

# Promoting Similarities in the Cultural Humanity for Guidance on Reducing Conflicts and Increasing Harmony in Korean Companies in Vietnam

Tran Thi Thu Luong  
Vietnam National University

## Abstract

Based on the findings on similarities and differences in the Korean and Vietnamese cultural features, and the social surveys conducted as part of the project "*Compiling, Publishing and Disseminating the Handbook of Korean-Vietnamese Behavior*" by South Korean Studies Center, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh City (USSH-VNU-HCM) with the support of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS) from September to October 2016, the paper covers the three points: *First*, analyzing similarities that create a special interaction effect between the two cultures. They are ones underlying the spectacular development of the Korea-Vietnam relations during the past time. Among them are similarities in the humanity and tolerance with a distinctive feature of "respect for affection", playing the most important role; *second*, analyzing cultural collisions caused by distinctive features in the structures of the two countries' traditional cultures. They include those of the South Korean culture namely *strong hierarchy, high respect of routines, and self-esteem of mono-culture* and those of the Vietnamese culture namely *strong village democracy, low respect of formalities, resistance to imposed culture*, and simultaneously analyzing the gaps in the modernity of the Vietnamese workers' culture compared to the requirements of modern production in Korean enterprises so as to point out that they are reasons for the increase of conflicts in Korean enterprises' operation process in Vietnam; and *third*, suggesting, based on the analysis, some cultural solutions to increase harmony and reduce conflicts, supporting a sustainable development of the Korea-Vietnam cooperation in Korean enterprises in Vietnam.

---

Received August 10, 2017; Revised version received August 16, 2017; Accepted September 01, 2017

Key Words: promote cultural similarities, cultural clash, reduce conflicts, increase harmony, Korean enterprises in Vietnam, USSH-VNU-HCM

## 1. Culture as a Companion of the Korea-Vietnam Cooperation during the Last Twenty-five Years

The year 2017 marks the 25th anniversary of the development of the Korea-Vietnam cooperation. During this time, the cooperation has taken place in a strong flow of globalization and has been based on the fundamental and long-term interests of the two nations. The remarkable feature of the Korea-Vietnam relationship is its rapid and comprehensive development in terms of politics, economy, culture and society with impressive figures and reverential results. More than 100,000 citizens from either Korea or Vietnam have been welcomed to settle, do business, study and even get married only after two decades. Annually, more than half a million of their citizens go back and forth to invest in, visit, and travel to the two countries.

It is obvious that the Korea-Vietnam cooperation during the past time has been not only the fruit of their cooperation through business contracts and projects, but also that of special interaction between the two cultures. The spectacular and rapid development of the Korea-Vietnam relationship is certainly not a random result but one that has been naturally accumulated from similarities in their cultural characteristics, similarities in their value systems as well as their development conditions throughout history. Although they have no common borders as well as favorable conditions for direct and extensive exchanges until the time of modern history, they were in the network of the Chinese cultural center and its peripheral countries, and they were also under the influence from the Indian cultural center. Therefore, the Korean and Vietnamese cultures have several typical similarities. Such similarities have been created through their two-way relationship and the mutual influence for thousand years. It is thus a deep analogy in their value systems. As a result, the cultural aspects of the two countries possess certain similarities.

In addition to the agents from the influences of the Chinese and Indian cultures, the Korean and Vietnamese cultures have some other similarities due to the constituent elements in their indigenous cultural identities. This is an analogy of the small-scale agriculture and society in the Asian production mode. Agriculture with livelihoods (cultivation and livestock raising) is always associated with an amiable humanist philosophy. Therefore, in the very essence of traditional culture of agricultural society, the Korean and Vietnamese cultures are full of humanity in harmony with the nature for survival.

The respect for affection is deep-rooted from the traditional characteristics of kinship preservation in Korean and Vietnamese societies. Based on this characteristics, the ancestor worship was born, has been preserved and remained in the two cultures.

For this reason, before being influenced by the Chinese and Indian cultures in respect to many elements of cognitive culture, ethical value of Confucianism and Buddhism, the Korean and Vietnamese cultures, by nature, had possessed the respect for affection based on their own economic structures, and indigenous societies. The respect for affection includes respect for family affection, respect for clan affection, respect for worship of ancestors, respect for community affection, and respect for nation affection. The humanity of indigenous culture is a foundation for the Korean and Vietnamese cultures have had direct assimilations with the philosophy of the Three Teachings: the *Goodness*, the *Filiality*, the *Duty* of the people in Confucianism; the philosophy of *good acts* to save human beings in Buddhism; and the philosophy of *harmony with nature, liberation of natural human beings* in Taoism.

