

Editor's Foreword

A Journey of a Thousand Miles Begins with a Single Step:¹ *Asian Studies* and Vietnamese Confucianism

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This special issue of *Asian Studies* is dedicated to Confucianism in Vietnam. The idea of this topic has a rather long history. It can be traced back to the second biennial conference of the World Consortium for Research on Confucian Cultures (WCRCC),² which took place in Vietnam in 2016 and was hosted by the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University—Ho Chi Minh City under the theme “Confucianism as a Philosophy of Education for the Contemporary World”.

After this conference, the journal *Asian Studies* published a special issue on *Confucianism and Education*, containing several articles written by scholars who attended this important academic meeting in Vietnam.³ However, at that time we only managed to publish one paper written by a Vietnamese author, namely Nguyen Nam's article entitled “A Vietnamese Reading of the Master's Classic: Phạm Nguyễn Du's *Humble Comments on the Analects* as an Example of Transformative Learning” (see Nguyen 2017, 167–99). Although usually, a single swallow does not make the summer, in this case the old proverb proved itself to be wrong.

Fascinated by the importance of this exciting topic, the editorial board started to think about collecting and publishing more papers from scholars who have

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- 1 Although this saying is often erroneously ascribed to Confucius, it is actually from Chapter 64 of Laozi's *Dao De Jing*. However, since we understand the Confucian culture as a broader discourse, and not merely a discourse directly pertaining and being limited to the teachings of Confucius, we still believe it makes a good point when speaking about the beginning of the research on Vietnamese Confucianism.
 - 2 The World Consortium for Research on Confucian Cultures (WCRCC) is a scholarly platform dedicated to fostering collaboration among international scholars on Confucian cultures and their application to contemporary social issues.
 - 3 Many of the papers published in that special issue (i.e. Thompson 2017; Rošker 2017; Bartosch 2017; Ott 2017; Ambrogio 2017; Ogrizek 2017; Hmeljak Sangawa 2017) were presented at the WCRCC conference in Vietnam, even though none of them deals directly with Confucian education in Vietnam.

contributed to the awakening of Confucian research in Vietnam. The reasons for this idea were numerous and varied.

First of all, Vietnamese Confucianism is a topic that is anything but well known in Western academia. While in recent decades, the subject has been increasingly often investigated by researchers from China and Taiwan, and has also obtained some attention in other East Asian areas, there exist—with few exceptions⁴—almost no works on Vietnamese Confucianism in Western languages. Even though Confucianism in general has become a very important research topic, its manifold Vietnamese variations and its impact on past and present Vietnamese culture are still widely unknown.

Therefore, the editorial board of *Asian Studies* was increasingly enthusiastic with regard to publishing this special issue. We are very glad that back in 2016, at the abovementioned WCRCC conference in Vietnam, we managed to meet Professor Tho Ngoc Nguyen, who was one of its chief organizers. Professor Nguyen is an Associate Professor at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University—Ho Chi Minh City, and is currently a visiting research scholar at the Department of Anthropology at Boston University. He is doubtless among the currently most prolific researchers in the field of Vietnamese Confucianism (see for instance Nguyen, N. T. 2014, 2016, and 2017). Hence, in spite of his busy schedule, Professor Nguyen showed a vivid interest in the topic and offered his help and support in the function of the guest editor of this special issue, which has now been able to see the light of day as a product of an active and fruitful collaboration between us.

The special issue consists of eight original academic articles on Vietnamese Confucianism. They are divided into three scopes of content, namely (1) “Religion and Philosophy”, (2) “Tradition and Modernity”, and (3) “National and Cultural History”. Even though all the papers in these three scopes are inadequate to cover the core aspects of Vietnamese Confucianism, they can carefully depict some important dimensions, helping to partially outline the portrait of Confucianism in this Southeast Asian country.

