Culture Honoring the Deceased in the Life of Vietnamese Families at Present

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Abstract: *Each culture has its own way to honor the deceased people. This paper aims to study the concept, the origin, the categories and the social impact of the culture honoring the deceased people in the life of Vietnamese families. It has also analyzed the achievements and shortcomings of the previous studies and offered some recommendations for further studies.*

Key words: culture, honor, the deceased, ancestor worship, Vietnamese families

1. Introduction

In family life, cultural behavior is not only limited to the relationships of living people such as between spouses, parents and children, or siblings but also relationships between the living and the dead. Visiting the homes of Vietnamese people, in rural or urban areas, in the North, the Central and the South, it can be seen that the altars of ancestors or the deceased members of the family are located. In fact, this shows the respect of the living to the dead.

Culture honoring the deceased in the life of Vietnamese families has been formed and existed for a long time in history. Since "Doi Moi" (1986), along with the economic and cultural achievements, there are also changes in the spiritual life of Vietnamese people including cultural behaviors towards the deceased, which have had both positive and negative impacts on the life of families and society. This requires not only managers and policy making agencies but also scientists to pay attention to study and solve the problems.

Stemming from the above- mentioned fact, in this paper, the author reviewed some key aspects of achievements of previous studies, both in Vietnam and abroad, thereby laying a scientific basis for the study of culture honoring the dead in Vietnam in the near future.

1.1 The concept of culture honoring the deceased

Culture honoring the deceased is a universal social phenomenon of pre-historic human civilization (Gaura Mancacaritadipura, 2013, p.181). It is natural for people to show affection to family members in particular, as well as to the people with great contribution to the country in general. In Vietnam, culture honoring the deceased is mainly manifested in ancestor worship. The author of the work *On the Religions and Beliefs in Vietnam Today* edited by Dang Nghiem Van (2002) stated that ancestor worship in Vietnam needs to be understood in broad sense. It is not only the worship of ancestors of a family or a clan but also of the people making extremely great contribution to the villages and the country. Sharing the similar viewpoints, Tran Quoc Vuong further demonstrated the specific images such as the family's ancestor ceremony, the clan temple, the communal house of the village to worship Village Deity and Hung King

Temple (Tran Quoc Vuong, 2000: 512). Besides, Pham Xuan Nam summarized that "In addition to animistic beliefs like many other people in ancient times, the ancient Vietnamese especially worshipped their ancestors and the heroes who had great contribution to the people and country. It is a spiritual culture that is both associated and complemented with patriotism- a prominent feature of Vietnamese cultural tradition (Pham Xuan Nam, 2008, pp. 202 – 203).

Honoring the deceased not only takes place in the mind, but is also expressed in practical activities and human behaviors. Obviously, such behaviors do not occur arbitrarily, but they must follow common rules called behavioral patterns. As we all know in natural life, when facing with any given situation, humans and animals usually have a reaction. But the reaction of people and things is not identical. If the animal's response is a natural biological reflex, the human response follows a predefined pattern. According to JH Fichter (1973) and Doan Van Chuc (1997), a behavior called a pattern when it is followed by many people repeatedly and it becomes a common rule of many people and especially it must contains some social meaning. General speaking, behavioral pattern, or behavioral culture, are "behaviors that represent a state of consensus of thought and affection, expressed in the vast majority of people living in the same society - that is the objectification of common thoughts and emotions, common values and norms in a culture" (Mai Van Hai, 2013, p.235)

The concept of "culture honoring the dead" also raises many issues that need to be concerned in all three aspects of awareness, attitude and behavior. This has been comprehensively mentioned by researchers. For example, one Japanese researcher wrote: "If analyzed, a culture consists of many factors: economic factors such as production, trade, distribution and consumption; political factors such as existence, division, inheritance of power; social factors such as kinship, group membership and marriage system; religious elements such as deities, festivals, myths and beliefs. The practice of ancestor worship integrates various elements of culture, making it a unified unity and allowing the society to operate. It can be said that it is the backbone of the culture (Takayoshi Sugiura, 2013, p. 628). And so, it can be recognized the

culture of behaving towards the deceased is a basic component in the overall culture of each nation.

