

Village Education in Central Vietnam from 1906 to 1945

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Abstract: The paper examines the education in villages/communes of *Trung Kỳ*, or Central Vietnam during the French colonial period, known at that time as Annam, over the period from 1906 to 1945, focusing on changes in the educational policies, funding, schools, teaching workforce, and school curricula. Regarding the educational policies, it analyses and clarifies a number of educational reforms, including: the reform implemented in 1906 to reconstituting Confucian schools; the reform implemented in 1919 to empower the French colonial authorities to administer the school system; and, the reform implemented in 1932 and 1933 to empower the local government to take control over the school system, after the Ministry of National Education was established. The paper also gives insight into other changes in funding, curricula, quantities of schools and students the teaching workforce. The author draws on primary sources such as reports of the French government, the educational agencies of Central Vietnam, and the historical annals compiled by the Nguyen Court, as well as archives and newspapers published in the region before 1945.

Keywords: Village school, educational reform, colonialism, Annam (Central Vietnam).

Subject classification: History

1. Introduction

In addition to strengthening a ruling system in Central Vietnam, the French colonial government made changes to the educational system by implementing a new educational policy and carrying out a step-by-step reform of Confucian schools and examinations to replace them with a new educational model. Unlike Tonkin (Northern Vietnam) and

Cochinchina (Southern Vietnam), the central region was where the Nguyen Court played an important role in governing schools, including launching reforms, and providing funding. This paper focuses on describing the changes of commune/village schools, which accounted for the largest proportion in the educational system in the central region from 1906 to 1945. During the period with many ups and downs, the region's people

tried their best to maintain commune/village schools, when the French colonial government were taking them for granted.

2. Commune/village education in Central Vietnam from 1906 to 1919

2.1. Reform of the Confucian education conducted by the French colonial government and the Nguyen dynasty

As the first Resident - Superior of Northern and Central Vietnam (*Résident supérieur de l'Annam et du Tonkin*), Paul Bert considered education to be an essential tool to conquer local people and realised the important role of the Confucian literati in society. In 1886, he affirmed: “Tonkin is a rich region with mild and diligent people...; they work, harvest crops, and pay taxes. It is, therefore, necessary to keep farmers calm”. Meanwhile, the central region was “a poor and aggressive region”; thus, it is essential “to reassure literati, maintain the king’s prestige, set up a circle of aristocratic politicians, and keep Confucian scholars calm” [46, p.112]. During the period, when Paul Beau was Governor General of Indochina (1902-1907), the educational policy of the French colonial government was more clearly shaped. Apart from increasing the investment in the colonial economy, P. Beau started to carry out an educational reform in Northern and Central Vietnam, focusing on changing the traditional school models and Confucian examinations. In Tonkin, schools in the system of the French - Vietnamese Education (*Enseignement Franco-Indigène*), commonly called French - Vietnamese schools, were initially established in 1885. Typically, the

College of Interpreters (*Collège des interprètes*) was founded in Hanoi and a large number of French - Vietnamese primary schools were founded in various provinces and districts. In the central region, however, very few French - Vietnamese primary schools were found before 1906 [19, pp.279-280]², of which the most outstanding were Hue National College (*Quốc học - Huế*) founded in 1896 and Hue Professional School (*Bách nghệ Huế*) founded in 1899. The establishment of schools, where French and Vietnamese national script (*Chữ Quốc ngữ*) were taught, mainly relied on French priests, particularly those of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (*Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes*) that founded schools in some big cities in the central region. According to the survey carried out in French colonies in 1895, there were around 1,200 children going to denominational schools in Annam. In addition, the sisters of Saint Paul’s School organised classrooms for orphans in a suburb of Hue City. Meanwhile, a French school was founded in Da Nang by the French Alliance (*Alliance Française*) [48, p.452].

On 27 April 1904, Governor - General of Indochina P. Beau promulgated a number of decrees to establish a number of institutions that would administer educational activities at the French and French - Vietnamese schools in Tonkin and the central region [2, pp.61-63]. The decree to establish the inspection of public and private schools all over Indochina showed the French colonial government’s intention of taking control over education in all regions. In Tonkin and Cochinchina, provincial departments of education were established to promote French - Vietnamese schools. Meanwhile, in the central region, “the shortage of educational

resources remained and everything was in preparation”, according to a report by Stanislas-Auguste Broni, Secretary General of the Palace of the General Government of Indochina (*Gouvernement général de l’Indochine*) [29, p.352].

On 14 November 1905, the President of France issued a decree on the establishment of the General Direction of Education in Indochina and its affiliated departments of education [17, p.109]. According to a decree issued by the Governor - General of Indochina, the Service of Education in Central Vietnam (*Service de l’Enseignement au Annam*) was founded on 30 October 1906 [17,134], later than those in Tonkin and Cochinchina. The decree gave stipulations on teachers, students, and French and French - Vietnamese schools [17, pp.136-137]. Collaborating with the French colonial government, the Nguyen dynasty in the region founded its own educational agency, called Ministry of Education (*Bộ Học*), which would replace the Ministry of Rites (*Bộ Lễ*) in administering teaching and examination activities. The Ministry of Education was headed by Minister Cao Xuan Duc.

On 8 March 1906, Governor General P. Beau signed a decree on the establishment of the Indochina Council of Perfection of Indigenous Education (*Conseil de Perfectionnement de l’Enseignement Indigène*) for the purpose of re-organising Confucian schools so as to finally convert them into French - Vietnamese schools. According to Secretary General Stanislas-Auguste Broni, the council was run under the direction of the Governor - General of Indochina with the aim of comprehending the thinking of local people as well as historical, philosophical, and linguistic issues in the

Far Eastern region, thereby developing and providing local human resources for the French colonial government [30, p.347]. On 16 May in the same year, the Governor - General of Indochina signed a decree on the establishment of regional councils of perfection of indigenous education in all regions of Indochina [31, p.692]. On 24 November 1906, another decree was signed to stipulate the organisational structure of the Council of Educational Perfection in Central Vietnam [48, p.1738], in which the French members played a decisive role.

