

The Tonkin Free School and East Asian Reformist Thought: Modernization, Texts, and Intertextuality

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This paper examines the Tonkin Free School (Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục) as a key site for the transmission and adaptation of East Asian reformist thought in early 20th-century Vietnam. Through an analysis of *Văn Minh Tân Học Sách* (New Learning Strategies for the Advancement of Civilization), it highlights how Vietnamese intellectuals engaged with and reconfigured ideas from Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927), Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929), Fukuzawa Yukichi 福澤諭吉 (1835-1901), and Zheng Guanying 鄭觀應 (1842-1922) within a localized vision of modernization. The study underscores that texts composed in Classical Chinese within the East Asian Sinosphere must be read in their original written language to fully reveal their intertextual references. Translating such texts into a non-Chinese language requires direct engagement with the original rather than reliance on intermediary versions, ensuring the preservation of intertextual richness. Without this process, translations risk distorting a text's intellectual and cultural dimensions. By reassessing the textual strategies of the Tonkin Free School and subsequent translations of *Văn Minh Tân Học Sách*, this paper highlights Vietnam's modernization as an active intellectual negotiation rather than a passive reception of foreign ideas.

Keywords: Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục (Tonkin Free School), *Văn Minh Tân Học Sách*, East Asian reformism, Vietnamese modernization, intertextuality, translation

Introduction

The intellectual landscape of early 20th-century East Asia was marked by a dynamic exchange of reformist ideas, with Classical Chinese serving as the primary medium of scholarly discourse across the region. Within this Sinosphere, texts were deeply intertextual, drawing upon a shared literary and ideological heritage that allowed for intellectual cross-pollination between China, Japan, and Vietnam. However, these intertextual dimensions are often obscured in translation, particularly when texts are mediated through intermediary versions that fail to capture their rich web of references and allusions.

This paper examines *Văn Minh Tân Học Sách* 文明新學策 (New Learning Strategies for the Advancement of Civilization, hereafter VMTHS), the principal text of the Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục 東京義塾 (Tonkin Free School), as an example of how reformist discourse was both transmitted and transformed within the East Asian

intellectual milieu. The VMTHS, originally composed in Classical Chinese, engaged with reformist ideas from figures such as Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Fukuzawa Yukichi, and Zheng Guanying. However, past translations into Vietnamese and English have largely overlooked its intertextual connections, presenting it as an isolated work rather than a product of broader East Asian intellectual currents.

Building on a new translation that restores these intertextual links, this study situates VMTHS within its historical and ideological context. By identifying its engagement with Chinese and Japanese reformist texts, this research reveals the extent to which Vietnamese intellectuals actively reconfigured foreign ideas to address local concerns. It argues that a full appreciation of VMTHS—and by extension, other Classical Chinese texts from the Sinosphere—requires a methodological approach that prioritizes direct engagement with the original text, ensuring that its intertextual dimensions are preserved in translation. In doing so, this study sheds new light on Vietnam's intellectual modernization as a process of adaptation, negotiation, and reinterpretation within the wider East Asian reformist movement.

Tonkin Free School and East Asian Intellectual Networks: A Critical Review

Modernization and reform movements in early 20th-century East Asia have been the subject of extensive scholarship. For Vietnam, David G. Marr's *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885–1925* remains a foundational study in English, although written more than half a century ago. Marr devotes an entire chapter to Tonkin Free School, describing it as “a vigorous but short-lived movement” that was at once anticolonial and anti-traditionalist.¹ Marr's research, based on French archival sources and Vietnamese writings, illuminates how the school's founders sought to transform Vietnamese society through education and the dissemination of new knowledge. He argues that although the movement lasted only from March to November 1907, it marked a significant intellectual break with the past – rejecting both French colonial authority and certain rigid Confucian conventions – in favor of new, modern ideals.² Marr noteworthyly points out that, “perhaps for the first time in Vietnam mere feeling against foreigners had been cut out-of-the political objections to colonialism, thus-rendering. Large bodies of Western learning psychologically respectable.”³ He also situates the Vietnamese reformers in a regional context, noting their awareness of Japanese and Chinese reformist literature and their adaptation of those ideas to Vietnam's circumstances.⁴

¹ David Marr, “The Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc” in *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971), pp. 156-184.

² *Ibid.*, 182.

³ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 168

Another valuable work in English is Vũ Đức Bằng (hereafter Vũ)'s article "Tonkin Free School Movement 1907–1908."⁵ It examines the establishment and ideological foundations of the school as a pioneering effort by Vietnamese Confucian scholars (such as Lương Văn Can 梁文玓 (1854–1927), Nguyễn Quyền (1869–1941)⁶ and transitional intellectuals (who grew up in Confucian tradition but "Western-oriented," such as Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh (1882–1936), Phạm Duy Tồn (1881–1924)⁷ to modernize education under French colonial rule. The school was strategically founded to align with the Protectorate Government (1883–1949)'s civilizing policies⁸ while promoting a vision of "universal modernization." This ambition was reflected in its curriculum, which emphasized concepts such as modern education, modern literature, and modern science.⁹

According to Vũ, a central theme of the movement was the integration of Western knowledge and practices as a pathway to progress. At the time, most of the population equated Westernization with subjugation to the French, but the Đông Kinh scholars sought to redefine this perception. They used their own authority as esteemed figures in Eastern traditions to advocate for a balanced appreciation of Western civilization. Rather than abandoning traditional Vietnamese and Eastern values, they selectively embraced elements of Western modernity to advance national development, exemplifying an early form of intellectual resistance within the colonial framework.¹⁰ Here, Vũ underscores the dynamic interaction between indigenous and foreign ideas in the school's curriculum—an aspect that Đặng Thai Mai had already identified over a decade earlier (see below).

For a considerable time, due to limited access to extensive reference materials—particularly from Japan—Vietnamese scholarship primarily acknowledged the influence of Chinese thought, which was introduced through publications known as "new books" from China. This recognition was largely due to the ready availability of Chinese sources. Describing the transformative impact of foreign ideas and global events on Vietnamese intellectuals at the turn of the 20th century in retrospect, the revolutionary patriot Huỳnh Thúc Kháng portrays Vietnam as a nation caught in a state of stagnation, surrounded by the overwhelming forces of Western colonialism and modernization. The First Sino-Japanese War (1894) and the Boxer Rebellion (1900) marked critical moments that allowed the influx of translated works from both Eastern and Western thinkers—such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao—as well as

⁵ Vũ Đức Bằng, "Tonkin Free School Movement 1907–1908" (1973), op.cit., pp. 30–95; see also National Archives of Japan, "Đông Du – A Political Movement to Gain Education from Japan" (2013) accessible at <https://shorturl.at/Pobnw>. In his doctoral dissertation titled "The Vietnam Independent Education Movement (1900–1908)" (University of California, Los Angeles, 1971), pp. 81–104 Vũ also reserves a chapter called "The Dong Kinh Free School" to discuss the school in its socio-political, cultural and economic contexts of the time.

⁶ Ibid., p. 37.

⁷ Ibid., p. 93, note 103.

⁸ Đặng Thai Mai, *Văn thơ cách mạng Việt Nam đầu thế kỷ XX 1900–1925*, p. 59.

⁹ Vũ Đức Bằng, "Tonkin Free School Movement, 1907–1908," p. 45.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 49–50.

revolutionary writings linked to Sun Yat-sen 孫逸仙 (1866-1925). According to Huỳnh, the exposure to those texts was akin to discovering a sudden ray of light in an otherwise dark and enclosed space for Vietnamese scholars who had already been grappling with national consciousness and a sense of urgency regarding their country's fate. The traditional system of Confucian education, centered around the imperial examination, began to lose its grip as modern concepts like "the survival of the fittest" and "human rights and freedom" took hold. However, it was Japan's victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904) that delivered the most profound jolt to Vietnamese minds. This event demonstrated that an Asian nation could successfully challenge a European power, offering both inspiration and a radical shift in perspective for those seeking a path forward for Vietnam.¹¹

The earliest monograph on Tonkin Free School, published in 1937 by Đào Trinh Nhất (1900-1951) and based on the oral history of the school's co-founder Nguyễn Quyền highlights the Vietnamese literati's rather limited access to Chinese "new books":

At that time, I came across new books written by Chinese reformist intellectuals, especially the teacher-student duo of Kang and Liang Qichao, either translated from European and American works or originally composed, such as Liang's *Zhongguo Hun* 中國魂 (*The Soul of China*), or John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*.¹² I read them with such passion that I forgot to eat and sleep.

The more I read, the more I realized how absurd and outdated our system of rote learning and imperial examinations was—it was only natural that we were a lost nation.

From that moment on, I was determined to use Quốc văn (the national language) and modern knowledge to awaken my fellow countrymen.¹³

Similarly, while acknowledging the influence of Japan's Meiji Restoration (1868-1889), Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War, and the backing of prominent Japanese figures—such as Inukai Tsuyoshi 犬養毅 (1855–1932) and Ōkuma Shigenobu 大隈重信 (1838–1922)—in the founding of Tonkin Free School movement, Nguyễn Hiến Lê (1912-1984), in his study of the school, first published in 1956 and later revised and reprinted in 1968 in Saigon during the period of national division, attributed the primary reformist inspiration for Vietnamese literati to Chinese sources. He emphasized the works of Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, rather than Japanese influences, as the main intellectual foundation for the movement.

¹¹ Huỳnh Thúc Kháng, *Bức thư bí mật của cụ Huỳnh Thúc Kháng trả lời cụ Kỳ Ngoại Hầu Cường Để năm 1943* (The secret letter from Huỳnh Thúc Kháng in response to Kỳ Ngoại Hầu Cường Để in 1943), (Huế: Anh Minh, 1957), p. 36.

¹² This is, in fact, Yan Fu's 嚴復 Chinese translation of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, first published in 1903.

¹³ Đào Trinh Nhất, *Tonkin Free School* (Hanoi: Mai Lĩnh, 1937), p. 9.

Because our movement began after China's, we naturally learned from their experiences and were influenced by them to some extent—the scholars of Tonkin Free School had read the books and newspapers of Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao. However, we had our own unique circumstances and pursued our own direction.

Kang and Liang still sought cooperation with the Qing 清 dynasty (1636-1912)—specifically with Emperor Guangxu 光緒帝 (1871-1908)—whereas the scholars of Tonkin Free School refused to collaborate with the Nguyễn dynasty (1802-1945), to the point of almost disregarding the government of Nguyễn dynasty entirely. (...) And despite living under the brutal colonial regime, these scholars never cooperated with the colonizers, maintaining an unyielding stance that even earned the respect of the colonial authorities.

Kang and Liang called for the abolition of the imperial examination system and the elimination of eight-legged essays 八股文 in exams, but they still preserved classical literature. It was not until 1917 that figures like Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1962) and Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879-1942) proposed the use of Baihua 白話 (vernacular Chinese). Meanwhile, as early as 1907, the scholars of Tonkin Free School had already advocated for the use of Quốc ngữ (the Romanized Vietnamese script), employing it as a means to enlighten the people, translating books into Quốc ngữ, and composing poetry to awaken their compatriots.¹⁴

Tonkin Free School obviously took advantage of the availability of “new books” in the nation and integrate them into its curriculum. In his seminal work *Văn thơ cách mạng Việt Nam đầu thế kỷ XX 1900-1925* (Vietnamese Revolutionary Prose and Poetry at the Beginning of the 20th Century) first published in 1961, Đặng Thai Mai emphasized the crucial role of the school's editorial board. Although the school was only active for a few months, it managed to distribute a substantial number of books and materials. Various textbooks, written in both Classical Chinese and Quốc ngữ, were compiled by its editorial team. According to Nguyễn Quyền, the school's principal, some publications had to be printed in the tens of thousands. Additionally, the school acquired a significant collection of “new books” from China to provide for local readers. Its editorial and printing division also translated and republished revolutionary poetry from progressive Confucian scholars of the time.¹⁵

One year after his initial study on the school in English, Vũ Đức Bằng published another two-part article written in Vietnamese in 1974 and 1975, examining the school as the first private university in modern Vietnam and assessing its curriculum as well as the challenges of textbook compilation.¹⁶ Vũ clearly highlights the significant disparity between the model established by Japan's Keio University and its adaptation within the context of early 20th-century colonial Vietnam: “When introducing the

¹⁴ Nguyễn Hiến Lê, *Tonkin Free School*, 2nd edition, (Saigon: Lá Bối, 1968), “Preface” for the second edition, no page numbers.

¹⁵ Đặng Thai Mai, *Văn thơ cách mạng Việt Nam đầu thế kỷ XX 1900-1925*, p. 59.

¹⁶ Vũ Đức Bằng, “Đại học tư lập đầu tiên tại Việt Nam hiện đại” (The First Private University in Modern Vietnam), *Tư tưởng*, 12 (1974): 103-115; and 2 (1975): 142-163.

Keio model into Vietnam, the founding scholars were well aware that it was only partially suitable. This was due, first, to the stark disparity in the current state of public knowledge and intellectual development between the Vietnamese and Japanese populations. Second, there was a significant gap between the available resources and the objectives they sought to achieve. Lastly, and no less important than the previous two factors, its implementation was also dependent on the French colonial administration's policies in Vietnam."¹⁷ On the other hand, Vũ reminds readers of how Vietnamese elites of the time learn from the West through the filters of their East Asian counterparts:

Receiving the West through an indirect model, Vietnam had to view it through the perspectives of China and Japan. Their all-too-familiar names, such as Rousseau (1712-1778), Montesquieu (1689-1755), Descartes (1596-1650), Darwin (1809-1882), Adam Smith (1723-1790), Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), and Socrates (470 BCE-399 BCE), were transformed, in that order, into Lư Thoa (Lu Suo 盧梭), Mạnh Đức Tư Cưu (Meng De Si Jiu 孟德斯鳩), Địch Tap Nhi (Di Ka er 笛卡爾), Đạt Nhĩ Văn (Da er Wen 達爾文), Tư Mật Á Đan (Yadang Simi 亞當·斯密), Tư Tân Tắc Nhĩ (Hebote Sibinsai 赫伯特·斯賓塞), and Tô Cách Lạp Đề (Sugeladi 蘇格拉底). Not only were the names of Western authors heavily distorted in pronunciation and form, but their ideas were also not necessarily presented accurately. (...) This is not particularly surprising, as even great reformist scholars like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao did not have a direct and thorough understanding of the West. (...)

In contrast, the Japanese had long been aware that it was precisely Western thought that had given them an advantage over the East in every aspect. Because of this, they saw the direct and authentic reception of Western ideas as an urgent task. Japan actively promoted, by all means, the dissemination and translation of works written in the “barbaric” European and American languages. The most influential figure leading the effort to understand Western thought during the Meiji era (1868-1912) was none other than Fukuzawa Yukichi, the founder of Keio University.

