

# Confucianism Then and Now: Merits and Sins

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**Abstract:** *Throughout history, debates, assessment and handling of Confucianism have constantly taken place both in Vietnam and overseas. The paper analyzes four aspects as follows: (i) different approaches to Confucianism, (ii) Confucianism - a dualistic doctrine, (iii) a Confucian scholar - a dual personality, and (iv) Vietnamese Confucianism then and now; from which some conclusions are drawn.*

**Keywords:** Confucianism, Confucius, Confucian Scholar, Vietnam, China

## Introduction

Whether in Vietnam or overseas, the debate around various aspects of Confucianism has been lively to this day. Even in China, the country of Confucius, the Confucian doctrine was criticized, modified, categorized, and recombined both overall and in detail before and even after becoming a nearly exclusively dominant socio-political ideology. Confucianism's biggest counterpart and partner are Taoist and Buddhist ideologies.

### 1. Different approaches to Confucianism

In Vietnam, although it was introduced during the Northern (Chinese) domination period, Confucianism, from a weaker position, had to compete fiercely with Buddhism in the Ly and Tran dynasties before becoming a dominant socio-political ideology since the Early-Le dynasty. Despite having endured many hardships and difficulties, it still maintained that orthodox position until the beginning of

the twentieth century. On the world level, thanks to the East-West cultural exchanges in the early modern period, Confucianism was introduced to the West, where scholars, especially Enlightenment philosophers, expressed their different opinions.

In China and Vietnam during the early decades of the twentieth century, the Confucian assessment was strongly influenced by the fierce political-ideological struggle of the time. The conservative side tried to praise Confucianism as a traditional ideological foundation that needs to be maintained and protected. The Renovation side, on the other hand, criticized Confucianism heavily to eliminate and widen the path of reform and renewal. The New Cultural Movement after the May Fourth Movement in China, of which Hu Shih is a prominent figure, launched a slogan: "Down with Confucius and sons". In Vietnam, in 1929, the radical Confucianist Phan Khoi ignorantly stated: "In the whole

country, Confucianism has come to the time of “retirement”, particularly in the South, it was not “retirement” but it was like being fired a long time ago... The rules must adapt to the time, now... we have to follow the global trend, so certainly Confucianism have to disappear” (Phan Khoi, 1929). In 1930, the scholar Huynh Thuc Khang declared: “In today’s world, if the ideology of Sir Confucius is being used to cope with the current situation, it is like a race between rowing a bamboo boat against a ship, riding a horse against a car.” (Retrieved from Nguyen Q. Thang, 1930: 181-183). In 1932, journalist Pham Quynh asserted: “The Confucianism is probably ending today. The Confucian son is now an out-of-season thing, the precious one” (Pham Quynh, 1932: 449).

In the following decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, under the socialist regimes in China and Vietnam, Confucianism has not yet ended its up-and-down fate. In the second half of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, radical anti-Confucian and anti-Confucian movements were started under the slogan “resolutely wiping out the remnants of toxic reactionary Confucianism.” But less than 30 years later, Confucius was suddenly revived, reinstated, promoted, and introduced to the whole world along with Confucianism in Confucius Institutes, as a symbol of a stably organized order of a wealthy and harmonious society. It is also argued that it is the disciplined spirit of New Confucianism that has inspired and started those successful feats of the Asian “tiger and dragon” nations for more than half a passing by century.

The contrast and double-tongued assessment of Confucianism might at first

confuse some people, make them unable to understand. However, if we patiently consider it, the issue could still be logically analyzed and to be revealed.

First and foremost, when assessing Confucianism, critics had imposed or even distorted Confucius too much. They only interpreted Confucianism based on their understanding, on the way they want to understand, or like understanding, which is highly subjective, with a simple, one-sided view like an ideology of staying static and isolated. Second, they often understood and evaluated the problem following an unconscious or even deliberate origin in a particular historical coordinate, with existing minds and requirements of the times, including their purposed calculations. Nowadays, sophisticated thinking and the systematic approach, with a polylinear viewpoint which was located in a space-time frame of reference, might help us to consider the problem fairly and more reasonably.

Accordingly, history is only an invisible original with many visible copies that created several informal sources and hearsay. Historiography, written history, is only “discourses” that historians create according to their subjective viewpoint. History is like a house with many windows, and the perspective of each person showed different contrast angles. On the other hand, the assessment of history and historical figures is also different, from person to person, from place to place, from time to time, though it all has a reason for existence, it is not necessarily reasonable and there will certainly be biased and unfair. Because as Zhuangzi 莊子 wrote in the *Nanhua Zhen Jing* 南華真經, either saying “yes” or “no” is also infinite (是亦

一無窮，非亦一無窮)<sup>1</sup>. As in the West, Blaise Pascal once declared: “There are truths on this side of the Pyrenees that are falsehoods on the other” (Blaise Pascal, 1871, XXV: 185).

