

Enduring Traditions: Why Colonial Educational Reforms Failed in Southern Vietnam

Pham Van Thinh¹

¹Thu Dau Mot University, Viet Nam

Email: thinhpv@tdmu.edu.vn

Abstract

This article examines the relative failure of colonial educational reforms in Southern Vietnam through a historical–institutional approach, emphasizing the role of “enduring traditions” rooted in the pre-colonial period. Drawing on Nguyễn dynasty historical sources and contemporary scholarship, the study argues that the educational foundations of the South were not solely state-driven but were also strongly shaped by community-based initiatives, particularly networks of Confucian scholars and private teaching practices. This “dual-origin” structure produced a flexible educational ecosystem capable of adapting to and sustaining moral and scholarly values even in the face of impositions from the French educational system. The article demonstrates that colonial reforms—characterized by top-down imposition and weak alignment with indigenous social structures—were unable to fully displace traditional educational institutions. In doing so, the study contributes to explaining the continuity of Vietnamese scholarly culture and offers a representative case for broader discussions on the interaction between external institutional models and indigenous knowledge systems in colonial contexts.

Keywords: Colonial education; Confucian intellectual networks; Cultural reproduction; Southern Vietnam.

Received: March 23, 2026

Revised: June 10, 2026

Accepted: Oktober 10, 2026

Introduction

The history of education in colonial contexts has long been understood as a process of institutional imposition, whereby metropolitan powers sought to restructure indigenous knowledge systems through formal schooling. Classical studies have demonstrated that colonial education functioned not only as an *ars* of governance but also as a mechanism for the reproduction of culture and social order (Altbach & Kelly, 1978; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). More recent approaches, however, suggest that such reforms often encountered persistent resistance from local traditions, significantly constraining their transformative capacity. In Vietnam, the tension between external imposition and endogenous continuity is particularly evident in Southern Vietnam—a distinctive historical region shaped by its own conditions of formation and development (Cuong et al., 2015; Le, 2018).

Southern Vietnam emerged through processes of migration, territorial expansion, and the establishment of authority under conditions of a relatively weak state. This gave rise to a social environment in which education initially relied primarily on community initiatives and networks of Confucian scholars, rather than centralized institutions (Khoang, 1970; Minh, 2006). Classical sources such as *Phủ biên tạp lục* and *Gia Định thành thông chí* document a vibrant intellectual life grounded in moral education and classical learning (Don, 1973; Duc,

1972). Over time, these traditions interacted with the state-organized examination system, producing a hybrid educational structure that combined informal and formal elements (Shǐguǎn, 1963; 2002).

This historical foundation is crucial for understanding the limitations of colonial educational reforms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although the French colonial administration sought to restructure Vietnamese society through a modern educational system, these policies were unable to fully displace deeply embedded mechanisms of cultural reproduction and intellectual identity (Marr, 1984; McAlister, 1966). As studies on nationalism and knowledge formation have shown, education is closely intertwined with processes of identity construction and the maintenance of social continuity (Anderson, 1991; Woodside, 1988). At the same time, recent critiques highlight that colonial discourse often misinterpreted Confucian traditions as passive and uncritical, whereas in reality they were adaptive and dynamic (Shah, 2025).

On this basis, the article argues that the relative failure of colonial educational reforms in Southern Vietnam can be explained by the enduring presence of educational traditions rooted in a “dual-origin” structure, combining community-based initiatives with processes of state institutionalization.

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

This study is grounded in an integrated framework that combines social reproduction theory, a historical–institutional approach, and comparative analysis within the context of colonial education. First, the theoretical contributions of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron provide a crucial lens for understanding education as a mechanism of cultural and social reproduction. From this perspective, education not only transmits knowledge but also sustains systems of values, norms, and “cultural capital,” thereby preserving the continuity of social structures even under conditions of change (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In the context of Southern Vietnam, this approach helps explain why traditional educational institutions—though not entirely formalized—were able to maintain long-term influence and resist external reforms.

