

NGUYEN TRUONG TO'S PERSPECTIVE ON ECONOMIC REFORM IN VIETNAM

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Abstract

Throughout history, the Vietnamese nation has witnessed numerous reforms and national renewal efforts, including those led by Khuc Hao (907), Ho Quy Ly (late 14th - early 15th century), Le Thanh Tong (late 15th century), Quang Trung - Nguyen Hue (late 18th century), and Minh Mang (first half of the 19th century). These reforms achieved varying degrees of success, influenced by multiple factors. However, their common goal was to affirm national pride, ensure the nation's survival, and advance the country in line with contemporary developments. One of the most notable economic reform efforts in modern Vietnamese history is associated with the reformist Nguyen Truong To. This article focuses on clarifying Nguyen Truong To's economic reform ideology and affirming its relevance to Vietnam's current economic renewal process.

Keywords: Nguyen Truong To, Reform, Education, Vietnam.

INTRODUCTION

In 1855, a French missionary, Gauthier (Vietnamese name: Ngo Gia Hau), invited him to teach Chinese characters at Xa Doai Seminary while also teaching him French. Gauthier took him to Singapore and Hong Kong and later to Rome and Paris, where he studied general and experimental sciences. At that time, he was one of the few Vietnamese intellectuals who had firsthand exposure to Western civilization and industrial advancements. These experiences profoundly influenced Nguyen Truong To. By the age of 30, he had acquired extensive knowledge in politics, economics, culture, and science and nurtured a great ambition to modernize the country. Nguyen Truong To's reform proposals were systematic and comprehensive, covering various aspects such as economics, politics, military affairs, diplomacy, and socio-cultural development. His ideas reflected not only his deep patriotism and profound scholarship but also his progressive thinking, which surpassed the outdated and conservative feudal mindset of his time. Regarding economic reform, his primary goal was to introduce Western books on key subjects such as agriculture and technology to Vietnam. He proposed that Western priests fluent in Chinese or Nom translate these materials for local use. His economic ideology holds both theoretical and practical significance for Vietnam's ongoing renewal and modernization efforts today.

METHODOLOGY

The study of Nguyen Truong To and his 19th-century reform efforts has increasingly drawn the attention of social scientists. Research on Nguyen Truong To has been conducted from various perspectives, primarily in the fields of economics, philosophy, political science, and sociology.

In carrying out this study, the author applies the dialectical materialist methodology, emphasizing a concrete and comprehensive historical perspective. A systematic approach is employed while also building on previous research to refine theoretical foundations and assessments. Additionally, an interdisciplinary research methodology is utilized, incorporating analytical and synthetic methods, historical and logical approaches, as well as statistical and comparative techniques. These methods are integrated to accomplish the research objectives effectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nguyen Truong To was a passionate learner with independent and creative thinking.

Nguyen Truong To was born in 1830 in Bui Chu Village, Hung Nguyen District (now part of Hung Trung Commune, Hung Nguyen, Nghe An) into a Catholic family. His father, Nguyen Quoc Thu, was a physician. As a child, he studied Chinese characters (Han) with his father and later studied under Tu Tai Giai in Bui Ngoa, Cong Huu in Kim Khe, and a retired district official from Dia Linh in Tan Loc (all located in Nghi Loc District, Nghe An).

From an early age, he was renowned for his extraordinary intelligence, remembering everything he learned with little need for practice, earning him the nickname “Trang To” (Scholar To). The second-ranked doctoral laureate (De Nhi Giap Tien Si) Dinh Van Chap (1882–1953) also wrote: “As a child, To excelled in the traditional Confucian examination system, and at the time, he was known as Trang To (also commonly referred to as Thay Lan).” Nguyen Truong To studied Chinese literature for a long time and had an extensive knowledge of Confucian scholarship, comparable to the scholarly officials of the Nguyen court. His writings, submitted to Emperor Tu Duc, demonstrated exceptional mastery of classical literature, syntax, history, and traditional Eastern laws, leaving no room for criticism. However, he never attained official degrees, partly because as a Catholic, he was barred from taking the imperial examinations, and partly because he may have deliberately avoided the Confucian bureaucratic path. (Truong Ba Can, *Nguyen Truong To – The Man and His Legacy*).

