

**EDUCATIONAL THOUGHTS OF FUKUZAWA YUKICHI AND NGUYEN TUONG TO:
PARALLEL VALUES IN EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN 19TH CENTURY
JAPAN AND VIETNAM**

**REFLEXÕES EDUCACIONAIS DE FUKUZAWA YUKICHI E NGUYEN TUONG TO:
VALORES PARALELOS NA REFORMA EDUCACIONAL NO JAPÃO E NO VIETNÃ
DO SÉCULO XIX**

**REFLEXIONES EDUCATIVAS DE FUKUZAWA YUKICHI Y NGUYEN TUONG TO:
VALORES PARALELOS EN LA REFORMA EDUCATIVA DEL SIGLO XIX EN JAPÓN
Y VIETNAM**



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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the similarities and historical significance of the educational ideologies proposed by Fukuzawa Yukichi (Japan) and Nguyen Truong To (Vietnam) amidst the challenges of Westernization in the late 19th century. Utilizing historical and comparative research methods, the study analyzes four core pillars of Fukuzawa's thought: education as the gateway to civilization, the philosophy of "Practical Learning" (*Jitsugaku*), the cultivation of independent character, and the synthesis of "Western science, Eastern ethics". The findings indicate that despite differing political landscapes, Nguyen Truong To's reform proposals in Vietnam mirrored Fukuzawa's spirit of pragmatism and enlightenment. The research underscores the pivotal role of intellectuals in shaping national educational policies and offers enduring lessons for contemporary educational modernization.

KEYWORDS: Fukuzawa Yukichi. Nguyen Truong To. Educational reform. Practical learning. Japan. Vietnam.

RESUMO: Este artigo examina as semelhanças e a importância histórica das ideologias educacionais propostas por Fukuzawa Yukichi (Japão) e Nguyen Truong To (Vietnã) em meio aos desafios da ocidentalização no final do século XIX. Utilizando métodos de pesquisa históricos e comparativos, o estudo analisa quatro pilares centrais do pensamento de Fukuzawa: a educação como porta de entrada para a civilização, a filosofia da "Aprendizagem Prática" (*Jitsugaku*), o cultivo do caráter independente e a síntese entre "ciência ocidental e ética oriental". Os resultados indicam que, apesar dos diferentes contextos políticos, as propostas de reforma de Nguyen Truong To no Vietnã refletiam o espírito de pragmatismo e iluminação de Fukuzawa. A pesquisa ressalta o papel fundamental dos intelectuais na formulação das políticas educacionais nacionais e oferece lições duradouras para a modernização educacional contemporânea.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Fukuzawa Yukichi. Nguyen Truong To. Reforma educacional. Aprendizagem prática. Japão. Vietnã.

RESUMEN: Este artículo examina las similitudes y la importancia histórica de las ideologías educativas propuestas por Fukuzawa Yukichi (Japón) y Nguyen Truong To (Vietnam) en el contexto de los desafíos que planteaba la occidentalización a finales del siglo XIX. Mediante métodos de investigación históricos y comparativos, el estudio analiza cuatro pilares fundamentales del pensamiento de Fukuzawa: la educación como puerta de entrada a la civilización, la filosofía del «aprendizaje práctico» (*Jitsugaku*), el fomento de un carácter independiente y la síntesis de «la ciencia occidental y la ética oriental». Los resultados indican que, a pesar de los diferentes contextos políticos, las propuestas de reforma de Nguyen Truong To en Vietnam reflejaban el espíritu de pragmatismo e ilustración de Fukuzawa. La investigación subraya el papel fundamental de los intelectuales en la configuración de las políticas educativas nacionales y ofrece lecciones perdurables para la modernización educativa contemporánea.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Fukuzawa Yukichi. Nguyen Truong To. Reforma educativa. Aprendizaje práctico. Japón. Vietnam.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 19th century, faced with the expansion of Western colonialism, East Asian nations were under urgent pressure to modernize to safeguard their sovereignty. Within this context, Japan successfully implemented the Meiji Restoration, transforming from a backward feudal state into an industrial power. At the heart of this transformation lay the educational ideology of Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901), who laid the foundation for the philosophy of “Practical Learning” (*Jitsugaku*) and the spirit of national independence through knowledge.

