

CHARACTERISTICS AND MAJOR TENDENCIES IN THE LIFESTYLE OF VIETNAMESE YOUTH TODAY

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It is in the media spotlight now the discussion of issues related to the lifestyle of youth and adolescents. Regrettably, what have been reflected on the media with a high frequency were negative phenomena and trends. In the meantime, relatively a few articles carrying news about positive, modern and healthy aspects in the culture and lifestyle of the youth. As a result, it has substantively contributed to exerting in a young generation whose social image is hardly good and bright. The obsession of such a social image created by the mass media will then cause older generations, parents, grandparents and leaders to become anxious, put less confidence in youth, and get pessimistic about future of the nation.

Vietnamese society is transforming in a swift, profound and all-embracing manner along with the renewal and integration process. Hence, that vigorous transformation of culture and life-style of the nation, particularly among the youth, both in positive and negative terms, has become burning topics in public and on scientific fora is an unavoidable matter.

The fact is that in order to identify accurately and fully major trends in the youth's lifestyle, as well as to advance

appropriate solutions and policies towards the work on youth, it is critically important to conduct researches on youth and their lifestyle in our country at the time being.

Having learnt outcomes from a wide range of national and overseas researches on youth, we opine that it is necessary to understand correctly the nature of youth age and the youth as a social group - a peculiar population.

Whatever the approach might be taken, the researcher circle virtually agrees with a reflection that *the youth is a transition age, from a minor to an adult, in the life of individual persons*. This means that youth is a generation growing and improving physical, mental ability and personality. They are neither minors, nor completely adults. Hence, they should not be treated as children, but also not completely as adults. They must be given conditions to quickly become citizens and possess independent sovereigns, but on the other hand need to be instructed, subjected to impact, guided and educated to be "good adults" who have full capacity to play a role of grown citizens.

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This is the most moderate issue, but it seems to be the one that is easily forgotten and confused by researchers, policy-makers, generations of adults and even the youth themselves chiefly because of the two following extreme points: first, young people are still deemed as children, need to be controlled and instructed; second, youth are considered adults who can be granted with associated obligations and judged as adults. It is recommendable to bypass these two tendencies in assessing and studying the youth's lifestyle.

Recently, our research team has completed a study in an attempt to provide a clear evidence of major characteristics and tendencies in Vietnamese youth's lifestyle. The study, "Real situation and change tendencies in Vietnamese youth's lifestyle in the renewal and integration process", is a State-level vested scientific project (See: 1). Within the limited scope of this article, we will present a summary of certain major findings from our study.

1. Positive trends

Having analyzed the combined outcomes from the survey conducted by our research team in early 2010 as well as others, plus data collected from various sources, we opined that lifestyle of the youth in our country is currently bearing the following six major characteristics and positive trends: 1/ respect and bring fine cultural, moral values and traditions of the nation into play; 2/ be patriotic and attentive to the country's current affairs; 3/ be pragmatic and practical in thinking, action and daily behaviour; 4/ be dynamic, creative, eager to seek for new and distinctive

things; 5/ be proactive to take international integration, absorbing progress of external civilizations and cultural quintessences; 6/ be ambitious, optimistic, highly motivated with political -social affairs, and having a relatively staunch political steadfastness and determination(1).

With regard to the first characteristic and trend, *respect and bring fine cultural, moral values and traditions of the nation into play*, facing societal stereotype of being 'hybrid', 'pursuing alienism', and 'loosing the origin' attached to the young generation under the impact of modernization and globalization, we conducted a survey and re-assessed the attitude and behavior of young people towards some values and relationships representative for the nation's fine cultural, moral values and traditions. *One of the values and relationships is the family.*

According to outcomes of the survey we had conducted with more than two thousand young people representing for their counterparts in both rural and urban areas with regard to the values drawing attention from the youth and put in priority order, *the family was the most attended value*. 95% of the respondents said that they were basically or very much attentive to the family. The Survey Assessment of Vietnamese Youth (SAVY) 2003, which was jointly conducted by the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the General Statistics Office (GSO) on a broader scale (with more than 7,500 young people), also produced the same results: 95% of the youth kept close ties with the family and had a

sense of being valuable to the family (2).

