

REFORMIST EDUCATIONAL

THOUGHT OF NGUYEN TRUONG TO AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION IN VIETNAM TODAY

EL PENSAMIENTO REFORMISTA EDUCATIVO DE NGUYEN TRUONG TO Y SU IMPORTANCIA PARA LA INNOVACIÓN EDUCATIVA EN VIETNAM

Pham Duy Hoang ^{1*}

E-mail: phamduyhoang2014@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4931-2104>

Nguyen Minh Tri ^{2*}

E-mail: nm.tri@hutech.edu.vn

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2535-1766>

¹ People's Security University, Vietnam.

² Hutech University, Vietnam.

*Corresponding author

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the educational thought of Nguyen Truong To (1830–1871), one of the most prominent reformist intellectuals in nineteenth-century Vietnam. Recognized for his visionary reform proposals submitted to the Nguyen Dynasty, Nguyen Truong To placed education at the center of national modernization. Confronted with the challenges of Western colonial expansion and Vietnam's internal stagnation, he envisioned a transformation of the country's traditional Confucian education, which he regarded as excessively rigid, dogmatic, and detached from practical needs. He proposed replacing rote memorization and examination-centered learning with an education oriented toward science, technology, foreign languages, geography, law, and applied knowledge, disciplines essential to strengthening the nation's intellectual and productive capacities. The article examines the philosophical underpinnings of Nguyen Truong To's reformist ideas, emphasizing his belief that education was the decisive force for cultivating human talent, fostering moral integrity, and advancing social progress. By contextualizing his writings within the incomplete reform efforts of the Nguyen Dynasty, the study elucidates both the originality and limitations of his proposals. Furthermore, it argues that Nguyen Truong To's progressive and humanistic perspective retains remarkable relevance today, as Vietnam continues to pursue comprehensive educational reform aligned with global integration and sustainable development. Ultimately, the analysis of Nguyen Truong To's educational philosophy offers not only historical insight into Vietnam's modernization struggles but also enduring lessons for constructing a modern, inclusive, and knowledge-based educational system in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Educational reform, Modernization, Humanistic education.

RESUMEN

Este artículo ofrece un análisis integral del pensamiento educativo de Nguyen Truong To (1830–1871), uno de los intelectuales reformistas más destacados del Vietnam del siglo XIX. Reconocido por sus visionarias propuestas de reforma presentadas a la dinastía Nguyen, Nguyen Truong To situó la educación en el centro del proceso de modernización nacional. Frente a los desafíos de la expansión colonial occidental y la estagnación interna del país, concibió una transformación profunda de la educación confuciana tradicional, a la que consideraba excesivamente rígida, dogmática y alejada de las necesidades prácticas. Propuso sustituir la memorización mecánica y la enseñanza centrada en los exámenes por una educación orientada hacia la ciencia, la tecnología, las lenguas extranjeras, la geografía, el derecho y el conocimiento aplicado, disciplinas esenciales para fortalecer las capacidades intelectuales y productivas

INTRODUCTION

The history of humankind has shown that for a nation to achieve harmonious and sustainable development, it must not only advance effectively in economic, political, and socio-cultural fields but also place particular emphasis on the development of education. Education serves as the primary means and foremost factor for transmitting, acquiring, and expanding the historical and social knowledge and experience accumulated by humanity. It not only cultivates individuals with academic knowledge and professional expertise but also nurtures people of strong moral character and civic spirit essential for societal progress (Dinh et al., 2023; Nguyen, 2024). Therefore, the study of theoretical foundations, practical experiences, and traditional values that can inform the current educational reform is of strategic importance. Throughout Vietnam's national history, many thinkers and reformers have recognized education as a crucial path toward national salvation and revival. Among them, Nguyen Truong To, a prominent intellectual of the 19th century, left a lasting legacy of profound ideas on national reform, particularly in the domain of education (Nguyen et al., 2023; Thang, 1997).

Nguyen Truong To's educational reform thought not only reflected a deep desire to rescue the country from stagnation and decline but also embodied a progressive, forward-looking vision. He believed that for a nation to prosper, educational reform was essential, drawing on Western knowledge while harmonizing scientific rationality with Eastern moral values. Although his ideas emerged in the unique historical context of the 19th century, they remain highly relevant as reference points for Vietnam's ongoing educational transformation (Do et al., 2024; La et al., 2024). This article seeks to analyze Nguyen Truong To's educational reform thought and its significance for modern educational renewal in Vietnam. In doing so, it affirms the enduring role of national intellectual heritage in shaping a progressive, humanistic, and sustainable educational system suited to the demands of contemporary development.

