

# Philosophical Transmission and Contestation: The Impact of Qing Confucianism in Southern Vietnam

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## Abstract

Southern Vietnam was reclaimed by the Vietnamese in the mid-seventeenth century. They first brought their folk Buddhism and various popular religions to new land; however, the bureaucratic system then forced the Chinese Han–Song dynasties' institutionalized and politicalized Confucianism on the population. The arrival of the Chinese from overseas since the late seventeenth century marked the introduction of Qing Confucianism into Southern Vietnam, shaping the pro-Yangming studies among local literati. Many writers claim that Qing Confucianism had no impact on Vietnam. Obviously, however, these writers ignored the diversity of Vietnamese Confucianism in the new frontiers in the South. Qing Confucianism was truly absorbed into many aspects of life among the local gentry, popularizing the so-called pro-Yangming studies.

The article aims to study the transmission, contestation, transformation, and manipulation of Qing Confucianism in Southern Vietnam by penetrating deeper into the life, career, mentality, merits, and influence of local Confucianists and reviving the legacies of practical learning in local scholarship. The research discovers that the practical learning of Qing Confucianism dominated the way of thinking and acting of local elites, affecting ideological, educational, cultural and socio-economic domains of local society. However, the domination of the classical Confucian orthodoxy and the lack of state-sponsored institutionalization in late feudal periods, as well as the later overwhelming imposition of Western civilization under French colonial rule, seriously challenged and downgraded the impacts of Qing Confucianism in Vietnam. Therefore, Yangming studies were once transmitted but had limited impact on Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Qing Confucianism, Southern Vietnam, practical learning, Yangming studies, transmitted and contested

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## Prenos filozofije in nasprotovanja: vpliv qingovskega konfucianizma na Južni Vietnam

### Izvleček

Vietnamci so ozemlje Južnega Vietnama pridobili sredi sedemnajstega stoletja. Na novo pridobljeno ozemlje se je sprva širil ljudski budizem in različne ljudske religije, kasneje pa je birokratski sistem ljudstvu vsilil še institucionaliziran in spolitiziran kitajski konfucianizem, ki se je izoblikoval med dinastijama Han in Song. Kitajski prišleki so v Južni Vietnam od poznega sedemnajstega stoletja naprej prinašali qingovski konfucianizem, pri čemer so se med lokalnimi literati izoblikovale t. i. proyangmingove študije. Številni pisci trdijo, da qingovski konfucianizem ni vplival na razvoj v Vietnamu, a so očitno prezrli raznolikost vietnamskega konfucianizma na novih južnih mejah. Ta je namreč vplival na številne vidike življenja lokalnega plemstva, predvsem pa je populariziral t. i. proyangmingove študije.

Namen članka je z raziskovanjem življenja, karier, mentalitete, zaslug in vplivov lokalnih konfucianistov ter s tem oživljanja dediščine praktičnega učenja v lokalni produkciji znanja prikazati prenos, nasprotovanje, transformacijo in manipulacijo qingovskega konfucianizma v Južnem Vietnamu. Študija je pokazala, da je praktično učenje qingovskega konfucianizma določalo način mišljenja in delovanje lokalnih elit ter s tem vplivalo na ideološka, izobraževalna, kulturna in družbeno-ekonomska področja lokalne družbe. Pri tem pa so prevlada klasične konfucijanske ortodoksosti, pomanjkanje institucionalizacije v poznem fevdalnem obdobju, ki bi jo podpirala država, ter kasnejše uvajanje zahodne civilizacije pod francosko kolonialno vlado postopoma zmanjšali vpliv qingovskega konfucianizma, Yangmingove študije pa so tako v Vietnamu imele zgolj omejen vpliv.

**Ključne besede:** qingovski konfucianizem, Južni Vietnam, praktično učenje, Yangmingove študije, prenos in nasprotovanja

## The Conservativeness of Vietnamese Confucianism from an East Asian Perspective<sup>1</sup>

Despite the fact that some Western scholars warn others to be careful when calling Vietnam a Confucian society, Confucianism has been deeply rooted in the Vietnamese mindset for almost two thousand years. This is the result of both imposition by Chinese rulers during the first millennium AD, and voluntary adoption by the Vietnamese bureaucracy during the second. Confucianism has helped

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to advance the frontiers of Vietnam and create a reasonable platform “where the Vietnamese people gained a national identity which made further Chinese intrusion improbable, rare, and finally wholly discontinued” (Fitzgerald 1972, 213).

The Vietnamese in late feudal periods followed both Confucianism and Buddhism (Buttinger 1968, 15), and to some extent the latter surpassed the former. According to Dung N. Duong, under specific circumstances, Confucianism and Daoism had to “accommodate” themselves to Buddhism (Duong 2004, 300) by accepting Buddhist influences on certain Confucian concepts such as filial piety, humane-ness, righteousness, etc., while Nguyen Ngoc Huy claimed that Vietnamese Confucianism has always been challenged by Buddhism (Nguyen 1998, 93). Unlike the case of China and Korea, traditional Confucian elites in Vietnam did not militantly oppose and or attempt to eradicate Buddhist influence, as they did not have a strong demand for building a “metaphysical counter-tradition”<sup>2</sup> to Buddhism (see Woodside 2002, 117, 127, 131).

After several waves of Confucian imposition in Northern Vietnam, the Chinese rulers in the fifth century became so surprised that Vietnamese Buddhism was as advanced as it was in China (Taylor 1976, 171); therefore, the Chinese rulers sometimes utilized Buddhism to calm down tensions in this colony. Jennifer Holmgren confirmed that there was a counterbalanced wave in Vietnam during the first six centuries of Chinese rule, where there was more “Vietnamization” of local Chinese than Sinicization of indigenous tradition (Holmgren 1980, 61: 115–19; also cited in Kiernan 2017). A similar claim can be found in Joseph Buttinger’s work, where Confucianism failed to Sinicize the local Vietnamese. He asserted that “the more they (Vietnamese) absorbed of the skills, customs, and ideas of the Chinese, the smaller grew the likelihood of their ever becoming part of the Chinese people” (Buttinger 1968, 29). Buttinger pointed to several reasons for this, including (1) the long prehistory of the Vietnamese, where the roots of local culture probably reached deeply into their pre-Chinese past, and (2) purely geographic conditions, whereby the Chinese could not control the Vietnamese effectively (*ibid.*). Truong Tũu, a twentieth-century writer, concluded that “... Confucianism was a force in Vietnamese society, but it was one that stimulated a strong cultural reaction” (Trương 1950, 183).

After several unsuccessful uprisings during the previous centuries, Vietnam regained its independence in 938 AD under Ngô Quyền’s (897–944) leadership. The Lý dynasty (1009–1225) was built mainly on Buddhist ideology, while Confucian scholars were simply in charge of the maintenance of the Confucian cult at

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2 This term is adopted from Woodside (2002, 127), meaning an ideological standpoint that can function as a counterweight to Buddhism.

the Court (see Hall 1976, 15). The Trần dynasty (1225–1400) largely shared similarities with the Lý, even though in this period Confucian schools were opened in important administrative centres and civic examinations were launched following the Chinese model (officially in 1247). Chu Văn An<sup>3</sup> and Hồ Quý Ly<sup>4</sup> are two significant Confucian scholars who laid the groundwork for Vietnamese Confucianism in this dynasty. Keith Taylor and Oliver Wolters showed that Lý and Trần rulers (1010–1400) pursued forms of legitimation (usually from local spirit cults and Buddhist beliefs) other than Confucianism (Taylor 1986, 139–76; Wolters 1996, 106).

The second period of Chinese rule (1407–1427) during the Ming dynasty left in Vietnam a stronger form of Neo-Confucianism modelled on that in China (with a system of 126 Confucian schools), which was then adopted by local Vietnamese elites such as Phan Phu Tiên (1370–1462), Ngô Sĩ Liên (1400–?), Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (1491–1585), Lê Quý Đôn (1726–1784), and so on. The *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (大越史記全書, *Complete Historical Annals of Đại Việt*) recorded that in the seventeenth year of Yongle Reign (1419), the Yongle Emperor of China ordered that Confucian texts, *The Four Books* and *The Five Classics* (四書五經, *Tứ Thư Ngũ Kinh*) be taken to Đại Việt (or Annam, as it was called by the Chinese) for the sake of Sinicizing the local education system. These were later used as classical texts for education and civic examinations during the Lê dynasty (1428–1789). Even though Confucian education was based on the Chinese model, the Vietnamese political philosophy was very different from its Chinese counterpart.