The influence of Fukuzawa Yukichi extended beyond Japan, resonating strongly among regional intellectuals and setting the stage for reform movements in neighboring countries. In Vietnam, Nguyen Truong To (1830–1871) emerged as a pioneering reformer with a vision far ahead of his time. Living in the declining period of the Nguyen Dynasty, Nguyen Truong To early on recognized the superiority of Western education and the necessity of restructuring the training system to revitalize the nation. This article focuses on analyzing the ideological parallels between Fukuzawa Yukichi’s educational thoughts and Nguyen Truong To’s reform proposals, thereby clarifying the role of international ideological appropriation in the development of educational policy in late 19th-century Vietnam.

The documentary basis of the comparison is delimited by a set of primary and interpretive sources. For Fukuzawa Yukichi, the analysis uses *An Encouragement of Learning* (2012) (*Gakumon no Susume*, originally published between 1872 and 1876), together with interpretive studies by Blacker (1964), Craig (2009), and Vĩnh Sinh (2004). For Nguyen Truong To, the analysis is based mainly on the reform manuscripts and petitions compiled in *Di thảo cách tân của Nguyễn Trường Tộ* (1988), and *Nguyễn Trường Tộ: Con người và di thảo*, edited by Truong (1988), complemented by Nguyen Lan’s (1994) study of Nguyen Truong To’s reform proposals, Đại Nam thực lục (2002), Woodside’s (1971) comparative account of the Vietnamese administrative model, and later historical interpretations by Đặng (1992), Chuông (2000), Phan Huy Lê (2012), and Phan Ngọc Liên (2015). These materials constitute the documentary corpus through which the article examines the relation between educational thought, institutional reform, and national modernization in Japan and Vietnam.

The educational reform ideologies of Fukuzawa Yukichi and Nguyen Truong To have long been a subject of significant interest for scholars both domestically and internationally, with existing literature categorized into three primary academic discourses:

Fukuzawa Yukichi and the Japanese Enlightenment: Western scholarship has long sought to explain Japan’s modernization through the intellectual legacy of Fukuzawa Yukichi.

In her seminal study, Carmen Blacker (1964) contends that Fukuzawa's thought should not be reduced to a mere transplantation of Western ideas; rather, it constituted a form of "psychological surgery" that reconfigured the Japanese populace from feudal subjects into modern citizens. Extending this interpretation, Albert M. Craig (2009) identifies Fukuzawa's early epistemological transformation as central to understanding the endogenous dynamics of the Meiji Restoration. Within the Vietnamese scholarly context, Vinh Sinh (2004) provides a systematic and comparative account of Fukuzawa's life and thought, thereby facilitating a more nuanced engagement with the Japanese developmental model.

Nguyen Truong To and Reformist Thought in Vietnam: In Vietnam, foundational studies by Truong Ba Can (1988) and Nguyen Lan (1994) have compiled, translated, and critically examined the extant writings of Nguyen Truong To, positioning him as a key intellectual figure at the cusp of Vietnam's encounter with modernity. From a comparative international perspective, however, Alexander Woodside (1971) offers a more critical assessment by juxtaposing the Vietnamese polity with the Chinese bureaucratic model. His analysis underscores the structural rigidity of the Nguyễn administrative system as a decisive constraint that prevented Nguyen Truong To's reform proposals from being institutionalized.

The Need for a Comparative Analytical Framework: Despite the richness of single-case studies on Fukuzawa Yukichi and Nguyễn Trường Tộ, direct comparative analyses—particularly in relation to educational governance—remain limited. Integrating broader theoretical perspectives, such as the "clash of civilizations" thesis advanced by Samuel P. Huntington (1996) and institutionalist insights from William G. Beasley (1972), enables a more robust explanation of why analogous encounters with Western knowledge generated divergent trajectories in Japan and Vietnam.

Building upon these foundations, this study proposes a comparative analytical framework centered on human capital formation and knowledge governance. Moving beyond a purely historiographical approach, it interrogates the epistemological underpinnings and policy orientations embedded in the reform visions of both figures. In doing so, the article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how knowledge systems interact with institutional structures, while also deriving implications for contemporary educational governance in the context of global integration.

