

LIFESTYLE OF VIETNAMESE WORKERS IN THE CONTEXT OF INDUSTRIALIZATION

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Abstract: It is now extremely important to summarize the practice, do research, and develop theories on the working class in the current context of our socialist - oriented market economy, acceleration of industrialization, modernization and international integration. It will provide theoretical and practical grounds for building guidelines and measures to get comprehensive development of the working class in this period. The paper gives an overview of research findings on the lifestyle of workers in the context of industrialization and modernization. Apart from analyzing theoretical viewpoints concerned, the author also raises some hypotheses to be used for follow-up research works on this topic.

Key words: Working class, lifestyle of Vietnamese working class.

1. Theoretical backgrounds of lifestyle

Researchers believe that lifestyle is firstly a concept of sociology, although it may be approached from different perspectives (such as philosophy, politics, and economics etc...)⁽¹⁾.

Regarding to the concept of *lifestyle*, Marxist – Leninist classic researchers emphasized that “mode of production” and “a certain mode of living” were related to each other⁽²⁾. We can see obviously that this viewpoint was continuously developed by philosophical and sociological researchers afterwards. They considered the viewpoint as one of the key factors for scientific definitions of the lifestyle: daily activities of a person show his/her nature.

In the 1970s, lifestyle-related issues used to be a focus of scholarly discussions and policy analyses in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (or the former Soviet

Union). Analysis of lifestyle was closely attached with conditions for socialism building in that period. Researchers agreed that it was impossible to separate as well as confuse “living activities” with its manifestations. According to their viewpoint, lifestyle has linkages with the mode of production and material welfare. It is closely related to different activities of people; it shows clearly the class nature and varies basically in accordance with socio - economic transformations. Lifestyle was seen as a

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(1) In social sciences at present, there has not been yet common understanding of the “lifestyle” concept. Depending on specific disciplines, we can see different approaches and subsequently different aspects relating to this concept. According to a recent state-level research program, there are at least 7 definitions of lifestyle.

(2) K. Marx and F. Engels (1980), *Complete Works*, The Truth Publishing House, Hanoi, p.269.

mode of living that is inherent in *living conditions* of individuals and social groups. Lifestyle of a person is always shown through his/her *living activities*. The following comment can be considered as a common opinion on lifestyle among philosophical and sociological researchers in the Soviet Union: “*Lifestyle (of socialism) is a harmonious and general system of basic activity features of man in all fields of social existence*”.

On the side of Western social sciences, many researchers argue that lifestyle is related to cultural patterns; moreover, the very cultural patterns differentiate social groups from each other. Lifestyle is also connected to different *ways of living* shown clearly in form of values and patterns of consumption, which accompany the increasingly greater differentiation in capitalist society. According to this viewpoint, the concept of lifestyle can be used to express differences between the urban way of living and the rural way of living. In reality, sociologists of the school of Chicago used to show this implication, when they assumed: “*urbanism becomes a way of life*”⁽³⁾. Apart from the above-mentioned implication, the concept of lifestyle is also used to imply opposite ways of living between different social groups.

In Vietnam, since the 1980s up to now, lifestyle - related issues have attracted a lot of attention from philosophical, political and sociological researchers. Many theorists criticized the tendencies to identify altogether the concepts of *lifestyle*, *standards of living*, *ways of living*, *manners of living*, and *styles*

of life⁽⁴⁾. The concept of lifestyle is analyzed from the perspective criticizing the tendency to identify lifestyle with *standards of living* in Western scholarly research. Standards of living are an *indicator* of lifestyle; it shows a certain level of human material activities. It is possible to state that standards of living reflect the extent, at which ones have gained achievements relating to material needs and welfare. Ones can consider standards of living as good, when economic development meets requirements of social consumption and security. Standards of living, however, are not homogenous with lifestyle. Different lifestyles can be found in the same modern industrialized society. Good standards of living are the premise for a lifestyle of high quality, but it is not always correct for the reversal. This interpretation enriches Vietnam communist party’s idea on building a *good lifestyle* in the context that “standards of living still remain low”⁽⁵⁾.

The concept of *culture* is relatively close to the concept of lifestyle. Values are the

⁽³⁾ The phrase “Urbanism becomes a way of life” was used by Louis Wirth, a sociologist of the Chicago school, to express particularities of patterns of consumption and cultural values in urban life. Researchers of the Chicago school used it to show that vigorous urbanization in Chicago created particular and original features of urban life.