Abandoning the binary dogmatic view of “if not white then black, and vice versa” to get to a dialectical view: “the colour of truth is grey” (André Gide), that the combination of a variety of colours is colourless, also requires a change in analytical methodology. Our rigid habit, which is hard to break, when assessing historical events or historical figures is that we often assess it in a “package approach” in terms of positive or negative. We are humans, and as Pascal said, are “neither animals nor gods”. The Vietnamese custom of eating in a tray advises us to try all the dishes on the tray, a little bit of each. However, the famous young contemporary Jewish historian Yuval Noah Harari approached in another way, which is common in the world today, that is the “buffet-style approach”, in which they could freely choose what suits their taste preferences (Harari, 2019). This means the historian could intentionally choose the positive or negative aspects or both after expressing his point of view, but not to impose others a general judgment on the historical events or historical figures. The assessment of Confucianism in Vietnamese society should be the same when analyzing the impacts from two sides, in other words, the merits and also, demerits of Confucianism on Vietnamese traditional and contemporary society should be considered, especially at the present, should be emphasized.

<sup>1</sup> *Nanhua Zhen Jing*, (Qi wu lun 齊物論), 27

Li Ling, a professor at Peking University made a wise comment in an essay: “After reading the Analects, I think it is best to neither worship Confucius nor drown him in the mud, instead, he should be said to be very similar to Don Quixote” (Xiabo Liu, 2012: 190).

This doctrine itself had been corrupted or alienated in the history of thought which made it different, and it was no longer what it had been but the same empty name. This was the root cause of the existing contrasting interpretations and understanding of Confucianism. Confucius himself once complained about this alienation when he metaphorically mentioned that, a vessel which originally has corners with a square bottom, but when it was modified to a round-bottomed vessel, it was called a cornered vessel or not. (“孤不孤，孤哉孤哉” A cornered vessel without corners! Is it a cornered vessel or not?)<sup>2</sup>. It is an action of fraudulently exchanging concepts, “changing squares to round” (破孤為圓), trying to exploit a name/a figure even when it was no longer the same.

## 2. Confucianism: A Doctrine of Duality

There was an opinion that Confucius was always right, only his students and those in later generations misunderstood and did it wrong. That was only partially true as Confucius himself did have mistakes when his teachings in the Analects always contained double meanings, made it difficult to understand or understand it in whichever acceptable way, which the Confucian researchers called “dualism”. Therefore, theoretically, many of his precious quotes were sublime, logical,

<sup>2</sup> *The Analects*, (Yong ye 雍也), 6.25.

and concise truths, but often contained an overall, multi-meaningful, concise, metaphor with hidden expression, making it easy to misunderstand and misinterpret. As a result, his doctrine, although still referred to as Confucianism, was understood in a very different way and applied arbitrarily depends on each user, especially towards the Government. It also led to another disastrous consequence that the theory was getting different over time and detached from social reality, getting more and more irrelevant to the name and fame.

#### *Confucian cosmology*

Speaking of cosmology, Confucius was different from the ancestors of other missionaries, he rarely discussed the topic of the mysterious metaphysical of the universe (hình nhi thượng - metaphysics). He is not an atheist or materialist as he still worshipped ghosts and gods but actively avoided and kept an appropriate distance (“敬而遠之”)<sup>1</sup>, instead of discussing practical stories of people on earth (形而下 - physic). Therefore, Confucianism was said to not be a true religion, but only a political philosophy - human morality.

The *Yi Jing* 易經, or, *Book of Changes*, was a core work of Confucian cosmology. It was formed in a process of continually adding long before Confucius, who only partially edited and interpreted. Along with other philosophical opinions on the theory of yin and yang, the unity of all things, and the collection of literary works, the *Yi Jing* was a pinnacle of Eastern wisdom talking about the universe, heaven - earth - human and its movement. Reading and understanding the *Yi Jing* was very difficult since it was also used as a fortune-telling book.

The *Yi Jing* taught that everything was transformed through the process of their movement via the interactions of Yin-Yang transformation, which both conflict and complement each other. The book *Zhongyong* (The *Doctrine of the Mean*) further explained: “If there is movement, it must change, if it is changed, it must be transformed” (動則變, 變則化)<sup>2</sup>.

Confucian cosmology is a bipolar monism, similar to the laws of transformation and conservation of energy in physics, the principle of contradiction in dialectical materialism, and the Western theory of evolution, but with somewhat more comprehensive and softer arguments. Although it all mentions the two-sided parallelism, the theory of Yin and Yang emphasizes that the main colour of the movement is the establishment of harmony, while the principle of dialectical contradiction enhances that the essential factor of the movement is the conflict. Likewise, Confucian cosmology advocates a gradual change, while dialectic emphasizes qualitative leaps and bounds.

It was difficult to make an overall assessment to affirm which side is superior to the other between the two ideological foundations of the East-West. However, Confucian ideology seems to be more stable, to transform more slowly. Only a few hundred years after the Confucian family, in the Western Han Dynasty (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC), the Confucian leader Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 made a statement that was in contrast to the spirit of the previous *Yi Jing* to illustrate his theory of “天民相與”: “The sky does not change and either does the religion” (天不變道亦不變)<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *The Analects*, (Yong ye 雍也), 19.

