

Field Management Research in Vietnam: Lessons for Navigating Social, Cultural, and Data Challenges



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DOI: 10.26573/2021.15.1.1

Volume 15, Number 1

January 2021, pp. 1-19

The paper examines the often-difficult processes and procedures for conducting field management research in Vietnam. Researchers must understand institutional and cultural barriers to research, manage relationships with host institutions and gatekeepers, request data, negotiate mutual benefits for research participants, and deal with the language barrier. Navigating these issues requires a good understanding of, and – most importantly – sensitivity to the Vietnamese cultural principles of kinship, reciprocity, harmony, and face. Recognition of these social imperatives will help researchers appreciate the subtle ways Vietnamese people communicate and understand how easy it can be to misunderstand or offend them. By describing and analyzing Vietnamese culture, education, and business practices, and reporting the personal experiences of several researchers, this article clarifies the conditions necessary for conducting fieldwork in Vietnam and more generally in cross-national field research.

Keywords: Emerging Market Economies, Vietnam, Vietnamese Management, Field Research

1. Introduction

Emerging countries are no longer solely suppliers of cheap labor. Instead, by redesigning business processes to do things better and faster than their rivals in the West, they are becoming hotbeds of innovation. Increasingly, then, companies in the developed world will find much to learn from their Asian rivals' management ideas and practices. Accessing and understanding these practices is the object of field management research, as defined by Edmondson and McManus "systematic studies that rely on the collection of original data in real organizations" (2007, pp. 9-10). By studying real people, real problems, and real organizations, field researchers generate new knowledge and insights into the application of theories, concepts, and techniques in varied settings. Moreover, field management research in different geographic regions, especially emerging countries where companies are advancing new techniques, can highlight differences and variations in best practices that may be of considerable importance to both practitioners and management scholars the world over. Unfortunately, field management research in Southeast Asia is not easy and guidelines for conducting it are not readily available. This paper helps fill this breach

by recommending strategies to help new researchers planning to do fieldwork in Southeast Asian emerging market economies, and in particular in Vietnam.

Vietnam is one of the fastest growing economies in Southeast Asia, offering foreign investors low-cost production sites, and a domestic market of over 97 million consumers. With over fifty percent of the population under the age of 35, it has a strong and vibrant workforce that has powered the country's rapid growth and emergence onto the global stage. In addition, Vietnam has one of the largest labor forces (57.5 million) in Southeast Asia and one of Asia's lowest wages (\$216 per month) (U. T. D. Nguyen, 2018). Politically, Vietnam is stable. The Worldwide Governance Indicators project assessed Vietnam at 0.20 on a global governance index that ranges from -2.5 (weak) to 2.5 (strong) (Kaufmann & Kraay, 2018). In comparison many Asian countries scored lower: the Philippines -1.12, India -0.9, Thailand -0.73, Indonesia -0.53, China -0.26, Cambodia 0.11, Malaysia 0.24, and Laos 0.42.

All this notwithstanding, academics have focused little research on management in Vietnam, and to date researchers have not analyzed or discussed the process of doing management fieldwork there, though its specific challenges have been noted (see e.g., Dinh, Igel, & Laosirihongthong, 2006; P. A. Nguyen & Robinson, 2015; Tran & Jeppesen, 2016). Likewise, researchers have explained the difficulties of doing social science fieldwork in Vietnam (see e.g., Boggiano, Harris, & Nguyen, 2015; Bonnin, 2010; Gillen, 2016; Scott, Miller, & Lloyd, 2006; Turner, 2013) and more broadly, the limitations of doing management fieldwork in emerging market economies (Hoskisson, Eden, Lau, & Wright, 2000). Given the obstacles to western-style research noted by these scholars, exploring and understanding ways to negotiate the specific hurdles encountered in Vietnam will not only help those hoping to work there, but also open the door for similar research in other countries of Southeast Asia.

This paper explains the processes and procedures for management research developed during six months of fieldwork spread over four extended trips to Vietnam. The fieldwork is part of an ongoing multiyear research project to study continuous improvement practices in Vietnam, in particular the mechanisms that Vietnamese organizations use to improve quality and productivity. Data were collected from two questionnaires of 660 respondents, as well as extensive interviews of 130 executives, managers, and employees at twelve of Vietnam's leading companies. Information was also gathered from conversations with over 400 business leaders, academics, and expatriates, many of whom have worked and lived in Vietnam for over 40 years.

The paper begins with an overview of the current research environment in Vietnam, and then describes the specific difficulties of doing research there. The subsequent sections reflect on the strategies adopted in the research approach, management of complex relationships with research partners and participants, and delicate negotiations for access to case companies, people, and data. Finally, the paper proposes ways to overcome these challenges.

