

Vietnamese Family - Change from Tradition to Modernity

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Abstract: Family is a cell of society, the first social institution contributing a fairly decisive part to build personality of each person. The family's stability is the premise for the development of a civilized and wealthy society. Family organization exists and changes with the existence and change of the social life. Over the last years, Vietnamese society have seen vigorous changes in many aspects thereby Vietnamese family is in transition from traditional family to modern one. This article focuses on clarifying the concept of family, traditional Vietnamese family, features of traditional Vietnamese family, especially pointing out the changes from traditional Vietnamese family to Vietnamese family today.

Key word: *Family, Vietnam, tradition, modern, change*

1. Introduction

Family is a fundamental and natural cell composing each community, society. Family play a core role in each person's life, where material and spiritual life of each individual is satisfied, one of the most social value of the Orient including Vietnamese. The family's stability is the premise for the development of a civilized and wealthy society. Everlasting strength of each country, nation depends much on the existence and development of family. Family is considered as fundamental value, the first social institution contributing a fairly decisive part to build personality of each person.

I can be affirmed that there is no sufficient and strong formation and development of personality if there is favorable educational environment in family as family is the first important institution imprinted in the being-built personality. Family is the place where a man is given birth and educated to have social credentials. Also, family is also the place where man enjoys life, love and protection between wife and husband, parents and children, among siblings...That enjoyment itself is the condition for man to develop physical and spiritual capacity, expanding its participation in the social activities and relations. It is social role or function of family.

Family is a social institution, exists and changes with the existence and change of the social life. During different historical periods, scope, structure and function of family change in line with the socio-economic conditions of such period. Recently, Vietnamese society has witnessed vigorous changes in many aspects, together with such change Vietnamese family is in transition from tradition to modernity. Therefore, it is in need to study this change comprehensively to identify the tendency of movement and change of Vietnamese family today.

2. Materials

Family makes its way in the world with the existence of the mankind society, man during itself recreation also create family. In the work “*German Ideology*”, Mark - Engels said that:” is that men, who daily re-create their own life begin to make other men, to propagate their kind: the relation between man and woman, the family”¹.

The main function of family is re-creating man. Family is formed by two primary relations: marriage and blood-relationship. In the West, many scholars have put forth new concepts of family. The work “*Third wave*” , “*Future shock*”, Alvin Toffler mentioned many theories on family, including “no-child family”, “deficient family”, “contracted family”, “homosexual family”...With the most generalized form, Alvin Toffler said that: the agricultural civilization is characterized by patriarchal family, industrial civilization by nuclear family and post-industrial civilization by the diversification of family type, feature, scope. In order to prove theory on family in the post-industrial society, in the “*Third wave*”, Alvin Toffler emphasized that:

“The industrially developed countries today are beehives with a mish-mash of family types: homosexual marriages, communes, groups, tribes, some ethnic groups and other forms never seen before. There were some contracted marriages, chain marriage...groups of families, experimented families, career families”².

In Vietnam, referring to the concept of “family”, some authors have different definitions based on their points of view. According to *Great Vietnamese Dictionary* “family is a group of members who have marriage and blood relationship and live in the same house”³. In the Journal “*Family psychology*”, Ngo Cong Hoan put forth a concept:” Family is a small society, having marriage, blood, psychophysiology relationship, having the same material and spiritual values, stable in the certain historical periods”⁴

In viewpoint of philosophy, at this time, in our opinion an acceptable definition of family is the one covering all relations and specific characteristics of a family. Therefore, it can be understood that *family is a fundamental social institution, a cell composing society, the most important form of each individual's life based on marriage and blood relationship that means the relationship between husband and wife, parents and children, siblings and other relatives.*

Family organization have many functions such as human reproduction, economy, family life organization (material and spirit), psycho-physiological need satisfaction but the most important and spiritual function is education. There must be children in a family (adoptive or natural children) and they must be educated to grow up. It can be family if it refuses to educate children. Family education must be the primary, school or society are only supporting. That organization is functioned to produce and preserve traditional culture. It originated from house-village-country relation in Vietnamese traditional society. This may be a difference in certain extent between Vietnamese family and that of other countries.

