

The Vietnamese intellectuals

The Vietnamese people are studious. The *lettrés* have been well respected in society. Some famous scholars were from ordinary families.

The Vietnamese were deeply influenced by Confucianism as soon as they got in touch with Chinese culture. Society was composed of four cardinal occupations of which the top was studying.

The intellectuals in feudal time.

Under the *Ngo* (939 – 965), *Dinh* (968 – 980) and *Earlier Le* (980 – 1009) dynasties almost all the intellectuals were Buddhist monks. The triennial contests took place in 1075 under the *Ly*. The next year the *Quoc Tu Giam* (National College) was opened. In 1080 the first Academy was created. The doctoral contest was held in the capital, *Thang Long* in 1232. The King recruited talented men through the contests. Everybody, regardless of their social classes, could be recruited provided that they passed the contest. In reality, few needy students passed the contest to be appointed by the King. In the olden time there were no public schools. Education was given by retired mandarins or dissatisfied scholars at home. Not many people could send their children to these private schools. On the other hand, they needed their children to help them in farming.

After the *coup d'etat* of 1527 many pro-*Le* students boycotted the triennial contests organized by the *Mac*. Some mandarins resigned. Some killed themselves to show their loyalty to the *Le*. Some tried to resist the *Mac* to restore the *Later Le*. It was the beginning of the one hundred-year civil war in our country.

The *Later Le* were restored after the fall of the *Mac* in the 17th century. The King became a political facade. The real power was in the hands of the *Trinh* who established a totalitarian regime, one of the most corrupt ones in Vietnam. In the 18th century the triennial contests were disorganized. The examination centers were noisy and in disorder. The result of the contest was unfair. Lords *Trinh* were corrupt leaders. Rich people could buy academic parchments and office titles.

Education in the South (Dang Trong) in the 17th century was primary in comparison with education in the North (Dang Ngoai). Talented men were recruited through the contest or recommendation. *Dao Duy Tu*, a herdsman, was recommended by *Tran Due Hoa* to become a strategist. Lords *Nguyen* were more popular and democratic than Lords *Trinh*. The Southerners had more freedom, justice and peaceful life than the Northerners under Kings *Le* and Lords *Trinh*.

In the 19th century the triennial contests were well organized. Kings *Minh Mang*, *Thieu Tri* and *Tu Duc* were good at literature and poetry. They all were devoted Confucians.

The Confucian scholars must be upright, loyal, good at literature, poetry, aware of Confucianism and interested in honor. Their loyalty to the King was tied to their patriotism. They were taught to be loyal to any good and bad Kings unless they were legitimate. This concept led to the distinction of the "good" and "legitimate" from the "bad" and "illegitimate" and to civil wars and revolts in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.

People accused *Tran Thu Do* in forgetting that his firmness, patriotism and lucidity saved our country from Mongolian invasion. People accused the *Mac* of overthrowing the *Le* without accusing the *Trinh* of usurping the *Le*'s power. It was the same for the *Tay Son* in the 18th century. If we say that the *Tay Son* were "illegitimate", *Quang Trung* must be "illegitimate". Was he wrong when defeating the Thai, Chinese troops and the "legitimate" feudal forces headed by the *Trinh* and *Nguyen*?

Ly Tien was the first scholar passing *mau tai* (1) under the Eastern Han. He was actively backed by Governor of Giao Chi, Zhe Miang-jian to be appointed Governor of Giao Chi by the Eastern Han under emperor Han Ling-ti (168 – 189). After him we had *Ly Cam* and *Truong Trong*. The latter was the first Giao Chi-born scholar to be appointed Governor of Kin Tcheng in China.

Under the *Ly* dynasty (1010 – 1225) Regent *To Hien Thanh* was well known for his uprightness when refusing the bribe given by Prince *Long Xuong*'s mother. He supported *Long Can* who was King at the age of three. It was King *Ly Cao Ton* (1176 – 1210).