In short, Japan, the young student of the West, was regarded as the ideal “same-race, same-script” mentor for Vietnamese scholars in their pursuit of European and American civilization. Furthermore, in terms of efforts to absorb Western thought and the policies of dissemination and translation, Japan was seemingly far ahead of both China and Vietnam. The translations of Yan Fu 嚴復 (1853–1921), the most meticulous Chinese translator of his time, did not reach Vietnam until at least after 1898.

Moreover, aside from Yan Fu, who was proficient in English, many other Chinese scholars contributed to an inaccurate understanding of the West among Vietnamese intellectuals due to their reliance on what was known as “aural translation.” They merely needed to “hear a rough summary” of a work and then “expand upon it,” rather than possessing the ability to directly engage with the complexities of a

¹⁷ Ibid., 12 (1974): 110.

foreign language. This issue applied not only to Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao but also to renowned popular translators like Lin Shu 林紓 (1852–1924).¹⁸

The above-cited observations reveal the intellectual journey of Western theories through Japan, China, and Vietnam, and this demonstrates the intricate process of transmission, adaptation, and localization within East Asia. Japan, as the initial recipient, actively engaged with and modified Western thought, passing its interpretations to China, where they were further mediated and transformed. Vietnam, as the final recipient, assimilated these ideas within its own historical and cultural context, leading to a distinctively localized intellectual framework. This interconnected intellectual history underscores the dynamic exchanges among East Asian nations, revealing not only the movement of ideas but also the creative adaptations that enabled these theories to take root in different socio-political contexts. The study of these intellectual flows offers valuable insights into how knowledge is transformed across cultures, highlighting the enduring interconnections that have shaped East Asian thought and modernization.

Although Chương Thâu (1935–2025) dedicates a short section titled “*Tân Thư – Tân văn*” (“*New Books, Newspapers*”) in his seminal 1982 monograph on Tonkin Free School—clearly defining these terms, tracing their origins to Western thought as translated primarily through Japan, and acknowledging their profound influence on patriotic intellectuals such as Phan Bội Châu (1867–1940), Phan Châu Trinh (1872–1926), Nguyễn Thượng Hiền (1865–1925), Nguyễn Quyền (1869–1941), and Lương Văn Can (1854–1927)¹⁹—his study largely adheres to the prevailing research trends of scholars in socialist North Vietnam.²⁰ According to Chương Thâu, “Tonkin Free

¹⁸ Vũ Đức Bằng, “Đại học tư lập đầu tiên tại Việt Nam hiện đại,” *Tư tưởng*, 2 (1975): 147–148.

¹⁹ Chương Thâu, *Tonkin Free School và Phong trào cải cách văn hoá đầu thế kỷ XX* (Tonkin Free School and the Cultural Reform Movement at the Early 20th Century), (Hanoi: Hà Nội Publishing House, 1982), p. 24: “*Tân Thư* is a rather broad term referring to books that contain new knowledge/learning (*tân học*), as opposed to the old knowledge/learning (*cựu học*) found in Confucian classics. (...) Most of these books were translations of Western works. In some cases, they were not translated directly from Western languages but through Japanese. Sometimes, only the fundamental ideas were summarized, with the primary goal being to introduce “Western civilization,” highlight its features, and promote imitation and reform. Thus, New Books became closely associated with reformist and modernization movements influenced by Western bourgeois thought in late 19th-century China. (...) These new books and newspapers had a profound impact on many patriotic intellectuals of the time. (...) It can be said that most of the Vietnamese patriots who later became key figures in movements such as the Duy Tân [Modernization Movement], Đông Du [Go East Movement], and Tonkin Free School were, in their early years, to some extent ‘enlightened’ by these passionate literary and poetic works.” This work is reprinted in Chương Thâu, *The Tonkin Free School and Its Prose and Poetry*, 2 vol., (Hanoi: Hà Nội Publishing House, 2010): vol. 1, pp. 29–164.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 8–9: “The issue of the Tonkin Free School received significantly more attention from researchers in socialist North Vietnam than in the South. (...) Through discussions, historians reached a consensus on several key points: the organization and leadership of the movement were led by progressive patriotic Confucian scholars, often referred to as ‘Confucian scholars in the process of bourgeois transformation.’ The movement itself was characterized as having a bourgeois (national democratic) nature, though it was not entirely radical.”

School demonstrated the impact of bourgeois ideology and progressive thought on the emergence and development of the early 20th-century revolutionary movement. It also played a role in guiding the struggle against reactionary and conservative forces that sought to hinder historical progress. Although these new ideas did not yet form a fully developed theoretical system, they still resonated with the aspirations and concerns of the oppressed masses, who were living in darkness under the heavy yoke of imperialist and feudal rule.”²¹ This research perspective remained dominant in Vietnamese academia for decades, persisting well into the early 21st century. And as a result, it pays little attention to the broader East Asian intellectual networks.

Borrowing, Adapting, and Rewriting: The School’s Principal Textbooks in Classical Chinese

Tonkin Free School played a crucial role in shaping modern Vietnamese intellectual discourse by leveraging a unique transnational approach to education. One of its most distinctive practices was the borrowing and subtle revision of Chinese texts, a process that blurred the lines between adaptation and originality. This method, while fostering the rapid dissemination of knowledge, also contributed to later misunderstandings of Vietnamese intellectual history, as readers often assumed these works were authored by Vietnamese scholars. However, this practice aligned with the prevailing East Asian intellectual tradition encapsulated in the expression “All under heaven belongs to the public” 天下為公, which permitted the free use of intellectual works without accusations of plagiarism. Additionally, the continued reliance on Classical Chinese as a medium for introducing Western ideas into colonial Vietnamese society significantly influenced the reception and reinterpretation of these concepts. This multilayered process not only facilitated the transmission of new knowledge but also shaped the ways in which reformist ideas were contextualized within Vietnamese thought. By bridging traditional and modern currents, Tonkin Free School linked Vietnam to broader East Asian reformist movements while simultaneously cultivating a distinct national consciousness. The examination of the school’s principal textbooks written in Classical Chinese allows us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their place within the intellectual world of the Sinosphere. Below are some preliminary research results coming out from my studies on the school’s adaptation of textbooks originally from China and Japan in general, and on specific works, including the *Tân Định Luân Lý Giáo Khoa Thư* 新訂倫理教課書 (*Newly Edited Ethics Textbook*) and *Quốc dân Độc bản* 國民讀本 (*Citizen’s Reader*) in particular.

Political Thought and the Role of *Tân Thư* (New Books)

²¹ Ibid., p. 98.

In *Traveling Knowledge: Publications from Japan and China in Early Twentieth-Century Vietnam*,²² I explore the impact of New Books imported from Japan and China on Vietnamese intellectual history. These texts introduced sociopolitical concepts such as democracy, civilization, and national independence, playing a crucial role in Vietnam's struggle against French colonial rule. While some New Books were officially classified and preserved, others were banned due to their association with reformist and anti-colonial ideologies. I argue that Vietnam, as the final recipient of these traveling ideas, experienced an indirect but profound engagement with modernity through Chinese translations of Japanese works. The study further distinguishes between sanctioned New Books—which dealt with scientific and technical subjects—and those that were censored for advocating political transformation. Through this analysis, I demonstrate how transnational knowledge exchange fueled anti-colonial movements and reinforced Vietnam's intellectual connections with East Asia.

Moral Education and the Adaptation of Ethical Textbooks

In *Traveling Ethics Textbooks in East Asia*,²³ I adopt a transnational perspective to examine how ethical education moved between Japan, China, and Vietnam at the turn of the 20th century. The study focuses on *Chūgaku Rinrishi* 中學倫理書 (*Ethics for Middle School*, 1899), a Japanese ethics textbook institutionalized to reinforce nationalism and loyalty to the emperor. This textbook was later adapted in China as *Lunli Jiaoke Fanben* 倫理教課範本 (*Moral Education Textbook*, 1906) and in Vietnam as *Tân Định Luân Lý Giáo Khoa Thư* 新訂倫理教課書 (*Newly Edited Ethics Textbook*, 1907). While Japan utilized this moral education to foster national unity, China reframed it to support modernization efforts, and Vietnam repurposed it as a tool for nationalist aspirations under colonial rule. These adaptations were not mere translations but strategic rewritings that reflected each society's ideological and political needs, illustrating the dynamic evolution of ethical discourse across East Asia.

In the same vein, in *All Under Heaven Belongs to the Public: Rereading Tân Định Luân Lý Giáo Khoa Thư in the Context of Early 20th-Century East Asia*,²⁴ I examine the broader implications of ethical education in the region. I argue that the adaptation of *Tân Định Luân Lý Giáo Khoa Thư* in Vietnam exemplifies the fluidity of authorship and intellectual property in early modern East Asia, where texts were freely modified

²² Nguyễn Nam, "Traveling Knowledge: Publications from Japan and China in Early Twentieth-Century Vietnam" in *Japanese Studies Around the World* 世界の日本研究 (2021), pp. 10–27.

²³ Nguyễn Nam, "Traveling Ethics Textbooks in East Asia at the End of the 19th and the Beginning of the 20th Centuries" 「19 世紀末から 20 世紀初頭にかけて東アジアの旅行倫理教科書」, 『上智大学教育学論集』 51 (March 2017), pp. 67–78.

²⁴ Nguyễn Nam, "Thiên hạ vi công: Đọc lại Tân định Luân lý Giáo khoa thư trên bối cảnh Đông Á đầu thế kỷ 20" (All under Heaven Belongs to the Public: Rereading Tân định luân lý giáo khoa thư 新訂倫理教科書 in the East Asian Context of the Early Twentieth Century), *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu và Phát triển* (Journal of Research and Development), vol. 5, 122 (2015): 121–141.

across borders. The Vietnamese version strategically removed Japanese references and reframed ethical principles to align with nationalist ideals, reinforcing civic responsibility and patriotism. I introduce the concepts of misreading 誤讀 and misinterpretation 誤解 to explain how texts, while appropriated and localized, also transformed in meaning. This study underscores the role of ethical education in shaping modern national identities and demonstrates how moral philosophy textbooks functioned as ideological instruments within East Asian intellectual history.

Borrowing, Rewriting, and the Quốc Dân Độc Bản (*Citizen's Reader*)

Another key aspect of my research is the influence of Chinese educational materials on Vietnamese textbooks. In my study on Quốc Dân Độc Bản, I examine its direct connection to Guomin Duben 國民讀本 (1903), a Chinese textbook that itself drew from Japanese and Western sources. The *Quốc Dân Độc Bản* was instrumental in introducing modern concepts of citizenship, national identity, and governance to Vietnamese readers. By tracing its transformation, I highlight the concept of *du hành tỉnh tại* (traveling in place),²⁵ whereby Vietnamese intellectuals engaged in an imagined journey of knowledge acquisition through foreign texts without firsthand exposure. The study challenges traditional assumptions about the originality of Vietnamese modernist thought, emphasizing the strategic adaptation of transnational ideas to serve local educational and political needs.

By providing readers with a brief overview of Tonkin Free School's principal textbooks written in Classical Chinese, I hope to lay the foundation for exploring the intertextuality of its manifesto, *VMTHS*, which further shaped Vietnam's reformist thought and educational strategies.

The Intertextuality's Turn: Vietnamese and English Translations of *VMTHS*

Intertextuality is a crucial factor when analyzing texts written in the same language, as it enables scholars to uncover and reconstruct the web of references, allusions, and intellectual exchanges that shape literary and cultural traditions. In line with Bakhtin, Kristeva claims, "Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another."²⁶ When texts share a linguistic framework, they inherently engage with prior works through citations, stylistic echoes, thematic resonances, and ideological dialogues. These intertextual connections allow for a richer understanding of the historical, social, and political dimensions of a given

²⁵ *Traveling in place*: This concept closely aligns with *ngoạ du* 臥遊, which can be understood as a type of imagined travel. When physical travel is not possible, one can experience distant places vicariously through paintings, travelogues, pictures, and other materials. This expression is notably employed in the *VMTHS*.

²⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, L. S. Roudiez, ed., T. Gora, A. Jardine, & L. S. Roudiez, trans., (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), p. 64.

discourse, as each text builds upon, responds to, or even subverts the ideas of its predecessors.

However, when a text is read in translation, it is largely severed from its native intertextual matrix. Translations inevitably filter the original meaning through the lens of another language and culture, often obscuring references that would be immediately recognizable to a native reader. This loss is particularly detrimental when examining texts that were once obscure or forgotten in their original language but have resurfaced in translation. As Roland Barthes highlights, “The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.”²⁷ Thus, in translation, the reader assumes an even greater role in interpreting and reconstructing intertextual references, yet the process is inevitably shaped by a different cultural and linguistic framework.

The idea of translation distorting the original intertextual network is explored by Antoine Berman, who identifies a set of “deforming tendencies” that impact translated texts, including rationalization, clarification, expansion, and ennoblement. These tendencies often strip away the stylistic and cultural particularities that tie a text to its original intertextual environment.²⁸ In extreme cases, this process results in the “domestication” of foreign elements, where intertextual references are either removed or replaced by equivalent elements from the target culture, further severing the text from its original literary network.

Similarly, Gideon Toury’s “translation norms” explain why translators adapt intertextual references to fit the cultural expectations of their audience, often at the cost of historical and literary continuity. According to Toury, translations operate within predefined cultural constraints, leading to a shift in meaning and context that distances the translated text from its original discourse.²⁹ This process contributes to cultural displacement, where references that once had clear significance within the original literary tradition become obscure or even meaningless in translation.

Furthermore, Lawrence Venuti expands on these ideas, critiquing how translation practices in the West favor fluency and transparency at the expense of intertextual depth. Venuti argues that translators are often pressured to make texts “invisible”, stripping them of their foreignness and thus erasing intertextual references that may seem unfamiliar to the target audience.³⁰ This results in a homogenized text that, while accessible to a wider readership, lacks the intricate network of citations, allusions, and cultural echoes present in the original.

As Kristeva asserts, “The text is therefore a productivity, and this means: first, that its relationship to the language in which it is situated is redistributive (destructive-

²⁷ Roland Barthes, trans. by Sl. Heath, *Image, Music, Text.*, (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 148.

²⁸ Antoine Berman, “Translation and the Trials of the Foreign” in L. Venuti, ed., *The Translation Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 287.

²⁹ Gideon Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies – and Beyond*, rev. ed., (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2012), pp. 76-77.

³⁰ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 17.

constructive), and hence can be better approached through logical categories rather than linguistic ones; and second, that it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another.”³¹ In this sense, translation is not merely a reproduction of meaning but a transformation that reconstructs the intertextual relationships of the original text within a new linguistic and cultural framework. While this process grants texts access to new audiences, it simultaneously alters their intertextual matrix, reshaping their meanings in ways that may diverge significantly from the original discourse.