The Vietnamese culture was based mainly on Neo-Confucianism, at least since the beginning of the Lê dynasty (1428–1789). Many people called the Confucian ideology “cửa Khổng sân Trình” (the gate of Confucius and the yard of two Chengs (i.e., Cheng Hao (程顥, Trình Hạo, 1032–1085) and Cheng Yi (程頤, Trình Di, 1033–1107)). However, Vietnamese Confucians did not engage in Neo-Confucian “metaphysical speculation”, as found in the East Asian states, and did not participate in the dynamic Confucian debates regionally (see Elman et al. 2002, 17). Alexander Woodside called Vietnamese elites “the Methodists of the Confucian world” since they had a strong interest in the quality of direct

3 Chu Văn An (朱文安, 1292–1370) was the first significant Vietnamese scholar who discussed the Confucian classics. His famous work, the *Tứ Thư Thuyết Ước* (四書說約, *The Brief Interpretation of Four Books*) was composed on the ideological framework of Zhu Xi’s the *Sishu Jizhu* (四書集注, *Concise Notes of Four Books*).

4 Hồ Quý Ly (胡季犛, 1336–1407?) was a nobleman of the Trần dynasty (1225–1400) who took over the throne in 1400 and established the Hồ dynasty (1400–1407) before the Ming invasion and rule (1407–1428). He was the author of a number of poems that conveyed important Confucian virtues and ideas.

practical experience without a deep concern with doctrine (Woodside 2002, 127, 211; Trần 1973; 1975). McHale was more serious when downgrading Vietnamese Confucianism as “a poor and fragmented understanding of the teaching” (McHale 2004, 67). Phan Đại Doãn, a twentieth-century writer, proposed that ancient Vietnamese elites had “simplified” Confucianism from China, and focused only on its practical applications (Phan 1998). The Vietnamese feudal states and their bureaucrats failed to function as an effective agent of Confucianization.

The Tây Sơn dynasty (1789–1802) and the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945) once again combined Han Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism by extracting practical experience from all previous generations to serve their social interests. Alexander Woodside concluded that Vietnamese Confucianism reached its height in the 1800s by applying *Zhou's Rituals* (周禮, *Chu Lễ*) into its administrative work rather than using them for philosophical appropriation and philological work (see Woodside 2002, 136). As a result, late feudal Vietnam remained on its own trajectory of Confucian application. *Đại Nam thực lục* (the *Annals of Đại Nam*) states that in the fourth year of the reign of Minh Mạng (1824), Ngô Đình Giá, an educational bureaucrat, asked to use *Tứ thư Ngũ kinh* (四書五經, *The Four Books and Five Classics*), *Tính lý đại toàn* (性理大全, *The Complete Collection of Neo-Confucianism*), *Thông giám cương mục* (通鑑綱目, *Outlines and details of the Comprehensive Mirror*), *Đại học diễn nghĩa* (大學演義, *The Romance of the Great Learning*), *Cổ văn uyên giám* (古文淵鑑, *An Insight into the Ancient Essays*), and so on as official textbooks in Vietnamese schools (see Quốc 2002, 56). In 1823, the work based on Zhu Xi's *lixue* (理學, Neo-Confucianism), the *Luận ngữ ngu án* (論語愚按, *Analysis and Comment on Analects of Confucius*), by Phạm Nguyễn Du (1740–1786) was published. Consequently, *The Four Books* and *The Five Classics*, as edited and interpreted by Zhu Xi, became the most important texts in Vietnam's feudal education regime (see further Đỗ 2018, 23–5).

Vietnamese Confucian elites emphasized the foundational texts of China's Zhou dynasty even though the state governance and civic examination applied the Neo-Confucian mechanism. Such a shortcoming of uniformity did not allow Vietnam to develop a full appropriation of Neo-Confucianism or access to the Confucian universality, as in China, Korea, and Japan (Woodside 2002, 140). As a result, the people could not engage in debates with them” in the Neo-Confucian world (see further Jamieson 1993).

Indeed, the Vietnamese Confucian elites intentionally shaped a syncretic belief system integrating the tenets of Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and local traditions to work as the concrete ideological foundation for all levels of Vietnamese

society (see Dutton and Werner 2012, 114; Duong 2004, 311). The balance among these elements varies in time and location, especially since the Vietnamese started expanding towards the South in the early seventeenth century.

### Vietnamese “Expanding to the South” and the New Face of Southern Confucianism

“Nam tiến” (Expanding to the South) in the seventeenth century enlarged the Vietnamese’s living space and enriched their cultural experience. By spreading to the South, the Vietnamese expanded their “orthodox” Confucianism geographically and encountered non-Confucian challenges. As a result, Confucianism in Southern Vietnam was modified by the Yangming School brought by the Vietnamese Chinese scholars. As a matter of fact, Yangming school significantly restrained the “orthodox” bureaucratic Confucianism and had to share its influence with Buddhism.

“Nam tiến” took place in two steps: from the North to the Central Region, and from the Central Region to the South. In 1600, Nguyễn Hoàng (1525–1613), a bureaucrat of the Lê dynasty, escaped to Thuận Hóa Region (present-day Huế area), established the Kingdom of Đàng Trong (early Cochinchina) and got in touch with the larger world of Southeast Asia, which “enabled him to establish a new vision of being Vietnamese distinguished by the relative freedom from the Vietnamese past and the authority justified by appeals to that past” (Taylor 1993, 64). Based on a profound Confucian viewpoint, Ngô Sĩ Liên in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* condemned Nguyễn Hoàng for being an unfilial man by leaving behind his ancestors’ shrines, tombs, and his family’s past, and claimed that he was rejecting the traditional status of being a “good Vietnamese” (see further *ibid.*). In return, Nguyễn Hoàng and his bureaucrats showed that they were eager to shape a new model of “good Vietnamese” by accepting and adopting new resources in the new lands. Fitzgerald (1972, 28) found another reason for “Nam tiến”, he claimed that the crowded peasants and inadequate lands in the North pushed the Vietnamese to explore the new lands in the South. In any case, the formation of Đàng Trong (Cochinchina) opened a new vision of being Vietnamese. Thus Confucianism in this new land was about to transform.

According to Jeffrey Richey, the Đàng Trong government appreciated and used Buddhism more than Đàng Ngoài—the Northern Kingdom (Richey 2013, 68), thus downgrading the importance of Confucian values when the Vietnamese went further south to the Mekong River Delta (see further Li 1998). “Expanding to the South” was, in fact, a two-way process—on one hand the Vietnamese



brought with them Buddhism and “orthodox” Confucianism; on the other hand they had to adopt the existing cultures of the lands where they arrived (see also Reid 1988, 8).

New settlements continued to expand, the land was cleared southwards, and Confucian-styled communal houses were built as a sign of the establishment of the imperial institution and confirmation of territorial/cultural sovereignty. The communal houses where the tutelary gods, sanctioned heroic gods, generals, and soldiers were worshipped functioned as a miniature model of the central imperial court. Furthermore, the system of ordinations and couplets presenting the virtues of the emperors and heroes at the communal house ensured the existence of imperial power and its orthodox civilizing missions in each new village.<sup>5</sup> Its purpose of unifying the new settlers, transmitting the civilizing missions, imposing sovereignty and carrying out other political functions made the communal houses in the South deeply institutionalized and politicalized.

In many parts of the South the concept of loyalty dominated the local Confucianists, thus creating an inherent patriotism in each person. Many Vietnamese officials and Confucian scholars, such as Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh (1650–1700), Nguyễn Cư Trinh (1716–1767), Nguyễn Văn Thoại (1761–1829), Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (1822–1888), considered striving to cultivate and protect feudal institutions as the sacred responsibility of their lives.

Early Nguyễn rulers such as Gia Long (r. 1802–1820) and Minh Mạng (r. 1820–1841) were shown to disfavour Buddhism and Daoism. Such a bias affected Confucian scholars in some ways. A few local scholars adopted a Confucian stance when criticizing Buddhism and Daoism. For example, Nguyễn Cư Trinh, in *Sãi vãi* (Monks and Nuns), called for monastic consolidation and a greater focus on Confucian virtues while stating that Buddhism and Daoism were not of practical use. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu in *Dương Từ-Hà Mậu* (楊慈-何茂)<sup>6</sup> led a strong discussion among the Confucian scholars and concluded that the core merits of a good man are loyalty, patriotism, and righteousness. However, when facing the local ethnocultural diversity, Confucianism failed to function as a single ideology that could incorporate and unify all traditions under its “orthodox” canopy.