In addition, the study employs an analytical framework of colonial education, in which education is viewed as an instrument of power aimed at restructuring indigenous societies according to metropolitan models (Altbach & Kelly, 1978). However, rather than assuming a unidirectional imposition, this article adopts a perspective that emphasizes the bidirectional interaction between colonial institutions and indigenous social structures. This view is reinforced by studies on nationalism and identity formation, particularly Benedict Anderson’s argument that imagined communities are constructed through systems of communication and education, yet always grounded in pre-existing cultural foundations (Anderson, 1991). At the same time, comparative analyses of Confucian models in East Asia highlight the central role of traditional education in linking state and society, thereby contributing to the resilience of knowledge systems (Rawski, 1979; Woodside, 1988).

Furthermore, the study engages with postcolonial critiques of Western discourses on East Asian education. Recent arguments suggest that portrayals of learners in Confucian traditions as “passive” or “uncritical” are products of colonial narratives that overlook the flexibility and adaptability of indigenous knowledge systems (Shah, 2025). This perspective allows for a re-

positioning of traditional education in Southern Vietnam as a dynamic system rather than a static legacy.

Methodologically, the study adopts a historical-documentary approach, combined with qualitative analysis of both primary and secondary sources. Core historical texts such as *Đại Nam thực lục*, *Đại Nam liệt truyện*, and *Đại Nam nhất thống chí*, together with local records such as *Phủ biên tạp lục* and *Gia Định thành thông chí*, are utilized to reconstruct the historical context and educational practices in Southern Vietnam (Don, 1973; Duc, 1972; Shǐguǎn, 1959a; 1959b; 1963; 1993; 1996; 2002). In parallel, modern scholarly works on the history of Southern Vietnam and Vietnamese education are employed for cross-reference and analytical enrichment (Cuong et al., 2015; Le, 2018; Fry, 2009; Marr, 1984; Thanh, 1996; Bau, 2006).

By integrating an interdisciplinary theoretical framework with historical source analysis, the study aims to provide a comprehensive explanation of the interaction between indigenous educational traditions and colonial reforms in the history of Southern Vietnam.

Results

Community-Based Education in the Frontier Context of Southern Vietnam

During the formative period of Southern Vietnam from the seventeenth to the late eighteenth centuries, education developed within the distinctive context of a frontier region, where processes of migration and territorial expansion unfolded rapidly while the presence of the state remained limited. Historical studies indicate that Southern Vietnam was initially a sparsely populated area, primarily settled by migrants from Northern and Central Vietnam, who brought with them traditional socio-cultural institutions, including educational practices (Cuong et al., 2015; Le, 2018). In the absence of a state-established school system or formal training mechanisms, the educational needs of local communities were met through self-organized forms of learning, laying the foundation for a distinctly community-based educational model.

Classical sources such as *Phủ biên tạp lục* record that, in its early stages, the *Đàng Trong* administration focused primarily on maintaining security and exploiting land resources, with little attention given to the establishment of public educational institutions (Don, 1973). Similarly, accounts in *Đại Nam thực lục* suggest that it was not until the mid-seventeenth century that examination regulations began to take shape, and even then were largely confined to the central region of Phú Xuân, while the *Gia Định* area remained virtually devoid of formal educational organization (Shǐguǎn, 1963). This implies that for an extended period, education in Southern Vietnam relied predominantly on individual and community initiatives.

Within this context, informal forms of education flourished. Families and kinship groups served as the primary units for transmitting classical Chinese literacy, Confucian ethics, and moral norms. Wealthier households often hired private tutors to educate their children or collaborated with neighboring families to organize small village-based classes. In addition, Confucian scholars—individuals possessing formal learning—frequently established teaching circles in their own homes, attracting students from surrounding areas. These classes not only conveyed classical knowledge but also emphasized moral education, character formation, and the cultivation of communal consciousness (Minh, 2006; Thinh, 2022).

Notably, community-based education in Southern Vietnam was not merely a continuation of inherited traditions but also demonstrated a high degree of adaptability to frontier conditions. In a dynamic social environment, where kinship ties and village structures were less stable than in Northern Vietnam, learning networks developed more flexibly, grounded in the personal reputation of teachers and the practical needs of learners. As documented in Gia Định thành thông chí, although the cultural and intellectual life of Gia Định emerged relatively late, it developed rapidly, marked by the rise of numerous influential scholars in the region (Duc, 1972). This suggests that community-based education not only fulfilled basic learning needs but also contributed to the formation of a new intellectual stratum in the region.

