

Pandemic and the Saving of Human Values

There is no longer a need to discuss the impact of Covid-19, its influence is all too clear. In addition to the immeasurable losses however, the pandemic is also bringing us major new revelations, making us all aware of the latent humanistic values which, up to now, were hidden behind ingrained habits, the temptations of life and our doubts.



Photo: Reuters

Supreme right to life and cultural choices

Recently, nations have been dealing with the challenge of the virus in many different ways. Asian nations, including Vietnam, enforced border closures and social distancing immediately, while European and American nations believed that such draconian distancing measures were at conflict with human freedom. However, when the pandemic flared up and started inflicting irreversible damage worldwide, strict rules became mandatory almost everywhere. This proved that globalization without regard to the customs, politics and economics of individual countries is a serious mistake. A pandemic is a global issue, the consequences of which cannot rest on the shoulders of one nation only.

Unfortunately, the world is still too divided to collaborate and allow one culture to judge the actions of others, unless we know exactly their special circumstances and unique cultural standards. Covid-19 has shown us that, if a nation considers its citizen's lives paramount, it will choose appropriate action, even if that action is different. Vietnam's policy, to "not leave anyone behind", recognized that sacred right. Seen from this perspective, the pandemic is helping preserve our national cultures, especially the unique local cultures which were previously long misunderstood or forgotten.

Pandemic and seemingly forgotten values

The disasters our nation have experienced accentuate, not just quantitatively, enormous invisible setbacks, such as increased discrimination, prejudice and social isolation. Before the pandemic, many Vietnamese suspected that core cultural values that once constituted the strength of the Vietnamese people had slowly vanished. They questioned whether or not the Vietnamese spirit and willpower were withering. In only one hundred days, those questions have all been answered.

When the pandemic erupted, most countries had no plans to repatriate Vietnamese citizens abroad, fearing that they would infect local communities back home. However, in Vietnam, the government resolved from the heart to welcome them back from infected areas around the world. This sacred value resulted from thousands of years of unending struggles against severe disasters and hundreds of fierce battles against all kinds of enemies planning to annex our land and enslave our people. The pandemic now demonstrates the growing self-awareness of the Vietnamese national identity, of a people with unique family and community attachments.

Photos of doctors, nurses, and medical staff, working day and night, have touched us. They jumped in at the height of the infection, regardless of the hour, to do their duties. In addition, hundreds of retired doctors and final -year medical students ignored the danger and volunteered to join the fight, demonstrating their true commitment when our country is in deep trouble. Covid-19 showed that this spirit never faded, it just hid in the turmoil of everyday life, always ready to explode whenever our nation was under threat. It's been a long time since we have experienced such solidarity of spirit so profoundly, or the strong protecting the weak so selflessly.

Ventilators and treatment rooms worth billions of VND have been donated by well-known figures, businesses and even by less privileged well-doers around the country. The "rice ATMs", in particular, have sprung up all over the country as a wake-up call for support in difficult times and have now become symbols of national solidarity and compassion, something which we, maybe considered a luxury beforehand. The pandemic has returned our faith in compassion and made us see hope even in the most difficult circumstances.

Core values cannot be easily lost, but can be easily hidden at times but when we face danger, when they burst out forcefully, with the boundless strength of the Vietnamese culture.

Soft power and national standing

Soft power is a concept the world has been paying attention to over the last ten years. Unlike hard power, which exhibits itself through military might and economic power, soft power combines hidden factors, cultural traits, creativity and national policies. Soft power is now considered a special ability to create a competitive advantage over other nations. Some countries have strong military potential and booming economies but exercise limited influence and have low international standings. Conversely, others are not strong economically, have limited military potential but successfully apply their soft power to affirm their standing as a strong nation. The success of Singapore, Israel and South Korea are the best examples of this and soft power is the key to erasing the mentality of prejudice of big countries against smaller ones.

The Covid-19 challenge shows us that our national identity and cultural standards, the core values of soft power of Vietnam, have not faded. Over the past four thousand years, our forebears knew how to use soft power to create political clout, to repel one invasion after another and secure our borders. The issue is now how to turn these values into developmental power in the current situation, to affirm our national standing in the face of the countless difficulties and new turmoil awaiting us in the future. This question cannot be answered in a day or two.

However, we must first change the elements of soft power is our national institutions. Institutional and policy reform can unleash the sources of our strength, creativity, social capital, and end in triumph. The post-Covid world will have no space for backward and stagnating science and technology, nor for limitations on creativity and entrepreneurship, nor for abuse of trust and sketchy beliefs. The value of a nation will not be based on their weapons, military, destructive power and natural, but on the values of a nation with creative values, entrepreneurship, science, technology, education and humanistic values. This is an opportunity to affirm the soft power of Vietnam. Institutional reform is now our mission.

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