The above-mentioned survey outcomes were further reinforced when 71.1% of the respondents said they were living with their parents; 21.9% living with parents and grandparents; only 3.9% living with either mother or father; and 3.1% living with others. As much as two third (82.5%) of young people in the survey highly appraised and opined that family education was significantly meant to them (1). A majority of young people also replied that their family members (father, mother, spouse, siblings) were *the first ones with whom they would consult* about a wide range of important issues in life (comparing with other such consultative targets as teachers, friends, doctors or medical staff and others).

That was not only the case. The attachment of young people nowadays to the family is also reflected through their attitude and *behaviour towards their relative clans*. In a survey conducted recently, when we raised an observation that young people now "*are rarely joining the clan's work*", then only 26% of the respondents agreed, whereas up to 43.3% disagreed and 26.8% said that the observation was half true and half false. 46.7% of young people interviewed said that they often contributed their opinions and advice to their family members. One half (50.2%) of the respondents said that they spent time talking with members of their families daily (1).

Attitude of young people towards religious belief of paying tribute to ancestors - one of the traditional characteristic of the nation - also drew our attention. Among more than 2,000

young interviewees, as much as 95.4% said that they joined the practice of paying tribute to ancestors at home; while it was a regular practice for 41.9%; and, a very regular practice for 26.0%. There were only 6.3% of the youth who occasionally participated in this activity (1).

It goes without saying that the attitude and behaviour of youth towards the family and family relationships, including the practice of paying tribute to ancestors, can not full reflect their attitude and behaviour to national cultural values and traditions. However, these reflections can be considered as good and most outstanding evidence because the family and family relationships at all times occupy the most central and vital point in all traditional relationships and values in Vietnam.

Regarding the attitude and behaviour of youth towards the country and nation, there are currently two flows of opinions and assessment in the public and the research community. The Resolution of the 7th plenary session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam (Tenure Xth) acknowledged that the young generation today is "*following the glorified tradition of the Party and nation, raising high the patriotism, consciousness of building and defending the Socialist Motherland*". This statement is also recognized in the works of some research teams (3). In the meantime, the second flow of opinions saw that the young generation is now more selfish, individualist and pragmatic, thus they are paying less attention to the country's situation, even become hopeless and

pesimistic about the country's situation.

In our survey, the value "*future and destiny of the country*" was on the moderate scale (8/15) in the youth value ranking table. Specifically, 73.9% of the respondents said they were attentive or very attentive to the country's affairs; whilst 6.4% were straightforward in saying no attention; 19% attentive but not with a high level. To certify the quality of youth's attention to the country's affairs, we asked them to evaluate some fundamental issues happening in the country. Their answers are reflected in table 1, in the next page (1).

The statistics show that youth's concern about the country's affairs is not high. Visibly, not quite a small portion of young population (from 28% to 52.8%) found it difficult and less confident to express their personal views on a series of critical issues facing the country. The rest of them, accounting for a larger part, demonstrated their attention to the country's affairs by making their relatively appropriate evaluation of the some key issues.

Bearing on the survey outcomes, it can come to a conclusion that the majority of Vietnamese youth now are highly attentive to the country's situation. Nevertheless, they want to present their love to the country in a more rational manner. It is not merely a sense of patriotism, but rather patriotism of the country's masters who are modern citizens being well informed and capable to assess the country's situation, fulfilling the role of masters of the country bound with full responsibility. This is a new issue that requires serious

education of the young generation today.

One important characteristic and tendency in Vietnamese youth's lifestyle is *high practicalness*. This has been recognized in some other studies, which contain different observations and appraisals because "practicability, practicalness, rationality" are accompanied in parallel by "selfishness, pragmatism". Though these two aspects differ in nature, it is hard to differentiate them when it comes to the lifestyle, life choice of humans in the context of market economy. Outcomes from our survey show that six respective issues drawing most attention from the youth include: 1/ the family; 2/ career (which is interpreted to be a job and successful profession); 3/ health; 4/ educational level; 5/ friendship; and, 6/ money. These are virtually the hottest and most practical issues for Vietnamese youth at the time being. On the other side of the front, the following topics are the least attentive among young people: 1/ power; 2/ world security; and, 3/ belief and religion. These three topics visibly are least related to them, thus even if being interested in the topics they hardly have conditions and means to express their interest as well as to actively participate in tackling those issues.

