

Confucian Civil Service Examination under Reign of King Le Thanh Tong (1460 -1497)

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Received on 15 November 2020.

Revised on 23 January 2021.

Accepted on 26 January 2021.

Abstract: King Le Thanh Tong based on and developed from the Confucian court examination systems of the previous dynasties to set the regulations for the examinations - to be held every three years; first, the *huong* (interprovincial) examinations; and then, the *hội* examinations, which were held in the capital city. The regulations were well and strictly organised for contestants to the *huong*, and especially the *hội* and *đình* exams. After the *hội* are the *điện*, or *đình* examinations, which were held in the royal palaces to define the specific ranks of the doctors. Still available now are a number of essays from the *đình* examinations reflecting the profound knowledge and real talent of the contestants, who had studied so industriously. The King applied many measures to timely honour the new doctors, promoting and encouraging the study and examination of contestants. The Confucian civil service examinations of his period were strictly and fairly organised as a model for the examination system of the following dynasties. From the examinations were selected scores of thousands of bachelors and 501 doctors, who had true talent and virtue, helping Vietnam to prosper during the years.

Keywords: Le Thanh Tong, Confucian court examination system, *huong* examinations, *hội* examinations, *đình* examinations.

Subject classification: History

1. Introduction

Le Thanh Tong, whose real name was Tu Thanh or Hao, was the fourth child of King Le Thai Tong and Queen Mother Ngo Thi Ngoc Dao, who came from Dong Bang Village, Yen Dinh Commune, Thanh Hoa Prefecture. He remained on the throne for 38 years (1460-1497) with two era names, namely

Quang Thuan (1460-1469) and Hong Duc (1470-1497). The king died at the age of 56 and his body was buried in Chieu Lang royal tomb in Lam Kinh Commune, Tho Xuan District, Thanh Hoa Prefecture. Historian Ngo Si Lien highly appreciated the lifework of King Le Thanh Tong: “The King built a prosperous cultural regime and broadened the territory. He was actually an

ingenious and heroic king...” (Ngo Si Lien et al. 1971-1972, Vol. 3, p.173). Particularly, prominence was given to the Confucian civil service examination, which helped Dai Viet (i.e. Great Viet, the name of Vietnam during his time) gain significant achievements.

Under the reign of Le Thanh Tong and during all the monarchical periods as well, the Confucian civil service examination in Vietnam was more or less influenced by that in China. The examination under the reign of Le Thanh Tong was closely attached to the Confucian education. At the same time, the examination characteristics from the previous dynasties were inherited and improved to set up an exemplary institution to be implemented in practice. The examinations were held for the purpose of assessing the educational results, based on which qualified and talented candidates would be selected for the positions in the governmental apparatus. Since 1997, many in-depth research works and articles on Le Thanh Tong have been issued such as: “Le Thanh Tong: Life and Distinguished Career of an Era” (Truong Huu Quynh, 1997), “A Number of Comments on Reforms by Le Thanh Tong” (Phan Dai Doan, 1997), “Civil Service Examination in Vietnam” (Nguyen Thi Chan Quynh, 2003), “Education and Examination in Vietnam” (before 1945 August Revolution) (Phan Ngoc Lien, 2006), “Confucian Education and Examination under Le Dynasty in Vietnam as Seen from Sino-Nom Documents” (Dinh Khac Thuan, 2009), etc. This paper focuses on the Confucian civil service examination system under the reign of the king, including the interprovincial exam (*thi hương*), the national primary exam (*thi hội*) and the

national final exam at the royal palaces (*thi đình* or *thi điện*). Based on the analysis of the examination system, some remarks are made to prove the achievements of the Confucian civil service examination as well as the significant contribution to the national cultural development, enabling readers to get further understanding of various aspects of the most thriving period of the Confucian education in Dai Viet during the second half of the 15th century.

2. Interprovincial exam

In the period of King Le Thanh Tong, the Confucian civil service examination inherited outstanding features from the previous dynasties such as the Ly dynasty (1010-1225), the Tran dynasty (1226-1400), and the Ho dynasty (1400-1407) as well as the earlier period of the Later Le dynasty, such as Le Thai To (1428-1433), Le Thai Tong (1434-1442), and Le Nhan Tong (1443-1459). Orderly and strict institutional regulations on the Confucian exams, including the interprovincial, the national primary, and the national final ones, were gradually promulgated and implemented.

According to “the Complete Annals of Dai Viet” (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*) and “the Categorised Records of the Institutions of Successive Dynasties: Chapter on Examination Rules” (*Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí: Khoa mục chí*), in the fourth month of the third year under Quang Thuan Reign (of Le Thanh Tong); i.e. 1462, regulations on the interprovincial exam were applied as follows:

“No matter whether it is a military or civil, ordinary or decorated candidate, they all have to come to the provincial departments to

make registration and show identity for the coming interprovincial exam by the early period (from the 1st to the 10th day) of this 8th lunar month; those who successfully pass the exam will be included in the list of candidates, which will be then sent to the Institute of Rites. Those candidates will take a national primary exam held in the middle of the first lunar month next year. Only those, who have been acknowledged on paper by the local mandarins and the commune authorities to be virtuous, can be added to the list of candidates for the exam. All the people, who are undutiful, inimical, disloyal, or deceitful..., are not allowed to take the exam, even if they have had studied well.

The nominated candidates have to declare their identity and other information about the home prefecture, district, commune, age, the Classic in which they are specialised (among the “Five Classics”, which include the Classic of Poetry, the Book of Documents, the Book of Changes, the Book of Rites, and the Book of Spring and Autumn), as well as the identity of their forefathers without any deceptions.

Actors, songstresses, traitors, and “puppet mandarins” (who collaborated with Ming invaders - author’s note) of bad reputations as well as their children are not allowed to take the exam. Those candidates, who bring books into the examination room, and those, who get assistance in doing the exam, will be punished according to the law.

The interprovincial exam starts with dictation for the purpose of excluding unqualified candidates.

The exam composes of the following tests: The first tests is focused on explaining the

meanings in the Four Books, consisting of five questions; the second test is focused on composing an official documents such as the *chiếu* (royal edicts), *ché* (also issued by the king, to announce regulations or rewards for or penalties on mandarins...), *biểu* (petitions or reports submitted to the king); the third test is focused on the ability to write poems of the Tang poetry style and odes (*phú*). The odes shall be written in the ancient or [Qu Yuan’s] *Lisao* (“The Lament” - 離騷) style; there should be 300 [Chinese] characters in the essay; and, the fourth test is focused on the ability to make eloquence and argument by writing essays to answer questions about historical or existing issues; the number of characters shall be 1,000” (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, pp.182-183).

