

Civil Service Examination Policy of Mac Dynasty and Role of Nguyen Binh Khiem

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Received: 7 December 2016.

Accepted: 23 March 2017.

Abstract: Among the talented and renowned Confucian intelligentsia trained under the Mac dynasty, Nguyen Binh Khiem is one of the most influential characters of the Vietnamese history and culture in the 16th century. His wholehearted service towards the dynasty was the result of a process of studying the reality and apprehending the course of development by a Confucian scholar who was abreast of his times. Nguyen Binh Khiem was well-known not only as a teacher highly esteemed for the morality and literary talent, but also as a prophet who foretold the developments of Vietnam – he is considered the No.1 forecaster in the country’s history. People pass to one another words of predictions thought to have been spoken by him, which are called the Oracles by First Doctoral Candidate *Trinh* (named after the title conferred on him by the royal court).

Keywords: Civil service examinations, Nguyen Binh Khiem, Mac dynasty.

Subject classification: History

1. Introduction

Mac dynasty came into existence in the background of the State of Dai Viet (Great Viet) sunk in a profound crisis at the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century with court affairs disturbances, factional brawls and revolts arising everywhere. Nevertheless, in a short period of time, the dynasty rapidly built and consolidated the organisation of the central and local administrative apparatuses. After more than 60 years of reigning in Thang Long, Mac dynasty bequeathed achievements

in political, economic and military fields. Especially, it devoted attention and attached great importance to the education with “*khoa cử*” (civil service), or royal/feudal competitive examinations, for the purpose of “using literature and education to train talents, repairing schools to expand education, promulgating schooling regulations to encourage enthusiasm” [7, p.187]. The paper gives a general presentation of the policy on the feudal civil service examination education of Mac dynasty (1527-1592) and the role of Confucian scholar Nguyen Binh Khiem.

2. The policy of civil service examination education of Mac dynasty

During the two decades at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, social scientists in Vietnam and abroad have confirmed the orthodox role and positive contributions of Mac dynasty to the Vietnamese historical developments.

The appearance of Mac dynasty at the end of the third decade of the 16th century temporarily put an end to nearly two decades of crisis of Le dynasty. On the fifth day of the fifth lunar month of *Đinh Hợi* year (circa June 1527), returning from his native village of Co Trai, Nghi Duong district, to the capital of Thang Long, Mac Dang Dung forced King Le Cung Hoang to abdicate the throne. According to what was written by a group of historians in Le dynasty in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (*Complete Annals of Great Viet*) and historian Le Quy Don in his *Đại Việt thông sử* (*General History of the Le Dynasty*), “at that time, most subjects and people tended towards [Mac] Dang Dung, so they welcomed him to the royal capital” [12, p.108], [3, p.326]. However, in order to regularise his ascending the throne, Mac Dang Dung compelled the king to make a royal edict to abdicate. He wanted Minister of the Interior, Doctor Truong Phu Duyet from Kim Dau commune, Thanh Mien district (now Lam Son commune, Thanh Mien district, Hai Duong province) to make the first draft of the edict; but Truong Phu Duyet resolutely refused to do. He glowered and shouted: “What’s the sense of that?” High-ranking Honourable Mandarin titled *Đông các Đại học sĩ* (Great Scholar of the Eastern Pavilion), Earl Nguyen Van Thai, then sketched the royal edict [12, p.108].

The royal proclamation of abdication included the following paragraph: “I (King Cung Hoang) have no virtue, I have abused the heavenly throne, I am unable to endure the shouldering. The heavenly order and human hearts follow the virtuous man. I judge from you, the highest ranking mandarin titled as *Thái sư* and *An Hưng Vương* Mac Dang Dung, innately intelligent and clear-sighted as both a scholar and a warrior. Outside you have carried out suppressions on rebels everywhere, all localities have been subdued, and inside your care for mandarins is good in all aspects. Heaven has permitted you to follow great efforts and virtue. Now I consider the reason carefully, so I abdicate my royal throne in favour of you” (12, p.108).

Right on the day the royal proclamation was promulgated, Mac Dang Dung ascended the throne, proclaiming himself Emperor, laying down the dynastic title (i.e. the name of the reigning years) of Minh Duc, declaring grand amnesty in the whole country, deposing King Cung Hoang to be Cung Vương (i.e. lowering the King’s level) and detaining him together with the Queen-mother in Tay Noi Palace. Some months later, Mac Dang Dung compelled Cung Vương and the Queen-mother to commit suicide.

