

# Paradigm of Vietnamese Family Values: the Traditional and the Changing

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**Abstract:** The paradigm of Vietnamese family values under the transition from a traditional agricultural society to a society of today has been fast changing as a result of the impacts exerted by industrialisation, modernisation and international economic integration. Components of this paradigm vary in terms of magnitude and intensity, namely, while those values belonging to the economic-material field change rather radically, the values of human relationship, spiritual life, spirituality and faiths change gradually and incrementally; and the values rooted in indigenous culture have more vitality than those borrowed from the outside.

**Keywords:** family, paradigm of values, renovation, transforming paradigm of family values.

**Subject classification:** Sociology

## 1. Introduction

Over the past 30 years since the start of the renovation process, the Vietnamese society has undergone profound transformations in many respects. In essence, it is a shift from a traditional agricultural civilisation to an industrial and modern civilisation, and, at the same time, a transition from a centralised subsidised mechanism to a market mechanism with State regulation. This is a double conversion, which is ongoing, even still at the beginning, when the cultural patterns of an industrial society have not yet been fully formed, and the stereotypes of an agricultural society have not yet disappeared.

Transition between two eras has caused many acute social problems: corruption, wastefulness, injustice, group interests, environmental pollution, etc. In the family, the aching issues are: increased separation and divorce, children being neglected, old people poorly taken care of, siblings involved in property disputes, and changing hierarchical order in the clan... Given such a situation, there have been many different opinions. Some people think that our society is now confused in values; fine habits and traditions are faced with challenges and many families have manifested signs of degradation of morality [2, p.51]. Others argue that the Vietnamese family has been severely degraded in the context of an economy of openness and renovation [3, p.119].

Others are regretful and nostalgic about the sweet beautiful things in the family of a past, etc.

So, in reality, what values does the Vietnamese family live with? How is such a paradigm of values operating and transforming? What dominates its operation? And, what needs to be done to help the paradigm of Vietnamese family values meet the demands of the society in the era of industrialisation and modernisation? Based on the results of the sociological survey under the ministerial-level research project "Paradigm of Vietnamese Family Values from a Sociological Viewpoint – a Case Study of Thai Binh Province" conducted by the Institute for Gender and Family Studies<sup>2</sup>, this article will contribute to answering the above questions.

## **2. Values in the economic-material field**

Values in the economic-material field are all things that humans create, absorb, and choose in relation to the natural environment, in order to meet their daily survival needs. The centralised manifestation of this type of value is eating, wearing, dwelling and moving. However, in satisfying these unchanging needs, there is a very different choice for each age or period of history.

In Vietnam of the past, due to the scarcity of consumer products, the expectations of the majority of people were to have enough food and warm clothes. The motto highlighted in the dress code was to "eat the food to be full, dress the clothes that are long-lasting". In those times, having enough to eat and to wear was something that was pursued by individuals, families, communities and society. People felt happy to solve the problems of foods and clothes. A Vietnamese proverb goes, "Three bowls of rice and three pieces of clothing prevent you from being pale and cold". In order

to cope with the shortage of consumer products, people advised each other to stock up their food and to have plans of foresight (e.g. "When having good harvests, don't turn disdainful to corn and sweet potato because they will be of great use in times of bad harvest"), and to be ingenious in spending (e.g. "Smart eating to have full stomachs and intelligent wearing to be warm") and find ways to extend the life cycles of the widgets (e.g. "Durable widgets depend on smart users"), etc.

