

Civil Examinations as a Mechanism of Academic Legitimacy in the Confucian State: The Case of the Nguyễn Dynasty in Vietnam

Mai Phuong Ngoc¹, Duong Thi Thanh Hai^{1*}, Nguyen Hong Vinh¹ and
Pham Thi Hoai Thanh¹

¹Vinh University, Nghe An, Vietnam

Corresponding Author: Duong Thi Thanh Hai, Email: haidtt@vinhuni.edu.vn

Abstract

This article examines the Nguyễn dynasty's civil examination system as a mechanism for legitimizing knowledge within a nineteenth-century Confucian state. Using an interdisciplinary framework that combines the history of knowledge, sociology of academia, and symbolic power theory, the study argues that examinations functioned not only as bureaucratic recruitment but as instruments for defining, ritualizing, and monopolizing orthodoxy. It highlights three features: standardized content institutionalizing Confucian ideology, state control excluding heterodox knowledge, and ritualized scholarly hierarchy extending from the imperial center to local communities. Distinct from late Qing China and Joseon Korea, Vietnam maintained a centralized "monopolized scholarly pathway" embedded in administrative-ritual structures, serving as cultural defense against colonial pressures. The case contributes to broader debates on civil examinations, academic legitimacy, and the politics of knowledge in premodern East Asia.

Keywords— *Civil examinations, knowledge legitimacy, Confucian state, Nguyễn dynasty, Vietnam.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In premodern Confucian states, civil examinations were not merely a mechanism for selecting administrative talents, but constituted a pivotal institution for institutionalizing the epistemic order and legitimizing political authority. Although grounded in the same Han-learning model, each East Asian country developed its examination system in distinctive ways, reflecting their specific political structures, social configurations, and conceptions of academic legitimacy.

In nineteenth-century Vietnam, the examination system under the Nguyễn dynasty was maintained as an institution that monopolized orthodox knowledge. Unlike late Qing China-where gradual reforms of examination content were introduced-or Joseon Korea-where private academies functioned as semi-autonomous intellectual spaces outside the state-Nguyễn Vietnam preserved a closed examination model, grounded entirely in Confucian classics and classical prose forms. Within this framework, academic legitimacy did not arise from individual intellectual capacity or critical engagement with knowledge, but was state-sanctioned through a formalized, ritualized examination mechanism closely tied to the monarchy's moral and political order.

This study approaches the Nguyễn dynasty's civil examinations as a form of symbolic power, shaped by the particular socio-political conditions of Vietnam during this period. By analyzing examination regulations, legal documents, honorific rituals, and village-level records, the research elucidates how the Nguyễn state controlled intellectual space, constructed scholarly status, and reproduced orthodox order. On this basis, the article contributes to broader academic discussions on knowledge power and legitimacy in Confucian East Asian states, while proposing a new interpretation of Vietnam's distinct position within the region's intellectual landscape.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Nguyễn dynasty's examination system has attracted considerable scholarly attention both domestically and internationally. In Vietnam, prominent studies have focused on reconstructing the structure of the examination system from administrative and institutional perspectives, primarily through imperial records, genealogies, and official documents (Trần, 1941; Nguyễn, N. Q., 2011; Đỗ, T. H. T., 2016; Phạm, 2000). Building upon this foundation, several specialized approaches have examined the structure of exam essays-especially the *Kinh nghĩa* genre-to clarify the normative ideology and moral function of Confucian knowledge in shaping social value hierarchies (Phan, 1994; Trần, T. K. A., 2010). More recent research not only expands the range of materials but also delves deeper into the ideological essence of the Confucian educational system. For instance, Nguyễn K. S. (2022) analyzed the state-led moralization process as a central pillar of political ideology, while Nguyễn, T. T. (2021) contextualized Confucianism within the broader intellectual history of Vietnam. In parallel, Trịnh, T. H. (2022) highlighted the strict normativity embedded in educational regulations and school codes from the 17th to the 19th centuries, revealing how the academic institution functioned to cultivate talent and select bureaucrats. These contributions have significantly clarified the institutional-ideological nature of the Nguyễn examination system and enriched the theoretical groundwork for analyzing knowledge as a form of symbolic power.

