



Research Article

**HANNAH ARENDT AND VIETNAMESE EDUCATION
TRANSMITTING AND CREATING:
TEACHING STUDENTS TO LOVE THE WORLD**

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ABSTRACT

The paper begins with a brief discussion of Vietnamese education in the East Asian context, arguing that the system does not hinder the ability to modernize but on the contrary, is rapidly expanding responding to globalization. However, there are concerns, especially with questions about creativity and adaptability. We will then turn to Hannah Arendt and her arguments on education, which focus on teaching children to love the world. Arendt's perspective is very Confucian, both in its view of conservative view of education as transmission of information, and its admonition that in transmitting the world, we must teach students to love it.

Keywords: education, citing, creating, Hannah Arendt, love the world.

1. Introduction

There are many paradoxes and tradeoffs associated with globalization, one of which is the tension between the need for creative thinking and innovation responding to globalization and fears about the deterioration and loss of local traditions and cultures under the onslaught of cheap mass produced goods and cheap mass produced culture¹. These observations should make it obvious why globalization creates issues for education. It is in our educational institutions that children learn the traditions of a particular culture,² but in the context of an increasingly interconnected world, there is a sense that children also need to be taught the skills necessary for innovation and creativity. This is why in Viet Nam, as elsewhere, the educational system, and educators, are stuck between requirements to reform education so it encourages more creativity and innovative thinking and concerns about the loss of local culture and traditions.

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¹ This tension exists, in part, because innovation and creativity are inherently at odds with tradition. This is not to say that all innovation and creativity threaten tradition—traditions change, and traditions that last embody long histories of innovation and adaptation—but innovation and creativity by their very nature involve change and, as such, transform existing traditions into something new. On the other side, too much emphasis on preserving traditions, and a refusal or inability to change, leaves no room for innovation or creativity.

In this paper we will argue that the choice between tradition and innovation is a false choice, and that in fact creativity and innovation depend on preserving local cultures and traditions and that preserving local cultures and traditions requires us to learn to innovate and create. We will argue this through an examination of the work of Hannah Arendt, whose 1954 discussion of a “crisis of education” in the United States reflects many of the concerns about the traditional foundations of Vietnamese education. Arendt recognized that the modern world brought with its rapid changes and new challenges, but the proper response for education was not to emphasize innovation and creativity. Instead, the role of the educator is to preserve the world—teaching the world as it is so that students will learn to love the world. We argue that Arendt’s ideas are not an alternative to Confucian education, but an extension of it: encouraging creativity without losing the transmission system of teaching. Moreover, Arendt reminds us that Confucius’ statement about transmission is only half the quote – “I transmit but I don’t create. I am faithful to and love the past”³. We argue that this approach creates a pedagogical foundation for education that reflects and preserves Vietnamese values and traditions, that by teaching students to be “faithful to and love the past” (Confucius) and “love the world” (Hannah Arendt), the next generation will know how to respect and preserve the beauty in the nation's history and integrate with modern world as Vietnamese.

We begin this paper with a brief discussion of Vietnamese education in the context of Confucian education in East Asia, arguing that this system does not hinder the ability to modernize, quite the contrary, countries with Confucian education systems are rapidly expanding in the face of globalization. However, there are concerns, specifically with the question of creativity and adaptability. We will then turn to Hannah Arendt and a brief discussion of her arguments about education, which focus on teaching children to love the world. We argue that Arendt’s perspective is very Confucian, both in its view of conservative view of education as transmission of information, and its admonition that in transmitting the world, we must teach students to love it. This will ensure that they will be able creatively expand on what they have been taught, without destroying it. We will conclude with a few brief ideas about what this looks like in practice.

2. Vietnamese education in the East Asian context

The traditional elements of Vietnamese education associated to the mottos in the school

Vietnam education has experienced several distinct phases⁴. Throughout this history, and up to the present time, the foundation of education has been Confucian, in

² This is in addition to families, religious institutions and the like. But, in the modern era, it is in our educational institutions that children learn about the traditions of the broader society—this is particularly true of those associated with a nation—through history, art, literature philosophy, science and so forth.

³ Confucius (1979), *The Analects*.

