


# CONFUCIANISM ACROSS BORDERS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ITS INTRODUCTION AND INTEGRATION IN SOUTH KOREA AND VIETNAM

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## ABSTRACT:

This study investigates the introduction and integration of Confucianism in South Korea and Vietnam through a comparative historical lens, aiming to understand how cultural and political contexts shaped divergent trajectories of Confucian influence. Utilizing a qualitative research design rooted in document analysis and interpretive comparison, the study analyzes historical texts, scholarly literature, and institutional records to trace Confucianism's arrival, adaptation, and localization in both nations. Findings reveal that South Korea proactively embraced Confucianism during the Three Kingdoms period, integrating it into education, governance, and national identity through institutions like the Taehak and Hwarang-do. In contrast, Vietnam encountered Confucianism under Chinese colonial rule, where it was initially imposed as a tool of assimilation but gradually reappropriated by the Vietnamese elite for state-building and cultural resilience. The study underscores Confucianism's flexibility and enduring influence, highlighting how it was reinterpreted to align with nationalist, socialist, and educational reforms in modern Vietnam. By contrasting Korea's voluntary adoption with Vietnam's complex negotiation of imposed ideology, this research provides deeper insights into the dynamics of cross-cultural philosophical transmission and the capacity of local contexts to reshape global ideologies.

**KEYWORDS:** Confucianism; Cultural transmission; Ideological adaptation; South Korea; Vietnam.

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## Introduction

Confucianism, as both a philosophical system and an ethical framework, has significantly shaped the socio-political, educational, and cultural foundations of East Asian civilizations. Originating in ancient China, Confucian thought expanded across the region through various waves of influence and interaction, often encountering distinctive local traditions and political realities. Among the nations deeply marked by this ideological transmission, South Korea and Vietnam stand out not only for their historical connections to Confucianism but also for the contrasting pathways through which it was introduced, adapted, and institutionalized.

In South Korea, Confucianism was embraced early during the Three Kingdoms (Figure 1) period and progressively woven into the nation's statecraft, moral education, and social order. The Korean elite actively integrated Confucian ideals, using them to strengthen governance structures and national identity. Institutions such as the *Taehak* and the Hwarang-do youth organization exemplify how Confucian principles were harmonized with indigenous values to shape a uniquely Korean ethical-political system.



**Figure 1.** Three Kingdoms of Korea map

Source: Ashraf Kamel, 2016

Conversely, in Vietnam, Confucianism entered under the shadow of Chinese imperial expansion. Initially perceived as a foreign imposition, it gradually took root, especially among

the ruling classes, evolving through cycles of resistance, adaptation, and localization. Confucian ideals eventually formed the backbone of Vietnam's imperial bureaucracy, educational systems, and moral philosophy. However, as documented in recent scholarship, Vietnamese society maintained a critical stance, especially in light of revolutionary transformations in the 20th century, where Confucian values were selectively reinterpreted to align with socialist and nationalist agendas (Nguyen, 2025; Tran, T. T. M., 2024).

This comparative study seeks to analyze how historical circumstances, political imperatives, and cultural dynamics shaped the divergent trajectories of Confucianism in South Korea and Vietnam. By exploring how each nation internalized and redefined Confucian thought, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural transmission and the localization of global philosophies. It also considers the enduring impact of Confucianism in contemporary debates on education, governance, and ethical development, especially in Vietnam where traditional morals continue to influence youth education amidst modernization and globalization (Nguyen, H. N. T., 2024a; b).

This article aims to (1) trace the historical introduction and dissemination of Confucianism in both countries; (2) examine how political imperatives and cultural conditions shaped its adaptation; (3) compare the institutional and ideological roles Confucianism played in Korea and Vietnam; and (4) reflect on the implications of these historical developments for understanding cross-cultural integration of philosophical systems in East Asia.

The structure of the article is as follows: the next section offers a comprehensive review of existing literature on Confucianism's diffusion and local adaptation in East Asia. This is followed by the methodology section, which outlines the comparative and historical approach employed in this study. The core analysis is divided into thematic discussions of Confucianism's introduction, adaptation, and societal impact in Korea and Vietnam, culminating in a comparative synthesis. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of this comparative analysis for understanding cultural transmission and ideological localization.

## Literature review

The diffusion of Confucianism across East Asia has profoundly shaped the cultural, social, and political landscapes of the region. As a philosophical and ethical system grounded in moral virtue, hierarchical harmony, and civic duty, Confucianism's legacy continues to inform contemporary governance, education, and social values. Scholarly discourse reflects a consensus on its broad regional impact while highlighting localized adaptations, especially in South Korea and Vietnam—two societies where Confucianism followed markedly different trajectories (Ha, 2018; Nguyen; Nguyen, 2024; Nguyen, 2022; Pettid, 2023).

## Confucianism in South Korea: Proactive Integration and Cultural Codification

South Korea's adoption of Confucianism was notably proactive and strategic. Scholars affirm that Korea was among the earliest recipients of Confucian thought, particularly during the Three Kingdoms period (Cartwright, 2016; Gao; Kim, 2009). Goguryeo established the *Taehak* (National Academy) as early as 372 AD, using Confucian classics to train state officials—signaling the state's instrumental use of Confucianism for political centralization (Kim; Kim; Dao, 2011). Baekje and Silla followed suit with institutional and ideological incorporation of Confucian ethics into legal codes, state rituals, and elite education, culminating in the emergence of the *Hwarangdo*, a youth organization that merged Confucian and indigenous values (Pettid, 2023; Seth, 2020).

The Joseon dynasty (1392–1897) epitomized Korea's deep Confucian entrenchment,

institutionalizing Neo-Confucianism as the state ideology. This phase witnessed the refinement of ethical governance, filial piety, and social hierarchy as foundational to Korean identity (Jin-Sook, 1997; Park; Cho, 1995; Pettid, 2023). While Confucianism helped consolidate a stable sociopolitical order, critics have noted its role in entrenching rigid gender roles and suppressing alternative worldviews—elements increasingly scrutinized in contemporary discourse (Gao; Kim, 2009; Ha, 2018; Horak; Yang, 2017; Lew; Choi; Wang, 2011; Pettid, 2023; Seth, 2020; Viengkham; Baumann; Winzar, 2018; Wazir; Lei, 2019).

