

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VIETNAMESE PATRIOTIC THOUGHT IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONTEMPORARY PATRIOTISM

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***Abstract:** This article examines the significance of Vietnamese patriotic thought in the first half of the 20th century in shaping contemporary patriotism. First, patriotic thought during this period constituted a crucial component of the broader Vietnamese patriotic tradition, serving as a spiritual source of strength that enabled the nation to overcome historical trials and pursue the goals of independence, freedom, and happiness. This body of thought enriched the patriotic tradition with diverse values and became emblematic of the spiritual qualities of the Vietnamese people. Moreover, early 20th-century patriotic thought provided invaluable lessons for building the spiritual foundation of national solidarity—an essential and decisive factor in generating the nation's endogenous strength for survival and development. It also demonstrated the intimate connection between national liberation, the protection of the people, the preservation of cultural identity, and the advancement of Vietnamese culture. In addition, it offered important theoretical lessons concerning the defense of sovereignty and national interests, the role of revolutionary leadership, and the integration of class, national, and international forces in the struggle for independence and development.*

***Keywords:** Vietnamese patriotic thought, first half of the 20th century, contemporary patriotism, independence, great national solidarity, lessons of patriotic thought*

1. Introduction

In the first half of the 20th century, Vietnam faced dire circumstances: independence and sovereignty had been lost to French colonialism, while Western cultural influences disrupted traditional structures and spiritual life. In such conditions, successive generations of Vietnamese rose against the colonizers, seeking every

possible path toward independence and national self-reliance. Alongside practical struggles, theoretical and ideological debates flourished. Rarely in national intellectual history had such a diversity of patriotic orientations appeared simultaneously from feudal, to bourgeois-democratic, to communist

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tendencies. Although not every orientation succeeded in practice, their theoretical contributions continue to hold profound significance for the development of Vietnamese patriotic thought today.

2. Vietnamese Patriotic Thought in the First Half of the 20th Century as a Component of the National Patriotic Tradition and a Source of Spiritual Strength Enabling the Vietnamese People to Overcome Historical Challenges in Pursuit of the Goal of Independence, Freedom, and Happiness

To assess the impact and significance of early 20th-century patriotic thought on the patriotic tradition of Vietnam and on contemporary patriotic thought, it is necessary first to outline the principal features of present-day Vietnamese patriotism. As noted in the *Vietnamese Patriotic Thought during the Independent Feudal Period (938–1884)* (Le Thi Lan [ed.] 2020: 40–49), it is relatively difficult to draw a strict line between the concepts of “patriotic thought” and “patriotism”. In this study, therefore, we consider all elements of patriotic thought and patriotism, encompassing ideas, theories, perceptions, emotions, and attitudes, with the overarching tendency of “placing the nation above all else, and above all, prioritizing national sovereignty and interests” (Le Thi Lan [ed.] 2020: 40). From this perspective, contemporary Vietnamese

patriotism is the result of the selective inheritance and synthesis of the essence of patriotic thought across historical periods, combined with the theoretical framework of Marxism–Leninism and Ho Chi Minh’s thought, situated within the conditions of the present era. The main elements of this patriotism can be summarized as follows:

First, in the context of peace and the promotion of national renewal, industrialization, and modernization, patriotism is understood primarily as the aspiration to advance the country, overcome poverty and underdevelopment, and achieve developed nation status. This aspiration is manifested in the everyday activities of Vietnamese people, provided these are oriented toward the nation. The diligent labor and study of each individual, aimed not only at securing their own livelihood and that of their family but also at contributing to the country’s economic growth; the enrichment of their own and others’ spiritual life while at the same time preserving traditional values and fostering a vibrant, diverse, and civilized cultural life for the nation—all of these are expressions of patriotism. In an age of rapid scientific and technological progress, the active acquisition and application of global achievements for the benefit of Vietnam’s development likewise constitute a manifestation of patriotic sentiment.