1.2 The origin of culture honoring the deceased

According to Russian anthropologist X. A. Tocarev, there are two different perspectives in culture honoring the dead. The first view is based on the oldest basis of burial, that is, the instinctive fear before the dead - a fear that seems to be inherent to all living things. And the second view suggests that another instinct in high animals that lives with the herd is attachment. They are discontented by the death of their fellows, so having to leave the dead bodies is a very difficult task. Tocarev asserts that these two opposing instincts have existed since the dawn of human history. Therefore, although funeral customs vary slightly among ethnic groups, they are generally governed by one reason or another, but mostly by a combination of the two above mentioned views (X. A. Tocarev, 1994, pp.196 – 198).

Not based on the instinctive reactions like Tocarev, in his original cultural works, the famous English anthropologist EB Tylor said that the beliefs of all things are the origin of religion and that is the basis for generating the conception of the soul of the dead as well as the custom of ancestor worship, which is essentially the worship of souls (E. B. Tylor, 2000). This conception has also been expressed in ancestor worship in many Eastern countries from thousands of years before Christ. Through preserved ancient documents, it was noticed that before the birth of Confucius, in China, there had been many events involving ancestral sacrifices and churches. Since the Shang Dynasty, ancestor worship has become a tradition in the lives of Chinese people (Tran Le Bao, 2013: 74). Meanwhile, in Vietnam, historian Dao Duy Anh also said that according to Vietnamese folk beliefs, people have both the soul and the body. When people die, their soul will leave the body and become a ghost, but they still take care of their descendants. When there is something dangerous, their soul will alert their children and grandchildren to be aware of. Because ancestral souls are so closely connected to their descendants, descendants must worship ancestors. Those who do not worship their ancestors so that their ancestors have to become miserably hungry souls are considered extremely undutiful. However, ancestor worship is not only for relieving sufferings of the ancestors' soul but also showing gratitude to ancestor and maintaining race. Therefore, ancestor worship considers the race maintenance as its goal (Dao Duy Anh, 2000, pp. 247 – 250)

Notably, many foreign researchers studying about Vietnam have the similar point of views. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the French author such as L. Cadière in the works of Family and religion in Annam and E. Diguet in Annamites: society, customs and religion mentioned the domination and influence of the "deceased" and "dead" people in the life of Vietnamese families (Nguyen Thua Hy, 2011, pp. 260 – 261). Recently, in an article written for the International Conference on Vietnam studies, co-organized by Ho Chi Minh National University and University of Toronto (Canada) in Binh Chau in December 2007, the Dutch anthropologist Oscar Salemink (2010, p.12) also affirmed: "In the dominant cosmology in Vietnam, death is a

journey rather than a radical departure, …. death is a transition of the soul from one world to another world where the soul lives on as a spirit until s/he is born again" (Oscar Salemink, ,2010, p.12). It should be emphasized that the conception of the soul of the dead continues to exist alongside the living is not entirely unfounded, but it comes from the real life of the people. Many people meet their lost loved ones through dreams, or they receive certain signals through foreshadowing. The historian Nguyen Thua Hy (2011) argued that the real life also forms a mysterious communication channel between the dead and the living. As an intermediary for the communication channels are the contingent of powwow, fortune tellers, worshippers, mediums, and currently supplemented by "psychic". The relationship between the living and the dead helps to solve issues arising from the life, especially the spiritual ones. That is the reason why culture honoring the dead was formed from the dawn of history and continues to exist and develop in the present era.

1.3 The basic categories of culture honoring the deceased

Basically, research on culture honoring the deceased can be divided into 3 categories: funeral, grave and worship.

First of all, funerals everywhere in the world include many elaborate and complicated rituals. For example, in the former China, this followed Zhou Gong's rituals including three components: funeral rituals, mourning clothes and mourning regime for the family members. The first thing in the funeral rituals is watching the coffins which may last for a week. Relatives and friends come to attend a feast and say farewell to the dead. Family members of the deceased wear white mourning clothes, mourning headband and waistband. After the ceremony, the votive paper is burned, so that the dead can have enough living facilities in the afterlife (Trinh Huy Hoa, 2001, p.90).

