

# Confucianism in Vietnam: A Hauntology-based Analysis of Political Discourse

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## Abstract

From the time it was propagated to Vietnam until it was forced to relinquish its leadership position in both politics and philosophy, Confucianism in Vietnam was never orthodox Confucianism. This study employs the theory of invented tradition to examine how Confucianism penetrated the ethnic Vietnamese community at the turn of the first millennium and points out its vital requirement: the construction of a Chinese-style centralized administrative government based on Neo-Confucianism. This requirement unfolded during the Le So Dynasty in the fifteenth century. Moreover, the theory of invented tradition can also be applied to discover the motivation behind Neo-Confucianism's process of manufacturing orthodoxy to speed up the goal of Sinicization. Somehow, the launching of the imperial examination system, meant to fulfill a system of bureaucracy, ended up resolving one of the greatest challenges of medieval times. It is to seek the ruler's uncritical submission to the ruled. This article applies hauntology to analyze two forms of Confucianism discourse in Vietnam. In doing so, this study determined that Confucianism evolved into its own unique system of thought in Vietnam and in the end, was not even recognizable as Confucianism. Throughout Vietnam's turbulent history, Confucianism shifted from a symbol of progress to one of backwardness. This culminated Vietnam's preoccupation with the de-Sinicization during the early twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** : Confucianism; Neo-Confucianism; Hauntology; Sinicization; De-Sinicization; Chinalization; de-Chinalization; Vietnamese Confucianism; Vietnamese invented tradition

## Introduction

In the early years of the twentieth century, Confucianism in general received a torrent of criticism after Western civilization made many great achievements which led many to deny or minimize the previous achievements of Confucian knowledge during the over the prior 2000 year-period. Confucian knowledge in Vietnam also suffered the same fate. It was not until the rise of the “East Asian dragons” that Confucian thought and traditions or traditions of Confucian origin became the main driving force promoting Confucianism. After that, Confucianism was once again revived and assured of its status. It has even been succinctly paraphrased that “the rise of Asia has its roots in Confucian values” (Kaplan 2015). In 2002, the edited volume, *Rethinking Confucianism, Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam*, by Benjamin A. Elman, John B. Duncan, and Herman Ooms raised the question of a new research direction for discovering Confucian values when openly pro-Confucian rhetoric was revived in the 1980s and 1990s. It is currently recognized that Confucianism provided the cultural foundations of Asian nations, as well as the source of social and political stability, which paved the way for Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore’s tremendous economic expansion in the 1960s and 1970s. As Shawn McHale noted, “The chapters focus on how an apparently common Confucian idiom in Asia was appropriated differently in various regions and among various social group as the consequence of divergent and historically contingent social, economic, and political circumstances” (McHale 2002, 3).

These arguments have inspired the re-examination of Vietnamese Confucianism which will be conducted in this study. The prospects for this nation in its attempts to recover Confucianist values is quite gloomy as low to high socioeconomic formations can be expected as a result of the adoption of Marxism’s deterministic history. In this context, historical patterns are viewed as predestined and unalterable. This view has caused Confucianism and other state-sponsored philosophical ideologies connected with feudalism to immediately be perceived as part of an obsolete social paradigm. The complex forms of discourse postulated by contemporary Confucianism in Vietnam reflect a spirit of de-Chinalization (a resistance against the modern-day, i.e. post-dynastic, expansion of China); the aspiration for a future in Vietnam untouched by China. However, that aspiration is conveyed in forms of discourse which come from a supposedly outdated Confucianism, which has no place in modern society. But on the other hand, such discourse also forces itself into the hearts and minds of the people ; thus support of that discourse is the undeniable role of patriotic Confucians. Somehow, a part of the invented tradition in Vietnam revolves around Confucianism. That background has created an environment wherein discourse on Confucianism in Vietnam oscillates from one mental complex to another. Vietnamese thinkers continue to discuss Confucianism and even become obsessed with it. Some concepts appear to no longer

exert any influence, whereas other concepts were fundamental to a certain extent in forming Vietnamese culture. Vietnam's future is lost in a territory that has never been invaded or Chinalized. All of these can be considered manifestations of Vietnamese hauntology.

The concept of "Hauntology" was first presented by the philosopher Jacques Derrida in his essay, *Specters of Marx*. Thereafter, philosopher cultural critic Mark Fisher frequently mentioned and applied this concept. Hauntology can be defined as a collection of ideas and philosophical musings on modern cultural, political, social, and identity goods that continue to be 'haunted' and dominated in terms of structure and discourse by phenomena that were considered to be deceased. The phenomenon of hauntology is value-neutral as it can apply to both positive and negative phenomena and the results of the phenomena can likewise be positive or negative.

In terms of this study's hypothesis, hauntology provides a framework for examining the complex relationship between past, present, and future, and it also challenges the idea of a linear and progressive understanding of history. It encourages us to recognize the haunting presence of the past and its impact on our collective and individual experiences. Hauntology will be the most common explanation for the complex forms of discourse on Confucianism in Vietnam, but this study also aims to review the process of Confucianism's importation into Vietnam. Therefore, in addition to hauntology, the theory of invented tradition will also be utilized to provide a reasonable explanation for the movements of Confucianism in Vietnam, especially during the Le So Dynasty. Since the 1960s, there have been heated debates about the authenticity of the tradition. By 1983, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's work, *The Invention of Tradition*, became regarded as the first study to present this as a complete concept. In it, Eric Hobsbawm distinguishes an invented tradition as "something" different from prior customs, and he additionally detailed the qualities of genuine traditions in order to juxtapose it against invented tradition. Cultural practices that are displayed or "deemed" as traditions touted as having their origins in the distant past while actually having more recent origins are illustrations of invented traditions. Invented tradition is also stressed as a tradition formed during periods of social transition at a time when "old" traditions and their propagandists became less effective or were disregarded. It is also observed when some groups attempt to break with the past by consciously abandoning old methods. Invented traditions are often created rapidly. They are intriguing and suggest continuity with the past and are characterized by "The use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes" (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983, 6). In the first pages of his work, Hobsbawm observes that "Nothing appears more ancient and linked to an immemorial past than the pageantry which surrounds British monarchy in its public ceremonial manifestations" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, 1), and in assertion, Hobsbawm and his associates also proved that those rituals were just

