

Confucian Education in the Northern Mountainous Regions of Vietnam during the Nguyễn Dynasty: From Policies to Socio-Cultural Impacts

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[Abstract]

This article examines the role of Confucian education in the Nguyễn dynasty's state-building strategy in the Northern Highlands of Vietnam in the nineteenth century. By analyzing official historical records and statistical data on the civil service examination system, this study challenges James C. Scott's "Zomia" theory of highland isolation and statelessness as it proposes a model of integrative negotiation which emphasizes connectivity, drawing on the analytical approach of Oscar Salemink.

The study identifies a fundamental shift from the "indirect management" policy during King Gia Long's reign to "civilizing" strategy under Minh Mệnh, in which education was used as a soft-power tool to establish symbolic sovereignty. Through the establishment of a system of educational officials, construction of Confucian temples and schools, along with revision of examination regulations in favor of mountainous regions, the Nguyễn dynasty forged a link between the central government and the local administration. Although examination results remained modest, the emergence of local intellectuals and "lưu quan"

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(Kinh officials assigned to the highlands) affirms that the Northern Highland was an active space of interaction, inseparable from the historical and cultural currents of a unified nation.

Keywords: Confucian education, Nguyễn Dynasty, Zomia, Northern Highlands, State-making

I . Introduction

In the history of state formation in premodern Southeast Asia, the relationship between lowland centers of power and frontier regions had long been a complex and controversial subject. Within international scholarship, the Northern Highland of Vietnam has been interpreted through Scott's "Zomia" framework. In *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Scott (2009) argues that highland history is a form of "anarchist history," in which ethnic communities adopted distinctive survival strategies, from "escape agriculture" to loosely structured social organization, making use of the "friction of terrain" to evade state control, taxation, conscription, and to maintain a safe distance from the lowland states. In this view, highland regions are considered peripheral, disrupted, and resistant to the civilizing projects of the delta region.

However, this approach, which portrays the highlands as isolated "zones of refuge," has been challenged by Salemink (2011) and scholars aligned with the "connected history" perspective. Salemink argues that an overemphasis on resistance and flight obscures the symbiotic and mutually constitutive relationships between the highland and lowland societies. From "a view from the mountain" perspective, Salemink puts forward the core argument that upland and valley regions were connected through commerce and networks of riverine and overland routes, creating mutual dependence between mountains and plains. According to him, local identity is described as an outcome of cultural, economic, political, and religious exchanges throughout the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods (Salemink 2011: 29-30). To reinforce his

argument of connectivity, Salemink focuses on the economic role of the highlands, asserting that power of highland chiefs was neither isolated nor solely based on traditions, but in fact generated and strengthened by their positions within long distance trade networks (Salemink 2011: 44, 47). Instead of being an enclosed “Zomia” space, the highlands were, in reality, a dynamic link in cross-border economic and cultural flows.

Adopting and expanding on this approach, the article argues that the connections between the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945) and the Northern Highlands were not limited to commerce or the loosely structured administrative apparatus but penetrated deeply into the cultural and social fabric through a distinct soft-power tool, which is Confucian education and the civil service examination system.

In terms of methodology, this study, in terms of policy, draws on primary sources of the Nguyễn dynasty, including *Đại Nam thực lục* (Veritable Annals of Đại Nam) and *Châu bản* (Imperial Archives). In addition, the article utilizes the statistical data on the civil service examinations from *Quốc triều Hương khoa lục* (Book of Laureates at Regional Examinations), and regional gazetteers such as *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* (The Comprehensive Gazetteer of Đại Nam) and *Hưng Hóa ký lược* (Records of Hưng Hóa) to analyze the institutionalization of education in the mountainous provinces (Hưng Hóa, Tuyên Quang, Lạng Sơn, Cao Bằng, and Thái Nguyên). The article focuses on examining how the early Nguyễn Kings (Gia Long reigned from 1802 to 1819, Minh Mệnh reigned from 1820 to 1840, Thiệu Trị reigned from 1841 to 1847, and Tự Đức reigned from 1848 to 1883) employed education as a strategy of civilizing to unify the political space and gradually incorporate the Northern Highlands into a unified state governance framework.

Regarding theory, the article contributes to scholarly debates on state formation in borderlands. While it draws on Scott’s concept of “Zomia” and Salemink’s “connected history” approach as points of reference, it does not apply these models mechanically. Instead, using 19th-century educational data from Vietnam’s Northern Highlands, the study proposes a more flexible analytical framework that perceives Confucian education as an “intermediary zone” in

which state power and local authority coexisted and mutually shaped one another.

The study proposes three main ideas. Firstly, it counters Scott's theory of "escape" by indicating that educational institutions (Confucian temples, schools, and educational officials) were established and maintained even in the so-called "sacred forests and poisonous water" regions. Secondly, Confucian education was not only a one-way ruling tool from the top to the bottom but also created a "negotiated space." There, a segment of the local intellectuals showed a strategic adaptation. They did not resort to flight or direct confrontation but instead chose to serve in the local government to reinforce their clans' local influence. Thirdly, the number of laureates was modest compared to that of the Red River Delta region, which already had a long-standing tradition of examination. The emergence of the local intellectuals and Kinh officials in the Highlands had gradually transformed the power structure, bringing this region from the periphery into an indispensable part of a unified sovereign nation.

