

The concepts of filial piety and factors affecting filial piety of Vietnamese people

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Abstract:

“Filial piety” is a fundamental moral value of the Vietnamese people, expressing the respect and gratitude of children towards their parents. It also embodies gratitude towards one’s roots, preserving the esteemed values of ancestors. Filial piety is a personal value that governs behaviour within the family and community. It has been revered in various beliefs and religions, particularly in ancestor worship. Originating from a culture that values emotions and gratitude, Vietnamese filial piety towards parents, ancestors, and loyalty to the country has been transmitted through generations since ancient times. The Vietnamese have integrated patriarchal norms, family values, and religious rituals of filial piety from Buddhism, Taoism, and especially Confucianism, further enriching and expanding the meaning of Vietnamese filial piety. This study aims to address questions regarding the viewpoints and practices of filial piety in traditional society; identify the factors shaping filial piety; and examine contemporary elements influencing Vietnamese filial culture. The study reveals that, in addition to moral values within the family, Vietnamese filial piety embodies community values and notably fosters patriotism rooted in village culture and national history. The approaches of Vietnamese and area studies are employed to comparatively analyse and synthesise the concepts and practices of filial piety in folklore, beliefs, and religions; and to discern differences in Vietnamese filial piety compared to the core values of filial culture influenced by Confucianism.

Keywords: ancestor worship, filial piety, grandparents - parents, gratitude.

Classification numbers: 10, 11

1. Introduction

“Filial piety” is a fundamental moral principle within the family, expressing the respect and gratitude of children towards their parents and ancestors [1]. Furthermore, filial piety is an ethical tradition and a community culture, reflecting gratitude to one’s roots and preserving and developing the esteemed values of ancestral generations.

Filial piety is considered one of the moral standards of societies, pervasive in cultures, beliefs, and religions, and even in architecture, paintings, music, and literature. The tradition of filial piety towards parents and ancestors, along with loyalty to the homeland, has long been established in Vietnam. Originating from a culture of respect, gratitude, and honour, filial piety contributes to forming the moral foundation of the Vietnamese people [1-3]. Although influenced by Eastern filial piety, particularly Confucianism¹,

with its patriarchal ideology and family rites, the filial piety of the Vietnamese people retains a distinct Vietnamese identity, echoing native Southeast Asian elements such as an agriculture-oriented lifestyle, motherhood, and the collective spirit of villages.

The foundational values of filial piety are often expressed in family relationships and customs, such as family norms, gratitude, tolerance, and responsibility towards parents, grandparents, and ancestors. In Vietnam, filial piety is also a community culture, reflected in belief values through scriptures, commandments, and rituals, as seen in religions and beliefs such as the worship of ancestors, heaven and earth, national forefathers, heroes, and founders of careers. Although the meaning and practice of filial piety have evolved through various historical and cultural periods and socio-economic contexts, it remains a fundamental component of the cultural value system of the Vietnamese people. Filial piety is not only a personal and familial value, contributing to social security, but also a community ethic, rich in humanities and spiritual culture, linking present generations with both the past and the future.

¹Confucianism is often described as a system of social and ethical philosophy, formed in the 6th century BC. In fact, Confucianism is an ancient religion that established the social values, institutions, and transcendent ideals of traditional Chinese society.

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In the contemporary context of globalisation, digital technology, and economic integration, domestic and transnational migration is altering the structure of the population, family, and community. Additionally, increased life expectancy, decreased birth rates, a fast-paced lifestyle, multi-dimensional interactions, personal freedom, and self-determination have significantly impacted individual consciousness and lifestyle, as well as family and traditional filial culture. This study aims to explore the viewpoints and practices of filial piety in the traditional society of Vietnamese people, as well as to identify the factors and contemporary influences shaping the culture of filial piety in modern Vietnamese society.

2. Research overview

2.1. Literature review

The literature review can be categorised into three main groups: studies related to traditional filial piety and filial piety in Vietnamese religious and folk beliefs; studies on the changes in filial piety in contemporary Vietnam; and studies on filial piety in some East Asian countries influenced by Confucianism.

Research related to filial piety and traditional family ethics, such as “From traditional filial piety, think about filial piety today” and “Filial piety in Vietnamese families today” [1, 2], affirms that filial piety embodies respect and gratitude for parents and grandparents, serving as a moral standard and behavioural culture within the family, and as the root of human morality. P.C. Son, in “Family Customs” [3] and “Family rituals in past and present”, also asserted that family customs and rituals in Vietnamese families play a crucial role in individual growth and the sustainable development of the nation. These studies confirm that Confucianism has a significant impact on filial piety in Vietnamese families, often without discussing the influence of other religions and beliefs. Meanwhile, Buddhist and Catholic authors in their studies [4-6], and scholars studying religions in “Culture, Beliefs and Religions Practice of Vietnamese People” [7] and “Theory of Religion and The Current Religious Situation in Vietnam” [8], have shown that indigenous beliefs, Buddhism, Taoism, and even Christianity also significantly influence the concepts and practices of filial piety among Vietnamese people.

The studies “The transformation of filial piety in Vietnam today” [9], “Piety in Traditional Culture and Its Aspects in Vietnam Today” [10], and “Changes in Filial Piety in Vietnamese Families Today” [11] highlight both positive and negative changes in the practice of filial piety today. These studies suggest that the main causes of these changes are globalisation and socio-economic factors, specifically the socialist-oriented market economy. However, the cultural

aspects and trends of younger generations related to family interaction in modern society may need further consideration. From an ecological anthropological perspective, the study “Finding Streets in The Village: The Thinking Afternoons of The Elderly” [12] described the inner conflict of the elderly, expressing both sadness over the fading and loss of tradition, and excitement and pride in the changes within the village. The recent study “The interdependence of happiness and filial piety within the family” [13] used a scale to show two aspects of filial piety: it can bring joy to parents but also imposes a personal obligation and pressure on their children.

