

ON CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT IN VIET NAM

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I. Meaning of raising the problem of cultural environment

1. In these recent years of globalization, during which man has been living in a permanent clash with foreign (alien) cultural types, the cultural environment seems to have suddenly gained a more considerable role in community life. From the East to the West, from family to nation, from religious devotees to followers of extremist atheistic currents... everywhere is seen the increasing influence of non-favorite cultures, while the preservation of cultural aspects which seemingly need to be nourished proves to be more and more difficult. UNESCO's philosophy of "tolerance" echoes out simultaneously with the philosophy of "identity". On the one hand, encouraging cultures with long standing tradition to preserve their identities, UNESCO, on the other hand, calls for "tolerance", opening, allowing for "symbiosis" with other cultural motifs.

Almost nobody spends the time in doing operation on this "dualist" approach. The majority is satisfied with the argument that such is life, praising *tolerance* is necessary and praising *identity* is, too. Those who are irked by the contradiction between the two ideas are labeled as

short-sighted or mechanistic.

More than a few people worriedly ask themselves: Is it true that the context has become such that man, as an individual, is becoming increasingly smaller, weaker, more tightly defined and restrained, in a society which is steadily developing in the direction of becoming multi-dimensional with its "logic of imposition"? As for the cultural environment, is it true that the part in it where man has no right to choose, the part which he is compelled to adapt to, will grow bigger and bigger than the part each individual, each community can create, build, and amend? More concretely, is it true that the European rationalist and anthropological culture has become too "classical" and "secular," now getting replaced by a "fast-food culture" or "stewing-pot culture"? Or is it only a "superficial choice" (1) of globalization times?

Is the present philosophy too weak, leaving society to the mercy of less-than-clairvoyant logics of life, in which "*such environment, such man*" is only one of many behavioral logics which are not too bad in modern social relation? Or has the philosophys position itself changed - the

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“Flat world” (2) philosophy now deprived of the responsibility to *control, regulate, and, as necessary, determine the context, as it was in the past?*

The problem raised is not too academically complicated. But the majority of theoretical analyses aimed at interpreting it are incomplete and unclear, and thus, not very convincing. In more recent years, with Alvin Toffler with his theory on “sociosphere” and “psychosphere”(3), and dating further back, to Max Weber and his theory of “the role of Protestant Ethics” (Protestant Ethics on Spirit of Capitalism (4), there are plenty of social phenomena, including the ideas of many great thinkers, which are guided by the “blind necessity” (5). The modern man *seems* to master the context, but it isn't surely wrong if we say the contrary: that, in fact, man grows more and more dependent on the environment.

2. Today, when speaking about *environment, environmental problems, or the protection of environment*, people usually think about the *natural environment*.

But when speaking of environment in the domain of social activity and human development - that is to say when analyzing the environments influence on the lives of individuals, groups, or communities (especially when associating it with characteristics of society and personality) - we will fall short in our explanation if we don't consider the whole varied and complicated social life outside that of the individual or community. Because the outside environment also influences, defines, and decides the appearance, the nature and the trends of other individuals and communities. Every

individual is more or less the product of a society, created from a given system, a given social mechanism. Every society leaves its imprint, positive or negative, on personal lives.

In such circumstances, we see the notions of *social environment* and *cultural environment* arising. Compared with *social environment* (6), the notion of cultural environment is usually more ambiguously defined, *the extension which is the whole human life and the intension which is the cultural side, or cultural aspect*; that means it nearly coincides with the notion of *social environment* in respect, differing only in the aspect under consideration, which is cultural and not anything else. The cultural environment is very rarely understood as including only purely cultural activities.

Meanwhile, categories falling under the social environment are more narrowly and strictly defined. For example, they can include: legal environment, economic environment, educational environment, ethical environment, etc. This manner of understanding exists in many languages.

That is to remind when someone uses the notion of *cultural environment*. Psychological, sociological, and anthropological research show that the cultural environment is a rather efficient theoretical foundation for examining external conditions for the formation or alienation of personality, the development or diminution of the individual, and the progress or regress of social groups or communities.