3. Results

3.1. Traditional Vietnamese family

According to the late Professor Tran Dinh Huou, tradition is not formed immediately, not immutable but fairly stable for long time. Therefore, he considered Traditional Vietnamese family is the one existed before the Westernization, that means existed until the end of 19th century, remains prevalent mainly in rural areas.

¹ K.Mark and Engels.1995, Complete Works, Third Volume. National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi, Page 41

² Alvil Toffler.1996, Third wave, Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, Page 313

³ Nguyen Nhu Y (chief author).1998, Great Vietnamese Dictionary, Culture-Information Publishing House, Hanoi, Page 719

⁴ Ngo Cong Hoan.1991, Family psychology, Hanoi Pedagogy University, Page 9

The Traditional Vietnamese family is considered by many researchers as the type of family with many factors likely immutable, rarely change, originated from the native culture, maintained and communicated from generation to generation. Traditional Vietnamese family is the one in close connection with rural, agricultural society. This form of family is the only one and existed at least to the period before Vietnam's contacting with the industrial and urban civilization (at the end of 19th century, early 20th century).

Traditional Vietnamese family is coupled with the village, commune cultural, with the policy that public rice field distributed periodically, agricultural production in combination with small scale industry, life needs of all members were satisfied by themselves. It was patriarchal family, attaching much important to ancestor worship and under significant influence by Confucianism; however, as ruled by native culture and affected by Buddhism and Taoism, it is not impacted inflexibly and passively but changed in line with Vietnamese society, Vietnamese tradition, softening rigid principles of the Confucianism in family.

Traditional Vietnamese family have many advantages such as close connection in respect of blood-based affection, preserving cultural traditions, customs, rites, promoting family tradition, rituals and family ethics. Family members may help each other both in material and spirit, take care of elderly and educate children. These are basic values of family culture that we must assume and promote.

Recently, many scientists have researched in Traditional Vietnamese family to find out its characteristics and values. In many different definitions, we agreed with the concept put forth by Do Thai Dong who said that: *"traditional family is surely the form of family in rural areas, in Asian agricultural societies, existed for a long time and nearly unchanged in many aspects. Thus, it is also agricultural family, an institution coupled with traditional agriculture, perhalf the agreement with the concept of traditional family is limited to such extent"*⁵

Accordingly, referring to traditional Vietnamese family it means extended family where three or four generations co-live together, dominated by patriarchalism and its members are affected by relatives, village and communal rules. A set of moral rules govern the relations among the members is communicated from this to other generation verbally or in other unwritten forms. That is respect for the elderly and love for the children, individual's benefit is lower than benefit of family, grateful to parents, filial piety is on top priority, respect grandparents, worship ancestors.

The ideal model of family: family live in peace, respect and comply with ethnical behavior, family tradition, having many children and grandchildren. Regarding education of children's personality, benefits of the family were far more important than individual interests of any one member of a family.

Traditional Vietnamese family have following characteristics:

Firstly, traditional Vietnamese family has been formed in the long history of the wet rice civilization and agricultural development, blood-based settlement, villages and neighbors were established, attached much importance to ancestors worship, families connected with each other based on father's family. The family members associated with each other not only by sentiment relations but also material which decided their survival that to earn living every day. Each family fed itself with almost all foods and other products. Siblings relationship have even been evaluated higher than marital relationship. Elder brother was on father's behalf to foster and educate his younger siblings. When parents are old, senile or dead the younger siblings will live with the elder's family, as a matter of course. If parents and elder brother die, the sister-in-law will be on their behalf to feed and

⁵ Do Thai Dong. 1991. *Traditional family and modifications in Southern Vietnam. Sociological researches on family in Vietnam.* Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, Page 72

educate the younger sisters and brothers. Marriage is very important, influencing on whole life happiness of the children but it is completely arranged by their parents.