METHODOLOGY

This study is conducted based on the following primary research approaches:

- *Historical Method*: Used to reconstruct the social contexts of Japan and Vietnam in the late 19th century, thereby clarifying the urgency of educational reform proposals during this period;
- *Comparative Method*: This is the core method used to contrast the key tenets of Fukuzawa Yukichi's thought (through seminal works such as *An Encouragement of Learning*) and Nguyen Truong To's petitions. This comparison identifies the convergence of "Practical Learning" philosophy and educational objectives between the two thinkers;
- *Textual Analysis*: The research conducts an analysis of original texts, academic studies on Fukuzawa, and the surviving manuscripts of Nguyen Truong To to extract arguments regarding educational management and policy;
- *Synthesis and Systematization*: Used to conclude historical values and lessons, drawing connections to the current context of educational innovation.

The study is therefore organized as a historical-comparative textual analysis of clearly delimited documentary sources. Rather than treating the two thinkers only as biographical subjects, the article examines how their writings, petitions, and later scholarly interpretations formulate educational problems, define the social function of knowledge, and propose institutional responses to the challenges of modernization and colonial pressure.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion that follows is structured from the documentary corpus identified in the introduction and methodology. Fukuzawa's educational ideology is first examined through his writings and their major interpretations, after which Nguyen Truong To's reform proposals are analyzed in relation to Vietnamese historical sources and the institutional context of the Nguyen Dynasty. The final comparative section then systematizes the convergences and divergences between the two reform projects.

Fukuzawa Yukichi's Educational Ideology: From Individual Empowerment to National Self-reliance

The educational philosophy of Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901) represents more than a mere collection of technical reform proposals; it constitutes a profound epistemological paradigm shift in East Asian intellectual history. Fukuzawa performed what scholars often term “epistemological surgery,” a radical process of detaching the concept of “learning” from the stagnant constraints of feudal ideology and repositioning it as the primary engine of modern civilization. His vision was not a simple adoption of Western curricula but a wholesale re-engineering of the Japanese mind.

Education as a Process of “Enlightenment” and the Deconstruction of Feudal Hierarchy: Fukuzawa approached the essence of education through a phenomenological inquiry: “*What is the ultimate purpose of learning?*” In doing so, he launched a frontal assault on the traditional Confucian worldview which perceived education as a tool for moral indoctrination and the maintenance of monarchical order.

Critique of the Edo Social Structure: Fukuzawa argued that Japan’s stagnation was not a product of resource scarcity but a deep-seated “subject mentality”—a psychological state of unquestioning obedience cultivated over centuries. He contended that the rigid class hierarchy (*Shi-No-Ko-Sho*) had effectively stifled individual initiative by fixing destiny at birth. By deconstructing this hierarchy, Fukuzawa asserted that the state exists for the people, not vice versa, thereby placing the individual at the center of the educational universe.

Redefining Inequality through Intellectual Capital: In his seminal work, *An Encouragement of Learning (Gakumon no Susume)*, Fukuzawa offered a sharp sociological argument that resonated with modern meritocratic theories. He claimed that disparities in wealth, status, and power in a modern society are not divinely ordained but are the direct results of a gap in intellectual capital. By shifting the burden of progress from the state’s mandates to individual merit, he redefined freedom: it was no longer a gift from the sovereign but a status to be earned through academic rigor and functional literacy.

The “Practical Learning” (*Jitsugaku*) Revolution: Challenging Metaphysical Hegemony: The core of Fukuzawa’s critical stance lay in his relentless deconstruction of “Empty Learning” (*Kyogaku* or *Hũ vãn*)—the traditional Han studies that prioritized rote memorization of ancient Chinese texts over modern inquiry.

Deconstructing Confucian Metaphysics: Fukuzawa viewed the preoccupation with *Tứ thư Ngũ kinh* (Four Books and Five Classics) as an intellectual shackle. He argued that these

studies produced “intellectual cabinets”—individuals who possessed vast amounts of data but lacked the analytical agency to apply it. For Fukuzawa, *tri thức* (knowledge) must possess two fundamental qualities: utility and verifiability. If a concept could not be tested against reality or utilized to improve the material conditions of society, it was deemed obsolete.

