The persisting legacies of imperial elites among contemporary top-ranked Vietnamese politicians

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Abstract

This study investigated how the legacies of Vietnamese elites continue to affect top-ranked politicians in Vietnam. We therefore compared a list of elites who passed the imperial examination (1075–1919) at the national level with a list of currently active Vietnamese top-ranked politicians (1930–2020) by matching their home districts. We used the average distance from each district to imperial test venues as instrumental variables for estimating possible connections at the district level. Results showed strong and persistent imperial legacies based on these home districts. This suggests the existence of persistent transmissions via informal institutions and channels of home favoritism.

Keywords: legacy, elite, imperial elite, politician, Vietnam

JEL classification: N35, N45, P26, J62

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1. Introduction

People of the mid-20th century witnessed the rise of communism throughout the world while many former colonies gained independence. In this regard, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) was a pioneer. Its initial aims were to free the country from oppressive French colonialism, terminate the monarchical regime, and transition to communism. Members of the CPV distinguished themselves from those working in previous institutions while holding power in 1945 and continued to do so even after reunification in 1975. As communists, they defined themselves as the leaders of a revolutionary faction.

Meanwhile, a rich body of literature shows that historical legacies have continued to persist, even through formal institutional changes (for specific reviews, see Nunn, 2020). Recent investigations into the impacts of imperial elites on contemporary educational outcomes and revolutions have also revealed strong connections. Chen et al. (2020) found that more imperial elites were associated with higher average years of schooling in contemporary China. Vu and Yamada (2020) showed a similar connection in Vietnam, thus indicating the influence of a strong legacy (via learning culture) on educational quality despite the termination of Chinese script in the Vietnamese written language. Notably, Bai and Jia (2016) investigated higher quotas on entry level imperial examinations, thus finding a higher corresponding probability of revolution after the examinations were removed. They also argued that this resulted in a cessation of access to higher social classes. As such, those who expected to become elites actually became revolutionaries. Meanwhile, Bai (2019) found that the quota was also associated with higher numbers of "new" Chinese elites who acquired their educations abroad.

Unlike China, Vietnam spent additional decades passing between French colonialism and monarchy following the last imperial examination in 1919. This arrangement continued based on a North–South division until the emergence of today's regime in the whole country after reunification in 1975. This poses the question of whether a similar mechanism can explain a similar legacy in Vietnam. As such, this study investigated whether the imperial legacy still influenced contemporary top-ranked communists and what channels may have affected this transmission. More specifically, we searched for connections between the historical numbers of imperial elites and numbers of top-ranked communists in terms of their respective home districts. In this regard, Vietnamese imperial elites were considered those who passed the imperial examination between 1075 and 1919 at the national level. On the other hand, top-

ranked communists were considered members of the Central Committee of the CPV throughout its history. These politicians are probably the most powerful people in the authoritarian regime (for details, see Vu and Yamada, 2017). We based our analyses on an instrumental approach in which the instrumental variables (a proxy for the educational costs posed to those who took the imperial examination) were set as the average distances from each district to the imperial test venues. Our findings addressed a gap in the literature while also enabling us to propose alternative mechanisms for transmission.

2. Data and empirical strategy

This study used an instrumental approach in which we regressed the number of contemporary top-ranked communists (*Top politician*) on the number of imperial elites (*Imperial elite*) for each Vietnamese district. In this regard, we used two data sources. The first was a list containing the names of 2,888 imperial elites from Ngo (2006), while the second was a list of all (825) Central Committee members of the CPV (hereafter, top politicians) between 1930 and 2020 (taken from Vu and Yamada, 2017). These lists were compared to determine which individuals were operating in the same home districts. We were able to identify and match 2,839 imperial elites with 738 contemporary top politicians based on their respective home districts[1]. Ngo (2006) compiled the most comprehensive list of imperial elites who passed the imperial examination at the national level from 1075 to 1919 (i.e., throughout Vietnamese history), while Vu and Yamada (2017) compiled a list of contemporary top politicians based on their corresponding profiles from the official CPV website. The data consisted of 687 Vietnamese districts[2].

We then created three panels to analyze outcomes. Panel A's outcome consisted of all top politicians (1930–2020), while Panel B's consisted of affiliates of the first Central Committee of the CPV (1930–1951), and Panel C's consisted of those in power subsequent to reunification (1976–2020) (excluding those who were also listed as Central Committee members in any previous period[3]) (see Appendix 1). District-level geographical data were used as controls (*X*). We then calculated three other factors, including population density, the Kinh

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[1] Some observations were omitted due to missing information concerning the home district.
[2] The district is the second administrative level in Vietnam. There were 689 in 2009. Two districts were omitted because they were missing necessary information for controls.
[3] The first Central Committee lasted from 1930 until 1951. Geneva Accords 1955 divided the country into North and South factions. Vietnamese reunification did not occur until 1975. Since the fourth Central Committee of the CPV in 1976, we found that all top-ranked politicians were born in 1921 or later, which was after the last imperial examination in 1919.

ethnic rate, and the ratio between the district population and country population as a weight for each district based on the 2009 Vietnam Population and Housing Census (conducted by the General Statistics Office of Vietnam). Controls also included croplands and urban land ratio from the 1992 Global Land Cover Characterization, elevations from the 1996 Landsat Imagery of the US Geological Survey, and distances to the coastline for each district from a country shape file obtained from the GADM (www.gadm.org).

