

**THE DUAL NATURE OF COLONIAL HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM:
POLICY, INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE, AND SOCIAL IMPACT (1858-1945)**

**A NATUREZA DUAL DO ENSINO SUPERIOR COLONIAL NO VIETNÃ: POLÍTICA,
ESTRUTURA INSTITUCIONAL E IMPACTO SOCIAL (1858-1945)**

**LA NATURALEZA DUAL DE LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR COLONIAL EN
VIETNAM: POLÍTICA, ESTRUCTURA INSTITUCIONAL E IMPACTO SOCIAL (1858-
1945)**



Tham THI HOANG¹
e-mail: hoangtham@tmu.edu.vn



Phuong THI HONG VU²
e-mail: phuong.vth@tmu.edu.vn



Quyen HONG DO³
e-mail: quyendo@tmu.edu.vn

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¹ Thuongmai University, Hanoi, Vietnam. Professor, Doctorate, Lecturer of the Faculty of Political Theory.

² Thuongmai University, Hanoi, Vietnam. Lecturer of the Faculty of Economics.

³ Thuongmai University, Hanoi, Vietnam. Head of the Department of Legal Affairs and Inspection.

ABSTRACT: This study analyzes the formation and socio-political impact of the professional and higher education system in Vietnam during the French colonial period (1858–1945). It investigates how a system designed for colonial governance unintentionally fostered a modern indigenous intelligentsia. Employing an interdisciplinary approach, the research combines historical-logical methods with a systematic analysis of primary sources, including the 1917 *Code de l'Instruction Publique* and colonial administrative decrees. Findings reveal a stark institutional duality: while “horizontal” policies aimed to limit elite growth, the functional need for administrative staff necessitated specialized colleges in medicine, law, and pedagogy. Despite strict quotas and indoctrination, this system produced a Western-educated social stratum that transcended colonial constraints. These intellectuals played a pivotal role in the 1945 August Revolution and the subsequent leadership of independent Vietnam. The study concludes that colonial higher education served as a transformative institutional synthesis, bridging traditional Confucianism and modern global education frameworks.

KEYWORDS: Colonial education. Higher education. Vietnam. French Indochina. Intelligentsia. Educational policy.

RESUMO: Este estudo analisa a formação e o impacto sociopolítico do sistema de educação profissional e superior no Vietnã durante o período colonial francês (1858–1945). Investiga como um sistema concebido para a governança colonial acabou, de forma não intencional, promovendo a formação de uma intelligentsia indígena moderna. Utilizando uma abordagem interdisciplinar, a pesquisa combina métodos histórico-lógicos com a análise sistemática de fontes primárias, incluindo o Código de Instrução Pública de 1917 (*Code de l'Instruction Publique*) e decretos administrativos coloniais. Os resultados revelam uma acentuada dualidade institucional: enquanto políticas “horizontais” buscavam limitar o crescimento das elites, a necessidade funcional de pessoal administrativo exigia a criação de instituições especializadas nas áreas de medicina, direito e pedagogia. Apesar de cotas rigorosas e da doutrinação, esse sistema produziu um estrato social com educação ocidental que transcendeu as limitações coloniais. Esses intelectuais desempenharam um papel fundamental na Revolução de Agosto de 1945 e na posterior liderança do Vietnã independente. O estudo conclui que o ensino superior colonial atuou como uma síntese institucional transformadora, articulando o confucionismo tradicional com os modelos globais modernos de educação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Educação colonial. Ensino superior. Vietnã. Indochina Francesa. Intelligentsia. Política educacional.

RESUMEN Este estudio analiza la formación y el impacto sociopolítico del sistema de educación profesional y superior en Vietnam durante el período colonial francés (1858–1945). Investiga cómo un sistema diseñado para la gobernanza colonial terminó, de manera no intencional, fomentando la formación de una intelligentsia indígena moderna. Utilizando un enfoque interdisciplinario, la investigación combina métodos histórico-lógicos con el análisis sistemático de fuentes primarias, incluyendo el Código de Instrucción Pública de 1917 (*Code de l'Instruction Publique*) y decretos administrativos coloniales. Los resultados revelan una marcada dualidad institucional: mientras las políticas “horizontales” buscaban limitar el crecimiento de las élites, la necesidad funcional de personal administrativo requería la creación de instituciones especializadas en medicina, derecho y pedagogía. A pesar de cuotas estrictas y de la indoctrinación, este sistema produjo un estrato social con educación occidental que trascendió las limitaciones coloniales. Estos intelectuales desempeñaron un papel clave en

la Revolución de Agosto de 1945 y en el posterior liderazgo de Vietnam independiente. El estudio concluye que la educación superior colonial actuó como una síntesis institucional transformadora, articulando el confucianismo tradicional con los marcos globales modernos de educación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Educación colonial. Educación superior. Vietnam. Indochina francesa. Intelligentsia. Política educativa.

