

Social Closure and Disparity in Vietnam: A Bourdieuan Analysis

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to examine historically the practice of social closure and the resulting disparity in the accounting profession in Vietnam. Although such social closure may exist in other emerging economies, there are external influences peculiar to each economy which exacerbates such disparities. This research applies Bourdieu's theories to explain social closure and the disparities between bookkeepers and professional accountants. The historical development of the Vietnamese accounting profession is also examined, to trace the origins of these disparities. Social closure - with its origins in French concepts of professional closure - is cited as the main reason for such a disparity between bookkeepers and professional accountants. This research adopts a conceptual, historical approach to explain social closure and examines how the professions were conceived and how the colonial experience left its legacy in the structure of the accounting profession in Vietnam.

Keywords: Accounting Profession, Bookkeepers, Professional Accountants, Social Closure, Vietnam

JEL Classification: M48

1. Introduction

There are many explanations as to why there is social closure and disparity within the accounting profession in Vietnam. This paper focuses on externalities to explain such a disparity. These externalities are a result of overseas systems being applied in a Vietnamese context. It is acknowledged that explanations by way of externalities may not

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be sufficient but they are the contribution of this paper. The Vietnamese case is worthy of examination because although such disparity may exist in most countries, they are more exaggerated in Vietnam, arguably due to external influences.

To explain social closure and disparity, this paper adopts a Bourdieuan framework utilising role and capital to create the conditions for social closure and disparity. Many accounting researchers such as Baxter and Chua (2008) have used Bourdieu who applied 'Bourdieu's practice theory' in a field study of a Chief Financial Officer and his ways of constructing his position and practices.

In Vietnam, according to the president of the Vietnamese Accounting Association (VAA), there is a vast disparity between bookkeepers and professional accountants. Such disparity (this paper contends) is the product of Vietnam's history with its successive layers of invasive accounting systems from France, China, Russia and Vietnam. In particular, the French have left Vietnam with an elitist tradition in the field of Accounting with their former divisive stratifications of status: professional accountants previously known to the French as - "*experts comptables*" and bookkeepers formerly known as "*teneurs de livres*". Such a legacy has left Vietnam with over 2 million bookkeepers, and 2500 professional accountants. Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of Field, Capital and *Habitus* will be used to examine this phenomenon of social closure and disparity and why there seems to be acceptance between bookkeepers and professional accountants despite this social closure. Given such acceptance, this paper seeks to explain in a Bourdieuan context, the question of how such diversity emerged and became so acceptable.

This paper is organised to firstly, consider the historical development of the accounting profession in Vietnam, and secondly, to apply Bourdieu's theory of Field, Capital and *Habitus* in this context, and then moves onto focusing on 'social closure and professional accounting bodies' to explain this disparity, before deriving a final conclusion.

2. Historical development of the Accounting Profession in Vietnam

In 1863, France colonised Indochina. Bopta, Yapa, & Jacobs (2007) describe how the first Western accounting system was introduced into Indochina in the 19th century by the French, to support their colonial rule and the colony's commercial development. There was initially

little demand for professional accountants and most of the accounting work was undertaken by French accountants rather than locals. In fact, the French accounting profession made little effort to educate the Indochinese. Vietnamese just played bookkeeping roles under the instructions of the French accountants (Bui, Yapa & Cooper, 2011). Thus, there were only a few Indochinese trained to be professional accountants in French offices and small trading companies. According to one elderly interviewee, there were few Vietnamese raised to the status of “*expert-comptable*” during the French occupation of Vietnam. In Indochina, accounting systems were entirely an application of existing French laws and practices, as no separate colonial law specifying the accounting and auditing system for private enterprises had been established under French rule (Bopta et al., 2007).

