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**Vietnamese Proverbs: Values Preserved in Modern
Society**

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Abstract

Vietnamese proverbs has created long-lasting values which are being passed on to the modern society with numerous passions. These values include humanistic values confirming the human position in life. They also comprise social values and human philosophy as well as aesthetic values. Therefore, typical proverbs of the Viet people which have been transferred to the younger generations via literary works such as *Việt điển u linh* (A collection of Vietnamese misteries) in the 14th century, *Lĩnh Nam chích quái* (A selection of the Viet extraordinary stories) in the 15th century are still being passed on until the present days.

With the foundation of traditional Vietnamese proverbs, modern proverbs have undergone profound changes as seen in modern life through different forms of media including printed and audiovisual media as well as internet. It is obvious that traditional proverbs has regenerated in the new appearance. Proverbs are reproduced in modern literary works. Proverbs are also recreated and transformed in prose, poetry and drama.

The movement and development of proverbs in our modern society confirm their deep values of the traditional culture. Writers, journalists and artists of other art forms have not only received the art tradition of word use of the ancestors but more importantly they have inherited the cultural environment, humanistic values and life philosophies in order to transfer to the next generations.

Henceforth, in the modern society Vietnamese proverbs are not obliterated but remain their vitality with different forms and have been of the Vietnamese people's favourite.

Keywords Values, preservation of Vietnamese proverbs, vitality of Vietnamese proverbs

Background

The value of Vietnamese traditional proverbs has been a creative product of the Vietnamese nation throughout its long historical journey. The lessons of human behaviours depicted in proverbs have rooted themselves deeply in the minds of Vietnamese generations. The elderly repeat proverbs in modern life and express their strong pride in the heritage of the past, which evidences the deep imprints of proverbs in the life of Vietnamese communities. Proverbs contain both linguistic and cultural values, and are the cultural values of Vietnam, thus creating vitality, especially in the context of modern society.

Compared to other types of folk literature, Vietnamese proverbs carry special values. Cao Huy Dinh (1976) notes that:

In Vietnam, scientific knowledge and folk philosophy are expressed in many specific and vivid forms (fairy tales, fables, jokes, anecdotes, riddles, etc.), but most directly and condensedly in the form of the proverb. Learning about nature and the universe, the practice of labor and fighting as well as all the handlings with life situations ranging from small to serious issues are continuously and constantly summarized into proverbs by the Vietnamese people from generations to generations. Proverbs, which are a product of vivid life and have a clear teaching purpose, participate actively in the ideological and cultural activities of the people.

As a valuable folk literary genre, Vietnamese proverbs are a topic of interest and are studied by many researchers, including not only literary and cultural scholars, but also linguists. From a linguistic perspective, proverbs are sentences that convey an artistic message in simple one-sentence form, which differentiates them from other artistic messages.

Humanistic Values in Vietnamese Proverbs

Family Values

Vietnamese proverbs have created sustainable values that people in modern society still embrace. They mention humanitarian relationships with humanistic values, which cover the relationships between spouses, parents and children. There are proverbs which have become guidelines for Vietnamese people. They comprise those expressing withdrawn lessons and philosophy in behaviour for a harmonious relationship between a husband and wife:

*Behind every great man, there is a great woman (Thuận vợ thuận chồng tát bể Đông cũng cạn)
A soft answer turns away wrath (Chồng giận thì vợ bớt lời)*

In Vietnam, the relationship between parents and children is important; it creates a strong link in the Vietnamese family:

He whose parents are alive is living in a house with a roof" (Con có cha như nhà có nóc)

Therefore, Vietnamese people take the teaching of their children into serious consideration:

Train up a child in the way he should go (Uốn cây từ thuở còn non, dạy con từ thuở con còn ngây thơ).

In order to teach their children well, parents should be as strict as possible:

Spare the rod, spoil the child" (Yêu cho roi cho vọt, ghét cho ngọt cho bùi"

Parents not only care for their children's schooling, but also take care of their children's marriage when they mature. The maturity of children is the result of the care and teaching from the family, school and the society. Parents are the ones who give birth and nurture the children; thus children are supposed to express their gratitude to the parents with respect in mind and in behaviour:

Children should respect both the father's side and the mother's (Bên cha cũng kính bên mẹ cũng vâng)

It is a deeply loving relationship with mutual care and support:

A young kid needs his parents; an old man needs his offsprings (Trẻ cây cha, già cây con).

