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THE CHANGE OF THE ANCESTOR WORSHIP BELIEF IN THE VIETNAMESE FAMILY NOWADAYS

Introduction

Ancestor worship, with special cultural values, is a universal and eternal form of belief in the spiritual life of every Vietnamese. In each of the historical ages many customs and beliefs are constantly changing and the ancestor worship is no exception. At present, the ancestor worship is not only a custom but a fine custom, a filial tradition, a principle of ideology of each Vietnamese. They must remember about the concept “people have ancestor, have the origin” and about their birthplace so the Vietnamese who live in their houses or far away, even very busy with thousands of work, need to gather together in the anniversary of ancestor’s death¹.

1. Vietnamese conception of ancestor worship

A thousand-year-old reality shows that “no Vietnamese do not worship ancestors even if they live alone or live away from home even in another places with different custom”². Every Vietnamese family have ancestors altars. Everyone worships the ancestors, with the belief that their ancestors are the most sacred. Although they enter the eternal realm, the descendants still conceive that the ancestors exist there by their side, always assist in all activities of life as well as always bless the descendants when they meet the disasters, difficulties; they are happy when the descendants are lucky, they encourage the descendants to do good things and they remind, rebuke the descendants when they

¹ Đào Duy Anh, *Vietnam’s cultural history*, Dong Thap Publishing House 1998; Đào Duy Anh, *Vietnam through Dynasties*, Historical Publishing House, Hanoi 1962; *Rurals of Vietnam in history*, part I & II, ed. Institute of History, Social Sciences Publishing House 1978.

² Vu Ngoc Khanh, *Vietnamese family culture*, Youth Publishing House 2008, p. 78.

do bad things. The success, glory of each member of the family, the family line in addition to the efforts of individuals and families also derive from the merits of the ancestors. Therefore, the ancestor worship has become a custom (known as filial piety).

Socially, ancestor worship has always been respected and acknowledged by the political institutions (state) with variable degrees. Therefore, this belief, which is always parallel to the historical process of the nation, is one of the basic elements that brings together special spiritual values and contributes to the creation of the core: esteem the sentiment, filial piety and literature of each Vietnamese. The ancestor worship is a vivid expression of the cultural tradition of the family – family line – village – country. The ceremony of “When you drink water, think of its source”, “Gratitude is the sign of noble souls” has been handed down for thousands of years. At present, the ancestor worship has been subjected to the influence of the time quite strongly.

Studying the ancestor worship of Vietnamese in the Vietnamese families today and pointing out its changes under the influence of the integration period are of the paramount importance and help us preserve and promote the value of ancestor worship to suit the present cultural life.

2. The traditional ancestor worship in the Vietnamese families

The essence of the ancestor worship of the Vietnamese is from the spiritual belief that the alive and the dead people have a bond of mutual relations. The descendants descend on their ancestors, hope to receive protection. Researcher Tran Quoc Vuong: “Folklore space is not only a living space but also a space of spirituality and folk imagination; from the Hell to the Heaven, nine directions in the sky, ten directions on the Earth”³.

The essence of ancestor worship is the realization of the interaction between the supramundane and the realm, the special form of human-human interaction and between human beings and eternal values.

With a long-standing cultural tradition, Vietnam is considered one of the areas that preserved many cultural values, ceremonies, customs, rituals etc. with standardization in lifestyle, behavior for each member in the village, family line and family to follow. These norms create the rules, customs, practices, beliefs, lifestyles, rules of behavior for every person – family – family line – village – country. Although many customs, beliefs and lifestyles are dominated, changed by market economy, international integration and exchange, when we study about the ancestor worship in the Vietnamese family, we realize that the core values of this belief still hold the traditional norm. We would like to point out the cultural norms and changes viewed from the ancestor worship of the Vietnamese family, starting with:

³ Tran Quoc Vuong, *Vietnamese culture – explore and contemplate*, National Culture Publishing House, Journal of Culture and Art, Hanoi 2000, p. 180.

