

Educational and Examination Reforms under the Minh Mang Reign: The Foundation for Constructing an Intellectual Mandarinate

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Abstract:

This article examines the system of educational and examination reforms during the reign of Emperor Minh Mang (1820-1840), a period marking the pinnacle of administrative consolidation in the Nguyen Dynasty. The author focuses on analyzing key policies, such as the standardization of Confucian curricula and the refinement of the *Huong* (Provincial), *Hoi* (National), and *Dinh* (Court) examination regulations to recruit talent. Diverging from the earlier period, which relied heavily on military meritocrats, Emperor Minh Mang advocated for a transition toward a bureaucracy professionally trained in Confucian classics. These reforms not only facilitated the development of a highly educated mandarinate proficient in administrative management but also contributed to strengthening royal authority and national unity from the central to local levels. The paper further evaluates the role of this "intellectual mandarinate" in implementing national modernization policies, thereby deriving historical lessons for civil servant training and recruitment in contemporary state governance.

Keywords: *Minh Mang, Educational Reform, Civil Service Examinations, Intellectual Mandarinate, Nguyen Dynasty Mandarinate System.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the trajectory of Vietnamese monarchical history, the Nguyen Dynasty (1802–1945) occupies a unique position as the final dynasty to exercise authority over a fully unified territory from North to South. Following the initial reign of Emperor Gia Long, which was characterized by a "transitional" nature and heavy reliance on a class of military meritocrats (Phan et al., 1997), the ascension of Emperor Minh Mang (1820–1840) marked a decisive turning point in the establishment of a professional and centralized administrative apparatus. One of the most critical pillars underpinning the success of this reform was the standardization of the educational and examination systems, aimed at constructing an intellectual mandarinate to replace the previous military-dominated bureaucracy.

The mandarinate system was not merely a hierarchical arrangement; it reflected the "organizational level, vision, and creativity of a regime" in response to historical imperatives (Phan et al., 1997). Recognizing this, Emperor Minh Mang continuously refined

educational institutions, employing Confucianism as the primary ideological tool to bind national unity and consolidate royal authority. During this era, education and examinations truly became the "necessary conditions for selecting officials at all levels" (Phan et al., 1997), creating a more equitable and objective talent screening mechanism compared to traditional methods of recommendation or protection.

The core objective of these reforms was to develop a "large body of Confucian scholars capable of meeting the demands of administrative reform" (Phan et al., 1997). Evidence suggests that the Nguyen Dynasty selectively inherited models from previous dynasties, particularly the Early Le period, to establish a structured examination system comprising the *Huong* (Provincial), *Hoi* (National), and *Dinh* (Court) exams (Phan et al., 1997). Consequently, a class of "intellectual mandarins" emerged individuals who were not only well-versed in classical scriptures but also proficient in administrative governance skills. As Phan Huy Chu once remarked on the value of examinations, selecting candidates based on "broad learning and actual talent" facilitated the flourishing of state politics (Phan et al., 1997).

Nevertheless, the study of educational reforms under Minh Mang extends beyond academic inquiry to possess profound practical value. Investigating how Emperor Minh Mang utilized the examination system to build a professional bureaucracy can provide "useful historical lessons for contemporary administrative reform and civil servant training" (Phan et al., 1997). This article will focus on analyzing specific facets of educational and examination reforms between 1820 and 1840, thereby elucidating the role of the intellectual elite in shaping the national identity of 19th-century Vietnam.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researching the educational and examination reforms under the Minh Mang reign is a prominent theme in Vietnamese historiography, as this period is regarded as the zenith of the Vietnamese monarchical institution.

Firstly, the primary historical sources from the Nguyen Dynasty serve as the cornerstone. The *Dai Nam Thuc Luc* (Veritable Records of Dai Nam) provides meticulous accounts of Emperor Minh Mang's edicts concerning the rectification of learning and examinations, asserting the paramount importance of education in national governance (Quoc Su Quan Trieu Nguyen, 2002). Furthermore, specific regulations regarding academic degrees and official titles within the examination system have been scientifically systematized in specialized dictionaries, facilitating a clear identification of the social status of the Confucian literati (Do Van Ninh, 2002).

Regarding the theory and practice of the mandarin system, the work of Phan Dai Doan et al. (1997) indicates that Minh Mang's reforms were not mere imitations but rather a "selective inheritance of the organizational model from the Early Le period," with references to the Ming and Qing dynasties to suit the context of a unified nation. The authors emphasize that during this reign, education and examinations were truly the "necessary conditions for recruiting officials at all levels" (Phan Dai Doan et al., 1997).

