

CURRENT SITUATION OF THEORY AND METHODOLOGY OF CULTURE AND PEOPLE IN VIETNAM DURING THE LAST FEW DECADES

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Although there exist several theories which provide methodologies for the study of development of people and cultures, in fact in Vietnam there are only two popular theories which act as guidelines for this field. 1/ One emphasizes human beings' social nature, judging humans primarily via their actions and considering humans as contextual products determined by society's materialistic life. According to this theory, all interpretations about an individual must be derived from his/her society. 2/ The other views humans as the center of socio-economic development, and also as the goal and the impetus for social development. From this perspective, any socio-economic changes, including economic growth, must be considered in relation to humans' development, that is, the value of all change and development must be measured in terms of the extent to which it serves human beings and brings them happiness.

Regarding cultural studies, there also exist two common theories guiding its research methods as well as cultural development. 1/ The first theory regards material production as the foundation of all of social life, including culture. Social existence determines social consciousness. In this way, culture is considerably influenced by infrastructure and will be changed as the society's production system changes. Personal and individual culture, as well as personality, all depend upon and are reflected in actions and behaviors. 2/ The second theory views culture as the internal factor determining social development; it is the mental foundation of a society, both the goal of and the impetus for social development. Towards this end, every social change or advance is rooted in culture, especially in traditional culture.

In fact, these theoretical frameworks, as well as the theoretical and methodological guidelines for social studies in Vietnam, are far from being strictly followed. Few researchers and writers adhere absolutely to the theoretical framework or methodologies which they support. Sometimes the

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theoretical framework presented in a study is only included for purposes of completeness, and in fact the research topic has been developed in some other way. Therefore, compromises, concessions, harmonizing, and incompleteness is frequently in scientific documents. This situation is acceptable to some extent, as sometimes valuable scientific work is still done, but in many other cases it is not acceptable.

Up to now there have been no comprehensive studies assessing the current situation of Vietnamese social studies in the last twenty years or defining the main features of theories and methodologies used to study culture and human development in Vietnam. Although many realize the necessity of this task, no one has taken the responsibility of performing and presenting it in a systematic way in writing; such a document has yet to come.

Based on personal study and observation of the quickly developing trend towards diversity in Vietnam's spiritual life, this paper attempts to present a comprehensive look at theories and methodologies of culture and humans as used in Vietnam – a poor country with fairly high life expectancy and education indexes (1).

I. Identifying common characteristics

1. During twenty years of active participation in globalization never before in Vietnam have there been more *varied and abundant theories and methodologies consisting of so many compromises, harmonizations and concessions*. This situation is reflected in the following areas:

- While honoring Marxism as a mental base and upholding the strong values of

Marxist doctrines, Vietnamese scholars no longer express only criticism of and prejudice against those doctrines opposed to or suspicious of Marx's.

- While affirming Ho Chi Minh's thought as a guidelines for practical work, the spiritual life of Vietnam welcomes, learns from, and puts to use other ideologies as well, no longer ignoring all other figures besides him.

- While acknowledging materialism as a theory and methodology fundamentally important for every work of research and practical application, socio-political activists, researchers and scholars in Vietnam are generally willing to converse with those who adhere to other philosophies and are ready to accept and learn whatever sound ideas they have to offer.

- While acknowledging dialectics as a methodological base for every mental activity, we no longer discriminate against other philosophies or criticize them as idealistic, metaphysical or eclectic. In fact, these philosophies are now seen from a more flexible point of view.

- While material decisionism (the idea that infrastructure determines superstructure, that material life determines spiritual life, etc.) is still appreciated for its importance to the

study of social life, nowadays other viewpoints, which place value on consciousness, will, traditional values, and the like, are also acknowledged as reasonable. Culture is even acknowledged as the mental foundation for social life and the goal and impetus for social development.

- While rejecting pluralism and the existence of multiple parties in the political domain, varying groups in the areas of culture, academics, religion, and so on are accepted and given equal treatment. Diverse and even complex activities in these areas are looked upon with a noticeably more tolerant eye. The term “pluralism” in areas other than politics is sometimes substituted with the word “diversity” to avoid misunderstandings. Activities of some religions have been legalized, Vietnam’s relationship with the Vatican has improved, and the US has removed Vietnam from its CPC list. Some religious hot spots exist, but this is not because of religious discrimination but rather the contrary.

