

The Miss Vietnam Pageant as Cultural Superstructure in a Socialist Market Economy

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Abstract: *This article analyzes the proliferation of beauty contests in post-Đổi Mới Vietnam, positioning the premier Hoa hậu Việt Nam (Miss Vietnam) pageant as a key cultural institution. Grounded in a Marxist theoretical framework, the analysis argues that the pageant functions as an element of the cultural superstructure, serving to legitimize the ideological contradictions inherent in Vietnam's "socialist-oriented market economy". By commodifying national symbols and the female body, the pageant manufactures consent for an emergent bourgeois ideology, reframing capitalist competition as national pride and individual success as collective progress. The study concludes that the Miss Vietnam pageant is a sophisticated ideological apparatus that aesthetically resolves the tensions between Vietnam's socialist political identity and its market-driven economic reality.*

Keywords: beauty pageants, cultural superstructure, socialist market economy, cultural hegemony, Vietnam

1. Introduction

In contemporary Vietnam, the phenomenon of "pageant fever" has become a highly visible and socially significant feature of the cultural landscape. Far from being mere entertainment, beauty contests have evolved into major national events, commanding widespread media attention and public engagement. At the apex of this trend stands the Hoa hậu Việt Nam (Miss Vietnam) pageant, a contest with a history spanning over three decades that has become deeply embedded in the national consciousness (Nguyen, 2025). The pageant's origins are inextricably linked to a pivotal moment in the nation's history: its inaugural event in 1988 occurred just two years after the Communist Party of Vietnam initiated the landmark Đổi Mới (Renovation) economic reforms of 1986 (Nguyen, 2025; World Bank, 2016). This temporal proximity is not coincidental; it suggests that the pageant is not an isolated cultural development but a direct product of a fundamental shift in Vietnam's economic base—its mode of production.

The emergence of the Miss Vietnam pageant was not simply an opportunistic cultural development but an ideological necessity created by this economic transformation. Before Đổi Mới, Vietnam's centrally planned economy was supported by a cultural superstructure that promoted socialist ideals: the primacy of the collective over the individual, the celebration of the worker and soldier as heroic archetypes, and a general de-emphasis on individualistic or "bourgeois" aesthetics (Schwenkel & Leshkovich, 2012). The Đổi Mới reforms, by introducing market mechanisms, private enterprise, and foreign investment, fundamentally altered the nation's relations of production, creating a new economic reality defined by competition and capital accumulation (World Bank, 2016; Evans & Hai, 2005). This new economic base required a new superstructure to legitimize it. The old socialist ideals were no longer sufficient to explain or justify a society experiencing growing inequality, consumerism, and individual ambition (Pham, 2020). An ideological vacuum thus appeared, necessitating a new "ideal citizen" who could embody and naturalize the values of the nascent market

economy. The Miss Vietnam pageant emerged to fill this void, producing a new ideal subject: the beautiful, educated, competitive, and globally-oriented woman whose success in the market-driven spectacle of the pageant could be framed as a source of national pride. Her triumph serves to naturalize the new economic system, making the pageant's timing a direct causal consequence of the change in the economic base.

This article argues that the Miss Vietnam pageant functions as a key component of the cultural superstructure in post-reform Vietnam. It serves to legitimize the contradictions of the nation's "socialist-oriented market economy" by commodifying national symbols and the female body, thereby manufacturing consent for a new bourgeois ideology under the guise of celebrating national identity and female empowerment. This analysis will proceed by first establishing a theoretical framework grounded in the Marxist concepts of base and superstructure, cultural hegemony, and the culture industry. The article concludes that the Miss Vietnam pageant operates as a sophisticated ideological apparatus that aesthetically resolves the tensions between Vietnam's socialist political identity and its increasingly capitalist economic reality.