The Local Educational Regulation, which was substantially aimed to reform Confucian schools, was ratified by King Thanh Thai on 31 May 1906 (i.e. on the ninth day of the fourth lunar month in the 18th year under Thanh Thai reign) [1, pp.847-853], [4, pp.448-454]. The main content of the Regulation was to include local schools in the system of public schools, divided into three levels as follows: (1) The first level (*Ấu học*): Those schools were established in communes/villages; the funding and the hire of teachers were undertaken by the commune/village authorities; the prefecture education commissioners (*Giáo thụ*) and the district education commissioners (*Huấn đạo*) were responsible for supervising teaching activities of *Ấu học* schools. According to the Regulation, it was obligatory for a commune/a village, in which there were 60 or more children aged from 6 to 12, to establish a childish school. Commune/village authorities were assigned to “make tentative budgets for the childish schools on their own”. After finishing *Ấu học*, the children would take an exam. Those, who passed the exam, got the title of *Tuyển sinh* and could enrol at a *Tiểu học* school. Teachers at the

commune/village *Ấu học* schools were also required to know *quốc ngữ* (Vietnamese national script). (2) The second level (*Tiểu học*): *Tiểu học* schools were established in each prefecture or district (named *Trường Giáo thụ*; i.e. Prefecture School, or *Trường Huân đạo*; i.e. District School). After finishing *Tiểu học*, students would take an exam called *Khảo khóa*. Those, who passed the test, got the title of *Khóa sinh* and could enrol at a *Trung học* school. (3) The third level (*Trung học*): *Trung học* schools were established in each province (named *Trường Đốc học*; i.e. Provincial School). French language, Chinese characters, and *quốc ngữ* were taught at those schools. Chinese characters and Vietnamese national script were taught by *Đốc học*, while French language was taught by teachers from the local French - Vietnamese schools. After finishing *Trung học* school, students would take an exam called *thi Hạch*. Those, who passed the exam, got the title of *Thí sinh*. Since 1909, only those who got the title of *Thí sinh* could take the regional exam (*thi Hương*).

The Local Educational Regulation, ratified by King Thanh Thai, mentioned the French - Vietnamese education in a small section of the last chapter. The relation between the local Confucian schools and new styled schools was generalised in the following sentence: "Only those, who got the title of *Tuyển sinh*, were allowed to enrol at French - Vietnamese primary schools". The Regulation was ratified by the Governor - General of Indochina on 14 September 1906. It provided standards for Confucian study and exams until 1918. The Resident-Superior in Tonkin promulgated an innovative programme, which was applied particularly to the traditional

Confucian schools and the French - Vietnamese schools in Tonkin [2, pp.71-72]. In the central region, the reform of Confucian schools reached the highest effectiveness since 1913. During the period from 1913 to 1919, the commune/village schools developed so rapidly that "every commune had a school" pursuant to the spirit of the Local Educational Regulation.

On 26 October 1918, the Ministry of Education submitted a proposal to abrogate Confucian exams. On 14 July 1919, King Khai Dinh approved the abrogation of Confucian exams and handed over all educational activities to the French government. The last national exam (*thi Hội*) was held in 1919, putting an end to the Confucian examination system that had existed for a thousand years and opening a new era for educational development in Vietnam.

2.2. State of commune/village education in Central Vietnam from 1906 to 1919

The reform in 1906 opened a new period for commune/village schools in the region, which was followed by a boom of *Ấu học* schools in 1913 and 1914. According to the Local Educational Regulation in 1906, the funding of *Ấu học* schools was covered by the communes/villages. For the communes/villages, which had a small population and did not have enough funding to found a school, could collaborate to build a joint-*Ấu học* school. Although *Ấu học* schools were run under the management of the commune/village authorities, they were supervised by the provincial departments of education, the Ministry of Education based in Hue, and the French colonial government. In the central region, in *Ấu*

học schools, also called commune/village schools, students learnt various subjects such as: Chinese characters, *quốc ngữ*, mathematics, geography, natural history, and hygiene so as to get sufficient conditions to take the regional exams.

The political upheaval in 1908 (the movement against taxation in the central region) led to the stagnation of *Áu học* school restructuring. A report submitted by the Office of General Government of Indochina to the Government Council in 1910, wrote “the local educational restructuring was completely stopped due to the political upheaval in 1908” [35, p.146]. One of the reasons for the stagnation was the funding

contribution charging each commune/village to build *Áu học* schools. The General Government of Indochina reported that before 1913, *Áu học* schools in the central region were mostly private. In 1913-1914, there were 1,717 *Áu học* schools with 18,443 students in the region, of which 457 ones were established and run by the funding of communes/villages and the rest of 1,260 were funded by individuals, who spent their own money on building schools and paying wages to teachers [36, pp.278, 285] (Table 1). Nghe An was the province which had the highest number of *Áu học* schools run by individuals making up over 80% of all such schools in the central region.

Table 1: Quantity of *Áu học* Schools (in the System of Confucian Schools) in Central Vietnam in 1913³

| No. | Province | Quantity of childish schools | | Quantity of students | |
|-----|--|------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| | | Run by communes | Run by individuals | In registration | In Presence |
| 1 | Thanh Hoa | 100 | » | 1,128 | 1,128 |
| 2 | Nghe An | 37 | 1,083 | 6,619 | 2,606 |
| 3 | Ha Tinh | | | No data available | |
| 4 | Quang Binh | 36 | 91 | 1,142 | 1,142 |
| 5 | Quang Tri | 31 | » | 494 | 293 |
| 6 | Thua Thien | 91 | » | 2,462 | 2,462 |
| 7 | Quang Nam | 70 | 74 | 4,065 | 2,378 |
| 8 | Quang Ngai | 41 | » | 1,070 | 775 |
| 9 | Binh Dinh and Phu Yen (total data in both provinces) | 18 | 2 | 566 | 555 |
| 10 | Khanh Hoa | 12 | » | 404 | 328 |
| 11 | Binh Thuan | 21 | 10 | 493 | 338 |
| | Total | 457 | 1,260 | 18,443 | 12,005 |

Source: Gouvernement général de l’Indochine (1913), *Rapport au Conseil de Gouvernement*, Session ordinaire de 1913, Imprimerie d’Extrême-Orient, Hanoi-Haiphong.