Select the location to place the altar

For the ancient Vietnamese most of tile houses or a cottages are constructed in the style of four pillars. Whether the size of the house is big or small (three or five compartments), the location of ancestral altar is always the most solemn place, thus “the ancestor altar always is placed in the middle compartment”⁴ – the sacred space. The altar’s direction follows the central door of the house. The ancients conceived that the best choosing of the direction of the house is that the front is the east, the back is the best; so the altar is placed in the middle of the house. We observed that most of the houses which were built about a hundred years ago have the east direction. Perhaps the ancient people said that the best direction according to the rotation of the sun is the east: “rise in the East, set in the West”. The science books of the winds and waters also write: “The East is merit, the South is vital force”. Therefore, the houses usually choose the east, the south-east or the south.

Currently, due to many land fund issues, the choice of house direction is not as the wishes of many families, the house built in new architecture is the building, the type of pipe house. The altar was taken to the top floor of the house but we saw that the altar was placed in the most important place in the house and still turned to the east.

Arranging the worshiping objects on the ancestor altar

The Vietnamese who are rich or poor must have ancestor altars in the house. For families from the middle class upwards, the ancestral altar is always well arranged. Traditionally, people divide the altar compartment into three classes. The outermost layer is the camp bed for people to do the ceremony; if there is no camp bed they will use the sedge mat in stead of. The second layer is an incense-table on which put the incense-burner, vase, lamp, crane etc. The innermost layer is the ancestral altar, in the middle there is a seat representing ancestors’ cult. The throne is painted with golden lacquer, dragon-shaped throne.

Some families also have a table to cover an ancestral altar, avoiding the hustle and bustle of outer life. For the well-off families the altar is decorated with horizontal lacquered board, parallel sentences. The horizontal lacquered board is re-lacquered and engraved with letters. From two sides of worship compartment hang parallel sentences. The parallel sentences are also red-lacquered, engraved with yellow letters and hung from the roof. The arrangement of worship objects on the altar of the ancients is very sophisticated. The worship objects must have enough meaning of five elements (metal, wood, water, fire, earth) to be born. Thus, the worship objects, in addition to the ancestors’ tablets (the throne), the descendants equip all types include: incense bowl, candle rack, incense tube, wine and water tanks, large wooden compote etc. but they must ensure the five elements as mentioned. Everything is arranged by the position that people can be seen the solemn, warm and meaningful (equivalent birth).

⁴ Tran Ngoc Them, *Find out Vietnamese cultural identity*, Ho Chi Minh Publishing House 2000, p. 250.

According to *Monograph of Hoàng Hóa district*, even if the poor families have no conditions, they still make high and narrow table unlacquered, the rich families have incense, prayer chair, gold lacquer painting and three, five or seven bronze and bronze busts. The altar compartment is also decorated with the door painting in fresco made by felt, parallel sentences. On the Lunar New Year or the anniversary of death people put on the fruits on the altar table, burn incense for worship. For rich families the worshipping objects are also the representation of the position of the family and family line. Therefore, the problem is more sophisticated, careful.

At present, the decoration of altar and worship objects of many families are no longer too fancy but they still comply with certain full traditional customs include the objects such as incense burner, candlestick, incense stick, cup of water. The altar is carefully decorated with ancestral tablets, incense burner, incense burner, lamp etc. The basic worship objects are: incense, flower and cup of water what shows certain changes in ancestor worship belief in the families.

Rituals of worship

There was not an unspoken stipulation about this ritual until the Nguyen dynasty, it was specifically stipulated the written form in the direction of the state normalization in the “Tho Mai ceremony” that assigned the ancestor worship and performed rites and ceremonies in the ancestor’s death anniversary. The person who is responsible for presiding over worship and celebrating the ancestor’s death anniversary (grandparents, parents etc.) must be the eldest son of the family, family line (or eldest grandson). When performing ritual sacrifices, he must wear correct and clean clothes (usually in long dresses and turban folded). Currently, due to working conditions, the convention is reduced, some families allow the youngest child to manage and worship when the eldest son is busy. Some families use the worship text according to the textbooks but others use vows according to family traditions that are passed down orally from generation to generation.

The process of performing the worship ritual during the death anniversary must go through the required steps from the recheck of sacrifice, incense, prayer to Kitchen God, to God of the soil and God of the gate and then proceed to worship ancestors. The ancestor worship must have all three rounds of wine, two rounds of incense, worship the full name of land, worship time, the worship host, worship objects, prayers etc. On parents’ death anniversary the eldest son must be presided over, the other sons must make the food tray or contribute for the death anniversary before. The acquaintances of the powerful family also bring on this day betel-nut, wine, votive paper, incense to the ceremony.

