

A Vietnamese Reading of the Master's Classic: Phạm Nguyễn Du's *Humble Comments on the Analects* as an Example of Transformative Learning¹

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Abstract

Phạm Nguyễn Du's influential text *Humble Comments on the Analects* (*Luận Ngữ Ngụ Án* 論語愚按) is an outstanding example of a Vietnamese adaptation and reworking of an East Asian intellectual tradition. In organizing his work, Phạm departed from convention by rearranging the extant chapters of the *Analects* into four "books": "Sage" (*Thánh* 聖), "Learning" (*Học* 學), "Official" (*Sĩ* 仕), and "Politics" (*Chính* 政). Moreover, Phạm placed particular emphasis on the "Learning" book, and thus underscored his contention that the classic text was especially relevant and meaningful to eighteenth-century Vietnam. This paper attempts to read Phạm's work in the contexts of both Confucian tradition and contemporary education. First, it examines Phạm's composition of the *Humble Comments* based on Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. Phạm's writing process in this work presents a fascinating case of transformative learning, in which the author questions received assumptions about the world and himself, puts forward new propositions, and elaborates these via an original reading of a classic. Through the analysis of Phạm Nguyễn Du's life and his preface to the *Humble Comments*, one can also gain a better view of the Vietnamese reception of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism, and more particularly, of Zhu's dictum of "learning for the sake of one's self" (*weiji zhi xue* 為己之學). Lastly, this dictum will be reappraised to show its validity in contemporary educational contexts.

Keywords: Sage, learning for the sake of one's self, transformative learning, civil service examination, *kunzhi* (acquiring true knowledge from predicaments)

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Vietnamsko branje klasike mojstra: Phạm Nguyễn Dujevi *Skromni komentarji k Pogovorom* kot primer transformativnega učenja

Izvleček

Skromni komentarji k Pogovorom (*Luận Ngữ Ngu Ân* 論語愚按) je odličen primer vietnamskega prilagajanja oz. predelave vzhodnoazijske idejne tradicije. Pham je v svojem delu izhajal iz odloka, ki poglavja *Pogovorov* preureja v štiri »knjige«: *Svetnik* (*Thánh* 聖), *Učenje* (*Học* 學), *Državnik* (*Sĩ* 仕) in *Politika* (*Chính* 政). Pham je posebno pozornost posvetil knjigi *Učenje* in tako poudaril svojo tezo, da je bilo to klasično besedilo za Vietnam še posebej pomembno v osemnajstem stoletju. Obravnavani članek poskuša razumeti Phamovo delo tako v kontekstu konfucijanske tradicije kot tudi sodobnega izobraževanja. Najprej preučí Phamovo sestavo *Skromnih komentarjev*, ki temelji na teoriji transformativnega učenja Jacka Mezirowa. Phamov proces pisanja predstavlja v tem delu zanimiv primer transformativnega učenja, v katerem se avtor ukvarja s sprejetimi predpostavkami o svetu in sebi in navede nove predloge, ki jih izdelava ob izvornem branju klasičnega dela. Skozi analizo Phạm Nguyễn Dujevega življenja in njegovega predgovora k *Skromnim komentarjem* lahko dobimo boljši vpogled v vietnamsko sprejemanje Zhu Xijevega neokonfucianizma, še posebej Zhujevega izreka »učenje zavoljo sebe« (*weiji zhi xue* 為己之學). V zadnjem poglavju članka je ta izrek ponovno ovrednoten, s čimer se pokaže njegova veljavnost v kontekstu sodobnega izobraževanja.

Ključne besede: svetnik, učenje zavoljo sebe, transformativno učenje, preiskava javne službe, *kunzhi* (pridobivanje pravega znanja iz težavnega položaja)

Introduction

Although much ink has been spilled on the subject of Confucianism in early modern Vietnam, there are many aspects of this important topic that remain poorly understood. How did Vietnamese literati receive and adapt Neo-Confucianism? How were the Confucian classics read to meet the particular needs of Vietnamese intellectuals living in a society structured by civil service exams? What do the lives and careers of individual Vietnamese Confucians reveal about the broader picture of Confucian practices in Vietnam?

In this paper, I consider these questions by examining the career of Phạm Nguyễn Du 范阮攸 (1739–1786) and his *Humble Comments on the Analects* (*Luận Ngữ Ngu Ân* 論語愚按, hereafter *Humble Comments*), a commentary on Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian thought. I contend that Phạm's life and his composition of the *Humble Comments* can be analysed as a form of transformative learning. As first defined by Jack Mezirow (1923–2014) in the middle of the 1970s and then developed by other scholars, the theory of transformative learning has become popular in North America, and is "gaining the interest of scholars in Europe, Asia, and

Africa” (Jarvis 2012, 201). The application of transformative learning theory to the case of Phạm’s life and his *Humble Comments* allows a better understanding of his intellectual evolution and distinctive understanding of the Confucian dictum of “learning for the sake of one’s self”. This paper begins with an overview of transformative learning theory, followed by a brief biography of Phạm Nguyễn Du. As we examine the *Humble Comments*, traces of Zhu Xi’s *Collected Comments on the Analects* (*Lunyu jizhu* 論語集注, hereafter *Collected Comments*) become observable, providing us with an example of the Vietnamese reception of Neo-Confucianism. This paper will make the case for the *Humble Comments* as an instance of transformative learning, as reflected in Phạm’s struggles to escape his intellectual and social predicaments and gain true knowledge. Finally, the Confucian dictum of “learning for the sake of one’s self”, as advocated in the *Humble Comments*, will be reappraised to indicate the its validity in the contexts of contemporary education.

“Transformative Learning”—An Overview

The theory of “perspective transformation” was first put forward in 1975 by Jack Mezirow, an American sociologist and professor of adult and continuing education (Jarvis 2012, xiii). Mezirow was inspired in part by the experiences of his wife, Edee, who returned to school as an adult (Lawrence 2015, 1). Mezirow’s framework would later be developed into what is now known as transformative learning, a theory of why and how human beings persistently struggle to better comprehend their world and cultivate a more critical outlook.

“Frame of reference” is a foundational concept in the theory of transformative learning. This term has been defined as “the meaning structures of assumptions and expectations that frame an individual’s tacit points of view and influence their thinking, beliefs, and actions.” Each frame of reference has two dimensions, known as “habits of mind” and “points of view”. Understood as habitual means of thinking, feeling, and acting effected by cultural, political, social, educational, and economic assumptions about the world of the subject, habits of mind can turn into a person’s viewpoints, or in other words, they “get expressed in a specific point of view” (Jarvis 2012, 196). Transformative learning has been defined by Mezirow and others as a process “leading to a deep shift in perspective during which habits of mind become more open, more permeable, more discriminating, and better justified” (Cranton 2006 in Kroth 2014, 3). The deep shift in question is also known as a perspective transformation, or paradigmatic shift, and this often proceeds

...[T]hrough a series of cumulative transformed meaning schemes or as a result of an acute personal or social crisis, for example, a natural disaster, the death of a significant other, divorce, a debilitating accident, war, job loss, or retirement (Taylor 2008, 6).

Going beyond the initial experiences that Mezirow observed through the specific case of women's re-entry programs in community college, the perspective transformation is clearly "not limited to women and appears even in traditional cultures characterized by *Gemeinschaft* social relationships" (Mezirow 1978, 55). Scholars in the field have also pointed out that transformative learning can take place in any situation in which adults are learning, including "formal settings, informal settings, and in independent, autodidactic settings" (Kroth 2014, xv). Moreover, transformative learning is not exclusively a form of individual learning, as it can also include group learning processes and certain forms of social change (Jarvis 2012, 201).

Mezirow's well known "ten phases of transformative learning" are summarized in the chart below.

Phase 1	A disorienting dilemma
Phase 2	A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
Phase 3	A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
Phase 4	Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
Phase 5	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
Phase 6	Planning of a course of action
Phase 7	Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
Phase 8	Provisional trying of new roles
Phase 9	Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
Phase 10	A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective

Table 1: Mezirow's Ten Phases of Transformative Learning (Adapted from Kitchenham 2008, 105)

As these ten phases are well suited to Phạm Nguyễn Du's life and his composition of the *Humble Comments*, they are employed as an *interpretive* tool to present the development of Phạm's thoughts. In its turn, Phạm's case can serve as an exemplary narrative to be added to the repertoire of stories of transformative learning.