With this case study, this research seeks to contribute another perspective on the existing theories of the borderlands and state making, affirming that the integration of the highlands into the central government occurred not only through oppression but also through education and the shift in awareness of political positions.

II. From 'Indirect Management' to 'Civilizing': The Shift in the Nguyễn Kings' Management Mindset

2.1. 'Sacred Forests and Poisonous Water': The Challenging Northern Highlands

In terms of administrative areas, the Northern Highlands during the Nguyễn dynasty experienced significant changes throughout the 19th century. In the early period of the Nguyễn dynasty, specifically under King Gia Long's reign, the Northern Highlands of Vietnam consisted of five "trấn" (the administrative area of "trấn" under King Gia Long's reign was the equivalent of "province" under Minh

Mệnh's), which were Cao Bằng, Hưng Hóa, Lạng Sơn, Thái Nguyên, and Tuyên Quang (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2006). After King Minh Mệnh's administrative reformation in 1831, Gia Long's "trấn" were changed into provinces: Cao Bằng, Hưng Hóa, Lạng Sơn, Thái Nguyên, and Tuyên Quang. According to the administrative reformation in 1832, in terms of scale, Lạng Sơn was categorized as a medium-sized province, while Thái Nguyên, Tuyên Quang, Hưng Hóa, and Cao Bằng were all classified as small provinces (Nguyễn 1996: 125-126). From the French colonial period until before 1945, apart from Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, Thái Nguyên, Tuyên Quang, several new provinces were established on the basis of reorganizing existing mountainous provinces, including Bắc Kạn¹, Hà Giang,² Hòa Bình,³ Lai Châu,⁴ Lào Cai,⁵ Phú Thọ,⁶ Sơn La,⁷ Vĩnh Yên,⁸ and Yên Bái⁹ (State Archives Department 2017: 41-44).

In terms of geographical location and topography, the Northern Highland provinces of Vietnam are situated in a strategically important position, bordering China and Laos. This region is characterized by high mountains, deep rivers, and rugged terrain, with the Northwestern part having a more complex and

¹ Bắc Kạn province: Established in 1896 based on the Bắc Kạn military base, separated from four subprefecture belonging to Thái Nguyên province.

² Hà Giang province: Established in 1891 based on the Hà Giang military base, separated from Tương An prefecture of Tuyên Quang province.

³ Hòa Bình province: in 1886, two subprefectures from Hưng Hóa province and one district from Sơn Tây province were separated to form Mường province, also known as "Chợ Bò" province. In 1888, it was renamed Phương Lâm province, and in 1891, it was renamed Hòa Bình province.

⁴ Lai Châu province: Established in 1909 from three subprefecture of Sơn La province; in 1915, Lai Châu province was abolished and reorganized as the 4th military administrative unit of Lai Châu.

⁵ Lào Cai province: Established based on the Lào Cai military base founded in 1886; in 1907, it was converted into the civilian province of Lào Cai.

⁶ Phú Thọ province: Established in 1903, formerly known as Hưng Hóa province.

⁷ Sơn La province: Established based on the Sơn La military base in 1886; and in 1904, it was changed into Sơn La province.

⁸ Vĩnh Yên province: Established in 1899, formed from five districts from Sơn Tây province and one district from Thái Nguyên province.

⁹ Yên Bái province: Established in 1900, formed from three districts and subprefectures of Hưng Hóa province and one subprefecture of Tuyên Quang province.

treacherous landscape than the Northeast. The major rivers here (Đà River, Thao River, and Lô River) served as main traffic arteries connecting the uplands and lowlands, yet they were also fraught with numerous rapids and waterfalls. The Đà River contained 83 waterfalls, with Vạn Bờ waterfall being the most dangerous; the Thao River was bordered by towering mountain ranges on both sides, its red, fast flowing currents rendering traveling by boat perilous. The Lô River alone had a total of 173 waterfalls, making the waterway extremely treacherous (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2004c: 407).

The Northern Highland provinces have four distinct seasons. January brings frequent rainfall, February and March are warm, May and June are hot, July and August pour with rain, accompanied by occasional storms, while November and December are bitterly cold. In Cao Bằng province specifically, "spring is still cold, summer is rainy, autumn is scorching hot, and winter is freezing" (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2006: 471). In the mountainous provinces, there is heavy mountain fog, persisting until 10 or 11 a.m., resulting in miasma.

In the perception of lowlanders, the Northern Highland area appeared as a dangerous space filled with challenges. Records from contemporary gazetteers reflected not only the geographical realities but also an anxiety over the "otherness" of a place with "sacred forests and poisonous water." From such a standpoint, the description in *Hung Hóa ký lược* by Phạm Thận Duật, an official from Ninh Bình appointed to Hưng Hoá province in the 19th century, portrayed the harsh weather conditions of this region. Pha Luông mountain (Mộc subprefecture) was said to have a cave of unfathomable depth; Khâu Bút mountain (Văn Chân district) was infamous for venomous snakes. The river Mỹ (Tam Nông and Thanh Sơn districts) was lined with highly poisonous "Kỳ" trees on the riverbanks. During autumn, their leaves fell into heaps, and summer arrived, bringing along heavy rainfall streaming down as black as lacquer. Both the Hoa and Thập streams (Phù Yên subprefecture) were noxious. To explain the toxicity of these bodies of water, Phạm Thận Duật attributed this forest leaves falling in large numbers into crevices and caverns, gradually decomposing, washed down by rain,

and thereby turning poisonous (UNESCO Center for Vietnamese Historical and Cultural Information 2000: 153-154, 171).

