

# The Situation of Vietnamese value system studies

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**Abstract:** *From the understanding of the terms “value system” and “Vietnamese value system”, this article focuses on the review, appraises the key studies of the West on Vietnamese value system as well as of Vietnamese scholars from the time of French colonialism until now. Based on that, the author proposes some ideas in identifying the current Vietnamese value system.*

**Keywords:** Value, value system, Vietnamese value system, national character.

## I. The terms of value system and Vietnamese value system

The term of value system appears more in the social sciences such as philosophy, psychology, pedagogy... However this is still a complex term, defining its meaning as a scientific concept hasn't get the unanimity up to now.

In general, we would understand that the value system is the combination of different values, arranged in a certain order to perform specific functions of assessments in a certain space-time. Each value in the value system is always historical-specific, therefore there is no general abstract value system, but it is always associated with specific subjects

such as Vietnamese value system, Chinese value system, Western value system... Besides, it is necessary to say that the value system is not a “simple and crude” set of values (Trần Ngọc Thêm, 2016: 52), but it is arranged systematically, following a certain order. In fact, the value system of a nation is always impacted and determined by the social existence, so it is like a mirror of society through the historical periods. Compared to other values in the value system of the nation, the cultural value is considered to be the most important, precisely because of this reason some people identified the cultural value system as value system of the nation. Usually, the value system changes more slowly than the social existence, and

the values themselves in the value system are not fixed forever, they have always been determined by the space-time context and objective relationships. Therefore, comparing the values in value system in each period we see the long-lived values, lost values, and changed position hierarchy of values in the value system.

From understanding the value system above, we think that Vietnamese value system includes ideal values, expectably existing in reality and having an orientating role for the human behavior, for the activities of social institutions and for the development direction of Vietnam nation-state.

## **II. The issue of Vietnamese value system studies**

Considering the issue of Vietnamese value system studies, we can see that in each phase of national history, there were quite much typical works referring to this content:

### *1. The French colonial period of early twentieth century*

The studies of Vietnam value system in this period were associated with a number of scholars such as: Trần Trọng Kim, Đào Duy Anh, Trần Đình Hượu...

The typical work is *Vietnam Cultural General History*, published in 1938 (reprinted in 1998), written by scholar Đào Duy Anh. The author summarized the 7 Vietnamese typical values as follows: 1) good “memory”, inclination to arts and intuition; 2) eagerness for learning and fondness for literature; 3) “less illusion” [inclination to practicalness]; 4) “hard

working power” at a level that few nations have; 5) “ability of suffering the misery and being often humble”; 6) “love of peace, but when facing the important affairs one is ready to sacrifice for grand cause”; 7) high ability to “imitate, adapt and reconcile”. According to scholar Đào Duy Anh, Vietnamese people have “smart intellect”, but few people are “extraordinarily brilliant”; the Vietnamese just love both science and arts, but they have richer intellect of arts than of science (Đào Duy Anh, 1998).

Historian Trần Trọng Kim when talking about Vietnamese people and the evolution of Vietnam finalized: With regard to intellect and character, the Vietnamese people have both good and bad qualities. Roughly they have sound mind, quickly understand in learning, are clever with hands; many people have swift wit and good memory; besides they have fondness for learning, hold knowledge in esteem, appreciate politeness, like morals; consider the kindness, uprightness, décor-um, wisdom and faithfulness as “Five Constant Virtues” for their behavior. However, Vietnamese often are sly, some-times wily, often disparage and make fun of others. They often are shy and want peace, but when going to war, they still have courage and discipline. Trần Trọng Kim also emphasized some typical limited qualities of the Vietnamese such as: relying on others, naïvety, egoism, familial selfishness, and localism... (Trần Trọng Kim, 2011). Although in Trần Trọng Kim’s study there were some rather subjective and class-conscious assessments, but we could

recognize that his assessments of strengths and weaknesses of the Vietnamese are quite clear and with scrupulous research in different cultural areas.

