

## CONFUCIAN PERSONALITY AS THE FOUNDATION OF PHAN BOI CHAU'S PATRIOTISM

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***Abstract:** In the article, the author analyzes the formation of the Confucian personality of the revolutionary Phan Boi Chau, demonstrating that the superior virtues of a Confucian scholar are the foundation of Phan Boi Chau's patriotism. These qualities serve as the internal strength that attracts support and participation in the revolutionary movement for national liberation led by him in the first two decades of the 20th century. The key lesson is the continuous cultivation and nurturing of the virtues of a Confucian scholar; overcoming challenges on the revolutionary path, and steadfastly pursuing the goal of national independence, as exemplified by Phan Boi Chau. This lesson aims to harness the internal strength of the nation in the current cause of national defense and construction today.*

***Keywords:** Confucian scholar, Confucian education, Phan Boi Chau, patriotism.*

Phan Boi Chau, one of the most exemplary patriots contributing to the distinctive patriotism of the Vietnamese people in the early 20th century, is praised by President Ho Chi Minh as a “hero, an angel, sacrificing for independence, worshipped by 20 million enslaved people”<sup>1</sup>. His outstanding patriotism continues to inspire and resonate strongly with the Vietnamese people in the ongoing efforts in the defense and construction of the Fatherland. In-depth

research into Phan Boi Chau’s patriotism not only helps understand the values and political-social influence on the nation and his era but also contributes to promoting and educating Vietnamese patriotism—the indomitable strength of the people for today’s youth of Vietnam.

Phan Boi Chau’s patriotism comprises three elements: intense love for the homeland, unwavering

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nationalist thoughts, and a resilient struggle for national independence. The article, through an internal approach and Phan Boi Chau's autobiographical works such as "*Ngục trung thu*," "*Lời tự phán*" (Prison Diary/ Notes), (Self-critical memoir) and "*Phan Boi Chau niên biểu*" (Phan Boi Chau Chronicle/ Year to Year Activities) reveals his self-reflection and experiences throughout his revolutionary activities, shedding light on an important foundation for the formation of his patriotic thought—the Confucian personality.

### **1. Confucian education laid the foundation for Phan Boi Chau's Confucian personality**

First of all, Confucianism, as an educational doctrine, had clear principles regarding purpose, content, methods, and the target audience to cultivate individuals of the Sage's Benevolence and Righteousness whom devote their whole life to cultivate the morality of the Confucian scholars and carry out the social ideal of a wise king with his good servants, the peaceful and prosperous society of Confucianism. For nearly 1000 years, feudal governments in Vietnam used Confucianism as the cornerstone for mainstream education and scholarship, meeting the expectations of the feudal authorities. Confucian scholars needed

to be enlightened by the ideals of Confucianism, pursued the path of self-cultivation, a well-managed family, a well administered state and peaceful world in order to practice and have self-consciousness of the responsibility to help the king govern country in order to illuminate the great virtues of the Heaven and the Earth. They needed to pass through system of examinations to become members of social management mandarin class.

Confucian education revealed some shortcomings during its long history in comparison to the societal dynamics. At times, these inadequacies did not stem from the intrinsic mandate of Confucian education, but from the subject who used it because of giving it deification and monopoly position. However, one undeniable achievement was the creation of a model of an ideal person (politically and morally) that contributed to the cultural and historical depth of Vietnam. The ideals of the Confucian scholar—respected for both talent and virtue—played a significant role in shaping a civilized Vietnam with a rich history and cultural depth.

The formation of Phan Boi Chau's Confucian personality began at an early age in the educational background of the poor Confucian family following the Confucian orderly routine: "When I was

a child, my mother comforted me that even if saying only half a sentence, it is also not negligent”<sup>2</sup>. By the age of 7, he was already reading classic Confucian texts. He even adapted *Analects* to make his own *Phan’s Analects*. The teachings in the *Analects* on morality and responsibility to the country, to the people of Confucian scholars, the ethics of the gentleman’s life have absorbed the heart and mind of Phan Boi Chau since childhood and became the guide to shape his Confucian personality. Specifically, he said that “The Confucian scholar needs to be broad-minded and strong-willed. Because the burdens are heavy and the road is long”<sup>3</sup>. The virtue is the responsibility we have to bear, that is why it is heavy. For bringing benevolence, we have to do it until death, so that is why the road is long”.

