

# An Analysis of the Influence of French Colonization on the Vietnamese Education System

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## Abstract:

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to consolidate their colonial domination, the French colonists adopt various means, trying to disintegrate the Vietnamese traditional Confucianism value system and establish the French-Vietnamese education system. Crude colonial methods exacerbated the loss of Vietnamese national culture and the fission of social classes, but objectively speaking, they also contributed to the establishment of modern education in Vietnam. This paper tries to present the evolution process of Vietnamese education under French colonization, and on this basis, to analyze the impact and influence of the French colonization on the Vietnamese education system, from which we can draw lessons for our educational reform.

**Keywords:** Vietnamese education; French colonization; French-Vietnamese education; Colonial assimilation

Ancient Vietnam was deeply influenced by Chinese culture, and Chinese characters and Confucianism were used to rule the country. In ancient Vietnam, the complete education system from the central government to the local was guided by Confucianism, and it adopted the imperial examination to obtain scholars as the means. As a concentrated manifestation of the power of Confucianism, the “Qinwang Movement” repeatedly counterattacked the French colonization and caused effective blows. In order to strengthen its dominance in Vietnam, the French government took multiple measures to destroy the traditional Confucian education in Vietnam from the root and to construct the French-Vietnamese education system. This paper tries to explore the impact and influence of French colonial rule on the local education system in Vietnam.

## 1. The Evolution Process of Education in Vietnam under the Colonization

After the signing of the Treaty of Vietnam in 1885, France took full control of Vietnam and divided it into one “colony”, namely Nanqi, and two “protected areas”, namely Beiqi and Zhongqi. In Beiqi and Zhongqi, where traditional education was more influential, the French colonists put forward the “joint policy”, which allowed the co-existence of French-Vietnamese schools and traditional Confucian schools in order to shake the conceptual foundation of the culture. They use the appearance of “cooperation” to carry out the

conspiracy of “assimilation”. In the “colony” of Nanqi, the old system was quickly suppressed and banned by military means, and the Mandarin Language schools were established in an attempt to directly cultivate local talents for colonial rule. With the further expansion of colonization, the demand for dominance and labor force became increasingly prominent, so the French colonial rulers intensified their educational reform, promoted the merger of “assimilated” improved Confucian schools and French-Vietnamese schools and developed a relatively standardized education system.

### (1) Transition: The Destruction of the Confucian Value System

After the invasion of Vietnam, the French colonists faced many cases of resistance and then realized the necessity of cultural conquest. The Confucian values of loyalty, filial piety, and integrity of the Vietnamese people, as well as the patriarchal consciousness of home and country, cannot be easily crossed<sup>[1]</sup>, and the carrier of its language and system became the primary reform goal for the French colonization.

#### The transformation of the text carrier

As the root of Confucian culture, Chinese characters carry Confucian values and patriarchal clan consciousness, which is a huge cultural obstacle for the French colonists to implement the colonial rule. In order to gain the support of Vietnam's upper class, the French colonists took a gradual approach, allowing the coexistence of Mandarin

characters (Latin Vietnamese), and French and Chinese characters. In 1865, the French founded the first Mandarin newspaper, *Jiading Daily*, which spread the Mandarin language in society publicly. On June 4, 1878, the French colonists issued two provisions in South Vietnam, requiring the use of all documents, resolutions, decisions, cases, orders, and documents in the Mandarin language; only those who knew the Mandarin language could get the opportunity to serve in government and subsequent promotion<sup>[2]</sup>.

In 1906, the French colonists added Mandarin characters and French elements to the imperial examination questions and stipulated: “For all the exams, there must be a translation test from Western words into Mandarin and Chinese characters”<sup>[3]</sup>. By 1910, the use of Mandarin characters has covered all official documents (including birth and marriage certificates)<sup>[4]</sup>. Until 1917, the orthodox status of Chinese characters in Vietnamese society was finally broken. Under the forced promotion of the French colonists, the number of people mastering Mandarin characters in Vietnam gradually exceeded that of Chinese characters, and the status and practical use of Mandarin characters also exceeded that of Chinese characters and Nom characters<sup>[5]</sup>. The crisis of Confucian education in Vietnam appeared.

