

Anthropological Observations on Vietnamese Older Adults, Questions to be Asked and Gerontology-Related Research in Vietnam

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Abstract

The current author is a social science researcher living in Vietnam for nearly a decade. Before developing a field work framework to do research about Vietnamese older adults, we start with the author's everyday life observations without any reference to a scholarly source. Although the author penned a number of books and articles on Vietnam, these references are intentionally removed for a lively, everyday life account. These observations, we guess will convince the readers that Vietnamese older adults worth studying from an anthropo-gerontological perspective: Vietnamese old people are respected in the society; old age is not associated with sickness or problem; the meaning of old age is different also because of circular view of life and death etc. The tentative questions for interviews follow these observations. Finally relevant academic research about Vietnamese older adults is reviewed to compare the observations with academic knowledge.

Keywords:

Vietnamese older adults • anthropo-gerontology • family values • circular life and death narratives • and the interpretations of old age

Vietnamlı Yaşlılarla İlgili Antropolojik Gözlemler, Sorulacak Sorular ve Vietnam'da Gerontolojiyle İlişkili Araştırmalar

Özet

Bu metnin yazarı yaklaşık on yıldır Vietnam'da yaşamakta olan bir sosyal bilim araştırmacısıdır. Vietnamlı yaşlılarla araştırma yapmak üzere bir alan çalışması çerçevesi geliştirmeden önce, herhangi bir akademik kaynağa başvurmaksızın yazarın günlük yaşamla ilgili gözlemleriyle başlıyoruz. Yazar, Vietnam üstüne kitaplar ve makaleler yazmış olsa da, bu kaynaklara, gözlemlerin daha canlı ve günlük olmasını sağlamak amacıyla bilinçli olarak yer verilmedi. Bu gözlemlerin, okuru, Vietnamlı yaşlıların antropo-gerontolojik bir bakış açısıyla incelenmeye değer olduğuna ikna edeceğini tahmin ediyoruz: Vietnamlı yaşlılar toplumda saygı görüyor; yaşlılık, hastalık ve sorunla ilişkilendirilmiyor; yaşam ve ölüme yönelik döngüsel bakış nedeniyle de ileri yaşın anlamı farklı vb. Bu gözlemleri şimdilik son şekli verilmemiş olan görüşme soruları izliyor. Son olarak, Vietnamlı yaşlılarla ilgili gözlemleri akademik bilgiyle karşılaştırmak üzere, konuya ilişkin akademik çalışmalar gözden geçiriliyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Vietnamlı yaşlılar • antropo-gerontoloji • aile değerleri • Döngüsel ölüm ve yaşam anlatıları ve ileri yaşa ilişkin yorumlar.

Anthropological Observations on Vietnamese Older Adults

Notes on Vietnamese Folk Religion

Despite of urbanization and industrialization, older people are still highly respected in Vietnam. One of the major reasons of this respect involves the folk religion which is tightly tied with the national culture. Although Vietnamese are mostly Buddhist or atheist or both (as Buddhism does not require a belief in God(s)), for most of the rituals including death and birth, folk religion which is a combination of ancestor worship, animism, shamanism and Chinese beliefs (especially Confucianism and Taoism) is more applicable. Nobody can be converted to this belief system, as it does not form an official, institutional religion. It is rather part of the national culture. So introduction to these belief systems is possible only by naturalization. Furthermore, let us note that this belief system is not completely consistent, at times it is self-contradictory, but this is not considered to be a problem for the followers, just like the situation in some other religions. For example, belief in ghosts, paradise and hell and rebirth which are theoretically irreconcilable are concatenated in a religious monolith.

According to Vietnamese folk religion, the house has a special importance. The deceased are considered to live in the house as ghosts. Thus, it is a 'settled' belief succeeding the hunter-gatherer religions. There should be ancestor worship days to commemorate the ancestors with full participation of the extended family. This partially explains the respect for older adults in Vietnam: As the older adults will become ancestors, they are highly respected.

Notes on Vietnamese Family Structure

As a typical indicator of an agricultural society, in traditional Vietnamese culture, the families are expected to have as many children as possible. That was originally for two reasons: For family work and as a social security system. In the traditional Vietnamese family, the youngest son (not daughter) is expected to live with their parents and own the house after they die. It is obviously patriarchal in contrast to Vietnamese relevant laws which promote egalitarianism. The logic behind allotting this social task to the youngest involves the fact that the youngest one is expected to live at least as long as his parents.