Despite the fact that the values in Vietnam value system through the studies in French colonial period are different, but the studies agreed on the values of the Vietnamese people in some points such as: With regard to strong points of Vietnamese people, there are some outstanding qualities such as fondness for learning, diligence and hard-working aptitude, undaunted patriotism, optimism, humanism... With regard to weaknesses of the Vietnamese, scholars had some remarks that Vietnamese are less creative, often ridicule and are envious of others... In general we can see that the assessments of the Vietnamese value system in this period focused only on depicting some typical features of characters of Vietnamese people, meanwhile the studies of the dialectical relationship between Vietnamese social existence and Vietnamese value system were quite few. Beside that, some assessments of the Vietnamese value system in this period were still subjective and somewhat class-conscious.

## 2. Period just before Renovation

Among the studies of Vietnamese people's characters as the science of history there is the work *Vietnamese Communes and Villages* by Nguyễn Hồng Phong. This work discussed rather objectively both positive and negative aspects of traditional characters (or personalities) of the Vietnamese people.

The author especially stressed the historical perspective in considering traditional characteristics, which means it is necessary to assess the daily live by specific periods and activities (Nguyễn Hồng Phong, 1959).

The study of Vietnamese characters was further developed by Nguyễn Hồng Phong in the work *Learning about National Characters*. This work was seen as the results of laborious studies of Vietnamese traditional national characters, expressed in literature, arts and life. Author analysed deeply and interpreted the typical characters of the nation such as the sense of collectiveness-community, respect for morals, thrift, simpleness, practicalness, indomitable patriotism and love of peace, humaneness, optimism (Nguyễn Hồng Phong, 1963). However, in its assessment, the author hardly mentions the negative sides of the personalities and characters the Vietnamese people.

In the 1980s, in the work *Traditional Values of the Vietnamese People*, Trần Văn Giàu has put forward a table of values of Vietnamese people that includes 7 points: patriotism, hardworking, heroism, creativeness, optimism, loving others and respect for righteousness. In particular, the value of patriotism was raised to patriotism and regarded as the "red thread" throughout the entire history of Vietnam from ancient to modern by the author. Among these values, the patriotism was elevated by the author to the rank of doctrine and was considered as the "red thread" throughout the entire history of Vietnam from ancient to modern times. Scholar Phan Ngọc also

pointed out some of the Vietnamese typical characteristics: 1/ attention, 2/ solidarity, 3/ harmony in family, 4/ compassion for people, 5/ respect for people regardless of wealth and poverty (cited after Ngô Đức Thịnh [chief author], 2010: 97). Vietnamese personality is typical first in responsibility. According to Phan Ngọc, the sense of responsibility is a quite popular character of Vietnamese people, expressed in the attitude towards the living and the dead, towards the present, the past and the future. Hence, in Phan Ngọc's opinion, "This sense of responsibility is manifested in public opinion, crystallized into moral standards, represented in tradition, and remained in inmost feelings" (Phan Ngọc, 1994: 34).

The work *Vietnam Civilization* by Nguyễn Văn Huyền (published in 2003), awarded *Hồ Chí Minh Prize*, indicated that Vietnamese people were educated by "obsolete learning, never getting methods", so they were less creative had the trend to "agree to everything and imitate everything". Unlike some previous researchers studying the Vietnamese value system, Nguyễn Văn Huyền did not talk about patriotism but he emphasized the courage of Vietnamese people: "The Vietnamese do not lack courage..., they are capable of long resistance in the worst conditions, of fighting against those forces who are more powerful in quantity and quality... Vietnamese farmers can become brave and enduring soldiers, having strong rushing power" (Nguyễn Văn Huyền, 2003: 361).

Nguyễn Văn Huyền had the same viewpoint as scholar Đào Duy Anh about

the fact that Vietnamese people have more the nature of artist than of scientist, and that the Vietnamese are more sensitive than reasoner. The difference of assessments of Nguyễn Văn Huyền in comparison with previous scholars was that he put some mental qualities of the Vietnamese in paradoxically opposite relations such as: The Vietnamese are lazy and hardworking, loose and realistic, erratic and consistent, thievish and generous, rustic and wise.

### 3. *Period from Renovation up to now.*

After the years of Renovation so far, there has been a research trend on Vietnamese value system from the psychological perspective which has attracted a number of representative authors such as: Đỗ Long, Vũ Dũng, Phạm Minh Hạc...