Although regarded as the school’s manifesto and action plan, *VMTHS*, written in Classical Chinese, had to wait nearly four decades for its first Vietnamese translation in manuscript form, completed in 1957. Since 1936, Mai Lâm (also known as Hoa Bằng) Hoàng Thúc Trâm (1902–1977) had been collecting documents and conducting interviews with individuals who had either contributed to the establishment of Tonkin Free School or participated in its operations. By 1945, after amassing substantial materials, he completed a book manuscript titled *Tonkin Free School* under the pen name Mai Lâm. Unfortunately, this manuscript was entirely lost during the First Indochina War. However, Mai Lâm did not abandon his research on the school. In 1957, after gathering additional materials, he completed another book manuscript under the same title, *Tonkin Free School*, this time under the name Hoa Bằng. Sadly, this manuscript has never been officially published and remains largely unnoticed in the library of the Institute of Literature in Hanoi.

In 2022, thanks to Dr. Trần Hải Yến’s discovery, the manuscript resurfaced, offering new insights into the school and its historical context.³² Interestingly, in the 1957 manuscript, Hoa Bằng included several modern Vietnamese translations of the school’s literature, including various textbooks. Among them, unsurprisingly, is *VMTHS*. A comparison between Hoa Bằng’s translation of *VMTHS* and its original Classical Chinese version reveals the translator’s effort to present a modern reading of the text—one that is accessible to contemporary Vietnamese readers yet does not

³¹ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, p. 37.

³² Trần Huy Liệu’s *Lịch sử tám mươi năm chống Pháp* (History of Eighty Years of Resistance Against the French), (Hanoi: Ban Nghiên cứu Văn Sử Địa, 1956) has a chapter titled “Tonkin Free School thành lập và Ảnh hưởng của nó” (The Establishment of Tonkin Free School and Its Impacts) that is based on the 1936 unpublished manuscript (142, note 3). In his manuscript’s preface written in Hanoi in 1957, Hoa Bằng recalls, “To write about Tonkin Free School, including its history, literature, and key figures, since 1936, in addition to collecting documents from books and newspapers, I also sought out and inquired directly with key individuals who had founded or participated in Tonkin Free School, such as Lê Đại, Hoàng Tăng Bí, Nguyễn Hữu Cầu, and Đàm Xuyên Nguyễn Phan Lăng, among others. // By 1945, having gathered a relatively complete set of materials, I compiled them into a book titled *Tonkin Free School*, under the pen name Mai Lâm. However, before I could publish it, war broke out, and as a result, both the manuscript and its author were each swept away in different directions by the tide of events. // Twelve years have passed. Over time, I have continued to collect more materials. Now, in order to contribute to the available references on Vietnamese modern history and literature, I have revised and published this book, *Tonkin Free School*, hoping to receive constructive feedback from dear friends near and far.”

consistently trace back to its referential sources (some of which may have been unknown to him). The translation includes thirty-one footnotes, mostly explanatory, but without clear references to intertextual sources that could offer further insights into the text's historical and intellectual connections.

In the introduction to his Vietnamese translation of *VMTHS*, first published in 1961, Đặng Thai Mai noted:

In 1953, a portion of *VMTHS* was translated into the national language by the Editorial Committee of the Ministry of Education. We have based our work on the printed edition from French School of the Far East to compare and revise certain parts to align with the original meaning, add translations for omitted sections, and provide annotations where necessary.³³

However, a comparison between Hoa Bàng's and Đặng Thai Mai's translations suggests that the latter may have, to some extent, been influenced by the former. Compared to its predecessor(s), Đặng Thai Mai's translation is more refined, detailed, and readable. However, it includes only 47 primarily explanatory footnotes. Although both Vietnamese translations of *VMTHS* are based on the original Classical Chinese text, they omit several significant phrases and expressions that could shed light on its intertextual relationships. Consequently, these translations present *VMTHS* as an isolated work, overlooking its engagement with broader East Asian intellectual currents and its connections within intertextual networks.

To date, *VMTHS* has been translated into English twice: first, in 2000, as a full translation titled *A New Method to Study Civilization* by Trương Bửu Lâm, and later, in 2012, as an abridged version titled *A Civilization of New Learning* by Jayne Werner and Luu Doan Huynh.³⁴ In his introductory remarks, Trương Bửu Lâm briefly acknowledges that *VMTHS* was used as a textbook at the private educational institution Tonkin Free School. He further contextualizes the school's publications, noting that it "published classical Vietnamese texts at the same time as it introduced from China philosophical and/or political works written by Western scholars such as Voltaire, Locke, Hobbes, and Montesquieu."³⁵ Similarly, Werner and Luu Doan Huynh situate their translation within its historical context, stating, "In the wake of the failure of the Cần Vương movement(1885-1889), Tonkin Free School advocated a "new learning" based on Western educational models in order to compete successfully with the West."³⁶ Both English translations share several key characteristics. First, rather than being translated directly from Classical Chinese, both are based on Đặng Thai Mai's

³³ Đặng Thai Mai, *Văn thơ cách mạng Việt Nam đầu thế kỷ XX 1900-1925*, p. 159.

³⁴ "A New Method to Study Civilization" in Trương Bửu Lâm, *Colonialism Experienced – Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism, 1900-1931* (MI: University of Michigan, 2000), pp. 141-156; and Jayne Werner and Luu Doan Huynh, trans., Tonkin Free School, "A Civilization of Learning" in George E. Dutton, Jayne S. Werner, and John K. Whitmore, eds., *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 369-375.

³⁵ Trương Bửu Lâm, *Colonialism Experienced*, p. 141.

³⁶ George E. Dutton, Jayne S. Werner, and John K. Whitmore, eds., *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, p. 369.

Vietnamese translation, making them instances of indirect translation. As a result, errors in the Vietnamese translation are carried over into the English versions, sometimes leading to further misinterpretations.³⁷ Additionally, both translations contain very few explanatory footnotes—18 in Trương Bửu Lâm’s and only 2 in Werner and Luu Doan Huynh’s—offering little to no discussion of *VMTHS*’s intertextual connections within East Asian intellectual networks.

In sum, the fundamental issue with the English translations of *VMTHS* lies in their source text. They are all based on a modern Vietnamese translation rather than the original Classical Chinese. This creates a significant barrier, as contemporary Vietnamese readers have no direct access to the original text, and their limited proficiency in Classical Chinese prevents them from fully grasping its depth and complexity.

A text composed in Chinese within the East Asian Sinosphere must be read in its original written language to fully reveal its intertextual references. Classical Chinese texts exist within a dense web of allusions, idioms, and historical resonances that are integral to their meaning. Translating such a text into another language—especially one outside the linguistic traditions of the Sinosphere—risks obscuring or severing these intertextual connections. While translation facilitates accessibility, it also disrupts the intricate network of cultural and intellectual references that define a text’s significance within its historical and literary context. If a Chinese text from the Sinosphere must be translated into a non-Chinese language, the translation must not merely be a rendition of an intermediary version but rather the translator’s direct engagement with the original Chinese text. The translator must uncover all possible intertextual references and consciously carry them over into the new translation, ensuring that it preserves the intertextual richness of the source text. Without this

³⁷ Here is an example. When discussing civil service examination reforms in Vietnam, the *VMTHS* employs the phrase *mại tính chi vi* 賣姓之圍. Based on Đặng Thai Mai’s Vietnamese translation, Trương Bửu Lâm renders it as “selling your name,” explaining that students often took examinations on behalf of others—a phenomenon referred to as “selling one’s name.” Another form of this practice involved cheating on the exam (155, note 13). In contrast, Jayne Werner and Luu Doan Huynh omit the phrase in their translation.

Both extant woodblock-printed and handwritten copies of *VMTHS* contain the character *vi/wei* 圍, which may be an alternative form of 關, meaning “doors of the palace.” This character frequently appears in terms related to the civil service examination. Notably, Giles’ *English-Chinese Dictionary* records *weixing* 關姓 as “examination names, a form of lottery on the names of successful competitors.” This refers to a popular betting pool in China, in which people wagered on the surnames of top scorers in local and national examinations (*weixing* 關姓) (Koos Kuiper, 2017). *The Early Dutch Sinologists (1854-1900): Training in Holland and China, Functions in the Netherlands Indies* (2 vols.), (Leiden; Boston: Brill), vol. 2, p. 856, note 5. This practice lasted for several decades but ended with the abolition of the civil service examination in China in 1905. Reports on such betting pools appeared in Chinese newspapers, which may have been imported and circulated in Vietnam. The *VMTHS* likely cited this phenomenon as a striking example to critique the outdated civil service examination system in both China and Vietnam. Given this context, *mại tính chi vi* should be translated as “the Palace doors of ‘selling names.’”

critical process, the translation risks distorting the text's intellectual and cultural dimensions.

The case of *VMTHS* underscores the necessity of engaging directly with original texts to preserve their intertextual depth. Only by doing so can scholars fully reconstruct the intellectual networks that shaped historical and cultural transformations. Rereading *VMTHS* in its original Classical Chinese allows us to trace the complex web of ideas that linked Vietnam, China, Japan, Europe, and the United States—revealing the intellectual interactions that fostered new ideologies and revolutionary thought in response to colonial domination.

A Call for Vietnamese Modernization

The *VMTHS*, originally published in 1904, is a reformist text that presents a compelling case for the modernization of Vietnam. It argues that văn minh 文明 (civilization) is not an abstract ideal but an ongoing, dynamic process that requires active participation and the enlightenment of the people. The text asserts that civilization is built upon intellectual progress and competition, emphasizing that nations advance only when they continuously engage in learning and innovation: “We humbly think that civilization is a beautiful term that cannot be adequately served by static flowery words of embellishments without ongoing active participation. Studies for advancing civilization bring people happiness, but one cannot acquire civilization overnight.” 【1a】³⁸

The text further contends that intellectual stagnation leads to national decline, reinforcing the idea that progress and competition are interconnected, “A Western scholar once said, ‘Civilization is purchased not only because of its values, but also by pains.’ What are the values? They are thoughts. What are the pains? They are competitions. The more people think, the more they compete with one another. The more they compete against each other, the more they think.” 【1a-1b】³⁹ This perspective reflects a social Darwinist view of global progress, in which nations must compete intellectually, economically, and technologically to survive and thrive. The text acknowledges that different societies exist at varying levels of development,

³⁸ All citations in this section are from Anonymous, *Văn Minh Tân Học Sách* 文明新學策—*New Learning Strategies for the Advancement of Civilization*, 1904 (New Annotated Translation), translated and annotated by Nguyễn Nam, Nichibunken (International Research Center for Japanese Studies), 2021. It is translated directly from the woodblock-printed text reproduced in Chương Thân (2010). *Tonkin Free School và Văn thơ Tonkin Free School* (The Tonkin Free School and Its Prose and Poetry), op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 203-242. The Chinese origin of the citation reads, 文明美名也非粉飾可以致之文明諸學幸福也非旦夕可以得之 (p. 205). The numbers in the special brackets 【 】 refer to the English translation's numbering on the same text.

³⁹ 西儒言曰文明者非徒購之以價值而已,又購之以苦痛.何謂價值思想是也.何謂苦痛競爭是也.愈思想則愈競爭,愈競爭則愈思想. (pp. 205-206).

categorizing them as barbarian, semi-civilized, or fully civilized, based on the extent to which their people have been intellectually enlightened. 【1a】⁴⁰

However, the document laments that Vietnam, despite its rich history, has fallen into a state of decline due to its failure to adapt to changing times. It describes how the country, once prosperous and self-sufficient, has become economically dependent on foreign nations, with its natural resources exploited by external powers: “Precious resources preserved in mountains and forests are no longer in our possession. The rights over the benefits of myriad wealth and goods are no longer in our hands.” 【2a】⁴¹

The text goes on to enumerate the vast array of goods that Vietnam now imports from China and the West, including textiles, tools, and even basic necessities such as soap and matches. 【2a-2b】⁴² This economic dependency is framed as a symptom of Vietnam’s broader failure to modernize its industries and develop domestic production capabilities. Beyond economic concerns, the text criticizes the cultural stagnation that has taken root in Vietnamese society. It describes how people, instead of engaging in intellectual or industrial pursuits, waste their time on trivial entertainment: “People now indulge in lutes and flutes, pitch-pot games, playing cards, board games, poetic word games, word gambles, astrology, divination, geomancy, or talismans, setting their mind for daily jobs in useless things.” 【3a】⁴³

The ruling elite is also faulted for obstructing progress, as they discourage the acquisition of new knowledge out of fear that modernization will threaten their authority. The document provides a striking example of this resistance: “A dignitary told his juniors, ‘If you want to become mandarins, be cautious: do not read new books and newspapers’” 【3b】⁴⁴ It frames this reluctance to embrace change as the primary reason why Vietnam remains static while other nations continue to evolve: “Examining our civilization, we can see that it has always been static, but European civilization as such always dynamic.” 【3b】⁴⁵

⁴⁰ 地球之有國也若者為野蠻若者為半開若者為文明每視乎民智之通塞多寡遲速為比例差。(p. 205).

⁴¹ 或山林寶藏利源非我有也財貨百物利權非我操也。(p. 207).

⁴² From silk and satin, cotton and felt, cloth and brocade, shoes and socks, handkerchiefs, eye glasses, umbrellas 把遮傘, petrol 燈火油, porcelain, crystals, enamel, watches 鐘錶, barometers 風雨針, thermometers 寒暑表, telephones 德律風, microscopes 顯微鏡, photos 炤相片 to stationaries, cinnabar ink, needles and threads, buttons, pigments, 【2b】 soap, perfume 花露, matches, steamed bread, candies, medicines, cigarettes 巴菰煙, opium 芙蓉烟, tea, wine, all kinds of commodities are purchased either from the North (China) or from the West (France): 綢緞絨壇布帛鞋襪手巾眼鏡把遮傘燈火油磁器玻璃瓊鐘錶風雨針寒暑表德律風顯微鏡炤相片以及避險筆箋硃墨絨線鈕釦顏料肥皂花露燐鑽饅頭糕糖菓品藥材巴菰烟芙蓉烟茶酒諸貨項不購之北則資之西.(pp. 207-208).

⁴³ 彼琴而笛而投壺而葉戲而國棋而詩謎而字賭而星命而占驗而風水而符籙日役智於無用者。(p. 209).

⁴⁴ 聞有某先生語後進曰諸君欲做官慎勿讀新書閱新報。(p. 209).

⁴⁵ 夫以我國之文明其永靜性也如此歐州之文明其永動性也。(p. 210).

To highlight the urgency of reform, *VMTHS* compares Vietnam to other nations that have successfully modernized. It praises Europe's constitutional governments, free press, and structured educational systems, arguing that these institutions foster intellectual progress and national strength: "In European countries, starting from their nation-building, above, there exists the parliament to preserve the state policy; and the press below reflects the people's situations and wishes." 【3b】⁴⁶

Having established the urgent need for Vietnam's modernization, the text proceeds to diagnose the underlying reasons for the nation's stagnation. It identifies key areas where Vietnam lags behind more developed countries, providing a comparative analysis that highlights the structural weaknesses preventing progress. By dissecting these deficiencies, the text not only critiques the status quo but also sets the stage for proposing concrete solutions.

