

## ИСТОРИЯ И КУЛЬТУРА

DOI: 10.54631/VS.2024.82-562779

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### **French-Vietnamese Educational Culture in Cochinchina (1862—1945)**

**Abstract.** During the colonization process, the French government issued many policies on all aspects from life to the economy in Vietnam to “domesticate” the Vietnamese people. In the field of education, France was particularly interested in establishing a colonial education system that was completely dependent on France. The process of imposing the educational system on the model of the French educational culture is also the process of absorbing and transforming the Vietnamese-French educational culture in Vietnam in general and in Cochinchina in particular. In this study, we analyze and evaluate the Franco-Vietnamese educational culture in Cochinchina during the French colonial period. From the research results, it is shown that through the process of establishing the French educational culture in Cochinchina (Vietnam), Vietnamese culture has received the French educational culture and created its educational characteristics in the period history of modern Vietnam. This education has many changes compared to the traditional Confucian education. This is the process of receiving and transforming the culture to fit the exogenous and endogenous, transforming the exogenous into the endogenous, becoming its own culture.

**Keywords:** education culture, Cochinchina, France-Vietnam, French colonialism.

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**For citation:** Ngo Thi Minh Hang, Bui Thi Huyen (2024). French-Vietnamese Educational Culture in Cochinchina (1862—1945). *The Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 8 (2): 67—78.

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### **Франко-вьетнамская культура образования в Кохинхине (1862—1945)**

**Аннотация.** В ходе колонизации Вьетнама французское правительство во всех аспектах жизни страны проводило много мер для покорения вьетнамского народа. Франция была особенно заинтересована в создании колониальной системы образования, полностью зависевшей от неё. Процесс внедрения французской образовательной модели является также процессом создания франко-вьетнамской образовательной культуры во Вьетнаме в целом и в Кохинхине в частности.

В этом исследовании проведён анализ и даётся оценка этой культуры во время колониального периода. Показано, что вьетнамская культура восприняла французскую образовательную культуру, что послужило основой для создания образовательной системы современного Вьетнама, которая в корне отличается от традиционной конфуцианской. Показан процесс ассимиляции элементов внешней культуры и становления национальной культуры.

**Ключевые слова:** культура образования, Кохинхина, Франция - Вьетнам, французский колониализм.

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**Для цитирования:** *Нго Тхи Минь Ханг, Буй Тхи Хюен.* Франко-вьетнамская культура образования в Кохинхине (1862—1945). Вьетнамские исследования. 2024. Т. 8. № 2. С. 67—78.

## Introduction

After the French colonialists completed the military conquest, they carried out the spiritual conquest, the first of which was to establish a French-style education system in Cochinchina (fig.1). The French gradually abolished Confucian education and replaced it with Western education in terms of the organization of the school system, the organization of classes, the construction of facilities, the training of teachers and students. Cochinchina is where the French established the first education system, but the education system here only has primary, secondary and vocational schools, not universities and colleges as in Tonkin. With this education system, the French colonialists wanted to train local civil servants and officials to work for the colonial administration. An education established to serve the purpose of domination, in addition to its limitations, has objectively also made certain contributions to Vietnamese educational culture, helping to lay the foundation for Vietnamese education in the modern South. Vietnamese education has been influenced by French education for a long time, and some factors continue to influence it to this day. The positive consequences, although beyond the will of the French colonialists, contributed to the process of socio-economic development and improvement of people's knowledge and vocational training for the people of Cochinchina. Wishing to have an objective and scientific view of the Franco-Vietnamese educational culture in Cochinchina during the French colonial period, we conducted research to complete the article.

## Methodology

The article is about the history of education and the intersection between historical research and educational research. To achieve the stated research purpose, we use scientific research methods such as document research: Accessing various document

sources, editing documents, comparing and contrasting documents. Selecting reliable material to be used in the article. The author uses the historical method to place the French educational process in the historical context of the French colonial period; uses a logical method to have an authentic, transparent and objective view of the French educational policy implementation process in Cochinchina. The author also relies on specific results and the positive impact of these results on society to make objective comments and evaluations on the Franco-Vietnamese educational culture in Cochinchina during the period 1862—1945.