Notably, the emergence of an "intellectual mandarin" through examinations gradually replaced the class of military meritocrats, establishing a professional administrative apparatus. Phan Dai Doan (1997) observes that Emperor Minh Mang was highly successful in "strengthening the class of Confucian scholars as the social foundation for the government". Additionally, studies on royal absolutism suggest that while the Emperor held absolute power, this authority was still subject to Confucian moral constraints through

the oversight system and educational institutions (Vu Quoc Thong, 1971).

Recent scholarship has expanded to the roles of specialized agencies such as the *Noi cac* (Cabinet) and the *Luc bo* (Six Ministries) in administering education, highlighting that the Ministry of Rites (*Bo Le*) and the Ministry of Personnel (*Bo Lai*) were the two most critical organs "responsible for examination and personnel affairs" (Phan Dai Doan et al., 1997). Finally, scholars generally agree that the construction of the civil service under Minh Mang provides "useful historical lessons for contemporary administrative reform" (Do Bang, 1997).

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of educational and examination reforms during the Minh Mang reign is situated within a multi-dimensional theoretical framework, integrating Eastern political philosophy with modern administrative theories.

Firstly, the Confucian Doctrine of the Rectification of Names (Zhengming) serves as the overarching ideological foundation. Emperor Minh Mang applied this philosophy to re-establish social order and administrative hierarchy, where every individual within the bureaucracy must align their conduct and competence with their official titles (Phan Dai Doan et al., 1997). The standardization of the examination system was the primary instrument for achieving this "rectification," ensuring that those wielding political power were "superior men" (Junzi) with refined moral and intellectual cultivation (Quoc Su Quan Trieu Nguyen, 2002).

Secondly, the study utilizes Max Weber's Model of Bureaucracy to analyze the transformation of the Nguyen state. According to Weber, a modern administrative apparatus requires professionalism, a clear hierarchy, and recruitment based on merit and technical qualifications rather than hereditary ties (Weber, 1947). Minh Mang's reforms vividly reflect the effort to "bureaucratize" royal authority, transitioning the mandarin class from a class of military meritocrats into professional administrative officials trained through formal education (Phan Dai Doan, 1997).

Thirdly, Institutionalism is employed to explain how educational institutions shaped the behavior and mindset of the mandarin class. Institutions are not merely formal regulations but also encompass moral norms and codes of conduct (North, 1990). The examination system under Minh Mang created a rigorous yet equitable "institutional environment," compelling the Confucian

literati to strive continuously for social and political recognition (Do Van Ninh, 2002).

Furthermore, the concept of the "Intellectual Mandarinate" is treated as a central variable. Unlike the feudal aristocracy of the West, the Vietnamese mandarins during the Minh Mang era represented a synthesis of classical knowledge and administrative power (Phan Dai Doan et al., 1997). The interaction between education and power established a strict "appraisal" mechanism, where career advancement was determined by merit and devotion (Do Bang, 1997). Finally, the theory of Centralization helps elucidate the ultimate goal of these reforms: utilizing the Confucian intellectual elite as a tool to dismantle local regionalism and consolidate power in the hands of the Emperor (Vu Quoc Thong, 1971).

IV. METHODOLOGY

To address the research questions regarding educational and examination reforms during the Minh Mang reign, this article employs a methodological framework that integrates Marxist historiography with specialized and interdisciplinary research methods.

Firstly, the *historical method* and *logical method* are utilized throughout to reconstruct the reform process within the specific historical context of 19th-century Vietnam. Examining educational policies in a dialectical relationship with the need for consolidating royal authority helps clarify the necessity of constructing an intellectual mandarinat (Phan Dai Doan et al., 1997). This methodology allows the author to analyze the transition from the military-oriented government model of the Gia Long era to a professional civil administrative model (Phan Dai Doan, 1997).

Secondly, *philological research* and *historical criticism* are applied to primary sources such as the *Dai Nam Thuc Luc* (Veritable Records of Dai Nam) and *Kham dinh Dai Nam hoi dien su le* (Administrative Repertory of the Nguyen Dynasty). The author conducts cross-referencing and verification of information regarding edicts, examination regulations, and official ranks to ensure the objectivity and authenticity of the data (Quoc Su Quan Trieu Nguyen, 2002). Decoding official titles in specialized dictionaries also helps establish an accurate database for the study (Do Van Ninh, 2002).

