

VIETNAMESE EDUCATION DURING THE FEUDAL ERA: SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCES OF CONFUCIAN EDUCATION

A EDUCAÇÃO VIETNAMITA DURANTE A ÉPOCA FEUDAL: INFLUÊNCIAS SIGNIFICATIVAS DA EDUCAÇÃO CONFUCIONISTA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the significant impact of Confucianism on Vietnamese education during the feudal era, spanning from 939 to 1945. Confucianism, introduced through Chinese influence, gradually became embedded in Vietnam's political, social, and educational systems. The Confucian philosophy of education, which emphasizes moral development, hierarchy, and social stability, shaped the Vietnamese education system by fostering the cultivation of virtuous individuals and officials for governance. This study delves into the evolution of Confucian educational ideals, their integration with Vietnam's traditional culture, and their influence on the establishment of a bureaucratic system that supported the feudal state's governance. Despite its contributions, Confucian education also had limitations, particularly in its rigid and rote-based methods, which hampered creativity and critical thinking. The paper aims to offer a comprehensive analysis of the dual impact—both positive and negative—of Confucian education on Vietnamese society.

Keywords: Confucianism, Feudal era, Intellectual class, Moral cultivation, Vietnamese education.

RESUMO

Este artigo explora o impacto significativo do confucionismo na educação vietnamita durante a era feudal, que se estendeu de 939 a 1945. O confucionismo, introduzido através da influência chinesa, gradualmente se incorporou aos sistemas político, social e educacional do Vietnã. A filosofia confucionista da educação, que enfatiza o desenvolvimento moral, a hierarquia e a estabilidade social, moldou o sistema educacional vietnamita ao fomentar a formação de indivíduos virtuosos e de funcionários para a governança. Este estudo investiga a evolução dos ideais educacionais confucionistas, sua integração com a cultura tradicional vietnamita e sua influência na criação de um sistema burocrático que apoiava a governança do Estado feudal. Apesar de suas contribuições, a educação confucionista também apresentava limitações, particularmente em seus métodos rígidos e baseados na memorização, que prejudicavam a criatividade e o pensamento crítico. O artigo pretende oferecer uma análise abrangente do impacto duplo – tanto positivo quanto negativo – da educação confucionista na sociedade vietnamita.

Palavras-chave: Confucionismo, Era Feudal, Classe Intelectual, Cultivo Moral, Educação vietnamita.

Introduction

The philosophy of education represents a core component within the broader socio-political doctrines of Confucianism. Confucianism was introduced to Vietnam primarily through cultural imposition, following the footsteps of early medieval Chinese invading forces (N.H. Nguyen 1998b; Woodside 2018). Initially, this led to resistance from the Vietnamese people. However, over time, Confucianism was progressively adopted and utilized by Vietnamese dynasties as a tool for governance throughout many centuries until the decline of Vietnam's feudal system (Q.T. Nguyen, Pham, and Lai 2023; Smith 2014; T.C. Nguyen 2020a) and has contributed greatly to shaping the characteristics of the modern culture of Vietnam (Tho 2016; Ly 2021; T.Q. Nguyen 2023; Do 2023; Ngo 2020; Q.H. Nguyen et al. 2020) alongside the influence of Buddhism and Daoism (Vuong et al. 2018). From being unfavorably received among the Vietnamese populace, Confucianism gradually assumed an increasingly significant role in bolstering the monarchy's authority, establishing a hierarchical bureaucratic system from top to bottom, and ensuring a tight-knit relationship between the state and its citizens. In particular, the adoption of Confucian educational ideals played a pivotal role in shaping a Confucian-based education system in Vietnam, enduring and evolving through the ups and downs of the feudal era.

There is a viewpoint that during Vietnam's feudal period (939 - 1945), despite the lack of comprehensive and widespread legal systems, the realm of personal thought and social morality remained relatively stable. Could the infiltration of Confucian thought have contributed to the development of Vietnam's education system beyond what was seen in previous periods? What exactly was the impact of Confucian thought on Vietnam's educational system during the feudal era, and what significance did it hold for Vietnamese society? Which aspects of Confucianism influenced feudal Vietnamese education? A dialectical, objective, comprehensive, and historically specific attitude is necessary to explore this issue. To meet the demands of studying socio-historical contexts, researching the impact of Confucianism on Vietnamese education during the feudal period is essential.