Second, patriotism today is defined

as “a sense of pride and dignity in being Vietnamese, pride in the nation’s glorious historical traditions; trust in the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam, in the cause of renewal toward socialism in our country; and a pure revolutionary ideal, loyal to the ultimate goal of national independence inseparably linked with socialism” (Tran Thi Hoa 2023). This represents the political dimension of contemporary patriotism. Here, traditional elements are combined with new ones that emerged in the early 20th century the birth and development of communist ideology in Vietnam, along with the associated theories of socialism. This dimension is a defining characteristic of Vietnam’s modern patriotic thought.

Third, patriotism in the present era entails a firm commitment to safeguarding sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, as well as to defending the national interest and preserving the peace won through the sacrifices of earlier generations. This has been a consistent theme throughout the history of Vietnamese patriotic thought and remains central today. In the early 20th century, this commitment took the form of an urgent aspiration, with the foremost goal of securing independence, regardless of whether the ideological orientation was feudal, bourgeois-democratic, or communist. During the mid-to-late 20th century, a similar commitment was evident in

patriotic thought associated with the construction of socialism, as the nation continually faced threats of invasion and violations of its sovereignty. In today’s peaceful conditions, this principle has by no means diminished; rather, it has become a solemn pledge to uphold independence and sovereignty. This may be considered one of the most enduring and essential elements of Vietnamese patriotism across its entire history.

Fourth, the core of contemporary patriotic thought lies in Ho Chi Minh’s patriotism. This embodies Ho Chi Minh’s ideas, beliefs, and aspirations regarding national independence, peace, prosperity, and a flourishing nation, which have now become the collective orientation of the Vietnamese people. Ho Chi Minh’s patriotism “links national independence with socialism, combines patriotism with proletarian internationalism, and binds love of country with love for the people, striving for the welfare and happiness of the people” (Nguyen Quoc Pham 2015). Contemporary patriotic attitudes, beliefs, and commitments directed toward the nation’s independence, sovereignty, prosperity, and happiness are founded upon and supported by Ho Chi Minh’s patriotism as their central pillar.

It can be observed that the above-mentioned dimensions of contemporary patriotic thought have inherited, absorbed, and further

developed the patriotic ideas of earlier periods, especially those of the early 20th century. Being the period closest to modern patriotic thought, the patriotic ideas of the early 20th century held significant meaning. They made substantial contributions to the development of patriotism as we know it today. As a stage in the historical progression of Vietnamese patriotic thought, early 20th-century patriotism transmitted the traditional patriotic ideals into the present, serving as a bridge that connected the past with the present. Moreover, it reinterpreted and revitalized the traditional patriotic legacy in new directions, giving it forms most closely aligned with modernity. This is particularly evident in the theory of national liberation. The theory of national liberation had long existed in Vietnam's intellectual history throughout the nation's struggles to defend its sovereignty, continually reinforced by repeated invasions and threats to national independence. It appeared in every form of patriotic thought during the feudal era, but by the early 20th century, it had become the core of all patriotic orientations whether feudal, bourgeois, or communist. Early 20th-century patriotism renewed, developed, and modernized this theory of national liberation, which directly provided the foundation for the contemporary patriotic discourse on national liberation.

Thus, the development of patriotic thought in the early 20th century constitutes one of the most important sources of modern patriotism. Today, patriotism (like other modern ideologies) possesses a distinctly modern character in its theoretical basis, content, and modes of expression largely originating from early 20th-century patriotism, which marked the transition from feudal to modern intellectual history. The emergence and development of new patriotic currents such as the bourgeois-democratic and communist orientations, the processes of systematization and theorization, and the wide dissemination through journalism and mass communication phenomena absent in the feudal period became common features of early 20th-century patriotic thought, and were subsequently inherited and advanced in modern patriotism. The principal contents of early 20th-century patriotic thought, especially communist patriotism, have become the core of today's patriotic ideology. Armed with such patriotic theories, the movements of the early 20th century continually rose to fight for independence, aiming for national sovereignty and prosperity, and eventually secured victory through the August Revolution of 1945 and the national reunification of 1975. These patriotic ideas, perspectives, and theories provided the spiritual strength for Vietnam's practical struggles throughout the 20th century.

This demonstrates both the bridging role (linking past and present) and the indispensable importance of early 20th-century patriotic thought within the broader continuity of Vietnam's patriotic tradition.

