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FRANCO-VIETNAMESE SCHOOLS FOR
GIRLS IN TONKIN AT THE BEGINNING OF
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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This paper is part of preparation for a more detailed paper on “Feminism movement in Tonkin at the beginning of the XX century and its related to public schools for girls”, which will possibly be presented at the workshop “Asian women and education”. The workshop is co-sponsored by the Harvard-Yenching Institute and the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences and will be held in Hanoi in June, 2011.

Franco-Vietnamese schools for girls in Tonkin at the beginning of the 20th century

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Abstract

“In history, Vietnamese women have gained a worthy place in society, and have always been deserving community’s respect for being indulgent mothers, sweet wives. However, traditionally, women have always been considered inferior to men, never equal to men and can not be educated as men”¹. The opening of Franco-Vietnamese schools for girls in Tonkin at the beginning of the 20th century was a revolution that gave the Tonkinese women the right to be educated at school, a “priority” they had not experienced for centuries. This phenomenon created an unprecedented opportunity for the Tonkinese women to access education, either in separate or in mixed schools, providing them an exclusive space where they feel themselves equal to men. This paper examines some facts related to the process of establishment and development of these schools.

1. Education for Vietnamese women at the beginning of the 20th century

In the traditional Vietnamese society, girls were abandoned from going to schools as Confucius regarded women as “hard to educate”. The only place where women could be educated was at home. Although mother directly took part in educating her daughters, father was the one whose hidden power exercised profound influence on their daughters. Conventionally, girls were taught to possess *tứ đức* (four virtues): *công* (work), *dung* (beauty), *ngôn* (language), *hạnh* (morality), among which *công* and *ngôn* were most likely the subject of education. The way of educating daughters depended on how rich the family and how educated the father was. Concerning *công* (work), girls being born into rich family could do more sophisticated manual work “Only in rich family, daughters knew how to weave, sew, the poor could merely know how to raise pigs, chickens, do

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¹ Pham Quynh. Sự giáo dục đàn bà con gái (Women’s education). *Nam Phong*, No4, October 1917, p. 207

rice husking, pounding, sifting and dishwashing”². In regards to *ngôn* (language), “In noble families, daughters were taught to form a standard language, in despicable ones, both children and adults used a distorted language which could not be written out. But some literati families were so strict that daughters did not dare to talk”³.

After the French invaded Tonkin, they started to organize classes for their children. Along with the schools for boys, schools for girls were opened, following up the educational revolution in the Metropolitan France which was signified with feminine education in the second half of the 19th century⁴.

In 1886, as soon as Paul Bert arrived in Tonkin, he planned to establish Franco-Annamite schools. But due to the lack of financial resources, the administration of protectorate could not open many public schools. Most Franco-Annamite schools at that time were private. In 1887, there were 42 primary schools sending academic achievements to the Hanoi Exhibition, including schools for girls. There were 4 primary schools for girls in 1887: 2 in Hanoi, 1 in Haiphong and 1 in Nam Dinh. Almost all those schools were for French, a few Annamite families allowed their daughters to attend schools “each girl’s school has about 30 Annamite girls, without much enthusiasm”⁵. In these schools, like boys, girls were taught French and a little arithmetic. Dumoutier attributed the lukewarm attitude of girls and their parents to the school programmes which focused more on general education than on specific feminine education “This is due to the secondary role of women among the Far Eastern people, which lends itself to little improvement of education. An effective way to combat this state of things, would be developing more training of sewing, making clothes to girls at schools”⁶. Dumoutier concluded that if schools had given more practical training for girls instead of teaching French, parents would have let more daughters to go to study.