After completion of the sacrificial procedures the owner of the ceremony or the powerful person of the genealogical family reads the family annals or summarizes the history of the family so that their children can see the tradition of their forefather. The children find that house of worship and ancestor worship are the association between members in the family and maintain their blood relations and the order in their families and clans.

Studying the specific beliefs of ancestor worship of the Vietnamese, we see that Vietnamese often perform ancestor worship on family's important events such as weddings, funerals, death anniversaries, New Year holidays, new house, new born, examinations, the first day and fifteenth day of the Lunar month etc. In addition, whenever the families meet with difficulties, challenges, joys or sadness in life, all people remembers ancestors by worshiping for not only expressing gratitude to their ancestors but also by praying for ancestors to cover up and support. The worship objects that are offered to the ancestors are often the products of the motherland. However, ancestral offerings of Vietnamese people can not lack the basic dishes such as sticky rice, chicken, meat. The Vietnamese conceive: "How is the Yang, so is Yin. Thus people worship the ancestors with food as well as clothing, utensils, money, flowers, tea, wine"⁵.

Traditionally, ancestor worship is extremely formal, respectful and necessary. Because according to folk conception, people believe that Yang and Yin are the same, people live as they die. On the other hand, people also believe that although parents and grandparents died, their souls still dwell on the altars of the family to be closer to their children and grandchildren, to monitor the work and activities as well as to bless them good luck and get rid of the bad luck. In other words, the ancestor worship is a line that connects the visible world of the alive people to the divine invisible world. It is inclined to the good for human, it leads people to the right thing and allow them to avoid doing the wrong thing.

3. Some issues of cultural change viewed from ancestor worship in the Vietnamese family

In recent years, along with the urbanization process, many cities, towns and district centers have been expanded to the surrounding areas. Many projects have been invested and masterfully designed like tourist resorts, newly built traffic projects that contribute to shorten the the distance between regions in the whole country. There have been created large industrial zones which have attracted thousands of workers to work; the road in rural areas has been concretized to fundamentally change the face of the countryside. The process of urbanization has an impact on the life organization of the former agricultural community and urban residents, forces them to reconstruct social life, living life, cultural life and to change to fit with the realities of life and working of each person.

The change from a farmer into a worker forced people to reorganize their lifestyle, work sense, responsibilities with family, society and factories where they work; to deal with all relationships in the family, family line and society. This cultural change starts with eating habits, thoughts and daily activities; ancestor worship is also organized to suit the real life.

Under the influence of market economy, the traditional ancestor worship of Vietnamese has changed a lot. Some changes such as the concept of ancestor worship

⁵ Ibidem, p. 250.

are not easy to recognized but others are also easily recognizable – such as the changes in layout, arrangement of the altar or in the worship ritual. These changes are partly appropriate for each person's real life, but they are also unreasonable. If we do not adjust, these changes will affect the customary habits that our forefathers have built for thousands years. Practical study of some cultural changes viewed from the belief of ancestor worship in the Vietnamese family shows that:

Changes in the size and structure of the family affect the variation in the ancestor worship belief

The family model of the Vietnamese is the nuclear family. But in fact there are families that have three, four or five generations living together. According to our survey data, there are still many family models in Vietnam today. These families have often economic conditions and political status in society. In other words, these are the families with a traditionalist tradition.

The communes where are the families with three, four or even five generations are established before 1945. These communes are formed on the basis of the villages which are classified by the state for the first ranking in the competition-examinations with merits in the national defense and national construction. Some communes have more than 150 families with three or four generations as Hoang Loc commune, Hoàng Phủ commune (Thanh Hóa province). This shows that the existence of ceremonial, ritualized norms in the ancestor worship here is indispensable.

