

SOUTH-EAST ASIAN CULTURE Vs. EAST ASIAN CULTURE

A Case Study of Vietnam and Japan

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By normal way of classification, Vietnam and Japan are of different cultural regions. Japan is an East Asian country and Vietnam is a South-East Asian one. So it is not easy at all to compare the two cultures of the two different regions. Though all comparisons are of relativity, it is necessary to have comparisons for a better understanding of the subjects and the relations among them. On the other hand, the division into different cultural regions is just a relative division by scientists; it is not an absolute separation. Moreover, due to the impact of historical situations, nations in different cultural regions have direct and indirect interactions. Therefore, making comparisons to find out those relations to draw the differences and similarities between those cultures is really necessary. Japan and Vietnam can be seen as the case in point. Furthermore, Japan and Vietnam both received influence from Chinese civilization. They share many things in common; however, more thorough study into the expressions of the influence could show significant differences.

The author selected to compare Japan with Vietnam with the aim to have better understanding of the Vietnamese culture and by that contributing to a better understanding of the relations between East Asia and South-East Asia.

There are different comparative methods. The comparative method used in this article is based on criteria. Five criteria is selected.

1. Natural Condition and Ecological Environment

With current scientific knowledge, natural condition and ecological environment are considered the important factors affecting the creation of human culture. The interaction between nature and human beings is the factor which creates cultural features.

2. Characteristics of Local Residents and Traditional Cultural Features

Cultural subjects, formation process of the ethnic group, and characteristics of the community are important factors when looking at culture. Traditional cultural features are examined on the most notable features in 4 cultural components ⁽¹⁾.

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⁽¹⁾ 4 cultural components: material production, life insurance, norms and spirit.

3. Formation of the First State

This is a significant event for every nation because the appearance of government laid a milestone marking a leap of a community. Formation of the first government helps the community enter new civilization; it is the crystallization of all previous cultural achievements, and the first step shaping a cultural identity.

4. Forms of Organizing Government throughout Historical Process

Since the formation of state, although the cultural products are created by people, the forms of organizing the state have strong impact on the development trends of the history, it also has manipulation impact on social features.

5. Behaviors to Alien Cultures

Culture is created in a certain environment and is limited by natural environment. However, culture is not close. The spread of values from one culture to other is a natural phenomenon; but the behaviors to that phenomenon depend on the characteristics of different communities. The phenomenon reflects the cultural features of the influenced culture. That's why this criterion can be used to find out the similarities and differences across cultures.

Considering the first criterion, Vietnam is a peninsula with the area of over 330 000km² and over 3000 km coast

and its coast line indicator (ISCL) is approximately 106 while Japan is an archipelago with 3600 islands which surround 4 main islands and has the total area of ~ 377 000 km², the coast length of 29 000 km, and the ISCL of 13⁽²⁾.

Due to its sloppy topography, the seasonal rains created a dense river and stream network (over 3000 rivers), which has hand-shape with fingers stretching towards the coast line. Due to incomplete alluvium, there are floods in the area, creating an ecological area with many places occupied by water. The Vietnamese called their country to be "Nước" (water).

The climate in Vietnam is diversified. There are 4 different seasons: spring, summer, autumn, and winter; in the southern part there are 2 seasons: dry season and rainy season. The common characteristics of climate is hot and humid. This is not only productive for agriculture but also breeding epidemics and diseases. Together with tropical and monsoon climate, there are storms every year. Nature also creates difficult challenges to human beings. Rains, floods, storms, epidemics and diseases are disasters, which the Vietnamese have to encounter frequently. Vietnam's territory spreads on 15 latitudes. There

⁽²⁾ ISCL = $\sum A / \sum L$ (total area divided by total coastal length). Japan ISCL ~13; Vietnam ISCL ~ 106, this means 1 km of coast line covers 13 km² or 106km² land area. The lower the ISCL, the greater influence of sea to the culture.

are mountain ranges running across the territory dividing the country into sub-climate zones including northern, central, and southern zones. Together with the diversity in topography, the differences in climate zones also contribute to the diversity and richness of culture allocated accordingly to natural division of zones.

