

Scientific conference: **METHODOLOGIES IN RESEARCH ON THE BASIC HUMAN AND CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF OVERSEAS VIETNAMESE COMMUNITIES TODAY**

Abstracted by
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Several different branches of social sciences and humanities are particularly concerned with studying human beings and their culture. Therefore, in order to study the basic traits of human beings and culture in general, or to do research on the people and culture characteristic of overseas Vietnamese communities in particular, it is necessary to take many of these branches into consideration. Thus, at the Conference on Methodologies in Research on the Basic Human and Cultural Characteristics of Overseas Vietnamese Communities, speakers presented on the various research methods that their specific scientific branches utilize, with the intent to study this subject from many angles. The conference was held in November 2008 in Hanoi within the framework of the same-name national-level research (Code no. KX.03.19/06-10) undertaken by Dr. Vũ Hào Quang, Associate Professor at the Institute for Public Opinion Studies, Central Committee for Education and Instruction.

I. Theoretical tools

According to Dr. Hồ Sĩ Quý (Associate Professor, Institute of Social Sciences Information, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences), before further study of the methodology used for research into the specific human traits and culture of the overseas Vietnamese community can be conducted, it is necessary to agree upon the meaning and connotation of some of the terms and content used in this research.

In the context of this research, Vietnamese living abroad are those who “used to or currently acknowledge Vietnamese nationality” and “still have Vietnamese blood in their veins.” In other words, as defined by Dr. Trần Ngọc Vương, (Associate Professor, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi), overseas Vietnamese are “people who originate from Vietnam, who maintain and display the basic characteristics and identity of the

Vietnamese in their spiritual life and cultural behaviors, and who are currently settled and working outside their motherland's boundaries".

As a research topic of social science in general, overseas Vietnamese need to be examined in terms of these following aspects: *first*, the condition of overseas Vietnamese (economic situation, language skill, academic achievements, understanding about and adaptation to local culture, social status, political and religious tendencies); *second*, their attitude towards their homeland (their views on political issues, on the country's development, towards national harmonization); *third*, their contributions to the development of their country (both their current contribution and potential for further contribution, including predictions about their capacity to contribute to the country in such fields as economics, politics, education, science, culture, the arts); *fourth*, present connections to mother country (such issues as remittance, mental attitude about or fixation on past events, Vietnamese language, generation gap, and future direction); *fifth*, potential for contribution (phenomena, communities and individuals who are likely to be role models and to contribute effectively to the development of Vietnam.

II. The sociological approach

1. Systematic approach:

Associate Professor Dr. Vũ Hào Quang considers the structure-function system to be the main sociological approach to doing research on this topic. This approach takes all components of a structure into account, acknowledging that each component contributes at least

one function to the system's activity. When the various components perform their functions well, they ensure the stability and sustainability of the system. Likewise, a component which, due to some disorder, fails to perform its function (also known as a disorder of function) inevitably leads to structural instability, or even damage.

In the context of overseas Vietnamese research, advocates of the systemic approach recognize that overseas Vietnamese play a vital role in the development of their homeland and the success of its revolutionary goals. According to this methodology, overseas Vietnamese communities need to be classified as essential parts of the Vietnamese nation if they display two out of the three following basic components of Vietnamese identity: territory, spirit, and bloodline (family clan). As such, if no appropriate mechanism is applied to employ the existing skills, aspirations, and patriotic spirit of overseas Vietnamese for the sake of their motherland, one must expect that, lacking connection to their structure, their natural behavior will be disrupted. Along with this behavior disruption come other unavoidable disorders of function, one of which is a loss of confidence in the success of the national revolution.

If we are aware of the natural bond between Vietnamese inside and outside the country's borders, we can take full advantage of Vietnamese mental and material assets to construct a single mutual Vietnamese home. In contrast, if we disregard the overseas Vietnamese's function as a contributor to the construction and protection of the

country, we oppose the revolution and destroy the country's unity.

2. Individual socializing approach:

The individual socializing approach focuses on the socialization and re-socialization process of overseas Vietnamese in their new cultures, taking into account factors such as family, school, friends, mass media, and society. Vietnamese who are born and grow up in a foreign country are affected by both the local socio-cultural environment, which they are immersed in, and by Vietnamese culture, which they are exposed to by their family upbringing. These two streams of influence are vastly different from one another; although the differences between them vary depending each individual's personal variables such as level of education, political viewpoint, and profession. In addition, each individual has his/ her own capacity for cultural absorption; therefore, the picture of the second generation of overseas Vietnamese is likely be a very nuanced image which varies greatly by individual, but that is clearly altered from that of the first generation (those who are born and grow up in Vietnam). Generational difference is one of the areas of study that most interests the individual socializing researcher.

