

CULTURAL TRADITION AND SOCIAL PROGRESS IN PRESENT VIETNAM

PHAM VAN DUC^{*}

1. On the Criteria of Social Progress

Etymologically speaking, the word ‘progress’ in some Western languages can be traced back to its root, related to a Latin word ‘progressus’ meaning “a forward movement,” a kind of development characterized by a *steady advancement toward a higher and better stage*. Its antonym is “regression” (regressus in Latin) indicating a backward movement characterized by a process of disintegration, destruction and degradation from the established structure of an object.

The notion of progress is closely related to the notion of *development* in Marxist literature. But, in some cases, they are not differentiated clearly, because the latter, in terminology, is defined as a “movement toward a higher and perfect stage”. However, while dealing with the nature of progress we should pay attention to two following points:

First, the notion is often employed in the context of relating to social process. Here, progress means a social tendency advancing toward a higher and better stage within a society, while other kinds of progress taking place in nature are expressed in the notion of development only. Therefore, the intent of development is wider than that of progress: when the former includes both forward and backward movements, the latter is understood as a forward tendency only.

Second, social progress, under any consideration, is related closely to an evaluation of events and processes happening in the society. This is a very important activity for the existence and development of human beings. A comparison between a present stage and the starting one serves as a foundation for this kind of evaluation. What is considered as progress is something valuable to the subject.

The notion of progress is a widely-used term in many social sciences including philosophy. So, here the problem is how to determine *the criteria of social progress* rather than to find out what the progress is.

^{*} Asst. Prof. Dr., The Institute of Philosophy.

There have existed various points of view on the criteria of social progress in the history of philosophy. Philosophers usually approach it from certain aspects of social life: moral or legal or even economic criteria, which are to serve as foundation for evaluation.. However, in general, there have been two typical approaches to the criteria of the term; one with understanding of social progress primarily as spiritual progress, and the progress of social consciousness while the other places emphasis on modes of production instead.

The Marxist materialistic understanding of history is the official view on social progress in Vietnam. In disagreement with the view that social progress is of spiritual elements, Marx is the first thinker to emphasize the material factors.. Marx conceived that social progress is a one-by-one replacement of socio-economic formations, a natural historical process, in which the later formation is always more progressive than the earlier. The development of the modes of production serves as a foundation for social progress. Furthermore, while considering social progress, beside the material one, Marx also paid attention to other aspects of social life: including political, interpersonal and cultural advances.. The ultimate aim of social progress is to serve humans, and more importantly, the free development of every man is the condition for the development of all others.

Apart from the above-stated Marxist view, there is also view on social progress elaborated by Ho Chi Minh, who has been recognized by UNESCO as a hero of national liberation and a great cultural thinker.

First of all, it should be admitted that there is no clear definition or theoretical explanation on the matter in Ho Chi Minh's writings and speeches. However, through his unpretentious thoughts, we can understand what he means by "social progress." While adhering to the Marxist idea on social development as a natural historical progress, Ho Chi Minh claimed that the development of human society is a law-following development, in which the more progressive societies will replay previous, less progressive, ones. He wrote "since the early history of the collapse of Primitive Communism had been caused by the replacement of Slavery. That mechanism collapsed and had been replaced by Feudalism. The collapse of Feudalism was caused by the replacement of Capitalism. This is a determinate law in the development of human society". "From Primitive Communism, through Slavery, Feudalism and Capitalism to Socialism (Communism) - In general, society) develops according to *such a certain law*" (¹). Ho Chi Minh was convinced that Capitalism will certainly be replaced by a new and more progressive type of society (Socialism) in the due course of the law-following development of human society. He stated "it must be understood that Feudalism

¹ Ho Chi Minh, *Complete Works*, The National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 1995, Vol. 7, p. 246 - 247.

was an obvious social advancement. Society has developed from its primitive way of life through Slavery, Feudalism and Capitalism then toward Socialism”⁽²⁾.

What are the characteristics of the new society, which Ho Chi Minh named as Socialism?

We can see, through his writings, the concise nature of a new society that the Vietnamese want to build: “a society with more and more advancement, more and more material wealth, better and better spiritual life”⁽³⁾; in which “every person is provided enough with food and clothing, and will be happy and free”⁽⁴⁾; “every person will be comfortably off, and have good schooling”⁽⁵⁾; “all people and nations will be more and more financially secure, our children to be more and more happy”⁽⁶⁾; “working masses get rid of poverty and all are provided with jobs and enjoy comfortable and happy lives”.⁽⁷⁾

Then how can the criteria of social progress manifest itself concretely in the different sectors of social life?

