

THOUGHT OF "REVITALIZING THE PEOPLE'S SPIRIT" OF PHAN CHAU TRINH

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ABSTRACT

Phan Chau Trinh was a Vietnamese patriot from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, who made significant contributions in both practical and theoretical aspects during the struggle against oppressive domination to reform and develop the country on a new path. One of his prominent ideas was the concept of democracy, which ignited the spirit of patriotism and the self-reliant will of the Vietnamese people, enabling them to recognize the social realities of Vietnam at that time and actively contribute to the nation-building and development process. This article analyzes the fundamental concepts of 'revitalizing the people's spirit' by Phan Chau Trinh, highlighting how these ideas greatly contributed to the struggle and social construction of the Vietnamese people during a period of significant changes.

Keywords: Phan Chau Trinh, Vietnam, democracy, revitalizing the people's spirit, struggle.

1. Introduction

The French colonialists invaded and quickly imposed their domination over Vietnam in all areas. The Nguyen dynasty became a mere formality, serving as puppets for the colonialists. Under the exploitative and oppressive policies of the French colonialists, the country became increasingly impoverished and backward, with the people suffering greatly and enduring the burden of "một cổ hai tròng."¹ The urgent needs of Vietnam at that time were to develop the country, enhance the intellect, spirit, and livelihood of the people, promote social progress, and strengthen military power... to create the strength for the struggle against the French colonialists and their feudal puppets. Faced with the demands of history, Vietnamese patriots rose up to seek a path of national salvation, uniting with the people, determined and united in the revolutionary struggle.

¹ Depicting the situation when the Vietnamese people were oppressed by two ruling powers, it is now France and the Vietnamese feudal system

Phan Chau Trinh, with a patriotic heart, dedicated his entire life to the revolutionary cause of national salvation. With fervent love for the country, he contributed to awakening the national spirit and inspiring the revolutionary movement that liberated our nation from slavery. Phan Chau Trinh's political ideology and practical activities were a guiding light, awakening the Vietnamese people to break free from the despotic and semi-colonial regime. His revolutionary thoughts encompassed various aspects such as politics, society, culture, and education. They left a significant mark on the history of the nation and the revolutionary movement in Vietnam during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Phan Chau Trinh, along with contemporary intellectuals and patriots, courageously stood up to mobilize the people to participate in reform programs and progressive political initiatives, rallying the strength of the masses in the common movement against the French colonial invasion. With a deep understanding of the circumstances and the power dynamics of the Vietnamese people at that time, he advocated for seizing the time and opportunities to strengthen the people, awakening them to rise and fight against the colonialists and their feudal puppets. This was precisely the endeavor he pursued in mobilizing the people by the principle of "revitalizing the people's spirit." Thus, we can see that Phan Chau Trinh made progress in his perspective and revolutionary principles that embodied progressiveness during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Vietnam. His political ideology and innovative approaches had a strong impact on the revolutionary movement of the masses, inspiring them to dedicate themselves to the collective cause of the nation.

2. Researcher methodology

To carry out the research content in the article, the author relies on the philosophical worldview and methodology of Marxism-Leninism to study the ideas of Phan Chau Trinh. At the same time, during the research process and the presentation of the thesis, the author also utilizes various specific methods such as historical and logical analysis and synthesis.

Regarding the reference materials, the author uses the complete works of Phan Chau Trinh, consisting of 3 volumes, published by Da Nang Publishing House in 2005, as the source for conducting the research. In addition, the author also inherits and builds upon other research works by other authors and scientists who have studied Phan Chau Trinh.

3. Results and Discussion

“Revitalizing the people's spirit” to revive the morale of the people.

In his threefold principles, Phan Chau Trinh placed the issue of 'enlightening the people's intellect' as the foremost task in the reform movement of the country at that time. He believed

that due to the low level of domestic intellect, our cultural and social life lagged behind other countries by a significant margin. Therefore, to achieve self-governance, the first step was to raise the intellect of the people. But why should the intellect of the people be elevated? According to Phan Chau Trinh, the purpose of raising intellect was to enable the people to realize their rights and responsibilities, awaken the spirit of self-reliance, self-strength, and the traditions of the nation, and elevate the 'patriotic spirit' throughout the country. Hence, the second issue in Phan Chau Trinh's threefold principles was precisely Revitalizing the people's spirit".