On the other hand, since Korea and Vietnam had had their own indigenous cultures before receiving externally cultural influences, their acculturation from the Chinese cultural center was not an unrefined copy but it was a creative two-way one. The refraction of this acculturation showed that the internal forces that transform foreign elements into internal elements of the Korean and Vietnamese cultures were very powerful. Thus, there are always differences and gaps in the analogy with that of China. In other words, there exist differences in their similar characteristics. This reminds us not to superficially recognize the similarities in

the Korean and Vietnamese cultures, and not see them as simple similarities so that we do not stumble in our behaviors and are always aware that they have their distinct features. And the distinctive features that penetrate many of the traditional Korean and Vietnamese cultural structures are: strong hierarchy, high respect of routines, and self-esteem of mono-culture in the Korean culture; strong village democracy, low respect of formalities, and resistance to imposed culture in the Vietnamese culture.

In the modern era, both of the Korean and Vietnamese cultures have shifted from the traditional to the modern ones throughout the ups and downs of history.

For Korea, the traditional cultural characteristics are inherited, preserved and developed in modern society. Their traditional cultural characteristics such as strong hierarchy, high respect of routines, respect for honor, respect for dignity, etc. are strongly preserved, creating a distinctive Oriental style of the modern Korean culture. On the other hand, the vigorous renewal of the industrial and urban environments, the dramatic development of media society, and extensive international exchanges create a modern face for the Korean culture with typical features like being dynamic, integrated and widely influenced by the Western culture (Protestantism, Europeanism, individualism, Western architecture, etc.). Thus, the most striking feature of the modern Korean culture is the coexistence of tradition and modernity. However, it is not a simple coexistence but a unique one. Culture has been deeply involved in the movement of this nation, contributing to the special development of "*the Miracle on the Han River*".

For Vietnam, in its context of strong social development in the trend of industrialization, modernization and global integration, the Vietnamese culture has preserved its cultural characteristics such as respect for nation affection, respect for family affection, respect for community affection, lifestyle without complicated rituals, flexibility in behavior, tolerance in religion, and adaptability, and at the same time it has changed in direction of being more modern, more dynamic and more integrated. In the modern era, Vietnam finds it more advantageous to expand international relations on a global scale thanks to the strengths of geopolitics and geo-economics. The Vietnamese culture has therefore increased its openness and integration. However, Vietnam's educational system and social structure have not

yet made breakthroughs for innovation, dissemination and application of modern knowledge into its socio-economic development so as to increase its modernity. Consequently, in the Korea-Vietnam cooperation, apart from the differences in their traditional cultural features preserved in their modern ones, the two countries have faced the challenges of modernity gaps in their cultures.

Apparently, during the past 25 years, in accompany with the economic, cultural and social exchanges between Korea and Vietnam, there have been contacts and clashes between the two cultures. While their similar cultural features have functioned as a powerful catalyst, their differences, especially the lack of understanding of the two cultures, have caused significant hindrances. Differences in their value systems due to the cultural characteristics always lead to differences in cultural behaviors, traditions and customs, etc. and likely cause cultural clashes during their cooperation. Therefore, it is crucially important to achieve an understanding of the two cultures, a cultural tolerance, an active construction of cultural dialogue, and a respect for their distinctive features. All are for cooperation in the common good, a reduction of cultural clashes, a stimulation of similar feelings, and a harmony and sustainability in the two nations' cooperation and cultural exchanges.

## **2. Some Shortcomings in the Vietnam-Korea Relationship in Korean Companies in Vietnam from the Cultural Perspective**

In the panorama of the Vietnam-Korearelations during the past time, the economic cooperation, especially the investment of Korean enterprises in Vietnam, is the most prominent. It is remarkable not only in terms of the amount of investment but also in its remaining the leading position of investment in several important fields in many regions of Vietnam. In May 2016, Korea had 5273 valid projects with its investment of \$ 49 billion, ranking first in the total investment and the projects among 115 countries and territories doing business in Vietnam. The Korean FDI enterprises play an important role in Vietnam's economy, employing about 70,000 Vietnamese workers and making up over 25% of Vietnam's total exportation<sup>1)</sup>. Some big Korean corporations like Samsung, LG,

Doosan, Kumho, POSCO, Lotte, Husong and so on have been present in Vietnam for several decades. By the end of 2016, the Korean investment still maintained its orientation to the Vietnamese market. All have promised a new wave of investment since the 25th anniversary of the Korea-Vietnam cooperation.