In December 1913, the Ministry of Education issued an ordinance regulating *Ấu học* schools, according to which every large commune/village should have at least one *Ấu học* school. For small and medium communes/villages, a joint *Ấu học* school should be established for every two or three communes/villages. Teachers at *Ấu học* schools must be: (1) *Tú tài*, *Cử nhân*, who got a teaching certificate; or, (2) candidates, who passed the first and/or the second rounds of the regional exam; or (3) those, who were proficient in both Chinese characters and *quốc ngữ*. Heads of the prefectures and districts must come personally to communes/villages to urge the commune/village authorities to establish childish schools and must report it to the Ministry of Education within three months. The Minister of Education must come personally to at least one province to supervise the establishment of *Ấu học* schools as an example and then assigned other officials from the Ministry of Education to carry out supervision in all the rest provinces. If the establishment of *Ấu học* schools was postponed in a commune/village or an idle report was submitted, the authorities of “the commune/village would be punished... if the head of a prefecture or a district did not carry out the work carefully, it would be reported in his official record” [4, pp.594-595].

In 1914, the Ministry of Education issued another ordinance regulating the salaries paid to teachers at *Ấu học* schools. The salaries should be at least six *Indochinese piastre* a month; must be specified clearly in the teaching contract, signed every six years. The wages of teachers at *Ấu học*

schools were paid by deducting from the budget of the communal land or apportioning among the commune people; “if the wage was not paid to *Ấu học* school teachers, the commune would be severely punished according to the law” [4, p.611]. The teachers who had worked for a long time and made much contribution to the people’s learning, would be rewarded with a title, which could be as high as *Chánh bát phẩm* (senior-eighth rank in the mandarin hierarchy).

In order to equip teachers with sufficient knowledge of *quốc ngữ*, French language, mathematics, and other sciences, the local government in the central region organised 6-month training courses in Phu Dien (Nghe An Province), Hue, and Quy Nhon [43, p.10]. Those, who passed the final exam of the courses, got a teaching certificate. Unfortunately, there were not enough graduates of the courses for new schools. Thus, the commune/village authorities had to appoint those, who passed the regional exams and had a command of *quốc ngữ*, as teachers of the *Ấu học* schools.

According to a report of the Service of Education, the modernisation of teaching programmes was initially implemented in 1914, marking a closer linkage between Confucian schools and French - Vietnamese schools. At the last grade of the *Ấu học* school (in the system of Confucian schools), French was taught with the same curricula as those at the preparatory grade of the French - Vietnamese schools. In 1917, another reform was carried out at the *Tiểu học* and *Trung học* schools in collaboration with the French colonial government. Since then, French was taught at Confucian schools, similar to French - Vietnamese schools.

Table 2: Public Confucian Schools in Central Vietnam in 1917-1918

| Level of education | 1917 | | 1918 | |
|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| | Quantity of schools | Quantity of students | Quantity of schools | Quantity of students |
| <i>Ấu học</i> | 1,538 | 37,272 | 1,553 | 30,320 |
| <i>Tiểu học</i> | 83 | 4,233 | 79 | 3,923 |
| <i>Trung học</i> | 13 | 723 | 13 | 657 |

Source: Gouvernement général de l'Indochine, Direction général de l'Instruction publique, (1931), *L'Annam scolaire*, Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, Hanoi.

As reported by the Service of Education, however, the educational transition from the Confucian teaching programme to the French - Vietnamese teaching programme just took place at some commune/village schools during the period from 1914 to 1919. Many students at the commune/village schools realised that the two teaching programmes were too much different from each other, so they wanted to come back to the traditional teaching programme; some of them even “felt latent animosity towards all what brought from the West” [43, p.10]. One of the causes of the phenomenon is the lack of qualified teachers, who got sufficient knowledge to provide training for students in the transitional period. New teachers were required to be good at Chinese characters, *quốc ngữ*, and subjects of sciences. It was impossible to satisfy the requirement with a six-month training course for commune/village teachers. At the final exam of the training courses held in three locations, including Phu Dien, Hue, and Quy Nhon, 41 graduates in Phu Dien and 36 graduates in Hue were qualified enough to be new teachers, while none of graduates in Quy Nhon was selected. After

being selected as new teachers, they were generally called “*giáo sư*”, which by accident coincides with the present-day title in Vietnamese language of “professor(s)” [36, p.280]. Owing to the expansion of schools, especially commune/village schools, *quốc ngữ* was popularised widely, as recorded by the Indochina Inspector of Education in 1916: “Recently, many books and newspapers have been published in *quốc ngữ*. Many European scientific publications have been translated into Vietnamese. Many publications in *quốc ngữ* have come out into society so quickly that publishers in France may feel envious” [44, p.8]. The central region could not be compared with Cochinchina and Tonkin in terms of the quantity of books and newspapers published in *quốc ngữ*. In the central region, *quốc ngữ* was disseminated mainly via schools.

In 1917, there were 1,532 commune/village childish schools established in all provinces of the central region, except Kontum and Langbian (Langbian Province was founded in 1916), with 33,328 students in total [37, p.100]. Before the Confucian schools were completely closed down, there were still

21,502 students going to the commune/village *Ấu học* schools in 1919 [38, p.99].