Due to the influence of Confucianism, the funeral rituals of Vietnamese people also followed Zhou Gong's ceremony, but they were modified to suit their inherent customs. The manifestation in the books "funeral rituals of families" and "Family ceremony" include rituals: necromancy, washing the dead, putting coins into the dead's mouth and putting the dead into a coffin. In the funeral, there is also music with musical instruments like trumpets and drums played during the offerings (Toan Anh, 2005 & Dang Duc sieu, 2006). In modern times, there are additional rituals, such as posting an obituary, commemorating the dead and paying tribute (Vuong Tu Trung, 2009). Vietnamese people think that "Of the dead, say nothing but good", so when a family has a funeral, people who have conflicts with members of that family still come to visit

According to Phan Ke Binh (1990) and Toan Anh (2005), after the burial was completed, when returning home, to show filial gratitude to the parents and grandchildren, many more rituals were performed. For example, the ritual to pray for their parents' peace, 49-day ceremony, 100-day ceremony, the first dead ceremony, the second death ceremony, burning votive papers, the removal of mourning clothes

The next steps of funeral rituals are the burial and building the grave. According to Tocarev, there are huge differences in burial among different ethic- groups. Through fieldwork sources, the French ethnologist Giothoni Mongta divided the burial into eight basic types: 1) bundling or discarding; 2) submerging in water; 3) putting in air; 4) burial (buried in the ground or in a cave); 5) cremation; 6) mummified; 7) dividing the body into pieces and 8) eating meat. Besides there are mixed forms of burial, often much more complicated. Tocarev also said that a surveyor named Peter discovered no less than 25 different methods of dealing with the dead. For New Caliber tribes alone, this observer discovered six types of burials: 1) burying the body in a narrow pit, letting the head jut out of the ground, then cutting off the head; 2) rolling the corpse in a shroud and laying it in the cave; 3) putting the dead body on a cliff or on a tree; 4) embalming, impregnating and burying in a house then becoming a Diet; 5) put the body in a standing position in a tree and 6) putting the dead body in the boat - only applied to the chiefs (Tôcarev, 1994: pp.199 – 201)

Generally, the burial and building graves for the dead are considered to be important in every nation. Reflecting the psychology and customs of the people in Bali, an Indonesian researcher stated that "the veneration of the dead may include the homage to the graves of the deceased relatives and in a broad sense, it may be the homage to the graves of heroes who died many centuries ago (Gaura Mancacaritadipura, 2013, p.183).

In Vietnamese's angle, a grave is considered to be the dead's home, so the society is very strict towards those who destroy graves, even though it is a derelict tomb. Gia Long Law had provisions such as punishing with strokes, banishing those who violate the tombs, even though they are the family members of the deceased. On death anniversary or Qingming festival, descendants who visit often build the tomb higher and remove the wild plants that can be harmful to the bones in the tomb. It is also believed that the dead protect themselves. When the graves subside, the dead will alert their children to repair and if it is a sabotage, then he cannot avoid being punished (Toan Anh, 2005, pp.367 – 369).

The third component of the culture honoring the deceased is worship. In his work "Early Form of Religion, Tocarev said that in every family in China, North Korea and Japan, they have an ancestor altar to worship, while performing that ritual is necessarily a patriarch of the family. When making a death anniversary, this person often informs ancestors about the family's events, e.g. the birth of a newborn, the marriage of a son and daughter and other important affairs. The head of a clan usually perform the rituals in the temple of the clan. Ancestor worship is also the basis of orthodox religion, Confucianism (Tocarev, 1994, p.319). Meanwhile, according to Nguyen Duy Thieu (2013), culture honoring the dead of Laotian people all took place during the Boun Pi May Tet holiday. Like other residents worshiping their ancestors, this is an opportunity for Laotians to show affection and responsibility to the deceased. These activities can be generalized at the following points: going to the temple to offer offerings to ancestors, building "houses" for

Buddha and ancestors by building symbolic sand mountains, washing the ancestors and finally praying for each family.