Social Values

The value of the proverb holds central social values embedded in the rule of each village, the heart of traditional Vietnamese society:

Each village has its own custom (Đất có lệ quê có thói)

The village customs are the principles, traditions, habits, rules and habitual lifestyles of the people in each region. Those rules are not written, but people must know these in order to obey:

Custom rules the law (Phép vua thua lệ làng)

In Vietnamese proverbs there is always appreciation and respect for neighbours who offer assistance in times of need. Therefore, Vietnamese people approve the sentiments among neighbours:

Better a neighbour that is near than a brother that is afar.” (Bán anh em xa, mua láng giềng gần)

A philosophy of behaviour is practical in Vietnam as the Vietnamese learn that distant relatives and siblings do not have the opportunity to provide instant and immediate help as neighbours can. Positioning neighbours as siblings strengthens community. Close neighbourly relations allow people to help one another without regret:

When a horse is sick, the whole stable refuses grass (Một con ngựa đau, cả tàu bỏ cỏ)

A good leaf covers the torn leaves (Lá lành đùm lá rách)

Do as you would be done by (Thương người như thể thương thân).

However, Vietnamese people prefer clearness and fairness in order to maintain long-lasting relationships. Appropriate behaviour is a social treasure which has long been established and developed:

A hedge between keeps friendship green (Yêu nhau rào giậu cho kín).

The tradition of love, solidarity, support and sharing in neighbourliness has created noble acts such as sharing one's meals and clothes, sacrificing personal property, and even life, in order to save and protect disadvantaged people. These are noble acts of favour in Vietnam, which demonstrate attitudes toward living:

While doing someone a favour, do not wait for a return” (Làm ơn đừng cầu báo đáp).

In charity, empathy is displayed towards fellow humans. These attitudes in helping others become humane efforts.

Paying one's debt of gratitude (Ơn trả nghĩa đền)

When drinking water, think of its source” (Uống nước nhớ nguồn, ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây).

Nevertheless, Vietnamese culture has it that people must always bear others in mind, more so in the debts they must repay:

One must be thankful for small favour” (Ơn ai một chút chẳng quên, phiền ai một chút để bên dạ này).

Aesthetic Values in Vietnamese Proverbs

Aesthetic Values Reflected in Dresings, Eating and Drinking

Vietnamese proverbs express aesthetic values in eating, dressing and living. Their conception of beauty is finely depicted by the language of proverbs. Idologies of eating do not simply constitute placing food in one's mouth to meet biological requirements, but rather, symbolize personality, morality and culture.

Do not eat to get full but to enjoy the flavour (Ăn lấy thơm lấy tho, chứ không ăn lấy no lấy béo)

Eat when you are invited, do when you are asked (Ăn có mời, làm có khiến)

Eat at pleasure, drink with measure (Ăn có chừng, chơi có độ)

Vietnamese people regard eating and drinking as a culture which utilizes the natural environment:

Ask Mother Earth for rice, ask Mother Sea and Mother Forest for food (Cơm gạo xin mẹ đất, thức ăn hỏi mẹ biển, mẹ rừng)

In their diet, Vietnamese people appreciate the synthesis and the harmony of ingredients, and this influences the way of preparing food:

Green rice cake should have both onion and fat (Bánh chưng xanh vừa hành vừa mỡ),

Having rice with soup is like having friends in a remote place (Ăn cơm có canh như tu hành có bạn)

The Vietnamese respect the harmony of food combining this with human relations:

Good wine should be shared with good friends (Rượu ngon phải có bạn hiền).

The proverbs also depict eating manners. Eating and drinking cultures of Vietnam have become a philosophy of harmony between nature and people.

Care the pot when you eat, sit after you check your chair (Ăn trông nồi, ngồi trông hướng).

Aesthetic Values Reflected in Dress

In addition to the proverbs about eating and drinking, Vietnamese proverbs reflect dressing manners. The monsoon tropical climate has created a diverse ecosystem for Vietnam, where the Vietnamese have adapted to this environment. As such, the Vietnamese have developed specific ways of dressing:

Three bowls of rice and three layers of coat prevent hunger and cold (Cơm ba bát, áo ba manh, đói không xanh, rét không chết).