Chu Van An proposed to kill seven bad Courtiers. He resigned when King *Tran Du Ton* (1341-1369) denied his proposal. He had a retired life near Mount Phoenix, *Hai Duong* province.

Dr. *Mac Dinh Chi* was a star in poetry. His presence of mind was unbelievable. His genius made him deserve the honorable title given by the Chinese Emperor "the two- nation first-ranking doctoral laureate".

Dr. *Nguyen Binh Khiem* (1491 – 1585) known as *Trang Trinh* was considered as a political prophet in Vietnam. He served the *Mac* for eight years, then resigned. The *Mac*, *Trinh* and *Nguyen* followed his advises. The *Mac* moved to *Cao Bang*. The *Trinh* kept the *Le* in paralyzing their power. The *Nguyen* went South far away from the *Trinh*.

Phung Khac Khoan, *Luong Huu Khanh*, *Nguyen Du* were *Nguyen Binh Khiem*'s disciples who had active contributions to the restoration of the *Later Le*.

Phung Khac Khoan (1528 – 1613), a step brother of *Nguyen Binh Khiem*, was a good diplomat. He convinced the Ming to recognize the *Later Le* after the defeat of the *Mac*.

Dr. *Phan Thanh Gian* killed himself by taking poison composed of opium and vinegar, thinking that he was unable to resist the French (1867). Before his suicide he got dressed properly. Looking at the North he bowed down to show his loyalty to King *Tu Duc*. He gave the last words to his family and took poison. Dr. *Phan Thanh Gian* signed the treaty of 1862, recognizing French occupation in the three Eastern provinces of *Nam Ky* (Cochinchina). In 1863 he went to France and Spain to negotiate the ransom of these three provinces. His mission was unsuccessful.

Dr. *Nguyen Trai* and Dr. *Ngo Thoi Nhiem* were two eminent scholars in feudal time.

Nguyen Trai received his doctorate at the age of 21. His father was Dr. *Nguyen Phi Khanh*, who was captured and brought by the Ming to Nanking. *Nguyen Trai* planned to go there to take care of his father. At the gate of China, listening to his father *Nguyen Trai* returned home, thinking about the country's liberation.

Nguyen Trai helped *Le Loi* actively. At first, in virtue of a Confucian scholar, he thought that *Le Loi* was an ordinary fisherman spending time eating and drinking. One late night, he heard *Le Loi* and his entourage talking about their plan of resistance. *Nguyen Trai* respected him, thinking that he deserved to assume national affairs.

In order to attract the participation of the masses in the resistance *Nguyen Trai* secretly ordered his men to use lard to write:

*Le Loi will be King.
Nguyen Trai will be his Courtier.*

on the leaves. The ants ate lard by biting these words to make them readable. The leaves fell. The wind spread them. People found the same words everywhere. They joined the resistance, thinking that it was God's will.

The resistance was totally supported by the people in the mountainous and rural areas. Its cause was clear. It gained popularity throughout the country. Its militants were well disciplined. They helped the people and respected their lives and properties. They swept all the isolated military posts of the Ming in the South. The Ming were militarily and economically isolated and besieged everywhere. At the Sino-Vietnamese border their reinforcements were fatally defeated. The Ming were demoralized. They withdrew from Dal Viet (2) after ten years of bloodshed.

Nguyen Trai was a strategist, a geographer and an educator. He wrote the famous *Binh Ngo Dai Cao* (Anti-Chinese Proclamation) and was author of many precious works. In 1442 he was sentenced to death after enjoying his retired life at the foot of Mount *Con Son*, *Chi Linh* district, *Hai Duong* province!

Killing talented men who had served *Le Loi* during the resistance against the Ming was a black spot in history. *Nguyen Trai*, *Pham Van Xao*, *Tran Nguyen Han* were killed under the *Le*. Under the reign of King *Gia Long* (1802 – 1819) Minister of Defense *Dang Tran Thuong* was killed and Marshall *Nguyen Van Thanh* was forced to kill himself because of a poem by his son, *Nguyen Van Thuyen*.

