

Democratic Culture in Vietnamese Traditional Society

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Abstract: Vietnam has a history of thousands years. During the process of national foundation and defense, Vietnam has encountered innumerable difficulties in the resistance wars against aggressors, the territorial expansion, and the conquest of the sea, in order to gain national development and leave heritage of cultural diversity and humanity with particular identity for the next generations. Vietnamese culture is, therefore, worthy of praise and pride in many aspects. For the entire Vietnamese history, democratic culture can be considered more or less traditional heritage with practical evidences. However, it would be an exaggeration to say democratic culture in Vietnamese traditional society played a significant role as a premise for the modern democracy; it would be also too far, if someone felt proud of the traditional democratic culture in Vietnam. "To achieve human rights, freedom, and democracy is an irreversible trend and they are really objective requirements of mankind. Vietnam is not an exception"⁽¹⁾.

Key words: Democratic culture; traditional society; civil; Vietnam.

1. Democratic culture

1.1. Firstly, it is necessary to make clear the concept of democratic culture [16]. Democratic culture is simply understood as the habit in making conception and evaluation, and the skill and nature in practicing democracy of community.

The habit and skill are shown via opinions, comments, attitude, and behavior of every community member towards: the system of power, including both state and religious ones; community-related decisions; community relationships; and, other community members.

They consist of behavioral ways and values as well as communicative standards and patterns of the community and social members towards social strata, social institutions, social relations, spiritual and faith relations. All the factors, such as: the habit of respecting or disregarding opinions

of others; the custom of having or having not a community discussion before or after a decision is made; the attitude and behavior to show agreement with or opposition to a collective decision or an opinion of the superior or a viewpoint of others; the way to listen to or disparage a different idea, an idea of a minority, or an interest of a minority; the attitude of respect or discrimination towards beliefs and religions generally or other people particularly, etc. show the level of the traditional democratic culture.

1.2. Talking about democratic culture, ones often pay attention to identification and sustainability of conceptions and attitude

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(1) Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's answering in an interview at the Koerber Foundation, Berlin, Germany on 15th October 2014.

of democracy as well as practice of democracy in community. For high-developed societies with a long history of democracy, the democratic culture is often more advanced. For less developed societies, however, democratic culture can be applied to an appropriate extent. Habits and customs of the traditional societies, which haven't been high-developed at the moment, are sometimes highly evaluated as those of a relatively high level of democracy in comparison with the standards of the modern democracy.

As democratic culture is reflected in behavior towards not only the system of power, but also spiritual and faith relations, equality of social members before the cult attracts more notice. In some communities, all members are equal before the Supreme Being and the Cult. In other communities, on the contrary, people are even discriminated before the supernatural.

1.3. Anyway, the democratic culture that modern societies are trying to achieve is to make the democratic standards of the whole mankind become universal norms to be applied in society and normal life of everybody and every community.

2. Commune democracy and village democracy

2.1. There has been a current of opinion, according to which Vietnamese traditional society had no democracy or at least it had democracy of its own type. It is the "commune-typed democracy", which was formed spontaneously with some initial conceptions of community equality, before the Kingdom of Dai Viet was founded.

Regarding to the commune democracy, Professor Cao Huy Dinh (Cao Huy Đình) wrote: "Until the Kingdom of Dai Viet was founded and Vietnam became independent after nearly a thousand years of persistent

wars of resistance, the ethnic community traditions were also promoted; the commune democracy was respected; and, the folk faiths were maintained. The states founded by the nobility coming from the most powerful tribes, such as Dinh, Le, Ly and Tran, were on the process of feudalization, but it was necessary to have a pantheistic religion and compassionism (Buddha exists everywhere; everyone can become a Buddha; Buddha loves all people. Or, the King is the embodiment of Buddha), in order to dignify and popularize the royalty and unite ethnic groups; i.e. it would help to bring all self-governing communes (including their own village customs and tutelary deities) together in a whole (the king's law and the king's favor). Buddhism, therefore, kept a key role. The proverb "Land of the king, temples of the village, and landscapes of Buddha" demonstrates that people highly praised Buddhism; Buddhist temples had the power to do governance of land and spiritual life of villages on behalf of the king. Thus, the regime of Buddhist kingdom was established with monks as its roots at the village level. It looks like the religious – administrative system of Khmer and Laotian people that we can see nowadays" [2].

