



PROMINENT TENDENCIES IN CONFUCIAN STUDIES IN VIETNAM DURING THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract: This article provides a systematic overview of the intellectual landscape of Confucian studies in Vietnam during the first half of the 20th century. By categorizing diverse scholarly orientations, ranging from the apologetic tradition and the resurgence of Yangmingism to the Marxist reinterpretation of Confucianism, the paper elucidates a profound epistemological shift: the deconstruction of Confucianism as a state orthodoxy and its reconstruction as an object of academic inquiry. By examining representative figures and their seminal works, notably Phan Bội Châu, Trần Trọng Kim, and Đào Duy Anh, this study highlights how distinct interpretive frameworks emerged to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. On one hand, this transition underscores the historical particularity of Vietnamese Confucianism in comparison to other East Asian nations; on the other, it recontextualizes the role and status of Confucianism within the broader trajectory of Vietnamese intellectual history.

Keywords. Confucian Studies, Yangmingism, Modernization of Confucianism, Vietnamese philosophical thought, Zhu Xi Studies

1. Introduction

The abolition of the royal examination system in 1918 marked a pivotal turning point for Confucianism in Vietnam. Once the dominant political ideology, Confucianism gradually became overshadowed by nascent intellectual currents imported from the West and Japan, most notably the dual trends of liberalism and democracy. This shift was not merely institutional; it inaugurated a profound transformation in the epistemic structure and the methodologies through which Vietnamese intellectuals approached Confucian studies during the first half of the 20th century.

Against this backdrop, the Vietnamese intelligentsia gradually transitioned toward treating Confucianism as *an object of academic inquiry*. This process was not instantaneous; rather, it matured and evolved through successive generations and diverse intellectual orientations. These included: the apologetic efforts to preserve the tradition amidst the decline of the Confucian-Mencian doctrine; the interpretation of Yangmingism as a catalyst for reform; the critique of Zhu Xi Studies (the Cheng-Zhu school) throughout the evolution of Vietnamese thought; and even the nascent trend toward the Marxistization of Confucianism.

The plurality of these research orientations rendered the landscape of Vietnam's "Old Learning" in the first half of the 20th century remarkably vibrant, exerting an intellectual influence no less significant than the contemporary "Western Learning". In this spirit, this article provides a systematic overview of the major orientations within Vietnamese Confucian Studies during this period. Such a sketch serves not only as a retrospective contribution to the history of thought but also seeks to delineate the prospects for Confucian research in the current era, where the intersection of tradition and modernity has become more pronounced than ever.

2. The Apologetic Orientation of the *Nam Phong* magazine and Phan Bội Châu

The emergence of new intellectual currents (Modern Learning) posed a grave threat to the standing of Confucianism (Old Learning). This pressure compelled the most devout Confucian scholars to exert every effort to defend the foundations of the Confucian-Mencian doctrine. The *Nam Phong* magazine (henceforth *Nam Phong*) and Phan Bội Châu stand as the two most prominent representatives of this apologetic orientation.

In 1917, the *Nam Phong*, founded by Phạm Quỳnh and Nguyễn Bá Trác, became one of the most influential academic forums in the first half of the 20th century. Operating under the motto "East and West, past and present, national literature and national essence", *Nam Phong* served as both a conduit for introducing Western thought and a platform for reaffirming the values of the Confucian tradition. Although often categorized as pro-monarchy or pro-French, the journal actually dedicated numerous works to asserting Confucianism as an essential moral foundation for building the nation's spiritual life. Notable among these were series of articles by Phạm Quỳnh (Quỳnh, 1918) (Chi, 1921) (Chi, 1924), An Khê (Khê, 1924a) (Khê, 1924b), Nguyễn Trọng Thuật (Thuật, 1934), Nguyễn Hữu Tiến (Châu Đ., 1923); (Châu Đ. , 1929); (Châu Đ. , 1934), Nguyễn Đôn Phục (Vân, 1926a); (Vân, 1926b)....

The attitude of the *Nam Phong* circle, while characterized by a reconciliation between the "new" and the "old", remained fundamentally rooted in the defense of Confucianism. This was no longer merely a matter of political ideology; their research on Confucianism also reflected a

profound fear of “losing one’s cultural roots”. This represents a crucial distinction from more radical intellectuals who viewed Confucianism as an obstacle that needed to be dismantled.