Besides the pride and excitement of these results, the consideration of remaining issues in the cooperation process so as to ensure its continuing sustainable development is extremely essential and significant in the long run.

In Vietnam, many issues have related to and affected the investment activities by foreign enterprises in general and Korean ones in particular. Some macro issues such as political relations between the two governments, global relations and regional relations, or specific issues such as investment conditions (i.e. laws on investment and employment, etc.) all have shortcomings and difficulties in need of being solved, adjusted and supported. However, in our view, besides these issues, the relation between humans and humans and the relation between Korean business owners and Vietnamese workers play a particularly important role because they are linked to the issue of human resources for production and investment. It directly affects the investment efficiency and the sustainable development of Korean enterprises in Vietnam. Therefore, a research on these relations to draw lessons and directly face the remaining issues to find solutions and directions for a sustainable development is a task of great need and practical significance for the Korea-Vietnam cooperation in general and for the milestone of its 25th anniversary in particular. Our paper, from a cultural perspective, analyzes the shortcomings and identifies the cultural foundations for solutions to reduce the conflicts and increase the harmony of the Korea-Vietnam relations in Korean companies in Vietnam.

Cheap and young labor is one of the attractions of the Vietnamese labor market for foreign enterprises including Korean ones. The number of 700,000 Vietnamese workers currently employed in thousands of Korean companies shows that the scale and intensity of the Vietnam-Korea relations in this aspect are quite big and

---

1) "The situation of Korean investment in Vietnam," Vietnam's Ministry of Planning and Investment, and Foreign Investment Agency, accessed September 9, 2017, <http://fia.mpi.gov.vn/tinbai/4829/Tinh-hinh-hop-tac-dau-tu-Viet-Nam-Han-Quoc>.

complex. In this context, while their cultural similarities explicitly support the investment in common terms such as psychology, living and social environment, their distinctive cultural features lead to cultural collisions, causing feelings of hurt for both the parties, hindering the production of Korean enterprises, and negatively impacting the construction of a strong corporate culture for Korean investment in Vietnam.

**a) Few Promotions for Vietnamese Employers have in Korean Companies due to the Korean Self-esteem of Mono-culture, which Demotivates Their Commitment and Loyalty**

The distinctive features in the structures of the two countries' traditional cultures consist of those of the Korean culture namely *strong hierarchy, high respect of routines*, and *self-esteem of mono-culture* and those of the Vietnamese culture namely *strong village democracy, low respect of formalities, resistance to imposed culture*. It is the differences in values of these cultural distinctive features that always lead to differences in their behavioral cultures, customs and traditions, and likely cause cultural collisions in the two parties' course of relations and exchanges.

For the Korean, due to the mono-culture lasting in their national history and the self-esteem of the "purely Korean" of their culture, they likely think that Koreans are superior and more reliable. It illustrates the fact that Korean enterprises are less likely to use and place Vietnamese people in high positions. Instead, high positions are reserved for Koreans only. As a result, there is a low index of Vietnamese employees' promotion in Korean enterprises whereas there is a rapid development of the Korean community in Vietnam. Although the salaries paid by Korean enterprises are not low compared to those by other foreign ones, the level of perception of fairness in Korean companies is much lower in many aspects (distribution, procedures and relations)<sup>2)</sup>, and there are few opportunities for

---

2) Kim Young Jo, Le Viet Phuong Thao, "The HR management in foreign-owned companies and their impact on the engagement of Vietnamese employees in their enterprises: A comparative study on Korean companies and other foreign ones in Vietnam," *Journal of Culture and Tourism* 9 (63) (2013): 42.

Vietnamese employees to improve their profession and competence. Therefore, their motivation to work and their loyalty to the enterprises decline. They do not have a great desire to stay long as well as enjoy working in Korean enterprises, even if the money they receive is not small, which makes it difficult for *Korean enterprises to recruit, nurture and retain their excellent staff*. Also, it turns a negative consequence badly impacting the quality of labor force - the core factor of the corporate culture.

In addition to the cultural causes, another one is from the passiveness and embarrassment in the personnel structure and management system of Korean enterprises. The reason is that the majority of Korean enterprises in Vietnam are of medium and small scales. Many of them do not own much capital, effective management and business strategies so they often prefer to find partners with cheaper production costs to invest in rather than conduct a long and thorough preparation process before their investment. Thus, a suitable regime for local human resources is not well constructed.