2. Overview of Research Culture and Environment

Following Vietnam's *Đổi Mới* (renewal) market-based reforms of the mid-1980s and the subsequent influx of foreign investment, the country is emerging as a fierce

player in the global business stage. The abundant low-cost labor of one of the youngest workforces in the world, and a literacy rate of 98.5 percent underpin Vietnam's attraction as a global manufacturing center. Today firms such as Samsung, Intel, and LG develop and manufacture high-tech products in the country's eight technology parks. Samsung Electronics has made Vietnam its largest smart-phone production base by investing more than \$17 billion in eight factories and a research and development (R&D) center in the country (Vu, 2018). Vietnam produces one tenth of the world's smart phones (Eckardt, Mishra, & Dinh, 2018), and is the second biggest exporter of them. But even though the United States is a major investor in Vietnam and its largest export market, and despite the international business community's immense interest in the country, Vietnam remains one of the least-researched regions in Asia.

While this lack of management research in Vietnam is an acute problem for the country (P. A. Nguyen & Robinson, 2015), there are good reasons for it. Vietnamese business schools were founded primarily as teaching institutions. Research is not a priority and is often actively discouraged. Faculty members are hampered by the requirement to get government permission to publish their work in international journals (Napier, Harvey, & Usui, 2008). This is difficult because both government officials and academics view many international research practices as new and controversial. Examples include (1) choosing one's research topics instead of being assigned them by government ministries; (2) choosing one's collaborators rather than being assigned to a project; (3) conducting analytical rather than descriptive research; and (4) jointly contributing to research instead of having a few individuals do the work with little to no acknowledgement (A. K. T. Le & Hayden, 2017; Napier et al., 2008). To make matters worse, a government directive, known as Decision 97, has restricted research in Vietnam to 317 approved topics, and banned all public discussions of unsanctioned subjects (Stocking, 2009). Similar restrictions have been noted in China, where the Party defines which topics academics and informants can and cannot talk about (Heimer & Thøgersen, 2006).

The socialist education system maintains its influence through the older generation of academics, who were trained in the former Soviet Union and are generally comfortable in their state jobs, and therefore uninterested in academic research or in new ways of doing things (Overland, 2008; Scott et al., 2006). As a result, only 1226 of the academics teaching at Vietnam's universities and colleges were recognized as meeting standards for professorships (Tien Phong, 2018), and even Vietnam's best academics have published few articles in international peer-reviewed journals (A. K. T. Le & Hayden, 2017). Table 1 presents a summary of statistics on higher education in Vietnam (Ministry of Education and Training, 2020).

Would-be researchers also face problems resulting from the chronic underfunding of universities and research institutes. Often, they have only rudimentary teaching materials and facilities. The curriculum focuses solely on textbooks, emphasizes rote memorization, and works towards the country's incessant and high-stake examinations rather than the problem-solving and critical-thinking skills that would prepare students to work in teams developing creative solutions to real-life problems (Temmerman, 2019). Universities not only lack the resources to address the needs of the country's present and future managers who are in dire need of international business education and training, but, ironically, offer courses in many irrelevant

subjects (Edwards & Phan, 2014). These problems can have a serious impact. Despite striving to participate in the globalized market, Vietnam “will lose its precarious niche in the skill-hungry global knowledge economy unless its students gain the real-world competencies and life skills, that typify other countries’ young achievers,” (Bayly, 2014, pp. 508-509).

Table 1 *Statistics on Higher Education in Vietnam 2018-2019*

	Total	State Schools	Non-State Schools
Universities	237	172	65
Undergraduate Students	1,526,111	1,261,529	264,582
Graduate Students	108,134	95,464	12,670
Faculty	73,312	56,985	16,327
- Assistant Professor Level	519	379	140
- Professor Level	4,139	3,525	614
- With Ph.D. Degree	21,106	17,336	3,770
- With Master's Degree	44,705	35,123	9,582
- With Bachelor's Degree	7,489	4,516	2,973

Source: Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam

Low pay as a result of underfunding is one of the most debilitating problems for academics in Vietnam. The monthly cost of living ranges from \$600-\$900 in Hanoi to \$750-\$1300 in Ho Chi Minh City, but academics earn on average only \$1,050 a month, and so are forced to supplement their income by doing other work including teaching evening classes at private schools, translating, consulting, or running their own small businesses (A. K. T. Le & Hayden, 2017; Zink, 2009). Moreover, because an academic career does not guarantee sufficient income to support a family, those who choose it find themselves at odds with the fundamental Vietnamese social and cultural imperative that people should marry and have children. This is a major problem for men, and even more so for women because female grantees earned 50 percent less from their research than male grantees (Zink, 2009). Combined with low salaries, heavy teaching loads, and the appeal of other jobs, this situation helps explain why many universities are also understaffed.

A further explanation of the shortage of management research is that it is generally difficult for academics, particularly foreigners, to investigate conditions in Vietnamese companies because the country’s culture of corporate secrecy makes it hard to access reliable data without powerful and influential contacts and endorsements (Dinh et al., 2006; Gainsborough, 2007; P. A. Nguyen & Robinson, 2015). Foreign researchers have also been discouraged by the lack of a shared language, which prevents them from connecting with most Vietnamese (Napier, 2006; P. A. Nguyen & Robinson, 2010; Simonet, 2008).

