

## Liberal Philosophy and Vietnamese Identity in South Vietnam's Higher Education (1956-1975): A Postcolonial Inquiry

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### Abstract

This study investigates the triadic philosophy of *humanism – nationalism – liberalism* that characterized South Vietnam's higher education (1956–1975), framing it as a distinct postcolonial epistemic formation. Drawing upon postcolonial theories (Bhabha, Mignolo) and liberal education philosophy (Nussbaum, Menand), the research conceptualizes the *Vietnamization* of “liberal education” (*giáo dục khai phóng*) as an act of epistemic disobedience – an intellectual strategy to localize Western knowledge and reclaim epistemic agency. Using historical and discourse analysis, the study identifies a *Vietnamese Liberal Hybrid Model* consisting of three interactive layers: (1) *Epistemic Layer* – the translation and reinterpretation of Western notions of humanism and freedom; (2) *Institutional Layer* – the practice of “autonomy within dependency,” reflecting the tension between academic freedom and external aid; (3) *Cultural-Social Layer* – the fusion of religious, philosophical, and modernization currents into *spiritual* and *ethical liberalism*. Findings reveal that South Vietnam's liberal education did not replicate Western models but restructured them into a postcolonial form embodying Vietnamese moral identity: *freedom linked with ethical responsibility, knowledge tied to community*. This hybrid liberal model contributes to expanding global discourses on liberal education in Asia and offers philosophical foundations for contemporary Vietnamese higher education reform toward autonomy, identity, and decolonial knowledge reconstruction.

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### Introduction

In the history of twentieth-century Vietnamese education, the period between 1956 and 1975 in South Vietnam represents a distinctive and underexplored case: a higher education system shaped by Western modernization while simultaneously striving to assert a national and cultural identity amid war and ideological polarization. Unlike the centrally planned model of the North, South Vietnam's universities operated within a pluralistic environment where French and American traditions coexisted, competed, and were selectively localized (Nga, 2015; Huong, 2023; Kelly & Slaughter, 1991). Within this hybrid intellectual space emerged the triadic philosophy of *humanism – nationalism – liberalism*, an effort to redefine the Vietnamese university's identity in a postcolonial context.

From a historical-institutional perspective, scholars such as Nga (2015) and Huong (2023) have documented the system's transition from French to American influence. However, these studies largely emphasize administrative structures, aid programs, and management reforms, leaving the

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philosophical and intellectual foundations of South Vietnam's educational system insufficiently examined. Yet contemporary journals – *Tư Tưởng, Bách Khoa, Văn Hóa Á Châu* – and writings by Nguyen Dang Thuc, Tran Van Trung, Pham Hai Ho, Thich Minh Chau, Le Manh That, and Le Thanh Tri (1972) reveal a robust localized liberal discourse (Marr, 1995; McHale, 2004; Tai, 1992). This discourse assimilated, critiqued, and reinterpreted Western liberal thought, reflecting an aspiration for academic independence and a search for balance between foreign epistemologies and Vietnamese cultural identity.

At the international level, research on liberal education in Asia has focused primarily on Japan, Korea, Singapore, and China (Marginson, 2014; Mok, 2018; Shin & Teichler, 2014). These studies illuminate globalization-localization dynamics but rarely address Vietnam – a case where liberal ideas evolved not through stability and prosperity, but through warfare and postcolonial reconstruction. Vietnam's absence from the broader conversation on "liberal education in the East" thus limits global understanding of non-Western liberal traditions.

Meanwhile, postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha (1994) and Mignolo (2000) highlight hybridity and epistemic disobedience as critical for understanding how formerly colonized societies negotiate knowledge, power, and identity. Viewed through this lens, South Vietnam's educational philosophy appears as a postcolonial hybrid formation in which Western liberal concepts were vernacularized within Vietnamese cultural and institutional realities. The rise of religiously affiliated universities (e.g., Vạn Hạnh, Đà Lạt) and the constitutionalization of academic autonomy in 1967 exemplify this dynamic.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates how the philosophy of humanism – nationalism – liberalism was articulated, localized, and institutionalized in South Vietnam's higher education. It addresses three questions: how liberal education was conceptualized; how freedom and humanism were embedded in educational practice; and what contributions this case offers to global debates on indigenization and decolonization. The study argues that South Vietnam's educational philosophy constituted a localized liberal discourse—an epistemic decolonization that redefined humanity, knowledge, and academic freedom within a postcolonial setting.

## **Theoretical framework and analytical model**

### ***Postcolonial theory and the concept of epistemic hybridity***

In the study of higher education, postcolonial theory provides a critical lens for understanding how knowledge, power, and identity are negotiated within decolonizing societies. As Said (1979) argues, colonial domination is not only political or economic but also epistemic – sustained through the imposition of Western discursive authority that defines how non-Western societies perceive themselves. Building on this foundation, Homi Bhabha (1994) introduces the concept of *hybridity* – a cultural and intellectual space where colonized societies neither merely imitate nor reject Western forms but rearticulate them within a third space of enunciation. This *third space* is a site of negotiation and transformation, where translation becomes an act of both adaptation and resistance.