First of all, while talking about social progress, Ho Chi Minh pays attention to the economy because that sector is a foundation of social life and the basis for human development. A strong and wealthy nation, in which material and spiritual life of its people are increasingly improving, is an ultimate aim of social development. In order to build such a society, advanced production forces and adequate production relations are needed; in other words, a new mode of production must be built up. That very mode of production will serve as a basis to change the material and spiritual life of a society.

However, social progress finds its best expression in social relations. Ho Chi Minh claimed that a progressive society is the one in which human exploitation and unjust oppression is, first, reduced, and then completely eliminated. Justice and social equality are to be established steadily, step by step; the gap between cities and rural areas is to be bridged gradually, and people will have more opportunities to develop fully their potentials. In his understanding, an economically wealthy society may not be progressive in social terms, if there are still human-exploitation, oppression and social injustice. A society cannot be qualified as progressive if its citizens are still being trampled on, exploited, enslaved and reduced to poverty.

Therefore, from a social perspective, progress is closely linked with human and social liberation. And it had not been by accident that Ho Chi Minh cited famous

² Ho Chi Minh . Op cit. p. 54.

³ Ho Chi Minh. Op cit, Vol.10, p. 591.

⁴ Ho Chi Minh. Op cit Vol.8, p. 396.

⁵ Ho Chi Minh . Op cit., Vol. 10, p. 97.

⁶ Ho Chi Minh. Op cit., Vol. 10, p. 317.

⁷ Ho Chi Minh. Op cit., Vol. 10, p. 17.

statements from French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and the American Declaration of Independence in his *Declaration of Independence*, the very document marking the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, to confirm man's inherent rights, such as "preservation of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness".

In the political field, Ho Chi Minh paid special attention to the issues relating to State and its jurisdiction. He understood that political progress can manifest itself in the progressiveness of a state government: of people who are in charge of the state powers and whose interests that government serves. In his view, a progressive government is a people-democratic state, belonging to people, governed by people, and to serve people's interests; all its powers must belong to people. He claims that a people's democratic government is the one that "serves wholeheartedly the people's interests"⁽⁸⁾; "people are real *masters* in power".⁽⁹⁾

The progressiveness of government also is expressed in its ability to realize freedom and democracy for the majority.. A society cannot be politically progressive if its power belongs to a minority and only the minority can get access to freedom and democracy, while the majority is deprived of access to these rights on paper only (and in reality, are completely deprived of freedom and democracy).⁽¹⁰⁾

Besides, democracy also is manifested in the freedom to put forward innovative ideas, and freedom in the creation of new material and spiritual values. It is the aspiration of every human to develop fully his or her ability and endowments.

Furthermore, social progress also expresses cultural progress. Culture, in Ho Chi Minh's thoughts, is a vital component of the whole social life. Culture should go side-by-side with the economy and politics. Ho Chi Minh repeatedly said "In the cause of reconstruction of our nation, we must address to all with the same attention to the four following issues: political, economic, social and cultural"⁽¹¹⁾

There exists indeed disparity between economic and cultural developments, in the history of mankind generally, as well as in social development of every nation separately. In some stages of its development a society may give priority to either political or economic development, and even sometime to cultural development. But for Ho Chi Minh, in order to build up, steadily and harmoniously, a new society, the same importance should be attached to economy, politics and culture. Ho Chi Minh, as a great cultural thinker, appraised highly the role and contribution of culture to the progress of society in general.

⁸ Ho Chi Minh. Op cit. vol. 10, p. 73.

⁹ Ho Chi Minh. Op cit. vol 7, p. 218.

¹⁰ Nguyễn Trọng Chuẩn (Editor), *Social Progress: Some Actual Issues*, The Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 2000, p. 79.

¹¹ Ho Chi Minh, *Artistic Culture and as a Battle Field*, The Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, 1981, p. 345.

Social progress, according to him, must rely on foundations of new knowledge, science, technology and culture. A new culture is the one which preserves national cultural values and acquires positive cultural values at the same time. It is a scientific and popular culture, with a typical national identity.