After one hundred years of ruling the country (1428-1527) with ten kings on the throne, the Le dynasty came to a temporary end of the royal vein initiated by Le Thai To (1428-1433). By his talent and mental power, Mac Dang Dung could seize the opportunity, overthrew Le dynasty, established Mac dynasty and continued to rule the country of Dai Viet.

Mac dynasty came into existence in the situation of the country having just spent a

period of crisis with a host of revolts lasting nearly 20 years. The constant wars created the state of a miserable country and wretched population, with the sense of worry spread all over the society. In particular, the contingent of mandarins were much dispersed and wavered in face of powerful changes of the situation. In the initial stage of building its career, the Mac dynasty's administration had to cope with numerous difficulties and obstacles both internally (home affairs) and externally (foreign relations with feudal China's Ming dynasty).

The first urgent work which Mac dynasty had to do was the rapid construction and strengthening of the organisation of the central and local administrative apparatuses. For fear that the newly-established administration was not considered to be the orthodox line, and could not seize the human heart, and that the mandarins were still missing the old king (the Le dynasty), Mac dynasty followed the law of rule of Le dynasty; it dared not change the law, but tried to console the people's hearts [12, p.110], intactly retaining the fully worked-out institutional model in the period of Le Thanh Tong (1460-1497). In particular, Mac dynasty paid attention to building and consolidating the army from the central to local levels in order to guarantee sufficient abilities for the forces to repress the population's resistance, and more importantly, to cope with the hostile forces. With timely policies, appropriate employment of talents and effective reinforcement of military forces, only after one year of ruling, the dynasty was able to temporarily settle the social order, so it now had time to take care of various economic fields and step up the culture and education in the country.

In the building and consolidation of the administrative institutional framework, the Mac thoroughly applied the old method of Le dynasty, carrying out the policy of winning over Confucians, the crowded and powerful stratum in the society. Mac dynasty showed its attention to the training and selection of a contingent of mandarins through the form of examinations. This was the second important internal policy after the one of consolidating the military forces.

When the Mac family ascended the throne, among the strata of feudal intellectuals of the Le dynasty, there was a strong disintegration: some of them hid and fled to forests and mountains, while others concealed their names, not wanting to appear [12, pp.110-111]. Some even sought ways to oppose the Mac and restore the Le dynasty. The re-employment of mandarins once serving Le dynasty to supplement the young administrative machinery of the new dynasty was a very practical and effective measure of the Mac. In face of the urgent need to build and consolidate the administration of which the stratum of Confucian mandarins played the key role, Mac dynasty showed strong attention and attached great importance to the education with civil service examinations.

One of the necessary tasks to create the contingent of mandarins for the dynasty was to organise "*khoa thi tiến sĩ*" (doctorate royal competitive examinations). The organisation of such examinations did not deviate from the purpose of building a Confucianist intelligentsia loyal to Mac dynasty and supporting its existence and development. Besides, the kings at the beginning of Mac dynasty had another purpose of exerting influence on the Confucian scholars who

lived in hesitation in face of the fluctuations of the contemporary time, trying to win over those who had served Le dynasty. It was noteworthy that from the time of seizing the royal power in 1527 until the time it had to withdraw from Thang Long, Mac dynasty was never neglecting the education and examinations. In 1592, the Mac army suffered heavy losses and had to surrender the royal capital, King Mac Mau Hop could still organise the final doctorate examination at Bo De temporary headquarters (Phu Vien village, Gia Lam, today is Bo De ward, Long Bien district, Hanoi) though. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* wrote about this examination as follows: “In the *Nhâm Thìn* year - the 15th year under Quang Hung dynastic title (1592), (the second year of [Mac ruler] Mac Hong Ninh), the third month of the lunar year (circa April 1592)...., the Mac lineage held a *thi Hội* (metropolitan exams), granting the titles of doctors to Pham Huu Nang and three others, and co-doctors to Nguyen Huu Duc and twelve others” [12, p.174].

