

Enlightenment thoughts in Vietnam and Korea: Focusing on the thoughts of renovated education by Nguyen Truong To (1830-1871) and Yu Gil-Jun (1856-1914)

La Duy Tan^{1*}, Phung Thi Thanh Xuan², Nguyen Trung Hiep²

¹Van Lang University, 69/68 Dang Thuy Tram Street, Ward 13, Binh Thanh District, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

²University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh City, 10-12 Dinh Tien Hoang Street, Ben Nghe Ward, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Received 28 November 2023; revised 26 February 2024; accepted 16 April 2024

Abstract:

The 19th century was a significant period of history for Vietnam and Korea when numerous challenges ignited by the West had become more visible and critical. To prolong the rule of the royal family, Vietnam and Joseon decided to shun the gateway to the outside world. In such a context, Dai Nam's and Joseon's intellectuals became alert and commenced to seek for optimal resolutions to revive their countries' vitality. The authors selected the two most important thinkers from Dai Nam and Joseon: Nguyen Truong To (1830-1871) and Yu Gil-jun (1856-1914). These two ideologists were born right prior to the fall of their states. Both exhibited an acute interpretation of the current situations which were happening within the entire Sino-sphere; hence, strongly enunciated remedies for their own country. Specifically, the authors try to illuminate the commonality and disparity between the two typical intellectuals who were born in the nineteenth century in each respective country to provide a keen insight into the struggles of Dai Nam and Joseon's adaptation in the process of modernisation in East Asia.

Keywords: enlightenment intellectuals, enlightenment thoughts in Vietnam and Korea, Nguyen Truong To, Yu Gil-jun.

Classification numbers: 3.4, 5.1, 8.1

1. Introduction

1.1. Comparative premises for the research

The 19th century was deemed to be an important period when premises for the changes and development of East Asian countries were gradually set. This was the period where interference and confrontation between the East and the West were taking place across the East Asian countries [1].

History is not simply a description of events with statistical achievements, or an inventory of consequences caused by a particular incident. History, as seen, should be the behavioral analysis of an individual or a group of individuals as large as a nation in a specific context with specific factors that form those behaviors such as cultural space, socio-

political background, etc., together with cause-and-effect relationships amongst those determinants. In Meg Gorzycki's opinion, history can also be seen as a lesson about social psychology on a macro scale, which subsequently provides social policymakers with an effective reference tool in the national governance process [2].

Until the 19th century, Vietnam and Korea were still largely subjected to Chinese political influences. Although each country had to face new challenges arising in their own territory, it was vital for them to ensure that their responses to whichever challenges, had to be consistent with the national interests in relation to China. However, the 19th century was a period that evidenced the decline of the Chinese

*Corresponding author: Email: tan.ld@vlu.edu.vn

empire over the entire Asian continent. Numerous Chinese essentials that used to be seen as ‘civilised’ in terms of cultural, political, and arts perspectives were consistently either reviewed or refuted. In such context, by the mid to late 19th century, East Asian countries witnessed the emergence of reformist ideas such as the Self-Strengthening Movement in China, Meiji Restoration in Japan, Enlightenment (개화 Kaehwa) in Korea, the call for modern reforms like those of Nguyen Truong To (1830-1871), Nguyen Lo Trach (1853?-1895?), etc. in Vietnam.

As one of the most significant intellectuals who contributed to the formation of the Enlightenment movement during the latter half of the 19th century in Korea, research on Yu Gil-jun (1856-1914) was conducted in various aspects. Besides, there are also a variety of research works which compare Yu Gil-jun’s thoughts with other Korean intellectuals’ innovative thoughts, or with other intellectuals from China or Japan. In particular, the authors pay special attention to the comparative study of the thoughts of innovative education between Yu Gil-jun and Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901) - a prominent Japanese thinker during the Meiji Restoration period. On the other hand, in Vietnam, regarding comparative research on innovative thoughts of Vietnam and Japan during the 19th century, it is typical to mention the work by Nguyen Tien Luc (2005) “A comparative study of reformist ideas of education in Vietnam and Japan in the mid-19th century: Focusing on the “real study” thoughts of Nguyen Truong To and Fukuzawa Yukichi”.