INTRODUCTION

Education functioned as more than just a medium for knowledge dissemination but a strategic component in shaping the political and social order within colonial territories. In Vietnam, under the impact of the first and second colonial exploitations, the French authorities implemented profound educational reforms aimed at gradually replacing the Confucian examination system with the Franco-Vietnamese educational model. In this process, professional vocational schools and higher education played a pivotal role in cultivating a new indigenous intelligentsia—a “middle class” intended to serve the French administrative and technical apparatus in Indochina.

The issue of colonial education has attracted significant attention from both international and domestic scholars, offering diverse perspectives. Kelly (2000), in her studies of colonial pedagogy, asserted that the French did not intend to create an egalitarian educational system but rather designed it as a tool for ideological control and maintaining colonial dependence on the metropole. From an institutional standpoint, Trịnh (1995) analyzed the structure of French schools in Indochina, emphasizing their role in forming a new elite that acted as both a product of and a potential counterweight to the protectorate regime. More recently, Nguyễn, (2020) clarified the transition from the “civilizing mission” (*mission civilisatrice*) to the establishment of sustainable cultural institutions, demonstrating that education was an inseparable part of soft power strategies.

Despite the solid foundation laid by previous scholarship, a significant research gap remains: existing studies often focus on primary education or reform movements, while the systematic linkage between professional vocational education and higher education as a specialized “human resource supply chain” for the colonial economic and administrative machinery has not been deeply analyzed. This article aims to bridge that gap by systematizing the formation of colleges and universities not just as individual training units, but as a strategic institutional network reflecting shifts in colonial governance logic. The novelty of this research lies in clarifying the duality of this system: on one hand, it served as an instrument of French domination; on the other, it unintentionally laid the first bricks for the modern higher education foundation in Vietnam, thereby providing a more objective and comprehensive view of this colonial educational legacy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interdisciplinary framework, merging the analytical lenses of Historical Studies and the Sociology of Education. To achieve its objectives, the following specific methods are utilized:

- **Historical and Logical Methods:** To highlight the alignment between the political ambitions and the educational execution of the protectorate, these methods are used to reconstruct the chronological evolution of pivotal educational decrees—most notably the 1917 *Code de l'Instruction Publique* promulgated by Albert Sarraut.
- **Documentary Analysis:** Serving as the cornerstone of this research, this method involves the rigorous exploration and cross-referencing of primary sources. These include annual reports from the Governors-General of Indochina and legal regulatory frameworks housed in national archives, which are then analyzed alongside contemporary scholarly works to maintain a multi-dimensional and objective perspective.
- **Systems Approach:** Rather than treating colleges and universities as isolated entities, a systems approach is employed to view the professional and higher education landscape as a cohesive whole. This perspective allows for a clearer understanding of how these institutions were intricately linked to the specific labor demands of the era's public works, law, healthcare, and administrative sectors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Colonialism and Colonial Education

The French conquest of Vietnam coincided with the second wave of French colonial expansion (1830–1870), marked by Louis Philippe's occupation of Algeria (1830) and Napoleon III's subsequent annexation of Cochinchina—seizing three eastern provinces in 1862 and three western provinces in 1867—before gradually encroaching upon Tonkin (1873–1882). While the French had garnered administrative experience in other territories, it was not until the late 19th century, under the Third Republic, that colonial policies and their accompanying educational frameworks were meticulously constructed for Indochina. Driven by the necessity to exploit markets and bolster France's economic competitiveness within Europe, Jules Ferry emerged as a fervent advocate for colonial expansion. As the architect of the Third Republic's new educational system, Ferry aimed to establish a state-managed, centralized model. To him,

education served as a cornerstone to solidify the political institutions of the Third Republic, a sentiment echoed by Bezancon, who noted:

The superiority of the republic rests on the expression of each individual's will, which is nothing more than logic and wisdom. Education is the republic's instrument for creating ordinary citizens; it is the tool for molding citizens to serve the Republic. (Trần, 2011, p. 32–33)

Although Jules Ferry's educational reforms were revolutionary in their pursuit of a secular, universal system, they were criticized for being rigid and overly centralized. As noted by Antoine Léon (1991), an expert on colonial policy, this model represented chauvinistic nationalism and imperialist ideology—an attempt at “cultural genocide” using French culture to assimilate minority populations.