After ending his formal studies, Nguyen Truong To opened a school to teach classical Chinese at home. He was also invited to teach at the Xa Doai Seminary. There, he was taught French and basic Western scientific knowledge by Bishop Gauthier (Ngo Gia Hau). With Gauthier’s support, Nguyen Truong To traveled to Hong Kong, several Southeast Asian countries, France, and other parts of Europe. This journey marked his pursuit of knowledge. While his foundation was in Confucian studies, he began engaging with Western culture around 1848–1849 and transitioned to Western learning in his early twenties. His choice stemmed from his recognition of the stagnation and limitations of Confucian scholarship and the advancements of Western education. He was also fortunate to have access to Western knowledge through figures like Bishop Gauthier and learned French missionaries with extensive academic backgrounds.

Scholar Dao Duy Anh noted: “Although he was born into a Catholic family, his mind was profoundly shaken by the cannon fire at Da Nang in 1848. From that moment, at just 20 years old, he decided to abandon traditional learning and pursue a more practical education.” In his

1864 work *Plan for Enriching the People and Strengthening the Nation*, Nguyen Truong To wrote: “For the past 15 years, I have anticipated the crisis we now face. That is why I have sought to expand my understanding by learning from others, rather than merely studying for a single day.” By early 1867, in *The Mission of the Delegation to France*, he wrote: “For decades, I have traveled the world, observing historical shifts and applying what I have read to real-life situations. Every conversation I have had, every word exchanged, has been an opportunity to gain knowledge.”

His reform proposals were comprehensive, covering nearly every aspect of governance. He advocated for maintaining and strengthening the existing social order while streamlining administrative structures by merging provinces and districts, thereby reducing bureaucracy and increasing salaries for officials. He proposed mapping territorial boundaries, conducting a nationwide census, and systematically documenting all aspects of the country’s affairs. He suggested establishing a Ministry of Agriculture and a Ministry of Foreign Affairs and insisted that the judiciary be independent, with the emperor having only the right to grant clemency but not to pass sentences.

Regarding national defense, he recommended temporarily making peace with France to consolidate forces, reinforce military ranks, train soldiers with the help of Western experts, improve military incentives, and develop modern weaponry. In foreign relations, he proposed temporarily conceding to France while building diplomatic ties with other nations to strengthen Vietnam’s self-reliance and prepare for eventual resistance.

Thus, among the reform advocates of the late 19th century, Nguyen Truong To stood out for the breadth and feasibility of his ideas, as well as the lasting influence of his petitions. Most notably, he emphasized the link between national modernization and the defense of sovereignty.

Under the Nguyen dynasty, the educational system and imperial examinations were based on Confucian principles, primarily aimed at training officials for government service. This system regarded Chinese classics (*Kinh, Truyen*) as the model, with success in the exams dependent on memorizing classical texts and excelling in poetry and prose. Meanwhile, many subjects such as natural sciences and foreign languages were neglected, and Classical Chinese (Chu Nho) remained the official written language.

Nguyen Truong To's Perspective on the Relationship Between Economy, Politics, and Education

Nguyen Truong To prioritized the goal of making the people prosperous and the nation strong, believing it to be essential for saving and preserving the country. He proposed that the court purchase steamships and send people to the West to learn how to operate and repair them. He also suggested initiating mining activities and establishing factories for consumer goods production to develop industry.