Applied to higher education, postcolonial theory explains how universities in postcolonial nations often adopt Western institutional models while simultaneously localizing them to reflect indigenous values and epistemologies. Mignolo (2000) and Quijano (2007) describe this as *epistemic disobedience* – the creation of knowledge from outside Euro-American centers as an assertion of intellectual sovereignty (Santos, 2014; Bhabha & Santos, 2021). Rather than rejecting Western knowledge, postcolonial societies reinterpret it to build alternative forms of modernity.

Within the context of the Republic of Vietnam (1956-1975), the reception of Western – first French, then American – educational philosophies exemplifies such postcolonial negotiation. Intellectuals such as Trung (1967, 1968, 1971), Toan (1971), and Tri (1972) not only translated but *re-signified* liberal education through Buddhist and Confucian philosophical vocabularies, producing a distinctly Vietnamese form of *liberal humanism*. In Bhabha's terms, this was not mimicry but creative

resistance: a *hybrid epistemic act* that reconstructed Western liberal ideals within local ethical and spiritual horizons.

### **Liberal education theory and the discourse of localization**

In Western tradition – particularly within the American context – *liberal education* has long been regarded as the philosophical foundation of the modern university. It aims to cultivate free, reflective, and socially responsible citizens capable of critical reasoning. Nussbaum (1997) defines liberal education as the cultivation of *moral imagination* – the capacity to transcend one’s own perspective through empathy and ethical deliberation. Menand (2010) views it as the institutional preservation of *the right to question*, the intellectual core of democratic life.

However, when liberal education traveled to Asia, it underwent profound cultural and institutional transformations. Marginson (2014), Mok (2018), Hayhoe & Pan (2001), Kimball (1995) demonstrate that liberal arts programs in Japan, Korea, and Singapore could not simply replicate the American model; they had to adapt to Confucian moral traditions and the presence of a strong state. In these contexts, liberal education became a multi-layered construct – balancing global ideals of freedom and critical inquiry with communal duty, moral cultivation, and social harmony.

Recent works by Mou (2024) and Cheng (2021) introduce the notion of *liberal education with a local soul* – an approach that reinterprets Western liberal ideals through indigenous ethical frameworks. This perspective resonates strongly with South Vietnam’s philosophy of *humanism – nationalism – liberalism*, which combined Western ideas of academic freedom with the Vietnamese pursuit of holistic human development rooted in cultural and moral values. Here, “liberation” was not understood as radical individualism but as self-cultivation and collective enlightenment – a reinterpretation that bridges Western rationality with Eastern humanism.

### **Analytical framework: The Vietnamese liberal hybrid model**

Integrating postcolonial theory and liberal education philosophy, this study proposes the *Vietnamese Liberal Hybrid Model (VLHM)* to analyze how South Vietnam’s higher education system (1956–1975) conceptualized and practiced its liberal philosophy. The model operates across three interrelated layers:

(1) *Epistemic layer* – Translation and Reinterpretation of Knowledge: This layer examines how Western concepts such as *liberal education* and *humanism* were translated and redefined in Vietnamese intellectual discourse. The term *liberal education* was rendered as *giáo dục khai phóng* (“education for liberation”), reflecting a shift from political freedom to moral and spiritual emancipation. This act of translation itself constituted *epistemic creativity*: language became a means of resisting epistemic dominance and constructing localized meaning.

(2) *Institutional layer* – Negotiated Autonomy: “Autonomy within Dependency”: At the institutional level, universities such as Vạn Hạnh, Đà Lạt, Huế, and Sài Gòn embodied the dialectic between autonomy and dependency. While influenced by American models through financial and technical aid, these institutions sought to maintain academic self-governance and intellectual direction. Their governance structures – credit-based curricula, faculty councils, and scholarly journals in Vietnamese – illustrate a negotiated autonomy that balanced external dependence with internal freedom. This reflects what Bhabha (1994) calls *hybrid agency*: the ability to act creatively within constraint.

(3) *Cultural-social layer* – Ethical and Spiritual Dimensions of Liberalism: The third layer situates education within Vietnam’s cultural and religious fabric. Distinct from Western liberalism, which prioritizes individual autonomy, Vietnamese liberal education emphasized ethical freedom – freedom intertwined with moral responsibility and communal solidarity. Universities like Vạn Hạnh (Buddhist) and Đà Lạt (Catholic) exemplified this synthesis by fusing modern liberal pedagogy with

spiritual humanism, giving rise to two unique intellectual forms: *spiritual liberalism* and *ethical liberalism*. These reflect the deeper cultural identity of Vietnamese liberal thought.