When individual/community life, with all its diverse aspects (customs and habits,

ethical tendencies, jurisdiction consciousness, intellectual standards, dynamism or degree of conservatism of a society) is considered as the condition, basis, or background for the formation of personality, the development of individuals, groups or communities, then we are talking about cultural environment. That means nearly all matters worthy of interest, once the problem of cultural environment is raised (as above-mentioned) are familiar to social-human theories. Because that which serve as the conditions and the environment for the formation of personality and the development of individuals, groups, or communities are certainly matters that society has tried to deal with for a long time. However, raising the problem of cultural environment as a theoretical instrument has its own meaning. If *natural environment* is the regrouping of factors outside the *social-human system* making *conditions necessary* for this system to exist and develop, then *cultural environment* is regrouping of factors inside the *social-human system* making *sufficient conditions* for each subsystem of this system to identify itself and progress.

In the abundant and dynamic development of human life, *what influence does the cultural environment have? What does it define, and to what extent does it determine* the behaviors, attitudes, and the nature of each person and each community? Why, in some communities, whose intelligence, skillfulness in communication, and rich creative potential are apparent, aren't there more inventions, discoveries, and creations of considerable value? What mechanism of

the context is able to deform every factor introduced from abroad? Why accept what is good from outside, only to see it become useless or deformed once applied to other cultural communities, especially those with long-standing traditions? Why call individuals "valuable" only when they live and work outside their original community? These questions make a "wide field of action" for the theory of cultural environment.

Another dimension to the problem of cultural environment is this: If the cultural environment influences each person and each community, then, vice versa, what role does the later assume, and to what extent are they responsible in the creation of their ideal cultural environment (for the development of society in general and of individual in particular)? The individual is never simply a pure and passive product of the mechanism. Today, does the personal part still carry as great a meaning as before, for rebuilding or changing the cultural environment? Changing the system and the mechanism, and changing the outside cultural environment (subject) under conditions of globalization is also a matter that the theory on cultural environment should address.

The detailed substance of the problem of *cultural environment* is probably not new, but the use of the theory on *cultural environment* is clearly a new approach to the consideration of familiar questions. And that is just the meaning of raising the problem of cultural environment.

II. On the cultural environment in Vietnam

In Vietnamese social sciences, there has not been any comprehensive research that

has identified and evaluated the real state of Vietnams current cultural environment. Published works and articles have rarely offered a methodical conclusion on it, and that is why, when socio-cultural problems are discussed, what is stated does not avoid analyses based on sensibilities, partial evaluations, or somewhat subjective drafts. On the basis of study and observation of the rapid development of Vietnamese societal life in recent decades, this text tries to suggest a global view on the cultural environment in Vietnam - a country which is still poor, but which nonetheless has got rather high indexes of life expectancy and education (7).

On the most general plane, we think that, in over twenty years of actively accepting globalization, establishing a market economy, and readily integrating into the international community, the cultural environment in Vietnam is now unprecedentedly rich, complicated, and fraught with plenty of implicit problems. Its a system of phenomena and socio cultural relations which are many-sided, many-dimensioned, and dynamic enough to welcome every new idea and stimulate every opportunity for discovery and creation. But it also comes with challenges and temptations enough to make any individual, family, or community become necessarily vigilant before the risk of losing his way or making a mistake. This estimation can be explained in more details as follows:

1. Ideological theoretical viewpoint:

In Vietnam, while Marxisms value is affirmed, Ho Chi Minh's thought is praised. M. Webers thesis on cultures role as decisive factor in the depth of social

structure, Alvin Tofflers theory on waves of civilizations, Teilhard de Chardins view on anthropology, UNDPs view on man as the center of socio-economic development, Carl Poppers view on open society, Samuel Huntington's view on the clash of civilizations, the conception of Mahathir Mahamad and other Asian thinkers on the role of Asian values in the development of modern society, the conception of T. Friedman on *Flat World and globalization*, etc.-all are now by no means strange to the research world in particular and to the intelligentsia in general.

