

CULTURAL LIFE OF VIETNAMESES AFTER TWENTY YEARS OF RENEWAL

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*The article presents a general view of cultural life of Vietnam after twenty years of renewal, pointing out the positive achievements and the limitations in the cultural life. The article is composed of 6 sections. In the first section - “**Culture renewal in terms of political-legal aspect**”, the author asserted the political-legal achievements, which have been realized thanks to the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party. In the section 2 – “**Absorbing world cultural values in order to enrich Vietnamese culture**” – the author analyzed the positive results and the limitations in the domain of cinema, photography, modern music, sports, miss competition and fashion model show, festivals, literature and art... The section 3 analyzes the process of “**Restoring and bringing into play traditional cultural values**”. In the last section, - “**Issue arising from culture renewal**”, the author pointed out the disease of “abuse” in diverse domains of culture and in the exercising of cultural liberty. And the author concluded: Cultural life asks to be managed scientifically and reasonably, that is it must be managed by laws. This is the manifestation of political culture’s role. Only so we could build up a culture that is humane, democratic, human-right respectable and constitutes the dynamic for development.*

After twenty years of renewal and integration, Vietnamese culture has undergone substantial changes to become more advanced, enriched and open. These changes have been brought about by the open-door policy of the Party and the State. They reflect our country’s compliance with the world’s common trend of international exchange and integration. They are also results of the renewal in our thinking. In cultural life, the most important renewal is manifested in terms of political and legal aspect.

1. Culture renewal in terms of political-legal aspect

Talking about renewal in cultural life is,

first and foremost, talking about renewal in the Party and State’s lines, direction and policies concerning culture. After the start of renewal, Vietnam’s culture has experienced the most significant landmark in its direction, which is the introduction of the Resolution of the 5th Plenum of the Central Party Committee (8th Tenure) “On building and developing an advanced Vietnamese culture deeply imbued with national identity”, issued on 16th July, 1998.

In this resolution, the Party objectively

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evaluated the cultural achievements, fairly reviewed the weaknesses, frankly revealed the main causes and proposed directions and specific tasks to develop culture. The Party's policy to develop the culture is in line with the views of integrating Vietnam into the world, building Vietnamese people and culture in the dialectical relation between the national and the international; considering culture as the spiritual foundation of society, as well as the end and the dynamic to promote socio-economic development; emphasizing the first task of building Vietnamese people so that they are both patriotic and have the solidarity with the world's peoples; highly appreciating democratic values and respecting artists' right to freedom of creation; being open to all the world's cultural achievements; completely not mentioning the dogmatic view honoring the socialist realism, in order to affirm that the Party "encourages researching and experiencing all methods, all creating styles" (1, p. 171). This is a very new view, a right legal basis which ensures the cultural liberty for Vietnamese people. This has been manifested in the richness and diversity of contemporary literature and art creations.

At the ninth Party's National Congress (2001), following the spirit of the Resolution of the 5th Plenum of Party Central Committee (8th Tenure), the Party proposed a new direction for developing Vietnam's culture, that is "To speed up the movement 'The whole nation is united to build up cultural life'; 'Building up civilized lifestyles and cultural families';... Bringing into full play the national cultural identity; preserving and restoring tangible and intangible cultural patrimonies that serve as a basis for

cultural exchanges among communities, regions, and between Vietnam and the outside world" (2, p. 222). At this congress, cultural development focuses on building "cultural life", "civilized lifestyles", promoting "cultural exchanges" within and across borders. Obviously, the policy to develop Vietnamese culture in the spirit of international integration has been consistently pursued by our Party.

The tenth Congress (2006) reaffirmed the orientation considering *cultural development as "a spiritual foundation of society"*. Specifically, culture should penetrate deeply into each residential community, each family and each person, improving Vietnamese cultural values, inheriting traditional values as well as receiving mankind's cultural quintessence, thus enhancing resistance to fight against harmful and depraved cultural products. It is also important to enhance the cultural value of every economic, politic, and social activities as well as people's lives" (3, p. 213).