products, in modern form, that popped up at the end of the early XX century. All of this lends credence to the claim that “tradition” that emerges or alleges to be old at the time of its emergence is frequently of recent origin and, in some cases, invented. In East Asia, it is believed that imperial examination is also a product invented from the need to recruit “personnel” to perfect the apparatus to serve the ‘Son of Heaven’ (the emperor). This exam is closely associated with the process of “standardization” or “orthodoxy”.

This article is organized utilizing a post-structural framework of cognition, hauntology, and invented tradition theory. Additionally, this article takes a qualitative approach to the subject via historical methodology and a comparative approach. This study will examine the path of Confucianism’s penetration and development in Vietnam, highlighting that as soon as Vietnamese intellectuals attempted to dismiss Confucianism as a product of Chinese philosophy, the Vietnamese become increasingly preoccupied with Confucianism. In practical terms, the article provides an overview of Confucianism in Vietnam. Theoretically, this study provides scientific arguments for the need to officially confirm the role of Confucianism in Vietnam.

## The Period of Moderated Confucianism in Vietnam

Since Confucianism was introduced into Vietnam through local Chinese officials who represented the “Celestial Empire” (Thiên triều/天朝) in the land occupied by China until it became a state-sponsored ideology in the Lê dynasty<sup>1</sup> (Hậu Lê triều/後黎朝), Confucianism in Vietnam was not genuine Confucianism. Instead, it was something that was moderated and invented.

In 179 B.C., Zhao Tuo (Triệu Đà/趙佗) captured the polity, Ou Luo<sup>2</sup> (Âu Lạc/甌雒) and divided it into two commanderies, Jiaozhi<sup>3</sup> (Giao Chỉ /交趾) and Jiuzhen<sup>4</sup> (Cửu Chân/九真), through deft political maneuvers. After that, those commanderies were merged into Nanyue<sup>5</sup> (Nam Việt/南越). In 111 BC, the Han Dynasty conquered Nam Viet and transformed it into Han territory. Ou Luo was subsequently divided into three commanderies Jiaozhi, Jiuzhen, and Rinan<sup>6</sup> (Nhật Nam/日南). It was also at this time that Confucianism was supposedly introduced into Vietnam

Initially, it should be evident that this indoctrination process involved two significant forces. The first was the system of mandarins who participated in the Chinese government’s ruling apparatus. According to *The Complete Annals of Đại Việt*<sup>7</sup> the two prefects, Tích Quang and Nhâm Diên, of the Jiaozhi and Jiuzhen commanderies, set up the very first school to teach etiquette and propagate Han customs. These mandarins can be considered the incubators of Confucianism. Shi Xie (Sĩ Nhiếp/士變), a Chinese military general, politician, and warlord who lived during the Eastern Han dynasty and early Three Kingdoms period of China was sent to be administrator of Jiaozhi Commandery. Although he was never proclaimed king, *The Complete Annals*

of *Đại Việt* (*Đại Việt* or *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*/大越史記全書) attached many legends to him, and historians referred to him as King *Si* (*Sĩ Vương*/士王) for his contributions to the background of Viet people which were foundational in Confucian thought and education. Lê Văn Hưu and Ngô Sĩ Liên,<sup>8</sup> two of the most renowned historians of medieval Vietnam, noted the importance of King Si. King Si was said to have been knowledgeable in the ways of being lenient and humble to respect scholars, loved by locals, and able to achieve a period of wealth and prosperity (Liên 2017: 102). Ngô Sĩ Liên also asserted, “Our country, as a civilized country, is a nation of Poetry (Thi/詩), Documents (Thư/書), Rites (Lễ/禮), and Music (Nhạc/樂), and this began with King Si, whose great merit was not only present during his times but has also passed on to the present” (Liên 2017, 102).

Secondly, there are also Confucian intellectuals who went to Vietnam for a variety of reasons, in addition to the mandarin force active in the ruling apparatus. Due to Wang Mang’s insurrection, the Han court witnessed numerous political events between the years 8 and 25 CE. The force of Han people who migrated and sought safety in Jiaozhi. The majority of them were dissatisfied Confucianists, and this force grew from the Han through the Tang dynasties. According to *Traditional Spiritual Values of the Vietnamese Nation* by Giau (1993), during the reign of King Si and during the period of Giao Chau, scholars were encouraged to open schools to teach Confucianism. In addition, there are notable Confucians (such as Yu Fan)<sup>9</sup> who were exiles to Jiaozhou (also Jiao Province) due to political issues, thereby contributing to the propagation of Confucianism. They “taught without tiring, and disciples frequently numbered in the hundreds” (Giau 1993, 61). There are schools that promoted Confucianism and Sinology in the centers of provinces or districts like Lei Lou (Luy Lôu/ 羸婁), Longbian (Long Biên), Tu Pho, and Cu Phong. “Jiaozhou is a land of civilization, mountains, and rivers, many resources, good literature, and outstanding skills” said Emperor Xian of Han at the time (Giau 1993, 87). It is not difficult to recognize that the Chinese were primarily responsible for the spread of Confucianism in Vietnam at that time.