In the SAVY conducted before, when being asked about their expectations of future and to *select two priorities if permitted*, nearly half (49.5%) of the respondents said that it was *a job*. This expectation was followed by 23.3% of respondents who wanted to enjoy a stable economic condition/income source; 9.7% considered happiness in general meaning was their first

aspiration; and 8.8% thought that the family with an aspiration of being

Though having a more practical mind and life choice, *a majority of young people in our country condemned choices of having a selfish and unhealthy life.* When being asked to opine on the lifestyle position of *"heightening individualism"*, as much as 56.1% of the respondents expressed basically or completely disagreement. The ratio of young people agreed with that idea was

Table 1: Observations of youth on some current affairs of the country				
	Rate (%)			Total
	<i>Bad</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>Not specific</i>	
Economic situation	14.2	33.1	52.8	100
Education situation	26.0	33.0	41.0	100
Law enforcement	29.0	30.2	40.8	100
Social ethics	24.9	23.0	46.1	100
Health care	30.2	36.0	33.8	100
Transport culture	55.8	16.2	28.0	100

fathers and mothers was their first choice. Only 7.4% of young people identified contribution to the country to be their first aspiration, of which people in the 14-17 year-old cohort took the main part (11.6%), decreasing down to 5.1%, and 2.4% stood for the 18-21 year-old and 22-25 year-old cohorts (2).

With regard to the second priority on expectations of future, the outcomes were as follows: having a stable economic condition/income source took the first rank (25%). The second position was taken by the aspiration of being able to make contribution to the country and society (22%), of which the 14-17 year-old cohort accounted 28% against 18.5% and 15.2% of the 18-21 year-old and 22-25 year-old cohorts respectively. Other next aspirations included happiness in general meaning (21%), having a family and being fathers and mothers (20%), and finally having a job (11%)(2). As such, the second priority choice saw a more complicated division and a considerable change on the scale of choices made by young people.

21.8%, and those who could not decide yet made up 22%.

It is our opinion that a practical and useful lifestyle in the thinking and pursued by the current young generation is a good characteristic, a strength and compatible with the demands popped up in a market economy global integration and competition. This should be considered a prescription, a "panacea" to overcome gradually non-rational way of thinking and living, which has been a chronic ailment of agricultural resident communities, including Vietnam.

Notwithstanding to the above-mentioned positive major characteristics and tendencies, *dynamism, creativeness, sensitiveness with emerging issues, openness, readiness and proactiveness to integrate (to the modern life and the world), optimism and highly social motivation* are essential and important characteristics and tendencies, influencing the majority of youth in our country. These appraisals have been

certified through the outcomes of ours and other surveys. We will have a more detailed presentation and analysis of this matter in another article.

2. Negative trends

Coming along with characteristics and tendencies in the positive and healthy lifestyle as discussed above, our research could also pointed-out four negative characteristics and trends taking place in Vietnamese youth's lifestyle. They include: 1/ self-indulgence; 2/ violence without care of law; 3/ selfishness, ignorance, carelessness, lack of responsibility and enthusiasm vested in youth; 4/ living with superficial mind, in pursuit of 'fashion', absorbing and easily subject to influence of external civilization and culture.

The above-indicated negative trends under various manifestations have burned up the public opinion by daily media reports. It is therefore impertative for researchers to explore the extent and scope of their impacts on youth in our country.

