THE SEARCH FOR MODERNITY:
LITERATURE AND VIETNAMESE NATIONALISM, 1900-1939

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INTRODUCTION

The French colonial period of Vietnamese history is well studied. Numerous works have been published over the years which have analyzed the colonial administration as well as its ever-changing policy. The most recent comprehensive study is written by Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hemery entitled *Indochine: La Colonisation Ambigue* [Indochina: The Ambiguous Colonisation] (1995). In this book, these two professors of history at the Paris-Jessieu painted a complete fresco of the French venture in the five countries of former French Indochina. Nothing is missing from this vast panorama, at least from the view of the colonial historian. What would have made this book complete is the examination of the anti-colonial movements.

A more recent partial but indirect expose of the French colonial history of Vietnam is Mark Philip Bradley’s work titled *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950*. As its title indicates, this is primarily a study of perceptions formed of the United States by the Vietnamese and of the Vietnamese people by Americans. This book reevaluates the origin of U.S. intervention in Vietnam dating it back to 1919 rather than the commonly accepted period of the Cold War Era. Bradley’s argument for such an early date is that it was when the Americans first gathered knowledge about Vietnam and its peoples. This book shows that the Americans had formed a negative view of the Vietnamese based on sparse and inadequate information.
from French sources. It also gives the readers the psychological dimension of French colonial policy and practice in Vietnam. The two books give extensive bibliographies that include practically all the important and core details on the French colonial practice in Vietnam. Both books give extensive bibliographies that include practically all of the important works on the French in Indochina and particularly in the three countries of Vietnam.

Studies concentrating on the phenomenon of anti-colonialism or nationalism in Vietnam are not lacking, although over the last 20 years, they tend to give more attention to the post-Geneva (1954) Era. Perhaps one of the most influential authors within the field of Vietnamese history and more specifically in the area of Vietnamese nationalism is David G. Marr. His two important works, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* and *Vietnamese Anticolonialism* delves into the links between Vietnamese identity and nationalism. *Vietnamese Anticolonialism* is more of a historical account of those Vietnamese leaders who resisted French colonial rule. *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, on the other hand attempts to analyze the impact of the colonial world on the Vietnamese traditional realm where morals and ethics occupied a significant place in the intellectual arena. William J. Duiker’s *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam* chronicles and provides a bibliographic account of the formation of various groups of Vietnamese nationalists and their more prominent leaders. Nguyen Khac Vien’s *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam* likewise provides an examination of various Vietnamese traditions,
but this production is more of an attempt to show how traditional Vietnamese influences like Confucianism made Vietnam more disposed to Marxism and Communism.

On another level, *Les Frontieres du Vietnam*, edited by P.B. Lafont presents a substantial analysis of the formation of Vietnam’s borders. This work not only chronicles Vietnam’s expansion, but it also links this development with the nature of Vietnam’s interaction with her neighbors. In addition to this, *Les Frontieres* also explores the imaginative world which helped in the formation of the Vietnamese frontier. Maps, historical treatises, and physical landmarks such as statues, pagodas, and religious buildings all served to instill a notion of set boundaries in the Vietnamese mind even in periods where no such borders existed. This compilation, however, is really set before the colonial period and thus can only describe the nature of Vietnam’s periphery at the time of the initial French incursion. It does not provide any analysis of the effect of French colonization on the Vietnamese boundaries and on the Vietnamese consciousness of these lines.

None of the books mentioned above has really delved into the intellectual realm of print such as the newspaper, education and the written language in relation to the Vietnamese nationalists’ search for a means to obtaining sovereignty from the French. This paper is an attempt to complement the previously mentioned works by an examination of Vietnamese nationalists of the Inter-War years and their view of the newspaper as a tool for the dissemination of ideas. The value that these nationalists
placed on this form of print meant that they had to support education and the development of the Vietnamese written language in order to take advantage of the full potential of this means of communication.

The fact that these nationalists were writing with the assumption that they were addressing the Vietnamese masses brings to the forefront the eventual need to address the public sphere in Vietnam. This work, though, is not an analysis of the audience to whom Vietnamese nationalists addressed. Rather, it is an inquiry into the links of commonality within Vietnamese society and how they evolved in the new French colonial world. A probe into the nature of the Vietnamese public sphere and into the question of whether or not a public sphere among the Vietnamese populace had even existed in the Inter-War Vietnam would be both an interesting and significant task. However, we will assume here that a public sphere, whatever its nature may have been, did exist in 20th century Vietnam.

The public sphere referred to here, is defined by Jurgen Habermas, the author of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, as a domain such as a newspaper or any other type of media where private individuals meet in a public realm to engage the governing authorities in discussion. More importantly, the public sphere in the world of letters used public opinion to keep the state updated and informed on the needs of society.¹

¹Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence.
This work will attempt to establish the fact that the Vietnamese were a distinct people who were consciously aware that Vietnam existed as a separate entity both physically and culturally. This uniqueness was further reinforced by traditional Vietnamese literature which both celebrated and defined what it meant to be a true Vietnamese subject. French colonization did force the Vietnamese to reevaluate their definition of themselves but it did not erase the Vietnamese notion of themselves as a separate people. Vietnamese nationalists of the early 1900s who witnessed the last stand and ultimate failure of the Vietnamese royal line and of the scholar-gentry using traditional Vietnamese methods of resistance had to explain Vietnamese subjugation. These men lived in a world where European technological, social and political forms of organization were suddenly introduced to them. They examined super-powers such as America, France and Japan for a means to freeing Vietnam of its colonial bonds. These Vietnamese nationalists often tried to function within the boundaries of the colonial environment.

Chapter one explores the notion of Vietnamese distinctness. The concept that the Vietnamese were a people who were unique from their neighbors was an essential aspect of Vietnamese nationalism. Vietnamese leaders of the 20th century addressed their audience with the assumption that the Vietnamese saw themselves as a separate people. Therefore, they had no need to create or develop a new idea of nationhood. These nationalist could draw on the conception of Vietnam that had developed long before

French colonization.

Vietnam, unlike some of its Southeast Asian contemporaries such as the Philippines or Indonesia, had its own distinct territory before French colonization. Its borders were formed through centuries of interaction with its neighbors. The Vietnamese frontier also developed along lines of physical and defensive demarcations. Within these borders, a unique Vietnamese culture formed over time. This culture reflected the amalgamation of both Chinese and Southeast Asian influences with indigenous interests and beliefs. The Vietnamese were similar to the Chinese by virtue of a shared intellectual culture. However, local interests linked to the Southeast Asian area made the Vietnamese aware that they were not Chinese. Vietnamese literature served to further enhance the Vietnamese concept of themselves as a separate people. Maps, books, and histories recorded the interactions between Vietnam and her neighbors. They celebrated and embraced traits that they believed distinguished the Vietnamese from their enemies and made them true subjects and loyal subjects of Vietnam. Vietnamese literature also mapped true and ideal notions of the Vietnamese kingdom.

French colonization forced the Vietnamese to change their views of themselves and of their enemies. The French changed Vietnam's physical, social and ideological world. Vietnamese leaders now found that they could not use ideas that had developed through centuries of interaction with their neighbors to oust this new enemy. They had to explain why the traits that had made them uniquely Vietnamese failed to keep them from
being inferior in their own lands. French occupation, however, never erased the Vietnamese concept of themselves as a distinct people. It simply forced them to re-define what differentiated them from their neighbors and from the French.

Chapter two is an analysis of Vietnamese literature and the Vietnamese intellectual world. Books and newspapers were rare before the twentieth century. Knowledge usually came from wood printed, hand written, and carved epigraphical materials. The most common form of literature in Vietnam was the Vietnamese novel called the “truyen.” These novels were often Chinese in origin, but the Vietnamese adopted these works as their own. These printed works served to re-enforce the traits and values that the Vietnamese admired.

French colonialism transformed the Vietnamese intellectual sphere by shifting the way that Vietnamese scholars viewed literature. Written works were valued less for their moral instruction. The introduction of the printing press and western forms of printed materials provided new means of expression for Vietnamese intellectuals. Short stories, essays, and newspaper articles became the more common. Authors also increasingly wrote such works for financial gain rather than for moral edification.

The newspaper provided a powerful means of expression for Vietnamese nationalists. These intellectuals saw the newspaper's potential in linking the scholar-gentry with the masses. However, before Vietnamese nationalists could effectively use the newspapers as a means of disseminating their ideas, they had to overcome the obstacles of
introducing this new form of print to the Vietnamese audience. In addition to this, French censorship of the newspaper greatly prohibited the extent of expression that Vietnamese nationalists could have. It shaped the way nationalists phrased their message to the Vietnamese people.

The change in the Vietnamese intellectual world and the introduction of new methods of communication such as the newspaper presented a challenge to Vietnamese leaders of the early 1900s. Chapter Three is an analysis of men like Phan Boi Chau, Phan Chau Trinh and the members of the Dong Kinh Free School who had grown up in a country which found that it could no longer use traditional methods of resistance to defeat the French. These men grew up in the shadow of the failed Can Vuong rebellion against the French. This last rebellion, led by the Vietnamese Emperor Ham Nghi and his loyal supporters, represented a defeat of the traditional Vietnamese means of identification and opposition which had been successful in centuries of interaction with the Chinese.

Vietnamese nationalists of the early 1900s devoted their lives to finding a means to free Vietnam from the French. They had to explain why the Vietnamese were now French subjects in their own country. In their anti-colonial efforts, these men, although greatly different from each other in ideology, found a common goal. They wanted to modernize Vietnam. These Vietnamese nationalists saw modernity as the technological, scientific, social and political reforms which would make Vietnam an equal to her European colonizers as well as to super powers such as America and Japan.
These Vietnamese nationalists of the early 1900s formed links between the men of the Can Vuong generation of the 1880s and 1890s and the more westernized representatives of the 1920s. They helped change the traditional viewpoints of the Vietnamese as people and Vietnam as a country. More importantly, these men kept the tradition of resistance against foreign rule alive.

Education played a significant role in the Vietnamese nationalists' search for modernity. Due to their Confucian heritage, the Vietnamese greatly valued education. Vietnamese nationalists living between 1925 to 1939 were distinctly aware of the link between education and modernization. The shift towards literacy increased its importance to these intellectuals. Chapter Four retraces the development of the French training schools as well as the formation the colonial Franco-Vietnamese schools in Vietnam. The original French training schools were set up to produce government personnel. These schools focused on subjects such as French, mathematics, physics, science and history. In addition to this, they also taught technical skills such as stenography, typing, accounting, and surveying. The French also developed the Franco-Vietnamese system after they abolished the indigenous Vietnamese schools.

The formation of the French training schools and of the Franco-Vietnamese schools did not mitigate the problem of education in Vietnam. These schools were poorly staffed and often underfunded. Plus, there were not enough schools to serve a population that demanded to be educated. It soon became evident to Vietnamese nationalists that the
French had failed in their "civilizing mission." Through their writings, these men questioned France's sincerity in educating the Vietnamese. They pushed for educational reform and for the development of *quoc-ngu*, the romanized form of the Vietnamese spoken language.

Education was also important to the Vietnamese because it highlighted a need for a common written language. Although the Vietnamese shared a common spoken language, traditional Vietnamese literature was based on the Chinese script. The fact that the Vietnamese written and spoken language did not correspond was an issue that Vietnamese nationalists debated continually upon. *Quoc-ngu*, the romanized form of the Vietnamese spoken language was initially supported by the French and their Christian adherents. Overtime an increasing number of the scholar-gentry began to espouse and develop this script. They translated Western and Chinese works into *quoc-ngu*, further enriching the Vietnamese language. By the 1930s, a majority of the intelligentsia were committed to developing *quoc-ngu* as a means towards modernization and as a way to link the spoken and written language together.

What I have achieved in this work is to show that modernizing tools such as the newspaper, education and language hampered Vietnamese nationalists' ability to effectively communicate with the rest of the Vietnamese populace. It was not until they discarded their Confucian notions of the scholar-gentry as the ultimate Vietnamese leaders that these nationalists were able to effectively resist against French colonization.
CHAPTER 1
VIETNAMESE DISTINCTNESS AND FRENCH COLONIALISM

Vietnamese Distinctness

The Vietnamese conception of themselves as a separate people and as a uniquely distinct ethnicity served as a fundamental base for Vietnamese nationalist movements. Modern nationalism was closely linked to this notion. In many cases, the idea of “ethnicity” served as a catalyst for the formation of a national state. These pre-modern ethnic communities functioned as the base of a group or a country’s notion of their national character. They were the ethnic cores around which modern nations could form. These ideas served as catalysts that could invoke images of a nation. In turn, these images connected and stirred the imagination of this nucleus.² Characteristics used to define any ethnic community were often ambiguous and definitions of what made up a certain ethnic group varied among both those within the group as well as those outside of the core. Therefore, nationalists had to choose the qualities that would appeal to the largest audience. They had to use myths and symbols that this core could relate to. This link gave nationalism its force.³

²Anthony D. Smith, in his work Nations and Nationalism in the Global Era, emphasizes the importance of pre-modern ethnic communities. In his opinion, these entities were the essential base for nationalism and national movements in the modern era.

The notion that the Vietnamese were a separate people served as an essential cohesive bond for Vietnamese leaders of the early decades of the 20th Century. Nationalists addressed their audience under the assumption that the Vietnamese saw themselves as a distinct people who distinguished themselves from their neighbors. These leaders never questioned whether the Vietnamese existed as a singular group. They appealed to the concept of distinctness that had existed within Vietnam long before French Colonialism. French colonialism shifted and perhaps sharpened Vietnamese conceptions of themselves as a people. However, it did not create these notions.

Distinctness as Defined by Borders

Vietnam, unlike some of its colonized contemporaries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, or Malaysia, had existed as an entity before French colonization. The Vietnamese possessed a definite territory which separated them from their neighbors. Three main factors were influential in the development of the region’s borders: the Chinese push south and Vietnamese protection of their Northern borders, the Vietnamese colonization South towards the Mekong Delta, and the establishment of a defensive line along the Western border. Due to these elements, the region’s contours had already consolidated to a form which closely resembled the Vietnam of the present by the time the French commenced their initial incursions onto Vietnamese territory.

The Northern limit of the Vietnamese frontier was formed through centuries of interaction with the Chinese. Chinese movement south into the mountainous and seaward
regions of the North had commenced long before the first century. Here, the Chinese collided against the realm of the Hung Lords, the origin of the Vietnamese nation, and established a limit between the two domains. Due to the complex history between China and Vietnam in which Vietnam was often viewed by its Chinese contemporaries as the southern frontier, this line was more of an administrative demarcation than an actual border of a nation. It was not until the 10th century that this boundary became the frontier of a state as a result of the creation of an independent Vietnamese kingdom. The formation of the first Vietnamese dynasties allowed Vietnam to transform itself into a state capable of challenging Chinese sovereignty. This opposition created a long history of resistance. Vietnamese literature and mythology abounded with stories of heroic men and women who risked their lives to oppose Chinese incursions. Even the Chinese had to admit that the Vietnamese did not accept subjugation easily. The official records of the Ch‘ing Dynasty highlighted Chinese acknowledgment of Vietnam’s spirit of rebelliousness.

The Vietnamese are indeed not a reliable people. An occupation does not last very long before they raise their arms against us and expel us from their country. The history of past dynasties has proved this fact.

In defending their border against constant Chinese intrusions, the Vietnamese proved that they were not only distinct from the Chinese, but that they could endure as a separate

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Vietnamese movement towards South and the Mekong Delta was a slow progression occurring over many centuries. Called “Nam-Tien” [progression towards the south], this phenomenon was considered one of the constants within Vietnamese history. From their point of origin near the Red River, the Vietnamese successively occupied the coastal plains moving towards the Truong Son. Their occupation of the lower regions of the peninsula brought them into contact with the southern Kingdom of Champa, which had extended north up to Hoanh-son. Early sources show that this culture, highly influenced by India, seemed to have its origins in the 2nd century and had developed a strong economic base capable of feeding and encouraging an abundant population. Over the centuries Vietnamese incursions had slowly chipped away at Champa’s borders until Champa as a kingdom ceased to exist.

Expansion into the Kingdom of Champa was accomplished through diverse forms. Wars waged by the Vietnamese against Champa were often presented as punitive expeditions. Victory was perceived as both a feat of man and of the divine will of heaven. Diplomatic arrangements served as an additional method of infiltration. In 1697, the Hue Court installed a prefecture in Panduranga, the southern region of Champa. This office,

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however, was limited since the prefect only had authority over the villages where the Vietnamese resided.\textsuperscript{8} Colonization by a vanguard of Vietnamese into an area which was often left neglected by the Chams was also a means of Vietnamese movement into this southern region. The Vietnamese filtered into areas left unoccupied by the Chams who considered these regions to be outside of the domain of their village’s protective spirit or within the realm of evil and malicious beings.\textsuperscript{9} The end result of Vietnamese domination was the creation of an administrative system, even in cases where Champa princes remained in control.\textsuperscript{10}

After having conquered the region to the south of the 18\textsuperscript{th} parallel, the Vietnamese shifted towards the Mekong Delta coming into collision with the Khmers, the people of what is now known as Cambodia. Their possessions, following the Mekong delta encompassed the Southern portions of present day Vietnam.\textsuperscript{11} Cambodia, also highly influenced by India, had fallen into decadence during the 15\textsuperscript{th} century due to external pressure from Ayutthaya and its Thai kings. In addition to this, its court was wracked by internal strife. This void in power allowed the Vietnamese to move into the southern part

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\textsuperscript{9}Ibid., 134.

