

# Comparative Images in Vietnamese Perception Through Idioms With Comparisons

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**Abstract**—Idioms are considered special linguistic units that represent national cultures and views (Giang, 2023). Idioms with comparisons are a type of idioms commonly used in Vietnamese communications. Comparative images of these idioms derive from their component parts implicitly containing typical cultural characteristics and unique perception of Vietnamese people. This paper is concerned with comparative images in Vietnamese perception through idioms with comparisons from a cultural perspective. A hand search of Vietnamese idiom dictionaries helped to establish a corpus of 731 idioms with comparisons, from which comparative image groups were identified. It was found that comparative images of Vietnamese idioms with comparisons come from humans, animals, objects and materials, natural phenomena, food, and plants. The diversity of comparative images of idioms with comparisons is a mirror that reflects not only the geographical and natural characteristics of Vietnam but also Vietnamese people's rich material and spiritual lives.

**Index Terms**—idioms with comparisons, comparative images, Vietnamese perception, culture, component parts

## I. INTRODUCTION

Hanh (2008) stated that there have been three approaches in studying idioms in Vietnam. First, investigations on idioms under etymology are research projects of macro field. These studies discover the formation and transformation of each idiom during its existence; in other words, the origins of idioms are recovered in order to make the forms and the idiomatic meanings transparent. The second approach in studying idioms is synchronic evolution. Research on idioms from this approach provides underlying cultural factors that govern the formation of idioms. Studying idioms under contrastive analysis is the third approach in which original recovery and synchronic evolution are the backgrounds for contrastive analysis works. Several attempts have been made to work out the similarities and differences between Vietnamese and another language, especially English, in terms of idioms. These in-depth investigations of idioms offer excellent opportunities for cross-language comparison and analysis.

According to Giang (2018), Vietnamese idioms have been investigated from both traditional and cognitive views. Those scholars who dropped the traditional view emphasize the fixation of idioms. They mean that idioms are unpredictable or non-compositional. Scholars who adopt the cognitive view focus on the ability to analyze idiomatic meanings from component parts forming idioms. It is believed that most idioms can be analyzable and have meanings that are at least partly motivated.

Menh (1986) and Chau (1981) supposed that idioms are available linguistic units which have stable structures, typical meanings and nominative functions. Dan's (1986) definition showed that an idiom is "a fixed group of words having a complete meaning and descriptive value" (p. 8). He also added that idioms express concepts based on separated images. Thus, idioms usually have their own figurative meanings. Similar to Dan (1986), Hanh (2008, p. 31) considered an idiom as "a fixed group of words which is firm in terms of structure, complete and figurative in terms of meaning, and is widely used in daily speaking". More specifically, Giang (2018) defined that an idiom: (i) is a fixed unit whose component parts cannot be varied or varied under definable control; (ii) is regarded as a complex scene with a bipartite semantic structure: a literal reading and an idiomatic meaning; (iii) has the meaning which is usually different from the meanings of the combination of its components; (iv) expresses a pure concept. Then, he divided Vietnamese idioms into three categories: idioms with pairs, idioms with comparisons and idioms with ordinary rules. Giang also carried out an investigation into contents of idioms with comparisons in Vietnamese in 2022. However, comparative images exposing the degree, the manner or the attribute of contents of idioms with comparisons were not investigated. In the present study, comparative images in Vietnamese perception through idioms with comparisons will be described and analysed from a perspective of culture.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### A. Idioms from Different Views

Traditionally, several authors such as Menh (1972), Dan (1986), Duc (1995), Hanh (2008) and Luc and Dang (2009) assumed that idioms are unpredictable or non-compositional. The idiomatic meaning of an idiom cannot be captured

although the meaning and syntactic properties of each word of that idiom have been learned. By this, it means that the meaning of an idiom cannot be derived from the meanings of its component parts.

The meaning of an idiom in Hanh (2008) is not the result of the compositional function of its component parts. An idiom is regarded as a single lexeme that is non-correlative in its syntax and therefore non-literal in terms of its constituents. For instance, *m ìch ùh c ánh* ‘monosodium glutamate’ is an idiom which can be paraphrasable as “valuable and rare”. The idiomatic meaning of this idiom seems to have no link with the literal meaning and syntactic properties of the idiom. In other words, the meaning of an idiom is the special chemical mixture of all components’ meanings, which is totally new in quality.

