

Characteristics of Vietnamese Philosophy Ideologies in the Early 19th Century

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Abstract: The movement, development of Vietnamese philosophical thought in the first half of 19th century was necessary to build an orthodox ideology leading social spiritual life towards protecting and consolidating feudal state centralization dynasty highly. Confucianism was chosen and developed to meet this requirement. The paper analyzes major characteristics of Vietnam philosophical thought in the first half of 19th century elucidating its differences in this stage in comparison to other stages and recommends some issues for further study.

Key words: Ideology; philosophy; Confucius; harmonization; nationalism.

1. Introduction

In the first half of 19th century in East Asia including Vietnam, there were cultural conflicts between Asia and Europe, Confucian and Christian values, Confucian philosophies and Western theory and science. Before these events, each East Asian country had its own ideological life in various movements and trends depending on each nation's own position. Vietnamese philosophical thought in the 19th century had its distinguishable characteristics compared with the previous period it had strong impact to Vietnam spiritual life in the 19th century and early 20th century. The author intends to have a closer look into these characteristics.

2. The historical context affecting Vietnam philosophical thought in the first half 19th century

The Nguyen (Nguyễn) dynasty officially ruled Vietnam in 1802 and developed its unified governance over the whole territory.

The initial Nguyen kings had to solve several serious issues such as setting legitimacy of the dynasty, overcoming economic crisis, gaining people's support, rebuilding moral value standards, etc. These major issues dominated Nguyen kings' internal and foreign policy during 19th century, they strongly influenced Vietnam politics, culture and thoughts.

In finding support for the struggle against Tay Son (Tây Sơn) dynasty in the 18th century, Nguyen Anh (Nguyễn Ánh) was seeking assistance from the Christian missionaries like Bishop Alexander Rhodes and accepted some French officers to serve the throne, therefore the direct contact with the Western civilization took place right

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then and some decades later. However, because of political and religious issues, Gia Long chose to gradually get away from French bishops French officers' influence regarding the dynasty governance of the country. Confucian was selected as ruling ideology since the dynasty establishment. Facing the possibility of Western invasion to the Oriental during Minh Menh (Minh Mênh) reign, notably the failure of the Qing dynasty in the First War of Opium (1839 - 1842) the kings and elite intellectuals did not change their mind towards a positive thinking on Western culture nor adjusted their political policies but consolidating Confucian ideology in the nation's spiritual life.

It can be assumed that ruling Confucianism the national domination ideology in spiritual life, Nguyen dynasty established its most important ideological foundation for the reign. With the deployment, consolidation Confucian ideology on all institutions of politics and society, Confucian values became strong pillars of social ethics and life hierarchy.

Confucianism was strongly reinforced in society while Buddhism, Taoism gradually faded and served people as religions only. That made ideological orthodoxy less various than a century ago. However, Vietnam was inevitable to receive waves of expansion, aggression of the Western capitalism in the 19th century. The French colonial invasion on Vietnam lasted nearly four decades led to Confucian ideology radically shaken. Confucianism proved powerless in leading the nation fight against a new aggressor of ideology and culture. Lesson on traditional with modern relationships was set in

solving the issue of history in this stage.

Thanks to national and regional specific context in the 19th century, philosophers focused on issues such as omnipotence of kings, the relationship between politics and religion assembling theocratic and subrogation entity, the position and mission of gentleman in society, the relationship between the gods and society in their attempts to explain neo political, regional, social issues, the behavior and development of Eastern-Western culture, Chinese views on cultural value, cognitive conflict between conservatism and renewal, moral philosophy, etc.

Vietnam philosophical thought in the first half of 19th century under historical context inclined towards Confucianism monopoly, reduced other traditional ideologies, and denied any new ideological factor. However, impact of the era led to the restoration of traditional national ideologies, and inspired reform as a direct result of acquiring modern ideological factors based on Confucian tradition.

3. Regarding Confucian ideology as the monopoly, reducing reconciliation with other ideologies and religions

King Gia Long chose Confucianism as the ideology foundation of the dynasty. He realized that it was an effective spiritual tool to build his dynasty. He advocated Confucianism as monopoly ideology which realized in a comprehensive manner across all aspects of social management.

The state institution following Gia Long ideology performed its social function of management bureaucratically, officials were selected through Confucianism examination, and Gia Long law based on two laws of the Qing and the Le (Lê) dynasties regulated the

country. The king ruled the state through that bureaucratic apparatus organization.