At the international level, research on civil examinations in premodern Confucian states has evolved toward theoretical systematization and regional comparison. Elman (2000) laid a solid theoretical foundation by conceptualizing civil examinations not merely as a recruitment mechanism, but as an institutional apparatus for legitimizing orthodox knowledge and reinforcing social order. Building on this trajectory, Liu (2007) highlighted the transnational influence of the Han-learning model on Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Simultaneously, Woodside (1988, 2002) and Zottoli (2006) emphasized the role of civil examinations in establishing symbolic power, shaping motivations for learning, and defining success paradigms within the social structure of Confucian societies. These studies position civil examinations at the core of the premodern East Asian knowledge system, functioning as institutions that legitimize and reproduce orthodox ideology.

However, most existing studies-both domestic and international-remain primarily focused on institutional descriptions or normative analyses of ideological content. Key aspects such as the function of academic coordination, the mechanisms for producing and monopolizing legitimate knowledge, and the symbolic-ritual dimensions of academic legitimization have not yet been systematically explored. Moreover, the Nguyễn dynasty's examination system has not been fully situated in an equal-level comparative framework with other regional Han-learning models such as Qing China, Joseon Korea, or Tokugawa-Meiji Japan, particularly from postcolonial perspectives and theories of knowledge power (Bourdieu, 1991; Woodside, 1998).

This article builds upon the aforementioned scholarly foundations but extends the analysis by approaching civil examinations as an institution that constructs and controls academic legitimacy within a structure of symbolic power. Rather than treating examinations merely as a recruitment tool, this study positions them at the core of the Nguyễn dynasty's governing apparatus, with the function of reproducing moral-political order through the regulation of language, content, and intellectual space. In doing so, it contributes to international discourses on the history of education and the politics of knowledge in East Asia (Elman, 2000; Liu, 2007; Woodside, 1988), while reaffirming Vietnam's distinctive role in the localization of the Han-learning model across the region.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article employs an interdisciplinary approach-drawing from the history of knowledge, the sociology of academia, and the theory of symbolic power-to analyze the Nguyễn dynasty's civil examination system as an institution for establishing and regulating academic legitimacy within a Confucian socio-political context. Theoretically, the study adopts the concept of "academic legitimacy" from the Han-learning tradition and integrates it with Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) analytical framework of "legitimate cultural capital". Through this lens, the article elucidates how the Nguyễn

court established and maintained a monopoly over the production of orthodox knowledge as a form of symbolic power.

In terms of sources, this study conducts qualitative analysis based on both official historical records and practical documents, including: (1) *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ* (vol. 7), which reflects the structural regulations of examinations and the standardized content model; (2) *Đại Nam thực lục*, which records imperial edicts regarding school organization and the control of teaching activities; (3) nineteenth-century village hương ước (village covenants) and khoán ước (communal contracts), which reveal how scholarly status was ritualized within local communities; (4) statistical data on official appointments by academic degree from Cao Xuân Dục (1993); and (5) modern scholarly works on civil examinations, Confucian learning, and the structure of academic power in both domestic and international contexts.

The primary analytical methods employed are content analysis in conjunction with discourse analysis, focusing on identifying argumentative structures in examination texts, the mechanisms for standardizing moral language, and the ritual processes of legitimizing knowledge. Simultaneously, the article conducts a comparative examination of Vietnam's civil examination model with the systems of late Qing China and Joseon Korea, in order to highlight the particularities of Han-learning localization in the Vietnamese context. The aim of this comparison is not to create categorical distinctions, but rather to illuminate how the Nguyễn state operationalized the orthodoxization of knowledge within the broader framework of premodern East Asia.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Legitimizing Knowledge through Examinations: Civil Examinations as a Mechanism for Institutionalizing Ideology and Regulating Morality

Under the Nguyễn dynasty, civil examinations were not merely a tool for recruiting bureaucrats, but functioned as a central institution for legitimizing knowledge, establishing academic authority, and constructing a foundation for political morality. Within this framework, knowledge was recognized only when conferred by the state through examinations, and this process was ritualized into a form of symbolic power designed to uphold ideological and socio-political order.