It appears the French may not have intended to establish an accounting profession as well as deliberately not educating bookkeepers in Vietnam, as Bui et al. (2011) claimed “the development of accounting in Vietnam in the colonial and post-colonial era was not established by the French during their domination” (p. 4). However, the French came to Vietnam for the exploitation of natural resources such as rice, coal, rare minerals and rubber to supply French industry. They needed to bring their accounting system to support their purposes. From 1864, the accounting system in Vietnam became an application of French practices and civil codes. Subsequently, from the mid twentieth century there arose other historical influences (derived from Chinese, French, Russian and American sources) on accounting practices in Vietnam. These influences have impacted on the structure of the Vietnamese accounting profession. Nonetheless, throughout the period of other foreign influences to the present day, French influence remained dominant. In particular, the elitist and narrowly based membership of the French profession became the standard model in Vietnam, as acknowledged by Bui et al. (2011): “the French accountancy profession did not have a tradition of becoming involved in colonial outposts as did the UK [United Kingdom] based Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA)” (p. 13)

In 1945 (after the success of the August Revolution), the revolutionary government - The people’s democratic state of Vietnam - was established. Unfortunately, after less than a year of independence, the French returned to Vietnam and the war against France lasted 9 years. In 1954, North Vietnam gained independence. South Vietnam continued to be dominated by France and later America. The country’s

liberation war lasted 20 years until 1975. North Vietnam was victorious and started the work of economic development, nation building and supporting the South, in the war of national liberation. Soon after - in 1954 in the north and then after 1975 in the South - the accounting system of Vietnam was formed. With limited knowledge and experience, Vietnam asked for assistance from other socialist countries such as China (since 1957) and then the Soviet Union (from 1970) (Than & Tan, 1993; Tran-Nam & Pham, 2003). Through the experience of a former senior official of the Ministry of Finance (MOF), Bui et al. (2011) shared:

Since North Vietnam was completely liberated [from the French] in 1954, with the assistance of Chinese and Soviet Union specialists, together with the economic restoration and development, the Government issued a range of accounting regulations for each economic sector of the national economy, based on the Chinese accounting model, including budget accounting, (heavy) industry accounting, capital construction accounting, supply and consumption accounting, trade accounting etc (p. 16)

In addition, during 1968-1970, to strengthen the skills of Northern Vietnamese officials, the State sent them to the Soviet Union to study and also invited Soviet Union specialists to train officials in Vietnam (Bui et al., 2011).

According to the Vice President of VAA in Ho Chi Minh City, with the financial support of Soviet Union, the Soviet Union's Journal Voucher system was then established in Vietnam. Bui et al. (2011) furthered explained that the Soviet Union's accounting system used 17 journal vouchers. Because of the simplicity of the Vietnamese market, there were only 12 journal vouchers applied in Vietnam.

South Vietnam in 1954 was described by a retired lecturer in Accountancy:

Even though the US came into Vietnam but the French accounting system had profoundly embedded in Vietnam. Vietnamese-owned companies and French-owned companies were too familiar with the French accounting. There had been some American-owned companies in Vietnam when the US arrived. Therefore, after 1954, South Vietnam used the French accounting and the American accounting (Interview dated 1 July 2011)

How did two systems work in South Vietnam? A retired lecturer in Accountancy further explained

1954-1975 French accounting system was the main system in South Vietnam. American-owned companies had used American accounting system since

they had to report back to their head-quarter in the US. In regarding to matter of tax, such companies had to report to South Vietnam government, so they had to use the French accounting system. At this time, South Vietnam government was quite flexible (Interview dated 6 July, 2011)

When North and South Vietnam were unified in 1975, Chinese and/or Soviet accounting systems were applied throughout Vietnam because Northern Vietnam won over South Vietnam and the Americans. Experiencing the change over time, the Vice President of VAA in Ho Chi Minh City wrote:

It is important to note that when Northern officials came to South Vietnam to take over companies, French and American enterprises, they should have had some knowledge of French and US accounting systems so that they could convert the old system [the French accounting] to Chinese and/or Soviet systems (Interview dated 5 July 2011)

Since the new systems were implemented in South Vietnam, Vietnamese professional accountants who were using French and/or American accounting systems were sent out to learn the Chinese/ Soviet accounting systems.

