



## Nguyen An Ninh's Conception of Culture and Its Value for Building Vietnam's Culture during the Innovation Period

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**Abstract:** The most common feature in terms of the content of Nguyen An Ninh's articles when he refers to the field of culture is that the criticism of weaknesses is always accompanied by pointing out the positive aspects and looking forward. Criticizes the public education system established by the French colonial regime in Indochina, its impoverished organization, and the old academic education. Based on the study of documents, and articles, this study focuses on systematically analyzing Nguyen An Ninh's views on culture; thereby showing the values of that thought in the construction of Vietnamese culture in the current innovation period.

**Keywords:** Nguyen An Ninh, the conception of culture, values, building Vietnam's culture, innovation period.

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## INTRODUCTION

From the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, Western culture has deeply penetrated Vietnam. Contact with an alien culture, represented by an advanced industrial civilization has caused a great disturbance in the psychology and consciousness of the Vietnamese people. The French colonialists deliberately carried out the plot to assimilate the culture of the Vietnamese people. The cultural issue becomes as urgent as the national one. So how can we resist assimilation, protect and preserve the national cultural identity, resolve the conflict between the old and the new, absorb the Western culture, and build a new culture? progressive and independent Vietnam.

These are big problems, big questions that need to be addressed. Because of its large size, it

attracted the attention of the intellectuals of the entire Vietnamese nation at that time. Attitudes or ways of dealing with Vietnamese intellectuals are not uniform. The conservative Confucian class clearly showed their opposition to and rejection of Western culture. Some Western-educated intellectuals, who joined the Western Village (acquired French citizenship), accepted cultural assimilation, that is, complete Europeanization, and abandoned traditional culture. Progressive intellectuals believe that it is necessary to harmonize the two cultures of East and West, selectively absorb the Western culture and preserve national cultural values.

Amidst these very different cultural attitudes, Nguyen An Ninh, with the thinking of a young intellectual, knowledgeable about Eastern and Western cultures, had a correct perception of culture

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and development orientation. national cultural development. First of all, Nguyen An Ninh expressed his criticism of Confucianism. Confucianism is an ideology in China founded by Confucius and was soon introduced to Vietnam. From the end of the 14th century to the beginning of the 15th century, Confucianism became the "State religion" in Vietnam, the orthodox ideology of Vietnam's feudal system, and was used by Vietnamese feudal dynasties (Giau, 1973). However, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that many Vietnamese intellectuals realized that besides Confucianism, there were many other ideas that needed to be learned. new development of the times. From there appeared critical and anti-Confucian thought and realized the need to absorb Western culture and ideas (Van & Luong, 2019; Van, *et al.*, 2019). On the contrary, the intellectuals who still had a strong feudal background tried to hold onto and maintain Confucianism. Controversy and clashes in the old and new intellectual circles, conservative and radical also started from the above contradiction (Nghia, 2013; Thinh, 2017).

Against that background, along with a number of other prominent figures, the appearance of Nguyen An Ninh with the thinking and thinking of the young generation emerged against the Confucian and conservative ideas of the Confucians. those who are always within the "cương tỏa" (strict management) of Confucianism, consider Confucian teachings as "khuôn vàng", "thước ngọc" (the absolute standard) to learn and follow (Giau, 1973; Van, *et al.*, 2019). With those fresh thoughts and patriotic enthusiasm, he had very typical views on culture. It is no coincidence that he began to focus on them from the areas of language, education, and culture in general. Because according to him, "culture is the soul of a nation", "people who understand the nation's soul, spiritual needs suitable for the nation, people who are able to guide every step of the way. nation, illuminating the path of the nation" (Center for National Studies, 2009, p. 1031).

## **RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Nguyen An Ninh's conception of culture and the role of culture**

In terms of culture, Nguyen An Ninh is one of the most typical thinkers in the South in the early 20th century. He made certain contributions to culture, especially views and ideas to revive and develop the national culture in the revolutionary cause of national liberation.

Nguyen An Ninh's cultural conception: When it comes to culture, Nguyen An Ninh has not given a complete definition, but through many of his writings, we can understand his concept of culture. According to Nguyen An Ninh, the culture that he

conceives belongs to the spiritual aspect, but there are many different interpretations.

