

Educational Culture and Popular Culture: Case Study Festivals in Sai Gon South International School, Ho Chi Minh City

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Abstract

Education, whose main object is pupils and students – the young living in a continuously connected environment, is characterized by endless diversity, regular interactions, the requirement for considering and examining the relation and influence of popular culture on education is essential and inevitable because “Whether we like it or not, popular culture touches all of our lives and the lives of our students. As educators, we cannot ignore popular culture”[9]. SaiGon South International School (located at 78 Nguyen Duc Canh Street, Tan Phong ward, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam) is one of the International Schools established earliest in Vietnam (over 20 years). This is the school following the curriculum of the United States situated in the East manifesting a multicultural environment with its objectives to create global citizens, who have quick responses to the changes of the times; moreover, popular culture is most focused and integrated into education and the curriculum of the school. In this paper, inheriting from previous studies and research on the relation between educational culture and popular one of some eminent scholars such as Diana Silbermanoo-Keller, Zvi Bekerman, Henry A. Giroux, and Nicholas C. Burbules; Jessica Wilson; John Morgan; L. Harklau and J. Zuengler; Owen Roberts; Robert Petrone; William Clapton as well as applying the structural chart of popular culture house created by John G. Jachbar, Kevin Lausé 1992 into the topic “*Educational culture and popular culture: Case study Festivals in Sai Gon South International School, Ho Chi Minh City*”, the writer analysed the values of educational culture reflected in mass festivals celebrated at SaiGon South International School by using opposite pairs like individual : collective; rests : studies; mass culture : elite culture; particularity : universality.

Key words: Educational culture; Popular culture; International School; Ho Chi Minh City.

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1. Introduction

Regarding the concept of “Educational culture”, Roland Barth in [5] claimed that “*Educational culture is defined as an established set of shared beliefs, attitudes, values, norms, relationships, goals, and practices that characterize an institution or organization.*”. In term of “popular culture”, A.A. Radugin in [7] defined that popular culture is cultural goods which are manufactured every day with a large quantity or (mass production), introduced to the public to a vast extent through different mass media, and consumed by all, regardless of regions and countries of living.”

We are immersed ourselves in the surrounding cultures, and popular culture is the one which plays the most important role among the three cultural types (the chart of relation between the three types of cultures - Ray Browne), whether it is liked or disliked, whether we are active or passive, popular culture still influences on our viewpoints, governs our way of life, Jack Nachbar & Kevin Lause in [7] noted that: “Popular culture surrounds us just as water surrounds fish, as the crystal environment good enough for us to live.”

Acknowledging that popular culture has much impact on every one’s way of life, hence it is necessary to exploit its educational potentiality, Ray Browne in [9] noted that “...the most significant academic and cultural development in the latter half of the twentieth century was the “rerecognition” of the importance of understanding popular culture.”

Particularly in globalization times, economic and intellectual times, information times, when the boundary among countries is only shown in the map, meanwhile interdependence among them is increasing day by day, when we want to create global citizens with “Vietnamese identity”, studying the relation between educational culture and popular one is most urgent as “Popular culture is today an intrinsic element of social and political life in many societies, particularly those that have reached advanced stages of industrialisation and development. Wherever we go and whatever we do, we are exposed in one way or another to elements of popular culture. The development and advancement of communication networks and technologies, particularly the internet, has only hastened the spread and penetration of popular culture into our everyday lived experiences”[9].

Therefore, we are able to exploit the educational potentiality of popular culture to see how “the widening fissures in the dichotomous relationships between popular culture and education” [1].

Apart from its own impression, popular culture is a young culture, suitable with the young generations, it is the teaching method which is most suitable with theory of diversified intelligence of Howard Gardner 1983. Every pupil has their own dominant strength, intelligence on a particular field such as linguistics, music, interpersonal communication, logics, mathematics, nature, pictures, etc. Using popular culture or applying designs into popular culture will help boost the strength of pupils with different intelligences. In fact, whether intentional or unintentional, teachers at SaiGon South International School often integrate popular culture in their lessons. A class is designed just like a gameshow for instance “Who is a millionaire” with all stages of competition. Start up, speeding up, reaching the goal, etc manifest an application of popular culture or show its influence; using word puzzles and pictures for words, guessing a word from a picture and so on are

themselves an application of popular culture and its influence on education.