Another seminal figure in this apologetic orientation was Phan Bội Châu, particularly through his work *Khổng học đăng* (*The Lamp of Confucianism*, 1929). This book was authored with the intent to *sustain humanity and preserve the human heart*. In essence, it sought to reaffirm the moral foundations of Confucianism as the spiritual pillar for the nation during times of upheaval. Phan Bội Châu endeavored to argue that “the old learning is not necessarily obsolete, and the new learning is not necessarily superficial” (Châu P. B., 1998: 13), aiming for a synthesis between tradition and modernity.

From its very title, *Khổng học đăng* carries symbolic weight: illuminating the Confucian-Mencian moral path to guide the human heart and affirming the continuity of the “direct and collateral lineages” within the Confucian school, known as the *Daotong* 道統 (The Transmission of the Way). Phan Bội Châu’s establishment of this idea of *Daotong* holds vital significance in the history of Confucian thought. Historically, Han Yu in *Yuan Dao* (Inquiry into the Way) once championed the slogan “uniting benevolence and righteousness” to restore Confucian orthodoxy against the influences of Buddhism and Taoism; later, during the Southern Song dynasty, Zhu Xi synthesized these teachings, “surpassing various scholars to directly reconnect with the lineage of Mencius” (Tuotuo 脫脫, 1985: 12709-12710). Both viewed the protection of the *Daotong* as the preservation of the spirit of Confucius and Mencius, a spirit that Phan Bội Châu sought to inherit when penning *Khổng học đăng*.

For Phan Bội Châu, the Confucian *Daotong* was not merely a lineage of intellectual inheritance but also the foundational source for preserving human integrity and character. By synthesizing the perspectives of Confucian scholars within the “direct and collateral lineages”, Phan Bội Châu elevated the moral-centric scholarship of Confucianism as a system of eternal values that no modern intellectual current could easily replace: “The fundamental purpose of our learning is to learn how to be human; and the paradigm of being human must be to strive for Sagehood. To attain Sagehood, one must uncover the essence of the Sages; and to grasp that essence, one must exert the utmost effort in the pursuit of learning” (Châu P. B., 1998: 276).

Consequently, *Khổng học đăng* can be viewed as an endeavor to reaffirm the authority of Confucianism amidst competing ideological currents. At the same time, it represents Phan Bội Châu’s search for a vantage point from which to reconcile the past with the present, and tradition with “New Learning”. This “apologetic” stance was not merely a form of nostalgia; it was a deliberate intellectual choice aimed at sustaining the vitality of Confucian ethics within a century of profound upheaval.

3. Trần Trọng Kim and the interpretation of Yangmingism in the 20th century

Until 1918, the history of Confucianism in Vietnam was dominated by the monolithic voice of Zhu Xi Studies. In its capacity as the official orthodoxy, Zhu Xi Studies provided a robust ideological foundation for the various feudal dynasties throughout history. Alongside this orthodoxy, other Confucian orientations, particularly Yangmingism, were relegated to the margins, receiving little attention from the feudal aristocracy.

This landscape only truly shifted following the upheaval of Vietnam's socio-political structure. The decline of the Nguyễn Dynasty allowed Yangmingism to gradually reclaim its position. The most pivotal figure in the resurgence of Yangmingism in Vietnam was Trần Trọng Kim.

Trần Trọng Kim (1883–1953), pen name Lê Thần, was a preeminent Confucian scholar in Vietnam. Although rooted in the Confucian-Mencian tradition, he had early exposure to Western academic trends. Consequently, his perspective on Confucianism possessed several distinctive features, most notably his elevation of the status and role of Yangmingism. His prominent works discussing this subject include *Nho giáo* (Confucianism, 1930) and *Vương Dương Minh* (Wang Yangming, 1934).

In 1930, Trần Trọng Kim published his treatise *Nho giáo* arguably the most significant work reflecting his thought on the synthesis of the “Three Teachings”. Written in the Vietnamese romanized script, *Nho giáo* provided such a comprehensive historical account of the formation and evolution of the Confucian-Mencian doctrine that it “overshadowed the research of scholars from traditional Confucian backgrounds, such as Phan Bội Châu’s *Khổng học đăng*” (Thao, 1991: 269). Through this work, Trần Trọng Kim outlined Confucianism as a systematic doctrine with a complete methodology, thereby opening a “new spirit that could adapt to our circumstances, our level of intellect, and our disposition” (Kim, 1943a: 10). According to Trần Trọng Kim, this spirit could only be embodied by Yangmingism, rather than the tenets of Zhu Xi Studies.

