

Book Reviews

The Multi-ethnic Culture of Vietnam

Author: Professor Đặng Nghiêm Vạn

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Đặng Nghiêm Vạn, the author of the book, is foremost an ethnologist. Despite working in different fields, the elements of ethnic minority and mountainous area are deeply embedded in his academic career. He stayed in the mountainous area when participated in the national Resistant war. He was responsible for two classes of mountainous children when he stayed in a dormitory in Nan Ning (Quangzhou, China). Back to Vietnam later, he was chosen to be a headmaster of the Mountainous Teacher College. That is why he understands thoroughly thinking, feelings and customs of the mountainous people.

Turning to ethnological studies, especially on the ethnic minorities in the mountainous area, he took the initiative to re-organize knowledge of this region and put it under the light of ethnological studies which he learnt in former Soviet Union. He became interested in religious studies when he attended the university of Lomonoxop, Moscow and Prof. S.A. Tokarev, a famous Russian ethnologist, was his principal supervisor. In the field of religious studies, he widened his research from primitive religions to current religions, from ethnic religions to national religions.

Research on Vietnamese culture, according to Đặng Nghiêm Vạn, must include all 54 different ethnics. In *A Multi-ethnic Culture of Vietnam*, he presents the concept of “culture” in ethological or anthropological aspects with priority for understanding of cultures of ethnic minorities. Readers will see the unity and diversity of a multi-ethnic culture of Vietnam as well as its great contributions to the building of the Vietnamese culture in general.

The book consists of 5 parts with 22 chapters. The opening part introduces concepts of culture, ethnic culture and national culture in the eye of Ethnology; the first part discusses on culture and economy; the second part is on material culture; the third part talks about society’s organization; and the fourth part deals with spiritual culture.

According to the author, at the present, on the geographical - ethnical map in Vietnam, we can still find the three levels that next to one another: The area of Trường

Son-Tây Nguyên; the area of West North, west of Thanh Hóa – Nghệ An and the region lying alongside with Vietnamese-Chinese border from Lào Cai, Hà Giang to Lạng Sơn; and the deltas from the South to the North, most valleys in mountainous area, the midland and deltas of Red river and Thái Bình river toward Quảng Ninh province.

In all these three levels, we can find various expressions of tangible and intangible culture. That is why, in the book, in each chapter, the author provides comparison for similarities and differences among regions, ethnics. It is the same to religious life of residents in those areas. He puts that, forms of world religions, from ancient to modern, from the East to the West are present in every ethnic in Vietnam. Primitive forms of religion such as totemism, magic, Shamanism are popular in their incomplete forms because in fact ethnic minorities now in Vietnam are not tribes from ancient time. As time goes by, monotheistic religions such as Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam have got up to 6 millions followers and are developing. This is to say that no one can deny the fact that in contemporary Vietnam, there are both monotheistic and polytheistic religions.

However, from an overall consideration, we can see that national religious system, known as Ancestor worship (for the deaths), or “đạo Tổ”, is the most fundamental and popular cult that all Vietnamese people are practising. Using the world “cult” (đạo), Đặng Nghiêm Vạn wants to explain that the concept of “religion” is understood differently in Vietnam because the Western people mostly worship the only one High God. Meanwhile, cults in the Orient and in Vietnam are basically not monotheistic religions; they are polytheistic religions. There are three levels of “đạo Tổ”: 1: family level which worships ancestors of family or clan (family expanded); 2. Village level which worships tutelary gods who protect for the village; and 3: National level which worships persons with great contributions to building and protecting the country. All these three levels are found in all ethnics who are living in Vietnam. Regarding the objects of worship, he indicates that people in the West mostly worship the God only while in the East people worship anyone who might have great contribution to the communities or to the nation.

The Multi-ethnic Culture of Vietnam can be considered as the summary of Đặng Nghiêm Vạn’s life-time research. He is now among leading ethnologists in Vietnam.

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