From a cognitive view, Giang (2018) believed that most idioms in Vietnamese can be analyzable and have meanings that are at least partly motivated. Based on the classification of idioms by Fernando and Flavell (1981), Giang (2018) divided Vietnamese idioms into four categories: transparent (all components are explicit), semi-transparent (some components are explicit and the others are implicit), semi-opaque (all components are implicit but possibly interpretable), and opaque (all components are implicit). This classification reveals that Vietnamese idioms appear from totally transparent to totally opaque. In fact, most idioms are motivated by cognitive – semantic mechanisms such as metaphors, metonymies and conventional knowledge (Gibbs, 1995). *Túc nổ mắt* ‘angry explode eyes’ [become extremely angry], *túc nổ ruột* ‘angry explode intestine’ [become extremely angry], and *túc lòì con người* ‘angry protrude pupils’ [become extremely angry] are called “anger idioms” which are widely motivated by conceptual metaphors. ANGER IS HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER is a conceptual metaphor that can activate the linguistic realizations of the anger emotion. Therefore, the figurative meanings of most idioms are not arbitrary.

Language in Zhang (2007) is a reflection of culture and culture directly shapes the formation of language. Idioms are considered an important part of the language and culture of a society. In discovery into the unknown world, idioms reflect the transformation in conceptualization of the world around and the association between the human beings and the universe (Giang, 2018). Therefore, idioms, as a form of a language, represent culture in a concentrated way. Binh (1999) found that geographical feature, living circumstance, mode of production, culture and national thought define the properties of idioms of each language. Similarly, Lan (2001) emphasized the role of the national thought in defining the images compared by giving a comparative table among Vietnamese, English and Russian in terms of idioms with comparisons. From this table, she commented that the images used to compare are very popular things in everyday lives of the people in each nation. Additionally, Hanh (2008) did not only pay attention to structural properties, he also particularly focused on the use and artistic value of Vietnamese idioms. From a cultural perspective, he said that underlying cultural factors behind idioms need uncovering.

The formation mechanism of Vietnamese idioms is generally motivated by external semantic cognition including metaphors, metonymies and conventional knowledge (Giang, 2018). It is a natural process involving the human perception about the world around (including natural world, social world and imaginative world) through comparative images. This formation is also affected by several underlying factors such as living circumstance, historical allusion, religions and beliefs, traditions and customs, etc.

### B. Classification of Idioms

There has been a great number of works classifying Vietnamese idioms (e.g., Luc & Dang, 1978; Tu, 1983; Duc, 1995; Hanh, 2008; Giang, 2018, 2021). Luc and Dang (1978) proposed a division of Vietnamese idioms according to the number of words forming idioms as well as their compositions. They gave seven types of idioms: idioms with three single words or more, idioms with a single word and a compound, idioms with two compounds, idioms as simple sentences, idioms with alliterations or compounds, idioms with symmetrical comparisons, and idioms with summary comparisons. Relying on the expressing functions of idioms, Tu (1983) addressed Vietnamese idioms and identified three major types of semantic functions that idioms fulfil: idioms expressing things, idioms expressing properties, and idioms expressing activities.

Vietnamese idioms, in Duc’s (1995) categorization under the symmetrical properties, are divided into three main groups: idioms with symmetrical patterns, idioms with comparison patterns, and idioms with non-symmetrical patterns. Sharing much with that of Duc (1995), Hanh (2008) classified Vietnamese idioms into three main categories according to their compositions and formation of idiomatic meanings: symmetrical figurative idioms, non-symmetrical figurative idioms, and simlized idioms. Linguistically, this classification of idioms in Vietnamese is regarded as a comprehensive one because it is based on both structural and semantic properties showing the nature of idioms. However, Giang (2021) claimed that Hanh’s classification is not based on a consistent criterion and he divided Vietnamese idioms into three categories: idioms with pairs (e.g., *buôn gian bán lận* ‘trade fraudulent sell fraudulent’ [cheat in commerce]), idioms with comparisons (e.g., *nói như vẹt* ‘speak like a parrot’ [be talkative], and idioms with ordinary rules (e.g., *gửi trứng cho ác* ‘give eggs to crow’ [believe in wicked people]).

