ASI Asia Social Issues ASIA SOCIAL ISSUES 2026; 19(4): 287787
https://doi.org/10.48048/asi.2026.287787 RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Development of Confucianism in Vietnam in the First Half of the 20th Century: The Case of Ngô Tất Tố

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Received: 24 August 2025, Revised: 22 October 2025, Accepted: 6 November 2025, Published: 17 November 2025

Abstract

Among the cultural and intellectual figures of the first half of the 20th century, Ngô Tất Tố is regarded as one who received a fundamental training in the classical Chinese educational system, a system that had shaped knowledge and learning in Vietnamese society for more than a thousand years. In the context of the decline of classical Chinese studies, Ngô Tất Tố rose above the limits of that tradition to become not only one of the leading representatives of the Confucian literati in the era of modern journalism but also a writer who quickly adapted and firmly established his position among the progressive authors of his time. His career extended across diverse genres, ranging from journalism to philosophy, and he produced significant works that contributed to both the shaping of his intellectual identity and the modernisation of Vietnamese Confucianism. The objective of this study is to clarify the academic value and contributions of Ngô Tất Tố to the research, application, and development of Confucianism in the context of Vietnam through his literary works and books on cultural and artistic criticism. The contribution of this study is: i) a comprehensive assessment of Ngô Tất Tố's thoughts and academic values on the research and development of Confucianism in Vietnam; ii) opening up a direction for in-depth research on similar scholars who have made discoveries and conducted research applying the ideas of major religions and philosophies of the world to the Vietnamese context.

Keywords: Classical Chinese studies, Confucianism, Characteristics of Vietnamese confucianism, Legacy of Ngô Tất Tố

Introduction

When Confucianism was introduced into Vietnam, it developed its own unique nuances. In particular, Confucianism in Vietnam exhibited differences in each historical period, closely linked to the political, economic, cultural, and social context. In each period, Vietnamese Confucianism had its own nuances and new characteristics thanks to talented and outstanding scholars. Thus, the study of Vietnamese Confucianism in general, and Vietnamese Confucianism through historical periods in particular, needs to focus on these outstanding scholars. They are the ones who led and developed Confucian thought in contemporary society, helping Vietnamese Confucianism to continuously evolve and acquire unique traits in each specific historical context. This study focuses on the legacy of Ngô Tất Tố, as a Confucian scholar and a prominent figure in the research and development of Confucian thought in Vietnam in the first half of the 20th century.

Ngô Tất Tố was born in 1894 in Lộc Hà village, Hội Phụ canton, Từ Sơn prefecture, Bắc Ninh province. Lộc Hà had long been a land of scholarly tradition. Within the Ngô family itself, there were already two men who had passed the *cử nhân* (bachelor's examination), Ngô Văn Bình and Ngô Ngọc Liên. According to the cultural customs of Vietnamese villages in earlier times, only those who achieved scholarly success or possessed wealth could hope to claim a seat of honour in the communal house. For this

reason, Ngô Tất Tố's grandfather devoted himself to years of study, labouring through seven provincial examinations (*thi hương*), yet in the end attaining only the degree of tú tài (licentiate). His father also made six attempts in the examination halls (*lều chõng*), but failed each time and eventually returned to the life of a village teacher (*ông đồ*). As for Ngô Tất Tố, though gifted in learning, he twice sat for the examinations but never advanced to the third tier (*tam trường*). At the age of twenty-two, however, in a final qualifying examination held in Bắc Ninh, he achieved first place. From then on, he was commonly called đầu xứ Tố.

With a life that spanned sixty years (1894 -1954), coming from the Old Learning (*Cựu học*) without any training in the New Learning (*Tân học*) schools, Ngô Tất Tố, through extraordinary intellectual labour and remarkable productivity, left behind a vast intellectual legacy of nearly fifteen hundred works across multiple genres. This constituted a living museum vividly reflecting various aspects of contemporary social life, embodying profound messages, declarations, and anticipations on questions of national and epochal significance.

Later, a number of scholars, writers, and journalists, in various contexts, often referred to Ngô Tất Tố as the last Confucian; Ngô Tất Tố as a Confucian scholar in traditional garb with gauze tunic and turban; Ngô Tất Tố as a profound Confucian thinker, with the intent of praising his intellectual transformations. Alongside these appreciations, however, appeared some inaccurate tendencies that overstated certain traits of the *ông đồ* (Confucian village teacher), leading to an image of the writer Ngô Tất Tố, author of *Lều chõng* (The Mat and the Tent), as a late Confucian scholar with hair in a topknot, turban, and long gown holding a steel pen.

Ngô Tất Tố may be called a Confucian in quotation marks because he indeed possessed a high level of *Hán học* (classical Chinese learning) compared with later colleagues who worked alongside him in journalism. Clearly, Ngô Tất Tố emerged from a Confucian background, yet it would be mistaken to take a brief period of learning in Confucian letters as grounds for portraying him as a Confucian teacher still entangled in obsolete constraints and outdated ambitions.

The main questions are: How did Ngô Tất Tố contribute to the development of Confucianism in Vietnam during the first half of the 20th century? How did notable contemporary scholars evaluate Ngô Tất Tố? In what ways do his works reflect new elements of Vietnamese Confucianism? Which of his writings are regarded as most significant in illustrating his thought on the evolution of Confucianism in Vietnam during this period? These are the central issues that this study seeks to address. It should be emphasised that the study of Confucianism in Vietnam has long attracted scholarly attention and research. However, studies that concentrate on individual eminent scholars to assess their leading roles within specific historical contexts remain a research gap that warrants further inquiry. Therefore, a focused examination of Ngô Tất Tố's intellectual legacy constitutes both an important contribution and a central objective in current and future academic research. The following sections will analyse these aspects in greater depth.

Literature review

Research on Vietnamese Confucianism (*Nho giáo*) and on Ngô Tất Tố has been addressed in both Vietnamese and international scholarship for several decades.

The study of Ngô Tất Tố's Confucian learning (*Nho học*) in particular must be situated within the broader context of research on Vietnamese Confucianism, especially in relation to the evaluations of specialist scholars in this field both inside and outside Vietnam.

According to Kelley, one of the world's leading scholars in the study of Vietnamese history as well as pre-modern Vietnamese Confucianism, scholars have not yet fully recognised the role of Confucianism in Vietnam's past, and important research still needs to be conducted. He arrived at this conclusion by testing the findings of his study against primary sources and parallel scholarship on China (Kelley, 2006, p. 314 - 370). In this regard, Vietnamese Confucianism, as studied through representative Confucian literati of the modern transitional era, may serve as a crucial research direction for clarifying the essential character of Confucianism in Vietnamese history.

Confucianism effectively ended its dominant position after 1919, when it gave way to other intellectual currents introduced into the country. Whitmore argues that Confucianism had been present in Vietnam for two millennia, but Vietnam did not

embrace Confucianism until the beginning of the modern period. Across successive stages, each containing elements of its predecessors, Vietnamese Confucian scholars learnt from their Chinese counterparts while maintaining independence, pragmatism, and political orientation in their approach. Whitmore also notes that a direct engagement with the *Ngũ kinh* (Five Classics) often attracted the attention of Confucian literati more than the study of the commentaries of Zhu Xi (*Đạo Tiết*). Unlike other East Asian contexts, Vietnamese Confucian scholars appeared less interested in philosophical debate until the eighteenth century. Significantly, Whitmore observes that the "Western assault" in the 20th century generated renewed interest in Confucian philosophy, and modern Vietnam witnessed the adaptation of Confucian thought to its circumstances. Confucian beliefs and practices today continue to guide ancestral rituals, are applied to contemporary issues, shape a broad cultural dimension within Vietnamese society, engage with the affairs of the state, and bring modernity into their present forms of expression (Whitmore, 2023).

