

The Important Role of Families in Present Day Vietnamese Society

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Abstract: *After failing to reach economic output targets under the centrally - planned economy in the 1980s the country faced serious financial, economic and social problems. In response to this acute state failure, in 1986 (at the 6th Party Congress) the Vietnamese political leadership formally abandoned the centrally - planned economy and began introducing market - oriented policies (Quang & Kammeier, 2002). Since then, Vietnam is an emerging market, and has been one of the fastest growing countries in the world - becoming a new Asian tiger. Annual real gross domestic product (GDP) growth averaged 6.8 percent in the period 1986 - 2006, with relatively little volatility and moderate inflation. In nominal terms, the economy was 10 times it's late-1980s size in 2006, at \$61 billion, making Vietnam the 58th largest economy in the world in 2006, up from 76th in 1986. According to the Deutsche Bank research growth forecast model, Vietnam will remain in the same growth league as China and India until 2020. In this context of market economy with the expansion of cooperation and cultural exchange, Vietnamese families are changing and adjusting to the new conditions. Are Vietnamese families now important in society? The article will answer this question.*

Keywords: *cultural exchange, society, vietnamese families*

1. Introduction

After failing to reach economic output targets under the centrally - planned economy in the 1980s the country faced serious financial, economic and social problems. In response to this acute state failure, in 1986 (at the 6th Party Congress) the Vietnamese political leadership formally abandoned the centrally - planned economy and began introducing market - oriented policies (Quang & Kammeier, 2002). Since then, Vietnam is an emerging market, and has been one of the fastest growing countries in the world - becoming a new Asian tiger. Annual real gross domestic product (GDP) growth averaged 6.8 percent in the period 1986 - 2006, with relatively little volatility and moderate inflation. In nominal terms, the economy was 10 times it's late-1980s size in 2006, at \$61 billion, making Vietnam the 58th largest economy in the world in 2006, up from 76th in 1986. According to the Deutsche Bank research growth forecast model, Vietnam will remain in the same growth league as China and India until 2020. In this context of market economy with the expansion of cooperation and cultural exchange, Vietnamese families are changing and adjusting to the new conditions. Are Vietnamese families now important in society? The article will answer this question.

2. Literature review

Families are not an unfamiliar and new research topic all over the world. As evidence, there are a lot of publications and working papers regarding to this issue. It is possible to list some examinations and investigations relating to aspects of families such as: origin of family (Engels, 1884), definition of family (Goode, 1982; Murdock, 1949), theory in studying family (Bich, 2003; Parsons, 1955), the family in the context of each country in the world (Engstler, 1999; Malinowski, 1913), functions of family (Robersons, 1991), the changes of family in the world (Goode, 1963; Thi, 2002), the future of family (Winch, 1979; Howe, 1972).

Also, family in general and sociology of family in particular become a very common research topic in Vietnam. Many organizations focused studying on families, many workshops and trainings on families have been held. Family studies have also been included as a subject in training programs of sociology faculties in some universities. Research topics focus on the following basic directions: Vietnamese traditional families (Dong, 1991; Houou, 1991), families changes in industrialization perspective (Bich, 1997; Binh, 2011), family and family education (Chuong, 2000), division of labor in the family (Teerawichitchainan, Knodel, Loi, Huy, 2008; Minh, 2008), divorce (Tam, 2002; Phuong, 1986).

Based on the inheritance of previous documents in combination with the data collected; this article has attempted to fill the gaps in the existing literature, and contribute a more complete understanding of the important role of families in

present day Vietnamese society, in terms of both documented and the analytical approach.

3. Findings

Some sociologists such as: Skolnick, Ogburn already said that the families lose their functions in industrial perspective. That means it has no importance in society. However, with real evidence, we affirm that the families still have a vital role for the survival and development of Vietnamese society.

