

SEVERAL CULTURAL FEATURES OF THE CENTRAL REGION OF VIETNAM

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It is difficult to define a specific boundary for regional cultural research in our country. Even the establishment of the typical indicators for each cultural region can not be clearly defined because the growth of the culture has originated from so many different factors. These include; breeding, geography, history and cultural exchange amongst different ethnic groups. Even those that follow the natural rule still have unexpected factors. Nevertheless, the result of this is that it is straight forward to identify the different cultural regions. All these factors influence the nature and behavior system of people in each area, and create specific nuances in the cultural portraits of ethnic groups.

In the process of developing the current economy-culture, the people and communities that are tempered in this way expose their strong or weak points, advantages or disadvantages. Analysis for the reasons to adjust or select the reasonable course for their development is mentioned in modern studies.

I. From the Ecological Geographical Aspect

Within Southeast Asia, the specific characteristics of Vietnam are not much different from its neighbours. For thousands of years, people here have lived by a planting economy, especially; rice, fruits and roots. Thenceforward, the foundation of spiritual life of this habitant also has been closely affected. Henceforward, the spiritual development of this area has been closely linked to its agriculture.

Through historical events and geographical reasons, Vietnam is spread out from north to south. On one side the ocean, on the other mountain ranges.

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The geography of the two ends - the South and the North - takes form of deltas as a result of the alluvial deposits of the two large rivers systems. These have created vast and fertile deltas for the wet field cultivating activity. Because of the shield of the Truong Son mountain range with many high and low layers of mountains descending to the sea, the Central region has a kind of terrain that is narrow and difficult to navigate. This specific geography controlled both the history and culture, and people who study this area always have to pay attention to this fact.

The Truong Son Range with the sloping to the sea creates many rivers that partition off the Central region into smaller sections. In mountainous areas, people have had to prepare mountain passes, and wherever many streams and rivers have obstructed the way, people have had to use floats and boats to cross. What is easy to notice is the lack of delta plains in rainy season flowing from the mountains is always threatening for people's lives. Various geographical buttresses have segregated the terrain here into localized area that have created noteworthy climate-geography sub-regions. Because of these features, immigrants to the central regions found it difficult to match the economy and achievements of the indigenous peoples.

II. From the Historical Aspect

The Central has high mountains partitioning off, long and narrow land with many streams that may obstruct transportation. It is the terrain itself that make people in the area easy to be isolated or advantageous in the plan of location.

On the distribution map of the ethnic groups, especially in the north of the Central region of Vietnam where the terrain is the most narrow and challenging, we can see that the phenomenon of interposition, mixed or inserted residence among ethnic groups is not common; even the local groups of the Chut, Bru, Tai-oi, Katu people also have a stable distribution due to their separation by geographical features. And from that, the structure of the state of Champa through the centuries showed special features that are known because of the achievements of modern researchers. This was the nature of ruling as a feudal group of many small countries (mandala) according to the template of ancient countries in the region and also in southern India. The names like Lam Ap, Hoan Vuong, Chiem Thanh in China - Dai Viet old history or appellations such as Amaravati, Ulik, Indrapura, Vijaya, Kauthara, Panduranga in Cham epitaph, or the separation Northern Cham - Southern Cham appeared basing on the existence of the two tribes Cau (Pinang) and Dua (Li-u), the regular displacement of the kingdom of Cham in the history, all are mentioned in assumption or argument of western researchers who study Cham. It is more or less reflecting the vague recognition of the united and unshakeable kingdom of Champa. However, in fact, it was merely a dominated or pervasive phenomenon that was temporarily influenced between one mandala and others.

Another feature of the terrain of the Central region, is that it creates good conditions for defendable boundary invading forces in civil wars of Dai Viet feudalism; it was the area that separated the two countries Cham Viet a regional scale, it was the meeting point of the two large civilizations in this area - India and China.