Over the more than six decades of ruling in the capital of Thang Long, the kings of Mac dynasty organised 22 *thi Hội* examinations, granting the titles of doctors to 485 contestants, among whom there were 13 *trạng nguyên* (first doctoral candidates). In addition to that, many other people took part enthusiastically in learning across the country, even in village schools, taught by *huong sư* (village teachers), in response to the special attention paid to the education and civil service examinations by Mac dynasty, though, due to various subjective and objective reasons, they did not have the chances to sit for exams, and therefore their names were not glorified on *bảng rồng*

(dragon rolls – the boards with the names of those passing the exams, hung in the Temple of Literature in Thang Long). The spirit for learning was high during the period. In the history of Vietnamese feudal education with civil service examinations after the reign of Le Thanh Tong, only the Mac dynasty was able to carry out the regulation of organising one examination every three years without interruption. The number of examinations and doctors under Mac dynasty could compare to those in the Later Le early period.

In order to encourage candidates to study and to dignify the examinations, King Mac Dang Dung followed the practices of 1484 under King Le Thanh Tong's reign, establishing stone stelae and awarding people who passed the examinations. Nevertheless, given the interminable wars, the erection of doctorate stone stelae by Mac dynasty was only carried out once in the first examination in the third Minh Duc dynastic year, or *Kỷ Sửu* lunar year (1529), under the rule of Mac Dang Dung. The contents of the text in the stelae reflected the dynasty's policy of taking care of talents and paying attention to Confucianism studies: “Obeying the order of Your Majesty the Emperor, for the celebration of the Confucian studies, I, your subject, would like to respect, clasp my hands and lower my head to offer the following words: if the Heaven Way is in accord, heroes will have the opportunity to be born into this world; if the King's rule is for development and prosperity, heroes in the world will be accepted for employment. The time of virtuous king and good subjects, the occasion of the inferior following the appeal of the superior are not accidental”,

“Scholars and heroes have come from the royal civil service examinations. Later [in history] in [Chinese] Han, Tang and Song dynasties and in our country of Dai Viet, virtuous kings in successive rules have taken competitive examinations as ladder rungs for heroes to advance on”; “I respectfully think: Saint Celestial Emperor is wiser than other people in life. He develops good work for the country. He uses military exploits to determine the world. He uses culture and education to train talents. He repairs schools to broaden the education. He promulgates schooling regulations to encourage ardency. Human civilisation has been improved and examinations have been renovated; the regulations on examinations, and favours and honours are granted according to hierarchy. It is much more evident and adequate in comparison with what was done in the old days”. “Scholars have the opportunity to meet the sacred dynasty, to absorb the new and fine education and to attend examinations to advance to the glorious way and have their names carved on stone stelae; it is very honourable indeed! So it is worthy to hold the great virtue in high respect, try one’s best to advance, take loyalty as the habit, politeness and reason as the mould, the intention must be straightforward, creating great and permanent career” [7, pp.186-187].

In 1582, Duke Tran Thi Tham, who has the high rank of *Thiếu bảo*, submitted a petition for continuing the fine tradition of the erection of stone stelae and the writing of graduates’ names on the golden book. However, that was not realised as there were numerous other things to do in the country at that time [3, p.426].

Mac dynasty absolutely followed the regulations of Le dynasty concerning the contents of education and examinations, from the selection among the candidates to the issues of exam questions, exam papers marking, exam overseers, the practice of rewarding and stone stelae carving. It seriously accepted and continued to consolidate the way of education with the civil service examinations of Confucian contents, which Le dynasty, especially King Le Thanh Tong, had taken great pains to foster. Therefore, the contents of education with the civil service examinations and the examination system itself defined by Mac dynasty did not lie outside those in Confucian classic books which had been brought into rule and model under Le dynasty. There are not enough materials nowadays to assess the contents of the education with civil service examinations under Mac dynasty because long time has elapsed with a lot of wars during the Le Kings - Trinh Lords’ period. We can only rely on the remaining regulations and what was written in books of Le dynasty to consider and ratify the remarks of the posterity so as to further understand the education and the examination system under Mac dynasty.

