

*History of Philosophy
История на философията*

PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT OF PHAN BOI CHAU

Cao Xuân Long

Vietnam National University (Vietnam)

Abstract. Phan Boi Chau (1867 – 1940) was a representative of revolutionary thinkers, revolutionaries, poets and educators of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his life of ups and downs, he has left many valuable ideas as lessons for the development of the country today. These are the views stemming from the pressing need of history for the fight for the liberation of nation and human; a combination of Eastern and Western cultural thought and Vietnamese cultural tradition; at different stages, his philosophical thought constantly changed and developed.

Keywords: Phan Boi Chau; philosophical thought; history; Viet Nam

1. Introduction

Vietnamese history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a period of great change in all aspects. This change set out a pressing issue of the road, the way to liberate the nation, people from the oppression of exploitation, remove the injustice in society... So many Thinkers had come up with different options for addressing these critical issues of society. These options, due to certain limitations of historical conditions, and ideological views, could be successful at varying degrees. But they had left a special mark in the history of thought in the transition period of the late nineteenth century early twentieth century. One of the prominent thinkers of this period was Phan Boi Chau (1867 – 1940). President Ho Chi Minh wrote that Phan Boi Chau was “a hero, an angel, a liberator of independence, worshiped by 20 million people in slavery” (Ho Chi Minh City, 2000, vol. 2: 172), because of “his noble heart and sacrificial life with many danger” (Ho Chi Minh City, 2000, vol. 2: 172) for the liberation of nation, country and people in Vietnam at that time. Phan Boi Chau is not only a writer, a poet, a patriot but a thinker, a philosopher, a sociologist with a great influence on socio-economic life, represents a volatile historical period in Vietnam.

2. Ideological contents

Phan Boi Chau's ideas are not only formed and developed from the practical demands of human liberation both at home and abroad but also on the inheritance,

receptiveness, selectivity and creativity of Eastern culture, Western culture and cultural tradition of the Vietnamese people. The content of Phan Boi Chau's philosophical thought is presented comprehensively, systematically and deeply, such as:

The first is the view of the world. Phan Boi Chau used the categories as: *Religion, nothing, nothingness, mind, God...* to present his views on the universe, in which the category he uses most in his writings to indicate that the first element in the world of phenomenal things is "*religion*". It can be seen that despite the term heterogeneity refers to the essence of the world, in his explanation of the first element of the universe, there is consistency. According to him, the first element that created the phenomenal thing in the world is invisible, colorless, and odorless... by senses, human beings cannot know the direct description of the nature of the universe, but it is absolute, unchanging, not lost, exists from shape to content of specific phenomena. This is also the characteristic to distinguish between the essence of the universe and the specific things, phenomena: "tangible", "perishable". Phan Boi Chau explained: "The principle of the universe is an invisible, indescribable, and impossible to describe to the end" (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 7: 31), because "the original is in the universe, what is tangible will be perishable, from the great world, such as morality, the Earth, the planet... to all the varieties in the universe; If the motive has a day of suspension, the heat has a day of extermination, the world has a final day, this is the "Already Done" Day, the "Already Done" time, simultaneously as the perishable time. Buddhism said that: Death had come. Catholicism said that: funeral day. So there should be "Already done" in the I Ching. However, the transformation in the end belongs to the shape, Buddhism called the form, the I Ching called gas. The invisible part that we cannot see: Buddhism called *nothing*, the I Ching called religion, that is will never be tangible and perishable" (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 8: 438).

