

## **ETHICS IDEA OF DUY TÂN CONFUCIAN SCHOLARS IN VIETNAM IN THE EARLY XX CENTURY**

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In the early XX centuries, Vietnam Confucian scholars mature during this period including Nguyễn Thượng Hiền, Phan Bội Châu, Phan Chu Trinh, Nguyễn Quyền, Đào Nguyên Phổ, Đặng Kinh Luân, Dương Bá Trạc, Lê Đại, Võ Hoành, Phan Đình Đối, Phan Huy Thịnh, Nguyễn Hữu Cầu, Hoàng Tăng Bí, Đặng Nguyên Cẩn, Đặng Thái Thân and Nguyễn Hàm escaped from the System of former competition-examinations or passed the examination but self-escaped from the feudal bureaucratic system to preserve their positions and roles of scholars in the society. They conducted a reform in every aspect of the society and considered it as an essential starting point of independent and prosperous Vietnam.

According to the united perspective of Confucian scholars in the early XX century, one of the major reasons for losing the nation was the loss of ethics. Consequently, it was important

to change the morality and fortify the ethics in order to gain the nation's independence.

It was strongly confirmed by Confucian scholars that the strength of each nation did not only derive from material, scientific-technology and political strength but also ethics. Ethics was considered as an effective weapon of small and weak countries that were suppressed by wealthy ones. Ethics was also a motivation for nations to approach their civilization and modernization. Particularly in democratic societies, ethics was not tarnished but proved its obvious role.

In our opinion, at present when political and cultural conflicts are happening worldwide, such judgement about the role of ethics is not conservative but modern.

Confucian scholars have brought out new opinions about ethics based on

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considerable values of traditional ethics combined with positive exogenetic factors. Basically, they are still using Eastern ethic concepts. In terms of individual quality, they consider Compassion, Rituals, Righteousness, Wisdom, Trust valuable and ethics, like morality, is unchangeable.

“Ethics includes morality and morality is part of the ethics. A person must have compassion, rituals, righteousness, wisdom, trust, industriousness, economy (...) Ethic people are people of proper behaviors. Such ethics is not considered new or old, western or eastern which means that anyone at any time must have such ethics to be whole person. Even a scholar originating any other theories, even different regime, including democracy, monarchy or communism is impossible to ignore the universal truth of ethics, in other words, ethics is unchangeable. Morality is something different. It is, in fact, changeable. “Morality in each regime, in each location is different” (Phan Chu Trinh, 1995, p.763).

Ethics is believed to be the characteristics that has been crystallized over many years of a certain nation. In the modern society, old ethics has been disappeared due to the conservativeness of the old generation while the new generation is miscellaneous and underestimate new traditions and ethics that have not been

completely formed.

Phan Chu Trinh used comparison when discussing morality and ethics. He discussed about family morality, national morality, social morality in the West in order to have judgement about Vietnamese morality. In his opinion, the Western morality was originated from family morality which was then developed into national morality and social morality and ideally into the global morality. While the increasing exacerbation of our current national morality was due to the disobedience of the Confucianism of our autocratic kings. National morality, social morality are absolutely unavailable. “Our only remaining custom is the morality of families, not courts due to our misleading instructions (Phan Chu Trinh, 1995, p.711).

In the current society, in fact, all five relationships in the Five Moral Bonds are weakened, specifically, king and subject *lạt như nước lã, đục như vôi* (as insipid as water, as opaque as lime), father and son *làm cho mất cả tấm lòng son* (loosing loyalty), brothers and sisters *trắt tréo thầy to nước lạnh tanh* and friends *thương ôi luân ấy mất đã lâu* (lost for a long time). When feudal monarchy is replaced by democratic regime, relationships between people in the society also change, leading to the disappearance of the king-subject relationship while other relationships in the five moral

bonds need keeping and promoting.

Confucian scholars are patient in preserving standards of these relationships.