In the work titled “Interprovincial Exams” (*Huong thí lục*) that described the interprovincial exams in different local areas, and the papers by and names of successful candidates in An Bang Prefecture (the modern-day Quang Ninh Province) at the examination in the second year of Hong Duc Reign (the year of *Tân Mão*, Metal Rabbit Year; 1471), Le Quy Don wrote: “The first test consisted of four questions on the Four Books and five questions on the Five Classics; the second test consisted of questions on edicts, *ché*, and *biểu*, of which each required one essay; the third test was focused on writing a poem of the Tang poetry and an ode; the fourth test was focused on writing an essay on a given issue. The rules were more thorough than those in China, aimed to choose the real talent. Many antithetical sentences of the parallel construction found in the poems are excellent” (Le Quy Don, 1977, p.221).

Le Quy Don also wrote more about the interprovincial exams under the Le dynasty (including also those in the reign of King Le Thanh Tong) as follows: “The examination was held once a year in our country. The examination compound was surrounded thickly by bamboo trees. The inside of the school was divided into four sections: the innermost one was the workplace of the chairmen of the examination board, the reviewers, and the proctors; the middle section was the workplace of the chief examiners, overseers (deputy chief examiners), and deacons. Those two sections were surrounded by thick fences; the two outermost sections were used as the examination place, where candidates came to do exams according to the schedule. Those two sections were surrounded by thin fences. In the crossroad, there was a thatch, making it convenient to collect the exam papers of candidates. The examination regulations in our country were different from those in China. Zhu Can, an envoy of the Qing dynasty who paid a visit to Vietnam in the ninth year of Chinh Hoa Reign (1688), wrote in his book titled “An Envoy’s Records” as follows: “The examination compound in that country did not consist of houses built beforehand, so candidates had to sit inside tents and write papers on the ground”” (Le Quy Don, 1977, p.97).

Thus, the interprovincial exam consisted of four tests. Those who successfully passed the exam were allowed to take the national primary exam held in the next spring. On the 15th day of the second lunar month in the 14th year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Quý Mão*, Water Rabbit Year; i.e. 1483), an imperial edict was issued with respect to the

interprovincial examination candidates as follows: “The ordinary (i.e. civilian) and military people, who passed three of the four tests, would be granted the title “Junior Bachelor” (*Sinh đồ*; equivalent to the title “High-school Graduate” or *Tú tài* under the Nguyen dynasty); those who passed all the four tests would be granted the title “Successful Candidate” (*Sinh viên*) as before. Those who did not pass any tests would have to join the army; those who passed one test would return to civilian life, undertaking all duties and taxes as an ordinary person. The successful candidates, who did not pass any tests at the national primary exam, would have to join the army as well. Administration commissioners, surveillance commissioners, local mandarins, and the leaders of the Imperial Academy (*Quốc Tử Giám*) had to make reports and execute the regulation” (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, p.279).

By the late 5th and the early 6th lunar months of 1463, King Le Thanh Tong made a decision about the schedule for the interprovincial exam. At that time, Le Hoang Duc, Minister of Rites with the title “the Count of Lam Giang”, reported: “An edict was sent to provincial administration commissioners, asking candidates to make preparations for exams. In regard to the schedule of the interprovincial exam, the dates were not fixed yet... This is to regulate that the first test of the interprovincial exam will be held by provincial administration commissioners on the 8th of the 8th lunar month this year in all provinces in the country and Phung Thien Prefecture. For the zones of Hai Duong, Son Nam, Tam Giang, and Kinh Bac, the second and third tests will be held on the 18th and the 25th

days of the same month respectively; the fourth test will be held on the 1st day of the 9th lunar month; and, the roll of successful candidates (*bảng vàng*, lit. the golden board [to write the names on], implying the great honour won by the laureates) will be hung for announcement on the 7th day. For the zones of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An, the second, third, and fourth tests will be held on the 15th, the 22nd, and the 26th days of the 8th lunar month respectively; the roll listing the successful candidates (laureates) will be hung for announcement on the 1st day of the 9th lunar month. For the zones of Thuan Hoa, Yen Bang, Hung Hoa, Tuyen Quang, Lang Son, Thai Nguyen and Phung Thien prefecture, the second, the third, and the fourth tests will be held on the 13th, the 18th, and the 26th days of the 8th lunar month respectively; the roll of successful candidates will be hung for announcement on the 1st day of the 9th lunar month” (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, p.280).

In the 10th lunar month in the 13th year of Hong Duc dynastic title (1492), an interprovincial exam was held. The king ordered mandarins at the Imperial Academy to work as the chief examiners in four zones, including Hai Duong, Son Nam, Tam Giang, and Kinh Bac; with four of them working in each of the zone. Since then, mandarins at the Imperial Academy started to undertake the responsibility for supervising the interprovincial exams and marking the exam papers (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, p.310; Phan Huy Chu, 1961, Vol. 3, p.13).

Based on the above-mentioned information, we can realise that under the reign of King Le Thanh Tong, interprovincial exams were not

fully recorded in historical documents. Over a period of 38 years of his reign, national primary exams were held every three years; from 1463 to 1496, consequently, 12 national primary exams were held in total. Regarding the examination schedule, interprovincial exams were held in the years of *Tý*, *Ngọ*, *Mão* and *Dậu* (i.e. the years of the Rat, the Horse, the Cat (also known as the Rabbit), and the Rooster in the zodiac); and national primary exams were held in the subsequent years - the years of *Thìn*, *Tuất*, *Sửu*, and *Mùi* (i.e. the years of the Dragon, the Dog, the Ox, and the Goat in the zodiac; *Tý* is followed by *Sửu*, *Ngọ* - by *Mùi*, *Mão* - by *Thìn*, *Dậu* - by *Tuất*). As 12 national primary exams were held over the period, it is obvious that 12 interprovincial exams were also held. Unfortunately, a lot of information about the interprovincial exams still remains unknown; for example, how many candidates attended each of the interprovincial exams? How was the exam held in Phung Thien Prefecture and zones? Where were the examination compounds located and managed? Who were supervisors and examiners? What was the specific content of the four tests in the interprovincial exam? How many candidates successfully passed it? Who achieved the highest score in each of the interprovincial exams? Such specific information has not been found in historical documents. According to some records, however, “in the 2nd lunar month in the year of *Quý Mùi*, Water Goat Year; 1463), a national primary exam was held for senior bachelors from all over the country. There were more than 4,400 candidates, of whom 44 were then considered to have passed the exam.” (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, p.185; Phan Huy Chu, 1961, Vol. 3, p.10).

