

## IMPACT OF CONFUCIANISM IN VIETNAM'S THOUGHT HISTORY

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### **1. The introduction of Confucianism into Vietnam**

Before Confucianism was introduced into Vietnam, cultural thought has developed at a high level compared to at the time. It has its own identity and has demonstrated the uniqueness of thinking and ideas about the people and the world. In the long colonial period of Vietnam, the Sinicization of the Vietnamese community is a regular and continuous process. Without indigenous ideological treasure with worldview and outlook on life and the bright Vietnamese culture that flourished before, Han cultural would have killed Vietnamese culture within the first few decades, not wait until more than thousand years of colonial.

Cultural thought and thought are strong enough that no force including military, economic, culture, thought might be overcome. This is a totally reject the notion that Confucianism has an active role in shaping Vietnam national consciousness. If going into social basis, and into the village units deeper, until the century 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup>, Confucianism does not have extensive social basis even a thousand years of Chinese domination went by. It is the indigenous ideas arising

from cultures of the Đông Sơn, Văn Lang, Âu Lạc period is fundamental, essential for the formation of national consciousness, national sovereignty.

Confucianism entered Vietnam since at least the first century before BC, following the northern invaders, and has created the basis for the Sinicization in different areas ranging from tools and methods of production, seasons to the way to see social hierarchy as intellectuals, farmers, workers, traders; rule and hierarchical style of the Han Dynasty which replaced the social structure of the regime of military chief, social mechanism with feudal landlords and farmers replace leader tribal patriarch; some customs, a number of elements in the costumes, rituals,... of the Han was introduced and gradually come into life of local residents; Han's writing became the official language in all documents of the ruling state<sup>(\*\*)</sup>.

Han culture is created position, strength

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<sup>(\*\*)</sup> The study before colonial, residents of Văn Lang, Âu Lạc whether they had writing or not remain a task of the researchers in Vietnam. The current material is not sufficient to confirm or deny the existence of writing (though primitive form) under the Văn Lang, Âu Lạc.

and development conditions for more than a thousand years of Chinese domination. Sinicization happened in many ways, firstly in social political areas, then and at the same time in the areas of consciousness, social thought. In a certain extent, Sinicization was successful, but the assimilation of the Vietnamese to turn them into the Han, turning Vietnam society into a Han society cannot be successful. It is the Vietnamese patriotism and wills against foreign aggression in all its aspects, including in thought aspects, particularly in Confucianism has failed plot to assimilate.

The Vietnamese resisted assimilation, but not completely against Sinicization and against the introduction of Confucianism. So after independence (in 1948), Confucianism continued to gradually enter into the social life and it was actively received, modified, vietnamized by the Vietnamese people, then gradually replaced Buddhism to become the official thought of the Vietnam feudal. But even become the dominant thought of the Vietnam feudal, Confucianism is not unique in every corner of the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. For about its five most brilliant centuries, Confucianism can not replace Buddhist and Taoism in the field of spirituality. The treatment of the government affairs, human behaviour every day is not based strictly on principles of Confucianism. In society, outside the court, in the villages and families, the less people comply with those principles. Of course, by Sinicization a thousand years, so Confucianism can not have a huge role

to society of Vietnam (in the different periods the role was also different, but that is not affected or unique role). Even in the current period, Confucian influence is not small compared to other lines of thought that are existing in the society of Vietnam now.

The influence process of Confucianism in Vietnam, as mentioned, starting from the first century BC, when Confucianism became the dominant orthodox thought in China, began to develop from the *Nhâm Diên*, *Tích Quang* to *Sĩ Nhiếp*, but really powerful from the Lý Dynasty and reached its peak in the Lê Thánh Tông (15<sup>th</sup> century). Then the role and influence of Confucianism began to decrease gradually and increasingly go into crisis. During the approximately three centuries, from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century, many thinkers have tried to exploit and use Confucianism for the development of the country, but more in depth search in Confucianism, they become impotent. Crisis of thought from the late nineteenth century and the triumph of the August Revolution in 1945 put an end to the role and influence of Confucianism which is considered as the mainstream thought, dominate and have a the most extensive major impact in the history of Vietnam. Of course, today, though not the orthodox thought and dominated the field of spiritual ideas, but Confucianism still has great influence in both positive and negative way.