\textsuperscript{10}Lafont, Les Frontieres, 18.

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., 13.
of the peninsula. The Vietnamese made their first military incursion into Cambodia in 1658 under the pretext of a border violation although no true borders had existed between the two at that time. From that point on, the Vietnamese and the Khmer courts were involved in constant military conflicts resulting in the progressive invasion and annexation of portions of Cambodia.

Vietnamese migration further pushed the formation of its frontier into Khmer land. Wars and internal conflicts within Vietnam such as the Tay Son revolt of the last part of the 18th century resulted in a flood of refugees moving into Cambodia. Vietnamese migration was also carried out in a deliberate fashion. From the start of the 17th century up until the middle of the 19th century, it followed a conscious policy implemented by the Nguyen Lords. This influx of Vietnamese migrants into Cambodia made it increasingly difficult to distinguish exactly where the frontier was. These districts established by the

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12Nguyen, Le Nam Tien, 125.


14The Tay Son revolt was led by three brothers, Nhac, Lu, and Hue Nguyen 1772 against the Nguyen lords of southern Vietnam. Named after the brother’s village of Tay Son, the revolt was a reaction to the exploitation of the peasants by local lords and mandarins. In 1777, with the support of both peasant and emerging merchant classes, the Tay Son defeated the Nguyen lords. In 1786, they proceeded North prevailing over the Trinh and disposed of the Le Monarch in 1787. Tay Son rule came to an end in 1802 when the last remaining Nguyen prince, Nguyen Anh, later known as Gia-Long, defeated the brothers to establish the Nguyen Dynasty. Joseph Buttinger, Vietnam: A Political History, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1968), 53-54. Le Thanh Koi, Le Viet Nam: Histoire et Civilisation, (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1955), 297.
Vietnamese were eventually placed under a Vietnamese prefecture. The Khmers, for the most part, did not resist Vietnamese colonization since the area taken was often sparsely populated. It is also essential to reiterate that for both the Kingdoms of the Khmer and of the Chams, the borders were fluid and not well defined.

Whereas Vietnam's borders towards the South and to the Mekong Delta were characterized by its relations with its neighbors, Vietnam's western limits rested on a double notion. They served as both a demarcation of the limits of the Vietnamese administrative system and as a line of defense against Montagnards and other ethnic populations. A series of military posts formed along the areas high terrain were known collectively as the Son Phong [protection of the mountains] protected the Vietnamese against Montagnard incursions. These posts, developed over the centuries, were completed during the 19th century by the Nguyen Dynasty. The Hai Phong [protection of the seas], running along the Vietnamese coastline, served as a defensive outpost against attacks from the sea.

Vietnam's written culture also affected Vietnamese notions of their boundaries. It instilled the idea of definitive borders within the Vietnamese collective memory, even at periods when this notion did not reflect reality. Maps, for instance, served to reinforce

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15Phoeun, *La Frontiere*, 143.


17Ibid., 21
the government's legitimacy. The Vietnamese used maps early in their history in order to create the popular support needed to administer and defend their borders. These maps were revised at times of conquest, of expansion or of protest- periods when the government's authority was in question.18

In addition to validating Vietnam's authority over its limits, the Vietnamese written culture also recorded Vietnamese thoughts regarding their borders. In 1076, when faced with the Chinese threat to the capital city of Thang Long, the Vietnamese general Ly Thuong Kict, proclaimed

    In the land of the South, the Emperor of the South must reside. This delimitation is clearly written in the celestial book. Why bandits, do you come to profane this space? You will be punished and completely defeated.19

Ly Thuong Kict clearly believed that Vietnam had definitive boundaries. His reference to the celestial book indicated that the Vietnamese had a relatively solid perception of a demarcation between Vietnam, the Southern kingdom, and its Northern limits. This written concept was sustained and passed on to Vietnamese generations after generations. In addition to this, the use of the celestial book hinted to the fact that Vietnam's borders were not formed by man, but by heaven itself. Since the Vietnamese borders were developed with heaven's blessing, the Chinese, in invading Vietnam, were


profaning Heaven's will.

The belief in Heaven's blessing bestowed a mythical quality onto the Vietnamese frontier. Additional mythical notions combining religion, indigenous beliefs, superstitions and the natural environment further reinforced the Vietnamese concept of their boundaries. Vietnamese folklore claimed that the limits were protected through the auspices of powerful and spiritual beings such as the Buddha, hermits, or protective genies. The Vietnamese marked their frontier with spiritually significant edifices such as stone foundations, pagodas, and stupas. In addition to this, they also used natural features within the landscape such as foothills, rocky outcrops, and steep slopes as markers for their borders. These characteristics within the environment, when combined with the protection and blessing of the gods and the local spirits, not only created natural delimitations, but also added a deeper significance to these boundaries.

Cultural Uniqueness

In addition to occupying a distinct territory, the Vietnamese were also culturally unique. They distinguished themselves from the Chinese in the North, from the Chams in the South, and from the Cambodians in the West. The impact of centuries of Sino-Vietnamese interaction made Vietnamese culture distinctly different from that of her neighbors. Vietnam had absorbed China's higher culture such as its education, literature and art. The countries that bordered it, such as Champa, were more influenced by the Indian heritage that had made its way up and across the peninsula. The Vietnamese
adopted Chinese technology and Chinese civil and moral laws. They also embraced various aspects of the Chinese organizational system. The Chinese concept of an administrative hierarchy which accorded a high level of respect for the bureaucracy highly influenced Vietnamese governance.

Traditional Vietnamese life revolved around the village, which could count up to several thousand members. A typical Vietnamese village was both cohesive and autonomous. In principal, its chief along with a council of nobles were elected by the residents as a collective. Those elected were often elders or respected members of the community. Each village assessed its own taxes and provided men for military and corvee services to the imperial government. It also maintained order through civil courts. Although mandarin courts existed, these were reserved for only certain crimes. The less serious crimes and property disputes were taken care of through local means. In addition to this, the village also took care of its own guardian cult. Residents descending from a common ancestor made up a clan. These members maintained ties to each other through the cult of ancestor worship.20

Like many of its Southeast Asian neighbors, rice cultivation formed the basis of Vietnamese economy. It was the mainstay of the Vietnamese diet as well as being the bulk of its trade. Houses situated in clusters and bordered by flooded rice fields were not uncommon sites in Vietnam. Cultivating rice required coordination on a village, provincial

and countrywide scale in order to build and regulate the multitude of dams, canals, and other hydraulic installations essential in its production. The Chinese administrative system allowed for this high degree of organization.

Confucian scholars often served as village leaders. Confucianism as an ideology was imported from China and became a pervading influence upon Vietnamese culture. Young Vietnamese men devoted years to mastering the Classics. Command of these Classics meant not only the possibility of a reputable and lucrative position in the government, but also that these men would be held in high esteem within Vietnamese society. Vietnamese boys from wealthy families or those who showed great potential commenced their studies for the Confucian exams at an early age. The exams tested men on their ability to master essay questions on literature, ethics, and politics, their grasp of poetry composition, and the writing of administrative texts. Candidates had to take two tests. Students who passed the first regional exams earned what would be construed as degrees, baccalaureates and licentiates in the West. These men were then appointed to mandarinal positions at lower echelons. They also earned the right to take imperial examinations given in the capital city under the authority of the emperor. The few who succeeded in the imperial exams were appointed to top administrative positions and became mandarins. They became members of a regime which administered the entire nation.

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If all Confucian scholars did not necessarily become mandarins, all mandarins were Confucian scholars due to their studies of the Confucian Classics. Those scholars who failed the exams or chose not to accept imperial appointments remained scholars, but were not mandarins. These men were exempted from corvees so they could spend their lives studying for the exams. To support themselves, many scholars worked as scribes, teachers and masters of ceremonies. They also drew up deeds, requests to mandarins and summons for members of their community. Confucian scholars kept village tax and civil records. Those who had studied medical texts often visited the sick and prescribed and sold medicines. Some who studied astrology told horoscopes for a small fee. In one form or another Confucian scholars integrated themselves within the villager’s daily life. Mandarins, on the other had, remained more detached due to their connection with the administration.

School teachers held the most honored positions within the village. Vietnamese schools were private initiatives taken on by rich families or a clan. Studying was so highly esteemed that it was rare to find a completely illiterate person. Families made great sacrifices to pay for a child’s education if he showed aptitude. Sometimes clans and villages contributed to educational costs for the honor of having a mandarin in their

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22Nguyen, Tradition, 25.

23Confucianism was a patriarchal philosophy. Only men were allowed to become Confucian scholars. The best that Vietnamese women could hope for was to marry an aspiring scholar or mandarin.
Confucianism in combination with ancestor worship and the veneration of the imperial court formed the base of Vietnam’s political and social structure. These three elements gave legitimacy to the existence of the monarchy and the scholar-gentry. They also linked the scholar-gentry with the rest of the Vietnamese populace. Confucianism, ancestor worship and the veneration of the imperial court called for a sense of obligation among all members of society. The mandarin, for instance, had rituals and sacrifices that he was obliged to perform in public. These duties gave him political and social power and they linked him to the peasantry.

Confucian morality also required a sense of reciprocal duty. Husbands and wives had to live together harmoniously. In order to be a true Confucian gentlemen, one also had to respect one’s parents, treat one’s neighbors with kindness, protect the weak, and show absolute submission to authority figures. Confucianism not only required those at the bottom of the society respect their superiors but it also called for those at the top to guard the weak. These three elements created an interdependent structure within Vietnamese society that linked the scholar-gentry to the peasants and the merchant classes.

Chinese culture heavily influenced the Vietnamese, yet the Vietnamese still

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24Nguyen, Tradition, 25.

maintained a sense of themselves as a distinct people. They were similar to the Chinese by virtue of their education and intellectual culture. However, common interests rooted in local positions made the Vietnamese distinctly aware that they were not Chinese and that they did not share the same national interests. These beliefs often ran parallel to those of Vietnam’s Southeast Asian neighbors. Localized aspects such as spirit beliefs and the notion of maintaining harmony with the environment were more akin to the beliefs of other Southeast Asian entities. 26 Vietnamese Buddhism, for example, was more similar to the Buddhism found in other parts of Southeast Asia than it was to Chinese Buddhism. In Vietnam, Buddhism appealed to the common people by identifying itself with the indigenous spirit cults associated with the worship of trees and aquatic powers. Excavations from Vietnamese archeological sites of Buddhist images dating from the Tang period show that this influence had come up from the South of the peninsula rather than from China. These replicas resembled Javanese styled images rather than those favored by the Chinese. 27 Vietnamese dependence on rice and its harvest cycle also linked them to their Southeast Asian neighbors who were similarly affected by the environmental necessities of the region. These local interests distinguished and set the Vietnamese apart from the Chinese.

The nature of these interactions between Vietnam and her neighbors instilled among the Vietnamese people a sense of separateness from those surrounding Vietnam's borders. Unlike the rest of Southeast Asia, Vietnam had more contact with the Chinese and had absorbed more of China's culture. This enabled them to develop strong social organizations that both addressed Vietnamese economic necessities and legitimized the scholar-gentry. Vietnam's embrace of Chinese high culture differentiated them from Southeast Asian neighbors, yet the Vietnamese still thought of themselves as a people apart from the Chinese. This distinctness as a culture was due in part to the formation of local interest which reflected much of the needs, demands and beliefs of the Southeast Asian region. These local interests came into increasing conflict with the objectives of the Chinese empire as the Vietnamese sense of themselves as a separate culture developed.

**Distinctness as Defined by Literature**

Vietnamese literature further enhanced Vietnam's disparity from her neighbors. These writings recorded the realities of Vietnam's interactions with the countries surrounding her borders. They also mapped an effort made by the Vietnamese to distinguish and to define themselves in relation to their neighbors. Many of these works focused on the long periods of Sino-Vietnamese interactions. As stated earlier, Vietnamese literature embraced and celebrated its countless heroes and heroines who gave their lives in defending Vietnam.

Chinese invasions into Vietnamese territory was a constant throughout Vietnamese
history. The following paragraph by Ngo Si Lien, a fifteenth-century historian showed that the Vietnamese expected these encroachments and persuaded their fellow countrymen to always be prepared.

South and North, when strong or when weak, each has its time. When the North is weak; that is how things are. This being so, those who lead the country must train soldiers, repair transport, be prepared for surprise attacks, set up obstacles to defend the borders, use the ideas of a large country with the warriors of a small country. Days of leisure should be used to teach loyalty and respect for elders, so the people will clearly know their duty toward superiors and be willing to die for their leaders. If an invasion is imminent, take words and negotiate, or offer gems and silk as tribute; if this does not succeed, then, though danger flood from every side, man the walls and fight the battles, vowing to resist until death and to die with the fatherland; in that case one need be ashamed of nothing. 28

Ngo Si Lien highlighted the nature of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship illustrating that it followed a certain pattern. The Vietnamese had to take advantage of the North and South would always fluctuate between periods of power and decline. The moments when China was at its weakest. These were the periods when soldiers had to be trained and when the borders had to be secured. More importantly, Ngo Si Lien felt that these were the days in which the populace had to be taught loyalty and respect—traits that were deemed necessary in defending the country.

Traditional Vietnamese literature emphasized and celebrated the notions of loyalty and respect. These were essential to the Vietnamese concept of themselves. The most basic level of Vietnamese society called for obedience to the patriarch of the family. The

28Ngo Si Lien, Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu., 4, 22a-b. Taken from Taylor, The Birth, 301.

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father served as the figurehead of the family and was to be heeded at all times. In addition to this, the Vietnamese venerated their elders whom they considered to be wise. They held their elders in high esteem and gave them positions of leadership within the village.

As Ngo Si Lien highlighted, the nature of Vietnam's interactions with her neighbors made these concepts important on a countrywide level. The loyalty and respect learned at the village level were transferred over to leaders at times of war. They gave the Vietnamese an honorable reason to die for their country. The definition of a true Vietnamese person was a man who demonstrated all the qualities of a loyal subject.

Vietnamese loyalty and devotion were not only traits that the Vietnamese strove for, they were features of a true Vietnamese subject. The writings of the Can Vuong [Royalist] Movement, for example, celebrated loyalty and devotion to the king and country as the embodiment of the true Vietnamese person. Its heroes served as the

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29 The Can Vuong Movement [The Loyalty to the King Movement] inherited Vietnam's long history of resistance against the Chinese. On July 4, 1885, the Vietnamese regent Ton That Thuyet placed the young emperor Ham Nghi at the head of an insurrection against the French. After a failed attack upon the French garrison in Hue, Ton then escorted Ham Nghi out of the capital thereby allowing the French to place Ham Nghi's brother, Dong Khanh, on the throne. Many of the Vietnamese scholar-gentry viewed Dong Khanh as a French puppet and chose to join Ham Nghi in his effort to regain Vietnam. This was the start of the Can Vuong movement. From his mountain hideout, Ham Nghi promulgated the Can Vuong edict which, at the foremost, called for loyalty to the King and to the country. Directed mainly towards the scholar-gentry, the edict sought assistance from the Vietnamese and more importantly, it gave royal sanction to popular resistance. Unfortunately, this movement proved to be short-lived. On November 18, the French captured the sixteen year old Ham Nghi and sent him into exile in Algeria thus effectively ending this short lived rebellion.

The Can Vuong Movement represented a last attempt by the Vietnamese to oppose its foreign invaders using traditional Vietnamese methods. It was a movement where a minority group of scholar-gentry, still loyal to the king, followed their Confucian moral duties. They led individual campaigns against the French. Some Peasants joined this royalist cause, but there were no concerted efforts or centralized plans. This movement espoused the ideal of reciprocal follower-leader responsibilities, violent resistance in force of great odds, glorification of death for a principle—all crucial elements of traditional
ultimate examples of the veritable Vietnamese character. This can best be seen in the following excerpt.

His loyalty to the king was ranked about all else.
The enemy burned him family home, excavated his parent’s tombs:
Nothing could alter his determination.
In the jungles and in the mountains, he built military camps...He was a perfect example of a loyal subject before Heaven and Earth... 30

Written by an anonymous Vietnamese poet, this passage portrayed Phan Dinh Phung (1857-1896), a moving force behind the Royalist movement, as a paradigm of fidelity. The author here believed that Phan possessed all of the characteristics of a true Vietnamese subject. Even in the face of his family’s ruin, Phan remained devoted to the emperor. The author emphasized the depths of Phan’s loyalty by highlighting the fact that Phan remained steadfast in his determination even when the enemy performed the ultimate act of desecration by robbing his parent’s tomb. Phan’s actions demonstrated that he was more loyal to the King than to the memory of his parents. In a society which embraced ancestor worship, Phan’s devotion was doubly significant.

The author’s elevation of Phan’s single-minded devotion for the crown was also a Vietnamese resistance. These ideals would continue to push later generations of scholars in their efforts to oppose French colonial presence.

The Can Vuong Movement was also known as the Royalist Movement since its members essentially supported the restoration of what they viewed as the legitimate Vietnamese emperor.

30* "Poem on True Heroism" ca. 1900. Taken from Lam, Patterns, 146.
subtle criticism against those who were not willing to fight for the king. If Phan represented the perfect example of a Vietnamese subject, then those who failed to join the king in order to protect their interests and their family homes must not have possessed the true Vietnamese character. They were not loyal Vietnamese subjects in the eyes of Heaven and Earth.

