

# IDENTIFYING THE FAMILY LINE CULTURE OF VIETNAMESE PEOPLE

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**Abstract:** Family line plays an important role in forming Vietnamese culture, and remembering as well as praying for the ancestor are regular activities of Vietnamese people. This article describes and analyzes the customs of worshipping in Vietnamese family, the embedded belief in the course, rituals of building a cemetery a death anniversary. This characteristic has changed dramatically the historical course of the country, resulting in a formation of a specific culture of community of people with the same blood. Conservation of the culture therefore becomes very necessary.

**Key words:** Family line, tradition, ritual, culture, kinship.

## 1. Perception of the family line culture of Vietnamese people<sup>(1)</sup>

UNESCO identifies culture as “...*the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses. In addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.*”<sup>(2)</sup> As such, the *family line culture* is also a cultural phenomenon which encompasses all *material culture (tangible culture)* and *spiritual culture (intangible culture)* created by a community of people with the same blood and which creates the identity of that community - family line.

Earlier, while examining Vietnamese culture in the old society, most researchers identified Vietnamese culture based on the most typical structure which includes three elements: family, village, country. It was assumed that family culture encompassed in its individual culture (in the role of a family member) and family line culture (in the role of an extended family, big family or family line). Nowadays, in the context of cultural diversity of different

cultures in the world, together with family culture, village culture and country culture, individual culture and family line culture have become entities with distinctive structures. Therefore, it is necessary to do research on these cultural entities.

In this paper, we focus on individual culture and community culture. Individual culture is formed on the basis of physical ability and social environment so that the individual is able to receive and express the community culture where he/she is a member. Meanwhile, the community culture (family, family line, village, etc) includes all the perceptions, values, system of behaviors which are accepted and shared by all

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(2) Tran Quoc Vuong (chief author) (1996), *General Culture Studies and Foundation of Vietnamese Culture*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, p.47.

members of that community. On this basis, family culture and family line culture can be considered a form of community culture, specific to a community of people of the same blood, as mentioned above.

Besides, community of Vietnamese people of the same blood is also understood as a “spiritual community” which is expressed in the family line’s traditions and beliefs of typical values: origin – ancestors – and people of the same blood. For Vietnamese family line in general, the traditions and beliefs of the origin and people of the same blood is worshipping ancestors. This is the basis for members to feel empathy towards and share the family line’s duties such as performing rituals in worshipping ancestors, building the family line’s ancestral worship house, taking care of ancestors’ tombs, organizing events in memory of ancestors and organizing death anniversary days, etc. As such, it is possible to say that family line’s culture is formed on the basis of the tradition of worshipping ancestors and its forms of expression in order to promote values of the family line.

## **2. The expression/structure of family line’s culture of Vietnamese people**

The family line’s culture of Vietnamese people is a socio - cultural phenomenon which belongs to the cultural form of a community of people of the same blood. Thus, it is structured with the following elements: 1. Family - nuclear family (parents and children), and big family or extended family (which includes many member families of a line), and family tradition 2. The belief of worshipping family’s and family

lines’ ancestors; 3. The organization of cultural activities in the family line; 4. The custom of writing the family line’s records 5. Traditions of the family lines.

### **2.1. Family, family lines and family tradition**

Family of Vietnamese people in the narrow meaning is a small family and in the broader meaning is a family line. Family is considered a small society (or micro society), a cell of a society and is an important factor promoting the development of society. As *Vietnamese Dictionary* edited by Van Tan described, family “*is a societal unit formed on the basis of blood...; in the feudal time, family usually included parents, children, grandchildren and sometimes grand-grand children...*”<sup>(3)</sup> The practice shows that the family and family line’s culture of Vietnamese people is demonstrated vividly and lively in life way, everyday activities, thinking and feelings of each individual member in that family or family line. And this is the life way of family and family line.

