

NGUYỄN TRƯỜNG TỘ'S NEW IDEAS ABOUT TALENTS, TRAINING AND USE OF TALENTS

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The paper studies Nguyễn Trường Tộ's new idea of education and training, especially his concept of talents, training and use of talents, through which some useful recommendations for the present course of education reform in Vietnam were made.

The trend of colonization of the Western colonial countries in the Oriental in the late 19th century brought Vietnam a challenge of reform or she would die. At the time, economic difficulties, political and social disorders and French invasion made the limitations and incompetence of the political system of Nguyễn's court clearly reveal. The requirement for innovating the country, reforming the education, the training of talents for the country in the new period was critical.

At that time, a lot of both mandarins and intellectuals who were not mandarins saw drawbacks of our education system and bravely made recommendations to the court. Among which, the most notable one for innovative thinking of education, examinations and human resources training belonged to Nguyễn Trường Tộ - the pioneering innovative thinker of Vietnam, who caught the demand of the history and urgently sent to Tự Đức's court a list of recommendations on innovations, comprehensively nationwide reform of

economy, diplomacy, culture, education, and military etc. He not only emphasized the inseparable role of talents in the prosperity of each country but also proposed new requirements for talents in the late 19th century.

1. Nguyễn Trường Tộ dialectically criticized Nguyễn's court concept of talents, their training and use of talents

Nguyễn Trường Tộ's ideas of talents, training and use of talents were derived from his political ideology. His basic political ideal was to construct a state institution with wise kings and obedient subjects, consensus on the basis of trust. In "Precious is the Throne, Respected is the Official" (posthumous manuscript No. 13, he pointed out: "the king who maintains disciplines, focuses on country issues should use talents, and if the king follows the justice and upholds the law, the order

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will be in accordance with the rule, there will be no objections and the career will not be worse off" (Posthumous manuscript No. 13, in: Trương Bá Cẩn, 2002, pp. 204). This political idea by Nguyễn Trường Tộ showed his reception and inheritance of the fundamental political principle of Confucianism under Nguyễn's court, which highly appreciated talents. He pointed out that to realize political ideals, the nourishment of talents played an important role in the prosperity and the decline of a nation, *cultivating talents is a broad road to the prosperity*. He wrote: "Talents are the vitality of a nation, a man of great vitality has strong muscles" (Posthumous manuscript No. 13, in: Trương Bá Cẩn, 2002, pp. 208).

However, when the destiny of the nation hung by a thread, he realized that: The Confucian model of talent training and using under Nguyễn's court was out of date for the demand of independent defense and development of the country. With critical thinking, he was aware that a talent training model based on examinations under Nguyễn's court only produced "hủ nho" (old-fashioned Confucians) who inflexibly followed the old style, kept holding on the old thinking, were incapable of perceiving the new age and incapable of creating products for the society. The mechanism of using talents and providing preferential treatment for talents under Nguyễn's court was only for Confucians who passed the exam without encouraging and focusing on human resources apart from Confucianism. The poverty, backwardness and weakness of the country in all areas at that time resulted from the fact that the outdated education and training system based on examinations was maintained for a long time. According to Nguyễn Trường Tộ, *valuables were easy*

to get but talents were difficult to find. Therefore, he radically and systematically criticized Confucian concepts of talents and methods of training and using talents.

At first, Nguyễn Trường Tộ was aware of the shortcomings and limitations of Confucianism - based education system under Nguyễn's court such as: Scholastics, restraints, heavy reliance on citations from Confucian classical works "Four books," "Five classics", distant from the practice, learning the South history to solve the North issues, no consideration of understanding the objective world and creating a favorable conditions for the development of science and technology etc. As for him, these limitations reduced the creativity of the Vietnamese. In "On urgent Matters", Posthumous manuscript No. 27, for the fourth matter, he wrote: "Nowadays when we are small, we study literature, poetry, and rhythmic prose. When we are older, we make law, calendars and take care of military and court issues. When we are small, we study about Shandong, Shanxi, but when we grow up, we deal with Cochinchina and Tonkin issues. As a child, we study Chinese astronomy, geography, politics, and practices and customs (which today have been changed), and as an adult, we handle with Vietnamese geography, astronomy, politics and practices and customs etc. There are such many similar things which cannot be mentioned all even the pen runs out of ink or the mouth gets dry" (Posthumous Manuscript No. 27, in: Trương Bá Cẩn, 2002, pp. 288).