On the whole, the harsh attitude towards spiritual phenomena, beliefs, religions, individualism, telepathy, alien cultures, and so on, has been replaced with a softer attitude in accordance with maintaining social harmony.

- While remaining determined to build socialism in Vietnam, as well as maintaining the emphasis on public and state property and the primary role of the state economy, the Vietnamese government is working on developing a

multi-sector economy that includes private capitalism and acknowledges the important role of the market economy, viewing markets as an optimal solution because of their character as a cooperative human achievement towards developing society. Vietnam has entered the WTO and participated enthusiastically in international organizations, and the different types of market are treated equally and have an equal chance to flourish in the country.

2. The above-mentioned theories include the following specific concepts:

Together with the acknowledged values of Marxism-Leninism, and Ho Chi Minh’s philosophy, Vietnamese researchers and intellectuals are also familiar with M. Weber’s philosophy about *culture as a decisive factor in social structure* (2), Alvin Toffler’s concept of *civilization waves* (3), the viewpoints of the UNDP and Teilhard de Chardin about *humans as the center of socio-economic development*,⁴ Carl Popper’s concept of an *open society*,⁵ Samuel Huntington’s argument about *the clash of civilizations*,⁶ Mahathir Mohamad’s theory about the role of *Asian values in the development of modern societies* (7), T. Friedman’s concept of *a flat world and globalization* (8), and so on. Some theories that had previously been shunned and ignored, such as those of Max Weber, Jean Paul Sartre, Teilhard de Chardin, and Carl Popper, have now found an accepted place in society’s spiritual life. Besides this, new theoretical phenomena such as

the concepts of *intellectual economy* (9), *globalization*, *human development and the HDI tool kit* (10) *environment and stable development* (11), and *human resources and social resources* (12) have also quickly gained popularity and are used in applied research in Vietnam. Internationally recognized works, such as Robert McNamara's memoir "In Retrospect: the tragedy and lessons of Vietnam" (1995), Thomas Friedman's "The World is Flat" (2006), Francis Collins's "The Language of God" (2007), and several invaluable publications of the World Bank, UNDP and UNESCO, have been published in Vietnamese almost as soon as the original versions. This is quite a new phenomenon in Vietnam, and it may not happen the same elsewhere (13). Besides the importance of popularizing international TV programs, information on the internet, and other multimedia products, providing diverse, updated information on theories is very important to the development of culture in general.

3. Inevitably, there exist forbidden topics, and the flow of information is not always as smooth as it should be. This happens for understandable reasons.

Although these theories and methodologies are abundant and varied and promptly updated when new information is available, it is in a rather limited manner. Not all of these theories have been thoroughly comprehended by the public, and in some cases they have been understood quite superficially. Even universities and similar institutions

lack the competent experts to produce works on these theories. This negatively affects the development of society's consciousness as well as the average level of theories and methodologies in general.

II. Current use of theories and methodologies regarding culture

1. Following other authors, we divide methodologies and/or theories into two categories: existent and need-to-build ones (14). Existent theories are those that have been proposed by credited philosophers and been relatively well fleshed out. During the last twenty years, two main existent theories have been used in our cultural studies and for cultural development: *one considers culture as a product of human activity, and the other views culture as the internal driving force of social development.*

Despite the fact that these two theories/methodologies are contradictory to a certain extent, they have existed together in our scientific life and their co-existence has not yet caused any problems (although both have had to compromise in order to remain alive).

2. Previously, culture was studied exclusively under Marxist viewpoints and methodologies. However, Marxist theories, as we know, rarely talk about culture. (In some classic works of Marx and Engels, the term *culture* is only mentioned a few times.) This is clear since in their time culturology had not yet appeared and *culture* was still understood in close relation to the term

civilization. (In fact, E.B. Tylor in *Primitive Culture*, written in 1871 defined “culture” somewhat like “civilization.” (15) The term *culture* was sometimes taken to mean *cultivation or growing* (16) hence at that time it was not an area that received much attention. Moreover, great Marxist figures did not find themselves responsible for building cultural theories as their theoretical tasks had already been too many.