Some theories that were at one time a cause for worry, and that were pushed out of the mind, now have found their position in the societys spiritual life. New phenomena in global theory - including views on economy of knowledge, society of information, globalization, human development and the set of HDI instruments?, environment and sustainable development, human capital, and social capital - are quickly popularized, received, and studied for application in Vietnam. Some works considered as "phenomena" for the world, such as Robert McNamaras memoir, *In Retrospect: the Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (1996), Thomas Friedmans *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century* (2006), or various publications of the World Bank, the UNDP, and UNESCO, are printed in Vietnam nearly simultaneously (in the same year) with the original text. It is a new phenomenon of spiritual social life in Vietnam, where formerly there have been never such updated facts. Together with the popularization of international

television programs, of information on the Internet, and of audiovisual works from media, the diversification and the updating of information on the ideological theoretical level now carries a special meaning for cultural environment in general.

Of course, there are still prohibited zones, and flows of information are not always transmitted smoothly as they should be. This, in most cases, occurs at random or by unavoidable situations. In any country, information that would influence national security, extremist, or sensitive theories regarding national and religious psychologies that would be detrimental to national interest must be controlled as much as possible. The cultural environment, seen through the ideological-theoretical domain, although rich, many-sided, and many-dimensional, remain on a limited level. All the above mentioned theories are not yet deeply known by the society. Even in universities and research institutes, there are rarely centers with great prestige and experts with great stature apprehending these theories and views. That is the weakness, the insufficiency of the theoretical area, influencing the level of the spiritual social life and that of the cultural environment in general.

2. Socio-economic viewpoints:

Now the Vietnamese economy is functioning in a market mechanism with strict requirements of globalization and has to meet the demand of determined transnational regimes. And even more recently, Vietnam has joined the WTO. But this has not yet ended the state of *conservation*. Such an economic entity has

created within itself complicated, interwoven phenomena, activities never seen in homogeneous economies. This makes a both culturally positive and negative environment for socio-economic activities which are directly related to not only the economy. At present in Vietnam, many forms of market economy have been defined and are developing. But several others are only beginning to take shape.

It falls short of being a really civilized market; unhealthy, negative, even mafia-like conduct, which has also existed abroad, now exists in Vietnam. The State economy is considered to play the leading role, but its effectiveness remains insufficient. Companies called "multinational" still benefit from national favor policy. Simple hired labor exists parallel with great production, with the economy of knowledge. After-effects of the subsidy system still impact some economic activities. Poverty diminishes considerably (even this is highly estimated by the world), but the gap between the poor and the rich continues to increase^(*)(8). Phenomena of luxury, waste, and corruption emerge in many parts.

Recently the press has said much about these troubles in the economy. The problem consists in that, such a cultural environment in economic activity gives enough room for healthy economic thought to take root, but also leaves enough crevices to foster almost every

(*) The rate of poor with food grains and food stuffs shortage decreased from 55 % in 1990 to 7.8% in 2004, that of poor in general from 705 in 1990 to 24.1% in 2004, but the gap between rich and poor increased from 4.1 times in 1990 up to 7 times in 1995, to 8.1 times in 2002 and 2004.

unhealthy form of self-interested activity. Doing business with honesty, based on the confidence to make profits, exists side by side with swindling and cheating actions. More than a few businessmen are ceaselessly incited by the responsibility that falls on them for the real weakness of the Vietnamese economy in the international market. Even those who are in high positions in state and private economic sectors are interested only in their own benefits, without regard for national interest (9). "While Vietnamese residents in foreign countries are economizing hardly note by note to send back to the fatherland, there are officials in Vietnam who gamble, sending millions of dollars abroad" (*) (10). Corruption, transnational women trade, embezzling money, swindling both workmen and governments officials - all exist blatantly side by side with healthy phenomena profitable to the working people and to the society.

This is an indication of the many-sided and complicated cultural environment that domestic and foreign researchers are toiling away to repair.

