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Vietnamese Proverbs From a Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

Proverbs are important data depicting the traditional culture of each nation. Vietnamese proverbs, dated thousands of years ago, are an immense valuable treasure of experience which the Vietnamese people desire to pass to the younger generations. This paper aims to explore the unique and diversified world of intelligence and spirits of the Vietnamese through a condensed and special literary genre, as well as a traditional value of the nation (Nguyen Xuan Kinh 2013, Tran Ngoc Them 1996, Le Chi Que and Ngo Thi Thanh Quy 2014). Through an interdisciplinary approach, from an anthropological point of view, approaching proverbs we will open up a vast treasure of knowledge and culture of all Vietnamese generations. The study has examined over 16,000 Vietnamese proverbs and analysed three groups expressing Vietnamese people's behaviors toward nature, society and their selves, and compared them with English and Japanese proverbs. The research has attempted to explore the beauty of Vietnamese language, cultural values and the souls and personalities of Vietnam. Approaching Vietnamese proverbs under the interdisciplinary perspective of language, culture and literature is a new research direction in the field of Social Sciences and Humanity in Vietnam. From these viewpoints, it is seen that proverbs have remarkably contributed to the language and culture of Vietnam as well as and constructed to the practice of language use in everyday life which is imaginary, meaningful and effective in communication. Furthermore, the study seeks to inspire the Vietnamese youth's pride in national identity and to encourage their preservation and promotion for traditional values of the nation in the context of integration and globalisation. In the meantime, it would be favourable to introduce and market the beauty of Vietnamese language, culture and people to the world, encouraging the speakers of other languages to study, explore and understand Vietnam.

Keywords: Vietnamese proverbs, cultural values, national identity, interdisciplinary approach, cultural perspective

Introduction

When mentioning Vietnamese culture, people often highlight such characteristics as water rice agriculture, nature-human unity, emotion-biased culture, etc. How are these ideas evidenced? The answer may evolve from literature, ethnography, and history in which proverbs are a vital base from which to explore cultural traditions. Proverbs can be considered to be one kind of culture since language can reflect vividly and entirely the social life of Vietnamese people. It has

become the encyclopedia, the handbook of life for all generations. It simultaneously reflects a typical water rice civilization, gathering comprehensively plenty of cultural-traditional values.

The core of culture lies in behaviour. This notion is mentioned in studies by Chu Xuân Dien (2006), Nguyen Xuan Kinh (2013), Le Chi Quy and Ngo Thi Thanh Quy (2014). These authors have discussed the cultural behaviours of the Vietnamese people reflected through proverbs. Proverb sentences show how to treat other people well, the concept of life of all classes in society. Proverbs can be seen as a dictionary for Vietnam's cultural personality in which one can find suitable behaviors of the Vietnamese in their relationships in family, community and society. Proverbs contribute to Vietnamese culture, viewed with the hope that this unique folkloric genre will become increasingly decoded.

Proverbs convey messages of culture

The proverbs is a form of cultural language, which is subtly and artistically employed, reflecting the colours of one country's culture (Tran Ngoc Them, 1996; Tran Quoc Vuong, 2005). This kind of language is expressed differently from one country to another. Through proverbs, we can decode cultural signals of countries around in the world. The British often use idioms and proverbs in every day language. For instance, to refer to someone who drinks a lot, the British employ "drinks like a fish." Similarly, "beggars can't be choosers" means that if you are asking for a favour from someone else, you have to take whatever they give you. The Japanese cultural treasure has many proverbs: "In any parents' thoughts, their son is only a child in spite of his age"; "Giving a child a basket full of gold is less precious than a book"; "One who can understand our feelings is better than hundreds of relatives".