Secondly, traditional Vietnamese family is extended with 3,4 generations, where the family members associate with each other by blood relation. There may be co-residence of three or more generations in a family: grandparents-parents-children, which is known as “three, four, five generations”. Each traditional Vietnamese family is an independently economic unit, a closed agricultural production unit. In the family, members associate with each other by material relation, ensuring their survival and by close sentiment relations which all help family exist and develop. That is the engagement between husband and wife, love for children, respect to parents, grandparents and ancestors...

Thirdly, traditional family influenced by Confucianism is protected by morality, custom, rites. Order is the thing to be protected.

As an ideology, a socio-political doctrine, initially Confucianism was introduced into Vietnam with a view to serving the domination of the Northern feudal dynasties. However, as a social ruling tool, Confucianism proved to be effective and suitable to the Eastern feudal societies. Therefore, after gaining independence, the feudal dynasties of Vietnam accepted and used Confucianism to consolidate community aiming to protect its independence and build the country. According to Confucianism, society is only an extended family. In family, grandparents and parents educate their children and grandchildren using the rule of conduct and ethics of Confucianism.

Fourthly, traditional Vietnamese family is a community which have close relations with village and country.

In the wet rice civilization, the most suitable form of co-residence in the same area is village and commune. Early appeared village and commune help consolidate the community in agricultural production, fighting natural calamity and enemy-inflicted devastation. Only community brings about life for each member, therefore, Vietnamese people live first for community, in close connection with the community. Vietnamese village is not the simple sum of families but an entity with the close association of families by many ties which are mainly habits, customs and village rules. Family is an entity associated with its clan and sentiment, compassionateness, responsibility relations are based on blood relations. Family is a “household” – economic, political and social unit to be in relation with the village, commune, local government and society.

3.2. Transition from traditional Vietnamese family to Vietnamese family today

With the cause of the country reform, Vietnamese family today has seen many changes in structure, scope, relations among its members under the influence of new economic, political and social conditions in the context of market economy and international integration.

Firstly, change in structure and scope

With the movement and change of history, social life, Vietnamese family also witnessed the change in scope from extended family into nuclear family, from a family with many generations co-living with each other into a family with only two generations. If traditional Vietnamese family has three or four generations, Vietnamese family today is nuclear one with two generations: parents and children, there are also single family, one-parent family. The reason of this phenomenon is very small place of residence but the more important reason is the difference in the psychology between the generations. However, despite of high ratio of nuclear family most of elderly in Vietnam are not lonely. In rural areas, elderly often live separately but near their children and grandchildren to help them and depend on them when they are old. The life close between the elderly and their children, grandchildren basically create stability and sustainability of family where the elderly are taken care thoughtfully and children are fostered and educated in good conditions, while in the cities, most of children and

grandchildren live far from their grandparents, depending much on the servants and kindergartens resulting in a gap in sentiment and education for both elderly and children, causing obstacle to the development of family and society.

For Vietnamese people, so far it is very important for a couple to get married and give birth, which is considered as tremendous duty, showing gratitude to their parents, family and ancestors. Therefore, family size is fairly large which may be 20, 30 people before reform period. This has been reduced recently, however, children always give lots of joy and happiness to every couple, making close and strong connection between them.

A large size family may cause conflict in term of psychology, age ect. But it also has positive aspect that parents, grandparents, children and grandchildren live together, share and help each other in their life. Nuclear family has its own advantages that there is less divergence in psychology or sentiment between the generations but it is lack of life experience, education in moral values etc. which may cause significant impact to the formation and development of the young's personality.

