CHAPTER 7

Critiquing the Promotion of American Biased "Liberal Arts Education" in Post- "Đổi Mới" Vietnam

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7.1 Introduction

One of the major topics in the debate about education among Vietnamese educators, researchers, and policymakers is the search for a new model and its underlying philosophy (Hayden and Le-Nguyen, Chapter 2). In this debate, one can hear many conflicting voices, but the idea of borrowing the American model of liberal arts education seems to be increasingly noticeable. The purpose of this chapter is not to deny the benefits of liberal arts education, nor to downplay the achievements and strengths of the American higher education system, but rather to show a worrying tendency, especially among a number of US-educated authors, to absolutise the American model while negating totally the national achievements of the past.

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P. Le Ha and D. Ba Ngoc (eds.), *Higher Education in Market-Oriented Socialist Vietnam*, International and Development Education,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46912-2_7

7.2 The Need for Model and Philosophy Change Under the Impacts of "Đổi Mới"

The change of education model and philosophy is not new in Vietnam. Before 1986, Vietnam had at least three times abandoned its higher education model and adopted a new one.

The history of Vietnam's traditional higher education began in 1075, when the first mandarinal examinations were organised by King Lý Nhân Tông. One year later, Quốc Tử Giám (College of National Sons) was established. Designed for the education of sons of the royal family, Quốc Tử Giám later received also sons of high-ranking officials, and from 1252, students from other backgrounds. This higher education institution in the Chinese style is often considered Vietnam's very first university. The Confucian model of higher education lasted for ten centuries, and ended in 1919, under King Khải Định.

The first change of model occurred under the French domination. To produce officials for the colonial administration, the French imposed on the country a Western-style education system. The first "modern" university in the so-called French Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) is the Indochinese University, established in 1906, consisting of five *Écolessupérieures: Écolesupérieure de Droit et Administration, Écolesupérieure des sciences, Écolesupérieure de médecine, Écolesupérieure du génie Civil,* and *Écolesupérieure des lettres.* The Indochinese University started its first academic year in 1907, and was the only institution of higher education in French Indochina before 1945 (Vu, Dao, Nguyen, Nguyen, & Pham, 2006).

The French model was sustained even after August Revolution (1945), when the Indochinese University was renamed to Vietnam National University (VNU), and during the anti-French war (1946–1954), when it was evacuated to mountainous regions. At the same time, several new colleges were established by the government of Hồ Chí Minh despite numerous difficulties.

The second change of model occurred during the anti-American war, when Vietnam was divided. During this period, both in the North and the South, higher education underwent significant developments.

In 1956, the higher education system in the North abandoned the French model and followed the Soviet model, in which all institutions were public, organised according to specialisation, and highly centralised. In 1975, the North Vietnam higher education system

included 30 universities (excluding colleges) with about 56,000 students. Meanwhile, the higher education system in the South adopted the American model. This system included both public and private institutions. In 1975, South Vietnam's higher education system had 7 public and 7 private universities with about 166,000 students (Dang, 1997).

The third change of model was in 1976, when the Soviet model was chosen to be applied in the whole country. Just as in North Vietnam before 1975, this system was highly centralised, and all its institutions were public. The mission of the system was to produce the "new socialist all-round developed citizens" to fulfill socio-economic plans set by the government and to build socialism in general. (See, for example, the article by Nguyen (2015) entitled "Ho Chi Minh Ideology of new fully and comprehensively developed people regarding the development of new Vietnamese people nowadays"). One of the major developments of this period was the rapid expansion of graduate programmes, although the government continued to send a large number of students to study in the East European socialist countries.

But the need for model change has never been as urgent as it is today under the impacts of "ĐổiMới". Initiated by the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1986, this policy has led to the opening of the country to the outside world, adopting the market economy, and has turned Vietnam from a war-ravaged and chronically starving country into one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Despite two international financial crises in 1997 and 2008, during the last 30 years, Vietnam's GDP has increased significantly at an average rate of about 7% and per capita GDP, from under US$100 in 1989 to about US$2587 in 2018 (General Statistics Office, 2016). See Fig. 7.1.

Vietnam's economic progress has had enormous impacts on the country's higher education system (Hayden and Le-Nguyen, Chapter 2; Chau, Chapter 8; and Pham, Chapter 9). As both living standards and market demand for qualified human resource are now much higher, the number of universities and students increased significantly. Many colleges were transformed into universities, and a large number of new universities, both public and private, were established. Table 7.1 indicates the development of Vietnam's higher education system in terms of institutions and students in the 2000–2015 period.