Regarding agriculture, he emphasized technical improvements and proposed creating the position of “Agricultural Officer” (*Nong Quan*) to oversee agriculture and forestry at the local level while widely disseminating agricultural knowledge to the people. In commerce, he

advocated for both domestic and foreign trade, opening markets for trade and investment, and harnessing the nation's economic potential. He encouraged the export of agricultural, forestry, marine, and mineral products. In finance, he stressed fairness and transparency in taxation, land measurement, and annual population registration to prevent revenue loss and fraud. He proposed increasing taxes on gambling, alcohol, tobacco, and imported luxury goods to protect domestic products while imposing higher taxes on the wealthy.

Nguyen Truong To had a deep understanding of the Nguyen dynasty's educational system. He believed that the stagnation and backwardness of Confucian education could only be eliminated by correctly defining its objectives. He recognized the crucial role of education in societal development, including economic progress. Based on his critique of traditional scholarship and his appreciation of Western civilization's superiority, he proposed a new, more practical educational approach. He argued that education should be relevant to contemporary needs and should be applicable in real life. Advocating for a pragmatic education system, he stated: "Without a clear and enlightened academic foundation, customs will deteriorate, and people's hearts will become increasingly deceitful, superficial, and hollow" (Can, 2002, p.125).

His views on educational goals were most clearly expressed in *On Practical Learning* (written in July 1866) and *Eight Urgent Measures* (written in October 1867). He urged the court to redirect education toward immediate practical needs, asserting: "In the past, we defended the country with bows and arrows, but today we need cannons to resist invaders" (Can, 2002, p.190).

According to him, the rise and fall of nations throughout history and the prosperity or decline of a country were closely linked to education and talent cultivation. Thus, he devised a plan for training national talent through a structured school system, with a focus on natural sciences. He also emphasized vocational training and practical experience, rather than relying solely on classical Chinese literary texts.

Based on Vietnam's realities, Nguyen Truong To designed a new educational program aimed at producing capable individuals to shoulder national responsibilities. At the time, the education system was heavily focused on ethics and politics while neglecting practical economic and scientific applications. To address these shortcomings, he proposed establishing new academic departments, including Agriculture, Astronomy, Geography, Industrial Technology, Law, and Foreign Languages. His proposed curriculum remains valuable even today.

Nguyen Truong To's educational program was comprehensive, encompassing natural sciences, social sciences, vocational training, language education, and moral instruction. He particularly emphasized the advancement of industrial technology (*Cong Ky Nghe*), which was an exceptionally forward-thinking idea for his time. At that point, the concept of "technology" was largely unfamiliar to both Vietnamese society and the Nguyen court. He also suggested that the court send students abroad for training.

Nguyen Truong To criticized the rigid, rote-learning approach of the time, which emphasized memorization and dogma. Even Nguyen emperors such as Minh Mang and Tu Duc recognized the shortcomings of this method, which lacked practical application. Emperor Tu Duc

remarked: “Education and learning in our country are severely lacking. Scholars merely recite prewritten texts without truly understanding them. Examiners judge based on literary style rather than substance. As a result, talented individuals have gradually become fewer” (Dai Nam Thuc Luc Chinh Bien, 1973, p.390).

To address this, Nguyen Truong To advocated for a practical education model that integrated learning with application. He specified what should be practiced and where insisting that practical skills should be taught for immediate benefit and future generations. For natural sciences, he proposed purchasing machinery and laboratory equipment for hands-on learning. His approach extended beyond technical fields to social sciences, making it a bold and innovative perspective.

He also suggested researching national laws, village customs, and the strengths and weaknesses of traditional education to identify necessary reforms. Even if his proposed educational experiments could not be implemented nationwide, he believed they should at least be tested in smaller regions such as a province or a village. Only then, he argued, could education truly serve the governance of the nation and the welfare of the people.

Nguyen Truong To recognized the role of agriculture and aimed for an economy with long-term and sustainable strategies.