Upon invading Indochina, the French authorities implemented an educational model based on the French metropolitan system but integrated with indigenous elements. Just as the Third Republic prioritized education, the colonial administration viewed it as a focal point of their governance. Consequently, French educational objectives in the colonies, including Indochina, were centered on several key pillars:

- First, the “moral conquest of the indigenous population”: As detailed in the reports of Georges Hardy (1917), Education Inspector for French West Africa, education was the premier tool for transforming “primitive” populations. Hardy argued that there was no better way to ensure loyalty than by educating indigenous children, instilling French diligence, knowledge, and centuries-old moral customs to mold their spirit according to colonial intentions.
- Second, “social preservation and racial association”: French education had to align with the traditional social structures of the colony. Hardy distinguished three social groups—aristocracy, urban dwellers, and rural peasants—corresponding to three types of schools. While schools theoretically accepted all classes, they had to “respect social differentiation”, teaching embroidery to the wealthy and weaving to the poor. Crucially, education also aimed to “train a middle, industrial class”—active participants in the colony's material enrichment who would serve as a loyal pro-French elite and a foothold for deeper societal penetration.

- Third, the “civilizing mission” (*mission civilisatrice*): This involved introducing Western values into schools as “universal” truths to “civilize” peoples deemed “savage” or “backward”. These values aimed to win over the colonies not just through technical knowledge but through moral alignment. However, to mask the exploitative nature of colonialism, authorities often had to account for local Sino-Vietnamese values and Confucian ethics, such as family piety. The inherent contradiction of the “civilizing mission” was laid bare by scholars like Antoine Léon, who noted that terms like “civilization” and “colonization” were often used interchangeably.
- Fourth, a “protected, closed world”: This aspect of the civilizing mission sought to align policy objectives with educational practice. Administrators used idealistic language to describe a world where hundreds of thousands of students awaited the “vast store of universal knowledge”—a narrative that stood in stark contrast to the brutal reality of colonial exploitation.
- Fifth, transitioning “from one war to another”: After World War I, two demands emerged: a sense of “fairness” toward loyal colonial subjects who had fought for France, and international pressure toward decolonization. Colonial authorities had to balance “duty” with “interest.” While speaking of responsibility, the primary goal remained protecting imperial economic and political interests. The Director of Asian Affairs at the Ministry of Colonies warned that natives educated in French methods could become “dangerous enemies”. This tension was inherent in Albert Sarraut’s (1917) *Code de l’Instruction Publique*, which framed schooling in Indochina as both an obligation and a gesture of gratitude for Indochinese contributions during the war.
- Sixth, “the Church and colonial domination”: This reflects the intricate relationship between the Church, civil administration, and military force. Despite the formal separation of secular and Catholic schools, the history of colonialism was deeply intertwined with Christianity. Missions often preceded state education, and the Church continued to penetrate colonial societies with the backing of the administration.

These educational objectives evolved through the stages of conquest, administrative consolidation, and economic exploitation in Indochina. Franco-Vietnamese education was thus an inseparable part of French rule; however, it was also absorbed and adapted by the Vietnamese people—a society with a long-standing cultural heritage—moving beyond the total control of the colonizers. Therefore, the development of professional and higher education must be

examined both within the framework of colonial policy and through the lens of the “Annamese” response and adaptation to these institutions.

French Educational Policy in Vietnam

Parallel to the consolidation of power and colonial exploitation, education was wielded as a potent instrument by the colonial administration. To facilitate governance, the French implemented a dualistic educational policy: first, the dissemination of French culture and language to train a cadre of indigenous mandarins and civil servants to serve as colonial intermediaries; and second, the systematic restriction of popular enlightenment through a policy of “obscurantism”. This was essentially an “horizontal” rather than “vertical” educational strategy—prioritizing basic, widespread literacy over high-level intellectual development for the masses.

