

Nguyen-Truong-To and the Quest for Modernization in Vietnam

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Summary

In the face of the Western challenge in the mid-nineteenth century, there were throughout East Asia enlightened individuals who advocated reforms for their countries. Meiji Japan's reformers, inside and outside government, were highly effective and successful in responding to this challenge. There were also many unsuccessful East Asian reformers, such as Nguyen-Truong-To, whose career and ideas are the focus of this essay. He was a pioneer of the modernization movement in modern Vietnam, but his reform memorials to the Hue court of the Nguyen dynasty were the voice of one crying in the wilderness. I will first address this question: How did Nguyen-Truong-To, unlike most of his Vietnamese contemporaries, manage to equip himself with a good body of knowledge about the modern world? I will try to shed light on this question that, posed more than fifty years ago, has never been addressed adequately, by probing into (1) Nguyen-Truong-To's position as a Catholic intellectual in a Confucian society, and (2) the influence of the Chinese *hsin-shu* (literally, "new books") on the genesis of his reformist ideas. I have found striking parallels between Nguyen-Truong-To and the Meiji intellectuals, most notably those in the Meirokusha (Meiji-Six-Society), in their role in enlightening their respective societies. I conclude by commenting on the issues that have confronted Vietnam in its quest for modernization.

Key words

NGUYEN-TRUONG-TO, MODERNIZATION, REFORM, REFORMER, VIETNAM, CHINA, JAPAN, EAST ASIA, NINETEENTH CENTURY, *HSIN-SHU* ("NEW BOOKS"), MEIROKUSHA (MEIJI-SIX-SOCIETY).

The name of Nguyen-Truong-To (1830–1871) first came to the notice of the Vietnamese public at the beginning of the twentieth century through the writings of Phan-Boi-Chau (1867–1940) and his colleagues in the Dong-Du (Go East) and Dong-Kinh Nghia-Thuc (Hanoi Free School) movements,¹ which

attempted to modernize Vietnam in the image of Meiji Japan. Ever since, his name has evoked among the Vietnamese a sense of both optimism and frustration. It has been a source of optimism because, when Vietnam was first confronted with a serious challenge from the West as early as the 1860s, there emerged a man of such high calibre and broad vision as Nguyen-Truong-To: therefore, it could not be said that the country was entirely bereft of talent. Observing, however, that Nguyen-Truong-To's memorials for reform went unheeded at the Hue court of the Nguyen dynasty (1802–1945)—in contrast to Meiji Japan, which effectively used such national talents—many in Vietnam have felt acute frustration at their country's lost opportunity to modernize and enter upon the path to the twentieth century.

Although Nguyen-Truong-To's name has seldom failed to come up whenever the question of modernization is discussed in Vietnam,² it is surprising that many significant aspects of his life and ideas still await more thorough examination. This essay is an effort to give a fuller picture of Nguyen-Truong-To. After presenting a profile of the man and his ideas, I will try to shed light on a question that, posed more than fifty years ago, has never been addressed adequately: "How did Nguyen-Truong-To, unlike most of his Vietnamese contemporaries, manage to equip himself with a good body of knowledge about the modern world?" At the end, I will make an assessment of Nguyen-Truong-To's career as a reformer within the context of East Asia.

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Nguyen-Truong-To was born in 1830 into a Catholic family in Bui-chu village, Nghe-an province. In his early years, he was trained in literary Chinese by his father and scholars in nearby districts. He was nicknamed "*Trang To*" (literally, "To, the academic graduate of the highest distinction") on account of his reputation for extraordinary intelligence. Nonetheless, being a Catholic, he was prohibited from taking the mandarin examinations and therefore barred from the normal course followed by contemporary scholars. His knowledge of the Oriental classics and command of literary Chinese (the official written language in Vietnam until late in the 1910s) are, however, evidenced in the many memorials that he submitted to the Hue court.

In 1848, at eighteen, Nguyen-Truong-To received his first lessons in French, Latin, and basic Western science from Monsignor Gauthier (known as Ngo-Gia-Hau in Vietnamese), who was in charge of the Catholic mission in his home district, as well as other French missionaries of the Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris (Foreign Missions Society of Paris). His course of study was interrupted when, following the Franco-Spanish invasion of Da-nang in August 1858, the ex-

isting ban on Christianity was enforced more strictly than before by the Hue court. Toward the end of 1848, to avoid the effects of the anti-Christian measures, Mgr Gauthier took Nguyen-Truong-To and his other Catholic protégés to Da-nang to place them under the protection of the European forces. It was from Da-nang that Nguyen-Truong-To traveled with Mgr Gauthier to Hong Kong and Penang, where the Société des Missions Etrangères had its seminaries. According to Truong-Ba-Can in his monumental work, *Nguyen-Truong-To: Con nguoi va di thao* (Nguyen-Truong-To: The Man and His Extant Writings),³ we can be certain that Nguyen-Truong-To's travels at this time were confined to Vietnam's neighbouring countries; it was not until 1867 that he went to France and other European countries. These trips nevertheless helped him broaden his knowledge about the outside world. As he put it: "When I grew up, I traveled around foreign lands and the knowledge gained from what I saw and heard there was enormously useful."⁴ Through his experiences abroad and through his reading of literature in Chinese (i.e., the *hsin-shu* or "new books") and French (and perhaps English as well), Nguyen-Truong-To became not only one of the first Vietnamese to be proficient both in literary Chinese and French, but also among the first to have been exposed to, and have possessed a coherent understanding of, Western culture.