First, according to Nguyen An Ninh, culture is the totality of human creations in terms of spirit, including morality, literature, philosophy, art, and related fields. there. In the work "Does Culture Change?", Nguyen An Ninh writes in terms of morality, literature, philosophy, art, etc., in short, in terms of culture. Accordingly, Nguyen An Ninh believes that the humanities, social sciences, human philosophy, and ethics created by humans in history are culture.

According to Nguyen An Ninh, culture is also understood as a spiritual synthesis that transcends all fields such as philosophy, morality, religion, law, customs, art, psychology, etc. Nguyen An Ninh wrote: "Religion, philosophy, morality, law, custom, art, psychology, all change with society. But culture is like the spirit that synthesizes everything on it, I say it doesn't change" (Center for National Studies, 2009, p. 1033 With this point of view, we can understand fields such as philosophy, morality, religion, law, custom, art, psychology, etc. as the concrete, and culture as the spiritual. common to these fields. That's why literature, philosophy, morality, religion, art, psychology, etc. of different ethnic groups, their cultural identity will also be different. Because each nation has its own cultural identity, that foundation will determine the process of forming the fields of literature, philosophy, morality, religion, art, psychology, etc. Nguyen An Ninh helps us to understand that, in addition to the regulations of historical circumstances, socio-economic conditions, literature, philosophy, morality, religion, art, psychology, etc. are subject to the regulations of the culture of each ethnic group.

According to Nguyen An Ninh, culture is an overarching concept, only at a fairly high level when people reach it through deep understanding. In the lecture "The ideal of Annam youth", Nguyen An Ninh also talked a lot about culture, although he did not give a definition of culture, he did explain the term culture, to him, "the two words culture itself connotes the meaning of the immense place, the highest place that we can reach after absorbing the high and wide horizons" (Nguyen An Ninh also has a way of defining culture according to the role of culture in the existence and development of the nation. According to Nguyen An Ninh, "culture is the soul of a nation". According to this understanding, culture is what is inside, the spirit of a nation, and culture is the core in all areas of social life. Therefore, in order to preserve the race, according to Nguyen An Ninh, it is necessary to revive the national culture, know how to absorb the culture of the times, and supplement the national culture to

make it richer and more diverse. Keeping the national culture is preserving the national spirit, preserving the national soul and national essence of the nation. Making revolution too, according to Nguyen An Ninh, must pay attention to culture, a nation dominated by foreign culture cannot have independence.

Thus, it is possible to understand the cultural concept that Nguyen An Ninh approached as the culture of a nation, not the culture in general; culture is the spiritual domain of society, including the fields of philosophy, morality, religion, law, customs, art, psychology, etc.; culture is the spirit that transcends the fields of philosophy, morality, religion, law, custom, art, psychology, etc. has reached a high generalization level, culture is spirit, is the soul of a nation. The culture of a nation is created by the creative labor of generations of that nation's races in the historical periods of existence and development.

According to Nguyen An Ninh, culture is not something in itself but is determined by economy and society, so when it comes to historical conditions. Politics and culture have a close relationship, in which culture is the sustainability of a people, while politics can change. Therefore, in order to develop the country, between politics and culture, one must both pay attention to politics in order to resolve the contradictions of the current society and bring the society into a stable order, but also pay attention to Regarding culture, According to Nguyen An Ninh, in Vietnamese society at that time, there was an attitude that only cared about politics, considering politics as the only one, but did not really care about culture. Nguyen An Ninh frankly criticized these views, he wrote: "They consider the issue of the survival of the race as a political issue, not a social one". According to Nguyen An Ninh, in the current colonial political regime, the most concerning issue of the social revolution is to overthrow this regime but to achieve that goal, first of all, we must pay attention to culture. society, and people's livelihood, because that is the basis and conditions for implementation. On the other hand, culture is not only the basis, the foundation of the present society but also the future of the race, so paying attention to and developing culture is a strategic issue that is very important for the future. country future. He wrote: "The problem of survival in our race is a social problem, it is in the province of our nation from the South to the North. We still have to take care that it has a common ideal for the present time to create the seed of the "tomorrow" tree of our people" (Center for National Studies, 2009, p. 66). Accordingly, culture is the source of strength throughout the nation's development history, it is necessary to be aware of the role of

culture in order to further improve the awareness and level of culture. Center for National Studies, 2009, p. 56).

