

Vietnamese Cultural Identity in the Face of Cultural Globalization

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Cultural globalization is the fierce and unavoidable tendency that has powerfully influenced the culture of each nation or ethnicity, especially the cultures of developing countries. They are worried about the uniformity of the world culture, which will fade away cultural identity diversity. This paper analyzes some threat and chances of the globalization process and point out several solutions that Vietnam has applied and practiced to preserve cultural identity in the context of cultural globalization.

Keywords: cultural identity, cultural globalization, globalization

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Introduction

Nowadays, Vietnam has become more and more deeply and widely integrated into the world in many aspects and fields. In general, globalization and cultural globalization are an inevitable trend in which every corner of the earth can be exposed to the whole world. Questions like: Will we follow a world of cultural uniformity? Will globalization destroy cultures? Are people witnessing a leveling of values in a “flat world” in which cultures will be marginalized like the fate of many languages incapable of conveying new reality?

We are facing a big contradiction: how does the national culture retain its identity while continuously acculturate with the world culture to enrich and strengthen the national culture? Moreover, how to promote national cultural values to the outside world? In other words, how to preserve identity and develop a national culture in the context of globalization of culture has become an urgent issue for each nation. In this context, Vietnam advocates consistently a Socio-cultural Development Strategy that has been started from the 5th National Congress “Building an advanced culture boldly imbued with national identity.” But the concept or awareness of what or how is “an advanced culture boldly imbued with national identity” has not been clarified. At present, the internet, media, technology, and global popular culture influence Vietnamese cultural identity and face many challenges and risks. From a theoretical perspective, this article will analyze some threats and chances of this process and how Vietnamese people find solutions to preserve their identity.

Cultural identity

So far, there have been more than a few dozen definitions of cultural identity in Vietnam and several countries in the world with different approaches. Identity in Vietnamese “*Bản Sắc*” originates from Sino-Vietnamese and encompasses two words: “*Bản*” means the root, the origin which belongs to itself; “*Sắc*” means colour, appearance. So, identity means the colour or appearance of an object, phenomena, a person that makes it itself differentiates to others. In English, identity comes from the verb “IDENTIFY”: “to recognize someone or something and say or prove who or what they are.” Then identity means “who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group which make them different from others” (Cambridge, 2013). “Identity is the characteristic to recognize who a person is or what a thing is. If culture is conceived as all values created by people in the process of dealing with nature, society, and themselves, then ethnic characteristics are expressed in culture” (Pham, 2013: 550). Cultural identity is created parallel to the process of creating culture. Therefore, in our opinion, cultural identity is accessible and understood from the following aspects:

1. Cultural identity is a system of typical values that are quite sustainable, born, and nurtured in specific circumstances with the cultural subjects in a given time and space in the national history process.
2. Cultural identity is the “CORE” of the nation (i.e., the typical ways of interacting and behaving of Vietnamese people), creating a nation’s peculiarity, which makes it impossible for the people to mix with other ethnicities.
3. Cultural identity is the historical value — meaning some values will change, lose outdated, obsolete aspects and add new, better, more progressive and humane values.
4. Cultural identity is a spiritual value classified as an intangible culture but does not have a “peer” relationship with intangible culture. Cultural identity governs and directs intangible culture. Tran Long (Tran, 2008) in the article confirmed that “this dominant relationship is not likened the relationship between the outside with the inner but the internal relationship. It is so-called the heart/center/core — margin relationship. Cultural identity lies in the core. If the core changes, the margin will change and vice versa.”

As mentioned above, cultural identity always changes. However, it changes slowly or speedily, more or less depending on the “environment” from which it has been generated,

exchanged and acculturated. Long Tran (Tran, 2008) mentioned the term “Super-adjustment” or simply “super correction” because “this is the intrinsic movement, slow movement, movement process appears very subtle changes, very natural in the views and thinking of the subjects. The transformation in this form is a positive change. It helps the subject always have a new look without losing his/her appearance.” Such changes are considerable enough so that Pham Duc Duong (Phạm, 2013: 174) agreed that there is no culture in the world called “thoroughbred.”