Thus, the principle of the universe with phenomenal things, although having different characteristics and characteristics, it has a close relationship and mutual transformation, in which *religion* – is the first element, the origin of the universe; generate yin and yang, Phan Boi Chau wrote: the essence of the universe has "two names but from one original source, religion generates gas, then gas authenticate religion. For example in human body, ears to hear, eyes to see, mouth to speak, it is gas, but belonged after the tangible. But why are ears to hear, eyes to see, mouth to speak? There is a reason for these but it can't be described. That is the religion that lay out the gas. No matter what, the first is the religion, to generate that thing, that subject" (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 8: 489); and from the most negative gas – yin and the most positive gas – yang *gathering to create sky, earth*; from sky and earth to the birth of all beings including human beings, he explained: the universe "is created when having positive and negative which are linked, then created the universe, means harmony" (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 7: 49). *In conclusion*, according to Phan Boi Chau, the universe is the "first" element, "the principles" to create this

world, that element is invisible, anonymous, immature, and innocent; however, it expresses itself through the visible, the known, the rational and the rational.

For epistemology, Phan Boi Chau towards the realization of entity of the world, however, the entity of the world is invisible, mindless, immaculate, odorless, so people can not perceive directly on the physical path, according to Phan Boi Chau, in order to understand the natural element, it is necessary to go through the manifestation of that virtue, the heaven and the earth, the universe and the people in the universe. He wrote: “To express the truth, one must hire the visible varieties, which only show the Statue in it.”

Such as: Qian is the sky; Kun is earth; Zhen is thunder; Xun is wind” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 7: 31). Therefore, in his perception, Phan Boi Chau also goes from sensory perception to cognition of reason, from the perception of individual characteristics, to the often changing nature of phenomena in the world, to the generalization of nature, stability, the immutability of cosmic nature.

From the dialectical point of view, on the basis of the entity of the world, which is derived from the political, Phan Boi Chau assumes that all phenomena are connected, influenced and transformed according to the law of mutual interaction of harmony and conflict, and united in the origin of the world is the Political. He examines phenomena in motion and development, but his movement and developmental ideas follow a cyclical trend back to the original, he does not yet point to the origin, the way the motivation and tendency of movement and development, even though he sometimes used numerical algorithms to explain movement, but confirmed and demonstrated that the development of the world was its own rules, not random.

From a dialectical point of view, in view of the condition of Vietnamese social history, he argued that although the country was now in trouble, was invaded and colonized by the French colonialists, Phan Boi Chau believes in a bright future for Vietnam with the united determination of the whole nation.

Secondly, Phan Boi Chau’s ideas about human beings: about the people origin, From the point of view of The I Ching, Phan Boi Chau said that the sky is the father and the earth is the mother, these two factors are *reasons (hetu)*, the combination of sky – father and earth – mother is *grace (pratitya)*, and people are the combination of sky and earth as a *result (phala)*. He wrote: “Sky is father earth is mother, People are mixed by sky and earth but in the middle” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 4: 182 – 183). However, Phan Boi Chau said that the combination of sky and earth in each person was not the same, so there would be boys, girls and each person has its own beauty. He wrote: “In the combination of yin and yang, when yang is stronger than yin, there will be boy, when yin is stronger than yin, and there will be girl” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 4: 184). Thus, from the content of human origin, Phan Boi Chau thinks that human appearance is “necessary for the balance in the universe” and that human was not a divine product by God or mind, but by *the grace of sky and earth*.

