

# Duy Văn Sử Quan

## A Pro-Culture Historical Perspective

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## Chapter 1: Preserving Our Culture

Before exile, we swam in the culture of our people as fish in water. A fish never knows that without water it will not survive; not until stranded on shore that it knows certain death by asphyxiation.

When still in home-country, we failed to be mindful of our culture, not different from the fish unmindful of water. Living in the midst of the people, sharing a common language, a similar dress code, the same customs and habits and traditional values and fixed rites and rituals, our thinking and actions thus followed age-old models.

We did not demur, nor were we at a loss. Once in a blue moon, some ones did not follow the mold and acted different, but these were the insignificant few, treated as the black sheep, as the usual dregs at the proverbial bottom of societies, not worth registering in our daily life.

Once setting foot in another country, even one just across the border, we began to feel strange and find ourselves at a loss; these peoples thought and acted in ways that were surprising, different and unfathomable. Stepping ashore in China, a country considered to share with us a common culture, we immediately found many discrepancies: they set off firecrackers at funerals and played trumpets at weddings.

At the New Year festival of a certain ethnic group in India, (each ethnic has its own ritual calendar and New Year), we would find ourselves spray-painted by the locals, our best dress ruined by the red and blue inks. These were not hostile acts, but rather part of their New Year rites to ask for blessings. Those are but a few examples of the many strange customs we had never known, unaware much of other cultures different from ours.

Landing in the U.S.A, we were very impressed by the modern technical marvels. Such as: Doors that automatically opened to welcome us even before our arrival; Several cars for every home, telephone sets, TV's; Everything was automated -- washing machine, vacuum cleaner, dish washer; Highways crisscrossing as in weave work. We were thoroughly impressed.

Yet after a short time, we found that in the American society, moral principles were turned upside down. Couples changed partners like changing clothes<sup>1</sup>, every other child did not live with a father and mother; sons killing fathers; students beating teachers; out-of-wedlock births<sup>2</sup>, boys joining gangs, becoming addicts; robbing and stealing everywhere, murdering rampant and without hesitation. The law was weak and soft: one could shoot the president and found not-guilty by the court.

We became anxious. These anxieties prompted many organizations of Vietnamese Immigrants to put out calls for the Preservation of Traditional Values. Like fish out-of-water, we now felt that our cultural heritage was indeed as string of gems, a legacy that must be protected and promulgated down to later generations of our offspring.

Nevertheless, there were many, perhaps a significant number, figured on this once-in-a-millennium chance on the American soil, with its good climate, high income, fulfilling amenities, secure life, social assistance of all forms...and democracy, it's foolish to think about moving anywhere else again, including back to the home country. The best thing to do, they figured, was to let our young folks be "Americanized" as soon as possible.

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<sup>1</sup> According to a 1988 statistics (Newsweek the week of August 24th, 1987), the average American marriage lasted 7 years before ending in divorce; the fear of AIDS improved the duration in recent years, compared to durations of 6.5 years in earlier decades.

<sup>2</sup> According to a 1986 statistics compiled by the U.S. National Institute of Health: 30 percent of American girls gave births out-of-wedlock; 80 percent had premarital intercourse.

But there were others not at all optimistic. They did not believe that it was possible for a nation, however strong and wealthy, could survive the long run if men would not agree to enlist in the army, if students could not read and write even after 12 years of schooling,... all the syndrome present 50 years before the fall of Rome. There were those who said “America, a swath of land, not our promised land<sup>3</sup>”.

That assessment was correct. Nevertheless, we were still hoping that the American people would be awoken when confronted by the danger of losing out to Russia; that they would change their attitude and policies. Indeed, there had been much change in the American public discourse since 1980. It's not certain whether the situation could be saved, but the universe is impermanent – anything could change. Moreover, to change external and internal policies was the responsibility of the 250 million Americans.

Our immigrant communities have an urgent problem that we ourselves need to solve: What to do to help our children avoid decadence, to save our daughters from being tarnished like the girls next-door, to help our sons avoid the fate of drug-addicts like other boys in the neighborhood? Moreover, we also want them to learn the excellence and beauty from the local people, such as their tradition of hard-working, their penchant to help the down-and-outs, people like ourselves.

But there is a difficulty, namely, that it takes less work to imitate the lesser than it is to copy the better. Also, cultural exchange between societies follows a certain law through the normal process of money exchange. That law is: Bad money chases away good money, “Tiền xấu đuổi tiền tốt”. That is to say, whenever there are two different kinds of currency – a good one with stable value such as silver coins; and a bad one prone to inflation such as paper money, then without being prompted, everyone spends all the bad money while storing the true money away in a safe. Thus the bad money has chased the good money from market.

The same applies to culture. Whenever two societies has an opportunity for cultural exchange, it's easy for both societies to imitate the others' bad habits without trying to study and learn the good things.

In short, other than letting our children pursue an educational exchange in modern sciences and technologies, we also have immediate responsibilities:

1. To preserve traditional values;
2. To safe-guard our children from being infected by the diseases in the local children.

Both are really the same, because accomplishing one task will simultaneously resolves the other: If we succeed in teaching our children Nhân, Nghĩa, Lễ, Trí, Tín<sup>4</sup>, then they will not behave contrary to those principles. Here is a bright example to follow: Japanese children are rigorously trained and disciplined since childhood and know how to exercise self-control, how to avoid decadence, and therefore Japanese societies are always wholesome, progressive, yet successful in preserving traditional culture.

### ***Culture is a good weapon in the fight to survive.***

Every society has its own unique traditions and habits, unique ways of thinking and behaving, that is a unique culture. In a competition on the same land, some will triumph over the others and will thus survive.

