Abstract: After passing the Palace Examination in 1904, Trần Quý Cáp (1870-1908) and Huỳnh Thúc Kháng (1876-1947) rejected a life of official service, and in 1905 they joined Phan Chu Trinh (1872-1926), a phó bằng from the 1901 examination, in making a trip to the south for the purposes of denouncing the examination system. Two aspects of this important historical event stand out. First, though these intellectuals repudiated the examination system for being obsolete and suborning collaboration with the French, they did so only months after themselves participating in an examination whose focus was hardly traditional or collaborationist in the way one might expect. Instead, the policy question in 1904 asked students if it were possible to use ancient insights in science and technology to build infrastructure as a means of escaping from the French yoke. Second, the four other graduates of the 1904 examination, including the top graduate, Đặng Văn Thúy, did not join these intellectuals in their repudiation of the exam. Indeed, far from rejecting an official career, Đặng Văn Thúy went on to head the Quốc Tự Giám (National College). Yet Đặng Văn Thúy’s response to the policy question—the only response to the 1904 examination that survives—clearly repudiates the legitimacy of the French protectorate and is far from thoughtlessly aping tradition.

To better understand Đặng Văn Thúy’s intellectual position and his break from his two fellow 1904 graduates, this paper considers an essay and a lucr bài poem in chữ nôm that he wrote as part of the collection entitled Khuyến tân học thuyết (勸新學說, Advice on New Doctrine). In this collection, he argues for a position that is adamantly critical of the French protectorate and praises reform agendas. However, he argues that true political independence can only be produced through indigenous institutions and modes of thought; therefore, to stem French power, Đặng Văn Thúy believed that it was critical to maintain and reform the monarchy as well as the ideas that served as its underpinnings.
Đặng Văn Thụy’s writings show that anticolonialists and “collaborators” shared much more in common than we might think, especially in the Duy Tân period (1907-1916), during which much of the Nguyễn administration was increasingly critical of the protectorate. Understanding his point of view may also allow us to consider the nuances with which Vietnamese intellectuals discussed, accepted, and rejected modernist ideology.

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