Nguyen-Truong-To's appetite for learning was boundless. "I pay attention to every subject," he wrote. "Above is the height of astronomy, below is the depth of geography, in the middle lies the complexity of human affairs. There are legal, military, religious affairs, modern technologies, physics and mathematics. I have studied all those subjects, and specially investigated the dominant trends in the world. Normally, those who acquire this kind of knowledge tend to use it for their self-advancement, but as for me, I simply would like to return the favor that God has bestowed on me, making me able to study, and I have no desire to use it for monetary gain."⁵

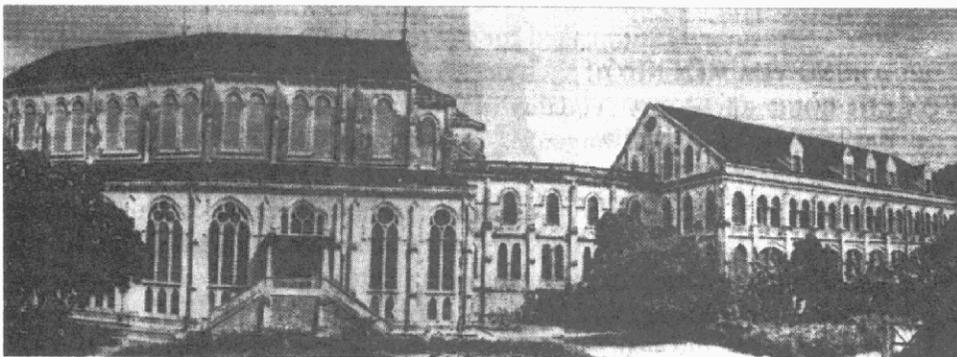
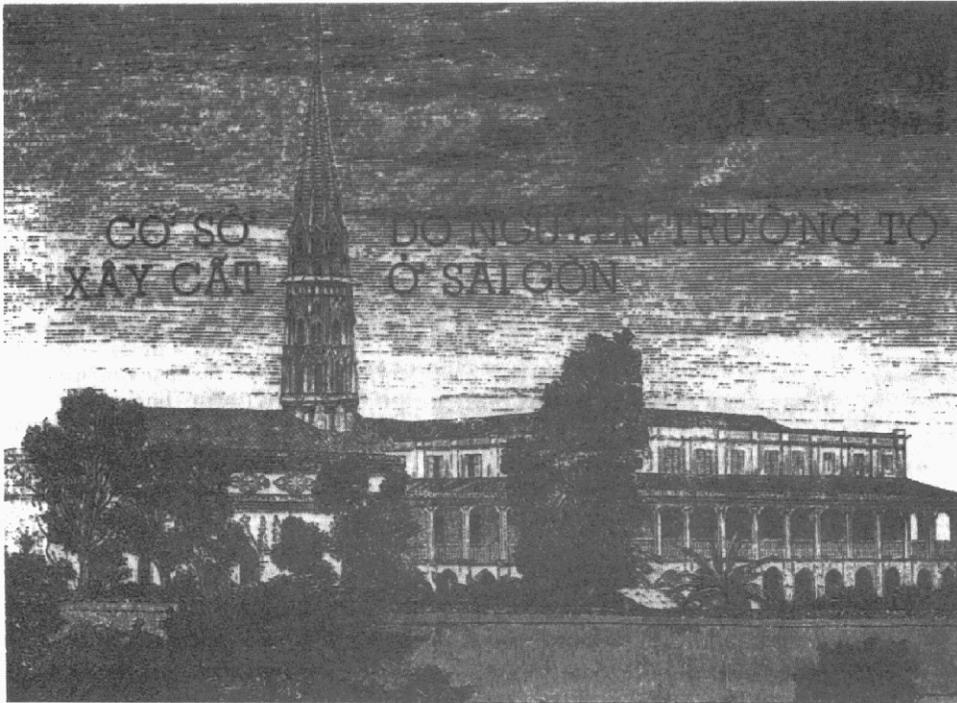
On returning to Saigon with Mgr Gauthier in 1861 at a time when France began to consolidate its grip on Vietnam, Nguyen-Truong-To accepted an offer to work for the French navy's Admiral Léonard Victor Joseph Charner as a translator of official documents from Chinese to French. His collaboration with the French seems to have stemmed from a patriot's desire to help with the peace negotiations between France and the Hue court. Such a settlement, to him, was essential for Vietnam to "strengthen itself and accumulate its energy" (*duong-tinh suc-nhue*), since it would suffer more severe losses should the military conflict be prolonged. But, in November 1861, Admiral Louis Adolphe Bonard, the new commander of French forces in Vietnam, intensified the hostilities and forced the Hue court to cede three provinces of Cochinchina through the so-called "Treaty of Amity" in 1862. As he saw no hope for a fair peace settlement, Nguyen-Truong-To resigned, ending his brief service for the invading forces. Most mod-

ern historians, regardless of their political orientations, agree that his collaboration with the French authorities was “motivated by a sincere, if misguided, patriotism.”⁶ At the time, however, this was seen by other Vietnamese as the conduct of a traitor, and Nguyen-Truong-To became a target for harsh attacks by many court officials, who even demanded his execution.

After leaving his post with the French, Nguyen-Truong-To engaged in supervising several construction projects, while he also devoted a great part of his time and energy to drafting reform memorials to the Hue court. Most notable among the construction projects carried out under his direction was the convent and chapel of the Sisters of Saint-Paul de Chartres (Tu-vien Dong-thanh Phaolo) in Saigon. With its construction work begun in September 1862 and completed in July 1864, this convent was among the first examples of Western-style architecture in Saigon, and one in which the French themselves took great pride. A French Catholic priest, in a letter published in the journal *Missions Catholiques* in 1876, had this to say about Nguyen-Truong-To’s role in the construction of this convent: “It was he who drew up the plan for the bell tower and carefully supervised the construction Every day he was at the construction site and paid attention to every detail. It should be said that without him it would have been impossible to carry out such a work since there were neither workers nor foremen of that kind in Saigon.”⁷ Nguyen-Truong-To was also responsible for the digging of the Sat Canal (dubbed the “Nguyen-Truong-To Canal”) in 1866 between the two main rivers in his home province of Nghe-an, a very difficult project that no one else had been able to achieve in previous attempts.