Thirdly, the *comparative historical method* is applied to highlight the distinct characteristics of the Minh Mang mandarinat system. The article compares this educational-examination model with previous dynasties, particularly the Early Le period, to demonstrate the "creative inheritance and development" of the Nguyen

Dynasty in adapting to the requirements of unified national governance (Phan Dai Doan et al., 1997). Simultaneously, an interdisciplinary approach between history and administrative science is used to evaluate the effectiveness of the civil service in exercising state power (Vu Quoc Thong, 1971).

Finally, the paper employs the methods of analysis and synthesis to derive the essential characteristics of the intellectual mandarinat from specific regulations on examinations, recommendations, and hereditary privileges (Do Bang, 1997). This approach facilitates a systematic perspective on the role of education as an "essential foundation" for constructing the political institutions of the Minh Mang era (Phan Dai Doan et al., 1997).

V. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

5.1. Pivotal Reforms in Education and Civil Service Examinations (1820-1840)

During the Minh Mang reign, education and examinations were not merely methods for talent recruitment but functioned as essential instruments for restructuring the state apparatus from "military rule" to "civil governance." The research findings indicate that centralization was achieved through three primary reform pillars:

5.1.1. Standardization of the Educational System and the Status of the Imperial Academy

The Emperor placed a specific emphasis on perfecting the Imperial Academy (*Quoc Tu Giam*) in the capital, Hue, as the national coordination center for education. According to historical records, the Academy did not only train *am sinh* (offspring of officials) but also admitted elite *cong sinh* from local provinces. Minh Mang standardized the curriculum focusing on the Four Books and Five Classics to foster a unified ideological system among the intelligentsia. During this era, education and examinations truly became "necessary conditions for recruiting officials at all levels". Agencies such as the Ministry of Rites played a direct role in managing rituals and examinations, ensuring rigor in training.

5.1.2. Finalization of Examination Regulations and the Restoration of the High Degrees

A significant finding is that Minh Mang finalized the examination system which remained rudimentary during the Gia Long era. In 1822, he officially restored the National (*Hoi*) and Court (*Dinh*) examinations to confer Doctorate (*Tien si*) degrees. This marked a turning point in enhancing the quality of the civil service. Historical

sources record many families with traditions of "fathers, sons, grandfathers, and grandsons consecutively passing high-level examinations," creating prestigious intellectual lineages that supported the court. Additionally, *An khoa* (special grace examinations) were frequently organized to expand opportunities for scholars. The strictness of the exams was also reflected in the clear distinction of titles such as *A khoi* or *At bang* (Assistant Doctorate/Junior Bachelor).

5.1.3. Recruitment Structure and the Formation of the Intellectual Mandarinate

Minh Mang's reforms catalyzed a powerful social shift. Recruitment transitioned from battlefield merit to academic competence. Upon passing the examinations, Doctors were typically appointed to the Han Lam Academy for a probationary period before being deployed to the Ministries or provinces. For instance, titles like *Bien tu* (Compiler) at the Han Lam Academy (rank 7a) were common starting positions for newly minted intellectuals. This system enabled Minh Mang to gradually replace the old military meritocrats with a professional, highly educated administrative apparatus. Research confirms that the central and local administrative machinery established by Minh Mang was among the most rigorously structured in Vietnamese monarchical history.

5.1.4. The Appraisal System and Power Control

To ensure the effectiveness of this intellectual elite, Minh Mang implemented a periodic appraisal system. Agencies like the Censorate (*Ngu su dai*) and remonstrating officials were tasked with monitoring the conduct of mandarins. Recruitment was not solely dependent on examinations but also integrated with the *Bao cu* (Recommendation system) and *Am phong* (Hereditary privileges) for the descendants of meritorious officials. However, the ultimate decision-making power remained with the Emperor following "Court deliberations" (*Trieu nghi*). This consolidated Minh Mang's principle of absolute centralization, transforming intellectuals into tools for national unification.

5.2. Discussion: Constructing the Intellectual Mandarinate – An Administrative Revolution

The construction of the intellectual mandarinatate under the Minh Mang reign was not merely a change in personnel but essentially a profound administrative revolution that transformed the entire power structure of the early 19th-century Vietnamese monarchy.