⁽⁴⁾ Truong Van Duc, Le Van Dinh (chief author) (2010), *Urban Lifestyle and Culture in Vietnam: an Approach*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi.

⁽⁵⁾ Communist Party of Vietnam (1982), *Documents of the 5th National Congress of Communist Party*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, pp.100-101.

essence of culture, for instance, ones cannot talk about lifestyle without mentioning value orientations. On the other hand, living activities and value orientations together constitute lifestyle, although lifestyle and living activities are not homogenous. From the cultural approach, some researchers define lifestyle as realization of cultural values through human living activities, like subjective aspects of culture⁽⁶⁾.

In a number of specific analyses, lifestyle is defined as human *behavioral way* before specific conditions the living environment. Many researchers emphasize mutual impacts between living environment, culture and lifestyle. Differences in behavior before living environment are diversified and depend on customs, practice and culture.

2. The “Proletariat” and working class in Vietnam

Countless theoretical arguments on the working class can be found in works of the Marxist – Leninism classic researchers. They believe that it is a phenomenon of industrial life and “the proletariat was produced by the industrial revolution”⁽⁷⁾. In the capitalist system, *the proletariat* has no means of production and the relationship between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is based upon purchase and sale of labor power. Karl Marx used to demonstrate that the nature of this purchase and sale of labor power was the very exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie.

On the one hand, Marx and Engels highly evaluated the capitalist mode of

production in terms of development of social productive forces. On the other hand, they also criticized severely the mode of production, as it resulted in *depravation* of the proletariat. Classic researchers considered the proletariat as the revolutionary class. They highlighted that it represented the high-leveled socialization of social production and it carried a historic mission, which was to wipe out capitalism and build future communist society⁽⁸⁾. In adding ideas to the argument, Lenin also affirmed afterwards that the proletariat was a politically ruling class that would lead the whole society in the process of new society creation⁽⁹⁾.

The success of the socialist revolution in the former Soviet Union was a ground for new debates on the concept of working class. Researchers emphasized features of *industrial labor* and identified workers as “a common owner of means of production”⁽¹⁰⁾. This was a completely new content in the concept of workers. After a proletarian revolution becomes successful, a worker still remains a worker, but the term of “proletarian class” (*non-ownership class*) no longer seems to be appropriate to show

⁽⁶⁾ Le Thi Lan (2012), “Relationship between Educational Thinking and Lifestyle”, *Social Sciences Information Review*, Vol.6.

⁽⁷⁾ K. Marx and F. Engels, *Complete Works*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, Vol.1, p.544.

⁽⁸⁾ K. Marx and F. Engels, *Ibid.*, p.610.

⁽⁹⁾ V.I.Lenin (1978), *Complete Works*, Vol.44, Progress Publishers, Moscow.

⁽¹⁰⁾ T. Daslavskaya (1989), *There is no other Way*, The Truth Publishing House, Hanoi, p.22.

this class⁽¹¹⁾. Social structure and economic achievements have changed not only the appearance of workers but also lifestyle features of this class basically. At home and workplace or everywhere else, the working class always shows a new lifestyle, of which the distinguished features include *consistent, highly disciplined, and collective*⁽¹²⁾.

In Western philosophy and sociology, there are many different analyses of the working class, which can be divided generally into two groups of opposite viewpoints. The first viewpoint argues that the working class has been gradually disappearing due to new productive development and modern technology. The declination of communist parties and left-wing forces results in changes in strategies of the working class movements. The second viewpoint, for which Marxist scholars are typical, argues that the current working class is not only internationalized by flows of laborers migrating from outskirts to centers, but also globalized by capitalist investments in the outskirts⁽¹³⁾.

In analysis of class issues, researchers have been inherently relying on some common indicators such as: market position, relationship with the means of production, and occupation. Recently, some researchers suggest that social class positions should not be viewed only from the economic perspective, but it is also necessary to take into account of other factors such as *lifestyle and consumption patterns*, i.e. the so-called class culture. In other words, each

social class has its own tendency of development and particular cultural features, including specifically manner of speaking, the way to dress, rites, hobbies, information and likings. Apart from some *indicators* such as employment or occupation, characteristics of an individual (or a group) are also shown by the *lifestyle*. Social classes are considered as different groups of people with particular hobbies, likings and lifestyle. A social class reproduces itself not only in the economic aspect by handing over possessions to the next generation, but also in the cultural aspect, in which lifestyle is a significant component. On the other hand, the social “reproduction” tends to make different social classes, social groups, and social strata closer to each other. A lot of scholars assume that the *labor class* (workers) has been accepting more and more patterns of behavior and consumption from the middle class; this makes differences between the social classes less and less important, since members of the social classes share the same patterns of consumption and social behavior.

