Vietnamese Family Culture from Tradition to Modernity: A Three-Pillar Philosophical Reading of Differential Erosion

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Abstract
Vietnamese family scholarship is large and competent, yet three tendencies constrain its reach: it engages little with English-language Vietnam-studies literature, treats Party-State family policy and normative content as horizon rather than analytical object, and lacks a taxonomy of what was lost or transformed when truyền thống gave way to hiện đại. This article makes four moves. First, it hardens three pillars of traditional Vietnamese family ethics (gia đình là tổ ấm (family-as-home), kính trên nhường dưới (respect for elder, yielding to younger), and đầu bạc răng long (lifelong fidelity)) into a named philosophical taxonomy: a Vietnamese anthropology of constitutive relationality (Tu Weiming) Vietnamized through Phan Ngọc's Việt hóa. Second, it reads the 1945–1986 socialist transformation and the 1986 Đổi Mới pivot as political-philosophical reconfigurations of the family, not mere policy succession. Third, it reads three contemporary erosions — communal-relational to individual-recreational; elder-as-moral-center to elder-as-care-recipient under material-transactional logic; durative-monogamous to consumer-disposable — as transitions between two social imaginaries in Taylor's sense. Fourth, it locates the Vietnamese case between East Asian compressed modernity and Vietnamese particularity, arguing that neither alone captures the trajectory. The philosophical contribution: Vietnamese family ethics is neither a heritage to be preserved unchanged nor a tradition that has dissolved. It is a resource demanding conscious cultivation, đến hiện đại từ truyền thống, arriving at modernity from tradition, and may offer a model for non-Western societies engaging modernity.
Key words: Vietnamese family culture, three-pillar taxonomy, Việt hóa, social imaginaries, compressed modernity, conscious cultivation, philosophical anthropology

1. Introduction

Two phrases bracket the question this article tries to answer. The first is the Vietnamese ideal of *ngũ đại đồng đường* — five generations under one roof — which captures, in a single image, the relational-communal vision of family life that has organized Vietnamese moral imagination for centuries. The second is a contemporary Vietnamese expression that has crossed into vernacular use: "when the TV breaks, throw it away and buy a new one." Between those two phrases lies the transformation we are trying to understand.

Vietnamese family scholarship is large and competent. Le Ngoc Van (2012), Nguyen Huu Minh (2014, 2021, 2025), Bui Quang Thanh (2022), Trần Đình Hượu (1996), and Le Thi (2014) all have major contributions to the field, and the policy literature anchored by Nguyen Phu Trong (2021) gives the work an institutional horizon. Yet three internal tendencies have constrained its reach. First, the body of work is largely Vietnamese-internal: it rarely engages the substantial English-language Vietnam-studies literature — Hy V. Luong (2003), Werner (2009), Rydström (2003), Drummond and Rydström (2004), Bélanger (2000), Earl (2014), Jamieson (1995) — that has been written about Vietnamese family life from outside. Second, it tends to operate within Party-State family policy and normative content as a horizon rather than as one position among others; Nguyen Phu Trong's "prosperous, progressive, civilized, happy" formulation is more often taken as a destination than as an analytical object. Third — and most importantly for what follows — it has not produced a clean taxonomy of *what*

was being lost, or transformed, when "tradition" gave way to "modernity." The reference category for *truyền thống* has remained under-theorized.

In this article, we make the following four moves. First, we harden three pillars of traditional Vietnamese family ethics — *gia đình là tổ ấm* (family-as-home); *kính trên nhường dưới* (respect for the elder, yielding to the younger); and *đầu bạc răng long* (lifelong fidelity, captured in the proverb of "gray hair and loose teeth") — into a named taxonomy, drawing on Trần Đình Hượu (1991, 1996), Phan Kế Bính (1999), Bui Xuan My (2007), Vu Ngoc Khanh (2007), Tran Ngoc Them (2016), and Đinh Gia Thuyết's annotated edition of *Gia huấn ca* (1952). Second, we reframe that taxonomy *philosophically*: the three pillars articulate a Vietnamese philosophical anthropology of constitutive relationality (Tu Weiming, 1989, on Confucian religiousness), Vietnamized through Phan Ngọc's *Việt hóa* (Phan Ngoc, 2002) into a synthesis that is neither pure Chinese Confucianism nor a wholesale local invention. Third, we trace each pillar through three transformative moments — the socialist transformation of 1945–1986 (read philosophically as a political-philosophical reconfiguration of family life), the Đổi Mới reconfiguration after 1986, and the contemporary period — with each contemporary erosion read as a transition between two social imaginaries in Charles Taylor's sense (Taylor, 2004). Fourth, we read the resulting Vietnamese trajectory through the East Asian compressed-modernity framework (Chang, 2010; Ochiai, 2014; Therborn, 2004), engaging that framework as a comparative-philosophical interlocutor while drawing on Trần Đình Hượu's apparatus for the tradition–modernity transition to refuse both wholesale Westernization and traditionalist preservation.

A note on stance. The article is Vietnamese-authority-friendly but analytically honest. Nguyen Phu Trong's family formula is engaged, not bracketed; so is the Confucian inheritance — but named explicitly, as Vietnamized Confucianism via Phan Ngọc, and read philosophically rather than left as unspoken substrate. Marxist methodology and the Vietnam Academy register are welcomed: Vietnamese Marxist family thought is one of the philosophical resources we hold in productive tension with Tu Weiming, Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas, Trần Đình Hượu, and Phan Ngọc.

The research question can be stated compactly. What is the structure of Vietnamese family tradition, what is happening to it under contemporary conditions, and how does the Vietnamese trajectory compare to the East Asian compressed-modernity pattern? The methodological apparatus is interdisciplinary cultural-philosophical analysis drawing on Vietnamese-internal scholarship, English-language Vietnam studies, comparative East Asian literature, and primary-source legal documents — the 1959 and 2014 Marriage and Family Laws read as political-philosophical reconfigurations rather than as policy episodes. The seven sections that follow develop the argument: traditional family culture as a distinctive philosophical-cultural synthesis; the socialist and Đổi Mới reconfigurations; the three contemporary erosions read as social-imaginary transitions; cross-cutting transversal forces (ICT, individualism, the repositioning of women); the comparative-philosophical question of where Vietnam sits between East Asian compressed modernity and Vietnamese particularity; and a concluding statement on the philosophical task of conscious cultivation.