### C. Idioms With Comparisons

Hanh (2008) regarded Vietnamese idioms with comparisons as fixed groups of words coming from comparative structures and having figurative meanings such as *khỏe như vâm* ‘as strong as an elephant’ [very strong], *như cá nằm trên thớt* ‘like a fish on a chopping-board’ [in a dangerous situation], *nhảy như chơi chơi* ‘jump up and down like a plover’ [jump up and down continuously], etc. In terms of composition, an idiomatic comparison is similar to an

ordinary one; however, they are different from each other in some ways. An ordinary comparison refers to two things belonging to the same category to show the degree of their similarity or difference. For example, “*Hue đẹp như chị gái m ìh* [Hue is as beautiful as her sister]” is an ordinary comparison since it refers to two people of the same category. Hue’s sister is beautiful and Hue is beautiful, too, but we do not know how beautiful Hue is. On the contrary, an idiomatic comparison involves one thing which is put in the same line with another of a different category to emphasize or exaggerate certain properties. Let’s have a look at “*Hue đẹp như tiên* [Hue is as beautiful as a fairy]”. This sentence is an idiomatic comparison in which the comparison is made between Hue and a fairy. It shows how beautiful Hue is because it is compared to the fairy’s beauty.

Idioms with comparisons are a popular type of idioms in Vietnamese. They are realized by three component parts, namely contents of comparison, comparative images and connectors of comparison, in which the comparative images are the symbols making the contents of comparison explicit (Giang, 2022). In *đẹp như tiên* ‘as beautiful as a fairy’ [very beautiful], *đẹp* (beautiful) is the content of comparison; *ti tiên* (a fairy) is the comparative image; *như* (as...as/like) is the connector of comparison. In addition, *tây* (as/like), *bằng* (as/like) and *tựa* (as/like) are also the connectors of comparison in some cases. According to Giang (2022), contents of comparison appearing at the same time with the comparative images and connectors of comparison are called closed contents of comparison; contents of comparison that do not appear with the comparative images and connectors of comparison are open. The comparative images usually show the degree, the manner or the attribute of contents of comparison.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study gives an in-depth discussion of comparative images in Vietnamese perception through idioms with comparisons; therefore, it is considered a descriptive study. According to Wisker (2001), the aims of descriptive research are to learn more about a phenomenon and to capture the phenomenon with detailed information. Wisker (2001) also explained that descriptive research attempts to determine, describe or identify what is. It means that in descriptive research, description, classification, measurement and comparison are used to describe what phenomena are. This study presents the theoretical background of Vietnamese idioms in general and idioms with comparisons via their comparative images in particular, which are illustrated by examples along with explanations and discussion, and then concluding remarks are given by means of deductive reasoning.

The data collection instrument employed in the study was a hand search of Vietnamese idiom dictionaries. According to Anshen and Aronoff (1999), dictionaries are valuable instruments for the scientific research of languages because of their ‘objective and readily verifiable reference’ (Neumann, 2001). Vietnamese idioms with comparisons are taken from five standard lexicographical works (current dictionaries). The collected data forms a corpus of 731 idioms with comparisons in a Word file, stored under different headings according to the comparative images investigated: comparative images from (1) humans, (2) animals, (3) objects and materials, (4) natural phenomena, (5) food and (6) plants.

After the data was collected and classified, the comparative images on which the idioms with comparisons are based were described and analysed. Six comparative image groups were found in the corpus. In each group, comments are illustrated by examples with explanations and discussion. In this study, Vietnamese idioms in general and idioms with comparisons in particular first had to be translated into English. However, there are several Vietnamese idioms for which English equivalents could not be found. In order to maintain consistency in translation, both word-for-word and paraphrase (Baker, 1992) are used as the translation strategies. Word-for-word translation would help to indicate the actual words in the source language, and the idiomatic meanings of idioms would be kept by paraphrase.

### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

An investigation of five Vietnamese idiom dictionaries was carried out in this study, and 731 idioms with comparisons were collected. Within this corpus, comparative image groups were identified. Table 1 shows the results for Vietnamese idioms with comparisons classified according to the comparative image groups, consecutively arranged from the largest number of idioms to the least. It can be seen that comparative images from humans, animals, and objects and materials are in the largest percentages of idioms (41.18%, 27.09%, and 16.00%, respectively). 6.84% of idioms with comparisons possess comparative images from natural phenomena. Comparative images from food, and plants have lowest percentages of idioms, with a total of 8.89%.