Living in an era where national independence has been lost and the people's freedom no longer exists, Phan Chau Trinh early recognized the essential issues needed to change the situation. He had a deep reverence for the history of the nation. He affirmed that our nation, with its thousands of years of nation-building and preservation, from the time of the Hung Kings² to the present day, has always demonstrated heroic resilience and determination in the struggle for the nation. Phan Chau Trinh believed in the traditions of the people, considering the Vietnamese nation as a "heroic and resolute" nation, with a history of courageous struggles that have left a lasting legacy

However, given the current situation, he expressed deep sorrow over the backwardness of the country. He compared the sentiments, psychology, national spirit, and tendencies of the Vietnamese people with the world and compared them with previous eras. And he had to exclaim, "Alas! The country of Nam (Vietnam) now, the national spirit is weak, the intellect is dim, compared to European and American countries, the gap is immeasurable in miles" (Thau, 2005, vol.2, p.64). He believed that it was precise because of the low spirit within the people that our nation was subjected to domination and exploitation: "...it is simply because the Vietnamese people are feeble that they are oppressed and suppressed..." (Thau, 2005, vol.3, p.252). He expressed pity for the "spirit" within the people, lamenting the scarcity of heroes today compared to the past when the Vietnamese nation was not lacking in heroic figures who traversed the land and sea. Phan Chau Trinh mourned for Vietnam, a country that should have been a powerful nation but instead became a colony. Why is that? - According to Phan Chau Trinh, it is because other countries value professions and are willing to venture far away, while the Vietnamese people prefer to hold official positions, cling to their homes, and only seek personal gain instead of contributing a small amount to create great wealth. Others work for the unity of the nation, but our people only think of personal benefits, disregarding their lineage, as the saying goes, "The rooster in the house only scratches its bones." Others are determined to sacrifice their lives for noble causes, but our people are timid and afraid of death..." (Giau, 1993, p.71-72). The

²The Hung Kings - is the term used to refer to the kings of Văn Lang, the ancient kingdom of the Lạc Việt people (Vietnamese) in Vietnam. The dynasty is believed to have been established over 4,000 years ago.

stagnation and decline of the nation do not stem from the inherent weakness of the Vietnamese people. From the earliest days of history, the Vietnamese nation has existed for thousands of years, establishing and preserving the country, achieving independence, national sovereignty, and a distinct culture. The decline of the Vietnamese nation is partly due to the lack of self-reliance and self-strengthening among the people, and their unwillingness to learn, which has caused the loss of the noble spirit and the traditional strength accumulated over thousands of years. He looked at history and the glorious traditional consciousness of the people, believing that: "In terms of history, the Vietnamese nation is not weak. Then why, under more than 60 years of protection, do we cover our eyes and close our ears, refusing to learn from the good things of others?" (Thau, 2005, vol.3, p.261).

To overcome the current situation, it is necessary to make modifications and reforms in all aspects of society, including politics, culture, economy, and education. We must learn from the civilization of Western countries as well as the reform examples of Japan and China. This is to first and foremost raise awareness and consciousness among the people, awakening their rights, namely "civil rights." It is essential to ignite the "spirit" within the people into a blazing fire that consumes all remnants of oppression and obstacles, aiming to achieve self-governance, restore independence for the nation, and secure freedom and happiness for the people.

The reasons for the weakening of the "national spirit" of the Vietnamese people

According to Phan Chau Trinh, on the path to rejuvenating the national spirit, the first obstacle that needs to be overcome is the institutional framework of the feudal regime that has ruled Vietnam for thousands of years and is currently maintained by the colonial authorities of French Indochina, turning it into a puppet government, serving as a powerful support for France from the Imperial Court in Hue to the Vietnamese officials at the provincial, district, and village levels.