3. Some other approaches:

There are three other sociological approaches that Associate Professor Dr. Vũ Hào Quang uses in his research on both the more general human traits (gender, age, ethnicity, education level, profession, lifestyle, value system) and also on the more specific cultural traits (reason for immigration, behavioral culture, cuisine, consumer culture, festivals, religion, family relationships and structure, relationship between

ethnic groups, political relations, art, national culture) of overseas Vietnamese communities.

The first approach is based on the theory of rational exchange and choice (also known as the Rational Choice Theory) and assumes the human tendency to make decisions based on how they can achieve maximum benefits with minimal cost. In this context, the theory is used to identify the basic characteristics of communication and relationship between individual overseas Vietnamese.

Based on the theory of social action, the second approach helps to analyze different kinds of action by individual overseas Vietnamese in family and social life, as well as the motivations behind such actions. The goal is to discover how both local social and cultural factors, as well as traditional culture, influence the individual and communal actions of overseas Vietnamese.

The third approach is based on the symbolic interaction and conflict theories, and helps to provide scientific basis for the policies of the Vietnamese government and its attempts to integrate the overseas Vietnamese community into the country's exploits and development. This research strategy aims to increase national solidarity, maintain and develop national identity, and exploit the strong points of the overseas Vietnamese community.

III. The cultural approach

In cultural study, the acculturation argument is one of the basic theories which points out the rule of cultural change and development of each human community in particular and of the whole human culture in general. Citing a great Indian cultural scholar's words,

“no culture is absolutely and purely loyal to its ancient time without being influenced by another culture,” Associate Professor Dr. Lê Quý Đức asserted that it is crucial to utilize the acculturation argument in research on the basic human and cultural characteristics of overseas Vietnamese communities. The connotation of the term “acculturation” can be understood as “a phenomenon occurring when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first hand contact, and in which the original cultural patterns of either or both groups may be altered”.

Overseas Vietnamese communities are living in environments where cultural interference, harmonization, and mixture take place every hour of every day. According to the acculturation rule, as their culture inevitably changes, they create their own unique characteristics which distinguish their communities from domestic Vietnamese communities. The culture of an overseas Vietnamese community is decided, at least in part, by the economic, political, social, and cultural conditions of the country within which it is located. According to the rule of acculturation, members of these communities have developed a “to be or not to be” mentality”; In order to survive, it is crucial that they absorb and adjust the culture of the neighboring communities. The geo-cultural and regional culture theory is also suggested to be applicable by Dr. Lê Quý Đức because, according to him, the “basic human and cultural traits of overseas Vietnamese communities” consist of only the most general characteristics. The specific, and therefore important, things are the basic human and cultural traits of each

specific group in the overseas Vietnamese community. They are diverse and various as a result of not only the complexity of their conditions, situation, and origin but also the distinct cultural characteristics of each region and country to which they re-locate, each of which is also diverse.

Cultural conflict is a common term used to denote the strain, clash, and disagreement that commonly occurs during the acculturation process. It includes everything from individual mentalities and prejudices to holy wars and ethnic clashes of a global scale. To Dr. Mai Văn Hai (Associate Professor, Sociology Institute, the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences), cultural conflict is an indispensable topic in research about communities settling abroad. The cultural conflict approach allows us to discover the values, standards, and cultural components that control the behaviors, lifestyle, and ideology of overseas Vietnamese communities living under the double-influence of both foreign and Vietnamese cultures.

Cultural disagreement, strain, and conflict are, and will always be present, especially among people who identify with different cultures. Every “culture shock” originates directly from the distinctiveness and difference in values, standards, symbols and language of each culture. However, each culture not only has its own distinct characteristics, but also shares some basic commonalities with other cultures.

A solution to help the overseas Vietnamese community deal with such double-influence is for them not only to accept the differences and the distinctiveness of other cultures, but at the same time, to try to find common

ground with them. To be more specific, the overseas Vietnamese community must learn to continuously explore and enlarge the set of common values (such as liberty, democracy, solidarity, cooperation, sympathy, equality, respect, environmental protection and mutual benefit) that it can share with other communities, countries, nations, cultures, and civilizations.