Dr. *Ngo Thoi Nhiem* was an excellent scholar in North Vietnam. When the *Tay Son* marched on *Thang Long* to defeat the *Trinh* in 1786, he was recommended by *Tran Van Ky*. General *Nguyen Hue*, future Emperor *Quang Trung*, was happy with his collaboration. After his victory over the Qing in 1789 he ordered *Ngo Thoi Nhiern* to use his literary talent to avoid the war between China and Vietnam. *Ngo Thoi Nhiem* accomplished his mission satisfactorily.

Emperor *Quang Trung* and *Ngo Thoi Nhiem* respected each other. The former loved the talents and knowledge of the latter. The latter respected patriotism, heroism and lucidity of this young and invincible Emperor.

After the fall of the *Tay Son* *Dang Tran Thuong*, who had been jealous of *Nhiem's* talent, ordered his men to beat him up to death in front of the Temple to Confucius in *Thang Long (Hanoi)* in 1803. What a smallness and cruelty from a scholar! *Dang Tran Thuong*, in his turn, was sentenced to death when he was Minister of Defense.

The intellectuals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In 1862 *Bien Hoa*, *Gia Dinh* and *Dinh Tuong (My Tho)* were occupied by the French who finished the conquest of the three Western provinces (*Vinh Long*, *An Giang* <*Long Xuyen*> and *Ha Tien*) in 1867.

Nguyen Dinh Chieu, *Huynh Man Dat*, *Phan Van Tri* exposed their patriotism in their poems after the signing of the shameful treaty of 1862.

Scholar *Nguyen Huu Huan* (1840 – 1875) led the resistance against the French in *Cai Lay, Thuoc Nhieu, Dinh Tuong* province. He was imprisoned once by the French. In 1874 he was released and continued the resistance against the French. In 1875 he was captured and executed in *Phu Kiet, Dinh Tuong* province at the age of 35. He was fearless before the execution in composing a long poem expressing his patriotic philosophy: "*I would rather die than surrender*".

From the second half of the 19th century to the early 20th century appeared many intellectuals who were aware of Chinese characters, *quoc ngu* and French. They soon collaborated with the French to maintain "French peace" and *mission civilisatrice* in their new colony in the Far East.

Ton Tho Tuong (1825 – 1877), a Confucian scholar in *Nam Ky*, was the early collaborator of the French. He initiated the creation of the title of *Doc Phu Su* for the Vietnamese administrators in *Nam Ky*.

Petrus Truong Vinh Ky (1837 – 1898) was an excellent linguist. He surprised French Emperor Napoleon III when he served as translator for the French during the visit of *Phan Thanh Gian* in Paris (1863). He wrote many books in French and *quoc ngu*. He gave birth to the first newspaper in Vietnam, the *Gia Dinh Bao*.

Paulus Huynh Tinh Cua (1834 – 1907) was a *Doc Phu Su*, a journalist and a lexicographer.

In *Bac Ky* (Tonkin) there were *Pham Quynh* (1892 – 1945) and *Nguyen Van Vinh* (1882 – 1936).

Pham Quynh was promoted to Minister of Education, then Minister of the Interior. He was good at Chinese characters, *quoc ngu* and French. His fervent belief in French *mission civilisatrice* and colonialism cost his life in 1945. He was corporally suppressed by *Viet Minh* at *Co Bi* (near Hue).

The above intellectuals had many contributions to the cultural treasure in *quoc ngu*. But, they were not politically welcomed by their people.

Nguyen Truong To (1828 – 1871) was different. He was a Catholic. He went abroad and admired Western culture and technology. He thought about his country's reforms to be economically prosperous, militarily strong, diplomatically open-minded, politically independent, socially happy and educationally Westernized. He sent his proposals of reforms to King *Tu Duc* many times without getting any positive response from *Hue*. His first proposal was sent in 1863 i.e five years before the reform of Japan. King *Tu Duc* and his entourage couldn't trust him due to his narrow relations with the French missionaries.

