Why do the Vietnamese people call a married couple ‘wife and husband’, not ‘husband and wife’ as do most peoples in the world?

The Vietnamese philosophy has it that human beings come from a mass, which was comprised of yin and yang. The latter was then divided into three categories – sky – earth – all species. All these species are of the five basic elements: water, fire, wood, metal, and soil, that mutually evolve in a closed circle. In the course of their primitive original stage to the present, the Vietnamese rely themselves on the inward emotion representing the yin, which is balanced by the adoption of odd numerical features, representing the yang when they express their ideas. In reality, there are quite a few expressions of odd numbers: ba cọc ba đồng ‘three sticks three pennies’ (for meager income), ba chǐm bảy noi ‘three sinks seven floats’ (for all ups & downs), năm dầu bảy chuyện ‘five things seven stories’ (for small chats), ba bảy hai mươi mốt, ‘three by seven = 21’ (for a short while), gà chín cây, ngựa chín hông mao (Truyện Sơn Tinh Thủy Tinh) ‘a rooster with nine spurs, a horse with nine manes’ (for non-existing foul and animal), etc. …; these exactly illustrate the adaption. They found their school of thoughts on the Kan (八卦) as shown in the I Ching, which is comprised of two yins and one yang. And so, their medically-based theory refers mainly on the kidney, a symbol of yin. This explains why the Vietnamese would praise someone who is kind to them for having ‘good belly’.

Comparing this philosophical orientation to the Han’s, it is clear that they base theirs on the ‘extreme’, which in turn dichotomizes into lương nghi ‘two elements’, then four symbols > eight triagrams > all species. The Han found their school of thoughts on the Li (八卦) or outward emotion, balanced by the adoption of even numerical features. Terms like tứ tự ‘four pillars’ (for four prime regents in the royal court), bát mạch ‘eight pulses’ (for eights sets pulse beats), luc vị ‘six elements of galenical medicine’ (for kidney tonic), luc bổ ‘six departments’ (for royal cabinet), bát tiên ‘eight fairies’ (for eight elderly sprites), etc., are evidently familiar to us. And so, their medically-based theory refers mainly on the heart. This explains why the Han would refer a ‘good heart’ to someone who is kind to them.

Other evidence illustrating the philosophical trend the Vietnamese prevail is the symbol of a square and a circle. The square represents yin and the circle yang. Anything that comes in a perfect shape is said được vuông tròn ‘to be in square and circle’ (for a perfect outcome). In daily activities, people would apply the ideas using these folk poems:

There squares in comparison with seven circles;
One’s father is well-off, then his children will benefit.

Or

May I pray to be square and circle,
So hundred years I’ll be in love with my spouse.

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1 According to Vietnamese culture in particular and SoutheastAsian culture in general, physical material is composed of five elements: water, fire, wood, metal, and soil. These five elements are illustrated by five pairs: giáp ‘water in nature’, át ‘water in pots’; bình ‘fire from thin air, like lightning’, dinh ‘fire in stove, oil lamp’; mậu ‘timber, wood in standing trees’, kjiang ‘lumber, planks’; canh ‘ore, native metal’, tân ‘processed ore, purified metal’; nhâm ‘virgin forest, uncultivated land’, and quỷ ‘cultivated land, rice paddy’.

2 Three squares denote the meaning of the efforts one strive to reach her/his goal; seven circles the wish that the Heaven would consent and support her/his efforts. Another way to explain three squares and seven circles is that the copper coin of the old time was round, in the middle of which there was a little square. The ratio of the square compared to the round copper was 3:7. The combination of three squares and seven rounds (i.e. ‘the circle in the first line refers to money, wealth, and prosperity.