In **Vietnam** at the end of the 19th century, agricultural production was still largely monocultural, with most cultivated land used for growing rice. The area of agricultural land increased significantly, but so did the amount of abandoned land due to natural disasters and poor harvests. Outdated farming techniques led to low productivity. In 1897, the **Hue** court signed a treaty granting **France** the right to reclaim wasteland. On May 1, 1900, the **French colonial authorities** issued a decree denying the **Nguyen** emperors' ownership of land. From this point, the French took over vast areas of land for plantations. “In 1900, the area of **European-owned plantations** was 322,000 hectares, including 78,000 hectares in **Cochinchina**” (Co, 2007, p. 287), leading to increasing land impoverishment and labor exhaustion.

Nguyen Truong To highlighted the importance of agriculture and its state at the time. According to him, agriculture was fundamental, serving food, clothing, and countless other needs of life. However, under the reign of **Tu Duc**, Vietnam’s agriculture declined severely and was neglected.

He proposed that the state train officials specialized in agriculture, called “**Nong Chinh**” (Agricultural Officers). This would be a dedicated team responsible for overseeing agriculture, improving farming, and assisting farmers in protecting crops from pests, increasing productivity, and expanding production. He observed that Vietnamese agriculture relied heavily on nature, and without change, people could not hope to prosper. Therefore, these officials were crucial not only in managing agriculture but also in overseeing irrigation. Their responsibilities were immense: “The agricultural official advises farmers like a farm owner, but while a farm owner only takes care of his household, the agricultural official is responsible for an entire district, ensuring its prosperity” (Lan, 2008, p. 40). In his writings *Te Cap Bat*

Dieu and *On Agricultural Policy*, he elaborated on this issue, emphasizing that agricultural officials needed to understand the resources, crops, and farming conditions in their managed areas and guide farmers in cultivation.

Nguyen Truong To also proposed compiling a book called *Comprehensive Agricultural Policy* for the people to study. This book would collect agricultural knowledge and spread it widely for public use. Being a strong advocate of science, he sought to introduce scientific advancements into Vietnamese agriculture a progressive idea for agricultural reform at the time.

His long-term, macroeconomic plans were also well-considered. For instance, to revitalize agriculture, he suggested boundary surveying to accurately determine the country's farmland and natural resources. This, he argued, was essential for expanding cultivated areas and increasing annual revenues for both the people and the state. He stressed that the government needed precise knowledge of the country's land its mountains, plains, rivers, canals, villages, and cities, as well as important strategic locations and scenic landmarks. In his view, effective governance requires "boundary management" to ensure proper resource utilization and development planning.

In Vietnam, this issue was often overlooked, resulting in unplanned production, budget shortages, and frequent land disputes among citizens. To establish good governance, the first step was to study national resources, starting with drawing a **national map** detailing locations, terrains, and land areas. Each province and village should then create their maps. He emphasized that mapping was an essential task: "Our country has always neglected this, believing it unnecessary, but in reality, it is immensely beneficial" (Can, 2002, p. 3).

He proposed digging new canals to boost trade, developing commercial ships, establishing local shipbuilding yards, implementing land reclamation policies, and resettling people in underdeveloped farming areas. He also advocated for conducting population surveys, setting up land measurement regulations, and defining national boundaries. However, he warned that land reclamation should not mean deforestation. He urged the state to set restrictions on protected forests to prevent irresponsible individuals from destroying them. His proposals were not isolated or narrow in scope but demonstrated an interdisciplinary and systematic approach to development. This reflects his role as a true reformist not just pushing the country forward, but ensuring a balanced and, in modern terms, sustainable development.

Beyond these observable issues, it is remarkable that **Nguyen Truong To** contributed to fields few others considered. Growing up in a region with many mines, he advised **Emperor Tu Duc** on mineral extraction techniques, including which technologies to use to prevent toxic gases and tunnel collapses. He also submitted petitions calling for urban planning reforms, suggesting planting more trees, restructuring roads, and improving drainage, bridges, and markets for better hygiene. He cared about social issues, proposing two categories of public welfare: orphans and the destitute. However, he suggested abolishing begging to prevent idlers from exploiting charity while ensuring that the truly needy were supported and trained in skills for self-sufficiency.