In 1906, in direction of the reform launched by the General Governor Paul Beau, the Council for improvement of indigenous education was formed to discuss guidelines for transformation of indigenous schools⁷. In The Guidelines for Education (*Bản Quy chế giáo dục*) issued by the Council dated 6 July 18th year of Thanh Thai reign⁸, there would

² *Đông Dương Tạp chí*, “Nời đàn bà” (Women’s talks). No 16, 1913, p.7

³ Ibid, p.8

⁴ Bezancon, Pascale (2002). *Une colonization educatrice? L’experience Indochinoise (1860-1945)*. L’Harmattan.

⁵ Dumoutier, M.G. (1887). *Les Dèbuts de l’enseignement Francais au Tonkin*. Hanoi, F-H Schneider, p. 8

⁶ Dumoutier, M.G. (1887), ibid p. 8

⁷ See more about The reform to reorganize Confucian schools and transform into Franco-Annamite schools in Tonkin in “Giáo dục ở Bắc Kỳ từ đầu thế kỷ XX đến năm 1915- chuyển đổi các trường Nho giáo sang trường Pháp-Việt” by Tran Thi Phuong Hoa, *Nghiên cứu châu Âu*, No 11/2010

⁸ 25 August 1906 according to Christian calendar. This Guidelines was translated from Chinese in the Official Documents of Nguyen Dynasty into quoc ngu by Nguyen The Anh *Parcours d’un historier du Viet Nam- Recueil des articles écrits par Nguyễn Thế Anh/ Ed. by Philippe Papin*. Les Indes savants, 2008. pp. 847-853

be schools for girls in indigenous schooling system (Au hoc, Tieu hoc, Trung hoc). But until the abolishment of the Confucian examination in Tonkin in 1915, no girls came to Confucian indigenous schools.

In contrast to conventional opinions of literati about women's study, Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc founders raised a question of opening a class for girls as early as 1906 when the idea of establishment of this school was formed. The most difficult issue was to recruit a female teacher. Eventually, Luong Van Can's fifth daughter, who knew Quoc ngu, was chosen a teacher for girls' class at Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc⁹. Little evidence shows how many women came to this class, what they learnt actually. According to Nguyen Hien Le's memory, the first two classes opened in March 1907 (before the Administration of protectorate issued an official permission): one for men and the other was for women, the total number of students was 70. "At that time, the opening of a class for girls was a big revolution: the literati did not only want to abolish the old man-woman order, but also wanted the women to have a position in the society, encourage them to have their own outlook on life"¹⁰. In speeches given by Dong Kinh's teachers and orators the addressing towards female audience was not rare. Phan Boi Chau, who had a profound influence on Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc, early recognized women's role in the country history and during his life, he made great contribution to Vietnamese women's progress.

In 1907, the first primary Franco-Annamite public school for girls was established in Nam Dinh. In 1910, another two were opened in Hanoi and Haiphong¹¹. The school in Hanoi was placed in Hang Trong street, then due to the increase of students, it was moved to Hang Cot street and accommodated in an old redecorated theatre¹². Although it was directed by a French female principal, the main teaching staff were Vietnamese as the majority of curriculum was instructed in Quoc ngu. The school recruited female teachers from Sai Gon teaching Quoc Ngu and a Chinese teacher coming from the Hanoi Franco-Vietnamese school for boys. "On the first day, few students came to school, but after some days, the number of students grew rapidly and no table was empty in classes. Many applications were rejected due to the lack of place. The school curriculum concentrated on domestic science (housework, sewing, broidery, drawing) and little Quoc ngu"¹³.

The success of the feminine Franco-Annamite school in Hanoi urged the French Superior Resident of Tonkin (Mr. Simoni) to think of opening up more schools for

⁹ According to Nguyen Hien Le, the class for girl within Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc was directed by Ms. Nam, Luong Van Can's fifth daughter. *Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục. Văn hóa Thông tin, Hà Nội, 2002. p.54*

¹⁰ *Ibid, p.55*

¹¹ Degree No 2436 dated 12 August 1910 by the General Governor of Indochina on creation of a Franco-Annamite school for girls- Ecole Brioux.