The lack of a research culture in Vietnam is equally evident in the limited research and development conducted in industry. Aside from R&D centers in large state-owned corporations and in foreign-invested enterprises (e.g., Samsung’s new \$220 million R&D center), research and development is still a peripheral activity in the

private and public sectors (The World Bank, 2014). Furthermore, disseminating research so that it can be widely beneficial is difficult as Vietnam has few connections among universities, research institutes, and industry (A. K. T. Le & Hayden, 2017; Vo, Nguyen, & Dinh, 2018). The lack of collaborative links further inhibits research in the country. Table 2 summarizes the reasons for the lack of a research culture in Vietnam and its subsequent problems.

Table 2 *Reasons for the Lack of a Research Culture in Vietnam*

Reasons	Resulting Problems
Underfunding of universities and research institutes	Rudimentary teaching materials and facilities
Out-dated curriculum	Curriculum emphasizes memorization necessary for examinations rather than problem-solving and critical-thinking skills needed in a modern business
Low pay	Academics have to supplement income by taking other work such as teaching, translating, consulting, and running their own business
Culture of corporate secrecy	Difficult to access reliable data without powerful and influential contacts and endorsements
Language barrier	Foreign researchers are discouraged by the lack a shared language, which prevents them from connecting with most Vietnamese
Lack of collaborative links between universities, research institutes, and industry	Only large state-owned corporations and foreign-invested enterprises conduct R&D and its benefits are limited to themselves and is not disseminated to the larger business community

3. Lessons for Field Researchers

While field management research in emerging market economies is an area of considerable interest to scholars, the research journey can be messy and fraught with complex relations and interests, logistical hurdles, and delicate negotiations. Fieldworkers must maintain good relationships with host institutions and other gatekeepers, offer benefits to companies that participate in the research, manage the language barrier, and sensitize themselves to Vietnamese culture, in which kinship, reciprocity, harmony, and face are vital. Recognizing these imperatives helps researchers appreciate the subtle ways Vietnamese people communicate and how easy it can be to misunderstand or offend them – a necessary skill when navigating the research landscape in Vietnam.

Seek Sponsorships

In Vietnam, the kinship system has strong patrilineal elements, and strict attention is paid to hierarchy and seniority (Haines, 2002). An individual is expected to defer to

anyone of higher status as determined by kinship, descent, gender, and age (Do, Quilty, Milner, & Longstaff, 2007). Every person has a place within the family, the village, and in the wider society, and that place determines duties, responsibilities, and privileges (Borton, 2000). “Right” relationships underlie social dynamics, and are so omnipresent that they are critical to getting things done in Vietnam. Access to companies, managers, and information depends on whom one knows and relationships with them. The support of a host institution that can provide introductions to case companies and solicit their support is therefore essential (P. A. Nguyen, 2015; Scott et al., 2006). In addition, host organizations help researchers find key informants, obtain government approval, and assess the cultural appropriateness of research materials (Boggiano et al., 2015).

An introduction in Vietnam is a form of sponsorship. This practice developed during times of war, when secret groups operating within the resistance network depended on those who introduced newcomers to take responsibility for their behavior, whether good or ill, because any mistakes could lead to arrest, torture, loss of information, or worse (Borton, 2000). Elsewhere in Asia similar situations pertain. In Chinese society, access to goods, services, and people is contingent on whether an individual is an insider versus an outsider (Joy, 2001), and good contacts are often necessary prerequisite for fieldwork there (Heimer & Thøgersen, 2006). In Japan also, researchers generally form an affiliation with a local university whose faculty can provide crucial introductions and give advice (Hardacre, 2003).

Another problem is that in Vietnam the study of social sciences is still in its early stages, so researchers and respondents have difficulty establishing trust. The lack of a research culture makes most top managers uncertain about how frank and open they should be. Vietnamese managers and executives are highly unlikely to answer a questionnaire unless they know the researchers and understand how they will use the information (Dinh, Igel, & Laosirihongthong, 2010; T. V. Nguyen & Bryant, 2004). Many have a policy of not responding to questionnaires at all (T. C. Le & Truong, 2005). Therefore, host institutions are instrumental in providing high-level official endorsement of the research and its goals, in helping to gain access to case companies, and in offering an empowering environment that encourages managers and employees to participate and respond candidly.

