

# THE ENLIGHTENMENT AS AN INTELLECTUAL SOURCE IN HO CHI MINH'S THOUGHT

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## **Abstract:**

French Enlightenment thought, grounded in the principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, exerted a profound influence on the thinking and revolutionary praxis of Ho Chi Minh during his leadership of Vietnam's struggle for national liberation. From his adolescence, he was deeply attracted to the Enlightenment ideals embodied in the 1789 French Revolution. This intellectual inspiration motivated him to travel to France and other countries in search of a path to national salvation.

The formation of Ho Chi Minh's thought evolved through a sequential process—from patriotism, through exposure to bourgeois democratic thought, and ultimately to Marxism–Leninism—demonstrating the significant role of Western Enlightenment ideas in shaping both his ideological outlook and moral character. Enlightenment values left a lasting imprint on his political thought and leadership style, contributing to the orientation of Vietnam's revolutionary path and its struggle for independence and national development.

**Keywords:** Enlightenment; political thought; Ho Chi Minh; Vietnam.

## **1. Introduction**

This article examines the influence of Enlightenment thought on Ho Chi Minh and analyzes how he appropriated and creatively applied its principles in the formation of his political thought and in his leadership of the Vietnamese revolution. By clarifying the origins, role, and significance of Enlightenment ideas in shaping Ho Chi Minh's intellectual development, moral character, and revolutionary career, the article also seeks to draw out theoretical implications and practical lessons for the creative reception of Enlightenment thought in particular, and for the broader study and development of political and ideological theory in general.

## **2. Content**

### **2.1. French Enlightenment Thought (17th–18th Centuries) and the Formation of Ho Chi Minh's Patriotic Aspirations (Before 1911)**

#### ***2.1.1. The Significance of the 1789 French Revolution in the Enlightenment Era***

The 1789 French Revolution erupted amid profound social inequalities and the inability of King Louis XVI to implement meaningful political and financial reforms. These conditions further stimulated Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Montesquieu in their critique of absolutism and their advocacy of liberty, equality, popular sovereignty, and constitutional government.

The Revolution commenced with the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789. In August of the same year, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was adopted, marking a historic milestone in France and Europe by affirming the principle of popular sovereignty and fundamental civil liberties. The document clearly reflected the intellectual imprint of eighteenth-century French philosophy, crystallized in the enduring motto: Liberty – Equality – Fraternity. The revolutionary process unfolded through a series of transformative events and culminated in 1799 with the rise to power of Napoleon Bonaparte.

The French Revolution not only dismantled the absolutist monarchy but also established the First French Republic, thereby institutionalizing new political and legal principles grounded in Enlightenment thought. Ideologically, it universalized the concepts of human and civil rights, challenged feudal privilege and clerical authority, and affirmed the sovereignty of the people. Practically, it restructured the political order, inspired constitutional movements across Europe and beyond, and initiated significant legal reforms, most notably the Napoleonic Code. It also contributed to profound socioeconomic transformations, including the abolition of feudal dues and the advancement of market-oriented economic relations.

However, in colonial territories such as Vietnam, the ideals of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity were systematically constrained by colonial authorities. Rather than realizing these principles, colonial rule imposed hierarchical and oppressive structures that denied fundamental rights to the indigenous population. Nevertheless, the revolutionary spirit and Enlightenment ideals of 1789 continued to inspire Vietnamese patriots and revolutionaries in their pursuit of national liberation and social justice.

### ***2.1.2. The Reception and Influence of the Ideals of Liberty – Equality – Fraternity in Vietnam from the Late Nineteenth Century***

In Vietnam, the reception and dissemination of the ideas associated with the 1789 French Revolution encountered considerable constraints. While certain East Asian countries, notably Japan, came into contact relatively early with Western political thought, the transmission of Enlightenment ideals into Vietnam occurred much later. This delay was largely attributable to the restrictive cultural policies implemented by French colonial authorities. Indeed, even the name of major Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu appeared only sporadically, for example in an anonymous text published in 1904<sup>1</sup>.

Western concepts of civil rights and democracy entered Vietnam primarily through reformist texts commonly referred to as *Tân thư* (“New Learning” books), transmitted indirectly via China and Japan. As a result of this mediated transmission, the reception of Enlightenment thought was often fragmentary and selective, lacking systematic theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> According to Do Quang Hung (1999), *Additional Understandings of Ho Chi Minh*, Labor Publishing House, Hanoi, p. 121..

grounding. Reformist intellectuals such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao contributed significantly to the circulation of constitutionalist and reformist ideas in the region; however, in Vietnam, structural and political constraints prevented these currents from developing into a broad-based intellectual movement.

