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ETHICS IN CONTEXT FROM A VIETNAMESE VIEWPOINT

Anh Tho Andres-Kammler[127]

In my role as Globethics.net Coordinator of the "*Ethics in Higher Education for Teaching and Administrative Professionals (EHE-TP)*" global training program, I have come to understand more about the importance of ethics in the context of Vietnamese culture. I have gained further insight from the perspective of someone who is Vietnamese-born, and yet has lived in the West since early adulthood.

Over the years, Vietnam has changed from a traditional Confucian society to a chaotic society in a process of development, with increasing inequality and unrest among the population. Though we are perceived as one of the emerging economies with much potential, external and foreign analysts have expressed concern over the chaos attributed to its declining values.

My purpose in this chapter is to share, especially with our readers from non-Asian countries, the role ethics has played historically in Asian and particularly Vietnamese culture and society. I express my belief that ethics *does in fact matter* to Vietnam and is an integral part of the educational process.

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First of all, allow me to share a snapshot of the Vietnamese culture and tradition for newcomers to this part of the world, as necessary background for understanding the role of ethics in Vietnam.

Coming from the Confucian tradition, Vietnamese were naturally inclined to respect the social hierarchy, which is comprised of mainly four social classes, according to the Confucian definition. The social classes are categorised as follows: the intellectuals (*Sỹ)*, the peasantry (*Nông)*, the artisans (*Công)*, and lastly, the businesspeople (*Thương)*. From this list, ordered in terms of social importance according to Confucian thought, we can see that intellectuals occupied a primary role in the pre-modern Vietnamese society.

The Vietnamese belief system draws its foundation primarily from values and virtues based on the philosophies of *Buddhism*, *Confucianism*, and *Taoism* - considered as the 'triple religion' (*Tam giáo)* that are prevalent in the Vietnamese culture. However, Vietnam owes much of its belief system to folk tales and traditions. Therefore, Vietnamese people are not referred as belonging to one unified group of believers of any of these above-mentioned philosophical schools.

The main "religion" of the Vietnamese mainly consists of the three Confucian social relations (*Tam cương)* practiced by the Vietnamese people through the cult of ancestors (*Đạo ông bà)*.

These three relations include that between the monarch with his subjects (*Quân thần cương)*, the one between the father with his sons (*Phụ tử cương)*, and one between the husband with his wife(s) (*Phu phụ cương)*. The word '*cương*' means 'reins', as in 'holding the reins', which signifies 'having things under control'. In this context, it would mean mastering the guidelines of the relations, the equivalent of our modern ethical trade term '*code of conduct'*.

According to the three-word book '*Tam tự kinh'* of Taoism, the "monarch-subject" relation is based mainly on the virtue of loyalty *Nghĩa*, which means integrity also inclusive of the notion of justice and

fairness; the "father-son" relation based on *Nhân*, which means humanity, compassion and empathy; and the "husband-wife" relation based on *Lễ,* which means harmony or respect. The latter relation is translated in rituals in the worship of ancestors, the traditions of gift-giving that shows gratitude, or the protocol of social hierarchy due to seniority in age or in wisdom.

The leaders (i.e. monarch, father and husband) shall provide love, care and protection to their community members (i.e. subject, son and wife). In return, the family (subjects, wives and children) shall respect, love, obey, and live in harmony with the head of the nation, of the family or of the home. Across the lines, the underlying virtues of intelligence *Trí*, and trustworthiness *Tín* regulate all relationships in the Confucian society.

The five main virtues (*Ngũ thường)* include *Nhân* (仁), *Nghĩa* (義), *Lễ* (禮), *Trí* (智), *Tín* (信), which constitute the code of conduct for Vietnamese males. The three rules of submission (*Tam tòng)* apply to the feminine gender, who must also practice the four virtues (*Tứ đức),* which include housekeeping skills (*Công)*, cultivating beauty (*Dung)*, keeping respectful speech towards others (*Ngôn*), and keeping ethical conduct through loyalty to her husband (*Hạnh*).

In the Vietnamese oral tradition, which played an important role in the education of the masses, we can still find many stories based on the Buddhist teachings. These teachings are combined with the Confucian upbringing, that emphasise the benefit of ethical conduct as part of the moral education (*Lễ)* and the *Law of Karma.*

As far as my generation is concerned, in the days of pre-communist regime when I was young (and even further back in the traditional Vietnamese society of the time of my parents and great grandparents), we were reminded of our duty and respect of the social order through these teachings. In this context, teachers, parents, priests or monks are

important stakeholders of a social system that evolves around the family as the nucleus of society.

