

Some Characteristics of Traditional Vietnamese Families in History

Mai Van Hai *

Abstract: The paper introduces some typical characteristics of Vietnamese family values before its cultural, civilized exchanges, integration with the West. Vietnamese family's fundamental characteristics are categorized into three groups in relation to natural environment, between man to man and inside each person mind. The author argues that those family values are permanent and hardly changed due to fundamental socio-economic factors such as a self-provided small farm production, Vietnamese village stratification, the effects of Confucius ethics, and from cultural perspective that the Vietnamese strong wish to own land. The paper shows that Vietnamese family values are a very potential area with diversified features that needs to gain more research in the coming time.

Key words: Family, family value, Vietnamese system, value in history.

Researchers should always pay attention to history of the issues when they start their research, and Vietnamese system of family value is no exception. The question is that how it was formed and revealed as well as its fundamental characteristics? And, what are the social and natural factors that affect its operation? The answer is obviously out of reach of any individual or any single article, because family value system is various and diversified: it is distinguished not only in each ethnic people, religion but also in each group's social stratification. Furthermore, in specific time of history, that system may contain abundantly different sense and layouts. It is therefore a challenge to present this system in a single paper.

Regarding this issue, historian Đào Duy Anh (1938) considers cultural phenomena are in fact self-evolving, they are more similar than different. However, he just describes similarities rather than difference.

In this article, the author mentions universal values rather than small differences (especially family value in social groups), which should be done by experimental researches.

1. Major expression of family value

Until 1960s, Vietnam civilization was agricultural with population mainly peasants working in agriculture, village is the main structural unit and culture reflects village, commune relations (Vũ Quốc Thúc, 1950; Trần Quốc Vượng, 2000). And each family in that civilization lived and had relations with all three habitats: nature (concrete, organic), society (in relation with others) and innate. Based on this classification, we present Vietnamese family's fundamental values in three categories.

1.1. Value in relation with natural environment

Several researchers have pointed out that most Vietnamese family in the past enjoyed

(*) Assoc. Prof., Ph.D., Institute of Sociology.

rice, vegetables and fish in their meals. They wore simple clothes, only essential things: male wore kilt, later trousers; female used skirts and brassiere, which were different from Chinese style. Another distinguished feature in terms of food and clothes is that they ate betel and dying their teeth black. Vietnamese people liked to live near their relatives. They preferred to live in their own house, though theirs in general quite simple: the roof was mainly made of straw and the house was made of bamboo in the yards. Their main crop was rice forcing them to reside in one place for a long time, which made transportation sluggish to develop: they got used to walk or row boats and they often did not go far from their villages.

Through thousand years of adapting environment with limited resources of economic tools and commodity, essential values were formed. For examples, people prioritized sustainable food and durable clothes. Thanks to tropically humid regions, people highly regarded direction of their houses to the South, “like marrying a good wife”. Being different to nomads or businesspeople, those long cultivating wet rice appreciated durable living in one place for better development. From reality, family values were cumulated in production such as hardworking and land love: “an acre of land worth a ton of gold”, saving habits were appraised, protecting health was welcomed.

The above values reflects essential demands in family life, and beside these needs people also have some more desires such better accommodation and fashion. That explains why on anniversaries, people put a five fruit

dish on their altar representing five values people wish (richness, nobility, longevity, health, happiness), some even post pictures and statues of luck, gift and longevity gods.

Value of subordinate system in relation to the environment is generally assessed as the product of vegetable civilization – the term coined by P. Gorou-with its foundation of small scale agriculture using much human labor towards self-providing “growing rice, knitting clothes and building houses from bamboo in the yards for their own needs” (Đào Duy Anh, 2000: 412). That is the culture that tends to optimally adapt to the current environment (Trần Quốc Vượng, 2000: 187-191). We could also mention that the natural and social environment is the base for the establishment of community characteristics in family life and community. We will have a deeper look into this in the next parts.

1.2. Values in the relation between man and man

Regarding the family structure in agricultural societies in the world, Alvin Toffler wrote in his book “The third wave”: “In any agriculture dominated society, people tend to live in big houses sharing with many generations and working together like a production unit (Alvin Toffler, 2007: 87). However, Vietnamese genealogy has divided into small family, and in most cases they were core family consisting of parents and their children. Each family has their own budget, property and economy (Nguyễn Từ Chi, 2013: 228-230). It is assumed that this family structure is appropriate for agricultural production and life style of people in the community.