<sup>2</sup> *The Doctrine of the Mean*, 23.

<sup>3</sup> Dong Zhongshu, *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露.

It was obvious that although it was still Confucianism, there were two contrasting interpretations and understandings, and neither side willing to yield to the other. The dual effects of Confucianism could be applied to the contemporary Vietnamese social development strategy. They both had the same goal to develop the country, but there were two means to use as a guideline: “Stability for development” or “Innovation for development”? Also, in terms of culture, should the task of “traditional culture conservation” or “international cultural integration” be emphasized? That question is not easy to answer, if you do not want to use duality, quibble, combine both of the ways, you can understand the way you want.

#### *Confucian society*

Regarding sociology, the basic ideological argument of Confucianism was to ensure a harmonious social order, with the inevitable corollary of maintaining the hierarchical caste system and the concept of fundamental thinking is the pair of gentlemen - small-minded people. The theory of identity and destiny, which advised people to settle down with their existing social position, not to overdo it or reverse it, supported that argument. The enforcement tool to ensure that social order was mainly based on ceremony, combined with punishments.

The foundation of Confucian sociology was the default recognition of social inequality, theoretically classifying into two distinct classes: the gentleman (the perfect person) and the small-minded person (the person who was yet complete). Next, Confucianism considered that aristocrats, bureaucrats, and scholars were perfect and excellent people, so they were

the gentleman, they deserved to rule, teach and command the weaker, loser group, those who had the duty to be labourers, who must obey and serve to the ruling class<sup>1</sup>. The *Analects* said: “The nature of the noble man is like the wind, the nature of the inferior man is like the grass. When the wind blows over the grass, it always bends” (君子之德風，小人之德草。草上之風，必偃)<sup>2</sup>. To be discreet, Confucianism argued that the bureaucracy had the function of doing a double task it was a paradox that is difficult to reconcile: being the parents of the people (民之父母), the shepherds, rule the people (牧民，使民), and at the same time be the servants (民之公僕) who have to serve the people (事民). It was argued that it was a meritocracy, that was, an elitism, even a qualitative representative democracy, superior to a quantitative representative democracy (the ruler is elected by the majority).

It was not causeless that Confucian societies had existed for a long time, lasting thousands of years in Eastern countries, typically China and Vietnam. Historically, the Confucian social system was said to be highly appreciated by the West, since it was an open, love-oriented society, not as tightly closed as the family aristocracy of Medieval Western Europe or blatantly

<sup>1</sup> In *the Analects* (Tai Bo 泰伯, 10), there is an existing question, argued about how to understand and authenticity, which, if true, is extremely negative: “A man who enjoys boldness and hates poverty will be rebellious. If a man lacks *ren* and his dissatisfaction reaches an extreme, he will rebel “(民可使由之不可使知之). This view is in contrast to Mencius’ theory of “民為貴” (*The people are the State’s most valuable possession*).

<sup>2</sup> *The Analects*, (Yan Yuan 顏淵), 12.19.

iniquitous as capitalism which was based on the predominance of money. Of course, the main reason for maintaining the stable, long-term existence of Confucian societies could be found in other factors as well: the totalitarian regimes controlling the lives of those under the regime comprehensively, closely, and sophisticatedly in all aspects. The mode of governance based on a patriarchal autocracy was also unskippable, a soft autocracy combined with a hard tyranny of brutality when necessary. Western thinkers and sociologists such as Montesquieu and Voltaire before and Wittfogel later called it an “oriental despotism”.

Theoretically, in addition to acknowledging the positive aspects, we could criticize and mention the negative points of Confucian society in many aspects, focusing on three main points. First, did implicitly identifying the ruling class (nobility, bureaucracy - Confucianism) with the perfect gentleman, the social elite align to the reality or not? History had proven that, in general, in Confucian society, the classes of “Hypocritic”, i.e. “gentleman - small-minded man” along with the abuse of power and corruption by the bureaucracy were common, not just particular phenomenons. Therefore, did institutions corrupt people or vice versa? Second, it might be possible that in a Confucian society, the ruling caste was not based primarily on the prestige of lineage or money, but it controlled a thing that was far more formidable, that was power. The degenerate bureaucracy was the powerful lords and financiers dealing together with power, and the job of converting power into real money was as easy as turning a hand. Third, the Confucian hierarchical

caste society would pave a way to deny civil rights and human rights, leading to a serious imbalance between state power and social power. A strong state based on a weak society was just a giant with clay feet, in danger of collapsing under its weight. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Nguyen dynasty in Vietnam was such a case.

