

A Study on the Classifications and Symbolic Meanings of Vietnamese Traditional Patterns

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Abstract : This study clarified the classifications of Vietnamese traditional patterns and analyzed the symbolic meanings that reflect the emotional and cultural background of the Vietnamese. The type and symbolism of Vietnamese traditional patterns were analyzed through research on the history of Vietnamese costumes, the history of Vietnamese arts, the history of Vietnamese traditional culture, and a Vietnamese museum survey. The results of this study were as follows: 1. Animal patterns are diverse and include dragons, unicorns, tortoises, phoenixes, cranes, lions, bats, tigers, and buffalo patterns. 2. Dragon patterns are the most utilized pattern for practical purposes. They are often used in royal costumes, Vietnamese traditional dresses, mandarin boots, bamboo fans, silk, satin, ceramics, and other detailed decorations. 3. The patterns symbolized fortune that meant good luck and longevity so people can live long and happy. Then the symbolic meanings of patterns were followed by prosperity, nobleness, apotopism, prolificacy, and wealth. 4. Since the most of animal patterns have symbolic meanings of fortune and longevity, animal patterns can be utilized as the source of traditional patterns of design inspiration for the development of Vietnamese modern patterns and the application on Vietnamese fashion products.

Key Words : Vietnamese traditional patterns, textile design, vietnamese culture, classifications of patterns, symbolic meanings

I. Introduction

Globalization has increased the demand for design industries based on culture. The creative application of traditional culture into modern design as well as fashion can make a significant contribution and act as a solid foundation for the development of national culture. Each nation has a period of pattern development that originated with the historical features of geography, economics, manners, and customs. A diverse country has a multiform development phase of costumes and patterns. Vietnam is a nation of 54 ethnic groups of people that have distinct features in language, traditions, religion, costumes, and patterns.

In the literature review, there were many papers that systematically studied traditional patterns such as Korean traditional patterns, Chinese traditional patterns, and Western traditional patterns. However, little attention has been given to traditional Vietnamese patterns as an inherited cultural property. This study is to help researchers interested in traditional patterns understand more about the traditions, cultural heritage, and a philosophy inherent in traditional Vietnamese culture in order to enhance patriotism. This study also introduces the aesthetical side about Vietnamese patterns to the other nations in order to contribute to the specific culture of a nation.

Textile patterns are the most vivid expressions of

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Vietnamese traditional culture. The designs of Vietnamese traditional patterns express the traditional cultural identity, the history, cultural development process, and cultural interaction. The textile patterns preserve the culture of the Vietnamese and play an indispensable role in the historical and cultural evolution of the Vietnamese (Diep Trung Binh, 1997). Vietnamese traditional patterns cannot be separated from Vietnamese costumes and Vietnamese arts (especially ceramics). Although the detailed study just mentioned the developmental history of patterns of Hue imperial palace, the selected works are Vietnamese traditional patterns with the plentiful and multiform conformations (Ung Tieu, 2005).

This study was to examine and clarify the classifications of Vietnamese traditional patterns through literature review, case studies and experiential way. Then, the kinds and symbolical meanings of Vietnamese traditional patterns were analyzed through research of the history of Vietnamese costumes, the history of Vietnamese arts, and the Vietnamese museum survey.

II. Research Methods

1. Research Topics

To determine the way of classifications as well as the symbolic meanings of Vietnamese traditional patterns, the following topics were investigated: 1. How to clarify the kinds of Vietnamese traditional patterns. 2. How to analyze the symbolic meanings of Vietnamese traditional patterns. 3. The impact of traditional patterns on Vietnamese fashion cultural products.

2. Materials and Data Collection

To gather the books, thesis, journals, and articles on Vietnamese traditional patterns based on Vietnamese Publishing House, SAGE Publications, Koreanstudies Information Service System (KISS), and Vietnamese

electronic documents. To analyze the key points such as Vietnamese traditional patterns, textile design, Vietnamese culture, classifications of patterns, symbolic meanings of traditional patterns of the previous materials in order to understand accurately the way of classifications as well as the exactly symbolic meanings of Vietnamese traditional patterns. By detailed examination of these documents, the author analyzed books, thesis, and journals from 1987 to 2007 as well as articles with various issues from 2004 to 2008 on Vietnamese costumes such as Cham Dress, Muong Dress, Mong Dress, Vietnamese traditional dress (*Ao Dai*), Vietnamese Revolution, and Vietnamese traditional patterns.

