

# Method of Talent Selection in the Lê – Trịnh Regime from the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries

Hoàng Anh Tuấn\*, Lê Thuỳ Linh\*\*

Revised on 31 August 2023. Accepted on 24 September 2023.

**Abstract:** During the Lê - Trịnh regime, the talent selection was paid special attention by the State in order to build a stable political system, develop the country's potential to be able to compete with the Kingdom of Cochinchina of the Nguyễn Lords. The method of talent selection in this period included the following forms of examination: *nhiệm tử* (descendants of mandarins were ordained), *bảo cử* (nomination) and *tiến cử* (recommendation). On the basis of scientific sources, the article focuses on analyzing the forms of selection, pointing out the positive and non-positive aspects of each method. The diversified system of talent selection helped to boost the country for a long time. However, the court implemented a number of rules which negatively affected the selection of talents, notably the payment of money or grain for mandarin position. The article also assesses an overview of the role and effect of talent selection methods on the state apparatus of the Lê - Trịnh regime.

**Keywords:** Selection, talent, Lê - Trịnh regime, examination, 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

**Subject classification:** History.

## 1. Introduction

"Talented people are the nation's vital resources. If these resources are prosperous and strong, the country will develop. If the resources are short, the country will be weak. Therefore, the wise emperors always consider educating talents, electing talents, and cultivating talents as their utmost priority". These are the content of the stelae of doctors in the year of Water Dog (1442) - the first examination under the Early Lê dynasty - compiled by *Đông Các đại học sĩ Thân Nhân Trung* (the great scholar in *Đông Các* - an agency of the court) reflected the general conception of Vietnamese feudal dynasties in selecting and using of talents. (For convenient, we use the term "court", "state", and "government" without distinguishing the time line or meaning, just to make readers easier to follow). During Lê -

---

\* University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

\*\* Institute of History, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

Email: tuan@ussh.edu.vn

Trịnh regime, talented people were appreciated and used by the State. The State had multiple methods of selecting talented people to serve the government's apparatus, especially through the basic form of examination, namely *nhiệm tử*, *bảo cử* and *tiến cử*.

## 2. Examination

### 2.1. Literary exams

The important exams to select talents were the *Hội* exam and the *Đình* exam. However, only those who had passed the *Khảo hạch* (oral) examinations and the *Hương* exams (the exams took place in local areas such as provinces, counties) were eligible to attend the *Hội* exam. Students who had passed the *Hội* exam were then allowed to attend the *Đình* exam.

The *Khảo hạch* examination took place from the year of the Metal Goat (1511), until the year of Metal Buffalo (1721) when the State canceled it. The examination is held before the *Hương* exam, the candidates who passed the exam were exempted from labor and military services and allowed to attend the *Hương* exam.

The *Hương* exam took place in several localities, and the State did not organize it. Perhaps due to the war situation with Cochinchina, in the year of Metal Rooster (1741) King Lê Hiến Tông allowed to restore *Hương* exam so as not to miss the talented people (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 177). In 1678, the State promulgated 16 regulations, stipulated the time of organization the *Hương* exam in every August (note that all the dates are lunar). The content of the *Hương* exam was mainly about management policies in the country, methods of governing the people, and how to select and use talented people. Several *Hương* exams which were held in Sơn Nam Hạ had shown these contents (Nguyễn Tá Nhí, 1995).

#### 2.1.1. *Hội* examination

The *Hội* examination was organized by the State in the Imperial Citadel of Thăng Long. The *Hội* exam was held after the *Hương* exam one year. The candidates of the *Hội* exam was not different from those under the Early Lê dynasty, including: *Hương cống* (candidates that passed the *Hương* exam), *Giám sinh* (students studying in Temple of Literature), children of officials studying in *Chiêu Văn quán*, *Tứ Lâm cục*, descendants of king's family studying in palaces, mandarins who wished to attend the exam for higher positions. *Ân giám* (students were given favor to study in Temple of Literature by the King), *Âm giám* (descendants of high-ranking mandarins from *Tứ phẩm* (Fourth-Rank) or higher were privileged to study in the Temple of Literature) must pass one test before they could participate in the *Hội* examination (Trịnh Thị Hà, 2020: 86).

The exam consisted of 4 sessions (or four schools). The first session was about *Kinh nghĩa*, *Thư nghĩa* (explains the meaning in sentences taken from *Tứ thư Ngũ kinh* - the

Four Books and the Five Classics). The second session was about poetry, and *phú* (a kind of literary genre). The third session was about *Chiếu, Ché, Biếu* (some kinds of literary genre). The fourth session was about *Văn sách* (about literature). Lê Quý Đôn wrote about the *Hội* exam during the Restored Lê (Lê trung hưng) dynasties: “In the first exams, there are five topics *Kinh nghĩa*, the candidates focus on one genre with the same form such as: *phá cú* (the first sentences for introduction), *tiếp từ, thích thực* (two parts of the test), *thúc kết* (ending), *bình luận* (comment), *tổng kết* (summary). The seniors prepared the sample tests, the words were strong and elegant, the candidates imitate. The examiners only refused the too bad papers.” (Lê Quý Đôn, 1977: 93).

The candidate who passed all 4 sessions was called *trúng cách thi Hội* (passed the *Hội* exam) and allowed to attend the *Đình* exam. The person who passed 3 sessions was called *trúng trường* (passed the exam). The candidate who passed the *Hội* exam with the highest score was called *Hội nguyên*.