2. Traditional Vietnamese family culture: a distinctive philosophical-cultural synthesis

Our purpose in this section is narrower than a textbook survey of the Vietnamese family. We want to establish the three pillars cleanly enough — and philosophically enough — that they can carry the analytical weight of the rest of the article.

Vietnamese family ethics articulates a philosophical anthropology of *constitutive relationality* — Tu Weiming's (1989) term for the Confucian vision of the human as a being whose self is realized through, not despite, embeddedness in family, community, and cosmic order. The Confucian way of being human, on Tu Weiming's reading, is

ultimate self-transformation as a communal act and as a faithful dialogical response to the transcendent; the family is the primary locus where this transformation is enacted. Vietnamese family ethics inherits this anthropology — but it never receives it in pure form. It is *Vietnamized*: selectively absorbed, adapted to the village-democracy traditions of Vietnamese agricultural society, blended with Buddhist and Daoist sensibilities, fitted to bilateral kinship patterns in much of the country, and carried forward in proverbs, ritual practice, and embodied family discipline rather than in mandarinal text-orthodoxy (Phan Ngoc, 2002; Trần Đình Hượu, 1996). The legal-historical record confirms this. Insun Yu's reading of the Lê Code (Yu, 1990) shows that Vietnamese pre-modern legal practice encoded a tension between state-promulgated Confucian orthodoxy and local Vietnamese custom — recognizing bilateral inheritance, women's property rights, and partible-inheritance arrangements that diverged sharply from contemporary Chinese practice. The Vietnamese family that emerges from this synthesis is therefore not "Confucianism in Vietnam" but a distinctive philosophical-cultural synthesis: more humanistic than its Chinese counterpart, more village-rooted, more bilateral, more ritually carried — a *Việt hóa* of Confucian relational anthropology. Trần Đình Hượu's (1991) treatment of the family as the matrix of moral education — *gia đình và giáo dục gia đình* — completes the philosophical picture: the Vietnamese family is not a cultural curiosity but the primary site where Vietnamese moral life is constituted. Read philosophically, the three pillars below are *expressions* of this constitutive-relational anthropology, not discrete cultural-descriptive items. Each is a claim about what the human is, when the human is read from within Vietnamese family-ethical practice.

2.1 The first pillar: gia đình là tổ ấm (family-as-home)

The Vietnamese term *nhà* — home — designates not merely a physical dwelling but a space imbued with warmth and the affection of those one loves. The *tổ ấm* — the warm hearth, the warm nest — is not a sentimental image but a philosophical claim about where the human is constituted. The household, on this reading, is the primary site of moral cultivation (Trần Đình Hượu, 1991). The proverb "one hand clapping makes no sound" underscores that harmonious relationships must stem from mutual love and reciprocated responsibility, while "men build houses, women build homes" inscribes a gendered division of household construction in which the moral-affective work of the *home* is irreducible to the physical *house*.

In traditional Vietnamese society, the family extends beyond the conjugal unit. It often embeds within a larger framework — a household potentially including grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren, sometimes spanning four or five generations. The *ngũ đại đồng đường* — five generations under one roof — is the limit case of this ideal, and the moral weight attached to it is considerable. As Bui Xuan My (2007: 251) writes, "the family is the foundation of Vietnamese society from time to time. In its simplest interpretation, 'family' refers to a husband and wife in a household with their children; however, many families also include co-residing parents or even span five generations — a configuration considered auspicious and often praised as a 'five-generation household'." The empirical ballast for this ideal is given regionally by Bélanger (2000), whose Vietnam Living Standards Survey data show systematically higher rates of multigenerational coresidence in the north of the country than in the south — a regional differentiation that already complicates any single-Vietnamese-family reading and prepares the ground for §6's claim that Pillar 1's resilience varies by region.

What distinguishes the Vietnamese *tổ ấm* from a generic ideal of family warmth is the embedded set of *philosophical-anthropological* commitments it carries. Marriage is not always entered on the basis of romantic love alone; the proverbial "where the parents place the child, there the child sits" or "marry first, get to know later" express a

configuration in which the conjugal pair is constituted within the larger relational matrix from the outset. Yet once the announcement rituals, the bride reception, and the ceremonies before ancestral altars have been performed, the family as *home* commands moral priority over the individual life-project. Proverbs such as "a humble thatched hut, two golden hearts" or "husband and wife are intimate partners — do not stray in anger" express, in Vietnamese folk-philosophical idiom, what Tu Weiming (1989) would name as constitutive relationality: the self is realized within, not despite, family embeddedness.

2.2 The second pillar: kính trên nhường dưới (respect for the elder, yielding to the younger)

The principles of *kính trên nhường dưới* (respect for elders, yielding to the younger), *hiếu* (filial piety), and mutual support across generations are regarded, within Vietnamese families, as the cornerstone of family ethics. Read philosophically, the elder is not merely a senior member of a hierarchy; the elder is a *carrier of moral authority* in an anthropocosmic-relational order (Tu Weiming, 1989). The relation between younger and older is *constitutive* of the moral self, not a one-way deference imposed from above.

The proverb literature carries the philosophical content. "A person with ancestors is like a tree with roots, like a river with its source" — and the elaborated form, "a tree only sprouts green branches if it has roots; water only assembles into a vast river if it has a source; one's origins come first, then follows one's own existence" — articulates a relational anthropology in which the self is unintelligible apart from the lineage in which it is constituted. The notions of *họ hàng*, *gốc gác*, and *cội nguồn* — kinship, lineage, origin — are not nostalgic appeals to ancestry but precise philosophical specifications of where the self comes from and to whom it is owed. The concept of *hiếu* is then elevated as the apex of Vietnamese moral order: as Bui Xuan My (2007: 253) notes, "if one cannot behave appropriately toward parents, exhibiting proper conduct outside the family becomes exceedingly difficult." The doctrine of filial piety holds that one's body and hair are parental gifts that must not be destroyed or disrespected, such that self-harm is viewed as ingratitude (Bui Xuan My, 2007: 254). Living well by cultivating character, refining oneself, and cherishing one's life is filial piety's complete expression.