This educational model was closely associated with the formation of distinctive cultural values in Southern Vietnam. As studies on Vietnamese intellectual history have shown, Confucianism in the South did not adhere strictly to orthodox forms as in the North, but was instead “localized” in a more pragmatic and flexible manner, emphasizing values such as moral integrity, loyalty, and self-reliance (Giau, 1998). This process produced a cultural–educational foundation that both preserved tradition and adapted to new circumstances.

From a theoretical perspective, community-based education in Southern Vietnam can be understood as having established a mechanism of “cultural reproduction” independent of the state, whereby values and knowledge were transmitted across generations through informal institutions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). When the Nguyễn state gradually expanded its control and institutionalized the examination system in the late eighteenth century, these educational foundations were not displaced but continued to coexist, forming a “dual-origin” structure within the broader educational system (Shíguǎn, 2002).

In sum, within the frontier context of Southern Vietnam, community-based education was not merely a temporary response to the absence of state institutions, but rather a durable foundation that played a crucial role in shaping the region’s intellectual identity and social structure. Its autonomy, flexibility, and strong social embeddedness enabled it to endure over time and to serve as a significant source of resistance against subsequent external educational reforms.

Importantly, the significance of community-based education extended beyond its immediate educational function. Because educational provision emerged from local initiative rather than state direction, authority over learning remained socially embedded within families, village communities, and respected teachers. This created a self-sustaining educational sphere capable of reproducing knowledge and values independently of formal political institutions. As a result, later colonial reforms faced not an educational vacuum to be filled, but an already functioning and socially legitimate system. The existence of this autonomous foundation helps explain why French educational institutions struggled to achieve deep social penetration and why traditional forms of learning continued to retain influence despite the expansion of colonial schooling. The operation of this educational sphere was further reinforced by the development of dense networks of Confucian intellectuals.

More importantly, the community-based character of education created the social conditions necessary for the emergence of enduring intellectual networks. Because learning depended on local initiative rather than centralized institutions, educational authority became concentrated in respected scholars and teachers. Over time, these actors evolved into influential nodes of knowledge transmission, transforming dispersed educational practices into interconnected

intellectual communities. The development of these networks constituted the next stage in the formation of Southern Vietnam's educational ecosystem.

Confucian Intellectual Networks and Mechanisms of Knowledge Transmission

Within the context of the strong development of community-based education in Southern Vietnam, a central factor ensuring the circulation and dissemination of knowledge was the network of Confucian intellectuals. Unlike the long-established academic centers in Northern Vietnam, where education was closely tied to the examination system and state institutions, intellectual networks in the South emerged under frontier conditions, characterized by high flexibility and a strong reliance on the personal reputation of teachers. This distinctive feature gave rise to a mechanism of knowledge transmission that both preserved tradition and adapted to the specific social conditions of a newly settled region (Khoang, 1970; Cuong et al., 2015).

Within these networks, Confucian scholars functioned not only as transmitters of knowledge but also as central nodes of social and cultural connection. Figures such as Võ Trường Toản exemplify the “teacher–disciple” model in Southern Vietnamese education. According to historical records, he did not pursue an official career but instead lived in seclusion, established a school, and trained numerous outstanding students, many of whom later held important positions in the imperial court (Tho, 1957; Thang, 2013). This illustrates that the role of the teacher extended beyond instruction to include moral guidance, character formation, and the construction of social networks for students.

The mechanism of knowledge transmission within this system was grounded in deeply personal relationships between teacher and student, in which knowledge was not conveyed mechanically but was inseparable from processes of moral self-cultivation. The curriculum primarily centered on Confucian classics, literature, and history; however, its ultimate aim was not merely success in examinations but the formation of morally grounded individuals with a strong sense of social responsibility. As studies on Vietnamese intellectual traditions have emphasized, Confucian education was fundamentally oriented toward “learning to become a person,” underscoring the integration of knowledge and morality (Giau, 1998).