Gia Long and Nguyen kings successively, thoroughly enforced the governance policy "using Confucius to external issues and applying law for internal affairs". On the one hand, it implemented economic development policies and culture restoration to bring social stability; on the other hand, it suppressed the opposition uprising to consolidate their absolute dominance. Emperor Minh Menh used both propaganda and laws as methods of governance. To concretize the rule of virtue, King Minh Menh appreciated agriculture as key to stability, perfected civil education and exams to teach people, and praised Confucian ethics in society. Besides, he comprehensively edited *Hoàng Việt luật lệ* (*Hoang Viet law*, prepared under King Gia Long) to apply to social management with the motto all must abide law. "Laws regulate bonuses and punishment, regardless power or position". King Minh Menh seamlessly combined laws and propaganda by stating that "the state clearly defines criminal law to educate civilization", "Education first, then punishment", and "Upon circumstances, policy implementation may be strict or lenient" because the ultimate purpose of the law is to educate culprits to be appropriate citizens [8]. With such flexible and determined political ideology, King Minh Menh helped solidify national unity and stability in early 19th century.

The foreign policy of the Nguyen dynasty regarded the native country superior while the non-Confucius countries the inferior, revealed in the policy of "seclusion". The state did not establish formal trade relations

with any country nor established ministry of foreign affairs in the cabinet, rather Ministry of Ritual dealt with all diplomatic activities.

Nguyen kings successively promoted agriculture and limited trade to restore the weak agriculture left by war. In parallel with some positive policies towards agriculture, Nguyen dynasty tried to curb trade growth of the relatively developed economy in the 18th century. Nguyen kings saw trade the most trivial and humble, so they ranked trade the lowest. This was affected by Confucius ideology of managing economy to follow its own economy structure, put faithfulness above benefits, and over appreciated virtue.

Giving Confucianism the basis for theoretical legitimacy of the dynasty, the Nguyen kings focused on Han Confucian ideology to resolve the relationship among the God, the king and the people. They only appreciated concepts supporting their political goals, such as destiny, respect gods. Thanks to 200 years of intact with the Le dynasty in the North together with relatively independent thoughts of the South, the ideology worshipping three religions (Confucius, Buddhism, Taoism) decreased significantly compared to Le dynasty ideology and Confucian thoughts became dominant, even unique. It was inevitable that Nguyen ~~dynasty~~ dynasty considered Confucian the only ideology because of the historical context that they wanted to strengthen legitimacy of the dynasty and gained Tonkin people support (especially elite Confucian): Confucius was the most effective and persuasive theoretical means. The fusion of ideology in this

period was intentionally ignored, including traditional philosophy-religions such as Buddhism, Taoism and new comer Christian, despite the missionaries hugely supported the Nguyen regain power. Nguyen dynasty attempted to eliminate Christian ideology and religion during 19th century, with some terrorist attacks and massacres proved this.

Nguyen dynasty ~~dynasty~~ restored, developed Confucius education system and recruited officials bureaucratically to achieve its political goals. This education system created bureaucratic elites having sufficient capability and ethics to obey the dynasty with orthodox viewpoints and interests attached to the crown, hence they were absolute loyalty. This was actually the educational philosophy of the Nguyen dynasty.

Because of Confucian dominance, natural knowledge interest trend from the West in the 18th century (notably Le Quy Don (Lê Quý Đôn)) as well as humanities trends (like Nguyen Du (Nguyễn Du)) in the early 19th century did not continue in the 19th century. Initial Nguyen kings efforts to promote Confucian political, moral doctrine (considering it ideological pillar to construct and develop the country, protect its power) achieved significant results in the early 19th century. That is also the continuing trend of political philosophy in the history of Vietnam philosophical thought. Besides granting Confucianism the monopoly ideology for consolidating government, stabilizing people's lives, Nguyen kings ignored opportunities to absorb global cultural, scientific and technical achievements for national development. Intentionally, Nguyen kings

refused to absorb human cultural values to enrich national spiritual life in contrast to what Vietnam nation used to selectively do. That led to a risk of reducing its diversity and innovative culture within a nation not building on a unique ideology.

Confucian system theories limiting themselves within China border did not accept exotic cultural values other than its own. This had restrained Nguyen dynasty vision leading to outdated and inadequate assessment and proposes to fight against the French colonialists. It is the too much Confucian introspective thinking and complacency of Nguyen dynasty elite intellectuals that strongly prevent them from accepting new ideas to reform the country. The failure of the dynasty in the war against the French invasion was the failure of Confucian theory system in struggling against different cultural aggressors and civilizations. It was also the failure of Vietnam political ideology and philosophy because it ignored tradition of infusion ideology by selectively absorbing spiritual values of other peoples in the process of cultural exchange and interaction to solve national practical issues.

In summary, the use of Confucian orthodoxy and Nguyen kings efforts created a typical and stable Confucian society with clear and strict social standards in the 19th century, it left undeniable values in the history of Vietnam ideology in general. However, the limitations and inadequacies of the monopoly Confucian ideology theoretically and practically revealed through administration in the 19th century. Eventually, it failed the challenges of the era and lost to

French invasion.