Together, these three layers form a dynamic structure in which global and local elements continually interact. The *Vietnamese Liberal Hybrid Model* thus reframes South Vietnam's higher education as a *postcolonial hybrid discourse*: a site of translation, negotiation, and reinvention where knowledge, institution, and culture intersect. Rather than a derivative imitation of Western liberal education, it represents an indigenous epistemology – an early Southeast Asian example of *decolonial liberalism* that balances academic freedom, cultural identity, and social ethics.

By combining postcolonial and liberal education theories, this analytical framework moves beyond traditional “influence-comparison” approaches. It conceptualizes South Vietnam's universities as epistemic actors that engaged in creative negotiation with Western modernity. The *Vietnamese Liberal Hybrid Model* also enables dialogue with contemporary debates on *decolonizing liberal education* in Asia, positioning Vietnam as a distinctive case from Southeast Asia where liberalism was redefined through postcolonial hybridity and ethical localization.

## Research methods

### Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research design that integrates historical analysis and discourse analysis within a postcolonial theoretical framework. The aim is not to describe organizational processes or educational policies, but to decode the discourse of liberal educational philosophy constructed in South Vietnamese universities during 1956-1975.

This approach aligns with postcolonial research, which conceptualizes knowledge as a socio-cultural product rather than a neutral system. As Foucault (1972) argues, *discourse* is a subtle form of power that governs how people speak and think about the world. Therefore, discourse analysis helps reveal how the philosophy of *humanism–nationalism–liberalism* functioned both as a product and as a response of Vietnamese intellectuals to the Western epistemic order.

The method serves two purposes:

1. To reconstruct the intellectual history of South Vietnamese education through textual decoding of academic and policy documents; and
2. To conceptualize a Vietnamese Liberal Hybrid Model, interpreted as the outcome of postcolonial knowledge negotiation.

### Data sources

The study draws upon both primary and secondary sources.

Primary sources include academic writings – articles, monographs, and speeches – from *Tu Tưởng, Đại Học, Văn Hóa Á Châu, Bách Khoa*, and *Vạn Hạnh* magazine (1956-1975). These were the main forums where liberal educational philosophy was articulated and debated. Representative authors include Trung (1967), Toan (1971), Tri (1972), and Thien (1967). Administrative and legal documents were also examined, such as the *1967 Constitution of the Republic of Vietnam* (chapter on university autonomy), *Vạn Hạnh University Annual Report* (1973), and educational reform reports from 1971-1974.

Secondary sources include Vietnamese studies (Nga, 2015; Huong, 2023), which provide institutional and historical context, and international scholarship on liberal education and postcolonialism, such as Nussbaum (1997), Menand (2010), Bhabha (1994), Mignolo (2000), Marginson (2014), Mok (2018), Cheng (2021), and Mou (2024).

### Sampling and selection criteria

The analysis focuses on the period 1956-1975, from the establishment of autonomous universities in South Vietnam to national reunification. Texts were selected according to the following criteria:

1. Direct relevance to educational philosophy or objectives;

2. Reflection on the relationship between Western knowledge and Vietnamese identity;
3. Evidence of negotiation between “liberalism” and “nationalism.”

#### *Analytical procedures*

The research process comprised four main stages:

1. Corpus construction: All texts were digitized and organized chronologically and by genre (academic, policy, and public discourse).
2. Thematic coding: Texts were coded by key terms – “liberal,” “humanistic,” “national,” “university autonomy,” and “academic freedom.” Each theme was labeled and cross-referenced within the frameworks of liberal arts and postcolonial hybridity.
3. Discourse analysis: Following Fairclough’s (1992) model, discourse was analyzed at three levels: a) Textual level: Linguistic expressions reflecting value systems; b) Discursive practice: How texts reproduce or challenge Western epistemic power; c) Social practice: The relationship between liberal discourse and Vietnam’s postcolonial context ().
4. Interpretation and generalization: Based on the coding results, the study formulates the Vietnamese Liberal Hybrid Model, expressed across three dimensions – epistemic, institutional, and cultural.

#### **Validity and reliability**

To ensure credibility and authenticity, the study follows three principles:

1. Cross-checking domestic and international materials to avoid unilateral interpretation;
2. Preserving the original language when quoting South Vietnamese texts to retain epistemic nuance;
3. Combining discourse analysis with historical contextualization to achieve triangulation among data, theory, and context.

#### **Limitations**

This study relies primarily on textual analysis and lacks full access to the archives of universities dissolved after 1975. Some materials (e.g., internal manuscripts or oral testimonies) could enrich the interpretation but remain unavailable. Nevertheless, within a postcolonial analytical framework, re-reading publicly accessible texts sufficiently reconstructs the intellectual structure and liberal spirit of the era.

#### **Significance**

The methodological approach not only describes a historical case but also repositions Vietnamese knowledge within the global academic map, affirming that South Vietnam did not merely *receive* but also *produce* knowledge through the localization of liberal education.

By integrating historical and discourse analysis, the study treats South Vietnamese higher education as a discursive epistemic entity inseparable from power, culture, and identity. This framework enables international academic dialogue, recognizing Vietnam as a distinctive case of decolonizing liberal education in Southeast Asia.