Fig. 1: Map of French Indochina (1930).

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:French\\_Indochina\\_c.\\_1930.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:French_Indochina_c._1930.jpg)

## Literature review

The issue of Franco-Vietnamese educational culture has attracted many authors and researchers from different aspects. Auguste Rivoalen [1956] researched the cultural presence of France in Vietnam and presented an overview of the educational situation of France applied to Vietnam and Cochinchina through its educational policies and curriculum. Gail Kelly [1982] researched Franco-Vietnamese school, 1918–1938 and gave a specific analysis of French educational institutions in Vietnam. These French policies were highly political, imposed on colonial education, and negatively influenced the thinking of indigenous people. Hoai Huong Aubert-Nguyen and Michel Espagne [2018] analyzed the process of Vietnamese cultural contact — the process that created the transfer and fusion of two-way culture.

Phan Ngoc Lien [2006] researched Vietnamese cultural contact with France and confirmed that French cultural contact has changed Vietnamese culture in aspects such as religion, language, ideology, and culture, including education. Vu Ngoc Khanh [1985] criticized French-Vietnamese education as an enslaving education, suppressing the national spirit, and implementing a policy of “Ngu dân”.

Nguyen Dang Tien [1996] in “History of Vietnamese Education before the August Revolution of 1945” has generalized French-Vietnamese education from 1858 to 1885 — education interwoven between Confucianism and French-Vietnamese. Phan Trong Bau [2006], in researching Vietnamese education in the modern period, gave a comprehensive overview of Vietnamese education during the French colonial period and its influence on the economic, social, and cultural aspects of Vietnam in the modern period. Nguyen Hoa Mai [2019] pointed out the significance of the French-Vietnamese educational acculturation process and its influence on Vietnamese education today. Nguyen Thuy Phuong [2020] in “Vietnamese Education in the Colonial Period, Red Myths and Black Myths” systematically analyzed Vietnamese education in the colonial period from the French invasion to 1945 and affirmed that educational policies have changed the face of contemporary Vietnamese education.

### **The period of interweaving Confucian and French education (1862–1917)**

In order to achieve the goal of imposing domination on the people of Cochinchina, the French colonialists quickly implemented many policies, including the policy of educating human resources. Language is a big barrier, so it is difficult for France to immediately impose its education on Vietnam in general and Cochinchina in particular. Therefore, in 1862, France opened an interpreter training school in Cochinchina [Trung tâm lưu trữ Quốc gia 2016: 22], which marked the beginning of the process of imposing French education in Cochinchina Vietnam. In 1867, France abandoned the Confucian examination and officially organized the examination according to the regular system. Schools of interpretation and counseling were opened to train people to work for France. More and more schools following the French program, opened by the colonial



government or by religions, have changed the educational landscape of Vietnam in general and Cochinchina in particular. The policy and education system imposed by the French in Cochinchina created the transition from Confucian education to French education.

On November 17, 1874, the Acting Governor of Cochinchina issued the Regulations for the main academic disciplines in Cochinchina and the Public Education Program, which was the first educational regulation of the French colonialists in Cochinchina. Regulations on the division of education into primary and secondary schools: Primary schools are concentrated in 6 places: Saigon, Cho Lon, My Tho, Vinh Long, Ben Tre and Soc Trang. The high school is only open in Saigon and teaches 3 departments with subjects: French, national language, mathematics, geography, and history (French history, not Vietnamese history) [Ibid: 37—39]. The French government also took multiple measures to facilitate the development of the Quoc Ngu script, such as issuing a decree in 1878: “banning the recruitment of native speakers who cannot read the national language or reducing taxes for officials who can write the script Quoc Ngu” [Phan Trọng Báu 2015: 52]. Although teaching French is also focused on implementation by the French government, however, according to [Cultru 1910: 399] “French language teaching is very limited, the number of students is very small, the content is sketchy. Therefore, the level of students is not equal to the level of elementary school in France.”