2. Literature review

To understand the cultural phenomenon of the Miss Vietnam pageant, one must first analyze the material conditions from which it emerged. The policy of Đổi Mới, initiated in 1986, represented a fundamental shift in Vietnam's mode of production, moving the country away from a centrally planned economy toward what is officially termed a "socialist-oriented market economy" (World Bank, 2016). Facing a severe economic crisis with triple-digit inflation, the reforms were designed to liberalize the economy, encourage foreign investment through measures like the 1986 Law on Foreign Investment, and integrate Vietnam into the global capitalist system (World Bank Group, 2018; Pham, 2020). The results of this transition have been profound. Vietnam has experienced decades of rapid economic growth, transforming it from one of the world's poorest nations into a

middle-income country deeply integrated into the global economy (World Bank, 2016). However, this economic "miracle" has been accompanied by the classic contradictions of capitalist development. Scholars have documented the rise of significant social and economic inequality, with the wealthiest individuals earning in a day what the poorest earn in a decade (Pham, 2020). The reforms also facilitated the emergence of a new consumerist class and a system of "crony capitalism," where economic power becomes concentrated in the hands of a new elite with close ties to the state (Pham, 2020). These developments—the embrace of market competition, the creation of new class divisions, and the rise of consumer culture—constitute the specific material conditions and class dynamics of the economic base that cultural forms like the Miss Vietnam pageant must reflect, legitimize, and reproduce.

The relationship between a society's economic system and its cultural forms is a central concern of Marxist theory. The foundational model for this analysis is the concept of base and superstructure. In this model, the base refers to the mode of production, encompassing both the forces of production (technology, labor) and the relations of production (the class structure, property relations). The superstructure consists of the legal, political, and cultural institutions, as well as the ideologies, beliefs, and values that arise from this economic base. Marx argued that the superstructure serves to maintain and reproduce the base, justifying the existing social order and the interests of the ruling class (as cited in *Simply Psychology*, 2023; Fivable, n.d.). While the base is the primary determinant, the relationship is understood as dialectical, meaning the superstructure can also exert influence upon the base (Engels, as cited in Wikipedia, n.d.).

The Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci refined this model with his theory of cultural hegemony. Gramsci (1971) argued that the ruling class maintains its dominance not primarily through force (coercion) but by manufacturing consent. This is achieved when the ideology of the ruling class becomes so deeply embedded in society's institutions—such as schools, the media, and religious organizations—that its values and worldview are accepted as "common sense" by the subordinate classes (as cited in Lears, 1985; ThoughtCo., 2020). These cultural institutions function to socialize people into accepting the existing social and economic conditions as natural and inevitable, rather than as artificial constructs designed to benefit the ruling class (Gramsci, 1971, as cited in Chiluwa & Samoilenko, 2019). A beauty pageant, particularly one initiated by a state-affiliated media outlet and later managed by commercial enterprises, serves as a prime example of such a cultural institution, shaping norms of beauty, success, and national identity that align with the interests of the dominant economic order (Nguyen, 2025).

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1947) of the Frankfurt School further developed this critique with their concept of the "culture industry." They argued that under late capitalism, culture is no longer an autonomous sphere of authentic expression but is instead mass-produced as a standardized commodity. Film, popular music, and other forms of mass entertainment are produced according to commercial formulas with the primary goal of generating profit and creating passive, docile consumers. The culture

industry impresses the "same stamp on everything," promoting conformity and discouraging the critical thought necessary for social change (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947). The modern beauty pageant, with its predictable format, commercial sponsorships, emphasis on spectacle, and production of celebrity "products," fits squarely within this critique of culture as an industrialized and commercialized process of mass deception (Nguyen, 2025).

Applying these theoretical frameworks to the specific phenomenon of beauty pageants is a well-established approach in cultural and media studies. Scholars have analyzed pageants as complex cultural sites where various ideological functions are performed. In postcolonial and developing nations, pageants are often examined as arenas for the production and contestation of national identity, where the female body becomes a symbolic representation of the nation itself (Cohen, Wilk & Stoeltje, 1996; Banet-Weiser, 1999). The beauty queen is constructed as an ambassador who embodies the nation's aspirations for modernity, global recognition, and cultural authenticity (O'Riain, 2009).

Feminist and Marxist analyses have also focused on the role of pageants in the commodification of women's bodies and the promotion of consumer culture (Lieu, 2013; Wolf, 1991). In this view, pageants transform women into objects of a patriarchal gaze and marketable commodities, while simultaneously promoting the products and lifestyles associated with a capitalist consumer society (O'Riain, 2009). Furthermore, pageants are seen as crucial sites for the negotiation of gender roles, constructing an "ideal femininity" that reinforces dominant social norms (Banet-Weiser, 1999). This ideal often combines traditional virtues with modern attributes in a way that serves the interests of the prevailing economic and political system. This body of literature provides a strong precedent for analyzing the Miss Vietnam contest not as a frivolous form of entertainment, but as a serious ideological apparatus with profound social and political implications.