Most recently, on 16th June 2008, the Party issued the Resolution No 23-NQ/TW of the Politburo which helps continuously build and develop literature and art in the new era. This is the Party's first resolution reserved only for literature and art, a particular area of culture. The resolution is regarded as the concretization of the Resolution of the 5th Plenum of Party Central Committee (8th Tenure). In this resolution, when reviewing the literature and art achievements in the past, the Party asserted the right to creation freedom: "Freedom in artistic creation and the diversity in the contents, creating styles, manifesting manners, are all respected;

personal traits and creative individuality are affirmed” (4, p. 5-6). And in the section “Objectives, guiding views ...”, the Party insisted on the policy that “continues renewing, creating favorable conditions for literature and art to develop strongly and variously in terms of topics, contents, forms, creating methods, experiences, explorations, which helps to enhance the overall quality of our country’s literature and art”. The resolution is an evidence of our Party’s close attention to the building and developing culture and cultural life for Vietnamese people as well as its strong determination to renovate culture.

Therefore, since the renovation, the cultural life of Vietnamese people has been raised to a new higher level, become far more diverse and richer. Traditional forms are being brought into full play. Meanwhile, new forms are being brought in from the outside world. *This is due to the fact that our Party recognizes and expands the right to cultural liberty, in line with the world’s common trend of expanding human rights.*

Another significant change in thinking that the Party adopted is that it recognizes personal benefits in the cultural freedom. It aims to build up, among others, the characteristic of working hard in Vietnamese people “for the benefits of themselves, of their families, their communities and society” (the Resolution of the 5th Plenum of Party Central Committee - 8th Tenure). This is a new development in thinking because previously people had to sacrifice their personal interests for the benefits of communities. Nowadays, the fact that personal benefits are recognized also means that cultural creation is not only for the sake of spiritual lives but also the sake

of material ones because creation does bring economic benefits. As the spiritual basis culture cannot help bearing physical-economic values, especially when it penetrates into people’s everyday life and become part of it. Therefore, these values must not be underestimated. The Resolution of the 5th Plenum of Party Central Committee (8th Tenure) clearly stated that it is vital to build “*economic policies in culture* in order to connect culture with economic activities”.

In short, we can say that the cultural renewal in respect of political-legal aspect serves as the important foundation for our country’s cultural renovation in the era of international integration. It is truly a lever on which a new people and culture are to be built bearing the era’s advances, bringing into play the traditional cultural identities of the nation.

2. Absorbing world cultural values to enrich Vietnamese culture

Owing to Vietnam’s open-door policy, people have got access to various novel art forms. The Resolution of the 5th Plenum of Party Central Committee (8th Tenure) pointed out that safeguarding national identity does not necessarily mean that the door to the outside world must be closed so that the people inside are separated; but rather, “Protecting national identity must keep in line with international exchange, being open but with a selective mind so that only the good and the progress of the other nations’ cultures are imported.” The Party’s tenth National Congress also pointed out: we must “inherit traditional values and absorb cultural quintessences of the world, increase resistance to fight against harmful and depraved cultural products.” Since then all kinds of cultures are welcome in Vietnam.

Firstly in terms of cinema, foreign films, especially Western ones, with both specific artistic values and commercial entertainment values, are shown widely in Vietnam. This area is the one that best demonstrates changes in cultural life of Vietnamese people in the renewal and integration time. Now people can enjoy not only films produced by socialist countries as in the past, but those by other countries as well. Nowadays, thanks to modern communication technologies, foreign films are flooding cultural life of Vietnamese people; televisions and Internet are the two most effective means of propagandizing foreign films, especially Western ones.