From a former senior official of the MOF, Bui et al. (2011) further clarified:

“...those former Vietnamese accounting staff who had been trained and worked for the French were familiar with the way of handling bookkeeping using the French chart of accounts. Therefore, retraining them was not an easy task” (p. 25)

After 1986, there began the conversion from an economy of communist central planning to a market economy. With the help of French experts, Vietnam built up a Vietnamese accounting system and selectively absorbed the international accounting standards. However, the Vietnamese accounting profession still has a strong imprint of the historical French accounting system with comparatively few professional accountants (*experts-comptables*) in relation to the total population. By contrast, there are many bookkeepers (*teneurs de livres*). When asked if she would allow her children to follow her career path, a senior bookkeeper in a State-Owned Enterprise replied *“I would never let my children to follow my career path. As an experienced bookkeeper, I earn*

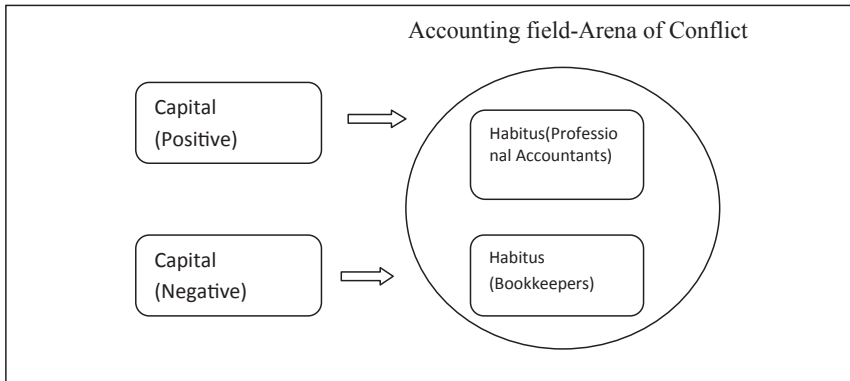
only \$US150 a month. How could they live with that amount of money?" (Interview dated 4 July 2011).

In summary, the Vietnamese have been strongly influenced by the French model of the Accounting profession. However, the French model that Vietnam inherited was particularly elitist. Further disruption in the development of the accounting profession came about because of constant warfare and foreign political influences. The end result is that Vietnam has reproduced a system, which in many ways is reflective of a French colonial past. Next, Bourdieuan's Framework will be utilised to explain the disparity in the accounting profession.

3. Bourdieu's Framework

Bourdieu's Framework of Fields, Habitus and Capital is best illustrated in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Connection of Field, Habitus and Capital Accounting field-Arena of Conflict



Source: Compiled by authors

3.1 Fields

There are many different fields of practice such as Business, Health, Education. Within each field, different positions are defined and distinguished relationally and defended with a position's history (such as bookkeepers and professional accountants). These positions are embodied and objectified through practical accomplishment

(Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (2000) describes field as a “form of life” which has its own contextualised patterning of practices. However, the advancement and distinction of position within a field is not a simple and straightforward process.

According to Chua and Poullaos (1998), the neo-Weberian school consists of a plurality of contending group-classes, status groups and parties, whose economic, social and political interests could differ or overlap. In addition, struggles for domination go on within each of these fields of social action, as well as among them (Chua & Poullaos, 1998). Ramirez (2001) mobilises Bourdieu’s notion of ‘Field and Capital’ to account for the failure of French accounting practitioners in achieving social closure before the Second World War. In particular, he points to the ongoing lobbying of large companies which viewed the creation of a profession of auditors endowed with public status as a threat to their discretionary power, not least with respect to the construction of financial statements and accounts. Ramirez (2001) also shows that the legitimacy attached to a particular position in a professional field depends on collective actions. Ramirez (2001) further claims that the notion of Field is more flexible because the forms of determination and domination that it induces are less constraining for individuals. The constitution and evolution of professional fields are in this way related to their embedding in the broader mechanisms that establish (in each and every society), hierarchies among bodies of knowledge and practice, and determine the way capital accumulated in one field is transformed into assets that can be used in another field (Ramirez, 2001). The concept of “*expert-comptable*” was in origin borrowed from other professional fields.

