

VIETNAMESE HISTORIOGRAPHY: DEVELOPMENT AND CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE DOI MOI PERIOD

ĐINH XUÂN LÂM^(*)
PHẠM HỒNG TUNG^(**)

This article is aimed to examine the development and contribution of Vietnamese historiography during the Doi Moi (Renovation) period. The authors point out the changes of Vietnamese historiography in terms of theories, methods and approaches and its principal achievements as well as its shortcomings.

Ten years ago, in 1999, John Kleinen, a Dutch scholar, published his book on the changes in Vietnam during the Doi Moi period with a very impressive title: “*Facing the Future, Reviving the Past. A Study of Social Change in a Northern Vietnamese Village*”^(*). Based on anthropological approach, Kleinen describes various changes in rural areas of Northern Vietnam during the time.

The title of the book was not taken in order to produce a journalistic sensation, but it does reflect the author point of view about two tendencies of economic, social and cultural changes in Vietnam during the reform period. The tendency toward industrialization, modernization,

urbanization, and globalization and the tendency toward restoring cultural values, and traditional social, political and economic structures, mechanism and activities. The two tendencies seem to be moving in opposite directions, but in fact they are closely intertwined in a single process. The tendencies were also popular in many countries in the process of modernization.

The connection between the two tendencies has reflected the relationships between the traditional and the modern factors, the past and the future, the de-construction and the re-construction processes, the national and international factors. In general, that was the

(*) John Kleinen. “Facing the Future, Reviving the Past. A Study of Social Change in a Northern Vietnamese Village”. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999.

(*) Professor, People’s Teacher, Vice President of Scientific Association of Vietnamese Historians.

(**) Associate Professor, PhD, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

relationship between the Past and the Present. Finding and analyzing the nature and the interaction of these tendencies, and the aspects and the effects of those relationships, were the missions of Vietnamese and foreign researchers, especially Vietnamese historians, to provide scientific data for the policy making process in Vietnam during the period of reform and international integration in the context of globalization.

During the last two decades, the Vietnamese historiography has experienced many radical changes and achieved some considerable successes. However, it has also faced up to some difficulties and shortcomings. In this article, we want to examine and discuss about those successes and shortcomings on some following aspects.

1. On the theoretical issues and approaches

1.1. In nature, Vietnamese modern historiography was and still is a Marxist one. The principles of Marxism are still the theoretical foundation for the historical studies and education in Vietnam. In most of their studies, the Vietnamese historians has always based on Marxist approach. Although there have been very few serious discussion on the ways to apply Marxist theory in historical studies in the last decades, we still can realize some following points concerning the influence of Marxism in the Vietnamese historiography nowadays:

First, most Vietnamese historians agree that Marxism is the theoretical basis and approach for their works.

Second, international changes after the Cold War and radical transformations in Vietnam have led to changes in applying Marxism in historical studies in Vietnam. More specifically, studying on Hồ Chí Minh's creative application of Marxism and Leninism to resolving revolutionary issues in Vietnam has allowed the Vietnamese historians to draw out valuable lessons in understanding and applying Marxist theory in their works. We can realize this clearly in the researches of Vietnamese modern history, on the history of the reform process under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam, on Hồ Chí Minh's thought, in the new ways of Vietnamese to interpret and analyze the relationship between the class and national issues in of the Vietnamese revolution.

However, due to the lack of a thorough and serious scientific discussion about the ways of applying Marxism in historical studies, those changes are mostly spontaneous, incomprehensive and incomplete. These are the various reasons for the suspicion, hesitation, and sometimes disorientation of Vietnamese historians when applying Marxism and Hồ Chí Minh's thoughts in their studies. It is even more concerned that many researchers, mostly young researchers seem to lack of self-confidence in applying Marxism, Leninism and Hồ Chí Minh thoughts in their studies, because they do not know, how to apply these as theoretical basis and methodological approach. The evidence is that in a lot of MA thesis and dissertations, most researchers

announced that “their arguments are based on the principles of Marxism and Leninism, and Hồ Chí Minh’s thoughts”. However, they cannot explain and point out which principles are used in their studies. In fact, such statements have nearly no meaning. Maybe they serve the MA and PH.S students only as a kind of theoretical amulet and that is exactly what Marx himself did not want.