As mentioned above, the situation in Vietnam is increasingly lagging, and the livelihood of the people is becoming more difficult. Part of the reason is that the Nguyen dynasty failed to perceive the changes in domestic and international situations. They adhered to a conservative approach, solely focused on maintaining their own existence. This has led Vietnam into a state of crisis. According to Phan Chau Trinh, the main cause of this lies in the feudal regime, which has made the people ignorant and the country weak. This has been a long-standing issue: "The mistakes from the Le³ dynasty passed down to the Nguyen dynasty, gradually deteriorating"

³The feudal dynasty of Vietnam, the Later Le dynasty, can be divided into two periods: Early Le and Later Le. The Early Le dynasty lasted for 99 years, from 1428 to 1527. The Later Le dynasty lasted for 256 years, from 1533 to 1789.

(Thau, 2005, vol.1, p.366). Having served in an important position in the Nguyen dynasty's court, he had the opportunity to witness the corruption and lowliness of the Nguyen kings and officials.

Phan Chau Trinh himself was sentenced to death by the officials of the Southern Court, but thanks to the intervention of Ernest Babut⁴, the sentence was reduced to imprisonment, and he was sent to Con Dao⁵. Phan Chau Trinh witnessed the surrender of the Nguyen kings and officials to the French colonialists. He also witnessed the loyalty of the Nguyen kings and officials to the French, as they turned a blind eye to the exploitation and killings committed by the French colonialists, who were supported and empowered by them. They oppressed the people and suppressed those who loved their country and advocated progress. Therefore, he accurately assessed the true nature of the feudal machinery of the Nguyen kings and officials.

It is for this reason that Phan Chau Trinh vehemently condemned the Nguyen kings and officials. According to him, the Nguyen kings and officials were an incompetent, lazy, unscrupulous bunch who were accustomed to flattery and intimidation. He described them as follows: "From the city to the countryside, the cunning ones are like ghosts and demons, deceiving, exploiting, afraid to do anything; the weak ones are like pigs and cows, trampled upon and unable to utter a word of protest" (Thau, 2005, vol.2, p.54).

Therefore, Phan Chau Trinh expressed a deep hatred and disdain towards the Nguyen kings and officials. His letters to Governor Beau⁶, speeches on "Ethics and Morality of East and West," speeches on "Authoritarianism and Democracy," Tinh Quoc Hon Ca I, and Tinh Quoc Hon Ca II... all revealed Phan Chau Trinh's attitude towards the Nguyen kings and officials. Especially notable is the letter he sent to Khai Dinh⁷, commonly known as the "Seven Lamentations," which listed the seven heaven-defying sins of the neglectful king deserving of decapitation. This was a

⁴ Alfred-Ernest Babut (1878 -1962) was a French journalist who dedicated his life to journalistic activities and associations in support of the nationalist movements of the Vietnamese people in their struggle against French colonialism throughout the first half of the 20th century.

⁵ Con Dao, located in Ba Ria-Vung Tau province, is an archipelago consisting of 16 large and small islands, approximately 230 kilometers away from Ho Chi Minh City. This place was where the French built a system of prisons to detain particularly dangerous criminals for the French colonial regime, including political prisoners and death row inmates.

⁶Paul Beau was a French diplomat and politician. He graduated in law and began his career in diplomacy in 1880. Paul Beau served as the French ambassador to China before being appointed to Vietnam and becoming the Resident-General of Indochina in October 1902.

⁷Khai Dinh was the 12th emperor of the Nguyen dynasty in the history of Vietnam, reigning from 1916 to 1925.

decisive blow against the feudal regime of the Nguyen dynasty, it accused the French politicians of providing support for the decayed golden throne of the neglectful king; the Hue court was a reanimated corpse used by the French government to intimidate the Vietnamese people, while Khai Dinh was a king going against the progressive trends of the world and contrary to the will of the people. Therefore, Phan Chau Trinh warned his compatriots: "Oh, what crime has our country committed to endure such suffering? What crime have our people committed to bear the weight of that demonic king? If we do not join forces with the masses to eliminate it, we will inevitably perish along with it" (Thau, 2005, vol.3, p.154-155).