Under such conditions, spontaneous cultural characteristics override others and create a negative consequence on the personnel and management systems. This increases cost burdens for companies when they have to send many Korean staff to Vietnam, and simultaneously lead to Vietnamese employees' negative attitude to Korean enterprises. Vietnamese employees' engagement to Korean enterprises is not high and then causes difficulties for Korean enterprises to create a strong corporate culture when they invest in Vietnam.

#### **b) Lack of Harmony in Companies due to Differences in the Korean Self-esteem of Mono-culture and the Vietnamese Democratic Community Culture**

A dominant feature of social behaviors in the Korean culture is its hierarchy, patriarch, and centralism. This cultural feature makes Korean employers' mainstreaming behavior to Vietnamese employees or workers a message that the behaviors of hierarchical culture are required to be adapted and enforced. However, the behaviors based on a strict hierarchy and several formalities are not familiar



with the Vietnamese culture. The Vietnamese enjoy the harmony, the mutual cordiality, and the simplicity without gaps and formalities. They consider it the value of intimacy, and the harmony is the “affection” that links employers and employees.

The results of a sociological survey on 150 Korean managers, Vietnamese officers and workers about on situations leading to clashes in their relations in Korean companies North Vietnam in 2016<sup>3)</sup>(referred as Sociological Survey 1) showed that 82.3% of Vietnamese thought the Koreans value the self-esteem in communication while the Vietnamese prefer democracy, informality and they do not bow the Korean when they meet each other; then it caused the Koreans’s misunderstanding of the Vietnamese’s attitude. For the Korean managers, 66.7% of them said that they easily became angry when the Vietnamese did not respect the hierarchy in their companies, behaved casually, did not bow to their employers, and had no positive attitude when they admitted any faults. Another sociological survey on 356 Koreans and Vietnamese in some Korean companies in Binh Duong Province, South Vietnam in 2016<sup>4)</sup>(referred as Sociological Survey 2) gave similar results: Koreans were unhappy because the Vietnamese did not respect the hierarchy: they behaved inappropriately (40%); they did not bow to their employers (22%); they did not positively admit their faults(28%). Meanwhile, the Vietnamese were not satisfied because the Koreans easily got angry (69%), or spoke too loudly and solved problems at their own choice (51%).

Because of this difference, there has existed a distance of dissatisfaction about many behaviors between the two parties. Although, with a routine of cultural tolerance, the Vietnamese usually choose to behave mildly and respect differences for coexistence, the Vietnamese culture has a strong internal force and high resistance to assimilation. Thus, they find every cultural imposition

- 
- 3) Sociological Survey 1 was conducted in September 2016. It was a part of the project “*Compiling, Publishing and Disseminating the Handbook of Korean-Vietnamese Behavior*” by South Korean Studies Center, USSH-VNU-HCM with the support of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS). The subjects were 150, including 3 Korean managers, 8 Vietnamese officers, 139 Vietnamese workers in 4 Korean companies in Bac Ninh Province, North Vietnam.
- 4) Sociological Survey 2 was conducted in October 2016. It was a part of the project “*Compiling, Publishing and Disseminating the Handbook of Korean-Vietnamese Behavior*” (*ibid.*). The survey was done on two groups: Group 1 consisted of 48 Korean employers and Vietnamese officers (16,2%), and Group 2 consists of 308 Vietnamese workers (83,8%) in 4 Korean companies in Binh Duong Province, South Vietnam.

unacceptable. When Korean business owners are strict, patriarchal, and likely to impose them upon the Korean culture, any arising conflicts of interest between the two parties may easily resonate with these cultural collisions and turn into a negative phenomena that hurts both; or their cultural instability may become a hinder to construct the friendly atmosphere, the mutual trust, and even become a kind of stress. As a result, the establishment of Korean enterprises' strong internal resources is negatively affected.

Apart from the collisions of traditional cultural differences, the relations between the two parties still *face challenges from the gap in modernity between the Korean and the Vietnamese cultures*. Considering the collaborative environment of Korean enterprises in Vietnam, the gap in modernity of the Vietnamese culture compared to the requirements of modern industrial production is shown as follows.

- *Imbalance in the professional knowledge and skills of Vietnamese laborers compared to technical requirements of modern industrial machinery in Korean enterprises.*
- *Imbalance due to Vietnamese laborers' agricultural habits compared to the industrial work behavior in accordance with the labor discipline requirements in modern factories of Korean enterprises.*

The gap is of course not identical for all Vietnamese workers. It depends on their education levels and professional skills. However, on the common ground of modernity in culture (the cultural entity's degree of mastering the modern knowledge and application of modern knowledge to life). This gap is the fact that the levels of Vietnam's labor force and economic development are lower than Korea's.

