

Banh Chung AR: Triangulating Technofemininity, Gender Roles, and Vietnamese Cultural Heritage

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INTRODUCTION

In Vietnamese society, femininity has long been associated with domesticity, particularly in the context of cooking and cultural preservation. Women have traditionally been expected to maintain household duties and prepare food for significant cultural events, such as the Banh Chung-making ritual during Lunar New Year. This responsibility places pressure on women to serve as the primary bearers of cultural traditions, while men are typically relegated to supportive roles in physical tasks (Nguyen 2015; Phan 2008).

The intersection of femininity, play, and cultural preservation offers a unique opportunity to rethink traditional gender roles in Vietnamese society. *Banh Chung AR* (2022), an Augmented Reality (AR) project designed by the researcher who is a Vietnamese woman, digitises the Vietnamese sticky rice cake making ritual- a tradition often tied to women's domestic roles during Lunar New Year (Tết). The project's interactive nature encourages users, regardless of gender, to engage in the virtual cake-making experience, demonstrating the potential of digital platforms to promote gender inclusivity and shared responsibility in preserving cultural heritage.

This paper explores how the project reimagines femininity and play within Vietnamese culture through examining the evolving gender roles in Vietnamese society, Techno-Femininity (Harkin 2023) and postcolonial critiques to challenge gender norms.

The Role of Vietnamese Women in Cultural Transmission and Family Dynamics

The historical role of women in Vietnamese culture has been shaped by Confucian values, which prioritise family hierarchy and emphasise women's roles in the home (Phan 2008). Women were responsible for maintaining family harmony, often through tasks like cooking and upholding cultural traditions. These expectations have persisted into modern times, where the family's happiness is often tied to the culinary skills of mothers and wives (Nguyen 2015).

In Vietnamese society, the role of women in family and cultural practices has evolved significantly, particularly in response to economic and social changes brought about by Doi Moi (the "renovation"), a series of market-oriented reforms that transformed Vietnam's economy in the 1980s. This shift to a market economy redefined family

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structures, gender roles, and intergenerational relations (Belanger & Barbieri 2009). The return of the household as the unit of production and consumption, following the downsizing of the socialist welfare system, significantly altered the boundaries between the public and private spheres. Women, in particular, saw their roles shift as they continued to bear the primary responsibility for maintaining cultural practices and managing household duties, even as economic changes demanded increased workforce participation.

Belanger and Barbieri's (2009) work highlights that women's domestic and familial responsibilities, especially in transmitting cultural traditions such as food preparation and caregiving, remained central to family life. The expectation that women should manage both economic production and cultural reproduction reinforces traditional gender roles, where tasks like preparing *Banh Chung* during the Lunar New Year symbolise not just domestic labor but also the preservation of cultural identity. This reinforces Nguyen's (2015) argument that family happiness is often tied to a woman's ability to fulfill these cultural duties effectively.

However, feminist movements in Vietnam have begun to challenge these rigid gender roles, advocating for gender equality in both the public and private spheres (Nguyen-Vo 2008). *Banh Chung AR* contributes to this movement by promoting the idea that anyone, regardless of gender, can participate in cultural practices like *Banh Chung*-making. The virtual experience encourages users to rethink the gendered division of labor in the home, suggesting that cultural preservation is a shared responsibility.

Techno-Femininity and Postcolonial Feminism in Vietnam

'Techno-Femininity' introduced by Harkin (2023) offers a framework for understanding how technology reshapes femininity, particularly in digital spaces. Feminist scholars have noted that feminine roles, such as nurturing and caregiving, are often undervalued in both physical and digital contexts (Harkin 2023). In games, feminine activities are frequently marginalised, overshadowed by more masculine themes like competition and aggression. *Banh Chung AR*, however, centers feminine tasks—like food preparation—within a digital experience, creating a gender-neutral space for cultural engagement.

This perspective aligns with Trinh T. Minh-ha's postcolonial feminist work, which critiques fixed cultural identities and emphasises the fluidity of traditions (Minh-ha 1989). Minh-ha's work urges for a reevaluation of the roles women are expected to play in maintaining cultural heritage, particularly in postcolonial contexts where patriarchal structures have defined those roles. *Banh Chung AR* reflects these ideas by leveraging AR technology to de-gender a cultural practice traditionally tied to women, promoting inclusivity and rethinking who is responsible for cultural preservation.

Feminine Play – Emerging Field in Vietnamese Digital Space

In Vietnamese culture, feminine play has traditionally been associated with domestic tasks like cooking and caregiving, often viewed as less serious or important than masculine pursuits. Mobile gaming in Vietnam has historically focused on masculine themes, with little room for games centered on feminine activities (Do 2020). Therefore, in Vietnam, the intersection of femininity, play, and technology remains an under-explored field, particularly in relation to cultural heritage preservation.

Banh Chung AR calls for further creative exploration to deepen our understanding of how feminine-coded activities can be translated into digital experiences, and how these experiences can challenge and transform traditional gender roles. Future research could explore how similar digital interventions might reshape other traditionally gendered practices in Vietnamese culture, such as caregiving or leadership roles within the

family. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the intersection of feminine play and cultural heritage offers rich possibilities for rethinking gender, technology, and tradition in the modern world.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper analyses how *Banh Chung AR* serves as a compelling case study for examining the intersection of Techno-Femininity, postcolonial feminism, and gender roles in the context of Vietnamese cultural heritage preservation. Through reimagining femininity and play within this cultural context, the AR experience opens up opportunities for users to reconsider gender roles in both domestic labor and cultural practices by promoting shared cultural responsibility. The project aims to draw attention to the concept of feminine play in Vietnamese culture, and contribute to initiatives which reshape traditional gender expectations.

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Project Link: <https://nhubui.myportfolio.com/banh-chung-ar>

BIO

Nhu Bui is a designer, researcher, and educator “living between cultures,” dedicated to preserving and celebrating Vietnamese heritage. Her PhD project focuses on crafting Vietnamese digital heritage, using design and Extended Reality (XR) to navigate cultural hybridity and post-colonial challenges in Vietnam. She is a community researcher at RMIT PlaceLab and a sessional academic in RMIT’s Master of Animation, Games & Interactivity program. Nhu has published three AR apps and research at ISEA 2024, presented at Autodesk Conference, and hosted AR Lantern Workshops at ISEA, with an upcoming workshop at SIGGRAPH Asia 2024.

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