As a scholar deeply committed to the study of Confucianism (*Nho giáo*) in Vietnam, in another work, Whitmore argues that we must set aside the image of Vietnam as simply mirroring China and its patriarchal order. Writings on Vietnam have often portrayed the country as shaped by its northern neighbour during the "one thousand years of Chinese domination" in the first millennium CE, to the extent that everything Vietnamese was to be interpreted through a Chinese lens, and even specifically through Confucian categories. Socially, this implied male dominance and paternal authority, patrilineal inheritance, and clan organisation, that is, a certain rigidity in social structure (Whitmore, 1984, p. 296–306).

From a different perspective on Confucianism in Vietnam, Vu and Yamada examine the influence of Confucianism on gender inequality. They use the number (or density) of those who passed the highest levels of the civil service examinations (*khoa cử*) in Vietnam (1075 -1919) within a given district as a measure of Confucian proficiency. Employing an instrumental variable method based on Vietnam's territorial expansion in history and the distance to examination sites, Vu and Yamada investigate the impact of Confucianism on labour outcomes, health, and education of women in comparison to men. Their findings suggest that Confucianism exerted a long-term negative effect on gender inequality across all dimensions considered. Yet, the results also reveal that when women today pursue more years of schooling, they tend to achieve better outcomes than men (Vu and Yamada, 2024, p. 165 - 184).

In studying Confucianism from a cultural perspective, Hieu emphasises that throughout its 1,900 years of transmission in Vietnam, especially during the Later Lê dynasty (Hậu Lê, 1428 - 1527) and the Early Nguyễn dynasty (Sơ kỳ Nguyễn, 1802 - 1883), Confucianism exerted powerful influences on Vietnamese culture. Confucianism primarily affected the upper strata of society, yet it never deeply took root among the lower classes. In the sphere of spiritual culture, Confucianism contributed to the formation of an official culture alongside popular culture, closely tied to national consciousness and forming the nucleus of national culture. It shaped the spiritual culture of medieval Vietnam under the weight of Chinese cultural influence, while at the same time restraining and negatively affecting Vietnam's traditional culture, both spiritual and material. The more Confucianism was esteemed, the weaker Vietnam became, and the more stagnant its culture grew. Ultimately, Confucianism proved powerless and declined as the nation faced the loss of sovereignty at the end of the nineteenth century (Hieu, 2015, p. 71 - 82).

Research on Vietnamese Confucianism (*Nho giáo*) by modern scholars has also yielded important theoretical reflections, especially in the field of education. Tho argues that in the modern context, marked by profound transformations in every dimension, the demand to build a humanistic education that is both suitable and effective urges people to reflect, debate, and search for an educational model that can inherit the traditions of the past, remain connected to present conditions, and secure all three aims of education: knowledge, skills, and attitude, that is, intellect, talent, and virtue. From the perspective of the cultural history of education in Vietnam, Tho analyses the Confucian cultural traits of the country and their influence on the tradition of humanistic education, considering this both as a foundation and as a source of motivation for discussing the factors that may shape the

development of a modern and effective Vietnamese education (Tho, 2016, p. 645 - 671).

Another important perspective is presented by Nguyen and colleagues, who identify the presence of Confucian educational thought in the context of the ongoing educational reforms in Vietnam. They examine how the foundational principles of Confucianism, particularly those concerning moral cultivation, pedagogical methods, and the role of the learner, can be adapted to the aims of modern education. Nguyen and colleagues show that Confucian values such as *nhân* (benevolence), *lễ* (ritual propriety), and exemplary moral conduct continue to provide meaningful frameworks for fostering moral development and civic responsibility. Pedagogical techniques such as self-reflective questioning, modelling, and case-based teaching remain consistent with modern objectives such as critical thinking and learner autonomy. Although certain criticisms point to the limitations of Confucian hierarchical structures or its incomplete scientific orientation, this study also draws on existing research indicating that Confucian education, especially in East Asia, is positively associated with the cultivation of students' creativity and critical reasoning. Nguyen and colleagues conclude that a critically integrated approach may assist Vietnam in developing an educational system that is culturally grounded, morally resilient, and globally competitive (Nguyen et al., 2025, p. 70).

In the study of Confucianism in Vietnam generally, and in research on Ngô Tất Tố specifically, Phan Cự Đệ in his work Ngô Tất Tố offered a profound assessment of Ngô Tất Tố's Confucian studies and described him as a Confucian who was irreverent toward Confucius. From works such as the novel *The Mat and the Tent (Lều chõng)*, the historical tale *In the Forest of Confucians (Trong rừng nho)*, and later writings such as *Critique of Confucianism by Trần Trọng Kim, Mozi (Mặc Tử), Laozi (Lão Tử),* and *The Book of Changes (Kinh Dịch)*, Phan Cự Đệ argued that although Ngô Tất Tố did not yet develop a scientific framework for Confucian studies, he was not one who blindly restored or one-sidedly exalted Confucianism. According to Phan Cự Đệ, from 1938 onwards, Ngô Tất Tố wrote many essays related to Confucianism, and this direction of his work was strongly influenced by Lu Xun (*Lỗ Tấn*). Therefore, in his words: "Although a disciple of Confucius and Mencius, like Lu Xun, Ngô Tất Tố at many points directly criticised the doctrines of the Confucian masters and displayed an 'irreverent' attitude toward Confucius himself" (Ngo, 1996: 11). For instance, Confucius was himself fond of official positions, and as Zhuangzi (*Trang Tử*) said, Confucius carried his Way to seventy-two lords, with the tracks of his horses and the dust of his chariots spread across the states, yet in the end his teaching was not accepted. In extremity, when two rebel generals of the state of Lu, his own native land, invited him to join their rebellion, he was prepared to go with them. This, according to Phan Cự Đệ, fit perfectly with the Confucian concept of adaptability to circumstances (*tuỳ thời*). He also noted that when *Confucianism (Nho giáo)* by Trần Trọng Kim was published in the spirit of restoration, exalting Confucius and Confucianism in line with the ruling elite, the scholar Phan Khôi at the time praised it unreservedly and advised all Annamites to burn incense before reading it. Ngô Tất Tố, however, maintained that the work contained many flaws and warned that without serious revision it would become "Trần Trọng Kim-ism" rather than Confucianism itself. Another point emphasised by Phan Cự Đệ is that although Ngô Tất Tố's writings contained valuable textual and methodological insights, he "did not yet study in a comprehensive and systematic way the fundamental issues of Confucianism" (Ngo, 1996, p. 13). In his view, Ngô Tất Tố's critiques were directed not only at Confucian political and ritual doctrines, like other modern literati, but also at *The Book of Changes (Kinh Dịch)*, which he particularly focused on, yet he did not accept the sanctifying attitude of some contemporary Confucians, including the celebratory view of the eminent Confucian scholar Phan Bội Châu. In 1944 Ngô Tất Tố published his edition of The Book of Changes, but Phan Cự Đệ argued that without modern scholarly methods Ngô Tất Tố could not study it on a scientific basis. Furthermore, when addressing the two novels on Confucian themes, *The Mat and the Tent (Lều chõng)* and *In the Forest of Confucians (Trong rừng nho)*, unlike *The Ink Brush (Bút nghiên)* by Chu Thiên which romanticised the examination system, Ngô Tất Tố revealed the backward and decayed nature of the Confucian examinations and directly criticised some of the vices of the literati of his time.