Filial piety is a significant ethic in Vietnam as well as in some East Asian countries under Confucian influence. The research “A comparison of contemporary filial piety in rural and non-rural China and Taiwan” [14] found that filial piety remains strong in Chinese societies, despite dramatic social and economic changes; caregiving for elderly parents was more common in rural compared to non-rural areas in China. “The influence of Confucianism on modern Korean family culture” [15] suggested that Confucian ideas are deeply ingrained in Koreans, even more so than in China, particularly regarding the culture of patriarchy and hierarchy, though there have been positive changes in modern society. Along with these ideas, the article “Empowerment and standardisation of the filial piety tradition in Vietnamese and Korean cultures” [16] offered a meaningful comparative comment: when theorising about filial piety, Koreans consider family morality as the core value of society, whereas Vietnamese filial piety is dominated by village culture based on harmony. “The Sequence of Loyalty and Filial Piety and Its Ideological Origins in the Traditional Ethical Culture of China and Japan” [17] discussed that although Japanese family culture (before World War II) was often based on patriarchy and age hierarchy, loyalty is the highest value in Japanese culture, from family to nation. These studies show that the main values of filial piety in East Asian countries are not identical, and they certainly differ from Vietnamese filial piety, which will be discussed in this study.

2.2. Research questions

The study aims to answer three questions as follows:

The concepts of filial piety of Vietnamese people; Practising filial piety in Vietnamese traditional society; and Factors affecting filial piety culture in Vietnam?

2.3. Research theories

The theories of Structural Functionalism and Cultural Relativism are applied in this study. Sociologists from the structural-functional group, such as E. Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, and Robert Merton, believe that a society exists and develops because its constituent parts work

harmoniously together to ensure the overall balance of the whole structure. Social institutions aim to meet human social needs; any change in one component will lead to changes in others. According to these postulates, the family is considered a component of the societal structure, performing basic societal functions. The family meets the needs of its members and contributes to social stability. In studying the role of the family in educating today's young generations, P.C. Son [3] also stated that the family is the first place where members form their personality, and traditional values are transferred from generation to generation.

According to L. Robert (1997) [18], the function of institutions contributes to maintaining the structure of the "social body". Besides transmitting the nation's history, filial piety also has an educational effect, serving as a basic function to maintain social order by directing people to voluntarily comply with moral patterns recognised by the community. Talcott Parsons discussed social phenomena as occurring in a "state of moving equilibrium". From the opposite perspective, structuralism suggests that the breakdown of family and filial piety can damage its functions, leading to social instability, especially in today's globalised and interconnected world. This world can create significant changes in thinking, working, and human interaction, potentially fostering prosperity but also increasing vulnerability and instability in society.

Cultural relativism was an axiom in F. Boas's anthropological research in the early twentieth century. Cultural relativism holds that a person's beliefs, values, and practices should be understood based on that person's own culture, rather than judged by the criteria of others. Cultural relativism helps make the study of cultures or anthropological research more objective. For F. Boas, the formation of ethnic culture is closely linked to historical processes and the interaction between cultures in a specific geographical environment [19]. Beliefs and value systems in filial piety, according to cultural relativism, have been sanctified in indigenous beliefs and the imported or domestic religions of the Vietnamese.

Radcliffe-Brown, with structural functionalism, claimed that social structure determines culture when explaining cultural differences, focusing on current factors. In contrast, F. Boas believed that culture determines social structure and emphasised considering historical contexts. While cultural relativism may illuminate the viewpoints and factors shaping Vietnamese filial piety, structural functionalism may explain the culture of filial piety in contemporary society.

2.4. Methodology

Filial piety is a moral value present in most cultures, but it has become a dominant value in Confucianism and East Asian countries influenced by Confucianism, including

Vietnam. However, the expression of filial piety in Vietnam varies across folklore and religions, differing by period, region, and social class. It may also vary according to historical circumstances and socio-economic contexts. This leads to different values, meanings, and consequences in both historical and synchronous dimensions within society. These issues warrant extensive research and study. Within personal limitations, the author aims to provide an overview of the concepts and practices of filial piety among Vietnamese people in folklore and some popular religions and beliefs in Vietnam, as well as the factors influencing filial piety among Vietnamese people.

Thus, the research focuses on the concepts and practices of filial piety, along with the factors influencing the culture of filial piety among Vietnamese people.

Vietnam has been influenced by both Chinese culture and indigenous Southeast Asian culture. The approach of Vietnamese Studies and Area Studies is employed through qualitative methods, such as descriptive and comparative analysis, and synthesis of documents based on the integration of knowledge from interdisciplinary research: cultural studies and religious anthropology.

More specifically, the study will describe, analyse, and synthesise the views and practices of filial piety among Vietnamese people in folklore and in some beliefs and religions; it will logically analyse the factors shaping and influencing Vietnamese filial piety.

Based on the findings of previous studies, comparative analysis is also used to identify the similarities and differences in the concept and practice of filial piety between religions, and the differences in Vietnamese filial piety compared to the core values in the filial piety culture of East Asian countries under the influence of Confucianism.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Some concepts and practice of filial piety of Vietnamese people

Filial piety is a cultural feature that has been inherited and integrated by Vietnamese people over time. Perceptions, viewpoints, and value standards in Vietnamese filial piety culture are shaped by the cultural ecology and faith systems in folk beliefs and religions throughout the country's historical process.

"Filial piety" in Vietnamese is "Đạo hiếu"

Scholar D.D. Anh explained in the Simplified Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary [20] that "Đạo" means the way, right reason, and morality, while "Đạo hiếu" refers to respecting and caring for parents and forgiving siblings. According to H. Phe's Dictionary [21], "Đạo hiếu" involves taking respect and gratitude towards parents as principles that must be

preserved and followed in social life, embodying the morality of being human.

Filial piety is described in folklore as the morality of descendants or the duty of children; children must remember their parents' merits with gratitude. Vietnamese folk verses express this sentiment: "A heart to worship mother and respect father/ Fulfilling filial piety is the offspring's morality"; or "Worrying at night then worrying in day/ How could it be filial as the child's duty?", etc.

Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism were introduced to Vietnam over time, contributing to the strengthening of the Vietnamese culture of filial piety. The Chinese character for "filial piety" (孝) symbolises the image of a son carrying his father on his back, with "the old" above and "the son" below. Confucian schools agreed that filial piety is the essence of being human. Tran Trong Kim, a profound Confucian scholar, believed that the roots of morality are love and respect, which form the foundation of filial piety. The Confucian concept of filial piety was originally related to bloodline, such as children taking care of their parents and grandparents and their funerals [22]. Confucianism was especially popular in the post-Le Dynasty in Vietnam in the 15th century. Nguyen Trai (1380-1442), a prominent politician and cultural figure of the Vietnamese people, emphasised filial piety in the responsibility to love and care for parents: "When it's warm or cold, I will take care of you/ Providing rice and medicine every time/ Come in and visit every now and then,/If you are safe, I will be at peace" [23].

Nguyen Du (1765-1820), the Great National Poet of Vietnam, showed in his work that the character Thuy Kieu was tormented by choosing to sacrifice her personal happiness to fulfil filial piety: "Love or filial piety, which one is more important?/As a child, it must first be grateful to the birth" (Kieu's Story). As for Nguyen Dinh Chieu (1822-1888), a famous poet of the south in the second half of the 19th century, filial piety surpassed fame and personal career when Luc Van Tien decided to drop out of the exam to mourn his mother.

In a culture that values gratitude, community cohesion, and national consciousness, the Vietnamese concept of filial piety is not only filial within the family (hiếu thảo) but also includes respect and gratitude towards predecessors in the community (hiếu nghĩa) and loyalty to the country (hiếu trung). This integration of family morality with village spirit and patriotism is evident. When Nguyen Phi Khanh, Nguyen Trai's father, was sent into exile, Nguyen Trai intended to follow to care for him, but his father told him: "Let your brother do this, you are an educated person, find a way to avenge the country and your father. This is great filial piety" (quoted by Nguyen Thi Tho, 2007). Likewise, according

to Nguyen Dinh Chieu, filial piety requires full devotion to children's destiny in the family and the duty of loyalty to the country and the monarch: "Being a guy is grateful to the country, owes to home/ Filial piety to father and king is the talent" (Làm trai ơn nước nợ nhà/ Thảo cha ngay chúa mới là tài danh). Loyalty and filial piety become ethical-political twins; filial piety is not only loyalty to the king but also fidelity to the fatherland or patriotism. Filial piety is associated with loyalty, as Ho Chi Minh taught party members: "Loyal to the Country, Filial to the People" (Trung với Nước, Hiếu với Dân), a term conceptualised by Ho Chi Minh, originating from the community and national characteristics of traditional Vietnamese filial piety. After learning of his eldest brother's death, Uncle Ho wrote in a telegram dated November 09, 1950, sent to the Nguyen Sinh: "A son sacrificed his family love because he had to worry about state affairs" [24]. When researching the concept of filial piety in Vietnamese culture among some students in Ho Chi Minh City, the study by N.D. Hai (2018) [25] confirmed that the word "filial piety" extends from family to monarch and nation; filial piety is both a moral code in family lines and a part of the national institution.

While Confucian filial piety contributes to the foundation for Vietnamese discipline and morality in families and society, Taoist filial piety strengthens beliefs in the "after-life". It involves helping deceased parents and relatives with requiem to bliss through funeral rituals, soul summoning, charms, votive papers, and burial items, etc.

Filial piety in Buddhist traditions is about salvation and openness in terms of object, time, and space. Thich Dong Thanh, Lin Vi Tuan, and Thich Nu Lien Dinh explain that Buddhist filial piety not only repays the kindness of parents but also repays human beings and the Three Jewels (Buddha-Dharma-Monk); both in human life and the six paths of reincarnation [4, 5]. Promoting parents and others to focus on goodness and truth is considered great filial piety. Buddhism also clearly defines "further filial piety" (vien hieu) to the saints and ancestors, and "near filial piety" (can hieu) to one's parents and neighbours.

For Christians, filial piety to parents is the top commandment among the laws related to others in the Ten Commandments. The Catholic dictionary of the Vietnam Bishops' Conference states: "Filial piety is love and respectful gratitude to one's parents and grandparents; Filial piety is God's law that teaches people to love, obey, and be responsible for their parents, both materially and spiritually" [6]; filial behaviour towards parents and ancestors is roughly called grandparental piety. Beyond the blood family, Christian authors also identify that filial piety is the light of truth, the gateway to bringing people into the great family of heaven, of which God is the creator and the Father [6].

Filial piety is a key concept in Confucian ideology that affected East Asian countries, including Vietnam. Despite sharing Confucian thought, these nations have different core values and expressions of filial piety. In Chinese filial piety, taking care of one's parents and family is the first priority, but later, filial piety within the bloodline linked with "loyalty" to the kings to maintain the feudal social order. Like Vietnam, Confucian ideas have penetrated deeply into the minds of Koreans for thousands of years, even more "concentrated" than in China. This is because many Korean feudal dynasties favoured Confucianism, and the ideology became exclusive and extreme during the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910). Filial piety in Korea is the root cause of building family ethics in hierarchy [15, 16]. For the Japanese, despite the influence of Chinese culture, due to differences in their historical and socio-cultural traditions (Shinto, Mikado, and Samurai), "loyalty" is the highest value, laying the foundation for universal morality in Japanese society. A study by W. Yang (2019) [17] further added that while filial piety has practical rationality and is a secularisation of Chinese morality, loyalty, despite being a Japanese national cultural and psychological heritage, has a religious colour, containing the risk of nationalism and absurdity.

Unlike these countries, it can be said that with integrated thinking, village culture, and country history, the concept and practice of filial piety among Vietnamese people includes behavioural relationships not only within the family and clan but also towards the community and the fatherland, harmonising monarch loyalty and patriotism.

Practising Vietnamese Filial Piety: From home to alley

Jean Ladrière (1921-2007), a philosopher and logician, stated that three systemic elements govern each other in culture: "ideas, normative values, and actions". Conceptions, perceptions, and beliefs about values and standards in filial piety are interrelated with behavioural aspects such as customs, lifestyle, relationships, and rituals, which have been institutionalised in Vietnamese civil society.