Another important feature of intellectual networks in Southern Vietnam was their openness and capacity for integration. Unlike regions with more stable social structures, Southern Vietnam was a *syncretic* of convergence for diverse populations, including Vietnamese, Chinese, and other communities. In this context, scholarly networks were not restricted by social origin but were formed on the basis of individual competence and reputation. Records from Gia Định thành thông chí and subsequent studies indicate that intellectuals of varied backgrounds actively participated in scholarly life and contributed to regional development (Duc, 1972; Thanh, 1996; Minh, 2006).

Notably, these intellectual networks extended beyond teacher–student relationships to encompass broader scholarly communities, such as literary circles and poetry societies. The case of the “Gia Định Tam Gia”—Trịnh Hoài Đức, Lê Quang Định, and Ngô Nhơn Tịnh—provides a representative example of an intellectual stratum capable of generating and disseminating knowledge within society (Xuan et al., 1987; Thanh, 1996; Thinh, 2022). Such groups not only sustained cultural activities but also contributed to the formation of a distinctive intellectual identity in Southern Vietnam, linking local knowledge with the central court.

From a theoretical perspective, Confucian intellectual networks in Southern Vietnam can be understood as a system of cultural reproduction, in which knowledge and values were transmitted through social relations and informal educational practices (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In contrast to the highly institutionalized model of colonial education, this system relied on direct interaction and the legitimacy of the teacher, thereby creating a durable and difficult-to-replace mechanism of knowledge transmission. Moreover, as studies on Confucian education in East Asia have shown, such intellectual networks played a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of tradition and mediating the relationship between state and society (Rawski, 1979; Woodside, 1988).

In the context of Southern Vietnam, this mechanism of knowledge transmission also demonstrated a high degree of adaptability in the face of historical change. When the Nguyễn state began to institutionalize the examination system and expand administrative control, Confucian scholars were not displaced but instead became intermediary actors, linking community-based education with state institutions (Shǐguǎn, 1993; 1996; Thanh, 1996). This indicates that intellectual networks were not merely products of society but also played an active role in shaping structures of power and governance.

In sum, Confucian intellectual networks and their mechanisms of knowledge transmission in Southern Vietnam not only sustained educational activities in the absence of formal institutions but also constituted a durable socio-cultural foundation. The combination of flexibility, moral orientation, and social connectivity enabled this system to endure over time and to become a significant factor in resisting subsequent colonial educational reforms.

The historical evidence therefore suggests that the strength of Confucian intellectual networks lay not only in their capacity to transmit knowledge but also in their ability to generate social legitimacy. Since educational authority was rooted in personal trust, moral reputation, and long-standing teacher–disciple relationships, these networks created channels of influence that could not easily be replicated by colonial institutions. Consequently, the French educational system encountered competition not merely from alternative schools but from an established social infrastructure of knowledge transmission. This helps clarify the causal link between intellectual networks and the limited transformative impact of colonial reforms. Understanding how these networks interacted with formal institutions requires an examination of the gradual process of state intervention and educational institutionalization.

As these intellectual networks expanded, they generated not only educational influence but also a reservoir of human resources that could be mobilized by political authorities. Rather than existing outside the state, many scholars gradually entered official institutions and connected local educational practices with emerging administrative structures. This transition illustrates how community-based learning evolved into a broader educational system that increasingly interacted with processes of state institutionalization.

Gradual State Intervention and the Process of Institutionalization

Alongside the foundations of community-based education and Confucian intellectual networks, another key factor shaping the educational structure of Southern Vietnam was the gradual intervention of the state and the process of educational institutionalization. However, unlike core regions such as Northern Vietnam—where the examination system and Confucian education were established early and developed in a relatively comprehensive manner—this

process in the South occurred later, was more adaptive in nature, and remained closely tied to the socio-political conditions of a frontier region.