III. From the Cultural Aspect

In the two ends of the country - the North and the South- both the social structure and the behavior system of the people have been influenced by the way people live in the plains landscape. Whereas in the central region, almost every indigenous group of people reside on the sloping surface of the mountainous systems and forests extending right to the sea. They live mainly on hunting and gathering forest product. For this reason, the indigenous ethnic people in Central Highlands, have preserved various activities that reflect their primitive economic form. Also, their many modes of behavior these and spiritual practices.

Some ethnic people, for instance, the Thai, the Tay, the Muong in the North of Vietnam familiarized themselves with wet rice cultivation. This has created elements that have made social gap more and more distinct. In the society of those ethnic groups mentioned above, castes such as “lang”, “dao”, “phia”, “tao”, exist on the basis of lineages who acquired lots of privilege and special advantages including; land, capital, irrigation systems, tools, man power etc. These castes consolidated their position, and from that point, strengthened their influence beyond the border of their villages, which formed upper managing units, and created new relationships outside the scope of their settlement units.

At the same time, in the Central region, living along the Central-Highlands, indigenous ethnic people (the Viet-Muong language speaking communities like the Chuts, the Mon-Khmer language speaking people such as the Bru, the Pacoh, the Taoi, the Katu, the Sedang, the Cor, the Banar etc., and the Malayo-Polynesian language speaking groups including the Cham H'roi, the Jarai, the Ede) resided independently in separate village like Vel, Vil, Play, etc. In this structure, there is neither lower caste, nor an upper caste. The hunting-gathering society and slash/burn agriculture. Wet rice cultivation has been done rather belatedly on this region. The main impact of the modern state has been the occurrence of wet rice fields. Consequently, in the Central part of Vietnam, as I have said, ethnic people living in mountainous area have strongly kept their own identity despite the many changes in the country.

The forest ecosystem, which at some sections stretches to the sea, is the home of those ethnic people mentioned above, and therefore, has remained in myths, legends, epics, and songs, as well as in the memory of many ethnic groups. The Cham's territory at that time covered the beaches and estuaries of the region's coastline. Wet rice cultivation might be carried out at this time due to cultural exchange between the inhabitants of ancient kingdoms in the region at ports or

trading areas. The remaining irrigation systems such as the system of water reservoirs at Chakling, Maren ditches and dams in the southern central region, or the existence of many wells and conduits in Gio Linh & Quang Tri partly reflect this fact. However, the marine economy of Champa such as fishing, sea trading routes and ports, has been shown to be a defining characteristic. This has been shown in the various historical documents and research works. The currents at the eastern side of the Highlands which flow to the East Sea are the important sea routes. These facilitated the activities of forest product trade with the people living in the upland. Trade was done through transit sheds that are kermises in the hill-midland region. Traders living in the coastal region, brought salt, fish sauce, forging tools, gongs, jars, silver, beads, etc. to exchange for forest products of the mountainous ethnic people. On the western side, the terrain is less challenging. There are flat area in the region, which were good for establishing a broader exchange network.

Historical documents about feudalism in Vietnam from the 16th Century to the 19th Century like "*O chau can luc*", "*Phu bien tap luc*", "*Dai Nam nhat thong chi*"... have helped us figure out the abundance and economic value of the forest products in this land. It can be said that these activities were the basis for the existence and development of the Cham countries in the Central region.

The movement of the Viet people from the North since the 11th Century mainly took place in the coastal region which was essential for the Viet tradition of wet rice cultivation. However, the land that the Viet people acquired was not as large and rich as that in their native land. Thus, new regional traditions were formed. Tofu made from soybean, and shrimp paste made from small freshwater shrimps was replaced by shredded *khuyet*, shrimp sauce, sauce, and white herring sauce made from ocean sources. Meat, sea fish, and wild vegetables made up their daily diet. Village structure was partly opened, and not closed like it had been with village gate, brick wall fence, banyan tree, landing place in the North. The role of lineages that cultivated and opened new land was established, which covered the venerable imposingness of tutelary gods. In their economic activities, there were not big differences between the marine economy, agricultural cultivation, and mountain farming. Some of the Cham is old ports were reemployed in economic activities.

