

Current Good and Bad Trends of Vietnamese Traditions and Customs

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Abstract: Vietnamese customs are very rich and express national identity. Currently, 54 ethnic groups live peacefully in a united country while the economic, social and political conditions of historical periods have greatly influenced the habits and customs of Vietnamese people. In the present time, the laws of the state, social and religious organizations play a very important role in the current practice. In this context, many good practices are valued while obsolete ones are being prevented or minimized. Good customs, which often involve ancestor worship and rituals, relate to labor and social cohesion. With the encouragement of the Vietnamese Government and the support of social organizations, practices consistent with the current social life have been preserved and developed throughout the country. Thanks to that, Vietnam has a common identity for all 54 ethnic groups. There are good customs, which have been forgotten for a time because of war, are now restored. Some customs are narrowed or changed in the way they are organized because of their potential danger to society. Originating from the feudal period and being influenced by superstition, backward customs are mainly related to burial and worship rituals. Because of their bad influence on the health and safety of the community, these practices are gradually being eliminated. Although changing habits is a very difficult task, recent studies show that the habits of the Vietnamese people are changing to be in line with modern life.

Keywords: Custom, Value, Practice, Influence, Change

1. Introduction

Traditions and customs are highly valued in Vietnam. The solemn folk festivals have seen an uplift in popularity while the laws governing social relationships such as the Vietnamese Civil Code in 2015 [1], the Law on Marriage and Family in 2014 [2], contain provisions that favor traditional regional customs. Customary rules are spontaneously applied in social fields of Indigenous people. Vietnamese people know how to embrace the diversity in customs and habits of different ethnic groups in their own country. However, unsound customs that are not appropriate for modern society are provoking reactions from the media. There have been many suggestions from individuals and social organizations to improve the situation, but the possibility to adjust or remove these practices is still a debatable subject.

The customary practices can be examined in the context of the legal system which is different from country to country because of differences in history, socio-political and

economic condition. As such, an analysis of the cultural and legal context of Vietnamese traditions and customs in order to better understand the spiritual life and social relationships of people is essential.

2. Literature Review

The customs of Vietnamese people have always been an interesting subject for books and articles. The most valuable mention is the work of Phan Ke Binh [3] which deals with Vietnamese customs and beliefs, including clan and social customs in the early twentieth century. Phan Ke Binh believes that the country's independence requires social reform, improving intellectual standards, eliminating backward customs and changing educational methods. He analyzes new and old customs to see what should follow and what to eliminate during the period when Vietnam was a French colony. Quang Tue [4] describes the spirit of ancient civilization in Vietnamese society. The book fully reflects the

spirit of a long-standing civilization in Vietnamese society from ancient times to the present. That culture is based on considering families as a social foundation, respecting moral morality, and stabilizing the lives of every family and society. The concept of family is expressed through conjugal relationships, filial piety with parents, and ancestor worship. Tan Viet [5] presents questions and answers about the origin of customs in Vietnam, and let readers assess and draw conclusions by themselves. In terms of local customs and habits, it is worth mentioning books by authors such as Li Khac Cung [6], which provide valuable materials for studying culture and customs in Hanoi.

Also, the mass media has been extensively discussed rituals and customs that are being performed along with current reviews. We also see news about customs and practices in official newspapers such as Viet Bao, Tuoi tre, and Cong an Nhan dan. Newspapers of the Vietnam Buddhist Association usually present interesting articles about customs and rituals related to Buddhism. In addition, there are laws as well as government circulars and directives that address customs and practices with related regulations. For example, the Vietnamese Civil Code 2015 clearly defines customs and clearly identifies the circumstances in which customs are applied. Vietnam's Law on Marriage and Family 2014 recognizes the importance of custom in marriage and family regime.

3. Research Methods

The research is primarily based on the analysis of secondary data derived from published research and articles on reputable websites. At the same time, field observations also help to verify and better understand the data collected, as well as to supplement essential information for the study. These methods served as bases for scientific inferences about an important social phenomenon in the lives of Vietnamese people.

We tend to find the answers to two following research questions:

- How did Vietnamese traditions and customs revolute?
- How Vietnamese people face unsound customs?

The following hypothesis will be verified: The habits of Vietnamese people are changing to be in line with modern life.

