

## Trần Văn Giàu - The great personality among modern Vietnamese intellectual community<sup>(\*)</sup>

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**Abstract:** *“Iron bulwark of South Vietnam” is the heroic land which gave birth to and trained the firm and loyal communists, the talented leaders, the eminent scientists of Vietnam. Among these there has been Prof. Trần Văn Giàu (6/9/1911-16/12/2010), a mirror of righteousness and talent with his merits and ups and downs, leaving deep imprints in the memory of people of Vietnam in general and of South Vietnam in particular. This paper generalizes the features, virtues, abilities, main studies and contributions of Prof. Trần Văn Giàu, in the same time pointing out the objective and subjective factors which influenced his virtues, righteousness and talent - representing one of the greatest historians of Vietnamese modern history.*

**Keywords:** Vietnam, Trần Văn Giàu, Intellectual.

1. Trần Văn Giàu was born in a landowner family having patriotic tradition at An Lục Long commune, Châu Thành district, Tân An province (now Long An province)<sup>(\*\*)</sup>.

After graduated the high school Chasseloup Laubat in Sài Gòn in 1928, he went to France for further study. Just here he began his patriotic revolutionary life. Since 1930 to the end of 2010, Trần Văn Giàu join the activities in various domains of the struggle for independence, unification and construction of socialism of his country. He was a steady revolutionary leader with high positions (zone Party secretary, city Party secretary), as well as a teacher and talented researcher. Even through many ups and downs of career, he always

<sup>(\*)</sup> This paper is a kind of overview and commentary.

<sup>(\*\*)</sup> His family and family of his wife almost were the greatest landowners of South Vietnam (with the “spread of their lands that... airplane couldn’t fly to the end” - to repeat his words), but he even voluntarily participated in proletarian revolution whose one of targets is “take the lands from the rich and give to the poor”. The fact that he “betrayed” his own class to join the opponent ranks is sufficient for him to be considered as a true revolutionary (<https://sites.google.com/site/hoangkimvietnam/tran-van->

excellently accomplished the missions, attaining the national and international achievements. His achievements, especially those that he obtained as an advanced and revolutionary intellectual, gave him the peak of glory and the high title awarded by State: the Hero of Labour in renovation period. Trần Văn Giàu was not only eager for learning, not only an erudite scholar, but he also had the competence of criticism, of opponent argumentum, having courage and creativeness. He always had the aspirations, high uprightness, great zeal and high perseverance and passion in scientific research, especially in national historical studies of pre-modern and modern times. In family, he was a kind-hearted, tolerant, model, honest, simple and jovial man, very loving family. As a revolutionary, all his life he struggled steadfastly, devoting his youth, intellect, happiness and himself to people and country. As a scientist, he exhausted his strength for thousands pages of writings with new discoveries. As a teacher, all his life he always concerned himself with the career of teaching words and teaching

[giau/tran-van-giau-tu-nha-cach-mang-den-su-gia](http://giau/tran-van-giau-tu-nha-cach-mang-den-su-gia)). In 1928, he went to France for study with intention to take two PhD diplomas in literature and law in order to defend the poor in his country, but after having contact with The Case Against French Colonization by Nguyễn Ái Quốc, he decided to join the French Communist Party (May 1929). In 1930, due to his participation in the manifestation at Champs-Élysées expressing the claim to President of France for abolition of death sentence to the patriot Nguyễn Thái Học and other leaders of Yên Bái revolution, he was arrested by French police and expelled back to Vietnam (<http://www.tintucmientay.com.vn/Kham-pha-mien-tay/Dat-va-Nguoi/Tran-Van-Giau-nha-cach-mang-hien-triet-cay-ai-thu-cua-nen-su-hoc-Viet-Nam.html>).

being man, according to the norm of “learning all life; learning from the people; learning from the books and the life; learning to be a Man (with capital letter)” (<http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/giai-tri...>). It can be said, Professor Trần Văn Giàu integrated fully high virtues of the modern intellectual. He is considered by domestic and international scientists as great revolutionary intellectual of Vietnam for his life and revolutionary career as well as his contributions.