In terms of natural resources, this was a region with abundant mineral deposits, namely gold, silver, copper, iron, and coal. The area was also endowed with a great many forests and valuable types of wood along with other forest products (Đàm 1998: 24). Additionally, there were other highland specialties such as velvet antler, ivory tusk, rhinoceros horns, and bear bile.

In terms of sociocultural aspects, the Northern Highland region was home to many ethnic groups, such as Tày, Nùng, Thái, Dao, and Hmông. These groups migrated to the Northern Highland area at different points in history, and each group had its own distinct cultural identity. Many prominent clans followed the tradition of “phụ đạo” (hereditary leadership) such as the Đèo, Cầm, Hoàng, and Lý clans. These families divided the Northern Uplands into different territorial domains and exercised their control over them.

The economic activities of the Northern Highland dwellers were diverse, including hunting, gathering, cultivation, and animal husbandry. This population was portrayed as robust, agile, and skilled at hunting and fishing on rivers. Agricultural practices varied according to topography. Whereas the slash-and-burn technique was practiced in areas at an elevation of approximately 500-1000 meters, the cultivation of wet rice and subsidiary crops was carried out in lower valleys (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2006).

2.2. Restructuring Borderland Power: From Political Compromise to Administrative Unification

Faced with rugged terrain and complex ethnic social structures in the Northern Highlands of Vietnam, King Gia Long introduced an indirect governance strategy that was pragmatic, recognizing this area as a military defense zone rather than a target for civilizing.

Regarding administration, King Gia Long still maintained governance structures from the Lê Trung Hưng period (in the 18th century) in the Northern Uplands, using the readily existing system

of local chiefs. In 1802, King Gia Long bestowed the nobility titles of “công,” “hầu,” and “bá” upon twelve local chiefs who with outstanding achievements in Tuyên Quang, Hưng Hóa, and Thái Nguyên (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2002: 526-527). King Gia Long preserved the leadership of local chiefs. For instance, he granted the Xá clan authority in Mộc and Đà Bắc subprefectures, the Hà clan in Mai Yên subprefecture, the Cầm clan in Mai Sơn and Sơn La, Tuần Giáo (UNESCO Center for Vietnamese Historical and Cultural Information 2000: 10). Within the administrative apparatus, King Gia Long even established the position of “Mán phủ sứ,” an official responsible for appeasing and winning over highland inhabitants. The indirect management policy was still maintained alongside the policy of suppression, which was applied to rebellious indigenous chiefs in the Northern Upland “trần.”

This governance strategy indicates that King Gia Long was keenly aware of the strategic role and geographical position of the Northern Highlands in state management, converting local indigenous chiefs into representatives of the court there, without dismantling the local authority structure. However, this implies that the fledgling state had to make a compromise with the upland authority.

King Minh Mệnh’s accession marked a fundamental turning point in state-making, shifting from indirect management to unification. The King no longer accepted the uplands as an autonomous buffer, and he was determined to incorporate them fully into the central administrative structure through an assertive policy of “cải thổ quy lưu” (replacing local chiefs with Kinh officials). The policy shift from King Gia Long’s reign to King Minh Mệnh’s marked a fundamental transition from a decentralized, multicultural model to one of hyper-centralization and cultural acculturation. King Minh Mệnh even sought to transform the mindset and perception of the frontier populace, who “only knew the existence of a frontier leader, but did not know the existence of the central court” (Choi 2004: 102). While this statement originally captured Minh Mệnh’s stance toward the Southern population, it profoundly reflected the broader ideological underpinnings and governance ethos that he

sought to convey to all frontier communities across the empire, including the Northern borderlands.

In 1821, King Minh Mệnh approved the establishment of the positions of “Cai châu,” “Phó châu,” and “Lại mục,”¹⁰ who were tasked with overseeing borderland management and the appointments of local inhabitants. In 1827, he abolished the positions once held by local chiefs under King Gia Long’s reign and replaced them with positions of “Tri phủ,” “Tri huyện,” and “Huyện thừa,” similar to those of the lowlands. Nonetheless, for the time being, local personnel were still entrusted with these posts whose titles were prefixed with “Thổ” (local) (Poisson 2018: 88). In 1829, the King took the next step by implementing a stricter policy for the mountainous regions. Accordingly, he abolished the right to “thổ ty thế tập” (heredity titles) (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2002: 862).

In 1835, King Minh Mệnh introduced the “Lưu quan” policy, replacing “Thổ quan” (officials originating from the highlands) with Kinh officials appointed by the court to directly manage subprefecture, district in ethnic minority regions. This policy was met with resistance from local chiefs, and Minh Mệnh had to resort to military forces (Đàm 1998: 169). However, the “Lưu quan” policy was introduced step-by-step in each province with different timelines, such as Thái Nguyên province in 1835, Hưng Hoá province in 1838. In reality, however, the power of local chiefs remained significant, and appointed Kinh officials faced considerable obstacles due to language and cultural barriers, the hostile living environment (Poisson 2018: 88-89).

