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Harmonization Processes and Relational Meanings in Constructing Asian Weddings

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Using multimethod data on wedding consumption, this research highlights the pursuit of harmonization as a dynamic and never-ending process that can happen within individuals, between human beings, and among different entities in the world. While prior research on harmony has treated the construct as a core value of Chinese culture or a set of abstract principles that guide consumer behavior, the focus here is on how harmonization happens, the conditions under which harmonization is either promoted or defeated, and the benefits resulting from harmonization that keep people involved in the process of creating it. This examination of Vietnamese weddings demystifies the myth that Asian consumers sacrifice individual preferences and bow to collective interests, explains how face influences Asian consumer behavior, and provides an extension of Richins’s categories or levels of consumption meaning.

The prevailing popular image of Asian consumers is that they consume to initiate, establish, reinforce, and extend themselves through relationships in their web of interpersonal connections (Eckhardt and Houston 2008; Joy 2001; Tse 1996). Moreover, they are thought of as holding a holistic view of the universe in which all elements exist as interdependent with each other and a view of the self as the center of a web of relationships (Tu 1994). These views provide evidence of the need for social harmony (Chang 2001). Thus, Asian consumers are thought of as willing to make sacrifices for the sake of maintaining social harmony. Their focus on social harmony explains many Asian consumption behaviors—for example, ascribing meanings to possessions based on their ability to represent harmony with others as opposed to their ability to represent status in relation to others (Eckhardt and Houston 2001); giving gifts as a vehicle for providing or saving face for someone, which is important in the achievement of social harmony (Joy 2001); valuing consumption when it allows the consumer to harmonize with his or her social environment (Tse 1996); and being able to combine incongruent information (Aaker and Sengupta 2000), to hold conflicting emotions (Williams and Aaker 2002), and to create malleable possession meanings (Eckhardt and Houston 2008) without a need to reduce dissonance. The latter findings might be explained by Choi and Nisbett (2000), who argue that because East Asians view life as more complex than Westerners see it, they are better able to accept contradictory things as both being true. But we believe that a more adequate explanation lies in the Asian preference for seeking and finding balance and harmony in all things.

The concept of social harmony is widely mentioned in research on Asian, especially Chinese, consumer behavior. However, there remain three major limitations in current research. First, current consumer studies tend to treat social harmony as an abstract value of Asian cultures that guides consumer behaviors or a set of principles by which consumers must abide without asking how harmony is engaged in and acted out in social interactions with others. If we treat harmony as simply a fixed value or principle, we run the risk of missing the complexity and subtlety of how it is achieved in Asian social life (Chang 2001). Second, previous research accepts that Asian consumers are harmony-oriented but does not explain the conditions under which harmonization is either promoted or defeated. Third, most studies tend to focus only on harmony as an ultimate goal.

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Insufficient attention has been paid to the question of how engaging in a process of harmonization may also help Asians achieve other goals, such as making and saving face, keeping order, and maintaining relationships.

We know that consumer goods have polyvocal significance. Product meanings can change over time and across situations, and even within one person, depending on the social context (Eckhardt and Houston 2008; McCracken 1986; Richins 1994). Our research extends the emerging body of literature on consumption meanings. It adds a new level, relational meaning, to Richins’s levels of consumption meanings. We locate the objectives in the context of Vietnamese wedding consumption. In pursuit of the objectives, we explore harmonization as a process where meanings of consumption are negotiated and created.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS
The Meaning of Consumption

Consumption goods have meanings that go beyond their utilitarian attributes and financial values. They include psychological meaning, “a person’s subjective perception and affective reactions. . . . It characterizes those aspects that are most salient in an individual’s reactions and describes the degree and direction of affectivity” (Szalay and Deese 1978, 2).

This topic has been the most relevant to consumer researchers (Friedmann and Lessig 1986; Hirschman 1980a; Kleine and Kernan 1991). A key focus has been product meanings, which are used to define the self and create a sense of identity (Belk 1988; Grubb and Grathwohl 1967). Product meanings play important roles in communicating information about their possessors and about social relationships (Douglas and Isherwood 1979).

Two manifestations of product meaning are public meanings and private meanings. Public meanings “are the subjective meanings assigned to an object by outside observers” (Richins 1994, 505). Private meanings “are the sum of the subjective meanings that object holds for a particular individual” (Richins 1994, 505). Public meanings are commonly shared whereas private meanings are personally idiosyncratic. Product meanings can be viewed as a series of overlapping layers ranging from very high (public) to very low (private) commonality among individuals (Hirschman 1980a).

Richins (1994) reviews several promising frameworks that might be used to study public meanings, including mass media cultivation theory (Faber and O’Guinn 1988), analysis of consumption stereotypes (Hyatt 1992; Solomon and Greenberg 1993), symbolic interactionism (Solomon 1983), social learning theory (Bandura 1977), and meaning transfer (McCracken 1986). Public meanings are shaped and reinforced by social institutions such as advertising, fashion systems, retail stores, television shows, and magazines (Hirschman 1980c; McCracken 1986); members within a culture tend to ascribe similar meanings to objects (Solomon 1983). Hirschman (1980b), however, found that shared meanings appear to be dispersed widely even for “well-known” popular culture artifacts among a small, homogeneous sample of consumers. Public meanings are polyvocal (Richins 1994), and consumers are aware of the multiple, opposing public meanings (Eckhardt and Houston 2008). This is consistent with the idea that there are unique or idiosyncratic shared meanings held by subgroups (Hirschman 1980b; Richins 1994).

Private meanings emerge from personal experiences with a possession. Such meanings may include public meanings and “the owner’s personal history in relation to the object” (Richins 1994, 506). Meaning derives from repeated interaction with a possession (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Thus, private meanings are “likely to be developed when an individual possesses the object in question” (Richins 1994). The meanings are not available to others unless the owner chooses to disclose relevant information (Richins 1994).

Consumer research has studied what meanings are ascribed to special possessions by their owners (Ahuvia 2005; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Grayson and Shulman 2000; Mehta and Belk 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Such research focuses on meanings that add value to possessions and make them special and irreplaceable. This focus is consistent with Richins’s suggestion that private meanings are more important in determining consumers’ feelings about the things they already possess while public meanings are more likely to influence things that consumers desire and hope to acquire. Although a product’s meanings greatly affect its adoption and use, there has been little empirical investigation of the processes by which these meanings are created by consumers during the product purchase stage.

The foregoing discussions raise several questions. First, do consumers create meanings to share with others? Second, why do consumers share personally ascribed meanings with others? Third, how do others respond and corroborate meanings? Fourth, how do meanings created during the purchase stage influence product adoption and use?

Kleine and Kernan (1991) hypothesized a conceptual model of the consumption-object meaning ascription process (COMAP). It is conceived as a cognitive process that focuses on how context influences the meanings ascribed to ordinary consumption objects. McCracken (1986) analyzed four ritual processes through which consumers derive meanings from and ascribe meanings to consumption objects: exchange, possession, grooming, and divestment rituals. Although Hirschman (1980c) conceptualized consumption meanings as a “collective action or process,” the conceptual frameworks noted above have treated the creation of meanings as individual actions that are influenced by external contexts rather than being collective and collaborative. Curasi et al. (2004) have moved from the individual to the family as a study unit. Their research focuses on meaning creation for special possessions from different family members’ perspectives, but it does not explore the interaction of family members in this meaning-creation process. Eckhardt and Houston (2008) study how the presence of others and the relationships among them influence private meanings.

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ascribed by individuals. However, they do not address the cocreation aspect of meaning ascription by all members together. By exploring harmonization as a process wherein the meanings of consumption are negotiated and created, our research studies interactions among family members to answer the four research questions laid out above.

What Is Harmony?