Hence, in an official class, popular culture can be used as learning topics, teaching method: “Popular culture is not merely a subject of learning; it is a form of public pedagogy both in terms of the issues it addresses and the technologies that drive it” [1] or tools of assessment.

Indeed, popular culture as learning topics has been studied quite early. As an insider, a teacher who is directly teaching pupils, and a researcher on culture (an outsider), scholars share that if computer games were important educational tools and provided us with interaction teaching method (Kurt Squire); the websites about online stories allowed readers to write on their own chosen topics or to take part in it with high authority, especially giving benefits to second language learners (Rebecca Ward Black). If considering the roots of culture, beauty, poetry, educational ability through resistant consciousness which is soaked in Hip-hop, shows to the educators with the shades and voices of the insight of young culture (Mary Stone Hanley), advertising mass media provide educational opportunity to students who will experience recognition. Students can contextualize and defamiliarize things with usual and clear look, through which promoting their critical thinking (Virginia S. Funes). Meanwhile, fashion style and phenomena inspire students and provide them with opportunity to experience new ideas (David Wong và Danah Henriksen) [1].

According to L. Harklau and J. Zuengler, for a language learning class, mingling popular culture may make teaching curriculum more practical to pupils' life and hence making them more interest and motivate to learn [4]. Carlos Antonio Aguire Rojas claimed that in history subject, studying popular culture helps to make clear the complexity and dimensions of historical course and the dialectic of investigation into history [1]. Regarding geography, the relation between geography and popular culture was first concerned when Burgess and Gold in [3] claimed that “The media have been on the periphery of geographical inquiry for too long. The very ordinariness of television, radio, newspapers, fiction, film and pop music perhaps masks their importance as part of people's geography ‘threaded into the fabric of daily life with deep taproots into the well-springs of popular consciousness”.

In short, previous studies show that in regular curriculums, popular culture is effectively used as a tool, teaching method, particularly used to explore the insight of complex theories or concepts and also as learning topics, William Clapton in [9] noted that: “Popular culture can be very effective as a teaching tool when it is used to promote and enhance understanding of complex theories and concepts. It can also be very effective when used as part of a specific assessment or assessment regime.”

However, popular culture in educational environment, according to researchers, is not without limitations.

Entertainment and impression partly attract pupils, but it easily leads to two consequences i.e. pupils do not indeed apply popular culture into exploring nor taking in part into what teachers teach them but rather “instead focus only on the popular culture artefact itself” [9]; others have doubts about seriousness of popular culture when it is used in learning. That viewpoint is not only in pupils but also in teachers themselves. Buckingham &

Sefton-Green in [2] noted that: “Buckingham & Sefton-Green assert that engaging in popular media has often been viewed as requiring no intellectual competencies, and does not develop any. Most teachers of literacy have viewed television as the enemy.”; and “Children are already overexposed to this kind of thing outside of school, why do we have to bring it into the classroom as well?”

Moreover, popular culture is often attached with the teenager’s culture, hence, it may be without adults. Popular culture also imposes challenges in pluralistic world and globalization, especially multicultural environment, as it is more unique than transparent, therefore, it does not include both adults and people from different cultures, from different groups or with various levels of knowledge.

Therefore, researchers point out strong points and weak ones implicit when applying popular culture into learning classes. However, those studies only focus on regular curriculums. This article would like to discuss popular culture through festival activities.

2. Case study – Sai Gon South International School (Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam)

According to the statistics from Education Department in Ho Chi Minh City, at present there are 55 schools involving foreign factors, in which 35 schools apply comprehensive foreign curriculums, with 12.283 pupils (with 40% of Vietnamese pupils) enrolling in the city itself.