Nevertheless, the partial reception of Enlightenment-inspired ideas exerted a discernible impact on Vietnamese patriotic movements, particularly by stimulating new reformist currents at the turn of the twentieth century. Figures such as Phan Boi Chau, Huynh Thuc Khang, and Tran Quy Cap were instrumental in promoting reformist initiatives that drew upon the intellectual resources of the *Tân thư* tradition to challenge colonial domination. However, the reception and application of these ideas remained theoretically uneven and strategically inconsistent, contributing to the eventual limitations and failures of early twentieth-century reform movements.

### ***2.1.3. Drawn to the Ideals of Liberty – Equality – Fraternity: Ho Chi Minh's Decision to Journey West***

Nguyen Tat Thanh – Ho Chi Minh decided to begin his journey to the West not merely as a personal choice but as the result of a profound attraction to the values of the French Revolution during the Enlightenment period. This is clearly reflected in his 1923 account to the Russian journalist and poet Osip Mandelstam. In that conversation, Nguyen Ai Quoc shared: “When I was about thirteen years old, I first heard the three French words: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity... I very much wanted to become acquainted with French civilization and to discover what was hidden behind those words... I decided to find a way to go abroad”<sup>2</sup>.

Ho Chi Minh's attraction to the values of the French Revolution of 1789 originated when he was first exposed to them around September 1905, while attending a preparatory class at the Franco–Vietnamese Primary School in Vinh<sup>3</sup>. In 1965, he told the American writer Anna Louise Strong: “The Vietnamese people, including my father, often asked who would help us escape from French domination. Some thought it would be the Japanese, others believed it would be the British, and some supposed it might be the Americans. I felt that I had to go abroad to see clearly for myself. After observing how they conducted their affairs, I would return to help my compatriots”<sup>4</sup>.

However, this attraction did not stem solely from abstract words or slogans posted on classroom walls but also from the concrete experiences of Nguyen Tat Thanh. This was particularly evident during his second return to Hue with his father in May 1906, especially when he entered Hue National Academy. In this environment, he not only acquired formal knowledge but was also exposed to progressive thought through French and Vietnamese

<sup>2</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 1, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, p. 461.

<sup>3</sup> Song Thanh (Ed.) (2006), *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, Political Theory Publishing House, Hanoi, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> Ho Chi Minh (1992), *Chronological Biography*, Vol. 1, Information and Theoretical Publishing House, Hanoi, pp. 47–48.

teachers. One of his teachers often told students that in France “from workers to members of the academies, all greatly respected talented and virtuous Vietnamese. France possessed many libraries containing books about revolutions throughout the world, and one could enter and read them free of charge”<sup>5</sup>.

This stimulated his curiosity and desire to explore French civilization and its representative thinkers. He “passionately devoted himself to a comprehensive study of the French bourgeois revolution and made great efforts to obtain the works of Enlightenment writers and philosophers such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau. In reading these works, he perceived a spirit of criticism toward despotism, a deep attachment to freedom, and an aspiration for equality and fraternity”<sup>6</sup>.

A clear parallel can be observed between the reception and influence of Enlightenment thought in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe and its impact on Ho Chi Minh, particularly within educational institutions. Schools functioned as sites where Enlightenment values were generated and disseminated. Ho Chi Minh was exposed to these ideas, became attracted to them, and felt compelled to travel to France in order to examine them at their source. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that: “The instruction of his teachers was an important factor in shaping President Ho Chi Minh’s orientation toward the West rather than the East”<sup>7</sup>.

However, alongside observing and learning from those French individuals he regarded as good, during his time in Hue Ho Chi Minh also carefully observed those French who were not. Ho Chi Minh “paid close attention to the words and actions of the French at school and also of those French who were working in what they called the ‘protectorate’ government. The more he studied, the more he grew skeptical of the beautiful words proclaimed by the French”<sup>8</sup>.

His years at Hue National Academy enabled him to recognize the contradiction between the proclaimed ideals of the colonial ‘civilizing mission’ and the actual conditions experienced by the Vietnamese population. On one side stood the slogan Liberty, Equality, Fraternity; on the other stood the harsh reality of French colonial rule. Later, as Nguyen Ai Quoc, he wrote: “Many unfortunate native women were forced to wear heavy shackles and sweep the streets for the sole crime of failing to pay taxes,” “There were not only continuous mass house searches but also body searches of natives anywhere, regardless of

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<sup>5</sup> According to Pham Hong Viet, “From Quoc Hoc Hue School, Nguyen Tat Thanh Set Out to Seek a Path for National Salvation,” in Ho Chi Minh Museum, Thua Thien Hue Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Ho Chi Minh Museum of Thua Thien Hue (2008), *Proceedings of the Workshop on Research and Verification of Documents and Relics Related to President Ho Chi Minh (1890–1911)*, Thuan Hoa Publishing House, Hue, p. 234.