Neu, Friesen and Everett (2003) suggest that in comparison with prior work on professionalization, one of the benefits of Bourdieu’s theorisation is to illuminate the constitution of solidarity within professional fields. Such prior work brings into consideration the writing of Marx and Engels (1994), Marx (1976, 1978, 1981), and Mao (2007) who were the original inspiration for the French writers Sartre and Bourdieu. Solidarity is instrumental in justifying the existence of professional associations in the eyes of their members, but they also embody knowledge and timeless ideals which remove from visibility, questions concerning professional privileges and lack of access to the profession for those like the “*teneur de livre*” (bookkeepers) whose “capital” is deemed insufficient to merit professional status.

In summary, the concept of Field which is mainly used by Bourdieu (1986), is a social arena where people in different positions manoeuvre and struggle to gain capital. Bourdieu categorises the capital into four types: economic, cultural, social and symbolic that will be discussed in the next section.

3.2 *Capital*

Bourdieu's (1986) framework of capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) provides a mechanism to explain and predict how new knowledge transpires within a field. Economic capital involves wealth. Bookkeepers who earn a fraction of what professional accountants earn exemplify the lack of economic capital. Economic capital allows a purchase of social capital and culture capital. Culture capital embodies knowledge, and academic qualifications. Social capital involves social relations and inheritance coming from families, schools, and businesses. Again in Vietnam, the difference between professional accountants and bookkeepers would be marked by differences in education in schools and in universities. Symbolic capital is a combination of economic, cultural and social capital being a form of power demanding recognition and reference. Symbolic capital produces changes in the given hierarchy and facilitates self-awareness among individuals exposed to its form. For example: the appearance of the Big 4 firms in Vietnam possessing considerable symbolic capital create a critical self-awareness with a field comprising small accounting firms and bookkeepers (Shenkin and Coulson, 2007)

Bourdieu has theorised the link between professional closure and social capital (McPhail, Paisey, & Paisey, 2010). Bourdieu (1990) illustrates such fields as being artistic, literary, scientific or academic. They are social spaces in which individuals possess unequal social capital, which may be subject to change. Bookkeepers and professional accountants in Vietnam illustrate this difference in the vast gap in social capital. Thus the field is never stable due to the inequality of capital between bookkeepers and professional accountants in Vietnam.

Bourdieu (2000, p. 243) points out that becoming a member of a recognised profession is not easy. "...in preparatory suffering or painful test. He must be personally invested in his investiture, that is, engage his devotion..." After years of suffering "painful" examinations the trainee accountant may be granted membership and become a professional accountant. According to Bourdieu (1986), examination plays a part

in the reproduction of all three types of capital. Thus, membership of accounting professions may be a product of the middle class monopoly of capital, which allows their offspring to pass examinations and achieve professional status. Individuals are positioned in a field according to the capital available to them: bookkeepers would have little capital while Big 4 accounting partners would have much more capital. Having any of four types of capital would enable individuals to affect the range of possible strategies and actions in a struggle to gain ascendancy in a respected field. In this way, capital creates identity.

In summary, Bourdieu has identified four types of capital: economic, social, cultural and symbolic. There is a gap in such capital between Vietnamese bookkeepers and professional accountants. By going through “painful” tests, professional accountants obtain professional qualifications together with achieving some types of capital stated above. Capital is what differentiates bookkeepers from professional accountants. Besides this concept of capital, there are concepts of *habitus*. Field and *habitus* involve social inheritance and habit, which are demonstrated by individuals in a defined field. Following the discussion of the concepts of capital and field, the next section discusses the concept of *habitus* that individuals bring into their professional field.