2.2. There haven't been any scholars differentiating clearly between the commune democracy and the village democracy. We just know the commune democracy seems to originate earlier. Today, influence left from bygone days in mind of Vietnamese people is sometimes recognized as the trace of commune justice, but it is sometimes recognized as the trace of justice of village organizations – a relatively typical social institution of Vietnamese people.

"Village democracy" is generally understood as a type of democracy among agricultural

people, who took control over farmland and social life. They practiced a type of Confucian democracy mixed with Buddhist equality and Taoist freedom. This type of democracy was spontaneously formed, resulting in relative equality before the faith in Buddhist and Confucian principles, before small-farming production, before natural calamities such as storms and floods, and before opportunities to examinations and appointment to the government... There are, not almost all, some opinions assuming that over many generations, Confucianism, Buddhism, and some other traditional forms of culture gradually built particular consciousness of democracy in the mind of Vietnamese people in the past. They did not see “the loyalty to the king” the same as “the blind loyalty”. The “three moral bonds and five constant virtues” were not too strictly applied (very similar to the matriarchal regimes, in Vietnamese traditional society, women got more democratic rights than their counterparts in some territories). In the world of mandarins, scholars could return the seal for resignation in order to live in seclusion, if they felt discontented with the court. People of humble origins still had opportunities to become mandarins. The “intellectuals - peasants - industrial workers - tradesmen” social order was accepted, but people also kept in mind that “one could not get rich without engaging in trade”. In reality, there was village democracy, as illustrated in the proverb “Village custom rules the law” [9; 4; 10; 1; 7; 3; 13].

2.3. Regarding to the village democracy, Professor Nguyen Dang Thuc (Nguyễn Đăng Thục) wrote: “If we define democracy as a governmental system elected by the people to serve interests of the people, in which power was really kept by the people,

the village or commune regime in the ancient Vietnamese village system was actually a particular democratic regime. The most original feature of the early democracy is that it was formed spontaneously and then by itself adapted to the centrally autocratic system of the East-Asian monarchic regime. It is, therefore, possible to say the governmental system of Vietnam looked like a federation at that time. Social and political organizations consisted of two opposite and overlapping systems. At the level of substructure, there was parliamentary, self-governing, and mass democracy. At the level of superstructure, there was an autocratic monarchy, in which the power was centralized via a system of mandarins. These two institutions are basically different from each other, but they co-existed for centuries at the time of peace and prosperity as well as at the time of civil wars or resistance wars against aggressors, despite the rise and fall in history.” [9, p.14].

According to Professor Nguyen Dang Thuc, the management mechanism of the traditional village institution was a very type of the parliamentary, self-governing, and mass democracy. This spontaneous political system was formed in history and adapted itself to all “autocratic monarchies, in which the power was centralized via a system of mandarins”. On the contrary, the autocratic monarchy maintained and took advantage of the system of self-governing democracy to serve its power centralization. Democracy of Vietnamese traditional society also originated in and was regulated by this complexity. Positively, those monarchic societies were not too severe for people. Negatively, however, there was just half-democracy. Both these positive and negative aspects stemmed from the above-mentioned complexity.

2.4. In Cao Tu Thanh (Cao Tự Thành)'s opinion, democratic values of Vietnamese traditional society were set up from the old days in history. To demonstrate and interpret the existence of the democratic values, he brought out a wide range of cultural images from legends, such as: Lang Lieu and the legend of *Bánh chưng* and *Bánh dày* (Square and round glutinous rice cakes); Mai An Tiem (Mai An Tiêm) and the legend of watermelon trade; Chu Dong Tu – Tiên Dung (Chử Đồng Tử - Tiên Dung) and the idea on women's emancipation etc. For later feudal societies, he also adduced a lot of conceptions on equality and freedom made by Phạm Lam Anh (Phạm Lâm Anh), Hồ Xuân Hương (Hồ Xuân Hương), Cao Bá Quát (Cao Bá Quát), Tung Thiên Công (Tùng Thiên Công), Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (Nguyễn Bình Khiêm), Đào Duy Từ (Đào Duy Từ), Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (Nguyễn Đình Chiểu), Nguyễn Hữu Huan (Nguyễn Hữu Huân) and Hồ Huân Nghiệp (Hồ Huân Nghiệp) etc. to argue that traditional democracy was not a delusion, but it truly existed in Vietnam. According to his assessment, the Confucian examination-based selection of mandarins and the political institution, in which the court counsellor was responsible for dissuading the king and dealing with corrupt mandarins and criminals, were really positive manifestations of the traditional democratic culture. However, he also illustrated some shortcomings, as below: [3]:

- "Vietnamese feudal society was mainly based on self-sufficient small-farming economy; it consequently could create only half-democratic tradition"

- The traditional democratic culture existed "parallel to protection of community members; it therefore suppressed them by community power. In addition to resistance

to domination of the ruling class, community was also detached from many processes of the whole country"

- In Vietnam, the sense of civic responsibility was formed on the basis of traditional society with simple and incomplete structure that inclined towards political aspects, so there were just patchy adjustments of democracy before requirements of modern development.

To make a general assessment, Cao Tu Thanh stated that Vietnamese traditional culture consisted of some factors that could become resources and motives for national and human development in Vietnam, but it also consisted of some factors considered as the burden and obstacles to development. The tradition of incomplete democracy and various social contradictions resulted in such a value.

2.5. Criticizing the way, which evaluates traditional democracy "by only reviewing literature" without "making scientific generalization" on the basis of analysis and recapitulation of all literature as well as interpretation of origins in the specific context of history, Professor Phan Huy Lê (Phan Huy Lê) gave some remarkable comments on the democracy in Vietnamese traditional society [10]:

- In Vietnam, at the ancient history, before the early state was founded, the slavery exploitation relations only existed in "the patriarchal – maidservant form". There was not such a draconian treatment like the European slavery regime.

- At the feudal time, the system of private ownership was established. Consequently, the class of landowners and the class of peasants, who had little farmland, appeared in society. Most of the peasants were tenant farmers; i.e. they had no or had very little farmland, so they had to do cultivation in

the land of the king or the landowners. “A common desire of Vietnamese peasants at that time was to strengthen public farmland of the village”. “In the political terms, therefore, the most democratic idea of peasants was to carry out an uprising against the autocracy, overthrowing corrupt mandarins, tyrants, and village bullies in the hope of having a new society of justice with a clear-sighted king and loyal people”. It means that “in the social struggle, the democratic thinking of Vietnamese peasants was just limited within the requirement of social justice and equality of property. Their highest aspiration for democracy was involved with socio-economic egalitarianism and political uprising, etc. This partly shows the utopian and helpless thinking of peasants in the process of self-emancipation”.

According to Professor Phan Huy Le, consequently, in Vietnamese traditional society, the democratic ideology was just the peasant democratic thinking, of which the highest ideal was commune equality with “a clear-sighted king and loyal people”. All peasants’ uprisings never aimed at dealing with issues of the political institutions. This means that it is too far to reach the standards of democracy with universal suffrage, political representation, and majority power like those in Ancient Greece.

2.6. Based on the above-mentioned viewpoints, we can come to following conclusions about “the commune democracy” or “the village democracy” in Vietnamese traditional society:

- There are enough arguments and evidences showing the existence of some democracy at a certain level in Vietnamese traditional society for the entire length of history from the prehistoric time to the Dinh (Đinh), Le (Lê) dynasties and the

recent Nguyen dynasties, compared with other harsh feudal societies in China, India and Islamic nations. It is a type of spontaneous and early democracy attached closely to various factors, including: the rural commune people; agricultural life; Vietnamese self-reliant and self-governing institutions; New Confucianism of more openness and less blind loyalty; Buddhism of fair complaisance and equality; and, Variant Taoism of relative freedom (different a lot from that in China). In the traditional consciousness of Vietnamese people, the ideals on justice, humanity, freedom, and equality (including also gender equality) were also bore some democratic color.

- Arguments made by some scholars, such as Nguyen Dang Thuc, Cao Xuan Huy (Cao Xuân Huy), Cao Huy Dinh (Cao Huy Đình), Phan Huy Le, and Cao Tu Thanh, etc. on the existence of some spontaneous and early democracy that was closely attached to the lower development of Vietnamese traditional society are not comments dictated by feeling to praise the beautiful features of the past, but they are findings of serious research works and are worthy of considerations. According to what we have realized by now, however, it is not reliable enough to make conclusions about positive or negative impacts of the traditional democracy on the modern society. It is really necessary to do further research on this.