### 2.1.2. Đình examination

In the year of Wood Goat (1595), during the reign of King Lê Thế Tông, *Đình* exam was restored. Around one to two months (sometimes three to four months) after *Hội* exam, the State organized the *Đình* exam at the palace’s yard of Lê King or Trịnh Lord to select the talented candidates. However, in the year of Metal Buffalo (1781), the *Đình* examination was held at the Temple of Literature (Ngô Cao Lãng, 1995: 485). The candidates who have passed the *Hội* exam were allowed to attend the *Đình* exam. The test is one literature article consist of two parts: *sách vấn* (questions) and *đổi sách* (answers). In *Vũ trung tùy bút* (An essay written in the rain), Phạm Đình Hổ commented: “About *Văn sách luận* (comment about literature book), if you are not a person who is fluent in the *Kinh Truyền* (Confucian book) from the past to present, you are not able to “put down your pen” and choose the words to write” (Phạm Đình Hổ, 1989: 194). This implies the high demand on qualifications for candidates. The main content was about national governance, the way of governing the country, the use of people of emperors, military, economy, foretelling (Đình Khắc Thuần, 2009: 38-45), and the topic was given by the King. The candidates who passed the exam are ranked doctor: *Đệ nhất giáp* (First-Rank), *Đệ nhị giáp* (Second- Rank), *Đệ tam giáp* (Third-Rank). *Đệ nhất giáp* is divided into three levels: *Đệ nhất giáp Tiến sĩ cập đệ Đệ nhất danh* (or *Trạng nguyên* - the first place), *Đệ nhất giáp Tiến sĩ cập đệ Đệ nhị danh* (or *Bảng nhãn* - the second place), *Đệ nhất giáp Tiến sĩ cập đệ Đệ tam danh* (or *Thám hoa* - the third place). *Đệ nhị giáp Tiến sĩ xuất thân* is also called *Hoàng giáp*. The person who passed the *Đệ tam giáp* was called *Đông Tiến sĩ xuất thân* (or Doctor). The exam held in the year of Metal Dog (1670) has the highest number of doctors, including 31 people. The exam held in the year of Metal Buffalo (1781) has the lowest number of doctors – only two successful candidates. Under the reign of Lord Trịnh Cương (1705-1729), thanks to his attempt to reform the administrative system, the recruitment of

talented people was focused, thus the number of passing exam was higher: the exam in the year of the Water Dragon (1712) has 17 doctors, the exam in the year of Wood Goat (1715) has 20 doctors, the exam in the year of the Metal Buffalo (1721) has 25 doctors, the exam in the year of the Fire Dragon (1724) has 17 doctors (Trịnh Thị Hà, 2020: 97).

### 2.1.3. Other examinations

\* *Chế khoa*: *Chế khoa* is a special examination to select talented people. The Restored Lê dynasty organized three exams at Vạn Lại - Yên Trường (today Thọ Xuân district, Thanh Hóa province).

The first *Chế khoa* was held in the year of Wood Tiger (1554). 13 candidates that passed the exam were called *Tiến sĩ xuất thân* and *Tiến sĩ đồng xuất thân*. Đinh Bạt Tụy had highest result and was awarded *Tiến sĩ xuất thân*. From the year of Wood Tiger (1554), “talents from all localities were not hesitant to travel thousands of miles to attend exams in Thanh Hóa, hoping to be succeeded and employed by Lê - Trịnh court. The King ordained the successful candidates according to their ability. The government, therefore, became more powerful.” (Lê Quý Đôn, 1978: 301).

The second *Chế khoa* was organized in the year of Wood Buffalo (1565). Ten examinees passed the exam, Lê Trạc Tú was at the first rank (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 313-314). In the year of Fire Buffalo (1577), the State organized the third exam, 5 candidates passed. At the beginning of the Restored Lê dynasty, *Chế khoa* were doctoral exams to attract talented people for the government apparatus, and to compete with the Mạc dynasty, affirming the orthodoxy of the Restored Lê dynasty (Tống Văn Lợi, 2022: 202).

\* *Đông các examination*: The *Đông các* exam appeared at the beginning of Hồng Đức period under the Early Lê dynasty but the Court did not implement in time. Until October of the year of Earth Pig (1659), the Court organized the exam. In *Kiến văn tiểu lục* (Collection of some stories what one sees and hears), Lê Quý Đôn wrote: “Around the year of Hồng Đức reign, the Court organized the *Đông các* exam. The mandarins who has ranking *tứ phẩm* (Fourth-Rank) and below attended the exam at the yard of Vạn Thọ Palace. The Emperor gave the topic such as: *Tang* five-word poem, or the critical essay, or *phú, tụng, châm* (various sorts of literary genre), etc. there was no definite form. The mandarin who passed the exam with the highest score was appointed *Đại học sĩ* (Senior doctor), and those who passed the exam with the third position was appointed a *Đông các Hiệu thư* (people working for *Đông các*). From the Restored Lê dynasty onwards, there were only three *Đông các* examinations” (Lê Quý Đôn, 1977: 100), including the exams which were held in the year of Earth Pig (1659) with five successful candidates, the year of Fire Dragon (1676) having six successful candidates, the year of Fire Goat (1727) registering three successful candidates. The incumbents who passed the examination were given hats and belts as the *Tam khôi* (three people that passed the exam with the highest result) (Đỗ Văn Ninh, 2002: 247).