The decisive methodological point is that this moral grammar is reproduced *not primarily through cognitive instruction* but through embodied practice. Helle Rydström's (2003) ethnography of moral cultivation in rural northern Vietnam documents how the *con ngoan* (good child) is formed into the *người tốt* (good person) through gestures of deference, the bodily comportment of seating arrangements, the rituals of meals and ancestor veneration, and verbal and gestural protocols of intergenerational respect. The Confucian-Vietnamized moral order is not abstract doctrine but lived discipline; it is reproduced — or transformed — at the level of body and habit, not at the level of explicit teaching. This embodied-morality framework has profound implications for §4.2 and §6: a moral order carried by bodily practice is *more durable* under social-imaginary transition than one carried only by text or doctrine, precisely because the body remembers what doctrine forgets. Folk literature reinforces the philosophical content: "a father's labor is like Mount Thai Son; a mother's devotion is like water that flows from its source," together with the legends of the Milk Tree, the White Chrysanthemum, and the Vu Lan festival of filial redemption, are not nostalgic décor but Vietnamese articulations of constitutive-relational anthropology in narrative-affective form.

The complementary direction — *nhường dưới*, yielding to the younger — is equally philosophically loaded. The principle of "wisdom does not come from the young" implies that adults possess greater experience and knowledge, *and therefore* bear responsibility for guiding and educating younger generations. The Vietnamese

term *khôn* — wisdom — refers to those who know how to live, to behave, and to express gratitude according to cultural norms; it is the practical mastery of *kính trên nhường dưới* itself. As Bui Xuan My (2007: 255) writes, "siblings should focus on fostering affection, supporting, protecting, and helping one another... Sisters living together should also have the same affection as brothers, treating one another with love and yielding to one another, advising each other with kind words and reason, so the family remains joyful, and the parents are satisfied." Today, this cultural value has transcended family confines to become a prominent societal interaction trait, with the elder-yielding-to-the-younger discipline serving as an unspoken criterion in Vietnamese workplace personnel evaluation.

2.3 The third pillar: đầu bạc răng long (lifelong fidelity, "gray hair and loose teeth")

The phrase *đầu bạc răng long* — gray hair and loose teeth — denotes longevity. As a wedding-blessing formula, it expresses the aspiration that marriage shall be eternal, akin to wishing a *trăm năm hạnh phúc* (a hundred years of happiness). Read philosophically, this is a claim about marriage as a *durative moral form* — a covenantal-relational commitment whose meaning is constituted by its lifelong scope, not as a contract terminable at preference. The Vietnamese term *bạn đời* (lifetime partner) is, as the existing scholarship rightly notes, a sacred appellation that no legal code can fully prescribe. Family is society's fundamental cell; eternal marriage is, by extension, the cornerstone of social stability.

The philosophical claim is operationalized through ritual scaffolding and proverbial wisdom. Loyalty (*chung thủy*), respect (*kính trọng*), and decorum (*nề nếp*) become the essential principles of marital relational life. The traditional wifely code prescribed the Four Virtues — *công*, *dung*, *ngôn*, *hạnh* — and the Three Obediences (*tam tòng*): obedience to the father before marriage, to the husband after marriage, and to the son after the husband's passing (Bui Xuan My, 2007). Both formulations carry the asymmetric Confucian-patriarchal weight that *Việt hóa* did not fully neutralize, even where (as Insun Yu's [1990] reading of the Lê Code shows) Vietnamese custom afforded women greater property rights than the Chinese parallel. The proverbs of marital ethics — "when husband and wife are united, they can drain the East Sea," "I cherish my husband even in tattered clothes; another's husband adorned in silk means nothing to me" — extend the philosophical claim: once married, the bond between husband and wife becomes top priority. As Bui Xuan My (2007) puts it, "the most important duty of a husband is to remain loyal to his wife, while the wife must remain virtuous toward her husband."

The *tương kính như tân* idiom — "treat each other with the respect for distinguished guests" — captures what the philosophical anthropology underwrites: love and marriage are processes requiring continuous nurturing, not fixed states. The third pillar, philosophically read, is the claim that marriage is *durative through ritual cultivation* — sustained not by feeling alone but by the embodied practice of treating the spouse as a guest worthy of one's best self.

2.4 The pillars are extracted, not invented

These three pillars are not invented but extracted. They are the analytic distillation — philosophically read — of what Vietnamese-internal scholarship has been describing piecemeal for decades. Naming them as a philosophical taxonomy is the article's editorial contribution. Each pillar carries empirical content (proverbs, rites, kinship arrangements, Bélanger's regional demographic data, Rydström's ethnographic observation) and philosophical content (Tu Weiming on constitutive relationality, Phan Ngọc on *Việt hóa*, Trần Đình Hượu on the family as matrix of moral cultivation). The philosophical reframing elevates the register; it does not replace empirical content. With the pillars in place, we turn to their reconfiguration under socialism and Đổi Mới.

3. Family change under socialism and the Đổi Mới pivot

The socialist transformation of Vietnamese family life from 1945 to 1986 is best read not as policy reform but as a *political-philosophical reconfiguration* of the family — an attempt to install, on top of (and partly against) the Confucian-Vietnamized substrate, a new philosophical anthropology of conjugal equality, free choice, abolished polygamy, and full gender-political citizenship. Vietnamese Marxist family thought is itself a philosophical resource, not just policy: Hồ Chí Minh's writings on women and family (Ho Chi Minh, 2011), the 1959 Marriage and Family Law's preamble, and the subsequent socialist-period scholarship articulate a distinctive Vietnamese-Marxist philosophical reading of the inherited tradition that selectively renews some pillars (durative fidelity reframed as socialist marital seriousness; respect-elder repurposed as cultural heritage rather than mandarinal religious practice) and confronts others (polygamous patriarchy, child marriage, women's subordination).

The 1959 Marriage and Family Law of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam is the foundational political-philosophical document of the period. It codified monogamy, gender equality in marriage, the right to free choice of spouse, and the abolition of polygamy and child marriage. Werner (2009) provides the anglophone analytical frame; Le Thi (2014) provides the Vietnamese reading. Both refuse a triumphalist or a declensionist narrative. The 1959 Law was not merely repressive of inherited custom; it gave women new legal standing, restructured inheritance, and put the household into a new philosophical relation with the state. Insun Yu's (1990) reading of the Lê Code matters here: the 1959 Law's invocation of bilateral inheritance and women's rights had Vietnamese pre-modern precedent, not just socialist novelty. The socialist reformers were, in part, recovering a Vietnamese custom obscured by 19th-century Nguyễn-dynasty re-Confucianization, not simply imposing a foreign egalitarianism. Trần Đình Hượu's (1996) framework of *transition rather than rupture* is the philosophical lens this section requires: the three pillars survive socialist reform in transformed but recognizable form.

