-Đổ Mi; i.e. Vietnam’s more open-door policy of renewal/renovation that allowed for increasing flows of people, finance, and information after 1986.

While masculinism may underpin heteronormative male domination, this does not mean that there is no space for resistance. A relation of domination occurs when power is abused and the possibility of resistance is restricted. As James Scott (1990, p. 45) has pointed out, relations of domination do not persist of their own momentum, but rather are sustained through ‘continuous efforts at reinforcement, maintenance, and adjustment’. Thus, while the possibility of resistance is restricted in a relation of domination, the possibility of resistance remains (Foucault, 1978, 1982; Fornet-Betancourt, Becker, Gomez-Müller, & Gauthier, 1987; Scott, 1990). Scott (1990, p. xiii) has suggested that in relations of domination, resistance may find outlet in the form of ‘hidden transcripts’ such as foot-dragging. In a similar way, Judith Butler (1990) has pointed to the performative possibilities of resisting gender norms through gender dragging. As Butler has argued, gender is not something one has, but rather something that is done. It is a doing; a ‘stylized repetition of acts’ (Butler, 1990, p. 191). As such, it can be subversively parodied and the dominant gender norms that underpin it can be challenged (Butler, 1990).

Gender dragging is nothing new in the Vietnamese context, as highlighted by studies of mediumship. Kerstin Endres (2011) and Oscar Salemink (2008), for example, have highlighted that spirit mediums often act as mediums for spirits of the opposite sex and engage in transgressive gendered behaviour. Indeed, Salemink (2008, pp. 269–70) has described how, in central Vietnam, female mediums ‘engage in behavior that is normally associated with and reserved for men – like martial art-type dances, drinking, and smoking’. Endres
(2011, p. 140) has pointed out that such transgressive practices may either be temporary, for the duration of the ritual, or may be ‘part of a permanent transgender identity of the ritual practitioner’. As Endres suggests, transgender practices are not restricted to the realm of mediumship, as has been highlighted recently in discussions about legal gender recognition in Vietnam. On 24 November 2015, the National Assembly passed a bill legalising sex reassignment surgery and allowing those who have undergone such surgery to legally change their gender (Nguyen, 2016; “Vietnam: positive step for transgender rights”, 2015).

It is through the doing of gender that one is recognised. Just as recognition may be conferred through positive cognisance, it may also be withheld, either through the non-recognition that occurs when an individual or collective (e.g. gay men) is rendered socially invisible, or through the misrecognition that occurs when an individual or collective is cognised negatively (Honneth, 2001, 2004). As Nancy Fraser (2001, p. 24) has pointed out, recognition, and its counterpart misrecognition, are not simply issues of individual or interpersonal psychology, but rather are anchored in the institutionalisation of norms and values that ‘constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible’. Butler (2004) has questioned the clear distinctions between recognition and misrecognition and has pointed out that there may be advantages to resisting recognition:

There are advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms. Indeed, if my options are loathsome, if I have no desire to be recognized within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred. (Butler, 2004, p. 3)

While it is through recognition that individuals develop their sense of social self, this does not necessarily mean that recognition is always positive (Butler, 2004; Fraser, 2001; Honneth, 2001, 2004).

In the following sections, I discuss the issue of recognition through the explanations and experiences of the Vietnamese gay men I interviewed. In doing so, I draw on the notion of bồng (shadow), as it provides an accommodating means for discussing gender variance and resistance to the heteronormative masculinist discourse. The discussions that follow are separated into two different uses of the term bồng: firstly, to refer to the hidden transcripts of gender resistance enacted in the shadows; and secondly, to refer to the casting of shadows and the recognition of shadows cast.

Hidden transcripts in the shadows

A number of my informants talked about their experiences growing up, and suggested that they knew they were gay at an early age because of their particular gendered preferences. Nam was a 44-year-old designer and language teacher, who I met at a local bar and later interviewed at his house in Hanoi. He told me that he first became aware of his sexuality when he was very young:

I think maybe when I was six or seven, because I do remember when I was really young, when I went to school, I played games and everything with girls, and I think by that time I would like to be a girl.
Here, Nam links his knowledge about being gay to his preference for girls' activities, suggesting that heterosexual boys cannot have those preferences. Nam also suggests that, at the time, he would have liked to be a girl. Nam explained that he first fell in love with a boy when he was about fifteen years old, but that he did not really ‘come out’ about his sexuality until he was nineteen, and then only to a small number of friends. He explained that pre-Đôi Môi, there were a lack of spaces within which to come out. Gay-friendly bars, like the one at which I first made contact with him, did not begin appearing in Hanoi until the early to mid-1990s, so Nam and his friends found a small uncrowded coffee shop where they could be open about their sexuality in the safety of the shadows:

Because I told you that I am 44, so at that time it was really difficult because before, I think before 1990, it was quite difficult and I remember, I think I still have some newspapers talking about homosexuality, and they called it a disease. Sometimes they called it a Western disease, a disease coming from Westerners. So, it was not easy, but we had by that time a coffee shop, a small place, so we went there. It was not really crowded, but about 12 people.

As Nam also explains, the dominant discourse surrounding homosexuality at the time was one of disease. Nam recalls that he came out about his sexuality in 1987, and as Richard Quang-Anh Tran (2014) has pointed out, it was in 1987 that Ho Chi Minh City’s Police published a four-part reportage on homosexuality entitled Tình Pêđê (Pede Love). The term pêđê is a diminutive of the term pederasty, and the reportage warned that it was a disease that was rapidly spreading throughout the country. While Nam suggests that it was more difficult prior to 1990, it is also worth noting that the perception of homosexuality as disease was reinforced with the first reported case of HIV in 1990, the Vietnamese government’s subsequent campaign against ‘social evils’ in 1995, and the positioning of homosexuality as a ‘social evil’ in 2002 (Khuat et al., 2009; Ha & Fisher, 2011; Horton, 2014; Horton et al., 2015; Nguyen, 2016; Vijeyarasa, 2010).

In a similar vein to Nam, Chin, a 21-year-old university student from Hanoi, who I interviewed at a local organisation for young gay students, connected his sexuality to his preference for activities traditionally associated with girls. He explained that he knew that he was gay very early in life because as a child he always preferred the games and toys usually associated with girls:

I can say that I was born homosexual and I knew it because when I was a kid I always liked things of girls but not boys. … I played with toys for girls, and games for girls, but not for boys. For example, I never played football. But, at the same time, I did it in secret. I never showed that I liked these toys for girls.

Chin states that he engaged in these activities in secret; in the privacy of his bedroom. His bedroom can thus be understood as a space of cover, a shadowy area within which he was able to transgress masculinist norms through engagement in hidden transcripts of transgendered play. While Chin hid his sexuality from his parents, they nonetheless recognised that he was gay. Chin told me that this made it easier for him, as he did not have to struggle with whether or not to tell his parents:

I think I had a better chance than most people because when I was a kid, my look was a little bit girly. I am very sweet and soft in my character, so my parents could already guess.
As Chin highlights, his ‘girly’ looks and ‘sweet and soft’ character meant that his parents could recognise that he was gay. As Brittan (1989) has argued, masculinism is founded on an assumption that heterosexuality is normal, and this impacts the extent to which gay men may be willing, or able, to position themselves outside this heteronormative discursive framework. It also impacts the ways in which those who do their gender in ways not prescribed by this framework are recognised.

While Chin suggests that his parents’ knowledge of his supposedly feminine character made it easier for him to be open with them, this is not always the case. Quan, a 22-year-old student from a rural town, who I was introduced to and interviewed at a local café, told me that his sense of not fitting in as a child meant that he withdrew from the social activities of both boys and girls. As he elaborated:

I have always felt different from the majority of people. In other words, I have always felt I did not belong to the boys’ group or the girls’ group, so I just withdrew from all the social activities of the kids around me. I stayed at home with my parents. I just stayed at home and didn’t go out to play with other kids in my neighbourhood. I spent most of my time in the library because my mother was friends with the librarian. I started to go out and interact with other people when I started going to high school, and that was with the girls. I got the sense of being gay when I was in grade 11.

Quan initially withdrew from the activities of his peers, and began spending most of his time in the shadows of the local library. However, upon starting high school, he began to engage with his female peers. Quan explained that his male peers also treated him like a girl, because of his physical features, which were not in keeping with the rural area in which he grew up:

The boys in rural areas are usually very big and dark, so in my class I was like a girl because I was very fair and very small and soft. The boys usually ruffled my hair and asked me, “why do you look so girly?” I enjoyed being in this group and being treated like a girl. I enjoyed being with these very tough masculine boys.

Here, Quan points to local understandings of what constitutes masculinity in rural Vietnam, and highlights that there are corporeal restrictions on the ability of boys to do their masculinities.