In home: Reflected in folklore (legends, fables, folk verses, and proverbs), previous generations passed on filial practices from the family to the village and the nation. They practised and taught their offspring to love and care for their parents and grandparents, especially the aged. This is because "The merit of a father is like a high mountain, and the care by a mother is like an endless spring" (folk verse). Filial piety also involves avoiding upsetting parents, tarnishing their ancestors' reputation, and doing good deeds to bring glory to their family and clan.

The filial piety of Vietnamese people promotes personal morality, family bonds, and community solidarity through customs and rituals at home and in the neighbourhood. Their practice of filial piety is closely related to the custom of

ancestor worship, a long-standing belief in Vietnamese life based on gratitude to one's roots and belief in the spiritual world after death. A.D. Rhodes (1593-1660), among the first missionaries in Vietnam, was surprised by the worship practices of the Vietnamese people, noting that perhaps no one respects and worships deceased parents like the Annam people [26]. When studying the culture, beliefs, and religions of Vietnamese people, L. Cadière (1869-1955) observed that Vietnamese people integrated beliefs into daily behaviour, deeply attaching them to family life; rituals originated from filial piety. Vietnamese people believed in the longevity of ancestors and the presence of deceased grandparents among the family to protect and bless them. The customs and rituals in ancestor worship show the harmonious relationship between family members, whether alive or dead. For the author, "a family is like a temple, the living members live in the front hall, then the first and the last will enter the main hall" [7]. Filial piety in the custom of ancestor worship expresses the tradition of gratitude to ancestors and the belief in ancestors' blessings on descendants. Vietnamese people often carefully conduct their grandparents' and parents' funerals, worship on death anniversaries, on New Year's Days, and place the ancestral altar in a solemn position in the house [1, 3].

Like their own culture, Vietnamese filial piety in ancestor worship bears a deep sense of community and national character. Ancestor worship is related to individual life cycles and community customs. Life cycle rituals such as birth, marriage, longevity celebrations, funerals, death anniversaries, and ancestral worship are often performed in families with the participation of neighbours and villagers, promoting individual and family connections with the village community.

Out home: For Vietnamese people, ancestors are not only in the bloodline but also include national founding figures, national heroes, and career founders. They are respected, deified, commemorated, and worshipped in folk beliefs, both legendary and historical characters. The Four Immortals is the common name for four saints in the belief of Vietnamese national heroes: Tan Vien Son Thanh, Phu Dong Thien Vuong, Chu Dong Tu, and Princess Lieu Hanh. Vietnamese former Prime Minister Pham Van Dong noted that villagers worship the tutelary god, national heroes, the fathers of professions, and cultural celebrities. D.N. Van (2001) [8] explains that ancestors include those deceased in the bloodline and those who have contributed to the community of villages and the country, which the author calls the Religion of Ancestor.

The worship of national heroes is the sanctification of figures who made great contributions to the country. L.V. Loi (2022) [27] stated that national heroes are the ancestral generation whom posterity honours as gods; Vietnamese

monarchies issued decrees to confer deities and regulations on worship. The Vietnamese state and governments through many regimes have always supported the establishment of temples and shrines to worship national heroes. In the minds of Vietnamese people, those with meritorious service to the community are often blessed gods who continue to help and protect the community after their passing. There are communal houses, temples, and shrines or palaces for them in almost every province and city in Vietnam, such as temples for national heroes: the Two Trung Kings/Ladies, Saint Tran (Tran Hung Dao), King Ly Thai To, and King Quang Trung. Temples worshipping famous people such as the traditional medicine physicians Tue Tinh and Hai Thuong Lan Ong; the cultural celebrities Chu Van An, Nguyen Trai, and Nguyen Du; and the land openers Mac Cuu and Nguyen Huu Canh, are still respected throughout the country.

In particular, scholar D.D. Anh (1938) [28] and other authors discussing ancestor worship [8, 10] confirm that the Vietnamese people, from North to South, have the custom of worshipping the Hung Kings, the national ancestors of Vietnamese. The dynasty of 18 Hung Kings is considered the time when the ancient state of Van Lang, the first national name of Vietnam, was established. Worshipping the Hung Kings is a cultural creation of the Vietnamese people, implicitly recognised by Vietnamese communities at home and abroad. It is akin to the Vietnamese wisdom: "Tree has roots, water has source". The death anniversary of the Hung Kings is the National Day to commemorate and pay tribute to the founders of the nation. The annual festival of the Hung Kings Worship Ritual in Phu Tho province (home of the Hung Kings), honoured by UNESCO in the "Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" in 2012 [29], embodies spiritual solidarity and provides an occasion to acknowledge national origins and sources of Vietnamese cultural and moral identity.

For Vietnamese people, filial piety in the custom of ancestor worship is also connected with the worship of heaven and earth, considered the most high ancestors, the first parents who created human beings. In the past, Vietnamese agricultural society was entirely dependent on nature (folk verse: *Rely on the sky, rely on the land, rely on the clouds/ rely on the rain, rely on the sun, rely on the day, rely on the night*). Franz Boas, in his Cultural Relativism, claimed that the objective world is always refracted through the subjective perspective of native speakers. In the worldview of the ancient Vietnamese, heaven and earth are the parents of people, divine beings with supreme power, knowing everything, rewarding and punishing everyone. This belief is expressed through folklore and daily life. In many situations, Vietnamese people call upon, pray to, and give thanks to heaven and earth, from popular language to acts of worship and supplication. Some Western

missionaries (ethnologists and linguists) recognised that the sense of God Heaven's supreme power is deeply imprinted in the Vietnamese religious consciousness. According to the authors, the vast majority of Vietnamese people believe that heaven and earth create and nurture people (*Heaven gives birth - Earth nourishes*).