Using the ten phases listed in this chart, a careful analysis of Phạm’s life and his preface to the *Humble Comments* illuminates the process of reception and adaptation of Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucianism in eighteenth-century Vietnam in general, and Phạm’s transformative learning process in particular.

Phạm Nguyễn Du: A Widower Confucian in Eighteenth-Century Civil-war Torn Đại Việt

Phạm Nguyễn Du 范阮攸 lived in a time of chaos and civil strife. He was born and grew up in the divided kingdom of Đại Việt, which had split into rival northern and southern realms during the seventeenth century. Over the course of his life, Đại Việt would be torn by rebellions and civil war, culminating eventually in the conflagration known as the Tây Sơn war (1771–1802). As an intellectual living amid war and political and social upheaval, Phạm Nguyễn Du 范阮攸 was a Confucian who longed for an imagined earlier golden age of peace and order.

Originally from Nghệ An (a province in today’s central Vietnam, known for its intellectual traditions as well as the rebellious spirit of its residents), Phạm Nguyễn Du was first known as Phạm Huy Khiêm 范摛謙; he later used the names Hiếu Đức 好德 and Dưỡng Hiên 養軒, while often writing under the literary name of Thạch Động 石洞. Renowned for his cleverness as a youth, Phạm was recruited to serve in the Imperial Diary Office of the Lê-Trịnh 黎鄭 Court, which ruled the northern realm of Đàng Ngoài (literally “outer region”). Phạm passed the Metropolitan Examination in the 40th year of the reign of Cảnh Hưng 景興 (1779), when he was 40 years old, and was promoted to the Hanlin Academy and Historiography Institute.² A loyalist to the Restored Lê dynasty, Phạm considered all anti-Lê-dynasty powers (including the leaders of the Tây Sơn uprising) to be usurpers, and maintained this conviction despite considerable evidence that the Lê dynasty was corrupt and in decline. According to the *Records on Nghệ An* (*Nghệ An ký* 乂安記) and *Comprehensive Study of the Metropolitan Graduates through the Dynasties* (*Lịch triều đăng khoa bị khảo* 歷朝登科備考), Phạm was serving as the official in charge of Nghệ An province in 1786 when he learned that the Tây Sơn had seized Phú Xuân, the capital of Đàng Ngoài’s southern rival. Faced with this alarming news, he left for Thanh Chương-Nam Đàn, intending to recruit soldiers to fight against the Tây Sơn. But he fell ill and died before he could put his defence plans into

2 In his preface to the *Humble Comments on the Analects*, Phạm also indicated that he was reinstated into the Hanlin Academy as commissioner in 1778.

action (this brief biography of Phạm Nguyễn Du is based on “Phạm Nguyễn Du and His *Records of a Broken Heart*” in Phạm 2001, 5–6).

Beyond socio-political events, Phạm’s worldview was deeply affected by personal tragedy. In 1772, while serving in the Ministry of Personnel, Phạm received the sad news that his wife of 13 years, Nguyễn Thị Đoan Hương 阮氏端香, had passed away at the age of twenty-nine. Just sixteen years old at the time of her wedding, Đoan Hương joined Phạm in a marriage that was happy but often interrupted by his civil service duties. The death of Phạm’s wife was a devastating loss, and grief-stricken he mourned her with 14 eulogies, 49 parallel couplets, and 34 sorrowful poems. These writings were later arranged chronologically in a collection titled *Records of a Broken Heart* (*Đoạn trường lục* 斷腸錄) (ibid. 2001, 38–39). This collection reveals much about Phạm’s emotional inner life; yet it also reflects his thoughts about learning and the purposes of knowledge. On the heels of this personal tragedy, Phạm also underwent an intellectual crisis that would change him forever. Rereading the *Analects* and writing commentary on it apparently helped Phạm to reorganise his life around the goal of Confucian enlightenment, and to overcome the above-mentioned difficulties standing in his way.

The Humble Comments on the Analects and Zhu Xi’s Collected Comments

Phạm Nguyễn Du wrote the *Humble Comments on the Analects*³ between 1778 and 1780, while serving as a court official. The connection between his work and Zhu Xi’s *Collected Comments* (*Lunyu jizhu* 論語集註) is shown in the title of Phạm’s text. Phạm was obviously familiar with Zhu’s *Collected Comments*, as he mentioned it in his description of the composition of his *Humble Comments*. “At first I read the main text until becoming intimately familiar with it,” he wrote, “then [I] elaborately examined the *Collected Commentaries*, and later carefully went through other Confucians’ explanations” (Phạm Nguyễn Du’s “Preface” to the *Humble Comments*). Phạm’s attitude toward Zhu Xi’s work is consistent with the Confucian notion of “Study of Principle” (*Lixue* 理學), as practiced by Lê dynasty literati in eighteenth-century Vietnam (Zhang 2008, 22–26). In his *Collected Comments*, Zhu employed the phrase “humble comment” (*yu’an* 愚按) about twenty times in total throughout the work when introducing his commentaries

3 For its analyses, the paper relies on the handwritten copy preserved in the Institute of Han-Nom Studies (Hanoi), call number VHV 349/1–2, reproduced as Phạm 2011; and as part of Phạm 2013, 817–1001.

on specific chapters of the *Analects* (*Chinese Text Project*). By borrowing this phrase, Phạm was indicating his admiration and intellectual debt to Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian philosophy. At the same time, however, the *Humble Comments*' distinctive attempt to re-interpret Zhu Xi's ideas can be glimpsed in Phạm's annotations to the original text, and especially in the unusual organizational structure he adopted.

After carefully studying every chapter of the *Analects* in its extant form, Phạm decided to take another step in his autodidactic process: writing comments on the classic. But instead of following the original work's structure, Phạm radically changed the way the chapters were originally arranged. He explained this as follows:

At the risk of being too bold, I have classified its chapters into categories for convenient review. [Based on my classification] the work generally has four books, twenty-three categories, and 493 chapters. In each chapter, my “humble comments” are added below the original main text. Thus, I have named this work *Humble Comments on the Analects*.

By reorganizing the *Analects* into four books called “Sage” (*Sheng* 聖), “Learning” (*Xue* 學), “Official” (*Shi* 仕), and “Politics” (*Zheng* 政), the *Humble Comments* signalled its author's intent to seek new interpretive insights from the classical text. The relationship between these four books has been construed by modern Vietnamese scholars as an attempt to emphasize the dictum of “Sageliness within, kingliness without” (*neisheng waiwang* 內聖外王) (Đinh 2012, 459–60). The dictum stands as an expression of the Confucian principle of self-cultivation (Zhang 2008; Chu 2009, 47), and Confucian literati can only take office and assume their social responsibilities based on this foundation. Phạm proceeded to break down each of the four topics into sub-topics to further explore a wide array of issues presented through the chapters that record both the Master's and his disciples' words. The chart below summarizes the resulting organizational structure of the *Humble Comments*.

Book	Category	Number of Chapters
<i>Sage / Thánh</i> 聖 (105 chapters total)	Knowledge (Học vấn 學問)	7
	Dignified Manner (Uy nghi 威儀)	7
	Residing, Dressing and Eating (Cư xử, phục thực 居處服食)	9
	Coping with human affairs and being exemplary to people (Ứng sự phạm vật 應事範物)	30
	Dealing with Changes/Disasters (Xử biến 處變)	7
	Judging people (Thù nhân 取人)	26
	Talking about Sages (Thuyết thánh 說聖)	8
	Commenting on Sages (Nghị thánh 議聖)	10
	<i>Appendix</i> : Disciples' Records of the Transmission of the Way through Sages (Môn nhân ký quần thánh đạo thống 門人記群聖道統)	1
<i>Learning / Học</i> 學 (202 chapters total)	Extension of Knowledge 1 (Trí tri 致知)	28
	Extension of Knowledge 2	27
	<i>Appendix</i> : Disciples' sayings (Môn nhân ngôn 門人言)	3
	Practicing with vigour 1 (Lực hành 力行)	39
	Practicing with vigour 2	39
	Practicing with vigour 3	19
	<i>Appendixes</i> : Disciples' sayings	19
	Disciples' records (Môn nhân ký 門人記)	1
	Filial and fraternal (Hiếu đễ 孝弟)	10
	<i>Appendix</i> : Disciples' sayings	5
	Social intercourse (Giao tế 交際)	6
	<i>Appendixes</i> : Disciples' sayings	5
	Disciples' writings for their students	1
<i>Ethically Responsible Scholar or Official / Sĩ</i> 仕 (45 chapters total)	Upper ethically responsible scholar/Official (Thượng sĩ 上仕)	11
	Middle ethically responsible scholar/Official (Trung sĩ 中仕)	18
	<i>Appendix</i> : Disciples' sayings	6
	Lower ethically responsible scholar/Official (Hạ sĩ 下仕)	8
	<i>Appendix</i> : Disciples' records	2