While Quan suggested that he enjoyed being treated like a girl by the ‘very tough masculine boys’, his story illustrates the perceived risks of being recognised as gay by peers. Having opened up to a boy in his class about his feelings for him in grade ten (when he was about sixteen), Quan told me that he then changed class because he became scared that the rest of his classmates would also find out that he was gay. Quan’s story also illustrates the perceived risks of being recognised as gay by family members. In contrast to the experiences of Chin, Quan explained that when his parents realised that he liked another boy, they first sought to ‘cure’ him with medicine. Findings from the Center for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (2011) suggest that this is not a unique case, and that some parents react strongly to finding out that their son is gay, by locking them in the house, physically beating them, or medicating them. Quan explained that when the medicinal ‘cure’ did not work, his parents took him to a pagoda in the hope that a monk would be able to rid him of the ‘female spirit’ that his parents thought was following him:
They tried everything to get me back. They even tried to ask the monk in the pagoda to do some magic on me. They think that a female spirit is following me and making me behave like a girl.

The idea that Quan may have been pursued by a female spirit is linked to the term bống lai cái (with a female spirit), which is sometimes derogatively used to refer to a male who has a female spirit within them and is thus perceived to have too many female traits (Tran, 2014).

Fear of what might happen to them or those close to them ensures that some gay men may seek to avoid being recognised as such, and instead engage in hidden transcripts of gender resistance in the relative safety of the shadows. While the revision of the Marriage and Family Law in 2000 and the positioning of homosexuality as a ‘social evil’ in 2002 can be understood as instances where the Vietnamese government has sought to maintain a relation of heteronormative masculinist domination, Nam’s, Chin’s, and Quan’s activities can be understood as hidden transcripts of resistance to the dictates of masculinism, in which they engaged in the shadows of cafes, bedrooms, and libraries (Scott, 1990). As also implied by their transgressive use of the shadows, fear of the consequences of being recognised as gay, may also lead some gay men to instead seek to cast ‘straight’ shadows when not otherwise under the cover of shadow.

Casting and recognising shadows

Viet, a twenty-year-old university student from Hanoi, who I interviewed at a local organisation for young gay students, told me that he had not told his parents about his sexuality because of how they spoke about homosexuality:

My parents are from a different generation and sometimes they have very old-fashioned thinking about homosexual people. Sometimes my parents see a programme on TV talking about homosexuals and my parents make comments that homosexuality is like a disease; that it is like a social disease. I cannot tell my parents after hearing them speak like that.

Here, Viet makes distinctions between his generation and the generation of his parents, suggesting that the younger (post-Đổi Mới) generations are more accepting. Indeed, findings suggest that there is increasing acceptance of homosexuality in Vietnam, particularly among the younger generations (iSEE, 2011). However, as Viet also suggests, the discursive linkages between homosexuality and disease continue to have an influence on the life choices of gay men, as by resisting familial and societal heteronormative expectations they may risk bringing shame upon their family. They may thus avoid ‘coming out’ to their parents for fear of hurting them or for fear of being cast out from the family.

Speaking more broadly about the possible repercussions of coming out, Thai, a 42-year-old business man from Hanoi who I was introduced to at a local bar, explained that he did not tell people he was gay because he was not sure how they would react or whether the knowledge would hurt them:

One of the things that I am worried about is that I will hurt people, not people hurting me. I am strong enough to tell them that I am gay and that there’s nothing wrong with that. But I’m afraid that I’ll hurt them, so usually I don’t show it anyway. Unless I know that they are open-minded enough to accept it and I can be open with them. Otherwise, ok, leave it like it is.
Toan, a 36-year-old unemployed engineer from Hanoi who I was also introduced to at a local bar, also told me that he was worried about the effect his coming out would have; particularly on his father. Toan explained that, as the eldest son, there was extra pressure to continue the family line, and while he suspected that his mother knew, he was worried that his father would become depressed and perhaps commit suicide. When I asked Toan whether it was difficult to be gay in Hanoi, he said that it was a lot easier today than when he was younger, as the younger generation were not so worried about upsetting their parents.