In their study, Cao Đắc Điểm and Ngô Thị Thanh Lịch (2014) pointed out the influence of the classical

Chinese educational system (*Hán học*) on Ngô Tất Tố. According to these authors, in his childhood, as he recounted in the essay *My Teacher (Thầy học của tôi)* published in the journal *Thời vụ* in 1938, his teacher was a Confucian village scholar (*thầy đồ*) from Nghệ, who had taught in the village for many years and was loved by the people. Whenever villagers faced difficulties, they came to consult him. Thus, a humble Confucian teacher, without authority or power, through words and the meaning of books, could win people's trust and become an adviser for everyone in the village. Even matters of village administration were referred to him by the elders and notables, so his role in preserving and reforming local customs was far from insignificant.

It is also noteworthy that in the novel *The Mat and the Tent (Lều chõng)*, Ngô Tất Tố described the books that children of his time had to study, and one study has observed: "First primers were the *Three Character Classic (Tam tự kinh)*, then *Introduction to Elementary Learning (Sơ học vấn tân)*, followed by *Family Instructions on Enlightening the Way (Minh đạo gia huấn)*, then the *Five-Character Poems for Elementary Learning (Ấu học ngũ ngôn thi)*, next the *Classic of Filial Piety (Hiếu kinh)*, and after that, the *Analects (Luận ngữ)* in the original text. At the age of ten, children began the *Book of Rites (Kinh lễ)*, but only two chapters… each day they copied one sheet of calligraphy and memorised several poems from the *Tang Poetry Anthology (Đường thi)*" (Cao, 2014, p. 40). When older, students entered the main curriculum of the *Classics* and *Commentaries*. The *Classics* comprised the *Five Classics (Ngũ kinh)*: *Book of Songs (Thi)*, *Book of Documents (Thư)*, *Book of Changes (Dịch)*, *Book of Rites (Lễ)*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals (Xuân Thu)*. The *Commentaries* comprised the *Four Books (Tứ thư)*: *Analects (Luận ngữ)*, *Mencius (Mạnh Tử)*, *Great Learning (Đại học)*, and *Doctrine of the Mean (Trung dung)*. This body of around twenty works formed the basic curriculum, summarising and explaining the essential doctrines of Confucianism. From childhood to adulthood, this Confucian scholastic education deeply shaped Ngô Tất Tố's outlook and way of life. Like all youths who pursued the "Gate of Confucius and Court of Cheng" (*Cửa Khổng sân Trình*) and took the provincial examinations (*thi Hương*), he spent many years as a young man studying in boarding schools throughout the regions of Kinh Bắc and Thăng Long. He had to discipline himself rigorously to attain an advanced level of classical Chinese learning so that he might compete in the talent selection examinations of the Confucian feudal system. As he himself recalled: "From the age of six until after twenty, immersed in the shackles of examination literature, I had grown entirely accustomed to it" (Cao, 2014, p. 49). In an interview with Thiết Can, a reporter for *The Bee (Con Ong)*, Ngô Tất Tố explained: "Although weary of the examination path, I still had to go on with it. For if I did not, my father would say, why study at all? After years of hardship in the schools, by the examination of Ất Mão, the last one, I failed. When the classical examinations were abolished, I then considered the path of becoming a teacher" (Cao, 2014, p. 49).

Quite different from the generations before him, under the colonial administration, candidates for the provincial examination (*thi Hương*) were required to sit not only for tests in classical Chinese but also in quốc ngữ and French. This forced Ngô Tất Tố once again to begin from the basics, this time with quốc ngữ, and also to study French. He later recalled: "At that time, in 1907 or 1908, I do not remember exactly, I only know that starting from the Kỷ Dậu examination session and for the following two years, there was an order issued by the government that beginning with the Kỷ Dậu session, in addition to classical Chinese, there would be an examination in quốc ngữ. Therefore, like many of my contemporaries, I also learned quốc ngữ. That was a compulsory condition" (Cao, 2014, p. 51). According to Ngô Tất Tố, if the Nôm script could be regarded as quốc ngữ, then he had already been writing it for nearly thirty years. The reason he began writing in quốc ngữ prose was linked to the influence of the anti-examination movement initiated by the Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục.

The echoes of examination reform, from the stage when candidates were required to compose in quốc ngữ and French voluntarily to when it became official, shook the lives of tens of thousands of literati pursuing the Old Learning (*Cựu học*) across the country. What followed was the dramatic decision to abolish the Confucian examinations altogether, first in Cochinchina – an event like thunder and lightning that shattered the Confucian world throughout the nation and left the literati disoriented at a crossroads, lost in a tragically new age. As a direct victim of the collapse of the Confucian scholastic system, Ngô Tất Tố was no exception.

Although he came late to quốc ngữ, only a short time after serving as a Confucian teacher (*thầy đồ, anh Khoá*), he firmly set his course for life, seizing the steel pen to embark decisively on a career in the world of the New Literature (*Tân văn*).

In addition, there are studies by other authors which, when referring to Ngô Tất Tố in relation to Confucianism (*Nho giáo*), appear in scattered remarks made while evaluating his works and tend to consider him a new-style Confucian (*tân nho*). For instance, Vũ Trọng Phụng wrote: "Ngô Tất Tố is a journalist of the Confucian school and an outstanding voice among the Confucian literati. He stands on the same level as Phan Khôi… Unlike the majority of Confucian-trained journalists who, as they grow older, inevitably wither, dull, and write poorly, producing work that is often clumsy and only occasionally readable, Ngô Tất Tố seems to gain vitality, even when entering the domain of the novel, which many may think is not his proper field since it belongs to the younger generation trained in French learning" (Ngo, 1996, p. 485). Commenting on the famous novel *When the Light is Out (Tắt đèn)* by Ngô Tất Tố, Vũ Trọng Phụng also gave a profound evaluation: "The author of *When the Light is Out*, although possessing only Confucian learning, is by no means inferior to writers of Western learning because he devoted himself to further study, and since the Western world was by no means closed to Confucian literati, Ngô Tất Tố was able to read Maxim Gorky through Chinese translations. Thus, *When the Light is Out* may rightly be considered a worthy reward for such a diligent seeker of knowledge" (Ngo, 1996, p. 487).

From this literature review, we see that the study of Ngô Tất Tố must be placed within the flow of Vietnamese Confucianism. Up to now, no scholar has undertaken an in-depth study of his writings on Confucianism. For that reason, we take as our subject Ngô Tất Tố's thought on Confucianism with the aim of clarifying two questions: *first*, his reflections on the nature of Confucianism; *second*, his development of Confucianism within Vietnamese practice, while also discussing his contributions to Vietnamese Confucianism.

Methodology

This study uses an interdisciplinary approach, combining philosophy with history and cultural studies. When applying an interdisciplinary approach between philosophy and history, the research results highlight the outstanding contributions of Ngô Tất Tố to the development of Confucian thought in Vietnam during the modern period, particularly the first half of the 20th century. The study analyses the relationship between Ngô Tất Tố's Confucian thought and his works, which are closely linked to the contemporary historical period. Furthermore, through the interdisciplinary approach between philosophy and cultural studies, this study emphasizes the modern elements in Ngô Tất Tố's works and creations, revealing the connection between traditional Confucian thought and the transformations of contemporary Vietnamese cultural life. At the same time, the interdisciplinary approach between philosophy and art studies elucidates the relationship between Confucian thought and contemporary literary language, affirming Ngô Tất Tố's talent and contributions in applying and expressing Confucian thought in his works. Thus, this interdisciplinary approach helps the study to analyse and clarify the outstanding contributions of Ngô Tất Tố in applying and developing Confucianism in the context of contemporary Vietnam – values that he left for later scholars to inherit and continue.

