

PHAN THANH GIAN'S EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT: A HUMANIST VISION IN THE TRANSITION ERA OF VIETNAMESE HISTORY

O PENSAMENTO EDUCACIONAL DE PHAN THANH GIAN: UMA VISÃO HUMANISTA NA ERA DE TRANSIÇÃO DA HISTÓRIA VIETNAMITA

Article received on: 7/18/2025

Article accepted on: 9/19/2025

Nguyen Tran Vinh Linh*

*PhD Candidate, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5968-0621>
linhmap70@gmail.com

Cao Xuan Long*

*Assoc. Prof. Dr., University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2773-830X>
caoxuanlong@hcmussh.edu.vn

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

Abstract

Phan Thanh Gian (1796–1867) was one of the eminent mandarins of the Nguyen Dynasty. His educational philosophy was not merely a path to acquiring knowledge, but fundamentally a means of cultivating character, constructing moral values, and nurturing a sense of social responsibility. Rooted in traditional Vietnamese culture and Eastern ethics, he emphasized that learning must be inseparable from moral self-cultivation, grounded in humaneness (*nhân nghĩa*), measured by practical action, and ultimately aimed at fostering patriotism and compassion for the people. For Phan Thanh Gian, education should not produce individuals who merely submit to authority, but rather form persons who live with ideals, moral integrity, and the capacity to serve society with both intellect and conscience. Employing a historical-logical approach and the method of analytical-synthetic review of relevant documents, this study elucidates the core values in his educational thought, including: the primacy of ethics in education, the importance of self-directed learning, and the intellectual's responsibility toward society and the nation. Phan Thanh Gian's educational ideas not only shed light on a period of profound historical transition in Vietnam but also offer valuable insights for today's educational reforms particularly regarding the formation of learners' character and moral resilience.

Resumo

*Phan Thanh Gian (1796–1867) foi um dos eminentes mandarins da Dinastia Nguyen. Sua filosofia educacional não era meramente um caminho para a aquisição de conhecimento, mas fundamentalmente um meio de cultivar o caráter, construir valores morais e nutrir um senso de responsabilidade social. Enraizado na cultura tradicional vietnamita e na ética oriental, ele enfatizou que a aprendizagem deve ser inseparável do autocultivo moral, fundamentada na humanidade (*nhân nghĩa*), medida pela ação prática e, em última análise, voltada para o fomento do patriotismo e da compaixão pelo povo. Para Phan Thanh Gian, a educação não deve produzir indivíduos que se submetam meramente à autoridade, mas sim formar pessoas que vivam com ideais, integridade moral e a capacidade de servir à sociedade com intelecto e consciência. Utilizando uma abordagem histórico-lógica e o método de revisão analítico-sintética de documentos relevantes, este estudo elucidou os valores centrais de seu pensamento educacional, incluindo: a primazia da ética na educação, a importância da aprendizagem autodirigida e a responsabilidade do intelectual para com a sociedade e a nação. As ideias educacionais de Phan Thanh Gian não apenas lançam luz sobre um período de profunda transição histórica no Vietnã, mas também oferecem insights valiosos para as reformas educacionais atuais,*



Keywords: Phan Thanh Gian's Thought. Educational Philosophy. Vietnamese Educational Thought. History of Vietnamese Philosophical Thought.

particularmente no que diz respeito à formação do caráter e da resiliência moral dos alunos.

Palavras-chave: Pensamento de Phan Thanh Gian. Filosofia Educacional. Pensamento Educacional Vietnamita. História do Pensamento Filosófico Vietnamita.

1 INTRODUCTION

Phan Thanh Gian's educational philosophy emerged in the early to mid-19th century—a period marked by profound crises in Vietnamese society: political turmoil, social fragmentation, and the increasing incursion of Western colonialism. The sharp contradictions between tradition and the transformations of the era, between Eastern moral values and the pressures of modernization, necessitated an urgent renewal of thought particularly in the domain of education.

Within this historical context, Phan Thanh Gian deeply absorbed the cultural essence of Vietnam, especially the Southern Vietnamese cultural tradition, which emphasized compassion, tolerance, righteousness, and a strong orientation toward ethical and practical living. He selectively integrated three major philosophical systems: Confucianism, which shaped his sense of moral duty and public service; Buddhism, which nurtured his compassion and altruism; and Daoism, which inspired a simple, harmonious, and nature-aligned way of life. These intellectual and cultural influences not only forged his integrity and character embodied in his reputation as an upright, just, prudent, and competent official but also laid the foundation for an educational philosophy imbued with enlightenment ideals, humanism, and national moral values.