Therefore, when Marx's successors (primarily Soviet researchers at the end of the 1960s) expressed interest towards culture, culture was in fact only viewed as a human activity and most of its studied elements belonged to the structure of social ideology and were determined by social existence. It is worth noting that in Marxist theories culture is mainly studied and discussed as part of the activities approach (Деятельный Подход, “activities approach,” is still regarded by some Western scholars as a considerable scientific achievement by the Soviets). The activity approach places emphasis on the connection between human's higher functions and their basic activities, or to put it in the terms used by *historical* materialism, every social change is derived from the society's material life and its production system. *Material production is the foundation of the whole of social life* – this very first and vital principle of materialism still appears in most textbooks on Marxist philosophy. Thus, the way *culture* is currently understood did not exist in

Vietnam before the 1990s. Still, it is necessary to remember that the activities approach and historical materialism in the field of cultural studies are fundamental and have their own strengths. They are still cherished by many scholars, though they are not the entire truth.

3. Interestingly, at the end of the 1980s, when some Western ideas about culture were accepted, especially after the participation in the *World Decade for Cultural Development* (1987-1996) launched by UNESCO, a new concept of culture and cultural elements, together with a new methodology, was put into use in Vietnam. Not long after that, official Party and government documents clearly stated: “Culture is the spiritual foundation of our society, the goal and the impetus for socio-economic development.” (17).

In fact, the idea of culture as *a structure lying deep in social life* was proposed by Max Weber. This theory has its own methodology, which honors the role of cultural factors. Hence culture is not only a product of social life but also, more fundamentally, a foundation determining the whole development process of a society. Weber successfully managed to use his theory to explain the role of Protestant culture in the establishment and growth of European capitalism. Nevertheless, Max Weber was given biased treatment by Soviet theorists, and as a result, was unknown in Vietnam (18).

During the era of renovation, with the encouragement of UNESCO's *World Decade for Cultural Development*, which focuses on honoring culture for its importance to development as well as to preserving national identity, that "decisive nucleus in every culture" Vietnamese ideologists, along with other ideologists worldwide, have applied Max Weber's theory to explain rather persuasively the sudden growth of the four Asian dragons based on the typical characteristics of traditional Confucian culture.¹⁹ Confucian cultural values and traditional opinions which place great importance on the human factor have been crucial elements for NICs to attain dragon-like levels of development.

4. Thus, the most meaningful change for Vietnamese society's theoretical and spiritual life during the first years of the renovation period was receiving a new concept of culture and methodology for studying it. In addition to the existent theory, which considered culture as a product of social production, was a new concept of culture as an inherent factor, determining and influencing (positively or negatively) socio-economic development. This surely was a much broader, flexible, and reasonable point of view, especially for Vietnam – a society with over a thousand years of continuous culture. And it was not until then that Vietnamese ideologists realized that Ho Chi Minh had held the same point of view towards culture ever since the 1940s.²⁰ Ho Chi Minh's definition of culture was no less concise and explicit than other popular definitions (21).

III. Current use of theories and methodologies of humans

1. In Vietnam the same situation applies to theories and methodologies of human study and human development. Previously, although humans were an object of special concern, they were only understood in relation to their social group, community, class, people, and nation, with little attention paid to the role of personal and individual factors, blood relations and race in determining human identity. In theory, the varied, complex and unique phenomena of individuality could be completely explained via social reasoning. Biological characteristics apparently had no role to play any role in forming human nature and personality. This biased viewpoint was often supported by such classic ideas as: "Humans are what they do" ²² or "Fundamentally, human nature is the sum of all of the individual's social relationships." (23). It was not until the 1970s that genes and genetics were known in Vietnam.

At that time, humans were viewed as a situational product and human formation was confined to beautiful yet routine criteria (24). Moral and social responsibility constituted the majority of the criteria for human development. This led to mistakes in application. The principles of material decisionism were applied to all aspects of human behavior: it was believed that human-human relationships in production were determined by forces of production, human consciousness by social existence, human nature and personality

by human activities. Even human success was explained in the same way that Engels explained the appearance of historical figures: "If there had not been Napoleon, there would have been another person to fill the same role. This is demonstrated by the fact that whenever history requires, the right person will appear. Take Caesar Augustus, Cromwell, and so on, as examples." (25).

2. Regarding methodologies, there was another reason why humans as a subject matter had been discussed and studied in such a restricted way: humans were looked at from rigidly fixed angles. It is common knowledge that humans are a complex, multi-faceted and unique object; however, interpretations on humans from spiritual, religious, sub-conscious, telepathic, and even biologically unique aspects were almost completely ignored. For many years, humans were studied by separate disciplines in isolation. The fact that it is inevitably difficult to study humans from all angles does not mean that the internal logic of human studies allows for some angles to be omitted. In fact, sociological studies on humans appeared in Vietnam quite late, and cross- and multi-disciplinary studies even later. It was only recently that complex research, life sciences, creativity, and anthropology began to be discussed, not to mention the practice of studying humans from these perspectives. In addition, some prejudices still exist against certain types of human

professions (such as the bias against businessmen and "merchants," or against the intellectual and their social status, against exploitation and employment, and so on).

