

The Conditions Forming Vietnamese Traditional Thinking

Dr. Trần Sỹ Dương

Institution of Philosophy, Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics. 135 Nguyen Phong Sac Street, Nghia Tan, Cau Giay District, Hanoi, Vietnam

Email address: duonghvctqg @ gmail.com

Abstract— Over the course of thousands of years of development, the Vietnamese people have shaped the traditional way of thinking with features containing both positive and negative factors. Traditional thinking is a product formed under the impact of natural, economic, social etc. conditions. Learning about the conditions affecting this formation helps deepen understandings about the characteristics of traditional Vietnamese way of thinking, thereby contributing to the promotion of positive influences and mitigation of adverse influences this way of thinking has on the current period of building the nation.

Keywords— Traditional way of thinking; characteristics of thinking; conditions forming way of thinking.

I. INTRODUCTION

Vietnamese traditional thinking was formed and passed on through thousands of years of history. This way of thinking has characteristics such as conservative, empirical, while limited in theoretical thinking; inclined towards strategy, detail, lack of coverage; lack rationality; weak legal thinking, both conservative and flexible, etc. The formation of this traditional type of thinking results from the impacts of many factors including economy, culture, social, politics etc. specifically characterize Vietnam.

II. ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

In the work of “German ideology”, C. Marx and F. Engels affirmed that, to people, “ They are like how their living activities like. Therefore, what they are like aligns with their production, what they produce and how they produce it. Therefore, what individuals are like depends on the physical conditions of their production”^[1]. At the same time, they also emphasized: “ It is man who, when developing his material production and material communication, transforms with that reality, both his thought and his thought product. It is not consciousness that determines life, but life determines consciousness”^[2]. Therefore, in a certain aspect, it can be said that human thinking is a product, a reflection of the characteristics of social production in certain historical periods. Therefore, to learn Vietnamese traditional thinking, first of all, it is necessary to find out the production base itself, which is one of the most important material foundations for the formation of the thought.

For a long time in Vietnam, small-scale, backward, fragmented, individual and stagnated agricultural production was the main one. The classic Marxists have mentioned the characteristics of small production in general, especially when they analyzed Asian modes of production and of pre-capitalist

societies. In classic works, the concept of "small production" is usually used synonymously with the concepts "natural economy", "patriarchal economy", "small farming economy", "small goods production" etc. Although C. Marx, F. Engels and VI Lenin have not given a complete definition of small production, from their viewpoints, we can generalize that “small production” is production has some common characteristics such as: ownership mode is the regime of small private ownership of the means of production; the workforce's level is the craft level with rudimentary tools and techniques with slow progression; the purpose of production is to be self-sufficient, to maintain the existence of producers and their families, not to create products for exchanging; labor division is formed spontaneously, traditionally and is naturally; individual labor is dominant, cooperative assignment is only random and not inevitable; production is dispersed, closed, isolated and is carried out according to empirical methods; social relations are natural, familiar, bounded by kinship, village relations etc.

It can be said that one of the most prominent characteristics of small production is low volatility. In agricultural production, from generations to generations, small-production farmers still work on the same field, with the same tools as their ancestors, in the ways that their ancestors used to practice, summerize and pass on. In the words of C. Marx, they "plowed on their land completely in the old rudimentary way of their fathers and resisted all new things with the inherent stubbornness of the slaves, of the past custom that haven't changed over many lifetimes"^[3]. That process of production goes on again and again in a seasonal cycle, from time to time; with the same plants, poultries, cattles etc. As a result, small producers do not need to worry and think to summarize and generalize, but create a habit of following the old experiences in the production process.

Similarly, the small-scale production of handicrafts is also stable. Product models are almost unchanged; production methods, handcraft tools and production technology are old-fashioned, remain almost unchanged over the years, even additional improvements do not make much change to these tools, technology and methods.