The authors are inspired by the above academic works. We focus on the connectedness of ideological movements in each East Asian country at a certain decisive moment for the nation’s destiny. To manifest this purpose, by analyzing the ideology of two typical educational reformers in Vietnam and Korea, Nguyen Truong To (1830-1871) and Yu Gil-jun (1856-1914), respectively, the authors mainly focus on explicating how the role of education was perceived as well as exploring the trajectory of education reforms in the context of the 19th century when many regional challenges constantly arose.

1.2. Vietnam and Korea between the East Asian geopolitical changes in the 19th century

1.2.1. The disintegration of the Chinese tribute system

After the end of the Imjin War (1592-1598) (Japanese Invasion of Korea) led by Hideyoshi Toyotomi (1537-1598)’s expansionism policy into mainland Asia, Japan under the Edo Shogunate almost conducted non-official diplomatic relations in the form of tribute with the Qing dynasty [3]. Despite that fact, Japan maintained trade relations with China through the gateway of Joseon and Nagasaki in southwestern Japan [4]. The Qing dynasty maintained its good relations with other neighboring countries, Vietnam and Korea included, under the tribute system established in the Ming dynasty.

By the 19th century, on the path of “Escape from Asia” (탈아), after years of covertly buttressing the field of Oceanology (i.e., 양학 Western Studies), Japan managed to keenly encounter Western thoughts as well as adopting the technology of the West. Consequently, Korea’s role as a bridge in trade and diplomacy between Japan and mainland Asia progressively became less important. Meanwhile, China under the reign of the Qing, began to decline in terms of international and regional prestige resulting from major events such as the Taiping Rebellion, or the defeat of the Qing empire in the two Opium wars. Subdued by the Japanese during the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), China was forced to cede the imperial control over the Korean peninsula to Japan. At the same time, due to the disastrous impacts of the Taiping Rebellion, Vietnam’s Nguyen dynasty had to terminate the tribute rituals to China for about 10 years. Vietnam’s tribute practice to the Qing empire was later restored in the 1870s under the Tu Duc period (1847-1883). However, it is noticeable that during this period of regional chaos, China was no longer aware of the ongoing French invasion of Vietnam [5].

1.2.2. Pressure of foreign interference

a. Vietnam

When Nguyen Truong To peaked his maturity of ideology and started to send testimonies to king Tu Duc, Nguyen dynasty’s kingship and territorial

sovereignty were also being challenged severely by the French colonial government. One of the most lethal attacks to the reign of the Nguyen dynasty was seen through the Treaty of Saigon (1862)¹, by which three important provinces such as Bien Hoa, Gia Dinh, and Dinh Tuong were yielded to the French. The loss of these provinces was fatal to the Nguyen dynasty since these three regions were important economic and political outposts before and after the establishment of the dynasty [6]. This Treaty was later extended into a more severe treaty, the “Treaty of Saigon (1874)” by which the Nguyen dynasty once again turned over another three Southwestern regions to France [6].

Since the Treaty of Saigon (1862), bewildered by the encroachment of Christianity and lost in finding proper ways for dealing with the internal and external pressure related to Christianity, Tu Duc’s government gradually lost trust in the literati class within his kingdom. Also, since his enthronement, king Tu Duc had to tackle legitimacy issues. His unrest conflicts with the court mandarins and literati across the country and aggregated the drastic decline of the Nguyen dynasty’s prestige. Thus, it is generally stated that the social and political situation of the Nguyen dynasty in the mid-19th century was either in a conservative or stagnant state. This state of the Nguyen royalties in the 19th century made a step backwards in terms of progressiveness compared to the social and political characteristics of the Dang Trong (Cochinchina) autonomous region, which were recorded to be more dynamic and open-minded in the Westerners’ journey diaries [7].