3. The viewpoint of spiritual social life:

We would like to touch upon the *leading spiritual state of society when considering and evaluating the development of the country at its present stage*. Lets use Alvin Toffers notion, that of the "Psychosphere", to indicate societys general spiritual-psychological, the most universal, belonging to the majority, with the force controlling the whole movement of the spiritual social life, corresponding

to each given historical stage. With such conventional intension, the psychosphere in todays Vietnamese society is likely of a new form, shaped and emerging since the late 1990s, when war and crisis were of the past, when the country had attained great socio-economic achievements after over twenty years of renewal. In the face of new opportunities (11) for development, each individual more or less unavoidably expressed his attitude. We see the psychosphere in Vietnamese society nowadays as mainly positive and optimistic, but in society, there remains a contrary opinion. There are still skeptical minds, anxious and sometimes pessimistic about the development. Lets firstly speak about this contrary flow of opinion.

* The skeptical, pessimistic view in some people, is not the majority, but among them are experts and social activists worried that Vietnam will lag behind in comparison with other countries in the region. At a lighter degree, some authors doubt the arguments of those who affirm that Vietnam is before the "gold opportunity of development" (12).

For example, according to the calculation of some IMF experts, the GDP per capita of Vietnam in 2005 reached \$552 USD. Supporting that, countries with higher incomes in ASEAN stopped developing, while Vietnam remained on the same growth rate as present. If this pattern continues? then Vietnam would take five years to catch up with Indonesia and Philippines, 20 years with Thailand, 24 years with Malaysia, 38 years with Brunei and 40 years with Singapore. And if ASEAN countries remain at the same growth rate as in recent years, Vietnam

* Le Dang Doanh's worlds.

will take 18 years to catch up with Indonesia, 34 years with Thailand and 197 years with Singapore (13). Although these are figures of a purely “mechanical” comparison and naturally the society doesn't develop so mechanically, this comparison does carry alarming meaning, startling optimists.

Another opinion considers that, with so much investment in Vietnam nowadays, Vietnams economy will likely attain a growth rate higher than 7-8%/year. The present growth is only an “illusory growth,” which isn't development. That is the “illusion of growth” (14). If this illusion is not only a product of the imagination, it will gradually become a barrier to development, perpetuating the lagging behind.

In the conference of October 21st 2006, at the 10th meeting of the National Assembly, XIth session, Mr. Nguyen Ba Thanh used concrete figures to show the cause for worry over the Vietnamese economy: In 2006, the gross domestic production is estimated at exceeding the plan by 8.2% and equivalent to 60 billion USD. The total national receipts for budget reach approximately 16 billion USD, while the budget over-expenditure is 3 billion USD, total expenditure: about 19 billion USD, nearly 5% of the GDP (security threshold). Meanwhile, the State owes the population through selling bonds and other forms at about 22 billion USD. The State owes foreign countries nearly 20 billion USD. And Mr. Nguyen Ba Thanh quipped: “With this economic picture, I am very doubtful that Vietnam will occupy the 16th rank in the world before 2025; Ill try to live 19 years more

to see what happens”.

Mr. Nguyen Ba Thanh isn't pessimistic, but his speech has shown the insufficiency that most people miss when they see the development of our country and of our economy only through optimist eyes (15).

The optimistic view also arises from the real state of education, a sector that has recently been sharply condemned by the Vietnamese press. Although Vietnams educational achievements are commended by many foreign experts, for domestic intellectuals, especially leading ones, the real state of Vietnamese education is less than exceptional. An insufficient mechanism of examinations, unprincipled extra-curricular teaching spreading evils from primary schools to undergraduate institutions; difficulty in controlling the quality of educational products (students who will be masters of the future) - these are some of the problems in the system.

Side by side with education is the Health system. In spite of praise from the World Health Organization (for achievements in the care of communitys health, for raising the life expectancy, and for effectively controlling the bird flu epidemic and SARS), many people are worried about the cultural environment in the Health system in Vietnam. A shaky infrastructure and degrading morality breaking the relations between physicians, doctors, and patients are causing the system to deteriorate beyond some peoples imagination.

Together with Education and the Health systems are activities of culture, science, art, publication, tourism, communication and transport, the environment, and social

welfare. We wouldnt like to mention more contrary phenomena, social evils in these activities because we can see it in the press almost every day. (As for the traffic safety domain, in 2006, there were 12.300 victims of accidents in Vietnam, and since early 2007, each day there is an average of 33 traffic deaths. WHO experts call this Vietnams *largest national epidemic* (16).

