VIETNAM - THAILAND CULTURAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS: A VIEW FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

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Abstract: There have still been many debates among scholars about the appropriateness of the international relations theory in Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular. In these theories, Constructivism has emerged as a suitable school for assessing international relations in Southeast Asia when ASEAN is moving towards building an ASEAN community in 2025 and developing an environment with common identities regarding security, politics, economy, and social culture. This paper focuses on analyzing and evaluating Vietnam-Thailand relations concerning social culture from the perspective of Constructivism. Research results reveal that the arguments of Constructivism are suitable to justify Vietnam - Thailand relation in the field of culture and society. Both countries have had changes in common perception and diplomatic ties. Both countries work towards forming common standards and strengthening the solidarity and friendship between two countries based on socio-cultural exchanges to build an ASEAN community.

Keywords: Vietnam, Thailand, ASEAN, Constructivism, Common identity.

1. Introduction

On examining the ASEAN development concerning culture and security from the perspective of Multilateralism, Amitav Acharya argues that the Asia-Pacific region is developing a unique "common cultural identity" in terms of regional security, a combination of Eastern and Western international relations principles. It combines Western concepts (e.g., national sovereignty and regional institutions) and Eastern perceptions, with only a few differences in management (Amitav Acharya 1998). It is also the best current model of International Relation (IR) found in Southeast Asia.

Referring to Constructivism and Southeast Asia security, Nikolas Busse says many previous scholars have researched and pointed out that Southeast Asia is a case of Realism. Self-help and self-balance of the power balance are often considered critical factors in establishing regional relations. In his work, Nikolas Busse counters these

arguments by introducing constructivism as an alternative theoretical framework. Accordingly, the main argument is that in Southeast Asia, ASEAN founders have moved away from the pure balance of political power regarding their international behavior. These countries have successfully established regional codes of conduct based on non-use of force, non-interference, and informality in conflict management. The bottom line is that the compliance with these principles over time has resulted in the emergence of a common identity among the Association members: the code of conduct has become an integral part of the foreign policy of ASEAN nations, and today it is seen as a basis of the "national interest" that they pursue. As a result, these countries have removed many of the strategies proposed by Realism from their foreign policy agendas, including preventing armed conflicts or building coalitions from fighting against outsiders (Nikolas Busse 1999).

The post-cold war debate between positivists and post-positivists over international security, especially realists, liberalists, and constructivists has been endless. Scholars now use both Realism and Constructivism to counter others' arguments in many studies on Southeast Asian security. Sorpong Peou analyzes and gives an overall evaluation of the situation of Southeast Asian security according to the historical axis. In this study, he evaluated the main works of two leading political scientists: Michael Leifer and Amitav Acharya. This review offers the following argument: Realism is more profound than Constructivism concerning the power balance, but it is more likely to be consistent with balancing other complex threats, a form of "minimalistic" or "soft" realism, which can help justify the complex tasks of building a shared security community (Sorpong Peou 2002).

Another Acharya's research examines Michael Leifer's contribution in studying regionalism in Southeast Asia, especially the role of ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum. According to his assessment, Leifer is not a realist or a neo-realist who completely rejects the role of ASEAN in the regional order. This paper argues that the real difference between Leifer and newer constructivists' understanding of Southeast Asia is not about whether Regionalism is essential, but in which evaluation conditions, Regionalism still plays a vital role. Leifer considers material forces, like the former existence of an outstanding power balance, a prerequisite for effective Regionalism. He pays little attention to the norms and political factors of regional identity forming. He does not consider them an independent force in the regional order. This paper argues that adopting a sociological approach, including the role of regional norms and identity formation, provides a more comprehensive explanation of ASEAN's achievements and failures compared to Leifer's studies focusing on the balance of power. This also opens space for a more transformative understanding of the Asian security order, in which socialization and institution establishments are not only seen as complementary factors for the power balance but also the factors that make up the balance of power in the region (Amitav Acharya 2005).