<i>Politics / Chính 政</i> (141 chapters total)	Self-rectifying (Chính kỷ 正己)	25
	Observing people 1 (Quan nhân 觀人)	28
	Observing people 2	28
	Ritual and music (Lễ nhạc 禮樂)	28
	<i>Appendixes:</i>	
	Disciples' sayings	1
	Disciples' records	1
	Governing people (Lâm dân 臨民)	27
	<i>Appendixes:</i>	
	Disciples' sayings	1
Disciples' records	2	

Table 2: *The Structure of the Humble Comments on the Analects by Phạm Nguyễn Du.*

At the end of each “book”, Phạm Nguyễn Du summarized his thoughts on the focal topic in a section called “General Statements” (*Tổng thuyết 總說*).⁴ Because of the central importance of these statements to the overall goals of the *Humble Comments*, some discussion of each of them is in order.

In his “General Statements on the Sage,” Phạm recapitulated the line of argumentation in the Book of Sage in three main points. First, he emphasized that the image of the Sage reassembled and reconstructed from various chapters of the *Analects* was a model worthy of emulation. Second, although the Sage had lived thousands of years earlier, Phạm believed that he remained accessible to contemporary readers thanks to his recorded words. Last but not least, Phạm maintained that learning the Way of the Sage was indispensable, because it was both cosmologically immense and humanly pragmatic. For Phạm, this dual quality of the Way—its simultaneous relevance to the entire universe and to the everyday reality of human beings—was precisely what made it so appealing as a model:

This Book solemnly selects factual records of the auspiciously virtuous Sage from the *Analects*. There are one hundred and five chapters, classified into four volumes, by which [the commentator] wants his readers to submissively respect and admire the Sage as if he majestically comes out before [them]. Admiring [the Sage] from a distance, one will have an object worthy of honour; getting closer to him, one will have an object to model after. One’s heart-and-mind relies on and turns towards [the Sage] as if a traveller has his home, an archer has his target; as if artisans look around and respectfully listen to their grand master, or as if the myriad

4 For the original texts of the four “General Statements,” see Appendix B at the end of the paper.

beings all together gaze at and simultaneously are supported by the sun and moon, heaven and earth. Neither distracting thoughts nor wishful thinking dare to germinate; nor does one dare to rush to wrong paths or heresies. Alas! Being born a few thousand years later, as for those who pursue the Sage's remaining words, the superior direct their thought to the mysterious, seeking the help of Confucianism [as a medium] to enter Chan (Zen) Buddhism⁵; the inferior feel content with their official salary, flowing into the degradation without knowing it. Who knows the refined of the Way of the Sage can match with the movements of the limitless and the supreme ultimate, and its unrefined does not go beyond the tangibility of the daily common sense, ritual and music, criminal law and government decrees. The far expansion of the Way spreads over the endless space of the past and present universe, but its near range dwells within the scope of [human activities, such as] coming-in or going-out, actions, eating and drinking.

By positioning the Book of Learning after his discussion of the Sage, Phạm continued his discourse on the model of the Sage, drawing readers' attention to what he saw as its defining feature. By modelling oneself on the Sage, Phạm argued, one was acting not simply to improve and complete one's own learning, but also to improve and complete the learning undertaken by others. Phạm's "General Statements on Learning" reads in part,

(...) [One should remember] three points on which Zengzi examined himself,⁶ and four things that Yan Yuan avoided when subduing his self;⁷ [these points are:] preserve what you have attained, and pursue what you have not yet been able to achieve; polish and cleanse your heart-and-mind; [and], socialize with humanity to approach what is called "Uprightness." Alas! At present in responding to humans and other beings, there is nothing other than the constancy of daily moral human relations. What we have on the pages is the heritage of the Master, and all are the instructions to practice the knowledge one has earned. From admiring

5 This reminds us of the relationship between Chan (Zen) Buddhism and Song Neo-Confucianism.

6 Zengzi 曾子 said, "Every day I examine myself on three points: whether if I may have been unfaithful when transacting business for others; whether if I may have been insincere when interacting with friends; and whether if I may have not practiced what I have learned" (*Analects*, "Xue er").

7 When Yan Yuan 顏淵 asked about benevolence, the Master said, "To subdue one's self and return to propriety" (*keji fuli* 克己復禮). Yan ventured to ask about the steps of the process. The Master responded, "Do not look at what is inappropriate to propriety; do not listen to what is inappropriate to propriety; do not speak what is inappropriate to propriety; and do not take any action that is inappropriate to propriety" (*Analects*, "Yan Yuan").

the Worthy to admiring the Sage, *from completing one's self to completing other human beings*—Confucians' learning is completely comprehensive. (Emphasis mine.)

For Phạm, the concept of learning flowed naturally into the idea of ethical and responsible service to society, since serving as an official allowed one to move from self-improvement to facilitating other people's efforts at self-improvement. In *The Book of the Official*, Phạm analysed the ideographic content of the Chinese character for "official", noting that its two integral components, "scholar" and "human," constitute the two poles that serve to define the essential meaning of official service. In Phạm's words, "without being 'scholar' and 'human', it is truly impossible to be an 'official.'"⁸ To be a good official, moreover, one must constantly strive for self-cultivation. Below is an excerpt from the "General Statements on the Official":

If directing one's aspiration to the upper rank, one may end up in the middle one; if directing one's aspiration to the middle rank, one unavoidably attains the lower; moreover, if setting one's aspiration to the lower, how can one practice the obligations of the subject, acting according to the humane way, and moving within heaven and earth?

Having linked self-cultivation to the ideal of ethical service, Phạm turned in his fourth and final book to the discussion of "politics", or the actual practices of governance. For Phạm, the ideal of the self-cultivated official was linked to two other Confucian concepts: the notion of rectification, and the idea of governing according to "the Mean". Here he offered his own gloss on the well-known claim put forward in the *Analects* that "to govern is to rectify" ("Yan Yuan" 顏淵, 12: 17).⁹ For Phạm, the goal of "rectifying" the practices of a state or royal court to bring them into line with Confucian principles could only be realized if the officials involved were truly committed to their own rectification through self-improvement. As Phạm put it in his "General Statement on Politics":

The *Book of Politics* collects the great teachings of the Sage as well as his disciples' sayings and records regarding politics, one hundred and forty-one (141) chapters in total. Based on the meaning of each chapter, this book classifies them into four categories, "Self-rectifying", "Observing people", "Ritual and Music", and "Governing people". On the basis of the idea "to govern is to rectify", the immensity of politics is contained

8 The original reads, 夫「仕」字從「士」從「人」，蓋非士非人，誠不足以言仕也。

9 The original reads, 政者，正也。

within these four categories, and is rooted in the rectification of the self. Hence, all sagely kings of the ancient past who were “discriminating, uniform in the pursuit of the rightness, and sincerely holding fast the Mean” took self-rectification as the foundation of justification.

Regarding the present structure of the *Analects* simply as the result of randomly collected and diverse written records by and on the Sage into seemingly casually named books that, in general, did not mean much to readers, Phạm Nguyễn Du took it upon himself to rearrange and classify the chapters into specific topics that would have maximum benefit for the learning purposes of the readers. In this way, Phạm aimed to make his reorganization of the *Analects* serve and underscore his emphasis on the primacy of self-cultivation and “learning for the sake of one’s self”:

Do contemporary readers of the *Analects* essentially want to search for the Sage’s instructions, being absorbed in contemplation [of them], experiencing them for themselves, applying them in the universe in order to pursue the [ideal of] “learning for one’s self”? Or do they necessarily want to base themselves on the [current] order of books and chapters, trying to figure out some meanings from this meaningless order, while getting bogged down in its tiny details? If people wish to explore the sage’s instructions by contemplating and quietly appreciating them, by experiencing them within their own bodies, and by applying them in practice in order to pursue the “Learning for the sake of one’s self”, then they should understand this work as an effort at self-teaching, undertaken by me, Thạch Động.