Times had changed, but the metastasis of a Confucian hierarchical society did not end in contemporary Vietnamese society. The whole people were worried when the number of bad powerful people and officials at the strategic level being punished tended to increase and became more serious. Many officials did take advantage of their positions and working conditions to embezzle, personal profiteer, etc. Did the process of power corruption turn these officials from a good person to a bad guy, from an integrity person to a greedy, luxurious person?

Finding solutions was directly related. Currently, did it seem to be a tendency to look for a meritocracy with a ruling elite (strategic level cadres) were virtuous and talented people? Where is the optimal solution? What was the optimized solution? Let people with real talent and virtue flourish on their own, develop in society, be appraised and recognized by the masses and professionals, become elites, true “gentlemen”, then society would select and gather into the A team which was capable of managing the country in the style of “求賢” (recruiting talents), “有麝自然香” (Good wine needs no bush) for the State to choose and use? Or at the very early stage, should we choose, draft up the pre-labelled elites, the great “seeds” and then incubate and rear the breeder style in a competition that could very easily become

unhealthy? And would that way pave a way for society's vices and the plots lying in the ambush, the hidden ambitions waiting for the time of a kind of opportunism with countless attitudes and cunning tricks of the "Hypocritic"?

An overarching problem which could be drawn to avoid falling into the rut of a totalitarian system of the Confucian hierarchical class, to effectively eliminate corruption and abuse of power, and on the other hand, to promote true democracy and human rights is to balance the gap between state power and social power. Laozi 老子's "無為而治" theories (the sage manages affairs without doing anything, and conveys his instructions without the use of speech), Adam Smith's "invisible hand" theory or the argument "The modest state is a modern state" (État modeste, état moderne) are a useful reference.

### *Confucianism*

Staying between the cosmology and the social perspective in the complex of heaven-earth-human was the viewpoint of the Confucian. Confucianism was a human life religion, a humanistic religion. It was called human life because it mainly dealt with human issues in existing life. Confucius said, "If you can't yet serve men, how can you serve the spirits?? If you don't understand what life is, how will you understand death?" (未能事人，焉能事鬼？未知生，焉知死？)<sup>1</sup>. He avoided mentioning four things, including "monsters" and "devils"<sup>2</sup>. It was called humanism, because Confucianism advocated closeness, not

being far from human life (道不遠人)<sup>3</sup> and loving all, but become intimate with his innate good-heartedness (泛愛眾而親仁)<sup>4</sup>. Confucianism stated that "a person who practices religion but stays far away from people would not be able to practice the religion" (人之為道而遠人，不可以為道)<sup>5</sup>. In modern terms, that is the undeniable positive capability of "engaging with the world" of intellectuals.

### **3. Face of a Confucian: a dual personality**

There were many things in previous Confucian writings about the ideal model of a noble scholar, which was completely different from a petty scholar that Confucius himself distinguished<sup>6</sup>. However, the noble scholar himself also has two contrasting layers that clearly show his dual personality. In China or even Vietnam in the past, it could be said that most of the Confucianists when grinding all had a dream of passing the exam to become mandarins, to change their lives, they were Confucianists - bureaucrats then bureaucrats - Confucianist. They had a dual personality: an independent enlightened intellectual, sticking to the moral principles of the sage, but at the same time, the servants who received perks and served the dynasty, with the duty of absolute loyalty to the kings, no matter whether they were good or bad. They often had a complicated mind, and often felt anxious in choosing a way of life. Which direction to follow, an independent intellectual or a bureaucratic servant mostly depended on the personality, bravery as

<sup>1</sup> *The Analects*, (Xianjin 先進), 11.

<sup>2</sup> *The Analects*, (Shu er 述而), 20.

<sup>3</sup> *The Doctrine of the Mean*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> *The Analects*, (Xue er 學而), 6.

<sup>5</sup> *The Doctrine of the Mean*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> *The Analects*, (Yong ye, 雍也), 11.

well as background and circumstances of each person.

Therefore, in history, the hidden personality of the Confucian often moved between two images with blurred borders. The first image of a typical Confucianist was a scholar with all three beautiful traits of “wise, humane, and brave”. Accordingly, “The wise are not confused, the humane are not anxious, the brave are not afraid” (知者不惑, 仁者不憂, 勇者不懼)<sup>1</sup>. Intellectually, Confucianists were people with a wide range of knowledge, erudition, understanding of life and people (通天地人曰儒), and “illustrate illustrious virtue, renovate the people, and rest in the highest excellence” (大學之道, 在明明德, 在親民, 在止於至善)<sup>2</sup>. In terms of compassion, the Confucianist was always concerned with the fate and happiness of everyone, even strangers. Because “if you see what is right and fail to act on it, you lack courage (見義不為, 無勇也)<sup>3</sup>. This was similar to J.P. Sartre’s modern conception of the role of engaged intellectuals when he said: “the intellectual is someone who meddles in what is not his business” (Sartre, 1972). For a huge righteous job, they were even willing to “sacrifice himself to consummate his humaneness” (殺身以成仁)<sup>4</sup>, and history had many such examples. The noble man “is in harmony but does not follow the crowd” (和而不同)<sup>5</sup>, the noble man is not partisan (君子不黨)<sup>6</sup>, having his own identity but does not act to be different from everyone else (別而無異).

