

SELECTIONS FROM THE NGUYỄN COURT'S COMMENTS ON SCHOLARSHIP AND THE EXAMINATIONS

Introduction

Eventually, the Tây Sơn rising cleared away the existing political powers and gained control of an extensive new Vietnam. However, a single prince of the southern Nguyễn family survived in the far south, the Mekong Delta, by escaping twice in the 1780s to the new capital of Siam, Bangkok. Returning, this prince Nguyễn Phúc Ánh (1762-1820) spent over a decade pushing north up the coast of Vietnam with a multicultural force until, in 1802, he defeated the Tây Sơn and established what would be the last dynasty of Vietnam, the Nguyễn. Initially a military regime with a penchant for following the contemporary Chinese Qing dynasty, the founding Gia-long Emperor (Nguyễn Phúc Ánh) established the national capital at Huế, leaving Thăng Long to become Hà Nội, merely a regional center.

The new dynasty took on a strongly Sinic [Chinese] form (putting aside its international maritime origins) under the second Nguyễn ruler, Minh-mạng (Nguyễn Phúc Đảm, 1791-1841). Minh-mạng brought the entire land together under his control, from the Chinese border to a Cambodia increasingly under Vietnamese dominance. He did this with the contemporary Chinese bureaucratic model, staffed with scholar-officials chosen by the Confucian examinations. Here we have comments by both Vietnamese emperors and their officials on scholarship and the examinations.

Document Selections with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

From *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, by Alexander Barton Woodside (Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1988), 208-218.

Selection from The Nguyễn Court's Comments On Scholarship and the Examinations

[Minh-mạng's comments after hearing the examination essays read to him in the 1830s]

In their examination themes, why must they demand such strangely recondite things? I regard the issuing of policy questions as being like asking questions about the Territorial Leader of the West [Hsi Po, King Wen of Chou, an ancient Chinese warrior ruler] conquering Li [an ancient state, situated in modern Shansi in China]. Sometimes we ask about such matters as King Wen serving the Yin dynasty and King Wu attacking the Yin dynasty. Questions like these have some bearing on the meanings of names and terms. Only then can one examine the scholars' mental and moral idiosyncrasies. If one emptily asks questions which use strange, eccentric phraseology, then those most prolific at repeating things from memory are able to answer them on their own. Truly, what is the advantage of choosing men by means like these?

**Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on
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Questions:

1. The Emperor of Vietnam had concerns about the examination system of his state. What were these concerns?
2. Why was he worried about these aspects?
3. What was the purpose of the examinations?

Longer Selection with Questions

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Selection from The Nguyễn Court's Comments On Scholarship and the Examinations

[Instructions of the Nguyễn court issued to Vietnamese examiners]

As to marking the examination papers, when interpretations of the Five Classics are involved, take as your central authority for the *Classic of Changes* what the Ch'eng brothers and Chu Hsi have transmitted. For the *Classic of Documents*, take as your central authority what Ts'ai [Ts'ai Ch'en, a Sung scholar] has transmitted. For the *Classic of Songs*, take as your central authority the assembled transmissions of Chu Hsi. For the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, take the original account of Tso as your central authority and use, comparatively, the Kung-yang and Ku-liang commentaries and sometimes the statements in the tradition of Hu [Hu An-kuo, a twelfth-century Chinese scholar of the *Annals* who had rescued them from relative neglect as classical writings]. For the *Record of Rituals*, take as your central authority the collected statements of Ch'en [Ch'en Hao, a Chinese Yuan dynasty scholar of this text]. When interpretations of the Four Books are involved take as your central authority the assembled annotations of Chu Hsi.

[Minh-mạng's comments after hearing the examination essays read to him in the 1830s]

In their examination themes, why must they demand such strangely recondite things? I regard the issuing of policy questions as being like asking questions about the Territorial Leader of the West [Hsi Po, King Wen of Chou, an ancient Chinese warrior ruler] conquering Li [an ancient state, situated in modern Shansi in China]. Sometimes we ask about such matters as King Wen serving the Yin dynasty and King Wu attacking the Yin dynasty. Questions like these have some bearing on the meanings of names and terms. Only then can one examine the scholars' mental and moral idiosyncrasies. If one emptily asks questions which use strange, eccentric phraseology, then those most prolific at repeating things from memory are able to answer them on their own. Truly, what is the advantage of choosing men by means like these?

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[Minh-mạng's comments after the 1835 palace examinations]

Issuing question topics is easy, writing the answers is difficulty. Now the site officials who issue the themes have books that they can examine, but the scholars who write the answers merely depend upon their memories and nothing else. [At the examinations] yesterday, the question was asked, What phenomenon is described by the term *phục nê trường lý*? But those who answered it did not know what thing it was. Previously the regional graduate Cao Bá Quát was tested. The theme topic was, What phenomenon is described by the term *phục nê trường lý*? Quát was unable to answer *phục nê trường lý* is the name of a star which comes from the [Chinese] book on the strange names of natural phenomena. [The emperor said] 'The books of our country are very few. Although we possess vast, extensive talent, we lack breadth of perspective. Subsequently when we send expeditions to the Ch'ing country we must purchase a great number of books and distribute them among our scholars.'