It was known that recovering the ethics of such a dependent nation as Vietnam was not easy but impossible to be delayed. Consequently, they put forth a measure to improve the ethics and change the national morality. That was to combine the traditional and Western ethics in a proper manner to make every Vietnamese citizen be responsible for their nation. Accordingly, Vietnam would be powerful and prosperous and be respected by other nations.

Basically, confucian scholars agreed to combine Western - Eastern, Ancient - Modern features to develop new morality and ethics, “combining Western civilization and Confucianism of the Oriental traditions rather than using either freedom and independence in the tongue tip of western researchers or the national spirit of Chinese studies” (Phan Chu Trinh, 1995, p.784).

The principle that is kept unchanged when receiving, adjusting and developing morality and ethics is the selection of valuable factors that are suitable to the morality and ethics of the Oriental in general and Vietnam in particular.

### *1. Innovating contents of ethical categories*

Ethical categories that were frequently

discussed by Confucian scholars are “loyalty” and “dutifulness” in which ways to ensure both loyalty and dutifulness were regularly discussed. What was new in the content of “loyalty and dutifulness” was that its final purpose was to serve the nation, to fulfill the noble responsibilities to the society and to be willing to scarify for the nation when it was in trouble. It was recommended by Lương Văn Can that:

“Áo cơm lộc nước đã bao lâu,

Một tấm lòng trung trả nghĩa sâu.

Mưa gió giữ gìn bền chí mãi,

Non sông gánh vác ghé vai vào”

*(The loyalty and willingness to repay for the nation which has been providing necessities for a long time)*

(Chương Thâu, 1996, volume 21, p.613).

“Loyalty” became “love for the nation” was the natural characteristics of Vietnamese and the national morality embedded in every Vietnamese. To free Vietnam, Vietnamese has to develop their own social characteristics, to unite and support for the general interest of the nation.

“Dutifulness” in this sense did not only mean to be dutiful with parents and family but also with the ancestors and the nation. Realizing dutifulness means taking part in the movement to free the nation and protect the nation from any enemies.

Confucian scholars tried to innovate the content of “compassion”, the basic ethical category of the Confucianism. Like many other Confucian scholars, Phan Bội Châu said that compassion had unique power in every aspect.

“The morality “compassion” helps us deal with every person, at every location and every time” (Phan Bội Châu, 1990, tập 9, p.41).

“No one has other moralities except ‘compassion’.” Like the great compassion of the Buddhism, loving nation as ourselves, considering enemies as friends of Jesus is also the meaning of the compassion (Phan Bội Châu, 1990, volume 9, p.41).

Innovation cannot ignore the opinion of “united Confucianism”, Confucian scholars still explained ethical categories of other theories and religions based on the “compassion” category of the Confucianism. However, the outstanding criterion of “compassion” in the new era was the love for nation and making the nation become prosperous. This firstly needs humaneness. “Benevolence and righteousness mean public-spirited and selfless along with humaneness” (Phan Bội Châu, 1990, volume 7, p.75).

Confucian scholars had deep understanding of “righteousness”. Righteousness means things suitable to the moral standards. Current morality, in their opinion, were fighting for the freedom and independence, fulfilling obligations for freeing the nation as

only citizens of a nation of sovereignty have rights. Obligations and benefits in the fighting to free the nation are not separated.

In specific relationships among people, Confucian scholars tried to develop “family education” to express their opinion of ethical standards and behaviors. Parents behaviors and children behaviors were kept unchanged all the time as they were the most basic behaviors of the human beings. Parents were always good samples of their children (*méo tròn làm mẫu bởi mình ta*), therefore, it was essential to maintain sound behaviors of a family. Children are teaching results of the parents so parents were responsible for teaching their children right from the time of pregnancy *khôn đại đức trong mình chuốc cả, dạy con xin dạy thừa trong thai*. Only sound morality of the family can improve the morality of the whole society. The innovative opinion of morality of Confucian scholars were considerably affected by the morality of the Confucianism; however, they were not inflexible opinions but in-depth thoughts and sincere advices characterized by traditional humane spirits of the nation.