The ideal Confucianist was a liberal intellectual whose thoughts were not stubbornly imposed and not only revolved around himself. There were four things the master had eliminated from himself: imposing his will, arbitrariness, stubbornness and egotism<sup>7</sup>.

On the other hand, the ideal Confucianist was a liberal intellectual, not autocratic or dogma: “Those who are ignorant but like to do things arbitrarily, those who are mean but like autocrats, those who live in today’s world but like to go back to the old way of doing things, such people are bound to harm themselves”<sup>8</sup>.

According to Mencius, a scholar needed a high level of courage and an upright temperament: “Do not do excessive things when rich, do not change when poor, do not be subdued when being threatened”<sup>9</sup>. Maybe the image of this Confucian scholar was somewhat idealistic, but it has been a source of inspiration and motivation for many generations of young people from the past till now.

However, there was also a second image, which was negative and contrasting with the Confucian scholar’s image above. Perhaps most of the people who carried this image belonged to the old and degenerated bureaucracy class. They were old-fashioned and narrow-minded, “petty and shallow”<sup>10</sup>, scholastic dogma only knew how to reuse the sayings of the ancients in the scriptures without being creative, not even dared to have their own opinions, mechanically

<sup>1</sup> *The Analects*, (Zi Han 子罕), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Yang Xiong 楊雄, *Fa yan* 法言.

<sup>3</sup> *The Great Learning*, I, 1.

<sup>4</sup> *The Analects*, (Wei zheng 為政), 24.

<sup>5</sup> *The Analects*, (Wei Ling gong 衛靈公), 9.

<sup>6</sup> *The Analects*, (Zi Lu 子路), 23.

<sup>7</sup> *The Analects*, (Shu er 述而), 30.

<sup>8</sup> *The Analects*, (Zi Han 子罕), 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Zhongyong*, chapter 28, translated by Doan Trung Con.

<sup>10</sup> *The Book of Mengzi*, (Teng Wen gong 滕文公), 下.

followed the spirit of “being a transmitter, rather than an original thinker, who trusts and enjoys the teachings of the ancients”<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, they were vainly arrogant, liked vanity, preferred flattery, scorned those of inferior status, hated those who dared to criticize them. That was the class of small-minded Confucianists that Nguyen Trai and Cao Ba Quat had regarded as those who were resigned to “bow to the will of others” (Cao Ba Quat: *Selected Works*, 2009: 316). In terms of lifestyle and behaviour, they always showed themselves as important with the deliberately serious facial expressions of great officials and superiors, and with a rigid, formulaic, and fake acting style. They tried to control their daily life to force themselves into norms and patterns in the spirit of “completely overcoming selfishness and keep to propriety”<sup>2</sup>. According to historical records, not everyone vouched for the lifestyle of Confucius. He was a very fastidious person in the way of communication, dressing, walking, and always showed excessive humility towards the kings. The gesture of swinging his arms too high when walking and his low stooping in the royal court were somewhat artificial (perhaps following the commandments of the *Book of Rites* (禮記 *Li Ji*). These were different from the image of a relaxed Laozi, who freely rode on the back of a buffalo. On the other hand, while Confucianism highly respects ritual, saying that “rites are designed to prevent chaos”<sup>3</sup>, Laozi strongly counters, asserting that “rites are the focal point of chaos”<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *The Analects*, (Zi Lu 子路), 20.

<sup>2</sup> *The Analects*, (Shu er 述而), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *The Analects*, (Yan Yuan 顏淵), 1.

<sup>4</sup> *The Book of Rites*, (Jingjie 經解), 3.

In the history of medieval Vietnam, both types of Confucianist - bureaucracy coexisted: the authentic Confucian scholars and the degenerated pseudo-Confucianism. The doctoral epitaphs, inscribed from an orthodox Confucian point of view, emphasize the aspect of personality and morality, and at the same time praise and criticize the two contrasting types of Confucianist - bureaucracy.

The doctoral stele of the Examination in the year of the Ox in the Temple of Confucius in Thang Long (1697, composed by Nguyen Kieu and edited by Nguyen Quy Duc) wrote: “[There are people] who are worthy of their real name, think about the former and take care of the latter, remain loyal, practice virtue and integrity, make their names more and more famous... There are also people whose real name is contradicted, who are always being malicious, and only worry about jealousy and flattery, keep greed and corruption in their minds, keep their mouths shut as if their jaws are closed, make their reputations dirty... thus be despised by the next generations (Ngo Duc Tho, 2010: 679-680).