3.3 *Habitus*

Bourdieu (1977) describes *habitus* as the predictable way that individuals connect with the social world. It also provides a set of “operating principles” (p.18) of behaving in different situations. Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 1998, and 2000) indicates that vocational practice is facilitated by skilful individuals. Regardless of whether a person is a café waiter, an accountant, a politician, a nurse or a school teacher, they understand and respond to the range of possible behaviours that may be involved in their workplace situation. In other words, they absorb the position and know how to perform it. Bourdieu calls it “practical knowledge” which can only be understood from a study of action. It has a logic of ordinariness that is, a combination of principles and convenience (Bourdieu, 1977, p.109). In addition, daily issues may be dealt with in an acceptable or predictable manner which Bourdieu (1977, p.72-77) calls “disposition”.

There are certain circumstances, which are repeated across an individual’s occupational life that would create a basis for them to deal with such circumstances when they occur. In general, practices are reproduced through *habitus* with amalgamation or incarnation of

the logic that facilitates practical functioning in various situations – our bodies have been appropriated by the social world, and at the same time, are enabled to appropriate the social world through the mastery of practices (Bourdieu, 1977). Practice and position in a field mutually inform and sustain each other. Bourdieu's view is that when practices are enacted or re-enacted, a history of the position is then connected or communicated. Achievements facilitate communication between *habitus* and habitat, between disposition and position, between one's historical development and the objectified history informing one's situation (Bourdieu, 2000). Practices and position tend to inform each other over time but they are often taken for granted by individuals. The logic of practices is internalised as second nature, and could be forgotten as history (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu refers to this as doxical relationship. Essentially, when dominant practices are naturalised and appear as a self-evident or basic and a common way of organising various aspects of personal and professional lives, it is referred to as *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1977; 1998). For example: the practice of 'fair value accounting' in accounting is a practice which has been normalised through the association of the embodied histories of accounting practitioners with the objective structures of the Accounting discipline.

Despite this homogeneity attributed to the *habitus* of individuals over time, Bourdieu (1977) also acknowledges the differences in personal styles of individuals occupying a particular position. For example: One Chief Financial Officer (CFO) may have a different personal life style from another. Style is considered to be the personal stamp or deviation in relation to the habitual practices of a time or class, resulting from the different social trajectory or ordering of life experiences of practitioners (Bourdieu, 1990). For example: accountants who work in a large, city based company may have a different style when compared with those who work in a small, rural company. In addition, the life-styles of professional accountants such as CPAs or CAs may be different from bookkeepers. Such differences in styles result from differences in capital and *habitus* within the same field. Furthermore, there is also a growing gap between individuals and their expectations, as their capital increases. This facilitates changes in *habitus* as they discover new ways of perceiving, recognising and behaving, or engaging in a reflective communication with a series of past positions that they have occupied (Bourdieu, 2000). This may result in a growing and conscious re-awareness of the normalised nature of the *doxic* experience that has been embedded in the day to day operation.

Habitus organises practices and perception of practices within a field. These perceptions are internalised by the individuals themselves (Bourdieu, 1984). One criticism involves the extent to which *habitus* changes because of the experiences individuals can have throughout their lives (Everett, 2002).

Bourdieu (1990) considered individuals will never know what they are doing because their practices largely reflect their *habitus*. Malsch, Gendron, and Grazzini (2011) argue:

Reliance on the concept of habitus would allow, for example, an examination of the ways in which French accountants' life experiences and trajectories influence their dispositions and interpretive schemes which, in turn, shape how they choose and elaborate their tactics from the repertoires of contention that prevail within their field and society (p. 218)

According to Neu, Ocampo, and Graham (2006), the notion of Field, Capital and *Habitus* are useful in understanding the static as well as the dynamic aspects of the institutional field. Whereas fields are seen as theoretical spaces constructed by discourse, Bourdieu (1998) refers to *habitus* as a real political space constituted by action. The discourse and position-gaining authority in a field, determine the boundary conditions for action play out in the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1998). Thus, when professional accountants seize the discourse and gain authority in the field of accounting, the boundary conditions may be set to exclude bookkeepers by a process of professional closure.