\* *Sĩ vọng examination*: In August of the year of Wood Buffalo (1625), the State began to establish the *Sĩ vọng* examination. The talented and virtuous *Cống sĩ* (who passed the

*Hương* exam) was eligible to attend. 27 candidates passed this examination. According to Phan Huy Chú, the purpose of this exam was to treat talented people who had not been inducted or ordained. In *Kiến văn tiểu lục*, Lê Quý Đôn had another opinion: “The *Sĩ vọng* examination is also called the *Hoành từ* examination, only for *Hương cống*” (means *Cống sĩ* who passed the *Hương* examination) (Lê Quý Đôn, 1977: 99). However, Phan Huy Chú argued that the *Hoành từ* examination was set up at the beginning of the Early Lê dynasty (1431), while the *Sĩ vọng* examination was set up in Restored Lê dynasty. The exam questions were usually given either by Lê Kings or Trịnh Lords. The candidates attended the test in one day at the lord’s palace or at the king’s palace. The successful candidates who have not yet become officials would be inducted *Tri huyện* (governor of a district) while those successful candidates that have been officials would be inducted *Tự thừa*, *Tri phủ* (position higher than *Tri huyện*), *Hiển sát phó sứ* (army leaders) or *Tham nghị* (consultant). For example, the examination was held in the year of Earth Dog (1658) under the reign of Lê Thần Tông King, 22 candidates passed the *Sĩ vọng* exam were appointed to positions at the Court and localities (Đỗ Văn Ninh, 2002: 565).

\* *Hoành từ examination*: After the *Đình* exam, the Court organized the *Hoành từ* to select all the talented people. The candidates were doctors or who had not passed the *Đình* exam. Because this exam was not official, there was no specific regulation on the content, time and location of the exam. In *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí* (Categorized records of institutions of successive dynasties), Phan Huy Chú explained that *Hoành từ* means “abundant, generous writing, showing the high education of the candidates. It is an exam to choose good writers and well-educated people” (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 12). The Lê - Trịnh Court organized six *Hoành từ* exams in 1625, 1691, 1715, 1724, 1727, and 1757 (Trịnh Thị Hà, 2020: 99).

\* *Thịnh khoa (Ấn khoa)*: *Thịnh khoa* was also called *Ấn khoa*. According to *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* (Imperially ordered annotated text completely reflecting the history of Việt), in the feudal examination system, there were regulations for the *Hương* and *Hội* examinations. Nevertheless, during the year when King or Lord had celebrations, they would open *Ấn khoa* exam. In the year of the Earth Pig (1779), Lord Trịnh Sâm organized *Thịnh khoa (Ấn khoa)* for *Hương* exam in October; 15 people passed the exam. Afterwards, the *Hội* exam was held in November. This exam was to deliberately show the Trịnh Lord’s “increasing merit and power” which overwhelmed that of the Lê King (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 1998, Vol.2: 749). The contestants attended *Thịnh khoa Hương* exam were *Cống sĩ*. The successful candidates of *Thịnh khoa Hội* examination were evaluated as doctors and were also ranked: *Đệ nhị giáp Tiến sĩ xuất thân*, *Đệ tam giáp Đồng tiến sĩ xuất thân* (Đỗ Văn Ninh, 2002: 83-84).

According to the statistics of doctoral examinations and equivalents (1075-1919) in the book *Các nhà khoa bảng Việt Nam (1075-1919)* (Vietnamese doctors (1075-1919)), out of 72 exams held under the Lê - Trịnh reign, 763 successful candidates were conferred the title of doctor. The first examination of the Restored Lê dynasty was organized in the year of Wood Tiger, the sixth year of Thuận Bình reign (1554), with a total of 13 people passed the exam. The final exam was held in the year of Fire Goat, the first year of Chiêu Thống

reign (1787), there were 14 people passed the exam. In the year of Metal Buffalo, the second year of Bảo Thái (1721), the examination was taken place and 25 candidates passed the exam - the largest number compared to other exams. This year, there was only one *Đệ tam giáp*, no *Đệ nhất giáp* or *Đệ nhị giáp* was conferred (Ngô Đức Thọ, Nguyễn Thúy Nga, Nguyễn Hữu Mùi, 2006: 828-830).

In addition, the Lê - Trịnh Court also organized other examinations for mandarins such as *Ứng chế, Từ mệnh, Kì tuần...* *Ứng chế* is an exam for those who have just become a philosophy doctor. In *Quốc triều hương khoa lục* (*Hương* examination of Nguyễn dynasties), Cao Xuân Dục wrote: after *vinh quy* (successful doctor travelling from the capital to his hometown to honor his relatives and ancestors), the doctors returned to the capital of Thăng Long and attended the examination. They were given a copy of the poem with the Lord's comments (Cao Xuân Dục, 1993: 74). In fact, this is a final examination for choosing the best official who will work as *Hiệu thảo* in the National Academy (*Hàn lâm viện*). Under the Lê - Trịnh reign, the State organized two exams in the year of Water Tiger (1722) and Water Buffalo (1733). The test included one poem or one essay (Ngô Cao Lãng, 1995: 311-312). Besides, from 1652, the Court organized mathematic exams. In the years 1691, 1724, 1735, etc., the Court organized medical exams to supply employee for *Thái y viện* (royal hospital) (Nguyễn Tá Nhí, 1995). Those who were proficient in astronomy, foretelling of the weather, destiny, etc, that passed the exam, would be given positions as an official (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 209).

In order to increase the quality of selecting talented people, the Court improved learning contents and examination forms, re-organized exams that were not organized properly and strictly, and punished unresponsive officials. The historical document shows some events:

In the year of Earth Monkey (1728), *Tham tụng* Nguyễn Công Hãng of the Trịnh Lord's palace ordered students studying at the Temple of Literature practicing *bát cổ* (ancient literature genre, composed during the 23<sup>rd</sup> year of Chenghua reign of Chinese Emperor Xianzong of Ming (1487)). This style of writing must have eight opposite clauses because he wanted to encourage students to change the genre in order to select the people with special talents (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 107).