## **2. Two different aspects of the Confucianism's role**

Overall, in political - social life, Confucianism played a large role, but

even so, it can not blur the national thought, the philosophy of "folk", as can not irreplaceable the culture of Vietnam. So far, there have been many researches working on Vietnam Confucianism and its impact in the history of Vietnam, but still lacks a clear analysis of interactions between indigenous nation's thoughts with Confucianism. Even in some works still have confusions between Confucian thought and Vietnam traditional native thought. In my opinion, the impact has created something that people usually call Confucianism in Vietnam, even Vietnamese Confucianism, unlike Confucianism in China and in Korea.

Recently, many scholars have highly appreciated the role of Confucianism in modern society, some European scholars who disappointed with the phenomenon of "degraded", "counter-culture" of the society in which they live also tend to the East Asian culture in general, and Confucian culture in particular with the hope of finding a "cure" for modern society. However, so far, their interpretation of Confucianism and its role in modern society is not enough to convince scholars, politicians and the society in general. Confucianism itself is a "collective" theory. Although Khổng Tử (Confucius) is considered as the master of Confucianism, but his original writings no longer remain. Though given that the thought of Chu Công and Khổng Tử were the keys, "Ngũ Kinh" (五經 *Wǔjīng*) and "Tứ Thư" (四書 *Sìshū*) were collective ideas of different people. The interpretation of Ngũ Kinh and Tứ Thư were a collective work and through many different historical

periods. Therefore, it contains a lot of conflicting opinions, even contradictory. Of course, acknowledge the role and influence of Confucianism, particularly the role of Confucianism today, not only based on the principles of its reasoning, but must consider all of these "legacy" that it left to the people and society. Of course based on the same reasoning platform, but the fact that the "legacies" are different. These were because of many historical, cultural, social elements and other natural conditions. Surveying the influence of Confucianism in Vietnam needs to come from that angle and the inner Confucian concept should be understood based on this; it can not be understood based on the content of the Confucianism's principles.

In Vietnam, Confucianism's legacy is still bulky. Maybe not "return", or "direct to it, and "promote" it as some scholars have identified when evaluating the role of Confucianism in the "dragon", "tigers" countries of the East Asia. If indeed it serves to promote the modern society to create the "dragon", "tiger" countries, Vietnam was surely a "tiger" country from long time ago. The reform of The Emperor Meiji in Japan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a break with Confucianism the most. The reform and modernization in Japanese society since the 60s of the last century was the continuity of that break. In South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, there also has the similar situation. These countries who were conducting reforms and social development, not seen anyone claim "return" to Confucianism again. With the successful reforms, Confucianism

was not rehabilitated. On the contrary, in fact, the society is more and more away from Confucianism and its legacies.

Since the "Renewal" so far, the market economy grows, Vietnam social life has diversity changes, fluctuations in the value of life, the formation of new values, the elimination of old values, moral degradation, ect. which have multi-directions including the "bad" and the "good" are also increasingly leaving confucianism. In some respects, such as thought, lifestyle, habits, the more the society escapes away from the Confucianism, the more it has the fast movement. It is the fact that clearly follows by the process of innovation. Agreeing with many scholars, we believe that Confucianism in Vietnam has created different implications for social movements. Besides the purpose of pointing out the value, the positive elements and aspects of Confucianism on the development of modern society, we also point out the limitations, negative elements and aspects which impede the social development so that we are able to get the right and full look of the role of confucianism in the modern society. Below briefly presented some such positive and negative aspects.