Results and discussion

Ngô Tất Tố on the nature of confucianism

The issues that Ngô Tất Tố addressed in his studies of Confucianism, in our view, may be grouped around the following content.

First, it is necessary to mention the cosmology (*vũ trụ quan*) of Confucianism. According to the traditional perspective of the East, ontology and epistemology were often linked rather than separated, as in Western philosophy. Through his translations of Confucian classics, and in particular in his study of *The Book of Changes (Kinh Dịch)*, Ngô Tất Tố also affirmed the provenance of the text he translated: "…the original text for this translation is the *Complete Zhou Changes (Chu Dịch đại toàn)* of Hồ Quảng and Kim Âu Tư, composed at the command of the Ming emperor Chengzu. Its contents gathered nearly all the earlier commentaries of the Confucian scholars. Among the editions of The Book of Changes circulated up to now, this one is the most complete. What is noteworthy is that in the *Complete Zhou Changes*, the compilers made the *Two*

Commentaries on the Changes (Dịch truyện) of Cheng Yi (*Trình Di*) and the *Original Meaning of the Zhou Changes (Chu Dịch bản nghĩa)* of Zhu Xi (*Chu Hy*) the central texts, while the commentaries of other scholars were treated as supplementary. Cheng and Zhu were the leading figures of Song Confucianism, but their interpretations were not without dogmatism and arbitrariness. Thus, when the text is called complete, this refers to its quantity, not to its quality. In other words, it is a thick book, not necessarily a book of truly correct interpretation. Yet what is correct, and what is not? Regarding the original text of *The Book of Changes*, such questions may remain unsolved even until the extinction of humankind. Hence, for acquiring a broad knowledge of *The Book of Changes*, it is preferable to read the *Complete Zhou Changes*. That is why the translator chose this edition as the basis for translation" (Ngo, 2024, p. 11).

From this, we may conclude that the Confucianism Ngô Tất Tố discussed, when considered in terms of its most essential content, namely cosmology, drew on Song Confucianism (960 -1279) and subsequently on Ming Confucianism (1368–1644), rather than on the original Confucianism of Confucius himself in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States period (771- 467 BCE in Chinese history).

In his research on the *Book of Changes*, Ngô Tất Tố maintained that the work, according to historical records, was completed in the Spring and Autumn–Warring States era. The *Changes* or *Zhou Changes* (*Chu Dịch*) consists of two parts, the Classic (*Kinh*) and the Commentaries (*truyện*), that is, the *Classic of Changes* (*Dịch kinh*) and the *Commentaries on the Changes* (*Dịch truyện*). The *Classic of Changes* is a manual of divination made up of three parts: hexagrams (*quái*), judgments on the hexagrams (*quái từ*), and judgments on the lines (*hào từ*). The *Commentaries on the Changes* is a philosophical work of ten treatises, known as the Ten Wings (*Thập dực*), among which the "Appended Remarks" (*Hệ từ*) is the most substantial. The fundamental ideas of the philosophy of the *Changes* are contained in the eight trigrams (*bát quái*), which grew out of experience and the practical observations of early human beings from the earliest stages of existence up to the time when people learned to domesticate animals and eat cooked food.

Ngô Tất Tố also observed that in the research of Guo Moruo (Quách Mạt Nhược), the thought of the *Classic of Changes* (*Dịch kinh*), as set forth in his essay *Research on Ancient Chinese Society* written in 1917, corresponded to the middle and late stages of the barbaric era, that is, the period when human society was transitioning from the primitive community to the slave-owning system. In the Shang dynasty, within slave society, from the struggle of the new social force, the Zhou people, against the domination of the slave-owning aristocracy, there emerged a new current of thought that resisted the theocratic ideology of the slaveholders. Thus, the idea of the eight trigrams (bát quái) appeared as a form of primitive dialectical materialism of the ancients. Yet, the materialist consciousness of the oppressed could not but be influenced by the ideology of the ruling class and took on a character of sacralisation. The Shang slaveholders appropriated it, transformed it, and used the hexagrams for divination, thereby turning the thought of the eight trigrams in the *Book of Changes* into mysticism.

The *Commentaries on the Changes* (*Dịch truyện*) appeared at the time when Zhou feudal society was undergoing a revolution from a decentralised feudal order to a centralised one. Consequently, the *Commentaries* also contained dialectical thought. However, as the newly risen ruling class sought to preserve its power, it gradually shifted from a dynamic cosmology to a static one, from a primitive dialectical outlook to a mechanical and metaphysical one.

Drawing on traditional accounts, Ngô Tất Tố held that Confucius himself composed the Ten Wings (*Thập dực*). In his translation, he explained that according to the record of Confucian learning from the Han to the Ming, the *Book of Changes* was said to have originated in the age of King Fuxi (*Phục Hy*). By the end of the Shang, the *Book of Changes* still consisted only of continuous and broken lines, without names or written explanations. At the beginning of the Zhou, King Wen (*Văn Vương*) gave each hexagram a name and composed attached judgments that spoke of the auspicious or inauspicious character of the whole hexagram. Afterwards, Jidan (*Cơ Đán*), known as the Duke of Zhou (*Chu Công*), the second son of King Wen, divided the lines of the hexagrams into six parts, each called a line judgment (*hào từ*), and under each line he added one or several explanatory sentences. Later: "… Confucius

then composed six additional treatises, namely the *Commentary on the Judgments* (*Thoán truyện*), *Words on the Text* (*Văn ngôn*), *Commentary on the Appended Remarks* (*Hệ từ truyện*), *Discussion of the Trigrams* (*Thuyết quái*), *Order of the Hexagrams* (*Tự quái*), and *Miscellaneous Notes on the Hexagrams* (*Tạp quái*). The *Commentary on the Judgments* had two sections: Upper and Lower; the *Commentary on the Images* (*Tượng truyện*) had two sections: Upper and Lower; the *Commentary on the Appended Remarks* had two sections: Upper and Lower. Altogether there were ten treatises, which the ancient Confucian scholars called the 'Ten Wings' (*Thập dực*)" (Ngo, 2024, p. 6).

However, Chinese scholars such as Ouyang Xiu (*Âu Dương Tu*) of the Song dynasty and Guo Moruo (*Quách Mạt Nhược*), as well as Vietnamese researchers of ancient Eastern thought such as Cao Xuân Huy and Đào Duy Anh, rejected Ngô Tất Tố's interpretation. Cao Xuân Huy argued: "The *Commentaries on the Changes* (*Dịch truyện*) consist of many mixed ideas, but the prominent thought in the *Appended Remarks* (*Hệ từ*) is the philosophy of Lao-Zhuang, with the ontology and dialectics of Daoism" (Ngo, 1996, p. 22). Đào Duy Anh maintained: "The author of the Ten Wings (*Thập dực*), at the end of the Zhou dynasty, placed the ideas of Confucianism and Daoism after the hexagrams, the judgments on the hexagrams, and the judgments on the lines, combining the principles of the *Changes* (*Dịch lý*) with the Daoist concept of the Way (*Đạo*) of Laozi to expound cosmology, and combining the principles of the *Changes* with the Confucian concept of human relations of Confucius to expound social philosophy" (Ngo, 1996, p. 23). Thus we may see that Ngô Tất Tố's approach to Confucianism was neither complete nor scientific, being confined to a limited set of sources.