Diagnosing Areas of Stagnation

VMTHS outlines five key areas where Vietnam falls behind in comparison to the West: rational thought, education, governance, national spirit, and engagement with the world.

Rational Thought and Intellectual Development

Vietnam's scholarly tradition, dominated by classical Confucian education, emphasized literary elegance and memorization over critical thinking and practical application. While Western intellectuals such as Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Spencer revolutionized political and social thought, Vietnamese scholars remained confined within the boundaries of poetic compositions and rigid ideological constraints. The text criticizes this tendency, stating, "For those who find themselves in a higher level, having climbed to a respected position in society, they pride themselves as self-proclaimed superiors... disdaining all new learnings for the advancement of civilization." 【3a】⁴⁷ Unlike Western societies, where political and philosophical discourse flourished through free speech and print media, Vietnam's intellectual climate discouraged independent thought, reinforcing a static worldview.

Education System

A significant barrier to progress was the outdated examination system, which prioritized classical literary forms such as Eight-legged essays and poetic compositions. In contrast, European nations had long established structured education systems with clear distinctions between elementary, secondary, and higher education, incorporating

⁴⁶ 歐州之立國也上有議院以維國是下有報館以達下情. (p. 210).

⁴⁷ 其高焉者博一名之徵號更詡詡以高人自居以世道自命(...)而文明新學一切鄙夷. (p. 209).

subjects like mathematics, law, and the natural sciences. 【4b】⁴⁸ The document critiques Vietnam's education system for failing to cultivate knowledge applicable to statecraft, industry, or commerce. Instead of fostering engineers, scientists, and administrators, it produced scholars trained in literary artistry but ill-equipped for modernization.

Political and Administrative System

Governance in Vietnam, according to *VMTHS*, was marked by resistance to change and an overreliance on outdated traditions. Western nations had developed constitutional governance, electoral representation, and participatory political institutions, allowing for continuous reform. 【5a】⁴⁹ In contrast, Vietnamese administrators avoided reform, preferred passive and obedient officials, and imposed bureaucratic constraints that stifled innovation: "In terms of administration, changes and reforms are forbidden. In terms of personnel recruitment, quiet and obedient people are preferred" 【4b】⁵⁰ The absence of institutional flexibility resulted in policies that were increasingly detached from the realities of an evolving world.

National Spirit and Disposition

The text contrasts the national spirit of Vietnam with that of European nations, highlighting that the West cultivated a strong sense of nationalism and civic duty. Western societies encouraged military service, economic engagement, and active participation in national affairs, while Vietnam placed excessive value on literary and artistic pursuits: "Besides literature, nothing else is prized; besides repression, nothing else is taken as principle; besides obedience, there is no further thought." 【5a】⁵¹ This rigid social order, discouraging both individual initiative and collective action, rendered Vietnam incapable of responding effectively to external challenges.

Customs and International Outlook

A final area of stagnation identified in the document is Vietnam's reluctance to engage with the world. Unlike European nations that pursued global exploration and commerce, Vietnamese society remained insular, hesitant to interact with foreign nations beyond China. The document critiques this lack of international engagement, stating, "Europeans attach importance to travel and deride dangers and difficulties... Moses spent forty years to reach Canaan. Columbus wandered for decades in the Atlantic. Matteo Ricci(1552-1610) also trekked in China for nineteen years." 【5a】

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 211.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 213.

⁵⁰ 行政矣而禁更張用人矣而貴安靜舊. (p. 212).

⁵¹ 文章之外無資格抑壓之外無尊旨服從之外無遠思. (p. 213).

⁵² In contrast, Vietnamese scholars and officials often resisted overseas travel and dismissed foreign knowledge. This self-imposed isolation limited Vietnam's exposure to scientific and technological advancements.

While the previous section outlined the symptoms of Vietnam's stagnation across various domains, the text now delves deeper into the ideological roots that have entrenched these problems. These deeply ingrained beliefs and social structures have long shaped Vietnam's governance, intellectual traditions, and interactions with the outside world, creating barriers to reform. Understanding these foundational causes is crucial to formulating effective strategies for change.

Identifying Roots of Stagnation

The document attributes Vietnam's stagnation to four deep-rooted ideological beliefs that have shaped its societal structure and governance for centuries.

Inner Civilization, Outer Barbarism 內夏外夷

A key ideological barrier to reform was the perception that Vietnam, as a Confucian society, was inherently superior to other nations, dismissing non-Confucian countries as "barbaric." This belief discouraged efforts to study foreign political institutions, scientific advancements, or economic practices. 【5b】⁵³ By refusing to learn from Western governance models, Vietnam remained locked in an outdated system that no longer served its needs.

Preference for Benevolence Over Power 貴王賤霸

Vietnam's political tradition idealized benevolent rule over pragmatic statecraft. While Western nations pursued strategies that balanced diplomacy with military and economic power, Vietnam remained fixated on Confucian ideals of moral governance. 【5b-6a】⁵⁴ This mindset made it difficult for the country to respond effectively to external threats or to adopt policies that prioritized national strength.

Reverence for Antiquity and Rejection of Modernity 是古非今

Another major impediment to progress was the belief that knowledge from the past was inherently superior to contemporary advancements. This veneration of antiquity discouraged engagement with modern scientific discoveries and technological innovations: "One starts with the viewpoint of judging the antiquity as right and condemning the present as wrong... unwilling to pay attention to later generations'

⁵² 歐洲之人重游歷而輕險艱摩西之遷迦南也四十年科倫布之徬徨於大西洋也數十年利瑪竇之跋涉於支那也十九年. (p. 213).

⁵³ 一起於內夏外夷之點而他國之政術技能弗遑問也. (p. 214).

⁵⁴ 一起於貴王賤霸之點而外國之富彊機巧弗屑謹也. (pp. 214-215).

knowledge and insights” 【6a】⁵⁵ This resistance to change perpetuated Vietnam’s reliance on outdated knowledge while the world around it evolved.

Hierarchical Social Structure 尊官賤民

The document also critiques Vietnam’s rigid social hierarchy, which placed officials above common people and discouraged social mobility. Unlike Western societies, where political and economic reforms allowed for upward mobility, Vietnam’s rigid system limited opportunities for talent to rise from outside the elite class: “Officials were placed above the people, stifling innovation and discouraging broader participation in governance and economic reforms.” 【6a】⁵⁶ This structure ensured that power remained in the hands of a few, preventing the emergence of a dynamic and engaged citizenry.

Recognizing both the structural weaknesses and the ideological barriers to progress, *VMTHS* moves from diagnosis to prescription. It offers six key strategies designed to counteract stagnation and set Vietnam on a path toward modernization. These proposals emphasize practical reforms in education, governance, industry, and communication, reinforcing the argument that progress requires both systemic change and a shift in mindset. By outlining these measures, *VMTHS* presents modernization as an achievable goal rather than an abstract ideal, urging immediate action to secure Vietnam’s place in an increasingly competitive world.

Six Strategies for Modernization

With this sense of urgency in mind, *VMTHS* lays out six key strategies for propelling Vietnam toward progress. These strategies address fundamental issues in literacy, education, governance, industry, and communication, advocating for systemic reforms that would equip the Vietnamese people with the knowledge and skills necessary to compete on the global stage. By implementing these measures, the text argues, Vietnam can break free from outdated traditions, cultivate a more enlightened citizenry, and lay the foundation for long-term national strength. The text sees these reforms as essential steps toward national revitalization, emphasizing that modernization is not merely a theoretical pursuit but an urgent necessity. Through these six strategies, *VMTHS* envisions a transformed Vietnam—one that embraces new knowledge, values intellectual competition, and actively participates in the global exchange of ideas and technologies.

Promoting National Script and Mass Literacy

⁵⁵ 一起於是古非今之點而後人之見識論思弗肯觀也。(p. 215).

⁵⁶ 一起於尊官賤民之點而閭閻之利病情狀弗暇計也。(p. 215).

The first strategy, “Promote/Use the National Script” 行本國文字, emphasizes the need to adopt Quốc ngữ, the Romanized Vietnamese script, as the standard writing system for the nation. *VMTHS* laments that Vietnam alone, among civilized nations, lacked its own writing system for the vernacular language. It notes how even neighboring countries like Siam (Thailand) and Laos had phonetic scripts of their own, and observes that Japan had devised the Kana syllabary ‘Iroha’ for writing Japanese. Historically, educated Vietnamese had used Classical Chinese for scholarship and a *chữ Nôm* (demotic script) for literary writings in Vietnamese, but neither was easy to master for the common people. The text argues that widespread literacy is the foundation of modernization, and a simplified, phonetic script would allow even women and children to attain basic literacy within months:

Recently, Portuguese pastors invented a script for our national language, employing the twenty-six European alphabetical letters ... as it is the simplest and quickest method, we should uniformly practice it. 【7a】⁵⁷

By advocating for Quốc ngữ, the text challenges the traditional reliance on Classical Chinese, which had long been the language of governance and scholarship in Vietnam. It argues that learning should be accessible to all, not just to the educated elite: “When people in our country attend school, they must take it as the primary gate [to go through], so that within a few months, all children and women will become literate.” 【7a】⁵⁸ The emphasis on literacy reflects a broader reformist vision: knowledge should be democratized, not monopolized by a small class of Confucian scholars.

The strong advocacy for Quốc ngữ in Vietnam’s modernization has parallels (and contrasts) in China and Japan. In China, late Qing reformers similarly recognized that traditional Classical Chinese was a barrier to mass education. In the 1890s, Chinese reformers, many with missionary ties, developed phonetic writing schemes, primarily using Latin letters, to promote literacy. These efforts sparked debate over three key issues. First was the choice of symbols: some favored Latin-based romanization, others drew inspiration from Japanese kana or Chinese characters, while some schemes adopted unconventional designs. Second was the role of phonetic symbols—whether they should replace traditional characters entirely or serve as pronunciation aids. The most contentious issue was the linguistic basis of these scripts. Some pushed for Mandarin as the standard, while others argued that literacy in Mandarin was too challenging for many and promoted separate phonetic systems for regional dialects, reserving Mandarin for national use.⁵⁹ Additionally, *the Qing New Education edicts* (1904) encouraged teaching the national language (Mandarin) in schools.⁶⁰ However,

⁵⁷ 近葡萄牙牧師製出國語字取歐洲二十六每字(...)以本音最爲簡捷似宜一律行之. (p. 217).

⁵⁸ 國中凡八學者以爲第一法門俾數月之間兒童婦孺皆識字. (p. 217).

⁵⁹ See John DeFrancis, “First Chinese Reformers” in *The Chinese Language – Fact and Fantasy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), pp. 242-243.

⁶⁰ Elisabeth Kaske, *The Politics of Language in Chinese Education, 1895-1919*, (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008), p. 251: “However, a closer look shows that given the limited time allocated to the teaching of

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Chinese intellectuals, even as they admired aspects of Western progress, generally saw abandoning Chinese characters as too extreme.⁶¹

Tonkin Free School's admiration of Japan's Iroha script likely stems from information in Chinese sources such as Kang Youwei's writings, which noted Japan's use of Kana alongside Chinese characters.⁶² Vietnamese reformers thus saw Japan as an example where a nation could modernize yet still preserve a script akin to Chinese characters, supplemented by a simpler syllabary. In summary, Vietnam's script reform was part of a regional trend toward vernacularization and mass literacy, paralleling Chinese and Japanese efforts, but Vietnam went the farthest by completely reinventing its written medium — a step that, in the long run, proved crucial to the success of Vietnamese literacy and nationalism.

Revising and Enriching the Curriculum of Knowledge

The second modernization strategy proposed in *VMTHS* is The Assessment and Revision of Books 校定書籍, essentially a call to overhaul the traditional curriculum and knowledge base. The text observes that Vietnam has a rich history and many books written by Vietnamese authors, but it implies that these need to be refined and supplemented with new knowledge, urging a shift away from an over-reliance on Chinese texts. The text laments that Vietnamese students spend years memorizing Chinese literature while neglecting their own history and the practical sciences necessary for national development:

Since ancient times, authors in our country have been numerous ... However, immediately after entering school, our country's people will read Northern books [i.e., Chinese books], and pay no attention to our publications. 【6a & 7b】 63.

Chinese, which was obviously insufficient also to learn writing in the literary language, educators were in fact taking recourse to a double language standard—literary reading vs. vernacular writing.”

⁶¹ Sun Jiahui 孙佳慧, “Letters of Revolution: The Failed Movement to Eradicate Chinese Characters,” *The World of Chinese* (2024), <https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2024/05/the-failed-movement-to-eradicate-chinese-characters/>

⁶² In his *Riben shumuzhi* 日本書目志 (*Catalogue of Japanese Books*), (Shanghai: Datong yishuju 大通譯書局, ca. 1897), Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927) describes Japan's writing system as follows, “Japanese script looks like ours but slightly mixed with Kūkai's 空海 thirteen-iroha script 日本文字猶吾文字也但稍雜空海之伊呂波十之三耳.” Kūkai (also known posthumously as Kōbō-Daishi 弘法大師, 774–835) was the founder of the Esoteric Shingon 真言 (mantra) school of Buddhism in Japan. According to Ryūichi Abe, “Kūkai was also said to have invented kana, the Japanese phonetic orthography, and the Iroha, the kana syllabary. In the Iroha table, the kana letters are arranged in such a manner as to form a waka that plainly expresses the Buddhist principle of emptiness.” Ryūichi Abe, *The Weaving of Mantra – Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 3.

⁶³ 我國古來作者林立(...)我國人纔一入學便讀北書而置我國書於不問. (pp. 217 -218)

The text proposes that educational curricula should focus on Vietnam's own history, Western sciences, and subjects that provide tangible benefits to society. It criticizes the traditional Confucian curriculum for its fixation on antiquated literary debates rather than practical knowledge:

Rarely do human beings reach a longevity of one-hundred years, but competent spirit is fully imprisoned in voluminous books piling up to the house's beams, to fatigue an oxen of burden. 【8a】 64

In addition, the manifesto advocates compiling new illustrated books and maps of Vietnam's villages, routes, and resources as study materials, "Additionally, we should compile illustrated books with maps and charts on villages and routes, (distributions of) taxable labors and rice fields as supplementary materials." 【8b】⁶⁵ This reflects a modern scholarly impulse to systematically catalog the nation's geography and economy – a kind of knowledge base useful for governance and development, not just pride in history. Crucially, the document insists that Vietnamese must also learn from world history and geography. It references titles like *Wudzhou Detu* 五大洲地圖 (*The Five Continents with Maps and Descriptions*),⁶⁶ *Wanguo Gangjian* 萬國綱鑑 (*A General History of All [Ancient and Modern] Countries*),⁶⁷ *Jinzhengshi Yao* 近政史要 (*General History of Recent Policies*),⁶⁸ or *Xixue Kao* 西學考 (*An Investigation of*

⁶⁴ 人生無期頤之壽齡而有用精神全爲充棟汗牛. (p. 219)

⁶⁵ 近作里路,丁田圖冊以補之. (p. 220)

⁶⁶ This may be another name for *Wu dazhou tushuo* 五大洲圖說 by Ai Rulue 艾儒略 (Giulio Alenio), edited by Qian Xizuo 錢熙祚, published by Shanghai shuju 上海書局 in 1898.