The goal of propagation during this time period was such that only Chinese people propagated Confucianism. Confucianism was still a result of the invaders’ horses, whether for personal reasons or because of the hegemonic national assimilation policies of the Celestial Empire. The goal of spreading Sinology and Confucianism was not unrelated to the desire to subjugate the “barbarians groups.” Those involved aimed to instill an East Asian order - an order that they themselves created, preserved and maintained by establishing a system of knowledge teams tasked with maintaining that order.

The extent of distribution was restricted to a small number of locals and individuals from the higher classes of society during that period. Propaganda mostly focused on two issues: respect for the military and men and contempt for women. This time period also saw the birth of teachers and students. A brand-new institution, the school, emerged from there.

Despite indisputably significant contributions, Confucianism during this time was received with extreme caution by the Vietnamese. It is vital to understand the inherent power of the indigenous culture in order to comprehend this “reservation.” These reactions are all considered to be part of the anti-Sinicization trend (resistance against the expansion of dynastic China), according to researcher Them Tran Ngoc. Vietnamese modern intellectuals contend that before Chinese dominance, the Viet people’s territory was a “country” with customs and habits. Many feel conflicted about what to do with these cultural items brought by the invaders and propagated by a layer of Chinese class. On the other side, one could argue that from the viewpoint of the Celestial Empire to the Viet people at the time, that the latter was a barbaric land suitable for Chinese cultural domination. Hence, they had a choice between providing barbarians with the most advanced scholarship of the time, Confucianism, or leaving them uneducated and thereby easier to manage. The Celestial Empire could have selected the second as it would have been a more straightforward option. What they found; however, was even though they sent over a so-called great Confucian scholarly force to educate a team of henchmen, that same team and eventually their descendants, as well as the vital Viet people, it did not come to pass that people only studied and practiced a Confucianism compliant to the will of the local Chinese mandarin. What emerged instead was nothing more than a crude form of Confucianism. For the same reason, it would be reasonable to say that Confucianism was no longer genuine after it arrived in Jiaozhou, the homeland of the Viet people.

In 931 and 938, the Southern Han (Nam Hán/南漢) fought two unsuccessful campaigns against the Vietnamese in an attempt to incorporate these Vietnamese territories into their realm (Taylor 1983, 269) Ngo Quyen’s victory over the Southern Han army on the Bach Dang River in 938 ushered in a new era of independence and self-reliance for the Viet people. Nonetheless, the Viet’s defense and construction were conducted in a rigorous and demanding manner. This distinct beginning is related to a brief succession of dynasties: Wu (939–968), Dinh (968–981), and Early Le (981–1009). These dynasties encountered a number of internal and external issues, the most prominent of which was the rebellion and launch of wars by the domestic military (Anarchy of the 12 Warlords). In addition, the fight against the hegemonic conspiracy of the Celestial Empire, particularly the Song army of Emperor Taizong, prevented the fledgling state apparatus from becoming organized.

The Ngo Dynasty and Dinh Dynasty through to the Early Le Dynasty was the first period of the construction of a centralized feudal state system. As indicated previously, aspects of the Confucian political worldview began to develop at this stage.

The land of Viet people that Ngo Quyen was declared king of was the result of a millennium of Northern dominance, and the social mechanism that the colonial powers utilized to survive - the Confucian political mechanism - obviously existed. Even within the context of the anti-sinicization campaign, Vietnam’s history documents the effect of

the Sinicization spirit: King Ngo's dictum to "install a hundred mandarins, regulate the court, and dress" is a prime example. *The Complete Annals of Dai Viet* also recorded Ngo<sup>10</sup> Xuong Van's remark: "Our forefathers' virtue permeated the hearts of the people; no one disobeyed any political instructions; unlucky our forefather passed away, Binh Vuong conducting wicked labor by ourselves, usurping the throne from our brothers and sisters, there is no greater sin" (Lien 2017, 126). These are the initial symptoms of imbibing the spirit of Confucianism. By the time Dinh, Dinh Bo Linh proclaimed himself emperor, the court had the mandarin Nguyen Bac and Le Hoan as a general to lead the army, and there was a system of Buddhist intellectuals who helped strengthen the effectiveness of the ruling apparatus with the goal of improving the quality of governmental centralization. During the Early Le Dynasty, Le Hoan divided the land among his sons, and the act of setting the era name as Thien Phuc/天福 (936–944) also partly speaks to the study of the Chinese Confucian organizational model during this Dynasty.

However, Confucianism did not yet have a firm foothold in the ideology of the new dynasties during this time. In the meantime, the path of peace and the benefits of a human-centered perspective strengthened Buddhism's ability to take root in the social and spiritual life of Viet people. Buddhism, due to its capacity to incorporate local folk beliefs and eliminate nihilistic teachings, quickly and deeply penetrated not only real life (outside of theory) but also the newly formed government (Linh 2021). Do Phap Thuan (915–990), Ngo Chan Luu (933–1011; also known by the name Khuong Viet Dai Su), Van Hanh (?–1018) and other prominent monks of the period wielded great political influence during this time. Consequently, under the Ngo, Dinh, and Tien Le dynasties, Buddhism rose to prominence as the ideological backbone of the emerging Dai Co Viet community and nation.

Following the Ngo-Dinh-Tien Le dynasty period, Confucianism saw relative progress stages during the Ly - Tran dynasty period underwent notable modifications. In general, though, this was still a time when Buddhism was the state religion.