Former politburo member and former Ho Chi Minh City Party secretary Lê Thanh Hải ever said: Comrade Trần Văn Giàu had the makings of typical patriotic personality of South Vietnam. The stuff of South Vietnam was exposed out from his voice, smile and daily behaviour, manifesting the kindness, tolerance, sincerity, passionateness, and also the determination, straightness, rightness. This South Vietnam stuff also imbrued his every work, from the works of revolutionary activities to scientific research works, imbrued his every idea and writing page. He was a talented practical organizer, and a model teacher, an erudite researcher. But first of all, he was a communist militant, always being ready for every mission provided that this mission is useful to Party, to revolution and people... From a patriotic student to faithful communist militant and then a “big old tree” in national science and education, his hundred-year life had no inactive time. In the last moment of his life, he always thought to common affairs without any personal preoccupation. Even in any circumstances, any position, he always devoted his all heart and made all

efforts to contribute the most to revolutionary cause of Party, of people (<http://www.sggp.org.vn/chinhtri/2016...>).

2. Professor Trần Văn Giàu has made many great works that have a systematism, a great summarization, a voluminousness, a deep specialism, a fineness, with discoveries, argumentation, demonstration..., having opened contents for the further scientific researches. He participated to teach some philosophical and political as well as historical disciplines at Hanoi University of Education and Hanoi University (especially in period 1954-1960). At the same time, he was one of the teachers who participated in training the first generation of students of Hanoi University of Education who later have become the pillars of various social sciences and humanities, of educational science of Vietnam.

The main sphere of scientific and cultural activities of Prof. Trần Văn Giàu was historical studies. We could cite some of his representative works as follows: “Memoirs 1940-1945 of Trần Văn Giàu”, “General Philosophy”, “Dialectics”, “Viewpoint of Universe”, “Historical Materialism”, “The Development of Vietnamese Thought from the XIX<sup>th</sup> Century to the August Revolution”, “Traditional Values of Vietnamese Nation”, “Crisis of Nguyễn Regime before 1858”, “History of Struggle Against Invasion”, “Vietnamese Worker Class”, “Vietnamese Pre-modern History”, “South Vietnam Defends Iron Bulwark”, “Hồ Chí Minh City Geo-cultural Records”, “Hồ Chí Minh Thoughts”,...

At the “rare age”, Prof. Trần Văn Giàu still gave birth to precious books, like:

“Traditional Spiritual Values of Vietnamese Nation” (with 350 pages long, 1980, 1993), “Hồ Chí Minh City Geocultural Records” (edited by Trần Văn Giàu, 4 vol., more than 2,000 pages), “Human Being Principles from Lý Thường Kiệt to Hồ Chí Minh” (2006), “On a Great Man” (2008), “Complete Works by Trần Văn Giàu” (3 volumes, 5,000 pages, 2006-2008), “Hồ Chí Minh the Great Man” (approximately 1,000 pages, 2010),...

His works were awarded the highly precious Hồ Chí Minh prize, among these works there are especially the books such as: “Vietnamese Premodern History” (4 vol, 1960-1963), “Vietnamese Worker Class” (3 vol, 1962-1963), “South Vietnam Defends Iron Bulwark” (5 vol, 1964-1965), “The Development of Vietnamese Thought from the XIX<sup>th</sup> Century to the August Revolution” (3 vol, 1973-1993)\*.

His books on *history of Vietnamese worker movement* are the works that have been referred to and much cited in the country and abroad. Besides the vividness and voluminous data, it is just the method and approach that made these works be high appreciated and widely referred to. There were many scientific works at home and abroad that sought to present and explain the Vietnamese pre-modern and modern historical process and events by various ways. However most of these works have

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(\*) The works that were selected and published in volume I and II of the collection “The Hồ Chí Minh Prize Works” are considered as his most representative works. However, these two volumes (with total 3,558 pages) still represent a small part of his scientific contributions to revolution, people and Vietnamese social sciences and humanities.

a common view, common presentation, causing the history to be the history only of political parties, leaders, religions and elite groups of all kinds. *Only in the above-mentioned works of Trần Văn Giàu, history is actually represented as “the career of people”*, in which, the physiognomies, figures, thoughts, aspirations and activities of public masses have reappeared vividly and concretely.

