

Vietnamese Scholars and Their Perception of the West in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century: The Cases of Nguyễn Văn Siêu, Nguyễn Tư Giản, and Đặng Huy Trứ

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Abstract: This study aims to understand the perception of the West of Vietnamese elites in the late nineteenth century, focusing on scholar-officials Nguyễn Văn Siêu, Nguyễn Tư Giản, and Đặng Huy Trứ after Vietnam engaged with France in 1858. This analysis focuses on the contents of their writings, showing that they perceived the far West as the Other, and used different strategies to construct an inferior Western Other by viewing the West from the perspective of Hua-Yi thought (C. *huayi sixiang* 華夷思想) and self-interest in order to simplify the West, and also created this essential otherness by adding geographical features. Understanding their perception and attitudes toward the West can help us gain a better understanding of the relationship between Vietnam and the West, of the complicated cogitation of Vietnamese scholars, and of the practices of Vietnamese Confucianism at that time. It can also shed light on the way East Asian elites engaged with the West, as well as on the reasons behind Vietnam's failures in dealing with the West in the nineteenth century.

Keywords: Vietnam, the West, Nguyễn Văn Siêu, Nguyễn Tư Giản, Đặng Huy Trứ

Introduction

In the words of Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823–1901), Asian countries in the nineteenth century were facing a “significant change not seen in three thousand years” (三千年來未有的大變局) (Chen 1990: 38)—namely, the Western threat. Vietnam was no exception. Western countries, with their powerful weapons and new technologies, demanded that Vietnam open up its ports to their merchant ships and unrestrained preaching, thereby acquainting local people with this uninvited guest. After the French-Spanish coalition assaulted the port of Đà Nẵng in central Vietnam in 1858, Vietnam officially entered into battles with France and the West. Facing the fierce Western powers, the urgent tasks for the Tự Đức 嗣德 court were to really understand who the West was and how to respond to them.

King Tự Đức 嗣德 (1829–83) had put significant efforts into getting to know and understand the West. For example, since 1858, the imperial examination had added questions about the West, and candidates were asked to put forward their views on Western powers and how to moderate them (Gadkar-Wilcox 2018). The king also assigned the envoys dispatched to China a new task: benefit from

visiting China—the contact zone of East Asia—by gaining as much information and knowledge about the West as possible, to know more about the West to better handle the threat (Nguyen H. Y. 2019).

Given this special circumstance, it is important and meaningful to understand how Vietnamese elites perceived and understood the West at this stage. However, until now there has been little research discussing these topics. Most research has focused on portraying what these scholars or envoys to China or elsewhere in Southeast Asia recorded—the contents of what they presented about the West (Phạm, Nguyễn, Văn 2001; Tạ 2018; Nguyen H. Y. 2020)—without discussing more in-depth issues behind these descriptions, like who the West was, how the Vietnamese came to know the West, in what way they created the West, what factors affected their understanding of the West, and so on. Thus, this article aims to use the writings of traditional Vietnamese scholar-officials such as Nguyễn Văn Siêu 阮文超 (1799–1872), Nguyễn Tư Giản 阮思儼 (1823–90), and Đặng Huy Trứ 鄧輝燾 (1825–74), and related documents, supplemented by other Vietnamese literati texts written after the 1850s, to explore how Vietnamese elites perceived the West, in what way they constructed the Western Other, and how they understood the dramatically changing world around them in the late nineteenth century.

The documents used in this study were written by senior officials of the period. Therefore, their views can be taken as representing one of the mainstream strands of opinion among Vietnamese elites concerning the West and the relationship between Vietnam and the West. Most of these works are notes or essays, providing richer and more scientific content than the traditional poetic genre often used by other scholars, so they offer more comprehensive portrayals of the authors' understandings and views of the West. Additionally, the above-mentioned scholar-officials were all well educated in the traditional Confucian education system and held important positions in the court (see the appendix). Among them, some had even been carefully selected to serve as envoys to China (Chen 2017). We can see that their talent, social status/rank, and influence were obvious to all. This is precisely because they held important positions, and all three had been officials in the capital for a long time; they were the people in the Nguyễn court who had the readiest access to contact with and information from the West. Nguyễn Tư Giản and Đặng Huy Trứ had also been directly involved in tasks related to or negotiations with the West. For example, King Tự Đức ordered them to collect intelligence on the West in China and other East Asia countries during their missions to China, or to deal with Western officials to purchase ships. Even though an official like Nguyễn Văn Siêu had not been directly involved in affairs related to the West, he was bound to have the fastest and most diversified access to relevant information about the West and its influence on the court and local people through his exchanges with other officials and scholars. Based on the above factors, including these officials' identity, talent, rank, social influence, and the characteristics of their works, publications, perceptions, and deeds, they not only represented well the voices and attitudes of the Vietnamese elites and literati

toward Western powers but also were in a position to directly affect the views of the king and other officials.

Therefore, using relevant works of these typical elites to explore their perceptions of the West will help us gain a better understanding of the past, understand the complex engagement between Vietnam and Westerners at the end of the nineteenth century, and grasp the changing practice of Vietnamese Confucianism in the turbulent new environment.

The Relative Situation of Vietnam and the Western Powers after 1850

In Western countries' eyes, Vietnam, with its rich natural resources and superior geographical location, was very favorable (Trương, Phan, and Nguyễn 1999: 484–86). Among them, France presented the biggest threat. France had long coveted Vietnam. Already from the seventeenth century, many French missionaries had entered Vietnam to preach. Also merchants, one after another, landed in Vietnam and collected intelligence about the country (Chapuis 1995: 172). By the end of the eighteenth century, when Nguyễn Phúc Ánh 阮福暎 (1762–1820) tried to overthrow the Tây Sơn 西山 dynasty, he received some help from France, which led to the signing of the first treaty, namely the Versailles treaty in 1787 (Yang 1981). Subsequent kings like Minh Mạng 明命 (1791–1841) and Thiệu Trị 紹治 (1807–47), based on their inexperience and their fear of the ambitions of Western countries like France, adopted a relatively conservative policy, refusing to communicate and establish a relationship with them (Trương, Phan, and Nguyễn 1999: 484–500). In the mid-nineteenth century, France repeatedly invaded Vietnam, claiming severe grievances against its missionaries. Finally, in August 1858, France and Spain made a joint attack on Đà Nẵng, a port in central Vietnam. Facing the threat of losing the country, at this point, the Nguyễn court could no longer avoid urgently knowing who France and the West were, what their designs were, and how to react to them.