### **Vietnam's Confucian Encounter: From Imposition to Adaptation**

Vietnam's relationship with Confucianism is more ambivalent, shaped by centuries of Chinese imperial domination. As documented by Whitmore (2023) and (Ly, 2015), Confucianism initially served as a tool of cultural and administrative assimilation. However, Vietnam gradually appropriated Confucian ethics, especially among the elite, to build indigenous legitimacy and intellectual sovereignty (Nguyen; Ho, 2019; Nguyen, 2023; Nguyen; Pham; Lai, 2023; Nguyen; Slivka; Telegina; Zaitseva *et al.*, 2020). The Lê dynasty institutionalized Confucianism as the state orthodoxy, embedding it in civil examinations, bureaucratic governance, and educational curricula (Nguyen; Ho, 2019; Nguyen; Slivka; Telegina; Zaitseva *et al.*, 2020).

Recent research has highlighted the selective and pragmatic appropriation of Confucianism in Vietnam. Tran, T. M. T. (2024) and Nguyen, H. N. T. (2024a) observe that Confucian values—particularly self-cultivation (*tu thân*), moral leadership, and communal harmony—were retained and reinterpreted by national figures such as Hồ Chí Minh. He fused these ideals with Marxist-Leninist thought to articulate a revolutionary ethics grounded in both tradition and socialist egalitarianism (Nguyen, H. N. T., 2024a; Tran, T. M. T., 2024). Yet, studies also acknowledge Confucianism's limitations in addressing contemporary challenges such as gender inequality, youth disillusionment, and educational stagnation (Lozano, 2021; Nguyen, 2025).

### **Modern Relevance and Contested Legacies**

Vietnam's current education reforms continue to grapple with this dual legacy. Nguyen, H. N. T. (2024b) and Tran, T. M. T. (2024) demonstrate that Confucian moral ideals remain embedded in ethical education but often conflict with the demands of globalization, digital transformation, and learner-centered pedagogies. Nguyen, H. N. T. (2024a) emphasizes the tensions Generation Z faces as they negotiate between traditional collectivist morals and modern individualistic aspirations. Meanwhile, Nguyen & Nguyen (2024) and Le (2016) document Confucianism's interaction with other belief systems and its resilience amid cultural hybridization.

Controversies persist regarding the depth of Confucian influence on contemporary moral education. While some scholars advocate for its continued role in fostering social cohesion and discipline (Nguyen, N. T., 2024; Tran, T. T. M., 2024), others caution against its patriarchal and hierarchical residues, which may stifle innovation and democratic development (Dang, 2021; Nguyen, 2022).

This comparative study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates by juxtaposing Korea's deliberate Confucian codification with Vietnam's experience of Confucian adaptation through resistance and recontextualization. While considerable literature exists on Confucian statecraft and social ethics, fewer works explore how historical pathways of integration continue to shape national moral discourses in the context of educational reform and political ideology. By bridging

historical analysis with contemporary perspectives, this research addresses that gap, offering a nuanced account of Confucianism's layered and evolving presence in East Asia.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative historical analysis to investigate the processes through which Confucianism was introduced, adapted, and institutionalized in South Korea and Vietnam. The chosen research design aligns with the objective of tracing ideological and cultural transformations over time within distinct national contexts. By focusing on the long-term development of Confucianism in both countries, the study adopts an interpretive approach that draws on textual analysis and critical synthesis of historical sources, scholarly literature, and archival data.

As the research is rooted in historical and textual analysis, it does not involve human participants in the empirical sense. Instead, the “subjects” of the study are historical texts, institutional records, academic analyses, and official documents that trace Confucianism's presence and transformation across various periods in Korea and Vietnam. These sources span from early dynastic histories and Confucian classics to modern scholarly interpretations.

The materials used in this study include primary and secondary historical texts, Confucian classics (such as the *Book of Documents*, *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and *Analects*), and modern analyses sourced from academic journals, books, and archival records. All texts were examined using qualitative document analysis methods, with attention to contextual meaning, ideological framing, and socio-political implications.

The procedure of the research began with a comprehensive literature review to map the introduction and diffusion of Confucianism in both Korea and Vietnam. Next, the study identified key historical periods and actors relevant to each country's Confucianization. Texts were collected and analyzed chronologically and thematically to uncover the mechanisms of integration, resistance, localization, and reinterpretation of Confucian principles. The research also examined cultural institutions such as the Taehak and Hwarang-do in Korea and the Confucian schools and examination systems established during Chinese rule in Vietnam.

For data analysis, the study utilized thematic analysis and historical comparison. Themes such as cultural assimilation, ideological resistance, elite adaptation, educational transformation, and moral-political synthesis were identified and compared between the two case studies. The analysis also considered the role of Confucianism in modern reform contexts, particularly in Vietnam's ethical education and governance debates. All interpretative claims were grounded in textual evidence and cross-referenced with peer-reviewed scholarship.

As this is a non-empirical, document-based study, no human or animal subjects were involved, and thus formal institutional ethics approval was not required. Nevertheless, the research adheres to ethical standards in academic integrity, citation, and source reliability. Where possible, original language sources were consulted alongside English translations to ensure fidelity and cultural nuance in interpretation.

## Results and discussions

### 1. Confucianism in South Korea and Vietnam: Historical Introduction, Adaptation, and Influence

Confucianism was introduced and influenced South Korea very early. Many researchers have agreed that South Korea was the first country in Northeast Asia to receive Confucianism, perhaps because of its geographical location and natural, cultural, and social conditions closest to

the Confucian heartland of China. There are theories suggesting that Confucianism was introduced to South Korea before the Three Kingdoms period, such as the “Gija Joseon theory” (the theory that Gija went eastward - towards Korea), “Three Han era theory” (194 BC), “Four Commanderies of Han theory” (108 BC) but these theories are still controversial due to the lack of historical events to verify them (Kim; Kim; Dao, 2011, p. 639). Historically verified, Confucianism began to be introduced into South Korea during the Three Kingdoms period, around the last years before the common era. The Three Kingdoms here refer to Goguryeo, Baekje, Silla kingdoms, and the neighboring Gaya confederation (Figure 1) (Cartwright, 2016).