5.2.1. The Shift from "Military Government" to "Confucian Bureaucracy"

Research findings indicate that Minh Mang resolutely abolished the legacy of the wartime period, which relied on the power of military meritocrats. From the outset, he recognized that the long-term stability of a unified nation required a "Confucian bureaucracy" proficient in administrative management. Instead of relying on the "Gia Dinh region where popular support had converged" through military generals, Minh Mang utilized education and examinations as a filter to select highly educated individuals, transforming them into the "civil servants" of that era. This was a strategic move to implement the principle of "civil governance," where proficiency in classics, history, and administrative documents became a prerequisite for joining the state apparatus.

5.2.2. Examinations – A Tool for Centralization and Ideological Standardization

From a discussion perspective, the examination system finalized in 1822 was not only an academic test but a political instrument to concentrate absolute power in the hands of the Emperor. Minh Mang adopted the models of the Ming and Qing dynasties to establish a strict officialdom, from the Six Ministries to the Six Courts and Six Sections, creating mutual supervision among agencies. Using Confucian classics as the examination content helped integrate "Three Bonds" and "Loyalty and Filial Piety" into the law, turning Confucianism into administrative rituals and codes of conduct. This transition helped dismantle local regional privileges, compelling the intellectual class to be loyal to the central court through the path of promotional ranks.

5.2.3. Professionalization of the Administration through the System of Ranks and Titles

A distinctive feature of this reform was the high degree of professionalization within the mandarinatate. The ranking system was detailed from the Senior First Rank to the Junior Ninth Rank, with specific functions and duties for each position, such as the *Bo chinh su* (Provincial Commissioner) holding provincial administrative power or deputy positions like *Tham tri* and *Thi lang* at the Ministries. Notably, the establishment of the Grand Secretariat (*Noi cac*) and academies like the Han Lam Academy created a class of "intellectual mandarins" serving as effective advisors to the Emperor in policy planning. The clear division of responsibilities between central and local levels, along with a rigorous appraisal system for "officials evaluating the merits of those completing their terms", created an administrative machinery that was "among the most rigorously structured in our country's monarchical history".

5.2.4. Historical Significance and Lessons in National Governance

Minh Mang's administrative revolution left profound lessons regarding the construction of a civil service based on talent and ethics. The combination of "Rites" and "Laws," using patriarchal relations to supplement national laws, helped maintain social hierarchy and stability. However, the heavy reliance on dogmatic Confucianism also posed challenges to creativity as history entered a new phase. Overall, the "Intellectual Mandarinate" model of the Minh Mang era remains a typical archetype of the integration between cultural knowledge and state management skills within the medieval Eastern context.

VI. CONCLUSION

The educational and examination reforms during the Minh Mang reign (1820-1840) were not merely adjustments to academic regulations; rather, they represented a comprehensive strategy to establish the foundation for a professional, knowledge-based administrative apparatus. Through this study, several pivotal conclusions can be drawn:

Firstly, Minh Mang's reforms marked a radical transition from the "military-oriented" governance model of the wartime era to a centralized "civil governance" (văn trị) model. The restoration of the high-level examinations (*Thi Hoi* and *Thi Dinh*) starting in 1822 cultivated a class of highly educated intellectual mandarins, who gradually replaced the influence of military meritocrats. This was a decisive step in professionalizing the state machinery, establishing academic qualifications as a prerequisite for recruitment and promotion within the officialdom.

Secondly, education and examinations were effectively utilized as political instruments to unify ideology and concentrate absolute power in the hands of the Emperor. By standardizing the curriculum based on Confucianism and perfecting institutions like the Imperial Academy (*Quoc Tu Giam*), the court formed a loyal intellectual elite proficient in public service codes of conduct and political ethics. This mandarinate served not only as administrators but also as guardians of the cultural values and social order of the dynasty.

Thirdly, Minh Mang's reform efforts resulted in one of the most rigorously structured and systematic administrative systems in Vietnamese monarchical history. The clear distinction between civil and military ranks, combined with supervisory bodies such as the Censorate (*Ngu su dai*), ensured discipline and efficiency in exercising state power from the central to local levels. The legacy of these reforms, particularly the provincial boundary demarcations and principles of public

management, continues to leave a profound imprint and remains a valuable reference for modern administration.

In summary, the construction of an intellectual mandarinate was the "core foundation" that enabled the Nguyen Dynasty to maintain national unity and promote the development of Dai Nam's civilization. Despite certain limitations due to the dogmatic nature of Confucianism, Minh Mang's administrative revolution stands as a powerful testament to a monarch's vision in placing knowledge at the heart of national governance.

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