In our education received at home, we were taught the rituals that show respect and loyalty to our parents and older members of the family. Such rituals included, practicing the cult of the ancestors by offering flowers and fruits on the altar, paying visits to our distant family members, or sharing our responsibilities among brothers and sisters. We were also taught to cultivate peace and harmony in our dealings with people around us, such as bringing gifts on special occasions to our neighbours or helping out poorer colleagues at work on the principles of solidarity, kindness and social harmony. In resolving conflicts, we were encouraged to do-no-harm to all living beings on earth, or keep our promises given to others based on the Law of karma.

However, the post-modern Vietnamese social context has been affected by wars and the ideological mutations of the Vietnamese perception, of what is considered moral values and system of beliefs. Looking through the loss of practice of these Confucian principles, I could witness a disintegration of families throughout the years, which is manifest through literature and everyday life.

In the North, Vietnamese people have undergone brutal disruptions of the society through centuries of war, but the utmost transformation of the social values was under the communist ideology, which abolished the Confucian tradition to replace it with Marxism by the second half of the 20th century. As a consequence, ideology that is foreign to traditional Vietnamese thinking was introduced, to replace loyalty to the Monarch to accountability to the Party. The abolition of the social relations of pre-war had been replaced by arguments favouring efforts of fighting against imperialism, in the name of anti-revolutionary partisanship. In the absence of religious practices or moral education, considered as a sleeping drug to the 'revolutionary spirit', there was a vacuum of moral

values that explains partly the disintegration of the family-based values and traditions.

In the South, Vietnamese people enjoyed a more liberal regime but were in a state of warfare, led by President Ngo Dinh Die, supported by America. The Diem regime was seen by external observers as a military dictatorship, but it has been remembered and recognized to be one of the most ethical governments, in terms of the values-based education and the quality of the people who were trained during this period. Indeed, in spite of the war, people were still free to choose and practice their religions and interact with the outer world. Foreign literature, foreign education from France and the United States were, for the most part, open to all social classes who could afford the high tuition fees. Public education taught in Vietnamese language was free and open to all. There was free press and a multi-party Parliament that allowed freedom of speech and thoughts, unlike in the northern part of the country which was closed behind the Iron Curtain.

As the Second Indochina War period ended in 1973, with the withdrawal of the American troops, "peace" was attained through the recapitulation of the southern government (Republic of Vietnam) to the northern government (Democratic Republic of Vietnam). This led to the re-unification of Vietnam and the birth of the Vietnamese Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRVN). The massive migration from the northern part, to the richer and milder southern way of life created another mutation among the Vietnamese population, through family separation, marriage, divorce, and other forms of social cohesion or disruptions effects from this "re-mix".

In the early 1990s, after a period of post-war reconstruction through collectivism, the country was re-opened to foreign investments, and a form of liberalism with a socialist orientation was introduced. With this new business-oriented policy, more interaction with foreigners was allowed, and foreign education was once more open to Vietnamese

students onsite, online or through study abroad programs. While only a minority of the population could afford to benefit from the open policy, inequality gaps became more apparent due to the privatization and reduction of public services in the health, education, transport, and housing services. Due to the dichotomy among the social classes of the have and the have-not, the Vietnamese society was once more transformed into one with more materialistic values that overwrite the Confucian tradition.

In this context, the majority of the Vietnamese population has been confronted with a decline of ethical values in post-modern Vietnam. Teachers have been faced with many challenges in their role as educators, including the explosion of divorce, rise in domestic and street violence, and new challenges of economic survival.

For teachers, a main challenge was to comply with curricula conceived and designed by bureaucrats, leaving no room for autonomy to the teachers in their role as "educator", thus also making the profession less attractive to younger teachers. As a history teacher shared his story: "The relationship between the "educator" and the "learners" is reduced to that of skills development, rather than the "formation of attitude" that is part of the education process". Other teachers mentioned the concern of group psychology due to the disparities of social norms that were present in the Confucian society. This new social configuration makes it difficult for the teachers to maintain discipline in class, let alone to deliver their work as wished.

From the parents' viewpoints, there is an overall perception of the declining sense of responsibility of teachers, which leads to the declining moral atmosphere of the whole society, attributed to the lack of "moral education" of the younger generations. With the privatisation of education, even at the kindergarten level, parents are now under financial pressure of paying higher tuition fees, to compensate teachers who require students to join their "private tuition class" after the official

school hours. Most parents assume that once they have fulfilled their duties of paying the tuition fees, they can transfer their educational duty to the hands of teachers.