On March 17, 1879, Governor General of Cochinchina L.-Ch.-G.-J. Lafont signed a decision to issue a new ordinance because the 1874 ordinance had proven ineffective. According to this regulation, the education system is divided into three levels, including the general school (level I), the district school (level II), the provincial school and the high school (level III). Each district has one elementary school, each province has six middle schools and the Chasseloup Laubat High School in Saigon. By 1880, the government had opened a secondary school in My Tho, a school in Cholon for overseas Chinese, and an elementary school for boys and girls [Trung tâm lưu trữ Quốc gia 2016: 42].

To encourage indigenous people to study, the French government issued a decree in 1879 waiving tuition fees for primary schools in the colony. This increased the number of students applying to the schools. "To avoid reprimands from the public authorities for this inefficient situation, village chiefs put pressure on families, forcing them to send their children to French schools" [Bezancon 2002: 46].

Beginning in 1886, Resident General of the French Republic in Annam and Tonkin P. Bert implemented changes in French education in Vietnam by both expanding schools and gradually reforming them to completely eliminate feudal education. In 1906, P. Beau proposed a plan to reform education in Cochinchina and Tonkin through decrees on March 8 and May 6, 1906 [Nguyễn Đăng Tiên 1996: 198]. This can be considered as the first French educational reform in Vietnam. The educational reform program is quite comprehensive, and under this reform, the educational system and examination system in Cochinchina are changed as follows: The French-Vietnamese school system is divided into two levels: primary and secondary.

## **The period of transition to the French educational model 1917—1945**

In December 1917, A.-P. Sarraut promulgated the General Regulations, which fundamentally changed the educational system in Cochinchina. This change is considered as the second educational reform. The Ministry of Education generally defines education in Vietnam as general and practical education. According to the Ministry of Education, the education system in Cochinchina is reorganized as follows: The school system is divided into two types: French schools teach French students according to the “National” program, and Franco-Vietnamese schools teach Vietnamese people according to the “Native” program. Education is divided into three levels: Primary, Secondary (high school) and Tertiary (college and university). There are also vocational schools corresponding to the primary and secondary levels.

In 1923, Governor General of Indochina M.A. Merlin had some new regulations to change the education system, which was reorganized as follows:

— At the primary level, there is a local primary school consisting of pre-school, preparatory and primary classes, sometimes only one or two primary classes, also known as Huong School because it is usually located in villages and the budget is contributed by the villages.

— At the high school level, there are two divisions: Primary College and Baccalaureate College: Primary College consists of first year, second year, third year and fourth year classes. Baccalaureate has a duration of 3 years, there are first year, second year and third year classes. The Baccalaureate program from the first year is divided into departments: Science, Mathematics and Philosophy

Thus, since the invasion and pacification of Vietnam, through the adaptation and reform of colonial officials from Bonard, Krant, Lafont, Bert, Beau, Klobukowsky, Sarraut, finally Merlin, Varenne, Vietnamese education has been unified, consisting of three levels: Primary School, College Primary School and High School with a total study period of 13 years. The French policy of educational reform has transformed the entire education system in Vietnam in general and Cochinchina in particular. The socio-economic and educational changes have also changed the Vietnamese culture in general and the social culture of Cochinchina in particular.

## **Comments and evaluations on the French-Vietnamese educational culture in Cochinchina**

### *The positive sides*

During their reign, the French carried out many educational reform policies, which fundamentally changed Vietnamese education in general and education in Cochinchina in particular. This education has made certain positive contributions to the development of education in Cochinchina and Vietnam.

