

SOME TRADITIONAL NATIONAL VALUES OF VIETNAM IN THE NEW CONTEXT

Luong My Van^(*)

***Abstract:** In the paper, the author considers conceptions of value, national values, and traditional national values, and from that point brings out and analyzes some traditional national values of Vietnam: patriotism, spirit of independence, unity and social order, harmony with nature, tolerance and adaptability, flexibility in resolving problems etc. In “the new context”, i.e. in the contemporary time, those values have changed in different ways, and almost all of them continue to exist as values in the modern society, not disappear, since they all contribute to build the present Vietnamese people and society.*

***Keywords:** traditional national values; new context; patriotism; spirit of independence; unity; harmony with nature; tolerance, flexibility.*

Introduction

One of the eagerly discussed topics in the scholarly circle recently is issues related to the ‘value system’. This is because the definition of value system, namely the main values that shape the essence of current Vietnamese society and people, is now becoming urgent, when the nation is step by step modernizing, consolidating and intensifying the internal force for the development. Internal force means what we already have inside, the internal

force of a nation is the very traditional culture and human (resource) of that nation. Building the value system is to clarify and apply that internal force, and the value system is also the target of the effort (of Vietnamese society) to develop. In National conference on culture (Nov.2021), General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong has pointed out that value system is built to “continue to preserve, improve

^(*) Dr., Institute of Philosophy, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

and develop the Vietnamese culture”¹. The value system is thus closely related to the past and directs toward the future. Therefore, when defining and building the value system, we cannot avoid considering the traditional values as one of the most important basis or material for the new value system.

1. Traditional national values and some of traditional national values of Vietnam

In General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong’s speech, value systems have four kinds: national, cultural, family value systems, and human standards (morality, personality). All of these value systems sit firmly on the foundation of the tradition. In this paper, we only consider the national value system and some values that can be seen as traditional national ones.

First of all, we take a brief look at the concepts of value, national value and traditional (national) value. “Value” means “the quality of being useful or important”, “belief(s) about what is right and wrong and what is important in life”². *Vietnamese dictionary* defines that “value means thing that makes something useful, meaning, worthy in some ways”³.

Values that we pursue are qualities important to the life or the community, the individual, contributing to the development and improvement of the life, community and individual. Therefore, it can be said that “national values” mean values on national level, good qualities that this nation - as a subject (main agent) - pursues and attempts to reach. The pursuit’s goal is that when mentioning this nation (in a given space-time context), we can figure out it by those values (qualities). For instance, when we talk about the United States, the values that American people exalt and pursue, or the general image of the US that we have, are freedom (liberalism, individualism), rule of law, democracy, ‘American dream’ etc.⁴ Another example, when mentioning Singapore, we cannot avoid values that Singaporean government has announced in the *White Paper of Shared Values* as national values Singapore has been building: “placing society above self, upholding the family as the basic building block of society, resolving major issues through consensus rather than contention, and stressing racial and religious harmony”⁵.

SOME TRADITIONAL NATIONAL VALUES OF VIETNAM...

National value system can include values that are currently built, that is to say this nation is building those good qualities inside itself, and long-held values that were built and fostered from generation to generation. Here we talk about the so-called “traditional values”. “Tradition”, in *Cambridge English dictionary*, is defined as “a belief, principle, or way of acting that people in a particular society or group have continued to follow for a long time, or all of these beliefs, etc. in a particular society or group”⁶. It means tradition continues for a long time, and “tradition” itself is something valuable for a particular community or society (of course, not every “tradition” is “valuable”), since people preserve and develop only things that are actually meaningful and useful for the then life, personality, community, and society. Traditional values are thus values that a community or people conserve and descend, and succeed each other to pursue for a long time.