Of far greater significance than the above construction projects were the memorials that Nguyen-Truong-To drafted from 1862 until his death in 1871. In all he sent more than fifteen reform memorials to the Hue court. A summary of the contents of the most important of these documents follows:

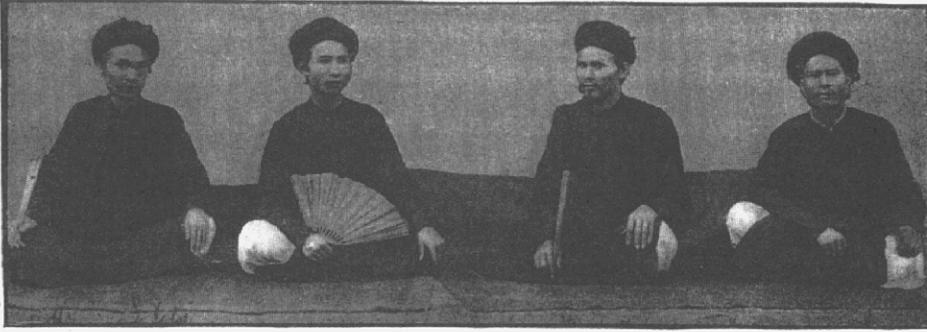
- 1) *Hoa tu* (“On a peace settlement”; first half of 1861) and its revised version *Thien-ha dai-the luan* (“On the dominant trends in the world”; March–April 1863) held that, in order to protect what had not been lost to France, Vietnam had no other choice than to sue for peace with France.
- 2) *Giao mon luan* (“On religious matters”; March 1863) argued that, if there were any traitors among the Catholics, they should individually be punished on the basis of their crimes, but that the Catholics should not suffer from a blanket condemnation. It asked for a tolerant policy towards the Catholics instead of the current anti-Christian decree.
- 3) *Vuong vi chi quy, quan vi chi trong* (“On the great value of the imperial throne and the importance of official ranks”; May 1866) held that, for the purpose of preserving social and political order, it is crucial to uphold the imperial throne and the officialdom. Japan, Turkey and many European



The convent and chapel of the Sisters of Saint Paul de Chartres built under Nguyen-Truong-To's supervision

nations were saved from social upheavals because they were able to maintain such institutions.

- 4) *Khai hoang tu* ("On how to reclaim the wilds"; February–March 1866) proposed that Vietnam should take the initiative and invite French



Unidentified Vietnamese missionaries in Tonkin:
Was one of the men in this photograph Nguyen-Truong-To?

[From *Les Missions Catholiques Française au XIX Siècle* (Vol. II: Abyssinia, India, Indochina), published under the direction of Père J. B. Piolet, S.J. Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, n.d.]

companies to come and invest in Vietnam, participating in the development of its mines and other resources so that the Vietnamese could learn modern technology and thus bridge the gap between their country and the outside world. If Vietnam was not prepared to do so, France would force its way in, anyhow, and seize Vietnam's resources for its own use.

- 5) *Hoc tap tru tai tran tinh tap* ("On the education and accumulation of talents"; September 1866) called for a stress on practical learning in education; the establishment of such departments as fisheries, mining, forestry, geology, and irrigation; equality of the sexes in education; encouragement of the study of foreign languages, etc., among the Vietnamese.
- 6) *Te cap bat dieu* ("Eight urgent matters"; 15 November 1867) urged reforms in such areas as defence, administration (merging of provinces and districts), taxation (increasing national revenue by levying taxes on luxury items), and education (introducing new fields of study like agriculture, geography, engineering, and law, and adopting the vernacular *chu Nom* or demotic script, as the official written language instead of literary Chinese).

Judging from the ideas that he put forth in his memorials, Nguyen-Truong-To, for a Vietnamese of his time, appears to have possessed an impressively wide-ranging and practical knowledge of modern civilization and to have clearly perceived the serious problems that Vietnam had to resolve if it were to survive as an sovereign nation. Among the court officials, Tran-Tien-Thanh (1813–1883), the Regent (Phu-chanh Dai-than) through whom most of Nguyen-Truong-To's memorials were submitted to the Hue court, was fairly receptive to his ideas. At times, even Emperor Tu-Duc seemed moved by his self-

less devotion and pioneering ideas: in 1866 the emperor assigned him and Mgr Gauthier to go to France to recruit experts and purchase books and machinery for a technical school to be built in the imperial capital of Hue. The prospect for the realization of his reform ideas had never seemed so promising as around this time. Unfortunately, when Nguyen-Truong-To and other envoys were in Paris and doing their best to fulfil their mission, the French forces in Cochinchina, in an act that violated the Treaty of 1862, launched another attack and captured the three remaining provinces of Cochinchina. Under increasing pressure from the ranking officials of the dominant “war faction” (*chu-chien*) who had vehemently opposed both the French and Christianity, the Hue court ordered Nguyen-Truong-To and his group to return home without delay. The mission thus proved a failure; the books and machinery purchased in Paris were kept in storage in Hue, and the technical school that Nguyen-Truong-To had dreamed of never came into being.

Returning to Nghe-an in 1868, Nguyen-Truong-To helped Mgr Gauthier build a Western-style seminary in Xa-doai, a village of his home province. Meanwhile, he continued to send memorials on domestic reforms and relations with France. In January 1871, he was summoned to Hue to discuss the details of his proposal that the court should exploit France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian war to regain the land that Vietnam had lost to France. Before anything concrete occurred, however, apparently because of his chronic health problem, Nguyen-Truong-To was back again in Nghe-an, where he died at the age of 41 in November of the same year. In the last minutes of his life, he wrote the following two lines, which sum up both his life-long frustration and the hope that he kept nursing for his country’s revitalization: *Nhat that tuc thanh thien co han, / Tai hoi dau thi bach nien co.* (“Once a mistake has been made, it is cause for eternal regret; / By starting over from the beginning, the foundation for a hundred years may be laid.”)