*First*, the introduction of the French education model in Cochinchina brought a new education with many positive factors. With this new education culture, for the first time, Vietnamese education is divided into specific and scientific levels, subjects and study duration, helping Vietnamese students step by step into an operating machine of modern education built by the French. The study at this stage has moved away from the

concept of studying to take an exam, to pass a Mandarin, to study for a degree etc. to studying to enrich knowledge and practical understanding to practice and work. Students can acquire comprehensive knowledge in various fields of life: Natural Science with Mathematics, Chemistry, Biology and Physics; Social Science with Literature, History, Geography, Law, Archaeology. Inheriting the national cultural heritage and receiving French education, in the modern period, Vietnamese education also attaches great importance to practical issues, learning with practice, learning to do and applying it to work.

*Second*, Franco-Vietnamese education included educational contents and programs with positive Western ethical values, which contributed to the creation of a new nature of education. The new education and ideological values such as democracy, equality and freedom etc. of Western culture have been imported into Vietnam. “French school... has given me true humanity, the same mindset, and a humane attitude” [Aubert-Nguyen, Espagne 2018: 240]. In addition, French-Vietnamese education allowed women to go to school for the first time, giving them equal access to knowledge as men. The year 1907 marked the establishment of girls' schools, Pascale Bezancon [2002] commented “Considered a breakthrough activity not only in education but especially in terms of ideology, it was positively received in the Sinology circles which considered educating girls useless. This reception of the former students greatly surprised and delighted the French authorities.” Currently, Vietnam is promoting the socialization of education. Education must ensure that people of all backgrounds and genders can learn the basic education program from elementary to middle school. The State always creates learning opportunities for everyone. Vietnam's education system does not charge primary school tuition, every child has the opportunity to go to school.

*Third*, the introduction of Quoc Ngu script into the primary school curriculum, although it is only three years, has made a big change for the children when they go to school. After three years of learning Quoc Ngu script, students can read and write fluently, know some basic knowledge useful for life, know basic calculations to work, and can enter vocational training in workshops. “Beyond the intention of the colonialists, the Quoc Ngu script quickly became the first connection with the Western civilization that Vietnamese people need to learn and contemplate for the cultural and national struggle” [Đỗ Quang Hưng 2019: 145]. In addition to Quoc Ngu, French has become the main language in schools and gradually becomes the main means for learners to directly approach progressive ideologies in the world, thus contributing to Vietnamese culture being closer to the values of Western cultures.

*Fourth*, in parallel with the system of primary and secondary schools in the general education system, education in Cochinchina in this period appeared as vocational schools to train human resources for colonial exploitation and development economic development. This is the type of school that traditional Confucian education does not have. Vocational schools were established and trained human resources for many new professions, making an important contribution to training human resources for society in various economic fields. These workers became an important part of the construction and economic development of Cochinchina during this period. The birth of vocational schools has changed the perception of disdain for manual labor in traditional society. Today, modern Vietnamese education also attaches great importance to vocational

education, building a vocational school system to meet the requirements of socio-economic development. To encourage students to enroll in vocational schools, the Government has focused resources on developing a system of vocational schools suitable to the needs of society.

*Fifth*, the school facilities are fully equipped and of high quality to serve the teaching and learning process. The schools are built in a cool Western architectural style with full classrooms, libraries, laboratories and dining rooms. The classrooms are arranged and designed scientifically, suitable for the acquisition of knowledge by the students. The desks and chairs of the students are also designed according to the physical characteristics of the students, ensuring the health and psychophysiological requirements. As a result, students' learning is highly effective, learning goes hand in hand. "In class, students sit on benches and standard desks to be able to read and write most conveniently; do not let students squat on the ground or boards" [Trung tâm lưu trữ Quốc gia 2016: 356]. Vietnam's school system today places great emphasis on investing in facilities. The school physical infrastructure system is designed and built according to European cultural standards: with names, uniforms, nameplates, rules, and appropriate design for the teaching and learning process and students, pays attention to the physical environment in accommodation, living, studying, playing, and relaxing after school. It is in that material cultural environment and space that educational activities take place with certain criteria and standards, contributing to the formation of an educational cultural environment in the period of integration and development.