Unlike the Laotians, Vietnamese ancestor worship takes place in the temple of a clan, while ancestor worship of a family must take place at the house altar. Whether the house is large or small, the altar must be plcaed in the most solemn place, usually in the center of the main house. On the altar, there are tablets. There may be pictures of the deceased. Usually people only put the tablets of the four generations (from the last generation upwards). For ancestors of the fifth generation or higher, the tablets are placed in the temple of the clan or removed. The most concentrated expression of ancestor worship is celebrating the death anniversary. The death anniversaries of grandparents or parents is the exact date on which the relative dies. Researchers all say that this is the most important thing in ancestor worship (Dang Duc Sieu, 2006, pp.385 – 386).

1.4 The social impact of culture honoring the deceased people

Researchers generally appreciate the role of culture honoring the deceased in family and social life. At the International Scientific Conference "Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Society", held in Viet Tri on the occasion of the Hung Kings' Commemoration Day in April 2013, Mexican anthropologist Edaly Quiroz, through his research on ancestor worship in his homeland, states that the function of intangible cultural heritages, including honoring the deceased is very important. It is not only a means of communication between generations and communities, groups and individuals but also as a means of social development (Edaly Quiroz, 2013, p. 180).

The authors Zhou Asia (Yunnan University) and Zhang Zhenwei (Zhongshan University), when studying the custom of worshiping Thai ancestors in southern China, have come to the conclusion that these cultural behaviors are not It only has a broad influence on people's lives and becomes an important part of the traditional culture of the nation, but also contributes to protecting cultural diversity in the process of globalization today (Zhou Asia, Zhang Zhenwei, 2013, p.41). Hua Xiaoming (2013), a scientist in Guangxi, through research on the worship of the Zhuang ancestors also affirms, besides showing a resilient struggle with nature and outside oppressive forces, this belief is also the most quintessential trait in the human spiritual world which has been realized. He said that today the worship of the Zhuang ancestors has evolved into a symbol to unite and strengthen the national spirit as well as promoting the identity of the Zhuang people throughout the world.

In Vietnam, Vu Tu Lap and his colleagues in the work "the Red River Delta Culture and Population" argued that worshipping and celebrating death anniversaries were actions of connecting the past with the present, or more accurately exploiting the power of the past in order to serve the present. They state that "In those days, the ancestors were invited to testify for deeds and to listen to their children's prayers in order to help them. Ancestors are not just those who were dead, but those who surround, guide and support their descendants. The significant points of the

tradition of ancestor worship are revealed when they merge the past into the present, transform the past power to integrate into the modern time and connect ancestors' strength with the life of their descendants" (Vu Tu Lap et al, 1991, p.176).

However, over thousands of years of establishment and development, besides the positive side, the culture honoring the deceased cannot avoid negative manifestations, with many consequences. Doing research on ancestor worship rituals in South Korea, Roger L. Janelli, a professor at Indiana University (USA) said that the participation in ancestor anniversary shows the solidarity of members living in the same village who cooperate with each other in farm work. But what brings unity can also bring divisions. Observing this issue, the author realized that some families do not attend the anniversaries since they are at odds with other members of the branch of the clan (Roger L. Janelli, 2013, p.613).

And in Vietnam, from the beginning of the twentieth century, specifically from 1913 -1914, when writing articles published on periodicals in Journal of Indochina, later gathered in the work *Vietnamese customs*, Phan Ke Binh noted that sacrifices offered are not costly, but many families become miserable because of the death anniversaries. Moreover, siblings may criticize each other for unequal contribution to ancestor worship. If there is an elegant way that saves costs is probably more convenient" (Phan Ke Binh, 1990, p.23).