4. Reinforcing and developing national ideology and nationalism

Since its establishment, Vietnam philosophical thought had to solve primary theoretical and practical issues to protect national sovereignty, culture and ethnicity. That is why Vietnam philosophy did not pay special attention to metaphysical philosophy issues. Instead, Vietnam philosophers attempted to give arguments asserting national independence, sovereignty, pride, spirit, equality rights developed thought a long period. Vietnam nationalism ideology aimed at building a suitable theoretical system to protect national independence and stabilize people's lives.

National independence and sovereignty are the criteria and supreme thoughts of Vietnam nationalists. These criteria were consolidated through acquiring Confucian theoretical system. By applying Han state management patterns to feudal Vietnam, Vietnam kings raised consciousness of territorial sovereignty granting the kings legal representatives of the monarchy, using Confucian theory⁽¹⁾. [5, p.1132]

The king was a symbol having national legitimacy, and had to bear responsibility for independence and sovereignty. Vietnamese accepted Confucian conception of fate, king, and national divine legitimacy to claim their legitimacy and assert their national rights. [7, pp.57-58]

Basically, nationalist ideology under the Nguyen dynasty was completed in many ways with the support of Confucianism. In terms of state management, acquiring Confucian social management model and considering it an effective tool to strengthen

the monarch political power, especially enhancing the role and benefits of people in the relationship between state and citizens to protect and develop the country was an appropriate approach of feudal dynasties including Nguyen. This made a way for state organic management and national building.

In terms of strength, Nguyen kings especially Minh Menh vigorously applied friendship policy with far countries and lured neighbor lords obey Vietnam monarchy [8]. Thanks to this policy together with building a strong military, Vietnam became a leading power in Southeast Asia in the early 19th century [6].

From perspective of culture, pride of national cultural characteristics was a fundamental element of Vietnam nationalism; it was one of the driving forces and fundamental meanings of the national independence struggle. In the 15th century, Nguyen Trai (Nguyễn Trãi) wrote in *Bình Ngô đại cáo* (*Declaration of Defeating Ming*): “Nhu nước Đại Việt ta từ trước/ Vốn xưng nền văn hiến đã lâu/ Núi sông, bờ cõi đã chia/ Phong tục Bắc - Nam cũng khác” [4] (Vietnam have long declared its sovereignty and independence, we have distinguished from the North in terms of boundary, etiquettes, customs). Some intellectuals in the 19th century critically enhanced national cultural value though in essence their thoughts stemmed from Chinese ideology. Nguyen dynasty used to consider themselves equal to the North counterpart in terms of intellectuals and education. It was an effort of the Nguyen dynasty in imitating model

⁽¹⁾ The ownership of a land should belong to a king.

of Chinese state management, education and civil service exams to show equality between Vietnam and China. The Nguyen dynasty even looked down on the Western countries because they did not have I Ching [1, p.13], to some extent this unrealistic thought showed Nguyen dynasty's pride of nationalism cultures.

This national ideology and Confucius teaching were the foundations of patriotism for Nguyen dynasty to construct and defend the country. Because of lying on such Confucius cultural and civilized shortcomings, the Nguyen nationalism ideology failed in identifying the enemy resulted in mistakes during national independence struggle against the French invasion in the late 19th century.

5. Academic and grassroots trends of Confucius in the early 19th century

Nguyen kings encouraged Confucian scholars further study Confucius classics to form Nguyen dynasty Confucius group. Notably, Nguyen Van Sieu (Nguyễn Văn Siêu) had study of Confucius in *Phương Đình tụy bút lục* (Some thoughts of Nguyen Van Sieu); Nguyen Phuc Ung Trinh (Nguyễn Phúc Ứng Trình) explained "The Analects" and praised Confucius in *Luận ngữ tinh hoa* (Essence of Confucius); Le Van Ngu (Lê Văn Ngữ) in the late 19th century wrote *Kinh lễ chủ nhân. Luận ngữ tiết yếu, Chu dịch cứu nguyên, Trung dung thuyết ước, Đại học tích nghĩa* (*Master of Analects, Core of Analects, Origin of I Ching, Explanation of Rightness, Meanings of Study*). The authors discussed the essence of Confucian classics in their own way, continuing the trend established by Le Quy Don, Pham Nguyen Du (Phạm Nguyễn

Du), etc.

Along with the trend of learning classis, institutionalizing civil service examination used Confucian knowledge as unique content in the 19th century. The most important papers in the civil service examination were *Kinh nghĩa* and *Văn sách* (*Meaning of Classics and Literature*). *Meaning of Classics* tested students' understanding of essential classical Confucius. *Literature* tested students' capability of applying Confucianism knowledge to solve socio-political issues. All classic exams tested knowledge in "Four books" and "Five classics" compiled during Ming dynasty and reprinted, according to Sino-Nom researchers [2, p.167].