b. Korea

Since the 19th century, Korea encountered intense provocations from Western powers with the frequent appearance of exploration ships from the West. Before the 19th century, the appearance of these ships did not cause any significant turbulence to Joseon’s national

security, which was different from what happened within the 19th century when their encroachment was constantly met with violent clashes. In addition, the *sedo* (세도 Power Politics) political government was mainly under the control of the two powerful maternal families of the Yi royalties known as the Kim clan of the An Dong region (安東 金氏) and the Jo clan of the Pungyang region (豐壤 趙氏). Political competition between these two clans caused constant tension within the central governmental factions which weakened the king’s power. During the same period, Korean history also recorded several factional purges which projected Christianity as the main cause of the moral decline of Joseon’s social tradition.

From the mid-19th century, *sedo* politics were suppressed, which helped to secure central power for the king, Heungseon Daewongun (흥선대원군, 1821-1898) started to deal with Western ideas which were considered a major threat to his efforts of rebuilding a traditional social order. He ordered to build Anti-appeasement steles (척화비 cheokhwabi) across the kingdom, warning people not to trade or try interacting with Western ideas. Heungseon Daewongun’s rejection and suppression of Western ideas caused great discontent among Western countries. Joseon’s anti-Western policy led to violent clashes with a French ship in the *Byeongin Yangyo* incident (병인양요 French Expedition to Korea) (1866) and with a US ship in the *Shinmi Yangyo* incident (신미양요 United States Expedition to Korea) (1871). Throughout these incidents, Joseon succeeded in resisting and repelling the provocations of the two powerful Western countries. Heungseon Daewongun’s successful resistance against the West as such instigated an arrogant mentality which further helped the Joseon court to tighten their closed-door and anti-Western policy [8]. Unfortunately, under the Ganghwa Treaty (강화조약 Japan-Korea Treaty of 1876), Joseon was forced to unlock the kingdom’s door, marking the inescapable period of foreign intervention in Joseon’s political process, which ultimately revealed the fragility of Joseon’s closed-door policy (쇄국정책) in the 19th century.

¹The Treaty of Saigon (1862) was signed by the Government of King Tu Duc under the internal and external pressure. At that time, the Northern part of the Kingdom became chaotic due to constant rebellions while the Southern part was gradually occupied by the French.

1.3. Summary of life and activities of Nguyen Truong To and Yu Gil-jun

1.3.1. Nguyen Truong To (1830-1871)

Nguyen Truong To was born in 1830 into a Catholic family of Confucian background. His father was a Confucian and a Catholic who fervently practiced Vietnamese traditional medicine [9]. Due to the family background, Nguyen Truong To got acquainted with a Confucian education at a young age. According to Truong Ba Can (1988), Nguyen Truong To obtained in-depth knowledge of Chinese characters and excelled at composing poems, whose ability was not at all inferior to any Mandarins at Nguyen's Court. Unfortunately, despite the outstanding capacity, he did not thrive in the national civil examinations. After several failures to pass the exams, he quit conventional studies and opened a Confucian school to teach Chinese classics in his hometown. During this time of adulthood, he happened to meet with Gaultier - the French bishop with whom he learned the French language.

Likewise, growing up during the reign of King Minh Mang (1791-1841), Nguyen Truong To had direct contact with Western ideas while witnessing the decline of the Nguyen dynasty throughout the reigns of King Thieu Tri (1807-1847) and King Tu Duc. Especially during the reign of King Tu Duc, although not a mainstream scholar in the society, his innovative ideas were attracted by the Tu Duc government including major court mandarins with bipolar attitudes: both excited and cautious. During the King Tu Duc period, Nguyen Truong To's reformist ideology was expressed mainly through testimonies sent to Tu Duc's court within the 1860s and onwards [9].