Although Tự Đức was a diligent king, his incomprehension of the West made it impossible for him and his courtiers to accurately diagnose the situation at home and abroad, as well as the real situation between Vietnam and its adversaries. Under such circumstances, the Nguyễn court ceded three provinces in southern Vietnam and the three provinces in the west to France in 1862 and 1867–69. By this time, Tự Đức already recognized that something was wrong and wanted to rectify the situation. He actively adopted more measures to understand Western powers, their true features, and how to react. For example, he set up institutions for learning Western languages and translating Western documents, and he actively purchased foreign ships (Chen 1991). Another measure worth mentioning was that he repeatedly ordered Vietnamese envoys to collect all kinds of Western information in China and from other East Asian countries, such as Korea and Ryukyu, for reference during their diplomatic trips to the Celestial Kingdom (Nguyen H. Y. 2019). Although the attitude of the Nguyễn kings toward China was not as respectful as before (Yu 2008), the Nguyễn court had no better choice. Apart from China, they had no other example to imitate and no other ally to call on. The Nguyễn Dynasty wanted to know what the West had done in China, whether the

same was in store for Vietnam, and how China had reacted to the Western powers; finally, they also hoped that the Chinese court could reach out to protect Vietnam (Woodside 1988; Zheng 2004).

Besides the desperate domestic situation, the international setting was also a cause for concern for King Tự Đức. Given all kinds of information, Tự Đức gradually learned about the excessive behaviors of Western powers in China and other countries in East Asia and also came to know that many countries and regions in Southeast Asia had become the colonies of different Western countries (Kelley 1998; Nguyễn H. Y. 2015). Looking around, no one could escape the claws of the West, from the once-powerful Middle Kingdom and other countries in the East Asian cultural sphere to the Southeast Asian regions once regarded as Hạ Châu (下洲 “the land below Vietnam”). This was a period when capitalist countries were undergoing the Industrial Revolution one after another. Their rapid economic development had made these Western countries greedy for more raw materials, labor, and markets. Asian countries like Vietnam with their rich products, large populations, and underdeveloped economic and social environments naturally became the coveted targets of Western countries (Trương, Phan, and Nguyễn 1999: 488).

In the late nineteenth century, then, both domestic and international circumstances had forced the Nguyễn Dynasty into contact with the West and with France in particular, leading them to quickly recognize the West and its characteristics and to propose a plan to obviate the fate of being colonized like other Asian countries. Facing the Western powers, how did Vietnamese scholar-officials come to know them better? In what ways did they *other* the West? What kinds of attitudes did they adopt, and how did they plan to deal with France and other Western countries? This series of issues associated with the survival of the Nguyễn government and the country was also a test for the dominant position of Confucian ideology in Vietnam; understanding and explaining how typical Vietnamese elites perceived and constructed the Western Other is the main purpose of this article.

Stereotypes and Representations: How Vietnamese Elites Constructed the West

In the writings of the Vietnamese elites mentioned above, much attention was paid to many aspects of information about the West, including different countries in the West like Phật Lang Cơ 佛朗基 (France), Hà Lan 荷蘭 (Holland), and Anh Cát Lợi 英吉利 (England); their geographic locations, customs, special local products, astronomy, and technology (Nguyễn V. S. 1882); and the activities of Western countries in China and other East Asian countries (Nguyen H. Y. 2020). In these texts, the West was posited as the Other because of differences in race, appearance, religion, language, customs, gender, and so on (Nguyen H. Y. 2020: 48–49). It is worth emphasizing that these different elements or characteristics were not a problem in themselves; the real problem lay in how the Vietnamese elites conceived and reinforced these different categories, and how they manipulated this process of othering, causing them to misunderstand the West and in the end be colonized by them.

Othering the West from the Perspective of Vietnamese-Style Hua-Yi Thought 華夷思想

The process of othering the West by these Vietnamese elites emerged during a clash between Vietnamese and Western civilizations—two cultures that had hardly experienced in-depth contact or mutual understanding before. Especially during their diplomatic delegations to China and other places, the Vietnamese scholar-officials witnessed the impact of Western learning and culture on local life. In their minds, familiar Confucian cultural norms were on one side, and Western power and a sense of enormous threat on the other. Hence, they saw themselves and their own living environment as a natural, normal, and homogeneous internal group, and the West was interpreted as a serious threat to the existing social order and moral concepts of this group. Once the West was stigmatized in such a manner, their distinctive identity as Other was defined and prescribed. Two different worlds of thought—the traditional Confucian thought and the inherent views of the West, complemented by real-life facts colliding with each other, caused them to perceive and internalize the West from their own point of view, namely Hua-Yi thought (*tu tưởng Hoa-Di* 華夷思想), through which they created standards for viewing and classifying the world based on Confucian principles. Because their perceptions were based in Confucian values, the appropriate paraphrase of 夷 in English here should be “people and/or places not adopting or professing Hua norms and Confucian values.” So, using common translations of 夷 as “barbarian” or “foreigner” are fully adequate for our purposes in this article. Hence, for ease of reading, I will use capitalized Yi throughout, except where specified otherwise.

For the Vietnamese scholar-envoys traveling abroad and engaging with different people and objects, the Hua-Yi differences could not have been more evident. Therefore, in their writings they repeatedly illustrated their views of Hua-Yi, as well as their standards for viewing the world. For example, visiting China as a Vietnamese envoy, Nguyễn Tư Giản was welcomed by officials all over China according to established diplomatic ritual. But sometimes he encountered difficult situations, such as when he saw the Chinese officials name the reception hall Yi Pavilion 夷館, or when he saw Chinese books in which Vietnam was called a Land of Yi 夷地 and Vietnamese were called Yi people 夷人. This led Nguyễn Tư Giản to express his own views on what Hua/Xia (華/夏 magnificent, efflorescent, etc.) and Yi 夷 meant. He argued, “Around the globe, there are countless countries in beautiful lands. Some are within, and some without, so how to differentiate them? Since ancient times, to distinguish between the Yi and the Xia has depended on the presence or absence of ritual (禮儀), and on the identity or difference of inscriptional practice (文行).” (夫蓋地球,麗而處者億萬國。為中為外,從何辨之?然而古來必夷夏之辨者,則亦視乎禮儀之存亡,文行之同異焉耳。) (Nguyễn T. G. 2010: 230).

In this paragraph, “some are within, and some without” refers to the Hua-Yi dichotomy, as he soon explains. According to Nguyễn Tư Giản, there were so many countries on earth, all different in their magnificent or barbaric characteristics, but for him the specific standard for Hua-Yi (or Xia) lay in *rituals* and *written*

language. He further explained that the standard of Yi-Xia should not depend on geography or location, for the following reason:

If you insist on using the middle lands to classify, then of the four seas and great continents, only to the west of Moliya (末利亞) and the Red Sea are at the center of the world, yet they could not be called *xia* 夏 (countries). Or if we look at some places in China, before the Qing established the country, Yunnan, Guizhou, and the three eastern provinces of Jilin, Heilongjiang, and Ningguta, were all the territories of the Yelang 夜郎, Kunming 昆明, Guifang 鬼方, Sushen 肅慎 and Woju 沃沮 in pre-Qin and pre-Han times. If we trace back the roots of these places, can we call them all Yi?