Traditional values can be considered from various aspects: individual (personal standards, morality), community (family values, values of communities, of ethnic

groups), or nation (national values). There are connections or sometimes intercommunications between personal standards and communal values, since an individual is also a member of community and the relations between individuals form the community; personal characteristics that are regarded as values are passed from generation to generation in a large and long-term group; and communal values are realized and manifested by individuals. For example, “patriotism” can be seen as a personal standard, and at the same time a national value of Vietnam, due to different perspectives. Traditional national values are ones built and consolidated for generations, and through those values we can visualize that nation’s image in its history.

Thus, what are traditional national values of Vietnam? What are good qualities of Vietnamese society and people that have a long history of being built and preserved? Considering documents written in feudal times, it is hard to find direct mentions of ‘national values’. We can only see those values indirectly, for example in documents where

feudal authors mentioned the spirit of independence, the love of the country and the unity in resisting foreign invaders, or requirements of social order and customs etc. Since Vietnam entered the modern times (i.e. when Western culture and civilization were introduced into Vietnam), works on Vietnamese people, culture, society etc. gradually emerged⁷. In those works, we can find (scattered) states or remarks about characters of Vietnamese people or community. Through those works, we can see some outstanding attributes which can be regarded as traditional national values of Vietnam as follows.

Patriotism. Patriotism can be considered a fundamental character of Vietnamese persons or the whole community of Vietnam as a subject. It is a traditional value, since it was built long time ago and throughout the thousands of years of Vietnamese history. President Ho Chi Minh once said: “Our people have a deep love of our country. It is our precious tradition.”⁸ Thus considering traditional values of Vietnamese people, it is impossible not to mention patriotism as the first and the most important one.

Spirit of independence. Along with patriotism, the spirit of independence is an outstanding character of Vietnamese people and each individual in every stage of the history. With this spirit, Vietnamese people experienced thousands of years of fighting for independence and finally regained the sovereignty. Also with this spirit, Vietnam has stood firm - as an independent country - against countless conspiracies to annex and considerable foreign powers. The spirit of independence is one dominant value of Vietnamese people that has been formed and trained from ancient times until this day.

Social unity and order. Patriotism and the spirit of independence can be maintained and displayed only when there is the spirit of unity within the community. Vietnamese people think that “unity is strength”, “one tree cannot amount to anything, three of them can make a mountain” (Vietnamese folk verses). Especially when there are common targets need to be aimed at, or common enemies need to be expelled, Vietnamese people are willing to put aside personal conflicts to enter together

SOME TRADITIONAL NATIONAL VALUES OF VIETNAM...

into a rank. The general awareness of the strength of unity is also a reason why Vietnamese society and communities in the history are relatively stable, disturbance is infrequent in social structure, and there is not much internal conflict in comparison with another nations and countries around.

Harmony with the nature. Almost all Vietnamese (ethnic) groups are inhabitants of the rice culture, their life depends on natural changes. That is the basis of the harmony and agreement with the nature in Vietnamese attitude and life-style. It can be seen in every activity of daily living (such as ways to build a house, traditional cuisine etc.), or spiritual life (such as religions, faiths, literature etc.). Harmony with the nature has for a long time become one of traditional values of Vietnamese communities.

Tolerance, acceptance, adaptability. The spirit of independence does not make Vietnamese people have xenophobic attitude toward “strangers” or “external things”. The harmony with the nature also is applied in the society: Vietnamese people accept and adopt changing things in living

conditions, or “different things” introduced into the society, to transform and make the contemporary society a better place. It can be found in individual attitudes and life-style, social trends, policies of governments or ruling powers etc. For instance, Confucianism has been introduced into Vietnam in the period of Northern domination (about the 1st century B.C.E) by the Northern invaders, but after that Vietnamese people have accepted and actively used it as an instrument to stabilize the society (in the early time after regaining the independence). Besides, the fact that foreign theories and doctrines (Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Occidental theories etc.) are continuously introduced into Vietnam during the history can show the spirit of tolerance, acceptance and adaptation of Vietnamese people. And all of this aims at the goal of national independence, development and wealthy.