¹² *Dong duong tap chi, "Đông Dương thời sự", 16 April 1914. The first primary franco-Vietnamese school for girls was placed in Hang Trong street, then due to the increase of students, the school was moved to Hang Cot street and renamed "Ecole Brioux"*

¹³ *Dong Duong tap chi, No 40, 1914, p.2*

Vietnamese girls in other provinces. In the postal note dated 11 April 1910, he requested all *Résidents* (Công sứ) of provinces in Tonkin seek funds for building girls' schools

“The Franco-Annamite school for girls that has just opened in Hanoi also received students from other provinces. So far the number of students has been so high that the school should issue some requirements for admission. The success highlights the need of creation of more schools for girls in provinces' centres. *Residents* of provinces are requested to take initiatives to provide resources from provincial budget to establish feminine schools”¹⁴

In their turn, the French *Residents* of provinces requested that the Vietnamese Head of provinces (*Tổng đốc*) examine the situation of their ruled area to make sure of the necessity of schools for local girls. Among the responses by *Tổng đốc* of provinces, there were some in a negative tone, among which one was from *Tổng đốc* Ha Dong. In the letter dated 28 April 1910 he wrote (both in Quoc ngu and French)

“Concerning the need for building a school for Vietnamese girls, I see that poor families do not let their daughters study. Only daughters of mandarins or the rich are educated, but very often the father take charge of teaching children or host a teacher at their home. Girls do not go to school. Since the government opened schools, daughters of the rich families go there to learn civilization. Many girls in Hanoi, Haiphong know about that kind of school. But in other provinces, such as this province (Hadong), very few people know about this kind of institution. If we open a new school here, I am sure, few girls will come”¹⁵.

Notwithstanding an unenthusiastic attitude of Vietnamese mandarins towards the opening of Franco-Vietnamese schools for girls, primary schools for girls were gradually established in Ha Dong, Son Tay, Bac Ninh, Lang Son, Ninh Binh, Hung Yen. In 1913, their number in Tonkin was 9 with 674 students. The school in Hanoi (école Brioux) had the biggest number of students of 324, followed by the Namdinh school with 111 students. The Haiphong school ranked the third with 109 students¹⁶.

¹⁴ The Vietnam National Archives Center No1 (VNAC I). RHD-3783. A.s creation d'une école des filles indigènes dans la province de Hadong. Dossier 2

¹⁵ VNAC I. RHD-3783. Dossier 8

¹⁶ VNAC I. RST-8464. Organisation et fonctionnement des écoles au Tonkin (1912-1917)