The examination curriculum under the Nguyễn dynasty was constructed upon the canonical Confucian corpus of the *Tứ thư* (Four Books) and *Ngũ kinh* (Five Classics), along with orthodox literary forms such as *chế nghĩa* (moral interpretations), *thơ* (regulated poetry), *phú* (rhymed prose), *văn sách* (policy essays), and most notably *văn bát cổ* (eight-legged essay)-a highly codified form that required candidates to strictly adhere to both content and structure. Volume 7 of the *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ* (Nội các triều Nguyễn, 1993) details the full set of examination regulations-from question design and grading procedures to result certification-and provides a corpus of model texts, including *chế nghĩa*, *thơ phú* and *văn sách*, highlighting the ritualized design of the examination system. Among these, the model set includes 30 *kinh nghĩa*, 20 *thơ*, *phú*, and 6 *văn sách*, clearly demonstrating the overarching objective of moral standardization throughout the scholarly domain.

An examination of the 30 model *kinh nghĩa* essays reveals that their content was structured around three main thematic axes: *thiên đạo* (heavenly order) and the structure of the cosmos, where concepts such as *thiên lý* (heavenly principle), *thiên mệnh* (mandate of heaven), and *tuồng pháp* (cosmic symbolism) were developed as philosophical foundations for political and social order; *trị quốc* (governing the realm) and *nhân chính* (benevolent governance), in which the king governs through moral principles rather than legalist enforcement; and finally *đức trị* (moral governance) and *chính danh* (rectification of names), which emphasize *lập đức* (cultivating virtue), *tu thân* (self-cultivation), and a rejection of *học vì lợi* (learning for personal gain).

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The normative argumentative structure of these essays typically follows the sequence: quoting the classics - interpretation - moral reasoning - political conclusion, showing that what was valued was not independent thinking but the ability to accurately reproduce the established canonical system.

Among the six *văn sách* (*policy essays*), it is evident that these were not merely exam preparation materials, but functioned as institutional mechanisms for codifying political ideology. These essays assert that academic legitimacy and hierarchical positioning are immutable orders, wherein each individual occupies a fixed and unalterable place; the monarch is sacralized as the embodiment of cosmic morality and rendered immune to critique; and moral instruction is prioritized over legal governance, with an absolute absence of arguments regarding law, administration, or technical reform.

A representative case is Essay No. 1, which articulates *trung - chấ - văn* as an ideal triad for moral-political governance in the Confucian tradition. Rather than listing them as isolated virtues-loyalty, sincerity, and refinement-the essay constructs a developmental hierarchy in which loyalty (*trung*) anchors devotion to the moral order, *chấ* embodies moral authenticity as unadorned substance, and *văn* represents the civilizing expression of virtue through cultural forms. This normative structure is legitimized through historical exempla, invoking the canonical figures of sage-kings such as Yao, Shun, Yu of the Xia, Tang of the Shang, and King Wu of the Zhou (Nội các triều Nguyễn, 1993). In this context, history functions not as empirical record, but as a rhetorical apparatus to codify an orthodox moral-political ideal.

The ritualized nature of the examination system significantly constrained intellectual engagement with contemporary realities. A salient example is the 1868 *thi Đình* (court examination) under Emperor Tự Đức, in which the monarch posed a timely question about governance during times of disorder in the past and present, and the pressing challenges of the day. However, the responses largely reflected doctrinal thinking: the scholar-official Bùi Sĩ Ước emphasized the Doctrine of the Mean (*Zhongyong*), while Nguyễn Tái recommended emulating the exemplary models of Tang of Shang and Emperor Xuan of Han.