We used the following equation during the second stage of our empirical estimation:

(1) $Top\ politician_i = \alpha_1.\widehat{Imperial\ elite_i} + \alpha_2.X_i + \varepsilon_i,$

where X is the set of controls and i is the district.

During the first stage, we used an instrumental variable (IV) for $Imperial\ elites$, as follows:

(2) $Imperial\ elite_i = \beta_1.IV_i + \beta_2.X_i + \epsilon_i.$

Based on a recent study by Vu and Yamada (2020), we used the average distance from each district to the imperial test venues as a proxy for the educational costs posed to those who took the imperial examination (i.e., the IV variable). We then used variations in imperial test venues (Table 1) and variations in territorial expansion throughout Vietnamese history, which nearly doubled between 1075 and 1919 (see Dell et al., 2018; Vu and Yamada, 2020). The average distance was strongly correlated with the number of imperial elites regardless of the added controls and district-fixed effects (Table 2).

Table 1. Timelines and the number of imperial elites

Examination years	Dynasty	Test venue		Our raw data	
		Province	District	Times tested	Number of imperial elites
1075–1225	Ly	Hanoi	Ba Dinh	4	11
1232–1393	Tran	Hanoi	Ba Dinh	16	49
1400–1405	Ho	Thanh Hoa	Vinh Loc	3	11
1426–1526	Le	Hanoi	Ba Dinh	32	1,008
1529–1592	Mac	Hanoi	Ba Dinh	22	482
1554–1595	Le	Thanh Hoa	Tho Xuan	8	51
1598–1787	Le	Hanoi	Ba Dinh	64	723
1822–1919	Nguyen	Thua Thien Hue	Hue	39	553
Sum				188	2,888

Table 2. Correlations between the number of imperial elites and *IV*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
The IV (distance)	–0.007***	–0.059**	–0.007***	–0.050**
	(0.001)	(0.026)	(0.001)	(0.024)
Province fixed effect		Yes		Yes
Other controls			Yes	Yes
N districts	687	687	687	687
R-squared	0.239	0.584	0.371	0.618

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses (*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1). P-weights were used in all estimations. Other controls were the 2009 Kinh ethnic ratio and population density, 1992 urban land ratio and cropland ratio, 1996 mean elevation, and the distance to coastlines in every estimation.

3. Results and discussion

We found that the imperial legacy was persistent in all panels (see Table 3). In Panel A, an additional imperial elite was associated with a 0.08–0.086 increase in the presence of top-ranked communists who shared the same home district during 1930–2020. Meanwhile, the value was 0.008 for the first Central Committee in Panel B, and 0.056 in Panel C, in which all top politicians were born in 1921 or later. Further, F-statistics in the first stages demonstrated the validity of our instrumental variables. The results in Panel B may be partially explained by the hypothesis put forth by Bai and Jia (2016), given that the CPV was one of many revolutionary factions. However, this cannot explain the results in Panel C, in which all politicians were born after the last imperial examination in 1919.

Table 3. Legacies and the number of contemporary top-ranked communists

	Panel A 1930-2020			Panel B 1930-1951	Panel C 1976-2020
	OLS	IV-Second stage	IV-Second stage	IV-Second stage	IV-Second stage
Variables	Top politician	Top politician	Top politician	Top politician	Top politician
Imperial elite	0.042***	0.080***	0.086***	0.008***	0.056***
	(0.009)	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.002)	(0.011)
Other controls	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
F-statistics[†]		94.45	128.75	128.75	128.75
N districts	687	687	687	687	687

Notes: Same as Table 2. † Kleibergen-Paap Wald rk F statistic for testing H0: Weak identification test.

We also propose several alternative hypotheses to explain the statistical results. First, home favoritism in Vietnam (Vu and Yamada, 2017) may incentivize top politicians to vote for younger candidates from the same home districts as those occupied by the later Central

Committee of the CPV. Second, top politicians may form small factions based on geographical proximity in order to concentrate their power. Third, the desire to reach the top class via learning culture (see Vu and Yamada, 2020; i.e., learning to win top positions through the imperial examinations) would have endured and been further magnified via mechanisms associated with the previous hypotheses. Meanwhile, the CPV was the only elite social ladder available between 1976 and 2020.

4. Conclusion

This study identified the existence of an historical legacy between imperial elites and contemporary top-ranked politicians in Vietnam. We argue that this is the result of historical transmission via informal institutions (learning/education) and the formation of home favoritism among compatriot politicians.

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Appendix 1. Descriptive statistics using the district as a unit

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Imperial elite (number)	4.132	11.210	0	98
Top politician (number)				
Panel A	1.074	1.710	0	10
Panel B	0.047	0.218	0	2
Panel C	0.820	1.318	0	7
Instrumental variable (km)	999.960	845.575	23.043	2127.534
2009-Population density (1,000 per km^2)	1.755	6.073	0.013	58.673
2009-Kinh ethnic rate	0.756	0.333	0.018	1
1992-Urban land rate	0.023	0.115	0	1
1992-Cropland rate	0.470	0.316	0	1
1996-Elevation mean (m)	216.259	309.712	1	1544.59
Distance to coastal line (km)	86.02	84.78	0.23	434.57

Note: Number of districts = 687.