In the book entitled *Vũ trung tùy bút* (*Essays Penned Randomly in the Rain*), Pham Dinh Ho, who lived in the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, analysed and appraised the examination contents of various dynasties as follows: “In approximately the reigns of Minh Duc [the dynastic title of King Mac Dang Dung - 1527-1529], Dai Chinh [the dynastic title of King Mac Dang Doanh - 1530-1540], the morale became worse and worse. Intellectuals

and belletrists vied with one another in an unpractical way, which was much worse in comparison with Le dynasty. However, the period of Mac dynasty was not yet foggyish, so learning, literature, state affairs and attainments were not much inferior to those of the ancients" [5, p.156]; "In the 21st year of Hong Duc dynastic title, [which was the reigning years of King Le Thanh Tong], (1491), the exam paper at the *thi Đình* (final exam, held at the Court/Royal palace, with questions given by the King himself) requested contestants to write a dissertation, with the exam question stating that in the ancient times, the clear-sighted kings and emperors ruling in the world had to select the transparency while eliminating turbidity, esteeming talents and giving up greed, as the first job to do... The literary dissertation exam paper included 200 Chinese characters, summarily asking about the good and bad of the ancient times and then the work done at the contemporary time. The exam paper put implicit and broad questions; if the learner did not fully grasp and efficiently handle the ancient and present situations, he could not write. Therefore, [thanks to the thoroughly prepared exam question,] many talents were selected. Recent reign could not compare [to that reign of Le Thanh Tong]. [But] The good orderly manner did exist and remain until Dien Thanh reign [dynastic title of King Mac Mau Hop (1578-1585)]" [5, p.169].

Having studied the contents of the first degree, or provincial-level, examinations (*thi Hương*) and the second degree, or metropolitan examinations (*thi Hội*), under Le dynasty and Pham Dinh Ho's remarks, we realise that the main contents of education and examinations under Mac dynasty were still based on the Confucian foundation built

by Le dynasty. The education with the civil service examinations partly absorbed "the scholars' tradition" of the Later Le early period [10, p.30].

The script used in education and examinations under Mac dynasty was the old Chinese characters; nevertheless, the dynasty also attached special importance to the use of *Nôm* script, which denoted the sounds of the Vietnamese language and was based on Chinese characters, and continued the achievements of former dynasties in examinations. In the second degree examination in *Ất Sửu* lunar year (1565) under the reign of King Mac Mau Hop, Doctor Nguyen Van Huy was selected by a *phú* (poetic essay, or rhythmic prose) written in that script in the fourth round of the exam. This was a rare case in the history of the Vietnamese feudal examinations [9, p.30]. We have not yet had enough materials to prove whether Mac dynasty brought *Nôm* script into the curriculum and whether the exam questions written in *Nôm* became part of the compulsory ones in *thi Hương* and/or *thi Hội*. Nevertheless, the acceptance and marking of the *phú* rhythmic prose dissertations like Dr. Huy's, written in *Nôm*, as having passed the exam, have revealed that Mac Kings respected the script. This was a more progressive manifestation in comparison with the education of earlier royal dynasties, including the Later Le early period.

The Mac dynasty's policy of caring about the education with civil service examinations both in the court and in localities created an animated atmosphere of learning in the entire country. It was the scholars' tradition that contributed to stepping up the career of education and examinations of Mac dynasty. It was not accidental that, right in the first

second degree examination held by Mac dynasty in 1529, as many as over 4,000 candidates, with their huts to stay in and small bamboo beds to rest on while taking the exam, contending with one another, shoulder to shoulder, arrived at the examination compound. The stele text on the examination revealed: “By *Kỷ Sửu* lunar year of Minh Duc dynastic title, His Majesty had been on the throne for 3 years. It was the initial point of civilisation in heaven and on earth. A big examination was held in the year. Contestants were chanting the song *Lộc Minh*, which was the song on mandarins marking exam papers and new bachelor laureates, in a crowd of over four thousand” [7, p.185]. When Mac dynasty lost ground and had to run away to Cao Bang province, it still paid attention to education and examinations. The dynasty handed down many considerable achievements, among which was the education with civil service examinations. Thanks to this, the contingent of eminent Confucian intellectuals, including many renowned names, such as Nguyen Binh Khiem, Giap Hai, Nguyen Thien..., appeared and took part in court affairs, making efficient contributions to the existence and development of the dynasty. Also owing to the sufficient care of the kings of the dynasty, many intellectuals in the period earned good reputation in the Vietnamese middle age history of education and literature. They were Nguyen Binh Khiem with a book of poetry written in *Nôm* script entitled *Bạch Vân quốc ngữ* (*Written in the National Language by White Cloud Hermit* – a literary alias he adopted), or the *bảng nhãn* - second prize laureate in the final royal court examination, Bui Vinh, who wrote the *phú* entitled *Cung trung bảo huấn*

(Precious Instructions in the Royal Palace), and Doctor Nguyen Du (Vietnamese: *Nguyễn Dữ*), who wrote the *Truyền kỳ mạn lục* (*Collection of Strange Tales*) that was named the “all-time fantastic pen”...