Thus, the successful candidates accounted for 1% of the total number of candidates. “In the 3rd lunar month (in the year of *Ất Mùi*, Wood Goat Year; 1475), a national primary exam was held for all senior bachelors in the country. At that time, there were 3,200 candidates taking the exam. The number of those who passed the exam was 43, including Cao Quynh and his friends” (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, p.254), which means that the ratio of those who passed the exam to the total number of candidates was roughly 1 to 70. “In the 3rd lunar month (in the year of *Mậu Tuất*, Earth Dog Year; i.e. 1478), a national primary exam was held and 62 candidates, including Le Ninh and his friends, successfully passed it” (Ngo Si Lien et al. 1971-1972, Vol. 3, p.261). According to the above-mentioned ratio of successful candidates, the total number of candidates taking the exam was at least 6,200... Those figures show that thousands of people passed the interprovincial exams (those who passed three tests were called junior bachelors, equivalent to high-school graduates under the Nguyen dynasty; those who passed all the four tests would be granted the title “Interprovincial Examination Successful Candidate” (it is equivalent to the title “Senior Bachelor” under the Nguyen dynasty). Significant achievements were gained in Confucian education and examination under the reign of Le Thanh Tong. After passing the interprovincial exam, candidates were allowed to take the national primary and the national final ones (at the royal palace). Many of them passed the national final exam and got the title “doctoral laureate” and some got the three best titles, including the first best scholar or the prime candidate

(*Trạng nguyên*), the second best scholar (*Bảng nhãn*), and the third best scholar (*Thám hoa*).

3. National primary and final exams

In the system of Confucian education and examination, national primary exam were defined under the Tran dynasty (1232). At that time, those who passed the national primary exam were called “national examination successful candidates” (*Thái học sinh*) or “candidates in the three successful groups” (*Tam giáp*) with specific rankings, including a group of three first-ranked candidates, a group of second-ranked candidates, and a group of third-ranked candidates, who were called doctoral laureates in the later periods. The titles “three best candidates” (the first best, the second best, and the third best candidates) and “doctoral laureates” were first bestowed upon 48 people, who passed the national exam in the 16th year of Thien Ung Chinh Binh dynastic title (1247) under the reign of Tran Thai Tong (1226-1258). Since then, the titles “three best candidates” had been used (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 2, p.21).

Under the Ho dynasty, in the second year of Khai Dai dynastic title (1404), Ho Han Thuong stipulated on the rules for the baccalaureates: the interprovincial exam was held in the 8th lunar month; those who passed it would be exempted from [some] service. The national primary exam would be held in the following 8th lunar month; those who passed it would be granted the title “national examination successful candidate”. Those exams were regulated to be held once every three years. However, the first national primary exam was left undone due to the

invasion of Vietnam by the Ming dynasty (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 2, p.238).

12 national primary exams and 12 national final exams were described quite objectively in some historical documents, such as the Complete Annals of Dai Viet, the Categorised Records of the Institutions of Successive Dynasties, and the Inscriptions in the Imperial Academy in Hanoi (*Văn bia Quốc Tử Giám Hà Nội*), as follows:

In the 2nd lunar month in the 4th year of Quang Thuan dynastic title (the year of *Quý Mùi*, Water Goat Year; i.e. 1463), a national primary exam was held for senior bachelors in the country. It was the first national exam under the reign of Le Thanh Tong. Attending the exam were 4,400 candidates, of whom 44 passed it and got the title “doctorial laureates”.

On the 16th day of the month, a national final exam was held in the royal palace for the doctoral laureates. The king ordered Nguyen Loi, Royal Minister of Education, and Le Niem, Royal Commander-General of the Imperial Academy Guards, to work as the chief examiners; Political Councillor Nguyen Phuc was appointed to work as the Deputy Chief Examiner; three mandarins were ordered to mark exam papers and read them to the king, including: Nguyen Nhu Do, Academician Recipient of Edicts and Head of the Department of Admonition responsible for the northern area; Nguyen Vinh Tich, Academician Recipient of Edicts responsible for the eastern area; and, Nguyen Ba Ky, the rector of the Imperial Academy. The king personally raised exam questions on the governing principles of the kings. At the exam, Quach Dinh Bao born in Phuc Khe Commune, Thanh Lan District (the modern-day Thai Phuc Commune, Thai Thuy District,

Thai Binh Province) achieved the first place at the national primary exam; Luong The Vinh born in Cao Huong Commune, Thien Ban District (the modern-day Cao Phuong Village, Lien Bao Commune, Vu Ban District, Nam Dinh Province) achieved the first place at the national final exam (held in the royal palace).

On the 22nd day of the month, the names of successful candidates were announced and the king bestowed titles upon them. At the same time, the roll listing their names was hung by the Ministry of Rites (*Bộ Lễ*) outside Dong Hoa Gate of Thang Long Imperial Citadel (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, p.185).

In the 2nd lunar month in the 7th year of Quang Thuan dynastic title (the year of *Bính Tuất*, Fire Dog Year; 1466), a national primary exam was held for senior bachelors, of whom 27 became doctoral laureates.

On the 12th day of the 3rd lunar month, the king came to Kinh Thien Palace to give exam questions on how emperors governed the country.

Le Canh Huy, who was the Commander-General, and Nguyen Nhu Do, Acting Minister of Political Affairs, were appointed to be chief examiners. Grand Academician Tran Ban, who was also the head of the royal council, was appointed to be the exam overseer. Three people, who were responsible for marking exam papers and reading them to the king, included: Nguyen Truc, who was an Academician Recipient of Edicts; Nguyen Cu Dao, who was an Academician Recipient of Edicts and the Acting Deputy Minister of Revenue (*Bộ Hộ*, which is similar to present-day Ministry of Finance/Revenue); and Vu Vinh Trinh, who was an academician, the

deputy head of the department of administration, and the supervisory secretary. Of the successful candidates, eight were first-ranked doctoral laureates and 19 were third-ranked doctoral laureates. Since then the national primary exam was stipulated to be held every three years.

On the 26th day of the month, the names of the new doctoral laureates were announced with titles bestowed upon them. The roll of honour was hung by the Ministry of Rites outside Dong Hoa Gate.

On the 3rd day of the 3rd lunar intercalary month, the new doctoral laureates, including Duong Nhu Chau from Lac Tho Commune, Sieu Loai District (the modern-day Lac Tho Village, Song Ho Commune, Thuan Thanh District, Bac Ninh Province), who won the first place at the national primary exam, departed for home to be welcomed in great honour by the locals and inform to their late ancestors of the glory (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, pp.196-197).

In the 2nd lunar intercalary in the 10th year of Quang Thuan dynastic title (the year of *Kỷ Sửu*, Earth Ox Year; 1469), a national primary exam was held for senior bachelors, of whom 20 became doctoral laureates². Than Nhan Trung born in Yen Ninh Commune, Yen Dung District (the modern-day Yen Ninh Village, Hoang Ninh Commune, Viet Yen District, Bac Giang Province) secured the first place.