TABLE 1  
COMPARATIVE IMAGES IN VIETNAMESE PERCEPTION THROUGH IDIOMS WITH COMPARISONS

No	Comparative images in Vietnamese perception	Number of idioms with comparisons	%
1	Comparative images from humans	301	41.18
2	Comparative images from animals	198	27.09
3	Comparative images from objects and materials	117	16.00
4	Comparative images from natural phenomena	50	6.84
5	Comparative images from food	33	4.51
6	Comparative images from plants	32	4.38
Total		731	100

### A. Comparative Images From Humans

Humans in the present study include specific people, body parts, occupations, activities, religions, beliefs and historical allusion. Comparative images from specific people such as *ông cụ bảy mươi* (a seventy years old man) in *lạ khụ như ông cụ bảy mươi* ‘as senescent as a seventy years old man’ [old and weak], *mẹ ranh* (a young mother) in *láo nhéo như mẹ ranh* ‘as shrill as a young mother’ [talking too much makes the others annoyed], *hủi* (a leper) in *bẩn như hủi* ‘as dirty as a leper’ [very dirty], and *cụ non* (a little old fellow) in *nói như cụ non* ‘speak like a little old fellow’ [be well-spoken despite being very young]. There are some body parts appearing in several idioms with comparisons. For example, the palm of the hand is shallow, which shows the degree of *cạn* (shallow) in *cạn như lòng bàn tay* ‘as shallow as the palm of the hand’ [be shallow in thought]. Other body parts such as fingers, hands, teeth, tongues and bowels are also the comparative images of several contents of comparison. These comparative images represent the figures, the functions or the attributes of the body parts.

Vietnamese people have many traditional occupations, each of which has its own characteristics. *Thợ đào* in *ăn như thợ đào* are the people who work as diggers. Digging is a hard work; hence, diggers must be in good health and often eat quickly and a lot. This comparative image indicates the degree and the manner of *ăn* (eat) in *ăn như thợ đào* ‘eat like a digger’ [eat quickly and a lot]. Some other jobs such as boatman, rice-hulling mill maker and blacksmith are also found in the comparative images of idioms in the corpus.

Comparative images from human activities account for a very large number. These activities in the comparative images often come from Vietnamese society in the past. Let’s have a look at *cãi nhau như mổ bò* ‘argue like butchering a cow’. Cows were previously raised for pulling power, not for meat. Most of the cows that were slaughtered were old and weak. They were no longer able to work and reproduce. Slaughtering pigs, chickens or dogs was the work within the families or the relatives. However, butchering a cow was a big deal, the work of the whole village. Because slaughtering cows was not a regular job, there were very few skilled people for the job. This work would be done by some so-called know-how men with the help of the others. In fact, the activities to kill a cow such as tripping, tying, using a hammer to stun its head, and then urgently cutting its neck for blood before the poor animal died were not easy. The more people participated, the more opinions were given. Therefore, there were often noisy quarrels right from the beginning of the work. By the time the cow was skinned and butchered, many onlookers around also made a lot of noise. Accordingly, *cãi nhau như mổ bò* which means “argue loudly” is often used with critical view.

Although Vietnam is a multi-religious country, Buddhism has the most influence on Vietnamese culture. A large number of Vietnamese words and idioms derived from Buddhism indicate this influence. There are many comparative images associated with pagodas, temples, shrines and characters appearing there: e.g., *vắng như chùa Bà Đanh* ‘as quiet as Bà Đanh pagoda’ [very quiet and deserted], *lừ đừ như ông từ vào đền* ‘as sluggish as a temple keeper’ [very sluggish], *to như Hộ Pháp* ‘as big as a Colossus’ [very big], *hiền như Phật* ‘as kind as Buddha’ [very kind], etc. *Bà Đanh* is a pagoda in Ha Nam province of Vietnam. It is located in a secluded location, which is surrounded by rivers and forests. In the past, there used to be wild animals, so it was dangerous to enter the pagoda by going through the forests. The only safe way was to row a boat across Đáy River, which was very inconvenient, and the pilgrims were sparse. Therefore, *Bà Đanh* pagoda is used as a comparative image showing the degree of *vắng* (quiet). Besides, for Vietnamese people, the underworld is always believed to be the place where people will live after deaths. In fact, several imaginary characters and scenes from the underworld appear in idioms as comparative images: e.g., *tối như cửa địa ngục* ‘as dark as hell’ [very dark], *chiều như chiều vong* ‘pamper like pampering manes’ [pamper somebody], *giục như giục tà* ‘urge like urging evil spirits’ [urge somebody to do something], *nhảm nhảm như chó cắn ma* ‘speak as a dog barks at ghosts’ [talk to somebody with anger and annoyance], etc.