2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Phan Thanh Gian's educational thought is expressed in a rich, profound, and systematic manner, aiming to cultivate individuals with intellect, virtue, and character—aligned with the demands of the era—to contribute to the construction, consolidation, and advancement of an ideal society governed by enlightened rulers, virtuous officials, and a peaceful populace. Among these principles:

Firstly, regarding the purpose of education, Phan Thanh Gian viewed education not merely as a means of cultivating knowledge, moral quality, and personal character for individual perfection, but more fundamentally as a foundation for national development. In his view, the prosperity and strength of a society depend upon individuals who possess both virtue and talent. Education, therefore, was a moral imperative—continuous and unceasing, to be passed down from one generation to the next:

“Thus, teaching and governing the people are of vital importance—one cannot go a day without them.

Great indeed is the virtue of Confucius:

For Heaven and Earth, He established the Heart.

For the People, He set the Mandate.

For the sages before Him, He continued the extinguished learning.

For the ten thousand generations to come, He opened the path to peace. Therefore, generations of rulers revered and offered sacrifices to Him without ever ceasing” (*Nguyen Duy Oanh, 1974, p. 212*)

Secondly, concerning the recipients of education, grounded in the Confucian principle of “*hữu giáo vô loại*” (“education for all, regardless of class”), Phan Thanh Gian asserted that every person—regardless of age, wealth, status, or intelligence—deserves access to learning, provided they have the desire to study. He often reminded young people:

“When young, one must diligently pursue learning;

When grown, one must work to repay parental gratitude and contribute to the nation” (*Nguyen Duy Oanh, 1974, p. 109*)

According to Phan Thanh Gian, education was not limited to the common people; even officials must continue to study in order to offer sound counsel to the ruler. Effective governance begins with proper instruction. Remarkably, in his thought, *educating the people* took precedence over *administering the people*. He declared:

“Governance may last for but a moment,

Yet education is transmitted through eternity.

Only when there is instruction can governance find its place and efficacy” (*Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 880*)

Given the enduring nature of education, Phan Thanh Gian paid close attention to the younger generation—those who would inherit and carry forward the destiny of the

nation. As an examiner at the imperial examination in Thua Thien, he recalled his own arduous journey through the civil service examinations:

“In learning, we strive to reach afar... The old path of study becomes ancestral endeavor; The road of examination offers few flowers along the way” (*Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, pp. 224–225*)

And he rejoiced upon seeing the capable youth stepping forth:

“In a fleeting moment, brilliance now reveals itself;

How swift the three years of toil have passed.

Quietly, I praise these youthful scholars from Central and South,

All yearning to don official robes and serve the realm”

(*Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 162*)

To inspire learning, he often extolled its transformative power:

“Study and reflection upon the classics yield profound insights...

The spirit of the literary brush may shake the Three Gorges,

And the flood of eloquence may overturn the Eight Great Rivers.”

(*Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 267*)

For Phan Thanh Gian, the act of learning expands human vision—both in terms of worldly understanding and moral purpose:

“One who never steps outside his gate cannot know how many streams and springs lie beyond” (*Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 391*)

Learning was also a way for a man of virtue to fulfill his destiny:

“To accomplish nothing in life is a disgrace to any true man.”

(*Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 403*)

It is thus evident that Phan Thanh Gian valued education as a holistic process of nurturing both intellect and morality. He advocated for a rigorous and dignified educational environment, rooted in tradition and institutional reverence:

“Our Imperial Court venerates teachers and honors the Way. In ancient times, a grand hall of learning—called the *Temple of Great Completion*—was established in the capital, a space of utmost solemnity. For several centuries, the Court has cherished moral learning and nurtured talents in abundance. Both governance and instruction have shone with equal brilliance from this very place” (*Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, pp. 880–881*)

Thirdly, concerning the content of education, Phan Thanh Gian regarded learning as the principal path to cultivating personal virtue and rendering service to the nation. In the context of his era, he continued to uphold the value of Confucian scholarship, treating the *Four Books* and *Five Classics* as the essential core of the curriculum, while also encouraging the expansion of intellectual horizons through the *Hundred Schools of Thought* and the historical chronicles, such as the *History of the Han*. He once wrote:

“First, one must read the *Five Classics* to establish foundational roots. Then, turn to the *Hundred Philosophers* to strengthen the external structure. Moreover, one ought to peruse the various histories to attain literary fluency. Among them, the *History of the Han* stands as the pinnacle; it must not be absent from one’s side” (Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 768)

He described the scholarly atmosphere of his time as follows:

“Beyond the city walls, wave upon wave of students gather,
Studying diligently to manifest their loyal hearts”
(Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 158)

This outlook reflects an educational ideal that cherishes the classics, reveres established models, and emphasizes rational cultivation—yet simultaneously highlights the importance of studying history to comprehend governance, and of understanding the ancients to act wisely in the present age. All of these educational contents aimed at shaping individuals of moral integrity, capable of proper conduct across all circumstances, and instilled with enduring ethical values. As Phan Thanh Gian asserted:

“Promote education and propagate virtuous customs;
Employ virtue, character, and the Way in selecting worthy talents;
Uphold loyalty and faith, clarify the Classics, and refine the self.”
(Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 796)

In addition, he advocated the teaching of *ritual* and *music* as instruments of moral order:

“Expand statutes to establish peace;
Then institute rites, and upon success in governance, enshrine music.”
(Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 797)

Beyond the Confucian canon and its moral-ritual teachings, Phan Thanh Gian also emphasized that educational content must align with practical realities, address societal

demands, and respond to the rightful aspirations of the people. For instance, during his administrative tours in Cochinchina, he would often pause his palanquin along the roads to directly engage with the populace and resolve their grievances. He advised:

“No virtue is greater than filial piety toward parents;
No duty is weightier than repaying one’s debt to country and kin”
(*Nguyen Duy Oanh, 1974, p. 109*)

Particularly noteworthy in his educational thought is the emphasis on embracing *new knowledge* from abroad. Phan Thanh Gian believed that learners must be equipped with broader understanding to contribute meaningfully to national construction and development. During his diplomatic mission to the West—especially in France, then a foremost center of science and civilization—he witnessed firsthand the robust foundations upon which Western nations had built their national strength. It became clear to him that, if Vietnam were to avoid being left behind, it would need a radical transformation in educational philosophy and approach.

His proposals to *send students overseas, promote international trade, and cease suppressing religious missions* were not merely diplomatic gestures, but powerful expressions of his reformist and forward-thinking vision. These were bold declarations of a desire to rejuvenate national consciousness through education. He called upon the nation to learn proactively from the West, to accept temporary disadvantages in order to assimilate the intellectual treasures of humanity, and to establish a new Vietnamese foundation of scholarship, technical capability, and moral culture.

Fourth, the method of education is a pivotal dimension in Phan Thanh Gian’s educational philosophy. He believed that the outcomes of education are determined not solely by its content, but fundamentally by the methods employed—by both the teacher and the learner—since these two actors constitute the very heart of the educational process.

First, with regard to *the teacher’s method*, Phan Thanh Gian did not base his pedagogy on rigid preaching or dogma. Rather, he grounded it in the Confucian principle: “*Lấy đạo làm gốc, lấy gương làm lời*”—“Rooted in the Way, spoken through example.” In other words, the teacher must embody virtue, using personal moral cultivation as the vehicle for instruction. Education, to him, was not a process of force-feeding knowledge, but of morally transforming the heart and mind. Therefore, he emphasized a teaching style

that was plain yet profound, easy to comprehend, imbued with ethical meaning, and grounded in lived experience.

Phan Thanh Gian's own life—marked by hardship, yet steadfast in integrity—served as a living lesson in perseverance and loyal-heartedness. His philosophical thinking is evident in his use of classical allusions, poetry, and symbolic imagery—such as the bamboo—to convey moral ideals: to be upright yet humble, resilient yet compassionate. He upheld *moral education* as a form of “*dao hạnh*” (virtue in practice), in which the teacher was not merely a transmitter of knowledge but a practitioner of the Way: one who spreads goodness, speaks truth, admonishes wrong, and upholds loyalty and incorruptibility.