The concept of social harmony in Asian culture appears in consumer research (Eckhardt and Houston 2001, 2008; Joy 2001; Keng and Yang 1993; Tse 1996), psychology (Aaker and Sengupta 2000; Bond 1991; Bond and Hwang 1986; Williams and Aaker 2002), and communication research (Chang 2001; Chen 2000, 2008; Li 2009). However, insufficient attention has been paid to defining the construct. In this section, we review literature in Chinese philosophy about the notion of harmony and compare these precepts with literature in psychology, communications, and consumer studies in order to provide a systematic understanding of the construct.

The meaning of the primary Chinese word for harmony, he, comes from two sources (Li 2008). First, it means mixing various sounds to produce music. Second, it means mingling different flavors. It will be noted that in these original meanings of harmony as mixing and mingling, harmony is not a state but a process. “It includes the balancing of opposite elements into an organic whole” (Li 2008, 85).

Harmony is not merely a matter of mixing sounds and mingling flavors. Harmony results only when different flavors are mixed in such a way that they enrich one another and when various sounds are mixed in order to complement one another. This is to say that different elements need to form a relationship in which they mutually complete and mutually compensate one another and in which “one element smoothens another” (Li 2008, 86).

The notion of harmony is also elucidated in The Book of Changes and in the Daoist text Dao De Jing to denote the ultimate way the universe operates. It is regarded as the perfect reconciliation and the dynamic balance of opposing forces of nature. For the Daoist, harmony is used to describe and prescribe the practice of human agency to take a path that accommodates with the world, which has a tendency to harmonize with itself (Li 2008). Harmony is also an important component of Confucian philosophy. Confucians focus more on generating harmony within society. Confucians consider harmony the virtue of virtues (Li 2008). There are five virtues: human excellence, rightness, ritualized propriety, wisdom, and sagacity. Confucius advocates not only practice these virtues but also practice them in harmony. This is the key to moral cultivation and the development of the human person. Confucians believe that through individual cultivation and the development of personal goodness, humans harmonize with the world and harmonize things in the world (Cheng 2006; Li 2006). Consumption can potentially enhance the practice of these virtues. The practice of seeking harmony can significantly shape consumer behavior. For example, the meaning of a laptop as a tool to practice wisdom may be no less important than as a means to reflect social status. A television set that functions as a gift to elderly parents in the practice of performing a correct gift-giving ritual, showing gratitude to parents (an important component of human excellence), and thoughtfully choosing gifts (as a wisdom behavior), may be more important than its physical features.

In ancient Chinese philosophy, the notion of harmony is defined as “the ultimate way the universe operates,” “the perfect reconciliation of opposing forces of nature,” “dynamic balances of opposing forces,” “the perfect state of appropriateness, which lays great emphasis on the proper position and due proportion of the various elements being involved” (Li 2009, 55–56), “mutual responsiveness in [an] appropriate way” (Li 2006, 583–84), and “a process of balancing of opposite elements into an organic whole” (Li 2008, 85). Although those views of harmony are illustrated in different ways, they express the common interpretation of harmony as a contextual and dynamic process.

In psychology, Kwan, Bond, and Singelis (1997, 1039) define harmony as “the balance achieved in relationships.” An individual’s relationship harmony was measured by the average level of harmony achieved in his or her five most important relationships. They found that relationship harmony has a positive effect on an individual’s life satisfaction, but more so for Hong Kong students than for American students. Relationship harmony also contributes to an individual’s psychological well-being in areas such as positive mood and self-esteem among various Asian populations (Chen et al. 2006; Stewart, Bond, Abdullah, et al. 2000; Stewart, Bond, Ho, et al. 2000; Stewart et al. 1998, 1999, 2002). Lun and Bond (2006) found that relationship harmony is highly correlated with the personality trait of individual agreeableness. They also found that higher relationship harmony in a group leads to better group performance. In communication studies, Chen (2000) found that the Chinese core value of harmony leads to a set of rules applied to Chinese conflict-management and conflict-resolution practices. Based on Goffman’s concept of performance, Chang (2001, 160) defines harmony as “a constructed, enacted and negotiated display, achieved through verbal exchanges which may mask interlocutors’ alternative motives.” During the negotiation process, interactants may conceal turbulence and frustration. Consumer researchers Eckhardt and Houston (2001; 2008) found that Chinese consumers’ constant concern for preserving harmony with others leads to malleable meanings for possessions and products.

While Chinese philosophy emphasizes harmony as a dynamic, contextual, never-ending process, psychology, communications, and consumer studies usually treat harmony as a core value of Chinese culture, a set of abstract principles, an ultimate goal, and a balance achieved in relationships that guide people’s behavior (except Chang 2001, as discussed above). Chinese philosophy also has a holistic view of harmony as something that can happen within individuals, among human beings, and between human beings and the world. Most studies, however, tend to focus on interpersonal relationship harmony. These narrow focuses...
are not without consequences. For example, research has found a correlation between harmony and individual life satisfaction (Kwan et al. 1997), psychological well-being (Chen et al. 2006; Stewart, Bond, Abdullah, et al. 2000), and private meanings ascribed to consumption (Eckhardt and Houston 2008). But these studies do not show how such things happen. It is more fruitful to treat harmonization as a process, “an object toward which to orient, rather than a primary goal” (Chang 2001). By unfolding the process, we may gain insights about how consumers use consumption as a resource to enact the harmonization process.

We adopt a view of harmony as a process: harmonization. It is an endless, dynamic, contextual process of creative transformation, during which differences undergo a transformational synthesis by means of changing and collaborating with one another without losing the integrity of each element (Cheng 2006; Li 2006, 2008, 2009). Further, harmonization can occur at many levels. It can happen within an individual or between individuals, between human beings and the natural world, and among different things in the world (Li 2006), as addressed by feng shui, for example. In the context of family wedding consumption, we focus on three processes: harmonizing within an individual, harmonizing things, and harmonizing with other people.

Difference and Sameness

Difference and sameness are necessary conditions in the harmonization processes. Li (2006, 591) claims that “harmony presupposes differences and has to be achieved through differences.” Sameness itself is not harmony, but it is a necessary condition for harmony. Sameness among things exists at various levels: being the same in some respects; being together, as when things share the same location; being parts of the same unit; and being identical or uniform (Zhang and Ryden 2002). In order to achieve harmony, we should only put together different things that are the same at an appropriate level. Li (2006, 590) suggests, “at an appropriate level, sameness is an ingredient of harmony and, as such, must be maintained and valued.” If we mix things that do not have a certain level of sameness, we create scattering and separation instead of harmony. However, what Li (2006) calls the “over-presence of sameness” or excessive uniformity (Zhang and Ryden 2002) is not conducive to harmony. Over-presence of sameness is caused by lack of diversity and by eliminating or destroying differences and oppositions.

Self-Cultivation

In Confucian philosophy, self-cultivation is a process that involves educating oneself, understanding oneself, seeing good traits in others and imitating them, and possessing virtue. Self-cultivation is the basis of harmony within the individual, the family, and other groups as well as harmony with the world (Li 2006; Tu 2000). Self-cultivation in the Confucian sense means learning to know people and take care of ordinary things and thus to know ourselves (Tu 2000). Learning is the core procedure by which we realize ourselves as concrete persons in a web of relationships with mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, daughters, sons, brothers, and sisters.

Empathy

Shott (1984) defines empathy as ability to predict the thoughts, feelings, and situations of another person. Mehrbani and Epstein (1972) describe empathy as emotional involvement in others’ feelings. Empathy goes beyond knowing others’ thoughts and emotions. Empathy includes sharing and experiencing the feelings of other people. In Asian culture, human beings are defined primarily by their sensitivity. That is, learning to be human means cultivating the capacity to empathize with the feelings of others, especially one’s closest kin (Tu 1994). This means understanding the dictum “do not do unto others what you would not want others to do unto you.” Having a sense of similarity between one’s own feelings and those of others leads one to treat others in a sensitive way.