Vietnam has a history of more than four thousand years, in which there have been a series of important historical events. During the long history, Vietnamese people have had many unique stories and anecdotes about different historical figures. This is a rich and diverse source of comparative images, from which several idioms with comparisons have been formed: e.g., *nợ như Chúa Chôm* ‘owe like King Chôm’ [owe a lot of people], *giàu như Thạch Sùng* ‘as rich as Thạch Sùng’ [very rich], *như vợ chồng Ngâu* ‘like the Ngâu’ [a separation of husband and wife], etc. *Nợ như Chúa Chôm* is an idiom related to an anecdote in the past. This anecdote concerns a historical figure called King Chôm. That was Mr. Lê Duy Ninh, i.e. King Lê Trang Tông, son of King Lê Chiêu Tông and a woman. When Lê Duy Ninh was born, his mother named him "Chôm". King Lê Chiêu Tông was usurped and Chôm was brought up by his mother in the society. He was very poor, thus, he borrowed money from a lot of people for food year after year. Then, when the Lê Dynasty was restored, Chôm was brought back to the capital to take the throne. Once, when going through the former hometown, many people recognized him and came to collect the debts. King Chôm did not remember how much and who he owed, so he told his soldiers to mint coins and scatter them on the roads. Whoever found the coins could keep them. It was the way King Chôm repaid the people he owed. This comparative image made *nợ như Chúa Chôm* mean “owe a lot of people”.

### B. Comparative Images From Animals

Vietnam is a country located in Southeast Asia with a long coastline stretching from North to South. Three-fourth of Vietnam's territory is mountainous and the rest is plain. It is also the country which owns vast deltas with several rivers. The diverse terrain combined with the tropical monsoon climate makes the fauna in Vietnam very rich. Many animals

have appeared in Vietnamese idioms, especially idioms with comparisons. Comparative images directed by Vietnamese people include both aquatic and terrestrial animals. Aquatic animals mainly live in rivers, streams, ponds and lakes such as snails, crabs, leeches, loaches, mussels, fiddlers, etc. Terrestrial animals include domestic animals such as dogs, cats, chickens, buffaloes, cows, pigs, etc. and wild animals such as tigers, bears, crows, cranes, shrews, etc. Below are examples for illustration:

(i) Comparative images from aquatic animals: e.g., *lẩn như chạch* ‘sneak away like a loach’ [sneak away in a quick way], *câm như hến* ‘as mute as a mussel’ [speak nothing], *dại như đĩa* ‘as obstinate as a leech’ [very obstinate], *ngang như cua* ‘as stubborn as a crab’ [very stubborn], etc.

(ii) Comparative images from terrestrial animals: e.g., *béo như lợn* ‘as fat as a pig’ [very fat], *ngu như bò* ‘as stupid as a cow’ [very silly], *khỏe như trâu* ‘as strong as a buffalo’ [very strong], *cao như sếu* [as tall as a crane’ [very tall], *hối như chuột chù* ‘as smelly as a shrew’ [very smelly], etc.

Comparative images from animals are used to show the degree or the manner of contents of comparison. The degree is expressed through animals’ appearance and characteristics. *Cao như sếu* [as tall as a crane’ [very tall] is an idiom in which the height of a crane represents the degree of *cao* (tall). The nature of a slug is to move very slowly and this property is the degree of *chậm* (slow) in *chậm như sên* ‘as slow as a slug’ [very slow]. The manner is expressed through animals’ activities. How a cat watches for a mouse shows the manner of *rình* (watch for) in *rình như mèo rình chuột* ‘watch for as a cat watches for a mouse’ [watch for something or someone].