After Confucianism was established as orthodox, the ethical teachings of the *Zhou Changes* (*Chu Dịch*) were elevated. Yet the Confucian scholars, in their studies of the *Changes*, focused primarily on its ethical doctrines, while its cosmology was increasingly pushed into metaphysical and mystical speculation. For this reason, over more than two thousand years, there came to be hundreds of thousands of commentaries and treatises on the *Changes*, but their interpretations were confined to highly abstract notions such as the Supreme Ultimate (*Thái cực*), yin and yang (*âm dương*), heaven and earth (*càn khôn*), principle and material force (*lý khí*), fortune-telling (*tướng số*), and so forth. The more the study of the *Changes* developed, the further it descended into the path of idealism and metaphysics. When Ngô Tất Tố compiled his edition of the *Book of Changes*, he focused largely on the idealist and mystical elements, which shamans exploited for gain by making arbitrary predictions about auspiciousness and misfortune. Thus he remarked in the *Book of Changes*: "From ancient times until now, everyone has believed the *Book of Changes* to be a difficult work. This is indeed true. But its difficulty does not lie in profound meanings, only in a style of writing that is disconnected, abrupt, like the speech of shamans, without beginning or end, without coherence, and at times not even consistent with the rules of grammar. Therefore, very often a single sentence may bear several interpretations, and in the end one cannot say which is correct and which is wrong" (Ngo, 2024, p. 12).

Yet in the early 1940s, such a critical attitude in the study of the *Book of Changes* represented a certain progressive value. We also know that the eminent Confucian of the time, Phan Bội Châu, in his *National Vernacular Commentary on the Zhou Changes* (*Quốc Văn Chu Dịch diễn giải*), praised the *Changes* without reserve. Phan Bội Châu regarded it as "a cabinet of jade, a treasury of gold, a family inheritance handed down from the ancestors, which our forebears such as Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm and Đào Duy Từ had already made use of" (Ngo, 1996, p. 20).

Apart from presenting the Confucian cosmology (*vũ trụ quan*) through the *Book of Changes* (*Kinh Dịch*), Ngô Tất Tố also addressed this issue in other works. In his *Laozi and Mozi* (*Lão Tử và Mặc Tử*), published in 1942 by Mai Lĩnh Press, one can recognise the influence of the current known as "Three Teachings Sharing the Same Origin" (*Tam giáo đồng nguyên*), meaning Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, a characteristic tendency among Eastern Confucian scholars which shaped his thought. Ngô Tất Tố regarded philosophy as a medicine for societies striving to overcome injustice and corruption, and he argued that philosophers must seek out the root causes of such conditions. Because the cosmos is a chain of causes and effects, in order to reach the ultimate cause, philosophers were obliged to return to the very beginning of all things. In his words: "…every philosopher of antiquity had a particular theory about the universe. In the East, for example, those

who compiled the *Book of Changes* held that heaven and earth were created from the two elements, yin and yang; in Europe, Socrates and Plato attributed the establishment of the universe to God. For Laozi, the origin of the universe was the *Dao*, and to understand the *Dao* was to understand the universe, that is, to understand the laws of heaven and earth and the moral principles of life…" (Ngo, 2024, p. 41 - 42).

According to Ngô Tất Tố's explanation of the *Dao*, people have often interpreted it as a path, a way, a doctrine, or a moral principle. Laozi did not take the word in that sense. In order to clarify his philosophy as genuine and in harmony with reason, Laozi borrowed the word *Dao* to designate something entirely different. For him, the *Dao* was a real entity, though without form or image, the primordial source of heaven, earth, and the myriad things. Laozi explained it in these terms: "There is a being formed from the mixture of all; it was born before heaven and earth; it is empty and still, standing alone and unchanging; it flows everywhere without ceasing. It may be the mother of the universe. I do not know its name, but I must give it a character-name and call it *Dao*, and forcibly give it another name, Great" (Ngo, 2024, p. 43).

The *Dao* possesses three qualities: it cannot be seen, it cannot be heard, it cannot be grasped. Laozi gave them the names *yi* (*di*), *xi* (*hy*), and *wei* (*vi*). Since *yi*, *xi*, and *wei* cannot be separated or examined with precision, they must be treated as a unity. At this point, the cosmos appears as a tangled and intricate reality, impossible to define. Above is the *Dao*, mysterious and unseen, while below it can be observed with clarity. This reality then returns to the state of subtle being, which Laozi described as the formless form and the imageless image, that is, the indistinct. In Ngô Tất Tố's interpretation, this resembled the Greek word *chaos* used by Western philosophers to refer to the obscure and shapeless state before the existence of heaven and earth.

From this, Ngô Tất Tố affirmed: "The *Dao* of Laozi may be compared with the Monad of Leibniz. Both are one and the same substance of natural activity, but Laozi differs entirely from Leibniz in that he did not separate soul and matter into two distinct entities" (Ngo, 2024, p. 47).

In his study of Mozi (*Mặc Tử*), Ngô Tất Tố argued that unlike Confucius (*Khổng Tử*) and Laozi (*Lão Tử*), when speaking of cosmology, Mozi referred to Heaven (*thiên*). Heaven, in his thought, was a transcendent being endowed with authority, sacredness, and fairness, resembling the head of a family or the ruler of a state: "… All under Heaven belongs to the authority of Heaven, just as a household belongs to its patriarch, or a state belongs to its sovereign, therefore anyone who commits offence against Heaven cannot escape. Conversely, whoever renders service to Heaven will certainly be rewarded…" (Ngo, 2024, p. 67). For Mozi, Heaven thus served as the model for all human conduct. Whether kings, scholars, or commoners, everyone had to conform to this model. This was the essential element in Mozi's doctrine of Heaven.

Second, the next issue that Ngô Tất Tố addressed in relation to Confucianism (*Nho giáo*) is the question of morality and ethics. Although his point of departure was profoundly influenced by the Confucian educational system (*Nho học*), the historical circumstances of his era brought about significant changes in his understanding of morality and ethics. To begin with, we may consider his conception of the Confucian scholar as depicted in the novel *In the Forest of Confucians* (*Trong rừng nho*), where the character Thận Trung expresses a view of the Confucian scholar that differs from tradition. Thận Trung states: "I am only a man who knows letters and has read books, not a Confucian scholar. One must remember that among us students, some are Confucian scholars, and some are not. Generally, those who have read Confucian books, who then pretend to follow the Confucian Way, and whose disciples attain what they call mastery, may be called Confucian scholars. As for myself, I have read many kinds of books, the books of Laozi (*Lão*), of Zhuangzi (*Trang*), of the Tang, of Mozi (*Mặc*). As for the histories, I have read them all, not only the Confucian books. My actions sometimes resemble the Confucian Way, but at other times are entirely opposed to it, so why must one insist that I am a Confucian scholar?" (Ngo, 1996, p. 123).