On the 26th day of the month, the king came to the entrance of Kinh Thien Palace to give questions on the country ruling principles.

The king ordered Le Niem, Rector of the Imperial Academy, and Nguyen Nhu Do, Minister of Personnel (*Thượng thư Bộ Lại*),

to work as the chief examiners. Duong Chap Trung, head of the Court of Judicial Review and Acting Deputy Minister of Justice (the Ministry was then called *Bộ Hình* in Vietnamese), was appointed to be the exam overseer. The four people, who were responsible for marking exam papers and reading them to the king, included: Academician Recipient of Edicts Nguyen Truc; Academician Grand Secretary Vu Vinh Ninh, who was also the director of the Court of Imperial Entertainments and the co-chief of the Department of National History; Auxiliary Academician Nguyen Duc Trinh; and Quach Dinh Bao.

On the 12th day of the 5th lunar month, the names of new doctoral laureates were announced. Titles and ceremonial dresses were bestowed upon them. A feast for congratulation was held for them at the Ministry of Rites (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, pp.224-225).

In the 3rd month of the 3rd year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Nhâm Thìn*, Water Dragon Year; 1472), a national primary exam was held for senior bachelors, of whom 26 achieved the title “doctoral laureates”³. Le Tuan Ngan born in Vinh Loc Commune, Te Giang District (the modern-day Vinh Bao Village, Vinh Khuc Commune, Van Giang District, Hung Yen Province) gained the first place at the national primary exam. Meanwhile, Vu Kiet born in An Viet Commune, Sieu Loai District (the modern-day Cuu Yen Village, Ngu Thai Commune, Thuan Thanh District, Bac Ninh Province) gained the first place at the national final exam held in the royal palace.

The examination content included the following:

The first test was focused on “the Four Books and the Five Classics” (*Tứ thư Ngũ kinh*; 四書五經). In regard to the Four Books, there were four questions on Analects of Confucius (*Luận ngữ*; 論語) and 4 questions on Mencius. Each candidate had to choose four of those questions. In regard to the Five Classics, there were three questions relating to each of the five books. Candidates could choose one of those questions to write essays. For “the Book of Spring and Autumn” alone, two questions were combined into one essay.

The second test consisted of questions on edicts, *chế*, and *biểu*. There were three questions relating to each of the three topics.

The third test was focused on the ability to write *phú* (ode). There were two questions. In regard to the style of the ode, the candidates were required to follow Li Bai’s style.

The fourth test was aimed to find out the candidates’ understanding of literature. The questions were focused on similarities and differences between the Books and the Classics as well as the good and the bad in the political affairs under various reigns.

On the 7th of the 4th lunar month, the king came to the palace to give questions on how the past emperors ruled the country.

Pursuant to the king’s order, Le Canh Huy, Minister of War with the title “Count of Kien Duong”, and Tran Xac, Minister of Personnel and Grand Secretary, were appointed as the chief examiners. Two mandarins (unnamed) were appointed as the examination overseers. Dinh Thuc Thong, Quach Dinh Bao and two others were responsible for marking papers and reading

them to the king. The rankings were stipulated by the king as follows: Vu Kiet, Nguyen Toan An, and Vuong Khac Thuat achieved places in the first-ranked group of doctoral laureates (*tiến sĩ cập đệ*); Vu Duc Khang and six others secured positions in the second-ranked group of doctoral laureates (*tiến sĩ xuất thân*); and, Chu Phong and 15 others achieved places in the third-ranked group of doctoral laureates (*đồng tiến sĩ xuất thân*).

According to the king’s order, the title “*tiến sĩ cập đệ*” was bestowed upon all three candidates in the first-ranked group, but they got different positions in the hierarchy of mandarins; specifically, the senior 6th rank in the mandarins’ hierarchy with the 8th *tư* (sub-level, if a person has been elevated with sufficient numbers of *tư*, he will be promoted to the higher level) was granted to the candidate who won the first place, while the junior 6th rank with the 7th *tư*, and the senior 7th rank with the 6th *tư* were granted to those who won the second and the third places respectively. Meanwhile, the title “*tiến sĩ xuất thân*” with the junior 7th rank and the 5th *tư* was granted to all candidates in the second-ranked group; and the title “*đồng tiến sĩ xuất thân*” with the senior 8th rank and the 4th *tư* was granted to all candidates in the third-ranked group. For those who were assigned to work for the Imperial Academy, their ranks would be promoted by one level. For those who were assigned to work as district prefects or supervisors, their positions would be granted based on the ranks (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, pp.246-247).

In the 3rd lunar month in the 6th year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Ất Mùi*,

Wood Goat Year; 1475), a national primary exam was held for senior bachelors. Attending the exam were 3,200 candidates, of whom 43 won the title “doctoral laureates”. Cao Quynh born in Cao Xa Commune, Dong Thanh District (the modern-day Dien Thanh Commune, Dien Chau District, Nghe An Province) gained the first place at the national primary exam. Meanwhile, Vu Tuan Chieu born in Nhat Chieu Ward, Quang Duc District (the modern-day Nhat Tan Ward, Hanoi) gained the first place at the national final exam held in the royal palace.

The examination content included the following:

The first test was focused on “the Four Books and the Five Classics”. In regard to the Four Books, there were three questions on Analects of Confucius, four questions on Mencius, and one question on Doctrine of the Mean (*Trung dung*; 中庸). Each candidate had to choose four of those eight questions to do the exam. In regard to the Five Classics, there were three questions relating to each of the Five Books, except for “the Book of Spring and Autumn”, which consisted just two questions.

In there was one question for writing poems and one for writing odes. The poems were requested to be written in the Tang poetry style, while the ode - in Li Bai’s style.

The third test consisted of questions on edicts, *ché*, and *biểu*. There were three questions relating to each of the three topics.

The fourth test was aimed to find out the candidates’ understanding of literature. The questions were focused on similar and different meanings of historical records as well as the significance of the strategies of military leaders.

On the 11th of the 5th lunar month, the king came to Kinh Thien Palace to give questions on the relationships between the kings and servants in the past.

Pursuant to the king’s order, Trinh Cong Lo, who had with title “Count of Doan Vu”, and Hoang Nhan Thiem, Minister of Personnel, were appointed as the chief examiners. Tran Phong, who was Head of the *Ngự sử đài*, the agency in charge of counselling the monarch against making mistakes, and Phi Ba Khang, Head of the Intermediate Department of Military Affairs, were appointed as the examination overseers. Three people were assigned to mark papers and read them to the king, including: Than Nhan Trung, Academician Reader-in-waiting and Grand Secretary of Dong Cac Palace; Do Nhuan, Editor in Dong Cac Palace; and, Quach Dinh Bao.