Because of the fact that agriculture is closely tied to land, gardens and farming fields, crop-based and livestock-based products can only be harvested on a seasonal, annual, or even multi-annual basis. Therefore, farmers need to have stable and long-term housing facilities to carry out production activities. "To have good settlement (i.e. dwelling) and [then] to work in contentment" has long been a desire of many households. Direction of the house is equally important. It is expressed in the proverb: "Take a gentle girl to be your wife / Build your house facing south". The custom is explained by material reasons: winter northern winds are strong and cold, while cool summer winds come from the south and southeast [5, p.287]. Since most households lived in dwellings with a thatched roof and mud walls, which were narrow and stifled with lack of light, so the old-fashioned lifelong dream of the peasantry was to own "brick-and-tile homes", which are the symbols of wealth and prosperity. In such a private small space, living facilities for human life were also very simple: cooking with a stove fueled with straw; and bathing with pond or well water regardless of hot or cold seasons. Traveling mainly was done with bare feet, (which, according to the iconography of poets, were the image of "stones worn out by heels of walking bare feet"). The transmission of news

was still face-to-face or by means of loudspeakers made of tin sheets, etc. Such a way of life covered a long span of history, including the State subsidy period.

But since the renovation to the present, the material and economic life of the people, as expressed in the family's living facilities, has changed very fundamentally, if not to say completely changed. Here we give only a small example: the disappearance of traditional cooking stoves. Survey data as well as records and observations of the research team confirm, not only in the urban areas but also in the rural areas, that almost all households no longer use ancient fuels like straw, rice husks, leaves, sawdust, charcoal, firewood, kerosene for cooking and preparing family meals. The alternatives to such traditional cooking methods are gas, electric and induction stoves.

As regards housing, we no longer see the shadow of a house consisting of one compartment and two lean-tos made of mud, bamboo and thatch, which were very popular in the past days<sup>3</sup>. They have been replaced by flat-roofed houses, high-rise buildings running alongside large, paved or concrete village roads on which cars can run. In the surveyed provinces, the majority of households have their own dwelling houses, of which the number of households with solid houses occupies a very high proportion (77.8%), the remaining 19.9% - of semi-solid houses, and only 2.6% do not have their own houses. The long-cherished dream of "brick houses and tiled patios" of the people before has come true.

Eating and clothing habits have also changed significantly. From a situation where around the year people had to struggle to cope with hunger and cold, now 85.8% of households surveyed said that they had "sufficient meals", of whom 6.6% had "delicious meals", and only 7.1% had "miserable meals". Regarding clothing habits,

46.6% of households surveyed said they had "decent and polite clothes"; 4.3% of households said they had "trendy and fashionable clothes"; 47.5% of households said they had "good enough, warm enough clothes"; and only 1.6% of household said they did not have enough clothes.

In terms of travel, from the point of view of only "stones worn out by heels of walking bare feet" up to the time of the survey, 39.1% of the respondents chose the option of "owning travel vehicles" (bicycles, motorbikes, and cars). In the context of the development of a market economy, people's travel needs have developed beyond the confines of the local economy. Therefore, in addition to public transport, private vehicles for personal and family travel have become a necessity. In the traditional society, people hardly went out of their villages, and hardly had time or money for tourism, but now everything is different. Specifically, in the five years preceding the survey, 73.8% of respondents said that they had visited relatives and friends outside their home districts and home provinces; 50.3% had visited in-country places of interests; and 2.5% had travelled abroad. This is an entirely new development from the traditional way of life, even in comparison with the State subsidy period.

### 3. Values in human relationships

If values in the economic-material field are related to the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, to the fulfillment of their subsistence needs, those in human relationships, and here the ones among family members, are perceived to be all about the emotional and moral aspects, the daily patterns of behaviours amongst themselves. In particular, it is the behaviour between husband and wife,

parents and children, siblings, behaviours with one's relatives, neighbours, friends, etc.

In today's Vietnamese family life, this value paradigm includes those values that have come from the nation's ancient beginning (such as faithfulness between the spouses, harmony among brothers, and mutual help among neighbours); and borrowed values, the influences of Buddhism and Confucianism, such as clement fathers and filial dutiful children, having many children and grandchildren, parents and grandparents living with their children and grandchildren, as well as new values, such as gender equality, generation equality, individual freedom, etc. The question is, in the existence of intertwined old and new, endogenous and exogenous values, what values are the Vietnamese families prioritising?