According to *Sino – Vietnamese Dictionary* by Dao Duy Anh, life way is “*habits of a family: customs, education in the family and family line*”<sup>(4)</sup>; according to *Vietnamese Dictionary* edited by Van Tan, family tradition is “*specific habits, customs and education of each family*”<sup>(5)</sup>. As such, family tradition is the habits of the family, affirmation of thoughts accepted and done by family members, just as they accept customs or

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<sup>(3)</sup> Van Tan (chief author) (1977), *Vietnamese Dictionary*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, p.335.

<sup>(4)</sup> Van Tan (chief author) (1977), *Ibid.*, p.335.

<sup>(5)</sup> Dao Duy Anh (1957), *Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary*, published by Truong Thi, Sai Gon, (third edition).

habits in order to ensure the existence and sustainable development of that family or family line. Family tradition is the cultural identity of each family/family line of Vietnamese people, i.e., it is typical for family culture or family line culture.

Family tradition is the crystallization of many generations' living experience, directly influenced by different stages of awareness and ideas of many families and family lines from different regions. As such, family tradition is a broad category with deep socio-cultural characteristics and diverse contents, serving as a strong foundation for the family culture and family line culture to develop so that it is relevant to each historical and cultural period of Vietnam.

## **2.2. The belief of worshipping family and family line ancestors**

Based on published materials on ethnography, archeology and folk culture, the custom of worshipping ancestors by ancient Vietnamese people appeared about 2500 - 2700 years ago. According to animism by ancient Vietnamese people, human beings as well as all the other animals have soul, leading to the worship of souls of the dead in the family and sacred objects/animals in agricultural villages in ancient times. This was the foundation for the formation of the belief of worshipping ancestors in the family and family line of Vietnamese people. When Confucianism came to Vietnam, Confucianism and patriarchy strongly influenced the belief of worshipping ancestors of Vietnamese people during the whole period of one thousand years under Chinese domination. Then came the period of Dai Viet's feudalism.

Together with Confucianism, filial piety was especially appreciated, creating a strong philosophy foundation for the belief of worshipping ancestors. At the same time, more prominence was given to family, family line and the issue of "great and respected family." At the time of Post-Le dynasty in the 15th century, Confucianism took up the official position in the society and the Le dynasty institutionalized the worship of ancestors. This was written in the Hong Duc Law, in the time of King Le Thanh Tong (1460 - 1497), which clearly stipulated that children had to worship five-generation ancestors; and that the cult-portion fields were means for earning money to maintain the worship of ancestors. The cult-portion fields could not be sold, no matter how poor family line members were<sup>(6)</sup>. Later on, since the mid of the 18<sup>th</sup> century until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rituals of worshipping ancestors were written in books such as *Tho Mai gia le* (*Book of Family Rites*) by Ho Si Tan (1690-1760)<sup>(7)</sup> from Tho Mai; *Viet Nam phong tục* (*Vietnamese Customs*) by Phan Ke Binh<sup>(8)</sup>;

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<sup>(6)</sup> Nguyen Si Giac (translated) (1959), *Hong Duc thien chinh thu* (*Documents under Hong Duc Time*), published by Nam Ha an quan, Sai Gon.

<sup>(7)</sup> *Tho Mai gia le* (*Tho Mai Family Rituals*) by Ho Si Tan (1690-1760), nickname Tho Mai, from Hoan Hau village, Quynh Luu District (Nghe An province). He received the title of Doctor in 1721 (Bao Thai the second year), with his highest position being *Han lam Thi che*. In the book *Tho Mai Family Rituals*, Ph.D. Ho Si Tan recorded in details customs, rituals and duties as well as regulations related to marriage, funerals and other cases for people to follow. (Cited Truong Dinh Tin (1999), *Vietnamese Customs – Marriage, Funerals and Other Special Cases*, Da Nang Publishing House, p.84).