Although Ngô Tất Tố articulated a stance denying the title of Confucian scholar for himself, this reveals a contradiction within his own thought. For in the final analysis, he was formed by the examination system, a fact that cannot be denied. His distinction between the Confucian scholar and the non-Confucian scholar carried only relative significance, shaped by the historical circumstances of his time. Later, in his studies

on Confucianism, Trần Đình Hượu pointed out that the very concept of the Confucian scholar in traditional Vietnamese society was never clearly defined: "In Vietnam, Chu Văn An, Nguyễn Trãi, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, Phan Bội Châu, are they Confucian scholars, or are Nguyễn Du, Trần Tế Xương, Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu also Confucian scholars? Are only those who passed the highest examinations such as the *Doctor of Letters (ông Nghè)* or the *Senior Scholar (ông Thám)* to be called Confucian scholars, or are the village teachers (*ông đồ*), often at the same time physicians, geomancers, and fortune-tellers, also Confucian scholars? Are only the loyal men such as Lý Trần Quán, the ministers of the Lê, to be called Confucian scholars, or also the Confucian loyalists of the *Aid the King Movement (Cần Vương)* in the late nineteenth century? Are the recluses such as Lý Tử Cấu, Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm, Nguyễn Thiếp, or even those who rebelled against the court such as Cao Bá Quát and Hoàng Phan Thái, Confucian scholars? Or do we also call Confucian scholars the military commander Trần Quốc Tuấn and the economist Nguyễn Công Trứ? Because the category of who is and who is not a Confucian scholar was never clearly defined, when one moves to discuss the positive and negative aspects of the Confucian tradition, opinions diverge greatly, depending to a considerable extent on subjective feelings and prejudices" (Tran, 2007, p. 54).

Moreover, as we have noted above, the Confucian scholar by tradition was expected to be versed in the doctrines of the Three Teachings (*Tam giáo*). Thus, in his discussion of morality and ethics, Ngô Tất Tố introduced distinct views when comparing the moral and ethical issues of Confucianism (*Nho giáo*) with those of Laozi (*Lão Tử*) and Mozi (*Mặc Tử*). According to Ngô Tất Tố, Laozi did not oppose morality, provided it was genuine and upright. On the contrary, Laozi strongly rejected the false morality of outward appearances such as conventional propriety, humaneness, righteousness, and ritual.

Therefore, Laozi employed the two words "Dao" and "De" (*Đạo* and *Đức*) to designate two fundamental principles in his philosophy, so that people might understand that his Way was the genuine Way. This genuine Way was the Way of nature, a Way of non-action that nonetheless achieves results. By contrast, the moral codes and ethical principles constructed by human society are false, and no matter how one strives to preserve them, they cannot endure. Ngô Tất Tố observed: "As much as Confucius esteemed ritual (*lễ*), Laozi despised it just as much, for according to Laozi, ritual is the decline of loyalty and faith and the starting point of disorder" (Ngo, 2024, p. 107).

From this perspective of Laozi, in the hierarchy of moral values in human life, the most precious is the Way (*đạo*), followed by virtue (*đức*), then benevolence (*nhân*) and righteousness (*nghĩa*), with ritual propriety (*lễ*) placed last. Thus, Laozi maintained: "When benevolence and righteousness are abandoned, the people will return to the genuine filial devotion of ancient times—'Reject benevolence and abandon righteousness, and the people will recover true filial piety and compassion'" (Ngo, 2024, p. 110).

In his discussion of the morality and ethics of Mozi (*Mặc Tử*), Ngô Tất Tố also highlighted their difference from those of Confucius. In the chapter *Gengzhu* (*Canh trụ*), it is said: "Duke Ye asked Zhongni about government, saying, How does one who governs skilfully act? Zhongni replied, One who governs skilfully brings people near and far together and makes the old and new flourish. Mozi heard this and said, Duke Ye Cao has not yet learned how to ask, and Zhongni has not yet learned how to answer. Does Duke Ye Cao not know that one who governs skilfully must bring people near and far together and make the old and new flourish? What he was asking was the method of doing so" (Ngo, 2024, p. 40). From this, Ngô Tất Tố concluded that this marks a fundamental distinction between the Confucians and the Mohists. Examining this point carefully, we can see that Confucius spoke only of an ideal purpose, whereas Mozi placed emphasis on the method of execution.

Therefore, the Confucians were inclined to set forth a lofty Ideal as the goal of human life. In political matters, for example: "The Confucians insist on saying that the king must be a king, the minister a minister, the father a father, the son a son, or that those nearby must rejoice, and those afar must be drawn near. These are ideal purposes, not methods of execution. Or in discussing the philosophy of human life, the Confucians only hang up a tablet demanding attainment of supreme goodness, without saying how one might reach that point. And when they speak of the specific entries on that tablet, they merely declare: to be a ruler, one must attain benevolence (*nhân*); to be a minister, one must

attain reverence (*kính*); to be a son, one must attain filial piety (*hiếu*); in association with others, one must attain trustworthiness (*tín*). They say nothing of why a son must be filial, why a minister must be reverent, why a ruler, a father, or a friend must be benevolent, kind, and trustworthy. In short, the discourse of the Confucians leans toward motives rather than results. They say one ought to act in such a way, but do not say why one ought to act in such a way" (Ngo, 2024, p. 42- 43).

Ngô Tất Tố and the development of confucianism in the Vietnamese context of praxis

From the issues in the study of Confucianism discussed above, Ngô Tất Tố spoke of the chaotic state of contemporary society and the predicament of the Confucian literati in that situation. In the preface to *The Mat and the Tent* (*Lều chõng*), he clearly stated the merits and faults of the feudal examination system: "It was precisely this system that made Vietnam a cultured nation, and it was also precisely this system that led Vietnam to the brink of extinction" (Ngo, 1996, p. 30).

The Mat and the Tent may be seen as a vivid and engaging journey against the flow of time, approaching and exploring a realm that bore decisive significance for the destiny of the nation in the historical museum of the distant past. The work illustrates in its entirety the process of advancement through the examination path of the scholar, describing in meticulous detail the modes of study and examination in former times, from the elementary level to the highest rank.

The socialisation of Confucian education (Nho học) was depicted by Ngô Tất Tố from the elementary schools to the Kính lạc văn phả, where renowned Confucian masters trained students in literary composition in preparation for the national examinations, the thi Hương. From the lamp-lit studies of the Confucian tradition, through the literary societies devoted to practice, to the examination halls themselves, an array of severe regulations compelled the entire educational system to comply without exception, even when many of these rules were recognised as absurd, for one was permitted only to bow and follow.

The particular achievement of *The Mat and the Tent* was its revelation of the tragedy of the Confucian literati, the intellectual class under the feudal order. The work shattered the illusions and longings for a life of splendour and glory cherished by the scholars of the past, leading them themselves into anguish, shame, weariness, and exhaustion with their precarious existence, and compelling even their families to abandon the extreme obsession with building marital happiness on examination honours, to return sincerely to ordinary life.

After the nightmares of the examination system, the spirit of *The Mat and the Tent* (*Lều chõng*) is embodied in Vân Hạc and his wife, who awaken, cast off all passion for examination glory, return to ordinary life, and find shared sympathy in the contemplative verses of the poet Nguyễn Công Trứ.