<sup>6</sup> Subcommittee for Research on Party History – Nghe An Provincial Party Committee (1996), *Ho Chi Minh in His Youth*, Nghe An Publishing House, pp. 92–93.

<sup>7</sup> Tran Van Giau & Tran Bach Dang (Eds.) (2009), *Gold in the Fire*, Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, p. 54

<sup>8</sup> Tran Van Giau & Tran Bach Dang (Eds.) (2009), *Gold in the Fire*, Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, p. 54.

whether they were men or women,” “Yet this was still insignificant compared to what occurred in the provinces, especially in Central Vietnam; there the resident official sentenced and imprisoned people en masse without regard to age, gender, or status,” “Everything that can be said still falls short of the truth. Never before, in any country, have human rights been violated in such a savage, cruel, and blatant manner”<sup>9</sup>.

The recognition of the inconsistency between proclaimed ideals and colonial reality further stimulated his determination to examine more deeply the values of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity articulated by the French Revolution.

After leaving Hue National Academy, Nguyen Tat Thanh and his father Nguyen Sinh Sac went to Binh Dinh. In January 1910, his father was dismissed from his position as district chief of Binh Khe and ordered to return to the imperial capital. However, Nguyen Tat Thanh did not follow his father and elder brother back to Hue but continued southward. In late August 1910, on his way to Saigon, he stopped in Phan Thiet and worked as a physical education assistant at Duc Thanh School. During this period, although he received an invitation to travel to Japan, he remained determined to proceed to Saigon.

At that time, Saigon was the largest commercial port in Vietnam, with relatively dynamic industrial development. Regular weekly ships departed for France, and posters along the streets advertised voyages to well-known cities and ports such as Singapore, Colombo, Marseille, Bordeaux, and Le Havre. During this period, he was exposed to progressive French newspapers through oppositional soldiers in the French army<sup>10</sup>. In 1924, in an interview published in the Italian Communist newspaper *L'Unità*, he stated: “Previously, I had read several newspapers circulated in my country, including some oppositional ones in Annam, read by Foreign Legion soldiers sent by Poincare for ‘re-education.’ These legionnaires read all kinds of materials; they were oppositional by nature. They allowed me to read French newspapers. Thus I developed the desire to see what the ‘mother country’ was like, and I went to Paris”<sup>11</sup>. While in Saigon, Nguyen Tat Thanh briefly attended the School of Practical Mechanics. The French historian Charles Fourniau observed: “The transition from a teacher to a student at a technical school was something unusual in a country that traditionally looked down upon industry and manual labor... therefore this young revolutionary came to the technical school not to learn a trade but to come into contact with the West, with Western industry, and with those who carried out that industry, namely the working class”<sup>12</sup>.

Ho Chi Minh’s decision to depart for France on 5 June 1911 therefore reflected not only the determination of a revolutionary but also marked an important turning point in his intellectual development and preparation for national struggle. Attracted by the values of the

<sup>9</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 2, p. 121.

<sup>10</sup> Ho Chi Minh Museum (1987), *Ho Chi Minh – Key Events*, Hanoi, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 1, p. 465.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Fourniau (1970), *Ho Chi Minh, Our Comrade*, Paris, p. 272.

French Revolution of 1789 and wishing to understand the true meaning of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,” he chose France rather than countries such as Japan. He believed that only in France could he thoroughly examine the contradictions between lofty ideals and the brutal colonial reality imposed upon his homeland. This decision represents the first significant imprint of the values of the French Revolution of 1789 on his decision to embark abroad.

## **2.2. Western Enlightenment Thought on Ho Chi Minh’s Path to Expanding Knowledge and Embracing Communism (1911–1920)**

Many scholars often emphasize that Nguyen Ai Quoc - Ho Chi Minh moved from patriotism to communism. However, for a fuller understanding, it is necessary to stress another important aspect: his schooling within a bourgeois democratic environment. This was not merely an expansion of the content of Nguyen Ai Quoc - Ho Chi Minh’s patriotism, but also a distinctive approach to Marxism-Leninism, different from that of many other communists in Vietnam and Asia, even those considered close to Nguyen Ai Quoc - Ho Chi Minh. This experience constituted an engagement with democratic principles not only in a narrow sense but in a broad one, encompassing the achievements of the Enlightenment era: bourgeois democracy.