Loyalty to the emperor was not the only attribute that the Vietnamese valued. In a reply to French demands for his surrender, Hoang Hoa Tham, a peasant leader of the Yen The region, highlighted the traits that tied the Vietnamese to their country. Hoang questioned France’s belief in her ability to rule the Vietnamese when the Vietnamese had no obligation nor link to the French. Like the unknown author of the first poem, Hoang expressed the need to be faithful to the emperor. In addition to this, he also underlined the fact that the Vietnamese were linked to their traditions.

But has France seriously considered whether it is possible to rule over the Vietnamese people when these are determined not to be loyal to France? As for us, we are loyal and grateful subjects of Vietnam. We are intimately bound to customs and habits of our country and we are determined not to give up these customs and habits though we encounter death...31

In Hoang’s point of view, it was their attachment to their customs and habits that made the Vietnamese ‘loyal and grateful subjects of Vietnam.’ These elements made up

31Hoang Hoa Tham, “In the Name of Human Rights....” (1890). Taken from Lam, Patterns, 138. Hoang Hoa Tham (d. 1913), also known as the Tiger of Yen The, was the peasant leader. He had both great leadership and military skills. He took part in the royalist movement though the French often considered him more of a bandit than a true military leader. Since he was not officially sanctioned by the Royalist movement, his army supported itself on what it could take.
the essential definition of a Vietnamese subject because it linked them to the land. Hoang never clarified the exact nature of these traditions, but he clearly assumed that they were uniformly the same for all Vietnamese subjects. His words also implied that these customs and habits were different from that of the French. Therefore, in order for the French to successfully rule Vietnam, the Vietnamese would have to give up these customs and habits. This was a task that the Vietnamese were determined not to do even in the face of death. Clearly, Vietnamese customs and habits were not the same as those of the French. If they were, then the Vietnamese would not have been so resistant to French control. This supposition was fundamental because it underlined the distinctness of the Vietnamese people and Hoang’s assumption that this fact was obvious to his audience, the French opposition.

It is essential to note that there are scholars within the field of Vietnamese history who believe that this national literature regarding Vietnamese resistance against the Chinese did not correspond with historical facts. They point out that, other than Chinese invasions under the Mongols, all Chinese invasions featured in literature took place at the request of reigning Vietnamese kings. Most of the military fighting had been between the court and the native rebels. For these scholars, this pointed more towards a long-standing national disunity within Vietnam than a patriotic unity against alien interference. Any Vietnamese discord actually came from internal factors and were not a result of external factors. National resistance, therefore, was the outcome of a long history of conflict.
between the court and the countryside. Although this argument may prove that the Vietnamese were not as nationally unified as their historical literature suggests, it does not erase the fact that Vietnamese traditional literature such as the works written during the Can Vuong Movement helped to distinguish the Vietnamese as a distinct people with a unique ethnic core. These virtues may have been borrowed from the Chinese, but the Vietnamese had adopted and espoused them as their own distinguishing markers.

Vietnamese literature was an essential tool in defining the Vietnamese character. It chronicled the interaction between Vietnam and her neighbors. At the same time, these works underlined traits that the Vietnamese regarded as necessary for the successful defense of the country against foreign invasions. Loyalty and devotion to the country were seen as the quintessential traits of the Vietnamese character. The historian Ngo Si Lien considered them to be important because they gave the Vietnamese a reason to die for their country. The authors of the Can Vuong Movement used loyalty and devotion as markers of the Vietnamese character. They believed that a true Vietnamese subject was the embodiment of obedience and duty towards the emperor and the country. These writings helped the Vietnamese separate themselves as a people from their neighbors.

The Effect of French Colonialism

French colonization greatly influenced the way future generations of Vietnamese nationalists conceptualized themselves and their fellow compatriots. The colonial world

change Vietnam's physical surroundings. It also altered Vietnam's social and political environment. The imposition of French control over Vietnam eroded the means by which the Vietnamese had traditionally identified themselves. In this new atmosphere, Vietnamese self-awareness in terms of loyalty for the king, country, and traditions no longer applied.

France's direct occupation of Vietnam forced the Vietnamese to reexamine their views of the enemy. Vietnam's long history of interaction with the Chinese had created a culture that identified itself against the Chinese. At the same time, Vietnam was also influenced by its Southeast Asian neighbors. French colonialism created a new adversary for the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese now found that traditional means of identification and motivation no longer worked. They had to acknowledge that the fight against French colonization was not just a further extension of their traditional struggle with the Chinese. The French were a new enemy and could not be considered a different version of the Chinese. The French not only affected the Vietnamese concept of space and of boundaries, they also changed the Vietnamese social and ideological world. The Vietnamese were now a people whose country was no longer effectively theirs. They faced the challenge of defining themselves within this context. The old means of resisting Chinese invasions or of absorbing Chinese high culture without losing Vietnamese sovereignty no longer worked. French possession of Vietnam could not be simply mitigated by sending annual tributes to Paris and acknowledging French dominance.
Vietnamese nationalists now had to explain why traditional methods of resistance against centuries of Chinese invasions failed against this new enemy. Throughout all this, however, the Vietnamese never lost the notion of their uniqueness as a people. French colonialism simply forced the Vietnamese to re-distinguish themselves as a distinctive group.

The Physical Environment

French imposition of its ideal over Vietnam was evident in her physical surroundings. The French combined the three countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam into a single entity which they renamed Indochina. They divided Vietnam into three administrative units: Annam, Tonkin, and Cochinchina. The north and central regions of Annam and Tonkin were ruled as protectorates. The emperor ruled over this area, but French ‘advisors’ held much of the political control. The southern region of Cochinchina became a French colony. The colonial administration had direct control over all affairs in this sector. The restructuring of Vietnam’s borders effectively separated what was once a single entity into three separate units. The addition of Cambodia and Loas created an administration of five unites where there was initially only three.

In the three Vietnamese regions, the French built a miniature replica of the world that they had left behind. They constructed new cities and ‘western districts’ in the image of France. These areas reflected French ideologies of order and balance which suited ‘...French economic and administrative purposes as well as the Frenchmen’s desire for
comfort."  These "western" cities changed the Vietnamese understanding of the space around them. A smaller version of France structured their physical environment and their daily lives. The Vietnamese now faced organized paved streets bearing French rather than Vietnamese names. French buildings and transport systems dotted the landscape. The French ideal of their space now dominated the Vietnamese physical world.

Changes Within the Village and Social Structure

Other changes in Vietnam's physical environment more deeply impacted the Vietnamese consciousness. French practices of granting land concessions to companies and collaborators changed the village social structure. These actions pushed Vietnamese peasants off their land producing an increasing amount of poor and land-less subjects. Large, impersonal plantations took the place of traditional family oriented village structures. Many of the scholar-gentry moved to the cities instead of remaining in the villages as they customarily had before the French invasion. Those who collaborated with the French no longer had any obligation to the members of their villages. These collaborators did not always come from the ranks of the scholar gentry. Members of the merchant class, not always looked upon with high regard by their peers within the Confucian tradition, found themselves raised to a position of wealth simply by having the right French contact.

French practices also shifted the traditional ruler-subject relationship. They erased

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the reciprocal connection between these two entities since the French had essentially hand
picked the emperor and all other high officials. France's influence over Vietnamese
political appointments freed high mandarin officials from their obligations to those below.
Their Confucian past no longer bound them to guard the weak. French colonization
changed the ideal the Vietnamese scholar as the moral and intellectual leader of the
community. These scholars stopped serving as the village teacher indoctrinating the youth
into the Confucian tradition. They also ceased to be the spiritual leaders who performed
in the villages social rites. Under the French, village traditions such as festivals, weddings,
and official ceremonies no longer served as reinforcements of the community's self-
consciousness and solidarity. Vietnamese officials simply became a part of an
administrative system which was set apart from the rest of the country. Since
collaborators received many advantages through their willingness to work with the French,
they became a small group of people who greatly profited from this arrangement.34

The Intellectual World View: Questioning Traditions and Loyalty

French colonization shifted many other aspects of the Vietnamese outlook on life.
It changed the Vietnamese intellectual's world-view. French and Franco-Vietnamese
schools forced students to question the customs and habits that had formed the basis for
Vietnamese self-awareness. These schools inundated students with notions of social

34David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, (Berkeley: University of California

35Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition*, 3-4.
Darwinism, science, and technology, ideologies which seemed to contradict many of the traditions that their families still followed. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Vietnamese who had attended the Franco-Vietnamese schools developed new attitudes that were different from those of the previous generation of anti-colonialists. This new spirit reflected a "...growing sense of individualism, a gradual loss of interest in the Confucian classics and in the past, and a strong admiration for all things French and Western...."36 The fact that this new intelligentsia favored the western way of life highlighted the degree to which the French had culturally westernized Vietnamese society. Even intellectuals who openly opposed the French could not escape this westernizing effect. Colonization induced a feeling of doubt and anxiety among Vietnamese intellectuals as their contact with European culture increasingly forced them to re-examine their traditional values and methods. Even the most reluctant literati found himself face to face with the French view of the Vietnamese world.

The increasingly weak position of the emperor also affected the Vietnamese image of themselves. The concept of a people’s devotion to a monarchy became less credible as the emperor slowly lost control over Vietnam. The final blow to the emperor’s power came in 1925. In an agreement called the Convention of 1925, French authorities and the Vietnamese regents stripped the emperor of his remaining power. This arrangement left

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36Duiker, The Rise, 179.
him with only ritual duties and other minor formalities. For many Vietnamese anti-colonialists, it seemed senseless to rally behind a powerless crown. There were, however, some who still felt that the emperor’s position could be saved. For instance, Pham Quynh, a prolific writer during the inter-war years, called for a modernization of the monarchy. He wanted the French to establish a constitutional monarchy. Other critics such as Nguyen Van Vinh (1882-1936), often called the father of Vietnamese journalism, opposed Pham. Nguyen supported a total modernization of Vietnam. He felt that the old system was dead and that any effort to revive it would have been pointless. This conflict showed that it was no longer possible to use the concept of fidelity to the emperor as a rallying cry for resistance. The emperor’s weakened position decreased the strength in the meaning of kingly devotion as a trait of a true Vietnamese subject.

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37 Ibid., 179.

38 Ibid., 173.
CHAPTER 2
VIETNAMESE LITERATURE AND THE NEWSPAPER

Traditional Vietnamese Literature

Vietnamese intellectuals acknowledged the importance of literature. Tran Huy Lieu, the author of *Mot bau tam su* [a gourdful of confidences], wrote that it was "...the quintessence [tinh hoa] of a country. For a country to be strong or weak, be prosperous or in decline, literature exerts a very great influence." Before the twentieth century, books and newspapers were rare. Knowledge at the village level came from printed, written, and epigraphical materials. In the nineteenth century, much of Vietnam's printed materials came from China. Prose novels were not a part of Vietnamese literature until the romanized characters replaced the traditional Chinese script. Novels, called "truyen" formed the base of Vietnamese literary culture. These works were narrative poems which often ended dramatically. They were written in a popular meter called *Thuong Luc Ha Bat* to complement the musical tones of the Vietnamese language. The Vietnamese also transmitted these stories orally at the base of Vietnamese society.

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40 McHale, *Printing*, 16-17.

The plot of Vietnamese stories were often Chinese in origin. The Vietnamese adopted these works as their own. Chinese names were changed to ones recognized by the Vietnamese. Vietnamese towns and villages replaced those of China. These stories were translated into Vietnamese, often by anonymous authors. For the Vietnamese, stories were not just for entertainment. They served as moral examples. The stories had to have

...the full combination of loyalty, filial piety, purity, and right conduct in them before people were permitted to read them. If they did not have these things, even though the story might be most interesting, and corresponded with the actual facts to a great degree, not only could no one read it, but our people would regard it as something that should be banned. The elders of our country in the old days wanted transmitted writings to be lessons. Therefore, it had to be, that people in the stories who did good things would always reap good results, and cruel people always came to cruel end.\(^{42}\)

Literature served as a pedagogical tool. More importantly, it was a guide to everyday actions. The literary work's objective was to highlight all the desirable attributes of a proper Vietnamese person. A wiseman-student relationship existed between the reader and the text. The Vietnamese wanted their stories to celebrate the values that they held dear. Traits such as loyalty to the family, heroism, and proper conduct were celebrated. In these stories, those who followed the path of goodness were rewarded in life while the evil-doers were punished.

The Vietnamese demand for stories to have great moral values reflected the influence of Confucianism on Vietnamese society. Confucianism taught that man, above all else, was being who was a part society. All men had obligations and duties to those around them. Traditional Vietnamese literature taught men how to best serve others. This Confucian influence made literature important within Vietnamese intellectual and social realms. The Vietnamese honored education, especially the knowledge derived from the Confucian Classics. Young Vietnamese men devoted years to mastering the Classics. Command of these Classics meant not only the possibility of a reputable and lucrative position in the government, but also that these men would be held in high esteem within Vietnamese society. Those who had studied the Classics served as role models. Therefore, a Confucian scholar was the embodiment of the highest Vietnamese values. 43

The Vietnamese Intellectual World Under French Colonialism

French colonialism greatly transformed the Vietnamese intellectual sphere. The 1920's and 30's saw a shift in the way that the Vietnamese scholars viewed literature. By the early part of the twentieth century the association between the written material and the reader had changed. Vietnamese readers began to analyze written works differently. Texts were taken less as moral examples. Vietnamese readers also shifted the way they viewed the authors. They now placed more importance on an author's status as a writer rather than as a paragon of virtue. Reading a few texts in depth became less important

than reading a wide variety of texts.\textsuperscript{44} The introduction of new print technology made this possible. It became more common to write short stories, essays, and newspaper articles. Authors increasingly wrote these works for financial gain rather than for moral gratification. This directly contrasted with the past where literary productions often had non-economic functions.\textsuperscript{45}

The introduction of the printing press and western forms of printed materials provided increasingly new means of expression for the Vietnamese. In Vietnam, the introduction of mass printing came in 1861. The invading French colonialists brought the printing press with them in order to produce both Vietnamese and French language materials.\textsuperscript{46} The Vietnamese later took full advantage of this process to produce a wide variety of literature ranging from novels and historical literature to newspapers and journals.

The importation of the printing press and of western modes of literature opened a new world of communication. This mass dissemination of literature via print technology was called Print Capitalism.\textsuperscript{47} It linked fraternity, power and time together. For instance,

\textsuperscript{44}McHale, \textit{Printing} 49.

\textsuperscript{45}Ibid., 16-17.

\textsuperscript{46}Marr, \textit{Vietnamese Tradition}, 145.

a newspaper, by its very format, connected events and people from different parts of the world together in an imagined community. Time, or the coincidence of events occurring and the same time (hour, day, year), tied these incidents together. This link did not necessarily have to be consciously acknowledged. Readers could be physically and mentally worlds apart but connected conceptually. The relationship between the book and the market formed the second link in print capitalism. The newspaper, an essential tool in colonial Vietnam, could be considered as a book. People who read the newspaper knew that there were many others reading the very same work. Yet, they did not know these people. The specific knowledge of another person’s existence, of their names, or of their character was not significant. It was the idea that they were all reading the same paper at approximately the same time that gave these readers a feeling of commonality. The simple fact of reading the paper elicited the knowledge, even subconsciously, that a whole nation was reading the same exact paper and absorbing the same news. A whole nation responded to the same print.

The newspaper provided a technical means for representing a community or an ideal nation. It provided a means for the readers to include themselves within an ‘imaginary community.’ People mentioned within the newspaper articles could be involved in different activities, but they were all doing this at the same time. The author used universal characteristics which the reader could relate to. These qualities formed

\[\text{Ibid., 33-36.}\]
webs of commonality between the author, the reader, and the book's characters.49

Adaptation was also necessary in the relationship between the author and the audience. Print culture gave the impression of being closed. Each text seemed to be unique and separate from other written materials. This sense of closure inferred a fixed point of view. An author could confidently choose any position and assume that the reader would adjust to the author's viewpoint. Printed material formed a 'reading public' because of this new relationship between the author and his readers. It enabled the author to form a following consisting of strangers. Their ability to adjust to the author's point of view was the only bond between this audience and the author.

**The Newspaper as a Tool for Nationalism**

The shift from an emphasis on morality found its most powerful form in the newspaper. This form of literature served as an important tool for the dissemination of nationalist thought. Newspapers opened a new realm of communication for the Vietnamese intellectual. They provided a new means of expression for moderate reformist elements of the first and second generation of intellectuals. These anti-colonialists with 'francophilic' tendencies preferred avoiding direct political action. They used journals, written both in French and quoc-ngu, to forward their interests of reform rather than revolt.50


50Duiker, *The Rise*, 111. Quoc Ngu was a romanized transliteration of the Vietnamese spoken language which will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Four.
For the Vietnamese, the use of newspapers required an adjustment from both the author and the reading public. The paper forced the author and the reader to accommodate to its format. Those who could not adapt were left out of the system. Therefore, the Vietnamese scholar-gentry had to shift their view of writing. As one anonymous Vietnamese author wrote, journalism was an occupation that people in the West had no trouble understanding. Westerners never used newspapers to "...expand moral principles... [N]ewspapers are only organs for disseminating thought and general information...." The Newspaper reported world events. It covered wide-ranging opinions and interpretations of the world. Sentences within a newspaper were short and concise. Unlike the *truyen* its words followed no poetic meters or rhymes.