The Philosophical Substance of *Jitsugaku*: *Jitsugaku* was far from mere vocational training; it was a transition toward positivist and empirical thinking. By proposing the replacement of classical literature with natural sciences, economics, and law, Fukuzawa was introducing the scientific method to the Japanese masses. He believed that only through empirical science could the Japanese people grasp the “principle of things” (*Ri*), thereby enabling a peer-level dialogue with Western civilization. This was a strategic move to move Japan from a culture of “belief and imitation” to a culture of “reason and innovation.”

Constructing “Independent Character” (*Dokuritsu*)—The Micro-Foundation of National Power: Fukuzawa identified a critical geopolitical paradox: a nation cannot maintain sovereign independence if its constituent citizens possess the “soul of a slave.” This concept of *Dokuritsu* (Independence) remains his most significant contribution to educational management theory.

Tangible vs. Intangible Modernization: Fukuzawa provided a sophisticated critique of the early Meiji government’s “superficial” modernization. He noted that it was easy to import “tangible” Western elements like steam engines and weaponry, but far more difficult to cultivate the “intangible” spirit of independence. He argued that without a populace composed of autonomous subjects—individuals capable of independent judgment and moral accountability—any technological advancement would remain hollow and vulnerable to external manipulation.

Rational Patriotism vs. Blind Xenophobia: Fukuzawa’s education sought to foster a “rational patriotism.” He critiqued the emotional, reactionary xenophobia of the conservative factions. To him, true national loyalty was not found in shouting slogans but in the individual’s ability to compete with foreigners in the marketplace of ideas and trade. He famously warned that an ignorant people would eventually lead to a bankrupt state, making education the ultimate tool for national security.

The Dialectic of “Western Science” and “Eastern Spirit” (*Wakon Yosai*): Navigating Intellectual Colonization: Despite his status as a “Westernizer,” Fukuzawa was acutely aware of the risks of intellectual colonization. He did not advocate for the total erasure of Japanese identity:

- Strategic Appropriation: Fukuzawa cautioned against the “mindless mimicry” of Western customs. He viewed Western civilization not as an absolute moral end, but as a strategic reference point for survival. His pedagogical approach was inherently pragmatic: adopt Western tools (science, law, economics) to protect the Eastern essence (sovereignty and self-reliance);
- The Synthesis of Multi-valued Education: By advocating for the *Wakon Yosai* (Japanese Spirit, Western Techniques) framework—albeit in a more radical form than his contemporaries—Fukuzawa created a multi-valued educational model. It was modern in its methodology yet fiercely nationalistic in its objective. This dialectic ensured that modernization did not lead to Westernization in the sense of cultural subservience, but rather to an empowered Japan capable of redefining its own path in the modern world.

Nguyen Truong To and the Endeavor to Restructure the Vietnamese Educational System

Systemic Crisis and the Stratification of Vietnamese Intellectuals in the Late 19th Century

Under the Nguyen Dynasty, particularly after the French invasion began in 1858, Vietnamese society fell into a state of systemic crisis. This crisis was manifested not only in the existential threat posed by Western weaponry but also in the ossification of an administrative model excessively dependent on Confucian value systems. Woodside (1971), in his comparative study of the Vietnamese and Chinese models, pointed out that absolute loyalty to classical values deprived the Nguyen court of the flexibility required to navigate geopolitical shifts. This explains why, despite Nguyen Truong To's incisive warnings regarding the obsolescence of the Confucian examination-based education, the court opted for conservatism as a self-preservation mechanism for its own power. As Phan Huy Le (2012) observed, it was a historical tragedy that intellectuals like Nguyen Truong To were situated within a governance system that had lost its capacity for self-adjustment. Economic backwardness combined with political conservatism weakened the nation's defensive capabilities, leading to a profound stratification within the intellectual class—the core force of social management.

The national situation catalyzed a profound transformation within the intellectual class, leading to a significant ideological stratification. Intellectuals were no longer a monolithic group but diverged into distinct factions: the *pro-peace* (*chủ hòa*), *pro-war* (*chủ chiến*), *conservative* (*thủ cựu*), and *reformist* (*đuy tân*). Among them, the reformist wing—awakened by regional upheavals—boldly transcended feudal etiquette to advocate for modernization, seeking to combine national renovation with the preservation of independence.