Vietnamese people do not appreciate some animals such as dogs, pigs and cows; therefore, these animals are often found in idioms with offensive meanings: e.g., *ngu như chó* ‘as stupid as a dog’ [very stupid], *ngu như lợn* ‘as stupid as a pig’ [very stupid], *ngu như bò* ‘as stupid as a cow’ [very stupid], etc. This explains why Vietnamese people will feel humiliated and insulted when they are compared to dogs, pigs or cows. Bees, squirrels and starlings are few of the animals that appear in comparative images with positive meanings. *Chăm chỉ như con ong* ‘as assiduous as a bee’ [very assiduous], *nhANH như sóc* ‘as fast as a squirrel’ [very fast] and *vui như sáo* ‘as happy as a starling’ [very happy] are the examples.

### C. Comparative Images From Objects and Materials

Vietnam is a country which has agricultural imprints with familiar items to farmers such as *cái bồ sứt cạp* (a bamboo basket with the broken rim) in *to như bồ sứt cạp* ‘as big as a bamboo basket with the broken rim’ [very big], *cái vại* (a jar) in *bình chân như vại* ‘as unruffled as a jar’ [stay unruffled], and *cái kiềng ba chân* (a tripod) in *vững như kiềng ba chân* ‘as steady as a tripod’ [very steady]. Comparative images can be the shapes, the parts, the colors, the functions or the features of the objects. *Kiềng ba chân* is an iron tool with three legs, on which pots or pans can be put for cooking. Because this tool has three legs and is made of iron, it is very steady no matter where it is placed. This is an image that shows how steady the content of comparison (steady) in *vững như kiềng ba chân* ‘as steady as a tripod’ [very steady] is. *Sắc như dao cau* is another example. *Dao cau* is a small sharp knife used for cutting areca-nuts. The comparative image of this item shows the degree of *sắc* (sharp) in *sắc như dao cau* ‘as sharp as a knife for cutting areca-nuts’ [very sharp]. *Sắc như dao cau* sometimes indicates “sharp eyes”.

In addition, comparative images from materials are also used in many idioms with comparisons. The degree of comparative contents is shown through the colors or the properties of materials compared such as coal is black, iron is hard, velvet is soft, glue is sticky, etc.: e.g., *đen như than* ‘as black as coal’ [very black], *cứng như sắt* ‘as hard as iron’ [very hard], *êm như nhung* ‘as soft as velvet’ [very soft], *dính như keo* ‘as sticky as glue’ [very sticky], etc.

### D. Comparative Images From Natural Phenomena

Vietnam is located in the tropical monsoon climate zone (humid and drizzly in spring; hot and rainy in summer; cool in autumn; cold and dry in winter). Diverse climatic conditions have directly affected Vietnamese perception in using comparative images in idioms with comparisons. In fact, there are several idioms with comparative images showing weather phenomena; for example, *nhANH như gió* ‘as fast as wind’ [very fast], *nhANH như chớp* ‘as quick as lightning’ [very quick], *ngáy như sấm* ‘snore like thunder’ [snore loudly], *bắn như mưa* ‘shoot like a shower’ [shoot a lot and continuously], *mạnh như vũ bão* ‘as powerful as a storm’ [very powerful], etc. In addition to comparative images of weather, Vietnamese people also refer to other natural phenomena related to moon, sun, stars, water, etc. *Đang lên như nước thủy triều* ‘rise like tides’ [advance in one’s career], *lơ thơ như sao buổi sớm* ‘as sparse as stars in the early mornings’ [very few] and *đông như nước chảy* ‘as crowded as running water’ [very crowded] are the examples.

Comparative images from natural phenomena indicate the degree or the attribute of contents of comparison. Wind speed represents the degree of *nhANH* (fast) in *nhANH như gió* ‘as fast as wind’ [very fast]. *Sét đánh* (thunderbolt) shows the attribute of comparative content in *như sét đánh* ‘like a thunderbolt’ [strongly affected].