3. Research Contents and Methods

For research methods, literature review, case studies, and experimental way were used to study the different kinds of Vietnamese traditional patterns. First, the literature related to Vietnamese traditional patterns and Vietnamese costumes were collected. The kinds and symbolism of Vietnamese traditional patterns were examined through a research of the history of Vietnamese costumes, the history of Vietnamese arts, the history of Vietnamese traditional patterns and Vietnamese museum survey. Second, the most frequently-used traditional patterns were classified such as geometric patterns, Han character patterns, floral patterns, animal patterns, and nature patterns. Then, the most frequently-mixed patterns were animal patterns and nature patterns. Finally, the understanding of Vietnamese traditional patterns was better understood by analyzing the symbolic meanings of these traditional patterns.

III. Results and Discussion

1. Classifications of Vietnamese Traditional Patterns

This study classified Vietnamese traditional patterns

into geometric patterns, Han character patterns, floral patterns, animal patterns, and natural patterns. Lozenge, hexagon, triangles, and circles are the patterns stand for geometric patterns. Apricot flower, lotus flower, peonys and rosette flower patterns symbolized floral patterns. Dragons, unicorns, tortoises, phoenixes, cranes, lions, bats, tigers, and buffalo are the patterns that stand for the animal patterns. Besides, the natural patterns that are included are clouds, flames, and wave patterns.

The following is the list of these patterns from the results of examining the types of Vietnamese traditional patterns:

1) Geometric Patterns

There are several methods which can be used to specify the classifications of geometric patterns such as the geometry, the shape, and Vietnamese terms methods. However, the commonly used one is the geometry method that consists of lozenge, hexagon, triangle, and circle patterns.

(1) Lozenge Patterns

In Vietnamese traditional patterns, lozenge patterns can be made by using sides of a lozenge with a longer and little curved sides. But lozenge patterns have not used separately because they are very simple. Therefore, it is usually used as the background in

textile design. Figure 1a is an example of textile design that used lozenge patterns with Han character and floral patterns.

(2) Hexagon Patterns

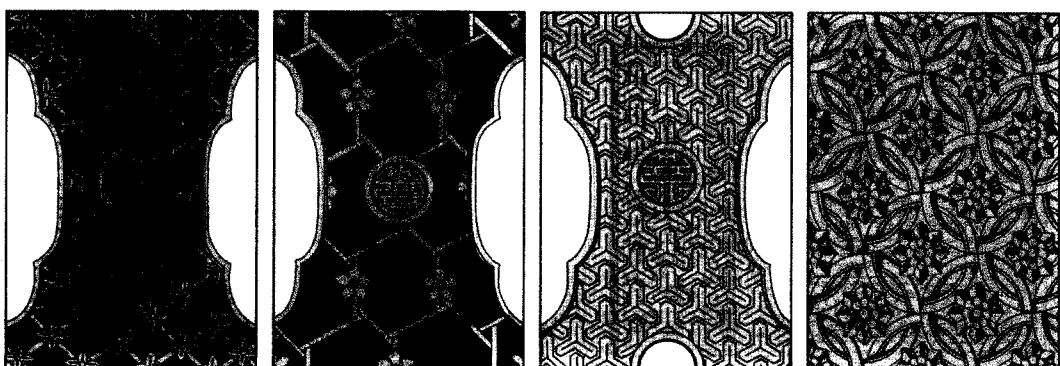
Hexagon is the symbol of golden tortoise in Vietnamese culture, so that this pattern is designed as tortoise scales. Figure 1b describes hexagon patterns. Normally, in textile design, hexagon patterns are often combined with other patterns. However, when these patterns utilize to design separately, they should be arranged together as the star.

(3) Triangle Patterns

Considering the history of Vietnamese traditional patterns, the triangle is the symbol of human beings. Triangle patterns often use to design as the background or to combine with other patterns. Triangle pattern in Figure 1c is used to design textile with the Han character pattern in the center.

(4) Circle Patterns

The circle is represented the wealth and contentment. In some dynasties of Vietnam, the ancient coins have used widely for exchange of goods. The circle pattern is symbol of golden coins (*kim tien*), and this pattern can be combined easily with the other patterns to design



