

LOOKING FOR THE TRUTH FROM BÃI CÁT VÀNG

NGUYỄN TÁ NHÍ^(*)

The long yellow sandy strip in the middle of immense Southern Asian Sea is called by different names *Hoàng Sa chủ*, *Hoàng Sa đảo*, *Hoàng Sa xứ*, *Vạn lý trường sa*, but the most familiar and loving one is *Bãi Cát Vàng* (the golden sand beach), a name in Vietnamese and written in Nôm characters.

The three Nôm characters *Bãi Cát Vàng* is written 埋吉鎮. The character *bãi* is composed of two elements, one to express the sound *bãi* borrowing the character *bãi* in Chinese, one to express the meaning *thổ* (land) to show that *bãi* is related to land. The character *cát* is formed by a Chinese homonym which is *cát* in *cát tường* (good fortune). In *Thiên Nam tứ chí lộ đồ thư* composed by the scholar Đỗ Bá in 1689 (in *Hồng Đức bản đồ* archived at Institute of Hán Nôm studies), there are also 3 words *Bãi Cát Vàng*. The two Nôm characters *Bãi*, *Vàng* are written the same as in *Thiên hạ bản đồ*, only the character *cát* is different. In this collection, the writer replaced the character *cát* with *cát* 葛 in the word *cát đằng*, a kind of vines. To have a better understanding of the book

title *Thiên Nam tứ chí lộ đồ thư*, we will go in more details to explain the meaning of some words which the author used to name the book.

Firstly, it is *Thiên Nam*. It was originally King Lê Thánh Tông's (1460-1497) pseudonym. When he started to reign, King Lê Thánh Tông also learned from his ancestors to take the pseudonym *Thiên Nam động chủ*. The ancestors that we mention here are Lê Thái Tổ with such pseudonyms as *Lam Sơn động chủ*, *Ngọc Hoa động chủ*, and Lê Thái Tông with the pseudonym *Quế Lâm động chủ*. In 1468, the king himself led the infantry to have a boat trip on Bạch Đằng River. On arriving An Bang temple, the troop garrisoned at the foot of Truyền Đăng Mountain. Being inspired by the magnificent scenery, the king at once wrote a Tang poem and asked to carve it on the cliff. The poem was titled *Ngự chế Thiên Nam động chủ đề*. In the two last sentence of this King-composing poem, he mentioned the

^(*) Associate Prof. and Dr., Institute of Hán-Nôm studies.

place name *Thiên Nam* like a nation name:

Thiên Nam vạn cổ sơn hà tại

Chính thị tu văn yển vũ thì.

Meaning:

Thiên Nam land, our homeland, stays forever through the time

It's time to put away weapons and take up the writing brush.

How ingenious! Thiên Nam động chủ wrote a poem affirming that “Thiên Nam land, our homeland, stays forever through the time,” which sounds like divine poem lines that chased the Song invader years ago: *Nam quốc sơn hà Nam đế cư!* (The Southern country's mountain and river the Southern Emperor inhabits).

The book *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* also revealed a very interesting event that in December 1467, the emperor Lê Thánh Tông showed the royal seal carved with six characters “*Thiên Nam Hoàng đế chi bảo*” for the chancellor to see and discuss. The country name Thiên Nam was also found in the book name *Thiên Nam dư hạ tập* compiled by the king and his imperial literary officials Thân Nhân Trung and Đỗ Nhuận. From then on, there appeared lots of works taking Thiên Nam as a country name, such as:

Thiên Nam ngữ lục (coded AB.192)

Thiên Nam danh tích thi tập (coded A.1156)

Thiên Nam lịch khoa hội tuyển (coded A.2735)

Thiên Nam lịch triều liệt huyện đẳng khoa lục (coded VHv.2713)

Thiên Nam tứ tự kinh (coded A.29)

Secondly, the word *Tứ chí* means the border in the four directions, east, west, south and north. This was a term used in land measurement. Especially in land selling agreement, there was always a commitment “*đông tây tứ chí y như khế nội, nhược hữu man trá tắc can cữu*” (i.e. The borders in the four directions is as written in the agreement, if there is any cheating, be willing to be punished). After understanding the meaning of the two word *Thiên Nam* and *tứ chí*, we can interpret the meaning of the book *Thiên Nam tứ chí lộ đồ thư* by Scholar Đỗ Bá living in the Lê dynasty, as: The book recorded all the roads to Thiên Nam country's remote borders in the four directions. On sheet 43b of the book *Thiên Nam tứ chí lộ đồ thư*, there is detailed information about the area of *Bãi Cát Vàng* and also ways from the land to this place:

“At the sea, there is a long sand beach called *Bãi Cát Vàng*. It's about 400 miles long, 20 miles wide majestically standing in the middle of the sea. From the seaport Đại Chiêm to Sa Vinh, whenever merchant boats from inside countries encountered the Southwest wind, they were drifted to this place. When ships from outside encountered Northwest wind, they were also drifted to this place. All starved, and goods were all left here. Every year, during the last month of winter, the Nguyễn sent troops with 18 ships to this area to collect objects, of which mostly were gold, silver, coins, guns and bullets...”