Vietnamese proverbs also reflect the cultural behaviors of the Vietnamese tradition. In terms of language, proverbs are special utterances, and frequently used in communication. Proverbs have efficiently contributed in the exchange of human ideas through vividly emotional expressions. On a literary level, proverbs are utilized by writers to illustrate their emotional thoughts. However, a notable point is that proverbs have become the cultural characteristics of each nation. Proverbs are signals to convey cultural messages. They, therefore, have become research objects so that the cultural characteristics, and behavioral practices of a group or a community of people are highlighted. When researching proverbs, people will understand the lifestyles, psychological structures, cultural traditions and identity of a country as well as the feelings of all people in a society. Proverbs become the national voice consolidated in short forms with concise contents. Proverbs tend to express people's intellect in the perception of the world, society, and human beings. They express people's attitudes, and how they treat towards each other in their life.

Proverbs reflect the relationship between man and natural environment

The cultural behavior is reflected in the relationships between man and the natural environment. The interactive experiences among common people resulted from their working life, struggles and routine activities have a practical value, for it has generalized human behaviors in life. This philosophy of life is universal and suitable for the context of Vietnamese society. It equips Vietnamese generations with practical experience to behave in the relationships with nature, family and society.

Through proverbs, we can partly visualize how our predecessors behaved with nature in antiquity. Proverbs about weather were born and developed from practical observations, learning, utilizing and responding to nature. Human beings always desire to understand and improve nature, climate, and weather. The discovery of the nature of the Vietnamese has occurred by either making use of existing natural resources for agricultural production, or promoting human intervention on nature to increase productivity.

For people in agricultural society, nature is always subject to study. Nature has always been harsh for the human. Wild jungles, seas, marshes, erratic rain and the sun, etc, always raise concerns in farmers' minds. Vietnamese farmers can, for example, forecast the weather by looking at the sky: "If there is lightning in the west, there will be rain early morning" (Chớp đông nhay nháy, gà gáy thì mưa). For those people whose lives are closely attached to fields and crops, they regard nature as a decisive factor in their work achievements. Therefore, in their conception, "Harvesting within one day is worth more than growing trees within three months" (Ba tháng trồng cây không bằng một ngày trồng quả), or "The buffalo is due on the day of rice seedling transplant; my wife is due on the harvest" (Trâu đẻ bữa cấy, vợ đẻ bữa mùa). These proverbs show that in antiquity Vietnamese people were dependent on nature; nature is the deity that guides their efforts in farming and they thus wholeheartedly respect nature.

Living in such conditions where the nature has great influence on farming and the life of the farmers, farmers try to learn and understand nature, and gradually attempt to live in harmony with it. Based on their experiences, they conclude: "January is the right time for planting sweet potatoes; February is good for growing beans and March is the time for eggplants" (Tháng giêng là tháng trồng khoai, tháng hai trồng đậu, tháng ba trồng cà.) They do not "live upon the sky, live upon the land, live upon the cloud and live upon the rain" etc., but they know how to take advantage of nature to apply this in their farming and to turn difficulties of harsh weather into advantages in farming cultivation.

Facing nature – the supernatural power – the farmer comforts himself in that if he understands the laws of nature, it is easier for him to succeed: "He who sees nature's laws will gain most success" (Biết sự trời mười đời chẳng khó). When humans have a better awareness of nature and technologies become more developed, they try to conquer and win nature, and make it work for them. This exposes a new step in the development in production and in the life of the farmer.

In proverbs, the natural world has its own life, which people clearly comprehend. In such circumstances, proverbs convey knowledge. When people utilize proverbs to treat nature, knowledge becomes a cultural expression. How proverbs express knowledge and culture is artistic. Such knowledge is both a proverb, and scientific, both as art and culture. Proverbs, therefore, not only convey knowledge and science but also culture and art.

Proverbs depicts the communication among humans

Human behaviour in agricultural society in old days was not only described in communication between people and nature, but also from human to human -- to the community of cultivation. Farmers had to struggle with the hardships of nature, so they were always aware of a "cohesive" community. In the fight with nature, people had to "break the jungle, and master the sea" (Nhất phá sơn lâm, nhì đâm hà bá). They could not live alone, whereas they had the sense to

rely on each other: “One holding hoe, the other with brush hook, both rely on each other to live” (Người cầm cuốc, kẻ cầm rựa, tựa lưng vào nhau). That is the reason why the number of sayings about the relationship between people and community occupies a significant position in proverbs.