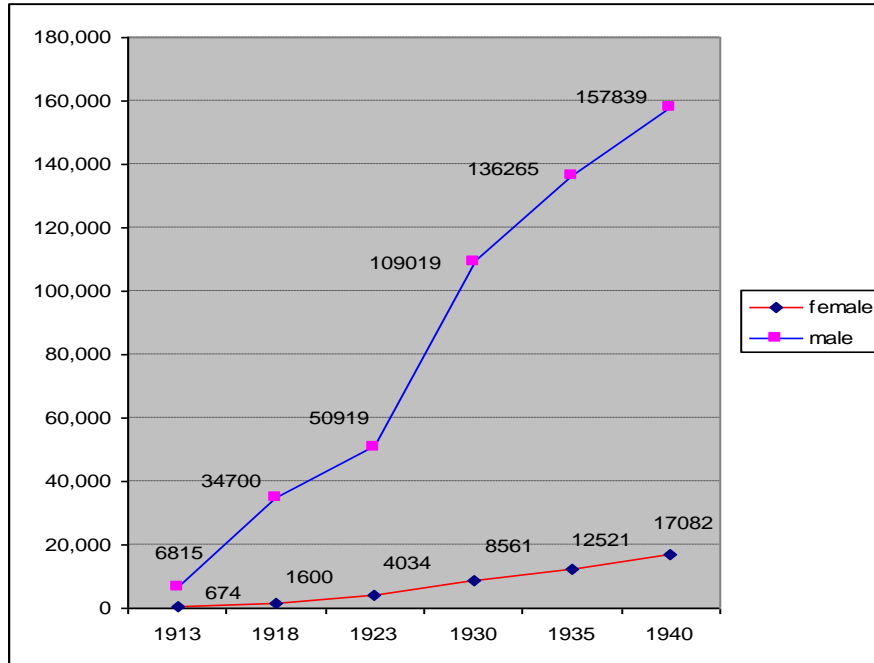


Figure 1. Number of students of public Franco-Vietnamese schools

In 1917, the first upper primary Franco-Annamite school for girl in Tonkin was opened (Dong Khanh school)¹⁷ with two courses: primary and upper primary (*primaire superieur*). The school's curriculum covered two programs: general education (morals and etiquette, Quoc ngu, French, hygiene, arithmetic, accounting, geography; and domestic science (household management, sewing, broidery,..)¹⁸.

There was no separate secondary school for girls. Those who wanted to continue study after graduating upper primary school could enroll in the *Collège du Protectorat* (Trường Bưởi) with their male schoolmates. In 1940 there were 10 female students at the *Collège du Protectorat*, while their male counterparts were 192¹⁹

Although the public Confucian indigenous schools had been in operation until 1918 when they eventually merged into Franco-Vietnamese schooling system²⁰, no girls were registered to this kind of school. Franco-Vietnamese and French schools were the only institutions to have indigenous female students.

Figure 1 shows the growing trend of female students in Tonkin from 1913 to 1940, which marked an increase of more than 26 times during the period. However, there

¹⁷ Dong Khanh school was renamed Trung Vuong school in 1930

¹⁸ VNAC I. RHD- 3814. Arrête No 2229 (Hanoi, 10 November 1917)

¹⁹ *Annuaire Statistique de l'Indochine*. Neuvième Volume 1939-1940. Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine. Direction des Affaires Économiques et Administratives. Service de la Statistique Générale. Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1942.

²⁰ See Tran Thi Phuong Hoa, *ibid*, 2010.

was always a big gap in number of female students in comparison with their male counterparts, with the ratio of 1:10 or more. The biggest gap was recorded in 1918, when the Confucian schools were merged into Franco-Vietnamese schools, making the number of male students soar from 9.292 in 1917 to 34.700 in 1918 (Confucian schools had no girls)

2. Teachers of Franco-Vietnamese feminine schools

Since 1910, a number of primary schools for girls had been established in big cities and provinces, the question of teaching staff for these schools became crucial. While the number of French female teachers could meet or even exceeded the demands, the lack of indigenous female teachers made the situation critical.

Most French female teachers in Tonkin were those who followed their husbands to Indochina for either military or civil missions²¹. Their large number made the teaching position in Tonkin quite competitive, leading to tendency of limiting the number of French married teaching women. In 1905, there was some correspondence exchanged between the Minister of Colonies and the General Governor of Indochina concerning the recruitment of French female teachers for schools in Tonkin. In the letter dated 10 April 1905, the President of the “*Ligue Francaise pour la Defense des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen*” in Paris requested that the Minister of Colonies examine the situation why “married female teachers are excluded from teaching at public schools, while they possess all qualifications to fulfill the tasks”²². The Minister of Colonies attached that letter to the General Governor of Tonkin concerning “the difficulty for married women to be recruited as teaching staff in Tonkin”. The Representative of the “*Ligue*” in Haiphong then confirmed the situation of teaching staff in Tonkin:

“Married women are, in Tonkin, the object of an exceptional situation in regard to their teaching cadres. Although equipped diploma required in the Metropole, they must give up this job that we reserve for the unmarried and widows.