In summary, Bourdieu's analysis of social identity and his efforts to theorise the way individuals internalise the social world are based on the concept of *habitus*. *Habitus* provides individuals with a disposition to accept their role and position within a field. Such acceptance enables social closure through power and domination to flourish within a field.

4. Domination and Conflict: the struggle for social closure

The social world is characterised by individuals holding different positions within the power structure. Perceptions of the power structure are derived from symbolic power, which promotes a hierarchy as legitimate (Everett, 2002). Symbolic power is embodied in the *habitus* and contributes to the reproduction of domination. Such reproduction is assisted by *habitus* as individuals are conditioned to expectations, which reinforce their domination. Bourdieu's (1990) theory recognises symbolic interaction between *habitus* and social structure, which connects relations

of power with the social and institutional agent of domination. Neu et al. (2006) illustrates how accounting technology materialised in a social world, as it is involved in a process of domination. Bourdieu's theory involves domination and uncovers the hidden mechanisms as to how domination is reproduced. Like Foucault, Bourdieu is interested in unmasking "taken for granted" power relations and to illustrate how power is maintained and the new possibilities of power arrangements that can become possible. Furthermore, Bourdieu considered research has two important roles: to reveal the hidden mechanism of domination and to publish their research beyond the academic field (Neu et al., 2006). According to Malsch et al. (2011), Bourdieu has allowed researchers to gain a better understanding of Accounting as a field that participates in a process of domination, especially with regard to professionalisation and accounting regulation. With respect to professionalisation, many studies refer to the quest for occupational closure. For Bourdieu, closure theory is focused on how a profession seeks market dominance by monopolising social and economic opportunities and by restricting membership (Chua and Poullaos, 1998). The history of accounting in Vietnam has been dominated by the French intellectual idea of professional closure resulting in a gap between bookkeepers (*teneurs de livres*) and professional accountants (*experts comptables*) - the former being excluded. What is original in a Vietnamese context is that French elitism - once successfully rooted in Vietnamese society - survived the departure of the French and subsequent influences of other foreign systems, despite the latter's communistic ideals. The irony is that while Vietnam became a communist state, elitism in the accounting profession remained, in spite of France relaxing its former elitist model.

How then did the colonial legacy of social closure survive? Bourdieu argues that the emergent patterning of practices in a field is mediated by the way in which individuals mobilise various forms of capital in a bid to impose their definitions on a situation. In Vietnam, those possessing capital in the Accounting field are the professional accountants occupying positions of power and prestige especially those partners in the big accounting firms and audit firms. Different positions in a field will be distinguished by their varying access to these forms of capital as exemplified between the bookkeeper and the professional accountant. Position in a field establishes identity. According to Cooper, Ezzamel and Willmott (2011), central to Bourdieu's theory is the idea of domination and the relationship between the dominator and the dominated. The field is a site of ongoing struggle. The guiding principle

of Bourdieuan theory is the idea that social communication is seldom a process of information sharing. Instead information seems to reflect an asymmetrical relationship between individuals who constantly manoeuvre and struggle over limited resources (Shenkin & Coulson, 2007)

According to Bourdieu (1998), fields are characterised by force and struggles, where individuals attempt to create a dominant mode of practice. For Bourdieu (1977), the struggle is played out between the dominated who wish to challenge *doxa* and the dominant who wish to defend it. Practices, which survive such challenges, become part of the acceptable discourse of a field: workable sets of practices dominating alternative systems. In Vietnam, such domination is exercised by social closure taking the form of an accounting profession with very limited entry.

Xu and Xu (2008) compared traditional bankers and modern bankers when their *habitus* became subjected to the project of standardising bank accounting terminology. Chinese bankers, familiar with English, were perceived to be modern and not as backward and archaic as their colleagues who continued to use the old language (Xu and Xu, 2008). Similarly, bookkeepers in Vietnam operating the legacy of the French/Chinese accounting may be perceived as archaic in contrast to accountants familiar with international accounting standards.