### E. Comparative Images From Food

In Vietnam, rice is cultivated in most regions, and it is considered the main food in daily meals. Therefore, it is not surprising that several comparative images come from rice-based dishes: e.g., *chán ngán như cơm nếp n á* ‘feel sick of somebody/something like clammy sticky rice’ [feel sick of somebody/something], *láo nháo như cháo trộn cơm* ‘get confused like soup and rice mixed’ [very confused], *mềm như bún* ‘as soft as rice vermicelli’ [very soft], *rời rạc như cơm nguội* ‘as desultory as cold rice’ [very desultory], etc. The dishes that appear in comparative images are mostly

popular such as *mắm tôm* (shrimp paste) in *gắt như mắm tôm* ‘as grouchy as shrimp paste’ [very grouchy], *canh hẹ* (shallot soup) in *rối như canh hẹ* ‘as complicated as shallot soup’ [confusing and complicated problems], *com nếp* (sticky rice) in *chán như com nếp nát* ‘feel sick of somebody/something like clammy sticky rice’ [feel sick of somebody/something], *bánh chưng* (square glutinous rice cake) in *dửng dưng như bánh chưng ngày tết* ‘as indifferent as Bánh chưng at Tet’ [very indifferent], etc.

*Bánh chưng* (square glutinous rice cake) is a traditional dish indispensable at Tết (Vietnamese Lunar New Year). This food is very delicious. However, every family has *bánh chưng* on Tết holidays, and it is so popular that people feel indifferent to this kind of cake. It is why *dửng dưng như bánh chưng ngày tết* means “very indifferent”. Another example, in which the degree of comparative content is from the appearance of the dish, is *rối như canh hẹ* ‘as complicated as shallot soup’ [confusing and complicated problems]. *Canh hẹ* is a soup made from shallot leaves and eggs. Shallot leaves are long, thin and tough; thus, they are tangled together when cooked. This comparative image helps to think of confusing and complicated problems like shallot leaves tangled together in a bowl of soup.

#### F. Comparative Images From Plants

Like the fauna, the flora in Vietnam is very rich and many kinds of plants appear in idioms with comparisons. Comparative images come from food plants, fruit trees, wild plants, medicinal plants, vegetables, etc. Some plants are compared as a whole such as *nhẹ như bấc* ‘as light as a rush’ [very light], *ngọt như mía* ‘as sweet as a sugar-cane’ [very sweet], and *run như cây sậy* ‘shake like a reed’ [shake with fright]. Most of comparative images are mainly from parts of the tree such as stems, fruits, bulbs, leaves and flowers: e.g., *đỏ như gấc* ‘as red as a gac fruit’ [very red], *lành như củ khoai* ‘as gentle as a bulb of batata’ [very gentle], *đen như củ sùng* ‘as black as a bulb of water lily’ [black skin], etc.

The degree of the comparative contents is based on the characteristics of plants such as shape, color, taste, price, growing condition, etc. Chilli is hot, and its taste represents the degree of *cay* (hot) in *cay như ớt* ‘as hot as chilli’ [very hot]. Rice leaves are long and thin. This image shows how thin the comparative content is in *mỏng như lá lúa* ‘as thin as a rice leaf’ [very thin]. In some cases, comparative images are parts of the tree in general without indicating any specific plants such as *đẹp như hoa* ‘as beautiful as a flower’ [very beautiful], *xanh như lá* ‘as green as a leaf’ [very green] and *trẻ như búp* ‘as young as a bud’ [very young].

#### V. CONCLUSION

Idioms which are considered the crystals of a language mirror human wisdom in the process of world perception (Zhang, 2007). The formation mechanism of idiomatic meanings is generally motivated by “external semantic cognition”, i.e. it is the process of human perception of the world around (including natural world, social world and imaginative world) through images (Giang, 2018). Specifically, idioms with comparisons represent Vietnamese comparative perception of what they have experienced. These idioms are realized by three component parts, namely contents of comparison, comparative images and connectors of comparison. Contents of comparison are usually explicit; therefore, the idiomatic meanings are mainly from comparative images associated with humans, animals, objects and materials, natural phenomena, food, and plants. Comparative images from humans, animals, objects and materials in the largest number show that Vietnamese people’s lives are colorful and idioms with comparisons correspondently reflect their lives. With creative perception of the world around, Vietnamese people have created an extremely rich corpus of idioms containing their living knowledge and cultural values.

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