

SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN VIET NAM TODAY

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The discipline of sociology in Vietnam was formed and began to develop at the beginning of the 1980's. Forming and developing relatively late and inclining to applied and experimental research, the discipline is less academically inclined: therefore, Vietnamese sociology is characterized by public sociology.

Since the 1990's onward, tremendous and rapid social changes during Vietnam's "Sæi Mii" (Renovation) and open-door period has created the liveliest "practical laboratories" and posed renewed demands for sociological research in Viet Nam.

A large portion of sociological works have been classified as research policy-oriented or policy relevant, commenting or appraising policies. Many studies were ordered from the government officers and politicians (covering the issues such as social stratification, exercising democracy at grassroots level, and fighting corruption). Pre-feasibility studies and studies assessing social impacts by programmes and projects were regularly conducted. Sociology not only has a public, but is also needed by the public as well as by the authority leaders at both central and local levels. However, to what extent it is needed remains an issue and depends on many factors.

With particular methods, sociology has contributed and is contributing to identifying, discovering, analysing and interpreting social problems arising from Viet Nam's society. It helps furnish answers to many questions aimed at explaining the causes and logic of social events and processes; reflects the historical depth in behavior and state of mind, attitude and behavioural models of different social groups in a changing society. Sociology provides state managers' circle with information which statistics fail to supply.

This "public sociology" has a role and activities that can be seen in the way of posing the questions and assessing research prospects of Vietnamese sociology with regard to the theme on social changes presented below.

This paper is excerpted from writings by the authors published in journals and newspapers in Viet Nam such as Tap chi Xa hoi hoc (Sociological Review), Tap chi Cong san (Communist Journal), Nhan dan (People's Daily), Dai doan ket (Solidarity's Weekly).

Since the beginning of 1990's, the general research theme of sociology was defined focus on *the impetus of social changes in Viet Nam in the course of carrying out policy Doi Moi (Renovation), economic development and stepping up national industrialisation and modernisation.*

Social change in Viet Nam comprise many factors, ranging from changes in social structure and the value system to changes in behavioural models and the lifestyle adopted by different social groups.

The research on this theme is considered both theoretical and experimental. Such research can provide useful information on trends and changes that are taking place under specific conditions to support the formulation of policies for socio-economic development in line with the orientation of assuring economic growth in parallel with political stability and social equality.

Identifying and forecasting these social changes are considered one of the research tasks of social sciences, especially of sociology in Viet Nam since the opening years of the 1990's.

Changes in social structure and stratification

Research in social stratification in place of research on class differentiation are a characteristic of sociological study in the Renewal period. The shift to a market economy has created a transitional socio-economic environment with many factors that exert direct or indirect impacts thus amplifying social stratification. These factors are: imperfect legal environment which facilitates the alignment of power by particular groups; advantage or special position (monopoly) enjoyed by some branches; dynamics and willingness of individuals or difference social groups upon entering the market economy. These factors condition the different levels of social stratification not only BETWEEN classes, social groups, regions and branches but also IN each part of the social structure.

In the current period of industrialisation and modernisation, the development of a market economy in the context of globalisation and regional and international integration (in economic, cultural and social fields) will continue to impact important social groups *in term of both active, growth-spurring and negative trends* which augment differences and social stratification.

Vietnamese sociologists are paying attention to the emergence of *new social groups and new social relations*. Some social groups have appeared with more or less delineated features. "Old" social groups still exist, but have undergone basic changes in the new conditions. The problem is to point out these new social groups' positions and roles in the course of social development.

For example, sociologists and government officers' circles have begun mentioning groups of businesspersons (or investors), especially in the private sector. They seem to be completely new figures with the position being

defined. The Communist Party of Viet Nam's "Communist Journal" also described the businessmen's circle in Ho Chi Minh City - a place considered the most dynamic in the process of reforming and restructuring mechanism as follows:

Multi-sectoral economy has strongly developed in the past ten years, of whom the private economic sector recorded the most dynamic development. At present, Ho Chi Minh City boasts 26,000 private enterprises of various types operating with a total registered capital of 23,000 billion VND (about 1,450 mill. US\$) accounting for 35.5 percent of GDP contribution and employing 76.5 percent of the workforce in the city. This sector comprises types of enterprises such as private enterprises, liability limited companies, joint-stock companies and private household economy. The latter has developed from 50,000 households in 1998 to 130,473 in 2,000. As such, the private sector in Ho Chi Minh City has actually become a fundamental component part and has contributed a great, active portion to the GDP growth, chiefly the generation of new jobs in the city. The private trading households alone, small in scale but great in number, have provided employment to 40 percent of the total workers in the city thanks to their sensitivity to market demand. In the hotel and restaurant business, the private sector's value accounted for over 77 percent of the total value of the business in the city.