INFLUENCES ON NGUYEN-TRUONG-TO’S REFORMIST IDEAS

How was it that, while most of the other Vietnamese literati were preoccupied with the dream of passing the mandarin examinations to gain access to the officialdom and “return in triumph to their home village” (*vinh-quy*), Nguyen-Truong-To succeeded in equipping himself with so much highly practical knowledge and acquiring a realistic and perceptive perspective on Vietnam vis-à-vis the outside world?

To answer this question, apart from the fact that Nguyen-Truong-To managed to obtain first-hand information about the outside world through his travel overseas, we should pay attention to: (1) Nguyen-Truong-To’s position as a Catholic

intellectual in a Confucian society, and (2) the influence of the Chinese *hsin-shu* on the genesis of his reformist ideas.

(1) Nguyen-Truong-To's position as an intellectual

As a Catholic intellectual who acquired his knowledge not for the sake of taking mandarin examinations, Nguyen-Truong-To occupied a unique position on the Vietnamese intellectual scene in the two decades from 1850. The fact that Nguyen-Truong-To studied Chinese classics without aspiring to enter upon an official career by way of the mandarin examinations (*khoa-cu*) is of great significance, in my opinion. Since he was barred from taking such examinations, Nguyen-Truong-To paradoxically enjoyed an advantage over the other Vietnamese literati of his time: in pursuing knowledge for its own sake, he was not bound by the *khoa-cu* restricted subject matter and its set mode of thinking. Uninhibited by these restrictions, Nguyen-Truong-To was able to see the problems of his society as they were. He thus launched scathing attacks on "empty learning" (*bu-hoc*) as practised in Vietnam at the time, and called for the adoption of "practical learning" (*thuc-hoc*). In so doing he acted like the Japanese intellectuals during the early years of the Meiji period, who had likewise been trained in Chinese studies in their youth, but were receptive to modern ideas, unlike most of their fellow scholars in China and Vietnam; they too could adopt Western learning because they were not bound by the rigid system of those mandarin examinations.

Perhaps it should be added that, in some respects, Nguyen-Truong-To was not such a rare phenomenon that existed only in nineteenth-century Vietnam: in any society and at any time, there have always existed "marginal intellectuals" like Nguyen-Truong-To who can see the evil aspects of their own society and thus become its most incisive critics. His marginal position, however, did not cause Nguyen-Truong-To to remain indifferent to the fate of his country. In fact, it was the other way around: because he was aware of the grave nature of the danger that was confronting Vietnam and perhaps also because he felt able to make a contribution to save it from this danger, he showed earnest and genuine concern over its future at every turn of events. As a Catholic intellectual, he painfully realized that many members of the ruling elite suspected him, yet his mind was always directed toward the Hue court in the face of the national crisis. These two lines of verse sum up his feelings: *Nhat ngu tuy vo hoi chieu xu, / Qui hoa tu huu huong duong tham*. ("Even if the sun does not shine upon my place, / The sunflower always turns to it nevertheless.")

(2) The impact of the Chinese *hsin-shu*

The term *tan-thu* (in Chinese *hsin-shu*, literally "new books") is used in Vietnamese to refer to a group of writings in literary Chinese or translations into

Chinese from Western literature published after China's defeat in the Opium War in an attempt "to know more about the enemy." Reformers such as K'ang Yu-wei (1858–1927) and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao (1873–1929) would later become prominent writers of *hsin-shu*. There were also *hsin-shu* composed by Protestant missionaries who wrote such books to demonstrate that, since the West possessed such an advanced civilization, then its religion (i.e. Christianity) should also deserve the notice of the Chinese.

More than fifty years ago, in his article "Where did Nguyen-Truong-To study?", the well-known Vietnamese scholar Dao-Duy-Anh (1904–1988) attempted to shed light on the impact of the *hsin-shu* on Nguyen-Truong-To's reformist ideas and made some valuable observations.⁸ Dao-Duy-Anh had access to the library of the Regent Tran-Tien-Thanh and also had the opportunity to collect and read the materials on Nguyen-Truong-To in the latter's home village. Dao-Duy-Anh suggested that Nguyen-Truong-To could not have acquired his body of knowledge about the West while he was in France since his stay there was rather short.⁹ He speculated that Nguyen-Truong-To must have been influenced by the Chinese *hsin-shu* that he obtained during his travels to Southeast Asia and Hong Kong,¹⁰ and in fact he saw a great deal of *hsin-shu* in Nguyen-Truong-To's library.

Concurring with Dao-Duy-Anh's observation, Truong-Ba-Can held that "in order to acquire a specialized body of knowledge, Nguyen-Truong-To must have studied by himself—reading books and journals . . . because while it was true that with respect to Western studies, the missionaries and especially Mgr Gauthier gave him lessons on the French language and Western science, these lessons on science must have been elementary, since most missionaries in the Missions Etrangères de Paris, before they were sent overseas for missionary work, only completed junior high school apart from their training at monasteries to become priests."¹¹ For this reason, Truong-Ba-Can too maintained that it was through his reading of the Chinese *hsin-shu* that by 1861, Nguyen-Truong-To had acquired quite a broad knowledge of Western technological and social sciences.¹²

Regrettably, all the materials in Nguyen-Truong-To's library were lost in the years that followed the end of the Second World War,¹³ and no one had recorded the titles of these books. Had we been able to identify them, we might be more positive in our assessment of the impact of *hsin-shu* upon Nguyen-Truong-To's reformist ideas. Since I have read through his writings, I tend to agree with the above observations by Dao-Duy-Anh and Truong-Ba-Can. But I would like to add a few comments.