若必執土地之中以求之，則四海大州，唯末利亞之西，紅海乃為地中，從未見彼方之能夏也。若謂從其本初立國而名之，則上國之雲貴二省，與東三省之吉林、黑龍江、寧古塔，固皆秦漢以前夜郎、昆明、鬼方、肅慎、沃沮諸國地也。今將從其朔，一例以夷之乎？(231)

As he clarifies, some formerly remote areas have now become indivisible territories of the Qing empire. Chinese scholars were unwilling to call their own remote places Yi but kept judging others as Yi based on their geographical distance. Does this not violate the Confucian doctrine of “Don’t do unto others what you don’t want done unto you” 己所不欲，勿施於人？ It means that we cannot rely on location or time period alone to distinguish whether a place is Hua or Yi. As a Confucian literatus, one should be fair and not unreasonably adopt double standards in viewing the world. Therefore, Nguyễn Tư Giản concluded, “Confucianists have the duty to write, so should not do this” 儒者秉筆之公，似不應如是 (232).

After refuting the idea of distinguishing Yi by location as practiced by officials of the Celestial Kingdom, and expressing his own views on the standards of Yi-Xia, Nguyễn Tư Giản (2010) demonstrated why Vietnam was Xia and not Yi. Said Nguyễn,

Moreover, ever since the Han Dynasty, our Vietnam and the Western Yue were territories of the Celestial Kingdom, and Vietnam was immersed in the learning of its Confucian classics and six arts, as well as its clothing, etiquette, and music for over two thousand years. During that time, the two countries separated and united from time to time, but the (Confucian) principle and morality are one, and the customs are also the same, whether now or in the past.

且吾越自漢以後，常與西粵並隸上國版圖，其詩書六藝之學，衣冠禮樂之化，沈浸醞郁幾二千年，中間雖乍合乍分，而道義之一，風俗之同，今猶古也。(233)

Clearly, Vietnam had a political system, clothing, customs, written characters, and so on, all similar to China. So, if China was Hua, logically Vietnam was Hua too, and not Yi.

Besides Nguyễn Tư Giản, other scholars such as Phan Huy Ích 潘輝益 (1750–1822) (Kelley 2005), Lý Văn Phức 李文馥 (1785–1849) (Zhang 2017), and

Đặng Huy Trứ (Đặng 1868a: 17) held the same point of view on Hua-Yi. For these Vietnamese scholars, this set of standards applied to all objects, including China, other countries in the sinographic sphere, other neighboring countries around Vietnam, and of course Western countries. Therefore, they called the countries in the sinographic sphere the “countries using the same written characters” (同文國); they regarded countries surrounding Vietnam like Laos, Thủy Xá (水舍), and Hỏa Xá (火舍) as barbarians, and accepted their tribute, forming a so-called Little Efflorescence World Order (小中華的世界秩序) (Yu 2008). Or they were accustomed to refer to Southeast Asian countries as the “lands below Vietnam” (Hạ Châu 下州). “Hạ,” meaning “down/under,” was relative to Vietnam, which was located in the center and therefore counted as Xia (Kelley 1998).

Western countries, predictably, could not escape this set of Hua-Yi standards. Reading through the works of Vietnamese scholars, we can see everywhere that they were using the lens of Hua-Yi to see and reformulate a strange West by devaluing and dehumanizing their categories of otherness, and in so doing drawing a clear boundary between the West and themselves.

For one, almost all of the above Vietnamese elites used the word *Yi* to stand for the West, in expressions like “Western Yi” (洋夷, 西夷) and “pseudo-West” (偽西), and when speaking of Western things, for example, “Yi religion” (夷教) or “Yi vessels” (夷船). Through the words used, we can see their prejudiced attitude toward the Western Other.

As mentioned above, the criteria distinguishing Hua from Yi were rituals and writing. These Vietnamese elites uncovered these factors one after another, and in so doing made the West become the Other. In terms of writing system, they believed that Western barbarians from the far west did not comprehend sinographs or follow Confucianism. Therefore, they lacked culture and belonged to another civilization. Phan Huy Chú 潘輝注 (1782–1840) said that looking at Western writing was like observing earthworms crawling on paper (Phan et al. 1994: 202). In terms of customs and habits, too, there was also an enormous gap between Westerners and countries in the sinographic sphere. Discussing with Chinese officials about the customs of the West, Nguyễn Tư Giản and his counterparts directly opined that “their customs cannot compare with countries using the same [Sinitic] script” 他氣習不比同文諸國 (Nguyễn T. G. 2010: 177). Let us see how famous scholar Nguyễn Văn Siêu observed the following Western customs from a surprised and uncomprehending perspective:

From the king to the common people, no one has two wives. If the wife dies, the husband can marry again. And if the husband dies, the wife too can remarry. . . . Whoever is getting married, both men and women will go to church to listen to the priest’s statement, and then return home. If men or women who break the law are afraid of their elders, they can go to church and ask the priest to help them explain and inform the elders via written letters. Although they will be angry, they will not punish them. If a woman commits adultery (28), she can go to church and confess to the priest. She will kneel outside the window of a box to whisper the truth to the priest. The priest will explain the religious precepts for her and absolve her guilt.

自王至於庶民無二妻者，妻死然後再取，夫死亦可再娶。．．．凡婚娶男女俱至廟聽太和尚說法，然後歸。男女有犯法，恐家主罪之者，至廟中求僧為之解釋，以書告于家主。雖怒不之罪也。婦女有犯(28)姦淫，進廟請僧懺悔。於小籠窗外跪向僧耳語其情實。僧為之說法，解罪。(Nguyễn V. S. 1882: 27–28)

When people die they are buried at the church. The remains of the most recently deceased are buried by taking away those of a previously deceased and throwing them in the corner, after which they inter them. Births and deaths are all reported to the church's priest for recording. Because of this, after three generations, no one knows about his ancestors anymore.

國人死各葬於廟中，後葬者則擇先葬者取其骸棄諸隅而安其處。生死皆告于廟僧為記。其世系然其家三代以後亦不復知其祖矣。(27–28)

When the king is enthroned, he does not set his own reign title, but keeps using time as counted by the Catholic Church. . . . If the king has no prince, then the king's princess will become the empress, and they pass on the throne to the princess for many generations. But now the empress likewise has no children, so the country has no king at all. Just four ministers govern the state. . . . Although the towns are thousands of miles away, they follow orders and dare not disobey.