Born in a time when Southern Vietnam fell under French colonial rule, Phan Boi Chau witnessed his country gradually succumbing to foreign domination. In this challenging context, the nation’s spirit for independence was vibrant. National heroes and intellectuals were actively resisting the invaders, and patriotic movements like “*Binh Tay*” (Pacify the Westerners) and the Can Vuong movement were underway. With the sense of responsibility befitting a

Confucian scholar, Phan Boi Chau saw his mission as continuing the noble cause of national salvation, following the examples set by previous heroes like Truong Cong Dinh and Nguyen Tri Phuong.

From the time I was a young boy reading the books left by my ancestors, whenever I read stories about the old days when people enthusiastically contributed to the country/ they were fervent in their pursuit of virtue and righteousness, I would often shed tears<sup>4</sup>. He put his ideas into action, responding to the Can Vuong movement by forming the “Can Vuong Scholarly Corps” with more than a hundred people. Although quickly suppressed by the French forces due to a lack of weapons and provisions, this event marked Phan Boi Chau’s decisive choice of the long and enduring path of “strategizing for the salvation of the nation.” From then on, he devoted his whole life to the revolutionary path of saving the country, influenced by Confucian education, the homeland’s traditions, and the selfless examples of contemporary national heroes who shaped the character of Phan Boi Chau.

**2. The cultivation of the qualities of a true Confucian scholar by Phan Boi Chau in practical activities to build the patriotic movement and struggle for national liberation.**

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The revolutionary activities in Phan Boi Chau's life were both a process of cultivating the essential qualities of a true Confucian scholar and a realization of those qualities - the qualities that won the hearts of millions of compatriots towards him.

Phan Boi Chau's life experiences show that he embodied the fundamental qualities of a true Confucian scholar, as outlined in the *Analects*, considered as standards distinguishing him from other social classes, and instilled in him from an early age. These qualities include:

A Confucian scholar is a person who studies the Dao and reads Confucian sacred books, in every gesture and action, must be humble to avoid impropriety and uphold righteousness, not to disgrace the dignity of the king.

A Confucian scholar is someone praised by relatives and neighbors for filial piety.

A Confucian scholar speaks carefully and keeps promises, acts decisively.

A Confucian scholar has a noble spirit, who does not leave works unfinished, maintains integrity, and refrains from deeds against righteousness<sup>5</sup>.

Phan Boi Chau preserved and nurtured these qualities throughout his life, expressing them in his humble yet intelligent writings, such as the "*Ngục trung thư*", (Prison

Diary/ Book written in prison) and "*Phan Boi Chau niên biểu*" (Phan Boi Chau Chronicle). In these writings, he humbly reflected on his successes and failures, turning them into lessons and experiences for those who would follow the arduous but honorable path of national salvation.

Phan Boi Chau considered the education of a Confucian scholar to be for the sake of righteousness. Despite his Confucian background and intellectual aptitude, he early on recognized the flaws of the civil service examination system, attributing them not to the fault of Sinology but to the ignorance of those who used it<sup>6</sup>. This critical thinking helped him understand the inherent problems of the examination system, which aimed at personal glory and social status rather than serving the nation. Therefore, he vehemently criticized the imitation of Chinese traditions and insisted on breaking away from the civil service path: "... Our people blindly follow, fearing not being like the Chinese... no matter how much we want to follow the current time, there is no other educational path than the civil service. Even if anyone wanted to follow a different path now, there is no educational path"<sup>7</sup>. He hoped to engage in righteous good deeds following the examples of the heroes in

the South rather than pursuing the civil service path.

However, after initial failures in the revolutionary movement, Phan Boi Chau realized the importance of establishing prestige through the civil service to win the hearts and minds of the people. The Confucian thought of Rectification of Names had built a solid rule in feudal society, adhered to by the Confucian dynasties and the people. A scholar had to conquer the court and the people through his outstanding intelligence, proven by passing the civil service examination. Phan Boi Chau understood that to achieve significant/great deeds, scholars had to be acknowledged through passing the examination, using this recognition to gain respect and support from the Confucian intellectual community: “However, I was then given a great teaching to know that if you want to be a hero, you must cultivate for a long time, and if you want to bear big missions, it requires a lot of accumulation of strategies”<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, he shifted his focus towards the civil service path. In 1900, after succeeding in the examination in Hanoi, he secured the top position, gaining peace of mind: “I obtained a mask to cover my face and shield my eyes from the world.