Confucian educational philosophy

The educational philosophy of Confucianism is fundamentally and systematically expressed, reflecting all aspects of social life since its inception by Confucius (551 – 479 BC). Subsequent philosophers have inherited, specified, and continually developed Confucius's ideas, enhancing the grandeur of this philosophical system. Confucianism once dominated the feudal society of China for an extended period. The emergence of Confucian socio-political theories was a response to the conditions and circumstances of ancient Chinese society. The acute social contradictions between the ruling and the ruled classes within the feudal society at the time, along with the constant warfare among vassal states, led to social disorder and increased suffering for the people. Faced with such chaotic social conditions, the question for many Chinese thinkers at the time was how to escape this disorder and crisis to bring about order, discipline, and social stability. Within this socio-political doctrine, the philosophy of education was of utmost importance. According to Confucianism, education is the fundamental means to establish a societal model and the ideal types of individuals necessary for that society.

From Confucianism's perspective, education's purpose is to cultivate good character in individuals, train officials who will contribute positively to the nation, and illuminate virtue, achieving the pinnacle of goodness. Confucius believed that the primary goal of learning is to develop a virtuous character. According to Confucianism, all humans are born with the same nature, which is natural and unchanged by conditions or circumstances. However, this innate nature can be altered by external factors and through the moral cultivation of the individual. In the Analects, Confucius stated, "By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart" (Institute of Sino-Nom Studies 2002: 257). Therefore, it can be said that the main objective of education in Confucian thought is to nurture ideal individuals who are morally upright and well-rounded in character, knowledge, and lifestyle. These individuals are the ideal pillars that Confucian scholars have always aspired to. Confucianism views the essence of the learning process as nothing other than the journey to rediscover the inherently good heart that has been lost (L.S. Tran

2004: 774). The Doctrine of the Mean also records a fundamental tenet of Confucian education: “What Heaven imparts to man is called human nature; to follow our nature is called the Way (Dao), to cultivate the Way is called education” (Quang Dam 1998).

The educational purpose within Confucian thought also aimed at developing a cadre of officials to benefit the nation. During the chaotic and tumultuous Spring and Autumn period in Chinese society, where “a king who is not a king, a minister who is not a minister, a father who is not his father, and a son who is not his son” (D.L. Nguyen 1998a: 483), wars of conquest and battles for dominance ensued. According to Confucius, these were due to the lack of moral virtue among people, contributing to societal instability. Thus, it was necessary to return people to righteousness through moral education. However, according to Confucianism, the ability to morally educate the populace depended on the role of the king and those in power, necessitating that rulers and officials continuously learn and cultivate moral virtue. This cultivation by kings and officials had to be sincere, constant and applied everywhere and in all situations.

The educational goal of Confucianism was to implement a political doctrine of ruling through virtue and maintaining social order in a feudal society. On the one hand, Confucianism emphasized the education and cultivation of kings and officials. On the other, it aimed to educate the people to replenish the governing forces within society (Q.T. Nguyen, Pham, and Lai 2023). This was because educated officials would understand not to harm the people; educated citizens would understand their duties and rights. Therefore, the primary focus of Confucian education, in general, and Confucius, in particular, was to train those from the ruling class, to train others who could supplement the ruling class, and to educate people to understand “dao” (moral principles). In the Analects, Confucius believed education was necessary for all, without distinction (class, wealth, good or bad). He wrote, “in teaching, there are no class distinctions” (H.L. Nguyen 2003: 85). Confucius’ educational policy was one of universal education, which was progressive in the historical context of that time. From its inception, Confucianism differed fundamentally from the ideas of other religions, especially concerning humanity. Confucianism significantly focused on

teaching moral values and educating people to transform evil into good. Evidently, the Confucian concept of humanity was intended for a feudal society, yet these moral principles helped the feudal society develop. Along with its positive aspects, Confucianism has had a wide-ranging impact on Asian countries and continues to influence them today.