3. Methodology

This article employs a critical theoretical analysis grounded in a Marxist framework. Its primary methodological approach is to re-interpret existing empirical data through this specific theoretical lens, aiming to reveal the underlying economic and ideological functions of the Miss Vietnam pageant.

The documented history of the pageant's organization, rules, evolution, and key milestones from its inception in 1988 through 2024. This includes information on organizing bodies, sponsors, and the changing nature of the contest itself. This includes an analysis of official government documents, such as the various decrees regulating beauty contests, which provide insight into the state's role and perception. The perspectives of the 14 key stakeholders interviewed in the thesis. This data is particularly valuable as it represents the viewpoints of the three crucial actors in the construction of cultural hegemony:

The State and Ruling Ideology: Represented by organizers from the state-affiliated Báo Tiền Phong newspaper.

The Producers of Culture: Including the pageant director, MCs, and members of the commercial organizing committees.

The Public (Consumers of Culture): Represented by audience members and journalists who cover the event.

The analytical process involves systematically mapping the empirical findings of the thesis onto the theoretical concepts of base/superstructure, cultural hegemony, and the culture industry. This method seeks to move beyond the original study's popular culture framework to uncover the deeper, often unstated, connections between the pageant's cultural expressions and the material realities of Vietnam's political economy. The goal is to deconstruct the pageant as a cultural text and social practice, revealing its function in legitimizing the dominant social and economic order in post-reform Vietnam.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Pageant as Culture Industry: From State Mouthpiece to Commercial Enterprise

The organizational evolution of the Miss Vietnam pageant directly mirrors the transformation of Vietnam's economic base. The contest was founded in 1988 by Báo Tiền Phong, the official newspaper of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, the youth wing of the ruling Communist Party (Nguyen, 2025; Wikipedia, n.d.). This origin firmly establishes the pageant's initial function as an instrument of the state, a cultural initiative launched by a party-affiliated entity to shape public consciousness in the early years of economic reform. In its nascent stage, the pageant was a direct product of the state-led superstructure, designed to create and disseminate new cultural values.

However, as the market economy deepened, the pageant's organizational structure shifted decisively towards commercialization. Beginning in 2014, private corporations, most notably Sen Vàng Commercial Advertising Company (2014-2022) and Hoàng Thành Media (2024), became co-organizers and producers (Nguyen, 2025; Wikipedia, n.d.). This transition marks the maturation of the pageant into a full-fledged product of the culture industry, as theorized by Adorno and Horkheimer (1947). The pageant's primary logic shifted from being solely a state-directed cultural activity to a commercial enterprise driven by profit motives, corporate sponsorships, advertising revenue, and the creation of marketable celebrity-commodities (Lieu, 2013). The involvement of companies like Sen Vàng, which manages the careers of winners and holds copyrights to pageant-related brands, exemplifies this industrialization of culture (Nguyen, N. M., n.d.).

This organizational evolution reveals a strategic shift in the state's hegemonic function—from being a direct producer of culture to a more sophisticated regulator of a privatized cultural market. In the initial phase of Đổi Mới, the state, through its affiliates, had to actively create the new cultural forms required to legitimize the emerging market economy. As Vietnam's capitalist base matured, a private sector capable of producing commercially appealing spectacles on an industrial scale emerged. This sector proved more efficient at

creating the polished, high-production-value entertainment demanded by a consumer society. Consequently, the state's role evolved. Instead of producing the pageant itself, it now exercises control through a comprehensive regulatory framework, exemplified by government decrees such as Nghị định 144/2020/NĐ-CP, which governs all performing arts, including beauty contests (Government of Vietnam, 2020). This regulatory role is ideologically more potent. By licensing and setting the legal parameters for private companies to operate, the state bestows an official imprimatur upon these commercial cultural products, framing them as "national" and state-approved. This allows the state to maintain ultimate ideological control while appearing to be at arm's length, a process that makes the commercial nature of the culture seem natural and legitimate, thereby constituting a more effective and subtle form of hegemony.