國王立不改元，以奉天主教紀其年。．．．國王無子，奉王女為主，世以所生女繼。今又絕，國中不復立主。唯以四大臣理國事。．．．各鎮雖在萬里之外，悉遵號令，不敢違背。(29)

According to Confucian doctrines and norms, there are strict rules for both men and women in traditional society to follow, telling them how to behave and how to live to the fullest to maintain social order. Hence, for Vietnamese scholars deeply affected by traditional Confucian ethics, they could not understand, let alone accept, customs like a wife freely remarrying after her husband dies, or not sacrificing to ancestors in the ancestral hall. Besides, they grew up being taught to be patriotic and loyal to the king, so how could they accept the fact that there was no king in the country, or that the king obeyed the arrangement of God instead of determining a new reign title when he came to the throne? Because of this, they did not hesitate to call their own Vietnamese people who followed Catholicism “stupid people” *ngu dân* 愚民 (Nguyễn T. G. 2010: 237). Thus, Vietnamese scholars used a Hua-Yi dichotomy to distinguish between themselves and Western Others. They ignored and devalued the religious and cultural characteristics of the Other and believed that those who agreed with Confucian beliefs were normal and civilized as Hua, while those who believed in Catholicism were naturally different, ignorant, and uncultured and could bring harm to the Confucian social order. Unsurprisingly, the West could not be accepted and recognized by Vietnamese scholars, and it was no wonder that they used to regard it as a great threat to Vietnamese society and Confucian orthodoxy, and established a drive-out-the-West attitude and response strategy.

In addition to devaluing the religion and culture of the Western Other from themselves, these scholars also attempted to explain and understand the West by associating certain aspects with facts or features of the Confucian culture with which they were familiar. For example, when introducing the spread of Catholicism to China, there was a paragraph about the relationship between Western education and Catholicism. Nguyễn Văn Siêu wrote,

Ngài Nho Lược 艾儒略's *Chức phương ngoại kỷ* 職方外紀 (Record of Foreign Lands), collected in the *Annotated Catalog of the Complete Imperial Library* (四庫全書提要), was composed in the year Tianqi Guihai 天啟癸亥 (1623). The book was about how these countries built their education systems and cultivated talent, and was divided into six subjects. The so-called *Lặc đặc lý gia* (勒鐸理加) are the liberal arts; *Bùi lục sở phí á* (裴錄所費亞) is science; *Mặc đệ tề nạp* (默弟濟納) is medicine; *Lặc nghĩa tư* (勒義斯) is law; *Gia nặc nhị tư* (加諾溺斯) is education; and *Đầu lục nhật á* (陡祿日亞) is morality. There were different stages in education: from liberal arts to sciences, taking sciences as the focus. Liberal arts are like *xiaoxue* (小學) in China, whereas science is like *daxue* (大學). Medicine, law, and education all serve utility. Morality, with its own methods, can make people develop to the greatest extent possible, seemingly no different from Confucian hierarchy. However, the things they investigate are all trivialities, whereas the principles they want to probe are evily ridiculous.

《四庫全書提要》艾儒略《職方外紀》已著錄，書成於天啟癸亥。所述皆其國建學育才之法，凡分六科。所謂勒鐸理加者，文科也。裴錄所費亞者，理科也。默弟濟納者，醫科也。勒義斯者，法科也。加諾溺斯者，教科也。陡祿日亞者，道科也。教有次第，徒文入理，而理為之綱。文科如中國之小學。理科如中國之大學。醫科、法科、教科皆其事功。道科則在彼法中盡性致命之極也。似與儒學次序無異。特所格之物皆其器數之末，所窮之理，又皆神怪之妄。(Nguyễn V. S. 1882: 36)

As we can see, Nguyễn Văn Siêu tried to make Western education more understandable by comparing its components with some elements of Confucianism. In the same way, he also associated Western religions with Daoism and (Chinese) Buddhism in his writings. In so doing, he found a way to understand and master Western culture, and therefore could explain and criticize the heterogeneous culture of this Other: “However, the things they investigate are all trivialities, whereas the principles they want to probe are evily ridiculous.”

Clearly, elites like Nguyễn Văn Siêu had two approaches to constructing the Western Other from a Confucian cultural perspective. One was to downgrade Western culture by comparing it with Confucian principles. Another one was to dominate its characteristics by likening them to Confucian elements.

Adopting such Confucian cultural perspectives and Hua-Yi thought to view the West became the tradition of Vietnamese literati in their engagements with the Other. When facing the relatively familiar Chinese Other or other East Asian countries, scholars Lý Văn Phức, Nguyễn Tư Giản and others all used Confucian cultural standards. For example, they called them countries using the same written characters, or fellow countries that revere Confucianism (同尊儒術). However, Vietnamese

elites were comparatively familiar with East Asian culture, and they were relatively close to these countries in terms of geography and history, while Vietnam and Western countries were far apart geographically and had little in-depth historical contact. Thus, although Vietnamese elites adopted the same Confucian cultural perspectives in their interactions with both East Asian and Western Others, the contents and attitude were totally different, illustrating the diversity and complexity of traditional Vietnamese literati while engaging with the Other.

Simplifying and Generalizing as Strategies to Perceive the West

In discussing the ways in which Vietnamese elites came to know and understand the West, we should clarify some important questions: For these Vietnamese elites, who was the Western Other? How did Vietnamese elites define the West? Is it the same Western world that we know now? Or was the Western Other in their perspective just a result of their imagination of a faraway place in the west that differed from Vietnamese culture (a kind of “imagined cultural West”)? Did the Vietnamese elites regard the West as one undifferentiated entity? Were they able to know or distinguish issues such as different states in the West with their own history and culture and complicated relationships between them?

In the case of Vietnamese elites like Nguyễn Văn Siêu and Nguyễn Tư Giản, although they already knew that the West comprised many different countries, they nonetheless simplified and generalized the Western countries and cultures. They were either unable or unwilling to see the differences between these Western states. This was a common feature among the Vietnamese scholars’ views of the Western Other at this stage.

Lý Văn Phúc and Nguyễn Văn Siêu, and even later scholars like Nguyễn Tư Giản, Đặng Huy Trứ, and Phạm Hy Lượng 范熙亮 (1834–86), although they had already known the existence of different countries like England, France, Holland, Spain, Portugal, and Russia, nonetheless referred to them collectively and undifferentiatedly with simple terms like *the Western/faraway barbarians* in most cases, or even used the same terms for France, who had invaded Vietnam (Đặng 1868a; Nguyễn V. S. 1882; Nguyễn T. G. 2010; Phạm 2010). When Nguyễn Tư Giản passed through the port of Hankou in 1868, he listed many Western countries coming there to do business. However, when describing their shops and decorations, he adopted the above approach by collectively calling them simply *the West* instead of describing each particular country (Nguyễn T. G. 2010: 237–38). Nguyễn Văn Siêu did the same, introducing many Western countries in his works, but in many places he was still unwilling to show or acknowledge the differences between them. For example, when writing about the Great Luzon Kingdom and Phật Lang Co, after explaining their geographic locations, characteristics, religion, customs, and local products, he used the sentences “the customs are the same as those in the West and the local products are the same too” 風俗與西洋同,土產亦同 (Nguyễn V. S. 1882: 29). Even King Tự Đức, in imperial examination questions from 1877, persisted in using the general terms *Western/the faraway West* to refer collectively to the diverse and

complex Western Other. The way Vietnamese elites and kings referred to Western countries shows that although they already knew that the West was made up of different countries, they were still unable to overcome cultural disidentification to see the West. They unconsciously regarded them as a collectively imagined and uncultured West compared with civilized Confucian cultures and countries.