Cham, a 46-year-old leader of a club for men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM), with whom I was put into contact via another organisation, was also the eldest son in his family. In line with Toan, Cham told me that being the first son increased the pressure on him to maintain the family line through the procreation of children, and that it would, therefore, be easier to come out if he was the second son. Cham explained that the fear of what might happen if someone knew he was gay stopped him from telling anyone he was gay until he was 37, despite knowing when he was 12 years old. As Cham put it:

I knew that I was gay when I was 12 years old, but at that time I was afraid of everyone. Every time I was in a group and someone just said the word sexuality or homosexuality, it was like somebody stole something from me. At 12, I knew, but I came out when I was 37.

As alluded to in Cham’s comment above, this is linked to negative perceptions of homosexuality in the Vietnamese context. As I have already argued, these negative perceptions are linked not only to dominant understandings about gendered differences and characteristics, but also to state-level policies that have served to reinforce the relations of domination that are underpinned by those gendered understandings, and the ways in which these are intertwined with socio-cultural understandings of marriage, family, and filial duty.

In discussing his experiences prior to coming out at the age of 37, Cham introduced the idea of his shadow, stating that it was something he had to live with:

I had to live with my shadow all the time. I just lived with myself and sometimes I felt like I was someone else. I was living with the physiology of someone else. Inside me was someone else. Or you can say that I lived the life of someone else, but not my life. Because I didn’t accept myself, I had to run far away from myself.

Here, Cham introduces the second understanding of the term bông, as a shadow that is cast, and suggests that his shadow did not fit his physiology. Because he did not accept himself, neither did he recognise the shadow that he cast off. He thus suggested that someone else was inside him. He was living someone else’s life. Cham elaborated on his understanding of the term bông as meaning shadow, and discussed it in relation to the ways in which some gay men try to pass as ‘straight’. As he put it:

It’s when you live with the shadow of someone else. You are not yourself. You live with the shadow of someone else. … In this case, the shadow of someone else means that you are gay but you try to live like a straight person, and you tell the other people that you are straight. You are not yourself.

Cham makes a distinction between self-recognition and the recognition of others, suggesting that gay men who do not come out about their sexuality, instead attempt to
cast a ‘straight’ shadow, and thus to portray themselves as someone else. Cham told me that, although he knew he was gay when he was about 12 years old, he did not have the confidence to project a gay shadow until he was 37. Rather, he lived his life publicly as a ‘straight person’ whose actions were not reflective of his self-image. Cham suggested that he came out because he needed to reconnect with his shadow, despite the risks of coming out, because if he didn’t, he ‘would go crazy’ living the life of someone else. As he put it:

That’s why it’s quite positive when you say “I am the shadow of myself”. The image and the shadow is me. I can be confident of my shadow. It is not the shadow of someone else.

Sang, a 36-year-old self-employed entrepreneur from the countryside to whom I was introduced at a local bar, told me that he was lucky that he had an older brother. However, while he suggested that this took some of the pressure off him to get married and have children, he had still not told his parents, because he was worried they might get depressed or decide not to see him anymore:

I still cannot imagine what would happen if I told them that I am gay. Maybe they agree or maybe they cannot stand it. That is what I think. Maybe they cannot stand it and get depressed. Maybe I will never see them again because they hate me. I am unsure of many things, so that is why I don’t tell them that I am gay.

Sang’s comments highlight his uncertainty about the possible consequences of telling his parents about his sexuality. He suggests that there is a great deal at stake, including the well-being of his parents and his own potential ostracism from his family. Such familial expectations are such that some gay men may attempt to conform to heteronormative values by trying to make themselves enjoy having sex with women. Sang, for example, explained that when he was at university, he had tried to have sex with women in the hope that doing so would make life easier for him. As he put it:

Even though I knew that I was gay, I still wanted to try. I thought maybe it would get better for me, but it didn’t, because when I went to university, a lot of my friends said fucking bad words. They said, “oh, you are a fucking girl, a chicken, a fucking girl”, and “you do not know how to have sex with a woman.” We went to parties together and they tried to introduce me to another girl, so I tried. I tried, but after one night together, it was not ok with me.

Reflecting dominant understandings of heterosexual masculinity in the Vietnamese context, Sang highlights the importance of hetero-sex to masculinism, as well as the negative implications of perceived failure to perform. Sang’s friends position him as a ‘fucking girl’ because of his perceived inability to have sex with women, and thus his perceived inability to perform his masculinity according to the dictates of the heteronormative masculinist framework.