This historiography of Trần Văn Giàu obviously has strongly influenced on historical awareness and approach of many domestic and foreign scholars. In Vietnam, next to his works there appeared some other highly valuable works on workers, peasantry, women,... which were realized by this approach. Abroad, only up to 1990s there appeared some studies in the direction of “*bottom up*”, among which the voluminous work by David G. Marr on August Revolution “Vietnam 1945: the Quest for Power” is the most representative work. Today, the application of ethnological, sociological and folkloristic approaches to historical studies by “*bottom up*” are more and more prevailing among historian community in various countries, but they have the risk to lead to extreme views, as if someone “can’t see the forest for the trees”. In this context, the book “Vietnamese Worker Class” by Trần Văn Giàu more confirmed its methodological value. Having made historiography, whether focused on mass movement, but Trần Văn Giàu didn’t fall into a kind of “populism”. He still maintained a multi-facial and pluri-dimensional view, not being extremist nor biased. In Vietnam, to study the worker class by pointing out the clear and fragile

boundary between the “masters” and the “workers”, and identifying the interaction between political regime, mass organization and worker class, may be effectuated only by Prof. Trần Văn Giàu, while abroad Joseph Buttinger and Martin Muray have still suggested only some ideas of the kind.

The three-volume collection of “The Development of Vietnamese Thought from the XIX<sup>th</sup> Century to the August Revolution”, that was published by Prof. Trần Văn Giàu in about the time between 1973 and 1993, is also famous both at home and abroad. This is a set of works that were given all *his efforts, his heart and intellect* to be accomplished. As an essentially specialist in writing universitarian courses and history of mass movements, Prof. Trần Văn Giàu was clearly aware of a very difficult and complicated mission when he switched to study on history of Vietnamese thought.

To compile a history of Vietnamese thought is a very difficult task that previously no one could make, but Prof. Trần Văn Giàu thought that he mightn’t refuse. When the first volume of this compilation was published, he confessed: “Solely entering history of thought, at least at the beginning, is a very worrying, fearful task that sometimes makes me tremble. (...) This is an attractive problem, but the task is very hard, anything is new and unknown, only the methodology is familiar. However, it must wait after a time of work to know whether the application of methodological principles is good or not” (<http://ussh.vnu.edu.vn/d4/news/Giao-su...>). After many years of hard study, finally Prof. Trần Văn Giàu

succeeded in accomplishing 3 volumes of the book “The Development of Vietnamese Thought from the XIX<sup>th</sup> Century to the August Revolution”.

In assessing this voluminous book, David G. Marr, one of the famous American historians on Vietnamese modern history, wrote: “Among those works that were published in all languages of the world, this work of Trần Văn Giàu is the best history on Vietnamese thought” (<http://www.ushh.vnu.edu.vn/d4/news/Giao-su...>). We should say this appreciation of a great Western historian like David G. Marr is enough to express the true value of the work which Prof. Trần Văn Giàu tried hard more than 20 years to accomplish, without the need of any additional comment.

3. In the context of prevailing dogmatism and voluntarism in ex-socialist system and social scientific community of soviet times, the fact that Prof. Trần Văn Giàu still advanced in scientific research is a great success at his times. Scientific community considered that marxist worldview of Trần Văn Giàu was manifested very particularly by his method and approach to history. It is surely that he is one of the first western-educated intellectuals who voluntarily received an absolutely rationalistic and scientific marxist method of thinking, and treated the leninist marxism scientifically as Marx ever demanded. That why in applying the marxist methodology to study national history, *he could avoid to maximum the defects due to the mechanical dogmatism* which was a grave disease of marxist historians not only in Vietnam but also in former world of socialist system.