The preliminary statistics in the lowlands on the laureates “Hương cống/Cử nhân” (Provincial Graduate) appointed by the Nguyễn court to important posts in the highland administrative

¹⁰ A “châu” was an administrative unit, inhabited predominantly by ethnic minority communities. In some areas, a “châu” was equivalent to a “phủ” (prefecture) and exercised authority over districts, while in other places it was equivalent to a district-level unit. “Cai châu” and “Phó châu” were minor officials within the administrative system. “Lại mục” were clerks who assisted the “Tri châu” or “Tri huyện.” These officials were responsible for military affairs, taxation, legal cases, and other administrative affairs within a “châu.”

apparatus, such as “Tuần phủ,” “Tri phủ,” “Tham hiệp,” “Bổ chánh,” “Án sát,” and “Tổng đốc” showed that there were 11 individuals appointed to Hưng Hóa; 7 to Cao Bằng; 13 to Lạng Sơn; 26 to Tuyên Quang; 27 to Thái Nguyên. Tuyên Quang and Thái Nguyên were the two provinces whose numbers of successful Confucian scholars appointed to these posts were significantly higher than that of Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn.

Through the administrative reformation of 1831 and the policy of “cải thổ quy lưu” (replacing the local with lowland officials), the government did not stop at exercising its influence over administrative management, but also aimed at ideological governance to pave the way for the penetration of Confucianism in the highlands. These measures, introduced by King Minh Mệnh, targeting the mountainous ethnic minorities in the early 19th century, were subsequently upheld and slightly rectified by the successors of the Nguyễn dynasty (Thiệu Trị, Tự Đức, etc.).

III. The Presence of Confucian Institutions

3.1. Institutionalizing Cultural Power: Network of Educational Officials

The establishment of a system of Confucian educational officials was considered one of the most effective instruments to extend the influence of the Nguyễn court’s bureaucratic apparatus into the administrative units of the Northern Highlands. The roles of “Đốc học” (Provincial Educational Officer), “Huấn đạo” (District Educational Officer), and “Giáo thụ” (Prefectural Educational Officer) were not limited to teaching alone, but also embodied Confucianism, managing local sociocultural activities. As early as the year 1802, the position of “Đốc học” was established on a concurrent basis for “trần” of Thái Nguyên, Lạng Sơn, and Cao Bằng (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2002: 527). “Đốc học” was a position responsible for educational affairs of a “trần” (during Gia Long’s reign) or a province (from Minh Mệnh’s reign onward). Appointees to this position were all laureates “Cử nhân,” “Phó bảng” (a sub-doctoral title institutionalized only during the Nguyễn dynasty for candidates whose results in the Metropolitan

and Palace examinations ranked below those of “Tiến sĩ” holders), “Tiến sĩ” (Doctoral Laureate).

During the reigns of Minh Mệnh and Thiệu Trị, this network was extended down to prefectures, districts, with the official appointment of “Giáo thụ” and “Huấn đạo,” who received salaries from the court. In 1822, across the country, one “Giáo thụ” was appointed in each prefecture, one “Huấn đạo” in each district to guide students, develop education, as well as train candidates for the provincial examinations (Poisson 2016: 43). According to the 1834 regulations, “Tú tài” (an individual passing three out of four provincial examinations) aged forty and above, upon passing the level “ưu” (excellence), would be appointed as “Giáo thụ.” Those who passed the level “bình” (good) would be elected as “Huấn đạo” (Minh Mệnh 1972: 180). Under Thiệu Trị’s reign, “Giáo thụ” received a monthly salary from the state, including cash and rice (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2007a: 169). From King Tự Đức’s reign onward, the court assigned “Cử nhân” to these positions.

During the early period, the implementation of education in the mountainous area was likely to meet with difficulties; therefore, it was not until 1834 that the Nguyễn court instituted teaching positions in Cao Bằng (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2004c: 106). In 1835, owing to the low number of students, the court abolished the position of “Đốc học” in Thái Nguyên province and established the post of “Giáo thụ” in Phú Bình prefecture. Students from Thông Hoá prefecture of Thái Nguyên province were obliged to attend classes with those from Phú Bình (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2004b: 470).

With great effort, education in the region had made certain progress. By 1843, as “many local inhabitants and children of local chiefs wished to pursue learning”, King Thiệu Trị ordered the construction of schools and established the post of “Giáo thụ” in Tuyên Quang province. However, in reality, the number of students in Tuyên Quang province remained small (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2007a: 556). In 1847, the post of “Giáo thụ” was established in Hoà An prefecture (Cao Bằng) and Trường Khánh prefecture (Lạng Sơn); the position of “Huấn đạo” was established in

Bình Xuyên and Phở Yên districts (Thái Nguyên) (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2007a: 1000-1001).

The formalization of educational positions in the Northern Highland regions is clear evidence of King Minh Mệnh's priority of cultural governance. These educational officials were not simply teachers but also the "cultural representatives" of the court, ensuring that teaching materials and mindset adhered to the Confucian standard.

3.2. Confucian Temples and Schools: Symbols of Confucianism and Culture

To realize its ambition of cultural unification, the Nguyễn court established early educational infrastructure right in regions which were considered "sacred forest and poisonous water." Contrary to the opinion that the highlands lay outside the reach of the state, historical records indicate the tangible presence of Confucian institutions here.

Most notably, the Nguyễn dynasty constructed a system of provincial Confucian temples—the symbol of Confucian cultural authority. While new Confucian temples were gradually built in Cao Bằng (1809), Tuyên Quang (1825), and Thái Nguyên (1832), the old ones were renovated in Lạng Sơn (1809), Hưng Hóa (1830). These provincial Confucian temples were constructed according to the nationwide scales and layouts standardized by the Nguyễn dynasty. In 1838, the layout of provincial Confucian temples was converted into one worship hall and two buildings on its right and left, each with five bays built from bricks (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2004d: 306).