#### **Findings**

##### ***The emergence of a liberal educational discourse (1956-1963)***

The years between 1956 and 1963 marked the formative stage of South Vietnam’s higher education and the emergence of a new intellectual discourse centered on *liberal education* (*giáo dục khai phóng*). This period corresponded with the establishment of a modern university system under the First Republic, when the government sought to lay both institutional and philosophical foundations for education in the postcolonial era. Within the political and cultural context of reconstruction, the

call for *liberal education* reflected an aspiration to rebuild the human being – *to educate the whole person (giáo dục toàn diện con người)* – as the ethical core of national modernization.

The Ministry of National Education (1972) articulated the goal of education as “developing human beings in their intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions.” This vision revealed an effort to transcend colonial technocracy and ideological instrumentalism by emphasizing human dignity as the ultimate purpose of learning. Education was not to serve the state or the market, but to cultivate free and responsible persons. Influenced by both Catholic personalism and Western humanism, this early philosophy treated the individual as a moral subject endowed with reason and conscience – one who must participate actively in the renewal of national life.

Academic journals such as *Tư Tưởng*, *Đại Học*, and *Bách Khoa* began publishing essays discussing *freedom of thought*, *autonomy of knowledge*, and *education as liberation*. The term *khai phóng* –literally “to open or release” – was used to designate a form of education that liberates the mind from ignorance and dogma. Early university leaders and scholars (Nguyễn Đăng Thục, Nguyễn Văn Trung, Trần Văn Toàn, among others) argued that the task of education was to harmonize intellect and morality, knowledge and national consciousness.

At this stage, *liberal education* became a response to the double burden of colonial legacy and ideological division. It sought to assert Vietnam’s spiritual independence through the moral reconstruction of the individual. The discourse emphasized *humanism* as the foundation, *freedom* as the means, and *cultural identity* as the goal. Thus, even before being systematized in policy, the idea of *liberal education* already carried philosophical depth: it was both a pedagogical principle and a moral declaration of postcolonial selfhood.

### ***The philosophical triad of humanism – nationalism – liberalism***

During the mid-1960s, South Vietnam’s intellectual discourse on education gradually crystallized into a coherent philosophical triad: humanism – nationalism – liberalism (*nhân bản – dân tộc – khai phóng*). This framework provided the moral and epistemic foundation for the formation of the southern university model. Emerging from both academic reflection and policy debates, the triad represented a conscious attempt to define education as a spiritual and ethical mission—an act of rebuilding the Vietnamese human being (*con người Việt Nam*) after the disruptions of colonialism and war.

*Humanism* (nhân bản) was placed at the center of this triad. It referred not merely to human-centered knowledge but to a moral vision of the person as an autonomous, responsible being endowed with reason and compassion. Thinkers such as Nguyễn Đăng Thục, Trần Văn Toàn, and Nguyễn Văn Trung argued that education must begin from *the dignity of the human person (phẩm giá con người)*. The educated individual was expected to develop intellect (*trí*), moral consciousness (*đức*), and emotional harmony (*tình*), thereby fulfilling the Confucian and Buddhist ideals of self-cultivation while engaging with modern humanistic thought. Education was conceived as an ethical process through which humans become free by becoming moral.

*Nationalism* (dân tộc), in this philosophical system, was not understood as political exclusivity or anti-foreign sentiment. Rather, it expressed the will to affirm Vietnam’s cultural identity and moral heritage in dialogue with the world. The “national” in education was thus cultural rather than ideological – it meant that knowledge should grow from the country’s own historical experiences, languages, and moral traditions. To be national was to be rooted; to be humanistic was to be open. Many university scholars saw in this balance the possibility of a modernity that does not erase the soul of the nation. National identity was therefore not a barrier to universal knowledge but the condition for participating in it with authenticity.

*Liberalism* (khai phóng) provided the dynamic and creative dimension of the triad. Literally meaning “to open” or “to liberate,” it was interpreted as the intellectual freedom necessary for both personal growth and social transformation. Within university philosophy, *liberal education* signified an education of openness – liberating the mind from prejudice, dogma, and the mechanical imitation

of the West. It invited learners to think critically, to question authority, and to engage in dialogue with diverse worldviews. Yet, unlike Western individualist liberalism, the Vietnamese notion of *khai phóng* retained a moral orientation: freedom was inseparable from responsibility, and intellectual autonomy was anchored in ethical self-discipline.

Taken together, the triad of *humanism – nationalism – liberalism* articulated a philosophy of education that sought harmony between the individual and the community, between modern rationality and spiritual tradition. It offered an indigenous synthesis that positioned education as both the instrument and the essence of human liberation. Within the postcolonial condition of South Vietnam, this triad became not only an intellectual framework but also a moral compass for rebuilding a society grounded in dignity, identity, and openness.