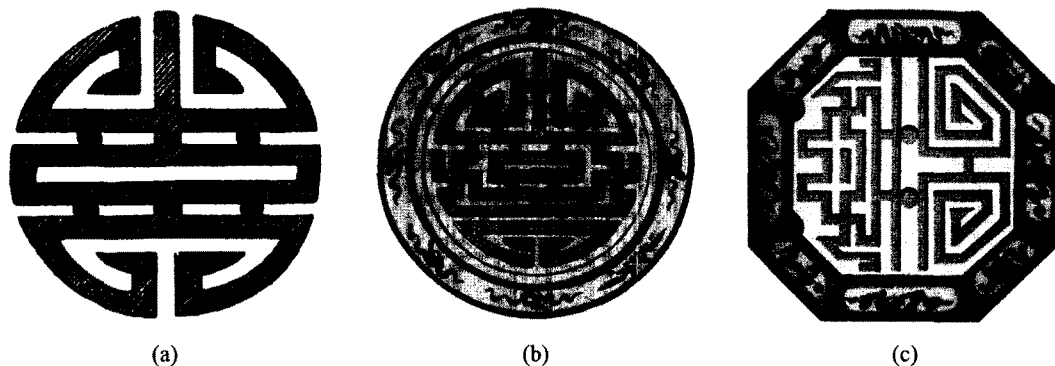
(a) Lozenge pattern

(b) Hexagon pattern

(c) Triangle pattern

(d) Circle pattern

<Figure 1> Geometric Patterns (Ung Tieu, 2005, Patterns of Hue Imperial Palace, (a) p.14, (b) p.17, (c) p.19 and (d) p.22).



<Figure 2> Han Character Patterns (Ung Tieu, 2005, Patterns of Hue Imperial Palace, (a) and (b) p.46, and (c) p.1 (M)).

Vietnamese traditional patterns. This is seen in Figure 1d with application between circle pattern and rosette flower pattern in textile design.

2) Han Character Patterns

Amount of Han characters are pictographic. Despite that the modern Han character is very different from the original symbols, it still affects pattern designs. Han characters are often supple, delicate, and winding together in the symmetric forms (see Figure 2). In all cases, the Han character pattern is aimed mainly for the decorations that corresponds to the philosophy of life.

3) Floral Patterns

There are many floral patterns that exist in Vietnamese traditional patterns. Some well-known patterns are widely used to design the textile such as Apricot flower, Lotus flower, Peony, and Rosette flower patterns.

(1) Apricot Flower Patterns

The Apricot flower (*Hoa mai*), is the symbol of the Lunar New Year in southern Vietnam. Figure 3a is a kind of apricot flower pattern. It normally has a yellow color and five petals. The more petals it has, the more prosperity people can get for a year. Apricot flower patterns are the symbol of prosperity and this pattern has existed frequently in the Vietnamese traditional dress (*Ao dai*) for many centuries.

(2) Lotus Flower Patterns

Lotuses are planted everywhere in Vietnam. The lotus flower is very beautiful despite the fact that it grows in a dirty place. The Vietnamese love lotus flowers and often use lotus flower patterns in designing Vietnamese traditional and cultural fashion products such as clothing, scarves, handkerchiefs, purses, jewelry boxes, and traditional dolls. Figure 3b is one of the instances of the lotus flower pattern.

(3) Peony Patterns

Figure 3c shows peony pattern. Peony is the queen of flower species in Vietnam. Peony which has the red color symbolizes to joyfulness, happiness, and wealth. This flower can be seen in the Vietnamese festivals and patterns are utilized to decorate cultural products including tableware, floor cushion, pillow, frame, bag, and clothing.

(4) Rosette Flower Patterns

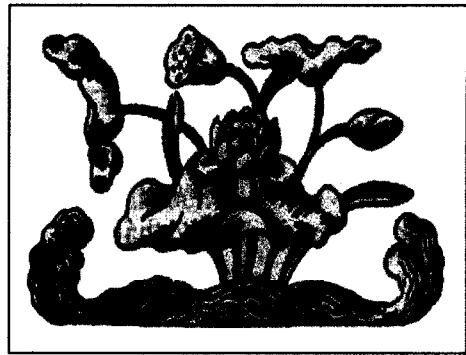
The Rosette Flower has eight lobes. When these lobes are cutting together, it can make the circles. Sometimes, the cutting lobes can create the small flower petals as in Figure 3d. The rosette flower pattern is one of Vietnamese traditional patterns and is numerously employed in textile designs.

4) Animal Patterns

There are four supernatural animals of power (*Tu linh*) among the animal patterns in Vietnamese traditional



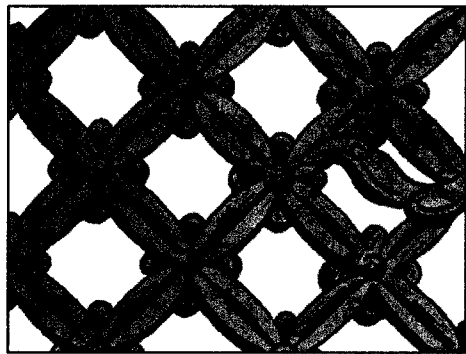
(a) Apricot flower pattern



(b) Lotus flower pattern



(c) Peony pattern



(d) Rosette flower pattern

<Figure 3> Floral Patterns (Ung Tieu, 2005, Patterns of Hue Imperial Palace, (a) p.93, (b) p.76, (c) p.95 and (d) p.15).