In the early period of territorial expansion, as documented in *Phủ biên tạp lục*, the *Đàng Trong* administration primarily focused on territorial management and population stabilization, while formal educational institutions were largely absent in the Gia Định region (Don, 1973). This reflects a common feature of frontier societies, where the state lacked both the resources and the immediate need to establish a systematic educational infrastructure. However, with the expansion of territory and the consolidation of political authority—particularly from the eighteenth century onward—the state increasingly recognized the role of education in training personnel and legitimizing political power.

Under the Nguyễn dynasty, the institutionalization of education in Southern Vietnam was more actively promoted. Historical sources such as *Đại Nam thực lục* record the establishment of regional examinations (*thi Hương*) in Gia Định and the appointment of officials based on examination results (Shǐguǎn, 1963; 2002). At the same time, educational and examination regulations were standardized according to the traditional Confucian model, similar to that of China, with the aim of constructing a unified and legitimate administrative apparatus (Woodside, 1988). Nevertheless, due to the particular historical conditions of Southern Vietnam, this process did not entail the complete replacement of community-based educational forms, but rather their supplementation and integration into the existing structure.

A notable aspect of this process was the role of local intellectuals. Many Confucian scholars who had emerged from community-based educational networks entered the bureaucratic system, serving as intermediaries between the state and society. Records in *Đại Nam liệt truyện* indicate that numerous individuals from Gia Định achieved success in the examination system and held significant positions within the imperial administration (Shǐguǎn, 1993; 1996; Thanh, 1996). This suggests that the state did not construct an entirely new educational system, but instead relied on human resources cultivated within traditional institutions to consolidate its authority.

However, the institutionalization of education in Southern Vietnam was subject to certain limitations. First, the scope of influence of the examination system and state education remained relatively restricted, particularly in rural and newly settled areas. Sources such as *Gia Định thành thông chí* indicate that despite the establishment of administrative structures, cultural and intellectual life remained dispersed and continued to depend heavily on local scholarly centers (Duc, 1972; Thanh, 1996). Second, the imposition of a centralized Confucian educational model was not fully compatible with the flexible social structure of the South, resulting in the coexistence of formal and informal institutions.

From a theoretical perspective, this process can be understood as a form of “incomplete institutionalization,” in which the state sought to standardize and control education but was unable to eliminate existing mechanisms of cultural reproduction embedded within society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This gave rise to a dual structure in which state and community institutions coexisted and interacted. As studies of East Asian education have shown, the Confucian model possesses a high degree of adaptability, allowing local elements to persist even when incorporated into formal systems (Rawski, 1979).

Moreover, this process of institutionalization contributed to shaping the political and cultural identity of the region. Studies on the history of Southern Vietnam suggest that the Nguyễn

state's expansion of education and the examination system was not solely administrative in purpose but also aimed at reinforcing legitimacy and national unity (Le, 2018; Cuong et al., 2015). However, due to the strong presence of local traditions, this process unfolded more as a form of negotiation than imposition, producing a relative balance between state authority and social autonomy.

In sum, state intervention and the institutionalization of education in Southern Vietnam did not follow a linear or comprehensive trajectory, but rather proceeded in a gradual, adaptive, and context-dependent manner. While the state played an important role in standardizing and expanding education, it simultaneously relied upon and was shaped by existing community-based educational structures. It was precisely this interaction that produced a “dual-origin” educational system, which later underpinned the resilience of tradition in the face of major transformations during the colonial period.

The process described above had important long-term consequences for the colonial period. Because state institutionalization in Southern Vietnam evolved through accommodation rather than replacement, community-based and official educational structures became mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. This produced a hybrid educational order in which legitimacy was distributed across multiple institutions instead of being monopolized by the state. Consequently, when French authorities later attempted to introduce a centralized educational model, they confronted a society already accustomed to educational pluralism. The colonial system therefore faced structural constraints that limited its capacity to displace existing practices, providing a key mechanism through which the dual-origin educational structure contributed to the relative failure of colonial reform efforts. This dynamic became particularly visible during the colonial era itself.