Located in Phu My Hung residence, the new urban area in the south of Ho Chi Minh city, SaiGon South International school – SSIS, Tan Phong ward, District 7, is not only one of the first schools (established in 1997), but it also is in stable operation, it is evaluated and acclaimed by both world organizations (acclaimed by WASC in 2005) and Vietnam ones (SSIS awarded best facilities by MOET). According to figures in 2016, the school has over 1,000 pupils from 35 nationalities. We can say that, SaiGon South International School is the school that both has the common features of international schools i.e. multicultural environment, developed countries’ curriculums which are IB, and particular characteristics of international schools of Vietnam meaning the west meets the east in celebrating festivals.

2.1. Events and cultural products in festivals

Of four groups of cultural house i.e. heritage, arts, media, and function, festivals, a kind of cultural events belong to “heritage group”. Celebrated in community, being a playground to help pupils explore the world, link the community in school, and prepare pupils to enter the open world, festivals in SaiGon South International School include Moon Festival (Lunar fullmoon August); International Week (the last week of October); Halloween (31st October); Reading Week (the last week of November); Winter concert (2nd December); Tet fair (the last day of Tet holiday before pupils go on their holiday); SSIS Idol (the last Friday of February); Pijama Friday (the first Friday of March); Earth Week (starting from 22nd April); Spring concert (April); Prom (end of May). Moon Festival is on fullmoon day of lunar August celebrated annually, it is also known as Looking Fullmoon Tet or United Tet, reflecting features of countries influenced by Han culture. This occasion is looked forward to by children as they are often given presents by adults. Presents are usually in forms of star lanterns, masks, turning lamps, etc. Traditionally, on Tet, people prepare good food, look at the moon and bring the star

lanterns. At the full moon, children sing, dance and enjoy the good food. In some regions, people play lion dance, and so on.



Figure 1: Moon Festival, SSIS

Originating from The World Day, International week celebrated in the last week of October is an important festival of international schools. It is one of the traditional festivals which is most looked forward to by pupils of these schools. Forms of celebration may change more or less from time to time, however they often have basic activities like parade to introduce traditional costumes together with fashion show, introduce music through songs and performances, and introduce cuisine and unique customs of their nations reflecting in games and cultural stalls. To encourage pupils to actively and fully take part in exhibiting cultural stalls, the organizers distribute accumulating signature forms at every stall, at the end of the festival, pupils can exchange the form with gifts. According to the principal of the school, International Week at SSIS is more than just parades and food festivals. It represents an essential part of our school culture.



Figure 2: International Week, SSIS

Halloween is celebrated on 31st October. Halloween in the short form "All Hallows' Eve", meaning the night of ritual for gods focuses on the topics of 'humour and making fun in order to face the power of death'. On this day, children will disguise themselves in odd costumes, go to knock the door of houses to play tricks and ask for sweets. Halloween of SSIS celebrates with red pumpkin, disguised costumes and foods, with scary horror movies and music, with familiar games such as grasping apples in a water bucket by mouth, matrix games, etc.



Figure 3: Halloween, SSIS

Reading week (in the last week of November) is a week for promoting reading culture. Activities and games relating to 'books' take place suddenly, accidentally and joyfully during that time. Winter (2nd December) and Spring concert (April) is a concert of all pupils in the school attracting most of them to take part in performances, supports from parents and teachers. Although the number of Vietnamese pupils earns only 10% or 20% of the total pupils of SSIS international school, with a viewpoint of respecting the culture of host country, Tet fair is celebrated formally on the last day before pupils go on their Tet holiday. On this day, cheery and apricot flowers, red packets of lucky money are available everywhere in the school. Pupils are at the big auditorium to watch teachers and other pupils perform, sing songs, play drama, and lion dance and play drums to welcome Lunar Tet and New Year. Then, everyone take part in folk games such as bamboo dance, sack jumping in the joyful, jubilant and lively atmosphere.