5 This metaphoric application was modelled after the Chinese Ming’s art of governing. According to Watson (1985), Duara (1988), Faure (1999) and others, late imperial Chinese states sanctioned the orthodox titles of specific gods (such as Guandi/God of War, Tianhou, etc.) to function as the “prolonged” hand of the emperor in each village.

6 The work *Dương Từ-Hà Mậu* was written by Nguyễn Đình Chiểu in 1854, mainly discussing the negative impacts of Buddhism and Catholicism and the need to revitalize Confucianism through the debates between two Confucianists, Dương Từ and Hà Mậu.

On the other hand, the more the Vietnamese went southwards, the more they strayed from the culture of the “central domain”—northern Vietnam. As early as the 1620s, there were some Vietnamese fishermen arriving at coastal sand-dunes nearby Saigon, from where they dispersed throughout the region of Southern Vietnam. They came to live with the local Khmer and turned the Khmer village of Prei Nokor into the city of Sài Gòn (Saigon) before the Chinese arrived from overseas (in the 1670s–1680s). The Khmers’ Hinduism and Theravada Buddhism, as well as the Chinese’s “Three Teachings”, all impacted the Southern Vietnamese, making them both similar and dissimilar to the northern population. In truth, the people who moved to the South became more independent in their thinking and way of life (see Fitzgerald 1972, 19–38, 29). At the beginning of this period, the Vietnamese migrants were largely poor fishermen, poor farmers, runaway soldiers, bandits, pirates, and prisoners, who were not well-educated or well-prepared to transmit Confucian values. Instead, Buddhism flourished and became a popularly opposing force to the “orthodox” cults. It is evident that the Southern Vietnamese used Buddhism to deal with the Cham and Khmer communities, while adopting Brahmanism (from the Cham) and Theravada Buddhism (from the Khmer) to enrich their traditions. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the Nguyễn lords of Đàng Trong officially set up administrative control over these new lands (1698 in Sài Gòn), and a number of Neo-Confucianism-educated bureaucrats were appointed to work there. Văn Thánh miếu, or the Temple of Literature, which functioned as the imperial institution, was built in Biên Hòa in 1715, marking the official cultivation of “orthodox” Confucianism in Southern Vietnam.

Despite these Confucian scholars–bureaucrats expending great efforts to cultivate and promote the Confucian orthodoxy in the South, they failed to transform the local communities. What they introduced and developed in the new lands was a series of segmented and practical Confucian elements rather than a systematic institution. While Northern Vietnam remained tightly engaged with Confucian ideology, the Southern Vietnamese had a looser relationship with Confucian orthodoxy in order to better handle and nurture their newfound social mobility. Such a transformation made Northern scholars doubt the “Vietnamese-ness” and orthodoxy of the new lands. As a matter of fact, the Southern Vietnamese adopted simple forms of Confucian values, such as respect for parents and a studious mindset. However, Olga Dror discovered that this was not to promote Confucianism as an ideological basis for society, but rather the limited application of particular Confucian ideas that could be widely accepted among the population (Dror 2018, 228–29).

The Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945) promoted connections and exchanges between the North and South. Commercial goods produced in the South were moved to the North; in return, many Northern Confucianists were appointed to work in



the South. However, as we noted above, the Chinese from overseas had brought Qing-style Confucianism to the South—probably in the form of Yangming studies—which did not match the Vietnamese “orthodox” Neo-Confucianism, as promoted by the bureaucrats. The former was diffused among the elites and merchants, while the later was applied in the administrative and educational systems. As a result, two schools of Confucianism intertwined to make a new face of Southern society.

Confucianism started to decline right after the French imposed their rule on the South during the 1860s. The civic examination was abandoned in the South at the end of the nineteenth century, while it did remain in the North until 1914 and in the Central region until 1919. In 1924, the French Governor agreed to include the study of traditional Vietnamese morality at the primary level; however, as Shawn McHale put it, “this was a hybrid moral instruction, combining elements of French moral teachings with Vietnamese ones, it could not be called purely Confucian” (McHale 2004, 74). There was a wave of Confucian renaissance during 1920–1940 in Vietnam motivated by a group of French-educated scholars such as Phan Bội Châu (1867–1940), Trần Trọng Kim (1883–1953), Phan Khôi (1887–1959), Phạm Quỳnh (1892–1945), Ngô Tất Tố (1894–1954), Đào Duy Anh (1904–1988), Trương Tửu (1913–1999), etc. (see McHale 2004, 71). However, it did not help to stop the downgrading of Confucianism nationwide after a long period of being ruled by the French.

After 1954, Northern Vietnam pursued socialism while South Vietnam was still at war. The administrators in Saigon encouraged moral education, for which some Confucian virtues were selected. However, this was, again, not a systematic Confucian institution. Instead, they absorbed some practical virtues to serve their temporary practical demands, such as filial piety, modesty, humility, and so on. For example, Saigon textbooks recounted the story of Lê Văn Khôi, praising his filial piety to his adept father, Governor Lê Văn Duyệt (1763–1832) (Dror 2018, 230–31) rather than narrating the whole historical fact of Lê Văn Khôi’s (?–1834) rebellion during the period of 1833–1835.

In short, the early Vietnamese migrants did not bring systematic Confucianism but instead Buddhism to set up a new “home” in Southern Vietnam. The Nguyễn lords period (1600–1789) and, later, the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945), promoted the Confucian orthodoxy and used it as a means of territorializing and civilizing the new lands. However, this wave of Confucian orthodoxy was challenged by the Qing Confucianism introduced by the Chinese from overseas. One interacted and restrained the other, but both were absorbed into the mindset of the Southern population.

## The Introduction of Qing Confucianism into Southern Vietnam by the Chinese from Overseas

The Hoa (ethnic Chinese) merchants and migrants arrived in Northern and Central Vietnam much earlier than in the South. In the North, the Chinese were present since the Western Han dynasty started ruling the land. In the Central region, Hoi An, a well-known entrepôt, became one of the destinations of Chinese merchants and workers from the first half of the seventeenth century on. However, the Chinese mainly migrated to Southern Vietnam at the end of the seventeenth century, after the fall of Zheng Chenggong's (鄭成功, Koxinga, 1624–1662) army in the Taiwan Straits. Furthermore, included in this first generation Hoa migration to Southern Vietnam were political refugees, but not merchants or free workers.<sup>7</sup> In 1679, Dương Ngạn Địch (楊彥迪, ?–1688)—the Long Môn (龍門) Military Governor, with 200 ships and 40,000 men under his possession, fled from the pursuit of the new Qing authority that was attempting to attack. After a month there was a storm and nearly 50 ships in the Long Môn fleet sank; the around 3,000 remaining people had to “drink dewdrops and raindrops” and “eat shoe soles” to survive and to find a way to Cochinchina.<sup>8</sup> Finally, they settled in the land which is now the south of Vietnam (Wheeler 2015, 152).

Dương Ngạn Địch settled in My Tho on the banks of the Mekong River Delta. Trần Thượng Xuyên (1626–1720), another general, and his followers established Thanh Hà village in Biên Hòa and Minh Hương village in the Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn area (recorded in *Đại Nam Thực Lục* (大南實錄, *Veritable Records of the Great South*)). During this time, Mạc Cửu from the Leizhou peninsular (Guangdong, China) came to build Hà Tiên,<sup>9</sup> an estate for Chinese immigrants, and then gave it to the Nguyen lords. Under Hà Tiên's development policy, and due to the fact that the Siamese King, Phraya Taksin (1734–1782), attacked Hà Tiên on and off from 1771–1772, many ethnic Chinese took refuge throughout the lower Mekong River Delta. The Nguyễn lords bestowed many privileges on Chinese communities, such as free trade and monetization, high-ranking positions at both the state and provincial levels, and so on (Borri 1998, 92; Nguyen 2010, 82). In 1669, a Qing mandarin named Yu Jin reported to the Chinese Emperor Kangxi that millions of Chinese had moved to Southeast Asia, many of whom worked as “traitors” or were appointed to some mandarin positions in the Vietnamese court (see Sun 2014, 327). The younger generations of mixed parentage between the Hoa and Vietnamese are called “the Minh Hương”.

7 See further Tsai 1968; Amer 1991; Engelbert 2011; Li 2004; Chí 2010; Barrett 2012.

8 French-given name for South Vietnam during the colonial period, 1858–1945.

9 Transbassac Region, or the lower Mekong River Delta of Vietnam.

From the eighteenth century onwards, the Hoa migrants arriving in Vietnam and Southeast Asia were no longer political refugees but workers and other economic immigrants (Cheung 2002, 33). They were treated as potential trading partners in many parts of the country. They participated in the state’s mining, coin casting, and metal import-export activities (Li 2011). The history of the ethnic Hoa in Southern Vietnam is briefly described below.