From the end of the 19th century to the early 20th century emerged five Confucian scholars. One of them, *Hoang Cao Khai*, served the French so actively that he was promoted to Vice-Roy of *Bac Ky*. The other four struggled for their country's independence. They were *Phan Dinh Phung*, *Phan Boi Chau* or *Phan Sao Nam*, *Phan Chu Trinh* and *Huynh Thuc Khang*.

Phan Dinh Phung (1847 – 1895) was Censor at the Hue Court. He was dismissed by *Ton That Thuyet* and *Nguyen Van Tuong* after he protested King *Duc Duc*'s dethronement. He led the resistance in *Vu Quang, Huong Khe* district, *Ha Tinh* province. *Hoang Cao Khai*, his old friend, convinced him to collaborate with the French but he refused. He fought the French until he died of dysentery in 1895.

Phan Boi Chau or ***Phan Sao Nam*** (1867 – 1940) was the leader of the Journey to the East Movement. Excited by the Japanese victory over the Russians after the reform of Meiji our revolutionary encouraged the students to study in Japan. He had connections with Inukai, Okuma and Sun Yat Sen in exile in Japan. He shuttled between Japan, China and Siam to help the Vietnamese students, to direct revolutionary activities inside and outside Vietnam and to struggle foreign support especially from Japan and China. Tacitly, the

Vietnamese revolutionaries in China received some favor from the local government. Inspired by the Kuomintang *Phan* founded the *Viet Nam Quang Phuc Hoi* in 1912. Many members of *Viet Nam Quang Phuc Hoi* returned to Vietnam to prepare an uprising. In 1917 *Luong Ngoc Quyen* and Sergeant *Trinh Van Can* took control of *Thai Nguyen*, hoisting the flag of *Viet Nam Quang Phuc Hoi* in five days.

In 1925 *Phan Boi Chau* was arrested in Shanghai and brought to *Hanoi*. He was sentenced to death. The Vietnamese students took to the streets, asking for his amnesty. Our revolutionary was under house arrest in *Hue* where he died in 1940.

Phan Boi Chau spent all his life for revolutionary activities. He stirred up Vietnamese nationalism with his books, poems, letters written in blood from Japan and his devotion to the country's *independence*. Many students or civil servants in the 1920s and 1930s quit schools or jobs to be involved in revolutionary activities against the French after seeing him. *Phan Boi Chau* was called *Ong Gia Ben Ngu* (the Old Man at Ben Ngu). *Phan Van Hum*, a graduate of *Ecole Supérieure de Travaux Publiques* in Ha Noi, was a civil servant in Hue. After a conversation with *Ong Gia Ben Ngu* he quit his job to embark upon revolutionary activities. In the 1930s he was a leading figure of the Fourth International in Cochinchina. He was killed by the Stalinists after the Viet Minh grabbed power in Sai Gon.

Phan Chu Trinh (1872 – 1926) was a revolutionary and reformer. He was apparently Westernized. He had hair cut with a mustache à la *Napoleon III*. He wore leather shoes, suit and tie. He neither liked monarchy nor relied on Japan. Like Gandhi he advocated *ahimsa* (non-violence), democracy, reform a *l'occidentale*. The *Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc* was founded in 1907 in *Hanoi* in imitation of the Keio University founded by Fukuzawa in Japan. *Phan Chu Trinh* gave lectures there several times. He was sentenced to death in 1908 because of the anti-tax demonstration in *Quang Nam*. The French did not execute him but they deported him to Poulo Condore. In 1911 *Phan Chu Trinh* went to France where he lived miserably in fourteen years (1911 – 1925). His son died of TB. When World War I broke out *Phan Chu Trinh* and Dr. *Phan Van Truong* were imprisoned at *La Santé* (3). He returned to *Saigon* in 1925 and continued his struggle by writing newspapers and giving lectures to advocate democracy and reforms. He died in 1926 near *Saigon*. Some 120,000 people attended his funeral.