In summary, Bourdieu's theory is about the idea of power and domination; together with the relationship between dominator and dominated. Bourdieu explores the attempts and struggles of individuals to create a dominant mode of practice. Domination and power provide individuals with capital (e.g. symbolic capital) and enhance their identities. Domination facilitates the process of professional closure as those with power restrict membership to create scarcity and disparity between members of the Vietnamese accounting profession. The following section discusses how professional accounting bodies can add to social closure.

5. Professional Accounting Bodies

Lee (1995) argues that the accounting profession is established "to gain market control of an occupational service by means of monopolistic exclusion of individuals deemed unworthy or unqualified to provide it" (p. 49). By contrast, Bledstein (1976) observes that organised professions are the means by which the middle class exercised cultural control and

established its social status. (Richardson, 1987) In the same vein, Johnson (1972) and Freidson (1986) maintain that the development of a profession is a result of cultural and historical forces. Earlier, Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933) attributed the development of the profession to unselfish motives such as a desire to serve the public interest. By contrast, Larson (1977) argues that professions are organised to gain market control of their respective field of service by establishing monopolies, entry pre-requisites, and examinations. It would seem that market power and market control are strong motivations for forming professional bodies. However, because Vietnam emerged from a French colonial background, which imposed an elitist and closed structure on colonial society, it would seem that Bledstein (1976)'s observation is most relevant with regard to middle class control and the establishment of social status.

Professions are social historical constructs according to the neo-Weberian school (Berlant, 1975; Larson, 1977; Macdonald, 1985) developed around strategies of social closure. According to Macdonald (1985), the followers of Max Weber have utilised the concept of social closure to explain how social classes and status are established and maintained, and how collective social mobility is attained. Furthermore, Macdonald (1985) considered the important part of the process of closure as being within the professional occupations and cemented by government registration. Such closure, as formally occurred in France and later by colonisation in Vietnam, is employed to monopolise economic social rewards by the institutionalisation of accounting. However, for Bourdieu (1978, 1989, and 1990) the concept of professional closure includes intellectual closure and can be seen as operational in a French context within a concept of "*expert-comptable*". It is the employment of the French concept of intellectual elitism to which Bourdieu refers, that makes his theories become the most relevant to explain the external influences on the emergence of the accounting profession in Vietnam and its social closure and disparity.

In France and its colonies, the institutionalisation of 'profession' was decided by the Government which places itself at the centre of professional closure. In this context of closed professions, Bourdieu (1978, 1989, and 1990) has developed the notion of fields which are a network of social and intellectual relations and organisational practises. Society according to Bourdieu is a series of interrelated and semi-autonomous fields. These fields are made up of individuals with different positions who struggle and compete for power, status, and

money. Individuals within a field seek a process of closure and a way to constitute their legitimacy. Such legitimacy according to Bourdieu (1980) is attained by the possession of capital specifically, economic, social or cultural capital. In the professional field, legitimacy is the outcome of collective action that is the product of internal conflict and by mimicking other professional bodies; such as in France where accountants modelled their institutions on the legal and engineering professions. It was even suggested that accountants in France be called accounting engineers, although as Ramirez (2001) points out, such imitations ensure inferiority in a hierarchy of professional fields. The low prestige of Accounting, derived in part from it being educationally ignored by the *Grande Ecole* (Ramirez, 2001). France has a dual university system: the *Universite's* and *Grande Ecoles*. *Grande Ecoles* is a "great school" whose graduates will be secured to have an elite degree and a piece of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1996).