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<sup>3</sup> [Translator's Note, TN] Patterned to contrast with a famous historical pronouncement “Hoành Sơn nhất đái, vạn đại chung thân” ascribed to an advisor to the first Nguyễn lord which set the start of the southward movement of the country in the 17th century.

<sup>4</sup> [TN] The Five main principles to live a just life, according to Confucianism. Nhân – Man: humanity; Nghĩa – social justice; Lễ -- rituals and traditions for dignity; Trí: Rational thought; Tín: Being true to one's word.

The United States collects immigrants from four corners of the world, and it is clear that the ethnic groups that succeed are those that bring along and preserve their traditional culture and values. These ethnic groups succeed greatly and hold prominent positions in many different areas.

At the top are the Jews, who are in total control of the machineries of finance, economics, education, communications, and the Democratic party, even though they are a tiny minority (about 2% of the population). The Jewish race are successful because they possess four strong points:

1. They wholly preserve the spiritual values manifested by the Jewish religion over the millennia.
2. Without a country and in Diaspora throughout the world, they learn from the local people the good, never the bad things and values.
3. Being discriminated against and looked down upon, they unite tightly and help out each other.
4. They invest in their children's education. Many Jewish families set up savings accounts with specific instructions that they be used only for college tuition.

After the Jews are the Chinese and the Japanese. Born and raised in America over many generations, most still possess their original peoples' characters.

Beyond are the Europeans whose ancestors helped create the country, and have been emigrating to America.

In contrast, the ethnic groups that did not bring with them cultural assets as capital, are ending up in the low rungs, unable to compete. A large number relies on welfare, a form of charity embedding an insidious plan: Give just them enough food to subsist, to live without a will to fight, always with mouth open waiting for mana from heaven.

Recently, the Philippinoes, the Thai's, and the Koreans have succeeded in establishing strong communities. Black Americans and Hispanics do not fare well culturally but have two advantages: They are physically strong, fit for heavy work, and they have a large population that are learning to unite, and thus are becoming two significant political factors.

The issue to be raised is: What should the Vietnamese Immigrant communities do in order to compete for survival, to find a stable position among the multi-cultural American society? There are many difficulties, due to the following three disadvantages:

- a. We are such a small minority, about 0.2% of the US population.
- b. We are small-built, competitive not in heavy work, only as white-collar workers. That is the reason why the US doesn't want to accept any more Vietnamese immigrants; they only want cheap servants, not more competitors in the white-collar job market.
- c. We have yet to learn how to unite as tightly as the other minorities, including the Laotians and the Cambodians.

Fortunately, we are endowed with intelligence, but over-relying on intelligence without other virtues such as a spirit of togetherness, mutual love and mutual benevolence... is not enough to survive the competition. Throughout history, there have been many extremely intelligent races that built splendid civilizations, only to be distinct today.

We have only one measure: Preserve Traditional Culture, because that culture is a sharp weapon that has helped us triumphed in the past and survive to this day.

## ***Preserving Vietnamese Traditional Culture***

Preserving culture is an urgent and necessary responsibility, and is also an appeal, a slogan worth repeating. We have yet to see any serious research into the cause of our diseases, such as the disease of Disunity, the disease of The Leader, the disease of Selfishness... all 10 serious diseases that destroyed the work of liberating the country. Many have mentioned these diseases,

but diagnosis is only the first step. Vitally important is the search for the remedy (or therapy), yet in order to treat the disease, one has to research into the pathology to find the root cause, or etiology. It is impossible to cure the disease without understanding the root case. For example: Shouting “Let’s unite” upon seeing a disunited community is no different from a physician telling the patient to “stop coughing” without prescribing any medicine. A cultural disease is a hundred-fold more difficult to treat than a physical ailment. We will need to defer discussions on this topic for another occasion. Here, we would like to contribute some thought to the work of preserving traditional Vietnamese culture.

That slogan has four words – “Preserve”, “Culture”, “Traditional”, “Vietnam” – each of which brings up questions worthy of answers:

## 1. Preserving the Traditional Culture of VIETNAM

Given that we will concern ourselves with only our own culture, yet do we not need also maintain intellectual values and moral values that we have absorbed from India, China, and the West? My thinking is that culture is a shared product by and for the whole human kind; one society learning and borrowing from another.

It’s not clear that the excellence we learn from China were invented solely by the Hán people all by themselves. As a concrete example, it’s a historical fact that Buddhism originated from China, and from there to us. Indeed, the Chinese borrowed more heavily from foreign cultures more than we ever did.

Circumstances of geopolitical origins forged for each society a number of virtues commonly called “Traditional Culture”; and to include the good and the not-so-good, the word “national trait” is often used. The virtues originating from outside but overtime became integrated as such into our culture, are considered our own, to be preserved, because our ancestors have endured many hardship over many centuries to learn. The anti-foreign spirit is backward and narrow-minded.

On this occasion, let me mention a popular error: Many people discard Marxism on account of its foreign origin. Wrong! We do not accept Mr. Marx’s theory not because he was a German, but because his theory is anti-humanity, unscientific and against nature. We do accept alien ideas which are good, such as Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, the Scientific mind, and the Western democracy.

If we discard all things alien, then we will be repeating the same mistakes committed by Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị<sup>5</sup>, who closing their eyes and blocking their ears, learned nothing from the modern and excellence of the outside world. So we lost our country to the French.

In contrary, there are many traditions and habits brought over by the Hán<sup>6</sup> and have been around for so long to be thought of as our people’s tradition. We are talking about the tradition and habit of Sexism – Trọng Nam Khinh Nữ, Favoring male over female. It is necessary to ask: Is this sexism a national tradition or not? In other words: For thousands of years, before being dominated and ruled by the Hán, did our ancestor practice sexism? If so, why is it that during the Hán’s rule there was a revolution in which two women led a male army to fight the Chinese?