The purpose of education is also to illuminate virtue and achieve supreme goodness. According to Mencius (371 – 289 BC), because humans possess benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom, they are distinguished from beasts; these ethical norms are initially nascent in the human heart, marking humans as inherently good. Hence, if people nurture their inherent goodness, they can become sages. Conversely, if this goodness is allowed to diminish, humans become selfish and petty, no different from animals. Contrary to Mencius's theory of inherent goodness, Xunzi (310-238 BC) proposed the theory of inherent evil. Xunzi believed that human nature is evil and that goodness is a product of human effort. According to him, humans are born with a desire for profit, leading to strife if followed; born with envy, leading to ruthlessness if indulged; born with desires for the pleasures of the senses, leading to debauchery if not moderated. Thus, following one's natural inclinations would inevitably lead to conflict, violation of duties, and disruption of order, resulting in cruelty. Therefore, education and moral guidance are necessary to reform and lead people towards propriety and righteousness, eventually achieving a harmonious society. Xunzi's view highlights that human nature is evil, but goodness is achieved through human efforts (Doan 1950: 354). Whether human nature is inherently good or evil, education is essential to cultivate humaneness and develop a good character. This educational aim of Confucianism is a progressive thought, transcending its time, as a society desiring development and progress needs individuals who possess both virtue and ability.

The educational content within Confucian thought primarily focuses on moral philosophy and ritual propriety. According to Confucian scholars, the goal is to cultivate individuals of noble character who are versed in poetry, literature, rites, and music and possess the qualities necessary to govern. These themes are encapsulated in the Confucian classics, the Four Books and the Five Classics.

Confucian education ensures that everyone understands and practices the principles of proper human conduct in relationships such as ruler-subject, parent-child, husband-wife, siblings, friends, and teacher-student, thereby fostering a universal comprehension of moral principles. With this objective, Confucianism leans towards moral and political education. Confucius emphasized the importance of focusing on the path, mastering virtues, following benevolence, and delighting in the six arts (D.L. Nguyen 1998a: 346). In Confucian educational philosophy, the development and training of individuals are guided by the principle of learning rituals before letters. Rituals are a major and fundamental aspect of Confucianism. The concept of Rituals is extensive, encompassing ceremonies (for government, marriage, funerals, and sacrifices) and the societal regulations for interpersonal behavior. It dictates individuals' hierarchical positioning and roles in society, establishing rational standards and norms. Confucius placed great importance on rituals; he defended the Western Zhou dynasty's rites, discipline, and morals while introducing new principles and content to rationalize these ideas toward progress. For instance, he advocated that the practice of rituals should pay attention to both substance and form, requiring a sincere and respectful attitude. After Confucius, rituals were enriched with new content, but the core remained focused on morality, standards, and ethical norms. Confucianism regards moral education as paramount, a philosophy that significantly influenced the feudal education system in China and Vietnam. Rituals were so deeply ingrained in education that they became the standard for evaluating human behavior, fostering a society that esteemed those who observed rituals and disdained those who did not, to the extent that individuals would rather die than forsake propriety.

Confucianism employs a variety of flexible methods to achieve its educational goals. One of the most esteemed educational methods in Confucian thought is leading by example, particularly the example set by kings and rulers. Confucius believed that governing others would not be difficult if one could correct oneself and be upright. If one cannot correct oneself, how can one correct others? (T.B. Nguyen 2000) The purpose and essence of this method require learners first to understand and then be able to articulate the knowledge from texts or acquired during the

learning process. In education, Confucian scholars emphasize memorizing the teachings of sages and the content of classic texts, with this information being imparted by teachers in a complete and often rote manner. This educational method is unsuitable for modern society as it limits learners' creativity. However, it also has a positive aspect. Confucian education promotes the idea that "learning should go hand in hand with practice," meaning that acquiring new knowledge and applying it to life is equally important.

To this day, the educational philosophies of Confucianism retain significant value and influence over Eastern education systems, including Vietnam. Confucius was the first to develop a relatively systematic curriculum and teaching methods, marking a progressive step in education. His ideas laid the foundation for generations of his followers to expand upon, creating a comprehensive Confucian doctrine accessible to all social classes for the first time in educational history. Consequently, Confucius is revered as the forefather of Eastern education. However, due to the historical context of his time, Confucian educational thought was heavily class-based, leading some later critics to view his teachings as overly strict and contrary to the interests of the working people.