Moreover, the majority of labor force in Korean enterprises in Vietnam come from rural areas - the lowest intellectual section in Vietnam. Hence, the gap in their professional knowledge and skills compared to the requirements for modern machine operation and technology transfer is quite a significant weakness. The agricultural lifestyle of Vietnamese workers is also tied to the consequences of

poor labor discipline, for example their lack of concentration on work (using personal telephones, chatting, etc.), their lack of modern professional skills, their slow reaction and lack of dynamism in competition. Also, in some cases, many workers with low education levels have been infected with bad habits that spontaneously invaded the Vietnam culture in its transition such as profiting lifestyle, idleness, and cheating etc., and they have carried such habits during their journey of behavior.

In Sociological Survey 1, the Vietnamese's behaviors at work that cause the Koreans' anger are: Using mobile phones (63,9%), chatting (56,5%), not raising any questions when facing troubles or knowing nothing to solve any arising problems (51%). In Sociological Survey 2, the similar findings are: Using mobile phones (56,6%), chatting (58,4%), not raising any questions when facing troubles or knowing nothing to solve any arising problems (30,3%), making technical errors (28%).

Thus, the culture of Vietnamese workers in Korean companies, viewed from the perspective of modern culture, is of a poor quality, causing difficulties in meeting the requirements of modern production and management. This has led to *an increase of conflicts in manufacturing operation of Korean enterprises in Vietnam.*

Above all, it is *an impetus of economic interests*: Vietnamese workers always want to have their salary increased. In all their strikes in Korean companies, the most important claim is a pay raise. However, due to their low profession and poor labor discipline that have led to their low labor productivity, poor quality and inefficiency at work, they have no reasonable grounds to ask their employers for a pay raise.

Then, *conflicts are found in the psychology and execution of welfare rights*: Due to their unfamiliarity with modern labor discipline and pressure, Vietnamese workers always find it difficult to execute strict rules and regulations in Korean enterprises. Some sociological surveys show that most of them share an opinion that the Korean regime and labor discipline are too strict. They want to increase their break time, and do not try hard to execute the labor regulations and disciplines. As a result, their dissatisfaction and aversion to Korean employers are

on the increase. However, if the demand to ensure the quality of products and the contract lifetime is vital, how can employers find out other ways to enforce strict regulations and control labor disciplines while facing the current state of poor modernity in the culture of Vietnamese workers in their companies?

In fact, many Korean enterprises in Vietnam choose to manage the human resources in the direction of *governing and controlling*. They have a tendency to set up more restrictive rules and increase their rigidity and punishment to ensure that they are *in full control*. The psychology of having no belief in the native people and tending to impose a culture of hierarchy leads to the fact that the behavior of Korean employers is *cold and violent* in the eyes of Vietnamese workers. This increases the resistance to any cultural imposition on Vietnamese workers, whose culture is strongly against assimilation.

The gap in the modernity of the culture of Vietnamese workers in Korean companies is not supposedly levelled but leaves a negative impact on the Vietnamese workers' aversion to Korean employers' regulations and their lack of tolerance and harmony in behavior. It can be considered as one important reason why the number of strikes of Vietnamese workers in Korean companies is always higher than that of other foreign companies even though the payment in Korean companies is not less than or and sometimes much higher than in the other companies.

### c) Increasing Cultural Clashes due to Language Barriers

Opposite vectors due to not mutually understanding the cultures between Korean enterprises and Vietnamese workers even increase more when they work with a language barrier.

Up to 2013 in Ho Chi Minh City and neighboring provinces, about 2,000 Korean businesses were employed 400,000 Vietnamese workers, but both of the parties found it difficult to overcome their language barriers. A survey on 400 Koreans in Ho Chi Minh City showed that 70% of the respondents considered the language barrier as their biggest difficulty in Vietnam; and 42.2% of Korean businessmen gave the same response<sup>5</sup>).

In another sociological survey, 54 Korean experts and managers in Korean companies Binh Duong Province, Dong Nai Province and Ho Chi Minh City<sup>6</sup>) were interviewed: 54% of the respondents could say some basic sentences in Vietnamese, 19% could give job instructions in Vietnamese; only 11% could communicate well in Vietnamese. To communicate with Vietnamese officers and workers, 64% of them used English or Korean interpreters, and just 30% used Vietnamese and their body language.

