

## **PHAN CHAU TRINH'S THOUGHTS ON ECONOMICS - LESSONS APPLIED TO VIETNAM TODAY**

**Assoc.Prof.PhD. Trần Mai Ước<sup>1</sup>**

**Summary:**

PhanChau Trinh (1872 - 1926), the leader of Duy Tan movement, with his economics thoughts, has left a bold mark in Vietnam's development history in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. From going through and clarifying the main contents of PhanChau Trinh's economics thoughts, the article also points out and analyzes the lessons that Vietnam can apply to its renovation, development and integration processes today.

**Key word:**

PhanChau Trinh, thoughts, economics thoughts, application

### **1. BACKGROUND**

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the French colonialists invaded Vietnam and turned it into a colonial, semi-feudal society. The Vietnamese feudalism and Confucian ideology proved increasingly powerless against the demands of the anti-aggression fight for national independence. In that context, Phan Chau Trinh (1872 - 1926) emerged with many ideas and tendencies of country renovation in a progressive direction related to economics, politics, culture and social life. When studying Phan Chau Trinh's thoughts on economics in his ideological system, we can see that it contained new, revolutionary and progressive contents, showed patriotism and enthusiasm and reflected the contemporary situation associated with economic, political, cultural and social conditions in the early 20th century but the most important issue was independence and self-strength for the nation. National independence and self-strength were the ultimate goal of Phan Chau Trinh's economics thoughts. The contents of economics thoughts initiated by Phan Chau Trinh have so far been thought back to have the same values and historical lessons for Vietnam today.

### **2. CONTENTS**

#### **2.1. Basic contents of PhanChau Trinh's economics thoughts**

The formation of PhanChau Trinh's ideological views on economics was attached to the socio-historical conditions of Vietnam and the world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, on the other hand, it was also under the impact and influence by the Vietnamese nation's patriotic thoughts, Tan Thu thoughts and Renovation thoughts of the progressive patriotic intellectual class appearing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In general, PhanChau Trinh's thoughts on economics did not arise from the emerging bourgeois economy and society, but the national spirit, appeared before the feudal regime bankruptcy, with an access to the external progressive thought trends affecting Vietnam at that time. Therefore, PhanChau Trinh's voice was the common voice of the nation represented by the patriotic feudal intellectuals on the way to gropingly find a new truth with their patriotism and enthusiasm and most important goal of national independence and self-strength.

First of all, heightening the role of production was a clear content in Phan Chau Trinh's economics thoughts. During his lifetime, he was very interested in business development. In "Đạo đức và luân lý đông tây (East-West Ethics and Morality)" (10,878 words long) and "Quân trị chủ nghĩa và dân trị chủ nghĩa (Monarchy and democracy)" (8,432 words long) which were his two presentations in Saigon, Phan Chau Trinh said that "whoever holds commerce will hold the world" (Qui tient le commerce tient le monde)<sup>2</sup>, so he advocated business development, shop establishment, commerce expansion, livelihood training for the people, and land reclamation association setting-up, plantation broadening and favourable terrain exploitation. He especially condemned the corrupt official class, called them "licensed robbers". He highly appreciated persons with practical mind. He said that for anyone in the world who wanted to be rich, noble, and not self-pitiful for conscience, only going for trade, farming for a living would make them luxurious and earn a lot of money without committing bribery from the nation. According to Phan Chau Trinh, the people's life was made more and more prosperous, the country's

---

<sup>1</sup> Chief of Office; Senior lecturer; Banking University of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

<sup>2</sup>Compiled by: Vinh Sinh; Translators: Nguyen Nghi (2018), *PhanChau Trinh and political works*, Tre Publishing House, p. 207; 239

economy was developed with measures and organised towards self-reliance and self-strength. To achieve this goal, it was first required to remove the remnants and obstacles of the feudal regime, gradually gain national independence, build a strong democratic bourgeois state, a fair prosperous society, deploy social equality and enforce discipline and law in the country, etc. And to do so, it must make the people self-renovated by means of propaganda and support to refute "outdated Confucianism", backward feudal ethic behaviours which were deeply ingrained in the people's subconsciousness. The ruling feudal class worked hard to instill absolute loyalty to the king, loyalty to their contemporary royal dynasty, not loyalty to the fatherland and the country. In addition, it was necessary to implement the "thái Tây (Western world)'s" customs, use the national script to propagate and support patriotism, compatriotism and moral standards (which were bourgeois in essence) for citizens. On the one hand, it was making the people realize the "outdated customs" of Confucianism. On the other hand, it was making the people understand the age's trend, recognize that Vietnam was formerly a civilized country, in a favorable geographical position, rich in natural resources. However, the Vietnamese people were not entitled to such resources, and the country was still underdeveloped and poor, while other countries were civilized. In Vietnam at this time, there were persons who either "put their wisdom in useless places", for example, passion for music, gambling, fortune-telling, etc. or just enhancing literature, "persistently holding illegal taxes", or crouching under fame to "tự mình lại củng cố một căn tính nô lệ (reinforce a slave identity by themselves)". In particular, it was essential to educate the Vietnamese people to eliminate the ideologies: firstly, it was considering "nội hạ ngoại di (insiders civilized and outsiders barbarous)" without knowing the techniques and skills in developed countries. Secondly, it was required to eliminate the idea of appreciation for royal way. Thirdly, it was necessary to remove the view that the past was right and now was wrong. Fourthly, it was removing the conception of respect for officials and contempt for the people without knowing how to pay attention to a good or bad situation in villages.