Most striking is the response of Lê Khắc Cần to a question regarding Western weaponry, in which he described the structure of warships using ornate poetic composition, providing no technical analysis whatsoever (Nguyễn, N. Q., 2011, pp. 23–24). These responses reveal that the ideology of the examination system had deprived the scholarly elite of their capacity for practical critique, even when the question explicitly called for creativity and applied reasoning. Confucianism-once a philosophy of action-had been transformed by the Nguyễn dynasty into ritualized literary formalism, becoming a tool for the symbolic reproduction of political authority.

The influence of this examination system extended far beyond education, permeating the domains of law and governance. As noted by Vũ, Nguyễn, and Phạm (2020), many provisions in the Gia Long Code were constructed according to Confucian moral logic, illustrating the interweaving of scholarship, ethics, and legalism into a comprehensive regime of power. Within this structure, civil examinations served as a mechanism for the politicization of knowledge, wherein the state legitimized its ideological authority by controlling the entire domain of academically sanctioned knowledge.

In summary, the Nguyễn dynasty's examination system not only standardized the content and form of knowledge but also generated a class of loyalist and conservative scholar-officials immune to the changing tides of history. Unlike other East Asian polities where the intellectual sphere was expanding and decentralized, Vietnam maintained a monopoly on legitimate knowledge through its tightly controlled examination institutions. This phenomenon was not merely a manifestation of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy but also the result of an integrated administrative structure linking village and central authority, the symbolic association between academic success and communal prestige, and the late nineteenth-century colonial context in which the state intensified its Confucian ideological control as a symbolic defense against external domination.

4.2. Monopolizing the Academic Space and Excluding Unofficial Knowledge

Unlike late Qing China or Joseon Korea-where private academies such as *sōwŏn* played a vital role in scholar training and the proposal of political thought-the Nguyễn dynasty's civil examination system was organized as a closed institutional apparatus, in which all activities related to the production, dissemination, and recognition of knowledge were centralized under state control. Academic status could only be attained through formal examinations, based on standardized content centered on the *Tứ thư*, *Ngũ kinh*, and classical Han-style literature.

The Nguyễn educational system comprised three levels: the *Quốc Tử Giám* (Imperial Academy) at the central level, provincial and district schools, and village-level classes. The educational bureaucracy-from *Tể tửu* (Rector), *Tư nghiệp* (Vice-Rector), to *Huấn đạo* (Local Education Officer)-was tightly regulated, with all teaching activities and student classifications subject to strict regulations and evaluative standards (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2022). Although private schools continued to exist, they were not recognized as institutions authorized to confer academic legitimacy. Even students who studied at home remained under the jurisdiction of local educational officials if they wished to formalize their eligibility for examinations.

The imperial system of rewards and punishments based on students' examination performance further reinforced this mechanism of control. The notion of "centralizing the space of moral-educational cultivation" was clearly expressed in Emperor Minh Mạng's edict: "Educational officials are appointed to serve as role models for students, not merely to fulfill bureaucratic quotas" (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2022). In January 1833, the Nguyễn court issued a regulation stipulating that students studying under their local educational officials would be rewarded accordingly, while those studying under officials from other jurisdictions would receive rewards redirected to the latter. Educational officials could be demoted if their students failed the examinations or submitted substandard essays (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2022). These reward-and-punishment policies demonstrate that education was systematically designed as an instrument of social governance through the standardization and disciplining of knowledge.

Compared to the epistemic models in China and Korea, the Nguyễn dynasty demonstrated a higher degree of monopolization over legitimate knowledge. While Korea maintained autonomous private academies such as *sōwŏn* (Haboush, 1991), where the literati could teach and cultivate scholarly prestige independently, in Vietnam, academic legitimacy (*chính danh học thuật*) was exclusively conferred through the formal civil examination system. According to Deuchler (1992), in Korea, "moral legitimacy was not entirely tied to official position" but could also arise from private institutions. In contrast, in Vietnam, all extra-official forms-even lineage schools such as that of Nguyễn Huy Oánh, a renowned private institution in Trường Lưu village-served merely as preparatory venues for examinations and were not recognized as producers of legitimate knowledge.