From the earliest days of occupying the three eastern provinces of Cochinchina (1862), *Admiral Bonard* advocated for a new educational model, viewing it as the primary requirement for the region's future. The objective was to immerse the indigenous population in the French language and lifestyle, ultimately cultivating a loyal workforce for the new regime. Bonard stated that teaching French language and customs to Annamese youth was necessary to produce competent employees and to reward families who demonstrated devotion to France. Consequently, following the occupation, the French moved to abolish the Confucian educational system—starting in the East in 1861 and the West in 1867. Chinese characters survived only in private domestic settings under traditional tutors, gradually replaced by “Western learning.”

On March 31, 1863, Governor Bonard signed a decree reorganizing the educational system in Saigon and its environs. The first two schools—one for boys and one for girls—were established primarily for the children of officials serving the new administration.

While focusing on vocational training for the colonial apparatus, the French strictly limited higher education for the indigenous population. Initially, only schools up to the secondary level were established within the colonies. Colleges and universities were non-existent, and indigenous students seeking higher degrees abroad were barred unless they had obtained French citizenship. Governor-General Merlin famously remarked: “*We should not expand vertical education here; it is better to focus on the horizontal*”. This reflected a profound fear that students studying abroad would encounter progressive civilizations and return to challenge colonial rule. Governor-General Albert Sarraut later admitted the danger of allowing the indigenous elite to be educated outside French jurisdiction, where they might be exposed to

different political spirits and return to use their skills against the “protectorate” that had denied them an education.

Faced with these restrictions, many progressive Vietnamese intellectuals sought to study abroad clandestinely. Fearing that returning youths from Japan, China, or the West would jeopardize their dominance, the French were eventually forced to open a limited number of higher education institutions within Indochina. Sarraut noted that revolutionaries in Hong Kong or Japan often justified their exodus by claiming the colonialists only provided “a low, mediocre education”. Thus, he opened *Lycées* and colleges to deprive them of this argument and prevent them from learning “lessons of rebellion” elsewhere (Nguyễn, 2011, p. 205). However, enrollment remained abysmally low; for instance, the Veterinary College, established in 1917, had only 27 students by 1943—merely 5 of whom were in their third year.

This deceptive policy of “obscurantism” was famously denounced by Nguyen Ai Quoc in *French Colonialism on Trial*. He provided staggering statistics: by 1924, in a population of 19 million, there were only 2,965 schools of all levels serving 148,000 students—meaning only 7 out of every 1,000 people had access to education. He observed that while the people begged for schools, thousands of children remained illiterate due to a severe, calculated shortage of educational facilities.

In summary, the primary goal of French education in Vietnam was to eradicate the Confucian system—which the French viewed as a breeding ground for “loyalist” (*trung quan, ai quoc*) sentiments and anti-French resistance—and replace it with a controlled vocational network. This system aimed to produce a necessary number of low and mid-level employees for the administrative and exploitative machinery (as high-level positions were strictly reserved for the French), while using education to mold a pro-French psychology and mitigate demands for genuine reform. By emphasizing “horizontal” expansion over “vertical” depth, the French effectively maintained a policy of educational containment.

Professional Colleges, Universities, and the “General Statute” of Higher Education

Professional Colleges and Universities during the Colonial Period

Due to a governance policy prioritizing “horizontal” over “vertical” education, the French administration initially refrained from establishing higher education institutions. It was not until 1917, driven by the acute need for high-level specialists to staff the administrative apparatus and technical sectors, that a Decree was promulgated to establish the first colleges in Indochina. The Franco-Vietnamese higher education system was largely modeled after the

French metropolitan structure, albeit modified to suit the Indochinese context—primarily to facilitate colonial exploitation. This highest level of the educational hierarchy consisted of two distinct types: Professional Colleges (*Écoles Supérieures*) and Universities.

Professional Colleges were specialized institutions where admission required specific diplomas and a competitive entrance examination. Successful candidates received full scholarships for the duration of their studies. In return, graduates were mandated to serve the colonial government in their respective fields for a fixed period; otherwise, they were theoretically required to reimburse their scholarship funds. These colleges aimed to train specialists—doctors, engineers, civil servants, and professors—under a rigorous and disciplined curriculum.

The University level was a cornerstone of the French educational reforms designed to sustain imperial power. On July 8, 1917, the Governor-General established the *Direction de l'Enseignement Supérieur* (Department of Higher Education), tasked with organizing and implementing curricula for both European and indigenous students. The University of Indochina (*Université Indochinoise*) was subsequently formed through the integration of several specialized schools: Medicine and Pharmacy, Veterinary Medicine, the Polytechnic bloc (Public Works, Chemistry, Industrial Electricity, Mining, Physical and Natural Sciences), Agriculture and Forestry, Commerce, Maritime and Fisheries, Law and Administration, and Pedagogy.