Presently, cinema activists are calling for professionalization of Vietnam's films. That means this area must be turned into a real industry – the cinema industry. Subsidizing mechanism is being abolished in all fields of cultural-social life, cinema in particular. However, cinema market mechanism has not been shaped. As a result, this led to the decline of Vietnam's films and currently this situation has reached an alarming point. The number of movie theatres has gone down from 300 to 100, films from 20 annually down to some 5 or 7. The film makers staff, from screenwriters, directors, actors/actresses to camera-men, are not actually professionals. This situation is partly due to the fact that there are no studios in Vietnam, a requisite condition for cinema industry professionalization (see 5).

We can say that changes in Vietnam's cinema occurred mainly on cinema market. There may have been already changes in conceptions and awareness of people as far as film industry is concerned; however, from conception to

practice is a long distance to bridge because of inadequate technical conditions and human resources. On cinema market the biggest change which has been witnessed ever since is our recognition of international integration, allowing the penetration of foreign films into the domestic film market, which may have both positive and negative influences. Negatively, market for domestic films has been narrowed minimally. Perhaps, movies is the area in which the concept "domestic goods" loses its most meaning. Viewers, though patriotic as they are, when watching Vietnamese films they cannot help feeling pity for their low technical and aesthetic level. Nevertheless, the invasion of foreign films still has positive effects on renovating the thinking of Vietnam's movies makers and stimulating this industry to develop. Definitely, if cinema wants to survive it must renovate itself in many basic respects, progressively becoming one of highly profitable cultural industries that serves our country's development.

Photography also experienced noticeable innovation. In war time, it served the country's strategic missions wholeheartedly. Its views and artistic functions were to be used to serve the country's political tasks. Nowadays, in renewal period all the functions of photography can be fully manifested. Aesthetic and entertaining functions are drawing attention from the public. Cultural freedom once again is clearly manifested. It is the first time in photography history nude pictures have been published into album: the album "Xuan thi" by Thai Phien was published in 2007 by Literature and Arts Publisher in Ho Chi Minh City and after half a

month 2.000 copies were sold out. Frankly, this is one of the most impressive changes in Vietnam's modern culture.

The world *modern music*, like movies, has also massively invaded Vietnam. At the end of twentieth century, such kinds of music as pop, rock, hip-hop (especially rap) were widely accepted by the youth, everyday broadcast on the radio and television, shown in music programs, competitions, and night clubs, etc...

Rock music with its excitement entered Vietnam, especially into two big cultural centres, namely Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city, in the early 1990s. The national rock competition named "Tiger Translate Rock Your Passion", held in the beginning of 2008 in the night show named Tiger Unite '08 at the seventh military zone stadium in Ho Chi Minh City, attracted 30,000 rock fans.

Sports activities also quickly integrates with those of the world. Vietnam's sports started to join regional and international games. International cup competitions such as football, volleyball, taekwondo, etc. have been continuously organized in Vietnam. Especially, the 22nd Sea Games (2003) were successfully held in our country. This is the games competition in which Vietnamese sports delegation won a lot of accomplishments, among which the first time in sports history being the top of the list. These accomplishments can only be obtained through renewal and integration.

The novelty in sports is not only displayed through records but also manifested through changes in the conceptions of sports. There has been a switch in attention from movement sport to professional sport. In the last days of the second millennium, on 30th November 2000, Vietnam's professional

football teams came into being; they were allowed to sign contracts with businesses, hire foreign players and coaches for their teams. We can say that these are living examples showing that Vietnam is actually on the way to integrate with the world.

Sports such as tennis, golf, which have been once called "luxurious" sports, now are being adopted by and gradually becoming part of Vietnamese sports. Golf courts, appeared like mushrooms after rain alongside with spas, ecotourism resorts, are becoming a popular phenomenon in Vietnam. However, this situation leads to some other serious problems such as environmental pollution and degradation, food and social security. These problems will be discussed in details in the last section.