This brings us to another question: The Vietnamese elites saw the West in a collective, simplistic way, but was this intentional (i.e., they already knew that there were different countries in the West, but either refused or did not want to write about the differences among countries), or were they simply unable to tell the difference between countries? My analysis of their writings suggests that this was an unconscious behavior. Because Confucianism had such a paramount influence on Vietnamese scholars and because their texts were produced within the mechanisms of Confucian knowledge production, whereby the sources of all knowledge came from the Four Books and Five Classics, the West and its related elements were not qualified to become the objects of careful investigation. As Nguyễn Văn Siêu once wrote,

In the reign of Ming emperor Wanli, Matteo Ricci, a native of Italy, traveled ninety thousand miles to Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Macao. In the twenty-ninth year of the Wanli emperor, he entered Peking and presented the Ming with local products and pictures of God and God's mother. The Ministry of Rites (禮部) did not receive these objects, on the pretext that the *Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty* (會典) did not normally include Western items in its records. The emperor sympathized with him as he had come from a faraway place, and allowed him to enter the hall to have meals. Many officials made friends with him, and Matteo Ricci settled down there.

明萬曆中，大西洋意大理亞國人利瑪竇泛海九萬里抵廣州至香山澳。二十九年入燕京，以方物獻並貢天主及天主母圖。禮部以會典不載西洋名目駁之。帝嘉其遠來，假館授餐。公卿多與之交。利瑪竇安之。(Nguyễn V. S. 1882: 32)

Here the Western Other is portrayed as having relied on its distance and exotic objects to gain temporary sympathy, curiosity, and hospitality. But in the end, because of Confucian norms, Westerners were not able to enter or take part in formal activities. This strong Confucian mode of thinking and stereotypes prevented the Chinese court from taking Western people and culture seriously from the very beginning. Later, when eventually they had no choice but to know and engage with the West, they were still reluctant and in any case were predisposed to an inability to see internal differences within the West.

Western Learning, Vietnamese Utility (西學越用): Viewing and Accepting the West from the Perspective of Utilitarianism

As Western powers became an unavoidable enemy, Vietnamese elites were forced to recognize their existence. Therefore, at this critical moment, they developed a new strategy to see and perceive the West. In other words, they tried finding a

balance between their own traditional standpoint and the urgent need to understand the West.

For the Vietnamese elites discussed above, the process of othering the West offered a kind of utilitarianism that could meet the needs of the Vietnamese while still conforming to Confucian principles. The West, for these Vietnamese scholars, held out only certain kinds of practical value. This was nothing other than another manifestation of their simplistic understanding of the West. The Vietnamese elites could not see all the characteristics and values of Western countries and cultures, and could only measure and view the West from the perspective of self-interest. We can see this in Nguyễn Văn Siêu's works. For example, when listing the special products of the Great Luzon Kingdom, Nguyễn used the phrase "all the silver used in China was made in Luzon, and other countries also accepted it" 凡中國所用番銀俱大呂宋所鑄,各國俱用之 (Nguyễn V. S. 1882: 29), clearly analyzing how it was useful or connected to the Celestial Kingdom and other countries. Or when writing about Coimbra (金吧喇), a town in the country of Daxiyang (大西洋國), after making an introduction about its distance from the port and its size, what was the connection between this town and us Vietnamese that made it worth mentioning? It turns out that the town had a connection to and value for China, namely, "Many of the (foreign) people who came to China and entered the Imperial Astronomical Bureau (欽天監) or traveled to Macau to become priests came from this town" 凡入中國為欽天監及至澳門作大和尚者多此土人 (26).

The principle whereby Vietnamese elites saw the Western Other from a utilitarian perspective can be dubbed *Western learning and Vietnamese utility* (西學越用)—the Vietnamese scholar-officials determined the specialties and characteristics of Western countries that could serve the interests of Vietnam. The way Nguyễn Văn Siêu othered the West was inherited and carried forward by later Vietnamese elites, one of whom was Đặng Huy Trứ. Traveling to Guangzhou twice, in 1865 and 1867, Đặng still regarded the West as a fierce barbarian, but he witnessed the benefits of opening the port of Hong Kong for the economic development of the island and its people. After returning to Vietnam, he reported the situation to King Tự Đức and requested the establishment of a department to oversee domestic and foreign commercial activities. King Tự Đức affirmed that idea and accepted to establish the Bình Chuẩn Ty (平準司 "Department of Assessment and Approval of Trade Products Aiming to Promote Equality [when doing business within Vietnam or with the West]") in Hanoi with Đặng in charge, but it barely lasted two years (Trần 2012: 47–65). Additionally, Western technologies like shipbuilding and artillery, in Đặng's perspective, also served the needs of Vietnam (Trần 2012: 47–65; Chuang 2016: 116–34). One of the key tasks of his two missions was to buy foreign ships built in the Hong Kong shipyards for the Nguyễn government and bring them back to Vietnam, to test the possibility of enhancing Vietnam's naval combat capabilities (Trần 2012: 58–60).

The most obvious manifestation of the Western learning, Vietnamese utility strategy was the case of Đặng and Western photographic technology. Đặng was the first Vietnamese to bring back to Vietnam the Western photographic technology

he had witnessed in Hong Kong. He established the first photo studio in Hanoi owned by a Vietnamese, called *Cảm Hiếu Đường* (感孝堂 “Hall for Expressing Filial Piety”), and specialized in taking portraits. Vietnamese still regard him as the founder of Vietnamese photography (Trần 2018). When Đặng was sent to Hong Kong in 1865, he had already been exposed to photography and expressed great interest in it. On his second mission, he invested substantial sums to bring this technology and equipment back to Vietnam. Why did Đặng like photography so much? We can find some explanations in his writings. Đặng commented on Western photography in his works:

Compared with the traditional painter, Western photography is more excellent, and the picture is more lifelike. I was sent to Hong Kong in the Ất Sửu year (乙丑 1865) and came to know this technology. I took two pictures of myself wearing court dress and brought them back to Vietnam. I took these pictures and the two paintings by Li Cuiyan and showed them to my relatives and friends to evaluate. They all agreed that Western photography was superior.

西人影相較與畫師傳神，最為取肖。乙丑余奉派往香港公幹，見齊功妙，因影照盛服二形袖以歸國，併與李翠巖所畫真容二幅以示親友相與品評，皆以西法為善。〈題清漣氏小照二首〉之序 (Đặng 1868a: 1114b)

The photos taken by Western photography were vivid, and the people’s clothing, skin, hair, face, and so on, were captured vibrantly, even better than by traditional painters. This compelled Đặng, and his friends agreed.