In terms of living ideal: ethical ideal of Confucian scholars is the freedom and independence for the nation and its citizens. Freedom is associated with human rights to have their minimal demands, including material and

spiritual demands, met thanks to their honesty.

Ethical opinion of Confucian scholars would be completed when they were able to identify their “living ideal”. Opinion of living ideal clearly expressed changes in the ethical ideal and was the result of the acquisition of Eastern-Western opinions. They improved traditional good characteristics of Vietnamese mentioned in the description by Phan Bội Châu about Vietnamese: self-strengthening will, honesty, bravery, enthusiasm, solidarity, knowledgeable, considerateness, affectionateness. In short, living ideal of new Vietnamese is:

*Firstly*, live judiciously: people must be judicious to recognize reasons and the status of their dependence; to be aware of various aspects of the modern life; to be aware of their responsibilities and obligations to the Nation.

*Secondly*, live with strong will. Will means the bravery to take undertake the cause of freeing the motherland. To have will, people must be confident: confident in themselves, confident in the nation’s future and confident in the selected regime. To the broader extent, confidence means “self-confident”, “self-responsible” in the spirit of “self-responsible hero” – to be self responsible for themselves, community and the nation.

*Thirdly*, renewing. Renewing means

re-innovating. People who are judicious, self-confident, self-responsible will certainly be self-innovated. The initial self-innovation lies in the knowledge, which means acquiring modern scientific knowledge, criticizing and amending obsolete knowledge to gradually lead the nation to the civilization.

The core factor of self-confidence, self-innovation was the thinking method. They directly criticized the obsolete thinking method of the Confucianism “thuật nhi bất tác” (reporting what was available without any creativeness), “hậu cổ hạc kim”, “trọng hư văn, khinh thực nghiệp” (pay attention to the impractical literature and ignore commerce and industry). Therefore, new people, particularly, the youth was asked to be independent in thinking, develop independent thoughts and stuff in order to be independent from other countries, to avoid losing their nation, national character and individual personality.

## *2. Innovate ethical opinion of some objects in the society*

From the opinion that innovating the society is the responsibility of every class, Confucian scholars, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, discussed ethical morality of every object in the society and ethics in various aspects. In this writing, we would like to analyze ethical opinion of some specific objects which are hardly mentioned in

the Confucian ethical opinion system.

*Religious ethics:* one of the special features of the Confucian scholars in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is the ability to overcome the discrimination to find out ethical values in the existing religions in Vietnam at that time.

According to Phan Bội Châu, doctrine of the Buddhism was not either transcendent or strange but was developed by the human beings to meet their religious demands: “Principle of the Buddhism is deep and non-discussible. To some extent, yes means no and vice versa. Saying no does not mean no while saying yes does not mean yes. People are free to talk what they want. The opinion of freedom is actually the opinion of the Buddhism” (Phan Bội Châu, 1990, volume 4, p.78).

In his opinion, religions are developed to meet the people’s demands for freedom. It is the basis for people’s spiritual free and motivation for people to gain physical freedom. In the relationship with the God, Buddha, Holy Ghost, Phan Bội Châu, however, put emphasis on the role of the human beings with the belief in their ability to self-liberate. Phan Bội Châu praised values of the Christian religion. That was love, humaneness and strong belief in the spiritual life.

*Ethics of businessmen:* as analyzed above, opinion of “paying much attention to agriculture but not business” of Confucian scholars is

originated from the underestimation of businessmen’s position and role. Confucian scholars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had different social opinion and certainly had different opinion of businessmen. In their opinion, if businessmen want to prove their values to the society, they should be aware of their professional ethics.

Although Lương Văn Can had an innovative opinion and action that was suitable to the modern society, he still managed to keep the sense of purpose and uprightness of a Confucian scholar. He was successful in keeping the opinion of a person’s ethics regardless of his/her career and time. For instance, in the writing “*Kim cổ cách ngôn*”, Lương Văn Can discussed about “opinion of enrichment” of Vietnamese which was humane and different from that of the capitalism and imperialism:

Property is related to the existence of a person. Therefore, it is essential to see if its origin is legal and transparent before using it. Transparent origin of the property will result in the ethical expenditure.