Dr. *Huynh Thuc Khang* (1876 – 1948) spent thirteen years in the Poulo Condore prisons on the account of the anti-tax demonstration in *Quang Nam* in 1908. Both *Huynh Thuc Khang* and *Phan Chu Trinh* were originally from *Quang Nam*. In Poulo Condore our revolutionary had enough time to study French by himself!

Huynh Thuc Khang ran a newspaper, *Tieng Dan*. In 1945 he was Minister of the Interior of the new-born independent government led by *Ho Chi Minh*. He became acting president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from June to September, 1946 during *Ho Chi Minh*'s stay in France.

The Westernized intellectuals.

After World War I the number of Westernized intellectuals increased visibly in Vietnam. It was not useful for the Vietnamese students to study Chinese characters. The triennial contests were abolished in Tonkin and Annam respectively in 1915 and 1918.

In 1918 *Ecole Supérieure de Hanoi* was re-opened. It became the Western cultural center for the Vietnamese students. Romantic and revolutionary thoughts and scientific and technological knowledge took sources from there.

Nguyen Thai Hoc, the founder of *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang* (Vietnam Kuomintang), Communist General *Vo Nguyen Giap*, *Truong Tu Anh*, the founder of *Dang Dai Viet*, former President *Tran Van Huong*, former

Prime Minister *Phan Huy Quat*, former Vice Prime Minister *Nguyen Ton Hoan*, former Minister *Luu Huu Phuoc* (communist), former Ambassador *Mai Van Bo* (communist)... were from this center.

Unlike the intellectuals influenced by French culture in the 19th century, the above intellectuals were involved in revolutionary activities after reading *Contrat Social* by *J. J. Rousseau*, *Esprit des Lois* by *Montesquieu* and getting in touch with the revolutionary war in the United States, the revolution of 1789 in France, revolution of 1911 in China, revolution of 1917 in Russia, and with socio-political thoughts from Karl Marx, Lenin, Sun Yat Sen, Gandhi, Woodrow Wilson etc.

Those students who graduated from French Universities became good specialists and held high positions in society. Bui Quang Chieu, an agrarian engineer, founded the Constitutionalist Party to carry out the motto *Phap Viet De Hue* (Franco-Vietnamese Cooperation). Nguyen Van Xuan, a graduate of the famous *Polytechnique*, became vice prime minister of the Cochinchinese Republic in 1946 and prime minister of the provisional government in 1948. Dr. Nguyen Van Thinh was prime minister of the Cochinchinese Republic. Nobody knows for sure if he hanged himself or he was hanged in November, 1946. Ngo Dinh Nhu, a graduate of *Ecole Nationale des Chartres*, was deputy director of *Ecole Française d 'Extreme Orient*. Dr. Le van Hoach was the second prime minister of the Cochinchinese Republic.

Phan Van Truong, Phan Chu Trinh, Nguyen An Ninh, Ho Huu Tuong, Hoang Xuan Nhi, Phan Van Hum, Nguyen Manh Tuong, Tran Duc Thao, Nguyen Manh Ha, Tran Dai Nghia, Pham Huy Thong... were anti-colonialist.

Nguyen Huu Tho, Trinh Dinh Thao and *Duong Quynh Hoa* did not join the resistance in the nine-year war but they were against the Americans in the second Vietnam war.

Hoang Xuan Han, Nguyen Quoc Dinh, Tran Van Chuong, Tran Cuu Chan, Tran Van Trai, Tran Van Do, Vu Van Mau, Vu Quoc Thuc, Vu Quoc Thong, Nguyen Cao Hach, Au Truong Thanh, Ngo Dinh Nhu, Ngo Dinh Luyen, Tran Le Quang, Chau Long, Bui Xuan Bao, Tran Dinh De, Tran Quang De, Tran Ngoc Ninh, Nguyen Ngoc Huy (Medicine), *Nguyen Ngoc Huy* (Politics), *Nguyen Van Bong, Truong Cong Cuu, Tran Vy, Truong Van Chom, Le Van Thoi, Tang Kim Dong, Pham Hoang Ho, Nguyen Quang Trinh, Buu Hoi, Truong Buu Lam, Truong Buu Khanh, Buu Loc, Le Quang Uyen*... were famous French-educated intellectuals in the nationalist government.