To achieve these goals, the article addresses the following research questions:

What are the fundamental components of Nguyen Truong To's educational reform ideology?

What is the relevance of his educational ideas for promoting educational innovation in Vietnam today?

This study is grounded in three main theoretical frameworks that provide the scientific basis and analytical orientation for addressing the research issues.

First, the theory of national intellectual heritage posits that the thought of historical figures embodies the intellectual essence of a nation, holds enduring value, and can be inherited and applied in new contexts. Nguyen Truong To's educational ideas are approached as part of this intellectual heritage, offering meaningful insights into Vietnam's current educational reform.

Second, modernization theory is employed to interpret the progressive nature of Nguyen Truong To's educational reform thought. According to this theory, education plays a key role in driving social modernization, developing human resources, and enabling international integration, an insight Nguyen Truong To remarkably foresaw and advocated for in the context of 19th-century Vietnam.

Third, educational reform theory serves as a tool for comparing Nguyen Truong To's ideas with contemporary directions in education reform. This theory emphasizes principles such as a shift from rote learning to meaningful understanding, from elite to universal education, and from closed to open educational model principles that significantly align with his vision.

DEVELOPMENT

This article approaches Nguyen Truong To's educational reform thought from a philosophical perspective, utilizing a combination of specific research methods. The historical-logical method is applied to clarify the formation and development of Nguyen Truong To's thought within the concrete socio-historical context of 19th-century Vietnam. This method also helps identify the internal logical connections between his ideas and current educational reform issues; The comparative-critical method serves to contrast Nguyen Truong To's educational ideas with modern reformist perspectives and policies.

Through this comparison, the article identifies points of convergence and applicability while offering critical and philosophical evaluations of the theoretical and practical significance of his thought; Inductive and deductive reasoning are flexibly employed throughout the argumentation. Educational ideas are derived inductively from Nguyen Truong To's specific writings and then interpreted deductively as part of a broader system of national reform thought, illustrating the dialectical relationship between the particular and the universal, a fundamental principle of philosophical reasoning.

Based on this methodological foundation, the article not only examines Nguyen Truong To's thought as a historical phenomenon but also treats it as a paradigmatic framework of educational philosophy, reform, and human

development bearing profound relevance for contemporary educational transformation in Vietnam.

By the late 19th century, Vietnam's feudal system had fallen into deep crisis. While the smallholder economy urgently required liberation and development, the outdated feudal relations of production continued to stifle the productive forces, leading to a comprehensive societal deadlock. Peasant uprisings erupted across the country, demanding a fundamental transformation of national governance. The Nguyen dynasty from Gia Long to Tu Duc persistently sought to preserve the feudal order, restore traditional structures, and suppress all forces of innovation. Meanwhile, the French gradually advanced their colonial conquest of Vietnam, culminating in the Treaty of Patenôtre in 1884, after which the country officially became a French colony.

One of the root causes of the Nguyen court's failure to resist foreign aggression lay in the backwardness of its educational system, which was dominated by dogmatic Confucian ideology, emphasizing classical texts while neglecting empirical sciences and practical applicability. This system failed to cultivate individuals with the capabilities needed to develop the nation or meet external challenges. Even Emperor Tu Duc himself acknowledged the shortage of talented individuals and raised the issue of educational reform, though only superficially and without transcending the confines of outdated Confucian learning.

In this context, a segment of patriotic intellectuals bravely proposed a path of national renewal through comprehensive reform. Prominent among them was Nguyen Truong To, a Confucian scholar with a visionary reformist mindset. Between 1861 and 1871, he submitted 58 memorials to the royal court, not only analyzing the country's dire situation but also offering concrete solutions across various domains: economics, military, politics, culture, and especially education. His educational reform thought can be summarized in the following key points:

First of all, advocacy for practical learning

Nguyen Truong To proposed a practical-oriented educational philosophy, emphasizing the role of real-life application in learning. He argued that education should be closely tied to contemporary realities and have tangible utility in everyday life. He wrote: "We should learn what we do not yet know to practice it. Practice what? Practice where? Practice what is in front of us and what will benefit future generations" (Luc, 2013, pp. 83–84).