### **The reform of the imperial examination system**

Before becoming a French colony, the imperial examination in Vietnam took the traditional Chinese “Four Books” and “Five Classics” as the main content, and selected the talents to consolidate the feudal rule of the Vietnamese dynasty, which also created the profound influence of Confucian education in Vietnam. In order to destroy the original education-selection mechanism and cultivate the talents who firmly maintain colonial rule, the French colonists began to gradually transform the imperial examination system in Vietnam. In 1898, the Governor of Indochina signed a document that added the second examination of Vietnamese Mandarin and French to the imperial examinations for the first time in Nandu Province, and the xiukai or scholars who passed the second examination would have the priority to obtain official positions. After 1903, the selection mechanism was tightened, only people whose first and second tests both meet the standard were able to become an official, that is, political talents must have the corresponding knowledge of Mandarin characters and French. Those who only received traditional Confucian education will be excluded from political-related positions<sup>[6]</sup>.

In 1906, the French colonists reformed the imperial examination from the traditional Confucian imperial examination to the multi-subject, multi-language, and

multi-character examination system. After the reform, the Vietnamese imperial examination focused on French history, French, natural science, and geography, no longer took Confucian classics as the main content, and lost the original theoretical framework and cultural carrier. Later, the rule that those who pass the imperial examination could not be an official directly failed to satisfy the students' goal of examination, and gradually, the imperial examination lost its value. In 1918, the French governor and Emperor Qiming jointly abolished the imperial examination system. Because of the demise of its axis, the traditional Confucian education system is difficult to become a system again.

### **(2) Assimilation: the Promotion of New French Schools**

Compared with the Beiqi and the Zhongqi, Vietnam Nanqi received less influence from China and Confucian culture, so the French colonists immediately took violent military means to abolish the original government system and the imperial examination system, closed Confucian schools, and established French-Vietnamese schools with French and Latin and the teaching languages. They also offered courses like French, Chinese characters, arithmetic, etc., and made them mandatory for local people. In 1917, the *General Rules of Academic Administration*<sup>[7]</sup> officially confirmed that “French-Vietnamese schools are the only way to receive education for Vietnamese” . According to the *Public Education Act* and the subsequent decree on higher education in Indochina, the French-Vietnamese education system has 13 years of schooling, including 5 years for primary schools, 5 years for advanced secondary schools, and 3 years for secondary schools.

In the course of French-Vietnamese education, the most important is language teaching. Gary Kelly investigated the curriculum structure of French-Vietnamese schools and found that in primary school, Mandarin characters and French are still parallel, but since the secondary education stage above, French has become the only teaching language<sup>[8]</sup>. However, schools that originally took Chinese as the main teaching language stipulated that teachers who only know Chinese or Mandarin characters were dismissed; the school offered French courses, French history courses, and “patriotic” theory courses, instilling the ideas of love, gratitude, and loyalty to France to the students, and cultivating students' identification and spiritual attachment to French culture. Pan Peizhu once pointed out bitingly that “chi dạy viết văn Pháp, nói tiếng Pháp, tạm thời làm nô lệ cho Pháp”<sup>[9]</sup>, that is, French schools “only teach people to write French, speak French and be a slave to France” , which reflected the

strong dissatisfaction of people of insight with the French colonial education system.

### **(3) Innovating: An Attempt at the Primary Education System**

With the deepening of the second colonial expansion, French colonization generated an increasing rapid demand for manpower. The colonial authorities believed that they should further “educate” the people to absorb more labor for colonial expansion. Therefore, under the guidance of the goal of establishing a centralized France-Vietnam education system, the French colonial rulers used the excuse of “enlightening the people's wisdom” to further promote the reform of colonial education and suppress local resistance forces in order to strengthen the control of colonial education and stabilize colonial rule.

#### **The banning of the New Learning Movement**

Vietnamese patriotic intellectuals took advantage of the vacuum period in the early days of the French military occupation when they had no time to care about education issues, and drew lessons from the reform movements in Japan and China to carry out the New Learning Movement with the theme of breaking the feudal system and patriotic salvation. Since October 1905, Pan Peizhu has successively led more than 200 Vietnamese students to study in Japan. In 1907, Pan Zhouzhen and others imitated the Keio Gijuku in Japan at that time and established a free school called “Tokyo Gijuku”, abolishing the Four Books and Five Classics, encouraging free exchanges between teachers and students in the classroom, and analyzing and discussing current affairs<sup>[10]</sup>. Inspired by the Tokyo Gijuku, people of insight followed its example and established new schools similar to free private schools.