What did the cooperative-collectivization period (1959–1986) do to each pillar? The first pillar — family-as-home — was reshaped by collectivization. The household lost some of its productive function as agricultural work was reorganized into cooperatives, but the family unit was reaffirmed at the level of philosophical-political discourse as the affective ground of the new socialist citizen. The household ceased to be the productive workshop and became, increasingly, the site of socialist moral cultivation — a reconfiguration that the state actively promoted through the *gia đình văn hóa* (cultural family) movement and other discursive interventions Werner (2009) documents in detail. The second pillar — respect-elder, yielding to the younger — survived socialist reform substantially intact at the family level, even as the state attacked some of its mandarinal expressions. Ancestor veneration was officially recoded as cultural heritage rather than religious practice, a strategic-ambiguity move that allowed the philosophical-anthropological substance of intergenerational relation to persist under a different ideological label. Rydström's (2003) ethnography, conducted in the 1990s in a region where socialist institutions had been most thoroughly deployed, shows that the embodied moral practices of intergenerational respect remained substantively continuous across the socialist period. The third pillar — lifelong fidelity — was, paradoxically, *reinforced* in some respects by socialist morality. Marital seriousness was a socialist virtue; divorce rates remained low; the post-1959 legal framework for divorce existed and was used, but the social weight of the durative-conjugal commitment did not collapse. Werner (2009) argues that the gap between formal-legal equality (which the 1959 Law established) and lived deference (which Vietnamized-Confucian relational expectations continued to inscribe) is itself a feature of the socialist period — and the gap is the political-philosophical observation, not its weakness.

The Đổi Mới pivot of 1986 then reintroduces household production, reactivates the family as an economic unit, and opens the discursive space for value pluralization. Le Ngoc Van (2012) identifies Đổi Mới as the structural break: the periodization the article adopts — pre-Đổi Mới as "tradition" — is the cut Tran Ngoc Them (2016), and Le Ngoc Van (2012) all use. Werner's (2009) decisive contribution to the philosophical reading is her argument that Đổi Mới did *not* reduce the state's role in shaping gender relations and household dynamics; instead, the post-revolutionary Vietnamese state continued to deploy gendered constructions and family-policy interventions to advance its own political-economic interests, just as the revolutionary regime had earlier. The 1959 Marriage and Family Law, the women's emancipation campaigns of the socialist period, and the post-1986 *gia đình hạnh phúc* / *gia đình văn hóa* discourse are, on Werner's reading, sequential moments of one continuous state project: governing through gender. The Đổi Mới family is not a less-statized family; it is a differently statized family, organized around new philosophical-anthropological constructions whose institutional expression is the 2014 Marriage and Family Law.

The 2014 Marriage and Family Law is the contemporary capstone. Its Article 3, Clause 2 codifies the contemporary Vietnamese legal definition of marriage and family in a register continuous with the 1959 Law's egalitarian commitments while accommodating post-Đổi Mới realities (Law on Marriage and Family, 2014). What it cannot — and does not pretend to — codify is the philosophical-anthropological substrate against which family life is now being lived: the *Việt hóa*-d Confucian inheritance of the three pillars, the layered residue of socialist political-philosophical reconfiguration, and the new pressures of compressed-modernity transformation. To those pressures we now turn.

4. The three erosions: contemporary transformations as social-imaginary transitions

The contemporary transformations of the three pillars can be — and have been — read sociologically. The original draft of this article already documented many of them. What we want to install in this section is a *philosophical* reading: each erosion is best understood as a transition between two social imaginaries, in Charles Taylor's (2004) sense — between two pre-theoretical, image- and narrative-laden configurations of what family life is *for*, what the human is, and how relational life is meaningful. The shift is not from "tradition" to "modernity" in some abstract sense but between two configurations of collective self-understanding. The empirical material remains; the philosophical reframing changes how it is interpreted.

4.1 The first pillar's erosion: from communal-relational to individual-recreational

The first transition is between two social imaginaries: the *tổ ấm* (warm hearth) imaginary — household as affective-moral ground, family meal as the unit of daily belonging, *ngũ đại đồng đường* as ideal — and the household-as-logistics-hub imaginary — household as the site where individuals coordinate independently chosen recreational, professional, and digital lives. The shift is not from "tradition" to "modernity" but between two configurations of what family life is *for*.

The empirical evidence for this transition is documented across the existing literature. In the past, people typically followed routines such as going to work, returning home, engaging in household production, sharing family meals, and teaching children — activities involving much collective participation among family members. Today, people increasingly engage in additional activities such as going out for coffee, discussing work outside office hours, or playing sports — activities that occur *outside* the family environment and, importantly, outside the temporal frame within which the *tổ ấm* used to constitute itself. While "responsibility" and even "living for others" were once top priorities, keywords like "personal interests" and "individual

passions" have gradually encroached on responsibility space. Notions such as "if you don't love yourself, don't expect others to love you" or "life is about not waiting" are no longer limited to youth but are also embraced by middle-aged Vietnamese — those raising children to adulthood. While this lifestyle concept is not inherently wrong, applied without judgment it can produce a configuration in which a husband, during critical periods such as his wife's pregnancy or children's adolescence, fails to share in the family's emotional life, prioritizing personal hobbies; or in which a wife consistently chooses fitness classes and weekend hobby clubs over the time the *tổ ấm* used to claim.

Ho Chi Minh City family culture shows the differential at the level of family-meal practice. Among families surveyed, the "frequent" category of family-meal practice held the highest proportion. In Vietnamese culture, meals are profoundly meaningful: they are a central bonding moment, a place to express love, responsibility, and the desire to *về nhà* — to return home. The concepts of "waiting for dinner" and "home-cooked meals" have long been familiar and heartwarming to Vietnamese people; their slow displacement is the empirical face of the social-imaginary transition. As Dao Thi Mai Ngoc (2014) puts it, "after work hours, family members often engage in recreational activities outside the family framework, resulting in the family ceasing to be a warm nest in the original sense of the word."

Bélanger's (2000) regional differentiation is the empirical hedge against any uniform-erosion claim. The northern multigenerational pattern is more durable than the southern nuclear pattern; the urban-rural axis cuts across the regional one; the *tổ ấm* imaginary is being displaced unevenly. The philosophical move from observation to claim is now precise: the *tổ ấm* as moral form is being replaced — at differential rates — by the household as logistical hub. The first pillar's erosion is a transition between two social imaginaries, and what is at stake is not declining family time but a reconfiguration of what family life is for.