Self-indulgence in youth can be seen from different dimensions: first, young people drop into the state of *depression, having no taste or being unable to work, study and live a normal life*. At the second dimension, youngsters are drawn into a lifestyle characterized by deviate activities, potentially vulnerable to become victimized by one or many social evils such as internet, drug addiction, violence, uncontrolled sex intercourse, prostitution, etc. The third dimension, the highest one, sees youth being in deadlock, hopelessness that may cause them to commit suicide, individually and/or collectively, or to

slaught, to commit mass killing, etc.'

Assessing from the psychological perspective, this lifestyle tends to commence from a state of mental crisis at different levels. Due to unique psychological-biological characteristics of the youth age, it seems that every youngster experiences one of the following states: exam failure, love depression, assertiveness to friends, being criticized by parents or teachers, or simply overwork, over-study, or knowing nothing to do in free time, etc.

According to a report of preliminary outcomes from the second SAVY, which was published in June 2010, after 5 years (after the first SAVY), the above-mentioned states have been on increase at an alarming level. For instance, 73.1% experienced depression; 27.6% once felt "very depressed", having a sense of uselessness oneself to a so high level that he/she could not act as normal; as much as 21.3% were hopeless of the future; 4.1% even once thought to commit suicide. Particularly, a common trend was that the younger age of the group was, the more depressed the youngsters felt. Up to 75% of respondents within the age range of 14-17 and 18-21 had undergone through such state, while it was more than 65% in the age group of 22-25 (4).

In our survey, among 2021 youngsters interviewed, as much as 84.5% said that they "never" had thought of suicide, but 10.6% responded that they "rarely", 3.5% "occasionally", and 1.4% "often" or "very often" thought of committing suicide.

Normally, overwhelming majority of youngsters on their own or with assistance from the family, school and friend could overcome such mental

crisis as "depression", "hopelessness". Nevertheless, in a certain condition, if this crisis becomes more serious owing to some impacts, then it will cause youngsters to drop in an indulgent life under one of the three above-described dimensions.

Visible impacts of the self-indulgence on schooling youngsters were study laziness, non-active in knowledge exploration, accepting "moderationism"^(*) (5). Among young workers, it was work laziness and ignorance in capacity-building training.

At the second dimension, self-indulgent life of youth is characterized by social evils, the way of living similar to that of "clan or flock", pursuing contemporary trends like *hippies* and *punk* or leaving the family to "live on street", etc. Though only a small portion of the young population is subject to this lifestyle, it is of particular concern in two aspects: First, this is an extremely dangerous signal of negative and unhealthy lifestyle, posing a danger to cause social instability, social ethical corruption, destroying the future of a segment of youth, as well as to create aches in society. Second, this lifestyle is spreading and seems to be on the rise. Thus, it is imperative to have practicable solutions to prevent its impacts on youth, helping youngsters to stay away or have appropriate "antibody" medicine to cope with these impacts.

The third dimension of the self-indulgent lifestyle is deadlock,

hopelessness and suicide among youngsters. Results from surveys show that only a small portion of young people (less than 7%) said that they once had faced deadlock, hopelessness and even thought of suicide. However, the fact in recent years has shown that there appear suicides committed by some youngsters, even collective killings because of extremely simple reasons (cursed by parents, criticized by teachers or betrayed by girlfriend/boyfriend, etc.). Hence, this is also a problem that needs to draw serious attention to and execute practical actions to prevent it from happening.

With regard to the trend of *violence without care of law*, our survey outcomes show that there are a few youngsters affected by this trend. The survey conducted in early 2010 found that; 75.1% of respondents said that they "had never had a fighting with other people". However, 18.8% answered that they "rarely fight with others"; 4.0% involved in fighting "sometimes"; and 2.2% were "very often and frequently fighting with others". The SAVY conducted in 2003 reported that only 2.5% of respondents said that they had assembled together to cause disorder, in which the youth in urban area took a larger account (4.7%). Particularly, this figure increased by 8% among urban youngsters in the age range of 18-21. Also in this survey, 2.3% of respondents said they had carried with them once fighting tools. Of this proportion, male youngsters made up 4%, while 0.5% went to females. Responding to the question: "Have you ever had violent acts that caused injuries to others?", nearly 3% of the interviewees said "Yes" (2).