The cyclical, repetitive production process has helped workers in small production accumulate a good deal of experience. Due to the stability of the production process, the succeeding generations just need to master the experiences and repeat the operations which the previous generations handed down to continue their production and their life. Such

a fixed, almost unaltered state of the production process does not raise the need forcing people to explore and create new things. Thus, the rise of the mentality of valuing experience is inevitable. With its characteristics, small production does not set any requirements that force workers to broaden their knowledge and improve their skills. In addition, the feudal society lasting for thousands of years did not create conditions for people to go to school. In the case of people who did go to school, then they were taught "... just study Confucianism ... far from reality ... learn to deal with, not to learn, to theorize and advance higher"^[4]. The content of their studying was the sages' literature and scriptures, whilst the knowledge of technical science, experimental science, and natural science was completely foreign. By the French colonial period, due to the obscurantism policy of the feudal-colonial government, education was the privilege of very few people and the majority of people in the society (over 90% of the population) were illiterate.

Thus, subjectively, small-scale producers themselves do not have the need to learn because they find themselves able to meet the needs of production and life by acquiring the experience of previous generations combined with their own experiences accumulated in the process of producing and living. Objectively, society did not facilitate that learning either. In such a situation, obviously, empirical thinking, which one of the outstanding features of traditional Vietnamese thinking, is formed. Consequently, when it is dominated by empirical thinking, traditional thinking limits in theoretical thinking. This can be clearly seen when we explore the mechanisms of formation, existence, and transmission of experience over generations. The small producers' experiences arising from the practice of their simple, cyclical production are only sentiment knowledge, which is the combination of experiences accumulated over time with no great leap. These experiences are not systemized and generalized by scientific concepts and categories but only expressed mainly through verses and proverbs. Therefore, the content of the experiences is more difficult to express clearly and completely.

The stability of small production is almost unchanged or just cyclically changed, which both give rise to empirical thinking and also form the basis of *conservatism as well as a fear for changes in thinking style*. Small producers live and work according to pre-existing models. Production process, product designs, breeds, care methods etc. are unaltered. Within that stability, small producers carry out production and can completely be satisfied with the very low standards of capital need of themselves and their families, according to the style of "3 bowls of rice, 3 pieces of clothes, no hunger, not cold to death". Therefore, the mentality of fearing to change and sticking to the old ways arises in the people. This mentality is also consolidated by the characteristics of backward manufacturing which is always governed by the favorable but also unpredictable natural conditions of Vietnam. These characteristics keep small producers from taking the risk to experiment and create new things. This situation having lasted for thousands of years gave rise to their conservative character, which makes them always allergic to

new things. As said by C. Marx, they are the people who "firmly oppose all social progress"^[5], those who hate all changes, especially sudden changes.

Small production is a self-sufficient production with the purpose of creating products to satisfy the needs of the producers, therefore, the small producer is more aware of the use value than the exchange value. With manual, rudimentary and outdated tools, they use their physical power more than their brainpower. The relationships they maintain in production are mainly based on kinship instead of economic interests... These characteristics *have limited the development of economic thinking*.

III. NATURAL CONDITIONS

Among the factors that affect the formation and development of thinking, natural condition is the factor that has considerable influence. C. Marx also said that natural geographic circumstances can make people become indolent or industrious, make people capable of calculating or not able to do that. For Vietnam, when commenting on the impact of natural geographic conditions on Vietnamese people, Professor Tran Van Giau wrote: "The natural geographic situation has contributed to shape the big virtues of Vietnamese people from ancient times"^[6].

Vietnam's natural conditions have created many advantages as well as difficulties for production and living. With a coastline of more than 3000km, the two ends of the country being two large plains connected by the coastal plain, hot and humid climate, fertile soil, these natural conditions are beneficial for crops and livestock. However, Vietnam also experiences harsh natural disasters every year with erratic weathers. In summer and autumn, storms and floods occur consecutively, engulfing many villages, fields and residents, which causes people to move to other places for living and production. Individuals', families' and communities' living and lifestyles are dependent on natural factors- weathers and climates. On the other hand, people have known to adapt to, conquer and renovate nature to a certain extent. People become more resilient, flexible and have a more subjective dynamism than people in places with only natural favors.