1.3.2. Yu Gil-jun (1856-1914)

According to Yu Yeong-ik' (1995), Yu Gil-jun studied Chinese classics with his father and grandfather since his childhood [10]. Yu Gil-jun studied hard for the Joseon civil examinations. In the 7th year of King Gojong (1870), Yu adopted Silhak (실학 Practical Learning) ideology when encountering Kim Ok-kyun (김옥균, 1851-1894) whom he shared similar thoughts with [11]. Later, by the age of 19 (1874), he abandoned

the path of Confucian examination and was fascinated with Western ideas. In 1881, Yu became the first Korean student in Japan. From then, he spent some time in Japan and visited America to explore Western ideas, culture, and institutions. During his overseas studies, Yu studied at Keio University where he worked under Fukuzawa Yukichi and Edward S. Morse's supervision - two prominent enlightenment thinkers of Japan and America.

While studying in Japan, Yu Gil-jun participated in the activities of Heungaehu (흥아회) - an organisation established with the purpose of uniting the three Northeast Asian countries Korea, China, and Japan. Through active participation in Heungaehu, Yu also managed to extend exchanges with Japanese scholars and politicians of his time. In 1882, during the Imo Incident (임오군란), Yu Gil-jun stopped studying in Japan on Min Young-ik (1860-1914)'s proposal and returned to Korea in January of the following year. In the fall of 1884, Yu Gil-jun started studies at Governor Dummer Academy, becoming the first Korean student in America. However, having known the debacle of the Gapsin Coup (갑신정변 1884), Yu decided to halt his studies in America in the winter of the same year. He then departed for European countries to further explore Western societies and returned to Joseon in December 1885.

After returning to Joseon, he began taking part in enlightenment movements which aimed at reforming the social system and awakening Joseon ordinary classes as a progressive activist both inside and outside of the government. Among many published works, the book *Journey to The West* (서유견문 西遊見聞) written in Korean and Chinese, it was one of the most significant since it substantially contributed to enlightening the Joseon people, and promoted ideas of progressive reforms. Via the book, Yu asserted that the Joseon dynasty's prosperity could only be attained providing that its people would have been nurtured with progressive and civilised thinking [12].

Later, Yu Gil-jun became involved with the activities of the pro-Japanese cabinet, established at the outbreak of the first Sino-Japanese collision

ignited by the Donghak peasant movement in 1894. After the Eulmi Incident (을미사변 Assassination of Empress Myeongseong) (October 1895), Yu approached Japanese minister Inuoe to request an investigation into the case. In February 1896, when the pro-Japanese cabinet collapsed and a pro-Russian cabinet was established, he was forced to flee to Japan [10]. After the dethronement of King Gojong in 1907, Yu Gil-jun returned to Joseon to serve as deputy leader of Heungsadan (흥사단) and chairman of the Hanseongbu People's Assembly (한성부민회). Facing the loss of Joseon to the hands of Japanese colonists, Yu Gil-jun did not hesitate to take part in many anti-Japanese movements.

It can be concluded that Yu Gil-jun was born and raised in a turbulent period of Korean society during the late Joseon period. He directly witnessed all the changes and decided to confront the recession of his fatherland. These societal factors of late Joseon in the 19th century evidently influenced Yu Gil-jun's perception of renovative education.

2. Nguyen Truong To and Yu Gil-jun's thoughts on renovative education in Vietnam and Korea in the 19th century

2.1. Nguyen Truong To's thoughts on renovative education

2.1.1. Awareness of the role and reality of education

After unifying the country and establishing his kingship in 1802, King Gia Long (1762-1820) advocated for the restoration of Confucian ideology along with Confucian traditional social order by encouraging education of Chinese classics and organising civil examinations to select talents for the government [13]. Since the period of King Ming Mang, the Nguyen dynasty's process of "Sinicisation" was accelerated and extended throughout the reigns of King Thieu Tri and King Tu Duc [14].