In my first days at school, learning the stories of Bà Trưng, Bà Triệu<sup>7</sup>, I was troubled and asked myself: Where were all the men, so that the women had to do the fighting? Afterwards, learning about the change over from matriarchy to patriarchy of early Vietnam societies, I found the answer: Discriminating against women and favoring men is a patriarchal nomadic tradition. The nomads such as the Aryans or the Chu barbarians, who originated from the plains of Eastern Europe and Mongolia. In the 12th century BC, thanks for bronze weaponry and horse-drawn

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<sup>5</sup> [TN ] Last few Emperors of the Nguyễn Dynasty, the last that ruled Vietnam.

<sup>6</sup> [TN] Hán: the predominant race and culture of the Chinese.

<sup>7</sup> [TN] Trưng sisters [39-43 AD], Triệu [ca. 225AD] rose up against the Hán rule of Vietnam.

chariots (they didn't know how to ride horses then), these strong but uncivilized barbarians invaded India and the Yellow River valleys, bringing with them the patriarchal societies and the male sexism.

During that age, the people of Văn Lang<sup>8</sup> already established a farming civilization. Womenfolk developed the land and cultivated, thus farming communities were always maternalistic. Today in Tibet, Myanmar, Laos where the Aryan or Hán influence did not reach, matriarchy prevailed. There, to get married, a man must offer cattle as dowry. In Upper Laos, to get married, a man must live with and offer free labor for the in-laws, and otherwise care for them. Poor guy, after two years, if he fails to impregnate his wife, he is dismissed.

Male sexism, “Nam Trọng, Nữ Khinh” is clearly a Hán tradition. These four words are clearly Chinese. Clearer yet: We have this proverb “The master's command doesn't compare with the lady's gong -- Lệnh ông không bằng công bà”. Why is it that everyone jumped to the lady's gong and dismissed the master's order? And why is it that today, the master has commands more power than the lady? I would like to respond:

After taking over our country, the Hán court sent over officials to govern the country. Following patriarchy, they taught Chinese education only to the local men and boys. Outstanding students were made a sub-official under their control, no different from the Viet officials under the French rule. According to Vietnamese history, one of the lucky ones who got to be sub-official was a Thi Sách<sup>9</sup>, who commanded no real authority as an “indigenous cadre”. Moreover, with the spirit of anti-invaders still feverish, the people did not trust and follow anyone employed by the colonist power. A third point is that Thi Sách was a man in the context of a society with a matriarch tradition which discriminated against men in favor of women.

Also according to Vietnam history, the Governor Tô Định commanded Thi Sách to order the people to do a certain task without effect. Enraged, Tô Định chopped off his head as an example. Thi Sách's wife sounded the gong, organized an army and succeeded in driving the Hán back to China.

Yet, there is more evidence: If in fact patriarchy was in effect, then the proper form of addressing would have been “Mrs. Thi Sách”, not “The Lady Trưng Trắc”, as the man's family name and sometimes given name would be used in lieu of a maiden name.

Mã Viện<sup>10</sup> brought an army to put down the uprising of the Trưng sisters, but he also realized that it was impossible to rule Văn Lang through the local men until the women of Giao Chỉ<sup>11</sup> ceased to hold power. Thus Mã Viện issued the ten laws, stripping women's rights and power to change the society from matriarchy to patriarchy. But it would not be overnight for a law to change an age-old tradition. Evidence: two centuries after Mã Viện, matriarchy was still unchanged, for another strong woman, the Lady Triệu, emerged to lead the fight against the Chinese, and another 500 years elapsed before a revolutionary leader emerged who was male, his name was Lý Bôn.

But the Hán continued to teach Chinese to the males of Giao Chỉ and made them local officials, eventually succeeding in forming a new class, Hán educated, willing to cooperate. This new class became the most favored class in the society. Starting from that class, matriarchy gave way to patriarchy. Those days marked the “Hán-ization” of Vietnam, starting with the Hán educated scholars.

In summary, Trọng Nam Khinh Nữ is a nomadic tradition imported into India and China in the 12th century B.C., then brought into Vietnam by the Hán. Until recently, this tradition was only popular amongst the upper class, not current in the mass. The village plow-hands wouldn't have

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<sup>8</sup> [TN] Văn Lang: the first established nation of Vietnam.

<sup>9</sup> [TN] Thi Sách was the elder Trưng sister's husband.

<sup>10</sup> [TN] Mã Viện: Hán's general.

<sup>11</sup> [TN] Giao Chỉ: historical reference to the people of Văn Lang in that period

an easy time trying to dominate their wives, who were also laboring in the field, who were no less strong or big. In general, in the Vietnam society, apparently there could be more dominated husbands than dominating ones.

The discussion above was meant to prove that the tradition of Trọng Nam Khinh Nữ is in fact not a national tradition, and that regardless of its practice, we should discard it because it is unfair and out of date.

## 2. Preserving TRADITIONAL Culture

The word *traditional* conjures up a number of questions:

- Does *Preserving traditional culture* also mean to discard anything new, or to maintain the obsolete and anti-progressive habits? My answer is no. If the people is a tree, then traditional culture is its trunk. Keeping the trunk firm and strong, not letting storms and wind to bring it down, does not mean to prevent new branches to develop, new leaves and flowers to sprout forth. Progress will transpire, so long as the base is not lost.

- How long must it be before something is considered traditional? My answer is that there is no time limit, yet there it must be time-tested, and must be accepted by the mass. To be preferred by a minority of upper-class is not sufficient a test of tradition.