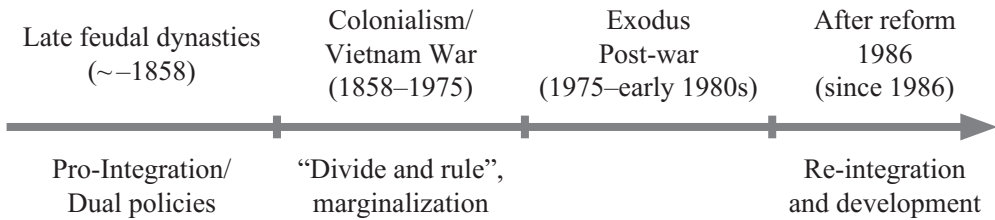


Figure 1: Short summary of the history of the ethnic Hoa in Southern Vietnam

With specific historical experiences in hand, the Hoa people, led by their elites, learned to “handle and preserve their own interests to ensure their position as Vietnamese society changed and their economic status eroded” (see Wheeler 2015, 143). As a matter of fact, the Hoa and the Minh Huong played an important role in the economic development of Southern Vietnam, within which the Yangming School of Confucianism (or Yangming Studies) has been noted as a significant philosophical contribution.

Wang Yangming (王陽明, 1472–1529), an important Neo-Confucian scholar of the Chinese Ming dynasty, stood on the core principles of Neo-Confucianism to discuss and develop further the philosophical concepts of the self-realization, self-reflection, and self-cultivation of each individual with the highest goal of attaining the ultimate unity of Heaven and Humanity (*Tianren heyi* 天人合一).<sup>10</sup> According to Wang Yangming, sincerity of the will comes before the process of correcting the original substance of the mind, the so-called *gewu* 格物 (Chan 1963, 655), the principle and the heart-and-mind are unified in one, and all myriad things exist in the heart-and-mind of human beings. If one possesses a good heart-and-mind, he becomes a person of good *liangzhi* (良知, intuitive knowledge); consequently, he will be able to self-realize ways to attain *Tianren heyi*. Compared with previous Neo-Confucianists (i.e., Zhu Xi), Wang Yangming emphasized practical logic epistemology and its deployment in living reality rather

<sup>10</sup> See Chan 1963, 658; Bary 1981, Xiii; Taylor and Rodney 1990, 5.

than purely diving within the theoretical ocean. Tang Junyi (唐君毅), a twentieth-century Confucian scholar in Hong Kong, thus called Wang Yangming's main approach to Confucianism "a heuristic language" (see Chen et al. 2014, 76).

The most notable point of Wang Yangming's philosophy is the unity of knowledge and action (知行合一, *tri hành hợp nhất*). Accordingly, knowledge is the original source of practice, and practice is the actual end of knowledge (Chan 1963, 656). By appreciating the unity of knowledge and action, Wang Yangming focused on the self-realization and self-cultivation of each person. Yangming Studies was introduced to both Korea and Japan. In Carter Eckert's words, Korean capitalism was imported by the Confucian literati in the state.

They resolved the apparent conflict between Confucian attitudes of disapproval regarding the pursuit of individual gain and the profit motive inherent in capitalism by claiming that the central purpose of profit was to improve the general quality of life and ensure the nation's independence. (in Tu, Hejtmanek and Wachman 1992, 9)

In Japan, disciples of Yangming Studies established the Yomeigaku (Yangming Studies) of Japanese Confucianism, a rival of the Shushigaku (朱熹學) during the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. Furthermore, Yangming Studies laid a significant philosophical foundation for the Meiji Revolution in 1868 (Chan 1963, 658), turning Japan into a world-leading economy. Similarly, the concept of the unity of knowledge and action deeply influenced Chinese revolutionaries (i.e., Sun Yat-sen, 1866–1925) and New Confucianists (i.e., Xiong Shili, 1885–1968, Mou Zongsan, 1909–1995, and so on.). The Chinese migrants to Vietnam mainly originated from Fujian and Guangdong, where Confucian values absorbed and enriched the trading traditions, forming an open-minded, dynamic, pragmatic and innovative form of Confucianism among the bureaucrats, elites, merchants, and some commoners.

The traditional Vietnamese state did not adopt Yangming Studies (see Elman et al. 2002, 15; Tran 2003, 735; McHale 2004, 81). Benjamin Elman and his fellows found that the traditional Vietnamese rural elites and commoners were satisfied with rice-fields, sumptuary laws about Confucian sacrifice and archaic forms of Confucianism (Elman et al. 2002, 17). Chu Thuán Thủy (朱舜水, 1600–1682), a late Ming–early Qing elite from Southern China, took refuge in Hội An for a while and found it disappointing that most of the local people came to him to ask for geomancy and other practical issues but not to discuss theoretical ones. He left for Japan where his interests were then fulfilled in the Yomeigaku school of Confucianism (Ba Xuyen cited in McHale 2002, 408). In our view, this

reasoning set out here makes sense, but there are also more causes to list. The Vietnamese Confucianists tried to compose a discourse on Confucianism with a nationalist and anti-colonial narrative of resistance to foreign aggression. David Kelly once stated that Vietnam, together with Korea, focused more on the ideological constructions of freedom and liberation (Kelly 1998, 3). The Koreans, in Alexander Woodside's research, intentionally differentiated themselves from China by emphasizing or prioritizing certain aspects of Confucian values and practices. For example, in family life, they further sharpened the family hierarchy and orthodox tradition by stressing "more clearly the distinction between sons of primary and secondary wives in descent groups" (compared to Chinese tradition) (Woodside 1998a, 197). On their side, the Vietnamese elites controlled the state-sanctioned writing of history and asserted a major form of oppositional boundary maintenance on external communication with China. Last but not least, the profound combination of the Three Teachings in Vietnamese Confucian orthodoxy did not give much space to change, or accept innovations. Consequently, Vietnamese Confucianism remains a special domain as compared with its East Asian counterparts.

However, Southern Vietnam enjoyed a more dynamic form of Confucianism, mainly shaped by the relaxation of Vietnamese Confucian orthodoxy and the introduction of Yangming Studies by the Hoa elites. The Nguyen lords in the South during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in particular offered the Chinese and Minh Huong elites good treatment if they proved to be loyal to the Vietnamese state (see Riichiro 1974, 140–75). Mạc Cửu (鄭玖, 1655–1735) and his son, Mạc Thiên Tứ (鄭天賜, 1718–1780), were appointed as the General Governors of Hà Tiên<sup>11</sup> who were able to mint coins, build fortresses, lay out markets, and conduct an independent foreign policy (see Chen 1960, 15, 41–63; Reid 1988, 44). In order to "Confucianize" his people, Mạc Thiên Tứ built Chiêu Anh Các (招英閣, Elites Attracting Pavilion) in Hà Tiên in 1736 where Confucius was worshipped and Confucian ideas were discussed and spread. Notably, Robert Kirsop, a member of staff of the East Indies Company, once described the form of Đàng Trong (Cochinchina) as similar to that of China, as many Chinese elites and merchants were recruited to work in the administrative system (see further Chen 1960; Fitzgerald 1972, 30). These men really applied a Qing style of Confucianism in their daily work.

Hà Tiên tells a significant story of pro-Yangming Studies in Southern Vietnam. Hà Tiên's Confucian studies were closely associated with the second General

11 Hà Tiên (河仙) was once known under different names, such as Can Cao, Cancar, Ponthiamas, and Po-Taimat.

Governor of the polity, Mạc Thiên Tứ. Cao Tự Thanh, a modern Vietnamese scholar, went so far as to claim that “a recognizable stratum of Confucian intellectuals could only be found in the Chinese enclave of Hà Tiên” (Cao 1996, 28). With the establishment of Chiêu Anh Các, Mạc Thiên Tứ gathered many prominent Confucianists from different regions of Vietnam and Southern China to deploy, discuss, and debate issues of Qing Confucianism as well as to compose poetry.<sup>12</sup> Mạc Thiên Tứ ordered the compilation of the poetic verses of the scholars and carved into stone steles two works, *Hà Tiên Thập Vịnh* (河仙十詠, *Ten Songs on the Beauty of Hà Tiên*) and *Minh Bật Di Ngư* (明勃遺漁, *The Last Fisherman in Minh Bật Region*) (see Trịnh Hoài Đức (1765–1825)’s *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí* (嘉定城通志, *Gazetteer of Gia Định Citadel*)). Similar to many Qing Chinese Confucianists at this time, Mạc Thiên Tứ and his colleagues’ poetry signified the ultimate “Way” of human beings by stressing the self-realization and self-cultivation of the heart-and-mind.