As a result, teachers are left alone in their task of "educating the children", and sometimes face the anger of parents when their children are punished or sanctioned for their misbehaviour in class, or failed due to their insufficient performance. Nonetheless, the biggest challenge is that the whole society—teachers, students, and parents included—are all under the pressure of maintaining the "political correctness" of the learning process, in line with the political agenda.

In my view, in any political system, the definition of *ethics* is adapted to the values defined by the belief system that is underlying organizational culture of that political system. It is therefore understandable that the Vietnamese definition of *ethics* follows the same tendency. Indeed, although the motto of education is about strengthening human values in the learners, that should be focused on the respect of ethics or *Tiên học lễ*, before proceeding to acquire the knowledge or *Hậu học văn* following the Confucian tradition. However, with globalisation and the privatisation of public services, post-modern parents and teachers are now under pressure to prepare their children/students to a professional life that is defined by other standards such as financial benefits and social advancement, in the absence of ethical consideration to others.

Therefore, the definition of ethics in the post-modern belief systems in Vietnam tends to follow the trend that we also observe in the globalisation era: a virtue such as loyalty to the organization is perceived as *corporate culture conformity* in a liberal capitalist society. However, in a totalitarian system, it means "loyalty to the ruling party" and more radically speaking, the "conformity to the prevalent religious norms" in a religion-based regime.

From my personal experience, interacting with different groups of teaching professionals coming from various backgrounds, I think that there should be a consensus between the three pillars of the social cohesion – the family, the school and the society – in defining what is needed to build an ethical and healthy education system. These groups should work together to make a viable environment where every stakeholder can benefit from the positive outcomes of a philosophy of education aimed at sustainability.

The education at home should prepare students to follow the rules at school, in terms of harmony and respect to others, especially to the teachers and the staff at school. The education at school is to prepare students to be a good citizen, while equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed for their professional life and their social integration. The education in society is to keep the Vietnamese values and traditions inspired from the *Tam giáo* to maintain harmony and social cohesion.

The lessons learned from our Vietnam training program on *Ethics in Higher Education for Teaching and Administrative Professionals* are conclusions that are similar to that of groups from Afghanistan or Africa who are facing similar challenges, although at a different level. The conclusions in all cases were that, for each group of stakeholders within the same cultural context, a code of conduct is needed, and should be practiced by the community involved. Therefore, there is a need of contextualization, such as conducting the course in the local language, and citing examples of ethical dilemma in context help learners to understand the importance of the teachers' role in disseminating ethics in their teaching.

My own take-away was inspired by the *VNTU Charter*[128] proposed by Michelle Duong, a veteran teacher who had experienced both the

[128] Michelle Duong, *Charter for Global Federation of Vietnamese Teachers Unions*, VNTU Collection, Vietnam Hoc Institute Geneva, 2020. Link to English version: https://nghiepdoangiaochuc.net/global-

benefits of the pre-war Vietnam education and post-war capacity building efforts as an overseas Vietnamese from the USA. In her proposal, she advocates a return to ethics based both on universal values and contextual values that are worth considering for adoption by teaching professionals from all countries of the world who are concerned about ethical education.

The Charter is composed of a preamble that explains the importance of ethics as foundation to all pedagogical approaches, based on the humanistic philosophy of Professor Luong Kim Dinh and the Vietnamese ethos (For whom, *Education* is a discipline that encompasses every other discipline as a noble mission). The preamble states that

> "Recognizing children's individual development as the goal of education, teachers must respect students' freedom of thought and encourage students to develop independent and critical thinking. Attention should be given to early age education, as children and young people who are equipped with certain skills such as reading, writing, or counting are more likely to have a better future than their counterparts who lack these skills."

The fifteen rules of the Charter are practical guidelines that constitute the Code of conduct of the Global Federation of Vietnamese Teachers Unions worldwide[129]. The founding members of the Vietnamese Teacher's Union were the first to adopt the Charter in its by-laws as Mission statement.

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federation-of-vietnamese-teachers-unions/the-vietnamese-teachers-union-charter/

[129] Michelle Duong, *Charter for Global Federation of Vietnamese Teachers Unions*, VNTU Collection, Vietnam Hoc Institute Geneva, 2020. Link to English version: https://nghiepdoangiaochuc.net/global-federation-of-vietnamese-teachers-unions/the-vietnamese-teachers-union-charter/

This is understandable, because to the eyes of all Vietnamese parents and citizens, education is considered as the driving force for sustainable development, national construction and peace. The education profession places many responsibilities on teachers, and equally, these responsibilities require corresponding rights. Teachers should be empowered to have the right to freely exercise all civil and professional rights, which is not yet the case of post-modern Vietnam at this stage.