4.2 The second pillar's erosion: from elder-as-moral-center to elder-as-care-recipient under material-transactional logic

The second transition is in the philosophical conception of the elder. The Confucian-Vietnamized anthropology read the elder as the *carrier of moral authority in an anthropocosmic-relational order* (Tu Weiming, 1989). Under contemporary conditions, where the second pillar erodes, the philosophical conception shifts: the elder becomes a *recipient of services* under material-transactional logic — care as service, inheritance as asset, eldercare obligation as a transaction whose terms are renegotiable.

The earlier draft of this article cited a series of newspaper accounts of parricide, fratricide, and infant abandonment as evidence for the second pillar's erosion. These citations cannot bear the weight of an analytical claim about trend. We replace them here with peer-reviewed scholarship. Rydström's (2003) ethnography of embodied moral transmission, Drummond and Rydström's (2004) edited volume on gender practices and family conflict, Bélanger's (2000) work on intergenerational support patterns, and Khuất Thu Hồng and Bélanger's longer collaboration on Vietnamese family demographics together give the second pillar's erosion its proper analytical anchor. The argument they support is sharper than the news-cases suggested: the second pillar erodes more *slowly* than the first because the relational philosophical anthropology is more deeply embedded in embodied practice, but where it erodes, the mechanism is precisely a shift in the social imaginary in which care becomes a service, inheritance becomes an asset, and the elder becomes — in extreme cases — a burden rather than a moral center.

The Yeh-Bedford reciprocal-versus-authoritarian distinction in the East Asian filial-piety literature clarifies the philosophical content. *Reciprocal* filial piety, in the Confucian-relational sense, is constitutive of the moral self — the relation is what makes the self what it is. *Authoritarian* filial piety, where it survives without the

relational-philosophical grounding, is mere formal compliance: the form is obeyed, the substance is gone. Tu Weiming's (1989) framework lets us name precisely what is at stake: *reciprocal* filial piety is what the second pillar carries when carried whole; *authoritarian* compliance is the visible residue when the philosophical anthropology underneath has begun to dissolve. Within this register, Drummond and Rydström's (2004) documentation of family conflict is not an inventory of pathology but an empirical window onto a transition in the social imaginary.

The empirical observation, philosophically read, is differential. Material wealth is increasingly used as a measuring stick in family relationships — a domain that should not be dominated by material considerations, and that is precisely the philosophical claim. As elder care becomes a logistical and financial calculation, the *elder-as-moral-center* imaginary is replaced by an *elder-as-care-recipient* imaginary, with material transactions as the medium of the relation. Le Ngoc Van (2012) and Tran Dinh Huou (1996) provide the Vietnamese theoretical apparatus for tracking the differential, and Rydström's (2003) embodied-morality framework explains the durability mechanism: where the second pillar is reproduced through bodily practice (seating, gesture, ritual proximity at meals and ancestor altars), it persists even where the doctrinal scaffolding has weakened. The erosion is real, but it is uneven, and it is uneven for philosophical reasons.

4.3 The third pillar's erosion: from durative-monogamous to consumer-disposable

The third transition is in the philosophical conception of marriage: from *durative moral form* to *consumer choice*. Charles Taylor's (2004) *buffered self* and *immanent frame* concepts — the modern self as bounded, agential, autonomous, with attachments held lightly because the self is the source of meaning rather than its recipient — name the philosophical-anthropological shift. The buffered self enters marriage with the implicit reservation that meaning is internally generated and contracts are revisable. This is the philosophical content of the contemporary expression "when the TV breaks, throw it away and buy a new one," whose full formulation runs: "in our time, when the TV broke, people repaired it; now, when the TV breaks, one simply throws it away and buys a new one." The adage implicitly contrasts marriage durability in the past with that of the present. In earlier times, if a spouse made mistakes or differences arose, they were afforded the opportunity to rectify — to become *cái vung với cái nồi*, a lid fitting its pot. In today's "fast-food era," there is increasingly little space or time for that work of fitting. The "discard old, buy new" thinking of consumer culture has gradually encroached upon family life — a domain once considered impervious to transactional or negotiable behaviors — and the philosophical name for that encroachment is the buffered self entering relational commitments at consumer-choice depth.

Tran Thi Minh Thi's (2020) empirical work is the primary anchor. Although fidelity remains the prime criterion in contemporary Vietnamese family culture — 41.6% of respondents in her study consider loyalty "important," and 56.7% regard it as "very important" — marriage longevity is, in practice, shortening. In traditional Vietnamese culture, divorce was nearly unthinkable. Marriage was considered a solemn commitment not only for the couple but for entire lineages. Customs such as "registering a matrimonial union," "arranging a spouse," and "evaluating a spouse by family reputation and lineage" reflect the high regard in which marriage was held. Practices such as consulting horoscopes, choosing auspicious dates, and observing physiognomy all stem from a deep concern for ensuring lasting marriages. Statistical data show that Vietnam currently records about 60,000 divorces per year, equivalent to 0.75 cases per 1,000 people, with a 25% divorce-to-marriage ratio — one divorce for every four marriages (Ngoc Mai, 2023). Recent surveys indicate that 28.4% of people now prefer cohabitation before marriage and 13.3% express a desire to remain single with no intention of marrying (Le Thi, 2014) — trends that, in our reading, are not

symptoms of moral decline but signs of a shift in the philosophical-anthropological configuration of conjugal commitment.

Werner (2009) and Le Thi (2014) supply the longer history of marital reform; Drummond and Rydström (2004) supply the contemporary pattern. The analytical claim crystallizes: the third pillar is the one most directly exposed to the buffered-self / immanent-frame transition, because durative marriage was the pillar most dependent on cultural-ritual scaffolding that the consumer-self imaginary systematically dismantles. From an anthropological perspective, other significant reasons might come from ICT saturation, which has reduced the need for direct family communication; the virtual world's seemingly glittering expressions and gentle interactions stand in stark contrast to real-life family relationships in which love intermingles with responsibility. But the philosophical content of the transition is what Taylor (2004) names: marriage shifts from a durative moral form to a contract held by buffered selves whose implicit reservation is that the contract is revisable.

The three erosions are differential. They proceed at different rates, through different mechanisms, against different forms of substrate-resilience. The first pillar erodes most visibly because the household-as-logistics-hub imaginary is most easily inscribed by ICT saturation and labor-mobility patterns. The second pillar erodes most slowly because the relational-philosophical anthropology of the elder is reproduced through embodied practice (Rydström, 2003) more durable than text-mediated doctrine. The third pillar is most directly exposed to the buffered-self transition. The differential is the analytical observation; the philosophical content of each transition is the philosophical contribution.