WEDDING CONSUMPTION AND VIETNAMESE CULTURAL VALUES

Long-Term Mutual Sharing Circle

Vietnamese kinship is thought to be shaped by three fundamental values: filial piety (hiếu), moral debt or gratitude (òng), and merit (đức) (McLeod and Nguyen 2001). Filial piety, the value given the most prominence, includes the duties and obligations of children toward their parents and grandparents. There is a close, unbreakable parent-child kinship relation based on the independent reciprocity of filial piety, moral debt, and merit. Children owe their parents a moral debt—that is, the life and nurturing they have received from their parents that they can never fully repay. Filial piety involves the obligations and duties of children toward their parents that result from this moral debt (Ho 1994; Phan 2006). Children must also be grateful to their ancestors for the prosperity, wealth, and happiness that they have. The merit that the ancestors have accumulated from generation to generation brings prosperity, wealth, and happiness to their descendants (McLeod and Nguyen 2001). The belief is strongly linked to the Buddhist tradition with the notion of cyclical reincarnation (Luong 2006). Vietnamese are taught that parents’ merits are countless. Thus, they are obligated to strive to repay as much as they can by pleasing their parents.

For the parents, giving birth and raising children helps to fulfill their filial obligations toward their own parents. At the same time, the parents expect that the sacrifices that they make to raise their children will be compensated by their children’s filial piety in the future (Phan 2006), even continuing after their deaths. Thus, familial interdependence is a long-term mutual circle. It is not just between children and
their parents during the children’s childhoods; it exists during adulthood as well and continues after the parents die. Mutual dependency and responsibility urge people to harmonize with other people within the long-term mutual sharing circle.

Long-term mutuality shapes Asian daily interactions, and consumption is no exception. For example, reciprocity is discouraged in a family context, and there is no need to build relationships through gift giving within the Asian family (Joy 2001). Products may be consumed to enable consumers to be more filial children (Eckhart and Houston 2008). Public meanings of filial piety constructed by advertising are well-received by Chinese consumers (Belk and Zhou 2002). Long-term mutuality sanctions family care for the elderly, which shapes consumption of homes for the elderly in Japan (Bethel 1992).

Family Face

Face is a universal phenomenon; however, the meanings of face differ from one culture to another (Li and Su 2006). For example, in the United States the concept of face is more like prestige. It is about individuality, free choice, and self-orientation (Li and Su 2006). In China, face is collective, a matter of obligation and other-orientation (Li and Su 2006). In social interactions, especially in Asian countries, it is important for people to maintain face (Bond 1991; Ho 1976; Hwang 1987; Mao 1994). Those who do or say things that cost another person face simultaneously damage their own face (Chen 2000). Saving or making face for others shows respect to them and can help maintain harmonious relationships. This behavior is in accordance with social moral standards and thus makes face for those who practice it. Therefore, face work is very important in harmonization.

In cultures influenced by Chinese philosophies, there are two types of face: mien-tzu and lien (Ho 1976). Mien-tzu stands for prestige or reputation achieved through competition and individual efforts (Hu 1944) or ascribed by communities (Ho 1976). An outstanding wedding presentation, which goes beyond expectations or requirements, would be considered exemplary conduct that adds to the family’s mien-tzu. However, it does not add to the family’s lien, another type of face that is “the respect of the group for a man with good moral reputation” (Hu 1944, 45) and the “virtue of his membership in society” (Ho 1976, 870). All people “have the same claim to lien, an honest, decent face” (Hu 1944, 62). Everyone is expected to behave in accordance with social moral standards. Therefore, lien cannot be gained, but losing lien is more serious than losing mien-tzu (Ho 1976). Not everyone is eager to gain face, but everyone is eager to avoid losing face. Losing individual face is undesirable, and losing family face is unacceptable. Thus, face work is not an individual decision but the result of the whole family’s efforts. For example, from a Confucian perspective, an individual who undertakes plastic surgery does so for family image and reputation (Lindrige and Wang 2008). Consumption for significant events such as weddings, funerals, and New Year celebrations is a collective decision as it works toward family face.

Previous consumer research has not separated the concepts of mien-tzu and lien when studying the concept of face. The research has focused only on the mien-tzu component. For example, Wong and Ahuvia (1998), Zhou and Nakamoto (2001), and Zhou and Belk (2004) have studied the concept of face and its influence on Asian consumer behavior, especially luxury consumption. Li and Su (2006) argue, “for face consumption the products must be either name brands or more expensive . . . the consumer must carefully judge the value of the products or services when purchasing or consuming with others” (242).

Consumption that communicates aspects of the owners can be used to gain mien-tzu but not lien. Public meanings of consumption are likely to have an important influence in gaining mien-tzu. But lien influences consumption choices and patterns as well. For example, conflict about what to consume might damage relationships and thus make the family lose lien. Failure to enact social rituals might hurt family image and reputation. Enacting proper interactions among family members through the consumption process and following relevant rituals and social moral standards can prevent a family from losing face. Thus, choices of consumption might not directly influence family lien but how the family collectively makes the choices and uses the products would.

Family Loyalty

Family loyalty refers to mutual obligations, the feelings of commitment, and emotional closeness that exist among family members. Mutual obligation includes (1) the sense of duty and commitment to respect and/or love and care for other family members and (2) the feeling of, the right to, and the taking for granted of, respect and/or love and care from other family members. Mutual obligations, feelings of commitment, and emotional closeness lead to obligations among family members as well as the right to involve themselves in family and individual consumption out of their wholehearted concern for one another. From the parents’ perspective, giving financial, emotional, and service support to children is a moral imperative. Mutual obligation also results from their unconditional and generous love for their children and from their sense of duty to voluntarily and spontaneously provide what their children need. For example, parents might become actively involved in their children’s house purchase because they might see that the house would play an important role in their children’s future success in their careers and happiness in the family. Grandparents might have a significant role in the consumption needs of their grandchildren because it is their duty to raise their offspring. Adult children might have great influence on consumption related to their parents’ health. We do not know when, how, and how much family loyalty shapes family consumption as well as individual consumption. Families and family members may vary in their family loyalty. How do consumers cope with too much or too little family involvement? How do they deal with too much involvement from one member and too little from another?
RESEARCH SITE

We chose to study Vietnamese wedding-ritual consumption because of its complexity, a complexity that is due to both the sheer number of people and objects involved and to the emotion associated with the process. Each of our wedding couples spent the equivalent of US$3,000–US$6,000 on their wedding consumption, in a country that has a per capita annual GDP of less than US$1,000, while an average wedding costs US$28,000 in the United States (Mead 2007). The number of guests in our sample of weddings ranged from hundreds to thousands. Ritual artifacts included, but were not confined to, wedding costumes, jewelry, invitation cards, decorations, flowers, food, beverages, music, dancing performances, and many gifts for the bride’s family. Meanings of consumption are created and negotiated around wedding rituals. Our field observation is consolidated with scholarly work on Vietnamese culture (Phan 2006; Trân 2004) to provide the description of the research site below, which helps to explain the context of meaning creation and negotiation.

