

The process of cultural transformation

from “traditional” to “modern”

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Translation

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What I write below is not meant to “educate”, “advise”, “appeal”. It is not abstract and does not constitute rambling theories, but rather are my memories of true stories, based on my own experience, to help young people understand some aspects of the issue of cultural transformation. This is essential in the search for a cultural path in order to be able to actually contribute efficiently to the development of the country, if that is their intention.

In this newspaper, I have had the opportunity to discuss the relationship between culture and development. I totally agree with the notion that culture is the determinant for development, and that it is vital to have an appropriate culture if we want to develop rapidly and vigorously. Appropriate means being appropriate to the time, creating conditions to satisfy the urgent material and spiritual needs of the entire population, bringing Vietnam out of the situation of backwardness, poverty, inferiority to its neighbors.

Thus, it requires us to reconsider the value system and the prioritization of these values, as well as methods of ideas and actions in our society to see whether it is appropriate or not, appropriate in the above-mentioned sense i.e. in terms of development. If it is not appropriate, of course it must be changed. But, as I have had the opportunity to emphasize, the big problem here is: how to initiate this change?

This question has two sides:

1. What to change, what culture, value system to adopt to replace the current culture - often called "traditional" culture with “conventional” values ?

2. Who is able to perform this change - that is to make people accept to abandon a way of thinking, a way of life which has become so familiar, so routine, a bad habit?

Though I do not delude myself that this is an easy task, I still believe that it is "feasible" – it can be done. But it takes time, a longer or shorter period depending on a number of factors, among which the basic elements are a wise and determined government and a favorable international environment. Time is the clearest factor, because cultural change is the result of a process that includes several stages. Speaking about the process and stages of course implies a time lapse.

I emphasize the two points “feasible” and time because on these two points , I have accurate facts relevant to the topic, drawn from my own experience, and I think as well as from the experience of many from my generation (I was born in 1924). It means that I can look back at what has happened to my generation in the past 75 years (those born in the decade of 1920), and also to what has happened to my father's generation and those of his acquaintances (those born in 1880), covering the process of the Vietnamese society cultural change during the last 150 years, from the end of the reign of Tu Duc til now, passing through the era of independence of the Nguyen dynasty (until 1885), of the French domination (1885-1945), of the differentiation between the national ideology and communism from 1945-1975, and of the communist domination, till now.

From the analysis of changes in the Vietnamese culture in the past 150 years, we can see that there are three periods: 1. The "traditional/conventional" period to the end of the reign of Tu Duc (1885); 2. The French protectorate period (1885-1945); 3. The period from 1945 to 2000.

"Traditional /conventional" period

Here, I focus on the educational aspects, and especially on learning methods, and curriculum. Those who have some concepts of sociology know that education is the most important tool to convey knowledge. Under the Confucius education regime, What kind of knowledge did the Confucian-traditional system impart that had an important impact on our ancestors’s generation in the period from the end of the reign of Tu Duc to 1920, the year the regime was abolished? Here, I use as example my father (born in 1883), who like many of his generation, had absorbed this method of education.

The academic program of the above periods revolved around subjects such as poetry and history, especially Chinese history. That generation did not benefit from instruction in subjects imparting knowledge such as Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry, Geography and History of the World, which were considered normal for my generation (1920). In order to get access to the flow of new ideas, the few who were more curious, like sir Phan Boi Chau,, had to read “modern” literary works about ideas of European philosophers and scholars, i.e. "Lu Thoa" (Rousseau), " Mạnh Đức Tư Cưu"(Montesquieu), "Mã Khắc Tư"(Karl Max), etc. – via Chinese people and Chinese characters (Hán characters) transcribed into “Nho” characters (Vietnamese/Hán), because at the time, they did not know any other language. Please allow me to say here that when reading Phan Boi Chau’s biography, at first I did not understand right away that he was referring to Rousseau, Montesquieu, Marx ...

French, the foreign language available at the time, was not considered as a learning tool, an opening door to the world treasure of knowledge . It was rejected because the 1880 generation believed that it was the language of barbarians or of "European folks", of the enemy. Many people even forbade their children, especially girls, from learning French. Even sir Phan Boi Chau, the advocate for " modern reform", did not know French, nor did he know “Quoc Ngu”, the "national language". He only started to learn to read and write “Quoc Ngu” after being arrested and confined by the French colonial government in Hue after 1925.