Vu Tuan Chieu, Ong Nghia Dat, and Cao Quynh achieved places in the first-ranked group of doctoral laureates; Pham Xan and 12 others achieved places in the second-ranked group; and, Do Vinh and 27 others achieved places in third-ranked group (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, p.254).

In the 3rd lunar month in the 9th year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Mậu Tuất*, Earth Dog Year; 1478), a national primary exam was held for senior bachelors, of whom 43 won the title “doctoral laureates”. Le Ninh born in Thu Ich Commune, Yen Lac District (the modern-day Thu Ich Village, Lien Chau Commune, Yen Lac District, Vinh Phuc Province) gained the first place at the national primary exam. Meanwhile, Le Quang Chi born in Than Dau Commune, Ky Hoa District (the modern-day Thang Loi Village, Ky Phuong Commune, Ky Anh

District, Ha Tinh Province) gained the first place at the national final exam held in the royal palace.

On the 14th day of the 5th lunar month, the king came to the palace to give questions on the country ruling principles of the past emperors and reviewed exam papers (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, p.261).

In the 4th month in the 12th year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Tân Sửu*, Metal Ox Year; 1481), a national primary exam was held for senior bachelors, of whom 40 won the title “doctoral laureates”. Pham Don Le born in Hai Trao Commune, Ngu Thien District (the modern-day Pham Le Commune, Hung Ha District, Thai Binh Province) gained the first place at the national primary exam. He got the first place at all three exams, including the interprovincial, the national primary, and the national final exams (such successful candidates were called “Ternary Best” - “*tam nguyên*”).

On the 27th day of the month, the king came to Kinh Thien Palace to give questions on *lý số*, a component of Confucian studies, which researched on the rule of yin-yang and the five elements.

Pham Don Le, Luu Hung Hieu, and Nguyen Doan Dich secured places in the first-ranked group of doctoral laureates; Ngo Van Canh and seven others - in the second-ranked group; and Nguyen Minh Dao and 28 others - in the third-ranked group.

On the 21st day of the 5th lunar month, the new doctoral laureates were invited to Dan Tri Palace. The king was seated in Kinh Thien Palace. The names of the doctoral laureates were read out loud to call them to enter. The Ministry of Personnel was responsible for informing the new doctoral

laureates about the king’s favour. Music was played, while representatives of the Ministry of Rites were hanging the roll of successful candidates outside Dong Hoa Gate. Afterwards, the Imperial Steed Department was responsible for sending a good horse to take the candidate of the first place (the prime candidate) to his home (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, pp.275-276).

In the 2nd lunar month in the 15th year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Giáp Thìn*, Wood Dragon Year; 1484), a national primary exam was held for senior bachelors, of whom 44 won the title “doctoral laureates”. Pham Tri Khiem born in An Trang Commune, Thien Tai District (the modern-day Cam Giang District, Hai Duong Province) achieved the first place at the national primary exam. Meanwhile, Nguyen Quang Bat⁴ born in Binh Ngo Commune, Gia Dinh District (the modern-day Binh Ngo Village, An Binh Commune, Thuan Thanh District, Bac Ninh Province) achieved the first place at the national final exam held in the royal palace.

At the national final exam held in the royal palace, the king asked questions on the understanding of literature, emphasising on how Confucian scholars were used under the Song dynasty.

Nguyen Quang Bat, Nguyen Giac, and Mai Duy Tinh achieved places in the first-ranked group of doctoral laureates; Ngo Van Phong and 15 others achieved places in the second-ranked group; and, Chu Dinh Bao and 24 others achieved places in third-ranked group.

On the 15th day of the 8th lunar month, stelae were set up to record names of the doctoral laureates who passed the national

exam in the period from the 3rd year of Dai Bao dynastic title (the year of *Nhâm Tuất*, Water Dog Year; 1442) under the reign of Thai Tong to the 15th year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Giáp Thìn*, Wood Dragon Year; 1484) (10 exams in total). Quach Dinh Bao, Minister of Rites was assigned to provide names and ranks of the doctoral laureates in those 10 exams to be inscribed on the stelae.

On the occasion, Quach Dinh Bao proposed changing the three titles “the first-best candidate”, “the second-best candidate” and “the third-best candidate” into “the candidates of the first-ranked group”, “the candidates in the primary roll” into “the candidates of the second-ranked group”, and “the candidates in the secondary roll” into “the candidates of the third-ranked group” so as to make it more appropriate to the contemporary system. After the proposal was accepted by the king, the Ministry of Works/Construction (*Bộ Công*) was responsible for carving inscriptions on the stelae.

The academicians, who worked with the king on literary affairs, including Than Nhan Trung, Do Nhuan, Dao Cu, Dam Van Le, Ngo Luan, Nguyen Don Hau, Luong The Vinh, Le Tuan Ngan, and Nguyen Xung Xac were assigned to compose the inscriptions.

Supervisors Nguyen Tung and Thai Thuc Liem, together with Phan Ly, were assigned to write down the inscriptions of Chinese characters in the style of the standard script, while To Ngai was ordered to write in the seal script. It was the first time the stelae were set up in the space named “*Nhà Thái học*” (lit. Hall of Great/Profound/Erudite Learning) in the complex of the Temple of Literature (Thang Long, Hanoi) to honour

the doctoral laureates, who succeeded in the triennial national exams⁵ (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, pp.282 & 285-286).

In the 3rd lunar month in the 18th year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Đinh Mùi*, Fire Goat Year; 1487), a national primary exam was held for senior bachelors, of whom 60 won the title “doctoral laureates”. Pham Tran born in Dong Phu Liet Commune, Thanh Dam District (the modern-day Dong Phu Village, Dong My Commune, Thanh Tri District, Hanoi) achieved the first place at the national primary exam. Meanwhile, Tran Sung Dinh born in Dong Khe Commune, Thanh Lam District (the modern-day Dong Khe Village, An Lam Commune, Nam Sach District, Hai Duong Province) achieved the first place at the national final exam held in the royal palace.

On the 7th day of the 4th lunar month, the king came to the examination place at the palace courtyard to give questions on the country ruling principles.

After reviewing the exam papers, the king asked the best candidates to come to Nhat Quang Gate of the royal citadel, and announced the list in the roll of honour. Tran Sung Dinh won the first place; Nguyen Duc Huan and Than Canh Van - the second and third places respectively. All three of them were considered doctoral laureates in the first-ranked group. Meanwhile, Vu Canh and 29 others were in the second-ranked group; Pham Tran and 26 others were in the third-ranked group.

