

RELIGIOUS LIFE IN VIETNAM AT PRESENT: FROM ASPECT OF FESTIVALS' ACTIVITIES

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In recent years, festivals actually have developed vigorously in our country and become notable phenomena in spiritual life of society. In the capacity of collective cultural activities, festivals have many elements of spiritual cultural life, religious life and cultural society of Vietnamese people in tradition and at present. Studying belief and religious life in our country at present we can not but study festivals; on the other hand, studying festivals we can not but study the angles of belief and religion.

Festivals were born from the life of social community; they have had special stamps of tradition, customs and mode of production of men in different periods and regions. Festivals were created by men to satisfy cultural, spiritual and recreational needs of men. Over thousand years of history, festivals have played an important role in the life of people. The existence and influence of festivals have reflected their fierce vitality. However, festivals of our country also have complex change but the causes may not be caused by festivals themselves.

We think that, one of many concerned problems in festival- life at present is development of festivals. The development of festivals has showed that many festivals are born. They have been organized on large scale in many regions. More and more people take part in festivals... In fact, development of festivals do not mean the appearance of new festivals but traditional festivals have been renewed. Because of certain reasons, some traditional festivals had been fallen into oblivion, they were not organized. They did not exist in the life of people. It means festival life of our people sometimes became poor and quiet.

“We are interested in belief festivals that all those who take part in festivals manifest their various beliefs to pray for their life². This distinction is only

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² Le Hong Ly. The influence of market economy on belief festivals. Culture and Information Publishing House. H. 2008. p.24

relative because most of festivals have belief elements. These elements make festivals sacred.

According to statistics of Department of Culture and Information, in our country there are 8.902 festivals, among them there are 25 imported festivals, 7005 popular festivals, 1399 religious festivals, 409 revolutionary historical festivals and 64 other festivals.³The division of festivals is only relative. We think that popular festivals and religious festivals have close relation. On the structure of festivals, Tran Quoc Vuong said “festivals consists of two parts. The ritual part is offering sacrifices to deities, Buddhas...The gathering part is a crowd gathers in a village or in many villages. These two parts are separate while they are unseparated⁴. In fact, two parts of festivals are unseparated. Any festival has belief, religious elements to reflect religious and belief life. After festivals are restored belief life of Vietnamese people is restored. The role of belief in Vietnamese traditional festivals is clear. Some people call it *restoration* of Vietnamese belief⁵.

In recent years many researchers are interested in the development of festivals. Some writers analyzed festivals from many different approaches. Many aspects of festivals are studied as the role of festivals, the management of festivals, and culture of festivals... The change of festivals that are influenced by market mechanism also is studied. Many research works help us to understand wholly festivals. From our approach, we do not study deeply and concretely any festivals. We only analyze festivals to show some features about belief life, religion reflecting through festival- life in our country at present.

First of all, we agree with the view of Michio Suenary in Tokyo University on *restoration* of popular belief in Vietnam. It is an important characteristic of belief life and religion in Vietnam at present. When speaking of *restoration* of popular beliefs, first of all we have to recognize that popular belief is restoring more and more. But we have to answer two questions: why does it restore? And why did it fall into oblivion in the past?

We underwent two fierce wars; all cultural and spiritual needs of our people were pigeon-holed because we had to fight for national independence. We

³ Id. p. 8

⁴ Tran Quoc Vuong; Spring and Vietnamese festivals. The old and at present magazine, volume 3 1994. p.9

⁵ Mich Suenary: The restoration of Vietnamese popular belief. Popular Literature Review volume 3, 1996 p. 82

understand that if we have not independence, our festivals, culture and belief can not exist. It is noteworthy that festivals only promotes their role and meet the spiritual need of our people when they have real life and are organized in daily life of people. After many years of wars and after many years festivals were not organized people in many regions get acquainted with the life without festivals. In these regions belief life of people also have become *vague*. This matter was caused by our infantile views of management policy regarding culture and belief after the restoration of peace. We were not able to distinguish belief – legitimate need of people which has been recognized by Constitution and the laws from superstition. So we had bad actions. We destroyed temples, pagodas, communal houses, shrines... so belief festivals had not places to organize. The unity of community became loose. The houses of culture in villages were not cultural centers so the spiritual life of people was really poor.

Festivals have their own lives and they connect to the spiritual life of people. People gradually find their spiritual space. Because our economy develops, the material life of our people is raised so people are interested in the spiritual life more and more. The spiritual festivals are gradually restored so that people can show their faith and aspirations. Comparing to war-time or post war-time, festivals develops more vigorously in recent years. Many levels of administration are interested in restoring and organizing festivals more and more. Festivals are organized on large scale in many regions. Festivals are restored vigorously in whole country so the belief and religious life of people become more plentiful. We can say that thanks to festivals the belief life of people develops; on the other hand thanks to belief element, festivals have more vitality and attract people's attention.