⁶⁷ This may be a shorter title of *Gujin wanguo gangjian* 古今萬國綱鑑 (Singapore: Jianxia shuyuan 堅夏書院, 1838); see <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=151372&remap=gb>. Although the extant publication has no author's name printed, it has been attributed to Karl Friedrich Gützlaff (aka. Guoshila 郭實臘, or Guoshili 郭士立, 1803-1851; see Guo Xiuwen 郭秀文, "Dongxiyang kao meiyue tongjizhuan de zhongjiao chuanbo celue 《東西洋考每月統記傳》的宗教傳播策略", *Xueshu yanjiu* 學術研究, no. 8/2016, p. 114). However, there is another book with a quite similar title, *Guojin wanguo gangjianlu* 古今萬國綱鑑錄 by Robert Morrison (aka. Molisong 模禮崧, or Malisun 馬禮遜, 1782-1834), as seen in a version of it printed in Japan: Moreishô 模禮崧. *Kokon bankoku kôkanroku* 古今萬國綱鑑錄, with Japanese guiding marks (*kunten* 訓点) by Ôtsuki Seishi 大槻誠之, corrected by Yanagisawa Shindai 柳澤信大, Tokyo: Tōsei Kamejirō 東生亀次郎, 1874. Confused by the resemblance of the two titles, some modern scholars consequently identify *Gujin wanguo gangjian* as Morrison's work, as in the case of Chou Yu-wen 周恩文, "WanQing jiauwuqian zai Hua Zhongwai renshi duiyu Meiguo jiaoyu de jieshao 晚清甲午前在華中外人士對於美國教育的介紹 (The Introduction of American Education by Missionaries and Chinese Officials and Commoners in Late Ch'ing China before 1894), *Jiaoyu yanjiu jikan* 教育研究集刊/ *Bulletin of Educational Research*, vol. 65:1 (3/2019): 121.

⁶⁸ It is possibly *Wanguo jinzheng kaolue* 萬國近政考略 by Zou Tao 鄒弢 (Shanghai: Sanjielu 三借廬, 1901).

Western Studies).⁶⁹ By citing these, the Vietnamese reformers signaled the need to go beyond the “Eastern horizon” of knowledge and include the West. The manifesto suggests taking such foreign works and abbreviating or translating them for Vietnamese students. The overall goal was to create a new curriculum that balanced Vietnam’s own heritage (to instill patriotism and identity) with knowledge of China (still important, but to be studied more cursorily) and knowledge of the West (deemed essential to catch up with the world). In short, this second method was about updating the content of education – rejecting the narrow focus on Confucian classics alone, and embracing a broader, globally-informed syllabus.

When comparing this to Chinese reform efforts, one can find a very similar trajectory. During the late Qing New Policies (after 1901), *Shuyuan* 書院 (the traditional academies) were converted into *Xuetang* 學堂 (modern schools) that taught a mix of Chinese and Western subjects.⁷⁰ Chinese reformers compiled new textbooks, often translations of Japanese texts which were themselves adaptations of Western knowledge. For instance, by 1903 Chinese students could read science textbooks, world geographies, and histories of foreign nations in newly established schools. Liang Qichao and other intellectuals wrote on world history; Liang famously argued that Chinese must study the history of other nations to understand how to strengthen their own. The manifesto’s mention of General History of Recent Policies suggests awareness of a Chinese work that summarized reforms in various countries — something Liang Qichao or others might have written to educate readers on world trends. Indeed, one cited item *Xixue Kao* hints at works like Yan Fu’s translations of Western ideas, or Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837-1909)’s *Quanxue Pian* 勸學篇 (*Exhortation to Study*, 1898) which urged learning “Western learning for practical use.” The Vietnamese approach of extracting key points and simplifying (“streamline verbose parts”) mirrors how Japanese and Chinese educators distilled complex Western texts into succinct textbooks for students.

In Japan, the Meiji government undertook a wholesale curriculum revolution as well. After 1868, Western sciences, mathematics, geography, and even physical education entered Japanese classrooms.⁷¹ The Japanese compiled their own series of

⁶⁹ This may be a shorter title of *Xixue kaolue* 西學考略 by Ding Weiliang 丁韞良 (William Alexander Parsons Martin), Tongwenguan 同文館, 1883.

⁷⁰ Linhan Chen and Danyan Huang, “Internationalization of Chinese Higher Education,” *Higher Education Studies*, vol. 3:1 (2013): 94.

⁷¹ Masao Watanabe, trans. by Otto Theodor Benfey, *The Japanese and Western Science* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), p. 7: After Japan opened its doors in the second half of the nineteenth century, in order to catch up with the West it adopted Western knowledge as well as institutions in one fell swoop. Modern educational institutions were created that began to train their own research and teaching staffs.” (6); Japanese scientist Yamagawa Kenjirō (1854-1931) recalls, “In those days there were few schools in Tokyo where foreign texts could be studied. These were the Daigaku-Nankō [the precursor of the University of Tokyo], the Keio Gijuku of Fukuzawa Yukichi, the Dōjinsha of Nakamura Masanao in Koishikawa, as well as the Kyōkan-Gijuku, which Fukuchi Gen’ichiro had opened in Shitaya.” (7).

textbooks often with the help of foreign advisors.⁷² By the 1880s, subjects like world history and modern science were firmly part of Japanese education.⁷³ Thus, the second method (curriculum reform) is a clear example of how Vietnamese intellectuals were following the content revolution happening in education across East Asia. They intended to preserve the essence of national history and moral values from Vietnam's tradition but to present them in a modern, concise way; simultaneously, they sought to graft onto this foundation the branches of world knowledge recently acquired by China and Japan. In doing so, they hoped to produce a generation of Vietnamese who were learned in both East and West – familiar with the achievements of the five continents and inspired by the lessons of Japan's reform and China's cautionary failures. This comprehensive reorientation of learning was indispensable to creating an informed public ready to push Vietnam forward.

Reform of the Civil Service Examination System

The third proposed reform is “The Transformation of the Civil Service Examination System” 改定試法. The text explicitly criticizes the imperial examination system for its arcane and impractical nature. It asks rhetorically whether it is rational to expect practical learning to come from superficial literary exercises, “The meanings of the classics are the most profound, thus is it rational to wish to observe practical learning through superficial writings? The Hundred Schools of Thought are limitlessly broad, thus is it appropriate to wish to identify real talent in thorough memorization and recitation from anyone?” 【9a】⁷⁴ The traditional Confucian examination process, which emphasized the memorization of classical texts and the composition of Eight-legged essays, is harshly criticized for its irrelevance: “We also do not know among “the pedants” 學究先生 and “great eight-legged-essay writers” 時文鉅子, who can have any knowledge of what the names of the five continents are, or which century is nowadays.” 【9a】⁷⁵ This is a direct attack on the time-honored but ossified mode of education in Vietnam (as in China): studying the Confucian canon and composing Eight-legged essays, rhapsodies, and classical poems under rigid formulaic rules. The document lists the various set-piece formats of the exam (eight-legged essays, regulated poems, etc.) and pointedly asks which of these “can be of any use” in real life. Furthermore, it cites a satirical Chinese piece called Keju Gua 科舉卦 (Hexagram of the Civil Service Examination) which mocked the

⁷² Ibid., “Introduction: Japan's Modern Century”, pp. 1-5; and “Japan Studies of Foreign Teachers in Japan: Investigations of the Magic Mirror,” pp. 23-40.

⁷³ Shigeru Nakayama, “Independence and Choice: Western Impacts on Japanese Higher Education,” *Higher Education*, vol. 18:1 (1989), *From Dependency to Autonomy: The Development of Asian Universities* (1989), pp. 31-48.

⁷⁴ 經典義最精深而欲借淺近之文章以觀實學有是理乎? 百家茫無紀極而欲窮一人之記誦以驗真才有是情乎? (p. 223).

⁷⁵ 又不知學究先生辰(時)文鉅子,其能識五洲何名號,今日何世紀之人者. (p. 223).

exam's pernicious impact.⁷⁶ This shows Vietnamese scholars were reading Chinese essays ridiculing the old exams.

Having condemned the existing exams, the text proposes a new approach: it notes that China had recently abolished the eight-legged essay (in the exam of 1901, leading up to full abolition in 1905) and switched to testing candidates with “Policy Essays” 策 and “Discursive Essays” 論. It recommends that Vietnam similarly adopt essay questions on practical and contemporary matters, drawing on Confucian classics as well as Vietnamese, Chinese, and Western history for content. The idea was to have candidates write analytically about issues rather than produce stylized literary pieces. Additionally, the manifesto suggests adding a few questions on arithmetic and Quốc ngữ in the exam to ensure candidates have basic modern skills. This proposed exam reform essentially mirrors what the Qing dynasty did: after 1901, the imperial exams in China (before being terminated) included questions on current affairs, some basic science, and policy problems, rather than purely classical texts.⁷⁷ The Vietnamese reformers are clearly taking a page from the Qing reform playbook, which is unsurprising since many Vietnamese literati closely followed news from China. Tonkin Free School intellectuals, however, felt Vietnam could wait no longer to change this system which they saw as a straitjacket on the mind.

Japan provides an interesting contrast: Japan had imported the Chinese-style exams during the Tokugawa era in a limited way but never to the extent of China or Vietnam. After the Meiji Restoration, Japan swiftly discontinued any Confucian exam remnants and instead instituted modern civil service recruitment (exams based on European models or requiring university graduation). By the 1880s, Japan had a Western-style civil service exam system for bureaucrats (under the influence of the French and German systems), alongside a new aristocracy of merit from its Imperial

⁷⁶ In 1904, Zheng Guangong selected humorous writings and traditional Chinese telling and singing pieces of art printed in newspapers and periodicals, and published them together in a magazine called *Shixie xinji* 時諧新集 (New Collection of Contemporary Laughing Matters). One of its main categories is called “Wenjie 文界” (Literary World) divided into a number of sections, of which is the “Hexagram of the Civil Service Examination.” See Li Wanwei 李婉薇, “Qingmo Minchu Yue Gang gemingpai baokan” 清末民初粵港革命派報刊, *Wenshi zhishi* 文史知識, no. 12 (2012): 31-32.

⁷⁷ On August 29, 1901, an imperial edict was issued, officially abolishing the eight-legged essay in the civil examinations, “all examination essays whether political discourses (*celun* 策論) or extrapolation of the Confucian Classics (*jingyi* 經義) had to be written in unbound non-metrical prose.” Elisabeth Kaske. *The Politics of Language in Chinese Education*, p. 254. The abolition was a critical decision made after several memorials sent to the throne by Zhang Zhidong, Zhang Yuanji 張元濟 and Kang Youwei (*ibid.*, p. 85), “signaling that examination questions for the *shengyuan* degree would now include Western learning (*Xixue*) as well as Chinese learning (*Zhongxue*). Moreover, it became clear that at the higher examination levels (for the *juren* and *jinshi* degrees) at least one set of policy questions would focus on ‘world politics.’” Richard J. Smith, *The Qing Dynasty and Traditional Chinese Culture* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), p. 393.

universities.⁷⁸ The Vietnamese reformers likely knew that Japan had long done away with Chinese exams, which bolstered their case that Vietnam must not cling to them. The manifesto's suggestion of including arithmetic and so on can be seen as trying to replicate, on a smaller scale, the kind of well-rounded examination that a modern state would use.

The *VMTHS* argues that government officials should be selected based on their ability to solve contemporary problems, not on their literary prowess. It recommends replacing the traditional examination format with assessments that test candidates on policy issues, historical developments, and arithmetic: "Using Confucian classics and commentaries, three histories (Vietnamese, Chinese, and Western) to produce exam themes and ask candidates to answer them ... Afterward, we can add a few questions in arithmetic and national language script, to ensure what they have learned or known and to what they apply do not contradict each other." 【10a】⁷⁹ By advocating for a more practical examination system, the text aligns with reformist movements in China and Japan, where similar efforts were made to modernize bureaucratic recruitment and governance.

Encouragement of Talents

The fourth strategy emphasizes the need of "To Nurture and Employ Talented Individuals" 鼓舞人才. The document argues that scholars and officials should be trained in Western studies, law, and commerce to ensure that they contribute effectively to governance and economic development. *VMTHS* attributes a strong statement—falsely ascribed to Guangxuehui 廣學會 (Learning society for self-strengthening, 1887-1956)—as a key justification for the urgent need to reeducate the gentry: "If we want to enlighten the people's mind, we must first enlighten the gentry's mind." 【10a】⁸⁰ This statement pinpoints a critical strategy: focus on converting the traditional elite (the scholars, officials, degree-holders) to the new thinking, because they are the opinion leaders whom the masses follow. *VMTHS* clearly elaborates,

⁷⁸ Liu Haifeng, "Influence of China's Imperial Examinations on Japan, Korea and Vietnam," *Frontiers of History in China*, vol.2:4 (1/2007): 493-512.

⁷⁹ 取經傳三史中(南中西)命題發問聽其議論(...)然後參之以算律國語字教條使之所學所試與所用不至背馳. (p. 221).

⁸⁰ Both the prefaces for the Society in Beijing and Shanghai by Kang Youwei and Zhang Zhidong respectively do not contain the cited sentence. See "Jingshi qiangxuehui xu 京師強學會序", *Qiangxuebao* 強學報, no. 1 (1895); "Shanghai qiangxuehui xu" 上海強學會序, *Xinwen bao* 新聞報, (December 4, 1895). However, a similar sentence is found in Liang Qichao's letter addressed to Chen Baozhen 陳寶箴, titled "Lun Hunan yingban zhi shi 論湖南應辦之事" (On What Hunan Should Do). Liang's sentence reads, "Thus, if we now want to enlighten the people's mind, we need to enlighten the gentry's mind; and as we should pass it on to the mandarin force whom we still do not know all, we therefore must enlighten the mandarin's mind, making it the starting point of everything 即今日欲開民智, 開紳智, 而假手於官力者, 尚不知凡幾也, 故開官智, 又為萬事之起點". The text reads, 欲開民智, 先開紳智. (p. 221).