Or the doctoral stele of the Examination in the year of the Goat (1715, composed by Bui Si Tiem and edited by Nguyen Quy Duc) wrote: “[There are people] who keep their integrity, keep their heart pure, stand in the royal court with honesty, use morality and benevolence to help their masters, thus make his reputation famous, his career outstanding, and get praised by later generations. Some people constantly change their minds, say and do the opposites, only think about money and coffins, only plot to gain and lose. They are those who show off a strong spirit on the outside, but

inside they are cowardly and jealous. They do things contrary to norms, and then when successful, they separate themselves from the righteous path. Ultimately, they make their reputation dirty, and let the people make laugh at them” (Ngo Duc Tho, 2010: 735-736).

In pre-modern time, during the cultural reform movement in the early twentieth century, the radical Confucianist Phan Chu Trinh had especially criticized the degenerated and old-fashioned Confucianists at that time.

It seems that all ethnic groups have a cultural genetic material (meme, corresponds to a gene, the biological genetics). Confucianism, through the education system, has permeated Vietnamese social classes for thousands of years. Historically, both contrasting images of the Vietnamese Confucianists have existed. There have been the highly virtuous Confucianists who dared to be themselves, dared to be creative, dared to accept losses, and also dared to refuse the temptations. On the other hand, there have been a few officials - Confucian scholars who took advantage of their status to feed their families, “took the official position as a place to sell goods” (Phan Chau Trinh, 1949), lost themselves in exchange for security or a little glory and fame, and imprisoned themselves in a cage of conservative dogma. It is worth noting that today, in addition to the truly respectable faces of intellectuals and culturalists, unfortunately, there is still a shadow of a non-personality type of Confucian servants, who have been reshaped and hybridized by the changing of times. This characteristic can be observed in some scholars, officials, and intelligentsia in general.

#### 4. Vietnamese Confucianism: Past and Present

Confucianism and Confucian scholars are associated with Confucian education. Confucian education is both the result and product of Confucianism, as well as the cradle and incubator for training Confucian scholars. Confucius himself was a private teacher full of passion for all his life, and he also claimed himself to be an avid learner, “I doubt there will be someone as fond of study”<sup>1</sup>. He considered the prerequisites of academic cultivation were the voluntary passion, which could be elaborated as “studying without satiety, teaching others without weariness”<sup>2</sup>, as well as the lifelong learning, depicted by the determination of “study as if you have not reached your goal- as if you were afraid of losing what you have”<sup>3</sup>. The relationship between teachers and students in the community of his disciples was so touching and faithful. Confucius had given out the principles and methods of education that can even be considered as extremely radical in today’s world. For instance, he stated that learning must come from voluntariness, teachers “only teach those who are eager to learn”<sup>4</sup>, also “there is no use in learning without deep thinking”<sup>5</sup>, and “teaching must be taught according to subjects of different levels”<sup>6</sup>. In addition, he argued that in a scholarly debate of truth-finding as well as in doing benevolent acts, it is better to value a truly humane mind than to passively follow your

<sup>1</sup> *The Ethical Sutras*, 38.

<sup>2</sup> *The Analects*, (Gongye Chang 公冶長), 28.

<sup>3</sup> *The Analects*, (Shu er 述而), 2.

<sup>4</sup> *The Analects*, (Tai Bo 泰伯), 17.

<sup>5</sup> *The Analects*, (Shu er 述而), 8.

<sup>6</sup> *The Analects*, (Wei zheng 為政), 15.

teacher”<sup>1</sup>. Confucius also deeply analyzed the different motivations of learning. “The ancient scholars studied for their own improvement. Modern scholars study to impress others”<sup>2</sup>, means that we need to learn to benefit ourselves, not to show off to others.

However, every medal has its downside. Confucianism cannot avoid old age and illness. Like Confucianism, Confucian education itself contains many internal contradictions between theory and practice. In the process of experiencing, challenging and transforming over the centuries, Confucian education has revealed more and more defects, some of which are fatal.

In this article, we only consider Confucian education in Vietnam. If Confucian education had played an active role, in comparison with Buddhism, in perfecting and developing a bureaucratic feudal system from the Ly, Tran and Early Le dynasties, then from the Mac to Later Le Restoration and finally Nguyen dynasties, although it was still maintained, this doctrine had shown many signs of deterioration in terms of ideology, education and academic performance.

Regarding motivation, Vietnamese people are considered to be studious, but many people consider studying as the only way to escape (to get rid of poverty) and to progress (to become a bureaucrat for a better life). The doctoral epitaph of the Temple of Confucius in Thang Long in the year 1676 emphasized: “Examination is the hope for the prosperity of the upper, is the ladder for the advancement of the lower.

The way in ruling the country is nothing more than that.” S. Baron, a half European-Vietnamese living in Ke Cho in the 17<sup>th</sup> century commented: “The Tonkin people are inclined towards education because that is the only step leading to status and promotion. It encourages them to be more and more diligent in their studies” (Baron, 1811: 674).