Đặng naturally admitted the wonderful craftsmanship of the Westerners, but one of the reasons he was so determined to bring this technology back to Vietnam, as he mentioned in his introduction to *Cảm Hiếu Đường*, was that he discovered that this photography technology could help achieve the filial piety (孝順) that Vietnamese valued most. Đặng said bluntly that people were the essence between heaven and earth, and the greatest virtue of people was filial piety. Both ordinary people and princes were born and raised by their parents. Hence, whether their parents were alive or dead, people would never forget them. However, we cannot see the faces of our parents all the time, and it is difficult to capture many details in traditional painting or sculpture. In this way, he said, taking photographs was the one best way to keep your parents’ faces on paper, ensuring that they were exactly the same and could be touched and seen anytime, anywhere. This was the best way for people to express their filial piety (Đặng 1868b, 3: 6–7).

Photography won Đặng Huy Trứ’s favor because of its unique utility in helping the Vietnamese perform filial piety. Just like the couplet he wrote at the entrance to *Cảm Hiếu Đường*, “filial piety to parents is shared by all people, and the best portrait is passed down from generation to generation” 孝以事親人所共，影佳肖像世相傳 (Đặng 1868b, 3: 7). Besides, in his opinion the establishment of *Cảm Hiếu Đường* was also a way to encourage everyone to perform filial piety. Đặng was thrilled to find a way for Western technology to directly meet Vietnamese’s

needs. He was excited to open the studio and documented this special moment in his book (1114b–1118b).

Western learning, Vietnamese utility opened up another approach for Vietnamese scholars to perceive and accept the West. More precisely, it was a self-generated effort and ideological adjustment on the part of Vietnamese elites and Confucian scholars in getting to know the West—not by negating it but by trying to see and accept the most utilitarian parts, out of self-interest. When Western powers eventually became their adversary, Vietnamese elites deeply influenced by Confucianism remained unable to accept the West in their hearts, but by the same token, they could not deny their powerful military and ships and could not drive them away either. In the context of these complex, contradictory feelings and beliefs, they eased their inner distress and contradictions by making use of some practical, useful aspects of the West to at least fulfill certain aspects of their Confucian responsibilities, like the case of *Cảm Hiếu Đường* or Nguyễn Văn Siêu above. In this way, they could rationalize and accept to a certain extent the inevitable existence of the Western Other.

In Vietnam, most scholar-officials took up dismissive stances in viewing the West at the early stage, although in the 1840s and 1850s, a few people such as Lý Văn Phức had called for learning Western technology or Western skills (Trần 2013: 246). However, they stopped at verbal appeals or petitions on paper. Most Vietnamese literati still detested the West and Western learning (Nguyễn T. M. 2021). Hence, Đặng's strategy and actual actions were undoubtedly a step forward compared to earlier scholars. Yet insofar as the Nguyễn Dynasty was facing “significant changes not seen in three thousand years,” such a closed and one-sided view of the Western Other may have satisfied their imaginary civilized selves, but was outdated and unrealistic. It is a pity that the egocentrism of the Confucian scholars of the Nguyễn Dynasty was still too strong to enable them to see the crisis they faced.

Adding Geographical Features to Reformulate the Western Other

In this section I discuss how Vietnamese elites used geographical characteristics to reformulate the distant Western Other and ask, How can geographical characteristics become essential to Otherness? Also, what are the similarities and differences between these geographic Western Others and traditional Vietnamese geographical concepts?

The first thing worth mentioning here is that Vietnamese scholars have long had a concept of space and geography and used this concept to draw boundaries between places. We can find this in many literary works of the past. For example, the famous poem “The Mountains and Rivers of the Empire of the South” (*Nam quốc sơn hà* 南國山河) by general Lý Thường Kiệt 李常傑 (1018–1105), known today as Vietnam's “first declaration of independence,” uses geographic dimensions to distinguish between China in the north and Vietnam in the south:

南國山河南帝居，
截然定分在天書。

如何逆虜來侵犯?
汝等行看取敗虛。(Viện 1968: 10)

Over mountains and rivers of the South reigns the Emperor of the South
As it stands written forever in the Book of Heaven.
How is it then that you strangers dare to invade our land?
Your armies, without pity, shall be annihilated. (Nguyễn and Hữu 1970: 204)

The poem shows that Vietnamese scholars had developed a sense of location and geography over a millennium ago, one inseparable from cultural and historical factors: this was a cultural-geographical dimension passed down to later dynasties. In the Nguyễn Dynasty, the scholars maintained this approach to describing the Other as we can see in the postscript written by Nguyễn Tư Giản to Bùi Văn Di 裴文禩 (1833–95)'s work composed during his 1878 trip to China: “The four seas and nine prefectures are so vast, how could we travel all round them? China in the past had twelve prefectures, and we can pass by four of them during diplomatic missions. Along the way, the mountains and rivers are so magnificent, and the people and customs so gorgeous, that we cannot see our fill.” (四海九州大矣。安得而徧遊?獨是中國古十二州地。使路經其四。其間山川城郭之壯,人物風俗之美,已多得未曾有觀止矣。) (Bùi 1878: 44).

From the eighteenth century, Western missionaries and powers brought new knowledge of world geography, which differed from the Confucian geographic worldview to which Vietnamese scholar-officials were accustomed. As a result, the two collided and connected, which also affected and restricted the formation of images of the Western Other for the Nguyễn scholars, especially the scholar-elites who had been traveling between places.

Geography was an important feature that Vietnamese elites utilized to make the West become the faraway Other. The Nguyễn elites used several geographic strategies to transform the West into a different and alienated Other. On the one hand, through terms like *Far West* (*viễn Tây* 遠西), *barbarians from the oceans* (*Đương di* 洋夷), and *pseudo-West*, they implied that they had come across the sea from the far west. Such names distinguished between Vietnam and the West in terms of geography and culture, including distance, constructing a kind of “nonscholarly place and people that had to travel across the sea” stereotype. The words and tone used formed a clear contrast with the descriptions of China mentioned above, which rendered these ignorant cultural and geographic characteristics of the West more salient by contrast. They based the geographic dimension in this view of the Western Other on a hierarchy of civilizations, which naturally needs a set of standards to support the comparison of the two civilizations—this was the role of Confucian principles and Hua-Yi thought, whose manifestations included the writing system, political system, clothing, and religious beliefs as mentioned above.