(*) According to reports of the Vietnam Students's Association in recent years, the ratio of students having moderate and poor learning outcomes remains high (66.15% for moderate, 10.85% for poor), while the rate of good and excellent students accounts for only 4.69%.

Though only a relatively meagre portion of youth acknowledged engagement in fights, we have witnessed in recent years dozens of school female students fought against each other. The fights were recorded and uploaded on internet. Hundreds of serious cases were committed by youngsters due to small disputes or simply "an unfriendly glimpse". Even so this was enough to prove the danger and tremendous effects of this lifestyle.

In the trend of violence committed by a portion of youth, it was especially serious with the phenomenon that youngsters *established gangs, "aggressive", ruffian and black-society groups*. According to our study, there were at least two types of criminal gangs and groups established by the youngsters who had a violent lifestyle. *The first of these types* were gangs or groups formed by "minor" ruffians who were naughty pupils and gathered together to bully, play, rob and fight with others. *The second type* was "real" gangster groups formed by a portion of non-school youngsters. In recent years, this type of gangster group has increased rapidly and expanded to many localities, especially in mega cities like Hanoi, Hochiminh city and particularly Hai Phong, which became the hottest and toughest pots.

With regard to the trend of *selfishness, ignorance, carelessness, lack of responsibility and enthusiasm of youth*, we found that it was the choice of a minority of Vietnamese youth. Qualitative observations reveal that it is currently hard to launch youth campaigns that can attract youngsters' active participation as compared with those in the past. Even the Young

Volunteers Campaign - one of the most outstanding movements of our country in the Doi Moi (renewal) period - could only draw attention and participation of a proportion of exemplary youth. In our survey, as much as 47.9% of respondents said they had never joined this campaign.

Our survey outcomes also show that the following matters attracted little attention from youth: religion, belief (9.9% completely did not care, 17.9% essentially did not care, and 32.3% half cared and half not; a combined ratio of these three groups was 60.1%). Other issues behind religion and belief included: world security (48.7%), political power (46.6%), democracy (28.7%), law (25.2%) and eco-environment (23.6%). Notably, up to 6.4% of respondents said they entirely or basically were not concerned with the future and destiny of the country (1). In reality, the percentage of youngsters who were less or not attentive to these issues may be even higher.

Concerning the trend of *living with superficial mind, in pursuit of 'fashion'*, our survey outcomes show that though a small proportion of youth are affected, it is on the rise track in the country's international integration. The most visible sight of this lifestyle is the way of dressing up, which is ridiculous, indecent and unappealing; in the field of music, it is the adoration of "commercial music" with meaningless, alien and even profane songs; the spoken-language is compressed in dense of slangs, profanities or special 'generational' signs of a group of youngsters; the abuse of of internet and other high-tech communicative means like, for instance,

talking on mobile phone while driving a motorbike, online game addiction, losing oneself in the "cyber world", "showing goods (nude body)" to sell their body on internet; and, especially, the perceptions of love and sex intercourse, for instance living like a real couple, collective sex intercourse, exchange of lover, etc.

The shaping, direction and development of trends in the lifestyle of youth in our country at present certainly result from combined impacts of both inner and outer factors. From our studies, we have found that apart from some dominant factors such as the renewal process of the country, globalization, there emerges the crucial role of the following seven factors; family and family education; school and school education; friend and friendships; modern media and internet; youth work of the Party, State, Youth Union, Students' Association and social environment, particularly adult generations; and, impact of cultural globalization.

Bearing on that ground, we opine that it is critically necessary to implement solutions that can exert about positive impacts on the socialization of personality of country's youth. Towards that objective, continued improvement of youth policies and laws of the Party and State; modernizing the way to mobilize, organize and educate youth by the Youth Union, Students' Association as well as assistance from the family and school in ethics, culture and lifestyle education and training for youngsters

have the most important role to play. It goes without saying that the media, especially modern media means, also keep a very critical role in this field. Finally, the youth themselves are the most important factor in building their capacity, perfectionating personality, choosing a proper lifestyle, setting out the direction and realizing their own future.

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