3.1. *The Vietnamese families are a legal institution to give a birth to maintain human - beings*

Childbirth and reproduce the labor force are considered sacred duty of Vietnamese families. No other institutions could undertake this responsibility. In the past, the cognitive level as well as the level of scientific and technical development were still low, so that Vietnamese people had no full consciousness and ability to control, to regulate the productive health for protecting mothers and children. The naturally productive standpoint led a lot of Vietnamese families were poor and sick. Members of families lived in narrowed, malnourished condition. The life - expectancy was low, and so on. Currently, the reproductive function of the Vietnamese families is as follow:

Vietnamese households' fertility rate have substantially declined and reached the sub-replacement fertility rate over the past years. The fertility rate in rural areas decreases faster than in urban area, but it is still higher. The proportion of women having a third child decreases yearly. However, in some geographic regions, this rate tends to increase. The reasons for giving birth to a third child related to the implementation of population, family planning in local area such as: there is self-satisfaction about some achievement, the letting loose of leadership and population work conduction, the organization system of family planning staff has not been strong enough and overloaded with work, the propagandizing, educating, providing services and building policies, regimes face many problems, etc. The reasons for giving a third child also related to son preference of Vietnamese culture. Most of Vietnamese families want to have at least one son because the sons are responsible for caring for old parents, ancestor worship, continuity the lineage, etc.

The reduction of birth rate as well as the Vietnam's population and family planning policy results in Vietnamese household size declining. It is also due to such negative factors as the increasing divorce rate of couples or the trend that a part of the population, especially young people do not want to get married or give birth in order to enjoy their own life. Across the country, single household account for a very low proportion. Small household size (households with 4 members or fewer) is common in our country, especially in urban areas. Generally, rural household size is larger than urban one throughout the country. In terms of geographic regions, the Central Highlands has the largest household size, the second is the Northern Midlands and Mountainous areas. The Red River Delta is the region with the smallest household size. Household size is inversely proportional to incomes of household. Household with the highest incomes (quintile 1) has the smallest size; in contrast, the poorest household (quintile 5) has the largest one. If the correlation between household size and genders of household heads is considered, female-headed households are smaller than male-headed households.

At present time, Vietnamese's mean age of marriage, especially men's is rising; for women, this trend has been likely to be stable compared with previous decades. Vietnamese men's mean age at first marriage is higher than women's in all the periods and regions. Urban young people get married later than rural ones because of the pressure of jobs, income, urban busy life; marriage is not regarded as important as other things. Kinh ethnic group - an ethnic majority in Vietnam, is considered to have more opportunities to get access to modern life, to know more about national policies so they have a trend to get married later than ethnic minorities. People working in public sector are more likely to get married later than people working in private sector or households because they suffer pressure from jobs they are in charge of in public sector, as well as seriously obey national policies related to marriage and family. People at low level of education and doing jobs concerning agriculture before getting married will often get married at younger age.

The abortion rate in Vietnam has been likely to rise for recent years. In rural area, this rate is a bit higher than in urban one. Young age groups' abortion rate is relatively high and often higher than older age groups. The abortion of people at low education level is relatively high. The Northwest had the highest abortion rate, the lowest rate belonged to the South Central Coast. The highest abortion rate is of couples with 1 or 2 alive children.

The most widely used contraceptive method in Vietnamese families is intra-uterine device (IUDs). Over half of married women from 15 - 49 answered that they have been using this method. The next are methods of menstrual cycle and using condoms. Other methods as male or female sterilization, withdrawal are less chosen by couples. The women's use of contraceptive methods is closely connected to some individual and public features. As the results given, couples' residence has impact on the choice of contraceptive methods. In rural area, couples choose modern contraceptive

methods, specifically the method of IUDs, much more than urban households. Urban families with better life experience and awareness usually use traditional contraceptive methods as withdrawal, menstrual cycle more than households in rural area. In terms of geographic regions, the difference in the rate of using contraceptive methods has been reduced and the difference is not very clear. The age using contraceptive methods is likely to increase and women at the age of 35 - 39 reach the top rate, then this rate has the declining trend when women get much older. Education level is always considered as one of the factors affecting individuals' behavior. As can be seen from the research result, different education levels have different impacts on contraceptive methods used by women. The higher the education level, the more contraceptive methods are used. People with high education level are more and more likely to use traditional contraceptive methods. IUDs is a contraceptive method most chosen by people without education level and the rate of using this has a decreasing trend when the education level rises. Couples' current number of children affects the choice of contraceptive methods, as well. Families with 2 children use contraceptive methods most; the lowest rate belongs to households without children. The demand of giving birth and the distance of fertility have influence on the rate of using contraceptive methods. When people have demand of having children, the rate of using contraceptive methods is lowest and women who want to give birth within 2 years tend not to want to apply contraceptive methods. Women living in households with electricity and T.V accept contraceptive methods more than others. Similarly, women living in places with convenient transportation condition accept contraceptive methods more. The principal provision source of contraceptive methods is in towns/districts/intertown centers, the next is district and provincial hospitals. For recent years, the network system of population and family planning has been a main provision source of contraceptive methods for couples. The main provision source of contraceptive methods in rural area is medical clinics in towns/districts/intertown centers whereas chemist's in urban area plays a big role in providing these methods beside medical clinics in towns/districts/intertown centers. In public sector, provincial, district hospital or medical clinics in towns/districts/intertown centers keep an important position in providing services of IUDs and sterilization for people.