About the human structure: Phan Boi Chau thinks that people are created by two divisions, the body and the humanity. In which: the flesh body is “human body”; that body is made up of *the five senses, the five organs, the six viscera and the blood vessels*. According to him, creation has created man “thoughtfully and perfectly” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 4: 201), the parts of the human body are neither redundant nor lacking; they have their own functions and relationships that help “Castle”, “metropolis” of *the soul world* exist. *The humanity* is human nature so that humans are superior to other species. Phan Boi Chau said that nature is inherent in the basis of the five senses, the five organs, the six viscera, not by heaven support as the conception of some philosophers before. According to him, the humanity of “a newborn, no one is more than absolute, and no one is less absolute, the gap is just a little bit”. But after the birth, because of the custom of the society, or the habit of the circumstances, that call “customs”; good customs are become more, then there are people with different degrees” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 4: 206 – 207). Phan Boi Chau said that people who want good things should rely on hard work and good social conditions. Exercise and social conditions are fundamental issues that affect people. In the context of Vietnamese society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in order to have good people, we had to change our social conditions; this means the invaders must be driven out. *The third is in terms of location role of human*. Phan Boi Chau has confirmed the position and role of human were very important in *the great universe*. That is what he looked at through the two fundamental relationships in the great universe: *Firstly, the role of human beings in relation to heaven and earth, God, or The creator*. Phan Boi Chau said that “Human is the child of heaven and earth”, “is the crystallization of heaven and earth”, and we have the phrase “If the Children surpasses His Father, The Home is blessed”. Therefore, for man, the creator always wants people to rise, assert themselves for the surrounding environment; *Secondly, the role of human beings in relation to the universe*. Phan Boi Chau confirmed that people were not merely a “product of the natural world”, but above all, it is “the most perfect product”, “a divine being in everything, called a masterpiece in the universe” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 4: 185). Because the Creator has given people “a smart brain, there is a power that other animals do not have” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 4: 186), according to Phan Boi Chau, It is precisely through “a smart brain”, “special powers” that human beings can defend themselves, to survive and conquer all things in this world. *Fourthly, it is human nature*. Phan Boi Chau said that people are the race who loves, supports and helps each other in life. He wrote: “Heaven and earth produce things, dividing the races. Races with scales are underwater, feathered races live on high ground; every human being has a race. The same race that harms one another, it is a common animal. The same race loves each other as human beings” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 2: 346). From the content of origin and human nature, Phan Boi Chau had sent a message of simplicity but deep human meaning. That was, in the context

of social history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, people especially all people in Vietnam had to unite and love each other to create a great power to “fight non-humans” to liberate people, liberate the Vietnamese people and create favorable conditions for human development.

Thirdly, Phan Boi Chau’s ideas on politics – society. *The first is the question of personality – human rights*, according to Phan Boi Chau, personality is a concept that refers to the way in which people express themselves to three relationships in the course of their formation and development, namely, “to heaven, to earth, to things and themselves” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 10: 145), that expression forces people to do so to the very end in the matter of “dignity, manners and styles” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 10: 145).

In essence, the nature of the personality problem manifests itself through three basic human relationships: *Firstly*, Considering in the relationship of man with our Creator is the first meaning of personality – that is *the first dignity* of human in the rankings of the natural world “*unconsciousness*” and “*consciousness*”. This dignity is not by man “self-styled” for himself, but it is thanks to the value of intelligent, morality and superior human power than the phenomenon in this world, he also asserted that even “stupid people are still sacred than animals” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 2: 58). So the Creator has appointed “*the best*” for human beings; *secondly*, the relationship of the people with the society is the second meaning of personality – that is *the personality of man*. The question of human personality is reflected in human relations with the issue of national independence, the sovereignty of each nation, and the issue of human rights in society. When based on the *Law of heaven* and *National law*, Phan Boi Chau has asserted that freedom was the right of every people to have no right to infringe upon; therefore, the fight for the independence and freedom of our nation was the law of heaven and international law. Therefore, in a country that knows how to promote civil rights, not only the people will be respected, but the country will also be strong. If the country does not respect the rights of the people, not only the people are despised, but the country is weak. Also, the nation’s right to be completely lost, the people will lose, but the country is no longer. *Considering the personality of man in relation to the state system*, Inner personality in this relationship is reflected in the democratic rights of the people in the country. Phan Boi Chau, after examining the weaknesses of political institutions in countries around the world, realized that national development was manifested through respect for human rights, especially the right to mastery of the people. He wrote: “Powerhouse countries are all countries in which civil rights are upheld” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 2: 387). According to him, those countries that promote civil rights must have “law, order, tax, and consumption are all decided by the parliament, but the parliament is organized by the people, the government is not allowed to intercede. Annually to Parliament periodic meetings, the congressmen gather in full. The government must present the project to the congress. The

