

## THE RED RIVER DELTA REGION IN REGIONAL CULTURE STUDIES

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### I. Regional culture studies

1. A region with societal-cultural characteristics is a particularly interesting study subject. In Vietnam, unique features of the nature in association with the good and bad aspects of life and people inhabiting in individual regions have been themes of discussion since the early time of the country's history. Today, quite a few people are still enthusiastically arguing for such nick-names as "Northern intellectuals" (*Kẻ sĩ Bắc kỳ*), "Southern Second brother" (*Anh Hai Nam bộ*), "Man from the Northern Capital City" (*Người Kinh Bắc*), or "Mr. Scholar of Nghe region" (*Ông đồ xứ Nghệ*), etc. In essence, this is the most central topic in the study of regional culture - a science developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Regional Culture studies) (see: 13, pp. 28-44).

Nevertheless, early understanding of regional culture has been acknowledged. Territorial characteristics, history, customs, personality of local communities, regional categorization, for example, had come into human knowledge in the Ancient times. In the West, the man who has been called the father of regional culture discoveries is Herodotos (was born in Halikarnasseus,

and lived in the 484 – 425 BC). He is famous for his life-long nine-volume masterpiece, "Historian", recording the Greco-Persian Wars, ethnographic history, history and culture of the peoples living in regions where he had been. Surprisingly, these are spacious regions in three continents - Asia, Europe and Africa. In the East, regional culture studies prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are not yet mentioned, though similar discoveries if being put in statistics are not a few.

2. In Vietnam, science came in recently, thus knowledge of regional culture is composed of assemblages in the mixture of the pre-science and science stage. The most accountable researches on regional culture in Vietnam are discoveries of French ethnologists in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. During that time, the ethnologists in the name of missionaries or officials of the colonial regime with their own enthusiasm carried out highly advanced researches on characteristics of society, race and culture of Montagnards (highland mountainous people), Kinh people, etc. Their researches also focused on some such

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regions as Hồng (or Red river) delta, Indochina (or Centre), Central Highlands, etc. Vietnamese social science, nowadays, enjoys myriad benefits from researches left by such scholars as Pierre Gourou, Jacques Dournes, Goerges Condominas, Henri Matire, etc. Regrettably, only few people in our country can read original texts of these scholars' works; it took a bulk of time that until recently some of these works could have been translated into Vietnamese (see more: 6,7,8,9).

**3.** Why region characteristics is a particularly interesting subject matter, whereas region (territory) is only a survival space, which is far distant with the social nature of human beings. In "Lectures of historical philosophy", when narrating the geographical base of the world history, Hegel said that "the connection between nature and national spirit is something on the surface, but when we see it as a land where the spirit moves towards a perfect, it is then in essence the foundation of nature". According to Hegel, the "geographical base", "natural existence" plays the role of "friend and enemy canon" for each nation. It reflects characteristics of every nation as "*the rule of nature*" (Природная определенность) (4, p.76). It turns out arguably that individuals, groups, ethnic groups, nations, states and communities in broader territories in shaping the nature of their own society, first and foremost are subjected to the regulation of *the rule of nature*. History of nations, regions is rich, multi-faceted and is seemingly not influenced by natural geographical conditions, but

deep in its root the rule of nature closely follows every person and people, leaving behind its footprint on each person during his life or on a nation through its racial, linguistic, cultural, lifestyle characteristics, etc.

**4.** Vietnam has a culture united in diversity. Unlike the Korean peninsular, Cambodia or Thailand, regional culture characteristics in Vietnam are limpid. Having travelled through several hundred kilometers along the country, one can recognize one distinct to another region. This distinction is associated with the landscape, which is not only preserved for sightseeing, but also regulates the local lifestyle. More noteworthy are distinctive aspects of the lifestyle, language (accent, intonation), ritual, customs, cuisine, etc. In our opinions, if Hegel's theory of the rule of nature is seriously taken, we can explain this distinction by geographical reasoning or at least partly because of geographical factors. Vietnam is a country with "the most fragmented geographic topology in the world", which was discovered by Pierre Gourou in 1936. He wrote: "Departing from the Northern/Tonkin, conquerors and migrants arrived and occupied the Centre/Indochina and the South, creating a state with a synchronized language and characteristics of a civilization. That state, however, has the most fragmented geographic topology in the world" (6, p.8). This is a noteworthy character in terms of geography and humanity of Vietnamese society. Hence, it is necessary to conduct more in-depth researches on the influence of this character.