⁴ Education under feudal regime lasted until the end of the 19th century; education under colonial rule lasted until 1945 and then the resistance against the French until 1954; followed by a period of dual systems, with

different ways and levels, still plays a key role, in which the teacher's position is always specially appreciated. There is a noticeable thing that entering high schools at all levels in Vietnam, we all see a common motto considered as the foundation of the training: “learn lǐ (禮) first, learn wén (文) second”. From the original Confucian word to the present day in Vietnamese society, the word “lǐ” can be understood in many different ways, but it is basically a way of following rules to harmonizing the relationships that have been handed down from ancient times. The word “wén” originally used to refer to the subjects “Shī Jīng, Shū Jīng, Lǐ Jì, Yì Jīng, Chūn Qiū”, later is understood as subjects associated with knowledge. The spirit of this motto can be traced back from the perspective of Confucianism originating from Confucius in *Analect*: “The matter said, “A young man should be a good son at home and an obedient young man abroad, sparing of speech but trustworthy in what he says, and should love the multitude at large but cultivate the friendship of his fellow men. If he has any energy to spare from such action, let him devote it to making himself cultivated”⁵. This way of visualizing students in this style of “coming being a good son, going being a good young brother” is also reflected in another motto found on the walls of many high schools in Vietnam today “entering the class, you learn lessons by heart; leaving the class, you understand that lessons”. These mottos, on the one hand, show the determination of educational system to emphasize the need to attain virtues to be human, the spirit of studiousness and earnestness in acquiring knowledge; on the other hand, there are potential risks of education crisis in the era of globalization. The second motto seems to encourage rote learning, memorizing, with the goal of going to school firstly to “learning by heart”, then “understanding”, but not talking about creating or applying knowledge in real life. The pressure to memorize is often accompanied by overloading knowledge, overloading the ability of independent learners, causing many rich families now choosing to let their children to attend International schools even though they have to pay very high tuitions instead of sending their children to public schools in Vietnam, preparing to send them to study abroad, leading to “brain drain” from high school. The first motto ranks learning knowledge after cultivating morality, or learning how to behave⁶. This also leads to difficulties in the era of globalization when integrating into the global labor market,

socialist education in the North and, in the South, a Republican regime that lasted until 1975; and unified education throughout the country since 1975.

⁵ Confucius (1979), *The Analects*, first chapter. This statement has the same meaning with the motto in many Vietnamese schools, which means that first you should learn how to behave properly, then you can study to get knowledge.

⁶ This has sparked a debate about whether or not to take the motto “learn lǐ (禮) first, learn wén (文) second” in high schools. There are two articles, namely “Should we maintain the motto “learn lǐ (禮) first, learn wén (文) second” in the school too” by Vo Thanh Van and “Again, we have to talk about keeping or leaving the motto “learn lǐ (禮) first, learn wén (文) second?” by Bui Nam published in the newspaper “Vietnamese Education” (<https://giaoduc.net.vn/>) dated 7/6/2016 and 29/10/2018 attracted a lot of people to comment.

what the market requires first is knowledge and professional working skills. This training mindset will also make it difficult for many Vietnamese intellectuals to return to their home countries after they have been trained abroad, so they have to spend a lot of time integrating into the domestic working environment full of rules that called “lǐ”.

The slogans and mottos of education in high schools in Vietnam associated with the foundation of Confucian education upholding absolutely the role of teachers. The fact of “learning by heart the lessons” or “understanding the lesson” or “learn lǐ (禮) first, learn wén (文) second “are all linked to the transmitting role of the teacher as Confucius said in *Analects*, “I transmit but I don’t create. I am faithful to and love the past”. But it seems that not many people understand the spirit of this sentence by Confucius.

Yu Lan Fung analyzed the above sentence of Confucius in his book *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, emphasizing Confucius’s role as a theorician that layed the foundation for social regimes inherent in the past. In fact, he was not only “transmitting” but also “originating”, “reinterpreted the civilization of the age before him” (Yu Lan Fung, 1966, p.48). Considering and examining the actions of Confucius, Fung draws the conclusion that he not only cited but also composed, added, explained, introduced details of his era, creating a strong tradition that influenced on the next generation⁷.