At present, we find out that the nuclear family model (spouse and children) are increasing due to economic conditions, working conditions. The restructuring of this nuclear model is due to the process of production industrialization including agricultural production and urbanization. These both issues have affected certain changes in the cultural life and religious life in which the ancestor worship also changed. When people leave their family to go to work far away or go to the city, the town, sometimes even in the village, they take the ancestral tablets, incense pins are applied from the main worship house in the hometown to make the altar in the new home. In these new houses it is difficult for the owner to arrange the position of the altar and the death anniversary in accordance with tradition.

The change in the arrangement of the ancestors' altar

At present, the arrangement of the ancestors' altar in the Vietnamese families still retains the basic elements but is arranged more compact, simpler. Nowadays, the house structure of most families is mainly roof house or building so arranging the ancestral altar in three-compartment houses encountered many difficulties. Some families still arrange the ancestral altar in the middle of the house or on the ground floor but according to living conditions, most people place the altar on the top floor of the house to be quiet and avoid noise. With the concept of "worship is sacred, forbear brings the good" the ancestor worship is still important to young people. But for young families the worship is mostly "distant" because their ancestors are actually worshiped in their parents' homes.

Therefore, the altar arrangement in a young family is mainly to fit the eyes, solemn and beautiful, so there is little standard in the decoration of the ancestral altar.

The change in worship ritual

Under the influence of urbanization, the ancestor worship rituals transform in a simple way in accordance with modern life but preserves the sacred meaning inherent. This change starts with the worship objects, rituals, vows, costumes, worship person etc. Some families are not familiar with the ceremonies so they invite the worshipers to preside over the ceremony in the death anniversary. This is on the contrary to the traditional ancestor worship where the eldest son in the family must be the worshiper, responsible for ritual worship ancestors on the death anniversary⁶.

In addition, under the influence of the market economy, many families hire people to cook for the ancestor's death anniversary what is a very popular service in today's society. Accordingly, this service will take care of all the cooking and prepare dishes and cups to worship the ancestors and then to entertain the relatives. Hiring a cook helps people reduce the workload for homeowners whenever they have a work. However, the family reunion and preparing for the anniversary of descendants are not longer, there is very little time for all members of family or family line to be closed together, to share with each other. That makes the anniversary less sacred.

The real life also makes families to celebrate the death anniversary in accordance with the working time of each person so the death anniversary may be hold sooner or later than a few days and hold on Saturday or Sunday. The change of the anniversary date is appropriate but because of that it is easy for the members to forget the main date of ancestor's death anniversary and to lose the spiritual element of the death anniversary.

Conclusion

Ancestor worship which is a form of folk beliefs has a great significance in terms of community organization in traditional society. This is a particular form of behavior, not merely human-to-human intercourse but between human beings and eternal cultural values. Over time, the concept and the way of worshipping ancestors of the Vietnamese have changed in some ways but the biggest meaning of this custom has not changed. It is considered to be the principle of human morality which is the fullest expression of the gratitude of the descendants towards the forefather. Studying some of the typical characteristics of ancestor worship in the Vietnamese family and its changes in the present society helps us to appreciate the great values of this belief in community life, to preserve and promote the traditional beauty which should not be lost in the future.

⁶ See Duong Thi Minh, *The Vietnamese family and the role of women in the current period*, National Political Publishing House in Hanoi 2004.

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The belief of ancestor worship is one of the ancient traditions of the Vietnamese which is present in almost every activity of ethnic culture. Through time, ancestor worship has still a lasting vitality in the Vietnamese mind and is respected by people although the current market economy has had an impact on this belief. Thus, we find the core values of the ancestor worship tradition in the family of Vietnam today that are still conserved by each person and each family.

Keywords: ancestor worship, tradition, ethnic culture.

Zmiana w wierze w kult przodków we współczesnej wietnamskiej rodzinie

Wiara w kult przodków to jedna ze starożytnych tradycji wietnamskich, wciąż obecna w niemal w każdym działaniu kultury etnicznej. Mimo upływu czasu kult przodków wciąż żyje w wietnamskich umysłach i jest przez ludzi respektowany, chociaż obecna gospodarka rynkowa miała na niego wpływ. Odnajdujemy zatem w wietnamskich rodach podstawowe wartości tradycji czczenia przodków, które są wciąż chronione przez każdą osobę i każdą rodzinę.

Słowa kluczowe: kult przodków, tradycja, kultura etniczna.