### ***Institutionalization of liberal education (1964-1972)***

The philosophical ideals of *humanism – nationalism – liberalism* took institutional shape during the Second Republic of Vietnam (1967–1975), a period marked by constitutional reform and the rapid expansion of universities. Liberal education, once a discourse of intellectual aspiration, was gradually transformed into an institutional framework embedded in law, governance, and curriculum design. This process reflected not only administrative modernization but also a conscious effort to translate philosophical values into academic practice.

The 1967 Constitution of the Republic of Vietnam explicitly affirmed *academic freedom* and *university autonomy* (*tự trị đại học*) as constitutional principles. Article 10 declared that universities had the right to organize teaching and research independently, to elect their own leaders, and to determine curricula according to scholarly criteria. These legal provisions gave philosophical weight to the earlier vision of *education for the whole person* (*giáo dục toàn diện con người*), thereby institutionalizing the link between freedom, responsibility, and truth.

Within this framework, different universities developed distinctive interpretations of *liberal education*, each reflecting their cultural and religious foundations:

- Vn Hnh University (founded 1964), established under Buddhist leadership, articulated the philosophy of *Buddhist humanism*. Education was defined as a path toward inner liberation (*giải thoát nội tâm*) and social engagement (*dẫn thân xã hội*). Its curriculum combined Buddhist philosophy with modern humanities, emphasizing ethical awareness, meditation, and civic duty.
- Đà Lạt University, a Catholic institution, developed a *personalist humanism* grounded in Christian theology and Western humanist tradition. Its educational goal was to form “the whole person” – intellectually, morally, and spiritually – while maintaining dialogue between faith and reason.
- Saigon and Huế Universities, as public and secular institutions, embodied the civic and professional dimensions of liberal education. Their curricula emphasized critical reasoning, general education, and the independence of scientific research as essential to national modernization.

Across these institutions, *curriculum reform* played a central role in realizing the philosophy of liberal education. Programs introduced general-education courses, electives, and interdisciplinary studies, shifting away from the colonial system of rigid specialization. Universities launched academic journals – *Đại Học*, *Tư Tưởng*, *Vn Hnh*, *Bách Khoa* – that served as platforms for philosophical and cultural debate. These journals became the intellectual laboratories of liberal thought, where Vietnamese scholars translated, interpreted, and contested Western ideas such as existentialism, phenomenology, and Thomism through the lens of Vietnamese ethical values.

Institutional autonomy, however, was not absolute. Universities depended heavily on foreign technical and financial assistance, particularly from the United States (USAID, Michigan State, Notre Dame programs). Yet rather than undermining autonomy, this dependency often stimulated internal debate about self-reliance and academic direction. Many rectors and professors viewed “autonomy within dependency” as a necessary paradox of postcolonial modernity – a way to learn from the West without losing the integrity of Vietnamese thought. In this sense, autonomy was not only a legal

condition but also a moral stance: the dignity of intellectual self-determination (Chapman & Adams, 2002; Kelly & Slaughter, 1991).

Through these institutional developments, the triadic philosophy of *humanism – nationalism – liberalism* moved from abstract ideal to lived practice. Universities became cultural spaces where moral formation, civic responsibility, and academic inquiry converged. The *liberal education movement* of this period thus represented a distinctive Vietnamese model of modernization – one that sought not to Westernize the mind but to *liberate it through culture*.

In short, the institutionalization of liberal education during 1964-1972 embodied an educational humanism rooted in Vietnam's moral traditions yet open to global knowledge. It realized, in practice, the vision of a university as both a sanctuary of free inquiry and a moral community – where education became the means by which a nation reasserted its soul.

### ***Liberalism as epistemic decolonization***

In the intellectual life of South Vietnam, *liberalism (khai phóng)* was not conceived merely as a political or pedagogical idea imported from the West. It was reinterpreted as a *moral and epistemic act of decolonization* – a way to liberate the mind from both colonial dependence and ideological captivity. This reinterpretation turned education into a spiritual practice of freedom, rooted in ethical reflection and the rediscovery of Vietnamese cultural selfhood.

After nearly a century of colonial domination, the Vietnamese intellectual world remained deeply marked by the hierarchy of Western epistemic authority. Scientific rationality, positivism, and bureaucratic technocracy had defined what counted as “modern knowledge.” Against this background, South Vietnamese scholars in the 1960s – particularly Nguyễn Văn Trung, Trần Văn Toàn, and Phạm Công Thiện – attempted to reclaim epistemic sovereignty by *rethinking modernity from within*. They did not reject Western philosophy; instead, they entered into dialogue with it, translating and re-signifying it through local moral vocabularies.

Nguyễn Văn Trung's works on *humanistic freedom* (1967) proposed that education must “liberate the Vietnamese mind from imitation” (*giải phóng trí thức khỏi sự bắt chước*). Toàn (1971) viewed philosophy as a journey of self-understanding – a path to recover human authenticity amid imported doctrines. Their writings, though framed within Western existentialist and phenomenological terms, sought to restore the moral agency of the Vietnamese intellectual subject. In doing so, they enacted what Walter Mignolo (2000) would later call *epistemic disobedience*: the refusal to accept a single, universal center of knowledge.