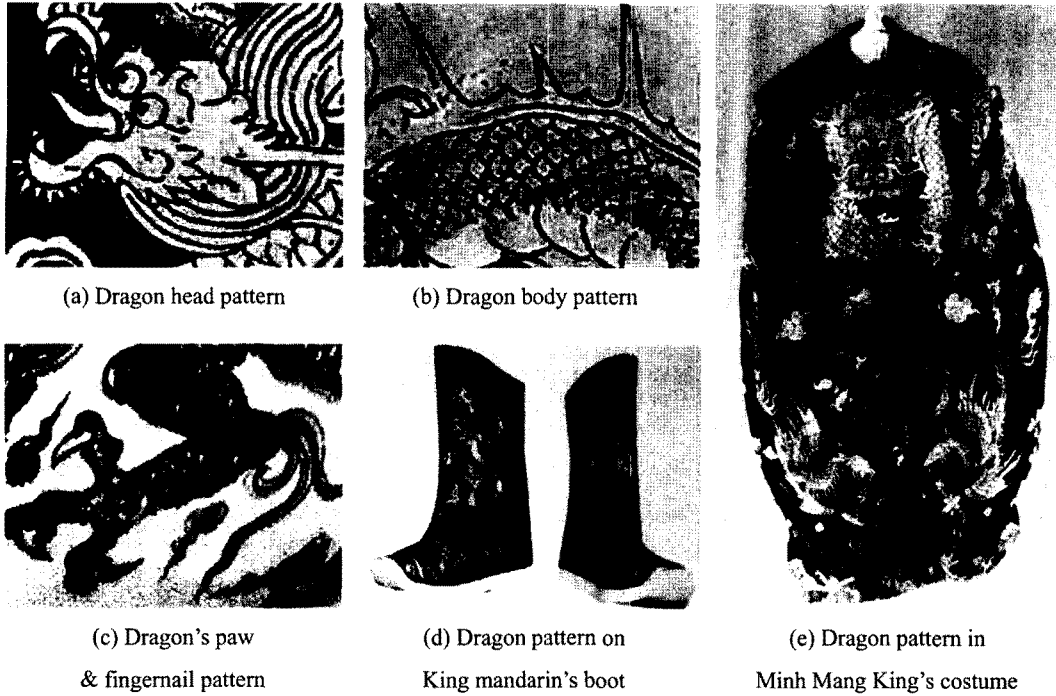
patterns. The four supernatural animals of power in Vietnam are dragons, unicorns, tortoises, and phoenixes. The utilization of *Tu linh* has particularity of religions because of the supernatural power. Besides, the other animals that are also used in Vietnamese traditional patterns are cranes, lions, bats, tigers, and buffalos. All these patterns express the hope in the future. However, the tiger pattern has a special property because Vietnamese people use this pattern for worship.

(1) Dragon Patterns

The dragon pattern is the most utilized patterns. Vietnamese people often choose this for designing clothing, especially the royal costumes and traditional dress. Vietnamese traditional dress is called *Ao Dai*. It is the national costume of the Vietnamese people so it is

popularity used in all areas and for all people from South to North as well as for all ethnic groups (Thao Thi, 1995). Vietnamese people are always proud of *Ao dai*. It is the same thinking Koreans have for the Hanbuk and the Japanese have for the Kymono.

Dragon patterns can be expressed in different ways such as the dragon head, dragon body, dragon's paw and fingernail or the whole dragon. Each different drawing of dragon patterns can be used for different purposes. The whole dragon pattern expresses impeccable esteem and is used for royal costumes. The dragon head pattern shows the mysterious strength, and this kind of pattern can be seen in roof tops. The other kinds of dragon patterns such as the dragon body, dragon's paw and fingernail can be utilized for decorative purposes such as textile designs (Thoi Trang Tre, 2007). For example,



<Figure 4> Dragon Patterns (Nguyen Ngoc Tho, 2006, *Ceramics' Patterns of the Minh, Thanh Dynasties – Volume 1: Dragon & Phoenix Patterns*, (a) p.214, (b) and (c) p.217; Doan Thi Tinh, 2006, *Vietnamese costumes through the ages*, (d) p.80 and (e) p.69).

Figure 4 shows that the whole dragon pattern can be used in front of the king's costume and mandarin's boot.

(2) Unicorn Patterns

The Unicorn is one of the four supernatural animals of power (*Tu linh*). According to Vietnamese history, only virtuous kings can see the unicorn because the unicorn is a harmless animal which never eats any other animals or walks on the grass. Figure 5a describes unicorn patterns used to decorate in textiles. However, unicorn patterns have not frequently used dragon patterns and phoenix patterns. When using unicorn patterns, Vietnamese people often decorate them with other objects such as poetry roll, pen brush, sword, and bamboo fans. All decorated objects with unicorn patterns have meanings related to handwriting and learning.