In those writings by Nguyen-Truong-To that I have read, there are two passages in which the book titled *Ying-huan chih-lieh* (A Short Survey of the Maritime Circuit) is mentioned. That is an important *hsin-shu* well-known not only



Ying-huan chih-lüeh

in China but also in Japan in the 1850s and 1860s. Let us consider how Nguyen-Truong-To made reference to that book.

In his memorial on “The dominant trends in the world” (dated 3 April 1863), Nguyen-Truong-To wrote: “I have frequently studied world affairs and realized that to sue for peace with France is the best thing we can do. In Europe, France is the most formidable military power, second to none. The French are determined and skilful fighters, and are equipped with impressive armed vehicles. Even in fighting, they respect justice and keep promises, unlike other countries that only look for profits In victory, their entire country would rejoice; they show no regret even if they have to sacrifice thousands of lives in order to preserve their national honor and prestige. Their commanders are daring, highly resourceful, and skilful in tactics in both land and sea battles. All this has been pointed out in the *Ying-huan chih-lüeh*.”¹⁴

In the memorial “Eight urgent matters” (dated 15 November 1867), Nguyen-Truong-To again referred to the *Ying-huan chih-lüeh* in his discussion of the peoples who lived in the western part of Vietnam. He recommended that the Hue court should ask the missionaries to go there and help them: “In the western area,

in the ancient times there were barbaric peoples . . . who later were enlightened by the Pacification Commissioners (*Hsüan-wei-shih*) and gradually became better off. This is a fact recorded in historical books from the West and in the *Ying-huan chih-lüeh* and not something I have made up."¹⁵

Although it is quite obvious that Nguyen-Truong-To cited the *Ying-huan chih-lüeh* in the above two passages to stress the objectivity of his argument and thus make it more persuasive, we may infer from these citations how influential this *hsin-shu* was in Nguyen-Truong-To's quest for an understanding of the outside world. Let us take a closer look at the *Ying-huan chih-lüeh* and observe the impact it made in China and Japan.

The *Ying-huan chih-lüeh* was compiled by Hsü Chi-yü (1795–1873) from 1843 to 1848 when Hsü held office in Fukien first as financial commissioner, and later as governor. Hsü was born into a gentry family in Shansi province. After obtaining the *chin-shih* degree in 1826, he first joined the Hanlin Academy; in 1836 he was appointed provincial censor of Shensi. He soon established his reputation as an effective troubleshooter. One year after the conclusion of the Nanking Treaty (1842), Hsü assumed his office in Fukien and it was at the request of Emperor Tao-kuang that Hsü compiled the *Ying-huan chih-lüeh*.

In Fukien, Hsü had the opportunity to establish contacts with many Westerners. Among them were Captain Henry Gribble (first British consul to Amoy) and his interpreter David Abeel (an American missionary), and other British diplomats such as George Tradescant Lay and Rutherford Alcock. These contacts proved essential to Hsü's gathering of information about the world beyond China. Hsü began his work by collecting as exhaustively as he could the world maps published in the West. He then wrote his commentaries on the basis of his reading of works by Chinese authors, old and new, as well as by the Christian missionaries writing in Chinese at the time. Hsü went through the trouble of meticulously verifying the information in these books with his Western contacts.

Published in 1849, the *Ying-huan chih-lüeh* consists of ten books totalling 145,000 characters and 42 maps. In the book, Hsü wrote not only about physical geography, but also about the political map of the world in the nineteenth century, dealing with such timely questions as Western expansion in Asia and its impact upon China and its tributary states. For several decades in China the *Ying-huan chih-lüeh* remained a major source of information about the outside world. It is worth noting that the reformer K'ang Yu-wei first read the *Ying-huan chih-lüeh* when he was seventeen, and thereafter the book became his desk-top companion.¹⁶

The *Ying-huan chih-lüeh* was reprinted in Japan in 1861; along with the *Hai-kuo t'u-chih* (An Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Countries; 1842)—another important *hsin-shu* compiled by Wei Yüan (1794-1856)—it provided the



Hai-kuo t'u-chih
(Japanese edition: *Kaikoku zushi*)

Japanese *shishi* (men of high purpose) with much needed information about the outside world when the national isolation policy of the Tokugawa régime was still in effect. It is important to note that even in 1874, by which time knowledge in Japan about the world beyond East Asia was generally ahead of that in China, the *Ying-huan chih-lüeh* was still translated into Japanese and found many readers.¹⁷

As for the *Hai-kuo t'u-chih*, even though there is no direct mention of it in Nguyen-Truong-To's writings, there are some significant parallels between its line of argument and his, and since the *Hai-kuo t'u-chih* was a prominent *hsin-shu* at the time, it is quite possible that Nguyen-Truong-To had read the book.

Wei Yüan, the author of the *Hai-kuo t'u-chih*, was a close friend of Lin Tse-hsü (1785–1850), the commissioner dispatched by the Ch'ing court to discuss opium matters with the British East India Company. It was Lin who asked Wei Yüan to write this book. The first edition of the *Hai-kuo t'u-chih* (1842) consists of 50 volumes, in the second edition (1847) it was expanded to 60 volumes, and in the third edition (1852) to 100 volumes. The *Hai-kuo t'u-chih* gave its reader not only information about the West but also suggestions for strategic measures to deal with the current Western encroachment, such as “using Westerners to fight Westerners” (*i-i kung-i*), “using Westerners to entice