Vietnamese intellectuals valued the potential of the newspaper. Correspondence, in the framework of written opinions or plain information, provided an indispensable link between the scholar-gentry and the masses. The significance of newspapers could be seen in the sheer quantity of papers printed. By 1933, there were 155 newspapers and periodicals in print. It was evident that Vietnamese newspapers and journals such as *Nam Phong*, one of the leading francophillic papers of the time, understood this fact. *Nam Phong* highlighted this by translating a long article on the career of making newspapers. According to the author of this article, the newspaper had to be impartial. It

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51 Thach, *Mot Cai*, 81-82.

had to examine all aspects and subjects and it had to inform the rest of the world. These were the basic functions of the paper. Newspapers not only taught and informed its readers, but they also entertained them. The author deemed the newspaper to be so important that he included a history of the newspaper from the invention of the printing press to the formation of the first newspaper. The article listed the differences between famous and not so well known newspaper houses in the West. It also enumerated the different jobs performed within the paper.53

In this article, the author affirmed the notion that the newspaper could form links among its audience. He underlined the media's capacity to connect different events, times, and spaces together. According to the author, "[a] newspaper is a landmark which records all of life and death in the world in a few pages of paper, gathered together in a place where anyone could receive them." The newspaper was, in essence, a marker where people from all walks of life could come together. The commonality connected the reading community together. In addition to this, readers were linked to world and to events which were often irrelevant to their lives.

53"Nghe Lam Bao" [The Newspaper Profession], translated in Hong Nhan, Nam Phong, (November 1930), 447-451. This article was translated into Vietnamese by a Vietnamese journalist named Hong Nhan. The actual origin of the composition is unknown. This article is significant because the editors of Nam Phong and the translator believed that newspapers were important enough to print such a long composition.

54Ibid., 446.
The author felt that the newspaper was important to colonial officials. This fact was underlined by his commented that,

...the newspaper office is a large and powerful force in the world, and it is a powerful force which people cherish above all. All the dictatorial governments keep the power of the newspaper, and want to use it as their own personal instrument; and all other governments fear it as well and would like to use it in the same way.

According to the author, the Vietnamese valued the newspaper in the same way that they valued food. The news and its link to world events were as necessary to existence as rice was to the Vietnamese staple. Governments treasured the paper simply because it was so highly valued by the people. Dictatorial governments hoarded it, while all other governments secretly wished to do the same. The author’s analysis, though a bit exaggerated, underscored the importance of newspapers to Vietnamese intellectuals. He underlined the value of newspapers to the governments to show that it was a powerful tool of communication. These nationalists felt that the newspaper was a force to be reckoned with.

The author of the anonymous article was not far off in stating that governments recognized the newspaper’s potential. In its 1927-28 annual report, French colonial authorities noted the subversive potentials of the press.

\[\text{55} \textit{Ibid.}, 446.\]
The press is a powerful weapon of propaganda, our opponents have not overlooked it. During this year, we have recorded a real flourishing [eclosion] of subversive tracts of a clearly tendentious nature, and that as a goal to awaken and exploit the nationalist feelings of the Annamites. Despite numerous proscriptions [interdictions], new tracts spring up practically everywhere and we need to watch with great care this form of propaganda. 56

The colonial rule understood the influence of newspapers. It deemed the paper to be an effective and frightening force of nationalist propaganda that had to be closely monitored. These tracts had the ability to awaken nationalist feelings. They noted that the profusion of publications were hampered by the copious laws and regulations. Both sides of the Vietnamese colonial world recognized the paper's latent potential to stir and connect the Vietnamese.

Obstacles Against the Newspaper

The true effectiveness of the Vietnamese newspaper was overestimated by both the Vietnamese anti-colonialists and by the colonial authorities. The nature of the colonial environment hindered the newspaper's potential to call forth and create a common bond among the Vietnamese masses. Colonial censorship limited the areas in which nationalists could venture. Therefore, full expression of nationalist ideas could not have been possible. Intellectuals had to either encode their message within a lexicon of metaphors or they had to simply omit their ideas. Censorship filtered any attempt by Vietnamese intellectuals to "exploit the nationalist feelings" of the Vietnamese. It also guaranteed that nationalist

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messages would not always be interpreted the same way.

Remnants of the previous views of literature affected interpretation. In this inter-war period, there were still nationalists who stressed the moral function of texts. As late as 1935, nationalist icons such as Phan Boi Chau still advocated using the media to emphasize the Confucian tenet of leading a life of self-perfection. According to Phan, newspapers were to "...strengthen the ethical instruction of the people, taking good morals and holding them up for citizens to follow, making a shining example for people to be guided."57 For Phan, newspapers were not tools which recorded world events. Nor were they weapons against the colonial government. Newspapers were tablets of moral instructions. Readers with a similar mind set expected the press to act as virtuous beacons of morality. They did not view the paper with the same western standards of their younger contemporaries. Since they had not adjusted to the newspaper’s format, they were already excluded from this aspect of print culture.

Collaboration with the French impeded the Vietnamese intelligentsia. Pham Quynh, for example, received help from Louis Marty, the director of the Political Service - the French operational intelligence bureau in Indochina. In 1917, Marty helped Pham set up the most effective intellectual journal of the period: the Nam Phong. Marty aided Pham by preventing competitors from publishing. In return, Pham and his associates

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rephrased their ideas to pass Marty’s scrutiny. By 1925, Nam Phong no longer dominated the press (The height of its influence was from 1917 to 1924). However, Nam Phong represented the divisiveness among the newspapers and its intelligentsia journalists. The various newspapers circulating within Vietnam in this inter-war era had different ideas of the Vietnamese nation. They also had differing notions of the means to achieving nationhood. A look at the editors of two newspapers within this period, the Nam Phong and La Cloche Felee showed these disparities. These papers were, in essence, representations of the ideals of their editors. The differences between these two papers highlighted the fact that the intellectual community at that time did not have the cohesive quality necessary to bring forth a united view of the nation. Vietnamese nationalists in the inter-war era lacked a common vision of a post-colonial Vietnam. No dominate viewpoints existed among these nationalists. Their differing ideas and antagonism towards each other prohibited a single concept of a post-colonial Vietnam.

Pham Quynh was best known as a collaborator. Pham came from a Vietnamese family of literati from the Hai Duong province (North Vietnam). He made his career working for the French. Pham initially worked as a language translator for the Ecole Francais d’Extreme Orient. During World War I, he aided the Surete by preparing anti-German Tracts in Chinese. The French aided Pham in his career as a journalist,
editor, and translator for the *Nam Phong*. Despite his close connection to the French Pham considered himself a patriot. He loved Vietnam. He wanted the France to civilize Vietnam, but not to make it French. To prove this, he never became a French citizen. In fact, he criticized those who embraced France at the expense of Vietnamese identity. In addition to being a collaborator and a patriot, Pham was also a nationalist. Pham was a patriot in the sense that he exhibited the proto-nationalistic sense of loving his country. Pham’s commitment to Vietnam went deeper than this. Although he collaborated with French colonial officials, Pham had a distinct notion of Vietnam. The belief that Vietnam needed to be modernized formed the base of this idea. He believed that Vietnam needed to evolve. The French were there to lead Vietnam into the modern world. However, the fundamental link that would enable the Vietnamese to make this transition was their "framework of nationality and race." Vietnam’s concept of their racial and cultural distinctiveness was how they imagined their communion and their political community. Pham did not believe that the Vietnamese should erase their past. Vietnamese history was the structure upon which Vietnam could modernize.

Nguyen An Ninh (1900-1943), the editor of the French language newspaper, *La Cloche felee*, was also a nationalist. His image of a Vietnamese nation was similar to Pham’s in that he believed in the importance of Vietnam’s national culture. However,

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60Ibid., 155-56.

61Pham Quynh, “Conservation and Evolution.” *Nam Phong* No. 156 (November 1930), 34.
Nguyen felt that parts of Vietnam's past, such as Confucianism could not be used as a cultural base. The Vietnamese had imported these aspects from China. Therefore, these ideas did not represent true Vietnamese culture. In addition to this, he believed that Vietnamese notions of philosophies such as Confucianism were diluted. They had been adapted and modified from the Chinese original. In Nguyen's point of view, they could no longer represent any form of truth.  

Nguyen represented intellectuals who rejected collaboration with the French colonists. He did not feel that the French could truly help guide the formation of a modern Vietnamese state. He also doubted that France would sincerely allow Vietnam to become its equal in the world stage. Unlike Pham, Nguyen refused to work for the French colonial authorities. He declined the magistrative post offered to him by the French colonial governor Cognac in 1923. Vietnamese nationalist like Nguyen opposed the collaborators' notions of the best route to nationhood.  

It was essential to note that the newspaper industry served only a small portion of the Vietnamese population. Circulation tended to be limited to Vietnamese intellectuals in the cities where printing presses were located. This was partly due to a lack of funding. Vietnam did not have a significant indigenous merchant class. Many of the merchants in Vietnam were ethnic Chinese. The newspaper industry lacked the funding and the

innovation that would have come from this class. Although the 1920s and late 1930s saw an increase in the circulation of printed materials in the countryside, the average peasant did not have much access to these texts. Extensive illiteracy, censorship, and complex government regulations all worked to impede the spread of print materials.

The Role of Censorship

French laws greatly influenced Vietnamese nationalist discourse. The colonial government essentially controlled all political dialogue among the Vietnamese. French colonial laws defined the realms of legal and illegal publications. They structured the forms of Vietnamese nationalism. Nationalist discussions were carried out within a framework of censorship. This greatly restricted the spread of ideas. Though French publishing laws limited the expression of nationalism, they did not fully inhibit the dissemination of Vietnamese political and nationalistic ideas.

In Indochina, the French publication law of 1881 formed the base of French censorship. This law, in combination with the 1898 decree, effectively restricted the mode and degree of political discourse among the Vietnamese. The 1881 law stipulated that a periodical had to have a French manager. Therefore, all publications were ultimately controlled by the French. The addition of the 1898 decree heavily influenced the language in which newspapers and journals could be written. This ruling declared that the "...publication in Indochina of every newspaper or periodical written in the Annamite.

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Woodside, *Community*, 79-81.
Chinese, or any other foreign language, cannot take place without the previous authorization of the Governor General. In essence, journals and newspaper could only be written in French. This regulation severally hampered the ability for intellectuals who wrote mainly in Vietnamese or Chinese to clearly communicate their ideas.

The severity of French censorship laws reflected colonial reactions to two factors: the alarming increase of Vietnamese participation in print-media and the changing political atmosphere in Paris. Few published materials existed before the 1920s. The number of people who were literate in quoc-ngu was even smaller. From 1920 to 1930, however, Vietnamese and French language materials became increasingly popular. Fearing this trend of increasing readership, the French colonial administration continued to heavily censor Vietnamese language materials. The local government relaxed this control from 1936 to 1939. This was a direct result of the pressure place on the colonial power by the Popular Front government in France.

Colonial censorship laws did not restrict all published materials. Although the colonial government carefully controlled political discussions, it allowed relatively free discourse on topics it deemed to be non-threatening. Materials such as religion and sexuality provided an outlet for Vietnamese intellectuals. Authors such as Tran Trong

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65 McHale, *Printing*, 75-76.
Kim focused on Confucianism and Vietnamese culture.68 These books served to inform and entertain the reading public. More importantly, they provided a medium in which debates relating to political discourse could be expressed. In these tracts, discussions such as the need to modernize at the expense of Vietnamese history and tradition were hashed over. These subjects, which could not be freely analyzed in political articles were viewed as non-threatening when placed within a discussion on Confucianism, for instance.

Although these censorship laws were restrictive, two major contradictions in these laws became apparent by the 1920s. First of all, press laws developed in a sort of Ad Hoc manner. The various laws, decrees, and rulings responded to the threats that the colonial administration perceived. These laws did not always correspond with existing regulations. At times, they even contradicted previous decrees. For instance, almost all decrees in the two protectorates of Annam and Tonkin undermined the original French publication law of 1881. The original publication law was produced for French citizens in France. To restrict Vietnamese publications, the colonial government issued further decrees overriding the authority of the French law. Secondly, these regulations contained important loopholes. Owners of French-language newspapers did not need permission to publish nor did they need to submit works for censorship. In addition to this, publishers of non-periodical matter such as novels and poems did not need to request authorization for

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68Tran Trong Kim, Nho-Giao [Confucianism]. (Saigon: Tan Viet, 1929). Tran Trong Kim was a theoretician who later briefly served as Vietnam’s prime minister under Japanese auspices in 1945.

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publishing so the French could not censor these works prior to printing.⁶⁹ Vietnamese nationalists, therefore, had more leeway for expression if they chose to publish in French.

The most important crux to French printing laws was their differing status between Vietnam’s southern region and the northern and central areas. The leading opposition literature came from the South because French colonies followed French laws. Cochinchina, as a colony, had greater publishing freedom than the French protectorates of Annam and Tonkin. The protectorates symbolically remained under the sovereignty of the emperor. Here, French laws had the power of a decree. These regulations could be overridden with other decrees. French laws, on the other hand, could not be overturned. Therefore, the French laws in Cochinchina tended to be more lenient than the decrees within the protectorates. In addition to this, the French colonial administration had also lost its censorship power over the South in 1937. This, in combination with already existing loopholes in French printing laws, allowed anti-colonialists greater printing freedom in the southern province of Cochinchina.⁷⁰

Cochinchina produced more radical anti-colonial literature due to the relative leniency of French Printing laws. Looking back at his university days in Hanoi, the famous literary scholar Dang Thai Mai reflected on the works that helped shape his and many of his colleagues’ frame of thinking.

⁶⁹McHale, Printing, 78.
⁷⁰Ibid., 75.
We often could read progressive newspapers sent from the South or from France. Among the students in the faculty of literature, we liked to read Nguyen An Ninh’s appeals which overflowed with patriotic ardor. Frequently, we were able to see several issues of L’Humanite, the newspaper of the French communist party. One day, through secret means, we received an entire bundle of Le Paria along with Nguyen Ai Quoc’s Le proces de la colonisation francaise.

Dang’s comment reflected the extent of political debates possible in Vietnam. French decrees did not hamper the influx of radical ideas into these Northern regions. Most ideas flowed freely into these provinces. The more radical ones were secretly slipped through the borders. The stricter decrees impeded debates within Tonkin and Annam. The intellectuals in these regions made fewer contributions to these types of political discussions. Political discourse of the more radical nature was dominated by the South and by those living in France.

Dang’s comments indicate that censorship considerably restricted nationalist debates in colonial Vietnam. Vietnamese authors living in France or the southern region of Vietnam could freely express their ideas, but this did not necessarily mean that all of this material would have been imported into the north and central regions. Dang and his colleagues at the university chose to read the more radical ideas coming from France and Cochinchina. Whether by limiting free speech or by influencing imported materials, censorship structured nationalist debates in Vietnam.

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71Dang Thai Mai, Hoi Ky p. 309. Taken from Ibid., 51.
CHAPTER 3
VIETNAMESE NATIONALISTS AND THE QUEST FOR MODERNITY

**Vietnamese Nationalists of the 1900s-1920s**

Throughout the early 1900s, Vietnamese nationalists like Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chau Trinh preoccupied themselves with finding a means of freeing the country; they thought very little of theoretical problems such as the future or ‘national heritage.’ However, this generation of scholar-patriots played a significant role in the Vietnamese anti-colonial movement. They left behind a legacy of consciousness, a feeling of greater duty among the Vietnamese to strive towards the goal of an independent Vietnam. These nationalists formed bridges between the Can Vuong generation of the 1880s and 1890s and the westernized representatives of the 1920s. They helped alter ideas and viewpoints away from loyalty to the king to loyalty and love of the land and people as a whole. These men were important because they kept alive the tradition of resistance against foreign rule that had kept Vietnam free of Chinese domination.

**Phan Boi Chau**

Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940) stands as a leading figure among the first generation of the nationalist-intelligentsia. He was viewed as a symbol of Vietnamese patriotism and resistance. To many later generations of nationalists, Phan was the embodiment of traits that they believed were necessary in the struggle against the French. He was not only a scholar, but also a patriot who loved his country. He voluntarily left his country in order
to further anti-colonial resistance against the French. Vietnamese historians today attribute the awakening of the Vietnamese national consciousness to Phan.\(^{72}\)

Phan was born in the village of Sa Nam in the province of Nam Dan. His father was a scholar who had earned the *tu tai*, the first level of civil service examinations. Unlike many successful candidates, Phan’s father had chosen not to enter into government service. He instead became a village school teacher. His father was an influential force in Phan’s early childhood.

Phan grew up in an atmosphere which was permeated by a strong current of Vietnamese patriotism. French encroachment of Vietnamese space increased daily. Phan witnessed a great deal of opposition by his predecessors. At an early age, Phan showed enthusiasm for the resistance movement. In 1874, at the age of nine, Phan received news of the *Binh Tay* “Put down the French” revolt, a scholar-led rebellion in the Nghe-Tinh provinces of Vietnam. Using bamboo tubes as guns and lychee pits as bullets, Phan and his classmates pretended that they were a part of the conflict. He was caught by his father and punished for playing at war.\(^{73}\) These games showed that Phan was highly influenced by violent rebellions against French intrusions. They indicated that he was cognizant of the events around him and that he reacted to them. His bamboo and lychee weapons were typical toys for young Vietnamese boys. Yet at the same time, they pre-shadowed Phan’s


preference for violent revolt over more peaceful, intellectual means.