After their contact with Western learning, the understanding of cultural geography of Vietnamese elites slowly changed, affecting in turn the way they viewed the West. Now they admitted the world was composed of five continents; the West had many countries with specific locations, and they used

this information to reformulate a geographic Western Other. The cultural geographic characteristics remained, but now they added more realistic geographic descriptions for these countries. Scholar Nguyễn Văn Siêu's record of France is an example:

Phật Lang Co is to the northwest of Luzon. Its territory is much larger than that of Luzon, and it takes more than forty days to reach by boat. It takes about twenty days from Luzon by land. The people are honest and skillful. The clocks they make are the best among the West. Their wine is excellent. The customs and local products are like those of the Western countries, and they also believe in Catholicism. They use silver money or money with three or four corners; all have characters on them.

佛郎機在呂宋北少西。疆域較呂宋尤大，沿海舟行四十餘日方盡。由呂宋陸行約二十日可到。民情淳厚，心計奇巧，所製鐘錶甲於諸國。酒極佳。風俗土產與西洋略同，亦奉天主教。所用銀錢或三角，或四方，俱有十字文。(Nguyễn V. S. 1882: 29–30).

By this time, besides keeping the traditionally spatial description of France, they added some specific geographic information, such as particular location and the estimated time needed to journey there from Luzon. It is worth mentioning that earlier they used China as the center and point of reference to describe the time and distance to travel to and from a certain place. Now they used other places as landmarks to calculate the travel time or distance to (e.g., it would take about twenty days from Luzon by land). In addition, by adding types of spatial organization, like territorial constructions, they accentuated the opposition between themselves and the West. Besides Phật Lang Co, Nguyễn Văn Siêu also described specific names, geographic locations, and relative distances of other countries in the same way. Based on the narratives mentioned above, Nguyễn formed a geographical mechanism to divide and classify the world, thus completing his classification, imagination, and expression of the Western Other.

By adding these geographical characteristics, Western countries became more specific and reachable, rather than the vague, collectively imagined enemies of the past. Because of this, for these Vietnamese scholars, the otherness and threat became stronger and more apparent than ever. For elites such as Nguyễn Văn Siêu and Nguyễn Tư Giản, the original traditional worldview was nothing more than the Celestial Kingdom, Vietnam, Korea, Ryukyu, Japan, neighboring barbarian states, and Hạ Châu to the south. However, the coming of Western countries forced them to realize that there was a vast world with many more countries apart from China and Vietnam, and they othered these countries by notably basing on their spatial marginality as compared with the above in-group countries. Although there was no Confucius, Mencius, or Cheng Zhu in these distant Western countries, they had nonetheless developed rapidly, and now even threatened the authentic China and Vietnam. To a certain degree, this new knowledge of geography shocked the Vietnamese scholars, and their narrative delivers an extremely important message: Nguyễn Văn Siêu and some other Vietnamese literati had

come to recognize (and accept) an additional worldview, which amounted to a disruptive and significant change in their thought.

Viewing One Other through the Eyes of Another Other: Changes and Contradictions in the Way Vietnamese Scholars Saw the West

In the context of the complicated and changing situation in Vietnam in the late nineteenth century, Vietnamese scholars saw that the West and France had slowly undergone many changes and transformations. In the beginning, they adopted the deep-rooted Confucian cultural worldview and a simplifying strategy in viewing the West, just like the perspectives of officials to Hà Châu in the 1830s (Phan et al. 1994; Nguyễn T. N. 2009), but later they compromised by explaining the West in a more practical way. In the end, the way they othered the West was enriched by the addition of new and specific spatial and geographic characteristics in addition to traditional cultural identity and geography. By the end of the 1880s, Vietnamese literati not only recognized that the West had its own developments in history and culture but also realized some unique features of each member country. The West had established a new form of relationship with some Asian countries that was completely different from the traditional tributary system. This process of othering the West was long-standing and grew richer over time, mirroring the changes in and complexity of the Vietnamese worldview, as well as the knowledge production of Vietnamese literati facing the great threat of the West.

However, we cannot deny that this transition was still in an immature stage. The most obvious example is that Vietnamese elites were still more willing to view the West from a self-interested and practical perspective, while ignoring other aspects, and retained a prejudiced attitude toward Western religion and gender relations. Scholars Đặng Huy Trứ, Nguyễn Tư Giản, and Nguyễn Văn Siêu revealed their positive views of Western learning, including trade, steamers, and artillery, and praised Western wine making and watch making. But they were still reluctant to understand Catholicism. Instead, they perfunctorily relied on anti-religion incidents and teachings divergent from Confucian ethics in their rejection of Catholicism, believing that it would bring great harm to Vietnam's people and social order. This caused them to use more negative language in their works describing the West. Their narrative methods and attitudes were stubborn and one-sided. To a certain extent, this shows that unconsciously they remained reluctant to recognize the diversity of the West.

Moreover, Vietnamese scholars' othering transformations of the West were superficial and full of contradictions. As mentioned above, they had added new geographical dimensions and territorial constructions to reformulate the Western Other. Although this change was significant, it was not able to completely change their deep-rooted Confucian cultural and geographic views. The scholars Nguyễn Tư Giản and Bùi Văn Dị still maintained fantasies about the traditional Confucian view of the world in 1878, reflecting that many scholars had not totally accepted this kind of transformation and new Western geographic knowledge.

However, the crux was that, when an understanding and evaluation of the West was most urgent, Vietnamese scholars preferred to rely on the perspective of another Other rather than trust the direct experience or knowledge of scholars close to them. The West or France was not completely alien to the Nguyễn Dynasty. Nguyễn Thánh Tổ himself had a close relationship with France, so he had his army organized according to the French model and equipped with the latest weaponry, which assisted him in overthrowing the Tây Sơn Dynasty and laid the foundations of the Nguyễn Dynasty (Karlová 2007). During Nguyễn Thánh Tổ's reign, some French also held different official positions in the Nguyễn court. Later, even though king Minh Mạng adopted a conservative policy toward Western countries, he was hardly ignorant of foreign situations. During his tenure, he sent officials like Lý Văn Phúc, Đặng Văn Khởi 鄧文啟 (1794–1831), and Phan Huy Chú to various countries and regions in Southeast Asia more than forty times (Chen 1990). One purpose was to collect information about the West and its effects on local life, as well as on the actual situation in various places around Vietnam (Kelley 1998). During the Tự Đức period, negotiating with the West had become an unavoidable fact. Because of the annexation of the three provinces of Vietnam to France, he also sent missions directly to France twice. It is fortunate for us that many officials left behind records that reveal for us some information about the West. In addition to these officials and their works, another figure worth mentioning is Nguyễn Trường Tộ 阮長祚 (1830–71)—a Catholic convert. He was much experienced in working with France, so he sent strong petitions to the king of Vietnam, expressing his understanding of the West and proposals for reform (Vinh 1999). Although not all these works were printed, the manuscripts were circulating among Vietnamese scholars. Their rank and positions in the imperial court privileged these Vietnamese elites to read these works and allowed them to grasp relevant knowledge about Western powers from these exceptional firsthand materials and experiences.