Westerners" (*i-i k'uan-i*), and "learning the strength of Westerners to control Westerners" (*shih-i chih chang-chi i-chih-i*).¹⁸ The shift in policy from "expelling Westerners" (*jōi*) to "learning from the West, catching up with the West, surpassing the West" (*Seiyō o manabi, Seiyō ni oitsuki, Seiyō o oinuku*) during the late Tokugawa and early Meiji was in line with Wei Yüan's principles. Nguyen-Truong-To himself was following a similar line of thinking in "On the Six Advantages" and other memorials when he recommended to the Hue court that it should embrace the methods of the West lest Vietnam should lose its sovereignty, and that it should "control the French by using other Europeans" or "use other countries to defend itself from foreign threat."¹⁹

When the *Hai-kuo t'u-chih* was published, it caught the attention of some Chinese literati, but afterward the book went out of print. Even when the then Minister of War Wang Mu-yin at the Ch'ing court recommended that the book be reprinted to provide each Imperial prince's family and each minister with a copy, and to supply a text for military schools, his proposal was flatly rejected.²⁰ In China, not only did Wei Yüan's ideas fail to get any serious consideration from the court, his talents were never properly used. He held office as a district magistrate, and when the court was threatened by the Taiping Rebellion, he was promoted to prefect, but never advanced beyond that rank and died in obscurity.

In Japan, by contrast, the *Hai-kuo t'u-chih*, just like the *Ying-huan chih-lüeh*, left a strong impression upon the intellectuals inside and outside the government. By 1852, there were five copies of its second edition in Japan; in 1854, fifteen copies of its third edition were brought to Japan, of which seven were placed under the Shogunate requisition and eight were sold on the market. Shioya Tōin was asked by Kawaji Toshiakira, the official in charge of finance and coastal defence, to select the most important parts for reprint. The first Japanese reprint of the *Hai-kuo t'u-chih* appeared in 1855, and by the end of the following year there were in all 21 different editions of the book.²¹ The popularity of this book in Japan illustrates the acute interest the Japanese took in world affairs and their prompt and serious search for an effective way to deal with the crisis that followed the arrival of Commodore Perry's Black Ships in 1853.

If the circulation of ideas for reform in China was much more restricted than in Japan, then their circulation in Vietnam was even more circumscribed. Notwithstanding, the impact of the *hsin-shu* was profound on those Vietnamese literati who had read them. Phan-Boi-Chau, a leading figure on the Vietnamese intellectual and political scene in the first quarter of the twentieth century, recalled in his autobiography that, reading such works as the *Ch'ung-tung ch'an-chih* (The War in the Middle East), the *Fa-Fu ch'an-chih* (The Franco-Prussian War)²² and the *Ying-huan chih-lüeh*, he was "deeply moved by the actual current situation of worldwide competition and by the tragedy of the ruin of nations and the extinction of races."²³

NGUYEN-TRUONG-TO'S CAREER VIEWED FROM AN EAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

As it has become rather obvious by now, we find it impossible to make a full assessment of Nguyen-Truong-To's career as a mid-nineteenth-century Vietnamese reformer, and indeed to understand the quest for modernization in Vietnam itself, unless they are set against an East Asian background, revealing how the Vietnamese scholar was influenced by currents of thought and social and political developments in other parts of East Asia, and how his ideas compared with those of other East Asian reformers. The following remarks perhaps can be made at this point.

(1) The importance of recognizing Vietnam's cultural ties with the East Asian world

So far as the Chinese *hsin-shu* are concerned, we have considered the influence of the early *hsin-shu* upon the formation of Nguyen-Truong-To's reformist ideas.²⁴ Heretofore, this influence had not been properly appreciated either in Vietnam or abroad. The main reason for this failure to understand is that the number of scholars inside Vietnam who have proficiency in classical Chinese has grown smaller and smaller following the abolition of the *khoa-cu* or mandarin examination system in the late 1910's and the adoption of the Romanized alphabet or *quoc-ngu* (literally, "the national language") as the country's official script instead of the Chinese script. For the same reason, to many outside Vietnam, the country's cultural connections with other parts of the East Asian world have become less apparent.

(2) Parallels between Nguyen-Truong-To and early Meiji intellectuals

We have previously mentioned a similarity between Nguyen-Truong-To and early Meiji intellectuals in the fact that they all had received training in Chinese classics in their youth and yet were receptive to modern ideas, being uninhibited by the restrictions of the mandarin examination system. Apart from this, upon reading the memorials that Nguyen-Truong-To sent to the Hue court from 1861 until his death in 1871, one cannot help but recall the reform proposals submitted by members of the *Meirokeisha* (Meiji-Six-Society) and published in the *Meiroke Zasshi* (Journal of the Meirokeisha). This society, formed in the sixth year of the Meiji period (1873), included renowned scholars in Western studies (*yōgakusha*) in Japan at the time, such as Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901), Katō Hiroyuki (1836–1916), Mori Arinori (1848–89), Nishi Amane (1829–97), Nakamura Masanao (1832–91), and others. The subjects treated in more than a hundred essays published in the 43 issues of the *Meiroke Zasshi* virtually swept over all of human culture: politics, economics,

history, education, laws, philosophy, religion, linguistics, natural science, and so forth. These articles were written for enlightenment (*keimō*) purposes and dealt with the most pressing issues that faced Japan at the time. To meet the demand of the Japanese reading public, the Meirokusha members acquired an astonishing range of learning; many of them were encyclopedists and pioneers of many fields in Japan. Men like Fukuzawa, Katō, Mori had their names attached to the history of modern Japanese education; Nakamura was the translator of John S. Mill's *On Liberty* (*Jiyū no ri*) and Samuel Smiles' widely popular *Self-help* (*Saikoku risshi-hen*)—books that set ideals for forward-looking Meiji youth; and Nishi was the founder of modern Japanese philosophy.