Take fashion as an example: In many meetings of the elderly, many wear blue robes and rigid head band<sup>12</sup>, others display medals, gold disks. Blue robes are Manchu's court attires that Emperor Minh Mạng copied. Rigid head bands appeared in 1920. Before that, our elders had to look into a mirror to wrap the head band every time. Golden disks were remnants of the Southern puppet government, and medals were awards that the French colonists gave to their effective hirelings. Those implements should not be made popular among the people, they are reminders of the disgrace of 80 years of lost sovereignty. These are not our peoples' tradition, they should not be displayed.

- By contrary, women's modern clothing – white trousers and wasp-waisted dress<sup>13</sup> designed by the artist Cát Tường in 1932 – differed little from older models and were welcome by women throughout the nation, should be considered traditional.

## 3. Preserving Traditional Vietnamese CULTURE

We all understood what *Culture* is, but to define this noun is quite difficult.

As evidence of this difficulty, in the 1977 edition of the magazine *Review of Anthropology*, there were 124 different definitions for the term. In general, scholars from the various disciplines (such as linguistics, psychology, social sciences, etc) all normally define Culture as their own subject matter, and not the others'. This dispute about "culture" makes me think about the Jainism legend The Blinds and the Elephant:

*One day, an elephant came to an region in which everyone was blind due to some illness. Upon hearing the arrival of an elephant, they all went to "see" it. One, able to feel the trunk, described the elephant as resembling an anaconda. One, able to feel the trunk, said that the elephant resembled a lance. Another, able to feel the tail, said the elephant was as long as a rope. Another, able to feel the ear, described the elephant as like a fan. Another, able to feel a leg, said it resembled a pillar.*

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<sup>12</sup> [TN] khăn đóng

<sup>13</sup> [TN] bee-waist dress: áo dài

The same reality, yet everyone perceived from a different angle. The current state of human knowledge is similar. That is, observations are made in parts, one-sided, with blind faith, followed by fighting and killing out of disagreements. Presently we are doing a lot of “elephant feeling”, as science has yet to illuminate all realities of the universe. Not until everyone realizes that he/she is still *thông-manh* – dim-witted<sup>14</sup>, does the world enjoy everlasting peace and happiness.

The reason why Culture has so many definitions is that the word is everything. Each discipline of knowledge is only a component of culture, just as each part of an elephant is only a piece of its body. Its extreme complexity gives rise to many incorrect assessments of culture:

- Some thinks that being able to use chop-sticks and being able to enjoy rice, rau muống<sup>15</sup>, tofu with tương<sup>16</sup>, and more generally, to clasp one’s hands to say “chào ông, chào bà”, to speak Vietnamese, are sufficient to preserve our people’s culture, and thus so limited their children’s education. That is not enough. These are only the necessary first steps.
- Some confuses Culture with Literature.
- The West often confuses Culture with Performing Arts. For example: In Washington D.C, the US capital there is an elegant building used for the Performing Arts named the Kennedy Cultural Center.

## As defined in the dictionaries

While scholars define culture in many confusing ways, the dictionaries cannot afford the 10 or 15 pages to list all the different definitions by all scholars and are forced to settle on a general definition. They say: Culture is how to live, how to carry out activities of life. Very succinct, but perhaps too succinct to be complete. Because it can be asked: Every living creature has a unique way to carry out the activities of life, and wouldn’t that qualifies a culture for every living creature?

Look at the bees. They have a perfect social organization, a system of production based on division of labor and distribution, a multi-class society without class struggles; an tedious administrative organization without bureaucrats; an army of kamikaze volunteers without command officers. In terms of technology, they can fabricate honey, the supreme food that no laboratory can produce. If we say that bees don’t have a culture of their own then the definition above is not quite complete.

## Need to redefine

We think that there is a need to supplant the definition. Culture must be defined as the way of carrying out life activities and the way of thinking, because human kind differs from the animals in our ability to think and the animals only live according to inborn abilities requiring no thinking. To complete the definition, the word thinking has to be added, because even in human societies, from one race to another, a culture is rated higher than another based on the ability to think, on the truth of their thoughts.

## 4. PRESERVING culture

The word *preserve* also raises questions:

- a. Do we preserve the whole of the cultural tradition, or do we have to be select only the good and discard the bad and outdated?

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<sup>14</sup> [TN] a play on words: *thông minh* = intelligent; *thông manh* = half blind

<sup>15</sup> [TN] rau muống: a kind of water cress common at the Vietnamese dinner table.

<sup>16</sup> [TN] tương: a kind of Vietnamese sauce similar to Hoisin sauce

Traditional culture is also called traditions. To answer succinctly, we would like to cite from the Kalama of Theravada Buddhism. The Buddha said: “Do not close your eyes and believe something to be the truth or good, only because it has always been a tradition.”

It’s so clear, 25 centuries ago, the great man from India, the Shakyamuni Buddha taught us not to be satisfied that all traditions are right and true. Some tradition is good, some is bad. We have to preserve the good and discard the bad.

b. If a cultural tradition is discarded, should it be substituted by a modern tradition from the West? “When in Rome, do as the Romans do – Đáo giang tùy khúc, nhập gia tùy tục”. The West has many good traditions, we should accept them for our own benefit and to help ourselves assimilate while living here.

But what about when both are bad, the Western and our own traditions? For example: Our forefathers said “Wherever parents put them, children must stay.” Given, the fathers did give themselves too much power and paid no regards to the children’s wishes. Nowadays, the Western tradition is the opposite: “Wherever the children put them, parents must stay”. The law guarantees the complete right of young people to choose their own mate.