Especially the beauty contests – a cultural activity which was considered strange and even a taboo in the past, now publicly recognized and annually organized in Vietnam at different levels such as Miss Vietnam, Miss Regions, Miss City/Province, Miss of Vietnamese ethnic groups, Miss of the Seaside Zone, Miss Ao Dai, Miss of Schools, Miss Photo, Miss Sport, Miss Tien Phong Newspaper, etc... The first Miss Vietnam contest was held in 1988, two years right after the introduction of "renewal". Since then it is organized every two years. And if counting other miss competitions, we have competitions almost annually organized. Recently, Vietnam has created a reputation as a host country for world beauty contests. Specifically in 2008, it is the first time in history Vietnam hosted Miss Universe Pageant with the participation of Misses from 80 countries around the world. Vietnam will also host the Lady World Contest 2009 in Bà Rịa-

Vũng Tàu; most importantly, Vietnam will host the 60th Miss World Contest 2010 in Nha Trang. These are vivid examples for our country's open and cultural integration policies.

Along with Miss Contests there come *Model Fashion Shows*. This is a quite new culture kind which has just appeared since the days of integration. Unlike Miss Contests, fashion shows tend to develop from a type of cultural activity to a cultural high-earning profession. Ministry of Culture and Information promulgated a decision on the establishment of Vietnam's Model Association, which will operate as a professional organization. Thus after 20 years of renewal the most popular types of Western culture have completely penetrated into Vietnam.

Other foreign cultural phenomena have been easily welcome by Vietnamese people in this open period, for example the *festivities* like Valentine Day, Christmas Day, Easter Day, etc... These are festivals that are being warmly greeted in Vietnam. Why are these Christian phenomena are so popular now in Vietnam?

I reckon that in the past, Christian community was somewhat separated from Vietnamese society and did not fall in line with its common people. Nowadays, when the policy of religion freedom is widely practiced throughout the country, Christian festivals suddenly become appealing to the public. They are widely welcome as new cultural values that did not exist in Vietnamese culture. In addition, these festivals, characterized as highly utilitarian (accompanied with gift-giving procedures), can easily penetrate into people's daily lives. Each Christian festival always attracts the participation of

many businesses because the benefits that the festival brings to them is not small. Therefore, the possibility of socializing these festivals into the community is really high. Moreover, cultural events that are economically backed up can enjoy greater popularity. Or rather, Christianity originally came from the West where globalization of capitalism commenced and spread throughout the world; and obviously, this economic globalization acts as a carrier of Western values to the world. So it is understandable that Western cultural phenomena enjoy greater popularity than those of the East in this period of global integration.

Two important fields of cultural life, namely, *literature & art* and *language*, also experienced lively exchanges and reception of values from outside. Nevertheless, due to the typical characters of these two areas, these phenomena of exchanges and reception will be discussed on another occasion.

All the above cultural exchanges are the most vivid manifestation of changes in cultural life in the direction of acquiring world cultural values. They are changing fundamentally the facets of Vietnamese cultural life. One can say that these new Western cultural-and-art forms have been largely imported into our country so that to become a significant part of Vietnamese culture.

3. Restoring and bringing into play traditional cultural values

Speaking of renewal, one usually sees its obvious manifestation in the new things imported from outside. But in reality, renewal in inheriting old traditions for building the new culture is always crucial, simply because building the new will

always costs less if it is founded on the ready existing own bases.

Our Party asserted that “Cultural heritage is invaluable assets which help connect national community; it is the essence of national identity and the basis for creating new values and cultural exchanges” (1, p. 173). Therefore, bringing into full play the cultural traditional values is always the first and foremost mission of the whole society.