The earliest literature on the working class in Vietnam was closely attached with political documents, especially works of Ho

⁽¹¹⁾ Hoang Chi Bao (et al) (2010), *Some Issues on Marxism – Leninism at the Present Time*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, pp.97-98.

⁽¹²⁾ Markku Kivinen (2002), *Russian Social Structure*, Paper presented on the 9th World Congress of Sociology, literature for references at the Institute of Sociology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

⁽¹³⁾ Bui Dinh Thanh (2004), *Sociology and Social Policy*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi.

Chi Minh. In “*Political fundamentals*” (1953), Ho Chi Minh defined: “only technological workers are completely representative for the working class characteristics”⁽¹⁴⁾. In the communist party political documents at that time, the working class was also recognized to have a “young” history and to be “relating much to peasants”; furthermore, the documents also highlighted that the working class were capable enough to lead the revolution in Vietnam to victory.

At the modern time, the working class in Vietnam is viewed from many approaches of social sciences. In a lot of historical research works, formation and development of the working class are analyzed from the stage of “class spontaneity” to the stage of “class consciousness”. In the meanwhile, philosophical, political and sociological researchers emphasized the nature of “paid employment” and “industrial production” as important factors for the definition of Vietnamese workers.

Doi moi (Renovation) has provided practical grounds for new interpretations on Vietnamese working class. The document of the 7th Meeting of the 7th-Term Central Committee of Vietnam Communist Party specifies that Vietnamese working class consists of not only laborers in the state-owned and collective sectors, but also those in the private as well as foreign-invested ones⁽¹⁵⁾. Researchers also emphasize the fact that Vietnamese working class consists of both manual laborers and brainworkers at present.

At the 6th meeting of the 10th-Term Central Committee of Communist Party (2008), it was also defined that “Vietnamese working class was a developing and powerful social force that consisted of both manual laborers and brainworkers, who were paid employees in all sectors of industrial production, trade and service”⁽¹⁶⁾.

3. Research on Vietnamese workers’ lifestyle in the context of industrialization

Regarding to practical significance, research works on workers’ lifestyle aim at giving an answer to the question: “how to create positive impacts on formation and development of Vietnamese workers’ lifestyle from the perspective of social sciences”.

International arguments on Vietnam’s society have suggested that it is necessary to build a new lifestyle, based on the social background that still remains agricultural with peasants as a majority. While Scott J. (1976) viewed the “moral economy” as a particularity of agricultural societies, including also Vietnam, Popkin (1979) affirmed that Vietnamese peasants were egoistic and they made all economic decisions according to their personal thinking and interaction of

⁽¹⁴⁾ Ho Chi Minh (2000), *Complete Works*, Vol.7, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, pp.211-212.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Communist Party of Vietnam, *Document of the 7th Meeting of the 7th Term Central Committee of Communist Party*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, p.32.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Communist Party of Vietnam, *Document of the 6th Meeting of the 10th Term Central Committee of Communist Party*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, p.43.

strategies. Both these approaches (*moral economy* and *political economy*) suggest that it is necessary to think further for discussions about Vietnamese society, culture, and lifestyle⁽¹⁷⁾.

Many local researchers have paid attention to the fact that Vietnamese working class was formed relatively late and its characteristics have been affected by the *agricultural, peasant and rural* culture in Vietnam. Looking back Vietnam's history, many researchers argue that before the twentieth century, the whole country "had a peasants' lifestyle" that was closely attached with self-reliant agricultural production and village organizational structure. They emphasize the "duality of the traditional lifestyle of Vietnamese peasants". On the one hand, the lifestyle is inclined towards experience, emotion, community coherence, and laboriousness. On the other hand, it "depends too much on customs and does not conform to the law". The Confucian education was a major factor for lifestyle reproduction during many centuries. Due to such a reality, researchers have consented to a conclusion that cultural heritage and lifestyle of a small-scale agricultural society caused complicated impacts on the formation of industrial lifestyle. *Doi moi* has much moved the backwardness and stagnation of the former subsidized system; it has liberated labor force of Vietnamese people, including the working class. Owing to industrialization, the lifestyle of Vietnamese

working class has been gradually shaped with new features, including: highly disciplined, comfort - liked, desirous of enrichment, and eager for learning. The regular educational system has contributed a part towards building a positive lifestyle that abides by the law, highly appreciates the sense of civic responsibility, and dignifies scientific values, democratic equality and rationality. The current industry has created a large - scale productive environment, forcing workers to adapt themselves to industrial life regardless of their backgrounds. These conditions are really favorable for "the *formation of industrial lifestyle* and laborers will escape from the small-scale agricultural lifestyle".