4. Research Result

4.1. Overview of Vietnamese Customs

Customs in most civilizations are formed from many sources. First of all, many practices originated from everyday imitations. These imitations then became habits, customs, and handed down from generations to generations. Secondly, customs are brought from abroad through invasions, cultural exchanges, and then integrated with local cultures. Third, customary law can originate from rules designed by the elites to exercise control over social activities. In addition, religion

plays a very important role in creating norms.

Customs in Vietnam has many characteristics that should be considered. First, 54 ethnic groups still retain their own identities, which are affected by different climatic and soil conditions in many different regions. When the ethnic minorities in the high mountains hold polytheism and rituals from ancient times, those who live in urban areas tend to follow the habits of modern life.

Second, Vietnam is located in Southeast Asia where many religions and beliefs coexist with rituals and interwoven customs. In this context, Vietnam experiences the advent of many cultural flows, particularly from India, China, Europe, and America. Due to the domination of Chinese feudal dynasties for a very long time, Vietnam is heavily influenced by Chinese culture. Confucianism and Taoism have strongly influenced the beliefs, the concept of life, and the behavior of Vietnamese people, especially the customs related to family life and social relations. Vietnam is a multi-religious country. Ethnic groups in the Vietnamese community have their own practices associated with their traditions and beliefs. According to statistics of the Press Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam, there are 6 major religions in Vietnam. They are Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao. Buddhism has 11 million followers, Catholic has 6.5 million followers, Protestant has 1.5 million followers. Cao Dai and Hoa Hao are two indigenous religions, with 2.3 million and 1.3 million followers respectively [7].

Third, customary practices are influenced by the legal system. Vietnam legal ideologies can be divided into four main periods, such as Feudal legal system, French colonialist, Soviet Union legal tradition and Vietnamese legal system in the period of integration and globalization. Under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party, normative legal documents (state law) are fundamentally recognized and applied widely to regulate all social relations. Recent changes in economic and political conditions have also had a great impact on the sustainability of customary practices. In 1986, the Renovation Policy has secured remarkable achievements in stimulating economic growth. Since the 1990s, customary law and precedents have attracted attention from the government. For example, Article 7 of the Marriage and Family law of 2014 stipulates, "In case the law does not specify and the parties do not have an agreement, the customs that express the identity of each ethnic group, not contrary to the rules set out in Article 2 and does not violate the law of this Law, shall apply " [2].

Finally, the current international exchange has affected the habits and living standards of Vietnamese people. The next section discusses recent changes in Vietnamese customs and habit.

4.2. Development of Fine Customs

4.2.1. Worship of Ancestors

All ethnic groups in Vietnam have special customs for the deceased, but the tradition of worshipping ancestors of the Kinh ethnic group that accounts for the majority of

Vietnamese is considerably different by expressing gratitude for the predecessors and recording the continuation of the clan. This custom also spans across religions. For example, Christians can put an Ancestor altar in their home. Similarly, Ancestor altars are placed next to the altar for the Buddha.

The tradition of worshipping ancestors preserves the community's cohesion and promotes the fine traditions of the family. This tradition is more important when it is reflected in the worship of the Patriarchate. Vietnamese people believe that they share common ancestors, so the Hung Kings' Commemoration Day has become a great event of the whole country, strengthening solidarity and national pride.

4.2.2. *Worship of the National Heroes*

Like many peoples in the world, Vietnamese people remember and honor their predecessors who served the country. The worship of national heroes in Vietnam also has the nuance of ancestor worship. This custom comes first from people when they want to preserve the tradition of fighting against natural disasters, the enemy of the nation, and want to have good examples for future generations.

Places of worship may vary depending on the reputation of the heroes. Great heroes are worshiped in temples, for example, the Temple of Two Ladies, Saint Giong Temple, and Saint Tran Temple. When the celebrities or the heroes are chosen as the Protector Saint of the village, they will be worshipped in the communal temple. It is possible for many Protector Gods to be worshipped in one place. For example, in the Communal house Dinh Bang, three Protector Gods such as the God of Mountain, the God of Land, and the God of Water are worshipped along with 6 Village founders.



Figure 1. Saint's Treasure Temple-Bac Ninh province Source: Vu Xuan Doan.

Buddhist organizations sometimes participate in the construction of these places of worship. For instance, the monument of Saint Giong in Soc Son, Hanoi was built with the socialization method at a cost of about 50 billion Vietnamese Dong, inaugurated in October 2010 [8].