Evaluating regional international relations from the perspective of Neo-realism and Constructivism, Sharah Eaton & Richard Stubbs address a question: "Does ASEAN have the power?" There are different arguments to answer this question given by two large groups of scholars called "Neo-Realists" (including realists) and "Constructivists".

Finding the answer to this question is useful because it helps draw a common stance based on the debate between the constructivists and the neo-realists regarding their evaluations of ASEAN. First, two groups draw different empirically-based conclusions about ASEAN's effectiveness on East Asian issues. Neo-realists are often skeptical of the association's role in the region because they consider this association with multilateral organizations as a whole a peripheral political activity towards the great power. They focus on the content and nature of international problems. The second argument, conceptually, is based too much on power. For neo-realists, power is often used interchangeably by force and coercion. Scholars influenced by social constructivism ideas pose a challenge to this model of power and dominance because power is not necessarily negative-sum or limited to conflict situations. Third, they suggest that both sides discuss closely related arguments in debates over ASEAN's future role and organizational structure (Sharah Eaton & Richard Stubbs, 2006). Neo-realists believe that the transition to an institutional form is based on more rules and order, while constructivists focus on establishing identity. Constructivists argue that the system of beliefs or values and shared beliefs also significantly impact the behavior of political and social actors in IR. Material resources are only meaningful for human activities through the common system of human perceptions (Wendt A 1995).

According to Constructivism, understanding how the subjects bring about benefits will help explain some phenomena in IR that the rationalists often ignore or do not fully explain. To clarify how interests are created, constructivists focus on the social identity of the state or individuals. According to them, "identity is the foundation of interests" (Wendt A 1992).

It can be seen that the debates over different views of Neo-Realism and Constructivism are still going on among scholars. However, Alexander Wendt does not pay much attention to the controversial issues between the two theories. Instead, he is interested in the relation between structure and element (subject). He identifies Constructivism as "a structural theory of the international system that has the following basic views: (1) State is the basic analytical unit of international political theory, (2) basic structures in the system of countries are more inter-subjective than material cognitive; (3) national identity and interests are an important part created by those structures rather than what is readily available" (Wendt A 1994). Although Wendt still considers the nation the center, he emphasizes that state and national interests should not be regarded as pre-existing.

Explaining the cooperation on common issues, Alexander Wendt introduces the concept of collective identity. The ability of states to overcome issues requiring joint action depends on whether the subject's social identity will create common or individual interests. Individual or common interest is the result of the degree and how social identity affects the process of binding one subject with another. Alexander Wendt called this process an "identity" process. When subjects have a positive "identity" process, a collective identity will be formed. Collective identity is the foundation for the feeling of cohesion, community... and thereby creating the common good (Wendt A 1994).

Among the commitments of member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations adopted at the 27th ASEAN Summit in Malaysia in November 2015 towards

ASEAN community building 2025, many objectives related to building a collective identity in different fields are mentioned, namely: Politics - Security, economy, and culture - society. ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) is committed to realizing a sustainable, resilient, and dynamic community, aware and proud of its identity, culture, and heritage. To evaluate the possibility of these commitments, we will analyze the socio-cultural relation between Vietnam and Thailand from the perspective of Constructivism between 1995 and 2020 to find out essential bases for the cooperation between two countries in this field.

Interest is a necessary factor because it will ensure a degree of predictability in international and national political research. Constructivism focuses on interest and other factors such as culture, institutions, and social norms. However, Constructivism considers interest an essential factor in understanding national behavior and action. Realists and liberalists hardly mention the interest in socio-cultural cooperation, and socio-cultural cooperation helps develop non-material factors that significantly affect international relations. Cooperation in the socio-cultural field between the two countries is the most apparent proof of the constructivists' arguments.