The arrival of standardized architectural structures, along with periodic worshipping ceremonies in the second and eighth months of the lunar calendar in the mountainous areas, served as "cultural representatives." These provincial Confucian temples declared the sovereignty of the Đại Nam state not only in terms of territory but also civilization, challenging any notion of a "stateless" Zomia zone. The Nguyễn dynasty established an administrative-ritual space where a few local officials and all laureates could be part of that

orbit.

Together with the construction of local Confucian temples, the Nguyễn court also commanded the establishment of a system of schools, which was considered educational infrastructure.

In 1814, King Gia Long proclaimed that “(the) teaching (of) students (be done), so that they later can come into service of the state” (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 1998: 115). From 1823, the regulations for local schools were introduced: schools at prefecture level consisted of three bays and two side wings, within in the budget of 300 “quan” (cash); whereas, those at district level were smaller and allocated a budget of 250 “quan” (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2004a: 300). In 1835, schools at prefecture and district levels were restructured, keeping the former layout while slightly reducing the length and width; the allocated budget was lowered accordingly to 130 or 170 “quan” (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2004c: 769).

In 1827, a school was established in Lâm Thao prefecture, Sơn Tây province. Following this, a string of schools was constructed: the school in Trùng Khánh prefecture (Tuyên Quang) in 1842, in Gia Hưng prefecture (Hưng Hoá) in 1843, in Đoan Hùng prefecture (Sơn Tây) in 1845, and in Trùng Khánh prefecture (Cao Bằng) in 1848 (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2006). The construction of educational institutions and prefecture-level schools in the locality under the reign of the first four Nguyễn Kings contributed to the making of local “Tú Tài,” “Cử nhân.” Investments in educational infrastructure were the tangible evidence of the fact that the Nguyễn court’s policies were not merely decrees or proclamations but were realized through physical structures, laying the foundation for the transformation of education in the Northern Highlands in the 19th century.

3.3. Creating Human Resources: Incentives of Examination

For the Northern Highland provinces, King Minh Mệnh granted privileges to candidates who exhibited intelligence and diligence to be selected to study at Quốc Tử Giám (the National Academy) (Nguyễn 1996: 109). Consequently, Lạng Sơn province sent Nông

Đặng Tuyền to study at the National Academy (Poisson 2018: 91). In 1843, to encourage educational activities in the uplands, King Thiệu Trị granted special favors to four provinces, Thái Nguyên, Lạng Sơn, Cao Bằng, and Tuyên Quang, allowing them to recruit “Cổng sinh” (nominated students) who have yet to reach the minimum age of 40 as prescribed by the court.

In 1853, students received assistance from the schools in the form of cash and rice (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2007b: 288-289). By 1855, King Tự Đức imposed an official quota on students from mountainous provinces in Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, Thái Nguyên, Tuyên Quang, Hưng Hóa, and Quảng Yên. Each province was allowed to select three to six intelligent and upright individuals who would be exempt from military service and corvée labor, and to become students (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2007b: 402).

In connection with this regulation, Imperial Archives from the Nguyễn dynasty stated that in April 1856, Nguyễn Hữu Hòa, an official from Hưng Hóa, reported to Bộ Lễ (Board of Rites) that Nguyễn Văn Nhân and Nguyễn Văn Quý had achieved the rank of “thứ” (weak) in the “khảo hạch” (local examination) in spring (State Archives Department, National Archives Center I 2004a: 333-334). In 1857, officials from Tuyên Quang reported that this province had four candidates taking the spring “khảo hạch,” of whom one achieved level “thứ” and three achieved level “bình” (State Archives Department, National Archives Center I 2004b: 534-535). These documents demonstrate that by Tự Đức’s reign, Northern Highland provinces started to produce students reaching modest yet noticeable levels in the Confucian examination. However, according to reports by “Bộ Lễ,” in 1856 and 1878, in Lạng Sơn and Tuyên Quang provinces, there were no candidates attending these two years’ “khảo hạch” (State Archives Department, National Archives Center I 2004b: 220; State Archives Department, National Archives Center I 2004c: 161-162).

In terms of examination, in 1807, candidates from Thái Nguyên, Lạng Sơn, and Cao Bằng took the provincial examinations jointly with the Kinh Bắc examination ground, while those from

Tuyên Quang and Hưng Hoá sat for the exam with the Sơn Tây examination ground (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2002: 702). By 1812, the system of examination grounds was reorganized. Accordingly, all candidates from Thái Nguyên, Lạng Sơn, Hưng Hóa, Tuyên Quang, and Cao Bằng provinces were to take the exam jointly with those from Kinh Bắc, Sơn Tây, and Hoài Đức of the Thăng Long examination ground (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2002: 838). The provincial examinations for candidates from the Northern Highlands were held before those for candidates from Quảng Bình southward (1813).