Confucianism was introduced into the three kingdoms at different times. Goguryeo, bordering some countries in China and having conflicts with these countries, was the first to be influenced by Confucianism. By the second year of King Sosurim’s reign (372 AD), scholarship was highly developed, leading to the need for systematic talent cultivation, so the king established the Taehak (National Academy) and set up a Confucian scholar training system. The Taehak was the first large-scale Confucian education institution in South Korea, intended for the crown princes of the central nobility, with the purpose of training and nurturing officials for the country. Confucian classics such as the Five Classics, Three Histories, and Records of the Three Kingdoms were used as teaching materials here. Goguryeo also established a system of Imperial Examination in the Five Classics, similar to China, for students who excelled in studying the Five Classics, forming an early education and examination system with a Confucian character. During this period, the introduction of Confucianism and the study of the sages’ writings were not only limited to the noble official class but also widely spread among the common people. In the localities, “Gyodang” (a type of school established by the common people) was opened for the children of commoners to come and read books or practice archery (Kim; Kim; Dao, 2011).

In Baekje, in the year 260 (the 27th year of King Goi’s reign), a system of officialdom and public service uniforms following Confucian style was established. This marks the reception of Confucian influence. The system of Scholars (si: those who study Confucianism, bac: extensive, erudite) also existed very early. The fact that Scholar Wang In brought ten volumes of the Analects and one volume of the Thousand Character Classic to Japan during the reign of King Geun-cho-go (346-375) proves that a Confucian classics research institute had been formed beforehand and Confucian thought had been widely spread in this country. By the Ung-jin dynasty (475-538), Baekje had established not only a central officialdom system but also a local district system. This shows that the political system was gradually influenced by Confucianism.

Among the three kingdoms, Confucianism was introduced into Silla the latest but is considered the country that best preserved and promoted its traditional thought while sensibly and firmly localizing the Three Teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism). From 502 to 536, Silla used the Confucian era naming system, established a public service uniform system, promulgated laws, applied Confucian-style posthumous titles, established the district system and mourning clothes system under the influence of China, unified the king’s titles, which were originally in local language, and named the country Silla. During the reign of King Jin-heung (540-576) of Silla, he highly valued Confucian thought. The content of the beast-watching stele (“The Beast-Monastery Week”) erected by King Jin-heung in the middle of the 6th century shows the attitude of promoting patriotic loyalty and implementing politics with a Confucian ideal. The content of the stele inscriptions of Hwang-cho-ryeong and Ma-un-ryeong show that he emphasized “governance through transformation” in the moral spirit of the times and clarified that “self-cultivation and bringing peace to the people” is the duty of the emperor. The final words on the stele also mention that the king encouraged virtues based on Confucian principles while introducing the principle of “rewards and punishments” to encourage the people to follow. In 545, King Jin-heung also commissioned the compilation of the National History. In this book, the

compiler Yi Sa-bu took the “Spring and Autumn Annals (春秋) historian perspective” of Confucianism as the foundation.

A representative of the spiritual life of contemporary Silla is the Hwarang-do (Flower Youth Corps), an organization that gathered young men striving to perfect personal character, train spirit and body, and participate in battles when the nation was in peril. The Hwarang-do followed the Secular Five Precepts, a set of practical moral codes, including five virtues passed down by the master Won-gwang to his disciples. These five virtues are loyalty to the king, filial piety towards parents, trustworthiness in friendships, courage in battle, and responsibility for taking life. These “Five Precepts” closely align with Confucian practical morals of loyalty, filial piety, trust, bravery, and humanity.

In 639, Silla began selecting elite youths to study abroad in the Tang dynasty. Upon returning, these individuals brought back many Chinese texts, playing a significant role in spreading Chinese culture in Silla, with some later becoming famous Confucian scholars. Silla adopted Confucianism to apply to the expansion of the state’s political system. Seol-Chong of Silla contributed to developing a writing style using the sound or meaning of Chinese characters to express the Korean language, creating the Idu script. The Silla people used Idu to spread Confucian classics and contributed to the development of Korean Confucianism. In 648 (the second year of King Jin-deok’s reign), Kim Chun-chu went to the Tang Dynasty’s National Academy to learn about the Confucius temple ceremony (ritual worship of Confucius) and Lectures (the method of teaching classics). This laid the foundation for the establishment of Silla’s leading Confucian education institution, the National Academy, during the period of Silla’s unification of the Three Kingdoms. Later, the Confucian scholar class emerging from the National Academy took on significant political functions, gradually reducing the power of the aristocracy.

On the contrary, the process of introducing and spreading Confucianism - as a foreign ideology - into Vietnam took place during the period of Northern (Chinese) domination. Vietnam’s history traces back to the Hung King’s era from 2879 to 258 BC, culminating in the Van Lang<sup>2</sup> Kingdom’s formation in present-day northern Vietnam (Le; Phan; Ngo, 2009). By then, the Vietnamese had developed their writing, culture, and religion. The worship of the Hung Kings is integral to Vietnamese spiritual and moral traditions, underscoring the deep respect for these legendary figures (Tian; Kosoy; Lee; Ransom *et al.*, 2008). The period is also notable for the emergence of Dong Son drums, emblematic of the era’s cultural and artistic excellence. These bronze drums highlight the advanced metallurgical and artistic skills of ancient Vietnamese civilization (Kipfer, 2021). The last Hung King was dethroned by someone who united the Lac lords to form the Au Lac kingdom under King An Duong, known as Thuc Phan, around 257-208 BC. In 179 BC, with the invasion by Northern feudal forces, the Kingdom of Au Lac (now Vietnam) entered a thousand-year period of Northern domination (Le; Phan; Ngo, 2009). After conquering the Au Lac Kingdom, Zhao Tuo (趙佗, 240-137 BC) merged it into his Nanyue kingdom, but by 111 BC, Nanyue was conquered by the Han dynasty, turning the Au Lac Kingdom into a Han dynasty’s district. Au Lac was subsequently divided into three districts known as Giao Chi (Jiaozhi, 交趾, modern-day Northern Vietnam), Cuu Chan (Jiuzhen, 九真), and Nhat Nam (Rinan, 日南). From that point, Chinese script, along with Confucianism, was strongly propagated into Au Lac Kingdom society, laying the foundation for the feudal ideological system. It can be stated that the orderly spread of Confucianism into Vietnamese

<sup>2</sup> The Van Lang Kingdom, spanning from 2879 to 258 BC under the rule of the Hùng kings, overlapped with the traditional Chinese period known as the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors, dating from 2852 to 2070 BC. This era, deeply rooted in the annals of Chinese history, predates the timeline of Confucius (551–479 BC) by several centuries, situating the founding of the Vietnamese state and the mythological era of early Chinese civilization in a time distinctly separate from the philosophical teachings of Confucius.

society began in the 1st century AD, associated with the wave of Han refugees to Vietnam and the level of Confucian scholarship of Han ruling officials in this land.