Korean managers in Vietnam find it hard to learn Vietnamese because they are very busy with their jobs; and some of Vietnam's universities with good quality of training provide Vietnamese courses for foreigners from different countries in the world and they use the English language as the instruction language. They are in lack of teachers who can speak Korean to directly teach Vietnamese with explanation in Korean. Therefore, it is a burden for Koreans who want to learn Vietnamese but are not good at English. For Vietnamese laborers, studying Korean is a dream because language centers are far from their working place, the tuition is expensive, and most of them can not quit their jobs to have spare time for their language learning. The most reasonable solution is that Korean enterprises spend some money organizing Korean courses for Vietnamese laborers in their workplace. However, implementation is not easy. The first reason is that in Vietnam, teachers of Koreans are insufficient and it is not easy to find good teachers who are willing to travel to these companies. And the second one is that many Korean business owners are not determined to overcome difficulties in investing in Vietnamese human resources.

It is an obvious hindrance that the two parties sharply realize. All attempts to solve this problem have not been enough for both to overcome the language barrier in their exchanges and relations, as well as their share of thoughts and feelings.

5) Cao Thuy Oanh, "Vietnam Integration of the Korean community in HCMC." (MA thesis, USSH-VNU-HCM, 2013).

6) A sociological survey conducted in October 2016 as a part of the project "*Compiling, Publishing and Disseminating the Handbook of Korean-Vietnamese Behavior*" (ibid.). In-depth interviews were performed with 54 Korean experts and managers in Korean companies in Binh Duong Province, Dong Nai Province, and Ho Chi Minh City, including 17 respondents from large-scale enterprises (24,000 to 31,000 staff), 10 from small-scale ones (20 to 30 staff), and the rest being technical or law experts.

### 3. Promoting Similarities in the Cultural Humanity for Guidance on Reducing Conflicts and Increasing Harmonies in Korean Companies in Vietnam

Certainly, not in all Korean enterprises in Vietnam, there exist such serious collisions and conflicts because the questions of resolution or cluster of the collisions and conflicts depends much on the culture and understanding of employers, as well as the appropriate policies and measures of enterprises. Actually, many Korean enterprises have had successful experiences in minimizing collisions, increasing harmony, and well adapting to the investment environment in Vietnam for better development<sup>7)</sup>. However, most of the others are still facing difficulties, and the contradictions are potential risks and under no satisfactory solutions for the two parties to be psychologically relieved, and then have proper perception and behavior to create the strength of human resources for the sustainable development of Korean enterprises in Vietnam's investment environment.

Accordingly, finding solutions to reduce conflicts and increase harmony in the Korea-Vietnam relations in Korean companies in Vietnam should be actively researched and supported to promote the bilateral relations to a new height.

Many factors affect the solution to conflicts, so the solution needs approaching from a variety of directions and fields (law, natural environment, society, culture, etc.). In this paper, we have chosen the cultural perspective to analyze the collisions and conflicts. Thus, we are going to choose a cultural solution to these conflicts and shortcomings.

#### a) Cultural Similarities in Humanity, Generosity, and Respect for Affection in the Indigenous Cultures of Korea and Vietnam being Important Agents to Create the Special Feature of the Korea-Vietnam Relationship

It is known that the reality in developing the Vietnam-Korea relations in recent

---

7) Tran Thi Thu Luong, *Distinctive features in the Korean and Vietnamese Cultures - Similarities and Differences* (Ho Chi Minh City: National Politics Publisher, 2016), 413 - 416.

years has been not only the result of project contracts but also that of the interaction between the two cultures. The rapid and comprehensive development of bilateral relations with impressive figures and facts demonstrates the cultural distinctiveness over many other contemporary factors, and it is clear that culture has played an important catalytic role.

Which cultural features have been able to create a special effect on the interaction between the two cultures and form the foundation for a spectacular development of the Korea-Vietnam cooperation in recent years?

Many researchers focus on the profound similarities in some cultural elements and values received from the influence of the cultural centers, namely China and India, on the Korean and the Vietnamese cultures: Their *languages* received a large number of Chinese words; their *writings* used the Chinese scripts for a long time and they possessed a massive cultural heritage of Chinese characters on the bibliographies and inscriptions, etc.; their *cognitive culture* deeply received the elements from the Chinese and Indian cultures such as Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism.