Phạm’s rearrangement of the *Analects’* chapters into specific topics proved influential. By the early twentieth century, the use of the Romanized alphabetic script as a method of writing Vietnamese had largely displaced the Chinese writing system in Vietnam. To preserve “traditional” values against Western influence, Confucian classics were progressively translated into Vietnamese by the means of the Romanized script. In 1922, the *Analects* was translated for the first time into Vietnamese and printed in Romanized script by the translator Dương Bá Trạc (1884–1944). An anti-colonialist Confucian educator and one of the co-founders of the Free School of Tonkin (Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục 東京義塾), Dương Bá Trạc followed in the footsteps of Phạm Nguyễn Du when classifying the chapters into categories. (Dương 1922). Five years later (1927), Lương Văn Can (1854–1927), also a co-founder of the Free School of Tonkin, produced his own translation of the classic, and classified its chapters into sixteen categories (Ôn 1927). Thus, the creative and critical rearrangement/classification model set by Phạm Nguyễn Du for the *Analects* in the eighteenth century lived on through the practice of a later generation of scholars in

early twentieth-century Vietnam. To understand the enduring appeal of this model, a closer investigation of Phạm's text is in order—especially those parts of it which suggest the author's transformative learning approach.

The *Humble Comments* as an Example of Transformative Learning

In lieu of a thorough analysis of the entire *Humble Comments*, this paper will focus on Phạm's preface. As we will see, this part of the text can be viewed as Phạm's attempt to mix autobiography with Vietnamese Confucian discourses. Understood in this light, the preface can tell us a great deal about Phạm's transformative learning process.

Phạm opened his preface by recalling the negative impacts of the pressure of preparing for the civil service examination as a teenager. The examination system was often considered a means for people to climb the ladder of success, bringing honour and wealth not only to the successful candidate, but also to his relatives. For Phạm, this state of affairs placed enormous strain on exam candidates. In a later poem, he recalled encountering an entourage of seven boats carrying the relatives of a high-ranking official, and noted that “When a man is appointed as Minister Duke, a hundred of his people are honoured—All are begotten under our Confucian ink brush” (Phạm 2001, 132–4). The pressure to succeed through the examination was thus put on men's shoulders very early in their childhood, and Phạm was no exception.

Although he read the *Analects* during his early adolescence, Phạm confessed that his initial reading of the classic was very superficial, as he concentrated mainly on “the sounds and meanings of its words” and thus failed to “apprehend its significance”. Merging in with the secular trends of his time, Phạm directed his learning to the “syntactic and semantic analysis [of the ancient writings]” for about twenty-five years. During this long period, he occasionally referred to the *Analects*, but only as a way to show off his erudition. As he explained, “Although I used the book from time to time, it was only to glean and collect bit by bit for the sake of memorization, so in the event that anyone asked, I would have the resources to expound as needed”. However, Phạm's learning style would change dramatically after he passed the Metropolitan examination and took up responsibilities in the Hanlin Academy and Historiography Institute. Finding himself in the new and unfamiliar role of state official, Phạm became anxious about his “ignorance” of the substance and meaning of good governance. In this time of difficulty, which might be labelled as the first and second of Mezirow's ten phases of transformative learning, Phạm returned to the Master's work as a source of intellectual consolation. As he wrote, “One night, thinking of the *Analects*, I took it out and read it”.

Like the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng 慧能, who became enlightened upon hearing a line from the *Diamond Sutra* (Yampolsky 1967, 133, note 41),¹⁰ Phạm found himself awakened when reaching the sentence “Being at the age of forty or fifty, but not yet making oneself heard of” from the *Analects*. Originally written in the book “Zi Han” 子罕 (9:23),¹¹ the sentence is part of the Master’s saying which Zhu Xi, in his *Collected Comments*, takes as a way “to alert people, to urge them to exert themselves in learning in a timely fashion.”¹² Taken out of its original context, the cited sentence seems to be concerned solely with a man’s career and reputation. However, when reread in context and in association with Zhu Xi’s comments, it conveys an encouragement for learning. For Phạm, this sentence offered a way to make new connections among one’s career, reputation, and learning.

To illustrate these connections in his preface, Phạm mentioned the case of the Song Confucian Xu Heng 許衡 (also known as Xu Luzhai 許魯齋, 1209–1281) as an example of self-reflection and determination to change after recognizing mistakes. He may well have read Xu’s biography (“Luzhai xue’an 魯齋學案”) in the *Records of Song-Yuan Scholars* (*Song Yuan xue’an* 宋元學案), since he cited forty-year-old Xu’s regretful words for having “taught and learned impetuously” (*shoushou menglang* 授受孟浪).¹³ In the first part of Xu’s biography, the boy Xu asked his teacher, “For what purpose do we learn?” (*Dushu hewei* 讀書何為) The answer he got was simply: “To take the imperial civil examination” (*Qu kedi er* 取科第耳). Of course, what the teacher said did not satisfy his pupil. Later in life, Xu also became a teacher with a number of students. His intellectual outlook changed radically after his visit to the Neo-Confucian Yao Shu 姚樞 (1201–1278), from whom he learned the Cheng brothers’ and Zhu Xi’s thoughts. Returning to his school, Xu told his students that what he had previously taught them was not right and should be abandoned, and that they should have a new beginning, starting with Zhu Xi’s *Elementary Learning* (*Xiaoxue* 小學), which, in the eyes and words of modern scholars, shows the need “to take responsibility for, to define, and to shape one’s self in the context of foregoing environmental factors and relationships” (de Bary 2008, 404). Xu Heng’s story, as narrated in Phạm’s preface is also a case of transformative learning which encouraged the author to thoroughly review his approach to, and understanding, of learning.

10 The original reads, 應無所住而省其心。

11 The entire chapter reads, “The young generation is awesome. How can we know that the coming generation will not be equal to the present one? But if a person at the age of forty or fifty has still not been heard of, he should not be in awe of either.” (後生可畏，焉知來者之不如今也？四十、五十而無聞焉，斯亦不足畏也已。)

12 The original reads, 以警人，使及時勉學也。

13 In “Luzhai xue’an”, the phrase originally reads as 昔者授受，殊孟浪也。

The story of Xu in the preface neatly frames the third and fourth phases of Phạm’s own transformative learning process. His rereading of the *Analects* could be seen as the process of the third phase—defined as the “critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions” undertaken by an individual who has achieved a long-cherished goal (in Phạm’s case, passing the imperial examination and taking office), only to discover that the achievement does not bring fulfilment. Having examined Xu Heng’s radical change in his orientation towards learning, Phạm considers his own circumstances:

Comparing my case with that of Luzhai pursuing the Way, I am still one year younger than him. From now until my old age there remains quite a significant amount of time. Shouldn’t I endeavour to move forward, and follow in the footsteps of those who acquire knowledge from predicaments in which they find themselves?

With the comparison of his case to Xu Heng’s, Phạm clearly arrived at the fourth phase, in which he recognized that “[his] discontent and the process of transformation [were] shared” with others who “[had] negotiated a similar change” with him. Noteworthy here is Phạm’s use of the concept of *khôn tri/kunzhi* 困知 (acquiring true knowledge from predicaments) in describing his circumstances.

Out of Predicaments with True Knowledge

To better understand how *khôn tri/kunzhi* is comprehended in the *Humble Comments*, we turn to Phạm’s comments on a particular chapter of the *Analects*. In Chapter 9 of the Book “Jishi 季氏”, the Master reviewed four types of people endowed with different learning capabilities. The chapter in question has inspired various interpretations (and thus various translations) for this specific sentence, *kun er xue zhi you qi ci ye* 困而學之又其次也. Below are some examples of how this has been rendered:

J. Legge: “Those who are *dull and stupid*, and yet compass the learning, are another class next to these.”¹⁴

D. C. Lau: “Next again come those turn to study after having been *vexed by difficulties*” (Confucius 1979, 140).

14 The original reads, 孔子曰：「生而知之者，上也；學而知之者，次也；困而學之，又其次也；困而不學，民斯為下矣。」. James Legge translates this as follows, “Those who are born with the possession of knowledge are the highest class of men. Those who learn, and so, readily, get possession of knowledge, are the next. Those who are dull and stupid, and yet compass the learning, are another class next to these. As to those who are dull and stupid and yet do not learn—they are the lowest of the people” (*Chinese Text Project* 2017),

S. Leys: “Next again come those who learn through the *trials of life*” (Confucius 1997, 83).

Ames and Rosemont: “Something learned *in response to difficulties encountered* is again the next highest” (Confucius 1998, 199).