From the eighteenth century to the first half of the twentieth, a large number of Chinese books from South-Eastern China followed the Chinese merchant boats to Southern Vietnam (see Li 2011, 167–82). Initially, the main beneficiaries were almost exclusively the Chinese immigrants, gradually expanding to Vietnamese Confucianists and commoners. This spread the Qing’s academic ideology and Confucianism extensively in the southern region, thus contesting the Vietnamese Confucian orthodoxy. In addition to the Qing Confucian classics, books on geomancy, medicine, and pharmacy, religions, Confucian stories, and others were also imported and circulated in large numbers. Many Vietnamese envoys of the Nguyễn dynasty to China were the Hoa or Minh Hương elites who played a significant role in introducing the Yangming School of the Qing dynasty into Southern Vietnam. For example, *Đại Nam Thực Lục* recorded the case of Lý Văn Phúc (李文馥, 1785–1849), a member of the Minh Hương elite of Fujian origin,

12 They were Trịnh Liên Sơn, Lê Bá Bình (from the Saigon- Gia Định region), Phan Đại Quảng, Nguyễn Nghi, Trần Ngoan, Đặng Minh Bôn, Trần Minh Hạ, Đặng Minh Bản, Tôn Thiên Trân, Mạc Triều Đán, Trịnh Liên Sơn (from North Vietnam), Hoàng Long (from Quy Nhơn), Phan Thiên Quảng (from Cẩm Giang), as well as dozens of Chinese Confucianists including Zhu Pu (Châu Phác 朱璞), Wu Zhihan (Ngô Chi Hân 吳之翰), Li Renchang (Lý Nhân Trường 李仁長), Dan Bingyu (Đan Bình Ngự 單秉馭), Tang Yuchong (Thang Ngọc Sùng 湯玉崇), Chen Yansi (Trần Diễn Tứ 陳演泗), and Wang Chang (Vương Sương 王昶) from Guangdong province; Chen Yueyuan (Trần Dược Uyên 陳躍淵), Chen Zilan (Trần Tự Lan 陳自蘭), Xu Ta (Tù Tha 徐鈞), Lin Weize (Lâm Duy Tắc 林維則), Xu Dengji (Tù Đăng Cơ 徐登基), Lin Qiran (Lâm Kỳ Nhiên 林其然), Sun Tianrui (Tôn Thiên Thoại 孫天瑞), Huang Jizhen (Hoàng Ký Trân 黃寄珍), Chen Xufa (Trần Tự Phát 陳緒發), Fang Ming (Phương Minh 方銘), and Sun Jimao (Tôn Quý Mậu 孫季茂) from Fujian province; Lu Fengji (Lộ Phùng Cát 路逢吉) and Zhou Jingyang (Châu Cảnh Dương 周景揚) from Jiangsu province; Xu Yewen (Tù Diệp Văn 徐葉雯), Chen Weide (Trần Duy Đức 陳維德), and Chen Ruifeng (Trần Thoại Phụng 陳瑞鳳) from Jiangxi province, and so on (see Chen 1967, 149).



who was appointed to be an envoy to the Qing court in 1833. On his way back home to Vietnam, he stopped in Fujian to pay a visit to the ancestral halls and in Guangdong to purchase books on behalf of the Minh Mạng Emperor. We discovered recently that many books published in Foshan (Guangdong) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were widely circulated and used as important textbooks among Southern Vietnamese scholars and students.<sup>13</sup> For example, the *Minh tâm bửu giám* (明心寶鑑) became a truly popular handbook among Confucianists of many generations in the South, even though it was never used in state-sponsored Confucian schools or civic examinations. *Minh tâm bửu giám* combined the Three Teachings within a Confucian framework which strongly encouraged self-realization and self-cultivation among individuals. Besides, *Tứ thư thể chú* (四書體注), a Zhu Xi-based interpretative work by the Qing scholar Fan Chang (Zi Deng), was beloved for its conciliation and simplification of *The Four Books* in classical Confucianism. Similarly, *Tứ thư đại toàn tiết yếu* (四書大全節要), composed in 1414 under the order of the Ming Emperor, Chengzu, and reprinted in Foshan during the Qing dynasty, was also commonly found in Southern Vietnam.

Our recent research shows that Võ Trường Toản (?–1792), Trịnh Hoài Đức (1765–1825), and Nguyễn Thông (1827–1884) were typical Vietnamese Confucian scholars who made Yangming studies part of their philosophical outlooks, especially the concept of “knowing speech and cultivating *qi*” (知言養氣) by Mencius and later Wang Yangming (see Ngạc Xuyên 1943). Unfortunately, this group of elites was not provided with a concrete environment to facilitate and develop such a new wave of Confucianism, since they encountered the imposition of the Vietnamese Confucian orthodoxy from the North. The disconnection

13 Popular texts include *Tam tự kinh* (三字經, *Three-Character Classic*), *Tam Tự kinh chú giải bệ yếu* (三字經註解備要, *The Brief Notes of the Three Characters Classic*), *Tam thiên tự* (三千字, *Three-Thousand-Word Cannon*), *Minh tâm bửu giám* (明心寶鑑, *Precious Mirror of the Clear Heart*), *Tứ thư thể chú* (四書體注, *Ontological Notes of Four Books*), *Tứ Thư đại toàn tiết yếu* (四書大全節要, *The Brief Interpretation of Encyclopedia of the Four Books*), *Kinh thi* (詩經, *The Book of Songs*), *Kinh Xuân thu* (春秋經, *Spring and Autumn Annals*), *Ngũ Kinh tiết yếu* (五經節要, *The Brief Interpretation of Five Classics*), *Ấu học cổ sự quỳnh lâm* (幼學故事瓊林, *Book of Collecting Stories for Children's Learning*), *Ấu học thái nạp tập* (幼學採納集, *Book of Collecting Knowledges for Children*), *Trị gia cách ngôn khuyến hiếu ca* (治家格言勸孝歌, *Family Instructions and A Song to Persuade People to be Filial*), *Tiểu học gia ngôn diễn nghĩa* (小學家言演義, *The Romance of Family Instructions*), *Nhị thập tứ hiếu* (二十四孝, *Twenty-four Stories about Filial Piety*), *Gia lễ* (家禮, *Family Rituals*), *Ngọc thu lễ bộ* (玉秋禮部, *Collection of Rituals*), *Vạn bửu toàn thư* (萬寶全書, *Complete Collection of Confucian Treasures*), *Tiên thiên dịch số* (先天易數, *Book of Changes*), *Tân Quốc văn* (新國文, *New Chinese Textbooks*), etc. We did an in-depth survey at Thốt Nốt District of Cần Thơ city and got to know that rural elites such as Mr. Phạm Tôn Long (?–?) and Mr. Cao Văn Hân (1924–1999) owned many of these texts before their descendants donated them to the provincial library of An Giang in 2016.

between Vietnam and the East Asian Confucian world really limited the continuity of scholarly exchanges between the local Chinese elites in Vietnam and their partners in South China, thus affecting the spread and impact of Yangming studies of later periods. The pro-Yangming studies group in Southern Vietnam quickly died out when the French took over Saigon and forcibly applied Western educational policies. During Western colonialism, the French first put the Chinese community on the periphery, eliminating their intermediary role between Vietnam and China. Thus, unlike other colonies in Southeast Asia, where empires made full use of Chinese communities for business and relationships with the Qing dynasty, the French reduced their influence in Vietnam (Wheeler 2015, 158; Hooker 2002, 20; Sun 2014, 333). Many Confucianists left Saigon for the Mekong River Delta where they built another Temple of Literature in Vĩnh Long in 1866 to maintain their studies. A decade later, the French took over the whole Lower Mekong River Delta, creating a dead-end for Confucian education in the South. Even so, Yangming studies still remained implicitly among the local scholars. Many Western-educated elites such as Trương Vĩnh Ký (Petrus Ký 1837–1898), Trương Minh Ký (1855–1900), Huỳnh Tịnh Của (Paulus Của, 1830–1908), and so on, thanks to their deep understanding of Confucianism, started translating a number of Confucian texts into the Romanized script system (*chữ Quốc ngữ*). This strongly accelerated Ming-Qing Confucian studies among the academicians and Confucian elites in Southern Vietnam.

