

APPROACHES TO AMERICAN STUDIES – SOME ISSUES TO BE RAISED

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1. The First Vietnamese Lecturer on American History

On writing this paper, one question comes up to my mind: “Who was the first Vietnamese lecturer on American history?”

We all know that since the end of the 20th century backward, Vietnamese education had been extensively influenced by Confucianism and was limited to classical works of Confucianism, which were naturally not concerned with international affairs. In the early years of the 20th century French colonial education system was established in Vietnam. New knowledge and methods were introduced and were taught either by French teachers or Vietnamese teachers who were trained in French educational institutions. Knowledge of History was taught so that colonial students could understand French history as a respectable “Mother Country.” It is surprising that the first lecture on the history of the American revolution was taught to Vietnamese students by a Vietnamese teacher in Vietnamese. That class was not an officially recognized one in the French colonial education system, it was a training course for young Vietnamese revolutionaries who started their cause of the struggle for national liberation. It was held secretly in Guangzhou (China) by the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League from 1925 to 1927. The first lecturer was Nguyen Ai

Quoc, later called President Ho Chi Minh, who had been a teacher before going abroad to find the way to liberate his country. These lectures were then collected and was first published in 1927 [1] under the title “Duong Kach Menh” (Revolutionary Road).

Starting from the point of view that Vietnam is part of the world and the Vietnamese revolution is part of the world revolution, Ho Chi Minh explained carefully to his students some of the representative revolutions in the world. One of the aims of his book is “*to take other nations revolutionary histories as example for us to look at, and to familiarize our people with the world movements*” [1]. Thus, an important part of the book is devoted to introducing and analyzing three big revolutions: the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Russian Revolution among which the first lesson is on the American Revolution.

In the lecture on the American Revolution, Ho Chi Minh puts forward 4 issues which are subsumed under the following headings:

- What is America history?
- Why did the Americans make revolution?
- What were the consequences of the revolution?
- How was the significance of the American Revolution for the Vietnamese revolution?

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With nearly 700 words in 3 medium-formatted pages, the writing sketches the bases of the struggle of the American people against the British for the independence of North of America during the second half of the 18th century. It is possible to recognize three main ideas in the writing:

First, the people in the North of America fought against the British colonialists. In Vietnam, the French colonialists were more draconian but "*the Vietnamese has not yet learned from the Americans the way to make a revolution*" [1]. The statement showed Ho Chi Minh's high appreciation of the American character and spirit, seeing them as an example for the Vietnamese revolutionaries.

Secondly, it emphasizes the American thinking represented in America's Declaration of Independence on "*the right to freedom, the right to work, and the right to happiness...*" [1] and it assumes that the people have the right to *abolish* any government which is destructive to people and to set up a new one, [1]. Later, these ideas were solemnly written in the first section of the Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945. This is an unchanged, objective, and bright judgment of great thought of the American Revolution and the American people.

Thirdly, in applying American experience to the Vietnamese Revolution it is realized that in America, "*workers and farmers are still leading a miserable life*" [1]. It should be noted that the judgment was drawn from a long road to national liberation. Nguyen Ai Quoc had been to America and had witnessed with his own eyes the realities of the American society during the early years of the 20th century. He concluded: "*We have sacrificed our lives*

for the revolution so we must do it radically. It means when the revolution succeeds, the power should be handed to the majority of people, not to a small group. Only in so doing can we avoid sacrifices and can our people live in happiness." [1].

It is clear that Nguyen Ai Quoc had drawn the good points from the American Revolution so that the Vietnamese would follow as well as its drawbacks so that the Vietnamese should avoid or overcome. His teachings have left deep impressions on many generations of Vietnamese youth on the way to national liberation.

After the August Revolution in 1945, in the documents sent to the American people and the American Presidents, Ho Chi Minh had many times focused on the greatness of the American Revolution and highly praised the good examples of T. Jefferson, G. Washington, A. Lincoln – those who made great contributions to the liberation of America. These letters often ended with the hope that the American Administration would respect on the great principles set forth by their predecessors to end the invasion war in Vietnam.

2. The Teaching of American History in Vietnamese Universities

In 1956, two years after the victory of Dien Bien Phu and the signing of the Geneva Agreement for ceasefire in Indochina, the Hanoi University was founded. Since then, in two history departments; one of the Hanoi University and the other of the Hanoi Teachers' Training University, American History has been taught as part of the world history. The basic content of the lectures on American history was printed in 2 volumes entitled: "*Pre-Modern History and Modern World History.*" Up to now, there has been

no curriculum specialized in American History.

In *Pre-Modern World History* [2], the history of America is mentioned in the following Chapters:

Chapter III: The Struggle against British colonialism for the independence of North of America and the Establishment of the United States.

Chapter VIII: The United States in the First Half of 19th Century and the Civil War (1861-1864).

Chapter IX: European Countries and the United States at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century.

In the *Modern World History* [3], the American history is not presented in a separate chapter but as part of the following chapters:

Chapter IV: Major Capitalist Countries in the Period of 1917-1939.

Chapter XV: Major Capitalist Countries in the Second Half of the 1970s to 1995.