While acknowledging the contributions of Zhu Xi Studies in consolidating the authority of the classics, Trần Trọng Kim did not hesitate to criticize this orientation, with Zhu Xi himself as the primary focus of his critique. He evaluated Zhu Xi’s epistemology, specifically the concept of *gewu zhizhi* 格致 (the investigation of things and the extension of knowledge), as being “narrow-minded in its rigid adherence to moralistic paths [...] overly pedantic about words and phrases, and too inclined toward literalism, thus failing to grasp the profound Mind-Learning of Confucius and Mencius” (Kim, 1943b: 243).

Trần Trọng Kim's critique of Zhu Xi Studies in his work *Nho giáo* was synonymous with a re-evaluation of the lineage of transmission to establish a new *Daotong*. In doing so, he relied on the tenets of Yangmingism and non-rationalist philosophy to define his stance. He argued that the dominance of Zhu Xi Studies, with its emphasis on literary formalism and the civil service examinations, had led society toward a state of "superficial prosperity but actual decline", where people "lacked the courage for progress, becoming weak and narrow-minded" (Kim, 1943c: 84). Consequently, Trần Trọng Kim maintained that only Yangmingism, with its core of intuition, could assume the leading role in the continuous lineage of this doctrine.

Regarding the defining characteristics of Yangmingism, Trần Trọng Kim focused on *Zhi Liangzhi* 致知 (Attaining the Utmost Innate Knowledge) and *Zhi Xing He Yi* 知行合一 (The Unity of Knowledge and Action). However, if it had stopped there, the Yangmingism, or Neo-Confucianism in general, that he advocated would not have offered anything remarkably new compared to contemporary writings. As the German philosopher G.F.W. Hegel once wrote, philosophy is "its own time apprehended in thoughts" (Hegel, 2010: 84). On a regional level, the social contexts of Asian nations catalyzed an "Asian Awakening" among the Confucian scholarly class. The encounter between East and West gave birth to a new movement: Modern Neo-Confucianism. While there are various interpretations of this term, the most common approach to Modern Neo-Confucianism is the recognition that Confucianism can transform and integrate with Western values. In Vietnam, the later generation of Confucian scholars, having absorbed these social shifts, became distinctly different from their predecessors. They admired figures such as Rousseau and Montesquieu and adopted new writing styles, making their "prose begin to reflect the clarity and lucidity of Western literature" (Thanh & Chan, 1996: 16).

In the case of Trần Trọng Kim, his career was deeply intertwined with French scholarship. Thus, he actively applied French philosophical perspectives, especially in *Nho giáo*. If intuition were treated purely from an Eastern standpoint, it might remain shrouded in mysticism and unpredictability. For this reason, Trần Trọng Kim restructured the inner meaning of this concept by integrating it with Henri Bergson's views on intuition. Specifically, a recurring theme in *Nho giáo* is the proposition: *Liangzhi is Intuition*. He noted, "the more closely we examine Henri Bergson's philosophy, the more clearly we perceive the sublime aspects of Confucianism" (Kim, 1943a: 36). Trần Trọng Kim believed that humans possess an inherent lucidity to understand all things, referred to by various names such as Illustrious Virtue 明德, Conscience 良知, or Intuition 直覺. All these terms point to "a highly acute perceptive faculty capable of immediately attaining the spirit and truth of all things" (Kim, 1943a: 107).

Liangzhi is a concept originated by Mencius, referring to that which is known without the need for thought 所慮者其也. Meanwhile, Henri Bergson's intuition is defined as "a spiritual empathy by which one is transported into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what is unique and consequently inexpressible within it" (Bergson, 1912: 7). According to

Nho giáo, *Liangzhi* is both a cognitive faculty of knowing without reflection, similar to Bergson's intuition, and an ontological concept referring to the unity of all things. Trần Trọng Kim sought to unify the epistemological and ontological dimensions of this concept to diminish the mystical nature of purely Eastern intuition.

In *Nho giáo*, Trần Trọng Kim delved deeper into the “Liangzhi-Intuition” connection through his study of Yangmingism. Regarding metaphysics, he observed a certain compatibility between Yangmingism and Taoism. He noted: “The Way belongs to the metaphysical realm; we can know it through our self-luminous spiritual perception, for it cannot be seen by the eyes nor heard by the ears” (Kim, 1943c: 72). The phrase “self-luminous spiritual perception”, which in Wang Yangming's original text refers to the extension of Conscience [致知], was identified by Trần Trọng Kim as intuition. According to him, a Sage only needs to “understand the true nature of the extension of Liangzhi, and nothing more” (Kim, 1943c: 104). The essence of *Zhi Liangzhi* is not stagnant in mere knowledge. Thus, it should neither be constrained by literalism nor entirely detached from the written word.