In the 1940s and 1950s few Vietnamese students graduated from British or American Universities. *Ta Quang Buu, Pham Van Thuat, Hoang Gia Linh* graduated from British Universities.

Nguyen Dinh Hoa, Nguyen Van Tho, Ngo Ba Thanh, Phan Thi Nguyet Minh, Huynh Sanh Thong, Pham Xuan An, Nguyen Ngoc Bich, Nguyen Ngoc Linh... were educated in the United States. In the 1960s and 1970s the number of Vietnamese students in the United States swelled. *Nguyen Xuan Oanh, Nguyen Van Hao, Phan Tuong Van, Nguyen Duy Xuan* were American-educated economists. Dr. *Nguyen Duy Xuan*, president of the Can Tho University, died in the Communist reeducation camp. *Nguyen Xuan Oanh, Nguyen Van Hao, Phan Tuong Van* stayed in Vietnam after the fall of South Vietnam. In the 1990s Dr. *Nguyen Xuan Oanh* was representative of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. *Nguyen Van Hao* left Vietnam in the 1980s. Dr. *Phan Tuong Van* faced trial. He was accused by the Communists of 'corruption'. He was protected by vice prime minister *Phan Van Khai* (4).

Truong Hoang Lem, Cao Thi Le, Nguyen Manh Hung, Nguyen Quoc Tri, Hoang Duc Nha... were American-educated intellectuals who, after the fall of the Republic of Vietnam, lived in the United States.

Nguyen Xuan Vinh, former Commander of the South Vietnamese Air Force (Republic of Vietnam), left Vietnam to study in the United States before the *coup d'etat* of 1963. He is currently teaching at Michigan State University (5). Dr. *Thich Thien An*, a Buddhist monk studying in Japan, left Vietnam for the United States in the mid 1960s.

Ngo Ba Thanh, *Pham Xuan An* and *Nguyen Thai Binh* studied in the United States. Politically, they were Americanophobe.

Ngo Ba Thanh spent many years in prison. She was considered to be pro-Communist by the Sai Gon government.

Nguyen Thai Binh was an anti-war protester in the United States. He was killed on an airplane.

Pham Xuan An was a trustful correspondent in the eyes of the Western correspondents before the fall of Sai Gon. Until 1975 his true background was unveiled. He was a Communist middle-ranking officer of Intelligence (6).

The Vietnamese could obtain the highest degrees in Chinese, French, English, Russian or German. In feudal time they spent time studying Confucian philosophy, history of China, poetry and literature. Under French rule the number of Doctors or *Agreges* in Law, Arts or Social Sciences was much bigger than the number of scientists and technocrats.

The contributions of the intellectuals to the cultural treasure and revolutionary archives were abundant while the country has been in total stagnation. Its economy has been backward. Its people have been among the poorest in the world. Its technology was terribly humble.

It is not right to attribute this backwardness to the war for, in the past 30 years, Vietnam was in peace. South Korea restored its economy and began its industrialization ten years after peace was re-established. After thirty years of reform Japan became the first industrial country in Asia, capable of defeating China, the most populous country, and Russia, the largest country in the world, respectively in 1895, 1904 and 1905.

Who are responsible for the country's stagnation? Leaders or intellectuals?

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(1) *Mau Tai* and *Hieu Liem* were equivalent to B.A.

(2) *Country's name since 1054.*

(3) *La Santé: Health. It was the name of the prison.*

(4) *Phan Van Khai* was a Southern-born student going to the North in 1954. He studied economics in the Soviet Union. He was strongly backed by *Vo Van Kiet*. In 1997 he held *Vo Van Kiet's* position as prime minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

(5) *He was retired in 1998.*

(6) *Later he was promoted to the two-star general of Intelligence. He wasn't happy with this military rank.*