The rapid expansion of the higher education system has generated criticism from a number of educators who worry about education quality.

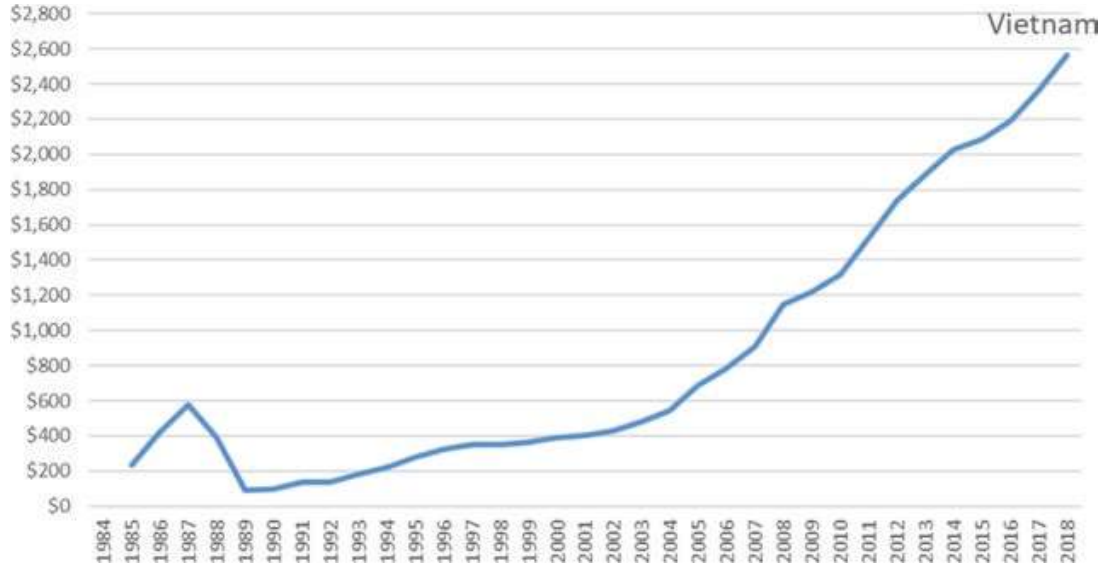

Fig. 7.1 Vietnam's per capita GDP growth (*Source* Data from the World Bank)

Table 7.1 Number of higher education institutions and students (thousands)

	2000		*2005*		*2010*		*2015*	
	Inst.	*Students*	*Inst.*	*Students*	*Inst.*	*Students*	*Inst.*	*Students*
Total	178	899.5	277	1387.1	414	2162.1	445	2118.5
Public	148	795.6	243	1226.7	334	1828.2	357	1847.1
Private	30	103.9	34	160.4	80	333.9	88	271.4

Source General Statistics Office (2016)

But the biggest problem, in my opinion, is the mismatch between higher education system's governance and philosophy and the country's market economy (Marklein and Mai, Chapter 11). After three decades of reforms, despite the label "Socialist" in its official name, Vietnam has become largely similar to capitalist countries in the world, except for a state-owned sector that is ineffective and irresistibly diminishing. Slowly, but noticeably, Vietnam has been renouncing the Soviet-style governance model by increasing the number of private universities, offering more autonomy to higher education institutions, and allowing a more flexible ceiling of tuition fees and higher enrolment quotas, to name only a few. However, those changes are far from enough. The globalisation

trend, especially after Vietnam joined ASEAN [1995], APEC [1998], WTO [2006], and CPTPP [Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, 2018], has required Vietnam's universities and their graduates to cooperate and compete globally, and at the same time posed for this higher education system many new challenges and problems, making the need for reform more urgent than ever.

It is in this context that the mentioned debate on higher education philosophy and model has emerged. In the debate, one can notice three main points:

1. Criticism of Vietnam's traditional education;
2. Criticism of the Soviet-styled model; and
3. The idea of borrowing the American model of liberal arts education.

I will examine these points below.