In Vietnamese people’s culture, the harmony in the family is especially respected; first and foremost is the concord between the husband and the wife. Vietnamese people highly appreciate that relationship and believe that “behind every great man, there is a great woman” (Thuận vợ thuận chồng tát bể Đông cũng cạn). Moreover, they conclude with a lesson about how to maintain peace in the family: “When the husband is angry, the wife should speak less,” and “a soft answer turns away wrath” (Chồng giận thì vợ bớt lời). Vietnamese proverbs well depict this important relationship and convey the messages of how to keep the family in harmony. Along with the husband-wife relationship, the tie between parents and children is acknowledged. In the Vietnamese’s viewpoint, parents who give birth, feed and nurture children are the shoulders for them to lean on and thus they say: “He whose parents are alive is living in a house with a roof” (Con có cha như nhà có nóc). In Vietnamese life, the family is not restricted to the nuclear family; it includes all relatives. This is the reason why this kind of relationship is also placed in a special position; Vietnamese people consider these relations to be a tie connecting those who have the same ancestors. Hence, Vietnamese proverbs concretely reflect this conception of the Viet people. The sayings “Blood is thicker than water” (Một giọt máu đào hơn ao nước lã) and “My children are on the first place; my grandchildren are the second; next come strangers” (Nhất con, nhì cháu, thứ sáu mới đến người dưng) can somehow illustrate this sentiment of the Viet people. However, they decide to follow the practice of clearness and fairness in order to maintain this kind of relation: “Good fences make good neighbours” (Rào giậu cao láng giềng tốt). The British share the same notion regarding such clearness and fairness: “Despite brotherhood, cheese should be bought.”

A proverb is not just about the expression of the people’s intellect in understanding the natural world but also people’s behaviors and feelings towards common problems of the community. People always have a sense of harmony with the surroundings. Especially with water rice farmers, their community life has become the number one concern. They consciously set up multiple relationships at different levels so that they could both create material wealth and spiritual values. The relationship between Vietnamese people and the community has transformed deeply into their minds, which manifests in neighbourhood relation, in religion, and in festivals.

In antiquity, there was plenty of suffering in human life. Even though they lived with arduousness and challenges, they always kept a sense of responsibility, sheltering each other in hardships. They felt the pain, the misfortune, and the sorrow of miserable people, “When a horse is sick, the whole stable refuses grass” (Một con ngựa đau, cả tàu bỏ cỏ). Natural disaster threats, oppressive violence and corrupt vices of feudal society always attacked their daily livelihoods. Thanks to their own experience, people, however, learned how to encourage each other in hard times, “Be together all day and night,” “The good leaves protect the worn-out leaves” (Lá lành đùm lá rách). Our predecessors always kept that tradition. They presented great things in idyllic ways, sometimes softly like sincere advice. Leaves with two contrasting images: Good – Worn out sheltering together convey a convincing meaning. They suggest an intimate relationship between humans, binding people together in an act of full kindness. It is the act of love, helping

each other in misfortune. It is this kind of human cultural value that bears countless generous hearts in the Vietnamese community. Specifically, great meanings in life have been inspired and gently conveyed through images to every soul, which awakens human compassion so as to live together in more effective ways. Man cannot live separately, cut off relationships with others, or create his own island. This conception is also reflected in an English proverb “No man is an island.” The existence of individuals plays an important role in the mutual assistance of the whole community. The relationship between man and his community has helped people live faithfully together, “A stranger nearby is better than a far-away relative” (Bán anh em xa mua láng giềng gần).

Proverbs mirror individual self-talks

The Vietnamese with their communal culture not only promote the relationship between family members and other people in the community and society but also attach great importance to self-improvement. Therefore, Vietnamese proverbs are a mirror to well reflect these moral lessons towards oneself.