The above analysis shows that even in the traditional foundation of Vietnamese Confucian education, it has contained the potentials and premise for creation. This is not only an issue of Vietnam but also a regional issue. Many scholars have discussed the prospects and challenges of Confucian education in East Asia.

Prospects and challenges of Confucian education in East Asia

⁷ There are many authors agreeing with this point in Fung's explanation of Confucius' speech in particular and Confucian opinion in general. People often prejudice Confucian education as a rote learning system that involves “a process of blind accumulation, memorization and retention of old ideas” (Kim, 2003, p.75) in which students gain mastery over materials through repetition and memorization and not understanding or critical engagement. This view is associated with Confucius’ statement, “I transmit, I do not create” In this view, “[r]espect for tradition, the practice of propriety and the reverence with which authority figures are regarded make Asian students much more reluctant to examine and challenge beliefs, assumptions and values, whether Confucian or otherwise.” (Kim, 2003, p.78). Pushing back against this narrow interpretation of Confucius, and Confucian education, Luming Mao argues that the broader context of The Analects make it clear that Confucius was not opposed to curiosity, creativity and innovation. Confucius does not, for example, pit reverence for tradition against openness to discovery and innovation: “I am not one who knew about things at birth; I am one who through my admiration of antiquity is keen to discover things” (Mao, p.405. Quoting 25; bk. 7, par. 20). Hye-Kyung Kim takes this even further, and argues that Confucius view “does not just allow but entails critical thinking”. Confucian thought is reflective, and thus creative and active. Building on with Freire’s assertion that knowledge involves invention and reinvention, and a critical consciousness that results when learners intervene in the world as transformers of that world. For Confucius, knowledge involves “critical inquiry” and “active transformation” of material not merely memorizing and saving.

In a Confucian system, the ultimate aim of education is training character, because the virtues are acquired through the transmission of knowledge, which is the path to moral excellence⁸. Moreover, while it is an individual who becomes educated, that individual is understood as an individual within community, so the aim of cultivating virtues is ultimately not about individual improvement, because an educated person serves the community at large. Despite the sense that Confucian traditions—and especially a Confucian education—are somehow inadequate to the demands of globalization – Marginson, et al. actually credit Confucian systems for the rapid success of education in the “Confucian Zones” of China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Viet Nam. Far from making these countries less competitive, what they call the Confucian Model, “enables those systems to move forward rapidly and simultaneously” in terms of percentage of population that participates in higher education, but also in the quality of universities and in the quality of research.

They identify four interrelated features of contemporary Confucian education that they credit for this success⁹, and all of this has worked together. The core is the nation-state which “frames the examination system, steers the patterns of public and household investment and drives the accelerated program of research” (Marginson, p.607). The “one-chance” examination provides a mechanism for social sorting and is “a powerful legitimating device for both the reproduction of elites and the maintenance of a hierarchy of tertiary institutions” (p.600). But, the key to all of this is “the bedrock of Confucian respect for education” and an almost religious sense that education is a duty, and that fulfilling this duty one brings honor to their family¹⁰. This model is changing the global balance of power in higher education—because it works¹¹.

⁸ *Analects*, “The Master said, “I set my heart on the Way, base myself on virtue, lean upon benevolence for support and take my recreation in the arts”.

⁹ The first is a strong nation-state which shapes educational policy and priorities. Second, there has been a rapid growth of participation in higher education, approaching universal levels, which has resulted in an increase educational funding through individual and household support for tuition, rather than the state. Third, there are “one chance” national examination systems which regulate entry into higher education, with the national research universities on top and low cost private (often for profit) vocational colleges at the bottom. This mediates social competition, legitimates the university hierarchy and harmonizes educational/social outcomes on behalf of the state. Finally, there is a growing public investment in research science, using the fiscal resources freed up by private funding of higher education through tuition, which created a rapid growth in and improvement of research activity” at universities. (Marginson, p.594)

¹⁰ Confucianism provides the cultural conditions that support the roles of state, household and examinations, and household funding is driven by Confucian attitudes and this sense of duty. Acceptance of examinations as legitimate is moderated by the belief that exceptional diligence should (and will) lead to ascension of the social ladder.