7.3 Differing Perspectives on Liberal Arts Education: "Khai Phóng" and "Khai Sáng"

In South Vietnam before 1975, the term "*Giáo dục khai phóng*" was popular. Largely forgotten after 1975, the term returned to life only recently to mean "Liberal Arts Education", and quickly became fashionable. Numerous conferences on the topic were organised, such as "Liberal Arts Education and the Future of Vietnamese Education" (*Giáo dục khai phóng và tương lai của giáo dục Việt Nam*) by FPT University in March 2015, "Liberal Arts Education" (*Giáo dục khai phóng*) by Vietnam Japan University, Vietnam National University in May 2017, "Liberal Arts Education – the US Model" (*Giáo dục khai phóng – mô hình Hoa Kỳ*) by Vietnam—US Friendship Association in August 2017—to name only a few. Recently, the newly established Fulbright University Vietnam declared that it is a "liberal arts education" university.

The re-emergence of the term "Giáo dục khai phóng", in my opinion, must be considered in the context of an interesting anti-official sociocultural tendency, that tends to re-evaluate, and sometimes over-evaluate, the achievements of the South Vietnamese regime during the anti-American war while downplaying those of the North. In this chapter, what I intend to do is to show that the outrageous promotion of the American model is a product of a biased dichotomy.

Ironically, an example of that biased dichotomy is the paper "Liberal Arts in Vietnam's Higher Education" that Dr. Vũ Thành Tự Anh from Fulbright University Vietnam presented at the conference "Beyond Dichotomies: Vietnam from Multiple Perspectives" organised by "Engaging With Vietnam" in Ho Chi Minh City and Phan Thiết (December 2018). Declaring that "Giáo dục khai phóng" was first introduced to Vietnam in the South before 1975 and has been revived by Phan Châu Trinh and Hoa Sen universities, Dr. Anh contrasted "Giáo dục khai phóng" with both traditional and contemporary higher education in Vietnam, declaring that the aim of both traditional and contemporary higher education is to produce servants, or even slaves, but not free people.

Dr. Vũ Thành Tự Anh is not the only author who holds that accusation. Dr. Nguyễn Thị Từ Huy, for example, in her answer to Phan VănThắng's question about whether the Vietnamese education during the last decades aimed at liberating human thought and creativity, stated: "No! If we are honest, we have to answer 'no'. There were some liberating efforts of some people, in some families, at some parts of some schools or institutions. But our education system as a whole is not designed with liberation spirit and method"[1] (Nguyen & Phan, 2019).

Such arguments are totally understandable in the HE context of Vietnam. But they can be applied to all education systems, including that of the USA. In fact, reading the arguments of the authors, who promote the term "Giáo dục khai phóng", one can notice that what they mean is not different from the term "Khai sáng" (Enlightenment) that was popular in the North. These arguments sound like Kant's arguments in his famous book *The Conflict of the Faculties.* There, Kant studies the traditional division of the Western Medieval University into three *higher* faculties, including theology, law, and medicine, whose teachings interest the government, and one *lower* faculty, that is philosophy, "whose function is only to look after the interests of science" and may use its own judgement about what it teaches. Showing that

[1] "Không! Nếu chúng ta trung thực thì chúng ta sẽ phải trả lời là "không". Có những nỗ lực khai phóng ở một số cá nhân, ở một số gia đình, ở một số bộ phận tại một số trường, tại một số tổ chức nào đó. Nhưng toàn bộ nền giáo dục của chúng ta không được thiết kế theo tinh thần và phương pháp khai phóng."

> *the biblical theologian (as a member of a higher faculty) draws his teachings not from reason but from the Bible; the professor of law gets his, not from natural law, but from the law of the land; and the professor of medicine does not draw his method of therapy as practiced on the public from the physiology of the human body but from medical regulations.* (Kant, 1979, p. 35)

Kant concludes:

> *…the government is interested primarily in means for securing the strongest and most lasting influence on the people, and the subjects which the higher faculties teach are just such means. Accordingly, the government reserves the right itself to sanction the teachings of the higher faculties, but those of the lower faculty it leaves up to the scholars' reason.* (Kant, 1979, p. 27)

In contrast, according to Kant, a philosophy professor is the "one that, having no commands to give, is free to evaluate everything, and concerns itself with the interests of the sciences, that is, with truth: one in which reason is authorized to speak out publicly" (Kant, 1979, pp. 27–29). Kant conceives the modern university with universal and autonomous reason as its guiding idea, and doing so gives the university universality and autonomy. The purpose of Kant's university is to produce not servants but free, "enlightened men", who are able "to make use of his understanding without direction from another" (Kant, 2003, p. 54).