D. K. Gardner: “Those who learn it but *with difficulty* are next” (Gardner 2003, 41).

E. Slingerland: “Those who *find it difficult to understand* and yet persist in their studies come next” (Confucius 2003, 196).

R. Eno: “Next are those who study it only *in circumstances of duress*” (Eno 2015, 92).¹⁵

Although different from one another, the above-cited translations can be sorted into three groups, depending how each of them interpret the keyword *kun* 困. The first group takes it as an innate characteristic of the learner, such as “dull and stupid” (Legge). Close to the first group, the second understands *kun* as the learner’s cognitive ability (Slingerland). But the most common rendering treats *kun* as difficult environments and/or conditions in which the learner acquires new knowledge. It is also worth mentioning that the same translator may have different interpretations of *kun* depending on the context. Below is Legge’s translation of a passage from the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), in which he interpreted *kun* differently,

Knowledge, magnanimity, and energy, these three, are the virtues universally binding. And the means by which they carry the duties into practice is singleness. Some are born with the knowledge of those duties; some know them by study; and some acquire the knowledge *after a painful feeling of their ignorance*. But the knowledge being possessed, it comes to the same thing.¹⁶

Similarly, *khôn/kun* as a key concept in the *Humble Comments* might convey various meanings depending on the context. Unlike what we have seen in the preface, in which *khôn/kun* should represent difficult circumstances, Phạm’s comments on Chapter 9 of “Jishi” provide us with a different interpretation:

Human beings possess four ranks of material nature, but they are all people (*dân/min* 民) who hold fast to the law and love virtue. Thus, those

15 All emphases mine.

16 The original reads, 知仁勇三者，天下之達德也，所以行之者一也。或生而知之，或學而知之，或困而知之，及其知之，一也。 Emphasis mine. (*Chinese Text Project* 2017)

who have difficulties but still learn can reach the status of those whose knowledge is inborn. Without learning, the transformation of material nature appears impossible. Falling into difficulties but not learning, one will forever be trapped in difficulties. Thus, although named “the people”, they are not part of “the people” in reality.¹⁷

Readers familiar with Neo-Confucianism can easily recognize the terminology employed in Phạm’s comments, such as his reference to the concept of “material nature” (*qizhi* 氣質). Imperfect and incomplete (and thus needing refinement), “material nature” is also known as “human psyches and temperaments,” (Bell 2008, 80), and placed in opposition to the “original nature” (*benxing* 本性), the perfect and good nature preserved in human sub-consciousness (Lee 2010, 129–53). As for the “original nature”, through Phạm’s comments, it can be identified as the nature of Heavenly pattern (*tianli zhi xing* 天理之性), another vital Neo-Confucian concept. Based on Confucius’ belief that “men are nearly alike by nature” and Mencius’ theory of “humans beings are good by nature,” Phạm believed the following:

At the beginning, both the noble person and the petty person have the nature of heavenly pattern. Protecting the pattern, one will ascend and become the noble person; losing the pattern, one will descend and turn to be the petty person. When the least bit of difference has occurred, heaven and earth automatically become apart.¹⁸

Furthermore, the “material nature” in Phạm’s comments is subsequently linked to the “people,” a move which has its origin in the *Classics of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經). The poem titled “Zhengmin 烝民” from this collection reads,

Heaven, in giving birth to the multitudes of the people,	天生烝民、
To every faculty and relationship annexed its law.	有物有則。
The people possess this normal nature,	民之秉彝、
And they [consequently] love its normal virtue.	好是懿德。

17 The *Humble Comments*, Book of “Learning”, vol. 7; the original read, 人有四等氣質，然均之秉彝好德之民。故困而學可以至於生知。變化氣質非學不能也。困而不學，乃終於困，名曰民而實非民矣。

18 The original reads, 君子小人其初皆具天理之性。保其理則上而為君子。失其理則下而為小人。毫釐一分，天壤自隔。

Based on this poem, Phạm talks about people under heaven who by their “original nature” should be able to “hold fast to the law and love virtue.” This also reminds us of Zhu Xi’s concept of “Heaven’s people” (*tian min* 天民) who are all the same in possessing the commiserating mind-and-heart (Hon 2012, 16). However, this potential equality turns out to be almost impossible in practice, due to differences among their “material natures.” In this case, Phạm obviously follows Zhu Xi’s line of thought on the uneven endowments of material nature that result in the unequal learning capabilities seen in human beings. Commenting on the same chapter of “Jishi,” Zhu Xi explains,

Kun 困 means that there is something obstructed. The passage indicates that since people’s material natures are not the same, there exist these four ranks in general. Yang [Shi, 楊時] said, “From being born with the possession of knowledge, learning and getting possession of knowledge to getting possession of knowledge with difficulties due to personal imperfection, although their material natures are not the same, their [acquired] knowledge is identical. Hence, the noble man only treasures learning as precious. Thus, being entrapped in difficulties by imperfect material nature but not learning accordingly is regarded as inferior.¹⁹ (*Chinese Text Project* 2017)

Thus, Phạm’s willingness to put himself “after *kunzhi* people” can be construed as his self-identification with those who were born with limited “material nature” and acquired knowledge from the difficult circumstances in which they found themselves. This realization was undoubtedly a critical landmark in his life. Having achieved this insight, Phạm decided to “abolish learning for the purpose of the civil service examination”, and instead began carrying the *Analects* with him day and night. This was the fifth phase of transformative learning (“Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions”), and the beginning of Phạm’s new journey of “learning for the sake of one’s self.”

The *Humble Comments* and “Learning for the Sake of One’s Self”

During Phạm Nguyễn Du’s lifetime, a series of “abridged” (*tiết yếu* 節要) Confucian texts, including the Four Books and Five Classics, emerged. The series’ compiler was Bùi Huy Bích 裴輝璧 (1744–1818), a high-ranking official and contemporary and acquaintance of Phạm Nguyễn Du. Bùi abridged not only the

19 The original reads, 困，謂有所不通。言人之氣質不同，大約有此四等。楊氏曰：「生知學知以至困學，雖其質不同，然及其知之一也。故君子惟學之為貴。困而不學，然後為下。」

Four Books and Five Classics, but also Neo-Confucian works, such as the *Great Compendia of Nature and Principle* (*Xingli daquan* 性理大全). As the purpose of this series was to help Confucian students prepare for the civil service examination, it was widely reprinted several times by various printing houses throughout the nineteenth century. A preface to the series found in the first book of the *Abridged Four Books – The Great Learning* (*Tứ thư tiết yếu – Đại học* 四書節要—大學, reprinted in 1850) confirms that the series was designed to help candidates in their preparation for the exam (*tiện ư quyết khoa nhi dĩ* 便於決科而已). The preface also distinguishes “learning for the sake of argumentation” (*nghĩa lý chi học* 義理之學) from “learning for the sake of the examination” (*khoa cử chi học* 科舉之學). According to the preface,

Learning for the sake of the examination and learning for the sake of argumentation are not the same. Learning for the sake of argumentation moves from erudition to simplicity, whereas learning for the sake of the examination focuses only on simplicity. Therefore, the latter takes the entirety of the classics and their commentaries and abridges them.²⁰

Another preface printed in the first book of the *Abridged Five Classics – The Classic of Documents* (*Ngũ kinh tiết yếu – Thư kinh* 五經節要—書經, reprinted in 1842) stated,

Learning for the sake of the examination concentrates on the comprehension of the script, often abridging and simplifying it to prioritize memorization and preparation for the examination.²¹

Solemnly printed in large-size characters at the beginning of every subset in this popular series, the perception communicated in the prefaces of the differences between the two learning styles must have reflected a common belief in elite Vietnamese circles at the time. Moreover, the popularity of the abridged series was evidence of the tendency of “learning for the sake of the examination” in society. Led partly by Bùi Huy Bích’s series, this tendency undoubtedly went against what Phạm Nguyễn Du was aiming at, namely “learning for the sake of one’s self.”