The concern is legitimate: the possibility for regression is lurking every day. A worry engrained in many parents is that their children will be depraved, meet wicked people, face unfortunate risks outside home, and so on. Cultural values that are clearly lower than in previous generations are already apparent. Some people feel that the present youth consider misbehavior as something natural and normal in social communication (17). If this is the case, this will without doubt be a very real danger.

We cannot say that the optimistic outlook or worried about the cultural environment as just mentioned doesnt find its basis. If only looking at the phenomena, we have to question whether the future will be surely beautiful.

However, the leading state of mind for development in our society is a positive, optimistic one. And here is the remarkably important cultural environment. Nobody can deny that today, more than ever, the psychosphere in Vietnam is looking remarkably positive and dynamic. In 2006, with impressive achievements of development and a mass of meaningful national events, Vietnams position has been positively estimated by nearly all countries and international organizations. Enthusiasm and belief in the future make

the leading atmosphere in the majority of populations.

Many people see the present moment as a “golden opportunity” (18) for the taking-off of each family, each community. Moreover, this state of mind is encouraged by positive and sympathetic regards from abroad (19). Allow me to cite here some remarks of foreigners who have lived and worked in Vietnam.

Klaus Rohland, WB’s representative in Vietnam, calls Vietnam “the story of a great success. It is possible to affirm that, besides China, Vietnam is the economy which is developing the most successfully in the world. He said this before Vietnam was even a WTO member (20).

Jonathan Wagh, chairman of a German company who has lived in Vietnam for over ten years, remarks: “In general, the Vietnamese are very open and willing to learn a lot about other cultures. In addition, they are well trained and very clever. In schools, they are taught to observe a very strict discipline, so their thinking for settling problems is restricted. But many Vietnamese are able to overcome this weakness if they are well guided. And those who can do this become successful, since they combine in themselves knowledge and qualified specialty” (20).

Mac Lachlan, British Deputy Ambassador, after years of working in Hanoi, says that what has most impressed him is that “The Vietnamese prove a terrible love of learning.” He believes this is why many European and Asian countries want to cooperate with Vietnam (21).

Dich Con, researcher at Chinas Institute of International Relations, says, “The fact that Vietnam will be a power in ASEAN is only the problem of time.” According to Dich Con, Vietnam has three main advantages: Firstly, a suitable model of development; secondly, political and social stability; and thirdly, a nationwide strong will for progress, with 82 millions inhabitants, among whom 2/3 are young people. Therefore, he remarks: “Whether ascending or descending, with its pride and self-respect, Vietnam will not accept to be in an inferior position” (22).

Not only Dich Con, Richard Quest, and a large number of foreign scholars, but even President G. Bush has used the image of *Asian Dragon* to describe Vietnam. When participating in APEC Conference in Hanoi, November 2006, President Bush has mentioned that Vietnam is “a young tiger” and that he was very impressed by this (23).

What I would like to call attention to is that even after the negative event of PMU18, synthetic regards to Vietnams development have not diminished, as forecasted by some experts. Hilary Benn, United Kingdoms Minister of International Development, who has a rigid view concerning the attachment of aids to the struggle against corruption, has had to admit that Vietnam has accomplished many surprising works, especially in eliminating hunger and alleviating poverty, improving peoples living conditions. He signed a cooperative aid agreement with Vietnam in mid-September 2006 (24). Clearly, it is not true that all compliments from foreign scholars are “diplomatic” and unfounded.

* It is possible to choose another indicator as a basis for evaluating the cultural environment in Vietnam: In mid-2006, NEF (New Economics Foundation), a prestigious society, research organization in England, estimated the happiness index (HPI) of 178 countries. NEF measured and ranked Vietnam at 12th, with a global happiness index of 61.2, above even China (ranking 31), Thailand (33), and Italy (66), among other countries. The happiness of each community was measured by the years included in the life expectancy capital, during which the person feels satisfied with his life on the basis of considering whether or not this corresponded with the conditions allowing natural resources to be consumed. That means, happiness is not necessarily associated with the level of richness-poverty, or the degree of development; happiness, first of all, is the degree of the humans satisfaction with his life (25).