Thus, Kant's university is intrinsically the university of reason, as Bill Readings puts it: "In this sense, the lower faculty turns out to be the higher, the queen of the sciences, the discipline that incarnates the pure principle that animates the University and differentiates it from either a technical training school (a guild) or a special academy (a royal society)" (Readings, 1996, p. 57). As we all know, Kant's idea of the modern university was first realised by Humboldt in Berlin and later became the model for Western universities.

In brief, both "Khai sáng" and "Khai phóng", as used both during the wartime and today in Vietnam, mean "liberating education", and they can be used interchangeably. The vague differing nuance in their contemporary connotation might be explained, probably, by the ways in which they were introduced in Vietnam: "Khai sáng" entered the Vietnamese vocabulary as the translation of the French term "Les lumières", while "Khai phóng"—of the English "Liberal arts".

7.4 Criticism of Vietnam's Traditional Higher Education

Kant's arguments sound very convincing in the West, but they are much less plausible when being put in the contexts of Vietnam and East Asia. Kant is one of the most important figures of the Western Enlightenment, the eighteenth-century intellectual movement the central ideas of which are the celebration of reason, the belief in the power and advancement of knowledge, and the opposition to intolerance and abuses in Church and State. All these ideas were born after, and largely because of, the ten medieval centuries that Europe had gone through under the Catholic Church, during which, to borrow Nietzsche's words,

> *All the methods, all the principles of the scientific spirit of today, were the targets for thousands of years of the most profound contempt; if a man inclined to them he was excluded from the society of "decent" people–he passed as "an enemy of God," as a scoffer at the truth, as one "possessed." As a man of science, he belonged to the Chandala.* (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 58)

That is the reason why Kant, in the mentioned essay "What is Enlightenment?", emphasised the revolt against ignorance and superstition with the motto "Sapere aude!" (Kant, 2003, p. 54).

The situation in East Asia is different. Enlightenment has a much longer tradition in East Asia under the influences of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. But before going further, it is worth mentioning, even in the most simplified manner, the difference between Christianity and the Eastern religions.

Nietzsche is probably the best writer on differences between Christianity and Buddhism. Christianity is a typical *monotheistic revelation religion of salvation,* in which God, in Nietzsche's words, "becomes merely a weapon in the hands of clerical agitators, who interpret all happiness as a reward and all unhappiness as a punishment for obedience or disobedience to him, for 'sin'". He continues:

> *Christianity had to embrace barbaric concepts and valuations in order to obtain mastery over barbarians: of such sort, for example, are the sacrifices of the first-born, the drinking of blood as a sacrament, the disdain of the intellect and of culture; torture in all its forms, whether bodily or not; the whole pomp of the cult […] Christianity aims at mastering beasts of prey; its modus operandi is to make them ill–to make feeble is the Christian recipe for taming, for "civilizing".* (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 74)

By contrast, Buddhism is a *nontheistic religion of enlightenment* (or awakening). Siddhartha Gautama is not God, nor Saviour, but a teacher. The goal of Buddhism is to attain enlightenment by meditation and following the *Eightfold Path* (right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration), but not to be saved by a loving God and obeying his commandments. According to Nietzsche, "Buddhism is a hundred times as realistic as Christianity–it is part of its living heritage that it is able to face problems objectively and coolly; it is the product of long centuries of philosophical speculation. The concept, 'god', was already disposed of before it appeared. Buddhism is the only genuinely positive religion to be encountered in history, and this applies even to its epistemology (which is a strict phenomenalism). It does not speak of a 'struggle with sin', but, yielding to reality, of the 'struggle with suffering'. Sharply differentiating itself from Christianity, it puts the self-deception that lies in moral concepts behind it; it is, in my phrase, beyond good and evil" (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 70).

In the same way, Confucius is not a divine being but a great teacher. Confucianism is not a religion per se, but rather a sociological theory that does not have much to deal with God or the relationship of human beings to God, but mostly about how people should live with each other and in harmony with nature. An easy criticism of Confucian higher education ("*Đại học*" literally means "higher learning") is that its pedagogical method is authoritarian, and that the only goal of its students is to pass exams to become mandarins, rather than to become free and open-minded people. In reality, Confucius' pedagogical method is strikingly modern, very close to what we call "learner-centred" today. Instead of long monological lectures, a good Confucian teacher poses questions and cites classic books, using allusions and analogies to stimulate his students to brainstorm until they arrive at the right ideas. Here is a passage from *The Analects* (Lunyu):

> *I do not open up the truth to one who is not eager to get knowledge, nor help out any one who is not anxious to explain himself. When I have presented one corner of a subject to any one, and he cannot from it learn the other three, I do not repeat my lesson.* (Confucius, 1861, Book VII. Shuh Urh, Chapter VIII, p. 61)