After mapping the land, he emphasized land reclamation to expand agricultural areas. He noted that Vietnam had fertile land but too much of it remained abandoned, such as areas along the **Mekong River**, which needed development. For remote regions, ethnic minority areas, and mountainous lands lacking labor, he proposed a **resettlement policy**, moving poor families from overpopulated villages and allowing prisoners to reclaim land. His policy differed from the forced labor system in state plantations, where prisoners worked under harsh conditions with chains and corporal punishment. Instead, he proposed allowing prisoners to bring their families and fully own the land they cultivated.

Nguyen Truong To prioritized **irrigation**, recognizing its crucial link to agricultural production. He argued that digging canals not only provided water for drought relief but also facilitated transportation. Therefore, canal construction was closely tied to dyke reinforcement and flood prevention. He recommended that the state take the initiative in dyke construction, encourage wealthy individuals to invest in irrigation projects, and reward those with contributions and innovations in this field. He also suggested sending people abroad to study **irrigation techniques** and bring back knowledge to benefit the country.

In **Vietnam's** industrial sector at the time, mining was the primary industry, including **tin, zinc, iron, mercury**, and especially **coal**. The **French colonialists** focused on developing these industries to meet the demand in **Indochina**, generate high profits, and compete in the **Far East** market. They exploited cheap Vietnamese labor using a mix of manual labor and mechanization to maximize profits. **Nguyen Truong To** saw Vietnam's abundant natural resources as a key to industrial development, emphasizing four major resource sectors: **marine resources, forestry, water resources, and minerals**. If properly exploited, these could make Vietnam prosperous. However, he acknowledged the difficulty of this due to the lack of expertise in **geology and mining**. His solution was to collaborate with the **French**, sharing profits while allowing the state to earn revenue, creating jobs for the people, and enabling officials and workers to learn new skills. He also stressed the importance of developing the **metallurgical industry**, which he believed was not immediately feasible but necessary for long-term national development. He encouraged state investment in industries and the establishment of factories, with particular attention to **crafts and fisheries**, such as fish salting and preservation, which should be industrialized.

Beyond large-scale reforms, **Nguyen Truong To** proposed many forward-thinking policies still relevant today, such as **progressive taxation**, where the wealthy would pay higher taxes, easing the burden on the poor. He also suggested imposing heavy taxes on **tobacco, alcohol, and opium** to discourage excessive consumption of these colonial imports. Additionally, he recommended high tariffs on imported **Chinese tea and silk** to protect domestic industries from price disruptions.

Studying **Nguyen Truong To's** economic reform ideas in 19th-century Vietnam is valuable for both theoretical and practical research in today's reform era. His thoughts provide important insights for managing and developing economies in remote and disadvantaged regions. By analyzing his proposals, we can understand both their progressiveness and limitations, drawing valuable historical lessons. His economic vision prioritized national and public welfare,

demonstrating forward-thinking ideas that were far ahead of his time. While his reforms were not implemented due to political and social constraints, his vision remains a key reference for economic development. History has proven that his ideas align with the inevitable path toward a strong and prosperous nation.

CONCLUSIONS

Nguyen Truong To's economic reform ideas hold profound practical value in Vietnam's ongoing national renewal. The Party, the State, and the people are increasingly focused on the issue of sustainable national development. The 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th, and 13th National Congresses of the Communist Party of Vietnam have all emphasized the role of sustainable development in international integration. Nguyen Truong To's economic thought is deeply insightful, ensuring both sustainability and continuous learning from the outside world and progressive nations for development. For this reason, his ideas surpassed those of his predecessors and even his contemporaries. Comparing these two historical periods further reinforces the significance and vitality of Nguyen Truong To's reformist ideas in general, and economic renewal in particular, both in the historical context and in Vietnam's present reality. Therefore, we must further promote his reformist spirit to build a truly scientific and modern education system that meets the demands of human resource training, serving the cause of building and defending a socialist homeland.

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