Given the shared East Asian cultural sphere, the influence of Fukuzawa Yukichi's educational ideology began to permeate the Vietnamese intellectual discourse through various channels. These ideas contributed to a shift from theoretical awareness to concrete action, manifesting in a series of modernization proposals. Within this reformist movement, Nguyen Truong To emerged as a preeminent figure whose proposals were distinguished by their comprehensiveness, feasibility, and long-term vision regarding the synthesis of national development and sovereignty.

The Influence and Convergence of Fukuzawa Yukichi's Educational Ideology on Nguyen Truong To's Reformist Thought

The success of the Meiji Restoration served as a powerful catalyst for many Asian nations. In Vietnam, Nguyen Truong To was among the few visionary thinkers who recognized the global shifts early on. He proposed a roadmap to escape Western encroachment based on the Japanese experience. This is explicitly documented in his 1871 petition:

Looking at Japan, originally a small nation [...] they began engaging with the Netherlands and Portugal, then invited the United States to assist in national affairs, opening their eyes to the world [...] From there, they built ships, trained the military, and prioritized commerce and industry, growing stronger each day [...] Their modern maneuvers are heard everywhere; that example is not far, it needs no further elaboration. (Truong, 1988, pp. 408–409)

Nguyen Truong To identified Japan's success as a result of an “open-door” policy, the adoption of Western civilization, and a focus on science and technology. This influence is reflected in his educational reform proposals across three dimensions: objectives, content, and methodology.

Educational Objectives: Cultivating Human Capital for a Modern Nation Defining educational goals is paramount to a nation's destiny. Recognizing the stagnation of Confucian education under the Nguyen Dynasty, Nguyen Truong To argued that reform must start with the correct definition of educational purpose. He emphasized training talent through a formal system that balanced natural and social sciences, with a heavy emphasis on Western technical knowledge. Beyond professional skills, his objective was to cultivate patriotism, national pride, and a “spirit of progress” among the masses—a clear resonance with Fukuzawa's pursuit of national self-reliance through enlightenment.

Educational Content: From “Empty Learning” to “Practicality” Informed by Fukuzawa’s critique of “Empty Learning.” Nguyen Truong To designed a comprehensive curriculum to address the shortcomings of contemporary Vietnamese scholarship. He advocated for “Practical Learning” (*Thực học*), where education must align with current reality. Mirroring Fukuzawa’s assertion that “learning is not just reading books but applying them to reality,” Nguyen Truong To proposed new disciplines, including Agronomy, Astronomy, Geography, Industrial Engineering, Law, and Foreign Languages. This curriculum aimed to replace outdated classical texts with empirical knowledge essential for national survival.

Educational Methodology: The Integration of Theory and Practice Nguyen Truong To criticized the scholasticism of the time, characterized by rote memorization and dogmatism. He proposed a pragmatic methodology: “theory must go hand in hand with practice.” For the natural sciences, he urged the court to purchase machinery and laboratory equipment for experimentation. This insistence on overcoming conservative copying and dogmatism represents a thorough appropriation of the *Jitsugaku* spirit, aiming to transform education into a tool for state management and societal improvement.

Analysis of Policy Forecasting and Temporal Synchronicity

A crucial point in this comparative study is the “temporal misalignment” between the reform movements in the two nations, which further underscores Nguyen Truong To’s exceptional vision. While Fukuzawa Yukichi began publishing his seminal works, such as *An Encouragement of Learning*, in 1872, Nguyen Truong To had already submitted a series of reform petitions to the Nguyen court as early as the 1860s. Notably, his 1871 petition—the year of his passing—coincided with the very period when Japan was laying the initial foundations of the Meiji Restoration (starting in 1868).

This correlation suggests that Nguyen Truong To was not merely a passive recipient of Fukuzawa’s ideologies; rather, he possessed an extraordinary capacity for policy forecasting. He identified the potential of the Japanese model while it was still in its embryonic stage. His early recognition of the inextricable link between “open-door trade,” “academic pragmatism,” and “national independence” demonstrates a political vision on par with the leading enlightenment thinkers of the region. Thus, the intellectual resonance between Nguyen Truong To and Fukuzawa Yukichi represents a convergence of great minds within a shared historical context, where education was strategically leveraged as a fulcrum to alter national destiny.