While some married women are admitted to education, it is only temporary and they are to remain continually in that grade, with no hope of advancement. It is invoked for the defense of the duty to help single women, without support, and the law leaves room for pity.

This theory, apparently just because it appeals to humanitarian sentiments, must

²¹ The writer Hoang Ngoc Phach who was a student at the *Collège du Protectorat* from 1914 to 1917 told that most female teachers at the *Collège du Protectorat* had husbands in military service. “Chuyện trường Bưởi” in *Thầy-trò trường Bưởi- Chu Văn An*. Giáo dục, 1998, p.98

²² VNAC I. RST-38094. A.s. de l’admission des femmes mariées dans le personnel de l’Enseignement du Tonkin

be rejected, as it should be noted that the general interest must always come before the special interest”²³

Although all the French female teachers were given rights to be recruited for schools in Tonkin then, they were not qualified enough for teaching indigenous girls because they could not speak Vietnamese, while a part of curriculum of primary Franco-Vietnamese schools was instructed in Quoc ngu²⁴. In 1910, the Superior Resident of Tonkin (Simoni) suggested that indigenous male teachers could work closely to the French directors of the school. Another choice was recruiting Vietnamese female teachers from Cochinchina. As new schools for girls were built up in several provinces, some Vietnamese teachers of École Brioux were chosen to be the school directors (*Đốc học*)²⁵. Ms. Ngo Thi Ton was the first teacher mobilized to become the director of Hadong girls’ school in 1910. She was the only teacher in charge of a class of 57 female students with a monthly salary of 30\$. In 1913, a French teacher was appointed the doctor of this school instead of Ms. Ton, increasing the teaching staff to two persons. But the number of students reduced from 57 to 39²⁶.

The first generation of Vietnamese female teachers was likely those who graduated from École Brioux. In 1913, the final examination of Franco-Vietnamese primary education took place in Hanoi and for the first time with the participation of girls. Some gained high score at the exam, above hundreds of boys. Soon after graduation they were appointed to be directors of feminine schools²⁷. *Dong Duong tap chi* marked this event extremely important in women’s progress “since the establishment of schools for girls, the post of female teacher was also set up. Female teachers were mobilized from province to province like other male teachers, secretaries or clerks”²⁸. In 1918, a section of training female teachers was founded in Dong Khanh school. Its enrollment in 1919, 1920, 1921 was 28, 38, 46 respectively.

The General Code of Education (Règlement Général de l’Instruction Publique en Indochine) issued by the General Governor Albert Sarraut in 1917 stipulated 4 categories of teachers, which then break down into 6 classes, on which the salaries depended. No female teachers ranked first category (both French and Vietnamese). French female teachers of 2nd and 3rd categories classified into 5 classes with annual salaries ranged from 8.000\$ to 3.000\$ (teachers in colonies were paid twice as much as teachers working

²³ VNAC I. RST-38094

²⁴ Most primary schools gave preparation courses.

²⁵ Ms. Ngo thi Ton was mobilized to be director of Ha dong school. She was the only teacher of the school and took charge of a class of 59 female students in

²⁶ VNAC I. RHD-3783-1. Rapport sur la statistique des eleves par classe de l’ecole des filles indigene de la province de Hadong (1910-1925)

²⁷ *Dong Duong tap chi*, 16 April 1914 reported a case of Madam Tran Thi Nhan, who held Certificate of Primary Education, was appointed the Doc Hoc of school for girl in Phu Tho.

²⁸ Ibid.

in Europe). Vietnamese female teachers of 2nd to 4th categories classified into 6 classes with annual salaries from 1.200\$ to 180\$ (while male teachers of the same category and class earned a little bit more).