Under the eyes of Phan Chau Trinh, the imperial court of the Nguyen dynasty was seen as the source of crimes in Vietnamese society, acting as obstacles to the development of Vietnam. According to him, if the monarchy and the imperial court were not overthrown, and the corrupt officials were not removed, the Vietnamese people would not be able to embrace civilization and progress. They would not realize their rights and stand up for themselves. He also believed that the authoritarian regime had poisoned the people, causing them to lose their love for the country. Therefore, he called for collective and determined action to eradicate this regime. They had to "uproot it from its very core" and "wipe out all remnants," in order to restore patriotism and the "soul of the people." Only then could they hope for a future of freedom and independence, or else they would be forever enslaved (Thau, 2005, vol.3, p. 280). He urged everyone to...

We need to awaken each other now, we must unite and resist the wicked kings and officials. We must break them apart, topple them, and eliminate their influence. We need to fill up the source, cut off the roots, and eradicate the power that has haunted us for thousands of years. If we don't do this, we will never see the light of the sun and the moon again! (Thau, 2005, vol.3, p.136)

The reason for such a situation, according to Phan Chau Trinh, is that the colonial government of France supported and colluded with the corrupt officials in Vietnam. At the same time, he condemned the colonial rule policy of the French. According to him, it was one of the factors that worsened the domestic situation, made the people's lives more miserable, and weakened the spirit of self-reliance, self-strength, and the concept of "people's rights" among the population. Despite advocating cooperation with the French, Phan Chau Trinh boldly opposed their actions. According to him, French protection had its flaws. These flaws, as Phan Chau Trinh saw it, were: firstly, turning a blind eye to corruption and decay without bothering to address it; secondly, showing contempt, mistreatment, and physical abuse towards the Vietnamese people, comparing the people of the South to cattle and pigs, refusing to treat them as equals, and being afraid of dirtiness. He wrote:

People of all intellects, whether foolish or wise, gentle or fierce, believe that the colonial power mistreated the Vietnamese people and did not treat them as human beings. "Those with a heart,

everyone is astonished and indignant that the French treat us like animals, treating us like wood or stone." He exposed their exploitative intentions as follows: "They (corrupt officials) know well that what the officials protecting them like is collecting maximum taxes, accelerating their collection, and what the officials protecting them hate is obstructing their activities, gathering and plotting." "They do not open avenues for profit, yet taxes must inevitably increase, and their collections create numerous difficulties..." (Thau, 2005, vol.2, p.52-56).

The governing policies of the French colonialists and the incompetence of the Nguyen dynasty's court have weakened the "national spirit" of the Vietnamese people. The people were not aware of their rights, nor did they realize the need to stand up with self-reliance and self-strength, to reform their lives and culture, to change their way of eating, dressing, and traveling, and to modify their mindset... all in the hope of progress. In order to overthrow the feudal regime and implement a strategy based on the French colonialists' "civilizing mission" to reform the country, Phan Chau Trinh believed that it was crucial to first awaken the national self-esteem, the spirit of patriotism, the national traditions, the consciousness of self-reliance and self-strength. Above all, he vigorously advocated for "people's rights" and "democracy". By making the people aware of the humiliation of losing their country, and the conditions of slavery, Phan Chau Trinh aimed to show the people the importance of the nation's fate and the dependence on the awareness of the people regarding their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Once the people have a clear understanding of their duties and rights, they will determine their destiny and that of the country.

Another point that Phan Chau Trinh sought to find was the cause of the nation's loss and the weakness of our people, which he believed lay in the moral and ethical foundations of society. According to him, whether a country is lost or preserved, prosperous or declining, is determined by its moral and ethical standards. The main issue to be addressed for the revival of the nation is the revival of its moral and ethical values. He wrote: "Brothers, let me sum it up for you: we already know that our country is lost because of the loss of moral and ethical values, our people are weak because of the loss of moral and ethical values, and we are looked down upon and ridiculed by others because of the loss of moral and ethical values. Therefore, we must rectify and restore our moral and ethical foundation" (Thau, 2005, vol.2, p.263). At the same time, he believed that in the current world competition, success or failure depends not only on material strength but also on spiritual strength. This spiritual strength lies within each nation, namely the moral values of that nation. For nations that have lost their country, like Vietnam, the greatest challenge in the competition for independence and escape from backwardness is to have a fundamental spiritual strength, a spiritual strength based on the glorious history of their own people. It is the inherent characteristic of a crystallized nation, like an enduring gem, an unbreakable iron... Phan Chau Trinh said:

From ancient times to the present, any ethnic group, regardless of the country, whether rich or poor, weak or strong, that has engaged in competition with other nations in the world, has relied not only on physical strength alone but also on moral values as the foundation. Especially for those nations that have fallen and now seek to rise from being oppressed by others, need an even stronger moral foundation than the currently prosperous nations (Thau, 2005, vol.3, p.243).

Measures to "revitalize the people's spirit "

Based on the established theory, Phan Chau Trinh tirelessly propagated and mobilized the people and his comrades to initiate the movement for civil rights. Building on the theory, he and his comrades Huynh Thuc Khang and Tran Quy Cap⁸ launched the Duy Tan movement, which spread throughout the central provinces and across the country. Phan Chau Trinh and his comrades traveled to villages and delivered speeches about the necessity of awakening intellect, cultivating morality, purifying oneself, practicing frugality, and awakening the national spirit. They called on everyone to rely on their strength, to be self-reliant, and to elevate the consciousness of democracy and civil rights. Confidential reports from the French authorities in Quang Nam confirmed this intention:

Public meetings were organized for speakers to teach the rural population about new ways to bring progress to the nation of Annam through secure means. They took control of schools and managed the educational system. They provided students with stimulating materials that instilled a love for the country, hatred for the invading forces, and contempt for death. Each individual had to be ready to sacrifice for the homeland. These were truly excellent lessons in spirit and determination, though it is regrettable that one day we would have to pay the price for that education (Kinh, 2001, p.48).

He made vigorous appeals to the people to take advantage of the government's legal protection to demand their right to live and be recognized as individuals. And he soon gained support from his comrades and the people who shared the same ideals. The first person to grasp and effectively implement Phan Chau Trinh's ideas was Le Co, who was related to him. Le Co transformed Phan Chau Trinh's theory of civil rights into reality in a remote and backward area. Two years after the reform was implemented, Le Co transformed the village of Phu Lam⁹ from "a secluded and inaccessible forest village, with transportation difficulties, a desolate place until now" into a lively place with smooth transportation. Not only did the villagers and neighboring residents

⁸Two Vietnamese patriots collaborated with Phan Chau Trinh during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Vietnam.

⁹Phu Lam village, Le Duong district, now known as Tien Son commune (Tien Phuoc) in Quang Nam province.

admire it, but even those from afar, especially those who had experienced Westernization, made efforts to visit Phu Lam to witness the organized work of a righteous man (Thang, 1992, p.227). Moreover, it developed into a powerful and widespread movement. A notable example of the people's response to Phan Chau Trinh's democratic ideas was the strong expansion of movements demanding civil rights. First and foremost, these movements aimed to resist the harsh oppression and exploitation imposed by the ruling authorities and feudal officials. The people had long harbored resentment due to heavy taxation and the burdensome exploitation by corrupt officials. As they were accustomed to traditional violent struggles, the new ideas had a tremendous impact, captivating them and inspiring them to join the fight. Riding this wave, the reform movement in Quang Nam and throughout the Central provinces shifted gears and rapidly progressed to large-scale anti-tax protests in 1908. It mobilized tens of thousands of people to take to the streets and directly confront the French colonialists and their feudal lackeys, creating a resounding impact on the national community and the entire population (Thang, 1992, p.227).

Phan Chau Trinh had a correct perspective when he elevated the position of the people to the highest and most sacred level, recognizing them as citizens of a colonized nation. He aimed to awaken in the people a spirit of independence, self-empowerment, and national pride, urging them to save themselves and their nation by learning about civil rights and promoting democracy.

When people understand their position, roles, and rights, they will undoubtedly be the ones to rise in revolution. In this regard, we see that Phan Chau Trinh emphasized the role of the people and entrusted the mission of national salvation to their hands, embodying the spirit of "the revolution is the people's cause." Therefore, he placed great emphasis on the role and rights of the people, affirming their right to life and to enjoy privileges, as well as their sacred obligations to the nation.