Moving to the early years of the Common Era, China experienced turmoil. Wang Mang<sup>3</sup> (王莽, 45 BC – 23 AD) overthrew the Western Han to seize power, but his government could not withstand the storm-like rebellions of the peasants, leading to chaos and instability in Chinese society. At that time, Giao Chi was considered a peaceful land, so a segment of the nobility, landlords, and Confucian scholars from the Han sought refuge in Giao Chi, contributing to the spread of Confucianism in this region.

Additionally, the expansion of the colonial administrative machinery during this period led to a strong propagation of Confucianism into Vietnamese society. In the year 23 AD, taking advantage of the peasant uprising, Wang Mang's authority collapsed, and Liu Xiu (劉秀, 5 BC – 57 AD) rose up to build power, claim the throne as Emperor Guangwu of Han, and restore the Han dynasty, historically known as the Eastern Han (or Later Han). In Giao Chi, based on the economic and political foundation from the Western Han period, the Eastern Han government began to expand its colonial administration. The central government was not satisfied with a binding administration style, merely sitting in the district awaiting tributes from local chiefs, limited to a few colonial administrative centers. Thus, they proceeded to encroach upon the lands of communal villages and develop uncultivated areas in relatively backward regions that the Nanyue and Western Han administrations had not reached. They moved large numbers of people to newly conquered lands, established new district outposts, dispatched officials, and deployed district soldiers to expand their dominion. Therefore, a large number of Han ruling officials, many of whom were Confucian scholars actively propagating Confucianism in Vietnam, were sent to Giao Chi.

The merit of spreading Confucianism into Vietnam during this period is associated with three notable figures: Tich Quang (錫光), Nham Dien (壬延), and Si Nhiep (Shi Xie, 士). The two governors, Tich Quang and Nham Dien, in the Giao Chi and Cuu Chan districts, established schools to teach Confucianism, aiming to train a class of lower-ranking officials for the colonial administration (Le; Phan; Ngo, 2009; Taylor, 2013). Those who attended these schools were descendants of officials working within the colonial government (including descendants of Chinese landlords and local chiefs). The ruling feudal authorities, represented by Tich Quang and Nham Dien, also sought to introduce feudal customs and rites to remote areas from the colonial administrative centers - places where the customs of the *Lạc Viet* people were still naive. This is a contentious argument because, prior to this, the Vietnamese (*Lạc Viet* people) had experienced two dynasties (Van Lang Kingdom and Au Lac Kingdom) that lasted over 2000 years (from 2879 BC), achieving significant cultural milestones, including the creation of a writing system and artifacts, most notably the Đông Sơn bronze drums (Kipfer, 2021). Thus, the efforts of these two Chinese governors essentially amounted to the forced assimilation of the colonial population into Chinese culture, fostering the development of a feudal superstructure of Confucian ideology aimed at consolidating and expanding the Han Dynasty's dominion.

The spread of Confucianism in Vietnam was elevated during the time Si Nhiep (137 - 226) served as a governor in Giao Chi from 187 – 226 AD. Si Nhiep was a highly educated Confucian official who had passed the filial piety and talent exams in China, and Giao Chi was well-versed in Confucian classics, especially the Book of Documents and Spring and Autumn Annals, and even personally annotated the Spring and Autumn Annals. Hundreds of Chinese scholars came to rely on Si Nhiep, contributing to the propagation of Confucianism in Giao Châu. To limit opposition from the people, Si Nhiep set up his administration in Luy Lau (羸婁, now Bac Ninh,

<sup>3</sup> Wang Mang (王莽, 45 BC – 23 AD) was the founder of the short-lived Xin dynasty (9-25 AD) in China.



Vietnam) - the then Buddhist center of Giao Chi, using pagodas to teach Chinese characters and spread Confucianism. As a result, Confucianism became widely popular among the nobility here, with many Vietnamese achieving fame on the path of Confucian examinations. Because Confucianism was so widely propagated during Si Nhiep's time. After his death, the Vietnamese Confucian scholars attached many legends to him and honored him as Sĩ Vương (King Sĩ, 士王), also called the “*Nam Giao học tổ*” (Southern Teaching Ancestor) in some temples. Although the Vietnamese adopted Chinese writing and Confucian doctrine, the assimilation of the Vietnamese people was not successful. The Vietnamese maintained their self-reliance and frequently launched armed uprisings, notably the rebellion led by Lady Trieu (248 AD), which unfortunately failed. This was followed by the successful uprising of Ly Bi<sup>4</sup> (503 – 548) in 544 AD, marking the establishment of the Early or Former Ly dynasty (前李, 544 - 602), the *Vạn Xuân* empire. There are no historical records from this period, but it is understood that Confucian doctrine continued to be accepted.

By the Tang dynasty era (618 – 907 AD), the development of Confucian culture and education in the southern provinces had reached a new level under the colonial administration. As the Tang dynasty expanded its territory, the number of administrative officials in “An nam”<sup>5</sup> (安南, Vietnam) increased. Those exiled to An nam were Confucian scholars and former officials; in other words, they were literate. Over these three centuries, the feudal court of China under the Tang implemented a system of selecting officials through examinations, replacing the nomination system of the Han dynasty. Due to this policy by the Tang feudal court, schools were even established in some villages. Moreover, the Tang dynasty sought to utilize education and examinations to attract intellectuals from across the world, guiding them to serve the dynasty, leading to the expansion of the Imperial Academy in the capital Chang'an to include students from An nam. As a result, this period saw the emergence of An nam (Vietnamese) Confucian scholars with high degrees and analytical skills, notably Khuong Cong Phu<sup>6</sup>, Khuong Cong Phuc<sup>7</sup>, and Lieu Huu Phuong<sup>8</sup>. By the end of the Tang dynasty (907AD), struggles for independence became frequent in An nam, leading to the neglect of Confucian study and examinations.