Congress is the people. What people think is right must be done by the government; what people think is wrong, the government won't do. Although the emblem of the Emperor is very respectful, but if the parliament does not agree, then the order must be revoked. Civil rights are so scary!" (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 2: 387). Therefore, in his view, the relationship between the people and the government is a dialectical relationship that affects and influences one another. Because, when the people have the right to self-control, the country also will be strong, he wrote: "A person, a family or a country, is all part of society ... we bring ourselves in society, no need to look at the society, but need to see ourselves, because we are a part of society. If we are good, the society has a good element as well, and then for a long time, the influence goes further, until the end, of course, the society is good at all" (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 9: 192), according to him, the freedom of the people is the right to do things within the framework of the law of the state has prescribed. By asserting human rights, Phan Boi Chau transcends the view of Confucianism when considering the human rights of men and women, and paying special attention to the rights of women, the feminist problem in the East is well-regarded "around the late 19th century and early 20th century European civilization pushed more or less bubbles into East Asia. Suddenly two words human rights popped up in the newspapers. Slowly, the ears of some girls have two words feminist rights" (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 4: 88 – 89). He argued that the distinction between the rights of man and woman is the result of a monarchy that denied or restricted the human rights of women. *Considering the relationship of man to himself* is the third meaning of personality – That is *the way to be a man*. The way to be man is set by the individual, it is regulated into the "archetype", "such as faithfulness, integrity, morality, dogma, etc., until the ear hears clearly, the eye sees brightly, the brain knows deeply, striving for boldness, risky adventurer for durability," (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 4: 216), which each individual must keep, must strive for throughout his life. According to Phan Boi Chau in the context of the social history of Vietnam at that time in the content of personality, only the way to be a man is that we could keep. Because, it was within each human being "but no one can stop us, and no one can rob us" (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 4: 216). He also asserted that in the contents of human personality "Our compatriots are only worth that much" (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 4: 216).

The second is Phan Boi Chau's idea of human liberation. He argued that the issue of human liberation is necessary, legitimate, righteous and inevitably going to win. From a solid belief in victory, he pointed out the content of human liberation as follows: *About the object of liberation*, Phan Boi Chau's idea of a human being is neither not an abstract general human, nor the entire working population of the world, but the Vietnamese people, the working people of Vietnam, is oppressed and exploited. *On the content of human liberation*, Phan Boi Chau was interested in liberating the whole person – both body and personality. From the point of view of

Confucianism, he introduced the method of social management by virtue and kindness. Phan Boi Chau focused on two things: nourishment and education, which are closely related to one another, contributing to the betterment of human life. Phan Boi Chau said that: “The people are concerned about the human life. The nourishment is that the people are concerned about the human life. The education is that the people are concerned about the spiritual life. If the nourishment and the education travel together peacefully, but there are also some delays; the first is nourishment and then education” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 10: 71). According to Phan Boi Chau, people must have good human qualities in order to improve their society and liberate them. They have to be both intelligent and willing to sacrifice for the nation. People who sacrifice for their nation and their fellow are well-educated people. However, for good education, there must be good social conditions – that society must follow the socialist path of Marxism – Leninism. Therefore, to liberate people, Phan Boi Chau said that it was necessary to perform two tasks - that is *nourishment and education*:

The Fourth is Phan Boi Chau’s ideas on ethics, education. *On moral issues*, according to Phan Boi Chau, morality is the norms, the available proper rules, the natural right, and the roots in the heaven that man had to perform to prove his nature. Therefore, he said *Morality plays a very important role in controlling human activity*, moral standards are considered rudder, the anchor of a boat, if no moral orientation, the human action does not determine the right and wrong, good and bad, like the boat without rudder disorientation on the sea. So he insisted that: “No one wants to drive the boat competently, then let it be sunk and floated naturally; want to keep the right mind but let it zoom out nonsensically. To follow the right way, the new mind will not be biased. To keep steady, the boat will go still.