This principle is clearly expressed in his memorials on practical education (1866), «*Eight Proposals for Urgent Reform*» (1867), and his proposal on reforming social

customs (1871). Nguyen Truong To criticized the prevailing education system for being overly preoccupied with the past, disconnected from current reality, and deeply influenced by rigid northern (Chinese) traditions. He condemned the practice of "following ancient kings" and "worshiping antiquity," as well as the Confucian moral path of cultivating personal virtue (sincerity, right-mindedness, self-cultivation, family regulation, and world peace). In contrast, he proposed that learning should begin with the investigation of things (*cách vật*), and knowledge acquisition (*trí tri*), followed by self-cultivation and governance. Hence, education should not be confined to the moral teachings of the sages but must include knowledge derived from nature and real-life experience.

He urged the court to reorient education toward more practical ends, asserting: "In the past, wars were fought with bows and arrows; today, one must have cannons to fight" (Can, 1988, p. 390).

Therefore, it was imperative to abandon conservative and archaic thinking, and instead absorb new knowledge and modern techniques: "Learn what we do not yet know to know; know to do... do the tasks that are necessary for our country today and leave behind useful achievements for future generations" (Can, 1988, p. 248).

Through a profound critique of the obsolete educational system, he established a proper educational goal: learning must serve the present needs of the nation while creating lasting value for the future. In response to the lack of talent, he advocated for the establishment of a formal domestic school system that prioritized the natural sciences and vocational training aligned with Vietnam's modern realities, rather than relying solely on ancient Chinese classics (Nguyen et al., 2025).

Moreover, he proposed opening the country to foreign mining enterprises as a way for Vietnamese people to access modern technology and vocational skills. He wrote:

What we seriously lack today is the opportunity to learn crafts and skills... If [foreigners] come to exploit a particular area, let our officials go there as well to observe firsthand what can be learned. Let the common people live near them, wear similar clothes, and interact regularly. Within ten years, our people's skills will be on par with theirs. Thus, without spending a single coin from the state, the people will still acquire useful trades. (Bat, 2005, p. 162).

Nguyen Truong To recognized that identifying the right educational objectives was crucial to training national talent. Only with a sound orientation could the stagnant

and outdated Confucian education system be effectively reformed.

Secondly, the advocacy for a comprehensive education system

Based on the realities of the country, along with his proposals to reform educational goals and methods, Nguyen Truong To envisioned a comprehensive and profoundly innovative educational program. Before detailing its content, he analyzed and pointed out the imbalances and shortcomings of the educational system under the Nguyễn Dynasty. To realize his practical learning ideals, he submitted to the court a large-scale reform plan aimed at a comprehensive overhaul of the existing education system. The main components of this program include the following:

First, he proposed allowing and encouraging national schools, provincial schools, and private institutions to teach practical knowledge. In the provincial and national examinations (thi Hương and thi Hội), the focus should shift to real-life issues such as law, calendar systems, military affairs, and political administration in key ministries like Public Works, Justice, Rites, and Personnel. Candidates should be encouraged to express their opinions honestly, without fear of highlighting strengths and weaknesses. Essays that offered clear, insightful, and contextually relevant analysis would be highly valued, whereas those heavy on classical allusions and Confucian texts would be secondary.

Second, he recommended the establishment of applied sciences faculties, such as Agriculture and Administration, Astronomy and Geography, Engineering and Technology, and Law.

In the field of Agriculture and Administration, Nguyen Truong To advocated compiling a *Complete Treatise on Agricultural Administration* (Nông chính toàn thư), emphasizing agriculture as the foundation of the national economy. He believed the decline in agriculture stemmed from outdated techniques, thus necessitating specialized training in agricultural sciences. Proposed subjects included agricultural astronomy, agricultural geography, botany, and the organization of domestic agricultural activities.

Regarding Astronomy and Geography, he saw them as foundational to various aspects of social life. Observing that contemporary texts in these fields were flawed and outdated, he proposed reviewing and revising old materials, selecting content aligned with Vietnam's specific natural conditions. Simultaneously, he advocated referencing Western scientific works, translating and summarizing the

most essential and practical content to popularize scientific learning and application.

For Law, he emphasized the fundamental principle that the law must be known and followed by all, from the emperor to the common people, and that the ruler should not stand above the law. He proposed establishing law faculties to educate both officials and citizens in legal knowledge. This, he believed, would bring about moral values such as loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness, not through abstract preaching but through legal clarity. Confronting the reality that "good deeds are not rewarded, and inaction is not punished", he argued that only a fair and transparent legal system could transform society and individuals, rather than relying solely on Confucian moral instruction.