In the year of Water Rat (1732), studying of classics, unifying the content was issued by Lord Trịnh Khương (Giang) (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 135).

In the year of Fire Pig (1767), Lord Trịnh Sâm wanted to make a great revival in role of literature for governing the country. Thus, he asked *Tể tửu, Tư nghiệp* (mandarins working in the Temple of Literature) to teach students everyday at *Thái học* (a place where students study in Temple of Literature). The students practiced writing on the first day and the full-moon day of the lunar month, and attend the exams every four months in February, May, August and November. The candidate passed the exam with high score would be ordained.

In localities, *Đề đốc học chính* (an official who was in charge of education in localities) of a *Thừa ty* (office in localities) asked *Hiệu quan* (officials in the districts such as teachers) to teach students and organize exams every four months (February, May, August and November). The exams was similar to the exams organized in Temple of Literature.

Successful candidates included: *Sinh đồ* were appointed *Cử nhân* (bachelors), *Học sinh* (students) waited for the next exam; *Sinh đồ* remained their status while *Hiệu quan* would be judged according to their success in works. Therefore, Confucian education was gradually revived (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 314).

In the year of the Pig (1779), the Court defined the regulations of teaching and learning, focusing on virtue and then literature. The people with virtue and talent would be inducted and ordained to work for the Court (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 447). At the same time, the organization of the examination was also rectified. Trịnh Lord reorganized the *Hương* exam, dismissed the officials who had committed mistakes in the exams in the years of Earth Rabbit (1759), Water Horse (1762), Earth Rat (1768) and Wood Horse (1774) (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 262, 272, 325-326, 372-373).

Through the organization regular exams (*Khảo hạch* exams, *Hương* exams, *Hội* exams, *Đình* exams) and irregular exams (*Chế khoa*, *Đông các*, *Sĩ vọng*, *Hoành từ*, *Thịnh khoa*, *Ấn khoa...*), the Lê - Trịnh dynasty has recruited highly educated people in society. It is important contribution to supply and replenish talented officials Confucian government apparatus. Three person who passed the exam with higher results (*tam khôi*) and *Chế khoa* was appointed to the positions in the National Academy (*Hàn lâm viện*). *Đông Tiến sĩ* (Doctors) were ordained as officials in *khoa* and *đạo* (offices of the State), not appointed as officials at localities. The young doctors were ordained the position of *Hiệu thảo* (people caring paperwork at *Đông các*). In case of appointment at localities, doctors affiliated to both offices called *Thừa chính* or *Hiển sát* in the position of *chưởng ấn* (the official highest position of the office), not *Tá nhị* (the second position) (Lê Quý Đôn, 1977: 95).

## 2.2. Martial exams

During Lê - Trịnh regime, the martial exams were organized to recruit martial officials. This is different from the dynasties in the past. In August of the year of Metal Buffalo (1721), the Court held a meeting to establish the martial school, enforce the regulations about martial lessons and competitions. Accordingly, the descendants of the senior officials and high-ranking courtiers were allowed to go to school. The content of learning was the practice of martial arts and forging strategies. The Court stipulated that there were three exams to recruit talented people in one year. The content of the contest includes: Sun Tzu's book, those who understand the book can compete three martial arts; the three martial arts include: riding horse and playing long sword, playing sword with shield, playing knife. The final exam is on military strategies. The winner is given an appellate exam at the Lord Palace (*Phủ Chúa*), and then appointed according to the high or low level (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 83).

*Bác cử* is the most important martial exam. The person who passed this exam was called *Tạo sĩ*, (similar to the title of Confucian doctor of philosophy). In October of the year of Water Rabbit (1723), the author of *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* wrote that in November in the year of Wood Dragon (1724), the Court began to organize the martial exam. The exam of *Sở cử* were organized in the years of Rat, Horse, Rabbit,

Rooster; the exam of *Bác cử* took place in the years of Dragon, Dog, Buffalo, Goat. Both of exams were held once every three years. The content of the exams includes asking about *Vũ kinh* (theory about martial art), martial arts contest, and *văn sách* (essay). *Sở cử* exams focused on martial arts: the successful candidates were called *sinh viên* (students); *quan viên tử*, *quan viên tôn* (the officials) that passed the exam were called *biên sinh*. The successful candidates of the *văn sách* exam were called *học sinh*; the officials who passed the *văn sách* exam were called *quan viên tử*, *quan viên tôn*.

The first round of *Bác cử* exam was about seven military books: *Thái công's "Lục thao tam lược"* (Six martial arts and three strategies), *Hoàng Thạch công, Tôn Tử, Ngô Tử, Tư Mã's "Binh pháp"* (Art of war), *Uất Liâu Tử*, and *Lý Vệ công's "Vấn đáp"* (interview). The second round was about martial competition. The third round was about essay writing. The person who passed all of the exams was called *Tạo sĩ*. The person who passed the third round with the highest result was called *Tạo toát* and was appointed as *Tạo sĩ* (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 93-94). The benefits they earned were similar to the benefits given to Confucian doctors of philosophy. 11 people passed the exam of the year of Wood Dragon (1724); Nguyễn Công Tự was a *Tạo sĩ*. The honorable *Tạo sĩ* was conferred *Chánh lục phẩm* (Sixth Senior Rank), *Tạo sĩ* was conferred *Tòng lục phẩm* (Sixth Junior Rank), those with lower score were offered *Chánh thất phẩm* (Seventh Senior Rank) and were given the position of *Phó võ úy* (the position in the Court's army). From the year of Wood Dragon (1724) onwards, the exam was organized once a year and the state made it as regulation. According to the statistics of Nguyễn Thúy Nga, under Lê - Trịnh reign, there were all together 221 *Tạo sĩ* (Nguyễn Thúy Nga, 2019: 85-177).