As a man of 19th century Vietnam, driven by his family background, Nguyen Truong To himself also pursued a social advancement path but did not achieve much success. However, compared to others of his time, his early exposure to Western ideas provided him

with an in-depth comparative vision of the strengths and weaknesses between Vietnamese traditional education and education of the West [15]. After giving up his pursuit of social status via the conventional civil examinations, Nguyen Truong To led a life of solitude, separating himself from his current society to take the standpoint of a quiet observer contemplating the changing world and to consolidate his perception of Vietnam in the 19th century. From the standpoint of an intellectual observing Vietnamese society, he expressed disappointment at the degeneration of the Nguyen dynasty's scholarship. In the Third Testimony "Grand Discussion on the Divided World" (*Thiên hạ phân hợp đại thế luận*) sent to King Tu Duc's court in 1863, he frankly said: "People often take advantages of education as a means of seeking honor and social advancement" while, at the same time, affirming his studies simply a means of "repaying what God has given me to learn". He spent all his life to prove that he did exactly as what he stated from the standpoint of an innovative intellectual, outside the officialdom: "At the court, I have no position, I do not attend banquets" [9].

Nguyen Truong To highly regarded the core value and role of education in building a strong nation. However, education with its purpose and mission manifested by Nguyen Truong To was to focus on "practical learning" (*thực học*). He articulated that "Learning and cultivating talents" was "an important key to the ups and downs of the past and present, to the prosperity and decline of we - ourselves and the others" [9]. He also clearly stated his views on "practical learning", such as: "In ancient times, someone was called a great saint because that person knew how to utilise things to serve humanity" [9]. By saying so, he emphasised to intellectuals that learning needed redefining as a means of serving social benefits which should be prioritised over the purpose of satisfying personal needs. Meanwhile, since the founding of the country, the Nguyen dynasty implemented a "respecting farmers, inhibiting traders" (*trọng nông ức thương*) policy which identified scholars with higher social status than others who created material wealth for the society. Such social stratification based on type of occupation was also known as "agricultural,

industrial, commercial, scholar” (sĩ nông công thương) order [16]. These two factors led to the phenomenon of a corrupted education situation in which the learners were keen on pursuing fame, seeking higher positions while forgetting common social interests, contributing greatly to the cause of cultural and social decay in the Nguyen dynasty.

2.1.2. Proposal for education reform in Vietnam

Impressed with Japan’s proactive reform movements during the Meiji Restoration period, Nguyen Truong To reported this to the Nguyen court. In his testimony, he positioned the Japanese as more civilised than the Chinese, thereby criticising the old-fashioned studies style of Vietnam literati in the 19th century.

Having had the opportunity to approach Western ideas and visit Western countries at a young age, Nguyen Truong To possessed a distinctly positive view of the Western thoughts of education. However, he also emphasised that learning from the West should not be equal to the obliteration of traditional values, but rather be equated with enhancing the national internal strength against external pressures and challenges. Many of his proposals hinted at the tendency of human resource development found in Japan during the Meiji Reformation period.

2.2. Yu Gil-jun’s thoughts on renovative education

2.2.1. Awareness of the role and reality of education

Yu Gil-jun’s progressive thoughts were deemed to have taken shape during his years of studying abroad in Japan and America. Returning to the Korean peninsula, he directly participated in the government and was enthusiastic about cultivating the people through renovative education. Yu Gil-jun realised that in the process of state building, human factors played a paramount role which always served as the foundation for a civilised society development. Therefore, Yu Gil-jun wrote and translated many works related to education in Japan and other Western countries to promote intellectual improvement for all classes in

the society at his time. Yu’s thoughts were particularly similar to Fukuzawa Yukichi’s thinking, such as: “the difference between the wise and the fool is due to education” [17].

As aforementioned, Yu Gil-jun’s “Journey to the West” is one of the most significant sources to be examined to deeply explore a variety of Yu’s thoughts. The work analyses modern Western civilisation through the experience of observing and experiencing European-American culture, “The Civilisation Situation” (實狀開化), one of the archetypal works, compiled on the analysis of Western civilisation through observing and interacting with European and American culture seemed to be suitable for the situation in Joseon [11]. Yu’s perspectives on civilisation progress were of great significance in which he criticised outdated traditional viewpoints while promoting the studies of Western thoughts. Yu’s progressive thoughts were formed based on the doctrines of human rights, social contracts of the West, and the renovative ideology of Japan during the Meiji Restoration period [12].