According to Nguyễn Trường Tộ, the above situation resulted from the fact that the Confucian education and examinations under Nguyễn's court mainly aimed at the human resources for social administration:

Study to be a mandarin in order to govern and teach the people to be content with their life and maintain the society disciplines. Therefore, when the country was in danger, with Nguyễn Trường Tộ, Đặng Huy Trứ was also one of those who realized the limitations of practice - distant Confucian education when he said that: "We haven't understood all astronomical and Math rules, so how can we know the destiny to take care of the people? When things happened, we recognized that our knowledge was limited. Literature can never help to deal with natural disasters" (Trà Lĩnh Group, 1990, pp. 271).

Secondly, Nguyễn Trường Tộ criticized the policy of utilizing talents of Nguyễn's court. He knew that the policy of utilizing human resources under Nguyễn's court could not encourage the activeness of talents to build the monarchy. In his opinion, the reason lied in the examination - based education system of Nguyễn's court. It only paid attention to vanity and did not have practicality. It encouraged people to study to become a mandarin as the main purpose and being more respected than those who were good at a practical job. In "Eight Urgent Matters", in the second matter, "nhiều học" (scholarship-granted students) section extracted from Posthumous Manuscript No. 27, he pointed out: "Why don't we have lots of talents while the other countries have sufficient talents? So, whether do we grant a favor without repaying? It seems that people in other countries in the world think that everyone wants to be rich and only take the word "fame" to cover themselves. The government also wants to use beautiful words "talent hunting" but actually they want to recruit workers. Therefore, people who study to be an official are the same as those who earn their living at their

hometown. The only thing is that working as a hire sounds despicable and working as an official sounds respectful and be under the name of contributing to the country etc. If there are any talents who are honest and determine to be devoted themselves for the country issues, that number is small (Posthumous Manuscript No. 27, in: Trương Bá Cần, 2002, pp. 280).

Nguyễn Trường Tộ also criticized the hit-or-miss use of talents without any policy and consistent rule, which did not assure talents to do their best. This led to a waste: "Now if someone is given good comments, he will be invited, and if there are any bad comments, he will be fired. The recruitment and keeping of talents have a deep root, but using or dismissing is all of a sudden. Therefore, it not only makes the course of talent recruitment meaningless but also talented men become worthless; this makes talented men come to a standstill and there is no way to be promoted; makes talents who do not luckily have a chance waste all of their previous effort and change to another job" (Trương Bá Cần, 2002, pp. 208). "At present, the country condition is disordered. There exist calamities sent from the Lord as a warning, drought; the wealth and the strength of the people are ran out of; the supply for the army is exhausted; in the Court, officials act the fool to please the King, cover corruption and stop talents" (Posthumous Manuscript No. 1, in: Trương Bá Cần, 2002, pp. 124). In his opinion, this situation was the source which causes the lack of talents for the country.

In the view of Nguyễn Trường Tộ, the deep root of lacking talents was deprived from the limited definitions of talents of Nguyễn's court. It only highly appreciated Confucians and those who were successful

through examinations. He proposed that the Court should *get rid of* the old concept that only Confucian intellectuals should be used and *change* the thinking that only literature should be used to recruit talents. There are no countries which take literature as a criterion to recruit talents. That is because poetry cannot fight against conquers, thousand words cannot produce an expedient” (Posthumous Manuscript No. 18, in: Trương Bá Cẩn, 2002, pp. 223). He proposed the Court to use and give awards to anyone; even they were merchants, physicians, farmers, social activists etc. provided that they could bring benefits for the society, for the country. Our country only treasured Confucians... if we let the people know that we appreciate other jobs, then not many years later, the people also contribute many more jobs for the Court” (Posthumous Manuscript No. 18, in: Trương Bá Cẩn, 1991, pp. 196). He emphasized “ In addition, the use of human resources depends on their strength”. Nguyễn Trường Tộ required a policy of talent training and using which was appropriate to the ability of each person so that we could see the strength and weakness of each talent and have a suitable appointment.