As far as regional culture in Vietnam

goes, having studied distinctive aspects in Vietnamese culture, some scientists divide Vietnamese culture into seven or eight substantial regional cultures, whereas some others consider Vietnam having sub-regional cultures. In one of the research works that in our opinions is the most fundamentally presented on regional culture in Vietnam, Prof. Ngô Đức Thịnh split Vietnamese culture into seven sub-regional representatives, namely: 1/ Northern delta; 2/ North-East; 3/ North-West and Central North Highlands; 4/ Central North coastal region; 5/ Centre and Central South coastal region; 6/ Long mountain range (Trường Sơn) – Central Highlands; and 7/ Southern region. There might be disagreement with this regional separation, which however exposes various outstanding social-cultural characteristics of each region (see more: 16, 11).

In 1992, in my doctoral thesis, defended in Rostop-na-Donu (Russia), on regional culture, I recommended that Vietnamese culture should be recognized as a region of culture – *Vietnamese regional culture*, in its relevance with East and Southeast Asian culture. As a type of regional culture, Vietnamese culture emerges with more distinctive characteristics, differing itself from what are considered the key and generalized aspects of East and Southeast Asian culture. That not being dissolved or disappeared after one thousand years under the domination of Northern (Chinese) dynasties, while absorbing other cultural factors like Mon-Khmer into Vietnamese united culture, makes it easier to explain for the

reason why Vietnam should be considered a relatively independent region of culture. Many Russian scientists supported this idea. Nevertheless, the idea has not yet been translated into more concrete action (12).

**5.** One of the particular aspects of regional culture studies, which is also recognized through our researches in reality, is that it is sometime due to being lured into seeking common rules or excessively enthusiastic in identifying general trends that quite a few researches tend to ignore a particular aim of regional culture studies, which is to define and indicate unique features creating the identities of the subject. This is a major difference that can only be found in some sciences, such as ethnology, anthropology, human studies (humanology), and regional culture studies. It is more often than not that most sciences function to explore general rules. However, for these sciences to define and indicate unique features to some extent is more even crucial than the exploration of general rules. This function should perhaps be deemed as a methodological guide for the study of subjects, such as the Red river delta culture, whose unique features need to be explored.

**6.** The study of regional characteristics as a science has been academically developed in major science centers in the world, though it is now on the initial steps. The majority of researches in the past were conducted as a result of private interest and enthusiasm of researchers who concentrated mainly on traditional and folk culture. Until

recently, some institutions specializing on regional studies have been established. These institutions undertake a holistic and multi-disciplinary approach on regional studies.

## II. The Red river delta region

1. The Red river delta region is one of the names called for the combined basis of Red river and Thai Binh river, spanning over 1.4 million hectares, accounting for 3.8% of the total area of the country. The region also abounds with the Tonkin gulf in the East, accommodating a population of more than 18 million people as of 2007, making up 21.6% of the country's total population (see more: 1, 2). The region's cultural-historical background made it the *Red river civilization*, which reached its splendid level with bronze drums, bronze jars, bronze arrows, farming with wet rice, and other remarkable political, law-governing, cultural and social achievements. The most essential cultural-societal unit in regional culture is *village*, which has its own customs, practices, festivals and governing institutions. The system of dykes is a unique feature of life conditions of inhabitants in the region. Historically, some urban areas in the Red river delta region were created in a quite early manner (in comparison with many counterparts in the world). Thăng Long citadel, for example, was established in 1010. Hiến ward (Phố Hiến) was an international trading hub in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Hải Phòng was also a crucial sea-port of the country during this period. Currently, the Red river delta region has more than one million

hectares for rice cultivation, accounting for 88% of land for crops of the region and 14% of rice-growing area of the country. Paddy productivity of the region is high, approximately 8-10 tons on one hectare per year. In recent years, the economic growth rate of the region has been consecutively more than 10%, contributing to nearly one fourth of the country's GDP. The figure set for 2020 is 26-27% (14). Economic structure of the region is moving towards the point where the percentage of agricultural production in the economy is reduced. Since the start of *doi moi*, the living conditions of the region's residents have been substantially improved.