1.2. The Doi Moi period has opened many opportunities for social scientists, including historians, to exchange opinion, experiences, theories and approaches with foreign colleagues. Moreover, there are now more and more students and young scholars who have chances to study abroad. The number of foreign researchers, especially those from the West and Japan, coming to Vietnam to carry out studies in collaboration with Vietnamese colleagues is increasing. This is a good situation for Vietnamese historians to improve their understanding of new theories and methods and to update their information and data.

As a result, recently, there have been some significant changes in theoretical foundation and approaches in the research of Vietnamese historians. The most significant is the fact that the expression and explanation of the nation’s formation is much more alternatively. It is no longer bound by Stalin’s concepts of nationalism and nation. Many issues relating to the history of economy, society, culture, thoughts, religions, and politics have been analyzed with new approaches whose results may be additional to those in the past. Thus, the interpretation and

presentation of national history is more comprehensive, detailed and alternatively.

However, the exchange seems to be carried out personally and irregularly by individual scientists. In fact, the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences and the Vietnam National University had cooperated (with the financial support of the Ford Foundation) to run a course on “inter-disciplinary approaches”. Some centers, including some branches of the Association of Vietnamese Historians (The Faculty of History, the University of Social Sciences and Humanities), the Institute of Vietnamese Studies and Development Sciences, and so on, are making efforts to invite foreign scholars to introduce the results of their studies, new approaches as well as new methods. More and more Vietnamese scientists are taking part in international research groups to study Vietnamese history which is a good opportunity for them to exchange theories and methods with others. Some research projects on many aspects of Vietnam have been completed with good results, for example: the project on Red River Delta (in cooperation with French experts), the project on Bach Coc (in cooperation with Japanese experts), projects on rural areas (in cooperation with German, Canadian, Australian, Japanese, etc), projects on the central part of Vietnam (in cooperation with Polish, French, and Japanese experts) etc. However, in most of the projects, there were very few publications or discussions on research methods and approaches, leaving little for Vietnamese scientists to learn.

Another positive outcome of multi-national collaboration is the increasing in the number of young historians with some foreign language proficiency, especially English. In addition, in recent years, some valuable studies of foreign researchers have been translated into Vietnamese, creating better references for Vietnamese researchers, especially students.

1.3. Thanks to the gradual changes in recent years which applied Marxism to history more fully, and the use of new methods and approaches to researching, research works of Vietnamese historians have become more interdisciplinary. History is basically an interdisciplinary science. In 1960s and 1970s, even before that, studies of Vietnamese historians like Đào Duy Anh, Trần Văn Giàu, Trần Huy Liệu, Nguyễn Khánh Toàn, Phan Huy Lê, Hà Văn Tấn, Trần Quốc Vượng, Đinh Xuân Lâm, Bùi Đình Thanh, Văn Tạo, Nguyễn Công Bình, Nguyễn Hồng Phong, Đặng Phong, etc had shown clearly the broad scope of the field, especially the researches on prehistoric time and on the history of economy, society, culture, thoughts, military and the nationalism. Recently, the application of approaches and methods of modern social sciences like sociology, anthropology, social geography, geopolitics has provided historians with new data and new ways of historical interpreting and evaluating, in order to find out new aspects of historical events and processes, especially the issues of Vietnam's modern history. This is a new tendency of development resulting in new successes in the future.

2. Some significant achievements

It is not easy to express opinions and conclusions about the achievements of Vietnamese historical studies during the last 20 years. However, we can list some most significant ones:

1. Following the previous studies, works accomplished by Vietnamese historians in the Doi Moi period had helped to understand more about the formation and development of Vietnamese nation. First, there is a new awareness of the history of the nation. Previously, most historical studies presented the history from ancient times up to the present. They began with the "states" of Văn Lang, Âu Lạc, then the Chinese domination period, the time of Đại Cồ Việt, Đại Việt, Đại Nam, the French domination, the period of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and finally the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Clearly, this is a wrong and inadequate presentation on the national progression of Vietnam. To bridge these gaps, at present, Vietnamese social scientists agree that the history of Vietnam is the history of all ethnic groups living the country today. This is a breakthrough in the concept of the national history, leading to the advancements in this discipline.

In this way, the studies of Vietnamese historians, archaeologist, and ethnologists, on the history of communities in the central area, the Highland, and the southern area, and cross-border ethnic minorities, have added new scientific knowledge to the research of Vietnamese history, making it more comprehensive and scientific.