The Vietnamese were not merely passive recipients of Confucianism, which was “forcibly” introduced into Vietnam through the colonial administration. To some extent, the upper class of Vietnamese society actively embraced it. This active acceptance began with learning Chinese characters. Given the relationship with a suzerain state, it was natural to learn their language for communication. Thus, from the start of the Northern domination period, members of the Vietnamese upper class actively learned Chinese characters, meaning they were studying Confucianism, leading to its certain development among them.

From the 6th century onwards, Confucian scholars emerged among the Vietnamese

<sup>4</sup> Ly Bi (李賁, 503 – 548) was the founder of the Early Ly dynasty of Vietnam (the *Vạn Xuân* empire), ruling from 544 to 548.

<sup>5</sup> *An Nam* (安南, Annam) or the “Protectorate General to Pacify the South” (*An Nam đô hộ phủ*; 安南都護府), was an imperial protectorate and the southernmost administrative division of the Tang dynasty and Wu Zhou dynasty of China from 679 to 866, located in modern-day Vietnam.

<sup>6</sup> Khuong Cong Phu (Jiang Gongfu, 姜公, 731–805) from Ai Chau (present-day Thanh Hoa, Vietnam) of An Nam (安南), was a poet, politician, and Taoist monk during the Tang dynasty who served as a chancellor during the reign of Emperor Dezong. During the reign of Emperor Duc Tong (780–805), Khuong Cong Phu passed the imperial examinations in 784 AD, achieved a doctorate degree and was the first Optimus (狀元) from the land of An Nam.

<sup>7</sup> Khuong Cong Phuc (Jiang Fu, 姜復): younger brother of Khuong Cong Phu, doctorate, was ordained by the Tang Dynasty.

<sup>8</sup> Lieu Huu Phuong (廖有方), from Giao Chau (present-day Hanoi, Bac Ninh, Hung Yen region) of An Nam (安南), passed the imperial examinations in 816 at Chang'an capital, was a poet and mandarin of the Tang Dynasty.

officials and nobility with a strong patriotic spirit and deep national consciousness. They used their Confucian knowledge for self-strengthening and to reinforce their national independence spirit, fighting for liberation. With the adoption of Confucianism, this elite Vietnamese group elevated their community consciousness, national consciousness, and autonomous independence to a new, higher level of theory, which was then deployed into strategic lines of the independence struggle and nation-building projects comparable to those of the northern enemy. Notable among these scholars were Ly Bi and Tinh Thieu<sup>9</sup>. Ly Bi's model of the Early Ly dynasty was the first experiment in using Confucian political theory to govern the country.

Moreover, Confucianism was also introduced into Vietnam through the Buddhist system. From the beginning of the Northern domination period, along with Confucianism, Buddhism was also transmitted to Vietnam. However, Buddhist intellectuals primarily delved into Buddhist doctrines through Chinese characters, which meant learning Confucianism, making them a group of Confucian-Buddhist intellectuals who were not only well-versed in Buddhism but also had a deep understanding of Confucianism. This group of Confucian-Buddhist intellectuals became increasingly numerous and influential in society from the 6th and 7th centuries onwards, as Buddhism from China brought with it Northern cultural elements, including Confucianism. Therefore, Buddhist intellectuals with a deep understanding of Confucianism used their knowledge of Chinese to disseminate its scriptures, thus not only spreading Buddhism but also promoting Confucian education.

## 2. Confucianism's Pathways in Korea and Vietnam: A Comparative Analysis

The spread of Confucianism across East Asia notably shaped the region's culture, society, and politics. Originating from China, this philosophical and ethical framework was absorbed differently by neighboring countries, reflecting their unique contexts. South Korea and Vietnam stand out for their distinctive approaches to adopting Confucianism, underlining the complexity of its cross-cultural transmission and adaptation.

### 2.1. The Introduction's Intent in Korea and Vietnam

In Korea, with a proactive attitude, the Three Kingdoms adopted Confucianism to apply it in consolidating and expanding the political institutions of the nation. At the beginning of the Three Kingdoms period, all three countries had not yet formed a state-like government structure, and their ruling capacity had not directly impacted the smaller states. To manage, unify, and effectively control the population, the ruling class needed a systematic ideology. The ruling class accepted Confucian ethical concepts, applying Confucian thought to aspects of social life. Recognizing the Confucian concept of loyalty and righteousness became a means to strengthen the power of the king domestically, promote patriotism, and protect the nation against external forces, most notably through the Hwa-rang-do army of Silla, simultaneously laying the groundwork for the unification of the Three Kingdoms.

Confucianism was introduced into Vietnam for various purposes. At the beginning of the Northern domination, it was introduced into Vietnamese society to serve the central government's assimilation and enslavement schemes. Through three typical figures actively spreading Confucianism in Vietnamese society at this time, Tich Quang, Nham Dien, and Si Nhiep, it is evident that the purpose of introducing and spreading Confucianism was to assimilate

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<sup>9</sup> Tinh Thieu (并韶, ? - 545) was a founding official of the Early Ly Dynasty in Vietnamese history. He was instrumental in helping Ly Bi establish the Van Xuan kingdom (in 544) and died in the war against the Liang army in 545.

Vietnamese culture into Han culture to consolidate the rule of Chinese feudalism in Vietnam and, at the same time, to train personnel for the ruling apparatus. With this purpose, Confucianism became the only ideology sponsored by the Northern (Chinese) authorities in the newly occupied land. The penetration of Confucianism into Vietnamese society also originated from the local rulers' schemes to establish their power bases. Officials in the colonial lands took advantage of the geographical distance and isolation from the Chinese central court to become powerful in a region, keeping Giao Chi as a land for themselves. To serve this scheme, they built a government apparatus in Giao Chi through the development and encouragement of studying and taking Confucian examinations, primarily aimed at the class of Vietnamese local officials and landlords, to prepare an intellectual workforce for recruitment as officials.