4.2.3. *Festivals Preserving and Celebrating the Cultural Identity of the Region*

Vietnam has many festivals throughout the year. Almost

every village has its own festivals, from simple ceremonies conducted at communal houses to ceremonial processions with flags, palaces, costumes, and solemn rituals. There are many festivals known nationwide such as Folk Songs Festival in Bac Ninh province, Huong Pagoda Festival in Ninh Binh province, and Tran Kings' Ceremony in Nam Dinh province, etc. There were rituals that were not sustained for some time, now being solemnly restored. For example, the Ploughing Ceremony which has not been carried out for nearly a hundred years is now conducted annually to encourage agricultural production. During this festival, people performed solemn rituals to start a new planting season. The first ploughman will be the one who plays the ancient kings, then the senior leaders will participate in plowing to set good examples of labor for the people.



Figure 2. Ploughing Ceremony in Ha Nam province. Source: [9].

Agriculture plays a key role in Vietnam's economy. In some countries in Asia, measures to encourage agricultural production like the Ploughing Ceremony date back to feudal times. With the development of economy and civilization in peacetime, these festivals are becoming more noticeable and create rich colors in Vietnamese cultural life.

These festivals have become an indispensable part of Vietnamese culture. However, Vietnam seems to have too many festivals. Lan Anh [10] noticed that according to statistics from the Department of Culture and Information in 2004, the country has 8902 festivals, including 7005 traditional folk festivals, 1399 religious festivals, 409 revolutionary historical festivals, and 25 festivals brought from abroad. On average, Vietnamese people have 24 festivals per day. Some festivals have to reduce the scope of activities. For example, the Fireworks Festival in Dong Ky village of Bac Ninh has been limited because of the risks posed by fireworks. Instead of burning large guns, only processions were organized. In Nem Thuong village, villagers have also narrowed the scope of their Pig Cleaving Festival. The procession of pigs is solemnly held, but the cleaving of pigs, which is considered disturbing, is done in secret places under the witness of very few people. In Do Son, Thanh Hoa, considering the danger of the Buffalo Fighting Festival, the organizers had to review the operation to ensure safety for participants, etc.



Figure 3. Fireworks Festival in Dong Ky village. Source [11].

4.3. Unsound Customs are Erased

“Unsound customs” are understood as practices that are no longer suitable for modern life, have negative impacts on the cultural and spiritual life, and can be harmful to human life. There are customs that have existed since ancient times. For example, in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, the Gia Rai ethnic group has the custom to arbitrate disputes by organizing diving competitions. Those who float first will be guilty and severely punished. Therefore, it is possible that both of them died from diving for too long under the water [12]. These customs are associated with superstition and appear as a challenge for the government and mass organizations.

Backward practices are mainly related to marriage and burial ceremony in ethnic minority areas. According to statistics of Le Tien Dung [13], there are 20 practices to remove, such as child marriage, high wedding challenges, wedding ceremonies for many days, keeping the dead body at home for many days, and not going to the hospital but asking for treatment by witches, etc.

In the mountainous areas, where the Bana ethnic group, the J'rai ethnic group, and the M'ay ethnic group live, it was customary that if a mother died after giving birth, no one would raise her newborn, otherwise, the forest ghost would destroy the villagers. Fortunately, with the intervention of the authorities, these customs have been gradually eliminated [14].

Superstition had been a problem that exists in all ethnic groups and regions. It has created different unsound customs. One example of a mourning concept is that if a family member died at the wrong time, other members would soon follow him. This belief obliges the living to carry out very complicated and expensive procedures to “dispel” this kind of bad luck. In Hanoi, according to our survey, the cost of such a procedure varies from VND 30 million to several hundred million, depending on each case and the economic conditions of the family. With the intervention of the government and social organizations, this practice has been significantly reduced. In the north, there are two pagodas which dedicate to these practices while paying respect to the new regulations. Practices in Linh Phai Pagoda, Hanoi are limited to the distribution of amulets for homeowners in need. Ham Long Pagoda in Bac Ninh only accepts simple procedures, for example, “Sending souls into the temple for

three years”. This practice, according to folklore, can resolve the potential dangers. The cost is only about 500 thousand VND.

4.4. Bad Trends Needing to be Controlled

There are customs that move in a socially undesirable direction and risk becoming unsound. There are two typical cases, which are the customs of “bride kidnapping” in mountainous areas and “burning joss paper offerings” in the lowland.

