

# VAN MIEU, VAN TU AND VAN CHI IN THE COURSE OF NATIONAL HISTORY

NGUYEN THI PHUONG CHI \*

NGUYEN KY NAM \*\*

**Abstract:** In the course of Vietnam's history, Van Mieu, Van Tu and Van Chi played an important role in the spiritual life and expressed our tradition "Venerated Teacher and Respecting Morals". Van Mieu was built in the capital of Thang Long under king Ly Thanh Tong (1070) so as to worship Confucius and his excellent students. Through many dynasties such as Tran, Early Le, Le Restoration, Tay Son and Nguyen, Van Mieu changed dramatically both in eligible students and in forms of examination... During Early Le dynasty, Confucianism reached its peak and especially King Le Thanh Tong commanded to erect the doctorate stelae for whom passed the exam since 1442. Nowadays, there are still 82 doctorate stelae in Van Mieu – Quoc Tu Giam Hanoi. Together with the system of Van Mieu in the central, provincial and district areas, Van Tu and Van Chi gradually formed and developed at the village in order to worship for Confucius and graduated people. Bac Giang and Bac Ninh are well-known as "old Kinh Bac area" which includes dense systems of Van Tu – Van Chi.

**Key words:** Van Mieu, Van Tu, Van Chi.

## 1. Van Mieu (Temple of Literature)

Van Mieu is a shrine to Confucius (551 – 479 BC) as a great ideologist, politician and creator of Confucianism in China. The Temple of Confucius has different names such as Confucius Temple, or Literature Temple. Most temples have a place to study that is called a Temple of Literature. Prior to the 15<sup>th</sup> century in China, Confucius Temple was not called the Temple of Literature. In the late stage of Tang Dynasty, Khong Tu was named to be Van Tuyen Temple or Literature Temple. During the Ming Dynasty, since Minh Vinh Lac period (1403 – 1424), it had been called Confucius or Literature Temple.

Since then, in all documents in Vietnam, it is called Van Mieu (or Temple of Literature).

Van Mieu is built to be a shrine to Confucius, 4 great sages (Yanhui, Zhengzi, Zisi, Mencius, 10 excellent disciples and 72 other students<sup>(1)</sup>).

Van Mieu in Vietnam was built in the capital of Thang Long in 1070, under the

---

(\*) Assoc. Prof., Ph.D., Institute of History.

(\*\*) B.A., Thang Long – Hanoi Heritage Conservation Centre.

(1) The students of Confucius could reach up to three thousands of people, among them 72 greatest students and Nhan Hoi (Yan Hui) and Zengzi were the best. After Confucius passed away, Zengzi used his teacher's lessons to be a Great Learning, Analects. 100 years later, Mencius made Mencius book, so Confucianism was widely popularized.



reign of Ly Thanh Tong (1054 – 1072). Dai Viet su ky toan thu (Complete Annals of Dai Viet) wrote: “Canh Tuat year, King Ly Thanh Tong (August of lunar calendar 1070) instructs to build Van Mieu, makes a statue of Confucius, Chu Cong and 4 sages<sup>(2)</sup>, paints 72 great students of Confucius who are worshiped all year round<sup>(3)</sup>”. In 1076, King Ly Nhan Tong also opened Quoc Tu Giam as the first university in Vietnam adjacent to Van Mieu so that princes could study. At first, the school was just for the princes and high-ranking mandarins’ children (called Quoc Tu).

During Tran Dynasty, Quoc Tu Giam changed its name into Quoc Tu Vien. First, only the juniors of *quan van* (civil mandarins) and *quan tung* (law mandarins) could study, but not for others. According to Complete Annals of Dai Viet: “In October, Binh Dan year (1236), Pham Ung Than became the chief of Quoc Tu Vien, in charge of caring of juniors of *quan van* and *quan tung*<sup>(4)</sup>”. This is because the participants could take over from their forefathers. However, protection of our country required better governmental organization, so Confucian education was applied to all Confucian gentries all over country from the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Quoc Tu Vien changed its name into Quoc Hoc Vien. Complete Annals of Dai Viet wrote: “Quy Suu year (1253), the King decreed that Confucian gentries all over the country had to go to Quoc Hoc Vien in order to study Four Books and Six Classics<sup>(5)</sup>”.