I made my first connection with my host institution through a serendipitous event. At the time, I was a Ph.D. student interested in studying Vietnamese business and management, and therefore eager to go to Vietnam for fieldwork. My Ph.D. advisor suggested that I find a host institution that would provide administrative support and research guidance. Since I was not familiar with any Vietnamese business schools, I typed “business schools in Vietnam” into the Google search engine, and my host institution was the first on the list of results. After learning about its programs and people, my advisor and I contacted the Dean of the Business School and arranged to visit. It is not, of course, a requirement to have one’s Ph.D. advisor present the first time one visits the host institution, but I found that my advisor’s presence established the importance of my research and gave me the academic credibility that as a student I was lacking. His physical presence accorded with the Vietnamese tradition of “*gửi gắm*” (entrusting) someone who is in your care to another person. This was a powerful gesture because the faculty of the host institution were being asked to take

my advisor's place in his absence. As a result, they took me under their wings and helped me make the right connections.

While academic introductions are helpful in many aspects of field management research, they may not be enough. It is critical for the researcher to identify and tap the help of hidden influencers within the local community. Often informal influencers hold huge power and can help new field researchers navigate their way. These are the people who are deeply embedded and highly involved in their community, and who have an expansive reach to people in different facets of it. In Vietnam, these individuals will not be found sitting up on the platform or in the limelight. Instead, they are "working on the edges" and "no one on the outside can figure out who they are" (Ashwill, 2005, p. 106). Researchers need to find and connect to them. This is especially important if the researcher is still a student, who will be unable to secure access by trading on credentials as a scholar and teacher, but may succeed by meeting informal influencers and explaining research goals and objectives to them. Such people may not be well positioned to give official approval for fieldwork or set up company participation, but they can help the researcher establish informal associations that may eventually produce necessary connections to the organization of interest and its leadership.

Identifying influencers is an important and time-consuming task that involves building a network of connections with as many organizations and people as possible. Being alert to unforeseen opportunities is an enormous help in this goal. For my research, I conducted interviews and discussions with people knowledgeable about Vietnam. Among them were the following:

- American and Vietnamese academics who have done research in Vietnam;
- Directors and members of business associations;
- Directors and members of community development;
- Directors of education institutes;
- Directors of chambers of commerce;
- Directors and affiliates of government agencies;
- Current and former consulate generals;
- Local and foreign consultants and trainers; and
- Prominent members of the expatriate community.

Each interviewee led me to another person who could be interviewed. As a result, by seeing the names that came up most often I developed a sense of the influencer network in the community, and whom I should connect with.

As a result of the many meetings listed above, I was introduced to one of the individuals who most influenced my research: an expatriate who has lived and worked in Vietnam since the 1960s and who therefore has extensive knowledge of the country. She has published several books on the experiences of the Vietnamese people so she was able to give me an abundance of ideas and helped me to better understand the Vietnamese business environment. Through this influencer – who is well-known in her circle, but not someone in the spotlight – I was introduced to other hidden influencers in the NGO/non-profit community. This eventually led me to the leaders of the International Labor Organization, who introduced me to senior members of a well-funded and -staffed trade organization that promotes business development in Vietnam. Through the organization, I gained access to seven case

companies which permitted me to: (1) conduct in-depth interviews with employees at different levels *ranging from* senior managers and frontline employees; (2) *directly observe* organizational operations; and (3) administer a survey on certain occasions.

I also had the good fortune to meet another member of the expatriate community who worked for a large U.S. corporation that does major outsourcing in Vietnam. Before this meeting, I had made numerous attempts to visit the company's Innovation and Training Center (located in Ho Chi Minh City), which provides its contract factories with in-depth training on using lean principles to enhance their business. The Center was housed in one of its contract manufacturing facilities so that students can interact directly with the shop floor work teams and thus learn by doing. The company's headquarters would not allow me to visit the production facility, claiming that they did not want to interrupt its operations. Even after I had visited the VP of Operations and several well-known academics and consultants on lean production had pled my case, I could not prevail. Nor could my new contact give me permission, but he did introduce me to a local consultant who eventually got me in. Knowing that I wanted to see the facility, he added me to a list of students he was taking there. The local consultant also invited me to participate in his projects, and this later resulted in finding case companies for my research.

During one of my research trips to Ho Chi Minh City, I had a chance meeting with another influencer, a Vietnamese-American educator and executive of a U.S. consulting company, who referred me to the senior management at a subsidiary of a large Japanese-owned company, who later allowed me to study the company.

These sponsors – host institutions and influencers – are well connected to industry and can expand the researcher's social network tremendously. Because they introduced me to members of the business community and its leaders, I gained access to the majority of my case companies and received positive responses when I asked them to participate in the research. Such sponsors also gave me much practical advice, sharpened my understanding of Vietnam's business environment, and prompted me to think more critically about various elements of my research.

Build Interpersonal Trust

Unlike the United States, Confucian societies such as Vietnam's are not adversarial societies based on contractual relationships but communities of trust based on the obligations inherent in the Vietnamese social structure (World Digital Library, 2014). All people have duties, responsibilities and privileges based on their place within the family and in the wider society (Borton, 2000).