It may seem a surprise, when Vietnam is considered happier than even United States and Japan; perhaps it requires further discussion. But here, on the plane of cultural environment, we want to extract NEFs research results on Vietnams degree of satisfaction with life at present. 61.2 % of the Vietnamese population admits that they are satisfied with the present life; that is, we think, a reliable figure. It should be noted that under present conditions the ideal degree of any nation is 83.5% and not 100% of its population being satisfied with their life (the country ranking first was Vanuatu whose index reached only 68.2).

* At last, another indicator, although its

sphere is smaller and its time shorter for generalization in comparison with the research process of NEF happiness index, is quite worthy to be chosen as the basis for estimating the cultural environment in Vietnam: In the late-2006 Gallup International Association (GIA, a well-known sociological research organization) explored the degree of optimism and pessimism in 53 countries. The results show that Vietnamese people occupy the first rank in the world regarding the degree of confidence in the future. Of approximately 49,000 people questioned in 53 countries, only 43% believe that the future will be better, among them, Vietnam: 94%, Hong Kong: 74%, China: 73%, Ghana: 68%, Nigeria: 66%, Thailand: 53%, and Singapore: 52%. The countries where there are most people optimistic in thinking about the future, are: India: 32%, Indonesia: 33%, Philippines: 34%, Iraq: 43%, and Greece: 44% (26).

Of course, these researches we mention are not entirely convincing, and when hearing outsiders praise Vietnam for being happiest and most optimistic in the world, nobody ignores that Vietnam has a very low GDP and in many domains it is still distantly found behind other countries in the world. But that is just something which makes the estimation of the state of the mind for development become more meaningful.

III. Conclusion

1. Never in the past has the cultural environment in Vietnam been so rich and varied, so dynamic and positive, so encouraging and attractive, with so many opportunities and challenges as is now the

case. We say this quite seriously and objectively. The degree of richness and diversity, the dynamic and active rhythm of Vietnams cultural environment are now enough to foster good ideas and stimulate discovery and creation.

But on the flip side, there are still many challenges and attractions, so hopefully every individual, family, and community will become vigilant before the risk of losing the way or making a mistake.

2. If seeing Vietnamese society through impressions left by negative phenomena and socio-economic insufficiencies; through pessimistic predictions for the continued development in Vietnam; or through comparison with advanced countries and their scientific, educational, and technological activities, we may find cause for worry about the cultural environment in Vietnam. Many-sided, many-dimensioned, but proving the state of mutually hindering, mutually contradicting, even mutually annulling ... in the development. There are many anomalous, bad, even evil ones which dont allow potentialities to be realized, and which contain numerous challenges dangerous to the development of individuals and communities.

Therefore, it is vital that we not see the development of Vietnamese society only with optimistic eyes, to the point where we lose vigilance and live as if nothing could hinder development. In these times of globalization we must remember that even the smallest tumor can eventually destroy an entire body. The present world is very vulnerable, and unexpected things

can happen at any time^(*). Vietnam, of course, is not outside this general order.

3. But it is also shortsighted and not clairvoyant if the development of today's Vietnamese society is viewed only with optimistic eyes. The cultural environment in Vietnam nowadays contains more than a few negative and anomalous factors. But if we manage to dominate them wisely, most such anomalous and negative factors in the world are only necessary or unavoidable diseases of a growing body.

Looking at Vietnam's cultural environment through the prism of the state of mind for development of the majority of population, through the positive and sympathetic estimation of foreign experts, through data on the degree of optimism, or through Vietnam's happiness index measured and made public to the world, we must admit that, for the most part, the cultural environment in Vietnam nowadays is fine, fair, and healthy, and not the contrary.

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* For example, during the last two years, the world has witnessed political troubles, social conflicts, even threats to economic sanction and to wage wars... for which the initial reasons are only the deduction or excitement from an uncalculated behavior of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, a careless word of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, a sensitive quotation of Pope Benedict XVI, an excessive attitude of Gruzias President Mikhail Saakashvili, a caricature related to Islam

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26. Vietnamese people are most optimistic in the world. See: www.tuoitre.com.vn 2/01/2007.