Researchers on Vietnamese culture listing Pham Thai Viet (2004), Long Tran (2008), Nguyen Tran Bat (2009), Pham Duc Duong (2013), Nguyen Van Chinh (2019), Dinh Xuan Dung (2019) all agreed on the levels and features of cultural identity even though they had their own different perspectives and purposes. Thus, on the term of level, we can see individual/personal identity, group/community/institution identity, and ethnic or national/state identity. On the term of feature, cultural identity bears the Primordialism which says that a cultural community has its own identity, specificity, stability, (relative) invariability and Circumstantialism, which means cultural identity is situational, interactive, relative/connected, and variable. So, cultural identity is not likened to naturally-born or artificially-created by subjective desires of human beings. It is the structure of various aspects and elements that have been formed and shaped through a movement and interaction, contact, interchange of the endogenous and exogenous factors of culture even subcultures for a long history.

The globalization and glocalization in Vietnam

Globalization, in the classical meaning, began around the 15th century after large-scale maritime expeditions. But the term “Globalization” (originating from the verb “Globalize” which means to make a company or system spread or operate internationally) came about in the 1950s, with the proliferation of motorized means of transport and the increase in trade. Since the 1990s of the twentieth century, and it has been officially used widely. Globalization means the speedup of movements and exchanges of human beings in almost every field, from goods, services, capital, and technologies to cultural practices worldwide. WHO defined globalization as “the increased interconnectedness and interdependence of peoples and countries. It is generally understood to include two interrelated elements: the opening of international borders to increasingly fast flows of goods, services, finance, people and ideas; and the changes in institutions and policies at national and international levels that facilitate or promote such flows.” (Globalization, 2020).

The term “Cultural globalization”: refers to the interpenetration of cultures, which, as a consequence, means nations adopt principles, beliefs, and costumes of other nations, losing their unique culture to a unique, globalized supra-culture (Globalization, 2020). That is the inevitable consequence of globalization on economic, political, and financial fields. The negative effects of cultural globalization on the loss of cultural identity and the diversity of cultures in the world are controversial.

No one can deny that globalization is an indispensable process, and it is creating opportunities for developing economies to integrate into the world economy on which rapid economic growth and technological innovation have been promoted. Vietnam, certainly, is not an exception. However, it is important to emphasize that the opportunities that globalization offers to different countries and ethnic groups are so much different. “Overall, the more economically developed, richer countries will share more opportunities than poor ones.

It also means that globalization will give poor, developing countries more challenges than opportunities” (Pham, 2006).

On the term of economy, as early as 1994, many economists and Vietnam leaders spoke of the risk of further economic backwardness. Up to now, that risk has still existed in many aspects: the requirements of development and international economic integration and accumulation from the economy for industrialization and modernization remains low; outdated infrastructure, low quality of human resources; high unemployment rate, mainly — imported high-tech and high-tech products.

On the term of culture, Vietnam also faces significant challenges from the culture. In fact, in the current era of globalization, concern about the possibility of losing national cultural identity is a common concern of developing countries. The rich and developed countries always want to impose their economies and cultures on the poor and developing ones. Thanks to global mass media networks and satellite communication technology, the popular culture has expanded globally. These networks have taken popular culture from the US, Japan, China, Korea, Taiwan... to every corner of the world, including Vietnam. Those violent attacks on a foreign culture can be a threat to the diversity of cultures and the loss of cultural identity.

In globalization, the cultural industry becomes an economic sector; cultural products and services as part of the global economy. The five largest cultural exporting countries in the world exported more than 50% of cultural products and services. For example, in 2013, nearly half of the digital cultural goods were based in North Americans (47%), 23% were located in Europe, and 25% were in Asia. In Asia, China, Korea, Taiwan, Japan made up most of the market (EY, 2015: 25), Vietnamese contribution was not considerable.