On the 4th day of the 5th lunar month, the king was seated in Kinh Thien Palace. Names of new doctoral laureates were announced loudly. The roll of honour was hung by the Ministry of Rites outside Dong Hoa Gate.

On the 15th day of the 8th lunar month in the 18th year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Đinh Mùi*, Fire Goat Year; 1487), stelae were set up to encourage Confucian scholars and honour the doctoral laureates (the stelae still remain in the Temple of Literature at present) (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, pp.298- 299).

In the 3rd lunar month of the 21st year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Canh Tuất*, Metal Dog Year; 1490), a national primary exam was held for senior bachelors, of whom 54 won the title “doctoral laureates”. Of those successful candidates, Nguyen Xao⁶ born in Phu Chan Village, Dong Ngan District (the modern-day Phu Chan Village, Phu Chan Commune, Tu Son Town, Bac Ninh Province) secured a place in the third-ranked group at the national final exam held in the royal palace. Meanwhile, Vu Due born in Trinh Xa Commune, Son Vi District (the modern-day Trinh Xa Village, Vinh Lai Commune, Lam Thao District, Phu Tho Province) won the first place at the national final exam.

On some day in the last 10 days of the 4th lunar month, a national final exam was held with the questions given by the king (the questions remain unknown).

Trinh Cong Dan, Minister of War with the title “Count of Dinh Cong”, and Le Nang Nhung, Minister of Justice, were appointed by the king to be the chief examiners. Quach Huu Nghiem, Deputy Chief of the *Ngự sử đài*, was appointed to be the examination overseer. Two mandarins were responsible for marking exam papers and reading them to the king, including: Than Nhan Trung, Grand Secretary of Dong Cac Palace, and Nguyen Ba Ky, Minister of Personnel.

After reviewing the exam papers, the king made a decision about the rankings of the candidates, according to which Vu Due, Ngo Hoan, and Luu Thu Ngan were the three candidates in the first-ranked group; Le Mau Tuat and 18 others were in the second-ranked group; and, Dinh Quat and 31 others were in the third-ranked group.

On the 18th day of the 5th lunar month, the king was seated in Kinh Thien Palace; names of the new doctoral candidates were read out loud to call them to enter; the mandarins in the court dresses congratulated the successful candidates; representatives of the Ministry of Rites brought and hung the roll of honour outside Dong Hoa Gate.

On the 19th day of the month, ceremonial hats, belts, and dresses were given to the new doctoral laureates. On the 20th of the month, a feast was held to congratulate them.

On the 15th day of the 9th lunar month, a stele inscribed with names of the doctoral laureates passing the national exam in the 21st year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Canh Tuất*, Metal Dog Year; 1490) was built in the Temple of Literature (the stele has been lost) (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, pp.306-307; Do Van Ninh, 2000).

In the 3rd lunar month in the 24th year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Quý Sửu*, Water Ox Year; 1493), a national primary exam was held for senior bachelors, of whom 48 won the title “doctoral laureates”. Vu Duong born in Man Nhue Commune, Thanh Lam District (the modern-day An Chau Commune, Nam Sach District, Hai Duong Province) secured the first place at the national primary exam and the national final exam held in the royal palace as well.

(He got the first place at all three exams, including the interprovincial, the national primary, and the national final exams).

On the 11th day of the 4th lunar month, the king came to the palace to give questions for the national final exam. The questions remained unknown.

Trinh Cong Dan, Minister of War with the title “Count of Dinh Cong”, and Quach Huu Nghiem, Chief of the *Ngự sử đài*, were appointed to be the chief examiners. Dam Van Le, Nghiem’s Deputy, was appointed to be the examination overseer. Six mandarins were responsible for marking exam papers and reading them to the king, including: Than Nhan Trung, Academician Recipient of Edicts and Grand Secretary in Dong Cac Palace as well as Rector of the Imperial Academy; Nguyen Ba Ky, Minister of Personnel; Do Nhuan, Academician Reader-in-Waiting and Grand Secretary in Dong Cac Palace; Le Quang Chi, Scholar in Dong Cac Palace; Luong The Vinh, Chief Academician Calligrapher-in-Waiting and Head of the Institute for the Veneration of Literature, Cultivated Learning Service; and, Ngo Luan, Editing Clerk in Dong Cac Palace.

After reviewing the exam papers, the king made a decision about the rankings of the candidates, according to which Vu Duong, Le Tham, and Le Hung were in the first-ranked group; Lai Duc Du and 22 others were in the second-ranked group; and Nguyen Quang Mau and 21 others in the third-ranked group.

On the 8th day of the 5th lunar month, the king was seated in Kinh Thien Palace; names of the new doctoral candidates were read out loud to call them to enter; and,

representatives of the Ministry of Rites hung the roll of honour outside Dong Hoa Gate.

On the 27th day of the month, ceremonial hats, belts, and dresses were given to the new doctoral laureates. On the 28th of the month, a feast was held to congratulate them.

On the 19th day of the 8th lunar month, a stele inscribed with names of the doctoral laureates passing the national exam in the 24th year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Quý Sửu*, Water Ox Year; 1493) was built in the Temple of Literature (the stele is no longer found in the Temple of Literature) (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, pp.310-312; Do Van Ninh, 2000).

In the 2nd lunar month in the 27th year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Bính Thìn*, Fire Dragon Year; 1496), a national primary exam was held for senior bachelors, of which 48 ones achieved the title “doctoral laureates”, including Nguyen Van Huan⁷. Nghiem Vien born in Bong Lai Commune, Que Duong District (the modern-day Cam Chang Village, Bong Lai Commune, Que Vo District, Bac Ninh Province) achieved the first place at the national final exam held in the royal palace.

On the 19th day of the 3rd lunar month, the king came to Kinh Thien Palace to give questions on the country ruling principles to the candidates taking the exam in Dan Tri.

Trinh Cong Dan, Minister of War with the title “Count of Dinh Cong”, and Quach Huu Nghiem, Chief of the *Ngự sử đài*, were appointed to be the chief examiners. Nguyen Hoang Thac, Deputy Minister of Revenue, and Dam Van Le, Nghiem’s Deputy, were appointed to be the examination overseer. Seven mandarins were responsible for marking

exam papers and reading them to the king, including: Than Nhan Trung, Academician Recipient of Edicts and Rector of the Imperial Academy; Dao Cu, Academician Reader-in-Waiting and Grand Secretary in Dong Cac Palace; Luu Hung Hieu, Academician Expositor-in-Waiting and Head of the Administrative Department of the Imperial Academy; Ngo Luan and Ngo Hoan, Editing Clerks in Dong Cac Palace; Tran Khac Niem, Calligrapher-in-Waiting at the Imperial Academy and Head of the Cultivated Learning Service; Nguyen Ba Ky, Minister of Personnel; Do Nhuan, Le Quang Chi, Scholar in Dong Cac Palace; and, Ngo Tham, Calligrapher-in-Waiting at the Imperial Academy.