The Yin Yang school in Chinese philosophy believed that Qian-Kun is the original yin-yang principle; Qian is the heaven, the father, and Kun is the earth, the mother. The relationship between Qian and Kun is the combination of yin and yang, the process by which all things were born in the natural universe, including humans [22, 30]. Ancient Vietnamese people held the concept that the heaven (sky) is round and the earth is square. Square and round represent the duality of yin and yang, earth and heaven (the legend of *banh chung* and *banh day*). Heaven and earth are considered the parents of humans, and the king is the "son of heaven", obeying heaven to rule people. The king, on behalf of the people, made offerings to heaven and earth to pray for peace, prosperity, good weather, and proliferation for the country.

Influenced by Confucianism, the Vietnamese people's filial piety extended to offerings to heaven and earth, and the most important ceremony of the monarchy was the offering at Dan Nam Giao. It can be said that Dan Nam Giao is the practice of Vietnamese filial piety, integrating the Vietnamese worldview and Confucian thought. According to Cardière (up to the time of his research), the national ceremony at Dan Nam Giao is the noblest and most solemn act in Vietnamese beliefs. Most Vietnamese feudal dynasties established Dan and held annual ceremonies to worship heaven and earth. During the Dinh dynasty (10th century), worshipping heaven and earth was called the Kinh Thien ceremony. From the Ho dynasty's Dan Nam Giao in the early 15th century in Thanh Hoa to the Nguyen's Nam Giao in the early 19th century in Hue, it still followed the same model: the main altar is circular, on a high square pedestal according to the "round sky - square earth" cosmology of the Vietnamese people.

Many families place an altar in front of their house to worship heaven and earth. Some Southern religions have a two-storey altar in the temple yard. People often light incense sticks and pray every day at sunset, the intersection of day and night, heaven and earth. The two-storey altar reflects the belief in harmony between yin and yang, serving as a place that connects people with Father Heaven and Mother Earth, with the hope of favourable weather and good crops.

Nowadays, although Confucianism and Taoism are considered doctrines or ideologies rather than religions, it is clear that the Confucian-Taoist ideology related to filial piety has deeply permeated and integrated into the

customs and practices of the Vietnamese people. Excluding Taoism, it can be observed that the practice of filial piety in religions focuses on the living rather than the deceased. However, indigenous culture, with the custom of ancestor worship, has led religious followers towards rituals and offerings to honour the deceased. Vietnamese filial piety is a synthesis of Vietnamese characteristics, value systems, and consciousness over time, becoming living values and spiritual culture, promoting the connection between individuals, families, and the community.

3.2. Factors affecting the filial piety culture of Vietnamese people

Due to its historical factors and geographical location, Vietnam is both a convergence of Southeast Asian culture and an approach to Chinese culture. It can be said that family practices, village customs, along with the Vietnamese worldview and belief in ancestor worship, integrated with Eastern filial values, have contributed to shaping the filial piety culture of the Vietnamese people.

Filial piety bearing the mark of Vietnamese ecology and history

According to Radcliffe-Brown, social structure determines culture. Cultural researchers agree that the rice civilisation has shaped the culture and character of the Vietnamese people. Vietnamese family customs and spiritual culture (such as ancestor worship, mother goddess worship², animism, heaven and earth) probably originate from agricultural life, depending on nature and a desire for fertility. Since ancient times, Vietnamese people have lived in river deltas to cultivate wet rice. They joined together to build canals, dikes, or dams for production and the prevention of natural disasters. With a settled lifestyle in rice cultivation, they respected the sense of gratitude and attachment to family and the community of villages. The interests and existence of the family are closely linked to the interests of the community and the survival of the nation (Vietnamese proverbs: *ích nước lợi nhà, quốc thái dân an, nước mất nhà tan*, etc.; meaning: useful for the country and interests the home; the peace of the country and peace of the people; the loss of the country and the destruction of the family).

While Chinese and Korean filial piety is heavily hierarchical, centralised, male-oriented, and connected to the family, the Vietnamese culture of filial piety, from family customs to religious rituals, is not only within the scope of bloodline but also strong in community and village

democracy. The agricultural culture of respecting family and village has contributed to shaping the characteristics of affection, community, and collective democracy in Vietnamese filial piety. N.N. Tho believed that traditional Vietnamese society, both before and after being influenced by Confucianism, is still generally a society of horizontal relationships [16].

Even though Vietnamese filial piety has been “Confucianised”, it retains a feminine, maternal character, echoing traits of native Southeast Asian cultures. Vietnamese people practice and pass on to their descendants the filial piety of “worshipping father and respecting mother”, balancing both paternal and maternal sides during the celebration of the New Year (The first Day for Father, the second Day for Mother), and celebrating the life expectancy of both grandfathers and grandmothers, fathers and mothers. The ancestral altar includes both paternal and maternal ancestors. Although Confucianism favours males with the custom of incense offering (*hương hỏa*) to the eldest son and grandson³, many Vietnamese people still respect the folk custom: “It doesn’t matter whether you choose to have a boy or a girl, as long as they are kind and righteous”. (*Gái mà chi, trai mà chi?/Sinh ra có nghĩa có nghì thì hơn*). While living in a dynasty that emphasised Confucianism, Nguyen Trai still expressed the view of filial piety regardless of gender: “Whether paternal or maternal, It’s the same on both sides/Don’t mess around over there, over here” [23].

The Southern wave, starting from the mid-16th century under the Nguyen Lords until the S-shaped map of Vietnam was formed, saw Vietnamese filial piety in Dang Trong continue to interact with the matriarchal culture of ethnic groups like the Cham, Raglay, and Khmer. Vietnamese people in the Central region welcome and respect the goddess Po Inu Naga, the Mother of the kingdom of Kauthara of the Cham, as the Holy Mother of Vietnamese Thien Y A Na, or Thien Mu (Mother Goddess of Heaven); Southern people especially revere Linh Son Holy Mother.

With a culture of gratitude, or the ethic of “drinking water, remember its source”, Vietnamese people value the tradition of filial piety towards their parents and grandparents, and promote filial respect towards neighbours (proverbs: *Sell distant brothers to buy near neighbours*), and honour loyalty to the country.