### **Nguyen An Ninh's concept of the role of culture in history and society**

According to Nguyen An Ninh, culture plays a very important role in the existence and development of the nation. For a nation to have real independence, it must first have a stable, long-lasting culture with its own identity, solidity, and development. Nguyen An Ninh admitted, "a nation dominated by foreign cultures cannot have real independence. Culture is the soul of a nation" (Center for National Studies, 2009, p. 158). It can be said that Nguyen An Ninh was one of the first revolutionaries to appreciate the role of culture.

According to him, before making the national liberation revolution, it is necessary to pay attention to consolidating, building, and developing culture, because culture is the national soul and national essence of the nation. A nation always exists and develops on the basis of a certain culture, and that cultural background will govern the movement and development of that nation. Nguyen An Ninh writes: "When the race emerges, we do not mean to live peacefully the life of animals, but to live with a culture, with strength, with all that It is best that a nation or an era can leave a deep imprint or a brilliant halo for the future" (Center for National Studies, 2009, p. 1031).

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Historical reality shows that many ethnic groups in the world, thanks to their highly developed culture, have enhanced their position and at the same time spread their cultural values in the world. Nguyen An Ninh once said: a nation that wants to live wants to be independent, wants to be famous among humanity, needs to have its own culture'. Nguyen An Ninh has demonstrated the cultural development of China, according to him, thanks to its unique, separate identity, and a quite high level, other ethnic groups that invaded China were defeated and destroyed by the China culture. China's assimilation is the basis for the expansion of Chinese influence on the world scale (Long, 2019; Van, 2021).

In the context of Vietnamese society, Nguyen An Ninh believes that it is necessary to focus on developing a culture to a higher level worthy of the times, which is a necessary condition for maintaining national independence and expanding exchanges. international. Nguyen An Ninh once said: "A nation with a noble culture will enjoy privileges that a lower nation cannot know". According to him, a nation that wants to enjoy legitimate rights and fulfill its noble aspirations and ideals need a developed culture. It can be said that this is a sharp statement, showing a strategic vision, and setting the right direction for the nation in the present and in the future. According to Nguyen An Ninh, it is not difficult to build a separate culture for the nation, but the most difficult thing is to find a solid spiritual asset as a foundation.

### **The value of Nguyen An Ninh's concept of culture in building the culture of Vietnam in the innovation period**

The Resolution of the XIII Congress (2021) of the Party affirms, "To develop comprehensively the human being and build an advanced Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity so that culture can truly become an endogenous and dynamic force. force for national development and national defense. Increase investment in cultural development. To build, develop and create the most favorable environment and social conditions to arouse patriotic tradition, national pride, belief, and aspiration to develop a prosperous and happy

country; the talent, intelligence, and quality of Vietnamese are the most important center, goal and driving force for the country's development". This is even more evident, along with the good work of Party building, economic development, consolidation of national defense and security, the good implementation of the Party's cultural development orientations are particularly important in the overall development process of the country. In that context, the values in the concept of Nguyen An Ninh's culture bring to the present cultural construction of Vietnam is not small.

Nearly a hundred years after Nguyen An Ninh's lectures on culture and youth ideals, if we read those presentations carefully, we still see many of the arguments of this 23-year-old intellectual young man that still exist today still retain their current value. Nguyen An Ninh realizes the power of culture on national issues and proves that if there is a strong culture, it is still possible to maintain national independence. He cited China as a country with a long-standing culture. When it was occupied by other ethnic groups, culture was the basis for the Chinese to not only regain national independence but also assimilate the invaders. conquer yourself. So preserving the nation's cultural identity is one of the effective measures to protect national independence in the context of loss of country and cultural assimilation. Improving one's own cultural level is a necessary condition in life, a condition for preserving independence and expanding the influence of a nation (Tinh, 1996; Liem & Son, 2009).