3. Commune/village education in Central Vietnam from 1919 to 1945

After the Confucian schools were removed from the system of public schools, which also means that the Service of Education and the local government in the central region no longer administered the schools, where Chinese characters were taught, basically all the commune/village childish schools were changed into French - Vietnamese preparatory or elementary schools. In reality, during the transitional period, just half of the commune/village *Ấu học* schools were changed into the French - Vietnamese preparatory schools. Those schools were maintained thanks to a particular fund, called the School Fund, to which communes/villages made contributions. The fund was under the control of the region's budgetary agency. In 1933, the School Fund was abrogated. Since then, all expenses of the schools were covered by communes/villages on the basis of contributions made by local people.

3.1. Commune/village schools in the system of the French - Vietnamese public schools in Central Vietnam

As soon as King Khai Dinh issued a *đụ* (Ordinance) on 14 July 1919 on handing over the administration of schools and the issuance of certificates and diplomas to the French government [5, p.240], L. Tissot, Interim Resident-Superior of Central Vietnam, sent a circular to the heads of provinces in the region the Mayor of Da Nang, and the

leaders of Phan Rang and Song Cau Delegations, demanding that it was obligatory to terminate the co-existence of two educational systems, change all *Ấu học*, *Tiểu học*, *Trung học* schools in the system of Confucian schools into French - Vietnamese schools [20, p.707]. According to the circular, it was essential that every commune school (*écoles communales*) had at least an infant class (*enfantin*) and a preparatory class (*préparatoire*); when possible, it could be supplemented with elementary classes (*élémentaire*). The schools that had only two former classes were called Commune Preparatory Schools (*Écoles Communales Préparatoires*); those which also had a preparatory class were called Commune Elementary Schools. For commune preparatory school that had only two classrooms, it was necessary to have only one teacher. The teacher was appointed by the Resident-Superior, based on the proposal from the director of the provincial departments of education. All building and running costs of the school were covered by the contributions made by local people under the management of the commune authorities.

Everything was carried out according to the plan. In 1919, all Confucian schools in the central region were changed into French - Vietnamese. All commune/village *Ấu học* and *Tiểu học* schools were changed into commune-run (or canton-run) preparatory schools or State-run elementary schools. All *Trung học* schools were changed into full-course primary schools (*Écoles primaires de plein exercice*) with five classes. After the transitional period, most of commune-run schools in the central region had one or two classes, so they were called preparatory schools (*préparatoire*)⁴. According to the

records of the Service of Education, the transitional period ended in September 1920 [43, p.55]

Due to the changes, the number of commune/village schools tended to decline, compared to that of Confucian schools in the previous period. In the 1920 - 1921 academic year, there were 665 preparatory schools with 19,995 students [39, p.97], decreasing by more than 50% in comparison with the number of the *Áu học* schools in 1917. The corresponding figure decreased to 663 in 1925, [40, p.86].

In an article of more than ten pages on the popular education in Indochina (*L'enseignement populaire indochinois*) published in the General Bulletin of Public Instruction (*Bulletin Général de l'Instruction Publique*) in 1927, A. Thalamas, General Director of the Indochina Service of Education, outlined the guideline on the educational reform of commune/village schools with respect to school curricula, textbooks, and teaching methods. According to him, the concept of commune/village schools was introduced in 1917 in the general educational system⁵. As regulated in the new law on education, "in principle, each commune must have at least a primary school. However, some communes could share a primary school. For the others, whose tax payers were more than 500 could have enough funding to maintain their own schools" [45, p.34]. Governor General A. Sarraut intended to divide the educational system in Indochina into two types: the education for the masses, which consisted of five grades at the first level; and, the education for the local elite (*élite indigène*), which consisted of ten higher grades. A.

Thalamas emphasised that it was necessary to broaden the primary education and consider it as the foundation for the entire national education with a horizontal plan of development [51, p.59].

When the primary education was not considered compulsory by law, the French colonial government realised that children's education was carried out very arbitrarily. A large number of children quit school, after one or two academic years. In 1924, Governor General Martial Merlin promulgated a regulation on the issuance of the elementary certificate, aiming to encourage children to take at least three grades to get the certificate. A. Thalamas assumed that the popular education (*enseignement populaire*) should consist of three grades instead of five ones. The elementary certificates helped to satisfy parents, when they saw that their children knew how to read, write, and calculate, and got some knowledge of sciences [51, p.60]. However, he supposed that local governments, in reality, did not pay attention to commune/village schools at all. In Tonkin, 85% of village schools were located inside the areas of pagodas or communal houses, while in the central region most of commune/village schools were thatched cottages with very rudimentary facilities. In addition, it was essential to reform the curricula of commune/village schools, aiming at practical learning to serve rural life.

The Chinese language learning was also minimised, focusing on meeting practical goals rather than literary bias so that students could know how to read administrative documents as well as the materials preserved at their home. The new learning method and Chinese textbooks

were compiled by the Service of Education. A catalogue of Chinese characters was promulgated so that teachers could use it to teach at school. The French textbooks at the commune/village schools were also re-compiled, making it easier for students to learn and practice. In addition to the textbooks, some newspapers and journals such as “Learning Newspaper” (*Học báo*), “Pedagogic Journal” (*Sư phạm học khoá*), and “General Bulletin of Public Instruction” saved several pages to publish lectures of learning subjects.