Based on the new achievements in Vietnamese history, the Ministry of Education and Training has adjusted the history textbooks and curricula in schools and universities.¹ Despite many shortcomings, the adjusted textbooks and curricula have helped to meet the demands of teaching and studying history of the nation in new times.

Another major project is an independent study, begun in 2001, of Vietnamese history at the national level by a group of experts in the Faculty of History, the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (Vietnam National University, Hanoi), led by Nguyễn Quang Ngọc. In 2006, this research project was accomplished and the preparation for publishing its results in form of a standard work on Vietnamese national history (4 volumes of about 3000 pages). The work represents the history of Vietnam from early days to the end of the 20th century, reflecting the achievements of both Vietnamese and foreign historians in studying on Vietnamese history up to now.

Since 2002, the Institute of History has carried out a large research project led by Trần Đức Cường to compile a series of Vietnamese histories comprised of 15 episodes with detailed information from the early period to present. This series

has been completed and many volumes have been published.

2. The second important contribution in researching Vietnamese history in the period of Doi Moi is studying on the history of each locality and area, with dozens of valuable publications in form of *Dia chi* (general description). A “Dia chi” is in fact not a purely historical research; it is an interagency scientific product of some social and natural sciences with the primary role of historical and cultural research. Although the quality of the text is unregulated and some do not measure up to expectations, they are the basis for the policy making process of each locality and province, and the important documents for the propaganda and education of local culture and history.

Some “Dia chi” are at a larger scale and dealing of some areas and localities such as the projects on the southern area, Hanoi, Red River Delta, on the Central Highlands, etc. These have been completed with good results due to significant contributions from historians. Those projects, carried out with interagency cooperation, can make scientific and practical contributions to the national campaign of renewal and renaissance in which the role and advantages of each science are enhanced. In the future, interdisciplinary cooperation on researches needs to be continued.

3. Some of the most significant discoveries of Vietnamese historians in recent years have been recorded, including: discovering and researching the royal citadel of Thăng Long, the

¹ In addition to the new history standard work, there are two course books on national history which have been published and reprinted many times, and considered good materials, namely: 1, Nguyễn Quang Ngọc (chief editor). *Tiến trình lịch sử Việt Nam* (The development of Vietnamese History). H.: Giáo dục, 2000; and 2, Đại cương lịch sử Việt Nam (Outline of Vietnamese History, including 2 volumes: Vol. I edited by Trương Hữu Quýnh, Vol. II edited by Đinh Xuân Lâm). H.: Giáo dục, 1998.

works on the sovereignty of Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa archipelago of Vietnam, the studies on the history of the Southern and Central areas, the study on Vietnamese political systems, the works on the history of the Communist Party, Government and National Assembly, the researches on Hồ Chí Minh, on the resistances against French colonialism and American imperialism, the works on the history of Vietnamese villages and rural areas, the studies on the history of Vietnamese thoughts and culture, on the history of commercial centers (Hội An, Phố Hiến, Kẻ Chợ, Domea, etc) etc. With various dimensions and meanings, those studies have made significant contributions to the economic, social and cultural development of the nation.

4. Another achievement of Vietnamese historians is the researches and discussions on controversial events and figures in Vietnamese history, which have been considered as “taboos” for a long time. It is the re-assessment of many historical figures in national history like Phan Thanh Giản, Nguyễn Văn Tường, Trương Vĩnh Ký, Phạm Quỳnh, or the Lords of Trịnh and Nguyễn, Sĩ Nhiếp, etc. some of them are very controversial like the assessment of the Lords of Trịnh and Nguyễn, the Vietnamese Nationalist Party, the role of the Comintern in Vietnamese revolution, the land reform, or the agricultural collectivization in North Vietnam during the 1960s.

What to emphasize here is the effects of the researches. It did not only provide new data, but also lead to a view on those events and figures which is able to overcome the shortcomings of and to

make the research of Vietnamese history more active and serious.

Of course, in spite of obstacles on the way to the truth and reality, in our opinion, Vietnamese historians can gain useful lessons to be more professional as scientists. The science of history will never accept the lies and the inaccuracies; it is always fair, equal and strict.