“These words are right and touching the root of the problem, because people model themselves after the gentry, the junior adhere to their senior, and the ears and eyes always have intrinsic relationships to one another.” 【10a】⁸¹ Therefore, unless the conservative literati can be won over or retrained, any reform will meet resistance or falter.

In practical terms, the document envisions taking hundreds or thousands of those with educational status (from high-ranking mandarins to humble degree-holders) and giving them new training in “new knowledge” and “new principles” so that they might remake themselves and thus remake society,

【10a】 Now as books have been appropriately revised, examination methods reformed, society cannot but wait for a few hundreds, or thousands of people who serve in imperial offices as administrators, official apprentices, official expectants, assistant instructors and instructors; or who are registered in the graduate records, from doctorates, supplementary graduates, 【10b】 provincial graduates, county candidates, to candidates from the royal family, candidates from high-ranking officials’ families, or state-stipend funded students. If they remain unable to broaden their mind to new knowledge, or to develop in accordance with new principles, making everything anew on the same page, we will witness a conflict between the old and the new.⁸²

It laments that institutions like Trại giám 胄監 (the Imperial Academy in Huế), also known as “The Place to Raise the Talent,”⁸³ were still wholly devoted to old literature and exam preparation, having “no relationship whatsoever with reality.” Even Quốc học trường 國學場 (the newer *School of National Studies*) founded around 1898 had turned out some capable people, but they remained ignored if they had no traditional exam credentials.

⁸¹ 此採本之至言也蓋民之則倣視紳董後生之觀摩視前輩其耳目固有相關焉者也。 (p. 221).

⁸² 四曰鼓舞人才彊學會之序曰欲開民智先開紳智此採本之至言也蓋民之則倣視紳董後生之觀摩視前輩其耳目固有相關焉者也今書籍正矣試法改矣祇可以待夫數百千萬之僉僉衮纓而通仕籍之承辦行走候補訓教諸員登科冊之進仕副榜舉人秀才以及尊生廩生學生諸人猶未有以擴充新聞闡發新理而使之一新不幾於舊界新界兩相撞突乎? (pp. 221-222).

⁸³ In the reign of King Gia Long of the Nguyễn Dynasty, the Imperial Academy was founded in Huế in 1803 under the name of *Đốc Học Đường* 督學堂. It was renamed Quốc Tử Giám 國子監 in March 1820 under the reign of King Minh Mạng. An article by Robert de La Susse, titled “L’Enseignement en Annam” (Education in Annam) printed in *Les Annales Coloniales* (June 03, 1913), also shows that French education had been introduced in this imperial institution around the time of its publication, “In addition, there is a special third-grade school in Hue called College Quốc Tử Giám. Quốc Tử Giám is the Vietnamese Prytanée; it receives the sons of royal or princely families and the children of the mandarins. There also modernism begins to do its work, and in the pagoda where the young Vietnamese used to learn exclusively the [Chinese] characters, the word of a French master comes today to be heard. The fact that French lessons are not the least assiduously attended is the best proof of the success of our teaching.” (p. 2).

The School for National Studies has been founded for about eight or nine years, competent and versatile people have come out from there, but nothing has been heard of, and neither has anyone asked about them. 【10b】⁸⁴

This critique highlights the inertia among the Vietnamese establishment. To address it, the authors call for proactive measures: essentially a campaign of intellectual re-education for the elite. They mention that even after curriculum and exam reforms, society “cannot but wait for” a cohort of enlightened officials to emerge and implement change.

This is a dramatic re-valuing of knowledge: a skilled engineer or scientist would outrank “a doctorate degree” 進士 in the traditional hierarchy. We see here the shadow of Meiji Japan’s example where Western-learned technocrats became the new elite,⁸⁵ and the projection of China’s attempts to honor graduates of modern schools (for instance, the Qing began to equate certain school diplomas with the old degree titles).⁸⁶

In summary, the encouragement of talent was about creating a native vanguard of modernizers from the ranks of the educated. Both Chinese and Japanese experiences suggested that a small nucleus of enlightened leaders could catalyze broader change: Japan had its oligarchs and “elder statesmen” 元老 who championed reforms,⁸⁷ China had reformist officials like Zhang Zhidong once convinced of new ideas. Vietnam’s colonized status complicated this – Vietnamese modernizers had limited access to power. Nevertheless, their strategy was to win over as many minds as possible among those Vietnamese who did hold influence (village elders, scholars, functionaries) to build a consensus for modernization from within.

Industrial and Technological Development

⁸⁴ 國學場之設八九年于茲非無交涉通才出於其間而未聞有問及之者. (p. 222).

⁸⁵ Kenichi Ohno, “Meiji Japan: Progressive Learning of Western Technology” in Arkebe Oqubay and Kenichi Ohno, eds., *How Nations Learn: Technological Learning, Industrial Policy, and Catch-up*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): “On top of all this, education became a national fad from top samurai to commoners. For adults, official and private courses were offered in ancient Chinese literature and philosophy as well as, in later years, Western languages, medicine, and navigation. For children aged roughly seven to thirteen, around twenty thousand unregulated for-profit private primary schools (*terakoya*) emerged all over Japan where self-appointed teachers taught reading, writing, and arithmetic (abacus) with flexible and individualized curriculums.” (91)

⁸⁶ Eddie Guan, “The Domino Effect: Abolishing the Imperial Examination System and the Downfall of the Qing Dynasty,” *The National High School Journal of Science* (2023), pp. 5-6, accessible at <https://nhsjs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/The-Domino-Effect-Abolishing-the-Imperial-Examination-System-and-the-Downfall-of-the-Qing-Dynasty.pdf>: “To guarantee a smooth transition from the old to the new system, the Qing government established a reward system for those who were willing to study abroad. The government adopted a set of guidelines proposed by the Viceroy of Huguang Zhang Zhidong: ‘Students who receive a high school diploma or attend school for 8 years will be given the title of “juren” (equivalent to the second rank in Chinese scholar degree standard). Students who receive an undergraduate degree will be given the title of *jinshi* (equivalent to the first rank).’”

⁸⁷ See Leon M. Bower, “The Genro of Japan,” *Social Science*, vol. 7:4 (October 1932): 406-411.

The fifth strategy, "Promote Industry and Craftmanship" 振興工藝, takes a historical and cultural approach to make its point. It first cites a curious example from an old court regulation: during the Lê Dynasty in Vietnam, only high mandarins were allowed to use fine imported ceramics from China, while lower officials had to use locally made wares.⁸⁸ *VMTHS* uses this to lament how shallow past leaders' understanding of economic progress was — they were content with sumptuary rules rather than fostering the ability to produce such fine goods locally. By highlighting this, it implies Vietnam's traditional elites paid little attention to developing domestic crafts or industry, which they see as a grave mistake.

VMTHS then compare two attitudes: "China of old vs the modern West". It notes that in antiquity, when a Chinese worthy wore a new kind of fine silk, everyone at court imitated it, thus improving local production — a story referencing Xie An of Jin dynasty wearing delicate silk that set a trend. In contrast, it says in Western countries, whenever a new tool or implement is invented, others immediately learn from it and spare no effort or expense to replicate and improve it. This is lauded as the benefit of mutual learning and competition. The critique is directed at Vietnamese (and by extension Qing Chinese) elites who might consume foreign goods as a status symbol rather than try to make their own: "If I, in a superior position, select refined objects for my own use, how can I give orders to subordinates?" 【11a-11b】⁸⁹ In other words, if leaders just import luxuries and don't develop industry, they cannot lead the country to wealth. The manifesto concludes that instead of focusing on frugality or limiting consumption ("moderation of expense of wealth"), Vietnam should focus on fully exploring the sources of wealth — a clear call for economic development as a priority over sumptuary morality.

The document then praises Vietnam's own craft heritage: it enumerates local crafts such as mother-of-pearl inlay (for which Vietnam was famed), conical hats, mats, woodwork, silk, etc., claiming Vietnamese artisans can make everything the Chinese can. However, it admits Vietnamese products are often coarser than Chinese ones, due to lack of good techniques and rigorous development, "However, if we compare the products of the North [i.e., China] with ours, there is the distinction of fine and coarse between them respectively. This happens because of the lack of good techniques to rigorously develop our crafts." 【11b】⁹⁰ This frank assessment leads to the suggestion that new methods and modern technical knowledge must be applied to upgrade local industry. The author(s) were likely aware that under French rule, Vietnam's traditional crafts were struggling against an influx of industrial imports

⁸⁸ This account is from the multivolume encyclopedic work titled *Lịch Triều Hiến Chương Loại Chí* 歷朝憲章類誌 (Categorized Records on Administrative Systems of Successive Dynasties of Vietnam) by Phan Huy Chú 潘輝注 (1782-1840), compiled over ten years (1809-1819).

⁸⁹ 自擇其精者而用之將安令人? (pp. 225-226).

⁹⁰ 然較之北項精粗判焉則振興之無其術也. (p. 226).

(textiles, paper, etc.) and that the colonial economy was oriented to exporting raw materials (coal, rubber, rice) rather than building native industry.

VMTHS also mentions recent encouraging signs: in Tonkin some people had discovered improved methods of raising silkworms, and the colonial government had opened an Agricultural School⁹¹ and a Vocational/Polytechnic School in Hanoi.⁹² These schools are applauded as “competent” ideas, yet the writer(s) note with frustration that they are neglected – the court doesn’t pay attention, the gentry disdain them, and thus only poor commoners enroll (coolies in the industrial school, mere peasants in the agricultural school). The phrase “Rigorous Development Without a Scheme” 振興之無其術也 poignantly captures how these initiatives lacked support and coordination.

While the previous reform strategies focused on restructuring the examination system and encouraging talents, the present approach aimed to reshape the incentive structure for the educated class. As long as success depended on composing ornate tributes to Confucian virtue, Vietnam would fail to cultivate engineers, entrepreneurs, or social reformers. Tonkin Free School sought to reorient the system to recognize and employ individuals with practical knowledge. It even proposed that those proficient in the sciences should receive higher rank and greater rewards than traditional degree-holders:

【12a】 Alas! The relationship between industry and the state is essential. If we do not keep pace with others, they will leave us behind. Nothing is worse than the leak

⁹¹ The Agricultural School (“Trường Canh Nông” or “Ecole d’agriculture”) was founded in Hue at the end of 1898 by Emperor Thành Thái’s royal ordonnance. This agricultural school is “certainly among the number of works whose success would contribute the most, by training heads of indigenous culture, to facilitate the Europeans established in Annam the development of their agricultural holdings.” It is also interesting to learn about the school’s first class of students, “At the beginning of the 1900-1901 school year, the choice was preferably made of former boys speaking and understanding French. This recruitment, however, only provided mediocre subjects, too old and fathers of family, having consequently occupations which prevented them from attending the courses regularly and fruitfully.” At this school, a variety of subjects were taught, such as general notions of botany, agriculture, arboriculture, vegetable growing, French language, and elementary arithmetic. Comité de l’Asie française, “L’École d’agriculture de Hué,” *Bulletin du Comité de l’Asie française – Année* (Paris: Comité de l’Asie française, 1901), pp. 26-27.

⁹² The Polytechnic School (“Trường Bách Công”, literally “Ecole de cent métiers” or “School of one hundred métiers”) was established according to a royal ordonnance issued in the eleventh year of the reign of Emperor Thành Thái (1899). In terms of its name, “The expression exceeded reality a little but it well characterized an establishment where we trained blacksmiths, farriers, fitters, turners, boilermakers, tinsmiths, molders-founders, carpenters, sculptors, masons, stonecutters, carvers, painters, saddlers, designers, etc.” Direction générale de l’instruction publique, *Annam scolaire: De l’enseignement traditionnel annamite à l’enseignement modern franco-indigène* (Hanoi: Imprimerie d’Extrême-orient, 1931), p. 133.

⁹² This long and informative paragraph is from chapter “Daily Newspaper” (Ribao 日報) in Zheng Guanying’s 鄭觀應 (1842-1922) *Shengshi weiyen zengding xinbian* 盛世危言增訂新編 (8 卷) (Warnings to a Prosperous Age – Updated New Edition), Guangxu gengzi 光緒庚子 edition (1900), reprinted by Taiwan Xuesheng shuju 臺灣學生書局 in 2 volumes, 1965, pp. 310-312.

of capital. We should invite brilliant teachers, purchase teaching aids/instruments, select talents of clever ideas and assign them to the schools. The Court should frequently look after and educate them. It should also issue an order to follow the European example of granting official credentials of merit. Those who are able to learn new patterns/styles, or to manufacture new devices, will be honored with official ranks, treated cordially with official pay, and endowed with special benefits. For those who are capable in natural sciences, study of Qi 氣, or chemistry, should receive a status of prosperity 【12b】 even higher than that enjoyed by those who passed the high levels of the civil examination. In such conditions, there must be talents promoting themselves and competing mutually in order to catch up with other peoples.⁹³

This radical idea (elevating scientists over imperial exam graduates) is evidence of how much Japanese and Western example had turned traditional ranking on its head. The comparative context reinforces that by the early 20th century, merit in East Asia was being redefined – not by mastery of Confucian texts, but by mastery of science, law, economics, and administration. Vietnam’s modernizers wanted to ride that wave and not be left behind. The author(s) effectively call for a Vietnamese proto-industrial policy – bringing in expertise, investing in equipment, nurturing skilled workers, and formally recognizing technological achievements. All these ideas show the clear imprint of East Asian reformist thought: Chinese scholar Zheng Guanying, in his influential book *Words of Warning to a Prosperous Age* (1895, referenced in the text), advocated for China to develop commerce and industry, set up technical schools, and reward inventors. Japan of course had done exactly this, inviting foreign experts, building state-owned factories and shipyards in the 1870s, then encouraging private businesses (with government support) in the 1880s.⁹⁴ By the early 1900s, Japan’s industrial prowess – with its modern textile mills, railroads, and growing heavy industry – was proof that an East Asian nation could industrialize rapidly.⁹⁵

In essence, the fifth method is about economic nationalism and modernization – encouraging Vietnamese to become producers, not just consumers or clerks. It’s a call to revive the spirit of craftsmanship with the aid of science, to elevate the status of those who work with their hands (hitherto looked down upon by Confucian culture) and integrate them into the national project of rejuvenation. This significant shift in attitude — valuing the technician and the entrepreneur — was happening in China and

⁹³ 夫!工藝之有關於國家也大矣我弗勝人人將棄我財用漏卮莫此為甚似宜延明師購儀器擇靈巧有才者充之以辰炤顧而訓勅之不令國中諸有能學得新式製得新器者傲歐洲攻牌憑炤之例榮之以品御,厚之以廩糈予之以專利諸有能格致氣化諸學者其榮貴出大科上如是而不銜巧爭奇以求勝人未之有也. (pp. 227-228)

⁹⁴ See Ardath W. Burks, “The West’s Inreach: The *Oyatoi Gaikokujin*,” in *The Modernizers – Overseas Students, Foreign Employees, and Meiji Japan* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1985), pp. 187-206.