On the other hand, Constructivism will explain the role of non-material factors in shaping the structure and institutions in the relation of two countries, showing common interests and identities of the region as well as the values and common perceptions between Vietnam and Thailand. Subsequently, we can evaluate common norms that improve friendship and cooperation based on socio-cultural exchange to build the ASEAN community.

Based on the arguments of Constructivism examined in the social-cultural relation between Vietnam and Thailand, the research paper will analyze and assess this relation to answer the following research question.

RQ: What is the evaluation of Vietnam - Thailand relations in the field of culture and society from the perspective of Constructivism?

2. Content

Special emphasis is placed on the role of awareness and interaction between countries by Constructivism. The change in a nation's perception plays an important role in promoting or limiting cooperation among countries and regions. This is completely appropriate when Vietnam and Thailand have changed common perception as an important basis for socio-cultural cooperation. As a result, the two countries try to strengthen and deepen relations with each other in many fields through cultural exchange, cultural promotion, people-to-people exchange, and student exchange.

Thus, both countries have made changes in common perception towards sustainable cooperation in all fields, including culture and society. Moreover, the process of continuous cooperation between the two countries since 1995 has further strengthened this common perception.

2.1. Common features between the two countries

Both countries are relatively similar in terms of geographical tectonics and diverse topography, including hills, plains, plateaus, highlands, and mainly plains. Moreover,

Vietnam and Thailand have had a process of cultural exchange quite early in history because the two countries have cultural bases and cultural formation processes with many similarities. Such similar conditions of nature and history also support a common understanding of socio-cultural cooperation, both natural and artificial.

Vietnam and Thailand have many other similar conditions for the development of common inter-subjective factors. Similar natural conditions and economic bases have led to the resemblance in human perception and behavior towards nature and society. These are the two endogenous bases to create similarities in cultural nuances between the two countries. In addition, with the same geographical location on the Indo-China peninsula, Vietnam and Thailand are both located in the area, which is influenced by Chinese and Indian cultures and Buddhism. Constructivism emphasizes immaterial power, in which beliefs and religions play an important role in creating identity and influencing the nation's actions in diplomatic relations. Therefore, there are the same beliefs and religions between Vietnam and Thailand, which are Buddhism, and this is the common point that makes the two countries have a closer relationship. The combination of endogenous and exogenous cultural factors has created a rich and diverse cultural development in each country's cultural formation process. And it is the similarity in a culture that has made the exchange between the two peoples easier, promoting socio-cultural cooperation.

However, according to Constructivism and common identities, each country also has its own identity. This particular identity plays a role in shaping the nation. Although Vietnam and Thailand have many similarities in culture and wet rice agricultural production, each country has its own unique cultural identity. When it comes to Vietnam, Thai people are always impressed with a heroic nation in the history of fighting foreign invaders, having defeated the French colonialists and the US imperialists. And they are also impressed with the great historical figure, President Ho Chi Minh, and unique traditional cultural features such as Vietnamese cuisine and national costumes.

On the other hand, in the impression of the Thai people, Thailand is the "Land of Smiles" with famous pagodas and towers, traditional festivals (Songkran, Hoa Lanh, Royal...), and unique cultural customs. These differences have made the people of the two countries always need to learn and discover each other's unique cultures. Therefore, although there are differences but not in conflict, it is also one of the bases to promote cooperation and exchange in the field of culture and society between the two countries.

2.2. Common identity in the process of bilateral cooperation in the field of Culture and Society

The socio-cultural relation between Vietnam and Thailand is also clearly shown through ethnic relations. During the war in Vietnam and in Thailand, the migration process of both countries was formed. Throughout history, due to many different reasons, there was migration between Vietnam and Thailand. Traces of this process are the presence of the Vietnamese community in the Thai ethnic groups and vice versa. In addition to the ethnic relation between Thai and Vietnamese people, the relation among other ethnic groups has also been formed. This explains why many different ethnic groups in both countries, such as Dao, Khmer, Khmu, Lao, Lu, etc., live together. The