It should be noted that people who received that method of education were not trained in methodologies for observation, analysis and information collection. On the contrary, they had to memorize all the books by Confucius and Mencius, along with Chinese history. On the other hand, studying the Hán characters meant remembering its typeface drawing, so they also had to work their memory really hard.

The knowledge that my father and those of his generation absorbed through the education system of the time was very limited. It only helped them to work as mandarins, but did not help satisfy the demands of the late 19th century and early 20th century modernization trend. However, they had an extraordinary memory. If this extraordinary memory could be combined with skills in observation, analyzis, information gathering, as well as extensive knowledge and a favorable environment, then brilliant scientists and engineers would have been developed. This was the case for some members of the next generation, for example the

scientist Bửu Hội. Of course there were many others, but I only mention Professor Bửu Hội because I know this case. It belongs to a different stage in the process of cultural change, which I will discuss further in the sections below.

Back to the period 1880-1920, the period of the "traditional/conventional" culture. What was particular to this culture was that it was a "closed" culture. But this "traditional/conventional" and "closed" culture did not survive in its pure state due to the domination of the French colonial government.

Period under the French Government protection: building infrastructure

The French colonial regime had many negative aspects, but it also had a positive one, although it was the result of an indirect effect, a "fall-out" (not intentional, not planned).

After defeating the opposing forces of Cần Vương (Tôn Thất Thuyết, Phan Đình Phùng) and consolidating the power, in 1895, France installed a regime of total control in Indochina. The first Governor, Paul Doumer, launched a far-reaching development plan: building roads, ports, a railway system, power plants, water plants, hospitals, designing urban settings etc. Their aim was to develop an infrastructure that would provide modern amenities for their lives, and especially help to exploit the abundant resources of Indochina, among which Vietnam obviously ranked at the top. Exploitation here is meant for the French colonial regime, and by the French.

The Vietnamese people could now see, with their own eyes, bridges, roads, electrical and water systems, buildings, tramways, trains, cars, etc.. Whether they like it or not, because of the presence of the French colonial regime, not only the elite class, but also all the Vietnamese people, could or had to open up to a new civilization, giving them a sense of awareness of the backwardness of Vietnam, at least in terms of sciences and engineering. This fact was expressed in a song that I studied in primary school, at age 10, around 1993. Now I do not remember the whole song, but the main lines are as follows:

Let's wake up, eyes opening to see the Asian continent,

A civilized foundation dazzling the whole world,

A light, promoting trade across thousand miles,

Trains, boats, aircrafts ...

I also remember that, inside the Hue citadel, at just about dusk, children gathered on the road, waited for the street lights to be turned on, and as soon as the lights were on they all shouted "Ye, lights on!". At that time, a new lighting system had just been installed. After the French engineers completed the installation work, they tested to see whether the lights were good, and if it was good, they said: "Ca y est" ("Okay" in English, pronounce XayYe).

On the other hand, though all the construction works by the French were to satisfy their needs, it had a "fall-out": the Vietnamese also benefited from it, even more than the French, because we outnumbered them. From 1945 onwards, when the French colonial regime had ended, Vietnam already had an infrastructure to build on, in an easier way. But the most important thing was the "demonstration effect". Although we had to fight the French to regain independence, honestly and objectively speaking, if the Emperor, officials and elite class from the Confucius regime had continued their leadership and ruled Vietnam since then (late reign of Tu Duc, 1884), insisting on saying "Confucius wrote," and acknowledging only China as the "civilized nation" and seeing the West as "barbaric people", Vietnam in 1945 would still have been immersed in the backwardness of the 1880s.

To clarify this point, I would like to repeat here a very meaningful song sung by students from the Tiên Tuyên Huế University every day from April to August 1945. (This university was a disguised military school established after the former Emperor Bao Dai declaring that Vietnam had abolished the French protectorate, dated 11-3-1945). This song was written by Mr. Ta Quang Buu. He was among the students who had studied in France (holding at the time the position of commissioner of the Ministry of Youth, of which Mr. Phan Anh was the secretary, under the Tran Trong Kim cabinet). The first paragraph of the song was as follows:

For twenty years we have eaten rice, not plowed,

We did not build roads, tunnels and bridges,

For twenty years, we have closed our eyes to follow the master,

Deeply concentrating on studying, we have been full, while others are hungry ! ...

It was the feeling of the youth before 1945, who had not been allowed to participate in the construction of the country. Now, in 1945, they faced a new opportunity,

offered at the right time. Because before this, in terms of education, there had been major changes during the French protectorate, especially the "Journey to the West" movement which had gradually replaced the "Journey to the East" movement.