As presented above, from his early youth, before departing to seek a path for national salvation, Ho Chi Minh had already been attracted to the ideals of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity of the French Revolution of 1789. At that stage, he could be described as a patriotic Vietnamese youth drawn to the slogans of freedom and bourgeois democracy. His patriotism began to incorporate elements of bourgeois democratic content. Nguyen Tat Thanh’s departure was similar to that of many contemporary patriotic youths, in the context of the wave of bourgeois democratic thought entering the Vietnamese national liberation movement through the “New Books.” Although Thanh’s patriotism differed to some extent from that of his predecessors, in our view it cannot yet be considered “different both in viewpoint and in political stance,” nor can it be said that his patriotism at that time “in essence differed from that of the earlier scholar-gentry in terms of viewpoint and political position”<sup>13</sup>.

Later, during the period 1911–1920, there have been various reasons why some observers, even to this day, maintain that Nguyen Ai Quoc was not influenced by bourgeois democratic thought<sup>14</sup>. However, in our view, similar to Lenin, in the course of seeking a path for national salvation, Nguyen Tat Thanh - Nguyen Ai Quoc traveled through and temporarily resided in several of the most developed capitalist countries of the time (England, France, the United States, and others), thereby perceiving the dual character of bourgeois democratic thought. He witnessed a civilized France with genuine democratic

<sup>13</sup> Dinh Xuan Lam (2008), *Contributions to the Study of the Life and Thought of Ho Chi Minh*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, p. 57.

<sup>14</sup> Ho Chi Minh (1986), *Complete Works*, Vol. 1, Truth Publishing House, Hanoi, p. 25.

freedoms, while also recognizing the class nature and limitations of bourgeois democracy, especially the brutality of colonialism, the offspring of imperialism. Consequently, he both criticized and selectively learned from and absorbed the positive aspects of bourgeois democratic thought. Nguyen Ai Quoc “admired the revolutionary spirit of the French people and the will for independence of the American people,” read the works of Enlightenment thinkers of the French Revolution, and participated in activities within the atmosphere of democratic freedom in Paris, where meetings were held “in a friendly and democratic atmosphere like the Jacobin clubs of the era of the French Revolution”<sup>15</sup>.

The path Ho Chi Minh undertook to broaden his knowledge and ultimately embrace communism and Marxism-Leninism further demonstrates the importance of passing through the school of bourgeois democracy. Ho Chi Minh moved from patriotism, through the school of bourgeois democracy and the school of labor and struggle of the working class and the world’s oppressed peoples, and finally became a communist. Experiencing the school of bourgeois democracy was not only an important condition for the maturation and development of his thought, but also an indispensable element in the formation of his character as a revolutionary leader. His journey was sequential and comprehensive, both ideologically and in terms of social systems: from feudalism/colonial-feudalism to capitalism, and ultimately to communism. This is reflected in his own words: “The minimum condition for us to become communists is the most elementary condition for action: freedom of the press, freedom of movement, freedom of education and study, freedom of assembly (all these rights have been brutally violated by the so-called civilizing colonialists)”<sup>16</sup>.

Thanks to the education he received from his family, his native region of Nghe Tinh, and national traditions, Nguyen Ai Quoc - Ho Chi Minh absorbed many positive elements of Vietnamese and Eastern culture before embarking on his journey to the West in search of a path for national salvation. These included the traditional Vietnamese patriotism in which love of country is first and foremost love of the people, the principle “*dan vi quy, xa tac thu chi, quan vi khinh*” (“The people are the most important; the state comes next; the ruler is of lesser weight”), and the humanistic and democratic values embedded in the tradition of resisting oppressive authority. In particular, his early exposure to the “New Books” enabled him to recognize the values of the French Revolution of 1789: Liberty - Equality - Fraternity. Rather than choosing the path of going East or North, Ho Chi Minh chose to go West, thereby initiating his period of seeking a path for national salvation.

Through this analysis, we wish to emphasize the significance of Ho Chi Minh’s early contact with the values of the French Revolution in shaping his choice of path for national salvation. Although at the time of his departure abroad in 1911 he did not yet fully

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<sup>15</sup> Tran Dan Tien (1975), *Stories about the Life and Activities of President Ho*, Truth Publishing House, Hanoi, p. 40.

<sup>16</sup> Ho Chi Minh, “Indochina,” *Cahiers du Communisme*. Cited in Ha Xuan Truong (1990), “The Issue of Democracy,” *Communist Review*, No. 2/1990, p. 50.

comprehend bourgeois democratic thought in general, he possessed a profound understanding of feudal ideology, owing to his background in a Confucian family and his extensive exposure to feudal scholarship. This is evident in his criticism of the methods of national salvation advocated by earlier leaders such as Phan Boi Chau and Hoang Hoa Tham. Ho Chi Minh recognized that feudal ideology had become obsolete, while also perceiving that the ideals of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity proclaimed by the French Republic in the Revolution of 1789 were worthy of serious consideration.