Although he supported violent opposition, Phan found early on in his life that he needed an education in order to gain respect and legitimacy among his peers. He learned that lesson when, at the age of 18, in 1883, he responded to a patriot call to arms in the Bac-ky region by posting an appeal titled Binh-Tay Tu Bac [Put Down the French and Regain the North] along the Mandarin road. To his great consternation most people ignored them. Phan found that this appeal was an

...empty writing, without effect. Within a few days the appeal was torn down and destroyed. For the first time I realized that it was indispensable to make a name for myself. Henceforward I bent every effort to cultivating my writing for the mandarinate examination. My literary reputation became more and more widespread; I passed first in several regional examinations.\(^74\)

In July 1885, resistance against the French intensified after Ham Nghi had fled the Hue court and issued the Can Vuong Edict. Phan and his peers, who were studying for the Confucian exams at the time, organized resistance groups for the village. When the French troops arrived, however, the groups panicked. Phan’s father ordered him to have the membership rolls destroyed.\(^75\) These failed experiences in organizing Vietnamese resistance against the French made him realize the necessity of having a formal degree. He started his scholastic training in the Confucian education system. Phan later took the mandarinate exams in order to make a name for himself. Phan’s failures to arouse public

\(^{74}\)Ibid., 50.

\(^{75}\)Marr, Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 83-85.
support for the call to arms in northern Vietnam made him realize the significance of the Confucian degrees. Without the backing of a degree, his station was humble and his words were insignificant.

Phan’s reflections highlighted a trend among intellectuals of the first generation. They valued their Confucian education less as a means for an official government position. Rather, it was a way to gain legitimacy as leaders among their peers who were similarly involved in the resistance movement. By choosing to pursue the mandarinate examinations, these nationalists still held Vietnam’s traditional belief in the leadership of scholar-patriot.

Phan never passed the imperial examinations, but his pursuit of a Classical education underlined the dilemma that nationalists of his generation faced. They were beginning to question the value of their traditional education in the face of French modernity. For the Vietnamese, this modernity was the technological, scientific, and political advances that France seemed to possess. Phan, as he recounted his youth, regretted the time that he had spent studying for his examinations. “It is regrettable that at that time I was burying my head in the stale literature on the mandarinate examination so that I could not benefit much.”76 Like Phan, Vietnamese nationalists of his generation felt that the time they had devoted to their classical studies was wasted. They had inherited a scholastic tradition that had failed to protect Vietnam against French invasion.

76Phan, Overturnd Chariot, 50.
However, the very structure of Vietnamese society still locked them into that tradition. These men had to have a degree in order to be respected. Phan's failed experiences in mobilizing his peers showed the continued necessity of the Confucian educational system. No matter how much they scorned it, the Vietnamese people continued to value the Confucian degree.

By the 1900s, Phan Boi Chau had begun to actively resist the French. He traveled throughout Vietnam in search of allies. At this time, Phan had a simple plan for resistance. First of all, he wanted to unite the scattered resistance elements. Secondly, Phan intended to garner support from the imperial family and the bureaucracy. Lastly, he needed to obtain foreign aid. In 1925, French colonial authorities condemned Phan to death for subversion, but then changed his sentence to permanent house arrest due to political pressure from both within Vietnam and from the metropolitan. Phan spent the remainder of his life under French surveillance in Hue.

**Phan Chau Trinh**

Phan Chau Trinh (1872-1926), was the other leading figure of the first generation of the Vietnamese nationalist movement. In many ways, Phan Chau Trinh’s background was similar to that of Phan Boi Chau. Both men were trained in the Confucian Classics and their studies greatly affected their understanding of the world. However, Phan Chau

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77 Duiker, *The Rise*, 34.

Trinh differed with Phan Boi Chau on two essential issues. Phan Chau Trinh did not believe in the necessity of violence, nor did he believe in maintaining the monarchy.

Phan Chau Trinh was born to a rich scholar-gentry family in the Tay-Loc village, Tien-Phuoc district, of the Quang Nam province. Phan’s father had studied the Confucian classics, but had never passed any exams. Instead of becoming a scholar, Phan’s father worked as a high ranking military official. At the start of the Can Vuong movement, Phan and his father fled to the mountains and joined the resistance where Phan’s father was killed by another member. Phan Chau Trinh thus had experienced the direct impact of violence during the Can Vuong movement. In his later years, he would become an avid critic against armed resistance.

After his father’s death, Phan returned to his village and began studying the classics with a local scholar under the guidance of his older brother. He passed the Confucian education system in 1901. Phan Chau Trinh chose not to utilize his degree to advance his career in the government. Although he received an appointment to the royal court for a short time, he made a conscious decision not to rise to high positions in the court even though he was highly qualified and talented. He became incredibly disgusted with the imperial system and eventually resigned in 1906. Phan later participated in a political assault against this mandarinal system.  

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79 Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, 86.

80 Ibid, 87.
In 1908, the Vietnamese royal administration implicated him in a peasant uprising and condemned him to death. They later changed this sentence to exile in Poulo Condore, an island prison off the coast of Vietnam. In 1911, Phan Chau Trinh was freed in exchange for voluntary exile to France. He returned to Vietnam in 1925 and died in Saigon on March 24, 1926.

**Education and the Quest for Modernity**

Vietnamese nationalists of the 1900s greatly influenced later generations of anticolonialists. Men such as Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chau Trinh spent their lives searching for solutions to Vietnam's colonial problems. Activists like Phan Boi Chau promoted revolutionary ideas which highlighted the need for violence. Education and print played a secondary role in their agenda. These tools were only useful if they furthered the goals of armed resistance. For these activists, education was useful only for the reconstruction of the country after it had been freed. Reformist elements within this nationalist generation believed that education and the media could be used to create an atmosphere for political and social reform. Men like Phan Chau Trinh and the members of the Dong Kinh Free School opposed violence. They believed that education was the solution to Vietnam's plight. Through education, Vietnam would be modernized. Many of these nationalists believed that France could help Vietnam in this quest. Vietnam could gain its freedom only after it had reached this stage.
Phan Boi Chau and Education

Phan Boi Chau's traditional background greatly affected his understanding of West. He believed that Vietnam needed to be modernized, but his plans for her future were vague. Phan and his peers envisioned a time in which Vietnam would stand as an equal among powerful nations such as France and Great Britain. They imagined modernization as the technological, scientific, political, and even social advances that would free Vietnam from her colonial chains. One of the best examples of Phan's understanding of the need to modernize was his pamphlet, *The New Vietnam* [Tan Viet Nam]. Phan laid out his vision of Vietnam's future in this article. Written in 1907, this composition reflected the impact of years of living abroad in that his conception of the future Vietnam greatly resembled his impressions of the West and of Japan, which the world viewed as an equal to America and its European counterparts.

In this article, Phan analyzed the Vietnamese colonial situation. He highlighted many of the unnecessary injustices that the Vietnamese suffered. Although he conceded that these transgressions upon the Vietnamese were terrible, Phan also felt that the Vietnamese were partly to blame for France's hegemony. He believed that Vietnam's "semi-civilized" state had led her to her present day plight. Phan's solution to Vietnam's problems was modernization. In his opinion, this would produce a better Vietnam by bringing her in line with other 'civilized nations' such as France and England. Phan envisioned a great Vietnamese nation after modernization. Except for a brief passage on
education, however, he did not lay out any concrete plan for accomplishing this feat.

One aspect of modernization which Phan emphasized was education. Phan understood the importance of education even though he ranked it as a secondary means to achieving Vietnamese independence. Phan felt that education served as the mold that shaped human beings. "...Mandarins, officers, and soldiers all come out of it. Education is also the basis on which politics are built. Taxes, criminal law, everything is determined by education...After modernization our education will be perfect."81 He believed that it was imperative that women and soldiers be educated in addition to the elite. However, Phan did not consider education to be a means towards Vietnamese sovereignty. It was rather, the end result of Vietnam's successful modernization.

Phan believed that education served as a base for achieving 'civilization,' which was the final level reached through modernity. To reach it, the Vietnamese had to discard their old ways in order to learn how to produce technological machinery. Phan criticized Vietnam's existing educational system. He felt that it lacked the military, agricultural, technical, and commercial training which Phan viewed as the essential core of education. Phan also stressed gaining a proficiency in foreign languages and foreign forms of writing since most of this information would be coming from outside of Vietnam.82

Phan Boi Chau felt that education served more as a building block for the

81Phan Boi Chau, The New Vietnam [Tan Viet Nam] (1907). Taken from Lam, Colonialism Experienced, 113.

82Ibid., 121.
formation of a strong post-colonial Vietnam than as a tool for resistance. Therefore, he never fully believed in the idea of mass education as a means of achieving independence. Phan continued to believe that change could only be brought about by dramatic actions of heroes and not through the complete will of the populace. Education was only important if it aided in this aim. This was most apparent in his support for sending students abroad. In 1905, Phan went to Japan in hopes of obtaining either financial, military, or political assistance from the Japanese. The Japanese had defeated the Russian Fleet in the same year. For Vietnamese nationalists, Japan’s victory over a white, imperial power, highlighted the overwhelming need to modernize. Japan had been victorious because she had borrowed scientific, technological and political ideas from the West. Vietnamese nationalists like Phan aspired to emulate Japan’s political and social success. In a conversation with Okuma Shigenobu, a Japanese politician, Phan found that the Japanese were reluctant to offer aid to the Vietnamese. They did not want to risk destroying their fragile bonds with Europe. However, the Japanese were willing to support Vietnamese students interested in studying in Japan.

Okuma Shigenobu’s offer to assist Vietnamese students initiated the formation of the Dong Du [Exodus to the East] movement. This movement sponsored the sending of Vietnamese students to Japanese educational institutions. Phan Boi Chau and Prince

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83Ibid., 30-32.

Cuong De, a member of the Vietnamese royal family, ran the *Cong Hien Hoi* [Public Offering Society]. Founded in 1907, it directed and controlled Vietnamese student activities in Japan. Students studying in Japan had to first go to the Binh Ngo Hien school to learn Japanese. Afterwards, they were sent to Japanese high schools. By 1908, there were over 200 Vietnamese students residing in Japan.\(^{85}\)

Although Phan devoted a significant portion of his time to obtaining funding and recruiting students for the Dong Du movement, he only viewed it as a subordinate means to his anti-colonial aims. In Phan’s 1907 conversation with two anti-colonial activists in the village of Binh-son, in the Quang-ngai province, he highlighted revolution as his chief objective.

> The aim of our present undertaking is revolution. But in order to bring about revolution, there must certainly be people inside the country to carry on the movement. Indeed, their importance is even double that of the students overseas, because the students overseas are cultivating the ability to construct, but the ability to destroy cannot possibly be looked for only from the students overseas.\(^{86}\)

Phan clearly believed that those who were directly involved in revolutionary activities within the country were more important than the students in Japan. He felt that the use of force was an absolute necessity for Vietnamese anti-colonialism. Destruction was the seed to true resistance. Students were significant for their ability to build. Their skills would be essential in the reconstruction and modernization of the country.


Phan Chau Trinh was an avid supporter of education. He led the Vietnamese Reformist Movement, which aimed at spreading education, and in particular, scientific and Western political knowledge. This movement also advocated the development of Vietnamese commerce and industry. Phan Chau Trinh had joined Phan Boi Chau in Japan to seek help for the Dong Du movement. Both men soon realized that their viewpoints regarding Vietnamese resistance were different and parted ways. Phan Chau Trinh, always a very well informed man, was more of a scholar than an activist. He enthusiastically learned about new revolutionary ideas, but never supported violence. Phan Chau Trinh best highlighted his views on violence by the following statement. "No violence! Violence means death: you who are my fellow country-men, you who really love freedom, I have one and only gift for you: education." In Phan’s point of view, education was always a more viable tool in gaining independence. Using force only led to inevitable defeat and an unnecessary loss of lives.

Like many nationalists of his time, Phan Chau Trinh stressed the need to revise Vietnam’s educational and political systems. He especially underlined the stagnant nature of the mandarinate. In 1907, Phan Chau Trinh wrote his “Letter to Governor-general Paul

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Beau." This letter to the French protectorate contained three basic analyses. First of all, the mandarins, due to the lax protectorate rule, took advantage of their position to abuse the Vietnamese people and to drain the country’s resources. Secondly, Phan highlighted the French’s hatred for the Vietnamese. In his opinion, this hatred divided the country. Finally, Phan emphasized that the Mandarins had adopted this French contempt for the Vietnamese and transferred it to the country.89

Phan Chau Trinh supported the abolition of the Vietnamese monarchy. Therefore, he showed a greater willingness to cooperate with the French, whom he felt could dispose of the decayed Vietnamese court. Naively, Phan advocated for the end of French colonial rule, but hoped that the French would aid Vietnam in creating a new country along the lines of the French model. He dreamt that France would aid Vietnam strive towards this modern world by giving the Vietnamese the technological, political, and scientific tools Phan and his peers deemed to be so critical to modernity.

In his letter to the Governor General, Phan called for an improvement in Vietnam’s pedagogical institutions. Phan’s letter acknowledged that the educational system had not been well developed. However, he did not put forth any definite ideas of what needed to be done to improve Vietnam’s schools.90 Phan seemed to view education as a tool for controlling the masses. He urged the French to develop education as a means to keep the

89Phan Chau Trinh, “Letter to Governor-General Paul Beau.” (1907). Taken from Lam, Colonialism Experienced, 125-140.

90Ibid., 137.
populace content and to exact the best work from them. Education served as a blindfold to the colonial situation. Phan believed that if the Vietnamese were happy then they would have no complaints regarding the French. In order to fully ensure the people's happiness, Phan encouraged the French to allow for more freedom of the press. He argued that this would allow the colonial government to monitor and better understand the sentiments of the people. Phan believed that France would eventually give Vietnam her freedom once Vietnam shed her backwardness and moved into the modern world.

The Dong Kinh Free School

The Dong Kinh free school was at the center of a popular movement for educational and social reform. Advocates of reform and violence alike viewed this school as a means of exposing young Vietnamese students to modern Western education. They perceived it as an instrument to spreading literacy and modern ideas throughout Vietnamese society.

Called Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc in Vietnamese, this school originated from Phan Chau Trinh’s trip to Japan in 1906. He admired Japan’s modernity and attributed its beginning to the Keio Gijuku, a school founded by the Japanese modernizer, Yukichi Fukuzawa. Phan Chau Trinh and his peers decided to open a school in Hanoi that would be patterned after this famous institution. The members elected Luong Van Can, a highly respected scholar who had earned the Cu-Nhan (Master’s degree) in a regional literary

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91Ibid., 139.
competition, as the director of the school. They appointed Nguyen Quyen as the principal of the school. Also known as Huan Quyen, Nguyen had served as the Vietnamese Royal Government’s Huan Dao (the district school superintendent).\(^9\) The Dong Kinh free school was located in a small flat on Han Dao Street. It first opened in March 1907 even though the government general had not granted the school permission to open until May.

The Dong Kinh Free School forwarded three main goals in its application to the government. It wanted to spread interest in commerce, industry, and the sciences. The school wished to promulgate the use of *quoc-ngu* as the national language. In addition to this, it also wanted to instill a sense of pride among the Vietnamese for their history.\(^9\) For its founders, the goal behind the development of the Dong Kinh Free School was to create a private school following French regulations that also fulfilled needs that went beyond those of the French and their Mandarin collaborators.\(^9\) The school did not want to train men simply to become clerks or to fill minor positions within the colonial administration. They wanted Vietnamese men to be the country’s future leaders and innovators.

The scholars of the Dong Kinh Free School were reform-minded individuals driven by the motive of modernization. They all agreed that Vietnamese society needed to be

\(^9\)Vu, *The Dong*, 37.


altered. These scholars wanted to build a Vietnam that was modeled upon modern Western nations. They wanted a nation that was educationally progressive, economically prosperous, and politically independent. At the Dong Kinh Free school, modern subjects were enthusiastically adopted by scholars for the first time. The school made eight levels of instruction available starting at the primary level to high school. They provided classes in quoc-ngu, French, and Chinese. Science, mathematics, geography, political history and economy, civics and literature constituted the core of the curriculum. The new school aimed at denigrating the old degree system in order to set new social and educational values.

The Dong Kinh Free School attempted to cater to academically gifted students of all backgrounds. It was tuition free. It even provided textbooks and educational materials and gave scholarships to poor students who showed academic potential. The school conducted both night and day classes for students and teachers who had other jobs during the day. Those who lived far away could stay in sleeping areas set aside for them. The Dong Kinh school also served lunches for teachers and less privileged students. Many of the teachers were enthusiastic volunteers. At its peak enrollment, the Dong Kinh Free School had about 1000 students registered in forty classes.

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95 Vu, The Dong, 55.

96 Ibid., 38. Marr, Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 166.

97 Vu, The Dong, 35-36.
The goals of the Dong Kinh Free School could best be seen in an anonymously written article used by the school entitled "A New Method to Study Civilization" (hereinafter "A New Method"). Written in 1907, this work highlighted the need to discard old Vietnamese traditions for modern ideas. It also listed many of the weaknesses among Vietnamese nationalists of the time. The author believed that modernization would help Vietnam integrate herself into the modern world. However, the aims of the Dong Kinh Free School were vague. They strove only to imitate European models of education. The school's scholars knew their final objective was Vietnam's political liberation. They had an idea of what they wanted, but could not develop a well thought out means of achieving their aims. As much as they desired to spread education, the members of the Dong Kinh Free School still remained an isolated group of scholars.