Even into the twentieth century, amid the expansion of the Franco-Vietnamese educational model through a network of public schools established by the colonial administration, the Confucian examination system continued to function as the sole institution for producing legitimate academic status. Some auxiliary examinations were introduced, incorporating subjects such as French and Mathematics, but these were limited to specific localities and had no bearing on the traditional *thi Hương* and *thi Hội* examinations-where Confucian content remained the absolute standard until the final round held in 1919. While the Franco-Vietnamese education system produced a new class of secular intellectuals oriented toward modern technical and professional disciplines, the Confucian system persisted as the only academically legitimate institution, refusing to recognize emerging forms of knowledge as valid bases for establishing social status.

Within the theoretical framework of Bourdieu (1991), this configuration constitutes a field of symbolic power (*champ de pouvoir symbolique*), wherein the state establishes and defends its monopoly over the distribution of "legitimate cultural capital" (*capital culturel légitime*). The exclusion of alternative

channels of legitimacy prevented the emergence of a pluralistic intellectual space and weakened the possibility of internal critique. As such, academic status under the Nguyễn dynasty did not merely reflect intellectual capacity, but rather emerged as the product of an institutionalized power mechanism-sustained through absolute control and the ritualization of the knowledge domain.

4.3. From Individual Academic Success to Ritualized Legitimacy: Knowledge as Symbolic Power in Society

Within the governance apparatus of the Nguyễn dynasty, academic success was not merely a result of individual scholarly effort, but rather a process of legitimizing knowledge that was ritualized from the central to the local level in order to construct symbolic power for the Confucian scholar-gentry. The civil examination system was not simply a recruitment tool, but a mechanism for reshaping the social order based on Confucian moral principles, in which academic status became a symbol of virtue, prestige, and power.

As the sole legitimate pathway for political advancement among the literati, civil examinations was closely tied to official ranks, titles, and opportunities for entry into the political elite. According to the statistics compiled by Cao Xuân Dục (1993), in 48 thi Hương (provincial examinations) held under the Nguyễn dynasty, 2,821 individuals who passed the Hương cống (provincial graduate) degree were appointed to official posts. The highest rates of appointment were concentrated in regions near the political center, such as Hà Nội (79.49%), Thừa Thiên (64.94%), and Nghệ An (61.01%), indicating a structural inequality in access to legitimate academic status across regions.

Similarly, the official careers of those who passed the Tiến sĩ (doctoral graduate) degree clearly reflected the institutional function of academic credentials: by 1898, there had been 21 appointed as Thượng thư (Ministers), 15 as Tổng đốc (Governors-General), 66 as Tri phủ (Prefects), 21 as Tuần phủ (Provincial Governors), and 40 as Án sát (Judicial Commissioners) (Cao, 1993).

Passing the examinations, especially at the higher levels, was also a symbolic event with ritual significance at both the court and local levels. As early as the Gia Long reign, successful candidates were granted special ân điển (imperial favors). For example, in 1807, those who passed the Hương cống examination were exempt from phu dịch (corvée labor), awarded ceremonial robes and hats, and invited to attend the Lộc minh banquet-a formal event held at the district office. In times of national mourning, the banquet could be replaced with silver rewards, but the symbolic function of imperial recognition remained intact (Nội các triều Nguyễn, 1993).

Those who passed the thi Đình examination at the Tiến sĩ level were honored with even greater ceremony: public proclamation at Thái Hòa Hall, posting of names on the golden board at Phú Văn Lâu, conferment of ceremonial hats, hairpins, parasols, and insignia, followed by a thanksgiving ritual at Càn Nguyên Hall and a Confucian ceremony at Quốc Tử Giám (Nội các triều Nguyễn, 1993).