For the above reasons, Confucianism was forcibly introduced into Vietnamese society, originating from the interests of the foreign ruling class. It symbolized ethnic discrimination and oppression, representing a policy of heavy ideological and cultural enslavement towards the native people. Therefore, upon its introduction to Vietnam, it inevitably faced strong resistance from the people. Moreover, to justify the existence of Buddhism in society, Confucianism was also introduced into Vietnam through a peaceful route. This purpose originated from the context that Confucianism was transmitted to Vietnam before Buddhism and was a tool of the rulers, hence Confucianism had legal superiority. To spread, Buddhism had to recognize the legitimate status of Confucianism. Thus, monks, as intellectuals proficient in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, contributed to integrating Confucian academic knowledge into practice.

Additionally, with the purpose of elevating community consciousness, national consciousness, and the consciousness of independence and autonomy to a new, higher theoretical level, the upper class of Vietnamese society voluntarily absorbed cultural knowledge and political institutions of Confucianism, thereby deploying strategic lines of struggle for independence and ways of organizing society and the state.

## **2.2. Proponents of Confucianism**

The force introducing and spreading Confucianism in Korea initially were the Han immigrants who came there. However, due to their small number and lack of social status, this group's ability to spread Confucianism was quite limited. After the ruling class of the Three Kingdoms began to recognize the positive aspects of Confucianism, they actively sent people to China to study. Upon returning, these individuals became an important force contributing to the spread of Confucian thought in Korea.

In Vietnam, since Confucianism was introduced through various means, the subjects of this process were also diverse. To serve the schemes of assimilation and enslavement by the governing authorities, the introduction of Confucianism was carried out by ruling officials such as Tich Quang, Nham Dien, To Dinh (蘇定; 30 - 40 AD), Ma Yuan, Si Nhiep, Do Tue Do, Cao Bien, and Chinese scholars fleeing to Giao Chau to escape the turmoil in the northern courts. Giao Chau, at that time, was a refuge for those fleeing from the chaos of the Northern dynasties. These refugees, relying on the local ruling officials for protection and receiving titles and lands, became an intellectual class with assets deeply rooted in the locality, sometimes even more so than the officials appointed by the Chinese court. They helped the local ruling officials to promote Confucianism in Vietnam.

In addition to the ruling class from China coming to oppress and exploit the people of Au Lac, there was also a significant portion of ordinary Chinese people - those who were exiled by the central feudal government - who came to "cultivate the land" in Giao Chi. The Later Han records state: "In the lands of Giao Chi, although districts and counties have been established,

the languages are different, requiring several translations to understand... After that, Chinese criminals were moved to live among them, only then slightly understanding the language, gradually conforming to the rites.” (Tran; Ha, 1960, p. 42) Thus, this policy of “migrating to cultivate” contributed to the feudal dynasty’s introduction of Confucianism or customs derived from Confucianism into the society of Lac Viet.

The force spreading Confucianism also included Vietnamese scholars and officials with a deep sense of patriotism and national consciousness. They knew how to utilize the Confucian knowledge and cultural achievements of the invaders, turning them into theoretical and spiritual weapons against those very enemies; notable among these scholars were Ly Bi and Tinh Thieu.

A unique point is that the force spreading Confucianism into Vietnam also included Buddhist monks. Typically, the study and spread of Confucianism were the tasks of Confucian scholars and gentlemen, but the history of Confucianism’s introduction and spread into Vietnam, as mentioned above, witnessed the significant role and contribution of Buddhist monks and the monastic community in this effort.

### 2.3. *The Spread’s Substance*

Being in a proactive position, the reception of Confucianism as a foreign ideology during the Three Kingdoms period was quite positive and healthy. All three countries adopted the ideology on the basis of national interests rather than to develop a foreign thought. Korea fully imported the Confucian canon, from which it selected elements suitable for its social conditions.

Korea adopted the Confucian educational system and included the classics in its curriculum, such as the Classic of Poetry, Book of Documents, Book of Rites, and Spring and Autumn Annals. Korea at this time accepted and pursued Confucian studies in a relatively pure form. Studies of temples from the Goguryeo period show that ancient temples usually faced east, but by the end of the Goguryeo dynasty, these temples gradually changed to face north. This is a sign of accepting the influence of Han Confucian ritual practices.

In Vietnam, as mentioned above, since it was introduced from various sources and through different paths, Confucianism also came in many forms, and it was not introduced as a complete system. With the purpose of assimilating and enslaving the native people, Confucianism propagated in Vietnamese society at this time was the extreme fragments of it. During the periods of Tich Quang and Nham Dien as governors of Giao Chi and Cuu Chan, the type of Confucianism introduced into Vietnam was not the original Confucianism of the Pre-Qin era. Elements such as “Book of Rites,” “Classic of Poetry,” “I Ching,” and “Spring and Autumn Annals” preached in Vietnam by these governors were likely adapted by Han dynasty education reformers, among whom Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒; 179 - 104 BC) was a powerful pillar. In other words, Confucianism in Vietnam at this time was of the same type as Confucianism tinged with theology during the Han Dynasty.

The Confucianism of Si Nhiep was the original Confucian doctrine integrated with Buddhist and Taoist thought to justify the rationality of the social hierarchy without relying on “fate” or “divine right of kings” as Dong Zhongshu did. Therefore, the Confucianism introduced into Vietnam during Si Nhiep’s time was different from the theocratic Confucianism initiated by Dong Zhongshu in the North. The elements of original Confucianism were introduced into Vietnam through the monks. For instance, through The Mouzi Lihuolun (牟子理惑) or the six letters exchanged between the Chinese governor Li Miao and two Vietnamese monks (Thich Dao Cao and Thich Phap Minh), many concepts of original Confucian thought were discussed, showing in terms like “Ji Dan,” “Kong Qiu (Confucius),” “Poetry,” “Rites,” “Confucian,” “Confucius, Buddha’s different teachings,” “The present does not yield to the past,” “Life and death have

their determined appointments, riches and honors depend upon heaven," and the Confucian thoughts on filial piety, the dead and the living. Through the upper class of Vietnamese society, the positive elements in the political theory of Han Confucianism were applied to fight for national independence and the right to self-determination of the country and applied in the way of organizing society and the state.