The most typical event can be mentioned is that in 1070, the Ly Dynasty led by Ly Thanh Tong established the Temple of Literature (Văn Miếu/文廟) in the capital Thang Long, worshipping Duke of Zhou and Confucius. This can be seen as the official reception of Neo-Confucianism by the Viet people. *Complete Annals of Đại Việt* recorded the following: "Canh Tuat, [Than Vu] 2nd year [1070], (Tong Hy Ninh, 3rd year) ... In the autumn, 8th lunar month, the Temple of Literature was built, and a statue of Confucius was built. Stautes were built for the Duke of Zhou and four succeeding generations of Confucius's disciples, and 72 other Confucian scholars (Thất thập nhị hiền/七十二賢 in Sino-Vietnamese). Ceremonies were dedicated to them in each of the four seasons. The crown prince came to study there" (Lien 2017, 170). During the reign of King Ly Nhan Tong (李仁宗), the *The Three Round Examination*



(Tam Trường/三場 in Sino-Vietnamese) was held, and Le Van Thinh (黎文盛) won first place. King Nhan Tong opened Temple of Literature to train talented individuals. Nhan Tong also established the *Imperial Academy* with the Confucian Mac Hien Tich serving at the Academy of Scholars (Hàn lâm viện học sĩ/翰林院學士 in Sino-Vietnamese).

The Ly Dynasty held examinations infrequently rather than on a regular basis, and the exams had no set format. The examinations were spaced quite far apart, and there was even a gap wherein no exams were recorded for 66 years (from 1086 to 1152).

During the Tran Dynasty, King Tran Thai Tong (1225–1258) who opened an examination for the Three Teachings (三教, Tam giáo), Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. King Tran Thai Tong again opened an examination Thái học sinh (太學生, Students of Supreme Learning) to select “three awardees” (三魁, Tam Khôi) which was composed of three candidates who ranked first, second, and third in the examination with the names respectively of Trạng nguyên (狀元) meaning the first place and best scholar, Bảng nhãn (榜眼), the second place examinee, and Thám hoa (探花), the third place examinee. The rank of Tiến sĩ (進士) was awarded to all the other examinees who successfully passed. In addition, the National Academy (Quốc học viện) instructed students in *The Four Books* (四書) and *The Five Classics* (五經). During the Three reign of King Tran Thuan Tong (1388–1398), a bachelor’s examination (舉人, senior bachelor) was held. Candidates began by taking the Interprovincial Examinations<sup>11</sup> (Hương examination). Those who passed could take the Pre-court Examinations<sup>12</sup> (Hội examination) the next year, and then the Court examinations<sup>13</sup> (Đình Examination) were the final step in selecting the three ranks.

During its 175 years of existence, the Tran Dynasty organized 14 examination courses (10 official and 4 sub-faculties) producing 283 Laureates. There were two examinations 1256 and 1266 that took two types Principal Graduates: the Trai Principal Graduates and Kinh Principal Graduates.<sup>14</sup> A total of 12 individuals attained the top rank.

## State-sponsored Period of Confucianism in Vietnam

After Lê Lợi drove the Ming army out of Vietnam, the Later Le dynasty was formally established in 1428 after his ascension to the throne. This was also the time that Confucianism advanced through state-sponsorship.

In her research articles, the historian Hue Tam Ho Tai pointed out the close relationship between Joseon and Le So, and noted an especially apparent relationship with China, which made the explanation of historical relationships much easier. Indeed, due to the geopolitical influences, with the nature of “ordination” and “tribute” revolving around the strong Chinese culture of East Asia, the socio-cultural history between Le So dynasty and Joseon (Korea) before and after the fifteenth century both recorded common denominators of philosophy and philosophical foundations.

Accordingly, social institutions were also shaped and developed, forming a culture of Sino-civilization. Also, from those postulates, in the 15th century, the Le So and Joseon dynasties had creative movements in thought and social management policy towards the mainstream of Neo-Confucianism. In *The Construction of Orthodoxy and Heresy: Neo-Confucian, Islamic, Jewish and Early Christian Patterns*, John. B. Henderson (1997) provides an overview of the models of orthodoxy and “heresy,” in which Neo-Confucianism was placed in relation to early Christianity. Neo-Confucianism defines heresy in the same way that early Christianity did. The author’s survey of religions includes Islam, Judaism, and early Christianity, but Neo-Confucianism views of “heretics” was broader. Neo-Confucianism even has names for these “heresies,” such as Buddhism, Taoism, Mohism (founded by Mozi 墨子), and Legalism (Henderson 1997, 23). In the Le So dynasty, in addition, the disadvantages and risks associated with the Tran dynasty’s dispersal of power prompted the Le So to seek solutions to occupy important gaps in the constitutional framework. Such solutions would assist Le So is not focusing exclusively on having power in the hands of the royal family, and would also ensure that the Le dynasty did not follow in the footsteps of its predecessors. The need for an attempt to curb the royal family’s vocation and put more emphasis on authority in the hands of the Son of Heaven (emperor) became even more urgent.

The majority of the research referenced thus far focused on the manner in which the Vietnamese dynasties “theorized political legitimacy” via Confucianism as a means of addressing endemic disobedience (Taylor 2002, 337) as a significant trait and a hypothesis that has been consistently demonstrated through multiple approaches. This characteristic is exemplified by the secularization of moral issues that “strengthen and regulate the rural economy” (Whitmore 1997, 665) in both Confucianism and radical Confucian intellectuals. Vietnamese Confucianism reached its zenith during the early Le Dynasty, whose prosperity was heavily supported and propagated by the Le So government for the sole purpose of constructing a model Chinese centralized state. The mechanism of formalizing Confucianism by promoting academic activities strengthened the centralized monarchy while simultaneously making Vietnamese Confucianism more rigorous and pragmatic (Linh 2022b).