⁹⁵ See W.J. Macpherson, Chapter 8 “Capital, Technology and Enterprise” in *The Economic Development of Japan 1868-1941* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 64-69.

Japan too. The Meiji slogan *Shokusan Kōgyō* 殖産興業 (Foster Industry) and the Qing slogan *Quan Xue* 勸學 (Exhortation to Study [practical subjects]) both resonate in the Vietnamese text's exhortations. All three societies were moving towards the idea that wealth and strength of a nation depended on machines, factories, and skilled workers as much as on educated officials or soldiers.

Establishment of Newspapers and Mass Communication Platforms

The sixth and final strategy advocated by Tonkin Free School document is the establishment of newspapers and the cultivation of an informed public opinion. *VMTHS* underscores the tremendous impact newspapers have had in other countries. It lists the various periodicities (dailies, monthlies, weeklies, etc.) and genres of newspapers that exist elsewhere — news of government policy, reports of unusual events, current affairs, public notices — covering everything from domestic matters and foreign affairs to specialized fields like law, medicine, agriculture, industry, and commerce. In a striking statistic drawn from Guanying's 1890s reformist writings, it cites that, "France has more than 1,230 newspaper publishers, Germany more than 2,350, England more than 2,180, Russia more than 430, America more than 14,150, and every district in Japan without exception runs its own newspaper house." 【12b】

⁹⁶ These numbers are invoked to awe the reader with how integral the press is to modern civilization. The text then notes that China too has lately set up many publishers. This aligns with the historical reality: after the 1895 defeat by Japan, China experienced a boom in newspapers, especially in treaty ports like Shanghai.⁹⁷ By the late Qing, reform-minded papers like *Shiwu Bao* 時務報, *Min Bao* 民報, *Xinmin Congbao* 新民叢報 (Liang Qichao's in exile), etc., were widely read by literate Chinese and Asian readers. The Vietnamese reformers were among those readers, and, in fact, some Chinese newspapers were also circulated in Vietnam around that time (see below).

The manifesto explains why newspapers matter: "Thanks to this, enlightening people's mind originates from here." 【12b】⁹⁸ In other words, a press is the vehicle to open the people's intellect by spreading knowledge, news, and new ideas far more broadly and quickly than traditional books or edicts. The author(s) observe that in

⁹⁶ 法國一千二百三十餘家德國二千三百五十餘家英國二千一百八十餘家俄國四百三十餘家美國一萬四千一百五十餘家日本無郡不有報館. (p. 228) This long and informative paragraph is from chapter "Daily Newspaper" (*Ribao* 日報) in Zheng Guanying's 鄭觀應 (1842-1922) *Shengshi weiyang zengding xinbian* 盛世危言增訂新編 (8 j.) (Warnings to a Prosperous Age – Updated New Edition), Guangxu gengzi 光緒庚子 edition (1900), reprinted by Taiwan Xuesheng shuju 臺灣學生書局 in 2 volumes, 1965, pp. 310-312.

⁹⁷ See Barbara Mittler, Chapter 6 "The Nature of Chinese Nationalism: Reading Shanghai Newspapers, 1900-1925" in *A Newspaper for China? Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai's News Media, 1872-1912* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), pp. 361-408.

⁹⁸ 中國近亦開設頗多其所以開民智者是在是. (p. 228)

Vietnam at that time, the only newspapers were French-language ones in Saigon and Hải Phòng, which few locals could understand, and a single Hanoi paper called *Đồng Văn* 同文 that was printed in Chinese characters.⁹⁹ The manifesto even outlines a model for a proper newspaper: it suggests one should be founded in the capital (Huế) directed by a great mandarin and other appointed officials, published half in Chinese and half in Quốc ngữ. The bilingual suggestion shows an astute understanding of the transitional readership — some older scholars still only read Chinese, while younger ones and the emerging middle class were learning Quốc ngữ. A state-backed but reform-minded paper could disseminate new methods and knowledge across the country.

Comparatively, the emphasis on print media as a catalyst of modernization is a common thread in East Asia. Japan had a thriving press after the Sino-Japanese War. As James L. Huffman observes, “Of particular importance to the press was the fact that more and more of these new urbanities were able to read. We already have noted the significant growth of literacy before the Sino-Japanese War; now, according to all observers, it grew even more rapidly.”¹⁰⁰ The Meiji journalism also played a crucial role for social cohesion and modernization.¹⁰¹ China during the late Qing saw intellectuals like Liang Qichao essentially become journalists to propagate reformist and then revolutionary ideas. Liang’s journal *Xinmin Congbao* published in Japan had wide readership among Chinese and Vietnamese exile circles. Phan Bội Châu (1867–1940), while in Japan, read Liang’s works and even wrote some essays that got printed in Chinese papers. Also notably, Japanese papers in Chinese, like Guangzhi Shuju 廣州書局 in Shanghai, helped spread ideas to other Asians. Phan Bội Châu’s seminal pamphlet *Việt Nam Vong Quốc Sử* (*History of the Loss of Vietnam*, 1905) was actually published in Chinese by a Japanese publisher and circulated among East Asian readers. This shows how a multi-lingual, transnational print network was at work: Vietnamese ideas printed in Chinese in Japan came back into Vietnam via Chinese texts or via later Vietnamese translations, completing a circle of knowledge. Tonkin Free School itself reportedly distributed some materials translated from Chinese reform tracts and possibly from Japanese educational texts. For example, lessons on world geography or on constitutional government may have come from either Chinese or Japanese publications that the school had obtained.

The concept of a “public sphere” where citizens engage with issues through print was taking root in East Asian Sinosphere. The call for newspapers also ties into the

⁹⁹ *Đồng văn* is the shortened title of *Đại Nam đồng văn nhật báo* 大南同文日報 (Đại Nam Newspaper in Shared Chinese Script, possibly initiated in 1891); see Đỗ Quang Hưng, Nguyễn Thành, and Dương Trung Quốc. *Lịch sử báo chí Việt Nam 1865-1945* (History of Vietnamese Newspapers 1865-1945), Hanoi: Đại học Quốc gia, 2000, p. 40.

¹⁰⁰ James L. Huffman, *Creating a Public – People and Press in Meiji Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), p. 226.

¹⁰¹ Alberta A. Altman, “The Press and Social Cohesion during a Period of Change: The Case of Early Meiji Japan,” *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 15:4 (1981): 865-876.

earlier point about script: only by using Quốc ngữ could newspapers reach a mass Vietnamese audience, since literacy in chữ Hán was limited to scholars. Thus, the first (national script) and the sixth (newspapers) strategies were synergistic. Indeed, within a few decades, Vietnam saw an explosion of Quốc ngữ journalism, much of it carrying the torch first lit by Tonkin Free School.

In comparative perspective, China's late Qing and early Republic period saw the newspaper become an engine of modernization and politicization. Reform clubs and reading societies formed around newspaper kiosks. The manifesto's authors clearly wanted to replicate that pattern in Vietnam: a literate populace informed by a domestic press would be harder to misgovern or oppress. Colonial rulers understood this threat; hence French authorities censored and restricted Vietnamese publications heavily. Japan, having no colonial overlord to restrict it, used the press both for internal reforms and external influence.

Thus, the sixth method encapsulates the creation of a modern public discourse. The newspaper was the 20th-century equivalent of what the "town criers" or village elders had been in pre-modern times for spreading news, but far more powerful and far-reaching. By urging the establishment of a Vietnamese-run press, the reformers were in effect preparing the foundation for public education outside the classroom, continuing the school's mission on a wider scale. This recognition that schools alone could not enlighten tens of thousands – but newspapers could – was a strategic insight shared by all modernizing movements in East Asia.

The above-discussed six strategies reflect *VMTHS*'s ambitious vision for reform, blending Confucian moral ideals with modernist, pragmatic solutions. The text presents a roadmap for Vietnam's transformation, calling for a society that is literate, scientifically inclined, and globally competitive.

The conclusion of *VMTHS* delivers an urgent and passionate call to action, warning that failure to modernize will lead to Vietnam's continued subjugation and decline. The text asserts that Vietnamese civilization has long remained static, unable to transition to the perpetual dynamism that characterizes European progress. It critiques the tendency of Vietnamese intellectuals and officials to cling to outdated traditions, arguing that mere cosmetic reforms or rhetorical embellishments are insufficient to bring about real change: "Mending and Rectifying' 補苴救正, 'Adorning and Exaggerating' 粉飾鋪張, appear insufficient to be identified as civilization." 【14b】

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The text emphasizes that modernization requires a deliberate and systematic transformation, urging readers to dismantle obsolete institutions and adopt forward-thinking governance, education, and industrial policies. It calls for radical action, using militaristic imagery to stress the necessity of decisive reforms: "Take broadaxes and long-handled swords to tear down the old wall; raise red flags and red banners in order to ascend the new stage." 【16a-16b】¹⁰³ It also underscores the importance of

¹⁰² 補苴救正, 粉飾鋪張非不足以號文明. Also see note 49.

¹⁰³ 闊斧大刀以斷故壘紅標赤幟以登新臺. (pp. 233-234).

cultivating intellectual dynamism, warning that a society that fails to foster competition and critical thought will stagnate: “It is essential to secure that people in the country start competing on account of thoughts, and initiate thinking on account of competition.” 【16b】¹⁰⁴

Throughout its conclusion, the text draws heavily on global examples to illustrate the urgency of reform. Together with Japan celebrated as a model of successful modernization, having embraced European civilization within three decades and emerged as a formidable power,¹⁰⁵ Siam (modern Thailand) is also acknowledged for its emerging efforts to adopt Western practices,¹⁰⁶ while China, despite its historical conservatism, is depicted as having reluctantly but decisively begun its own reform process.¹⁰⁷ The text warns that Vietnam, if it does not follow suit, will be left behind in the race for global progress. It laments the country’s passivity, contrasting it with the transformative efforts of other nations.¹⁰⁸ A sense of historical determinism pervades the conclusion, as the text suggests that civilizations inevitably rise and fall based on their willingness to adapt. The idea of infinite progress is emphasized, suggesting that what is considered “civilized” today may soon be outdated, and that Vietnam must continuously strive to keep pace with global advancements. Ultimately, the text asserts that true civilization is achieved not through passive admiration of tradition but through deliberate and sustained efforts toward enlightenment and progress. It envisions a future where Vietnam embraces intellectual competition, industrial advancement, and political reform to secure its place in the modern world. The final passage employs powerful mechanical metaphors, comparing the reform process to a self-winding clock that must be properly set in motion to function:

Like the rules of winding up a striking clock, when the clock axle has fully been wound up, this will bring its results. It is also like the exact response of the thermometer to the air [temperature] without a tiny error. 【11:16b】¹⁰⁹.

By presenting modernization as an inevitable and necessary transformation, *VMTHS* positions itself as both a warning and a roadmap. It compels its readers to recognize that Vietnam stands at a crossroads: either it embraces reform and joins the ranks of civilized nations, or it remains stagnant and risks perpetual subjugation.

Intertextuality in New Learning Strategies for the Advancement of Civilization: Connections to Chinese and Japanese Reformist Thought

¹⁰⁴ 使一國之人因思想而生競爭因競爭而生思想. (p. 234).

¹⁰⁵ See note 49.

¹⁰⁶ 不聞之暹羅乎?十年前與歐洲通派,子弟往學,今已略有新政可觀矣! (p. 15a).

¹⁰⁷ See note 50.

¹⁰⁸ See note 51.

¹⁰⁹ 如自鳴鐘之挾法條而機軸悉至焉其取效也如寒暑針之應空氣而絲毫不差焉. (p. 234).

Đặng Thai Mai's Vietnamese translation of *VMTHS* contains only 47 footnotes, primarily serving an explanatory function. However, a close examination of the original Classical Chinese text reveals over 100 intertextual references that could be incorporated into new Vietnamese and English translations. Unlike Đặng Thai Mai's annotations, which focus on clarifying terminology and historical context, these additional intertextual notes would highlight the text's extensive connections with contemporary reformist writings. By systematically mapping these intellectual linkages—spanning the late Qing dynasty, Meiji Japan, and the broader East Asian discourse on modernization, education reform, and national renewal—such a translation would more fully illuminate *VMTHS*'s engagement with contemporary debates. Without these referential notes, modern scholars risk overlooking the depth of its intellectual entanglements and its position within the wider reformist movement.

As shown in Appendix 1, *VMTHS* engages extensively with Chinese and Japanese reformist discourse from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The text draws significantly from key figures such as Liang Qichao, Kang Youwei, Fukuzawa Yukichi, and Zheng Guanying, integrating their ideas on governance, education, and national self-strengthening. Specific references suggest that *VMTHS* borrows arguments from Liang Qichao's essays in *Shiwu bao* and *Xinmin Congbao*, particularly his discussions on constitutionalism, industrialization, and the role of education in national renewal. Similarly, Kang Youwei's advocacy for institutional reform, as expressed in *Riben Shumu zhi* 日本書目志 (*Catalogue of Japanese books*) and *Shang Qingdi Wushu* 上清帝五書 (*The Fifth Memorial to the Emperor*), resonates with the structural changes *VMTHS* envisions for Vietnam. From the Japanese context, Fukuzawa Yukichi's *Gakumon no Susume* 学問のすすめ (*Encouragement of Learning*) and reformist periodicals such as *Xinmin Congbao* provide a model for how Western political philosophy and technological advancements were adapted to East Asia, influencing the intellectual framework of *VMTHS*.

Beyond these East Asian influences, *VMTHS* also reflects engagement with Western thought, primarily through Chinese translations of European works. Treatises on international law, geography, and industrialization, widely circulated in late Qing China via missionary-run presses and Shanghai-based publishers, likely contributed to the worldview presented in *VMTHS*. Texts such as *Wanguo Gongfa* 萬國公法 (*Principles of International Law*) and *Shengshi Weiyan* 盛世危言 (*Words of Warning in Times of Prosperity 1893-1900*) appear to inform *VMTHS*'s arguments on sovereignty, diplomacy, and economic modernization. These references underscore how *VMTHS* does not merely advocate for reform but actively participates in a transnational intellectual conversation about modernization strategies for non-Western societies.

Recognizing the textual interconnections in *VMTHS*, this paper now provides concrete examples to illustrate how intertextuality manifests within the text. These examples include direct borrowings from reformist writings, adaptations of key political concepts, and strategic alignments with contemporary debates on governance,

education, and economic development. By demonstrating specific instances where *VMTHS* engages with Chinese, Japanese, and Western sources, this discussion underscores the depth of intellectual exchange shaping Vietnamese reformist thought. Understanding these intertextual references allows for a more nuanced appreciation of how Vietnamese intellectuals positioned themselves within the broader East Asian and global reformist movements, selectively appropriating ideas to construct a localized vision for Vietnam's modernization.