With the wars and revolutions, this family structure was mostly untouched as Vietnamese revolutionaries had no intention to fight with their own national culture; but the law, as stated above, is in favor of egalitarianism, rather than patriarchy. That is why, Vietnam has one of the highest indicators for gender equality. Women's participation to social and political life is very high, even higher than those for some of the European countries. On the other hand, the urbanization ratio is changing and economic activities are getting diversified. In other words, not all the families are in villages or equivalent rural areas, and not all of them are engaged in agriculture only. Although Vietnam's population is more than 90 million, the number of cities with at least 2 million people is only 2, Hanoi (exceeding 7 million) the capital, and Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon, nearly 7 million) which is the economic engine of the country (similar to the case for Ankara and Istanbul). So although urbanization is a trend to be influential in Vietnam, Vietnamese prefer to live in small cities which have ties with the rural areas.

So many families are nowadays engaged with trade, industrial activities or service sectors (very typically restaurants and coffee shops) which do not require a high of number of children for

support. Secondly, in contrast to the past 'Que será, será / Whatever will be, will be' kind of parenting, i.e. "let's have the baby first, we can think about it later on" , a quality parenting approach is getting more common which focuses on providing the best opportunities possible for each child. This mentality, the diversity of family's economic activity and the rising economic costs of parenting lead to decline of the number of children per family and accordingly the household and family size.

With a larger family size, the respect for older adults was even more guaranteed: f Child can't help his daddy, Child 3 would have time. By the way, within the Vietnamese family, the children are called by their numbers. Even when they are called as Aunt or Uncle, usually they are called by their number on the basis of birth order. Number 1 is not allotted to anybody. The oldest in the birth order is called Number 2. For example, Uncle 2 (chị hai), Aunt 7 (dì bảy), Sister 3 (chị ba). The maternal relatives and paternal relatives are completely separated by different expressions. Unlike the case in English, maternal uncle and paternal uncle have different terms: Cậu for maternal uncle ('dayı in Turkish) and ch for paternal uncle ('amca' in Turkish). Even for maternal uncle's wife and paternal uncle's wife, different expressions are used. n such a family configuration, the family is not only extended, it can be super-extended: Distant relatives of nth degrees are named as if they are closer members of the family. This is an excellent family net for Vietnamese older adults.

However by shrinking of this family net due to the decline of the family/household size as a result of 3 major factors mentioned above, the Vietnamese older adults can also have less support in case of a life difficulty including a health emergency. The social insurance system in Vietnam is considered to be weak and far from meeting the needs of the older adults. That is why the family net is vital for survival. Based on our observation we can

state that it is nevertheless rare for Vietnamese older adults not to be taken care of by the family network. Uncared older adults are considered to be shame for the families: "What kind of a family would not care for their older adults?! Shame!" Older adult nurseries or care centers are unheard of. In short, older adult care is considered to be a family responsibility.

Traditionally, Vietnamese family members live close to each other. For example, a neighborhood may consist of close and distant members of a set of concentric, prototypical families. However this proximity is no longer applicable in areas where some family members moved somewhere else for job opportunities. But even in that case, they would not miss ancestor worship days and return home for any serious family issue.

Notes on Vietnamese Social and Culture Life

Typical entertainment of the Vietnamese is karaoke and drinking alcohol. Drinking has a significant value in culture. Vietnamese drink for any occasion without moderation. That is why alcohol-caused illnesses are very common in Vietnam. However, drinking habits follow the patriarchy: Women rarely drink. It is known that women live longer than men worldwide on average. But this age difference can be even larger in Vietnam because of the gender differences in excessive drinking.

Vietnamese are known to live longer. This is usually attributed to their simple life without stress (after the Vietnamese-American War), simple meals and positive attitudes not only for life, but also for death. For Buddhism there is no paradise or hell, but in Vietnamese folk religion, people can go to hell if they did bad things including murder, robbery, not respecting older adults etc. There is an afterlife. They will return to life in another body, and this can be either a human beings' or an animal's. This cycle of rebirth will continue until people will

find a way to arrive at the stage of eternal bliss, Nirvana. Thus people who die don't feel like that is the end of the story, and the funerals are not always gloomy. Life continues in new bodies and through the children of the family.

Final Notes

Vietnam, diverging with the case in China, did not enforce any form of one child policy. Contrary to the situation in China, Vietnamese government promoted families to have as many children as possible after the war (i.e. after 1975) to balance the lopsided distribution of women and men at reproductive age. Not only men, but also women had joined the ranks of guerilla warfare, but still a higher percentage of men were in combat and among casualties. Government's promotion coincided with Vietnamese traditional values which brought a population boom until 21st century. After the war, the government told the female guerillas and women in general to return to their home to have children. So the percentage of female soldiers in Vietnamese army is limited.