Whitmore stated that, the 15th through the 19th centuries were marked by administrative centralization, territorial expansion, population growth, economic development, an emphasis on orthodoxy, and cultural standardization. The emergence of a new class, the intelligentsia, was contingent on the rise of Neo-Confucianism and its goals, which are directed by the state. According to the author’s analysis, intellectuals believed that state intervention in the rural would result in a material welfare of the populace, a goal that was both broader and narrower than a purely Confucian moral order. In fact, a substantial portion of their accumulated knowledge was used to strengthen and regulate the rural economy (Whitmore 1997, 665)

Woodside observed that this complexity was explained by Vietnam's territorial expansion southward and westward into areas with long-established Hindu states. Buddhism makes Confucian notions of political identity controversial and creates a crisis in the formation of political order. In addition to establishing stability, the incorporation of these regions necessitated the strengthening of the political center's legitimacy and the official abolition of the hereditary bureaucracy (Woodside 1998, 202).

In *Complete Annals of Đại Việt*, there is a record of Le Thai Tong asserting, "If you want to have talent, you must choose to be a scholar, but if you choose to be a scholar, you must take the Imperial examination first" (Lien 2017, 396). Therefore, as an inevitable effect; the Imperial examination and regulations surrounding it showed signs of extreme zeal. Consequently, the next most obvious manifestation that can be considered is the expansion of "infrastructures" serving the purpose of conveying the Confucian spirit.

All of these movements led to a state of "entering the world" and "practicing" — the most effective ideological product of the authorities. It was also the most essential product of the standardization process. According to those guidelines, subconsciously, a male child was forced from birth to death to study hard, take examinations, become a mandarin, and dedicate himself to serving the Son of Heaven. To put it another way, Neo-Confucian orthodoxy was an invention to standardize State Ideology, and the Imperial examination was the result of that invention.

During the Le So dynasty, 26 doctoral examinations were held, 989 doctorate degree candidates passed and 20 passed in the position of the top rank. Particularly during the reign of King Le Thanh Tong (1460–1497), 12 doctoral examinations were held, and this produced 501 doctorates and 9 paragons. The table below is number of national rank-holders in the imperial examinations by times:

Observing the graphs representing the precise statistics, it is evident that the prior dynasty exhibited little change in the number of examinations and passing rates. The tradition of conducting imperial examinations had only recently been established during the Le So period. Consequently, the quick expansion in the number of examinations and laureates throughout the Le So period demonstrates that the Imperial examination should be viewed as a social-cultural phenomenon that was created. All of the above analysis is intended to demonstrate that Confucianism in Vietnam was invented and developed with very definite purposes and techniques. Since then, the approach of examination preparation has progressively become a trend-setter, leaving no actual place for self-cultivation, the supposedly ultimate and highest objective of Confucianism.

It is possible to discuss the system of Imperial examination alongside the recruitment of mandarins and the institutions associated with it as a typical "invention" to perfect that path of standardization. In an article Nguyen Ngoc Tho stated, "Orthodoxization" of culture is a political mechanism - ideology - culture that the feudal dynasties in China,

Korea, and Vietnam implemented at different levels in order to “standardize” and unify the cultural mores of the different regions. On the other hand, it is also to ensure the smooth flow of mainstream culture throughout the country, as well as to strengthen the central government’s management power” (Nguyen 2020, 93).

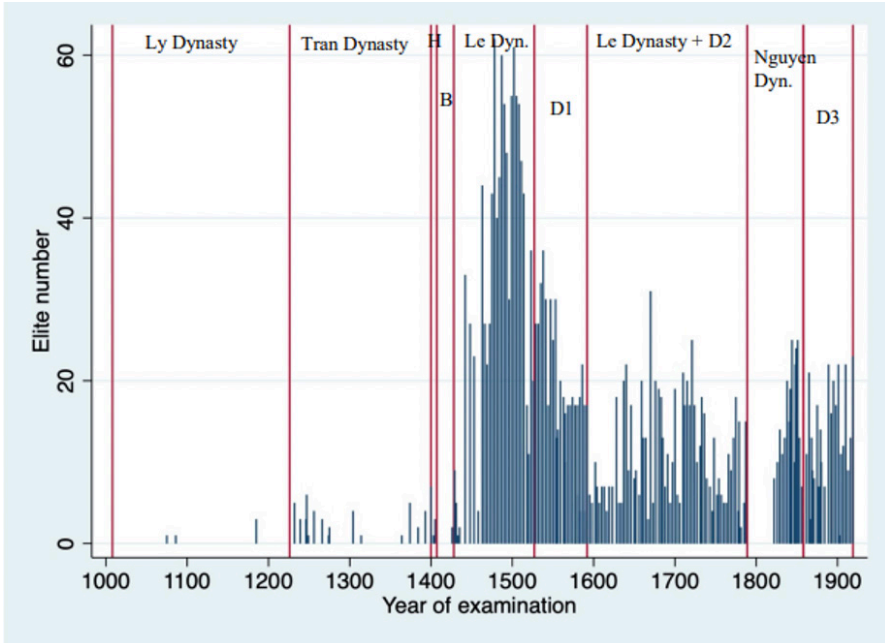


Figure 1. Number of national rank-holders in the imperial examinations by time (VU TienManh and YAMADA Hiroyuki, 2020)

That movement was an inevitable requirement of each dynasty, but above all the changes and accretion of ideology, all together, it also aimed to erase boundaries and even merge military power with theocracy. And in fact, the Eastern feudal dynasties gained the loyalty of both from that very wise merger. Neo-Confucianism established itself in a privileged position and nonchalantly became true essence of the commander of the times.