The survey results show that the option of "grandparents and parents living with their children and grandchildren" ranked in the lowest place with only 24.1% of the respondents. This is a huge change compared to the family values of Vietnam in history. Because, in the past, it was a dream for every family, regardless of any social class or group they belonged to, to have members of three or four generations living together under the same roof. However, the dream is no longer quite popular presently.

The next indicator of "faithfulness of spouses" was selected by 96% of the respondents. What is special here is that, if the option of "grandparents, parents living with their children and grandchildren" has experienced a sudden change, then the indicator of "faithfulness of spouses" is almost completely reserved as compared with the traditional. The continuity of this indicator is not at all accidental. In the modern society, the family is no longer a closed economic unit, where adult members can earn independent

incomes and children can still be raised by either their fathers or their mothers when the marriage breaks down. That means the indicator of conjugal bondage essentially no longer comes from ensuring the well-being of the family but rather the fulfillment of the psychological-emotional needs of individuals. Generally speaking, in the past faithfulness was for the survival of the family, and today it is for the survival of love. Modern marriage is based on love, and only love can sustain that marriage. This explains why in both the traditional and modern family, conjugal bondage has always been valued in family life.

The Vietnamese family can now be seen as a form of transition from the traditional to the modern. This feature makes the choice of value to be also "transitional". At the study site, the reason respondents have raised in praising the value of faithful spouses is both to show the desire to maintain husband-and-wife love and to ensure the survival of the family and the future of children.

It is also worth noting the tendency to adopt new values, most notably gender equality and equality among generations in the family life. The prevalence of this value choice is moderate (51.6%) reflecting the transitional nature of the family transition from the traditional to the modern. Equality is a value of modern society and, moreover, a value of life quality. In the modern age, especially in transitional societies, one cannot help but have the choice between the survival value, the self-expression value and value of improving the quality of life. Normally, in developing societies, including Vietnam, survival values are prioritised over values of self-expression and quality of life. At the study site, over 50% of respondents prioritised the choice of equality in family relationships, and in our view, this is a high priority choice for values of life quality.

#### 4. Values in spiritual life, spirituality and beliefs

Along with the economic and material values and values in the relationship amongst members in regard of family life, one cannot fail to mention those values in spiritual life, spirituality and beliefs. This value chain is conceived to be all about the subjective meaning of trust, peace of mind, excitement in human life.

In the Vietnamese family, this value chain is indigenous, formed on the Southeast Asian cultural bases<sup>4</sup>. It is the ethics of “remembering the source of the water you have drunk”, or, translated in another way, “when drinking water, think of its source”, reflected in the worship of ancestors. It is believed that ancestors, even though they have come to the other world, still always exist and protect the lives of their descendants in this world, and the offspring can contact the ancestors through worship. As wet rice farmers, people also believe in the power of the supernatural, so in the four seasons, every time the weather is changing, families are filled with the incense smoke from worship practices to pray for good weather, peace and prosperity. In addition to indigenous knowledge, the Vietnamese people also adopt those values from other civilisations due to the long history of cultural exchanges, such as Buddhism (from India), Confucianism (from China), Christianity (from the West), and many other cultural values, including the values brought about by globalisation.

Therefore, it is easy to see the inner world of Vietnamese family members as a multi-dimensional, multi-colour picture. The survey results show the priorities in choosing values in the inner life of the modern Vietnamese family. The highest preference rate belongs to the option of “filial piety to and respect for

ancestors” (95.2%). In the families in the research area, almost every home has an altar worshipping the parents and the loved ones who have passed away. Each clan or sub-clan have their own worshipping halls or shrines dedicated to their common ancestors, which contains a lot of meaning: being grateful for being given birth to, heading towards one’s source, i.e. origin, as human beings have their ancestors, expecting to receive blessings and support from ancestors in the other world. So, the principle of “remembering the source of the water you have drunk” maintains its value and continuity in the modern family life.