*Sixth*, Franco-Vietnamese education has produced a large contingent of Western-educated intellectuals. Since the 1920s, intellectuals educated in French schools in Indochina or France knew both Vietnamese and French, and they were the ones who contributed to the image of a new group of Vietnamese intellectuals. It is a team of scientists, cultists, writers, and artists with a scientific spirit... Most of them have a deep nationalist spirit and contribute to the creation of an elite class in society. They advocated turning the French colonialists' tool of assimilation and enslavement into a tool for Vietnam's independence. With the progressive ideas acquired, the neo-educated intellectuals used them to enlighten the people's knowledge and restore the people's air in the national revival, turning exogenous into endogenous, enriching the people's culture. It is these contents that have formed the unique characteristics of contemporary intellectuals with their contributions to the country's development.

#### ***Limitations of French-Vietnamese education in Cochinchina***

*First*, the French education imposed in Vietnam was aimed at serving the colonial government. The ultimate and highest goal is still to enslave the colonial population culturally, politically and economically according to the subjective point of view of the ruler. "School is the most effective tool, most certainly in the hands of the conqueror" [Luro 1887: 1]. The French opening of schools is seen as a spiritual conquest of the indigenous people. "This conquest is longer and brighter than the previous one, but also richer and laudable. The instrument for the realization could not be anything other than the school" [Hardy 1917]. In addition, the goal of eradicating the traditional culture of the indigenous peoples and assimilating their culture is also clearly expressed and consistently implemented. During a parliamentary debate on the foundations of colonial

policy, Jules Ferry stated: “I repeat that to the superior races, they have a right because they have a duty. It is the duty to civilize the lower races” [Ferry 1893: 210—211].

*Second*, the Franco-Vietnamese school was established by the French to realize the goal of training a team of intellectuals to serve the colonial exploitation process. Therefore, the content and learning methods designed by the French government have strongly influenced a part of Vietnamese youth, making them passionate about learning and discovering new things about the West, but forgetting the cultural values of Vietnamese traditions over the centuries. This is reflected in the memoirs of former French-Vietnamese students: “Currently, I still write better in French than in Vietnamese, I only regret one thing, that is, I don't feel complete. I'm all Vietnamese because I don't know the history of Vietnam well, it's a gap that's hard to fill. That is my weakness, that evokes in me a cultural complex” [Aubert-Nguyen, Espagne 2018: 238]. Vietnamese intellectuals who studied in France were described by Francisque Vial in 1939 as follows: They are people who “float precariously between East and West, without direction, loss of balance, mental and emotional disturbances. Because they cannot penetrate deeply into French civilization.” [Vial 1939: 113].

*Third*, the planning of educational development and the arrangement of the network of schools and classes in the Franco-Vietnamese educational system is still inappropriate in some localities; no attention is paid to the quality assurance factor, resulting in schools being concentrated in large centers, and there is a shortage of schools and classes in remote and isolated areas. A French person commented on the Franco-Vietnamese education system as follows: “...there are obvious shortcomings in the rural education system, obvious weaknesses in the vocational education system, and unevenness between regions, social inequality...” [Trịnh Văn Thảo 2019: 14]. Although France opened schools to educate people, the percentage of uneducated students was still high. Specifically “in 1886, although the population of Cochinchina at that time was about 2 million people, the total and commune schools were only 300; the number of Vietnamese teachers was 503; the number of students at all levels 18,231” [Lý Tường Văn 2020: 2]. Commenting on the French policy of restricting education, leader Nguyen Ai Quoc wrote: “The people of Indochina implored to open schools because schools were seriously lacking. Every year, at the beginning of the school year, many parents have to knock on the door, run around, and sometimes pay double the boarding fee, but still can't find a place for their children to study, and thousands of children have to suffer stupidity ignorant because of the lack of schools” [Ho Chi Minh 2011: 35].