Recall that Confucianism is predicated on the belief that humans are fundamentally decent, teachable, improvable, and perfectible through personal and communal endeavors; particularly through self-cultivation and self-creation. This self-centeredness is predicated on the importance of establishing one’s personality as an independent, autonomous being, and with dignity. Therefore, this philosophy of self-cultivation is at the core of Confucian education. This philosophy seeks to create a harmonious society and is based on personal moral development. The pursuit of moral perfection and knowledge is part of that process.

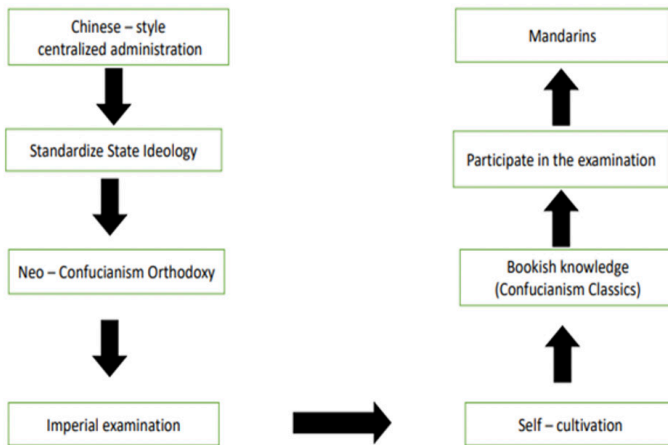


Figure 2. Neo-Confucianism Orthodoxization's Paradigm in the Le So Dynasty (Linh 2022b)

However, based on the preceding paradigm's analysis, it is clear that the Le So dynasty's campaign was not synchronized with that ideal form of Confucianism. This was obviously not a hindrance at the time, as it served the purpose that the 'Son of Heaven' expected. The long-term consequences, however, were disastrous,<sup>15</sup> as history has shown.

## Complicated Forms of Confucian Discourse in Vietnam

The inconsistent forms of discourse generated by Vietnamese scholars on Confucianism can be viewed from McHale's analysis of two typical Confucian studies in Vietnam, namely, *Confucianism* (1929–1930), by Tran Trong Kim and *Vietnam's Historical Culture* (1938) by Dao Duy Anh. McHale summed up that both Tran Trong Kim and Dao Duy Anh, despite their opposing ideas, believed that Confucianism was central to Vietnamese history. The author at the same time emphasized the paradoxes in both practice and Confucian research in Vietnam wherein the modern Vietnamese, on the one hand, emphasize the precious heritage of the past while also completely drawing attention to how strongly Confucianism shaped premodern society. And all of McHale's arguments show that "the influence of Confucianism in Vietnam has been exaggerated and misperceived" (McHale 2002, 397). When discussing Tran Trong Kim - a researcher in the early twentieth century, McHale said that Tran Trong Kim himself displayed contradictions while recognizing the role of Confucianism in Vietnamese history and culture. According to Tran Trong Kim, Confucianism is the core of

everything within Vietnamese culture, including being the origin point of customs and politics. Elsewhere, Tran Trong Kim concedes that such a core may not exist. McHale also stated that the Vietnamese have embraced shallow versions of Confucianism rather than localizing it. Meanwhile, Phan (2004)-one of the Vietnamese contemporary polyhistorians, said that the Vietnamese have localized Confucianism in his famous work, *Vietnamese Cultural Identity*. Phan Ngoc specifically analyzed and evaluated the “refraction” of Confucianism when it penetrated Vietnam. He proposed the concept of selective types, from spiritualism to manipulative theory, through which he affirmed that Vietnam had received Chinese Confucianism through four determined concerns: Conditions, the Fatherland, Family, and Face.

Consequently, according to Phan Ngoc, when entering Vietnam Confucianism was subject to considerable refraction, since Vietnamese people perceived Confucianism through four significant lenses: Fatherland, Village, Southeast Asian culture, and historical status and standing. Therein: “From the perspective of the lens of the Fatherland, monarchical loyalty and patriotism emerged. The culture of Folk-Aristocratic Dualism, which had an emphasis on folk culture, was the result of the lens of Vietnamese villagers. The tendency of “Feminization and respect for women” was a product of the cultural lens of Southeast Asia. The culture of Southeast Asia is a wet rice culture in which the yin role, understood as the female role, was emphasized through the worship of fertility symbols, deities, and polytheistic beliefs. Approaching “harmony” was the result of viewing ideological and social phenomena through the lens of historical status and standing.

This study concurs that Vietnamese intellectuals of the 20th century had little knowledge of the history of Confucianism in Vietnam and further concurs with McHale’s assertion that Marxist nationalists have been modifying the Confucian framework since 1945 as they keep deliberating about Vietnamese national identity. One aspect of this is that they formulated a Marxist interpretation of Vietnamese history in which Confucianism served as the ideological foundation of the feudal system. The aim of their research was not Confucianism or its place in a larger material and symbolic economy, but rather how it contributed to the tragedy of feudalism and/or the downfall of the French at the hands of the Vietnamese resistance (McHale 2002, 401). Yet, this study holds there is no contradiction in Kim Tran Trong’s thesis since he earlier conceded that “Vietnamese people emulate authentic Confucianism.” In other words, it is perfectly plausible that ancient Vietnamese only studied Confucianism superficially, and that over time, “what was false came to be true” and became a “genuine Confucianism” by Vietnamese definitions. And this “Vietnamese Confucianism” gradually fused with other cultural symbols and rituals to become a shabby chic cloak, thereby bringing the Viet dynasties closer to the Celestial Empire. Or it might be argued that the Southeast Asian indigenous tradition in Vietnam hampered the state and the people’s ability to accept and adapt to China’s Confucian orthodoxy in its entirety (Nguyen 2020, 25).