To make headway in such a society, it is necessary to build trust. But in Vietnam this is complicated by the country's long history of conflicts with foreigners within and without its borders. These have left a history of uncertainty in daily life that encourages people not to trust others very easily (Le et al. 2007).

Even though contracts have legal binding in Vietnam, trust is the more important be-all and end-all for successful one-on-one relationships, including business relationships. Trust substitutes for the developed market institutions and legal infrastructure necessary to facilitate business transactions or, when necessary, to sanction defaulting partners (McMillan & Woodruff, 1999; T. V. Nguyen, 2005; V. T. Nguyen, Weinstein, & Meyer, 2005). Vietnamese managers are therefore skillful in purposefully building trust with new business partners (Rowley & Warner, 2008).

Researchers, too, must develop trust-building techniques because while introductions and sponsorships are necessary to gain access to companies and extend one's social network, they are not sufficient. Building interpersonal trust with host institutions, informants, executives and managers is equally important because it is critical to developing the "right" relationships necessary to getting things done and to achieve successful professional partnerships.

Trust-building can be a lengthy process because Vietnamese people need time to interact, observe and "test their working hypothesis about the degree of trust they give a person" (T. C. Le, Rowley, Truong, & Warner, 2007, p. 121). In such a relationship-based society it is not enough to fly in and fly out. Long-term the researcher needs to commit to the country and spend significant time there to prepare the ground and cultivate relationships. For example, the early stages of my fieldwork were spent developing relationships with host institutions and agencies and meeting with business leaders, managers, and members of the local community.

Developing trust with executives, managers, and informants at the case companies is equally important. Either through unstructured interviews, interactions with managers and staff members, and attendance at meetings and events, in Vietnam informal contacts and conversations are vital for two reasons. First, they let the company representatives and the researcher establish understanding and clarify expectations about the benefits of the research. Second, they give researchers the chance to build the right relationship that is so critical for achieving mutual confidence and ease of communication necessary to gather more information. Similarly, Turner (2013) observed that access to local individual ethnic minority voices depends on trust, respect, and humility. Wei (2006) found that Chinese respondents were forthcoming only after she and her respondents had developed mutual trust. Bestor *et al.* also found that introductions in Japan "involve the standard Japanese cultural practice of borrowing trust from other people in order to gain access to a new situation, which carries complex obligations to act responsibly and not misuse or damage the trust" (2003, p. 14).

In my experience, though emails and telephone conversations can be used to stay in touch their efficacy is limited. Leaving voicemails is impossible because Vietnamese cell phones lack the voicemail function. I also learned quickly that many of my contacts would rather text than answer the phone because they are always in meetings. I therefore only use emails to tell my contacts my itinerary when I am in Vietnam and to set up a tentative schedule during my stay. I use the telephone just to set up or confirm appointments and communicate other minor details.

Living in a communist country, people do not want to have anything written or recorded that could later be misconstrued or harm them in any way, so rich conversations and discussions can only occur face-to-face. Indeed, the smallness of many Vietnamese cities makes such face-to-face relationships the norm.

As in other Asian countries, eating plays an important role in Vietnamese culture because it brings people together. The importance of eating is illustrated by the range of meanings of the word *ăn* ("to eat"). It appears in a number of proverbs including *ăn kỹ no lâu, cày sâu tốt lúa* (literally: "eating carefully makes you feel full longer, ploughing deep is good for the rice"; meaning: "careful execution brings better results than hasty actions"). The word also has many semantic extensions such as *ăn ở* (literally: "eating living"; meaning: "to conduct oneself, to behave") and *ăn tết*

(literal: “eating New Year”; meaning: “to celebrate the New Year”). Therefore, I spent a good deal of my time enhancing relationships and trust by sharing meals. For example, I often met my contacts at the case companies at coffee shops for casual conversations and discussions on the purpose of my research. I also had meals with informants such as local consultants and expatriates to talk about the business environment in Vietnam and to gather their input about the direction of the research. During these meetings, we drank beer and ate local dishes. I also took part in a number of celebrations including attending a wedding, singing karaoke at a birthday party, and eating hot-pot on the terrace at a housewarming. These events gave us the opportunity to share what was happening in our lives, both professionally and personally, and helped build the empathy that paves the way to trust.

A history of prior relations and interactions transform an “under socialized relationship” by providing an informal social foundation for building trust (Schilke & Cook, 2013). A Vietnamese contact once told me, in Vietnam the first time you meet someone you are a stranger to them; the second time you become an acquaintance; and by the third time you are a friend. Small informal meetings and conversations are extremely useful in the metamorphosis from stranger to friend. This social etiquette is also practiced in the business environment. As Borton explains, “Like many Asians, Vietnamese engage their counterparts through casual conversation to build a relationship. Then and only then, can the discussion successfully approach business. Entering too soon violates trust-building; pushing too fast risks everything” (2000, p. 22). Extending trust leads to reciprocity (Luhman, 1979). When we trust others “they become more likely to behave in a trustworthy manner and to trust us in return” (Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006, p. 998).