Meanwhile, the view of “having sons to continue the family line” has been adopted by only 25% of the respondents as their prioritised option. This change can be derived from the new understanding of equality between wife and husband, between sons and daughters, and between men and women. When it comes to equality, the mentality of having a son as a must is gradually changing. On the other hand, the impact of population policy must be taken into account. The campaign of family planning, with such slogans as “Each married couple should give birth to only one or two children”, “Two children only, for good parenting”, etc. has significantly changed the perception of the people and married couples on the preference of sons over daughters.

Another traditional value is “respect for the rules of ethical behaviour”, which also tends to be less of a priority choice (39.5%). The rules here are understood to be strict and rigid rules of Confucianism. In the family, each member must strictly adhere to the moral principles, the children must be always polite, well-behaved, obedient to parents, grandparents and older people; girls must cultivate the four attributes of an ideal woman: *công, dung, ngôn, hạnh* ([being

good] at homemaking skills, in the appearance, speech manners, and behaviour); while sons desire for progress and improvement, that include self-improvement, management of one's household, governing a country, and pacifying the world. The family members must act in accordance with their hierarchical role positions, respectively applied to the wife, the husband, the father, the children, who all need to perform as they are expected to. This is a family model promoted from the Confucian point of view, but was not quite so popular because the majority of people were illiterate and lived naturally in line with what life itself was and what they usually conceived<sup>5</sup>. Today, 100% of the respondents are literate, with the majority of them graduating from lower secondary and upper secondary schools, so that in addition to the remaining feudalist rules, they have adopted many new values. The low score of the indicator on "respect for the rules of ethical behaviour" has shown a change in the lifestyle of the family today.

The variation in the selection of the options described above shows that there seems to be a tendency that those values originating from indigenous cultures are far more enduring than externally borrowed ones like those from Confucianism and Taoism. Indigenous traditional values derive from the real needs for survival, the causal relationship in human life, as the swallet constantly connecting family members over time. This is an important premise for Vietnamese families in the process of modernisation to be open to accepting new values without losing their identity.

In adopting new values, it is noteworthy that the indicator of "being able to rest and to relax" won nearly half of the respondents' choice. This is one of the values cherished in the modern society. Just like equality, being able to rest and to relax is

an indicator of quality of life, especially quality of spiritual life. At the survey site, in addition to watching television, listening to the radio, watching videos, surfing the internet, reading books, etc., people also spend their free time participating in other forms of leisure such as sightseeing, travelling domestically and abroad, visiting relatives and friends outside their home districts or home provinces, etc.

## 5. Conclusion

From the description and analysis of the operation and transformation of the paradigm of Vietnamese family values after 30 years of renovation, in the case of Thai Binh province, the following comments can be made:

- The Vietnamese family now lives with a whole world of values. In terms of type, that world is not only related to the economic and material life, the human relationship, but also in spirituality, spiritual and religious life. In terms of attributes, that world is so rich and diverse, including indigenous values and values borrowed from many different cultures. Historically, that world has not only traditional values, but also modern, and even postmodern ones just brought about by globalisation and international integration.

- The changes of the fields in the current paradigm of family values are uneven. While those among the material-economic changes are rather radical, the values in the human relationship, spirituality and beliefs change gradually and incrementally. In general, indigenous values have more viable than those borrowed from outside. Likewise, the values of survival, ensuring the survival of the family, are given more priority to than such values of self-expression and enhancing the quality of life.

- The operation and transformation of the paradigm of family values show that the Vietnamese family culture from the history to the present is the culture of integration - integration of indigenous cultures of Southeast Asian foundation with Buddhist culture, Confucian culture, and Western culture, and, presently, the global culture. It is worth mentioning that through such waves of integration, our fore-fathers have constantly absorbed new elements and values to enrich themselves, making the Vietnamese family identity not immutable but always innovative and developmental.