Vietnamese wedding rituals, like other types of rituals in Vietnam, include two components: lễ (rite) and hối (festivity). Lễ (rite) refers to the solemn and spiritual part of the event, while hối (festivity) refers to the joyful and secular part. Vietnamese weddings include a series of ceremonies: lễ xin dâu (asking to receive the bride), lễ đón dâu (receiving the bride), and a wedding feast. On the wedding day, the groom and his family go to the bride’s house to ask to receive the bride. The groom and his family carry several decorated lacquer boxes or trays covered by red cloth (mâm quà). Inside these boxes are various gifts for the bride’s family. The mâm quà must include betel and betel nut, which symbolize the bond between the bride and the groom. There must also be a pot of wine and two small cups for the couple to serve wine to their elders during the ceremony. Other gifts may include tea, fruit, cakes, sticky rice, a boiled chicken, a roast pig, cloth, a pair of candles, money, and jewelry. For the bride this is considered a rite of separation (van Gennep 1960). Mâm quà are presented to her family, who report their daughter’s marriage to their ancestors. Then the bride and the groom exchange rings in front of the ancestors’ altar and pay their respect to the ancestors. From this moment, the groom is accepted as a member of the bride’s family. To acknowledge the new family member and congratulat the couple, the bride’s family members are introduced to the groom and present the newlyweds with gifts.

When the rites held at the bride’s house are finished, the “receiving the bride” procession, composed of the bride and her delegation, goes to the groom’s house. There, similar rituals are performed, such as paying respect to ancestors, asking to be accepted into the family, being introduced to family members, and receiving gifts. The rites of receiving the bride have similar meanings for the groom’s family. Lễ xin dâu and lễ đón dâu are the solemn and spiritual parts of the wedding, while the wedding reception is the major festivity. Vietnamese consumers tend to base their wedding-related consumption around these two components, the ceremony and the reception. The ceremony is organized at a private home; participants are limited to members of the immediate or extended family. The reception is usually celebrated at a public or commercial place; the guests invited to the wedding banquets are much more socially expansive, ranging from friends of the couple to coworkers of the parents.

The reception usually starts with a dance performance to highlight the appearance of the couple. Dancers may dress in Vietnamese traditional outfits and dance to Vietnamese countryside music or recitations of folklore. They may also dress in Western-style dresses and dance to new music such as rock, jazz, or tango. Then the couple comes up to the stage. They may perform recently created rites such as pouring champagne over a champagne fountain, cutting a wedding cake, and lighting candles. Then the couple’s parents join them on stage. They thank the guests for attending the reception and invite them to start the party. The banquet meal usually has five to ten courses. During the banquet, the couple and their parents walk around to express their gratitude to the guests.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, we conducted a qualitative investigation of wedding consumption in Vietnam. Weddings may include a series of ceremonies that involve not only family members and extended family but also friends and the community. Wedding rituals strengthen communities by maintaining ways of life and ensuring that these patterns are passed on to the next generation (Leeds-Hurwitz 2002). Weddings may also challenge communities as the couple may look inward at themselves rather than outward to the community. Weddings become a site of consumption where the couple and their families face a large number of consumption decisions (Mead 2007; Otmes, Lowrey, and Shrhm 1997). There are many people involved in weddings who may have different views on various issues. Participants may also face a tug-of-war between collective and individual desires. Weddings unite two individuals as well as their families, and people hope to build harmonious relationships within this unity. We believe wedding-ritual consumption provides a fertile context in which to examine the process of harmonization.

Data for the study were collected over two 3-month periods during wedding seasons in Ho Chi Minh City, the center of trading and economics in Vietnam. To increase awareness of and participation in the study, the female researcher widely announced the nature of the work to acquaintances in Ho Chi Minh City. Informants were also selected through wedding-business sites such as hotels, restaurants, photo studios, and wedding-gown stores. The participants included 53 brides and grooms in their mid-20s to late 30s and 16 of their parents in their late 50s to early 70s (participants’ profiles are included in appendix tables A1 and A2). Most of these people defined themselves as middle class in terms of their ability to afford an average (by their society’s standards) wedding. Parents of some couples have passed away. Some live in provinces while their children live and work in Ho Chi Minh City. Therefore, our sample has fewer parents than brides and grooms.

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The study employed multiple qualitative and interpretive methods. It centered on ethnographic research methods to learn through participating in and observing others’ wedding activities in daily life. The first author accompanied participants on their wedding shopping trips and attended 20 weddings. A total of 425 pages of field notes, 210 pages of personal journal entries, 162 photographs, and 20 hours of videotape from field trips supplemented the interview texts described below.

However, certain aspects of wedding planning are not well documented by these ethnographic procedures. These include topics such as ambivalence, controversial behaviors, and sensitive subjects. Projective techniques were used to extract such information. Four drawings (appendix figs. A1–A4) were used as projective stimuli. Participants were asked to imagine what is happening in the pictures. The first drawing shows a couple sitting with their parents in a living room. There are several wedding artifacts such as wedding cards and a wedding album. The scene might lead to stories about family discussions before or after the wedding, with possible generational differences. The second drawing is a scene of a wedding ceremony at home when the groom’s side comes to the bride’s home and presents nuptial gifts in front of the altar. This is the most important moment, where the two families jointly perform rituals and are introduced to each other, so the questions of whose family face, status, and traditions should be preserved are potential conflicts. The third drawing is a scene of a wedding reception at a hotel. It triggers potential conflicts similar to those associated with the second image. However, this setting is more open to the public than was the previous one. It may suggest collaboration between the two families but may also lead to surface harmonization. The last drawing is a photo of a couple, which might trigger gender and generational differences about wedding photography. The traditional outfits also spur discussion about tradition versus modernity and local versus global wedding practices.

Separate interviews with the brides, the grooms, and their parents were conducted before and after their weddings. Interviews with the informants before their weddings covered wedding-preparation topics. This prewedding interview was also when projective tasks were completed. In post-wedding interviews, emphasis was placed on informants’ feelings and retrospections on the big day and their wedding consumption, including visual elicitation using the wedding photos of the couple. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. Data include 1,573 transcribed pages from 84 hours of interviews in Vietnamese.

Following a naturalistic inquiry method, we conducted data collection, analysis, and interpretation in a circular or hermeneutic manner (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Spiggle 1994; Thompson 1997). Iteration between individual stories and family accounts was made to form, revise, and further develop understandings of the entire data set. This was done to foster more general, conceptual themes and to determine relationships among these themes. Finally, the interpretation task was performed to seek parallel structure, similar themes, and recurring elements across contexts, situations, individuals, and families. Harmonization was not an a priori theme, and the interviews covered a wide range of wedding topics. Our findings emerge from the data as a whole. In the following, however, we present two selected cases that allow us to illustrate major findings.

**HARMONIZATION PROCESSES**

**Harmonizing Things**

Figure 1 shows a Vietnamese wedding card that includes a cover, wedding announcement, and reception invitation. The folk poem in the upper right corner reads “a hundred-year marriage between square and circle” (Trăm năm kết nghĩa vuông tròn). The square and the circle represent the couple. There is a common Vietnamese saying: Cha Trời (Father Sky), Mẹ Đất (Mother Earth). Sky is represented as round and Earth as square. Bride Nga argued: “There are Yin and Yang combining in harmony. Isn’t it [the case that] a circle intertwining a square makes the card look harmonious?” She proceeded to explain: “The cover is traditional. You see, the folk poem, the scene of a traditional wedding procession, the red color, and golden letters. Inside, we have more modern look: roses, hearts, and ivory color.” She argued that red is the color of weddings, but having only red would make the card look too dark. The ivory wedding announcement and reception invitation brighten the card. Furthermore, the cover is just for decoration. The wedding announcement and reception invitation present a great deal of information about the wedding ceremony and reception. It would be difficult to read golden letters on a red background, while it is easier to read on an ivory background. Moreover, ivory looks modern and luxurious. Nga keenly believed that her wedding card was a harmonious combination (kết hợp hài hòa) of old and new, Yin and Yang, and modern and traditional.