*Viet Nam van haa su cuong* (*The Fundamental of Vietnamese History and Culture*) by Dao Duy Anh<sup>(9)</sup>; *Nep cu - Tin nguong Viet Nam* (*Old Customs – Beliefs of Vietnamese People*) by Toan Anh<sup>(10)</sup>, etc. These books were widely disseminated.

In the recent years, many Vietnamese researchers believe that worship of ancestors is a form of folk belief of Vietnamese people which has become a custom, and that worshipping ancestors as a belief is closely related to strengthening the blood relationship of a family and family line with the village and country. On the basis of worshipping ancestors in the family and family line, the belief of worshipping Hung Kings was formed; Hung Kings were proclaimed to be ancestors of Vietnamese nation. Therefore, every year, Vietnamese people organize the traditional festival on the death anniversary of Hung Kings – the tenth of the third lunar month in memory of Hung Kings who founded Van Lang – the first ancient country of Vietnamese people.

In their beliefs of ancestor worship, Vietnamese people strongly followed the principles of patriarchy. The family line ancestor – the first person in that family line, who would be honored by his offspring forever, should be a man. As such, family line of Vietnamese people is just like a big family consisting of many small families closely connected to each other by the blood relationship and this is established based on the father. Family in a broad meaning is family line, which includes not only those living, but also the dead. And then, family line is like a temple,

the living members are standing by the entry door. They all will go through that important threshold, the threshold of a death, to enter the temple. All the people are sheltered by the same roof. Then, relationships when one is living are not excluded by the death; on the contrary, those relationships, have made sacred by religion and belief, becoming sustainable and vivid, as happens in worshipping family line's ancestors by Vietnamese people in traditional society<sup>(11)</sup>.

Moreover, the patriarchy principles also stipulated who has the right to worship ancestors. Dao Duy Anh gives remarks: "*The person who takes lead in the duty of the ancestor's worship is the eldest son in the small family and the head of the family line*"<sup>(12)</sup>. Based on patriarchal principles, Vietnamese people distinguish families in two lines: father's blood relations (ho noi) and mother's blood relations (ho ngoai). For ages, father's blood relation has been structured into nine-generations ("cuu toc"). They are myself (nga - toi) and counts up to four generations: father (phu - cha), grandfather (to phu - ong), grand - grand father

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<sup>(8)</sup> Phan Ke Binh (2005), *Vietnamese Customs*, Culture-Information Publishing House, Hanoi.

<sup>(9)</sup> Dao Duy Anh (2006), *The Fundamental of Vietnamese History and Culture*, Culture-Information Publishing House, Hanoi.

<sup>(10)</sup> Toan Anh (1966), *Old Customs – Beliefs of Vietnamese People*, the Upper Volume, Nam chi tung thu, Sai Gon.

<sup>(11)</sup> Do Trinh Hue (2006), *Culture, Religion, Beliefs of Vietnamese People – Under L.Cadiere's Perspective (1914 - 1944)*, Thuan Hoa Publishing House, Hué, pp.159-160.

<sup>(12)</sup> Dao Duy Anh (2006), *Ibid.*, p.224.

(tang to - cu), grand - grand - grand father (cao tang to - ki); and from myself counts down for four generations: child (tu - con), grandchildren (ton - chau), grand - grand children (tang ton - chat), grand - grand - grand children (huyen ton - chut). The patriarchal principles has made the father's blood relation prevalent and more important than mother's blood relations.<sup>(13)</sup>

In addition, patriarchal principles also influence the division of inherited assets (fields, the family line ancestral worship house and family valuable objects). According to these principles, only men who play the role of the head of the family line can inherit assets which might be ancestral worship house, family line's valuable objects and cult-portion fields. At the same time, patriarchal principles influence decision making related to transferring inherited assets to members of the family line. This was also protected by the feudal government, expressed in the Hong Duc law compiled in the time of King Le Thanh Tong (1460-1497) and Gia Long Law compiled in the time of King Nguyen Gia Long (1802-1820). According to these laws, the eldest son (and later would become the head of family line) took responsibility of worshipping ancestors, thus he would be given a bigger portion of assets. Thanks to that, Vietnamese family lines could keep their assets for many generations, and cult-portion field were used to get income for maintaining duties in worshipping ancestors, restoring family line's ancestral worship house, repairing ancestors' tombs and organizing death anniversaries regularly and for long time.