- Back to the question stated at the beginning of this paper: Is our society in a confusion of value? Are ethics and morals of the Vietnam family being downgraded? The answer drawn from our research is: no. We argue that the multi-dimensional movement in values, including social values and family values as above stated, has made many people confused. In addition, in the context of a society in transition, conflicts between the old and the new are unavoidable.

It should be emphasised, however, that all times of cultural transition and integration taking place in the past were initiated from the top, so, before reaching the grassroots, exogenous values had gone through many filters. And today, in the context of the trend of globalisation, when the world has become “flat”, direct cultural absorption comes from the bottom upwards, not from the top downwards as before. That way of absorption, on the one hand, makes the Vietnamese way of life, including the paradigm of family values, dynamic, and, on the other hand, inevitably leads to values chosen in neither a selective nor a controlled way. The problem therefore is that functional agencies should develop and produce a set of common standards

for the development of a paradigm of family values and norms in the context of globalisation and international integration, which reflects the trends and aspirations of the vast majority of different social groups. Only in that way can the exposure to and absorption of culture, including a paradigm of family values, contribute to building the sustainable family, thereby contributing to the building of a Vietnamese culture which is “advanced, deeply imbued with national identity” as the Resolution of the Party has set out.

### Notes

<sup>2</sup> The study was conducted in both the rural and urban areas - An Cau commune (Quynh Phu district) and De Tham ward (Thai Binh city) with both qualitative and quantitative methods. The total number of people interviewed was 825 divided equally between rural and urban areas, genders, ages, education levels, occupations, economic backgrounds... Of those surveyed, 580 people were surveyed with questionnaires; and 245 people were surveyed with in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The quantitative information was focused on the value choice of people in three areas: economic, material and physical life; social relations of the family; spiritual life, spirituality, beliefs. The qualitative information was intended to better define the perceptions, thoughts and causes of the current selection of the family values, as well as changes in the options selected. The quantitative information was processed with the software of SPSS 16.0. The conduct of the research project was based on two theoretical perspectives: modernisation theory and subcultural theory.

<sup>3</sup> As depicted by Pierre Gourou, the common housing type of the poor in the North Delta was a simple frame made of the wood of the *xoan* (*Melia azedarach*, or the bead tree), that holds the thatched roof of the main

house. That main house had only one room and two wings; the left wing formed a closed chamber, where women live and foodstuff is kept. The house opened out through a central door, which had no expensive wooden doors and frames. The two wings were closed tightly with mud-straw walls. The middle door had no wings; when necessary, it is closed with a bamboo plank vertically put [5, p.280].

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the first to prove that there was a Southeast Asian indigenous cultural foundation/background is French scholar G. Coedès. His views were based on the achievements of archaeology, linguistics, ethnography, history, literature and arts, etc. The common characteristics of Southeast Asia cited by G. Coedès include: (i) with regard to physical aspects: rice farming on the field, cattle raising, using rudimentary metalware, being good at boating; (ii) with regard to social aspects: important status of women, matrilineal family, social organisation based on the need to irrigate the field; (iii) with regard to mythology: opposites in cosmology between the mountains and the sea, between the poultry and aquatic species, between the mountainous people and those in the Red River delta; (iv) with regard to religions: the theism of spirits (all things have souls), worshiping ancestors and worshiping the gods of soil, placing temples in high places, burying dead people in jars or stone trunks; and (v) with regard to languages: using words with single syllables [1, p.115].

<sup>5</sup> According to Tran Quoc Vuong, there has never been a state of Confucian primacy in the Vietnamese cultural life and thought chronologically, even from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his opinion, the Vietnamese people's mind is open, pluralistic, diverse, etc. and includes “rationality” of Confucianism, “spirituality” of Buddhism, “transcendence” of Taoism and also the superstitious “deities” of the petty farmer nature, etc. In the family life Confucianism holds the father/the husband, while the Vietnamese people hold the mother/the wife, respectively, in high esteem [7, pp.510-511].

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