3.2. *The Vietnamese families play an important role in the formation and development of their children's personality*

The process of nurturing and educating children started in the womb of his mother and cries when was born is in a family environment. The family is "*the first school*" of every human life. The family is the chief agent of socialization in all society (Smelser, 1994). According to Macarenco "*what your parents did for you before 5 years of age, which is 90% the result of the educational process*" (Chuong, 2000). The education of the family not only has strong effects and meanings for children but also has significance for human life. So that, Vietnamese families are interested in raising and educating their children. It is an obligation of the parents to prepare the children for independence, to teach them eventually "*to stand on their own feet*" (Aubert, 1968:83).

About educational function of Vietnamese families at present time, parents play an important role in educating their children. Fathers symbolize intelligence, will, and family's discipline to unite children - especially sons. Therefore, the father needs to participate in bringing up children since they are small, spend time for and looking after them, etc. Mothers who are often careful, close to children everyday, find out and timely shape misleading, and better at raising children lifestyle, conduct and human life. With tender and tactful attitude, mothers convert, persuade and teach children to love even when they grow up.

Parents spend a lot of time and activities aiming at educating and socializing children. The most frequent activities showing parent's care for children are: parent reunion, helping children with home studies, spare time for children, job orientation and marriage orientation.

However, in raising children, it is necessary to combine the entire power of family as a united team, and agree on aim and teaching methods, prove the roles of grandparents, siblings beside parents' responsibility. It should be clearly aware of abilities, strengths, and weaknesses of different family members in raising children.

Out of the content items to educate children at present, parents should take care of moral education, education of working attitude and skills, education of independence character and sex education. All the matters above have role and certain influence on the development and perfection of children's personalities.

In order to promote family's role in educating - socializing children, some solutions are suggested: i) consolidating family institution, ii) strengthening relationship between family and school in educating - socializing children, iii) combining between family and community in educating - socializing children, iv) making social environment healthy.

3.3. *The Vietnamese families have always been regarded as a unit of economic production and consumption of society*

There is no known society in which the family doesn't play a major economic role (Smelser, 1994), and Vietnam is not an

exception. Of course, the family is no longer a complete self catering production chain, but rather a production household, engaged in production, business or services with different trades and different incomes. In general, groups of households earning mainly from salaries, allowances, trade and services, have higher income than those engaged in farming or animal raising. The economic role of the family is reflected in two fundamental activities: direct work to generate cash such as salaries, trade, services, hiring out labor or selling craft products. The other is indirect work such as cultivation, animal husbandry, creating products to meet daily consumption needs of the family, including the preservation of food and foodstuffs, expenditure management, healthcare and meals for family members. In the family, the husband tends to engage in economic activity that generate cash income and the wife takes part in indirect economic activity, bringing products that meet daily needs of family members. Now, we can see that households' income has had a rising and stable tendency. This demonstrates that households' living standard has been improved better. Nevertheless, there still exists a quite big difference in the income of rural and urban households, as well as between the richest and poorest household groups. The Southeast is the region with households' highest income, whereas the Northeast has the lowest income of households. As for the structure of income source, the biggest source is from salaries, the next is from agricultural activities. Meanwhile, the source from construction and forestry is lowest. There is a certain difference in the structure of income source of rural and urban households. Rural households get the biggest source of income from agricultural activities; the next is the source from salaries. On the contrary, income source from salaries is the main income of urban households. Income from agricultural activities only takes a small proportion in the structure of urban households' income. Quintile 5 (the richest group) has the biggest income source from salaries and others while the poorest group (quintile 1) has the main income source from agricultural activities.