At the beginning of the 20th century, even the elderly Confucians in the Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục organization saw the needs to learn from the West. They asked the colonial government to establish universities. But before having a Western-style university, a Western-style school was a must, and it was necessary to know the language, of course the French language – the one that they refused to learn, as mentioned above. Therefore, Governor Paul Beau opened a university, of course, teaching in French – to mock the ignorance of the Confucians. They came to the university and were dazed as they did not understand anything. Thus, after a short time, Vietnam's first "university" was closed down.

But the movement to "westernize" the educational system continued. First, the establishment of the Quốc Học Huế school, in 1905, where teaching was done in both the "national language" and French. The establishment of these new schools was highly encouraged by a group of Vietnamese high officials. Mr. Ngo Dinh Kha, father of the late President Ngo Dinh Diem, was one of those high officials. The first generation of Vietnamese who studied foreign languages were the ones who entered that school. In addition to the French language, the school also taught a number of "new" courses such as Mathematics. Overall, this was a revolution in education. This revolution also had a second part, when in 1918, the Confucian exam system was completely abolished.

Period under the French protectorate regime: Journey to West

Whether one likes it or not, and though the above decision was from the French protectorate government, it marked an important and decisive transformation from East to West, from a "traditional/conventional" culture to a culture which, if not necessarily from "West", was still no longer a pure "Confucian-Mencius" culture. One of the decisive consequences of this change in direction was a "Journey to the West" ("go West") movement- Vietnamese students going to France to study – which appeared in the last years of the 1920-1930 decade. Some had scholarships, some were from powerful or wealthy families - "pampered rich kids" or "Prince of Bac Lieu". Of course, this was an opportunity for a number of Vietnamese people to have direct contact with a new civilization and culture, different from the culture of Vietnam.

Prior to "going west" to learn, Vietnamese students obviously had to know French, and especially had to obtain the French baccalauréat. This was made possible by the French protectorate government opening high schools with French program in the years 1920-1930. First, they opened schools for their own children, such as the Albert Sarraut school in Hanoi and Chasseloup Laubat in Saigon, but a number of Vietnamese students could be also admitted. And then, they opened "indigenous" schools, such as the Bưởi school in Hanoi and Petrus Ky in Saigon. After 1930, many high schools with French programs were established, such as Yersin, Couvent des Oiseaux (for girls) in Dalat, and Thien Huu (Providence), or upgraded schools such as Khai Dinh in Hue. The first Vietnamese scholars and specialists - doctors, pharmacists, engineers, etc. - came from those schools.

I need to add that during that period a number of high officials at the Hue court also encouraged the "Western learning" movement, among which Mr. Nguyen Huu Bai. They set up a Learning Promotion Association and granted a number of scholarships to outstanding students to study in France. The first receivers of the scholarships i.e. Hoang Xuan Han, Ta Quang Buu, Nguy Nhu Kontum, would play a very important role in the modernization of education in Vietnam after 1945. During those years, in order to limit the number of students going to France, for fear that they would be infected by Western liberal thoughts, the French protectorate government opened only one university for the whole of Indochina, the University of Hanoi, but it only taught Medicine, Pharmacy and Law.

But the Indochinese development programs needed several mid-level technical persons. To meet this demand, the French protectorate regime opened a series of technical schools to train mid-level professionals (agents) in fields such as public works, agriculture, forestry and livestock, health, administration, etc. These people will later be the first professional group in Vietnam. In order to get into these schools, the requirement was to hold a baccalaureate.

Before 1940, students in the Central part of Vietnam had to go to Hanoi or Saigon to attend the Baccalaureate exam, but after that, the Baccalaureate exam was also organized in Hue. In addition, between 1940-1945, due to the war, travel between Vietnam and France was interrupted so students could not go to France to study. The protectorate regime then widened the university system to show their care for youth's future and to prevent Japanese influence. In addition to the faculties of Medicine, Pharmacy and Law, a faculty of Sciences was established..

In terms of cultural transformation, the above decisions and facts had profound consequences. One was to provide opportunities for the Vietnamese people to have contact with Western civilization and culture in general, and a civilization of sciences and technology along with a liberal culture.

In addition to the traditional Confucian culture some Vietnamese were able to , acquire some international languages, absorbed some additional knowledge and get acquainted with a number of new values. My father was one of those people. He initially followed the Confucian system, learned Han, brought "tent and mat" to the old exam system: in 1918, he attended the last Tam Truong-style exam from the Han system. But at the same time he also learned the "national language" and French language and followed the "new" program - with "new" subjects such as mathematics – taught at Quoc hoc, a newly opened school.