role of ethnic communities in each country is very important, as they are the link between the two countries and create closeness between the two communities. This is reflected in the process of people-to-people exchanges between the two countries. In this regard, Vietnam has had important foreign policies in its people-to-people relations. This is a special activity, creating the sympathy, support, and cooperation of the people of other countries, thereby building a good relationship between Vietnam and other countries. People's diplomacy has a rich, creative, diversified, and flexible mode of operation, which effectively supports the diplomacy of Vietnam. It is a fact that Vietnamese people have lived in Thailand since ancient times, and the process of Vietnamese Thai integration and development is so strong today, which has made many contributions to the construction of Thailand, as well as activities towards their motherland Vietnam. The people-to-people exchanges between the two countries have clearly shown the role and importance of promoting people-to-people diplomacy and enhancing understanding of culture and people between Thailand and Vietnam. People-to-people exchanges have resulted in great contributions of the Vietnamese Thai community to Thailand's socio-economic development, and the people-to-people diplomacy of Vietnamese Thai is the foundation for promoting the good relation between Vietnam and Thailand at present.

Currently, most Vietnamese expatriates in Thailand have obtained nationality and papers issued by the Thai government and become Vietnamese Thai who have legal status in the host society. Thus, the socio-cultural relation between Vietnam and Thailand is increasingly deepened, creating favorable conditions for the Vietnamese Thai community to participate in all aspects of Thai social life. Many Vietnamese Thai have high positions in local government agencies or become successful entrepreneurs. On the other hand, the local government also creates favorable conditions for people to teach and learn Vietnamese and to join Vietnamese expatriates in organizing activities to preserve the traditional cultural identity of the nation on the occasion of traditional New Year holidays, incense offering activities, President Ho Chi Minh's birthday celebration, annual National Day celebration at relics, Uncle Ho memorial in Nakhon Phanom localities, Udon Thani, Phi Chit. Besides, religious activities at Vietnamese temples and pagodas in Thailand are maintained and preserved. Through these activities, people of two countries have the opportunity to meet, contact, and understand more about each other. Thereby, they can access and have more information channels to find localities in the country to invest, do business, and travel, which contributes to increasing the two-way trade turnover between the two countries. This plays an important role in enhancing understanding between the two peoples and deepening the strategic partnership between Vietnam and Thailand. In addition, Vietnamese expatriates also contribute to mutual understanding and cross-border ethnic relations. Socio-cultural exchanges help to form a common identity.

2.3. Common identity in institutional interactions

From the arguments of constructivism on common identities, Southeast Asia is a community with a common identity in the region. It is the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). The ASCC community aims to closely connect Southeast Asian countries in a cohesive community, developing equally in harmony, with "societies of

concern and sharing". The socio-cultural community has four components: (1) Building a community of caring societies; (2) Regulating the social effects of economic linkages; (3) Ensuring environmental sustainability (4) Strengthening the social cohesion of the region. The basic objectives of the third pillar embodied in the Declaration of ASEAN Concord (Bali II) and the ASCC Master plan include: contributing to the building of a people-centered ASEAN Community; having a social responsibility to build lasting solidarity and unity among the nations and peoples of ASEAN by moving towards a common identity; building a sharing, caring, harmonious and open society where people's living standards and welfare are enhanced. Through ASEAN, the socio-cultural relation between Vietnam and Thailand has increasingly institutionalized inter-subjective factors such as common perception, common identity, common standards, and shared values of the region. Thereby, Vietnam and Thailand increase mutual understanding and create trust and cooperation opportunities accordingly. Here, institutions help create common norms, values, and identities, which in turn help develop socio-cultural cooperation. In contrast, socio-cultural cooperation within an institution facilitates its development and helps to create common norms, values , and identities.