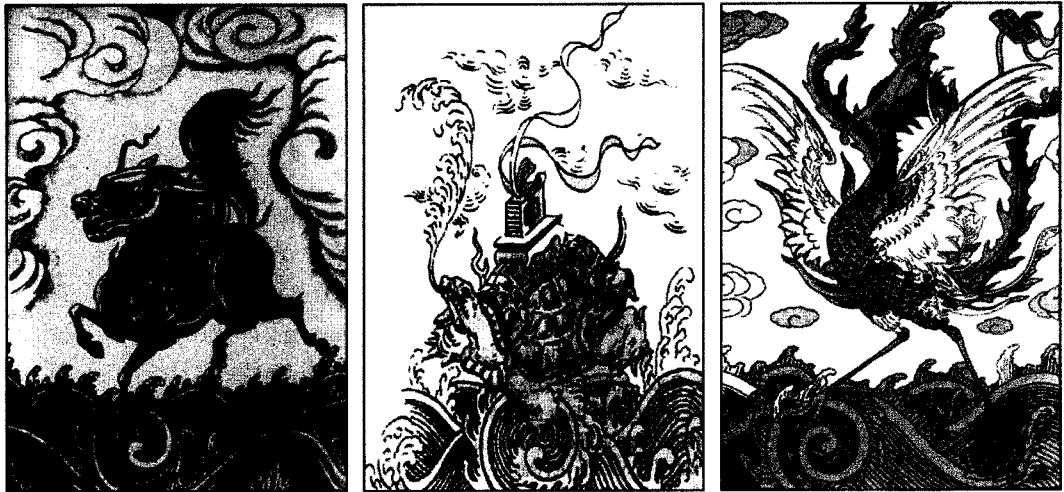
(3) Tortoise Patterns

The tortoise is the third animal of *Tu linh*. Vietnamese people believe that the round in front and flat underneath

of the tortoise shell represents images of heaven and earth. Vietnamese people also use tortoise shells for fortune-telling. Tortoise patterns like Figure 5b are used to design textiles and clothing. Tortoise patterns are combined with lotus flower pattern with the wishing of longevity and nobleness. Tortoise patterns are also sometimes decorated with the other objects such as poetry rolls, pen brushes, and bamboo fans.

(4) Phoenix Patterns

Figure 5c is a phoenix pattern. The phoenix is the fourth animal of the four supernatural animals of the power. The phoenix is the symbol of Vietnamese wives, women, and girls in general. Phoenix patterns are often used for women products such as embroidered handkerchiefs, fashion accessories, costumes, pin cushions, and jewelry boxes. Phoenix patterns also decorated in tables, chairs, caskets, and pictures (The Gioi Phu Nu, 2006). In the southern Vietnam, often shows as a pattern with four phoenixes spreading tails

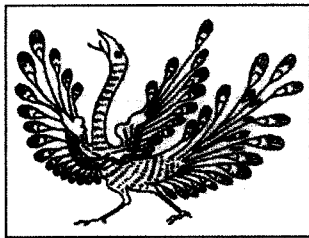


(a) Unicorn pattern

(b) Tortoise pattern

(c) Phoenix pattern

<Figure 5> Three animals in the four supernatural power's animals (Ung Tieu, 2005, Patterns of Hue Imperial Palace, (a) p.137, (b) p.156 and (c) p.146).



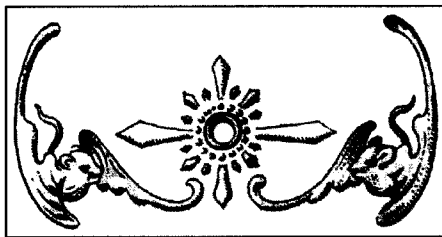
(a) Crane pattern



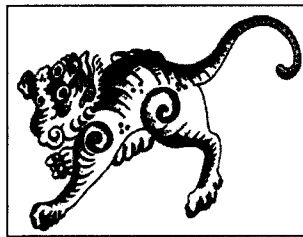
(b) Good-natured Lion pattern



(c) Powerful Lion pattern



(d) Bat pattern



(e) Tiger pattern



(f) Buffalo pattern

<Figure 6> Animal patterns (Nguyen Ngoc Tho, 2006, Ceramics' Patterns of the Minh, Thanh Dynasties – Volume 1: Dragon & Phoenix Patterns, (a) p.225; Ung Tieu, 2005, Patterns of Hue Imperial Palace, (b) p.175, (c) p.176, (d) p.166 and (e) p.179; (f) Ho Chi Minh City Sea Games 22 , <http://www.seagames22.hochiminhcity.gov.vn>, 2008.03.12).

and this type of pattern is often used in front of the entrance of a pagoda.