Vietnam has rich mineral resources but the reserved volume is in general not much. The country has advantage in land area. Agriculture production started very early and has been a main economic sector in all historical periods.

One notable natural characteristic is, geographically, Vietnam has a communication location. It is the cultural exchange place and the place which has been affected by regional and world cultures. The national territory has been enlarged with times.

Japan has a bit larger area than Vietnam. Mountains accounts for 75% of the total area and forest covers 67% of the total area in Japan.

With modest annual rainfall of 300mm/year and having mountainous topography near the sea, Japan does not have many rivers. 13 rivers written in geographical books are short, small, and poor in alluvium.

The country almost has no delta ⁽³⁾. Even areas called plain like Kanto and

Kansai are only big valleys created by volcanoes' magma. In the country, there are 200 volcanoes, out of which there are 60 active ones. That's why Japanese took Fuji to be the symbol of the country. There are around 300 valleys separated into 7 volcanic zones. Due to separated topography, Japanese culture is divided into localities.

In return for its small residential and cultivation area, Japan is surrounded with oceans and has a dense harbor system and various ocean resources. The rivers and streams have great influence in Vietnamese culture; in contrast, ocean is an important factor creating Japanese cultural identity.

The climate in Japan varies markedly from region to region. Some places are cold like Siberia (e.g. Hokkaido) others are warm like South-East Asia (e.g. Okinawa and some southern islands). There are 4 different seasons with low humidity. The climate is not advantageous for agriculture development. Added to that, Japan suffered from harsh natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, tidal waves, sea storms and volcanoes.

Natural resources in Japan are poor⁽⁴⁾, including cultivated area. There are only 2.5 million ha which can be cultivated but only in spring-summer crop.

features. The alluvium scale and quality in this area is not similar to other deltas in the world.

⁽⁴⁾ In fact, there were big mineral mines such as copper, silver and gold but most of them were exhaustively exploited in 17th century.

⁽³⁾ Some Japanese books mention Ota delta, the area in which Hiroshima is located. However, it is mainly about the component

Japan is situated in the ocean. Before the European came, it was not affected by other cultures. The country was actively imported outside civilization factors.

In comparison with Vietnam, Japan has quite stable territory.

With those stated above, it is possible to draw the similarities and differences on the natural conditions and ecological environment between the two countries.

The similarities can be seen facially like the similar size (330000/377 000km²); both countries have topography with mountains, forests, plains and coast lines. Both have to encounter natural disasters. However, if we analyze in more details the natural factors, significant differences can be seen. First, it is the difference between a peninsula and an archipelago, the ISCL is 8 times different (13/106). This feature makes the ocean influence to each nation different. The difference is also shown in the advantage and difficulty level brought about by the nature like harsh natural calamities, richness in natural resources and influence by the geographical location.

With the second criterion, *local residents and traditional cultural features*, Vietnam is identified as a multi-ethnic country. There are 54 ethnic groups each with its own language and traditional culture and

there is an ethnic majority, Kinh ethnic (or Viet ethnic)

Vietnamese cultural features have been formed in the long history by many factors including some main factors as follows:

- Influence of 'water' environment formed a river and water culture manifestation in the characters of people living near streams and rivers (brave, flexible, adaptive and good at situation solving).

- Impact of production and working conditions (agriculture of wet rice). In the process of conquering the delta, they had to embank to regulate water and prevent flood. To do this, they needed community power. Villages, a residential form with united spirit, have become a place with various cultural features. In the tradition, values, unity (community cohesion), pioussness to parents (nuclear family is a cell of society) and respect of the elderly (respect of experience) are always appreciated norms. However, due to the production situation, the Vietnamese are not farseeing and they are unfamiliar with financial accounting and planning. Equality (equally divided) became an effective measure to maintain harmonious relations in villages.

A historical impact, having to encounter frequent foreign invasions, has created the unyieldingness, steadfastness and independent awareness among Vietnamese. This was also a

factor reinforcing the community institution.