For Phạm Nguyễn Du, the two contrasting forms of learning reflect the mindsets of two differing personalities. Commenting on Chapter 6:13 of the *Analects*,

20 The original reads, 科舉之學與義理之學不同。義理之學必自博而之約，科舉之學則主於約。故取經傳之全而節之。

21 The original reads, 科舉之學專於理會文字，往往節而約之以優記誦、備決科。

“You should be a *ru* 儒 scholar after the style of the noble person, and not after that of the petty person,”²² Phạm Nguyễn Du states that,

After Confucius and Mencius, people who learn to become Confucian are numerous; but since their mindsets are false and not genuine, consequently their learning is only for the sake of reputation and fortune, and is not based on [the improvement of] the self to serve magnanimous affairs. In general, seeking knowledge turns people into the noble person, when being anxious [for reputation and fortune] changes people into the petty person. The tiny space existing in the contention between the principle and the temperament entails the difference between the two types of the noble person and the petty person.²³

In a poem titled “Presented to Tồn Am” (Ký trình Tồn Am 寄呈存庵), Phạm addressed a statement on his purpose of learning directly to Búi,²⁴

為己既能希孔孟

[Learning] for the sake of one's self, one has modelled oneself on the examples of Confucius and Mencius;

逢辰應不愧皋夔

Finding oneself at a right time, one should not be ashamed with Gao Yao and Kui.²⁵

Even though the context of this admiring poem remains unknown, it was certainly no accident that Phạm chose to offer a critical commentary on the goal of learning when learning for the sake of the examination had already become a trend. For Zhu Xi, even though the sages and worthies had numerous discussions on the objective of learning, none of them were as essential as Confucius' oft-cited dictum, “Learners of the ancient time learned for the sake of [cultivating] themselves; nowadays learners learn for the sake of [pleasing] others.”²⁶ Based on the Master's dictum, the

22 “Yong ye 雍也” (6:13) of the *Analects*: 子謂子夏曰：「女為君子儒，無為小人儒。」

23 The original reads, 孔孟之後，世之學為如者多矣，惟其立心偽而不真，故其學只為名譽利祿，不於自己分上事。蓋為學則同於君子而操心則入於小人，所爭理欲一毫之間，遂有君子小人兩樣之別。

24 Tồn Am is the literary name of Búi Huy Bích. The poem is in the collection called *Anthology of Poetry from the Imperial Việt* (*Hoàng Việt thi tuyển* 皇越詩選), also compiled by Búi.

25 Gao Yao was the legal officer of the legendary emperor Shun, who also appointed Kui as the music master.

26 The original reads, 子曰：「古之學者為己，今之學者為人。」 (“Xianwen 憲問”, *Analects*, 14:24). Zhu Xi's original line reads, 其說多矣，然未有如此言之切而要者 (*Collected Commentaries*).

phrase “Learning for the sake of one’s self” became one of the most central themes for Neo-Confucians. Zhu Xi even employed it as an important criterion to identify who should be included in his circle of fellow scholars. An advocate of this spirit, Phạm would base his learning agenda on Zhu Xi’s tradition.

Having established the new goal for his learning, Phạm Nguyễn Du undertook to devise a concrete agenda, which he tried to realize through a rereading of the *Analects*. As described in the preface, having resolutely abandoned “learning for the examination” (*cử tử học* 舉子學), Phạm read the *Analects* in three stages. First, he read the main text repeatedly until becoming intimately familiar with it (*shoudu* 熟讀). The term *shoudu* employed in this specific context is actually also a key term in the *Conversations with Master Zhu, Arranged Topically* (*Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類), especially in the sections on reading. According to Zhu Xi, becoming intimately familiar with a text means the reader taking it into their heart-and-mind, an embodiment process that requires both physical experiences of and deep reflections on the focal subject. As stated in *Conversations with Master Zhu*:

Generally speaking, in reading, we must first become intimately familiar with the text so that its words seem to come from our own mouths. We should then continue to reflect on it so that its ideas seem to come from our minds. Only then can there be real understanding. (Chu 1990, 135)²⁷

Using this specific term, Phạm clearly shared the same thoughts with Zhu Xi, as the first stage of his reading method implied direct contact with and independent understanding of the text without assistance from any intermediary.

In the second and third stages of his reading, Phạm reread the *Analects* with the help of the *Collected Commentaries*, and later, in consultation with the annotations made by other Confucian scholars. This appears similar to the method described in *Conversations with Master Zhu*, which recommends reading commentaries only after the attainment of intimate familiarity with the text. In Zhu Xi’s words, the order should go as follows: “At the moment I’m not even speaking about the recitation of commentaries; let’s simply recite the classical texts to the point of intimate familiarity (Chu 1990, 138).”²⁸

27 The original reads, 大抵觀書先須熟讀，使其言皆若出於吾之口；繼以精思，使其意皆若出於吾之心，然後可以有得爾。

28 The original reads, 而今未說讀得注，且只熟讀正經。As a breakthrough, the first and direct reading of a text requires great effort, and the consultation of commentaries should only come later. Zhu Xi reminds us that, “You must take the classical text and read it till you’ve become intimately familiar with it. Savor each and every word until you know its taste. If there are passages you don’t understand, ponder them deeply, and if you still don’t get them, then read the commentaries—only then will the commentaries have any significance” (*ibid.*, 155).

The way Phạm studied the *Analects* was thus very much in line with Zhu Xi's reading method. According to Zhu Xi, if people do not read a classical text in this manner, their understanding of it will remain superficial: "the words will be hollow and learning will not be for their own sake, as is now the case with those preparing for the examinations" (Chu 1990, 156).

Besides the *Humble Comments*, Phạm Nguyễn Du's thoughts on "learning for the sake of one's self" are also well presented in a poem entitled "Bequeathed to Phạm Lập Trai, Who Passed the Imperial Examination in the Same Year as the Author"²⁹ (Di đồng niên Phạm Lập Trai 遺同年范立齋). The poem reads:

Memorizing well the remainder [of the teachings of the sages],	記誦得緒餘
Holding fast to them but losing their true subtleties,	攀持失真妙
People are remote in time and space from the thoughts of Confucius and Mencius,	悠悠孔孟意
And [the thoughts of the masters] increasingly become vague and unclear to them.	日望益幽渺
[Following such a learning method], people will ruin their intention,	以此壞心術
Run into the apertures of fame and gain,	走入聲利竅
And even until their death, remain unaware of its danger.	到死不自覺
This is both regrettable and mournful.	可嘆復可悼
I am glad that at your young age,	我喜君年髫
Through learning, you already found the gist [of the teachings].	學已見大要
Various schools of thinkers have discussed [the classics] in succession,	百家談紛紛
As a mixed assembly of disciples in chaos.	雜進徒擾擾
As gem-like stones, they can be thousands though,	雖累千砢砢
But can any small piece of preciousness be found among them?	何如一寸寶
Why don't we go back to the essence [of the teachings],	曷不反精義
Probing [into the texts], gradually analysing and understanding them?	探討漸剖瞭
When the latent has been revealed and honoured,	蘊蓄既寵遂
It will expand, exposing its depth and vastness.	克擴自汪浩
Confucians of the Song and Yuan dynasties had gone ahead,	宋元諸儒先
Closing the door and carefully studying [the classics].	閉門事講究
[Traveling on] the great road, one really looks up [to the high hill].	景行實在仰

29 Lập Trai 立齋 is the literary name of Phạm Quý Thích 范貴適 (1760–1825), who passed the civil service examination and earned the title "presented scholar," *jinshi* 進士, at the age of 19 in 1779. Like Phạm Nguyễn Du, he was uncooperative with the Tây Sơn.

All of the profound teachings can be examined	微訓皆可考
And traced back up to their sources.	淵源邈以上
The effects [of this learning method] are not small, indeed.	功用良非少
If the cause of truth does not perish,	斯文苟不喪
With it, one can rise again from decline and failure.	相與起衰倒

The last two lines in the poem are unmistakably based on Chapter 9.5 of the *An-alects*. In that chapter, the Master remained fearless when facing threats because he confidently considered himself the embodiment of this culture.³⁰ Similarly, Phạm placed himself in a comparable position of a follower of the Way, who had learned and experienced the Sage’s teaching, holding fast to and finally practicing it in his life. The poem nicely summarizes the last five phases of Phạm’s transformative learning process, whose starting point is “Learning for the sake of one’s self”.