These similarities are very deep and prominent. However, they do not make a distinctiveness in the similarities of the Korean and Vietnamese cultures for explanation about the special interaction of the Korea-Vietnam cooperation. These features are common to all the peripheral countries related to the two major Asian cultural centers. i.e. the Chinese Center and the Indian Center.

What really makes the Korea-Vietnam relations special? In our standpoint, it is the similarity in the components of the indigenous cultures of Korea and Vietnam in which the deep humanism and generosity with the prominent feature of respecting affection play the most important role.

Although the traditional Korean and Vietnamese societies have different common borders and different indigenous cultural backgrounds, they are agricultural ones of rice cultivation. Their respect for affection has rooted from the essence of the agricultural society to the environment of farming practices with experiences on the nature and traditions to live in harmony with the nature for survival.

Also, the respect for affection has come from the bloodstream routine in the traditional societies of Korea and Vietnam. On such a ground, the worship of

ancestors has existed and been preserved in the cultures of Korea and Vietnam since ancient times. Thus, before the influence from Confucianism in receptance of the Confucian moral values of family and social relations, the nature of the indigenous cultures of Korea and Vietnam, based on their own economic and social structures, had possessed a strong respect for affection: respecting the family affection, respecting the ancestral affection, respecting the ancestor worship, respecting the community affection, and even respecting the affection for those born in the same country.

Thus, we can find some uniqueness of the similarity in the deep humanity in the nature of Korean and Vietnamese people.

For the Vietnamese, the humanity expressed through the spirit “*Do as you would be done by*”, the community cohesion, and the community responsibility is a vital condition for their survival and development. The humanity of the Vietnamese culture is also rooted in their native spiritual breadth of a wet-rice society in the ancient Southeast Asia - a matrilineal society with women’s great role in their MOTHER characteristics of giving birth, protecting and nourishing children. Thus, in their behavior, the Vietnamese usually bring their intimacy and closeness of family affection into social relations.

The humanity is also an inherent part in the nature of the Korean culture. The ideology of *Hong-ik In-gan* (홍익인간)(human endowment) is a profound human thought expressed in the Korean’s famous mythology of Tagun and through the Korean’s philosophy of social behavior. *The Hong-ik In-gan is created by the self-governing consciousness. The selves with their construction of relations being superior, inferior, on their right and left, inside and outside can achieve the affection namely the Hong-ik In-gan. The self affection in families for the superior is their love for parents (filial piety) and their worship of ancestors; the one for the inferior is their benevolence for children; the one for their surroundings becomes the respect and love for friends. If the selves’ love orients upwards, it is obeisance; if it orients to all natural things, it is the love for nature; and if it is developed in the political aspect, it becomes the national love. The concept of Hong-ik In-gan, i.e. the Korean’s national notion, is not only a concept of education, but also is rooted in the traditional thought and it is inherited today.*<sup>8)</sup>



Thus, the cultures of Korea and Vietnam are inherently imbued with the humanity. It is a profound similarity in the indigenous values of the two cultures. Accordingly, they both have positive permaculture with the philosophy of the Three Teachings: the *Goodness*, the *Filiality*, the *Duty* of the people in Confucianism; the philosophy of *good acts* to save human beings in Buddhism; and the philosophy of *harmony with nature, liberation of natural human beings* in Taoism.

This is a solid cultural foundation for the homogeneity in the warmth, enthusiasm, protection and share for those who are more miserable in the Korean and Vietnamese cultures. On their heart, the Korean and Vietnamese have a special room for the sense of intimacy.

This also explains the seemingly paradoxical phenomenon in the history of the Korea and Vietnamese relations: In a certain period of the Vietnam War, Korea dispatched its army to Vietnam (1964 - 1973). Although Korea was neither the only country nor the one with the biggest number of troops that were present in Vietnam, and a part of its army caused a painful commonplace slaughter in some regions in Central Vietnam, the number of Korean hybrid offsprings in this period was much bigger than those of the other countries participating in the Vietnam War. These Korean hybrids have long been associated with the Vietnamese community and have become a strong hybrid community in Central Vietnam.

Likewise, the current Korea-Vietnam multicultural marriages indicate that, even with no clear direction, the unconscious sense of intimacy and sympathy for family affection is one of the reliable reasons for the Korea-Vietnam multicultural marriages to make up the highest rate in Korea.

In addition to the economic investment for benefits and other conditions, in our opinion, the sense of cultural similarity between the Korean and the Vietnamese creates a warm breeze of intimacy and convenience for Korean enterprises' tendency of investment in Vietnam. It can be considered as a favorable catalyst from the human harmony, contributing to the strong investment flow of Korean

---

8) Lee Jong Seong, "The Nature of Korean Traditional Thought in the Tangun Mythology" (paper presented at the international conference on the Similarities and Differences between Vietnam's Confucianism and Korea's, Hanoi, September 10-11, 2009).

enterprises into Vietnam in recent years.