Thus, the decision of Nguyen Tat Thanh - Ho Chi Minh to turn either toward the East or toward the West, as well as his choice from the outset to “bypass” feudal ideology in order to approach early on the thought of the most representative bourgeois republic (France), carried profound significance for his journey to seek a path for national salvation. To see this more clearly, one may compare him with contemporary intellectuals such as Phan Boi Chau, who underwent a difficult transformation from monarchism (before 1904), to constitutionalism (in 1906), and only in 1912, under the influence of the Xinhai Revolution in China, shifted to a republican stance, although he continued to uphold the role of Cuong De as a “legitimate monarch.” It should also be added that, in the Vietnamese context of that period, many individuals were attracted by the ideals of the French Republic and chose to go to France, such as Phan Chu Trinh. However, Phan Chu Trinh’s departure for France (also in 1911, the same year as Nguyen Tat Thanh) took place in a “passive” situation after he had been “pardoned” and released from Con Dao prison, and after fourteen years he returned home still maintaining essentially the same perception of the French Republic without significant change. In his memoirs, Tran Huy Lieu recorded the following:

“Each of us, young people deeply engaged in activism, when introduced to meet him, was immediately confronted by Phan with a testing question:

- Have you read *The Social Contract* by Rousseau or *The Spirit of the Laws* by Montesquieu?

- Yes, sir, I have!

- Ninh, he has read them as well...

Thus, in Phan’s ‘overseas’ conversations there was no mention whatsoever of the October Revolution in Russia, nor of the Communist International, nor of the founding of the French Communist Party...<sup>17</sup>

As for Ho Chi Minh, he went to France to genuinely explore the ideological values of the French Revolution of 1789 and did not stop there; he employed them as a powerful weapon in the cause of national liberation, eventually attaining a new and qualitatively higher awakening under the light of the Russian October Revolution of 1917 and gradually perfecting his path to national salvation.

<sup>17</sup> See Do Quang Hung (1999), *Additional Understandings of Ho Chi Minh*, p. 128.

### **2.3. Western Enlightenment Thought in the Intellectual Foundations and Leadership Style of Ho Chi Minh in Leading the Vietnamese Revolution (1920–1969)**

Western Enlightenment thought exerted a profound influence on Ho Chi Minh's ideology and leadership style throughout his leadership of the Vietnamese revolution.

*2.3.1. In Ho Chi Minh's thought, this influence is manifested in several key aspects:*

*First, the conception of democracy and human rights.*

Ho Chi Minh's conception of democracy and human rights reflects the influence of Enlightenment thought in multiple dimensions.

*The idea of human rights and democracy.* Ho Chi Minh regarded human rights and democracy not as abstract concepts, but as products of human struggle within society. This reflects the Enlightenment view that human beings are subjects endowed with rights and responsibilities in society, and that such rights should not be restricted by the power of ruling classes.

*The class and cultural character of democracy.* Ho Chi Minh emphasized that democracy and human rights are not merely individual entitlements but must be institutionalized and guaranteed through a political system. Accordingly, he paid close attention to the cultural and class character of democracy and human rights, affirming that they cannot exist independently but depend upon national culture and specific socio-economic conditions. He stated: "We must preserve our national character, and whatever is good or beneficial in Eastern or Western culture we must learn in order to build a Vietnamese culture. That is, by drawing upon the good experiences of past and present cultures, we cultivate a Vietnamese culture imbued with a genuinely Vietnamese spirit, in harmony with the democratic spirit"<sup>18</sup>.

*The realization of human rights through democratic mechanisms.* Ho Chi Minh stressed that the protection of human rights and democracy must be ensured through lawful and constitutional democratic mechanisms, with government organized and exercised in democratic forms, such as general elections based on universal suffrage and the drafting and adoption of constitutions. At the very first meeting of the Government, he set forth six urgent tasks, the third of which was the drafting of a constitution. He explained: "Previously we were ruled by an autocratic monarchy, and then by a colonial regime no less autocratic, so our country had no constitution. Our people did not enjoy freedom and democracy. We must have a democratic constitution"<sup>19</sup>. He then proposed: "To promptly organize a general election under a system of universal suffrage." Ho Chi Minh placed particular emphasis on the people's right to supervise and oversee state organs. In his view, the people participate in

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<sup>18</sup> *Cuu Quoc* Newspaper, issue of 25 November 1946.