Next, S. Baron discussed the contents that were taught in the school: “The scriptures focus mainly on maxims, political theories, principles of morality and civility, following the national governing regulations and the rules of human behaviour... They are not familiar with the philosophy of nature, nor they are good at mathematics and astronomy” (Baron, 1811: 674-675). Richard (lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century) observed: “Being indifferent to the search for the truth, they are only interested in moral conceptions. They put in the effort to learn what is available in the books of the sages, without examination or criticism” (Richard, 1778: 267). By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, according to Bissachère, “the Tonkin people were disciples of the Chinese Confucians... they are far below the level of the Europeans... in almost all forms of knowledge” (Bissachère, 1811: 120). Confucianism only aimed for adaptation and existence in society but did not promote society to become civilized.

This practice led to a formal learning method, a rote learning way in education, and clichéd expressions in examinations. Phan Huy Chu noted: “From [Le] Restoration dynasty, scholars only liked meticulously written sentence, literature became increasingly old-fashioned; in every paragraph, there was an opening

<sup>1</sup> *The Analects*, (Yong ye 雍也), 19.

<sup>2</sup> *The Analects*, (Wei Ling gong 衛靈公), 36.

sentence, which reflects the meaning of the whole paragraph... Scholars only learned by heart and then followed exactly what was written in the book, without stating their opinions. Poetic works were all copied from the old ones, without fear of duplicates [similar works]" (Phan Huy Chu, *Records on Administrative Systems of Successive Dynasties* 歷朝憲章類志), Volume II, 2005: 28). Pham Dinh Ho in *Written on rainy days* 雨中隨筆 criticized that most of the Confucianists at that time were just "people who love fame, follow the vanity, practice making fancy literature" (Pham Dinh Ho, 1989: 9).

The negative consequences of the degenerated Confucianism had caused serious problems for the Vietnamese post-medieval society. It paralyzed the creativity and prevented the innovative ideas of the people, first the Confucian elite, then the kings and royal officials, who all fall into the cultural quagmire of conservatism and xenophobia, and finally led to the stagnation, weakness, and backwardness of the nation.

Phan Huy Chu, a Confucianist who lived in Nguyen dynasty, while on a business trip to Java (Indonesia), a Dutch colony, remarked that the lives of the Europeans there were very civilized. However, his inherent Confucian ideology forced him to criticize: "The only thing they do not know is the canonical rituals of Confucius so that even possessing hundreds of skills, in the end, they are still classified as barbarians" (Phan Huy Chu, *Recit sommaire d'un voyage en mer* 海程志略1833; *An Account of a Travel by Sea*, 1994: 167).

Gia Long, the first king of the Nguyen dynasty, when ascended the throne had defended his conservatism: "I think if

we follow the ancient traditions, our nation will last forever" (Phan Thuc Truc, *Remaining Records of National History* 國史遺編 2010: 85). Tu Duc, the last king of the sovereign period of the Nguyen dynasty, turned that conservatism into extreme xenophobia. According to Phan Chau Trinh, at that time, "there were also educated people like Nguyen Truong To, who advised the king to go to the West, to examine their civilization and then let the people learn; many other royal officials had also asked for it, to which the king replied: "The Japanese are Barbarians, the Siamese are Barbarians; Barbarians learn from Barbarians. Why should a descendant of God like me have to learn from the Barbarians?" (Phan Chau Trinh, *The complete works of Phan Chau Trinh*, Volume III, 2005: 276). Similarly, in an exam paper submitted to the final round of the national examination in 1876, a Confucian scholar wrote: "Japan used to follow the Chinese civilization, but now they have eradicated the old habits to follow the norms of Western countries. Although now being a prosperous nation, soon or later they will turn out to be barbarians" (Hoang Thai Xuyen, 1910: 13).

It can be said that we cannot impartially evaluate Confucianism/Confucian education with both its positive and negative aspects. There are many two-sided effects of them affecting contemporary Vietnam, which required dynamic thinking and analytical approach in both theory and practice to assess. Confucianism/Confucian education have both rights and wrongs, sometimes they are good but bad at other times, just as the confession of Lady Kieu of Nguyen Du, who "thinks her merits are not matched her sins".

Confucianism/Confucian education is the cultural and educational heritage of Vietnam. As the cultural writer Nguyen Khac Vien said, “For Vietnamese people, Confucianism is more than a doctrine recorded in the books of the sages, it is a legacy of history, a fundamental legacy for us to absorb, to resist, and to overcome the process of historical transformation that the country is going through in the present era” (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1998: 2-3). Today, we can still learn the Confucian spirit in some respectable points, such as the non-extreme soft thinking style, the high responsibility towards life and society, the affection towards family and friends, and the bravery and straightforwardness of the soldier.

Regarding the last point, Nguyen Khac Vien, whose thought is blended by the ideology of Asia and Western Europe, once regretfully confessed: “[True] Confucianists are human beings, who are like the upright bamboos, like the firmed pine trees standing in the cold wind. As for us [contemporary intellectuals], we are just the bags holding knowledge, the reeds shaking before the breeze, and when hardships come, we cannot be trusted..., just like the sticky powder that can be easily moulded by opposing forces” (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1998: 51). This sincere but profound confession is worth our reflection. We should not accept or reject Confucianism/Confucian education in a “package” way, in a way as if we are eating “a mixed feast” of an old bad habit. Today, as suggested by Y.N. Harari, we should approach this doctrine in a “buffet” way, so that we can freely choose what we like and fit our body, without paying attention to people’s praise and blame.