Liang Qichao's Concept of a "Young China" vs. "Old China"

VMTHS describes China as "Forever-Old Country" 永舊國 and "Conservative country" 守舊國, mirroring Liang Qichao's distinction between "Young China" and "Old China" in his 1900 essay *Shaonian Zhongguo Shuo* 少年中國說 (*Theory of Young China*). Liang argued that China's progress depended on fostering a youthful, reformist spirit while breaking away from its rigid traditions. By adopting this framework, *VMTHS* implicitly calls for Vietnam to embrace a "young" reformist trajectory rather than stagnate in an "old" Confucian order.

Liang Qichao's Theory of the "Age of Transition"

VMTHS employs terms such as "External world" 外界 and "Internal World" 內界, concepts central to Liang's *Guodu shidai lun* 過度時代論 (*On the Age of Transition*, 1901). Liang's argument that reformers faced resistance from both internal conservatism and external pressures finds echoes in *VMTHS*'s critique of Vietnam's intellectual stagnation. The text suggests that Vietnam, like China, is caught in an age of transition and must actively shape its future by embracing modern knowledge and institutions.

The Japanese Model of Fangzao 仿造

The term Fangzao 仿造 (reproduction or imitation of foreign models) appears in *VMTHS*, reflecting a key concept in late Qing reformist discourse. This term was extensively used by Zheng Guanying in *Shengshi weiyan*, where he discusses Japan's strategic adaptation of Western technology and governance. Zheng emphasized that Japan succeeded by not merely adopting Western technology but by systematically localizing and improving upon it. *VMTHS*'s emphasis on "imitating foreign methods while maintaining national identity" aligns closely with this framework, suggesting a Vietnamese approach to modernization modeled after Japan's success.

Republicanism and Political Reforms

VMTHS's discussion of "Constitutionalism" 立憲政體 and "monarchical republicanism" 君民共和政體 mirrors debates in late Qing China about political reform. Liang Qichao's essay "Shizhong dexing xiangfan chengyi" 試中德性相反成議 discusses the struggles between republican and monarchical factions in post-1789 France, using this as a comparative framework for China's reformist aspirations. *VMTHS*'s discussion of governance reform follows Liang's model, arguing that Vietnam, like China, must adopt constitutionalism to balance traditional authority with modern governance structures.

Kang Youwei's Reformist Agenda

Kang Youwei's radical calls for institutional reforms resonate throughout *VMTHS*. In his *Shang qingdi wushu*, Kang warned that without systemic reform, China would face inevitable decline. *VMTHS* echoes this sentiment in its critique of Vietnam's civil service examination system, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and reluctance to adopt new governance models. The text advocates for educational reforms similar to those Kang proposed, including replacing classical literary studies with practical subjects aligned with state development.

The Role of the Press in Political Reform

Liang Qichao's belief in newspapers as catalysts for political enlightenment finds strong resonance in *VMTHS*. Liang argued that major Western newspapers acted as platforms for parliamentary discourse, fostering civic engagement and holding governments accountable. *VMTHS* similarly underscores the necessity of newspapers for enlightening the people and challenging entrenched political inertia.

Additionally, *VMTHS* appears to be in conversation with *Xinmin Congbao*, a periodical established by Liang Qichao in 1902 in Japan. This publication advocated political reform, industrialization, and national strengthening—key themes mirrored in *VMTHS*. Similarly, Zheng Guanying's *Shengshi weiyuan* warned of China's decline due to lack of national consciousness, ideas that *VMTHS* adapts to Vietnam's own situation. Moreover, the reference to the need for a strong press aligns with articles in *Shibao* 時報, a reformist newspaper in Shanghai that championed similar arguments about political modernization and national self-strengthening.

The Meiji Restoration and Japanese Reformism

The influence of Japan's Meiji reforms is evident throughout *VMTHS*, particularly in discussions on education, industry, and governance. The text references Fukuzawa Yukichi's advocacy for Western studies and his role in founding Keio University, which became a model for Japan's modernization. *VMTHS* suggests that Vietnam should adopt a similar educational model, emphasizing practical knowledge over rote

learning. The text also references Japan's rapid industrialization as a case study for Vietnam's economic reform.

Civil Service Examination Reforms and Their Qing Context

One of the most critical reformist arguments in *VMTHS* is its critique of the civil service examination. The text argues that rote memorization of Confucian classics and rigid formats such as the eight-legged essay were detrimental to national progress. This stance closely parallels late Qing discussions on educational reform. In 1905, the Qing government officially abolished the civil service examination system, recognizing its failure to produce administrative talent capable of handling modernization.

VMTHS references the Keju Gua, a satirical critique of the system found in reformist periodicals like *Zhuangxie zazhi* 莊諧雜誌. The text also mentions *maixingzhiwei* 賣姓之圍 (the practice of wagering on candidate surnames), which refers to *weixing* 闡姓, a form of betting on the surnames of top examination scorers. This practice was widely reported in newspapers such as *Shen bao* 申報, *Dianshizhai Pictorial* 點石齋畫報, *Zhongwai gongbao* 中外公報, and *Hu bao* 滬報, highlighting its popularity and moral concerns regarding the commercialization of scholarly success.

The *VMTHS* is deeply interwoven with contemporary East Asian reformist thought. Through its engagement with the ideas of Liang Qichao, Kang Youwei, Fukuzawa Yukichi, and Zheng Guanying, the text demonstrates how Vietnamese reformists were actively responding to the intellectual currents shaping China and Japan at the turn of the 20th century. Moreover, the intertextual connections between *VMTHS* and various reformist writings, newspapers, and educational debates highlight the necessity for a more comprehensive translation and annotation. As evidenced by the discrepancy between Đặng Thai Mai's translation and the extensive intertextual references in the original text, future editions of *VMTHS* should incorporate these intellectual linkages. Such an approach would provide a fuller understanding of how this text participated in broader East Asian reformist movements and ensure that modern scholars do not overlook its contributions to the discourse on modernization, education, and national renewal. By synthesizing influences from Chinese and Japanese reform movements, *VMTHS* advocates for Vietnam's modernization while engaging in a broader transnational discourse of reform and progress.

Vietnam's Place in East Asian Intellectual Currents

Tonkin Free School and its *VMTHS* exemplify the intricate interplay of intellectual currents that shaped Vietnam's modernization efforts in the early 20th century. As this study has demonstrated, Vietnamese reformers did not operate in isolation; rather, they actively engaged with Chinese and Japanese reformist thought, selectively borrowing and adapting ideas to address their unique colonial and socio-political circumstances.

By placing Vietnam's reformist discourse within the broader East Asian intellectual landscape, this paper has highlighted Tonkin Free School's role as both a conduit and a filter for transnational knowledge transfer.

The analysis of *VMTHS*'s intertextual references has revealed how Vietnamese intellectuals, like their Chinese and Japanese counterparts, grappled with the challenges of modernization, governance reform, and national renewal. The text's engagement with the ideas of Liang Qichao, Kang Youwei, Fukuzawa Yukichi, and Zheng Guanying underscores Vietnam's intellectual participation in the larger reformist movements of the late Qing dynasty and Meiji Japan. However, the study has also shown that Vietnamese scholars did not merely emulate foreign models; they reconfigured these ideas within a distinctly Vietnamese framework, advocating for a pragmatic approach to modernization that balanced national identity with the demands of global change.

A key insight from this study is the role of Classical Chinese as both an enabler and a constraint in Vietnam's engagement with reformist discourse. While Classical Chinese facilitated Vietnam's access to reformist thought from China and Japan, it also obscured the sources of these ideas, leading to later misunderstandings about the originality of Vietnamese intellectual contributions. Furthermore, the reliance on indirect translations—first from Classical Chinese to modern Vietnamese and later to English—has further distanced *VMTHS* from its intertextual network, reinforcing the need for a more comprehensive scholarly engagement with the original text.

By examining the adaptation, transformation, and re-interpretation of reformist ideas in *VMTHS*, this paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Vietnam's intellectual history. Tonkin Free School movement was not merely a localized expression of reform; it was part of a broader East Asian conversation about civilization, governance, and national survival. Future research should continue to explore the mechanisms of knowledge transmission in the Sinosphere, particularly the ways in which Vietnam, as both a recipient and a contributor, engaged with and reshaped transnational intellectual currents.

Ultimately, the story of Tonkin Free School serves as a testament to the dynamism and complexity of early Vietnamese reformist thought. It reminds us that modernization in East Asia was not a unidirectional process but rather a series of negotiated, contested, and localized adaptations of global ideas. By reassessing Vietnam's place within this intellectual exchange, we gain a deeper appreciation of the country's historical agency and the broader patterns of knowledge circulation that continue to shape modern intellectual landscapes.

Appendix 1:
Potential References for the Văn Minh Tân Học Sách

The *Văn Minh Tân Học Sách* (*New Learning Strategies for the Advancement of Civilization*), published in 1904, was a product of Vietnam's intellectual engagement with contemporary East Asian reformist thought. While the text's arguments for modernization, educational reform, and national renewal resonate with broader intellectual currents, tracing its intertextual influences requires careful examination of late 19th- and early 20th-century Chinese and Japanese reformist writings, as well as Western political, economic, and scientific treatises that were introduced to East Asia through translation.

This appendix provides a comprehensive bibliography of potential references that the authors of *VMTHS* may have consulted or drawn inspiration from. The selection includes works by prominent Chinese reformists such as Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei, who played crucial roles in shaping the intellectual climate of the late Qing reform movement. Many of their writings, circulated through newspapers and edited volumes, addressed key issues such as constitutionalism, industrialization, education reform, and national strengthening—concepts that closely align with the arguments presented in *VMTHS*. Additionally, the appendix includes major publications from Japan, where thinkers like Fukuzawa Yukichi and reformist periodicals such as *Xinmin Congbao* actively disseminated ideas on Western political philosophy, technological modernization, and self-strengthening strategies.

Beyond Chinese and Japanese influences, this bibliography also features Western works—ranging from treatises on international law and geography to historical accounts of the Meiji Restoration and European industrialization—that were translated into Chinese and widely read by East Asian reformers. These sources, introduced through various channels including Shanghai-based publishers and missionary-run presses, likely contributed to shaping the worldview and reformist aspirations reflected in *VMTHS*.

By compiling these references, this appendix aims to illuminate the intellectual landscape in which *VMTHS* was conceived. It serves as a foundation for further research into the transnational flow of ideas and the intricate process of textual borrowing, adaptation, and reinterpretation that characterized Vietnam's modernization efforts in the early 20th century.

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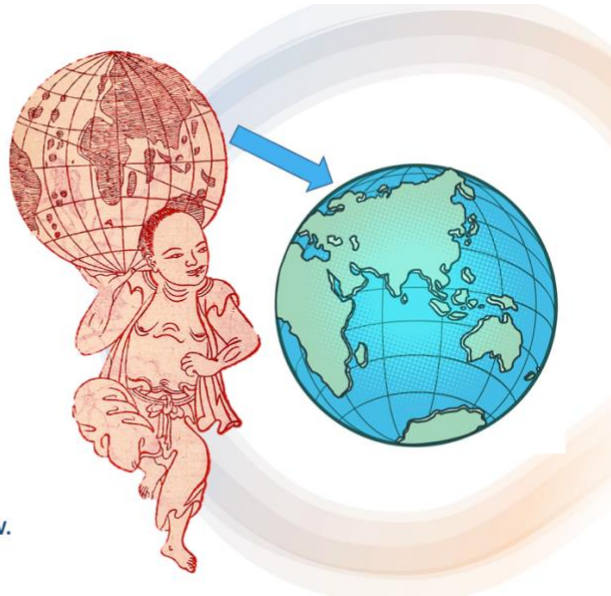
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Appendix 2:
The Icon of Tonkin Free School
and Pages from the *Văn minh Tân học sách*

**The Icon of
 Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục**

- Features a Vietnamese teenager carrying a globe.
- Symbolizes the burden and responsibility of modernization.
- The globe highlights Asia and Europe, emphasizing global awareness.
- Marks a departure from the traditional Sino-centric worldview.



The school's logo/icon represents an energetic Vietnamese teenager carrying the globe on his shoulder. This imagery conveys the aspirations of the school's founders, symbolizing the burden and responsibility of modernizing Vietnam in a rapidly changing world. Notably, the globe in the illustration prominently displays the Eastern hemisphere, with Asia and Europe clearly visible. This visualization of the world marks a significant departure from the traditional Sino-centric worldview, wherein Vietnam and other peripheral kingdoms were imagined in relation to a dominant Middle Kingdom (China). Instead, this new imagery reflects a growing awareness of global interconnectedness and Vietnam's place within a broader geopolitical framework.



Pages from the *Văn minh Tân học sách* (New Learning Strategies for the Advancement of Civilization)

Appendix 3: Some Principal Textbooks in Classical Chinese of Tonkin Free School

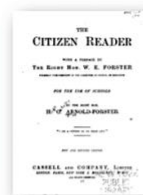
Some Principal Textbooks of Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục: *Chūgaku rinrishō* & Its Variants in China and Vietnam



Nhật Bản *Chūgaku rinrishō* (1899) → Trung Quốc *Lunli jiaoke fanben* (1903) → Việt Nam *Tân đính luân lý giáo khoa* (1907)

Tân Đính Luân Lý Giáo Khoa Thư 新訂倫理教科書 (Newly Edited Ethics Textbook), a Vietnamese adaptation of the Chinese *Lunli Jiaoke Fanben* 倫理教科範本, which itself was derived from the Japanese *Chūgaku Rinrishō*.

The Citizen Reader: For the Use of Schools (1885) by H. O. (Hugh Oakeley), Arnold-Forster, 1855-1909



Japanese *tokuhon* 読本 ("Reader"/"Primer")
Wilson's Readers or McGuffey's Reader

During the period from 1887 from 1903 there were a number of books published with *Kokumin dokuhon* 国民読本 in their titles, such as:
Kokumin dokuhon by 井田秀生 (1887),
Kokumin dokuhon by Kouga Senzaburou 高賀 詮三郎 (1890),
Kokumin dokuhon - Koutou shougakkou you 国民読本: 高等小学校用 by Bungakusha Henshūsho 文学社編輯所 (1897), or
Dai kokumin dokuhon 大国民読本 by Ichikawa Genzou 市川 源三 (1903).

Foster's *Citizen Reader*
AND
Other Referential Works in
Western Languages and
Japanese



Guomin duben (1903)
by Zhu Shuren 朱樹人,
and *Tân Đính Quốc Dân Độc Bản* (1907) by
the Tonkin Free School,
Vietnam

Tân Đính Quốc Dân Độc Bản 新訂國民讀本 (Newly Revised Citizen's Reader), an edited version of the Chinese *Guomin Duben* 國民讀本, [Slide 8] inspired by Hugh Oakeley Arnold Foster's *The Citizen Reader for the Use of Schools* (1885) and a series of Japanese publications on citizenship.