Like many nationalists of the time, those within the Dong Kinh free school valued the elite scholar-gentry. Following traditional Vietnamese beliefs, the author of "A New Method" emphasized the importance of the intellectuals' position within Vietnamese society. He highlighted that the Vietnamese admired scholars and stated that they "...always imitate the scholars; the later generations like to emulate the earlier ones; the ears and the eyes usually entertain some relationship between themselves."98 Scholars had the responsibility to part with their out-dated notions since they were the leaders of the community. Therefore, they needed to be well educated in order to adequately

98 "A New Method to Study Civilization" (1907). Taken from Lam, Colonialism Experienced, 149.
comprehend modern technological, political and social issues. The Dong Kinh Free school’s pedagogical program focused on the practical and technical careers in order to prepare students for employment. The school’s scholars criticized any emphasis on the Confucian Classics. In their opinion, these works offered no real practical training for skills such as law, astrology, military science, medicine or the natural sciences.99

In addition to being an engine of educational reform, the Dong Kinh free school was also an important medium for the transmission of ideas. The school gave presentations as oral propaganda. On one hand, these public lectures, poetry recitals, and dramas were artistic endeavors. They recounted heroic Vietnamese legends such as that of the Trung sisters, Tran Hung Dao, and Pham Ngư Lao. These presentations were designed to instill a sense of pride among the Vietnamese audience in their country and their past. They reminded their listeners that Vietnam had its own proud history. At the same time, they indirectly criticized French colonial presence.100 The school’s focus on Vietnamese history showed a very nationalistic outlook on the part of its members. They emphasized discarding outdated ideas, but they also believed that it was essential for the Vietnamese to read historical literature in order to inculcate its audience with a feeling of pride for Vietnam. The author of “A New Method” supported Vietnamese history, but not artistic literary works. He felt that these texts, although they were brilliant stylistically,

99Ibid., 144.

100Marr, Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 168.
did not help open people’s minds. Literature, for the Dong Kinh school, had to have a political or technical message in order to be significant.\textsuperscript{101}

The scholars of the Dong Kinh Free School emphasized reading books written by Vietnamese authors. The author of \textit{“A New Method”} focused on the fact that foreign texts did not deal with Vietnamese issues. \textit{“...Chinese books record Chinese history; they have nothing much concerning us.”}\textsuperscript{102} In his opinion, most of the Classics contained useless information that only served to boggle the mind. The school supported the idea of establishing a canon of books that were \textit{“...useful to the people’s mind and the conduct of world affairs.”}\textsuperscript{103} The criteria for the selection of material was their modern character. Therefore, they had to in some way touch on the scientific, political, and social issues that members of the school considered to be useful. The school’s scholars felt that the canon of books needed to be translated into Vietnamese, but that the full translation was not necessary. They only considered the outlines of these books to be important. Ironically, the scholars of the Dong Kinh Free School deemed the four books and the five classics of Confucianism to be \textit{‘fit to print’ with the addition of modern commentaries.}\textsuperscript{104}

Though it emphasized focusing on Vietnamese works, The Dong Kinh Free School

\textsuperscript{101} Lam, \textit{Colonialism Experienced}, 152.

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Ibid.}, 147.

\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Ibid.}, 147-148.

\textsuperscript{104} Vu, \textit{The Dong}, 47.
also played a major role in introducing foreign ideas to Vietnam. The French heavily
censored foreign, and in particular, Western materials. Therefore school smuggled these
works in from either China or Japan. Members of the school translated contemporary
Chinese works, especially texts written by reformist authors such as Liang Ch‘i-ch‘ao.
The school printed portions of these works in the school’s journal, the Dang Co Tung
Bao. These scholars also translated Western works by authors such as Rousseau and
Montesquieu from Chinese sources. 

They felt that books, speeches, poems, and songs from the West such as Rousseau’s Social Contract could help the Vietnamese to build a
greater feeling of patriotism and ethnic devotion among themselves. Through these
translations, the members of the school contributed to the introduction of modern
terminology such as ‘economy’, ‘progress’, and ‘revolution’ into the Vietnamese
vocabulary. The school’s translations served as an important tool for the spread of
Western ideas among Vietnamese intellectual who received most of their information of
the modern world from translations. The works of Chinese reformers, in particular,
greatly influenced their understanding of the world. Phan Boi Chau, Phan Chau Trinh,
and their contemporaries acquired most of their information about the modern world from
Chinese reformist writings known as Hsin-shu, the New Books.

The transmission of the schools translated works was aided by the schools

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105 Marr, Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 172.

106 Phan, Overturned Chariot, 9-10.
ownership of one of the two journals in Tonkin. As mentioned earlier, the school owned the *Dang Co Tung Bao*. Nguyen Van Vinh, the school's French teacher served as the editor of this paper. The school also managed to secure all of Tonkin's media service by befriending and gaining influence over Dao Nguyen Pho, the editor of the second journal, *Dai-Viet Tan-Bao*. The Dong Kinh Free School's control of Tonkin's two journals showed that its members understood the value of the press. According to the author of the "A New Method", the press expressed the people's will.

The author of "A New Method" believed that newspapers helped to expand people's horizons. In his opinion, newspapers would "...put an end to the tendencies toward obstinacy and ignorance." He criticized Vietnam for having only two major centers of print: Saigon and Haiphong. These areas provided French newspapers, which he claimed that few people could read. Only one Chinese newspaper existed. This was the *Dong Van Nhut Bao*. The school's support for newspapers was an attempt to bring Vietnam into the modern world. They continuously emphasized modernity. The press was a tool to achieve this. The authors of the Dong Kinh school strongly advised against an isolationist policy. They cited Japan and Siam as two examples of modernizing. The Dong Kinh school also believed that newspapers and print in general, would awaken

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107Vu, *The Dong*, 49.

108Lam, *Colonialism Experienced*, 143-144.

109Ibid., 152.
Vietnam from its slumber of ignorance.

Although the Dong Kinh free school played a significant role in the first part of the Vietnamese anti-colonial movement, its life span was relatively short. Ideological differences tore the school apart. Some of the school’s members, led by Phan Boi Chau, believed that the school could be used as a tool to further their goals of armed resistance. Phan Boi Chau argued that any form of modernization, whether it be social or educational, was useless unless the country was first purged of the French. Phan Chau Trinh along with Luong Van Can and Nguyen Quyen opposed this violence-oriented philosophy. They saw the school as a mechanism for peaceful reform. Phan Chau Trinh and his supporters believed that the school’s activities should be limited to educational pursuits. They hoped that the school could create the conditions for social and political reforms.\(^\text{110}\)

In order to work out this conflict, the members of these two factions held a secret meeting to discuss the school’s aims. They agreed that those who supported violence should leave the school in order to protect the school from French suspicions. Unfortunately, the French Military Council, after an emergency meeting, accused the school of being a center of rebellion. They revoked the school’s permit in 1908. The French also suspended the school’s official organ of communication, the *Dang Co Tung Bao*.

The Dong Kinh free school, which lasted a little over a year, greatly influenced the

\(^{110}\text{Vu, The Dong, 74. Duiker, The Rise, 56.}\)
nature of Vietnamese nationalism. At its heart, it was anti-traditional. Except for its support for Vietnamese history, the scholars of the Dong Kinh free school called for the dismantling of the traditional Vietnamese Confucian learning system. They advocated copying the Western model of education. The school’s propaganda forced traditionalists into a defensive position. However, the Dong Kinh group, like the nationalists of their period, did not offer a coherent alternative to the tradition that they were attacking. The Dong Kinh free school’s efforts through their pedagogy, translations, and newspapers made the idea of gaining a Western education and learning from the West more acceptable among Vietnamese nationalists.

**Men on the Periphery**

The currents of thought running through Vietnamese nationalistic circles were not limited to the above-mentioned. Men who were not as well known in the anti-colonial movement and even those who had more favorable views of the French shared the similar views of the Vietnamese plight. Hoang Cao Khai and Cuong De did not stand out in Vietnamese history as staunch nationalists. Hoang, for one, was more of a collaborator than a nationalist. However, a look at their writings showed that Vietnam’s intellectual atmosphere in this early 1900 period called for some type of change. They espoused comparable views of education and print. Although they did not necessarily support complete independence from the French, they blamed Vietnam’s ignorant condition for its subjugation by the French. These men supported modernization. Education would be the
vehicle that would bring Vietnam out of its backwardness.

Hoang Cao Khai

Hoang Cao Khai (1850-1933) was the first Vietnamese high official to rally behind the French when they invaded North Vietnam in 1883. After France’s occupation of Vietnam, Hoang received the position of Kinh Luoc, the representative of the emperor. He held this position from 1888 until its abolishment in 1897. Hoang was a Mandarin collaborator who enthusiastically supported continued French presence in Vietnam. He believed that the French could guide the Vietnamese to technical, scientific, political and social advancements. He argued that France would give Vietnam autonomy in everything except foreign relations once Vietnam learned from France. In his article, “On the Wisdom of Our Country to Rely on France”, written in 1910, Hoang forwarded the idea that France could improve the Vietnamese educational system. He truly believed that French presence was of a great benefit to the Vietnamese.

...we ought to rely on France to introduce modifications into our educational system. Then, after our intelligence has opened up, probably France will grant us our autonomy in internal affairs. In foreign relations she still will be our protector. Then we shall become like Canada, Australia, all colonies of England. We should also note that autonomy may be obtained only because we deal with France; there is no such possibility with other colonial powers.111

Hoang accepted that France and Vietnam would always be linked. He obviously did not believe that Vietnam could function autonomously. In his view, the Vietnamese were not

111Hoang Cao Khai, “On the Wisdom of our Country to Rely on France” (1910). Quoted in Lam, Colonialism Experienced, 160.
intelligent enough to run their own internal nor external affairs. They needed France’s guidance and protection. He argued that even if Vietnam would have been able to repel the French, it was so backward that other nations would eventually conquer it. Hoang considered education to be a means towards Vietnamese modernization. However, he lacked any confidence in Vietnam’s ability to function and compete as an autonomous entity even after an educational reform.

Prince Cuong De

Prince Cuong De (1882-1951) was a direct descendent of Gia Long, the founder of the Nguyen Dynasty. Although he was a member of the royal court, Cuong De never accepted France’s occupation of Vietnam and was covertly involved with the anti-colonial movement. He was best known as Phan Boi Chau’s royal alternative to the Vietnamese throne. Cuong De concurred with Phan Chau Trinh’s analysis that French mistreatment of the Vietnamese was the source of much of the unhappiness and resentment in Vietnam. In his “Letter to Governor General Albert Sarraut” written in December 1913, he attempted to persuade Sarraut that if the French treated the Vietnamese well, they would be happy even under French domination. Like Hoang, Cuong De used Great Britain’s association with Canada and Australia as alternatives to the French colonial situation. Both countries were linked politically with their “mother country”. At the same time, they also ran their own domestic affairs. Cuong De pointed out that Canada and Australia had no need to rebel against Great Britain. Therefore, there was no need to waste money
suppressing resistance within these countries. Cuong De pointed out that the more the French repressed the Vietnamese people, the more rebellious they would become.112

Cuong De did not favorably view the general Vietnamese populace. He believed that ignorance was the main reason for their unhappiness. Cuong De felt that the Vietnamese masses were naturally slovenly and lazy. He urged the French to change the educational system in order to alleviate this problem. Cuong De believed that if the educational system is changed, then undoubtedly new methods are to be used, for example, in disciplines such as mining, electricity, medicine, literature, industry, commerce, agriculture, forestry. There will indeed be no reason to let the people behave in their own way, for example, to nurture hatred against foreigners or to learn how to despise others as in the past. Having learned the sciences from the government, people will use them to improve the quality of their lives. There will no longer be husbands who owe their two meals a day to their wives and who roam everywhere aimlessly with their bundle of clothes under their arms....113

Cuong De tied education and modernization together. Education provided careers that would improve the quality of life. He believed that the lives of the Vietnamese people would be ameliorated once they were educated in the sciences. He also argued that the miserable habits that the Vietnamese currently followed would cease once the Vietnamese had been educated. These habits, which many of the Vietnamese nationalists who were educated in the French school system seemed to be so ashamed of would be erased by a French education.

112Cuong De “Letter to Governor General Albert Sarraut.” (December 1, 1913). Quoted in Lam, Colonialism Experienced, 178-185.

113Ibid., 180.
CHAPTER 4
LITERACY AND EDUCATION

Education represented an important means of nation-building for Vietnamese nationalists. It was essential to the development of a Print Community, defined herein as a community formed by the interactive process of spreading and receiving knowledge whose development was aided by the spread of mass printing. Vietnamese intellectuals pushed for an improvement in the Franco-Vietnamese schools which were developed specifically for the Vietnamese population. They wanted these institutions to provide students with a scientific, philosophical, and technological base that would propel the Vietnamese into the modern world. Plagued with problems these Franco-Vietnamese schools were only shadows of the true French schools in Vietnam and France.

Widespread literacy in Vietnam was a phenomenon of the twentieth century. Up until nineteenth century, few Vietnamese could read fluently. Information within printed works were often transmitted orally. The Vietnamese often "...required "cultural brokers": literate villagers like monks and Confucian scholars, or blind bards who could repeat texts that they had memorized. With this mediation, the printed word exercised a profound impact on a highly oral world."114 Literature in pre-twentieth century Vietnam, therefore, was an interactive process that occurred not only between the author and reader, but also between the cultural broker and his audience. The printed word created

114McHale, Printing, 135.
an important tie between literate scholars and their fellow villagers. Non-literate members of Vietnamese society relied on Buddhist monks and Confucian scholars for information from the outside world. This allowed Vietnamese scholars to interact with the peasantry on a greater scale.115

Print literature substantially transformed Vietnamese society. Now, printed materials such as books, journals and newspapers influenced and shaped Vietnamese thought. The introduction of literacy greatly enlarged language’s potential. Words committed into space served to display the various shades of meaning that a word possessed. It recorded the past and present meanings of the word, therefore increasing the word’s life-span. Literacy allowed for the existence of an infinite amount of words, whereas a"...simple oral dialect will commonly have resources of only a few thousand words..."116 At the same time, literacy fixed the meaning of the word inscribed within the text. Words were less reliant on the fluctuations of meanings common to the oral culture.

Literacy took over the realm of orality and transformed the relationship between the story-teller and the audience. It challenged the traditional role of the Vietnamese scholar. The rise of literacy isolated the scholar from the peasantry. Print-technology also changed the structure of the text and isolated written materials from each other. This

115The term “Vietnamese scholar” is used herein to refer to the literate members of Vietnamese society such as the Buddhist monk or Confucian scholar who often dedicated their lives in pursuit of knowledge.

116Ong, Orality, 7-8.
enabled the author to choose a point of view with the assumption that the audience would adjust to it. In oral cultures, the audience and the storyteller interacted with each other. The cultural broker’s interpretation greatly depended on the audience and the environment in which the story was told. Increasing literacy and print-technology eroded these ties between Vietnamese intellectuals and the peasantry by making the scholar-gentry’s role as the cultural broker superfluous. Now, literate peasants who had increasing access to printed materials no longer needed the scholar to receive information within printed works.

**French Training Schools**

For Vietnamese Nationalists living in the 1925 to 1939 period, the increasing shift towards literacy made education more important. Huynh Thuc Khang, the first president of the Chamber of People’s Representatives highlighted its continuing significance in the following speech given at the opening ceremony of its third session. This presentation, which focused on Central Vietnam’s education, resources, and the penal code, was an attempt by Huynh to remind the French of the positive reasons to support education. He highlighted some of the essential issues that Vietnamese nationalist had against France’s educational policy in Vietnam. Huynh acknowledged that education was universally recognized as being important. “People regard education as their life, their legacy; without it, they cannot live. In this highly competitive period, without education, what
more can be said?" As previously mentioned, education for the Vietnamese was not just a means to sustaining a livelihood. It was also socially significant. At the height of Confucianism's influence, clans vied for the honor of having a scholar in the family. The demise of the Confucian system did not eradicate this tradition. It simply shifted this intellectual focus towards the French school systems.

Huynh underlined the fact that the French had already completely abolished the old educational system, but had not successfully integrated the new French schools into Vietnam. There were not enough public schools, yet French laws hindered the formation of private schools such as the Dong Kinh Free school. This dearth of schools affected the lives of countless Vietnamese youngsters who found their education cut off because they could not secure admission into the schools. For Huynh, this was a sad phenomenon because these children would be unable to find jobs in the future. He mourned for those who were about to start their education since,

...they will have to while away their youth, facing the outer walls of the schools, for lack of space inside. The parents will look at their children in distress; the brothers will look at one another in anger. Such a loss and such a pity! The first work of the government is civilization; its second word is collaboration. And yet, in education, it has consistently refused to adopt an appropriate policy without which it will be impossible for thousands of Vietnamese youngsters to find jobs...  

Huynh's emphasis on education's role in providing the training necessary to obtain

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117 Lam, Colonialism, 263-264.
118 Ibid., 263-264.
a job in the colonial world reflected a key shift in the way the Vietnamese perceived schooling. This change was a direct cause of the French colonial environment.

Nationalist intellectuals of the inter-war period had a different educational experience than the men who had proceeded them. Instead of devoting years to the study of the Confucian classics and of Chinese characters, these men went to French colonial schools or if their parents were rich enough, to schools in the metropole. As the French colonial government grew increasingly larger, the French found it necessary to recruit government personnel from the native population. The French, therefore, trained many of these nationalists to serve the colonial administration.