Figure 4: Tet Fair, SSIS

SSIS Idol is annually celebrated on the last Friday of February. The program is a competition between groups and individuals. The fund from selling the tickets (50,000 VND for children tickets and 100,000 VND for adults) is used for the charity 'Vietnam Heart' and heart operation for poor children of Vietnam. Pijama Friday celebrates on the first Friday of March in which pupils do not wear their uniforms. Instead of wearing uniforms

they can wear casual dress to school.



Figure 5: Pijama Friday, SSIS

Earth week (start from 22nd April) gives a message of protecting the environment, organic food, avoidance of wasting paper, etc to call for environment preservation. On this day, most pupil and teachers are in green.



Figure 6: Earth Week, SSIS

Prom, the night festival to mark the maturation, learning how be adults of pupils, known as Promenade, the party for highschool students at the end of school year, often takes place at the last month of the year. Prom indeed is enjoyed by teenagers in the United States and Canada, whereas in Britain, it is called Ball. In Australia and New Zealand, it is known as School Foormal. Other countries like Poland and Italia call it ‘Party 100’, because it is celebrated in there 100 days before graduation day or examination.

The festivals in SSIS all are celebrated in the form of spectacle – mingled with colours and lights (decorating classes, school), music, stage, cuisine (Buffet or food stands), folk games and modern games. Colour is fixed according to each and every activity: Halloween colour is black and red, dim light, strong music; Winter coulr is white, strong light; International Week is colourful.

And, despite changing the format from country to country or from season to season, there are heroes always there in the childhood, with unchangeable dreams and wishes: Moon sister and Cuoi uncle in Fulmoon Festival, King & Queen or variation of Mr & Mrs. Prom in Prom. In childhood everyone has a wish to see and talk to Moon sister, Cuoi uncle, to get on the moon; to take part in the festival just like Cinderella, meeting prince or princess of their life, to be praised as the most beautiful girl in the night – Mr & Mrs. Prom. Hence, nostalgia is a tactic used in designing festival programmes.

2.2. Cultural values in popular culture festivals

2.2.1. Self-awareness, devotion – individual and collective

Festivals are based on the pupils' voluntariness. They have a right whether to join the festival or not. In fact, most pupils take part in it. Pupils have rights and opportunities to volunteer, "race for the vote" into the Student Council to organize the festival. To be in this council, pupils are given chance to develop their leader skill, charming, confidence, and bravery, etc. That is also a chance for all pupils of the school to show their personality, ego, to answer questions: Who am I? (Pijama Day); Where am I from? (International Week); My character (Halloween, Prom); My hobby and talent (SSIS Idol, Reading Week). Educational culture of international school emphasizes on individuals that every individual is a difference, that I am the only entity in this world. To answer the question "Who am I" is a big success. However, individual always links with the collective, the community, which is the characteristic of festivals. Firstly, festivals are the products of the collective: school, parents of pupils (Student Council to support activities of classes, Bliss 4 Youth to support activities of school, Global issues network to support activities of community). Individuals, from pupils to teachers, staff members, parents, despite different skins, different nationalities, all integrate into a collective. Some activities specify their main objectives which are for community, contributing to promoting awareness of community protection (Earth day); other activities charge to do charity, raise money for community (SSIS Idol). Those are values of self-awareness and devotion. Therefore, through popular culture festivals at international school, the core values such as self awareness and dedicated devotion are manifested.

2.2.2. Balance – Rest and Work

Festivals refer to relaxation and rest. First, for festivals are often celebrated at free times. "Leisure is free time when man is free from pressure of work and other duties." [Phan Thu Hien 2013]: on Friday night, before the winter holiday, before year end, or even a special day given by the school or a whole week in order to organize activities (International Week). Second, because festivals are occasions for playing, entertainment so that 'a run away from daily life' is given to pupils, teachers and parents. [Phan Thu Hien 2016].