Many of Yu’s reformist ideas became the theoretical foundation for the enlightenment movements after the Gapsin incident in 1894. Yu Gil-jun pointed out the negative effects of learning by memorising Confucian classics. After experiencing the education systems in Japan, America, and exploring Europe, Yu Gil-jun strived to expand education to the whole society as part of his education reform thoughts. To him, studying abroad was strongly recommended as a major accelerator for the enlightenment process. In the context that the Joseon society was not open enough to accept new ideas from the outside, Yu Gil-jun sought help from Fukuzawa Yukichi to have his *Journey to the West* book published in Japan [11]. Similar to Fukuzawa, Yu stated that “learning does not mean just learning difficult words, reading difficult ancient texts, enjoying poetry, etc. Ordinary people are often concerned about the future, and thus, are not willing to spend all their property for their children to study such things. This style of learning needs renovating into practical learning which closely meets people’s daily needs” [17].

2.2.2. Proposal for education reform in Joseon

Korean scholars in Korea previously analysed many aspects of Yu Gil-jun's work *"Journey to the West"*. His renovative ideas of education were analysed from a historical perspective. In that light, Yu was said to have adopted ideas from his instructor Fukuzawa Yukichi - in the aspects of political economy, and Edward S. Morse, an American biologist - in the aspect of Western science and technology [11]. The content of Yu Gil-jun's work *"Journey to the West"* includes two parts. Part one is the translation of the political economy of the West extracted from Fukuzawa Yukichi's book. Part two, written by Yu, is the idea of "education for all" at which the outline of his modern and traditional views on education were revealed [12]. In the book, Yu argued that: "All things can reach an extremely good state. Currently, no country has reached such a state. Only the West is pioneering at this point. Anyone who tries their best will reach civilised enlightenment" [12].

At the same time, he denounced a trend of enlightenment ideology that unconditionally praised Western civilisation without fully understanding it. Also, he disagreed with those who verbally attacked whoever argued the negative aspects of the West as: "those who stand in the way of enlightened civilisation" [12]. Yu Gil-jun's thoughts on this issue are seen closely to Yukichi's ideas of promoting "practical learning": "All those, who are properly educated, acknowledge the benefits of knowledge, and think that it is an advantage worthy of efforts and sacrifices. However, ignorant people are quite indifferent about its benefits. This is one of the serious effects of their ignorance. It is truly heartbreaking to witness the indifference of parents in educating their children. They do not see any benefit for their children to bury their heads in books, nor are they grateful to the teachers who make efforts to learn and come to educate their children" [17].

To Yu Gil-jun, civilised reform in the East must be executed by understanding the superiority of the West providing that the cultural essence of the East should not be ignored but enhanced. Truly civilisation was required to maintain Eastern moral values while learning Western civilisation in terms of scientific and

technological advances. Yu Gil-jun's interpretation of Eastern civilisation can be found in his instructor's sayings- Fukuzawa Yukichi: "Independence of a nation or of an individual cannot be separated from knowledge and civilisation" [18].

3. Conclusions

3.1. Similitude through historical and political perspectives within the boundary of each country

First of all, it is to mention the similarity in the social and historical context in which the two innovative thinkers- Nguyen Truong To and Yu Gil-jun- grew up. Vietnam and Korea in the second half of the 19th century witnessed multifaceted political and social decadence resulting from the passive and conservative proclivity of the Nguyen dynasty and Joseon dynasty. These two dynasties blocked themselves into a trap of Confucian ideology, and closed their borders to the West, ultimately limiting their internal strength to respond to foreign pressures.