Although Confucian higher learning relies heavily on classic books, Confucius insists that thinking is more important than memorising: "Learning without thought is labour lost; thought without learning is

perilous" (Confucius, 1861, Book II. Wei Ching, Chapter XV, p. 14). Confucius also encourages his students to have a dialectic and pluralistic attitude which is the message in a popular anecdote attributed to him. One day, Zi Gong, one of Confucius' students, was asked by a guest: "How many seasons are there in a year?" "Four seasons" answered Zi Gong. "No! Three seasons"—replied the guest. They quarrelled until Confucius came and said: "There are three seasons in a year". After the visitor left, Confucius explained, "That man was a cricket spirit. Because crickets are born in the spring and die in the fall, they never see the winter. For them, there are only three seasons in a year".

The anecdote is anecdote, but its popularity reflects the Confucian conception of knowledge that is very different from that of Socrates. As Francois Jullien puts it in his book *Le détour et l'accès*, Socrates's two important—maybe the most important—contributions to Western philosophy are "Inductive reasoning" and "universal definition".

> *Induction (epagôge) is understood as the progression from the particular to the general: from the consideration of the most diverse examples, the spirit rises up to the common character which unites them in a single kind; and definition, the true logos, is the collection of those general characteristics which say the essence of the thing, its ousia. This, to which we aspire the Socratic irony, by malmeaning our opinions, and of which the dialectic tries to give birth, is this in itself, of which the criterion is the universality (implying the non-contradiction) and which, alone, can found "science".*[2] (Jullien, 1995, p. 259)

The exigency of universality implies that any liberating education must free students from false knowledge and must orient them towards the truthful knowledge, that is universal, objective, and unique. Thus, Western liberating education, whether it is under the name of "Liberal arts" or "Enlightenment" is intrinsically of *imposing nature*, and the *Socratic*

[2] In French: "L'induction (*epagôge*) est comprise comme la progression du particulier au général: de la considération des exemples les plus divers, l'esprit s'élève au caractère commun qui les rassemble en un genre unique; et la définition, comme *logos* véritable, est la collection de ces caractéristiques générales qui disent l'essence de la chose, son *ousia*. Ce, à quoi nous aspirer l'ironie socratique, en malmenant nos opinions, et dont tente d'accoucher la dialectique, est cet *en soi*, dont le critère est l'universalité (impliquant la non-contradiction) et qui, seul, peut fonder la 'science'" (trans. Ngô Tự Lập).

(dialogic) method or the so-called *critical thinking* are nothing but technics. And this is true throughout the history of Western education, both before and after Kant.

But in Confucius's philosophy, the search for the universal truth, on the basis of the non-contradiction principle, is not priority. Jullien puts it:

> *His avowed concern is therefore not knowledge, having in mind the Truth, but the regulation of the conduct - which allows to marry the regulation of the World. Therefore, far from pretending to describe the real, to reproduce on an abstract plane the great articulation of things, the Confucian statement, pronounced from Master to disciple, in relation to the circumstance, can be only indicative. But by reacting sharply, and in a special way, he opens at the same time the infinity of the course of things. It illuminates indirectly, from their slightest detail, what cannot be defined in a general way: their background of immanence.*[3] (Jullien, 1995, p. 228).

Similarly, Taoism is rather a philosophical school than religion. It is about the principle, or the "way", of everything in the universe, and about how to learn and master that principle to achieve the state of harmony and perfection.

As in the famous saying "The finger pointing at the moon is not the moon", Taoist educational philosophy insists that students must learn the essence of things but not their names defined and dictated by others, and that teachers must enlighten their students instead of imposing on them fixed ideas. Here are the first lines of Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*: "The way you can go isn't the real way. The name you can say isn't the real name" (Lao, 2009, §1: Taoing; p. 2).

A good Taoist teacher should not be authoritarian. He should not try to put as much as possible information into learners' minds, nor to impose on them his viewpoints, but should instead motivate students to learn by themselves in the most natural, effortless way: "Studying and

[3] In French: "Son souci avoué n'est donc pas la connaissance, ayant en vue la Vérité, mais la régulation de la conduite - qui permet d'épouser la régulation du Monde. Aussi, loin de prétendre décrire le réel, reproduire sur un plan abstrait la grande articulation des choses, le propos confucéen, prononcé de Maître à disciple, en rapport à la circonstance, ne peut-il être qu'indicatif. Mais en réagissant à vif, et de façon particulière, il ouvre du même coup sur l'infini de la marche des choses. Il éclaire de biais, à partir de leur moindre détail, ce qu'on ne saurait définir d'une façon générale: leur fond d'immanence" (trans. Ngô Tự Lập).

learning daily you grow larger/Following the Way daily you shrink/You get smaller and smaller/So you arrive at not doing…" (Lao, 2009, §48: Unlearning; p. 72).