Compared with the French-style schools hurriedly opened by the French colonists, although the local new-style schools also teach courses such as French and Vietnamese characters, their functions and motivations are completely opposite to them: the former provides local personnel such as translators and junior secretaries for the colonists, to maintain French colonial rule as the basic premise, while the latter aims to enable graduates to master an independent national language, develop a unique cultural personality, and have the ability to develop a career in a free Vietnam<sup>[7]</sup>. Therefore, the development of Tokyo Gijuku greatly shakes the status of France in Vietnam and poses a threat to French colonial rule in Vietnam. In November 1907, the French colonists ordered the closure of the Tokyo Gijuku, arrested almost all the teachers, and ordered the confiscation and strict prohibition of collecting and distributing the teaching materials of

the Tokyo Gijuku. So far, the educational self-rescue campaign initiated by Vietnamese progressive intellectuals has failed.

#### **The establishment of the French-Vietnamese education system**

In the early and mid-term of the imperial examination reform, the French-Vietnamese education system established three levels of graduation diplomas: “selected students”, “class students” and “trial students”. In the later stage of the reform of the imperial examination, the General Regulations on Education and Politics systematically divided French-Vietnamese school education into two outlines, namely general studies and industrial studies, including two types of French schools<sup>[11]</sup> and French-colonial native schools. The French schools fully follow the French education charter, and the educational object is the local French, while the French-colonial local schools follow the local charter, and the educational object is the Vietnamese native people. Both types of schools are divided into three levels: primary school, middle school, and university. The middle school is divided into two classes: junior middle school and senior middle school. At this time, the system model of French-colonial native education was basically settled.

With the promulgation of the Royal Edict<sup>[12]</sup> of the Hue court in July 1919 and the implementation of a number of related French decrees, Vietnamese local education completed the transition to the French-Vietnamese education system. The traditional improved Confucian school and the French-Vietnamese school merged to form a systematic French-Vietnamese education system. The modern general education system of primary school, middle school, and university was expanded to a 6-year primary school system, which enrolled children at the age of 6 and graduated at the age of 12. Primary school is divided into two stages. The first stage is grades 1 to 3. After passing the examination, a “junior primary school learning certificate” is obtained; the second stage is grades 4 to 6. After passing the exam, a “high school learning certificate” is awarded<sup>[13]</sup>. The 6-year middle school system consists of the first 4 years of junior high school education and the last 2 years of high school education. Those who pass high school graduation have the opportunity to enter Hanoi University for further study.

## **2. The Impact of Colonization on Education in Vietnam**

The French colonists first destroyed Vietnam's traditional Confucian education and established a new colonial education system, which catalyzed the creation of modern

education in Vietnam to a certain extent. However, colonial education with the primary goal of assimilating the local people is always a concrete embodiment of political means, which cannot be separated from its characteristics of ignorance, violence, and coercion. The abolition of Chinese character education, the serious imbalance between the number of schools and the number of school-age students, and other multiple factors made a large number of children in rural areas drop out of school, causing strong dissatisfaction among the people and further exacerbating social panic.

### **(1) The Decline of the National Culture**

When Confucianism education was dominant, qualified Vietnamese people usually had the concept of receiving education, so the level of illiteracy in Vietnam was generally high at that time <sup>[14]</sup>, with nearly 80%-85% of Vietnamese people being able to read and write. But after experiencing the crudely transplanted colonial education, the literacy rate of Vietnamese people fell to 15%-20%, and the number of illiterate people in rural areas or in ethnic minority areas reaches 100% <sup>[15]</sup>. The French colonists bluntly said: “Vietnamese can speak, but they cannot read or write. We have been creating illiteracy.” <sup>[18]</sup> The number of Vietnamese-educated people dropped sharply, while the proportion of pro-French people rose rapidly. A new generation of Vietnamese intellectuals who were familiar with French culture and upheld Western values gradually grasped the discourse power in the academic circle, and the center of power and the source of culture shifted to another nation. Vietnamese historian Chen Zhongjin once pointed out that Vietnamese students are as ignorant of their own country as they are of foreign countries. They do not understand their own country and even do not know their own language <sup>[9]</sup>. Under the deliberate avoidance and smearing of local culture by colonial education, Vietnamese students would subconsciously say “Our motherland, France” , but they are completely ignorant of Vietnam's history and culture. The Vietnamese people, even pro-French among them, are to varying degrees receiving spiritual and cultural oppression and have experienced the desperate situation of having nothing to rely on in terms of national sovereignty and national culture.