So, globalization brings two disadvantages for developing and underdeveloped countries, including Vietnam: (1) their cultural products and services are difficult to penetrate into the markets of developed countries and cannot compete with developed countries’ cultural products and services; (2) globalization threatens to and detracts from the cultural identity of peoples. The fear of loss of cultural identity and the destruction of ethnic cultures is central to the debate over globalization. “It can be said that globalization has now become an indispensable and irreversible trend. It not only interconnected and intertwined economies but has become a complex, diverse and powerful structure that no force can change” (Nguyen, 2019).

Recently, we can find the term “Glocalization,” a combination of the words “globalization” and “localization” is used to “describe a product or service that is developed and distributed globally but is also adjusted to accommodate the user or consumer in a local market” (Adam Hayes, 2019).

From the above understanding, we can infer that “Glocalization” is the process or manipulation made by two agents: the producers of services/products and the customers/users. It can be more widely inferred that a product’s receivers, a service, or even a cultural value can totally adjust or restructure them to suit their usages, desires, and configurations.

Some measures to preserve Vietnamese cultural identity

The effect of cultural globalization on Vietnamese culture is an inevitable trend in this world today. What strategies or policies Vietnam has to integrate into the global culture and preserve our own identity?

At first, Vietnamese people “choose to actively and positively integrate to take advantage of opportunities and overcome the challenges of globalization” (Pham, 2006) as Mahatma

Gandhi strongly asserted, “I do not want my house to be surrounded on all sides and the windows closed. I want the cultural breeze of all the countries to blow around my house as freely as possible. But I do not allow anything to tilt my feet.” It is the truth that Vietnam always bears in mind that we start as a small country with an outdated, poor, and weak economy. So, we choose to actively and positively integrate to discover suitable solutions for our country as well as to avoid the impositions from foreign countries. Our long history has proved this measure is correct and effective in most cases.

Secondly, Vietnamese people have always applied harmonious, flexible, and creative behaviors. Due to such behaviors, Vietnamese culture does not extremely reject external cultural values. Still, it is willing to absorb them in a methodical manner so as to make our culture more diverse and stronger. Traditionally, Vietnam had not cultural conflicts or fights with the external culture imported. Until now, most of the wars have been to defend the enemies who had invaded our country, our borders. Religions like Christianity and Buddhism, Islam once came to Vietnam then have coexisted and developed harmoniously. In reality, Vietnamese people go to pagodas on the first, middle, and final day of the Lunar month and go to church on Christmas.

Thirdly, it is important to increase resistance to Vietnamese culture. “That resistance of Vietnamese culture has its roots in the depths of the soul, intellect, national pride, and unyieldingness in every Vietnamese person... So the policy of assimilation of culture during the thousand-year domination of the Northern feudalism, even of the old colonialism and newer one hundred years still does not fade the national cultural identity.” (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2012). Increasing resistance to preserve Vietnamese cultural identity, it is a must to follow some solutions like (1) reject the values that arise from the very opposite side of the market economy in globalization to assure economy and culture develop a parallel, so that economy does not destroy culture and culture does not hinder economic development; (2) purify the beautiful values and good tradition while expelling out-of-date or backward customs and habits which prevent the advance of Vietnamese society; (3) increase the intellectual content of Vietnamese cultural identity.

Fourthly, it is equally important to develop the character, mettle, and personality of cultural subjects in a position to deal with the trend of the new cultural wave. The bravery of culture always manifests itself deeply and strongly in the character, mettle, and personality of the cultural subjects. The quality and effectiveness of raising people’s knowledge will give Vietnamese people the ability to distinguish between values and counter-values; what needs to be acquired, what needs to be rejected from foreign cultures as well as how to put more intellectual and cultural contents into Vietnamese products exported.