Due to the influence of Marxism on historical thinking in Vietnam, with socioeconomic formations going from low to high, the idea of deterministic history suggested that historical trends were fixed and could not be changed. This forced Vietnamese Confucianism, the philosophy associated with feudalism, to be understood as an outdated social model. It thereby suffer the same fate as other “outdated” phenomena and lost both its novelty and capacity to contribute to modern society.

Perhaps because of this, those who do not support the “return” of Confucianism are quite common. The article, “Confucian Influences in Vietnamese Culture”, is a typical example. In it, the author, Ly Tung Hieu, a lecturer at Ho Chi Minh National University, said that Confucianism had shaped the spiritual culture of Vietnam in the Middle Ages such that it became sinicized to a significant extent. Confucianism influences both the spiritual culture and the material culture of Vietnam. Confucianism has a negative side, which is harmful to Vietnamese culture. The author firmly asserts that Vietnamese culture today does not need Confucianism (Hieu 2015). Meanwhile, Confucianism in Vietnam continues to be influenced by patriotism and nationalism. Contemporary Vietnamese history highlights Confucian scholars such as Mac Dinh Chi, Chu Van An, Nguyen Trai, Nguyen Binh Khiem, Luong Van Can, Phan Boi Chau, Ngo Duc Ke, Phan Chau Trinh, and Huynh Thuc Khang. These Confucianists, whether in times of peace or turmoil, still showed their temper and virtue. The attitudes they embodied and the actions they took for their nation and the community still resonate with modern people. Their names are used to name the roads in large and small cities throughout Vietnam.

Thus, on the one hand, Vietnamese are rejecting Confucianism as a product of outdated feudalism, while on the other hand, Vietnamese still highly appreciate Confucianism because most of the elites who contributed to Vietnamese society before the 20th century were from Confucian backgrounds. Since Confucianism’s flaws outweighed its virtues, Vietnamese intellectuals lost interest in it and began attempting to construct or invent new symbols in which Confucianism’s imprints were as faint as possible. It was hard to do that without invoking Confucianism or Confucian materials. The following examples of doubts about the authenticity of Vietnamese traditions will partly illustrate that complexity.

In a 2015 research article, “From Moral Exemplar to National Hero: The Transformations of Tran Hung Dao and the Emergence of Vietnamese Nationalism,” Liam Kelley argues that his evaluation as a historical figure was carried out in various ways in the past, and it is evident that he only became a national hero in the twentieth century because all examples of this appraisal were “produced” in recent decades. However, the field of Vietnamese history is slow to adopt these ideas on topics such as traditional creation and the modernity of nationalism. Liam Kelley assesses that while many scholars today may be aware that much of what has been written about Vietnamese history is presented through a nationalist lens, very little work has been done to determine exactly how and when that prism was created (Kelley 2015a: 1964).

Kelley in later studies acknowledged that academic scholarship in Vietnam was heavily influenced and politicized by the ideology of Vietnamese nationalism — what he calls “academic politics”. Besides, the evidence that Liam Kelley gave when discussing the national hero, Tran Hung Dao, as one of the invented traditions of the Vietnamese people. Kelley quickly concludes that nationalism and “the emergence of Vietnamese nationalism” are the engines of invented tradition.

According to Kelley, the customs established by historians of Imperial Vietnam have become deeply ingrained over time. He further contends that these invented traditions, referred to as “Medieval Vietnamese invented traditions” (như một truyền thống được kiến tạo của người Việt Nam thời trung đại) have solidified as irreversible truths, particularly during the latter half of the 20th century due to the influence of nationalism (Kelley 2012, 122)

Kelley has also conducted a comprehensive analysis of *The Arrayed Tales of Collected Oddities from South of the Passes* (Linh Nam chích quái liệt truyện/嶺南摭怪列傳)<sup>16</sup> and posited that a significant amount of the historical content included therein lacked veracity. It is evident and unequivocal that a substantial portion of the information is fabricated or derived from preexisting sources. The author posits that the upper class in Vietnam during the 15th century demonstrated cultural superiority in comparison to the barbarians, thereby establishing ancient and divine characteristics for their territory. According to Kelley (2015b), his conclusion suggests that the creation and preservation of traditions are primarily orchestrated by those in positions of power, rather than being organically developed and upheld by the common people (p. 188). The author highlights the involvement of elites in shaping the current perception of “Vietnamese tradition” and underscores the impact of twentieth-century scholars in advocating and popularising folk literature (Kelley 2015b, 118).