A culture of residence of Vietnamese people is vividly depicted in their proverbs. As such, houses are built for optimum residence and permanent settlement. They represent stability, and a location for ancestral worship and for the storage of farming products, crops, labour tools and animals. The house is a symbol of family and rural life and is regarded as "the key element of Vietnamese civilization" [2]. The Vietnamese must have an appropriate settlements in order to ensure work sustainability:

Having a settlement allows work contentment (An cư mới lạc nghiệp)

Vietnamese people also convey their house building experiences in proverbs. The Vietnamese's house is a yin-yang harmony, a harmony between the sky - the land - the people:

Being in the downtown is the best, being close to a good neighbour is the second-best, being close to a river is the third" (Nhất cận thị, nhị cận lân, tam cận giang).

Aesthetic Values Reflected in Speaking

The Vietnamese people convey politeness and modesty in speech. Here, the greeting that is considered more important than property:

A word of greeting is more satisfying than a feast (Lời chào cao hơn mâm cỗ)

It is thus implied that mastering the art of small talk can open up the opportunity for success:

To speak kindly does not hurt the tongue" (Lời nói chẳng mất tiền mua, lựa lời mà nói cho vừa lòng nhau).

Someone's personality, behaviour, educational and family backgrounds are revealed through the way they speak, and similarly, people's judgement is based on how they use words in their daily communication:

The bird is known by his note, the man by his words" (Chim khôn hót tiếng rảnh rang, người khôn tiếng nói dịu dàng dễ nghe).

However, the Vietnamese people do not expect nice untruthful words, but rather, prefer honesty and faith despite the harshness:

*Beauty is only skin deep (Tốt gỗ hơn tốt nước sơn)
Beauty is but skin deep (Cái nết đánh chết cái đẹp)*

The philosophical values in proverbs are rich, diverse, flexible and practical in Vietnam. The most striking values in these proverbs are thought, affection and respect for promoting kinship, summarized into profound philosophical lessons. The philosophy of the Vietnamese harmoniously combines affection and morality, respect for others and respect for personal honor, family and social relations, kinship and neighbourship. These factors ground motives for lack of assimilation.

Aesthetic Values Reflected in Behaviour

Displaying the experience of difficulties due to wars, natural disasters and epidemics, Vietnamese proverbs still very much pervade the Vietnamese, who employ proverbs in daily to as a societal memory of solidarity and unitedness:

*One single bamboo can't form a row (Một cây làm chẳng lên non)
United we stand, divided we fall (Đoàn kết thì sống, chia rẽ thì chết)*

The proverbs teach to live responsibly with community through acts of supporting others in difficult circumstances:

When a horse is sick, the whole stable refuses grass (Một con ngựa đau, cả tàu bỏ cỏ)

Proverb Values in the Modern Life

Proverbs represent a literary genre with unique practical functions. The traditional proverb present in current society is not only orally transmitted but has integrated into society through media. Grounded in traditional proverbs, modern proverbs have been mobilized and transformed into emotional sentiments, handed down through media. Traditional proverbs have formed the foundation of modern proverbs, and modern proverbs in turns have been transformed into new ideologies, becoming reborn and reshaped in modern writing, poetry, drama and other media.

Vietnamese proverbs are widely used in journalism. There are many traditional proverbs which are used in their original form in media

Fine clothes do not make the gentleman (Tốt gỗ hơn tốt nước sơn)

It is too late to lock the stable door after the horse has bolted (Mất bò mới lo làm chuồng)

To speak kindly does not hurt the tongue (Lời nói chẳng mất tiền mua, lựa lời mà nói cho vừa lòng nhau)

We learn not at school but in life (Học thầy không tày học bạn)

Journalists sometimes flexibly use proverbs and modify way of highlighting content to be expressed. For example, the original proverb:

The elder sister falls down, the younger lends a hand (Chị ngã, em nâng)

has changed to:

The younger sister falls down, the elder lends a hand (Em ngã, chị nâng)

This exchange of words has brought other meanings to the proverb. In addition to the original message about the sisterhood in the family, it highlights the role of the elder siblings in supporting the younger. This new use of the traditional proverb allows the writer of an article to increase the efficiency of expression, improving the strength of the article. Accordingly, the content of the proverb is preserved, but the proverb now carries a new nuance and is thus more attached to current issues.