In that September, my father had just passed away seven weeks ago, and the burden in the family suddenly fell on my shoulders. That was the time when I began to plan the revolutionary path”. This self-reflection shows Phan Boi Chau’s intelligence and practicality. He clearly understood the psychological and moral traits of the people and actively utilized them to build personal credibility for revolutionary activities.

***Phan Boi Chau cultivated qualities of strong determination, flexible thinking, decisive action, and loyalty to the great cause of saving the nation.***

Alongside establishing his reputation through the civil service, Phan Boi Chau continuously formed connections and expanded relationships with intellectuals and revolutionary comrades both inside and outside the country: “Although I have a strong temperament and know honor and integrity, I won’t follow others like a servant... I joined the party for a long time, (therefore, my reputation in society has become a bit more known. I think if I don’t take the initiative to work now, who else will wait for?”<sup>10</sup>. He acknowledged being adventurous and resolute in pursuing a thought (of saving the nation). Despite numerous challenges, he remained determined to implement

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it. His communication with others was characterized by maintaining trust and gratitude, even with just a few words or a small act of kindness, never forgetting it for a lifetime and continuing to pursue the ultimate goal (independence for the nation), not hesitating in methods or strategies<sup>11</sup>.

It can be seen that the Confucian motto “unyielding in the face of countless changes/ dealing with changing things by using a fixed/unchanged principle” was extensively used by him throughout his revolutionary activities. From forming the Can Vuong Scholarly battalion, plotting against Nghệ An province, establishing the Vietnamese Restoration League to honoring Cường Để (direct descendant of King Gia Long) as the legitimate ruler, writing propagandistic poetry to awaken and encourage patriotic sentiments, supporting *Duy Tan* (promoting people’s intellect, uplifting national spirit, utilizing the talented) for the national cause, forming alliances with domestic and international patriotic and revolutionary forces, seeking support from Chinese and Japanese intellectuals, appealing to Japan for support in the national liberation movement, organizing the *Dong Du* movement to seek education, training talents, establishing the provisional government “Devoted

New Vietnam”, purchasing weapons and attempting to transport them back to support Hoang Hoa Tham... were all significant endeavors where Phan Boi Chau meticulously sought success according to his principles and spirit. Unfortunately, due to collusion between the French authorities in Indochina, the Chinese government, and Japan in suppressing the Vietnamese national movement, these endeavors of his ultimately failed.

When arrested by the Guangdong authorities, facing imminent death, Phan Boi Chau’s heroic spirit shone through his composed, free-spirited, and defiant attitude towards his fate: “I knew early on what this evening was like; my head was about to leave my neck, but I still found it amusing”<sup>12</sup>. Loyal to his principles, willingly shouldering the responsibility of sacrificing himself for the country and its people, Phan Boi Chau continuously actualized his ethical qualities in revolutionary activities to save the nation. He became the soul of the national liberation movement in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and one of the outstanding national revolutionary figures of Vietnam.

**3. The qualities of a Confucian scholar as a foundation for the nationalist ideology of Phan Boi Chau,**

**connecting him with intellectuals and revolutionary comrades inside and outside the country.**

The nationalist thought is one of the three elements constituting Phan Boi Chau's patriotism. His nationalist thought can be considered the advanced stage of the development of patriotic thoughts because the formation of these thoughts is closely associated with the period of the national liberation movement on the regional and global stage, contributing to the identification of a modern political concept, that is, "nationalism". His nationalist thought reached the understanding of modern nationalism, developed as he represented "a large part of the local community beginning to recognize itself as a distinct national community in the modern world, a body of citizens linked by a common destiny"<sup>13</sup>. His nationalist thought attained the perception of modern nationalism, maturing when he represented "a large part of the local community beginning to recognize itself as a distinct national community in the modern world, a body of citizens linked by a common destiny"<sup>14</sup>.

Phan Boi Chau's nationalist ideology can be succinctly summarized in three overarching principles that govern all his revolutionary activities as follows:

1, National independence is the supreme and sole goal.

2, Any means, tactics, strategies, or forces capable of advancing the achievement of national independence are mobilized by him into practical revolutionary activities.

3, The interests and dignity of the nation take precedence above all else.

