

The Reformation Of Nguyen Truong To In The History Of Southeast Asia In The 19th Century

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Abstract

Southeast Asia, including Vietnam in the nineteenth century, is a volatile area. Countries in the region have been invaded by colonial countries. In that period, in some countries in the region appeared the idea of reform of the country in which the reform of Nguyen Truong To the idea of historical significance is not only for Vietnam but also in the region of southeast Asia. With nearly 60 proposals, his country's innovative ideas are a bright spot in the process of the history of modern Southeast Asia. This research is based on surveys of archived documents referring to Nguyen Truong To's reform proposals still in Vietnam. This study uses documentary and logical methods to clarify the research problem. The highest goal of the research is to point out the advances that Nguyen Truong To proposed to reform Vietnam at the end of the 19th century.

Keywords: History; Reformation; Southeast Asia; Nguyen Truong To.

1. General context of Southeast Asia in the 19th century and some trends in national reform

1.1. Historical background

Southeast Asia, with its favorable geographical location, has become a place for international exchanges very early on. From the 16th to 19th centuries, there were many big

changes in Southeast Asia. This was a “period of gradual decline and crisis for the monarchical countries in the region”¹. Meanwhile, around the world, Western capitalist countries after completing the industrial revolutions, typically England, France, the Netherlands, ... have been stepping up their colonial invasion to the East. to find consumer markets and raw material sources for strong industrial development. The recessionary context of Southeast Asian countries has “created favorable conditions and opportunities for colonialism to penetrate and invade Southeast Asia, which placed Southeast Asian countries in front of a great threat to their independence”².

In Southeast Asia island, since 1565, the Spanish army led by Legazpi attacked and conquered the Philippines and by the mid-nineteenth century had completed the conquest of the entire archipelago. In Malaysia, on May 2, 1511, Albuquerque led 1,400 Portuguese soldiers to invade Malacca. By the middle of the 17th century, Portugal gradually weakened, and Malaysia fell under the domination of the Dutch colonialists. After that, Malaysia became a place of competition between British and Dutch capitalists. As a result, with outstanding growth in all aspects, Britain gradually prevailed. By 1867, the Straits colony, including central Singapore, Malacca, and Penang, was under the direct management of the British Colonial Office. In Indonesia, since 1509 the Portuguese have come to take over important strongholds. The Netherlands also approached Indonesia, and Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) gradually dominated the entire Java archipelago. Forced European traders, including the British, to withdraw from Java.

In the mainland Southeast Asia region, since 1855, England, France, America, Portugal, etc. have pressured the Siamese government to sign unequal treaties. Siam became a heavily dependent country, especially on Britain and France. In Burma, in March 1824 the British colonialists declared war on Burma. After three wars of invasion, in 1885 the conquest of Burma was completed.

¹ Nguyen Van Nam, *Understanding the history of Southeast Asian countries ASEAN*, Hanoi Publishing House, Hanoi, 2002, p.120.

²Dang Van Chuong (Editor), *Closing and opening policies in some Southeast Asian countries*, Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, 2017, p 134.

In Indochina (Vietnam, Lao and Campodia), French capitalists sought to infiltrate and influence the Khmer court, forcing King Norodom to sign two treaties of 1863 and 1884. At this point, France dismissed the influence of the court. Siam, stripped Cambodia of its state power and effectively took control of Cambodia. In Laos, in parallel with invading Cambodia and Vietnam, since 1865 French troops have sought to invade Laos in the name of an “expedition”, France sought to pressure and eliminate the influence of the Siamese court for Laos. On October 3, 1893, Siam signed a treaty with France recognizing the relinquishment of control over Laos. French colonial rule in Laos began. In Vietnam, in September 1858, the French colonialists opened fire to invade Vietnam. The Nguyen Dynasty gradually surrendered. In 1884, France forced the Nguyen Dynasty to sign the Treaty of Patenotre, establishing a civil society to rule in Vietnam.