Overcome the Language Barrier

The lack of a shared language may prevent foreign researchers from connecting with locals and communicating with Vietnamese managers and employees who are not proficient in English. The language barrier may even pose a challenge for *Việt Kiều*: a Vietnamese term that means Overseas Vietnamese and refers to a Vietnamese person – like myself – living outside the country in the Vietnamese diaspora. The Vietnamese language has evolved differently for those inside and outside of the country. Many terminologies I use are foreign to my colleagues in Vietnam. For example, I would use *sự sáng tạo* to translate “innovation,” but many of my colleagues use the term *sự đổi mới* which identifies the renewal/renovation goals of the market-based reforms of the 1980’s. According to *Trung Tâm Khoa Học Xã Hội Và Nhân Văn Quốc Gia*, Viện Ngôn Ngữ Học (National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities of Vietnam, Institute of Linguistics), the dictionary translation of “innovation” is *sự đổi mới* while “creativity” is *sự sáng tạo*.

On the other hand, there are many new vocabularies in Vietnam that have been created recently to compensate for the previous lack of business terminology including *dịch vụ chăm sóc khách hàng* (literally: “the service of taking care of the customers”; meaning: “customer service”), *khởi nghiệp* (“startup”), *nhà khởi nghiệp* (literal: “startup doer” hence “entrepreneur”), and *sự khởi nghiệp* (“entrepreneurship”). While some terms are better translated than others, they are now widely used in the news media. In addition, words such as “marketing”,

“coaching”, and “logistics” do not have literal translation, and so are widely used in their English forms. This is similar to the findings of Bestor *et al.* in Japan, “Even a researcher with the highest level of language training will find it necessary to master new terminological terrain; indeed, the specialized vocabularies and semantic domains of any Japanese institution or setting provide an enormous amount of basic social and cultural data that a fieldworker will need to master in order to understand the ethnographic site and the phenomenon under study” (2003, pp. 9-10).

To obviate the language issue, I hired two local research assistants: (1) a native Vietnamese English teacher in Ho Chi Minh City; and (2) a graduate student from the University of Languages and International Studies of the Vietnam National University in Hanoi. I hired two assistants rather than just one for a number of reasons. First, flying one assistant between Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi would have been very expensive. Secondly, having an assistant in each city meant that their accents were the same as the respondents and this made the respondents more comfortable during interviews. Neither assistant shared my field of study, but they were eager to learn about the research. Their lack of knowledge about my field may even have been a plus because they did not have any expectations from the respondents during the interviews. An assistant accompanied me to most company visits and interviews. By employing multiple assistants with different perspectives to collect and analyze data, I mitigated the internal validity problems suffered by qualitative researchers who work alone in the field (also, see e.g., Ebneyamini & Moghadam, 2018).

In addition, the research assistants helped me to navigate sensitive situations. Like other Asian cultures, the Vietnamese care passionately about *thể diện* or *sĩ diện* (“face”) (T. Q. T. Nguyen, 2015)– that is, the respect they receive from others (Jamieson, 1995). According to Ashwill (2005), the Vietnamese value face highly because it helps maintain respect and harmony in interpersonal relationships. While *mất mặt* (“loss of face”) is severe in any society, it is unbearable in Vietnam as evidenced by the Vietnamese expression: “Better die than to lose face” (Borton, 2000, p. 24). Thus, for example, during interviews the assistants and I avoided any phrases or dialogue that would expose respondents to the risks of losing face. The research assistants could push through sensitive topics such as the efficiency of their managers without shutting down the interviewees’ frankness. Yeh (2006) has observed a similar situation in Tibet: researchers who stay in the country long-term have to adopt certain patterns of behavior, dress, and speech to help them blend in or live in greater harmony with their host communities.

To further complicate the language issue, standard Vietnamese is based on the dialect of Hanoi – the capital – but the country also has several regional dialects. While I am fluent in Vietnamese, I also had to deal with the dialect issue. For example, my colleague and I spent one rainy day in Hanoi, going from vendor to vendor, asking to purchase a *dù* which means “umbrella” to a southern Vietnamese. Each vendor scratched his or her head and directed us someplace else. Later on, we were told the reason: in North Vietnam *dù* means “parachute”!

My research project also involved gathering information via a questionnaire. To ensure that respondents from all regions would not misunderstand any part of it due to dialect differences, we took great care to work with translators who spoke the three most distinct dialects of Vietnam (those from the north, south, and central

regions). The questionnaire was written in English and then translated into Vietnamese by the research assistant from Ho Chi Minh City in the south. This translated version was then edited for clarity and accuracy by the research assistant in Hanoi and a lecturer at my host institution, a native Vietnamese living in Hanoi, which is in the north. This checked version was edited again by a Vietnamese-American who spoke the dialect of the central region. The Vietnamese version of the questionnaire was then refined by a panel of ten continuous improvement experts, five from Ho Chi Minh City and five from Hanoi, who reviewed it for understandability and clarity. After changes and corrections, the Vietnamese version was translated back into English by a Vietnamese native of Ho Chi Minh City. The back-translation ensured conceptual consistency and identified any deviations. The original English version of the questionnaire was then compared with the English translation of the Vietnamese version, and any differences or issues were resolved to the satisfaction of the translator and the author. As an additional benefit this process improved the questionnaire itself.