Nevertheless, if one sets aside the idealistic and feudal elements of Confucius' views, educators worldwide have studied and praised the enduring values within Confucian philosophy. These values are applied in teaching and especially emphasized in moral education for the younger generation. It can be affirmed that, beyond the feudal regime and into the present and future, the progressive aspects of Confucius' views remain relevant and should be studied, validated, and applied in global education.

Characteristics of Vietnamese education during the feudal period

The formation and development of Vietnamese education during the feudal period (939 - 1945). Feudal education in Vietnam was a systematic, organized, and essentially Confucian education. Vietnamese feudal education is marked from when Ngo Quyen (898-944) gained independence (939) to the August Revolution in 1945.

After winning on the Bach Dang River, Ngo Quyen ascended the throne and embarked on the construction and defense of the homeland. During the construction process, the Ngo Dynasty focused on developing education. However, the dominant period of the Ngo, Dinh, and Early Le dynasties was influenced by two major religions, Buddhism and Daoism, so learning mainly took place in temples. Although introduced to Vietnam during the Northern domination period, it was only in the Ly Dynasty, during King Ly Nhan Tong reign that Confucianism began to be emphasized and spread in Vietnamese education. Specifically, during this period, Vietnam's first national university - Imperial Academy or The Sons of State (Quốc Tử Giám - 國子監) was established in 1076 as a place to train children of kings and mandarins and later expanded to those with good talent (Vuong et al. 2018; T.C. Nguyen 2020b; Yang 2022). The Ly Dynasty existed for 215 years through nine kings (1010 - 1225), and achievements in the field of national construction were the foundation for the Ly dynasty to develop an educational culture and create a spiritual life for an independent nation. The Ly Dynasty advocated teaching and learning according to the Confucian regime, separating education from the temple environment, and selecting a team of mandarins to rule the administrative apparatus and propagate Confucianism. This is the basic, fundamental orientation of the position, tasks, and role of examination education in building and developing the country of the feudal nation of Vietnam. By the early Le period, Confucianism became the main ideology and occupied an important position in the lives of Vietnamese people, and from here, Confucianism became the main content of feudal education, lasting more than a thousand years in Vietnam. Vietnam.

From the 16th century to the early 18th century, with extremely complex political and social developments, Vietnam also affected Confucian education. The late 15th and early 16th centuries was the period of decline in the political power of the Le Dynasty and the birth of the Mac Dynasty. In the 17th and 18th centuries, there was a conflict between the Trinh and Nguyen dynasties. Factional wars made the feudal central state gradually weaken, state institutions became weak, and state discipline was loosened. This also led to the decline of Confucian ideology. Confucian education can no longer promote its positive aspects, and the examination situation

is also cliché and full of lies. Confucianism was only restored in socio-political life and the Vietnamese education system during the Nguyen Dynasty in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. At the end of the 19th century, French colonialists invaded our country, Vietnam's feudal education system was completely changed, and Chinese characters were replaced by the national language and French characters. From the textbook program's content to learning, teaching, and organizing exams, the school system from elementary, elementary, college, and high school to professional schools, Universities were gradually formed, replacing schools and feudal education.

Some characteristics of Vietnamese education during the feudal period. For thousands of years, Vietnamese people learned Chinese characters (read Chinese characters according to Vietnamese pronunciation) and used Chinese characters as official writing to take notes. However, the Vietnamese people have not been sinicized due to developing education, maintaining and cultivating a sense of national independence (Do and Ngo 2023), and preserving national cultural identity. Besides using Chinese characters, Vietnamese people also rely on Chinese characters to create Nom (Nôm - 喃) characters to write and express in Vietnamese (T.C. Nguyen 2019; Phan 2020). The first person whose name was recorded in history books and who contributed to the development of Vietnamese writing was Nguyen Thuyen. He used Nom to write a poem about chasing crocodiles, and King Tran Nhan Tong changed his family name to Han-Han Thuyen, likening him to Han Du, a writer from the Han Dynasty in China who also wrote poems about chasing crocodiles. King Tran Nhan Tong himself also had a poem "Cu Tran Lac Dao" written in Vietnamese. Later, many literary, historical, medical, and scientific works of great value were written in Nom. Typical examples are Quoc Am Thi Tap by Nguyen Trai, the translation of Chinh Phu Ngam Khuc by Doan Thi Diem, and The Tale of Kieu by Nguyen Du.