The author Đỗ Bá with the pseudonyms of Đạo Phủ, from Nghệ An, lived and

worked in Đàng Ngoài (Northern Vietnam) during Lê Trịnh period, so when he wrote about fishermen who explored and collected sea products in Bãi Cát Vàng, he noted: "Every year, the Nguyễn sent troops with 18 ships to this place...". However, when the book was took to Đàng Trong (Southern Vietnam) under the control of the Nguyễn, the person who copied from the original corrected *Nguyễn thị* (Nguyễn family) to *Quốc vương* (Emperor) to be appropriate. The copy A.588 is currently archived at the Institute of Hán Nôm studies notes: "Every year, the Emperor sent troops with 18 ships to this place to collect objects".

Thiên Nam tứ chí lộ đồ thư was highly appreciated by the society. Even some people took pains to summarize the main parts to compose the book *Toàn tập Thiên Nam tứ chí lộ đồ thư*.

The book *Giáp Ngọ niên bình Nam đồ* (included in *Hồng Đức bản đồ*, coded A.2499) had the same way of writing three characters *Bãi Cát Vàng* as *Thiên Nam tứ chí lộ đồ thư*. The first page of the book, there is a line "*Giáp Ngọ niên bình Nam đồ, Đoàn quận công họa tiền*", i.e. Đoàn Quận Công drew the map recording the march of the army to the South in the year Giáp Ngọ, and offered it to the royal court. Đoàn Quận Công is Bùi Thế Đạt's title. The book *Nghệ An ký* wrote by Scholar Bùi Dương Lịch showed that Bùi Thế Đạt was from Tiên Lý village, Đông Thành district, Nghệ An township. When he was small, he studied very hard, and he was especially good at arts of war. When growing up,

he joined the army and attended battle, and commanded a very elite navy. In 1753, he was appointed as Đốc lĩnh of Sơn Tây, Hưng Hóa and took part in wiping out bandits. In 1763, he was assigned as a Đốc suất of Nghệ An and made a lot of contributions. In 1770, he was nominated for the position of Đại Tư Mã, titled Đoàn Quận Công. In 1771, he was granted two words Meritorious Official. At that moment in Đàng Trong (Southern Vietnam), Nguyễn brothers stirred up a revolt in Tây Sơn, which shoke the capital Phú Xuân. On that occasion, in the year Giáp Ngọ (1774), Trịnh lord appointed Hoàng Ngũ Phúc as Bình Nam Thượng tướng quân to conquer the South. When arriving Nghệ An, with the support of Governor Nghệ An Bùi Thế Đạt, he disseminated a proclamation to appeal Nghệ An people. It was written in Nôm:

"*Nước lấy dân làm gốc, khi bình cư chi có phiền dân*"

Dân lấy nước làm lòng, phen hữu sự sá tua vì nước"

The spiritual call rejoiced Nghệ An residents, so within a week, there were thousands of able-bodied young men applying. Being talented for combats on water, Đốc suất Nghệ An Bùi Thế Đạt was appointed to be the pioneer to lead the warship company to garrison at seaport Đồng Hới. Lê court's navy directed by Đoàn Quận Công Bùi Thế Đạt advanced to the south. Wherever he passed, he recorded the roads and marked all important places. There were totally 17 maps. On page 143 in *Giáp Ngọ niên bình Nam đồ*, there were

drawings of roads in Quảng Nam and *Bãi Cát Vàng* were written in Nôm.

This is an very important map collections which helped Thượng tướng Việp công Hoàng Ngũ Phúc completed his mission to pacify the South and unified the country after one century of division. Moreover, *Giáp Ngộ niên bình Nam đồ* also provided lots of data for the scholar Lê Quý Đôn to write *Phủ biên tạp lục*, the scholar Nguyễn Huy Oanh to write *Quảng Thuận đạo sử tập* which was widely circulated. A lot of later written works about *Bãi Cát Vàng* in the area of Southeast Asian Sea belonging to Vietnam used materials from *Giáp Ngộ niên bình Nam đồ* by the famous general Bùi Thế Đạt.

The character *Cát* in *Bãi Cát Vàng*, apart from the way of writing as *cát* in cát tường (good fortune) and *cát* in cát đắng (a type of vines) is read as *sa* (means sand). We found this way of writing in *Giao Châu dư địa chí*, coded VHv.30. The fact that there are ways of writing *cát* in *Bãi Cát Vàng* in Nôm shows that *Bãi Cát Vàng* is very familiar to Vietnamese. When writing, compiling or drawing maps, if it is necessary to write *Bãi Cát Vàng* in Nôm, the authors easily chose an appropriate Nôm character without deliberately thinking. There were some authors who borrowed the pronunciation from Hán characters while some chose to read according to the meaning. Why is it easy to select? There is only one explanation that the noun

phrase *Bãi Cát Vàng* had become a part of them. I really like the name of a book edited by Dr. Mai Ngọc Hồng, published by Information and Communication Publisher in October 2013 that Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands are flesh and blood of Vietnam □

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