5. Cross-cutting issues: ICT, individualism, and the repositioning of women

The previous section read each pillar through the social-imaginary apparatus. This section turns to three transversal forces — ICT saturation, individualism in its several forms, and the repositioning of women — that act *differentially* on each pillar. These are not a new tripartite taxonomy parallel to §4; they are a re-cut of the same material from a different angle, one that lets us see the *forces* that drive the three erosions.

5.1 ICT saturation

A common sight in many Vietnamese homes today, especially in urban areas, is for each family member to possess a smartphone. The 2024 Living Standards Survey reports that 97.3% of households now own a mobile phone, tablet, or landline, up from 91.7% in 2019 (NSO, 2024). This is not yet evidence of erosion; it is evidence of access. The transition to which this access contributes is the one named in §4.1: the household as logistical hub coordinating independently chosen recreational, professional, and digital lives. As rural residents transform into urban workers and as work migration accelerates, family-centered living space is gradually replaced by office and commute environments. With escalating work pressures, time and energy available for direct family interactions are significantly reduced.

The family is, after all, a unique space free from formality, a sanctuary where one returns at long days' end to shed social burdens. It fulfills the role of the *dạ dày* — the stomach — providing spiritual nourishment and replenishing strength. Life experience and traditional family values are typically shared during leisure moments, at meals and during members' rest time. Increasing social media use (Facebook, Zalo, TikTok, Instagram) leads to more time spent in virtual worlds and less in face-to-face interaction. The most visible consequence is mutual understanding and sharing decline among loved ones. ICT effects on family time are not Vietnamese particularities but East Asian regional patterns (Chang, 2010; Ochiai, 2014); the comparative data from the compressed-modernity literature show similar dynamics in Korea and Japan. What is Vietnamese-specific is the rate and the substrate: ICT saturation acts on a *Việt hóa*-d

Confucian household whose embodied moral practices retain more durability than the standard compressed-modernity model would predict.

5.2 Individualism and the "self-centered mindset"

Traditionally, in Vietnamese society, collective family and kinship interests took precedence over individual needs. Under market economy, urbanization, and globalization, a "self-centered" mindset — favoring individual interests and the nuclear family over extended familial bonds — has grown increasingly prevalent. The 2024 Living Standards Survey reports average monthly per-capita income at VND 5.4 million, a 9.1% increase from 2023 (NSO, 2024).

Unit: Thousand VND

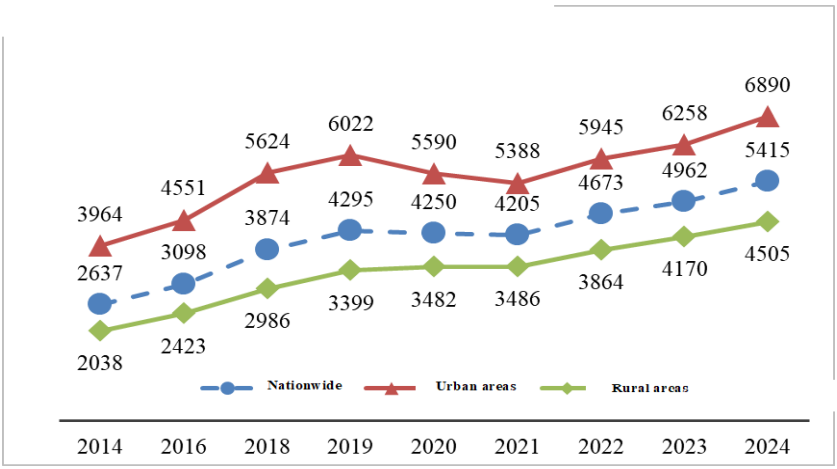


Chart 1: Average Monthly Income Per Capita by Urban/Rural Area, 2014–2024 (Source: https://www.nso.gov.vn/tin-tuc-thong-ke/2025/05/thong-cao-bao-chi-ket-qua-khao-sat-muc-song-dan-cu-nam-2024)

The percentage of upper secondary correct-age enrollment rose from 63.1% in 2014 to 80.0% in 2024; 97.6% of households live in durable or semi-durable housing, with 26.6 m^2 per capita living area; 95.1% have access to hygienic toilets, 99.0% to sanitary water, and 99.8% to grid electricity.

Infrastructure Indicator	**2009**	**2019**	**2024**	**Change (2019–2024)**
Households using grid electricity for lighting	N/A	99.4%	99.8%	↑0.4 percentage points
Households using sanitary water sources	N/A	97.4%	99.0%	↑1.6 percentage points
Households using hygienic toilets	53.9%	88.9%	95.1%	↑6.2 percentage points

Table 1: Housing Infrastructure Indicator depiction [authors' own visualization]

These are favorable conditions, permitting each family member to develop comprehensively and allowing time for nurturing prosperous, happy families — but

they are also the material conditions under which the buffered-self transformation Taylor (2004) names can take hold.

A philosophical caution is in order. The Inglehart-Welzel (2005) framework of self-expression-versus-survival values offers a comparative anchor: as survival pressures lift, value structures shift toward self-expression. Read philosophically, however, this framework is itself a *philosophical anthropology of values* — a claim about what kind of being the human becomes when survival pressures lift. Tu Weiming's (1989) constitutive-relational anthropology and Phan Ngọc's (2002) *Việt hóa* apparatus together qualify the framework's universal claim. The Vietnamese case may instantiate a different philosophical anthropology of post-survival life, one in which constitutive relationality remains a candidate moral source rather than being displaced by self-expression as the organizing value. The empirical observations support this qualification: while many young Vietnamese now choose to live independently in pursuit of careers or private lifestyles akin to Western practices, the Vietnamese "self-centered mindset" is rarely the libertarian-individualist self-expression of the Inglehart-Welzel model. It is, more often, what we might call a *self-protective reaction* against the pressures of "sacrificing for the family" — a question, often inwardly directed, about what one truly gains from such sacrifice. The "self-centered mindset" is not necessarily selfish; it is a philosophical response to a transformed material situation.