IV. The historical comparison method

According to Associate Professor Dr. Vũ Hào Quang, it is critical that the Vietnamese immigration to foreign countries be seen as an objective historical event. The history of Vietnam in the 20th century witnessed three large-scale migrations. The first migration was during period from 1945–1954 when the Vietnamese proletarian revolution occurred, and revolutionaries ousted the prior feudal-colonial rulers. The second migration took place after 1975 when the Vietnamese carried out a war of resistance against the United States. The third migration came after 1980 when communist soldiers and officials, along with their families, left Vietnam to study in foreign countries. Additionally, another form of Vietnamese immigration into other countries involved those who continued to live in a foreign country even after the set time for foreign work or study had expired.

With the historical comparison method, we may compare various reasons for Vietnamese migration which are directly connected to the historical and political conditions of Vietnam. We may also analyze the relationship that the overseas Vietnamese community has with both the local community and their homeland community in regards to time, space, socio-economics, and political and

cultural conditions. By making such comparisons and analyses, our researchers can draw conclusions that are crucial to solving problems in the relationship between overseas Vietnamese and domestic Vietnamese communities.

Also using the historical comparison method, Associate Professor Dr. Trần Ngọc Vương mentioned the diachronic axis approach and the approach based synchronization structure. According to the diachronic axis, each minor overseas Vietnamese community exists relatively independently as a result of its unique history, age, size, and specific characteristics. According to the synchronization structure, each overseas Vietnamese community has its own inner structure, from the simplest structure to the most complicated one. This structure can be observed and classified from many angles and using many different methods. Depending on the conditions of its specific location, each minor overseas Vietnamese community's interaction with its local community may create features and characteristics all its own.

V. The cultural anthropology approach

In addition to the sociological and historical comparison methods, Dr. Vũ Hào Quang also referenced the cultural anthropology method. He affirmed that overseas Vietnamese have strong connections with their homeland, of which they are an indispensable part. Their biological characteristics, including physical appearance (build, height, weight, complexion), spirit, and cultural characteristics are all similar to those of the Vietnamese in their homeland. The cultural anthropology method helps researchers study to what

level overseas Vietnamese are able to integrate into their new living environments. As we analyze the relationship between successive generations of overseas Vietnamese, this approach enables us to recognize the differences and similarities between different generations and between half-blood and pure-blood Vietnamese.

In addition to presentations on research methodology, the conference also included time to assess the role that the Vietnamese Fatherland Front is playing in the making and implementing the government's policies towards overseas Vietnamese and in the enhancement of overseas Vietnamese-related tasks during the international integration process (presentation by Dr. Hoàng Hải, Central Theoretical Work-Front Center). In the conference, Dr. Lê Văn Toan, a lecturer at the Hồ Chí Minh Institute, delivered a speech about China's experience in recognizing and solving ethnic and religious problems with a view to developing its culture and community. Furthermore, Vũ Thị Vân Anh, M.A., (East-Asia Research Institute, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences) provided information about Vietnamese immigration to Laos. Her research aimed to study emigration and its impacts.

Over four million Vietnamese are currently living abroad in approximately 70 countries all over the world. They are an essential component of their motherland, Vietnam. They, with their financial capacity and knowledge, have and will continue to play an important role in the development and international integration of Vietnam. Therefore, it is crucial that systematic research be done on the material and spiritual life of overseas Vietnamese. The results of such scientific research will provide the

Vietnamese Government with a profound basis for improving national solidarity, for achieving stable development, and for further international integration.

List of presentations at the conference:

1. Vũ Hào Quang. "Some distinctive approaches in research on basic human and cultural traits of overseas Vietnamese communities".
2. Mai Văn Hải. "Cultural conflict – an indispensable topic in the research on communities settling abroad".
3. Lê Quý Đức. "Acculturation theory in research on 'the basic human and cultural characteristics of overseas Vietnamese communities nowadays'".
4. Hồ Sĩ Quý. "Overseas Vietnamese: some theoretical issues, methodologies and methods".
5. Trần Ngọc Vương. "Starting from the actual formation process of overseas Vietnamese communities, let's try discussing the way to learn about and assess them".
6. Hoàng Hải. "The Fatherland Front and the task concerning overseas Vietnamese in international integration era".
7. Lê Văn Toan. "Being aware of and dealing with ethnic and cultural problems in developing the culture and the people – Chinese experiences".
8. Nguyễn Thị Vân Hạnh. "Acculturation – an approach used in research on overseas Vietnamese".
9. Phạm Ngọc Trung. "Some thoughts on the topic: 'Some basic cultural and human characteristics of overseas Vietnamese communities nowadays'".
10. Vũ Thị Vân Anh. "The method to approach and research into emigration and its impacts (case study: Vietnamese emigration to Laos)".