Fluency in Vietnamese is not a requirement for doing fieldwork in Vietnam but being able to speak some Vietnamese is useful. The level of language competency depends on the linguistic abilities required by the project and the interpretation of data. First-time researchers with limited Vietnamese language skills may need to tailor their research goals to fit their language limitations. Research assistants and translators who speak the native language and understand the culture can help at this stage. Doing fieldwork in itself provides a powerful opportunity to improve one's language skills and cultural understanding of the host country. Even researchers who speak the language well will find it necessary to master new "terminological terrain" and to learn cultural sensitivities. Julien Leyre, founder of the Marco Polo Project, an Australian organization that explores new models for cross-cultural connections, writes that learning a new language – Chinese in his case – was "Fantastic because it taught me humility – the limits of one's own brain and the limits of capacity. By doing that, it also builds empathy for people who come from somewhere else and might struggle articulating things. And you have this very deep, ingrained sense of what it feels like to be operating in a world that is unfamiliar." Building empathy is crucial to constructing trusting and respectful professional relationships.

Find Immediate Benefits for Research Participants and Partners

As noted previously, the challenges of doing research in Vietnam, particularly the problems of data collection and reliability, are exacerbated by the country's lack of a research culture. Just as Hoskisson *et al.* (2000) have observed in other developing countries, Vietnam's data sources can pose many problems of interpretation. Online or publicly available data may not be accurate; centralized (governmental) data sources may be outdated due to rapid economic growth and frequent policy changes; data collected by different government departments and levels may not be consistent; and financial reporting may not be based on conventional market standards. Researchers should therefore collect all necessary data themselves.

But even when the researcher has been permitted inside the company to meet with executives and managers – a big accomplishment in itself because most Vietnamese organizations are barricaded inside high metal gates and strictly guarded by security personnel – asking for data of any kind remains a difficult task. Being able to offer

something in return is important. Researchers are expected to provide immediate and concrete benefits in exchange for research assistance and participation because exchanges – of knowledge or more concrete benefits – are expected in many aspects of Vietnamese social and professional life. Reciprocity is a Vietnamese norm summed up in the saying: *Có qua có lại mới toại lòng nhau* (“Reciprocity brings contentment”). Indeed, the research participant or partner will often be direct and ask for these exchanges right at the beginning of the project.

While exchanging benefits such as reciprocal learning and the advancement of management theory are ideal, host institutions, agencies, gatekeepers, executives and managers in Vietnam may be interested in more immediate and tangible benefits, such as remuneration for research assistance services (also see e.g., Scott et al., 2006). After all, the priority for many institutions and organizations in Vietnam is some measurable contribution to economic development or profit. Furthermore, fieldwork investments such as financial compensation and gift exchange play a major role in the negotiation of power in particular between researcher and respondent. “The wrong kind of gift, too much of a gift, or the lack of a gift also shapes fieldwork relations, the quality of the response of the subject, and influences research outcomes” (Gillen, 2012, p. 1169). The exchange of benefits is another negotiated process – one in which neither party holds complete authority and which can raise a number of ethical dilemmas and requires critical reflection (Scott et al., 2006; Turner, 2013).

During my research, my Ph.D. advisor and I provided free consulting services and gave seminars to executives and managers at the case companies. These services were much appreciated since many of the executives and managers at the case companies were very interested in continuous improvement practices such as lean production and employee idea systems. They used our consulting services to increase their knowledge and to exchange ideas on how continuous improvement practices could be applied in their operations. In return, I was able to collect multiple sources of data including in-depth interviews, survey results, direct observations, and company documents. Through the surveys, I was able to capture a broad group of 660 respondents. The face-to-face interviews of 130 senior managers, middle managers, supervisors, and frontline employees enabled me to ask the respondents more in-depth questions. The direct observations of the twelve case companies verified and clarified the interview responses, and facilitated visual checks and comparison of each firm’s continuous improvement efforts. When available, I gathered company documents including continuous improvement/quality reports and copies of employee improvement ideas amounting to more than 600 pages of information, charts, and pictures. Put together all these data painted a fuller picture of continuous improvement practices in Vietnam.