¹¹ Together private funding of tuition, public funding of research, and economic growth, enable the Confucian systems to lift mass participation, university quality and R&D all at the same time and at

This model is not without its drawbacks, however, and the authors note that there can be conflicts between governmental priorities and those of academic disciplines driven by peer review, which may present a barrier to academic creativity. Education is not necessarily hindered by state instrumentalism, but where government control is accompanied by “conservative academic cultures” high levels of social conformity, or a closure to foreign talent,” the Confucian model may be a detriment, because it “cannot respond to both global intellectual currents along with local potentials for creativity (Marginson, p.606) The authors note that “modern Confucian scholarship needs room to breathe, grow and reinvent if it is to sustain an evolving East Asian identity” (p.607).

We are now back to the tension between respect local traditions and an openness to innovation and creativity, because the issue is not Confucianism per se, nor is it a question of state control, the issue is an approach to education that sees it as a closed system—a static set of beliefs, rather than one that is in an ongoing process. Thus, while the Marginson et al note that a Confucian system clearly has a capacity for reflexive self-improvement, the question is whether and how it is realized. We think that this observation is key for thinking about education in Viet Nam, and that the work of Hannah Arendt can help us tease this out. We turn to this now.

3. A possible solution for Vietnam: a combination of Hannah Arendt and the East Asian traditional thinking

Education is conservatism - the meeting point between Hannah Arendt and the Eastern educational thinking

Arendt argued that the rapid changes of the modern world undermined the durability of “the world”¹² by which she meant that same that that we mean when we say that “globalization” threatens local culture. It is important to note that the world is more than material objects, because in order for material object to be meaningful, they must become a part of the world. This only happens when they become part of a story in which they “lose their contingency and acquire humanly comprehensible meaning”¹³. To the extent that globalization undermines traditions, it leads to a kind of worldlessness, in which we experience isolation and alienation: we no longer feel at home in the world, we no longer know who we are, and can no longer make sound judgments about the world, about what is good or bad, right or wrong. From here leads to the issue of education, in which we see

unprecedented speed. “No other developmental model of knowledge economy is associated with progress at this rate.” (Marginson, 2011, p.607-08)

¹² By “the world” Arendt meant something close to culture, and it includes both material culture (object that we create) and material culture. The world gives human beings a permanent home, providing a sense of stability and durability, a sense of reality and of who we are.

¹³ Telling and preserving stories is the meaning of tradition, and as such tradition not only preserves the world, it connects us to the world, and to each other. It infuses the world with meaning, transforming it from a place that we merely cohabitate into a world that we share.

two basic meeting points between the views of Arendt and Confucius: the view of the role of the teacher, the educator and the role of education itself.

Regarding the role of educators, Arendt and Confucius meet at the point that they appreciate the authority and responsibility of the teacher, due to their nature standing in the middle position between the world (the old, the past) and young people (new, future), between private domain (family) and public domain (political). Arendt said that educational institutions exist “in the middle of the private domain of home and the world in order to make the transition into the world possible”. Interestingly, in the hierarchy of Confucianism “king - teacher - father”, we also see this medial relationship: the teacher stands in the middle of political relations (with the king (the ruler)) and family relationships (with the father). Arendt says that it is the adult's responsibility to protect children from the world, but one more responsibility is to protect the world “from being overrun and destroyed by the onslaught of the new that bursts upon it with each new generation”.(Arendt, 1977, p.186)¹⁴. By this she meant that the teacher is a kind of representative of the world, “pointing out the details and saying to the child: This is our world” (189). It is the teacher’s job to know the world and to take responsibility for it, although they themselves did not make it, and even though they may secretly or openly wish it were other than it is”. This is what it means to assume responsibility for the world. Confucius, as a teacher, talks about himself: “How dare I claim to be a sage or a benevolent man? Perhaps it might be said of me that I learn without flagging and teach without growing weary”¹⁵ and describes the way of his life “At fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty I took my stand; at forty I came to be free from doubts; at fifty I understood the Decree of Heaven; at sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I followed my heart’s desire without overstepping the line”¹⁶ as the life of learning constantly. From this perspective, Confucius is an exemplary teacher from Arendt's point of view, who constantly learns to understand the world, takes responsibility for introducing learners to the world, “teaching without growing weary”.