Thus, in general, until the second half of the 19th century, most Southeast Asian countries were dominated by Western colonial countries. However, in Southeast Asian countries during this time, ideas of national reform appeared with the aim of restoring independence and developing the country.

1.2.The national reform movement in Southeast Asian countries

Siam: In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, King Rama V (Chulalongkorn) carried out reforms. In the economic field, he abolished slavery, abolished the state forced labor regime, reduced taxes on land, especially reduced taxes on the key rice production area in central Siam. These policies have progressive significance, helping to liberate labor, promote agricultural production, and make the Siamese economy change strongly . In the administrative field, King Rama V built a European state model, in which the king is the supreme power in the state council, in addition to a state council that acts as a Parliament. The special thing about the 1892 reform was the abolition of the tax collection regime. Tax collection is directly carried out by state employees, increasing policy revenue while at the same time reducing the harassment of farmers caused by tax contractors... On the basis of socio-economic changes, Siam has been given a position in the diplomatic struggle with Western countries, gradually moving towards eliminating unequal treaties.

In some other countries such as Burma at this time, there were also policies of reform, developing the state along the capitalist path, establishing a constitutional monarchy. During the reign of King Mindon (1853 - 1874), reforms were carried out, he minted new coins (1861), encouraged industrial and commercial business, imported a number of ships and machinery purchased from Europe, and built telegraphs. King Mindon's reforms were suppressed by British colonialists but contributed to the formation of a new intellectual class in Burma, creating conditions for the movement to fight for independence in Burma later (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018)... In the Philippines, Jose Rizal fought and propagated for the Spanish government to carry out reforms, for equal rights between Filipinos and Spaniards, and to send delegates to the parliament; protect private property rights; freedom of trade, the movement led by Jose Rizal caused many difficulties for Spanish colonial rule, however this movement gradually created conditions for America to step in to replace the Spanish colonialists in the Philippines.

2. Nguyen Truong To's ideology of national reform

A typical representative of the reform movement in Vietnam in the 19th century stands out the role of Nguyen Truong To. Nguyen Truong To was born as a Catholic intellectual, worked for France, and visited many places around the world, so progressive streams of thought appeared in him. His innovative ideas and proposals came from patriotic heart, concerned about the country's difficulties when confronting powerful foreign invaders.

In Nguyen Truong To's perception, if you want to avoid invasion and maintain independence, you must carry out reforms. He said, "If the country is not rich yet, why not plan to become rich? If the soldiers aren't strong yet, why don't you worry about making them stronger? Our people are not wise yet, so why don't we educate them about morality? The outside enemy is about to enslave and plunder our wealth, so why don't we ask each other and remind each other to find a way to prevent it? Why don't you use your energy to take care of immediate urgent matters, instead of using it on distant

and impractical things?³ Therefore, from 1863 to 1871, Nguyen Truong To sent nearly 60 statements to the court of King Tu Duc, proposing to reform the country, including the following aspects.

Regarding agriculture, with the awareness that this is an important issue because at that time more than 99% of people lived by farming "Agriculture is the root, clothing and hundreds of other needs for life depend on agriculture" (Truong Ba Can, 2002), he advocates paying attention to training a team of agricultural officials to develop agriculture: "Now, first of all, we would like to publish a complete set of agricultural books. Then, throughout the country, where has there been an agricultural method suitable for the land, what is the weather like, reporting everything to the province and the province to the Ministry to coordinate it into the Agricultural Policy book? . If we see something that can be invented, we will prepare textbooks. Old agricultural books that are not suitable for our country's climate and soil should be eliminated. In addition, please also establish a Ministry of Agriculture like Western countries"⁴.