Secret of the success in doing business is the honesty; in other words, profit should be naturally gained without any unreasonable activities and dangers. Paying too much attention to gaining their own profits by harming others will lead to the bad luck of the next generations. Gods always bless good people and punish treacherous ones.

Regarding property, it is essential to advise people not to take anything of others, not to pay attention to the profits but ignore responsibilities.

The poor should be careful in choosing their jobs as they should not take others' property when doing business and exchanging goods to gain profits.

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*Ethics for females:* Confucian scholars did not develop a system of theories on ethics but express their points of view through existing poems, songs and proverbs or composing poems and songs that have direct impacts on the objects. They composed educational songs including *Tỉnh quốc hồn ca*, *Dạy con*, etc. (Phan Chu Trinh), *Tân nữ huấn ca* (Nguyễn Hữu Cầu), *Nữ quốc dân tu tri* (Phan Bội Châu), *Bài ca cứu quốc* (Huỳnh Thúc Kháng), etc. Along with songs to teach people about the love for their nation and race, they also expressed their opinion of equality, equal rights, training standards for the youth in the new era and females who used to be underestimated in the feudal Confucianism.

Let's take an example from *Tân nữ huấn ca* by Nguyễn Hữu Cầu. He called for people to be clearly aware for an era in which women's right were respected; women should learn new things while preserving good traditions of the nation, learn how to behave with family members and with the nation. Nguyễn Hữu Cầu also reminded women of their "natural"

responsibilities including up-bringing children, teaching children, expenditure, worshiping without superstition, spending time on doing exercise, particularly in an era where women should learn a job to earn their living.

“Cuộc đời gặp buổi giao thông,

Nữ quyền hai chữ vang trong hoàn cầu

(...)Cốt sao quốc túy bảo tuyền,

Trau thêm học mới làm nền duy tân.

(...)Nhất là học văn tinh thông

Hai là nghề khéo ở trong tay mình.

(...)Muốn cho không yếu không hèn

Về phần thân thể phải nghiên vệ sinh...

(...)Đến như lễ bái quỷ thần

Dù Gia, dù Thích cốt phần tự tu...

Chẳng nên mê tín theo đời

Dã man đến thế, thật nòi dã man”

(Chương Thâu, edited by Hồ Anh Hải, 2007, p.226-235).

Nguyễn Hữu Cầu managed to overcome obsolete morality of the Confucianism by confirming that:

“Buổi đầu kén chọn lắm sai,

Phải người cờ bạc đông dài khôn ngoan

Hoặc người vô nghĩa bất nhân

Kíp nên kiếm chốn rời chân ngoài vòng.

(...)Phải nhà bắt nạt bắt khoan

Quá đường cay nghiệt sẽ bàn ở riêng

(...)Có con đứng vậy nuôi con

Hiếm hoi bước nữa ai còn cấm ai”  
(Chương Thâu, edited by Hồ Anh Hải, 2007, p.226-235).

Possibly speaking, the innovation in the ethical opinion of Confucian scholars was corresponding to their stages of innovation and evolution. In any conditions, at any eras, they are actually good examples of the ethics improvement.

Based on the traditional ethics and by acquiring positive and innovative factors of the era, Confucian scholars have brought the system of ethical opinions to a new height with more advanced contents and ethics characterized by the humanitarianism. That is the love for the nation, for the people; criticism of the feudalism, colonialism. Confucian scholars believe in the dignity and power of the human being; accordingly, they put emphasis on awaking and providing guidelines for the people to fight against their enemies to free the nation,

bringing actual humane values: independence, freedom, equality and humanity. In spite of certain limitations related to the era and personal awareness, innovative opinion of ethics of Confucian scholars plays a crucial role in the development of a suitable ethical system of new Vietnamese □

## References

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