(Sources: Manh Phuong: The Development of Private Sector in Ho Chi Minh City. Communist Journal. No. 27. September 2002, pp. 5-49).

In this case, the businesspersons' circle is being formed as a stratum with a great economic potential, being *the most dynamic social group* and a new source of strength of socio-economic development *that may make an active contribution to the country's trend of integration and development.*

From such new social groups and strata, a "new middle stratum" has been formed and developed in Viet Nam, which is represented by businesspersons, development investors, scientists, technologists, intellectuals and managers' circles, etc. The identification and confirmation of the existence of such a "new middle stratum" in an official social stratification system will create a new way of thinking about social management in Viet Nam at present and for the future.

Besides the forming of a market oriented economy, building a State under the rule of law and exercising the democratisation of social life have also created significant changes in the managerial model as well as in the awareness of the people and managers' circle.

The democratisation of social life is reflected in the exercise of the Democracy Regulations at the grassroots level. The increasing level of people's awareness in publicity, transparency and their rights to information accessibility, public opinion and dialogue - either direct or through

representatives, and the mass media - between people and the administration at all levels have demonstrated certain social changes. This growing field also helps augment awareness, forms new concepts and challenges elements of the old value system in conformity with new conditions.

Social institution and social changes

After 15 years carrying out the renewal, Vietnamese families as a social institution have experienced considerable changes. Family households' role as an economic-production unit is being restored and accommodated to new development conditions.

It seems Vietnamese individuals and families are restructuring their living strategy to ensure and develop individual and family welfare under the new conditions. This trend can be seen in changes within the family division of labour, in economic relations between family members and descent line and in relations among economic units (usually discrete family households).

Changes can also be seen in the structure of investment in economic operations, in training families' human resources and the pattern of time use, etc.

As an institution and social group very sensitive to changes, relations within families and between families will mirror and reflect macro social changes. Consequently, further and deeper research on their diversified issues must be made from various angles to help identify the country's social changes in the present stage.

Social changes in enterprises

The renewal and open-door policy have given birth to many new types of enterprises: private enterprises, joint ventures with foreign countries (at various degrees) and equitised enterprises, etc. Therefore, *new social groups* and *new social relations* in enterprises have become a theme of present-day sociological research. Among others, what is noteworthy are new social relations (ownership, management and employer – employee, industrial relations, etc.) and new social groups (Vietnamese and foreign entrepreneurs, hired labourers in joint ventures with foreign countries).

Cultural differences appearing for the first time in these enterprises have sometimes lead to contradictions, even conflicts between employers and employees. Strikes have emerged - a rather new phenomenon among Vietnamese workers. Relations between Vietnamese and foreign partners and between Vietnamese workers and foreign investors have emerged. The issue of the role and activities of trade unions in these enterprises have also cropped up. The appearance of these problems has attracted the attention of managers' circle and public opinion, which should be analysed by sociology from the angle of macro and micro social changes. These emerging trends have

informed managerial activities and spurred Viet Nam's industrialisation, open-door and integration process.

Changes in the social welfare system and social security network

In the course of shifting to a market-oriented economy, the social welfare system and social security network take the role as a "buffer" for the "shocks" caused by the administrative reforms to a part of the population. However, they can only help to overcome the immediate menaces to social stability in the context of restructuring. From a long-term point of view, there must be a social welfare system and social security network suitable to the current market mechanism.

At present, the social security network in Viet Nam has to give priority in spending to beneficiaries of social welfare policy (to war-contributors, ie. martyr's or invalid's family members, veterans), and is not yet able to carry out thoroughly the principle "pro-poor" or providing "for the poor". This pattern can be traced to historical causes: in addition to Vietnam's modern experience with over 30 years of war, the Vietnamese tradition of "when drinking water, one should not forget its fountain" guides policy decisions.

These are important issues that sociologists may delve into and discover from the present changes, and point out the theoretical and practical bases for forming a new social welfare system in the years to come.

Social changes and changes in social psychology

The psychology of "quiet seeking" or *safety first* for individual life as a *living principle* is a heritage left by the subsistence economy still in existence until not long ago. In fact, this orientation continues to exist and influences social accommodation to the processes of restructuring, development and modernisation in Viet Nam.

The subsidisation mechanism has basically been eradicated, however its remnants still remain in the urban and rural people's psyche. In the countryside, it is the cooperative model that once has ensured them of a minimum, stable living standard. In towns, a part of the working people still want to work in State agencies or enterprises rather than in the private sector. The psyche of "accepting low but stable income rather than high, but venturesome, risky income" still lingers even among a part of young workers.