Savant Phan Huy Chu summed up the care for education and examinations and its important effect in the building and consolidation of royal Mac dynasty as follows: “After the two examinations during the Minh Duc and Dai Chinh dynastic years, Mac dynasty still practiced the custom of holding one examination every three years. Despite being busy with wars, it did not abandon examinations; that was why the dynasty had a lot of talents to help the defence of [their] country against Le dynasty, lasting for over 60 years. That was the very effectiveness of the civil service examinations” [2, p.26].

3. The role of Nguyen Binh Khiem

Nguyen Binh Khiem (1491-1585) was a native of Trung Am village, Vinh Lai district (now Vinh Bao district). In his salad days, Khiem was influenced by family education, especially the profound knowledge acquired from his mother.

According to books of history, soon after being born, Nguyen Binh Khiem got famous for “his lively, intelligent and imposing face; he could speak after one year of age. When he was four years old, his mother taught him the original sentences from books, including classics of Confucianism. Once having read, Mr. Khiem memorised immediately” [4, p.447].

Besides learning from his mother until he was proficient in classics, history, poetry and

prose, when he was grown up, Nguyen Binh Khiem pursued the study from *bảng nhãn* Luong Dac Bang, native in Trac Vinh village, Co Hoang district (now Hoi Trieu hamlet, Hoang Phong commune, Hoang Hoa district, Thanh Hoa province). While being Luong Dac Bang's disciple, he was imparted with the knowledge from a set of books of prophecy based on stars, entitled *Thái Ất thần kinh*, that the teacher had brought home after a diplomatic mission to China.

Nguyen Binh Khiem witnessed a lot of ups and downs and the decline in the history of Le dynasty. He was also a witness of continual popular revolts during the first two decades of the 16th century; at the same time, he eye-witnessed the birth of Mac dynasty and the changes of the society during the period of time, especially in his native Vinh Lai district, the centre of career establishment of the dynasty. Policies in the fields of politics, military, economy, culture and education of Mac dynasty were written about in concrete details in ancient books. Posterior historians extolled the initial achievements of Mac administration. For example, Le Quy Don wrote: “[Mac] Dang Doanh realised that there were many plunderers in the country, so he issued an order that people all over the regions not carry with them swords, sharp knives and weapons while walking on roads. Anyone who infringed the order shall be arrested by the law enforcement for punishment. From then on, traders only walked around with bare hands, with no need to bring arms along for self-defence; for several years there was no trace of thieves and plunderers, it was not necessary to huddle cattle into stables at night; only one head count of the cattle was made each month. There were bumper crops in several

consecutive years, the people in four regions (meaning “everywhere” – *editor's note*) enjoyed peace” [3, p.342]. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* wrote similarly to what historian Le Quy Don did above, and contained even more lively illustrating details: “In several years the passers did not pick up objects that somebody had dropped on the road, it was not necessary to close outer gates, there were successive bumper crops, and there was relative peace across the territory” [12, p.115].

Nguyen Binh Khiem had the opportunity to enjoy the peace and prosperity created by Mac dynasty for several years [12, p.115], and he also somewhat realised and recognised the dynasty's policy of employing talents and carrying out the education with civil service examinations. He had earlier lived over 30 years under Le dynasty, but never “erected a hut and brought a traditional narrow bamboo bed”² in any examination campus. He was famous as a well-read person in the “area of river and water in the eastern region” (i.e. his native region). He was also renowned for his knowledge of Confucian classics coupled with the profound understanding of Taoism and studies in books on prophecy written during China's Song and Ming dynasties. He also had great insight on the Confucian principle of following the line of education with the civil service examinations to arrive at the target of “achieving promotion, which means becoming a mandarin, and achieving success, which means becoming a teacher”. But why did he not attend the first examinations of Mac dynasty and wait for eight years to present himself for examinations, despite various pieces of advice by many friends of his who had sat

the exams and entered the political way with the dynasty? (they had advised him to get out of the “seclusion” to “enter the world”) [4, p.448]. By then, he was already in his forties, as a Confucian saying went - “*tứ thập nhi bất hoặc*” - the age when there was nothing to be doubted, or when one could be certain of everything.