Third, concerning the issue of writing systems, Nguyen Truong To aimed to build a practical, effective script capable of swiftly conveying information. He proposed the adoption of a Nationalized Sino-Vietnamese Script (chữ Hán quốc âm). In his memorial, he wrote:

Our country is among the second-tier nations of the East, and yet we are the only one without our writing system. Is it that Heaven does not favor us? Currently, we lack a native script and must use Chinese characters, pronounced neither in the Chinese accent nor in the common Vietnamese tongue. As a result, the Chinese cannot understand us when we speak, and those unversed in Chinese characters cannot comprehend written documents either. Government proclamations require intermediaries to read and explain them to the people, which often leads to misinterpretation and confusion about court intentions. (Luc, 2013, p. 89).

Developing a writing system closely tied to the Vietnamese language, capable of effectively communicating policies and popularizing education, was deemed urgent. His proposed script, a combination of Chinese characters and Vietnamese pronunciation, possessed administrative authority and unifying features, enabling learners to quickly access modern knowledge, especially in the natural and social sciences. In doing so, education would train a new generation of capable individuals, meeting the pressing needs of national development.

Thirdly, the principle of "learning in tandem with practice"

This was one of Nguyễn Trường Tộ's most progressive and innovative educational viewpoints, aimed at addressing the inherent limitations of the contemporary educational system. He asserted that it was essential to abandon rote memorization and mechanical learning in favor of a more practical and experience-based model of education,

developing learners' full capabilities and qualities; learning must be combined with practice, and theory must be linked with reality. The development of education and training must align with the demands of economic-social development, national defense, scientific and technological progress, and the development of human resources and labor markets (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2016, p.114-115).

This is the focal point of development, marking a breakthrough in human resource development for Vietnam in the 21st century, affirming the new educational philosophy of the country: «teaching people,» «teaching knowledge,» and «teaching skills».

Reaffirming the critical position and role of education and training, the Party's latest resolution also calls for «building a coherent system of institutions and policies to effectively implement the Party's strategy for education and training, alongside science and technology as the nation's primary policy, a key driver for national development» (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021). Previously, the policy only emphasized the general direction: «education is the national priority.» However, this document now demands clear identification of the goals of education and training in the upcoming period, aiming to develop a Vietnamese citizen who is healthy, capable, educated, and responsible for themselves, their family, society, and the nation. It also emphasizes «focusing on educating core values, creativity, and especially the patriotic spirit, national pride, and fostering the desire to develop, build, and protect the homeland» (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021). Education should integrate knowledge, ethics, aesthetics, life skills, and physical education to elevate the stature of the Vietnamese people and meet the demands of national construction and defense.

These perspectives reflect the Party's intellectual and policy development, inheriting its consistent approach across historical periods, prioritizing education and training as a strategic issue while aligning with global development trends and the practical realities of Vietnam. The Party continuously demands the acceleration of fundamental and comprehensive educational reforms.

With the Party and State's correct policies, the nation's education system has achieved significant milestones. Vocational education has evolved into an open, interconnected system, aligned with international standards. The 2021-2030 vocational education network plan, with a vision until 2045, has been issued, laying the foundation for streamlining and prioritizing investment resources. Training programs, facilities, and the quality of the teaching workforce are gradually being standardized and

modernized. Many international collaboration projects have been signed and implemented. Efforts to connect labor supply and demand have been prioritized. The proportion of workers with vocational qualifications and employment matching their skills has increased. Vocational education has played a key role in forming a skilled workforce and modernizing the working class and peasantry to contribute to economic-social development and the industrialization and modernization of the country.

The educational process has shifted from primarily knowledge acquisition to the comprehensive development of learners' capabilities and qualities; from classroom-based learning to diverse learning formats, including online education, social activities, extracurricular activities, and research. The combination of school education, family education, and social education aims to train people with ethics, discipline, civic responsibility, life skills, work skills, foreign languages, information technology, digital skills, creativity, and international integration (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021).

However, alongside the progress, there are still some limitations and weaknesses, especially regarding the quality of education and educational management, which remain problematic. The renewal of thinking and educational activities has not fully met the set requirements; some tasks and solutions for reform lack a systematic approach and stability. The quality and effectiveness of education and training are still not high. The education and training system lacks synchronization and connectivity across different levels and methods of education; the content and curriculum remain heavily theoretical and insufficiently practical. Training still lacks integration with scientific research, production, business, and labor market needs. There has not been sufficient emphasis on developing students' qualities and skills. Education focused on «cultivating humanity» ethics and lifestyles is still not given adequate attention. The training of high-quality human resources does not yet meet the requirements for economic and social development. The quality and quantity of teachers and education managers still face challenges in some areas. State management, school management, and administration still have many limitations. This shortcoming has been acknowledged:

Education and training have not truly become the primary national policy or a driving force for development. The quality and effectiveness of education and training are still low compared to expectations, especially in higher education and vocational training. The education and training system lacks connectivity between different levels and methods of education and remains heavily theoretical with insufficient practical training. Training is not sufficiently

linked to scientific research, production, business, and labor market needs; ethical education, lifestyle education, and work skills are insufficiently emphasized. Educational methods, testing, and evaluation are outdated and lack substance. Educational management is still weak. The teaching staff and education managers do not meet the requirements. Investment in education and training has not been effective. Policies and financial mechanisms for education and training are not yet appropriate. The infrastructure and facilities remain insufficient and outdated, especially in remote, rural, and difficult areas. (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2016).