- Although there used to be a particular type of democracy in Vietnamese traditional society, by the early 20th century it was too far for such a type of democracy to satisfy the demand for democracy at the common standards. In fact, it was much lower than the level of democracy in the world and it did not play a significant role as a favorable

condition or the grounds for development of modern democracy in Vietnam. In the 1930s, the Western thoughts of democracy were introduced into Vietnam. At that time, the orders and disciplines of Vietnamese traditional society were hardly helpful to enlighten the people's knowledge.

- In the meanwhile, obstacles caused by Vietnamese traditional society to acquisition of the Western thoughts of democracy lasted tenaciously from the early 20th century and they are still relatively obvious at the present.

2.7. While looking for evidences to demonstrate the existence of the traditional democratic culture in Vietnam, we find none of scholars mentioning to what extent the traditional democratic culture reached and to which society in developed countries it was similar. Surely, it is not easy to get an answer to the question. Yet, if we don't get an evaluation of the actual level of the traditional democracy, it will be hardly possible for us to realize how positively and how negatively it has influenced on the modern society in Vietnam. It is, therefore, unavoidable that assessments are made by more or less feeling, when the modern society of Vietnam with the current development and integration is placed in correlation with heritage of the traditional democracy.

3. Democratic or non-democratic

3.1. On the obstacles of Confucianism to democracy in some societies, such as China and Vietnam, Professor Tran Ngoc Vuong (Trần Ngọc Vượng) wrote: "Confucianism was chosen as an ideology of monolatry for over two thousand years in the political history of China and for hundred years in the political history of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, resulting in a huge pressure that repressed and prevented effectively all orientations towards democracy as well as

creating the legitimacy to suppress and decimate all organizations, forces, and activities against the power centralization of the monarchical state. As an ideological theory - the theory on ruling power, Confucianism brought out a magic wand to maintain its "seemingly unchangeable" position. It is a guarantee of absolute and unconditional loyalty among all its believers to the king - a supreme and unique power individually given to an only orthodox family for each specific time on the basis of generation succession" [12].

For the entire length of history, the feudal monarchical ideology caused an enormous pressure to repress and prevent effectively all orientations towards democracy and created the legitimacy to suppress and decimate all organizations, forces, and activities against the monarchical orientation of the Central state. This contention of Professor Tran Ngoc Vuong is really necessary to be emphasized.

3.2. Reviewing all the types of democracy in the past, we think there is only one deservedly considered as heritage of traditional democracy in our mankind - it's the Ancient Greek democracy. As commented by A. Lincoln, the democracy in Ancient Greece is completely similar to the democracy in the United States in the early 20th Century, except for some differences in the sphere of activities. One was practiced in a small citadel in the coastal area of Mediterranean Sea over 2,000 thousand years ago; the other was practiced in the whole territory of the United States at the modern time. One was applied for the slaveholding and upper classes, except for slaves; the other was applied for all people, no matter it is the president or a waiter, a white or a colored person [15]. The democracy in Ancient

Greece is viewed as heritage of traditional democracy, because its ideals, principles, and style are the same as those of the modern democracy: power is seized by the majority; there is a mechanism preventing the misuse of power; there are principles implementing the universal suffrage and democratic representation; decision-making is rule by majority vote and on the basis of ballot equality. That's why modern democracy has been developed more conveniently in the societies, which have been influenced by the Greek cultural heritage.

It is impossible to say heritage of other traditional democracies is not significant for modern society at all, but in fact its significance is very limited. According to Professor Tran Ngoc Vuong, Japan is the only country in the world, where the ruling family-line remained very long since the old days without replacement. Yet, democracy was even unfamiliar to its people till the Meiji Restoration. After becoming a new power in the world, Japan did not "follow" the example of European countries in building democratic political institutions. Only after its failure in the Second World War, were activities of political democracy and democratization initially carried out in Japan [13].

Before inevitable requirements of democratization of the entire social life for development, we have to see whether our historical heritage was democratic or non-democratic, when reviewing all what inherited from our traditions.