One may argue that this is just a hybrid creation—a mixture of elements drawn from different and separate sources (Ger and Belk 1996; Kraidy 2005; Pieterse 1995; Werbner and Modod 1997). Or, because the wedding card itself is a Western invention adapted to Vietnamese traditions, it might be seen as participating in a global structure of common difference (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Wilk 1995). But we argue that harmony is not merely a matter of mingling or mixing different things. Things must be modified and adopted in such a way that they mutually complete, mutually compensate, and mutually advance one another. This process forms a better organic unity (Li 2008).

Harmonizing things involves a balance between maintaining differences and establishing similarities. The comment of Mr. Ho (late 60s) echoes this harmonization process: “It is not simply mixing the old and the new. Áo dài makes the bride look graceful. But the groom has clumsy hands. He would drop things or spill wine during the ceremony. Western-style suit is as formal as áo dài, and it is convenient for the groom. . . . Things must be modified to make the whole wedding better. Photographers cannot interrupt the ritual pro-

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cess for good poses. We, however, also simplified some rites. For example, the couple did not kowtow to the parents.”

Our participants also create a harmonious consumption experience by blending various meanings created by each family member. Bride Nga first planned to wear an áo dài at the reception. However, she later decided to wear a Western-style gown. She said: “I love áo dài. We [the couple] love tradition. However, at the reception we should have some things Western. Having all traditional things is not good. It must be boring. Mingling different things in harmony [kết hợp hài hòa mọi thứ] makes a better reception.” However, as we unfold below, the experience is more complicated than simply blending traditional objects with modern ones.

The groom’s mother explains how the wedding gown would reflect the face of her family: “[Others] would evaluate our family through her appearance.” This is very similar to what Gillette (2000) found about the role of wedding gowns in influencing the social standing of the bride’s natal and marital families in the Chinese wedding context. The prospect that Nga might fail to conform to community standards if she had dressed in áo dài at the reception moved her mother-in-law to persuade her to wear a Western wedding gown. However, the mother-in-law also cleverly creates a meaning for the Western-style wedding gown in terms of her concern and her love for Nga:

I know that others would criticize our family [if she wore áo dài], but I had to cleverly explain the matter to them [the couple]. I can’t only think of myself, of what I want. I have to put myself in their [the couple’s] shoes. So I told my son that I didn’t have a chance to wear a gown in my wedding. We did not have money. Furthermore, there was no such Western fashion when I got married. I empathize with the bride’s feelings. She would regret it later [as I did] if she had not had a wedding gown. It’s true. I actually think for her. You know, I love my children and do not want them to feel that they can’t have what others have. (Groom La’s mother)

The fact that interdependent cultures emphasize social harmony does not mean they are selfless (Belk 1988; Bond 1991; Chang 2001). They do not discount their own interests or those of others. In achieving their self-interest, they simultaneously think of how it would also benefit others. Family face, family loyalty, and long-term mutuality serve as sources for consumption meanings. The mother-in-law intentionally drafts and communicates the meanings of love and care for her children.
to achieve her goal of maintaining her family face. This is similar to the rationale that Wong and Ahuvia (1998) found to justify luxury goods consumption in Asian societies. Western products have symbolic meanings in the form of status but also have a private meaning of love. Groom La accepted the meaning delivered by his mother and served as an intermediary to transfer the meaning to the bride. However, he also created new meanings, built upon the one described by his mother. The consumption of the wedding gown is not about obeying his mother’s wish but about creating a memorable experience and honoring his promise to love and care for his wife. This harmonizes his mother’s preference with his bride’s preference: “Mom really cares about my wife. She [my mom] thought for her [my wife]. I do not want to force my wife if she does not like [wearing a wedding gown]. . . . I explained to her [the bride] what Mom thought. . . . I want anything [related to our wedding to be] memorable. . . . For me, it shows my love, my care for my wife” (groom La).

Each member is willing to create meanings built upon those ascribed by others. They might not feel connected to meanings created by others, just as Nga did not believe in her mother-in-law’s love and care for her through wedding-gown consumption. However, she is willing to coordinate multiple layers of meaning into the consumption activity:

His mother wants [me to wear a wedding gown]. To some people, face is very important. . . . I want to please her [so that] it will be easier for me when we live in the same house. I do not lose anything; right? I wore ao dài to greet guests; then I changed to the gown. . . . La likes ao dài too. But a wedding gown would make his mother happy. He would think I care about his mother. He will love me more. . . . When he first saw me [in my wedding gown], it [my feeling] was like a bit shy, a bit anxious. . . . It’s hard to tell but you know, the gown is not like our [Vietnamese] clothing.

Your shoulder and your breast are uncovered.

Nga did not share the meaning of love and care for her created by her mother-in-law. She communicates the meaning of obedience to her mother-in-law so that she can have better in-law relationships, a major concern of new brides. She communicates the same meaning to her husband to show him her respect for his mother; thus she expects to get “more” of his love. At the same time, she kept to herself the meaning of intimate physical attentions.

Researchers have found that product meanings can change over time and across situations (McCracken 1986; Richins 1994). Especially in an Asian context, product meanings can be malleable due to the people who are around when the product is used (Eckhardt and Houston 2008). Our findings go beyond this. First, exploring harmonization as a process allows us to study the role of family members and their interaction in the meaning-creation process. We do not stop at seeing others as influences on private meanings created by the individual (Eckhardt and Houston 2008). Through interactions, each family member creates meanings built upon meanings created by other members. Second, we do not see the meanings created by our participants in communicating with others as belonging to public-, private-, or subgroup-meaning categories as suggested by Richins (1994). Informants might create private meanings and keep these to themselves, for example, Bride Nga ascribed the meaning of intimacy to her wedding gown. They might also create different consumption meanings to communicate to different people depending on their interpersonal relationships—a particular communication pattern of East Asian cultures (Yum 1988). For example, Nga ascribes different meanings to the consumption of her wedding gown depending on whether she communicates with her husband or with her mother-in-law. The meanings are created in order to communicate with others, not to keep solely for oneself. The receiver may accept or reject meanings created by the sender (e.g., La accepted meanings created by his mother, but Nga rejected them). However, everybody is willing to co-create meanings in order to make consumption an activity that will strengthen their relationships. Each meaning addresses the concern of the person it targets. The meanings are related to family face, family loyalty, and long-term mutuality in family. The consumption activity, wrapped up in supplementary and conflicting meanings, sounds beneficial to all members. It is polyvocal in precisely the right way. We call this “relational meaning.”

Harmonizing within the Individual

Weddings are also a venue for young couples to realize their individual desires. Our data reveal two categories of desires: perfect appearance of the couple in public and romantic love. Groom La (mid-20s) echoes this desire:

I thought my wedding must stand out. I mean, being unique in its style, the receiving-the-bride procession—everything.

I simply thought that I love my wife so I express this through things like a car, hotels, nuptials, etc. I wanted to have something that people would have to remember. . . . I wanted a limousine or a convertible car. A convertible car is so romantic. I could have had it decorated as a carriage in Cinderella movie, you know. . . . I wanted something that would attract attention and strike people’s eyes. People have to remember my wedding. (Groom La, mid-20s)

La’s parents are municipal authorities. Popular belief holds that government authorities use their children’s weddings to make money, inviting people who are under their power to the weddings in order to receive a lot of money in the form of wedding gifts to the couple. Furthermore, a lavish wedding would imply that the family is very rich and might create rumors that the parents take bribes. Therefore, having an outstanding wedding might hurt the La family’s reputation. Later, in the postwedding interview, La revealed the tension he faced:

I talked to my parents, and they did not agree with the idea. They didn’t want the wedding standing out. You know . . . my parents’ positions. People may judge our family. It is our family face. . . . You know I’m young, and as people always say: “Nựa non hàu đả” [“young horses are always eager to

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kick,” which means young people are usually immature and fantasize about their abilities]. When I talked to my father, a small talk between two men as friends, my father told me about the role of the man in the family. We discussed many topics. It is not that I didn’t care about my family face. But we [the couple] are young, so I thought my wedding must be different. I mean, being unique in its style. Then my father just reminded me about what matters the most. I’m an adult, right? I must take responsibility.