When discoursing on *loyalty*, for example, he would cite classical exemplars such as Vice Minister Jia of the Jin dynasty—not merely to praise loyal officials, but also to criticize servile flattery, recognize human limitations, and urge learners to engage with the past critically and independently:

“The sage perceives the crisis before it takes form,
As one who sits upon smoldering embers.
Clutching the heart of loyal affection,
His words move listeners to tears”(Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 442)

To Phan Thanh Gian, *loyalty to the ruler* was not blind obedience, but the *courage to speak truth and rectify errors*—a spirit of “*trung dũng can gián*” (loyal valor through remonstrance):

“The sage seeks to align his virtue with that of his sovereign;
His heart never strays from righteousness.
Cultivating the heart and refining the nature,
He follows the Mandate of Heaven in all”
(Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 778)

For this reason, Phan Thanh Gian was several times demoted for his candid remonstrations. Yet he remained unwavering in his principle: to admonish the ruler was to save the people and guide the monarch toward sagely rule. As Nguyen Duy Oanh (1974) observed:

“Thanh Gian was a man of integrity, upright and incorrupt. As an official, he was diligent and prudent, unafraid to speak when needed...

His memorials reveal a heart full of loyal affection beyond what words could express”(p. 80)

His formal memorials of gratitude, too, served not only as expressions of loyalty to the throne, but as *moral exemplars* teaching the value of gratitude and faithful service:

“This humble servant devotes heart and soul,
Striving with all strength to show loyal sincerity;
Ever venerating honesty and diligence in instruction,
Praying this heart remains free of regret,
And ever full of grace and virtue” (*Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, p.*

730)

In moral education, he often employed the imagery of the *bamboo* a symbol of the noble man (*quân tử*) to emphasize resilience, uprightness, and forbearance:

“Beyond the fields stands a clump of bamboo,
The northern wind bends its stalks.
Though it trembles in the storm,
It has endured a lifetime of hardship.
Weeds may provoke and encroach,
Yet its deep roots preserve order.
With a hollow heart, it receives all things,
Unattached to worldly dust” (*Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 140*)

Guided by the spirit of “*education as a form of moral cultivation*” (giáo dục là để hành đạo), Phan Thanh Gian, wherever assigned, made it a priority to establish schools, promote literacy, and awaken the people’s mind—viewing this as an essential element of national governance:

“There are those with elegant literary talent,
Yet they neglect the duty of enlightening the world;
However brilliant they may be, they bring no true benefit” (*Phan Thi Minh Le &*

Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 882)

Second, regarding *the method of learning*, Phan Thanh Gian emphasized the importance of learning from life, learning for self-cultivation, and insisted that the foundation of all learning must be self-transformation:

“The instruction of the sages begins with perfecting the self,
And only then extends to the world.

Our learning must be rooted in the self,

And through effort, bear fruit”(*Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 882*)

He criticized hollow scholarship and the pursuit of fame or personal gain—learning that yields no benefit to the people or the nation. To study without applying, he believed, was fruitless. Therefore, learners must cultivate willpower, morality, and practical competence in harmony.

Coming from a background of hardship—having lost his mother at an early age—Phan Thanh Gian held deep respect for perseverance, the love of learning, and gratitude. He never forgot those who had supported him during his poverty-stricken youth:

“To those who fed and clothed him during his years of study, He remained ever grateful and sought every opportunity to repay their kindness”(*Various Authors, 2015, p. 74*)

Notably, Phan Thanh Gian was among the few Confucian scholars in early 19th-century Vietnam who embraced a *selective cultural syncretism*. He proposed sending young students abroad for study, opening trade routes, and learning from the West in order to rejuvenate the nation. For him, education was not merely a scholarly endeavor, but a *strategic defense* against foreign domination:

“Speak not lightly of casting aside the pen and taking up arms at the Ngoc Gate, For even with white hair, one can still repay the country’s debt.” (*Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau, 2005, p. 359*)

3 COMPARATIVE INSIGHT: EASTERN AND WESTERN EDUCATIONAL IDEALS

Phan Thanh Gian’s educational vision presents an early and profound attempt at reconciling Eastern moral philosophy with the emerging rationalism of Western thought. Drawing from a Confucian framework rooted in moral cultivation (修身, *xiu shen*) and hierarchical social harmony (秩序, *zhixu*), he valued the role of education in forming ethically responsible individuals. Education in the Confucian tradition emphasizes character, filial piety, and loyalty to the state, as articulated by Tu Weiming (1996), who affirms that "self-cultivation is the root of all learning in the Confucian tradition" (p. 11).

In contrast, Western Enlightenment ideals—emerging from Locke, Rousseau, and Kant—prioritize individual autonomy, critical thinking, and civic rationality. Western

education evolved toward a model of learner-centered inquiry, experimental science, and political participation (Lee, 2014). These ideals emphasize reason (*ratio*) over ritual, personal liberty over hierarchy, and institutional innovation over canonical authority.