3.3. The commune naive and spontaneous democracy in the early state of Vietnam was preserved by a particular way through all the centralized feudal dynasties, including also the Le-Trinh period, forming a specific type of democracy – the village democracy.

Ideas on equality and justice, freedom and responsibility between leaders and community people, between men and women, between different social strata, and between different local areas etc., gradually became mechanisms of the village democracy with an ideal model on the peasants' democracy. Democracy of this type provided all people with equality of interests and responsibilities for "the village affairs", of which the top is the village responsibility for "the state affairs" - assignments from the king and the nation. Equality of interests and responsibilities led to equality of property and labor, of which the top was the economic egalitarianism; i.e. everyone had the right to cultivate public farmland and all the rich possessed private farmland. The village democracy also consisted of a political democratic aspect. All village labor-aged men (aged from 13 to 53) were equal to give opinions and to have relative positions in the village. The ideas on political uprisings, of which the highest level was a peasants' revolt, were often supported by the village opinions.

3.4. Regarding to the thinking, spirit, and psyche, the village democracy created favorable conditions for all village members to have equality in getting Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. On the contrary, the New Confucian viewpoint against the "blind loyalty", the Taoist viewpoint on freedom, and especially the Buddhist viewpoint on equality and humanity really made the village democracy more popular and more significant. As external spiritual values, including also Confucianism, were never adopted thoroughly into the village, all the above-mentioned viewpoints were mixed together rather harmoniously – i.e. they were not too strictly applied; yet, it was not encouraged to make change or

creation; they neither revered too much anything, including even the king and religion, nor advocated extremism or opposition.

3.5. In terms of practice, the village democracy was done by a very simple method. Institutions of the village councils or village dignitaries looked very hard, but the decision-making of those institutions were really unstable; there were no strict procedures; and, the institutions varied by village. As a result, the supervisory mechanism was too flexible and inconsistent. It was very common that a decision was made, but then it was not implemented at all. It is one of the reasons to explain why the democratic ideologies, which were widely disseminated into Vietnam in the 1930s, could not reach rural villages, but they were almost limited within some outward activities in big cities.

4. Conclusion

Based on what we have mentioned and analyzed above, we can come to some following conclusions. While the Ancient Greek democracy left Europe, the West, and the whole mankind huge heritage of democracy, ranging from the ideals to the viewpoints, from the principles to the patterns, from the methods and rules to the routes and steps, and even the procedures to do voting and vote of confidence, the commune or village democracy in Vietnam just left the modern society *some sense of relative justice and equality between social members*. In the meanwhile, the heritage of non-democracy and anti-democracy from the village democracy particularly and from Vietnamese traditional society generally resulted in a heavy burden on the modern society, as below:

- There was not a conception on the power by majority and community shown via decision-making of the village head or village council at all. No matter the sense of

blind-loyalty was great or not, the voice of the king, especially after being re-transmitted by advisory institutions, was always seen as a supreme order. The autocracy of the king had the power to carry out suppression. Although people could "overthrow" a government theoretically, this rarely happened for over 1,000 years. The people, therefore, had the responsibility to obey all orders from the king. The fact that people could beat the drum to claim innocence at the "Three Judicial Organs" was the last mechanism that showed respect for the people's voice. Yet, it was just used to decorate the clear-sighted reputation of the king rather than to ensure the justice of the law.

- There was not absolute equality of votes (among the village labor-aged men) in the mechanism of traditional democracy.

- The will of a social member (every citizen, every village member, and even every village men) was never considered significant in society. On the contrary, every village member had to undertake decisions of the village, no matter he/she agreed with it or not.

- There were no ideas or principles enabling people to stick to individual opinions. If someone had a different opinion from the village opinion, he or she had no choice but to leave the village.

- A minority had no power at all in the village. In Vietnamese traditional society, a minority could do anything but to expect eagerly for support from the public opinions and social ethics.

Even for the simplest sense of democracy that "people are owners" consequently, democracy actually never existed in the institutions of Vietnamese village democracy; i.e. it was not found in Vietnamese traditional society at all. For a more complicated and

more profound sense of democracy that “power is seized by a majority and social institutions are empowered to implement the power of a majority and community”, it was more unfamiliar to Vietnamese traditional society. This is an undeniable fact and “a burden of heritage” on the next generations.

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