Fifthly, facing the globalization of culture, scholars pointed out two trends in the debate surrounding this perspective. The first trend often called unification holds that globalization is creating a flat world, whereby a common value system representing humanity will gradually be established on a global scale sooner or later. The second trend, called diversification, argues globalization not only diminishes national identity but also contributes to strengthen national identity at the risk of dissolution in the flat world (Nguyen, 2019). In this context, Vietnam tends to return to nationalism, to the roots, honoring traditional cultural values. In this strategy, Vietnam respects the process of acculturation, reception and transformation of international cultural elements into our cultural treasure. On the one hand, search for and highly appreciate new symbols and identity of Vietnamese culture.

We have to accept the truth that people can coexist from family, commune, community to institutions because they must and surely will build up shared values. Both Westerners and

Easterners have been heavily influenced by bipolar thinking that always tends to attribute the world to opposites and contradictions instead of mutual complementary aspects. “The coexistence of cultures, cultural values inevitably spawn a new culture. And those cultures exist in parallel, not against each other, not destroying each other. Culture is the result of peaceful coexistence, not the result of conflict” (Nguyen, 2009).

Moreover, researchers on Vietnamese culture, although they had their own perspectives, they all came to the consensus on the division of the Vietnamese cultural process into three phases/classes/backgrounds, can be used collectively as a background: the indigenous cultural background, the cultural exchange with China and the region, the cultural exchange with the West. We can also call these three cultural phases: indigenous culture, regionalization and internationalization. Thus, it can be said that before the exchange of culture with the region and the world, Vietnam had an indigenous culture as the foundation in which the biggest role is folklore. The folklore, based on the foundation of wet rice agriculture, possibly, has contacted and exchanged with the Asian region and the world, including popular culture at present and created a typical way to preserve cultural identity. Pham Duc Duong (Pham, 2013: 171) recognized two ways Vietnamese people have used to conserve and promote their own culture; those are:

1. Each of the exogenous factors received underwent three steps in an orderly fashion: first copied, secondly simulated, and finally localized-transformed into Vietnamese (or Vietnamized).
2. Endogenous factors in relation to exogenous factors of the same structure are also transformed into three steps: disassembled the old structure (deconstructed), then reorganized (restructured) reconstruction according to modern sense, and finally modernized.

Thus, he concluded “ethnic identity or cultural identity is expressed in the selection and how to transform foreign elements according to the mind in accordance with the value system of each nation” (Pham, 2013: 175)

In reality, Vietnamese people watch Chinese films, Korean films, American films, and Taiwan films and listen to C-Pop, K-pop, J-pop, enjoy various kinds of food from other countries like Sushi, Kimchi, hamburgers, hot dog, KFC, Lotter... Some young people mimic their idols to wear fashionable clothes and hairstyles like the actors or actresses, even behave like those in their films. For example, consider the Korean cultural wave that has penetrated Vietnam since the 1990s. It is clear that we have a diffusion spreading the Korean cultural wave starting from movies, supplies, products, lifestyles, and styles of a part of people in the areas Korean culture has come. However, this is just an impact, watching and absorbing in the early stages, not a cultural invasion. Besides, with the characteristics of the Vietnamese cultural “strata,” the cultural harmony and tolerance, when receiving and absorbing Korean culture, the Vietnamese cultural configuration is definitely not the status-copying configuration. Vietnamese people will receive and transform it to suit their own cultural configuration as they absorbed Chinese culture, French culture and American civilization.

Conclusions

Observing the waves on the oceans, we can see that strong waves can engulf smaller waves, but with the equivalent or larger waves, they cannot pass through but only blend with

well. Suppose cultural globalization is considered a powerful and inevitable wave. In that case, Vietnamese culture needs to become an equally strong wave by promoting the utmost internal resources, continuously reforming ourselves as well as learning the good and beautiful things from other nations making them an exogenous power source to make our culture richer, stronger, and more diverse.

“In the world... there are nations who have their own cultural identity, no power can erase, no suppression can fade away. Vietnamese people have had such a cultural identity” (Phan, 1998: 143). That identity is an extremely important and necessary endogenous resource for Vietnam to receive and integrate with other major cultures and leverage the development of the economy in the context of exchange and cooperation, respect, and equality.

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