<sup>19</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 4, p. 7.

state affairs according to the principle of “using the people’s talents, strength, and resources for the benefit of the people... the Government merely assists in planning and mobilization”<sup>20</sup>, while also underscoring the role of law in safeguarding citizens’ and human rights under the principle that “in all matters, there must be the sacred authority of the rule of law”<sup>21</sup>. These positions clearly reflect Enlightenment thought concerning the role of democratic institutions and legal frameworks in protecting and promoting the rights of citizens.

*Second, the conception of a rule-of-law state of the people, by the people, and for the people.*

Rooted in Western Enlightenment thought, Ho Chi Minh’s conception of a rule-of-law state of the people, by the people, and for the people was profoundly shaped by several key principles.

*The subject of power.* Ho Chi Minh emphasized that state power must belong to the people: “authority and force reside in the people”<sup>22</sup>. He regarded the people as the supreme subject of power, for “our country is a democratic country; the highest position is that of the people, because the people are the masters”<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, the task of the government is to serve the interests of the people: “Whatever benefits the people, we must do our utmost to accomplish; whatever harms the people, we must do our utmost to avoid”<sup>24</sup>. This clearly reflects the influence of Enlightenment ideas on democracy and human rights.

*The role of law.* Ho Chi Minh stressed the necessity of a legal system that protects the rights and freedoms of all citizens and that must be founded upon the will of the people. This demonstrates the Enlightenment principle that power must be constrained by law, and that law should express the general will rather than the interests of a particular class or individual.

*The relationship between the state and the people.* Ho Chi Minh emphasized the role of the state as a “servant” of the people, while also underlining the responsibility of citizens in building and defending the state. He stated: “Our country is a democratic country; all benefits are for the people; all powers belong to the people. The work of renewal and construction is the responsibility of the people. Authorities from the commune level to the Government are elected by the people. Organizations from the central to the local level are established by the people”<sup>25</sup>. This reflects the Enlightenment conception of the relationship between state and citizen, in which both sides are bound by law and contribute to the development of society and the common good.

*Control of state power.* Ho Chi Minh highly valued the role of suffrage in promoting popular participation in controlling state power. He emphasized not only the people’s right

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<sup>20</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 5, p. 81.

<sup>21</sup> “Vietnam’s Claims Song,” *Nhan Dan* Newspaper, 30 January 1977.

<sup>22</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 6, p. 232.

<sup>23</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 7, p. 434.

<sup>24</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 64–65.

<sup>25</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 6, p. 232

and duty to vote but also the right to withdraw confidence from representatives who fail to meet the expectations of their constituents. At the same time, he advocated the construction of democratic institutions that would enable the people to participate in state management. All of these elements reflect Enlightenment ideas concerning democratic rights, the accountability of representatives to the electorate, and popular participation in public decision-making.

*Third, the conception of education and the human person.*

Enlightenment thought exerted a profound influence on President Ho Chi Minh's views on education and the human person. The Enlightenment emphasized the power of knowledge and reason in advancing social progress. Ho Chi Minh placed education at the forefront of the revolutionary cause and the construction of a new society, aiming to raise intellectual standards and ensure sustainable development. He understood that education constitutes the essential foundation for forming good citizens and capable cadres—individuals equipped with awareness, knowledge, and the ability to participate in national development. He affirmed: “The task of education is extremely important and honorable... Without education and without cadres, it is impossible to speak of economic or cultural development”<sup>26</sup>.

The Enlightenment also promoted freedom of thought and intellectual independence, enabling individuals to develop their cognitive and analytical capacities. Ho Chi Minh stressed democracy and freedom within education through the establishment of a system that encourages independent thinking and personal development. He required that: “On every issue, teachers and students must discuss together; whoever has an opinion should express it honestly. Whatever is not yet clear must be questioned and discussed until clarity is achieved”<sup>27</sup>. For learners, he advised: “Constantly strive to advance; cultivate an independent spirit. Rely on oneself, be self-conscious, proactive, and self-reliant...”<sup>28</sup>.

Furthermore, the Enlightenment upheld the universalization of education and equality in access to knowledge. This is reflected in Ho Chi Minh's condemnation of the obscurantist policies of French colonialism and the feudal regime, as well as in his implementation of a mass literacy campaign after the August Revolution of 1945. He advanced the slogan “implement universal education”<sup>29</sup> promoting literacy and ensuring that “everyone has the opportunity to study”<sup>30</sup>.

Finally, Enlightenment thought valued the role of teachers in transmitting knowledge and shaping human character. Ho Chi Minh likewise held educators in high esteem, recognizing them as individuals who exert a profound influence on social development and the formation of future generations.