Between 1880 and 1920, financial accounting experts with high social capital such as top civil servants, economists, and leading academics became experts in accounting (known as "*experts-comptables*") (Ramirez, 2001). Most of the experts were graduates of prestigious *Grande Ecoles*. The experts were careful to distinguish themselves from those involved in accounting practice, especially from the inferior "*teneurs de livres*" or door to door bookkeepers who serve small businesses with basic bookkeeping. French accountants built their professional fields by constructing the distinction between the "*experts-comptables*" and "*teneurs de livres*" who work in industry (Ramirez, 2001). In 1912 the "*experts-comptables*" formed a professional association in Paris; they were careful to exclude the unworthy i.e. those without social capital. In 1914 the membership was still only about 100 members because of the restriction of the membership. However, after the First World War there was a great demand for accountants, who then began to form their own small associations. In 1922, there were no less than 25 associations of practitioners working in industry calling themselves different types of accountants. In 1920, the practices of the "*teneur de livre*" developed due to the increase in tax rules. Eventually the "*teneurs de livres*" established their own association called "*societe-teneurs de livres*" in 1938. Ramirez (2001) comments that small businesses preferred to use the service of the "*teneurs de livres*" even though the work of the "*teneurs de livres*" was considered superficial by the elite "*experts-comptables*". In summary, France developed and exported into Vietnam these distinctions among accountants: the elites "*experts-comptables*" (very few of them worked

in Vietnam); the “*teneurs de livres*”. During the French colonial era in Vietnam, the French established no accounting profession or society, and tended to use accountants from France for their large enterprises. During their time in Vietnam, Bui et al.. (2011) finds:

During the colonial rule, bookkeeping and accounting in a majority of French businesses in Vietnam was directly handed by the French, using the French accounting system... To assist them in detailed bookkeeping, the French trained those Vietnamese who worked for them in the company on how to write numbers neatly and tidily to be able to do sums easily and accurately (p. 9).

In addition, a Vietnamese bookkeeper who used to do bookkeeping jobs under French colonisation in 1930s claims:

There were very few Vietnamese “experts-comptables” who graduated from “commerciale” school and this was in contrast with large number of Vietnamese bookkeepers who were responsible for writing receipts of “mandate” in Indochina (interview dated 3 July 2011)

Even though the French have left Vietnam, their legacy has been naturally incorporated into the Vietnamese accounting system as well as in society. Such a legacy can be seen from the formation of a small “*société*” similar to the “*teneurs de livres*” in France and it was called “*Câu lạc bộ kế toán trưởng*” by Vietnamese bookkeepers (Ho, 2010). In the past, such “*société*” was not a profession in that, similar to the French system, it drafted no standards since accounting standards were developed by the Government. According to some senior members of the VAA, the VAA is not fully considered as an accounting profession similar to those in Western world. It is perceived of as an “association of social occupation” because there is no clear regulation and direction established for the operation of the VAA. Accountants may join the VAA and pay substantial fees and enjoy the social capital it provides by means of a fee based membership.

6. Conclusion

This paper shows how Vietnam’s colonial past has left its legacy strongly entrenched and how the accounting profession in Vietnam has organised itself using the French concept of intellectual elitism of social closure to restrict membership. Unable (until comparatively

recently) to develop its own accounting system, various influences were imported from French, Chinese, Soviet Union and American accounting practices. These subsequent influences have delayed the development of the profession during a period when - in France - membership of the accounting profession widened. But in Vietnam such professional development was never achieved as the Chinese and then the Soviet Union imposed their communistic accounting systems. However, when these foreign influences departed, Vietnam resurrected the old French system of social closure with its elitist traditions and divisive status of "*expert comptable*" and "*teneurs de livres*". In addition, the accounting profession in Vietnam - like their French counterpart - is not an autonomous body. It is simply a voluntary association. Just as in France, all accounting decisions are made by the Ministry of Finance. Possibly, partly for this reason and the high fees of membership, many bookkeepers do not see the importance of belonging to the professional accounting body and hence their apparent contentment with this social closure and disparity. The Bourdieuan concept of *habitus* explains such contentment. Moreover, because of the fees of membership of the VAA, it is confined largely to professional accountants who have in Bourdieuan terms 'symbolic capital'. But change is coming as the UK based profession body ACCA and CPA Australia begin to expand their membership in Vietnam. It remains to be seen if these invasive Western professional bodies will dominate the field of accounting, or whether the local accounting profession will mimic their practices and expand its membership.

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