Flexibility in resolving problems. The tolerance, acceptance, adaptability to new elements and environments, the harmony in the behavior of Vietnamese people is closely connected with the

flexibility in being aware of and resolving problems. To accomplish their purposes, they understand that there are various ways to go and try to find the best way according to the situation, instead of clinging to a fix one. This flexibility can be seen not only in individuals' way of thinking and behaviors, in daily life, but also in economic, social and cultural trends, in political and diplomatic policies etc. It thus can be regarded as a characteristic or traditional value of Vietnamese people.

There are more than abovementioned values that can be called traditional national values of Vietnam. However, in our opinion, when we talk about "Vietnam" as a nation, then we can describe the Vietnamese nation through those values.

2. Movements and changes of traditional national values in the new context

The so-called 'new context' means the current environment, the space, the situation where we are experiencing and participating in its course. 'New' can be seen as 'new' compared with "traditional". "Tradition" itself is often put in comparison with "modern",

accordingly tradition means something in the past, a heritage of the past, something "old". The timeline flows from the past to the present and the future, constantly and unceasingly, it is to say the so-called "tradition" - or something in which the tradition is, the "past" - gradually changes and becomes the present. This process takes place complicatedly in which some elements change fast and the other more slowly. Thus it is impossible to be certain when "tradition" really comes to an end and the "modern", the "new" replaces and continues. Here we tentatively suggest that the "past" (in Vietnamese history) started its process toward the end from the time when elements of Western culture and civilization were introduced into Vietnam, and this process stopped from the success of the August Revolution and the foundation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, that is to say the transformation from "tradition" to "modern" took place in more or less 100 years. The 'new context' means the current time when that "modern" is continuing, adding some more new things in comparison to the early "modern time", and can be

SOME TRADITIONAL NATIONAL VALUES OF VIETNAM...

more and more distinguished from the 'tradition'.

The obvious differences between the modern age and the 'tradition' can be seen in all areas of social and individual life and even in the natural environment. In economic - social sphere, the modern age is the age of globalization, Vietnamese economy is determined as the socialist-oriented market economy with various new elements, new productive forces and relations that never appeared in the traditional society of which the kernel is agricultural economy. In the modern times, the economy emphasizes commercial goods with the leading role of trade and finance, which were never important in a "traditional" times. There also are more elements and complicated relations in society compared to the 'traditional society' which was agrarian with some strata such as landlords and peasants and intellectuals (also the officials). As regards science and technology, it can be said that the development and wide application of science and technology (of the West, introduced into Vietnam) to every aspect of social life make the modern Vietnamese society extremely different from the

"traditional" one. The daily life (cooking, clothing, shelter, travel etc.) of modern Vietnamese people also is different from the early one: household items which are technological applications (electricity, IT etc.) are not present in the "traditional" times, meal and eating habits change, clothes, dress and grooming are totally new, the residential architecture innovates even in the rural areas, the family structure, the role of woman etc. everything has changed. As to spiritual culture, Vietnamese people have accepted the influence of all trends and no longer live only in the Eastern cultural atmosphere. The most influencing factor of all these changes is the very Western culture and civilization. The popularity of culture, the individual freedom, the analytical thinking etc. are basic elements that make traditional culture change into "modern" one.⁹ In addition, we cannot avoid one element in the modern age that is making more and more profound impact on the modern life: the natural environment. The natural environment has been changed fiercely and become more and more severe for the past few decades. It can be said that human

beings are in the age of climate change (that who must take responsibility is the very human beings). This natural environment is totally different from it in “traditional” times - when the climate was generally clement although there were times when and places where occurred natural disasters. In addition, Vietnam is a country favored by the nature, with a large amount of resources and a richly diverse ecosystem. This situation has a big change in the modern times. In brief, we can see the difference between the “modern” and the “traditional” in every aspect of individual and social life. In such a context, how do traditional values change and do they have any influence over the modern life and people?

However, despite the enormous differences between the “modern” and the “traditional”, it can be seen that modern and traditional societies are not two worlds. Beside huge differences, we can always see the similarities or the connections in which one is the result of the development of the other, that is to say there is an unbroken continuity between the past and present. Traditional values are these bonds.