The work *Psychology of Vietnamese people in the industrialization and modernization - Some points to overcome*, by collective of authors who are members of the Society for Psychology and Education (under direction of Phạm Minh Hạc, 2004), analysed deeply positiveness and limitations of psychology of Vietnamese people. Although some of its assessments are still subjective, but from the psychological perspective, the work has certain practical contributions in the context of the country entering the period of industrialization and modernization, putting forward new problems for the studies of Vietnamese value system.

From the perspective of axiology, Hồ Sĩ Quý in the book *On Values and Asian Values* has analyzed the traditional Asian values in the context of the contemporary

world and in comparison with other value systems. The work has synthesized the typical views of some reputable scholars at home and abroad about the values and Asian values. Especially the author interpreted the correlations between the traditional Asian values and the culture of Vietnam, and analyzed the dominant values of the Asian values table applied in Vietnam, such as diligence, fondness for learning, respect for family and community... The author also initially posed new problems in the studies of value system of Vietnamese people in the context of international integration and globalization (Hồ Sĩ Quý, 2005).

Trần Ngọc Thêm is considered as one of the “active” researchers of Vietnamese values system in recent years at numerous large-scale scientific conferences and as scientist who has published many valuable works on this issue. Among his works, we must mention two recent representative ones such as: *Some Issues of Vietnamese Value System* (2015) and *Vietnamese Value System from the Traditional to the Modern and the Path to the Future* (2016). Having applied the systematico-typological approach, the author identified a five identity characteristic system of Vietnamese culture such as: 1) community coherence (village coherence); 2) preference for harmony; 3) appreciating the Yin (the moderation); 4) tending to synthesis; 5) flexibility (Trần Ngọc Thêm, 2015: 160-161). In addition, the author also pointed out some bad habits of Vietnamese people as: deceitfulness, saying one thing and doing another, weakness for achievements, lacking the

sense of law... In particular, the author also added 15 personality qualities of the Vietnamese such as: awareness about legislation, frank honesty, personal spirit, scientism, self-respect... It can be said, this is a quite elaborate work in presenting the human qualities of Vietnamese people on three aspects: advantages, limitations and additional qualities by results of survey in detail.

The remarkable highlights of the studies on Vietnamese people value system after the Renovation Day are: Their evaluation of Vietnamese values was relatively objective, including on good characteristics and bad characters. Furthermore, the issue of studying Vietnamese value system began to be interested by scholars from different angles. Some works analysed deeply the variation in the Vietnamese value system through the tables of survey with rich and reliable data. Besides, some of works referred to the effects of times phenomena such as the trend of globalization, international integration, market economy... These phenomena are impacting the change of Vietnamese current value hierarchical system.

In some documents of the Vietnam Communist Party, the Vietnamese human-building orientations were also put forth, most typically in the Fifth Resolution of 8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee (1998) and the Ninth Resolution of 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee (2014).

Those Vietnamese human values which were determined by the Vietnam Communist Party in the 5<sup>th</sup> Resolution of

8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee are: ardent patriotism; national self-strengthening spirit; solidarity; sense of community making coherence between individual - family - village - Fatherland; love of humans; tolerance; respect for sentimental attachment; respect for morals; diligence; creativeness in working; subtlety in behaviour; simplicity in lifestyles. Vietnam Communist Party affirmed that these values are assessed as “sustainable values, the essence of the Vietnamese peoples communities that has been built up over thousands years of struggle for building and defending the country” (Vietnam Communist Party, 1998).

Following the points of view in building up Vietnamese value system of 5<sup>th</sup> Resolution of 8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee, the 9<sup>th</sup> Resolution of 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee confirmed again: Perfecting the value norms of Vietnamese culture and people, creating environment and conditions for the development of personality, morals, intellect, creativeness, physical health, spirit, social responsibility, civic duties, law-abiding consciousness; promoting patriotism, national pride, conscience and responsibility of each person to oneself, family, community, society and country...; developing culture for the perfection of human dignity and building human being for cultural development. In building the culture, the focus must be kept in mind to build human personality, good lifestyle, with basic features: patriotism, love of humans, sentimental attachment, honesty, solidarity, hardworking, creativeness (Vietnam Communist Party, 2014).