Gathering to see, lust prevention is more difficult to prevent water flow; speaking out widely, controlling the mind as well as the boat” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 1: 55). Thus, so that the human mind does not oscillate and wobble like “the boat does not have wheel, and anchor” there should be “devotional” that virtue manifests itself through four basic ethical standards, that are *benevolence, righteousness, proprieties, wisdom*, Phan Boi Chau explained more clearly: “Take *righteousness* as the pole to push, take *benevolence* as the paddle to swim. Going straight into dogma door, steering firmly whether east or west, to the shore of dogma, steering firmly whether left or right, that is true. So the boat follows the wheel, so even small or big boat, the commander is still finished” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 1: 55). These four standards of moralities, Phan Boi Chau from the perspective of Confucianism called Four Clues, he explained: “The Four Clues Theory is said in the heart of people there were four good terms also called four properties: to love someone is *benevolence*; to be ashamed is *righteousness*; to be humble is *proprieties*; to be aware of right or wrong is *wisdom*” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 4: 202 – 203). The role of four clues is enormous, it is not only valuable to the individual but also to

honor family, rule country and settle the world, he wrote: “When the Four Clues newly opens, as only a drop of water flowing, that flows forever to sea making a big one, people amplify the Four Clues to honor family, rule country and settle the world by heart inferred only” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 10: 33).

About education: Under the conditions of Vietnam in the second half of the nineteenth century, the first half of the twentieth century, the educational mission for the people became more urgent than ever. Because, according to him, our country was stagnant, slow to develop and could not resist the invaders because of old-fashioned thinking, and an old education that had blinded our people and made them foolish. The revival of the country, the liberation of the country should have an advanced education keep up with the times. The education that he set out as follows: *For educational purposes*, for each individual, education plays a crucial role in shaping human personality. Phan Boi Chau confirmed: “We learn to be human beings, and a standard mold of a man is sainted; if someone wanted to be like that, they would find the essence of the saint; as putting effort into learning” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 9: 259). Education does not only work for each person, but it also has a significant influence on the issue of national liberation and the sustainable development of each nation and race. He wrote: “Pay attention to education is to remove the private interest for the public benefits, to make country move forward” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 2: 263); *on the subject of education*, Phan Boi Chau said that education was necessary for everyone, everywhere and everytime, “*as human, should be educated*”, regardless of rich and poor... He was particularly interested in educating soldiers, women. Because he said that the soldiers were the protection force, to help everyone in society, and women had the responsibility as mother, to help husband and children, and also had a great influence on the formation of personality, emotion and intelligent of the children – “the future owners of the country”; *on the content of human education*, Phan Boi Chau said that it was necessary to educate the whole person, to be useful to the society in order to do that, it must pay attention to both virtue and wisdom “To open up patriotism and mutual trust, to educate the people, to help civil rights make everyone progress thousands of miles” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 2: 262 – 263). He argued that the content of education should not be overlooked, but it was also necessary to focus on what people need to learn, to use, what was useful for their development and the country, not “to educate whatever is available”. From the study of the model and the educational method of other countries, especially the educational experiences of Japan in the modern period, Phan Boi Chau had designed an extremely rich and unique model of education for the country. He wrote: “Education, ethics, gymnastics, nothing is missed. To study from Chinese, Japan, Europe is to learn everything. Preschools, orphanages, elementary schools, high schools, universities throughout the city, every village were everywhere. During the new innovation period, teachers in schools were invited as Japanese, European and American for teaching. After a period of reform, our peo-