Today, in the context of industrialization, urbanization and market economy, culture honoring the deceased poses many issues that need attention. Jing Wang (2013) said that in China urban population is increasing rapidly and the existence of traditional cemeteries leads to the lack of space, affecting the ecology and sustainable development of the whole society. Meanwhile, according to Edaly Quiroz (2013), in Mexico, ancestor worship depends much on what we call the "commercial aspects". Vietnam is not an exception. Studying in a Red River Delta village during the "Doi Moi" period, John Kleinen showed that the communal rituals are increasingly strengthened and more and more money is spent on feasts (Kleinnen, 2007, pp.227-231). Regarding the scale of the feasts, during fieldwork in Hoai Thi village Bac Ninh, Luong Van Hy (1994, p.461) noted that there were usually 60 to 120 people eating and drinking on the same anniversary while the entire village has only 761 people. The author stated that when families have a lot of members, death anniversaries will become a financial burden for them (Luong van Hy, 1994, p.461). Some authors pointed out that the death anniversaries are the occasions for rich families to show off delicacies and for corrupt officials based on their right to receive a disguised bribe" (Tan Viet, 1996, pp.38-39)

2. Conclusion and recommendations for further studies

5.1. The topic of culture honoring the deceased with the focus on ancestor worship, has been studied by many scholars. They are not only ethnographers, religions, cultural researchers, anthropologists, but also religious sociologists.

Although none of them pointed out and clearly defined the concept of "culture honoring the deceased", through their works, the authors have brought a fairly complete picture in all three components of this social phenomenon - funerals, graves and worship. Many have also pointed out the origin of the culture honoring the deceased, the diversity of burial and worship, the effects of foreign culture, as well as the dual impact of this custom. Moreover, many people question the existence of a culture honoring the deceased. According to these authors, entering the modern era, under the impact of industrialization and urbanization, the culture honoring the deceased can no longer retain the same content and form. This makes many people feel confused and awakening in them deep memories attached to their ancestors.

5.2 However, in terms of modern science, the general picture of the culture honoring the deceased has not satisfied the needs of the readers. Firstly, methodologically, because the concept of "Culture honoring the deceased" has not yet been developed with definite denotation and connotation, the in-depth description and analysis of funerals, graves, worship and death anniversaries do not yet have an organic attachment as components of a perfect whole system. Secondly, with regard to approach and methodology, existing studies can be divided into two trends: The first trend is the work of historians and cultural researchers. These authors often provide readers with general knowledge and generalized comments on a large space, not attached to a specific place at all. This makes the readers difficult to verify if they have any questions. The second trend is the studies of anthropology, ethnography, and religion. The advantage of this approach is that the studies have been associated with a particular place, a district or a village, for a specified period of time. However, this approach does not focus much quantitatively (expressed in numbers, percentages…). The absence of quantitative analysis can make readers wonder whether the researchers' observations and assessments on this phenomenon are accurate, how common is its practice and there is a difference in practice between groups.

5.3 In Vietnam in recent years, especially since "Doi Moi" (1986), there have been also research on culture honoring the deceased people, with both quantitative and qualitative methods under the view of social structure. However, such independent studies are still limited. In general, elements of culture honoring the deceased are only considered separately or integrated into a broader research topic. For instance, in the research topic "development aspects of rural culture", the authors have studied in depth mourning regimes along with other cultural aspects such as marriage, community, creativity and enjoyment of culture of people (Luong Hong Quang, 1998, pp.112 – 114). Similarly, in the work, "Building and developing an advanced culture imbued with national identity", funeral rituals are also put together with other customs such as weddings, family tradition, family rituals and festivals.

5.4 Thus up to now, especially in Vietnam, there has not been an in-depth empirical study, both quantitative and qualitative, about the topic of culture honoring the deceased as a unified entity including all its inherent components. Especially, in the long and arduous resistance wars, in every

village and town in Vietnam, there are martyrs who died for the Fatherland. Although in the practical life, the Party and the State have had many ways of honoring martyrs and their families, on the scientific level there are still no such research on this issue. These facts show that the research topic of culture honoring the deceased with an interdisciplinary approach, has become more urgent than ever. Hopefully, in the near future, there will be studies that meet the requirements of life, in order to contribute to the construction and development of a Vietnamese advanced culture imbued with national identity which the Resolutions of the National Party Congress has repeatedly mentioned

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