#### *a. Positive roles*

1. In history, Confucianism has played an important role in society and in the Vietnam's thought. The achievements in many aspects of Vietnam in about two thousand years, more or less, is associated with confucianism. The confucian thought became one of the important materials of Vietnam's thought in the history. These historical

figures are more or less affected by Confucianism or come from Confucianism, but they are political and spiritual leaders of Vietnam against the Han domination. Since the Vietnam's dynasties gained the independence (from 938) even at different levels, but they were aware that the Confucian thought can strengthen and develop their dynasties so they found the way to choose exploit, inherit, modify, and vietnamize it to the way which is in favor of the dynasty and the country. The basic ideas of Confucianism as "God's will", "legitimacy", "honorable man, jack sprat", "three Moral Bonds, five constant virtues, "loyalty, piety, polite, gratitude" are key materials to create new political, economic, cultural, social, ideological institutions... for the Vietnam's dynasties after gaining independence and autonomy. Later, on that foundation, the new dynasty could create an independent feudal society, promoting the "quality of Vietnam", the reform of old institutions, create a Vietnam feudal society as independence, autonomy as other countries.

2. Confucianism together with Buddhism entering into Vietnam has created a crowded national intelligentsia, plays an important role in political society and the spirit life of the nation. Of course, not only Confucianism is the only source and prerequisite for the formation and operation of the intelligentsia. The history of national construction and defense can not be missing a large role and enormous contribution of Confucianism intelligentsia. Confucianism not only plays a large role in creating the feudal

intelligentsia but also the team of kings, mandarins, the "leaders" in the local areas and regions across the country in the dynasty. In the prosperous period, Confucianism provided for the government apparatus the mandarin class through education and examinations. Along with the Confucianism intelligentsia, the mandarin class on the hand operate in the management apparatus, rule by feudal state, on the other hand, participation in cultural, ideological, academic activities of the country such as: compile national history; compose literary, art, discuss political, social, academic issues, training of officials.

3. Confucianism together with Han's writing contribute to bring a knowledge base about new nature society the Chinese in general and the Han people in particular, and many other nations in the region later . Based on that Chinese philosophy, astronomy, medicine, history, literature, art and lifestyle had highly influenced in the society of Vietnam. Thanks to Confucianism and Han's writing, new horizons of knowledge and culture were expanded in Vietnamese people and society. Of course, when entering into Vietnam, they were Vietnamized for suitable with natives. Under the influence of Confucianism, the knowledge in all aspects being previously accumulated also refine, upgrade, systematize again according to the spirit of Confucianism. That is one of the factors that constitute the foundation of the knowledge base of Vietnamese history.

4. Confucianism plays an enormous role in the developing and organizing

wealthy structure of centralized feudal state. In this role Confucianism, actually start to have influence since Chinese domination area. When regaining independence Vietnam society requires stability, unity and development, strengthen and maintain the independence and autonomy needs a strong centralized state to be able to against foreign aggression, construction of irrigation works. Confucianism has the ability to meet that demand so right from the Lý, Trần regimes and Confucianism began as an ideological basis for the construction of centralized feudal State.

The theory of Confucianism as king and mandarins, god's will, king faith established the power of thought to the centralized feudal system, so after that the dynasty was trying to exploit the Confucian theory to server for state building and consolidation of the dynasty. Confucianism has contributed actively to the concentration of power and creating strong centralized state, stability and development of feudal society, protecting the independence and sovereignty of the dynasty and the country.

5. Confucianism also has a large role in the development of patriarchal small farmer economy in Vietnam. The process of formation and development of Vietnam feudal society associated with the introduction and penetration, Vietnamization of Confucianism because it met the demands of small farmer agriculture which was changing from the cooperative clan, tribal to agricultural economy of patriarchal

feudal state. In that economy, the family as a unit of production, an important social component, a miniature model of society, the relationship was affected by to the direction of the Confucian theory of the whole length of more than thousand years.