The guideline on reforming commune/village schools came into effect in 1927 [23, pp.48, 110], the quantity of commune/village schools in the central region grew higher, amounting to 757 in 1930 [33] and 1,042 in 1935 [34]. The commune/village school might consist of two grades (the

preparatory school) or three grades (the elementary school). In the 1941-1942 academic year, the number of commune/village schools increased rapidly, since the local government of the central region stipulated that it was obligatory to have a school in every village. The increase of commune/village schools during this period was similar to that in 1913 and 1914. In the 1943-1944 academic year, the total number of commune/village schools in the central region was 1,919 with 63,089 students, of whom 5,880 were female [46]. It was the highest figure over the period from 1919 to 1945, even higher than the corresponding number of *Áu học* schools in the period from 1913 to 1917 (just more than 1,500 childish schools). In 1943, the commune/village schools accounted for 61% of all public schools in the central region.

Table 3: Commune/village schools in the system of French - Vietnamese public schools in Central Vietnam

| Academic year | 1920 | | 1944 | |
|--|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| | Quantity of schools | Quantity of students | Quantity of schools | Quantity of students |
| Commune/village schools | 665 | 19,955 | 1,919 | 63,089 |
| Public elementary schools | 88 | 6,519 | 1,067 | 60,742 |
| Preparatory primary schools | 16 | 5,152 | 147 | 40,095 |
| Senior primary schools (<i>Primaires Supérieurs</i>) | 1 | 471 | 4 | 1,898 |
| Secondary schools | | | 1 | 524 |
| Total | 769 | 32097 | 3138 | 166348 |

Source: Gouvernement général de l’Indochine (1921), *Rapport au Conseil de Gouvernement*, Session ordinaire de 1921, Imprimerie d’Extrême-Orient, Hanoi-Haiphong; Haut-Commissariat de France pour l’Indochine (1946), *Annuaire Statistique de l’Indochine*, Onzième Volume, 1943-1946, Statistique générale de l’Indochine, Saigon.

The only senior primary school in the region in 1920 was Hue National School; at that time, Vinh School was just a primary school.

3.2. Funding for commune/village schools: Local contribution - School fund (fonds de concours)⁶

Although commune/village schools played an important role in giving education to rural children, neither the French colonial government nor the Service of Education provided funding for those schools. All the school building and running expenses were covered by local people. After *Áu học* schools were abrogated and replaced by preparatory schools⁷ in 1919, the French colonial government imposed a fund to cover all the building and running costs of the preparatory schools, including also salaries paid to teachers. The fund was named “*Fonds de concours*” (School fund). If a commune/village was in financial difficulty, it could collaborate with neighbouring communes/villages to build a school in principle of sharing expenses. In some communes/villages, there were particular farming lots, from which the yield was used to build and run the schools. However, most of the expenses used to cover the school building and running costs was contributed by commune/village people. The contributions, also called school taxes, were delivered to the central region’s budget so as to pay for commune/village schools afterwards. Prior to 1919, monthly salaries of teachers were paid directly by communes/villages. Since 1 January 1920, the salaries were taken from the School Fund of the central region’s budget⁸ [20, p.716].

The regulation about the school tax, which communes/villages had to pay to the central region’s budget, raised controversial opinions. *Firstly*, local people had to pay an additional tax, although it just made up a small proportion (6%) of the total tax that communes/villages had to pay. In many provinces, the school tax was even higher, amounting to 12% of the total tax (in Ha Tinh, it was even higher) [43, p.55]. *Secondly*, in many villages, children did not have an opportunity to go to school. As two or three villages shared a school, children in the villages located far from the school could not go to study. *Thirdly*, the school fund did not guarantee justice for all villages. In poor villages, people had to pay the school tax every year, though none of their children went to school. There was an opinion arguing that the school fund should be removed and villages were allowed to found schools freely, depending on their own situation [32, p.30]. However, the local government of the central region assumed that the school tax accounted for a small proportion of the total tax imposed on villages, but the school fund helped to ensure popular and compulsory education for all people [25, pp.74-81].

The Decree dated 21 July 1927 of the Governor-General of Indochina re-affirmed the maintenance of the school fund contributed by communes/villages so as to serve activities of the elementary schools [21, p.891]. At the same time, it stipulated that communes/villages were responsible for paying salaries directly to the school teachers⁹. After the Decree was promulgated, the School Fund provided funding for not only commune/village schools but also infant and preparatory classes at the public

elementary schools as well as the primary preparatory schools, of which the funding came from the central region's budget in the earlier period [43, p.54].

In 1929, Thanh Hoa Province contributed the largest amount to the School Fund (34,202 *Indochinese piastre*) and had 5,664 students. The second place was taken by Nghe An Province (30,640 *Indochinese piastre*) with 2,655 students. Thus, on average, each student in commune/village schools contributed 11.54 *Indochinese piastre* to the School Fund, which was the highest in comparison with all other provinces in the central region [43, p.40]. So, every person in Thanh Hoa Province contributed 4.7 cents, while the corresponding figure in Nghe An Province, was almost 5 cents [43, p.40].

In reality, local people in the central region actively contributed to the School Fund. In some provinces, such as Thanh Hoa, Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Thua Thien, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, and Binh Thuan, village people voluntarily contributed money to building schools of brick walls and tile roofs. In some areas, such as Ben Thuy, Phu Yen, and Phan Thiet, kind-hearted people even donated their own houses to be used as schools [18]. However, the government did not pay attention to commune/village schools. As a result, the bad conditions and the shortage of schools remained, as were complained about frequently in society.