Regarding irrigation work to support agriculture, he advocated planting forests and digging canals to limit the devastation of floods and droughts: "Everyone can see the benefits of digging canals. Only a small amount of water falling during the storm and flood season usually causes damage to us. However, that doesn't mean there are no ways to deal with it. Unless the sea level rises, there is no way to stop it, but rainwater is different. Our country has many mountains and few plains. When there is a lot of rain, the rainwater is blocked by the mountains, so the people suffer damage. Now, if we cut many channels to carry water (I know about this), the water will be weak and unable to spread and flood. Everywhere, we have to cut canals into many water paths. That is the best policy"⁵

Regarding trade, Nguyen Truong To, in many documents sent to the Court, always emphasized the need to

³ Truong Ba Can, *Nguyen Truong To people and manuscripts*, Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House , Ho Chi Minh city, 2002.

⁴ Truong Ba Can, *Nguyen Truong To people and manuscripts*, Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House , Ho Chi Minh city, 2002.

⁵ Truong Ba Can, *Nguyen Truong To people and manuscripts*, Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House , Ho Chi Minh city, 2002.

open the seaport for ships from other countries to trade. He pointed out, "Why don't the concubines know how times change; Just stick to the logic of the book, saying indiscriminately: The court opens its doors to welcome robbers? Why don't you know that the time has come and it cannot be stopped? [...] The gates of all Eastern countries have been opened, so why can our country alone be closed?" (Institute of Social Sciences, 2000). Regarding finance, he advocates that the state needs to take measures such as taking advantage of tax sources (heavily taxing casinos, alcohol, opium, imported luxury goods, taxing the rich...), he said that "taxing gambling heavily, regardless of urban or rural areas, depending on the location where it is established, each casino must pay taxes from one thousand to two or three thousand francs a year. Anyone who evades taxes and secretly gambles will allow casino owners or outsiders to force them to pay and receive rewards. Tax evaders who secretly gamble will have half of their wealth confiscated and put into the public treasury... Now, no matter where you are, in the countryside, each winemaker must pay a tax of one hundred francs a year, in the city each year from three. to four or five hundred francs. Thus, wine sellers will have to sell alcohol at high prices, and people will drink less. Please tax cigarettes. Smoking is not inherently beneficial to life but gradually becomes costly. It's just pretending to be stylish. So please open a wholesale store in each market. Other places are distributed and sold by this store. Each wholesale shop must pay one hundred or fifty francs each year"⁶.

Regarding politics, he called for innovating the training of mandarins, governing the country with a strict legal system to ensure fairness, limiting the king's powers, and firing any incompetent mandarin, no matter how old. Children of noble families or noble families should be careful in selecting officials who must be honest, diligent, and talented. He said that "Regardless of officials or citizens, everyone must learn the laws of the country and the newly supplemented laws." added from Gia Long to present. Whoever is good at the law will be an official because the law includes the discipline, authority, and orders of the country, in which the three diamonds, the five regulars, and the administrative work of

⁶ Truong Ba Can, *Nguyen Truong To people and manuscripts*, Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House , Ho Chi Minh city, 2002.

the six ministries are all complete. The officials use the law to rule, and the people follow the law to preserve it. Any punishment in the country is not beyond the law”⁷

Regarding the military, he said that we must attach importance to military literature, absorb and build modern military theory, value soldiers by organizing training, strengthening soldiers, and paying attention to training good commanders. both in theory and practice of “offense and defense”, knowing how to build positions in different terrains, knowing how to creatively apply military tactics, and knowing how to use military techniques. On the other hand, there must be a regular assessment of martial arts knowledge: “Now I would like to bring back the ancient military books (I have some understanding of this) to review. Any book, any place where the meaning is not correct, the weapons are outdated, the technology is ineffective, the terrain is not suitable, the climate is not suitable and all the things that are implemented will not bring results must be abandoned. Choose what is relevant today, related to the situation in our country, experiment with each thing and then compile it into a book for study. In addition, let's invite famous people, people who are talented, skillful, and know how to manipulate, to research and write additions to that book. In addition, you must also buy Western books on the art of naval warfare and translate them for reference and study. At the same time, we bring in Westerners who are good at military matters (this matter will be reported later when we return) to coordinate with our military officers to train soldiers every day”⁸.