In 1281, the Court founded other places

for studying in Thien Truong prefecture as the second capital of Tran dynasty (present Nam Dinh city). The document books did not mention who could study there. They just stated that Thien Thuoc prefecture residents could not study”. The history books wrote: “Tan Ty year (1281), establishment of a place for studying in Thien Truong, Thien Thuoc prefecture residents were not allowed to study (according to the old customs of Tran Dynasty, soldiers in Thien Thuoc were not allowed to study because their strength seemed to be reduced)”<sup>(6)</sup>.

Under the reign of Tran Minh Tong, Chu Van An was assigned to be the mandarin of Quoc Tu Giam Tu nghiep and he was in charge of teaching princes. In 1370, Chu Van An passed away and Tran Nghe Tong made an altar for him in Van Mieu next to Confucius’s altar.

During the Early Le period, Confucianism developed very quickly. In 1484, King Le Thanh Tong had placed the stelae of doctor laureates since the examination in 1442. Up to present, there have been 82 stelae of doctors in Van Mieu – Quoc Tu Giam (Hanoi) (Early Le placed 12 stelae following different exams such as 1442, 1448, 1463, 1475, 1478, 1587, 1496, 1502, 1511 and 1514). In Mac Dynasty, they just erected 2 stelae for the examination in 1518 and 1529. Even though Mac Dynasty held 22

---

<sup>(2)</sup> Four Disciples: Yan Hui, Zenghi, Zisi and Mencius.

<sup>(3)</sup> *Complete Annals of Dai Viet*, Vol.1, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1993, p.275.

<sup>(4)</sup> *Complete Annals of Dai Viet*, Vol.2, Social Sciences Publishing House, 1971, p.14.

<sup>(5)</sup> *Ibid*, Vol.2, p. 25.

<sup>(6)</sup> *Ibid*, Vol.2, p.51.



examinations of doctorates, they just placed a stele at Van Mieu – Quoc Tu Giam in 1529. During the Le Restoration, examinations were regular and in 1653 people placed the doctor's laureates in Van Mieu with 25 stelae for exams during 1554 – 1652. After that, in 1717 the Court placed stelae for the second time with 21 stelae of doctors' laureates from 1656 to 1715. By placing stelae in two big occasions and other examination times, Le Restoration had placed 68 stelae of 82 doctor laureates until 1779 exam. Under Tay Son and Nguyen Dynasty, the capital was moved to Phu Xuan (Hue), so the doctor laureate stelea were no longer erected in Hanoi.

In Le Restoration (1762), King Le Hien Tong repaired Quoc Tu Giam as a place for studying the Confucianism in the royal citadel.

In 1785, Quoc Tu Giam was changed its name into Thai Hoc house once again.

Under Tay Son Dynasty, Van Mieu – Quoc Tu Giam in Thang Long was called Van Mieu in Bac Ha prefecture. In the late stage of Le – Trinh period and resistance against Manchu Dynasty, Van Mieu was seriously destroyed. The residents at Van Chuong village wanted the Court to repair it. It was said that King Quang Trung answered with an eight word distich metre poem:

“When our country reunified  
Doctor Laureates would be made”

Under the reign of Canh Thinh, the King decreed to repair Van Mieu in Bac Ha Prefecture.

In 1802, King Gia Long closed Quoc Tu Giam school in Hanoi, and turned Thai Hoc house into Khai Thanh - a place for worshipping parents of Confucius and used

a location in Hoai Duc Prefecture as a place of studying. Under the reign of Thanh Thai (1889 – 1907), it was changed into Van Chi of Tho Xuong District. The sign in front of gate Thai Hoc Mon was also turned into Mieu Mon. In July, the 4<sup>th</sup> year of King Gia Long (August – 1895), General Commander Nguyen Van Thanh built Khue Van Cac, which was made of wood. During the reign of Minh Menh, General Commander Dang Van Hoa used wood pillars to avoid mould and it was roofed by tubular tiles to protect against rain and sun. Van Mieu in Thang Long was renamed Van Mieu Bac Thanh.