Thus, education faces significant challenges, particularly in developing high-quality human resources to meet the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Therefore, the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party set the requirement to shift from:

mainly classroom-based learning to diverse learning methods, focusing on online teaching and learning, through the internet, television, social activities, extracurricular activities, and scientific research; school education must be integrated with family education and social education. Training should aim to develop people with ethics, discipline, responsibility as citizens and members of society; with life skills, work skills, foreign languages, information technology, digital technology, creative thinking, and international integration. (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021).

The urgent issue today is the fundamental and comprehensive reform of education and training, as well as the development of human resources to effectively enhance people's intellectual capacity, nurture human resources, and train talented individuals. It is essential to gradually build an advanced education system with a reasonable scale, level, and structure of professions, which not only preserves the cultural identity of the nation but also meets the requirements for building and defending the country in the era of the information revolution and globalization.

To implement fundamental and comprehensive reform of Vietnam's education system, aiming to develop human resources with high effectiveness, we must continue to make strong and synchronized innovations in the core elements of education and training. This should focus on developing the qualities and capabilities of learners and incorporate the values found in Nguyen Truong To's philosophy of comprehensive education. To achieve this, Vietnam's education system needs to:

First, it is necessary to redefine the goals of education and training. The traditional model focused on what schools

can provide should be replaced by a learner- and society-centered approach that addresses the actual needs of socio-economic development. As emphasized in the 12th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam: "Education and training development must be closely linked with socio-economic development, national defense and security, scientific and technological advancement, human resource development, and the labor market" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2016).

Second, the content and curricula of education must be reformed to ensure the comprehensive development of learners. Equal attention should be given to moral, cultural, technical, vocational, and productive aspects of education. Particular emphasis should be placed on character building, ideal formation, moral education, intellectual growth, physical development, and aesthetic appreciation. Alongside the acquisition of knowledge in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, greater focus should be placed on technology, foreign languages, and informatics. Education must integrate moral education, academic instruction, and vocational training, with moral education serving as the ultimate goal. While talent and intelligence are to be nurtured, ethics must remain foundational.

Third, teaching and learning methods must be modernized across all educational levels. Pedagogical approaches should be streamlined, practical, and tailored to specific disciplines and learner capacities. Active learning, hands-on experience, and the practical application of knowledge should be encouraged to enhance learning outcomes.

Fourth, the quality and capacity of teachers and educational administrators must be improved. It is necessary to professionalize and standardize the teaching workforce at each level and type of education in line with the demands of reform. This requires educators to engage in continuous professional development, uphold ethical standards, and innovate in teaching methodologies to fulfill their roles as exemplary figures in society.

Fifth, the national education system must be restructured towards openness and flexibility, promoting lifelong learning and progressively building a learning society.

Sixth, education and training policies and financial mechanisms must be reformed. Greater social participation in educational development should be mobilized, and investment efficiency in education must be improved through better use of public resources and more effective financial governance.

CONCLUSIONS

Nguyen Truong To's educational reform ideology reflects a profound, progressive vision that was ahead of its time. Despite living in a feudal and backward society, he boldly proposed comprehensive reforms to education, intending to build a practical academic foundation that would serve the country's development. Key elements of his ideology, such as emphasizing the role of science and technology, reforming the content and methods of education, expanding access to global knowledge, and linking talent development with societal needs, all hold enduring value and can be flexibly applied in the current educational reforms in Vietnam.

The reality of educational reforms in Vietnam today faces numerous challenges, such as the insufficient quality of human resources, the imbalance between knowledge-based education and the cultivation of skills, and the limited spirit of creativity and self-learning. In this context, inheriting the values found in Nguyễn Trường Tộ's ideas is highly significant, as it helps guide reform thinking towards a scientific, humane, and modern direction. This also serves as evidence of the importance of tapping into and promoting the nation's intellectual heritage in the process of building an advanced education system in Vietnam that both preserves national cultural identity and keeps pace with global development trends.

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