There seems to be a conflict between the groom and his parents. However, what captures the essence of the data is that La does not see this as a conflict between his parents and himself. For La, his individual desires were more salient in the wedding planning process at an early stage, but then his father triggered La’s obligation to family face. The nuance here is that La internalized the differences between his wants and his parents’ wants. The differences become a tension between his independent self—“I’m young; I like being different. . . . My wedding must stand out”—and his interdependent self—a filial son, the only grandson of the family tree. While his ideas about making the wedding unique were restrained by his concern for his family face, La still found a way to make his wedding stand out. Below is an excerpt from our field notes at the bride’s house on the wedding day:

Finally, I saw a procession heading toward the house. There was an old man in a black suit leading the procession. Next to him was a young man carrying a tray with a decanter, two small cups and some pieces of betel. Then I saw a man in blue ao dai and khăn đồng (a traditional Vietnamese hat), holding a bouquet. He must be the groom. After him were seven men in red ao dais and khăn đồng carrying mâm qua. Following these men were four couples; the men were in suits and women were in ao dais. Some passers-by stopped and looked for a while. Some continued riding past but turned around to look at the procession. Along the street, people stood in front of their doors to see what was going on. (Wedding ceremony of La and Nga)

La reasoned that many guests who were invited to the reception are his parents’ colleagues. The reception is open to the public. Therefore, a showy reception would hurt his family face. The wedding ceremony, however, was limited only to extended family members and close friends. Therefore, he could balance his individual desire and his obligation to family face by making this part of the ceremony unique in style. Furthermore, his individual desires and his obligation to family face do not merely restrain one another but rather are mutually complementary. La is proud of having all his mâm qua carriers wearing ao dais and khăn đồng. To him, this is tradition, and having a traditional wedding ceremony also enhances his family face. La has resolved his internal tension in order to harmonize with his parents. This is a process of harmonizing within the individual. Our findings support the belief that people who can harmonize within themselves can reconcile different things in the world and can harmonize with other people.

In summary, weddings are where our informants work on family face as well as their own individual desires for self-expression. The two goals seem to be in opposition but are actually complementary. Sometimes, informants interpret differences among family members as internal tensions between their independent selves and interdependent selves. Solving the internal tension is a process of harmonizing within the individual, which allows our informants to integrate seemingly conflicting selves to create a coherent sense of a unified self. This is similar to Ahuvia’s (2005) notion of synthesizing identity solutions. La’s ability to ascribe polyvocal meanings to consumption helps him to satisfy both his independent self and interdependent self. We also see what McCracken (1986) called the process of meaning transfer from goods to consumers. La successfully manages to extract the meanings of consumer good to fulfill his self-definition.

Harmonizing with People

Harmonizing with other people is a process in which involved parties “continuously adapt and relocate themselves towards interdependence and cooperation by a sincere display of wholehearted concern between each other” (Chen 2000, 5). Chinese philosophy recognizes that humans can experience tensions and undesirable situations in life, but “humans can also overcome them by developing their understanding and by accommodating their actions with this understanding” (Cheng 2006, 34). In this sense, harmonization can be approached by self-cultivation and adjustment to other parties (Cheng 2006). Harmony presupposes the coexistence of multiple parties who have different perspectives and different views on various issues. If there is mutual complementing and mutual support among the parties, so that each depends on the others “for strength, actuality, productivity, and value” (Cheng 2006, 27), then we can say the parties engage in a harmonization process. However, harmonization does not mean mindlessly following others or powerfully and repeatedly forcing one’s opinion on others. Harmonizing with other people does not mean suppression; instead, it means reconciling different views on various issues in order to achieve better results. In this section, we use an example case to illustrate the process of harmonizing with people and forces that constrain or promote the process.

Bride Tô and groom Hoàng are in their late 20s. Tô is a third-generation Chinese Vietnamese. Her family lives in a Chinese-Vietnamese neighborhood. She speaks Chinese at home and with neighbors. Hoàng’s grandparents moved from northern Vietnam to Saigon in 1954, when the country was divided into two regions. The North was under communist control. Hoàng’s grandparents and some other villagers (most of them relatives) lived close together and created what they call “our village” in Saigon. They still keep their northern accent. The community is located along such small streets (about 3 feet wide) that cars cannot enter. The wedding was on a Sunday. Although their neighbors were only invited to the wedding reception, they were standing...
along the street, observing the procession and wedding ceremonies at the groom’s and the bride’s houses.

Hurwitz (2002) sees weddings as a nongeographic boundary that strengthens ties among members of a community. Each community wants to see its customs and rituals performed in the wedding. In the cross-cultural marriage of Hoằng and Tô, one of the issues that the two families faced was whether the bride would wear áo dài in the wedding. The groom’s side wanted to see the bride dressing in áo dài, while the bride’s side did not want their daughter wearing the Vietnamese outfit. Each member tried to approach harmony with other people through (1) empathizing with others, (2) self-learning, and (3) collective adjustment. Each attempt uncovers forces that influence harmonization: longitudinal mutuality, family face, and family loyalty.

While longitudinal mutuality, family face, and family loyalty promote the harmonization process as our analysis shows, these forces may also constrain the process. At the early stages of the negotiation, there were tensions between the couple: “It was a headache. He [groom Hoằng] did not think for me [bride Tô]. He just wanted to please his parents.” Filial piety has forced Tô to reject the groom’s side’s request. At the same time, Hoằng was afraid only of losing his family face. Each of them tried to persuade the other to accept his or her own parents’ preference. This is consistent with previous research showing that harmony in Chinese culture is defined within the family. Thus, Chinese are more aggressive toward out-group members (Leung 1998). Bond (1988) and Ho (1996) also found that some components of filial piety are negatively related to “pro-social values.” However, our participants have gone through the harmonization process to achieve a solution that satisfies all members.

Bride Tô talked to her friends about the situation. She learned from those Vietnamese friends the significance of áo dài to Vietnamese. The understanding changed her perception and her attitude toward the conflict. At first, her attitude was quite defensive: “The groom’s side usually wants to control the bride’s side. I’m afraid that they will have me dress in áo dài.” After learning from her friends, she showed her empathy to the groom’s side: “I understand how they feel. I am marrying into their family. All Vietnamese brides wear áo dài.” At the same time, her filial piety and emotional closeness to her mother led to her empathy with her parents: “I always want to make my parents happy. . . . I’m so worried that my parents may be upset. They think that I [will get] married and I forget them. . . . My mother did not reject their request. She did not say a word. But I know that she would be sad if I wore áo dài. If my mother is upset, I cannot be happy.”

Note that the bride’s mother’s parental obligation toward her children restrained the mother from expressing her preference. She was afraid that if she had rejected the groom’s family’s request, the in-laws might cause trouble for her daughter later when she joined their family. This is surface harmony. The mother was not happy at all and the bride noticed that. She wants to make her parents happy with her wedding. This is a way in which she can partially repay her moral debt to her parents. Valuing filial piety, she wholeheartedly understands Hoằng’s desire to please his parents: “Every child wants to make their parents happy in this important event. It’s our obligation.” In discussing the matter with her spouse, she has further empathized with the groom’s parents: “People would criticize our parents [the groom’s parents]. They would say this family does not teach their children well.” Similarly, the groom learned to empathize with the bride’s side through his discussion with the bride: “We also have to think from the bride’s side. They are Chinese. They don’t want their daughter to forget their roots. Although modern Chinese Vietnamese no longer wear their traditional wedding costume, they wear a wedding gown instead; they do not want their children to wear Vietnamese outfits.”