3. Vietnamese Patriotic Thought in the First Half of the 20th Century as a Source of Enrichment for the National Patriotic Tradition and as a Defining Feature of the Spiritual Character of the Vietnamese People

As noted above, patriotic thought in the first half of the 20th century acted as both a bridge and a transitional stage between traditional (feudal) patriotism and modern patriotism. It not only transmitted earlier ideals and perspectives into the modern era, but also expanded them with new dimensions and fresh values, thereby enriching the Vietnamese patriotic tradition. Its contributions included modernization, theoretical refinement, new ideological standpoints, and the proliferation of diverse orientations.

Early 20th-century patriotic thought constituted the foundation of Vietnam's political thought of the time. In the context of foreign invasion and the oppression of the people, Vietnamese political thought shifted away from the Confucian ideal of "self-cultivation, family regulation, governance, and world order" (tu tề trị bình) toward urgent questions of national independence and the construction of a strong state capable of preserving

sovereignty. Virtually all political thought of this period was framed within patriotism. Struggle for independence became the paramount goal of all patriotic movements, whether long-established or newly emerging. Feudal currents, rooted in the long tradition of loyalty to the monarch, sought to rally the people around a king in order to reclaim sovereignty from colonial rule. Constitutional monarchy, inspired by models such as Japan, represented a new orientation that went beyond traditional feudalism. Bourgeois-democratic currents flourished, still committed to independence as the ultimate goal, but proposing various strategies both violent and non-violent. Communist currents, the latest to emerge, possessed the most coherent theoretical foundation and were able to mobilize the masses' strength to achieve national independence. Other related theoretical and political issues, such as the identity of the enemy (French colonialism, feudalism, or other external forces) and the subject of struggle (monarchs and subjects, citizens, or the masses as self-conscious and responsible individuals), all fell within the domain of patriotic thought. Thus, both political reality and political theory in early 20th-century Vietnam revolved almost entirely around the axis of patriotism, with national independence as their central aim. This constitutes one of the enduring values of early 20th-century patriotic thought

for intellectual history and the broader patriotic tradition.

Another notable contribution lies in the theoretical value of early 20th-century patriotic thought—its expansion beyond the traditional, largely Confucian, framework. It absorbed global intellectual influences, primarily Western, and thereby modernized patriotic theory. As previously noted, Vietnam at this time was exposed to Western cultural and civilizational currents at an unprecedented level. Initially received with resistance due to the enduring dominance of feudal ideology, these influences gradually came to be actively embraced as tools to achieve the supreme goals of independence and self-strengthening. In turn, patriotic thought itself underwent modernization and theorization. This was evident in the work of prominent thinkers such as Phan Boi Chau, Phan Chu Trinh, Pha Khoi, and Nguyen Ai Quoc, as well as in intellectual circles gathered around newspapers or reform movements, who debated questions such as the nation's objectives, strategies for revival, and the struggle to seize power from colonial rule. The dissemination of newspapers and books markers of modernized intellectual life compared to the feudal era spread patriotic ideas widely among the masses. In this way, early 20th-century patriotic thought developed through diverse forms,

contents, and orientations, making a vital theoretical contribution to the overall development of the Vietnamese patriotic tradition.

The trajectory of early 20th-century patriotic thought reveals a fundamental feature of the Vietnamese patriotic tradition: patriotism as the nation's endogenous strength. The context of colonial domination and loss of independence compelled all classes, as Ho Chi Minh observed, to rise up for freedom regardless of social position (Ho Chi Minh 2011 , vol.7: 38). Waves of struggle never ceased, and defeats never extinguished determination. Patriotic ideas followed one another like continuous experiments: beginning with feudal currents rooted in long-standing traditions; followed by bourgeois-nationalist currents inspired by Western models and neighboring nations, experimenting with multiple strategies but always aiming at national independence; and culminating in communist patriotism, which succeeded where others had failed. The continuous emergence of these currents, all directed toward the supreme goal of independence and self-reliance, demonstrates unmistakably that patriotism is the Vietnamese nation's internal driving force a ceaseless current throughout history, energizing both action and thought, and serving as the foundation for the flourishing of ideological movements.