6. Confucianism played an important role in the development of education in the Vietnam history. From even before setting up Quốc Tử Giám (the first university in Vietnam) in the Lý, Confucianism education was the official education of the feudal state with the best rules and contents. The examination, selection and training of students was also conducted with all the methodical rules, model and Confucian scholar class is powerful resources for this education<sup>(\*)</sup>. With Confucian, education was supported by centralized feudal state the Confucianism had more favorable conditions for development and ingrained in Vietnam society. Over a thousand years after independence, autonomy, and Confucianism education dominated the upper position in society and training to officials, and most of human resources for the state, army and society in general. Confucian education has played an active role during the development of feudal Vietnam, and even later, when the new European ideas began enters Vietnam in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

7. Confucianism also plays an important

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(\*) "Tứ Thư", "Ngũ Kinh" are the educational materials, training people with the goal of creating the educated, the "gentleman", "macho" people. The Confucian scholars around the village, the neighborhoods became educators; their home became the training school students for generations. Many Confucian scholars have become renowned educators in history.

role in establishing the lifestyle and culture in general, promoting the Vietnam cultural development in the detection limit. Many theories have played an important role in changing the orientation adjustment of lifestyle, customs and practices of the Vietnamese. Whatever the local lifestyle, customs have been established and deeply rooted resistance, the penetration of Confucianism has contributed to the "crossing out" the simplicity, rustic, naive, crude of the indigenous customs, habits and lifestyles from the Văn Lang, Âu Lạc. Many different customs, practices in "ceremony" of the Han people entered into Vietnam, ideas of "polite", "legitimacy" and other Confucian ideologies print in bold in Vietnam funerals, weddings, holidays, festivals, cult... Confucianism has been enriched and supplemented many new points for new lifestyle, customs, habits and custom of the Vietnamese.

8. Confucianism has a special role in fixing the template for social relations, family, clan in the feudal era in Vietnam. Confucianism has identified the basis pillar relationship of the society like a king and mandarins, teacher and student, parents - children, wife - husband, brother, friends... Its effects to the social relations is very large, very deep roots, clinging tightly in social life, until now many places, many areas, many relatives, families are not out of the model. Of course, the influence of Confucianism to the social relations, family, and clan absorbed into the life of the inhabitants of Vietnam more slowly than into the palaces, law courts but when it has soaked deep, it

has tight endurance much more. Confucian ethics in the social relations based on its model have long-term vitality and influence into the Vietnamese and have become a constituent element of the moral virtues of the Vietnamese.

Apart from the above, Confucianism also has an active role in some aspects. But the positive role of Confucianism is limited even when it is raised at unique position in society.

#### ***b. Limitations of Confucianism***

Limitations of Confucianism is also very big, complex and diverse problem. The researchers were able to agree in many identification, evaluation, but also had many different opinions, even contradictory. Below briefly presented in a limited number of aspects, the negative legacy that Confucianism is causing implications for modern society in our opinion.

*Firstly*, both in terms of theory and practice, Confucianism associated with conservatism, first in economic issues. Confucius was born on the foundation of an agricultural society which was beginning to move to feudalism. Therefore, it highly appreciated agriculture, defied commerce, engineering, handicraft and industry in later. In the ancient times, it was significantly positive, but as society entered the modern era, it became a barrier to the development of trade and industry. Confucianism strengthens agricultural society in terms of ideas and institutions making up a solid citadel to prevent any change of industry and commerce that we can not develop even though the seeds arose earlier and thus

hinder the development of society. In Vietnam history, Confucianism is often based on arguments of conservatives and conservative policies in the economy.

Even in the current period, mark of Confucianism in the conservative opinion on economic, culture, society development is not over. Actual history of Japan, Korea, China and Vietnam has proved that. In Vietnam and China today, many places, many areas, smallholder sector have been removed, Confucianism scholar class was over, but in these places, Confucianism economic and other economic variables continue to hinder many economic life. Way of doing business regardless of economic efficiency not based on the needs and tastes of the market, as for "fame" rather than "benefit", face disease still exist and at some areas, it remains the leading position.