The school system of Vietnamese Confucian education in feudal times did not have a division of educational levels for teachers, and there were no strictly and appropriately regulated programs, documents, and textbooks like today. Beginning in 1075 during the Ly Dynasty, Vietnamese monarchs implemented imperial

examinations to recruit state officials from the populace. By 1396 (in Tran Dynasty), these exams were organized into two stages: the local level (thi Hương) and the national level (thi Hội). Candidates had to succeed at the local level to qualify for the national level exams. The central examinations consisted of one or two phases, varying by dynasties, with the initial phase being a written test and the second phase, likely reserved for top scorers of the written portion, was an oral test (thi Đình). The program and documents can be broader or narrower to a certain extent, not clearly specified. At the same time as developing the education system, the feudal state paid great attention to organizing exams, seeing this as an important measure to select talented people to join the national executive apparatus. It should be noted that the regulations on examinations under feudalism were very strict, proving that the management capacity of the educational system of the dynasties from Lý and Trần to Lê and Nguyễn was very strong. Selecting talents through examinations, although very rigorous, also embodies a democratic element as it creates opportunities for children from the common classes.

The most basic and prominent feature of the education system during the feudal period in Vietnam is the education of Confucianism. Vietnamese Confucian education carries all the characteristics of Chinese Confucian education combined with the traditional culture of the Vietnamese people. Confucianism aims for individuals to develop good character, education aims to train a cadre of officials to benefit the country, and education serves to illuminate virtue, achieving the essence of goodness. The content of education in Confucian thought primarily focuses on moral and ceremonial education. Educational methods such as setting examples, memorizing the texts of sages, or practicing learning and doing in Chinese Confucianism are clearly reflected in the feudal education system of Vietnam.

In the history of Vietnam's feudal regime and its system of Confucian education and civil examinations, as pointed out, the cadre of talents - the intellectual class (the product of the education and examination system) of Confucian studies, if successful, were appointed as officials, participating in the governance structures of the state apparatus, where many (especially from the Early Lê dynasty onwards) held high positions, taking on the heavy responsibilities of the

court and the nation. At this point, it's clear that the cadre of talents and the intellectual class of Confucian studies had a significant influence and role within the state apparatus on the nation's fate and, thus, on society as a whole. They (also known as Confucian officials) played a major and primary role in constructing and operating an educated state apparatus. From the Trần dynasty onwards, there were various types of examinations. However, all culminated through three main examination stages: the Preliminary, the Metropolitan, and the Palace exams to select talents for the court and the country. All these examinations shared the common feature of being organized and directed by the royal court. The organization of exams was very strict. In these exams, feudal dynasties took great precautions against cheating. Detected cheaters were severely punished and possibly condemned to slavery, imprisonment, or even death.

The content of teaching and learning progressively improved through the feudal dynasties in our country. However, in general, the education in Vietnam during this period still focused on teaching the principles of "Rites" and "Literature". The principle of "Rites" always reminds people that they must learn courtesy, kindness, harmony with others, respect for order, reverence towards the elderly, and a clear sense of hierarchy. Meanwhile, "Literature" reminds people that they must study to become talented and virtuous. With its teaching content focusing on nurturing literature, practicing martial arts, and cultivating morality, this education system trained ideal individuals who are not only morally upright and of good character but also knowledgeable and possess a way of life - the most important resource in all historical circumstances of nation-building and defense.

The influence of confucianism on Vietnamese education during the feudal period

Confucianism was introduced into Vietnam during the Chinese domination period, accompanying the northern feudal forces' invasions and assimilation schemes. However, as previously discussed, Confucianism officially became the dominant ideological system in Vietnamese society during the Early Lê period. From

the 10th to the 15th century, in response to the need to build and develop the Đại Việt state, the national feudal class actively absorbed Confucianism through economic, cultural, and diplomatic exchanges with China. Due to its long existence and purposeful use by feudal dynasties, Confucianism profoundly influenced many areas. It became a powerful tool for the ruling class in Vietnamese feudal society. The marks left by Confucianism in Vietnamese society are quite clear in terms of politics, culture, society, and particularly in education (Tho 2016). The influence of Confucianism on the education system during the feudal period in Vietnam is reflected in several aspects.