Initial attempts to reorganize and structure Cochinchina's educational system came between 1879 and 1905. The French had tried to ensure that students reached higher levels with a strong educational background by establishing two levels of education within the government schools: the cantonal schools and then an arrondissement level school, which taught both French and quoc-ngu. This was then followed by secondary education in training schools such as the College Chasseloup-Laubat which were the first schools established by the French colonial administration, aside from the Catholic missionary schools. The very first training school was the College des Interpretes in Saigon, which opened in 1860. The school trained Vietnamese students for twelve months to be translators and liaison personnel between French authorities and local Vietnamese.

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officials.\textsuperscript{120}

A second school, the College des Stagiares, created by the French in 1873 and eventually closed in 1876, trained Vietnamese colonial administrators. The college also provided Vietnamese cultural studies. It taught Vietnamese history, language, and geography in addition to Chinese language and history. From 1886 on, the Ecole Coloniale in Paris trained administrators for the Vietnamese colonial administration. This school also had an indigenous extension designed to train low level personnel.\textsuperscript{121}

In addition to the College des Stagiares, three other complementary schools provided administrative and civil-service education for Vietnamese students after the primary school level. For the most part, these schools trained secretaries, interpreters, postal workers and technicians for the French colonial government. The College de My Tho, the College Chasseloup-Laubat in Saigon, and the Ecole Normale in Gia Dinh all had five year scholastic programs. They taught students European based subjects such as advanced level French, mathematics, physics, natural science, general history, and geography. Technical skills such as stenography, typing, accounting and surveying were also taught.\textsuperscript{122}

In 1874, the French colonial government abolished all village schools in

\textsuperscript{120}Lessard, \textit{Tradition}, 109.

\textsuperscript{121}Ibid., 112.

\textsuperscript{122}Ibid., 117.
Cochinchina. In place of these schools, they established six primary schools, which were divided into primary and secondary levels of education. Each level required three years of study. At the primary level, students learned to read and write. In addition to this, they also studied arithmetic, French, quoc-ngu, and Chinese characters. The secondary levels focused on French, quoc-ngu, mathematics, and history.123

In Annam, the heart of the Vietnamese monarchy, the French opened the National School (Quoc Hoc). Members of the Imperial family, and high level mandarins attended this institution. The National School taught French and Chinese characters. In 1907, the French reorganized the college by replacing the traditional curriculum with a four-year program based on the Western model.124

The French administered Tonkin as a protectorate as it did Annam. However, they exerted a large amount of control over this province since they considered it to be the administrative center of Indochina. French control over Tonkin increased in July of 1897 when the emperor signed a royal ordinance giving the powers of the Viceroy of Tonkin to the French Resident Superior.125 The schools in this region, therefore, trained the personnel necessary to run the colonial center. One such school, the College des Interpretes in Hanoi trained Vietnamese administrators. Established in 1885, it provided

123Ibid., 112-113.

124Ibid., 129-130.

125Ibid., 119.
courses in quoc-ngu, French and Chinese characters. In order to recruit personnel for its central administration, the school gave out large numbers of scholarships. In 1904, for instance, French officials had made plans to give out forty scholarships for the college.¹²⁶

Tonkin's educational system at the primary level consisted of three types of schools: preparatory, elementary, and primary. Preparatory schools existed at the village or canton level. They provided two years of education. Elementary schools provided three levels of classes: infant, preparatory, and elementary. The primary schools were located in the provincial capitals.¹²⁷ These initial schools set up by the French served to train government personnel vital to the colonial administration. Many nationalist of the 1925-1939 period were trained in these schools. However, by the mid-1920s, it became apparent to these intellectuals that the French colonial educational system could not inadequately propel the Vietnamese into the modern world.

The Push For Educational Change

Vietnam's literacy rate during the inter-war years underscored the ultimate failure of French pedagogy in Vietnam. Scholars of Vietnamese history have estimated that by the mid-1920s, only five percent of the Vietnamese population was literate enough to read a newspaper, a proclamation or a letter. At the dawn of World War II, only ten percent of

¹²⁶Ibid., 120.

¹²⁷Ibid., 126.
the Vietnamese population had obtained functional literacy.\textsuperscript{128}

The colonial administration’s policy towards education reflected its administrative problems. The French themselves admitted that they did not have a clear colonial plan.

Of the Indochinese policy, we did not have one. No direction, no method. And these negations are not polemical phrases but constant irrefutables. The points of view vary with governors, and many times with the same governors when they change departments.\textsuperscript{129}

The development of the French colonial educational structure mirrored this trend. Plagued with problems, the Franco-Vietnamese schools constructed for the Vietnamese population were only shadows of the true French schools in Vietnam and France.

In 1917, the French colonial government attempted to standardize the Vietnamese school system. Albert Sarraut, a socialist who served two terms as Governor General of French Indochina and later became France’s Minister of the Colonies, passed the \textit{Reglement General de l’Instruction Publique}. This decree strove to unify colonial Vietnam’s educational system within the three provinces. It formed the post of the Inspectorate General of Public Instruction. An additional decree in 1920 established the office of the Director General of Indochinese Public Instruction. This office oversaw every level of education in Indochina.\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{128}This is a rough estimation made by David Marr. Marr, \textit{Vietnamese Tradition}, 34.


\textsuperscript{130}Lessard, \textit{Tradition}, 113.
Sarraut’s decree of 1917 produced the Franco-Vietnamese school system in Vietnam’s three provinces. These schools joined existing French institutions which had served French, Eurasian, and when space permitted it, Vietnamese students who were either from rich landowning families or had parents who served in the colonial government. The administration modeled the Franco-Vietnamese schools after France’s metropolitan institutions. Schooling was divided into three different levels. A five year primary cycle in the French language medium formed the base. Afterwards, students went through a five year superior course (grades 6 to 10). The University of Hanoi topped off this educational system. The university provided instruction in education, public works, law, administration and medicine. These schools also taught both quoc-ngu and French although instructors in all levels were required to use French. As a result of their formation, all other non-French schools were deemed as private institutions since the Franc-Vietnamese schools were now viewed as the “universal” public school. Schools not within the Franc-Vietnamese system now had to adhere to the curriculum of the Franco-Vietnamese schools. 131

The French colonial administration created these reforms for three reasons. First of all, World War I created a shortage of manpower within the colonial government. The Franco-Vietnamese schools were modified to instruct students in areas deemed relevant to...

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the Vietnamese environment since the colons objected to educating the Vietnamese in French schools. Therefore, education focused on primary and technical information. These were all aspects that the French felt would be practical to the Vietnamese.\footnote{Ibid., 14-15. Lessard, Tradition, 134.}

Franco-Vietnamese schools, like the training schools, supplied the colonial government with educated Vietnamese who could work under French supervision.

Secondly, the French wanted to dismantle the Vietnamese indigenous schools. These institutions often taught Vietnamese using Chinese characters. The French government had no means of controlling the indigenous schools’ curriculum and found it easier to take them apart. The Franco-Vietnamese schools also provided an alternative education to a population which demanded more schooling. The French colonial government essentially established the Franco-Vietnamese schools in order to prevent increasing Vietnamese enrollment in the French schools.\footnote{Kelly, Franco-Vietnamese, 14-15.}

On the surface, standardization of the colonial school system seemed to increase the rate of education by boosting enrollment within French supported schools. Between 1917 and 1926, the number of students attending pre-university schools almost doubled. By 1938, this number had increased to more than 138 percent. These calculations seemed to reflect the success of the Franco-Vietnamese school system. In reality, it was exactly the opposite. The level of education and literacy actually decreased due to the formation

\footnotetext{\textsuperscript{132}Ibid., 14-15. Lessard, Tradition, 134.}
of the Franco-Vietnamese schools. Their development included the dismantling of the indigenous school system. In 1924, the French forcibly closed over 1,800 indigenous schools in the provinces of Annam and Tonkin. Additionally, the 1917 decree had already taken apart the village schools and only 1,900 Franco-Vietnamese schools existed in these areas to make up for this dearth of schools.\(^\text{134}\) The termination of these indigenous schools increased the rate of illiteracy in colonial Vietnam. There now existed more students than spaces within the schools.

The Franco-Vietnamese school system also faced many additional problems. In the inter-war years, shortages of qualified teachers and money continually plagued the schools. Many of the Franco-Vietnamese schools ended up with teachers who lacked a proficient command of French due to this shortage of qualified instructors. In 1924, a code of public instruction attempted to amend this problem. The first three years of primary education could be taught in Vietnamese if the teachers were not fluent in French. This produced two separate educational systems: A Vietnamese language based system, which was often found in poor rural areas and a French based system found in urban locations.\(^\text{135}\) Unfortunately, the Vietnamese language based systems tended to hamper further education for most Vietnamese children. In order to get into the second level of primary schools, a student had to demonstrate proficiency in French. The Vietnamese-

\(^{134}\)Ibid., 32.

\(^{135}\)Ibid., 33-35.
language institutions did not provide enough French instruction for most students to pass the French language exams. Therefore, only a small amount of Vietnamese students actually graduated from the Franco-Vietnamese schools. In 1925, of the 253,366 students enrolled in the Franco-Vietnamese school system, only 3,185 students earned their certificate of primary studies. An additional 395 students received their diploma from the superior primary school. This totaled up to only a little more than one percent of the Vietnamese student population.136

The fact that the French had miserably failed in their civilizing mission soon became apparent to the Vietnamese intellectuals. The Nationalist intelligentsia questioned the colonial administration’s fiscal priorities. The colonial government could waste money “...buying from the English unusable underwater cables, French Indochina can send to France each year tens of millions of piastres to make as a contribution to the military expenses of the metropole....” When the question of developing public instruction arises, however, “...the government sees that there is no funds in the budget.”137

These intellectuals questioned France’s sincerity in educating the Vietnamese. La Cloche felee journalist, E. Dejean de la Batie, highlighted this obvious contradiction in France’s objective and the reality of the colonial educational system.

136Lessard, Tradition, 146.

If we now examine the intellectual state of Vietnam today and if we compare it with that of Vietnam in the old days, we will see, with the obvious evidence, that the parallel is far from being to the advantage of the pretended educational mission of France in this country.¹³⁸

De la Batie pointed out what was evident to most intellectuals. Vietnam’s educational level under the French regime was worse than it was before French colonization. Vietnamese intellectuals felt that the French colonial school system was a failure. They continually criticized its insufficiency. The intelligentsia felt that the scholastic system should function to raise the Vietnamese people’s “...intellectual level and revive, through contact with European ideas and science, their intellect accustomed to the old Chinese studies...”¹³⁹ Yet, the schools were ill-equipped. They lacked adequate materials for teaching. The level of education in the secondary schools were low due to the lack of competent teachers.

Vietnamese intellectuals manifested their frustration with the French colonial educational system in two ways: they either took it upon themselves to teach the masses, or like De la Batie, they prolifically published critiques on the French. In the 1930s, an increasing amount of intelligentsia integrated themselves among the lower levels of Vietnamese society. Dissatisfied with the progress of the Franco-Vietnamese schools,


they took it upon themselves to teach *quoc-ngu* to those who could not afford a primary school education.\footnote{Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, 186.}

**Quoc-ngu and Language as a Base.**

The quest for educational reform and an increased literacy rate was intimately tied to nationalist debates regarding *quoc-ngu*. This Vietnamese romanized script was an important element in Vietnamese nationalist debates. It linked to language’s ability to conjure up a sense of “contemporaneous community.” The Nationalism which emerged in the late 19th century promoted loyalty to a particular version or ideological construct of a country rather than loyalty to the physical country.\footnote{E.J. Habsbawn, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 93.} Language allowed people to feel connected to strangers who spoke the same tongue. In addition to this, language, because of its agelessness, served to tie people to their ancestry. It “...connect[ed] us effectively to the dead.”\footnote{Anderson, *Imagined*, 145.}

Language, for nationalists after 1830, became increasingly linked to the idea of nationhood. States became more aware of the importance and political nature of language. States became increasingly involved in public education. Therefore, like the Vietnamese, the Poles, Czechs, and Welsh all debated on the issue of which language should be used. In order to use language as a common bond the written and the spoken

\footnote{Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, 186.}

\footnote{E.J. Habsbawn, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 93.}

\footnote{Anderson, *Imagined*, 145.}
language had to correspond with each other. The Vietnamese ancestors’ spoken and written language differed from each other. This dissimilarity was divisive to the promotion of a singular post-colonial Vietnamese nation. Between 1920 and 1945, eight-five percent of the Vietnamese population spoke the same language with only minor variations in dialects. Since the majority of the inhabitants spoke Vietnamese, Vietnamese intellectuals had a possible base from which they could link the Vietnamese people together. The Vietnamese nationalists’ dilemma was that the language that tied Vietnam to its past was not Vietnam’s spoken language. Dynastic Vietnam used Chinese as its official court language. The Vietnamese spoken language had no written equivalent until the development of the *nom* script, a derivative of Chinese characters made to represent the sounds of the Vietnamese language. The invention of *nom* resulted from the ancient literati’s interest in local Vietnamese oral tradition. Their desire to produce and record story recitations, folk-singing and compositions representative of the village inhabitants led to the formation of the script. *Nom* linked the literati to the village. At least one person within the village could passably read *nom*. This fragile bond made it possible for the elite to spread their ideas down to the village level. *Nom* never developed into common use since the scholar-elite had never taken the script seriously. It was not part of the court language so literati viewed it as a recreational tool. In addition to this, *nom* was actually more complex than Chinese itself. The Vietnamese had made no clear

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143 Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition*, 138.
effort to simplify it until the 1920's. By this time, quoc-ngu, a romanized, written version of the Vietnamese spoken language, had already taken hold.

Vietnam’s dilemma over the disparate nature of its written and spoken language greatly resembled the issues that nationalists around the world were facing. Welsh scholars, for instance did not write in their own language. In the 18th century, even those who were anti-English wrote their correspondence to each other in English. This was the language in which they had been trained. By the end of the 1600s the Welsh literati had lost touch with traditional Welsh culture, symbols, language and grammar. English lyrical forms became dominant in poetry and Protestant theology replaced traditional symbolism. In Wales, the trend towards embracing Welsh heritage did not begin until the period between 1660 through 1730 with a resulting increase of books published in Welsh. Scholars came to see Welsh as a national asset. These men developed and extended the Welsh language. William Owen (Pughe), a language mythologist, was one of the most influential in developing the language. The revival of Druidism in the late 18th through early 19th centuries placed the scholar, poet, and teacher in the center of Welsh culture. It also showed that Wales had an older cultural tradition than most of its

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144Ibid., 141-142, 148.


146Ibid., 69.

147Ibid., 71-73.
western European counterparts.\textsuperscript{140}

\textit{Quoc-ngu in Vietnamese History}

The transliteration of Vietnamese phonetic sounds into Latin script was attributed to Alexandre de Rhodes. Rhodes, considered one of the most prominent figures in French missionary history, was born in Avignon in 1591, he left for East Asia in 1619. In 1624, Rhodes left Macao, the center of the Jesuit missionary, for Cochinchina. Rhodes displayed his outstanding ability to master languages. He was able to teach in the indigenous language after only six months of study.\textsuperscript{149} Rhodes developed \textit{quoc-ngu} as an aid for Catholic missionaries learning Vietnamese. His great contributions to its formation were the tone and diacritic marks to indicate vowel pronunciation, both of which were essential for understanding the Vietnamese language.\textsuperscript{150}

The further spread of \textit{quoc-ngu} was hampered by the literati’s attachment to Chinese characters. The court language and dynastic records were based on the Chinese script. Having devoted most of their lives studying for the Confucian exams, most scholars were reluctant to embrace a new script which had no social value. \textit{Quoc-ngu}’s stigma of having been developed by westerners also hindered its diffusion.

Unlike the Chinese script, \textit{quoc-ngu}’s introduction to Vietnam was fairly recent and older

\textsuperscript{140}Ibid., 66.


\textsuperscript{150}Osborne, \textit{The French}, 90.
generations of Vietnamese intellectuals associated *quoc-ngu* with the West. They did not consider it their own script. In the past, those who had championed for this script were often Christian converts or collaborators who linked themselves to the French. They had supported the romanized script in an effort to undermine the prominence of Chinese characters and the literati who embraced them.

In his memorials on reforms sent from 1866 to 1868, Nguyen Truong To (1827-71), a Catholic convert sent by Catholic missionaries to study in France, underlined the incompatibility between the Vietnamese spoken and written language.

Our country is the second largest country in the East, and yet we do not have our own system of writing. Is it because Heaven does not favor us? No, it is simply because we have always been fascinated by the foreign script [Chinese]. We learn it so well that even our scholars of talent have not dared invent a new system lest they be opposed by public opinion.

...We now use Chinese characters, which are doubly inconvenient both because they are not correctly pronounced and because they do not transcribe our spoken language.\(^{151}\)

In this paragraph, Nguyen highlighted the Vietnamese obsession with Confucianism and with the Chinese language. He pointed out that Vietnam was one of the largest countries in Southeast Asia, yet it did not have its own written language. Nguyen felt that the Vietnamese inconvenienced themselves by using Chinese characters since it did not match the spoken language. Furthermore, Nguyen pointed out that the Vietnamese often incorrectly pronounced these characters.