“Learning for the Sake of One’s Self” in Modern Contexts

Determining the precise contexts of all Confucius’ sayings, made thousands of years ago, remains an impossible task. In his discussion of the difficulties of contextualizing Confucian classics, Tu Wei-Ming mentions the dictum of “learning for the sake of one’s self” as an example of this arduous task,

The challenge all members of the scholarly community who are actively involved in comparative studies must face is whether or not, in principle, we can really understand such a deceptively simple Confucian statement as “learning is for the sake of the self” out of context. The answer, unfortunately, must be in the negative. We cannot know what it means if we do not situate it in its proper context. (Tu 1985, 54)

However, besides their efforts in reconstructing the contexts of the sayings, people often try to read the Master’s words into their contemporary contexts. It is not difficult to see that both Zhu Xi and Phạm Nguyễn Du advocated “learning for the sake of one’s self” on similar grounds, working against the socio-educational

30 The chapter reads, “The Master was put in fear in Kuang. He said, ‘After the death of King Wen, was not the cause of truth lodged here in me? If Heaven had wished to let this cause of truth perish, then I, a future mortal, should not have got such a relation to that cause. While Heaven does not let the cause of truth perish, what can the people of Kuang do to me?’” (*Chinese Text Project* 2017)

evils of their times, which were learning exclusively for the sake of the civil service examination, for personal career-advancement and interest, and nothing else.³¹ As pointed out by de Bary, Zhu Xi's thoughts started and ended with the goal of "learning for the sake of one's self" (de Bary 1991, 31), and the same is true of Phạm Nguyễn Du. They both read, understood, and carried Confucius' dictum into their contemporary contexts.

Although still trying to reconstruct the socio-political and cultural contexts of the tradition of "learning for the sake of one's self" (Kuang 2012, 27–37), modern scholars seem more interested in its potential impact on contemporary society (if it were to be widely taught and embraced). Bian Shiyong believes that Confucian "learning for the sake of one's self" has nothing to do with vulgar individualism that is now popularly understood as striving egoistically for the benefit of oneself. On the contrary, it is the need to morally cultivate and perfect the self which is the core of strong human relationships (Bian 2005, 124).

Based on the same understanding, Li Can feels the urgency to recover and strengthen the tradition of "learning for the sake of one's self" in order to fight against utilitarianism, as well as the need to revivify it to reinforce the interactive effects of the "college humanistic quality education model." Li even goes further, and criticizes the abuse of multimedia in college teaching that can weaken the thinking abilities of the student, and suggests that the tradition of "learning for the sake of one's self" could be a way to reduce the overdependence of college teaching and learning on multimedia sources—one that can enhance the proactivity of the learners (Li 2015, 49; 2011, 17–20; 2010, 122–25).

Huang Jianhua and Wang Derong examine the principle in connection with Zhu Xi's *Learning Regulations of Bailudong Academy* (*Bailudong shuyuan xuegui* 白鹿洞書院學規). As Zhu Xi's Academy took the principle of "learning for the sake of one's self" as an integral part of its spirit, it emphasized three key issues: the cultivation of morality, the pursuit of the self-improvement of virtues, and the realization of an ideal personality. Like Xiao Qunzhong and other Chinese scholars (Xiao 2002, 5–9; Li 2008, 77–80), Huang and Wang see this traditional moral education trend as advantageous in modern society, because it can contribute to training a healthy personality, constructing a harmonious social environment, improving the self-consciousness and initiative of the moral subject, and removing utilitarian and instrumentalist tendencies from modern

31 Here is Zhu Xi's description of what was happening in his time, "But in today's world what fathers encourage in their sons, what older brothers exhort in their younger brothers, what teachers impart to their students, and what students all study for is nothing more than to prepare for the civil service examinations" (de Bary 1991, 32).

education (Huang 2012, 18–21).³² Other scholars, such as Zhou Zhixiang and Zhu Hanmin, also study Zhu Xi’s perception of the tradition of “learning for the sake of one’s self,” concluding that for Zhu, this tradition is both the goal and foundational principle of learning, and that the purpose of Zhu’s interpretation of the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學) is to theorize and systematize the tradition, as well as to implement it in his annotated text (Zhou 2011, 34–39). The principle is also studied in relation with Kant’s concepts of moral self-discipline and freedom (Wen 2006, 63–70).

Since the tradition/principle of “learning for the sake of one’s self” has travelled far beyond national boundaries, it has been practiced and studied not only within China, but also in other countries in East Asia. In Korea, the eminent Neo-Confucian Yi Hwang 李滉 (1501–1570, more widely known as Yi T’oegye 李退溪), had his understanding of the tradition linked directly to the study of the heart-and-mind (*simhak* 心學), which was systematized in the Study of Principle (*lihak* 理學) and centred on Substance-Function (*cheyong* 體用) (Lee 2010, 165–90). Studying the influence of the Cheng brothers’ interpretation of the principle “learning for the sake of one’s self” on Korean educational philosophy, Jang Jing Ho focuses on the case of Yi T’oegye, and concludes that the revivification of this tradition could be used to counter certain problems in contemporary education, such as egoism, commercialism, and the worship of money (Zhang 2002, 75–78).

The case of Phạm Nguyễn Du suggests that the notion of “learning for the sake of one’s self” is both similar to and different from these latter-day attempts to revive the term as a principle of learning. Among Phạm’s many elucidations of the dictum, his comments on Chapter 9:30 (“Zi Han 子罕”) of the *Analects* are worth considering. Here he stated:

When understanding that learning is for the sake of one’s self, one will be able to put forth one’s strength conscientiously; hereafter one can believe in right principles with firmer sincerity³³; hereafter one can stand erect in the middle without inclining to either side³⁴; hereafter one can

32 There are a number of essays written in the same vein, such as Pang 2010, 8–9.

33 Chapter 19.2 (“Zizhang 子張”) from the *Analects* reads, “Zi Zhang said, “When a man holds fast to virtue, but without seeking to enlarge it, and *believes in right principles, but without firm sincerity* (信道不篤), what account can be made of his existence or non-existence?” (*Chinese Text Project* 2017; emphasis mine).

34 The *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong*) records a conversation between Confucius and Zilu 子路 on energy (*qiang* 強), in which the Master states, “The superior man cultivates a friendly harmony, without being weak. How firm is he in his energy! He *stands erect in the middle, without inclining to either side* (中立而不倚). How firm is he in his energy!” (*Chinese Text Project* 2017; emphasis mine).

suit one's actions to changing conditions. The attainment of this level is already the sage's affair.³⁵

For Phạm, “learning for the sake of one's self” is the foundation of the long process of becoming a sage. With the right motivation, he believed, a person will invest all efforts into the perfection of the self and knowledge. Self-cultivation and knowledge learning are thus processes that require the learner to use critical observation and analysis to verify the truthfulness of what he has learned. Only in such conditions can the learner accept and live up to the verified “right principles with firmer sincerity”. This critical mind helps to prevent any biases, helping the follower of the Way to “stand erect in the middle without inclining to either side”. Standing unbiased subsequently allows the sage-to-be to act flexibly according to any given circumstances when holding fast to his right principles. This depiction of this lifelong learning process can serve as advice that is universally applicable to anyone who sincerely wishes to become more morally cultivated, intellectually improved, and socially engaged. Thus, besides reading the dictum into contemporary contexts and employing it as a way to fight against egoism, commercialization, corruption, and other negative practices in modern education, Phạm's thoughts on the motto “Learning for the sake of one's self” presented in his *Humble Comments* can inspire us with suggestions of how to live this motto to the fullest.

Conclusion

As a theory of adult learning, transformative learning theory allows us a deeper look into the intellectual life of Phạm Nguyễn Du and his *Humble Comments*, helping us to identify Phạm's deep shift in perspective from “learning for the sake of others” to “learning for the sake of one's self”. His transformative learning process was a long-running attempt to find true knowledge in the predicaments and circumstances in which he found himself. Although his chosen path to Confucian sagehood was long and difficult, Phạm was determined to take it. By intensively reading the *Analects* in the light of Neo-Confucian philosophy and in the context of civil-war-torn eighteenth-century Vietnam, Phạm completed what would later be formalised as Mezirow's ten phases of the transformative learning procedure. Powerful and encouraging, Phạm's story is an example of how a pre-modern Vietnamese member of the literati could read a Confucian classic and adapt Neo-Confucianism to the socio-cultural and historical conditions in which he lived.