Secondly, it also refers to the rapid social changes of Vietnam and Korea along with the process of adolescence of both. Nguyen Truong To and Yu Gil-jun were both passionate about learning. They can be seen as 'social products' born from the intersection of East Asian traditional thoughts and newly adopted Western ideas. Both did not achieve much success on the traditional academic lifepath. But their constant efforts of studying were the motivation for the two innovative thinkers to keep learning to deepen their insights into their fatherlands.

Fascinated by the overwhelming power of the West, Nguyen Truong To and Yu Gil-jun advocated reform modeling from the West. Both placed a significant role on "practical learning" in which teaching subjects contributed to the spiritual and material enhancement were encouraged while refuting the old-fashioned teaching and learning in Vietnam and Korea in the 19th century. However, sharing common ground, Nguyen Truong To and Yu Gil-jun both called for education reform following the West without losing cultural quintessence and national identity. At this point, it can be concluded that Nguyen Truong To and Yu

Gil-jun' thoughts were more or less impacted by the idea of "dongdoseogi" (동도서기 Theory of learning Western technology while fully preserving East Asian values) which was widely argued around East Asian countries in the 19th century. In fact, among the four nations of the East Asian cultural zone, no country succeeded in actualising this "dongdoseogi" theory. Self-strengthening Movement in China, Bukhak theory (북학론 Northern Learning) - one theoretical branch of "practical learning" (silhak) in Joseon, including the reform movements in Vietnam in the late 19th century were all deemed a failure in the flow of history of the East. The only East Asian country managing to hit the road to modernisation was Japan. But before that, Japan advocated the "Exit Asia" theory (탈아) which was typically reflected in Fukuzawa Yukichi's ideas of modernization.

3.2. Personal variability through historical and political perspectives

The objective distinction between the two reform thinkers of Vietnam and Korea in the mid-19th century is noted to have a slight differentiation in the adolescence background and in period, and the span of reform activities. Compared to the Vietnamese counterpart, living much longer than Nguyen Truong To, Yu Gil-jun had ample time to perform as a reform activist. As a result, Yu Gil-jun's influence did not stop at just theoretical debate, he had more opportunities to enforce his thoughts into reality. From this point, Yu Gil-jun was historically depicted differently in comparison with the Vietnamese thinker. Nguyen Truong To, on the other hand, was somewhat pessimistic about life until his death. Despite the short time of working as an interpreter for the French, Nguyen Truong To tormented himself for many years. It was said that because of the guilt, he inhibited himself from participating in public affairs to affirm his purity and integrity.

However, the above difference is not as noticeable as the difference in the inheritance of ideas of "practical learning" identified by the dissimilarity in the political mobilization of each country. Specifically, Nguyen Truong To was the earliest pioneering reformist who requested reforms to the Nguyen court. Before that,

there were no harsh voices from the intellectuals which could strongly challenge the political foundation of the dynasty. The Nguyen dynasty was the last political force which successfully survived amid struggles with other major political clans after the Le Trung Hung period. Meanwhile, the Korean political situation during the Joseon period was chaotic. Apart from the Japanese invasion of Joseon (1592-1598) and the two conquests of the Qing Dynasty in the early and mid-17th century, Joseon's political foundation was relatively stable. However, such three upheavals were the premise for Joseon's academic revisionism to rise. One of those revisionist thoughts to be mentioned is Silhak (practical learning).

Since the birth of the "practical learning" theory, a number of Joseon innovative ideas in the 19th century originated from the idea of "practical learning". With longer historical development of "practical learning" ideas and a variety of divided sects, Yu Gil-jun was favored with a profound environment to grow into a truly influential thinker in Korea when compared to Nguyen Truong To in Vietnam. As a result, Yu Gil-jun "enjoyed" better conditions to "enter the world" than Nguyen Truong To - the first and "lonely" reform thinker.

Lastly, Nguyen Truong To was one of the very few Vietnamese intellectuals in the 19th century who had the opportunity to visit Western countries. During his trip, he happened to encounter Japanese people whose nation was thriving while on the path of "Exit Asia". Nguyen Truong To's interest in Japan - a country in East Asia was inevitable, but his understanding of Japan including the impact of the Meiji Restoration was unlikely to be as profound as compared to Yu Gil-jun who spent time studying and living in Japan.