As for religion and belief, the Vietnamese respect the worship of their ancestors. In communicating with Chinese, Indian and western cultures, Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity were introduced into Vietnam. Foreign religions and local belief have accepted, co-existed and developed. The country became a place of religious mixture and co-existence.

Different from Vietnam, Japan is a homogeneous country with common and distinctive identity. In the population structure, 99.4% of the population are Japanese; 0.6% are other ethnic groups (600,000 Koreans, 40,000 Chinese and 20,000 Ainu). The process of "homogenization" occurred while Japan was isolated islands with little contact with outside world. That Japan's topography was separated with mountain ranges, valleys and islands created various forms of local cultures. Japan has been divided into 6 cultural regions including Hokkaido, Nigata and Kanazawa, Kanto, Kansai, Kyushu, and Shinkoku and other southern islands.

Considering environment impact, it can be seen that ocean, mountains, temperate climate, volcanoes and earthquakes are natural factors having strong and frequent influence on the formation of Japanese traditional culture. Those factors created the character of the Japanese. They are

rigid, economical, loyal to traditional values, and also perfectionists. The relatively isolated location (of the entire archipelago and of each region) brought Japanese the reserved character. They always have the "lonely" feeling, they, therefore, expect to integrate into and learn from outside world.

In terms of historical conditions, Japan was not subject to foreign invaders except for the 2 unsuccessful attacks by Mongol-Yuan. Instead of wars for country protection, civil wars among feudal forces happened frequently resulting in the formation of Bukufu institution, a style of military government led by Shogun families. At the same time there existed a titular civil government headed by emperor (Teno). All these made the Japanese become disciplined and respect the role of the leader. "Trust" is appreciated in the moral norms. The development of local feudalists in each valley led to the formation of Samurai, which later became an important class in society called Bushi (warriors). In the traditional society, most of the population lived in rural area. They lived in *mura* (villages). Different from villages in Vietnam, the *mura* were hierarchical. All members had clear functions, responsibilities and positions. The idea of equal right "everyone has the same role like fish of the same litter", a kind of village democratic with equalitarianism which was often seen in

Vietnam was completely strange to the Japanese society.

The only important religion in Japan was Shinto. This religion was mixed with ideas from Confucianism and Buddhism on the basis of worshipping Sun Goddess. Other religions in Japan did not develop except for Mahayana Buddhism.

Once, Japan had considered China to be the ideal model to learn. Confucianism imported to the country but it was not adopted originally. Japanese selected parts of Confucianism but they followed the main theory. The selection of mandarins (civil service government officials) by examinations was not adopted.

In the dimension of local residents and cultural features, the similarities are that both communities belong to Mongoloid and have common South Asian factors.

Traditional culture of both countries were formed on the paddy agriculture basis. They have high sense of community and respect for experience and age. They were both influenced by Chinese culture. Confucianism, Taoism and many Chinese norms can be found in both countries' cultures.

However, the multi-ethnic feature of the Vietnamese community is far different from the homogeneous feature of the Japanese. The difference is also shown in the domination of southern

features and the absence of nomadic features in Vietnamese versus the domination of northern feature and the presence of nomadic economic features among Japanese. The major influence to Vietnam culture was south up and that to Japan was north down.

There was no national religion in Vietnam, while in Japan, there was one religion - Shinto. The differences are also shown in the behaviors of two nations. The Vietnamese are flexible, gentle and adaptive; while the Japanese are disciplined and rigid. Among the moral values, Vietnamese respect most the pioussness to parents while the Japanese respect most the "Trust".

The first government in Vietnam was specified to be in the late of Dong Son Age, about 2500-2700 years ago. The formation of the first government was early, but this was not a consequence of the process of social differentiation in socio-economic development. This was accelerated by the outside impact of production, and protection from foreign invaders. Right after their foundation Van Lang Government and later Au Lac had to encounter the southward invasions of the Chinese empires. This is a significant difference between Vietnamese and Japanese culture.