### ***2.3.2. In the Ho Chi Minh style***

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<sup>26</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 10, p. 345.

<sup>27</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 9, p. 266.

<sup>28</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 3, p. 457.

<sup>29</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 3, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 4, p. 187.

The influence of Western Enlightenment culture and thought played an important role in shaping the style and way of life of Ho Chi Minh, giving him a distinctive and unique personal style.

*First, a cheerful and witty spirit:* Ho Chi Minh was not merely a revolutionary leader but also a person with a broad cultural outlook, reflected in his cheerful and humorous spirit. He enjoyed humor and often created a friendly and pleasant atmosphere around him. For example, when Ho Chi Minh once completed passport procedures, the officer asked him: “What is your father’s name?” He smiled and humorously replied: “If I am Ho Chi Minh, then my father must be Ho Chi Thong.” Everyone around burst into laughter. On another occasion, a foreign journalist asked him: “Is Ho Chi Minh Nguyen Ai Quoc?” He answered: “You should ask Mr. Nguyen Ai Quoc and you will know.” On another visit to local units, someone asked: “When will you have a wife?” He replied: “When that happens, I will answer”<sup>31</sup>. Studying Ho Chi Minh, the cultural scholar Huu Ngoc observed: “Ho Chi Minh’s sense of humor also blends East and West, combining many elements: intelligence and the innocence of a peasant, the satirical tone of a Vietnamese Confucian scholar, and the wit of a Parisian”<sup>32</sup>. This mixture shows the flexibility and diversity in the way he absorbed and expressed himself through culture.

*Second, respect for personality and rejection of the cult of personality:* Ho Chi Minh showed no trace of personality cult; on the contrary, he could even make fun of himself. In 1946 in Paris, after laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, his car passed along the Champs-Élysées on the way back to the hotel. An accompanying official said: “Mr. President, a very large crowd has gathered to watch you pass”. Ho Chi Minh laughed and replied: “Of course, my friend! They want to see the Vietnamese Charlie Chaplin”<sup>33</sup>. This remark reflected not only humility but also a profound approach to human relations. It expressed an important value of Enlightenment and Western civilization: respect for human dignity and individuality, without imposing oneself upon others.

Ho Chi Minh also required: “From the Central Committee down to local party cells, all must follow the principle of collective leadership and individual responsibility; all must oppose the cult of personality and bureaucratic commandism; all must honestly practice self-criticism and frank criticism; all must truly uphold democracy”<sup>34</sup>. He resolutely opposed what he called “communist arrogance”. He stated: “Our Party members are very ordinary people, because we are the children of the working class and the laboring people; we are simply loyal to the proletariat and determined to struggle for the people. That is all.

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<sup>31</sup> Do Hoang Linh (Comp.) (2009), *Stories that Endure Through Time*, People’s Public Security Publishing House, Hanoi, p. 65

<sup>32</sup> Huu Ngoc, “Ho Chi Minh and Western Humanism,” 15 May 2011, available at: <https://suckhoedoisong.vn/ho-chi-minh-va-nhan-van-phuong-tay-16912838.htm> (accessed 23 June 2024).

<sup>33</sup> According to Huu Ngoc (1991), *Sketches of the Cultural Portrait of France*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Hanoi, p. 23.

<sup>34</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 10, p. 431.

Precisely because we are very ordinary, our Party is very great. Apart from the interests of the Fatherland, the class, and the nation, our Party has no other interests”<sup>35</sup>.

*Third, a democratic style close to the people:* Ho Chi Minh consistently demonstrated a democratic spirit by respecting the rights and opinions of the people. He regularly sought opinions, listened to suggestions from all sides, and valued democracy in decision-making. He affirmed: “All forms of organization and methods of work must serve the interests and needs of the masses. Therefore, any method of organization or work that does not suit the masses must be boldly proposed to higher authorities for abolition or revision. Any method that suits the masses and that they need, even if it does not yet exist, must be proposed to higher authorities for adoption. If necessary, we should implement it first and report later, as long as it is effective”<sup>36</sup>. He further emphasized: “Our methods of work, organization, speaking, propaganda, slogans, writing articles, etc., must follow this principle: ‘From the masses, and back to the masses’”<sup>37</sup>. To implement this principle effectively, Ho Chi Minh always maintained close contact with the people, participating in their daily lives, understanding their difficulties and sharing their joys. He frequently visited and encouraged people in localities, offices, and factories, communicating with them in a friendly and approachable manner. These features partly reflect Enlightenment ideas about building a democratic society closely connected with the needs of the people.