This *decolonial liberalism* took concrete shape through three interrelated intellectual practices:

1. Translation as epistemic rebellion – Western concepts such as *freedom, autonomy, and liberal education* were translated into Vietnamese metaphors – *tự do học thuật, tự trị đại học, giáo dục khai phóng* – that carried distinct moral resonances. Each translation involved reinterpretation, shifting meaning from individual autonomy to ethical self-discipline, from rational critique to moral self-cultivation. Translation thus became an act of intellectual authorship: to translate was to transform.
2. Ethical re-signification of freedom – Unlike the Western liberal tradition that emphasizes the individual's right to act, the Vietnamese discourse framed freedom as the *capacity to act rightly*. “Freedom” (*tự do*) was linked to *đạo lý* (moral order): to be free was to live according to conscience. This ethical turn redefined liberal education as a moral pedagogy of responsibility rather than unbounded autonomy.
3. Dialogical synthesis of knowledge traditions – South Vietnamese thinkers positioned Western philosophies in conversation with Buddhist, Confucian, and Christian moral doctrines. This dialogical approach gave rise to what might be called a *hybrid moral epistemology* – a way of knowing that combined critical rationality with spiritual introspection. It acknowledged the necessity of scientific rigor while affirming the primacy of human meaning.

Through these practices, *liberal education* became an instrument of epistemic liberation. It dismantled colonial hierarchies of knowledge not by confrontation but by *internal transformation* –



absorbing the rational tools of modernity while re-rooting them in Vietnamese ethical consciousness. This subtle form of decolonization worked within the language of the colonizer yet subverted its authority through reinterpretation.

Ultimately, *liberalism as epistemic decolonization* in South Vietnam embodied a double gesture: *appropriating Western knowledge to transcend it, and reviving indigenous wisdom to renew it*. The *khai phóng* ideal thus extended beyond the classroom; it became a moral stance toward life and a philosophical expression of postcolonial subjectivity. Within this horizon, to educate meant not merely to learn what others had discovered, but to *recreate knowledge as one's own*, grounded in cultural identity and ethical reflection.

### **The Vietnamese liberal hybrid model in practice**

Synthesizing the preceding analyses, this study conceptualizes the *Vietnamese Liberal Hybrid Model* as the distinctive epistemic structure underlying South Vietnam's higher education during 1956-1975. The model captures how global and local elements were woven together to form a *postcolonial liberalism* that was at once philosophical, institutional, and cultural. Rather than a derivative of Western liberal arts education, the Vietnamese Liberal Hybrid Model represents a process of *creative adaptation* – a rearticulation of universal values through Vietnamese moral and spiritual vocabularies.

The model comprises *three interrelated layers*, each reflecting a dimension of postcolonial hybridity.

#### **(1) The epistemic layer – reinterpretation of western knowledge:**

At the epistemic level, South Vietnamese scholars approached Western knowledge not as an authority to be imitated but as a dialogue to be renewed. Translation and reinterpretation were central to this process. Concepts such as *liberal education*, *autonomy*, *freedom*, and *humanism* were rendered into Vietnamese terms – *giáo dục khai phóng*, *tự trị đại học*, *tự do học thuật*, *nhân bản* – that infused them with local ethical meaning.

For example, *khai phóng* (literally, “to open or release”) carried connotations of moral enlightenment and inner freedom rather than unbounded individualism. In Buddhist and Confucian contexts, liberation meant the emancipation of the self from attachment and ignorance; in Catholic and personalist discourse, it meant the realization of conscience and truth. Through these reinterpretations, Western liberal ideals were absorbed into an indigenous framework of moral cultivation (*tu dưỡng*).

This epistemic layer thus illustrates a process of translation as transformation – a re-signification of modern knowledge through Vietnamese humanistic language. It constitutes the intellectual foundation of the *Vietnamese Liberal Hybrid Model*.

#### **(2) The institutional layer – “autonomy within dependency”:**

At the institutional level, universities became the living laboratories of this hybrid liberalism. South Vietnam's higher education system, though influenced by American aid and expertise, pursued its own vision of autonomy and moral responsibility. This condition – often described by contemporaries as *“tự trị trong liên hệ”* (“autonomy within relationship”) – reflected the paradox of postcolonial modernity: dependence as the condition of self-determination.

Universities such as Vạn Hạnh, Đà Lạt, Huế, and Saigon expressed this negotiated autonomy through diverse organizational and curricular forms. Vạn Hạnh University institutionalized Buddhist humanism, treating education as spiritual liberation and social service. Đà Lạt University cultivated Catholic personalism, emphasizing conscience and moral leadership. Public universities like Huế and Sài Gòn focused on civic humanism and scientific rationality, while maintaining curricula grounded in ethics and national culture.