The first scope is entitled “Religion and Philosophy”, and consists of three single papers mainly dealing with the transmission, cultivation, and evolution of Confucianism in Vietnam in both philosophical and religious domains. Tho Ngoc Nguyen, the author of the first article, entitled “When the Sage Becomes a ‘God’:

4 See, for instance Dutton and Whitmore 2012; Young 1998; Huy 1998; Kelley 2006; Nguyễn Q. 2002; Phan 2000; Nguyễn K. S. 2017; Pham, 2002; Tuan 2015; Tran 2003, etc. If we take a closer look to these sources, we will discover that even though these texts were written and published in English, their authors are mostly Vietnamese.

The Spiritualized Confucian Sect of Minh Đức Nho giáo Đại đạo in Southern Vietnam”, argues that Confucianism was adopted and “localized” in pre-modern Vietnam, and strongly refracted on the process of “Marching to the South”, as the Vietnamese expanded to the South from the seventeenth century on. In the South, and with the interaction of the specific local historical context (the Late Nguyen dynasty, 1802–1945; French colonialism, 1858–1954, etc.), Confucianism penetrated into the masses and crept into every corner of the village. It was strongly influenced by existing religions such as Buddhism, Caodaism⁵ and popular forms of belief. Against such a background, “popular” Confucianism has been transformed into a special form of the religious movement, the Minh Đức Nho giáo đại đạo, where Confucius is seen as both sage and god. The article highlights that the non-elite community easily transforms and applies Confucian ethics in a spiritualized way even without the state’s engagement or intellectual leadership. The second paper, “Lê Quý Đôn’s Theory of *li-qi*” by Yueh-hui Lin, focuses on Lê Quý Đôn (1726–1784)—a famous Vietnamese scholar of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, and his ideology via the work *Vân đài loại ngữ* (*Yuntai leiyu* 芸臺類語). The author argues that Lê’s concept of *li-qi* (*lý-khi*) ultimately originated in Han dynasty *qi*-transformative cosmology and was strongly influenced by Zhu Xi’s theory of an inseparable *li-qi* and the Vietnamese tradition of Three Teachings syncretism. Through Lê’s thought, readers can somewhat grasp the history of the adoption, evolution, and nature of traditional Vietnamese Confucianism in comparison with other traditions in East Asia. The third article, entitled “Philosophical Transmission and Contestation: The Impact of Qing Confucianism in Southern Vietnam” by Tho Ngoc Nguyen and Phong Thanh Nguyen, further discuss the transmission, contestation, transformation, and manipulation of late Qing Confucianism in Southern Vietnam. Accordingly, the practical learning of Qing Confucianism was introduced by migrant Chinese elites from Southern China to Vietnam during the late seventeenth century, and once it had entered the ways of thinking and acting of local elites it went on to affect the ideological, educational, cultural and socio-economic domains of local society. However, the impact of the predominant classical Confucian orthodoxy, the weakness of state control, and the influence of French colonialism seriously challenged and downgraded the impact of Qing Confucianism in Vietnam. As a result, Yangming studies (Đương Minh học 陽明學) had limited influence on Vietnamese scholarship.

5 A twentieth-century-born synthetic religion in Southern Vietnam with a synthesized and restructured teaching from the philosophical backgrounds of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Catholicism and other forms of Vietnamese folk beliefs (see Ho Tai 1983, 77–80; Dutton, Werner and Whitmore 2012, 429–30).