The atmosphere of preparation takes place a week before or even a month. Everyone in the school including teachers, pupils, staff members and even parents are looking forward to the festival. A week before the festival, posters, symbols related to it are hung everywhere in the school: Icons of Halloween are red pumpkins empty inside, horrible ghost masks and also flying brooms, etc; Reading Week's icon is a book; Winter Concert's icon and Spring Concert's is a Piano; Tet Fair's icon is sakura and apricot flowers; SSIS Idol's icon is micro;

Pijama Friday's icon is a pajama suit; earth Week's icon is little plants including green bonsai held in hands during the festival. Teachers and assistant teachers decorate the class. The whole school is full of colours and whistles.

The characters taking part in the festival prepare costumes and 'disguise' according to its content. Most colourful is the International Week, full of traditional costumes of races and nationalities. Reading Week will appear a number of Cinderellas, 101 spot dogs, Esmeranda step out from the story. Halloween shows off the bony bodies, witches, satans, etc. In Earth Week, the school is full of green colour, in the hands of many is little plants or small bonsai. While the children look forward to Moon festival, teenagers are waiting for Prom. In Moon Festival, children disguise into jewel rabbits, Cuoi uncle, fairies. The maturation rite is a memorable event. Boys, as a prince wearing vest suit, girls, as princess wearing gown, are allowed to aisle the hall openly, to dance and enjoy the night party under the light and music. That is an occasion for fully relaxing and resting, leisure, eating favourite food, and most important is family unity. Every year, SSIS international school has only 180 learning days, but official festival days earn up to 23 (i.e. one eighth of the time). Every month has festivals. Those festivals are not only for relaxing or leisure but for work and learning. These festivals focus on clear aims and objectives – providing pupils with chance: to learn leading skill and organizing – as they are organized by pupils themselves, to learn soft skills – communicative skill and group work (i.e. multicultural learning method is not effective), to learn about their friends' cultures (International Week), to learn about awareness of protecting the environment (Earth Week), to learn about reading culture (Reading Week). Over all, pupils learn how to balance between learning and leisure, between physical and spiritual things, between sciences and humanities, between arts and academics, between future career and family relations. If this is so, pupils will be a perfect man, ready to step in, integrate into the changing and challenging world. Parents also learn the need to balance between work and family. Unlike other schools in Vietnam, parents only meet teachers on the meeting day or when they are called for to deal with their child's faults, while coffee morning occasions just like parents meeting in SSIS international school take place openly, joyfully and regularly. Especially, parents also take part in festivals of the school as the way in which they are by the side with the school and also reminding them of balancing work and spending their time on their children. Hence, the relationships become more balanced, avoiding a case that the more the children grow, the less they are closed to their parents, and they incline toward their friends or they isolate themselves, until the gap is too far, parents would not aware where their children are on the way of learning how to become a real man. The deep floor of educational culture of the school is the value of 'balance in life', a core value manifested through those activities.

2.2.3. Outstanding – Mass and Elite

Those who are confident and want to challenge themselves can take part in SIS Idol, Winter Concert and Spring Concert. The performances in these festivals are home-grown products of teachers and pupils. However, the boundary between mass and elite is not clear in here. Despite home-grown products, many products reach the skilled levels of performance. Pupils themselves learn music, dance, and performance at the age of three, four and after their graduation they continue their love for arts. The audience has certain knowledge for arts as they learn it regularly and systematically though they are not so professional, especially in Winter Concert and Spring Concert, professionalism is manifested clearly.

In other words, the mass i.e. a number of pupils registering for the festival performance and fan are large; the format of the competition follows from the game show – the famous Got Talent of TV Station, together with the elite characteristics – the quantity of the products and knowledge of audience, it creates impressiveness and attractiveness of the festivals and celebrations of SSIS international school. Through public musical festivals, the school would like to emphasize: Academic excellence is not only the value reflected in official learning but in all activities, not in sciences but in arts. Outstanding is in any fields useful and opens to the bright future. These talent competitions provide pupils with a certificate, which is one of the most important documents for them to study abroad.

2.2.4. Respect – Particular and Universal

Festivals and celebrations are events to be looked forward to in every international school. SSIS is an international school – multicultural environment. This school is located in Vietnam, a Far East country. Hence, what is its characteristic of festivals and celebrations making it unique in particular and international schools in Vietnam in general?