However, the Red river delta region has an average population density of over 1,200 people per square kilometer, five times higher than that of the country; the economic, cultural, social life of residents in various places in the region remains low and poor. In the mainstream of the country that has surmounted out of poverty, many challenges are facing the region for its development under the pressure of on the one hand rapid economic growth needs, but on the other the demand for sustainable development with attention given to handling societal issues.

2. Entering into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the most eminent challenge for the Red river delta region is a development model to be selected and implemented. To respond to this challenge, the Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam on 14/9/2005 adopted the Resolution No.54-NQ/TW on the Red river delta region. One year later, the Prime

Minister issued the Decision No.191/2006/QĐ-TTg of 17/8/2006 approving the Action Programme for “socio-economic development and ensuring national defense, security of the Red river delta region by 2010 with an orientation to 2020.” The landmark documents affirm and lays the ground for planning to realize the role of being a “force-driving economic zone” of the Red river delta region.

Nevertheless, in implementing the macro-level strategic thinking as stated in the two above-mentioned documents in the whole region, there have been discrepancies. A development strategy and a master plan worked out for the entire region and of every single sector, locality are still lacking or of low quality. The coordination mechanism put in place to connect the whole region, bringing into play potentials and strengths of individual localities is weak. Policies to mobilize different resources for development are insufficiently effective and efficient. The development of urban areas and industrial zones is inappropriate in the midst of inadequate and poor socio-economic infrastructure. Land management is inefficient, declining cultivation land and erupting social issues<sup>(\*)</sup>. Environment is increasingly and seriously polluted. There is no proper plan to bringing to full play traditional strengths. There are concerns in the cultural, educational and social fields. The poverty rate is

declining swiftly, but the rich and poor gap is widening. People's life is spotted with dark corners and not really healthy. Human development is not as good as being desired. Overall, the current development status of the Red river delta region does not keep up with its potentials and advantages. More critically, there is no efficient solution yet to deal with this problem (15).

**3.** In relation to the development of the Red river delta region today, we think that it is necessary to discuss more in-depth Pierre Gourou's views given 80 years ago. What should be noted is that for this delta region, which drew Pierre Gourou's most attention, it is both rice and agricultural production nor pit coal, minerals, sea and islands, but it is human beings. He wrote: “Human beings are the most geographical element of this region...It can hardly find a landscape imbued with more humanity”. “Peasants in the Northern delta region, though, lived in inadequacy, but not in hopelessness. In practice, these poor peasants had generated a complex civilization with individual humans at the center bound by a network of family and neighborhood relationships. As village and community studies showed, peasants lived in a spiritual world and a society which brought about countless things to them with excitement and satisfaction. Moreover, this civilization has integrated into an environment where it develops”. “In a country where human beings are uplifted on top of everything”, it is necessary for researchers “to do their job in the most diligent manner” on human beings if

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<sup>(\*)</sup> Within 7 years, (from 2001-2007), the total arable land area converted to non-arable land in Vietnam was up to 513.000 hectares. Available at: <http://www.toquoc.gov.vn/Print/Article/Nong-Dan-Mat-Dat-Du-An-Lai-Bo-Hoang.html>.

they ache for understanding the Red river delta region (6, p.100-101, 522).

At the time when Pierre Gourou wrote the above lines, the population density in the region was 430 people per square kilometer, which would increase, according to his projection, to 860 people by mid-1994 and 2001. If that happened, he continued, labor power would be superfluous and the delta would not be able to provide adequate foodstuff to feed itself. Consequently, according to Pierre Gourou, "the most significant thing for the peasants is to hang on the expansion of large ownership, which should be even where necessary eliminated by the land law" (6, p.524).

Being a colonialist scholar, but Pierre Gourou through his above descriptive paragraphs and a 600-page book, demonstrated a scientific perspective imbued with full humanity. His projection of inadequate foodstuff produced by the Red river region to feed itself is incorrect, though it is true when he forecasted a two fold increase of the population and abundant labor power with associated effects. Furthermore, it is important in our opinions that 80 years ago Pierre Gourou suggested *the hang on and elimination of large ownership*. This is because he intelligently foresaw the appropriate rationale for *household production* and *household ownership model* in relation to further development of the Red river delta region.