The vinh quy ceremony-an official homecoming ritual-was institutionalized in 1822, allowing successful candidates to return to their native villages for two months, with transportation provided by state-run postal stations. The imperial court also issued explicit appointment guidelines based on the examination rankings: those who achieved first-rank Tiến sĩ Đệ nhất giáp were assigned to the Hanlin Academy (Hàn Lâm Viện) (sixth-rank principal grade, Chánh lục phẩm); second- and third-rank graduates were appointed as Tu soạn or Biên tu (from sixth-assistant to seventh-principal rank, Tông lục to Chánh thất phẩm); and Phó bảng (associated doctoral degree holders) became Kiểm thảo (seventh-assistant rank, Tông thất phẩm). These appointments led to corresponding administrative posts such as Tri phủ (Prefect) or Thự Tri phủ (Acting Prefect) (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 2022).

This ritualization was not limited to the imperial center but was deeply institutionalized in the communal life of villages. Numerous village charters (hương ước) and customary regulations (khoán lệ) prescribed specific forms of honoring successful candidates, ranging from ceremonial processions, banquets, congratulatory plaques, and monetary rewards, to elevated seating positions in the village

communal house and posthumous ancestral worship. For example, several old customary texts from Thanh Hóa province illustrate this well: the *khoán ước* of Xa Lý village (1896) stipulated that graduates of the highest degree (*đại khoa*) would be escorted in a dragon palanquin, accompanied by flags and drums, awarded 50 *quan* (a traditional Vietnamese monetary unit used in premodern times) and 20 *quan* for couplets (Võ & Vũ, 2000, p. 140). Đồng Lương village (1868) organized a presentation ceremony at the communal house (*trình đình*) and a ritual offering to the tutelary god (*thần Thành hoàng*), treating academic success as a sacred rite (Võ & Vũ, 2000, p. 114). In Bảo Trung hamlet (1811), a *Tiến sĩ* degree holder was honored with an elaborate ancestral worship ceremony, material gifts and cash rewards, and was elevated to a position of local prestige (Bột Trung ước văn).

Similarly, lower academic degrees were also honored in accordance with their ranks. Those who passed the *Cử nhân* examination were paraded from the village gate with drums and gongs, accompanied by ceremonial orations and banquet offerings. The *khoán ước* of A Đô village (1908) specified the procession route from the provincial capital to the district, commune, and village, with the participation of local officials and residents, and a grand banquet with sticky rice, wine, and sacrificial pigs (Võ & Vũ, 2000, pp. 217-220). Seating arrangements in the *đình làng* also reflected the symbolic structure of knowledge. According to the *khoán ước* of Diễn Nội village (1865) and Phi Bình village (1901), individuals who passed the *Tú tài* or higher were seated at the front row, on par with civil mandarins of the seventh rank (Võ & Vũ, 2000, pp. 89, 182). The *văn ước* of Bồng Trung (1833) even included a detailed seating chart, visually illustrating how academic status was integrated into social hierarchy.

According to Bourdieu (1991), *chính danh học thuật* constitutes a form of symbolic capital defined, regulated, and conferred by the state to preserve institutional power. In the Nguyễn dynasty's case, intellectual capital was not established through independent scholarly pursuit or creative output, but rather through ritualized and institutionalized recognition granted by the state. By controlling the examination content, appointment mechanisms, and ceremonial honors, the imperial court maintained exclusive authority in determining who could be recognized as legitimate intellectuals.

This ceremonial system thus functioned not only as a means of encouraging academic effort, but also as a mechanism to legitimize moral and political authority. While in Joseon, many scholars who passed the examinations could withdraw from officialdom to establish *sở võn* (private academies) and develop independent intellectual traditions (Deuchler, 1992, p. 114), in Vietnam, there existed no other pathway to attain *chính danh học thuật* except through the examinations. All forms of honor and recognition had to be state-sanctioned and ritualized within communal life—a process that assimilated intellectual capital into the structure of centralized power.

