

The Acceptance of Confucianism and Transfiguration of Family Structure in Areas around China: An Example of Early Modern Vietnamese Society

Shinya UEDA, Research Fellow, Osaka University

The general familial group in the major ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, such as the Burmese, Thai, Khmer, and Malay, tend to be bilateral descent families. The “multi-household compound” is a typical example of this familial group. Historically, the formation of this social feature is usually explained by the fact that Southeast Asia was sparsely populated and an area of high social fluidity in the pre-modern period. It is argued that this situation prevented Southeast Asia from establishing tight social groups with a fixed and closed membership. As a result, bilateral kinship groups were widespread in Southeast Asia.

Nonetheless, Vietnam differed from these cases in Southeast Asia in the sense that firm social groups existed which had fixed and closed membership, for instance in the village community (làng) and the paternal clan (đòng họ), which rapidly grew after the seventeenth century. These social groups are particular in distinguishing “outsiders” from “insiders” by strict membership. In early modern Vietnamese society these social groups were not only characteristic for the upper classes but also for the life of the commoners. Especially, the Red River Delta of Northern Vietnam transformed into an introverted inward-looking society whose people attached greater importance to maintaining their vested rights, property, and position, due to the extensive expansion of agriculture. The result was the establishment and reinforcement of various social organizations characterized by closed membership through the device of Confucianism, and the construction of the village communal hall (đình) and ancestral hall (nhà thờ). These developments also show that Confucianism became popular with the common people in Vietnam at that time. In this sense, it may be said that in Vietnam the early modern period was the time when “traditional culture” formed while strengthening a cultural connection with China. However, as in the cases of Japan and Korea, this does not mean that Vietnamese society became merely a copy of Chinese society. Rather, traditional society formed as the result of the interaction between Chinese and Southeast Asian cultures and with reference to the peculiar socioeconomic background in Vietnam at the time. However, the transfiguration of the family structure of early modern Vietnamese society and how the present Vietnamese paternal clan emerged in this social situation has not received sufficient scholarly attention. This presentation contributes to filling this gap by studying the interaction between Southeast Asian culture and Confucianism in early modern Vietnamese family structure based on local historical documents.