During the 1920s–1940s, while many Northern and Central scholars were busy with the debates on Vietnamese traditional Confucianism and national identity building (as mentioned above), the local elites in the South were quiet since they did not find the same interest in archaic forms of Confucianism. Instead, some elites in Saigon published a number of books on Wang Yangming’s philosophy. Đào Trinh Nhất was often mentioned for his publication entitled *Wang Yangming: The Promoter of the Theory of Attaining the Supreme Conscience* (致良知) and *the Unity of Knowledge and Action* (*Vương Dương Minh: người xướng ra học-thuyết tri lương-tri và tri-hành hợp nhất*, unknown publication year), followed by Phan Văn Hùm with the work *Wang Yangming: Life and Theory* (*Vương Dương Minh: thân thế và học thuyết*, reprinted 2016), Ba Xuyên with the article “Critics on Phan Văn Hùm’s book of Wang Yangming” (1949), Trần Trọng Kim with the book *Wang Yangming and the Studies of Supreme Conscience* (*Vương Dương Minh và cái học trí lương tri*, 1960), and so on. These scholars were strongly supported by a few publications and societies such as Sài Gòn Tân Việt (New Viet of Saigon) and Hội Khuyến học (Educational Promotion Society), among others. Unfortunately, Yangming studies were neglected during the Third Indochina War (1954–1975) and then the post-war period. Notably, while Confucianism was

overthrown in North Vietnam at this time, two Confucius temples were built in the South, one in Châu Đốc (An Giang province) in 1970, and another in Gò Công (Tiền Giang province) in 1974.<sup>14</sup>

In the early twenty-first century, a number of new scholars became interested in learning Yangming studies; however, what they are really investigating is New Confucianism with a significant contribution of Yangming studies in its core philosophical foundation. The Harvard-Yenching Institute plays an important role in creating and providing opportunities and academic resources to connect contemporary Confucian studies scholars in Vietnam with the world. Recently, Trần Nhân Tông Institute was established in Hanoi, which strongly encourages the new wave of Confucian studies in Vietnam.

### Multi-Directional Interactions and the Evolution of Southern Vietnamese Confucianism

It is reasonable to say that the Yangming school of Confucianism was formed and evolved through the debates that occurred among the Neo-Confucianists during Ming-Qing periods. In 1313 Zhu Xi interpreted Confucianism as an orthodox ideology, and made it the basis of civil service examinations (see Chan 1963, 654) while Wang Yangming emphasized the doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action, and “stressed the correspondence and equal importance of knowledge and action” (ibid., 656). Both these rival schools of thought have long existed among Southern Vietnamese Confucianists.

Since the 1500s, practical learning in the Yangming school of Confucianism directly generated the rise of a new literature in China and other East Asian states that transmitted the possible relationship with economic management concisely presented in the formula “order the state and save the world” (經國濟世); therefore, the Yangming spirit in economic innovation was acknowledged as a kind of “statecraft” (see further Woodside 1998b, 200). In Japan, such statecraft strongly energized the emergence of an industrializing Japan after the Meiji Revolution in 1868 (see Elman et al. 2002, 8). In Southern Vietnam, the rise of domestic market-based production and maritime trading since the early eighteenth century was an advantage for the cultivation and development of epistemological Yangming studies, but, unluckily, this wave was contested and gradually faded. Many early Minh Hương and Vietnamese scholars in Saigon-Chợ Lớn were

14 We discovered another small-scaled Temple of Literature was built in Cao Lãnh city of Đồng Tháp province; however, the history of this establishment was not recorded. Furthermore, this temple is currently abandoned.

both Confucianists and merchants. They joined the South Chinese and Southeast Asian spectrum of *rushang* (儒商, Confucian merchants), such as Chu Thuần Thủy (朱舜水, 1600–1682), Mạc Thiên Tứ (鄭天賜, 1718–1780), Trịnh Hoài Đức (鄭懷德, 1765–1825), Lý Tường Quang (李祥光, also called Bá hộ Xường, 1842–1896), Huỳnh Văn Hoa (黃文華, 1845–1901, also called Hứa Bồn Hòa), and so on. However, with the exception of Mạc Thiên Tứ, these merchants-Confucian bureaucrats did not hold high-ranking positions; they had to follow the imperial rules in facilitating the “orthodox” Vietnamese Confucianism. Furthermore, as Alexander Woodside pointed out, the Vietnamese “practical learning”, like that in China in some domains, “was under great pressure to abbreviate space in order to reconcile expanding, heterogeneous frontiers with the central metropolitan domain—whose legitimizing myth belonged to a smaller, less mobile, pre-commercial age” (Woodside 1998b, 201). Serving as bureaucrats, these men were obliged to follow the mainstream.

Since the French colonists imposed a full Western educational system in Vietnam during the second half of the nineteenth century, Confucian studies were severely damaged, especially after the fall of civic examinations (1919), when the imperial court lost its power. Discussions on the divide of national studies took place with the participation of many Confucian scholars of the early Nguyễn dynasty, such as Nguyễn Trường Tộ (阮長祚, 1830?–1871), Phạm Phú Thứ (范富恕, 1821–1882), Đặng Huy Trứ (鄧輝著, 1825–1874), Nguyễn Lộ Trạch (阮露澤, 1853?–1895), and so on. They talked about whether the Vietnamese elites should continue with traditional Confucianism or transform themselves to facilitate Western education, and whether the Vietnamese should follow the colonial policies or rise up to assert themselves. Almost all of them shared a commonality: they acknowledged the backwardness of Vietnamese Confucianism as well as the long-lasting disharmony between knowledge and action, and suggested the new motto of “Confucianism as the substance, Western studies as the function” (東體西用). Unfortunately, Emperor Tự Đức (1829–1883, reigned 1847–1883) declined to implement this innovative initiative.

However, this rejection did not have much of an effect on Southern scholars. They, being deeply influenced by Yangming studies, did not pursue engagement in civic examinations and bureaucratic appointments. Instead, they followed the concept of “self-cultivation as the root” in the *Daxue* (chapter 1) by focusing on self-cultivation and practical participation, especially in the mainstream of local economic dynamism. From the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, according to Li Tana, Vietnamese commodities were mostly purchased (by international merchants) from the South, which clearly reveals that the commodity production and commercial activities were mainly based in the southern part of the country

(see Li 2010, 96). Trịnh Hoài Đức, a prominent Minh Hương scholar, went on his business to Phnom Penh (the present-day Cambodian capital city). Mạc Thiên Tứ was known as an outstanding ruler, a Confucian scholar, and a talented trader. He organized many maritime trading fleets to sail to Japan, China, and Batavia to do business, thus making Hà Tiên a significant trading port in the eighteenth century (see Chen 2008; Li 2013). Võ Trường Toản (武長纘) and other pro-Yangming Confucianists highly appreciated the *Daxue* and the theory of knowing speech and cultivating “*qi*” (知言養氣, Tri ngôn dưỡng khí), actively bringing Confucian ideology into the reality of education and the social renaissance. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (阮廷炤, 1822–1888), another southern scholar during the early period of French colonialism, built up the character Ông Quán in his notable work *Lục Vân Tiên* in a similar way. Ông Quán, a member of the Confucian elite, did not participate in the civic examinations since he was disappointed with the Vietnamese state governance; therefore, he lived as an anchorite and opened a store to earn a living. Ông Quán was a typical Southern Confucianist who adopted and absorbed both Confucian ideology and the principles of a commodity-based economy, and struggled with economic growth and attempted to come up with justifications for profit. The local writer Ngạc Xuyên Ca Văn Thịnh found on a stone stele at Vĩnh Long Temple of Literature the fact that the term “practicality 切實” was repeatedly used in an essay dedicated to the former scholar Nguyễn Thông (阮通, 1827–1884).