Unlike professional colleges, university enrollment was open to any student possessing the required diploma without a competitive entrance exam, with no age or quota restrictions. The curriculum focused on providing a solid foundation of specialized knowledge without being strictly confined to a singular professional path. Students were generally self-funded, and the government held no obligation to provide employment upon graduation.

In practice, the University of Indochina functioned as a conglomerate of Professional Colleges. Before 1945, the system included the following key institutions:

- The School of Veterinary Medicine: Formed on September 5, 1917, to train veterinary assistants and practitioners. Initially requiring a primary certificate, it evolved to require a Baccalaureate by 1941, granting the degree of Doctor of Veterinary Medicine under the supervision of the Inspectorate of Agriculture and Livestock.
- The School of Medicine and Pharmacy: Founded in 1902 under the directorship of Dr. Alexandre Yersin. Initially training medical assistants, it was elevated to a college in

1923. By 1930, it became a faculty of the University of Indochina, officially recognized as a branch of the Faculty of Medicine in Paris. The first domestic doctoral graduates emerged in 1935.

- The School of Pedagogy: Established on October 15, 1917, to train teachers for primary and lower secondary schools. It offered two main branches: Literature (humanities, history, philosophy) and Science (mathematics, physics, biology).
- The School of Law and Administration: Originating from the merger of the Schools of Administration in Hue and Hanoi. It evolved into the Indochinese Institute of Higher Learning in 1924, and finally the Faculty of Law in 1941, focusing on political science, law, and philosophy.
- The College of Agriculture and Forestry: Established in 1918, it focused on vocational training until 1938, when it was upgraded to train Agricultural and Forestry Engineers.
- The School of Public Works: Founded in 1902 to train technical staff for the departments of public works and surveying. In 1944, it was upgraded to a professional college for engineers.
- The School of Commerce: Established in 1920 with a two-year curriculum, later expanded to three years with a focus on domestic and foreign trade, eventually becoming the College of Commerce in 1928.
- The College of Fine Arts: Founded on October 27, 1924. Initially a three-year program, it was later extended to five years and split into Fine Arts and Applied Arts in 1942.
- The College of Sciences: Established in 1940 in Hanoi to train high-level specialists and researchers in natural sciences.

In addition to these higher education institutions, the French also established various vocational and technical schools in major hubs such as Saigon, Hai Phong, and Nam Dinh to meet lower-level technical demands.

General Statutes of Higher Education in Indochina

To standardize the organization and management of these institutions, the Governor-General of Indochina issued a Decree on December 25, 1918, promulgating the “General Statutes of Higher Education in Indochina”.

Under these statutes, the oversight of higher education was vested in a Director, appointed by the Governor-General. The Director was required to hold a French Doctorate and

possess a minimum of 15 years of experience in the educational sector. Each individual college was led by a Principal, appointed by the Governor-General upon the recommendation of the Director of Higher Education. Requirements for the principalship included a French Bachelor's degree and at least 10 years of professional experience in education or public administration.

Admission criteria for regular students required a secondary school certificate or a Baccalaureate, with an age limit between 18 and 25. Successful candidates through the competitive entrance exam were entitled to a state scholarship, supplemented by an allowance of 20 Indochinese piasters. In exchange, graduates were contractually obligated to serve the Government of Indochina for at least 10 years; failure to do so required the full reimbursement of tuition and scholarship funds. Additionally, higher education students were exempt from poll taxes, military service, and *corvée* labor. During summer and lunar new year holidays, they were granted free railway transportation to return to their hometowns.

Beyond regular students, the colleges also permitted the enrollment of “auditor” students. These individuals were not required to pass an entrance exam and did not receive scholarships, yet they could earn the same degree as regular students upon completing the prescribed curriculum and passing the final graduation examination. For these students, the maximum age limit was extended to 30 (except for the Schools of Medicine, Pharmacy, and Veterinary Medicine). Graduation diplomas were formally signed by the Governor-General and the Director of Higher Education, while the School Principals were only authorized to provide a countersignature

In conclusion, the “horizontal” educational strategy—driven by a policy of obscurantism to facilitate colonial control—resulted in a severely restricted landscape of professional and higher education throughout more than 80 years of French occupation. The establishment of these schools was not born of a desire for indigenous enlightenment, but rather out of the functional necessity for qualified cadres and specialists to operate the colonial administrative machine. Furthermore, it served as a reactive concession to the persistent demands of the Vietnamese people, who pressured the authorities to provide local education so that their children would not have to seek knowledge abroad.