#### 4. Vietnamese human value system in the studies of some Western scholars

Besides the studies of Vietnamese scholars, we would mention a number of studies of foreign scholars on the value system of Vietnamese people: *Annam Empire* by Charles Gosselin, published in 1904 in France - the book presented with fidelity the panorama of Vietnam's traditional society and later was referred to by Trần Trọng Kim when he wrote the *Vietnam Historical Summary*; *Annam National Psychology* by Paul Giaran - an French official who was counsellor in Indochina - also published in 1904 in Paris; *Portrait and Characters of the Annamite* by French army lieutenant Ch. Leson Saint Martin, published in Hanoi in 1912; *Understanding about Vietnam* by Pierre Huard and Maurice published in Hanoi in 1954... (cited after Trần Ngọc Thêm, 2016: 140-143).

Most noteworthy is the study of the Italian scholar, published in Paris in 1981 with the title: *Vietnam between two myths*. Claude Palazzoli mentioned 7 typical values of Vietnamese: 1) sense of “maintaining dignity, refusing to lose it in any challenge”; 2) “diligence can help to cover the sea”; 3) “courteousness and delicateness... makes the atmosphere here be not rude or heavy”; 4) “a subtlety deliberately split hairs”; 5) “unassertiveness prolongs weightiness, judgment and decision”; 6) “pragmatism... and ingenious adaptability and lucidity in any situation”; 7) “especially being romantic and sentimental” (cited after Ngô Đức Thịnh [chief author], 2010: 97).

In this work, Claude Palazzoli described the Vietnamese with the characters that he called “myths” such as: a small, brave and proud nation; a wise, effective and hard-working people; an enduring and resilient nation... Besides, he also presented a quite frank remarks on Vietnamese people: A lovable and hopeless country, quarrelsome and stubborn about an unbreakable faith, but also a crooked and delicate Vietnam, open to foreigners and welcoming the other cultures and other options despite intense embargoes... As conclusion for his assessments, Claude G  rald Falazzoli confirmed: In conclusion, it is a Vietnam “endlessly humane, fascinating and sensitive” (cited after Trần Ngọc Thêm, 2016). It can be seen, these are the remarks on the value system of Vietnamese people based mainly on analyzing the characters of people in the context of Vietnam having been invaded by colonialism in the twentieth century, however, these are very respectable assessments of foreign scholars in the study of Vietnamese value system.

### **III. Some conclusions**

Studies of Vietnamese value system have long been the attractive theoretical and practical subject. Western scholars and the class of Vietnamese scholars living in the French colonial period were the firsts who were interested in this interesting and not less difficult to be convinced topic. Starting from the initial questioning of the pioneers, the next generation of researchers have tried to put forth the theoretic bases, the methodological orientations and practical instructions with certain significance for the next studies.

The most difficult of the study and identification of Vietnamese value system is that: Despite the clear fact that Vietnamese people and Vietnamese culture have many particularities and a system of unique values, which were early formed in the national history, existed quite stably, and had considerably determinant significances for further development of man, society and country, however, proving convincingly these particularities of values of Vietnamese culture and people is not easy at all. Sensory perception is not always identical to the theoretical explanations. Moreover, as for Vietnamese value system, besides the identification of positive values which have to be brought into play, there still are negative limitations and defects to be eliminated and overcome. This fact was proved by the actual researches to be extremely difficult.

After over 30 years of renovation, together with advances in new theories and perspectives on culture, civilization and man, generation of scientists today have had the relatively systematic works of Vietnamese value system. Many valuable works were presented and published to the world scientific community. Besides, the new results of scientific studies have also become the theoretical perspectives on culture, people and values in the documents of Vietnam Communist Party, particularly since 5<sup>th</sup> Resolution of 8<sup>th</sup> Central committee up to now.

Overall, though the research achievements are very great, but they are still small and modest in comparison with the scale and

stature themselves of the Vietnamese value system. This requires researchers and social activists to take more great pains to explore and enrich further the theory of Vietnamese value system, so that this theory could increasingly reflect more deeply realities □

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