Secondly, focusing on developing many business lines in different fields was prominent in Phan Chau Trinh's economics thoughts. According to him, a nation that desired to develop its economy must develop business lines to create products for social life. In particular, during his communication with Western civilization, as well as when reading Nguyen Truong To's cahier, Phan Chau Trinh was very fond of Nguyen Truong To's suggestion to the king that it was required to quickly send persons to Western countries for apprenticeship. In his speech in Saigon (1925), he said: "There are also educated people like Nguyen Truong To who saw the king go to the West exploring their civilization, then send others there for study..."<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, when communication with and movements of the Western civilization developed and brought study opportunities, he called on the people to actively participate for country development. He wrote:

*"Quickly going to learn jobs,  
We will teach each other after then"*<sup>4</sup>

Business line expansion for economic development purposes was one of the contents Phan Chau Trinh cared about much. The economy's nature in his conception was not a self-sufficient economy but a commodity economy. That production must be exchanged with foreign countries, providing many goods on the domestic and export demands for economic accumulation. He wrote:

*"Professions are racing more and more forwards,  
Things are newer and newer for their good look.  
Transporting them to sell in foreign countries,  
External benefits are added to good internal ones.  
A lot of profits increase with more and more capital,  
Wide trading everywhere in all four directions"*<sup>5</sup>

Phan Chau Trinh was aware of the role of business line development for socio-economic development in general. He set up a program of self-establishing tree planting, cloth weaving and trading associations, commodity production and boarding goods trading facilities to serve and ameliorate the country's production. It could be said to be a new finding that contributed to positive transformation in socio-economic life<sup>6</sup>.

In his opinion, in order to develop the country's economy, it was essential to focus on, fortify and develop industry and commerce, at the same time, to improve agriculture, reclaim land to put into agricultural production,

---

<sup>3</sup>Nguyen Van Duong (1995), *Phan Chau Trinh's collection*, Da Nang Publishing House, p. 807

<sup>4</sup>Nguyen Van Duong (1995), *Phan Chau Trinh's collection*, Da Nang Publishing House, p. 129

<sup>5</sup>Nguyen Van Duong (1995), *Phan Chau Trinh's collection*, Da Nang Publishing House, p. 146

<sup>6</sup>Tran Mai Uoc (2017), *Phan Chau Trinh's political thoughts*, Political Theory Publishing House, Hanoi, p. 146

and to expand economic exchanges with other countries. Phan Chau Trinh himself also paid great attention to practical activities in production movements and business line development, he directly learned to make tortoiseshells while being exiled in Con Dao (1908-1910), develop films while in Paris, etc. Thus, there was unity between his thoughts and actions, that is, valuing professional development. Here, we have somewhat clearly seen that in addition to having overcome the guidelines of removing the old and backward life patterns, paving the way for a new, more progressive lifestyle meaningfully critical of the obsolete practices and customs and establishing a new way of life of civilization, progress and humanity colours, through Phan Chau Trinh's economics thoughts, we have seen his awareness that national independence restoration strength would depend on business line amelioration strength and the country's economic and financial potential improvement.

Analyzing Phan Chau Trinh's economics thoughts, we have found that he was a man with a modern vision. And other Renovation thinkers, including Phan Boi Chau, only looked at the country's economic development in general, with their immediate aim of improving the people's living standards. But Phan Chau Trinh clearly defined that the country's economy must be a commodity economy and the developed people's livelihood was a favorable condition for raising the people's awareness and spirit. Besides, he was also conscious of ownership, a particularly important issue in our modern society. He pointed out that country development must be based on focusing on and fortifying industry and commerce, improving agriculture, producing agro-forestry products for export, and relying on French policies for economic development. He encouraged the Vietnamese people to learn jobs, contribute capital to do business, improve machinery, work on schedule, produce many goods, trade with foreign countries for more capital, expand and develop the country and people's lives.