Ho Chi Minh thought that an unlearned nation means a weak one. Therefore, due attention should be paid to the development of national culture by promoting the educational level of the masses in order to overcome backwardness. The building of a new progressive culture, in this context, cannot be separated from social, economic and political considerations. This is why culture is not an outsider of economy and politics.

Relying on the above-stated Ho Chi Minh thoughts, we can draw the following conclusions relating to the criteria of social progress:

First, social progress should be addressed from a comprehensive point of view including all economic, political and cultural aspects of social life. Relying on such a point of view, one can overcome one-sidedness and partiality in consideration of social development.

As we have discussed, progress is related to the category of value and its standards. Progressiveness of a society at any of its stages is determined by a comparison with its previous state, and one in which economic, political, social and cultural indicators are to serve as four kinds of criteria. There should be a close link among these four factors. A society cannot be recognized as progressive if it is successful only in economic development, and which is even considered as a foundation for progress, while ignoring other aspects of social life. ⁽¹²⁾

Second, social progress, in Ho Chi Minh's thoughts, is closely related to humanity's progress. Ho Chi Minh devoted his entire revolutionary cause to the single aspiration to make "our country entirely dependent, our people fully free, our compatriots provided with food and clothes and everyone gets access to education" ⁽¹³⁾.

Though Ho Chi Minh had not addressed directly the question of social progress, we can see through his unpretentious, but profound, ideas, that his notion of social progress always goes with the cause of national liberation of the masses from domination. Even in his ideas of the development of a new society Ho Chi Minh focused people's living conditions. All aspects of development (to be comfortable financially, free, happy and to have access to education) expressed in

¹² Today, in order to evaluate the development of a nation, UNDP works out the criteria of human development index including such indicators as GDP, educational index and life expectancy. And according to these criteria, despite its underdeveloped economy, Vietnam is among the group of nations with an average human development index: Vietnam is ranked as high as 110 among 174 nations worldwide (UNDP. Human development report 1999, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 260).

¹³ Ho Chi Minh. *Op cit*, v. 4, .p. 161.

Ho Chi Minh's thoughts have become important criteria for social development and progress. In other words, the ultimate goal of social progress is to serve humans and for the sake of humans.

In our opinion, the criterion of human's comprehensive development should be an important measurement of social progress in the present context of the world. Man should be recognized as a driving force, as well as object of social development. It means that while all changes and developments taking place in various fields of social life: economical, political, social and cultural; are related to participation of the human factor and governed by humans. All these changes and developments are ultimately oriented to serve humanity, toward a better life. This is a very humanistic measure of social progress.

2. Cultural Tradition in Social Progress

In its general meaning, heritage means property that is passed down from generation to generation. Cultural heritage includes cultural properties: masterpieces of architecture and literature as well as other spiritual properties passed down from one generation to another (¹⁴). Being understood in such a way, cultural heritage implies material heritage (such as famous sites and architectures,) and aesthetic heritage (such works of arts, cultural tradition and custom.).

We will not discuss here the value of the inheriting of material culture, because its value is relatively established and less disputable. Our focus will be put on the role of the value of the heritage of spiritual (immaterial) elements to social progress. Needless to say, the notion of the heritage of spiritual culture is intentionally (cognitively) rich. Therefore we would like to analyze only the role of tradition, one of the important components of social progress.

First of all, it must be stated that cultural tradition, is something that is passed on from preceding generations to us. In this way, it is something that belongs to the past but still impacts and influenced directly the present. (¹⁵)

¹⁴ *Vietnamese Encyclopedia*, The Center for compiling Vietnamese Encyclopedia. Hanoi, 1995, p. 667 (in Vietnamese).

¹⁵ Tran Van Doan defines tradition "as a part of our life, what lasts for generations, what could be passed on to the next generations, what may benefittradition is called tradition only if it forms a part, a necessary part of our life; only if it preserves our life; and only if it could further or prolong our life. Hence, the main issue here is what could be called, or regarded, or categorized as tradition, must be seen from three aspects of human life: tradition as a part of life, tradition as a mean for life-preservation, and tradition as a force stirring the development of life." (Tran Van Doan. *What can be called tradition?* The paper to be presented at the International Conference on *Traditional Values and the Challenges of Globalization* organized by *The Council for Research in Value and Philosophy*, Washington D.C. and *The Institute of Philosophy*, Vietnam, May 14 - 15, 2001, p. 4; According to George McLean, tradition is "The development of values and virtues and their integration as a culture of any depth or richness takes time and, hence, depends upon the experience and creativity of many generations. The culture which is handed on, or *tradita*, comes to be called a cultural tradition; as such it reflects

