

## What is anthropology in Vietnam?

Atsufumi Kato

Ethnology or anthropology in Vietnam has reached a turning point in recent years. I say “ethnology or anthropology” because young academics in Vietnam are now trying to change their subject’s name from “ethnology” [dân tộc học] to “anthropology” [nhân học].

The term anthropology is newly coined and combines “human” [nhân] and it’s “study” [học]. It was not used in Vietnam before the early 1990s (I found a Vietnamese textbook on anthropology published in 1994 at the National Library of Vietnam). While laypersons can easily imagine what ethnology is all about, many scholars do not understand the meaning of anthropology.

The movement to change the field’s name from ethnology to anthropology is developing in three mutually related directions. First, faculties of anthropology have been established in several universities in Vietnam. The Department of Anthropology was established in 2002 in the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH), Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City, and was upgraded to the Faculty of Anthropology in 2008. In 2015, at the USSH in Hanoi, the Department of Ethnology [Bộ môn dân tộc học], which had been under the Faculty of History, was upgraded to the Faculty of Anthropology. At the same time, with support from the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the faculty also created a curriculum for a doctoral program in anthropology. Since I had been working in academic institutions in Hanoi at that time, I witnessed these events up-close. The key person behind this movement was Professor Nguyễn Văn Sửu who has a PhD from the Australian National University, was a specialist in land disputes in Vietnamese villages, and is now the dean of the Faculty of Anthropology in USSH, Hanoi. With support from international advisors such as Professor Hy Van Luong from the University of Toronto who is one of the world leaders in the anthropology of Vietnam, Sửu actively promoted the transition from ethnology to anthropology, while also consulting the older generation of ethnologists in the country.

As onlookers from Japan might know, the Japanese Society for Ethnology

was also renamed as the Japanese Society of Cultural Anthropology in 2004. In other words, it means that the group stopped self-identifying as an association for studying ethnic groups, including Japanese people, and now intends to widely study human societies from the perspective of a culture study.

In comparison with the Japanese case, what are the core objectives of renaming ethnology as anthropology in Vietnam? This brings me to the second and third directions in which the movement has developed.

The young generations of Vietnamese ethnologists, or now anthropologists, are eagerly introducing anthropological theories in Western Europe and North America. When I started learning about Vietnamese culture in the early 2000s, Vietnamese books on ethnology or anthropology were mainly based on the Soviet style of evolutionist ethnology and referred to outdated works such as Morgan; I remember deciding not to read books and journals on ethnology or anthropology written in Vietnamese. However, in recent years, significant changes have been made. There now appear many translations of classical Western ethnological and anthropological works such as those by Mauss and Lévi-Strauss. Current anthropologists' works are often referred to in articles. Nguyễn Văn Sửu and others have also edited an anthology of contemporary theoretical anthropological works, including works by scholars such as Sherry Ortner (*Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties*).

At the same time, there have been attempts to re-examine the genealogy of anthropology in Vietnam. In 2015, the newly founded Faculty of Anthropology at USSH, Vietnam National University, in Hanoi, hosted an international conference on "Anthropology in Vietnam". Two of the sessions in the conference were about two Vietnamese ethnographers born during the colonial period. One of them was Nguyễn Văn Huyền. He had a PhD from Paris-Sorbonne University and had worked at the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) as a researcher. He was an outstanding assistant to French ethnologists and historians and also conducted his own research on religion and social structures in Vietnamese villages and published books on Vietnamese culture. The other was Nguyễn Từ Chi (also known as Trần Từ). He also studied French anthropology before World War II, and after Vietnam gained independence in 1945, he joined the Viet Minh (League for the Independence of

Vietnam). However, there was a misunderstanding. One day, while at the Viet Minh base in North Vietnam, Nguyễn Từ Chi was asked to deliver a lecture on culture where he talked about structuralism. This lecture was criticized as being too bourgeois in taste and he thus had to quit his job at the revolutionary organization. Nguyễn Từ Chi then survived by making a living as a magazine editor and translator. He also continued his fieldwork among the Muong people, and although he was outside of the academic mainstream of Soviet-style ethnology during that period, he did influence many young ethnographers in Hanoi, and some of them occupied important positions in official research institutions. As Trương Huyền Chi notes, Nguyễn Từ Chi's life experiences tell us that even in the 1960s–80s when ethnologists' academic activities were strongly controlled by the Communist Party, there was still some room for alternative anthropologies to have a place in Vietnam.