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In Kiều Story by Nguyễn Du, there are these lines that use the symbols of squares and circles to indicate a perfect union:

\[\text{One's fate}^4\text{ is frail like a dragonfly's wing, (line 441)}\]
\[\text{Whether the blue frame would consent square and circle.}\]

\[\text{Or}\]

\[\text{Hundred years of calculation of squares and circles}^5\text{, (line 1331)}\]
\[\text{The source of river must be inquired thoroughly.}\]

Clearly, according to the Vietnamese philosophy, yin comes before yang. This means the woman's roles are somewhat more important than the man's in the Vietnamese society. In fact, the Vietnamese traditionally respect women, and they also do not regard less man. As a matter of fact, girls in a family would receive more care from their parents than their masculine siblings, especially from their mother. It might psychologically be that the mother always thinks about her daughter(s)' future, when they have their own family where all the responsibilities would be placed on the young ones’ shoulders.

The most typical picture reflecting the roles in a family in Vietnam is that the husband has to toil with farm works or with tasks that require muscles and courage: hunting, fishing, lumbering, etc., whereas the wife stays home to take care of all housework, nurture the children, do the silk work (raising the silk worms, providing sufficient mulberry leaves to feed the worms, obtaining filaments from the cocoons, and weaving the silk, ...). In addition, she has to plan well to make ends meet.

The role of the wife is more important in educating the children. The time the wife’s pregnancy and her care of the child after its birth is extremely significant to the life of a family, which lasts at least for three years. Her singing to lull the baby to sleep, using the rhymed folk poems, is an invisible glue that adheres the love of the child to its family. Patriotism takes root in the child’s heart ever since. S/he definitely loves her family and the home village in which s/he is born and raised.

In the history of Vietnamese literature, there have been so many folk stories praising the role of the woman in society, such as Tiên Dung ‘a girl whose countenance is as beautiful as a fairy’ with Chử Đồng Tử ‘a poor boy living along the river shore’, Trâu Cau ‘the betel and areca’ (a wealthy farmer was ready to accept a poor young man to be his son-in-law), Ngưu Lang Chức Nữ ‘a buffalo boy and a princess from the heaven were in love with each other’. Besides, dynasties in the past, especially under the reign of the Post-Le (1428 – 1527), the Luật Hồng Đức ‘Law of Clemency’ included 11 sections that protected the women’s rights, in which, the wife was entitled to file a lawsuit against her husband if the latter did not fulfill his duties, or the wife was entitled to keep her heritage without being interfered with her husband’s family, etc.. Meanwhile, under the Ming Dynasty (1368 -1644), there were only 7 sections related to women’s rights. However, none of these seven sections were as liberal as those in Luật Hồng Đức.

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3 These lines express the wish of a woman who prays for her marriage to be perfect: Lay trời cho được vuông tròn ‘May God bless our proposed union so it would turn out perfect; Trăm năm cho tròn lòng son với chàng ‘The wife promises herself to be with her husband through all ups and downs till the ripe old age.’

4 Vietnamese people strongly believe in fatalism. Therefore, one’s destiny depends on many factors that severely affect her/his life: war, natural disasters, diseases, etc.. The first line reflects the common idea of one’s fate being as frail as a wing of the dragonfly in strong wind (unable to stand still in all catastrophic storms in life). The second line highlights a person’s suspicion: whether the Heaven (blue frame) would bless their union (square and circle). As a result people always pray for being lucky.

5 Calculation of square and circles means ‘to prepare for a union of a woman and a man’. The source of river means ‘one’s personal details and past history’. The proposer wishes to find out her/his partner’s background.
Unlike most countries in the world, the most important factor throughout the course of Vietnam history is that when a woman gets married, she is entitled to keep her own name without having to change her family name to her husband’s. And this is completely legal.

Regretfully, as a result of over one thousand years (111BC – 937AD) under domination of the Han, Vietnamese tradition was wiped out and replaced with Han’s culture, which venerates the role of the man (A man means “yes”, ten women mean “no) for the idea of one boy is worthier than ten girls. As a result, the man in a Han family is the “king, lord” or “master” to whom his woman has to be submissive. This practice is well known as master husband and servant wife. The Vietnamese have forgotten their original culture and civilization on one hand. On the other hand the Han considered the Vietnamese culture and civilization the Southerners’ guidelines (South Lodestar).