In the period of renovation, inheriting cultural traditions has met with dogmatism and puerilism. Although in our country there were not any serious cultural destructive acts, but there was one time when only cultural values which were relevant to our ideology were acquired. Values that were contrary to atheism were limited. Now as a result of belief freedom, a concretization of cultural liberty, various belief cultural values of people are restored and accepted. Pagodas, temples, and churches have been restored. Theological schools such as Zen monasteries, friaries are built everywhere. People have the right to choose which cultural values to pursue according to their beliefs. In that spirit, traditional festivals have also been revived throughout the country. One can say that a *new cultural environment* has been being established in our country in the spirit of cultural freedom since the introduction of renovation policy.

However, cultural freedom which goes beyond legal-moral principles will risk to harm the national cultural values system. Our Party had a right policy on bringing into play cultural heritage which was mentioned in the Resolution of the 5th Plenum of Party Central Committee (8th

Tenure): “Preserving national identity must go hand in hand with the fight against backwardness and obsolescence in our old customs and habits.” This policy fits with the tone of the whole world.

But in our country, in the early days of renovation there was a campaign to restore rampantly every old cultural phenomenon in the name of national identity protection. Festivals were held interminably in every locality, accompanied with unsound customs such as going into a trance, fortune-telling, burning votive paper luxuriously, etc... At that time, it felt that the whole nation was launching a “general pilgrimage” back to the past; this was based on the unilateral view holding that only cultural traditions made up national identity. In this respect, even UNDP stated: “Taking the extreme position of preserving tradition at all cost can hold back human development” (6, p. 89). Obviously, such negative phenomena in the inheriting traditional cultures had and have somewhat contaminated our cultural environment; thus they have to be eradicated.

Recently, in this spirit, a *new cultural phenomenon of bringing festivals into play* worthy of remark has appeared, that is the *secular festivals*. This festival type is to replace somewhat traditional types of festival that seem to have been saturated. This new type of festivals brings into play the modern cultural values. It aims at taking advantage of the material-economic values of cultural events to serve the development of the nation, which is relevant to the pragmatism of the modern consumption-oriented culture in this globalization era. Here in this kind of festivals, traditional and modern values are intermingled. Vietnamese people have

quickly recognized the practical tendency of the world festivals, turning their own into a cultural tool to serve the national development process. The recent years have witnessed the increasing popularity of nonreligious festivals such as tourism, sport, book, spring newspaper, fruit, parachuting, fireworks, food, waterways festivals, etc... And in order to promote international cultural exchanges, we even use English for naming some of the festivals among which is "Festival Hue", held every year in Hue city. This colorful festival attracts all types of cultural performances and the participation of both domestic and foreign troupes. We can say that our country's cultural inheritance and development is moving in the right direction in the spirit of renovation and integration.

Traditional kinds of culture such as *classical-traditional operas and dramas, and traditional folk-songs (tuồng, chèo, cải lương, các làn điệu dân ca cổ truyền)*, and especially the art types which were not much respected in the past, such as *festival song ("ca trù")* in particular (which is also traditionally known as *hát ả đào*, now are being attended by the State and research circle. Policies have been promulgated to preserve these traditional cultural forms. Theatres are being invested and improved; old-aged artists are being recognized and encouraged to make use of their talents and to impart experience and skills onto the younger generations. However, according to the development law of values system, traditional cultural forms cannot help having their old values changed. Therefore, the issue of renovating and making use of these cultural forms for the sake of national

development and modernization while maintaining their position in the society's reception is still a problem difficult to resolve.

In all, inheriting and bringing into play cultural traditions while acquiring the cultural values from the outside world has become a vital cultural development strategy for the service of the national modernization.

4. Issue arising from culture renewal

Being open to the world cultural values is a right policy of our Party and State. Nevertheless, this must be based on the economic, social and cultural backgrounds and conditions of Vietnam; only those values which are relevant and *particularly applicable to Vietnam's situation* are to be brought in.

There is a universal rule holding that a country after a long time of being shut down from the outside when opens its door will easily fall into another extreme: being open to all grossly and thus indistinguishably. Vietnam's cultural life seems partially to fall in such situation.