## **2.3. Cultural activities of a family line**

### **2.3.1. Family line's ancestral worship house**

Earlier, every family line in the Red River Delta built an ancestral worship house to worship their founder which is also called *tu duong*. There is a tablet on the altar at the ancestral worship house, and very often, it is written clearly on the tablet that the tablet is for the founder of the family line. Examples can be "*Tran mon lich dai to ton than chu*", which means: "The ancestor of the Tran family line". The language on the tablet is usually Sino, and it is never changed, thus it is called "*Bach the bat dieu chi chu*". It might be the case that certain family lines could not afford to build an ancestral worship house. Then the family line's ancestral altar is kept at the house of the head of the family line. When the death anniversary comes, the event is organized here, in the same way as it is organized at the ancestral worship house. In most cases, a family line builds their ancestral worship house with the wish that the head of the family line would keep it forever. However, if the first line of the family line (which is the eldest son) does not have a son, the worship responsibility will be passed on to the second line (which is the next son).<sup>(14)</sup>

On the other hand, big family lines are divided into many lines. If that line has a lot of offspring, then they might build their own ancestral worship house to worship the

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<sup>(13)</sup> Phan Dai Doan (2003), *Vietnamese Villages - Some Socio-cultural Issues*, Culture-Information Publishing House, Hanoi. p.27.

<sup>(14)</sup> Phan Ke Binh (2005), *Ibid.*, pp.27-28.

founder of their line, called “*Ban chi tu duong*”. On the altar of that line there is also the tablet of the founder of that line, called “*Than chu ban chi duoc tho doi doi*”, put on the most solemn place<sup>(15)</sup>. Family line’s ancestral worship house in general is built in a piece of land of that line which might have been bought with money donated by offspring. There are cases that men do not have sons, or women do not get married and they donate money or fields to the line and when they pass away, they would be worshipped at the ancestral worship house (on the Hau [back] altar). Those fields of the family line are also called “death anniversary fields”, which means the family lines give them to someone to work on and receive part of benefit. This benefit would be kept and used for organizing the death anniversary for those men without sons and women without children. These anniversary days are called *gio Hau*<sup>(16)</sup>.

In general, family line’s ancestral worship house should be built on a piece of land which is a bit at higher than the surrounding, with nice position, following feng shui principles and is usually surrounded by a wall of bricks. In the front there is a three-way-in gate (*cong tam quan*), then a wide tile yard and then a three-room or five room house built in the old style with traditional roof. The ancestral altar is put in the middle room: first it is an incense table, then the main altar on which there is a throne with tablet of the family line founder; in the right room and left room there are altars of

ancestors following the founder of family line or the most famous people of the line or the altars of men without sons or unmarried women. In front of the incense table in the middle room there is usually a big tablet with letters in Sino, for example “*Le toc tu duong*” (which means ancestral worship house of Le family”). On the beam and the main pillar (in the middle room) there are usually tablets with big letters or parallel sentences in Sino, honoring the family line’s history and traditions and famous people in the family. In the family line’s ancestral worship house, there are usually many objects bought with money donated by people in the line. These objects might be incense table, throne, lamps or a vase for incense. All these objects are usually illuminated or nicely carved with shells. In addition, there are usually antique objects such as copper incense burner, a pair of copper lamps or copper cranes, vases for flowers, etc. In old time, people used worship objects with the names such as “*tam su*” [three objects], “*ngu su*” [five objects] or “*that su*” [seven objects]. These objects were made of copper, tin or valuable, illuminated or carved wood. People in old time appreciated and kept these worship objects very carefully and did not dare to sell them. If a family had to sell them because they were really in needs, this would be considered a very bad act and they would not be respected by many people<sup>(17)</sup>.