Comparative Analysis: Intellectual Intersection and Divergent Development Trajectories

Epistemological Convergence: From Metaphysical Belief to Positivist Thinking

The most profound resonance between Fukuzawa Yukichi and Nguyen Truong To lies not in isolated technical proposals but in a comprehensive epistemological paradigm shift. Both enlightenment thinkers conducted a radical critique of the traditional East Asian knowledge base—dominated by Confucian metaphysics—to establish a new foundation rooted in pragmatism and verifiability.

Firstly, the severance with “Empty Learning” and scholasticism. For centuries, educational systems in both Japan and Vietnam operated on Confucian theories, where knowledge was defined as the mastery of classics, rituals, and abstract moral values. Fukuzawa Yukichi labeled this “Empty Learning” (*Hư học*)—knowledge that served only literary decoration and was detached from the laws of the natural world. He argued that memorizing the Four Books and Five Classics did not help one understand the mechanics of a steamship or the laws of a market economy.

Echoing this, Nguyen Truong To’s petitions vehemently criticized the “scholasticism” of his time. He pointed out that contemporary intellectuals were obsessed with “polishing every fine sentence and clever word” while the national destiny was at stake. The convergence here is the identification of an epistemological paradox: as traditional knowledge increased, the capacity to solve practical problems decreased. This served as the starting point for an intellectual revolution: dethroning dogmatic values to honor those capable of transforming reality.

Secondly, establishing “Practical Learning” and the utility of knowledge. At the heart of this similarity is the concept of “Practical Learning” (*Jitsugaku*). At a deeper level, however, “Practical Learning” for both Fukuzawa and Nguyen Truong To was not merely vocational training; it represented a transition from belief to testing:

- For Fukuzawa, *Jitsugaku* meant learning things that are “rational and evidence-based,” such as geography, physics, and economics. He emphasized that knowledge must provide tangible benefits to the individual and the nation;
- Nguyen Truong To proposed a similar model by demanding the teaching of Western empirical sciences (Agronomy, Engineering, Astronomy...). He believed that true knowledge must be for “governing the country and helping the world.”

This similarity reflects a shared modernization vision: both believed that Western natural sciences and objective laws were “universal truths.” Adopting Western knowledge was not an “abandonment of identity” but an “access to truth” to revitalize the nation.

Thirdly, systems thinking and the empirical method. Both Fukuzawa and Nguyen Truong To advocated for observation and experimentation. Fukuzawa advised citizens to “observe objects to deduce their principles.” Nguyen Truong To went even further, urging the court to purchase machinery for experiments and to test new policies at the local level (villages) before wider implementation.

This was a massive leap in methodology. Instead of accepting truth based on the authority of sages, both thinkers directed learners toward accepting truth based on actual outcomes. Their epistemology shifted from static (copying the past) to dynamic (creating the future). This convergence in positivist thinking created a unified theoretical foundation, despite their different political barriers.

Strategy for Cultivating the “New Human”: From Passive Subjects to Autonomous Agents

One of the most revolutionary similarities between Fukuzawa Yukichi and Nguyen Truong To lies in their efforts to redefine the nation's ideal human model. Both recognized that for a nation to modernize successfully, it was not enough to change institutions or technology; more importantly, it was essential to create a new generation of individuals with independent character and proactive mindsets.

Firstly, liberating the “subject mentality” and constructing independent character. Fukuzawa Yukichi delivered a shocking manifesto in *An Encouragement of Learning*: “Heaven creates no man above another, and no man below another.” He analyzed that Japan’s stagnation stemmed from a “subject mentality”—a mindset of blind obedience and dependence on the government. According to Fukuzawa, a nation can only be independent if every individual within it possesses an independent spirit (*Dokuritsu*). Education, therefore, is not about producing subordinates who follow orders but about creating autonomous subjects capable of independent judgment and accountability.

In parallel, Nguyen Truong To identified the “weakness” and “indifference” of the populace under the grip of dogmatic feudal ideology. In his petitions, he did not merely propose teaching technology; he emphasized fostering a “spirit of progress” and “national self-esteem.” He envisioned an education that trained talents who dared to face the reality of the country's

backwardness to seek change. The convergence here is the view that national independence must begin with individual independence. Both thinkers regarded the formation of an autonomous character as the ultimate goal of modern educational management.