III. Some shortcomings

1. In terms of theories and researching methods, the primary shortcomings are the lack of longterm orientation, the lack of systematic organization, and especially the lack of exchanging and updating the knowledge as well as a democratic atmosphere for discussions. In the future, the Scientific Association of Vietnamese Historians and institutions for teaching and researching history must pay more attention to these deficiencies. Along with the development of other social sciences and humanities to meet the demand of the campaign for national reforms and renaissance and international integration, the development of theories and researching methods of history may lead to the formation of many historical universities, all of them will respect the truth and the interest of the nation, and will be the foundation for the country to develop with new achievements.

2. The second shortcoming is the “gaps” in researching history in Vietnam. Of course, like in other sciences, there are always “gaps” in history, and the discovery of those “gaps” is also a scientific achievement. The problem is that each “gap” must be filled to meet the demands of younger generation to understand the national history. For example, in the modern

history of Vietnam, for a long time we focused on the researches of French colonialism and the changes in the lives of the Vietnamese under it. This was appropriate because the “main characters” of Vietnamese history must be the Vietnamese people, their life and their struggle for independence and freedom. However, our knowledge of the appearance of the French in Vietnam, on the appearance of Western people in Vietnam, on the policies of the French, on the organization of the military, courts, intelligence agents, and other tricks to exploit and suppress Vietnam, etc of colonial government is not adequate. And the historical relationships among Vietnam and other nations in Indochina have not been fully researched. If those “gaps” are not filled, the younger generation would fail to understand the history of Vietnamese people. Similarly, we seem to be satisfied with the “established” stories of the wars against invaders. There are a lot of faults making us unsatisfied because what the status quo is very general, sketchy, with little resources to serve as comparison. Moreover, there are few experts on significant events like the campaign at Điện Biên Phủ, Hồ Chí Minh campaign, Khe Sanh battle, “Điện Biên Phủ in the sky” battle, etc. Furthermore, some periods are deliberately omitted, like Nhân văn-Giai phẩm movement, the southwest border war (1975-1979) or the northern border war (1979), the issues of the sovereignty of archipelagoes, and so on.

We have to admit that there are always issues that cannot be discussed openly in scientific forums. However, it does not mean that scientists cannot discuss them due to the development of information

technology and globalization, if an issue is not discussed in Vietnam, it can be discussed elsewhere. If Vietnamese historians do not study their own history, others will do so, and they cannot protect the interests of the nation, the truth, when necessary. Thus, filling the “gaps” and increasing connections with foreign historians must be considered as one of the main missions of Vietnamese historians at present.

3. A basic shortcoming of Vietnamese modern history is the lack of basic reference projects. By which is meant historical dictionaries, dictionaries of historical characters, concepts, localities, events and regulations. The lack of such works brings a lot of difficulties in historical education in schools, and cannot meet the demand of historical information about people in Vietnam and global history. Moreover, those reference books would be the manifesto of Vietnamese historians. Their paucity means the lack of prestige of Vietnamese historians.

Another hindrance is the lack of historical books in foreign languages. Currently, foreigners who study and do research on Vietnamese history have two references by Lê Thành Khôi (1955)^(*) and Nguyễn Khắc Viện (1976)^(**). These are two valuable works, but they are outdated. Moreover, most reference books on Vietnamese history are compiled by foreigners.

Of course, compiling the two upper projects was very difficult and needed the cooperation of many people using a

(*) Lê Thành Khôi. *Le Vietnam, histoire et civilisation*. Paris: 1955.

(**) Nguyễn Khắc Viện. *Vietnam: A Long History*. H.: Thế Giới, 1976.

lot of time and effort. However difficult it is, Vietnamese historians must complete the work because it is their duty to the history of the nation and the people in this time of Doi Moi and international integration. The main constraint is the need for organization and investment from the government and other relating departments.

4. A serious shortcoming of Vietnamese modern history is the quality of historical education and propaganda inside and outside schools. The lack of changes, the number of errors in historical textbooks, the lack of interest in teaching and learning history in school, the bad results on tests in this subject, the bad quality historical films, plays, novels, the damage to many historical monuments, etc. are the responsibility of Vietnamese historians.

To overcome these complications, we need more comprehensive and determined resolutions from many departments of the government. It is obvious that if each historian or historical researcher and teacher does not have a full awareness of these shortcomings, it is very difficult to overcome them.

These are some initial opinions about the tendencies, achievements and shortcomings of Vietnamese modern history as a discipline. To the professional historian, there may be some subjective errors in this report. We really want to receive feedback from colleagues and readers to help us and people who are working in history to complete our mission better and contribute more to the national effort of Doi Moi and renaissance at present.