In terms of geographical location, Vietnam is an important traffic hub of countries in the region as well as other regions in the world. This feature creates many advantages for economic and cultural development. However, this location also makes Vietnam the target of foreign enemies. Scarcely is there any country in the world that, in the course of its existence, must always cope with invasive wars like Vietnam. This history has made people become brave with decisive attitude and always ready to make plans to fight the enemy with both strength and intellect, "use the minority to defeat the majority". In term of social history, this fact is also the basis for forming *flexibility in the thinking of Vietnamese people*. (There seems to be a contradiction: the economy is the basis of conservatism and fear for changes, but the historical and social characteristics create the flexibility in traditional Vietnamese thinking. ?!)

IV. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONDITIONS

The process of formation and development of human thinking on the one hand, is influenced by economic factors and natural conditions, on the other hand, it is also influenced by cultural and social factors.

Vietnamese culture is a diverse and rich culture that has been formed and developed for thousands of years. Starting from the Northern Delta region - the center of political and social life, "the cradle of the formation of the Vietnamese nation, the homeland of Vietnamese cultures"^[7], in the course of existence, the culture exchanged and received the cultural values of China and India and in the expansion to the south, it gradually adapted itself to the new ecological environment. Simultaneously, it received the elements of Cham culture, Khmer culture etc. creating the rich and diverse nuances of Vietnamese culture. Vietnamese culture is clearly shown in people's relationship with nature, in the way of eating, dressing, talking and behaving between people. These cultural values have been formed, existed and developed in human's life, in which labor and production are the most important. This also means that the small production in Vietnam has made an important contribution to form the basis of the national culture, and at the same time, that culture reinforces and develops the characteristics of the thinking of producers in the production.

Among the cultural and social factors affecting the formation and development of traditional thinking, village culture has left deep imprints. In the traditional Vietnamese social life, villages held a very important position, being the basic unit forming a nation. Each village existed as an isolated and closed socio-economic unit. It is the limited, both physically and abstractly, space of the village narrowed down the vision of people. Their thinking was only used to solving small problems within the border of their villages, therefore, *it inclined towards details but lacked of strategy and coverage*.

As an isolated socio-economic unit, the village is also a highly autonomous entity. The autonomy of the village, in terms of culture, is shown through village rules, conventions, customs, practices, institutions and cultural activities of each village. These factors have adjusted and influenced all behaviors of the villagers. For villagers who can still lead a normal life without stepping out of the bamboo grove- the border of the village in their whole life, they only know that what regulate their life are customs and convention without knowing the laws of the country. They behave towards each other according to neighborhood bonds and kinship relationships. This situation has contributed to *the irrational and emotion-oriented way of thinking*, as well as *the weak legal thinking* of Vietnamese people.

Along with the impact of village culture, imported cultural factors have had a significant impact on traditional thinking.

When considering these effects, first of all, the impact of Confucianism must be considered. Being imported to Vietnam from the beginning of the AD, the Confucian culture has had a great influence on the traditions, way of thinking and characters of Vietnamese people. Acquiring and developing Confucian conceptions about "Nhan - Nghia" (humanity),

Vietnamese people have always attached great importance to humanity, loving and helping each other with the spirit of "good leaves protect torn leaves". This philosophy is the basis to reinforce the relationship-oriented behavior which was formed under the direct impact of the process of working and living in the Vietnamese villages. Confucian rigorous norms bound people in defined values and they were only allowed to behave within those patterns. This feature easily makes people passive, accepting the existing reality, less daring to cross the set boundaries to develop. Along with that, another feature of Confucianism is the spirit of nostalgia, which means always looking towards the past, absolutizing the role of the past, respecting the past with the spirit of worship. The consequence of this is that it makes people think and act merely according to old experiences and turn old experiences into the standard to measure of all the values of the present and the future. This feature is very consistent with the empirical Vietnamese way of thinking, thus it creates more conditions to reinforce the existence and development of such way of thinking.