Firstly, regarding the purpose of education and the selection of talents. The purpose of Confucian education in Vietnam during the feudal period was also to teach the moral principles of being human, meaning education aimed to create individuals who always think and act in accordance with the ethical standards set by Confucianism. These Confucian moral standards include benevolence, righteousness, propriety, etc., educating individuals to treat others with kindness, to be tolerant and generous, and at the same time, to behave properly and according to social norms. This helps individuals lead a life that respects hierarchy, recognizing their duties and responsibilities in social relationships. With this purpose, education is one of the measures to maintain the order and discipline of society. From the profound influences of Confucian education, the philosophy of “education without distinction” - education is necessary for everyone, so the educational philosophy of Confucianism during the feudal period from the Lý to the Nguyễn dynasty paid great attention to selecting talents regardless of social status, those with morality and ability all had the opportunity to learn. This created a driving force for education development, with many intellectuals and talents striving to excel in literature and history to pass exams and join the ranks of officials. Confucian education in Vietnam also particularly emphasized morality, educating the principles of being human. Confucianism trained ideal individuals, comprehensively developed in talent and morality to win people’s hearts, set examples for people to follow, and simultaneously educate the public. This educational perspective in Vietnamese feudal society continues the educational thoughts of Chinese Confucian scholars.

Through the Confucian civil examination, education to find Confucian scholars and intellectuals supplementing the ruling force of feudal society and also an important force contributing to the construction and development of an ideal society according to the spirit of Confucianism; this ideal is expressed through the four principles: self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and world peace. During the Early Lê period, the feudal government organized many exams like Minh kinh and Hoàng từ, and many people achieved high ranks. Throughout the Early Lê period, 29 national exams were organized, selecting 988 doctoral laureates. The Mạc dynasty organized 22 exams, selecting 385 doctoral laureates. The Lê Trung Hưng period (1533 – 1789) organized 68 palace exams, selecting 717 doctoral laureates (Q.N. Nguyen 2010).

Although inheriting most of the ideas of the educational thought of indigenous Confucianism, the educational ideas of Confucianism were not purely Confucian when introduced into Vietnam. Vietnamese Confucianism was blended with the thoughts of Buddhism, Daoism, and the folk beliefs of the Vietnamese to create a Vietnamese Confucian education system (Vuong et al. 2018). This can be seen in the composition of the thoughts of national Confucian scholars throughout history. There, we find elements of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. This is also evident in the concepts of Confucian scholars. Trịnh Huệ, a top Confucian scholar during the reign of Lê Cảnh Hưng, believed that the “stop at the ultimate good” from the “Great Learning” is also the good of Buddhist scriptures, and the Confucian “filial piety and loyalty” is similar to Buddhism’s “Four Debts of Gratitude” (from Trịnh Huệ’s work “The Unity of Three Religions”). Ngô Thì Sĩ considered the Buddhist “compassion,” the Taoist “purity”, and the Confucian “benevolence, righteousness, loyalty, and propriety” (from Ngô Thì Sĩ’s inscription on the renovation of the Tam Giáo Temple). Phan Huy Ích thought the Buddhist concept of “emptiness and cessation” was not different from the Confucian “sincerity” (in the preface of Phan Huy Ích’s in Trúc Lâm Đại Sĩ’s Clear Serenity). In China and other East Asian countries, there was also the phenomenon of “The unity of Three Religions”, but it did not permeate the history as it did in Vietnam. In China, there were times when Buddhism was persecuted, such as by Emperor Taiwu of Northern

Wei, Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou, Emperor Wuzong of Tang, etc. However, such “Dharma calamities” did not occur in Vietnam.