In summary, academic success under the Nguyễn dynasty was not merely a reflection of scholarly achievement but a means of constructing symbolic power. The state ritualized knowledge as a form of political and moral capital—where academic status was bestowed rather than earned through independent creativity. This indicates that under the Nguyễn regime, knowledge was profoundly politicized and ritualized, thereby reinforcing the orthodox Confucian model of *chính danh* rule.

5. DISCUSSION

Building upon the foundational works of Elman (2000), who conceptualized civil examinations as mechanisms for legitimizing orthodox knowledge in late imperial China, and Woodside (1988), who emphasized structural parallels between the Nguyễn and Qing regimes, this study advances the discussion by shifting the analytical lens toward the symbolic monopolization of academic legitimacy in Vietnam. While previous studies have primarily focused on the ideological or institutional dimensions of Confucian examinations, this article integrates the sociology of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991) to theorize the Nguyễn model not merely as an educational apparatus but as a highly ritualized field of knowledge production that systematically excluded alternative epistemologies.

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The foregoing analysis demonstrates that the civil examination system under the Nguyễn dynasty did not merely operate as an academic institution, but as a form of symbolic power with a high degree of institutionalization. Through mechanisms of content standardization, ritualization of outcomes, and the administrative allocation of scholarly status, the Nguyễn state constructed a closed knowledge structure-one in which knowledge was not autonomously developed, but tightly controlled and defined by the state as a form of coercive soft power.

Unlike Elman's emphasis on the pedagogical diversity and scholarly debates within China's examination system, the Vietnamese model-especially in the late nineteenth century-operated under a far more centralized and exclusionary structure, wherein academic legitimacy was inseparable from imperial authority. Woodside's comparative framework remains valuable, yet this article deepens the analysis by demonstrating how symbolic capital in Vietnam was ritualized not only in court ceremonies but also embedded within village social hierarchies, creating a dual-layered legitimation system rarely observed in Qing China.

In contrast to other East Asian scholarly models-such as late Qing China, where examination reforms had been implemented since the late nineteenth century, or Joseon Korea, where private academies (*sŏwŏn*) functioned as competitive and pluralistic centers of scholarship-Vietnam under the Nguyễn dynasty upheld a "monopolized scholarly pathway." In this model, the state served as the sole authority conferring academic legitimacy and simultaneously exercised comprehensive control over all institutions responsible for the production, dissemination, and reproduction of legitimate cultural capital, in the sense articulated by Bourdieu (1991).

One of the core causes of this model lies in the unique integration between the centralized bureaucratic structure and the village system-a dual governance model in which symbolic power was not only granted from above by the state but also re-established at the village level through communal rituals. This structure rendered academic success not merely an individual achievement but a collective honor. Academic achievement became a form of symbolic capital in which the village invested, which it recognized and transmitted-through seating hierarchies in the communal house, deity worship rituals, steles, tomb inscriptions, and family genealogies. This system did not encourage intellectual diversity, but rather demanded the reproduction of collective values through a state-defined template of academic legitimacy.

Second, the Nguyễn examination model also reflected a form of cultural defensiveness in the face of external domination. In the context of French encroachment at the end of the nineteenth century, the state's tightening of examination content and preservation of orthodox Confucian structures constituted a symbolic strategy of resistance. Examinations-with their rituals and canonical texts-were maintained as manifestations of orthodox moral power, serving as a bulwark against the "symbolic threat" posed by the West. This explains why early twentieth-century educational reforms (such as the inclusion of French and mathematics) failed to dismantle the closed scholarly structure: because the standard of academic legitimacy did not lie in content per se, but in the legal authority of legitimacy bestowed by the state.

Third, the ritualization of knowledge was deeply connected to the model of a moralized polity. Within the Confucian framework of governance, the ruler must practice the Way (*hành đạo*) rather than merely administer (*hành chính*); to study for office was to become a symbol of moral authority, not a technocratic expert. Consequently, knowledge held value not for its practical utility, but for its moralizing capacity and its conformity to ritualized standards. As such, the examination system did not evolve as a mechanism for the creation of new knowledge, but as a structure for reproducing the moral-political order through text and ritual.