The above education system of course affected my father in terms of culture. Compared to some people of the same generation, who refused to follow the "Western type" program, he was much more open. He was not too far entangled in the "traditional/conventional" paths and values in the way he viewed life and people, and how one should live. Just a few examples: my brothers and I were not forced into the "father-son mold" from the "three Confucian values": we were not obsequious, nor afraid of our parents. We could go out without their permission, return home without reporting; we did not have to kneel down to perform all the rites during traditional ceremonies; we were free to choose friends from all social classes, and they were all treated very kindly by my parents; as to myself, although my father wanted me to follow in his steps - to study to become a high mandarin official – he did not use his authority to force me when I wanted to go in another direction etc ..

What was special was that he continuously reminded us to focus on learning French (the foreign language of the time) and ... mathematics, because, according to him, these two were the two basic disciplines in the new world – we had to learn Mathematics (differential, integral) to keep pace with modern times. Now looking back, it was clear that he had a vision far ahead of his time ; but, in terms of Han study, when we showed no progress after studying with a teacher for a few months, he let it go and stopped forcing us to continue ... *Good bye Confucianism ! Good bye Confucian-traditional culture!*

In fact, it was not a “good bye” to the Confucianism-traditional culture. Although in our family, our parents did not say "Confucius said", "Mencius said “ all day

long, in everyday life, we actually applied the "Five Constant" principles of Confucianism.

In addition, all of us were scouts members, and the scouts' values were fundamental values necessary for a good and healthy society, so we were still following a basic moral value system. Furthermore, my mother and my elder sisters were Buddhist followers and often mentioned "retribution", "causality", "phuc duc"(living a generous and virtuous life to positively influence the future of the family through causality and karma), so we still absorbed the basics of Buddhism. In short, although the education system that I absorbed was not burdened with the old-fashioned culture and "traditional/conventional" values, it did not discard all the old culture and values.

Period of 1945-2000

In March 1945 Vietnam entered a new historical period, when Emperor Bao Dai declared the end of the French protectorate. From then on, in terms of culture, whether they wanted to or not, the French were no longer in the position to decide the direction for Vietnam. The best example to illustrate this situation was the introduction of the "Hoang Xuan Han program" of education. Vietnamese children studied and took the Baccalaureate exam in Vietnamese, and the teachings was no longer aimed at training public servants and mandarins for the imperial court or the French protectorate government, but rather at science and engineering, and the building of a new society with new values, different from the "old" and the "traditional/conventional" value. Actually, this was a continuation of the process of moving towards the aforementioned culture, but it had an important and clear impact: it made the transformation stronger and faster.

In the decades that followed, social transformation in Vietnam took a strong and rapid turn. The "traditional/conventional" culture and values gradually lost its dominant character, new cultural values appeared and competed in influencing the Vietnamese thinking and behavior. The two main systems were the socialist system following a Lenin model where "red ideology over specialized expertise " was brought into Vietnam by Mr. Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Party, and the liberal system of the Western model imported by the US, in which "expertise" based on sciences and technology was the flagship.

The above two systems took part in a fierce competition to influence the Vietnamese people, especially the younger generation. This competition had negative as well as positive aspects. One positive aspect was that the Vietnamese younger generation enjoyed a situation that the generation of their parents or grandparents did not enjoy: thousands and thousands of young people had favorable conditions to study abroad, get exposed to new culture and values, new ways of thinking and new work methods. Meanwhile, in the country, millions of people from every class of life, in every region, benefited from or had to have contact with unfamiliar things, which although not all good, were new, different from the "traditional/conventional" ones.

This was an encounter, a mix of cultures, an exchange and at the same time a clash between Western and Eastern cultures. This encounter was intensified and broadened with the intervention of the Americans after 1954.

The Americans involvement in Vietnam had military and political aspects and also had a strong cultural impact. Half by accident, half purposely. By accident, because of their presence, their way of life - *the American way of life* – totally different not only from the lifestyle of Asians but also from Westerners from Europe – liberal, cool, free, geared towards material comfort for everyday life as a result of technical advances. This proved to be a big attraction for people with low living standards like the Vietnamese. In summary, the presence of the Americans, with a totally different civilization than Vietnam, had a strong demonstration effect.