4.2 Manufacturing Hegemony: State Regulation, Corporate Production, and Public Consumption

The Miss Vietnam pageant operates as a textbook example of Gramsci's (1971) model of cultural hegemony, wherein consent is manufactured through the coordinated actions of the state, cultural producers, and the public. The state perceives the pageant as a valuable tool for projecting soft power and promoting a positive, modern, and culturally rich image of Vietnam on the international stage (Nguyen, 2025). Through its regulatory bodies, such as the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, the state ensures that the pageant's content aligns with official cultural policy and "thuần phong mỹ tục" (traditional customs and morals) (Nguyen, 2025; Government of Vietnam, 2020). This oversight provides the pageant with an official stamp of cultural legitimacy, positioning it not as a mere commercial venture but as a nationally significant event.

The organizers, both the state-affiliated Báo Tiền Phong and their corporate partners, function as what Gramsci (1971) would term "organic intellectuals" of the ruling order. They see themselves as custodians of a prestigious national brand, tasked with balancing tradition with commercial appeal to maintain public interest (Nguyen, 2025). They are the agents who translate the abstract interests of the economic base—promoting competition, consumerism, and individual success—into a compelling and aesthetically pleasing cultural narrative that the public can consume and celebrate.

The public's engagement with the pageant completes the hegemonic circuit. They consume the event as both a form of entertainment and a source of national pride, eagerly following the contestants and celebrating the winner (Nguyen, 2025). Simultaneously, the public also participates in criticism, particularly on social media, regarding scandals, perceived injustices in judging, or the increasing commercialization of the contest. However, this criticism rarely challenges the fundamental ideological premises of the pageant itself—the valuation of beauty as a form of capital, the legitimacy of competition as a means of social mobility, and the equation of individual success with national glory. Instead, public outcry over scandals, such as those involving the conduct of past winners like Nguyễn Cao Kỳ Duyên (smoking in public) or Trần Thị Thùy Dung (academic qualifications), functions as a form of social regulation

(Nguyen, 2025; Tuổi Trẻ News, 2016; Vietnamnet, 2016). These "moral panics" serve to reinforce the very norms they appear to transgress, pressuring the organizers and future contestants to adhere more closely to the idealized image of the "perfect" beauty queen. This feedback loop helps the culture industry refine its product to be more palatable and resilient, ultimately strengthening, not weakening, the overall hegemonic structure.

4.3 Symbols of Commodified Nationalism: The Crown and the Áo Dài

The ideological work of the pageant is most powerfully performed through its key symbols, which are imbued with national meaning while simultaneously being subjected to the logic of commodification.

The Crown: The pageant's ultimate prize, the crown, has undergone a significant transformation that mirrors the economic changes in the country. The thesis documents its evolution from a simple, symbolic prize in the early years to a multi-billion VND object of desire, elaborately designed and commercially sponsored (Nguyen, 2025). The materials and monetary value of the crown are heavily publicized by the organizers, turning the symbol itself into a spectacle of wealth. Designs often incorporate nationalistic motifs, such as the 2016 crown featuring 63 pearls to represent Vietnam's 63 provinces (Nguyen, 2025). This process represents the commodification of status. The crown's value is no longer purely symbolic of honor; its immense monetary value, a key talking point in media coverage, explicitly equates national prestige with material wealth and corporate sponsorship. It teaches the public to admire not just the winner, but the economic power that can produce such a luxurious object.

The Áo Dài: The mandatory áo dài (traditional long dress) competition is perhaps the most crucial element in the pageant's ideological toolkit. The áo dài is a potent and emotionally resonant symbol of Vietnamese tradition, national identity, and an idealized, graceful femininity (Leshkovich, 2003; Heritage Line, 2024). Within the context of the pageant, this powerful cultural symbol is appropriated by the culture industry. The áo dài segment provides a veneer of cultural authenticity and tradition to what is, in essence, a commercial competition modeled on Western formats. It allows the pageant to present itself as a guardian of national heritage, masking its function as a promoter of globalized, market-driven beauty standards. This represents the commodification of culture, where a cherished symbol of heritage is decontextualized and transformed into an aestheticized element within a commodity spectacle, its cultural meaning harnessed to legitimize a commercial enterprise.