Recently the role of cultural tradition has been widely discussed in many national as well as international seminars and conferences held in Vietnam. According to some scholars, all the so-called cultural traditions can contribute positively to development and social progress; there is no negative or valueless tradition. On the contrary, other authors claim that a tradition always contains both positive as well as negative features: the former manifests in that the tradition contributes to promote social progress and consequently crystallizes in traditional values while the latter can contribute nothing but be an obstacle to social progress.

In Vietnam as well in some other Asian countries, alongside with different points of view, there exist different attitudes to cultural tradition: negative attitudes intending to negate completely cultural tradition, regarding it as something belonging to the past and to be eliminated meanwhile conservative attitudes insisting that all that belong to cultural tradition are positive and valuable.

We are basically in agreement with the view that tradition in general and cultural tradition in particular is always contains both positive and negative features: some cultural tradition contributes positively to social progress while other may stand in the way of social progress. There exist both positive as well as negative elements within each cultural tradition.

The problem is what the criteria to evaluate or verify a tradition are. In other words, what are the standards relying on which we can judge whether a cultural tradition is valuable or not.

If we accept the above-stated criteria then only those cultural traditions, which satisfy these criteria (namely those are able to serve and promote progress in various sectors of social life), can be recognized as valuable and positive. It means that a cultural tradition is acknowledged to impact positively on social progress if it can contribute to development in economic, political, social and cultural sectors of life.

Besides, social progress means primarily, human progress. Therefore, the criteria of human progress and development should be the standards to verify and evaluate the values of cultural tradition. Because it is indisputable that social progress, after all, is to serve human beings sake of their development. Human beings here are, of course, not only one particular stratum or class but entire masses as citizens of society in general.

Any tradition can be prolonged, even when its socio-economic conditions have disappeared long ago. Tradition itself is not something unchanged, once established, yet it has been constantly verified by concrete socio-economic

the cumulative achievement of a people in discovering, mirroring and transmitting the deepest meanings of life. This is tradition in its synchronic sense as a body of wisdom" (George F. McLean. *Tradition, Harmony and Transcendence*, Washington D.C.: CRVP, 1994), pp. 9 -10.

conditions. Therefore, the traditions that can impact positively on social progress are only those that can “accommodate” to new conditions.

We do not mention here those cultural traditions,--obsolete customs and habits influencing negatively on social progress. These kinds of traditions should be overcome and eradicated as soon as possible.

What we count on here are those cultural traditions that contribute to develop fully the human potential. In other words, we only honor and preserve those traditions which capable of serving human interests, and more importantly, to always generate new values.

However, every cultural tradition, which has already accommodated to new social conditions, contains both positive and negative features. Even the highly valuable traditions, which seems to possess only positive components, cannot avoid this duplicity.

For example, fondness for learning is a fine tradition of our nation, as well as many other nations worldwide. It is a positive tradition for the national cause of building and development and should be brought into play. However, in the past, the ultimate aim of learning is not to become a mandarin or master,. But a worker. This kind of mentality, despite certain changes during our Rrenovation, still strongly influences our people and society today. Its manifestation can be seen in the fact that nowadays most of Vietnamese families do their best for their children in entrance examinations to tertiary education, because only very few parents want their children go to vocational schools. This attitude leads to an unbalanced situation in Vietnam: we have more tertiary-graduate students than skilled workers. Even worse, is the fact that many highly educated people have to take manual labor or very simple jobs. This is a total waste for society.

Therefore, while respecting and upholding the fondness for learning we should change the long-standing attitude of our people who stand behind this preference of master to worker.

Amother long-standing tradition in Asia, including Vietnam, is respect to the elderly. It is a very fine tradition honored and preserved by the Vietnamese. According to Professor Tran Van Doan, this tradition is honored by many Asian nations, not under the pressure of any particular element, but simply because it serves the interests of *all people* as well as the particular individual, group or class. More than that, the benefit from this tradition is not limited within the moral sector, but spreads widely to all other aspects of social life, and rises to “universal” significance. It means that, for example, government can save expenses on pensioner’s subsidy or building nursing houses for the elderly; the elders can be less worried about their usefulness; and families save money on childcare and security of their homes.