The article must also avoid treating "individualism" as a single force. ICT-individualism (smartphone-mediated retreat into virtual worlds), market-individualism (the household as small-business or small-investment unit), and aspirational-individualism (life-stage individuation: postponed marriage, deliberate singlehood, lifestyle differentiation) have distinct mechanisms and distinct effects on each pillar. ICT-individualism acts most strongly on Pillar 1; market-individualism intersects with Pillar 2 in the form of inheritance disputes and elder-care monetization; aspirational-individualism acts on Pillar 3 in the form of marriage postponement and cohabitation. Each is a philosophical-anthropological transformation, not just a sociological one.

A brief Habermasian move closes this subsection. Vietnamese family ethics — the three pillars taken together — is a tradition that, under contemporary conditions, requires *dialogical translation* in public reason (Habermas, 2006). The pillars are neither a comprehensive doctrine to be imposed in the public sphere nor a private cultural matter to be bracketed; they are a tradition whose semantic content must be reflectively translated for engagement with modern public-political discourse. In Habermas's idiom — adapted to the Vietnamese case where Marxist-secular state authority and Confucian-Vietnamized family tradition stand in a distinctive dialogical relation — Vietnamese family ethics is a candidate post-secular philosophical resource, requiring translation rather than either imposition or withdrawal. The 2014 Marriage and Family Law's articulation of family in Article 3, Clause 2 is one site where this translation work becomes legible.

5.3 The repositioning of women

The change in women's economic, educational, and family-role position is the deepest of the cross-cutting transformations. It is also the one with the longest history. Le Thi (2014) shows that the change is not a Đổi Mới novelty but a continuation of a pattern that runs back through the socialist period — and, as Insun Yu's (1990) reading of the Lê Code demonstrates, with pre-modern Vietnamese precedent in bilateral inheritance and women's property rights that distinguished Vietnamese custom from the Chinese Confucian parallel.

Today's Vietnamese women enjoy increased rights and assume multiple roles. Their economic role has expanded: more women participate in the labor force and often serve as primary financial providers. A UN Women–supported study reports that women-owned enterprises account for 26.5% of total active enterprises (UN Women, 2021a). Women's access to university-level education is now on par with men's, with

consequences for "marriage postponement" and deliberate single life. Women are increasingly influential in critical family decisions — house purchases, children's education investment — rather than being confined solely to domestic tasks. Whereas the old adage "men build houses, women build homes" once prevailed, today many women work and contribute economically to households; in some families, traditional marital roles have been reversed.

This evolution carries a philosophical-anthropological cost that the literature names the "double burden": while women enjoy greater equality, they continue to carry primary responsibility for family-relational maintenance even as they take on full economic-productive roles. Werner (2009) and Drummond and Rydström (2004) provide the analytical frame: the gap between formal equality (which the 1959 and 2014 Marriage and Family Laws codify) and lived deference (which Vietnamized-Confucian relational expectations continue to inscribe) is not a residue but a structural feature of the way the Vietnamese state has historically governed through gender. The "double burden" is the empirical face of a philosophical-anthropological gap between two configurations of women's selfhood: the political-philosophical anthropology of equal-conjugal-citizenship that the 1959 Law installed, and the lived philosophical anthropology in which constitutive-relational expectations of women's moral-affective work persist in attenuated form. Reconciling tradition with modernity, on the article's reading, can only be achieved by working at this philosophical level — by transforming, not bypassing, societal perceptions about women's role in family flourishing.

The three cross-cutting forces do not add three new pillars. They are the *transversal* forces that act on the three existing pillars at different rates, through different mechanisms, with different philosophical-anthropological signatures. They are why the three erosions of §4 occur differentially, and they prepare the comparative-philosophical question of §6.

6. Discussion: the Vietnamese trajectory between two philosophical models

Where, between two philosophical models, does the Vietnamese case sit?

Model A is the **East Asian compressed-modernity philosophical model** (Chang, 2010; Ochiai, 2014; Therborn, 2004). On this reading, Vietnam converges to the Korean and Japanese pattern: the same telescoped shift from agrarian-extended-multigenerational household to urban-nuclear-dual-earner family, the same buffered-self transformation, the same dramatic erosion of the elder-as-moral-center across all three pillars. Model B is the **Vietnamese-particularity philosophical model** (Phan Ngoc, 2002; Trần Đình Hượu, 1996). On this reading, the Vietnamese case preserves a distinctive philosophical synthesis: village-rooted, ritually carried, bilaterally inflected, less dependent on mandarinal text-tradition, and therefore more durable under compressed-modernity pressures.

We argue that *neither* model alone captures the Vietnamese trajectory. The Vietnamese case neither converges to a generic East Asian compressed-modernity pattern nor preserves Vietnamese tradition unchanged. It instantiates a *distinctive philosophical synthesis under directional erosion*. The differential erosion of the three pillars is the article's analytical observation; the *Việt hóa*-d philosophical-cultural synthesis is the article's philosophical name for what is being eroded.

Tran Thi Minh Thi (2020), Bélanger (2000), and Rydström (2003) all point in different ways to the relative durability of the second pillar in Vietnamese family life. Tran Thi Minh Thi's empirical work on what Vietnamese families now identify as core values shows that intergenerational respect retains substantial weight even where conjugal-fidelity expectations have eroded. Bélanger's regional-differentiation analysis shows that multigenerational coresidence — the structural support of Pillar 2 — persists in northern Vietnam at higher rates than in the south, confirming the regional differentiation that any compressed-modernity universalism obscures. Rydström's

ethnographic account of moral cultivation as embodied practice provides the philosophical durability mechanism: where moral order is reproduced through bodily comportment, ritual proximity, and the spatial arrangement of family meals and ancestor altars, it persists more robustly than text-mediated doctrine under the same compressed-modernity pressure. The Vietnamized-Confucian inflection — village-rooted, less mandarinal, more humanistic, ritually carried — is, on this account, a philosophical resource that disciplines individualism in the second-pillar domain even where it leaves the first and third pillars exposed. This is not a moralistic claim about Vietnamese exceptionalism. It is an analytical observation about which pillars are most and least exposed to the compressed-modernity dynamic, and through what philosophical-anthropological mechanism.