When connecting the past to the present, human and communities in the past to human and communities in the present, they contribute to the building of intrinsic character and identity of Vietnamese person, community, and society. Obviously, those traditional values can change, the same goes for the so-called “character” which is not fixed at all times.

We will consider the change of abovementioned traditional values of Vietnam in the modern age - in the new context and different from the “traditional” times. It can be said that the patriotism - as a value - has no fundamental change. Vietnamese people in the “traditional” society or “modern” one still maintain “a deep love of the country” as President Ho Chi Minh once said. The difference can only be seen in the expression of that love, due to the different situations. In the modern times when “Peace, cooperation and development are still the main trends, but (all the countries) are facing considerable difficulties and obstacles (...). The globalization and international integration still develop, but be challenged by the competition for influence between

SOME TRADITIONAL NATIONAL VALUES OF VIETNAM...

large countries and the rise of the ultranationalism. (...) Economic competition, trade wars, fights for market, resources, technology, high-quality human capital, and attraction of foreign investment etc. between countries are getting fiercer and fiercer, exerting a powerful effect on the global production and distribution chain”¹⁰, when the economy and politics are complicated but it can be said that the risk that the national sovereignty might be directly violated is not as strong as the risk of being economically backward and decreasing the regional and global influence, thus the patriotism is mainly expressed in the aspirations and actions to develop the country, make the country wealthier and stronger, defend the sovereignty and spread the country’s influence. The same goes for the spirit of independence of Vietnamese individuals and community, it has never ever faded away. In the new context, that spirit is continually maintained and promoted, connected with the patriotism, to aim at a developed and self-reliant country. The spirit of independence and the patriotism are important

values at any given time, they on the one hand contribute to the form of specific characteristic of Vietnamese people and community, on the other hand are spiritual foundations for modern Vietnamese people to build and develop the country.

The unity and social order as a value has, in turn, some changes under the influence of the current international economic and political context which is highly complicated. However, the stability and social order is the common tendency of Vietnamese people and communities. Vietnamese people love peace and tend to the stability in life. That is fundamentally necessary in the new context, since the unity and order is important foundation to develop the economy and culture, and to make the country strong and independent.

As to the value of harmony with the nature, it can be said that this changed more than anything mentioned. One of the reasons of that enormous change is the very change in thinking way, under the strong influence of the modern Western way of thinking. The analytic thinking, the tendency to conquer the nature is introduced into

Vietnam and thus the mentality toward the harmony with the nature, the obedience to the natural laws of Vietnamese people faded away. It has caused big negative impact right in the current time: climate change, severe temperature, environmental pollution etc. It is obvious that environmental problems of the current Vietnam is not only caused by Vietnamese people or Vietnamese culture, since the climate change is a global problem, the deforestation of the Amazon or the damage of the ozone layer also have serious effect on Vietnamese environment. However, Vietnamese people cannot avoid their responsibility for the destruction of their own natural environment. In this context, the harmony with the nature as a traditional value can become an important moral support to protect and restore the nature, therefore we must find the way to resurrect that value and bring it into the modern life.

As to the tolerance, adaptability and flexibility in resolving problems, it can be said that those values somewhat decreased in some periods. For example, before the era of Doi Moi, political and social

policies of Vietnam were ‘subjectivist and voluntarist’, it is to say inadaptable and inflexible, regarded only one direct as a right way, ignoring the actual social and economic context. However, from Doi Moi until now, the spirit of tolerance and adaptation and the flexibility are actively restored and thus produced positive effect on many aspects of social life. Vietnam has actively accepted achievements of the technological development and integrated into the international community, to change the underdevelopment and advance the country. So these traditional values still exist and develop, playing important roles in the social life.