Respect for older adults can go to its extremes to lead to gerontocracy which is known to mean government by older adults. This is also against an egalitarian understanding of democracy. Older people should be respected, but only as much as other age groups. Recently the average age of Vietnamese politics is declining, and this also has implications for the future policies. The youngest of the Vietnamese-American War combatants are now in their 60s, and their leaders are in 70s and 80s. As the war was over by 1975, currently more than two-thirds of the Vietnamese society were born after the war. Thus the war generation will be less influential in Vietnamese politics soon. This may have implications not only over politics but also societal dynamics. So let us note the intergenerational ideological gap on this occasion.

Tentative Interview Questions to be Asked for Vietnamese Older Adults

For an anthropo-gerontological field work with Vietnamese older adults, a few questions would be especially interesting. For one thing, in Vietnamese culture being old is not associated with negative terms in contrast to the situation in countries like Turkey. So the meaning and construction of old age in Vietnam would be completely different. So we can ask them about their interpretation of old age. Secondly, we can ask whether they feel the negative consequences of the shrinkage of the household. Thirdly, we can ask them their interpretation of life and death. As death is not the end of everything according to Vietnamese culture, their interpretation of old age is expected to be different as well: With a circular model of life and death, old age would be the last stage before rebirth rather than the last stage before the end of everything. Of course in other cultures too there is a belief in afterlife, but as the name implies it is after life, in other words, it starts only when the life ends, and that is not the case for Vietnamese folk religion. Fourthly, we can ask them about their daily activities, as this can be a source of inspiration for older adults of other cultures.

A Brief Overview of Gerontology-Related Research in Vietnam

Before conclusion, we review a number of gerontology-related research studies conducted in Vietnam: Lam, Mai & Hong (2013) note that not surprisingly there are regional differences in the percentage of older adult population across Vietnam, and their access to health services. Majority of them live in rural areas. Two-thirds of the Vietnamese older adults live with their children, although this percentage is declining annually. Even a decade ago, Giang & Pfau (2007) identified the rural-urban gap in terms of Vietnamese older people's quality of life. However, both settings have advantages

and disadvantages for old age. While Ha & Vo (2016) find that quality of life is better for urban Vietnamese older adults than rural ones, anecdotal evidence provides another account with regard to intensity of family care in rural areas.

Nguyen et al. (2017) investigated quality of life of Vietnamese older adults in rural areas and checked its relationship with a set of variables, concluding that;

“While higher QoL in elderly men was significantly correlated with 5 factors, aged ≥ 80 years, following Buddhism and Christianity, having better connection and without illness in the past 6 months, these among female counterparts are aged ≥ 80 years, completing secondary level or above, having medium and high socioeconomic status and without illness in the last 6 months” (p.63).

Regardless of rural/urban divide and converging with our observation that ancestor worship requires a ‘settled’ life, Tran & Vu (2018) find that one of the most important factors in life satisfaction of the Vietnamese older adults is permanent housing.

Similar to our observation about older adult care as family responsibility, Yamada & Teerawichitchainan (2015) conclude that “[i]ntergenerational coresidence significantly increases the psychological well-being of the older adults in Vietnam” while Nguyen & Nguyen (2010) state the following:

“Similar to many other countries worldwide, Vietnam is facing a challenge of an ageing population. This challenge is even more difficult to overcome because Vietnam is a developing country lacking an established aged care infrastructure and system. Many aspects of aged care have largely been relied on families of aged people due to a strong influence of Confucian philosophy. Looking after aged parents has

always been seen as a responsibility and filial piety of children and their extended families. Therefore, providing healthcare for aged people in their family and community context is important” (p.224).

Finally, agreeing with our observation, Mai et al. (2017)'s statistical analysis associate manhood with alcoholism in Vietnam. Based on these findings, we can also ask Vietnamese older adults their housing arrangement, family care, and past and present drinking habits.

Within the limited space we had in this section, we could only refer to a handful of gerontology-related research studies in Vietnam. In the future study, some other relevant works will be properly presented and discussed such as Hoi, Thang & Lindholm, 2011; McCann et al., 2004; Teerawichitchainan, Knodel & Pothisiri, 2015; Teerawichitchainan, Pothisiri & Long, 2015; Vietnam Ministry of Health, 2017 etc.

Conclusion

It is seen that an anthropo-gerontological perspective is rare in Vietnam. Most of the research either concerns demographics or medicine/health, nevertheless a number of papers published on well-known gerontology journals are to be noted. Thus, we expect that our field work would provide valuable information for gerontology and anthropology communities.

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