However, according to Professor Tran Van Doan's analysis, an excessive honor to the elder, would lead to a conservative dogmatism, obstructing our approach to new problems by thinking that we can always count on the elders. Youth may lack of bravery, become passive to the world around them when they encounter difficulties. On the side of the elders, when respect and honor to them becomes blind obeisance, they may think that only they are capable of solving problems in the contemporary society. In reality, the elders can become obstacles to social development when their knowledge and experience cannot help them to deal with new difficulties.⁽¹⁶⁾

Therefore, there exists ambivalence, even within the tradition of honoring the elderly. Inability to promote its positive elements, and limiting or overcoming negative components, can cause this fine and honorable tradition to be a stumbling-block to social progress, instead of promoting it.

From the above analysis on some fine Asian and Vietnamese traditions, we can conclude that even honorable and valuable ones can contain, certain negative components, which should be considered. The problem here is to retain the positive elements while restraining and gradually eradicating the negative ones. The reason that a tradition contains both positive and negative elements, is that it belongs to the past. Therefore, when it enters the present, some of its attributes can satisfy new conditions, while others cannot do so, and should be eliminated.

The eradication of the negative features of cultural tradition can be done in two main ways: *a spontaneous eradication* or an *intentioned eradication*. The first usually takes place naturally, without any concrete plan. Custom, habit and mentality, which cannot meet the demand of new conditions, will be gradually eliminated and replaced sooner or later by new, appropriate ones. Usually the process of replacement and transformation of elements within a tradition takes place slowly.

The more effective way is an intended eradication, in which all inappropriate elements are to be removed and all positive elements are encouraged. This is an intended orientation of values. There exist various measures of this kind of process: from economic measures impacting directly on material interests, to educational and publicizing ones influencing factors and interests. It is a more positive, effective and faster way of selection of tradition. For example, with the appropriate policy to impact on student's interests, in order to encourage them to enroll in vocational schools, together with certain educational and communication measures, we can, step by step, change the long-standing preference of master to worker which is part of the tradition of fondness for learning.

In the present context of the globalization process, the problem of selection of tradition become very important. The right solution to the problem can contribute

¹⁶ Tran Van Doan. Op cit, p. 32, 33.

to, not only preservation of cultural identity of a nation, but also guarantee its development. A nation will develop progressively if it is capable of, not only inheriting valuable traditions (which have established their essence) but also by promoting and upholding them through the acquiring the quintessence of the culture of mankind, to enrich its traditions. Both the extreme attitudes in mankind's history: either total closure to all international relations to protect its own tradition, or the unselective acceptance of other cultures, can lead a nation to an unpredictable catastrophe. It can bring on a sort of alien isolation with the rest of the world --or it change a nation into a pale shadow of another nation.

With the open foreign policy implemented in the cause of country's Renovation since 1986, Vietnam *is willing to make friends*. More than that it is *ready to become friends*, with all countries and nations on the basis of mutual respect of national independence and sovereignty and mutual benefit. Moving in this direction, Vietnam gets the opportunity to acquire the essence of other cultures to enrich its own. As the result, the fine traditions of the Vietnamese have been continuously enriched, while backward and inappropriate impediments to social progress have been gradually eradicated. In this context, tradition plays more and more an important role for social progress.

Conclusion

Tradition can impact positively or negatively on social progress. It impacts positively on social progress if it helps people find solutions to problems raised by contemporary society. In this way, tradition influences actively various sectors of social life as well as contributing to promote man's comprehensive development.

Every fine cultural tradition of a nation, be it the most valuable, contains a symbiosis: positive as well as negative.. After all, tradition belongs to the past, and when it enters the present, some its aspects can meet the demands of new circumstances, but some cannot and are subject to elimination.. Therefore, the problems of how to select a tradition, promote its positive aspects, restrain and overcome gradually its negative aspects, these are vital to social progress.

The way to select a valuable cultural tradition consists in preservation and promotion of national identity, simultaneous with intensive integration and cultural exchange with the world. It is a good method to acquire cultural distillations of the world to enrich our national culture. The development of cultural tradition, in its turn, will contribute more positively on social progress.