## **2.2. Lessons applied to Vietnam today**

It can be said that for Phan Chau Trinh's basic thoughts on economics, if the limitations of historical conditions and class nature had been ignored, we still draw the lessons and apply them to Vietnam today.

### **Firstly, a lesson on seizing opportunities to promote economic integration**

During development, awareness of international and domestic historical conditions, and on that basis, analyzing the situation, setting out revolutionary guidelines and strategies in line with practices have become absolutely necessary for every country and people. During history evolution, each different historical period has had its requirements and missions set forth, requiring thinkers to have keen understanding of the situation and change in thinking to keep up with and respond to history changes. Among the patriotic intellectuals at that time, Phan Chau Trinh was one of the most typical representatives in the historical period of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was freed from all traditional constraints, going out to find a way to save the country, to promptly set out the Renovation guidelines towards national liberation.

Phan Chau Trinh once wrote: "a race wishes to be like a civilized one, which can be thanks to self-independence and self-strength only"<sup>7</sup>. During the current renovation, we must build, consolidate and develop national bravery on a par with other countries and the age regarding both awareness and practical activities for country development. The sense of self-reliance and self-strength in the current context is very important, laying a foundation for our rising to integrate into the world actively, not passively, without obsession. The sense of self-reliance and self-strength must be synchronized in all aspects of economy, politics, culture, science - technology, theory, etc. to ensure sustainable development. In addition, the integration and cooperation trends are inevitable, so it is necessary to take advantage of all external resources for great renovation achievements in all aspects of social life. In the current context, Vietnam always attaches importance to generating and promoting synergy for quick and sustainable country development, including internal force promotion considered as a decisive factor, external resource exploitation as an important factor, combination of national and age strength. The renovation takes place in the context of the stormingly developing scientific and technological revolution, increasingly growing and expanding knowledge economy, under the impact and influence of the fourth industrial revolution, etc. so Vietnam must actively use scientific and technological achievements, especially high technologies (information technology, biotechnology, new material technology, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, big data, etc.) along with knowledge economy achievements for socio-economic development, labor productivity increase, product quality improvement, industrialization and modernization shortening, "taking a shortcut to wait in front", favorable domestic environment building, and the world's modern advanced science and technology application for the sake of rich people and a strong country.

Today, economic globalization has become an objective trend, a vivid reality, including both positive and negative sides, opportunities and challenges, strongly affecting all countries and peoples in the world. Being quickly aware of such a trend, the Party and State of Vietnam have set forth the guidelines of proactively integrating into the

---

<sup>7</sup>Nguyen Van Duong (1995), *Phan Chau Trinh's collection*, Da Nang Publishing House, p. 696

international economy, implementing independent and autonomous foreign policies along with multilateralizing and diversifying international relations. Up to now, our country has established stable relations with major countries, foreign and trade relations with many countries and territories; we have had economic integration at all levels (bilateral, regional and global), joined AFTA, ASEM, APEC, WTO. Intensive and extensive international economic integration has contributed to making Vietnam an important part of an economic net with the world's leading economies. Especially in the last 2 years, Vietnam has taken part in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (2018) and most recently signed a Free Trade Agreement with the European Union (EVFTA; 2020). Via external relation expansion and regional and international economic integration, Vietnam has attracted an increasing amount of foreign investment capital in the forms of direct investment (FDI) capital, and development assistance (ODA) capital; also established credit relations with international financial - monetary institutions, made use of a significant amount of concessional loans from the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), Asian Development Bank (ADB); at the same time, taken advantage of advanced science and technology, foreign management experience, and expanded import and export markets to develop the country. On the other hand, thanks to expanded international cooperation, international friends can better understand the country and people of Vietnam, show more affection, support and help for Vietnam's renovation. Thereby, Vietnam has also contributed to the common struggle of the progressive people in the world towards the age's common goal of peace, national independence, democracy and social progress. On its immediate development path, Vietnam has both opportunities and difficulties and challenges intertwined. The ongoing anti-COVID-19 pandemic fight is a particular example, so the lesson on seizing opportunities to promote economic integration while studying and learning about Phan Chau Trinh's economics thoughts is still not old in the current period.

#### **Secondly, a lesson on improving the people's quality of life**

Economic poverty has been one of the root causes of socio-political instability. Therefore, focusing on and seeking solutions to improve the people's quality of life would play a very important role in socio-political stability as well as our national construction and defense cause. At present, attention to issues of the "people's livelihoods" or "livelihoods of the people" is of humanistic thought and humanity. The "people's livelihoods" is often explained as the people's life, but mainly emphasizes the people's essential needs. Such needs of course include material and spiritual needs. However, when it comes to the "people's livelihoods", most concentrate on the material aspect and pay little attention to the spiritual aspect of the people's livelihoods. In fact, the "people's livelihoods" is a historical category. In the condition that the people are not satisfied with the minimum needs: food, clothing, residence, travel, or in other words, when the basic right to survival is not solved, it will be hard to guarantee the improved people's quality of life!