Despite reliance on foreign aid (notably through USAID and the Michigan State-Notre Dame programs), these universities asserted their intellectual independence by designing Vietnamese-

language curricula, publishing scholarly journals, and fostering public dialogue on the philosophy of education. Institutional autonomy was understood less as bureaucratic independence than as *moral integrity* – the freedom to define educational purpose in accordance with cultural and ethical values.

*(3) The cultural-social layer – ethical and spiritual liberalism:*

The third layer situates liberal education within Vietnam's cultural and spiritual traditions. South Vietnamese intellectuals viewed education not only as an academic pursuit but as a moral journey aimed at forming the "whole person." The *liberal spirit* (*thần thái khai phóng*) was intertwined with *đạo lý Việt Nam* – the ethical codes of harmony, compassion, and duty.

From Buddhist and Confucian perspectives, freedom was inseparable from self-discipline; from Catholic and personalist views, autonomy was bound to moral truth. This convergence produced what may be called *ethical liberalism* – a synthesis of Western freedom and Eastern virtue. Education's ultimate goal was *freedom through moral cultivation*, a liberation that begins from within.

Universities, in this sense, functioned as *moral communities* (*cộng đồng đạo học*), where teachers and students jointly pursued intellectual rigor and inner refinement. Liberal education thus became both a cultural ethos and a social practice – manifested in academic debates, campus life, and civic engagement.

***Synthesis: a hybrid model of decolonial liberalism***

Taken together, these three layers constitute a coherent model of *postcolonial liberalism*. The Vietnamese Liberal Hybrid Model embodies the principle that freedom and identity, universality and locality, reason and morality can coexist through dialogical balance. It challenges the binary opposition between "Western modernity" and "Vietnamese tradition," proposing instead a third space of education: *modern yet humane, autonomous yet relational, liberal yet ethical*.

In the global history of education, the Hybrid Model of Decolonial Liberalism stands as an early Southeast Asian experiment in *decolonial knowledge formation* – a vision of the university as both a sanctuary of free inquiry and a site of cultural renewal. Its enduring insight is that education becomes truly "liberal" only when it enables a people to think with their own mind and feel with their own moral heart.

## **Discussion**

***Theoretical implications: liberal education as a postcolonial project***

The findings suggest that South Vietnam's higher education between 1956 and 1975 can be understood not merely as an institutional adaptation of Western models but as a *postcolonial project of epistemic reappropriation*. By integrating *humanism* – *nationalism* – *liberalism* into a coherent philosophical triad, South Vietnamese intellectuals localized the meaning of liberal education and redefined it as both an ethical and cultural endeavor.

This challenges the dominant global narrative that treats liberal education as an inherently Western epistemology. In postcolonial settings, "liberation" (*khai phóng*) is not equivalent to the Western liberal ideal of individual autonomy; rather, it reflects a collective moral awakening – *freedom within ethical responsibility*. In this sense, South Vietnam's liberal discourse can be read as an early form of *decolonial liberalism*, a hybrid model that subverts the epistemic hierarchy of Western modernity by translating its principles into local ethical frameworks.

Theoretically, this interpretation extends Bhabha's notion of *hybridity* and Mignolo's *epistemic disobedience* into the educational domain. It demonstrates that hybridization is not a symptom of dependency but an act of creative re-signification – a strategy of producing new epistemic meaning within the tension between universality and locality. Thus, Vietnam's liberal education experience contributes to a broader postcolonial understanding of how knowledge systems are indigenized in non-Western societies without forfeiting intellectual rigor or openness.

*Regional comparison: Vietnam in the Asian liberal education landscape*

When situated within the broader Asian context, the Vietnamese experience stands apart from the trajectories of Japan, Korea, Singapore, and China. In East Asia, liberal education reforms were introduced primarily under conditions of economic modernization and political stability, allowing universities to integrate Western liberal arts into existing Confucian traditions (Mok, 2018; Marginson, 2014). South Vietnam, by contrast, pursued its liberal project in the midst of war, nation-building, and ideological division.

While Japanese and Korean universities emphasized *critical rationality* and *global competitiveness*, South Vietnam framed liberal education as a moral and spiritual process – a “cultural redemption” after colonial trauma. Its intellectuals sought to rebuild identity through moral cultivation and dialogue with global knowledge, not through technocratic modernization. This emphasis on *ethical freedom* and *spiritual liberalism* differentiated Vietnam from the pragmatist orientations of neighboring systems.

In this sense, South Vietnam’s liberal education was less an imported reform and more an *existential project*: the search for meaning, identity, and humanity within conditions of postcolonial fragility. This makes the Vietnamese case particularly relevant to current debates on *knowledge pluralism* and *Asian liberalism*, offering a Southeast Asian model where liberal education evolved as moral resistance rather than as elite human capital formation.

***Epistemic reconstruction: from translation to hybrid knowledge***

One of the key conceptual contributions of this study lies in identifying *translation* as the central epistemic mechanism of hybrid knowledge formation. The act of translating Western concepts such as *liberal education*, *autonomy*, or *freedom* into Vietnamese not only carried linguistic meaning but also transformed epistemic boundaries.