CRedit author statement

La Duy Tan: Structuring and Conceptualisation, Planning, Writing and Editing; Phung Thi Thanh Xuan, Nguyen Trung Hiep: Co-Writing and Reviewing.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

REFERENCES

- [1] S. Min-gyo (2018), "19th century Joseon government's trade and business relations: Logic of rejection and its significance", *Joseon Dynasty History Journal*, **86**, pp.227-255 (in Korean).
- [2] M. Gorzycki, L. Elder, R. Paul (2016), *Historical Thinking: Bringing Critical Thinking Explicitly into The Heart of Historical Research*, Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House, 159pp (in Vietnamese).
- [3] R.P.H Mason, J.G. Caiger (2003), *Japanese History*, Labor Publishing House, 450pp (in Vietnamese).
- [4] J.B. Lewis (1994), *The Pusan Japan House (Waegwan) and Choson Korea: Early Modern Korean Views of Japan Through Economic, Political, and Social Connections*, University of Hawaii Publisher, 928pp.
- [5] Y. Tsuboi (1993), *Dai Nam Country Facing France and China (1847-1885)*, Vietnam Association of Historical Science, 336pp (in Vietnamese).
- [6] M.W. Mcleod (1988), *The Treaty of Sai-Gon and The Vietnamese Response to French Intervention, 1862-1874*, University of California, Los Angeles, 284pp.
- [7] L.D. Tan (2022), *Study on The Chinese Policies of Vietnam's Wan Dynasty and Joseon in The 19th Century: Focusing on Bangyo (邦交) and Sadae (事大)*, Doctoral Thesis, Academy of Korean Studies (in Korean).
- [8] L.D. Tan, N.T.N. Cam (2020), "Korea's and Vietnam's encounter and reaction towards western ideas in the flux of western intervention: Focusing on selective factors from the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth century", *VNUHCM Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, **4(4)**, pp.677-688, DOI: 10.32508/stdjssh.v4i4.606.
- [9] T.B. Can (1988), *Nguyen Truong To: People and Heritage*, Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House, 505pp (in Vietnamese).
- [10] Y. Young-ik (2022), "Yu Gil-jun", *Encyclopedia of Korean National Culture*, http://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Contents/Index?contents_id=E0041318, accessed 6 April 2022 (in Korean).
- [11] H. Su-mi (2014), *Tradition and Modernity in Yu Gil-jun's Educational Activities*, Doctoral Thesis, Hongik University (in Korean).
- [12] O. Seong-cheol (2015), "Study on Yoo Gil-jun's concept of education", *Korean Education History*, **37(1)**, pp.131-156 (in Korean).
- [13] Institute of History (1963), *Dai Nam Thuc Luc*, **2**, History Publishing House, 464pp (in Vietnamese).
- [14] C.B. Wook (2019), *The Southern Region under The Reign of Minh Mang (1820-1841): Imperial Policies and Local Reactions*, Hanoi Publishing House, 330pp (in Vietnamese).
- [15] V.N. Lanh (2003), *Nguyen Truong To's Ideology of Cultural and Educational Reform and Its Significance for The Cause of Education in Vietnam Today*, Master Thesis, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh city (in Vietnamese).
- [16] D. Bang (2019), *Vietnam's Commercial Economy under The Nguyen Dynasty*, Social Sciences Publishing House, 159pp (in Vietnamese).
- [17] N.T. Luc (2005), *Comparative Study of Educational Reform Ideology in Vietnam and Japan in The Mid-Nineteenth Century: The Realist Ideology of Nguyen Truong To and Fukuzawa Yukichi*, University-level research project, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh city (in Vietnamese).
- [18] N.C. Binh (2021), "Autobiography of Mr. Phuc", *Readvii*, <https://readvii.com/sach-cua-fukuzawa-yukichi>, accessed 6 April 2022 (in Vietnamese).