The freedom to choose is a rational and appropriate principle, but it is only a principle. The issue to be raised is: These young men and young women, are they really making a choice or not? My answer: Marriage has to start with love, but Love is part of Emotion – *Tâm* – because love makes the heart beat fast, while Choice is part of the Rational – *Trí*, which need a sober mind to compare and select the best. The issue becomes complicated because Emotion and the Rational are the sine and cosine of the same angle. Following trigonometry:

$$(\sin a)^2 + (\cos a)^2 = 1$$

so that

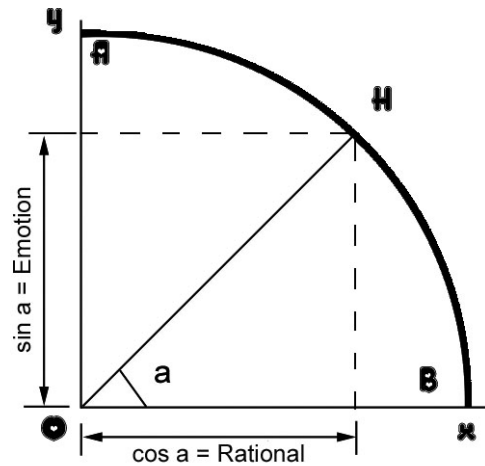
$$(Emotion)^2 + (Rational)^2 = 1^{17}$$

- If Emotion is assigned to the ordinate, and Rational to the abscissa, then for each degree of (a), the value of Emotion is sine (a) and the value of Rational is cosine (a).

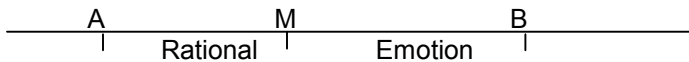
- If one knows the value of Emotion, then the value of Rational may be calculated, and vice versa, according to the following equation:

$$(\sin a)^2 + (\cos a)^2 = 1$$

- In other words: If Emotion reaches the maximum (sin a = 1) then Rational reaches the minimum of 0 (cos a = 0).



For reader unsure of his trigonometry: you could visualize the arch A-B as a line:



<sup>17</sup> This equation will be used in the study of effect of Emotions and the Rational on Culture and the ups and downs of Nations, in Part II.

with the equation  $(\sin a)^2 + (\cos a)^2 = 1$ , and regard the distance from A to M as Rational, and that from M to B as Emotion. Whenever M proceeds towards A, then Emotion increases and Rational decreases. Whenever M reaches A, then Emotion reaches its maximum, and Rational disappears. This is the case of “lightning strike” (Emotion =1, Rational = 0). Once fallen into that situation, one is devoid of the Rational or ability to think and choose, and is satisfied with the subjective sense that “Love at first sight means love forever.”

After marriage, as time progresses, Emotion is less excited and decreases to allow Rational to increase, and one regains clarity. Then and only then will she find herself irritated by his short temper, every night waiting with dinner in vain. He now is addicted to gambling and perhaps is having an affair. Only now will he find her argumentative, always scolding the children, prone to jealous fits, driving friends and business away. The family is no longer a warm and cozy nest, but unfortunately, it's too late. Only two solutions: One is to swallow and make the best of the situation for the rest of their life, two is to part ways through the divorce court, letting the children suffer.

Because the Americans lack steadfastness and ability to withstand hardship, cannot make the best of a situation, they usually choose the second solution. This is the reason why on average, the American marriage lasts a mere six or second years before ending up in divorce.

Recently, young Americans came up with a new invention. Before the official marriage, they tried it out first, just like buying shoes, one tries them out by putting his foot in for fit. Frankly, that method benefits only the foot, which gets to wear new shoe, but not the shoes. Moreover, the Americans tried it out over and over, yet divorces continued.

I would like to offer my humble personal experience to the young readers as a solution that might combine the old and the new, the east with the west. Whenever you find your heart beating too fast and your mind dim, then please consult some one outside, such as your parents, siblings, or friends. You can ask without having to commit yourself to accept the advice beforehand. Amongst the outsiders, no one are better than your parents because they have your happiness at heart, and they have plenty of experience in the meaning of marriage.

That experience is: Love is a necessary ingredient, but is not the only ingredient needed to guarantee lasting happiness. There are many other ingredients, but only time-tested experience can help keep us cautious, before rushing head-first into an unknown adventure.

## ***Cultural Heritage***

It has been posed, this rather senseless question, which must be included for the sake of completeness for the discussion: Is the cultural heritage we receive from our ancestors sufficiently valuable to warrant our preservation effort? Now that we are citizens of a strong and prosperous nation, shouldn't we just discard the old and adopt the local culture as our own? My thoughts are:

In reviewing history, we can see that Vietnam did have a golden age that we can be proud of. Nobody can deny, nor does the wider world not disagree that: **The Viet people is a courageous people.** Though a small country, situated next to and ruled by an empire fifty times its size for more than a millennium, not only did Vietnam manage to rid itself of the yoke of foreign-rule, it also has defeated the giant many times. Indeed, Vietnam is the only nation in the world that has defeated Mongolia three consecutive times, not when the Mongolian empire was in decline but in fact when it covered most of Asia and Europe, from the Pacific to India, the Middle-East, the banks of the Danube and the Baltic sea. At that time, “the great Soviet” and even the Russian empires had not been born, but it was the kingdom of Mtskva that was being trampled on by the Mongolian horsemen. From Europe to Asia, no nation or bloc of nations were able to withstand these horsemen, except for tiny Vietnam.