*Secondly*, Confucianism contribute effectively create and maintain a way of thinking and action - to show the thinking that has temporarily called Confucian thought. Confucian thought is pretty special, different from other thought. It current affects to Vietnamese thought. Many people have talked about thinking of small producers or small farmers. However, talking about Confucianism thought almost has no one<sup>(\*)</sup>. However, people have recognized the fact that the "erudite scholar" that

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(\*) Prof. Nguyễn Tài Thư in a speech at the workshop "Vietnam Confucianism and culture of the East Asia" at the Institute of Philosophy (6/2009) also have very relevant remarks about the style of Vietnam Confucianism thinking: towards the facts, public interests, away from the metaphysical thinking; favorite simple and concise; way of fusion thinking; Cult saints and sages, dogma.

comes from Confucianism, has existed for thousands of years and still exist until today. "Erudite scholar" is a very special feature created by Confucianism, but in the other theories often do not see creating products like this.

The way of thinking which takes the Nghiêu (Emperor Yao), Thuần (Emperor Shun) era, take the whole behavior of ancestors, of the past to deal with contemporary issues that is, thinking back to the past, little attention to present and even have future-orientation is another outstanding feature. From the King to Confucianism scholars who were great mandarins and strategic mastermind in court when being asked on an issue that often take the past to be the "golden rule" for the present. Even dreams, plans for the future, their orientation is always striving towards the past as a key, essential, core element. Perhaps so, in dealing with problems Confucianism thinking often shortsighted, limited in many ways. In the training and education, "Extensive knowledge" is considered as the most criterions not the creation.

Features back to the past associated with other outstanding characteristics is "close-door". It is possible that Confucianism born, survived and developed in China, where the Han communities are self-centered, the culmination of the world, other communities are barbarians so that Confucianism should also have absorbed the thoughts, and these eventually became the guiding principle of thinking and acting of the confucian scholars and society. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century,

Western countries have developed much higher, but many the confucian scholars did not admit the sad facts that the whole nation was behind the times to learn and grow, and still see the Europe countries as barbarians.

With Confucianism "Intelligentsia is the most" (farmer is the second). Confucian scholars considers themselves as the culmination of the world, they no need to communicate, learn, their countries do not open to develop, however they was closed for the thinking, lifestyle outside can not enter because all these were all inferior and lose what they already had. These thinking and attitudes that lead to form of thinking, the mentality and actions of human when beings in contact with new things is withdrawn, isolated and segregated, integrated.

Features self-closing and self-contained of Vietnam feudal society for centuries have "a positive and effective contribution and" of Confucianism in terms of both theory and practice. Confucian scholars who have self-closing and self-contained ideas actively created the institutions, cultural social structure and firm thought to eliminate, prevent and eradicate new ones if they penetrate in the society. Consolidate and strengthen old ones, do not accept the new, self-framed itself in the available framework from the previous generation is one of the outstanding characteristics of Confucian thought. The "Extensive knowledge" has countless different expressions in the way of thinking and way of life and action.

*Thirdly*, some scholars have appreciated the role of Confucianism in the

consolidation and development of the family. Confucianism is considered to create the framework of family relationships and thereby maintain the stability of the family and society. However, this is only the advantages of Confucianism for the family. In other negative surface, which was previously noted, but recently have not been paying much attention, it is aftermaths of the Confucian with family. Some scholars consider that such routine activities of the family that recently risen as ancestor worship, care of graves, buildings house for their ancestors, compiled and documented family annals... are routine family rooted in Confucianism. It helps to strengthen family and clan's ties, from which they can promote individuals and community actively in helping each other. In our opinion, there may be confusion in the way of seeing the source of the above routines. Confucianism is not exactly the theory to make the above routines. The worship of ancestors from long ago, before Confucianism, which was a custom of the agricultural population. Do not remove this, Confucianism only reinforces it in the realistic aspects of life, in relationships with grandparents, parents who give our birth and education only. The restore of these routines therefore, not return with Confucianism.

In the earlier stages, we have put much effort to break the Confucian chains binding the family. But until now, no one can confirm Confucian aftermaths no longer harmful effects of contemporary family life. Women in rural, coastal and mountainous areas still

subject to be beared by chains of "spirit of three subjections of a woman and four virtues at different levels.