In addition, we taught executive and full-time MBA classes and seminars at our host institution and host agency in exchange for their sponsorship of the research project, introductions to local business leaders, and the opportunities they gave us to gather further input from the larger business community. More than 390 executives and managers from a diverse set of industries participated in these classes and seminars including many individuals from the case companies, which provided mutual benefits. Attendees expanded their understanding of business concepts and tools from the West, and exchanged ideas on the potential applications of these new

business practices in Vietnam. For host institutions and agencies whose purpose is to bring talent and experts from overseas to help local firms apply world-class management practices, bringing academics from the U.S. and Europe gives them 'international brand' recognition within Vietnam. The interactions with local business leaders in these seminars and classes gave the researchers the chance to solicit participation and access to companies. Furthermore, the frank in-class discussions and responses to team exercises validated incipient ideas about how foreign best practices might be adapted to fit Vietnam's business and cultural environment.

4. Conclusions

Field management research overseas is important to both practitioners and management scholars. This is particularly true of research on emerging Asian countries. Their organizations provide unique insights on best practices that can contribute to the development of new models of global business management and also to the integration of Asian perspectives into current scholarly conversations.

This research makes two contributions to business management research. First, though the specific challenges of research in Vietnam have been previously noted, to my knowledge this is the first investigation into the processes and procedures for conducting management fieldwork in that country. Second, this research expands knowledge of field management research and lays a foundation for future work in cross-national fieldwork, especially in Southeast Asia.

For practitioners interested in working in Vietnam (or, more generally, Southeast Asia), the study provides two broad lessons. First, it emphasizes the importance of building the right relationships necessary for getting things done and achieving successful professional partnerships. Second, it suggests strategies to overcome the social and cultural challenges in Vietnam. Practitioners who understand the Vietnamese cultural principles of kinship, reciprocity, harmony, and face can better manage complex relationships with partners and collaborators. They will also appreciate the subtle ways Vietnamese people communicate and the conditions necessary to handle delicate negotiations.

To gain a better understanding of Vietnamese management, we need to build a stronger base of empirical observations and so we need more field-based studies. But researchers hoping to contribute to this endeavor will find their access to information constrained by Vietnam's considerable educational, governmental, social, and cultural differences. Learning about those differences and the strategies others have used to handle them is useful preparation for fieldwork there, and also in other countries of Southeast Asia. The experiences and suggestions described in this paper are aimed at helping and encouraging investigators seeking to discover more about business in this expanding and dynamic region. Table 3 presents a summary of the social, cultural, and data challenges and the ways to overcome them.

While these strategies provide a broad template that can enrich the fieldwork experience, they are by no means an exhaustive description of field management research in Vietnam. There is a lot more work to be done, and the challenges of conducting research and disseminating findings across cultures are tremendous. Developing new techniques for success is critical. Researchers should improve ways to access reliable data. They also need to explore methods for finding immediate

benefits for research participants and partners, and for overcoming the language barrier.

Table 3 *Social, Cultural, and Data Challenges and Ways to Overcome Them*

Challenges	Detail challenges	Ways to overcome challenges	Learnings
Social	Access to companies, managers, and information depends on whom one knows and relationships with them	Seek sponsorships from host institutions and informal influencers	My sponsors (1) introduced me to members of the business community and its leaders, (2) helped me gain access to case companies, and (3) provided practical advice and sharpened my understanding of Vietnam's business environment
	Trust is critical to developing the "right" relationships necessary to getting things done and to achieve successful professional partnerships	Develop trust with executives, managers, and informants to establish understanding and clarify expectations about the benefits of the research, and to achieve the ease of communication necessary to gather information	I spent time enhancing relationships and trust through unstructured interviews, interactions with managers and staff members, attendance at meetings and events, casual conversations, and shared meals
Cultural	Lack of a shared language may prevent foreign researchers from connecting with locals and communicating with Vietnamese managers and employees who are not proficient in English	Overcome the language barrier by hiring local research assistants who can mitigate the internal validity problems suffered by qualitative researchers who work alone in the field	To accompany me to company visits and interviews, I employed local assistants who shared the same dialects as the respondents. I also worked with translators who spoke the three most distinct dialects of Vietnam to ensure that respondents would not misunderstand any part of the survey.
	Vietnamese care passionately about face because it helps maintain respect and harmony in interpersonal relationships	Local research assistants can help navigate sensitive situations such as the efficiency of the interviewees' managers without shutting down the interviewees' frankness	During interviews, the assistants avoided any phrases or dialogue that would expose respondents to the risks of losing face when handling sensitive topics that had the potential for offending the interviewees and making them clam up
Data	Data collection remains a task	Provide immediate and concrete benefits in exchange for research assistance and participation because reciprocity is expected in many aspects of Vietnamese social and professional life	We provided free consulting services and gave seminars to executives and managers in exchange for company data including in-depth interviews, survey results, direct observations, and company documents
	Data sources may not be reliable or accurate	Researchers should collect all necessary data themselves	We collected multiple sources of data including in-depth interviews, survey results, direct observations, and company documents to triangulate the data

Future research on this topic would benefit from much more discussion of what works, what does not, and what the future holds.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

5. Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported with faculty development funding from Saint Mary's College of California.

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