4.4.1. Bride Kidnapping

The Thai and H'Mong ethnicities share a well-known custom, when done in the traditional way, can also be considered as the beauty of a culture that helps to reduce the cost of marriage. In fact, when the man cannot satisfy the demand set out by the woman's family in order to marry her, he can compromise with the woman by finding her out in the street and “kidnapping” her. Then they will bring gifts to the woman's house to celebrate. The practice of “bride kidnapping” may vary a little, but generally respects the woman. However, this custom is being altered in a negative way and leads to social consequences. Men who only love unilaterally now try to kidnap the woman that he desires without her agreement. This custom, which now seems like a kidnapping, is regarded as a violation of the law. On the other hand, the practice of “bride kidnapping” is one of the causes of underage marriage. Frequently, women are kidnapped when being still very young. According to the survey of ethnic minorities conducted by the National Committee for Ethnic Minorities in 2015, the H'Mong has the highest rate of child marriage, up to 59.7%.



Figure 4. Bride Kidnapping. Source: [14].

According to Lin Taylor [15], Bride kidnapping, even though it is illegal, still occurs in countries like Armenia, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, South Africa, and in rural parts of the Central Asian country. In Kyrgyzstan, about one in five young women and girls are kidnapped for marriage. In Vietnam, this practice only exists in some places, especially in ethnic minority areas. However, the state and public opinion have taken measures to prevent bad developments.

Article 181 of Vietnam's Criminal Code [16] stipulates, “Any person who forces another person to marry against

his/her will, obstructs another person from marrying or maintaining their voluntary and civilized marriage, forces or obstructs a divorce by means of abuse, mental intimidation, demand for property, or other methods [...], shall receive a warning, or face a penalty of up to 03 years' community sentence, or 03 - 36 months' imprisonment." However, current sanctions are still implemented by local authorities. In most cases, people use education and reconciliation measures.

4.4.2. Joss Paper Offerings

The practice of burning fake money and paper items comes from ancient China [17]. In the past, this custom, which was to use more economical material in the funeral, now turns out to be problematic because more and more resources are being wasted, and the incineration of materials have been worsening pollution.



Figure 5. Joss Paper Offerings. Source: Vu Xuan Doan.

Joss paper offerings are widely used in families, temples, cemeteries, and pagodas on countless occasions. In many temples in the North and North Central, people burn more joss paper offerings than in the South. Items in papers are varied in form, and they are more and more like the real thing. In the old days, people burned paper elephants and paper horses. Now people burn cars, cell phones, refrigerators, air conditioners, and even aircraft made of colored paper and expensive materials. It is believed that these things will be used by the dead in the afterlife. There are many handicraft villages specializing in these products. It is a serious charge and a cause of pollution because paper items are burned everywhere.

The cost for this item is growing. Vietnamese people spend a huge amount of money to buy and burn nearly 50,000 tons of joss paper offerings every year. Only in the Hanoi area, the annual cost amount is up to 400 billion VND [18]. According to the statistics of the National Institute of Arts and Culture in 2015, only at Saint's Treasure Temple in Bac Ninh province, the money spent on joss paper offerings has reached 190 billion VND / year. This amount of money could

have been invested in public works or help those in need.

The Vietnamese government has issued official letters and decrees to limit the use of joss paper offerings. For example, under article 18, Decree 75/2010 / ND-CP, there exist "Caution or a fine of from 500,000 VND to 1 million VND for acts of burning joss paper offerings at festivals, historical and cultural sites, and other public places"[19]. In addition, local authorities such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hue, Quang Nam, Da Nang, Bac Ninh, etc. have implemented measures to limit this practice. However, this custom is deeply ingrained in the Vietnamese lifestyle. Therefore, restrictive measures can only take effect gradually over time.

Meanwhile, religious organizations have been involved in correcting the conventions, which yielded promising results. According to Vu Van Tuan [20], in February 2018, the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam issued the Official Letter No. 031 / CV-HDTS, which proposed that Buddhist monks and nuns should help eliminate superstitious thoughts and prohibit joss paper offering at Buddhist facilities. According to some journalists such as Vu Xuan Ban [21] and Hue Linh [22], the phenomenon of burning joss paper offerings in temples in Hanoi has been reduced. Many joss paper makers are preparing to switch to other professions. With about 18,000 temples in Vietnam, if this Letter is respected, the positive impact would be significant.