Trần Trọng Kim's meticulous restructuring of Neo-Confucianism was driven by his intention to establish a new *Daotong*. Historically, Hồ Quý Ly (1336–1407) also offered deliberations regarding the orthodoxy of the Confucian-Mencian Way². However, in terms of content, Trần Trọng Kim's perspectives exhibited a more scientific character compared to the thoughts of the Hồ monarch. By observing the modernization of pre-Meiji Japan, Trần Trọng Kim recognized the true potential of Yangmingism. Consequently, he exerted great effort to introduce this orientation to Vietnam, hoping for a positive transformation for the nation.

In addition to his foundational treatise *Nho giáo*, the monograph *Vương Dương Minh* is imbued with a similarly transformative intellectual spirit. Alongside the scholarly contributions of Phan Văn Hùm and Đào Trinh Nhất, these works marked a turning point in early 20th-century Vietnamese Confucian studies. These works functioned as a bridge, enabling Vietnamese intellectuals to re-envision their heritage through the lens of modernity. This process allowed them to identify the intrinsic values of Confucianism that were adaptable to a new context, while simultaneously “transforming” Confucian studies from a dogmatic, archaic system into a modern academic orientation. Furthermore, it can be argued that this shift laid the

¹ Original Chinese text: 「良知者《孟子》所謂是非之心人皆有之者也。是非之心不待慮而知，不待學而能，是故謂之良知。是乃天命之性，吾心之本體，自然靈昭明覺者也。」. Translation: “Conscience is what Mencius referred to as the ‘heart of right and wrong,’ which is possessed by all human beings. This heart of right and wrong knows without the need for deliberation and acts without the need for learning; therefore, it is called Conscience. This is the nature endowed by Heaven, the original substance of our mind, which is naturally luminous, spiritual, and self-aware” (Wang Yangming 王陽明, 1935: 674).

² Cf. *Minh Đạo* by Hồ Quý Ly. Although the complete text has been lost, its primary tenets are recorded in the *Dại Việt Sử ký toàn thư* [Complete Annals of Dai Viet], “The Annals of the Trần Dynasty” (Emperor Thuận Tông) (Huu, Tien, & Lien, 1967: 22a-22b).

groundwork for Confucian research conducted from comparative and intercultural perspectives.

4. Confucianism from the Perspective of Historical Materialism

Trần Trọng Kim's branching out in his study of Confucianism also manifested as a "purely rational" argument to defend the doctrine. According to him, the failure lay not within Confucianism itself, but rather in the "error of the Confucian scholars who failed to strictly follow Confucius's principles, specifically, the need to adapt to the times in accordance with natural laws, thereby leading to the wretched results seen today" (Kim, 1943a: 51). This idea of Trần Trọng Kim's met with fierce opposition from Marxist scholars, most notably Trần Văn Giàu and Đào Duy Anh. This encounter marked a new transition, showing that Confucianism had begun to be interpreted through the lens of historical materialism.

"In general, Trần Văn Giàu focused his attacks on the opportunistic and reformist nature of Confucian thought. His attitude reflected an uncompromising condemnation of Confucianism. In *Vietnam du Confucianisme au Communisme: Un essai d'itinéraire intellectuel*, Trịnh Văn Thao explained this as an invariant theme of Marxist philosophical critique, which "seeks to evaluate the nation's cultural and intellectual life through the dual lens of scientism and religious criticism" (Thao, 1991: 270).

Trần Văn Giàu's evaluations were clearly rooted in class stance—that is, a trend of criticizing Confucianism from a political science perspective. In this section, we aim to further clarify the Marxist philosophical approaches to Confucianism in Vietnam during the first half of the 20th century. To this end, Đào Duy Anh's *Khổng giáo phê bình tiểu luận* (*A Critical Essay on Confucianism*, 1939) serves as the most viable point of reference.

Đào Duy Anh's book stands as one of the preeminent studies of Confucianism through the lens of Marxist philosophy. This work emerged in a context where Confucianism was, on one hand, being vigorously defended by scholars such as Phạm Quỳnh, Nguyễn Hữu Tiến, Phan Bội Châu, and Trần Trọng Kim; and on the other, facing powerful attacks from radical scholars like Phan Khôi and Phan Châu Trinh. Đào Duy Anh argued that both orientations were biased because they "failed to research Confucius's life and the nature of Confucianism in accordance with historical circumstances" (Anh, 1939: 16).