Like relation to natural environment, the mutual relation among members of small family, or between small family with their neighbors and relatives has established distinguished value system. For examples, in the relation between husband and wife, loyalty and love are priority demands. There are several literature verses mentioning this relation, such as: “Long live marriage, no matter catching fish in the stream or picking vegetable in the wood”; or, “I love my husband despite his humble appearance, and I pay no attention to yours”. That love and loyalty have not been built over night, they have a deep root. In the context of pre-industrial society, marriage loyalty was a big value without which family could be broken, children were left miserable and parents could rely on nobody. It is therefore necessary for all to keep loyalty in that context.

In the relation between parents and children, people appreciate factors such as number of children, respect and kindness, loyalty. When a mother gives birth to a child, its parents should always love their descendant. In return, children should pay filial piety to their parents. That notion has been mentioned in the *Kiều* story written by Nguyễn Du (Huỳnh Công Bá, 2008: 376). For showing their gratefulness to their parents, sons should follow study career and graduate while daughters ought to practice four values “work, beauty, speech, virtue”. Among all brothers and sisters, they are assumed to take care of each other. People believe that brothers given birth by the same mother are produced from the same bag, so they should love each other and when they become adults, they still need to cohere, cover and

protect each other.

Looking back at the values of family cultural behaviors, we can see that those values have created close, kinship relations among members and made family become stable and sustainable before all changes. Of course, this little value system has been affected by foreign factors like Buddhism, Confucius, Christian religions, especially its vocabulary. Eventually, that value system belongs to village, commune structure and culture under Southeast Asian structure, or in short, it belongs to Vietnamese agricultural civilization.

1.3. Inner value of people's spiritual life

Spiritual life, specifically religion is very diversified and various, it reflects not only belief, knowledge but also happiness, anger, love and dislike and people's hope for better life. Being unable to discuss all these aspects, we can only focus on two fundamental issues to family life: their awareness to their root and the hope for a better striving life.

As we all know, Vietnamese family line has a common custom to build a temple to worship their ancestors. Twice a year, all male gather to clean the tombs and pay rites to those ancestors. In family level, the rich build their own temple while the medium and the poor establish an altar in the middle of the house, even those live on boats in the rivers also have a smaller one. The dead parents and ancestors are worshipped on the first and fifteen day of the lunar month, they are also asked to help their descendants manage their tasks. This is a national and family typical feature of culture, which is often referred to as ancestor worshipping

religion. It sees the dead exist beside their descendants, therefore they should be paid rites in the first and middle days of the lunar months as if they are still alive. Significantly, after rites close relatives often have meals together.

Mentioning the social sense of this phenomenon, the researcher Đoàn Văn Chúc (1997: 133) wrote: “In any anniversary of the family or clan, all members gather to express the value of the group they constitute and belong to. Hence, social coherence is reestablished and suspect, conflict may be alleviated or even diminished”. Vũ Tự Lập et al. state in *Văn hóa và cư dân đồng bằng sông Hồng (Red River Delta Culture and Population)*: “Ancestors are not just those who were dead, but those who surround, guide and support their descendants. The significant points of the Red River population are revealed when they merge past into present, transform past power to integrate the modern time, connect ancestors’ strength with offspring life” (Vũ Tự Lập and et al, 1991: 176).

Besides worshipping their own ancestors, most Vietnamese families have rites served in each lunar month, starting with Lunar New Year, then January 15th, early March festival, March 3rd, May 5th, July 15th, August 15th, September 9th, October 10th, October 15th, December 23rd. People also set altars worshipping different gods. New Year lunar holiday is a symbol and a factual icon mainly for weather, in a fixed time to pray for prosperity, good health and inspire producers before any agricultural activity time (Đoàn Văn Chúc, 1997: 132). Adding to this opinion, Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ (2011: 262) states that ordinary Vietnamese people

do not tend to pay much attention to academic thinking in religion such as universal foundation and creation, or deep practice of worshipping.

Additionally, there are practical values of everyday life submerged in superscripted rites because it is the time for enhancing independence and verifying community connection among kinship people, fostering spiritual belief and strength as well as hope for prosperity, namely good weather for better crop and long life, happiness people.