The scarcity of primary and secondary schools was exacerbated at the higher education level, both in the number of institutions and student enrollment. Statistics reveal that even in 1942—the year with the highest recorded enrollment—the total number of students across the entire Indochinese Federation was a mere 1,085. Within this figure, approximately 200 were French nationals who remained in the colony due to the disruptions of World War II.

Consequently, the indigenous student population per institution averaged only a few dozen individuals. This quantitative reality underscores the exclusionary nature of the colonial academic elite, proving that higher education remained a narrow gate, strictly guarded by the protectorate's political and economic interests.

Critical Observations and Key Characteristics

Characteristics of Colonial Higher Education

The higher education system established by the French in Vietnam was essentially a distorted mimicry of the French metropolitan system. While it adopted the French framework, the colonial administration selectively “trimmed” and altered it to suit imperial objectives. This was particularly evident prior to 1920; thereafter, as the quality was incrementally raised, it aligned more closely with French standards. This mimicry was a logical necessity, as the colonial government lacked the capacity—or the desire—to innovate a distinct indigenous model.

The system was characterized by its minuscule scale. Beyond several short-lived institutions that closed within a year (such as the School of Applied Sciences, 1923–1924) or existed merely on paper (such as the *Génie Civil* school proposed in the 1906 Beau Decree), the so-called University of Indochina at its zenith (1940–1945) comprised only seven schools: Medicine-Pharmacy, Law, Sciences, Fine Arts, Agriculture-Forestry, Veterinary Medicine, and Public Works. These institutions, all located in Hanoi to serve the entire Indochinese Federation, never exceeded a total enrollment of 1,000 students. Notably, social sciences and humanities were severely neglected, represented only by the Faculty of Law and the Literature department within the School of Pedagogy—both of which focused almost exclusively on French jurisprudence and literature. There were no faculties dedicated to heavy or light industry.

Crucially, the “University of Indochina” was a collective nomenclature for a cluster of independent colleges rather than a cohesive organizational entity like the *Universités* in France. Initially (1906–1918), this name was a demagogic political tactic that failed to deceive the public. Until 1945, these schools remained under the fragmented management of various General Directorates (*Direction Générale*) or Inspectorates (*Inspection Générale*). It was only between 1947 and 1955 that the “French-Vietnamese University” emerged as a unified organizational entity comparable to global university standards.

In terms of quality, while these institutions lacked the faculty expertise and infrastructure of their metropolitan counterparts, the quality of the student body was

comparable. Vietnamese students were subjected to rigorous entrance examinations and stringent “weeding out” processes, fostering a culture of intense academic diligence (colloquially known as rote-learning to excel).

Regarding pedagogical methods, the reality often fell short of the modern standards demanded by the administration. Despite requirements for meticulous lesson planning and modern instructional techniques, many instructors remained confused or perfunctory in their execution. Pham Van Thu, a contemporary educator, recounted that while inspectors might be satisfied with the beautiful “labels” of well-prepared lesson plans, the actual classroom delivery was often hollow, failing to ensure student comprehension. The methods of “rote memorization” and “teacher dictates, student transcribes” remained prevalent. Nguyen Van Ngoc, a school inspector in 1934, sharply criticized this mechanical approach, describing teachers as “broadcasting machines” and students as “typewriters” who mindlessly transcribed long, tedious lectures without critical engagement.

The faculty body was predominantly French and notably small. Very few held advanced doctorates; most instructors at the College of Sciences held the *Agrégé* (the highest French competitive degree for secondary teaching, distinct from the modern Master’s degree). While a small minority engaged in scientific research—primarily in taxonomic surveys of flora, fauna, soil, and medicine—indigenous involvement was minimal. Between 1940 and 1945, Dr. Ho Dac Di was the sole Vietnamese individual recognized with a status equivalent to an “Associate Professor”.

The establishment of the Franco-Vietnamese educational system to replace the Confucian model represented a monumental, albeit contradictory, reform in Vietnamese history. It was a “dual-natured” system: simultaneously progressive and reactionary.