Ironically, however, when describing Western powers and their reactions, whether in the first or second half of the nineteenth century, Vietnamese scholars mainly looked to Chinese books and experiences for information and answers, but hardly cited other Vietnamese natives' firsthand records—some of these would have included experiences like the petitions of Nguyễn Trường Tộ. Thus, scholars like Nguyễn Văn Siêu cited *Narrative of the Chinese Embassy to the Khan of the Tourgouth Tartar* (Yiyu lu, 異域錄), *History of Ming Dynasty* (Mingshi, 明史), and *Illustration of Macao* (Aomen tushuo, 澳門圖說), Đặng Huy Trứ learned the experience of China and Hong Kong in dealing with the West. Even in the 1890s, scholars Nguyễn Văn Tường 阮文祥 (1824–86), and Nguyễn Thuật 阮述 (1842–1911) still referred to Xu Jishi's 徐繼畲 (1795–1873) *A Brief Survey of the Maritime Circuit* (Yinghuan zhilue, 瀛寰志略) (Gadkar-Wilcox 2018). Another point worth mentioning is that, in terms of genre, most officials, including envoys sent to France like Phan Thanh Giản 潘清簡 (1796–1867), Nguyễn Khắc Đản 魏克檀 (1817–73), and Phạm Phú Thứ 范富庶 (1821–82) preferred the traditional mode of expression—poetry—as the main medium for recording the strange and exotic things they saw in the West. They rarely used notes, prose and other styles to describe their experiences or comprehensively record different events or phenomena. Therefore, their

works laid stress on personal feelings rather than on discussing the true meaning of things. Hence, it can clearly be seen that Chinese books, thoughts, and even literary genres remained as the primary source of knowledge and external packaging of knowledge for Vietnamese scholars during this period. Thus, the new world perspective of the Vietnamese elites, although changed, was still observed through the eyes of Chinese literati and the traditional lens of Confucianism, rather than created through the personal experiences of Vietnamese scholars and their actual circumstances. This third-party perspective and filtered knowledge were not completely wrong but could be influenced by the authors' political or cultural nationalism. As a result, this compromised the comprehensiveness and objectivity of the information and knowledge, and it was often difficult for Vietnamese literati to determine an appropriate response for the specific situation in Vietnam.

The Nguyễn Dynasty scholars' reliance on the Chinese Other in perceiving the West led them to see the distant West as ever distant and unfamiliar. In the end, when the enemy was already at the door, the Vietnamese court was still unable to diagnose them. In the imperial examination questions from 1862 to 1919, the Nguyễn Dynasty government repeatedly asked candidates about how to deal with the West, the development of Western civilization, Western electrical appliances, technology, and other knowledge, and how to deploy Confucian doctrines and knowledge to understand and explain Western learning and other issues, but in the end still could not find the appropriate answers.

Conclusion

In the late nineteenth century, the ways in which Vietnamese elites perceived and othered the West was through a process of simplifying and seeing it through a self-interested perspective, adding geographical dimensions to construct a faraway, uncultured West. Whatever the strategy, their understanding and the mechanism of this othering process was based on Hua-Yi thought, which posited hierarchically arranged cultural identities. Although the Vietnamese and Western civilizations had enjoyed some contacts in the past, they were limited to a small group of people and aspects, leading to many cultural clashes in the turbulent nineteenth century. The Vietnamese scholars' othering of both the West and East Asian countries was based on *cultural identity*, but there was an essential difference: one side was a different cultural identity, and the other side was a largely identical cultural identity, leading to a series of problems in the perceptions of, attitudes toward, and acceptance of the West.

It is precisely because of their different cultural identity from the Western Other that Vietnamese scholars ignored the West as a source of knowledge and could not observe the complexity and diversity of the Western Other. They were unable or unwilling to recognize that the Western Other had its own unique history and culture, and they treated Western learning from the perspective of Western learning and Vietnamese utility. Therefore, in the writings of Vietnamese scholars, the Western Other was described as a ferocious, ambitious, and nonscholarly adversary.

During the Nguyễn Dynasty, the kings and scholar-officials were the producers, propagandists, and defenders of knowledge. Therefore, the way they viewed the Western Other became a dominant stereotype in Vietnamese society. These views

and strategies were formed and maintained through the main communication channels, such as their speeches and publications, and the education system. Through this process, their thoughts became well-known norms and endured, thanks to the persistence and reproduction of internal members (i.e., other Vietnamese scholars). When most literati and people in Vietnam had no direct experience with the West, people could only rely on this stereotype to know the West and adopted the same strategy in constructing the Western Other and distancing themselves from the West; in so doing, this stereotype was maintained and propagated.

Of course, how Vietnamese scholars othered the West had been changing, but China, another huge and unavoidable Other, had a great influence on this transformation. Vietnamese scholars learned about the West through Chinese materials, neglecting their own contacts and experiences with the West and their own situation. As a result, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Vietnamese court and most of its scholars still lacked a nuanced understanding of the Western Other that was threatening their very survival and destiny.

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Appendix

Table 1. A brief introduction to the main officials discussed in this article

| No. | Name | Position | Related Writings | Remarks |
|-----|---------------------------------|---|--|--|
| 1. | Nguyễn Văn Siêu 阮文超 (1799–1872) | Held different positions in the Hanlin Academy 翰林院 and Cabinet 內閣 (Trịnh 2021: 160) | <i>Phương Đình tùy bút lục, quyển 4</i> 方亭隨筆錄 卷四 [Random Jottings of Phương Đình] (essays) | Deputy candidate 副榜 in the imperial examination in the year of Mậu Tuất (1839); served as envoy to China once in 1852. |
| 2. | Đặng Huy Trứ 鄧輝燡 (1825–74) | Held different positions in the Hanlin Academy and Ministry of Revenue 戶部 (Trịnh 2021: 212). | <i>Đặng Hoàng Trung thi sao</i> 鄧黃中詩抄 [Collected poems of Đặng Hoàng Trung] (poems) <i>Đặng Hoàng Trung văn sao</i> 鄧黃中文抄 [Collected essays of Đặng Hoàng Trung] (essays) | First candidate in the metropolitan examination 會試 in the year of Giáp Thân (1844); had direct experiences in dealing with Western officials to buy ships and collecting information about the West when traveling to China (Guangzhou, Hong Kong) in 1867 and 1872. |
| 3. | Nguyễn Tư Giản 阮思簡 (1823–90) | Held different positions in the Hanlin Academy and Ministry of Official Personal Affairs 吏部 (Trịnh 2021: 184) | <i>Yên thiều bút lục</i> 燕輶筆錄 [Jottings from the Efflorescent Carriage] (notes) | <i>Jinshi</i> 進士 in the imperial examination in the year of Giáp Thân 甲辰 (1844); dispatched as envoy to China in 1868, when one of his missions was to collect information about the West in China. |

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