In terms of exam organization, to avoid regional disparities and the fact that all successful candidates were concentrated in the Red River Delta lowlands, King Thiệu Trị introduced a quota on the number of laureates for each region and applied the color-marking of exam papers to facilitate the grading process. Accordingly, “exam papers from Hà Nội province were marked with bright red color, selecting ten candidates; those from Bắc Ninh, Thái Nguyên, Lạng Sơn, Cao Bằng provinces were marked with black color, with eight candidates selected; others from Sơn Tây, Hưng Hóa, Tuyên Quang provinces were marked with dark red color, selecting five candidates” (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2007a: 215-216). The use of color marking on exam papers allowed examiners to identify whether they were grading papers belonging to candidates from the Northern Highlands. Taking into account this information, examiners could consider the quota and candidates’ actual competency. Had it not been for such a method of grading, candidates from the Northern Highland regions would have met with intense competition from those coming from the Red River Delta lowlands.

By Tự Đức’s reign, in 1848, the court continued to implement regulations on color-marking of candidates’ exam papers by province but raised the number of selected candidates by one person for each of “the color black and red” (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2007b: 80). This adjustment increased the total number of selected candidates from thirteen to fifteen.

The Nguyễn dynasty’s educational incentive policies in the

Northern Highlands were not meant to create universal access to education at a large scale, but to recruit and appeal to a small minority of the local elites sufficient to employ and operate the local administrative apparatus. These policies motivated children of local chiefs to actively seek and pursue Confucian education to legitimize and maintain their clan's authority in their region.

IV. Confucian Examination Education and Its Socio-Cultural Impacts in the Northern Mountainous Region

4.1. Hung Hoá as the Transitional Zone and the Lateness of Educational Achievements

Taking into account the data from both *Quốc triều Hương khoa lục* by Cao Xuân Dục (1993) and *Cử nhân triều Nguyễn, Tú tài triều Nguyễn* by Nguyễn Thúy Nga (2019a; 2019b), it can be determined that there were 38 “Tú tài” and 6 “Cử nhân” from the Northern Highlands.

In terms of place of birth, all six “Cử nhân” came from Hung Hoá, while “Tú tài” had a more diverse background, having their roots in Bắc Giang, Hưng Hóa, and Tuyên Quang, among others. The fact that the majority of laureates originated from Hung Hoá indicates that Hung Hoá was not entirely an “isolated mountainous” province, but rather a transitional zone, bordering the Red River Delta and a stepping stone from which Confucianism continued to gradually spread its influence to remote areas (Cao Bằng, Tuyên Quang, Lạng Sơn).

In terms of the “Tú tài” group, there were 22 individuals whose examination year cannot be identified, together with 16 individuals whose exam dates have been determined, including: 1852 (2 candidates), 1888 (1), 1894 (2), 1897 (2), 1900 (8), and 1912 (1). Regarding the group of Cử nhân, the statistics are as follows: 1891 (1 candidate), 1894 (1), 1897 (2), 1900 (1), and 1906 (1). None of these “Cử nhân” achieved the title of “Tiến sĩ” in the later metropolitan and royal examinations.

Although the data on examination years is incomplete, it

indicates that “Tú tài” and “Cử nhân” mostly emerged during the reigns of Kings Đồng Khánh (1885-1889), Thành Thái (1889-1907), and Duy Tân (1907-1916). This information suggests that education in the highland areas required from five to six decades to be absorbed and transformed, from when King Gia Long laid the foundation, and King Minh Mệnh ordered the construction of educational infrastructure, to the final realization of education policies in the form of tangible outcomes. The statistics on the number of laureates in the later period of the Nguyễn dynasty show that the early Nguyễn Kings’ policies did not fail, but rather slowly and consistently made progress, continuing to be effective even after the appearance of colonialism in Vietnam.

4.2. Laureates from the Northern Highland of Vietnam

The data on “Cử nhân” and “Tú tài” from the Northern Highlands presented a modest number of laureates in comparison with the Red River Delta, whose number of “Cử nhân” reached around 2000 (Đỗ 2016). Nevertheless, in addition to the preceding comparison, these figures should be put in relation to the population size of the highlands themselves. In 1847, the number of “đình” (adult male of working age) in Hưng Hoá was 11.219; Lạng Sơn, 11.224; Thái Nguyên, 11.710; Cao Bằng, 11.013, and Tuyên Quang, 6.734 (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2007a: 1004-1005). These numbers were significantly lower than those of the lowlands, namely Hanoi with 64.201, which was approximately 5.7 times the figures of Hưng Hóa and Lạng Sơn provinces, and 9.5 times that of Tuyên Quang province. Other Red River Delta provinces all had larger populations, such as Bắc Ninh with 63.774; Hải Dương, 49.475; and Nam Định, 78.268 (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2007a: 1004-1005). This demographic disparity implies that the modest number of laureates in the Northern Highlands, when compared to the Red River Delta, should be attributed to not only its fledgling education activities but also its small population.

Among the Northern Highland group of “Tú tài” and “Cử nhân,” the distribution by lineage is as follows: the Nguyễn clan (16 individuals), Đình (1), Đặng (2), Đỗ (1), Ngô (1), Kim (1), Văn (1), Bùi (1), Hoàng (1), and Lê (3). These statistics emphasize the

dominance of the Lê and Nguyễn clans among the list of laureates, instead of the typical lineages of the Northern Highlands, such as the Đèo, Cầm, or Vy clans. This pattern can be understood using the concept of “Kinh già hóa thổ”—the Kinh lowlanders who settled in the highlands for generations and gradually became localized. According to Poisson (2018), the emergence of the seven major lineages in Lạng Sơn traced back to the mid-15th century, including the Vi, Hà, Nông, Hoàng Đình, Nguyễn Công, Nguyễn Khắc, Hoàng Đức, and two separate clans of Nguyễn Đình. Majority of them had their origins in Nghệ An (The Central part of Vietnam), and their ancestors were Lê Lợi’s supporters during the Lam Sơn uprising in the 15th century. Following Lê Lợi’s succession to the throne, they were granted properties and hereditary titles. Over time, these families became powerful and influential clans in Lạng Sơn (Poisson 2018:175-176). Poisson points out that many of the highland leaders were not members of ethnic minority groups, but Kinh people who had settled in the highlands for a long period of time, firmly attached to the regions, and established their own authority. It is possible that due to this reason, their descendants were the first to seize opportunities to attend examinations. Most notably, the Nguyễn clan alone produced sixteen laureates.