Lexically, most of the cases, things are accompanied with classifier cái, meaning ‘mother, principal, master, feminism, wife… that can be found in con Đại Cái mang ‘mom is responsible for her child’s deed’, đường cái ‘main road’, sông cái ‘wide river’, con trâu cái ‘female water buffalo’, bột cái ‘yeast’, làm cái ‘banker (of a game), côt cái ‘principal pillar’, … Unfortunately, many so-called Vietnamese scholars have had a pro-Han outlook on the role of the wife as ‘inferior to her man’.

Etymologically, the terms vợ chồng did not appear until the 16th century. Prior to this time, the Vietnamese used to call a married couple cái dôn. This term is presently spoken at Long Hưng village in Quang Tri province, Central Vietnam. In mid-17th century, a large number of Cantonese migrated southward to Vietnam and settled here (families of the invading soldiers, political refugees, merchants, etc.). Among them were a few noted writers who eventually influenced the way of using kinship terms: 夫 [jeuhng fu] replaced the dôn ‘husband’, and 老 婆 [lou poh] the cái ‘wife’. However, the Vietnamese did not copy their terms hundred percent. Instead, they just borrowed [jeuhng] and [poh], and it was the lucky thing that the order of vợ chồng ‘wife and husband’ did not change into ‘husband and wife’ as do the Cantonese.

(Notes: History repeats. Today, people in the North replaced quite a few terms in the vocabulary with modern Cantonese: linh for lé ‘decimal’, trợ lý for phụ tá ‘assistant’, xuất/nhập khẩu for xuất/ nhập cảng ‘import/export’, …)

Grammatically, one of the eight ways to form a compound noun is a combination of two nouns: áo quần ‘shirt and pants’ (clothes), trâu bò ‘water buffalo and ox/cows’ (cattle), nhà cửa ‘house and door’ (housing) trường vườn ‘paddy and garden’ (real estate) hồ ao ‘lake and pond’ (water body) bàn ghế ‘table and chairs’ (furniture) sách vở ‘book and notebook’ (textbooks and binders) xe cộ ‘vehicle and palanquin, sleigh’ (means of transportation) chợ búa ‘market and swap meet’ (necessary of life) rừng rú ‘forest and woods’ (uncivilisation) chim chóc ‘big birds of all kinds’ (birds). This combination denotes the greatness, qualitatively and quantitatively. In the old days, áo means ‘outer garment’ that covers the pants as well. A water buffalo is bigger than an ox; a paddy is much larger than a garden; a house has many doors; a lake is wider than a pond, and so on. From this fact, we can conclude that anything that is greater should come before the lesser.

The role of the wife in a family, from the Vietnamese perspective, is more important than that of a husband’s; therefore, the wife must come first!

By the way, it is advisable that no words in Vietnamese are meaningless, as many have thought. For instance, the term chóc ‘small bird’, a variant ofích, is one. Let’s read these four lines by the scholar Nguyễn Quý Tấn. He described a picture in which he saw 101 birds: one crow and 100 sparrows. The stanza goes like this:
One bridd, one bridd, and one bridd,
Three four five six seven eight bridds.
Why so few crows but many birds?
They have eaten one million pounds of people’s feed.

Another example: búa in chợ búa, meaning ‘swap meet’ có ‘palanquin’ móc ‘automatic (Thái original ‘mat’) … Statistics from researches indicate that Vietnamese vocabulary is comprised of approximately 42% of Thai, Malaysian 19%, Myanmar 12%, Champa 19%, Laotian 15%, Han 27%, and Assam language (a dialect in India, no statistic has been made).

This article can continue without and end, but I wish to stop here. In general a Vietnamese compound is comprised of two terms; the more important one comes first and the less follows.

Marriage to the Vietnamese is an equal harmony that upholds a couple to a better life for themselves and for their offsprings, as go in these following lines:

Wife and husband in harmony can dry up the whole East Sea.
Your friends can help you to get rich; your wife to lead a prestigious life.
A wise husband can afford his wife to wear slippers;
A wise wife makes her husband a wealthy and famous person.

Compared wearing slippers to a wealthy and famous person, the wife’s deed is far greater than her husband’s. Think about it.

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