Although animated by a spirit of criticism towards Confucianism, which he believed had produced the grave maladies of contemporary Vietnamese society, Ngô Tất Tố did not reject it entirely or absolutely. The examination system had trained men without individuality or independence of thought, men who merely followed the books of the ancients, and in so doing compelled blind obedience to the hierarchical order of the feudal society. Yet Ngô Tất Tố, in the final analysis, still stood on the ground of a Confucian scholar whose position was closely connected with the common people. For this reason, in *The Mat and the Tent* (*Lều chõng*), he showed particular sympathy for the cultivated and elegant Confucian scholars. They were not concerned only with study as a path to advancement in the examinations, like Hải Âu, Vân Hạc, and Đốc Cung. The figure of Vân Hạc in *The Mat and the Tent*, like Đờm Thận Trung in *In the Forest of Confucians* (*Trong rừng nho*), was an image close to Ngô Tất Tố himself, the đầu xứ Tố. They were the type of talented Confucian literati who did not care for official honours, who would not bow and bend to seek titles and emoluments. They preferred to stand like a pine tree in the open sky, freely resounding, rather than bind themselves to the court as servile subjects with no sense of their place. From the perspective of this class of Confucian scholars who valued freedom and openness, combined with the influence of progressive and vigorous ideas from the working people, Ngô Tất Tố was able to recognise the backward and decayed nature of the feudal examination system and to voice an unflinching critique of certain negative aspects of the Confucian literati.

In his discussions of Confucianism, although he retained traces of antiquarian thought, Ngô Tất Tố did

not regard the Confucian studies of others with leniency. In particular, concerning the work *Confucianism* (*Nho giáo*) by Trần Trọng Kim, Ngô Tất Tố approached it with a method of interpretation considerably more progressive than that of many social science scholars of his time. Trần Trọng Kim was renowned for this book, and the critic Phan Khôi in his day praised it lavishly for its value and its contribution to preserving the cultural heritage of a nation with a thousand years of tradition. This reputation led Ngô Tất Tố, for a long time without reading it, to assume it was a worthy work. Yet when he did read it, his view changed entirely. He pointed out many serious errors made by Trần Trọng Kim in writing *Confucianism* and affirmed that even the judgement of Phan Khôi, a respected contemporary scholar, contained many limitations regarding Confucianism.

He went on to provide concrete examples to demonstrate his critique. When Duke Ai was infatuated with courtesans and neglected the affairs of state, Confucius intended to abandon his official post. Yet he did not do so immediately, for fear of exposing the ruler's indulgence in women. Confucius waited until the suburban sacrifice, when the ruler failed to share meat with the great officers, and only then seized upon this pretext to resign.

There was also an occasion when Confucius became acquainted with Duke Zhao. Duke Zhao had taken as his wife a woman from the state of Wu who belonged to the same clan. One day the Grand Minister of Sacrifices asked Confucius: Does Duke Zhao know ritual? Confucius replied that he did. The Grand Minister then said to others: I have heard that the gentleman has no faction. But now it seems the gentleman also has a faction. Duke Zhao took as his wife a woman of Wu who was of the same clan. If he can be said to know ritual, then who does not know ritual? The reason Confucius answered in this way was precisely because he himself recognised that Duke Zhao did not know ritual, yet as he was Confucius's sovereign, Confucius preferred to incur the fault of failing to judge a man correctly rather than openly point out the faults of his ruler.

From this, Ngô Tất Tố concluded: "Considering these accounts, one sees that the meaning of Confucius' loyalty to the ruler was loyalty to the personal figure of those who held imperial power, not merely loyalty to the abstract authority of the throne" (Ngo, 1996, p. 230).

On the question of Confucius's attitude toward the people, Ngô Tất Tố's evaluation was the same. The author of *Confucianism (Nho giáo)* had written that according to Confucius, the ruler must bear full responsibility for the people and must act according to their will: "If the ruler does anything contrary to the hearts of the people, that is contrary to the Mandate of Heaven. The ruler, although holding Heaven's authority, must still bear full responsibility toward the people. The people, although subject to rule, still retain the right to compel the ruler to act in accordance with the good" (Ngo, 1996, p. 230). Ngô Tất Tố rejected this claim, insisting that Confucius never had such a conception of the people's importance. In his view, Confucius exalted absolute monarchical power. The Confucian doctrine was the foundation of centralised monarchy. History itself had borne this out. Ngô Tất Tố wrote: "In the *Analects*, Confucius said: The people can be made to follow, but not made to understand. From this one sees that he was inclined toward autocratic politics and never considered the people to be Heaven" (Ngo, 1996, p. 230).

Trần Trọng Kim often employed his own commentary to extol and defend Confucianism in a rather overt way. For example, in one passage the author of *Confucianism (Nho giáo)* wrote: "…According to the opinion of Confucius, the myriad things in the universe transform themselves according to the principle of harmony… Confucius took this principle as the basis for establishing a philosophy of human life, that is, an ethic of morality that is gentle and harmonious, sufficient to make human beings possess a pleasant appearance, without fear or sorrow…" (Tran, 2017 p. 20). Trần Trọng Kim idealised Confucianism and argued that it could be applied in any era, always to good effect. The doctrine of Confucius was regarded as an eternal truth, perfectly good and perfectly beautiful: "…Therefore, to unite Confucianism with modern science, it does not seem contrary to the principles of Confucius and Mencius, for one must adapt to the times and transform accordingly…" (Tran, 2017, p. 24). Possessing progressive views, Ngô Tất Tố did not accept this tone. He held that the scholar must adopt an objective stance and not bring preconceived judgements. He sharply criticised the tendency of Trần Trọng Kim to exalt Confucianism: such criticism showed that the author always stood on subjective ground and could not rid

himself of prejudice. When comparing Confucianism with philosophies from antiquity to modern times, Trần Trọng Kim consistently affirmed the superiority of Confucian thought. He wrote: "At that time there were also men such as Parmenides and Zeno of the Eleatic school, who proclaimed a doctrine in opposition to the Ionian school… at the same time there was Pythagoras… toward the end of the fifth century before the Christian era, there was Socrates, who initiated a philosophy of human life… If one compares the principles of these schools in the West with the principles of Confucianism, one sees that Confucianism synthesises all the ideals mentioned above… the use of intuition in Confucianism corresponds in part with the philosophy of Henri Bergson, a renowned philosopher in France… the more one examines Bergson's philosophy, the more one perceives the profound insight of Confucianism" (Tran, 2017, p. 18).

Discussions

It may be emphasised that Ngô Tất Tố was one of the most representative figures of modern Vietnamese Confucian learning (Nho học). From his critique of Trần Trọng Kim's *Confucianism* (Nho giáo), we see his sharpness of mind and combative spirit, always ready to confront opposing views in scholarly debate. His reasoning was rigorous, and his stance was firm. For instance, when speaking of attitude in scientific research he wrote: "With a book that concerns the thought and learning of a nation, no one has the right to show deference to the author to the point of also deferring to the errors in the book, thereby misleading later generations" (Ngo, 1996, p. 232). From such an attitude, Ngô Tất Tố often criticised the author of *Confucianism* with severity. Perhaps this was the quality often possessed by the Confucian literati of the Old Learning (*cựu học*), and Ngô Tất Tố displayed it in the character of the Confucian ideal: *phú quý bất năng dâm, bần tiện bất năng di, uy vũ bất năng khuất* (wealth cannot corrupt, poverty cannot move, power cannot subdue).

If we place this work in its historical context, it is evident that it was a critical study of genuine value, for it exposed the unacceptable flaws in Trần Trọng Kim's writing on Confucianism. In this way, it played no small part in limiting the influence of the book *Confucianism*. Naturally, the influence of Trần Trọng Kim's *Confucianism* was a negative one, and to restrict its impact on contemporary society was both necessary and beneficial. What must also be recognised is that in his critique of Trần Trọng Kim's *Confucianism*, even though Ngô Tất Tố did not directly criticise Confucianism as a whole, he nevertheless revealed many of the limitations of its fundamental doctrines when measured against the tendencies of the modern age.