In South Vietnam’s intellectual discourse, translation became a space of negotiation: *giáo dục khai phóng* (“liberating education”) diverged from its Western referent to emphasize ethical awakening; *tự trị đại học* (“university autonomy”) invoked moral self-governance rather than bureaucratic independence; *tự do học thuật* (“academic freedom”) was interpreted as responsibility to truth and community. These semantic shifts reveal a *vernacular epistemology* – a local grammar of liberalism that preserved ethical depth while accommodating modern rationality.

This process exemplifies what Santos (2014) calls *ecologies of knowledge* – a coexistence of epistemic systems grounded in distinct cultural logics. In Vietnam’s case, the hybridization of Buddhist compassion, Confucian self-cultivation, and Western humanism produced a plural epistemic field that anticipated contemporary global movements toward *decolonial humanism*. Thus, the Vietnamese Liberal Hybrid Model (VLHM) demonstrates how translation, rather than imitation, can generate genuinely new intellectual forms.

***Contemporary relevance: reclaiming liberal humanism in Vietnamese higher education reform***

The legacy of South Vietnam’s liberal education, though interrupted after 1975, holds enduring relevance for contemporary Vietnam. Since the 2000s, debates on university autonomy, academic freedom, and liberal education have resurfaced in both policy and scholarly discourse (Son, 2020; Hieu, 2022). However, these discussions often rely on Western institutional frameworks without adequately engaging the indigenous intellectual heritage of liberal humanism developed during the southern era.

Revisiting the philosophical foundation of *humanism – nationalism – liberalism* provides not only historical continuity but also epistemic self-awareness for reform. The Vietnamese Liberal Hybrid Model (VLHM) offers three insights for current higher education policy:

1. Epistemic autonomy – Universities should be empowered to produce knowledge grounded in local ethical and cultural values, not merely adapt imported paradigms.
2. Moral cultivation – Education for freedom must integrate character formation and civic ethics, bridging the gap between competence and conscience.

3. Dialogical modernity – Vietnam’s engagement with global academia should be dialogical rather than imitative, recognizing hybridity as a creative resource, not a deficit.

By reclaiming its liberal humanistic tradition, Vietnam can redefine modernization as *ethical modernization*: a synthesis between global rationality and national moral identity. This approach would not only strengthen higher education reform but also reposition Vietnam as an active participant in global intellectual pluralism.

In sum, the discussion underscores that South Vietnam’s liberal education was not an isolated historical phenomenon but part of a longer continuum of epistemic self-assertion. Its hybrid liberalism remains a philosophical resource for reimagining the university in postcolonial Vietnam – a university that liberates by cultivating both intellect and virtue.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the philosophy of liberal education in South Vietnam (1956–1975) through a postcolonial lens, revealing a distinctive effort to reconstruct knowledge and identity under conditions of geopolitical dependency, ideological conflict, and cultural pluralism. By situating the triadic philosophy of humanism – nationalism – liberalism within a framework of postcolonial hybridity, the analysis demonstrates that South Vietnam’s higher education was not a derivative reproduction of Western models but a creative epistemic project aimed at reclaiming intellectual autonomy and cultural agency.

The emergence of liberal education during this period reflected a broader attempt by Vietnamese intellectuals to harmonize modernity with indigenous moral traditions. Rather than adopting liberal education (giáo dục khai phóng) as a Western construct, they reinterpreted it as an ethical practice of self-liberation and holistic human development. In this hybrid formulation, freedom was anchored in responsibility, autonomy was tied to moral order, and knowledge was directed toward cultural renewal. Liberal education thus became both a philosophical foundation and a strategy for national reconstruction.

This study contributes theoretically to postcolonial educational scholarship by extending Bhabha’s concept of hybridity and Mignolo’s epistemic disobedience into the realm of higher education. The proposed Vietnamese Liberal Hybrid Model illustrates how translation and vernacularization function as epistemic acts capable of generating alternative knowledge systems. It challenges assumptions of Western universality by showing how liberal ideas can be transformed through local ethical vocabularies and spiritual traditions.

Empirical findings from academic writings, university charters, and policy documents indicate that South Vietnam’s liberal philosophy operated through three interconnected dimensions: epistemic reinterpretation of Western concepts; institutional negotiation expressed through “autonomy within dependency”; and cultural synthesis that rooted academic freedom in ethical humanism and communal responsibility. Together, these dimensions position South Vietnam’s universities as active agents in a broader postcolonial negotiation of knowledge.

For contemporary Vietnam, the findings underscore the need to balance current emphases on autonomy, quality assurance, and global integration with renewed attention to epistemic autonomy and ethical formation. The Vietnamese Liberal Hybrid Model offers three implications: strengthening local intellectual agency, embedding ethical development into curricula, and recognizing hybridity as a creative pathway for modernization rather than a deviation from global norms.

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