Various Aspects of Influences by East Asian Cultures on Vietnamese Culture

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Ten years ago, when I first visited Vietnam, my first impression was that it was a culture and society with such a wide variety of characteristics that it made me recall all of my past experiences in Taiwan, Korea, mainland China, Okinawa, and even Japan, where I had conducted social anthropological research. When I was invited by Professor Higa to talk about Vietnam for 20 minutes, I accepted his offer lightly, because I would be able to fulfill my task talking about this experience. But since Vietnam has a long history influence affected by various foreign cultures, I found it impossible to handle it in such a short talk, so I intend to make my presentation primarily using slides and film images.

Chapter I provides an overview of cultural influences involving Vietnam; Chapter II presents “Dong But” (童軍) as an example that illustrates the relationship between foreign religions and native religions; and Chapter III focuses upon an earth god as an example of regional differences and transformation within a religion.

As I outline cultural influences in Chapter I, I show various similarities between Vietnam and Japan. Shuin-sen trade (trade by shogunate-licensed trading ships) made a significant contribution to this exchange. Even today, pictures on Totom (Vietnamese playing cards) depict Japanese manners and customs at that time. Between Korea and Vietnam, many similarities can also be identified in folk art, a meeting house called “Dinh,” a seniority-based social order, and Confucian rituals, and there was even some direct exchange, without China as an intermediary. Moreover, a variety of commonalities can be found between Ryukyu and Vietnam, such as in paper money with coin motifs, the spiritual power of sister on her brother, bone-washing rituals, and three even gods, and history tells us that Ryukyu-sen trade was very active prior to Shuin-sen trade. As for the relationship between China and Vietnam, since direct interaction in both peacetime and wartime continued for more than 2,000 years, it is much harder to find anything that has not been affected. Nevertheless, I can show a unique example such a Dong But, which is an unique association of shamanic elements with Confucianism in Chapter II, and then in Chapter III, I show that unique elements can be recognized in the earth god, which appears to be of Chinese at surface, and that the southern type of earth god is beginning to show up in cities such as Hanoi as a consequence of economic expansion from the south.
If we look at Vietnam through Chinese models and simple theories of cultural diffusion, we may able to explain most of what we see in Vietnam. But these explanations cannot only adequately account for the diversity of culture in Vietnam, but overlook a deep underlying structure unique to Vietnam.

The methods used in social anthropology would help us understand Vietnam by providing a more comprehensive picture of the country by its intensive observation on a small spot with a help of history.