Thirdly, he claimed that there should exist a new concept of talents. When the country was being invaded by the French – the enemy was superior in terms of weapons, war facilities and civilization, talents of Confucian type were not capable of taking the historical mission in this period of history. It was required that the Court should have a new concept of talents and build a suitable system of training and using talents so that they could meet the need for defending the country in this period of time. Nguyễn Trường Tộ was aware of that fact from the early stage. He said that, *talents*

should not only be the ones with good behaviors and loyalty but also the ones with skills; and that only people “with skills can be successful because only talented people can deeply understand the reasoning between human beings and other objects” (Trương Bá Cẩn, 2002, pp. 221). Talent was defined by Nguyễn Trường Tộ as all scientific and technological knowledge and skills, techniques to deal with a job, which could be achieved from learning from the nature, imitating the nature, exploiting the nature and developing science to increase properties and enrich human life and not only limited in traditional area: forestry, fishery, farming, hunting, horse-riding. He also said that talents were all those who *could broaden knowledge for the purpose of serving human life* and not those who knew literature. This is a progressive outlook by Nguyễn Trường Tộ.

2. Nguyễn Trường Tộ’s new concept of training and using talents

Nguyễn Trường Tộ particularly paid attention to the role of education, training and took education reform as the first priority among all issues urgently needed to be solved in order to training new human resources to meet the requirement of the new age. Reorganization of academics is the foundation of a nation”.

Nguyễn Trường Tộ *realized that the greatest limitation of Confucianism - based education system was its main focus on morality, manner and loyalty in the society without a sufficient attention to "practice".* He criticized this weakness of Confucianism - based education system. Although “his critique was somewhat partial and he absolutely did not mention any achievement brought by Confucianism – based academic

system (Lê Thị Lan, 2000, pp. 99), his critique was necessary for a change in the examination - based education system and created a premise to approach a new thinking towards education. After pointing out the shortcomings, backwardness of the examination - based system in training and using talents of the Court and based on the new concept that talents should be the ones who could broaden the knowledge for a better human life, *Nguyễn Trường Tộ proposed a new education method, a new model of training and recruiting talents.*

His educational reasoning was presented in two cahiers "On experimental learning issue" in July 1866 and "Eight Urgent Matters" in October 1867. In which, *Nguyễn Trường Tộ proposed a practicality- oriented reform of education.* He pointed out the pioneering role of education reform: "It is necessary to start learning based on the practice; study should be divided into departments, subjects; awards should be given to candidates to these departments and subjects to encourage so it will gradually bring benefits, and vices will gradually disappear" (Trương Bá Cần, 2002, pp. 291). In this approach, the objective of study was clearly identified as *learning what we had not been known to put into practice and practicing what could be seen ahead and leaving benefits to next generations.* This view by Nguyễn Trường Tộ was the acquisition of Western education which highly appreciated practice, application and science.

With this guideline of education reform following the practice direction, Nguyễn Trường Tộ established a new teaching program which, from his point of view, could meet the requirement of the practice for competent human resources who could be

capable of handling important issues at that time. Education reform was to train a new generation of talents to supplement skillful people to the old class of mandarins who were only good at Confucianism. If this action was carried out, this would gradually make change in the qualification and competence of the management staff governing socio-economic fields, which resulted in political reform following the model Nguyễn Trường Tộ highly appreciated.

Nguyễn Trường Tộ believed that astronomy and geography were the origin of everything. He proposed to establish departments of marine resources, mountain resources, land resources, water resources, agriculture, astronomy, geography, engineering, law etc. in the State program of training talents. *It can be seen that the thinking of highly appreciating natural sciences, knowledge of human beings about the objective world, the existence of society was a new idea in contrary to the Confucian thinking of treasuring morality.* With such education reform, talents trained by the State did not only limit to the Confucian class but expanded to almost all other classes of people. Nguyễn Trường Tộ's new concept of talents and new program on training and using talents following Western education model were appropriate to the demand for defending and developing the country at that time.

From the view of the new education and training thought, Nguyễn Trường Tộ *proposed reform regarding to policies and education activities on one hand, and on the other hand, he made a lot of detailed reform suggestions related to the use of and preferential treatment policy for the talents under the management of the contemporary Government.* Based on the awareness of the

great role and heavy responsibility of talents as leaders and managers, and the current situation that the incentive policy did not match with their position, he suggested the Court increase salary and introduce a suitable incentive policy for talents who worked for the government bodies in order to raise the responsibility of officials for public affairs and corruption preventing.