Making Confucius become academic in the nineteenth century was represented mainly in the compilation of history books. Big history books compiled under Confucius influence such as *Đại Nam thực lục* (*Đại Nam Chronicle Records*), *Việt sử thông giám cương mục* (*History of Vietnam*), *Minh Mệnh chính yếu* (*History of Vietnam under Minh Mệnh reign*) and a lot of history books published by individuals showed how deep Confucianism was among elite intellectuals. These academic Confucius achievements demonstrated the success of Nguyen dynasty in making Confucius the orthodox ideology.

Confucius was also brought to grassroots citizens to make it the monopoly ideology reflected through several forms. First, Nguyen kings paid special attention to educate people. Most Nguyen dynasty kings had ethic lessons for people, for example King Minh Mệnh had 10 regulations, King Tu Duc (Tự Đức) had 24 ethic lessons sent

annually through administrative ways. Confucian doctrines gradually went into people's lives to become moral rules and social norms for practices.

Second, elite intellectuals becoming officials and scholars consciously taught their families follow regular Confucian pattern norms and wrote clan regulations as a tool to educate children in the family. Confucian education robustly developed in the 19th century with a lot of home training materials and songs that helped bring Confucian effectively and deeply to Vietnam families, contributed to building Confucian personality of family, clan members. However, this only appeared in traditional Confucian families.

Third, the most successful form popularizing Confucianism to every corner of Vietnam was its penetration in village conventions. Those documents were common in the 19th century regulating conducts, behaviors in each village community. People voluntarily accepted and complied village regulations and Confucius ethical standards of conduct and lifestyle. This was also a special form of popularizing Confucianism in Vietnam society throughout the 19th century.

The very participation of villages' elite scholars in the process of developing written conventions was a key step for Confucian ideology officially delivered, accepted and voluntarily complied in villages' life.

Along with the development of civil service examination and Confucianism, Confucius class was also strengthened. It included a small number of scholars becoming officials and most villages' scholars such as teachers, doctors, soothsayers, etc. forming

folk group engaged in villages' consultancy. This was the intellectual elite intermediary between the court and the village; as a bridge to transmit, disseminate knowledge Confucianism, the training example, directives and orders of the court to the classes of people in the village. Through the intermediary role of grassroots scholars, Confucian political ideology values such as perfecting oneself, managing family, governing the country, connecting the world were put into villages' thoughts, specific terms of village management to penetrate people's lives deeper. The village was organized in Confucian hierarchy manner, Confucius influenced all the construction of conventional behaviors, ceremony, rituals, crop protection, village protection, ethical standards. Deep patriotism started from family love to villages, hometown, and nation in accordance with Confucianism conventional regulations to become an ethical framework for social sustainability.

Confucian ethics with human standards, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, trustiness were built on the metaphysical interconnections among gods, earth and man aiming at an ideally moral peaceful society. Confucius ideology helped form a fine spiritual life of agricultural village residents. Minh Menh, Tu Duc kings strongly enhanced Confucian moral reasoning. The moral village community values were the ideological content contributed to social stability and characteristics of Vietnam in the 19th century. Loyalty and pious characteristics were seen as the pillars of family, clan, monarchy; they were developed systematically in two dimensions: from grassroots organizations (family, village to

the throne), and vice versa in accordance with the popularizing and specializing Confucius trends. These ethical standards contributed to further strengthening the stability of family, village, hometown, country in terms of spirits and institutions.

By deploying two trends, Confucius became Vietnam permanent mental factor by middle 19th century. When the Western values were vigorously introduced to Vietnam in late 19th century, Confucius values imbued in Vietnam culture should receive more attention [3, pp.318, 322].

6. Conclusion

Four major features of Vietnam philosophical ideologies mentioned above in early 19th century to some extent show us regularity of movement, development of Vietnam thoughts at this stage. Making Confucian the monopoly ideology was a deliberate choice of the Nguyen dynasty based on political and thoughtful reasons, this also had culture and history relations. The Confucian monopoly seemed to end one of Vietnam core ideologies, the fusion of ideology reconciliation and religion. On the one hand, it helped Nguyen dynasty succeeded in strengthening its legitimacy in the early reunification, build a Confucian political culture with brilliant achievements and assert Vietnam position in the region. On the other hand, it caused ideological creativity reduction originated from the diversity, abundance and ideology - religion reconciliation culture of Vietnam. By the end of 19th century, Nguyen dynasty ideology failed in protecting national independence and sovereignty while Japan, Thailand remained its independence and freedom to

enter the modern stage of development.

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