Proverbs express the attitude and affection of the working people towards life issues, while contributing effectively in the exchange of people's thoughts and emotions. Proverbs can be transmitted through the proverbs themselves, or can be passed down in through larger speech. More importantly, proverbs are transmitted and embedded in literary works, such as in folklore. Here, audience can better understand the meanings of the proverbs. In the works of those such as Nam Cao, Nguyen Huy Thiep, Nguyen Xuan Khanh and Ho Anh Thai, brief, concise and terse proverbs intertwine with literary texture to dominate the author's literary style, in vivid harmony with tradition.

Vietnamese proverbs have been transformed in the new era though incorporating traditional values and vitality. The birth of modern proverbs is congruent with the general rule of formation of traditional proverbs. In addition to the borrowing and collective creation, there are proverbs created by intellectuals in different fields and in different eras. Modern proverbs have significant roles in communicating new policies in different areas of society. However, the dark side of society is reflected strongly in proverbs:

There is official correspondence in the left pocket, there are reports in the right pocket (Công văn túi áo, báo cáo túi quần)

and

There is a pocketful of announcements, there is another bagful of instructions (Đầy túi quần thông báo, đầy túi áo chỉ thị)

are of the proverbs criticizing the pressure of bureaucratic procedures in public office.

First comes relationship, second comes position (Nhất thân, nhì thế)

and

The warehouse-keeper is superior to the chief officer (Thủ kho to hơn thủ trưởng)

are of the proverbs with which criticize corrupt officials. While traditional proverbs reflect experience, modern proverbs indicate social criticism. It is noteworthy to know that not all new derived expressions in media are regarded as modern proverbs since they have not been approved and accepted by a large audience. These can be classified into three categories. The first and the biggest category consists of proverbs which are entertaining and innocuous. These proverbs give people joy but do not hold long attention. For example, the derived proverb:

The nearer you are to ink, the blacker you get; the closer you come to the fire, you will get burnt” (Gần mực thì đen, gần đèn thì cháy)

originates from the old

The nearer you are to ink, the blacker you get; the closer you come to the fire, the brighter you can see”/

He, who keeps company with the wolf, will learn to howl” (Gần mực thì đen, gần đèn thì rạng).

The proverb:

The young relies on his father, the old relies on his son” (Trẻ cậy cha, già cậy con)

has been reproduced into

The young relies on his father, the old relies on his pension” (Trẻ cậy cha, già cậy lương) [3].

The second category are the derived proverbs which reflect some kind of unapproved generalisation:

Money goes first, positions follow (Tiền bạc đi trước, chức tước theo sau)

or

Immense fields do not make as big profits as an middleman” (Ruộng bẽ bẽ không bằng nghề buôn nước bọt) [4].

The last category includes proverbs which are newly reproduced but precisely summarizes social life practices such as

Cutting down trees is the brother of storms and droughts, driving swiftly is the uncle of death and injury (Chặt phá cây xanh là anh của bão bùng, hạn hán. Phóng xe vùn vụt là chú ruột của tang tóc, đau thương) [4].

Vietnamese proverbs are passed down through generations through such publications as *Proverbs and Folk-songs* (two volumes), *Vinh Hung Long Publishing House* (1932) and *Vietnamese Folk Poetry* (Vu Ngoc Phan 1975). These have been reprinted and are always welcomed by readers. President Ho Chi Minh called these publications jewels in Vietnamese folk treasure, and which provoke conceptions of duty, in order to render

these proverbs more beautiful and brighter. The movement of traditional proverbs into modern society helps to reaffirm the sustainable values of traditional language and culture. Writers and journalists not only receive the tradition of folklore art, but also absorb cultural atmosphere, human values and life philosophy so as to pass them on to new generation. Outlining the values and vitality of proverbs allows us to recognize and identify the rich diversity of behaviour philosophies of practical and knowledgeable folk artists. Values in proverbs are imbued with the soul, the ideological personality of the Vietnamese people and the imprints of the era from which they came. Most folklore philosophies in proverbs remain to guide people. This accumulated knowledge enriches personal experiences, wisdom, and virtue, while sharpening appreciation of nation.

In modern society, Vietnamese proverbs have not been forgotten, but maintain vitality and exist in different forms. Traditional proverbs are still in use with yet in new forms so as to become integrated into modern life. Via their appearance in media, proverbs can become more alive and resonate, and develop with time. Proverbs have demonstrated their vitality and pervasiveness as they become perpetual through time and space. Traditional values are being lost, and the values in proverbs must be preserved and promoted.

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