Especially, Nguyễn Trường Tộ paid *great attention to the issue of training talents and introducing a motivation policy for them in the area of military*. One of important military issues in order to strengthen the army for the country, in Nguyễn Trường Tộ's view, was the training of good commanders, because "commanders like ears and eyes, soldiers like limbs. That blind eyes and deaf ears could control limbs is an unheard story" (Posthumous Manuscript No. 27, in: Trương Bá Cần, 2002, pp. 272). The process of reconstructing commander teams should focus on the quality but not the quantity, because "even though a talented commander is busy, he still has abundant time to solve problems, but if he is incapable, he cannot manage his own time let alone manage others. Therefore, it is necessary to select good officials and reduce the number of incapable ones. (Posthumous Manuscript No. 27, in: Trương Bá Cần, 2002, pp. 273). At the same time, he frankly suggested that "if officials are incapable, even if they are offspring of meritorious officials, they should be provided with some fortune without asking them to do anything and they should not be given any authority. If not, it could cause a great harm" (Posthumous Manuscript No. 27, in: Trương Bá Cần, 2002, pp. 273). He emphasized that if a commander made a contribution to the country, he would be promoted and paid at

the level for a long term. For soldiers, he asked to raise the education level for them. It only could be done if there was a good education system and an appropriate education policy. If not, "the customs will be degenerated day by day, and the people will become more and more deceitful, flighty and empty."

He also suggested "a method of education, study and acquisition of advantages in foreign military arts by inviting Westerners who are good at military.... to cooperate with our commanders to train soldiers everyday ..., or inviting Western officials who are good at martial arts to teach our officials. In addition, we need to buy books about art of war on land and on water, and then translate them into Vietnamese for references" (Posthumous Manuscript No. 27, in: Trương Bá Cần, 2002, pp. 269). Nguyễn Trường Tộ realized the weakness in domestic art of war and asked for a change. It can be said that the proposal of reforming military was one of the most important matter in the idea of reforming education, training talents and renovating the country proposed by Nguyễn Trường Tộ.

One notable point which can be easily recognized is that, Nguyễn Trường Tộ, while highly thinking of Western scholastics, realized the dialectic relationship between the open trend of the new age and the education reform. The open trend created the condition for reforming education and education reform produced a new class of intellectuals who had sufficient skill and competence to carry out the open, self-strengthening, independent, active, flexible and effective policy. If we did not open the country, we would lack information and do not know the requirement of the period, then we could not

recognize the demand for education reform, which made the domestic education out of date. In contrast, if we opened without reforming the education system, we could not create a new talent source and would not have enough resources to recover the country's economy and military, which made the country gradually lose their independence.

However, at his time, Nguyễn Trường Tộ could only see the positive influence of opening and reforming education based on Western method. He could not foresee the difficulties and barriers of the open trend, education reform and training new human resources for the development of the country. This is also a limitation in the view of almost all Confucians in the late 19th century.

Nguyễn Trường Tộ had a new concept of talents, training methods, use and the introduction of preferential policy for talents. He also kept proposing a change of the old-fashioned and backward academic approach into a new one. However, for many reasons, they were accepted by Tự Đức's court at some small points, which was not systematic and consistent, so the result had little practical meaning.

With the responsibility of a citizen for the country, Nguyễn Trường Tộ expected to contribute to the prosperity of the nation. He revealed that: *Although my knowledge is shallow but my heart is deep; it is not feasible for me but I have a will, so whatever I can hear or can see urge me as if I have done something great. I am certain that it is not because of it; I am discouraged or change my mind.* Unluckily his proposals of reforming education, training talents on all fields of economics, science, military, management etc. were not accepted by Nguyễn's court for an advanced education

and training policy appropriate to the trend of the history. This missed a chance to develop sufficient talents to deal with new challenges in the late 19th century. Nowadays, when we open that page of history again, "revise the old in order to know the new," it is unavoidable to be surprised by and admired at Nguyễn Trường Tộ's talent. Moreover, we can see that even the time passes but his practicality-based education reasoning, his method of education, training and using talents based on the western experience of education and his broad and deep view of plan to protect and develop the country still remains their values at the present and in the future □

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