Proverbs are the consolidated words from experiences of our ancestors, the lessons withdrawn from ancient times, and the way to deal with life. “He, who keeps company with the wolf, will learn to howl” (Đi với Bụt mặc áo cà sa; đi với ma mặc áo giấy). That is how people behave not only towards particular circumstances but towards themselves also. People adapt themselves to any environment they are living in. To adapt to a specific circumstance, each individual will need a new and appropriate way of living and dealing with others. When moving from one environment to another, we should also learn how to change our lifestyles to suit the new circumstances. This is also consistent with reality in Vietnam, for the fact that “every country has its customs.” In each local area, families have their own customary routines and habits. In new circumstances, it is, therefore, necessary for people to recognize new objective conditions so that they can adjust behaviours accordingly. The more that adjustments are made, the more proactive people become to promote their lives. Those who do not adjust to new circumstances will become like a fish out of water.

According to modern theories, how to deal with new circumstances, and with oneself is a life skill. Since antiquity, our ancestors have left their descendant generations useful lessons of behavior. In popular behavior, there is a mixture between nobleness and triviality, good things and bad things, passion and apathy, etc. Vietnamese people behave flexibly. It is from interactive relationships that we find the intelligence, dexterity, and sensitivity of the Vietnamese people. In response to each circumstance, behavior may vary to suit objective contexts as “he who lives with cripples learns to limp” (Ở bầu thì tròn, ở ống thì dài). This has become the philosophy of life that helps people keep away from loneliness and uncertainty. This also assists people to naturally and actively integrate into a new environment.

Moreover, Vietnamese proverbs reflect how people self-remind of the way to live in life. In their conception, the cleanliness of mind, and honesty and goodness despite that poverty and difficulties are more valued than the wealth earned through dirty money. Hence, they tell themselves “A clean fast is better than a dirty breakfast” (Giấy rách phải giữ lấy lề), and “honesty is the best policy” (Thật thà là cha quý quái), which suggests the importance of keeping one’s self away from sins and crimes for the sake of puremindedness.

Folk knowledge has given man moral lessons, reasons for living, and ways in which to treat others. It directs people to the noble sentiments - love and hate in people’s point of

view. Man is the total sum of all social relations. Social constituents must include different relationships. Each member of such relationships has their own roles, responsibilities and rights. Those individuals are the cells that contribute to the common entity – society. Life is not simple due to complex relationships; proverbs, therefore, have become educational lessons for many Vietnamese generations.

Conclusion

Proverbs under a cultural perspective include the culture of language and culture of behaviour. The culture of behavior consists of behaviour towards nature and society. This content is dramatically expressed in the Vietnamese proverb treasure. A proverb is a cultural language in which we can find great words, and words of wisdom from idyllic artists. Cultural beauty expressed in proverbs has penetrated deeply into the heart of every Vietnamese person across generations.

In the cultural behavior towards nature, just like in other countries, Vietnamese people manage multiple relationships. On one side, nature is a Friend. On the other side, it is God. Mainstream behavior is trying to harmonize with nature, and to adapt nature to survive.

The characteristics of family and society behavior present the natural instinct of love among members as these relationships stem from either coherence or blood relations. Goodness-oriented elements are the key characteristics of the Vietnamese family and community behavior. Vietnamese people always highly appreciate compassion, charity, love, and gratitude.

The culture of behaviour presented in proverbs helps us understand folk people's perspectives.

Antiquity appreciated spiritual values, the beauty of soul, the intellect, and lifestyles; they offered positive behavioural principles and conceptions. All of these things have become the aesthetic in community life, a reference for moral standards in Vietnamese society. Today, we still recognize the imprint of traditional culture deep inside the personality of the Vietnamese people, in Vietnamese life. Vietnamese culture transmitted through proverbs is always able to blend into the beauty of human culture to create values for human life.

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