Phan Boi Chau emphatically affirmed these principles: "A person's life is determined by the purpose, only caring about the purpose, seeking it at the last moment. As for methods, although they may be adjusted at times, they are not the main concern"<sup>15</sup>. This criterion is also the value standard distinguishing his patriotic thoughts from those of other contemporaneous revolutionaries. It explains why, despite sharing Confucian roots with other revolutionaries, Phan Boi Chau was not constrained by the rigid doctrines of Confucianism, readily approaching the most advanced revolutionary movements, methods, and ideologies of the time.

These principles, which express the spirit of (the doctrine of the) "unity of knowledge and action" (zhi xing he yi 知行合一), combined with the sense of responsibility of a scholar towards the nation, the land, and enduring qualities of resilience, typical

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of Confucian intellectuals venturing into the revolutionary path for the country, shaped the illustrious revolutionary life of Phan Boi Chau. Despite his acknowledgment that “for many years, planning a hundred things but accomplishing none”<sup>16</sup>, he utilized the scholarly status as a means to win hearts and serve the cause of national salvation. He flexibly adapted the organizational methods for national salvation, swiftly transitioning from *Dong Du cau hoc* (Going East for seeking education) to *Dong Du cau vien* (Going East for seeking support), from the establishment of the Duy Tan Association in 1904 to the formation of the Vietnam Restoration League in 1912, then evolving into the organization of the Vietnam Nationalist Party in 1924, incorporating the strategy of violence, including assassination tactics, with propaganda to elevate intellect, uplift national spirit, cultivate talents, etc. When imprisoned in Hue, isolated from the people’s struggle movement, he spared no effort, within the available circumstances, to delve into the entire Sinology scholarship to write the “*Khong Hoc Dang*” (The Light of Confucianism), the “*Quoc van Chu dich dien giai*” (National textbook on the interpretation/ Annotated Explanation of the *Yijing* (Book of changes) , with the hope of preserving and promoting

the cultural essence of the nation in the modern era.

All his strategies, principles, tactics, and methods demonstrate that Phan Boi Chau was a master of the *Yijing* scholarship (易學), strictly adhering to the spirit of timeliness, “unyielding in the face of countless changes/ dealing with changing things by using a fixed/ unchanged principle” steadfast in the goal of struggling for independence for the nation. Despite changing times, he closely followed the realities of the revolutionary masses at home and the global dynamics to make decisive decisions that maximized the strength of individuals and organizations to serve the noble cause of saving the nation. His advocacy of seeking support from Japan, based on the theory of reciprocal benevolence of Mantous and the theory of consanguinity, identical language, was intentional to use persuasive reasoning and exploit the maximum support of the Japanese government for Vietnam’s struggle for independence. This argument was considered timely and useful for the purpose of seeking support in the context of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when a proletarian state had not yet emerged, and Japan was seen as the only lifeline in the eyes of the patriotic Phan Boi Chau.

Although his intention of *Dong Du* (Going East) for seeking support

failed, Phan Boi Chau easily formed connections with many Japanese and Chinese intellectuals, despite language barriers, and received their wholehearted support. This demonstrated the common denominator of noble qualities between him and intellectuals from Japan and China—the persuasive power, the adhesive quality, the foundation for mutual trust, respect, and support. It wasn't the idea of consanguinity or identical language but rather the lofty character of a scholar overcoming all hardships, obstacles, and sacrificing personal gains for the greater cause that became a cultural magnet, captivating international figures, comrades, and fellow countrymen who stood by him in the revolutionary struggle. It can be said that the moral integrity and responsibility of a patriot for the greater cause shown by Phan Boi Chau serve as both an example and a secret to winning the people's hearts for anyone dedicated to the ideals of national independence.

Thus, we can say that the unwavering commitment to the path of national

salvation, never resting for a moment, nurturing the virtues of a scholar, overcoming all difficulties and dangers on the revolutionary path of Phan Boi Chau laid the foundational basis for the nationalist thought that he tenaciously built and pursued throughout his revolutionary life for the liberation of his people. This is the golden key to Phan Boi Chau's strength, helping him establish invaluable, reliable, efficient, and sustainable relationships with comrades and friends domestically and internationally, serving as an extremely important foundation for mobilizing precious resources to build forces and conduct revolutionary activities. He left a significant lesson on self-improvement/self-cultivation, cultivating the character of a patriot, and profound and valuable experiences in building forces, determining direction, choosing revolutionary methods, etc., for the next generation is the greatest success of the national revolutionary Phan Boi Chau.

*(Translated by Phan Thi Thu Hang)*

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