2. Evergreen family value system

Mentioning the features covering Vietnamese culture until contacting with Western civilization, researchers believe that its permanent socio-economic foundation is hardly changed therefore the culture will contain permanence characteristics (Đào Duy Anh, 2000: 393; Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, 2011: 26). Đào Duy Anh states that: “This culture has not been changed for a long time, it is because of agricultural production manner. In all aspects, we can see the past values exist in the modern time, that is why we cannot develop as fast as the Western nations” (Đào Duy Anh, 2000: 393). Researcher Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ supports this opinion: “The motif and tradition of culture is often permanent with slow, minimal change. There has not been a cultural revolution that leads to a change of cultural model” (Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, 2011: 32).

The above characteristics mentioned by these two researchers are drawn at national cultural and civilized level as well as family cultural scale in history. For example, Vietnamese people used to worship their descendants and practice holiday to realize weather change for crop production, appreciated

loyalty between husband and wife, highly regarded relative relationship, and transferred knowledge and experience through time.

That permanent characteristic happens not only in time-consuming spiritual and cultural aspects but also in quick changed socio-economic section. It is this slow change that surprises foreign tourists and researchers. Vietnamese peasants carry low priced products in the long distance to trade while modern transportation is also applied in the same rout with respect to the idea that time is money (Vũ Quốc Thúc, 1950: 11).

This raises another question that why before contacting Western culture and civilization especially industrialization, Vietnamese culture sustained its original characteristics so long. It may be because Vietnamese culture is based on family line and sentiment, people highly regard next generation and appreciate peace and harmony rather than competition (Đào Duy Anh, 2000: 389-392).

Those suggestions are reasonable, and Đào Duy Anh tries to explain the permanent, little changed characteristics of Vietnamese culture in history. With regard to family value system and form sociology perspective, this is because of the following fundamental reasons.

First, Vietnamese traditional economy which all households take part is a small scale, self provided model requiring hard labor and more or less of closed circles. In that context, each community in general and every single household in particular could produce all what they need. In their field, they grow all from rice, cassava, bean, sesame, peanut, strawberry; the same with their garden, they harvest in all four seasons. They raise poultry like chicken,

duck, goose and cattle such as buffalo, cow and pig. In addition, there are knitting frame for producing clothes. We could see the whole national economy in one household economy (Nguyễn Hồng Phong, 2005: 420). It is the stereotype of self providing at minimal level that has made its members feel secured and independent enough to avoid any change.

Second, it is about social structure. Until 1938 (60 years from French invasion), there were 92% population living in rural areas (Vũ Quốc Thúc, 1950: 35), or the village structure in Vietnam remained unchanged. That structure consists of five categories: in term of geography: village, lane; regard kinship: relative; with age: the old, the youngster and the children; for working union, staff, and voluntary members: union, wing (Nguyễn Từ Chi, 2013: 222-276). Of course, these groups are different in terms of scale, organization manner and their functions in the villages. Despite their variety, they share a common feature: the group members of each group are mainly from families in the village and their action (except union of bartender, painters, and builders) take place within the village. The limitation of space makes them hard to exchange and learn knowledge from outside world.

Third, culturally important factor is the effects of Confucius with the core of patriarch system. Those dogmas were constituted and codified in legal documents, and more important, they were taught in village schools by Confucian teachers through generations. Despite initially reasonable Confucius theory, it has revealed weaknesses and defects. Confucius, by its very nature, encourages people to return to the past, not move forward

to the future. It completely prioritizes community and paternalist privilege while ignoring equality and freedom including members' freedom to choose their partners. The Confucius dogmas became a barrier to all innovation, it just let family recreate what had already existed.

Fourth, cultural factor that we should pay attention to is Vietnamese people's desire to own land. It is believed that people's soul is immortal, and it cannot rest if the dead bone is moved or the tomb is shaken, the corpse is buried in a dirty place or in other people's land. Therefore, people see the optimal option is that one lives in his own house, and is buried in a tomb in his own land. The worst scenario in their mind is that they live without land and die somewhere other than in their mother land. Bearing this in their mind, they were reluctant to take risk to leave their hometown to do business or technology, despite the fact that they could become rich if they do so while become poor if they stay in their own village. For those who dare to leave to earn their living, they rush back to their villages to buy land and build houses as their ultimate goals after collecting enough money from outside world (Vũ Quốc Thúc, 1950: 87-90). The desire to own land and careless to doing business attached to isolation inclination, resistance to outside intruding factors have been the base for Vietnamese family values unchanged in history.

Finally, Vietnamese family value system is a diversified field that nobody can cover in a single paper. What has been mentioned her is just its typical features in history before any contact with the Western culture and civilization. In this interim period, there

should be more studies regarding the issues of family values.

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