Thus a striking resemblance between Nguyen-Truong-To and the Japanese intellectuals in the Meirokusha lies in their encyclopedic knowledge about things Western needed to meet the requirements of their respective societies. The circumstances surrounding them, however, were quite different. The Meirokusha membership at the time consisted of some thirty scholars (not to mention a countless number of scholars of Western learning, i.e. *yōgakusha*, outside the Meirokusha) who commanded respect from both the public as well as the government. In Vietnam, Nguyen-Truong-To was a lone figure, subject to suspicion and jealousy on the part of many officials at the Hue court. His reform memorials were the voice of one crying in the wilderness.

Another important parallel between Nguyen-Truong-To and the Meiji intellectuals was that they all paid utmost attention to the dominant trends in the world: it is on the basis of their analysis of those trends that they proposed a course of action for their respective countries. Such an approach was not only apparent in Fukuzawa Yukichi's *Bunmeiron no gairyaku* (*An Outline of A Theory of Civilization*) and in the writings of other Meirokusha members, it was also a common feature of writings by other prominent Meiji intellectuals such as Nakae Chōmin and Tokutomi Sohō. Similarly, in contrast to most Vietnamese intellectuals of his time, Nguyen-Truong-To was able to evaluate the crisis of his country in the context of what he perceived to be the dominant trends of the current world (*thien-ha dai-the*), including the political situation in France and the differences between France and other European countries; and given the circumstances of the times, he arrived at radical solutions for Vietnam.

As has been aptly pointed out, through Nguyen-Truong-To's writings, "one sees that he had no doubt about French ambitions in Vietnam . . . [In spite of this] the question of modernization of the nation was to him of the foremost importance; for this reason, he called for an expansion of trade and relations with other countries, and he held that Vietnam should make peace and give temporary concessions to France."²⁵ Allowing for the different situation in Vietnam and in Japan, Nguyen-Truong-To's perception of national independence was essentially

the same as the view adopted in Meiji Japan. Although the Meiji government did make repeated attempts at revising the unequal treaties that Japan had been forced to conclude with Western powers during the late Tokugawa years, it practically took the entire Meiji period (1868–1911) for Japan to achieve a complete treaty revision, which came about only because, in the meantime, Japan had grown into a wealthy and strong nation.

(3) No actual meeting between Nguyen-Truong-To and Itō Hirobumi

As a matter of some interest, it has long been widely believed in scholarly circles in Vietnam that Nguyen-Truong-To actually met Itō Hirobumi (1841–1909), a hero of the Meiji Restoration, and that the two, in a most animated conversation, exchanged their views on the state of affairs of their countries.²⁶ It is true that in his writings, Nguyen-Truong-To often cited developments related to Japan (apparently out of a desire to use the Japanese examples for demonstrating that the policies of the Hue court were outdated); nonetheless, I have elsewhere shown that such a meeting was a fiction and never took place.²⁷ The point of contact between Nguyen-Truong-To and his Japanese contemporaries was not any personal encounter but the shared perception that to make their countries “wealthy and strong” was the most effective means to achieve national independence in the face of relentless Western inroads in the later half of the nineteenth century.

* * *

In conclusion, we may observe that, despite their intellectual brilliance and novelty, the readership of Nguyen-Truong-To’s writings in Vietnam remained extremely limited for a long time, although they made a powerful impression on those with access to them. A typical case was Nguyen-Lo-Trach (1852–1895), author of *Thien-ha dai-the-luan* (The Dominant Trends in the World), a work showing the decisive influence of Nguyen-Truong-To’s ideas and constituting the prime mover behind the Dong-Du and the Dong-Kinh Nghia-Thuc Movements in the first decade of the twentieth century. Nguyen-Lo-Trach was one of those few who had the rare opportunity to read Nguyen-Truong-To’s writings. The reason was rather simple: he was a son-in-law of the Regent Tran-Tien-Thanh. The case of the scholar Dao-Duy-Anh, who also had access to Nguyen-Truong-To’s materials, is quite similar: his wife was a granddaughter of Tran-Tien-Thanh.

The point that I hope to bring home here is obvious. In spite of the enormous desire for new information about the outside world among the population at large, the rigidly traditional court officials tried their utmost to limit its flow into Vietnamese society as much as they could, lest the status quo should be seriously

challenged. Indeed, such restraints on the circulation of new ideas have proved a major stumbling block to intellectual advancement and social progress in Vietnam.

Notes

In citing works in the notes, short titles have generally been used. Works frequently cited have been identified by the following abbreviations:

NTT Ho-Chi-Minh City: NXB Thanh pho Ho-Chi-Minh, 1988

1. In the *Viet-Nam quoc-su-khao* (A Treatise of Vietnam's National History) written by Phan-Boi-Chau in 1908 when he was in Japan, Nguyen-Truong-To is credited with being among the first "who sowed the seed of enlightenment" in Vietnam (Ha Noi: NXB Giao Duc, 1962, pp. 68-69). From November 1925 to October 1927, the *Nam phong* (South Wind) reprinted various writings by Nguyen-Truong-To in literary Chinese. In a 1933 article in the same journal, Nguyen-Trong-Thuat compared the enlightening role of Nguyen-Truong-To to that of the Japanese Fukuzawa Yukichi and the Chinese K'ang Yu-wei (*Nam phong*, no. 180, January 1933, pp. 1-11).
2. Ever since the 'renovation' (*doi moi*) policy was launched in Vietnam in 1986, Nguyen-Truong-To's reformist ideas have been discussed frequently by the mass media and in academic circles. The first symposium on Nguyen-Truong-To under the socialist government of Vietnam took place in Ho-Chi-Minh City in 1992. A thirty-minute documentary film on Nguyen-Truong-To was produced recently; the author was asked to serve as its historical advisor.
3. Ho-Chi-Minh City: NXB Thanh pho Ho-Chi-Minh, 1988 (hereafter cited as NTT), p. 120.
4. "Bai tran tinh," NTT, p. 120.
5. Ibid.
6. Mark W. Mcleod, "Nguyen Truong To: A Catholic Reformer at Emperor Tu-duc's Court," in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2 (September 1994), pp. 315-316.
7. Cited in NTT, p. 29.
8. *Tri Tan*, no. 7 (July 18, 1941) and *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hué* (no. 4, April-June, 1944).
9. According to Dao-Duy-Anh, Nguyen-Truong-To stayed in France for "less than two years." On the basis of the materials that we have in hand, we can assert that Nguyen-Truong-To stayed in France for only eight months, from the end of March to the end of November, 1867.
10. *Tri Tan*, loc. cit., p. 23.
11. NTT, p. 63.
12. Ibid., pp. 22-23.