Furthermore, the Vietnamese people have a strong national consciousness due to a history of thousands of years of resisting assimilation, fighting foreign invaders, several centuries of expansion to the South, and even

²Mother Goddess Worship is a Vietnamese indigenous belief, a form of worship that deifies nature such as sky, earth, water, and forest-mountains into mother goddess.

³However, the youngest sons are often in charge of *hương hỏa* (instead of the eldest sons) in the South Central and Southern Vietnam.

a modern history of fighting for national sovereignty and independence. The history of formation, protecting the homeland from natural disasters and invaders, building and developing the country is closely linked to the names of talented individuals. The custom of “Cúng việc lễ” in many rural areas of the South is a form of ancestral memorial service, a filial piety culture in the community to show gratitude to ancestors who have travelled with difficulty to find a place to live and leave a legacy for their descendants. The dense system of temples, shrines, and pagodas expressing filial piety to heaven and earth, gods, Buddhas, national heroes, and ancestors has remained for thousands of years throughout the country.

The customs and value systems in Vietnamese filial piety are closely related to those found in folk beliefs and religions in Vietnam.

Beliefs and religions help with shaping and institutionalising Vietnamese filial piety

It can be said that all beliefs and religions in Vietnam promote filial piety and integrate indigenous filial piety into their systems of doctrine, rituals, and religious life. In the convection dimension, belief values, dogmatic systems, and rituals related to filial piety in religions permeate the consciousness and practice of filial piety among the Vietnamese people.

Vietnamese folk beliefs, especially ancestor worship, are considered a way of expressing gratitude to the roots, whether followers of different religions or none. The practices of ancestor worship as family customs, rituals, and funerals are both spiritual culture and behavioural rules in family and village communities. These are considered the basis of Vietnamese filial piety culture.

Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism were introduced to Vietnam for almost a thousand years of Chinese domination, with different periods of prosperity and decline for each religion during the Vietnamese dynasties. Since then, Vietnamese filial piety has been systematised, becoming more diverse and flexible. With synthetic thinking and a culture of mixing and tolerance, the Vietnamese people have integrated patriarchy, moral standards, and social rituals from Buddhism, Daoism, and especially Confucianism into their culture of filial piety. Filial piety in Taoism leans towards souls and the “after-life” by promoting beliefs, mantras, and rituals of “contact” with the deceased in the worship of ancestors and the Mother goddess.

The missionary Buzomi commented, “perhaps thanks to Confucianism, society and family in this country (Dang Trong in the 16th century) had a high level of organisation. The people of this country have admirable virtues and customs”. When researching the belief culture of Vietnamese families

by observing and penetrating family and village rituals in the central part in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Cadière expressed his admiration for the family cultural structure, along with the filial piety rituals of the Vietnamese people. The author made a fervent wish: “Please do not use any measures that threaten to weaken the family in this country, but on the contrary, strengthen it by all means. Alas! Is it possible...” [7].

The Vietnamese monarchy of the 15th century also institutionalised filial piety associated with ancestor worship through the law of The Hong Duc Code (Clause 7, Article 2) [31], which mentions the relationship between parents and children, including the obligation to obey and take care of parents and grandparents while they are still alive, as well as holding their funerals and rituals when they pass away. The dynasties of Le and Nguyen considered unfilial piety as one of the crimes that must be severely punished. The annual solemn rituals of worshipping heaven and earth of the monarchical dynasties were the official ceremonies of national filial piety towards father heaven and mother earth.

Whereas Confucian filial piety in Vietnam emphasises compliance with laws, rituals, and behavioural morality (state codes, village rules, family ethics), Buddhist filial piety focuses on moral aspects such as cultivating oneself, keeping commandments, doing charity, making offerings, and guiding parents to good dharma. Buddhism clarifies that filial piety beyond the world is the true dharma. No child is unfilial in Confucianism, but monastics in Buddhism are filial because they know how to bring true faith and interest to their parents. Buddhist scholars say: the sutra system of Buddhism (Four Noble Truths, Theory of Cause and Effect, Reincarnation, Noble Eightfold Paths, etc.) contains commandments and teachings on filial piety at different levels [4, 5]. The Vu Lan ceremony of filial piety is an important festival in Mahayana Buddhism (Northern Buddhism) to express respect and gratitude to parents and ancestors. Theravada Buddhism (Southern Branch) focuses on individual spiritual growth and self-discipline in temples, called ‘tu báo hiếu’. It teaches that individuals are responsible for their own enlightenment and repaying the gratitude towards one’s parents as good karma or merit, and as a way to contribute to social order. Despite their deep attachment to Mahayana, Vietnamese people still encourage everyone to participate in short-term filial retreats to repay merit to their parents and create good karma for themselves.

While the Three Teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism) contribute to shaping the Vietnamese culture of filial piety, Catholic filial piety is “localised” in the spirit of cultural integration of the Second Vatican Council (1965). Catholic scholars affirm filial piety in Catholicism by citing many precepts, maxims, and hymns in the Bible related to filial piety, especially the example of Jesus’ filial obedience

to his heavenly Father and earthly parents. The Catholic communities mixed their faith with indigenous traditions in filial piety practice, especially the value of filial piety in ancestor worship. Ancestor ceremonies and life cycle rituals of marriage, funerals of Christians, or Catholic Masses to pray for parents and ancestors at cemeteries show the impact of Vietnamese filial piety culture on Catholic rituals. Vietnamese Catholic historians also confirm that the ups and downs of missionary history in Vietnam are closely linked to the issue of filial piety in families, especially ancestor worship and polygamy. In fact, the 1659 Injunctions of Catholicism were several hundred years ahead of Vatican II when it clearly stated, “Do not seek how to bring our customs into their country, must respect the ancient customs of the natives” regarding filial piety and ancestor worship of Vietnamese people [6, 32].