Regarding education, he advocated building a pragmatic education by introducing and promoting the teaching of natural sciences such as agriculture, technology, jurisprudence, astronomy and geography, attention and Encourage the teaching of foreign languages (English, French, Chinese and other languages in the region): “Now, in my opinion, we should send all our students to Malaysia (Or leave an excerpt at If a few decent people save up for a job assignment, find a place with a good school and rent a house, then studying will be more convenient [...] Sixth, half of the

⁷ Truong Ba Can, *Nguyen Truong To people and manuscripts*, Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh city, 2002.

⁸ Truong Ba Can, *Nguyen Truong To people and manuscripts*, Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh city, 2002.

students are allowed to learn French, the other half learn English, When I normally socialize, I learn Java and Chinese, so by learning one, I know two. Seventh, if someone is smart, their main language is to learn French, but when they have free time, they can learn English as well. When you finish the course, you can take a separate exam in English. If you do well, the court will have its own reward, so everyone knows how to try and not waste time studying”⁹

Regarding diplomacy, Nguyen Truong To proposed that the court make peace with France because according to him, our country did not have enough conditions to immediately expel the French. To reconcile with them is to control them, forcing them to concentrate their troops at certain points: “Now, please send a high-ranking mandarin to Gia Dinh, discuss this matter privately with the new marshal, if so he can concentrate his troops, go back and keep one place, while the other places will give us all the answers, as I expressed in the previous memo, that is the best plan. If that doesn't work, go back and wait a while”¹⁰. He advocates implementing a multilateral foreign policy, attaching importance to relationships with major powers, and using those countries to restrain France and each other. Specifically, Nguyen Truong To suggested that the court “must contact Spanish to find out the current outcome of Italy, Prussia, and France?”, “What is the direction of England and Russia?”. We must actively contact the outside world to let France know that we are “not isolated”, we must skillfully relate to Spanish and Prussia - countries that have conflicts with France so that “they will happily help us”, we must take advantage of them conflicts between countries, first of all the conflicts between countries, first of all the conflicts between Spanish and France, Prussia and France and England and France, Nguyen Truong To suggested “On the one hand, while traveling West, first go to Gia Dinh and visit the Spanish consulate to suggest old filial relations and apologize for past conflicts. Then I secretly discussed the current situation with him, asked him to write a letter to inform me about returning to the country first, then I would go to Spanish court first to find ambassador

⁹ Truong Ba Can, *Nguyen Truong To people and manuscripts*, Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh city, 2002.

¹⁰ Truong Ba Can, *Nguyen Truong To people and manuscripts*, Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh city, 2002.

for introduction, first came to express his thoughts to the court of Italia, then secretly asked what the current outcome was of Italia, Prussia and France? What is the future direction of Russia and England? If it is convenient to take advantage of the opportunity, please ask them to immediately send it to England. If they want to cooperate with us to expel the French, then secretly plot with them. After that, he went to ask the French court (In front of Italia, only talk about France and visit, do not reveal your true intentions)”¹¹.

Table 1: Lists some important manuscripts/Draft of Nguyen Truong To

No	DRAFT	TIME
1	Manuscript No. 1: Discussing major situations in the world	March – April 1863
2	Draft No. 5: Plan to make the people rich and the country is strong	June 20 – July 18, 1864
3	Draft number 18: About practical learning	September 1, 1866
4	Draft No. 19: Must temporarily rely on the Dharma	September 3, 1866
5	Draft No. 20: About the possibility of taking back the three provinces ceded to France	October 27, 1866
6	Manuscript No. 33: Regarding sending people to study in France	February 13, 1868
7	Manuscript No. 45: Regarding sending students to Singapore to learn languages	April 14, 1871
8	Draft No. 51: Need to firmly grasp the political situation in France	May 1871
9	Manuscript No. 52: Renewing and expanding diplomatic relations	September 15 – 21, 1871
10	Draft No. 53: On agricultural policy	October 4, 1871
11	Draft No. 55: Doors should be opened, not closed	October 9, 1871

Source: Truong Ba Can, Nguyen Truong To people and manuscripts, 2002.