Nguyen’s support of *quoc-ngu* reflected a very Catholic, pro-French attitude. It

\(^{151}\)Nguyen Truong To, *Memorials on Reforms* (1866-1868). Taken from Lam, *Patterns*, 99-100.
attacked Chinese, the basis of Confucianism. Nguyen’s criticism of the Chinese script aimed at breaking the link to Vietnam’s Confucian past. As a Catholic convert, Nguyen tied Confucianism to China. He looked at Vietnam’s connection with China as a burden and a part of the past. In Nguyen’s view, Vietnam could liberate herself by looking towards France for guidance. France, and her ideas meant modernity. Vietnam could used *quoc-ngu*, a gift from the westerners, as a means to free herself from this chain which tied it to China and to the past.

Before the 1920s, those who pushed for the use of *quoc-ngu* were often like Nguyen. They supported the French. These groups profited from their association with the French. Their advocacy for *quoc-ngu* struck against the literati trained in Chinese. This literati had historically led the Vietnamese masses against the French. Many intellectuals linked the French colonial administration’s attack on traditional education in Chinese as an attack on the scholars. This perception remained among some intellectual circles of the second generation. In his article, “Hier et Aujourd’hui: Coup d’oeil sur le niveau intellectuel et la vie materielle du peuple annamite avant et apres la conquete Francaise,” E. Dejean de la Batie criticized the French for suppressing Chinese language education. He claimed that the French attacked both Vietnam’s scholars and Chinese culture to distract the Vietnamese. French suppression served as a front. It made the Vietnamese forget French trespasses made during its conquest of Vietnam.  

152 De La Batie, *Hier*, 1.
exaggerated as this hypothesis may have been, it showed that Vietnamese nationalists of this period still valued the traditional status of the scholar-gentry.

Those at the lower levels of the Vietnamese society also viewed *quoc-ngu* with suspicion. Vietnamese villagers considered Chinese characters to be sacred and that the script itself carried magical powers. The actual meanings of the characters had little significance. *Quoc-ngu* did not possess these mystical qualities. Looking back to his life under the colonial regime, Nguyen Dac Bang, a French trained village teacher who served as the leader of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party in his village of Son Duong, recounted the villager’s view of this strange *quoc-ngu* script. Nguyen had been able to continue his primary education at a provincial school. This, he stated, was because his father was “progressive.”

[The] older women in the village had discouraged people from learning the modern Vietnamese script. They cited the strange-looking and unsacred nature of modern writing. In those days, villagers even used the paper from modern Vietnamese books as paper towels or toilet tissue. Nobody dared to trash Sino-Vietnamese books.¹⁴³

The older members of the Vietnamese village distrusted *quoc-ngu*. For them, the written language held a double significance. It was a means of communication. However, it was also linked to the realm of the spirit. These villagers were suspicious of *quoc-ngu* because it was strange looking. Plus, it did not have the sacred qualities that Chinese characters had. This fear and mistrust in this new Vietnamese script hindered its full spread in

colonial Vietnam.

Vietnamese nationalists in the inter-war years understood the importance of having a corresponding written and spoken language. The second generation of nationalists placed more significance on the value *Quoc-ngu*. They were trained in *quoc-ngu* and French and therefore received *quoc-ngu* more openly. Men from the older generation, like Phan Boi Chau, were less likely to support the use and spread of *quoc-ngu*. They were often trained in Chinese and *nom*. Embracing *quoc-ngu* meant that they had to accept a form of writing in which they were less proficient. In fact, Phan Boi Chau had not yet learned to read and write this script by 1925. He still believed in using Chinese sources as the basis of his information.\(^{154}\)

**The Development of *Quoc-ngu* as the Written Language**

The advancement of *quoc-ngu* as a form of expression was one of the strongest forms of anti-colonialism in inter-war Vietnam. It helped to form a single concept of language. *Quoc-ngu* broke Vietnam’s reliance on French and Chinese. Compared to Chinese characters, *quoc-ngu* seemed to have several distinct advantages. First of all, it was easier to learn than Chinese. *Quoc-ngu* corresponded to the spoken language and therefore simplified the learning process for young Vietnamese students. Secondly, by publishing in *quoc-ngu*, Vietnamese nationalists could disseminate their ideas more effectively. Writing in *quoc-ngu* allowed for a wider range of distribution since illiterate

\(^{154}\)Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, 196.
audiences could listen to articles being read rather than additionally relying on a translation of the text. This provided a link to the spoken language. \textsuperscript{155} Lastly, Quoc-ngu facilitated the introduction and translation of western words. One could possibly say that this script became the “...focus for a new Vietnamese (and not Sino-Vietnamese) identity.”\textsuperscript{156}

The French government played a small role in the spread of quoc-ngu as they were the ones who initially promoted the use of this form of writing. The French choice to use quoc-ngu was practical. The Christian interpreters who were willing to work for the French used quoc-ngu. During World War I, the French used quoc-ngu to train minor functionaries. \textsuperscript{157} These minor implementations were only the first steps to the diffusion of quoc-ngu. The training of minor bureaucrats and the creation of the Franco-Vietnamese school systems after World War I also played a large role in the diffusion of quoc-ngu. The colonial government considered the Chinese script to be an obstacle to modernization and it also distrusted Confucianism, which they linked with the Chinese script. To hasten its demise, the government implemented two opposing plans which it followed haphazardly. Aimed at promoting the French language, these plans actually furthered the spread of quoc-ngu. First of all, colonial authorities increased the number of French language courses offered. These were provided for workers such as minor bureaucrats,

\textsuperscript{155}McHale, Printing, 47-48.

\textsuperscript{156}Duiker, The Rise, 60.

\textsuperscript{157}Marr, Vietnamese Tradition, 137.
who dealt with the French on a daily basis. Secondly, the colonial government moved towards establishing more schools at the village level. Although the colonial government had initially promoted the use of French at all levels, these schools ended up using *quoc-ngu*. The urban schools and the upper levels of the educational system attempted to use French. Since using French proved to be too difficult, schools in the villages and primary levels used *quoc-ngu*.\textsuperscript{158}

Vietnamese journals also contributed to the spread of this script. The first publication in *quoc-ngu*, the *Gia Dinh Bao* [the Journal of Gia Dinh], first appeared in Cochinchina in 1865. Being pro-French, this paper served as a major vehicle to the promotion of both *quoc-ngu* and the French culture in Cochinchina. Central and Northern Vietnam faced more publication difficulties. The decree of 1898 required journals written in either Chinese or *quoc-ngu* to be managed by a French citizen.\textsuperscript{159}

Once the French commenced promulgating *quoc-ngu*, Vietnamese intellectuals took the initiative and developed this script beyond French intentions. Vietnamese authors pushed for and developed *quoc-ngu* in their works. Through printed literature, these intellectuals introduced new styles of writing. They disseminated *quoc-ngu* by translating major literary *nom* and Chinese texts into this script. These intellectuals also expanded the *quoc-ngu* vocabulary. The bilingualism of these intellectuals allowed them to borrow

\textsuperscript{158}Duiker, *The Rise*, 108.

\textsuperscript{159}Ibid., 11.
terms and ideas from both China and the West. They were able to understand the terms in
the context of the foreign language and then translate them literally into their native
Vietnamese. Concepts such as evolution, citizen, and mass opinion were adapted and
integrated into the quoc-ngu lexicon thereby expanding the Vietnamese understanding of
the outside world.\textsuperscript{160} Quoc-ngu publications enlarged the range of spoken Vietnamese.
They added the rhetoric of political activists and the terminology of doctors, lawyers and
entrepreneurs to the existing language of the literati, the Buddhists, the artisans, and the
peasants. By 1945, 40,000 scientific and technological terms existed within the
Vietnamese language.\textsuperscript{161}

\textit{Quoc-ngu as the Vietnamese Language}

Although the Francophiles and nationalist intelligentsia accepted quoc-ngu more
readily, these scholars understood that quoc-ngu came with its advantages and
disadvantages. The Vietnamese dynasties wrote their official histories in Chinese. This
language, however, was only accessible to the elite. The use of quoc-ngu alienated the
Vietnamese from their history and from their Chinese heritage. It created a generation of
young intellectuals who could not read the old dynastic records and ancient literature.\textsuperscript{162}

The coexistence of both French and Vietnamese in colonial Vietnam created


\textsuperscript{161}Marr, \textit{Vietnamese Anticolonialism}, 168.

\textsuperscript{162}Anderson, \textit{Imagined}, 126.
barriers within the Vietnamese society. The colonial school system produced intellectuals who were sometimes more adept in French than they were in Vietnamese. Nguyen Tinh, a journalist for La Cloche felee, claimed that these individuals preferred French because they viewed it as a sign of being part of the elite. They wanted to copy everything French. These men were willing to exchange their culture for French culture. Nguyen felt that this abandonment of "...the ancient culture and of the maternal language should worry the Vietnamese who hope for the future of their race."\textsuperscript{163}

Nguyen also felt that some intellectuals abandoned Vietnamese because of its perceived paucity in terms of expression. He was critical of these individuals and believed that they viewed the Vietnamese language this way because they had a limited knowledge of it. Nguyen stated that even peasants had a larger comprehension of Vietnamese. He pointed out that its ability to assimilate Chinese into its vocabulary attested to Vietnamese's capacity for enrichment. Nguyen felt that the Vietnamese people needed to work at enhancing the Vietnamese language and that they needed to adapt it to the demands of time because

\textit{[l]anguage is the most precious guardian of people's independence...If the Vietnamese proudly guard their language and work to enrich it, to make it more capable to popularize, in Vietnam, the European morals and scientific doctrines, the emancipation of the Vietnamese people would not be more than a question of time.}\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{163}Nguyen Tinh, "La Langue, Liberatrice des Peuples Asservis." \textit{La Cloche Felee} No. 27 (Saigon, 21 December 1925), 2.

\textsuperscript{164}\textit{Ibid.}, 2.
For Nguyen, total support of Vietnamese ensured eventual Vietnamese independence. Vietnamese guarded a rich heritage while at the same time it allowed room for growth and development. Nguyen believed that Vietnamese autonomy from the French could be obtained if the cultural, political and scientific language of the West could be incorporated into the Vietnamese language and therefore into the Vietnamese world-view.

A few Vietnamese nationalists at this time felt that quoc-ngu could be used to correct various problems within the Vietnamese national character. Pham Quynh, for instance, supported the idea of a national Vietnamese literature written in this romanized script. He felt that the Vietnamese youth lacked discipline in their thought process. They did not have a firm knowledge of either French or Vietnamese. According to Quynh, the Vietnamese youth had no "...concrete sense of what words really meant."\(^{165}\) Quynh’s statement was significant because it mirrored Nguyen’s concept of language’s responsibility. This notion pushed for the modernization of Vietnam using European knowledge of science, math and technology. These nationalists felt that quoc-ngu built a solid foundation that would allow students to emulate more readily other subjects necessary to pull Vietnam into the modern world.

This idea was also reflected in Pham Minh Thuong’s article, “Viet quoc ngu cho dung la su can cho nguoi trong nuoc ta lam.” [Writing Quoc-ngu is Necessary for People in our Country.] In this article, Pham strongly advocated teaching quoc-ngu correctly.

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He found that people did not care about writing correctly because they often "...wrote incorrectly, but didn't know or knew but were not willing to correct their mistakes, showing that it did not matter at all." Pham criticized Vietnamese teachers for not caring enough about proper writing. He believed that writing incorrectly affected people's ability to read. This in turn hampered people's understanding and their capacity to learn subjects such as science, mathematics, and geography, deemed necessary for the modernization of Vietnam. In Pham's opinion, "Teaching [students] to speak the mother's tongue, teaching [students] to correctly write the words of the homeland is the responsibility of each teacher."

The fact that Pham linked writing, quoc-ngu, and the concept of homeland together was notable. Half a century earlier, Vietnamese intellectuals would never have linked speaking in the 'mother's tongue' and writing the works of the 'homeland' together with this script. By the 1930s a majority of the intelligentsia were committed to the development of quoc-ngu. They included these ideas in their modernization plans as a way to "avoid permanent reliance to any foreign language."

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166 Pham Minh Tuong, "Van De Viet Chu Quoc-Ngu Cho Dung." Phu Nu Tan Van. (Saigon: July 24, 1930), 5.

167 Ibid., 5.

168 Marr, Vietnamese Tradition, 137.
CONCLUSION

Vietnamese nationalists living between the Inter-War years of 1919 to 1939 were preoccupied with finding a means to explain Vietnam's subjugation to the French. They wanted to free Vietnam from French authority. These men who inherited a strong tradition of resistance quickly found out that they could no longer use its methods to rally the Vietnamese people. At the same time, they were also part of an intellectual world into which new forms of communication and print had been introduced. The task these Vietnamese intellectuals found themselves faced with was how to tie the two worlds, the modern world of science and technology introduced by the French to the Vietnamese traditional world.

In the time period under consideration in this work, these men were yet unable to successful meld these two realms together. They wanted to modernized Vietnam so that it would be an equal to the super powers of Europe, America and Japan. However, they were ultimately unsuccessful in this task. This may have been because they still belonged to the Vietnamese scholar-gentry. They still clung to the notion that it was the Vietnamese intellectuals who would ultimately lead the people into rebellion against the French. In their efforts to refine print, education, and the written language, this scholar-gentry found itself to be more isolated from the populace. The urbanization of Vietnam, the change in Vietnam's social structure, the failure of the Franco-Vietnamese school
system and the development of *quoc-ngu* all served to break the links between the Vietnamese nationalists and the Vietnamese people they hoped to lead.

Vietnamese anti-colonialism would not be successful until after World War II with the rise of Communism. It would be important to analyze the differences between the Communists and their nationalist counterparts of the earlier years to see what, if any, influence the newspaper, education and *quoc-ngu* played in the rise of Communism and its success of rallying the people behind its cause.

In this work, I have shown that modernizing tools such as the newspaper, education and language, in one way or another, hampered Vietnamese nationalists ability to effectively communicate with the rest of the Vietnamese populace. This is ultimately ironic since these three resources should be regarded as communication facilitators. The Vietnamese had a distinct notion of themselves as a separate people. This was an essential base for Vietnamese nationalism. Vietnamese intellectuals addressed their audience with the assumption that the Vietnamese distinguished themselves from their neighbors and from the French colonists.

The Vietnamese further reinforced this concept of uniqueness through their literature. These works also defined what it meant to be a true Vietnamese subject. The notions of loyalty and devotion to both the family and the king were celebrated as the essential characteristics of a true Vietnamese person.

French colonialism changed the Vietnamese environment. It also altered the
Vietnamese perception of themselves and of the world around them. After the Can Vuong rebellion and the subsequent defeat of the Emperor Ham Nghi and his roylist supports, Vietnamese nationalists found that they could no longer use notions loyalty and devotion to the king to rally the Vietnamese behind their cause. In their analysis of the world superpowers of America and Europe, these Vietnamese intellectuals believed that modernization would be the solution to Vietnam’s dilemma. Modernization would also be the end result of their work to free Vietnam, on some level, from French control.

Vietnamese Nationalists from the early 1900s up to the eve of World War II were unique from the rest of the Vietnamese because they were highly educated. Their bilingualism in either Chinese or French allowed them to have access to information from the outside world. The Vietnamese intellectuals’ knowledge of different languages allowed them to introduce new words to the Vietnamese lexicon, thereby developing and enriching *quoc-ngu*.

The Vietnamese Nationalists of this period had been introduced to and were comfortable with new forms of print such as the newspaper. They used the newspaper and other writings to push for more improvements in the Franco-Vietnamese school system and governmental reforms. They demanded more schools to accommodate the Vietnamese populace. These Vietnamese intellectuals were also vocal critics of the French “civilizing mission.” Through their writings, these men questioned France’s sincerity in educating the Vietnamese.
This work shows that Vietnamese nationalists of the Inter-War years found themselves isolated intellectually and physically from most of the Vietnamese populace. French colonization had created large urban centers in Vietnam. Most of the Scholar-gentry, who before had resided among the Vietnamese peasants in the traditional villages, migrated to these urban centers where the best in French and Franco-Vietnamese education was provided. These men were highly educated and trained in some of the best French and Vietnamese schools whereas a large portion of the Vietnamese populace were uneducated or poorly educated due to the dearth of Franco-Vietnamese schools and the dismantling of the Vietnamese indigenous schools. In addition to this, Vietnamese nationalists were using and developing a script that the rest of the population and even the older generations of intellectuals were unfamiliar with.

This work constitutes a partial answer to a larger question. As mentioned in the introduction, a future inquiry on the nature of the Vietnamese audience needs to be done. These nationalists were addressing a public with the assumption that they could relate to and understand the ideas that these leaders were trying to put forth. This work has shown that there were many obstacles to the spread of any nationalist vision. Issues such as the basic French colonial censorship and the hurdles of a failed educational system seem to point to the fact that these nationalists did not really reach a wide portion of the Vietnamese populace. This brings into question the true effectiveness of these nationalists.
Additionally, the question of how the Vietnamese populace received and translated this information needs to be answered. As mentioned before, the French censored a great portion of Vietnamese publications. Therefore, Vietnamese nationalists had to phrase their ideas in a way that would have been deemed acceptable to French authorities. These Vietnamese authors also had the choice of writing in French. Publishing in French would bring into question the success rate of translation and comprehension whereas Vietnamese writers who chose to write in quoc-ngu were subject to the uncertainty of whether or not their audience truly received the full message. However, it is truly hard to gage how an audience receives information. We would then be entering into where we may be attributing motivation to an audience that may not have had any.
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