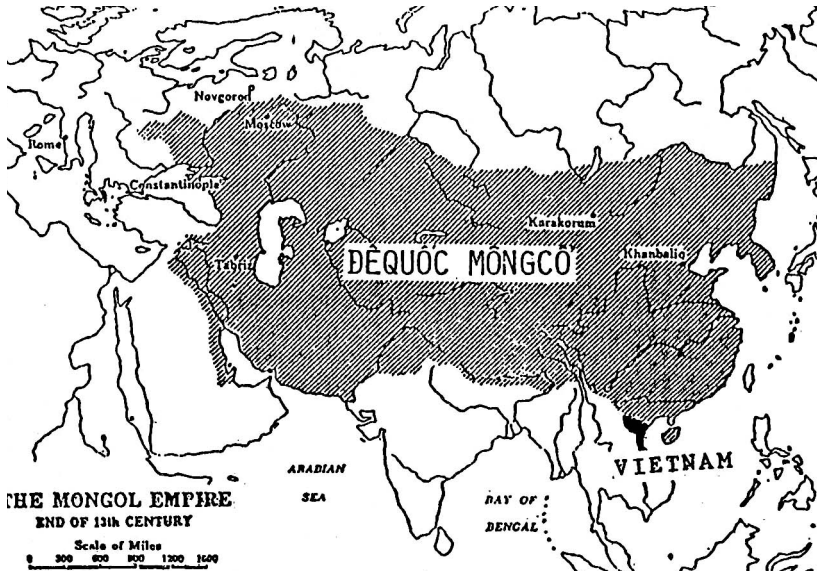


Figure 1: Vietnam and the Mongolian Empire in the 13th century

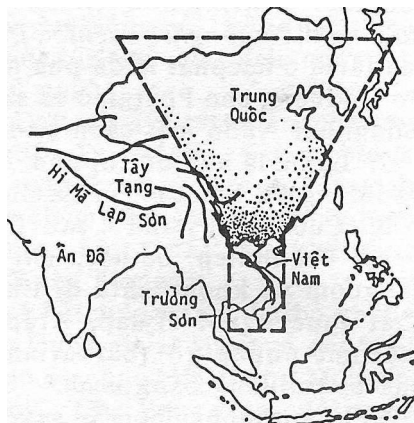
There are several reasons that helped the Vietnamese victories, but the main one was clearly written in history: In that era, the people of Vietnam achieved a high level of unity, exemplified by *Hội Nghị Diên Hồng* (The Diên Hồng Conference).

Another great achievement was regarding China, which has assimilated all of its hundreds of its ethnic cultures into the Hán Culture – Hanized. A typical case is Manchu, which used its strength to successfully invade China but ended Hanized and lost out to the Hán race. In contrast, after a thousand years being part of China, we remained a separate people.

A third great achievement: Not only did our ancestors hold the northern border, they also managed to expand the southern, from the banks of the River Nhị to the border with Cambodia 2,000 miles further south. The expansion rate was 1 kilometer per year on average.

To help visualize these achievements, we now cite several concrete images. Looking at a map of Asia, we can see that China is a giant nation in the north, and Vietnam serves as a narrow corridor, a single-lane path linking China with the fertile South East Asia.

Let's visualize the two nations as parts of a huge funnel.



Throughout history, the Hán race in the interior of the funnel relentlessly wanted to pour through the funnel's opening to expand South.

- The people of Vietnam played the role of a cork placed at the funnel's opening to prevent China's army from passing through. The Chinese army was stopped like pebbles, while the Hán Chinese culture, like liquid, was allowed to permeate through.

- Our ancestors received the liquid, which represented the essence of Hán Culture, added our own culture to form a weapon to vanquish Chiêm Thành.(Champa).

Through history, our ancestors have completed three great achievements:

- a. Avoided assimilation into the Hán culture after a millennium of Chinese rule;
- b. Stopped the Hán race from expanding southward;
- c. Achieved the southern expansion ourselves.

Had not our ancestors been successful at stopping the Chinese southward expansion, not only would the demise of Vietnam be certain, but all of the South East Asia would have long been Hanized.

### ***Culture is the deciding factor of the fate of nations***

Reviewing the history of mankind, we can see something so valuable that can be classified as a rule: Culture directly effects the fates of nations and peoples. That is to say:

- From ancient time till now, from East to West, all peoples achieved their greatest when their cultures are wholesome and rich.
- Contrariwise, a crooked culture resulted in the decline of the nation. This was indeed Vietnam's fate in modern history.
- Many nations having attained a splendid culture, like Ancient Egypt, Khmer, and Inca, ended up extinct, when their culture found no way forward. Kings and Princes abused their nation's wealth and the people's labor to build grand temples and splendid palaces. The people became extinct because of starvation and fatigue, not able to withstand sickness.
- This was also today's tragedy of Vietnam: The Marxist culture found itself in one-ended alley. Just like the Royalties of the ancient, the Party has exhausted the people. So I say: Today, our people are getting closer to the calamity of being extinct.

I would like to cite ten more cases to prove that culture is the deciding factor in the rise and fall of nations, as recorded clearly in history:

1. In the 7th and 6th centuries B.C., the six Schools of Intelligence<sup>18</sup> developed at the same time in India. These six schools included Fate<sup>19</sup>, Skepticism<sup>20</sup>, Absolute Skepticism, Materialism<sup>21</sup>, Atomism<sup>22</sup>, and Naturalism<sup>23</sup>. These all share the same goal of combating and abolishing superstition of Brahmanism. They paved the way for Buddhism. Later on, Asoka used Buddhism to peacefully unite India. India went on its golden age.
2. Rome developed from a small city to envelop the whole of Europe, the Near East, and North Africa, thanks to a brilliant culture.

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<sup>18</sup> Lục phái Trí Tuệ

<sup>19</sup> Định Mệnh

<sup>20</sup> Hoài Nghi

<sup>21</sup> Duy Vật

<sup>22</sup> Nguyên Tử

<sup>23</sup> Thiên Nhiên

3. At the end of the fourth century AD, the Roman empire started to decline because of the following reasons:

a) Young men abandoned study in pursuit of the games of gladiators, fighting, and refused to enlist in the army. Rome was so in short supply of educated men that it had to rely on Greeks, Arabs and Jews for secretarial work. Rome had to enlist the “barbarians” into its army. These rented soldiers had to fighting spirit because they were paid only in salt.<sup>24</sup>

b) Morals and Ethics were in decline. Ladies of the upper class engaged widely in extra-marital affairs. To avoid stiff penalties, they secretly registered with police as prostitutes. If they were caught in the act, they could then get away with the legality of prostitution.

c) Senators took bribes, annexed public land and bought slaves to work the land.