Along with the capital in Hue, Van Mieu in Nguyen Dynasty was built in Hue. Van Mieu or Van Thanh were various names of Van Thanh Mieu, a temple for Confucius – great teacher. However, the location of Van Mieu changed many times. Under Nguyen lords, in 1691, lord Nguyen Phuc Chu built Van Mieu at Trieu Son village, about 7 km away from the capital to the north west. In 1766, during Hue Vuong Nguyen Phuc Khoat reign, Van Mieu was moved to Luong Quan village, in the south or Huong river (Perfume River). In 1770, Van Mieu also moved to Ho village in the north west of capital.

In 1808, under the reign of King Gia Long, Van Mieu was built at the present location at Huong Long village, Hue city, Thua Thien Hue province. The old temple is still kept as Khai Thanh Tu (temple for parents of Confucius). The temple was built very superbly on the bank of the Huong river, An Binh commune, An Ninh village, west of the capital.



There are two houses of stele in front of Mieu yard, the right stele carved the decree of King Thanh To Nhan (Ming Mang) that Thai Giam was not listed as a mandarin. The left stele carved decree of king Hien To Chuong (Thieu Tri) that on the mother's side of king could not take part in the government. Van Mieu also has two rows of doctorates stelae with carved names, home town, dates of 193 doctorates in 39 Hoi examination and Dinh examination. Nguyen dynasty started building the stelae of doctorates in Van Mieu (Hue) since 1822 examination.

Van Mieu at other localities appeared in Ming period in 1414 "Hoang Phuc in Ming dynasty say that prefects, districts were to set up Van Mieu and altars Xa Tac, Phong Van, Son Xuyen with other saints..."<sup>(7)</sup>.

In Early Le dynasty, Confucianism developed very splendidly and construction of Van Mieu was paid great attention. In 1465, the king ordered rituals at Van Mieu: "Use two days of spring and autumn to worship 10 disciples"<sup>(8)</sup>. Several Van Mieu at localities were built in Early Le in the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century like Mao Dien Temple. Mao Dien temple was in Mao Dien, Binh Giang district, Hai Duong province (present Mao Dien village, Cam Dien commune, Cam Giang district, Hai Duong province) which was to hold the prefectural examination of Hai Duong. Mao Dien Temple is a rare temple which is has been kept very traditional for its size, history, just behind Van Mieu – Quoc Tu Giam in Hanoi.

Van Mieu in Bac Ninh was also built in Early Le dynasty, at the location of Thi

Cau, Do Xa prefecture, Vo Giang district, Tu Son, Kinh Bac (present Dai Phuc precinct, Bac Ninh city, Bac Ninh province). Van Mieu in Bac Ninh worships Confucius, 4 disciples and 12 stelae "Kim bang luu phuong", erected in Bi temple, records the history for 677 students in Kinh Bac (including Bac Ninh, Bac Giang and some communes of Gia Lam, Dong Anh (Hanoi) and Van Lam, Van Giang (Hung Yen)<sup>(9)</sup>. In 1802, it was repaired.

Van Mieu in Lang Son was built in Le Restoration (17<sup>th</sup> century) at the location of the North gate of Lang Son citadel. During its existence, Van Mieu in Lang Son did not have stele carved for mandarins, just for Confucius. Compared to Van Mieu in Hai Duong, Hung Yen, Bac Ninh... the size of Van Mieu in Lang Son was quite small. In 18<sup>th</sup> century, Van Mieu was moved to the south of Long Da mound (dragon land), present Vien 50 (Chi Lang precinct, Lang son city). According to stele of Thanh pagoda, (the 4 year of Canh Thinh, 1796) Van Mieu has 6 compartments, roofing. At Dau year (1885), the French set up a station

<sup>(7)</sup> *Complete Annals of Dai Viet* (1971), Vol. 2, p.274.