The goal of building an ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community is detailed through specific cooperation programs such as the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Action Plan (ASCC POA) 2004, the Action Plan for the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Vientiane (VAP) 2004 and now the ASCC Master Plan 2009-2025. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Master Plan consists of six main components: (1) Human development (2) Social welfare and insurance (3) Social rights and equality (4) Ensuring environmental sustainability (5) Building ASEAN identity (6) Closing the development gap and 40 components with 340 implementation measures for the period 2009-2025 as well as implementing and monitoring institutions (Trương Duy Hòa 2013, 183).

To support the goal of building the Community, ASEAN has approved and is focusing on implementing the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity, which aims to strengthen regional connectivity across all three contents: hard infrastructure connectivity (transportation and transport). carriage); soft infrastructure (institutions) and people, expanding connectivity throughout East Asia; at the same time, actively promote efforts to narrow the development gap in the Association through the Work Programs to implement the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI).

In summary, the socio-cultural relation between Vietnam and Thailand from the perspective of constructivism shows similarities between Vietnam and Thailand in terms of economy and culture. This contributes to forming the common identities of the region, and at the same time, each country always maintains its own identity. But, on the other hand, it emphasizes the national benefits of each country from its foreign relations in the socio-cultural field. As a result, both countries have changed common perception, implemented an innovative approach in regional diplomatic relations, formed common standards, and strengthened solidarity and friendship between the two countries based on cultural and social exchange to build the ASEAN community. Besides, cultural exchanges and people-to-people exchanges have also been enhanced, making it easier for the two countries with similar cultural identities to get along. In addition, the active participation of Vietnam and Thailand in building a peaceful, stable,

and resilient ASEAN Community that operates with rules, the benefits of the people, and the people-centered basis has contributed to realizing a common identity value - ASEAN identity.

Thus, the application of constructivism in explaining and evaluating the socio-cultural relation between Vietnam and Thailand has helped to justify the development process of cooperation between Vietnam and Thailand in this field. Furthermore, based on arguments emphasizing the role of common interests, identities, and common identities, constructivism has provided suggestions for each country on socio-cultural cooperation, thereby contributing to bilateral relations in other fields.

3. Conclusion

The socio-cultural cooperation between Vietnam and Thailand (1995 - 2020) has gained certain achievements. The cooperation contributes to strengthening the relationship between the two countries, creates opportunities for close exchanges between the two countries, and improves the quality of human resources. Both countries try to work together towards a united ASEAN Community and form the common identities of the region, while each country always maintains its own identity. Both countries have had a change in common perception and implemented an innovative approach in diplomatic relations. Both countries try to form common standards and enhance solidarity and friendship based on socio-cultural exchanges to build the ASEAN community.

The socio-cultural relation between Vietnam and Thailand from the perspective of constructivism shows that there are always similarities between Vietnam and Thailand in terms of economy and culture. Such similarities contribute to forming the common identities of the region, and at the same time each country always maintains its own identity. This is also a prominent aspect of the bilateral relationship between the two countries.

Forming the common identity of both countries is not easy when the perception of each country is different, and the change requires a long process of interaction, not to mention the enticing effect of large countries. Those are challenges that need to be taken into account. Still, from the evaluation of the socio-cultural relations between the two countries, it can be seen that the two countries themselves also have many similarities in culture such as cuisine, climate, agricultural products, etc. In addition, the exchange activities of the two peoples have also been promoting the understanding of the two cultures. 2020 is also the year marking the 20th anniversary of teaching Thai in Vietnam. At the local level, 13 pairs of provinces/cities establish friendly relations between Thailand and Vietnam, of which 9 pairs are under the embassy's management. This helps strengthen the link between the two countries in commercial, cultural, and educational cooperation (According to the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Notably, this year marks an important milestone, celebrating the 5th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral relations between Ho Chi Minh City and Bangkok. With such conditions, it is possible to work towards forming a common identity in bilateral cooperation and institutions between Vietnam and Thailand in the future. This case also

adds a perspective on Constructivism and the feasibility of this theory when looking at international relations in Southeast Asia.

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