In “From Confucianism to Nationalism: Fictive Kinship and the Making of the Vietnamese” Duong (2020) studied key forms of discourse. The author indicated that evolution of values can be observed in the endeavors of scholars who are engaged in the pursuit of knowledge regarding the genesis of the Vietnamese populace. The author conjectures that during the period spanning the 15th to 19th centuries, Confucian intellectuals who self-identified as progeny of the Han ethnic group, aligned themselves with the legacy of Han culture. During the period spanning from 1860 to 1945, scholars of colonialism employed ideas of race, anthropology, and social evolution to assert that the Annamites were a population characterized by hybridity. Furthermore, these scholars argued that the Annamites were in a state of ongoing evolution, necessitating the intervention of civilized enlightenment. According to Tran Trong Duong, native intellectuals in Vietnam synthesized elements of Confucian Chinese thought and French thought to posit the ancestral lineage of the Vietnamese people as being traceable to the Hung Kings. The study’s conclusion reveals that the primary objective of this ideological transformation is to promote patriotism, resist French influence, and safeguard the



nation against colonial subjugation. Consequently, the advent of colonialism in Confucian philosophy spurred a transformative shift in paradigms, resulting in the emergence of fabricated kinship and the proliferation of nationalism within the context of Vietnam (Duong 2020, 165).

Forkan Ali elucidates the enduring functionality of Confucianism in the face of Marxist influence and the indispensable role played by Ho Chi Minh's nationalism (Ali 2020). The author claims that the evolution of modern Vietnamese society has been affected by Confucianism. The author posits that within modern popular thinking, there exists a perception that Confucian ideals are antiquated and absurd. In the context of Vietnam, it is noteworthy that Confucian principles and traditions persist and are disseminated through several religious, institutional, and personal means. According to Ali (2020), the author postulates the necessity of reevaluating and advocating for the principles and doctrines of Confucianism within a society grappling with a growing array of difficulties stemming from the process of industrialization.

The discourse around Confucianism in early twenty-first-century Vietnam is characterized by its complexity, as seen by the arguments and supporting evidence pertaining to the creation of traditional activities in the country. The aforementioned intricacy not only exemplifies the intricate nature of the philosophical worldview in Vietnam but also reflects the enduring aspiration of the Vietnamese people to emancipate themselves from the constraints imposed by Confucianism through countless centuries. As mentioned earlier, the increasing efforts of Vietnamese individuals to disavow Confucianism in the contemporary day inadvertently serve as a testament to its enduring impact.

## Conclusion

This article provides a concise overview of the introduction of Confucianism into Vietnam, highlighting that during this period, the dissemination of Confucian ideas mostly encompassed philosophical fragments pertaining to worldview and education. These fragments served as a crucial instrument for the colonial governance of imperial China. Subsequently, during the zenith of the 15th century, the King Le once again employed this strategy as a means to enlist mandarins and curtail the proliferation of familial military forces within the royal establishment. This decision was informed by a costly lesson learned by the imperial court in preceding times. Subsequently, the Le dynasty forfeited the chance to establish a nation characterized by profound adherence to the invaluable principles and fundamental tenets of Confucianism.

Vietnam, a nation with a rich historical legacy spanning millennia, has witnessed the emergence of two distinct socio-political formations, both deeply influenced by the principles of Confucianism. The initial instance took place during the 15th century

when the Kings and officials of the Le So Dynasty implemented Imperial examinations to promote adherence to Neo-Confucianism. The second occurrence took place during the transition to the twentieth century, when Marxist intellectuals, burdened by the de-Chinalization designation and envisioning a Vietnam with a promising future free from Chinese colonization, formulated the concept of “patriotic Confucianists” in an effort to diminish the influence of Confucianism.

## Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Lê dynasty was the longest-ruling Vietnamese dynasty as it ruled Đại Việt from 1428 to 1789. The Lê dynasty is divided into two historical periods: Lê Sơ (黎初朝); and the restored period or Revival Lê (Lê Trung hưng triều / 黎中興朝).
- <sup>2</sup> Ou Luo was a supposed polity that covered parts of modern-day Guangxi and Northern Vietnam.
- <sup>3</sup> his location corresponds to present-day Northern Vietnam.
- <sup>4</sup> It is located in present-day Thanh Hóa Province, Vietnam.
- <sup>5</sup> The border region corresponds to a section of contemporary China and Vietnam.
- <sup>6</sup> It was located in the central area of modern Vietnam between the provinces of Quảng Bình and Bình Định.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Complete Annals of Đại Việt* is a national historical series of books compiled in the form of chronicles recording the history of Vietnam from the time of King Duong Vuong's reign (2879 BC) to Le Gia Tong reign of the Later Le Dynasty (1675).
- <sup>8</sup> According to contemporary scholars, Le Van Huu and Ngo Si Lien are the two most esteemed and well-known historians who specialize on medieval Vietnam.
- <sup>9</sup> Ngu Phiên/ 虞翻 (164–233) was a Chinese essayist, politician, and writer of the state of Eastern Wu during the Three Kingdoms period of China
- <sup>10</sup> Ngô Xương Văn / 吳昌文 ( 935–965), second son of Ngô Quyền, the dynastic founder.
- <sup>11</sup> Provincial examinations
- <sup>12</sup> National examinations
- <sup>13</sup> Oral examinations (the emperor would directly interview the shortlisted candidates and select the best examinees)
- <sup>14</sup> The division of Kinh and Trai in the examination of the Tran Dynasty, just like the Qing Dynasty, divided the Hans and Manchus to distinguish them clearly. However, this assessment is less approved. Instead, researchers agree that the Kinh is the capital, the area near the capital or the plain around the city. And, the Trai was a mountainous area or border area far from the capital.
- <sup>15</sup> Trần NgọcThem, a Vietnamese cultural researcher, emphasizes very precisely the bad habits of Vietnamese people in his works on education. For more information on this topic, read *Discovering the Identity of Vietnamese Culture*.
- <sup>16</sup> This literary work is alternatively referred to as the *Selection of Strange Tales in Lĩnh Nam*. The work in question is believed to be a semi-fictional piece originating from 14th-century Vietnam, authored by Trần Thế Pháp and written in the Han script.

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