Along with Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism have also left clear marks on the way of thinking and behaving of the Vietnamese people. Buddhist doctrines that teach people about tolerance, kindness, inclination to the good things and elimination of evil ones are easy to be received by people who carry the tradition of kindness as depicted in traditional verses: "love people as you love yourself", "good leaves protect torn leaves" Thus, they become a basis to reinforce the emotion-oriented way of thinking and behaving of Vietnamese people. The Taoist "inaction" idea helps people form a special behavior motto - considering everything that happens is natural, not worrying about oneself - in failures, which are likely to occur in small production - production that depends on the uncertain and risky natural conditions of Vietnam.

As mentioned above, it can be said that Vietnamese culture is an open culture, which contains a mixture of different ideologies and concepts of outlook and worldview, which also more or less contributed to the formation of integrated and dialectical thinking. Meanwhile, production is mainly a self-sufficient and small, which is one of the bases to form the metaphysical, scattered, one-sided way of thinking of Vietnamese people. This also means that a conflict has arisen between an open culture with regular exchanges with the outside, and a closed economy. This is one of the bases for the arising of complex contradictions in the traditional Vietnamese way of thinking. In terms of culture and ideology, they tend to make people want to separate from social relationships and the real social life, especially the material life (Confucianism refers mainly to spiritual life and belittles materials and material activities; Buddhism encourages people to escape from trivial material needs, to head towards supernatural relations; Taoism emphasizes "inaction" ...). However, social reality forces people to face harsh nature, poverty, diseases ... This situation has contributed to the creation of *a way of thinking that is both dialectic, flexible and conservative; both integrated and fragmented....*

V. POLITICAL CONDITIONS

In terms of politics, Vietnamese people have gone through various regimes: feudalism, semi-feudal colonialism and the current time is the period of transition to socialism. Each social regime has made different marks on the way of thinking and psychology of Vietnamese people, especially the feudal regime. The feudal regime in Vietnam lasted for thousands of years, containing strict hierarchies that created hierarchical mentality. This mentality has limited and forced people to behave and act in predetermined frameworks, thus supplementing and maintaining the conservative, undynamic, and the reluctance to change of Vietnamese people. Besides, caste discrimination in feudal society prevented the formation of a democratic atmosphere - an indispensable condition for the development of theoretical thinking. This has become a favorable environment for the existence of the empirical with the lack of autonomy and dynamism way of thinking. Within the nearly 100-year domination of the semi-feudal colonial regime, with the obscurantism policy, French colonialism and feudalism have confined the intellect of all social strata in obscurity. Before the August 1945 revolution, more than 90% of the Vietnamese population was illiterate. In such low intellectual conditions, empirical thinking and conception of the absolute role of experience become useful and appropriate.

A new social regime with a centralized and subsidized management mechanism was established and existed for a long time. This management mechanism has molded human thoughts and actions into formulated theoretical points. Creative thoughts and actions that go beyond the defined stereotype, differ from the opinions of superior leaders or resolutions could be considered political faults with all kinds of blame. Therefore, this mechanism eliminated the democratic atmosphere - the living environment of scientific, independent, autonomous and creative thinking. It directed people into the pre-arranged, stable, invariant order ... All these factors made people become passive, reluctant to think,

afraid to change and not dare to take risks. These are also the characteristics consistent with the empirical, conservative and passive etc. traditional Vietnamese way of thinking and thus, it further facilitates the existence and development of the this thinking.

In conclusion, the long-standing small production along with natural, socio-cultural, political conditions have created conditions for the formation of the traditional thinking of Vietnamese people with characteristics such as deep empirical thinking, weak theoretical and economic thinking; lack rationality, emotion-oriented thinking, limited legal thinking; inclined towards details, lack of strategy; flexible but also conservative ... In the current period, some characteristics of traditional thinking are causing certain obstacles to the process of building a market economy with a commune orientation. In the context of increasing international integration, understanding the conditions forming of traditional thinking will help overcome the negative characteristics of this type of thinking, thereby contributing to success of the country's renewal process.

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