The indigenous religions that appeared in the late 19th century in the South are spiritual creations, blending Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism based on the Vietnamese tradition of gratitude. Studies on the land, culture, and people in the South of Vietnam by Dang Nghiem Van [8] and other cultural scholars show that ancestor worship holds a key position in the spiritual life of Vietnamese families, whether living in rural or urban areas, domestically or abroad. Southerners, followers of religions such as Buu Son Ky Huong, Tu An Hieu Nghia, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Ta Lon Filial Piety Buddhism, or Cao Dai, all prioritise filial piety. They maintain the tradition of gratitude to their parents and ancestors, to the country, to the Three Jewels, and to their compatriots in their religious teachings and rituals.

While customs of filial piety in family and community, as well as the spiritual culture of filial piety in religions and beliefs, play an important role in traditional society, socio-economic factors seem to strongly influence decisions on how to practise filial piety in modern society.

Contemporary socio-economic and cultural context

While cultural relativism can illuminate the concepts and factors that shape Vietnamese filial piety, structural functionalism can explain filial piety in contemporary society. Radcliffe-Brown and structural functionalists argue that social phenomena occur as a “dynamic equilibrium”. If social relationships change, it will lead to changes in the entire social system and vice versa.

Today’s socio-economic factors are changing the social life of Vietnamese people. In addition, culture, media, and the “flat world” in modern society strongly impact personal consciousness, lifestyle, family relationships, and community configuration, which are deeply related to filial culture, with both positive and negative effects.

Globalisation originates from technological updates and replacements that break down the gaps of time and space, leading to changes in traditional orders. Globalisation and economic integration, internal and transnational migration are creating a changing process of demographic, family models, and community structure in modern society. The phenomenon of labour export, and the migrating flows of youths and young families seeking opportunities to study or make a living in big cities in recent decades, have significantly impacted Vietnamese filial piety culture, from rural to urban areas, even among Vietnamese labourers abroad. The number of rural households with parents has become smaller in villages. Many households consist only of the elderly or grandchildren living with their grandparents while their parents work far away and send home filial expenses. Conversely, immigrant households in urban areas often live in crowded conditions, constantly changing neighbourhoods, and the sense of community solidarity becomes fragile.

Although Vietnam is achieving the golden population structure together with a replaceable birth rate, it is also entering the phase of “population ageing”. Life expectancy is increasing thanks to socio-economic growth and better access to healthcare, but birth rates are decreasing, causing the population to age faster. According to the United Nations Population Fund, Vietnam is one of the countries with the fastest population ageing rate in the world and will enter an ageing population period in 2036. Vietnam currently has about 14.4 million people of retirement age. However, 72.3% of the elderly have no pensions or social benefits and must depend on their children [33]. The majority of the Vietnamese population living in rural areas (65.7%) are farmers and work in agriculture. Meanwhile, it is shown that more than 90% of workers in urban factories are migrant labourers from rural areas. While young people follow the fast pace of life in a competitive society, the number of ageing and lonely elderly people is easily “left behind”.

Changes in family size, structure, and living conditions also lead to changes in the behavioural relationships between family members and generations. The number of nuclear families is rising, and the size of families is smaller. Avoiding living together between generations is not only the desire of young families but also a meaningful choice for today’s elderly. Today’s generations of offspring choose a nuclear family and contribute “filial expenses” because they do not want to be tied down; or the elderly dislike depending on their children when they can financially support themselves. In addition, unlike traditional Vietnamese beliefs, many young people today consider that marriage is not the only goal of love, and more young people intend to lead a single life, or form a non-marital family, or become a single parent. The current gender gap is also signalling changes in family structure in the future.

Traditional families put family interests above personal ones, often requiring the obedience of children to their parents, and wives to their husbands. Today, family members are becoming more equal and democratic, especially in the relationship between husband and wife, and between parents and children. Women in the family, with roles as wife, mother, or daughter, are almost treated more fairly in terms of obligations and rights related to previous generations and in their access to social services.

Filial piety in traditional Vietnamese society (influenced by Confucianism) emphasises the authority of parents, the daily obligations of children to their parents, and makes children tied to their family and hometown. However, in modern society, the age of digital technology and multi-dimensional information, self-determination and personal freedom are promoted. Along with socio-economic development, young generations have chances to study, develop capacity and expertise. They are free to leave their family to choose their partner, lifestyle, profession, and future direction rather than being determined by their parents or following a “hereditary” career. In reality, most families of intellectuals, civil servants, and industrial workers are nuclear families but they still retain some filial characteristics of traditional families. Even if they do not live with and care for their parents, they send filial expenses and receive support from their extended family and relatives in need. They still visit their parents in their hometown, especially on death anniversaries and Tet holidays (Lunar New Year). Most families with origins in the countryside or migrant workers often return to celebrate Tet with their parents and visit ancestors’ graves in their hometown as a custom of their filial piety.

Studies on changes in filial piety in modern society [9-11] revealed that positive changes in filial piety today include the emergence of social centres for the homeless elderly, hiring maids to take care of parents at home, new concepts of marriage, and more civilised worship of ancestors. Many families maintain traditional filial values while incorporating modern elements. Descendants take care of their parents materially and pay attention to their mental health, such as taking them on trips and helping them to join recreational activities. Social organisations play an increasing role in promoting filial piety. Many programmes and events are held to encourage filial piety, such as writing contests on the topic of filial piety, ceremonies to honour filial children, and gratitude programmes for families of war invalids and martyrs.

Recent research on the interdependence of happiness and filial piety within the family in Vietnam [13] concludes that at the social level, promoting the value of filial piety is fundamental to building family happiness, making an important contribution to achieving a welfare society at home. Moreover, industrial society tends to simplify community

rituals and loosen family customs. Daily routines also show a decrease in family cohesion. The pressure of work or making a living for adults, and study pressure for children today, causes many families to have less time together. Some elderly people, despite having many children and grandchildren, are still lonely during the holidays while their children often phone or send gifts instead of visiting directly. The aged in rural areas feel both pensive and sad due to the fading and loss of tradition, yet eager and proud of the changes in the village with high buildings, cars, internet cafes, supermarkets, etc. The elderly admit to feeling lonely in their own homes when their sacred spaces, houses, and gardens are invaded by modernity [12]. The care of children seems no longer to compensate for the old people’s worries. The elderly see the urbanisation process encroaching on the village. At the same time, their hometown gradually loses its village culture, and the relationships between people in the village gradually fade away. Meanwhile, their descendants choose to study trendy majors or turn to non-agricultural fields because they cannot bond with the countryside.