4. Today, looking back to Pierre Gourou's views, we understand more deeply the failure of production scope

imposed in the Red river delta region in the 60s and 80s of the last century. In a broader context, agriculture in many parts of the world today is still based upon household production model. Thus, we can not judge Pierre Gourou's perspectives on peasantry, agriculture and countryside as deriving from an individual on a specific case or just a look based on subjective and arbitrary sense.

Pierre Gourou saw the poverty of the Red river delta region, but also realized that "peasants in the region generated a complex civilization with individual humans at the center" bound by "a network of family and neighborhood relationships", "closely linked with the nature". The spiritual world of the residents "always brings about countless things to them with excitement and satisfaction". In our opinions, it is important to take these Pierre Gourou's observations as an excellent recommendation for the development of the Red river delta region in particular and the entire rural area in Vietnam in general. Maintaining this advantageous feature in the development process is evidently an ideal for the Red river delta region.

5. To say equally that the development of the Red river delta region in the last twenty years has made those who are enthusiastically attentive to it less pessimistic. Undergoing thousands of years of poverty, hunger, backwardness, fragmentation and underdevelopment, the growth of the whole delta region in the past period is a fabulous breakthrough. For the first time in

history, the peasants could surmount out of the poverty line (exceeding the baseline for a poor country with average GDP per capital of 1,000 USD/per year or 875 USD/per year of the World Bank standards). Food production is not only sufficient to feed the region, but also becomes surplus for export. Entrepreneurialism is taking root and stimulates all agriculture-related production aspects. Industry and services are rapidly developing. Poverty has been substantially reduced. Education, science and educational level of the people are overall on the rise. Knowledge-based economy is penetrating into various aspects of life. The cultural-social life of the majority of the population is progressively changing.

Nevertheless, a sense of pessimism remains and has been somehow ascending since 2008 due to the impacts of the global financial crisis, increased inflation, devaluated currency, hardly curbed corruption, macro-policy influenced by interest groups, uncontrolled property market, educational, cultural and social issues getting more serious, reoccurrence of poverty, poor macro-regulation, bottlenecks of the national economy getting out of the surface, etc. These problems were recognized and warnings have been given. However, as a human body is growing up, it appears that if there are too many diseases then none of them is the most critical. Therefore, the pessimistic psychology is not yet properly treated.

With the current poor development

planning, the worst scenario for the Red river delta region in future may be a super urban area, stretching from Việt Trì to Hà Nam or Ninh Bình, from Hoà Bình to Hải Phòng and Quảng Ninh, regardless of the decentralization policy. Mega cities, advanced urban areas would be submerged in a sea of fragmented urban areas, which are surrounded by ranges of poor and slum streets with underemployment and societal evils. There will be modern and luxury streets, which may not be of high culture. Urban areas have nice houses, but few streets are gorgeous. Agriculture is maintained with farming and husbandry enclaves lying in consecutive chains of urban areas and industrial zones, etc. The national economy continues to grow. The rich get richer, while the middle class and especially the poor can hardly enjoy the results of development. GDP per capital would not exceed 5,000 USD per capital annually.

The picture we have depicted above is based on warnings given by theorists of the trap of middle income and the development model of Southeast Asia in relevance to the East Asia model (10). It can be said immediately that these theories may not be completely correct. Hence, the above imaginative picture even if there is any justifiable point in it is still an imaginative picture. Hopefully, there is nothing becoming true from this picture.

### **III. Concluding remarks**

From the regional culture perspective, the Red river delta region encompasses potentials and more comparative advantages than other regions of the

country, even in comparison with Hochiminh city. The region's natural resources, human and social capital, among others, are abundant and not yet fully tapped. Historical, political, cultural resources are also ample and in full potential. Attraction of external resources is facilitated by current favorable international situation. Achievements in development in the past years have provided with valuable lessons and created good momentum for further development. What remains is the development will of human beings – leaders, managers, intellectuals, entrepreneurs, and all working people. This is one of the challenges facing us every day.

Naturally, on this aspect (the development will of human beings), if compared with the development needs, the human status – human resources, the contingent of intellectuals, entrepreneurs, managers, etc. – of the region is still far behind meeting the demand. However, these problems though whatever serious they may be are not diseases that can act the patients up. These gaps must and can be filled up in a short period, if the Red river delta region can materialize the prescriptions as stated in the Programme of Action approved by the Prime Minister on 17 August 2006.

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