### **(2) The Establishment of Modern Education**

After Vietnam became a French colony, the feudal landlord economy collapsed and the commodity economy developed rapidly. The old-style education could no longer adapt to the needs of the colonial regime and the social and economic development of the colonies and was replaced by the French-Vietnamese education system

gradually established by the French colonial government. The French-Vietnamese education system is more standardized and systematic in terms of the schooling system, more in line with the requirements of modern education in terms of educational objectives and content, and has a clear curriculum system and strict examination standards. In terms of the universality and practicability of the teaching content, colonial education also has incomparable advantages to traditional education.

On the other hand, during the period of the imperial examination system, the policy of giving special favor to those who passed the exams led to a narrow “reading-only theory” . Most Vietnamese students only deal with the exam by memorizing classics, and they do not understand the principles contained in the books, nor pay attention to practical science. It is more difficult to combine theory and practice for effective expansion. Some of them pursue spiritual comfort, face the reality that their homes have been invaded, and do nothing. Instead, they gradually degenerate from seeking peace and patience at the beginning to a situation where they are powerless to resist <sup>[19]</sup>. However, feudal bureaucrats and gentleman families with a certain social background in Vietnam, especially foreign students, learned the advanced ideas of “independence, equality, freedom and democracy” after being exposed to the real French culture, and got rid of the old education system. They abandoned the feudal ideas that developed under the old education system, which also laid a talent foundation for Vietnam's future independence movement. As John Cady said, most of the initiators of resistance to colonial rule were students studying in France <sup>[20]</sup>. It can be seen that although the original intention of colonial education is to suppress, destroy and cover, the essence of the modern education system in pursuit of truth cannot be erased by colonial intentions.

### **(3) The Fission of the Social Class**

French colonization resulted in the fission of Vietnamese social classes, developing the working class transformed from the peasant class and the urban middle class transformed from the ruling class in the feudal period. With the increasing expansion of educational obscurantism and privilegeism, the degree of polarization between the rich and the poor continues to deepen, creating an insurmountable gap between the two.

In the early days, the Vietnamese elite, represented by Pan Peizhu, lamented the loss of the nation in the face of French colonization, but the New Learning Movement and the revolutionary actions they organized did not pursue true national equality and independence <sup>[21]</sup>, but “the future ‘New Vietnam’ should stand among the world empires and dominate the politics of

countries in the surrounding regions” , which still shows strong characteristics of narrow nationalism <sup>[22]</sup>. The intensification of colonial plunder at this stage also caused Vietnam's economic development to stagnate, and a large number of people lost their jobs. Against the background of the intensified social contradictions in Vietnam and the prevalence of the communist “world revolution” , in the process of the Vietnamese bourgeois-democratic revolution, slogans like “the bourgeois-democratic revolution under the leadership of the working class” , “overthrow imperialism and feudalism” , “realize national independence” , and “peasants own land” appeared. It was pointed out that the main driving force of the revolution is the workers and the peasants, and the party must realize the alliance of workers and peasants, and use the revolutionary violence of the masses to the uprising and seize power <sup>[23]</sup>, which further accelerated the fission of the colonial social class.

### 3. Reflection and Enlightenment

In order to cultivate forces loyal to the French colonization, the French colonists dispelled traditional Vietnamese Confucian culture, strictly controlled the scale of enrollment, and reformed the enrollment system, which kept most Vietnamese people in a state of ignorance, but objectively established an education system that has begun to take shape with a modern education framework. In addition, although colonial education with the ultimate goal of “assimilation” runs counter to Vietnam's socio-economic development level, intensifies the differentiation and contradictions among social classes, and exacerbates the crisis of national culture and education, it has to a certain extent promoted the development of Vietnam's transformation into a modern society, laid the foundation for the “enlightenment” of a small number of democratic revolutionaries, and provided lessons and experience for the future reform of Vietnamese education. With the tide of globalization sweeping the world, cultural appropriation and spiritual assimilation also occur from time to time. In education reform, we can find a way forward in the historical heritage and learn from the lessons of various countries in the educational reform. While constantly improving the educational concept and model, we should, with a higher educational perspective, deeply plant the feelings of family and country, cultivate individuals with cultural self-confidence and national pride, and foster a solid talent foundation for the prosperity of the country.

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