Secondly, Vietnamese education’s content, teaching methods, and examination system during the feudal period also bore a strong imprint of Confucian educational thought. The basic teaching content of Vietnamese education in the feudal era was also the Four Books and Five Classics, to guide individuals towards their virtuous nature, rejuvenate the people, stabilizing goodness, and living according to the principles of humanity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith, practicing the way of the gentleman. This teaching and learning content created strengths for education. Education became a useful tool for self-cultivation, training ideal individuals complete in morality, personality, knowledge, and lifestyle. By the Nguyễn dynasty, to bind everyone to the mold of Confucianism, the mold of the feudal regime, and to train those who were loyal to the ruling class, the Nguyễn Dynasty decreed “People from the age of 8 go to primary school then study the Filial Piety Classic, the Loyalty Classic. From the age of 12, first study the Analects, Mencius to the Doctrine of the Mean, the Great Learning; from the age of 15, first study the Book of Poetry, then study the Book of Changes, the Spring and Autumn Annals, along with learning about the various philosophers and history” (National History Archives of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2002: 574-575). The content of the Vietnamese Confucian education system during the feudal period emphasized moral education, de-emphasized talent and intelligence, “for the ruling officials, virtue is necessary, with virtue, people are pacified, with virtue, there is harmony with heaven and earth, leading to favorable winds and rains” (V.G. Tran 1993: 94-95). However, the education of the feudal period did not focus on teaching production knowledge and techniques; most of the production process was based on the experience left by predecessors. Farmers learn agriculture spontaneously, and so do traders, and crafts such as carpentry, masonry, construction, including mining, smelting, and casting iron, mechanics... were also passed down through apprenticeship within guild organizations and direct participation in production, without any formal schools, textbooks, or curricula (Le 2003: 16). Therefore, the

textbook system of Confucian education was essentially the Confucian classics concentrated in the Four Books and Five Classics, written in Chinese characters.

Lê Quý Đôn (1726-1784) wrote in “Kiến Văn Tiểu Lục”: “Around the Hồng Đức era, books were distributed annually to the provinces, such as the Four Books, Five Classics, etc., from which educational officials would teach, and talents were selected through examinations based on these texts; from the Trung Hưng period onwards, examination questions were drawn solely from the Four Books, Five Classics, etc., as these texts are replete with literature” (Institute of Sino-Nom Studies 2002: 770). This shows that the content of education and examinations in Vietnamese education during the feudal period was deeply influenced by Confucianism.

Even to achieve its goals, Confucian education particularly valued teaching and learning methods in knowledge acquisition. Confucius always affirmed that reviewing what you have learned and gaining new understanding is how one becomes a teacher. To achieve this, students must study and revise daily, carefully review all that has been learned, regularly recapitulate the teachings of their masters, and practice what has been learned to solidify their knowledge. In this review process, by reading and carefully considering the teachings, one can discover and contemplate new ideas, uncovering new knowledge through reviewing previously learned materials. According to Confucius, a learner must practice continuously to become proficient and insightful, making the mind more alert and clear. Learning is an endless process of exploration, constant review, freely absorbing, self-consciously reinforcing learned knowledge, and enhancing one’s awareness while also independently thinking to discover new things. Learning is the first stage of recognizing objects and understanding the world around them, followed by consolidating what has been learned and accumulating knowledge to build a better society. After learning and implementing what had been learned, Confucius also required learners to think deeply to benefit from what they had learned.

In Vietnamese education during the feudal period, rote memorization and doctrinal teaching methods were mainly used. Learners and examinees primarily

memorize and learn by heart through day and night studying classics and history. In the feudal era, children were taught to memorize but not necessarily to exercise critical thinking. As they grew older, they were taught to learn couplets, poetry, essays... From young to old, learners only studied ethics and literature. They were learning these two fundamental subjects to cultivate knowledge and practice social norms in human relationships to create a harmonious society.

Thirdly, Confucianism influences the teaching staff and the standards for students and examinees. The teachers in the Confucian education system of the feudal era were Confucian scholars, those who had succeeded in Confucian examinations. The teaching staff had to be individuals of good character, exemplary in morality, and proficient in literature, letters, and philosophy. Therefore, the product of this education system was moral and knowledgeable individuals who knew how to act and think according to Confucian ideals. For learners and examinees, the target audience of Confucian education was unlimited, without distinction of social status, to create individuals who embody Confucian ideals, are moral, and act and think by the governance goals of the feudal government. However, most Vietnamese Confucians only set themselves the goal of studying to pass exams and become officials for wealth and comfort. Completing that task was seen as the end of their education. Few had higher aspirations, such as studying to participate in debates on regional issues, working for society, or contributing to advancing national culture.