But to get rid of the ambiguity and duality that Confucianism itself once had, what should we emphasize at the current historical coordinates of contemporary Vietnamese society in the twenty-first century? Should we focus on the positive or negative side of Confucianism/Confucian education? This dilemma is similar to the current problem posed to the intelligentsia. Currently, every Vietnamese person earnestly wishes the country to develop well and sustainably. But what to do to develop, which way to develop, to persist in preserving the tradition for development or to innovate comprehensively to develop? Different answers may vary depending on the concept, depending on the perspective of each person, but overall, according to the trend of the times and public opinion, it is probably not too difficult to get an appropriate answer. In modern architecture as well as in “post-modernism” philosophy, the concept of “deconstruction”, coined by J. Derrida and J. Foucault, has become a popular keyword, a trendy term. In common sense, “deconstruction” is not synonymous with “destruction”, it means restructuring, replacing a building, a model with a sense of inheritance selection. We do not renovate or patch up the old thinking system, but why we have to throw away the usable materials and equipment of the old building just to serve today? There was a time when we used to talk a lot about the word “revolution”, in the sense of sudden violence, but forgot or avoided mentioning the form of “evolution” in the sense of peaceful gradualism. But it is the cultural evolution, formed by many cultural transformations, that can be seen as a real driving force for a non-violent, quiet, and sustainable social revolution.

The difficulty here is the dare to bravely say goodbye to the golden past, a glorious time, or as Marx said, the situation of the dead clinging and weighing on the living. Here, perhaps we should take advantage of Confucius to carry out the very words of the holy teacher: “It is better to value a truly humane mind than to passively follow your teacher”. For the sake of benevolence, it will not be the case that today’s competent students are forced to yield the truth to the respectable teacher of the past. Allow me to repeat my statement in a paper written for a scientific conference on Confucianism nearly half a century ago (1973), inspired by the sentence Aristotle used to describe his teacher: “I love Plato, but I love the truth more than Plato” (*Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas*). Likewise, “We love Confucius and Mencius, but we love the truth more than Confucius and Mencius” (See: Nguyen Thua Hy, 1973).

### **Discussion**

Confucianism has passed through history, but Confucianism is still existing with us, all over the world and in Vietnam, with a variety of positive and negative contrasts, with its quintessential values and all of its hybrid variables in a complex and tangled situation. With the spirit of “self-selecting food” explained above, what should we do with Confucianism in the modern world? First of all, we need to re-recognize Confucianism. Confucianism can be considered as a major doctrine (in terms of cognition, socio-political and human ethics) that has made many contributions to the history of human’s ideology, but just that, nothing more. It means that we need to de-deify Confucianism, to not consider it as a religion that can save people, so as we need to debunk the myth

of Confucianism, to no longer consider it as a perfect ideology that can still be used in today’s world to improve society. What has passed, let it go! To do so, we need to identify the true face of Confucianism, to distinguish the prior pre-Qin Confucianism (with two key faces being Confucius and Mencius) from the Han Confucian and Song Confucian movements later.

Second, we need to deconstruct Confucianism, that is, to deconstruct its doctrine. What is the turbidity that has turned into residues of Confucianism that exist today as a social consciousness (*habitus*) in contemporary Vietnam? Is it the conservative spirit of “completely overcoming selfishness and keep to propriety”, or the “invariable religion” of some people in the policy-making departments that is hindering the process of social innovation and development? Or does it like the thought of the hierarchical caste, giving oneself implicitly the right to be “one man above another man” as the word used by Fukuzawa Yukichi, mixed with the kinship spirit of the old saying “one of us becomes a mandarin and the whole clan gets favours”, the ideologies which are still clinging to several corrupted officials, resulting in the source of power abuse and corruption? And in general, it is the passive submission mentality of the masses, who consider themselves as the inferiors (“when the wind blows over the grass, it always bends”).

Nevertheless, Confucianism still has a quintessence, which is indispensable in contemporary Vietnamese society. It is the spirit of “Moving”, which explains the impermanent evolution of society and people in the historical flow. It is the cluster of the three concepts “Wise - Humane

- Brave” of primitive Confucianism. In which: Humane is the basis of human love, a humane spirit and respect for the living rights of other humans; Wise is the reaching to a higher level of awareness of mankind and times, is an effective tool to neutralize ignorance, which is the cause of many calamities; Brave is the required commitment of the intellectuals, who dare to accept the righteous and dare to refuse the unscrupulous. What can be added is the ideology for the people of Mencius, who initiated civil rights with the spirit of “the people are the State’s most valuable possession, the land is next, and the king is the least”.

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