4. Early 20th-Century Vietnamese Patriotic Thought and Its Invaluable Lessons on Building the Spiritual Foundation of Great National Solidarity – the Decisive Factor Generating Endogenous Strength for the Nation’s Survival and Development

One of the most significant aspects of early 20th-century Vietnamese patriotic thought for contemporary patriotism is its lessons on national solidarity.

Solidarity, and particularly great solidarity, has always been a major theme in Vietnam’s political and intellectual history. Solidarity is “an objective necessity, arising from individuals within the community who, because of shared interests, are inclined to join together, forming a bloc that harnesses and multiplies individual strengths into collective power, thereby achieving common goals” (Khuat Viet Hung 2021). Great solidarity signifies broad, inclusive solidarity—gathering all forces without exclusion. The Communist Party of Vietnam has regarded great solidarity as a strategic and existential principle, a conclusion drawn from both the historical experiences of national struggles and the theoretical framework of scientific socialism.

A look at the emergence and trajectory of patriotic movements in the early 20th century highlights profound lessons about solidarity.

At the time, in the face of French

colonial invasion and domination, Vietnamese patriots adopted multiple strategies in pursuit of sovereignty and national self-strengthening. First came the feudal orientations, deeply rooted in tradition, which continued to rally around the Nguyễn dynasty and Confucian worldviews, even as their political structures had become largely nominal. These were followed by the formation of bourgeois-democratic movements, influenced by Western thought and regional revolutionary struggles. In the 1920s, communist-oriented movements emerged in response to the influence of the international communist movement. Among these varied patriotic trends, both feudal and bourgeois-nationalist orientations eventually failed to achieve independence. One key reason for their failure was their inability to unify the entire nation in the anti-colonial struggle. Regarding Confucian-oriented feudal patriotism, Tran Van Giau observed: “Even if Confucian notions of benevolence, loyalty, and filial piety had once been of some effectiveness, under the circumstances of that time they proved insufficient to rally the broad masses of the people or to chart a viable path to liberation” (Tran Van Giau 1996a: 542). As for early 20th-century bourgeois-nationalist thought, he noted: “Revolutionary nationalism arose from the people’s anti-imperialist spirit. Yet during the interwar period,

nationalist revolutionary parties were organizationally weak, intellectually shallow, dismissive of theory and propaganda, and unable to arm themselves with a coherent system of strategy and ideals. Consequently, when repressed by the French, these organizations collapsed and even under favorable conditions failed to regroup. Their ranks splintered, the majority lost heart, conservatives compromised with imperialism, and the most resolute elements sooner or later turned to Marxism–Leninism to continue the cause of national salvation” (Tran Van Giau 1996b: 576).

Only the communist orientation of patriotic thought, grounded in Marxism–Leninism, succeeded in uniting the nation, expelling foreign domination, and establishing an independent state committed to socialism and prosperity. The founding of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1930 provided leadership for the independence struggle, and within just fifteen years, the Party led the masses to the historic victory of the August Revolution of 1945, which inaugurated a new era of national independence and socialist orientation. The success of this orientation stemmed largely from its elevation of great national solidarity to the level of a strategic doctrine and an existential principle/life-and-death view.

In fact, the lesson of solidarity is one of Vietnam’s oldest historical

truths. Throughout millennia of nation-building and defense, the Vietnamese people learned that solidarity generates immense strength capable of moving mountains and overcoming calamities whereas disunity leaves individuals powerless. This lesson, drawn from countless struggles against natural disasters and foreign invasions, was reaffirmed in the early 20th century: “Solidarity is strength” proved once again to be an existential truth. Early 20th-century patriotic thought distilled and deepened this lesson, articulating its concrete application to patriotism: the purpose of solidarity, its agents, and its methods. Importantly, it also introduced a new element compared with earlier times: in the modern era, only great solidarity under the banner of Marxism–Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Thought could lead to complete and lasting victory. This represents one of the most significant contributions of early 20th-century patriotic thought to Vietnam’s contemporary patriotic tradition.