From 1729 to 1731, the Court prescribed three rounds in an exam; the candidates that passed all three rounds were called *Tạo sĩ*. For those unsuccessful candidates but with skillful technique and high ability, ten of them would be chosen and given positions as *Tạo sĩ*. By April in the year of Metal Rat (1780), the Court prescribed that there were four rounds in an exam. The examinees had to write an essay in the fourth round. Those who passed two rounds were called *Tạo toát* (Đỗ Văn Ninh, 2002: 86-88).

In order to avoid missing the talented people, in the year of Water Rat (1732), Lord Trịnh Khương (Giang) adapted the rules of *Hoành từ* exam from the Confucian examination system to set up *Hoành tuyển* exam; the excellent candidates were honored and appointed to positions. (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 135). Thus, by 1732, there were two martial exams: *Bác cử* and *Hoành tuyển*.

### 3. Nhiệm tử

*Nhiệm tử* is a traditional way of recruiting officials, based on the Court's ordained policy for senior officials' descendants. Therefore, *nhiệm tử* is also known as *chế độ tập ấm*, based on the high or low position of senior officials to bestow *ấm tước* for a son or grandson (Đặng Kim Ngọc, 2011: 114).

The regime of *tập ấm* was relatively complete under the Early Lê dynasty in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, during the Restored Lê dynasty, until the year of Wood Dragon (1664), the Court prescribed: for high-ranking founders of the Early Lê dynasty from *tam thái* (three grand) and *tam thiếu* (three vice), their descendants were eternally *công thân tôn*; for senior officials of the Restored Lê dynasty with the titles of *Tả hữu Đô đốc*, *Tả hữu Thị lang*, their descendants were eternally *quan viên tử*. In the year of Fire Horse (1666), the rule of *nhiều ấm* was set for the descendants of *nội giám* (eunuchs' adopted sons). In the year of Fire Snake (1677), the rule of *nhiều ấm* was expanded to the descendants of senior officials. The rules were based on each position of the mandarins (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 635-636).

In September of the year of Water Rabbit (1723) the Court stipulated the rules of *nhiều ấm* for the descendant of high-ranking courtiers of the Early Lê dynasty and the Restored Lê dynasty (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 93).

In the year of Fire Horse (1726), as the request of Trịnh Quán and Nguyễn Công Hãng, the Court had the rules *phong ấm* for officials' parents, wives and children, based on their positions and titles. Therefore, mandarins of *Nhất phẩm* and *Nhị phẩm* were endowed according to their titles while mandarins of *Tam phẩm* and *Tứ phẩm* were awarded according to their position (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 102).

In July of the year of Wood Buffalo (1745), Duke Vũ Tất Thận (who was given the name of Trịnh Thiết, after the surname of Trịnh Lord) was promoted as *Tả Đô đốc* (admiral), governed *Tôn nhân phủ* (an office), with the position *Hữu Tôn chính*. And then the Court chose his descendants for official positions (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 205-206).

In the year of the Metal Horse (1750), the State restored the method of *ấm tử* (a son was ordained thanks to his father's contribution to the dynasty, not by passing the exam). In the past, for official's children learning at Temple of Literature: sons of *Nhị phẩm* mandarin would be appointed to *Tự thừa* position while sons of *Tam phẩm* mandarin would be appointed to *Tư vụ* position. After one term, they would be promoted to the positions of *Viên ngoại* or *Tri phủ* respectively. Later, the Court redetermined that who worked as *Tư vụ* would be promoted to *Tự thừa* position. Then (from 1750 onwards), the Court returned to the old previous norm (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 221).

In the year of the Wood Dog (1754), the Court reformed the selection of officials for *Bộ Lại* (Ministry of Home Affairs). Accordingly, the policy for sons of *Nhị phẩm* mandarin would be applied to the policy issued in the year of Water Tiger (1722). Basing on the contribution and capacity, *chánh* (senior), *tòng* (junior) officials would work in the Lê King's palace or Trịnh Lord's palace. Whoever passed the exam would be given position in the districts. Every six years, the Court tested all officials' merits.

In the year of the Wood Monkey (1764), the Court promulgated new regulations: *Nhất phẩm* mandarin's son was ordained to the same position of those that passed *tam trường tứ trường* (three/four rounds of the *Hội* exam). *Nhị phẩm* mandarin's son was ordained to the same position of who passed *tam trường tam trúng* (three rounds of the *Hội* exam). *Tam*

*phẩm* mandarin's son was ordained to the same position of who passed *tam trường nhị trúng* (two rounds of the *Hội* exam). The examinee that passed *Hoành từ* exam was ordained to the same position of who passed *tam trúng*. The candidate that passed *thượng khảo* (good rank) was ordained to the same position of who passed *nhị trúng*. Those passing the *ngự đề* (test was given by the Lord) was ordained to the same position of whom that passed *nhất trúng*. If any person has a similar background, the Court set the position based on passing the exam earlier or later, and their work. Their work, merit and punishment must be clear facts within the exact time. Whoever hides the truth would be severely punished according to the old rules (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 279).