ple are more qualified than Europeans, Americans, and foreigners. The way to open schools, to arrange learning, teaching, appointing talented learners were imitated the beauty or the good of countries such as Japan and Europe. Studying philosophy, literature, history, politics, economics, military, law... Studying the industry, commerce, agriculture, business woman, technique, forestry... All things that our people needed to learn by inviting teachers, opening the school for our people, no matter how rich or poor, boys and girls from 5 years of age and older are enrolled in preschools to be educated by teacher; eight years old child or above are enrolled in and educated in elementary school. By the age of 18, the talent was good, then entered the college, to be subjected to the education of professional colleges” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 2: 261 – 262). As Phan Boi Chau confirmed: education was “the mold” creating human beings, if the mold was good and astute, it would create elite, give strength to the country, so all issues in the content of education must be implemented, supervised, monitored, tested carefully from the whole of society, from taking care of the organization of the classes and the levels of education to the people, to the standard curricula, uniformly from top to bottom, set by the Ministry of Education under strict scrutiny by Parliament. On the other hand, to educate people effectively Phan Boi Chau had pointed out the specific requirements that must be had by teachers and pupils, in which for *teachers*, Phan Boi Chau said that to be able to do as a teacher to educate someone in a way of “legitimacy” firstly not to forget “Think of the past to understand today, as the worthy behavior of a teacher” (Analects, 1950: 20). On the other hand, the teacher must clearly define the object to have a way of teaching to the level of each person reasonably. According to Phan Boi Chau, a good teacher is as well as “a good physician, usually prescribes drug depending on each patient” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 9: 240). In addition, the teachers also need to use visual methods, as examples in education and training. According to Phan Boi Chau, there is an intuitive way of teaching people not to use words to communicate information to learners, but through their gestures, actions and moral examples, the teacher communicates information to the learner to follow and remember. In this way, the teacher seems to teach nothing, but actually “is teaching, no need to teach by mouth” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 9: 244). Besides, he said that the teacher should avoid two things: firstly, to avoid saying the useless thing what is neither useful to the learner nor meet the requirements of the society; moreover, the instructor should avoid outrageous attitude toward the learner. For *learners*, Phan Boi Chau had identified three essential requirements to help learners achieve high academic results: *the moral sense of learning*. He advised the student to be humble, honest, serious and creative in learning. He talked that: “We learn from the saint, not only what he says, but what he does not say we should care more” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 9: 247); *on reading books*. This is one of the important methods to help learners acquire the knowledge of the teacher better, Phan Boi Chau said: “Book learning is not about learning by heart, this is

not called learning! The meaning of the book must be invented outside, that is how to read books” (Phan Boi Chau, 1990, vol. 9: 213); *on making friends*. For the best learning outcomes, one of the most important things is making friends. Each of us should choose the people who are useful for your study.

In summary, the content of Phan Boi Chau’s philosophical thought is distinctive, rich and relatively systematic in many aspects: from the problems of the essence of the world, epistemology, dialectical views, to problems about human, human rights, education, morality... Such contents are the inheritance, selective combination of the moral ideas of the East, the West and the cultural traditions of the Vietnamese people to liberate people, liberate and develop the country. If filtering out certain historical limitations in his thoughts, then the special ideological content that is still meaningful reasoning, as useful lessons in the process of building our country today.

REFERENCES

- Boudarel, G. (1997). *Phan Boi Chau and Vietnamese society in his time*, Hanoi: Information Publishing House (Translation of Chuong Thau, Ho Song).
- Phan Boi Chau. (1990). *Full volume*, Volume 1 – Volume 10. Hue: Thuan Hoa Publishing House.
- Tran Van Giau. (1993). *The development of thought in Vietnam from the nineteenth century to the August Revolution, Volume 1,2,3*, Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House.
- Hoai Thanh. (1978). *Phan Boi Chau*. Hanoi: Culture Publishing House.
- Chuong Thau. (2004). *Research on Phan Boi Chau*. Hanoi: National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi.
- Chuong Thau, Tran Ngoc Vuong. (2001). *Phan Boi Chau on the author and the works*. Hanoi: Education Publishing House.
- Ho Chi Minh. (2000), *Full volume, volume 2*. Hanoi: National Politics Publishing House.
- Analects*. (1950). Sai Gon: Tri Duc Publishing House.

✉ **Dr. Cao Xuân Long**

Associate Dean – Faculty of Philosophy
University of Social Sciences and Humanities
Vietnam National University – Ho Chi Minh City
10 – 12, Dinh Tien Hoang St.
District 1
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
E-mail: caoxuanlong.khoatriet@gmail.com