First, there is a cultural integration between the West and the East in festivals and celebrations. Halloween, Winter Concert, Spring concert, Prom are mass festivals of the West mingled with Moon festival, Tet fair of the East. Such mingling, formula and artifacts are transformed to suit the culture of the host country. For example, Halloween decorations are not much horrible, they only show the patterns of red pumpkins, human bones in the main hall, where the festival takes place, disguise into ghost and characters in the story, etc. Formula is transformed: after entering the big hall, proper music (horrible) is performed, children take part in the games such as fashion show, maze, and so on in dim light. Format Prom originally consists of two parts: in prom and post prom. When prom ends at the school, pupils continue prom night at a certain place. To avoid being drunk, accidents due to drinking alcohol, parents often prepare an after prom extravaganza to welcome them. In international schools in Vietnam, this format is changed: it only takes place at school. That is suitable to the rules, norms of communicative behavior of the East. The change in formula shows the respect – respecting the culture of the host country. In Tet Fair, principal of schools send emails to all teachers and pupils to explain the meaning and origin of Tet and deeds which should be done on Tet. Especially, with thanking culture, principals recommend teachers and pupils should thank who, wish new year to whom, buy lucky money packets from which addresses, how much they should give on tet. They remind staff members of thanking people surrounding: security guards, cleaning ladies, taxi drivers, nail makers, etc. That is way of perceiving generous and open culture.

Second, as it is international school – multicultural environment, SSIS has important and unique festivals: International Week. This festival, parents and pupils together take part in. When dressing them ethnics' traditional costumes, parents and pupils themselves are artifacts of their own countries to introduce their cuisine, music, and cultures through national stalls. Those activities reflect respective values: respect one own country, respect their friends' cultures, and respect the differences among people. On an occasion of playing children explore and learn about other cultures, traditional costumes of other countries, they become closer making it easier for someone to accept other cultures, melting themselves into culture of other countries when they know

that they have a friend belonging to that culture, they experience it. And, on the way to the sea, those pupils who used to expose to other cultures are easy to open their heart to accept and integrate them into the new things. The correspondent pair of particular and universal shows the core foundation of values of educational culture in multicultural environment, first most is respect: respect and pride in one own country, respect one own traditional costumes, pride in one own cuisine and culture; respect other cultures and differences.

In order to be a global citizen – citizen of national community as well as the world’s – pupils need to develop subtle balance between cultural identity, nation and globe, need to change from ethnocentrism to ethno relativism) [Bennett, 2004], to understand that “every group of culture has its own behavior patterns to be distinguished from other groups’ [Domnwachukwu 2010]. It means that we need to tolerate, integrate, equalize, and accept the cultural differences. That is respect.

3. Conclusion

The article discusses on popular culture and educational culture through the case study of SaiGon South International School’s festivals. Therefore, popular culture and educational culture are closely related. How to exploit the former in particular, public culture in general to to emphasize and orientate the values in education is skillfully and flexibly mingled between individuals and collective – self awareness and devotion; rest and work – balance; mass and elite – outstanding; particular and universal – respect will contribute to educational objectives for global citizens – national identity. I think that, in the context of modern world, it is not the objective of multicultural international school, but it is also objective of the world education in general. In order to train global citizens, who are able to integrate, tolerate, and equalize, culture needs to link with popular culture, because the new sky for learning always offers the international and multicultural environment; and we continue to learn much from our communication with other countries. If we see popular culture festivals to be for entertainment, relaxing and organizing, designing events with relaxing spirits, entertainment and public (drawn from work, elite), the role of popular culture festivals is not considered important. Then a number of festivals will be fewer and fewer, the quantity is not fully invested.

When the western festivals spread over the the East and the traditional festivals introduced into international schools will be changed so that they suit to the culture of that country, that school. This article has not mentioned about the transformation of culture when the cultural context is changed. Deeper studying in this matter will help to interpret and limit counterpoints in perceiving festivals and new culture from the perspective of the pupils, teachers and parents.

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