In addition, the US government also had policies aiming at influencing the Vietnamese culture. They launched large-scale programs to bring Vietnamese officials abroad to "observe" or get "further training"; encouraged students to study in the US, and offered thousands of scholarship to students. And locally, they ran modernization programs geared towards modernizing business practices and work methodologies for Vietnamese people, in public as well as private areas.

After a long period of 20 years (1954-1975) of intensive direct intervention in Vietnam at a high level, the Americans had left a strong and deep influence over Vietnamese culture, and this would be difficult to erase. Even the Communist government failed to eradicate this American and capitalist influence, in spite of their "revolutionary" ideology and determined spirit.

Not only did they not change the Southerners after waves of thorough and brutal "socialist reform", but on the contrary they became attracted to and had to adopt

the Southerners's lifestyles imbued in Western and American culture. This process is ongoing, and is increasing in speed and intensity. We do not yet know where it will lead.

Culture transformation is a long process

What I need to mention here is that I'm one of those who has gone through the above changes, has absorbed the "traditional/conventional" culture – through my family's upbringing - and then through cultural transition - through my father and during secondary school - and then Western culture - while studying in Europe - and finally the American culture while working with the Americans and living in North America.

Thanks to the training in scientific and objective methods of study, I can analyze my cultural background, which is that of many other Vietnamese of my generation, or the generation closest to mine. I have some personal remarks, which are of course subjective, but may be helpful to those who wish to understand the cultural transformation of Vietnam and find a cultural path that would lead to rapid and effective development.

I think that the culture I have embedded in my brain now is the result of an evolution over a century, starting with the changes affecting my father. He was born at the end of the reign of Tu Duc, but he got to absorb, and willingly so, a culture which at the time could be called very "advanced", very modern, but it was considered as "belonging to the West". He was not afraid of harming his reputation and being considered "western". In was in that spirit that he had educated, encouraged and gave me the resources to go forward on a new path, at the secondary level, and then at the university level, giving me the opportunity to absorb a culture that is new and needed for the development of our country.

On the other hand, having absorbed some good moral values from the "traditional/conventional" culture, I did not blindly follow all western values, especially the American ones, which are extreme, for example demanding absolute individual freedom, pursuing profit obsessively, accepting the principles of not caring for anyone in a battle for survival. But in my quest for knowledge, I have absorbed the essential methodologies related to observation, investigation, analysis, sciences, objectivity, exhaustivity. In short, it was all about a way of thinking and working effectively. Here, I should add that one of the decisive factors in my cultural transformation was my willingness to work hard to acquire foreign

languages, and thanks to this, I could expand my vision and understand other cultures, because foreign language is the key to open the door to knowledge treasures. In this regard, although belonging to the 1880 generation my father had also recognized the importance of foreign languages, along with rightfully understanding that mathematics was the key to sciences and technology.

I think that this cultural journey - from East to West, but not becoming completely Westernized – was not just my journey, but also the journey of thousands and thousands of Vietnamese of my generation. To think further, if after 1975, after peace had returned, the thousands of people who had undergone the cultural transformation process constituted a large team with expertise in several disciplines, with the potential of becoming major technical assets. They could have effectively contributed towards the country's development if they had been employed. But, unfortunately, the Communist Party leaders considered them as enemies, or felons, who should be excluded from society or be punished. This forced them to flee into exile abroad, and contribute instead to the development of their country of residence.

Simultaneously, with the severe lack of technical persons in all sectors, with the choice of an economic development path and a cultural and values system proven to be counter-productive by the history of the Soviet and Eastern Bloc because of the fact that it is a “closed” system, the Vietnamese Communist Party leaders have pushed Vietnam back to the where it was at the end of the reign of Tu Duc, i.e. erasing more than 100 years of development, bringing the Vietnamese nation back to a bottleneck road.

However, fortunately, today's situation has one difference from Tu Duc's time: back then the emperor and the royal court as well as the intellectuals had all put the brakes on change, while the people only played a passive role. Today, the government is still strongly braking, but the people are stepping firmly on the accelerator. Historical experiences showed that under such conditions, the situation would change, and although the Vietnamese Communist Party still holds their blind and ideological policies and behavior, they cannot prevent the forward movement of the Vietnamese people.

What was said above also shows us that cultural change cannot happen overnight and at your own will, but it's a process, long or short, depending on whether the method is wrong or right:

- If it's right, changes may occur more rapidly and help the country grow faster;
- If it's wrong, then we'll go around, or worse, go backwards to the starting point, or even regress.

Ton That Thien