## 2.4 Reception and Attitudes

In Korea, Confucianism was not only widespread among the upper classes of society but also reached the common people. According to research in "An Introduction to the History of Korean Thought," local "Gyodang" was opened for the children of the common people to read books or practice archery (Kim; Kim; Dao, 2011). Thus, Confucianism in Korea during the Three Kingdoms period contributed to laying the foundation for universal education. Perhaps it is for this reason that in the following historical period, private studies developed even more than official studies.

Koreans adopted Confucianism with a proactive attitude, entirely voluntarily. Although the three countries of the Three Kingdoms period were influenced by Confucianism to varying degrees, from the beginning, Confucianism was regarded as the main orthodoxy used in the political system.

In Vietnam during the Northern occupation, the recipients of Confucianism were not widespread. The Confucian education system was implemented only because the foreign ruling class wanted to train a number of subordinates for their ruling apparatus, not with the intention of educating the entire indigenous Vietnamese population. Confucian classics were taught in schools, but those attending these schools were the descendants of Han officials and landlords and some descendants of the upper class of Vietnamese society whom the invaders could rely on to govern.

Even among the upper class of contemporary Vietnamese society, Confucianism was not widely promoted due to the contradictory attitude of the Chinese feudal court towards the spread of Confucianism into Vietnam. They both promoted education, pushing the influence of Confucian culture to remote districts and counties and simultaneously suppressed and limited the development of Confucian culture in these areas. In 845, the Tang dynasty set a quota that "no more than eight students from An nam (安南) should pass the imperial examinations for the Jinshi degree, and no more than ten for the Mingjing degree" (Le, 1961) because the Tang dynasty feared that admitting too many foreigners (An nam) would risk them looking down upon the Chinese people.

The attitude of the Vietnamese towards the adoption of Confucianism was not entirely uniform. Some people from the upper classes of Vietnamese society adopted Confucianism through the education system of the occupying authorities. However, Vietnamese scholars during the Northern occupation were not a homogeneous group, and not all Vietnamese who studied Confucianism became agents of the Han dynasty. For example, the first class of Vietnamese scholars recorded in history, such as Zhang Zhong, Li Can, Li Xian, and Bo Long, though serving as officials in mainland China, used their Confucian knowledge to fight for the truth, for the respect of Giao Chi talent, for the equality of Giao Chi people with the Han dynasty.

Among the people, Confucianism encountered fierce resistance, as it played an essential role in legitimizing the Northern occupation regime and transforming Vietnam into districts and counties of the Han dynasty, making Vietnamese culture dependent on and a part of Han culture. Thus, opposing Confucianism and Sinicization became a part of an important goal in the struggle against the northern invaders, protecting the survival of the Vietnamese nation.

In the latter half of the Northern occupation period, the Vietnamese gradually shifted from a resistant attitude to a proactive adoption of Confucianism from a political-social perspective. Patriotic scholars among the Vietnamese officials and landlords used the very Confucian knowledge to become self-reliant, strengthen their national independence spirit, and fight for liberation. These developments show that the Vietnamese at this time were not only opposing the invasion and assimilation of the enemy but also knew how to transform the intellectual and cultural achievements of the invaders into theoretical and spiritual weapons against those very enemies.

## **2.5 Distinctive Features of Confucianism in Korea and Vietnam**

Through analyses of the process of Confucianism's introduction into Korean society, it is evident that Confucianism during this period had the following characteristics.

*First*, during the Three Kingdoms period, both Confucianism and Buddhism were valued in society. At this time, the influence of Confucianism in Korean society was not yet that of Zhu Xi's teachings with the policy of "Rejecting Buddhism," so the relationship between Confucianism and Buddhism remained close. Confucianism was the orthodoxy used in the political system, but in terms of its impact on society, it was not as significant as Buddhism. Therefore, scholars of this period proposed the idea of "different paths, same destination" and sought harmony and integration between them. A notable proponent of this idea was King Jinheung. He greatly valued Confucian thought in his political viewpoint, devoutly followed Buddhism, and became a monk in his later years. Won-gwang, originally a Buddhist monk, was the one who composed the "secular five precepts" for the Hwa-rang organization, in which the virtues he established differed from Buddhist tenets and were closer to the practical ethics of loyalty, filial piety, faith, courage, and humanity of Confucianism. In Hwa-rang-do (an organization embodying important aspects of ideology, politics, and social affairs at the time), the most important aspect in terms of ideology was the integration of the three teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. From the beginning, the three teachings were accepted and used by Hwa-rang-do in a state of harmony. Choe Chi-won (최치원) said:

"Our country has a very mystical doctrine called Pung-nyo. The fundamental principles of this doctrine have been detailed in historical records; in reality, it encompasses all three teachings and continues to educate all beings. At home, maintain filial piety towards parents; abroad, be loyal to the country, as taught by Confucius. Handle affairs with non-action and practice the 'way of silence,' as directed by Laozi. Do no evil, support and do good deeds, as taught by Buddha." (Kim; Kim; Dao, 2011, p. 650)

Besides that, researcher Le Quang Thiem also stated, "Throughout the Three Kingdoms era, Buddhism and Confucianism in Korea coexisted harmoniously side by side." (Le, 1998, p. 298)

*Second*, Confucianism during the Three Kingdoms period was practical, containing many positive elements. Confucianism at this time primarily existed in the political realm. Although not yet flourishing, it was applied to consolidate and expand the political institutions of the state, train talents, organize a system of officialdom according to Confucian style, and serve as a standard for moral cultivation. As they voluntarily and proactively adopted Confucianism, the Three Kingdoms selected positive elements of Confucianism to apply to their nation's realities. All three countries accepted the ideology based on national interests rather than developing a foreign thought. Scholars of the Three Kingdoms pursued a spirit of straightforward morality, actively engaged in reality, and did not delve into flamboyant literary studies. As the Silla period approached the era of unification, Confucianism flourished, and scholars criticized the bone rank

system (a strict class system of Silla), proposing a new progressive value standard that prioritized Confucian virtues over status. A notable thinker of this idea was the scholar Gang Su. He said, "Being poor is not shameful; what is truly shameful is learning the way and not practicing it." (Kim; Kim; Dao, 2011, p. 643)

*Third*, during the Three Kingdoms era, within the Confucian categories, Korea emphasized the category of loyalty. The Confucian scholars of that time centered around the king, and even if disliked by the monarch, they always considered themselves as political advisors supporting the royal authority. The stone steles erected by King Jin-heung in the mid-6th century demonstrate his high regard for the ideology of loyalty to the sovereign and love for the country. The Year of the Monkey pledge stone (壬申誓記石) - a small stele still preserved to this day, contains a record from before the Silla unification of the Three Kingdoms, reflecting the mindset and consciousness of the Silla youth at that time.