Secondly, transitioning from “abstract morality” to “practical competency.” In the old educational system, the ideal model was the “gentleman” (*Junzi*) who mastered the classics and possessed morality according to Confucian standards. However, Fukuzawa and Nguyen Truong To agreed that this model had become powerless against Western encroachment:

- Fukuzawa advocated for individuals who understood calculation, business, law, and science—those he called “civilized.”
- Nguyen Truong To proposed training specialized talents in agriculture, engineering, diplomacy, and law.

The similarity lies in the shift of educational focus: from cultivating abstract moral qualities to equipping professional competency. The “new human” in their thought was a combination of national responsibility and specialized practical skills. This reflects modern human resource management thinking: using work efficiency and practical contribution as the measure of human value rather than lineage or literary prowess.

Thirdly, rational patriotism and global vision. Another profound point in their strategy was the construction of rational patriotism. Fukuzawa criticized blind patriotism, arguing that without intellect, patriotism only leads to complacency or baseless fear of foreigners. He wanted the Japanese to learn English and science to understand and engage in dialogue with the West.

Nguyen Truong To exhibited a similar spirit when he demanded that Vietnamese intellectuals “open their eyes wide to the world.” He advocated for sending students abroad and learning foreign languages to absorb global quintessence. The “new human” in the vision of Nguyen Truong To and Fukuzawa was not one who remained closed and proud of the past, but one ready for global integration to protect national identity through intellectual strength. This is the precursor to the concept of the “global citizen” in modern education—individuals rooted in national culture but possessing the intellectual tools of humanity.

Divergent Implementation Models and Policy Outcomes: From Theory to Political Reality

While Fukuzawa Yukichi and Nguyen Truong To shared a remarkable similarity in their enlightenment vision, their implementation paths and policy outcomes diverged significantly.

This divergence stemmed not only from individual will but also reflected the profound differences in the power structures and political environments of late 19th-century Japan and Vietnam. The success of Japan in modernizing its education system was not a mere historical accident but the result of a political structure primed for transformative change. Beasley (1972) analyzed that the Meiji Restoration established a ‘political space’ expansive enough for Fukuzawa Yukichi’s ideologies to permeate and be institutionalized—most notably through the Education Code of 1872. Conversely, in Vietnam, although Nguyen Truong To attempted to delineate a developmental vision comparable to that of Japan, the absence of a leadership class with a reformist mindset relegated his petitions to the status of mere ‘*di thảo*’ (archival manuscripts). This stark contrast exemplifies Huntington’s (1996) theory regarding the divergent responses of nations to Western civilization, which are fundamentally predicated on ‘institutional identity’ and the cultural appropriation capacity of the elite class.

When it comes to the implementation Models—Civil Society vs. Absolute Monarchy—the most fundamental difference lies in the agents of policy implementation:

- Fukuzawa Yukichi opted for an implementation model centered on building civil society. He did not place his entire reliance on the government. Instead, he established Keio University (Keio Gijuku), an independent private educational institution. Fukuzawa believed that to change the nation, one must create a new class of intellectuals outside the bureaucracy—individuals capable of leading public opinion and exerting pressure on state policy. This was a bottom-up and outsider model of reform;
- Nguyen Truong To was constrained within the model of extreme absolute monarchy. Due to the absence of a strong merchant class and the court’s tight control, he was forced to choose the only available path: submitting petitions to the King. His model was purely top-down. The fate of his ideas depended entirely on the vision of a single individual (Emperor Tu Duc) and the consensus of a court hierarchy that had been calcified by Confucianism.

In terms of institutional response and intellectual resistance, the difference in outcomes also lay in how the existing governance systems responded to innovation.

- In Japan, following the Meiji Restoration (1868), the new leadership (young Samurai from the Satsuma and Choshu domains) found common ground with Fukuzawa’s ideas.