The reason for the moral and ethical decline in society, according to Phan Chau Trinh, is that the ethics and principles of traditional Vietnamese culture have been used as tools to uphold oppressive monarchic relationships. The Confucian-Mencian doctrine, which was once present in our country, was manipulated to strengthen the autocratic rule of the kings. The kings were considered sacred, like gods, while the people were treated as mere rubbish, devoid of any rights. Therefore, in order to restore the Confucian-Mencian ethics and traditional moral values in Vietnamese history, as advocated by Phan Chau Trinh, we must first preserve the foundation of our national ethics and principles. We should learn from the positive aspects of European ethics and principles, harmonize them, and then promote them as national moral values. The core of national moral values lies in the love for the country. Phan Chau Trinh wrote:

The Confucian-Mencian doctrine has been lost, and now if we want to have a strong moral and ethical foundation, it is not enough to simply import democracy from Europe. Democracy is like a good medicine used to cure our own oppressive poison. Bringing the civilization of Europe means bringing back the Confucian-Mencian doctrine." (Thau, 2005, vol.3, p.259).

Restoring ethics and moral values is also a step towards revitalizing the "national spirit" within the country, helping the people recognize their mission and rights in order to collectively restore the nation and the people. For this purpose, it is necessary to have a spirit of patriotism combined with ethics and moral values, combined with democracy. "From now on, the Vietnamese people must have a sense of love for the country... The national moral values must be deeply ingrained in their minds, then the aspirations for freedom and independence of our nation can be achieved in the future" (Thau, 2005, vol.3, p.253). And "only when the people understand such (understanding of democratic governance) will they truly love their country, and only when they love their country can we hope for freedom and independence in the future. Otherwise, we will remain oppressed forever" (Thau, 2005, vol.3, p.280).

Therefore, revitalizing the "national spirit" within the people and granting self-governance to the nation is the task of the entire population, not just a few individuals. Therefore, all citizens must unite, cooperate, and form a unified and resolute force. Only when the people are united can they gather as political parties and organizations to struggle against French colonialism. Therefore, Phan Chau Trinh called on the people to unite and form organizations and groups to participate in the revolutionary movement, considering unity as a strength of the nation.

Moreover, in order to reform the country, restore the precious traditions of the nation, overthrow the feudal regime, and fight against French colonialism to regain national independence, it is necessary to have new individuals of the era. These individuals should possess both virtue and talent and be willing to shoulder the responsibilities of the nation. Recognizing that Vietnamese society needs new individuals, those who have a sense of civic responsibility and the ability to exercise citizen sovereignty, Phan Chau Trinh strongly criticized the idealized Confucian scholars of the past. From the early years of his activism, he considered it his mission to construct a new worldview for a new class of people. He advocated for the creation of exemplary individuals who possessed practical skills and were dedicated to serving the people and the nation, individuals who were willing to traverse vast oceans to seek knowledge for the salvation of the country and its people. These individuals should have a sense of personal dignity and respect for human rights. In other words, according to him, the new ideal individuals should embody the values of Benevolence, Righteousness, Ritual, Wisdom, Trustworthiness, Diligence, and Frugality.

4. Conclusion

Thus, through the revolutionary principles and methods of Phan Chau Trinh and his comrades, the Duy Tan movement was launched and spread throughout the country. They made great efforts to mobilize, propagate, and preach to the people about their rights, duties, position, and role in society. This was the most concentrated expression of Phan Chau Trinh's democratic ideology. The content of his principles received early support from many people and created positive changes among the masses. From this foundation, the people began to realize the need to rise and revolutionize all areas of society. First and foremost, it was necessary to revive the spirit of the people and gradually restore the "national soul" through self-reliance and self-strengthening, demanding self-governance in the hands of the people. And "every Vietnamese person should understand their obligations towards Vietnam, so that not only will Vietnam become prosperous and strong, but also no one in the world would dare to look down on the Vietnamese people anymore" [Thau, 2005, vol.3, p.263].

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