This psyche not only exists in the rank-and-file workers but also affects entrepreneurs, chiefly when they encounter difficulties and risks caused by a changing institutional environment. In such circumstances, they will not be rationalists, strong-willed and determined to invest. As a result, it curbs the rising strength of potential entrepreneurs and investors capable of engaging in market competition with partners from the region and in the rest of the world.

To what degree is this argument true in Viet Nam? What social groups practise the above-mentioned principle and how it effects the country's development? People are awaiting an answer from sociologists.

Changes in value standards

Generally, one can dwell on the shift from concepts, awareness and use of elements in various value systems, typical of the dychotomy between "past - tradition" and "present - modernity". Specifically, one can talk of elements of the value system inclined towards ethical responsibilities and the functioning value system. And, as usual, traditional values are often attached to fixed ideas that makes reservations about the old and the existing whereas modern values often underline rationalism as well as the functions and elements of development. The continual changeover of these value systems is like a colour background that is moving slowly but not unnoticeably.

One powerful example lies within the family institution: a comparison of the two Laws on Marriage and Families - one promulgated in 1986 and the other, in 2000, will reveal that the 15-year interval of the renewal period has marked major changeovers in marriage and family relations in Viet Nam. These relations have become *more complex and diversified*, and especially bear *"more individual factors"*. Families as well as marriage and inter family relations nowadays are no longer as strict and as clearly defined as they were 15 years ago. Standards concerning relationships between generations in families, gender roles and the issues of divorce, children born out of wedlock and pre-marital sex, etc. are being gradually "regulated" by law rather than ethical values.

A similar situation is also seen in many other fields, for example, the transfer of elements of the old value system by those of the new system that takes place gradually, step by step as an unavoidable social force. The tempo of changes can vary, depending on the domain and the degree of sensitivity to the new or the wish to "make reservations about" the old, etc.

For example, though changes in the values of marriage and families seem rather obvious, it can be said that changes in the country folks' views regarding the most important quality of officials in the grassroots political system still changes rather slow. Results of a recent study show that people still hold dear the ethical qualities of officials rather than thinking highly of "new" qualities necessary for development such as being "knowledgeable about the law" and being "capable of excelling at economic performance."

The following phenomena will illustrate more these changeovers in daily life:

Changing behavioural models in daily life

In daily life, sociologists also routinely observe instances of behavioural patterns that are changing: modern high-rise residential building quarters are

forming a living model linked with new standards of the urban lifestyle; the pattern for consuming food by urban dwellers is also shifting according to a new changing living standard, lifestyle and concepts in health and aesthetic aspects. People who "seek healthcare" in the current mixed public-private health system and orientations for youths' educational attainment and profession under the pressure of market forces, etc. can all be identified within sociology's prism and from a separate angle of view. And more or less directly or indirectly, they can serve as useful, necessary information for policy makers.

Some of these afore-said examples show that *social changes* are a vast theme and are actually and closely related to social development at present and in the future, from macro to micro scale, and from social structure to daily behavioural and cultural models. In a fast-changing society such as that in Viet Nam, studying social changes from many angles has always been a domain that demands the participation and contributions from sociological research. In both aspects of practice and methodology, this research theme is sufficiently vast to help address overall social problems and to encourage an all-round, multi- and inter-disciplinary approach when conducting applied sociological research. Through these techniques, *sociology may contribute valuable discoveries and scientifically based advice to delineating policies for national development in the new period.*

In Viet Nam's reality at present, it can be said without exaggeration that *sociology can go into all lanes and alleys of society in order to uncover and interpret practice in its own way.* The question remains as to what extent its efforts are facilitated and encouraging to gear its advantage thrust to the mapping out of policies and management of social development at present. Naturally, sociologists' circle and their research should raise their prestige in the eyes of the public first. Next comes the role of managerial agencies, policy makers and politicians. Regrettably, these efforts have not fully materialised for two reasons. First, sociologists need to prove further their actual capacity, and second, policy makers, for their part, must also realise more the contributions of *professional, orthodox* sociological research and therefore invest confidence in, and make it easy for, sociologists to "practise their profession" in a most useful way for society.

Besides a small number of sociological studies ordered by managerial and policy-making agencies, sociologists still conduct a series of consultancy services and sociological researches within the framework of development projects in the diversified fields of healthcare, education, hunger eradication and poverty alleviation, rural and urban development, gender and women, families, children, teenagers, social evils and environmental hygiene, etc. Hundreds of sociological researchers have traveled and are traveling to all

corners of the country to execute this mission. They *bring sociology into life and popularize and publicize it*.

On the other hand, as time passes, senior researchers are worried about the question of *what Vietnamese sociology can do more for policy making and social development management at the macro level and at its generality as a scientific subject?* This is also another way of posing the problem for public sociology in Viet Nam at present.

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