(5) Crane Patterns

Another kind of bird that looks like phoenix is a crane. Cranes are often showed with two folded wings,

standing on the back of a tortoise and with flower in its mouth. In Vietnam, people usually use two cranes for worship and places them on ancestral or deity altar. The crane pattern in Figure 6a is a decorative pattern used in lacquered furniture, tableware, bedding, interior products, and fashion cultural products.

(6) Lion Patterns

The lion is used in Vietnamese traditional patterns with two forms: one for good-natured lion patterns and one for powerful lion patterns. Figure 6b is one kind of good-natured lion patterns used in textile design such as handkerchiefs, costumes, and handicrafts. However, at figure 6c, a powerful lion patterns is employed in different applications including decorating screen, memorial stele of kings with the unhurried appearance.

(7) Bat Patterns

In Vietnamese traditional patterns, bat pattern has the symbolical meaning of fortune. Vietnamese people used bat patterns in textile design or jewelry with the belief of good luck. Bat patterns in Figure 6d can be metamorphosed into apricot flower, lotus flower or cloud patterns. When a bat pattern metamorphoses into apricot flower pattern, it means fortune as well as prosperity. It is also similar when a bat pattern metamorphosis into a lotus flower pattern with the meaning of fortune and nobleness; but when metamorphosing into cloud pattern it means fortune and longevity.

(8) Tiger Patterns

A tiger is an animal of worship in Vietnam. Vietnamese people often carry a thurible (incense burner) for a tiger because they consider tiger as a talisman to annihilate ghosts and devils. That is the reason why tiger patterns are usually utilized for designing. Figure 6e is often seen in wooden furniture,

pottery, ceramics, textile screen and fashion apparel.

(9) Buffalo Patterns

Vietnam is an agricultural nation where the buffalo is symbolic of help during the harvest. Buffalo brings well-being, happiness, and strength to the people. In the 22nd Sea Games held in Vietnam, buffalo in Figure 6f was chosen as the mascot of Sea Games so buffalo patterns can be utilized in many different designs such as T-shirt, hats, metals, handkerchief, cell phone ring, and necklace.

5) Natural Patterns

(1) Cloud Patterns

Cloud patterns are also one of the most utilized patterns in Vietnamese traditional patterns. Besides, this pattern can be used with dragon patterns in term of fortune and longevity. Cloud patterns in different sizes can be designed to hide some parts of dragon pattern that creates a feeling that dragon is looming. We can see the design of cloud patterns like Figure 7a in royal costumes, Vietnamese traditional dress, handicrafts, and modern costumes.

(2) Flame Patterns

Flame patterns of Vietnamese people are often showed with the flare in the middle and fire surroundings. The flare of the flame pattern is often crude and big while the fire of the flame pattern is fairly short and small. Figure 7b represents the rotate movement so the drawings of this pattern are at random.



(a) Cloud pattern



(b) Flame pattern



(c) Wave pattern

<Figure 7> Natural patterns (Nguyen Ngoc Tho, 2006, *Ceramics' Patterns of the Minh, Thanh Dynasties – Volume 1: Dragon & Phoenix Patterns*, (a) p.63, (b) p.149 and (c) p.94).

Flame patterns are utilized almost in Vietnamese ceramics and handicrafts.

(3) Wave Patterns

Vietnamese people are often described wave patterns in simple way of the semicircle with some details of spumes shooting out in the sky. Wave patterns and cloud patterns are usually used together. Sometimes, Vietnamese people used wave patterns with dragon patterns with the meaning of longevity and fortune. Figure 7c is one kind of wave pattern that can be seen in Vietnamese ceramics, handicrafts, and costumes.

2. Symbolic Meanings of Vietnamese Traditional Patterns

1) Apotropism

Apotropism is the study of how to protect people from evil magic and evil spirits. In Vietnam, the meaning of tiger ties into religious symbolism as a talisman to obliterate ghosts and devils so the tiger pattern has the symbolic meaning of apotropism (Ung Tieu, 2005). Another pattern which has the symbolical significance of apotropism as the tiger pattern is the lion pattern.