<sup>(8)</sup> It means that ten students of Confucius are worshiped in Van Mieu. They are Nhan Uyen, Mau Tu Khien, Nhiem Ba Ngu, Trong Cung, Te Nga, Tu Cong, Nhiem Huu, Quy Lo, Tu Du, Tu Ha. Then Nhan Uyen was upgraded to higher grade "phoi huong". Also Tang Tu was upgraded to the grade "phoi huong" (*Complete Annals of Dai Viet*, Vol. 3, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi 1972, p.351).

<sup>(9)</sup> The stone stele shows that Van Mieu was initially built in the North east of Bac Ninh citadel or present Thi Cau. In 1802, after coming to the throne, king Gia Long repaired Van Mieu. In 1838, king Thieu Tri made a new one. In 1928, king Bao Dai moved Van Mieu to the current location ([mobile.vietgle.vn/detail.aspx?key=văn+miếu+Bắc+Ninh&type=A0](http://mobile.vietgle.vn/detail.aspx?key=văn+miếu+Bắc+Ninh&type=A0))



in front of the South of the citadel.

Van Mieu was blockaded by the French army. On the occasion of spiritual ceremonies, mandarins had to select the exterior land for this. In 1889, they asked the French to give them Van Mieu back for spiritual ceremonies but the French did not agree. Upon later discussions, they agreed to build Van Mieu at another place. The selected location was foot of the mountain of Tam Thai (present Phi Ve mountain) at Dong Kinh. There is Tam Thai mountain behind Van Mieu, in front of Ky Cung river, Tam Thanh and Chua Tien on two sides. In April 1891, Van Mieu was officially constructed and finished one month later. Van Mieu consisted of 7 buildings and used larger tiles and bricks.

According to Shino - Nom documents, Van Mieu Vinh Yen was also built in 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Stele of Trung tu Van Mieu tinh nghi mon bi ky ( No 5107 – 5108, Institute of Han – Nom Studies), situated at Cao Xa commune, Bach Hach district, Vinh Yen province was erected in the 7<sup>th</sup> year of Canh Tri reign (1669) by Tran Dang Tuyen at Hoang Mai commune, Yen Dung district. First sentence: Tam Doi chief town was at Cao Xa commune, Bach Hac district, to the west of commune<sup>(10)</sup>. “Phu” grade in Le – Trinh dynasty was the local governmental grade just behind “Tran” (Tran – Phu – huyen – chau – xa)<sup>(11)</sup>.

Van Mieu was also built under the reign of Nguyen lords and Nguyen Dynasty such as: Tran Bien Van Mieu, the earliest one in the South, constructed in At Mui (either in 1751 or 1775 as there are two ideas about the dating of Tran Bien Van Mieu)<sup>(12)</sup>. In 1794 Van Mieu and the Temple of Tran

Bien palace, which was originally constructed by King Hien Tong Hieu Minh and collapsed, was restored by Le Bo Nguyen Do. The central part is Dai Thanh palace, east Than Kho, west Duc Thanh temple, left Kinh Thanh gate, right Ngoc Chan gate, Khue Van Cac is in front. Both bell and drum are hung on two sides, left Sung Van house, right Duy Le house, surrounding by the square citadel. There are 50 people of Le sinh and 50 people of mieu phu<sup>(13)</sup>.

In 1824, the 5<sup>th</sup> year of Minh Mang, he decided to build Van Mieu in Gia Dinh, Phu My commune, Binh Duong district. Van Mieu in Vinh Long was set up in Giap Ty year (1864), in the 17<sup>th</sup> year of Tu Duc and finished at the end of Binh Dan year (1866). There are three Van Mieu in the Mekong Delta Region. Except for Van Mieu dated in Le – Trinh dynasty in Tonkin and Nguyen lords in Cochinchina, most of Van Mieu were constructed at the reign of

---

<sup>(10)</sup> Trinh Khac Manh (2008), "Overview of documents in Chinese on Van Mieu in Vinh Yen", in *Van Mieu and Traditional Education in Vinh Phuc*, p.12.