The average expense of Vietnamese households was significantly improved in recent years. Average monthly expense of households headed by women is higher than that of households headed by men. Average expense gap between urban and rural areas have decreased slightly but remained large differences of the expense rate. The biggest expense of all the households is living expense, but the rate of living expense in urban areas is always higher than that of rural areas. It is the same situation between the quintile 5 and quintile 1. Only the expense on education is almost no difference between groups at different living standards. In daily expenses, women have the highest right of deciding, most men do not take part in this duty. With other expenses like children's education and disease treatment, men play higher role in deciding. This is common in all the households in spite of rural or urban families. Nevertheless, in buying expensive things, the rate of both wives and husbands discussing on making decisions ranks highest. Meanwhile, this rate of only women deciding this expense is not high, especially in rural areas.

3.4. The Vietnamese families are responsible for taking care of elderly people

The proportion of elderly people in Vietnam is rising sharply in recent years. The ageing population is focused mainly at the ages of 60 - 64 and 65 - 69. There are more ageing females than males. The rate of ageing males at lower ages is higher. But the rate of ageing females at higher ages is higher than that of the ageing males. Ageing Vietnamese are involved in various forms of economic activities to earn income for themselves and/or their families, especially related to agricultural activities. The statistics shows a majority of ageing Vietnamese is literate, whereas only a minority of the older people professes a religion. Co-residence with a spouse and a married child is the social norm for older persons whose children are adults. Co-residence is higher in urban than rural areas, a common pattern found in a number of developing countries. Elderly people mainly live in rural areas. Generally, in urban areas and deltas, the ratio of old people is higher than that in mountainous, remote and far-flung areas. The highest rate of old people is in Red River Delta, the lowest in Central Highlands.

In spite of the fact that Vietnamese government spiltulated a lot of policies for elderly people, but the public support that is currently available to the elderly is extremely limited. The state's inability to provide full support to the elderly people so that the responsibility of taking care of them actually belongs to family. It is confirmed by the number of elderly people living with their children when they are old and a lot of policies required families take care of elderly people. The family undoubtedly does still play a crucial role in providing older persons with care in Vietnam. The main reason for this situation is that the children want to compensate their parents' sacrifices for them. It is called "*filial piety*" (Dao Hieu in Vietnamese). In somewhat general terms, filial piety means to be good to one's parents; to take care of one's parents; to engage in good conduct not just towards parents but also outside the home so as to bring a good name to one's parents and ancestors; to perform the duties of one's job well so as to obtain the material means to support parents as well as carry out sacrifices to the ancestors; not be rebellious; show love, respect and support; display courtesy; ensure male heirs, uphold fraternity among brothers; wisely advise one's parents, including sorrow for their sickness and death; and carry out sacrifices after their death. But a core ideal of filial piety is the fulfillment of child's obligations to the parent:

"children were made to feel keenly that they owed parents a moral debt so immense as to be unpayable. A child was supposed to try to please his or her parents all the time and in every way, to increase their comfort, to accede to all their wishes, to fulfill their aspirations, to lighten their burden of work and of worry, and to comply with their wishes in all matters, great and small" (Jamieson, 1993:17). Everyone in Vietnam is known that "*Cong cha nhu nui Thai Son, nghia me nhu nuoc trong nguon chay ra*" (Your father's merit is immense like Thai Son mountain, and the moral debt to your mother is endless like the water from its source), so they would also support their old parents. That was the way they paid their moral debt to their parents to some extent. We could understand why families are very important in taking care of elderly in Vietnamese society.

4. Conclusion

Vietnam is undergoing the process of industrialization and modernization. It has brought the families in Vietnam new opportunities to develop; the living standard of the greatest part of Vietnamese families is improving, the basic functions of families have changed for the better. That means family is very important and inevitable in Vietnam. As a conclusion, I cited the Lack's opinion when he made a remarkable comparison: "*The Americans have social security, unemployment benefits, health insurance, orphanages, psychiatrists, marriage counselors, and old age homes. The Vietnamese have the family. The Americans have television, technology, mobility, independence, privacy, and the women's movement. The Vietnamese have the family*" (Lack, 1986).

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