Despite wishing to build an independent culture, Nguyen An Ninh did not follow the trend of extreme xenophobia. He criticized narrow-minded nationalism: "Patriotism with a focus on xenophobia, patriotism that calls for revenge, separates itself from its victors and condemns their civilization, that patriotism, isolating himself in an ivory tower, and thinking that everything there will be perfect. That sentimental blind patriotism is really nothing to be commended for, but it only leads to paralysis and the annihilation of the race"<sup>4</sup>, seeing the internationalization of the times: "The world is moving towards internationalism just like a boat being swept away by a stream of water that cannot help it" (Tinh, 1996, p. 185), but asserts: "Internationalism cannot exist. without nationalism" (Tinh, 1996, p. 186), and finally came to the conclusion: "Nationalism and internationalism have nothing to do with each other. Moreover, nationalism extending to internationalism instead of causing sharing, suspicion, and hatred among peoples only contributes to harmony and beautifies humanity" (Center for National Studies, 2009, p.982). With a deep and correct awareness of nationalism and internationalism, Nguyen An Ninh

realizes the need to exchange and learn cultural values abroad, especially European culture. According to him, Vietnamese culture needs to be built on the basis of traditional culture and absorb foreign cultural values: "But now in this day and age, each of us Asians must equip both sides, must absorb the Western culture as well as Asian culture" (Tinh, 1996, p.87). He found the interaction between the two cultures, understanding European culture is also a way to understand himself: "You have to go through European culture again to understand Far Eastern culture deeply" (Tinh, 1996, p. 92). Therefore, he called on the people to learn French culture in order to expand people's knowledge, widen their awareness, make their race strong, and quickly escape the yoke of slavery. This thought is the starting point for the cultural exchange process of Vietnam today.

Although he exalts the power of Western industrial civilization, Nguyen An Ninh does not exaggerate and flatter it like some others. He is cautious when considering the influence of Western civilization, as well as its dangers. He quotes Tagore as saying: "European civilization is a crusher. It destroys the peoples it invades, it destroys every race that dares to hinder its invasion. That is the civilization of cannibals, oppressing the weak to get rich on their backs. Everywhere it sows jealousy and hatred, everywhere it plunders. As a scientific civilization, it is inhumane. It is made powerful by focusing all its energies on the single goal of getting rich." Nguyen An Ninh pointed out the reverse side of Western civilization when it came to dominating our country. It worships money, making people slaves to money. Many large-scale con artists are masked by masks of innocence, morality, and friendliness. But in fact, hidden behind that mask are depraved acts, corrupt, corrupt, and evil consciences. There are people who are fascinated by it, have lost the noble qualities of the race, abandoned the Fatherland, and betrayed their brothers. Thus, in the process of cultural exchange, it is necessary to be selective, to choose cultural values suitable to the characteristics of the Vietnamese people.

Nguyen An Ninh does not accept cultural assimilation because according to him, any nation that allows a foreign culture to rule cannot have true independence. This view of his has strongly attacked the policy of cultural assimilation of the French colonialists. At the same time, he also criticized some Vietnamese people's habit of learning and learning, preferring Westernization, and illiteracy: "Many Vietnamese people who are now Westernized Annam think that when they pick up the banalities of European customs, they will make the compatriots understand that they have received Western

training. Such ignorance of European culture should not surprise us. Because only those who have firmly established culture are able to enjoy a foreign culture" (Center for Cultural Studies, 2009, p. 1035).

## CONCLUSION

Nguyen An Ninh's thought on culture is quite comprehensive and covers many fields. Despite his very young age, Nguyen An Ninh has quite a sharp and comprehensive cognitive ability in a very complex field. In particular, in Nguyen An Ninh's thought on culture, he entered the socio-cultural fields, but he mentioned new issues, few people mentioned, such as spiritual culture, Religion, language culture, culture in love, marriage, or the art of "Tuồng", "Chèo", etc. So, with a rather massive and rich system of cultural perspectives and ideas, Nguyen An Ninh was worthy of the title of a great cultural house of the Vietnamese nation in the early twentieth century with the immortal maxim: "Culture is the heart of the nation".

In view of culture, Nguyen An Ninh emphasized the need to build an independent culture of the nation to contribute to the determination of life values for young people at that time, on the basis of inheriting the cultural identities of the youth. the nation's traditional culture and selectively absorbing other cultures in the world, especially French culture. From an ethical point of view, he emphasized human relations on the basis of ensuring mutual benefits, and in the spirit of "loving others as well as yourself", the society will forever be stable and secure, and long-lasting. These ideas are still valid and have great significance in building Vietnam's culture of "advanced and imbued with national identity".

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