After the Yayoi culture age (3rd century B.C. - 3rd century AD), metallurgy and paddy cultivation were introduced into Kyushu. This created a

leap in Japanese history. Together with the economic development, social differentiation became distinctive. In the mid 1st century B.C., there appeared a rich class of Shucho (leaders). After that a series of Kuni (a form of early state) in which the most powerful one was Wo. After established in 55 B.C. the country submitted itself to the rule of Han dynasty, beginning a development stage within the orbit of Chinese civilization.

In terms of government, although there were different forms of government, the main trend of government in Vietnam was the central government with power concentration. Under Ly-Tran dynasties (1009-1400), the model of people-close power concentration lasted almost 4 centuries. From 15th century, the bureaucratic power concentration model was popular. In 19th century the autocratic power concentration was adopted. From 1600-1789, there were continual wars. In the north, there was a special institution with the co-existence of 2 governments: titular Le court and Trinh (military government) with real power.

In Japan, from the 7th century, under the Tang dynasty model, Japan tried to establish a central government with power concentration led by an emperor. However, in 10th century, the imperial power became weakened because Kokushi appointed by the central government to manage a Kuni have increasing number of Shoen (peasants) which were given as gifts.

During this time, the requests for bidding to reclaim new land (Mayo) was popular. Successful bidders were called Tato. People with much land were called Daimyotato. These people had a lot of Samurai. This was the basis of forming separate military forces. This was the cause of wars among local feudalist forces and the formation of Bakufu institution (Shogunate) from 1192 to Meiji Restoration (1868).

3 the similarities between Japan and Vietnam in terms of government organization can be represented as follows:

-Both are influenced by the Confucian model from China.

-Both pay attention to law.

-The institution type in Vietnam from 1600 to 1789 was similar to that in Japan in Bakufu time from 1192 to 1868.

The differences are:

-Vietnam often established a strong power concentration institution. In Japan the local government was the forces dominating all aspects of social life. Bukufu institution only controlled the locality in terms of army.

-With the need of having good government officials (mandarins), Vietnamese feudal dynasties from Ly dynasty (1076) implemented the civil service examination to select talented people. Since then, the dual-board system of government officials (literary and military) was formed. Japanese

feudal dynasties never adopted this system. Therefore, Samurai were both good at literature and martial arts.

With its geographical position, Vietnam has advantage in *communicating with alien cultures*. In reality, the country has received enormous values from other cultures. The behavior of the Vietnamese started from suspicion, and then they were forced to accept the values, but then they found ways to change them accordingly to their norms. Meanwhile, the Japanese, with their own cultural features, considered the outside cultural values higher than theirs. They received the outside culture then they could have leaps in development (bronze casting, paddy cultivation, norms from China etc. Therefore, The Japanese traditional behavior was, they first identified the summit model of development then they tried to learn that model. The behavior also includes, if they find a model out-of-date, they are willing to give it up, and try to learn from other better model. That was the case Japan turned its back to the Chinese model, after China lost the Opium War to the westerners. Since then, the Japanese have tried to follow western norms.

With the above analysis of the similarities and differences, it is possible to draw some general consumptions.

1. It is said that there are similarities between Vietnamese and Japanese culture (same culture, same race). This is correct, because the two nations had the common Asian value having used paddy cultivation to be the main economic sector. Both were influenced by Chinese culture, in some specific aspects, it is also possible to find out similarities e.g. the existence of similar institution (civil government and military government) in certain historical period. Those are the advantages for culture exchanges, co-operation between two countries.

2. It would be a mistake to conclude that the similarities between the two cultures are so many that we can use the norms of one culture to infer to those of the others. For example, it is impossible to use the characters of the Vietnamese farmers to infer and say that Japanese farmers have the same character.

3. To learn from each other and to expand co-operation, it is essential to carry out careful and in-dept study of culture. This is not only true in the case of Vietnam and Japan but also in other cases. To generalize, it is essential to take into account specific cases and factors when studying cultural similarities and differences between East Asia and South - East Asia.

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