The interaction between community-based traditions, intellectual networks, and state institutions produced a hybrid educational order that combined social legitimacy with formal authority. By the nineteenth century, this dual-origin structure had become deeply embedded in regional society. Consequently, when colonial authorities introduced a new educational model, they confronted not isolated institutions but an integrated educational ecosystem whose resilience had been shaped through centuries of historical development.

The Resilience of Tradition in the Face of Colonial Educational Reforms

The introduction of the French colonial educational system into Southern Vietnam from the late nineteenth century is often regarded as a “modernizing” turning point in the history of Vietnamese education. In practice, however, these reforms failed to achieve the depth of transformation anticipated by the colonial administration. One of the core reasons lies in the enduring resilience of indigenous educational traditions, which had been formed and consolidated within the distinctive socio-cultural structure of Southern Vietnam long before colonial intervention. The significance of this historical evolution becomes particularly evident during the colonial period. The effectiveness of French educational reforms depended not only on their administrative design but also on their ability to penetrate an educational environment already structured by community traditions, intellectual networks, and partially institutionalized state practices. It is within this context that the relative failure of colonial educational reform can be more fully understood.

First, it is important to recognize that colonial education was designed as an instrument of governance and social control, aimed at training an intermediary class to serve the

administrative apparatus (Altbach & Kelly, 1978). This system was based on Western curricula, employed quốc ngữ and the French language, and sought to replace the role of Confucian learning in intellectual life. However, this top-down approach failed to account for the depth of cultural reproduction mechanisms deeply embedded in Vietnamese society. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), education is not merely a process of knowledge transmission but also a means of maintaining social values and structures through “cultural capital.” In the case of Southern Vietnam, Confucian values and traditional intellectual networks constituted an autonomous system of cultural reproduction, making it difficult for colonial education to achieve full replacement.

Studies on Vietnam’s colonial history further highlight the limitations of French educational reforms. As noted by Bau (2006) and Marr (1984), although the new school system expanded, a large proportion of the population continued to rely on traditional forms of learning, particularly in rural areas. McAlister (1966) similarly emphasizes that colonial policies often failed to penetrate deeply into indigenous social structures due to differences in goals and values between the French administration and the Vietnamese population. This resulted in a condition of “coexistence” between two educational systems: the formal system controlled by the colonial state and the traditional educational networks that continued to operate within everyday social life (Bau, 1996).

In Southern Vietnam, the resilience of tradition was further reinforced by the region’s historical and social characteristics. As discussed above, education in the South was built upon community foundations and flexible intellectual networks, with limited dependence on the state (Cuong et al., 2015; Thanh, 1996; Le, 2018). Consequently, when the colonial educational system was introduced, it did not replace a pre-existing centralized structure but instead had to compete with a diverse and highly adaptive educational ecosystem. Sources such as Gia Định xưa and studies on Southern Vietnamese culture indicate that traditional values—particularly Confucian ethics—continued to be sustained in daily life despite the presence of Western education (Bau, 2006; Minh, 2006; Thanh, 1996; Thinh, 2022).

Another crucial factor lies in the role of education in the construction of identity and collective consciousness. According to Anderson (1991), imagined communities are formed through cultural and educational practices, in which language and historical memory play central roles. In Vietnam, the traditional educational system contributed to maintaining a distinct cultural and intellectual identity, thereby complicating colonial efforts at cultural assimilation (Bau, 1996). Woodside (1988) further argues that the Confucian state model in Vietnam possessed a high degree of adaptability, allowing traditional elements to persist even amid political transformation.

At the same time, recent critiques of colonial discourse shed further light on the resilience of tradition. Shah (2025) contends that the depiction of East Asian learners as “passive” is a product of Western perspectives and does not accurately reflect historical realities. In the context of Southern Vietnam, intellectual networks and community-based education demonstrated not only continuity but also adaptability and innovation. This flexibility enabled educational traditions not merely to survive but to reconfigure themselves in response to new conditions.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the “failure” of colonial educational reforms should not be understood in absolute terms. Rather, it reflects a complex process of interaction

between two knowledge systems: one external and highly institutionalized, the other indigenous and deeply embedded in social life. As Fry (2009) suggests, the development of modern Vietnamese education is best understood as a process of integration between traditional and modern elements, rather than complete replacement.