4. In recent centuries, the West was at the top of the world because of advances in science, technology, and the Renaissance that begat the democratic revolutions.

5. Under the Tang (Đường) dynasty, China attained a splendid civilization. During that era, the Chinese were open-minded and had no anti-foreign attitude. According the Japanese historian Obata: “The capital Chang An (Tràng An) was a center of religious preaching for all religions in the world, and was also the gathering place for many races with different religions such as Siri, Tartars, Arabs, Annamese, Koreans, and Japanese.” The reason why the Chinese did not discriminate against other races or religions was due to the Three Religions. Students had to study all three different philosophies (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism), had opportunities to compare and synthesize them into a rich and wholesome consciousness. So China developed its economy, technologies, commerce, commercial navigation, and rituals to a point theretofore unseen and not again witnessed

6. However, suddenly in the year 845 AD, under pressure from the Scholar group headed by Hàn Dũ, emperor Tang Wutong (Đường Vũ Tông) gave the edict announcing the policy of Abolishing Foreign Religions, making Confucianism the state religion, destroyed the temples of all other foreign religions, deported all foreigners and destroyed all sea-going vessels to prevent people from going abroad, such as the monks Pháp Hiền and Nghĩa Tĩnh, who had gone to India to bring back Buddhist scriptures using sea routes. Buddhism was destroyed to the root: 25 thousand pagodas were leveled, gold and silver Buddha statues were melted into bars, bells turned into copper coins for the Treasury. Two-hundred and fifty thousand clergies were pushed into “new economic zones” to break fresh ground, worked the land, and to generate tax revenues for the court. From that day on, China has been in decline without reversing course even today. It still remains a “sleeping lion”.

7. After that upheaval horrific event, naturally there were thousands of clergymen who took refuge in our country. This must be why Buddhism broke out suddenly in Vietnam right after the religious repression by Tang Wutong, From then on, with the addition of Buddhism, our ancestors had the complete set of Three Religions to consolidate our culture. A century later, we regained independence, and several centuries later, we vanquished the Mongolian invaders.

8. But not too long afterwards, our king Trần emulated the Chinese and abolished the three Religions, borrowed Confucius Scholars from the Song Dynasty to establish a state religion. The consequence was clear and swift. Only 65 years after the victories against the Mongols, Vietnam was defeated by Champa. “Chế Bồng Nga rode his horse in the middle of the capital Thăng Long like in a deserted place”.

9. In 1945, Japan was defeated and destroyed by nuclear bombs, its economy out of strength. Yet only in 20 years time, it had no problem becoming very strong. The reason: While the world was askew because of perverted cultures, Japan was able to preserve its wholesome culture.

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<sup>24</sup> Roman ladies wasted all their money for China silk brought over through the Silk Road, and the Treasury had to no cash to pay the soldiers’ wages.

10. In 1947, the Jewish people returned to their ancestral land after two thousand years in Diaspora, because they were able to preserve their culture.

There are many other evidences in history, but I think those just cited are sufficient to prove: Culture is the deciding factor in the fate of nations and peoples. If we accept that precept, we – refugees in all four corners of the world – will recognize the following urgently needed actions:

1. Preserve the wholesome culture of our Lý-Trần ancestors;
2. Try to learn the good, the beautiful from other societies;
3. Most importantly, Do not get infected by the bad from other societies. No different from fourth-century Rome, the capitalist West is starting on a perverted road.

Israel and Japan are two bright examples that we should emulate. That does not mean that we should applaud and agree with all policies from these governments. We need only learn their spiritual values and Ethics, especially their spirit of national unity.

Let me add another story. In 1966, while attending the World Anti-communist Conference in Seoul, I stopped by Tokyo and Jerusalem and was greeted and consulted by their State departments. At both places, they asked a common question:

“What do you think we could do to help Vietnam?”

I gave the same answer: “You should provide scholarships for Vietnamese students to come to your country to study.”

They asked: “Why do you want your students to come to study in our country?”

I answered: “Because only in your country will there be opportunities to learn the spirit of Grand National Unity and your national plan”.

At this point, the Japanese delegate said: “We provided many scholarships, but very few came”. The Israelite delegate said: “We provided many scholarships, but there isn’t a single participant from Vietnam”.

So I shut my mouth, unable to respond. But I understood: Only kids from the rich and powerful were allowed to study abroad, and they only wanted to go to America or France to entertain themselves while studying. Would be a mistake to go to Israel or Japan!

There three disasters to avoid:

- a. To lose the virtues passed down from our ancestors;
- b. To fail to learn the good from others;
- c. To be infected by the bad from others.

In the previous century, we lost our nation to the French because the court was infected by the disease of Dogma from the Chinese. Recently, the upper class was infected by the disease of Perversion from the West and lost to the Communist. Now, our compatriot refugees in the U.S. are facing a big disaster: Many elements are emulating the bad behaviors of American society, when this society is itself in the midst of corruption. It’s difficult to avoid this, because as I have explained: It’s always easier to emulate the bad than to copy the good. “Gần mực thì đen”, You get stained being close to ink, and today’s the American society is very tarnished.

During the war, the Vietnamese society exhibited many misbehaviors, but they were not extreme. There were watch-snatching, purse-snatching, but not organized gangs that feed drugs to kids then send them out to rob.

Centuries ago, the Japanese came to America and learned many good things from America, without being infected by any perversions, because the American society was then healthy and wholesome. We have the unfortunate fate of landing here while the society is its nadir of depravation.