The philosophical task this surfaces is what Trần Đình Hượu (1996) names *đến hiện đại từ truyền thống* — arriving at modernity from tradition, not in spite of it. Modernization, on this apparatus, is not the negation of tradition but its critical renewal. The Vietnamese case is therefore a candidate philosophical resource for non-Western societies engaging modernity: a model of how philosophical-cultural traditions can be *consciously cultivated* through directional change rather than either preserved unchanged or dissolved into compressed-modernity convergence. Trần Đình Hượu's argument is precise: the path requires neither nostalgic restoration nor wholesale Westernization, but the philosophical work of identifying which traditional resources can be carried forward, which must be transformed, and through what mechanism. Phan Ngọc's (2002) *Việt hóa* apparatus is the resource for the second of these moves: inherited traditions are received not by adoption but by selective adaptation, and the same mechanism that *Việt hóa*-d Confucianism into a distinctive Vietnamese synthesis is, on this account, available for the *Việt hóa* of late-modern philosophical-cultural pressures into a Vietnamese form fit for the new conditions.

We engage the Party-State family formula directly. Nguyen Phu Trong's (2021) "prosperous, progressive, civilized, happy" articulation captures real aspirations. The 2024 Living Standards Survey data (NSO, 2024) on rising incomes, expanding education, and improving infrastructure show that the prosperity-and-civilization end of the formula is being substantively achieved at the empirical level. Yet the formula operates as *aspiration* rather than as analytical description: the empirical material on divorce trends (Tran Thi Minh Thi, 2020; Ngoc Mai, 2023), time-use figures (UN Women Vietnam, 2021b), the differential erosion of the three pillars, and Werner's (2009) account of state-driven gender as continuous project show where the formula does and does not capture lived family life. Our stance is Vietnamese-authority-friendly but not blindly ideological: the formula is engaged philosophically, not bracketed; counterbalanced with international scholarship, not dismissed. As Bui Quang Thanh (2022) writes, "the values distilled from filial piety, neighborhood solidarity, and community consciousness... have crystallized into a form of 'soft power', contributing significantly to the driving force behind the cultural values of the nation both now and in the long term" — but the conditions under which this *soft power* survives directional erosion are precisely what the article tries to specify. Vietnamese Marxist family thought sits, on our reading, as one philosophical resource alongside Tu Weiming, Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas, Trần Đình Hượu, and Phan Ngọc — productive tension, not conflict.

We close this section with an honest acknowledgment of what the article cannot resolve. How much of the Vietnamese trajectory will remain distinctive in the next twenty years depends on philosophical-cultural processes the article cannot predict. Whether mediating institutions — the state, the school, the family itself — can articulate a hybrid ethics fit for the new conditions depends on whether the philosophical task of conscious cultivation is taken up. The differential erosion of the three pillars is real and directional, but its rate and its end-state are not pre-determined. The philosophical claim is more modest than a prediction: the Vietnamese case is a *site* where the philosophical work

can be done, and the three-pillar taxonomy, philosophically read, makes the work visible.

7. Conclusion: from passive observation to conscious cultivation

The article opened with two phrases. The first was *ngũ đại đồng đường* — five generations under one roof — the relational-communal vision of the Vietnamese family. The second was the contemporary Vietnamese saying that captures the consumer-disposable logic colonizing even intimate relationships: when the TV breaks, throw it away. We can now read those two phrases back through the philosophical apparatus the article has built.

Three implications close the article. First, the philosophical-analytical conclusion: Vietnamese family transformation is best read not as uniform decline but as *differential erosion* across three pillars — three transitions between two social imaginaries each, operating at different rates and through different mechanisms (Taylor, 2004). The three-pillar taxonomy makes the differential visible; the social-imaginary apparatus makes it philosophically legible. The first pillar — *gia đình là tổ ấm* — undergoes the most visible transition, between the *tổ ấm* and the household-as-logistics-hub imaginaries, driven primarily by ICT saturation and labor-mobility. The second pillar — *kính trên nhường dưới* — erodes more slowly, because the relational-philosophical anthropology it carries is reproduced through embodied practice (Rydström, 2003) more durable than text-mediated doctrine. The third pillar — *đầu bạc răng long* — is most directly exposed to the buffered-self transition, because durative marriage was the pillar most dependent on cultural-ritual scaffolding that the consumer-self imaginary systematically dismantles.

Second, the comparative-philosophical implication: the Vietnamese case occupies a position between two philosophical models — East Asian compressed modernity and Vietnamized-Confucian inheritance — and instantiates a distinctive philosophical synthesis under directional erosion. Neither Chang's (2010) nor Ochiai's (2014) compressed-modernity universalism nor an exceptionalist Vietnamese-particularity reading captures the Vietnamese trajectory; the *Việt hóa* apparatus (Phan Ngoc, 2002) and the village-rooted, bilaterally inflected, ritually carried character of Vietnamese family ethics give the case its philosophical specificity, while the directional erosion is real. The Vietnamese case thus matters for international comparative philosophy of family change: it is a worked instance of a non-Western tradition engaging modernity through neither nostalgic restoration nor wholesale Westernization.

Third — and this is the philosophical task the article surfaces — Vietnamese family ethics is not a heritage to be preserved unchanged, nor a tradition that has dissolved. It is a philosophical resource that demands *conscious cultivation* in Trần Đình Hượu's (1996) sense — *đến hiện đại từ truyền thống*, modernization as the critical renewal of inherited resources, neither nostalgic restoration nor wholesale Westernization. The empirical material gives us the substrate; the three-pillar taxonomy gives us the structure; the social-imaginary apparatus gives us the philosophical vocabulary; the *Việt hóa* mechanism gives us the means by which inherited traditions become contemporary resources. What remains is the work itself — the philosophical-cultural cultivation through which mediating institutions in contemporary Vietnam (the state, the school, and the family itself) might articulate a hybrid ethics fit for the new conditions.

The conclusion, then, does not summarize. It returns the reader to the opening contrast between *ngũ đại đồng đường* and the disposable TV. The point is not nostalgia for the first or condemnation of the second; the point is that Vietnamese family ethics names a tradition whose philosophical resources are still available to those who would consciously cultivate them. Future research will benefit from extended comparative-philosophical work between Vietnamese family ethics and East Asian neo-Confucian and Western post-secular thought; from longitudinal tracking of the philosophical

durability of the second pillar; and from engagement with the diaspora literature, which the present article has by editorial choice set aside. The closing question is whether the institutions of contemporary Vietnam can take up the philosophical task of conscious cultivation. That question the article leaves open with the reader.

Declaration on AI Use

AI-assisted tools (including Claude Opus 4.6 and Grammarly) were used during manuscript preparation. We mainly used it for initial brainstorming, annotated outline suggestions, language editing and refinement. The authors take full responsibility for the content, interpretation, and integrity of the research.

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