4.4 The Ideal Woman as Ideological Product: From National Symbol to Brand Ambassador

The winners of the Miss Vietnam pageant are not simply individuals who triumph in a competition; they are meticulously crafted ideological products manufactured to embody the prevailing values of the era. An analysis of the winners over time, as documented in the thesis, reveals a clear shift in the archetype of the "ideal" woman (Nguyen, 2025).

Early winners, such as Nguyễn Diệu Hoa (1990), a polyglot with a strong academic background, represented an ideal that prized intellectualism and traditional virtues, aligning with the state's early emphasis on building a knowledgeable and moral citizenry (Nguyen, 2025).

In recent years, the archetype has shifted dramatically. Modern winners are polished media personalities, adept at social media, and prepared from the moment of their coronation to function as brand ambassadors and commercial influencers (Nguyen, 2025). This evolution reflects the maturation of Vietnam's consumer economy. The ideal woman is no longer just a symbol of national virtue but a valuable commodity herself, possessing what scholars have termed "girl capital" (Mears, as cited in Balogun, 2020). Her beauty and title are forms of capital to be leveraged in the market for endorsements, advertising, and media appearances.

The "Người đẹp Nhân ái" (Beauty with a Purpose) segment, a mandatory part of the modern pageant, serves as a crucial ideological mask in this process. This ritual, where contestants participate in televised charity projects, presents social problems like poverty and lack of infrastructure not as systemic issues rooted in the contradictions of the economic base, but as opportunities for the benevolent intervention of beautiful individuals, often sponsored by large corporations (Nguyen, 2025). This narrative depoliticizes social inequality, recasting it as a sphere for personal charity rather than political action. It aestheticizes suffering and reinforces the idea that the market system—which produces both the immense wealth of the corporate sponsors and the poverty of the charity recipients—is fundamentally benevolent and self-correcting. The ideal woman, therefore, becomes a figure who does not challenge the system but rather demonstrates its compassion, making the inequalities it generates more palatable.

5. Conclusion

This analysis has examined the Hoa hậu Việt Nam pageant not as a simple celebration of beauty, but as a complex cultural institution operating within the superstructure of post-Đổi Mới Vietnam. By applying a Marxist theoretical framework, it becomes clear that the pageant is more than just entertainment; it is a potent ideological apparatus that reflects, legitimizes, and reproduces the dominant economic base of the nation's "socialist-oriented market economy." The pageant's historical evolution from a state-led cultural activity to a fully commercialized product of the culture industry, its strategic use of national symbols, and its production of an "ideal woman" who embodies market values all point to its crucial role in manufacturing consent for a new social and economic order.

The pageant's primary ideological function is to aesthetically resolve the core contradiction at the heart of modern Vietnam: the tension between its official socialist political identity and its increasingly capitalist economic reality. It achieves this in several key ways. First, it naturalizes capitalism by presenting individual competition, the pursuit of commercial success, and the logic of consumerism as natural, desirable, and fundamentally patriotic activities. The winner's journey from contestant to celebrity is framed as a narrative of personal

empowerment and national glory, masking the underlying class dynamics and exploitative potential of the market system.

Second, it commodifies tradition by appropriating powerful and emotionally resonant national symbols, most notably the áo dài, to provide a veneer of cultural authenticity for a modern, commercial enterprise modeled on global formats. This process strips these symbols of their historical context and re-packages them as aesthetic elements within a commodity spectacle, allowing capitalist culture to present itself as the legitimate heir and guardian of national heritage.

Finally, the pageant masks social inequality. Through rituals like the "Beauty with a Purpose" segment, it depoliticizes systemic issues such as poverty, recasting them as problems to be solved through the charitable acts of beautiful individuals sponsored by corporations. This creates a powerful narrative in which the market system is portrayed as fundamentally benevolent, capable of generating both the wealth for philanthropy and the compassionate individuals to dispense it, thereby obscuring its role in creating the inequalities in the first place.

In sum, the Miss Vietnam pageant is a sophisticated mechanism of cultural hegemony. It is a factory for producing not just beauty queens, but also ideology. By seamlessly fusing capitalist values with the language of national pride, tradition, and female empowerment, it produces a compelling narrative that manufactures public consent for a new social and economic order. The spectacle of the pageant ultimately serves to reinforce the legitimacy of the very system that created it, demonstrating the enduring power of the cultural superstructure to shape consciousness in service of the economic base.

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