Reviewing Vietnam's cultural life shows that, apart from its achievements that may positively contribute to modernization, there remain the feelings that the way Vietnamese think is being governed by the Western thinking. This way of thinking is illogical imitation. This consequently leads to abuses in receiving new cultures. We are abusing the use of English language; abusing the absorption of literary and artistic concepts and theories; abusing entertainment and advertisement programs on mass media (especially on radio and television); abusing commercial books; abusing sex show in literature,

films, music, including theatre, and even in ordinary cultural lives (which is currently termed as “sex” and “hot shots”); abusing mass cultural performances such as fashion shows, beauty contests, etc; abusing “luxurious” sports such as “golf”; and even abusing in organizing festivals.

In terms of Vietnam’s beauty contests, according to a recent survey conducted on *Yahoo.com.vn* Net, the number of people who were against these contests was very high by the end of August 2008: 76% of people in the survey responded that there are so many beauty contests in Vietnam. *Tuanvietnam.net* website also published opinions of its readers against the frivolity and luxury of these contests because in Vietnam now so many people are still suffering hardships in their lives (see 7). These views became better established when the scandal of Miss Vietnam 2008 Trần Thị Thùy Dung with her false school report was revealed. Together with the irresponsible actions and unacceptable explanations from the organizing board, Miss Vietnam 2008 Contest has made the public furious and disappointed totally. It seems that for Vietnamese, the “moderation”, truthfulness, and purity are still important criteria of cultural values.

Overuses of “hot shots” in literature and art also have negative effects on the society: abortions among teenager girls are at an alarming rate; a number of 13-year-old girls became pregnant without knowing who the father of their child were since they had had sex with more than dozen men in their commune, even DNA assessors lost patience in seeking for the baby’s real father (see 8). Likewise, the rate of adultery is also on the increase.

In terms of *golf courts*, there have been so many cries from farmers. It is said that when golf courts “land” the fields, farmers are sentenced to poverty! Cries from poor farmers clearly reveal that self-interest disease is invading the lives of Vietnamese people. It makes Vietnamese officials become indifferent to the risk of impoverishment of the farmers because of golf court and spa resort construction. According to statistics, the number of golf courts in Vietnam is too high (123 courts built and been building in total, accounting for 38,000 hectares, half of which is cultivated land). Meanwhile in the world, golf is not on the list of Olympic Games and the 29 of every year has been chosen to be non-golf day (see 9). On the visit to Hòa Bình Province, General Secretary Nông Đức Mạnh even reminded the local officials that golf courts should not be built on fields (see 10). In the difficult time of the world economy this August 2008, President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea also requested the country’s authorities to stop playing golf (see 11). So is building too many golf courts an abuse in Vietnam?

And above all is the abuse of the right to freedom of creation. As it is mentioned previously, our Party has asserted uncountable times the right to freedom of creation. It also, however, emphasized that this right has to go alongside with *citizen’s duty*. But in fact, there still remains here and there the extreme phenomena. On the one hand, there exist the so-called “guiding authoritarian opinions” of someone that negatively limit the freedom of expression and freedom of creation. On the other hand, because of IT advances, especially the Internet, freedom of expression and freedom of creation

sometimes go beyond the limits. When publications can freely go online without being assessed by any publishers or editors, freedom of expression and creation will become absolute, which overshadows citizen's duty. Many articles have been written as if only to self-satisfy individual's eagerness for success; carelessly - and - irresponsibly written writings are still posted online. In these cases, one can say that *freedom of one person is doing harms to freedom of the others*. Such type of freedom clearly violates the human rights.

In sum, above-mentioned disordered phenomena can be designated only by one word: "abuse". And they also make us think that cultural life asks to be managed scientifically and reasonably, that is it must be managed by laws. This is the manifestation of political culture's role. Only so we could build up a culture that is humane, democratic, human-right respectable and constitutes the dynamic for development.

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