Nguyen Binh Khiem, as well as many other contemporary Confucians, followed the views and perception of Confucian saints and did not consent to the murder of the king and usurpation of the throne by Mac Dang Dung. That was one of the reasons he did not serve Mac dynasty right from the beginning. Nevertheless, Nguyen Binh Khiem could not keep himself away from the situation because, in his own thinking, he was always anxious about the desire to help the life; he cared about the safety of the society and the miserable life of the population. It was more important that, during the period, the permanent danger of invasion by the foreign country in the north was threatening the survival of the nation and the country. Even an ordinary working grassroot had to worry about the destiny of the country, so how about a person understanding the situation like Nguyen Binh Khiem? How could he remain unconcerned! He often disclosed his zealously patriotic thought, his “anxiety about the affairs of the times” in works of both poetry and prose: “*Nguy thời hồng tể quý vô tài* (Assisting the country in the dangerous times, I am not ashamed of my talent), or “*Lão lai vị ngại tiên ưu chí*” (Putting the worry [for the country] first is not ended when one gets old) or “*Khu khu ưu quốc mẩn thành ty*” (Gripping abreast the worry for the country, the hair is as hoary as silk).

It is certainly that, after a long time of considering, experimenting, tossing about and weighing the pros and cons, Nguyen Binh Khiem definitely decided to attend the examinations and serve Mac dynasty. In 1535, he attended the third examination organised by the dynasty and won the highest position of the *thi Hội*, thus becoming a *trạng nguyên*. In order to manifest his attitude of being abreast of the times in face of a new society with positive changes, Nguyen Binh Khiem composed a poem written in *Nôm* script, praising the prosperity of Mac dynasty with the following sentences: “*Mừng thấy thời vắn đời mở trị/Thái bình Thiên tử, thái bình dân*” (I am glad to see life opens the turn of events/Peace [and prosperity] from the Celestial Emperor, Peace [and prosperity] for the population” [11, p. 15].

Since the time Nguyen Binh Khiem started serving as a mandarin of Mac dynasty, he brought his own “personal knowledge” to wholeheartedly serve the kings of the dynasty in all spheres: politics, literature, education and military..., and he was also given with preferential treatment and shown consideration to by the dynasty. Nguyen Binh Khiem’s career as a mandarin was smooth, with high positions achieved. His duration of taking part in political affairs was not long, only over seven years, but he was rapidly promoted to many important functions. After becoming *trạng nguyên* at the age of 45, he was appointed *Đông các Hiệu thư*, in the rank of a chief sixth grade mandarin, next he was received in the function of Deputy Minister of War, in the rank of an associate third grade mandarin. He was then promoted to Deputy Minister of the Interior in the rank of a

chief third grade mandarin, serving concurrently as the *Đông các đại học sĩ* (Great Scholar of the Eastern Pavilion), a function held until he retired. On the *lạc khoản* line (for writing the name of the writer on a stele) of the Trung Tan temple-house, compiled by Nguyen Binh Khiem himself, it clearly reads: “Doctor of the *Ất Mùi* lunar year’s examination, Deputy Minister of the Interior and Great Scholar of the Eastern Pavilion, *Trung Am* Nguyen Binh Khiem compiled” [1, p.160].

The book entitled *Nguyễn Công Văn Đạt phả ký* (*Genealogical Register of Nguyen Cong Van Dat*) compiled by Doctor Vu Kham Lan in 1775, 190 years after the death of Nguyen Binh Khiem, reveals that only after his retirement was Nguyen Binh Khiem conferred the title of *Trình Tuyển hầu* (“*hầu*” = *marquis*), then promoted to be the Minister of the Interior (with the rank of an associate second grade mandarin), *Thái phó* (one of the three highest ranks in the royal court) and *Trình Quốc công* (“*quốc*” = *national*, “*công*” = *duke*) [6, p.53], [1, p.160]. So in the end of his life, Nguyen Binh Khiem was conferred with the highest positions in titles by Mac dynasty. (The stipulations in the Later Le early period were that *Thái phó* was a very important title of the court, which was usually conferred to the relatives of the king or men of great merits only [8, p.627]).