Thus for Arendt, the role of education is basically conservative, conserving the world to pass it on to the next generation - passing it on, not breaking it, and in this sense, she is very Confucian. According to Confucian conception, the teacher is a person who “knowing the past to understand the present”, and education is to lighten the light of the ancient time in himself.

¹⁴ What she means by this is that children, as newcomers, are not familiar with the world, and this lack of familiarity means that they can threaten its stability by making changes willy nilly—a threat that is similar to the threat of globalization. Adults must assume responsibility for the world.

¹⁵ Confucius (1979), *The Analects*.

¹⁶ Confucius (1979), *The Analects*.

But there is another dimension to Arendt's thought, and that is the acknowledgement that this conservative aspect of education—of transmitting the world without changing it—can be stifling, that “this conservative attitude—which accepts the world as it is, striving only to preserve the world... is irrevocably delivered up to the ruin of time.” (Arendt 1977). But this she meant that every generation must be able to change the world—otherwise they will not feel at home in it, nor will they be able to take responsibility for it¹⁷. There must be a balance: if the world is too “stable,” there can be no change and we stagnate and die. If there is too much change, there is not enough stability and we forget who we are, and lose our capacity to make good judgments. This balance between innovation and stability is maintained by a proper understanding of tradition, particularly in relation to authority¹⁸. Thus, for Arendt, authority, tradition, and innovation are intertwined. It is the ability of each generation to innovate to reject or augment tradition, over time that gives tradition its staying power. To preserve the world under these conditions means more than teaching or transmitting the world as it is, it means teaching our students to love the world, so that they will take responsibility for it – changing it for the better, but preserving what is essential—and transmitting it to the next generation. Teaching our students to love the world is also Confucian.

Educating by teaching students to love the world in Vietnam

Arendt concludes her discussion crisis in education by reaffirming the love for the world and the love for children as a precondition for educators to take responsibility of both preserving the world and encouraging children to create a better world¹⁹. In order to do that, it is not enough to teach knowledge about the world, it is necessary to teach children to love this world so that in turn, they will take responsibility for that world, and if there is a change they transform it to a better. This thought of Arendt could find harmony in the concept of traditional Confucian education beginning with Confucius. The question for Vietnamese educators is a practical one: where and how to do this.

¹⁷ “To preserve the world against the mortality of its creators and inhabitants it must constantly be set right anew.” (Arendt, 1977, p.192).

¹⁸ Tradition “is the thread that ties us to the past, providing a sense of permanence and stability”. Tradition is tied to authority—Arendt connects this to the Roman concept of *auctoritas*, a counsel from the past that is augmented in the present, forming the ongoing thread of tradition that each generation adds to and then bequeaths to the next.

¹⁹ “Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.” (Arendt, 1977).

Vietnamese educational reform should be more meaningful than learning to be creative; it is learning creativity that develops from our love for a specific world, world of Vietnam and teaching students to be responsible for that world. It seems like we haven't done this yet. Doan Hue Dung in the article “Ethical education or political education in the Vietnamese education system” said that in higher education, despite the great efforts of the Ministry of Education and Training, of The Faculty of Politics at each university and every teacher of Marxism-Leninism subjects, college students do not really believe that those courses are necessary for their intellectual and moral development (Doan Hue Dung, 2005, p.458). The same is true for high school education. In high school, students are taught history, but do not see the relevance of history to their lives. The author takes the example of a 11th grade student Nguyen Phi Thanh, who in a contest to choose excelled students by writing an essay about literature in 2005, criticizing the way of teaching and learning in the school and express youngsters' thoughts about ancient literary works.²⁰ Clearly, she did not see the relevance of the poem to understand who she was. The author Doan Hue Dung concluded that teaching content alone is not enough to cultivate essential qualities, or create a sense of responsibility for the wider community (which can be understood for the world).