In the context of the "people's livelihoods" becoming a focus in Vietnam today, the first mandatory requirement for the government is to further care for and solve difficulties and improve a business investment environment for the people, to look more after socio-cultural development, to improve the people's material and spiritual life, to promote civilized urban ward building movements, including attention to propagating and mobilizing the people to keep environmental sanitation, replicating good models. In addition, it is necessary to continue to better implement social security policies, quickly solve urgent issues of the people's interest, synchronously perform social policies, aim at sustainable poverty reduction, social welfare enhancement, narrowing of the rich-poor gap between urban and rural areas; add solutions to encourage organizations and individuals to make investments in remote areas; consolidate socialization of poverty reduction, focus on and prioritize resources for socio-economic development, sustainable poverty reduction in mountainous and remote areas, etc, accelerate administrative procedure reform, maintain solidarity, unity, promote democracy, uphold the sense of responsibility of each cadre, public officer and official in the state's apparatus.

In the current period, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to develop complicatedly and unpredictably, spreading widely and breaking out in many countries and regions across the world, greatly affecting economies in the world and countries as major partners of Vietnam. In Vietnam, it has been impacting many socio-economic aspects; the people's life has had many difficulties; many enterprises, business households and cooperatives have had to suspend their operations, decreased their production scale or produced in moderation, which has increased unemployment and job losses in the short time and the situation may be more complex if the epidemic lasts long. In order to share difficulties, ensure the lives of people and workers nationwide, and contribute to social stability, the Government of Vietnam has proactively made timely and appropriate decisions to help businesses and the people overcome difficulties, together with participation of the whole political system, consensus and solidarity of the whole people and the whole army, which has brought strength to help Vietnam basically control the COVID-19 epidemic and maintain macroeconomic stability, social stability, strengthen cooperation and share experiences, equipment and medical supplies with countries, which has been recognized and highly appreciated by the world.

PhanChau Trinh's renovation thoughts aimed at not only educational, political and cultural issues but also economic issues, the lesson on improving the people's quality of life is still a content of great theoretical and practical values for Vietnam today.

### 3. CONCLUSION

PhanChau Trinh's economics thoughts have been quite comprehensive, profound, systematic, reflecting the reality of life and bearing an imprint of the age. Although there have been certain limitations in awareness and practices, it is clear that his thoughts and activities have made an important contribution to special change in the Vietnamese people's thinking, awakening the people's awareness of the people's livelihoods. His economics thoughts have a worthy position in the history of Vietnamese thoughts, great significance in the practice of seizing opportunities to promote economic integration and improve the Vietnamese people's quality of life today. Applying his economics thoughts is also an expression of "revising the old to know the new" when it is also necessary to consider the past to know the present for Vietnam's contemporary development today./.

### REFERENCES

- [1]. Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam (2021), *Văn kiện Đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ XIII*, Nxb. Chính trị Quốc gia, Hà Nội. (Communist Party of Vietnam (2021), *Documents of the 13th National Congress of Delegates*, National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi.)
- [2]. Nguyễn Văn Dương (1995), *Tuyển tập Phan Châu Trinh*, Nxb. Đà Nẵng. (Nguyen Van Duong (1995), *Phan Chau Trinh's collection*, Da Nang Publishing House)
- [3]. Vĩnh Sinh (Biên soạn), Nguyễn Nghi (Dịch giả) (2018), *Phan Châu Trinh và các tác phẩm chính luận*, NXB Trẻ tr. 207; 239 (Vinh Sinh (Compiler): Nguyen Nghi (Translator) (2018), *Phan Chau Trinh and political works*, Tre Publishing House, p. 207; 239)
- [4]. Trần Mai Ước (2005), *Những tư tưởng đổi mới về văn hóa - đạo đức của Phan Châu Trinh*, Sách: Bước chuyển tư tưởng Việt Nam cuối thế kỷ XIX đầu thế kỷ XX (PGS.TS Trương Văn Chung – PGS.TS Doãn Chính chủ biên), Nxb Chính trị quốc gia, Hà Nội. (Tran Mai Uoc (2005), *Phan Chau Trinh's innovative thoughts on culture and ethics*, Book: Transformation step of Vietnamese thoughts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Assoc. Prof. Dr. Truong Van Chung - Assoc. Doan Chinh (Editor), National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi.)
- [5]. Trần Mai Ước (2017), *Tư tưởng chính trị của Phan Châu Trinh*, Nxb. Lý luận chính trị, Hà Nội. ((Tran Mai Uoc (2017), *Phan Chau Trinh's political thoughts*, Political Theory Publishing House, Hanoi.)