4.3. The Diversity of Pathways to Power among the Laureates

The education outcomes and success of the civil service examinations were demonstrated through the official appointments. Historical resources on these appointments during the Nguyễn dynasty record a list of officials from the Northern Highlands, such as “Tú tài” Hoàng Huy Tá from Lạng Sơn province, appointed “Huấn đạo” in Việt Yên (Bắc Giang) (Nguyễn 2019b: 177); “Cử nhân” Nguyễn Du from Lạng Sơn province, appointed “Huấn đạo” (1891), and granted the power of “Tri huyện” in Việt Yên (1893-1894); “Tú tài” Vũ Kỳ from Sơn Tây province, appointed “Huấn đạo” in Lập Thạch district (1884), “Tri huyện” in Đồng Hỷ (Thái Nguyên), and “Tri huyện” in Thanh Ba (Hưng Hóa) (1890) (Poisson 2018: 124-125). Another example is “Tú tài” Đinh Văn Tú from Thái Nguyên, who was appointed “Huấn đạo” in 1833. On this appointment, King Minh Mệnh declared that the education movement in Thái Nguyên was

thriving, and Đinh Văn Tú was appointed to encourage local talent (National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty 2004b: 876).

In his study of highland officials, Poisson (2018) suggests that three appointed Tày officials were (i) Nông Hùng Tân, “Tri phủ” in Trưng Uyên (Cao Bằng), descending from a line of local chiefs who controlled Bảo Lạc subprefecture since at least the eleventh century; (ii) Ma Doãn Miễn, serving as “Tri châu,” and Ma Doãn Thiện serving as “Bang tá” in Chiêm Hóa subprefecture (Tuyên Quang); and (iii) Vi Văn Lý, holding the position of “Tuần phủ” in Lạng Bằng (Lạng Sơn) in 1896. Among these clans, the Ma Doãn was bestowed the right to collect taxes from the Tụ Long copper mine and other types of taxes in Bình Kinh and Đãi Man, whereas the Vi had served for generations as local chiefs in Lộc Bình subprefecture, Lạng Sơn province, and played a decisive role in border defense (Poisson 2018: 169-172). These instances emphasize a certain connection between the Nguyễn dynasty and highland officials. Additionally, Vi Văn Lý’s influence and his achievements in fighting off Chinese invaders in 1853, 1854, and 1859 compelled local officials and the court to depend on him to preserve the region’s stability (Poisson 2018:172). The local leaders maintained a form of “dual authority” built from traditional lineage prestige and administrative titles (“Tuần phủ,” and “Tri châu,” etc.) granted by the court without necessarily attending the civil service examinations. The Nguyễn dynasty accepted this diversity, recruiting officials through examinations and official appointments of local leaders.

The simultaneous existence of two pathways to official appointment, which were the civil service examination for laureates and hereditary appointment for local chiefs’ descendants, created a flexible power network, challenging theoretical notions on the absolute antagonism between the state and the highlands

4.4. Restructure the Highlands: A Space of Compromise

The quantitative and qualitative analyses on education in the Northern Borderland region of Vietnam during the 19th century lay the foundation for rethinking prominent theoretical models on the relations between the highlands and the lowlands. While Scott’s

theory of “Zomia” suggests a history of flight from and rejection of the state, evidence from the Nguyễn dynasty paints a different picture of the process of active integration and political negotiation, supporting and further elaborating on Oscar Salemink’s theory.

Firstly, the tangible presence of a network of local schools and Confucian temples in the frontier regions challenges the theory of spatial limits of the “wet-rice state.” Different from Scott’s finding that the “wet-rice state” only focused on the lowland inhabitants to facilitate tax collection, the Nguyễn court was willing to cover the administrative expense so that its influence could reach the highlands through the payment of salaries to officials assigned to work there, the construction of local schools, and Confucian temples. The establishment of a system of education officials, who received salaries from the court, demonstrates that the state did not “abandon” the uplands, but actively crossed the treacherous terrain to set up cultural outposts in subprefectures and districts of the regions. According to Oscar Salemink (2011), the presence of Confucian temples and schools established a system of imperial “symbols” directly within the highland regions, shaping the socio-cultural landscape of the frontier according to the norms of the Red River Delta lowlands.

Secondly, the emergence of the local intellectual class participating in the system of civil service examination supports Salemink’s argument of “connected history.” The historical and examination data of the Northern frontier suggest a different reality. The analyses on the origin of the intellectual and frontier officials demonstrate the presence of intermediary agents who participated in the government apparatus. Lineages such as the Vi, Nông, or Ma Doãn clans did not opt for “flight” as described by Scott. On the contrary, they chose a strategy of adaptation. The case of Vi Văn Lý, and mountainous officials, who were bestowed titles, was the strongest evidence of a compromising relationship between the state and the highlands, instead of one-way oppression or “absolute flight.”