<sup>(15)</sup> Phan Ke Binh (2005), *Ibid.*, pp.27-28.

<sup>(16)</sup> Phan Ke Binh (2005), *Ibid.*, p.30.

<sup>(17)</sup> Phan Ke Binh (2005), *Ibid.*, p.29.

### 2.3.2. Ancestors' tombs

Ancestors' tombs are the tomb of the founder of the family line, together with tombs of other ancestors following the founder. The tomb of the founder is usually big and magnificent, built in the folk style. According to *feng shui* theory, the founder's tomb is usually put in place with nice position and with potential for future development. The founder's tomb is usually built with a special kind of brick called *gach chi* which is round or square in shape. On the tomb, there is a stone stele with the founder's name, date of birth and date of death. Around the tomb, there is usually a brick wall about 50 – 60 centimeters high, round, rectangular or square in shape. If the tomb is surrounded by a wall, there should be a gate in the front together with a kind of built screen to protect the tomb from wind. It is also necessary to build a screen behind the tomb to protect it from wind. In the case that the family line owns their own cemetery, the founder's tomb is always put in the highest position. The tombs of other ancestors are in the same direction with that of the founder, in the hierarchy, creating a group of tombs carefully arranged<sup>(18)</sup>. For recent years, tombs of rich families have usually built in new styles and have become bigger (still, they have to follow strictly *feng shui* principles) for family lines to affirm their position among the community. On the other hand, as required by the movement of "new rural areas", it is stipulated that village should have a common cemetery and not allowing private cemetery. Therefore, family lines also have tried to bring all their tombs into the common cemetery and build

new tombs here in line, creating a nice "street of tombs" (especially in communes in the suburbs of big cities such as Hanoi, Hai Phong, Hue, Da Nang, Ho Chi Minh City, etc.).<sup>(18)</sup>

Selecting a place for the founder's tomb is very important. It is believed that it might influence positively or negatively on offspring' life of that family line. The practice shows that when members of a family line become successful (being promoted in high positions), it is believed that it is because of the fact that the family line's founder was buried in a good place in accordance with *feng shui* principles (for example "tomb is in a dragon's mouth"). For ages, among the folks there is a saying "Life is much dependent on tombs rather on a rice bowl" (*Song ve mo ma, ai song ve ca bat com*) to remind people that it is very important for them to take care of ancestors' tombs carefully. If they have bad luck in life, it is believed that there might be something wrong with the founder's or ancestors' tombs. Therefore, usually at the end of the year, family lines visit and take care of their ancestors' tombs; there is also a festival called *Thanh minh* when people go to visit and take care of tombs. This activity was mentioned by the famous poet Nguyen Du in his work *Truyen Kieu* [*Kieu's Story*] in sentences "Thanh Minh in the third month/The festival is called taking care of tombs (*Thanh minh trong tiet thang ba, Le la tao mo, hoi la dap thanh*). This has proved that in old times, during Thanh minh period in the third lunar month, so

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<sup>(18)</sup> Chu Quang Tru (2003), *Vietnamese Folk Architecture*, Fine Arts Publishing House, Hanoi, p.113.

many people went to visit ancestors' tombs that it was just like a festival.

*2.3.3. Death anniversary of the family line and rituals in worshipping ancestors*