13. Dao-Duy-Anh gave an account of the circumstances in which these materials were lost in his article “*Toi da mang toi de mat nhung tai lieu quy ve Nguyen-Truong-To nhu the nao?*” (In what way was I responsible for the loss of valuable materials on Nguyen-Truong-To?), included in NTT, pp. 484–488.
14. NTT, p. 108. Nguyen-Truong-To quoted this passage from the *Ying-huan chih-lüeh*, Book 7, p. 533. In the original text, there is no mention of “armed vehicles.”
15. This passage is cited from the *Ying-huan chih-lüeh*, Book 1, p. 91.
16. Sakade Yoshinobu, *Kō Yū-i* (K’ang Yu-wei). Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1985, pp. 35–36.
17. The title of the Japanese translation is *Eikan shiryaku* (A Short History of the Maritime Circuit), slightly changed from that of the original; although the original title is still kept on the title page, with a subtitle *Zokkai eiri* (a popular version with illustrations). See *Nihon’yaku Chūgokusho sōgō mokuroku* (A Comprehensive Bibliography of Translations from Chinese into Japanese) compiled by Tam Yue-him under the supervision of Sanetō Keishū (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1980), p. 100.
18. For a more detailed discussion, see Lu Wan-he, *Meiji ishin to Chūgoku* (The Meiji Restoration and China) (Tokyo: Rokkō Shuppan, 1988), pp. 123–125.
19. NTT, pp. 145–151. In the memorial “On the Six Advantages,” Nguyen-Truong-To also mentioned the policy of “using the Westerners to fight Westerners” but as a statement of Emperor Tao-kuang: “Emperor Tao-kuang of the Ch’ing court has said: ‘The best policy to fight against the Westerners is to use Westerners’ ” (Ibid., p. 144).
20. In 1862, when Takasugi Shinsaku (1839–67)—a disciple of Yoshida Shōin, the pioneer and symbol of the anti-Tokugawa movement—secretly went to Shanghai to observe the situation in China in person, he found to his dismay that the *Hai-kuo t’u-chih*, “the best Chinese work on strategy, had been allowed to fall out of print.” Takasugi considered this neglect to be one of the main reasons for the decline of the Ch’ing dynasty. See Joshua Fogel, *Politics of Sinology: The Case of Naitō Konan* (1866–1934). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 15.
21. The information in this passage is based on Lu Wan-he, op. cit., pp. 123–127. For more details about different editions of the *Hai-kuo t’u-chih* in Japan, see Tam ed., op. cit., pp. 4, 98–99, 101, 103, 136, 206.
22. These two works were written by Liang Ch’i-ch’ao.
23. Phan-Boi-Chau, *Overtured Chariot: The Autobiography of Phan-Boi-Chau*, translated with an introduction and annotations by Vinh Sinh and Nicholas Wickenden. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1999.
24. Later Chinese reformist writings, particularly those by Liang Ch’i-ch’ao, also left a strong imprint not only on the generation of Vietnamese intellectuals who were active in the first quarter of the twentieth century such as Phan-Boi-Chau and Phan-Chau-Trinh, but also on those who grew up in the 1920s—i.e., the generation of Dao-Duy-Anh (1904–88), Dang-Thai-Mai (1902–84) or Tran-Huy-Lieu (1901–69), regardless of their political orientations. For a discussion on this subject, see my paper “Meijiki ni tsukurareta Wasei Kango no Betonamugoka” (The Vietnamese Adaptation of the New Terms Created in Meiji Japan to Render Western Ideas), in *1994-nen Nihon kenkyū Kyoto Kaigi kiyō*, vol. III, pp.

195–206.

25. NTT, pp. 84–86.

26. To my knowledge, such a meeting was first speculated by Dao-Dang-Vy in his article “Nguyen-Truong-To et son temps” in *La Patrie Annamite*, no. 1937–1938, and it was later repeatedly mentioned by other authors, including Dao-Duy-Anh and Truong-Ba-Can.

27. I have done this by looking into, and analysing, their respective domestic activities and overseas travels in the 1860s. See “Giac mong chua thanh: Vai y kien dong gop vao viec tim hieu va danh gia Nguyen Truong To” (An Unachieved Dream: Contribution to an Understanding and Appreciation of Nguyen-Truong-To) in my book *Viet Nam va Nhat Ban trong the gioi Dong A* (Vietnam and Japan in the Context of East Asia) (Ho-Chi-Minh City: jointly published by the Department of Culture of Ho-Chi-Minh City and the Department of History, Ho-Chi-Minh City University of Education, 1993), pp. 111–146.

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要 約

グエン・チュン・トー(阮長祚) とベトナムにおける近代化運動

ビン シン

19世紀半ばにおける西洋衝撃後、東アジア諸国では種々の改革が試みられたが、最も素早い対応をみせたのは明治日本であったことは周知の通りである。本稿は、ベトナムにおける改良運動、近代化運動の先駆者、阮長祚に焦点を当ててみたい。同時代の中国、日本における改革運動、啓蒙思想との関連を分析しながら、阮長祚の改良思想の形成やその骨格に関する、今までまだあまり知られていない側面を明らかにし、最後にベトナムにおける近代化運動の問題点について言及する。