- **Progressive Aspect:** It introduced modern scientific knowledge, technology, and—indirectly—the bourgeois democratic ideals prevalent in France. Even if unintentional on the part of the colonizers, these ideas permeated Vietnamese society, providing a significant leap forward from stagnant feudal ideologies.
- **Reactionary Aspect:** The system was fundamentally designed as an instrument of enslavement and exploitation, aimed at maintaining colonial hegemony over Vietnam.

Ultimately, this educational shift dismantled an obsolete system but replaced it with a narrow, guarded gateway to knowledge, the legacy of which would continue to influence the intellectual and political landscape of modern Vietnam.

The Impact of Higher Education Development on the French Protectorate and Vietnam

For the French Protectorate: As a colonial instrument designed to serve imperial political and economic agendas, the French educational system largely achieved its primary objectives. The dismantling of the traditional Confucian examination system and the cultivation of a functional workforce for the colonial administrative and exploitative apparatus were successfully realized. However, the ideological and political aims—such as fostering absolute loyalty to the protectorate—met with only limited success. These efforts lacked depth and structural stability, failing to create a long-term, unwavering pro-colonial consensus among the educated elite.

For Vietnam: The impact of French education on Vietnamese society was direct, comprehensive, and profoundly contradictory, representing a complete imposition of a new educational model from its inception to its systemic consolidation.

- **Positive Impacts:** Despite its colonial nature, the system introduced transformative changes. Most notably, it officially integrated Vietnamese women into formal education, granting them recognition alongside men—a monumental leap in social perception and a cornerstone of early modernization. Furthermore, the Franco-Vietnamese higher education model shifted the focus toward pragmatism and vocationalism. Education was no longer merely a path to mandarinship but a gateway to diverse modern professions, including technical engineering, commerce, medicine, and law. As a primary institution for training a new type of Vietnamese intelligentsia, these colleges reshaped the social structure. By 1945, approximately 400,000 individuals held Franco-Vietnamese degrees, forming a new intellectual stratum. This class spanned various professions, from educators and lawyers to doctors and veterinarians. By 1939, graduates from the University of Indochina's schools of Law and Medicine were recognized as having qualifications equivalent to those in metropolitan France. This modern intelligentsia became a pivotal social force, spearheading changes in social consciousness, economic thinking, and cultural identity. They played a decisive role in the national independence movement, culminating in the 1945 August Revolution. Many alumni of this system,

such as Vo Nguyen Giap, Truong Chinh, and Pham Van Dong, as well as prominent scientists like Ta Quang Buu and Vu Dinh Hoe, became key leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, bridging colonial training with the goal of national liberation and cultural preservation.

- **Negative Impacts:** The system remained under the rigid surveillance of the *Direction de l'Enseignement Supérieur*, with ultimate authority resting with the Governor-General. Heavy political weighting hindered scientific investment tailored specifically for the Vietnamese people. The drive for “Frenchification” and chronic budgetary constraints prevented the development of a distinct national curriculum. Moreover, the pedagogical and administrative methods were often conservative and inflexible, failing to represent an optimal model for modern education. While the system produced an elite intelligentsia, it failed conspicuously in providing mass education. The centralized management, overly burdensome examination culture, and elitist focus resulted in low overall literacy rates, which hindered the broader development of a progressive, civilized society.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the professional and higher education system in colonial Vietnam was a markedly dualistic institution. On one hand, it reflected the colonial government’s ambition to create a local workforce to facilitate governance and economic exploitation. On the other hand, the transition from Confucianism to the Franco-Vietnamese model unintentionally laid the foundation for modern higher education. This transformation was not merely a structural change in schooling but a pivotal cultural and intellectual synthesis that shaped the modern Vietnamese intelligentsia, who would eventually play a critical role in the nation’s historical trajectory.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the author proposes the following:

- For Historical Research: Further exploitation of archival records regarding specific curricula is necessary to clarify the degree of compatibility between colonial education and metropolitan standards of the era.
- For Heritage Preservation: Educational institutions established during this period (such as those now part of Vietnam National University and Hanoi Medical University) should be protected. Conservation policies should link architectural values with the promotion of long-standing academic traditions.
- For Educational Policy: Reviewing the history of this system provides valuable lessons regarding international cooperation in training and the selective absorption of intellectual elites in the context of contemporary educational integration.

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CRedit Author Statement

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