2) Fortune

In Vietnamese traditional patterns, there are a lot of patterns that have the symbolic meanings of fortune including lozenge patterns, triangle patterns, dragon patterns, unicorn patterns, phoenix patterns, and bat patterns. A unicorn brings fortune because it represents love and peace. Formerly, the footprints of a unicorn were considered as the royal descent and the horns were regarded to the children of the king (Ung Tieu, 2005). The Vietnamese are often used in unicorn patterns in wedding palanquin with the wishing of fortune for bride and bridegroom. It is the same for dragon and phoenix patterns. In Vietnamese culture, dragon is the symbol of the husband and the phoenix is the symbol of the wife. The dragon pattern and

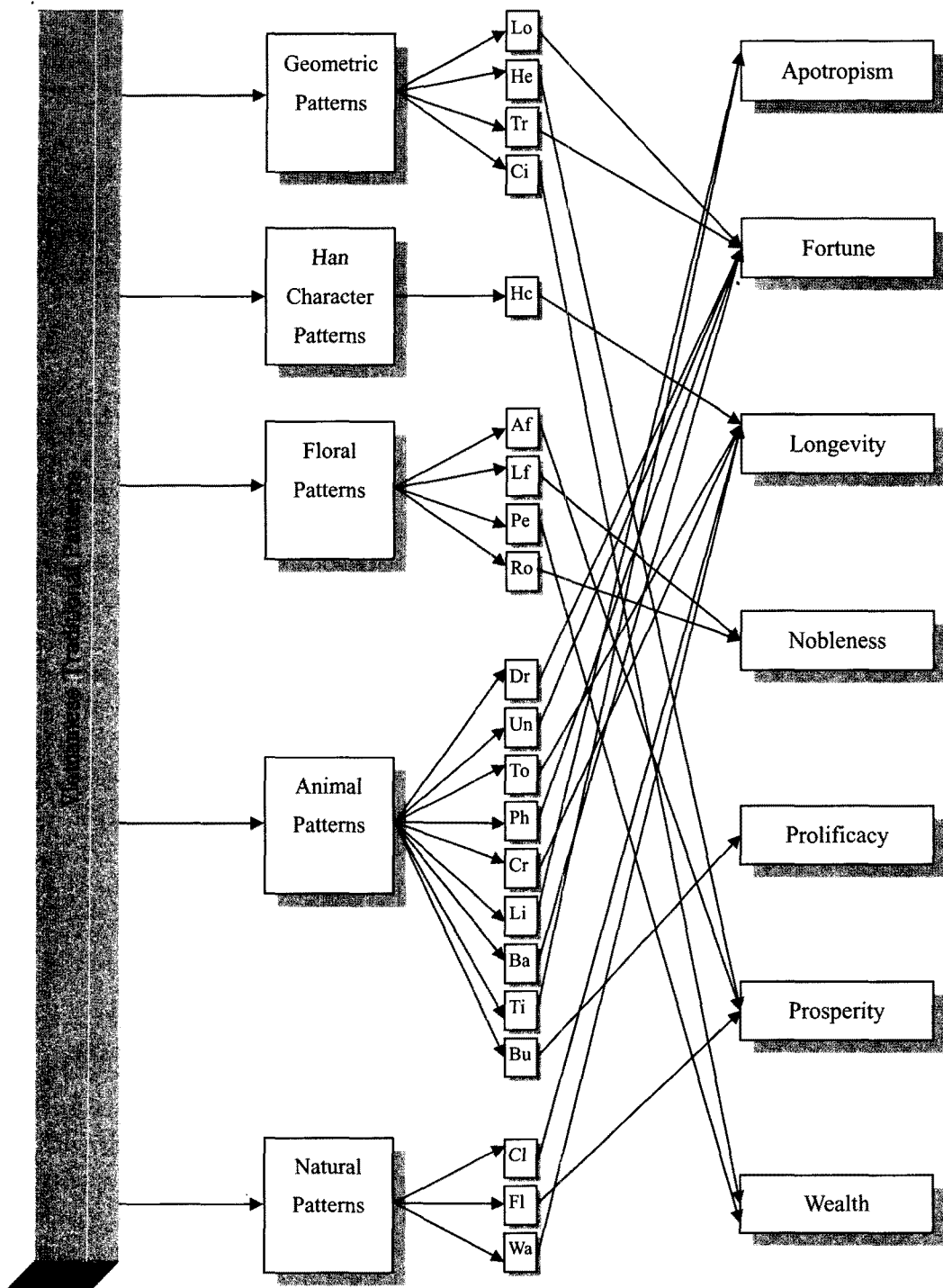
phoenix pattern are often combined together in designing textile (Doan Thi Tinh, 1987). These patterns are found on Vietnamese traditional wedding dresses with one side of dragon pattern, one side of phoenix pattern and Han character pattern surrounding with the meaning of double happiness (Vietnamese - *Song hi*). Vietnamese people believe that these patterns are the symbolical significance of the harmony for the married couple.