In his advanced age, Nguyen Binh Khiem continued to join army in combat to suppress rioters in the Northwest mountainous areas together with his fellow-mandarins in Mac dynasty such as Vu Can and Nguyen Mau, who both won the titles of doctors in the 1502 examination and then served as mandarins of Le dynasty before joining in political affairs

of the Mac: “*Niên dư lục thập cường tông nhưng/Lưỡng độ kinh qua trú thử phong*” (The age is on the right side of sixty, I try to follow the army/I have come here on two occasions and stopped at this mountain during both) [11, p.164].

In 1542, Nguyen Binh Khiem submitted a petition asking for the beheading of 18 high-ranking mandarins who had been abusing power, and also asking for permission to retire. However, after retirement from political affairs to work as a teacher, he was still frequently summoned by Mac Kings for consultation. History books wrote: “Though he stayed at home, Mac Kings, respecting him as their Master, ordered envoys to come to consult him whenever there was any important matter in the country; they sometimes also summoned him to the capital to ask for advice on major plans” [2, p.449]. For his part, Nguyen Binh Khiem also on many occasions made comebacks and took part in the political arena of Mac dynasty.

Researchers say that Nguyen Binh Khiem had three times serving as a mandarin. In the years of the Quang Bao dynastic title (1554-1561), when he was nearing the age of 70, Mr. Khiem followed the military column of Mac dynasty to go for suppressing rioters in the western part of the country (Hung Hoa, Tuyen Quang province) in the capacity of a *tham tán quân cơ* (military privy counsellor). He then composed a number of poems entitled *Tòng Tây chinh* (Military Expedition to the West) that included the following verses: “*Đệ tầm lão chuyết vị năng binh/Cường trí tông nhưng tán viễn chinh*” (I am ashamed of being no longer skillful in military affairs/Still, I tried to join the expedition).

In 1561, when he was exactly 70 years old, for once more, Nguyen Binh Khiem informed that he had retired: “*Niên phương thất thập dĩ hưu quan/Trùng dương u thể mịch cổ san*” (My age is exactly 70 years old; I have retired from a mandarin’s affairs/I seek to come back to the old mountain, with the canopy hanging down and the curtain hiding in the deserted place).

But, sometime after that, he again went out to act as a mandarin until the year he was 73 years old. Only then did he really and finally retire [4, p.99].

Three times of retiring and the same number of times of coming back to the court affairs of Mac dynasty proved the high level of loyalty of the great Confucian intellectual Nguyen Binh Khiem. Even when Mac dynasty was overthrown by the Le-Trinh dynasty, and the Mac had to flee Thang Long royal capital, Nguyen Binh Khiem still gave scrupulous and thorough suggestions and recommendations to the Mac lineage, helping them stay safely in the border province of Cao Bang, and helping Mac dynasty linger there for an additional nearly 90 years.

Nguyen Binh Khiem’s post-retirement life included the establishment of the Bach Van (Vietnamese: *Bạch Vân* – White Cloud, his scholarly alias) school to train talents for the country. The school of the *Tuyết giang phu tử* (the Grand Master of the Snow river - another scholarly alias of his) was not only famous in the 18th century but also well-known in later years in the history of Vietnamese ancient education. A lot of celebrated Confucian intellectuals studied and became renowned from his Bach Van school, including Phung Khắc Khoan, Luong Huu Khanh and Nguyen Du (Vietnamese: *Nguyễn Dữ*)...

4. Conclusion

It is possible to assert that Nguyen Binh Khiem’s wholehearted service for Mac dynasty was the result of a process of studying by experiencing the reality, grasping the development of the situation – that of a Confucian scholar conversant with the contemporary social evolution. His love for the country and pity for the people and concern for the survival of the nation were the firm foundation for him to put forth the clear-sighted decision: to follow, aid and be loyal to Mac dynasty for all his life. His lofty devotion and ideal, desiring for “Peace and Prosperity for and from the Celestial Emperor, Peace and Prosperity for the People” were only realised during a short period of time at the beginning of the dynasty. However, his outstanding contributions in the fields of politics, military, prose and poetry..., and, especially, in the education and training of talents in the 18th century, have been and will be honoured and admired forever by the posterity.

Notes

² The two things candidates did to stay in and sit at while taking exams, thus this idiom means “taking the exam”.

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