Learning about the other side’s customs and traditions makes each member of the couple aware of others’ thoughts. Moreover, learning makes them feel more knowledgeable. The groom even felt he was becoming a better person after learning Chinese customs: “It’s true that I first learn their customs because I want to resolve the differences. Only if you know them, you can understand what they think, why they do what they do. But after my initial reading, I wanted to learn more. Each culture has its essence. I enrich my mind. The more knowledgeable we are, the better life we live” (groom Hoằng, late 20s).

This is consistent with Tu’s (2000) interpretation of Confucian self-cultivation: no external demands take precedence over understanding oneself and developing one’s own sense of self. As a foundation of self-cultivation, learning, however, encourages people to be connected with communities in order to realize themselves as concrete persons in a network of relationships. Hoằng was asked to follow some customs by his parents and the elders in his extended family. He searched for information about Vietnamese customs in books and on the Internet. At first, he did not like these customs when the elders mentioned them. Nevertheless, after his self-learning, he appreciated their symbolic meanings and even realized his duty to preserve the custom, as he is the eldest son. “Frankly to say, first I did not like the customs. It’s not because my parents wanted that I must do it. I have my own point of view. I talked to the elders. I read from books and the Internet. When I understood the meanings of the customs, I thought it is necessary to follow the customs. I am happy and my parents are happy as well. . . . When I have children, I want to keep those traditions in their wedding.”

Hoằng’s narrative demonstrates that harmonization does not mean passively bowing to authority. If he had not gone through a learning process, he could have suppressed his wishes and ended up with a surface harmony. Self-education enabled him to become aware of others’ thoughts—something not sufficient but necessary for empathy. Self-education also helps him recognize the similarities in different views, which is important to integration and to balancing differences.

The public meaning of consumption of the áo dài, which
represents Vietnamese identity, makes challenges to the *lien* aspect of family face. It is the shared concern for *lien* that helps family members not only sincerely to understand but also to relate to each other’s emotions and thoughts:

You know, our neighborhood is all Chinese. They would blame us for forgetting our roots. I know how my parents would feel. (Bride Tô, late 20s)

My parents want the bride to wear *áo dài*. I know that they didn’t mean to make it hard on her. There will be older people and our relatives, attending the ceremony. If she does not dress in *áo dài*, they will feel that we do not respect them. We understand the problem that my parents face. (Groom Hoàng, late 20s)

We know that they, like us, must be careful of what others say about our family image. . . . I understand that it would be difficult for the couple if the two families have conflict. (Mr. Sơn, Hoàng’s father)

There are parallels between this case and our projective data showing that family face is a common goal that ties family members together through collaboration in wedding preparations. Stories stemming from a projective drawing of a wedding ceremony (appendix fig. A2) show conflicts between the two families would become a topic for critics; thus, they would hurt the *lien* aspect of the two families’ face. Ultimately, a harmonious relationship between the two families enhances the *lien* aspect of family face for both families. Any damage to one family’s face would also hurt the other family’s face. Thus, the harmonious relationship between the two families would be destroyed: “I want no conflict, no misunderstanding between the two families. If two families [in the projective drawing] quarrel, people would laugh at us. They [the two families] would have no face. Furthermore, only if the two families are in a harmonious relationship can the couple be happy” (Ms. Ai, late 50s).

This wholehearted empathy facilitates the two parties’ collective adjustment in the harmonization process. The groom’s father first suggested that the bride did not have to wear *áo dài* during *lễ xin dâu* (the asking-to-receive-the-bride ceremony) at the bride’s house. She could wear a wedding gown, and then she would change to *áo dài* at the groom’s house for *lễ đón dâu* (receiving-the-bride ceremony). The solution was based on his understanding that the bride’s family did not want her to wear *áo dài* in front of their altar; more important, they did not want their neighbors to see the bride in *áo dài*. However, when the groom’s father talked to the groom’s relatives, some of them argued that changing costume had a bad symbolic meaning for the marriage. They interpreted the act of changing clothes as a symbol for changing spouses. The bride’s family, then, suggested that the bride could change to *áo dài* at her house after *lễ xin dâu*. Later, the bride would be presented to the groom’s relatives in *áo dài* so that the relatives would not know she had changed her costume. With this sincere empathy, the two families continuously adapted and adjusted themselves toward a harmonious solution. Each party not only responded to other parties’ adjustments but also did so in a completing, supplementing, and advancing way. We call this process collective adjustment.

There are three metaphors suggested by our participants to describe the process of collective adjustment. In the first metaphor, the participants compare their adjustment behavior with the mechanism used by a group of people maneuvering to move furniture around in a house. They do not know ahead of time how to do what they are doing. During the process, they continuously communicate and modify their behavior according to the obstacles they face and the movements of others. In the second metaphor, informants refer to musicians playing in an orchestra. Everyone has his or her own instrument, but they must coordinate and adjust to blend into the group performance. In the third metaphor, informants use the concept of a soccer team. Players’ movements and actions during a game are determined by those of their team members. Each team member has his own role, but the team coordinates harmoniously to achieve a common goal.

The meanings of the product’s uses, for example, wearing the gown in front of an altar, changing it at the bride’s house, or changing it at the groom’s house, were created and modified by the group. These actions show their willingness to collaborate. This finding aligns with Richins’s (1994) speculation of a middle level of subgroup meanings. Moreover, our study shows a process of collective adjustment of meanings. Members on each side ascribe different layers of meanings built upon meanings created by the others. Here we see relational meanings at the group level. Meanings are exchanged to address the concerns of the other group and are relationship-oriented. The meanings are rooted in family face and long-term relationships within and between groups. The meanings are not used “to define and orient the individual” (McCracken 1986). “Not wearing *áo dài*” in the ceremony at the bride’s home is not about the bride’s identity but about the relationship between the bride’s family and the groom’s family, the relationship between the groom and the bride, and the relationship between the bride and her parents. “Wearing *áo dài*” before going to the groom’s house is not about the bride’s identity but about the relationship between two families, between the groom’s family and their extended family, and between the groom and the bride.

**DISCUSSION**

Our findings reveal the processes of harmonization, which we argue can occur in any consumption situation where consumers need to synthesize multiple goals without discounting any of them. The special emotions and obligations we have seen in Vietnamese wedding consumption are also present in other life-cycle events and decisions, such as reproduction, child rearing, caring for elders, funerals, and Tet (traditional New Year) consumption. However, even in a culture that promotes individualism, such as in the United States—in the context of family, including mutual obligations (Hauerwas 1980) and the desire to maintain harmony (Commuri and Gentry 2000)—co-constructed relational and familial goals are not necessarily less important than indi-

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individual self-interests (Epp and Price 2008). Furthermore, even within the Asian interdependent self, which is defined by and sustained with respect to a web of relationships (Tu 1994), an element of individuality obtains (Belk 1988; Bond 1991). Harmonization occurs to provide solutions for any conflicts and tensions in the practice of the independent and interdependent self without discounting any of them.

Simply considering harmony as a value misses the complexity of Asian consumer behavior. This view cannot separate a wholehearted harmonization process from surface harmony (Chang 2001). Harmonization does not involve seeing those who differ as opponents to eliminate or to accommodate by suppressing personal interests. To eliminate differences, to commit to uniformity, and to submit to totalitarianism without sincere empathy only leads to surface harmony, which conceals turbulence (Chang 2001). Unfolding the harmonization processes corrects the myth that Asian consumers subsume individual interests to collective ones. There is beginning to be an academic outlook on consumers that the difference between independence and interdependence is not as clear-cut as was once thought (Griffiths 2012). We join a small but growing number of researchers who systematically study how individuality is acted out in Asian consumers’ daily lives. Griffiths (2012, x) pioneered this thrust by “mapping the first discursive principles by which individual agency successfully negotiates social interactions” in China. Our research focuses on the interaction between individuals and their intimate familial networks. We have demonstrated that Vietnamese consumers do not sacrifice individual interests to maintain harmony. Sameness and unity undercut the conditions necessary for harmony, or are even seen as indicating a lack of harmony. We also unfold forces that promote harmonization: family face, family loyalty, and long-term mutuality. However, these forces may also restrain the harmonization process. Our framework also distinguishes harmonization from the harmony as performance observed by Chang (2001) in which people manipulate their communications to protect “social harmony.”