[Nguyễn Công Trí, an official, while serving as the governor-general of Hải Dương and Quảng Yên wrote in a memorial of 1836]

Up until now many prefectural and district educational officials have not received the confidence or the obedience of local scholars. Licentiates have been used to fill educational offices. Since their scholarship is unable to surpass that of other men they do not command the scholars' admiration. Please increase the use of ... regional graduates, and remove the original licentiate prefectural and district officials and return them to their studying to wait for future examination periods.

[Minh-mạng's comments]

Although the things that our country's scholars study are not very extensive, at least their phraseology is elegant and there is indeed enough to read. At present and in the future the trend of events will be to make human literary knowledge daily more abundant, and the Ch'ing court will not necessarily be able to excel us.

[From Minh-mạng's edict of 1837]

Previously I have heard that educational officials, because they considered that government books were to be heavily respected, merely cherished them and stored them. None of the scholars under their jurisdiction were able to read them or to transcribe materials from them. Surely this was not the purpose of the court's distributing the books ... [Educational officials] must allow the scholars under them to come by themselves and copy materials and study, in order to broaden their experience. If ... the books that were originally supplied become worn out and cracked it does not matter.

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[*Tôn Thọ Đức, financial commissioner of Hanoi province, in 1837*]

Today's students in large numbers skip over [texts]. From their youth they have already practiced writing essays, and do not know how to progress gradually in the proper sequence. In teaching children of seven and eight years of age, please let them be taught to read the [Chinese] *Classics of Loyalty and Filial Piety* first, as well as the Four Books which belong to primary studies. Only afterwards let lecturing on the Five Classics and philosophy and history be continued.

[*In 1838, the emperor told his high officials*]

Now we have the *Classic of Songs* and the *Classic of Documents* with which to test many scholars, and the military classics with which to teach warfare ... Only Naval warfare has not yet had books written about it that people can be made to study. I indeed have a cursory knowledge of one or two of the tactics of the Western countries, but I want you all to examine them and become familiar with them ... and make [your findings and calculations] into books. We will order soldiers to study them day and night.

[*Vũ Đức Khuê wrote to Minh-mạng in 1840*]

Up until now, censors who have been sent out to examination sites have ignored the distinction between inner and outer sites and have all been able to go and come in turns, day and night. The censors know all the records of names and native places of the competing scholars which are kept in the proctors' hall. It has even got to the point where censors sometimes come outside the site gates, roaming around looking at things and meeting the scholars, at the time when names are being chanted at the site gates allowing the scholars to enter. When the scholars' papers are handed in, the censors have priority seating at the crossroads watchtower. They grasp and examine the papers ... Of the censors who are sent to serve at examinations sites, please from now on have one man especially [charged with] investigating the inner site and one man especially [charged with] supervising the outer site. They must definitely not be allowed to go in and out [of the other site] without authority ... With regard to the chanting of names at the site gates, censors must not go outside the sites and meet with the scholars. In the evening, when papers are handed in, censors must sit together with the outer site officials in the crossroads watchtower. They must not without authority take the scholars' examination papers and grasp them and examine them. They must also not have foreknowledge of the names-native place records in the proctors' hall.

[*Thiệu-trị wrote*]

I have read in the Ch'ing statutes that both their regional and metropolitan examinations have established quotas. If the elderly pass examinations but are unable to serve as officials,

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they too obtain an increase in rank and return home to retirement. Their examinations' searching for talent is as broad as this.

[Thiệu-trị in 1843]

I have observed that at palace examinations at the Ch'ing court those who are chosen the three most eminent winners are not very much above the average. It is merely a matter of that man being better than this one. Since the time that this court has inaugurated examinations, for a long time the selection of the three highest graduates at the palace examinations has received only empty stress ... The writings [of Mai Anh Tuấn] are rather versed in systems of government and are comparatively better than those of previous examinations. We ought to make him the 'first-ranked' in order to encourage numerous scholars.

[Thiệu-trị in 1843]

Many of the men who have been chosen at the Thừa Thiên site [Huế] are quite young. At first I was suspicious of their abundance to the point where I read their examination papers. There were those who had struggled to gain licentiate status, those whose ancestors had been officials, and those who were young in years but literarily mature. Only then I began to realize that the study of literature has been advancing daily recently, and that Quảng Nam is especially prospering [literarily].

[Nguyễn Công Trứ on faded gentility]

An antique painting hangs above the poor scholar's wall, smudged by smoke, the hues of its water colors blurred ... book volumes in the attic are nibbled by cockroaches, who expose their cheap clay-red seals ... A coffinwood chessboard has been stored in his ghost house for seven existences, its characters for 'sun' and 'field' having become deformed. A salary of rice from his own personal rice field fills up one small box; an abstinence regimen of sweet potatoes fills up one market basket.

Questions:

1. Did the emperors and the officials share the same concerns about the examinations?
2. Did all parts of society have a chance to pass the examinations?
3. What did this kind of study have to do with the foreign (Western) powers?