5. Early 20th-Century Vietnamese Patriotic Thought and the Close Connection Between National Liberation, the Protection and Development of the People, and the Preservation and Advancement of National Culture

In the early 20th century, Vietnam endured colonial conquest and domination, suffering severe exploitation and oppression in both

economic and social life. At the same time, Western cultural influences began to permeate society, producing profound transformations. Within this context, as discussed above, a succession of patriotic currents emerged and developed, all committed to the fundamental goal of national independence and sovereignty. Figures such as Phan Bội Châu, who shifted from feudal-nationalist to bourgeois-democratic positions in search of effective paths to liberation, exemplified the dynamism of this intellectual landscape. Likewise, the activities of the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng under Nguyễn Thái Học and Nguyễn Tổng in the 1920s reflected determined efforts toward national liberation. Above all, the emergence of the communist line, from the 1930s onward, provided the clearest and most effective expression of this struggle.

Yet patriotic thought of the early 20th century did not confine itself to the single dimension of independence. Much like earlier patriotic thought, which encompassed questions of dynastic legitimacy, pride in national history, and the valorization of Vietnam's cultural heritage, the patriotic discourse of this period also addressed broader concerns related to the nation's welfare. It included a strong awareness of the need to preserve and develop cultural identity, to advance material and

human development, and to build a prosperous and resilient Vietnam.

In the cultural sphere, the contributions of both bourgeois-democratic and communist currents were especially notable. Among bourgeois-democratic thinkers, some simultaneously affirmed the necessity of learning from the West while insisting on preserving elements of Vietnam's traditional cultural heritage, thereby seeking a balance between old and new. Others called for "total Westernization," arguing that only by abandoning Confucian legacies could the nation progress. Still others rejected both wholesale Westernization and a return to Confucian ethics, instead calling for the cultivation of a distinctly national culture. Despite these differences, all shared a common objective: advancing national culture as a precondition for independence. Communist-oriented patriots, developing somewhat later, approached cultural issues more concretely and practically, enabling their ideas to resonate broadly and take root in social life. They did not attack or praise Western civilization in general but focused their critique on French colonialism the immediate enemy which had implemented policies of obscurantism and repression in education and media, stifling Vietnam's cultural development and leaving the people impoverished in both knowledge and spirit. In response, communists highlighted the progressive features

of a national education system under a democratic-proletarian regime, oriented toward constructing a new culture rooted in the spiritual well-being of the entire people. This approach gave culture a genuine developmental path, liberated from dogma, and also strengthened the liberation struggle by raising popular consciousness and mobilizing the masses. In short, early 20th-century patriotic thought enriched patriotic theory with important insights on the building and renewal of the national culture.

Equally significant was the material and economic dimension, which had been relatively absent in feudal patriotism. By the early 20th century, amid repeated failures of feudal-oriented struggles and growing awareness of Vietnam's weakness, many patriots began to emphasize the need to strengthen the nation economically and demographically as prerequisites for independence. The Duy Tân reform movements, led by bourgeois-democratic intellectuals, called for the development of industry and commerce to enrich the country and strengthen its resilience. In communist theory, economic issues were examined in relation to class and socio-economic formations, with a special focus on human resources. The working class was seen as the foundation of production; liberating workers meant unleashing productive forces, enhancing their health, culture,

and intellectual capacity, and granting them political participation steps essential for the nation's economic and material development.

These various aspects economic growth, human development, preservation of cultural heritage, and the creation of a new culture did not exist separately but were tightly interconnected within the framework of patriotic thought. All were directed toward the supreme goal of national liberation, for under colonial domination, independence remained the foremost issue to be resolved. Strengthening the people, the economy, and culture were seen as essential means of building a powerful and self-reliant nation capable of winning independence.

For today's generation, living in peace, these early 20th-century perspectives on national self-strengthening through economic modernization, cultural development, and human advancement continue to provide valuable lessons and historical points of reference. In this respect, early 20th-century patriotic thought made profound contributions to both the general patriotic tradition and to the theoretical foundations of modern patriotism in particular.