These insights extend the current literature by introducing a nuanced model of what might be termed "ritualized academic authoritarianism," whereby the state's control over knowledge extended beyond examinations and into the symbolic order of community life. This approach contributes not only to the

historiography of Vietnamese Confucianism but also to global discussions on how states manufacture legitimacy through knowledge systems.

From a theoretical perspective, the scholarly field under the Nguyễn dynasty represents a paradigmatic case of a symbolic field (*champ de pouvoir symbolique*) in which legitimate cultural capital (*capital culturel légitime*) served not only as a criterion for entry into the bureaucratic apparatus but also as a symbol of the political-moral order as defined, controlled, and ritualized by the state. Within this structure, knowledge did not exist as a space for critical discourse or intellectual autonomy, but was constructed as an instrument to preserve the immutability of the ruling ideological paradigm, systematically excluding any possibility of endogenous transformation in thought.

In summary, the Nguyễn civil examination system constituted a thoroughly politicized configuration of knowledge. It effectively combined bureaucratic organization, ritualized practice, and symbolic authority to construct, maintain, and reproduce the orthodox ideological order. It was precisely this closed nature that rendered the Vietnamese model fundamentally distinct from other Confucian societies in the region—not only in terms of academic content but also in the form of power that was deeply embedded in the operational logic of knowledge itself.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has elucidated the role of the Nguyễn dynasty's civil examination system as a highly structured and totalizing politico-ethical institution of knowledge. Far from being a mere mechanism for bureaucratic recruitment, the examination system functioned as a symbolic field of power, in which knowledge was controlled, standardized, and ritualized in service of maintaining the orthodoxy of the political-social order.

Three central characteristics have been established: (1) the standardization of examination content and format to institutionalize Confucian ideology as the sole model of legitimate knowledge; (2) the monopolization of the entire scholarly space through state control of educational institutions and the elimination of any possibility for legitimizing heterodox ideas; and (3) the ritualization of academic success as a mechanism to legitimize knowledge as a symbol of social power, closely tied to a governance structure that extended from the imperial center to the village level.

In this framework, the examination system became the most effective political apparatus for the instrumentalization of knowledge by the feudal state, continuously reproducing a loyalist and conservative intellectual elite, while entirely excluding pluralistic scholarship or critical thought. This model not only ensured symbolic stability within domestic governance but also operated as a form of “cultural fortification” in symbolic opposition to the West during the precolonial period.

From a theoretical perspective, this system demonstrates the state's power to define, control, and distribute legitimate knowledge through mechanisms of centralized ritualization and legitimation. Knowledge in this context ceased to be a product of creativity or discovery and instead became the outcome of institutional designation. The civil examination system was thus not an academic arena, but rather a machinery for shaping and maintaining the political-social order by means of knowledge-encoded power and power-encoded knowledge.

This conclusion invites a reconfiguration of modern approaches to the examination system in East Asian studies: it is necessary to move beyond the “purely academic” interpretive model and instead consider civil examinations as components of a Confucian state's symbolic-institutional power apparatus, with profound and enduring ramifications across political, social, and epistemological dimensions into the modern era.

This research has primarily focused on the examination institution under the Nguyễn dynasty by analyzing textual samples, examination regulations, and legitimation rituals. It has not yet explored in depth the interaction between the examination system and social groups outside the scholar-official class—such as women, commoners, or religious communities. Additionally, the scope of international

comparison has been limited to China and Joseon Korea, without extending to Southeast Asian contexts where Confucian influence was weaker. Therefore, future studies could broaden their scope through interregional comparisons, analyzing the role of civil examinations within hybrid institutional forms under colonial regimes (e.g., the Quốc Học in Huế), or delving into non-official educational practices such as private schools, household tutoring, and societal responses to the conservative examination model in the late nineteenth century. Another promising direction would be the application of historical ethnography to reconstruct communal memory of the examination system, thereby linking past symbolic spaces to contemporary structures of knowledge and power.

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