Additionally, despite the modest number of laureates and late achievements in the latter period of the 19th century, the emergence

of candidates from Hưng Hoá who either belonged to migrant groups or “Kinh già hóa thô” implied a certain appeal of Confucianism. The fact that these candidates were willing to attend the provincial and metropolitan examinations held by the state and complied with the standards of administrative documents and Confucian rules, demonstrates their efforts in joining the central government network in search of validity. The presence of academic titles “Cử nhân” and “Tú tài,” along with the process in which students from the mountainous regions pursued their studies, serves as a testament to the “connection/link” described in Salemink. Participation in the examination system represented a form of active integration, as students from the mountainous regions accepted the study of the Four Books and Five Classics, complied with school regulations and examination rules, and used Classical Chinese written forms in their examination essays. The journeys undertaken by candidates to the lowlands to sit for examinations, and their subsequent return to their mountainous homes carrying books and literary knowledge, along with the state’s textual conventions, constituted a flow of connection which gradually erased the divide between the highlands and the lowlands within the sphere of Confucian education.

Thirdly, education was an instrument of civilizing. In this case, education played an important role. Before a system of educational institutions was established by Minh Mệnh, the relationship between the court and local chiefs was largely based on individual fidelity, through different obligations such as marriage, official appointment, or even oppression. By introducing Confucianism, the state steadily implemented the standard mindset and social norms of the River Delta region to the local intellectuals of the highlands. Administrative documents and proposals gradually became the link between the Imperial City of Huế and remote villages.

Despite the modest number of laureates, the effectiveness of the Nguyễn dynasty’s policies lay in the standardization of the highland local intellectuals who pursued Confucian education. “Tú tài,” together with “Cử nhân” or those passing only one or two provincial exams, who were not documented in the Nguyễn dynasty’s historical records, became cultural representatives,

extending Confucian ideology to the social structure of the highlands. It was them who gradually erased the boundary between “Kinh people” and “the mountainous,” between the central and the peripheral. The socio-cultural impact of Confucian education in the Northern mountainous regions lies not only in the modest numbers of schools and successful candidates but also in its contribution to the idea of a unified state. It disrupted the opposition between the “center” (the lowlands) and the “periphery” (the highlands). Confucian education in the 19th century transformed the highlands from a space of “avoidance” into one of connection, integrating the northern mountainous regions into the broader current of Vietnam’s cultural history. Therefore, this study supports and expands upon Salemink’s theory by demonstrating that the connections forged through Confucian education and the examination system under the Nguyễn dynasty operated at the level of consciousness and ideology, complementing the forms of integration through economic exchange, trade, and political alliances.

V. Conclusion

Research on educational activities and the civil service examination system in the Northern Highlands under the Nguyễn dynasty presents a multifaceted picture of efforts in state-making in the borderlands during the 19th century. The article indicates that there existed a relationship between the highlands and the lowlands in Vietnam, aligning with Salemink’s approach and a space of interaction and integration, rather than a stateless and “fleeing” space portrayed by Scott. This study indicates the following:

In terms of governance strategy, the Nguyễn dynasty carried out a fundamental shift from the model of “indirect governance” under Gia Long’s reign to the model of “civilizing” during the reign of Minh Mệnh. Minh Mệnh’s decision to abolish the system of hereditary leadership and replace it with the “lưu quan” system was not simply an administrative reformation but also a deliberate attempt to unify territories, eliminate transitional zones so that the borderlands could be incorporated into the political structure of the

central government. Within this strategy, education was employed as a soft-power instrument in order to establish a uniform cultural order from the central to the localities, from the capital to the frontier.

In terms of infrastructure, the presence of a system of provincial Confucian temples, schools, and local education officials, despite the obstacles of geographical location and human resources, served as the symbol of Confucianism. These education systems refute the notion that the authority of the “wet-rice state” was confined to the River Delta regions. On the contrary, the state made financial investments to preserve the presence of Confucianism in the highlands, transforming educational institutions into “outposts” of a Confucian civilization, where rituals and social norms of the central court were practiced. In addition to economic goals, the Nguyễn dynasty extended its reach to the highlands due to geopolitical concerns regarding sovereignty and security. The Northern Highland was not a “stateless” space but, in reality, a space with state presence.

In terms of cultural agent, this study indicates that the reception of Confucian education in the frontier areas was slow; however, it still brought about noticeable outcomes. Data on the concentration of “Tú tài” and “Cử nhân” in Hưng Hoá, as well as the fact that educational achievements were concentrated during the latter period of the Nguyễn’s reign, suggest a gradual and consistent penetration of Confucianism. The participation of migrant groups, the “Kinh già hóa thổ” clans, such as the Nguyễn clan, in the civil service examination system bore testimony to the emergence of a new class of “cultural intermediaries.” Instead of fleeing from the state, they actively utilized their qualifications and official titles granted by the court as a form of political-cultural capital to reinforce their local authority. They were the important link, facilitating the transformation of isolated indigenous communities into administrative units under the state.

In conclusion, the most significant legacy of Confucian education during the Nguyễn dynasty does not lie in the modest statistical figures of laureates but in its contribution to the

establishment of a communal administrative space. This steadily dismantled the binary opposition between “the Kinh people” and “the Thượng people” (inhabitants of mountainous regions), paving the way for the formation of the notion of a unified national territory.

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