3) Longevity

The tortoise pattern has the symbolic meaning of longevity because they can live longer than a thousand years. According to Vietnamese history (in the Duong Dynasty) the military governor of middle area in China offered Hien Ton King in Vietnam (806-821) a tortoise wishing for the longevity of the dynasty (Ung Tieu, 2005). Crane patterns also have the symbolic meaning of longevity. Cranes often has the white color because Vietnamese people believe that the white color of crane feathers looks like the white hair of the elderly with the confidence and wisdom from the longevity of their living. For this reason, the crane patterns are often used to design fashion cultural products for the gifts of the elderly people. The other patterns which have the same symbolic meanings of longevity are, Han Character patterns, cloud patterns, and wave patterns.

4) Nobleness

Nobleness can be understood as the quality or state of being greatness, dignity, magnanimity, and elevation of mind. It is also known as grand or impressive, especially in appearance. In Vietnamese traditional patterns, the lotus flower patterns and rosette flower patterns are the symbolic meanings of nobleness. Lotus begins as a little flower in the mud and muck, and then it slowly grows up towards the surface of the water and becomes beautiful. This is the reason why the Vietnamese loves lotus flowers so much and see the lotus flower as the symbol of nobleness.



(Lo-Lozenge; He-Hexagon; Tr-Triangle; Ci-Circle; Hc-Han character; Af-Apricot flower; Lf-Lotus flower; Pe-Peony; Ro-Rosette; Dr-Dragon; Un-Unicorn; To-Tortoise; Ph-Phoenix; Cr-Crane; Li-Lion; Ba-Bat; Ti-Tiger; Bu-Bufferalo; Cl-Cloud; Fl-Flame; Wa-Wave)

<Figure 8> The Classifications and symbolic meanings of Vietnamese traditional patterns.

5) Prolificacy

Buffalo patterns has the symbolic significant of prolificacy because the Vietnamese believe that the buffalo symbolizes the hope of a fine harvest. The art image of buffalo pattern expresses open-minded, joyfulness, and hospitableness (Ho Chi Minh City Sea Games 22, 2008). Prolificacy is the property of producing abundance in sustaining a vigorous and luxuriant growth. The buffalo pattern is chosen as the image of the 22nd Sea Games to encourage the athletes to do their best.

6) Prosperity

Prosperity can be defined as an economic state of growth with rising profits and full employment. It also can be understood as the condition of prospering and being successful or thriving. In Vietnam, the apricot flower is very popular in southern Vietnam, where the plant is purchased during *Tet* (the traditional Vietnamese Lunar New Year). This kind of flower often has five petals and yellow colors. The more petals it has, the more prosperity people can get over a year. As a result, the apricot flower pattern has the symbolic meaning of prosperity. Hexagon patterns and Flame patterns have the same meanings as Apricot patterns.

7) Wealth

There are two patterns including peony patterns and circle patterns standing for wealth. The circle pattern is symbolic of the Vietnamese culture with the image of ancient coin. The circle outside for the coin means the sky (*thien*), and the square hole at the center of the coin means the earth (*dat*). Hence, the circle pattern is symbol of golden coins (*kim tien*) with the hope the wealth to everyone in Vietnam country (Ung Tieu, 2005).

Figure 8 summarized the classifications and symbolic meanings of Vietnamese traditional patterns. Figure 8 shows that are easy to recognize that there are five groups with twenty-one Vietnamese traditional patterns in difference. Each traditional pattern has a symbolical significance.

IV. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study clarified the types and analyzes the symbolic meanings of Vietnamese traditional patterns through literature review in response to the need of the design development of traditional fashion products. Based on the analysis, the following results were obtained. First, animal patterns have the large amount of patterns including dragon patterns, unicorn patterns, tortoise patterns, phoenix patterns, crane patterns, lion patterns, bat patterns, tiger patterns, and buffalo patterns. Second, dragon patterns are the most utilized pattern for practical purpose that reflects the understanding of traditional aesthetic beauty and philosophical approach by applying symbolic meaning in patterns. Dragon patterns can be mixed with the other patterns including cloud patterns, wave patterns or phoenix patterns. These patterns were often used in royal costumes, traditional and cultural fashion products, traditional dress, pagodas, roofs, silk, satin, ceramics, and detailed decorations in Vietnam. Third, as the result of examining the kinds and symbolic meanings of Vietnamese traditional patterns, the patterns symbolized fortune in the good luck and longevity for human beings. The symbolic meanings of patterns were followed by prosperity, nobleness, apotropism, prolificacy, and wealth. Animal patterns can be utilized as the source of traditional patterns of design inspiration for the development of Vietnamese modern patterns since most animal patterns have the symbolical significance of fortune and longevity.

The limitations of this study are that the classifications of Vietnamese traditional patterns only for textile patterns which were presented by images and tables. Further development of Vietnamese traditional pattern applying to architect and craftwork needs deeper understanding in order to broaden the source of Vietnamese traditional patterns.

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