The downside of contemporary society is the crisis of values, pragmatism, and a culture of personal enjoyment. Moral values are also affected: family structure and community cohesion become fragile, which can lead to a decline in social moral standards. Modern piety mixes filial duty with self-interest and is not as pure as before. Piety is weighed and calculated in terms of profit and loss. The culture of gratitude and filial piety is sometimes abused as commercial products. Some individuals and families today want to show off by organising expensive and lavish funerals, building tombs like royal mausoleums, or expressing excessive superstitions, such as hiring worship services. Even in some families with many children, the responsibility of taking care of parents is often pushed aside. With the belief that “the afterlife is like the present life”, the types of offerings and votive paper have become very sophisticated and diverse, from clothes and houses to high-tech devices that pollute the environment.

Furthermore, while the legal system is becoming more complete and detailed, crime and social evils are still widespread and increasingly sophisticated. Many sociological studies show that the majority of criminals come from families lacking filial piety and experiencing family violence. For some people, family is not a peaceful home and does not guarantee life. Family conflicts, violence, divorce, or criminal cases between relatives related to moral degradation, inheritance, and parental care obligations have been on the rise in modern times.

It can be said that village culture with Vietnamese characteristics (respect for agriculture, family and community affection, and national spirit), together with folk beliefs, especially ancestor worship, can be seen as the foundation

that shapes the filial piety of Vietnamese people. Over time, the filial piety in Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity has integrated, been Vietnamised, and enriched the filial piety culture of Vietnamese people. Nowadays, the concept of filial piety among Vietnamese people is not much different from the past, as it also stems from gratitude to one's origins, parents, and ancestors. However, today's generations of descendants practise filial piety differently from the ancients due to social circumstances and modern lifestyles. In spite of some shortcomings, in general, the generations of descendants try to fulfil their filial duties to their parents and ancestors even if they are unable to directly care for them. Though it is a controversial issue due to traditional concepts, the opinion on quality elderly care services is becoming more accepted. However, as society becomes more prosperous, life becomes more stressful and self-centred, and the communal character of filial piety seems to fade more than before.

From the above findings and discussion, the factors affecting Vietnamese people's filial piety can be summarised as follows (Fig. 1).

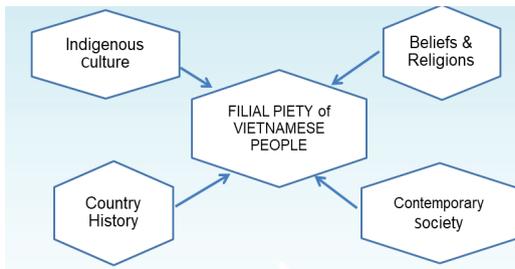


Fig.1. Factors affecting Vietnamese people's filial piety.

Filial piety practices in East Asian countries and Vietnam during the medieval period were quite similar in terms of family lineage. According to Professor Tsuboi Yoshiharu, if we compare the intensity between countries influenced by Chinese culture, nowhere emphasises filial piety more than China. However, modern society and political life have changed the ways filial piety is practised. According to some studies, Japanese, South Korean, and Taiwanese people prefer nuclear families; social security, care services, and nursing homes have increased rapidly [14,15,34]. Meanwhile, a high proportion of the elderly still stay at home in mainland China and Vietnam, especially in rural areas. The government is responding to the situation of the elderly population living alone at home. L.P. Su's research showed that while Chinese rural elders live alone or with their daughters or eldest daughters-in-law at the filial expense sent home, most Taiwanese elders rely on pensions and social security [14].

According to L.X. Chung (2015) [15], although Korean society favours the nuclear family, family rituals and genealogy remain strong in modern times. However,

the negative effects of hierarchical culture and domestic violence are gradually diminishing. K.T. Sung (2024) [34] stated that, in facing the rapidly ageing population and changes in modern family structures in Korea, there have been nationwide public and private efforts to preserve traditional values associated with respect and care for the elderly. In general, the practice of filial piety in East Asia and Vietnam has changed significantly in contemporary society, but traditional filial piety still holds core values and meanings for each nation to preserve and promote.

4. Conclusions

The concepts and practice of filial piety among the Vietnamese people show that Vietnamese filial piety encompasses both personal living values within the family and the bond of mutual connection between individuals, their family, the community, and the country. With village culture and national history, Vietnamese filial piety extends from the family to the community and the nation. Besides the moral values within the family, Vietnamese filial piety expresses collective values, social ethics, and especially promotes patriotism.

The system of beliefs, rituals, and teachings of filial piety in many religions and folk beliefs not only provides spiritual support for Vietnamese people, helping to reform people's hearts, but also links tradition with the present. Filial piety in religions and beliefs expresses a rich spiritual culture, contributing to the transmission of cultural, ethical, and historical values from previous generations to the next.

Contemporary socio-economics and culture are changing the family model and community structure in today's society, strongly affecting the lifestyle and choice of filial piety practices among Vietnamese people. However, filial piety remains one of the constants of Vietnamese culture, contributing to building well-being and humaneness in society. Perhaps primary and secondary schools need to increase more educational programmes on the values of filial piety in the family and community.

Religious faith and rituals have largely empowered and promoted the filial piety tradition in Vietnam. Religious believers need to promote the spirit of ecumenism, demonstrate the function of reformation and education, and promote the humanity of filial piety, contributing to building social security and stability. However, it is also necessary to "clean up" filial piety practices, especially outdated rituals and superstitions that impact the environment.

Potential research on the positive and negative aspects of Vietnamese filial piety, especially in the context of globalisation and economic integration in today's society, or comparative studies of filial piety practices in rural and urban communities, may be needed to make significant contributions to policies on family and social welfare.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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