Re-examining scholars such as Nguyễn Văn Huyền and Nguyễn Từ Chi, along with the lack of attention given to Soviet-style ethnology and its influence, as Hy Van Luong observed in the proceedings of the “Anthropology in Vietnam” conference, resulted in connecting recently established Vietnamese anthropology directly to the French style of ethnology or anthropology. As Trương Huyền Chi points out, focusing on Nguyễn Từ Chi's life story should not necessarily bring about a reconstruction of the discipline's genealogy, but as seen above, it suggests multiplicities in the ethnologies or the anthropologies of Vietnam. Moreover, in response to Luong's suggestion, the Faculty of Anthropology at USSH, Hanoi, is speedily preparing for another conference focusing on the influence of Soviet ethnology on Vietnamese anthropology that is scheduled for June 2017.

To reiterate, in comparison with the Japanese case, the main objective of the shift from ethnology to anthropology in Vietnam is integration into mainstream global anthropology. Some of these efforts are as follows: (1) Introducing up to date anthropological theories from Western Europe and North America into Vietnamese scholarship in the field, and (2) To relativize (if not erase) the influence of Soviet-style evolutionist historical ethnology.

In this process of mainstreaming, it must be noted that research areas of Vietnamese anthropologists are almost always limited to studies conducted

within Vietnam. Of course, there are economic reasons that limit Vietnamese scholars from going abroad in addition to the fact that the country's government prioritizes research projects studying ethnic groups in Vietnam. However, if Vietnamese anthropologists study theories from the West and only provide ethnographic information on Vietnamese people, it is very possible that Vietnamese scholars can be assigned the position of "native" anthropologists in world anthropology. I think that anthropology in Vietnam has the potential to make original contributions to the field of anthropology not just as a "native" type of anthropology but also as a "regular" one. So what can anthropology in Vietnam do?

Each region's anthropology has its own history, its own objectives, its own style, and different topics of special interest. As I have mentioned earlier, anthropologists in Vietnam are now trying to reconstruct the discipline's identity and are even reconsidering the legacy of Soviet-style ethnology in Vietnamese ethnologies or anthropologies. It may be a possible means to establish anthropology in Vietnam as unique and distinct from other strands of anthropology, but I am concerned that these efforts might only serve to create an inner consistency in the discipline.

Instead, I think it would be more fruitful for anthropologists in Vietnam to offer fresh arguments and thereby contribute to the world of anthropology. There are several topics in the anthropology of Vietnam that can provide new perspectives for anthropologists the world over. For instance, discussions about moral economy are the most likely to inform the larger field of anthropology, although I might sound self-serving by saying so, because my research topic looks at the moral economy of local self-governance in Vietnam. Needless to say, James Scott is a well-known name in Vietnam (which reminds me, his books have not been translated into Vietnamese yet), and young Vietnamese scholars such as Nguyễn Văn Sửu consistently produce works on Vietnam's moral economy and on the everyday practices of ordinary people by referring to, or by criticizing, James Scott's theories. How ordinary people's morality is formed in a society with different ideological schools of thought, such as Confucianism, the community's moral standards, and socialist ideals and how these coexist together are questions worth inquiring into. In this regard, Vietnam

is one of the best places where one can develop arguments about the morality of complex societies. Vietnamese studies also have a long tradition of folklore and arguments for and against revolutionary movements that may help inform discussions on the moral economy. Needless to say, it is not only the study of moral economy in Vietnam that can contribute to the wider field of anthropological scholarship—there are many other topics such as the sufferings from the war and socialist modernity.

It would be ideal for anthropologies from different parts of the world to contribute to the field of anthropology in an original and distinct manner. In reality, however, given the Western countries' economic, political, and cultural hegemony in the world, it is impossible for all accounts to equally connect with each other. If the ethics of anthropology were aligned with the makings of a horizontal world, I would like to emphasize that it would be necessary to create at least a semblance of a horizontal world in anthropological scholarship by first offering economic, political, cultural, and linguistic assistance in the advancement of anthropological enquiry.

To conclude, I suggest that the possibility of integrating Vietnamese anthropology in world anthropology, through the contribution of original arguments to anthropological scholarship, is a forward-looking effort instead of being inward-looking towards consistent yet monolithic self-identification.