Secondly, change in family relations

Firstly, wife-husband relationship, until now for Vietnamese people marriage always a great work of each person's life, much importance always attached to marriage and family. In traditional Vietnamese family, "marriage is arranged by parents", a man may have many wives but a woman had only one husband, only man had the right to make decision on important works of family.

Today, there have been many great changes in socio-economic conditions which result in positive and better changes in moral standards of marriage relation. Marital relation is based on voluntary marriage. Man and woman have freedom to make a date, love, get married and build their family life. Equal and harmonious relationship between wife and husband is always fundamental moral standard to have a happy family "couples living in harmony have strength to make the Eastern Sea dry". Equality and democracy between wife and husband is a typical feature of new family, they share household chores and domestic duties, bring up and foster children, together make decision on important matters as well as take part in social activities. In the past, in traditional family, the thought of man preference and admission of plural marriage humbled the women but today equality between wife and husband is prevalent.

Secondly, relationship between parents and children, this relationship since time immemorial has been the most spiritual and noble sentiment in family life. In traditional Vietnamese family, moral standard of this relation is quite limited by Confucianism: parents make order - children must comply; education by imposition, violence; differentiated between son and girl. Today, such limitations have been gradually eliminated. Parents love, foster and educate their children, provide the best conditions for them to study and grow up, there is no discrimination between the children. Parents understand and live close to their children, respect their freedom and personality, facilitating to solve conflict and misunderstanding between the two generations. The children and grandchildren are more confident and proactive in showing their opinions, thought and sentiment to their parents or grandparents.

Thirdly, relation among siblings in family, in traditional Vietnamese family special importance was given to the relation among the siblings even more important than marital relation. A husband may leave his wife but can not leave his siblings. In family today, in general the sentiment and love among siblings are still remained. However, in some families there are still negative signs in their relation. Less children help the families have better conditions to foster and educate the children but excessive pamper may make them more selfish. The children are familiar to the care from other people but do not know how to give attention, care of others, they care about themselves only, what good or delicious is for them. From these small things, the children are selfish even to their siblings, calculating, jealous, envious and then dispute, disagreement even leaving or violence to each other for material benefit only.

In addition to above changes, there are some other changes, there are conflicts in many modern families as the family members do their own business outside the house and such “open” business has caused disorder in family relation. The family member’s reach is larger, social function of the family is narrower, other social institutions such as schools, workplaces ect. play more important role. It is noted that in the urban environment, especially the big cities, it is more difficult for the parents to control their children. The relation among family members is no longer close as it was before, each person cares for its own work and benefit only, spend less time for other family members. More and more members in rural families, especially the young, have left their house and land for city and town to find job, which caused many complicated changes in traditional way of life of many families. The change in place of residence and way of earning living, urban lifestyle imbibed by these young people have made the engagement and connection which used to close and strong among the family members loose in certain extent. In some families, the traditional moral standards in faithfulness, filial piety, sentiment have been affected by money and free lifestyle, cracked by the self-indulgence of individualism. There is an increasing number of elderly, disabled living with loneliness, shortage of sentiment, those who live with financial difficulty, abandoned children, those who have poor care and protection. The young are in high risk of sexual abuse, social crime.

4. Conclusion

In traditional and modern Vietnamese society, family always plays an important role as a home of every one. Not only in childhood but in whole life each person needs a home, a family. Family life is a part, one of the most meaning parts, worth living of each person. Vietnamese family has witnessed a significant change from traditional to modern model. With the change in moral standards of family and family relations in many directions today, it is very essential to heighten awareness of the role and position of family in the development of each individual. It is in need to create humanistic social environment as the premise for the development of each family. The values of traditional Vietnamese family must be promoted dialectically as the foundation for building new family in line with the social development. Building family to become a home, a cradle to nurture each person’s life is not duty of any specific person but it is the duty of each individual, each family and the whole society. Family will exist forever in social life, in communities of people therefore it is necessary to strengthen awareness of role and position of family and family education, contributing its part to build family to become a healthy cell in the development of the society.

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