In this land, the mountainous cultures, the marine activities of the Cham people, the mark of Indian civilization and culture have still been preserved to different extents. Japanese, Europeans and the people in the region have still kept trading at the seaports. Hoa-Viet culture - a result of the Viet's Southward - march and pure Hoa culture have joined together in commercial centers or at the coast of the Central region. All of those have not only created specific features for the regional culture in comparison to that in other areas, but also made the similarities and differences of each sub-region stand out.

The challenging terrain in this region maybe once localized the settlement of the inhabitants but did not prevent cultural exchange. The natural terrain, in fact, help to shape the cultural identity of individual groups.

Captions:

1. From the west of Quang Binh, the community of people who are called Chut including groups such as Sach, May, Ruc, Arem, Ma Lieng are distributed and localized clearly into local groups living on the east - west side of the TS range. Bru people live contiguously to the Chut who are in the southwest of Quang Binh. Their boundary is marked from here to the west of Quang Tri: Bru-Khua, Bru Tri, Bru Macoong ethnic groups are distributed in the south of Quang Binh and the north of Quang Tri, while the Bru-Van Kieu have been living in the southwest of Huong Hoa for a long time. As the groups are based along the north - south axis of the northern Truong Son as already mentioned, we can easily realize the reason for the gathering together of Pacoh - Ta-oi ethnic people in the west of Thua Thien-Hue and Katu people in the south of Thua Thien and the north of Quang Nam. The boundary of ethnic people here is not matched with the provincial administratively boundary, however, it is related to the natural terrain and the feudal state, so the modern government considers this the marker to fix administrative organizations.

The distribution of ethnic people with the geography more or less reflects the characteristic of the resided environment of the communities living here. The feature that is easy to recognize is the subdivision and localization of ethnic groups as necessitated by the tarrain. Therefore, living area has a tendency to enlarge east – west. Hence, the frontier between the two countries Vietnam and Laos in this region is merely the politically administrative border and is not recognized by the boundaries of ethnic people.

2. In fact, the researcher can quickly realize the difference among local groups in the same ethnic people. For instance, language, custom, even the social structure among groups such as Katu Driu, Katu Chatau or Katu Nai (High, medium, low) shows significant differences. Ta-oi people, Paco, Pahi group do not want to admit the unity of ethnic people because of the difference of many factors in cultural activities (communicated language, weaving, communal house, resided features). The same elements can be seen in Bru people (Van Kieu, Tri, Khua, Macoong), Sedang people.

3. In a relatively narrow area in the west of Quang Binh, the local groups of ethnic people called Chut including Sach, May, Ruc, Arem, Ma Lieng, do not live very far from one another, however, the connection among them is limited because limestone mountains in this area.

4. Works written in the last decade of the 20th century by researchers who were interested in the kingdom of Champa and ancient countries in the Southeast Asian region leant towards the recognition the parallel existence of small countries

(mandala) in the area of the old Champa. Because of the early contact with Indian civilization by the sea trade, the kingdom of Champa like several other then kingdoms in Southeast Asia applied administrative institutions similar to that in the south of India. It meant that many small kingdoms in one kingdom united to one another, and these small kingdoms were called Mandala.