In the year of the Fire Pig (1767), the Court had the ordained regulations for royal people. The officials in *Phủ Tôn Nhân* listed the names and send to *Bộ Lại* and appointed no more than 5 people per year. Senior officials that were ordained inappropriately would be excommunicated. With such regulation, the system was gradually improved (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 312).

In the year of the Water Snake (1773), the State had *nhiều ấm* regulations for senior officials. Thus, it is clear that *nhiệm tử* was carried out regularly under Lê - Trịnh reign. This policy was effective in encouraging officials' dedication to nation. At the same time, the Court took advantages of talented people who were born in famous and educated families. Because they inherited not only the talent but also virtue from the traditional families, from a young age, they have been familiar and can learn essential administrative skills. Besides, as descendants of royal family or senior officials' families, they imbibed the value of honor, tradition of family and benefits to the clan (Phạm Hồng Tung, 2005: 89). Đặng Thế Khoa was a typical example. He was the grandson of Duke Đặng Huân. Thanks to his general's lineage, he was ordained position in the army. He was widely educated, integrity, was highly praised by Trịnh Lord, and promoted to the position of *Thượng thư bộ Binh* (Minister of Defense). Historian Phan Huy Chú ranked Đặng Thế Khoa in the list of 39 supporters with meritorious merits during the Restored Lê dynasty (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 326-327). However, it is not always possible to select talented people by *nhiệm tử*. Phan Huy Chú wrote: "*nhiệm tử* is not good; how can a mandarin's son naturally be better than the son of ordinary people. Dandies without real talent but were ordained in high position would destroy the selection of talented people. That's why *nhiệm tử* is not a good recruitment" (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 574).

#### 4. Bảo cử and Tiến cử

In the early periods of the Restored Lê dynasty, the Court recruited and appointed mandarins according to neither their social status nor their social position. As a matter of fact, there were mandarins of lower rank, such as Trần Đăng Doanh and Vũ Phương Trượng who started their career as *Tri phiên* and *Thị lang* (two low-ranking positions) later advanced to high-ranking positions. Lưu Đăng Sĩ was a *sinh đồ* (student), Vũ Duy Chí was *duyện lại*

(official with position in low rank); later, both of them played important roles as *Thượng thư* (Minister). In particular, Vũ Duy Chí worked as *Thượng thư bộ Lễ* (Minister of Ministry of Rites), counsellor of the Trịnh Lord's palace (*Tham tụng*). At his retirement, he was promoted to the position of *Thượng thư bộ Lại* (Minister of Ministry of Home Affairs) and given the honorable title of *Quốc lão thiếu phó* (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 330-331). According to historian Phan Huy Chú, he was a supporter with meritorious merits during the Restored Lê dynasty. Under the reigns of Vĩnh Trị (1676-1680) and Chính Hòa (1681-1704), the Court based on their contribution to the King during the early days of the Restored Lê dynasty to honor them accordingly. Until the year of the Fire Horse (1726), there were regulations about *văn thuộc* and *tôn phẩm* (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 101-102). *Tôn phẩm* is the Trịnh Lord's officials; their appointment to position as well as their *phong ấm* (ordaining their parents, wife and children), however, were two ranks lower than a doctor that passed the exams.

According to Phan Huy Chú, talented people could be introduced in two ways: *Tiến cử* (recommendation) was the selection of talented people regardless of their social status; *bảo cử* (nomination) was the selection of people according to their fame and quality. The two ways seemed similar but slightly different (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 689). *Bảo cử* helped supply more officials for the Court alongside examinations. From the Lý - Trần dynasties, *bảo cử* had become popular. The officials have the right and obligation to recommend qualified and talented people, not necessary senior officials or passed the *Đình* exam for available positions (Đặng Kim Ngọc, 2011: 145). In the year of the Metal Dog (1670), the Court ordered courtiers to recommend talented people who could serve as chiefs, deputies in the district and *Huấn đạo* (teacher). *Nhi phẩm* mandarins were allowed to introduce four people. *Tam phẩm*, *Tứ phẩm* and *Ngũ phẩm* (Fifth-Rank) mandarins were allowed to introduce three people. Each *Lục phẩm* (Sixth-Rank), *Thất phẩm* (Seventh-Rank), *Bát phẩm* (Eighth-Rank) mandarins were allowed to introduce two people. The Ministry of Home Affairs (*Bộ Lại*) would set the positions for them. The Court praised mandarins who recommended good officials. The people who had been recommended would be punished if they were founded cheating or wrong doing. (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 690).

In the year of the Fire Pig (1707), under the reign of King Lê Dụ Tông, *Thừa ty* and *Hiển ty* (two offices of the State) asked *Huyện lệnh* (leader of district) to recommend the people who had enough ability to work as the chief and deputy, come to Thăng Long to work for the State (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 690).

In the year of the Water Tiger (1722), the government regulated that, every year, the martial mandarins of *Tứ phẩm* or lower had the right to recommend officials, similar to what the Confucian mandarins were allowed to do. (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 690).

In the year of the Metal Monkey (1740), the Court twice promulgated edicts for straightforward advice. In May, the Court requested mandarins focused on their works as well as recommended talented people. In December of the same year, the Court promulgated the policy which allowed the talented people could recommend themselves to the central government. (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 167, 170, 175).

In the year of the Metal Rooster (1741), the Confucian mandarins of *Tứ phẩm* or higher working for *Phủ liêu* (an office belonging to Trịnh Lord) were allowed to recommend a district official (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 181).