This innovative idea, of “Confucianism as the substance, Western studies as the function”, remained among scholars in the early twentieth century. Kang Youwei (1858–1927), Liang Qichao (1873–1929), and later, Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) inspired local elites to get in touch with Western rationalism from the traditional Confucian standpoint. In particular, the success of the Japanese Meiji Revolution attracted many Vietnamese reformers, many of whom studied in Japan in the early twentieth century (see Woodside 1998b, 211). Phan Bội Châu (潘佩珠, 1867–1940) and Cường Để (彊樞, 1882–1951) organized the famous Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục Movement in the first decade of the twentieth century, sending a number of reformers to Tokyo. These scholars later established the Duy Tân Association (維新會) which advocated the study of the Japanese experience (especially the Meiji Revolution). These reformers went so far as to plan to replace the current young king Duy Tân (1900–1945, reigned 1907–1916) with Mr. Cường Để, another member of the royal family who had studied in Japan during the Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục period. In Southern Vietnam, Gilbert Trần Chánh Chiếu (1868–1919) and his colleagues launched the Minh Tân Movement (明新運動) and tried to connect with the Duy Tân reformers. On the other hand, some local millenarian religions, such as Bửu Sơn



Kỳ Hương,<sup>15</sup> Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa,<sup>16</sup> and Hoahaoism<sup>17</sup> in An Giang province, Caodaism<sup>18</sup> in Tay Ninh, and other popular religious movements (e.g., the Bình Xuyên group) were formed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of these set up close relationships with secret societies in both Vietnam and South China (e.g., the Thiên Địa Hội (天地會, Heaven and Earth Society)). Unfortunately, the French rulers, with the support of the Japanese Government, extinguished these movements in the second decade of the twentieth century. As a result, the initiative of transforming the Vietnamese state by applying the Japanese experience came to an end. The French government in Vietnam recognized the existing risks of progressive Japanese-Chinese philosophical thought that were being transmitted into Vietnam, so they tried to control the press and publishing industry to avoid the spread of such ideas into the political domain. This policy of the French rulers broke the traditional connection to East Asian politics and scholarly ideology, giving way for Marxism to enter Vietnam.

The pro-Yangming studies group in Southern Vietnam mainly applied some aspects of this philosophy into practical life, yet did not go further in realizing it. While Confucian scholars in China, Korea, and Japan were busy writing commentaries on Confucian classics, most of the Vietnamese Confucians dedicated their intellectual energy to the articulation of their innermost spirituality in poetic language (Duong 2004, 293), or to their socio-economic activities. Mạc Thiên Tứ's Chiêu Anh Các in Hà Tiên was not an exception to this. All the Confucianists emphasized composing poems that vividly transmitted their philosophical interest in self-cultivation of the heart-and-mind, but did not engage in developing

15 Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương is a synthetic religion founded by Đoàn Minh Huyền (1807–1856) in 1849 in Châu Đốc, An Giang province. Currently, there are around 15,000 followers in the Mekong River Delta (see more Ho Tai 1983, 20–7).

16 Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa is a synthetic religion under a branch of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương that combines Mahayana Buddhism, Linji zong (臨濟宗), Tiantai zong (天台宗), Confucianism, Taoism, ancestor worship, and patriotism. It was founded by Ngô Lợi (1831–1890) in Ba Chúc village, Tịnh Biên District, An Giang province. There are now about 80,000 followers in Southern Vietnam (see more Ho Tai 1983, 3, 12, 66).

17 Called đạo Hòa Hảo in Vietnamese and 和好教 in Chinese language, Hoahaoism was founded in 1939 by Huỳnh Phú Sổ (1919–1947) in Hòa Hảo village of An Giang province. Hoahaoism continued Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương's philosophy; however, it adjusted the structure by taking Mahayana Buddhist philosophy as the foundation and adding ancestor worship (see Ho Tai 1983, 17–19, 26–7, 125, 170).

18 Called đạo Cao Đài in Vietnamese and 高台教 in Chinese, Caodaism is a synthetic religion with five million followers founded by Ngô Văn Chiêu (1878–1932) in Tây Ninh province. Caodaism was constructed on the foundation of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, ancestor worship, Catholicism, and others (see Trần 2006; see more Ho Tai 1983, 77–8, 100; Dutton and Werner 2012, 429–30).



logical metaphysics of Confucian concepts or theories. The ending of the twentieth century witnessed many significant transformations in Vietnam (i.e., the Vietnam War 1954–1975, the Economic Collectivism Movement 1975–1986, the Reform since 1986), which did not create any space for the revitalization of Confucian studies. It is in the early twenty-first century, when Vietnamese education connected to the rest of East Asia and the Western world, that New Confucianism found its way to penetrate into Vietnamese scholarship, thanks to the connections between Vietnamese academicians and prominent scholars in East Asia and the US. As Tu Wei-ming put it, Confucian humanism has been revitalized and re-signified extraordinarily over the last few decades (Tu 1986, 3–21), and the recent introduction of New Confucianism in Vietnam shows positive signs of the scholarly incorporation of Vietnam into the world at large.

### Prominent Legacies of Qing Confucianism in Southern Vietnamese Tradition

Southern Vietnamese Confucianism possesses a number of prominent features in comparison to the classical Confucian tradition (in the North). Previously, pre-modern Vietnam was known by global researchers as a shallow and segmented Confucian state with an overwhelming emphasis on practical application and less theoretical appropriation; however, scholarship on the features of Southern Vietnamese Confucianism has been limited due to the lack of in-depth research projects focusing on this issue. Within the framework of this work we initially point out the following three prominent features.

#### (1) *Taking spiritualized Confucianism to convey Confucian studies* (Đĩ giáo bảo học, 以(儒)教保(儒)學)

The first notable feature of Southern Vietnamese Confucianism is the trend of *taking spiritualized Confucianism to convey Confucian studies*. In North and Central Vietnam, spiritualized Confucianism existed in parallel with the state-sponsored politicalized Confucianism; however, it was in Southern Vietnam that Confucian studies of all kinds came together (i.e., “orthodox” Vietnamese Confucianism, pro-Yangming studies, and Confucian ideology absorbed in local religious movements), yet none of them became the leading system, and all Confucian flows had to “take refuge” under religious domains (i.e., popular religions, newly-emerging religious movements). In other words, local religious systems were built or consolidated on the ideological foundation of Confucianism as well as of Buddhism

and Daoism. For example, the cult of Guandi (關帝, Quan Đế), the Chinese God of War (see Duara 1988, 778–95), was introduced from China a long time ago. It existed under the form of a singular public cult in North and Central Vietnam during feudal dynasties. However, in Southern Vietnam, this Vietnamese tradition of Guandi worship has not been as strong as the Guandi cult following the footsteps of Chinese immigrants from South-Eastern China. Guandi has been proclaimed to be the Martial God who stays in line with Confucius (the Literary Sage).<sup>19</sup> Guandi has been praised as a symbol of absolute loyalty, bravery, and righteousness for he conveys mostly Confucian virtues, even though Daoism and Buddhism adopted and resettled his symbolic associations.

Folk religions in Southern Vietnam, especially the endogenous religions that are constituted on the basis of combining the ideology of the Three Teachings, still occupy an important part of Confucian ideology. While the above-mentioned Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, and Hoahaoism place a strong emphasis on Buddhism, Caodaism stresses Daoism, and the Minh Đức Nho giáo Đại đạo<sup>20</sup> focuses largely on Confucianism. Often in those religions, Confucian morality calls for humanitarian cultivation because “if there is no humanitarian cultivation, there is no approach to the Heavenly Way”.<sup>21</sup> It can be seen that Confucian ideology functions as a means to associate the endogenous religions with the reality of life and practical situation in the country.

## (2) *Taking practical learning to restrain virtual learning* (Dĩ thực chế hư, 以實(學)制(約)虛(學))

The Qing practical learning that followed the Chinese immigrants into Southern Vietnam largely satisfied the local elites and commoners, since it, on the one hand, highly valued “the universally practical use” (*kinh thế chí dụng*, 經世致用), “maximizing resources to gain public welfare” (*lợi dụng hậu sinh*, 利用

19 During different field-trips to the Mekong River Delta in 2015–2017, we discovered that there were around 30 temples of popular gods/goddesses reserving a notable place for the worship of Confucius (i.e., Tianhou temple in Bạc Liêu city, Tianhou temple in Giồng Trôm district of Bến Tre province). These temples were erected by the local Chinese, while the religious communities in these places include both the Vietnamese and the ethnic Chinese.

20 It is a synthetic spiritualized sect of Confucianism founded by Lưu Cường Cáng in 1932 in Ba Động, Trà Vinh province. Its philosophy mainly revolves the Confucian concepts of “Mình đức” (明德, “to illustrate illustrious virtue”), “Tân dân” (親(新)民, “to renovate the people”), and “Chí thiện” (至善, “to rest in the highest excellence”) with a wide range of liturgical combination of Buddhism, Daoism, Caodaism, and others.

21 This verse is originally derived from the Taoist scriptures, which have been used by many sects in Vietnam to educate believers (欲修仙道, 先修人道; 人道不修, 仙道遠矣).