3. Some comments on Nguyen Truong To's ideology of national reform in the context of 19th century Southeast Asia

¹¹ Truong Cong Huynh Ky (Editor), *Modern Vietnamese History Textbook*, Hue University Publishing House, Hue, 2013, p 114.

For Vietnamese history in the second half of the 19th century, the appearance of Nguyen Truong To's reformist ideology was a response to an inevitable trend of history. When the country faces enslavement by outside forces, fighting through reform is also the right choice. To survive and be self-reliant against the invasion of the French, Vietnam was required to reform the country, making it rich, strong, and self-reliant like Siam or Japan did. In Japan, Fukuzawa Yukichi's idea of national reform had many similarities with Nguyen Truong To's thought of national reform in Vietnam. Japan in the context of the second half of the 19th century also had transformations. strong, making the whole world admire¹². Nguyen Truong To's reform proposals, including progressive and practical points, if implemented, would certainly change the face of Vietnam at that time. According to Pham Huy Thong: "Reading Nguyen Truong To's 58 manuscripts, we will be truly amazed by his profound understanding of many fields, from natural science to machine technology, from social studies to national defense and diplomacy. He deserves to be considered the founder, or the person who drafted the ideas that gave birth to many scientific fields in our country, such as agriculture, astronomy - geography, jurisprudence, diplomacy, commerce, education. ..." ¹³

Starting from a correct understanding of the world situation, from comparing one's country with countries in other regions to see similarities and awareness of the weak aspects of a country compared to other countries. Nguyen Truong To's ideology of national reform is expressed by a comprehensive, detailed and meticulous system of reform thinking in all fields. Most countries in the region during this period still maintained a form of struggle through violence and had to admit defeat. His ideas of national reform were a response to the need for innovation to Development without innovation is stagnation and backwardness.

¹² Nguyen Tien Luc, *Fukuyawa Yukichi and Nguyen Truong To on educational reform ideology*, Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh, 2013, p 118.

¹³ Pham Huy Thong, "Nguyen Truong To - A great thinker of Vietnam in the 19th century", January 25, 2016, <http://philosophy.vass.gov.vn/nghien-cuu-theo-chuyen-de / Vietnamese History /Nguyen-Truong-To-a-house-tuong-long-cua-Viet-Nam-during-the-19th-century-581.html>, accessed April 15/ 2019.

Nguyen Truong To's reformist thinking still has disadvantages, however, like any other theories or theoretical systems, they have advantages and limitations. But it can be seen that one of the very important issues to carry out reform is that the feudal state apparatus of the Nguyen Dynasty is still unable to respond, it is dry, stagnant and conservative. The Nguyen court at that time was still not clearly aware of its position on the world map, did not fully understand the country's potential strength, and did not really seriously and enthusiastically support the ideology of land reform.

4. Conclusion

In the historical context of Southeast Asia and Vietnam in the 19th century, under the threat of Western countries, a trend of national reform appeared in which Nguyen Truong To's national reform ideology was a phenomenon. With nearly 60 enthusiastic testimony, he outlined a new development path for Vietnam in the 19th century. The phenomenon of Nguyen Truong To in the historical context of Southeast Asia in the 19th century is outstanding and special. In him, we can see the stature of a typical patriotic intellectual, but failed before the times, but the valuable lessons he left for the country still shine brightly, it contributes and adds to the construction and development of the country through historical periods.

Today, Vietnam is developing day by day and gradually moving forward to become a promising country in Southeast Asia. Lessons from history, with examples full of wisdom and enthusiasm, enthusiastically devoted to the country like Nguyen Truong To, firmly believe that Vietnam will continue to move forward steadily, becoming a bright spot in Southeast Asia in economic development.

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