3. Undeniably, the era of renovation, while breathing vitality into Vietnam's social life, has also brought a wind of change to the area of human study. At the end of the 1980s Soviet theorists honestly admitted their "negligence of humans," strongly criticized administrative mechanisms like subsidization, and paid special attention to studying the human factor, both theoretically and practically. In this way, they hoped to "return to humans" (but unfortunately history did not allow Soviet theorists to pursue their ideas to the end).²⁶ At the same time, in 1990, the UNDP published its first *Human Development Report*, which drew special attention from all nations in the UN. The UNDP recommended that governments should not put too much emphasis on economic growth or look for wealth by any means to the neglect of humans. The truth of good development was stated simply: "a nation's wealth is its people," "human development is the end of every development." (27).

Not long after that, Vietnam began accepting sound ideas from foreign sciences, especially the concept of the human factor and the role of humans in the development process. As a result, the statement "*humans are the goal and the impetus for development*" appeared in

important Party and State documents (28). Beginning in 1995, Vietnam appeared in the UNDP's Human Development Report. In 2001, Vietnam announced its *National Report on Human Development*. The quantitative approach to studying human development also gained attention at the provincial level. The idea of *humans at the centre* gradually gained popularity; according to this concept, humans play the decisive role in both the "input" and the "output" of the whole development process. Also with this new idea, the traditional concept of humans remained intact – that *humans are the deepest reason for all failures and the profoundest reason for all successes*.

4. Thus, that *humans are a situational product* turns out to be the final stage in the whole process of human development. In the case of the success of the four Asian dragons, culture and humans are not just situational products but forces working from deep within those societies. In order to activate these forces to develop the society, a methodology must be used that respects human and cultural factors. It is undeniable that "humans create situations to the same extent that situations do."²⁹ In reality, the idea of *humans at the center of the development process* has been theorised into several methodologies positively influencing Vietnam's period of renovation as well as its national development.

IV. Conclusion

1. Although there are many theories proposed by credited researchers used as

methodologies for human study and development, in Vietnam only two theories are used: 1/ One theory emphasizes humans' social nature, viewing humans first from the vantage point of their activities and considering humans to be situational products determined by society's material life. In this manner, all interpretations about humans are drawn from social reasoning. And all social relationships as well as global movements, such as the changes caused by the collapse of the socialist system and by globalization and the increasing participation in the global market economy, are considered as factors with either profound or limited influence on humans and human development. Those complicated social relationships along with traditional relationships have shaped the appearance, identity and personality of the Vietnamese. 2/ The second theory regards humans as the center of socio-economic growth, as well as the goal and the impetus for social development. In this manner, all socio-economic changes, including economic growth, must be considered in relation to human development. The value of all change and development must be measure in terms of the extent to which it serves human beings and brings them happiness.

2. With regard to cultural studies, in fact there are also two common theories acting as methodological guidelines for research and development. 1/ The first theory regards material production as the basis for social life, including culture.

Social existence determines social consciousness, and the whole of this produces culture. Therefore, culture will be determined by infrastructure to a considerable extent, and will change according to changes in social production. Personal and individual cultures as well as personality all depend on and are reflected in actions and behaviours. 2/ The second theory regards culture as an internal factor determining social development. It is the society's spiritual base, the goal and the impetus for social development. According to this, every development or change in social life has to take into account cultural roots, especially traditional cultural characteristics.

3. It must be said that the theoretical and methodological frames and guidelines have rarely been strictly followed in Vietnam's social studies. Few scholars faithfully adhere to a selected theoretical frame or methodology in their research or writings. Occasionally the section on methodology in a research report is just for decoration and the research is in fact carried out rather subjectively. Compromise, concession and half-agreement is frequently seen in scientific documents, and even those allergic to Marxism often accidentally or deliberately conduct their research based on Marx's ideology. There are also researchers who use both Marxist and anti-Marxist methodologies together in their research.

This is tolerable, but only to a certain extent. In other words, the use of

contradictory ideas and methodologies still allows a researcher to produce a valuable scientific product. However, this may not be reasonable in every research procedure. It is for another writer to address what the exact limits are for using these contradictory ideas and methodologies.

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