Saloman (2007) makes a related argument, arguing that Vietnamese history, and therefore Vietnamese identity, is taught in a way that “Vietnam” and “Vietnamese” are viewed as fixed and homogeneous categories²¹. “Diversity, cultural dialogue and hybridization are systematically neglected, if not negated” (Salomon, p.355). If what it means to be Vietnamese is fixed, then young people have no ownership of their own history or identity, it does not seem relevant. It becomes something that they learn, not something for which they have a continuing responsibility. Moreover, in a globalizing culture in which there are constant alternatives and challenges to this fixed identity, there is no room to adapt – no choice for who to be in the midst of changes except to cling to the past, or to throw it out and embrace what is new.

As we have argued above, we do not necessarily have to choose between one of two paths—innovation without tradition or tradition without innovation. The combination of Arendt and the thought of Confucian education can give us a third path. This Tran Trong Kim, a Vietnamese intellectual of the early twentieth century mentioned in his book on

²⁰ The question in the exam was “Introducing the beauty of the “Van te nghĩa sĩ Cần Giuộc” by Nguyen Dinh Chieu”, but she said she could not point out the beauty of the work because she did not see it well, did not find it beautiful and thought she was studying an inappropriate program.

²¹ The history curriculum officially transmits a Vietnamese national identity which is the result of a process of ‘cultural dialogue’ which blends local culture (what is historically seen as “Vietnamese”), external influences (e.g. Chinese, Indian, Colonial) and modern socialist culture. But while the official position is that modern Viet Nam has resulted from a process of hybridization, as a practical matter, the idea of what it means to be Vietnamese is presented in essentialist terms: singular, fixed and unchanging.

Confucianism. So, what does this mean by teach students to love the world in Vietnamese context? How to learn the good things from outside, encouraging creativity but still promote our own advantages? In our opinion, a possible solution is to gradually remove barriers, break walls so children can be exposed to history, tradition, and approach knowledge of the world at close distance. This is what Arendt called teaching children “the world as it is”. Through it, children gradually become familiar and have a sense of the world like their feeling with family, then they will love, and find ways to live in that world, to build that world.

4. Conclusion

Although there is no definite solution to the pressure between tradition and globalization, but what we have discussed above shows that we need to teach in ways that students know how to love the world, let them acquire their own history - and so the problem is how to teach young people the way they come to the meaning of that history, the meaning of becoming Vietnamese in the present. That means the teacher does not make a statement –“to be Vietnamese means this” –helps students struggle with the questions, “What is the meaning of being Vietnamese” in a particular context. The focus is not only on what is good for Vietnamese people (like the familiar approach of globalization) but also “what is the purpose and meaning of being Vietnamese in the world”.

Both Confucius and Arendt express an understanding of education: more than knowing the world, education involves loving the world. If we love the world, we will have ownership, will be responsible for that world, our relationship with the world (and with the rest of the world) will be an adaptive relationship. If changes come from our love for the present world - these changes, in the long run, will preserve what is good and true in the long run.

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HANNAH ARENDT VÀ GIÁO DỤC VIỆT NAM
THUẬT NHI HỮU TÁC: DẠY CHO NGƯỜI HỌC TÌNH YÊU CÔI SỐNG

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TÓM TẮT

Bài viết bắt đầu bằng một cuộc thảo luận ngắn gọn về giáo dục Việt Nam đặt trong bối cảnh Đông Á, cho rằng hệ thống này không cản trở khả năng hiện đại hóa mà ngược lại, còn nhanh chóng mở rộng khi đối mặt với toàn cầu hóa. Nhưng, có những lo ngại, đặc biệt với câu hỏi về sự sáng tạo và khả năng thích ứng. Sau đó chúng tôi sẽ chuyển sang Hannah Arendt và những lập luận của bà về giáo dục, trong đó tập trung vào việc dạy trẻ em yêu thế giới. Quan điểm của Arendt là rất có tinh thần Khổng giáo, cả về quan điểm cho giáo dục nghĩa là bảo tồn và truyền tải thông tin, và khuyên rằng khi truyền đạt thông tin về thế giới, chúng ta phải dạy học sinh biết yêu nó.

Từ khóa: *giáo dục, thuật, tác, Hannah Arendt, tình yêu cõi sống.*