Many practices about family and clans still exists and potentially thrive. Remarkably, rather than aftermaths in family, clan relation was brought to society, use in office, behave in the workplace. "One person is a leaders meaning that all clan will be rely on", relative doctrine within the village communes, districts, authorities are still a force created many undesirable consequences for economic development, culture and society in general.

In our opinion, the explanation of the cause of the economic miracle of Japan in the last decade of the twentieth century lies in the use of Confucianism values about family, is probably only true to a limited level then be inflated because of the other motivations. If the Confucian values in the family has a large role, why in the earlier period and in the places where Confucianism has large influence such as China, Vietnam, Korea, not show such effect. And similar to above, if true as commentary on the development of Japan, then why in the place of Confucianism arose and existed more than two thousand years, the value does not work be like in Japan? Perhaps there are other more fundamental causes determining the miracle of Japanese development, not the Confucian values in the family. If Vietnam use the Confucian values that certainly could not have been as successful as expected.

*Fourthly*, in the management of society, Confucianism is to leave the hard

aftermaths and has a large scale. Confucianism emphasizes moral values (charity and justice), courtesy education (courtesy) in social management. But in reality, Confucianism has made the so-called charity and justice, courtesy education (courtesy) to be a rule principles with level arbitrary. Already becomes the "mandarin", they have enormous power.

Already become king, they are son of heaven with absolute authority. Society has lower levels, great gentleman, scholar, honorable man, jack sprat. On the face, the king considered the people as children, but in fact quite the opposite. Looking back at the whole history can be seen, Confucianism encourages the "behavior" in social management in the interests of corporations rather than the rule of virtue and not rule by law. The governance and management of society of Confucianism associated with three moral bonds, five constant virtues, three subjections of a woman, four virtues, rectify the name... several hundred years has seeped into the education system, power society, today there are still remnants continue to be present in social life, create obstacles to hinder social development. Governmental system based on Confucian thought in fact extremely allergic to these internal changes and the effects of alien will hinder the acceptance of new ones and promote the development of the system, ect. The metamorphosis of administration, social management in unsystematic, subjective, dictatorial not democracy, in practice is

very diverse, sometimes difficult to see clearly.

*Fifthly*, in educating and training people, Confucianism appreciates classics and history. But classics and history used to be mechanically compliant, metaphysics, literature, technical contempt. Confucianism limits to create new things. Self-improve of Confucianism is mainly in moral practice, defy academic industry, tend to learn to be mandarins and not to the creative work, learn to be the mandarins not to be the workers. Mode of Confucian examinations heavy on examinations, learning by heart rather than memorizing scientific knowledge about nature and society, ect. The aftermaths of Confucianism in education and training is causing great influence on the education and training in Vietnam today.

Confucianism is still influential in Vietnam contemporary society. Many people are looking to restore Confucian ideas. But if in Confucian studies we do not question seriously, clearly both the positive and negative trends, it is likely to recover the negative factors for the development of modern society. It is important that Vietnam society is needing of reform ideas, needs innovative thinking continues to accelerate industrialization and modernization, the Confucianism is not able to meet these new demands in most respects. Vietnam society in the past century, especially in the twentieth century, when receiving the flow of new ideas, new styles of thinking, often have to undergo a period of "fighting" with the Confucianism and even these of

thinking and ideas in some areas, some times forced to be Confucianism to go deep into the social life and promote the effect. It seems that the similar situation is happening, although new ideas, style (think, live, action...) will not only have to "fight" with only Confucianism.

The summary above of the positive role and limitations of Confucianism is not everything which history of Confucianism and Confucian heritage mark on Vietnamese people and society. The fate of Confucianism in contemporary society not only by the its active role or limitations decide, but also the modern social life. The use, inherit and develop the role of Confucianism as well as to limit its harmful effects therefore, must be based on needs and trends of modern society. It can not just look at Confucianism or based on the desire of some "modern Confucian scholars" who are eager to revive the "spirit" of Confucianism in the previous period of its history.

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