Nam also explained that when he was in his early twenties, he had tried to have sex with different women:

The worst thing was I tried with my best friend, so afterwards I felt really bad because I tried with her. Afterwards, I tried many girls that I didn’t even know when I was a student. I just said, “ok, maybe I don’t know because I haven’t tried.” But I did try, and now I can be sure. Since then, I never tried again. Now I have met a lot of women that I could sleep with, but it’s not, I’m not; when I’m with a man, it’s different. The emotion, and the, you know.
Here, Nam highlights the intense pressures to conform, and he told me that some of his gay friends were married to women, and that this was because they lacked the courage to come out. Nam told me about a gay friend of his who had recently married a woman because of the pressure from his family:

Recently, one of my friends, he had been coming to the gay bar for a long time, and he had a boyfriend, but then, because of family pressure, he got married to a girl. But he still goes to the bar. He said that he just got married because his parents wanted him to get married.

As Nam suggests, his friend sought to cast a ’straight’ shadow, while still seeking out the shadows of the gay bar, where he could be open about his sexuality. While Nam struggled with his sexuality earlier in life, he told me that he was now open about his sexuality and expressed the importance of being able to recognise himself in the shadow that he cast:

I just want to be the shadow of myself, not the shadow of other people. I’m just bông and I’m just a human being. So what if I’m the shadow of myself? So what if I’m bông? I’m just being myself. Bông is me, I am bông, and bông is a human being.

In line with Cham, Nam points to a desire to be at one with his shadow, to be able to be himself, and to be recognised as a human being on a par with others. His and Cham’s use of the term bông to mean shadow sheds light on the ways in which gay men seek to navigate the heteronormative masculinist framework in their search for the recognition of self and others.

### Conclusions

In this article, I have adopted the Vietnamese term bông as a means for framing Vietnamese gay men’s navigation of the dominant heteronormative masculinist framework. Masculinism provides the performative context within which boys and men do their masculinities. It dictates that heterosexuality is the norm, and contributes to the social subordination of those who do not adhere to its dictates. This relation of domination has been maintained, adjusted, and reinforced by Confucian and Taoist gendered distinctions, and by state policies governing ‘social evils’, and the legal rights to marriage and gender recognition. This has had implications for the recognition of gay men, who have struggled to find a place within this heteronormative framework, but who nonetheless have navigated these constraints in performative ways.

The childhood memories of Chin, Viet, Nam, Quan, and Cham illustrate the ways in which masculinism has influenced the lives of those men who do not recognise themselves within the dichotomous order, and how fear of the repercussions of not fitting in have forced them to conceal their activities in the shadows. In the shadows, they have been less restricted in their activities, and have been able to engage in hidden transcripts of resistance in playful ways; liking and playing with those toys and games traditionally associated with girls, for example. However, as the stories of Chin and Quan attest, the ability to adhere to the dominant masculinist discourse is also constrained by variables such as corporeality and character, and this may mean that they are nonetheless recognisably ‘gay’. While this may make it easier for some men, it may also have negative consequences, which is why some men may seek to conceal their sexuality and to instead cast ’straight’ shadows.
As the stories of Toan, Thai, Sang, Cham, and Nam have highlighted, some gay men seek to cast ‘straight’ shadows out of uncertainty and concern about how their coming out might affect their family members, as well as what it might mean for their relations with their parents. It is not difficult to understand why some men choose to avoid being recognised as gay within a masculinist context that equates homosexuality with disease, ‘social evils’, and filial impiety. While a man’s position as first or second son impacts the extent to which they are able to navigate familial pressure to marry and have children to differing degrees, the pressure is nonetheless such that even second sons seek to avoid being recognised as gay. As Sang and Nam have pointed out, some men may seek to engage in hetero-sex in an attempt to improve their situation, while, as Nam has explained, some gay men even marry women, casting ‘straight’ shadows while at the same time seeking out spaces of shadow, such as gay bars. As Nam’s and Cham’s explanations of bồng suggest, this may be reflective of a desire to recognise themselves in their shadows, rather than feeling that they are living someone else’s life.

As Butler (1990) has pointed out, gender is something that is done. It is enacted through repeated stylised acts, and while possibilities are restricted within the masculinist framework, spaces for resistance remain. The term bồng provides an illuminating Vietnamese lens through which to understand gay men’s experiences. Through their imitative performances of gender and sexuality, the men interviewed in this article cast light upon the social and imitative structures of gender and sexuality that underpin the masculinist framework. At the same time, their resistance to the masculinist framework challenges those structural foundations and paves the way for the appearance of shadows of many forms, cast out from human beings, participating on a par with one another.

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