In 1932, the Ministry of National Education under the administration of the Nguyen Court was founded, with Pham Quynh holding the post of Minister. Several policies aimed at reforming the elementary and primary education in the central region were issued, including the abrogation of the School Fund. On 5 July 1933, Governor-

General Pierre Pasquier issued a decree approving an educational reform in the region. According to the decree, the local personnel administration at French - Vietnamese elementary and primary schools was undertaken by the Ministry of National Education [22, p.1125]. Major educational positions, such as *Đốc học*, *Huấn đạo*, *Giáo thụ*, who had been abrogated by the Educational Regulation in 1917, were restored. In the central region, there were about 30 educational officials taking administration of primary and commune/village schools [42, p.91]. The decree also stipulated the abrogation of the School Fund. Local people (by commune/village or some communes/villages, if they shared a school) should contribute money, in order to cover the building and running costs of their schools. The educational reform in 1933 created favourable conditions for establishment of many new schools on the basis of contributions made by local people, especially in Nghe An and Quang Nam Provinces [50, p.91]. In 1940, commune/village (or inter-commune/village) elementary schools (*écoles communales et intercommunales*) and public elementary schools, also called official elementary schools (*écoles élémentaires officieles*), were added to the group of schools at the elementary level, which was under the administration of the Ministry of National Education and the government. Since late 1941, however, the administration of commune/village schools was handed over to the commune/village authorities, according to a royal edict issued by King Bao Dai and a decision signed by Minister of National Education Pham Quynh [27, pp.129-133].

3.3. Commune/village teachers

After 1919, most of the teachers at commune/village schools were former village teachers. They had to work in difficult conditions and suffered extremely unfair treatment. Before 1919, in order to encourage people to found commune/village schools, the royal court in Hue implemented some appropriate policies on giving titles and rewards to village teachers at childish schools. After the childish schools were changed into the commune/village schools in the French - Vietnamese educational system, a large number of the village teachers were also recruited, but they were not provided with any official ranks. Some of them were those, who passed the first and/or the second round of the inter-provincial exam¹⁰, knew Vietnamese national language, and had a teaching certificate¹¹. Later on, some of them got the Certificate of Elementary Studies¹² or the Certificate of French-Vietnamese Primary Studies (*Certificat d'Études Primaire Franco-Indigène - CEPFI*)¹³. Some of the village teachers enrolled on senior-primary schools, but they did not get yet the Diploma of Complementary Studies (*Diplôme d'Études Complémentaires*). The village teachers just got a one-year teaching contract, based on the proposals of the provincial departments of education and the approval by the Resident-Superior of Central Vietnam. The wages paid to the teachers were deducted from a fund contributed by local people. The fund was sometimes managed by commune/village authorities and sometimes by the provincial government. The management of the fund did not comply with any principles, as mentioned

in the report of the Chamber of People's Representatives of Central Vietnam (*Chambre des Représentants du Peuple de l'Annam*) in 1936: "The government should have undertaken fully the people's education, but the administration of commune/village schools was handed over to commune/village authorities or county/provincial authorities... In some provinces, the chief ministers used money of the educational fund to improve the tourist infrastructure (in Quang Binh Province) or buy facilities for the office of the prefect (in Quang Nam Province), while more teachers were dismissed and more schools were closed down" [11]. Village teachers lived in miserable conditions, as described in "Thanh Nghe Tinh Newspaper" (*Thanh Nghệ Tĩnh tân văn*): "The wage of a village teacher ought to be at least 10 *Indochinese piastre* a month, but that in Nghe An Province is just 6 *Indochinese piastre*. Recently, it has even been cut down... Three years ago, a wage ranged from 16 to 23 *Indochinese piastre*. At present, it is ranging from 6 to 8 *Indochinese piastre*" [6]; or, "The wage of a village teacher, who is responsible for giving lessons to 60 or 70 children, is even lower than that of a coolie" [7]. Although village teachers undertook hard work, they were coerced by village authorities: "In Thanh Hoa Province, after the teaching contract terminated, village authorities intended to replace the village teachers by their relatives, who had a certificate of elementary studies. After the superior mandarin realised it, he commanded the village authority to keep the existing teachers. Since the intention could not be done, the village authorities deliberately caused trouble to the teachers; they spoke ill of the teachers and threatened

to force children to quit school, aiming at closing down the school and dismissing the teachers” [8]. As a result, many teachers had to leave the school. In some villages, the authorities appropriated part of the teachers’ wages [10].

Before the certificate of elementary studies was issued in 1925, village teachers were selected from those, who passed Confucian exams, or those, who had the certificate of French - Vietnamese primary studies. Since the certificate of elementary studies was applied¹⁴, many people could be appointed as teachers at the village schools, if they had the certificate. According to the public opinion, however, the certificate was not reliable to guarantee the teaching qualification. Besides, making corrupt use of the regulation stipulating that those, who had the certificate of elementary studies, were considered qualified enough to be teachers, village authorities selected and appointed their relatives, who had the certificate, as the village teachers. As a result, many people, “who did not have appropriate dignity or knowledge, were appointed village teachers” [10].

In 1932, the Ministry of National Education restored the positions of Provincial Education Commissioner, District Education Inspector (*Kiểm học*), Prefecture Education Commissioner, and District Education Commissioners. In 1933, the School Fund was abrogated, so the central region government no longer administered the fund. The responsibility for paying wages to village teachers was handed over to the commune/village authorities. At the same time, the wages of teachers were decreased by 40% [50, p.92].

3.4. Curricula at commune/village schools: Teaching of Chinese characters and French language

In principle, commune/village schools had to comply with the curricula specified in the Educational Regulation in 1917. Thus, students at the infant classes studied 11 subjects, including: Ethics, Physical education, National script, Mathematics, Drawing, Popular science, Geography, Fine art, Craft, Chinese characters, and French (optional). Meanwhile, students at the preparatory and the elementary classes studied 12 subjects, including those of the infant students and History in addition. At commune/village schools, French was not a compulsory subject, while Chinese characters were taught from the infant class with a new teaching method named “Chinese Characters Teaching Method” approved by the General Inspector of Education [17, pp.369-370]. In 1922, Nguyen Hiet Chi and Le Thuoc compiled a handbook of learning the characters for students at elementary schools in the central region. The handbook was approved by the Resident-Superior in Central Vietnam on 7 March 1922. In the handbook, there were three groups of Chinese characters, including: 100-150 characters that students at the infant class had to learn so as to construct common phrases; 150-200 additional characters for students at the preparatory class; and 150-200 more characters for students at the elementary class. The two authors also proposed a new teaching method, which made it easier for students to remember new characters and know how to write and use the characters [24, p.35]. In 1933, after the Ministry of National Education was