What is shared by Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist teachers is their open and suggestive teaching method. At first glance, their teaching method seems to be very Socratic. But there is a big difference between them: the aim of the Asian teachers is to invite their students to *know*, rather than to *define* things. Let's take only one example from *The Analects*. "Xian asked what was shameful. The Master said, 'When good government prevails in a state, to be thinking only of salary; and, when bad government prevails, to be thinking, in the same way, only of salary – this is shameful'" (Confucius, 1861, Book XIV. Hëen Wan, Chapter I, p. 139). This passage, rich in implications as all others in Confucian classics, is examined brilliantly by François Jullien in the mentioned book *Le détour et l'accès*. Different commentators interpret it in different ways. For He Yan, it is normal to think of salary when the country is well governed, it is shameful to do so when the country is not well governed. James Legge's translation that I cite above reflects perhaps Zhu Xi's interpretation, according to which it is shameful if one always thinks of salary regardless whether the country is well governed or not. Here Confucius does not try to define, but rather to open a path of reflexion on the topic (Jullien, 1995, p. 261).

It is interesting to notice that while traditional East Asian higher learning is often criticised for relying too much on classic books, the Great Books Movement, initiated and promoted by many Catholic Liberal Arts institutions, follows the same path: focusing on the Great Books of Western Civilisation, which is hailed as a new sort of higher education. Mortimer J. Adler, for example, writes in "Reforming Education":

> *In the early 1930s President Hutchins was asked whether great books seminars, then open only to a picked handful of students, should be accessible to all the students in our colleges. His brief reply was crisp and clear. He said that the best education for the best was the best education for all. Great books seminars in our public schools and in our colleges should be available to all the students there, not only to the few who elect to take them or who are specially selected*. (Adler, 1990, p. 5)

7.5 Criticism of the Soviet-Style Model

Criticism of Vietnam's Soviet-style higher education, and the Soviet model itself, is also often biased and exaggerated. First of all, the Soviet higher education system was nothing but a Western system *par excellence*, and the Soviet university is intrinsically Kant's university of reason applied to the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). What makes it different from other Western University models is its philosophical foundation—Marxism, or more precisely, dialectical materialism, and historical materialism, a typical Western philosophical school. The authors of the book *Critiquing Bourgeois Trends in Pedagogy*, for example, cite Engels's *The Principles of Communism* as their philosophical foundation:

> *Education will enable young people quickly to familiarize themselves with the whole system of production and to pass from one branch of production to another in response to the needs of society or their own inclinations. It will, therefore, free them from the one-sided character which the present-day division of labour impresses upon every individual. Communist society will, in this way, make it possible for its members to put their comprehensively developed faculties to full use.* (Sokolova, Rodionov, & Sklovsky, 1978, p. 6)

The liberating mission is clearly declared in many, if not most, Soviet documents about education. M.A. Prokofiev, for example, writes in *Higher Education in the USSR*, a book published by UNESCO in 1961, that the mission of the Soviet university is to produce enlightened citizens for the communist society that is believed to "… open boundless vistas for the cognition of the objective laws of nature and social phenomena, for the development of science, education and culture" (Prokofiev, Chilikin, & Tulpanov, 1961, p. 6). In the following excerpt from the same book, Tulpanov explained more clearly the aim of the Soviet education system:

> *The all-round development of man, the bringing up of a generation able to complete the building of the Communist society – the society of highest social justice and welfare – such is the aim of upbringing, education and training of the younger generation in the Soviet Union. […] The harmonious of the personality is ensured by a combination of the physical, mental, labour, ethical and aesthetical education of the growing generation, the fostering in young people of lofty sentiments of humanity, exalted moral traits, by upbringing in the spirit of service to society, service for the good of all the people.* (Prokofiev et al., 1961, p. 33)

One can even find in Tulpanov's text the term "enlightenment":

> *The all-round development and education of man is ensured in the Soviet Union not only by the board system of secondary and higher education but also by the entire system of cultural enlightenment and scientific propaganda. Suffice it to point to the activities of the vast network of various museums, palaces and houses of culture with their diverse amateur art groups, libraries, sport organisations, radio and TV programs*, etc. (Prokofiev et al., 1961, p. 33)

In brief, the whole Soviet education is conceived as general education, that is practically not different from what we call liberal arts education today.