Identifying lifestyle as a significant component of culture, researchers argue that there is a culture of workers and it is rooted deeply in the national culture. Particularities of *the workers' culture* are labor eagerness and creativeness; the working class may contribute their own cultural features (lifestyle) into the national culture. Researchers also emphasize the significance of *labor, responsibility and morality* as the most important principles of the new lifestyle in socialism building.

On the one hand, flows of rural labor migrants have been increasing labor force

⁽¹⁷⁾ J. Scott (1976), *The Moral Economy of the Peasant, Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press; S. Popkin (1979), *The Rational Peasant: the Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam*, University of California Press.

for industrial development. On the other hand, they have also resulted in a lot of pressing problems relating to urban management work. The housing shortage and difficulties involved with social security and welfare for the working class are really conspicuous *social issues* at present⁽¹⁸⁾. Researchers highlight that it is very significant to solve the above-mentioned social issues in order to build a healthy lifestyle for workers. According to this viewpoint, “housing” and “income” are not merely involved with technical measures, but also involved with *family relationship, morality and lifestyle*, which are very pressing issues in life of workers.

Environmental issues are globally urgent at present. Since industrialization is now taking place in Vietnam, we cannot avoid those issues. Environmental pollution has become a challenge for development. From the perspective of social sciences, environmental issues are not simply relating to nature, but also relating to *culture and lifestyle* of man. In the context of a multi - constituent economy, economic units and producers give the top priority to economic interests and disregard cultural and moral targets. It is obviously important to carry out environmental protection, look after interests of laborers and build a “business culture”, in order to promote progressive and modern lifestyle of workers.

Owing to international integration and rapid development of means of communication, laborers can access overseas cultural products. How to make them avoid negative impacts

of Western lifestyle, however, is a challenge for both policy-makers and social science researchers. A lot of them assume that the system of education has not accomplished the tasks of human resource training to meet development requirements of the country, although it has gained some achievements. Emphasizing the urgency of this context, researchers consider it *an indicator* on the backwardness of the education system in relation to the goal of new lifestyle building. They highlight the importance of educational investment, viewing it as a basic measure to increase human development, improve the working class and build a *positive lifestyle* for them. Recommendations made by researchers contribute a part toward realization the communist party’s guideline on “intellectualization of workers”, helping them to become a vanguard class in the country industrialization and modernization.

Doi moi has set up a new stage of the working class development history. As specified by the communist party’s documents, however, shortcomings in socio-economic development have been affecting considerably *employment, living conditions, thinking and emotional life* of workers. The working class has made a lot of efforts to improve itself, but it has not been qualified enough to satisfy requirements of the country industrialization and modernization.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Ton Thien Chieu (et al) (2008), *Advantages and Disadvantages in Production and Living Activities of Young Workers Coming from Rural Areas*, Literature of the Institute of Sociology.

Our research on the current lifestyle of workers is *directly focused on living and working activities* of this class. In the context of Vietnam socio-economic transformation and due to the fact that most of Vietnamese workers come from families of “peasants”, we aim our research goal at highlighting particularities of the working class and its lifestyle as well as showing factors that influence the formation of workers’ lifestyle. Our research findings provide useful evidences to build a positive lifestyle and minimize negative aspects of the current lifestyle of workers. Such research works, furthermore, are really essential to give theoretical and practical grounds for the guidelines and measures to “make the working class more powerful with high class and political consciousness as well as the sense of citizenship responsibility, patriotism, and socialist - love so that they can be representatives for the national cultural quintessence etc...”

Industrialization and modernization took place in other countries long ago, but they are now still taking place in Vietnam, where nearly 70% of all population live in rural areas. To do research on lifestyle of workers with *the social science interdisciplinary approach* is, therefore, necessary to identify particularities of Vietnamese workers’ lifestyle, based on the common laws. It will make a contribution towards building scientific interpretations and empirical evidences for theoretical awareness of industrialization

and modernization in Vietnam at present and in the coming decades.

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