*Fourth*, in French-Vietnamese schools, the shortage of teachers is still common, many French and Vietnamese teachers are trained in a patchwork way. The professional capacity of a part of the teachers is still weak. Another reality is the discriminatory policy of the colonial government against foreign and Vietnamese teachers. There is a big gap between foreign teachers and Vietnamese teachers. This has not attracted domestic resources to choose a teaching career. Ms. Tran Thi My, formerly a student at Áo Tím School and later a physical education teacher at the school, said that the salary of a history teacher with a bachelor's degree in France is only 1/3 of the salary of “a lady who only knows how to play drums and have a very low level of education”. Even on business trips, Vietnamese teachers have to travel in third-class trains, while the French are allowed to travel in first-class cars with sleeper beds. Decoux also condemned: “the



disrespect, arrogance, and clumsy behavior of low-ranking French civil servants towards natives” [Decoux 1949: 370].

*Fifth*, limitations in curriculum and teaching content. The primary and secondary school programs in Franco-Vietnamese schools are too long, with students having to attend school for 13 years. Thus, “for a student to complete a school program from primary school to college or university, it takes 15, 16 years, even 20 years of youth if majoring in Medicine and Pharmacy” [Phan Trọng Bái 2006: 116]. Regarding the content of subjects taught in the Franco-Vietnamese curriculum, including history and literature, students approach the history and literature of France and other countries of the world, the content of the bourgeois revolutions in Britain, America and France or the movements of colonial countries to fight for independence was deliberately cut out “a Western protectorate people who sought to prevent the protected from learning the language and literature of that Western country” [Bui Quang Chieu 1925: 9]. Instead “History focuses on the expansion of whites in Europe and especially the Americas, Asia, Oceania, and South Africa [Phan Trọng Bái 2015: 51]. Some subjects have anti-scientific and anti-historical content, such as the origin of the Vietnamese as descendants of the Goloans, the Vietnamese people are barbaric and wild (Annamit), the Vietnamese people must be grateful for the civilization of the French. “We can expect very serious results from the young Annamites who will return to their homeland, after receiving and studying in France, instilling in our spirit, an understanding of the consequences of our civilizing mission” [Le Myra de Vilers 1908: 5].

## **Conclusion**

From 1862, when France opened its first school, to 1945, the Franco-Vietnamese education system was quite complete, becoming an education system that covered all levels from kindergarten, high school, vocational training, college, and university. The establishment of Franco-Vietnamese schools and training schools during this period was to fulfill the French purpose of abolishing Confucianism in Vietnam, replacing it with “French studies”, and training a team of diligent, Western-educated officials to serve the operation of the French domination machinery in Indochina. To some extent, the French had some success in achieving their goal in Vietnamese educational institutions. Franco-Vietnamese education was imposed on Cochinchina, and although the positive results were not within the scope of the French government's purpose, objectively it left great historical values in the development of Vietnamese education. For the first time in the history of the Vietnamese nation, Confucian education was closed to receive a new Western education, creating a new Franco-Vietnamese education with a new generation of intellectuals. The newly acquired knowledge is an important baggage for Vietnamese intellectuals in general and Cochinchina intellectuals in particular to approach and study the world, serving the cause of national renewal and regeneration. It was this group of people who became the core force in the national and democratic revolutionary movements to regain independence and freedom for Vietnam. The French-Vietnamese education organized in Vietnam has both positive aspects and certain limitations. However, this education was an important transition from feudal education to modern

education. Based on the positive points and limitations of the French-Vietnamese education system during the French colonial period, Vietnamese education can draw on experiences for reference and supplementation when building and developing the country's education system to integrate with regional and world higher education.

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Дата поступления статьи: 21.07.2023

Дата поступления в переработанном виде: 31.05.2024

Принята к печати: 18.06.2024

Received: July 21, 2023

Received in revised form: May 31, 2024

Accepted: June 18, 2024