Đào Duy Anh employed a method we term "de-sacralization of the Sage" to establish the primacy of the historical context over a philosopher's scholarship, in this case, Confucius. From a Marxist perspective, Đào Duy Anh argued that Confucius's era marked a transition from a natural economy to a commercial economy: "When the foundations of the feudal economy fluctuated, all the cultural and material institutions built upon that foundation, along with the social psychology and consciousness determined by that economy and system, had to transform

accordingly" (Anh, 1939: 37). This was the basis for the emergence of the "Hundred Schools of Thought". The rise of a new landlord class threatened the power of the Zhou aristocracy. It was economic backing that allowed this aristocratic class to ascend to a dominant position under the designation of *Shi* (scholars/literati): "Confucius was the philosopher representing the ideology of the new landlord class and the military-scholarly elite" (Anh, 1939: 42).

Đào Duy Anh's argument was established on the basis that Confucius had resolved the contradiction between his aristocratic origins and the scholarly-military elite orientation he advocated. The outcome of this conflict was a strategy of 'adapting to the times' and initiating reforms to seize political power. However, given the turbulent state of China's economic infrastructure, Confucius's flexibility could not conceal the conservative tendencies within his doctrine, a point Đào Duy Anh emphasized through Confucius's views on the "rectification of names" and the centralization of power. By portraying the "true face" of Confucius in a raw light through socio-economic perspectives, Đào Duy Anh demonstrated that in a class-based society, whether a person is a sage or a commoner, "no one can act or think outside the confines of their era and class" (Anh, 1939: 39).

Establishing the true face of Confucius meant establishing the very origins of Confucianism's development. Explaining the survival of Confucianism for over two millennia, Đào Duy Anh argued that Confucius represented a new class: the feudal landlords. The protracted existence of Confucianism was due to: (i) the fact that the feudal system had not yet collapsed; (ii) the lack of industrial development and a persistent focus on physiocracy (honoring agriculture); and (iii) the resulting social stagnation, evidenced by the conservative socio-political views of Han and Song Confucianism.

Đào Duy Anh's central thesis was that an intellectual system representing a ruling class would remain dominant until new economic foundations emerged to threaten the old class's power. This was proven true in Vietnam, as the Nguyễn Dynasty faced a crisis of authority under French artillery fire. This shock "exposed all the weaknesses of Confucian society and all the malpractices of Confucianism" (Anh, 1939: 131). Nevertheless, the fading of Confucianism in the 20th century did not imply that its intellectual values had lost their utility. On the contrary, studying it with a scientific spirit, rather than treating it as "golden rule and jade law", is essential to prevent Vietnamese people from feeling "like strangers passing through their own homeland" (Anh, 1939: 152).

5. Assessment and Conclusion

Reflecting on the landscape of Vietnamese Confucian scholarship in the first half of the 20th century, the transformation process can be likened to moving the statue of Confucius from

the pedestal of political authority onto the “dissection table” of Western academic inquiry. This process of “de-sacralization” unfolded through three dominant orientations.

First was the apologetic orientation, epitomized by the *Nam Phong* circle and Phan Bội Châu. These scholars endeavored to wipe away the dust of time so that the Confucian-Mencian image could retain its solemnity of the *Daotong*, viewing it as a spiritual anchor in an era where Confucianism had lost its political standing.

Second was the reformist orientation influenced by Yangmingism, most notably represented by Trần Trọng Kim. He sought to synthesize Confucian tradition with Western philosophy, thereby opening prospects for a modernized Confucianism capable of adapting to the characteristics of the contemporary era.

Third was the critical orientation based on the stance of historical materialism, represented by Đào Duy Anh and Trần Văn Giàu. This trend aimed to deconstruct the authority of Confucianism, clearly delineating its historical limitations while placing it under the light of historical science rather than mere scriptural veneration.

The convergence and dialogue among these three orientations demonstrate a fundamental shift: Vietnamese Confucianism transitioned from an official state ideology to an object of academic research. This process not only reflects the crisis and restructuring of traditional thought amidst the East-West encounter but also showcases the dynamism of the Vietnamese intelligentsia when confronting epochal changes. Compared to China or Japan, where Confucianism was either undergoing radical revival or total rejection, the coexistence of these diverse trends in early 20th-century Vietnam created a unique profile: a conscious effort to preserve cultural roots, an openness to foreign elements, and a bold critical spirit aimed at a new horizon of knowledge.

Adopting the ethos of “nurturing the past to understand the present”, this inquiry into early 20th-century Vietnamese Confucianism does not aim to resurrect an ideology that has fulfilled its historical mandate. Instead, it serves to identify the enduring philosophical and cultural values of the doctrine. Rediscovering the richness of Confucian studies during this period contributes significantly to the history of Vietnamese philosophical thought and offers insights into approaching traditional heritage from a vision that engages in a meaningful dialogue with modernity.

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