They were eager for a new governance paradigm to confront the West. Fukuzawa's thoughts became the "theoretical raw material" for the state's practical policies;

- In Vietnam, Nguyen Truong To's proposals met with fierce resistance from the conservative literati class (*sĩ phu*). In their eyes, changing the examination-based education was not merely a change in knowledge but an abolition of their class privileges and power base. Nguyen Truong To's failure illustrates a governance system that had lost its capacity for self-adjustment and the absence of a pro-reform interest group within the government.

As for policy consequences and historical trajectories, the consequences of these two models reshaped the destinies of the two nations.

In Japan, Fukuzawa's ideas were institutionalized through the Education Code of 1872 and the explosion of modern universities. As a result, Japan cultivated a workforce of experts, engineers, and managers capable of running an industrialized nation within three decades. Japan swiftly escaped the threat of colonization and became a global power.

In Vietnam, Nguyen Truong To's petitions were shelved. Vietnam continued to maintain its outdated education until it completely lost its independence. However, in the long run, his ideas sowed the seeds for the *Duy Tan* and *Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc* movements in the early 20th century. The price of this delay in policy implementation was over 80 years of colonization, during which education no longer served national self-reliance but was repurposed for colonial exploitation.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The comparative analysis of Fukuzawa Yukichi and Nguyen Truong To's educational ideologies transcends historical reconstruction; it reveals universal laws of knowledge evolution amidst global transformation. The values proposed by these two enlightenment thinkers in the 19th century remain the core challenges that modern education strives to address.

The Eternal Value of "Practical Learning" in the Knowledge Era

The convergence between Fukuzawa's *Jitsugaku* and Nguyen Truong To's *Pragmatism* established a gold standard for education: Utility and Problem-Solving Capacity. In the current

era of the digital economy and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the lesson of “Practical Learning” is more urgent than ever:

- **Combating Credentialism and Dogmatism:** Nguyen Truong To criticized education focused solely on examinations, while Fukuzawa rejected “Empty Learning.” Today, modern education still faces the challenge of producing graduates with degrees but lacking practical skills. Their philosophy reminds us that knowledge only holds true value when transformed into the capacity for action and social surplus.
- **Interdisciplinary Integration and Empirical Science:** Nguyen Truong To’s proposal to teach Astronomy, Technology, and Law over 150 years ago was a precursor to modern STEM and multidisciplinary education. This reaffirms a vision of education without borders, where science and technology are the universal languages of civilization.

Managing Change and Lessons in Educational Policy Implementation

The divergent historical outcomes (Japan’s success versus Vietnam’s missed opportunity) offer a costly lesson in Educational Governance:

- **Consensus between Intellect and Authority:** Fukuzawa’s ideas succeeded because they met a political apparatus eager for innovation. Conversely, Nguyen Truong To failed due to a governance system lacking mechanisms for criticism and renewal. The lesson is clear: advanced educational ideas can only flourish within a flexible governance system willing to relinquish old privileges for the national interest.
- **The Role of Civil Society and Private Education:** Fukuzawa’s Keio University model demonstrates that education should not be a state monopoly. Diversifying training models and encouraging social resources—as Nguyen Truong To suggested—is key to fostering competition and sustainable quality.

Constructing Autonomous Individuals in the Context of Global Integration

The most profound implication from both thinkers is the cultivation of Independent Character.

- **Rational Patriotism:** Both thinkers agreed that patriotism is not isolationism but learning from global quintessence to strengthen the nation. In the age of globalization, education

must produce “global citizens” with a national identity but an international mindset. Rational patriotism allows individuals to remain distinct while being capable of equal dialogue and cooperation with the world.

- The Spirit of Self-Study and Lifelong Learning: Fukuzawa emphasized that individuals must change their destiny through education. Nguyen Truong To sought an enlightened populace to escape submissiveness. This is the essence of “Lifelong Learning”—a pillar promoted by UNESCO.

Thus, reflecting on history from the perspective of modern education, the failure to implement Nguyen Truong To’s proposals remains a profound cautionary tale. Chuong Thau (2000) argued that without a proper understanding of the era’s imperatives, all technical reform efforts become futile. This necessitates that contemporary education continuously innovate its governance mindset and align with international standards while remaining deeply rooted in the nation’s practical realities—embodying the spirit of “Practical Learning” (*Jitsugaku*) that both Fukuzawa and Nguyen Truong To painstakingly cultivated.

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