empowered to administer the education in the central region, the Governor-General of Indochina promulgated a decree on the educational reform in the region, in which the curricula at commune/village schools were stipulated to have much more simplistic content in comparison with those in the Educational Regulation. The new school curricula emphasised the learning in *quốc ngữ*. Although it did not stipulate specifically which subjects must be taught at school, the decree raised the necessity of teaching ethical and hygienic issues as well as basic scientific concepts [22, p.1125]. At public schools (French - Vietnamese schools), it was stipulated that students had one and a half hours to study Chinese characters¹⁵. In the central region, however, lessons of Chinese characters were maintained at almost all elementary schools with more hours than other schools. According to the Indochina Service of Education, until 1930, there were three hours for teaching the characters per week at schools in the region. At some schools, there were even five teaching hours, due to the local demand [43, p.22]. Meanwhile, at French - Vietnamese schools, the learning of *quốc ngữ* was popular at the elementary level (the infant, preparatory, and elementary grades at the primary school) and the learning of French language was popular at the “second” grade¹⁶ and above. As the French - Vietnamese schools predominated in the educational system, the learning of Chinese characters fell into decline as from the late 1930s. Students no longer wanted to learn it, especially those in Tonkin and Cochinchina [12], [13], [14], [15]. In 1937, the Governor-General of Indochina promulgated

another decree removing all lessons on Chinese characters from the curricula at the elementary schools [28]. Obviously, lessons on the characters were still maintained at almost all commune/village schools in the region in 1935. Yet, the statistical data in 1937 and 1940 show that Chinese characters were no longer taught at any commune/village schools [34]. The situation changed in 1940, when France fell in Europe and Japan sent its troops to invade Indochina. When Japanese troops had occupied Indochina, schools in Vietnam remained under the administration of the French colonial government. In 1941, the Service of Education and the Ministry of National Education discussed the possibility of bringing back the classical education. According to Minister Pham Quynh, the Western education brought more advantages to people, but it also brought “democratic harmful effects”, which “caused damage to humankind” [15]. The Confucian core values, such as the filial piety and the loyalty, should be preserved, as they were the very foundation for the family and the fatherland [16]. Since 1942, consequently, Chinese characters were taught again, especially at private schools.

3.5. Private schools

Apart from public schools, private ones were also founded in the central region, including diocesan and non-religious schools. Those private schools were founded according to the decree dated 27 January 1925 by the Governor-General of Indochina and the decree on the establishment of private schools in the region dated 11

February 1925 by the Resident - Superior of Central Vietnam. As soon as those decrees were issued, private schools started to flourish. According to data of the Service of Education, while none of private schools was found in Tonkin in 1926, many private schools had been founded in the central region at the senior primary and other levels¹⁷. In that year, in the region, the number of private elementary schools was more than 200, of which 145 were founded by the church [41, p.462]. One of the reasons for the boom of private schools there is that too few teaching hours on Chinese characters were provided at public schools, as indicated in the Learning Newspaper. According to the Educational Regulation, while an hour and half a week was spent on teaching the characters at public schools, many schools in the central region proposed having six hours instead [3]. The Service of Education realised that local people in the region considered the learning of Chinese characters to be significant in daily life, since “it was the language used in household documents (debt agreements, purchase contracts, property ownership certificates etc.), local administrative documents (of the villages, communes, districts, and province), and the writings found in solemn places in communal houses, pagodas, temples, and shrines as a way to remind the merit of ancestors and hand over the tradition” [43, p.25]. As the public schools did not satisfy the local people’s demand for learning Chinese characters (the inter-commune schools were just convenient for the children who lived near the school; meanwhile, those who lived far from the schools could not come to school everyday), people decided

to found private schools, particularly family-based private schools. According to the regulation, people could establish a family-based school for their children and relatives, where the number of students was not more than five; they did not need to apply for the foundation permit and the schools were not supervised strictly by the government and the department of education with respect to school facilities, hygienic conditions, and teachers’ qualifications. The teaching of Chinese characters was maintained with the traditional methods at many family-based schools, regardless of the ups and downs of the Confucian studies.

4. Conclusion

Commune/village schools played an important role in the educational system in Central Vietnam from 1906 to 1945. The French colonial government and the Nguyen Court worked out a large number of policies aimed at developing schools. The Educational Regulation in 1906 created a new period for *Áu học* schools by stipulating that every commune/village had to found an *Áu học* school with prescribed curricula and funding sources. From 1913 to 1918, *Áu học* schools flourished on the basis of the contributions made by communes/villages and individuals. There were around 1,500 such schools in the central region until 1919. The edict issued by King Khai Dinh on 14 July 1919 empowered the French colonial government to take control over all schools. Immediately, the French government deployed a new educational system, based on a decree promulgated by the Resident-Superior of

Central Vietnam on 30 July 1919. The decree provided specific regulations relating to schools in the region. As a result, all *Áu học* schools were changed into commune/village preparatory or elementary schools with the school curricula prescribed in the Educational Regulation in 1917; all expenses of the schools were paid by the School Fund, to which local people contributed money as a school tax. The School Fund was added to the central region's budget for the purpose of serving elementary schools. The transition from the Confucian schools to the French - Vietnamese schools took place for one year, from the late 1919 to the late 1920. Consequently, the number of commune/village elementary schools decreased gradually, from more than 1,500 schools in 1917 to about 750 schools in 1930. In 1932, the Ministry of National Education was established by the Nguyen Court. Governor-General Pierre Pasquier issued a decree dated 5 July 1933, launching a school reform in the central region and handing over the administration of primary schools to the Ministry of National Education. Thus, commune/village schools were administered by commune/village authorities again and the School Fund was abrogated. In 1940, the government of the region promulgated a new policy to include commune/village schools in the system of public elementary schools under the administration of departments of education and provincial governments. In 1941 and 1942, however, it was stipulated that commune/village schools were run by commune/village authorities again. In 1944, the number of commune/village public schools was more than 1,900, while the

corresponding figure of private schools was 950, of which 855 ones were non-religious.