But we should also ask ourselves: Why is it that today the Japanese and Jews are present in large numbers in America, yet they are not corrupted? Let me respond: Because the Japanese and the Jews are able to preserve their ancient culture. Wherever they go, they are able to maintain the conduct of a civilized people, self-respecting and keeping the good-name for their race.

Let me offer a temporary conclusion: We should emulate today's lessons from the Japanese and the Jews, if somehow we fail to recollect the brilliant examples set by our ancestors in the Lý, Trần era.

**1. [pp. 1-2] What seemed to be the general problem confronting the overseas Vietnamese Communities at the time of the writing?**

- a. Communist vs. Capitalist.
- b. Fish without water.
- c. Immigrants without money.
- d. American vs. Vietnamese culture.

**2. [pp. 1-2] What specific cultural aspects of America that the author was concerned about?**

- a. Too much emphasis modern science and technology, not enough in the humanities.
- b. The American law gives too much power to the individuals .
- c. Broken families, delinquent children, drug addiction and murder.
- d. Consumerism is rampant: too many TV's and cars, telephone sets.

**3. [pp. 1-2] In the saying “Tiền xấu đuổi tiền tốt”, what was tiền being compared to in the current discussion?**

- a. The money supply of a market economy.
- b. Real money anchored in gold or silver rather than floating money
- c. Cultural values that could be good like gold-anchored money or bad like inflatable money
- d. A means to put comparative values on the fresh-off-the-boat and the established Americans

**4. [pp. 1-2] What of the following is NOT an action that the Vietnamese Communities must face immediately, as urged by the author?**

- a. To preserve traditional values.
- b. To keep our young Vietnamese from emulating bad American habits.
- c. To put a fire-wall between American culture and Vietnamese youths.
- d. To learn good habits from the Americans.

**5. [page 3] Why did the author discuss the strengths and weaknesses of various American ethnic groups?**

- a. To show that it made sense to think about Americans as composed of distinct ethnic groups.
- b. To show that a strong sub-culture is an important reason why Jews and Chinese seem to do better than other ethnic Americans, or the “whites”.
- c. None of the above.
- d. Both (a) and (b).

**6. [pp. 4-5] Why did the author think that the issue of Trọng Nam Khinh Nữ was important in the current discussion?**

- a. Because this tradition has been brought over from China into Vietnam for so long that it's no longer recognized as a culture that is NOT really Vietnamese.

## Quiz for Chapter 1

- b. Because we live in America and sexism favoring male over female is unacceptable.
- c. Because we need to know the significance of the Trưng Sisters.
- d. Because the author loved his mother more than his father.

### **7. [pp. 4-5] What is the origin of the Patriarchy system in Vietnam?**

- a. It came from Aryan (Indian) and Mongolian societies to China, then to Vietnam.
- b. It is a natural order of societies.
- c. God made woman from Adam's rib.
- d. The Chinese brought this system to Vietnam in the 12th century AD.

### **8. [p. 6] Which of the following was the author's thesis regarding Traditional Culture**

- a. Tradition is antiquated and must be studied to avoid past mistakes.
- b. All things traditional are sacred; Touch not the tradition of our people.
- c. Traditional values must be practiced for 110 years before they can be officially stamped as such.
- d. Traditional practices can be a thousand or a hundred years old, as long as they are accepted by the mass and tested over time.

### **9. [p. 6] What is the origin of the Áo dài?**

- a. It was designed in the modern era by a Chinese clothier.
- b. It was designed in the thirties to emulate the Shanghai Chinese dress.
- c. It was designed to make a woman look like a wasp.
- d. It was a modification of older Vietnamese traditional dress by a modern-era Vietnamese artist.

### **10. [pp. 6-7] What is culture, according to the author?**

- a. The way a society lives and thinks.
- b. The way a society conducts its day-to-day activities.
- c. The way a society treats men, women and child.
- d. The way a society thinks about man relative to a supreme being.

### **11. [pp 7-9] What is the author's advice regarding marriage?**

- a. "When in Rome, do as the Romans do": Do it the American way.
- b. "Cha mẹ đặt đâu con ngồi đó": Do it the Vietnamese way.
- c. Use mathematics, esp. Trigonometry, to guide your love life: Do it the scientific way.
- d. Beware of the power struggle within yourself between your brain and your heart: Find a mixture between the old and the new.

### **12. [pp 9-11] What historical facts do not support the Vietnamese pride as a people?**

- a. In the 12th century AD, Vietnam withstood the global military conquest of the Mongolian Empire.
- b. The Vietnamese language is distinct from the Chinese even after 1000 years of Chinese rule.
- c. The Vietnamese and the Chinese have been in conflict for thousands of years.
- d. The Vietnamese successfully protected Southeast Asian countries from Hanization.
- e. The Vietnamese assimilated several races and annexed their lands to expand the country.

Quiz for Chapter 1

**13 [pp. 11-12] Which of the following is NOT true?**

- a. Buddhism has roots in philosophy.
- b. Rome declined and fell because its numerous military defeats.
- c. A culture based on a single faith is not necessarily strong.
- d. Advances in science and technology are possible in a tolerant society.

**13 [pp. 12-13] Which of the following is true?**

- a. China has always been a closed society, hostile to foreign cultures.
- b. Vietnam has always been a closed society, hostile to foreign cultures.
- c. Both China and Vietnam flourished when Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism were prominent together.
- d. Vietnam has always been militarily superior to their southern neighboring countries.

**14 [pp. 13-14] Which of the following is not advisable, according to the author?**

- a. Try to learn from the Japanese and Jewish Americans.
- b. Try to identify and stay away from some Western cultural practices.
- c. Try to learn and emulate the good, the bad, and the ugly of the culture in which we live.
- d. Try to learn about our 10th century AD history and traditions.