In sum, the resilience of educational traditions in Southern Vietnam played a decisive role in limiting the effectiveness of colonial reforms. Rooted in community foundations, intellectual networks, and mechanisms of cultural reproduction, this system not only resisted external pressures but also adapted to change, thereby sustaining the continuity of Vietnamese culture and knowledge under colonial conditions.

Taken together, the evidence presented in this section points to a causal explanation rather than a merely descriptive account of colonial educational outcomes. The relative failure of French reforms was not simply the result of administrative shortcomings or insufficient implementation. Instead, it stemmed from the encounter between a centralized colonial educational model and a deeply rooted dual-origin educational structure composed of community institutions, intellectual networks, and partially institutionalized state traditions. Because these indigenous foundations continued to reproduce cultural authority, social legitimacy, and collective identity, colonial education was unable to establish exclusive control over knowledge production. The outcome was therefore coexistence and adaptation rather than replacement, a pattern that forms the central argument of this study and is explored further in the discussion section.

Taken together, the historical evidence presented in this section reveals four interrelated empirical patterns. First, education in Southern Vietnam originated largely from community initiatives that developed independently of strong state control. Second, these initiatives gave rise to extensive Confucian intellectual networks that transmitted not only knowledge but also moral authority and social legitimacy. Third, the gradual institutionalization of education under the Nguyễn dynasty incorporated rather than replaced these existing traditions, producing a hybrid educational structure that combined community and state elements. Finally, when French colonial reforms were introduced, they encountered an educational ecosystem that was already socially embedded, culturally legitimate, and institutionally adaptive. These findings collectively support the central argument of this study that the resilience of Southern Vietnamese educational traditions stemmed from a dual-origin structure, which limited the transformative capacity of colonial educational reforms and contributed to the continuity of indigenous knowledge and cultural values.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the relative failure of colonial educational reforms in Southern Vietnam cannot be explained simply as a matter of policy design or the administrative capacity of the French colonial government. Rather, it must be understood within the deeper context of historical–social structures and the mechanisms of cultural reproduction that had already developed prior to colonial intervention. In other words, the core issue was not merely the “inefficiency” of colonial education, but the collision between two systems of knowledge and institutions governed by fundamentally different logics: on the one hand, a modern educational system imposed from above; on the other, a traditional educational system accumulated and sustained within the social life of Southern Vietnam over generations.

From the perspective of social reproduction theory, it is evident that traditional education in Southern Vietnam had established a mechanism for maintaining “cultural capital” that operated relatively independently of the state. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), educational systems tend to reproduce social structures through the transmission of values, norms, and cultural habits. In the case of Southern Vietnam, Confucian intellectual networks and community-based educational institutions fulfilled this function, creating a durable cultural foundation that colonial reforms found difficult to replace. This helps explain why, despite the clear objectives of the French educational system, it was unable to fully eliminate the influence of Confucian learning and traditional forms of education in society. A clearer understanding of this resilience emerges when cultural reproduction is viewed as a concrete social process rather than an abstract theoretical concept. In the Southern Vietnamese context, cultural reproduction operated through the intergenerational transmission of Confucian moral values, teacher-based scholarly authority, educational legitimacy, and collective intellectual identity. These elements were reproduced through family learning, community schools, teacher–disciple relationships, intellectual networks, and later through their incorporation into state institutions. As a result, traditional education persisted not simply because particular institutions survived, but because the social foundations that sustained them continued to generate cultural authority and legitimacy. This mechanism helps explain why colonial educational reforms were able to expand administratively yet remained limited in their capacity to transform local educational culture.

Second, the research findings also highlight the distinctive character of Southern Vietnam as a frontier space in shaping the structure of education. Unlike regions with long-established state traditions, Southern Vietnam developed under conditions of migration and territorial expansion, where social institutions—including education—emerged from the bottom up, based on community initiatives and flexible social networks (Khoang, 1970; Cuong et al., 2015). This characteristic produced a diverse educational ecosystem that did not depend entirely on the state, thereby reducing the effectiveness of externally imposed institutional reforms. When colonial education was introduced, it did not replace a pre-existing centralized system but had to compete with a decentralized yet resilient structure.