“Each small kingdom/mandala was established basing on the elements of the science of winds and waters such as sacred mountain (symbolized god of Siva), holy river (represented goddess of Ganga - Siva’s Wife); hallowed seaport (market at the harbor, place for commercial transaction, trade Central region); sacred city (site for the king and royalty to reside, royalty Central region); holy land (land for worshipping gods and ancestors, belief center). For instance, the small kingdom of Amaravati in present-day Quang Nam was established on the five following elements: 1. Sacred mountain: Mahaparvata or My Son mountain/cat tooth; 2. Holy river: Thu Bon; 3. Hallowed seaport: Dai/Hoi An seaport; 4. Sacred city: Srisanabhadresvara in My Son” (Tran Ky Phuong: *Champa Buddhism Vestige in Quang Binh*. Typing paper, pp.1-2)

5. Foreign scholars while mentioning of the kingdom of Champa often refer to the existing model of small countries with the economy basing on the river exchange network. Several works are noteworthy such as O.W.Wolter: *History, Culture and Religion in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982); Rie Nakamura: *Cham in Vietnam: Dynamics of Ethnicity* (Ph.D. dissertation). Washington University, Department of Anthropology, 1999.

6. The terms appearing in Cham epitaph such as Campadhipa (the Cham King), Maharaya (the great king), Rayadhiraya (the king of kings) revealed the influence level of each title in the relation among small countries. In other words, the unity covering the whole/dominating or separating one small country with other small countries was the phenomenon that often happened in each different stage of history in the land of the kingdom of Champa.

7. Perhaps the “Cham” people should be considered as the communities living in this landscape, and they all were the subjects of small countries, which formed the image of Champa kingdom in the past. They are not only parts of the Cham ethnic people. The important and noteworthy thing is they are various ethnic groups belonging to different linguistics families, who lived in small countries.

8. The treasures of legends and myths of many ethnic groups living in the Central-Highlands share a topic; in the past, their ancestors’ habitat extended to the delta. But for many reasons such as of venomous bees (in the Taoi, the Katu), of the sea deity’s attack (in the Chut), or of the dividing line occurred in the habitat after the monsoon (in the Van Kieu, the Sedang), etc., they had to move to the upland due to the protection of the forest. Some old documents found in Quang Tri area (15th Century) describe in detail the presence of ethnic minority groups in the

lowlands at that time. (More details in Nguyen Huu Thong: *The Northern Area of the Central Part: Initial Experiences* in Scientific News. Sub-institute of the Central Cultural Art Studies in Hue City, No. September 2002, pp. 5-19).

We can find the remains of their former habitat in the land worshipping ritual of Kinh people in the Northern Central region nowadays. On the worshipping tray for the ancestors they put a basket made of banana leaves, which holds fish sauce, dry fish, sweet potato buds, and indigo shirts. The Kinh people use Katu and Taoi language to call this basket Talet/Xalét. The word “chàm” in “áo chàm” (indigo shirt) is applied to indicate the color of the cloth usually used by the ethnic minorities living along the Central-Highlands. Possibly, the word “chàm” talked about rather popularly in the Central region is not originated from the way people euphemize the word “Chăm” (in the Chăm people), but being used solely to refer to the people who wore “áo chàm” (indigo shirts), who in the old days used to live spread out to the delta where the people organizing the land worshipping ritual lived. This point the hypothesis that the subjects of small countries in the Champa kingdom in the Northern Central region at that time comprised Mon-Khmer inhabitants cultivating wet rice fields. Similarly, in the Southern Central region there was the system of borrowing the Viet's land with interest for cultivation, which was reflected through the ritual of land contract. When the contract expired, the cultivators (although in fact they were the owners) continued to hold the land contract ritual with the “former owners”.

9. Along the Central land popularized a system of kermises taken place in the area between the mountains and the delta or at the sources of the rivers where, the Kinh and the Thuong met each other and exchanged goods. Geographical names such as Ben Giang, Trung Phuoc, Tuan, Cam Lo... are where those activities took place in the past and are more or less still present.

10. Because the western side of the Highlands slopes gently, the trading network was broadened. Many traders searched for goods supplied in the uplands of Laos, in Thailand, Myanmar, etc. Nowadays, various ethnic groups have still kept lots of gongs, jars, beads, agates etc. from these places via the exchanging activities.

11. In spite of the fact that the Cham people today no longer have marine trade, it cannot be said that they did not once have that tradition. Under the impacts of past wars merchants who lived on the marine trade dispersed.

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