As to the relationship between university and state, one might pose a question: how can the university realise its enlightenment mission without autonomy? The answer is, unlike Kant's, that Soviet educators, with their strong belief in the scientific nature of Marxism, do not think that autonomy is necessary. For them, being a scientist is being a Marxist. Prokofiev puts it:

> *Some foreign circles hold the view that universities need autonomy, that they have to be independent of society and the State, the view that the task of universities is to propagate knowledge, irrespective whom this knowledge serves. Such views frequently express the desire of progressive scientists to escape from the thrall of prevailing bourgeois ideology and views [...] What matters is not whether the State influences the university or not, but in what direction it influences it. The Soviet State is concentrating its efforts on the utmost improvement of the people's well-being, the progress of science and the arts, on educating the young generation through work, in the spirit of respect for all the nations. In our society there is no contradiction between the State and the people, between the State and science, between the State and the university.* (Prokofiev et al., 1961, p. 6)

It is also with their strong belief in the power of Marxism, i.e. of science, which is essential also for the thinkers of the Enlightenment, that Soviet educators see no need of distinguishing between liberal education and other forms of education.

> *There is no contrast between education in the humanities and other forms of education in the Soviet higher school [...] Science represents the exact knowledge of objects and processes of objective reality and in this sense there is no*

> *difference in principle between the sciences of nature and the sciences of society and man as a member of society […] That is why […] humanistic education in the USSR is an integral part of any education in general whether in the natural or in the technical sciences, whether a higher or secondary education.* (Prokofiev et al., 1961, p. 33)

The Soviet model of higher education has been applied systematically in North Vietnam since 1954 and expanded throughout the country since its reunification in 1976. But the liberating spirit of the new education system was declared and applied by Hồ Chí Minh's government since 1945 in the whole country. On November 25, 1945, only two months after the birth of the newly independent Vietnam, the Central Executive Committee of the Indochinese Communist Party issued the *Directive on Resistance and National Construction*, instructing Party members on the tasks of building a new culture. The document reads in part:

> *On culture, organizing popular educational campaigns, actively eliminating illiteracy, opening new universities and secondary schools, reforming education in the new spirit, eliminating indoctrinating teaching method, promoting national culture, building a new culture based on three principles: national, scientification, massification, and nationalisation.*[4] (Central Executive Committee of Indochinese Communist Party, 2000, pp. 9–17)

The target set by the revolutionary government was to build a new system of scientific, democratic, and patriotic education for the mass. To establish the legal framework for it, during the anti-French resistance war (1946–1954), Vietnam issued two important documents, Decrees No. 146-SL and No. 147-SL, confirming again its three fundamental principles: "national", "scientific", and "popular". In this system, not only sciences, but all subjects, are seen as tools of enlightenment. All undergraduate programmes, whether in social sciences and humanities or not, and whether they are in comprehensive universities or in narrowly specialised institutions, include compulsory courses of general education, that are intrinsically liberal arts. That is the reason why a Vietnamese

[4] In Vietnamese: "Về văn hóa, tổ chức bình dân học vụ, tíchcựcbài trừ nạn mù chữ, mở đại học và trung học, cải cách việc học theo tinh thần mới, bài trừ cách dạy học nhồi sọ, cổ động văn hóa cứu quốc, kiến thiết nền văn hóa mới theo ba nguyên tắc: khoa học hóa, đại chúng hóa, dân tộc hóa."

bachelor's degree is earned over four or five years of full-time study like in the USA (while it is for 3 years in Europe).

Despite significant difficulties, Vietnamese higher education system was quite successful before 1986—to meet the demand of a Soviet-style command economy, and is still considered as a good education system. In 2018, based on average PISA and TIMSS scores, the World Bank's report "Growing Smarter: Learning and Equitable Development in East Asia and Pacific" ranks Vietnam as one of the Top 10 Best Performing Education Systems in the world. The report reads: "East Asia and Pacific dominates the ranks of top scorers, with 6 of the top 10 and 8 of the top 20 scores since 2000. The Top Performing Systems include seven economies with an average score above 550 points - equivalent to 1.6 more years of learning than the average OECD member country. These systems enrol 24 million students, or 7 percent of the region's students. All of the highest scorers are middle- or high- income countries. But some low- and middle-income countries perform well, too. Average performance in Vietnam and in B-S-J-G (China) surpassed OECD member countries" (World Bank, 2018, p. 7).