On the 26th day of the 3rd lunar month, the exam candidates were invited to Kim Loan Palace. The king personally had a look at each of the candidates and decided that 30 of them became new doctoral laureates.

Remarkably, 43 were successful at the national primary exam in 1496, but the king decided that 30 of them were doctoral laureates, while the rest 13 were failed by him. It was the only national final exam, at which 13 doctoral laureates were failed. Apart from the “physiognomy-related assessment”, there might be other reasons for failing those candidates. It is necessary to do further research on this.

On the 27th day of the month, the king was seated in the main palace, making a decision about the successful candidates. Nghiem Vien, Nguyen Huan, and Dinh Luu were assessed to be in the first-ranked group, while Dinh Cuong and 7 others were in the second-ranked group and Nguyen Dao Dien and 17 others in the third-ranked group.

On the 6th day of the 12th lunar month, a stele inscribed with names of the new doctoral laureates at the exam in the 27th year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Bính Thìn*, Fire Dragon Year; 1496) was set up. The stele still remains in the Temple of Literature at present (Ngo Si Lien et al., 1971-1972, Vol. 3, pp.314-315 & 318; Do Van Ninh, 2000, pp.150-151).

Thus, at the 12 national exams, the king granted the title “doctoral laureates” to 501 candidates in total. Of those candidates, there were 11 ones winning the first place at the national primary exam, including: Quach Dinh Bao, Than Nhan Trung, Le Tuan Ngan, Cao Quynh, Le Ninh, Pham Don Le, Pham Tri Khiem, Pham Tran, Nguyen Xao, Vu Duong, and Nguyen Huan. There were 11 winning the first place at the national final exam held in the royal palaces, including: Luong The Vinh, Duong Minh Chau (first place in the second-ranked group, but there was no one assessed to be in the first-ranked group), Vu Kiet, Vu Tuan Chieu, Le Quang Chi, Pham Don Le, Nguyen Quang Bat, Tran Sung Dinh, Vu Due, Vu Duong, and Nghiem Vien. Of those who won the first place at the national final exam, there were two “Ternary Best” (*tam nguyên*), namely Pham Don Le and Vu Duong.

The above-mentioned achievements gained in the Confucian civil service examination demonstrate that the Confucian education was highly appreciated under the Le dynasty. Most of 501 doctoral laureates, including those who won the first place at the national exams, became pillars of the centrally monarchic system in the reign of Le Thanh Tong, contributing significant part to the prosperous social development of Dai Viet.

4. Remarks and conclusions

A very important contribution of the system of the Confucian education and civil service examination under the reign of Le Thanh Tong is that in 1462, the interprovincial exam was institutionalised to be held every three years. According to the regulation, the interprovincial exam was held in the years of *Tý*, *Ngọ*, *Mão* and *Dậu*, while the national primary exam was held in the subsequent years - the years of *Sửu*, *Mùi*, *Thìn*, and *Tuất*. Prior to the interprovincial exam in the prefectures or interprovincial regions, tests of dictation were held to eliminate those who were not qualified enough to take the exam. The interprovincial exams complied with the following regulation: The heads of communes were in charge of guaranteeing that the candidates nominated to the exam were honest and knowledgeable about at least one of the Five Classics; the interprovincial exams were to be held in the 8th lunar month; the list of the candidates who passed the exam was posted up within the first ten days of the 9th lunar month; mandarins of the Imperial Academy were assigned to supervise and mark the exam papers; the exam consisted of four tests. In the interprovincial exam of 1462, for example: The first test contained five questions on “the Four Books and the Five Classics”. The second test was focused on writing edicts, *chế*, and *biểu* of either the ancient or four-six styles (antithetical and non-rhythmic). The third test was focused on the ability to write poems of the Tang poetry style and odes of the Lisao style; each essay was written with 300 characters at least. The fourth test was aimed to find

out the candidates’ understanding of literature; the questions were focused on historical or topical issues; and, each essay was written with 1,000 characters at least. 12 interprovincial exams were held over the period from 1462 to 1495 and scores of thousands of candidates succeeded in passing the exams. They were then qualified enough to take the national exams, and contributed significant part to the national socio-cultural development.

Le Thanh Tong paid special attention to the national primary exams. At first, the king appointed reliable and erudite mandarins to undertake important tasks in the exams. They were ministers, such as those of war, justice, or personnel, leaders of the Censorate and department of war, and heads and officials of the Imperial Academy. They played the roles of the chief examiners (that comprised of one or two persons), overseers (deputy chief examiners, comprising of one or two persons), and those who marked the exam papers and read them to the king (that comprised of three or four, and sometimes five or seven persons, depending on the size of the exam). They were completely responsible for the examination regulations and results, securing the strictness, transparency, and fairness so as to find out the talent to serve the country.

The specific contents of the national primary exams held in 1472 (the year of *Nhâm Thìn*, Water Dragon Year) and 1475 (the year of *Ất Mùi*, Wood Goat Year) show that they consisted of four tests as follows: The first test was focused on “the Four Books and the Five Classics” with three questions on the Analects of Confucius, four questions on Mencius, and one question on the Doctrine of the Mean. Candidates had to choose four

from those eight questions to write essays. In regard to the Five Classics, there were three questions relating to each of the five books. Candidates could choose one of those questions to do the exam. For “The Book of Spring and Autumn” alone, two questions were combined into one essay. The second test was focused on the ability to write poems. There was one question that required writing a poem of the Tang poetry style and one question that required writing an ode of Li Bai’s style. The third test consisted of questions on edicts, *ché*, and *biểu*. The fourth test was aimed to find out the candidates’ understanding of literature. The questions were focused on similarities and differences in the historical classics and in-depth understanding of the martial mandarins’ strategies and capacities.

One can realise that the national primary exam consisting of four tests was a Confucian basic and difficult challenge to candidates. If they neither had comprehensive understanding of the Four Books and the Five Classics nor knew how to write royal edicts, *ché*, *biểu* and compose poems of the Tang style, they could hardly pass the exam. It was followed by the national final exam held in the royal palaces to make decisions about the rankings of the doctoral laureates. The questions used at the national final exams were often raised by the king, focused on the emperors, the relationships between the kings and servants, and the principles of ruling one’s country, etc. One can see now some well-known essays written at the national final exams by Luong The Vinh (1463), Vu Tuan Chieu (1475), and Vu Due (1490), etc. Those essays show the authors’ wise Confucian knowledge and topical

questions, demonstrating the real knowledge of the candidates at the national exams under the reign of Le Thanh Tong.