Objectively speaking, some Confucians of this period were concerned with scholarship but mainly focused on politics and ethics, seldom discussing metaphysical issues, a higher realm of thought where profound cognitive abilities and creative actions are hidden. Moreover, they transformed the metaphysical into the practical and pragmatic. For example, regarding the concept of “heaven” in the heaven-earth-human relationship, they did not consider “heaven” as a natural entity with its nature or as a spiritual, supernatural entity with a role in the universe, but only from the perspective of human benefit, like understanding “heavenly timing” for farming to yield results, or from a religious, belief perspective, how humans should relate to heaven for their benefit, thus advocating “respecting heaven”,

“complying with heaven”, “serving heaven”, “following heaven”, etc. Another example is the I Ching (Book of Changes), which introduces the world’s origin as the I Ching has the Supreme Ultimate, which generates the Two Modes. The Two Modes generate the Four Images, then the Four Images generate the Eight Trigrams (Wang, Bao, and Guan 2020). The Eight Trigrams determine good and bad fortune; good and bad fortune create a great business. For Vietnamese Confucians, the focus was not on what “the Supreme Ultimate”, “Two Modes”, “Four Images” are, but they were intrigued by the last two propositions “the Eight Trigrams determine good and bad fortune, good and bad fortune create a great business”, their attention was on what could directly benefit.

From examining the influence of Confucianism on the education system of feudal Vietnam, it can be concluded that Confucianism had both positive and negative effects on Vietnamese education. On the positive side, with the aim of educating virtuous and talented individuals, especially emphasizing the role of morality in education, this created good, righteous people for society, enabling society to develop peacefully. Moreover, the scholarly spirit of Confucianism also influenced people in society to have a greater zeal for learning. The founders of Confucianism were famously keen learners, arguing that without a love for learning, “one who desires to be benevolent instead becomes ignorant”, “one who desires to be brave becomes rebellious”, “one who desires to be resolute becomes brutal”. Confucius himself was a model for this spirit of scholarship. This progressive viewpoint ensured that over more than two thousand years of history, his disciples continued the spirit of avid learning, a spirit of tireless study, playing an important part in encouraging the learning movement in feudal society up to the present day. Although it did not focus on the education of technical labor skills, the method of combining learning with practice in Confucianism also contributed to making the educational goals of Confucianism meaningful for the transformation of nature and society. Notably, the educational thought of Confucianism had positive impacts on the training of intellectuals, those who became officials in the feudal government. This intellectual class significantly contributed to the country’s preservation,

construction, and development. The spirit of Confucian education is associated with the prosperity of dynasties and the nation.

Alongside the positive aspects, Confucianism also negatively impacted the education of feudal Vietnam. The conservative mindset of Confucianism hindered reformative thoughts and hampered societal development; the rote learning method, dogmatic teaching, focus on memorizing passages, empty theories, and pursuit of vain glory... are limitations of Vietnam's feudal education system. Across all feudal dynasties in Vietnam, teaching and learning still revolved around Confucian ideals, encapsulated in the four principles of "self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and world peace", "literature to carry the Way", focusing only on "intellectual and moral education" without emphasizing physical and aesthetic training - conditions for the holistic development of individuals. Although feudal Confucian education produced a class of intellectuals to build and develop society, the ultimate goal was to serve the ruling class's interests and the feudal government.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Confucianism significantly shaped Vietnamese education during the feudal era, instilling values such as moral cultivation, respect for hierarchy, and social stability. The Confucian education system aimed to produce virtuous individuals to serve in governance, reinforcing the political structure and societal norms of the time. This system contributed positively to creating a well-educated intellectual class, which played a key role in the administration and development of the feudal state. However, the Confucian approach had its limitations. Its focus on rote memorization and rigid learning methods stifled creativity and critical thinking. This narrow focus on moral and literary education also neglected practical and technical skills essential for broader societal progress. Despite these challenges, Confucianism left a lasting imprint on Vietnamese education and culture, fostering a strong respect for learning that continues to influence Vietnam's educational philosophy. While later educational reforms moved

beyond Confucianism, the values it instilled during the feudal period remain an important part of Vietnam's intellectual and cultural heritage.

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