

SEMINAR: VIETNAMESE CONFUCIANISM AND EAST ASIAN CULTURE

*Reported by
NGUYỄN MẠNH TOÀN*

For 2 days, June 23rd and 24th, 2009, in Hanoi, the Institute of Philosophy, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences in coordination with the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, an affiliate of Academia Sinica (national academy of Taiwan), held the first international seminar on the topic: *Vietnamese Confucianism and East Asian culture*.

Vietnamese members attending the seminar included not only Confucian experts from such constituent institutes of Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences as Institute of Philosophy, Institute of History, Institute of Han-Nom Studies, Institute of Chinese Studies, Institute of Northeast Asian Studies, Institute of Social Sciences Information; but also scholars from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities and Hanoi National University of Education. Foreign participants were Confucian experts from the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, an affiliate of Academia Sinica; and the National Taiwan University. The seminar was

also attended by the leaders of Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences and the vice representative of Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Hanoi.

Out of the total 35 scientific reports sent to the seminar, 20 were presented and brought into discussion throughout 6 sessions. Those scientific reports and discussions ideas in the seminar were focused on the following topics:

1. General theoretical issues:

The scholars gave detailed analysis, in different aspects, of general issues in Confucianism studies in Vietnam such as typical properties of Vietnamese Confucianism, process of Confucianism propagation and development in Vietnam. In addition, discussion was also given, from the perspective of Vietnamese literature, to the methodology of Confucianism and women's rights studies, the importance of compiling and publishing the general glossary of Han-Nom letters and Chinese translation of Vietnamese Confucian pieces of literature in its history of import and rise. Regarding

this part, those scientific reports and comments reached a consensus in the following points:

- a. The import of Confucianism into Vietnam could be traced back to the Chinese-dominated period, but it was not until the country regained its independence did Vietnamese Confucianism have significant development.
- b. Confucianism contributed to building and consolidating the centralized feudal state in Vietnam.
- c. Confucianism in Vietnam had both similarities to and differences from its Chinese counterpart.
- d. Women's rights received more attention and recognition by Vietnamese Confucianism, compared with its Chinese counterpart. For instance, under the early Le dynasty, the flourishing period of Vietnamese Confucianism, its Hong-Duc Code included articles on women's rights that were more progressive than Chinese regulations.

Meanwhile, the scholars still excitedly debate and didn't reach a consensus over some points as followed:

- a. The development process of Vietnamese Confucianism can be represented by a downward curve, which began with Lý Dynasty, reached its climax under the rule of Emperor Lê Thánh Tông of Lê Dynasty, then fell into crisis until its final period under Nguyễn Dynasty.
- b. Under Nguyễn Dynasty, despite the imperial court's policy to restore its status in the society, Confucianism evolved into a highly dogmatic, rigid and harsh ideology, and became a hindrance to the emergence of patriotic,

advanced and social reform initiatives, delaying national development.

- c. According to other scholars, Vietnamese Confucianism achieved its most comprehensive and complex development under Nguyễn Dynasty. This is characterized by the fullest growth of books on Confucianism. On the one hand, Confucian publications of this period outnumbered the total of those produced under all the preceding dynasties. On the other hand, nearly all Confucian books written prior to Nguyễn Dynasty were literature and poetry pieces, while academic books, as can be seen under Nguyễn Dynasty, were almost absent.

2. Confucianism and East Asian culture:

On this topic, numerous scholars supposed that, Confucianism not only played a substantial role in providing a background to the construction of the Vietnamese feudalistic regime, but also equipped patriotic Confucian intellectuals with basic knowledge to struggle for national independence, self-rule and equal status with feudal China. In the cultural area, Vietnamese dynasties relied on Confucianism as their ideological and educational basis to carry out their imperial examinations, selecting those qualified to serve in the state's bureaucracy. In addition, Confucianism also helped enrich Vietnamese culture. Besides traditional customs and rituals, shared by basic social strata, which were typical of the native wet rice civilization, the majority of Vietnamese medieval customs and habits including worships, marriages, funerals, and festivals were heavily influenced by Chinese Confucianism.

The scholars also made a thorough analysis, in general, on the impact of Confucianism on East Asian cultural development, and in particular, the process of integration among Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism to create a common ideological background, referred to as “Three religions combining into one” in Vietnam. The conclusion was their affirmation that in the East Asian world, China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam all share the Confucianism-based culture. Furthermore, Confucianism constitutes a major part in the cultures of Singapore and Malaysia. Although the situations of contemporary Confucianism in these countries are varied, there still exist a number of similarities between them, such as their common confrontation with Western culture penetration, modernization, and the pressures to change inflicted by globalization.