<sup>(11)</sup> *Tran*: changed from *dao*. *Tran* includes two parts: internal and external part. Internal parts were in the plains (Hai Duong, Son Nam, Son Tay, Kinh Bac) and external parts were so remote (Lang Son, Hung Hoa, Thai Nguyem, Tuyen Quang, An Quang). Especially Thanh Hoa and Nghe An still kept the same. There were total of 13 tran which were under control of Nguyen lords.

<sup>(12)</sup> In 1861, after conquering Bien Hoa province, the French demolished Van Mieu Tran Bien. On the occasion of 300 years of formation and development of Bien Hoa – Dong Nai, Dong Nai province repaired Van Mieu Tran Bien, this is one of the biggest cultural monuments which stimulates the traditional values of culture and humanity. The monument consists of two parts: ceremonies part and exhibition one.

<sup>(13)</sup> *Chronicle of Greater Vietnam* (2002), Vol. 1, Education Publishing House, Hanoi, p.306.



King Gia Long, Minh Mang, Thieu Tri and Tu Duc.

Van Mieu Xich Dang or Van Mieu Hung Yen (Present Xich Dang village, Lam Son Precinct, Hung Yen city, Hung Yen province), built in 1832 under the reign of Minh Menh.

At the late reign of Minh Menh, 1838 (the 19th year of Minh Menh), the Court regulated about Van Mieu style for all localities, "The ancient Van Mieu is square house with two compartments, having large space which divides into Left and Right side, made of brick"<sup>(14)</sup>.

According to the statistics, Nguyen dynasty has 28 Van Mieu in the capital and other provinces: Hanoi (1070), Hue (1692) and Van Mieu at other provinces Bien Hoa (1715), Bac Ninh (repaired in 1802), Quang Nam (1802), Binh Dinh (1802), Nghe An (1803), Thanh Hoa (1805), Quang Yen (1805), Cao Bang (1809), Lang Son (repaired in 1809), Quang Ngai (1817), Quang Binh (1818), Nam Dinh (1821), Hai Duong (1823), Gia Dinh (1824), Tuyen Quang (1825), Binh Thuan (1826), Hung Hoa (repaired 1830), Thai Nguyen (1832), Hung Yen (1839), Ninh Binh (1839), Khanh Hoa (1846), Son Tay (1847), Vinh Long (1864 - 1866), and Văn Miếu at areas: Quang Tri (1802), Phu Yen (1802), Ha Tinh (1833)"<sup>(15)</sup>.

## **2. Van Tu (Confucian Temple) and Van Chi (Confucian Shrine)**

As mentioned above, the system of Van Mieu includes Van Mieu at the capital and Van Mieu at province and district. Van Tu and Van Chi at the commune and village is only a place for worship of Confucius, but

also a place to record the names of graduated people.

Phan Ke Binh has written about Van Tu and Van Chi as: "The open – air altar is so called Van Chi (Confucian Shrine) and the alter with roof called Van Tu (Confucian Temple). Both Van Tu and Van Chi are to worship the graduate people in the village. Some villages have no graduate people, so Confucius was called Tien Thanh su in order to encourage other people to study. The worshipping of educated people consisted of three ranks: First doctorate, Second Graduated people and Civilian sixth and seventh mandarin grade, Third baccalaureate and civilian ninth mandarin grade. Many places just paid attention to the competition examination and listed the laureate people if they are the highest rank of mandarin or civilian. Second mandarin grade was not listed if they did not have an examination"<sup>(16)</sup>.

Van Chi at Ngoc Than village, Quoc Oai district, Hanoi is a rare Confucian Shrine with a roof that keeps the original architecture of a village, commune in Hanoi. Van Chi also has a stele dated in the Nguyen dynasty. The content of stele included a carved title, name of graduated people through examination<sup>(17)</sup>.

<sup>(14)</sup> *Chronicle of Greater Vietnam* (2006), Vol. 5, Education Publishing House, Hanoi, 2006, p.306.