My arguments do not mean that the higher education system of Vietnam today is without problems and shortcomings. What I want to say is that Vietnamese higher education shares the enlightenment mission with other Western modern systems of higher education. What matters is not whether it includes liberal arts education in its curriculum, but how liberal arts education is conceived and realised. In reality, the Vietnamese Soviet-style higher education systems are often criticised for producing "too many masters and too few workers" (*Thừa thầy thiếu thợ*), i.e. being too comprehensive, for concentrating too much on general knowledge, rather than on practical skills needed for students while entering job market.

7.6 The Idea of Borrowing the American Model

The authors who champion the idea of borrowing the American model never mention the ever-worsening state of liberal arts education in the USA. However, the idea sounds much like an echo of the call for restoring US-style liberal arts education, which in its turn, reflects a problem of higher education in the USA and in the world in general: the decline of social sciences and humanities in the university that is now redefined as a commercial corporation rather than an institution of enlightenment.

The decline of liberal arts education in the USA is not a new trend. It began decades ago, and has long been an important and controversial topic in academic publications. As early as in 1996, Bill Readings, in his outstanding book *The University in Ruins*, analysed profoundly the relationship between what he called the "Corporate University" and Consumerism, reflected in the "Universities of Excellence", which functioned and were classified in rankings much like bestsellers books or music CDs. One of the most important consequences of higher education commercialisation is the said declining role of social sciences and humanities, or the liberal arts. According to Readings, the university's mission has shifted from guaranteeing the social bond to producing "human resources" for the marketplace, abandoning its traditional "adventure of a liberal education" (Readings, 1996).

One decade later, another author, Ronald Strickland, in "*The Decline of Privilege and the Rise of Privatisation in Public Higher Education*" (2006) puts it in a bigger picture:

> *The expansion of American higher education during the 1960s marked the beginning of a struggle for democratic empowerment that has continued to the present. Although this conflict has taken shape in debates over issues such as affirmative action and political correctness, at bottom, the key issue is whether public higher education will function primarily as a site for vocational training in service to the corporate sector or as a site for critique-based liberal education in the common public interest. Humanities education should be central to this struggle because, unlike other academic fields, the humanities are only indirectly focused on job preparation.* (Strickland, 2006, p. 207)

Here I want to draw attention to one of his observations: today, among Western universities, only the elite universities have good programmes in social sciences and humanities, and even in the elite universities, it is the faculties of business and technology that are profitable and considered the centre of their activities.

The decline of liberal arts education in the USA still continues today. When the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point announced its plans to drop liberal arts majors in geography, geology, French, German, two- and three-dimensional art—and history, *The Atlantic* published an essay by Adam Harris entitled "The Liberal Arts May Not Survive the 21st Century". The text examines the moves of American universities to promote STEM vocationalism, to reduce in-depth focus on the liberal

arts, in the contexts of dramatic cuts in public budget for higher education. The author writes: "Wisconsin built a public higher-education system that was admired around the world. But it may not withstand a tech-hungry economy" (Harris, 2018).

Why liberal arts education is declining is not the topic of this paper. What I want to say here is that the decline of liberal arts education is a problem not only in Vietnam, but also in the USA and in the world in general. One might pose a question: why should we borrow a model while it is struggling itself for survival?

7.7 Conclusion

Like most, or more precisely all, higher education systems in the world, Vietnam's higher education system of today is facing big challenges. Some of those challenges are common, others are specific to Vietnam due to its specific history, tradition, and current contexts. There are also the challenges created by the country's remarkable achievements—not only achievements in economic development, but also achievements in education, which turned Vietnam from a country with 90% of the population being illiterate into a country with a large system of schools and over 700 universities and colleges.

To cope with those challenges, Vietnam's higher education has to learn from experiences of other countries, especially the USA and European countries, whose models have proved to be excellent in many aspects.

However, learning is not copying. And learning does not necessarily require negating the past. The absolute contrasting of the Western University with East Asian Higher Learning, and the US-style with the Soviet-style higher education, are both too easy and biased. There is no perfect model for all countries or at all times. My standpoint is that any blind attempt to borrow foreign models without careful consideration of concrete local conditions cannot be successful.

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