3. Confucianism and Lê Quý Đôn:

This topic received much attention from the scholars, as can be seen in the number of reports and comments made on it in the seminar. Lê Quý Đôn’s works were elaborately studied by scholars, for example, “Kiến Văn Tiểu Lục” (見聞小錄), a record on Vietnamese history and culture from Trần Dynasty to Latter Lê Dynasty; “Quần Thư Khảo Biện” (群書考辨), written about his thoughts when studying Chinese history; “Thư Kinh Diễn Nghĩa” (書經演義), written on Chinese ancient history and philosophy; “Vân Đài Loại Ngữ” (藝臺類語), considered Vietnamese biggest encyclopedia of the middle age and “Đại Việt Thông Sử” (大越通史), written on the history of Latter Lê Dynasty, etc. The reports mentioned basic issues in Lê

Quý Đôn’s ideology, including his theory on “Ly” (理) (principles, logic); “Khi” (氣) (energy flow) and the ontological problem. The scholars agreed on the following remarks:

1/Lê Quý Đôn was the first Vietnamese Confucian intellectual to compose a monograph on Kinh Thư (書經) (Shu-jing) (Classic of History), through his “Thư Kinh Diễn Nghĩa”.

2/The preface of “Thư Kinh Diễn Nghĩa” written by Lý Trần Quán on 1778 gave an appropriate evaluation on Lê Quý Đôn and his work:

“This book relies on the original version of Shu-jing and provided new ways of interpretation and discoveries that have never been found or mentioned by previous generations and authors. Moreover, it was written with careful reference to relevant materials”.

3/Lê Quý Đôn contributed to the elucidation of Shu-jing, at the same time, raised his independent and new ideas on some points that needed further studying.

The scholars all consented that Lê Quý Đôn was an erudite Confucianist, and a prominent intellectual of Vietnam.

4. Confucianism in Vietnam:

The majority of scholars supposed that Confucianism had made its entry into Vietnam as early as the 1st century BC, but throughout the 1000 Chinese-dominated years, its influence in the country was still much restricted. It was only until the 10th century AD, when Vietnam regained its independence and started to build its own Đại Việt civilization, that Confucianism had an opportunity to extend its impact, due to the needs to construct a centralized feudal state.

Confucianism paved the way to cultural and educational development of the Vietnamese feudal society. It satisfied the need of staff recruitment into the feudal bureaucracy, training Confucian intellectuals that not only served the imperial court but also promoted the national culture through their art and literature compositions, national history compilation and medical research.

The scholars also agreed that Vietnamese Confucianism is not a simple reproduction of the Chinese original version, but adapted to suit Vietnamese traditional thinking and meet its then social needs.

5. Confucianism and nationalism:

The scholars acknowledged and analyzed the role of Confucianism in the building of national consciousness and nationalism in the globalization era. Although Confucianism has a long history of spreading and influence over the Vietnamese society, Vietnamese Confucianism is not coincidental with that of the Chinese Han or Song dynasties. This is due to the fact that Vietnamese people succeeded in integrating Confucianism into their own national identities, turning it into an effective tool against invasion, interference and assimilation conspiracies by Chinese dynasties throughout the history, thereby, forming non-extremist nationalism.

6. Confucianism and morality:

Regarding this topic, the scholars made intensive study on such categories of Vietnamese Confucianism as “dao nghia” (道義) (moral principle, righteousness), “trung” (忠) (loyalty, faithfulness) and “hieu” (孝) (filial duties); as well as the behavior culture

of Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, another Vietnamese salient educator, thinker and poet of the 16th century. They gave detailed analysis on the formation and development, and comparison between the categories and notions of Chinese and Vietnamese Confucianism. On that basis, they came to assert that the transmutation from the category “nghia” (義) of Chinese Confucianism to “dao nghia” (道義) of Vietnamese Confucianism, on the background of dialectic synthesis between Confucianism and Vietnamese worldview, has helped diversify the meanings of “dao nghia”, as well as its multi-functional role in building and maintaining the Vietnamese society.

All the discussions above support the idea that Vietnamese Confucianism has been well-oriented and developed.

After two-day of enthusiastic and candid scientific discussion, the seminar ended in success. It also pointed out a number of issues on Confucianism in East Asia and Vietnam in particular, that need further studying by researchers, such as comparing Vietnamese Confucianism with its counterparts in other East Asian countries except for China, identifying the role of Confucianism in the context of current economic globalization. As for Vietnam, Confucianism played a significant part throughout the nation’s history and continues to influence on the contemporary society. Consequently, it is essential that researchers keep studying on, in order to take advantage of positive elements and eliminate negative ones, serving the national development process. Those issues mentioned above can be considered suggested topics for the next seminars.