The second scope of content concentrates on “Tradition and Modernity”. It includes two articles. The first article, entitled “The Origins of Contemporary Moral Education and Political Ideology in Confucian-Marxist Hồ Chí Minh’s Vietnam” by Forkan Ali, discusses how Confucianism continued to function despite the influences of Marxism and European colonialism in the Confucianist-Marxist Hồ Chí Minh’s Vietnam, and how it contributed to shaping contemporary Vietnamese society. The author asserts that the current Communist ideology and Western manner of thought consider Confucian values as “something outdated and irrational”⁶; however, Confucian values and traditions are popularly maintained and implemented through various religious, institutional and personal arrangements in today’s Vietnam. In the current situation of increasing social challenges during the process of industrialization, the author suggests that Confucian values and teachings should be re-considered and promoted. In the second paper, entitled “Vietnamese and Chinese Movies about Royalty: From Confucian Cosmology to Ecological Politics”, the author Cam-Giang Hoang clarifies the similarities and differences in how modern Vietnamese and Chinese films portray royal subjects and court life, how they express the concepts of “the Unity of Heaven and Man” (*Thiên nhân hợp nhất, tianren heyi* 天人合一) and “Rectification of Names” (*Chính danh, zhengming* 正名) in their modern political discourses. The article aims to draw a possible link between the past and present by further discussing the influence of orthodox Confucianism on contemporary forms of cultural and political practices in both countries.

The third scope is named “National and Cultural History”, comprising three articles. The author Trong Duong Tran, in his article entitled “From Confucianism to Nationalism: Fictive Kinship and the Making of the Vietnamese”, investigates the transformations and hidden political discourses in the long-lasting debate regarding the origins of the Vietnamese people during the pre-modern and modern periods. Accordingly, pre-modern Confucian scholars tended to associate Vietnamese cultural origins and traditions with Confucian thought and consider it a successor of Confucian civilization, while authors from the later French period began to apply theories and Western approaches, having studied and interpreted their findings in a different way. He discovers that the process of changing paradigms in Confucian thought through colonialism lead to the formation of fictive kinship and the spread of nationalism in Vietnam. However, today’s Vietnamese people still look for a greater contribution of Confucian values in specific situations. In a study entitled “The Last Confucians of Mid-20th Century Vietnam: A Cultural History of the Vietnam Association of Traditional Studies”, Tuan Cuong Nguyen examines the formation and operational agendas of the Vietnam

6 See Forkan Ali’s article in this issue.

Association of Traditional Studies (VATS) in promoting Confucian cultural practices in South Vietnam during the period 1955–1975. The research shows that this organization attempted to popularize Confucianism and make it compatible with ideas and practices introduced by modernization and Westernization in the middle of the twentieth century. However, the lack of research materials and, especially, the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the reunification of Vietnam, put an end to this movement, even though its aftermath remains in the research community. In the third article, entitled “The Vietnamese Confucian Diplomatic Tradition and the Last Nguyễn Precolonial Envoys’ Textual Communication with Li Hongzhang”, two authors Gabriel F. Y. Tsang and Hoang Yen Nguyen draw on an illustration of the diplomatic norms of Vietnam in a time of peace to specify the superficial practices of Confucian discourses in the final negotiation in 1883 between the states of the Nguyễn Vietnam and the Qing China, both of which encountered the military threat from the West. The research genealogically clarifies the diplomatic dilemma between two Confucian states in early modern history, and prioritizes the concerns about ethics that especially annoyed the pre-colonial Nguyễn politicians in the late nineteenth century. The article analyzes the case of the last Nguyễn pre-colonial envoy to China, Lý Văn Phức (李文馥, 1785–1849), and his meeting with Li Hongzhang (李鴻章, 1823–1901), the diplomatic representative of the Qing government in 1883 in Southern China. The authors discover that the determinate factor of pre-colonial political negotiation between China and Vietnam within the East Asian Confucian cultural sphere was the power relation that prioritized national interests from the center to peripheries, not morality. The study concludes that Confucianism, in this case, has been misused, since it plays the role of a degrading prerequisite for maintaining political validity.

Although the collection of eight articles in this volume is obviously inadequate to display and represent all aspects of Vietnamese Confucianism, each of them covers a certain facet and is based upon the concrete specialized expertise of their respective authors. In this way, the collection as a whole discloses several prominent issues from the history and evolution of Vietnamese Confucianism, as well as the essence and application of its values in Vietnamese society. We are strongly convinced that the topic deserves the attention of a broader academic public, and hope therefore that this issue will become one of the first small, but important steps on our way to reveal the hidden images of Vietnamese Confucianism.

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