Our findings uncover harmonization processes that integrate and balance differences to achieve a better solution without discounting any individual account. These processes require dialogue, self-cultivation, wholehearted empathy, and a willingness to adjust. We discovered three harmonization processes: harmonizing things, harmonizing within the individual, and harmonizing with people. Consumption meanings play an important role in the harmonization process. Consumers ascribe multiple meanings to products and communicate these meanings to address others’ concerns. Meanings are created and modified to maintain and strengthen relationships with others. Consumption meanings are layered to protect family face, others’ face, and thus the individual’s own face.

Richins (1994) classifies product meanings into the categories of public meanings and private meanings. She maintains that public meanings are assigned and shared by members of society at large. But private meanings are particular to “the owner’s personal history in relation to the object” and “are not available to others unless the owner chooses to disclose the relevant information” (Richins 1994, 506; emphasis added). She also speculates about the possibility of a third level of meaning—the meanings held by social subgroups. Our data suggest other levels of meaning—relational meanings. First, consumers may create a particular consumption meaning to communicate to a specific person. The meanings are created in order to communicate with others, not to keep for oneself. Everybody is willing to create multiple layers of meanings in order to make consumption an activity that will strengthen their relationships. Relational meanings can be created at the group level when one group’s members collectively create meanings to communicate with another group in order to strengthen the relationship between two groups. Richins (1994) argues that public meanings are more likely to influence consumer desire, while private meanings are more important in determining consumers’ feelings about the things they already possess. We find that in an Asian context, the relational meanings are more likely to influence group and family consumption decisions and experiences.

While the study of private meanings of products focuses on consumer feelings and experiences with products they already process, our study highlights the importance of relational meanings in the purchase process of family consumption. Within the context of harmonization, we see that family members’ ability to cultivate multiple layers of meanings to address other members’ concerns influences what products are purchased and how the products are used. More research is needed to explain under which circumstances family members emphasize negotiation of product meanings rather than negotiation of physical features. It is also important to explore how both product meanings and physical features are contested within families.

Consumer research has studied the particular meanings of products that give them value and influence consumer behavior (see, e.g., Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Eckhardt and Houston 2008; Richins 1994). However, this body of research has focused on products in isolation. Consuming for rituals such as weddings, funerals, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year celebrations include constellations of consumption activities. We find that the meanings of one consumption activity are built upon the meanings of other consumption activities. The process of harmonizing things reveals the dynamic interaction of the meanings of consumption activities. Consumers ascribe meanings to each consumption activity in relation to other consumption activities in order to create a comprehensive consumption experience. At the same time, they blend all consumption meanings created by different co-consumers in order to make a harmonious consumption experience, which benefits them all.

Li and Su (2006) provide evidence that face in an Asian context differs significantly from other psychological constructs such as prestige, status, and conspicuous consumption in US culture. However, their concept of face consumption, defined as “the motivational process by which individuals try to enhance, maintain, or save self-face, as well as show respect to others’ face through the consumption process,” is distinct from the concept of harmonization.

NGUYEN AND BELK
of products” (Li and Su 2006, 242), addresses only the mien-tzu aspect of face. Their findings show how product brands, prices, and prestige objects influence consumers in China differently from consumers in the United States because of the ability to enhance, maintain or save the mien-tzu aspect of face. However, the lien aspect of face is as important as or even more important than mien-tzu. Our findings show how consumers ascribe meanings to products and services and modify features of products and services to harmonize with people, which is important to avoid losing the lien aspect of face. Thus, face determines not only what consumers buy but also how they buy and use it and what meanings they ascribe to products.

**LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION**

Generalizations about the specific practices of achieving harmony might be problematic because our samples of informants are from an upscale class. Although the notion of harmonization is pervasive, the perception of balance may differ across groups. Thus, the wedding resulting from striving for harmonization by middle-class families in our sample may differ from the weddings of families in other classes. Further, gender distinctions and changing gender roles in the family are most advanced among the urban middle class studied. The result of the harmonizing preferences of the bride’s and groom’s families might therefore differ in other classes. Clearly, there are unanswered questions: What are the similarities and differences among the different groups? To what extent does the reception of modernization influence the harmonization process across classes and geographic areas?

Weddings are unique consumption events that are a natural focus for studying harmonization. Researchers should also explore which consumption events in more everyday situations would be most likely to evoke harmonization—for example, family vacations, child nurturing, and caring for the elderly. Researchers should also focus on whether the harmonization processes we have found are applicable to more mundane group consumption scenarios outside family—for example, among groups of friends on vacations or at reunions, among Asian group tourists, or in retirement communities. We would also expect to find harmonization practices within Western university departments that act as pseudofamilies with doctoral students as “children,” within reconstituted Western families, and in other contexts where face and harmony dominate competition and negotiation.

Chinese philosophy defines harmonization narrowly as occurring inside groups. Outside groups can instead involve severe competition among these groups. We can easily find such outside competition—for example, schools’ teams competing in elementary, high school, or university sports tournaments, or competition among villages at communal rituals. A similar phenomenon of outside-group competition can also be found in Western organizations—for example, competition among university departments for resources. Given the imprecise definition of groups, we believe that the issue of how group boundaries are defined in order for harmonization to take place is also important to study.

Researchers have observed that harmonization also occurs in Western families (Coffman and Lehmann 1987; Epp and Price 2008; Park 1982). Prior studies, however, have not explored in depth how this process occurs. Our findings show that family members go through a process of harmonizing things by mixing and mingling different things in order to achieve a balance of maintaining differences and establishing similarities that satisfy all family members. Leibniz’s notion of harmony echoes a similar concept: “Harmony is unity in variety. . . . Harmony is when many things are reduced to some unity. For where there is no variety, there is no harmony. Conversely, where variety is without order, without proportion, there is no harmony. Hence, it is evident that the greater the variety and the unity in variety, this variety is harmonious to a higher degree” (Leibniz 1948, 12; cited in Carlin 2000, 101).

Researchers studying family decision making should examine the notion of harmony in Western philosophy and how it shapes family decision-making processes as well. To do so, we would want to look at the process of how family members construct a coexistence of differences and similarities.

**CONCLUSION**

Our research demonstrates that harmonization is a dynamic, contextual, never-ending process that can happen within individuals, between human beings, and among different things in the world. We found that Asian values such as long-term mutuality, family face, and filial loyalty promote this harmonization process. However, these forces may also constrain harmonization either because they define harmony narrowly within a family or because they promote surface harmony. Harmonization provides a framework for exploring how consumption meanings are layered and negotiated among family members and among groups. Our framework builds on Epp and Price’s (2008) framework, which studies family consumption as collective collaboration, not as individuals within collectivities.

Please use DOI when citing. Page numbers are not final.
## APPENDIX A

### TABLE A1

**PROFILE OF COUPLE INFORMANTS**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Number of pages</th>
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### TABLE A2

PROFILES OF PARENT INFORMANTS

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</table>

### FIGURE A1

A FAMILY SITTING TOGETHER

[Image of a family sitting together]
FIGURE A2

A WEDDING CEREMONY AT HOME

FIGURE A3

A WEDDING RECEPTION AT A HOTEL
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