6. Early 20th-Century Vietnamese Patriotic Thought and Its Theoretical Lessons on Sovereignty, Revolutionary Leadership, the Mobilization of Endogenous Strength,

and the Integration of Class, National, and International Forces

Throughout its entire course of development, encompassing both its failures and successes, early 20th-century Vietnamese patriotic thought imparted important lessons to modern patriotism. These lessons concern the consciousness of defending sovereignty and national interests, the nature of revolutionary forces and leadership, the theoretical and strategic lines of struggle, and the integration of class strength, national strength, and the strength of the time...

First, the consciousness of sovereignty and national interests was a consistent thread throughout all patriotic thought in Vietnam's history. In the early 20th century, with the loss of independence and sovereignty and the severe violation of national interests, this consciousness became all the more pronounced, dominating the discourse of the time. Every ideological current, whatever its orientation, was ultimately directed toward reclaiming sovereignty and defending the nation's interests. This was exemplified by patriots such as Phan Boi Chau, who was willing to abandon his original worldview in favor of new positions so long as they served the goal of independence, as well as by communist leaders of the 1930s, above all, Ho Chi Minh.

Second, the question of revolutionary forces and leadership was clarified by both the failures and successes of the

period. Feudal and bourgeois-nationalist currents, and their practical defeats, demonstrated that the ruling classes landlords, feudal aristocrats, or the bourgeoisie could not lead the struggle for independence. In contrast, the success of communist-oriented patriotic thought in mobilizing the masses proved that revolutionary leadership had to come from the Communist Party, the vanguard of the working class, while the revolutionary forces under its leadership had to include the entirety of the Vietnamese people: workers, peasants, petty bourgeoisie, intellectuals, and other strata. This conception of revolutionary forces was closely linked to the principle of great national solidarity.

Third, the issue of theoretical orientation and guiding principles was decisive. Feudal-oriented patriotism drew on Confucianism, while bourgeois-nationalist patriotism drew on liberal and democratic currents from the West, as well as to some extent from Japan and China. Both orientations failed to achieve independence. Only communist-oriented patriotism, grounded in Marxism–Leninism, provided the theoretical clarity and organizational strength necessary to unite the nation, overthrow colonialism and feudalism, and secure independence after more than a century of foreign domination. This confirmed the historical correctness of Marxism–Leninism as the guiding theoretical foundation for Vietnam's revolutionary leadership.

Fourth, the integration of class, national, and international forces was another decisive lesson. Feudal and bourgeois-nationalist currents failed not only because of weak internal organization but also because they could not connect domestic struggles with global conditions, nor could they mobilize solidarity from international progressive movements. By contrast, communist-oriented patriotism emphasized the role of working people as the decisive force in both national and social revolutions. It recognized that national liberation was inseparable from the liberation of labor, which would elevate the worker to the position of master of the nation. At the same time, it placed high value on international solidarity, seeking support from progressive forces around the world to strengthen domestic struggles. The integration of national strength with class solidarity and international support led to revolutionary victory, enabling the construction of a new regime led by the working people.

These lessons on sovereignty, revolutionary forces and leadership, great national solidarity, and the combination of national, class, and international forces remain invaluable for contemporary patriotic thought, originating from the struggles and theories of early 20th-century patriotism.

7. Conclusion

Vietnamese patriotic thought of the early 20th century made profound

contributions to the development of the patriotic tradition and to contemporary patriotism. In brief, it constituted a vital component of the national patriotic heritage and a spiritual source of strength that enabled the Vietnamese people to endure and overcome historical trials in their pursuit of independence, freedom, and happiness. It enriched patriotism with new values, making it a defining trait of the Vietnamese people's spiritual character. It provided enduring lessons on the importance of building great national solidarity as a decisive factor in endogenous strength, ensuring the nation's survival and development. It highlighted the intimate connection between national liberation and the protection of the people, the preservation of cultural identity, and the advancement of national culture. Moreover, it offered essential theoretical lessons on sovereignty, leadership, endogenous strength, and the synthesis of class, national, and international forces.

Building on these contributions, contemporary Vietnamese patriotic thought founded on Marxism–Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's patriotism has continued to develop, achieving new theoretical advancements and being applied creatively in practice. It remains a guiding force for Vietnam's progress on the path of national independence and socialism.

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