35 The original reads, 知學為為己, 則能切實用力, 然後能信道愈篤, 然後能中立不倚, 然後能達權與變。至是己為聖人之事矣。

Viewed in this light, Phạm’s career and work offer a valuable perspective on the question of whether and how Confucian tradition(s) of learning can contribute to the acquisition of knowledge and self-cultivation in the information age. Phạm’s agenda of “learning for the sake of one’s self” does not mean egoism; instead, it reflects the quest for self-improvement as a means to promote positive social change. Phạm urged the learner not to blindly believe in and dogmatically repeat what she has learned, but to experiment and draw out meaningful lessons from her own experience. Moreover, the unconventional organization of *Humble Comments* reflects Phạm’s commitment to the ideal of independent and creative thinking. Phạm’s work thus offers us an opportunity to see Confucianism as a vibrant literary and philosophical tradition—a tradition that many in Vietnam and elsewhere have used to reflect critically on some of the most pressing issues of our contemporary era.

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Appendix A

Phạm Nguyễn Du's

“Preface” to the *Humble Comments on the Analects*

(from *Luân Ngữ Ngũ Án* 論語愚案, preserved in the library of the Institute of Han-Nom Studies, Hanoi, Vietnam, VHV.349/1-2)

論語愚案自序

故年十三家父使讀論語經虎其音義而未能知味也稍長為湯屋所驅專事章句文字之學以投時好與論語相遠幾二十六年時或執卷不過勾擇推捨務為記憶待訪問擬資肥腴而已聖賢旨義茫然洋若亦未能自悔亦未有發發之者成歲于九輪宛俯敷添差以狂慳懷恐懼一夕思由論語取讀之至四十五十無開句恍然如夢方覺徘徊如有所失矣且既而當然自肯自許年下知信平生校度從小學入平為明道君子以吾觀魯曾求道時尚古正由古今至老之年更有許多年矣獨不可努力力向前以自托于困知之後即於是發意發學字學動以論語自隨先恭讀正文分讀其義註次真諸儒說遂逐章玩味不捨晝夜積七八月漸漸開豁遂深嗜而力求焉輒不自揆拉出諸類以便覽閱凡為篇四為類二三為章四百九十三每章序正文下附以愚按因以論語愚按名之自是年夏越庚子冬乃成將之亥金豐公暇取玩語有未慙慮輒復要接期以老乃敢問世或以論語聖人所記章部二子簡子取而改篇簡是類能不為辰論所累歟則又曰未暇也固云論語孔子弟子嘗雜記其言而卒成其書者曾子弟子

月日

樂于春之徒也每篇取篇首而空為初初無意義頽淵大賦其次如子路子張治長以其名為篇與樹靈陽貨季氏無別頗覺亂流沈論語古十一篇齊二十二篇曾乃有下介且以管數多繁勞均也今之讀論語者為必欲推尋聖訓潛田鑿鑿體於躬應於事物以求所以為己者矣為必欲披掩篇章次第就無意義中強求有意義區區從事於其小者矣如必欲推尋聖訓潛思默契體於躬應於事物以求所以為己則此書固石洞氏自學之書也文篇類附已見而不為訓釋何妨乎且論語四百八十二章內六章重出此書去其共

重出但如鄉黨篇四十五節及從集註四三章別為四章為四百九十三重出章雖以類散出逐章必有註篇名示不沒也其說集註以發正文亦謹重之所為也其註而曰聖曰學子曰法曰政以聖人盛德格言列於前則以門人所言所記列於後相統屬有法度學者就篇求類就類求章就章求求意以覺然不謂之有功而謂之有罪可采攸謂此書余因而顧學聖人之道也不敢自以為功亦不敢自以為罪諸君無論此作之功罪盡語語之是非客既去攸掩卷悲夫孔子沒論語存遺棄當一日忘也聖賢既遠吾語與節莊誦道言衍佛

海陽華堂范生齋筆點

全序性慈知之不至行之不力上悖至教以違先意曾子曰吾日三省吾身此讀論語大法也若俟知教者取焉固非其語于書手藏之房于冬敬書于京北月德之江之修拙齋

Appendix B:

“General Statements on the Sage”

為言教一統相續傳之無窮於尚書見堯舜湯武之
 事業於論語見夫子之事業
 聖篇總說
 此篇謹取論語中所記聖人懿德事是凡一百五章為
 四卷欲讀者端詳景仰聖人襟臨乎前望之而有
 所尊仰之而有所準其心一於依歸其心一於向往知行
 者之有象射者之有的如群工之環視拱聽乎大匠如
 萬物之齊瞻並戴乎天地日月無別念妄意之歎赫
 也岐異端之眾趨也嗚呼生於數千載之後求聖人之
 津授言高者馳心玄妙搜儒而入於禪非若泯泯乎於流
 於污下而不自覺孰知聖人之道其精則足以配無極
 太極之運而其粗不出日用尋倫禮樂刑政之具其六
 遠則磅礴古今守而之不可窮際而其近不出起居出
 入動休飲食之間其事上賤下愚厚仁愛之極其至而耳
 進退辭受之義則千乘萬壙舉天下之可敬者不足
 以動其心其處已接物溫和平易而剛天直方之氣則
 非千鈞萬仞雷霆斧鉞之所能展聽其言者無且
 多之效目前之利而天子用之可以齊家治國平天下
 配三皇五帝三王之並下貽國家生民千萬世無窮之
 安學者用之進足以致君澤民樹立不朽退足以修己
 教人俯仰無怍大哉道乎備於聖人之身而散見於
 聖人之書聖遠書存茲則見昔亦猶見聖也豈見
 聖亦希免由聖可不知所警勸哉

“General Statements on Learning”

如此後世則以譏不為惡矣
 附門人記諸弟子一章
 樂也愚參也魯師也徐也也
 愚按此章先儒以為聖人之言指四守之微而深警之
 也然求之四倫之末則師之無賞由之無文其病最
 一區而愚者之原管者之實偏中自有是處宜乎魯能
 傳道樂能道道而師與由終終不至欺
 學篇總說
 此篇謹取論語中論學處凡一百二章為六卷固以
 致知力行名身交際隨章意而類分之謂斯言想若其
 聖門萬策親炙于江漢秋陽太和元氣前者魯之三克
 禪之心守其所已得求其未能磨濯吾心周旋人道以庶
 幾所謂正歲嗟采目前庶物無非樂倫日帝田之常紙
 上餘師無非心得躬行之教由希賢而希聖自成己而
 成人儒者之學無餘蘊矣

“General Statements on Official”

仕篇總說
 此篇謹取論語中聖人貴人小人之事九四十五章分上中下類為三卷以為仕者登或天仕字從士從人蓋非士非人誠不足以言仕也聖人用行捨藏典顏淵當高才如仲由乘將之妻于賈隱王之疑皆未足以語此仕之單的捨茲其何適歟至若子產有君子之道管仲有仁者之功史魚之直武子之愚公叔之什家臣臧閔之見大意皆當中之勉進者聖人亦各有取焉其餘謂之具臣謂之窮仕謂之鄙夫臣聞此亦可以悚惕矣嗟夫君臣大義

諸天地本諸人心士之未仕則學事君之道既仕則行所學以事君有志於上猶倚其中苟志於中不免為下又况所志既下其何以行臣美合人道俯仰於天地間為歷歷遺續無非至訓求之則得捨之則亡願以此望士大夫亦所以自勉

“General Statements on Politics”

多士章以士同毋亦何異之有是故為國者莫急於立
 裁或不
 政篇總說
 右政篇以全人大訓及門人所言所記凡關於政者共一百四十一章各同章意分正已親人孔樂臨民四類推政者正也之意則政之大無出此四者而其本在乎正已是以古先聖王惟極性允執厥中皆正己底道理事者若於一辰法或垂拱萬世宗廟顧以聖王扶植以不入於舍歟
 養稱於經傳而長存於日用常行固無非一己之柱一
 已正則萬目舉一歪不正則萬目隳執此以求古後
 盛衰治亂之迹猶鏡效燭耀瞭然在掌為政者小
 用之可已工即大用之國天下都本外是測乎