"We swear to Heaven. We vow to adhere to the path of loyalty for three years, committing no crimes. We swear that if we fail to keep our word, we shall bear great guilt before Heaven. We swear that if the country is unstable and the world is in turmoil, we will surely act." (Kim; Kim; Dao, 2011, p. 651)

Previously, they also vowed to fully comprehend the Confucian classics such as the Classic of Poetry, Book of Documents, Book of Rites, and Spring and Autumn Annals over three years. Through these records, we see that the youth at the time armed themselves with faith and loyalty. Their actions showed that they valued loyalty, a moral principle of Confucianism.

Hwa-rang-do played a role as the holder of Silla's strength and became an important foundation in the effort to unify the Three Kingdoms, also being the place that housed talented and loyal individuals. "Talented and virtuous ministers and loyal servants all originated from Hwa-rang-do, as did outstanding generals and brave soldiers." (Le, 1961, p. 652)

Finally, during the Three Kingdoms era, the Koreanization of Confucianism was carried out to a certain extent. During this period, although Korea was still under Chinese control, it was not subjected to colonial rule for an extended period (unlike Vietnam), so the adoption of Confucianism was not merely about embracing external values and culture but also involved Korea's enhancement and development of these, laying the foundation for building a distinctly Korean Confucianism in later stages.

In Vietnam, stemming from the interests of the ruling foreign class, the negative elements of Confucianism were introduced into the colonial society. Confucianism, with its harsh and reactionary ideas of the three bonds, five constants, and the mandate of Heaven, was considered the dominant ideology of the Northern feudal class, used primarily as a tool for invasion and oppression of the nation, heavily enslaving the indigenous people in terms of thought and culture. However, beyond the invaders' intentions, Confucianism created conditions for social and cultural transformation in Vietnam. The Vietnamese nation resisted the invasion of the Northern feudalism, moving towards restoring its independence by applying the cultural knowledge and political institutions of Confucianism introduced by the Chinese to dominate the Vietnamese. It can be said that although Confucianism was not localized during the Northern occupation, there was a trend of selective adoption and application to address practical societal issues to a certain extent. Therefore, from the time Confucianism was introduced, impacting society and the Vietnamese people, the practical trend was valued more than the academic or theoretical trend, and this would continue to influence the feudal dynasties of Vietnam during its independence periods later.

Confucianism during the Northern occupation was also Confucian thought blended with Buddhism. Many Confucian scholars were brought into practice through the role of monks, as intellectuals proficient in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, who were valued by the feudal

dynasties to assist in state affairs, becoming advisors within the government. While this allowed Confucianism to expand its influence, it also led to a dilution of its rational character. The blending of Confucianism and Buddhism meant that neither could maintain the purity of their doctrines.

In summary, Confucianism during the Northern occupation was Confucian thought linked with the national defense struggle of the Vietnamese people, not merely Confucianism adopted in its entirety, but also blended with Buddhism, laying the groundwork for the “three teachings harmonization” policy of some feudal dynasties of Vietnam later on.

## Conclusion

This comprehensive exploration of the introduction and dissemination of Confucianism in South Korea and Vietnam reveals a complex interplay of cultural, political, and social dynamics unique to each region. In South Korea, the proactive adoption of Confucianism by the Three Kingdoms during the Three Kingdoms period was a strategic endeavor aimed at consolidating state power, enhancing political institutions, and fostering a sense of national unity and identity. The Korean approach was characterized by a voluntary and selective integration of Confucian tenets into their sociopolitical fabric, demonstrating a remarkable capacity to align foreign philosophical ideals with indigenous needs and aspirations. The establishment of Confucian academies and the integration of Confucian moral codes into societal norms, particularly through institutions like Hwarang-do, underscored the deep-rooted influence of Confucianism in shaping Korean intellectual and ethical landscapes.

Conversely, in Vietnam, the introduction of Confucianism during the Northern occupation presents a narrative of cultural imposition and resistance. The Northern rulers' strategic deployment of Confucianism as a tool for assimilation and domination was met with varying degrees of resistance and adaptation by the Vietnamese people. Despite the initial intention of the Northern dominators to enforce a cultural and ideological hegemony over Vietnam, the Vietnamese demonstrated remarkable agency in appropriating Confucian elements that resonated with their socio-political context and aspirations. This nuanced engagement with Confucianism facilitated the emergence of a distinctive Vietnamese interpretation of Confucian principles, intertwined with the nation's struggle for autonomy and the preservation of indigenous cultural identity.

The juxtaposition of Korea and Vietnam's experiences with Confucianism highlights the fluidity and adaptability of cultural ideologies across different contexts. In Korea, Confucianism was embraced as a foundational pillar for national development and identity formation, blending harmoniously with existing traditions and contributing to the formation of a cohesive societal structure. In Vietnam, Confucianism's introduction was initially marked by coercion and resistance, yet over time, it was selectively integrated into the fabric of Vietnamese society, contributing to its cultural and intellectual richness while also embodying the resilience and adaptability of the Vietnamese spirit.

This study reaffirms the significance of Confucianism as a major cultural and philosophical influence in East Asia, demonstrating its capacity to shape societies in multifaceted ways. The contrasting trajectories of Confucianism in Korea and Vietnam underscore the importance of context in the transmission and transformation of cultural ideologies, revealing the intricate processes through which foreign ideas are localized, adapted, and redefined to meet the unique needs and aspirations of different societies.



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