Rather than rejecting one tradition for another, Phan Thanh Gian advocated for a principled synthesis: retaining Eastern ethical foundations while adopting Western methods and content. His proposal to send students abroad was not merely a diplomatic tactic but a visionary act grounded in a comparative pedagogy.

In essence, he exemplified what contemporary theorists call “selective cultural syncretism” (Phan, 2018)—a blending of foundational values and modern functionality. This integration of Confucian ethics with Enlightenment rationalism finds echoes in Vietnam’s ongoing educational reform, which continues to seek a balance between tradition and innovation.

“To learn from the West is not to abandon the East, but to awaken the East to its higher potential.” (*Author synthesis*)

4 CONCLUSION

Phan Thanh Gian’s educational thought constitutes a profound and coherent system of ideas concerning the role, objectives, subjects, content, and methodology of education. It was forged through a harmonious synthesis of the humanistic spirit of Vietnamese culture, the ethical principles of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, and his own lived experience amidst the socio-political upheavals of 19th-century Vietnam. At its core lies the conviction that *education is the essential path toward self-cultivation, intellectual enlightenment, moral formation, and service to society.*

Phan Thanh Gian regarded education as the very foundation of good governance and the necessary condition for establishing an ideal social order characterized by “*an enlightened ruler, virtuous ministers, and a peaceful populace.*” He emphasized the formative role of morality, knowledge, and intellectual awakening in the development of the whole person—one who lives with ideals, acts with integrity, and possesses both practical capabilities and a deep sense of civic responsibility. In his view, education was not merely the transmission of knowledge, but a transformative process of inner refinement grounded in self-discipline, loyalty, and the moral enactment of the Way (*hành đạo*).

In the historical context of transition between tradition and modernity, Phan Thanh Gian demonstrated the courage of vision by elevating moral education, advocating for self-directed learning, and underscoring the social responsibility of the intellectual class. Although the full realization of his educational ideals was constrained by the historical forces of his time, his thought remains a lasting testament to the spirit of enlightenment (*khai phóng*) and humanism in Vietnamese education. These values continue to offer vital historical lessons for the pursuit of educational and social progress in modern nations.

REFERENCES

1. Lee, H. K. (2014). Confucian moral self-cultivation and modern education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 48(1), 25–44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12056>
2. Nguyen Duy Oanh. (1974). *Danh nhân Phan Thanh Giản*. Hanoi: Giáo dục Publishing House.
3. Phan Le Ha. (2018). *Vietnamese education: History and challenges*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-7589-4>
4. Phan Thi Minh Le & Chuong Thau. (2005). *Phan Thanh Giản – Cuộc đời và tác phẩm*. Hanoi: Văn hóa Thông tin Publishing House.
5. Tu, W. (1996). *Confucianism and human rights*. Columbia University Press.
6. Various Authors. (2015). *Phan Thanh Giản – Từ nhân vật lịch sử đến con người văn hóa*. Ho Chi Minh City: Tổng hợp TP.HCM Publishing House.
7. Le Quang Truong. (2016). Quan niệm văn chương của Phan Thanh Giản. *Tạp chí Sử Địa*, Special Issue.
8. Tran Bach Dang. (2013). *Thế kỷ XXI nhìn về nhân vật lịch sử Phan Thanh Giản*. Ho Chi Minh City: Hồng Đức Publishing House.
9. Nam Xuan Tho. (1957). *Phan Thanh Giản, 1796–1867*. Tan Viet. Retrieved from <https://ci.nii.ac.jp>
10. Nguyen Thi Ngoc. (2017). *Đặc khảo về Phan Thanh Giản*. Ho Chi Minh City: Hồng Đức Publishing House.
11. National Conference on Phan Thanh Giản. (2005). *Proceedings of the National Conference on Phan Thanh Giản*. Hanoi: Hội Nhà Văn Publishing House.
12. Doan Le Giang. (2009). *Tư tưởng – lý luận văn học trung đại Việt Nam* (chapter on Phan Thanh Giản). VNU-HCM Publishing House.

Authors' Contribution

Both authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

How to cite this article (APA):

Linh, N. T. V., & Long, C. X. (2025). PHAN THANH GIAN'S EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT: A HUMANIST VISION IN THE TRANSITION ERA OF VIETNAMESE HISTORY. *Veredas Do Direito*, 22(2), e223475. <https://doi.org/10.18623/rvd.v22.n2.3475>