### **b) Promoting Similarities in the Humanity of the Korean and Vietnamese Cultures to Reduce Conflicts and Increase Harmonies**

Why does this intimacy not have a positive impact on the Korea and Vietnam cooperation in Korean companies in Vietnam? Why do there appear cultural collisions making the two partners here be far away from each other, be in lack of mutual understanding, and have explosive reactions hurting each other, and causing bad consequences and damages?

Perhaps, there are several reasons. And it is obvious that emphasis is not placed enough on the cultural solution under the two parties' perception. Therefore, the preeminent potentials of their cultural similarities have not yet been promoted so that different elements have spontaneously overwhelmed and led to bad consequences.

Based on the findings in the similarities and differences in the cultural features of Korea and Vietnam, our research points out that Vietnam and Korea are two countries with many cultural advantages for great and special relations. And the development of the Korea-Vietnam cooperation in recent years has proved it. Nevertheless, the reality still shows that the two parties are not really fully aware of the strengths and superior potentials of their similarities to promote the strengths and resolute their conflicts. The problems in the Korea-Vietnam cooperation in Korean companies or multicultural families need to be more effectively mitigated employing the cultural solution.

Above all, there should be a mutual cultural understanding and an active cultural tolerance to build up a cultural communication and a self respect for the sake of mutual cooperation, create harmony, and reduce cultural collisions for the stability in the Korea-Vietnam relations.

In addition to conducting more comparative studies on the cultures of Korea and Vietnam, there should be guidance for specific contexts of cooperation and exchange for specific participants. With the space of cooperation in Korean companies, the cultural solution should be applied:

- 1—Enforcing education and propaganda activities about the similarities and differences of the Korean and Vietnamese cultures for the cooperative partners; Building the philosophy of respecting the other's culture; Employing the humanity, the love and cultural tolerance - the strengths in the two parties' similarities - as the foundation for cultural communication without any cultural imposition resistance.
  
- 2—Korean companies should have some discussion on agreement about their principles, rules and labor disciplines in their company before execution. They should explain to Vietnamese workers reasons for applying such rules for the common good and for the company development so as to create a consensus with the workers. They should believe the fact that they will feel free to execute the rules only when they have a thorough understanding. It is much better than setting up the detailed rules to govern them without any consensus. When the agreement has been achieved, the penalty for those acting in open violation will be under the Vietnamese worker's support with no cultural resistance.
  
- 3—Korean enterprises should directly deal with the current situation of Vietnamese labor force to determine the fact: to steadily make full use of the young and cheap labor force in Vietnam, they are advised to build up a proper personnel strategy and tackle the weakness of modernity of the Vietnamese workforce. In details:
  - Korean enterprises should increase the training spending (on language and skills) for Vietnamese staff and workers so that they can have better qualified staff and consider it an investment for development;
  - Korean enterprises should overcome hindrances to reliably take on qualified Vietnamese employees, give them important positions, share their belief and pride to build up a strong corporate culture; create the employees' bond and loyalty to retain the elites and stand strongly in their fields of investment.
  
- 4—With right perception, Korean enterprises should find it important to develop the codes of conduct and behavioral guidelines to encourage correct behaviors and

criticise misconducting ones. Fairness and cultural tolerance should be employed in respect for the distinctive features of the two cultures as a foundation and criteria for composing the codes of conduct to reduce conflicts and increase harmonies in their organization.

## Works Cited

- Cao, Thuy Oanh. "Integration of the Korean community in Ho Chi Minh City." Master Thesis, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, 2013.
- Kim, Young Joein, Le Viet Phuong Thao. "The HR management in foreign-owned companies and their impact on the engagement of Vietnamese employees in their enterprises: A comparative study on Korean companies and other foreign ones in Vietnam." *Journal of Culture and Tourism* 9 (2013): 42.
- Lee, Jong Seong. "The Nature of Korean Traditional Thought in the Tangun Mythology." Paper presented at the international conference on the Similarities and Differences between Vietnam's Confucianism and Korea's, Hanoi, September 10-11, 2009.
- Tran, Thi Thu Luong. *Cultural Characteristics of Vietnam and South Korea: Similarities and Differences*. Ho Chi Minh City: National Politics Publisher, 2016.