Figure 6. Joss Paper Offerings Incinerator -Saint' Treasure Temple. Source: Vu Xuan Doan.

4.4.3. Belief in Past Lives

Buddhism has a great influence on the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people, creating a fine tradition of loving peace, democracy and goodwill. Buddhism values and protects life, encouraging people to live in harmony with nature and society. Not only monks and nuns but also many Vietnamese who are not Buddhists consider the teachings of Buddhism as the motto of life and the standard to cultivate themselves.

With the influence of Buddhism, most Vietnamese believe in the Law of cause and effect. It is believed that if anyone does evil in this life, it will suffer bad consequences in the next life. This belief has some advantages because it can help reduce bad actions and make people do good deeds. However, people also believe that what happens to them in the present life is a consequence of what they did in their previous lives. This concept, when combined with superstition and being led by bad guys, has caused serious consequences. Instead of finding ways to overcome

difficulties in life, people go to temples and pagodas to pray and ask the help of monks or shaman. They argue that doing so will redeem past sins and be forgiven for a better life. Taking advantage of this situation, many legacy places have erected myths, scams to take money from people who pray. Bui Hoai Son - Director of the Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Arts, commented: "It is the economic benefits that have distorted some worship facilities in Vietnam, far from the original good purpose"[23]. In April 2019, there were some serious superstitious events that made the state and the Buddhist Association intervene. For example, Ba Vang pagoda in Bac Ninh province propagated and invited thousands of people to worship and pay large sums of money. According to a Labor Reporter survey in March 2019 [24], this Pagoda collected about VND 100 billion each year from superstitious people who believed in what happened in previous lives. They believed that paying for souls could solve all problems in life. In this case, the temple has become a place of religious business, instead of where people come to accumulate virtue and tranquility for life.



Figure 7. Pray in Ba Vang Pagoda. Source [23].

In this situation, the Government, as well as the Vietnam Buddhist Church, had many meetings and measures to prevent bad developments. They also propagated and educated people to follow the right path of Buddhism. At the Government press conference held on April 2, 2019, Ms. An, Vice Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism said, "The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism will continue to coordinate with the Vietnam Buddhist Church, the Ministry of Home Affairs and localities to continue propagating and raising people's awareness of traditional cultural values and good beliefs, avoiding being used to turn their legitimate wishes into profiteering activities."

5. Findings and Discussions

From the above results, we have found the answers to the two research questions as follows:

5.1. Evolution of Traditions and Customs

Customs and habits strongly influence the lives of Vietnamese people while Chinese culture has an important influence on Vietnamese customs and habits since ancient times. Besides, Buddhism also greatly influenced the spiritual life and social activities of Vietnamese people.

While the plains are somewhat guided by contemporary political factors, in the mountainous areas, the ethnic groups maintain big differences with the practices of polytheism. From high mountains to large cities, there are good customs and backward practices. We noticed that most customs are from Ancient time, but they are not entirely stable. There have been many changes until now, both in positive and negative ways.

5.2. Attitudes Toward the Bad Trend

Traditions and habits are mainly related to marriage and family, social relations, and burial procedures. The Vietnamese people follow these practices as rules to respect from generation to generation. Many people realize that some rules are no longer relevant to the present life. Nevertheless, because of a long-standing habit, many people still do not easily give up these customs. Over time, as some customs become dangerous or too expensive, public opinion in many places shows that more appropriate changes are needed.

The Government of Vietnam is seeking to eliminate bad practices. However, the habit of "respecting village rules more than the orders of the king" still enroots deep in Vietnamese society. It appears impossible for all problems to be solved by adopting the rapid application of state laws. This is why the role of social and religious organizations in educating and encouraging people to maintain good traditions and to eliminate backward practices is indispensable. In fact, the good cooperation between public opinion, mass media, religious organizations, and administrative agencies has brought positive results in recent years.

6. Conclusion

Vietnamese customs and traditions represent a long-standing culture and are influenced by many cultural movements. At present, the law of the state seeks to limit or eliminate bad practices and promotes the customs that are in accordance with the modern social and cultural life. Governments, social and religious organizations have contributed positively to this trend. Although changing habits is difficult and requires time, recent advances have shown that Vietnamese society has had great success in preserving national identity and building a civilized culture.

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