The king used various ways to timely honour the new doctoral laureates, aiming to encourage scholars to study hard to win exams. Two or three weeks after the national primary exams, the national final exams were held and successful candidates were invited to the royal palace. The king was seated in Kinh Thien, the main imperial palace, while the names of new doctoral laureates were read aloud. The Ministry of Personnel was ordered to give ceremonial dresses, hats, and belts to the new laureates. The Ministry of Rites was ordered to hang the roll of honour [with their names] outside Dong Hoa gate. At the national exams in 1469 and 1490, new doctoral laureates were invited to a feast at the Ministry of Rites; the Imperial Horse Department provided good horses to take the candidates who won the first place at the national final exam home in great honour. After the national exam in 1472, mandarin ranks were granted to successful candidates as follows: For first-ranked group, the senior 6th rank in the mandarins’ hierarchy the candidate who won the first place was bestowed on with the 8th portions of *tu*, and those who won the second and the third places were granted with the junior 6th rank with the 7th *tu*, and the senior 7th rank with the 6th *tu* respectively. Meanwhile, the junior 7th rank with the 5th *tu* was granted to those in the second-ranked group, and the senior 8th rank with the 4th *tu* - to those in the third-ranked group. For those who joined the Imperial Academy, their ranks would be promoted by

one level. For those who were assigned to work as district prefects or supervisors, the titles would be granted in line with their granted ranks. In addition to the granting of the titles and perquisite to the successful candidates, in 1484, names of the doctoral laureates, who passed one of the ten national exams during the period from 1442 to 1484, were inscribed on the stelae placed in the courtyard of the Temple of Literature, which was called “*Nhà Thái học*” (the Hall of Great Learning). Names of the doctoral laureates, who passed the national exams in 1487, 1490, 1493, and 1496, were then also inscribed on stelae to make their names remembered forever. The above-mentioned activities that honoured the doctoral laureates, and their appointments to positions in the governmental system after returning from their home villages with respectful reception by villagers, are great glory to them, who would be awaited by a bright future of being a mandarin. That was probably the most attractive motivation urging many people to study hard and take exams in the period of the reign of Le Thanh Tong, leading to the outstanding achievements in the Confucian education and examination, which could be gained under the reign of few other kings⁸ (Nguyen Huu Tam, 1996, p.192). Scores of thousands of candidates passed the interprovincial exams. At 12 national primary and final exams, 501 candidates became doctoral laureates, 11 of whom won the first place at the national primary exams, 11 others - the first place at the national final exams, and two - “ternary best” candidates. Based on the impressive achievements, one can affirm that Confucian education and examination

under the reign of Le Thanh Tong were the most thriving in the history of Confucian education in Vietnam⁹.

With the real talent, the loyalty, and the dutifulness, the doctoral laureates and the high-ranking mandarins contributed significantly to the cultural and educational development in Dai Viet under the reign of Le Thanh Tong. The principles of true knowledge, the strict and clear exercise of the rules, and the fair and objective selection of laureates in the exams became the foundation and example for the Confucian examination system under the following dynasties. It was a great contribution made by the Confucian education and civil service examination under the reign of Le Thanh Tong in the history of Dai Viet.

Notes

¹ This paper was published in Vietnamese in *Khoa học xã hội Việt Nam*, số 5, 2020, then developed into this English version. Translator: Nguyen Tuan Sinh. Language editor: Ta Quang Dong.

² At the national exam in the 10th year of Quang Thuan dynastic title (the year of *Kỷ Sửu*, Earth Ox Year; 1469), 22 candidates became doctoral laureates (Board on Research and Compilation of History of Thanh Hoa Province, 1998, Vol. 3, p.38).

³ At the national exam in the 3rd year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Nhâm Thìn*, Water Dragon Year; 1472), 27 candidates became doctoral laureates (Board on Research and Compilation of History of Thanh Hoa Province, 1998, Vol. 3, p.38).

⁴ Prime candidate Nguyen Quang Bat, who won the first place at the national final exam, came from Binh Ngo Commune, Gia Dinh District (Board on

Research and Compilation of History of Thanh Hoa Province, 1998, Vol. 3, p.38).

⁵ In the first period (from 15th of the 8th lunar month in 1484), ten stelae inscribed with names of doctoral laureates were placed in the Temple of Literature, but just seven remain until now. The three that have been lost are the stelae inscribed with names of the doctoral laureates at the national exams in the 10th year of Quang Thuan dynastic title (the year of *Kỷ Sửu*, Earth Ox Year; 1469), the 3rd year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Nhâm Thìn*, Water Dragon Year; 1472), and the 15th year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Giáp Thìn*, Wood Dragon Year; 1484).

⁶ At the national exam in the 21st year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Canh Tuất*, Metal Dog Year; 1490), 54 candidates became doctoral laureates. The first place at the national primary exam was won by Nguyen Khao (Phu Chan Commune, Dong Ngan District) (Board on Research and Compilation of History of Thanh Hoa Province, 1998, Vol. 3, p.38).

⁷ At the national exam in the 27th year of Hong Duc dynastic title (the year of *Bính Thìn*, Fire Dragon Year; 1496), 30 candidates became doctoral laureates. The first place at the national primary exam was won by Nguyen Huan (Kim Doi Commune, Vu Ninh District) (Board on Research and Compilation of History of Thanh Hoa Province (1998), Vol. 3, p.38).

⁸ Under the reign of the Mac dynasty in Thang Long over 65 years, from 1527 to 1592, “22 exams, which provided 485 doctoral laureates and 13 prime candidates, were held. It demonstrates that the dynasty paid special attention to the Confucian education and civil service examination” (Nguyen Huu Tam, 1996, p.192).

⁹ “Thousands of Confucian scholars passed the national exams over the 170 years under the [Tran] dynasty. Unfortunately, that was a long time ago and thereby relevant documents have been lost. Thus, we now have information about only 52 of them” (Ngo

Duc Tho, et al., 2006, p.18); “... during the period from the 6th year of Binh Thuan dynastic title (the year of *Giáp Dần*, Wood Tiger Year; 1554) to the 1st year of Chieu Thong dynastic title (the year of *Đinh Mùi*, Fire Goat Year; 1787) under the Restored period of the Le dynasty (*Lê trung hưng*), the total number of unscheduled exams held per the kings’ order (*Chế khoa*) and regular national exams amounted to 73, at which 772 candidates became doctoral laureates”... [p.14]; The Mac dynasty held “22 exams, which provided 485 doctoral laureates and 13 prime candidates, were held. It demonstrates that the dynasty paid special attention to the Confucian education and civil service examination” (Nguyen Huu Tam, 1996, p.192).

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