*Fourth, an open and flexible mindset:* Ho Chi Minh did not confine himself to a rigid ideological system but flexibly absorbed and applied new knowledge to the specific conditions of the Vietnamese revolution. This demonstrates the diversity and multidimensional nature of his open thinking, enabling him to approach issues from multiple perspectives and find creative and appropriate solutions. The Polish historian Helen Tuocmer wrote of him: “Ho Chi Minh represents the complete image of a synthesis: the wisdom of the Buddha, the charity of Christ, the philosophy of Marx, the revolutionary genius of V. I. Lenin, and the sentiment of a patriarch. All harmoniously combined in a natural manner”<sup>38</sup>.

In sum, the influence of Western thought and culture contributed to shaping a multidimensional and open cultural identity in Ho Chi Minh. He integrated these elements naturally and flexibly into both his life and his work, thereby creating a distinctive cultural style, lifestyle, and image—not only for himself but also as an inspiration for society as a whole.

### **3. Several Research Values in Place of a Conclusion**

*First,* Enlightenment thought holds great value in Western civilization and for humanity as a whole. In studying the influence of Western Enlightenment thought on Ho Chi Minh, we not only identify the origins of these ideas within his thought, style, and

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<sup>35</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 9, p. 555.

<sup>36</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 5, p. 283.

<sup>37</sup> Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Complete Works*, Vol. 5, p. 286.

<sup>38</sup> According to Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics and Public Administration (2010), *Ho Chi Minh's Legacy in the Contemporary Era*, Political–Administrative Publishing House, Hanoi, p. 654.

actions but also recognize their profound appeal and influence on humankind. The Enlightenment brought to society fundamental values such as freedom, democracy, and respect for the individual. These values were deeply absorbed by Ho Chi Minh and expressed in his efforts to build an independent, free, and happy Vietnam. He transformed these values into an integral part of his thinking, lifestyle, and leadership style, thereby creating a profound influence on the past, present, and future of Vietnam. This demonstrates that Enlightenment thought is not merely a component of Western civilization but also a source of inspiration and practical value for humanity.

*Second*, studying the influence of Western Enlightenment thought on Ho Chi Minh provides an important methodological lesson in the reception and application of ideas and theories. It suggests that one must approach ideas at their roots and sources, where they were first conceived and formed, in order to study and understand them thoroughly. Ho Chi Minh did precisely this when he traveled to France to research and absorb the values of the French Revolution: “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.” At the same time, his reception of these ideas was not a mechanical repetition but a process of comparison, selection, and creative application of those values to the concrete circumstances of the Vietnamese revolution.

*Third*, Ho Chi Minh became a great revolutionary and an outstanding thinker of Vietnam in large part because he pursued learning and the acquisition of knowledge and ideas in a comprehensive and sequential manner, while continuously expanding his intellectual horizons and embracing new ideas and knowledge. Ho Chi Minh’s thought and lived practice did not involve any abrupt “transition” or “skipping of stages,” but rather moved sequentially through the historical stages of ideological and social development: from feudalism and colonial feudalism to capitalism, and finally to communism. This progression contributed to Ho Chi Minh’s intellectual stature, wisdom, and moral authority in comparison with many Eastern revolutionary leaders and even some of his own followers. Ho Chi Minh demonstrated an open-minded approach in learning and absorbing the intellectual achievements of both East and West, past and present. He was an outstanding student of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Lenin, yet he also did not hesitate to absorb the positive values of Western bourgeois democratic thought. This enabled him not only to build a solid intellectual and ideological foundation but also to develop a theoretical system appropriate to the realities of the Vietnamese revolution. The valuable lesson from Ho Chi Minh lies in perseverance in learning and systematically absorbing ideas—from lower to higher levels, from simple to complex—while maintaining an open mind that is not confined within a rigid ideological framework but remains flexible in embracing new knowledge suitable to the context and needs of the era.

*Fourth*, a remarkable feature of Ho Chi Minh’s thinking was his ability to combine theory with practice, translating ideas into concrete actions that responded to the needs of the revolution and served the interests of the people. For Ho Chi Minh, studying and absorbing ideas and theories was not merely for the purpose of expanding personal knowledge; more importantly, its ultimate aim was practical application. He understood that

noble ideas truly gain value only when they are implemented in real life, contributing to the creation of progressive and beneficial values for the nation. During his time in the West, especially in France, Ho Chi Minh constantly studied new ideas with the noble goal of finding a path to national and popular liberation. He absorbed the core values of Enlightenment thought—Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity—while also creatively adapting them to the specific conditions of Vietnam. This confirms that Ho Chi Minh was not only an outstanding revolutionary but also a remarkable practitioner, always directing his efforts and creativity toward building a just and progressive society for the people and for the nation.

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