American history is also mentioned in the sections related to international relations such as:

Chapter III: Washington-Versailles System

Chapter VII: International Relations leading to World War II (1929-1939)

Chapter VIII: World War II (1939 – 1945)

Chapter IX: International Relations from 1945 to the First Half of the 1970s

Chapter XIV: International relations from the Second Half of the 1970s to 1995.

From what has been mentioned in those chapters, it is possible to make the following judgments:

First, in terms of quantity, the number of pages in the curriculum as well as teaching hours for the subject on the history of America takes up a considerable amount of time in the whole curriculum of the world history, including world and regional superpowers.

Secondly, glorious pages of the American people in the fight against colonialism for liberation to establish the United States as well as the struggle to abolish slavery play an important part in the curriculum with well-known names such as Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln... “New deal” of Fr. Roosevelt in the 1930s and the role of America in the anti-fascist war in European and Pacific battles are always highly appreciated as a crucial contribution to the victory of the Allied Forces in the world.

Thirdly, in the conditions of the Cold War worldwide, Vietnam was a hot spot in the early years of the 1950s. The presence of the American forces in Vietnam and the long-lasting and severe war (1954-1975) had resulted in hostility between the two countries. The textbooks and the lectures on this period focus largely on the global policy of the American government, its interference into the world's events, and its expansion of power and violation of many people's rights, in which the Vietnamese can recognize directly its negative sides.

Fourthly, in such difficult situation, the lectures, especially the graduation papers by students of the Faculty of International Studies still tried to exploit the positive sides of the Vietnam-America relations. These were the topics of the meetings, the demonstrations held by students, intellectuals and all walks of life in America, demanding the American Administration to stop the war in

Vietnam. In Particular, the period of 1944-1946 was most frequently mentioned. The Viet Minh led by President Ho Chi Minh with American officers from The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in Kun-Ming (China), joined to fight the Japanese in Indochina. Living in difficult conditions in the forestry and mountainous areas of the Northernmost Base of Vietnam, officers of the OSS were the only foreigners who trained Vietnamese revolutionary armed forces. They were also among the earliest men to appear in Hanoi some days after the general uprising and the victory of the August Revolution. On those days, many letters were sent by President Ho Chi Minh with goodwill and friendship to the American President, the American Congress, and the American people. Unfortunately, the Truman Administration and its successors had chosen a different approach to foreign policy that ended up with the Paris Agreements in 1973 and the American bitter defeat in Vietnam in 1975 after years of severe war.

These sketches show that the teaching of American history is still conducted in Vietnamese Universities with both positive and negative sides concerning the American foreign policy and its relation with Vietnam. So, how should American Studies be run in the new context of the history?

The first conference on the American Literature was held in the College of Social Science and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi in 1998. Twenty three years after the Vietnam War, 3 years after the establishment of Vietnam-America diplomatic relation, scholars of literature of the two countries gathered together to discuss the influence of the Vietnam War on American

literature, culture and the critical approach to non-literary documents... [4]. The establishment of American Studies as a discipline was also raised for discussion in the Conference.

3. The Establishment of American Studies in Vietnam: Some Issues to be Raised

The above section only mentioned the teaching of American history. With the multi-disciplinary structure of Vietnam National University, Hanoi, many departments and faculties also teach American Studies depending on their particular speciality (literature, economics, law...). The Faculty of International Studies was founded and it considers American Studies as central part of research on the American continent. The faculty is responsible for teaching about the United States, its history, culture, economy, law, political system, society, and foreign policy. This orientation has important and long-lasting significance for the foundation of American Studies in Vietnam.

At present, the establishment of American Studies in Vietnam is raised in a favorable condition: the Vietnam-America diplomatic relation has been normalized and scholars have been exchanged, and it suits the aspirations of the two countries: for a stronger friendly relation and an effective co-operation.

However, in order to implement the discipline successfully, the first issue raised is to set up a "Program on American Studies," mobilizing researchers in this field throughout the country to follow a general program with concrete assignments. At the same time, international relations in American Studies network should be established regionally as well as world-

wide so as to promote the development of American Studies.

The second issue is to train a staff of lecturers on American studies. This staff should consist of young, competent, and prospective academics. They will either learn American Studies in classes organized in Vietnam from both American and Vietnamese scholars or will be sent to study in the United States or may attend a combined mode of training. This is the most fundamental step so that we will have enough human resources to run American Studies in Vietnam. Along with building human resources, building physical facilities is also of vital importance. There should be an American Studies Resource Center which includes newspapers, materials, and media relating to American Studies.

The third issue is to promote exchanges among students of the two

countries through summer classes or some other kinds of meeting so that young people will have more opportunities to understand each other and subsequently to understand aspects of each other's country. There is a reality that due to the long-lasting war in Vietnam, points of view about each country may be more or less refracted which would make it impossible to have a full understanding of each other. As scientists, we should not avoid this reality but to remedy the problem we should establish a picture of each nation exactly as it is through educational activities or cultural exchanges.

Although it might be a bit late, the establishment of the American Studies in Vietnam is of necessity. The discipline not only provides basic and systematic knowledge on a scientific field but also contributes efficiently to the promotion of the relation between the two countries.

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