It can be said that Prof. Trần Văn Giàu deeply pondered on application of

socioeconomic formality theory and class struggle theory to periodization of Vietnam history, and he himself soon saw that it is not necessarily to impose one period or another of national history to this and that socioeconomic formality.

Professor Trần Văn Giàu started his career in the sphere of theories and politics. Besides the works of propaganda and cadre training, he also compiled quite many philosophic books, political economy works and literary monographies. But *historical science is the sphere to which he most obviously confirmed his great and overwhelming prestigious contributions.*

Influences and prestige of Prof. Trần Văn Giàu in Vietnamese pre- and modern historical studies are confirmed first of all not because of voluminous quantity of his published works, but just because of his *approach* and *professional seriousness* expressed consistently in all his works. It is no doubt that Prof. Trần Văn Giàu is a marxist historian. His “*marxistness*” - to use the word of a disciple of his, Prof. Trần Quốc Vượng - *entered his flesh and blood* (<http://www.ushh.vnu.edu.vn/d4/news/Giao-su...>).

The works of Prof. Trần Văn Giàu cited many documents, “but although they are full of references, the reader feels no triteness, on the contrary he is strongly attracted by the eloquent and coherent explanation of the author. Therefore, not only the domestic readers and historical researchers, but also the foreign scholars are eager to read his books. *He is a Vietnamese contemporary scholar who is most cited by the foreign works on Vietnamese premodern history*” (<http://100years.vnu.edu.vn...>).

In our opinion, the factors that have impacted on virtue, uprightness and talent of Prof. Trần Văn Giàu are as follows:

*First*, he had a intelligence, sensitivity and knowledge of his times as well as untired constant striving efforts in activity.

*Secondly*, having been born in one of the richest families of South Vietnam, he had the conditions for study; at the same time the then revolutionary atmosphere impacted on his sensitive consciousness, making him soon understand revolution. He went abroad to study in order to acquire the Western advanced culture and sciences, and later always updated knowledges due to his foreign language knowledges and eagerness for learning.

*Thirdly*, he had thorough grasp of a true classic marxist methodology and an advanced contemporary scientific method.

*Fourthly*, he constantly trained himself in the fierce revolutionary struggle and was aware of own responsibility, deciding to engage himself in the way that he had chosen.

*Fifthly*, he was influenced by the thinking method of Hồ Chí Minh, the patriotism, the will of engagement and the decisiveness of South Vietnam intellectuals, as well as the pragmatism of South Vietnam men.

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For the contributions of Prof. Trần Văn Giàu to sciences, Prof. Đinh Xuân Lâm and Prof. Phạm Hồng Tung appreciated: As a teacher, Prof. Trần Văn Giàu has contributed to foundation of Vietnam new academic education, directly participated in teaching from Preparatory School to Hanoi University. He directly or indirectly trained many excellent pupils in Vietnamese historical science, among which are great

historians such as Đinh Xuân Lâm, Phan Huy Lê, Hà Văn Tấn and Trần Quốc Vượng. As a scientist, with his dozens of voluminous studies, Prof. Trần Văn Giàu has affirmed himself the position and height of *a greatest historian of Vietnamese modern historical science*. And above all, he was a communist intellectual personality with the characters of simpleness, tolerance, decisiveness and kindness; a model teacher loved and highly respected by pupils (<http://100years.vnu.edu.vn...>).

Prof. Trần Văn Giàu was awarded by the Party and State many orders, medals and other high titles: Order of Hồ Chí Minh, Independence Order, first-class Order of Resistance, Hồ Chí Minh Prize (at 1<sup>st</sup> time, 1996); title of People's Teacher; title of Hero of Labour (10/10/2002); insigne of 80 years of Party membership. He was also the first and unique scientist in Vietnam who had the scientific prize with his name even when he was still alive: the Trần Văn Giàu Scientific Prize □

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