It can be said that traditional national values have different changes in the new context, in which the importance of some decreases, some others maintain but change in the way of manifestation, or experience ups and downs. But almost all of abovementioned traditional values, since they all contribute to the characteristics of Vietnamese people and community, still exist and exert significant effect in different ways on the current social life of Vietnam.

SOME TRADITIONAL NATIONAL VALUES OF VIETNAM...

Conclusion

Building new value system, it is impossible not to consider traditional values, since they are elements contributing to the creation of the current people and society - the subjects of that new value system. Traditional values have experienced different changes from the past to the present, because the present (the new) is significantly different from the traditional times (the old). However, almost all of them still maintain the role of value

in the present, still be alive, not disappear. Their roles are expressed in the fact that they still contribute to the formation of the spirit and characteristics of the current society; society can encounter serious problems without them. Of course there are more traditional values than what are mentioned above, and all of them deserve to be considered, in order to uphold their roles in the modern life, to build and develop the modern Vietnamese people and society. □

REFERENCES

- 1 Nguyen Phu Trong, *Bài phát biểu trong Hội nghị văn hoá toàn quốc tháng 11/2021* (Speech in National conference on culture, November 2021) <https://moit.gov.vn/tin-tuc/hoat-dong/toan-van-phat-bieu-cua-tong-bi-thu-nguyen-phu-trong-tai-hoi-nghi-van-hoa-toan-quoc.html> (accessed June 8, 2023).
- 2 https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/value_1?q=value (accessed June 8, 2023).
- 3 Trung tâm Từ điển học (Vietnam Lexicography Centre), *Từ điển tiếng Việt* (Vietnamese dictionary) 1997, Da Nang Publishing House, Da Nang, 1997, p.371.
- 4 See: Nguyen Tai Dong, “Một số vấn đề lý luận về giá trị và hệ giá trị quốc gia” (Some theoretical issues on value and national value system), in: Proceedings of Conference “Relations between the building of national value system, cultural value system, personality of Vietnamese people and preservation and development of family value system”, Hanoi, 2023, p.12-15.
- 5 Parliament of Singapore (1991), *White Paper on Shared Values*, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/government_records/docs/a487bfd-7aea-11e7-83df-0050568939ad/Command1of1991.pdf? (accessed May 22, 2023).
- 6 <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/tradition> (accessed June 8, 2023).
- 7 See: Đào Duy Anh, *Việt Nam văn hoá sử cương* (Principles of the history of Vietnamese culture) (first edition: 1938), Hoi nha van Publishing House, Hanoi, 2000; Nguyễn Văn Huyền, *Văn minh Việt Nam* (Vietnamese civilization) (finished in 1939,

- first published in French in 1944), Hoi nha van Publishing House, Hanoi, 2016; Lương Đức Thiệp, *Xã hội Việt Nam* (Vietnamese society) (first edition: 1944), Hoi nha van Publishing House, Hanoi, 2018; Phan Kế Bính, *Việt Nam phong tục* (Vietnamese customs) (first edition: 1915), Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, 2005; Paul Giran (translated by Phan Tín Dụng), *Tâm lý dân tộc An Nam* (Psychologie du peuple Annamite) (first edition: 1904), Hoi nha van Publishing House, Hanoi, 2019, etc.
- 8 Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Completed works*, vol. 7, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, p.38.
 - 9 See: Đinh Xuân Lâm (chief editor), *Đại cương lịch sử Việt Nam* (Introduction to Vietnamese history), vol. II, Education Publishing House, Hanoi, 2001; Phan Ngọc, *Sự tiếp xúc của văn hoá Việt Nam với Pháp*, (Contact of Vietnamese culture with French), Culture and information Publishing House, Hanoi, 2006.
 - 10 Communist Party of Vietnam, *Văn kiện Đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ XIII* (Documents of the 13th National Party Congress), vol.1, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2021 (<https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/van-kien-tu-lieu-ve-dang/book/sach-chinh-tri/van-kien-dai-hoi-dai-bieu-toan-quoc-lan-thu-xiii-tap-1-403>, accessed June 12, 2023), p.43.