In the year of the Fire Tiger (1746), Lord Trịnh Doanh told the government officials that *Thừa ty* officials were the discipline of the district, good or bad things came out of them, thus feel obliged to nominate the talented people for *Thừa ty* (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 208).

In the year of the Fire Rabbit (1747), the bell and wooden fish were placed at the left door of the Palace's gate; those who wished to report or to recommend themselves to the Court would come to ring the bell (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 211).

In the year of the Earth Dragon (1748), the Court issued an edict, citing the Classic of Poetry (out of the Five Classics) as “open to search for talents and appoint capable people for mandarin post. Accordingly, for many generations, loyal mandarins obeyed the King to serve the Court. Now the country was not fully peaceful and soldiers were not fully rested, the Court needed talented officials. I learned from the old books and thus desired to have talented people”. The Court, therefore, ordered its mandarins to recommend talented people to be appointed to positions. The mandarins who recommended good people would be splendidly awarded; those who recommended wrongly would be severely punished (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 691).

In the year of the Water Goat (1763), the Court ordered its officials to nominate talented people: “the State's policy is to use talented people; the Court appoints its officials basing on the people's recommendation. I care about the country's governance thus I pay great attention to the selection of talents. Regardless of city or village, the talented people would be appointed accordingly.” (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 691-692).

The above events show that the Lê - Trịnh regime is relatively proactive in recruiting talents to serve the country. The introduction of good people to suitable positions is also considered as the duty and responsibility of the incumbent mandarins. The nomination and recommendation are based on the personal prestige of the introducer, and at the same time, that prestige is also a guarantee factor in selecting talented people. The contribution or fault of the referrer and the referred person are closely related. This relationship comes from personal credibility that has been enhanced into the duty and responsibility of individual mandarin. Therefore, basically, *bảo cử* and *tiến cử* are good methods in recruiting officials, especially in urgent circumstances such as war when the Court could not organize examinations to select talents. However, these are also difficult methods because the exams are not a standard measure, mainly based on the ability to judge and analyze bases on the referrer's understanding to find out the talented people (Lê Thị Thanh Hòa, 1994: 44-47).

Additionally, in order to support the selection of talents, the Lê - Trịnh Court implemented such measures as *khảo khóa* to reorganize the mandarin system. Although *khảo khóa* does not recruit more talents for the State apparatus, it contributes to “clean up” the apparatus, ordaining or degrading the mandarins based on their work within a certain

period of contribution. *Khảo khóa* began in the early year of the Restore Lê dynasty and effectuated in the years of 1631, 1665, 1676, 1682, 1685, 1689, 1690, 1715, 1719, 1720, 1726 (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 692-701). In the year of the Metal Monkey (1740), the State issued 15 regulations that made “all the people in capital and towns feel happy”, including the improvement of mandarins’ working quality, such as: judging mandarins every three years; reappointing good mandarins who had been unjustly sacked; sacking the mandarins whose appointment had been bribed (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 161). In June of the year of the Water Goat (1763), Lord Trịnh carried out a number of reforms, including the act of “carefully selecting officials to make the national examinations more righteous” (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 274). As for the exams of martial arts, in the year of the Earth Tiger (1758), the Court ordered the nation-wide surveillance in order to eliminate all “fake titles”, thereby cleanse up the army (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 259). The Court respected talented people with moral qualities. According to the official history records, in 1676, *Bồi tụng giám sát ngự sử* Trần Thế Vinh (born in Phong Xuyên commune, Tiên Phong district), who was promoted to the position of *Đề hình* through *bảo cử*, was severely punished and fined because he had not organized his father’s funeral properly (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 16).

In contrast to the aforementioned advanced policies, at some certain moments, the Court implemented a number of rules which negatively affected the selection of talents, notably the payment of money or grain for mandarin position in years of 1721, 1740, 1742, 1748, 1760, 1768. Historian Phan Huy Chú assessed: “The official title is so important that it cannot be bought and sold. (Corrupted mandarins) exploited and destroyed the State treasure for private benefits, such an act should not be in the common life. Under the reign of Quang Thuận, only low-ranking position was sold; that was still not too harmful. By the reigns of Vĩnh Hựu and Cảnh Hưng, the district-level positions were sold for money and grain; that was really harmful. Alas! For the prestigious position that people in the past had to strive for many years to achieve through strict exams, now it can be bought up easily by paying money and grain. Under such circumstance, the selection and appointment of mandarins was popularly cheated owing to the greedy officials. Such careless and corrupted acts would inevitably lead to the collapse of society like what happened during the Han and Jin dynasties in China.” (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 687). Therefore, although education was still considered a means to recruit talents, the literacy and moral standard of both examinees and examiners has gradually deteriorated (Phan Ngọc Liên, 2006: 89). The selection of talents, therefore, became a severe challenge for the Court.

## 5. Conclusion

Under the Lê - Trịnh regime, the Court focused on recruiting talents for the State apparatus. The Court many times promulgated nation-wide announcement to search for the

talented people. In the year of the Earth Rabbit (1759), although it was only the *Hương* exam, Trịnh Lord still reminded all the *công sĩ* that “scholars were the pillar of the Court”. The key to raise talents lay at the way of education. (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1991: 262).

The principal ideology of the Restored Lê dynasties’ rulers included “paying attention to the rule of the country and caring the selection of talented people” (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 691-692). The basic methods of talent selection were through examinations, *nhiệm tử*, *bảo cử* and *tiến cử*. Since the Court considered exams as the key ground for selecting talents, Confucian education played a crucial role in the society. Furthermore, as Court trained talents who worked for government’s politics, therefore, the education focused on morality, attitude and skills (Vũ Ngọc Khánh, 1985: 88-93). According to author Nguyễn Đức Huệ, “The State, villages and families were the three entities contributing to the development of contemporary education, in which the state played the most important and decisive role by its bureaucratic recruitment regime” (Nguyễn Đức Huệ, 2006: 34).