Death anniversary of a family line is a community cultural activity and is a specific expression of the custom of ancestor worship – one of the most sacred duties of the offspring. This is a task with deep human meaning, helping offspring not to forget their ancestors and the cultural origin of their family and family line. This is because through the organization of ancestors' death anniversary, apart from their expressing gratitude towards their ancestors, each death anniversary is also an opportunity for them to remember merits which their ancestors' had done, how ancestors had supported them in life, brought them good luck. As such, every year, when the founder's death anniversary (death anniversary of the family line) or the death anniversaries of other ancestors come, all the offspring gather in the ancestral worship house of the family line, or at the house of the family line's head to organize this event, remembering achievements and merits of their ancestors; At the same time, this is also a good opportunity for relatives to have meal together, becoming closer to each other. The organization of the death anniversary, including implementation of rites and providing a meal, is the responsibility of the family line's head and the "organization committee" (including heads of all the family branches who were called "quan vien" in old time) as stipulated by the customs. Nowadays, different family lines appoint a kind of representative committee which

includes respected people, the family line's head and family branches' heads. The committee will take care of the family line's duties. When the founders' death anniversary comes, the offering tray which consists of glutinous rice, pig's head (rice is put on the tray first and the pig's head is put on the rice. In addition to the pig's head, it is important to put on the rice a boiled pig's tail, intestine to show respect to the ancestors). Wine, betel and areca is put on the altar. When all the offspring are present, the ritual head and the ritual committee perform necessary rites. The ritual head - usually the family line head – and other members of the ritual committee wear traditional clothes for the event and begin the ritual. He steps into the middle of the mat and ceremonially read the ritual text with the content honoring merits of the founder and other ancestors. After that, offspring, according to their order in the family line, take turn to come and pray. And then the ceremonial meal comes. The meal which has been prepared carefully, with two compulsory dishes being boiled pork and glutinous rice, is now put on mats and the elderly people, visitors, relatives and offspring are invited to the meal. Usually, people attend the meal are also given something from the offerings called *loc*, which can be some fruit or dishes and which they take home for their children so that their children will have good luck.

Since the 1960s, in the North, family lines do not have cult-portion fields anymore, thus they have a kind of "family line fund" created by donations of offspring. This fund is used for organization of death anniversaries



and other tasks such as repairing the founder's tomb, renovating the family line ancestral worship house, buying worship objects, etc. For the recent years, in many family lines, apart from creating "family line fund", they also create education promotion fund to encourage the study of children in the family line. Especially for those family lines with tradition of studying hard (for example, Bui family line in Thinh Liet, Hanoi), on the family line's death anniversary day, children with good performance are called by name and given prizes by the head of the family line in order to encourage them to try more.

As such, the meal in the day of family line's death anniversary can be considered an occasion for people in the big family to sit together, be closer to each other. Looking from spiritual perspective, if ancestors' death anniversaries are organized carefully, these occasions will influence children positively in safeguarding and promoting family line's cultural identity. On this basis, ancestors have become a bridge, connecting the past and present, aiming at the future so that living people remember merits of the dead, take them as an example and try their best.

### **3. Conclusions**

From family to family line, from family line to communities and then to the whole country, the belief of worshipping ancestors in family and family line of Vietnamese people has become a tradition, reminding younger generations of their origin and ancestors. On the basis of the belief of ancestor worship, the feelings of love and respect towards ancestors, the feelings of

love towards human being in general and love towards one's homeland has been formed in each Vietnamese person. Therefore, we believe that cultural activities originating from the belief of ancestor worship has created a favorable environment to nurture the culture of family and family line. At the same time, that environment has also nurtured different cultural nuances of family and family lines, contributing to the diversity of Vietnamese cultural identity.

Through many ups and downs, the culture of Vietnamese family line has developed a lot, having its specific features and structures on the common background of Vietnamese culture. As such, the culture of Vietnamese family line has a long formation and development history; it includes spiritual (or intangible) cultural values such as the family and family line tradition, the family line life way, ancestor worship and rituals; agreements within the family line of the relationship among family line members, the relationship with society (village, country), the role and position of family, family line towards the development of the village, country and nation in history; and material (or tangible) cultural values such as epitaphs, family records, ancestor altar, family line ancestral worship house, ancestors' tombs, etc. These are essential elements which make up family line culture of Vietnamese people. And it has undergone a long process of formation and development as well as it has changed dramatically in the historical course of the country, resulting in a formation of a specific culture of community of people with the same blood.

