Report for the IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award (2025)

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With the generous support of the IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award, I was able to conduct fieldwork in Vietnam that significantly advanced my research on the cultural and historical roots of educational disparities. The award allowed me to return to Vietnam from July 1 to August 8, 2025, and complete an intensive phase of archival research and data verification. This work has strengthened my theoretical framework and will directly inform the development of my dissertation proposal.

Fieldwork Activities

My primary task was collecting archive data at the national archive centers in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. I focused on historical documents, maps, and administrative records that trace Vietnam's cultural divergence and unification between the North and the South. Particular attention was paid to:

- Records related to the long-term influence of Confucian meritocracy in both regions.
- Documentation on colonial and wartime disruptions (French colonization and the Vietnam War), to better isolate enduring cultural effects from political and economic shocks.

In **Archive II (Ho Chi Minh City)**, I examined narratives by Vietnamese scholars on the centrality of Confucian thought during the period of North–South division. Confucianism was repeatedly cited as a national philosophy, invoked to sustain a sense of unity despite political fragmentation.

In **Archive III (Hanoi)**, I accessed a personal collection of handwritten manuscripts by Vietnamese scholars. These writings reveal nuanced distinctions between Vietnamese Confucianism and its Chinese counterpart, emphasizing how local adaptation shaped its intellectual and cultural role. I also found records on state investment in education during the feudal period, which suggest a system of priorities that differs from portrayals commonly found in Western scholarship on Vietnamese education. In particular, these sources noted that education was primarily funded privately at the household level. Importantly, this work allowed me to bring to light voices of Vietnamese scholars whose writings were never published due to political constraints. By incorporating these perspectives, my research contributes to

voicing a decolonial position that resists dominant Western framings of Vietnam's intellectual and educational history. Moreover, during the Vietnam War there is little archival data available from the North. The materials I was able to consult provided a partial view of the education system during that time, which contributes important context for my analysis.

Building on my preliminary findings from the previous year, I revisited archival sites to validate earlier notes and supplement missing data. This iterative process allowed me to refine my argument and build more concrete assumptions. The extended stay also enabled me to partially overcome bureaucratic delays in accessing restricted resources, which otherwise would have hampered the progress of my project.

Significance of the Fieldwork

The fieldwork revealed how Confucianism was reinterpreted in times of division and localized in ways that differentiated it from Chinese traditions. By recovering and amplifying the suppressed voices of Vietnamese scholars, this project not only enriches the empirical record but also advances a decolonial critique, positioning Vietnamese intellectuals as active agents in defining their own educational and cultural legacies.
These findings provide a strong foundation for my dissertation. The work also contributes to a broader scholarly agenda in comparative education and cultural studies, by illustrating how historical legacies intersect with modern institutions to influence social outcomes. The insights from this research are intended to speak not only to Vietnam's case but also to ongoing debates on the role of culture in shaping educational achievement globally.

Academic and Professional Impact

The IRIS Summer Fieldwork Award came at a critical pre-dissertation stage. The archival work and extended data verification it supported have solidified my project design and given me the empirical grounding needed for my doctoral proposal. The experience has also strengthened my professional development by positioning me to contribute to scholarship at the intersection of culture, history, and education.

I am deeply grateful to IRIS for making this research possible and for supporting the advancement of my dissertation work.