The selection of talents through the exams has some limitations because it was affected quite strongly by the historical context, the ethical degradation of candidates and examiners. A noticeable feature is that the Courts recruited many literary mandarins, later there were martial exams. The selection of talents in the fields of science and technology were highly limited.

The methods of *nhiệm tử*, *bảo cử* and *tiến cử* were solely based on personal prestige in order to recruit candidates for the government apparatus. *Nhiệm tử* is based on the prestige of the grandfather or father, the blood relationship was condition. In some cases, *bảo cử* is also based on blood relationship. *Tiến cử* was base on the talent and virtue of the inductee. *Nhiệm tử* and *tập ấm* were deeply humane, reflecting the Court’s tribute to its courtiers’ contribution to the government (Nguyễn Thị Thu Hương, 2020: 87-88, 97). *Tiến cử* reflected social relationships in which talents were honored. All the above methods helped the Lê - Trịnh regime to select and appoint talents into the political and administrative system. The talents, on their side, contributed to the country, for example Doctor Nguyễn Văn Giai (who passed the first *Hội* exam during Restored Lê dynasty in 1554), Lê Quý Đôn, Phạm Công Trứ, Đặng Đình Tường, Nguyễn Quý Đức, Nguyễn Công Hãng, Lê Anh Tuấn, Nguyễn Tông Quai, Ngô Thì Sĩ, etc. all remarkably contributed to the regime in the fields of politics, military, diplomacy, economy, culture and society during the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

**Acknowledges:** This research was sponsored by Project KX.04.28/21-25.

## References

- Cao Xuân Dục. (1993). *Hương examination of Nguyễn dynasties*. Hồ Chí Minh City Publishing House. Hồ Chí Minh City.
- Đặng Kim Ngọc. (2011). *Regime of education and recruitment mandarins in the Early Lê (1428 - 1527)*. Cultural and Scientific Center of the Temple of Literature. Hanoi.

- Đinh Khắc Thuân. (2009). Doctors and doctoral paper test in Lê - Trịnh period. *Sino-Nom Journal*, 4(95): 38-45.
- Đỗ Văn Ninh. (2002). *Dictionary of mandarin's positions in Vietnam*. Youth Publishing House, Hanoi.
- Lê Quý Đôn. (1977). Collection of some stories what one sees and hears. In *Lê Quý Đôn complete works*. Social Sciences Publishing House. Hanoi.
- Lê Quý Đôn. (1978). General history of Đại Việt. In *Lê Quý Đôn complete works*. Vol.3, Social Sciences Publishing House. Hanoi.
- Lê Thị Thanh Hòa. (1994). *Selecting and using talented people in history*. Social Sciences Publishing House. Hanoi.
- National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty. *Historical records Đại Việt (1676-1789)*. Social Sciences Publishing House. Hanoi.
- National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty. (1998). *Imperially ordered annotated text completely reflecting the history of Việt*. Vol.2, Vietnam Education Publishing House. Hanoi.
- Ngô Cao Lãng. (1995). *Annals on history of Vietnam*. Social Sciences Publishing House. Hanoi.
- Ngô Đức Thọ, Nguyễn Thúy Nga & Nguyễn Hữu Mùi. (2006). *Vietnamese doctors (1075-1919)*. Literature Publishing House. Hanoi.
- Nguyễn Đức Huệ. (2006). Some features of the examination and regulations using mandarins in the Restored Lê dynasty. *Journal of Historical Studies*, 12(368): 31-38.
- Nguyễn Tá Nhí (Compilation). (1995). *About examinees in Phụng Dực village (in Hà Tây province, belongs to Hanoi now) who passed the exam*. Social Sciences Publishing House. Hanoi.
- Nguyễn Thị Thu Hương. (2020). *Regime tập ấm in the Restored Lê dynasty from 1533 to 1789*. The project of scientific research in 2000. Institute of History. Hanoi.
- Nguyễn Thúy Nga. (2019). *Martial examination and people passed the martial exam in Vietnam*. Social Sciences Publishing House. Hanoi.
- Phạm Đình Hồ. (1989). *An essay written in the rain*. Tre Publishing House. Hồ Chí Minh City.
- Phạm Hồng Tung. (ed.). (2005). *A brief study on experience of selecting, training and using talented people in history of Vietnam*. Vietnam National University Press. Hanoi.
- Phan Huy Chú. (2007). *Categorized records of institutions of successive dynasties*. Vol. 2, Vietnam Education Publishing House. Hanoi.
- Phan Ngọc Liên. (2006). *Education and examination in Vietnam (before the August Revolution of 1945)*. Encyclopedia Publishing House. Hanoi.
- Tống Văn Lợi. (2022). Examination and educational achievements of the Restored Lê dynasty in the 16<sup>th</sup> in Vạn Lại - Yên Trường. In scientific conference proceeding on *Vạn Lại - Yên Trường Capital in history of Lê dynasty*. Social Sciences Publishing House. Hanoi.
- Trịnh Thị Hà. (2020). *Education and Confucianism examination in Đại Việt during the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries*. [Doctoral thesis in History, Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi].
- Vũ Ngọc Khánh. (1985). *On the education of Vietnam before 1945*. Vietnam Education Publishing House. Hanoi.