厚生), “learning for practical use” (*học dĩ trí dụng*, 學以致用), “seeking truth from facts” (*thực sự cầu thị*, 實事求是), and “saving the state and supporting the people” (*cứu quốc tế dân*, 救國濟民). On the other hand, it seriously criticized the Song-Ming’s Neo-Confucianism which pursued a deep structure of theoretical wisdom yet went beyond reality. They shared a common vision of bringing the Confucian ideology closer to the state’s and people’s practical interests. As a matter of fact, the Confucian elites and students in Southern Vietnam did not show any interest in participating in the civic examinations and working in the bureaucratic system.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the Nguyễn emperors had to recruit a large number of officers from the North and Central regions to work in the South. They brought with them the classical state Confucianism, and the more of these mandarins that were appointed, the more pressure local practical learning had to cope with. The gap between the state-sponsored Confucianism and practical learning thus grew larger.

In fact, the study of *statecraft* (經世之學) used to promote the state’s governing capacity might have been largely absorbed by the first emperor of the Nguyễn dynasty, Gia Long, during his journey-in-exile in the South at the end of the eighteenth century. He came to power in 1802 when he strongly supported the dynamism of commodity production and commercial activities in the South. His son, Minh Mạng (1820–1941), facilitated similar interests by implementing the policies of developing irrigation systems, trade, military innovation, national defence, science-based education, and law. The concept of *statecraft* was then spread to Confucianists, creating an atmosphere of political discussion which strongly motivated the idea of reform in Vietnam during the French colonial period.

Practical learning rejects the concept of “Mandate of Heaven”; instead, it advocates Mencius’s “theory of original goodness of human nature”. It is reasonable to conclude that the practical learning of this period aimed to encourage sainthood, advocate the learning of ancient wisdom, and appreciate the philosophies of Confucius and Mencius. This is evident in the working spirit of the Southern Vietnamese Confucianists, who loved to discuss only the practical knowledge and skills to attain morality and political ideology rather than getting engaged in deeper metaphysical generalizations and theoretical debates. It is notable that Southern Vietnamese Confucianists were interested in extracting the core ideas of the ancient sages but not the interpretation and explanations of Confucian scholars of later generations. As a result, Yangming studies were, in fact, limited due

22 Even though practical learning was introduced in both Korea and Vietnam, the two states reacted and applied in different ways. The Chinese writer Xu Yiling (2018) found that the Koreans deployed a Confucianism based on heart-and-mind, while the Vietnamese emphasized practical learning.

their pro-Yangming status in Southern Vietnam. The whole package of studies conceptualized and generalized by East Asian scholars of different periods was, again, not totally adopted.

Practical learning among Vietnamese Chinese scholars during the early periods was somehow more dramatic than that seen among the local Vietnamese elites. Yangming studies are said to be one of the core philosophical foundations for the opening and the rise of medieval trading ports such as Hội An, Cù lao Phố, Hà Tiên, and later, Sài Gòn – Chợ Lớn. Mạc Thiên Tứ, who was supported by many Qing Chinese scholars, was energetic with regard to reclaiming lands and opening commercial activities rather than making any real investments in building a metaphysical form of Confucian education under his leadership.

### (3) *Respecting the Way and ignoring fame and benefit* (Trọng đạo khinh danh, 重道輕名)

It is reasonable to conclude that the practical learning of Southern Vietnamese Confucianists formed the spirit of “disregarding bureaucratic Confucianism and imperial examinations of local elites” (see Cao 1996, 42). Instead, the Southern literati highly appreciated the capacity for self-cultivation and the individualistic merits of each Confucian scholar.

Here we come back to the case of Võ Trường Toản, a local Chinese Confucianist. He was well-known throughout the South for his virtues and aspirations as a Confucian scholar. He was not interested in the political domain, even though Emperor Gia Long invited him (many times) to work at the court. Phạm Việt Tuyền, in his notable work on Southern Vietnamese literature, considered him to be one of the two greatest Confucianists of the South, along with Mạc Thiên Tứ, who opened schools and set up Confucian institutions to educate many generations of Southern Confucian scholars (Pham 1965). Võ Trường Toản’s students followed his virtues. For instance, Ngô Tùng Châu (吳從周, 1752–1801) committed suicide by poison but did not surrender and hand over Quy Nhơn citadel to the forces of the Tây Sơn uprising. Phan Thanh Giản (潘清簡, 1796–1867) also killed himself when forced to hand over the Mekong River Delta to the French in 1867. Several Confucianists of later generations, e.g., Bùi Hữu Nghĩa (1807–1872), Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (1822–1888), and Phan Văn Trị (1830–1910), were also said to inherit Võ Trường Toản’s virtues. As the French completely controlled the Saigon region in 1862, all Confucianists moved to the Mekong River Delta and continued their scholarly careers there. Five years later, in 1867, the French forcibly took over the delta, so those Confucianists once again moved, this time to the

southern part of Central Vietnam. Having no bureaucratic title and no significant property in hand, they sacrificed their connections to their homeland and ancestral halls in order to keep their Confucian virtues and patriotism.

Many Confucianists participated in anti-French movements in Southern Vietnam. For instance, they joined Trương Định's (1820–1864) revolt in Gò Công, Nguyễn Trung Trực's (1838–1868) in Rạch Giá, Võ Duy Dương's (1827–1866) in Đồng Tháp, Trần Văn Thành's (?–1873) in An Giang, and so on. Notably, many members of the South Chinese elites and secret societies (e.g., the Heaven and Earth Society) joined the revolts since they found similar ideas and attitudes among local Confucianists. Unfortunately, the revolts were finally suppressed by the French, and the leaders and significant Confucianists were killed. However, their virtues and devotions were long-lasting in the local traditions, since students of later generations continue to learn from them in textbooks, in literary works or in artistic performances, and the people who live in their local communities are always inspired by their spirits when they participate in various memorial activities dedicated to these elites.

In sum, in comparison to the Northern Vietnamese Confucianists who pursued bureaucratic Confucianism and civic examinations, the local literati in the South were more interested in bringing practical learning to life. Having no important political positions or bureaucratic titles, their devotions have been dramatically recorded in people's heart-and-mind rather than state-sponsored history. Various forms of studies made up the pre-modern Vietnamese society and ideological education; therefore, it would be inaccurate to generalize a set of common features for Vietnamese Confucianism in all regions. Similarly, it would be wrong to claim that Southern Confucianism was “not truly Vietnamese” (as considered by some Northern Confucian scholars—see Richey 2013, 68–9). Confucianism was transmitted and adopted differently in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Similarly, Confucianism was adopted and adapted differently in North/Central and Southern Vietnam. Therefore, only a multi-dimensional and multicultural prism can function accurately and effectively when looking at Confucianism from different backgrounds.

## Conclusion

The Confucian contacts between Vietnam and China and the rest of East Asia varied in time and space. Due to the importance of the building of oppositional “boundary maintenance” by the state rulers and elites against Chinese hegemony, the Northern and then the Central Vietnamese adopted Han-Song Confucianism

from China and maintained the philosophical axis over time, thus becoming “an island” of old Confucianism compared with their East Asian counterparts. The overwhelming emphasis on the application of knowledge and the disharmony between knowledge and action did not allow the classical Vietnamese Confucian scholars to transform and develop Confucian scholarship.

Since the late seventeenth century onwards, the Chinese elites from overseas introduced into Southern Vietnam a new facet of Confucianism, Qing Confucianism, and this had remarkable impacts on the ideological foundations of the local literati. Consequently, pro-Yangming practical learning was shaped and spread locally until the beginning of Western colonialism. Unfortunately, the domination of “orthodox” classical Confucianism promoted by the bureaucrats, as well as the disregard of the state rulers, did not facilitate the circulation and evolution of Yangming studies in Vietnam.

In comparison with other non-Chinese East Asian Confucian states, Vietnam adopted and used Confucianism in its own way, one that best served the state’s practical interests and strategy. Many layers of Confucianism, different in categories, thus stacked up together, and while one may dominate it cannot completely extinguish the others. Vietnamese Confucianism has been formed by various single insertions rather than being a systematic structure as a whole, among which the moral ideology and ideology of national security are the most prominent factors. By absorbing pro-Yangming studies, Southern Vietnamese Confucianism clearly manifests such a feature, especially the fact that local Confucian scholars emphasized self-realization and self-cultivation rather than getting engaged in state-sponsored Confucianism and civic examinations.

The statement “Yangming studies have had no impact in Vietnam”, as made by certain scholars, is both accurate to some extent and inaccurate in the others. It is the truth that Yangming studies did not cultivate a state-level spectrum of influence, even though they deeply affected the ideological mentality of the local gentry and certain aspects of life in the local community in the South. The transmission, spread, contestation, and then decline of Qing Confucianism in Vietnam over the last three hundred years can function as a test case with regard to the reform-free Confucian orthodoxy in pre-modern Vietnam.



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