3. Study program of Franco-Vietnamese schools for girls

In the old learning, the most popular books for women included *Nữ huấn* (Instruction for women), *Nữ giới* (Restriction for women), *Nữ tắc* (Rules for women), which were “boring, telling childlike stories, containing meaningless trifling stories, inspiring no elegance and charm”²⁹. For women, books played a mere role- severe instruction and reminding of duties, which Nam Phong called the “police instruction”. When the Franco-Vietnamese schools opened in Tonkin, there was no official program for girls. Students of École Brioux learnt little French, Quoc ngu, calculation and spent most of time learning domestic work such as sewing, broidery, lacing, knitting, decorating (the French teachers often took charge of manual course). *Dong Duong tap chi* considered this program too simple “It is hard to be civilized with this rudimentary practice”³⁰.

When the first Franco-Vietnamese schools for girls started to operate in Tonkin as early as 1910, the *Superior Resident* of Tonkin suggested using the Program of schools for girls in Cochinchina (My Tho school). In the postal note dated 11 July 1910, he attached the Program of My Tho school for girls and instructed

“You will be able to use this document for the organization of similar schools in centres of provinces, while the program for teaching young indigenous girls have been elaborated in Tonkin”³¹

The Program of My Tho school focused on practical learning which consisted of 3 parts: 1) Instruction in Quoc ngu and French; 2) Manual study; 3) Domestic management study. A crucial part of this program was devoted to training domestic work.

In spite of the *Resident's* promise of elaboration of a study program for girls, it took long time for its preparation. In 1910, the General Governor Klobukovsky issued a Program for Primary and Complementary studies but he did not assign a specific program for girls. In 1913, Albert Sarraut amended the Klobukovsky's Program of Complementary study for students of *Collège du Protectorat*, which did not mention a separate section for girls.

In 1917, Albert Sarraut adopted the General Code of Education, which gave a specific place for girl's training. Article 80 of this Code stipulated

²⁹ *Nam Phong*, “Địa vị người đàn bà trong xã hội nước ta” (Women's position in our society), April 1924, No 82.

³⁰ *Dong Duong tap chi*, No 40, 1914, p.2

³¹ VNAC I. RHD- 3783. Dossier 11-15

“the organization of primary schools for girls in principle obeys the same rules as that of municipal schools for boys. There will be at least one primary school for native girls with the full cycle of primary education (*Écoles primaires de plein exercice*) in each capital of province. At the moment, if a separate school for girls could not be built, native girls can go to mixed schools but should be seated in a separate class”³².

Concerning the study program, the Code specified

“In schools for girls, every afternoon, one and a half hours should be given to training domestic management. The general program should be constrained to have time for a special course for girls”³³.

The Code suggested that it depend on teachers who identified which parts of curriculum could be reduced, when girls may need less theory than boys.

In 1918, the Director of primary education in Tonkin circulated the updated Program of Elementary schools, in which all subjects were the same for both boy and girl. The only difference was the lesson of manual work (*thủ công*), which provided boys with rudimental knowledge of “masculine” work such as fishing, farming, carpentry, etc.. and girls with that of “feminine” work such as sewing, knitting, broidering, etc..³⁴

The development of Franco-Vietnamese schools for girls was a big impetus for Tonkinese women in their path toward more comprehensive progress, first moving them out from home to schools, then integrating them into broader social space. The gradual shift of feminine school programs from confining to domestic work to more general ones gradually seated women equally to men, at least in schooling environment. Starting from this point, women feel confident to struggle for other rights besides the right to be educated in the social environment. “By the 1920s, “women and society” had become something of a focal point around which many other issues often revolved”³⁵. The visible educational progress of women created one of the biggest impulse for further change of the Tonkin society.

³² Règlement Général de l’Instruction Publique en Indochine, adopted by A. Sarraut 21 December 1917 in Saigon. P. 38

³³ Ibid. Art. 137, p. 55

³⁴ VNAC I. RHD-3754. Programme de l’enseignement elementaire franco-indigene des ecoles elementaires au Tonkin (1918)

³⁵ David Marr. The 1920s Women’s Rights Debates in Vietnam. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 35, No.3 (May 1976), p. 371