Third, the interaction between the state and society in the development of education in Southern Vietnam reveals a model of “dual origins,” in which formal and informal institutions coexisted and complemented one another. As discussed earlier, the Nguyễn state gradually institutionalized education through the examination system while simultaneously relying on local intellectual networks to sustain it (Shǐguǎn, 1963; 2002). This produced a hybrid educational structure in which state authority did not completely dominate but constantly interacted with social forces. Within such a context, colonial reforms—designed according to a centralized and standardized logic—encountered significant difficulties in adapting to this flexible structure.

Another important dimension concerns the role of education in the construction of identity and collective consciousness. According to Anderson (1991), education serves as a crucial instrument in the formation of “imagined communities” through the transmission of language, history, and collective memory. In the Vietnamese case, the traditional educational system not only transmitted knowledge but also sustained a distinct cultural and intellectual identity closely associated with Confucianism and national history. Studies by Marr (1984) and McAlister (1966) suggest that during the colonial period, this identity became the foundation

for intellectual and nationalist movements, thereby undermining the effectiveness of French educational policies.

At the same time, recent postcolonial critiques also contribute to a reassessment of the role of traditional education. Shah (2025) argues that Western perceptions of East Asian education as “passive” constitute a discourse shaped by power relations and do not accurately reflect historical realities. In the context of Southern Vietnam, traditional educational networks demonstrated a significant capacity for adaptation and innovation, enabling them not only to survive but also to restructure themselves in response to colonial transformations. This suggests that the “resilience” of tradition should not be equated with conservatism, but rather understood as the result of flexible adaptation.

Finally, the findings of this study also carry broader implications for understanding education in colonial and postcolonial contexts. As Altbach and Kelly (1978) have argued, colonial education often aimed to restructure society according to the model of the metropole, but its effectiveness depended on the degree of compatibility with indigenous social structures. The case of Southern Vietnam demonstrates that when traditional educational foundations are deeply developed and closely embedded in social life, external reforms are unlikely to produce radical transformation. Instead, the outcome tends to be a process of hybridization and coexistence between different educational systems.

From these analyses, it can be concluded that the relative failure of colonial educational reforms in Southern Vietnam was the result of a complex historical–social structure in which indigenous educational traditions played a central role. The combination of community-based foundations, intellectual networks, and the gradual institutionalization of education by the state created a system with a high capacity for both resistance and adaptation, thereby sustaining the continuity of Vietnamese culture and knowledge amid the transformations of the colonial period.

Conclusion

This study has systematically analyzed the formation, development, and interaction of educational institutions in Southern Vietnam from the pre-colonial period to the era of French educational reforms. On this basis, it argues that the relative failure of colonial educational reforms should not be understood as an isolated phenomenon, but rather as the outcome of a distinctive historical–social structure in which indigenous educational traditions played a central role.

First, education in Southern Vietnam emerged within a frontier context, strongly shaped by community-based initiatives and Confucian intellectual networks. These elements gave rise to a flexible and highly adaptive educational system that did not depend entirely on the state. Subsequently, the process of institutionalization under the Nguyễn dynasty did not replace these foundations but largely integrated them, resulting in a “dual-origin” structure that combined community-based and formal education. It was precisely this structure that ensured the resilience of the educational system, enabling it to maintain a lasting influence within social life.

Within this context, colonial educational reforms—characterized by top-down imposition and grounded in external models—were unable to eliminate the mechanisms of cultural reproduction and intellectual identity deeply embedded in Southern Vietnamese society. Rather than achieving complete replacement, they produced a condition of coexistence and hybridization

among different educational systems. This underscores the limitations of top-down reform models that fail to account for the depth of indigenous socio-cultural foundations.

From a broader perspective, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of tradition as a dynamic force in the history of education—one that not only resists but also adapts to change. The case of Southern Vietnam provides a representative example for discussions of colonial education, while also offering important implications for examining the relationship between external institutional frameworks and indigenous knowledge systems in comparable historical contexts.

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