<sup>(15)</sup> Nguyen Quoc Hung (2009), *Conservation and Promotion of Confucianism sites of Hanoi in the Integration Period, Van Mieu – Quoc Tu Giam and Confucianism Sites in Vietnam*, Bulletin of workshop, Hanoi, p.21.

<sup>(16)</sup> Phan Ke Binh (2005), *Vietnam Custom*, Cultural Information Publishing Houses, pp.141 - 142.

<sup>(17)</sup> Lan Anh (2011), *Van Quy, Van Chi at Ngoc Than Village, in A Meeting of Confucianism Management Offices in Vietnam*, Hanoi, pp.195 - 209.



There are lots of Tu Chi and Van Chi as follows:

Viet Yen district:

- Tu Chi Tho Ha, Van Ha commune also conserve 8 stone stelae and carve 70 Confucian students. The earliest stele is erected in the 5 year of Vinh Thinh (1860) and the latest one is 9 September of the 9 year of Tu Duc (1856).

- Van Chi Bai Ca, Van Trung commune

- Van Chi Yen Vien, Van Ha commune

- Van Chi Nhat Minh, Quang Minh commune

- Van Chi Tu Lan, Tu Lan commune

Yen Dung district:

- Van Chi Binh An, Tan Tien commune

- Van Chi Dinh Uyen, Tan Tien commune

Bac Giang city:

- Van Chi Dong Nham, Tho Xuong Precinct

- Van Chi Dinh Ke, Dinh Ke commune

Lang Giang district

- Van Chi Trung Phu, Tan Hung commune

- Van Chi Yen Thinh, Tan Thinh commune

- Van Chi Bang, Nghia Hoa commune

Bac Giang, Bac Ninh – Kinh Bac is famous with Confucianism and good tradition of studying. The system of Van Chi in various villages in Bac Giang province has contributed to this.

Due to the wars and rebels, most sites of Van Tu and Van Chi have been seriously demolished. However the “Exhibition on Van Tu and Van Chi of Thang Long and adjacent areas” was inaugurated on 24 January 2013 at Tien Duong House of Thai Hoc, Van Mieu – Quoc Tu Giam (Hanoi) which shows us the large numbers of Van Tu and Van Chi still existing. The display included 130 images on Van Tu, Van Chi in Hanoi and other provinces like Bac Ninh,

Hai Duong, Ha Nam, Nam Dinh, Ninh Binh, Hai Phong, along with a large number of Confucian artifacts. The Confucian Shrines are like a house with three spaces or five spaces. They include Confucian temples at Vinh Tru, Duy Tien (Ha Nam province) and Confucian temples in Lang Vong commune, Nho Quan district, Ninh Binh province.

“A Confucian Shrine has a smaller size according to prefecture, district or village. An example is the Confucian Shrines of Tu Liem district (Hanoi), Nhat Tao, Tu Liem district and Cau Ranh commune, Bac Ninh province. More importantly, the Confucian Shrine of Nguyet Ang, Dai Ang commune, Thanh Tri district, Hanoi with its unique pattern paper is exhibited”<sup>(18)</sup>.

Nowadays, Confucianism is no longer as important as it was once. Only a few Vietnamese understand Chinese. Most of Van Mieu, Van Thanh Van Tu, Van Chi have been demolished. On the other hand, documents about Van Tu, Van Chi are not so common; so we find it difficult to research.

In summary, Van Mieu in Vietnam was established in the Ly Dynasty, developed through many dynasties and broadened in the Nguyen Dynasty. Van Mieu existing until now are 28. Among them, Van Mieu Tran Bien has been rebuilt so greatly. Van Mieu, Van Tu and Van Chi are symbols of the cultural and studious tradition of Vietnam and also express “Venerated Teacher and Respecting Morals” of Vietnam.

---

<sup>(18)</sup> Dinh Thi Thuan, *The Exhibition on Van Tu and Van Chi and Thang Long and Adjacent Areas*, in vietnamplus.vn, 24/1/2013.