An important problem to influence belief and religious life in our country is the change of the line and policy of our Party regarding belief and religious problems. In this article we do not deal with this problem deeply. Our people find the new change in belief and religious life when many places of historical interest are rebuilt by government; many festivals are organized in temples, pagodas; the Anniversary of King Hung's death becomes national festival and government officials take part in festivals and practise belief action etc. These events have made the belief life of people more plentiful and festivals develop

The above conditions force us to think of many problems. Festivals were born long ago; beliefs have existed in people from time immemorial why have they showed like that at present? It is not easy to answer this question thoroughly. We need to have different approaches. If we think that the source of development of festivals is spiritual need of people we shall answer a question why these belief and spiritual needs did not manifest ten years ago. Beside objective reasons that we analyzed there are some other reasons. One of many reasons is the change in the ownership relation when we transfer to market mechanism. In subsidy system all properties belong to State and cooperative. At that time people had nothing to worry about their future because State made arrangement for them everything. In subsidy system people often relied on others. Although they lived in hard condition they were insouciance. Personal interests were hidden by collective interests. In that condition people had nothing to lose because all properties were common ones. In the *doi moi* (renewal) period, people are absolutely self control in production and in their life so personal interest is respected. Since then people have freedom of working but they lose many things. They meet difficulties in market mechanism. They have to worry many things. They have to worry about social security, traffic accident, and social evils. Although people gradually appropriate to new situation, society changes vigorously make people face many challenges which they did not meet in subsidy period. That is why they depend on deities.

Dinh Gia Khanh thought that “the changes in social life according to market economy create upset in social relation. The explosion of traditional popular festivals as well as new development of community activities may be considered unintentional reaction to social condition. The above organizations of traditional popular festivals and community activities may be solutions to help people stabilizing their spiritual life”⁶.

Since then belief and religious life in our country manifest notable characteristics. So researchers and managers should be interested in these characteristics. For example, superstitious phenomenon becomes rather popular in belief life. Here, we do not discuss on the concept of superstition but we try to point out superstitious phenomena in festivals. Thanks to means of

⁶ Dinh Gia Khanh and Le Huu Tang : Traditional festivals in life of modern society. Social Sciences Publishing House. Hanoi, 1996 p. 25

information and fact -finding trips, we can affirm that superstitious phenomena become rather popular. At Tran Temple festival, tens of thousands of people jostle each other to get a seal hoping to get a good promotion in the new year. At Ba chua kho (Goddess of Stock) temple festival people offer Ba chua kho many offerings in order to pray her for loan good fortune...In these festivals we find that the ritual part is really notable, but gathering part seems to be disappeared... This story also happens in festivals in temples, pagodas of villages. The psychology of people who go to pagodas or temples is to pray deities for their prosperity, health and happiness. It is active element of festivals. But in many festivals there are superstitious activities as divination, selling of amulets, sortilege... These activities deform the good values of festivals. Some people offer deities costly offerings. A huge volume of votive paper is burned . Some people remark that we are changing from extreme left (to oppose all ritual forms) to extreme right (superstitious activities are developing). I think the above remark is comparative logical. In festivals there are many magicians they help worshippers to pray Buddha and deities. Most of these magicians are not professionals. They depend on festivals so their ritual forms are not standard.

Why does superstitious element become notable in belief life through festivals? One of many important reasons is uncomprehending. Sometimes we find that people take part in festival but they know little about this festival and celebrity who is respected by them. People flock into temples and pagodas that are considered to have supernatural power. They entrust deities of different temples. Worshippers usually pray for loaves and fishes so their offerings are costly.

Some people think that ritual element in festivals is gradually reducing and festive activities are gradually increasing. But we find that festive activities do not attract people to take part in festivals because they have many recreational facilities at present. They take part in festivals because of psychology and belief. They only pray for themselves and their family so characteristic of community is not notable. Worshippers only want to satisfy their needs so they offer sacrifices to deities; they pray for deities' gifts..... It is right to say that worshippers' actions are superstitious activities. In festivals we find that people hustle against others in narrow space so the methodical and sacred characteristics of festivals are violated.

The above phenomena, however, reflect incompletely religious belief life at present. The researchers and managers should study these phenomena carefully to have suitable resolutions for festivals' activities. We should make festivals become mental food of people. If we do it well, the restoration of festivals and of popular belief is the restoration of traditional cultural values. It has an important significance in developing popular cultural tradition in global background at present. /.