However, Ngô Tất Tố's approach in his critique of Trần Trọng Kim's *Confucianism* leads to two aspects that must be assessed with objectivity. On the one hand, to exalt Confucianism excessively, and on the other, to deny it excessively, both result in a partial view of the subject under study. What was still needed at that time was a more balanced perspective in research on Confucianism. We know that in those historical circumstances, the renowned scholar of the Old Learning (*Cựu học*), Phan Bội Châu, in his work *The Lamp of Confucian Studies* (*Khổng Học Đăng*), had already offered valuable studies of Confucianism, which Ngô Tất Tố must surely have known. In the preface to *The Lamp of Confucian Studies* (*Khổng Học Đăng*), Phan Bội Châu set forth profound purposes for the study of Confucianism: "…The author also wishes people to understand that the old learning is not necessarily antiquated, and the new learning is not necessarily superficial. If one learns to the level of spirit, then it is like building a house: the old learning is the foundation, and the new learning is the material; both sides may aid each other in constructing a splendid edifice… The author wrote this book with the intention of harmonising the old learning and the new learning; the two sides completing one another, and certainly not in opposition. By old learning, the author refers to the philosophy of Asia from antiquity; by new learning, he refers only to modern science that is truly useful for the human life of today's world. The term old learning is not a tool for stealing robes and official regalia. The term new learning is not bait for flattering one's way to gold and honours. Therefore, the author swears beforehand to three kinds of people: a – those who seek only the rewards of officialdom in the village hall; b – those who seek gaudy display, taking bags of silver and bowls of rice as the bait of happiness; c – those who flatter and follow power, taking their own compatriots and race as bait for personal advancement. These three kinds of

people are asked not to read this book" (Phan, 1998, p. 14).

In *Critique of Tran Trong Kim's Confucianism (Phê bình Nho giáo của Trần Trọng Kim)*, Ngô Tất Tố emphasised three main points: first, the careless use of sources; second, the inaccurate presentation of certain tenets of Confucian doctrine; and third, the biased attitude of a supposed scholar.

On the matter of sources, Ngô Tất Tố argued that in preparing his *Confucianism (Nho giáo)*, Tran Trong Kim had relied on materials indiscriminately and without sufficient caution. He drew heavily on later compilations that added embellishments, especially those of the Song Confucians. As a result, many passages turned out to be inaccurate and not truly faithful to Confucius' original teachings. In cases where the sources contained unresolved controversies, Tran Trong Kim did not present them as questions to be examined but instead offered them with an almost definitive tone, as if they were beyond doubt. This demonstrates, by contrast, that Ngô Tất Tố himself maintained a scholarly seriousness and a scientific attitude toward research. The same quality can be observed in his other studies, such as those on Laozi and Mozi.

From the content of *Critique of Tran Trong Kim's Confucianism (Phê bình Nho giáo của Trần Trọng Kim)*, we can also see that Ngô Tất Tố had a deep understanding of Confucian doctrine. This becomes clear in his criticisms of points where Tran Trong Kim misinterpreted Confucius. A striking example concerns the concept of loyalty to the ruler (*trung quân*). Tran Trong Kim wrote: "Whenever people have gathered together to form a society, there must inevitably be someone in authority who holds power to maintain order for the entire community. That authority is the ruler. Thus the meaning of 'ruler' is the one who holds sovereign power over the whole community, over the entire country. Every political system must contain such sovereignty. When sovereignty rests in one person, he is called emperor or king; when it is entrusted to a group of citizens who have collectively authorised it, it is called the leadership. Both emperor and leadership alike belong to the meaning of ruler. Therefore, in the political life of a country, Confucian teaching places special weight on the relationship between ruler and subject… The expression 'loyalty to the ruler' should not be understood, as it usually is, to mean loyalty only to the person of the emperor or king, but can be taken more broadly as loyalty to the sovereign authority within the state" (Ngo, 1996, p. 228).

Ngô Tất Tố argued that such an interpretation was mistaken. The Confucian concept of loyalty to the ruler (*trung quân*) cannot be understood in so broad and progressive a sense. According to Tran Trong Kim, loyalty to the ruler in a broad sense meant loyalty to sovereign authority, which he divided into two types: one held by a single individual, namely the emperors and kings, and another held collectively by a group empowered by the citizens. In response, Ngô Tất Tố offered a satirical criticism: "Heavens! If that were truly the case, then Confucius would not only be indistinguishable from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but he would even resemble Karl Marx and Lenin as well!… But in reality, Confucius' doctrine of loyalty to the ruler was never so boundless and all-encompassing. Nowhere in the Confucian texts is there any distinction drawn between sovereign authority and the personal figure of the emperor himself…" (Ngo, 1996, p. 229).

Conclusion

From the two principal dimensions of Ngô Tất Tố's engagement with Confucianism, one can discern both his analysis of the internal contradictions within Confucian doctrine and his critical assessment of its intellectual and moral implications. The issues he investigated consistently revolved around foundational questions of Confucian thought, such as cosmology, ethics, and moral cultivation, through which he also examined the crisis of identity confronting Confucian scholars during the decline of the millennia-old Han Learning (Hán học) tradition in Vietnam.

Although Ngô Tất Tố did not provide a systematic or comprehensive treatment of Confucianism, in his works such as *Book of Changes* (*Kinh Dịch*), *Laozi* (*Lão Tử*), *Mozi* (*Mặc Tử*), *Critique of Confucianism by Tran Trong Kim* (*Phê bình Nho giáo của Trần Trọng Kim*), *In the Forest of Confucians* (*Trong rừng Nho*), and *Thatched Cottage and Examination Mat* (*Lều chõng*), he vividly delineated the pressing questions of his era, encompassing politics, society, and thought. In doing so, he clarified a historical turning point in Vietnam's intellectual and cultural life, namely the transition from Old Learning (*Cựu học*) to New Learning (*Tân học*),

where the old had not yet completely vanished while the new was only beginning to emerge within the educated class of the time.

Within this context, Ngô Tất Tố made enduring contributions to the study of culture and thought in general and to Confucianism in particular. He was not merely a bridge from Old Learning to New Learning but also a pioneer standing at the forefront of efforts to modernise Vietnam's newly born national literature in the vernacular (*Quốc âm*). For this, Ngô Tất Tố rightly deserves the title of a New Confucian (*Tân nho*) of Vietnam in the first half of the twentieth century.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Editorial Team and peer reviewers for their important comments that improved the quality of this manuscript. We would also like to thank some experts from the Faculty of Philosophy and the University of Social Sciences and Humanities for further discussions on some contents that need to be developed in this research so that we can improve this scientific article.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

We did not use this AI technology in all of our design and writing of this manuscript.

CRediT author statement

Pham Thanh Ha is the first author, a PhD in Philosophy, who wrote content the "**Ngô Tất Tố on the nature of confucianism"** and part of content the "**Ngô Tất Tố and the development of confucianism in the Vietnamese context of praxis".**

Nguyen Dinh Lam is the corresponding author, an Associate Professor, PhD in Cultural Studies, who wrote the **Literature review**, **methodology**, and part of content the "**Ngô Tất Tố and the development of confucianism in the Vietnamese context of praxis"**, the **discussion** and **conclusion** of the manuscript.

In this study, the two authors have equal academic contributions. They discussed together while writing each section of the manuscript to demonstrate the key findings of this study.

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