Over a long period with many changes in educational policies, commune/village schools always played a significant role in the educational system in Central Vietnam. Village teachers accounted for a majority, making up almost half of all teachers. However, they always suffered from injustice in terms of wages, working conditions, and treatment.

In conclusion, commune/village schools showed the contradictions in the educational policy of the French colonial government in the central region particularly and Vietnam generally. On the one hand, people had opportunity to absorb a new educational system with methodical, systematic, scientific and diversified school curricula. Also owing to the commune/village schools, *quốc ngữ* was popularised widely in the region. On the other hand, inadequacies can be seen in the management of schools during the period. Although local people contributed money towards running the schools, the government made interventions in the teacher appointment, wage payment, school budgets and curricula. In many provinces, local authorities even used the education budget for other activities, cutting the funding for building schools and paying teachers. Due to the financial shortage, many schools were left in poor conditions and teachers were neglected by the government. As reported in the press at that time, people did not feel satisfied with the educational system, to which they had tried their best to contribute in the hope of enhancing educational quality on their native soil.

Notes

¹ The paper was published in Vietnamese in: *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử*, số 2, 2020, and developed into this English version. Translator: Nguyen Tuan Sinh. Language editor: Etienne Mahler.

² According to a report of Governor General Pau Beau, there had been French - Vietnamese schools in Thanh Hoa and Vinh Provinces since 1899 [19, pp. 279-280]. However, there are not any records of those schools available at the moment.

³ In 1913, there were 12 provinces in the central region, but Kontum Province was not included in the table. From February 1913 to 1921, Phu Yen Province was called Song Cau Delegation under the administration of Binh Dinh Province. In October 1921, it was renamed Phu Yen Province. Meanwhile, Ninh Thuan was called Phan Rang Delegation under the administration of Khanh Hoa Province. Since 1922, it was named Ninh Thuan Province.

⁴ The French - Vietnamese educational system consisted of the following levels of education according to the bottom-up order: (1) Elementary level (commune-run schools, State-run elementary schools, the elementary grades of the full primary schools); (2) Primary level (full primary schools); and (3) Senior primary schools (Hue National School, Dong Khanh School, Vinh School founded in 1920, Quy Nhon School founded in 1921), and vocational training schools such as Hue Training College.

⁵ In the administrative system of the French colonial government, a village and a commune were used the same to show the smallest administrative division.

⁶ In some documents, it is called Fund of School Fees, but it is herein called School Fund.

⁷ According to the Seventh Section of the Principal Veritable Records of the Great [Country in the] South (*Đại Nam thực lục chính biên Đệ thất kỷ*), the primary school consisted of five following grades

according to the bottom-up order: Fifth Grade, Fourth Grade, Third Grade, Second Grade, and First Grade. Commune/village elementary schools consisted of Fifth and Forth Grades; see [5, p.241]. According to the French names of the grades, the commune/village schools consisted of “*Enfantin*” (Infant) and “*Préparatoire*” (Preparatory) grades and were generally called “preparatory schools”.

⁸ In the central region’s budget, there was an account named “School Fund” - the Revenue contributed by communes/villages to the running costs of commune/village schools (*recettes sur fonds de concours - contribution des villages dans les dépenses de fonctionnement des écoles communales*).

⁹ Article 70 of the Educational Regulations stipulated that teachers at commune/village schools were appointed by the government according to the proposal from the Service of Education. Article 71 stipulated that wages of teachers were paid by the jurisdictional institutions. The Resolution promulgated in 1927 empowered communes/villages in Central Vietnam to administer commune/village schools, including the payment of wages for teachers.

¹⁰ Before 1919, the interprovincial exam (*thi Hương*) consisted of four rounds. Those, who passed the first and the second rounds but failed the third one, were called “first/second round candidates”. If having the command of the Vietnamese national script, they would be appointed village teachers.

¹¹ The training courses of teachers were held in Phu Dien, Hue, and Quy Nhon. After the 6-month training courses, students were provided with teaching certificates.

¹² Since 1925, the Certificate of Elementary Studies was granted to those, who completed three first grades at the elementary school. They had to take all exams in Vietnamese national script, while the French exam was optional.

¹³ The Certificate of French - Vietnamese Primary Studies had been granted in the central region since 1907.

¹⁴ Aimed at classifying further between the education for the elite and that for the masses, in 1924, the French colonial government made a revision to the Educational Regulation. Article 135 of the Regulation was revised as follows: “The certificate of elementary studies is applied”. Article 136 stipulated that “it was obligatory to have a certificate of elementary studies before applying for a French – Vietnamese primary certificate”. To get a certificate of elementary studies, students had to pass all exams in their native language, while the French exam was optional. Village schools just consisted of three grades, including: Infant, Preparatory, and Elementary. It is, therefore, unnecessary for students to learn French language, when they want to get a certificate of elementary studies.

¹⁵ In Northern and Central Vietnam, lessons on Chinese characters were taught on Thursday at all primary schools.

¹⁶ Second grade was called “*moyen*” (middle). According to the names used by local people to call grades at the primary school, the fifth meant the infant grade (*enfantin*); the fourth meant the preparatory (*préparatoire*) grade; the third meant the elementary grade (*élémentaire*); the second meant the middle grade (*moyen*) (since 1927, the second grade was divided into the junior and the senior); and, the first meant the senior primary grade (*supérieure*).

¹⁷ Pellerin School in Hue was a senior primary school.

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